

There was no such thing as an 'easy job' for most working class people in the nineteenth century. All occupations and trades were subject to the same long hours, low pay and what we would consider dreadful working conditions. However, perhaps one of the worst industries to be involved in was coal mining. Not only was the work long and hard but it took place in an inherently dangerous environment. Every year hundreds of people were injured and killed by accidents in mines.



Image 1: Late 19th century photograph showing some Durham coal miners. (Photo from Durham County Record Office, ref D/Ph162/8.) Click on image to enlarge.

Crook was primarily a coal-mining town: the industry was certainly responsible for employing the vast majority of the town's inhabitants. As a result, we're going to have a look at some aspects of life at work down at a pit.

## Children and coal mining

When people think of coal miners they tend to have an image of muscular men with faces and bodies blackened from the coal dust. However, it was not just men who worked in mines but women and children too.



Image 2: Photograph showing a group of miners, including boys, with a pit pony. (Photo from Durham County Record Office, ref D/C112/88) Click on image to enlarge.

No. 116.—John Otterson.  
I am 13 the 15th April, 1841.—I became a door-keeper on the barrow-way four years ago. I got up at four o'clock, took breakfast, walked to the pit by half-past four; began work at five. I had no candle allowed at all, except my father gave me any; he gave me four, which burnt about five hours, and I sat in darkness the rest of the time. I liked it very badly, it was like as if I was transported. I used to sleep; I could not keep my eyes open. The overseer used to lay us with the yard wheel; he used to leave the marks; I used to be afraid. The partners sometimes thought me for being asleep. They never gave me any money. We loose at five and come home. I got my dinner—washed; I took off all my clothes, and then went to bed about eight. I did not go to play; the more we play, the more we sleep in the pit.

Image 3: Extract from the evidence of John Otterson to the Royal Commission into the Employment of Children in Mines. (Image from Durham County Record Office, ref Library G249). Click on image to enlarge.

1. Goes to school sometimes on Sundays; cannot read; cannot say the Lord's Prayer or the Commandments.  
2. When he is in the pit nobody comes to talk to him.  
3. Sets mine-traps in the pit, and catches fire sometimes; brings them to the out in the stable of the pit. There are marks in the pit which fly at the candles. Never plays at anything the days he works in the pit; on other days plays at marbles; throws a ball at the wall; plays at teaching a boy, and running and trying to catch him; plays at the hoop—iron or wood. Quarrels with other boys.

Image 4: Extract from the evidence of William Laws to the Royal Commission. Unusually, Laws still attended Sunday School and mentions playing games. Click on image to enlarge.

The 1842 Royal Commission into the Employment of Children in Mines found that children as young as five or six were working full days in some mines. They were mainly employed as trappers or door-keepers. This job involved opening doors so that the trucks carrying the coal through the mine could pass through and then making sure they closed behind them. It was essential that this was done so that the mine remained properly ventilated. Although not physically hard, the work was boring and was often done in complete darkness. As the children grew older they were sometimes moved on to opening the barrow-ways (larger openings designed to allow larger trucks and sometimes ponies through) before starting work actually moving the coal.

The Commissioners were deeply shocked by what children were asked to do in the mines. They found that girls as well as boys were expected to haul and push trucks weighing up to 200 kilos through the mine, work which caused deformities and long-term injuries. In response to the findings of the Royal Commission, Parliament passed the Coal Mines Act of 1842. This banned all

