

PIT LASSES

Women and Girls in Coalmining c1800-1914

Denise Bates

In 1841 a Royal Commission investigated coal mining. To their horror, investigators discovered females aged from 5 to 65 working below ground alongside naked men.

In May 1842 a public outcry erupted. Mining women were shown as morally corrupted and incapable of running a home or bringing up children properly. Long hours and violence against them also created outrage. Parliament hastily banned female work underground.

For almost 170 years this has remained history's view of these women and girls. Their lives have not been researched before, other than that the same few examples have been used to illustrate the same few superficial points. Denise, a history graduate and a descendent of a female miner of 1842, returned to contemporary sources to establish

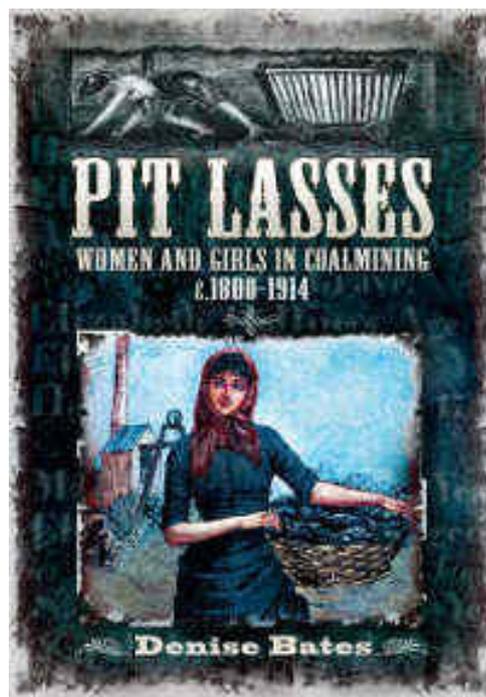
- what the women themselves said about their work and lives
- the economic and social reasons why females worked underground in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Scotland and Wales but not in other areas
- the jobs they carried out
- the accuracy of the criticisms levelled against them in May 1842
- their domestic lives, health, education, religion and clothes
- How they adapted to the ban on working underground

Denise's research demonstrates that accusations made about them in May 1842 were based on trivial or out-of-context evidence. She challenges the idea that women worked without tops, noting that the only evidence of this relates to five teenage girls who attended Sunday School, one of whom was commended elsewhere in the report for her propriety.

She offers a credible explanation of why females worked underground in some areas but not others, a question which has not to date been resolved by historians.

Her research in contemporary, primary sources demonstrates that female miners were decent, moral women and girls, in many cases capable of making their own decisions about how they wanted to earn their living and of defying the law when it banned them from making their own choice on the matter.

Pit Lasses will appeal to anyone interested in the social or economic history of Victorian Britain, those interested in mining history, and family historians. Denise has used the lives of the females interviewed in 1841 to provide a valuable addition to our understanding of Victorian society and a human interest story.



About the author

Denise Bates is a graduate historian and writer, specialising in the nineteenth century. She is the author of *Breach of Promise to Marry*, published by Pen & Sword in January 2014 and has contributed features to a number of magazines, including BBC History and the Times Educational Supplement.

Denise Bates is available for interview, talks or to write features.
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