

Child Labour, Public Decency and the Iconography of the Children's Employment Commission of 1842¹

Peter Kirby

Manchester Papers in Economic & Social History, No.62, October 2007

The mid-nineteenth century was a period of enormous moral and social realignment in Britain. Definitions of public decency were sharpened and given increasing social and legislative prominence whilst a growing body of puritanical literature was directed towards the sexual customs of the working classes.² Such concerns stemmed partly from claims that a growing industrial working class lacked 'proper' rules of deference and decency and partly from a fear that the unfettered fertility of the working classes might result in threats to the social order and a draining of the public purse. Indeed, major changes in social policy, such as Poor Law reform, were predicated, in large part, upon fears about rising population, improvident marriages, the decline of the traditional family unit and increasing levels of illegitimacy. Government investigators increasingly highlighted the moral and physical decline associated with industrial work and by the 1830s and 40s reportage of working-class morality had become firmly established within contemporary analyses of working life.³

Coalminers attracted particular attention as they posed both a physical and sexual threat to mid nineteenth-century middle-class constructions of sexuality. They were also an increasingly numerous occupation group. In 1840 the Children's Employment Commission began an investigation into the conditions of children employed in British mines. The Commission was convened at the behest of Lord Ashley who wished to gather empirical evidence to support a legislative limitation of child employment.⁴ The scale of the inquiry was impressive.

Four Commissioners were appointed: the economist Thomas Tooke; the sanitary reformer Thomas Southwood Smith; and the factory inspectors Leonard Horner and Robert John

1 The author wishes to thank Drs D.E. Martin, J.H. Woodward and G. Redworth and the staff of West Yorkshire Archive Service, Halifax, for their guidance. This article forms part of a more extensive study currently in preparation.

2 Mason, *Victorian Sexual Attitudes*, p. 63; Roberts, '*Morals, Art, and the Law*'; See, for example, P.P. 1837-38, Report of the Select Committee on Metropolis Police Offices, Minutes of Evidence, pp. 134-137, in which the distribution of obscene images to school children was one of the major concerns; Roberts, '*Society for the Suppression of Vice*'; Saunders, Copyright, obscenity and literary history'; Daunton, *House and Home*, p. 12.

3 Tonna, for example, wrote of the manufacturing system in 1843-44, 'our women are changed into men, and our men into devils'. Kovacevic and Kanner, '*Blue Book into Novel*', p. 171; Fears of moral collapse were not confined to philanthropists and evangelicals. The radical Francis Place and the communist Friedrich Engels both believed that the working class and factory workers in particular had no chastity. McKendrick, '*Home Demand*', p. 166.

4 The investigation was prompted by accounts of poor working conditions amongst miners that had been mentioned in the reports of the earlier Factory Commission of 1833. The Mines Act of 1842 prohibited the employment below ground of boys below the age of 10 years and excluded female labour altogether. 5 & 6 Vict., c.99.

Saunders. Between November 1840 and March 1841 more than twenty sub-commissioners were appointed and each was allocated one or more coal-districts on which to report.

Altogether, the Commission took evidence from more than 4,000 people connected with coalmining.⁵ In the course of their investigations, some of the sub-commissioners discovered that face-workers in a few coal-districts (in particular, Lancashire and West Yorkshire) occasionally worked naked and that young haulage workers at times worked alongside them. The disclosures prompted discussions of immorality among miners and raised questions about the effect upon children of working underground in such a brutalising environment.

The revelations also provided a powerful weapon in the campaign for reform of child labour in mining. For example, in moving the bill for the prohibition of women and children from coal mines, Lord Ashley could state confidently that children and young female coal miners commonly worked naked in coalmines.⁶ Some of the moral implications of the Commission's reports have been investigated by John, who has focused in particular on attitudes to female miners and by Humphries who examined the issue of protective legislation within the context of constructions of bourgeois sexuality, whilst Hilden has examined how industrialists, legislators and bourgeois reformers in Belgium became increasingly interested in the sexuality of miners from the 1840s.⁷ This article attempts to examine the social context from which such reports arose, discusses how the reports of underground indecency were transmitted to the public via periodicals and newspapers and questions the verity of some of the claims made by the sub-commissioners of 1842.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the public outside the British coalmining districts understood little about miners and their working conditions. Contemporary 'authoritative' accounts could be wildly misleading. William Pyne, for example, instructed readers of his 1806 encyclopaedia that "there are many families who live under ground, and only visit the regions of day occasionally. They have regular markets below, to which dealers descend to supply them with the articles of subsistence and clothing which they want".⁸

William Cobbett, similarly, visited the north-east coalfield in 1832 and reported afterwards: "Here is the most surprising thing in the whole world; thousands of men and thousands of horses continually living under ground: children born there, and who sometimes never see the surface at all, though they live to a considerable age".⁹

5 PRO HO74/1. Home Office. Various Commissions' Letter Books, 1836-45, 13 Oct. 1840, pp. 219-21; Kirby, *Employment of Children*, pp. 300-304.

6 Cooper, *Speeches of the Earl of Shaftesbury*, 7 June 1842, p. 37.

7 John, *Sweat of their Brow*; Humphries, 'Protective legislation'; Hilden cites Gramsci who argued "that the new type of man demanded by the rationalization of production and work cannot be developed until the sexual instinct has been suitably regulated and until it too has been rationalized." Hilden, *Women Coal Miners*, p. 411.

8 Pyne, *Microcosm*, p. 164.

9 Quoted in Hair, *Views of the Collieries*, p. 6 (emphasis in the original).

The belief that miners were a semi-troglodytic race prevailed in some parts of the country well into the mid-century. The MP and former pitman, John Wilson, encountered a barman in Shoreham whilst employed on a coaster in 1856. The barman discovered that he had been a pitman.

Pressing for more information, he inquired how long I had been down the pit. "Seven years," was the answer. In most surprised tones he said, "Have you not been up until now?" I was surprised at him, and replied, "Yes, every day except on rare occasions." "Why, I thought you pitmen lived down there always!" said the querist. Wilson discovered subsequently that "there was a generally-held opinion that the coals ... were dug out of the bowels of the earth by a class of people who were little removed from barbarism, and whose home was down in the eternal darkness".¹⁰ The notion that miners were a 'race apart', therefore, was widespread during the early nineteenth century.¹¹ Allegations of moral degeneracy among miners, however, were cited rarely prior to the Commission's investigations of 1840-41. The first major nineteenth-century critic of moral standards among coalminers was the writer and traveller Richard Ayton (1786-1823) who visited a Whitehaven mine in 1813 and described how the mixing of the sexes below ground offered opportunities for sexual depravity.

In consequence of the employment of women in the mines, the most abominable profligacy prevails among the people. One should scarcely have supposed that there would be any temptations to sin in these gloomy and loathsome caverns, but they are made the scenes of the most bestial debauchery. If a man and woman meet in them, and are excited by passion at the moment, they indulge it, without pausing to enquire if it be father and daughter, or brother and sister, that are polluting themselves with incest ... it is not a little offensive to see them changed into devils in their appearance, but it is afflicting indeed to witness the perversion that takes place in their moral character. They ... become a set of coarse, licentious wretches, scorning all kind of restraint, and yielding themselves up, with shameless audacity, to the most detestable sensuality. Their abominations are confined during the day to the dark recesses of the mines; but at night they are cast up from the pits like a pestilence, to contaminate the town.

The "ruffian-like" adult miners encountered by Ayton were described as "a band of devils". "Great God", he pleaded with his readers, "can nothing be done for the redemption of these wretched slaves?.. These dismal dungeons are certainly not fit places for women and children, the removal of whom would be an act of humanity".¹²

The sub-commissioners of 1842 also believed that opportunities for sexual adventures were occasioned by the mixing of the sexes underground.¹³

10 Wilson, *Memories of a Labour Leader*, p. 95.

11 See Williams, *Notes on the Underground*, p. 66.

12 Ayton and Daniell, *Voyage Round Great Britain*, vol.II, pp. 159-60, 156, 158. The work is occasionally cited under the name of the engraver William Daniell (1769-1837).

13 A remarkably similar attitude was displayed by contemporary Belgian observers. Hilden, 'Women Coal Miners'.

Periodic contacts between young haulage workers and naked adult males at the face during the working day were regarded as shocking. "What passes underground in the dark tunnels in which the people work', noted the sub-commissioner for north Lancashire, 'is not known even to the under-ground overlooker".¹⁴ Sub-Commissioner Samuel Scriven, in his report on the small pits around Elland and Brighouse, depicted coal miners as a morally depraved race and declared himself "shocked in contemplating the hideous, and anything but human, appearance of these men, who are generally found in a state of bestial nakedness ... Black and filthy as they are in their low, dark, heated, and dismal chambers, they look like a race fallen from the common stock."¹⁵ In north Staffordshire, Scriven found that the miners' appearance "had something truly hideous and Satanic about it, and prompted me to ask myself - Can these be human creatures? The heat arising from the congregation of so many persons and so many candles, together with the offensive odour from their excessive perspiration, was intolerable; all were naked or nearly so".¹⁶ Scriven had almost certainly been influenced by Ayton's earlier critique of miners' sexual behaviour almost three decades earlier.

Where Ayton depicted a Whitehaven trapper as "resembling in the abjectness of its condition some reptile peculiar to the place", Scriven, on his first encounter with a Yorkshire trapper, viewed him, consonantly, as "abject and idiotic - like a thing, a creeping thing peculiar to the place".¹⁷ Scriven emphasised the indeterminate sex of young west Yorkshire miners: "There is no distinction whatever in their coming up the shaft or going down ... Indeed it is impossible to distinguish, either in the darkness of the gates in which they labour, or in the cabins before the broad light of day, an atom of difference between one sex and the other".¹⁸ Symons, sub-commissioner for the West Riding and Cumberland, noted that "some little difficulty occasionally arose in pointing out to me which were girls and which were boys, and which caused a good deal of laughing and joking ... though the girls are clothed, at least three-fourths of the men for whom they hurry work stark naked, or with a flannel waistcoat only, and in this state they assist one another to fill the corves 18 or 20 times a-day".¹⁹

14 (P.P. 1842, XVII), p. 804.

15 (P.P. 1842, XVII), p. 63.

16 (P.P. 1842, XVII), p. 127; Ayton had earlier observed of the Whitehaven miners that 'they were mostly half-naked, blackened all over with dirt, and altogether so miserably disfigured and abused, that they looked like a race fallen away from the common rank of men'. Ayton and Daniell, *Voyage round Great Britain*, vol.II, p. 155.

17 Ayton and Daniell, *Voyage round Great Britain*, vol.II, p. 156; (P.P. 1842, XVII) p. 72; Scriven, perhaps the most active of the sub-commissioners in his pursuit of underground immorality, had actually been a replacement for the original west Yorkshire sub-commissioner, William Wood, who had had to retire from the Commission early on account of an indisposition. Prior to his departure, Wood produced a substantial report together with minutes of evidence from a hundred witnesses. By contrast with Scriven's discovery of "bestial nakedness" and Symons comparison with a "brothel", Wood's report offers no mention of underground nakedness or of sexual license among miners. His report's sole reference to children's clothing states, unsensationally, "With regard to clothing in the week-days, there is not the tidiness which could be wished." (P.P. 1842, XVII), H.7, H.9.

18 (P.P. 1842, XVII), p. 73.

19 (P.P. 1842, XVI), p. 196.

When Symons entered a pit at Barnsley, he “found assembled around a fire a group of men, boys, and girls, some of whom were of the age of puberty, the girls as well as the boys stark naked down to the waist, their hair bound up with a tight cap, and trousers supported by their hips ... Their sex was recognisable only by their breasts.” Symons and a Leeds solicitor obtained a deposition from an ardent 40 year-old collier who claimed: “I have worked a great deal where girls were employed in pits. I have had children by them myself, and have frequently had connexion with them in the pits.”²⁰

Nakedness among children and adolescents was of particular concern to the sub-commissioners. A thirteen year-old male witness stated, “Our breeches are often torn between the legs with the chain. The girls' breeches are torn as often as ours; they are torn many a time, and when they are going along we can see them all between the legs naked”.²¹ Symons noted in a section entitled 'Prostitution in pits', “When it is remembered that these girls hurry chiefly for men who are not their parents ... that they go from 15 to 20 times a day into a dark chamber ... which is often 50 yards apart from any one, to a man working naked, or next to naked, it is not to be supposed but that where opportunity thus prevails sexual vices are of common occurrence... Add to this the free intercourse, and the rendezvous at the shaft or bullstake ... and consider the language to which the young ear is habituated, the absence of religious instruction, and the early age at which contamination begins, and you will have before you, in the coal-pits where females are employed, the picture of a nursery for juvenile vice which you will go far and wide above ground to equal.”²² Symons and Scriven both noted frequent encounters with naked, or semi-naked men, women, boys and girls. Scriven described his encounter with an eleven year-old female hurrier.

She stood shivering before me from cold. The rag that hung about her waist was once called a shift, which is as black as the coal she thrusts ... During my examination of her the banksman ... wanted to take her away, because, as he expressed himself, it was not decent that she should be (her person) exposed to us; oh, no it was criminal above ground; and, like the two or three other colliers in the cabin, he became evidently mortified that these deeds of darkness should be brought to light.²³

The girl is said also to have stated: “If I want to relieve myself I go into any part of the pit; sometimes the boys see me when they go by.”²⁴

20 (P.P. 1842, XVI), p. 284.

21 (P.P. 1842, XVI), p. 295.

22 (P.P. 1842, XVI), p. 196. A contemporary pamphlet suggested worse. Strange, Horrible prostitution and murder of women and children ... employed in mines and collieries. A review of this book appeared in the Literary Gazette, 9 July 1842. No copies appear to have survived. There appear to be no extant copies of the pamphlet.

23 (P.P. 1842, XVII), p. 104 (emphasis in the original).

24 (P.P. 1842, XVII), pp. 103-4. There were few sanitary arrangements below ground. Miners commonly used old workings as a lavatory. Hence the opportunities for miners to see each other performing bodily functions were frequent. Benson, *British Coalminers*, p. 33; Douglass and Krieger have remarked that underground lavatory conditions remain primitive to the present-day: 'if you wish to relieve yourself, you do it just where you are'. *A Miner's Life*, p. 23.

When a Rochdale coal proprietor recounted examples of underground indecency, Kennedy (the Lancashire sub-commissioner) noted that he had “suppressed [the] stories as being unfit for publication”.²⁵

The Commission’s revelations of underground nakedness prompted a wider interest among newspapers and periodicals. In a petition to parliament, Edward Binney, a prominent Manchester campaigner against female underground labour, was particularly disturbed by the apparently indeterminate sex of the young Lancashire colliers which, he suggested, could be deduced “only by the exposure of the upper parts of their persons and their voices”.²⁶ William Carpenter claimed that in the West Riding, “the men work in a state of perfect nakedness, and are in this state assisted in their labour by females of all ages, from girls of six years old to women of twenty-one, these females being themselves quite naked down to the waist”.²⁷

It was suggested that in Wigan, “Father, mother, and children will work together at times [in the pits], and not have a shirt amongst them”.²⁸ Periodicals sustained the accounts of widespread nakedness. The Quarterly Review noted in an article of June 1842 that: “The commissioner found ... when hoisted in a corve to the bank with another human being - that it was a girl. She, like the rest, was naked”.²⁹ W.R. Greg, meanwhile, in the Westminster Review, described the “disgust with which we read of their being engaged, in the years of opening womanhood”.³⁰ Some of the reports also exhibit voyeuristic tendencies: a Barnsley solicitor, for example, disclosed to the sub-commissioner the results of his own private explorations.

At Silkstone there are a great many girls who work in the pits, and I have seen them washing themselves naked much below the waist as I passed their doors, and whilst they are doing this, they will be talking and chatting with any men who happen to be there with the utmost unconcern, and men young and old would be washing in the same place, at the same time.³¹

The Commission of 1842 was unique in its innovative use of drawings to describe working conditions.³² The images of Lancashire miners that appeared in John Kennedy's report were produced by Binney who noted: “at the instance of Lord Shaftesbury ...

25 An underlooker at Hyde, Cheshire, commenting upon the dress of mining women, claimed: 'I have seen many a one with her breasts hanging out'. (P.P. 1842, XVII), p. 202; (P.P. 1842, XVII), p. 200.

26 Mining Journal, 30 April 1842, Vol.XII, p. 142.

27 Carpenter, *Treatment of Children Employed in Mines and Collieries*, p. 26.

28 Winter, *The Busy Hives Around Us*, p. 78.

29 Ferguson, 'Colliers and Collieries', p. 177.

30 Greg, 'Protection of Children in Mines and Collieries', p. 121; The Annual Register reported: “In the West Riding, it appears, girls ... commonly work quite naked down to the waist”. Annual Register, 1842, p. 165.

31 (P.P. 1842, XVI), p. 250.

32 As Binney remarked in 1842, it was “nearly impossible to describe the details of a coal mine, and the employment of the men and women engaged in it, without the aid of drawings”. 'Petition of Edward William Binney', p. 142.

I went down numerous pits to get drawings of the women to show how they were employed."³³ The Yorkshire sketches were almost certainly produced by sub-commissioner Scriven himself. Allegations of underground nudity were supported by a variety of illustrations of naked face-workers (Figure 1).

33 Greenwell, *'Underground Conveyance of Coals'*, p. 59. Joseph Brotherton (1783-1857) was M.P. for Salford from 1832 to 1857.

Figure 1. Naked Face Workers

40. I have often been shocked in contemplating the hideous, and anything but human, appearance of these men, who are generally found in a state of bestial nakedness, lying their whole length along the uneven floor, and supporting their heads upon a board or short crutch (Fig. 4); or sitting upon one heel balanc-

Fig. 4.

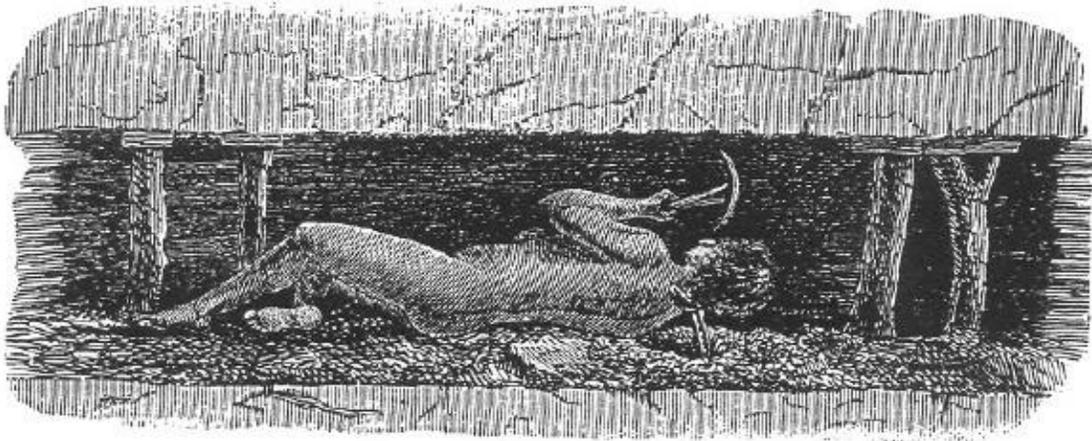


Fig. 5.

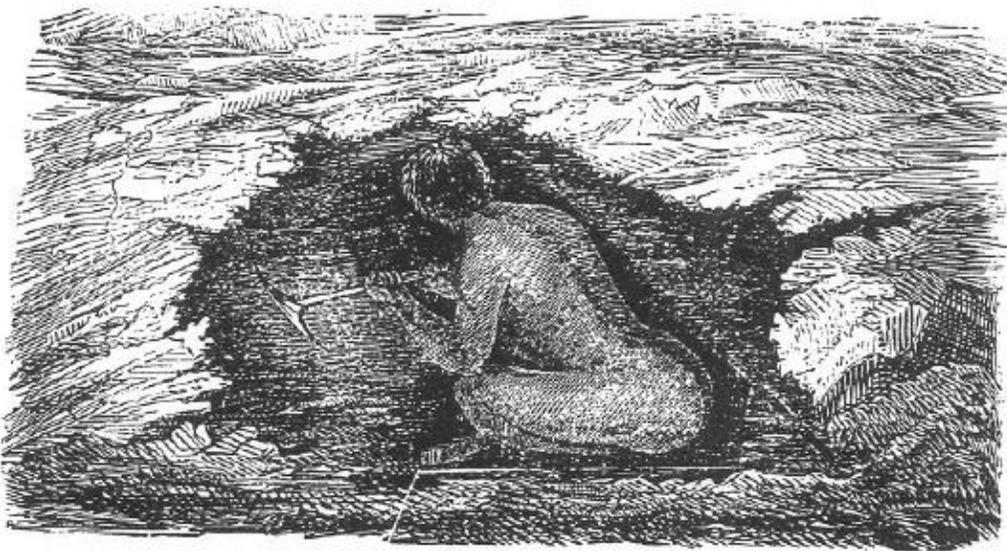
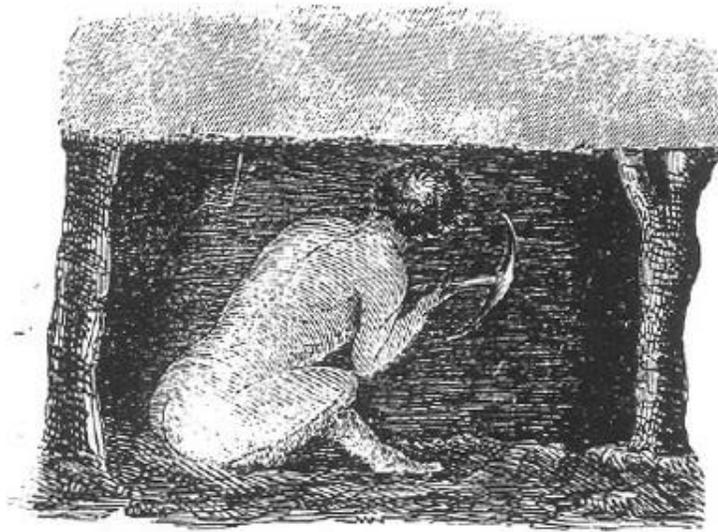


Fig 6.



ing their persons by extending the other. Black and filthy as they are in their low, dark, heated, and dismal chambers, they look like a race fallen from the common stock. It did not much surprise me to be told that old age came prematurely upon them, and that they were “mashed up” at 40 or 45: indeed the care-

Source: P.P.1842, XVII, p.63.

The most widely-publicised of the Commission’s illustrations, however, appeared in Scriven's report and depicts a 14 year-old boy and a girl of “about 15 years of age” being wound up a mine shaft in a “cross-lapped” position. The girl is clearly naked from the waist up, and has her legs around the body of the boy.³⁴

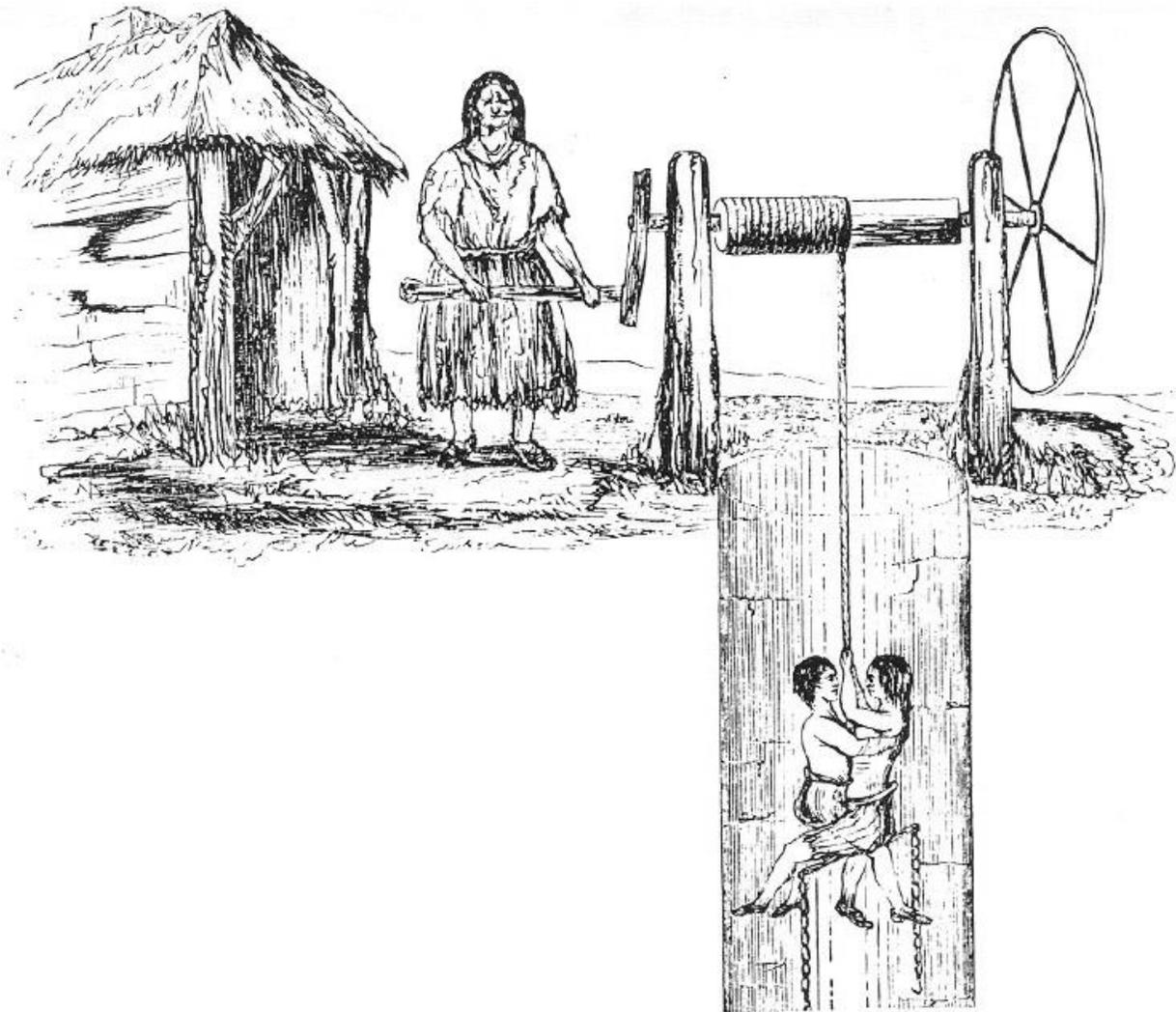
This image shocked early Victorian society and was widely reported. A contemporary summary of the Commission carried the picture, observing “the revolting indecency of this placing of a male and a female, each of them in an almost naked state”.³⁵ To what extent, however, can Scriven’s drawing be said to depict an actual historical event? There is evidence to suggest that alterations were made in the wake of the original drawing. The breeches worn by the children, for example, appear to have been added later indicating that the two figures had been depicted in the first instance as completely naked. The position of the boy's right leg seems also to have been altered.

There are further grounds for doubting the verity of the image. Would a single female human winder possess the physical strength to raise the weight of the two children using a primitive turn-wheel of the type shown in the drawing?

34 “The sketch given is intended to represent Ann Ambler and William Dyson ... in the act of being drawn up cross-lapped upon the clutch-iron”. (P.P. 1842, XVII), p. 61.

35 Carpenter, *Treatment of Children Employed in Mines and Collieries*, p. 8. Carpenter simply reproduced the image used in the Commission report.

Figure 2. Sketch of Ann Ambler and William Dyson



Source: P.P. 1842, XVII, p. 61.

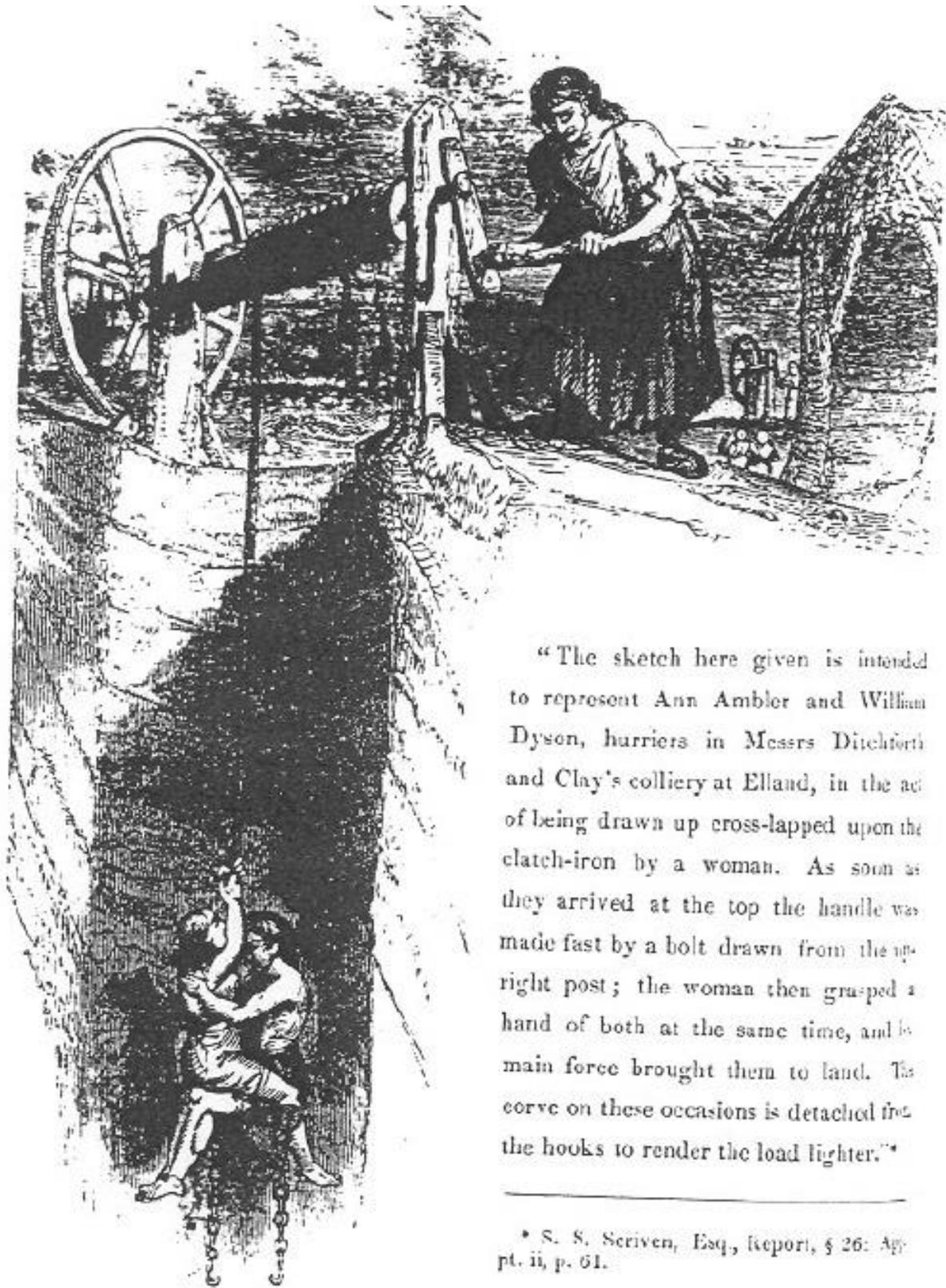
On the basis of Stanway's 1833 averages (of the weights of male and female non-factory children) the combined weights of the children would have approximated 172 pounds (more than 12 stones).³⁶ In view of the heavier body-weight of most mines-employed children, it is likely that the children in Scriven's illustration exceeded those weighed by Stanway in 1833.³⁷ The depth of the pit in which the two children worked was given as 150 feet.³⁸

36 The combined weights for average male and female factory children at the same ages would have been approximately 165 pounds (just under 12 stones). Factory Commission (P.P. 1833, XX), Cowell's report, p. 87.

37 James Holroyd, the surgeon in attendance, noted in an appendix: 'In a physical point of view, the children and young persons are for the most part strong, robust, and healthy'. (P.P. 1842, XVII) p. 97.

38 (P.P. 1842, XVII), p. 102.

Figure 3. Ann Ambler and William Dyson



“The sketch here given is intended to represent Ann Ambler and William Dyson, hurriers in Messrs Ditchfort and Clay’s colliery at Elland, in the act of being drawn up cross-lapped upon the clutch-iron by a woman. As soon as they arrived at the top the handle was made fast by a bolt drawn from the upright post; the woman then grasped a hand of both at the same time, and by main force brought them to land. The corve on these occasions is detached from the hooks to render the load lighter.”*

* S. S. Scriven, Esq., Report, § 26: App. ii, p. 61.

It is therefore unlikely that the drawing in Scriven's report depicts an actual event, despite claims by the sub-commissioner and two local surgeons to have witnessed the children being thus drawn up the shaft.³⁹ Interestingly, J.H. Clapham examined the drawing and discovered no impropriety, noting that it illustrated "the hardships of children when getting to and from their work."⁴⁰ The drawing (Figure 2) was probably the most widely disseminated image from the 1842 report. In July 1842, the Westminster Review published a modified version of the original drawing of the two young miners (Figure 3). In the Review version the image was refined further for a predominantly metropolitan audience. Here, the 'drawn-in' breeches became an established component of the image. Moreover, a second figure was added, operating a winding wheel in the distance, suggesting that this was not an isolated mode of labour.⁴¹

At the height of campaigning during May and June 1842, the Tory Halifax Guardian and the Bradford Herald (both of which had been active in the campaign for the Factory Acts) published their own versions of the two children in a series of articles entitled 'White Slavery in England' (Figure 4).⁴²

A further image of a sexual nature, originally from Scriven's report on west Yorkshire, was published in a much more exotic and romanticised form by the Westminster Review. Both are compared below.⁴³ In Scriven's report to the Commission, a female coal miner was shown (below left), standing by a fireplace, covered in coal-dust with her breasts partially exposed. In the Review version (below right - clearly intended to represent the drawing in Scriven's report) the woman appears clean of coal-dust and is holding her exposed breast in a provocative manner: her breeches were also drawn shorter (Figure 5).

The widespread reports of indecency which emerged from the investigation of 1840-42 did not pass without criticism from Lord Londonderry, whose collieries employed no women.

39 Scriven noted in his report: 'I visited this pit ... and saw the girl above alluded to ascend the pit in the manner described, viz. across the lap of the boy. She appeared about 15 years of age ... I was perfectly shocked at her style of dress'. (P.P. 1842, XVII), p. 103; One of the surgeons, James Holroyd, had, at the instigation of Lord Ashley, assisted William Dodd (the famous 'factory cripple') on his investigative tour of the Halifax factory district in November 1841. Dodd, *The Factory System Illustrated*, pp. 148-49; The 1841 census gives girl's age as 14, PRO.HO107/1299.

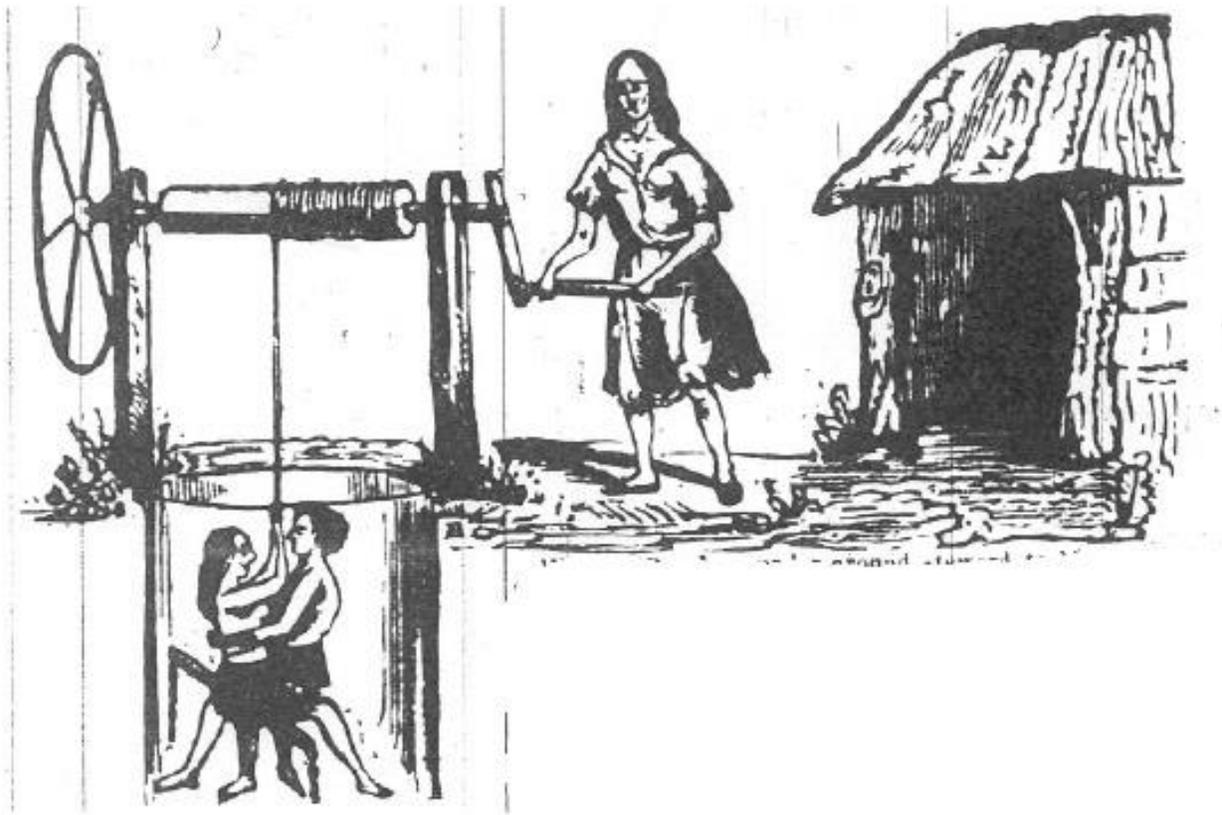
40 "A boy and a girl face one another, holding a rope and sitting astride of a pole or plank which is fastened to the end of it. Close above them, probably somewhat nearer in the sketch than in real life, is an old woman turning the handle of the winch which is hoisting them to the upper air". Clapham, *Economic History*, p. 433; see also the brief discussion by John, *Sweat of their Brow*.

41 The drawing has frequently been used in modern textbooks to demonstrate the nature of child labour in nineteenth-century coal mining. For example, see the cover of Henriques, *Early Factory Acts*, Allen, *Victorian Children*, p. 35 and Aylett, *In Search of History*, p. 19. Source: Greg, W.R., 'Protection of children in mines and collieries', *Westminster Review*, vol. 38, July 1842, p. 104.

42 *Halifax Guardian*, 14, 21, 28 May and 11 June 1842, p. 2; *Bradford Herald*, 19, 26 May and 2, 16 June 1842.

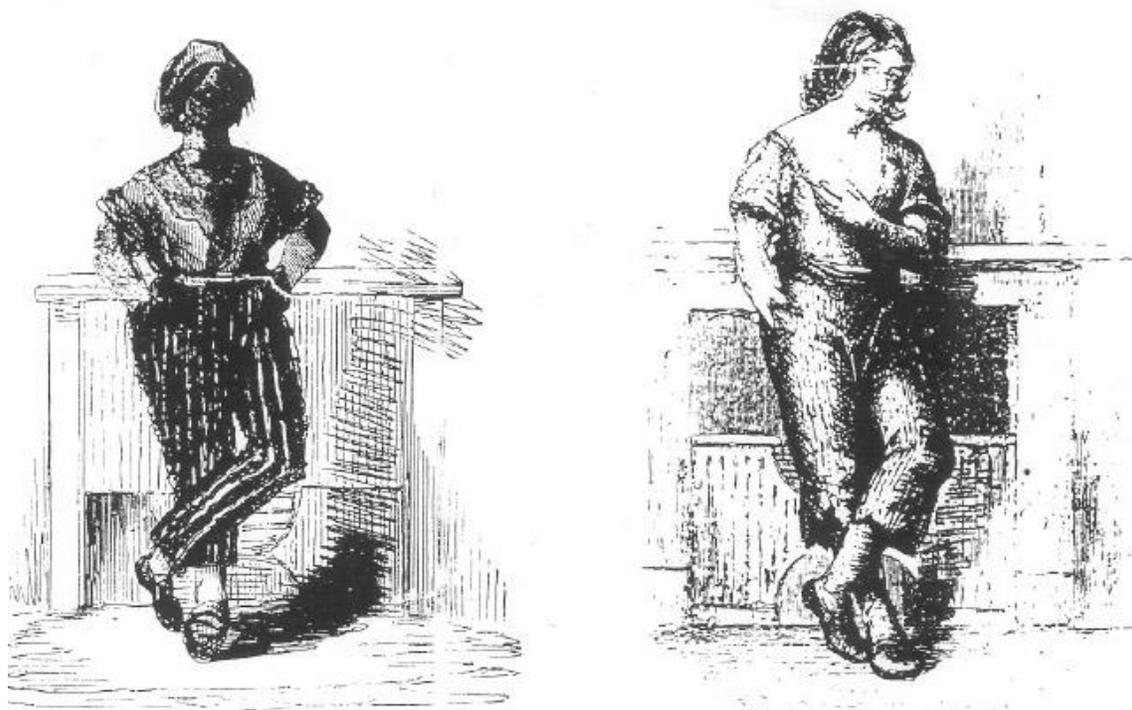
43 (P.P. 1842, XVII) p. 74; Greg, 'Protection of children in mines and collieries', p. 123.

Figure 4. Ann Ambler and William Dyson



Source: Halifax Guardian, 21st May, 1842, p.5.

Figure 5. Female Miners



Sources: P.P. 1842, XVII, p. 74; Greg, 'Protection of Children in Mines and Collieries', p. 123.

He protested at the illustrations, claiming them to be “pictures of an extravagant and disgusting, and in some cases of a scandalous and obscene character ... not such as should have been adopted in a grave publication ... more calculated to excite the feelings than to enlighten the judgement”.⁴⁴ He claimed that a “mania” concerning the issue of children and women in coal mines had arisen from “the exaggerated report of the commissioners, and the disgusting pictorial woodcuts with which they had embellished their report. These prints were seen in the salons of the capital [and] the ladies were all enlisted in the cause of their own sex, thus represented in so brutal a manner”.⁴⁵

A West Riding coal-master claimed that miners attended to their work with imagination rather less susceptible of evil from the want of clothing than those of the gentlemen Commissioners... behind that ragged attire, there often existed a degree of virtue and even modesty.. and yet these gentlemen presume to compare the conduct of these people, where deficiency of dress is occasioned by force of circumstance ... to the frequenters of brothels.⁴⁶

Reviewing a book claiming both prostitution and murder in coal mines, the Literary Gazette commented: “In these times of apathy, it may perhaps be necessary to get up excitement by such expedients as the disgusting cuts of naked men, women, and children in every shape of indecent exposure; but to our minds it would have been better, and more rational, to have addressed the sense of the public, and not its passions, which can be stirred by such means equally in a bad as in a good cause ... we confess that we think too much fuss has been made about the scanty dress of the females... if not a fashionable ball-room, at any rate the Opera stage, might furnish the moralist with quite as startling topics for descant and reprobation”.⁴⁷

Despite the sub-commissioners’ exaggeration of its sexual implications, there appears to have been little shame attached by miners to the practice of working naked. Indeed, the sub-commissioners’ questioning on the matter was often the cause of amusement. When asked about nudity among miners, a 38 year-old Lancashire woman claimed audaciously: “I remember seeing a man who worked stark naked, and we would not go near him: we used to throw coals at him.”⁴⁸

Jonathan Presto, a Somersetshire coal miner who began work as a pushing-boy in 1864 at the age of twelve, described in his autobiography the working attire in his pit: “The carting boys ... take off their boots ... and waistcoat and shirt, and there they are with nothing on but their hat”.⁴⁹

44 Hansard (Lords), 24 June, 1842, Vol. LXIV, col.539.

45 Vane, A Letter to Lord Ashley on the Mines and Collieries Bill, p. 29. Cited in Heesom, 'The Coal Mines Act of 1842', p. 71.

46 Leeds Mercury, 18 June 1842.

47 Literary Gazette, 9 July 1842, p. 1.

48 (P.P. 1842, XVII), p. 214.

49 Presto (Pseudonym of Charles Challenger), *Five Years of Colliery Life*, p. 21.

It was suggested to Kennedy in Lancashire that there was “a great deal of fashion in the habit” or that “it was inconvenient to work with clothes on, as clothes are apt to get into creases and chafe the skin”. The attire of the miners at the 'Strip-and-at-it Pit' in the Forest of Dean, meanwhile, leaves little to the imagination.⁵⁰

Nakedness was a condition to which most children of miners were accustomed and it was commonplace for coalminers to wash quite openly on their return home. The 'miner's bath' brought children into contact regularly with naked adult family members long before they commenced underground labour. As Hair pointed out, most pitmen in the North East in the 1840s were regularly washed down by their wives, and in his 1856 book, John Leifchild observed: “Upon their entrance into their little cottages they ... proceed to strip and wash themselves, which, from the secluded character of the colliery villages, they see no harm in performing somewhat openly”.⁵¹ There is some evidence, too, that an awareness of underground nudity formed part of children’s play in mining communities.

A Lancashire underlooker recalled that as a boy of six, he and other drawers had found themselves alone in a pit whereupon they began to imitate the hewers: “we set to a-getting coals for our amusement, stark naked; and the girls were stripped too ... Some of the girls were 16 and some of them younger”.⁵² It is doubtful, however, whether it would have been practical or safe to work, as was suggested by some of the Commission woodcuts, without boots. In a letter to the Mining Journal, a Welsh collier doubted how “any collier, if a sane man, could think of working underground perfectly naked... I have worked myself, for years together, with only a cap on my head, a pair of small-clothes, or trousers, on, and a pair of strong nailed shoes, which constituted the whole of my dress when at work underground, and, setting decency aside, I could not, under any circumstances, have done without.” (Figure 6)⁵³

Revelations of underground nakedness were almost certainly less sinister than was implied in the reports of some of the sub-commissioners. Indeed, the drawings generally suggest that the prevalence of underground nudity was greatest at the most secluded parts of the mine: among the hewers, at the coal-face where the effects of heat and hard labour were at their most intense. In those cases, almost all were depicted naked (Figure 7). The drawings of the more densely populated workings, however, usually show the younger haulage workers either fully- or partially-clothed. Moreover, although child haulage workers might, in the course of their labour, collect coal from a hewer, that hewer was frequently a father or a brother.

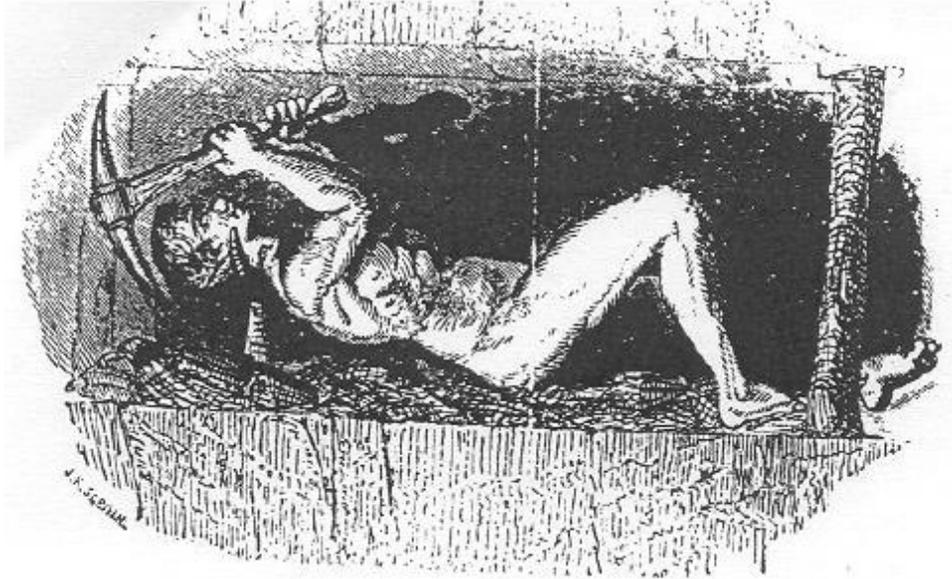
50 At one wet Lancashire pit, it was claimed that, 'The children have flannel dresses to go down in, which are pulled off and put in a dry place near the eye of the pit, and they work nearly naked'. (P.P. 1842, XVII), p. 159; (P.P. 1842, XVII), pp. 813, 201; Only at one north-east pit (Shilbottle) were men said to have worked 'completely naked'. (P.P. 1842, XVI), p. 525; (P.P. 1842, XV), p. 182.

51 Hair, *Social History*, p. 162; Gateshead Observer, 30 Aug. 1849; Leifchild, *Our coal and our coal pits*, p. 193. The 1989 edition of Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* contains a photograph of a miner being washed by his wife.

52 (P.P. 1842, XVII), pp. 813.

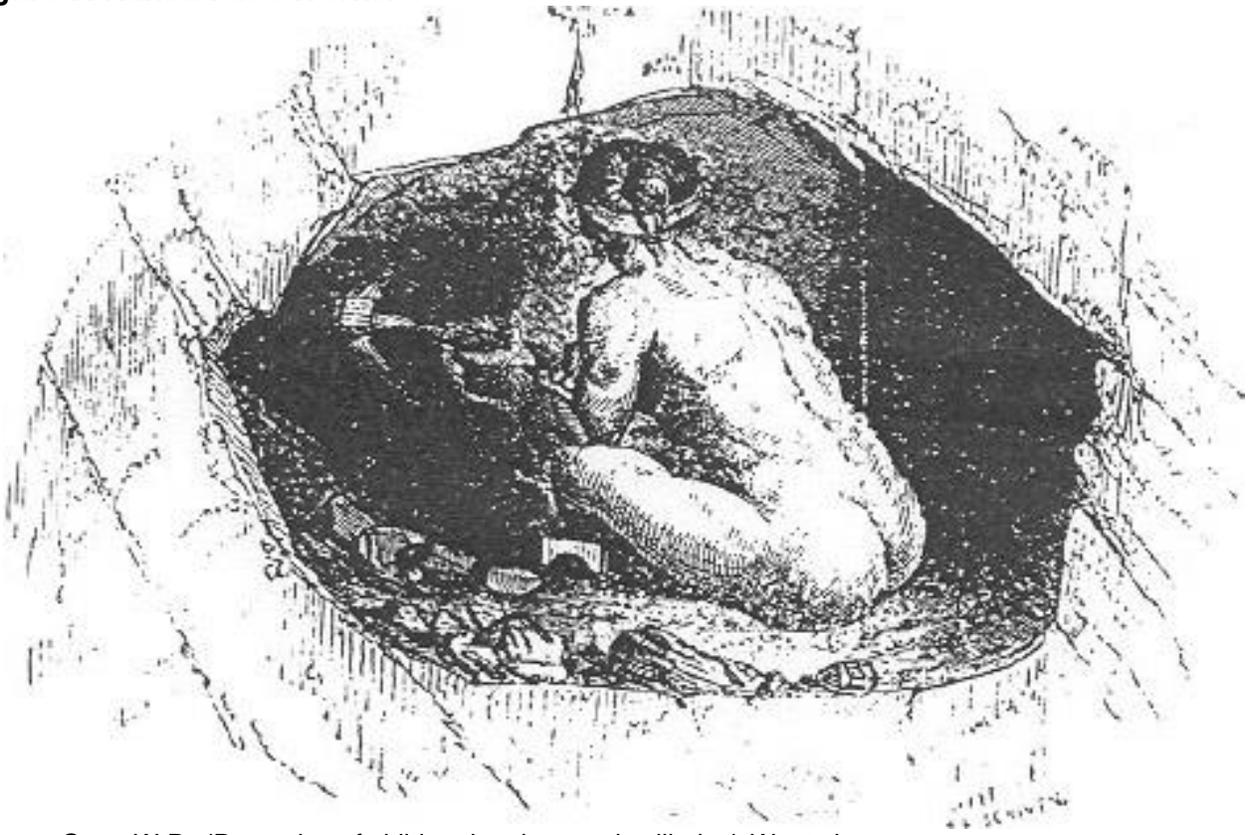
53 'A Collier', *Mining Journal*, 23 July 1842, vol.XII, p. 237.

Figure 6. Naked Miner Working Without Boots



Source: Greg, W.R., 'Protection of children in mines and collieries', Westminster Review, vol. 38, July 1842, p. 120.

Figure 7. Naked Face Worker



Source: Greg, W.R., 'Protection of children in mines and collieries', Westminster Review, vol. 38, July 1842, p. 121.

Accounts of underground promiscuity among coalminers, therefore, probably resulted as much from imagination and gossip as from the reporting of actual events. Even before their

prohibition from pits, girls did not commonly work below ground after puberty because, as a male miner from Yorkshire modestly explained: "Girls ought not to remain longer than 13, because there are things which make it improper afterwards. It is wrong for girls to come among naked folk after that".⁵⁴ If a degree of underground nakedness was more or less accepted by colliers and their families in the 1840s, this did little to prevent the reformers using such reports as a powerful propaganda weapon. "No brothel can beat it", claimed Symons, with reference to the situation in west Yorkshire mines. The comparison with a brothel was used to great effect by Lord Ashley in moving the Bill in 1842 to prohibit women and children from mines.⁵⁵

54 (P.P. 1842, XVI), p. 279.

55 (P.P. 1842, XVI), p. 181; Cooper, Speeches of the Earl of Shaftesbury, 7 June 1842, p. 31.

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