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## Chapter 1

### Background to the children's lives

This book examines the lives of children of the labouring poor, those just above or on the edge of poverty, in nineteenth-century Hertfordshire. The living and working conditions of children and young people up to the age of seventeen are examined through documents of the period.

Most children were destined to do some part-time or full-time work from the age of eight in the first half of the century, although by 1900 many children were in school for much of the time. However, children over eleven were legally allowed to work in 1900 under certain conditions. The voices in the documents examined are not usually those of the children or their families but in some of the interviews conducted by factory inspectors the authentic voices of the children themselves can be heard, whatever the agenda behind the questioning. Reminiscences of nineteenth-century childhood in the county, whether seen through a cloud of fond memories or recalled in bitterness, can also throw some light on the lives of these children.

There is an examination of the conditions in which the children lived and the work that they undertook and six of the occupations to be found either all over the county or just in specific areas are scrutinised in more detail. These are agriculture, straw-plaiting, silk-throwing, papermaking, brickmaking and chimney-sweeping. Although some general conclusions can be drawn about children's lives in nineteenth-century Hertfordshire, it is clear that, in Nigel Goose's illuminating phrase, there were 'varieties of childhood' throughout what was a small agricultural county, although increasingly urbanised by the end of the century.<sup>1</sup> Much depended on location, availability of employment of various kinds, family circumstances and access to education. The main variant was the income from the jobs performed by the parents and the degree of their dependence on their children's wages. The experiences of a child in a silk-throwing mill were different from those of a climbing boy and the life of a full-time straw-plaiter was

different from that of a child in the brickfields. They all, though, had some things in common; perhaps a rudimentary education, sub-standard housing with little drinkable water, no defence against the ever-present threat of disease, a restricted diet and often inadequate clothing. Their families usually had little or nothing to fall back on if disaster struck such as the death of a parent, a sharp rise in food prices or prolonged unemployment. The possibility of having to apply to the parish for help or, more likely after 1834, of going into the workhouse was always present.

Some Hertfordshire children's lives were often quite different from others due to the effects on different parts of the county of the changes that occurred throughout the nineteenth century. By 1800 the effects of the Industrial Revolution were being felt most in the south-west of the county. The rest of the county remained much more rural. There had always been routes from London mainly through the north-east of Hertfordshire to the north of England. A large amount of agricultural produce was carried along these roads to London and horse manure along with other types of ordure were brought back along the roads and by barge along the Lea to fertilise Hertfordshire's fields. By 1800 the Grand Junction (later Union) Canal stretched from London to Stoke Bruerne in Northamptonshire via Tring. Arthur Young, the noted commentator on agricultural matters, said in 1804 that Hertfordshire was 'generally devoid of manufacture', but by 1800 there were silk mills and paper mills established in the south-west of the county along the banks of the rivers Chess and Gade and by the Grand Junction Canal.<sup>2</sup> In the east of the county the rivers Lea and Stort were being improved for navigation, a process begun in the eighteenth century. The coming of the railways from the 1830s onwards opened up the county still further. The building of railways was a purely speculative venture with no central planning of routes. Each railway company had to raise money, overcome natural obstacles and local opposition and secure an Act of Parliament. The first company to lay down lines in Hertfordshire was the London to Birmingham Railway Company which was encouraged by local businessmen, including David Evans of Tring Mill, to follow the route of the Grand Junction Canal towards Tring. It had reached Boxmoor near Hemel Hempstead by 1837 and other lines soon followed. In 1842 a line ran through Bishop's Stortford to Cambridge and by 1850 the Great Northern Railway had reached Hitchin. In 1868 St Albans and the surrounding area were linked to London by rail. Heavy and bulky goods could be moved around more freely and fresh produce such as milk could reach London from Hertfordshire much faster.

Another factor that made an impact was the rise in population that had begun in the eighteenth century and accelerated in the nineteenth century. In 1821 the population of the county was 132,400 and by 1891 had risen to 215,179. One result of this



Figure 1. St Andrews Street, Hitchin. This scene illustrates the high proportion of children in the population, c.1890.

was that the number of children under fifteen also increased dramatically. In 1821 there were about 50,000 children under that age living in Hertfordshire; by 1891 there were 77,901. This showed that throughout the century under fifteens comprised well over a third of the total population of the county, even though the death rate was high for children, especially those under five. The large numbers of children in the streets was most noticeable in Hertfordshire towns such as Hertford, Watford and Hitchin. Some of the middle classes responded by forming societies to help the poor, especially poor children. One such society was the Hitchin Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, set up in December 1831.<sup>3</sup>

As the century progressed, the standard of living improved for some workers who could take advantage of the cheaper grain from the US and Canada and the refrigerated meat brought from New Zealand and South America. However, the benefits did not often filter down to those on lower incomes such as most agricultural labourers whose wages did not increase but in some cases went down. Mostly this was due to the effects of the depression that hit English agriculture in the last quarter of the nineteenth century due partly to a series of bad harvests in the 1870s combined with competition from imported foodstuffs. The importation of straw plait from the

Far East which helped to bring about the swift decline of the straw plait trade in the 1870s deprived many of the families of agricultural labourers of another source of income (see Chapter 3). Some of the older plaiters carried on with greatly diminished earnings but young workers, mostly girls, had to find other employment such as going into service, into some branch of needlework or into the straw-hat-making trade which continued into the twentieth century.

By the 1890s the silk industry was in decline with only two silk-throwing mills still working at Redbourn and St Albans. The industry did not recover from the effects of Cobden's Treaty of 1860 that allowed French silk goods into England free of duty while English silk goods, when exported, were subject to a duty of up to 30 per cent. Also most paper mills in the county had closed by the 1890s leaving Dickinson's mills at Apsley, Hemel Hempstead and Croxley, Rickmansworth to carry the industry into the twentieth century.

Another aspect to see great changes was education. The setting up of board schools after the 1870 Education Act as well as the move to compulsory schooling in 1880 and free schooling in 1891 meant that the number of working children under eleven dwindled rapidly. The leaving age was raised to twelve in 1901. The transition to full-time schooling unbroken by absence for work or to help in the home did not come easily and it took to the end of the century for most parents to accept that their children could not usually be kept away from school for any reason other than illness.

The thing that did not change much in Hertfordshire during the century was the rigid social structure and the place that the labouring poor occupied in it, for Hertfordshire was a conservative county. Even in church the divisions were emphasised. Many of the better off paid rent for their pews which were then for their exclusive use. The most expensive seats were at the front nearest to the altar, while the poor sat in the free seats at the back or round the sides. To many of the poor this seemed to emphasise their inferior status in a place where they felt all should be treated equally. It would take a devastating world war to begin to make serious cracks in the system.