

Breaking Ground - Women of the Northern Coalfields
Mining Art Gallery
13 October 2018 - 24 March 2019



The Mining Art Gallery in Bishop Auckland, County Durham will present the temporary exhibition *Breaking Ground - Women of the Northern Coalfields* (13 October 2018 - 24 March 2019) examining the often misunderstood role of 19th century women in the coal mining industry. In particular, the exhibition will explore the experiences and artistic depictions of the Pit Brow Lasses, who worked on the surface of British collieries.

Early in the industry, coal mining was a family affair; men would hew the coal and their wives and children worked alongside them as 'hurriers' taking the coal to the surface. However, on 4 July 1836, a flood at Huskar Moorend Pit in Barnsley claimed the lives of 26 children, leading Queen Victoria to order an inquiry into working conditions.

The report found that women were working alongside men in unsuitable proximity and dress, often bare-chested with their skirts tucked up or wearing trousers. These findings were met with public outrage, with the report deeming the women "unsuitable for marriage and unfit to be mothers". In May 1842 the Mines and Collieries Act was passed, prohibiting all women and children under the age of 10 from working underground.

The legislation was met with dismay in mining communities. The subsequent loss of wages placed many families in difficult financial situations and for the first eight years of the Act, women simply continued to work underground, often dressed in men's clothing, with employers turning a blind eye. However, in 1850 as mine inspections began in earnest, women had to find other ways of earning a living within the mining community.

In areas such as Lancashire, Yorkshire, Wales and Scotland women moved their work to the surface of the colliery and earned their wage by hauling tubs or picking stone from coal. These women - known as Pit Brow Lasses in Lancashire and areas of the North, Tip Girls in South Wales and Pit Bank Women in Staffordshire - were to become something of a cultural phenomenon for their unconventional appearance and lifestyle, though their influence is often overlooked today. *Breaking Ground - Women of the Northern Coalfields* uncovers the transgressive steps these women took to continue working in coal mining, and how they politically defended their right to do so.



The emergence and popularity of photography during the Victorian era ensured that the Pit Brow Lasses, and their distinctive style of dress, were well-recorded. Many photographs of Pit Brow Lasses were commissioned by diarist and social commentator Arthur Munby, whose portraits depict the women standing proudly in their 'uniform' - breeches worn under rough skirts, kerchiefs tied around their heads and thick boots - gazing confidently into the camera, their fearless attitude dispelling conventions of the demure female subject. Contemporary ephemera featuring the Pit Brow Lasses such as postcards, and their appearance in works of popular culture including Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *That Lass O'Lowrie's* (1887), suggest women at the pit head captured the public imagination across the country.

Despite this, many continued to be outraged at the idea of women carrying out hard labour in clothes that threatened Victorian notions of womanhood. From 1860 onwards, parliament made several attempts to prevent women from working at the pit head. Threatened again with abolition from their jobs in 1887, Margaret Parks, Mayoress of Wigan, organised a march on parliament, with the Pit Brow Lasses dressed in their work clothes to prove they were "*not the degraded, unsexed, health injured creatures...but are, on the contrary, as good an example of honourable and vigorous womanhood as England itself can produce.*" Despite further legislative attempts to force women out of the mines throughout the 20th century, they staunchly defended their rights to work, with the last woman retiring from the pit brow in the 1960s.

Artworks featured in the exhibition demonstrate that Pit Brow Lasses remained in the cultural consciousness throughout the mid-20th century. Highlights include a painting of Welsh pit women by former collier Archie Rhys Griffiths and a depiction of the Pit Brow Lasses by contemporary artist David Venables, whose works explore the industrial heritage of the North East.



As well as the women who toiled on the edge of the pit, archival evidence within the exhibition suggests that other women in mining communities were much more than the universally accepted wife, mother and domestic help. These women had to deal with the uncertainty of unpredictable wages, injury to their breadwinner and sometimes death. Many women protected against the potential loss of earnings by taking in lodgers, washing, mending, or undertaking agricultural work when the seasons allowed.

A recently uncovered hand-coloured photograph (pictured above) displayed in the exhibition depicts Hannah Porter, who lived independently after her miner husband began working in Australia. Resourceful and resilient, over the course of her lifetime Hannah was a dressmaker, took in lodgers, catered local social gatherings, undertook agricultural work and even ran a hardware shop from her front room to help support herself and her two young daughters. This 1862 photograph was arranged by Hannah, who must have only just heard of the advent of photography, to send to her husband overseas.

Victorian women in coal mining communities were fiercely protective of their families and did whatever it took to ensure their survival. In 1872, following a rise in meat prices, miners wives organised a strike against the mobile butchers that visited the colliery towns and villages. Known as the 'anti-meat' agitation, in a show of political strength, women across the mining communities of Northumberland and Durham persuaded whole villages to stop eating meat. The butchers eventually backed down, and communities across the country were inspired to take up similar protests.

Angela Thomas, Mining Art Gallery Curator comments:

"We are delighted to be launching a new temporary exhibition at the Mining Art Gallery to bring to light and celebrate the significant role of women working alongside men in the Northern coalfields. With 2018 marking 100 years since some women in the UK were granted suffrage, this is the perfect time to foreground the pioneering attitudes and strength with which the Pit Brow Lasses asserted their right to work and challenged the notions of womanhood. We look forward to raising awareness about their history and cultural significance in the UK, particularly in relation to mining art."

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MEDIA ENQUIRIES

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NOTES TO EDITORS

About The Auckland Project

The Auckland Project is an arts, faith and heritage destination in the town of Bishop Auckland in north east England. With the medieval Auckland Castle as its centrepiece, The Auckland Project will encompass the UK's first Faith Museum, Spanish Gallery and Mining Art Gallery, along with the Auckland Tower welcome centre, Walled Garden, parkland, hotels and restaurants. More than £130m has been committed to the Project to date.

The Auckland Project began in 2012, when Founder Jonathan Ruffer decided to buy Auckland Castle, and a remarkable series of 12 paintings by the Spanish master Francisco de Zurbarán that were housed there, to keep them in trust for the people of north east England. As the project has developed beyond the Castle walls, local people have remained at the centre of the mission to revitalise Bishop Auckland, and bring about real change in the region. At the heart of The Auckland Project is a mission to reinvigorate the future of this former industrial town through employment, training and education, increasing opportunities and aspirations for local people and businesses alike.

The Auckland Project's next major milestone is the opening of Auckland Tower, a newly built welcome centre designed by award-winning architects Niall McLaughlin, on 20 October 2018. Auckland Tower, will allow visitors to learn about the history of Bishop Auckland and enjoy spectacular views of the surrounding area from the Tower's 15-metre high viewing platform. This will be followed by the reopening of Auckland Castle in Spring 2019, following a multi-million pound conservation programme. The public will be able to follow the processional route through the Castle's State Rooms, returned to their Georgian Gothic splendour as designed by architect James Wyatt, and discover the story of the Prince Bishops of Durham and their lives at Auckland Castle over the centuries.

For more information, and a full list of The Auckland Project's supporters, please visit aucklandproject.org.

About the Mining Art Gallery

Located in Bishop Auckland's Market Place, the Mining Art Gallery is the UK's first gallery dedicated to exploring how miners responded to their experiences through art - from the claustrophobia and fear of life underground to the camaraderie and spirit of the communities they returned home to. Providing a permanent home for over 400 paintings and drawings, the gallery features works by famous local artists Tom McGuinness and Norman Cornish alongside those by miners from across the country, and artists responding to the immense significance of the industry to the UK.