

3H The Miner's Tale

There are five model miners; one in the Visitor Centre, one in the Blacksmith Shop and three in the Locomotive Shed.

Come on, have a look at a real miner. Now, what's special about what the miner wears? How do you know I'm a miner?

The answer is the hat. It started life as an ordinary felt hat, but we need to stiffen it and make it hard. The hat is essential to protect your head. If you have ever been in a mine you'll know that the first thing you do is bang your head because it's dark and you can't see the walls and the roof of the mine. It happens all the time. So the hat has to fit, and it has to be tough.

The other thing is you need a light. You can't carry a candle in your hand because you need two hands to work. You can't tie it on, because it will burn you. There is only one place for the candle, and that is stuck on the front of your hat with a lump of clay. That way the light doesn't dazzle you, and you can see what's in front.

Next, you need strong boots. Clogs are best. It's rough underground, the ground is wet, and you need protection in case rocks drop on your toes. Clogs have a wooden sole, and iron grips on the bottom which look a bit like horseshoes, and they're made of very tough leather for protection.

Now, what else am I wearing? Actually, it doesn't matter. I tie the bottoms of my trousers to stop them flapping, but any trousers will do. Sometimes you see people wearing their old Sunday best suit when it's worn out. It doesn't matter what you wear. In fact, I'll tell you something. When you go deep down in a mine, it gets warmer the further you go. And when you're working you get hot, so the clothes come off. Yes that's right, the clothes come off and some men work with no clothes at all. But there's not a lot to see by candle light, so just get on with working. It's not a fashion parade down there.

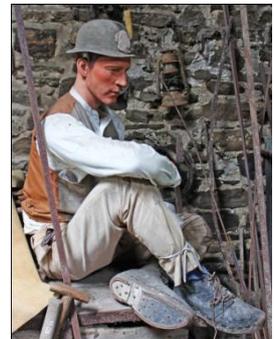
On the way you need something with pockets. You need to carry spare candles, you need to carry your lunch, and you need gunpowder and fuses. But that's about it.

Now, there are the tools. The standard thing is every miner needs a shovel and a pick. You might say the shovel and the pick are the miners' trade mark. When the rock is too hard for a pick we have to use gunpowder. You'll see how it's done when you go in the mine.

But I think you might just have another question. Who would be a miner? What a terrible job being in the dark all day! Why do I do it?

You've heard that it's dangerous and unhealthy and all the rest. Maybe you think it's the worst job in the world.

You don't know anything. Let me explain why I am a miner.



Look at the average farm worker. He's tied to his cottage. He can't escape, he's paid a pittance, he can't grow his own food. He's a slave to the farmer.

Things in this country got worse and worse. We had these corn laws between 1815 and 1846 to stop cheap corn coming in from abroad. But what it meant was that ordinary people starved. There wasn't enough corn in the land to feed the population and the price of corn went up so that we couldn't afford it. The ordinary working man needs food in order to work, but who listens to us? Parliament was controlled by the big landowners and they wanted their profits, so they brought in these laws to protect themselves. It nearly caused a civil war, I'll tell you.

So, what can a man do? If he's poor he can work in a factory, or he can work in a coal mine, employed by the mine owner and living on nothing at all. But we metal miners are a different breed. We're not employed by anyone. We're free, and we have a proud tradition of being free that goes back for hundreds of years in some parts of the country. You see, we know about mining, and none of these fancy gentry are going to dirty their posh coats and come down a mine to discover how we do it. So we can charge what we like, and work when we like. We've always had strict rules about that, and no-one can stop us.

There's a long tradition of metal mining – in Wales, in Cornwall, and in Derbyshire as well as here. And with that tradition there's a lot of expertise. No-one in the world can beat us. What's more, there are precious few people who would dare to come down a mine and find out how we work, so what we do is a kind of trade secret. We're not going to show people how to bore a hole, how to use the gunpowder, how to fire a shot. It's our job, and you leave it to the men who know.

Your metal miner is a free man, and they have to treat us properly or there's no profit for anyone. First, you have to persuade us to come. They call us 'squatters' but that's because the owner has to give us some land rent free. We build our own houses, and we grow our own food. Whatever happens, we won't starve. If the price of corn goes up, we eat vegetables. We have parsnips and potatoes and carrots and sprouts and cabbages all winter. We keep a pig that we kill for Christmas, and then there's salt pork for the winter. The whole family works on the land between other jobs, so we survive when others starve. This is my insurance if the mine fails. We don't live at Snailbeach. Everyone has to walk in. And if one mine fails, we could walk to another.

A mine doesn't last forever. It only lasts as long as you find the mineral. So we don't live at the mine. We show the mine owner that we're free.

Then the way we work the mine depends on a contract. Every month we make a new one. We tell the mine owner what we want, and how much lead he will get. We work in gangs, and every member of the gang gets a share of the money. If the mine owner wants a new tunnel or a shaft, we contract for it at so much a yard. We're in control of our lives and our wages. And at Snailbeach, there's always work, there's always lead, and everyone is happy. It's not like these mad ventures where they get people to start digging and they find nothing at all. Go to one of these places and however much they pay, you know they will run out of money when they find no lead. So Snailbeach is safe. We mine 3,000 tons of lead from here every year, for year upon year. This is the richest mine in the land and we are the men who know how to work it.

It is also a good mine. It has plenty of ventilation. The water that comes in from the ground above keeps down the dust, so you're not coughing all the time. It has a good reputation. Most of the levels are over 2 metres tall, so a man can stand safely, and there's a good flow of air. The stopes where we mine are wide because the ore is plentiful. There's room to swing a hammer or a pick. We have three shifts a day, so no-one works too long. Now at Snailbeach they made us work longer. Normally a miner does 6 hours, no more, and that includes time for lunch. But Snailbeach mine is so deep that it can take you an hour to climb up at the end of the shift, so you don't get so much work done. And the time spent climbing is counted as working time. So they wanted eight hour shifts. Anyway, we got a decent agreement. An eight hour shift allowed half an hour for going down, and an hour for coming up. And we still take the hour for lunch because it's heavy work, and a man needs his break and his food if he's going to work. Eventually they convinced us that we'd earn more money if we worked eight hour shifts, and you can see that at the end of the month.

Most of us don't work Saturdays and we never work on Sundays. We're good religious people. Sunday is for chapel. It's the Lord's Day and He commands us not to work on the Sabbath. A miner goes to chapel. His children go to Sunday School. And this is a true day of rest as the Lord commands. The mine owners don't like it because they have to pump the mine when there's no-one at work, and they say it spoils their profits. But what does it profit a man if he breaks the Lord's commandments? This is what it costs if he wants to mine lead.

This isn't the only day of rest. At the end of the month we're paid, and that's another day off. It might annoy the owners, but that's the way miners work. We are free. We make our own contract. It's a bargain.

With this, we know the mine owner, and he has to be on our side. He pays compensation when someone is injured. He pays for a doctor for when we're sick. If old miners can't work so hard, he lets them do lighter jobs, or let's them work in old parts of the mine at reduced rates.

We have a miners' benefit society as well. We pay so much a month to cover men who are sick or injured. We pay benefit to widows.

We've never had many children in the mine, because there wasn't much they could do. Most of the work was at the surface, sorting the ore and throwing away the rubbish. But now they don't do that. They go to school. The mine company and the Marquis of Bath built the school in 1845 and they paid the teacher. They knew this would help them, because your miner is a skilled man, and his children need an education.

The only disagreement we had with the Marquis was about the chapel. You see, we are mainly chapel, and the Marquis didn't like that. He thought we should go to the parish church in Minsterley. But nobody tells us where to pray. We worshipped in houses, and then in the blacksmith's shop in Snailbeach. The Marquis wouldn't let us build a chapel. But up the valley the land belongs to the Earl of Tankerville. He doesn't get on with the Marquis. He let us build a chapel up there because he and the Marquis don't see eye to eye. Eventually the Marquis built a church in Snailbeach, but no-one went to it. So the Marquis had to let the Methodists build a chapel in Snailbeach, but he charged them rent every year and I think that was out of spite.

So there you have it. Mining here is a good life. It's secure, it pays. Our women and children don't have to work underground. For a mine, Snailbeach is healthy, and in the winter you'd rather been down the mine than out in the rain and snow. We're independent, educated, skilled, and we control our working hours. It's hard work but we have time for rest, time to manage our own land, and everyone is fed. We own our own houses and land, and we're independent. We're respected, good law abiding religious people. We trust in the Lord to keep us safe, and we have faith in our eternal home. A lot of people wish they had a life like ours, I'll tell you.