

# Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society.

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## **Child Labour in the Coal Mines of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire in the Nineteenth Century.**

EXTRACTS FROM THE REPORTS OF  
COMMISSIONERS, 1842.

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By HERBERT GREEN, B.A.

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**S**TUDENTS of local history frequently experience difficulty in obtaining definite and reliable examples of conditions in their own locality. Search for material of this description may involve much trouble in obtaining volumes from distant libraries, or a visit to London. It is hoped that the printing of these extracts will fill a gap in local records, for no historian of Coal Mining in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire has made more than passing reference to these reports of Commissioners.

Although Nottinghamshire is not mentioned by name in the evidence, it is obvious from the names of the villages and towns in which witnesses worked or lived, that the conditions described obtained in Nottinghamshire as well as Derbyshire. Some of the topics included are overwork of children, diet, clothing, age, physical condition, homes, butty system,<sup>1</sup> attitude of coal owners, attitude of parents, influence of Methodists, educational facilities and attendance at public worship.

<sup>1</sup> See also *The Coal Industry of the Eighteenth Century*, Ashton and Sykes, pp. 113, 114, 161.

Further information and opportunities for comparison are provided by the findings and conclusions of the commissioners. From these it appears that the hours of work for children in the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire coal mines, fourteen hours a day and upwards, were longer than those of other districts. Another practice, common in the local coalfields and condemned by the commissioners, was the employment of boys at the steam engines for letting down and drawing up the workpeople. Parts of Derbyshire are also mentioned among the districts where food was poor in quality and insufficient in quantity, and where clothing consisted of rags.

Some of the children were engaged in trapping; others in pushing and dragging carriages of coal from the workings to the main ways or to the foot of the shaft. Employed to open and shut doors, "trappers"<sup>1</sup> were excluded from light and from companions, and, but for the passing and re-passing of coal carriages, would have suffered almost solitary confinement. The second type of employment, the pushing and dragging of the carriages, required an unremitting exertion of all the physical power which the young workers possessed, and while promoting an extraordinary degree of muscular development, did so at the expense of the other organs, and produced a general stunted growth of the body.

Here follow extracts from "The Physical and Moral Condition of the Children and Young Persons Employed in Mines and Manufactures, illustrated by Extracts from the Reports of the Commissioners for Inquiring into the employment of Children and Young Persons in Mines and Collieries, and in the Trades and Manufactures in which numbers of them work together not being included under the terms of the Factories Regulation Act." (John W. Parker, W. Strand, H.M. Stat. Off., 1843).

<sup>1</sup> See also Ashton and Sykes, p. 20 *et seq.*

PHYSICAL CONDITION OF CHILDREN AND  
YOUNG PERSONS EMPLOYED IN COAL  
AND IRON MINES (p. 11, Derbyshire).

*Food, Clothing and Physical Condition.*

*Sub-Commissioner's Report.*

“ Their food generally speaking is full as ample and good as those labouring above ground ; but having to get their meals, one at so early an hour in the morning, often without fire or light, the other in the cold bad air of the pit, after having been in a profuse perspiration, without as they state, scarcely being able to wipe the mud from their hands—also being so long between their meals must deprive them of all comfort, if it does not injure their powers of digestion.

Their clothing consists of a coarse flannel shirt or jacket and trousers, mostly of the same material. The jacket is thrown off in most pits, and only used where they are allowed to sit down to their dinner, or on coming out of the pit. As to cleanliness during work, it is impossible; but at the same time I was much pleased at the particularly neat and clean appearance of the collier children I met with at the various Sunday Schools.

Those cottages which I visited belonging to the colliers varied much in different parts of the district ; at Ilkstone (*sic*) and its neighbourhood they were decidedly much more neat and comfortable than any of their neighbours, who were engaged either lace-making, stocking-making, or agriculture; but at South Normanton, and Kirkby they were the picture of dirt and wretchedness. I observed in all parts, if there was but little furniture, every collier's cottage had a blazing fire; this they get free of any expense, and certainly it is a set off against their deprivations.” (Fellows, Report, ss. 50-55; Appendix, Pt. 2, p. 256).

“ In external appearance I think the children in the

South part of the district are healthy, and (with the exception of those who have worked at a very early age being bow-legged), not ill-formed. I have observed that their complexion although not altogether to be called sickly, is of a sallow hue; this, I suppose, follows as a matter of course from their being nearly deprived of daylight.

Those children who are employed at the pit mouth, or in farmers' services are straighter on the legs, and better looking than those working underground. I have noticed the children who do not work, or who have not from an early age worked in pits are well and better formed than those, if even of the same family, who have worked at an earlier age than twelve years." (*Ibid.* s. 45/7, p. 255).

#### *Evidence.*

Dr. Blake "considers they are generally as healthy as the labourers above ground, which he attributes to their better diet" (Fellows, Evidence No. 10, App. Pt. 2, p. 266, 1. 6).

William S. Smith, Esq., Surgeon, "As a body he considers them more healthy than the lower classes in the neighbourhood. The cause of this he attributes to their living better, and he always finds a collier child will sooner get the better of an illness, than a stocking maker, as he has the better stamina. (*Ibid.* No. 83; p. 286, 1.57). See also witnesses Nos. 23, 25, 26, 40, 69, 72, 73, 77, 80, 88, 102, 110, etc.

*Immediate effects of overworking (Derbyshire, p. 34).*

*Sub-Commissioner's Report.*

"In this district, as has been shown, the hours of work are commonly 14 and are sometimes extended to 16 out of the 24, and the mines in general are the most imperfectly drained and ventilated. Of the fatigue of such labour, so protracted and carried on in such places of work,

the following evidence exhibits a striking picture, and it will be observed that the witnesses of every class, children, young persons, colliers, underground stewards, agents, parents, teachers, ministers of religion, all concur in making similar statements."

*Evidence.*

" Thomas Straw, aged seven, Ilkiston:—" They would not let him sleep in the pit, or stand still; he feels very tired when he comes out, gets his tea and goes to bed. Feels tired and sleepy on a Sunday morning; would rather be in bed than go to school." (Fellows, Evidence No. 21, App. pt. 2, p. 269, 1.11). John Hawkins, aged eight, Underwood:—" Is tired and glad to get home, never wants to play." (*Ibid.*, No. 108; p. 293 1.16). George Pollard, Strelley, " Feels very tired, his back and shoulders ache; he is always too tired to play " (*Ibid.*, No. 16; p. 295 1.8). Thomas Moulton, aged nine, Trowell:—" They want no play, but go home to bed as soon as they can." (*Ibid.* No. 15, p. 267, 1.35). Matthew Carrington, aged nine, Ilkiston:—" Is very tired, and very seldom goes out of doors." (*Ibid.*, No. 19, p. 268, 1.45). Robert Blount, aged ten, Eastwood:—" He is always too tired to play and is glad to get to bed; his back and legs ache; he had rather drive plough, or go to school, than work in a pit." (*Ibid.*, No. 99, p. 290, 1.34). Joseph Skelton, aged ten, Underwood: " He is very tired, and always glad to get to bed; had much rather work above ground; they dare not then work them so hard." (*Ibid.*, No. 109, p. 293. 1.35). Aaron Chambers, aged eleven, Watnall:—" He never plays from one week to another; he is too tired without playing; had rather do any work above ground; it is such hard work." (*Ibid.*, No. 101, p. 291, 1.30). William Hart, aged eleven, West Hallam:—" Has felt so tired that he was glad to get home, and too tired to play; has felt very stiff and tired on a Sunday." (*Ibid.*, No. 52, p. 277, 1.40). Joseph Limb,

aged eleven, Loscoe:—"Never plays when he has done threequarters of a day's work, he is too tired." (*Ibid.*, No. 68, p. 282, 1.59). George Riley, twelve years old, Babbington:—"At night he is so stiff and sore that when he sits down, he can hardly get up again." (*Ibid.*, No. 147, p. 301, 1.56). William Watson, aged twelve, Watnall:—"Always too tired to play, and glad to get to bed." (*Ibid.* No. 102, p. 291, 1.54). William Trancer, aged twelve, Bagthorpe:—"Is very tired and glad to get home; his arms, legs and back all ache." (*Ibid.*, No. 80, p. 285, 1.50). Stephen Morley, aged twelve, Newthorpe:—"Had rather work above ground, the collier's work is so hard; often is so tired that his limbs ache again." (*Ibid.*, No. 134, p. 299, 1.8).

John Bostock, aged seventeen, Babbington:—"Has often been made to work, until he was so tired as to lie down on his road home until 12 o'clock, when his mother had come and led him home; has done so many times when he first went to the pits; he has sometimes been so fatigued that he could not eat his dinner, but has been beaten and made to work until night; he never thought of play; was always too anxious to get to bed; is sure that this is all true" (*Ibid.*, No. 146, p. 301, 1.33). John Leadbeater, aged 18, Babbington:—"Has two miles to go to the pit, and must be there before six, and works until eight, he has often worked all night, and been made by the butties to work as usual the next day; has often been so tired that he has lain in bed all Sunday. He knows no work so bad as that of a pit lad." (*Ibid.*, No. 138, p. 300, 1.16). Samuel Radford, aged 19, New Birchwood:—"Has been a week together and never seen daylight, but on a Sunday and not much then, he was so sleepily." (*Ibid.*, No. 271, p. 236. 1.45). See also Nos. 51, 53, 195.

These statements of the Children are fully confirmed by the evidence of the adult workpeople:—William Fletcher, collier, West Hallam, "Considers the collier's life a very

hard one, both for man and boy; the latter full as hard as the former." (*Ibid.*, No. 57, p. 279, 1.18). John Beasley, collier, aged 49, Shipley, "He has known instances where children have been so overcome with the work as to cause them to go off in a decline; he has seen those who could not get home without their father's assistance, and have fallen asleep before they could be got to bed; has known children of six years old sent to the pit, but thinks there are none now at Shipley under seven or eight; in his opinion a boy is too weak to stand the hours even to drive between until he is eight or nine years old; the boys go down at six in the morning, and has known them kept down until nine or ten until they are "almost ready to exhaust"; the children and young persons work the same hours as the men; the children are obliged to work in the night if the waggon road is out of repair, or the water coming on them; it happens sometimes two or three times in the week; they then go down at six p.m. to six a.m. and have from ten minutes to half an hour allowed for supper according to the work they have to do; they mostly ask the children who have been at work the previous day to go down with them, but seldom have to oblige them; when he was a boy he has worked for 36 hours running many a time, and many more besides himself have done so." (*Ibid.* No. 40, p. 274, 1.23). William Wardle, aged 40, Eastwood, "There is no doubt that colliers are much harder worked than labourers. Indeed it is the hardest work under heaven." (*Ibid.* No. 84, p. 287, 1.51). Samuel Richards, aged 40, Awsworth, "There are Sunday Schools when they will go: but when boys have been beaten, knocked about, and covered with sludge all the week, they want to be in bed to rest all day on Sunday." (*Ibid.*, No. 166, p. 307, 1.58). William Sellers, operative, aged 22, "When he first worked in a pit, he has been so tired that he has slept as he walked." (*Ibid.*, No. 222, p. 319, 1.35).

William Knighton, aged 24, Denby, "He remembers 'mony' a time he has dropped to sleep with the meat in his mouth through fatigue. It is those butties; they are the very devil; they first impose upon them in one way, then in another." (*Ibid.*, No. 314, p. 334, 1.42). Engine man, Babbington, "Has when working whole days often seen the children lie down on the pit bank and go to sleep, they were so tired." (*Ibid.*, No. 137, p. 300, 1.10). John Attenborough, schoolmaster, Greasley, "Has observed the collier children are more tired and dull than the others but equally as anxious to learn." (*Ibid.*, No. 153, p. 304, 1.22). Ann Birkin, "Is mother to Thomas and Jacob; they have been so tired after a whole day's work that she has at times had to wash them and lift them into bed." (*Ibid.*, No. 81, p. 285, 1.59). Hannah Neale, Butterley Park, "They come home so tired that they become stiff, and can hardly get to bed. Constantine, the one ten years old, formerly worked in the same pit as his brothers, but about half a year since his toe was cut off by the bind falling; notwithstanding this, the loader made him work until the end of the day, although in the greatest pain. He was out of work more than four months owing to this accident." (*Ibid.*, No. 237, p. 320, 1.51). Ellen Wagstaffe, Watnall. "Has five children, three at Trough-Lane, and two at Willow Lane, Greasley; one at Trough Lane is 18; one 14; one 13 years of age, and those at Willow Lane, Greasley, are sixteen and nineteen; they are variously employed; the youngest was not seven years old when he first went to the pits. The whole have worked since they were seven or seven and a half; they have worked from six to eight; from six to two for half days, no meal time in half days; she has known them when at full work so tired when they first worked that you could not hear them speak, and they fell asleep before they could eat their suppers. It has grieved her to the heart to see them." (*Ibid.*, No. 104, p. 292, 1.18). Ann Wilson, Underwood,



"Is mother to Richard Clark, and mother-in-law to Matthew Wilson; has heard what they have said and believes it to be true; has known when they work whole days they have come home so tired and dirty that they could scarcely take their clothes off; has had to do it for them and take them to the brook to wash them and has sat up most of the night to get their clothes dry. The next morning they have gone to the pit like bears to the stake." (*Ibid.*, No. 112, p. 294, 1.5). Hannah Brixton, Babbington. "The butties slave them past anything. Has frequently had them drop asleep as soon as they have got in the house, and complain of their legs and arms aching very bad." (*Ibid.*, No. 149, p. 302, 1.44).

William Hawley, Schoolmaster, Ilkiston (*sic*) "Has certainly perceived those children who work in the pits much more dull and stupid than the others both at school and chapel; it is his opinion, children are at the pits too young, and it is decidedly too long for children to work from six to eight; he has often to complain of the colliers' children's bad attendance on Sunday mornings and the reply generally is they were so tired they overslept themselves." (*Ibid.*, No. 32, p. 271, 1.47). Isaac Rowtham, Schoolmaster, West Hallam, "Has observed boys who have been brought up in the free school and afterwards worked in a pit, and attended the Sunday School, read much worse than they formerly did, and are duller, and more tired than other boys, although equally as willing to learn." (*Ibid.*, No. 159, p. 279, 1.7). Samuel Brentnall, Kimberley School, "Has been Superintendent more than six years; has observed the pit boys much duller and more stupid at learning; they are very heavy and drowsy, and frequently drop asleep during the service; has observed this more frequently among the younger ones." (*Ibid.*, No. 165, p. 307, 1.19). Daniel Hook, Schoolmaster, Radford. "Has often observed and mentioned it, that the pit boys are anxious and willing to be taught, but he

scarcely knew one but what was duller than the other boys in the school and always appeared more tired and sleepy." (This opinion was agreed to by the other teachers). (*Ibid.* No. 40, p. 264, 1.6.). Samuel Morris, Schoolmaster, Ilkist-on (*sic*) "Has noticed that they are much more tired than other boys, and do not come before ten; they also much more apt to sleep during the service than others." (*Ibid.*, No. 30, p. 271. 1.9). William Robinson, Sunday School Teacher, "Has taught the class where the principal part of the collier boys are; he finds them duller and more tired than the other boys; he often has seen the bigger boys fall to sleep, and is sure they are not so quick as the frame-work knitting boys; they have told him, excepting on a Sunday they are months without seeing daylight; another reason is, that being so fatigued, they do not attend school-hours so well as the other boys; they often tell him they could not awake; he finds they are as willing, but far backward than the other boys, who are not so old." (*Ibid.*, No. 231, p. 271, 1.35). Rev. F. Hewgill, rector, Radford, "He certainly thinks, indeed has noticed, they are more dull than their school-fellows." (*Ibid.*, No. 6, p. 264, 1.54) Rev. W. J. Hobson, minister of Trowell, "Has observed they appear more tired and do not attend so early, and the parents, when applied to often say they come home so wearied they cannot get them to school in time. (*Ibid.*, No. 11, p. 266, 1.33).

#### *Stunted Growth.*

"Andrew Blake, M.D., states of the colliers in Derbyshire, that "he has observed that many of them are not so tall as their neighbours in other employments; this, in a degree, he considers is owing to their being employed too young." (Fellows, Evidence No. 10, App. pt. 11, p. 266, 1.10).

#### *Crippled Gait.*

"In Derbyshire the children who have worked in the

collieries from a very early age are stated to be bow-legged," (Fellows, Report, s. 45; App. pt. 11, p. 255).

#### *Diseases.*

"I met with very few colliers above forty years of age, who, if they had not a confirmed asthma, were not suffering from difficult breathing" (Fellows, Report, s. 57; App. pt. 11, p. 256). Phoebe Gilbert, Watnall; "She thinks they are much subject to asthma. Her first husband, who died aged 57, was unable to work on that account for seven years" (Fellows, Evidence, No. 105, App. pt. 11, p. 292, 1.46). William Wardle, collier, 40 years of age, Eastwood: "There are some who are asthmatical, and many go double" (*Ibid.*, No. 84; p. 287, 1.40).

#### *Premature Old Age and Death, p. 73.*

Of Derbyshire the Sub-Commissioners reports:—

"I have not perceived that look of premature old age so general amongst colliers, *until they are forty years of age*, excepting in the loaders, who evidently appear so at twenty-eight or thirty; and this I think must arise from the hardness of their labour in having such great weights to lift, and breathing a worse atmosphere than any other in the pit." (Fellows, Report, s. 49; App. pt. 11, p. 256). Phoebe Gilbert states:—"The loaders are, as the saying is "Old men before they are young ones." (Fellows, Report, Evidence No. 105; p. 292, 1.48). Dr. Blake says: "He has also noticed that when a collier has worked from a child, and becomes forty, he looks much older than those of the same age above ground." (*Ibid.*, No. 10. p. 266, 1.8).

#### MORAL CONDITION.

##### *Means of Instruction (p. 152).*

In Derbyshire the Sub-Commissioner reports:—that there are no other means of instruction for the children employed in labour than Sunday schools; that there are indeed some National and Free schools from which

however, the collier children are excluded by the rules of the schools; and that the constant answer of the coal-owners and agents to his enquiries throughout the district is "No School, no reading room, no club, nor anything of the sort connected with these coal works." (Fellows, Report, Mines; Mines; App. pt. II, p. 257, ss. 69 *et seq.*; Evidence pp. 275 *et seq.* Nos. 45, 50, 66, 109, 125).

*Use of Means of Instruction* (p. 162).

Both these causes operate with peculiar force in the Derbyshire district, and the Sub-Commissioner reports:—"I as well as the schoolmasters, have found a dullness about these children not in other boys; with one striking exception, namely the Chesterfield Union, in which it is the custom to work only ten hours a day; here the children look much happier, and without the dullness so apparent in them in other parts of the district." Of the children in general in the coalfields of this district the clergymen and agents says: "They appear more tired and do not attend so early; and the parents when applied to often say they come home so wearied that they cannot get them to school in time. When the boys have been beaten, knocked about and covered with sludge, all the week they want to be in bed all day to rest on Sunday." (Fellows, Report, Mines. App. pt. II, p. 258., s. 87. Evidence, p. 266, 1.33).

*Attendance at Public Worship.* (Derbyshire, p. 167).

In Derbyshire, "attendance at a place of worship is nearly confined to those children who attend the Sunday schools, and who as a matter of course, go with the whole of the scholars to the church or chapel to which the school is attached"; and great numbers of the children themselves give such evidence as the following:—"Neither he nor his parents go to church or chapel; goes to no school." (Fellows, Evidence, Mines, App. pt. II, p. 343, 1.4). "Neither attends church, school, nor chapel; quite

ignorant, rather ashamed." (*Ibid.*, p. 347, 1.20). "Does not go to school, church, or chapel; does anything on Sunday." (*Ibid.*, p. 331, 1.35). "Works on Sunday, and can neither attend church, school, nor chapel." (*Ibid.*, p. 354, 1.41). "Neither he, nor any of his family go to church or chapel." (*Ibid.*, p. 353, 1.42).

*Inefficiency of Day School Teachers.* (*Derbyshire* p. 173).

The method of teaching commonly pursued by these instructors is such as might be expected from their own general want of knowledge, and especially their ignorance of the mind of a child whose body is exhausted by labour. The teachers in general, says Mr. Fellows, allow the children to read without seeing that they attach any meaning to the words. "If I called a child to read a verse or two and afterwards asked the meaning of any one particular word therein, in almost every case I have found them at a loss; for instance I asked a very good reader what was the meaning of the word "weary"; he could not tell; I then appealed to the whole class; at last a boy said he knew—it was a lad who wore his clothes out." (Report, Mines, App. pt. 11, p. 258, s. 83).

*Inefficiency of Sunday School Teachers.* (*Derbyshire*, p. 174).

Of the inefficiency of these schools, the Sub-Commissioner gives the following practical illustrations:—"Has been three years at the Brinsley Church Sunday School; cannot say his A.B.C." (Fellows, Evidence, Mines; App. pt. 11, p. 295, 1.35). "Has been 4 or 5 years to Baptist Sunday-school; cannot spell horse or cow, and is otherwise very ignorant." (*Ibid.*, p. 294, 1.1.). "Has been to Calvinistic Sunday School 4 years; can spell neither church nor house." (*Ibid.*, p. 272, 1.70). "Has been at the Methodists' Sunday School, Ripley 5 years; only reads, a, b, ab,; cannot spell in the least; cannot tell what d - o - g spells—he says "gun" (*Ibid.*, p. 315,

1.18). (See also Nos. 12, 76, 77, 90, 108, 111, 123, 133, 207, 229, 301, 311, *et seq.*).

*Actual Moral State.* (Derbyshire, p. 180).

Mr. Fellows reports that in Derbyshire the moral condition of the children and young persons depends much on the character of the butty and the overlooker; that some of these men are class teachers among the Methodists, and will not allow a bad example to be set the children; while others are profane and immoral, encouraging in the children swearing and every other kind of vice; but that, after his examination of the district, he entertains a much higher opinion of the colliers, both men and children, than he did from hearsay. (Report, Mines, Pt. II, p. 257, ss. 60, *et seq.*).

*Exertions to Advance and Indifference regarding Education.*

Indifference of Parents to the Childrens' education in the Mining Districts. (Derbyshire, p. 254).

Mr. Fellows states that the sole wish of the parents examined by him seemed in general to be "to make all they could out of their children at as early an age as possible without regarding their future welfare"; and that "he has not only heard of, but has witnessed the anxiety of the father and mother that their coming off-spring may be a boy; both uniting in lamenting their fate should it happen to be a girl, "because in that case they could not send it so early to labour." (Report, App. pt. II, p. 258, s. 88).