

Resource 3

The lives of working children

Statements taken from children as part of the *Royal Commission into Child Labour* of 1842.

Cotton mill workers:

Elizabeth Bentley went to work at the mill when she was six years old, often working from five o'clock in the morning until nine o'clock at night to support her widowed mother. Her job was that of a 'doffer'. When the machines were full, her job was to take the full bobbins off, carry them to the roller, put empty bobbins back on again and then start the frame going once more.

When she was ten she worked as a 'weigher' in the carding-room from half-past five in the morning until eight at night. The carding room was full of dust, which got in her lungs and made it impossible to see across the room. The basket she pulled around was filled with weights, and her shoulder often became dislocated.

"I have been employed in piecening at a worsted mill...the hours of labour were from six in the morning until seven and half-past seven and eight at night; half an hour was allowed at noon for dinner - not any time was allowed for breakfast or drinking."

Benjamin had started working in the mill at the age of nine, his father being unable to provide for him. He told of being forced to work in a bent over position for thirteen or fourteen hours a day. He was unable to write and could read only poorly, having not received any type of education and had no prospects.

Coal mine workers:

Alexander Macdonald: *"I entered the mines at about eight years of age. The condition of the miner's boy then was to be raised about 1 o'clock or 2 o'clock in the morning if the distance was very far to travel, and at that time I had to travel a considerable distance, more than three miles. We remained at the mine until 5 and 6 at night."*

We had leather belts for our shoulders. We had to keep dragging the coal with these ropes over our shoulders, sometimes round the middle with a chain between our legs. Then there was always another behind pushing with his head."

Keir Hardie worked for twelve or fourteen hours a day as a trapper. *"The work of a trapper was to open and close a door which kept the air supply for the men in a given direction. It was an eerie job, all alone for ten long hours, with the underground silence only disturbed by the sighing and whistling of the air as it sought to escape through the joints of the door."*

George Anderson. *"In the night shift I go down at 4 pm and come up about 4.30 in the morning. I'm often sleepy. I got my hammers (beaten) twice by being asleep. My door is nearly 2½ miles in. The pit looses (closes) at half past three and though I run I am nigh an hour getting out."*

Jane Peacock Watson began work as a child and was forced to make her children work underground. *"I have wrought in the bowels of the earth 33 years and have been married 23 years, and had nine children... I have always been obliged to work below till forced to go home to bear the bairn (child). We return as soon as we are able, never longer than 10 or 12 days, many less if they are needed."*

Women so soon get weak that they are forced to take the little ones down (the mine) to relieve them; even children of six years of age do much to relieve the burthen"

Eight-year-old Sarah Gooder: *"I'm a trapper in the pit. It does not tire me, but I have to trap without a light and I'm scared. I go at four and sometimes half past three in the morning, and come out at five and half past (in the afternoon). I never go to sleep. Sometimes I sing when I've light, but not in the dark; I dare not sing then. I don't like being in the pit... I would like to be at school far better than in the pit."*

11-year-old, Janet Cumming: *"I carry the large bits of coal from the wall face to the pit bottom. The weight is usually a hundredweight. I do not know how many pounds there are in a hundredweight. The roof is very low and I have to bend my back and legs and the water comes frequently up to the calves of my legs. I have no liking for the work, father makes me like it. I never got hurt, but often am obliged to scramble out of the pit when bad air was in."*