

## WORKING CONDITIONS AT PEGGS GREEN COLLIERY A TYPICAL 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY COAL MINE

### Operation of the mines

By the 1570's, the larger Collieries in the area, were formally organised. The labour was recruited using a sub-contract system known as "charter" or "Butty", under a working miner who employed the other members of the team, and paid them out from the coal which they produced. At a negotiated rate, based on 21 cwt to the ton. The owners practice was to reject tubs of coal without payment if the owners' Weighman considered they were deficient in terms of the quality or quantity of coal brought to the surface. The sub-contractors were responsible for organising all the day-to-day operations, but their activities were directed and supervised by the owners over viewer, who was responsible for "boring" for coal and for such matters as deciding the locations of the pits and drainage channels. This system of mine management continued in the coalfield until the nineteenth century

The Collieries had a much smaller footprint than those of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the waste material remained underground. While there is little evidence of the the Mine owners being reprimanded by the Coroner's for the working conditions and safety in the Mines; they were quick to take action on breach of contract. The Coroner's verdicts either blamed the Miner for negligence or found for Accidental Death . Gradually legislation was introduced to make the Mines safer which was resolved with its nationalization in 1947,

### Safety

The first trial of a Davy lamp was at [Hebburn](#) Colliery on 9 January 1816. The lamps had to be provided by the miners themselves, not the owners, as traditionally the miners had bought their own candles from the company store. Miners still preferred the better illumination from a naked light, and mine regulations insisting that only safety lamps be used

More generally, the Select Committee on Accidents in Mines reported in 1835 that the introduction of the Davy lamp had led to an increase in mine accidents; the lamp encouraged the working of mines and parts of mines that had previously been closed for safety reasons. Davy Lamps were used as a check then candles were used to give better light. The gauze was easily damaged and eventually improved lamps were developed.

The **Regulation and Inspection of Mines Act** of 1860 therefore required coal mines to have an adequate amount of ventilation, constantly produced, to dilute and render harmless noxious gases. This was carried out by air being extracted from one shaft and the clean air being drawn down from the other shaft using air ways controlled by a series of doors. Plans of Pegg;s Green Colliery show it had two shafts.

## News Paper Articles

**Saturday, 22 September 1838**

### **Death from gunpowder; fatal rashness**

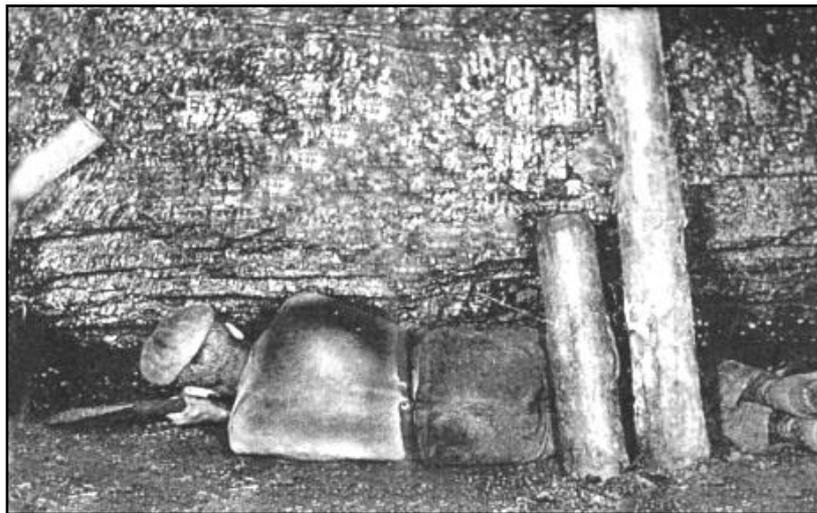
An inquest was held on Tuesday at Thringstone, on the body of John Birch, a young man aged 19, who was severely burnt from the explosion of a bag containing two or three pounds of gunpowder, in the Pegg's Green Colliery, on Saturday fortnight. Four blasts had been made by drilling holes in the coal, at about two yards asunder (*apart*); three of them had been fired, and the last, which was had been loaded first, and was fired last. A bag of gunpowder belonging to the deceased had been laid by one Richard Wardle about six yards from the blast. After the blast had gone off, some paper which had been used in preparing the blast, fell in a lighted state upon the bag containing the deceased's powder. As soon as the other young men who were round, saw it, they ran away; but the deceased very thoughtlessly and incautiously went to knock the fire off the bag, for the purpose of saving the powder, when just as he was touching the bag with his hand the powder exploded, and blew the deceased backwards to the ground. He was picked up, and found much burnt on the stomach and front of his body; he lingered until the next Saturday.

**Verdict, "Accidental Death"**

**February 10<sup>th</sup> 1838**

### **Inquest on Fatal Accident at Pegg's Green –**

On Wednesday evening, the 31<sup>st</sup> ult., Samuel Burrows aged about 24 or 25, went to work in a pit at Pegg's Green Colliery, for the first time; and at midnight, while engaged in breaking out the coal, a large stone, weighing upwards of a ton, fell from the roof, and crushed him to instant death. **Verdict accordingly**



**April 13 1844**

### **Ashby de la Zouch Petty Sessions,**

George Perry, of Thringstone, **was committed for three months hard labour** for violating his contract with the Pegg's Green Colliery Company; and several men working at the same colliery were committed on the previous Monday for the same offences.

**December 29<sup>th</sup> 1838**

**JAMES TYLER**, blacksmith, of Thringston, in the employ of Messrs. Price and Co., at Pegg's Green Colliery, charged with stealing a large quantity of iron and horse shoe moulds, the property of the said company. – Committed to the sessions

**June 12<sup>th</sup> 1839**  
**THE HURRICANE**

This town and county – and, from what we hear, it would seem the greater part of the country – has been visited during the week by one of the most tremendous hurricanes which has been known for many years, whether we consider its violence or duration. It began on Sunday night, lulled somewhat in the course of the following day, again raged with violence on Monday night, and finally subsided early on Tuesday morning. To chronicle the disasters occasioned by the violence of the wind in this town and country would occupy several columns, there being scarcely a street in the town which was not strewn with broken slates, tiles and bricks, and hardly a farmer in the county who had not been injured to a greater or lesser extent; but as we cannot spare so much space, our readers must be content with the following particulars.....

The chimney at Pegg's Green Colliery, near Ibstock, (one of the finest in the country, being exactly 100 feet high) was blown down between five and six o'clock on Monday morning, scarcely thirty feet being left standing; fortunately no person or building was injured by the falling of the mass of brickwork.

**May 7<sup>th</sup> 1842**  
**Ashby de la Zouch Petty Sessions**

William Green of Whitwick, charged by John Price, agent to the Pegg's Green Colliery Company, with absenting himself from work; case adjourned for a week, in consequence of the Constable not having served the warrant

**March 9<sup>th</sup> 1844**  
**SHOCKING DEATH IN A COAL PIT**

An inquest was held at Thringstone, in this county, on Tuesday last, by John Gregory, Esq., on the body of Wm. Smith, about 35 years of age. From the depositions of witnesses it appears the deceased was employed at Pegg's Green Colliery, and on the Friday previous was employed in boring the coal for the purpose of putting in a charge of gunpowder. While thus employed, an immense mass of coal suddenly gave way, and, falling on him, literally buried him, with exception of his head. The poor fellow gave an alarm, and by prompt assistance, he was extricated in about five minutes, scarcely able to speak, and was carried home where he lingered till nine o'clock on Sunday morning. The deceased had been employed at boring "all his life", was an experienced workman, and had just before sounded the coal and thought it was firm to give way without a "shot". Mr. Lomas, surgeon, who was sent for when the accident took place, stated that he had no hope from the first. The immense pressure of the coals had seriously injured the spine, the pelvis, and most of the internal viscera, from the effects of which he had no doubt death ensued.

**Verdict, "Accidental Death"**

**April 13<sup>th</sup> 1844**  
**Ashby de la Zouch Petty Sessions**

George Perry, of Thringstone, **was committed for three months hard labour** for violating his contract with the Pegg's Green Colliery Company; and several men working at the same colliery were committed on the previous Monday for the same offences. – Some minor cases were disposed of and the following parties committed for trial; Sarah Yates, of Shackerstone; Robert Wheat and John Wilson of Whitwick

**April 19<sup>th</sup> 1844**  
**Ashby de la Zouch Petty Sessions**

George Perry of Thringstone, was charged by the Pegg's Green Colliery Company with neglecting his work. It appeared that the defendant had signed a written contract to serve the company as a Collier, to work six whole days, and to give 14 days notice before leaving. The defendant had given the notice, and since then had only worked a quarter of a day, thereby causing a severe loss to the company. The defendant said he had joined the Miner's Union, and he was obliged to do a certain portion of work, if he did more, he should have to forfeit 2s. 6d. per day. The Magistrates considered the case clearly proved, **and they committed him for three months to the house of correction to hard labour**. Several other men from the same colliery, who had signed similar contracts were committed for the same period on Monday last. It is believed that this mode of proceeding has had good effect, as the men at the Pegg's Green Colliery are for the most part of them now at work.

**January 4<sup>th</sup> 1845**

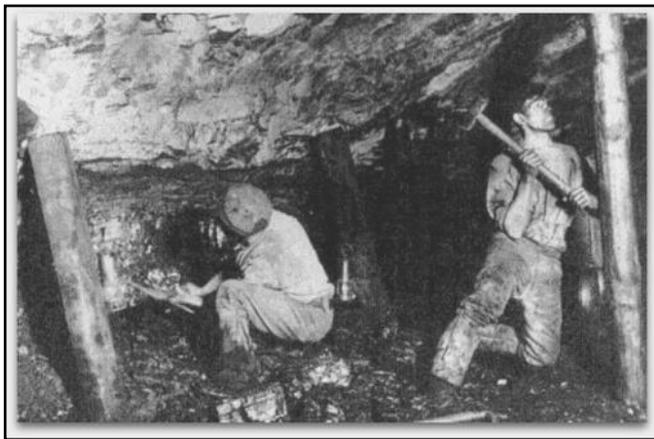
**Ashby de la Zouch Petty Sessions**

Samuel Freeman 25 (could neither read nor write) was charged with stealing, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December, two "picks" from the Pegg's Green Colliery. – Mr. Simpson conducted the prosecution. – Mr. John Price stated that a great number of picks had been lost from the colliery, and that he could swear positively to one of the picks produced as the property of himself and partners. Prisoner, who is a Blacksmith, had come to ask for work in the Blacksmith's shop at the colliery, on the very day the picks in question were missed. – Samuel Bonser, a labourer residing at Whitwick, deposed to meeting prisoner on the 6<sup>th</sup> December in the morning; prisoner asked him if he had anything to do, and, if not, if he would accompany him to Pegg's Green to ask for work? Witness said he had no objection; they went, neither got work, and, as they were coming away, prisoner pulled the picks out of his pocket, and said, "see what I have nipped". Witness advised him to go and restore them, or they would both get into trouble; but prisoner said no – he would go and swop them at Baltimore's; which he did, in witness's presence, for a poaching net. – Robert Baltimore, a barber at Whitwick, said that the prisoner came to him on the 6<sup>th</sup> December to ask him to swop the picks, and told him the things were his own – asking witness if he had ever known him to do anything wrong. He had a job to do, and had no tools. Witness then gave him a pocket knife, pair of pincers, a hand vice, and a net he had for "covering over fruit trees" and so keeping the blackbirds from getting at the cherries.....continuation not available.

**April 5<sup>th</sup> 1845**

**FATAL COLLIERY ACCIDENT. –**

An inquest was held at Thringstone, in this county, on the 1<sup>st</sup> inst., before John Gregory, Gent., on the body of John Hutchinson of Sheepshead, aged twenty. Deceased had come from his home in search of employment, and, with a namesake, but not a relative, was engaged early on the Monday morning in pumping out water from one of the pits at Pegg's Green Colliery, when a large stone, weighing between 10 and 12 cwt., fell from the roof and crushed him to death; he only said "Oh dear". The stone covered nearly the whole of his body, and fell without any warning; the roof was supported by timbers in the usual way, and no indication of it being unsafe had been perceived; the stone in question fell from between the supports. – Verdict; "Accidental death".



**June 7<sup>th</sup> 1851**

**A BOY DROWNED AT PEGG'S GREEN**

On Thursday week, about 7 o'clock in the morning, Thomas Locker, a lad about sixteen, went with another youth to bathe in the reservoir at the Pegg's Green Colliery. He could swim a little, and tried to swim across, but when about the middle went down. A boy named Barkby, who was on the bank, seeing him sink, called out for help, and Henry Smallwood, who was at work close by, immediately went in with his clothes on, and soon brought out deceased, and took him to the Engine Inn, where the usual efforts to restore animation were made, but without success. Mr. Price, part proprietor and manager of the colliery, hearing of the accident, sent off directly for Mr. Orton, surgeon, but his exertions were also fruitless. The reservoir was about six foot deep, and though strict orders were given that no one should bathe in it, the boys would occasionally transgress in the absence of Mr. Price.— **On Friday, Mr. Gregory held an inquest at Thringstone on the body of the deceased, when a verdict was returned of accidental death.**

**September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1853**  
**FATAL COLLIERY ACCIDENT. –**

An inquest was held at Griffydam, upon Jarvis Marshall, deceased. He was about twenty years old, and employed as a loader in Pegg's Green Colliery. On Saturday, the 20<sup>th</sup> ult., he was employed in loading the stone from a horse way, which was being made in the pit. The stone was blasted from the roof, and a great many shots had been fired in the course of the morning. About one o'clock a blast having been fired, deceased, who had no occasion to have done so, went to the place, and proceeded to try a stone which had been shaken in the roof with a pick several times. Another man took the pick from his hand, and, in less than a minute, the stone fell on the hip of deceased, and crushed him against a heap of stones on the floor. He was extricated as soon as possible, and taken home in a cart, but was so much injured internally that he died on the following Tuesday. **Verdict, "Accidental Death", and the jury recommended that Mr. Price, the manager, should give strict orders to the loaders not to go to the spots where shots had been fired, till the safety of the roof had been ascertained.**



**March 21<sup>st</sup> 1857**  
**Ashby de la Zouch Petty Sessions**

John Bradford of Thringstone was charged with having on the 8<sup>th</sup> inst., stolen some pieces of wood valued at 8d and belonging to the Pegg's Green Colliery Company. It appeared from the evidence of P.C. Earpe, that whilst on duty during the night in question, he saw the prisoner come from the wood-yard near to Pegg's Green Colliery. He had some wood under his arm, and when he saw witness he lay down under the hedge, and put the wood in the hedge bottom. He afterwards said, "Master allows me to take it". This was denied by Mr. Wm. Kidger, one of the partners, and the wood was identified. In defence, prisoner said he was going through the yard, and took the wood, but did not know he was doing anything wrong. – **He was sentenced to 14 days imprisonment in the county house of correction.**

**December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1859**  
**PEGGS GREEN COLLIERY, LEICESTERSHIRE**  
**NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN**

That the partnership heretofore subsisting between us, the undersigned Thomas Bostock, John Price, William Kidger, John Knight, Benjamin Walker, and William Worswick, under the style or firm of "Bostock, Price and Co.," and sometimes called "The Peggs Green Colliery company", or under any other style or firm whatsoever, has been this day **DISSOLVED** by mutual consent'

**Saturday, 2 September 1865**  
**Fatal Colliery accident at Swannington**

On Saturday night last, an accident of a very serious nature took place in the shaft of No.3. New Colliery (this was presumably the colliery known locally as "Clink" 1863-1877), by the explosion of a charge of gun cotton used for blasting, by which one man, named Jas. Smith was killed, and another, named W. Birch seriously injured. the nature of the accident will perhaps be better understood from the evidence given at the inquest, which was held at Coalville on Monday last, on the body of Smith, - William Birch, the first witness called, said: I am a collier employed in sinking a new shaft at Swannington No.3. belonging to Mr. Worswick. I have for some time been working with the deceased, who is about 30 years of age. He was the head-man, and had the management; our usual mode is to drill a hole in the stony bine, then put the powder cotton down it. We have an iron instrument called a needle, which is put into the charge, and then hammered down with an iron

hammer. We then draw the needle out, and put a straw down the needle hole, filled with fine powder. We then put a candle beside the straw, at such a length that we think will not blow up before we get out of the road, by being drawn up. This is the plan we have always pursued up to this time, and never have anything happened wrong before. On Saturday night about six o'clock, myself and the deceased went to work. There was another man named W.Revel, down face and the stones bruised it ?? I was never insensible; it put out all the lights. I never saw deceased afterwards, who never moaned or made any noise. They shouted from the top as soon as it went off, "are you all safe"? I shouted again, "no we are shot". They came down with a light, and took deceased up, and me afterwards. I could not see; the shaft is about 90 yards deep; the explosion must either have occurred either from a spark flying from the top of the needle, or from the point of it striking the iron stone in the hole. I never saw him do such a thing before during all the time I worked with him; he was not drunk, nor had he had any drink, being a very sober man, and no man in England was more capable of using gunpowder than deceased. – W. Revel, labourer, stated that he was at the bottom of the shaft when the accident occurred, ladling water, about two yards from deceased. Saw him first hammering the rammer, and afterwards the needle. heard Birch say, "I would not do that Jim; it will go off". I do not understand their work, and did not know he was doing wrong. I shouted for lights, and J. Jarvis came down; he did not speak afterwards, and died on the road. - James Jarvis said: I am a banksman, employed at the new colliery No.3. I was on the bank at the time of the accident; I knew the men were preparing a shot, but heard no signal given for them to come up, but heard the explosion and felt alarmed. Joseph Harris called "I'm alright?" I heard a man call from the bottom of the shaft to bring a light. I jumped in the barrel, and went down with a light, and found deceased lying on his face at the contrary side of the shaft to where the shot was fired. He was insensible, and appeared to be dying; he was brought up and put into a cart, and died on the road home, - Mr. G. Lewis, managing engineer of the works, stated that he had given notice of the accident to the Inspector of the District, had examined the shaft, and considered the accident had been caused as described, through the man's own carelessness, but not as the witness thought. He believed it was caused by friction of the needle through the closely compressed cotton. Deceased was considered to be the best man they had about the works whom he would sooner have trusted with this kind of work than anyone else, as he had been employed in the same sort of work nearly all his life time. - The coroner (J. Gregory Esq.), having shortly summoned up the jury immediately returned a verdict of "Accidental Death". The death must have been almost instantaneous, as he appears to have had hold of the needle with his left hand, which was blown off. The handle of the needle then struck him under the chin, and drove a portion of his jaw bone into the brain. Deceased was a very fine young man and had left a wife and one child to lament his untimely death. He was buried on Tuesday; his fellow labourers (shaft sinkers) carrying him to his last home on earth.

#### **Saturday, 6 June 1891**

It is thought that this William Stinson was possibly the father of Joseph Stinson (aged 36) who was killed by a roof fall in the same pit in February 1890.

Staunton Harold – At the colliery 4 p.m. – William Smith, Stallman at the colliery said on Thursday morning that he was in the pit working at No.1. stall. William Birch would examine the stall before they went to work. He was putting a hole in when the accident happened at about 10 o'clock. Deceased had been sawing a prop to make some sprags, and had just sawn it through when the roof started all at once. It was the roof of the stall and the roadway which began to press down and fall. There were other men working with deceased, but they got out before the roof bore down like a clap of thunder, all at once, and he did not have time to get away himself. Witness packed up coals between himself and the deceased to try and keep the roof up. Deceased cried out when the first fall came and "crawled" under the coal to get out of the way, but this was all borne down on him. Witness was got out first, being drawn out by his legs. He left the mine before rescuers got to the deceased. By the inspector: There was not sufficient quantity of sprags, so deceased cut a prop, and left the prop in so that the top should not be disturbed. There was a sudden thickening of coal just there, and extra precautions had been taken. Stanley had done what little holing had been done that morning, and had set the sprags that were up. He had done that the day before – all but one – and the old man was going to set one for himself. Witness thought Stanley was a competent man to set sprags. The foreman found no problem with the setting when he came through. – William Birch, deputy at the colliery, and residing at Gelsmoor, said he examined stall No.1. at 5.30. on the morning of the accident. – By the inspector: The one pack was partly built when he was there and the other was up. He was night deputy, and made his inspection before leaving at 6.30 a.m. – John Saunders, under-manager at the colliery, said he saw stall No.1. at 8.30 a.m. on the 28th. The day shift were then at work.

The stall appeared safe. There was some holing done on the left side of the gate, but he saw nothing to find fault with. – By the inspector: The packing should have been done at night, but the stallman on the night shift was ill. The floor coal was rather soft, and it had gradually worked down, and the sprags had been pushed into the floor. The coal was solid and had to be blown. – Thomas Stanley, collier, Coleorton, confirmed the previous witnesses and said he assisted to get deceased out. The jury returned a verdict of “Accidental Death”.

## **THE CHILD EMPLOYMENT COMMISSION 1842 (REF WILLIAM STENSON)**

One might assume that by this time, the working conditions in coal mines had improved considerably, however, much to the contrary, as the following has been included to give the reader an appreciation of just how diabolical conditions were.

A “Children’s Employment Commission” was established in 1842, and the following extract is taken from a report by James Mitchell, Esq., on the employment of children and young persons in the mines of the Warwickshire and Leicestershire coal-fields, and on the state, condition and treatment of such children and young persons. The following text and illustration are taken from the report:-

The following questions were put to **William Stenson** (No.80):-

***You are an engineer and have the management of the Whitwick colliery?*** - Yes.  
***Having read the evidence of Michael Parker respecting the Snibston colliery, will you be so good as to state if the same will apply to your colliery?*** - To a considerable degree the same. We have 110 boys under 10. We support a day-school, to which the children under 10 go, and we have a Sunday-School also. Men who act together as butties (similar to agents who employ several men to whom the men are responsible) get great wages, as much as 28s. a week. We do not put the boys to push or draw the trains. We employ horses and asses. We do not use iron chains but flat ropes, which we consider much safer. Ropes will tell a tale before breaking. Our people begin work about seven, and leave about seven at night. In other respects, the description of Mr. Parker will apply to us.

The following questions were put to **Michael Parker** (No.77) of Snibston Colliery:-

***What occupation do you follow?*** - Ground bailiff to the Snibston Collieries.  
***At what age do children commence going down the pits?*** - Some at seven and all ages afterwards.  
***How are boys under 10 employed?*** - Opening doors, sweeping railroads, driving ponies and asses, according to a boys activities.  
***When do they begin to fill skips?*** - About 18.  
***Why do they not go to this work sooner?*** - Our coal is all in large pieces, and they are not equal to the work.  
***Are other boys employed at other employment?*** - Some work at what is called putting the coal, that is pushing and drawing the coal from the face of the work to the crane at the horse-way. Two boys are able to draw a train, or the one draws and the other pushes. A large basket is put on the train and the basket is filled. It will hold about seven cwt.  
***When do they take the pick in hand to dig the coal?*** - About 20, but some much sooner if very active. Our coal is very hard and some young people are not capable of doing it.  
***Do the baskets when once loaded go all the way to the shaft, and afterwards are they lifted up without being emptied?*** - When the trains arrive at the horse way, the baskets are lifted up by a crane and put on the great horse-wagon and then are conveyed to the foot of the shaft.  
***Do the boys enjoy good health?*** - Exceedingly good.  
***To what age can a man hold out to work?*** - Some work well at 60 years, but some are knocked up at 50 and 45. 50 may be the average.  
***What is the cause of a man being knocked up as early as 50?*** - The severe labour, and on some constitutions the bad air takes considerable effect.  
***Are the mines much exposed to bad air?*** - Only at chance times. The wind is carried through the mines.  
***What are the hours of work?*** - The holers (shot firers?) go down at two in the morning, and return

about two or three in the afternoon. The others begin to go down about half-an-hour before six and are ready by six to go to work. They finish at six and take half-an-hour to come up.

**How many go down together and come up together?** - About four men, and if all boys, five or six. They go in the basket. We have had no accidents in our pits going up and down.

**To what do you attribute freedom from accidents?** - To have good tackling and taking care. There is a man whose duty is to see the boys safe in the skips coming up and that there are no more in numbers than four men, or more than five or six boys. They are particular to have a steady man at the engine.

**What precautions do you take against fire-damp or choke damp?** - Strong ventilation.

**What time do the men take their meals?** - The engine stops about half-an-hour at one o' clock, then the people all rest.

**What are the wages of the fillers?** - 3s. a day, no beer and the company allows 10 cwt. or 12 cwt. of coals in the month and the men have free cottages and gardens or a very small rent of 1s. a month.

**Are they often out of employment?** - Some time in the summer when there is a small demand for coals.

**Are the people tractable, and is there a good feeling between masters and men?** All quite friendly.

**Do the people attend public worship?** - Most of them do.

**Do the children go to school?** - They in general go to day-schools, and all go to Sunday-Schools. Mostly all learn to read and many to write.

**Have they a Field-Club?** - Yes. They pay 8d. a-month and receive medical attendance and 7s. a-week when sick. The boys pay 4d. a month, and receive 3s. 6d. a-week when sick. If the fund falls short the company makes it good. There are few accidents from the falls of stone or coal from the roof. We have not had any such for years past.