**Lord Shaftesbury A Men’s Breakfast Biography**

Although the son of an earl, Anthony Ashley Cooper was neglected and abused. His father bullied him and advised his boarding school tutors at Chiswick to do the same. Ashley carried the scars of depression with him all his life. However, time, the cruelties he had suffered were transformed into good: he was always prone to sympathize with the sufferings of others. His nursemaid, Maria was the only adult to show him any affection and, at bedtime would tell Ashley stories from the Gospel and taught him how to pray. Maria had showed Ashley to “seek first the kingdom of God.” From this simple sharing of the Gospel, Ashley became a fervent Christian in spite of ridicule from his peers at school. After transferring to Harrow, Ashley, nearly 16, was horrified to witness drunken pall bearers drop a pauper’s coffin amidst a stream of oaths. This incident opened Ashley’s eyes to the needs of the neglected poor and, under God, he determined to devote his life to improve the lot of the poor and disadvantaged in Victorian England.

Having entered Parliament in 1826 as a convinced, evangelical Christian, Ashley soon learned of the horrors of the lower classes in England. Shocked by what he heard of the treatment of the insane, he personally toured asylums and witnessed how screaming lunatics were chained, hand and foot on their straw mattresses where they lay in their own filth until they were sluiced down with cold water. He rose in Parliament in 1828 convincing fellow members to take action and in the next 49 years various Lunacy Acts were passed. He cited the case of a Welsh girl, Mary Jones, a simple girl who had for more than a decade been locked in a tiny loft with one boarded-up window with little air and no light. The room was extremely filthy and was filled with an intolerable smell. She could only [squat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Squatting_position) in a bent position in the room and this had caused her to become deformed. The notorious Bedlam Lunatic Asylum was shut down and new hospitals were built wherein the inmates were beginning to be better cared for and even treated.

Next he tackled the issue of children's working hours. In the factories children had no rights. The dirtiest jobs were given to the children who, because of their small build, were able to crawl into tiny spaces midst the machines. Many times a child would be told to clean under machines even while they were running, resulting in grave injury or even death. Victorian child labour consisted of very long working hours. The normal work week would be Monday to Saturday from 6 A.M. to 8 P.M. Children would be beaten or fined for falling asleep, for making a mistake or being late. There were often more children than adults in those factories. That became a fifteen year fight, with Ashley seeking a minimum age for child employment and a 10 hour maximum working day. Ashley’s concern for these children was also spiritual for, with an estimated 100,000 people migrating from the country to the cities, they were no longer receiving any Anglican teaching or pastoral oversight. Ashley was instrumental in establishing the church pastoral aid society to provide lay Christians to work under the support of a Church of England pastor in the cities, for the Anglican Church was haemorrhaging its urban poor who worshipped in non - conformist chapels. This struggle was compounded by unsympathetic bishops whose churchmanship was generally more high church and they were suspicious of lay ministry. However, as his faith strengthened, Ashley’s 2 favourite Bible verses were, “I will never leave you, nor forsake you” and Christ’s own promise to the disciples, “Lo, I am with you always”.. The Bible gave him the strength to succeed in his work in the face of great opposition.

Ashley laboured long to see that Christian education--"ragged schools"--was provided for street urchins, for Ashley believed that without an education their lives were doomed to criminality, imprisonment and possibly capital punishment. There were then no national schools and had been none since the time of Alfred the Great. These ragged schools were run by volunteers and received grants from generous benefactors who desired a Christian education for the poor. In an effort to create a future for these children returning home from their Ragged Schools to hovel-like homes or, worse, to exist under the shelter of railway arches, Ashley proposed to Parliament in 1848 that up to a thousand of these children annually, both boys and girls, could be transplanted at public expense to useful employment in Australia, New Zealand and Canada where they would work in the fresh air on the farms. The scheme proved to be very successful.

In the year of 1848, Queen Victoria feared for her personal safety for this was the year of peasant revolution where a series of republican revolts against European monarchies, beginning in Sicily, spread to France, Germany, Italy, and the Austrian Empire. Many believed that Ashley’s many social reforms were instrumental in keeping Britain’s poor from joining in similar revolt. He also established 2 training ships for the Royal Navy, the Chichester and the Arethusa, moored in the Medway, where young men would receive appropriate training for naval life, to be positive ambassadors for Britain abroad, replacing the drunken, disorderly men who had previously manned Britain’s ships.

A terrible cholera epidemic in 1849 took 53,000 lives nationwide. and made his point for the need for improved sewage systems and the supply of pure water to Britain’s cities He also for reforms in providing new cemeteries outside the overcrowded cities where bodies were buried over and above previous churchyard burials, resulting in burial mounds forming, causing water pollution.

He backed efforts at evangelization (including the work of American hymn writers and evangelists, Moody and Sankey) and, without Ashley and God’s stirring within him, there would have been no London City Mission, no CPAS.

He pressed for legislation to end the dreadful practices of forcing half naked women and children to haul coal, to sit, confined in the darkness to open and close ventilation doors to and pump water for long hours in cramped conditions. Often they were not allowed above ground at all. The thought of using children for working the coal mines was very attractive to mine owners. Children were much smaller, enabling them to manoeuvre in tight spaces and they demanded a lot less pay. The darkness in the mines made it hard and often cause permanent eyesight problems from the constant strain on the eyes.

Due to a lack of proper ventilation, coal dust clogged the air. Considering that Victorian Children would work from 12 to 18 hours a day amongst constant noise, and rat infestation and many developed respiratory problems. Some children developed permanent spine deformity from having to constantly walk stooped over. Explosions or cave-ins were an ever-present fear. Due to the lack of safety awareness in the mines, death was a constant and ever-present danger. There was also moral danger for these children for, working practically naked underground, the girls were often abused in the most degrading way.

Perhaps Ashley is best known for his zeal in abolishing the practice of boys working as chimney sweeps. The life of a chimney sweep in Victorian times was nothing like you see in Mary Poppins. It was a brutal, dreary existence for Victorian child sweeps, some as young as 3 years old. Their tiny size made them a popular choice for going up the narrow chimney stacks. A Victorian child Chimney Sweep may have been the most dangerous job for children in the 1800’s, especially when first starting doing the job. Being sent up the chimney the first few times would cause the child’s arms, elbows, legs and knees to be rubbed and scraped raw. At times their knees and elbows looked as if there was no skin at all on them. Their employer would then wash their wounds with salt water and send them up another chimney without sympathy.

After a time the child would develop calluses, making their task a little more bearable. But the dangers of the job were only beginning. Falling was a major fear for chimney sweeps or getting stuck in the stacks also, for both could easily cause death. The constant breathing in of soot caused irreversible lung damage and, for the boys, scrotal cancer was common. There were a few reported cases of children getting stuck in chimneys and no one even knowing it, leaving them to die alone from exposure or smoke inhalation or worse. The lifespan of Victorian Chimney sweeps was short. Orphans were sometimes taken and put into (for lack of a better word) slavery to their chimney sweep masters, and were returned to the street when they grew too big for the chimneys at about the age of 9 or 10. Bosses deliberately underfed children so they would be thin enough to continue climbing chimneys. Sometimes children were even kidnapped for the job. The tragedy was that such children were not even necessary. Sweeping chimneys could have been done more safely and just as well by using brushes. The last chimney sweep’s climbing boy, George Brewster, died in Fulbourn in 1873 before the practise was finally outlawed.

Ashley combatted white slavery, in which girls were sold into prostitution and out of his straightened finances (for his steward embezzled from him whilst overseeing Ashley’s estate in Wimborne) and did all he could to feed starving children. When, on his father’s death in 1851, Lord Ashley became Lord Shaftesbury he built cottages and improved the amenities of his estate which had been woefully neglected by his self-centred father. Shaftesbury, was an advocate of better housing for the poor and his agitation in Parliament led to many tenant reforms and on August 3, 1875, under his guidance, he laid the foundation stone of a large housing complex, the Battersea Park Estate in south London that was created without a public house to discourage drunkenness.

Lord Shaftesbury lived a life convicted that [Christ](https://www.christianity.com/jesus/) must be the centre of a living faith. He spoke strongly against the secularism of his age, yet he was a warm friend of the atheistic Prime Minister Palmerston who gently mocked his belief. The people, however, did not mock. When he preached Christ, they listened with respect. At his funeral, in 1851, hundreds of thousands of the poor stood hatless in the pouring rain to show their love for the man who had loved them. He died after hearing the 23rd Psalm read to him and his children heard him say, “I am just touching the hem of His garment.” His children understood that their father, was believed that, like the haemorrhaging woman in the Gospels, he would be able to cast himself at the feet of Jesus and, healed, look into his face, Shaftesbury’s Lord and Saviour.