

EVIDENCE COLLECTED BY DR. MITCHELL: SOUTH STAFFORDSHIRE COAL FIELD

No.13 - William Troughton

I was 18 in last March. I began to work in the pits 3 years ago. I carried dirt or slack from the men holing the coals back into the gob. I crawled under the coals, and with a rake filled a basket, and then crawled out and carried the basket back about 20 yards, and emptied it out. I came by half-past 5 and got down by 6, and went to work. Men crawled under to take out the big coal and rolled and pushed it out and loaded the skips and then the boys crawled in and filled the baskets with the slack, being the small coal and dust. If the coal be as big as an orange, it is taken up by the men for the forges and furnaces but if the coal is only as big as an egg it is not worth taking and the men leave it.

The boys keep on trousers, shoes, and stockings, to this work. The coal sometimes gets inside the trousers and annoys, and you sweat, and the dust sticks to the skin.

When we come home after 6 we wash the face, and neck, and hands, and half up the arm, and wipe the breast with a towel. The boys have a pint of beer allowed to dinner and a pint in the hovel after coming up...

We have generally a jack bit in the morning before starting from home. The boys take down a little bit of bread and cheese and a drop of beer, and a drop of coffee - sometimes only water - and have it when they can so as not to stop the work. The doggy sees that they do not stop the work. The doggy is always a good workman, but he is very strict over the others. He has 5s. a-day, and all he does is to walk about in the pit and make other people work. Some of them would not work if it were not for the doggy. He assists the butty. We must take the coffee from the bottle when and how we can.

The dinners are sent down the pits in the skips and we know them by the marks on the handkerchiefs. The dinners are carried to a large room cut out of the coal and we assemble and sit all round and one of the men in the middle, with the bottle pours out the drink into a cup and serves everybody in turn, until it is all used.

When I came up at night I used to have broth warmed up, the remainder of what had been used at dinner, and perhaps bread and cheese. We never had meat for supper. We are sometimes allowed to take home part of our beer from the hovel, instead of drinking it there.

We have great deal of fun when at dinner in the pit. Sometimes there is swearing but if the butty hear the swearing, or if anybody tell him, he keeps off the beer from the offender; but it is all drunk by the others. The men all agree to this rule and it is strictly enforced. any part of the pit the religious men will tell on him, and he loses his beer that day. The men are afraid to swear for fear of losing the drink.

No.13 - William Troughton (Continued)

Between supper and bed-time in summer I would take a walk out and come back, and go to bed at nine. I sleep very sound, but waken regularly at five.

After twelve months I took to be a horse-driver, and got 3s. a-day for the days I worked, which would be four or five days a-week.

If a man belonging to the pit get killed, nobody works until alter the funeral, which is usually on the Sunday. The master is at all the expense of the burying in such case. The master allows the widow six shillings a-week, as long as she continues a widow, and every month a load of 15 cwt. or a ton of coals they do not stand very particular. The men also collect 6s. a-week for her for 6 months, to enable her to turn herself round. All the men of the pit attend the funeral of a man who has been killed, and the butty finds them in bread and cheese and drink and they generally get very freshish before they leave. The butty gives them good public-house beer on such occasions.

We have 20 men and 20 boys in our pit. The youngest boy is about ten. He sweeps the rails down in the pit. The horses and waggons can come up near to the place where the men work, but the skips may have to go 30 or 40 yards on slips before getting to the horse-way. We have no door boys. The working is about 300 yards from the shaft.

There are hundreds of mice in the pit in all parts. There are crickets chirping everywhere. In some pits there are rats. The rats and mice steal the candles. They come down at first in the oats and hay and breed in the pit. Cats are kept in the pit, and generally make their appearance amongst the men at dinner. We have a cat in the pit which has been down a twelvemonth and lately had 6 young ones.

The pit is warm, beautifully warm. It is about 223 yards from the surface. We hate hundreds of jack-gnats in the pit. They bite you and make a blister on you.

There are wood-lice in any part of the pit wherever there is wood. There are a great many fortylegs and black-clocks. Mushrooms will grow well near the stable, 30 or 40 yards from the shaft. The pit is so warm it could grow anything and there is plenty of water.

The candles used in the pit are short sixteens. Every man has 5 a-day, or whatever may be necessary. About 12lb. are wanted in a day for the men and for the roads. Candles are stuck on the coal all along the roads, for to enable the horses to see .

No.13 - William Troughton (Continued)

We have much sulphur in the pits, more than there is in any part of England, as I have heard people say. Sometimes they cannot work for it. They use a lamp at the bottom of the up shaft. There are fires sometimes lighted at the foot of the shaft.

There is a good deal of choke- damp. When men fall down, the other men get them up the shaft and dig a hole and put the head in and that always brings the man to life again if he has any life left in him at all.

We had ironstone-pits about West Bromwich but they are worked out now. But there are 2 or 3 ironstone-pits a short way off, not a mile.

We settle every week. The butty pays the men at the hovel, to every man his money. The men contribute then 4d. a-piece and send for the value in beer and get good beer, better than butties' beer. A day's work of a pickman is 1 yard 6 inches in front, and 2 yards inwards, and 2 feet high. On Sundays the miners are usually dressed in black clothes.