Working Lives

Introduction

In 1841 infant mortality was extremely high and around 15% of babies died before their first birthday. A newborn male could expect to live to 40.2 years of age and a female 42.0. Life expectancy is double today. Worn out by physical exertion, the working classes were old before their time. The spectre of unemployment was ever-present as economic fluctuations, trade downturns and new productive industries might render a trade obsolete. Add to this illness and disability, often through accidents at work. This familiar cycle repeated patterns of deprivation from generation to generation.

Families moved to towns and cities in droves. Manufacturing employed 3,358,000 in 1871: 2,089,000 men and 1,269,000 women. Domestic service, the prime occupation for women, came second with 196,000 men and 1,488,000 women. This contrasted with 545,000 dress and footwear workers and about 400,000 mill girls. Agricultural labouring was in third place, with 1,351,000 men and 85,000 women; a total workforce of 1,436,000. With the onset of a long economic depression two years later, increased USA imports of foodstuffs and migration to towns, those employed in agriculture continued to fall.

Factory and Industrial Life

The greatest industrial advance came with the railways from 1830 and use of steam power, vital for transporting goods and a migrating labour force. The factory system was typified by cotton magnate Samuel Greg at Styal near Manchester. A remote, rural setting was ideal with easy access to water and transport. Greg turned to cheap child labour as Poor Law authorities sought to off-load children to the care of others. Pauper children slept two to a bed in an Apprentice House with clean sheets once a month, new Sunday clothes every two years and new jackets replacing those too small or worn out.

By 1833 the Gregs employed 380 people at Styal, mostly women, but almost a quarter were children. The Gregs had four other mills too, employing over 1,600 people. The working day began at 5:00 am and continued until 8:00 pm. Mill workers had a break of 40 minutes with occasional 'tea at the machines.' Wages were low but so were rents with food purchased from the factory shop.

Few cotton mills were run on such benign lines. Accommodation might not be offered or continuity of employment. Income after deductions for rent and shop food was miniscule, if any. Monopoly shops would charge extortionate prices and were known to adulterate food such as adding mashed potato to bread, boosting profits at the expense of workers.

Working conditions were unhealthy and extremely dangerous. At Styal, horrific accidents did occur, such as on 23 June 1845. The buckle of a loom-strap caught in the sleeve of Joseph Davenport, snatching him up to the drum, wrenching his arm off at the shoulder. On 6 March 1865 the head of John Foden, aged thirteen, was crushed between the roller beam and carriage when sweeping under the mule. In October 1895, in Britain, 49 people were killed in factories and workshops and, of the seriously injured,174 had limbs amputated.

Many new urban mills were small and in 1841 nearly half of Lancashire cotton mills employed less than 50 people. Proud independent weavers found it hard to compete with production as factories grew rapidly in size from 1860. By the turn of the century, massive mills fringed several Lancashire towns with limited companies replacing family enterprises.

Power-loom weavers survived in small clusters in the late developing towns of Burnley, Nelson, Colne and Accrington but competition was fierce and earnings low.

Oldham survived by specialising in coarse linen and Bolton in fine yarn, whilst Macclesfield proudly held on to its title as the premier silk town in Britain. The West Riding of Yorkshire dominated woollens and worsteds with competition from West Country broadcloths. Leeds, as with Halifax and Huddersfield, adapted and diversified, selling woollens brought into cloth halls from surrounding villages. With the gradual decline in textiles, Leeds was well placed to develop engineering, boot & shoe manufacture and other skilled trades.

Grimy, smelly and unhealthy industries took their toll. Widnes grew a staggering ten-fold to 30,000 in 1891, thanks to the chemical industry but the price was pollution. Airborne soda fumes cascaded from chimneys, and hydrochloric acid and other chemical waste seeped into rivers and vegetation. A pungent smell of hydrogen sulphide enveloped the town but did not deter Irish refugees fleeing from the famine of the mid 1840s, impervious to appalling and arduous working conditions.

Port Sunlight, "neat and cheerful" and home to Pears and various other soap products, was in complete contrast. A well planned working community was run on paternalistic lines. In return for jobs for life, decent housing, schools, a library and various institutes, the workers of William Lever were destined to a life of sobriety and thrift, with encouragement for self-improvement.

Similar models existed. John Cadbury, a Quaker, opened a shop in Bull Street Birmingham in 1824 selling tea, coffee, cocoa and drinking chocolate as an antidote to alcohol. By the 1870s, the Cadburys had moved to Bourneville where a factory village was built. Another Quaker, Joseph Rowntree of York, manufactured similar chocolate products. He created a garden village at New Earswick but this social reformer and philanthropist had a much grander vision to eradicate poverty and improve the lot of Britain's poor through campaigns, social surveys and political lobbying. His son Seebohm would be the torch-bearer late century.

The New Lanark Mills near Glasgow are famed for the work of social reformer and pioneer Robert Owen who reduced working hours, improved village housing and provided education. At Saltaire, on the outskirts of Bradford, Sir Titus Salt was ambitious and altruistic too. He built an alpaca mill complete with neat houses, a chapel, warehouses and park.

Many technical advances had come by the 1850s, spawning new towns. Barrow-in-Furness diversified into shipbuilding but tonnage was miniscule compared to the Merseyside, Clyde, Tyne & Wear and Belfast. The factory system spread into other trades such as boot and shoe making, tobacco, jam and related food processing. Innovation was the order of the day.

Domestic Service Below Stairs

At one extreme came the 6th Duke of Bedford, who, before his death in 1839, employed 300 servants, or 6th Duke of Portland with 320 servants in 1900. "A manual of Domestic Economy," published in 1857, offers advice and a note of caution. It recommended a net income of £1,000 per annum that afforded a butler or manservant; coachman or groom; one or two housemaids; cook; lady's maid; maybe a nursery maid and sometimes both.

An annual income of £500 afforded only three servants: general manservant or parlourmaid; housemaid and cook. One horse or pony and carriage might be kept. A mere £250 would necessitate a maid-of-all-work, a euphemism for dogsbody. An extremely modest £100 per annum meant keeping a young girl "as is quite useless here to allude to."

Having acquired a servant or three, then how to deploy them? Advice was forthcoming via Mrs. Beeton's Household Management. First published in 1861, it sold over 2,000,000 copies in seven years. The most favoured background was the agricultural class but beware local girls who gossip, run away to home, or draw "followers," alias boyfriends.

A parish clergyman, local squire, or respected tradesman might "put in a word" for those applying. An alternative recruitment method was the hiring or "mop" fair where milkmaids, cooks and housemaids presented themselves, carrying tools of their trade, such as a basting spoon or a broom. In some places cooks wore a red ribbon and maids a blue one. These fairs were on the decline by 1850 but survived until 1914 in Wales, the North of England and Scotland.

Mrs. Beeton in the 1860s suggested that a maid-of-all-work might earn £9 to £14 per annum but this was in London. Some 35 years later social researcher, Charles Booth, claimed an average annual wage for housemaids in the West End was £17 per annum but only £13 in the East End. Footmen, required to be at least 5ft 6ins and with a commanding presence, would earn £20-£22 per annum at the end of the century in London. Height was important and a man 6ft tall could expect an extra £10 per annum, bringing his earnings to £32.

Most below stairs, servants especially, were often at the mercy of their employers. In order to move employer, a good reference was needed but there was no legal obligation to provide one. A false or defamatory reference was actionable in law, but only if a servant could afford the cost and provide compelling evidence in an attempt, often futile, to prove malice.

Work was invariably hard and unrelenting but, unlike mills, rarely dangerous. The butler was defacto manager, overseeing all, but operating through the housekeeper as far as the female servants were concerned. He ran the wine cellar and was expected to be skilled in bottling and decanting wines, and for overseeing brewing in larger establishments until the 1880s. He was also responsible for the family's plate and all table arrangements.

Footmen were expected to be "attentive to all but obtrusive to none." They were expected to move silently and only speak if spoken to. Footmen cleaned all family shoes, perhaps making the polish too in the first half of the century, trimmed the wicks and filled the oil lamps daily for most of the century. There might be 20 or more in a large house, or at Longleat, 500. In the 1830s Belvoir Castle in Leicester got through a staggering 600 gallons of oil in a four months season. Newspapers had to be ironed "to fix the ink."

A footman at aristocratic Londonderry House in Park Lane used a pedometer at the height of the London season. In one day he clocked up 18 miles, all without going out of the house. Since most middle class homes in cities were built upwards, stair climbing was an accepted part of the job.

Housemaids were expected to get most of their work done before the family came down for breakfast. This meant getting up at 6:00 in summer or 6:30 in winter. The first winter task was to open all downstairs shutters, then take up all the hearthrugs and sweep and dust towards the fireplace. The hearth would be cleared of cinders, to be recycled in the kitchen

or laundry, and the fires lit. A house employing 8 servants might well get through half a ton of coal per day, all of which had to be carried up the stairs by the housemaids. In the morning, after preparation of breakfast, a cook discussed menus for the next day and prepared luncheon plus pastries and jellies for the evening. From 5:00 pm to 10:00 pm would be filled with preparing and serving the evening meal and supper. Only then was her day finished.

A rather different job awaited the mother of 'Kathy of Enfield,' a pupil-teacher in 1899 at the age of 13 when she lost her father. Her mother had died in childbirth. Now an orphan, she obtained a job via an agency to work for the Lord Chief Justice of Ireland in County Clare, as a nanny, tutor and general factotum. That she taught, was reliable and a Catholic held her in good stead. Kathy says her mother loved the job.

Working On The Land

Life in the 1830s was hard. The enclosure system stifled self-employment from open field villages to rented farms. Hiring was on a casual basis, often by the day, with no payment if work was unavailable through bad weather, poor harvests, low demand or mismanagement. Short-term contracts were common for harvesting, hedging, ditching and threshing. Living-in began to disappear. Low pay was exacerbated by the Speenhamland system with wages topped up. Productivity was affected as labourers were disinclined to work hard. It was no coincidence that poaching, pilfering and other crime rose by 30% between 1824 and 1830.

The Swing Riots started in June 1830 and became more violent two months later as threshing machines meant fewer labourers and no winter employment. About 400 threshing machines were destroyed but some local magistrates were sympathetic. A signed poster of 1830 in Norfolk reveals in large bold type: "To discontinue the use of Threshing Machines, and to take them to pieces." A typical incident might arise on a Saturday night after the inns had closed with gangs of 20-30 intent on destroying machines.

Their demand was for a summer wage of 15/- and winter wage of 13/6d, a huge increase as the average was 8/4d per week. Ring-leaders were often craftsmen who led the labouring poor. Whilst some arsonists bore a grudge, most rioters were deemed of good characters. Retribution was swift and savage. In nearly 2,000 trials, 252 were sentenced to death and 19 actually executed, with another 500 transported for life and a spell of imprisonment for many others.

Such extreme punishment was a lesson to all, tempted to inflict damage and destruction. The scene switches to Tolpuddle and testimony of George Loveless. Workers in the district were paid 10/- per week but in the immediate vicinity of Tolpuddle were informed that wages were to be cut to 9/-. After several months this was reduced do 8/-, then 7/- and finally 6/-. A group of labourers formed a friendly trade society to consider what they could do. This came to the attention of James Frampton, a major landowner, who wrote to Lord Melbourne, Home Secretary who drew attention to the rather obscure Unlawful Oaths Act of 1797.

On 21st February 1834 notices appeared, threatening to punish with 7 years transportation any man who should join a union. At issue was swearing an oath of allegiance. Three days later George Loveless, as the main leader, was arrested and duly imprisoned in Dorchester. The judge, John Williams, was intent on making an example of all six men, supposedly ring-leaders, but they were of good character and in theory at least the gathering was not illegal.

George Loveless addressed Judge Williams. "My Lord, if we had violated any law it was not done intentionally. We were uniting together to save ourselves, our wives and families from starvation."

Loveless had not reckoned with Judge Williams who, taking Lord Melbourne's advice, and no doubt swayed by Frampton and others, tried the men for mutiny and conspiracy under an Act designed to suppress mutiny at sea. Loveless later said, "The greater part of the evidence against us at our trial was put into the mouths of the witnesses by the judge." In summing up, Judge Williams said that if such societies were allowed to exist it would ruin masters, cause stagnation in trade and destroy property. All six men were duly sentenced to 7 years transportation.

The press gallery in the Crown Court in Dorchester erupted into outrage and news of the conviction spread rapidly. A petition was launched, attracting 800,000 signatures for the men's release and a political march organised. In March 1836 a complete pardon was given by new Home Secretary, Lord John Russell, to all six men who returned to England but only George Hammett stayed, coming back to live in Dorset. The five others all emigrated to Ontario, Canada, with their families.

Migration from the countryside continued throughout the century. Towns might offer better paid and more varied occupations, the possibility of housing, more amenities and a far better social life such as schools, libraries, mechanics institutes, shops, parks, newspapers and more pubs, clubs and places of entertainment, from theatres to music halls. Strikingly, most people came from a radius of about 20-30 miles but this widened considerably in the second half of the century with growth of the railways. Bolder spirits were attracted by newspaper adverts that included emigration too.

The other major factor was wheat, especially following repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, a year in which one quarter of all males aged 20 and over were employed in agriculture. In 1851 it employed a fifth of the entire working population who produced about the same for national income. Fifty years later this had fallen to 10%, and a lower economic contribution, thanks to the economic depression from about 1873 to 1896 and imported food, especially wheat and corn (maize) from the USA, at the expense of British production.

The passing of traditional ways of life was deplored but the future beckoned that promised better wages, shorter hours, improved housing, more education and improved environment in which to raise a family. Ebbing away was the old-style labourer, steeped in the land, with scant education, accustomed to traditional methods passed down over centuries. Vanishing too were the country parson, land agent, carpenter, furrier, farrier, and other occupations that made an immense contribution to a tranquil rural life. At the top of the artisan pyramid were those possessing specialist and craft skills from master-thatcher to expert hedgers and drainers who may haggle a price, part of which might be payment in provisions.

Hardy wrote about mop fairs at Michaelmas, Martinmas and May-day in rural Dorset and his home town of Dorchester. "Amongst these, carters and waggoners were distinguished by having a piece of whipcord twisted round their hats; thatchers wore a fragment of woven straw; shepherds held their sheep crook in their hands, and thus the situation required was known to the farmers at a glance."

Rider Haggard talks of a shepherd, in his 70s, who had worked for 60 years, 40 of those for the same farmer. "Sunk as he was in 'eld', it was easy for anyone accustomed to watch his class, to see that in a very many cases the services of two men of the present generation

would be of less value than those of the shepherd." A Poor Law Commissioner provided a breakdown in 1838 of a wage of 10/- with 7/- spent on flour and yeast, and over 1/6p on rent with nearly a shilling (a bob) on coal. Candles, clothing, beer and tobacco competed for the meagre balance. In 1851 wages in Devon, Dorset and South Wiltshire were far lower than, in Lincolnshire, considered an average county, where a typical male wage was 11/- a week. Women and children could earn 2/- a day harvesting, 1s 9d for lifting potatoes and just 9d weeding and planting. Thrift was encouraged as villages had numerous friendly societies, savings banks, coal clubs and clothing clubs.

Soon the Crimean War (1853-56) would have an impact as Rider Haggard recalls in meeting an old labourer living in a small cottage with his wife. "We found him aged and withered but still an apple-cheeked individual, seated upon a bank, enjoying the sweet air, though it be a bit draughty. In the Crimean War, a loaf cost up to a shilling and other food a proportionate price. He stated that for months at a time he existed upon nothing but a diet of bread and onions, if lucky washed down with a small-beer. He ate these onions until they took the skin off the roof of his mouth." Rider Haggard asked if his eight children endured the same diet. "No, generally they had a little cheese and butter in the house, but he could not put it into his own stomach when they were hungry and cried for food. Things better now, he added."

This was perhaps the most extreme of meagre diets but nutrient deficiency was common as an example from Salisbury in 1850 illustrates. Breakfast was flour and a little water, lunch a piece of bread and cheese, late afternoon a few potatoes, with bacon on rare occasions, and bread and water for supper. Where meat was provided, this would often go the husband. An average weekly portion was 16oz in contrast to 12 lbs of bread and 6lbs of potatoes. New roller-milled flour was manufactured in quantity towards the end of the century but this was low in nutrition as was condensed milk. Deficient in vitamins A and D and natural fats, coupled with a staple diet of bread and potatoes, it was no surprise that rickets was all too common.

Housing was often cramped, damp and insanitary, and romanticised thatched cottages might conceal squalor and wretchedness. A family would live in one or two rooms with earth floors that 'heaved' and might be awash in winter. Neither roof nor walls were rain-proof. Dirt and droppings oozed from the thatch and water had to be fetched from a pond or rain barrel. An outside privy or two might serve from eight to ten families. Edwin Chadwick, sanitary reformer, pulled no punches on a visit to the Vale of Aylesbury in 1841. "The vegetable substances mixed with the mud to make it bind, rapidly decompose, leaving the walls porous. The earth of the floor full of vegetable matter, and from there being nothing to cut off its contact with the surrounding mould. It is peculiarly damp."

A reporter on the Times, illustrated vividly in 1850 this was no isolated incident. He was reporting on Wark Castle in Northumberland. "The very picture of slovenliness and neglect. Wretched houses piled here and there without order, filth of every kind scattered about or heaped up against walls; horses and pigs lodged under the same roof with their owners, and entering by the same door; with in many cases a pigsty beneath the only window."

Rider Haggard spoke of dilapidated cottages with roofs fallen in, making them uninhabitable, but caring landlords did exist. At Grafham in Huntingdonshire, the Duke of Manchester built cottages with 3 good sized bedrooms and a living room, whilst Lord Leconfield rented new houses for 1/6d per week; an absolute bargain as they all had 4 bedrooms, a living room, kitchen and large garden. This was the same figure charged by the Duke of Bedford for his

cottages; plain, substantial and hygienic. The tidy, neat cottages provided by Titus Salt at Saltaire cost from 2/4d a week but they had between 3 and 6 bedrooms rather than 2 or 3.

On leaving school at 12 in 1898, 'Kathy of Enfield's' father worked on a farm but as a human scarecrow, chasing away birds. He earned 2/6d a week. Yearning to join the navy, he had to wait until the age of 14 to achieve his ambition when he could join as a 'boy sailor.'

Society was becoming increasingly urban with expansion of the factory system, the reliance on outworkers, growth in trades, not least for the home, the meteoric rise of professions and domestic service, and gradual improvement in living standards for the artisan and aspiring middle classes. Life on the land had changed forever, helped by an expanding rail network criss-crossing most of Britain. It transformed hitherto village life, little changed in decades if not centuries. Increasing social mobility was the pathway to forging a better life though it took courage, contacts and means too.

Birth of the Co-up

Four days before Christmas Day in 1844, at 8.00 pm on the dot, a shop opened at 31 Toad Lane, Rochdale. It sold flour, oatmeal, butter and milk purchased from Manchester as local wholesalers refused to trade. Candles were used for lighting. The shop counter comprised wooden planks resting on large barrels. To one side was a bench for waiting shoppers. A cashier sat the other side and duly recorded every payment against each member's name, to be used to calculate a 'Divi' paid to customers. The Co-operative movement was born and registered as the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers on 24th October. The shop opened two nights a week. In due course the Co-op would transform the shopping habits of a nation.

Although the venture was pioneering, it was by no means the first as by the 1830s some three hundred co-operative societies existed in the UK but they lacked business acumen and many ran into financial difficulties offering credit. Robert Own was keen to promote the concept of co-operatives as were George Holyoake and Dr William King, editor of "The Co-operator" between 1828 and 1830. He urged future co-operatives to learn the lessons of failure.

The venture was welcomed by the impoverished of Rochdale as the weekly wage of weavers had fallen by half over two decades. Manipulation was not only the preserve of truck shops. Food prices in retail shops were set high and adulteration of food and tampering with scales were common practice to boost profits. The Hungry Forties meant many families were not only on the bread line but close to starvation at times.

The twenty eight founding members were determined to trade ethically and honestly and invested £28 to pump-prime start-up. After three months the shop opened four nights a week and the range of products was extended. After trading for one year, total membership had increased to seventy four, capital to £81 and takings to £710. Within twenty years the idea had spread to France, Germany, Spain and Russia, and soon after to Japan also. The first self help guide for co-operatives was written by George Holyoake in 1858 and published in four languages.

The Pioneers' Rule Book set out 'objects' for the financial benefit and improvement of the 'social and domestic conditions' of members. Capital was to be raised in shares of £1. Initially the store was to sell food and clothing but the aim was to extend this to other items to help relieve the worst effects of reduced wages. The ambitious intention was to improve production, land cultivation and distribution and provide housing and education as well. A

temperance hotel was to open "as soon as convenient." Profits were to be divided pro-rata to purchases by members.

Co-operative values were based on self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity, reinforced by the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and care for others. These were set out in seven guiding principles that emphasised autonomy and independence, education and training, co-operation with and between co-operatives and financial prudence, including equitable capital and setting up reserves. Voting was based on one member one vote. Lessons had been learned as the full market price was to be charged and no credit given.

Jumbo Farm at Middleton near Rochdale was founded in 1851. This led to the creation of the Co-operative Wholesale Society in 1860 that later expanded into fruit and vegetable growing on a large scale. By 1863 there were 332 societies. Trade expanded considerably and a large department store opened further up Toad Lane in 1867. Over a century later it was demolished to make way for road improvements by which time the store had already closed, spelling the death-knell of other co-op department stores as competition was fierce. At the turn of the twentieth century 1,651 co-operatives existed in the UK, including over 150 productive societies manufacturing items from clothing to hardware, all under the umbrella of the Co-operative Wholesale Society.