

Children No Longer in the Mines Pit Ponies

In 1842 the British Government made it against the law for women and children to work underground in the mines (although they continued to work very hard and for long hours on the surface, at the 'pit head'). With no children or women underground, who would push and pull the heavy tubs full of coal from where it was dug, to the mine shaft where it was pulled up to the surface? The men did not much want to do this tiresome work.

To take the place of the women and children, small horses were brought down into the mines. They were called pit ponies and most miners became very fond of them. They would share their dinner with them and bring them special treats. (They were particularly fond of mints.)

Many pit ponies lived, worked and slept all their lives in the mines. There were stables underground for them. Most never saw any daylight unless they became ill and had to be taken out of the mine to get better. A hundred years ago there were more than 70,000 ponies working in Britain's mines.

There are many stories of ponies in the pits saving the lives of miners. Ponies could often sense when the roof of the mine was in danger of falling in and would refuse to move when this was so. There are also stories of miners who lost their lives while trying to save their ponies from dangerous situations such as



A miner sharing his 'bait' (his dinner) with his pony

poisonous gasses in the mines.

By the middle of the last century electrical machinery was taking over the work of the ponies. Gradually, the ponies were retired. The mines were by then mostly run by a government organisation, The National Coal Board, or N.C.B. The N.C.B was very careful to find good homes for the ponies as they were retired. There are a number of interesting websites telling the stories of ponies working in the coal mines. Two good ones to look at can be found at www.newrider.com/Library/How_it_Was/pit_ponies.html and at www.pitponies.co.uk A video of pit ponies at work which can be found on at www.imdb.com/title/tt0125458/