

BEFORE THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Unlike political revolutions, the Industrial Revolution did not begin with great civil unrest or the clash of armies. As a result, it is difficult to arrive at a date for its beginning. The Industrial Revolution did not occur overnight, but rather began gradually and grew over several decades. Most historians place its beginnings in England in the mid-1700s, a decade or two before the American Revolution.

Most people lived in the country before the Industrial Revolution. In England, 75 percent of the population lived in rural areas or small villages in 1700. The percentage was even higher in continental Europe. Those cities that existed were few in number and of modest population. Due to the limited development of farming methods, it was necessary for the majority of the people to live in the country in order to produce enough food for the population. Most families farmed and lived on small plots of land that were controlled by large land owners who were often members of the nobility.

The total population of Europe was quite small. For example, in 1700 England's total population was about five million, compared to 70 million today. The people of preindustrial Europe lived very isolated lives. Roads were poor and dangerous, so people rarely traveled beyond their home villages. News of events in the outside world arrived slowly and sporadically. As a result, the small villages that dotted the countryside were the centers of life for the majority of Europeans. Few people ever left the area of their birth.

While the vast majority of the population worked in the fields, farming did not provide year-round employment. The peasant farmers were quite busy during times of planting and harvesting, but at other times they were free to do other work. During these times, thousands of families worked in their homes for clothing merchants. The merchants provided the families with wool or cotton, and for a fixed price, the families spun yarn on their spinning wheels and produced cloth on their hand-operated looms. This practice between the merchants and rural families is known as "cottage industry" because all of the work was done in a family's cottage home.

Weaving cloth was difficult and tedious, but provided a valuable income for many families. It was convenient work, since it was performed from within the home and at the pace desired by the worker. Children worked along with their parents, often becoming skilled at spinning yarn at a young age.

The system also had advantages for the merchants. The merchants paid very little for the cloth produced by the rural families and could then sell it at a handsome profit. However, the merchants were troubled by the inconsistent levels of production by the families and had no way to supervise their work. Often the cloth would not be delivered on time, especially when there was field work to divert the families from their spinning and weaving. Thus, the merchants desired another system that would allow greater supervision, more consistent delivery, and increased production. When the opportunity to produce their goods through new methods came, the merchants were quick to seize it.



Prior to the Industrial Revolution, most people were involved in agriculture and cottage industry.

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Directions: After reading, answer the following questions in complete sentences providing full detail. For questions not answered in the text, you will need to use your reading to come up with a reasonable answer and provide support for your thinking.

1. When do historians date the start of the Industrial Revolution and why is this an approximation?
2. Why did most people live in the country/rural areas before the Industrial Revolution?
3. Why did farmers live isolated lives before the Industrial Revolution?
4. Describe the cottage industry. Include the 5Ws.
5. What advantages did cottage industry offer to merchants?
6. What problems did the merchants face with the cottage industry?
7. The Industrial Revolution brought about new methods of producing goods. Why would merchants eagerly embrace these new methods of production?
8. Why do you think the Industrial Revolution began in England and not the United States?