

John's first day down the mine

My name is John. At the age of 8 years old my father told me, that come Monday morning I was to start life as a miner. I was very proud that my father considered me grown up enough for me to join him. I could not wait for him to start to teach me some of the many skills that as a Cornish miner, he was well known for. With a bit of luck and my father's skill I had no doubt that we could earn a good deal of money. I was very pleased to be working with my father who I knew would treat me fairly and look out for me.

As was traditional for any boy starting down the mine, my mother got together a new set of clothes for me. I had a canvas jacket and trousers, a flannel shirt and pants, **wooden soled boots** (without socks) and a **felt tull** hat hardened with pine resin to protect my head.

On Monday, I was woken at half past 4 and we walked along the cliff side paths to the mine. On arriving we went to the miners dry and I was allocated 3 pegs, 2 for my clothes and one for my hat. Here I changed into the clothes my mother had prepared for me.

Next we went to our locker to collect our tools which the blacksmith had sharpened. The lockers and tools were all numbered. Our number was 102. Out of our locker my father removed a rope and several drills called **boryers** all of different lengths. He tied these together with the rope and slung them onto his shoulder. He gave me several **gads** to carry in my pockets. **Gads** are little metal wedges used to help split the rock. He also took out **poll picks**.

Next we went to the storehouse to get gunpowder, fuse, candles, clay and paper. We were quite weighed down by the time we were finished and I was a bit concerned about how I would manage climbing down all the ladders in the mine.

As this was to be my first day, my father's aim was to introduce me to all the parts of my new job and not for us to complete a normal day's work.

We waited at the mine entrance for all the other miners to start down the ladders before us. The other miners were very friendly and gave me much advice to hold on tight to the ladder and not to look down. Finally at about 6.30, we stepped onto the ladder that led down into the mouth of the mine. We got down to the first level and stepped off and lit our **candles** and wrapped some **clay** around them and stuck them onto our **tulls**.

"Are you ready my son?" My father said to me.

"Yes father" I said although I felt very scared. Below me I could hear the muffled sounds of the miners singing what sounded like a very long distance below.

We stepped back on to the ladders and headed down towards the sound. The light from the surface disappeared. The light from the **candle** was just enough for me to see my hands and not much further. Although the darkness was quite scary, I was glad that I could not see below me and was sure that I would become used to the dark as all miners are.

As I climbed, water dripped and streamed down onto me until I was soaked right though. My back ached and my hands went from pain to stiffness and then numbness. We climbed down for 2 long and awful hours. I struggled to keep a good hold. Even though I was wet I got hotter and hotter the further down we went for the rock gets hotter the deeper you go. Finally and with much relief we stepped off and into a tunnel or subway leading away to the side.

This subway was very narrow and low, often with only a few inches to spare above my father's head. We were now very deep under the ground. We walked for half an hour before we came to a place where the tunnel opened out slightly and there were several coats and kegs of water and boards to sit on and my father told me to sit down and take a rest and a drink. We took our **candles** off our **tulls** and stuck them on to the wall.

I could tell we were very near to where men were working as I could hear a thud, thud noise which I later learned to be the sound of the **boryers** and also a tick, tick noise that I later discovered to be the sound of the **poll picks**. "It is nearly mo'sel time" my father said. Mo'sel is our word for lunch. "We will wait for the others to join us before we begin. Before they come they will blast the holes they have been drilling, do not be afraid when the blast happens."

The thudding and tapping had come to an end and I listened out and heard the shout "fire". My father paced his hand on my shoulder and in a flash of time there was a mighty explosion that I have to admit terrified me. From out of the smoke, dust and noise suddenly appeared 2 miners. After seating themselves there was another shout and further explosions and even though I knew what to expect this time, it did not terrify me any less. It sounded as if the earth itself were being ripped in half. Two more miners appeared out of the smoke and we got out our mo'sle of a barley pasty and cold tea. After mo'sle many of the men got out their **clay pipes** for a smoke, as smoking was not forbidden in tin mines as it is in coal mines.

Then my father showed me our work. We had our own pitch not far from where we had had our mo'sel. It was normal for each pitch to be worked by 2 or 3 men helped by 1 or 2 children. Our task was to remove the rock which contained the little black crystals of tin, this was called **ore**.

The ore was found in a stripe which was about 2 foot thick. The stripe went both up and down and left and right. It was surrounded by very hard **granite** rock and in some places softer **killas** rock.

The solid rock face was too hard to break with the picks, but they could be used to break open cracks and remove loose areas of rock. Into the solid rock face the **boryers** were beaten into the rock with **hammers** to make a hole 2 feet deep. To do this you held the **boryer** in your left hand and whilst turning it hit it with a **hammer**. As the hole got deeper the **boryer** was swapped for a longer one. This was a very tough job on the arms and the constant banging caused a ringing in my ears. This was one of the jobs I hoped to become very skilled at, But father explained to me that mostly my job would be to collect the broken lode stone using a **shovel** and to take it away in a **hand barrow**.

We would earn however much tin was in the ore. The hole made by the **boryer** was cleaned out with a wooden swabstick. **Black powder** which was kept in a **flask** called a jack was put into the hole and this was sealed with clay with a **safety fuse** leading to the **powder**.

Around us we heard the sound of explosions indicating it was time to light our own **fuse** and then "go to grass" our term for heading back up to the surface.

Setting up the explosives safely requires a lot of skill and intelligence and I knew of many men who had lost limbs, eyesight and even their lives in doing it wrong so I was glad to have my skilful father to teach me. We lit our **fuse** and left it behind us as we gathered ourselves together for what was to be the hardest part of the day, the climb with tired and aching limbs back up the ladders.

Upon reaching the surface I was amazed to find that it was only 5 o'clock. Daylight had never seemed so bright or the air so fresh and delicious. I looked forward to getting back home to rest my aching body and see my mothers face.