

### **What impact did urbanisation have on people's lives in nineteenth century England?**

In 1750 approximately 15 per cent of the population lived in towns, by 1850 it was around 50 per cent, and just thirty years later, in 1880, it had risen to 80 per cent (Evans, 1993, p101; Best, 1985, p24). Hudson (1992) details several theories that have been proposed to explain urban growth, but they are all intrinsically linked with the industrialisation of the nation.

As Britain progressed from being just a centre of “worldwide commerce” to embrace a “centre of manufacturing industry” (Briggs, 2000, p17), the increase in the mechanisation of the textile industry and the utilisation of steam power meant that employment was to be found in central locations. Opportunities for those other than agricultural labourers became very limited in rural areas as domestic employment became a thing of the past. These technological advancements must be seen as one of the primary reasons for people, especially the unskilled workers, to move to towns to try and ensure they could earn the money to live. Indeed in 1801 two-fifths of the population were employed in manufacturing, but by 1871 this proportion had increased dramatically and had reached nearly two-thirds of the population (Evans, 1993, p101).

While these developments were highly profitable for a few entrepreneurial individuals, the majority of the population suffered as a “more modern social structure, with power concentrated in upper and middle class groups” (Hudson, 1992, p156) was established. Unskilled labourers moving to towns had little choice but to live in slums, renting “only the worst built dwellings in the most overcrowded and insanitary districts” (Chinn, 1995, p153), while more prosperous suburbs developed away from the town centres for the more wealthy classes. Although public health reforms did eventually improve the sanitary situation, the levels of mortality were very high as is shown by Liverpool's annual death rate of 36.5 per mille in 1865 (Best, 1985, p74). Hudson (1992) reports that the annual rates of urban mortality were higher than urban birth rates, which shows that towns only grew as a result of high levels of immigration from the rural areas. It could be argued that the high mortality rates was beneficial to the country as a

whole as they prevented the population increasing too quickly for it to be supported which could have led to a “major fall in real incomes and an aborting of economic growth” (Hudson, 1992, p155).

Within cities it was not just the poor housing conditions that people had to suffer. Urban dwellers were at the mercy of criminals supplying increasingly dubious food stuffs: “beer and milk could be watered down”, “ash, sloe or elder leaves were offered in lieu of tea”, and “the addition of alum, a mineral salt, made impure bread look whiter so that it could fetch a higher price” (Evans, 1993, p155). Worryingly, these are the least concerning adulterations, and some of the other food substitutions led to the poisoning of many people. Although the extent of the problem is unknown and difficult to discern, it was widespread enough to warrant a treatise, attention from the medical profession, and eventually legislation.

It was not just problems with their home lives that the workers had to endure: their places of work – the factories – were unpleasant and dangerous, and their detrimental effects on the environment form the mental image often associated with the Industrial Revolution. Dickens’s *Hard Times* is set in a fictional town called ‘Coketown’, a name immediately suggesting sooty buildings and a general grimy atmosphere. Dickens describes the buildings as “black, like the painted face of a savage”, and the air containing “interminable serpents of smoke”. While it is a fictional town, it is believed to have been based upon either Manchester, or a town near Stoke-on-Trent, which gives a sense of the overall nastiness of the contemporary urban environment. In reaction to the appearance of industrial towns, Eliot “lamented that it was ‘difficult to keep one’s faith in a millennium within sight of this modern civilisation’” (Briggs, 1990, p74). The factories themselves were not subject to the stringent health and safety directives that exist today, and many people would have died, or have been terminally injured while working; Richard Oastler compared the “conditions in the worsted mills of Bradford with those in ‘hellish’ colonial plantations” (Briggs, 1990, p62).

The large impersonal factories also served to make the workers faceless, Briggs (1990) uses the words of Taine to describe the dehumanisation in the North of England where he felt “man was an insect and that

it was the army of machines which held the attention” (p70). Rousseau also compares the labourers to ants in *Émile*, again giving an indication of their perceived anonymity. It was not just the individual that was losing face, society was obviously changing, and the once highly regarded church going was not immune to the change:

“The places in which church-going was lowest included every large town described in the census report as a cotton town, the two greatest woollen town, Leeds and Bradford, every large coal town except Wolverhampton and the two great metal centres of Birmingham and Sheffield” (Briggs, 1990, p63).

On an individual level, it could be difficult to see urbanisation as a positive progression. However, the development of a manufacturing industry can clearly be seen to have brought hope, indeed the vast numbers of rural emigrants are clearly an example of this. Without question, industrialisation led to great prosperity and growth for the country as a whole, and the feeling of the age was gloriously embodied through the Great Exhibition of 1851. Historians have a tendency to dwell on the negative, and it must be considered that there were many other notable events in the nineteenth century which benefited society as a whole, certain portions of society which had hitherto been marginalised, and the individual.

Possibly one of the greatest innovations was the steam locomotive railway which, while primarily facilitating industry, suddenly gave the individual the potential to travel, and therefore to holiday. The increase in the demand for leisure pursuits was manifested in 1871 with the establishment of the FA cup. Advances were made in medical practices, with the first public health act being passed in 1848; the first factory act was passed in 1833 to help protect the factory workers, and in 1847 the ten hours act was passed limiting the working hours of women and children. Reform acts were passed in 1832 and 1867 giving previously excluded social groups the vote, and in 1871 the first women’s college, was founded at Cambridge University.

The growth in manufacturing also indicates a cultural change, as manufacturing would only increase to satisfy the demand for the product, which in turn suggests an increase in consumerism. A significant proportion of people must therefore have been in a position to buy goods, which would only be possible if

their incomes allowed it. The poor living conditions put pressure on the existing amenities and steps had to be taken, and were, to improve matters. While this would not necessarily have helped the first wave of immigrants, their descendants would have been better catered for; in the same way, education was eventually made available to a larger range of individuals.

There is a conflict between image and reality in both rural and urban environments. Urban situations are perceived, as a result of literature and art, as hideous places to live and work, and rural settings are portrayed as idyllic. While this maybe a reaction to the unquestionable urban horrors there is an issue of viewing rural life with a misty eyed sentimentality. Agricultural work, although constituting the largest occupational group in 1851, was dependent on the season. Rural accommodation was primitive, and the likelihood of having any form of sanitation was low. Communities was isolated, unlike urban communities which thrived to such a degree that they developed their own informal economies. However, despite the improvements which were certainly a result of urbanisation the country remained the goal of many: "Throughout the nineteenth century, large numbers of English businessmen who had made money in the city wanted nothing better than to establish themselves in appropriate style in the country" (Briggs, 1990, p72).

Being in a position to view the Industrial Revolution in its historical context, it is apparent that the horrors which the first generation of industrial workers, who Evans (1993) conjectures "laboured in worse conditions than their fathers" (p156), suffered were crucial in facilitating the development of the society in which people live today. The first people to benefit from urbanisation were the upper and middle classes, followed by the skilled workers who were unthreatened by mechanisation. As is so often the case, it was the unskilled labourers, who had unwittingly laid the foundations for many of the developments that occurred over the following century giving greater personal satisfaction and political freedom, that were the last to benefit. It is unfortunate that by the time the whole of society was to enjoy the changes brought about by urbanisation, those who had tolerated the misery of the first generation had died.

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