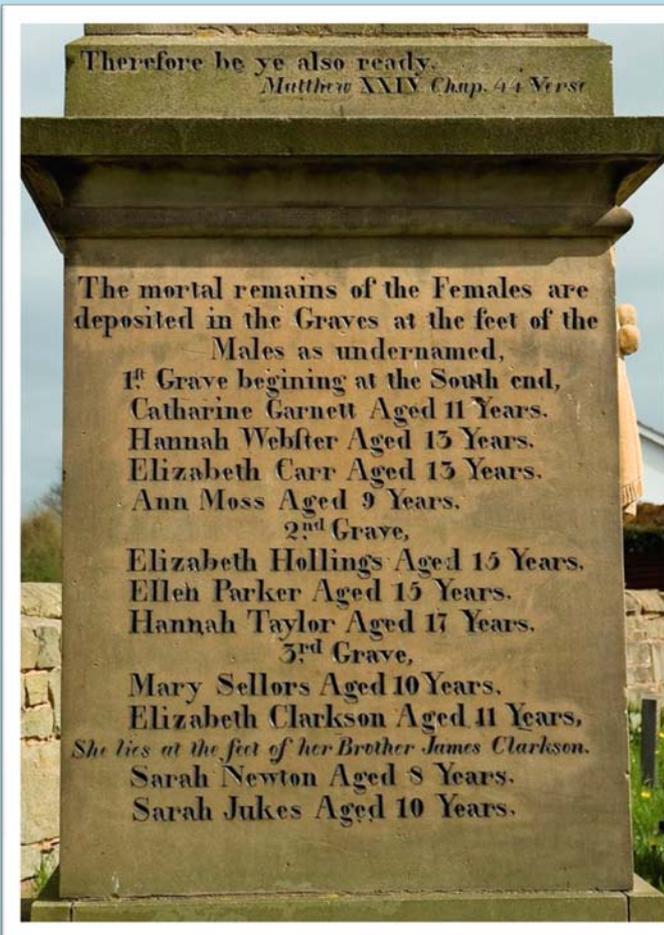


Background Information:



The 1842 Royal Commission

The 1833 Factory Act had stopped the employment of children under nine working in textile mills. Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper, later the Earl of Shaftesbury, campaigned for similar protection for children in coal mines. His efforts brought about the setting up of a Royal Commission to enquire into the working conditions in coal mines, in particular its effect on women and children.



Huskar Memorial, All Saints Church, Silkstone
© NCMME

On the 4th July 1838 at Huskar pit in Silkstone Common near Barnsley, twenty six children lost their lives in one tragic accident. This increased public concern and made it become more urgent to set up the Commission.

1842 Children's Employment Commission

The Commission was intended to collect information about the condition and treatment of children working in mines.

Four commissioners were appointed to collect and compile evidence for the Commission. Britain was divided into districts and each district was assigned a sub-commissioner. These men had a difficult job. They were sent to do an inspection visit at every coal mine. For example, Mr Symonds, during his visit to the Yorkshire coal mines, visited 200 pits and actually went down and explored 70 of them. Most importantly he interviewed a wide range of people at the coal mine, from the owners to the youngest child working as a trapper.

The purpose was:

- to collect information about the condition of children working in the mines
- to publish a report on the findings

- to advise on any new laws

During their investigation the sub-commissioners investigated the following subjects:

- the number of women and children employed
- at what age they were employed
- how they were hired
- terms of employment such as hours of work, holidays, wages
- working conditions
- treatment of children, juveniles and women
- accidents and long term effects on physical well-being

Evidence to the Commission was not given under oath, but a written record was made of every interview. Some workers, afraid that they might lose their jobs, may have made light of their working conditions. Some children had experienced no other working life except coal mining and could not compare it to other sorts of work. Others may have taken the opportunity to speak honestly about their lives.

The sub-commissioners were horrified by what they learned during their investigations. They each wrote detailed reports and sent them to be put together in one report, in London. This report was the first Royal Commission report to feature illustrations.

After 1842

Many people were shocked at the findings of the Commission. In particular they were shocked to learn that women and girls worked all day with men who generally worked naked.

Although Lord Shaftesbury had to make compromises on some of his recommendations, he did achieve his main reform in an Act of Parliament that was passed in 1842. It stated that it was illegal to employ a female of any age, or a boy under the age of ten, underground at a mine.

Consequences

Mining families suffered hardship as men and boys could not produce the same amount of coal as they had done with the assistance of the women and younger children. This meant that the family wage was not as much as before.

More boys of ten and over were employed which actually increased the number of children

employed underground.

Women had to find other work, but many women found it difficult to find other jobs in coalfield areas. Some got jobs on the surface of the pit whilst others had to look elsewhere. Some women and children continued working illegally, sometimes with the knowledge of the mine owners or managers.

More horses and ponies were used to transport coal. In some cases this was more costly than employing people. Food and bedding taken underground for horses and ponies encouraged larger numbers of rats or mice into pits. Some roadways may have needed to be made bigger to allow horses and ponies to travel. Mine owners would also need to employ men to look after the horses.

The Act was well intentioned but the implications of it weren't really taken into consideration. With only one inspector in Britain to check that the law was obeyed, it was difficult to enforce. Nevertheless it marked the first step in improving the lives of mining children and improving conditions and working practices in coal mines.



further reading

Fact

Devlin,R., 1988. *Children in the Pit* (The Friends of Whitehaven Museum).

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Preece, R., 1992. *Danger in the Dark* (NCMME).



museum links

Find out more about the 1842 Children's Employment Commission on site at the Museum, in the 1842 Gallery.

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