

# NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



## VICTORIAN BRITAIN: CHILD LABOUR IN TEXTILE FACTORIES

### TEACHERS' NOTES

This lesson was the fifth in an intensive week's course on Victorian Britain for a Year 6 class. The children had not studied the Victorian era and had the usual difficulties of understanding what life was like for people during the period being discussed.

Wanting to incorporate ICT and to extend a relatively able group within the class, I chose the website [www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk), which provides a very good child labour simulation.

At the beginning of the week I had introduced the topic by asking the children what they knew about Victorian Britain – what dates would they be writing on their timeline? Next I had recounted a tale of a young girl, Edie, who lived in a workhouse in Bristol. For this I used the story-telling exemplar of Lotte's story (see 'Down the Mine' on the Nuffield website), although Edie worked in a cotton mill, rather than a mine as Lotte did. For the details of the story I drew on children's life experiences described in the different sections of the Spartacus website. I wanted to make this as dramatic a tale as possible, so incorporated parts of the Lotte story. For example, Edie (myself) was invited to the 'big house' to wash, dress and eat well before spending the night in a lovely warm comfortable bed. The following morning a distinguished gentleman, the Honourable Michael Sadler, came to ask 'me' questions. The class were enthralled, gripped by the situation that Edie found herself in.

I had left the lesson on a dramatic climax, with the children not knowing what had happened to Edie after the interview with Michael Sadler. I had told them that they might find out about her through using the internet and possibly coming across some of the friends who had worked with her at Cressbrook Mill in 1832.

#### **Year group/class**

Year 6, 26 pupils, of mixed gender and ability.

#### **Teaching time**

One one-hour lesson.

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## Learning objectives

For the children to:

- gain an understanding of conditions in early nineteenth century mills
- be able to read and interpret difficult and challenging texts
- understand and use language appropriate to a committee of inquiry
- pursue an historical enquiry, raising questions and using original sources.

## Key question

What was life like for workhouse children in the early nineteenth century?

## Resources

All the resources used in the lesson were on the excellent Spartacus website: <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/>. The information we used is in the section: Child Labour 1750–1900, listed on the site’s home page.

The children explored the resource material on the site, and followed hyperlinks, to discover the information they wanted.

## The teaching

### Episode 1

*Focus: Discussion – past children’s lives*

Building on the previous lessons, I introduced the investigation with a discussion about what the main occupations of the people who lived in the eighteenth century would have been, and whether there would have been changes in the nineteenth century. Then we progressed on to what children did in these periods. As pupils in a semi-rural school, the class could appreciate that most children in this school would have been from agricultural families, but they all wanted to own the farms, not be farm labourers!

I asked if they, as children then, would have attended school. Some thought they would have done, but one boy, who attends the local scouts in the original school hall, recalled a date of 1889. He thought that schools would not have begun until near that date. The whole class were confident that the children of this time would have been at home or out playing with their friends – ‘Having a great time’ was the consensus of opinion.

### Episode 2

*Focus: Using historical sources on the internet*

I then invited the children to surf the Spartacus website, focusing on Child Labour 1750-1900. I asked them to look for any information they could find about working conditions for children. I was keen for this to be a dynamic search and for the children to uncover information at their own pace.

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In the computer suite the children sat in mixed ability pairs, each at a computer. They knew how to use hyperlinks and how to use the Back button to return to where they had begun their investigation.

I moved about the room, only stopping for a few minutes at a time to check that they could give me just one key fact from a page they were reading. Some pairs found the information quickly, and others were keen to click on the hyperlinks which informed them about related areas. One pair caused me to halt the researching: LS and AB had discovered that in Manchester during the 1800s only two out of five children would reach the age of five. AB is a poor reader but he can pick out key facts quickly. He looked around the room of 25 and deduced that only 10 of them would still be alive. I asked the room to listen to the facts the boys had uncovered, and AB divided the room into two groups, one of 10, one of 15. He told them with a shy grin that the group of 10 were very lucky because they would still be alive. There was a stunned silence. His partner then added that the ten who were still living would have to share a toilet with 115 other people. Some children immediately wished they were in the other group!

### **Episode 3**

*Focus: Reading for key facts – with time limit*

I now wanted the children to focus on how they could interpret text. Depending upon their reading ability, I gave them different characters to read about. Their focus in the reading was to be able to write a short speech which they could make to Michael Sadler, had they been asked to attend his Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry. I asked them to write down information they thought they could use. This was to establish skimming skills.

One pair began to write out verbatim the text from one of the interviews, but when told they only had another three minutes before the computers went off, they quickly chose key facts to record.

### **Episode 4**

*Focus: Discussion based on information gained from the Sadler Committee's report*

With the computers off, we discussed the key question of what life was like for workhouse children. There was a wealth of responses which included: short, boring, lonely, dirty, dangerous, painful, cruel, cold and hungry.

Further responses included a more detailed account of the pain and misery which surrounded working children, whilst alternatively other pairs had clearly recognised that these orphaned or abandoned children found company in working with other children. Some pairs further suggested that parents wanted their children to go to work, to bring desperately-needed income into the house. These pairs liked the idea of the independence and feeling of power they thought they would have if they were providing such an important source of funds for their poor brothers and sisters – who would otherwise be certain to die of starvation.

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## Episode 5

*Focus: Working in pairs – preparing statements for the Sadler Committee.*

I now gave the children five minutes with their partners to produce a short statement to present to Michael Sadler's Committee of Inquiry, saying why they felt children should or should not work. I told them they could take on any of the characters they had read about in the course of their research. Some children adapted the narratives so that they were friends or family of those who had testified or even of some children who had died.

We then set up the room for each pupil to step forward and proclaim his/her speech. I audio-taped the speeches so that they could later hear how this simulation of the meeting of the formal committee sounded, but without an external microphone I was rather unsuccessful.

The speeches alternated between those who were for child labour and those who were against it. They shouted 'Shame!' when they heard something which they disagreed with and 'Aye!' when they heard something they thought was a good idea. At the end of the 'hearing' the class were asked to vote on whether they were for or against child labour. There were two for and three against, with the remaining 17 children abstaining. When I asked why they couldn't vote one way or the other, their opinion was that they couldn't stop children working overnight without some form of money being paid to the family to stop them from starving. They also thought that the children should be allowed to attend school!

## Learning outcomes

The children:

- developed knowledge and understanding of Victorian Britain from primary sources and other information texts
- were able to withdraw the key facts from contemporary documents and interpret these in their own words
- were able to understand and engage with the problems which faced poor working class families and also the government in creating acceptable law
- were able to recognise the importance of seeing all aspects of a debate before coming to a conclusion
- were fascinated that they could learn so much and have great fun whilst studying history
- were intrigued that they could use primary sources to re-create a scene from the 1830s.

## Reflection

This was a wonderful opportunity for the children to use speaking and listening skills by participating in a debate. The documents they read are recommended for key stage 3, but with the hyperlinks the children were able to move beyond the documents and search out a wealth of additional information. I would like to have

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dressed the children up in Victorian clothing and videoed the Committee of Inquiry (including myself in costume) as the children loved the idea of listening to themselves on audio – although it didn't record very well. In future I will definitely check the equipment before undertaking any form of recording!

Note from Jacqui Dean. An exciting lesson where, their imagination stimulated by the earlier story, the children pursued a genuine historical enquiry, read difficult and challenging texts, and applied their new knowledge and understanding in a debate on child labour to reach sophisticated conclusions.

**Nuffield Primary History project**

**General editors:** Jacqui Dean and Jon Nichol

**Author of this unit:** Christine Williams, Sefton

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