

## Lithgow state mine heritage park & railway



### School Activity – “From a boy's first day at the pit to an experienced coal miner”

In the contract mining days before mechanisation, most boys started work at the age of 14 years, following their dad into the mines.

in many cases their fathers had applied for the job while the boys were still at school. Once they turned 14, they left the school for the mine.

In preparation for his job, the young boy would go with his parents usually to the co-operative store to get his water bottle and crib (meal) tin. He would also, if times were reasonably good, get a work shirt or flannel and a pair of boots. If finances would not allow this, he would have to settle for some hand me downs from his dad or relatives.

In the days before bath houses at the pits, there were no washing and changing facilities. Boys and men would wear their work clothes to and from the pit irrespective of the weather.

There were no clean or dry clothes for them when they emerged filthy dirty and soaked in sweat and grime. Sometimes they would have to walk three or four miles out of the mine and then another few miles from the pit top to their homes where mum would have a tub of water for the boys and dad. As was customary, dad would have first go and then the boys in order of seniority. This would take place around the fire in winter.

From the first day a boy went into a pit there was a pecking order through which he progressed to the coal face. On his first day at work a young boy might be lucky to get a job as a token boy on the surface. Every miner had his own identifying number stamped on the leather token and the token boy would take these from the skips and hang them on allocated hooks for reuse.

The next step was being sent underground and given a job as a trapper, opening and closing the ventilation doors for the wheelers and horses. From there he would become a clipper, clipping on full and empty skips. After some experience, he would be taught spragging, jamming the wheels on the skips.

This could be a very dangerous job and many boys and men lost fingers doing it.

Most boys spent their first years as token boys, trappers, greasing the tommy dodds that controlled the hauling rope, clipping, spragging skips and then, when their turn came, they became wheelers. The miner with his horse was responsible for getting the empty skips to the miners at the coalface and bringing the full skips out again. This was the last stage before going to the coal face. to which they were promoted on the basis of seniority.

As miners they learned the various skills such as timbering, erecting brattice for ventilation and laying rails. To become classified as a full fledged miner on the coal, you had to have worked three years with an experienced miner in and around the coalface.

(from “At the Coal Face” – Paddy Gorman, *Mining & Energy Division, CFMEU 1998* – ISBN 0 9585647 0 1 )