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Social Studies I- Modern World History

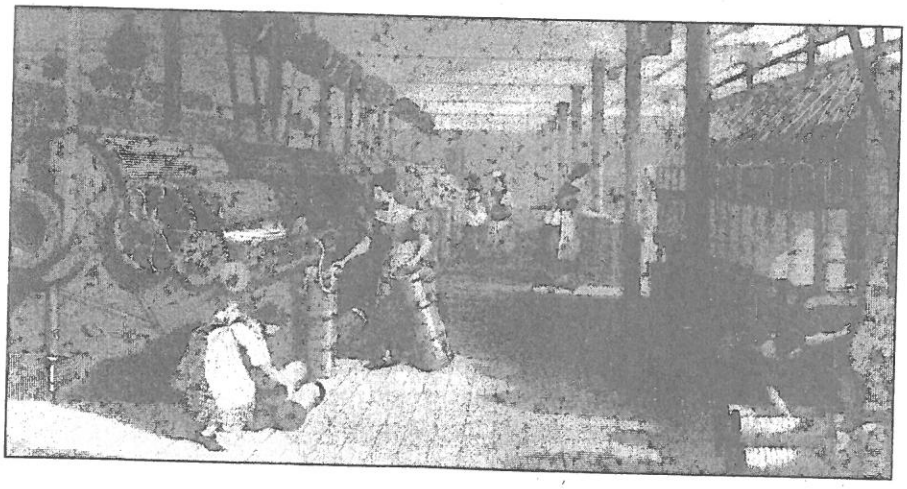
Directions: Read the article and answer the questions on your own piece of notebook paper.

74 A WORKING DAY IN A MANCHESTER COTTON MILL

*The living and working conditions of the poor became a topic of discussion in newspapers throughout Great Britain after the Sadler Committee of Parliament released its findings in 1832. One newspaper—*The Morning Chronicle*—wishing to discover more about the lives of the working classes, sent correspondents to the major industrial areas. In the excerpt below, a correspondent details the daily life of cotton-mill workers in the northern industrial town of Manchester. As you read the excerpt, compare the life of the Manchester mill workers to that of factory workers in the United States today.*

In the majority of mills labour begins at six o'clock A.M. throughout the year. In a certain number, the engine during the dead winter months does not start until a half an hour later. As a general thing, however, operative Manchester is up and stirring before six. The streets in the neighborhood of the mills are thronged with men and women and children flocking to their labour. They talk and laugh cheerily together. The girls generally keep in groups with the shawls twisted round their heads, and every few steps, in the immediate vicinity of the mills, parties are formed round the peripatetic establishments of hot coffee and cocoa venders. The factory bell rings from five minutes before six until the hour strikes. Then—to the moment—the engine starts and the day's work begins. Those who are behind six, be it but a moment, are fined twopence; and in many mills, after the expiration of a very short time of grace, the doors are locked, and the laggard, besides the fine, loses his morning work.

Workers in an early British textile factory



Breakfast hour comes round at half after eight o'clock. The engine stops to the minute, and the streets are again crowded with those of the operatives who live close by the mills. A great many, however, take their breakfasts in the factory, which, as a general rule, supplies them with hot water. The practice of the people taking their meals in the mill, though I believe contrary to the letter of the law, is quite necessary, owing to the distance which many of the workpeople live from their place of labour, and to the short time—only half an hour—allowed for the meal. Its constituents are generally tea and coffee, with plenty of bread and butter, and in many cases a slice or so of bacon. At five minutes to nine the factory bell sounds again, and at nine the engine starts again. The work goes on with the most perfect method and order. There is little if any talking, and little disposition to talk. Everybody sets steadily and tranquilly about his or her duties, in that calm methodical style which betokens perfect acquaintance with the work to be done, and perfect skill wherewith to do it. There is no hurrying or panting or toiling after the machinery. Everything appears—in ordinary phrase—to be "taken easy"; yet everything goes rapidly and continuously on.

The men wear blue striped shirts, trousers and slippers; the women generally envelop themselves in coarse pinafores and loose jackets tying round the throat. Spinners and piecers go about their work generally barefoot, or with such an apology for *chaussure* as forcibly reminds you of the old story of the sedan chair with the bottom out. Were it not for the honor of the thing, they might as well go entirely unshod. I fear that I cannot say much for the cleanliness of the workpeople. They have an essentially greasy look, which makes me sometimes think that water would run off their skins, as it does off a duck's back. In this respect the women are just as bad as the men. The spinners and piecers I have mentioned fling shoes and stockings aside, but I fear it is very seldom that their feet see the interior of a tub, with plenty of hot water and soap. . . . Efforts have been made for the establishment of baths for the working classes in Manchester, and several mill-owners have actually erected conveniences of the sort, but the operatives in too many cases absolutely declined making use of them, and as a general rule can with very great difficulty, if at all, be made to appreciate the advantages of clean skin and free pores. . . .

In Manchester everybody, master and man, dines at one o'clock. As the chimes sound, all the engines pause together, and from every workshop, from every industrial establishment . . . the hungry crowd swarms out, and streets and lanes, five minutes before lonely and deserted, are echoing the trampling of hundreds of busy feet. The Manchester operative in prosperous times needs never want, and seldom does want, a dinner of what he calls "flesh meat". This he sometimes partakes of at home, sometimes at a neighbouring cook-shop; occasionally he has it brought to him at the mill. A favourite dish with the operatives is what they call potato pie—a savoury pasty made of meat and potatoes, well seasoned with pepper and salt, and roofed in with a substantial paste.

Many of the men after despatching their dinner, which they do comfortably in half an hour, spend . . . their leisure in smoking or lounging about, until the never-failing bell proclaims that time is up, and that the engine and its attendant mechanism are ready to resume their labours. The work then proceeds to half after five o'clock, at which all labour finally ceases; the periods of toil having been from six o'clock until half past eight o'clock, from nine o'clock till one o'clock, and from two o'clock until half past five o'clock, making an aggregate of ten hours.

READING REVIEW

1. How were workers punished for being late?
2. What did the correspondent think of the workers' personal hygiene habits?
3. What similarities and differences are there between the life of the Manchester mill workers and the life of workers in a modern factory in the United States?