

# Children in the Mines

## 1. Starting Work

In the factories, children started work as young as three years of age. They did very dangerous jobs and worked long hours. In the mines children did not usually start working until they were seven years old. It was terrible work. Either very cold or very hot. Sometimes there was 30cms or more of icy and filthy water on the floor, and with water dripping from the roof. The tunnels in the mines were sometimes tiny – as little as 50cms high.

Children worked for 12 hours a day and sometimes much longer. Imagine working hard for the length of a full school day, then having to work the length of another full day at school before you could go home.

The first job that children were often given when they started work was to open and close little doors within the mine tunnels. The doors were called 'trap doors' or just 'traps' because they trapped the air and other gasses within the mine. The youngest children opened and closed the traps to let the people pulling the 'tubs' (trucks) of coal through. (In Durham, the little trucks of coal were called 'tubs', because at first they were just tubs, without wheels – in fact, a sledge.) The children who opened and closed the traps were called 'trappers'. I cannot imagine what the life of a trapper was actually like. I will leave it to Sarah Goodler to tell us. Sarah was 8 years old when she told her story to people from the government in London.

"I'm a trapper in the Gawber pit. It does not tire me, but I have a trap without a light and I'm scared. I go at four and sometimes half past three

in the morning, and I come out at five and half past [in the afternoon]. I never go to sleep. Sometimes I sing when I've light, but not in the dark; I dare not sing then. I don't like being in the pit. I am very sleepy when I go sometimes in the morning. I go to Sunday schools and read Reading made Easy ... They teach me to pray ... 'God 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 on 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."

There were many hundreds of other children like Sarah working as trappers then.