

LIFE IN BRITAIN BEFORE THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

*A Charming Cocktail of Mud,
Manual Labour and Misery
(But with Great Hats)*



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Other topics in the Industrial Revolution series;

From Mud to Machines: Britain Gets a Makeover

Chimneys, Change and the Modern Age



Introduction

Ah, the good old days – before steam engines, factories and questionable Victorian medicines. When life was simple unless you were trying to stay warm, find food or live past the age of 40.

Most people lived in the countryside, waking up at the crack of dawn and spending all day toiling relentlessly in the fields, sowing and harvesting with tools that hadn't seen an upgrade since the Romans packed up and left. Everything was handmade from your clothes to your complaints about the weather. The pace of life was slower because walking was the main form of transport back then.

There were no factories belching smoke, no trains and no emails – just good old-fashioned shouting across the village green. Jobs mostly involved farming, blacksmithing or “general peasantry”. If you owned more than two turnips you were practically gentry. Sure – life was hard, but at least you didn't have to worry about your phone battery dying.



Work

Before the Industrial Revolution, most people in Britain were knee-deep in jobs that revolved around farming, local crafts, and manual labour – no office chairs or spreadsheets in sight. Here's a rundown of the typical gigs folk had back then:

Agricultural Workers (aka the backbone of everything)



Most people were either farmers or farm labourers, as to be fair, there wasn't much else to do. They planted crops, tended animals and spent their days battling mud, weather and the occasional angry goose.

Craftsmen and Artisans

Back before China was invented, us Brits had to make everything ourselves, if it didn't grow on a tree, you turned to local craftspeople;

- Blacksmiths – basically metalworking wizards, they made tools, horseshoes and the odd sword.
- Carpenters – builders of homes, wagons, and anything wooden that didn't walk away.
- Weavers and Spinners – they made cloth by hand until machines came along and stole their thunder – rude.
- Cobblers – kept everyone's feet respectfully covered.



Domestic Servants

In wealthier households, servants were essential. Cooks, maids, butlers – you name it. Basically, human Swiss Army knives with aprons.

Church Folk

Priests, monks and nuns kept the spiritual side of things ticking over – and often ran schools and cared for the poor as nobody had invented the Education Board or the DWP.

Tradespeople and Merchants



In towns, you'd find butchers, bakers (no candlestick makers, sorry – they did exist though), and merchants selling their wares at market.

Transport Workers

Before railways, goods travelled by cart or canal. That meant plenty of work for carters, waggoners and boatmen.

In short, work was physical and not particularly glamorous – but at least you didn't get stuck in traffic on the M25.

Diet

Food was a repetitive blend of what was local, what was seasonal and what wouldn't kill you. It was also mostly beige. A typical diet would consist of bread



(made with coarse grains like rye, barley or oats), pottage, which was a type of watery stew made with grains, water and whatever vegetables were lying around (onions, leeks, cabbage, maybe a carrot if it was your birthday). Peas, beans and turnips were frequently on the menu with potatoes and tomatoes making their appearance in the 16th/17th centuries.

The Brits were initially deeply suspicious of these exotic foreigners – potatoes grew in the ground, were not mentioned in the bible and looked like something you would feed a pig not a person. Same with tomatoes, they also arrived from the Americas in the 16th century but people initially refused to eat them as they were *clearly* poisonous.



It wasn't until the 18th century that potatoes and tomatoes really began to catch on. By the late 1700s potatoes had formed a major part of the working-class diet with people boiling, mashing and roasting them with great enthusiasm. Tomatoes took a little longer and didn't *really* gain proper acceptance in British cooking until the 19th century. Even then the Italians had to make them look cool first.

If you were fortunate enough to own a cow, or had access to one, your diet might also include milk, butter and cheese. Meat and fish were rare for the poor but you might get the odd bit of bacon or dried fish on holy days – especially Fridays, which the Church declared meat-free.

Water was dodgy, so ale or weak cider was the drink of choice, even for babies and children. It was basically medieval squash.

If you happened to be Gentry or Nobility (aka you had your own spoon and no mud on your shoes) you had slightly richer pickings. Meat featured heavily in a



noble diet and would have included venison, beef, pork, mutton and poultry. There were bonus points for stuffing things into things – think ‘goose stuffed into a pig’.

After the 15th century, exotic imports like spices (pepper, cloves and nutmeg), sugar and dried fruit began to appear in elite kitchens and were used to create a variety of pies, puddings and tarts.

In a nutshell, before the Industrial Revolution your diet was largely determined by your class, the season, and whether or not your neighbour’s cow had keeled over. It was a life of stews, bread and seasonal surprises, all washed down with something vaguely alcoholic.



Fashion

What people wore prior to the Industrial Revolution very much depended on their class, job and how close they were to a sheep. Clothes back then weren't *really* about self-expression, they were more about practicality, social standing and surviving the weather.

The lower classes mainly wore wool, and if not wool, homespun linen. Cotton did exist but was rare and expensive. Men wore loose linen shirts (which would



often double as nightwear), woollen breeches or hose, a doublet or jerkin, which was a type of fitted jacket and a cloak: great for keeping off the rain and dramatic exits.

Women would wear a shift which was like a base layer and probably the only thing you would wash as you couldn't wash the rest! On top of this would go a kirtle: a sort of fitted dress, an apron to protect their clothes and a coif on the

head to keep hair in place. They also wore stays or a bodice just to keep everything in check. Before you ask – no, women did not wear knickers, or anything resembling modern underpants. In fact, in those days, the idea of women wearing garments such as trousers, breeches or drawers was considered scandalous and vaguely threatening to the natural order of things.

If you were lucky enough to own shoes, they were most likely leather, handmade and passed down from someone with differently shaped feet.

Everything was scratchy and smelled faintly of damp and colours were muted. Normally dull earth tones like browns, greys and greens as bright dyes were expensive.

If you were wealthy your fashion choices were a little more expansive. Clothes were made from fine wool, imported cottons, velvet and brocade. Colours were much more striking: Rich reds, blues and purples were the colours of choice – courtesy of expensive dyes.

Men wore shirts and cravats which were normally frilled, a waistcoat *and* a frock coat, wigs and powder as well as shoes with actual buckles.

Women also wore shifts and stays like their lower-class counterparts but these would have been made of finer material and were often trimmed with lace. They also wore corsets and panniers (side hoops) underneath long flowing gowns with abnormally wide skirts. Great for clearing a room – not so good for farmwork. Accessories included fans, gloves and hats which looked like they might bite.

Fashion was slow, expensive and mostly handmade – every outfit was an investment, and unless you were rich you probably only had one “nice” set of clothes that you wore to church, weddings and ultimately your own funeral.



Healthcare



Pretty much non-existent. If you broke a bone, you simply walked it off. If you caught the plague... well best get your affairs in order.

The idea of the NHS was a long, long way off and before the mid-18th century, “healthcare” was less a profession and more a gamble.

You had three basic options when it came to dealing with illness:

- Treat it yourself with herbs and hope.
- If something needed chopping off, go to your barber-surgeon (yes, the same man who shaved your face would happily amputate your leg).
- Consult a “doctor” – only applied to the wealthy and if you were willing to stake your life on Latin mumblings and bizarre potions.

The term “doctor” is used very loosely here as physicians of the day were usually university educated in Latin, not medicine and although they diagnosed patients, they rarely touched them as this was beneath them. The actual work was done by the afore mentioned barber-surgeons who were responsible for pulling teeth, chopping off limbs and setting bones. Their motto: work with speed, not anaesthetic.

Most people in their time of need would consult an apothecary, the chemists of the day or failing that a wise woman or folk healer.

Popular treatments at the time included bloodletting, where “doctors” would open a vein and apply leeches to “let out the bad blood”. This would often result in the patient feeling lighter, probably because they were dying.



Herbal remedies were also very popular with some being quite effective such as mint for stomach complaints, garlic for wounds and lavender for headaches. Some were absolute nonsense, such as hanging a dead mole round your neck to cure a cough.

Hospitals sort of existed but were more religious institutions, not medical ones. Their job was to provide spiritual care – they'd make you *comfortable*, not *better*.

Some Common Cures for Common Illnesses

Fever – Bloodletting

Toothache – Extraction with pliers

Headaches – Trepanning (drilling skull)

Melancholy – Leeches, prayers, brisk walks

Plague – Prayer, herbs, getting as far away as possible



(Absolutely no clue what is happening here)

Entertainment

Entertainment didn't just come in the form of staring into the fire and gossiping about Margaret two doors down. Believe it or not, people still managed to have fun and they came up with plenty of ways to do it, despite the lack of electricity, social media, or indoor plumbing. Pre-industrial Brits amused themselves with a combination of music, mischief and moderately dangerous pastimes.

Dancing and Music

Folk dancing was very popular – jigs, reels, Morris dancing, basically anything you could stomp to with a tankard in one hand. Live music was the only kind and



everyone knew someone who could bash out a tune, whether it be on a fiddle, flute or a hurdy-gurdy. If you were posh, you might have a harpsichord or lute at home and know at least three tragic ballads about someone drowning in a river in the name of love.

Theatre and Performances

Instead of Netflix you had puppet shows, minstrels and storytellers. Travelling players brought drama to towns and villages. Shakespeare wasn't just for the London elite – his plays toured, and the audience was rowdy. If you lived in town, you had playhouses and later on opera and musical performances, mainly for the genteel (who sometimes still threw things if it was bad).

Public Spectacles

A bit like rubber necking the scene of a car crash, folk did like it a bit “grim”. Public executions were seen as a good day out – people brought snacks and their children. Bear-baiting, cockfighting and dog fights were tragically viewed as mainstream forms of sport and fairs and markets often included acrobats, jugglers, sword-swallowers, and the occasional deeply unsettling clown.



Games and Gambling

Card games, dice, and board games like draughts were common at home and in taverns. Gambling was everywhere – from betting on horses to who could drink the most ale without falling over.

Outdoor Sports

Archery, wrestling, and fisticuffs were popular as was mob football, which was vaguely like rugby but with no rules and possible livestock involvement. Injuries were frequent, and that was what made it fun.

At Home: Reading, Sewing and Gossip

If you were literate (not a given) reading aloud to your household was a treasured pastime. Reading materials could include The Bible, ballads, or slightly scandalous poetry.

Sewing, embroidery and knitting were practical and sociable and this naturally would lead to *gossip*, the real national sport. Neighbours, relatives, livestock drama – no one was safe from a wagging tongue.

Fancy Pastimes: For the Wealthy



Riding, falconry and fencing were popular, as was hunting – because clearly nothing could be more entertaining than chasing a deer through a muddy field in a powdered wig.

Socialising was almost a full-time job, if you weren't attending balls or tea parties, you'd pop along to your neighbour to judge their furniture and compare inheritance prospects.

The rich also kept themselves occupied by reading, particularly classical literature, writing long, florid letters and scientific dabbling. Basically, life for the elite was just a blend of landowning, leisure, and looking vaguely bored while doing impressive things.

Conclusion

Life in pre-industrial Britain was overall tough, slow and mostly local – but full of community, tradition, hard bread and no plumbing. It was a world of muddy boots, strong ale, church bells and utterly baffling fashion choices.



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