

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

The industrial revolution in Britain: teacher's notes

You are going to search the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* to find out who in your area was important in the development of industry during a period of increasing change between about 1700 and 1850.

Given their different population levels, then as now, searches in the dictionary for people involved in the industrial revolution in different areas of Britain will yield varied results. It would be helpful to prepare for this lesson by checking which geographical region works best for you. Remember that the county boundaries used by the Oxford DNB in the articles you find on people active between 1700 and 1850 will be those in existence then and not the modern boundaries; for example Bath is regarded as being in Somerset. You should note that, owing to the way in which the dictionary text was encoded, a search for connections with a particular county may not return people associated with some of the major towns within it. For more complete results you may wish, for example, to search for Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, and Glasgow, or for Lancashire and Manchester, or for Bristol and Somerset.

Log in to the Oxford DNB: click on the blue link: www.oxforddnb.com/subscribed. If you have access by username and password, you will be prompted to type them.

Under 'Advanced search options' click on 'People'. Then under 'Fields of interest' select 'Manufacture and industry'. Under 'Places, dates and life events' put 1700 in the 'from' box, 1850 in the 'to' box, and in the 'place' box either your county or, if you live in or near a large urban centre, your city. Click 'Search'.

- How many results do you get for your selected place?
 - If you got **less than 5 hits for a city** or **less than 10** for a county go to **A**
 - if you got **more than 30 hits** go to **B**
 - otherwise go to **C**

A You didn't get many hits. It looks as though your area was less important than other areas in the early history of industrialization.

- Why do you think this might be?
You may like to take the opportunity for a class discussion of this question.
- Which places do you think might have been more important for the industrial revolution?
 - *try out your ideas by searching in different cities or counties*
- For which places were there more results?
Once again, a class discussion might be helpful.
 - *now go to C*

B You got lots of hits. It's probable that your area was important in the early history of industrialization.

For a clearer picture of what was going on try searching under a shorter period, for example 1700–1800, or a smaller place in the area, for instance Salford instead of Manchester or Greenock instead of Glasgow.

- What was your new period or place?
 - How many hits did you get?
You may get a more specialized result, with Greenock for example dominated by shipbuilding and related industries.
 - now go to **C**
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C Order your results by 'death date order'.

- Do you notice any difference between the early 1700s and the mid-1800s in the occupations of the men and women listed?
These men and women may have other occupations which have nothing directly to do with industrial activity. This can be used to demonstrate that simple categorization of people is often impossible: some men and women in the past had multiple occupations and interests.
 - If there is little difference go to **D**
 - If you spot differences, what are they?
 - What does this say about the way industry and manufacture developed in your area?
Some areas became associated early on with particular industrial processes and remained so; other areas saw shifting activity.
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D Choose a person and click on his or her name. From the article answer as many of the following questions as possible:

- What was his/her name and life dates?
 - What was his/her occupation?
 - Where was he/she born or brought up?
 - Where was he/she educated and/or apprenticed?
 - When and where did the industry or business start?
 - Did he/she have any business partners?
 - Find one other interesting fact about this person.
The questions posed here are designed to reflect the fact that, for example, not every factory owner born in Lancashire stayed in his native county to launch his business. Many entrepreneurs were incomers.
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E Break into groups of 4–5 people and tell the others about the background and career of your chosen subject. Then come together as a class and answer the following questions:

- How many of the people who had workshops, factories, or businesses in your area were local?
- How many served as apprentices and how many joined a family business?
- How many came from outside the area?
- How many from your area moved outside to do their work, and where did they go?
- How many different industries and occupations in your area did you find?
- Do you know (either from the articles or from your own knowledge) if any of these still exists in your area?
As a follow-up to this activity you may like to use the 'British entrepreneurs and brand names' feature article (click on the 'Themes' tab and go to 'show all features') to link to various household names whose originators are in the dictionary. Those named here mostly lived in a slightly later period, but they demonstrate the connection between people, places, and familiar products.