

The True Story of the Hard Life of Child Chimney Sweeps in Victorian England



One of the most beloved scenes in the entire Walt Disney canon is that of British chimney sweeps dancing atop roofs with blackened faces and their brooms while singing "Chim-Chim-Chirree" in *Mary Poppins*. Much has been written about the Disneyfication of the genuinely gruesome original fairy tales passed down by the Brothers Grimm, but this is nothing compared to the vast gulf that exists between Disney's chimney sweeps and the historical truth of this exceptionally unusual occupation.

Children, for obvious reasons, made the ideal chimney sweep. Master chimney sweeps were all adult men and though they may have looked like Dick Van Dyke, they certainly did not sound like him, having had actual British accents, nor did they behave like him. Master chimney sweeps acquired their young apprentices by buying them from their parents. They would then be trained and put to work, usually on the same day. The life of child who became a chimney sweep was not exactly one of dancing with Julie Andrews and shiny, happy smiles. Just as a guitar player must develop calluses in his fingers in order to strum, so did the flesh of the young chimney sweep first need to be primed to allow him to acquaint himself with the difficulties of rubbing up against the stone interior of the chimneys. This process involved rubbing their bodies with a brine to toughen the skin while standing in close proximity to burning flames. The first few weeks of a chimney sweep's life was dedicated to this process of preparing a defense against the exceptionally unhealthy conditions inside the smoke stack. The first couple of times down the flue would normally result in the child ending his day bleeding profusely from his limbs and in some cases appearing as if his knees and elbows had been rubbed completely off. Then it would be off to the brine for more rubbing until the child could no longer stand it. The threat of a cane or the promise of a ha'penny would be the only incentive to continue.

It did not get any better. The lungs of these children were quickly poisoned and few survived even to middle age. And then there was those rare but unfortunate few who never made it out of childhood. Although hardly common, there were several cases where children got stuck without anyone being aware. Naturally, they started a blaze and the result was the literal roasting of a young boy to death. It was tragedies like these that led to awareness of the dangers of this situation and several laws were passed to address it, mainly the Chimney Sweeper Act of 1875.

Victorian Servants – Scullery Maid and House Maid

In the early nineteenth century, it was common for young children to go into domestic service at a very early age, usually around ten years of age but sometimes as young as eight. The daughters of working class men and women had to earn their living and domestic service was considered an ideal occupation for young girls and single women.

The life was gruelling and exhausting. Working hours could be up to 17 long each day, from 5.30 a.m. in the morning until 10.30 p.m. The work was endless and physically demanding.

Servants were seen as dispensable creatures, barely human, solely in existence for the comfort of the family and so health and safety issues for the servant were not considered the employer's responsibility.

The issue of servants' injuries was finally included in the Workman's Compensation Act of 1907.

Maids and cooks had to endure lack of fresh air, monotonous, long hours of work and accidents in the course of their work such as burns, falls and cuts.

Servants slept in the kitchen or in cupboards under the stairs or in attics. They were often forbidden to sing or laugh and had to remain as noiseless and invisible as possible.

If they came into contact with a member of the household, they were to keep quiet, avert their eyes and walk out of the room backwards. If anything was broken or damaged, the servant was made to pay and the sum would be deducted from their wages.

Victorian Scullery Maid

This was the lowest occupation of all, usually taken up by very young girls. The scullery maid's day was filled with duties such as emptying and cleaning chamber pots, polishing brass work and silver, scrubbing the front stairs, washing dishes and scouring pots.

The Victorian scullery maid cleaned the kitchen floor as well as stoves, lit bedroom fires first thing in the morning, and carried heavy cans of warm water up the stairs for bathing, each load would weigh around 15kg. She would usually stumble into her bed in the attic, exhausted, at around 10.00 p.m. She would have her food and clothes provided for and earn a wage of between 10 to 13 pounds per annum.

Victorian House Maid

The Victorian house maid came under the supervision of the Housekeeper and depending on the number of servants kept by the family, could fulfill a number of different positions such as chamber maid, parlour maid, in between maid (commonly known at the time as a tweeny), kitchen maid or laundry maid.

The work performed by these servants was back-breakingly strenuous and included duties such as changing linen, making up beds, dusting and cleaning bedrooms, cleaning out fireplaces, polishing grates, hauling coal up to the bedrooms and lighting fresh fires.

Other duties would include scrubbing floors on hands and knees, brushing carpets, beating rugs and cleaning and filling lamps each day. Laundry maids would typically soak loads of laundry, wash, rinse, wring out the washing and then iron the household's laundry when dry. The Victorian house maid could expect a wage of between 15 to 20 pounds per annum, the tweeny earning the least.

