

Background Information:

Working Conditions in 19th Century Mines



The early 1800s saw great changes in people's working lives, People moved away from earning their living in farming and towards industrial work. This period is commonly known as the Industrial Revolution. It was usual for children from poor families to start work very young.

Many industries grew quickly as owners of businesses and factories pushed their work force to improve their profits so that the business could continue to expand. This added to dangers in the workplace, but some industries were already very risky. This was especially true in the case of coal mining.

Work in Mines

The owners of coal mines needed a work force that would produce coal as cheaply as possible. A miner was paid according to how much coal he produced, *not* how many hours he worked. Some miners would take their whole families underground to try to get as much coal as possible, so they could earn more money. Each member of the family would be given a different job to do which would help the miner to get as much coal as possible.

Working Families

A family would often rent a place to live from the mine owner. This meant that the mine owner would pay the family for mining coal, but take back some of the money as rent for the house. Large families might live in just two rooms with few possessions.



Image of a miners cottage on the site of Caphouse Colliery, taken in the early 1900s.

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APPENDIX H.

TABLE OF WAGES AND CONSUMPTION OF FOOD for Eight Weeks in the Families of Six Colliers in Flockton, a parish in Yorkshire chiefly composed of Colliers.

Employment.	Wages per Week.	Rent of House.	Number of Rooms.	Size of House.	Beds.	Ventilation of Rooms.	Furniture.	Books.	Garden.	Remarks.		
Collier In Land in Harvest	£. s. d. 0 14 8 0 6 1	s. 1	Kitchen Back ditto 2 Chambers	ft. ft. 4 by 5 3 by 3½ 4 by 5	3 very good; hung in winter	Excellent; thorough draught	5 Tables Clock Arm-chair Chairs	Delf-case, with abundance of Cooking utensils.	4 Bibles 2 Testaments 2 Hymn-Books Common Prayer Herbal Book Barbauld's Hymns	Dr. Channing's Catechism Questions on the New Testament Common Prayer	Beautiful order, 18 yds. by 7 yds.	This person is a steady man; delicate from asthma; has worked with on master 30 years.
Hurrier Hurrier At School ..	0 7 0 0 5 6 1 13 3	Per Week.					This house uniformly clean. The owner and his children can read and write, and regularly attend public worship. Their food consists of milk and water, with bread to breakfast; meat and potatoes to dinner. Breakfast at 6; dinner from 2 to 5; a little bread between. Killed a pig in the winter weighing 10 stones. Window curtains both to upper and lower rooms. This family dress very well.					
			Butter . s. d. Coffee . 0 3 Tea . 0 7½ Sugar . 1 0	Coals . s. d. Meat . 2 6 Wheatmeal 6 2	Oatmeal . s. d. Malt . 2 1 Potatoes . 0 8							

Excerpt from a table of information about miners living in Flockton, from the Children's Employment Commission (Mines), published in 1842.

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Work would start early, so the family would need to get up very early in the morning. Many families worked for up to 12 hours each day, and for 6 days a week. The only days off would be Sundays and holy-days like Christmas or Easter. Some mine owners might have given their workers a day off on the day of Queen Victoria's Coronation.

Children who attended Sunday school might receive basic training on the alphabet, counting and bible stories, but this would be their only education.

Families walked to the pit-head, which could be several miles away. When they arrived at the mine, they might be lowered into the pit on the end of a rope in total darkness.

At the pit-bottom the workers had to walk to the coal face, which might be quite a distance. The underground roadways were usually narrow, uneven and low. There was no light, except for the miners' candles.

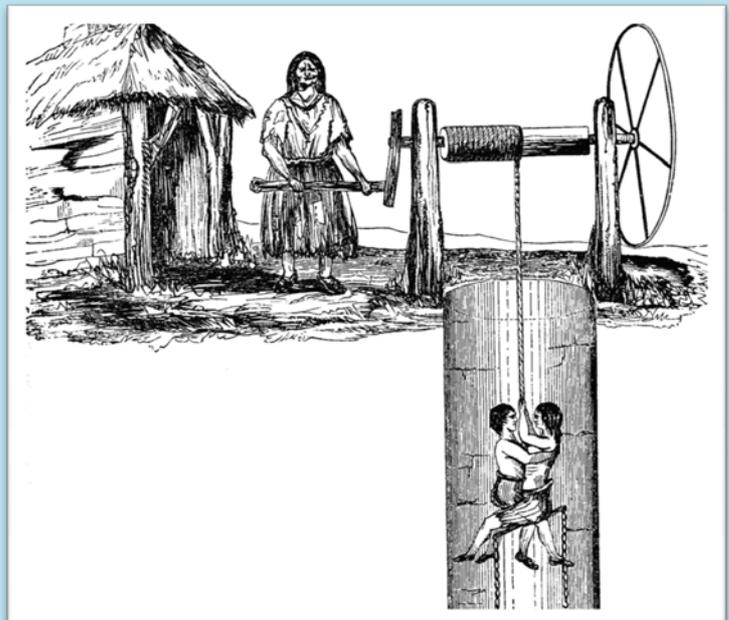


Image from the Children's Employment Commission (Mines).
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Conditions Underground

When working underground, conditions for all the workers were difficult and dangerous. Mines are completely dark; there is no light at all. Tallow candles, made from animal fat, were the cheapest light available. Miners had to buy their own.

Conditions were cramped. Some of the underground roadways were as little as 60 – 120 cm in height. Mine owners did not want to increase their costs by making them bigger. So small children were often used to pull or push tubs or large baskets of coal on sleds along the low and narrow roadways.

Some mines were very hot and wet, or hot and dusty. Dust was formed as stone and coal were worked by pick. Poor ventilation meant that the dust stayed in the air underground. In some mines, it was so hot that workers wore little or no clothing whilst they worked. It would feel even hotter if the ventilation was poor.

Water is always present in coal mines, as it seeps through the rocks above and gathers in underground reservoirs or old workings. Flooding was always a possibility and an ever present fear.

Rats and mice were known to live in coal mines, though pits generally had one or the other. They were especially common in mines that employed horses and ponies, as the bedding and food for the ponies also provided food for the rodents. Rats and mice would also eat crumbs or scraps dropped by miners.

Cause of Death.	Under 13 years of age.	13 and not exceeding 18 years of age.	Above 18 years of age.
Fell down the shafts	13	16	31
Fell down the shaft from the rope breaking . .	1	..	2
Fell out when ascending . . . . .	..	..	3
Drawn over the pulley	3	..	3
Fall of stone out of a skip down the shaft . .	1	..	3
Drowned in the mines	3	4	15
Fall of stones, coal, and rubbish in the mines .	14	14	69
Injuries in coal-pits, the nature of which is not specified	6	3	32
Crushed in coal-pits . . . . .	..	1	1
Explosion of gas	13	18	49
Suffocated by choke-damp . . . . .	..	2	6
Explosion of gunpowder . . . . .	..	1	3
By tram-waggons	4	5	12
Total	58	62	229

Table listing numbers of deaths of people working in a coal mine by various causes, from the Children's Employment Commission (Mines), published in 1842.
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The cramped conditions made accidents and injuries a common occurrence, with roof-falls one of the most likely causes of injury or death. Shaft accidents were also common, while mine gases could cause explosions or poison the workers.



further reading

Fact

Devlin,R., 1988. *Children in the Pit* (The Friends of Whitehaven Museum).

Gallop,A., 2010. *Victoria's Children of the Dark* (The History Press).

Hannavy,J., 2009. *The Victorians and Edwardians at work* (Shire).

NCMME Resource pack, *Victorian Workers and Child Labour* (NCMME).

Fiction

Preece, R., 1992. *Danger in the Dark* (NCMME).



museum links

Find out more about the working conditions of miners and their families in the 1800s on site at the Museum, in the 1842 Gallery and on the underground tour.

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