

Industrial Revolution Girl

My name is Marged and I live in a village called Treboeth, which isn't far from Swansea.

My family

I live with my mother and father, four sisters and five brothers. I am 13 years old, my eldest brother is 17 and my youngest sister is 2 years old and all of the rest are somewhere in between.

Welsh coal

All of us in our family, except for the little ones, of course, work underground. Everyone wants our coal from Wales because Welsh "steam coal" burns with great heat but with hardly any flame or smoke which is good for all types of engines not only in trains but also steamships and factories. Well, that's what my brother says anyway.

Disease

We used to live in Tredegar until the cholera came. It's an awful disease to have and lots of people in our street died from it. The doctors didn't know how it came to the town, and didn't know how to get rid of it or treat it either. It's no surprise that cholera is called the "King of Terrors." People's houses and the streets were disinfected but nothing seemed to work because it kept on killing people. Some people in our street started going to chapel and church more because they

thought that if they prayed hard enough then God would save them. One Sunday my mother and father made us all go to chapel but there wasn't a seat left to sit on because there were so many people in there.

Moving home

That was when my father decided that we had to move away and so he packed us all up and we walked all the way here to be where my father's family live.

My job down the mine

They still keep the farm here but I don't see them very often because I work so hard underground in a coalmine called Mynydd Newydd. I work as a door-keeper or a trapper. I sit in a hole that's hollowed out from the ground and hold a string that's fastened to the door. When I hear the coal wagons coming I have to open the door by pulling the string and close the door once the trucks full of coal have gone through. My father lets me do it because it's one of the easiest jobs down the mine but it's very dark and lonely, as well as damp and draughty especially when I don't have any money left for candles. We only get 2 pennies a day and our candles cost us 2 and 1/2 pennies a week so I have to be very careful. It's so dark where I sit that I get very frightened sometimes, especially when the rats come looking for a share of my dinner. That's when I sing the hymns I learn from my mother and from Sunday School and try to talk to the older children when they pass through my door pushing their heavy trucks full of coal.

Dangerous air

My father says that my job is very important because opening and closing the doors keeps the fresh air flowing, and then you don't get lots of bad air and gases building up that can kill you or even blow up the mine. Because my father and brothers work at the coal face, they take a canary bird in a cage down the mine with them because if it breathes in dangerous air, the canary will faint and drop to the bottom of the cage, which is a good warning and gives them a chance to scramble to safety.

Morning

We leave the house before six each morning. A man called the 'knocker-up' makes sure we are up by going from house to house, tapping on bedroom windows with a long pole. I walk to work with my older sister Martha. She's only just come back to work because she was run over by a tram a while ago and was home ill a long time, but she's better now, even though she'll probably always have a limp.

The days end

We make sure not to forget our dinner, which we eat down the mine. Usually we have bread and cheese, or bread with a bit of cold bacon and cold tea that we keep in a stên, which is a tin jar with a lid and handle. We don't get home until seven o'clock at night and sometimes even later, which is why I'm so hungry when I get in - and dirty! My mother makes us wash as soon

as we get in and fills a big tin bath with hot water from the kettle on the fire. My father washes first and then the rest of us wash by age. The water is very dirty by the time it gets to me.

The mine's chapel

In our mine, we have a special chapel that the miners cut out of the coal seam held up with wooden pit props. There are also big wooden seats for us to sit on. The walls are whitewashed and light in the dark underground. The men made this chapel after a very big explosion that killed many of the miners. I love it in there because the prayer meeting every Monday morning before the shift starts makes me feel a lot safer.

Pit ponies

On my grandfather's farm, he has lots of horses that he catches from the ones that run wild on the common. These horses are not as nice as the ponies that have just started to come underground to haul wagons full of coal along rail tracks. I feel sorry for the pit ponies because they don't get to see much daylight because they are stabled underground and hardly ever come to the surface. We visit my father's family on the farm when we have a day off and my grandmother always worries about us because she's seen so many miners die from coal dust in the lungs. My mother says that dying of cholera and hunger are worse, which makes my grandmother stay quiet but I know that she still cries after we've gone.

Our house and home

We live in a house that my father rents from one of the managers of the coal mine. It's better than the one we had in Tredegar because we have a back garden here where my mother keeps a pig, and some chickens that my grandfather gave us. She also grows lots of vegetables for the stew that we have for supper every night. My mother is very clever and looks after the money that we all bring in. She works very hard making sure that we have enough to eat and that we have clean clothes to wear, which is very difficult as there are so many of us all in one house, especially in the winter. That's when the house feels very damp as all the clothes dry on a line in front of the fire. We have work clothes and Sunday best clothes which are passed down through the family as we grow older, even our shoes, if they aren't too worn. My mother says that we must look our best when we go to pray to God. She also doesn't want the other women in the chapel to gossip about her and say that she's not a good housewife and mother. My mother always seems to be having babies but not all of them live for long. My eldest sister said that if we could have afforded a doctor, maybe my new little brother wouldn't have died but my father says that it was God's Will and that we should accept it.

Moving out

We are 11 in the family but soon my two elder brothers and my second sister will be moving out when they get married. My mother and father are thinking of having a

lodger to help with the money that they'll lose from not having my brother and sister's wages, but I don't know where they'll put him!

Drinking

My nine year old sister and mother have started to make "diod fain" which is a drink made from nettles that they sell to the colliers as they pass the house when they come off shift. It's very popular because my dad says that it clears the throat beautifully from all the coal dust. She only charges a farthing for a cup but the farthings soon add up to make pennies, as she sells quite a bit of it. She also makes ginger beer, and I think that she started making it because she didn't want anyone in our family to drink the real beer that a lot of the miners buy in the ale houses after work. She says that lots of families have been destroyed by the demon drink. I'm glad she doesn't know that my brother has a pint of beer with his friends sometimes!

Other work

One of my younger sisters is very good at sewing and my uncle on the farm has asked if she can go and live with them to make all of their sheets and shirts and farm clothes. I think she'll go because she's very frightened of the dark and so would be useless working underground. I hope that they'll still let her sew for us because she's very good at making hand me down clothes look less patched!

Reading and writing

My father can't read or write but my mother can. She can also add up numbers, which she says is handy when the butcher gives her the wrong change sometimes. We speak Welsh at home and my mother reads to us every night from the Bible and I learn some of the verses by heart. I know the 23rd psalm from start to finish. My mother is determined that none of her children will go out into the world without being able to read and write. I liked school very much when I went there and would have loved to have stayed but that would have meant that my parents would have, not only lost my wages, but they also would have had to pay for my schooling, which was out of the question.

Punishment

My brothers hated school because the teacher was so cruel and quick to whip with his stick if they made a mistake. I don't think that the teacher was as cruel as the new mine manager that we have because, yesterday, he beat a boy from our street really badly on his legs for stealing bread from someone else's food bag because the rats had eaten his own food. I feel sorry for him because he can't kick his ball in the street as he walks home now so I'm going to ask him if I can borrow it until his legs feel better, after all, it was my grandfather who gave him the pig's bladder to make the ball in the first place.

