

Women in history

COALMINING WOMEN

VICTORIAN LIVES AND CAMPAIGNS

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3 Above ground – the pit lass

Names and numbers

The pit brow lass or lassie was the girl or woman who worked above ground at coal mines. This is a Lancashire term but writers tended to use it when referring to pit women generally. This was probably because a greater number of women worked at mines in this area than anywhere else in Britain. In 1886 when the future of the women's work was being keenly debated by Margaret Park and others, almost 40 per cent of the total number of women pit workers were employed in west Lancashire, mainly around the towns of Wigan and St Helens. There were also some lesser known terms: in Cumberland the women pit workers were called screen lasses, in the Black Country they were pit bank wenches, in Scotland pit head workers and in Wales where they worked at iron mines, they were known as tip girls.

It is difficult to know exactly how many females were employed in the nineteenth century since many moved from job to job or worked only for a short time, generally leaving when they married or had a child. Not until 1874 are the figures even partially reliable. From this date we can see who was working at a particular date from the reports of the Inspectors of Mines. As you can see from the table the numbers fell from just under 7,000 in that year to just over 4,000 by 1886. It was in 1886 that a serious attempt was made to stop the women working.

Most of the women were single and many were quite young, though they had to be over ten. Some collieries forbade married women to work. Gradually laws were passed which kept young people in school for longer periods. For example, the Education Act of 1880 made school attendance compulsory for those aged between five and ten, though children under 14 could work providing they could prove that they had attended a school or had reached some level of educational achievement. In 1887 the starting age was raised to 12. Some girls

Number of surface females in different districts in 1886

N. Wales	61
S. Wales	835
W. Scotland	41
E. Scotland	576
Yorkshire	5
N. Staffs, Cheshire, Shropshire	319
S. Staffs, Worcs.	237
Northumberland, Durham, Cumberland	398*
N. and E. Lancs	317
W. Lancs	1,321

* All but 3 were in Cumberland.

Numbers of surface females at coal, iron, shale and clay mines

Year	Females	Total surface labour force
1874	6,899	110,218
1881	4,715	96,090
1887	4,183	97,737
1890	4,206	106,421
1900	4,808	155,829

worked as 'half-timers', spending part of the day at a school and the rest at work. One Wigan girl who began in this way at the age of 12½ was so small that the manager had to tell her to bring two bricks to stand on in order to reach the *picking belts*.

What exactly did these girls and women do? The answer is that they performed a wide range of jobs which helped prepare the coal to be sold. The demands and pace of the work and the daily duties could vary quite considerably. In the summer, for example, they were not usually as busy as in the winter months, when there was a greater demand for coal. Perhaps the best way of illustrating the variety of work