

VICTORIAN BRITAIN: DOWN THE MINE

Resources

The story of Lotte

Somehow as soon as Lotte saw him come into the courtyard of the workhouse she knew she didn't like him. He didn't look ugly or anything; he was quite tall. He was nicely dressed and he was carrying a big bag of sweets. All the other children liked him a great deal and they all crowded round him and said, 'Hello Mister,' and he would say, 'Hello, hello, hello, hello. I wonder who would like one of my bits of candy here?' and he would give out his bits of candy to all the children. Then he would say, 'Is there anybody here, poor souls, who haven't got any parents at all?' and some of the children would say, 'Me, me!' and he gave them two bits of candy. But Lotte turned away and walked into the corner of the yard and looked at him because she felt there was something wrong somewhere, and all the rest of the children were munching their sweets and saying, 'She's silly, they're very good these are, they're very good indeed – you're silly to turn them down.' And Lotte said, 'My grandma always, before she died, used to say to me that I shouldn't take sweets from people, and I'm not going to 'cause I do what I'm told.'

Then they went in to have their meal, and they all stood up in silence in long rows by the tables, whilst the workhouse master and his wife came in very slowly, and very pompously, to take their seats with the tall man who had been giving out all the sweets.

The workhouse master turned round and said, 'Be seated,' and everybody sat down, and he said, 'I want to present to you here Mr Akenshaw. Mr Akenshaw's come on a special mission from a long way away, from the north of England, and he's going to find some people who are willing workers, and he's going to give jobs to some of you children, you lucky children. You'll be able to have jobs, and then you'll earn some money. Aren't you lucky children, and as a special sign of your luck today I'm going to give you double rations.' Oh, and how they cheered and they banged their

spoons on the tables, and they said, 'Oh it's a lovely day today, we're getting double rations!' – and they did.

They didn't have just one bowl of soup – and it was good soup, it was soup with thick bits in it, great chunks of meat – they had *two* bowls of soup and everybody was saying, 'This is lovely isn't it, this is great, wonder who he is, wonder where we're going?'

Afterwards Mr Akenshaw walked down and said, 'Erm, that one looks good, yes, erm, that one looks good, yes, that one looks good, that one looks good, yes, I'll take that one, yes, that's a good strong one, yes, I'll have her, yes, I'll have her, yes, nice strong boy too.' So he got loads and loads and loads of them, and the master of the workhouse said, 'Right, now go and pack up all your things. Mr Akenshaw has got a special wagonette to take us along to Chichester where we will catch the coach, and then you will go off with him to be little workpeople. I'm sure you will enjoy it, greatly.'

Well, they were so excited about the journey they didn't really think about where they were going. But as they went further and further north it got colder, and colder, and colder, and the children kept saying, 'Are we going to the North Pole? Is it that far that we are going?' But eventually they got towards a town, a big town it was, and there was lots and lots of smoke, and at the other side of the town they could just see a funny sort of machine sticking out of the ground with a big, big wheel on it. Mr Akenshaw said, 'Now children that's where we are going; you're going to see my coal mine. I'll bet none of yer have ever been down a coal mine before, have you?' And they said, 'No, no we haven't, we haven't – it's all new to us.'

Well, they got into their lodgings and they got into little beds, and the next morning they were woken at 4 o'clock in the morning. Oh, it was early, oh dear, it was very early when you had to go to work, and by 5 o'clock they were all queuing up at the mine and waiting for their turn. Oh, it looked very, very steep, it went down, down, and down, and it was very black in there. It was very, very scary getting into the bucket, and they held the bucket to one side so you could get into it, but then it swung into the middle of the hole, and then they wound you down, and down, and down, and down, and as you looked up you saw the light getting smaller, and smaller, and smaller, and smaller, and when Lotte got to the bottom it was quite dark.

There was a big man next to her who said, 'Here lassie, come along with me and I'll show you what you're going to do,' and Lotte said, 'I can't see, I don't know where I am.' 'Wait a minute,' he said, 'I will just light the lantern.' He lit the lantern, closed its window, and took her along a long corridor that got smaller, and smaller, and smaller, and smaller, and smaller and every little while along the corridor there was a little door that they had to go through, and Lotte said, 'Why have we got so many doors here?' and he said, 'Ah well, that's to make sure that the air gets all the way through. If we didn't have the doors the air would just stay in one place and it wouldn't get through, and the miners right at the end, where they're picking at the coal, wouldn't be able to breathe. These doors is very important – that's going to be your job.'

And eventually they got to a door and he said, 'Now you sit here, little madam, and when you hear one of the big wagons – we call them corves – when you hear one of the corves coming along, you'll hear it rattle, rattle, rattle along, then you open the door and then it can go through, alright? Simple job, anybody can do it. I'll come back when it's time to go up.' At that he turned to leave her, and she said, 'Are you going to leave me in the dark? Aren't you going to leave me a light?' He said, 'You'll have to get used to the dark, little missy, but for today maybe I'll give yer a stump of candle to start yer off,' and he pulled a little tiny stump of candle out of his pocket, and lit it from the candle in his lantern, and there was a little glimmer of light. 'Won't last long,' he said.

With that he was off and away, and there she sat at the side waiting, and didn't know what was going to happen at all. The little candle flickered by her side, and then there was a dreadful thunderous noise coming along like an enormous machine coming towards her, and she thought, 'What is this, what's happening?' and up, up, up she saw coming a girl just a bit bigger than her, with her head down, and she had a big belt on, and a chain that went from the belt inbetween her legs to an enormous great tub full of coal. It was huge and the little girl was pulling it, and pulling it, and pulling it. Lotte was so amazed that she forgot to open the door and the little girl said, 'Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up,' and she opened the door quickly. As the great wagon went through the door she saw that behind it was an even smaller little boy, and he was down there with his head pressed against the tub, and it went through, and when it had gone through she closed the door – and at that the candle went out.

Now she was in the dark, and she didn't like being in the dark one bit, and she sat, and sat, and sat. Then there was another rumble, rumble, rumble, rumble and she opened the door and she couldn't see anybody, but she put out her hand so that she could touch a little girl who was going by, and she said, 'My name's Lotte, what's yours?' And the little girl said, 'I'm Elizabeth,' and Lotte said, 'What yer doing?' Elizabeth said, 'I'm a hurrier, that's what I am. Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up!' and she pulled her way forward and Lotte put out her hand, and she touched a little boy just as he was going on behind with his head down, and she said, 'I'm Lotte, who are you?' and he said, 'I'm Billy.' She said, 'What do you do?' He said, 'I thrust, I'm a thruster,' and he pushed and pushed away.

Well, it seemed as if she was there forever and ever, and ever. Then just when she was feeling, 'Oh, I'm so tired I'm going to go to sleep,' the big man was by her side again with his lamp, and he said, 'Well, little miss, how did you like your first day's work?' She said, 'Oh, I didn't like it very much at all.' He said, 'Well, it's 5 o'clock now so it's time to go.'

She'd been there twelve hours, and as she went along she thought, 'I'm so hungry I don't know what to do; will we get any food when we get up?' She got into the big tub at the bottom and they waited, and then when everybody was in they shouted, 'Wind her up!' and there was a sudden sound from above, 'Aye, aye!' and the tub began to rise up, and up, and up, and up, and up and the light grew bigger, and bigger, and bigger, and bigger until they were right at the top. A man pulled the tub to the side, and they climbed on out, and Lotte thought, 'I don't want ever to go down there again.'

But she did. Day after day after day she went down and did this horrible job. Until one day the big man when he came to collect her said, 'Well now, little missy, you seem to be doing rather well. Let me feel your muscles, hold up your arm for me.' She held up her arm and he felt her muscles and he said, 'I think I can make a hurrier out of you, little missy. Tomorrow we'll have a try.' She said, 'Does that mean I don't have to sit in the dark all the time?' He said, 'Yes, yes, I think we can have you moving now.'

Well, the next day when she went down she went with a man all the way to the coal face, and it got very, very, very, very low when they got near the coal face. When he got to the coal face he took most of his clothes off and started with a pick, picking away at the coal and trying to get big pieces. He said to her, 'Put that in the corf, and there was a

huge great piece – oh! – nearly the size of the bottom of a chair, and she thought, 'I can't pick that up, it's too big,' but she had a try. She got it off the ground, but then dropped it and it cracked into two, and the man turned round and he was suddenly very angry with her. 'Hey, little missy, that won't do. I want *big* pieces, we get good money for big pieces; don't you dare drop any more pieces.' 'No, mister,' she said and she picked it up and she put it into the wagon, then more, and more, and more pieces of coal. Finally he said, 'Now put on the belt and pull.' She put on the belt and chain and she began to pull. 'Pull harder,' he said, 'come on, get down on your hands and knees.' She got down on her hands and knees and began to pull, and pull, and pull – and finally he said, 'Hang on, I'll get yer a boy. Fred, come here!' A little boy came scuttering through and said, 'Yes, master?' The miner said, 'I'll have you thrusting today, Fred. Go on with Lotte there and see what you can do.' And Fred went behind to put his head to the corf and push, and push. Soon it began to move, and they pulled, and they pulled, and they went through all the trap doors all the way through until they got finally to the place where the coal went. 'Well,' Lotte thought, 'that's awful, that's a terrible job, that's dreadful. If I have to do the same tomorrow I'll be worn out. Can I go up now?' The man said, 'Can you go up now, yer silly lassie – ha, ha, ha! No, you've got to go back, you've got to bring twenty of those wagons today.' Twenty times a day she had to pull, and pull, and pull.

Well, it got a bit better. She got very strong, she got very clever about how to lift things, she knew how to squat down to lift things instead of bending down, and she knew how to give a little weight before she lifted a big lift and then put it in. She learnt a lot of tricks.

But oh, it was a hard life. At times, when she went up at 5 o'clock in the afternoon and saw the last little bit of daylight, she said, 'I can't even summon the energy to eat or wash,' and sometimes she missed her meals, and sometimes she went to bed dirty, and she didn't bother about it 'cause she was so tired.

Then one day Mr Akenshaw came; still the same tall, very elegant gentleman, and he talked to all the children. He said, 'Now, we are going to have a visitor tomorrow, ha, ha, ha. Now, I wonder who I would like to have to see the visitor?' He looked around and he thought, 'Will it be you, or will it be you?' Finally, who do you think he picked? 'Lotte,' he said, 'you come here little girl, you come back to my house.' She said, 'You mean I haven't got to go down today?' and he said, 'No, you haven't got to go

down today. You come back to my house and I'll see about a bit of breakfast for you.'

Well, he brought her into the house and then he said, 'Oh wait a minute – just stay there,' and he called for his housekeeper. She came along and she said, 'Oh, the poor wee mite!'

'Take her off and wash her, Mrs Jones,' said Mr Akenshaw, and she was taken to the most beautiful bathroom, and the lady drew hot water for her, and there was soap and suddenly she felt all clean. Then the lady went and fetched her fresh clothes – and it wasn't just ordinary clothes, it was a party frock that she was given. Mrs Jones combed her hair and brushed it, and she even had some ribbons for her hair, and all the time Lotte was thinking, 'This is wonderful.' Mrs Jones took her downstairs and there was Mr Akenshaw. He said, 'Now missy, what would you like for your breakfast? Would you like some bacon and eggs?' and she said, 'Oh, yes! Oh, thank you Mr Akenshaw, that's lovely.' She sat down and they brought her a huge dish, not just an ordinary sized plate, not just an ordinary sized plate like we have, but an enormous one – and she ate, and ate, and ate, and ate, and ate until she could feel that if she ate one mouthful more she would burst. Then she said, 'Thank you, Mr Akenshaw, that's lovely,' and Mr Akenshaw said, 'Well now, you can do something for me little Lotte, ha, ha, ha!'

'We're going to have someone come from London today who's, erm, who's asking about how children get on in my mines. Now, I hope you answer his questions nicely for him, won't you, because if you do answer his questions nicely, well – maybe like as not you won't have to go down tomorrow either – we'll see, we'll see.'

And at that there was a rat-tat-tat at the door, and they looked out and they could see a chaise, and out of the chaise was getting a very elegant gentleman with the tallest top hat you have ever seen in your life, and he had lace at his cuffs, and lace at his collar and he seemed to be the smartest person in the world. He came into the house and said, 'Morning, Akenshaw. Now then, I want to see all of your er, your workers. Have you got them here?' And Mr Akenshaw said, 'Yes, we have got little Lotte here, we think a lot of little Lotte. Do you want to ask her some questions?'

'Yes, Akenshaw,' he said, 'yes, yes – sit down my dear,' and they sat down at a table and he got out a big form that he was going to fill in and he said, 'Now, what's your name?' and he filled in her name, and then

he said, 'Now, how old are you my dear?' and he filled in her age. Then he said, 'Now, tell me about work down the pit.'

And Lotte said, 'Well, it used to be really horrible, oh, I can't tell you how bad it used to be. It was really nasty, but it's got ever so much better, oh it's ever so much better.' 'Now, how does your master treat you?' he said. 'Oh, he's so kind, is Mr Akenshaw,' said Lotte, 'he's such a good man. Do you know what? He give me this beautiful dress and he gave me such a lovely breakfast, it was just so nice I can't tell you what a good man Mr Akenshaw is, he's lovely, he really is.'

'Oh, good,' said the man from London. He filled in the form and signed it at the bottom and said, 'Can you write your name, little girl?' and she said, 'Er, I can, just.' He said, 'Right, put your name at the bottom here. That means that what you've said here is true.'

She took the pen and she thought, 'I hope I don't make a blotch with the ink.' She dipped the pen in the ink and then she wrote: big 'L', and then little 'o', and then two 't's, and an 'e', and put her pen back in the inkstand. 'Jolly good,' said the man and he put some sand over the top of it to dry the ink, and shook the sand off and then folded up the paper and put it in his pocket.

'Well, Mr Akenshaw, it seems you've got a clean bill of health. I'll report to the office and we'll send through to you. Goodbye, goodbye,' and with that he got into the chaise and drove away. Mr Akenshaw turned round to Lotte and said, 'Well done little girl, well done – I'm right pleased with you today.'

This is a special story, I haven't told you all of it. I wonder what happened next in my story?

Nuffield Primary History project

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VICTORIAN BRITAIN:

DOWN THE MINE Resources

Evidence of children working in the mines, from the 1842
Parliamentary Commission's Report on conditions in the mines

Sarah Gooder, aged 8 years

I'm a trapper in the Gawber pit. It does not tire me, but I have to trap without a light and I'm scared. I go at four and sometimes half past three in the morning, and come out at five and half past. I never go to sleep. Sometimes I sing when I've light, but not in the dark; I dare not sing then. I don't like being in the pit.

John Saville, aged 7 years

I stand and open and shut the door; I'm generally in the dark, and sit me down against the door I never see daylight now, except on Sundays.

No. 61. — James Wood. Percy Main Colliery

I am 8 years old. I have been down the pit six weeks. I keep a door. I go away from home before 3 o'clock. I go with my brother, who keeps the chains down the pit. My mother calls me. I get home about the same time as the other boys. I am not frightened. I'm never beaten. My brother [aged 9 years] took me down at first. I have never been to any school.

No. 38. — Joshua Stephenson.

Heaton Colliery

I am aged 8 years. I have been down the pit two years and more. I went down the pit before I was six years old. I keep a switch and a door. I get up out of bed at 3 o'clock and go down the pit at 4 o'clock a.m. The pit looses at 4, and I get up and home about 5 o'clock; then I wash myself and get my dinner, meat and potatoes. After dinner I go to bed; I never play about first. I go down the pit in the cage. I take baits [food] down with me; mostly bread and cheese, sometimes beef; always as much as I want. I cannot read at all. I never was at any school in my life, day or Sunday school. I never go to any church or chapel.

No. 111. — William Laws.

Blackboy Pit

I am ten years and three months old. I have worked two years. I was a trapper when I first went down; I was a barrow-way trapper. I am now a trapper in the horseway. The doors are larger. I sit and pull the door with a string. The door shuts of itself. I never fall asleep. I like the pit nicely; I get 10 pence a day.

I go to school sometimes on Sundays; cannot read; cannot say the Lord's Prayer or the Commandments.

When I am in the pit nobody comes to talk to me.

I set mice-traps in the pit, and catch two sometimes; I bring them to the cat in the stable of the pit. I never play at anything the days I work in the pit; on other days I play at marbles; throw a ball at the wall; play at running and catch another boy; play at the hoop; quarrel with other boys.

No. 206.— Fanny Drake, aged 15. Charlesworth's Wood Pit

I have been 6 years last September in a pit. I hurry [push] by myself. I find it middling hard. It has been a very wet pit before the engine was put up. I have had to hurry up to my calves of my legs in water.

I go down at 6 a.m, and sometimes 7; and I come out at 5, and sometimes 6.

I don't like it so well. It's cold, and there's no fire in the pit. I'd rather be out of pits altogether. I'd rather wait on my grandmother.

I push with my head sometimes, it makes my head sore sometimes, so that I cannot bear it touched; it is soft too. I have often had headaches, and colds, and coughs, and sore throats.

I cannot read. I can say my letters.

Widow Drake, Fanny's grandmother, aged 79.

I have never tried to get anything else for Fanny to do, because there is nothing else to do – only work down the pit.

No. 208. — Mary Margerson, aged 16. Charlesworth's Wood Pit

I work in a pit above the one where Fanny Drake works. We work from 6 in the morning till 5 at night. I don't stop for any dinner. I get muck up generally all the time, and I rest odd times. I hurry alone. I am quite sure I have nobody to help me. I work for Joseph Lister, who pays me. The pit is very wet. The water comes up nearly to my calves generally, till they let it off. It is often so for a week together. I find it very heavy work. I am very tired when I come home. I hurry both muck and coals, and I can't keep count of the number of corves per day. I am well enough used by the men. I can't read. I go to Sunday-school.

There is a cold wind in the pit.

I don't like being in the pit. My father and mother are alive, but they are always sickly. I have four sisters, and three work in the pit; and I have a brother, and he is going 5 years old, and he does not work yet.

No. 215. — Jane Margerison. Examined May 12, at Woodenthorpe Pit

I'm going 16. I hurry. I have been 4 years at pit. The work doesn't tire me. I've never been badly. I come at 6, I go out sometimes at 3 and sometimes at 4. I know no getters who leave the hurriers corves to fill after they have gone out themselves. I don't mind being in pit so much. I have been to service till I came to pit. I like going to service best. My father took me away from service to send me to pit. I did go to Sunday-school, but I don't now, because I have to help my mother. The men wear trousers in the pit. It's wet a bit, but it does not come over my shoes.

No. 216 — Anne Firth. Examined May 12, at Woodenthorpe Pit.

I'm going 9. I come down at 6. I live at Middlestown. I go out at 5 sometimes. I go out sometimes earlier. I hurry with another who is less than me. Ann Eyre hurries with me. I don't fill or riddle. It go at Sunday-schools. I can read a bit, not Testament. I am tired in my arms and my legs, and all. I don't like being in pit. I'd rather be in school. I've been a hear here. It's wet, and I get my feet wet sometimes.

No. 218 — William Firth, between 6 and seven years old :—

I hurry with my sister. I don't like being in pit. I was crying to go out this morning. It tires me a great deal. They pay me sometimes. I always stop for dinner.

No 214.— Samuel ... , Woodenthorpe Pit, Flockton: —

I am going 11. I've been 5 years at pit. I shut trap-door at first when I came. I come down every morning at 6. I get up at 5. I go away at half-past 4. I go at 4 on Mondays. I never go till 4 on Saturdays. I stop from 12 till 1. I never do aught then. I have to riddle when I hurry. I hurry about 20 corves. Its dry where I hurry. My work doesn't tire me at all. I go to Sunday School. I read in A B C. I go where John Sorby teaches. I have had good health.

Mine steward's evidence to the Commission

William Pickard, General Steward at Denby Mine

We used trappers till lately, and they used to go and begin as early as 6 years old. They come at 8 or 9 years old to hurry.

The thinnest coal bed we are working is only 10 inches. We cut the gates 26 inches high. The youngest children go there.

The corf and coal together weigh 28 stone (174 kilograms). They will have 250 yards to hurry, on average. They hurry 16 a day.

The biggest part of the gates are dry. There is some places where the water is over their shoes; but very few. It is mostly very dry considering. I don't like to see the poor little children dabble in water.

I do not think now that children's work is hard work. They have generally play enough after their work is done.

It would be possible to cut the gates higher; but it would be a great expense.

I don't know how we are to do without girls; we cannot do without them ... they are far better hurriers and more attentive to their job.