



HEROES UNDERGROUND

The Opening of the Mine and the beginnings of the village

Front Street was then built to provide the shops to supply the wants of the miners and their large families. High Spen was a typical mining village. In green fields, in 1837, a colliery shaft was sunk, workshops erected and a few houses built to house the miners. With the colliery expanding, more houses had to be built. The miners had to be fed so shops were built and the village developed; with the pit-head gear rising like a gallows against the sky, dominating the village.

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1 Explain the words and phrases which are highlighted.

'wants of the miners' =

'colliery shaft' =

'pit-head gear rising like a gallows' =

'dominating the village' =

2 I think the writer likes/doesn't like mining because he uses words and phrases such as

3 How useful is this photograph in showing you what the pit was like?

4 What does it not show

?



Sketches done by one of the workmen

The Miners

*These miners were a **breed apart**. They were hard-working, hard drinking, sport-mad, generous, fit men, who when not down under working in the **bowels of the earth** were working in their gardens, **walking their whippets**, flying their pigeons, playing football or drinking in their clubs. Dressed in navy blue suits, **flat cap and muffler** they lived life to their rules.*

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'breed apart' =

'bowels of the earth' =

'walking their whippets' =

'flat cap and muffler' =

'they lived life to their rules' =



2 I think the writer likes/doesn't likes miners because he uses words and phrases

such as



A museum has asked for a poster showing the appearance of a miner along with his sports and interests. Complete the poster below.





Miner's hobbies and pastimes

'cock-fighting and bare-fist fighting' =

*Pigeons and whippets were the **prerogative of the miner** - no other trade or profession at that time indulged in such hobbies.*

2 Which sports and hobbies would we think were all right today and which would not be allowed?.....

*The **pigeon duckets** were usually painted white, with a splash of red or blue on them, and were at the bottom of the garden or up on the allotment which most miners had.*

*Whippets were kept for the **hare-coursing** which was popular right up till 1959.*

Pitmen Painters – a Group of miners from Ashington took up painting and became famous. One of the most famous was Norman Cornish. Norman Cornish, born 1919 in Spennymoor, County Durham, became a miner at the age of 14 – an occupation he remained in for 33 years.

*The miners also enjoyed other sports. Between 1830–1900 horse-racing, **cock-fighting and bare-fist fighting** took place on Barlow Fell. Jim Waters of Barlow was the local champion.*

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1 Explain the words and phrases which are highlighted.

'prerogative of the miner' =

'hare-coursing' =



Courtesy of Northumbria University



Courtesy of Northumbria University

3 What titles would you give these paintings?

What words would you use to describe the mood and feelings in the sketches and the painting?

How has Norman Cornish been successful in these paintings? Think about how the figures are grouped, the objects in the pictures and the colours that are used.



Working conditions in the Mines

Spen Colliery was not a deep one, so gas was seldom encountered. This meant that naked lights could be used and illumination was offered by candles or carbide lamps. It was no wonder that many miners suffered from eye-trouble. Boys began work in the pit at fourteen years of age. It horrified me to hear the boys at school just longing to start work, and to get a pit-pond of their own. It was the last thing I wanted in fact it was the "big-stick" for me at Grammar School. If my work was not up to standard my Father would say, "Aalreet: If yor not gaan te work, ye'll gaan doon the pit!". That was enough for me - for I wanted to be a teacher.

Working eight or nine hours a day, lying in water, using a hand pick, pushing heavy tubs, seams of only eighteen inches' All this for a mere pittance - no wonder they all went on strike, although it gained them little.

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1 Explain the words and phrases which are highlighted.

'so gas was seldom encountered.' =

'and to get a pit-pond of their own' =

It was the last thing I wanted in fact it was the "big-stick" for me at Grammar School =

"Aalreet: If yor not gaan te work, ye'll gaan doon the pit!". =

'they all went on strike' =

2 *If the work was so hard why do you think boys were keen to work in the pit?.....*

3 *Look at the painting of work underground and the photograph. Which do you think is the better type of evidence for working underground in a mine?.....*



Norman Cornish

Courtesy of Northumbria University



This was taken as late as the 1950s when coal was still extracted as it had since the beginning of the twentieth century.



MINER'S INJURIES

The miners worked in dreadful conditions and deaths were frequent, injuries being everyday occurrences. Two of my Uncles, Bob Donnelley and Bob Johnson died through pit accidents, and my father was brought home one day with *spinal injuries* due to a rope snapping and whipping him.

When someone was killed in the pit, the buzzer sounded and work stopped at the pit. The whole village was silent, wives stood in groups, waiting anxiously to hear which family was to suffer. Being such *a close-knit community the whole village grieved at the death.*

In my Father's day Mr. Redpath was the Area Manager, *living in splendour* in Beda Lodge. Mr. Strong was the Colliery Manager and Mr. Rooney the Under-Manager. Not once did I hear my father say a wrong word about any of them.

Working in such dark, damp and cramped positions with very little light caused much *arthritis, rheumatism* and eye-trouble.

These poor people often in great pain, knew that should the boss hear of it, he would have to *give them notice*, which would mean even more poverty and worse still - *eviction!* They persevered and went to work *sorely crippled*. One

miner, Joe Armstrong could not bend his neck at times and his entree into the mine could be traced by the sounds as he bumped his head on every roof truss. There was also Geordie Charlton of Collingdon Road, who could hardly walk in-bye so gladly accepted a lift in a tub pushed by a workmate, often Stephen Waters. Geordie was so grateful that he always marked the first full tub for Stephen. Mr. Strong himself was well aware of these happenings for he himself was crippled with arthritis but tried hard not to show it.

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1 Explain the words and phrases which are highlighted.

spinal injuries =

a close-knit community the whole village grieved at the death.

=

living in splendour =

arthritis, rheumatism =

They persevered and went to work sorely crippled =



2 Write a report to the board of Health explaining the dangers faced by miners in the pit.

3 Why would miners often keep quiet about the injuries they had suffered?.....



Miner's wives

"bait", baccy (or tabs) =

The *wives were the centre of the family*. They brought up large families on little money; cooked and baked the *home-grown produce*; washed clothing *in antiquated fashion*; a chore taking all day in most houses, disciplined the children, ensured that the worker of the house had his "bait", baccy (or tabs) his cold tea to drink and his carbide or candles to take to work. When they slept I don't know - for they were up with their husbands early in the morning and were always waiting when they returned. A marvellous race indeed and in spite of all this work they maintained a spotless house. These wives made good mothers. They loved their children and saw to it that they were always in when the children returned from school. Nothing was too much trouble when it was for the children.

2 Does the writer think the miner's wives were important/not important?.....

3 Miners wives had a much easier life than their husbands. Do you agree or disagree?.....



Courtesy of Beamish Museum

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1 Explain the words and phrases which are highlighted.

'wives were the centre of the family' =

'home-grown produce' =

'in antiquated fashion' =



Wives of miners forsake their domestic duties for a few moments to discuss the news of the stoppage, which they will feel very keenly.

Credit: Evening Chronicle and Journal



Miner's Daughters

Miner's daughters had to work hard. Before school and on returning, work was there for them. At week-ends they had to help Mum before going out to play and it was quite a common sight to see a group of children playing a game, with nearby two or three prams containing little brothers and sisters – big sisters had been sent out to look after the little babies of the family. Sons escaped lightly. They were the future breadwinners of the family so they were allowed to go out when they wished. Others having cooked meals for the family would put out the plates and even salt the meal for the men! They carried in the coal, cleaned the shoes and waited on the menfolk like slaves. When my girl friend came North (from Salisbury Plain) for the first time in 1961 she was horrified to see my Mother doing so much for Father. She turned to me and very firmly told me not to expect that sort of treatment from her. I told her that my generation didn't expect it – but there are still a few men in High Spen that expect their wives to do most things for them.

1 Explain the words and phrases which are highlighted.

'Sons escaped lightly' =

'even salt the meal for the men!' =

'that my generation didn't expect it' =

2 Is there anything in the account which suggests these attitudes lasted a long time?.....

3 Did the author think women should do everything for their menfolk?.....

4 List the jobs men and women do in your family? How much has changed do you think?.....