

**Durham Miners Heritage Group
Information and Activities Package**

Teaching Notes

Children and Women at Work 1

Prior to the nineteenth century, there was no legislation which specifically restricted the conditions of work of children. However, the rapid rise in industrial labour which was the backbone of the industrial revolution led to calls for changes. Of course, such restrictions were vociferously and actively opposed by factory and mine owners and their personally nominated Parliamentary representatives.

Concerns first started to be raised with regards to the employment of children in the Lancashire cotton spinning and weaving mills, and in the Yorkshire woollen mills. The first legislation to address this was enacted by the Factories Act of 1802. The Act applied only to the mills, not to the mines. It obliged factory owners to take measures as to the hygiene of the working conditions, to house male and female workers separately, to supply two complete outfits of clothing each year for all workers and to attend to any outbreaks of infectious disease.

More pertinently with regards to children, the Act specified that all children must be schooled in reading, writing and arithmetic for the first four years of their employment. Children must not start work before 6am, must finish before 9pm and must not work more than 12 hours in any one day. Children must have one hour in Sunday school where they must be instructed in the Christian religion.

Interestingly, the Act specifically stated that factory owners must obey the law, as if this needed stating explicitly. The Act did not provide for any factory inspectors nor give any authority to Parliament to enforce it.

This is not to say that all factory and mine owners treated their employees inhumanely. There were a significant number who, by the standards of their day, took good care of their workers, but the majority cared more for profits and the 1802 Factories Act went largely ignored.