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1

Introduction

My first job came when I was only a little over six years of age; it was turning a wheel for a rope and twine spinner at Rob's Rope Walk, Duddeston Mill Road, Vauxhall, Birmingham. I received 2s 6d per week, and worked from six in the morning until six at night.¹

Will Thorne was very young when he began work in 1863, joining thousands of young child workers in Birmingham's factories and workshops. If he had arrived at the gates of a cotton mill in search of work, six-year-old Thorne would have been refused employment because he was too young, but legal restrictions on child labour in 1863 did not apply to all sectors of the economy. Government legislation aimed at regulating and restricting the employment of children was first introduced with the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act of 1802, followed by a series of Factory Acts during the nineteenth century. However, it was only in 1867 that employment of children below the age of eight was prohibited in all factories and workshops, despite the large numbers of children who worked in manufacturing industries other than textiles.² Studies of child labour have examined the experiences of child workers in agriculture, mining and textile mills, yet surprisingly little research has been concentrated on child labour in industrial towns that had quite different patterns of economic activity and organisation.³ This book explores child labour in Birmingham and the West Midlands from the mid-eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, focusing on the economic contributions of child workers under the age of 14 and their experiences of a childhood dominated by work. It offers insights into the relationship between child workers and their families, highlighting the extent to which children's education and health could be damaged for the economic benefit of families as well as employers. Furthermore, it enhances our current knowledge of childhood and child

1 Will Thorne, *My Life's Battles* (London, 1925), p. 15.

2 Peter Kirby, *Child Labour in Britain, 1750–1870* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 94.

3 Joyce Burnette, 'Child Day-labourers in Agriculture: Evidence from Farm Accounts, 1740–1850', *Economic History Review*, 65/3 (2012), pp. 1077–99; Hugh Cunningham, 'The Employment and Unemployment of Children in England, c1680–1851', *Past and Present*, 126 (1990), pp. 115–50; Maxine Berg, *The Age of Manufactures, 1700–1820: Industry, Innovation and Work in Britain* (London, 1994); Eric Hopkins, *Childhood Transformed: Working Class Children in Nineteenth-Century England* (Manchester, 1994).

labour by illuminating this previously unexamined aspect of the Birmingham and West Midlands' economy, arguing that child labour was not a short-lived stage of the early Industrial Revolution but an integral part of industry in the region until towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The literature on child labour has expanded over the last three decades to include the significance of child workers' contribution to industrialisation and the relative importance of children's earnings to the family economy.⁴ More recently, attention has turned towards the themes of child workers' health, diversity of employment and agency among child workers.⁵ These studies have informed the arguments developed in this book, which examines the nature and extent of child labour in Birmingham and the West Midlands and the changes that took place in the levels of child labour between 1750 and 1900; the importance of children's earnings to the family economy; changes in the intensity of children's work and the impact of early work on children's education, health and life chances; and changes in attitudes to child labour and childhood over time, as well as evidence of children's agency as participants in historical change.

In the centuries before industrialisation approximately a third of households in early modern England contained servants, including children, who were housed, clothed and fed within the household in exchange for unpaid work.⁶ A further one-third of households had older children who were living away from home: children from poor rural families were expected to leave home from the age of ten to live and work as farm servants until they were old enough to marry and set up their own household. Younger children still living at home earned small amounts for bird-scaring or watching sheep. When not working on the land, the entire family would be occupied with the sorting, carding and spinning of wool.⁷ Most children lived in rural or semi-rural districts in the mid-eighteenth century, working at bird-scaring, picking stones or weeding and planting crops, and many continued in this rural way of life until much later in the nineteenth century. Roger Langdon, for example, began work as a farmer's boy in 1833 at the age of eight: 'For the princely sum of one shilling a week I had to mind sheep and pull up turnips in all winds and weathers,

4 Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, "The exploitation of little children": Child Labour and the Family Economy in the Industrial Revolution', *Explorations in Economic History*, 32 (1995), pp. 485–516; Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2010).

5 Peter Kirby, *Child Workers and Industrial Health in Britain, 1780–1850* (Woodbridge, 2013); Nigel Goose and Katrina Honeyman (eds), *Childhood and Child Labour in Industrial England: Diversity and Agency, 1750–1914* (Farnham, 2013).

6 Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London, 1971).

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

starting at six o'clock in the morning'.⁸ However, with enclosure and the move towards day-labour, the problem of seasonal employment in agriculture became more acute, as high levels of unemployment among adult agricultural workers became common from October to March.⁹ The main period of enclosure in Warwickshire, from 1760 to 1790, may have been a significant factor in encouraging rural families to migrate to Birmingham and other nearby towns in search of industrial employment.

Peter Kirby has identified the important role of workshop-based industries in absorbing migrant labour as structural changes occurred in the agricultural labour market. Workshop production was relatively flexible, as employers relied on the use of hand tools rather than capital-intensive machinery and could lay off workers when trade was depressed.¹⁰ Even in textiles, domestic production within small units remained important: more than half the employees in the silk industry in 1851 were employed in small firms of fewer than 20 employees. Boys and girls were employed in a wide variety of domestic workshop occupations, ranging from hose and stocking manufacture to gloving, printing and soap-boiling. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries regional specialisation developed based on established rural domestic industries, such as woollen textiles in the West Riding of Yorkshire.¹¹ Joseph Terry began work in 1823 at the age of seven in a Yorkshire woollen mill, later recalling the experience in his autobiography:

some part of my time was spent Setting Cards, or inserting the Card Teeth into leaves and Garters as they were called to fit on the Scribbling Machines for Scribbling Wool etc. This was a most wearisome and dreary task ... great numbers of children and young and grown-up families got their bread by this poor and unhealthy means; the very best hands never exceeding one shilling per day, and great numbers suffered much in their health from this, worse than slavish employment.¹²

In metal-working industries men and boys were employed in the production of machines and machine parts, whereas women workers and girls were found in the less-skilled work of chain-making, nail-making and pin-making.¹³ Metal

8 John Burnett (ed.), *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London, 1994), p. 46.

9 K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 144.

10 Kirby, *Child Labour*, p. 61.

11 Pat Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution* (Sevenoaks, 1992), p. 118.

12 Burnett, *Destiny Obscure*, pp. 57-8.

13 Kirby, *Child Labour*, pp. 63-4.

industries in Birmingham became specialised during the eighteenth century in brass-wares, jewellery-making, buttons, buckles, toys and the gun trade. Intermediate technologies, particularly the introduction of the stamp, press, draw-bench and lathe, encouraged small firms to meet the growing demand for a variety of goods. Pat Hudson and Eric Hopkins have argued that the increased division of labour and specialisation of Birmingham's metal trades in the late eighteenth century involved the expansion of female and child labour.¹⁴ Skilled workmen employed child assistants, while young girls were employed to hand-paint buttons and buckles and in the manufacture of covered buttons and gilt jewellery. This book explores differing forms of children's industrial employment, including parish apprenticeships and non-apprenticed child labour in various occupations and work environments in the West Midlands, with a particular focus on Birmingham. E.P. Thompson famously referred to the 'exploitation of little children' as one of the most shameful aspects of industrialisation in Britain.¹⁵ However, the experiences of non-apprenticed children employed in occupations such as pin-making and nail-making in manufacturing workshops or factories have been largely neglected. A comparison of these experiences with those from elsewhere illuminates and adds to the existing literature on child labour.

Studies of child employment in agriculture and rural industries by Helen Speechley, Joyce Burnette and Nicola Verdon found that children's earnings, however small, were important to their families.¹⁶ The impact of enclosure may therefore have encouraged rural families to migrate to industrial towns, where work was available for women and children as well as men. Studies of parish apprenticeship by Katrina Honeyman and Alysa Levene suggest that parish apprenticeships were important in providing child workers to local craftsmen and women as well as to new textile manufacturing industries.¹⁷ Research by Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries highlighted the significance to family incomes of the earnings of children of factory workers and outworkers, reflecting the

14 Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution*, pp. 122–5; Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham: The First Manufacturing Town in the World 1760–1840* (London, 1989), pp. 102–03.

15 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1991), p. 331.

16 Helen Speechley, 'Female and Child Agricultural Day Labourers in Somerset, c.1685–1870', PhD thesis (University of Exeter, 1999), pp. 19–48; Burnette, 'Child Day-labourers'; Nicola Verdon, 'The Rural Labour Market in the Early Nineteenth Century: Women's and Children's Employment, Family Income, and the 1834 Poor Law Report', *Economic History Review*, 55/2 (2002), pp. 299–323.

17 Katrina Honeyman, *Child Workers in England, 1780–1820: Parish Apprentices and the Making of the Early Industrial Labour Force* (Farnham, 2007); Alysa Levene, 'Parish Apprenticeship and the Old Poor Law in London', *Economic History Review*, 63/4 (2010), pp. 915–41 at 929–30.

situation in agricultural families.¹⁸ These studies thus raise questions about the amount children could earn in particular industries or sectors of the economy, and at what age they typically began work. Furthermore, historians such as Hans-Joachim Voth, Jan de Vries and Nigel Goose have suggested there was an intensification of work between 1760 and 1850 that markedly impacted the life chances of working children in terms of educational attainment, levels of literacy, health and life expectancy.¹⁹ These important themes and avenues of research are drawn together here to frame a new history of child labour in Birmingham and the West Midlands.

18 Horrell and Humphries, “Exploitation of little children”; Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, ‘Old Questions, New Data, and Alternative Perspectives: Families’ Living Standards in the Industrial Revolution’, *The Journal of Economic History*, 52/4 (1992), pp. 849–80 at 851–2.

19 Hans-Joachim Voth, ‘Living Standards and the Urban Environment’, in R. Floud and P. Johnson (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 268–94 at 293; Jan de Vries, ‘The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution’, *The Journal of Economic History*, 54/2 (1994), pp. 249–70 at 255–76; Nigel Goose, ‘Employment Prospects in Nineteenth-Century Hertfordshire in Perspective: Varieties of Childhood?’ in Nigel Goose and Katrina Honeyman (eds), *Childhood and Child Labour in Industrial England: Diversity and Agency, 1750–1914* (Farnham, 2013), pp. 157–214 at 159–67.