

TWERTON'S FORGOTTEN CHILD FACTORY WORKERS

SLEEVES had to be rolled up and long hair tied back! For the children who worked at the Twerton Woollen Mill, getting clothing or hair caught up in the fearsome machinery could lead to terrible injuries or even death.

The factory girl in the picture below is not a Twerton child, but she *is* typical of the sort of children who would have been employed at the former woollen mill on the Lower Bristol Road. Nothing represents Twerton's hard and gritty past more than these tragic children.



Traditionally woollen cloth was made in weavers' cottages on wooden looms. But with the coming of the Industrial Revolution, mechanisation took over. From the 1700s onwards, cloth was produced in factories called mills beside the river at Twerton. Here, people of all ages worked long hours amid the deafening roar of the machinery.

Mill owners such as the Carr family at Twerton, found it advantageous to employ children. The children could be paid less, didn't complain as much as adults, and were small enough to crawl under machines to clear away blockages. Also, their nimble fingers were good at fixing broken threads.

Sadly, children and teenagers were the main victims of accidents at the Twerton Woollen Mill. For example, there were incidents when young workers operating the machines trapped and crushed their hands in the cog wheels.¹ And from 1867 comes this report of a child fatality at the mill:

"A boy 14 years old named Sumner, died at the United Hospital on Monday from the effects of an accident sustained at Mr Carr's cloth factory... The lad's arm was caught by the machinery and was much lacerated."²

1 Bath Chronicle, 17th August 1871, p.5 and 19th May 1923, p.11
2 Bath Chronicle, 10th October 1867, p.5

Did the parents of these children worry about them working at the mill? Probably so. But they were families trying to cope with grinding poverty and thought it important for a child to be bringing home a wage.

A man named Stanley Batten recalled how, after his father died, he had been sent to work in the Twerton Woollen Mill as a child. He wrote:

"The question now arose about my getting some work – a boy not eight years old! I would not try to get work. My father was an ex-sailor and he wore a leather belt: it was some belt! A relation took hold of my jacket collar with one hand, and with the other made use of the belt right down Mill Lane to the factory gates. My back was sore. I got a job bobbin winding to a weaver."³

Changes in the law

Over time, new laws improved conditions for the children of the factories and mills. The Factory Act of 1833 established inspectors to check that child workers were spending part of their day in school.

In 1857 an inspector discovered a twelve-year-old girl named Jessie Ponting working at the Twerton Woollen Mill – with no evidence that she was getting any schooling. The mill owner, Mr Isaac Carr, insisted that she was being schooled. Then he said that he would dispense with all child workers under the age of thirteen.⁴ History shows that he never kept this promise.⁵

In 1876 a new Factory Act was passed making employment of workers under the age of ten illegal. Then in 1880, the Education Act stated that children under ten must be in full time education at school. By 1899 the age of compulsory education had risen to twelve. These rules put an end to most child labour.

However, even within living memory, people would still leave school aged only thirteen and take on 60-hour-a-week jobs in the harsh environment of the Twerton Woollen Mill.

This old stone gate is now all that remains of the Twerton Woollen Mill. The structures behind it are modern-built student flats.



3 Stanley Batten, Bath and Twerton 65 Years Ago, Bath Chronicle and Herald, 17th January 1931, p.17

4 Bath Chronicle, County Magistrates' Office, 30th July 1857, p.3
5 Cf. Stanley Batten's memories of working in the mill as a child



Isaac Carr who ran the Twerton Woollen Mill. He pledged to dispense with all child workers under the age of thirteen, but he didn't keep his word.