

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

Teaching Notes

Children and Women at Work 3

The following three pages are included not for Keystage 2 teaching as such, but as background information and for the personal interest of those teaching this subject. They address what was the true nature of the national disquiet which led to the passing of the 1842 Mines Act which made it illegal to employ women or children underground in the mines.

The real impetus for the passing of the 1842 Mines Act came about because of the intimate proximity of men and women in the conditions which prevailed below ground, particularly in deep pits where typically the temperature and humidity were both high. Men often worked completely naked. Women occasionally naked, but usually topless. This, while practical, offended Victorian sensibilities.

The reality was even worse. There was a great deal of actual abuse. It was accepted as part of the reality of working in the pits.

A further cause of moral indignation was the Commission's finding that pregnant women would typically work underground until the day of their confinement, and within days

of giving birth would return to work in the pit, taking their nursing infant with them underground.

Children starting work at the age of seven, sometimes younger, would grow up in the pit deformed from the strain of pulling heavy tubs and carrying unreasonable loads while their bones were still forming. Puberty typically did not occur, in either girls or boys, until their late teens. The majority of those who started work in the mines at seven years of age died before they were 25.

The evidence given to the Royal Commission of 1840-42 needs no further elaboration. The following submissions of evidence are statements taken from the first report of the Royal Commission, 1842.

Matthew Fountain, under-ground steward at Darton Colliery:

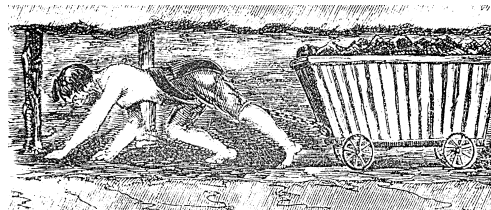
The girls are unfitted, by being at pits, from learning to manage families. Many could not make a shirt.

Michael Thomas Sadler, surgeon:

I strongly disapprove of females being in pits; the female character is totally destroyed by it; their habits and feelings are altogether different; they can neither discharge the duties of wives or mothers. I see the greatest differences in the homes of those colliers whose wives do not go into the pits in cleanliness and good management.

John Simpkin, collier:

I have had children by them myself, and have frequently had connection with them in the pits.



Rev. Oliver Levey Collins, Incumbent of Ossett:

There is a good deal of drunkenness and sensuality. Bastardy is sadly too common; they look on it as misfortune, and not as a crime.

John Cawthra, collier:

I think it is not a good system bringing girls into pits; they get bold. It tends to make the girls have bastards very much in some pits.

George Armitage, aged thirty-six years:

I dare venture to say that many of the wives who come from pits know nothing of sewing or any household duty, such as women ought to know.

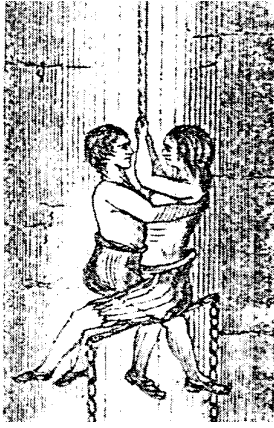
John Thornley, one of her Majesty's justices of the peace for the County of York:

The youths of both sexes work often in a half-naked state, and the passions are excited before they arrive at puberty

The commissioners themselves concluded that

“the employment of female Children and Young Persons in labour, to the degree which at present prevails, has the effect of preventing them from acquiring the most ordinary and necessary knowledge of domestic management and family economy; that the young females in general, even when presenting the most tidy and respectable personal appearance before marriage, are nearly ignorant of the arts of baking and cooking, and, generally speaking, entirely so of the needle; that when they come to marry, the wife possesses not the knowledge to enable her to give her husband the common comforts of a

home; that the husband, even if previously well-disposed, is hence often led to seek at the public house that cheerfulness and physical comfort which his own fire side does not afford, whence all the evils of drunkenness in many cases grow up; that the Children,



This sketch, entitled 'Will and Ann' was included as part of the report of the 1842 Royal Commission.

quite apart from any evils which the altered conduct of the father may bring upon them, but solely from the bad training of the mother, are brought up in no habits of order and comfort, but are habituated from their youth to all the evils of a disorderly and ill-regulated family, and must give birth to a still worse state of things in a succeeding generation; that under these accumulated evils the wife and the mother is perhaps herself the most acute sufferer from the consequences of her own defective education."

In an editorial of the 17th May, 1842, The Times commented: *In point of morality we have dropped enough to show what must be its effects. In some pits it is stated that gross indecency is the law - in most it seems the common consequence of this employment.*

But it was clear that attitudes were changing. Later in the same editorial The Times continued,

"... In many districts the practice of employing females in the mines has never existed. In several mines... it has lately been stopped, and the better part, nay, the mass, of the colliers have now learned that a respectable wife, and a comfortable and tidy home, though supported at the expense of more continuous work for themselves, are better worth having than the fourteen shillings or fifteen shillings a week which they used to gain from the labours of an oppressed and perhaps corrupted drudge ... Other proprietors profess a wish to follow the example, but dare not offend the men. This, at least, is the most pardonable motive which is suggested. We trust the legislature will before long save them the responsibility, to which they seem so unequal, of having any choice in the matter."

The Mines Act of 1842 made it illegal to employ any female of any age underground. No child under 10 years of age could be employed underground. Working hours were restricted and meal breaks introduced. It remained, however, many years before the provisions of the Act were enforced throughout the land.