

Why is it difficult to find out what **children's** working conditions were like?

## Lesson 2: MINES

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many children faced the dangers of work in coal mines. As the demand for coal increased, more and more children were employed in the mines. Men and older boys worked as '**hewers**', cutting the coal with picks. Women and younger children hauled the coal along dark tunnels to the shaft bottom where it was loaded into baskets and winches to the surface.

Children as young as eight worked as '**trappers**', opening the doors to let the coal trucks pass along the tunnels.

The following sources can tell us a lot about work in the mines, but it is not always easy to find out what children's working conditions were **really** like.

### **30 August 1820**

Frederick William Bond age twelve

Head fractured by kick from a horse in Clandown coal pit.

### **14 December 1821**

William Bourne age nine

Killed by falling down Ludlow coal pit: 24 fathoms (122 feet)

### **26 November 1824**

George Chappel age eight

Killed by falling down Ludlow coal pit

### **4 October 1835**

John Ashman age eleven

Killed by falling down the Tynning coal pit

### **16 November 1842**

Joseph Parfitt age nine

Killed by bad air in a coal pit

### **Background to Source 1:**

*These extracts are from the parish register of Radstock in Somerset. The burial register is particularly useful because it recorded the cause of death and the age of the people concerned.*

### **ACCESS:**

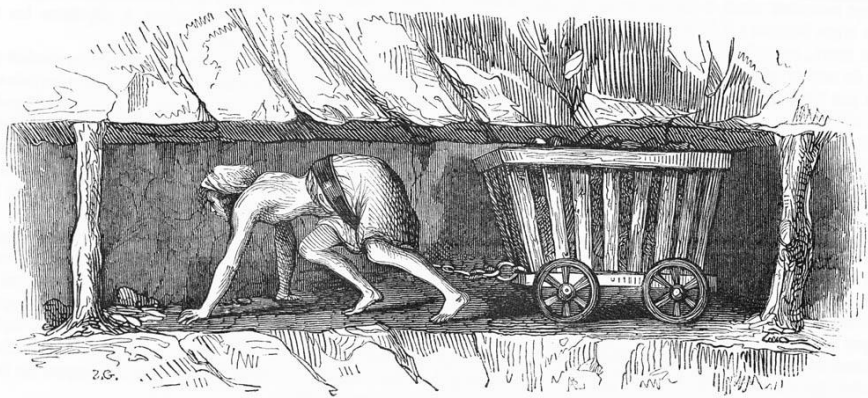
What **do** the extracts tell us about children's work in coal mines?

Why is this source likely to give us reliable information about children's deaths in the mines?

What **don't** these extracts tell us about children's work in coal mines?

**Background to Source 2:**

*In 1840, the government set up a royal commission to investigate working conditions in the mines. Over the next two years, the four commissioners and twenty sub-commissioners interviewed hundreds of men, women and children from coal pits across the country. The final report of the commission filled three volumes when it was published in 1842. It gives us very detailed evidence about children's work. However, some people at the time opposed reform of the mines. These people claimed the report exaggerated bad conditions. They said that the commissioners asked leading questions and that some children lied about their work. They also claimed that the pictures showed the very worst cases of child labour in the mines.*



**Janet Cumming, a coal bearer, eleven years old**

I go down with the women at five in the morning and come up at five at night. I carry the large bits of coal from the wall face to the pit bottom. It is some weight to carry. The roof is very low. I have to bend my back and legs and the water comes frequently up to the calves of my legs. Have no liking for the work. Father makes me like it. Never got hurt, but obliged to scramble out of the pit when the bad air was in.

**Alexander Gray, a pump boy, ten years old**

I pump out the water in the under bottom of the pit to keep the men's rooms (the coal face) dry. I am obliged to pump fast or the water would cover me. I had to run away a few weeks ago as the water came up so fast that I could not pump at all. The water frequently covers my legs. I have been two years at the pump. I am paid 10d per day. No holiday but the sabbath (Sunday). I go down at three, sometimes five in the morning, and come up at six or seven at night.

**ACCESS:**

Why is the *Report on the Employment of Children in Mines* such a useful source for historians?  
Think of two problems which historians face when using the text and pictures from this source.

**Background to Source 3:**

*Many mine owners were worried by the Report on the Employment of Children in Mines. If the government decided to stop children working in mines, the mine owners' profits would fall.*

*The Marquess of Londonderry owned many pits in the north-east of England. In 1842, he attacked the report in the House of Lords. This is an extract from his speech:*

The commissioners expected and desired to find ill-treatment of children. Their instructions were to examine the children themselves, artful boys and ignorant young girls, and to put questions in a manner which suggested the answer.

The trapper is generally cheerful and contented, and to be found occupied with some childish amusement, such as cutting sticks, making models and drawing figures with chalk on his door.

**ACCESS:**

Why did the Marquess of Londonderry attack the report?

What did the Marquess of Londonderry think about the commissioners?