

Home Life

1. Eating, Sleeping and Washing

Two hundred years ago, people working in the mines and in the factories were very poor – perhaps poorer than it is possible for us to imagine. Not all mine and factory owners were uncaring. Some factory owners such as Samuel Greg in Cheshire, Robert Owen in Lanark, the Rowntree, Cadbury, Fry and Gurney families and those mine owners, such as the Pease and Partners in the north-east, who provided decent conditions for the people that worked for them. They built villages with houses which for their time were considered luxurious. These factory and mine owners regulated peoples working hours so that they were not excessive, and made sure that they were not badly treated at work.

However, the better owners were not typical. Most factory and mine workers were badly paid and lived in terrible conditions. Houses were cold and damp. There was no running water. Water had to be carried from a pump in the street, worked by a heavy handle and shared by many people. The poorest people often owned very little and possessed very little furniture. Several people would commonly share one bed. Some of the very poorest of families did not have beds and had to sleep on the floor.

At first whole families often had to live together in just one room. There was no bathroom and no lavatory. It was usual for whole streets to share one or two toilets. Typically there would be one for each side of the street, located at the end of each row of houses.

As the years past, conditions became better. Miners and factory workers would come to live in one house per family, usually with four rooms – two bedrooms upstairs, while downstairs there would be a living room and a kitchen.

Such houses still had no bathroom, no running water and no drains. The better houses had a yard at the back with a toilet in a small brick shed in the corner. In the north-east such outside toilets were called 'netties' (perhaps from 'the necessary', considered politer than saying lavatory or toilet). In the towns, though, many houses were built 'back-to-back' sharing their thin walls not only with their neighbouring houses on either side, but their back wall with the house behind. Such houses obviously did not have a back yard and therefore did not have a nettie and the people on each side of the street continued to share.

With no running water piped to the streets, the toilets of course did not flush. What was politely called the 'night spoil' was removed from the netties while most people slept, by 'night spoil men', more often known as 'midden men'. (Midden is an Old Norse word for dung.) They took the contents of the toilets in carts out into the countryside and sold it for a few pence to the farmers. In the days before chemical fertilizers, the farmers ploughed it back into the land as manure.

Cooking was at first done over an open fire. Later, from about two hundred years ago, iron 'ranges' with hotplates and ovens began to be fitted into houses, still heated with a coal or wood fire. The fire or range was usually the only source of heat in the house – and winters were significantly colder then than they are today.



A woman cooking over the open fire of a iron kitchen 'range'

To bathe, jugs of water would be heated up on the range and poured into a small metal tub in the kitchen. People would bathe in these in front of the fire, as in the picture on the next page. When not in use the tub (usually referred to as a 'tin bath') would usually be kept hanging on a wall, outside

in the back yard if the house had a back yard. On a kitchen wall if not.

When most of the mines in County Durham were first opened (from around the 1850s) there was no electricity. Lighting was by candles or by oil lamps. However, both candles and lamp oil were expensive, so people tended to go to bed when it got dark.

Washing clothes was a chore. In the days before washing machines clothes were washed in an iron tub. Water was heated up on the kitchen range. There were no detergent powders then. Soap had to be flaked off the soap bar with a knife and dissolved into the water, or, for cleaning very dirty clothes, rubbed from the bar directly into the cloth. To agitate the dirt out of the clothes in the tub they were pounded by hand with a device known as a dolly. This was a stick like a broom handle with wooden prods attached to the end.



A miner (Thomas Barnes) washes in a tin tub after returning home from work at Brandon Colliery, watched by his granddaughter.

Washing machines did not start to be manufactured until about eighty years ago. For a long time these were not electric (many houses did not have electricity until less than sixty years ago).



Instead, the early washing machines were operated by hand by turning a handle. A hand operated washing machine is shown in the picture.

The device with its own handle, fastened to the back of this washing machine, is called a mangle. The white bit is a pair of rollers which are turned in opposite directions by the handle. Can you think what the mangle on a washing machine was used for?

Many families rented small plots of land like those in the photograph on the next page. Here they would grow vegetables or flowers. These were called 'allotments' because they were allotted to each person, often by the local council. Most allotments had a small hut like those in the picture, for storing tools and other things, and for resting and sheltering in.



Allotments, small plots of land where people grew vegetables or flowers.

It was not uncommon for people to keep a pig or some hens for eggs on their allotment, but most people grew vegetables for food. When the Pease family built houses for their workers in Esh Winning they built many with their own allotments attached, in the form of a long garden belonging to each house, but this was unusual. Mostly people rented an allotment some distance from their home.