

2 LONELY LITTLE TRAPPERS

It is almost superfluous to state, that on the proper ventilation of air the lives of the miners depend. The ventilation again depends entirely on the trap-doors being kept shut and on their being properly closed immediately after the carriages conveying the coal have passed them.

The youngest children in the mines are intrusted with this important office! They are called trappers. Their duty consists in sitting in a little hole, scooped out for them in the side of the gates behind each door, where they sit with a string in their hands attached to the door, and pull it the moment they hear the corves (i.e. the carriages for conveying the coal) at hand, and the moment it has passed they let the door fall to, which it does of its own weight. If anything impedes the shutting of the door they remove it, or, if unable to do so, run to the nearest man to do it for them. They have nothing else to do; but, as their office must be performed from the repassing of the first to the passing of the last corve during the day, they are in the pit the whole time it is worked, frequently about 12 hours a day. They sit, moreover, in the dark, often with a damp floor to stand on, and exposed necessarily to drafts, though I have seldom found the temperature lower at their posts than 58°, and often higher.

The ages of these children vary from 5½ to 10 years old; few come before they are nearly seven, and few remain longer than 9 or 10. There is no hard work for these children to do,—nothing can be easier; but it is a most painful thing to contemplate the dull dungeon-like life these little creatures are doomed to spend; a life, for the most part, passed in solitude, damp, and darkness. They are allowed no light; but sometimes a good-natured collier will bestow a little bit of candle on them as a treat.

Royal Commission, 1842

3 'I DAREN'T SING IN THE DARK'

Sarah Gooder, age 8: I'm a trapper in the Gawber pit. It does not tire me, but I have to trap without a light, and I'm scared. Sometimes I sing when I have a light, but not in the dark; I dare not sing then. I don't like being in the pit.

I go to Sunday-schools and read Reading made Easy. (She knows her letters and can read little words.) They teach me to pray. (She repeated the Lord's Prayer, not very perfectly, and ran on with the following addition bless my father and mother, and sister and brother, uncles and aunts and cousins, and everybody else, and God bless me and make me a good servant. Amen.'). I have heard tell of Jesus many a time. I don't know why he came to earth, I'm sure, and I don't know why he died, but he had stones for his head to rest on. I would like to be at school far better than in the pit.

Royal Commission, 1842

4 HER LAMP HAD GONE OUT

Mary Davis, near seven years old, keeper of an air-door in a pit in South Wales, was described by Sub-Commissioner Franks as, 'A very pretty little girl, who was fast asleep under a piece of rock near the air-door below ground. Her lamp had gone out for want of oil; and upon waking her, she said the rats or some one had run away with her bread and cheese, so she went to sleep. The overman, who was with me, thought she was not so old, though he felt sure she had been below near 18 months.'

5 LITTLE BOY LOST

I imagine one of the first questions an anxious mother would ask would be, 'Is there not a great danger of link boys of ten years of age being lost in the passages of the dark mine?'

Formerly there was great danger of this kind, with very little boys, under ten, or even eight years old. But, on the whole, very few cases of this kind have occurred in the northern pits. The trappers are stationary, and if found away from their doors are thumped and threatened. Many sit there, too, in fear of the hobgoblins to be met with in the pit; and the reputation of hobgoblins is sustained for their good behaviour. Some friend, if not the father, takes them to the door, and probably comes for them at 'kenner' or 'lose' time.

Very recently a little boy was lost in one of the Welsh pits. His name was William Withers, and on a Friday morning he went to work with his father as usual. On arriving at the pit, he found that he had forgotten his lamp, and returned for the purpose of getting it, intending to follow his father into the mine. As he, however, proceeded along the sub-terranean road, he lost his light, and as a consequence his way, and wandered into some old works. From that time till Monday morning he was not seen or heard of. He was then found by the hauliers in a very weak state, and taken home ...

His own account is as follows:— 'After I lost my light, I found that I was lost, and in a strange road. I could hear my father at work all Friday, I knocked the side, and made as much noise as I possibly could, but no one answered me. They all went out that night, leaving me there; I cried very much. I thought I saw the stars two or three times, although I was 100 yards under ground. I saved my dinner as much as I could, only eating a bit at a time, not knowing whether I should ever be found. The pit broke (work) on Saturday morning, so there was no work until Monday morning. The whole time I had been wandering about in the dark, when I heard the hauliers, and I made my way to them. When asked what day it was, the poor little fellow did not know, but thought he had been lost seven or eight days.

J. R. Leifchild, *Our Coal Fields and Our Coal Pits* (1853)

6 THE BOY WHO STOLE A DINNER

There have been cases of the maltreatment of children in collieries brought before the magistrates—perhaps one or two a year. The maltreatment was always according to barbarous rules among the workers themselves, inflicting punishment on supposed delinquents, generally by holding the head fast between the legs of another, and inflicting each a certain number of blows on the bare posteriors with pieces of wood, called 'cuts', about a foot long and an inch in diameter, used as tokens to distinguish one man's tubs from another. However the one punished may cry, they stick to him; and in the last case, where a hungry lad had stolen a pit-dinner, they mangled his body seriously. In other cases the injured parties could not work at all for some time. In the case mentioned, the offenders were made to placard the town with an apology, to render some compensation in money to the party, and promise not to follow any such course in future.

Evidence of Joseph Wild, chief constable of Oldham, to the *Royal Commission, 1842*

7 VICIOUS-TEMPERED COLLIERS

The treatment [of children employed in coal mines] varies, not only in different pits, but according to the disposition of the men under whom each drawer works. That any harsh usage is contrary to the wish, and even the peremptory orders, of the proprietors and undertaken, is certainly the case in almost every pit; but the colliers are uneducated people, and are usually vicious in temper ... What passes under ground in the dark tunnels in which the people work is not known even to the underground overlooker; for the Children dare not complain, and he (the overlooker) can only be in one of the many burrows of which a coal-mine consists, and cannot hear what passes in the others.

A. Austin's report on the Lancashire coal-mines to the *Royal Commission*, 1842

8 THEY SOON GOT USED TO IT

When a child first goes into the pits [in North Wales] he is taken down by his father, or some friend who has employment in the work; he is usually put to keep an air-door, or to some light work. In examining the boys, few would own that they felt much fear or distress on entering the pits, and all say they very soon became used and reconciled to their work. They are for the most part children of colliers, and from infancy familiar with the idea of under-ground work, and anxious to go below and begin to work. This wish of course meets with no opposition from the parents, who, lured by the wages, are never backward in sending their children to the pits as soon as they can get them into employ, so that no sooner is a collier's son able to exert a little muscular force than he becomes an under-ground machine, destitute of the slightest mental cultivation.

Royal Commission, 1842

9 FOUR-YEAR-OLD MINER

There is evidence that some Children begin to work in the pits of the Coalbrook Dale district ... as early as six years of age. One instance, indeed, came under the observation of the Sub-Commissioner, in which a Child two years younger, that is, four years of age, was regularly taken into the pit by his father. 'This remarkable instance became known to me', says Dr Mitchell, 'when exploring the Hill's Lane Pit, belonging to the Madeley Wood Company ; the ground-bailiff, two charter-masters (the persons who contract to work the mines), and a labouring collier accompanied me. "I say, Jonas," said the ground-bailiff to one of the charter-masters, "there are very few Children working in this mine; I think we have none under ten or eleven." The collier immediately said, "Sir, my boy is only a little more than four." This was a very unseasonable interruption; and all that the ground-bailiff said was, "Well, I suppose that you take good care of him: you take him down and up when you go yourself".

Royal Commission, 1842

10 QUITE A CATCH !

Families of *boys* are, amongst pit-people, valuable property, on account of their earnings in the pits. A widow with a family of boys is considered a catch. I was told that such a widow was accosted by a suitor even at her husband's grave. Her reply was, 'You are too late: I am engaged. I accepted P-- before starting for the funeral!' J

J. R. Leifchild, *Our Coal Fields and Our Coal Pits* (1853)

11 THE PRICE OF A DRINK

Many a collier spends in drink what he has shut up a young child the whole week to earn in a dark corner as a trapper.

George Armitage, school-teacher and ex-colyer at Silkstone Pit, to the *Royal Commission*, 1842

12 'A VERY IGNORANT CHILD'

Susan Pitchforth, aged 11, living at Elland: I have worked at this pit going two years. Come to work at eight or before, but I set off from home at seven. I walk a mile and a half to my work, both in winter and summer. I get porridge for breakfast before I come, and bring my dinner with me—a muffin. When I have done about twelve loads I eat it while at work; I run 24 corves a day; I cannot come up till I have done them all. If I want to relieve myself I go into any part of the pit. Sometimes the boys see me when they go by. My father slaps me sometimes upon the head, or upon the back, so as to make me cry ...

A very ignorant child (commented Mr Striven, the Sub-Commissioner). 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, and saturated with water, from the chipping of the roof and shaft. During my examination of her the banksman whom I had left in the pit came to the public-house and 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.

Royal Commission, 1842

13 HIGHER THAN ST PAUL'S

Ellison Jack, 11-years-old girl coal-bearer at Loanhead colliery, Scotland:

I have been working below three years on my father's account; he takes me down at two in the morning, and I come up at one and two next afternoon. I go to bed at six at night to be ready for work next morning: the part of the pit I bear in the seams are much on the edge. I have to bear my burthen up four traps, or ladders, before I get to the main road which leads to the pit bottom. My task is four or five tubs: each tub holds 4¾ cwt. I fill five tubs in twenty journeys.

I have had the strap when I did not do my bidding. Am very glad when my task is wrought, as it sore fatigues. I can read, and was learning the writing; can do a little; not been at school for two years; go to kirk occasionally, over to Lasswade: don't know much about the Bible, so long since read.

R. H. Frank, Esq., the sub-commissioner: A brief description of this child's place of work will illustrate her evidence. She has first to descend a nine-ladder pit to the first rest, even to which a shaft is sunk, to draw up the baskets or tubs of coals filled by the bearers; she then takes her creel (a basket formed to the back, not unlike a cockle-shell flattened towards the neck, so as to allow lumps of coal to rest on the back of the neck and shoulders), and pursues her journey to the wall-face, or as it is

called here, the room of work. She then lays down her basket, into which the coal is rolled, and it is frequently more than one man can do to lift the burden on her back. The tugs or straps are placed over the forehead, and the body bent in a semicircular form, in order to stiffen the arch.

Large lumps of coal are then placed on the neck, and she then commences her journey with her burden to the pit bottom, first hanging her lamp to the cloth crossing her head. In this girl's case she has first to travel about 14 fathoms (84 feet) from wall-face to the first ladder, which is 18 feet high: leaving the first ladder she proceeds along the main road, probably 3 feet 6 inches to 4 feet 6 inches high, to the second ladder, 18 feet high, so on to the third and fourth ladders, till she reaches the pit-bottom, where she casts her load, varying from 1 cwt to 13 cwt., into the tub.

This one journey is designated a rake; the height ascended, and the distance along the roads added together, exceed the height of St Paul's Cathedral; and it not unfrequently happens that the tugs break, and the load falls upon those females who are following. However incredible it may be, yet I have taken the evidence of fathers who have ruptured themselves from straining to lift coal on their Children's backs

Royal Commission, 1842

14 'PERFECTLY BEAUTIFUL'

Margaret Leveson, 6 years old, coal-bearer in the East of Scotland coal-field; described by Mr Franks, the Sub-Commissioner, as 'a most interesting child, and perfectly beautiful'. She said: 'Been down at coal-carrying six weeks; makes ten to fourteen rakes [journeys] a day; carries full 56 lbs. of coal in a wooden backit [Scots for a shallow wooden trough]. The work is na guid; it is so very sair. I work with sister Jesse and mother; dinna ken the time we gang; it is gai dark.'

Royal Commission, 1842

15 'FATHER MAKES ME LIKE IT'

Janet Cumming, 11-years-old coal-bearer, East of Scotland oalfield: Works with father; has done so for two years:

Father gangs at 2 in the morning: I gang with the women at 5, and come up at 5 at night; work all night on Fridays, and come away at 12 in the day. I carry the large bits of coal from the wall-face to the pit-bottom, and the small pieces called chows, in a creel; the weight is usually a hundred-weight; does not know how many pounds there arc in the hundred-weight, but it is some work to carry; it takes three journeys to fill a tub of 4 cwt ... The roof is very low; I have to bend my back and legs, and the water comes frequently up to the calves of my legs; has no likening for the work; father makes me like it ... Never got hurt, but often obliged to scramble out when bad air was in the pit.

I am learning to read at the night-school; am in the twopenny book; sometimes to Sabbath-school. Jesus was God; David wrote the Bible; has a slight knowledge of the first six questions in the Shorter Catechism.

Royal Commission, 1842

16 LITTLE ANN AMBLER

We have but one girl working with us, by name Ann Ambler, who goes down with us on the clatch harness; she wears her breeches when she goes down, and while at work, and comes up the pit cross-lapped with us in the clutch harness; when she is down she hurries with us in the same way as we do, without shoes or stockings.

William Dyson, aged 14, employed in Messrs Ditchforth & Clay's colliery, Elland, Yorks; the sketch is intended to represent Ann Ambler and Will Dyson being drawn up cross-lapped upon the clatch-iron by a woman. As soon as they arrived at the top the handle was made fast ... the woman grasped a hand of both and by main force brought them to land.

Royal Commission, 1842

17 'A PICK IN MY BOTTOM'

Thomas Moorhouse, a collier boy: I don't know how old I am; father is dead; I am a chance child; mother is dead also; I don't know how long she has been dead; 'tis better na three years.

I began to hurry when I was 9 years old for William Greenwood; I was apprenticed to him till I should be 21 ... The overseers gave him a sovereign to buy clothes with, but he never laid it out ; I ran away from him because he lost my indentures, for he served me very bad; he struck a pick into me twice in my bottom. (Here I made the boy strip, and I found a large scar likely to have been occasioned by such an instrument ... There were twenty other wounds, occasioned by hurrying in low workings ..) He used to hit me with the belt, and mawl or sledge, and fling coals at me; he served me so bad that I left him, and went about to we if I could get a job.

I used to sleep in the cabins upon the pit's bank, and in the old pits that had done working; I laid upon the shale all night; I used to get what I could to eat; I eat for a long time the candles that I found in the pits that the colliers left over night; I had nothing else to eat ... When I got out next morning, I looked about for work, and begged of the people a bit. I got to Bradford after a while ... I work now here for John Cawtherly; he took me into his house, and is serving me well; I hurry for him now, and he fords me in victuals and drink.

Mr Scrive's report for the *Royal Commission, 1842*

18 THE MINER'S APPRENTICE

Besides my husband I have a boy who works on the hand [i.e. breaking up the coal and loading it to meet the band or chain drawing up the shaft] with my husband, a dirt carrier, at 2s a day. We have also an apprentice, but we don't know his age nor he himself 'except what we guessen'. He came from Manchester; a boatman picked him up upon the canal side and brought him with him to drive his horse, and he could not find his way back. He was to or 11 years old, named William Butler, and he used to lie about and get burnt at the coke hearths. A woman brought him to me and asked if I would have him; and I pieced a pair of trousers and waistcoat for him, and a pair of shoes that were too small for one of my wenches I had tipped and put on his feet. He bound himself apprentice.

A miner's wife at Bilston, S. Staffs; Midland Mining Report to the *Royal Commission, 1842*