

Coal Mining in the 1890s and 1900s

In Britain, the industrial revolution dramatically increased the demand for coal. The amount of coal mined increased tenfold between 1790 and 1830. By 1900, there were over 3000 collieries in the UK, employing nearly 0.8 million people.

Mining was a dangerous operation – tunnels could collapse, coal dust could catch fire, ventilation was poor and the use of explosives to break down coal could result in air containing high levels of carbon monoxide. Accidents, many of them serious, were commonplace.

There were a number of different roles for miners within coal mines. The work done by ‘hewers’, who actually mined the coal, was hard and physical and shifts were often 12 hours long.



Fig. 1. Hewers in Ossett in the 1880s (www.ossett.net)

The growth of mining had a major impact on how people lived in places like Barnsley. Coal mines needed large workforces, so some mine owners built houses for their workers close to the pits they owned. In Kiveton Park, for example, the Coal Company built 46 houses in 1867. Some mine owners founded schools, clubs and sports facilities for their workers and their families. This was one of the reasons mining communities in places like Barnsley often established strong identities.

Before 1842, children of all ages worked in coal mines. They generally worked as ‘trappers’, who opened and closed wooden doors to let air through mine tunnels and ‘drawers’ or ‘hurriers’, who dragged heavy carts of coal along underground tunnels. In 1842, Lord Shaftsbury’s Mines Act outlawed underground work for women and girls and for boys under the age of 10. After the introduction of the 1878 Factory and Workshop Act, education for all children up to the age of 10 was compulsory and the working hours of 10-14 year-olds were restricted.

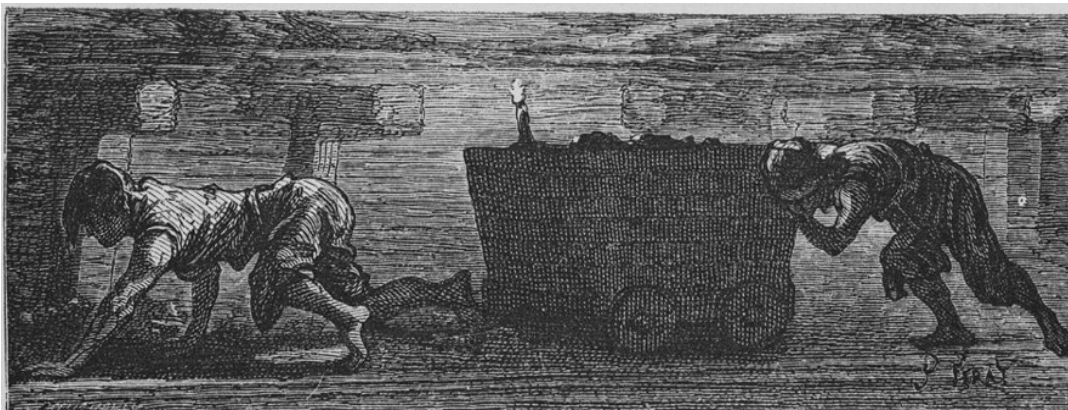


Fig.2. ‘Drawers’ - children drawing coal along a mine tunnel (www.museumwales.ac.uk)

In 1900, boys as young as 10 were still working in coal mines. Conditions would have been dark and often damp, as well as dangerous. The only light would have been provided by oil lamps, which had replaced candles during the nineteenth century.

In 1888, boys working as trappers could earn 1 shilling per day (for a day lasting 8 hours). Those who worked as 'hurriers' are likely to have earned more. This was quite a good wage compared to what boys could earn working in other industries. By 1905, miners were well-paid in comparison to other manual workers, earning, on average, around £74 per year. Miners often received other benefits, such as housing, that other workers did not have access to.



Fig. 3. Dodworth Miners' Welfare - a recreation facility built for miners which is still in use today (www.hrionline.ac.uk)



Fig. 4. (left) In the early twentieth century, miners usually lived in terraced houses. Many terraces built in Barnsley in the 1890s and 1900s are still in use today.

In the early twentieth century, food was, by modern standards, still expensive in relation to wages, but some foodstuffs were more expensive than others. Bread was relatively cheap and could cost as little as 1d per pound (approximately 600g). Meat and dairy products were more expensive. Beef, lamb, pork and cheese cost around 7-8d per pound and half a pound of butter cost around 6d.

The spending power of mining families would have varied according to their size, the number of family members working and the roles performed by those working. There were a lot more consumer goods for working people to buy in 1900 than there had been in the mid-nineteenth century and it was much more common for shop-keepers to allow their customers to pay for goods in instalments. However, it is likely that larger families would still have had to devote a large proportion of their income to food, particularly as girls and boys under 10 could no longer work.



By the 1890s, Most children from mining families would have attended day schools until at least the age of 10. Many would have attended Sunday school as well.

Fig.5. Children at school in the 1890s (www.brassandbricks.co.uk)