

According to a contemporary source produced in 1867 by two middle-class socialists, J.M. Ludlow and Lloyd Jones, 'the true working class' were defined in the following way:

'The terms "working class", "working men", will be taken as meaning those who work, chiefly with their muscles, for wages and maintain themselves thereby. It is not, indeed, intended to deal with "the poor", i.e. those who may work, but cannot habitually maintain themselves.'

This suggests that the working class, i.e. those that were regularly in work and able to maintain themselves, saw themselves as distinct from the poor, i.e. those who had no work, or only occasional work, and couldn't keep themselves and their families. It also portrays the mid-nineteenth century working class as self-confident. This may have been partly due to the fact that this period saw a rise in real incomes of most workers, an improvement in living standards and a reduction in the percentage of people in receipt of poor relief.

Regional division

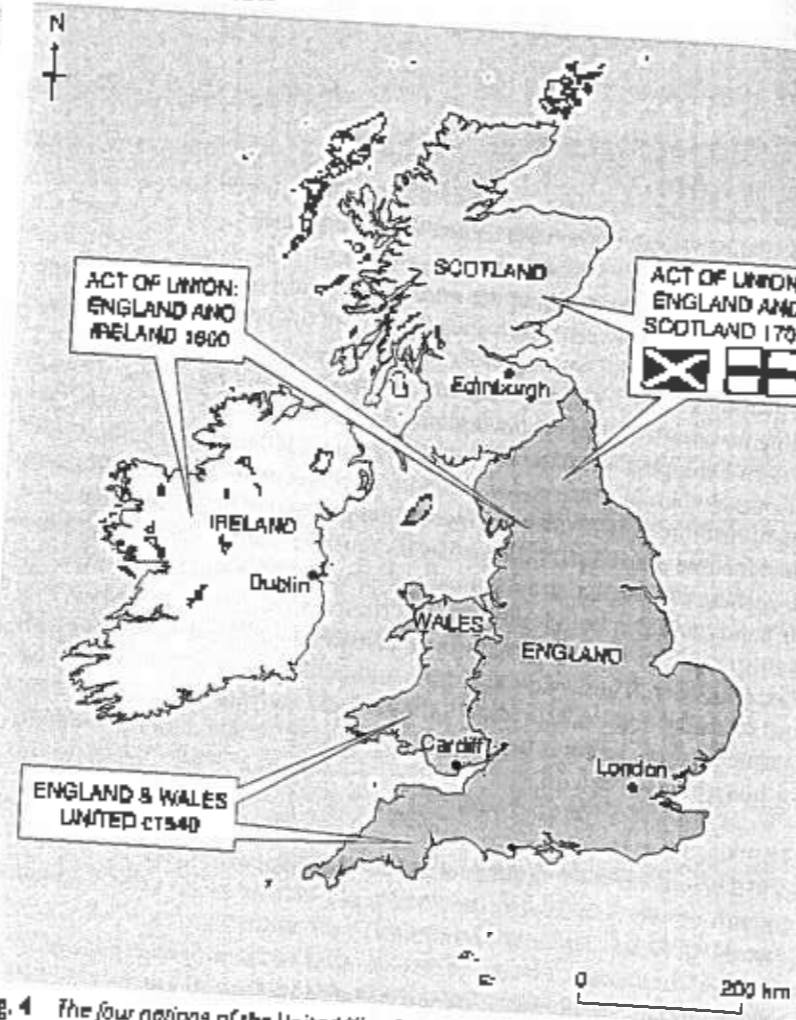


Fig. 4 The four nations of the United Kingdom

Throughout the nineteenth century, England was the dominant social, economic and political centre of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Much of Wales had been ruled by England since the thirteenth century until England and Wales became united between 1536 and 1543. The Acts of Union with Scotland in 1707 and Ireland in 1800 confirmed England's strong central position. England was confident in its national identity. Scotland, Ireland and Wales had to work hard to maintain theirs. There were

also regional divisions within the United Kingdom, less well-defined than the national ones, but that often operated along differing economic and social lines and had implications for the local populations. Perhaps the most obvious regional division in England was between the industrial north and the largely agricultural south.

National identity and the preservation of old traditions and language were important to Scotland, Ireland and Wales, but by about 1870, the national language of each was under threat. There was an attempt to anglicise the Gaelic speakers of Scotland through the 1872 Education Act and similar pressure on Welsh speakers and the Irish Gaelic speakers of Ireland. The official justification was that the agricultural labouring class would be prepared for urban life. In fact school attendance was poor in remote areas of Scotland, but in any case steady migration to the towns made Gaelic almost obsolete and severely depopulated those areas.

Even the railway network failed to connect the Highland region in the north of Scotland to the rest of Britain. Consequently the Gaelic-speaking crofting families were left behind during the golden age of farming in the 1850s and 60s, living a hand-to-mouth existence, largely ignorant of new farming methods and machinery and financially unable to make any improvements. Their rents became disproportionately high during the depression that hit farming in the 1870s, and in 1882 this led to an outbreak of civil disobedience, known as the Crofters' War. It underlined the economic imbalance between the north of Scotland and the more prosperous south. Farm workers in south-east Scotland were better off than their crofting counterparts in the north, but their wage was on average higher than farm workers in most other regions of Britain. This had come about largely because the system of long leases there encouraged tenant farmers to make improvements, which turned in good profits and enabled them to pay higher wages.



Fig. 5 Highland Crofters planting potatoes using a foot plough

By contrast with the backward rural culture of the Scottish Highlands, central and southern Scotland flourished as a result of rapid industrialisation: in Glasgow and the surrounding area, there was a textile industry, engineering and shipbuilding and a prosperous middle class. In 1880, Edinburgh and Glasgow were the third and fifth wealthiest cities in Britain respectively.

In Ireland, only in Ulster in the north was there any modern industrial development: in Belfast, also renowned for textiles, engineering and shipbuilding, the population grew and wage levels were high. However, the

ACTIVITY

In pairs, draw up a chart under the following headings: upper class, middle class, working class. Write a short summary of what characteristics distinguished each class from the others. What are the problems with categorising people in this way?

KEY QUESTION

How important was the role of individuals and groups and how were they affected by developments?

KEY TERM

crofters: a person who worked a small landholding known as a croft in the north of Scotland, where the soil is generally poor; he and his family made a meagre living, out of which rent had to be paid to the landlord.

CROSS-REFERENCE

Developments in farming are discussed in Chapter 3, pages 22–23.

A CLOSER LOOK

The Crofters' War forced the government in London to sit up and take notice. The Napier Commission was appointed to inquire into the problems of poverty and landholding in the Highlands. In 1886 the Crofters Act gave crofting families security of tenure and ended arbitrary eviction by the landlord.

ACTIVITY

To what extent were the benefits of industrial wealth enjoyed by the people of Scotland, Wales and Ireland?

benefits were not shared by the rest of Ireland, as the poor rural economy was too weak to stimulate demand for industrial goods.

In Wales, a division between the north and south was emphasised by industrial development around the coal fields of Glamorgan. In the south, but a single national identity emerged more strongly in Wales than in either Scotland or Ireland. There were not the cultural or language divisions that existed between the Lowland and Highland Scots, nor the economic gap, as in Ireland, between the prosperous minority in Ulster and the impoverished majority in the rest of the country. In Wales, religion provided a new source of national identity. By 1850, Wales had become strongly Nonconformist and the religious census of 1851 indicates that possibly three quarters of the population were regular chapel- or church-goers. Sunday services were conducted entirely in Welsh whether in rural North Wales or in the industrial towns of Glamorgan.

In all regions, the landed classes were not constrained by cultural and economic divisions. Their wealth enabled them to pursue a more cosmopolitan life, with a mansion house in London – where they could engage in the political, intellectual life of the capital city and keep abreast of the fashionable world, or travel abroad – returning to their country residences when Parliament was in recess or social or sporting occasions demanded it.

The north/south divide in England

The north/south divide in England, which had become apparent during the decades of industrialisation between 1780 and 1830, persisted beyond the mid nineteenth century. Coal and iron ore deposits had allowed industry to develop in the north, while the southern counties, lacking such natural resources, had remained largely agricultural. Some counties in England and Wales had suffered serious depopulation by 1850, particularly those remote from industrial towns, such as Cornwall, Shropshire, Somerset and Westmorland. The local economies stagnated and wages of farm workers, already low, dropped beneath the level of farm workers in other parts of the country. The attraction of higher wages in the towns and easier access, because of the development of the railways, stimulated a further exodus. Increased mechanisation and other improvements in the farming industry often reduced the need for labour, while at the same time urban industry increased its demand for labour. When depression hit farming in the 1870s, agricultural workers again headed for the towns. The reduction in numbers of farm workers had the beneficial effect of improving wages for the rest, though the northern farm workers had always been paid better, as farmers were competing with wage levels in industry. At the same time, counties around London and those containing industrial towns were enjoying an economic boom.

ACTIVITY

Extension

Try reading *North and South*, a novel published in 1855 by Elizabeth Gaskell, or watch the BBC adaptation, to get a flavour of the north/south divide.

Prosperity and poverty

The concept of Britain being 'two nations', suggested by Benjamin Disraeli in his novel *Sybil* published in 1845, which exposed the appalling living conditions of the working classes, could be seen as valid for much of the remainder of the nineteenth century. There appeared to be an identifiable gulf between the minority middle and upper classes, who could rely on a decent income from their assets or occupations and enjoyed a comfortable standard of living, and the majority working classes and the poor, whose living standards were often precariously balanced between sufficiency and destitution. Most historians acknowledge that after 1850 there was a rise in living standards but disagree as to the extent and degree of poverty that continued and the effectiveness of its treatment.

Prosperity

In the mid nineteenth century, Britain was enjoying a period of unprecedented prosperity. An entrepreneurial spirit led to some of the profits of industry and trade going into overseas developments. When those met with success much of the capital came back to Britain. It was the middle-class manufacturers and merchants who benefited most from this activity. The owners of these thriving business concerns and others, who contributed to the control of trade and industry, formed part of a growing, prosperous middle class. They built substantial houses on the outskirts of industrial towns such as Edgbaston in Birmingham. They could afford the best quality furniture and furnishings, several domestic servants and the luxury of a carriage and pair (of horses). They limited the size of their families through birth control, educated their children privately, ate well and could afford the best medical attention when they fell ill. This group was a small percentage of the broader middle class, but the benefits of economic growth permeated much of respectable Victorian society, who regarded their rising standards of living a reward for thriftiness and hard work.

The wages of the working classes fluctuated according to the state of the economy, whereas those of the middle class did not. However, an indication of overall rising prosperity was the increase in workers' wages in both town and country, although rural wages were generally well below those of industrial workers. The wages of industrial workers rose on average by about 50 per cent between 1850 and 1875. At the same time prices rose on average by 20 per cent, giving workers a rise of about 30 per cent in real wages. The result was increased spending power.



Fig. 6 Children playing on a summer's day while adults rest; rising wages and falling prices meant that life for workers and their families was less harsh than it had previously been

Rising wages and falling prices meant that for the working classes in the cities life was less harsh. Simple commodities like soap and matches became more easily available and, more importantly, affordable. Fresh food was quickly brought in from the surrounding countryside by train and in general food was cheaper. Diets became more varied with plentiful supplies of meat, milk and vegetables. Factories were producing cheaper goods specifically targeted at better-off skilled working-class families with spare cash. There was more leisure time each week as the practice of a half day on Saturday arose out of the 1850 Factory Act, which cut working hours in the textile industry, and Bank Holidays were introduced. Family excursions to the seaside or countryside by train at weekends became popular.

CROSS-REFERENCE

Refer back to Chapter 3, pages 22–27, for details of the rapid expansion of industry and export trade.

A CLOSER LOOK

Rural wages

Historian E.L.M. Thomson in his *Anatomy of English Agriculture, 1870–1914*, looks at movements in earnings of farm labourers alongside a cost of living index for the period. He concludes that their wages rose in real terms from 1860, dropping to a low point only between 1878 and 1886, at the height of the depression in farming, but even so at best their wage rose to 20 shillings a week and they could never be classed as anything other than poor.

A CLOSER LOOK

Bank Holiday Act, 1871

This legislation made provision for four statutory holidays a year, as many people worked all year round with the exception of Christmas, Easter and other traditional festivals.

Table 2 Money wages and real wages in the United Kingdom 1850-86 (1850 = 100)

	Money wages	Real wages
1850	100	100
1855	116	94
1860	114	105
1866	132	117
1871	137	125
1874	155	136
1877	152	132
1880	147	122
1883	150	142
1886	148	142

Poverty

EXTRACT 2

After the middle of the century, the sense of urgency about poverty began to abate, in part because the poor were visibly sharing in the material progress of the nation, in part because the attitudes that had seemed so threatening to them proved to be more humane in practice. As the normal poverty of the normal working classes became less problematic, the idea of poverty became normalised. The stigma that had attached to poverty in the aftermath of the New Poor Law (1834) and in the turmoil of the 1830s and 1840s gradually disappeared; whatever stigma remained was reserved for the dependent and the unrespectable poor, those who existed on the margins of society or were outcasts from society. The bulk of the poor, the 'working classes' as they were increasingly called, were seen as respectable, deserving and worthy.

Adapted from Gertrude Himmelfarb, 'The Idea of Poverty' in *History Today*, Issue 34, 4 April 1984



Fig. 7 People gather on the steps of a slum in Liverpool in the late 1800s

ACTIVITY

According to Extract 2, what is Gertrude Himmelfarb's view of poverty in mid-nineteenth century Britain? How optimistic is this view? Give examples to support your answer.

KEY TERM

stigma: the shame or disgrace attached to a person, because of their condition – in this context because they were poor

The mid-Victorian boom which brought prosperity to so much of the country did not solve poverty and its associated problems, nor relieve the misery and wretchedness of those at the bottom of the economic ladder. There was still unemployment. For those in work some of the conditions were deplorable. There remained the problem of unregulated employment of young children in small workshops. There was no state system of education and poorer working-class children could not read or write. The most pressing problems were the state of housing in the slum districts in towns and cities and the health hazards caused by overcrowded and insanitary living conditions. Action was required, but there were strongly held laissez faire views that it was not the role of government to intervene in people's welfare. Nevertheless, social improvements were introduced through limited government intervention in public health legislation, factory legislation and in the introduction of a state education system, all of which benefited the working poor.

In spite of the higher standards of living, the spectre of poverty was never faraway. There was little security when workers, skilled or unskilled, lost their jobs, possibly through being 'laid off', ill health or simply old age. The skilled among them might have set money aside in the Post Office Savings Banks introduced by Gladstone in 1861, or in a Friendly Society, or they would resort to a kind of 'self-help' by relying on family or neighbours, or accept charity, but none of these measures would guarantee a solution to their predicament. Although Gertrude Himmelfarb suggests that the stigma of poverty was 'reserved for the unrespectable poor', it was often the hard-grafting, 'respectable' unskilled workers, who could never earn enough in good times to set aside savings, who ended up turning to the only state provision available – poor relief and the workhouse, with all the humiliation and stigma that brought to a working man and his family. Economic prosperity could not banish poverty.

ACTIVITY

Divide into small groups and each research one of the following aspects of 'living in poverty' in Britain in the mid-Victorian era: poor relief and the workhouse; child labour; unemployment; living conditions; coping with sickness, disease and poor health. By presenting your findings to the class you will build up a comprehensive picture of what it was to be poor. Use the school library and the Internet to help you with your research.

It is difficult to assess with certainty the extent of poverty or the proportion of the population in poverty at any given time, although Himmelfarb suggests it was lessening as they began to take a share in the material progress of the nation. Official figures indicated a decline in the number of the poor since the introduction of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act.

Whatever level of relief was given, there was always a group of people who remained in poverty – paupers, sometimes referred to as the 'residuum' (the lowest element of the poor). There were differing views as to what category of people they included and why they remained poor. For some, they were feckless, irresponsible drifters and utterly undeserving of any relief. For philanthropists like William Booth they included decent working-class people, demoralised and distressed at their inability to maintain themselves or their family, the 'submerged tenth' – in other words numbering as many as three million.

In April 1886, Charles Booth (1840-1916), a wealthy shipping merchant, concerned at the high levels of poverty he observed among urban workers, set out to inquire into working life in London. His work continued for a decade, but the results of his first survey, 'Life and Labour of the People of London', published in 1889, suggested that over 30 per cent of the population lived in poverty.

A CLOSER LOOK

While they enjoyed a more prosperous and comfortable lifestyle, many of the working classes preferred to regard themselves as separate from the 'pauper class', but the reality was that poverty was within the working class and not below it. This is underlined by historian Theodore Tappan when he suggests that 'one of the greatest divisions in Victorian society – that between the "poor" and the rest – did not occur at any obvious point of separation at all, but within the working class itself.'

CROSS-REFERENCE

Government intervention to help alleviate poverty is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, pages 48-50.

Table 3 Paupers on relief 1834-80

	Number of paupers	Percentage of population
1834	1.26 million	8.8%
1850	1 million	5.7%
1860	845,000	4.3%
1870	1 million	4.6%
1880	808,000	3%

KEY TERM

philanthropist: a person who tries to benefit mankind

ACTIVITY

Working in pairs, draw up a list of ways in which you think the standard of living for the working classes improved between 1850 and 1886. Can you identify and explain the differences in the standards of living between the middle and working classes?

STUDY TIP

In your answer make sure you clearly identify the different arguments of each historian. Remember they may only differ in some aspects and not all. To help you achieve this, make a brief note of the main points in each extract before you begin your answer.

STUDY TIP

It would be helpful to use the information you gathered in the activity on page xx to help you answer this question. Try to make full use of the facts and figures quoted in the chapter to support your answer.

Summary

- A class system was a prevalent feature of mid-nineteenth century Britain. There were three main classes (upper, middle and lower) and disparities within each class.
- Industrialisation brought significant change to the existing social structure with the accumulation of wealth by middle-class industrialists, who challenged the economic superiority of the upper classes.
- Four fifths of the occupied population could be described as working class and earned their living through manual labour.
- There were national and regional divisions within the United Kingdom, which operated along differing economic and social lines and had implications for the local populations.
- There was an identifiable gulf between the minority middle and upper classes and the majority working classes and the poor, in terms of standards of living.
- Britain was experiencing a period of unprecedented economic growth, which brought an overall rise in prosperity. An indication of this was the increase in workers' wages in both town and country.
- Rising wages and falling prices meant that for the working classes life was less harsh.
- The mid-Victorian boom did not solve poverty and its associated problems.
- There was growing concern about what caused poverty and how to eradicate it.

AS PRACTICE QUESTION

Evaluating historical extracts

With reference to Extracts 1 and 2 and your understanding of the historical context, which of these two extracts provides the more convincing interpretation of poverty in the mid-Victorian era?

A PRACTICE QUESTION

'The majority of British people enjoyed an improved standard of living between 1851 and 1886.' Assess the validity of this view.

5 Social movements and policies

EXTRACT 1

The Conservative government of 1874–80 was responsible for one of the most notable instalments of social reform of the century. To some extent these achievements were the product of a deliberate intention to use social improvement as a means of gaining working-class favour. But very largely they were responses to problems which ministers could not ignore, shaped principally by the results of formal inquiry, the pressure of public opinion and the promptings of the civil service. They implemented no programme and embodied no philosophy. Nearly all were cautious and limited and some were weak and ineffectual. Only the Labour laws of 1875 went substantially beyond what the immediate situation demanded. As a whole the measures form an impressive body of work, but what they symbolise is less a Conservative zeal for reform than Conservative empiricism in the face of concrete problems.

Adapted from Paul Smith, *Disraeli: Conservatism and Social Reform, 1967*

ACTIVITY

Evaluating historical extracts

According to Extract 1, what motivated the Conservative government of 1874–80 to introduce so much social reform?

The political dominance of Gladstone and Disraeli between 1866 and 1885 meant years of strong government and this is perhaps reflected in the enormous quantity and range of legislation which addressed the important social issues of the day. However, the motivation of mid-nineteenth century governments for introducing reform legislation is often considered from a modern viewpoint. Social legislation did not necessarily have an interest in the condition of the people at heart.

Self-help

As part of the general philosophy of *laissez faire*, there was an emphasis on the individual. There was a growing belief that everyone should have the opportunity to fulfil their potential but they must take personal responsibility for their actions, be prepared to work hard to achieve their aim, and not blame other circumstances when mishaps occurred. This notion was expressed most clearly in the book entitled *Self-Help*, by Samuel Smiles, published in 1859, which came to epitomise the Victorian values of the mid-nineteenth century of constantly striving to improve oneself and change for the better. Smiles' key virtues for success were a sense of duty, strength of character, thrift and self-help.

A CLOSER LOOK

In his book *Self-Help*, Samuel Smiles created the idea of the modern 'role model', when he featured the activities of high-achieving men to inspire ordinary young people to overcome disadvantage and adversity and work hard to change their lives. His book, which was read and admired by Gladstone, quickly became a bestseller. Since then the book has been translated into more than 40 languages – and it is still in print.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this chapter you will learn about:

- self-help
- trade unions
- education and social reform legislation

KEY TERM

Empiricism: a system which relies solely on knowledge gained through direct experience

KEY QUESTION

As you read this chapter, consider the following Key Question: How did society and social policy develop?

KEY QUESTION

How important were ideas and ideologies?