

# Children at Work



Charles Dickens and later Arnold Bennett, painted a vivid picture of working conditions in Victorian England, and yet it is difficult for us to imagine what life was really like, especially for children working in industry.

In the 1840s there was growing concern about the employment of children and in 1841 Her Majesties Commissioners undertook a nationwide survey on the “state, condition and treatment of children and young persons”. In Worcestershire they visited many factories; Glovers, weavers, nail makers, carpet manufacturers and two porcelain factories, belonging to Mr.Grainger and Mr.Chamberlain. The report to the commission by Samuel Scriven and his description of what he found at the porcelain works makes very interesting reading.

*“A considerable number of young people were employed and I was forcibly struck with the difference in their appearance and characters as compared with the workpeople in the Staffordshire Potteries. This I could only infer resulted from the greater regularity in their hours of work, and the opportunities thus afforded them of acquiring educational knowledge, as upon all occasions they laboured only from six to six, deducting two hours for meals, and were under no circumstances allowed to remain longer. Their florid countenances indicated robust health, cheerfulness and contentment. Their occupations were similar, except in one important particular, and that is, that neither women or girls were employed in turning or throwing, these departments being considered in the potteries the very hot beds of profligacy. Out of twenty-four persons twenty-two could read and eighteen could write.”*



It seems that the conditions in the porcelain factories were far better than in most other industries in the county and better than in Staffordshire. Chamberlain had only recently taken over the Flight, Barr and Barr concern, concentrating production on the present Severn Street site. The factory was much smaller than it is today, probably only employing around 150 people. It must have been a very close community. Employees worshipped, baptised their children, were married and buried at St Peter’s Church

that stood on the site of the current car park. Many of the children were also educated at St Peter's School – now the museum!

As part of the national survey, individual workers were interviewed and their words were recorded in such a way that we can almost hear them talking today.

At Chamberlain's Elizabeth Davis (aged 28) said, *"I am the superintendent of the burnishing room; commenced as a burnisher when I was six years old; served my time, and was then made what I am, a looker over the rest. We have but one room, and in that about 12 or 14 young women under 18 years of age; they are all bound by agreement, not by stamp, and have to serve five years. They work by weekly wages, and receive the first year 2s. per week, increasing 6d. per week every year to 4s. for the last two years. They work from six to six in summer, and from eight to eight in winter, and are allowed half an hour for breakfast and one hour for dinner, which they always take good care to keep; they all go home to their meals. We have no rewards or punishments for good or bad conduct. We have holidays at Easter and Christmas and Whitsuntide. Some of them can read and write, - not all; their characters are good, or they would not be here; we have written characters with them. I think they are all well-disposed and very good girls. I never hear any improper expressions, - that would not be allowed. I think all of them attend worship; some of them are singers in the choir."*



Chamberlain would have been very careful to choose just the right person to answer the questions and Miss Davis does seem to be pretty content with her work, but the most staggering thing to me is that she says she started work when she was just six years old! My first question would be how do you control and instruct children of such a young age when they struggle to concentrate for more than a few minutes at a time? Another employee provides the answer; they worked with their parents who took responsibility.

Robert Edgintown (age 16) said, *"I am a dipper, and I work at the same tub as my father. I have been employed nearly six years.....I get six days work a week, and earn 6 shillings. Father receives the money for my board, lodging and clothing. I never found the dipping to hurt me yet, or my father; it agrees very well with my health..."*

The painters could earn more than the others, but only when there was enough work to keep them busy for the whole week. Henry Griffiths (age 17) explained.

*"I am apprenticed to Messrs. Chamberlain; have been bound four years and am to continue until I am 21. I paid no premium; I am not paid a weekly salary, but work by the piece. I work six days in the week when we have work to do; then I get half the amount of the journeyman's wages, which I shall continue to receive during the period of apprenticeship; my average wages for six days would be 1 pound a week; I get sometimes more – at others less; it depends*



*upon good or bad patterns. I am a painter; there are about 36 others in the same room, 15 of whom are apprentices; they all work upon the same system, except those who have just begun, who work the first two or three months by the day. I went to a private school before I came to work, and paid 12s a quarter. I can read and write well; I could answer for the other lads in the same room that they can all read more or less – not all can write....”*

The commissioners found conditions and wages to be very similar at Grainger’s factory at St Martin’s Gate.

George Grainger was interviewed on 1<sup>st</sup> April,



*“I manage this porcelain factory for my mother, the administratrix of my late father who was proprietor of it upwards of 34 or 35 years. We have at a rough guess about 100 hands employed of all ages – men, women, boys and girls; out of this number perhaps there are 30 under 18. I pay the several foremen of departments every Saturday night in hard cash – not in wage bills; I never knew such a thing as a wage bill in Worcester. Our people are admitted to the works at six in the morning in summer and seven or eight in the winter, and leave at six, seven or eight as the season*

*may be; out of this they are allowed – those who work by day-wage and apprentices – two hours for meals which they take. I do not think on any occasion, with the exception of oven-men, that we have ever worked more than 72 hours a week, even under a press of orders, or do I think it ever necessary that we should. Upon the average our piecework people do not actually work more than seven or eight hours a day. I do not know of any process that is deleterious to them, if they exercise common care and cleanliness. Some of them will make the rooms unnecessarily hot, and afterwards expose themselves to cold air; the dippers are the worst for this. We have no system of rewards or punishments for good or bad conduct. There is a sick club, to which all may belong, if they like, and derive a benefit from in sickness, amounting to 4s. a week and upwards for men, and apprentices 2s. There is a sick box also, supported by visitors, from which all are supported in illness.*

*The moral condition of our young children I believe to be very good; I seldom hear of any delinquencies amongst them, or profane oaths or profligacy. I know nothing of the Potteries but from hearsay, and therefore cannot speak as to any comparative difference in the characters of the two classes. Most of our people can read and write. The apprentices make out their own weekly accounts, and give their receipts when required. We do not employ women for trading lathes or turning wheels; that is done by boys.”*



In conclusion there were far worse places for a youngster to work in the 1840s. Many of them learnt to do a skilled job for reasonable employers, who did not flog or beat them. But

we still only ever see one side of the picture. The materials used in porcelain manufacture such as mercury, lead and arsenic must have had a detrimental effect on the workforce, but the dangers were not recognised. The factory workers paint a pretty rosy picture of their working lives – they may of course have been told what to say by their employers!

Interestingly the Commission report includes a note (about Grainger's factory) – "*these premises are of the second class of potters; rooms small, badly ventilated, hot and unclean.*" So maybe George was telling the truth, but not quite the whole truth.

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