

Children in the Mines

2. Heavy Work

When they became a little older and stronger, children were put to work pulling the heavy tubs of coal through the tunnels. They had to pull it from where the coal was mined to the bottom of the shaft. From there it was carried up to the surface up ladders or lifted with ropes. This was very heavy work, and very tiring. Sometimes the coal was carried in baskets (in Durham, known as 'corfs') on their backs. They would carry up to 50kg at a time. The girl in this drawing below was called Janet Cummings and was 11 years old when she was told her story in 1840:



"I gang with the women at five and come up at five at night; work all night on Fridays, and come away at twelve in the day. I carry the large bits of coal from the wall-face to the pit-bottom, and the small pieces called chows in a creel [a basket]. They usually weigh a hundredweight, but it is some weight to carry; it takes three journeys to fill a tub of 4 hundredweight. The distance varies, as the work is not always on the same wall; sometimes 150 fathoms, whiles 250 fathoms. The roof is very low; I have to bend my back and legs, and the water comes frequently up to the calves of my legs. I have no liking for the work; father makes me like it. Never got hurt, but often obliged to scramble out of the pit when bad air was in."

What Janet calls a creel is a basket. A hundredweight is an old measurement of weight, equal to about 50kg. A fathom is an old

measure of distance; 150 fathoms is a little less than 300 metres. 250 fathoms is about 450 metres.

Robert North when older remembered drawing (or pulling) tubs:

“I went into the pit at 7 years of age. When I drew by the girdle and chain, the skin was broken and the blood ran down. . . . If we said anything, they would beat us. I have seen many draw at 6 [years old]. They must do it or be beat. They cannot straighten their backs during the day. I have sometimes pulled till my hips have hurt me so that I have not known what to do with myself.”