Teaching the Industrial Revolution:

What kinds of stories should we tell about it?

Some years ago I was given a copy of ***Liberty's Dawn: A People's History of the Industrial Revolution*** written by **Professor Emma Griffin** of the University of East Anglia.

I confess it wasn't a book I'd have read on my own initiative, especially as I had a riveting book on medieval public health on the go. However I repaid the generosity of the gift by reading the book and found myself increasingly enjoying it and thinking about its implications for teaching about the Industrial Revolution at Key Stage 3. What follows therefore juggles a report on the book's conclusions and reflections on teaching the Industrial Revolution at KS3, especially the messages students get from that teaching about this most significant of events.

Dr Griffin sets out to investigate the question 'what was the impact of the world's first industrial revolution on the ordinary men, women and children who lived through it?' If that sounds unremarkable her sources are not – over 350 autobiographies, memoirs and sets of notes written by those ordinary men and (all too rarely) women. Some were published at or near the time, many were not. Dr Griffin uses these accounts to survey the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the autobiographers' working lives, on their experiences of love and sex, on their education and involvements with religious organizations and finally with their connections with political movements.

At first glance my impression was that the book was structured around a fairly random set of topics and would prove to be yet another compilation of 'interesting' quotations. That initial impression was quite wrong. Far from being a simple miscellany of quotations, the book has a strong and convincing developmental argument, building a picture of how members of the working classes came to have the skills and confidence to emerge as leaders. Men such as the shoemaker Thomas Hardy (founder of the London Corresponding Society), breeches-maker Francis Place and weaver Samuel Bamford did not emerge suddenly as fully-fledged leaders. They had built their experience and confidence from opportunities created by the changing world of the Industrial Revolution. This makes sense of the book's title - *'Liberty's Dawn'* grew out of working people's experiences in the Industrial Revolution, not just because they were driven by squalor and hardship to improve their housing and working conditions but because industrialization changed people's mentalities, creating the environment in which they could gain the skills and confidence to enable them to campaign for

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a role in government. Therefore one consequence of the Industrial Revolution was the creation of what later periods would call a ‘Can Do’ mentality amongst some members of the working classes.

Dr Griffin therefore challenges interpretations (and by implication teaching) which offer only a gloom-laden picture of the impact of the Industrial Revolution, suggesting instead a more rounded and complex picture of how people responded to the Industrial Revolution. The starting point for her argument lies in the enthusiasm of the working class autobiographers for the many new working opportunities created by industrialization.

Before the Industrial Revolution there had been widespread under-employment, unsurprising given the slow but steady rise in population since around 1500. Many male agricultural workers did not have year-round work and it was especially hard for women and children to find work. The result was significant poverty. Then came the Industrial Revolution, creating many more jobs and a much wider range of work, especially jobs that the unskilled could learn quickly. Working men therefore had regular work and, as importantly, the confidence that there were other opportunities available. This confidence led to many doing something that few people had dared do in pre-industrial society – they walked out of jobs to seek better wages, shorter hours or because employers maltreated or did not respect individuals. Thus for working men the Industrial Revolution brought opportunity, optimism and confidence because they now had regular work and were better paid than their forefathers who’d been patchily employed in agriculture. [On a personal note I’ve often wondered why my 3x great-grandfather, an agricultural labourer, moved his family from the Furness peninsula to Liverpool and now I have a better hypothesis – not just the attraction of work but also perhaps putting irregular work behind him in favour of the prospect of easily-learned jobs].

If the ‘Industrial Revolution was undoubtedly a time of economic opportunity … the weight of existing social structures and cultural expectations kept women firmly shut out’. The only female beneficiaries were single women in factory towns who earned more and worked more regularly than their mothers had done. This was however a transitory benefit as most women gave up full-time work once they had children although many tried to earn a little more by working from home, taking in laundry, making and selling food, shoes, anything to bring in a few more pennies. If women did go back to work it was because of a crisis such as the death, illness or desertion of a husband. Even then work for most meant poorly-paid dressmaking, charring or laundry-work, never enough to keep a family without help from the parish or from money brought in by working children.

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And while on families, it's clear that another effect of the Industrial Revolution was that people married younger because young workers had more money and men were confident of employment. Earlier marriage meant larger families especially as many couples began enjoying, in the words of one autobiographer, 'naughty tricks on the bed', when marriage was promised rather than after the wedding ceremony. A large number of brides were pregnant at their wedding ceremonies, something else to explore in my family tree though not to add into a KS3 scheme of work!

If the Industrial Revolution did not give women more opportunities, it provided children with far too many. The result was a 'disaster' for many children who found themselves working for long hours at an earlier age than previous generations and amidst the dangers of industrial conditions. They started work at an earlier age, not because parents had become more heartless but because working opportunities now existed on a large scale for the first time. Children had always been expected to work because the few pence they earned contributed to staving off a family's poverty. However children in the countryside had had the advantage of a gradual introduction to work, starting at a slightly older age (because there were fewer jobs) and doing far more seasonal work. In contrast industrialisation meant an earlier start to work and a more abrupt, continuous one because they did not have the relief of seasonal unemployment. The one benefit in industrial towns was that the availability of jobs meant that some parents could and did take children away from factories if they were mistreated and found them better employment. This was not a luxury that had been available to rural children who, if they did find work, were often trapped with cruel employers because there were no other working options.

Later chapters are just as engrossing, moving beyond work into the experiences of the autobiographers as participants in evangelical churches and in self-education. If this sounds worthy and ever so slightly boring – it isn't. As Dr Griffin's argument developed it actually became quite exciting to see how involvement in churches and education created experiences that fed into Chartism and other working class reform movements.

Dr Griffin's autobiographers record a variety of educational opportunities – night schools, Mechanics' Institutes, mutual improvement societies, Sunday schools – that offered free or cheap education to adults. The Industrial Revolution that had deprived children of schooling therefore also created the environment in which adults had more educational opportunities than before. These opportunities were clearly cherished by the individual autobiographers but, more widely 'helped to create a workforce with the capacity for collective action'.

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What was even more interesting was the way that evangelical churches opened up opportunities in industrial towns from the 1790s onwards by allowing the illiterate and the poor to be active and questioning participants, a cast of mind impossible in the established church which preferred its members to be passive recipients thinking obedient thoughts. As a result the poor and uneducated took their first steps in speaking in public in their local chapels, finding their voices as individuals.

To sum up, industrialization gave men more working opportunities and more income and therefore more choice over where they worked. These opportunities increased individuals' sense of independence and self-confidence which in turn prompted some to educate themselves which engendered even more confidence. Evangelical churches also played an important part in helping individuals to discover and develop skills of oratory and organization. All this fed into working class political movements – from the London Corresponding Society of the 1790s to the growth of Chartism and its many local societies in the 1830s and 1840s. Many Chartist leaders were the product of such background experiences, having been in effect trained for leadership through their self-education and in local chapels. Working class political movements did not therefore appear simply as a response to the appalling working and living conditions created by the Industrial Revolution but because of the opportunities created by that same revolution.

What are the implications of this interpretation for teaching at KS3?

I have written a little before on https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/IssueIndRev.html about teaching the Industrial Revolution at KS3. That discussion addressed three issues:

- the importance of helping students understand the long-term significance of the IR
- ideas for creating a rapid overview of inventions and their consequences
- the importance of studying locality and individuals to help students understand what was it like to live during this immense change

For that discussion see https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/IssueIndRev.html

However Emma Griffin's work has raised further questions that may be worth thinking about when planning teaching the Industrial Revolution at KS3.

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1. What overall image of life during the Industrial Revolution do students take away?

Is their image one of unremitting misery and hardship for everyone with the exception of ruthless factory owners and the comfortable upper-class? Do students therefore see working people as simply victims of the Industrial Revolution? If so, should and can schemes of work be amended to reflect the diversity of experience discussed by Dr Griffin, particularly to reflect the opportunities created for working class men?

2. What's the most enthusing and motivating way to begin investigating the Industrial Revolution? I've written elsewhere www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/Issuewhy.html

about the problems of automatically beginning topics with 'why did it begin? because at that stage students don't know what 'it' (e.g. Civil War, World War One, Industrial Revolution) was and the analytical approach involved is usually less appealing that investigating the human experiences of the event itself. It's far better to tackle 'why did it begin?' at the end of the unit when students have an understanding of what was involved and the significance of the event for people at the time.

So it may be much better to begin work on the Industrial Revolution with individuals, not with machines, inventions or the big concept 'The Industrial Revolution'. Instead explore the experiences of named individuals – how their lives were changing and whether these changes created more opportunities than problems (plenty of scope for variety of response). One conclusion may be that those great inventors and industrialists were not the only 'active' citizens and that not all ordinary people were 'victims'. Then, when students have a sense of the ways in which individuals' lives were changing, it's time to ask why those lives were changing.

3. Can you begin at the end?

Continuing the search for ways of beginning work on the Industrial Revolution how about ignoring working conditions and domestic squalor completely to start with? One of Dr Griffin's key points is that the leaders of working class political groups and movements gained their experiences in leadership because of opportunities created by industrialization. So why not start by leaping ahead to the Chartist campaigns of the late 1830s and 1840s or even further ahead to demands for political reform in the 1860s and social reforms in even later decades – get students interested in protests and campaigns then explore where the momentum and experiences of the leaders had come

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from? Why were they able to do this now? Therefore you're unravelling the story of industrialization backwards.

A similar approach would begin with the development of professional sport in the late 19thC – the first large football and cricket crowds – but why was this happening then when such events hadn't taken place in 1750? What had created the opportunities for professional sport to take place – which again unravels backwards through the necessity of railways to transport teams and supporters, the growth of towns to provide supporters etc etc - all the Industrial Revolution is there!

4. Do students have a clear picture of pre-industrial life?

One of the important points made by Dr Griffin is that it's impossible to assess the impact of the Industrial Revolution if we do not have a clear picture of the nature of working class life before the late 18th century. Without that there's no basis for comparison and we're all vulnerable to seeing industrialization as bringing an end to some kind of rural idyll. Therefore do students at KS3 need a lesson or two evaluating the 'quality of life' of working families c.1750 so they can make valid comparisons? Students clearly benefit when issues such as standards of living can be studied across time and this is a good example for the need for such thinking and planning.

5. What kinds of stories should we tell about the Industrial Revolution?

Having used this question as my title I wonder if this would make a good over-arching enquiry question for studying the Industrial Revolution, one that would pull together other enquiries into individual aspects of the period? Its great advantage is that it would avoid a sole concentration on squalor and hardship and hopefully engage with the opportunities, excitements and achievements of working people. It also leads into the minds of people at the time – minds we might otherwise be in danger of stereotyping as downtrodden or rebellious when clearly some working people were adventurous, ambitious, excited.

Further details

For further details see:

Emma Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn: A People's History of the Industrial Revolution, Yale University Press, 2013.*

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