

“Interview with Elizabeth Bentley”

House of Commons Committee Interview with Elizabeth Bentley
Elizabeth Bentley interviewed by Michael Sadler (1832)

CONTEXT: Elizabeth Bentley was born in Leeds 1809. She began working in a flax mill at the age of six. On 4th June, 1832, Elizabeth was interviewed by Michael Sadler and his House of Commons Committee. She told of how working in the card-room had seriously damaged her health: "It was so dusty, the dust got up my lungs, and the work was so hard. I got so bad in health, that when I pulled the baskets down, I pulled my bones out of their places." Bentley explained that she was now "considerably deformed". She went on to say: "I was about thirteen years old when it began coming, and it has got worse since."

Question: What were your hours of labour?

Answer: As a child I worked from five in the morning till nine at night.

Question: What time was allowed for meals?

Answer: We were allowed forty minutes at noon.

Question: Had you any time to get breakfast, or drinking?

Answer: No, we got it as we could.

Question: Did you have time to eat it?

Answer: No; we were obliged to leave it or to take it home, and when we did not take it, the overlooker took it, and gave it to the pigs.

Question: Suppose you flagged a little, or were late, what would they do?

Answer: Strap us.

Question: What work did you do?

Answer: A weigher in the card-room.

Question: How long did you work there?

Answer: From half-past five, till eight at night.

Question: What is the carding-room like?

Answer: Dusty. You cannot see each other for dust.

Question: Did working in the card-room affect your health?

Answer: Yes; it was so dusty, the dust got up my lungs, and the work was so hard. I got so bad in health, that when I pulled the baskets down, I pulled my bones out of their places.

Question: You are considerably deformed in your person in consequence of this labour?

Answer: Yes, I am.

Question: At what time did it come on?

Answer: I was about thirteen years old when it began coming, and it has got worse since. When my mother died I had to look after myself.

Question: Where are you now?

Answer: In the poor house.

Question: You are utterly incapable of working in the factories?

Answer: Yes

Question: You were willing to have worked as long as you were able, from your earliest age?

Answer: Yes.

Question: And you supported your widowed mother as long as you could?

Answer: Yes.