

The Industrial Revolution

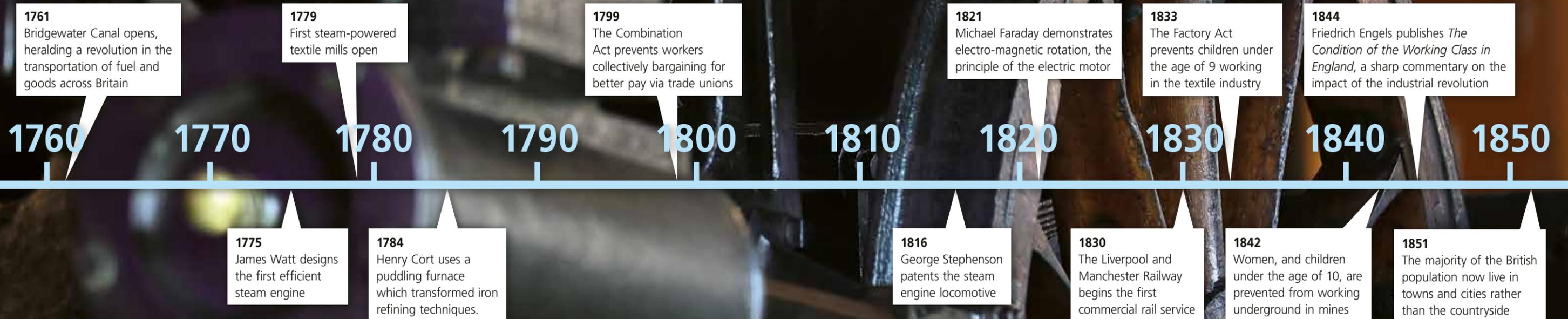
Chart the key breakthroughs of the Industrial Revolution with this timeline before reading about some alternative interpretations of the events

Critiquing the Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution is part of British historical identity and is often seen as the 'life story' of the nation. It is a tale of intrepid inventors, enterprising entrepreneurs and the creation of new and dynamic industries. The timeline to some extent reinforces this image by highlighting some of the key inventions and innovations in transport and manufacturing. But is there a different story? The timeline also suggests some of the challenges of industrialisation: child labour, exploitation of the working class and the decline of some industries as others expand.

Historians have also challenged this chronology, arguing that the Industrial Revolution started much earlier in the eighteenth century which witnessed the rise of 'proto-industrialisation' — where traditional methods of manufacturing were located in rural homes but market mechanisms increasingly came into play. There was also a rapid increase in the size of the population, as adults became economically independent at a younger age, married earlier and had more children. Consumer behaviour also changed, with the population buying an increasing range of food and goods produced both at home and overseas. Thus recent research has put less emphasis on the growth of industry and new inventions in the eighteenth century, and instead emphasises that there was more pre-industrial output than previously thought.

Finally, there has been more attention paid to worldwide comparisons. China, for example, had an impressive agricultural output and was at least, if not more, inventive than Britain. For example, gunpowder, the compass, paper and printing were all invented in China. Rural China was linked to market fairs and integrated into a national network of canals, rivers and roads. Asian commerce helped to develop industrial activity in Britain and Europe. Manufacturing in Britain only forged ahead of China (and Japan) at the end of the eighteenth century.



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