

10 The Standard of Living Controversy

PREVIEW



Working class poverty or a Golden Age?

'In fifty years of the Industrial Revolution the working class share of the national product had almost certainly fallen relative to the share of the property-owning and professional classes. The 'average' working man remained very close to subsistence level at a time when he was surrounded by the evidence of an increase of national wealth.'

E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963)

'Consumption statistics before 1850 ... indicate modest but fluctuating increases. Import statistics are the most accurate of the measures ... and these show important long term gains ... During the 'hungry forties' there were increases in the average per capita consumption ... Misconceptions existed about England before the industrial Revolution, for example that rural life was naturally better than town life, that working for oneself was better and more secure than working for an employer, that child and female labour was something new, that the domestic system was preferable to the factory system ... and so on, in other words the myth of the golden age.'

R.M. Hartwell, *The Rising Standard of Living in England 1800–1850*, *Economic History Review* 2nd Series XIII (April 1961)

TALKING POINT

Consider how we might arrive at some measure of the standard of living today. What factors would you include?

Note

In the first years of the twentieth century A.C. Bowey stated that people's perception of progress is largely psychological and relative. He remarked 'People are apt to measure their progress not from a forgotten position in the past but towards an idea which, like an horizon, continually recedes.'

TALKING POINT

Should historians have their own political beliefs and should these colour their history?

The difficulties in tackling the question

Great wealth was created by the Industrial Revolution but did all share in the prosperity? One of the hardest fought debates amongst historians is whether the standard of living of the labouring classes rose or fell between 1780 and 1850. It is also one to which no final answer has been reached.

Historians, such as E.P. Thompson, believe that the condition of the mass of working people deteriorated between 1780–1840 and hence they are dubbed 'pessimists'. Ranged against them are the 'optimists', like Hartwell, who argue that a slow but perceptible improvement took place.

Why has an answer to this question proved so elusive? Firstly, there are an enormous number of factors which we need to take into account when measuring the standard of living: consumption of foodstuffs, nutrition, public health and so on. At best, measuring changes in the standard of living depends upon fragmentary and unreliable statistics, of which real wages (money wages adjusted to prices i.e. what money wages will actually buy) and price indices (changes in the price of goods relative to what people earn) are the most important. Both these sets of statistics are fraught with difficulties of compilation and interpretation. Most of the data on money wages tends to come from the south of England and represent the wages of skilled workers. Rarely do they show what the whole family earned which would be more the norm at this time. Shopping baskets of typical goods, upon which price indices are based, often omit important commodities and fail to show regional variations.

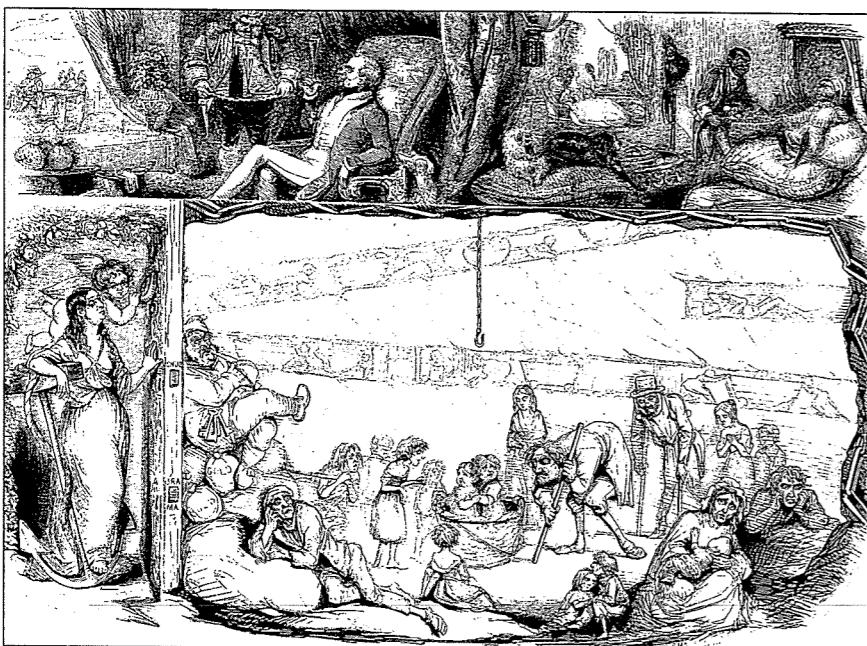
Secondly, there is a confusion of terms. 'Standard of living' is often used as if it were interchangeable with 'quality of life'. A sense of progress is very subjective and relative to the individual. New working conditions or changes in life-style, may seem to the individual to be a backward step despite the possible increase in material comfort. Such perceptions are impossible to measure numerically.

Thirdly, historians who 'joust' with one another do not always make it clear which time-span their arguments cover. Some refer to the century in which the full impact of the Industrial Revolution occurred, 1750–1850; others to a more limited period, namely the war period and its aftermath 1790–1830; others to the first 50 years of the nineteenth century.

Fourthly, all historians have political beliefs, whether they belong to a particular party or not, and these can consciously or unconsciously colour their interpretations. Marxist historians, like E.P. Thompson, fiercely denounce the denigration of workers by the capitalist system. Equally, 'liberal' historians point to the ultimate benefits of capitalism and thus, if they admit hardship to workers in the short term, reconcile them in the long term.

Fifthly, it is impossible to isolate industrialisation as the sole cause of fluctuating economic fortunes. For twenty-three years of the period under scrutiny, 1793–1815, Britain was at war, population rose rapidly, urbanisation accelerated and there was a series of poor harvests. All of these factors must have played a part, in varying degrees, to the raising or lowering of the standard of living of working people.

Sixthly, we must be clear about which workers we are discussing. It would be misleading to see all workers as either suffering or benefiting



'CAPITAL AND LABOUR'. A VIEW OF THE STANDARD OF LIVING IN EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND. PUNCH MAGAZINE 1893.

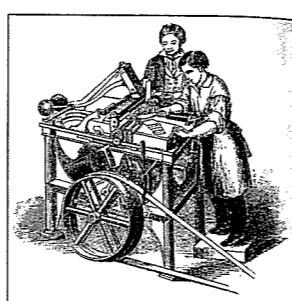
from the industrial revolution equally. In the cotton industry alone, for example, the 1841 census enumerates 1225 subdivisions, of which the mule spinner headed the list.

The issues in the debate

The debate ranges over many factors and it would be useful to clarify the issues over which historians disagree. Firstly we need to be clear as to the period under discussion. Successful harvests and lower food prices coupled to low levels of population growth prior to 1770 indicate a general improvement in the standard of living for the mass of people. Additionally, general prosperity was enhanced by the rising home market for industrial goods.

There is even less doubt about the period after 1840, particularly after the deep depression which ended in 1842. There is substantial evidence to show an improvement in real wages, at least up until the 1870s, with a further acceleration in the last quarter of the century as prices fell steeply. The quality of life too improved. Working conditions were generally better and hours were reduced. The environment of towns became healthier as major outbreaks of disease diminished and sanitary reforms became widespread. Thus the specific period of the controversy relates to the period between 1780 and 1840.

There is little dispute that this period was one of extreme economic fluctuations. The long wars with France (1793–1815) induced hyperinflation which bore down heavily upon the working poor. In the wake of the war, depression, and a series of cyclic catastrophes followed as the economy plunged into a series of depressions: 1815, 1819, 1832 and



DID MACHINERY ENHANCE OR
ENSLAVE WORKERS?

TALKING POINT

Cyclic depression means several years of prosperity followed by a relatively short run recession. Why was industry particularly subject to this kind of depression?

1842. Often, the relative gains during better times were wiped out by widespread and lengthy unemployment during bad times. Nowhere is the pendulum of fortune and misfortune better described than in the Manchester novels of Elizabeth Gaskell.

Of course different workers were affected in different ways. Unskilled and semi-skilled suffered most. Skilled workers, such as engineers, dubbed the 'aristocracy of labour' fared best. Worst-off were the agricultural labourers of the southern counties where the alternative of factory work was not available. Even so, not all benefitted from factory work. Advancing technology, such as that occurring in cotton weaving, displaced large groups of workers such as the handloom weavers. In other instances rapidly expanding industries such as cotton stole markets from linen and wool; railways from canals and coaching.

Yet despite all these variations historians must attempt to generalise whilst accepting that there will be exceptions and modifications to the overall picture. If we are to provide some answer, no matter how tentative, to the question, 'Did the standard of living of the working class rise or fall?', we must deal in averages of real wages, and average consumption of foodstuffs. This latter factor is of particular relevance when we appreciate that a worker in the early part of the nineteenth century spent some 70 per cent of his earnings on food.

Whilst historians define the period under review as a coherent one for the purposes of the debate it is by no means clear that this is the case. Applying the principle of an average of real wages to the period 1780–1840, it appears that the pessimists have a strong case, whilst after 1840, the balance of argument is tipped in favour of the optimists.

Alternatively, if we take consumption of foodstuffs as the yardstick of our measurement the case for improvement looks bleak. Meat consumption, considered to be the principal arbiter of the standard of living at this time (before the age of wholefoods and high fibre diets) seems to show a decline between 1780–1840.

The major source of information we possess for meat consumption consists of the Returns for Smithfield market, the most important meat market in London. Quite apart from the fact that other meat markets were gaining in importance there is a further difficulty attached to the interpretation of these figures. Whilst the Returns tell us the total number of beasts brought to market they do not tell us the weight of these animals. Even if we accept that the weight of cattle and sheep increased it would be wrong to conclude that it kept pace with demand. Furthermore, the meat returns exclude pigs which were often reared by workmen in backyard sties which provided a more staple part of his diet than butchers' meat. Other basic commodities, such as tea, sugar, beet and tobacco show no signs of increased consumption until after the 1840s.

Whilst it would be foolish to suggest a golden age of rural contentment prior to the Industrial Revolution there can be little to recommend the pestilential towns or the dangers of factory and coalmine to health. The self-regard of independent craftsmen cannot have been enhanced, argue the pessimists, by being dragooned into factories. Cyclical unemployment caused by periodic booms and slumps were a depressing characteristic of factory work. Furthermore, prosperity did not return immediately with a

resumption of work. Debts had to be honoured and small savings slowly accumulated once more.

And throughout the period population was growing fast. Between 1801 and 1841 there were seven million more mouths to feed and jobs to create. The fact that there was no famine to wipe out this advance indicates an overall increase in production of foodstuffs. Of course, this in no way mitigates the undoubtedly hardship that many suffered.

What then are we to make from the conflicting interpretations of sources? Definitive conclusions may escape us at present but at least we must endeavour to acknowledge both the problems and issues in the debate – Are historians referring to the same period of time? Have they slipped from discussing the material comforts of life into more impressionistic accounts of the quality of life? How sound is the statistical evidence they employ in their arguments?

EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

The historiography of the Industrial Revolution and the standard of living controversy

The phenomenon of the Industrial Revolution was quickly recognised by contemporaries and their successors as a significant break with the past. Historians identified and attempted to explain not only the nature of the change but who had lost and who had gained from the process. In their interpretation of evidence they were often influenced by the times they lived through and their own political outlook.

Toward the middle of the nineteenth century the system of capitalism itself was blamed as directly responsible for the plight of the poor.

Source A: Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx

Revolutionaries who attempted to explain the mechanics of social change argued that social class arose out of who controlled the means of production. The present social classes of proletariat (workers) and bourgeoisie (bosses), they argued, would come into inevitable conflict. From the clash of classes there would emerge a classless or communistic society.

'Under normal conditions, large capital and large landed property dominate society. The middle classes must increasingly disappear until the world is divided into millionaires and paupers ... Competition has penetrated into all human relationships and it has brought complete bondage in all its aspects.'

F. Engels, *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy* (1844)

'Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possess, however, one distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms. Society, as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.'

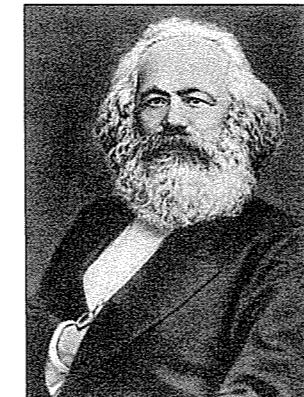
F. Engels and K. Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848)

Source B: Arnold Toynbee 1852–1918

Toynbee pioneered the study of the Industrial Revolution. He stressed the importance of this period as a fundamental break with the past. He was

TALKING POINT

Make a list of the types of evidence available on this issue. For each type of evidence, examine its uses and limitations.



KARL MARX

not a member of any political party but was a fierce critic of the dogmas of political economy. His work had a great influence on his contemporaries at Oxford.

'The new class of great capitalist employers made enormous fortunes, they took little or no part personally in the work of their great factories, their hundreds of workmen were individually unknown to them; and as a consequence the old relations between masters and men disappeared, and a 'cash-nexus' was substituted for the human tie. The workmen on their side resorted to combination, and Trade Unions began a fight which looked as if it were between mortal enemies rather than joint producers. The misery which came upon large sections of the working people at this epoch was often, though not always due to a fall in wages ... But they suffered likewise from the conditions of labour under the factory system, from the rise in prices, especially from bread before the Repeal of the Corn Laws, and from those sudden fluctuations of trade, which, ever since production has been on a large scale, have exposed them to recurrent periods of bitter distress. The effects of the Industrial Revolution prove that free competition may produce wealth without well-being. We all know the horrors that ensued in England before it was restrained by legislation and combination.'

A. Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution* (1884)

Source C: J.L. and B. Hammond

A growing interest in working class movements motivated the husband and wife team of the Hammonds to investigate the impact of industrialisation upon sections of the labouring poor. Their pioneer works; 'The Village Labourer' (1911), 'The Town Labourer' (1917) and the 'Skilled Labourer' (1919) became classics of working class history.

'Thus England asked for profits and received profits. Everything turned to profit. The towns had their profitable dirt, their profitable slums, their profitable ignorance, their profitable despair ... For the new town was not a home where man could find beauty, happiness, leisure, learning, religion, the influences that civilise outlook and habit, but a bare and desolate place, without colour, air or laughter, where man, woman and child, ate and slept ... The new factories and the new furnaces were like Pyramids, telling of man's enslavement rather than of his Power, casting their long shadow over the society that took such pride in them.'

J.L. and B. Hammond, *The Rise of Modern Industry* (1925)

Source D: J.H. Clapham 1873–1946

Described as a 'giant' among twentieth century historians, Clapham began his life's major work, 'An Economic History of Modern Britain', in 1921, published in three massive volumes between 1926–38. In this work he challenged certain widely accepted interpretations of the industrial revolution; in particular the legend that everything was getting worse for working people, down to some unspecified date between the drafting of the Peoples' Charter and the Great Exhibition.

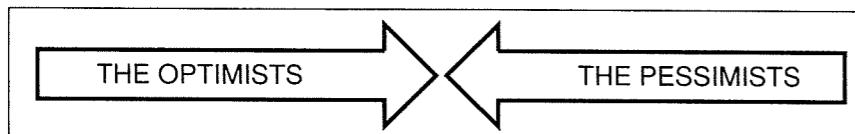
'All estimates of the welfare of the labouring population are defective – industrial or agricultural – which are based only upon the earnings of the principal bread winner ... Typical industrial towns such as Manchester or

Leeds provided opportunities for relatively considerable family earnings. But whether the representative parent of the mill child was a spinner, or one of the new engineers or, on the other hand, a despairing handloom weaver or irregularly working Irish labourer.'

J.H. Clapham, *An Economic History of Britain* (1938)

The current debate

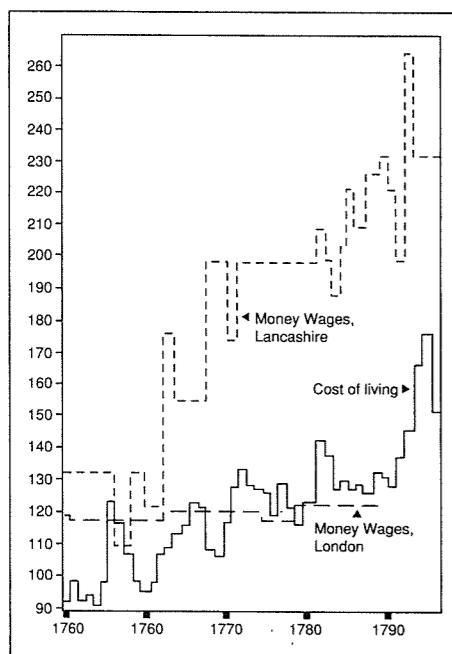
Clapham had dented the notion of the 'down-trodden masses' suffering unrelieved cruelty as a consequence of industrialisation. He revealed that the standard of living debate was obscured by inadequate statistical information and political bias. Since Clapham's time the controversy has continued with current historians dividing into two camps.



The Defence and Prosecution cases draw upon the following areas of evidence.

- Real wages
- Mortality and health
- Nature of Employment
- Unemployment
- Nutrition

Source E: Real Wages



Source F: Cost of living

Compiling a cost of living index is equally beset by difficulties. Among the most widely used by historians is that compiled by Dr. N.J. Silberling. An extract is shown below.

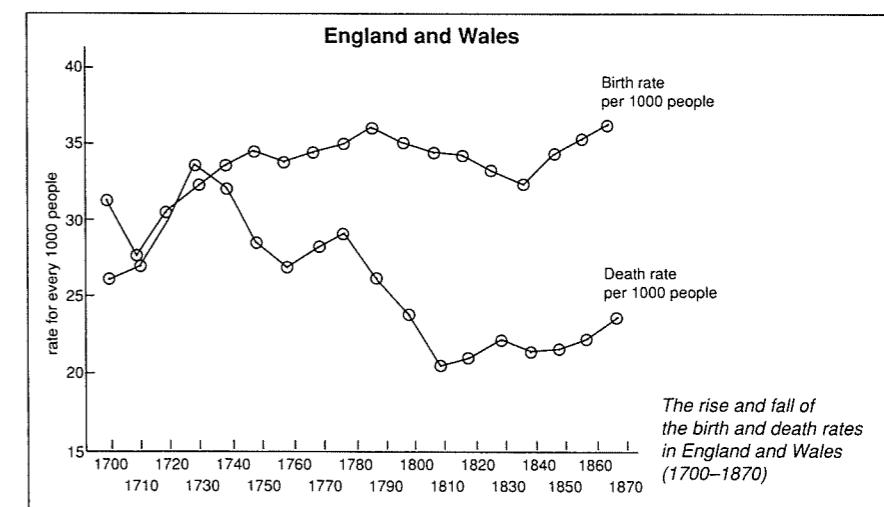
Food (42 points): Wheat	15	Fuel and Light (6): Coal	4
Mutton	6	Tallow	2
Beef	6	Clothing (8 points): Wool	3
Butter	5	Cotton	3
Oats	3	Flax	1
Sugar	3	Leather	1
Coffee	1		
Tobacco	1		
Tea	2		
		Total 56 points	

Source G: Birth and death rates

There is little reliable data on health for the statistical evidence that exists can scarcely be described as representative. For example, historians have used military and army recruitment records and friendly society information.

We are therefore left with mortality rates from which to draw conclusions. The limitations of this source of evidence has already been discussed in the chapter on population.

There was particular cause for alarm in those towns experiencing a rapid growth. The death rate in Liverpool, for instance, rose sharply from 1000 in 1831, to 35 per 1000 in 1841. For many urban dwellers, at least, any improvement of health which occurred as a result of advances in standards of personal cleanliness was more than outweighed by the evils of the environment in which they had to live as the chapter on Public health illustrates.



Source H: Employment and unemployment

Before you consider this aspect of the problem you need to be aware that there are different forms of unemployment. Re-read chapter six on population to help you recall that there were three types of unemployment caused by a) _____ b) _____ c) _____. The most serious form of unemployment in the early nineteenth century was _____.

Few studies have been made on the incidence of unemployment during this period, for most of the employment data refers to the skilled artisan or factory operative. At the most desperate end of the social scale, however, we must consider the almost permanent core of poverty, namely the extent of pauperism. Consider the information below on poor rate expenditure.

Poor rate expenditure		
	Receipts	Expenditure
1783–5	£2,168,000	£2,004,000
1803	£5,348,000	£4,268,000
1813	£8,647,000	£6,656,000
1823	£6,898,000	£5,773,000
1833	£8,807,000	£6,791,000
1843	£7,086,000	£5,208,000
1853	£6,522,000	£4,939,000
1863	£9,175,000	£6,527,000

Source I: The 'quality' of life introduction

Despite the introduction of the 'less-eligibility' principle the inmates of the workhouse were not necessarily the worst-off section of the population, and nor can this widespread poverty be purely measured in terms of material deprivation of food and clothing.

It is entirely illegitimate to reject the half million or more handloom weavers of 1830 or the army of seamstresses ... But for the Industrial Revolution most of them would not have been there, or at any rate their life would have been very different ... poverty and dirt alone are not the issue. The change from one way of life to another is equally at stake ... As is often the case, the poets saw things the vulgar economists did not ... The historian forgets at his peril that the problem of the social impact of the Industrial Revolution is not whether men live by white or brown bread, no meat or roast beef, but that it was inhuman.

E.J. Hobsbawm, 'The Standard of living during the Industrial Revolution: A Discussion'
Economic History Review, Vol 16, August 1963

Source J: Types of unemployment

The impact of structural unemployment cannot be measured, but the largest group, well known and documented are the half million handloom weavers who may have represented, at least in the 1830s, one and one quarter million people in total.

More evidence is available on the impact of cyclic slumps, although caution must be exercised for the worst periods and the most depressed areas attracted the most attention.

(a) Unemployment in some towns, 1841–2				
Town	Fit for work	Fully Employed	Partly Employed	Unemployed
Liverpool,				
Vauxhall	4,814	1,841	595	2,378
Stockport	8,215	1,204	2,866	4,145
Colne	4,923	964	1,604	2,355
Bury	3,982	1,107	—	—
Oldham	19,500	9,500	5,000 (half-time)	5,000
Accrington (textiles)	3,738	1,389	1,622	727
Wigan	4,109	981	2,572	1,563

(b) Unemployment in Bolton 1842			
Trade	Total employed in 1836	Total employed whole or part-time in 1842	Percentage Unemployed
Mills	8124	3036 (full time)	60
Ironworkers	2110	1325 (short time)	36
Carpenters	150	24	84
Bricklayers	120	16	87
Stonemasons	150	50	66
Tailors	500	250	50
Shoemakers	80	40	50

Source: H. Ashworth, 'Statistics of the present depression of trade in Bolton', Jour. Stat. Soc. V (1842), p74

All we can say with some certainty is that cyclical and underemployment in addition to structural unemployment was much higher before the 1840s than after, for trade union figures, which became available after 1850, show nothing like the same catastrophes occurring.

Source K: Literature as evidence

The disparity between these 'good' and 'bad' times was vividly described by the contemporary novelist, Elizabeth Gaskell, the wife of a Unitarian minister who worked amongst the poor in Manchester.

(a) The 'good' times

Run, Mary [Barton's daughter] dear, just round the corner, and get some fresh eggs at Tipping's (you may get one apiece, that will be fivepence); and see if he has any nice ham cut, that he would let us have a pound of.' 'Say two pounds, missis, and don't be stingy', chimed in the husband.

'Well, a pound and a half Mary ... and Mary ... you must get a pennyworth of milk and a loaf of bread – mind you get it fresh and new – and, and – that's all, Mary.'

'No, it's not at all', said her husband. 'Thou must get sixpenny-worth of rum, to warm the tea: thou'll get it at the 'Grapes'.

(b) The 'bad' times

And by-and-by Mary began to part with other superfluities at the pawn-shop. The smart tea-tray, and tea-caddy, long and carefully kept, went for bread for her father. He did not ask for it, or complain, but she saw hunger in his shrunk, fierce, animal look. Then the blankets went, for it was summer time, and they could spare them; and their sale made a fund, which Mary fancied would last till better times came. But it was soon all gone; and then she looked around the room to crib it of its few remaining ornaments. To all these proceedings her father said never a word. If he fasted, or feasted (after the sale of some article), on an unusual meal of bread and cheese, he took all with a sullen indifference, which depressed Mary's heart. She often wished he would apply for relief from the Guardian's relieving office; often wondered the Trades' Union did nothing for him. Once when she asked him as he sat, grimed, unshaven, and gaunt, after a day's fasting over the fire, why he did not get relief from the town, he turned round, with grim wrath, and said, 'I don't want money, child! D-n their charity and their money! I want work, and it is my right. I want work.'

Deeper and deeper still sank the poor; it showed how much lingering suffering it takes to kill men, that so few (in comparison) died during those times. But remember! We only miss those who do men's work in their humble sphere; the aged, the feeble, the children, when they die, are hardly noted by the world; and yet to many hearts, their deaths make a blank which long years will never fill up. Remember, too, that though it may take much suffering to kill the able-bodied and effective members of society, it does not take much to reduce them to worn, listless, diseased creatures, who thenceforward crawl through life with moody hearts and pain-stricken bodies.

E. Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (1848)

Source L

(a) Decennial percentage increase in London population, beef and sheep at Smithfield, 1801–51							
Census date	Animals ave. of	Index figure			Decennial increase		
		Popu-lation	Beef	Sheep	Popu-lation	Beef	Sheep
1801	1800–04	100	100	100			
1811	1810–12	119	105	119	+19	+5	+19
1821	1819–22	144	113	135	+25	+8	+16
1831	1830–34	173	127	152	+29	+14	+17
1841	1840–43	202	146	176	+30	+19	+24
1851	1850–52	246	198	193	+43	+42	+17



MRS ELIZABETH GASKELL

Consumption of food

We have already examined some of the attempts to draw up a cost of living index. When we attempt to calculate the standard of living through consumption we are faced with similar statistical problems. There are at least five problems that historians have encountered when trying to calculate working class consumption. Next to each factor below explain how they may affect the conclusions reached.

- Old and new types of diet.
- Measuring average working class consumption.
- Trends in types of foodstuffs.
- Actual quantities consumed by the working class.
- Nutritional value of the food.

What was a working class diet? This is an almost impossible question to answer. Much of the debate, however, centres upon the returns from the principal meat market in London, Smithfield.

(b) Yield of Excise on Hides and Skins in London and Rest of Country 1801 (1800–1 for Excise) = 100

Date	Population	Country yield	London yield
1801	100	100	100
1811	114.5	122	107
1821	136	106	113
1825	150	135	150

1 Study sources A, B, C, D.

Complete the information in the table below.

Author	Date of writing	Pessimist/ Optimist	Possible reasons for interpretation

2 As late as 1850 more people worked at home or in small workshops rather than factories. Over a million were domestic servants and a fifth were still employed in agriculture. How would this information affect your evaluation of the pessimistic claim of Toynbee that the Industrial Revolution fundamentally changed the employer/employee relationship?

3 Study source E

- What is meant by the term 'real wages'?
- How does London compare with Lancashire over this period?
- How might you attempt to explain the difference between the two regions?
- What problems are there in using this information to reach conclusions about real wages in Lancashire?
- Explain what probably happened in the years 1756–58 and 1768–70.
- What information do you consider necessary in compiling a cost of living index?

4 Study source F

- What conclusions can you reach about the relationship between the different items of expenditure?
- What is the major item of food expenditure?

How will this make the existence of a workers' family precarious?

- What two important items of expenditure are missing from the cost of living index?

5 Study source G

Look back to the earlier chapter on Population and Industrialisation and review the factors given for a decline in mortality.

6 Study source H

(a) What do the figures suggest about the rate of pauperism in the early nineteenth century?

(b) In 1834 there was a fundamental change in the administration of the poor law (see 'Poverty and Policy'). How might this affect your interpretation of the data? i.e. that pauperism appeared to decline because of lower expenditure between 1833–1843.

7 Study source I

(a) What area of the debate on the standard of living does Hobsbawm highlight?

(b) How is this particular aspect of the controversy difficult to determine?

8 Study source J

(a) What impact would these levels of unemployment have upon working class communities?

(b) How might this evidence alter possible conclusions on real wage indices?

(c) What reserves would the majority of workers possess in order to cope with periods of unemployment?

(d) Why would such periods of unemployment have such lasting effects?

(e) The 1842 depression was one of the most severe of the first half of the nineteenth century. How does this information affect your evaluation of this source?

(f) Most of this information was collected by businessmen for poor relief purposes and propaganda for the Anti-Corn Law League. How might this affect your interpretation of the source?

9 Study source K

(a) What type of unemployment is Elizabeth Gaskell describing?

(b) What are the value and limitations of this work of fiction to the historian?

10 Study source L

(a) What conclusions can you draw from these figures?

What does it indicate about the demand for, and the supply of, meat?

(b) What would you expect to happen to the price of meat over this period?

(c) What would be the result of these price movements on the standard of living?

(d) What limitations are there with this evidence when historians use it to generalise about the living standards of the labouring classes throughout the country?

(e) What conclusions can you make about meat consumption outside London?

EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE
The debate about food consumption and diet
Prepare a large double page chart to look like this.

Aspects of Debate	Arguments for Optimism	Arguments for Pessimism
Meat consumption		
Cereals and potatoes		
Fish		
Food adulteration		
Tobacco, tea and sugar		
Summary		

As you read through the arguments of the two main historical protagonists, summarise their views in your chart. Which do you think seems the most convincing?

Eric Hobsbawm is a Marxist and Professor of History at London University.

Ronald Hartwell is a Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford.

Meat consumption

Arguments for Pessimism The chief weakness of the Smithfield series is that it does not comprise all the meat sold in London, since it neglects pork, and both home and county-killed meat which was sold mainly at Newgate. It is doubtful whether even in the 1850s Smithfield had lost much ground to other markets.

Railways made an even bigger difference ... but in 1842 these had not affected supplies very much.

It has been argued that there was a supposed increase in the average size of beasts but there is no evidence for this ... 668 lbs. in 1821, 630lbs. in 1836 640lbs. in 1842.

Arguments for Optimism Smithfield, between 1800 and 1850, the slaughter of cattle increased 91% and sheep 92% ... there were other fast growing markets, Newgate, Leadenhall, Farringdon and Whitechapel. ... only two thirds of fresh meat went through Smithfield.

Certainly the railways much increased the supply of country killed meat to London.

Nor, of course, was the increased supply confined to London ... increasingly Birmingham and Liverpool provided more.

R.M. Hartwell

Cereals and potatoes

Arguments for Pessimism Wheat production and imports did not keep pace with population, so that the amount of wheat available per capita appears to have fallen steadily from the late eighteenth century until about the 1840s or 1850s, the amount of potatoes available rising at about the same rate ... Wheat productivity show fairly stable yields up to 1830, a modest rise of about 10% in the 1830s and a startling large one of 40% after 1840, which fits in with the picture of very rapid improvement ... after the effects of the 1842 depression had worn off.

E.J. Hobsbawm

Arguments for Optimism There are unfortunately no adequate statistics for bread and meat consumption ... Wheat and bread prices certainly support the view that there was no long term shortage of wheat and flour. Wheat prices fell sharply after 1815 and were relatively stable, though with a discernible trend downwards, after 1822, the yearly average reaching 70s only on one occasion, 1839, before 1850, and the price in 1835, 39s 4d being the lowest price for half a century.

Far less is known about potato consumption ... the theory that this increase was not a net addition to total diet, associated after 1815 with the increasing use of allotments by the working class, but a necessary substitute of an inferior vegetable for wheat bread; is based on the doubtful assumptions that bread was declining, and that the potato was an inferior food.

R.M. Hartwell

Fish

Arguments for Pessimism A notable increase is, however, recorded for fish. In Birmingham per capita consumption – negligible in 1829 – had more than doubled by 1835 and continued to grow at a rapid rate until 1840. Undoubtedly this improved the nutritive value of the poor man's diet, though it may not indicate that they felt themselves to be eating better ... they may well have moved to fish because they could not afford meat.

E.J. Hobsbawm

Arguments for Optimism By 1840 ice and fast transport were enabling trawlers to fish farther north and were opening new markets in the inland towns ... the supply of fish increased after the abolition of the salt tax in 1825, and, after 1830, with technical innovations in fishing that increased yields, particularly the development of deep-sea trawling and drift fishing.

R.M. Hartwell

Food adulteration

Arguments for Pessimism The growth of adulteration slightly strengthens the pessimistic case. The 'Lancet' inquiry in the 1850s brings the following points out very clearly (i) all bread tasted in two separate samples was adulterated. (ii) over half of oatmeal was adulterated. (iii) all but the highest quality teas were invariably adulterated. (iv) a little under half the milk. (v) all butter was watered.

E.J. Hobsbawm

Arguments for Optimism Similarly food adulteration, which Dr. Hobsbawm seems to think was suddenly discovered in the 1850s was well known to Smollett in 1771, when he complained that, 'The bread I eat in London, is a deleterious paste, mixed up with chalk, alum and bone ashes.

R.M. Hartwell

Tobacco, tea and sugar

Arguments for Pessimism Tea, sugar and tobacco indicate no marked rise in the standards of living, but beyond this little can be deduced from the crude series.

E.J. Hobsbawm

Arguments for Optimism Although consumption statistics before 1850 are inadequate and unreliable they do indicate modest but fluctuating increases. Import statistics are the most accurate of the measures ... and these show important long term gains; for example, in tea, from about 1820 there is a rise; in tobacco a persistent upward trend; and in sugar the trend movement is upward. By 1840 steamships were pouring into England an almost daily stream of Irish livestock, poultry, meat and eggs. During the 'hungry forties' there were increases in the average per capita consumption of a number of imported foodstuffs: butter, cocoa, cheese, coffee, rice, sugar, tea, tobacco and currants.

R.M. Hartwell

Per Capita Consumption of Tea, Coffee, Sugar and Tobacco			
	Coffee (lbs)	Tea (lbs)	Sugar
			Tobacco (lbs)
1790	0.10	1.16	–
1800	0.08	1.48	15.32
1820	0.34	1.22	17.74
1830	0.95	1.23	19.08
1840	1.08	1.22	15.20
1850	1.13	1.88	25.26
1860	1.23	2.67	34.14
			1.22

B.R. Mitchell and P. Deane, abstract of British Historical Statistics

'THE CONDITION OF ENGLAND' NOVEL

Historians have always used fiction to illustrate the thoughts, attitudes and feelings of those who have lived in the past in order to recreate what is sometimes called the 'climate of the times'. The historian of mid-Victorian England may use fiction from these times to an even greater extent, for the period spawned an entire genre of novels which explored the 'social question'.

The 'question' which these novels addressed was the state of the lower or working classes under the impact of industrialisation. The authors of such works concluded that England had become irrevocably divided into two nations, poised on the brink of disaster.



ILLUSTRATION FROM HARD TIMES BY CHARLES DICKENS. PRIOR TO WRITING THE NOVEL DICKENS PAID A BRIEF VISIT TO MANCHESTER.

A

TWO NATIONS

Stephen Morley, an Owenite in conversation with Lord Egremont, a young aristocrat

"Say what you like, our Queen reigns over the greatest nation that ever existed."

"Which nation?" asked the young stranger, "for she reigns over two."

The stranger paused; Egremont was silent, but looked inquiringly.

"Yes," resumed the stranger after a moment's interval, "Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of other planets; who are formed by different breeding, are fed by different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws."

"You speak of ..." said Egremont, hesitatingly.

"The Rich and the Poor."

B. Disraeli, *Sybil*

The purpose of these novels was to awaken the conscience of the ruling classes to their responsibility toward improving the condition of the poor in order that the nation might re-unite in common purpose.

A whole host of these novels are now regarded as important literary works. Benjamin Disraeli's 'Sybil' (1845), Elizabeth Gaskell's 'Mary Barton' (1848) and 'North and South' (1855), Charles Dickens's 'Hard Times', and the lesser works of Francis Trollope's 'Michael Armstrong: The Factory Boy' (1839–40) and Charles Kingsley's 'Alton Locke'.

B

HARD TIMES

They were ruined when they were required to send labouring children to school; they were ruined when inspectors were appointed to look into their works; they were ruined when such inspectors considered it doubtful whether they were quite justified in chopping people up with their machinery; ..

C. Dickens, *Hard Times*

C

Dickens Criticised

It's Dickens delight in grotesque and rich exaggeration which has made him, I think, nearly useless in the present day.

J. Ruskin in a letter to his friend Charles Eliot Norton just after Dickens's death.

D

DICKENS: A TRIBUTE

Dickens has done more to ameliorate the condition of the English poor than all the statesmen Great Britain has sent into Parliament. What other reformers hoped to do by legislation, he did by a supreme act of moral imagination.

D. Webster's tribute to Dickens during the author's lecture tour of America 1842.

E

Types of novels flourishing in the early nineteenth century

The Newgate novel

- tales of crime, imprisonment, escape, recapture and hanging
- specialised in the exotic, grotesque and macabre
- tales of aristocratic life, usually containing a lowly-born heroine
- morally uplifting tales meant to encourage virtue in the reader. The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was the most famous organisation dedicated to this principle.

The Gothic novel

Silver-fork novels

Hortatory novels

F

Reading for the Masses

We have our penny libraries for debauchery as for other useful knowledge; and colleges like palaces for study – gin palaces where each starving Sardanopolous may revel until he dies.

R.D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social history of the Mass Reading Public 1800–1900*

G

READERSHIP

It is notoriously difficult to determine which books were read by which classes but some clues are provided by the economics of publishing.

- Three volume novels sold for a guinea and a half.
- Many novels were reissued in a one volume edition for one shilling.
- Many novels appeared in serial form first – Fraser's magazine and Blackwood's were the most respectable and sold for 2s.6d. per issue.
- Lending libraries from about the middle of the century (one year's membership cost about one guinea)
- Mechanics Institutes – there were about 700 by mid century but they would only stock the most famous of the novels.
- Libraries attached to Sunday Schools, Ragged schools and penny lending facilities at railway stations.
- Countless weeklies of a sensational type cost only 1d or 2d. They serialised Dickens, Thackray and Gaskell. In 1840 there were 80 cheap journals in London alone; by 1860 there were 100. The 'London Journal' reached a peak sale of 500,000 copies in 1858. One of its rivals, 'Reynold's Miscellany' sold as many as 200,000 a week.

LITERACY

This is notoriously difficult to estimate and to define. The best overall figure is that in the early Victorian period two-thirds to three-quarters of the working classes had some reading ability.

1

Study the first two sources.

- (a) What messages are the writers attempting to convey?
- (b) How do they achieve this effect? Refer to language, tone and style.

2

Study the next two sources.

- (a) In what ways do they disagree about the value of Dickens social novels?
- (b) In what ways must a historian differ from the novelist in the way he describes historical attitudes? Use the first two sources as references.

3

What other considerations must a novelist take into account when producing his work?

- (c) In what way might a novelist be described as 'shaping reality'?
- (d) How influential could a novel such as Dickens 'Hard Times' be in 'shaping reality'?

4

What different impression would be conveyed if the figures for literacy were reversed and expressed as 'nearly one-quarter of the population could neither read or write.'

- (b) What does the huge circulation of cheap journals suggest as to the standards of literacy of the working classes?

- (c) (i) What is the difference between the actual readership of a Journal and the number of copies sold?

- (ii) What inferences can you draw from this difference?

Wheat and Potatoes Available per Capita 1760–1914			
	U.K. Wheat	Potatoes	
1760s	1.5 (lbs)		
1770s	1.3	1775	0.35
1780s	1.4		
1790s	1.36	1795	0.40
1800s	1.3		
1810s	1.05	1814	0.47
1820s	0.95		
1830s	0.9	1836	0.67
1840s	0.85		
1850s	0.85	1851	0.70
1860s	1.03	1885	0.80

R.R. Salaman, *The History and Social Influence of the Potato* (1949) quoted in B.R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics*

Summary

Arguments for Pessimism There is thus no strong basis for the optimistic view, at any rate for the period from c.1790 or 1800 or until the middle 1840s. The plausibility of, and the evidence for deterioration are not to be lightly dismissed.

E.J. Hobsbawm

Arguments for Optimism

The failure of living standards to rise much before 1815 was due not to industrialisation but to war. R.S. Tucker's index of consumer good prices – for food, fuel and light and clothing, the most important items in working class budgets – show a downward trend from about 1813–15 to 1845 as also does Miss E.B. Schumpeter's index for 22 articles of food and drink. The conclusion from consumption figures is unquestionably that the amount and variety of food consumed increased between 1800 and 1850.

It is as foolish to ignore the sufferings of this period as to deny the wealth and opportunities created by the new industry. Misconceptions about England before the Industrial Revolution, for example, that rural life was naturally better than town life, that working for oneself was better and more secure than working for an employer, that child and female labour was something new, that the domestic system was preferable to the factory system ... and so on, in other words the myth of the golden age.

R.M. Hartwell

E.J. Hobsbawm, *The British Standard of living 1790–1850*, Economic History Review 2nd Series X August 1957

R.M. Hartwell, *The Rising Standard of Living in England 1800–1850*, Economic History Review 2nd. Series XIII April 1961

A Judgement

The social benefits and the costs of industrialisation cannot be neatly summarised on an accounting sheet. Some contemporaries regarded the cheapness and greater availability of some foodstuffs and cotton clothing as a triumph whilst others indicted these same articles as evidence of degradation. How is it possible to reach general conclusions about the labouring poor in total when different groups at different times were affected in different ways? How is it possible to quantify into a single equation such diverse factors as regular but low paid work contrasted with infrequent but highly paid work? How is it possible to measure the benefits arising from government legislation? In what way can we determine the quality of life and in what sense can we weigh it in the balance against material improvement?

Historians still dispute the period of time in question, the reliability and inadequacy of the data, the interpretation of the data and thus the generalisations that can be summed up in terms of a 'rise' or a 'fall' in living standards. The contemporary 'reality' was deeply pessimistic and we must never lose sight of the significance of events as seen by those living through the experience of early industrialisation. More recently historians have attempted to reconcile the optimistic with the pessimistic view. One such attempt has been made by the historian Phyllis Deane, Lecturer in Economics at Cambridge University.

A reconciliation of optimistic and pessimistic views

To sum up, then, what conclusions can we draw from all this? The first is that there is no firm evidence for an overall improvement in working-class standards of living between about 1780 and about 1820. Indeed, when we take into account the harvest failures, growing population, the privations of a major war and the distress of the post-war economic dislocation, we may reasonably conclude that on balance average standards of living tended to fall rather than to rise.

For the period from about 1820 to about 1840 it is difficult to be as definite. Certainly there is no evidence for a substantial rise in real incomes and what we can deduce from the statistics is not strong enough to compensate for the wide margin of error in the data. On the other hand the evidence for a fall in standards of living rests either on presumptions that we cannot empirically check with the information now accessible to us – like the incidence of unemployment, for example – or on data of actual consumption per head of certain not very important commodities whose consumption could as well be attributed to changes in taste or the weight of duties as to a fall in real incomes. Perhaps on balance the optimists can make out a more convincing case for an improvement in the standard of living than the pessimists can for a fall. But either case is based largely on circumstantial evidence and there is one thing that we can take as reasonably certain – and that is that whichever way it went, the net change was relatively slight.

Finally, beginning in the 1840s we find much stronger evidence of an improvement in the average real incomes of the working class, evidence that has been strong enough to convince even some of the remaining pessimists. It does not rest however on a perceptible increase in real wage rates. Habakkuk, for example, observes that 'The inconclusive nature of

the current debate about living standards in this period is perhaps a warrant for supposing that a substantial and general and demonstrable rise in the real wages of industrial workers did not occur until the 1850s and 1860s: and it was not until about 1870 that real wages in agriculture began to rise and a steady rise was apparent only in the 1880s.¹ The argument for an improvement in the average standard of living in the middle of the century rests largely on a change in the composition of the labour force. To quote Hobsbawm, the most recent of the advocates of the pessimistic interpretation of the industrial revolution:

Little as we know about the period before the middle forties, most students would agree that the real sense of improvement among the labouring classes thereafter was due less to a rise in wage-rates, which often remained surprisingly stable for years, or to an improvement in social conditions, but to the upgrading of labourers from very poorly paid to less poorly paid jobs, and above all to a decline in unemployment or to a greater regularity of employment.

This shift in the distribution of the labour force from the traditional highly seasonal occupations characteristic of a pre-industrial economy to the modern sector with its mechanical aids to labour, its disciplined working habits and its continuous intensive use of capital equipment in day and night shifts is the true spirit and essence of the industrial revolution. Agricultural labourers, for example, normally earn less per week than factory workers of equivalent skill; handloom weavers earn less than power-loom weavers; canal bargemen less than locomotive drivers. Thus a shift in the composition of the labour force – a fall in the proportion of workers engaged in the low earning categories and a corresponding rise in the proportion of those in the high earning categories – would raise the average level of earnings per worker even if wage-rates in each occupation remained unchanged. This is the process that seems to have gathered momentum in the 1840s and to have brought with it perceptible improvements in material standards of life for the working classes. It may indeed have begun earlier, but it is not until the 1840s that we can be reasonably certain of its positive effects.

REVIEW **Historiography**

Unless you embark on original research you are greatly dependent upon the interpretations of the past made by professional historians. Their objective is to present to the reader a valid account of past events based firmly on a critical analysis of sources. Historians, however, like any other individual, live through particular times and in societies with particular values, attitudes and beliefs. It would be surprising if they were not untouched by their own times and that their writing did not reflect society's perception of itself. Historiography is the rather grand term we use for the study of the writing of history.

It was in fifth century Greece that the application of scientific method to history first began. The greatest of Greek historians was undoubtedly Thucydides (440 – 399 B.C.) who defined his aims as,

'The absence of romance in my history will I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content.'

A profound change in the writing of history came with the emergence of Christianity. St. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 A.D.) described the purpose of history as an account of the revelation of God in the world and thus a distinction was made between pre- and post-Christian times – B.C. and A.D.

The discovery of the New Worlds and the Ancient Civilisations of the East from the fifteenth century onwards stimulated interest in peoples from non-European and non-Christian societies. Seventeenth century developments in astronomy unseated the accepted Christian view of the earth as the centre of the universe. During this time a number of universal and comparative histories of civilisation were attempted.

In the nineteenth century came the most important step in the development of a critical and scientific historical method. Leopold von Ranke (1795–1866) subjected his sources to rigorous scrutiny, establishing the need for objective ground rules for historical evidence.

-
- 1 Read Thucydides account of his aims once more.
 - (a) What does this tell you about the generally accepted notion of history up to the time in which he lived?
 - (b) Many Greeks believed that the historical process worked in cycles and that eventually history would literally repeat itself. Is there any evidence that Thucydides shared this belief?
 - 2 Why should the expansion of European geographical knowledge and a scientific understanding of the universe shake Christian interpretations of history?
 - 3 'Some scholars take refuge in scepticism, or at least in the doctrine that, since all historical judgements involve persons and points of view, one is as good as another and there is no objective historical truth.'

G. Clarke, *The New Cambridge History I* (1957)

Is it possible to arrive at objective historical truths? What are the problems in so doing?

- 4 What belief dominates our own age?
Perhaps a belief in progress, regression, cyclic, no discernible pattern?
What evidence would you use to support your point of view?
How might each of these beliefs affect the way in which the history of this age would be written?
Which of these beliefs characterises the writing in this book?