

## Children in Coal Mines: The 1842 Report

From the whole of the evidence which has been collected, and of which we have thus endeavoured to give a digest, we find- In regard to COAL MINES-

1. That instances occur in which Children are taken into these mines to work as early as four years of age, sometimes at five, and between five and six, not unfrequently between six and seven, and often from seven to eight, while from eight to nine is the ordinary age at which employment in these mines commences.
2. That a very large proportion of the persons employed in carrying on the work of these mines is under thirteen and eighteen.
3. That in several districts female Children begin to work in these mines at the same early ages as the males.
4. That a great body of the Children and Young Persons employed in these mines are of the families of the adult workpeople engaged in the pits, or belong to the poorest population in the neighbourhood, and are hired and paid in some districts by the workpeople, but in others by the proprietors or contractors.
5. That there are in some districts also a small number of parish apprentices, who are bound to serve their masters until twenty-one years of age, in an employment in which there is nothing deserving the name of skill to be acquired, under circumstances of frequent ill-treatment, and under the oppressive condition that they shall receive only food and clothing, while their free companions may be obtaining a man's wages.
6. That in many instances much that skill and capital can effect to render the place of work unoppressive, healthy, and safe, is done, often with complete success, as far as regards the healthfulness and comfort of the mines; but that to render them perfectly safe does not appear to be practicable by any means yet known; while in great numbers of instances their condition in regard both to ventilation and drainage is lamentably defective.
7. That the nature of the employment which is assigned to the youngest Children, generally that of 'trapping', requires that they should be in the pit as soon as the work of the day commences, and, according to the present system, that they should not leave the pit before the work of the day is at an end.
8. That although this employment scarcely deserves the name of labour, yet, as the Children engaged in it are commonly excluded from light and are always without companions, it would, were it not for the passing and repassing of the coal carriages, amount to solitary confinement of the worst order.
9. That in those districts in which the seams of coal are so thick that horses go direct to the workings, or in which the side passages from the workings to the horseways are not of any length, the lights in the main ways render the situation of these Children comparatively less

cheerless, dull, and stupefying; but that in some districts they remaining solitude and darkness during the whole time they are in the pit, and, according to their own account, many of them never see the light of day for weeks together during the greater part of the winter season, excepting on those days in the week when work is not going on, and on the Sundays.

10. That at different ages, from six years old and upwards, the hard work of pushing and dragging the carriages of coal from the workings to the main ways, or to the foot of the shaft, begins; a labour which all classes of witness concur in stating requires the unremitting exertion of all the physical power which the young workers possess.
11. That, in the districts in which females are taken down into the coal mines, both sexes are employed together in precisely the same kind of labour, and work for the same number of hours; that the girls and boys, and the young men and women, and even married women with child, commonly work almost naked, and the men, in many mines quite naked; and that all classes of witnesses bear testimony to the demoralizing influence of the employment of females underground.
12. That, in the East of Scotland, a much larger proportion of Children and Young Persons are employed in these mines than in other districts, many of whom are girls; and that the chief part of their labour consists in carrying the coals on their backs up steep ladders.
13. That when the workpeople are in full employment, the regular hours for Children and Young persons are rarely less than eleven; more often they are twelve; in some districts they are thirteen; and in one district they are generally fourteen and upwards.
14. That in the great majority of these mines night-work as a part of the ordinary system of labour, more or less regularly carried on according to the demand for coals, and one which the whole body of evidence shows to act most injuriously both on the physical and moral condition of the workpeople, and more especially on that of the Children and Young Persons.
15. That the labour performed daily for this number of hours, though it cannot strictly be said to be continuous, because, from the nature of the employment, intervals of a few minutes necessarily occur during which the muscles are not in active exertion, is nevertheless generally uninterrupted by any regular time set apart for the rest and refreshment; what food is taken in the pit being eaten as best it may while labour continues.
16. That in well-regulated mines, in which in general the hours of work are the shortest, and in some few of which from half an hour to an hour is regularly set apart for meals, little or no fatigue is complained of after an ordinary days work, when the Children are ten years and upwards; but in other instances great complaint is made of the feeling of fatigue, and the workpeople are never without this feeling, often in an extremely painful degree.
17. That in many cases the Children and young persons have little cause of complaint in regard to the treatment they receive from the persons in authority in the mine, or from the colliers; but that in general the younger Children are roughly used by their older companions; whilst in many

- mines the conduct of the adult colliers to the Children and Young Persons who assist them is harsh and cruel; the persons in authority in these mines, who must be cognizant of this ill usage, never interfering to prevent it, and some of them distinctly stating that they do not conceive that they have any right to do so.
18. That, with some exceptions, little interest is taken by the coal owners in the Children and Young Persons employed in their works after the daily labour is over; at least little is done to afford them the means of enjoying innocent amusements and healthful recreation.
  19. That in all the coal-fields accidents of a fearful nature are extremely frequent; and that the returns made to our own queries, as well as the registry tables, prove that of the workpeople who perish by such accidents, the proportion of Children and Young Persons sometimes equals and rarely falls much below that of adults.
  20. That one of the most frequent causes of accidents in these mines is the want of superintendence by overlookers or otherwise to see to the security of the machinery for letting down and bringing up the workpeople, the restriction of the number of persons who ascend and descend at a time, the state of the mine as to the quantity of noxious gas in it, the efficiency of the ventilation, the exactness with which the air-door keepers perform their duty, the places into which it is safe or unsafe to go with a naked lighted candle, and the security of the proppings to uphold the roof, etc.
  21. That another frequent cause of fatal accidents in coal mines is the almost universal practice of intrusting the closing of the air-doors to very young Children.
  22. That there are many mines in which the most ordinary precautions to guard against accidents are neglected, and in which no money appears to be expended with a view to secure the safety, much less the comfort, of the workpeople.
  23. That there are moreover two practices peculiar to a few districts which deserve the highest reprobation, namely, - first, the practice not unknown in some of the smaller mines in Yorkshire, and common in Lancashire, of employing ropes that are unsafe for letting down and drawing up the workpeople; and second, the practice, occasionally met with in Yorkshire, and common in Derbyshire and Lancashire, of employing boys at the steam-engines for letting down and drawing up the workpeople.
  24. That in general the Children and Young Persons who work in these mines have sufficient food, and, when above ground, decent and comfortable clothing, their usually high rate of wages securing to them these advantages; but in many cases, particularly in some parts of Yorkshire, in Derbyshire, in South Gloucestershire, and very generally in the East of Scotland, the food is poor in quality; the Children themselves say that they have not enough to eat; and the Sub-Commissioners describe them as covered in rags, and state that the common excuse they make for confining themselves to their homes on the Sundays, instead of taking recreation in the fresh air, or attending a place of worship, is that they have no clothes to go in; so that in these cases, notwithstanding the intense labour performed by these Children,

they do not procure even sufficient food and raiment: in general however, the Children who are in this unhappy case are the Children of idle –and dissolute parents, who spend the hard-earned wages of their offspring at the public-house.

25. That the employment in these mines commonly produces in the first instance an extraordinary degree of muscular strength; this preternatural development and strength being acquired at the expense of the other organs, as is shown by the general stunted growth of the body.
26. That partly by the severity of the labour and the long hours of work, and partly through the unhealthy state of the place of work, this employment, as at present carried on in all the districts, deteriorates the physical constitution; in the thin-seam mines, more especially, the limbs become crippled and the body distorted; and in general the muscular powers give way, and the workpeople are incapable of following their occupation, at an earlier period of life than is common in other branches of industry.
27. That by the same causes the seeds of painful and mortal diseases are very often sown in childhood and youth; these, slowly but steadily developing themselves, assume a formidable character between the age of thirty and forty; and each generation of this class of the population is commonly extinct soon after fifty.

When we consider the extent of this branch of industry, the vast amount of capital embarked in it, and the intimate connexion in which it stands with almost all other great branches of trade and manufacture, as a main source of our national wealth and greatness, it is satisfactory to have established, by indubitable evidence, the two following conclusions:-

1. That the coal mine, when properly ventilated and drained, and when both the main and the side passages are of tolerable height, is not only unhealthy, but, the temperature being moderate and very uniform, it is, considered as a place of work, more salubrious and even agreeable than that in which many kinds of labour are carried on above ground.
2. That the labour in which Children and Young Persons are chiefly employed in coal mines, namely, in pushing the loaded carriages of coals from the workings to the mainways or to the foot of the shaft, so far from being in itself an unhealthy employment, is a description of exercise which, while it greatly develops the muscles of the arms, shoulders, chest, back, and legs, without confining any part of the body in an unnatural and constrained posture, might, but for the abuse of it, afford an equally healthful excitement to all the other organs; the physical injuries produced by it, as it is at present carried on, independently of those which are caused by imperfect ventilation and drainage, being chiefly attributable to the early age at which it commences, and to the length of time during which it is continued.

There is, however, one case of peculiar difficulty, viz., that in which all the subterranean roadways, and especially the side passages, are below a certain height; by the Evidence collected under this Commission, it is proved that there are coal mines at present in work in which these passages are so small, that even the youngest Children

cannot move along them without crawling on their hands and feet, in which unnatural and constrained posture they drag the loaded carriages after them; and yet, as it is impossible, by any outlay compatible with a profitable return, to render such coal mines, happily not numerous nor of great extent, fit for human beings to work in, they never will be placed in such a condition, and consequently they never can be worked without inflicting great and irreparable injury on the health of the Children.

[Then follow conclusions in regard to Ironstone mines, blast furnaces, underground labour in tin, copper lead, and zinc mines, etc.]

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