

Women doing 'men's work': Wigan pit brow girls

Although it was accepted that working-class women had to work, there was a lot of discussion about what kind of jobs they should do. In the 1860s the House of Commons set up a Select Committee to investigate the case of women who worked on the surface of mines and collieries. One group, the pit brow girls of Wigan (source 9), wore trousers at work. The arguments about this particular group were especially fierce and reveal a lot about people's attitudes to women and to the sort of work that was thought suitable for them.

Unsuitable work for women

In 1864 the writer John Plummer visited Wigan to watch the pit girls at work. What he saw upset him:

SOURCE 10

In various directions might be witnessed women with bared arms, one or two with short pipes in their mouths, performing labours totally unsuited to their sex.

John Plummer, *Once A Week*, 27 August 1864

Plummer was not alone in thinking like this. Eight years earlier an official had reported on the work of pit girls in South Wales. He wrote of the 'masculine nature of the employment' which, he said, was 'degrading to female character'. He said that the girls became covered in dirt and this was bound to 'undermine their modesty and self-respect', and that working alongside men exposed them to bad language and bad habits. All this, he said, meant that a pit girl was not able to carry out her proper functions in the home:

SOURCE 11

What is she able to do towards the management of a house, and towards making her husband happy and comfortable?

- 1 She does not know how to keep a house clean and tidy.
- 2 She cannot cook.
- 3 She knows nothing of the management required to make her husband's earnings go as far as possible.
- 4 She is ignorant of the proper management of children.

H. S. Tremenhoe, Report of the South Wales Mining District, 1856



SOURCE 9

Pit brow girls at Shevington colliery near Wigan, photographed standing by a coal truck in 1867. Known in Lancashire as 'pit brow lasses' or 'bro wenches', their job was to push the pit wagons, which had come up from the mine loaded with coal, over the top of the pit brow and tip the coal into shoots where they removed the dirt from it. They also loaded railway trucks with coal.

activity

- 3 Look at sources 10, 11 and 12 and the information in the text.
- a the kind of work some people thought was unsuitable for women?
- b their attitude to women?