

Slavery: 5 White slavery in Britain

Britain was full of virtual White slaves up to the 20th century. We could look at the slavery of Whites in Puritan England; the slavery of 100,000 Irish under Cromwell (sold to the West Indies); the enslavement of Protestants by Charles II; poor serfs (virtual slaves) in medieval times, or the slavery of sending minor criminals to Australia or America for hard labour. Between the 16th and 19th centuries various acts were passed to enable the enslavement of White poor people, mainly to provide labour for the colonies. Even Quakers in Philadelphia demanded White slaves from England in the 17th century. Many of these were kidnapped off British streets.

We must also consider thousands of people press-ganged into serving in the navy or the army during times of war, especially the Napoleonic Wars. This was legal practice. Those who survived (most didn't) were indentured for years without their permission.

Across Europe, peasants working for the aristocracy or landed gentry were treated as slaves for centuries before the French Revolution. A peasant's life was worth little with common lands stolen from them by the rich and aristocracy since the 14th c. (N.B. 'villein [serf] tenure', 12th c. or the enclosure laws under the Stuarts). The conditions of the poor working class for hundreds of years in Britain was beyond despicable. Hundreds of thousands starved to death in rural areas where there was no work and no assistance. Those in the cities fared little better living in conditions worse than domestic animals, with many dying in the street. Historic records of what people saw visiting the poor is shocking in the extreme; the poor were treated as less than human. Workhouses were established to get the poor off the streets, where they died in droves; up to 90% of children died. In pre-industrial Britain the poor had simple choices: execution for poaching, starvation on the street, slow death in the workhouse or transportation as a slave overseas. After the Industrial Revolution another choice was being worked to death in a factory, living in a crowded unhygienic slum and probably dying young of disease or industrial accident.

From the 18th century onwards the Industrial Revolution initiated the factory system where children as young as six were locked in for 16 hours a day. The basic machines were treacherous and hundreds of children were crushed in the workings. Hands and arms were often ripped off; girls had all their hair ripped off; some were totally crushed as they fell into the machinery. Wounded children were turned out with no compensation and left to die on the street. Children who fell asleep through exhaustion were beaten with iron bars. Note that 8-year old children were still working in US factories and mines in 1920. Reformers often bemoaned the fact that do-gooder sentimental activists took up the fight for Black slaves overseas but ignored the plight of White child slaves a few miles away.

While Parliament was enacting the abolition of slave trading (slavery actually continued for a long time) White boys as young as five were being beaten, starved, whipped and forced up chimneys in the House of Commons and everywhere else. They often died when masonry collapsed, they were burned, or they suffocated on coal dust. This continued after Blacks were freed in the British Empire. The House of Lords refused to end child slavery in chimney cleaning due to the interference with the 'property rights' of the rich. Tens of thousands of young children as young as seven worked as slaves in British coal mines dragging coal carts, some were as young as four. Poor children were not considered as worth anything. This was in my grandfather's lifetime.