

Trades and Working Conditions in Bristol in 1865

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A fruitful and detailed source of information on local industrial history during the nineteenth century is to be found in the mass of printed material issued by Parliament in the form of reports by Royal Commissions and Select Committees, and in the evidence which was collected during the course of their enquiries. Many of these Reports and Parliamentary Papers give extremely detailed evidence about industries, industrial processes, machinery, conditions of work, housing, wages and the welfare of employees. The reports and papers of the Commission on the Employment of Children 1862 - 1867, for example, contain information about Bristol industries, factories and workshops, as well as about the conditions of work for children¹. The work of this Commission arose out of the growing concern for children's welfare and education, which was to lead to increasing Parliamentary control over children's employment and to the Education Act of 1870². The following account of conditions in Bristol is based on the evidence which was collected in the city by one of the Commission's investigators, J Edward White, during 1865³.

The report produced by J Edward White on *Miscellaneous Manufacturers of Bristol* shows clearly the very wide range of products which were made in Bristol, many of them in small workshops crowded into the central area of the city. Most of these trades were labour-intensive, several employed a high proportion of low-paid female labour, and powered machinery played only a small part in their operations. Besides larger concerns such as the collieries in Bedminster, glassworks, brickworks, iron foundries, sugar refineries, breweries, soap and chemical works, there were many smaller trades such as metal-working, brass, nail and pin-making, lead-shot works, cocoa, tobacco, printing, tanning, clothing, millinery and rag-picking. The investigator commented that

Bristol is a picturesque city, partly from its situation, but chiefly from the age and character of its streets and buildings, many of which have the look of belonging to the middle ages. This, however, has the natural drawbacks in narrow streets and inconvenient buildings with the want of space and necessary accommodation ...

His verdict on the normal hours of work in Bristol was that, compared with many other places, they were moderate not exceeding 12, and he did not think that children were forced into unduly early or excessive work, although he was concerned about the low standard of education which the Children displayed. The general working day in Bristol workshops and factories was from 6.00 am to 6.00 pm. Wages for children were said to be from 3s 0d to 5s 0d per week although, like adults, many children were employed at piece-work. Evidence on conditions in the brass works was taken from Mr Thomas Hale, the owner of Hale's Brass Foundry in Narrow Wine Street. He employed several boys from the age of 11 years, and the hours were 6.00 am to 6.00 pm. He stated that there were six other brass foundries

in the town. No steam-driven machinery was employed in the works, 'our premises are not suitable for it'. He confessed that the trade was not a healthy one, and that the workers were much subject to asthma from the dust given off in filing, turning and hammering the brass and copper, 'I do not think that the noise has any bad effect'. Thomas Gill age 12 who worked in the casting shop was also interviewed. He had started work at the age of 10, in a factory producing blueing, blacking, chicory, washing powder and matches, where there were fifteen other boys and the hours were 6.00 am to 6.30 pm. He had found that the blue affected his health very badly, and he much preferred working in the brass foundry.

It made me and my clothes very blue. There was no washing place. It did not suit me so well as brass casting. The blue was like poison to me. Know it did not suit me because it made me feel tight in the chest. Had to go to the doctor very often, ie once or twice a month and have a couple of pills. He did always give us some pills. Two or three of us generally went together. There was none of them that did not have to go to the doctor. We did have the headache too. Here I am quite well and don't ever cough.

Thomas Gill stated that he went to a Sunday school, 'but not night school because Mother makes me go to bed early'. When questioned, his education proved, not surprisingly, to be rudimentary. He could read a little, but he thought that there were five half-crowns in a sovereign, that Bristol, London and Scotland were large towns and Ireland was a small town; he had not heard of Dublin.



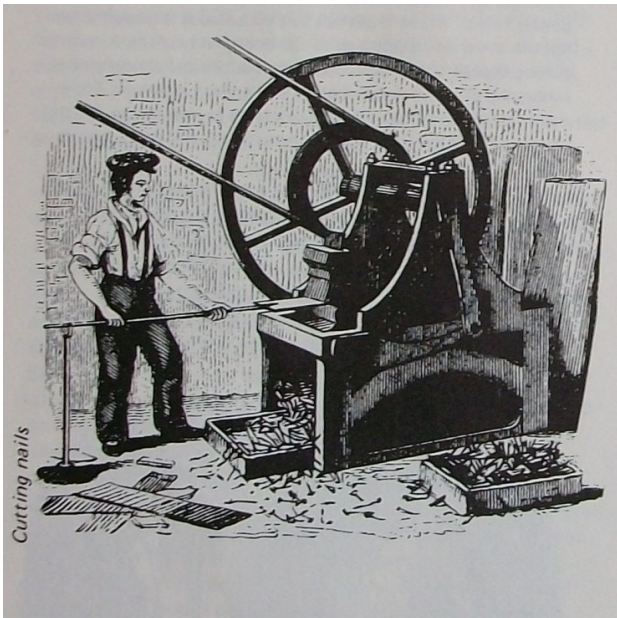
Mr Llewellyn of Llewellyn and James, Brass-Founders and Coppersmiths at Castle Green, was also interviewed about the working conditions in his establishment. He employed nearly 100 men and boys, and claimed that the firm was the biggest brassfoundry in Bristol, making brass and copper work of all kinds, including steam engine mountings, hydraulic engineering, bell-founding and making the coppers of breweries, sugar refineries etc. The hours were 6.00 am to 6.00 pm with a half day on Saturdays.

The Avonside Engine Company carried on a Locomotive, Marine and General Engineering works in St Philips making especially locomotives and employing 700 men and 100 boys. M Edward Slaughter, the managing director, stated that he was firmly opposed to any legislation which might limit the hours of work for boys under the age of 18. He declared that

Any such limitation would cause a deduction from the amount of labour at present available to us cause such an increase in the cost of production as would in effect amount to a serious tax upon manufacture result in a national loss.

He went on to say that the trade would not be able to face foreign competition, especially from France, if the hours of work were in any way reduced.

Other iron-working and engineering works in Bristol which were visited by the investigator included Stotherts, engineers and ship-builders, at Hotwells; Roberts and Daynes, iron-works and timber yard, at St Philips; and I and E Bush iron works, at St Philips.



Mr William Cooksley who manufactured wrought nails, chains and patten rings at Horton Street was interviewed by Mr White. The hours at his works were 6.00 am to 6.00 pm but he complained that the boys he employed went off at 6.00 pm and worked for other people and were consequently tired and languid next day. He stated that

One, for instance, has had to work in this way for his father at home, making rivets. Other boys have been solicited by another small master to go and work for him alter their day was finished here. This is an in justice and loss to us...

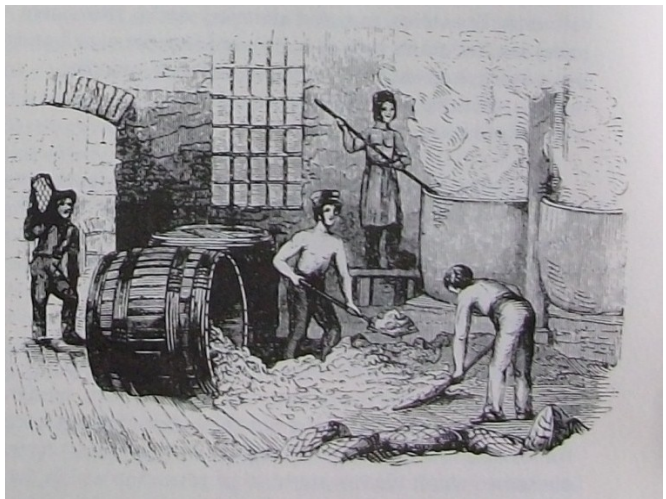
At Sherrings cut-nail and shoe-heel works in Wilder Street the manager, Mr F Pillars, stated that 30 boys were employed to feed the machines and another 20 to sort and parcel the nails. They were paid from 2s 6d to 6s 0d per week, according to their age and ability. Few were under 13 years of age. The hours were 6.00 am to 5.30 pm. One of the

boys, John Wintle age 13, stated that he earned 3s pa week .He attended school on Sundays but not during the week since his mother was a carrier and when he left work he had to attend to her horse.

At Sheldon Bush and Company's Shot, Sheet Lead and Pipe Works at Redcliffe Hill and Cheese Lane, Mr Thomag Sheldon stated that the hours were 6.00 am to 6.00 pm, although sometimes the hours were longer in August and September when there was a great demand for lead shot because of the shooting season. He did not like to employ boys under the age of 11, nor those who could not read and write.



The Netham Company employed some 200 men and 35 boys at their Chemical Works in Sr Georges, where they manufactured soda and vitriol. Six of the boys were under 13 years of age. One boy, James Hurst, aged 10 said he had been at the works for a year. He worked from 7.00 am to 5.00 pm breaking stones with a hammer, and earned 3s per week, Not surprisingly the inspector found that he could not read very well.



Similar working conditions, wages and hours of work were found at most of the other firms which the inspector visited in Bristol. These included Finzel and Sons, sugar refiners, at Counterslip which employed 'several hundred men and boys' and where the working conditions were very hot, so that they worked stripped to the waist. The works did, however have a brass band and a lending library. Other works visited included Christopher Thomas and Brothers, Soap and

Candle Making Works, Broad Plane, which was said to be one of the largest of its kind in the country: Robinson's Stationers and Printers, Redcliffe Street, where much of the work was printing stationery, labels etc for grocers and making paper bags, and where many women were employed:

E and W Greenslades 'Brush Bellows Plane and Patten Manufacturers' at Thomas Street; J Pocock's Hair Cloth and Curled Hair Works at Lower Castle Street, where nine boys were employed and where it was reported that 'there has been some falling off in the curled hair making trade owing to the general use of steel springs for mattresses and cushions'. Three Marine Store Dealers were also visited by the inspector, Matchins in Old Market Street and William Clacke's and Bailey's both in Thomas Street. In these places from six to forty women and girls were employed in sorting and tearing up rags, woollens and cotton cloth. The hours were 6 am to 6 pm, and the wages 6s. per week. The working conditions were close, hot and dusty and the workers were affected by asthma, but at Matchins where, when business was good as many as 60 women were employed, it was declared by Mrs Matchin that 'It is dusty work but they don't seem to mind it. They are chiefly Irish'.

The premises of these dealers in rags, bones and other waste provided the worst working conditions in Bristol, and the investigator suggested that attention should be given to the public health hazard which they represented.

In these rags, paper picked from scavengers' carts, bones, and all sorts of rubbish, of kinds which of course cause effluvia, are accumulated. A police officer stated in court that the stench caused in turning over the rubbish to search (for stolen property) was so bad that he was obliged to give it up. . . The work places which I saw . . . were piled with rags, and in the lower part of one were bones and rabbit skins, not sweet smelling. . .

The one firm in Bristol which stood out from all the others for its working conditions and concern for its employees was J S Fry's Chocolate and Cocoa Works in Union Street. The investigator declared that the care taken by the firm for the comfort and welfare of the people employed made it a pleasure to visit the place. The premises were described as 'common street dwelling-house rooms, but there is no crowding, and the place is strikingly clean and comfortable'. Two hundred people were employed, two-thirds of them female and half of these girls under 18 years of age. Only a few boys, and no-one under 12 were employed. Most of the women were employed in packing, filling bags, fastening and labelling the packages. Hours for men and boys were 6.00 am to 6.00 pm with an hour and a half for meals, while for the women and girls the hours were 8.00 am to 6.00 pm. Mr Joseph Storrs Fry stated 'We found it better to let them take their breakfast comfortably at home before they oome to work . . .' Work on Saturdays stopped at 2.00 pm. Each day there was a short religious service for the employees at 8.45 am, and the investigator was greatly impressed by the manner in which this was conducted and by the attitude of the workers. Attention was paid to the education of the young people employed; they were encouraged to attend evening school and most of them could read; 'No persons, however skilful, are retained whose moral conduct is unsatisfactory.' The wages were from 3s 0d to 5s 0d per week for girls and 7s 0d to 10s 0d per week for women.

The rapid growth in the population of Bristol from 61,000 in 1801 to 154,000 by 1861, and the fact that factories, workshops and houses were crowded within the central area, meant that the city was a prey to disease. During the 1850s Bristol was the third most unhealthy town in England with an annual death-rate of 29 per 1,000 people⁴. Inadequate or non-existent sewers and lack of a pure water-supply meant that cholera and similar diseases flourished. The Report of 1865 shows some of the other reasons for this state of affairs: the investigator reported that 'there is in general a great want of proper privy accommodation, not only in the dwelling houses of the poorer classes, but also in the manufactories'. He went on to describe the conditions, with a mass of horrific detail. For example, in one factory there were two privies for at least 150 people, in another place nine families had only one common privy, and many of the privies were in a shocking state. A medical officer for the city had recently been appointed, but he had little power to act, and the sanitary inspector was likewise powerless to interfere unless a definite public nuisance was being caused.⁵

Visitors to Bristol during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had frequently commented upon the cleanliness of the city, its good drainage and pure water supply. By the mid-nineteenth century all this had completely changed, many parts of Bristol were filthy and unhealthy, the Frome and Avon were little more than open sewers and the stench from the harbour was highly offensive, especially during the summer months. Not until the 1870s when an adequate supply of pure water was once more available, when an enormous amount of work had been done on providing drains and sewers, and when many small industries had been moved from the crowded courts and alleys of the central area into the rapidly expanding suburbs, did the mortality rate fall and Bristol gradually lost the unenviable distinction of being one of the unhealthiest and disease-ridden cities in the kingdom.

References

- 1 The Commissioner's Reports are to be found in;

Parliamentary Papers	1863	xvii,	3170
Parliamentary Papers	1864	xxii,	3414
Parliamentary Papers	1865	xx,	3548
Parliamentary Papers	1866	xxiv,	3678
Parliamentary Papers	1867	xvi,	3796
- 2 For the background to the Commissioner's work G Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain*, 1971, pp 74-48 .
- 3 Parliamentary Papers 1866, xxiv, 3678, pp 57-71. Report upon Some Miscellaneous Manufacturers of Bristol.
- 4 J Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century*, 1887, p 313.
- 5 Dr David Davies was appointed as the first medical officer of health for Bristol in February 1865. David Large and Frances Round, *Public Health in Mid-Victorian Bristol*, Bristol Historical Association, 1974, p 16.

Illustrations from *The Useful Arts and Manufactures*, Tomlinson, 1862