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WOMEN WORKERS AT SHROPSHIRE MINES

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SYNOPSIS

Although women have played an important part in Shropshire mining, and in considerable numbers, it must be said that no record has been found of their employment to any great extent underground. Elsewhere in Britain the underground employment of women and girls was commonplace until outlawed in 1842. In 1838 at Silkstone near Barnsley, for example, an inrush of storm water occurred at the Moorside Pit and among the 26 persons drowned were seven girls aged 9 years to 17 years. Ann Moss, age 9 was the youngest girl but some of the boys were still younger, for example, Joseph Birkinshaw age 7 and Abraham Wright age 8.

Probably the earliest reference to women working in the mines in Shropshire occurs about 1688 when some poor inhabitants of Coalpit Bank petitioned for relief from hearth tax on the grounds that they were so poor they were forced to send their wives and children to the pits. From the end of the eighteenth century Parish Records provide some slight evidence that women worked underground, in Maddey between 1800 and 1810 two girls and twenty four men were killed in the pits. At Ketley in 1804 a woman was killed by a roof fall in an ironstone mine while in 1805 a similar accident occurred in an ironstone mine at Wombridge. Other accidents involving women are recorded in Dawley in 1813 and Lilleshall in 1816. None however appears to have been in coal mines and it is certain that the underground employment of women had ceased before the 1842 Mines Act which prohibited such employment.

However the situation was very different at the surface of the mines for by the 1850s several hundred women were at work on the waste heaps and around the pit mouth. Even in 1888 during a period of rapid decline in Shropshire mining the mines inspectors' Report records 256 females at work at Shropshire mines, of whom fifteen were aged between 13 and 16 years. John Randall the local writer described in 1859 a visit to a local mine "here we are at the pit's mouth, men, women and boys all at work and the chains busy over the pulleys, tink-a-tink-tink and clat-clat-clattering over the rollers——". A few years earlier the 1851 census showed some girls to be at work at the age of ten.

The 1861 census for the Little Dawley area gives an interesting insight into family life at the time. At No 24 Little Dawley, lived Elizabeth Evans, widow (aged 43) who worked as an agricultural labourer, daughters Mary Ann (22) and Eliza (18) were both "stone miners", son Bruce (15) was a labourer and three other children were still "scholars". At No.44 Holywell Lane, William Baugh, a stone miner (age 55), lived with his wife Lydia (56) and their children, daughters Rosannah (27) a stone pit labourer and Meriah (16) also a stone pit labourer, and son William (19) a stone pit miner. A further daughter Fanny

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was still a scholar, as were two grandchildren Sarah and Isiah Baugh, who may have been the illegitimate children of Rosannah. No.29 Burrough's Bank, the small squatters' cottage now rebuilt on the Ironbridge Gorge's Blists Hill Site, was the home of the Corbett family, husband, wife and six children of whom two daughters (ages 20 and 14) were pit labourers and three sons (ages 24, 22 and 17) were coal miners.

From the above and other entries it can be seen that most pit girls were described variously as stone miners, stone pit labourers and pit bank labourers. The most common form of employment for women and girls, by far, was the sorting out of the ironstone nodules from the clay as it was received at the mine waste tip. Shropshire iron ores are found mainly as nodules in a matrix of clay shales in seams up to 10m thick. The whole of the seam was mined, sent to the surface and tipped on low heaps allowing it to weather. Frost and rain action would help separate the nodules from the clay, the girls would then collect these nodules, place in boxes or baskets and carry these on their head to the ironstone heaps called ranks. For each tonne of ironstone, ten tonnes of waste clay remained behind forming the now wooded heaps so characteristic of the Coalbrookdale Coalfield today. About 1870, the peak ironstone producing years, nearly half a million tonnes of ironstone was being obtained from the Shropshire mines annually.

The use of girls to pick the ironstone from the clay was commonplace throughout the nineteenth century and in the 1830s it was investigated by the Commissioners inquiring into the employment of children. The report is worth quoting in full

“The carriages or waggons containing the pennystone are drawn to the foot of the shaft and are then hoisted up by steam engine or gin and afterwards pushed by men or drawn by horses along a railway to a part of the pitbank and emptied out. Here may be seen at all seasons of the year a number of young women and girls breaking up the pieces of clod, and gathering out the pennystone, and putting it on baskets as they are called, but which are small vessels made of iron, and when one of these is filled a girl, with the assistance of another girl, takes it upon her head, and carries it and empties out the iron-stone into a large heap in a place by itself, where it lies exposed to the sun and air.

In the cold weather the young women and girls are clothed in warm flannel dresses and great coats like those of men, with handkerchiefs around their necks, with hats or bonnets on their heads, and seem to be comfortably protected from the weather. They are always smiling, laughing and singing, and when observed at their work manifest a consciousness of how well they would appear if in better attire. The employment seems very healthy being light and in the open air. Young women at this employment earn about 8s per week”.

The report goes on to describe how many of the young women “come up to London in the month of May, and go about three months into the service of the market gardeners, being employed at weeding, and afterwards in carrying vegetables, strawberries and other descriptions of fruit to market”. This seasonal migration of women stonepickers continued at least until the 1870s and has been studied in some depth in papers in an Information Pack available from the Ironbridge Gorge Museum. The women returned from London in time for the local fairs or ‘Wakes’ in September. Not only did they obtain extra money and experience from their visits to London for parish records show that a good many also produced children whose fathers are given as being “from London”. Prior to the construction of the Shrewsbury and Birmingham Railway in 1849



Fig I. Shropshire pit girls “pottling” strawberries at a market garden to the west of London. (Illustrated London News 1846. I.G.M. T. Pit Girls Pack).

the young women always walked to London, a distance of about 140 miles. Artists’ sketches of the period are available depicting the Shropshire pit girls in London and on the market gardens.

Not everyone agreed with the view quoted in the Commission’s report of the ironstone picker’s lot being a happy and healthy one. In 1857 W.H. Barclay in his book on Wesleyan Methodism at Lawley Bank considered that the employment of wives and daughters of the working men in such work was

“contrary to nature, contrary to every sense of propriety and right, contrary to every law of civilization, morality and religion —” How repulsive to every feeling of modesty and refinement to see, especially on a cold winters day, a number of young women, dressed partly in male attire poised on the bleak summit of a ‘Pit Bank’, some thirty or forty feet high, exposed to wind, storm and tempest, engaged in work fit only for the most robust men to perform”. It was “a foul blot on the history of our nation” and “until these evils are removed, and the daughters of the poor are instructed in household duties instead of being sent at a very early age to work on the pit banks - we cannot reasonably hope to see the homes of poor working men made more cleanly, happy and comfortable”.

Ada Neild, a prominent Labour Party Member, in a contribution to the newspaper ‘*Labour Leader*’ in 1897 seems to have had somewhat similar sympathies. She states that the girls at Madeley, “average age of 18 years (though several quite old and middle aged women are numbered amongst them) work on the pit mounds, that the majority of them walk a distance of two or three miles. They have to be on the pit banks at 6 am, and leave 3.30 to 4.00 pm for which they receive from 8d to 1s per day”. She describes their menfolk as a



Plate I. Adams Engine and Ironstone Pit, Madeley Wood, Shropshire in 1847, by W.W. Smyth, Inspector of Mines . This shows pit girls picking ironstone on the right. (Ironbridge Gorge Museum Collection).

“fearfully forlorn looking set of men, rawboned and illshaped”. She concludes “that it is no wonder that Shropshire stands at the top of the list of counties for illegitimate children”.

However there is in Madeley a surviving eyewitness to these events, Mrs Anny Payne, now over 100 years of age. Mrs Payne has recorded her memories for the Ironbridge Gorge Museum and what interesting reading they make. She began work at the Kemberton Pit, Madeley in 1900 at the age of 13 on a Tuesday morning. Prior to this she had had a meeting with Mr Fletcher, the foreman, who agreed to give her a job and then went home to make preparations. Her mother made her a bonnet and a bag and also a bag-apron, then bought a pair of nailed shoes and a new basket “to take me food in”. The print bonnet was only for going to work, for when there she had to fix a roll made up of old stockings to her head to help support the iron box she had to carry. The iron boxes were made by the pit-blacksmith and had two handles. Describing her first attempts at carrying the boxes on her head she said “I dropped mine above once and the stones fell down to the bottom and I had to go and fetch and pick it up and put them in the box and put it on again”. Asked how she felt after the first day she replied, “I did have a stiff neck, I cried, when I put the box on me head and put the stone in, oh it did hurt me, oh it did make me have a stiff neck”.

She had to walk about three miles to work and get there for 6 am. All the girls “used to go together so nobody would be missed out” they used to be singing all the way and people would say “The women are coming down the Bank singing”.



*Plate II. Mrs Anny Payne,
aged 100 (1988).
Ironbridge Gorge Museum
Collection*

There were two groups of girls, the carriers and the pickers but, Mrs Payne says “you had to work there a long while before you got to be a picker”. She spent almost all of her time as a carrier leaving the pits soon after she became a picker herself. The pickers got more money than the carriers because “they had to scramble up the mounds to get the clay all the way. You would wear out more aprons with your knees, scrambling up the mounds”. The pickers job was a much dirtier job than that of the carriers. The carriers would take the stone in the boxes on their heads across to some older ladies who would “pitch it into ranks about two or three storeys high”. Mrs Payne went to work at the pits contrary to the wishes of her father but she has some pleasant memories of the time, of the cabin they used to warm themselves in before work and being around the braziers on the mound itself.

Noah Ball in “*Life in the old days of Dawley*” says of the girls at Kemberton Pit, they “always seemed to be happy as they sang their way to work, and on their return some would be balancing a wicker basket on their head but the contents of these baskets I know not”!

At the nearby Court Mounds women and children were allowed to collect the small pieces of ironstone left behind and sell it to a “Mr Tranter at the Cement Mill for 5s per tonne”. Was this what the baskets contained? After weathering in the ranks at some pits the ironstone was calcined in heaps but at others it was sent to the works at the blast furnaces to be calcined in kilns.



Plate III. Miners, men, women and boys working outcrop coal at the Foxholes, Benthall, during the strike, 1920s (I.J. Brown Collection).

Only two illustrations showing Shropshire pit girls at work are known, the first by Warrington Smythe, a mines inspector in the 1840s showing girls picking stone on a heap at Madeley and the second is a photo showing mineworkers at Waxhill Barracks Mine about 1900.

In the 1870s most of the larger ironstone pits employed up to 30 girls on the mounds and in 1888 there were 256 females at Shropshire pits. By 1901 after closure of many furnaces this had fallen to 137, of whom three were aged 12 - 14 years, 17 aged 14 - 16 years and the remainder over 16 years. The fall continued, between 1900 and 1906 it fell from 125 to 68 and after 1912 very few were employed on stone picking. In 1921 only 8 females were at work at Shropshire mines, almost certainly none of these were on stonepicking and from 1924 until 1938 there was never more than two females employed at Shropshire mines. During the Second World War however some ten women were recruited for picking ironstone as a wartime measure at Kemberton Colliery. From this time more females came to be employed about the larger mines in the offices, in the canteens (including for a time the writer's own mother) and as colliery nursing sisters, although there was always some debate as to whether the latter could be legally employed underground to assist in an emergency.

Besides stone-picking, the only other area of work that has traditionally been carried out by women in Shropshire mines was that of labouring about the pit shaft top. One particular task often performed by women was that of 'banking' which involved the receiving of the mineral at the shaft top, either the coupling of baskets or boxes from the chain or rope or the operation of a short wheeled plate, called tacking. This was pushed over the shaft so that the boxes of mineral could be dropped by the rope or chain onto sets of wheels. Another job performed by women was that of winding by hand using a hand winch or capstan.

There are many records of women falling down the shaft, one in 1805 is recorded in the diary of Mary Fletcher, wife of the Vicar of Madeley. In this incident a woman, "being at her work near the mouth of the pit, her foot slipped, she fell in and was dashed to pieces". Again in 1808 a woman was killed "when working on the bank of a pit at Ketley, she slipped off the tacking". The Inspector of Mines reports records many such incidents such as the following

- 1858 Wombridge, a girl S.A. Birch fell down the pit.
- 1861 Lawley Bank (Coalbrookdale Company) Elizabeth Corbett, banksman fell down the shaft.
- 1863 Lightmoor (Coalbrookdale Company) J. Pritchard and a woman rode on a skip and into the shaft.
- 1864 Lilleshall, a girl J. Jackson fell down the shaft while banking for her father.
- 1865 Wombridge, bankswoman, fell down the shaft.

Women have been employed around the shaft top in this century. In the 1970s Mr E. Rodenhurst of Whit church wrote to the writer about two women he remembered operating hand-winchers at Lawley in the period 1909-1912, while the late Mr W.H. Williams remembered Sam Hydes Pit near Wrockwardine Wood in the 1920s.

"There were two shafts, the one nearest the road had a hand winch and the winder was a woman we called Emma Licker but her real name was Emma Knight. I have seen her wind men up and down. There is a story of how she would shout down the shaft to the men in the box coming up - 'Owd on while I spit on me hand' hence her nickname. The local children also called her 'Wind-up Emma' but when they did Emma would shake her fist at them and use some most unprintable language'.

As previously mentioned wartime in the 1940s brought new opportunities for women in Shropshire mining. The ironstone pickers at Kemberton Pit had a special red-bricked rest room built for them which survived until the 1950s. No ironstone pickers were employed after nationalisation of the coal industry in 1947 but the improved welfare standards brought in by nationalisation did lead to the appointment of more women office and canteen staff and from the early 1950s female nursing sisters were employed at all the larger collieries.

Women workers at the mines produced some most colourful characters, a few of whom are mentioned in this article. Many are remembered today by the older generation although the large scale employment of women finished more than 70 years ago. At the time of writing however Mrs Anny Payne still remains; the last true Shropshire Pit Girl.

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Fig 2. Shropshire mineworkers in traditional dress, drawn from a photograph taken at Waxhill Barracks Mine near Lilleshall about 1900.

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