

The Shift from Home to Factory

The Industrial Revolution brought about fundamental changes in the way goods are made. It introduced mass production, or the large-scale production of identical goods, and the use of new sources of energy to meet human needs. People started making products in factories instead of at home, using steam power to run the machinery. New inventions in textile manufacturing, including the spinning jenny, cotton gin, and the steam engine, triggered further production in new factories, where large numbers of people worked on these machines.

The Factory System



Before the Industrial Revolution, craftsmen worked at home, spinning wool, cotton, and linen by hand, and then weaving the thread or yarn into finished cloth. This was known as the domestic system, or cottage industry.

During the Industrial Revolution, large numbers of workers began working together in factories. In these factories, workers could be supervised and could use machines driven by water or steam power. The rate of production in the new factories was astonishing by the standards of the time. As a result of these improvements, the price of cloth decreased and the demand for textiles rose.

Raw cotton was imported to England from the Southern United States. In England, it was then spun into thread and woven into cotton cloth in factories. From there, the cloth was shipped all over the world.

England's plentiful supplies of coal and water provided the resources needed for steam power to run the factories. Its engineers and craftsmen were skilled at making machinery. As the demand grew for less costly British textiles, more and more factories were built, employing greater numbers of workers.

Working Conditions



While factory owners grew richer and more powerful, the conditions of the new working class worsened. Early factories were often appalling places to work, with unsafe and unpleasant conditions. Unlike today, workers during the Industrial Revolution were expected to work long hours or they would lose their jobs. Many workers had to work 12 hour days, six days a week. They didn't get time off or vacations. If they got sick or were injured on the job and missed work, they were often fired. Women and children also worked in factories to earn income.

A lot of the jobs during the Industrial Revolution were dangerous. There weren't any government regulations to help protect workers. Workers sometimes had to work closely with powerful machines that had no safety features. It was not uncommon to lose a finger or a limb. Workers in mines were subject to tiny tunnels that could easily collapse and trap them underground. Many factories and mines were filled with dust that not only made it difficult to breathe, but could cause diseases including cancer. Other places were unsafe fire hazards where they dealt with flammable chemicals or fireworks. The smallest spark could set off a blaze or explosion.

Child Labor



With the rise of industry, men, women, and even children began working in factories. A lot of factories used child labor in the same unsafe working conditions that adults worked in. Factories often hired children because they could pay them lower wages than what adults were paid. Some children were sent to work in the coal mines, as they were small enough to fit in tight spaces. They were subjected to the same long work weeks and poor conditions as adults. Many children were killed or got sick working in factories.