

EVIDENCE TO THE VIOLATION OF THE LAW RELATIVE TO THE  
EMPLOYMENT OF CLIMBING BOYS IN SWEEPING CHIMNEYS  
Examined by Mr. J. E. White, October and November 1862

Mr. George Ruff, Upper Parliament Nottingham

I am a chimney sweeper, and also own a shop here. Twenty-five years ago I was the first agent in this town of an association formed to prevent the use of climbing boys.

At one time soon after the Act (3 & 4 Vic. C. 85, 1840) their number in this town was brought very low. But lately they have very much increased. A few months ago I made out a list of 14 men here employing between 21 boys; one employed 3. I have since found that I had omitted some. The boys are, I should say, between the ages of 8 and 14 with few perhaps of 6 and 7. I am certain that unless something is done things will soon be as bad as ever. There is a competition here between those who use boys and those who will not, and an association of those masters who object to their use has been formed to stop it. I have nothing to do with it.

The law against climbing boys is a dead letter here. At first a paid agent was employed by some gentlemen and ladies in the town to watch the sweeps, but he has given up, as he came to neglect the duty.

No prosecutions were brought till, as nearly as I remember, about 12 years ago when Mr. Peter Hall visited this town, amongst other places for the purpose and he came at intervals afterwards but has of late discontinued his visits. Some sweeps and one householder were convicted and punished but several got off. The magistrate required evidence which it was almost impossible to procure, such as seeing the boy actually in or just leaving the chimney. Mr. Hall complained that after all his cost and trouble he failed here, in many cases on evidence clear enough to convict anywhere else as seeing a boy enter a house without a machine and leave it with soot. He was however much dreaded by the sweeps and as soon as his arrival became known by the railway policemen or any one seeing him at the stations the sweeps were all on their guard and he had to employ a person unknown to watch the sweeps for him.

The use of boys is much encouraged by the fact that many householders will have their chimneys swept by boys instead of by machines. I have myself lost a great amount of custom which I should otherwise have, and some which I formerly had at large houses and public establishments because I will not use boys. That reason was not given. But I was not employed after I refused. I have been sent away even from magistrates' houses and in some cases even by ladies who have professed to pity the boys for refusing to use them.

However, to satisfy particular customers and in order to be able to do jobs where perhaps one chimney out of a lot would need a boy, I did for a time try to bring up one of my own children to it, but my wife and I felt that we could not stand it any longer and that we would sooner go to the workhouse than suffer what we did from it.

No one knows the cruelty which a boy has to undergo in learning. The flesh must be hardened. This is done by rubbing it, chiefly on the elbows and knees with the strongest brine as that got from a pork shop close by a hot fire. You must stand over them with a cane or coax them by a promise of a half-penny &c if they will stand a few more rubs.

At first they will come back from their work with their arms and knees streaming with blood and the knees looking as if the caps had been pulled off.

Children's Employment Commission, 1862: First Report of Commissioners Presented to Both Houses of Parliament, 1863.



Chimney Sweeps  
*Oncology's Arrival in the 'Age of Reason,'*  
 "Cancer among chimney sweeps,"  
 U.S. National Library of Medicine

The best age for teaching boys is about 6. That is thought a nice trainable age. But I have known 2 at least of my neighbor's children begin at the age of 5. I once saw a child of only 4½ years in the market place in his sooty clothes and with his scraper in his hand. I know that was his age. Some said "look at that little fellow, he is not 4? But one man standing by said "he's 4 ½ his father (naming him) told me his birthday, and said that he began when he was 4 and that he would make a nice little climber."

Nottingham is famous for climbing boys. This is on account of the chimneys being so narrow. A Nottingham boy is or was worth more to sell.

A boy of about 7 or 8 was stolen from me once. As he was in the street a man seized him from behind in his arms, carried him off straight to a lodging house and stupefied him with drugged tea. After the tea the child fell into deep sleep and lost all his appetite. An inspector and I raced him to Hull. The boy was so glad to find that "master" had come. The man had said that if they had got him to France, they should have had 10 pounds for him. There was another boy found with him.

Seven or eight years ago a boy was smothered in a chimney here. The doctor who opened his body said that they had pulled his heart and liver out of place in dragging him down. . . .