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Opening extract from

The Worst Children's Jobs in History

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The Worst Children's Jobs in History

Stop Reading This Book Right Now!

INTRODUCTION

Put it down, walk slowly to the kitchen and open the door of the cupboard under the kitchen sink. Off you go!

Don't touch anything. Just look.

Are you back yet? Did you see lots of plastic bottles with names on them like Mr Muscle, Cif, Domestos and Flash? You did, didn't you? And they all said in big, bold letters that they make jobs like cleaning the cooker, washing the kitchen floor and keeping the lav shining bright quick and easy, didn't they?

But why is the writer of a book on the worst children's jobs in history asking you to poke about under the kitchen sink, reading a load of old labels?

Because if you'd been alive in the Middle Ages, you wouldn't have had all these bottles of chemicals to make work easy. The point of this book is that every worst job throughout history would have been ten times harder in those days than it is now.

Tough Jobs

If you think you can handle terrible blisters, freezing cold, aching arms, long hours and not much money, you could try being a washerboy, washing the lead ore that your dad has dug up down a Victorian lead mine. How do you wash ore? First you smash it with a hammer, which means dodging the razor-sharp tiny pieces that fly into the air every time you wallop it. Then you collect up all the pieces with your bare hands and put them into a sieve on the end of a pole. After that comes the chilly part. You pump the sieve up and down in a tub of icy cold water. It's not easy. The end of the pole is higher than you are, so you have to jump to reach it. It is back-breaking work and you won't stop shivering. It might not be too bad in summer, but imagine doing this in the middle of winter.

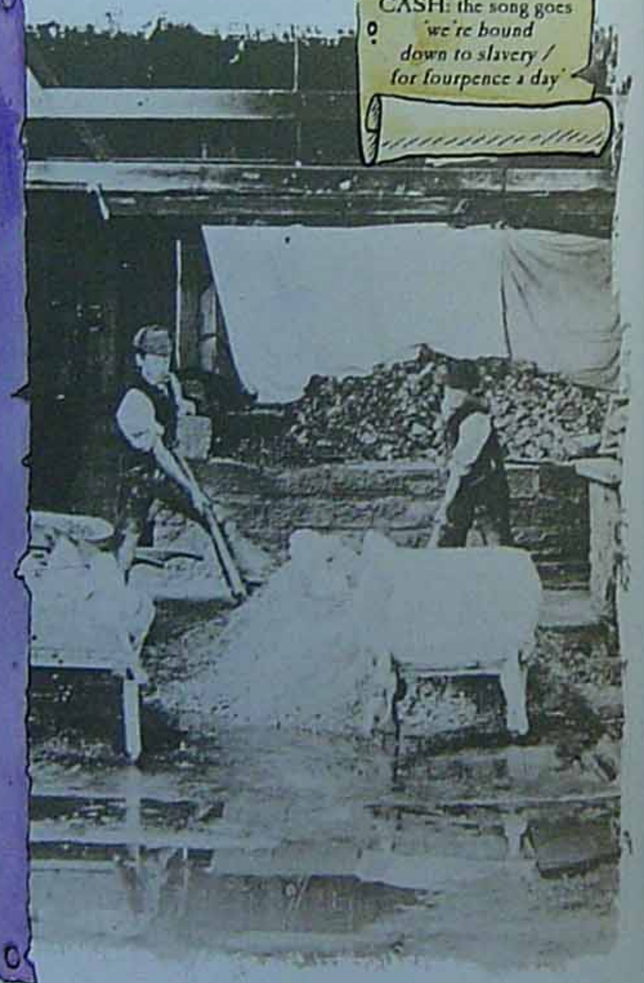
JOB SCORE
Washerboy at lead mine

COLD: spend all day soaking wet on a hill in the Pennines

FILTH: at least there's plenty of running water around

BOREDOM: long hours of discomfort

CASH: the song goes *'we're bound down to slavery / for fourpence a day'*



Good Jobs

Not all children's jobs were horrible. Every year on 6 December a boy was chosen to be bishop in charge of all the local churches until Christmas was over. It was supposed to remind people how humble Jesus had been. The boy bishop got to wear fancy clothes and could order all the priests around. He could even declare holidays and tell the priests to hand out sweets to the local children. In the sixteenth century Henry VIII decided to ban the whole thing as the boys who were chosen weren't treating it seriously enough. In fact, they were just having a laugh. I don't blame them. Do you?



JOB SCORE
Boy Bishop

CASH: for a while

FILTH: and you get nice new shiny robes

GLAMOUR: a few weeks of star status

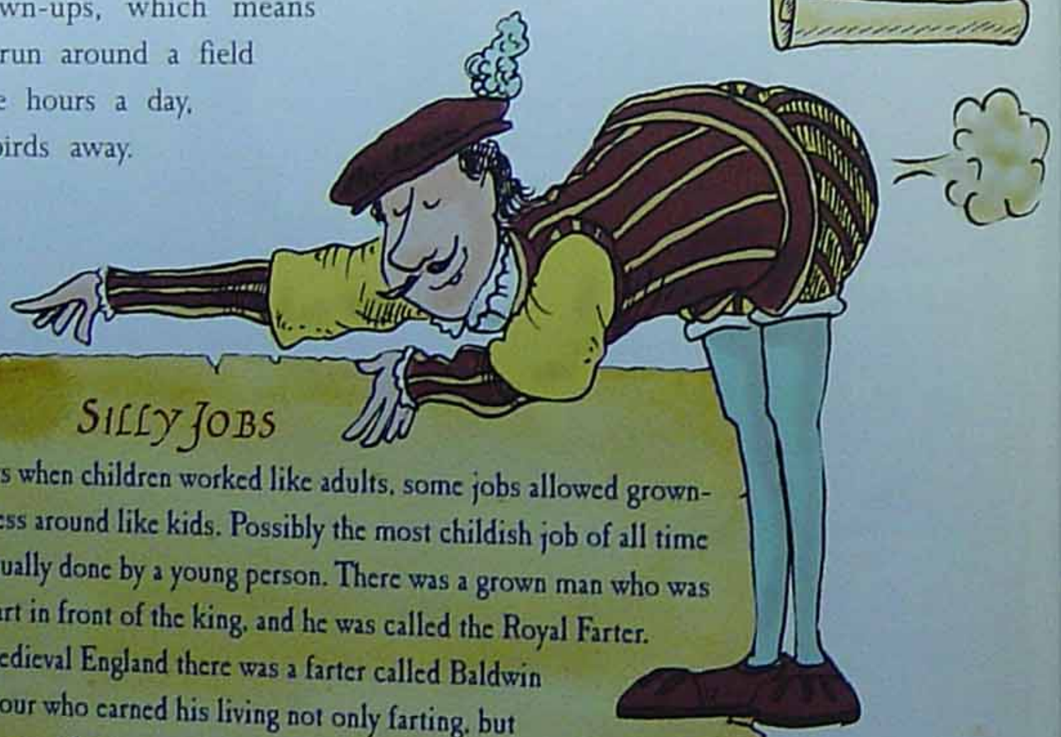
DANGER: don't get too carried away, you'll be lowly again come Christmas

For instance, let's suppose you'd wanted to do something simple like wash your pants. Before you even got started, you had to make your own washing powder. You would probably have used a handful of wood ash from the fire, or a mix of water and human wee, then rolled your sleeves up and got down to scrubbing away all those stubborn stains.

And if you think that sounds disgusting, other jobs were even stinkier. To make leather you needed a mixture of chicken poo and dog poo, which were mixed up to make a poo gravy and tipped into huge vats. Then you soaked a load of greasy animal skins in the gravy for about twelve months, hacked off the slippery fat and eventually you got leather.

So how come all these children had the free time to do so many worst jobs? Nowadays you're supposed to spend all day at school. But in the Middle Ages, unless you were pretty rich (and a boy), you weren't ever going to need to speak French or to know where Africa was. It was much more important to help your parents in the fields, or get out and earn some cash. And children have so many uses! You can fit into small spaces, like underneath big clanking machines. You've got small, quick fingers, so you're good at making lace or pins. And you've got more energy than grown-ups, which means you can run around a field for twelve hours a day, chasing birds away.





Silly Jobs

In the days when children worked like adults, some jobs allowed grown-ups to mess around like kids. Possibly the most childish job of all time wasn't actually done by a young person. There was a grown man who was paid to fart in front of the king, and he was called the Royal Farter.

In medieval England there was a farter called Baldwin Le Pettour who earned his living not only farting, but whistling and leaping around while he did it. He must have put on a really good show. The king found him so funny he gave him a present of a piece of land for making him laugh so much. Maybe you could try it in front of your head teacher and see what he gives you.

So over the years, kids like you have made themselves useful in all kinds of ways that sound terrible to us now.

Of course, jobs don't have to make you puke to count as worst jobs. Maybe they're tiring – so exhausting that you don't have the energy to chew your dinner when you finally stagger home. They can be scary – if you're afraid of the dark, don't try the mining jobs on pages 97-100, and if being shut in a tight space gives you the willies, definitely don't get apprenticed to a chimney sweep like the climbing boys on pages 19-20.

But who knows – you might really enjoy some of the jobs in this book. If you like climbing, what about a job scrambling up the rigging of a naval ship (page 16)? If you're into horses, you could have a go at being a 'riding child', speeding round a Tudor racetrack – if you're racing for the king, make sure you win, because Henry VIII's not the kind of bloke you want to upset. Or if you spend all your time playing on your Playstation, your nimble fingers could come in handy for picking pockets. And although all this might seem a bit of a laugh to you, for the children who really did these jobs it was a matter of life and death.

So do you fancy having a go at some of the worst jobs in history? If you don't, chuck this book in the dustbin right now, but if you do, let's get started on some top jobs that are colder, dirtier, scarier and stinkier than anything you have ever seen in a horror film.

Still with me? OK, let's turn the page.