THE ROYAL BRITISH LEGION

KEY STAGE 2 / LESSON 2

Reginald Alfred James Cooper

Child Mill Worker in WW1

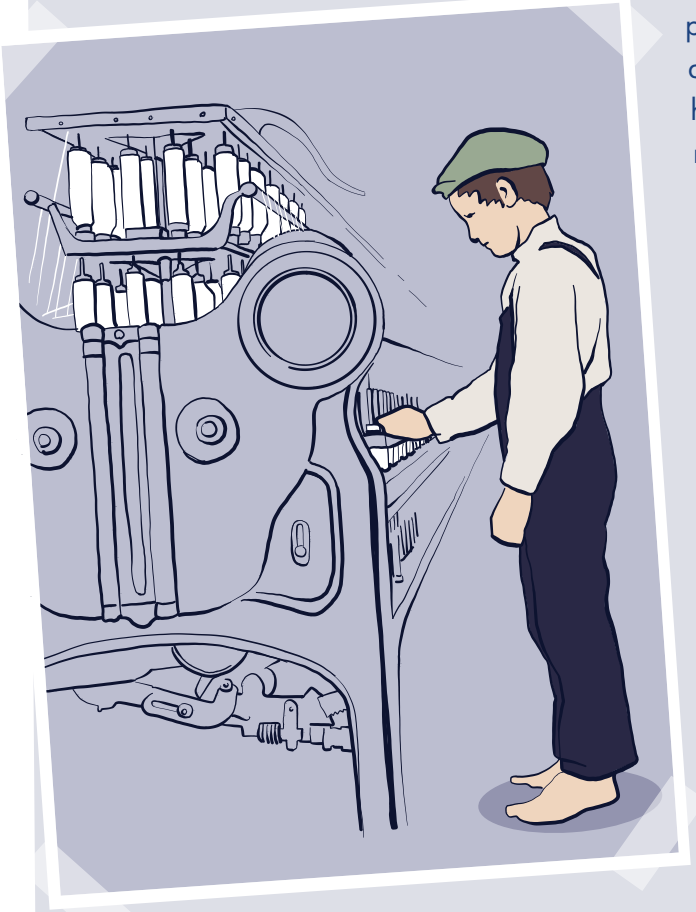
IN ASSOCIATION WITH

National Literacy Trust

Changing life stories

Reginald Alfred James Cooper

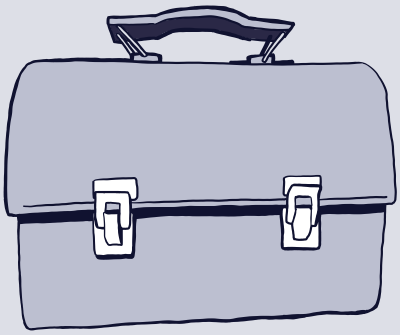
Reginald Cooper was 11 when he went to work at the Shepley cotton mills in Glossop, Derbyshire. A centre for the cotton industry, all the mills suffered as more and more of the mill workers joined the armed forces. It was not possible for the mills to close because the materials they made, such as fabric for aeroplane wings, were essential for the war effort. The mills started to employ adults who were too old to fight in the war and children to make up the work force.



Reginald was still at school, but with his father's permission he began part-time work at the mill, dividing his day between the mill and school. He had to arrive at 6am to start the morning shift. His mother would prepare a 'can and a box' for him; a packed lunch consisting of a hot drink in a flask and a sandwich. He then faced a frightening half a mile walk in the dark crossing a narrow bridge and dodging water rats.

On arrival Reginald would hang up his jacket on a nail, put on his overalls and remove his shoes and stockings. Even in the freezing winter, the children worked barefoot as it gave them more grip when moving across the wooden floor boards alongside the moving machinery. The machines were cleaned with oil and the floors could be slippery. If an accident happened it had to be reported, but there were no nurses on site, only a first aid kit in a tin box. Reginald recalls visiting the doctor with infected splinters in his feet on a number of occasions.

The boys and girls working at the mill were given the jobs which took advantage of their small size. Reginald first worked as a 'tuber', filling canisters with paper tubes that were then fixed on to the machinery. Later once he had more experience, he became a 'piecer'. The large spinning machines were 150 feet long and lined with threads of cotton.



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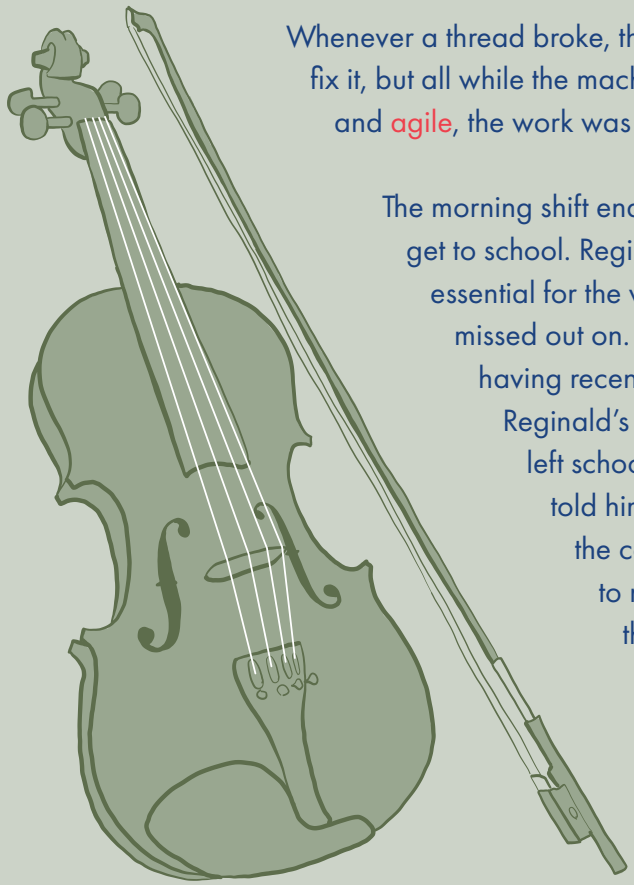

Whenever a thread broke, the piecer had to run to where the damage was and fix it, but all while the machines were still moving; the piecer had to be quick and agile, the work was simple but boring.

The morning shift ended at 1pm and the children had 30 minutes to get to school. Reginald and his friends enjoyed doing something essential for the war effort but were sad about the things they missed out on. In particular Reginald enjoyed sport and music, having recently learnt to swim and started violin lessons. Reginald's school work suffered and in 1916, aged 13, he left school and started working full-time at the mill. People told him he had a great opportunity to make a career in the cotton industry and work his way up, so he went to night school to study engineering. However at the end of the war, his father died and along with his brother he took over his father's butchers' shop. Reginald enjoyed his work at the mill but regretted losing out on his education and activities such as sport and music.

Glossary:

cotton industry – all the work happening to make cotton materials

consisting – made up of

machinery – the parts of a large machine or a number of machines

spinning machines – machines that turn raw material (e.g. from a cotton plant) into thread

agile – able to move easily

regretted – felt sad about

A day in the life of a child mill worker in WW1

Storyboard information

You are going to create an illustrated storyboard about a day in the life of a child mill worker. Use the information on the fact sheet and decide on the six main events of the child's day. In order draw a picture of each event.

Under each picture write one or two sentences to explain what is happening.

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