

8.2 The Industrial Revolution in Britain

Britain before 1750

Before 1750, Britain was an agricultural society. Around 80 per cent of people at the time lived and worked on small farms in rural areas. Most farms harvested small crops each year and raised small herds of livestock (such as sheep and cattle). Despite the small scale of most English farms, agriculture was still the main economic activity in Britain.

By comparison, manufacturing, mining and trade employed relatively few people in Britain. For the most part, manufacturing was small and localised. Tools used in the manufacture of most goods (such as carts, mills and looms) were basic and powered by people, animals or waterwheels that harnessed the power of fast-flowing rivers and streams.

Towns and villages at the time were small and self-contained. Roads linking villages were poor and most people travelled on foot or by horse. In fact, Britain's road system had not improved much since the fall of the Roman Empire, around 1300 years earlier. As a result, most people rarely travelled far from the places where they lived and worked.

In most cases, the working day began at sunrise and ended at sunset. People's diets were inadequate and average life expectancy was short. Illness was common because of poor hygiene, bad or non-existent sewage systems, and polluted water supplies.

British society was divided into strict social classes according to wealth and position based on birth. The aristocratic (noble) families made up only 1 per cent of the population but controlled about 15 per cent of Britain's wealth. Noble gentlemen did not involve themselves in farming, trades or professions. Instead, they invested much of their wealth in land.

There is no single event that marks the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, but the industries that first experienced it were connected with the production of iron, coal, cotton and wool.



Source 1 A 19th-century artist's impression of rural life in Britain before the Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution begins

During the Industrial Revolution, Britain's population quadrupled from an estimated 6.5 million people in 1750 to around 32.5 million in 1900. This increase was mainly a result of improved living standards and declining death rates. The population of Britain moved from rural to urban communities, and Britain was transformed through the development of:

- **factories and textile mills** – the Industrial Revolution led to thousands of new factories and mills being built across Britain. These factories relied on large numbers of workers and machinery to manufacture massive quantities of goods in one place. The growth of factories and textile mills transformed Britain's economy and society.
- **modern towns and cities** – great industrial and commercial cities like London and Manchester grew as people moved to towns and cities to work at the new factories, mills and metal foundries. Before the Industrial Revolution, 80 per cent of the population lived in the countryside and only 20 per cent in cities. Industrialisation reversed this pattern. By 1850, 80 per cent of people in Britain were living in a major city or town and only 20 per cent remained on the land.
- **new sources of power** – the development of steam power and electricity transformed the manufacturing, agricultural transport and communications industries, having a major impact on people's everyday lives.

Supplies of coal became vital to fuel steam engines and, later, electrical power stations.

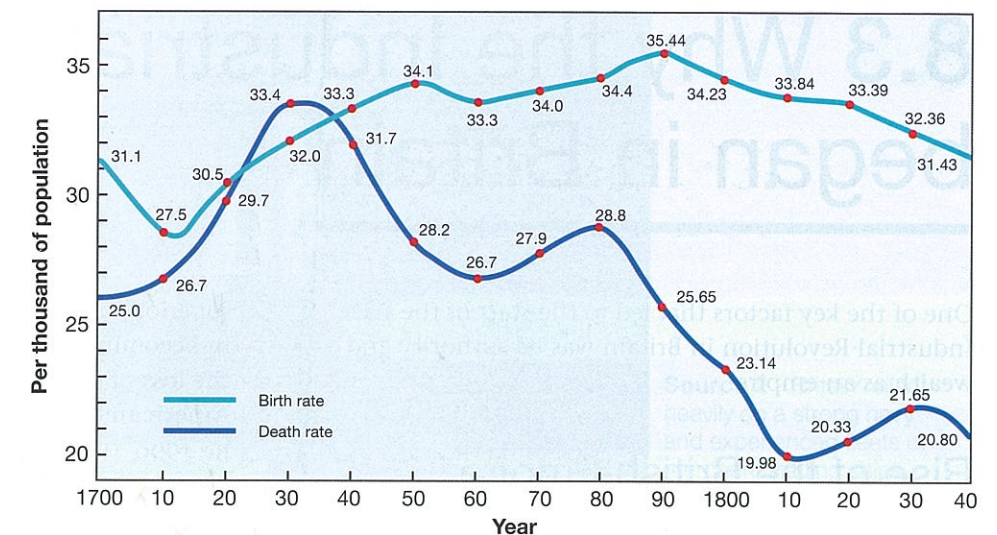
- **improved transport and communications** – as the population grew, towns became linked by new canals, roads and railway lines. New modes of transport were also invented to replace horse-drawn carriages (see Source 3). As travelling conditions improved, people travelled more and lived less isolated lives. Later, new communication technologies like telegraph and telephone systems were also introduced.

The growth of cities and industries also saw the emergence of a new social class that became known as the 'middle class'. This new group of people came from a broad range of backgrounds and were neither wealthy aristocratic landowners nor impoverished factory workers. Instead, they included wealthy industrialists and merchants, as well as bankers, shopkeepers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, and the increasing number of managers, clerks and government officials. People earning middle-class salaries could afford fine clothing, furniture, ceramics and other household items. It was this class of people that drove the demand for mass-produced consumer goods. They also drove the need for more schools, universities and libraries. The political power of the British middle class increased throughout the 1800s.



Source 3 This painting from 1831, *The Progress of Steam, A View in Regent Park 1831*, humorously shows suggested replacements for horse-drawn carriages.

8A What technological innovations led to the Industrial Revolution?



Source 2 Population change in Britain, 1700–1840

Check your learning 8.2

Remember and understand

- 1 When and where did the Industrial Revolution begin?
- 2 List five key features of British society in the century before the Industrial Revolution began.

Apply and analyse

- 3 Write a paragraph explaining how life changed for British people between the mid-1700s and the late 1800s.
- 4 Using Source 2, describe the changes that took place in Britain from 1700 to 1840.
- 5 Before the Industrial Revolution, 80 per cent of people lived and worked on the land. How had this trend changed by 1850?

Evaluate and create

- 6 Historians still argue about why Britain became such a powerhouse of the Industrial Revolution, while other European countries were slower to modernise. The Netherlands and France were two other countries that might have had an Industrial Revolution first. Conduct some Internet research to identify some of the reasons why this didn't happen.