Background

As the Industrial Revolution gathered pace thousands of factories sprang up all over the country. There were no laws relating to the running of factories as there had been no need for them before. As a result, dangerous machinery was used that could, and frequently did, cause serious injuries to workers. To add to these dangers, people were required to work incredibly long hours – often through the night. Perhaps one of the worst features of this new industrial age was the use of child labour. Very young children worked extremely long hours and could be severely punished for any mistakes. Arriving late for work could lead to a large fine and possibly a beating. Dozing at a machine could result in the accidental loss of a limb.

People began to realise how bad these conditions were in many factories and started to campaign for improvements. There was a lot of resistance from factory owners who felt it would slow down the running of their factories and make their products more expensive. Many people also did not like the government interfering in their lives. Some parents, for instance, needed their children to go out to work from a young age, as they needed the money to help feed the family.

Not all factory owners kept their workers in bad conditions however. Robert Owen, who owned a cotton mill in Lanark, Scotland, built the village of New Lanark for his workers. Here they had access to schools, doctors and there was a house for each family who worked in his mills.

By 1833, the Government passed what was to be the first of many acts dealing with working conditions and hours. At first, there was limited power to enforce these acts but as the century progressed the rules were enforced more strictly. Nonetheless, the hours and working conditions were still very tough by today’s standards, and no rules were in place to protect adult male workers.

Listed below are details of the legislation (laws) that was introduced to improve working conditions in factories.

| Date | Industry | Details of law |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1833 | Textiles | No child workers under nine years  Reduced hours for children 9-13 years  Two hours schooling each day for children  Four factory inspectors appointed |
| 1844 | Textiles | Children 8-13 years could work six half-hours a day  Reduced hours for women (12) and no night work |
| 1847 | Textiles | Women and children under 18 years of age could not work more than ten hours a day |
| 1867 | All Industries | Previous rules applied to workhouses if more than five workers employed |
| 1901 | All Industries | Minimum age raised to 12 years |