



The Lives of the Nailers in Industrial England

In this short video, Avi Benn (AKA Mary-Ann Bird) explains how poor families in England made the nails that held the British Empire together. For their hard work, nailers were cheated and paid a meager wage. Their grocery list hammers home how hard it must have been to stomach this kind of work.



00:01

*Nick Dennis standing with
Avi Benn, AKA Mary-Ann
Bird*

*Mrs. Bird picks up a rod of
iron and a nail*

NICK: I'm here with Mrs. Mary-Ann Bird to talk about nail production during the Industrial Revolution. So how were nails made?

MRS. BIRD: Right, well, this is the world of Mary-Ann Bird, and all nails were actually made from a rod of iron. This kind of gauge, but six feet long. Now there were hundreds of different types of nails, but they all started life from a rod that was like this.

00:46

*Mrs. Bird hands Nick a
nail*

*Black and white painting
of men working in a nail
shop*

Now, you start making nails when you're five, because at the age of five you've actually got some strength in your hammer hand, and you've got some hand and eye coordination. Because to actually make a nail that is like that, you'd like to see that, you would only heat about half an inch—that's 12 millimeters—of the rod of iron in the furnace. Now the furnace in a nail shop is in the middle of the floor, and it's completely open, so six or seven people can all work round it. It's more cost-effective that way. So you put the tip of the rod into the furnace, and it gets red hot and pliable, and then you bring that out onto your anvil. And then you hammer and stretch that small amount of pliable metal to make your nail. So you hammer and stretch, turn your rod, hammer and stretch, turn your rod, and you keep on going with that.

01:42

*Drawing of a young girl
working as a nailer*

Now, if you're an 8-year-old girl, remember you've been making nails since you were 5, you're an 8-year-old-girl, then you are expected to make over 200 of those an hour. So that is quite going some. And for each of those nails, you're looking at striking with the hammer over 30 times. So you are working extremely quickly, and extremely hard. You're working from about 6:00 in the morning until 10:00 or 11:00 at night, because you have a quota that you need to fill.

02:19

*A drawing of the many
different types of nails that
would have been made in
industrial England*

Now, the thing you need to understand, is that, we know about the mining industries, and we know about the cotton mills in Lancashire, but in fact, the nailing industry is something that often you don't think about. You see nails—everybody uses nails—but you don't actually realize what kind of production they had. And it was only ever a cottage industry. So don't think huge great nail shops with hundreds of people working, it was small family units that were working. And in fact, nailers were incredibly poor. And they were so poor they couldn't afford to go and buy the rods of iron themselves, so they would rent their cottage and their nail shop from a nail master.

03:07

Now, the nail master rented them the cottage, he rented them the nail shop, he rented them the piece of equipment that they would need to use, he provided them with the rods of iron, and he also told them the kind of nails they had to make. And then he bought the nails at the end of the week. Now, I don't think it will come as any great surprise when I tell you that the nail master was a rip-off merchant. He saw it as his job to make as much money as he possibly could, and the only way that he could do that was by cheating and lying to the nailers.

03:41

Short weight: *weight that
is less than stated*

So when he provided them with their rods of iron to make the nails, it was short weight. And then when he bought the nails at the end of the week, again, it was short weight, because his scales would be wrong. And he could actually cheat the nailers by as much as 50%. So by the time the nailers had actually paid him for the

04:24

“While this is certainly not a perfect comparison, 50p (pence) in 1800 would, after rent, leave you with about \$40 spend today.”

04:56

rods of iron, and he had paid them for the nails, they would be paid the princely sum of ten shillings, which is 50p. And this is what 50p would buy in 1850.

NICK: So, not a lot. 10 shillings would pay for your rent, coal, bread, potatoes and fats, laundry soap, turnips, and two and half pints of beer.

MRS. BIRD: Yes. Yeah. And the tripe cuttings—tripe is the lining of a stomach of a cow—but it’s tripe cuttings, so it’s not even the tripe itself, it’s the bits that have been cut off the tripe, that are perhaps slimy, and going off, and not very nice.

And I think it’s also important to say that, not only was the population rising in the Industrial Revolution, but also our empire was growing. And so one of the things is, there was this huge demand for nails from all over the empire, and of course at one point we did have American colonies. And so, in lots of American houses, there would be English nails that had been made.

05:22

And I think the other thing that I need to tell you, is that, the story of Mary-Ann Bird is not a fictitious one. She was a real live person. She was my great-great grandmother, and she was a nailer from the West Midlands. And so, anybody that’s actually watching this program, who is living in America, whether they become archaeologists, whether they become historians, whether they just buy an old house—if they find a nail like the one that you’re holding, then it could well have come from England. And you never know, it might have been made by Mary-Ann or her daughters, and shipped over to America.