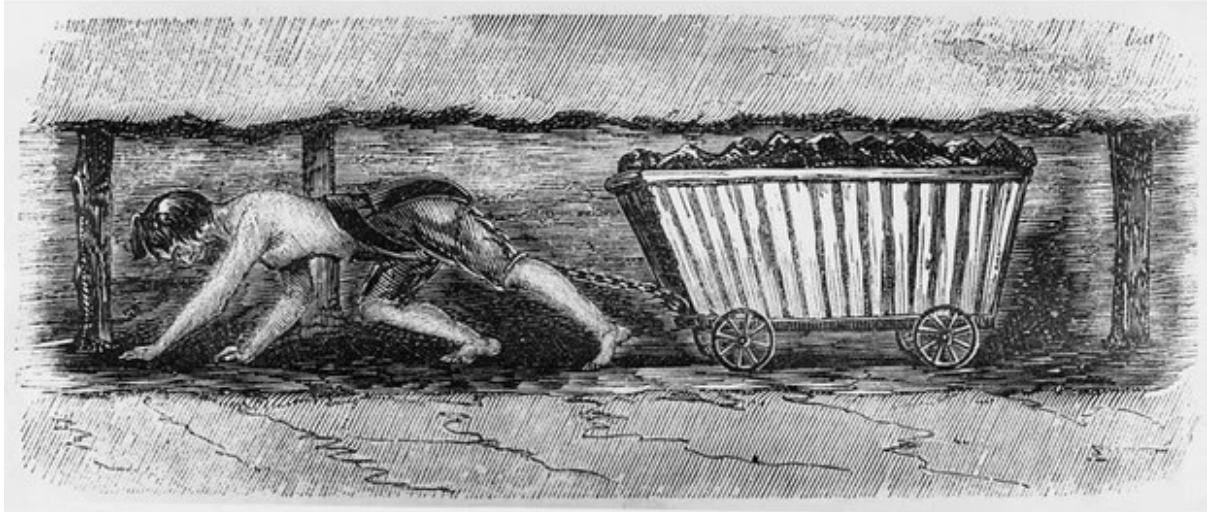


The scandal of female miners in 19th-century Britain

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Images of topless women and girls working down mines caused a furore when they appeared in the British press over 170 years ago. However, as Denise Bates explains, accusations of immorality did not reflect the true situation



A sketch of a young woman miner pulling a cart filled with coal. From the report of the Royal Commission, c1842. (Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images)

Respectable readers of the Morning Chronicle and The Times awoke one morning in May 1842 to disturbing reports of trousered women and girls working underground in mines. Harnessed like animals, they dragged heavy carts of coal. In the coming days increasingly scandalous details from the newly published Report of the Children's Employment Commission appeared in newspapers and periodicals across the country. The greatest scandal was not the brutal work, which damaged women's health, but revelations that they worked topless alongside naked men.

Newspaper coverage of the story was sensationalist. The unambiguous sensuality of pictures commissioned by some periodicals fuelled a rapidly growing feeling that mining girls were corrupted by their surroundings, became immoral in conduct and made bad wives and mothers.

A great fury ignited the country in Britain in the summer of 1842, triggering a press campaign to prevent females from working in underground caverns. However, the actual evidence gathered by the Employment Commission was never adequately reported and rapidly faded from view.

The scandal of female miners surfaced, almost by accident, thanks to social reformer Lord Ashley's stubborn determination to expose the abuse of child workers in factories. In 1840, Ashley (the future Earl of Shaftesbury) prevailed upon Queen Victoria to appoint a commission to investigate practices in a number of industries.

Its officials were instructed to report on the situation of workers aged under 18. However, when investigating coalmines in east Scotland, west Lancashire and west Yorkshire some officials were horrified to see women's welfare compromised by work that seemed to be beyond their strength. Four of the investigators then overstepped their instructions and recommended that "such a pernicious system" was changed.



An illustration depicting two children being lowered into a coal mine, c1840. (Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

By the 1840s female mining was already on the wane for a number of reasons. Where union activity was taking hold, miners reckoned that restricting the supply of labour led to higher wages. Some even refused to work alongside women. The mine owners also reaped greater profits with a male workforce because teenage boys were generally stronger than women and could move more coal.

There was a moral dimension too. Respectable miners and owners felt that hauling coal was not an acceptable job for a woman, as some men did work naked. Men often refused to allow their womenfolk underground and some owners stopped girls working as soon as they reached adolescence. All the same, some 6,000 women and girls were still working underground in small pits, often helping their husbands, fathers or brothers. This was a legacy of a much older system of mining when whole families had worked together.

Despite the press furore about topless female miners, the investigators found just one pit where females worked with bare tops, the Hopwood pit at Barnsley. Only six females worked at Hopwood. One was a child who opened the underground doors for coal trucks to pass through. The other five were young teenagers who pushed the trucks. All went to Sunday school or chapel.

Pushing trucks loaded with coal was hot, sweaty work and at Hopwood some tunnels ran uphill, making the task even more onerous. Girls and boys removed their tops for the practical reason that helped them to keep cool, but investigator Jelinger Symons was still appalled. He labelled Hopwood pit as "a nursery for juvenile vice".

Convinced that he had unearthed serious moral failing at Hopwood, Symons began to ask people he was interviewing about the dress and conduct of female workers. He also recruited another investigator, Samuel Scriven, to the venture. Scriven reported seeing 10-year-old Susan Pitchforth without a top when she left work. She was, however, the only half-dressed female that he witnessed.

Topless working

Several male witnesses assured Symons and Scriven that topless working and immorality among mining women were widespread. Yet it may well be that these men were morally opposed to female mining and hoped their evidence might hasten a change in the law. Moreover, their words were contradicted by the evidence of their female counterparts.

For while male witnesses stressed that underground work robbed women of decency of feeling and the skills to run a home, the harrowing testimonies of female miners contradicted the picture of immoral, ungodly women who lacked the ability or motivation to be good wives and mothers. They spoke instead of the practical difficulties a female miner faced when she returned home exhausted by her work and hurting from chafed skin, cuts that became infected, and crushed fingers or feet.

Some were almost too tired to wash when they got home but forced themselves to do so for the sake of cleanliness. Others spent Sunday desperately trying to catch up with housework rather than going to church. Teenage girls, without domestic chores to attend to, reported sleeping for much of Sunday or walking outside in the fresh air after spending six days confined underground.

Fifty-year-old Margaret Baxter explained how she went to the pit at four in the morning and returned home at noon to nurse her sick husband and teach her daughters to sew. Ann Fern and Bessy Bailey said that they were kept away from church on Sundays so that they could learn to cook, sew and knit.

In spite of such statements, the commission's report left a bad impression of mining women. This was partly due to the controversial images that were used to accompany it. For example, when illustrating a safety point, Samuel Scriven included a sketch of two topless teenagers, Ann Ambler and Will Dyson, sitting crotch to crotch as they were hauled out of the mine in a dangerous manner. Two other sketches also appeared to show topless females.

These illustrations, which were not an accurate reflection of the mining women, had a major impact. Together with the witness statements, they had, with the assistance of the press, sparked a public outcry that left politicians almost powerless to resist. Within three months parliament had banned females from underground work to protect their health and morals, and to enable them to look after their families properly.

For some women, mining had been the only employment option, and they went on to suffer years of hardship because there were no other jobs. A few defied the law for a while and continued to work underground. By the end of the 1840s they had generally found a new role, moving coal at the pit head.

The taint of immorality produced by the report would hang over these women for years to come. In fact, it was not until 1911 that those campaigning to have women excluded from any work at the pit head acknowledged that the moral standards of mining women were as high as those who worked in other occupations.