

A day in the life of Martha the Bal-Maiden

My name is Martha. I am 8 years old. I am one of 10 children. Our father, who was a miner died last year. Now, everyone in the family must go to work including my youngest sister who is only 6. Most of us work on the dressing floors, but 2 of my older brothers work down the mine and we are very proud of them.

I am going to tell you about a typical day in my life. I wake up at 4 in the morning and help prepare breakfast and something to take for lunch. If we have a little bit of money to spare it will be a barley pasty, but most days I make a hoggan from barley flour with a bit of potato in it. I put this in my little white **mo'sel bag** as well as some dried mugwort leaves for tea and tie it around my waist.

I am what is known as a bal maiden which means that I work on the dressing floors of a mine where we break up and sort the rock ore that the miners bring up from the mine. Bal means mine and maiden means girl and that's how we got the name.

The bal maidens have a special way of dressing and are very interested in fashion. Unlike other ladies who wear ankle length skirts or dresses, bal maiden's skirts are calf length so it is easier for them to work. I like to wear many petticoats to give myself a full skirt as that is the fashion. I also wear a blouse and shawl. The most important thing for me is to make sure my bonnet which is called a **gook** and my **walking out apron** are as white and clean as possible. I only have one pair of shoes, they are wooden soled **boots**.

I leave home at 5.30 in the morning and walk 4 miles along the cliff paths to work. I carry another apron made of rough hessian called a **towser** over my arm. When I reach the dressing floors, which are on the cliff side next to the mine entrance where my older brothers work, I take off my white **walking out apron** and change it for my **towser**.

My work is very dirty. The **tin ore** that I work with has a red stain that gets on my clothes and skin and is very difficult to get clean. For this reason, although I like to look as neat and tidy as possible, my work clothes are not my best and most fancy which I save for church on Sunday.

My normal job is griddling (sieving) the **crushed ore**. Any ore that is too large to pass through the holes in the **griddle** gets taken back to be recrushed. The powdered ore that passes through is removed in **hand barrows**. Very often I work at barrowing as well.

My mother and other brothers and sisters also work here. There are many different jobs on the dressing floors depending on whether tin or copper ore is brought up. The men and large boys break up the large pieces of rock that come up from the mine. This is called spalling and long handled hammers called **spalling hammers** are used to do the smashing. Then the rock is broken up even smaller with a small **cobbing hammer**, some of my sisters do this job. The waste rock is separated from the ore on picking tables, my very youngest brothers and sister work here.

I think the most difficult task on the dressing floors is that which my mother does. It is called bucking. She uses a big flat **bucking hammer** to crush the picked copper ore down to a powder.

Other people work machines called stamps which smash the wet tin ore into a fine mud. One of my brothers is in charge of a buddle where the **tin mud** is washed and separated. Most of us bal maidens wear protective bands on our hand and legs and often get hurt by rocks and hammers. Most of the jobs use water and we all get wet and muddy.

At lunchtime my family meet up and have mo'sel together. We heat a **kettle** of water and make mugwort tea, we take out our **mo'sel bags** and eat our hoggans, which are very hard and dry and do not nearly fill us up enough. After lunch I take out my crochet from my pocket and watch my brothers and sisters while they play.

My normal working hours are 7 in the morning till 5.30 at night, with an hour for lunch. For a week in every month we have sampling time. Then we are very busy and I have to work from 6 in the morning till 8 at night. I cannot tell you how tired I am during these times. Even at the end of a normal day I am tired. If the weather is bad I get cold and wet and when it is hot I get sunburned and overheated. There is very little shelter for us on the cliff side.

When I get home, I help prepare a hot supper and try to dry my clothes by the fire if they are wet. I help get my younger brothers and sisters to bed and then like to listen to the stories of my brothers' adventures down the mine. I go to bed at 8.