



The Lives and Work of Coal Miners in Industrial England

What was life like for the coal miners who fueled Britain's industrialization? Pretty sooty! Men, women, and children lived, worked, and died in industrial England's hazardous mines. With Alan and Taz, Nick Dennis digs into the lives and work of Britain's coal mining communities, past and present.



00:01

Nick Dennis stands underground with Alan and Taz, two coal mine workers. All three of them wear hard hats.

I'm here with Alan and Taz, 459 feet and two and a half inches underground, to find out about the importance of coal and what life was like for miners.

NICK: So how was the coal taken out of the mine, and where did it go?

ALAN: Well, in early days, it was taken outta mine by manual labor. Women, children, anybody that needed employment were employed in the mines.

NICK: So you mentioned women and children working here, can you tell us a bit more about what kind of work they did and who else worked in the mine?

00:48

Drawing of the inside of a coal mine. A small child is opening a door with a rope and a mother is pushing a large cart of coal up to the door

TAZ: Well, the children, both boys and girls, would start as young as four. And we know that's young, but their job, the first job, would be, they were just tied to a door, and sit there listening for their mother. When they've been sat there one hour, mother knocks on the door, the children pull the door open with a rope, and the reason for that is they are sat in total darkness, right? Mother comes through the door, the children close the door. When they get older, and we've moved on to a different period of time, then the children will be doing all the jobs.

NICK: And what about women?

A drawing of a woman, hunched over underground and harnessed to a cart of coal that she is pulling behind her

ALAN: Women usually pulled the carts. The husband used to pick and shovel it out the ground from the seam, then the women used to put the coal lump forms into a like, a skid trolley, harness themselves up to that, and walk on hands and knees, pulling this trolley, until the son at the trapdoor. Then he used to open the trapdoor, and then she went on to main roadway and then out of mine.

01:56

NICK: And how heavy was this trolley with the coal?

ALAN: Well, it's like this, the more coal you got it, the more money you got, so...

NICK: So we've got all this safety equipment, and I'm sure, you know, we're well protected, but,—yes—what was it like, how safe was it for people working the mines?

TAZ: Not very safe.

A drawing of an explosion in a coal mine

ALAN: In the early days there were just hundreds and hundreds just getting killed, and nobody were really bothered, because coal working, life's cheap, and you just got on with it, just something you had to do, and the more careful you were the longer you lasted, so, it were like a culture.

TAZ: There's a byproduct of mining coal, Methane gas. So in the early days, when they're working with the candle, if they hit a pocket of gas, then (boom!) that area will blow. They probably get killed outright, if they're not, they were seriously injured. It's a dangerous environment, yeah.

02:48

In the early days, all the roof supports were wood, and that were important to the miners, because wood, when it's getting old and tired, it talks. It makes two very important noises. The first one is a creek, now you can live with that, but if it gets worse and it gets louder, they get out quick because they know the next thing, it's gonna simply collapse and they'll be buried, yeah?

03:39

*Picture of a jar of Marmite
– Marmite is a black, salty,
gooey substance eaten
on toast for breakfast. Its
marketing slogan is “Love
it or hate it.”*

Gas was also a silent killer. You can't smell it, you can't see it. If they had an inrush of gas, it could kill as many as 20 men in one simple way. And the reason they discovered this, they couldn't understand why all the people were just found dead, and some clever people did some autopsies and realized that it were a gas.

It's an hard thing to explain being a miner, because it's a bit like Marmite—people love it, and people hate it, and the majority of them love it, yeah? I worked in this industry 26 years, best job I've ever had. I won't want to go back to doing anything else. My father worked in it all his life, and his people have got generations, going back—back into 1800s—still working, because some people might say it's bred into 'em, but it's just such a unique job. You can't explain the camaraderie, the friendship, the community spirit when we're were working locally, second to none, anywhere in this world.

ALAN: It was more than a job, it's a way of life, and I think you were just born into, into that profession.