

DURHAM MINERS HERITAGE GROUP

**A LEXICON OF TERMS
USED BY MINERS IN THE
DURHAM COAL FIELDS**

Some Words and Terms Used By Coal Miners

The words listed below are some of those used by coal miners in County Durham. In different parts of Great Britain and in other countries miners have other words for some of the same things. The list is not a full list and some of the terms were used in the past but are now old fashioned.

After Damp	Similar to Choke Damp (see below) this is the air left in the mine after an explosion. It has little oxygen and is therefore deadly. (Also see Carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide, below.)
Anthracite	Anthracite is the purest form of coal. It forms from bituminous coal and gives out great heat when it burns.
Bait	The packed meal a miner would carry with him and eat half way through his shift. The word comes from the Norse <i>bita</i> , a bite.
Bank	This has two meanings. It can mean the top of a mineshaft. In addition, a miner might talk of 'banking' meaning to go up to the surface.
Banksman	The person in charge of controlling the lift (cage) up to the surface.
Barrowman	A person who pushed the 'tubs', usually a young person in their teens.
Bituminous coal	This is the commonest form of coal in the United Kingdom; it is black or sometimes brown and burns well.
Board	See 'Gate'
Boll	The old measure of an amount of coal. It was a measure of volume, rather than weight, equal to

	<p>48 gallons (six bushels) – in modern units approximately a fifth of a cubic metre.</p>
Bond	<p>An agreement of employment and wages between a miner and the owner of the mine.</p>
Brattice	<p>Screens used to direct the flow of ventilation below ground.</p>
Cage	<p>The lift which takes men and tools down into the mine and brings men, tools, and the coal they have mined up to the surface again.</p>
Canch	<p>Stone inevitably mined with the coal (either underlying the coal seam or overlying it) which has to be subsequently separated from the coal.</p>
Carbon	<p>The main chemical of which coal is made. Coke and graphite (see below) are almost pure carbon. Other types of coal and peat contains other chemicals as well.</p>
Carbon dioxide	<p>A colourless gas without a smell which can build up in mines which are poorly ventilated, or be left after a fire or explosion of 'fire damp' (see below). Not strictly poisonous as such, it can cause people to fall asleep and then can suffocate them, and so is a serious hazard.</p>
Carbon monoxide	<p>This is a gas that is part of the 'after damp' (see above) left behind after there has been a fire or explosion of 'fire damp' in a mine. It has no smell or colour, but is extremely poisonous and a great hazard following such an accident.</p>
Carboniferous	<p>Gas which causes unconsciousness and possibly death. Chemically these can be carbon dioxide or carbon monoxide. They are particularly dangerous because they not have a smell.</p>
Cavil	<p>An area worked by an individual miner, usually drawn by lots.</p>

Chaldron	A unit of amount of coal. Much fraud occurred because what actually constituted a Chaldron differed from one region to another. For example, a Chaldron exported by boat from Durham or Northumberland amounted to 53 cwt (about 2695 kg) . However, when it arrived in London, their Chaldron was 28 cwt (about 1424 kg). Because 53 cannot be divided by 28, the cumulative loss through 'rounding up' and 'rounding down' became substantial. The Coal Mines Inpection Act of 1872 made it illegal to sell coal by anything but nationally recognised units of weight – the hundredweight (cwt) and the ton.
Choke Damp	Gas, the same as natural gas (methane) which can seep out of rocks and if set on fire causes explosions
Chummins	An empty tub.
Clarts	Sticky, wet clay or mud.
Coal	The remains of plants which have been fossilised over millions of years. Most of the coal in Great Britain formed between 290 million and 350 million years ago. (See also Anthracite, Bituminous coal, Coke, Jet, Lignite and Peat.)
Coke	Coke is not mined but is made by baking bituminous coal (see above) in special ovens which do not allow air in. It is almost pure carbon and though difficult to light, when it burns it give of lots of heat and very little smoke. Coke is also important for making iron and steel from iron containing rocks ('iron ores').
Corf	Before they had tubs, the coal was put into baskets known as 'corfs' which were then dragged through the mine. From about 1830 these were replace by wheeled 'tubs'.
Cracket	A small stool used for support by miners hewing

	coal from narrow seams.
Dad	To beat the coal and rock dust and dirt from one's clothing.
Damps	See Fire Damp, Choke Damp
Deputy	The pit Deputy, in some places known as and under-viewer, was the highly trained person who had responsibility for the working and the safety of a shift of men working underground or for a part of the pit.
Dreg	A piece of wood or metal inserted between the spokes of the wheel of a truck to prevent it from inadvertently moving.
Drift	This has two meanings. It can mean just a hole or tunnel which has been made to carry off water or supply fresh air. Its more modern use is to describe an underground mine which is accessed by a gently sloping tunnel, rather than by a vertical shaft.
Exploder	Device for setting off explosions in the mine to loosen the coal.
Femmer	Very delicate.
Fire Damp	The time between 290 and 350 million years ago when much of Britain's coal was formed
Galloway/Gallower	A breed of pony, originally from south-western Scotland, much favoured for use in coal mines.
Gate	From the old Norse word for a road, a gate is a tunnel. In other parts of Britain these are often referred to as 'boards' from the wooden boards that were used to cover them so that the wheels of the 'tubs' did not sink into the mud.
Graphite	Graphite is often not thought of as a form of coal but really it is. Graphite is the most pure form of

coal and is made of pure carbon. It is too valuable to use as a fuel, and also it is very difficult to start burning. You will know graphite because, mixed with clay, it is what is called 'the lead' in pencils. It has many other uses. In olden times it was much sought after for making the moulds into which hot iron was poured to make cannon balls. More recently it has been important for building some kinds of nuclear reactor and nuclear power stations.

Hand Putter	A man who pushes the tubs full of coal from the working coal face to the 'Onsetter' at the cage.
Hewer	A miner who actually cuts the coal from the ground.
Hoggers	Shorts worn by miners.
Horse Keeper	Just as it sounds – the person who looks after the pit ponies.
Hoy	To throw.
Hunkers/Hunkering	Sitting on the backs of one's legs and the heels of one's feet.
In-bye	The journey from the lift shaft to the working coal face, which could be several miles underground.
Jet	Jet is a form of lignite (see below) which can be highly polished and has been used for making jewellery since stone age times. In Great Britain most jet comes from the coast north and south of the town of Whitby in Yorkshire where it can be found in the sea cliffs.
Keel	An oval shaped boat used to ferry coal down the rivers. They typically held about 20 tons of coal.
Keelsmen	The boatmen who ferried the coal in the Keels.
Keps	A block upon which the lift cage rests to secure it

	in position.
Kist	An underground office, possibly sometimes nothing more than a chest, used by the pit Deputies. It was used as the assembly point where the miners would be given their instructions as to where they would be working on any particular shift.
Lignite	Lignite, sometimes called brown coal, is what peat (see below) turns into before it becomes bituminous coal. In Great Britain there is not enough lignite to ever have been worth mining, but in other countries such as the U.S.A. and Poland it is an important fuel.
Limmers	The shafts by which a pony was attached to a tub.
Marra	A colleague regarded as one's equal.
Mine	A mine is a place where minerals such of coal are dug out of the ground. Also see Open cast, below.
Open cast mine	An open cast mine is one where the substance being mined, such as coal, is very close to the surface and can be simply dug out without needing to tunnel underground. So, an open cast mine is a big pit open to the sky.
Out-bye	The journey back from the coal face to the cage (<i>cf</i> 'In-bye').
Peat	Peat is the first stage in plant remains becoming coal. It is generally only a few thousand years old (while coal is many millions of years old). Many of the moors of northern England and Scotland are covered by peat. It is used as a fuel in houses in some parts of Scotland, Ireland and Finland.
Pillar	Coal left unmined to support the surrounding rock.

Pitmatic	The dialect which developed amongst the miners and pithead workers of the north-east of England. (A dictionary of Pitmatic, 'Pitmatic: The Talk of the North East Coalfield' by Bill Griffiths is published by Northumbria University Press; July, 2007 Isbn-10:1904794254/Isbn-13:9781904794257)
Pittub	The full name for a Tub. (For the meaning of Tub see below.)
Pony Putter	A person who guides a pony pulling a tub through the mine.
Prop	A strong piece of wood, or in more modern mines steel, wedged between the floor and the roof of a mine tunnel to hold the roof up.
Putter	A person who pulled the corves full of coal or stone through the mine. These were originally mainly women. Subsequent to women being prevented by law from working down the mine, they were replaced by teenaged boys.
Ramble	The layer of stone (typically shale) which overlaid most seams of coal and which it was often impossible to avoid becoming mixed in with the hewed coal.
Rolley	A wheeled carriage which carried two corves underground.
Safetylamp	A special type of lamp used in mines to detect dangerous gasses safely, to warn miners of the danger of an explosion.
Score	The agreed amount of coal which, on being mined, determined the amount a miner was paid. It varied slightly. The Keelmen on the Tyne recognised a standard 'score' as being 20 corves. On the Wear, however, it was 21 corves.

Screening	Sorting the coal and removing the stones from the coal. This was a surface job. It was hard, filthy and boring work, mostly performed by women and young boys.
Scumfished	Feeling suffocated
Seam	Coal layers under the ground are referred to as 'seams'. These rarely run horizontally and vary considerably in height. Many in the North-east of England were less than 45 cms thick. In other parts of Britain they could be as much as 2 metres or more thick and in other countries (notably Australia) coal 'seams' can be as much as 40 metres thick. Much of Britain's coal is in seams of less than 30 cms and is currently regarded as not commercially minable.
Shaft	A vertical hole giving access to a deep mine, usually used to house a cage lift.
Shotfiring	Setting off small explosions in holes drilled into the coal or rock to break the solid coal or rock into manageably sized pieces.
Steel Mill	An old non-flame lighting device. A steel wheel was turned in contact with a piece of flint, which resulted in a shower of sparks giving some light.
Surfeit	The same as 'choke damp'
Tally	The same as a 'token'.
Token	An identity disk carried by a miner. There were two identical tokens for each miner. One was left with the cage operator when the miner went underground as a record of who was actually in the mine at any particular time. The other was kept by the miner on his person at all times to allow him to be identified should there be an accident.

Trapper	Trappers opened trap doors within the mine to allow tubs to pass through and closed them behind the tubs to prevent explosive gasses circulating throughout the mine. Trappers were almost always young boys and girls. It was cold, wet, boring work, sitting in the dark for 12 or more hours a day – but also a highly responsible job. If there was an explosion in the mine it was often 'convenient' for the mine owners to blame the trappers regardless of whether they were negligent or not.
Tub	A small truck on wheels into which coal and stone was loaded for transportation within the mine and up to the surface.
Tub	A small wheeled truck, used to move coal and rock around the mine and up to the surface. (Also see 'Corf').
Under-viewer	See Deputy.
Viewer	A local name for the manager of a colliery. The manager was the person who held overall responsibility for the running of a pit.
Wailer	A person, typically a young boy or girl, employed to pick stones out of the coal.
Wasteman	This was a very responsible position to have. The wasteman was responsible for supporting the roof behind the miners, and also for ensuring that fresh air circulated throughout the mine.
Winding men	The persons responsible for raising and lowering the cages.