



Scavengers



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The youngest children in the textile factories were usually employed as scavengers and piecers. Scavengers had to pick up the loose cotton from under the machinery. This was extremely dangerous as the children were expected to carry out the task while the machine was still working.

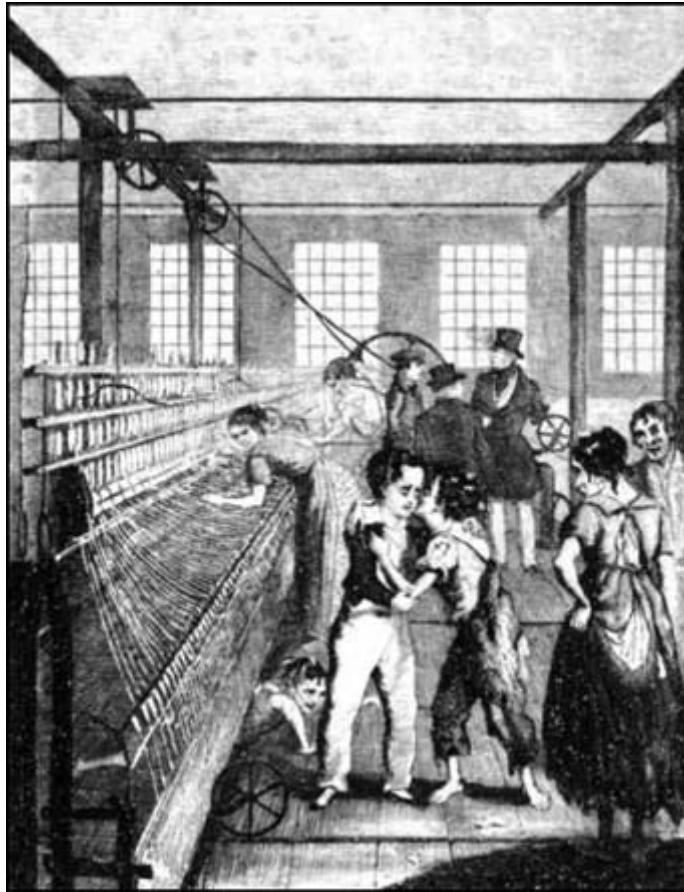


Illustration of scavengers and piecers at work that appeared in Trollope's *Michael Armstrong* (1840)

[Child Labour Debate Activity \(International School of Toulouse\)](#)

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(1) John Brown wrote about Robert Blincoe's experiences in a textile mill in an article for *The Lion* newspaper (15th January 1828)

The task first allocated to Robert Blincoe was to pick up the loose cotton that fell upon the floor. Apparently, nothing could be easier... although he was much terrified by the whirling motion and noise of the machinery. He also disliked the dust and the flue with which he was half suffocated. He soon felt sick, and by constantly stooping, his back ached. Blincoe, therefore, took the liberty to sit down; but this, he soon found, was strictly forbidden in cotton mills. His overlocker, Mr. Smith, told him he must keep on his legs.

(2) Frances Trollope, *Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy*(1840)

A little girl about seven years old, who job as scavenger, was to collect incessantly from the factory floor, the flying fragments of cotton that might impede the work... while the hissing machinery passed over her, and when this is skillfully done, and the head, body, and the outstretched limbs carefully glued to the floor, the steady moving, but threatening mass, may pass and repass over the dizzy head and trembling body without touching it. But accidents frequently occur; and many are the flaxen locks, rudely torn from infant heads, in the process.

(3) David Rowland worked as a scavenger at a textile mill in Manchester. He was interviewed by Michael Sadler's House of Commons Committee on 10th July, 1832.

Question: At what age did you commence working in a cotton mill?

Answer: Just when I had turned six.

Question: What employment had you in a mill in the first instance?

Answer: That of a scavenger.

Question: Will you explain the nature of the work that a scavenger has to do?

Answer: The scavenger has to take the brush and sweep under the wheels, and to be under the direction of the spinners and the piecers generally. I frequently had to be under the wheels, and in consequence of the perpetual motion of the machinery, I was liable to accidents constantly. I was very frequently obliged to lie flat, to avoid being run over or caught.

(4) Edward Baines, *The History of the Cotton Manufacture* (1835)

It is not true to represent the work of piecers and scavengers as continually straining. None of the work in which children and young persons are engaged in mills require constant attention. It is scarcely possible for any employment to be lighter. The position of the body is not injurious: the children walk about, and have the opportunity of frequently sitting if they are so disposed.

(5) E. C. Tufnell, one of the Factory Commissioners, wrote about the work of scavengers in 1834.

The scavengers, who have been said (in the Report of the Factory Committee) to be "constantly in a state of grief, always in terror, and every moment they have to spare stretched all their length upon the floor in a state of perspiration." I have seen scavengers idle for four minutes at a time, and certainly could not find that they displayed any of the symptoms of the condition described in the Report of the Factory Committee.

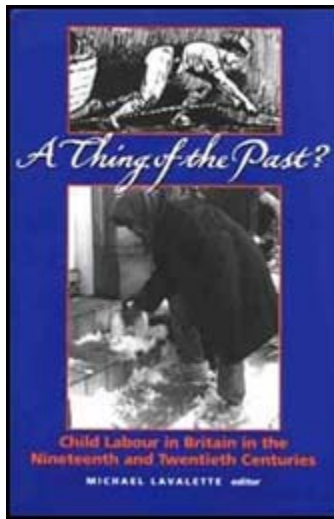
(6) [Angus Reach](#), [The Morning Chronicle](#) (1849)

The piecers, either girls or boys, walk along the mule as it advances or recedes, catching up the broken threads and skilfully reuniting them. The scavenger, a little boy or girl, crawls occasionally beneath the mule when it is at rest, and cleans the mechanism from superfluous oil, dust and dirt.


The opinions of two medical gentlemen of Manchester, with whom I have conversed upon the subject of factories and health, come to this: that the insalubrity of Manchester and of the Manchester operatives is occasioned not by the labour of the mills, but by the defective domestic arrangements for cleanliness and ventilation.



Illustration of scavengers and piecers at work that appeared in Edward Baines' book *The History of Cotton Manufacture* (1835)



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