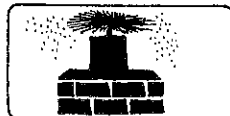


19 Climbing Boys . . .



Orphans did not stay in workhouses for very long. They were usually made apprentices at an early age. None suffered more than the climbing boys.

These were young children who worked for chimney sweeps. Their job was to climb inside chimneys and scrape the **soot** from the walls.

The children were supposed to be learning their trade: they were really the sweep's assistants. But some master sweeps treated them as little better than slaves.

Owners usually wanted their chimneys cleaned in the early morning. There were few people around at that time to see how it was done. In any case, people wanted clean chimneys. *How* they were cleaned really did not bother them.

If the chimneys had been built straight and wide, they could easily have been brushed clean. But many chimneys were crooked and narrow. Some only measured 23 centimetres square. So children climbed inside to clean them.

Many house-holders insisted on using children even in wider chimneys, long after machines had been invented. They were afraid of soot damaging their carpets.

Boys were sometimes so tired that their master had to force them to go to work. If the child hesitated at the bottom of the chimney, his master stuck pins in his feet. Or lit a fire to force the child to keep climbing.

Parliament passed law after law to get things changed, but climbing boys went on being used until 1875:

* 1788: No apprentice sweeps under 8 years old

* 1834: No child under 10 to be employed

* 1840: No person under 21 to sweep chimneys

(Fine of £10 for anyone breaking this law)

But boys went on being used until:

* 1875: Sweeps to be **licensed**. Licences only given to sweeps not using climbing boys

The 1875 Act was passed mainly through the efforts of Lord Shaftesbury, who spent much of his life trying to help poor children. When he died in 1885, the public collected money for a **memorial** in London. It still stands in the middle of Piccadilly Circus today.



soot licensed memorial
illegitimate

A A master sweep described what boys went through (1863):

No one knows the cruelty which a boy has to undergo in learning. The flesh must be hardened. This is done by rubbing it, chiefly on the elbows and knees with the strongest brine, close by a hot fire. You must stand over them with a cane, or coax them with a halfpenny, if they will stand a few more rubs.

At first they come back from their work with their arms and knees streaming with blood, and the knees looking as if the caps had been pulled off. Then they must be rubbed with brine again. In some boys I have found that the skin does not harden for years.

B The sweep's house:



C Another sweep spoke of two of the job's dangers:

I had boys as young as 5½ years, but I did not like them; they were too weak. I was afraid they might go off. They go off just as quietly as you might fall asleep in the chair, by the fire there.

I have known eight or nine sweeps lose their lives by the sooty cancer. The parts which it seizes are entirely eaten off, caused by 'sleeping black' and breathing the soot in all night.



D Many climbing boys were orphans from workhouses because poor feeding had made them skinny. But poor mothers often sold children, especially **illegitimate** ones, for as little as 50p.

E An inquest found that one boy died from 'bad weather':

February 1808: a climbing apprentice of Lambeth was sent at three in the morning to sweep some chimneys at Norwood. The snow was so deep, and the cold so extreme, that a watchman said that he would not have sent even a dog out.

The boy, having swept two chimneys, was returning home with another boy, but found the cold so extreme that he could go no further. He was taken to a public house at Dulwich, and died within an hour.

The master sweep was brought before the magistrate. His main fault appeared to be sending the boy out so early and he was dismissed. An Inquest was held and the verdict was, Died from the Inclemency [harshness] of the Weather.



G Two climbing boys killed (1825).



1 Make up a class drama on this topic. The scene is a Committee of Enquiry and five MPs are to hear evidence from master sweeps and climbing boys. Decide what other witnesses you want to call. The Committee want to get at the truth, so the members need to work out their questions in advance. The witnesses need

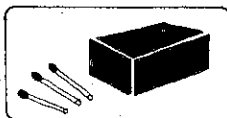
to be equally clear. You can either tape the event or act it to a group of younger pupils.

2 Prepare a class display. You could include:

- * letters to newspapers about it
- * posters to publicise what is happening

Use your library to find out more on the subject.

20 . . . and Match Girls



phosphorus lethal luminous
socialist subscription
'New Model Unions' 'phossy jaw'
'dockers' tanner'

The second half of the 19th century saw new attempts to form trade unions to protect workers. These unions were quite different from the Grand National Consolidated of 1834.

The first of these new unions was the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, founded in 1851. It was such a success that other skilled men, such as carpenters, soon copied the idea.

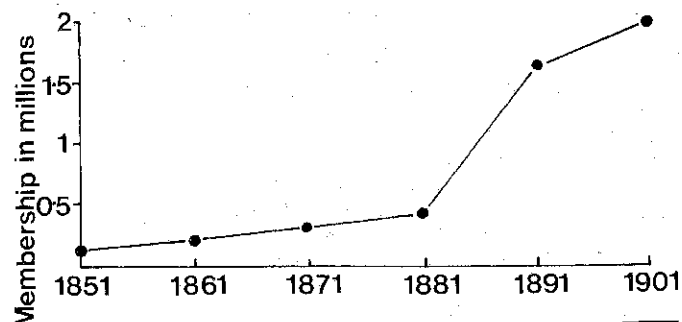
These 'New Model Unions' were a success because their members were skilled workers. They could afford to pay a union **subscription** of 5p a week. This money was used to pay full-time staff, including a Secretary.

They did not expect sudden changes; instead, they worked to improve working conditions for members. But, of course, their members were in demand. Employers needed their skills.

The unskilled workers were in a totally different position. Dock workers, for instance, were lucky to earn even 30p a week, but there was no shortage of them. Organising a union for them was going to be difficult.



Making matchboxes at home for Bryant and May in 1871.



Trade union membership.



Bryant and May's factory in 1871.

So it was perhaps a surprise that the first successful strike by unskilled workers was by very poorly-paid workers indeed. They were the match girls who produced **phosphorus** matches. Some were made at home under the domestic system; others were made in factories.

The phosphorus was melted and stirred up with glue to make a paste. Then, bundles of matches were dipped in it by hand. Afterwards, they were shaken and dried. It was not difficult work: much of it was done by children. But it was dangerous.

Warm phosphorus smells fishy. Quite early on, it was also found that the fishy fumes were **lethal**. To start with, a worker might get toothache, as the fumes attacked the teeth.

After many months of pain, the teeth rotted and fell out. Some workers walked the streets all night because they could not get to sleep.

However, the disease did not stop with the teeth. It spread to the jaw. Workers called it 'phossy jaw'. Bits of the jawbone rotted away; sometimes, it had to be completely removed. One in eight workers probably caught it; a few of them died.

Often, the conditions in which these people worked increased the dangers. Many factories did not have enough fresh air; workers ate their food off tables dirty with phosphorus; unwashed clothes stank of it. Because it was **luminous**, workers often shone on a dark night.



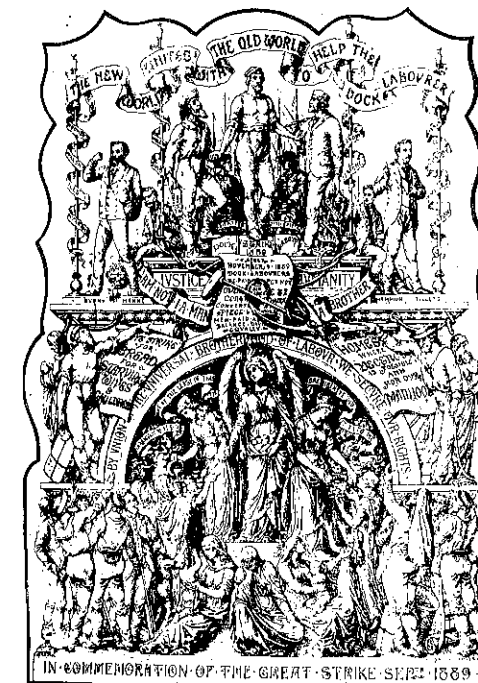
Striking matchgirls!

In the East End of London, about 1400 girls worked at Bryant and May's match factories. Many had skin diseases because there was nowhere to wash their hands. Some went bald. They all had to put up with heavy fines out of their weekly wages of 20p (girls) or 40p (women).

They were poor and uneducated yet, when they went on strike, they won. It was mainly because a determined **socialist** named Annie Besant helped them. She got them publicity; she found them support and money.

In less than a fortnight, the girls were promised better conditions. The fines were ended and box-fillers were given a nine per cent pay rise. It was a milestone in union history and other victories soon followed. In 1889, the gas workers demanded – and got – an eight-hour day.

Later that year, the London dockers went on strike. Their main demand was for a minimum wage of 2½p an hour. They called it the 'dockers' tanner'. (A 'tanner' was a coin worth 2½p.) It was a long and bitter strike but, in the end, they also won.



Reminder of the dockers' strike, 1889.



- Each of these dates is important in trade union history. Put them in chronological order and explain what happened in that year:
1889; 1834; 1851.
- Give two reasons why it was hard for unskilled workers to go on strike.
 - Give two reasons why the Engineers' Union was a success.
- Which of the pictures do you think are primary sources?
 - Describe what each of the people is doing in the lower picture on page 74.
 - How would the photograph on this page help the girls?
- If you were Annie Besant, which of these actions would you have taken to get support:
 - Led a march into the West End of London;
 - Got newspapers to print pictures of the girls' working conditions;
 - Got some girls interviewed on television;
 - Organised a petition to take to Parliament;
 - Arranged big public meetings.
 Give reasons for the actions you choose.
 - In the library, find out what she *did* do.