

Conditions in the Coal Mines

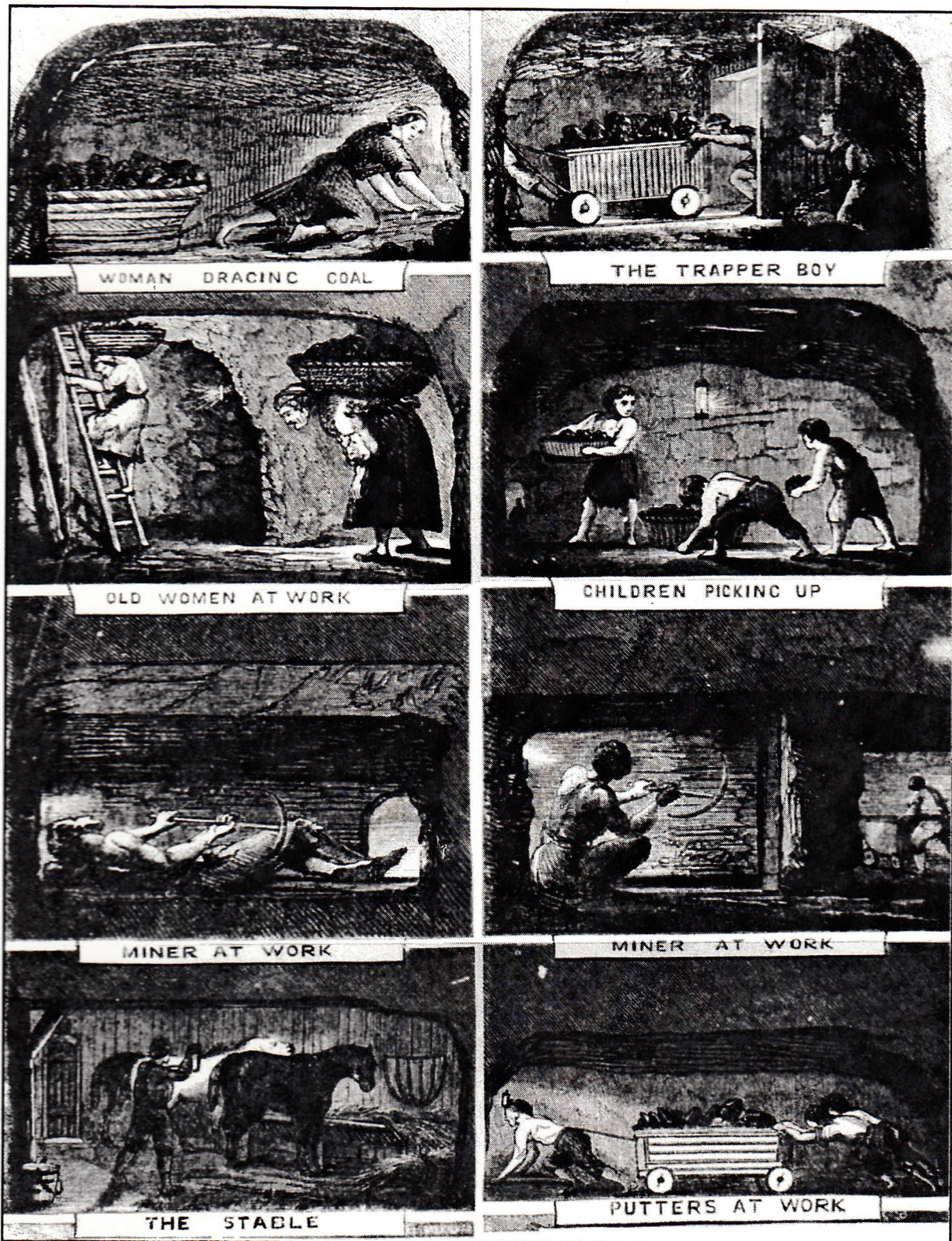
Coal mining was common in England by the beginning of the eighteenth century. Coal was used in place of wood for fueling stoves in the manufacture of bricks, dyes, glass, and other products, and in heating homes. After the steam engine was invented, more coal was needed to heat the water into steam, so more mines were dug deeper into the ground. More workers were also needed to fulfill the rising demand for coal. In 1750 British workers mined 5,000,000 tons of coal. By 1830 miners were producing 23,000,000 tons.

Men, women, and children worked in the mines, and sometimes whole families would work together. Mine workers labored half-naked in the hot underground tunnels cutting coal by hand and dragging it up to the surface. Women and children often had to crawl through narrow underground passages—some as low as 16 to 18 inches in height—pulling coal carts for 10 to 20 miles a day. The mines were damp and dark, and workers risked lung diseases from breathing air full of coal dust. Betty Harris, a “drawer” who pulled a coal cart through the mine passages, described her work:

I have a belt around my waist, and a chain passing between my legs, and I go on my hands and feet. The road is very steep, and we have to hold by a rope; and when there is no rope, by anything we can catch hold of. There are six women and about six boys and girls in the pit I work in; it is very had work for a woman. The pit is very wet where I work, and the water comes over our clog-tops always, and I have seen it up to my thighs; it rains in at the roof terribly. My clothes are wet through almost all day long.

Workers in the coal mines had to face the dangers of drowning from underground floods and suffocation from poisonous gases. Frequent explosions were caused when the candle flames miners used to find their way through the mine met with explosive marsh gas. Before 1810, when wooden props were made to support tunnel roofs, cave-ins were also common.

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Here we see workers in several sections of a coal mine in the 1800s in England.