

## Women in Mines

In some areas of the country, women and young girls worked underground whereas in other areas they were only expected to work on surface. It could be argued that this was even more arduous as they had to work in all weathers.

Several government reports were made by the Victorians. It is interesting to note that most of the investigators were more concerned at the 'moral danger' to young girls than the fact that they were being asked to work underground at all! Certainly a sign of the times when life was cheap. An extract from the *Children's Employment Commission of 1841* gives an indication of the type of work women and girls did on surface in Shropshire.

"... The wagons are pushed by men to a part of the pit-bank, and emptied out. Here may be seen at all seasons of the year a number of young women and girls breaking up the pieces of clod and gathering out the pennystone and putting it in baskets as they are called but which are small vessels made of iron, when one of these is filled a girl, with the assistance of another girl, takes it upon her head and carries it and empties out the ironstone into a large heap in a place by itself where it lies exposed to the sun and air.

In cold weather the young women and girls are clothed in warm flannel dresses and great coats like those of men, with handkerchiefs round their necks, with hats or bonnets on their heads and seem to be comfortably protected from the weather. They are always smiling, laughing, and singing and when observed at their work manifest a consciousness of how well they would appear if in better attire.

The employment seems very healthy, being light and in the open air. It has been stated by one medical gentleman that the loads which they took upon their heads were too heavy for them and caused injury but if so that might easily be remedied by giving to the smaller girls baskets of a less size and, besides this, it is their own fault if they load them more than they find agreeable. Young women at this employment earn about 8s. a-week.

An old miner .... stated that he considered that young women on the banks led a far happier life than servants in a gentleman's family and would make far better wives for miners. They had their own liberty after their day's work and on Sundays they might dress in the morning and go about where they pleased. They were not spoiled, like women in a gentleman's family, by seeing extravagance which a miner could not afford. Their notions of things agreed better with those of the miner and when they married they studied economy and if they had no families they would go out to the bank to work without a murmur. In all this it is very probable that the old miner was right.

Many of the young women who work on the banks in Shropshire come up to London in the month of May, and go for about three months into the service of the market gardeners, being employed at first in weeding, and afterwards in carrying vegetables, strawberries, and other descriptions of fruit to market. They are reputed to be very economical, and to make a great deal of money, which they bring back with them into Shropshire."

The following extracts from *Parliamentary Papers of 1842* give an insight into working conditions for women in other parts of the country.

"... In England, it is only in some of the colliery districts of Yorkshire and Lancashire that female children of tender age and young and adult women are allowed to descend into the coal mines and regularly to perform the same kinds of underground work, and to work for the same number of hours, as boys and men; but in the East of Scotland their employment in the pits is general; and in South Wales it is not uncommon.

*West Riding of Yorkshire: Southern Part* - In many of the collieries in this district, as far as relates to the underground employment, there is no distinction of sex, but the labour is distributed indifferently among both sexes, except that it is comparatively rare for the women to hew or get the coals, although there are numerous instances in which they regularly perform even this work. In great numbers of the coalpits in this district 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.

Girls regularly perform all the various offices of trapping, hurrying (Yorkshire terms for drawing the loaded coal corves), filling, riddling, tipping, and occasionally getting, just as they are performed by boys. One of the most disgusting sights I have ever seen was that of young females, dressed like boys in trousers, crawling on all fours, with belts round their waists and chains passing between their legs, at day pits at Hunshelf Bank, and in many small pits near Holmfirth and New Mills: it exists also in several other places. I visited the Hunshelf Colliery: it is a day pit; that is, there is no shaft or descent; the gate or entrance is at the side of a bank, and nearly horizontal. The gate was not more than a yard high, and in some places not above 2 feet.

When I arrived at the board or workings of the pit I found at one of the sideboards down a narrow passage a girl of fourteen years of age in boy's clothes, picking down the coal with the regular pick used by the men. She was half sitting half lying at her work, and said she found it tired her very much, and 'of course she didn't like it.' The place where she was at work was not 2 feet high. Further on were men lying on their sides and getting. No less than six girls out of eighteen men and children are employed in this pit.

We saw another girl of ten years of age, also dressed in boy's clothes, who was employed in hurrying. She was a nice-looking little child, but of course as black as a tinker, and with a little necklace round her throat. In a pit near New Mills, the chain, passing high up between the legs of two of these girls, had worn large holes in their trousers; and any sight more disgustingly indecent or revolting can scarcely be imagined than these girls at work - no brothel can beat it.

On descending Messrs Hopwood's pit at Barnsley, I found assembled round 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 (at Silkstone and Flockton they work in their shifts and trousers). Their sex was

recognisable only by their breasts, and 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.

In the Flockton and Thornhill pits the system is even more indecent: for 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: I have seen this done myself frequently.

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 (the bank face), 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, where the corves are brought, 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 we above ground to equal."

The following extracts are from the same source and are from actual interviews.

"... I work from 6 in the morning to 6 at night. Stop about an hour at noon to eat my dinner; have bread and butter for dinner; I get no drink. I worked at drawing when I was in the family way. I know a woman who has gone home and washed herself, taken to her bed, delivered of a child, and gone to work again under the week."

#### Testimony of 17 year old Patience Kershaw in 1842

It's good of you to ask me,  
Sir, to tell you how I spend my days  
Down in a coal black tunnel, Sir,  
I hurry corves to earn my pay.  
The corves are full of coal, kind Sir,  
I push them with my hands and head.  
It isn't lady-like, but Sir,  
you've got to earn your daily bread.

I push them with my hands and head,  
and so my hair gets worn away.  
You see this baldy patch I've got,  
it shames me like I just can't say.  
A lady's hands are lily white,  
but mine are full of cuts and segs.  
And since I'm pushing all the time,  
I've got great big muscles on my legs.

I try to be respectable, but sir,  
the shame, God save my soul.  
I work with naked, sweating men  
who curse and swear and hew the coal.

The sights, the sounds, the smells, kind Sir,  
not even God could know my pain.  
I say my prayers, but what's the use?  
Tomorrow will be just the same.

Now, sometimes, Sir, I don't feel well,  
my stomach's sick, my head it aches.  
I've got to hurry best I can.  
My knees are weak, my back near breaks.  
And then I'm slow, and then I'm scared  
these naked men will batter me.  
But they're not to blame, for if I'm slow,  
their families will starve, you see.

Now all the lads, they laugh at me,  
and Sir, the mirror tells me why.  
Pale and dirty can't look nice.  
It doesn't matter how hard I try.  
Great big muscles on my legs,  
a baldy patch upon my head.  
A lady, Sir? Oh, no, not me!  
I should've been a boy instead.

I praise your good intentions, Sir,  
I love your kind and gentle heart  
But now it's 1842,  
and you and I, we're miles apart.  
A hundred years and more will pass  
before we're standing side by side  
But please accept my grateful thanks.  
God bless you Sir, at least you tried.