The Coming of Steam

The uses of steam had been explored since the 17th century, but it was not until 1712 that Englishman Thomas Newcomen developed the first steam-driven pump, which was used to draw water out of mines. In 1782, James Watt improved on this simple pumping engine by developing a separate chamber to condense steam, which meant that the machine could continue working at all times. Subsequently, he created a steam pressure gauge and rotary engine that could drive various forms of machinery.

Society Shifts

The invention of a practical steam engine had an immediate effect on employment, first in Great Britain and later around the world. England had huge natural resources of coal that could fuel steam engines, and this drove the creation of mills and factories that turned out the goods that people had been creating by hand. Ships and trains powered by steam moved manufactured goods and people from place to place quickly and more efficiently. Western society, which had long been agrarian, began to center on cities as laborers who had worked in cottage industries or on farms moved there in search of jobs.54r

The Growing Middle Class and Working Poor

Steam, as it drove the Industrial Revolution, had differing effects on people's lives. A middle class sprang up around the factories, mills, transportation hubs, and financial centers created by the Industrial Revolution; these people worked less and enjoyed an improved standard of living. But those who worked in "the dark satanic mills," as the English poet William Blake called the factories, labored at low wages and for long hours under working conditions that were unhealthy and dangerous.

A Laboring Class of Children

Another change in working habits was the fact that young children began working along with adults in textile mills. Since the repetitive tasks they did there were considered easy, they could be paid less. In 1841, the British census found that the three most common occupations for boys were agricultural laborer, domestic servant and cotton manufacturer -- the latter two driven by the need of the new middle class for servants, and of the mills for cheap labor. In the burgeoning coal mines providing the fuel that fed the steam engines, a third of the workers were boys and girls under the age of 18.

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