Living Conditions and Urbanization

Working in new industrial cities had an effect on people’s lives outside of the factories as well. As workers migrated from the country to the city, their lives and the lives of their families were utterly and permanently transformed.

For many skilled workers, the quality of life decreased a great deal in the first 60 years of the Industrial Revolution. Skilled weavers, for example, lived well in pre-industrial society as a kind of middle class. They tended their own gardens, worked on textiles in their homes or small shops, and raised farm animals. They were their own bosses. One contemporary observer noted, “their dwelling and small gardens clean and neat, —all the family well clad, —the men with each a watch in their pocket, and the women dressed in their own fancy, —the Church crowded to excess every Sunday, —every house well furnished with a clock in elegant mahogany or fancy case. . . . Their little cottages seemed happy and contented. . . . it was seldom that a weaver appealed to the parish for a relief. . . . peace and content sat upon the weaver’s brow.” But, after the Industrial Revolution, the living conditions for skilled weavers significantly deteriorated. They could no longer live at their own pace or supplement their income with gardening, spinning, or communal harvesting. For skilled workers, quality of life took a sharp downturn: “A quarter [neighborhood] once remarkable for its neatness and order; I remembered their whitewashed houses, and their little flower gardens, and the decent appearance they made with their families at market’s, or at public worship. These houses were now a mass of filth and misery.”

In the first sixty years or so of the Industrial Revolution, working-class people had little time or opportunity for recreation. Workers spent all the light of day at work and came home with little energy, space, or light to play sports or games. The new industrial pace and factory system were at odds with the old traditional festivals which dotted the village holiday calendar. Plus, local governments actively sought to ban traditional festivals in the cities. In the new working-class neighborhoods, people did not share the same traditional sense of a village community. Owners fined workers who left their jobs to return to their villages for festivals because they interrupted the efficient flow of work at the factories. After the 1850s, however, recreation improved along with the rise of an emerging the middle class. Music halls sprouted up in big cities. Sports such as rugby and cricket became popular. Football became a professional sport in 1885. By the end of the 19th century, cities had become the places with opportunities for sport and entertainment that they are today.

During the first 60 years of the Industrial Revolution, living conditions were, by far, worst for the poorest of the poor. In desperation, many turned to the **“poorhouses”**set up by the government. The Poor Law of 1834 created workhouses for the destitute. Poorhouses were designed to be deliberately harsh places to discourage people from staying on “relief” (government food aid). Families, including husbands and wives, were separated upon entering the grounds. They were confined each day as inmates in a prison and worked every day. One assistant commissioner of the workhouses commented, “Our intention is to make the workhouses as much like prisons as possible.” Another said, “Our object is to establish a discipline so severe and repulsive as to make them a terror to the poor and prevent them from entering.” Yet, despite these very harsh conditions, workhouse inmates increased from 78,536 in 1838 to 197,179 in 1843. This increase can only be viewed as a sign of desperation amongst the poorest of the poor.

**Primary Source Description of River Thames in London(1855)**

“Observations on the Filth of the Thames”

SIR,
I traversed this day by steam-boat the space between London and Hangerford Bridges between half-past one and two o'clock; it was low water, and I think the tide must have been near the turn.  The appearance and the smell of the water forced themselves at once on my attention.  The whole of the river was an opaque pale brown fluid. . . . The smell was very bad, and common to the whole of the water; it was the same as that which now comes up from the gully-holes in the streets; the whole river was for the time a real sewer.  Having just returned from out of the country air, I was, perhaps, more affected by it than others; but I do not think I could have gone on to Lambeth or Chelsea, and I was glad to enter the streets for an atmosphere which, except near the sink-holes, I found much sweeter than that on the river.
I have thought it a duty to record these facts, that they may be brought to the attention of those who exercise power or have responsibility in relation to the condition of our river; there is nothing figurative in the words I have employed, or any approach to exaggeration; they are the simple truth. . . . surely the river which flows for so many miles through London ought not to be allowed to become a fermenting sewer

Sincerely,

Professor Faraday

# Primary Source Description of Manchester (1844)

An excerpt from Friedrick Engels,The Conditions of the Working Class in England in 1844. Engels grew up in Prussia (Germany) and was the son of a wealthy German cotton manufacture. As a radical journalist and critic of industrialization, he sought to make the public aware of the poor conditions of workers and the negative effects of industrialization. His parents sent him to work in a factory in Manchester, England, hoping it would change his radical thouhts. It had the opposite effect. Engels later partnered with Karl Marx to writeThe Communist Manifestoin 1848. He supportd Marx financially so that he could write his famous book,Das Kapital. Engels lived form 1820 to 1895.

Manchester proper lies on the left bank of the Irwell, between that stream and the two smaller ones, the Irk and the Medlock, which here empty into the Irwell. . . . The whole assemblage of buildings is commonly called Manchester, and contains about four hundred thousand inhabitants, rather more than less. The town itself is peculiarly built, so that a person may live in it for years, and go in and out daily without coming into contact with a working-people's quarter or even with workers, that is, so long as he confines himself to his business or to pleasure walks. This arises chiefly from the fact, that by unconscious tacit agreement, as well as with outspoken conscious determination, the working people's quarters are sharply separated from the sections of the city reserved for the middle-class; . . .
I may mention just here that the mills [factories] almost all adjoin the rivers or the different canals that ramify throughout the city, before I proceed at once to describe the laboring quarters. First of all, there is the old town of Manchester, which lies between the northern boundary of the commercial district and the Irk. Here the streets, even the better ones, are narrow and winding, as Todd Street, Long Millgate, Withy Grove, and Shude Hill, the houses dirty, old, and tumble-down, and the construction of the side streets utterly horrible. Going from the Old Church to Long Millgate, the stroller has at once a row of old-fashioned houses at the right, of which not one has kept its original level; these are remnants of the old pre-manufacturing Manchester, whose former inhabitants have removed with their descendants into better built districts, and have left the houses, which were not good enough for them, to a population strongly mixed with Irish blood. Here one is in an almost undisguised working-men's quarter, for even the shops and beer houses hardly take the trouble to exhibit a trifling degree of cleanliness. But all this is nothing in comparison with the courts and lanes which lie behind, to which access can be gained only through covered passages, in which no two human beings can pass at the same time. Of the irregular cramming together of dwellings in ways which defy all rational plan, of the tangle in which they are crowded literally one upon the other, it is impossible to convey an idea. And it is not the buildings surviving from the old times of Manchester which are to blame for this; the confusion has only recently reached its height when every scrap of space left by the old way of building has been filled up and patched over until not a foot of land is left to be further occupied.
Right and left a multitude of covered passages lead from the main street into numerous courts, and he who turns in thither gets into a filth and disgusting grime, the equal of which is not to be found - especially in the courts which lead down to the Irk, and which contain unqualifiedly the most horrible dwellings which I have yet beheld. In one of these courts there stands directly at the entrance, at the end of the covered passage, a privy without a door, so dirty that the inhabitants can pass into and out of the court only by passing through foul pools of stagnant urine and excrement. Below it on the river there are several tanneries which fill the whole neighbourhood with the stench of animal putrefaction. Below Ducie Bridge the only entrance to most of the houses is by means of narrow, dirty stairs and over heaps of refuse and filth. The first court below Ducie Bridge, known as Allen's Court, was in such a state at the time of the cholera that the sanitary police ordered it evacuated, swept, and disinfected with chloride of lime. . . . At the bottom flows, or rather stagnates, the Irk, a narrow, coal-black, foul-smelling stream, full of debris and refuse, which it deposits on the shallower right bank.
In dry weather, a long string of the most disgusting, blackish-green, slime pools are left standing on this bank, from the depths of which bubbles of miasmatic gas constantly arise and give forth a stench unendurable even on the bridge forty or fifty feet above the surface of the stream. But besides this, the stream itself is checked every few paces by high weirs, behind which slime and refuse accumulate and rot in thick masses. Above the bridge are tanneries, bone mills, and gasworks, from which all drains and refuse find their way into the Irk, which receives further the contents of all the neighbouring sewers and privies. It may be easily imagined, therefore, what sort of residue the stream deposits. Below the bridge you look upon the piles of debris, the refuse, filth, and offal from the courts on the steep left bank; here each house is packed close behind its neighbour and a piece of each is visible, all black, smoky, crumbling, ancient, with broken panes and window frames. The background is furnished by old barrack-like factory buildings. On the lower right bank stands a long row of houses and mills; the second house being a ruin without a roof, piled with debris; the third stands so low that the lowest floor is uninhabitable, and therefore without windows or doors. Here the background embraces the pauper burial-ground, the station of the Liverpool and Leeds railway, and, in the rear of this, the Workhouse, the "Poor-Law Bastille" of Manchester, which, like a citadel, looks threateningly down from behind its high walls and parapets on the hilltop, upon the working-people's quarter below.
Everywhere heaps of debris, refuse, and offal; standing pools for gutters, and a stench which alone would make it impossible for a human being in any degree civilised to live in such a district. . . . Passing along a rough bank, among stakes and washing-lines, one penetrates into this chaos of small one-storied, one-roomed huts, in most of which there is no artificial floor; kitchen, living and sleeping-room all in one. In such a hole, scarcely five feet long by six broad, I found two beds - and such bedsteads and beds! - which, with a staircase and chimney-place, exactly filled the room. In several others I found absolutely nothing, while the door stood open, and the inhabitants leaned against it. Everywhere before the doors refuse and offal; that any sort of pavement lay underneath could not be seen but only felt, here and there, with the feet. This whole collection of cattle-sheds for human beings was surrounded on two sides by houses and a factory, and on the third by the river, and besides the narrow stair up the bank, a narrow doorway alone led out into another almost equally ill-built, ill-kept labyrinth of dwellings....
Such is the Old Town of Manchester, and on re-reading my description, I am forced to admit that instead of being exaggerated, it is far from black enough to convey a true impression of the filth, ruin, and uninhabitableness, the defiance of all considerations of cleanliness, ventilation, and health which characterise the construction of this single district, containing at least twenty to thirty thousand inhabitants. And such a district exists in the heart of the second city of England, the first manufacturing city of the world. If any one wishes to see in how little space a human being can move, how little air - and suchair! - he can breathe, how little of civilisation he may share and yet live, it is only necessary to travel hither. True, this is the OldTown, and the people of Manchester emphasise the fact whenever any one mentions to them the frightful condition of this Hell upon Earth; but what does that prove? Everything which here arouses horror and indignation is of recent origin, belongs to the industrial epoch.

From Friedrich Engels, The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844(London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1892), pp. 45, 48-53.