

The Children's Employment Commission (1842) [excerpts]

The Children's Employment Commission was an inquiry into the ages and conditions of children working in the coalmines of Great Britain and Ireland in the years 1840 to 1842. The Commission interviewed 4,108 witnesses and published 15 volumes. Below are excerpts of testimonies of some of these witnesses. The original records were published as part of the *Parliamentary Papers*.

From: Great Britain, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1842, Vol. XVI, pp. 24, 196.

2.—Sex: Employment of Girls and Women in Coal Mines.

1. Districts in which Girls and Women are Employed Underground.

119. In England, exclusive of Wales, it is only in some of the colliery districts of Yorkshire and Lancashire that female Children of tender age and young and adult women are allowed to descend into the coal mines and regularly to perform the same kinds of underground work, and to work for the same number of hours, as boys and men; but in the East of Scotland their employment in the pits is general; and in South Wales it is not uncommon.

120. West Riding of Yorkshire: Southern Part—In many of the collieries [*i.e., coal mines*] in this district, as far as relates to the underground employment, there is no distinction of sex, but the labour is distributed indifferently among both sexes, except that it is comparatively rare for the women to hew [*i.e., cut*] or get the coals, although there are numerous instances in which they regularly perform even this work. In great numbers of the coalpits in this district the men work in a state of perfect nakedness, and are in this state assisted in their labour by females of all ages, from girls of six years old to women of twenty-one, these females being themselves quite naked down to the waist.

121. "Girls," says the Sub-Commissioner, "regularly perform all the various offices of trapping, hurrying, filling, riddling, tipping, and occasionally getting [*i.e., terms for getting coal from the mines*], just as they are performed by boys. One of the most disgusting sights I have ever seen was that of young females, dressed like boys in trousers, crawling on all fours, with belts round their waists and chains passing between their legs, at day pits at Hunshelf Bank, and in many small pits near Holmfirth and New Mills: it exists also in several other places. I visited the Hunshelf Colliery on the 18th of January: it is a day pit; that is, there is no shaft or descent; the gate or entrance is at the side of a bank, and nearly horizontal. The gate was not more than a yard high, and in some places not above 2 feet. When I arrived at the board or workings of the pit I found at one of the sideboards down a narrow passage a girl of fourteen years of age in boy's clothes, picking down the coal with the regular pick used by the men. She was half sitting half lying at her work, and said she found it tired her very much, and 'of course she didn't like it.' The place where she was at work was not 2 feet high. Further on were men lying on their sides and getting. No less than six girls out of eighteen men and children are employed in this pit. Whilst I was in the pit the Rev. Mr. Bruce, of Wadsley, and the Rev. Mr. Nelson, of Rotherham, who accompanied me, and remained outside, saw another girl of ten years of age, also dressed in boy's clothes, who was employed in hurrying, and these gentlemen saw her at work. She was a nice-looking little child, but of course as black as a tinker, and

with a little necklace round her throat. In two other pits in the Huddersfield Union I have seen the same sight. In one near New Mills, the chain, passing high up between the legs of two of these girls, had worn large holes in their trousers; and any sight more disgustingly indecent or revolting can scarcely be imagined than these girls at work—no brothel can beat it. On descending Messrs. Hopwood's pit at Barnsley, I found assembled round a fire a group of men, boys, and girls, some of whom were of the age of puberty; the girls as well as the boys stark naked down to the waist, their hair bound up with a tight cap, and trousers supported by their hips. (At Silkstone and at Flockton they work in their shifts and trousers.) Their sex was recognizable only by their breasts, and some little difficulty occasionally arose in pointing out to me which were girls and which were boys, and which caused a good deal of laughing and joking. In the Flockton and Thornhill pits the system is even more indecent: for though the girls are clothed, at least three-fourths of the men for whom they 'hurry' work *stark naked*, or with a flannel waistcoat only, and in this state they assist one another to fill the corves 18 or 20 times a-day: I have seen this done myself frequently." (J. C. Symons...).

Prostitution in Pits

"When it is remembered that these girls hurry chiefly for men who are not their parents; that they go from 15 to 20 times a day into a dark chamber (the bank face), which is often 50 yards apart from any one, to a man working naked, or next to naked, it is not to be supposed but that where opportunity thus prevails sexual vices are of common occurrence. Add to this the free intercourse, and the rendezvous at the shaft or bullstake, where the corves are brought, and consider the language to which the young ear is habituated, the absence of religious instruction, and the early age at which contamination begins and you will have before you in the coal pits where females are employed, the picture of a nursery for juvenile vice which you will go far and we above ground to equally."

From: *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, Vol. XI (New York: J. & H. G. Langley, 1842), p. 268.

Betty Harris: "I was married at 23, and went into a colliery when I was married. I used to weave when about 12 years old; can neither read nor write. I work for Andrew Knowles, of Little Bolton (Lancs), and sometimes 7s. [*shillings*] a week, sometimes not so much. I am a drawer, and work from six o'clock in the morning to six at night; stop about an hour at noon to eat my dinner; have bread and butter for dinner; I get no drink. I have two children, but they are too young to work. I worked at drawing when I was in the family way. I know a woman who has gone home and washed herself, taken to her bed, delivered of a child, and gone to work again under the week.

From: Great Britain, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1842, Vol. XV, p. 84.

Betty Harris, aged thirty-seven, drawer, in a coal-pit at Little Bolton: "I have a belt round my waist, and a chain passing between my legs, and I go on my hands and feet. The road is very steep, and we have to hold by a rope; and when there is no rope, by anything we can catch hold of. There are six women and about six boys and girls in the pit I work in; it is very hard work for a woman. The pit is very wet where I work, and the water comes over our clog-tops always, and I have seen it up to my thighs; it rains in at the roof terribly. My clothes are wet through almost all day long. I never was ill in my life, but when I was lying in. My cousin looks after my children in the day time. I am very tired

when I get home at night; I fall asleep sometimes before I get washed. I am not so strong as I was, and cannot stand my work so well as I used to. I have drawn till I have bathe skin off me; the belt and chain is worse when we are in the family way. My feller [husband] has beaten me many a times for not being ready. I were not used to it at first, and he had little patience. I have known many a man beat his drawer. I have known men take liberties with the drawers, and some of the women have bastards.

Patience Kershaw was called upon to provide testimony to the Ashley's Mines Commission of 1842. She worked as a "hurrier," i.e., she pushed and pulled a heavy wagon of coal far underground, covering twenty miles each day during her twelve hour shift. The Mines Act of 1842 prohibited employment in the mines of all women and boys less than thirteen years old.

Patience Kershaw [age 17, Halifax]: "My father has been dead about a year; my mother is living and has ten children, five lads and five lasses; the oldest is about thirty, the youngest is four; three lasses go to mill; all the lads are colliers, two getters and three hurriers; one lives at home and does nothing; mother does nought but look after home.

All my sisters have been hurriers, but three went to the mill. I never went to day-school; I go to Sunday-school, but I cannot read or write; I go to pit at five o'clock in the morning and come out at five in the evening; I get my breakfast of porridge and milk first; I take my dinner with me, a cake, and eat it as I go; I do not stop or rest any time for the purpose; I get nothing else until I get home, and then have potatoes and meat, not every day meat. I hurry in the clothes I have now got on, trousers and ragged jacket; the bald place upon my head is made by thrusting the corves [*i.e.*, *baskets of coal*]; my legs have never swelled, but sisters' did when they went to mill; I hurry the corves a mile and more under ground and back; they weigh 300 cwt.; I hurry 11 a-day; I wear a belt and chain at the workings, to get the corves out; the getters that I work for are naked except their caps; they pull off all their clothes; I see them at work when I go up; sometimes they beat me, if I am not quick enough, with their hands; they strike me upon my back; the boys take liberties with me sometimes they pull me about; I am the only girl in the pit; there are about 20 boys and 15 men; all the men are naked; I would rather work in mill than in coal-pit."