

**Durham Miners Heritage Group
Information and Activities Package**

Teaching Notes

Children and Women at Work 2

Subsequent Factory Acts followed in 1819 and 1833 which further attempted to better conditions in the cotton and woollen mills, but conditions with regards to children and women working in both the factories and in the mines remained dismal until the 1840s. After long campaigning by many eminent persons, notably Michael Sadler, himself a mill owner, who campaigned against the monstrous hours generally worked by children in the mills, and Anthony Ashley Cooper, the 6th Earl of Shaftesbury, a tireless social reformer, it was a tragedy which precipitated action.

In 1838 26 children under 16 died underground in a mine accident. The 19 year old Queen Victoria herself ordered an official enquiry. Parliament, at that time itself in a condition of political disquiet, chose to ignore the request until pressure from the public and Lord Ashley forced them to set up a Royal Commission. At the time, almost a quarter of a million people were working in the coal and iron ore mines in Britain. Yet there were just four inspectors charged with enforcing such laws as there

were throughout the entire kingdom.

The quotations and the illustrative sketches on the students' sheets are taken from the *First Report of Commissioners for Enquiring into the Employment and Conditions of Children in Mines and Manufactories (On the employment of women and children in coal mines)*, delivered to Parliament at the beginning of May, 1842. The Report of the Royal Commission makes for, by modern standards, shocking reading and led to the passing of the first Mines Act later that year.

However, the Report was greeted by the general public with not quite the effect one might imagine it would have today. It led to a widespread view that miners and their families were simply drunken savages who deserved no better treatment than that which they received. Perhaps ironically, what brought about change were supposed sensibilities of a moral nature, rather than concern for the physical welfare of the children and women working underground.