

From 1750 to the early 20th Century, the industrial revolution created a huge demand for workers in factories – while advances in farming reduced demand for agricultural labour.

The result was a huge movement of people from the countryside to the cities.

In 1801, only 31% of the British population lived in urban areas. By 1881, that figure had shot up to 68%

Because workers needed to live close to their workplaces, homes were squeezed into the smallest possible amount of space around the new factories.

They were built as quickly, and as cheaply, as possible, and were damp, dark, and dirty.

In Scottish cities like Glasgow, tenements were built in huge numbers. Demand for housing was so high that large families often lived in small, cramped tenement flats.

“I did not believe until I visited the wynds of Glasgow, that so large an amount of filth, crime, misery, and disease existed on one spot in any civilised country “

And in all cities, the thousands of people crowding into the same few square miles all had to share a small number of privys – toilets with no flush. A typical block housing 360 people would have 6 privys.

With no plumbing or sewers, privy buckets were emptied into open cesspits, or the street. Fresh water from wells or pumps were often contaminated by this untreated waste.

The result of this sudden urbanisation was a public health disaster.

City housing was the perfect breeding ground for diseases such as typhus, cholera and typhoid – resulting in very high death rates.

Many politicians, and certain factory owners, saw that change was needed.

The expensive work of laying drains and sewers below streets began, throughout Britain's cities, along with clean water supplies – such as the Loch Katrine reservoir and aqueduct in Glasgow.

Public health acts were passed by Parliament through the mid 1800s, obliging city councils to provide minimum standards of sanitation.

The Glasgow Improvement Trust was set up in 1866, and cleared the worst slums.

By 1870, most workers in Britain were beginning to see real improvements in their living standards.