

Mining - Children in the Mines – Useful Reports & Sources

“These doors are called trap-doors, and the children so employed trappers...the employment being one of the most monotonous and deadening to all the mental and physical powers of a young child which can well be conceived. The trapper has to sit, often exposed to damp, completely in the dark, and in silence, from the time the coal begins to be brought forward by the drawers till the last whirley has passed, cheered only by the occasional gleam of a lamp from a passing whirley, or a few words from the drawers.”

Children in Mines and Collieries, 1839, p38

“The little trapper of eight years of ages lies quiet in bed...It is now between two and three in the morning, and his mother shakes him, and desires him to rise, and tells him that his father has an hour ago gone off to the pit..He turns on his side, rubs his eyes, and gets up, and comes to the blazing fire, and puts on his clothes. His coffee, such as it is, stands by the side of the fire, and bread is laid down for him...He then fills his tin bottle with coffee, and takes a lump of bread, and sets out for the pit, into which he goes down with the cage, and walking along the horseway for upwards of a mile...He knows his place of work. It is inside one of the doors called trap-doors, for the purpose of forcing the stream of air, which passes in its long, many miled course from the down shaft to the up-shaft of the pit; but which door must be opened whenever men or boys, with or without carriages, may wish to pass through. He seats himself in a little hole, about the size of a common fire-place, and with the string in his hand: and all his work is to pull that string when he has to open the door, and when man or boy has passed through, then to allow the door to shut itself...He may not stir above a dozen steps with safety from his charge, lest he should be found neglecting his duty, and suffer for the same. He sits solitary by himself, and has no one to talk to him;...For he himself has no light. His hours, except at such times, are passed in total darkness. For the first week of his service in the pit his father had allowed him candles to light one after another, but the expense of three halfpence a-day was so extravagant expenditure out of tenpence, the boy’s daily wages, that his father, of course, withdrew that allowance the second week, all except one or two candles in the morning, and the week after the allowance was altogether taken away; and now, except a neighbour kinder than his father now and then drop him a candle, as he passes, the boy has no light of his own.”

from Dr Mitchell’s report of the Collieries of South Wales, Children in Mines and Collieries, 1839, p38-39

Philip Phillips, nine years old:

“Began work when seven years old. Has often fallen asleep when tired. Runs home and gets bread and cheese. Was burnt by the fire-damp nine months since, and laid by five months, expected to die. When the accident took place, some men were in the mine; one had gone into the old work. The men were first burned. I was carried home by a man; the fire hurt me very badly; it took the skin from my face. Have returned to work three months. Father is a carpenter. Mother has eight children, three out at work (Face quite disfigured).”

from Mr Kennedy’s report of the Collieries of South Wales, Children in Mines and Collieries, 1839, p41

John Hawkins, eight years of age

“Has worked in Sissons Pit a year and a half; lives a mile from the pit; and goes down from five to nine; that is, the child, eight years old, is employed in the pit at work from five o’clock in the morning to nine at night, a period of sixteen hours.”

from Mr Leifchild’s report of the Collieries of South Wales, Children in Mines and Collieries, 1839 p55

“That man must have strong nerves who for the first time descends a deep shaft, probably much deeper than St Paul’s Cathedral is high, without some degree of uncomfortable sensation. To a young child it is often cruelly frightful. It is difficult to describe the impression of dark confinement and damp discomfort conveyed by a colliery, at first sight. The springs which generally ooze through the best-cased shafts, trickle down its sides, and keep up a perpetual drizzle below. The chamber or area at the bottom of the shaft is almost always sloppy and muddy, and the escape from it consists in a labyrinth of black passages, often not above four feet square, and seldom exceeding five by six.”

Mr Symons, describing a Yorkshire coal field from Children in Mines and Collieries, 1839, p8

“...that it can scarcely be said to be an uncommon occurrence for a child to work at the early age of five years and a half – this is the youngest age at which I myself have found any employed;”

Mr Franks, report of the Collieries of South Wales, Children in Mines and Collieries, 1839, p20

“My youngest boy, Lewis, was taken down at five years and three months old, and has been down ever since”

Mrs Mary Lewis, taken from Mr Franks, report of the Collieries of South Wales, p20

“I have been down about three years. When I first went down, I couldn’t keep my eyes open; I don’t fall asleep now; I smokes my pipe; smokes half a quarter a-week”

William Richards, aged seven and a half, Buttery Hatch Colliery taken from Mr Franks, report of the Collieries of South Wales, p20

“William Richards, aged twelve, coal-cutter: “Works with his father. Has been at work ever since he was four years old. Was taken to work by his father, because times were poor, and he was worth an extra tram”. A tram or dram is the privilege of a cart of coal, as additional work.

from Mr Franks, report of the Collieries of South Wales, Children in Mines and Collieries, 1839, p20

“They went themselves into the coalpit so early, that they do not know their own duties. If there be justice for colliers’ children, as for factory children, God send it!”

from Mr Franks, report of the Collieries of South Wales, Children in Mines and Collieries, 1839, p21

“instances appear, however, by no means rare, where infants of of six and even five years of age, are taken to attend the trap-doors, and often at seven or eight to assest an elder child in pushing the wagons. In all instances, the children remain as many hours, and not unfrequently more, in thepits than the adults. The reasons for the infliction of this cruel incarceration of very young children may be summer up – 1st. In the assertion that unless early inured to the work and its terrors, the child would neer make a collier. 2nd. That the think coal pits could not possibly be worked with a profit otherwise; as after a certain age, the vertebrae of the back do not so easily conform to the required posture. 3rdly That their parents cannot afford to keep them idle. It is universally remarked that the parents themselves bring their children at their early age of their own accord, and are frequently checked by benevolent employers.”

from Mr Franks, report of the Collieries of South Wales, Children in Mines and Collieries, 1839, p21

Speaking in general terms the work in a colliery is divisible, first, into that of getting or hewing the coal; and secondly, into that of conveying it from where it is got to the pit's mouth. In the former species of work, adults, and in the latter, children are for the most part employed.

The occupations of the coal workers may be thus classified:-

1. Holers, Miners or Getters, as they are variously called
2. Hurriers, Pullers, Pushers, Drawers, Wagoners, Helpers, Thrutchers, Carriers, or Thrusters
3. Hookers-on
4. Air-door Tenders or Trappers
5. Pony-drivers

Children in Mines and Collieries, 1839, p36

Mr Franks gives the case of William Woods, aged fourteen, who was a coal hewer in the east of Scotland:-

“I have been three years below; I hew the coal and draw it to the pit bottom. Was obliged to go, as father could work no longer; he is upwards of sixty. I gang at three in the morning, and return about six, it is no very good work, and the sore labour makes me feel very ill and fatigued; it injures my breath. We have no regular meal-times; food is not safe in the pit. The lads and lassies take oat-pieces and bread below; we drink the water sometimes; get other food at home, sometimes broth, potatoes, and herrings...”

“I examined this boy on the Saturday, at a cottage near the pit” says Mr Franks, *“and the state of exhaustion he was in can scarcely be imagined; his appearance bespoke great neglect and poverty”*.

Children in Mines and Collieries, 1839, p36