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Disability and political activism in industrialising Britain, c. 1830–1850

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ABSTRACT

This article examines disabled people's political activism in Britain before the emergence of the modern disability rights movement (DRM). Focusing on the campaign for shorter factory working hours in the 1830s and 1840s, it highlights the centrality of so-called 'factory cripples' to the reformist cause, both figuratively and as witnesses to the consequences of industrial labour. Drawing on a wide range of sources – from accounts of campaign speeches and gatherings to official reports and the writings and testimonies of impaired workers – the article shows how the factory movement opened spaces for working-class 'maimed' and 'deformed' people to talk about their experiences in their own words. Self-proclaimed 'factory cripples' engaged in the fight for shorter hours in complex and reciprocal ways, with some using it to advance a socio-cultural understanding of 'disability'. Recognising this reminds us that disabled people engaged in significant forms of political activism long before the twentieth century and suggests that the analysis developed by the DRM was not as pioneering as some studies imply.

KEYWORDS

Disability; activism; factory reform movement; industrial work; occupational health; political protest; nineteenth century; labour movement

In the Castle Yard at York on Tuesday 24 April 1832, before a crowd of 12,000 supporters of factory reform, Richard Oastler related the story of a 17-year-old 'cripple' who, he claimed, 'had had his limbs entirely distorted by the long hours he had worked in mills, and was now unable to do any kind of work'.¹ The young man, a Huddersfield factory operative named Joseph Habergam, had begun work at the age of seven, whereupon he had been 'compelled to work from five in the morning to eight in the evening' with only 30 minutes' rest. Within six months, Habergam's 'knees and ancles began to give way'. Soon his older brother and sister had to 'drag' him to the mill, as he was 'utterly unable to walk'. Moving to another establishment, Habergam endured four more years of excessively long shifts, eventually being discharged for attempting to run away following a vicious beating from one of the mill's

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¹*Leeds Mercury*, 28 April 1832 [4]. Most newspapers consulted were not paginated when originally published. They have been accessed using digital archives for this article. Page numbers (indicated in square brackets) have been added where these are given in the digital archive.

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overlookers (foremen). Now under the care of Dr Walker of Huddersfield Infirmary, his broken body marked him out as one of the ‘victims’ of the factory ‘system’, unsupported in his ‘distress’ by those who profited from it. He had been advised to use leg irons but could not afford the lining pads to wear them comfortably. In this state, he had dragged himself to Oastler’s residence at Fixby Hall where, ‘weeping’, he had told his story. ‘I know scores and scores again of little children that are thus ground down to powder’, concluded Oastler, ‘and this day I call upon Yorkshire to assert that on her soil this slavery shall no more continue’.²

In the 1830s and 1840s, the campaign for a Ten Hours Bill that would reduce the hours of factory workers mobilised images, displays and narratives of industrial deformity to highlight the conditions in northern textile mills, weaving them into gothic tales of suffering.³ Built on a coalition of social-crusading Tories, such as Oastler, Michael Sadler and Lord Ashley, campaigning medical men, clergy, conscientious employers, and worker-led Short Time Committees, the factory movement discussed at length the deformities and impairments of workers, placing them at the heart of an emotive campaign to reform the pernicious factory ‘system’.⁴ Oastler’s retelling of Habergam’s story is a prime example of what James Vernon calls the ‘melodramatic dynamic of public performance’ characterising political culture in this period.⁵ The speeches of factory reformers and visual culture of the movement described a ‘common character of deformity’ that represented the condition of the human body under industrial capitalism: short in stature, crooked of limb, and ‘worn out’ like old machinery.⁶ Although textile workers suffered numerous debilitating health problems, from lung disease to hearing loss, reformers deliberately focused on the physicality of impaired workers, presenting an emotive, yet selective, view of industrial disablement.⁷ Focusing on the visibly marked body provided a powerful rhetorical means of emphasising the victimhood of young workers, authenticating arguments for shorter hours. By September 1832, this rhetorical strategy had been so successful that a reporter who saw a banner of a ‘man with bent legs’ at a short-time gathering could know immediately

²York Herald, 28 April 1832 [3]. Habergam’s name appears in various forms in the sources consulted, including ‘Habberjam’ and ‘Hebergam’. We use Habergam.

³R. Gray, *The Factory Question and Industrial England, 1830–1860* (Cambridge, 1996), 39, 53, 79–81; K. Honeyman, *Child Workers in England, 1780–1820: Parish apprentices and the making of the early industrial labour force* (Aldershot, 2007), 188; J.A. Hargreaves and H.E.A. Haigh, *Slavery in Yorkshire: Richard Oastler and the campaign against child labour in the industrial revolution* (Huddersfield, 2012); B.M. Marshall, *Industrial Gothic: Workers, exploitation and urbanisation in transatlantic nineteenth-century literature* (Cardiff, 2021), 114–42.

⁴Gray, *op. cit.*

⁵J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A study in English political culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), 108.

⁶For example see *Manchester: The Factory Commission arrived: memorial of the factory children presented* (Manchester, 1833).

⁷J. Greenlees, *When the Air Became Important: A social history of the New England and Lancashire textile industries* (New Brunswick, 2019), 36.

that it was there ‘to signify the effects of working in factories’.⁸ While effective, such stock imagery failed to capture the variability of impaired workers’ bodies and experiences.

However, ‘deformed’ workers were more than mere bystanders to the campaign for industrial reform. As Kathryn Gleadle’s work on child protesters has shown, those held up as ‘victims’ of the factory system were not without agency.⁹ As we shall see, if the sentimental sufferings of ‘factory cripples’ were useful for reformers, so too was the reform movement useful for impaired workers. This article presents a new ‘disability perspective’ on the factory movement, showing how campaigns for shorter working hours in the 1830s and 1840s reflected and, more significantly, shaped emerging modern ideas about disability. It explores how both supporters and opponents of reform drew on dominant cultural modes of representing impaired bodies when making their arguments about factory regulation. Focusing on testifying, writing and public speaking, we examine the ways in which ‘deformed’ and maimed people were drawn into the campaign for shorter hours, and how they used it to highlight their circumstances – sometimes in ways that diverged from the agenda of non-disabled reformers. In pursuing these goals, we aim to answer the following questions: How did the factory movement use images of bodily difference to advance the reformist case? What were the experiences of deformed and ‘disabled’ people in campaigns for improved working conditions? What risks and benefits did they derive from their involvement in the cause and how did this involvement change over time?

In exploring these issues and emphasising physically impaired people as actors in the industrial politics of nineteenth-century Britain, this article addresses a significant lacuna in both labour history and disability studies. Wary of reformers’ sensational claims regarding the causes of industrial ‘deformity’, historians have tended to avoid examining the contribution of people with impairments to the factory movement.¹⁰ Beyond the consideration of a few well-known examples, such as that of Robert Blincoe (a former factory operative who gained fame following the publication in 1828 of a shocking memoir about his life in the mills), little attention has been paid to what ‘deformed’ workers themselves had to say about their experiences or their relationship to the wider campaign for industrial reform and the nascent labour movement.¹¹ For the

⁸Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser, 1 September 1832 [4].

⁹K. Gleadle, ‘“We will have it”: children and protest in the Ten Hours Movement’, in N. Goose and K. Honeyman (eds), *Childhood and Child Labour in Industrial England: Diversity and agency, 1750–1914* (Farnham, 2013), 215–30.

¹⁰P.W.J. Bartrip and S.B. Burman, *The Wounded Soldiers of Industry: Industrial compensation policy, 1833–1897* (Oxford, 1983), 10–13; P. Kirby, *Child Workers and Industrial Health in Britain, 1780–1850* (Woodbridge, 2013), 62–78.

¹¹J. Waller, *The Real Oliver Twist: Robert Blincoe – a life that illuminates an age* (Cambridge, 2005); J. Kuskey, ‘The working body: re-forming the factory body’, *Victorian Review*, 42, 1 (2016), 4–9; J. Brown, ‘A memoir of Robert Blincoe, an orphan boy’ (1832 edn), in J.R. Simmons Jr (ed.), *Factory Lives: Four nineteenth-century working-class biographies* (Plymouth, 2007), 88–179; R.G. Kirby and A.E. Musson, *The Voice of the People: John Doherty, 1798–1854 – trade unionist, radical and factory reformer* (Manchester, 1975), 353, 375–76.

most part, historians seem to have dismissed the presence of ‘deformed’ people in the factory movement as little more than a rhetorical ploy on the part of its leaders. This portrayal reflects a tendency in labour history to view disability as a ‘private, ahistorical experience’, and to assume that disabled people were both economically inactive and incapable of participating in the politics of class struggle.¹²

Disability scholars have been better at recognising disabled people’s engagement in industrial politics, but scholarship in this area has mostly concentrated on the twentieth century.¹³ Until recently, it was commonly believed in disability studies that the nineteenth century was an especially bleak period in the ‘rise of disability’, when disabled people were forced from the world of work by industrialisation and the arrival of factories. Increasingly excluded from industrial workplaces, older, weaker or impaired people, it is argued, had few opportunities to participate in the new politics of labour.¹⁴ Yet such assumptions are empirically dubious. People with impairments continued to work in significant numbers throughout the period.¹⁵ As we argue below, impaired and ‘deformed’ workers also played a more significant role in the emergent labour movement than has hitherto been recognised.

Furthermore, the focus of disability historians on the kind of political activism that fed into the modern disability movement – ‘collective political action by and for people with disabilities’ calling for the provision of accommodations, services and access as ‘enforceable civil rights rather than dispensations of charity’ – has meant that earlier forms of individual or collective political action by disabled people in support of other causes have been ignored.¹⁶ It is anachronistic to view the factory reform campaign as ‘disability activism’ in the modern sense, as it was never a movement led *by* disabled people *for* disabled people or one that demanded equality. Indeed, the impairments of

¹²S.F. Rose, ‘“Crippled Hands”: disability in labor and working-class history’, *Labour: Studies in working-class history of the Americas*, 2, 1 (2005), 27–54, 47; S. Bengtsson, ‘Out of the frame: disability and the body in the writings of Karl Marx’, *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 19, 2 (2017), 151–60, 158.

¹³For example see A. Jennings, ‘Organized labor and disability in post–World War II United States’, in M. Rembis, C. Kudlick and K.E. Nielsen (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History* (New York, 2018), 247–61; C. Brigden, ‘Voice and agency: workers with a disability and trade unionism’, *Labour and Industry*, 29, 1 (2019), 118–31; P.K. Longmore and D. Goldberger, ‘The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression: a case study in the new disability history’, in P.K. Longmore, *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (Philadelphia, 2003), 53–102.

¹⁴M. Oliver and C. Barnes, *The New Politics of Disablement* (Basingstoke, 2013), 52–73; R. Slorach, *A Very Capitalist Condition: A history and politics of disability* (London, 2016), 69–92.

¹⁵S.F. Rose, *No Right to be Idle: The invention of disability, 1840s–1930s* (Chapel Hill, 2017); S. De Veirman, ‘Deaf and disabled? (Un) employment of deaf people in Belgium: a comparison of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century cohorts’, *Disability and Society*, 30, 3 (2015), 460–74; D.M. Turner and D. Blackie, *Disability in the Industrial Revolution: Physical impairment in British coalmining, 1780–1880* (Manchester, 2018).

¹⁶C. Barnes and G. Mercer, *Disability* (Cambridge, 2003), 176; Longmore, *Why I Burned My Book*, *op. cit.*, 114; S.N. Barnartt, ‘Activism and advocacy’, in S. Burch (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of American Disability History*, 3 vols. (New York, 2009), Vol. 1, 9–11; D.M. Nepveux, ‘Activism’, in R. Adams, B. Reiss and D. Serlin (eds), *Keywords for Disability Studies* (New York, 2015), 21–25.

factory workers were not classed under the umbrella term ‘disability’ in sources produced at the time. Men, women and children damaged by factory work were rarely described – or saw themselves – as ‘disabled’, even when their blighted economic prospects were discussed.

In the 1830s and 1840s, the word ‘disabled’ was most commonly applied to people incapacitated from undertaking paid work.¹⁷ Yet not all those whose injured or ‘deformed’ bodies were held up as evidence of the evils of the factory system were incapable of work. Many operatives continued to work long after the onset of impairments, despite being described as ‘cripples’ – a label often associated with helplessness and deliberately used by reformers to evoke charitable feelings.¹⁸ This language helped to present the campaign for reduced hours, which Short Time Committees intended to benefit all workers – able-bodied adults and ‘crippled’ children alike – in non-threatening terms to potential middle-class supporters, as something aligning with their humanitarian instincts rather than threatening their economic interests. However, while its sentimental undertones could not be escaped, the popularisation of the term ‘factory cripple’ during the 1830s introduced a common point of identity that impaired workers themselves eventually appropriated. Doing so enabled them to call attention to the problems they faced as a distinctive subset of Britain’s working classes. As such, while we are mindful of the difficulties of projecting modern categories of disability onto the past, we argue that in mobilising ‘crippled’ operatives to demand change by articulating their lived experiences of impairment, the factory movement deserves to be recognised as an early example of disability politics. Reappraising industrial reform from the perspective of self-proclaimed ‘factory cripples’ not only adds depth and nuance to the political history of physical difference before the advent of modern ‘disability activism’, it also illuminates the politics of working-class protest at this time more generally.

The moment of the ‘factory cripple’

The origins of the ‘factory cripple’ image that so dominated the campaign for industrial reform in the 1830s can be traced back to the eighteenth century. As industrialisation gathered pace, concerns about the health effects of industrial labour, especially on children, led to the regulation of factory work through such measures as the Factory Acts of 1802 and 1819. Evidence presented in support of this legislation

¹⁷Turner and Blackie, *op. cit.*, 36.

¹⁸N. Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak shows and modern British culture* (Berkeley, 2010), 18. For a detailed account of a ‘crippled’ operative who continued working after becoming impaired see Waller, *op. cit.*

frequently linked physical traits such as stunted growth, painful legs and ‘deformity’ with child labour in factories.¹⁹ It was out of these arguments that the ‘factory cripple’ template grew.

While campaigners had highlighted the ‘deformed’ bodies of operatives before, it was not until the 1830s that stories of worker ‘deformity’ became central to the fight for factory reform. These stories resonated with the public at this time for several reasons. First, this was a period when the movement for the abolition of slavery was also gaining momentum. Anti-slavery offered a rhetoric of moral outrage, infused with an evangelical spirit, that centred disability as a mark of exploitation.²⁰ Oastler and others in the factory movement commonly likened the situation of industrial workers to plantation slavery and often referred to them as ‘white slaves’. Given the popularity of abolitionism at this time, the parallel between the ‘factory system’ and the treatment of slaves in Britain’s overseas colonies was a convenient (if dubious) one to make. For factory reformers, both represented a ‘cruel and degrading system’ that ‘saps the strength of [a man’s] intellectual character and makes him a cripple for life’ via unremitting labour.²¹ Conflating paid factory work with unfree colonial labour also allowed reformers to counter political economists’ argument that working in factories was a product of workers’ free agency and therefore unsuitable for regulation. They observed that many working-class families were compelled to send their children to the mills due to fears of impoverishment, and that those who left factories because of health worries would be denied poor relief.²² Like anti-slavery campaigners, factory reformers emphasised disability as a mark of worker victimhood that fuelled humanitarian calls for amelioration. If slavery in the New World warranted government intervention, Oastler and others argued, so too did the slave-like existence that factory workers in Britain had to endure.

Such arguments reflected and played on contemporary concerns about the perceived prevalence of impairment in industrial communities, and this is the second reason the figure of the ‘factory cripple’ gained such traction in the 1830s. By the time Oastler made his speech at York, the urbanisation accompanying Britain’s industrial transformation had seen thousands of people concentrated into manufacturing towns like Leeds and Manchester.

¹⁹ Alfred’ (S.H.G. Kydd), *The History of the Factory Movement*, 2 vols in one ([1857] New York, 1966), vol. 1, 11, 51–55; J.V. Pickstone, *Medicine and Industrial Society: A history of hospital development in Manchester and its region, 1752–1946* (Manchester, 1985), 43; Honeyman, *op. cit.*, 47–48; J.T. Ward, *The Factory Movement, 1830–1855* (London, 1962), 19–27; *Information Concerning the State of Children in Cotton Factories* (Manchester, 1818), 7, British Library Add. MS 27805, Place Papers Vol. XVII.

²⁰S. Hunt-Kennedy, *Between Fitness and Death: Disability and slavery in the Caribbean* (Urbana, 2020), 4–6, 138–57.

²¹Gray, *op. cit.*, 37–47; T. Jackson, *Britain’s Burden: Or, the intolerable evils of colonial slavery exposed* (Cambridge, 1832), 3. See also *The Condition of the West India Slave Contrasted with that of the Infant Slave in our English Factories* (London, n.d. [1833]).

²²*The Factory System and the Ten Hours Bill: Extracted from Fraser’s Magazine April 1833, article ‘Natural economy, no. V’, (n.pl.)* ([London], n.d. [1833]), 4.

Among their number were many with non-normative bodies who congregated in the streets or were brought together in hospitals. This concentration helped make physically impaired people seem more conspicuous in factory towns than in sparsely populated rural settings, and increasingly troubled observers.²³ At a factory reform meeting in Leeds in January 1832, the Reverend Richard Fawcett gave expression to this concern when he remarked that ‘We used to be surprised on seeing a cripple in our streets, but now, alas! we cannot pass along a single street without witnessing the lamentable appearance of children, and, indeed, upgrown persons, labouring under severe bodily affliction’. Fawcett was one of many urban clergymen, lawyers and doctors alarmed at the seemingly increasing number of ‘cripples’ and ‘deformed’ persons in industrial communities. At the same meeting, surgeon Samuel Smith of Leeds Infirmary told how he first started to notice ‘an unusual number of cases’ of deformed legs among patients sent to him from a ‘neighbouring manufacturing town’ over a decade earlier. Since then, the infirmary’s expenditure on orthopaedic devices for factory workers had increased to such an extent that the hospital now had to ask patients’ parishes to contribute to the cost of supplying these.²⁴ Made at a time when growing concerns about the cost of public welfare were contributing to calls for a New Poor Law (which was eventually enacted in 1834), Smith’s comments reveal how factory reformers astutely tapped into the zeitgeist of the 1830s.²⁵ If campaigners’ frequent expressions of sympathy for the plight of ‘deformed’ workers framed factory reform as a humanitarian crusade, their enthusiasm for highlighting the fiscal burden of industrial disability revealed a harder economic edge. As one operative argued, failure to reform a system of work that ‘lays the foundation of future debility and decrepitude’ would lead to the ‘fearful pauperisation of the country’.²⁶ Comments like these were designed to strike a chord with cost-conscious policymakers and ratepayers, and built on the idea enshrined in the 1824 Vagrancy Act that deformed beggars were a social nuisance and threat to public order.²⁷ While the primary aim of the Ten Hours Bill was to reform the working conditions that produced deformity rather than deal with its social consequences, concerns about welfare, public order and the threatening visibility of the sick and deformed poor were never far away from debates about factory labour.

While worker deformity was a major theme in the campaign for factory reform in the early 1830s, accounts of public meetings at this time seldom report ‘deformed’ workers talking about their own experiences of ill health

²³A.N. Bergen, ‘The Blind, the Deaf and the Halt: physical disability, the Poor Law and charity c. 1830–1890’ (PhD, Leeds, 2004), 332–33, 377–79.

²⁴*Leeds Intelligencer*, 12 January 1832 [3].

²⁵A. Digby, *The Poor Law in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales* (London, 1982), 9.

²⁶*British Labourer’s Protector and Factory Child’s Friend* (Reprint Edition, New York, 1969), 22 March 1833, 210.

²⁷5 George IV c.83, *An Act for the Punishment of Idle and Disorderly Persons*, 21 June 1824, article IV.

or disablement or the physical impact of industrial labour on their lives.²⁸ As the Calderdale operative George Crabtree observed of a meeting he attended near Halifax, although several speakers recounted in ‘feeling and pathetic terms their Factory experience’, when specific cases of disablement were mentioned, the ‘factory cripples’ concerned did not get to speak for themselves, but were merely described by others.²⁹ In such circumstances, bereft of a voice, impaired workers had little control over the narratives about their bodies and experiences developed at reform gatherings.

Verbal descriptions of ‘crippled’ workers like the ones heard by Crabtree were just one of several ways factory reformers made deformity visible at public events. Other methods included the display of visual imagery depicting operatives with ‘deformed’ bodies and the occasional carefully staged appearance of ‘factory cripples’ themselves. The ‘politics of sight’ was a key component of all political movements in the early nineteenth century, and such visualisations were deployed to provide unambiguous proof of the evils of the factory system and establish the moral worthiness of the Ten Hours cause.³⁰ They were also intended to provoke a powerful emotional response in those who saw them – something Samuel Smith achieved at the York Castle meeting in April 1832 when he held up a picture of a ‘poor deformed man, about thirty years of age’, which ‘caused a great sensation in the meeting’. This effect deeply impressed Oastler. Writing to the Manchester labour leader John Doherty, Oastler reported that, on seeing the picture, ‘the whole mass of people silently and reverently uncovered their heads’ in a ‘spontaneous movement of sorrow, pity, and respect, towards the unhappy victim of slavery, whose mangled and deformed limbs were pencilled before them’.³¹

What Oastler neglected to say was that the ‘deformed’ man himself played an important role in the production of the image displayed at York. Struck by the former operative’s appearance after a chance encounter in the street, Smith had asked the man ‘to call upon me in the afternoon’, and it was during the man’s visit later in the day that the ‘sketch’ displayed at York was made.³² In deciding to visit Smith and allowing himself to be drawn, the unnamed man effectively lent his visibly different body to the reformist cause, becoming an active contributor to the campaign for shorter hours in the process. Contrary to Oastler’s characterisation of him, the ‘deformed’ man was not quite the helpless person the great orator implied.

²⁸For rare exceptions to this characterisation: Anon., *Report of the Proceedings of the Huddersfield and Bradford Meetings, Held on 26th and 27th of December, 1831* (Leeds, n.d. [1831?]), 3; Anon., *The Ten Hour Bill. Keighley meeting, Monday 30 January 1832* (Leeds, n.d. [1832]), 2.

²⁹G. Crabtree, *A Brief Description of a Tour through Calder Dale, being a letter to Richard Oastler, surnamed by Baines ‘King of the Factory Children’* (Huddersfield, 1833), 20.

³⁰Vernon, *op. cit.*, 107–16.

³¹*Leeds Intelligencer*, 26 April 1832 [3]; Richard Oastler to John Doherty, 17 May 1832, *Poor Man’s Advocate* (Reprint Edition, New York, 1969), 26 May 1832, 146. For a later example of an image of a deformed worker being displayed at a meeting see *British Labourer’s Protector*, 1 March 1833, 190.

³²*Leeds Intelligencer*, 26 April 1832 [3].

Similar images found their way onto banners displayed at short-time parades. Perhaps the most well-known of these was the ‘triumphant procession’ that took place in Manchester in late August 1832. Comprising somewhere between ‘several hundreds’ and ‘thousands’ of factory workers, this ‘was headed by two men, bearing a flag with the representation of a deformed man’ on it and the appropriated abolitionist slogan “‘Am I not a Man and a Brother?’”. Following this was a ‘long line of Factory Children’ carrying ‘a great variety of banners’ which included other images of workers described variously as ‘deformed’, a ‘cripple’ or ‘knock-kneed’, at least one of which was said to be inscribed with the exclamation ‘Excessive toil is the burden of my soul’.³³ Like the drawings at York, many of the banners depicted real-life ‘factory cripples’, such as Robert Blincoe whose portrait had appeared in the *Poor Man’s Advocate* two months earlier and later graced the title page of his reprinted memoir (Figure 1).³⁴ These processions and images helped to bond protesters together in a shared sense of self, claiming disablement as a collective working-class experience.³⁵

By lending their bodies to the factory movement in this way and appearing figuratively at public events, real-life ‘stunted’, ‘crippled’ and ‘deformed’ workers engaged in a form of *indirect* activism that gave the campaign for shorter hours a powerful moral force. As the campaign progressed, operatives with non-normative bodies slowly began to take part in more *direct* forms of activism. For example, in April 1833, the *Manchester Times* reported that John Doherty ‘produced two persons dreadfully crippled by factory labour’ at a reform meeting in the city.³⁶ According to the *Manchester Guardian’s* account of the event, these ‘two deformed persons [,] named Wilson and Woolley’, were ‘placed on a sort of stage’ by Doherty ‘to state that their crookedness arose from factory labour’.³⁷ By appearing in person like this and agreeing to show themselves as living proof of the physical effects of industrial labour, Wilson and Woolley gave the figure of the ‘factory cripple’ a flesh-and-bone quality difficult to represent fully in words or pictures. Workers exhibiting ‘stunted growth’ and a ‘sickly appearance’ who were placed on stage at reform meetings in other places fulfilled a similar purpose.³⁸

Such public displays of ‘deformed’ workers reached their peak in protests against the Royal Commission on Factories in the spring of 1833. Fearful that the Commission was favourable to millowners, Short Time Committees

³³*Leeds Intelligencer*, 30 August 1832 [3]; *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 1 September 1832 [5]; *Guardian and Public Ledger*, 3 September 1832 [4]; *Manchester Guardian*, 1 September 1832 [2]. For another example of a banner featuring ‘crippled manufacturers’ at a pro-reform rally see *Leeds Times*, 4 July 1833 [4].

³⁴Kirby and Musson, *op. cit.*, 376; Waller, *op. cit.*, 311; Anon., ‘Robert Blincoe [sic.]’, *The Poor Man’s Advocate*, 9 June 1832, 161.

³⁵K. Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789–1848* (Manchester, 2016), 130.

³⁶*Manchester Times and Gazette*, 27 April 1833 [2].

³⁷*Manchester Guardian*, 27 April 1833 [3].

³⁸For example, *British Labourer’s Protector*, 12 October 1832, 32.

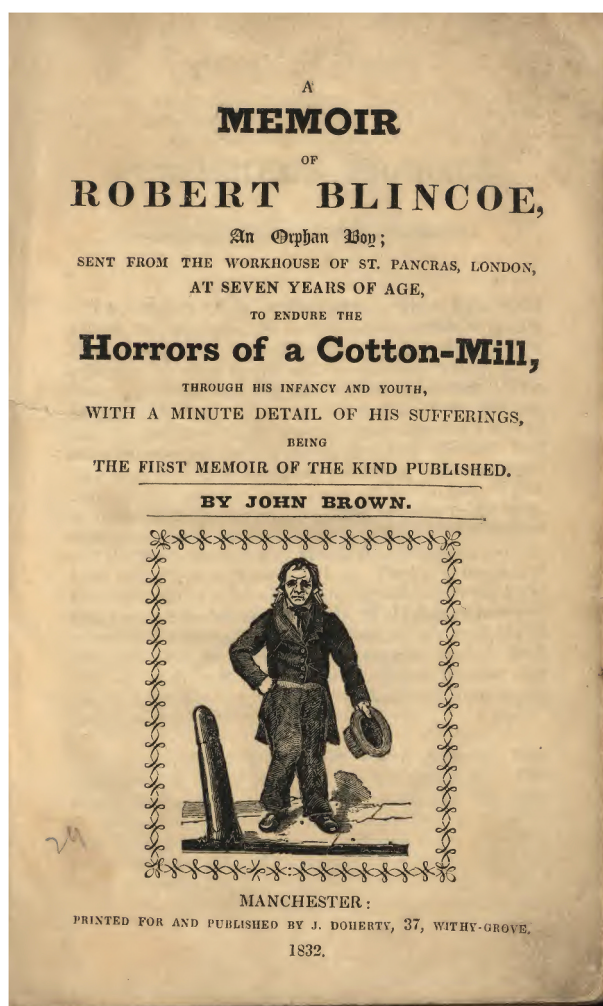


Figure 1. Title page of ‘A memoir of Robert Blincoe, an orphan boy’ by John Brown (Manchester, 1832).

staged mass demonstrations of child workers to greet the commissioners at towns across Lancashire and Yorkshire. In Bradford ‘a deputation of factory cripples, attended by thousands of factory children’, presented a letter to the Commissioners that asserted their desire for a Ten Hours Act, declaring that ‘we will have it, and that’s all we have to say’.³⁹ Similar ‘memorials’ were presented in Leeds and Manchester.⁴⁰ Although carefully stage-managed by the committees, the vibrant spectacle of child protesters, including ‘hundreds of factory-made cripples’, and the wording of petitions acknowledged the agency of those commonly cast as ‘victims’ in reform rhetoric. Opponents of

³⁹*The Standard*, 10 June 1833 [4].

⁴⁰Anon., *The Commission for Perpetuating Factory Infanticide* (London, n.d. [1833]); Anon., *Public Protest against the Factory Commission, Meeting in the Free Market, Leeds, 22 May 1833* (Leeds, n.d. [1833]).

reform attempted to discredit the short-time cause by using the time-worn tactic of alleging ‘fraudulent’ disability and suggesting that campaigners selected the sickest-looking children for these spectacles, dressing them up in rags for effect. For supporters, however, the display of impairments provided powerful ‘ocular corroboration’ of the sufferings of young workers that could not be dismissed.⁴¹

The speeches of leading reformers, and the banners unfurled on processions, made factory deformity more visible but did little to elevate the voices of impaired workers. However, as the campaign for shorter hours gathered momentum, other sites of activism opened to them, providing more effective forums in which to talk about their lives in their own words. Of these, the one that gave the greatest number of ‘factory cripples’ an opportunity to have their say was undoubtedly the official inquiries into the factory question of the 1830s. The most famous of these was the Parliamentary Select Committee called in 1832 to consider the merits of a Ten Hours Bill, chaired by Michael Sadler. Over time, ‘factory cripples’ used such opportunities to discuss their experiences in ways that were framed by, but diverged from, conventional descriptions of the effects of long hours on their health and appearance. The remainder of this article explores how these testimonies constitute an emergent politics of industrial disablement.

Testifying: ‘disabled’ witnesses and official inquiries

The Sadler Committee of 1832, and the Royal Commission established a year later, prompted significant data gathering on the part of the Short Time Committees, both to provide quantifiable evidence of the extent of deformity in particular worker populations, and to select individuals who might provide evidence of the impact of factory work on their own lives, both verbally and (in some cases) by displaying their crooked limbs to committee members.⁴² Of the 87 witnesses who appeared before the Sadler Committee, 29 (a third of the total, and nearly half of all the worker witnesses) were people who testified to experiencing significant health

⁴¹(Kydd), *op. cit.*, vol. 2, 43. Gleadle, *op. cit.*; A. Ure, *The Philosophy of Manufactures* (London, 1835), 299. G. Higginbottom and G.S. Bull, *Instructions to the Short Time Committees of England and Scotland, with Reference to the Commission* (Manchester, n.d. signed ‘24 April 1833’); D.M. Turner, ‘“Fraudulent” disability in historical perspective’, *History and Policy*, February 2012, <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/fraudulent-disability-in-historical-perspective>, accessed 11 December 2020.

⁴²CONFIDENTIAL MEMORANDUM used by the Short Time Committees in the preparation of their evidence for the Parliamentary Select Committee, 1832’, in C. Driver, *Tory Radical: The Life of Richard Oastler* (New York, 1946), 550–53; Higginbottom and Bull, *op. cit.*; BPP, *Factories Inquiry Commission: First Report of the Central Board, House of Commons*, 28 June 1833, <https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.1833-014207?accountid=14680>, accessed 11 December 2020 [hereafter *Factories Inquiry Commission: First Report*]. BPP, *Report from the Committee on the ‘Bill to regulate the Labour of Children in Mills and Factories of the United Kingdom: With the Minutes of evidence, Appendix and Index* (1832), 157, <https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.1831-013421?accountid=14680>, accessed 11 December 2020 (hereafter Sadler Report).

impacts as a result of factory work.⁴³ Aged between 14 and 56, many attested to the crookedness of knees that distinguished ‘factory cripples’, but testimonies reveal a wider range of impairments including fatigue, asthma and, in one case, an ‘extreme state of lowness and depression of mind’.⁴⁴

Despite the opinion of medical men that lower limb deformity was more prevalent in women and girls owing to their greater ‘delicacy’, only three ‘deformed’ female witnesses appeared before the Sadler Committee.⁴⁵ This may have been a consequence of female operatives’ widely reported (and possibly well-founded) fear that revealing their crooked limbs would damage their marriage prospects.⁴⁶ Whatever the reason, the relative absence of women among Sadler Committee witnesses reflected (and perhaps even propelled) the gendering of the ‘factory cripple’ image. Despite constituting the majority (58%) of workers employed in cotton factories and a significant proportion (41%) of those working in woollen mills in the early 1830s, female operatives were far less likely than males to appear in reformist or official discourse about the factory system as ‘factory cripples’.⁴⁷ Modesty dictated that of the 13 witnesses asked to ‘show’ their ‘deformed’ or damaged limbs to the Committee, none were female.⁴⁸ By focusing on male bodies and operatives with non-normative limbs in this way, the Sadler Committee helped flatten out the experiences of impaired industrial workers and promote the image of the (male) ‘factory cripple’ that would come to dominate discussions about industrial disablement in the debate over factory reform.

Among the witnesses who ‘showed’ their ‘deformities’ to the Committee was Joseph Habergam, the young operative whose story Oastler had told so sensationally at York Castle. Habergam’s appearance on 1 June 1832 is worth examining in depth, as it suggests how far his own statements about his life confirmed or challenged those expressed by Oastler at York. It also reveals the kind of details impaired workers wanted, or were able, to introduce to the debate over factory reform when they got a chance to speak for themselves. The pressure on operatives to tailor their narratives to conform to the competing agendas of those present was quite considerable. Although opponents of the Ten Hours Bill accused Sadler’s committee of pro-reform bias at the time, the atmosphere awaiting witnesses was far from friendly or

⁴³Driver, *op. cit.*, 170; Sadler Report.

⁴⁴Sadler, Report 471.

⁴⁵*ibid.*, 503–04.

⁴⁶For example see J. Fielden, *The Curse of the Factory System*, 2nd ed. ([1836] London, 1969), 21; W. Dodd, *The Factory System Illustrated In a Series of Letters to the Right Hon. Lord Ashley* ([1842] London, 1968), 200; Turner and Blackie, *op. cit.*, 147.

⁴⁷J. Burnette, ‘Women workers in the British industrial revolution’, Table 2 in R. Whaples (ed.), *EH.Net Encyclopaedia*, March 2008, <https://eh.net/encyclopaedia/women-workers-in-the-british-industrial-revolution>, accessed 11 December 2020.

⁴⁸Sadler Report, 148–53, 195–99, 229–31.

comforting.⁴⁹ Recounting his experiences in front of Sadler's Committee to an official the following year, Habergam remembered a chaotic and noisy scene. Committee members constantly conversed with each other before quizzing him and, when they did, they all started 'asking me questions at once'. Amidst such disorder, Habergam told the official, it was difficult 'saying what I meant'.⁵⁰

Habergam probably found the tone of some committee members' questioning hostile, too. As with Oastler's telling of his story at York, his work history, physical impairment, and bodily appearance were major themes in Habergam's testimony, and he confirmed much of what Oastler had said about him. Unlike at York, however, these details did not go unchallenged. Oastler had revealed that Habergam had run away from Mr Brook's mill following an attack by an overlooker to '[l]oud cries of "Shame, shame"'.⁵¹ In Westminster, by contrast, opponents of reform seized upon Habergam's account of the incident to cast doubt on the extent of his physical impairment. One sceptical legislator asked: 'Did you not say that at 14 you ran away from the overlooker'? To which Habergam replied: 'I said he turned me away', but, fearing more violence, 'I got up the stairs before him, and ran round the machine' to avoid the man. Sensing a chance to undermine the teenager's credibility, Habergam's interrogator shot back accusingly: 'Then your limbs were not much injured then?'⁵² In such circumstances, it took courage and resilience to provide testimony.

Witnesses seem to have been coached in what to say by the Short Time Committees that sent them to London, and supporters of reform asked many leading questions to ensure that operatives stayed 'on message'.⁵³ This led to exchanges that reinforced the helpless and pitiable image of 'factory cripples' propagated by orators such as Oastler. For example, one legislator asked Habergam:

have you found that, on the whole, you have been rendered ill, deformed and miserable, by the factory system, as at present pursued? – Yes; oh! if I had a thousand pounds, I would give them to have the use of my limbs again.⁵⁴

How far the 17-year-old Habergam truly believed this grim assessment of his situation is difficult to assess, as it is likely that he was eager to please his factory movement sponsors. Yet, if some of his comments were influenced by his relationships with reformers, Habergam's evidence offers a more rounded portrait of his life than the simplistic rhetoric adopted by Oastler and other Short Time leaders. For a start, Habergam presented a much fuller

⁴⁹Ward, *op. cit.*, 61.

⁵⁰*Factories Inquiry Commission: First Report*, C1, 136.

⁵¹*Poor Man's Advocate*, 12 May 1832, 130.

⁵²Sadler Report, 164.

⁵³Waller, *op. cit.*, 301.

⁵⁴Sadler Report, 164.

picture of his family circumstances than Oastler did. The older brother and sister mentioned by Oastler feature in Habergam's story, as does the anecdote about them helping him get to work each morning. In Oastler's telling, the brother and sister were, quite literally, *props* to his story, used by Oastler to emphasise the young operative's dependence and passivity. When Habergam discussed his siblings, he humanised them, revealing their names: John and Charlotte.

His brother and sister were more than mere living mobility aids to Habergam: they were allies bound together in a struggle for mutual survival. By the time Habergam gave his evidence, moreover, brother John was dead, as was his father who died in 1826, while Habergam was still working. This knowledge invites a more nuanced understanding of the young worker's circumstances. In addition to John and Charlotte, Habergam also stated that he had two younger brothers who were working in the mills in 1832. With two or three siblings and a widowed mother presumably living with him in the same household, it is easy to imagine the financial strain Habergam's family was under – something Habergam himself suggested when he revealed that his mother had frequently approached the parish for help. Seen in this light, Habergam's determination to keep working and his family's effort to get him to the factory each morning suggests a level of *interdependence* characteristic of many other disabled people's family lives in the early nineteenth century.⁵⁵ By admitting that his mother, 'being a widow and having but little, could not afford' to let him stop working, and that he felt it was his 'duty to go to those mills . . . to maintain' her, Habergam revealed explicitly her reliance on his labour.⁵⁶ Other witnesses told similar stories.⁵⁷ These statements reveal the complex family relations and economic responsibilities of impaired working people, while simultaneously establishing their good character by emphasising their 'industriousness' and willingness to work. This borrowed a technique used on other occasions when impaired people addressed authority, such as in applying for poor relief.⁵⁸

Habergam's experience also reveals the interdependence between 'factory cripples' and the leaders of the factory reform movement. At York, Oastler had described Habergam's first visit to him in emotional terms in a way that enhanced his messianic self-image as a saviour of poor 'white slaves'. Habergam, in contrast, stressed his own agency when he recalled the encounter for the Sadler Committee, pointing out that he had approached Oastler in the hope of obtaining the linings for his leg irons. Habergam also

⁵⁵*ibid.*, 157–59, 164; D. Blackie, 'Disability, dependency, and the family in the early United States', in S. Burch and M. Rembis (eds), *Disability Histories* (Urbana, 2014), 17–34.

⁵⁶Sadler Report, 159, 164.

⁵⁷*ibid.*, 150–53.

⁵⁸Kuskey, *op. cit.*, 7; S. King, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750s to 1830s* (Montreal, 2019), 127, 230.

revealed that Oastler's patronage enabled him to receive treatment at Leeds Infirmary as an inpatient. However, this came at a cost. Following Oastler's York speech, Habergam and his brothers were threatened with dismissal by their employer.⁵⁹ And a month after testifying before Sadler, Habergam – now unable to work – found his poor relief withdrawn, allegedly because of his determination to speak out against his former employers. In a dramatic gesture that challenged Habergam's right to speak as an injured victim of the factory system, the overseer – a man 'profitably connected' to the mill-owning interest – had thrown Habergam's medical certificate proving that his condition 'disable[d]' him from factory work in his face.⁶⁰ Such intimidation was followed by public accusations about the reliability of his testimony.⁶¹ By mid-April 1833, after another perceived slight on his character, Habergam finally fought back. The target of his ire was John Wilson-Patten, Member of Parliament (MP).

Like other opponents of the Ten Hours Bill, Wilson-Patten attempted to undermine reformers' arguments by using the long-established strategy of blaming 'disabled' people for their own impairments. In a speech to the Commons on 3 April 1833 calling for 'further inquiry' into the factory question, Wilson-Patten referred to an unnamed Sadler witness whose testimony, in his view, 'had made the greatest impression upon the public'. This witness stated he had become 'crooked' as the result of factory work. Yet Wilson-Patten claimed he had 'incontrovertible evidence, that the deformity of this man had nothing to do with his work in the factories but was the result of injuries received . . . in a wrestling match'.⁶² In doing so, he attempted to undermine a central pillar of reformers' arguments without denying the seeming ubiquity of 'deformity' in Britain's industrial districts.

Somehow Habergam learnt of Wilson-Patten's comments and assumed (mistakenly, according to the MP) that they referred to him. Upset by the perceived attack on his character, Habergam, who had recently become a pupil at the Lancasterian School in Leeds supported by his local factory movement 'guardians', composed a letter addressed to his 'accuser' three days later.⁶³ Sent to *The Times* by Short Time campaigner Cavie Richardson, who saw an opportunity to discredit an opponent, the letter was written in a deferential tone. 'I am sorry that you have been stating things falsely about me', Habergam wrote, and he reaffirmed that his 'deformity came on in the factory'. However, he also asserted that his experience of disablement gave him the right to express his views publicly: 'I have got very much crippled, and seen many of my comrades much injured in their health'. The education

⁵⁹Sadler Report, 162–64.

⁶⁰*London Evening Standard*, 19 July 1832 [1].

⁶¹*Leeds Mercury*, 26 January 1833, 5.

⁶²Hansard, HC Deb 3 April 1833, vol. 17 cc79–115. For another example of this line of argument see Ure, *op. cit.*, 401.

⁶³*Leeds Intelligencer*, 7 February 1833 [4].

provided by his supporters in the movement had given him the literacy skills that allowed him to ‘read his testimony’ and stand by it. Framed as a modest defence of his ‘character’, Habergam nevertheless adopted the role of defender of all those injured by the factory system, expressing his hope that Wilson-Patten ‘will not say any more to oppress the poor factory children when you have read my letter: they are oppressed enough by their masters and overlookers’. By describing himself in abject terms as a ‘poor boy . . . a cripple, in bad health’, Habergam attempted to shame Wilson-Patten by implying his comments were ‘ungentlemanly’ and insufficiently protective of an object of compassion – which the MP was forced to deny. Here we see how Habergam and his supporters were able to manipulate the ‘pitiable’ subjectivity of the ‘factory cripple’ to speak truth to power.⁶⁴

‘We deserve something better’: factory activism in the 1840s

Testifying before official inquiries such as the Sadler Committee was clearly a bruising experience that could have ramifications for witnesses long after they had given evidence. Indeed, Joseph Habergam would face a similar ordeal again when he, along with other Sadler witnesses, was called to give evidence to the Royal Commission on Factories in the spring of 1833. Questioned rigorously on the accuracy of his statements to the Sadler Committee and confronted with testimony from other operatives disputing many of his claims, Habergam was simultaneously cajoled by supporters of reform to maintain the general picture of factory life he had presented to Sadler. Unsurprisingly, the teenaged Habergam found such conditions disconcerting, confessing to feeling ‘frightened’ when he heard there ‘were so many [who] spoke against me’.⁶⁵ Despite the young worker’s best efforts, Commissioner John Elliot Drinkwater was unconvinced, reporting, in June 1833, that he ‘had reason to disbelieve the whole of H[a]bergam’s evidence’.⁶⁶ Once more, then, Habergam’s credibility was being called into question when he spoke about his experiences of industrial labour and ill health.

Although the Royal Commission recognised that factory work caused health problems for young workers, the resulting Factory Act of 1833 was regarded as a defeat by supporters of the Ten Hours Bill. While it created an inspectorate, banned children under nine from working in factories, and reduced the working hours of children aged nine to thirteen to eight hours

⁶⁴*The Times*, 12 April 1833, 3; *Lancaster Gazette*, 27 April 1833 [3]. See also Gleadle, *op. cit.*, 224.

⁶⁵*Factories Inquiry Commission: First Report*, C1, 135–44 (quoting at 144).

⁶⁶*ibid.*, 158. For a highly polemical account of Habergam’s ordeal before Drinkwater see R. Oastler, *Speech delivered at a public meeting held in . . . Huddersfield on . . . 18 June 1833 to petition the House of Commons against the report of the Factory Commissioners being received* (Leeds, 1833), 7.

a day, the law fell far short of campaigners' calls for a 10-hour day for all workers.⁶⁷ After this setback, the factory movement lost its momentum for a time, as its leaders turned their attention to new controversies, most notably the implementation of the New Poor Law, which they feared would allow mass migration of unemployed rural workers to factory districts, driving down wages and producing even more exploitative working conditions.⁶⁸ By the end of the decade, images of the deformed factory child appeared to belong to a bygone era.⁶⁹

However, industrial disablement was put back in the spotlight in the early 1840s in the writings of William Dodd. Born in Kendal in 1804, Dodd claimed to have spent 25 years from the age of six working in a factory, suffering damage in his knees and losing an arm as a result of industrial labour.⁷⁰ During the autumn of 1841 he had been sponsored by Lord Ashley to tour the Midlands and north of England to gather evidence in support of a new Ten Hours Bill. These letters were published as *The Factory System Illustrated* (1842), and they describe Dodd's conversations with the disabled poor, revealing not just familiar tropes of industrial deformity, but also the ongoing struggles of those 'cast off as useless lumber' from employment.⁷¹ Dodd viewed his own experiences as a 'decided cripple' as validating his work, enabling him both to 'speak feelingly' about the situation of his 'fellow cripples' and to win their trust so that they would share their stories.⁷² Dodd repeatedly drew attention to the impoverishment of impaired factory workers, stemming not just from the inability to earn the same wages as others, but also from the higher medical costs they faced.⁷³

The issue of compensation for 'deformed' or maimed workers had been raised by some witnesses before official inquiries in the early 1830s, but Dodd made the issue central to his writing, as a 'question of the utmost importance to factory cripples'.⁷⁴ He drew attention to inequality of treatment fostered by a system of redress which, since workers as 'free agents' largely accepted any risks that came with their employment, was largely at the discretion of employers. Dodd also highlighted how accident victims were more likely to be supported than those who became 'crippled by inches with long hours' of labour.⁷⁵ He challenged the complacency of employers on this issue. When the Bolton industrialist Edmund Ashworth told him

⁶⁷Ward, *op. cit.*, 101–06.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, chap. 7; N.C. Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement, 1834–44* (Manchester, 1971), 57.

⁶⁹S. Walton, 'Industrial sightseeing and Frances Trollope's Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy', *Women's Writing*, 18, 2 (2011), 273–92, 282.

⁷⁰W. Dodd, 'A narrative of the experience and sufferings of William Dodd, a factory cripple', in Simmons Jr (ed.), *Factory Lives* (1841), 181–222.

⁷¹Dodd, *Factory System*, *op. cit.*, 106–07.

⁷²*Ibid.*, iv, 33.

⁷³Dodd, 'Narrative', *op. cit.*, 215.

⁷⁴Sadler Report, 396, 475; *Factories Inquiry Commission: First Report*, 31; Dodd, *Factory System*, *op. cit.*, 119.

⁷⁵J.L. Bronstein, *Caught in the Machinery: Workplace accidents and injured workers in nineteenth-century Britain* (Stanford, 2008), 29 and chap. 4; Dodd, *Factory System*, *op. cit.*, 79, 211.

that impaired workers could always fall back on the Poor Law for support, Dodd retorted that he thought ‘we deserved something better, after seeing all our prospects in life blasted’.⁷⁶ For Dodd, support was bound up with dignity. In May 1841, he had petitioned parliament for ‘reparation’ for those ‘maimed, mutilated, and crippled for life’ by factory work in a fashion that honoured the sacrifices they had made in the cause of national prosperity.⁷⁷ Two years later, Dodd suggested another scheme for the benefit of those ‘who have been “worked up” in the factories’ when he responded to proposals to improve the education of child workers. Thwarted in his own efforts to take up a career in teaching because of the discrimination he faced due to his ‘deformity’, Dodd proposed that ‘factory cripples’ should be encouraged and trained to become teachers in manufacturing areas. Employment of people incapacitated from other work as teachers was relatively common in this period, but the practice was coming under increasing attack from supporters of professionalisation. Amidst such cultural currents, Dodd’s scheme underscored the value of education and teaching as a means for injured workers to maintain independence and dignity.⁷⁸

Dodd’s reports of his encounters with fellow ‘cripples’ in *The Factory System Illustrated* humanised the victims of industrial exploitation and advocated on their behalf. In a letter from Bradford he described taking tea with two brothers ‘both factory cripples, and both presenting to the eye of the observer, a sad spectacle of factory suffering’, remarking that ‘I do not remember to have spent a more pleasant evening in the whole course of my existence, than I did . . . with these simple, kind-hearted people’.⁷⁹ The ‘isolated state’ in which many lived, he argued, served to ‘deter’ them from challenging the difficulties facing them.⁸⁰ By identifying ‘factory cripples’ as a distinctive ‘unfortunate class of beings’ and by adopting the collective ‘we’ when advocating for them, Dodd imagined a community united by their common experiences of impairment and injustice.⁸¹ While he was not the first nineteenth-century writer to describe impaired people as a ‘class’ sharing experiences and interests, Dodd’s work was pioneering in its articulation of common grievance in the context of a wider political struggle.⁸²

For Dodd, political activism was a survival strategy. The *Hull Packet* recommended *The Factory System Illustrated* not just for the ‘correct and forcible view it gives of the factory system’ but also because ‘the author depends on the sale’ of the book to make a living, being ‘incapacitated’ from

⁷⁶Dodd, *Factory System*, *op. cit.*, 87.

⁷⁷*The Standard*, 27 May 1841 [3].

⁷⁸*The Fleet Papers*, 16 September 1843, 4; J. Franklin, ‘Disability panic: the making of the normal school teacher’, *Victorian Studies*, 62, 4 (2020), 644–67.

⁷⁹Dodd, *Factory System*, *op. cit.*, 49.

⁸⁰*Fleet Papers*, 16 September 1843, 4.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, authors’ emphasis.

⁸²For an earlier example see J. Wilson, *Biography of the Blind*, 4th ed. ([1820] Birmingham, 1838), v.

manual labour.⁸³ Like Habergam, Dodd benefited from the patronage of powerful reformers. Yet this laid him open to accusations that he was willing to change his opinions to serve the highest bidder – a point raised forcefully by the mill owner MP John Bright in parliament on 15 March 1844 when he revealed letters allegedly written by Dodd suggesting the self-styled ‘Factory Cripple’ was willing to switch sides in the factory debate for a price. As opponents of reform had done to Sadler Committee witnesses a decade earlier, Bright also cast doubt on the truth of Dodd’s ‘statements respecting the manufactories of the north’ and the causes of his ‘deformity’.⁸⁴ Bright’s accusations were echoed by another opponent of factory regulation, William Cooke Taylor, who similarly recognised Dodd’s striking bodily differences, but disputed their origins, claiming they ‘were in no way derived from the mill or the factory’.⁸⁵ This was exactly the same tactic Wilson-Patten had used in the speech that so upset Habergam, and, once again, the ploy enabled opponents of reform to counter arguments about the harmful effects of factory work without denying the prevalence of ‘deformity’ in industrial communities.

By the time Bright unleashed his character assassination of Dodd, Ashley had already distanced himself from his former employee, and others in the short-time camp soon followed.⁸⁶ Abandoned by reformers, Dodd emigrated to the United States, where he attempted to resurrect his career as a writer by publishing *The Labouring Classes of England* in 1847. Interestingly, the book was published under the pseudonym ‘an Englishman’ – a sign perhaps that Dodd feared his damaged reputation might follow him to America, hampering his efforts to make a living there, and a reminder of the potential risks attending activism at this time.⁸⁷

Despite the controversy surrounding Dodd, his work stands out for how it highlights the issue of financial redress for disabled workers – an issue that would not be addressed legislatively until the Employer’s Liability Act, 40 years later.⁸⁸ The factory movement gave Dodd a platform to go beyond sentimental framings of worker deformity and highlight the socio-economic origins of disablement. Others similarly used the campaign for industrial regulation to present more rounded portrayals of impaired people and the challenges they faced. In February 1846, speakers at a meeting of Preston operatives took aim at Dodd’s persecutor, John Bright, directly. Bright had recently cast doubt on reformers’ claims regarding an experiment with

⁸³Hull Packet, 17 June 1842 [3].

⁸⁴J. Bright, *Speech of Mr Bright, M.P. in the House of Commons on Lord Ashley’s amendment to Sir J. Graham’s Factory Bill, 15 March 1844* (London, 1844), 29–30, 35–38, 40–45.

⁸⁵W. Cooke Taylor, *Factories and the Factory System* (London, 1844), 71–72.

⁸⁶Bright, *op. cit.*, 39, 41; *The Standard*, 11 April 1844 [4]; *The Times*, 4 May 1844, 8.

⁸⁷W. Dodd, *The Labouring Classes of England, Especially those Engaged in Agriculture and Manufactures* (Boston, 1847).

⁸⁸*ibid.*; Bartrip and Burman, *op. cit.*, chap. 5.

reduced hours at a factory in the town and made more disparaging comments about ‘crippled’ workers. Speakers at the meeting attacked Bright on both counts. For William Hyam, though, it was Bright’s dismissive attitude towards ‘factory cripples’ like himself that particularly irked. He ‘was not ashamed of his picture’, Hyam told the audience, ‘but why should he be scoffed and scorned and made a jest of, for what to him was a misfortune that he could not help? It was galling enough to be pointed at and laughed at in the streets without being taunted by Mr. Bright’.⁸⁹ While the purpose of the meeting was to defend the Ten Hours cause against the barbs of one of its most prominent parliamentary opponents, Hyam’s feelings of frustration, anger and hurt at people’s treatment of him as a ‘factory cripple’ are palpable. The focus of Hyam’s criticism, then, was not simply the hated ‘factory system’, but society more generally. Anticipating the sentiments expressed by subsequent generations of disabled activists, Hyam pointed out that his biggest problem as a ‘factory cripple’ was not his bodily capacities, but the way others reacted to his physical difference. Following Dodd, Hyam seized the opportunity provided to him by the fight for industrial reform to advance a broader social critique – one that centred the experiences of ‘factory cripples’ and emphasised the socio-cultural origins of ‘disability’.

Ashley’s treatment of Dodd indicates just how precarious impaired people’s position within the factory movement could be. Yet other prominent ‘factory cripples’ enjoyed longer and more harmonious associations with the campaign, and their deeds suggest that more balanced and enduring relationships with short-time leaders were possible. Joseph Habergam may have approached Oastler for help acquiring linings for his leg irons in the early 1830s, but, a decade later, it was Oastler who stood in need of assistance. When Oastler was imprisoned for debt for more than three years in the 1840s (seemingly for political reasons as much as financial ones), Habergam soon became a ‘regular visitor’, providing food as well as company for the incarcerated agitator.⁹⁰ More significantly, Habergam also played an active role in efforts to secure Oastler’s release. After learning of a proposal to raise funds to pay off Oastler’s debts in October 1843, Habergam quickly set about trying to drum up support for the idea. Writing to ‘a gentleman in Huddersfield’ on 14 October, Habergam urged him to help establish a subscription for Oastler, declaring that factory workers would surely ‘give a penny’ or more to see ‘so good a man (who has sacrificed his *all* for the working classes)’ set free. Keen to set an example, Habergam even pledged ‘a sovereign’ of his own money – a promise he made good on and

⁸⁹*Preston Chronicle*, 7 February 1846 [3]. For Bright’s speech that prompted the Preston meeting see Hansard, HC Deb 29 January 1846, vol. 83 cc408–412.

⁹⁰Driver, *op. cit.*, 413–14; Ward, *op. cit.*, 219; *Fleet Papers*, 24 April 1841, 132, 24 August 1844, 479, 7 September 1844, 499.

bettered when an Oastler ‘Liberty Fund’ was officially launched later in the year.⁹¹ Not content with sending his own money, he also collected and transmitted donations from others to the fund.⁹²

Other ‘factory cripples’ similarly aided short-time leaders engulfed in legal troubles and maintained close ties with the movement for over a decade.⁹³ Such examples challenge the idea that impaired workers were simply pawns in the struggle for industrial reform, deployed or discarded at the whim of manipulative reformers. Habergam and others clearly had a deep and enduring personal commitment to the campaign for shorter hours, which they demonstrated through numerous *voluntary* acts of support for its leaders. Far from mere ‘objects of compassion’, then, some deformed or maimed workers became highly engaged *activists* whose long-standing dedication to the Ten Hours cause often matched that of more illustrious figures.

Conclusion

In 1847 a law was passed limiting the working day to 10 hours for all women and for children under 18 employed in textile mills. While this disappointed those hoping for a 10-hour day for all factory workers, the law effectively marked the end of the political moment of the ‘factory cripple’. Apart from an occasional appearance at Chartist meetings, ‘factory cripples’ never again received the same level of attention from reformers.⁹⁴ Even before the passage of the 1847 act, prominent advocates of the short-time cause were heralding the demise of the ‘factory cripple’ as a significant political concern. Indeed, by the time the Sadler Committee began hearing testimony in 1832, factory conditions in large towns and cities, where widespread abuse was more difficult to hide, were already much improved on those in the earlier and more remote rural manufactories described by many witnesses. The inspectorate created by the 1833 Factory Act, together with the fencing of machinery, and changing labour patterns that restricted child workers to less dangerous ancillary roles, further reduced instances of maiming.⁹⁵ When Lord Ashley addressed a short-time meeting at Bradford in March 1846, he could claim that it was thanks to the reform movement that factory children ‘no longer presented those distorted and crippled forms, which . . . he had witnessed in different mills’ a decade earlier.⁹⁶ By

⁹¹ *Halifax Guardian and Huddersfield and Bradford Advertiser*, 21 October 1843, 5; *Halifax Guardian and Huddersfield and Bradford Advertiser*, 16 December 1843, 4; Driver, *op. cit.*, 441–42.

⁹² *Fleet Papers*, 27 January 1844, 84.

⁹³ Waller, *op. cit.*, 304–07; *Manchester Guardian*, 20 March 1844, 6.

⁹⁴ *Manchester Times and Gazette*, 11 April 1848, 5.

⁹⁵ Waller, *op. cit.*, 302; J. Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2010), 217.

⁹⁶ *Leeds Times*, 14 March 1846, 3.

1850, reformers like Ashley were moving on to champion other causes, and 'factory cripples' faded from their sight. However, the belief that industrial workers were particularly vulnerable to disablement due to their exploitation by ruthless capitalists persisted, animating calls for working-class unity from Chartism to trade unionism.⁹⁷

The image of the vulnerable 'factory cripple', worn down by hours of long work, helped shape ideas about disability and able-bodiedness in Victorian England. Building on earlier philanthropic precedents, the factory movement contributed to the enduring idea that 'deformed' or 'damaged' bodies – particularly those of children – were objects of pity, deserving of sympathy, support and protection.⁹⁸ It seems no coincidence that Dickens's Tiny Tim character, the archetype for subsequent depictions of disabled people as 'sweet innocents', first appeared in 1843 after the campaign for factory reform had been raging for over a decade.⁹⁹ By deploying 'cripples' to elicit sympathy for their cause, reformers in the 1830s and 1840s contributed to the solidification of a sentimental discourse of disability that still informs popular culture today.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, campaigners' calls for the standardisation of working hours based on what a 'typical' labourer could perform in a day inadvertently helped promote the abstract ideal of the 'normal' working body. This had longer-term implications for measuring performance and affected the position of people whose bodies were considered incapable of meeting these standards.¹⁰¹

Rather than the helpless victims of reformist propaganda, 'factory cripples' were invested in the movement in complex, reciprocal ways. Held up as a pitiful symbol of factory 'slavery' by Oastler in 1832, Joseph Habergam recognised the value of his story to the Ten Hours cause, exchanging it for medical care and access to education, and ultimately repaying the support he received by helping to secure Oastler's freedom in the 1840s. The campaign for shorter hours created spaces for 'maimed' and 'crooked' workers to participate actively in labour politics. By allowing themselves to be depicted on banners, presented at meetings or 'exhibited' before officials, 'factory cripples' invited people to stare at their visibly different bodies and consider the effects of industrial labour. In doing so, they engaged in a similar type of 'visual activism' to the kind outlined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and practised by people with non-normative bodies at other times and places. This 'structured self-disclosure' was governed by gendered rules of propriety and carried risks.¹⁰² In the face of ridicule, accusations of dishonesty, and

⁹⁷Turner and Blackie, *op. cit.*, 170.

⁹⁸D.M. Turner, 'Impaired children in eighteenth-century England', *Social History of Medicine*, 30, 4, (2017), 788–806.

⁹⁹M.F. Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A history of physical disability in the movies* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1994), 33.

¹⁰⁰P.K. Longmore, *Telethons: Spectacle, disability and the business of charity* (Oxford, 2016), chap. 7.

¹⁰¹Kuskey, *op. cit.*, 7.

¹⁰²R. Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How we look* (Oxford, 2009), 193.

intimidation, many were too ‘shy’ to speak out.¹⁰³ Combined with the ‘isolation’ that Dodd identified, this ensured that factory reform never became a fully fledged ‘disability movement’ in the modern sense. When disabled people came together to advocate for change later in the century, it required the institutional setting of blind and deaf schools to create a stronger sense of community.¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, the history of the factory movement challenges the presentism that characterises most portrayals of disabled people’s political activism. In historical materialist accounts of disability, the rise of industrial capitalism is presented as ruthlessly disempowering those who through ‘weak constitution’, age or impairment were unable to fit the ideal of the interchangeable able-bodied worker.¹⁰⁵ This argument was also made by nineteenth-century opponents of the ‘factory system’, but it is not the whole story. By making the ‘disabled’ body central to its critique of industrialisation, the nascent labour movement presented some impaired workers with an opportunity to speak out for themselves, which they seized. In doing so, figures like Habergam, Dodd and Hyam railed against perceived injustices, highlighting the specific problems they faced as ‘factory cripples’. While they may have echoed non-disabled reformers’ portrayal of impairment as an individual misfortune, ‘crippled’ activists frequently advanced more nuanced analyses of their circumstances by emphasising that the real source of their ‘misery’ was not their visibly different bodies, but the way society treated them. In asserting this, they presaged modern disability activists’ insistence that it is society that ‘disables’ people, not impairment. This view is often regarded as the cornerstone of the emergent disability rights movement (DRM) of the 1970s and 1980s. Consequently, our findings challenge the idea that the analysis advanced by the DRM was as pioneering as some studies imply.¹⁰⁶ Self-proclaimed ‘factory cripples’ developed and promoted a socio-cultural understanding of ‘disability’ long before the twentieth century. Recognising this reminds us that disabled people have a much richer history of activism than they are usually given credit for. Until that history is better known, the long path to disability justice will remain dimly lit.

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¹⁰³Dodd, *Factory System*, *op. cit.*, 10, 200.

¹⁰⁴Barnatt, *op. cit.*, 9.

¹⁰⁵Oliver and Barnes, *op. cit.*, 52–73.

¹⁰⁶T. Shakespeare, ‘The social model of disability’, in L.J. Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader: Fifth edition* (New York, 2017), 195–97.

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