

WOMEN IN MINING COMMUNITIES

In the nineteenth century the life of coal mining families was drastically altered. Families that had worked together in the mines were now separated by new restrictions. The Coal Mines Regulation Act of 1842 made it illegal for women and young children to work underground. However, the law did not provide any compensation for the lost income.

Many coal mining families had relied on the income of the wife and children to survive. One woman who lost her job because of the act commented that work underground may not have been pleasant, but it was certainly better than starving. This legislation marked the first time that adult women in Scotland were excluded from an occupation on the basis of gender.

In order to comply with the Coal Mines Regulations Act, women bearers working underground were replaced by pit ponies. This was a costly undertaking for mine owners. The animals were expensive to feed and the height of the roof had to be raised to accommodate them. Mine owners were not eager to take on this extra expense or lose their cheap female labour.

Many women were so poor that they were willing to continue working illegally even with a 3s (15p), cut in weekly pay. There were instances of women dressing in men's clothing,

and sneaking into pits through side entrances. Inspector Tremenheere estimated that only 200 of the 2,400 women previously employed in mines had found other jobs by 1845. Many of these women took pride in their work and were not going to give up their way of life, even if it meant acting illegally.

The penalty paid by coal owners for continuing to employ women underground was hardly a deterrent. For example, the mine was only penalised £10 for each female employee found working in the mine. Some mine owners required women to pay this fine themselves if caught. In addition, the Home Office, the department in charge of executing the act, hired only one man to inspect all of Scotland's 2,000 collieries. If coal owners were actually caught breaking the law, the Home Office was hesitant to pursue what was a lengthy and costly trial process.

Women gradually moved into jobs above ground. Mine owners preferred to have women working in the pithead because they worked for lower wages, and did not have a women's union to "stir up trouble." Men had previously refused to become coal bearers, but as women began to replace men at the picking tables, men replaced women underground. In the early 1900s approximately 90% of all women employed at the mines worked sorting coal. Elderly

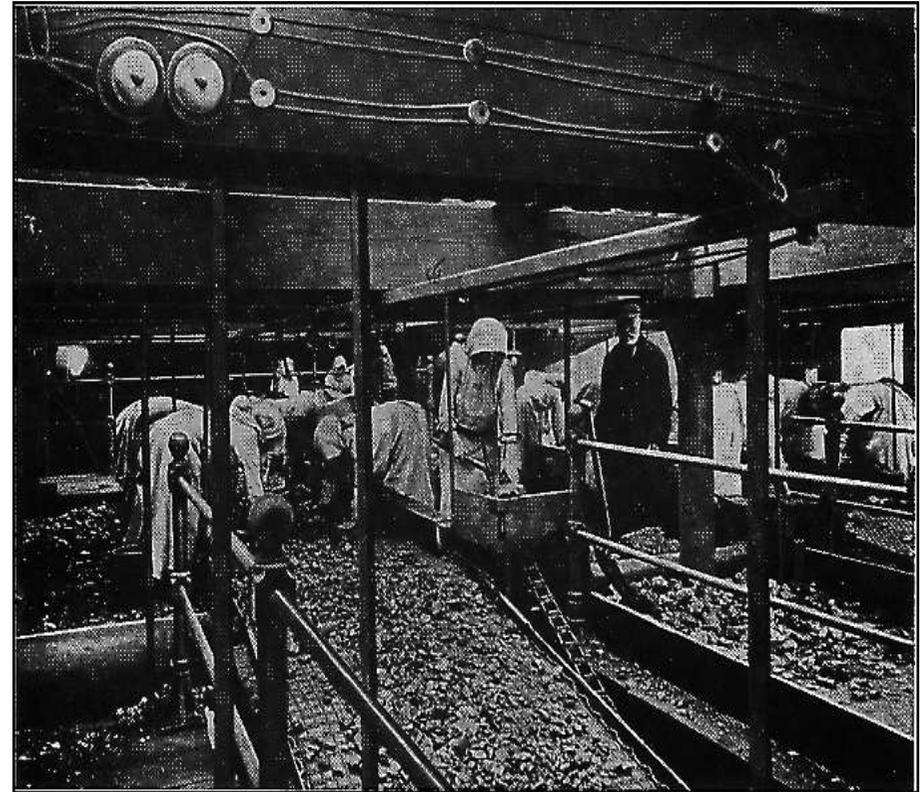
WOMEN IN MINING COMMUNITIES

and disabled male miners were also employed at the picking tables, earning twice as much as female pickers despite the fact that the women worked twice as fast.

The Coal Mines Regulation Act of 1887 raised the minimum working age to twelve. Many children went to work in the mines with their parents once they had finished their schooling. There is one story of a girl who was so small when she began working at the mine that the mine owner told her to bring bricks to stand on in order to reach the picking table.

The sorters stood at the picking tables inspecting the coal that was brought from the pit face, picking out lumps of dirt and rocks. The women were scorned by outside society for wearing trousers and discarded men's jackets, but these clothes were necessary because of the long days spent working in cold dirty conditions. They wore scarves wrapped around their heads, but this did not prevent the coal dust that constantly blew about from sticking to their skin and clothes. Although it was tiring work, the open air of the pit brow was often preferred to the stifling confines of the textile mills, the other alternative for working class women at this time.

Most "pit brow lasses", as they were called, were young women in their twenties, who had parents, brothers, or husbands also working in the mines. In fact, 99% of pit brow



Women at the picking tables, note the male supervisor

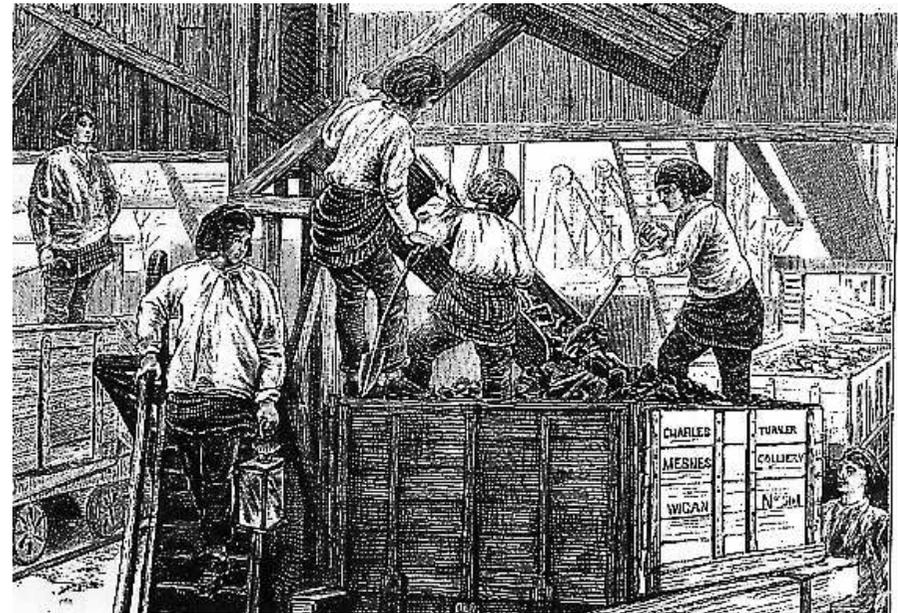
women married miners. These pit brow women were a very tight-knit group, bonding together in the face of the male-dominated industry. Often they formed close friendships with the other pickers, and sometimes sang while they worked. Mine employees worked six days a week. The working hours

WOMEN IN MINING COMMUNITIES

were shorter on Saturday as this was payday. Shifts were usually 12 hours, but there were instances of women working 18 hour shifts.

Women had little time for leisure activities because time off was usually devoted to housework. However, they did find some time for fun. They would meet friends at the markets on Friday and Monday evenings, and on Saturday afternoons. There were dances within the mining community and festivals to mark special occasions. As part of these festivals, women would participate in contests, such as baking competitions. On days off they would host tea parties for other friends from the mine. These pit brow lasses enjoyed the freedom and independence of their lifestyle, and often used their earnings to buy penny romance novels and music.

Throughout the nineteenth century the male-dominated miner's union put pressure on women to leave the mines. They argued for more of the picking jobs to be given to disabled miners. Many women's positions were turned over to men. The union believed that removing the female work force would make it easier to demand higher wages for miners to support their families.



Women loading coal hutches

There were concerted efforts in Parliament to completely ban women from the mines in 1887 and 1911, yet women were able to hold onto their way of life. Following the organised protests of women in 1887, the Mines and Collieries Acts merely banned them from pushing heavy wagons.

WOMEN IN MINING COMMUNITIES

As technology developed in the early 20th century, washers and cleaning machines began to take over the role of human pickers. By the 1950s there were less than one thousand women employed in the mines, compared to somewhere between 5000 and 6000 in 1841. The last two women to be employed in the British coal industry retired in 1972, marking the end of an era for female labour in the mines.

For hundreds of years the hands of women helped to shape Scotland's most important industry. The pit brow lasses were dedicated to supporting their families, and took pride in their work. When Jane Brown, a coal picker, was asked if she would rather go to work in another job, she answered defiantly that she would never leave the pit brow because that was where she belonged and the other picking girls would miss her. These women pulled together in a common struggle, leaving behind a trail of sweat and tears, and their legacy should not be forgotten.



Women workers loading coal from a coal chute
