

WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN THE MINES BEFORE 1842

Only men work underground in mines today, but this was not always the case. Before 1842 men worked together with their wives and children. The history of women in mining stretches as far back as the industry itself, yet their role is often forgotten.

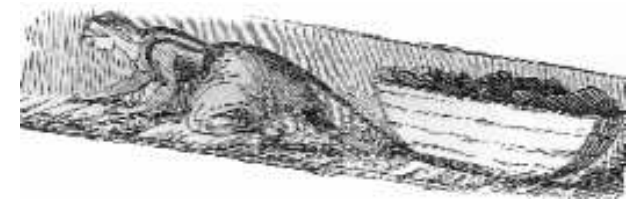
In 1606 a system of slavery was enacted by royal statute. Under this legislation coal miners were bound to their masters, which meant that the entire family was compelled to work in the pits. Children's labour was often signed over to the master soon after birth in a ceremony known as arling, and babies were sometimes taken down into the mines on their mother's backs before they were even old enough to walk.

Miners would hew the coal from the face and the women 'bearers' carried the coal to the shaft, and then up to the surface. Women made several trips a day, carrying a basket weighing up to 54kgs (120 lbs).



A bearer

If a miner was married, his wife became his bearer, helped by any children. Coal was transported in either a basket carried on the back, or a box, called a slype, dragged behind the bearer on a chain. A waist harness was used by children who were not yet strong



Pulling the coal in a slype.



Harness for hauling coal wagons.

enough to carry the load on their backs. In later years many pits had cast iron rails along which the bearers would push tubs of coal.

Early mine tunnels were often low, forcing bearers to work crouched over for hours without the opportunity to stand up. In order to see in the dark shafts, they carried candles in their teeth while they dragged their load to the surface. There was poor ventilation underground and it was usually hot, so even the women and

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girls often worked naked to the waist. Flooding was a constant problem. Water seeped into the newly dug roadways, resulting in bearers working bare-foot in pools of water. These horrific working conditions left many people in mining communities with stunted bodies and swollen legs.

In mining families parents usually worked together in the mines and children most often accompanied them. Children aged as young as five were assigned to be 'trappers', opening and shutting underground doors for ventilation. In mines with low seams and roadways children could manoeuvre more easily and therefore often worked as bearers in preference to women. Even very young children were typically expected to work a twelve hour day.



Young girls also worked as bearers.

In 1799 the system of slavery was banned, but economic bondage still continued for women underground. Men were paid extremely low wages and women earned even less. Miners had to pay their bearers out of their own wages and this was an incentive for men to marry. Without a wife to carry the coal, a miner would have to pay a young girl to work for him. In contrast, a wife working as a bearer did not have to be paid as her labour contributed to the family's income.

This system of work came to an end in 1842 when the Mines Act banned women, and children under the age of ten from working underground. Women from mining families continued to work, but did so on the surface as pickers, sorting the coal.

