

Working in a mill

The mill I work in is called the Puff and Brass after the name of the steam engine that drives all the machines. The day starts when a knocker upper bangs on our

bedroom window with a long stick. He goes all the way down our street waking the workers like this. It is half past four in the morning.

I get to the mill at half past five when the engine starts. The mill gates are closed at twenty to six and anyone who arrives later has to wait until breakfast time before they can start work. They are fined for being late and the fine is taken out of their wages at the end of the week.

The engine works at full speed driving all the machines until half past seven. I am a weaver now and have four looms to look after. Before that I worked in the spinning shed – first as a doffer and then as a piecer. Cotton is spun onto bobbins and a doffer lifts the full bobbins off the spinning machines and puts in an empty one for the machine to fill up next. Some children who work as doffers a long time become bent almost double as they lean over their machines and can never straighten up again. A piecer is a child who ties threads together again when they snap on the machine. One piecer was found to walk twenty miles in her twelve hour shift.

The machines slow down at half past seven for ten minutes while the mechanics oil the engine. We have a quick breakfast of tea and bread and butter. The engine speeds up again until mid day when it stops for an hour. We have to clean our machines for about twenty minutes before we can go outside and have our lunch. It is good to get out into the fresh air. The inside of the mill is hot and damp and the air is full of cotton fibres. They make people cough and wheeze. Sometimes they spit up blood and get a disease called consumption which kills them.

The engine starts again at one o'clock and we work until five o'clock when it slows down again for twenty minutes. We have tea then but as soon as the engine picks up speed again we are back at work until seven o'clock.

I go home with John, my younger brother. He works as a scavenger. This means he crawls under the spinning machines and cleans out the fluff that collects there. He shows me his bruises because he was caught having a nap by his machines. The overlooker beat him with a strap.

When we get home we have a little more food but are really too tired to eat it and go straight to bed. It only seems a moment before there is a banging on the bedroom window again.

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Age range

- Years 3/4 (SP4/5).
- Years 5/6 (SP6/7).

Resources

Copies of the worksheet. Dictionary.

Using the worksheet

This activity can be used to follow on from activity **1B** 'Spinning and weaving'. It takes the story of these two textile processes into an industrial context and highlights the activities of the workers and some of the conditions in which they worked. After the students have performed the comprehension tasks and used the dictionary, they can use the text on the worksheet again for activity **3B**. The story here is a fictitious one but it is based on fact. Mills were sometimes called after their engines. Two real examples are the 'Puff and dart' and 'Bang the nation'.

Younger students

The students should use a dictionary to look up the meanings of bobbin, consumption, loom, overlooker. They should then answer these questions.

Questions (and answers)

Write these questions on the board for the students to try. (Answers in brackets.)

1. What time was Edith woken up? (4.30am)
2. How long did it take Edith to get to the mill after she had woken up? (1 hour)
3. Why do you think she did not want to be late? (She did not want to be fined)
4. Where did Edith go at lunch-time? (Outside)
5. Why was John beaten? (Because he had a nap)
6. Why do you think Edith and John were tired? (Because they had worked all day)

More able students can try the questions for the older students.

Outcomes

The students can:

- Extract information from a text.
- Appreciate some of the conditions endured by people working in a Victorian mill.

Older students

The students should use a dictionary to look up the meanings of bobbin, consumption, loom, overlooker. They could start by answering the questions set for younger students then move onto these questions. (Answers in brackets.)

Questions (and answers)

Write these questions on the board for the students to try.

1. Why do you think someone came round to the workers' houses to wake them. (They did not have alarm clocks).
2. How could you tell if a person had worked as a doffer a long time? (They walked bent up. They could not straighten up).
3. Why was the inside of a mill an unhealthy place? (The air is full of cotton fibres that make people cough, wheeze and develop consumption which is fatal).
4. Why do you think the machines need to be kept clean? (Cotton fibres get into the machinery and stop it working).
5. What do you think an overlooker does? (Supervises the work and punishes people who are not working).

Outcomes

The students can:

- Extract information from a text.
- Appreciate some of the conditions endured by people working in a Victorian mill.