

History of Mining

For thousands of years, coal has been an essential fuel across the world. Most of the coal that people used was mined very close to the surface. Charcoal was also used during these early years. Charcoal is produced by burning wood and was a valuable resource in Britain for a long time.

In Roman Britain, the Romans started to exploit the coal underground in Britain. After the Romans left, Britain appears to have stopped mining coal until the 1200s. It was during this century that coal started to be dug up again on a larger scale. Even then, it was still only the coal that was close to the surface. It soon became apparent to the people of London that burning coal was bad for people's health. In 1306, a Royal Proclamation told artists and craftsmen in London to stop using coal. They were instructed to go back to using charcoal for their work; it was deemed to be a lot healthier.

The first examples of mining deeper underground are from the 1500s. In 1575, a man named Sir George Bruce of Carnock became the first person to mine coal underwater. These mines were called moat pits. Getting to the coal was very challenging, and Sir George had to build an artificial island in the middle of the Firth of Forth (a large estuary in Scotland). He was then able to dig out a large mine shaft through the island to the base of the water. It was considered one of the wonders of the age.

Everything changed in a big way in the 18th century with the start of the Industrial Revolution. Coal mining started to increase during this time. During the Victorian era, it became more vital than ever. Suddenly, steam trains were puffing across the landscape in unprecedented numbers and steamships were travelling the globe. The small-scale mines couldn't keep up with the demand for coal for all of these machines, so a new method of mining was needed.

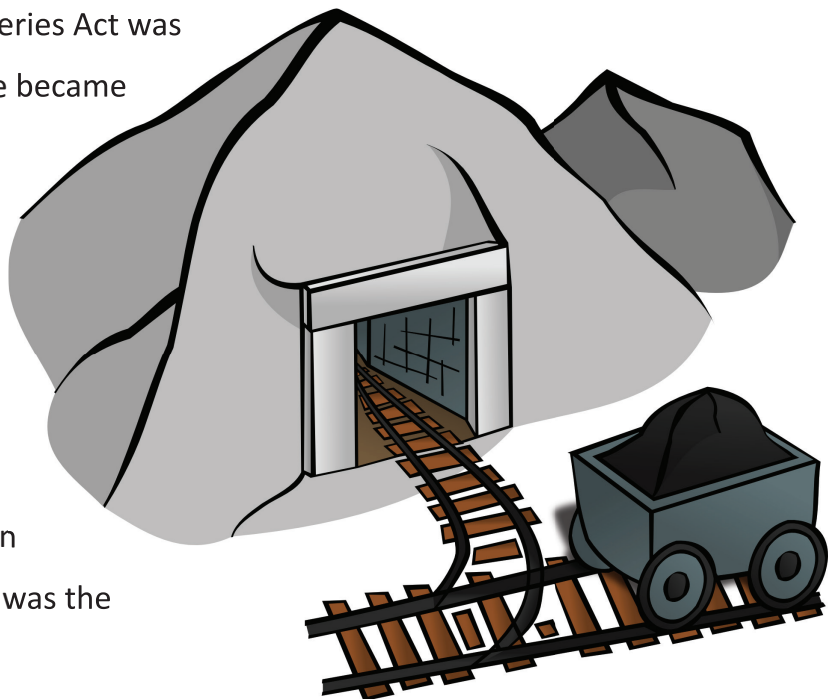
Deep shaft mines suddenly became increasingly important. They started to open across Britain, particularly in the Midlands and northern England, along with southern Wales and Scotland. These places were sitting on most of the coal in Britain. Whole new cities began to grow around

the mines in these areas, with many of the men and children heading off to work in the shafts. Unfortunately, conditions were not very good, and many of them suffered illnesses or died as a result of their work.

As the Industrial Revolution picked up steam, large factories began to require even more coal. In the mid-1800s, over 200,000 people were working in British mines: men, women and children.

This changed in 1842 when the Mines and Collieries Act was published. After a fatal accident in 1838, people became aware of how young the children were working in the mines. They were even more shocked to discover that girls were being allowed to work. This “made girls unsuitable for marriage and unfit to be mothers,” according to the author of the Act.

Once the Act was passed, no females or children under 10 were allowed to work in the mines. It was the beginning of a new era of coal mining.



VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. Find a word that means “take advantage of”.
2. Write a definition for “apparent”
3. What does the phrase “one of the wonders of the age” tell you about Sir George’s mine?
4. What does the phrase “unprecedented numbers” tell you about the steam trains?
5. What does the word “puffing” tell you about how trains moved?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

- E** Why has the author chosen to use the phrase “the Industrial Revolution picked up steam”?
- R** Why were London’s artists and craftsmen told to use charcoal?
- S** How did the Mines and Collieries Act change mining for people?
- I** What impact might this have had on families? Consider pros and cons.
- R** When was the accident that resulted in the Mines and Collieries Act?

Answers:

1. Exploit
2. Became clear
3. Nobody had seen anything like it before
4. There were more of them than ever before
5. There would have been noise and puffs of smoke

E: It is a phrase that means began to get going, but the use of steam links it with the steam engines and steamships mentioned before.

R: It was thought to be healthier

S: Females and young children could no longer work in the mines

I: Family members might live longer but they would now have less money coming into the household

R: 1838