

Working Class Standards of Living

Black, Jeremy and Donald M. MacRaild. *Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

The issue that defined a class more than anything else was their spending power. In the nineteenth-century, a person was working class if, like the majority of the population, he or she spent around 80 per cent of all income, and perhaps more, on the basic functional needs of the human being-- food, shelter and clothing. That is one reason why the standard of living question has dominated so much of British social and economic history over the last two hundred years. [...]

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Whether or not the nineteenth century saw improvements in peoples' economic lives to match their changing social world is a matter of some debate. Factories, town streets, urban housing, pressures upon space, and a lack of fresh air and green land may have come increasingly to typify the world of the worker, but it is not at all clear that the new wealth created at the time trickled down to the ordinary man, woman and child. Indeed, the standard of living debate continues to rumble on among historians. Part of the reason for this is that the data for measuring past economic life are partial and problematical. Historians simply cannot provide a definitive answer to the question 'did the Industrial Revolution increase the buying power of the working class?'

It is difficult, not to say impossible, to recreate the economic life of a past individual or family in its entirety. Any historian purporting to provide such answers would need to have access to information concerning aspects of life that appear to have gone unmeasured. We have no real idea about the regularity of wages in the Victorian economy. However, we do know that, in an export nation, the economy was susceptible to peaks and troughs of high activity or inertia. It is known that under-employment affected many trades, especially in agriculture, where work came in intense bouts-- particularly at harvest time-- only to drop off in the winter. Different regions, occupations and years or

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periods witnessed a variety of experiences with regard to economic performance. While male wages are relatively well charted, we know less about the methods and rates of payment for women, and the extent of child labour is problematical. While paid money wages were increasingly the norm for British workers at this time, many still took part of their pay in the form of perks and non-money payments, free produce (such as coal), and so on.

The emphasis on wages must be balanced against the cost of that basket of goods which all working families relied on. Staple food items for working-class families included flour, potatoes, cheap meats, tea, sugar and dairy products. Also vital was the rental cost of the family, which could fluctuate wildly, especially in boom towns where pressure on space was considerable. Clothing and basic furniture, pots and pans, limited quantities of cutlery, and vital commodities such as candles, all have to be factored in to the equation of what it cost for a family to live and whether or not their surplus income increased. The same should also be said for drinking, illness, old age and strikes-- all of which reduced the ability of individuals and families to reach the necessary purchasing power for good health.

In recent years, historians have developed a method of research-- dubbed anthropometric history-- in order to study evidence of the changing physique of workers. While the incidents of data which include the measurement of the height or chest size of people in the past is limited (so far military and prison data have been most utilitised), this type or innovative approach has enabled the debate to move on from what was once simply a competition between incomplete registers of food prices and wage levels.

It is quite likely that the working family had more disposable income in 1900 than 1800. Probably wages doubled in the same period. But even in 1909, as Maud Pember Reeves famously asserted in her tract of this title, most workers took home 'round about a pound a week'. National income increased far faster than the individual's average share of that income. In other words, while the individual looks to have got a little richer (against increased wages can be set falling costs of living, especially in the last quarter of the century) the country overall got very much richer and much more obviously so. What this means is that if the average man and woman almost doubled their income while national income increased three or four times, then a smaller class of people enjoyed very much enhanced incomes and conditions of life.

Increases in wages were also uneven. In the early part of the century-- taking into account the experiences of the then still proportionately important agricultural workers and those experiencing privation in dying trades (for example handloom weavers)-- average wages probably fell. 'The hungry forties' was not a term used at the time. However, the term seems appropriate for an age of Irish Famine (1845-51), periods of general economic hardship, widespread problems faced by workers in hard-pressed trades, the mass social and political protests of Chartism and revolutionary ferment in Europe (1848), which swept away regimes.

Free trade, railways and resulting economic prosperity are said to have killed off Chartism in the 1850s. And there is little doubt that, if Victorian labour experienced anything of a 'golden age' it was in the years from the mid-1850s till the mid-1870s when those trades we really associate with Victorian mass production (iron- then later steel- working) flourished. The sense in which the period 1850-70 was one of general improvement is tempered by the fact that wages did no more than keep pace with rising

costs in the 1850s and that it was not until the mid-1860s that improvements became clear. A fall in prices from the early 1880s, particularly in the price of food, then strengthened the buying power of the average wage. We must bear in mind, of course, that these generalisations hide a multitude of varying circumstances: unemployment, abandonment, drunkenness, and death of the breadwinner could have an enormous impact on individual families.