A Day in the Life of Coal Whipper:

London, November 11, 1837
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Morning came early in the Lackey house. It was before dawn on a Saturday. William, the father, rose quietly from his bed. His wife Merrill continued to sleep. She would not have to wake until first light, when she would get up and start to make slop-shirts with her needle and thread. She could produce up to three per day, but at only a penny each, it added little to the family income.\(^1\) William looked around the small, filthy room. Although it was too dark to see, he knew its appearance well. There was only one bed, made a dirty straw, to share between him and his wife.\(^2\) His sleeping children were crowded together on the floor on one side of the room. The tattered blankets that covered them were much too small, and there would be little cold pairs of feet sticking out of their ragged clothes. William and Merrill had five children still living. They lost one to whooping cough, and another to the cholera epidemic of 1832.\(^3\) Tom was the oldest survivor. He was thirteen. He was followed by William Jr., Judith, Tim, and little Elizabeth. William Jr. was twelve. He, along with Tom, was still old enough to remember the times before the reforms. Both of them had spent long hours in factories in their early years.\(^4\) Now they worked on the streets, garnering pennies here and there among the shoppers on Fleet Street.

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The Lackeys shared their house with four other families, each one inhabiting just one room. They lived in the Ruins, a part of the Wapping district. They had been here for about five months, ever since their former landlord evicted them. William couldn’t blame him. After all, they couldn’t afford the rent. There had been very little work at coal whipping since the summer began, and the room had cost 2s a week. This room cost only 1s. 6d, and the cold days of November provided work once again. There was no time for getting ready, no need to be clean. Breakfast consisted of just a few bits of bread. William ate it quickly and put on his sailor’s jacket. He could not afford to be late. Today his crew took on a new job at the docks, and he had to arrive early to buy his quota of rum.

William made his way out of the house. As he stepped over the piles of trash and filth, he took care not to wake the children of the other men. They all worked hard in this house, and needed whatever sleep they could get. He had to walk through the Wenton’s room to get out, and he tipped his head to Jack as he passed by. Jack was a good man with five kids of his own. He worked on the docks too, unloading cargo from the ships. Today he should have been unloading the regular shipments of tea, but he had fallen on the job last Monday and broken his leg. Now it was only a matter of time. A man with a bum leg could not find any work, and his diet was too poor to allow him to heal. William had seen it before. Soon, the landlord would force the Wenton’s out, and they would end up in the dreaded workhouse.

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5 Mayhew, 243
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid, 238.
8 Porter, 231.
The workhouse was an old concept, and not a bad one in the beginning. The goal was to provide a place to work for the poorest of society when they could find work nowhere else. However, **after the reform of 1834**, the goal of the workhouse became to make it such a bad place to work that no one would want to live there. The **conditions there were even worse than the slums of Wapping, and those who had to reside in the workhouse were only there because they had no other option.** Workhouses could house as many as 1,500 to 2,000 paupers. Men, women and children all joined together on Sundays for a worship service organized by whatever religious group ran the institution. **That’s where** Jack would end up. Listening to some religious talk from a rich Anglican. Maybe it would do some good for him, but it sure **wasn’t** for William. Even though he had heard rumors of Anglican churches trying to reach out to the working class by using common workingmen like himself, William wouldn’t believe it. Working class people **didn’t** go to church. They **didn’t** have the time or the interest.

As William left the front door, he joined the countless other men from Wapping who lived and worked at the docks. It was not a long walk. The Lackeys lived close, right where the tavern owners wanted them. There was no reason to move away, because there was nothing to move away to. Everyone who worked at Wapping was stuck. The docks here had been built about thirty years ago. Ever since then, men and their families had spent their whole lives in

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12. Ibid, 229.
the slums of the workingman. William had been out of Wapping before, several times actually, but never far. He had heard of the great buildings of London, and had even been once to visit Waterloo. He had crossed the new bridge and seen the tower of the shot mill dominating the sky. He had also been to St. Paul’s Churchyard, and had seen the Colosseum when its construction was almost complete. Here, however, there were no great buildings, no inspirations of human achievement. The only structures around were the countless houses packed with poor, wretched families living a life void of happiness. The mood on the street was sad and silent, with little whispers scattered here and there among the masses. William joined Pete, one of his regular walking companions, and they strode quietly down the road. They had met almost two years ago at the Saturday night market, right after Pete arrived in London.

Saturday night market was the highlight of the week for many working class folk. Here, they could buy food at cheap prices and also enjoy the revelry and laughter that did not exist in their daily lives of work. The food was not good, of course. It consisted of the leftovers of whatever the middle class would not buy. The bread was stale, the fruits were rotten, and the milk was sour. But the food was there, and it was cheap. That’s what mattered to the people who bought it. Here, one Saturday night two years ago, Pete had been with his wife trying to find food cheap enough to get them through the week. As they moved from stand to stand, a young lad darted past them and disappeared into the crowd. Directly after him came William, yelling and flailing his arms as he tried to grab the boy. The boy was too quick, though, and

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William too clumsy. Pete didn’t even have time to cry out before William plowed into him full speed. They rolled and tumbled in a heap on the hard ground as the boy got away. The men got up and William explained that the boy had stolen a loaf from him right after he had bought it from the bread stand. As he finished explaining, one of the Peelers came to investigate the scene. His blue police uniform and clean face stood out in the crowd, and William again recounted what had happened. Unfortunately there was nothing to be done. The boy was long gone and everyone involved knew he would never be caught. There were simply too many bread thieves and too many places to hide.

Soon after this, Pete got a job down at the docks, and since that time William and he had grown to be friends. They were both nice sorts of chaps, the kind that are hard to find among the ragged ranks of Wapping. This morning was foggy and cold. As they walked the half-mile to the river, they thought about the long day ahead of them. William’s coal whipping crew had not had work since Wednesday, but that would change today. Each of the nine men on his crew had paid their dues at the tavern last night, and they were practically guaranteed a ship for today.

The system was a rotten one. The coal whippers already had a miserable life, and the ship owners and tavern owners forced them into even worse situations by their employment procedures. As it always was on the docks, there were more men looking for work than work could be found. In order to capitalize off this imbalance, the owners organized employment around the tavern. In order to get a job, the whippers had to please the tavern owner. The only way to please the tavern owner was to buy his drinks. William often had to spend half of his wages on drinks just to secure the next job. Many of the men spent the money and consumed

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17 Belcham, 22.
the alcohol themselves. William usually only spent the money. He gave most of the drinks away to the other men.

This morning, William was also obliged to buy a quarter of rum as a way of securing the owner’s good will for the next job. After he bought the rum, he walked to the dock to join his crew. They all, like him, were covered with the black coal dust that ingrained itself into their skin. The other eight men were already there, waiting for him. They had worked together as a crew for three months. William was the newest member of the team. He had been on crew 111, but a coal basket dropped on their foreman and seriously injured him. After that, the group split up to work with other crews. William ended up on crew 48. Jon was the foreman here. He had worked as a coal heaver for the past 15 years and was heavily in debt to the tavern owners. They forced him to spend so much money on drink that the wages he earned from each job went straight to buying rum. The taverns would sell to him on credit so that he would always owe them money. Then, they would hire him for reduced wages that allowed him to “repay” his debt. Jon would always be in debt. There was no way out. There were over two hundred coal-heaving crews on the docks, and each one had a similar tale of hopelessness and woe.

William and the rest of the men boarded the skiff that would take them out to their work ship, the Cape Hammersby. On the way, they talked about the visit the Queen had made to London only two days earlier. One of the men, Arthur, said his brother had actually seen Her Majesty in Cheapside. Bob had heard that on the day of the celebration, the prisoners in

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18 Mayhew, 235.
19 Ibid, 238.
20 Ibid, 236.
21 London Times, 10 November 1837, pg. 5.
Borough Compter received beef dinners and plum pudding.\textsuperscript{22} The talk of good food caused a collective sigh among the men. The visit of the Queen was a special day indeed! The parade had been a grand display, with carriages, nobles, royal attendants, lavish decorations, and many free gifts. Although the rain dampened part of the afternoon, the overall procession went very well.\textsuperscript{23} Of course, none of the men of crew 48 had seen any of these wonders, only heard about them from the gossip rings. Their main interest in the whole ordeal was in what kind of ruler this new Queen would be. \textbf{King William IV had not been very popular.}\textsuperscript{24} Maybe this new Queen would be different. Dared they hope that she might even have some concern for the working class? This dream was bold, much too bold, they decided. The Queen was the Queen, and they were \textit{just coal heavers.} \textbf{No sense in raising false hopes.}

The skiff had almost arrived at the \textit{Cape Hammersby}. The water was filthy. The refuse of the whole city dumped into the Thames, and the results were easy to see.\textsuperscript{25} William’s family drank this water, he knew, but there was no alternative. \textbf{That’s just the way things were.} The skiff docked with the coal ship and the men got out and started to work. Four men took their places in the hold filling the first basket load while Jon, the foreman, took his regular job as the basketman. William and the other three took their places at the ropes. The ropes \textbf{were used} to help lift the basket after it was filled. The four men would hang onto the ropes while climbing over a five-foot barrier and then jump off, using their momentum to carry the basket up and out of the hold. Then, the basketman, stationed on a plank over the hold, would guide the basket and

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{London Times}, 13 November 1837, pg. 5.

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{London Times}, 10 November 1837, pg. 5

\textsuperscript{24} Arnstein, 16.

\textsuperscript{25} Porter, 315.
dump its contents into the weighing machine. They had to repeat this process sixteen times to “whip” one ton of coal, and they were expected to “whip” one hundred tons during the course of the day. 26 It was a long, hard job.

William and the men worked in total silence. 27 The lack of conversation gave him plenty of time to think. Most of the time, he thought about his children. He had grown up in the slums. He knew he would never escape it, but he had always hoped for something better for his kids. He knew that education was the key. If he could only give his children the opportunity to read, he knew they would have a shot at leaving this wretched life. As he remembered his own childhood, he thought of the one chance he had to go to school. When he was only ten, the school on Spicer Street opened at a cost of only a penny a week. 28 His family had saved enough money to send him and two brothers to school for a full year, but then their father lost a leg in a wagon accident. They had to use the money for food instead, and the responsibility for the family fell on the boys. William’s brothers were both older, and they turned to crime. They followed the example of Ikey Solomons by pickpocketing in the wealthier parts of town. 29 The money they made helped out the family for a little while, but the good fortune did not last. The authorities caught them one day in the act of stealing and deported them to Australia. 30 William

26 Mayhew, 237-238.
27 Ibid.
29 Tobias, 60-62.
30 Ibid.
did not want his children to be forced to live a life of crime. He could accept them as beggars, but not as thieves.

As he daydreamed about his children and their future, the yelling of the foreman brought him back to reality. Time for the shift change. The four men in the hold came up to the ropes, and William’s group went down into the dusty coal pit to begin filling the basket. Shoveling the coal was harder work than pulling the ropes. William dug his shovel into the pile and started filling the basket. The dust invaded his nostrils and stung his eyes. He was glad it was cold. November was a good month for a coal whiper. There was more work than in the summer and not as much heat.

William continued shoveling in the hold until the call for lunch came. The whippers didn’t work on a definite schedule. Their job was simply to get all the coal off the boat. If they did their allotted work each day, the owner paid them. Lunch today was a loaf of bread and a potato William had brought from home. The potato was bland and cold. The bread was extra stale, almost as hard as a rock. His wife would be going to market tonight to replenish their supply.

Lunch was short. William’s crew was anxious to get back to work so they could finish their load for the day, pay their dues at the tavern, and go home to sleep. Tomorrow they would rest, for the first time in six long days. The typical load for one day usually took seven hours. This day they would finish in six. William once again started out on the ropes, and moved to the pit around mid-afternoon. The time passed quickly, and soon they had their one hundred tons of coal complete. The men smiled as they once again boarded the skiff to go back to the shore.

Now they would enjoy a nice time at the tavern.

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31 Mayhew, 238.
William got off the boat with the other men and walked through the dirty streets to their patron’s bar. It was almost dusk and the drinking houses would soon be crowded. William ordered rum first and drained it in one gulp. The cold liquid coursing down his throat was a welcome relief from the dust of the coal ship. He ordered another but drank it slower. By the third one, he had tired of this game of buying and drinking and offered his glass to Bob instead.

Bob, by this time already quite tipsy, took it gladly. The crew had a special fondness for William, mostly because he bought them drinks. They did not understand why he would not get drunk with the rest of them, but they were happy to accept the benefits.

After he had bought and donated his required quota, William slipped out of the tavern and began the lonely walk home. The streets were filled with cheap prostitutes, trying to squeeze the last few pence out of the drunken workers who staggered out of the bars. William ignored them and kept walking. He arrived at the house after a fifteen minute walk. The other men were still at the bars. He walked through the Wenton’s room. There was still no work for Jack, one of the children told him. When he came into his family room, his wife greeted him kindly. She had finished three shirts. Good, another three pennies. Tom and Will Jr. were still out, on their way home from Fleet Street. Judith, Tim, and Elizabeth all looked up at him with eager, hungry eyes. They knew tomorrow would be better. Tomorrow, there would be rest, if only for a day. He picked up each of them in turn and kissed their dirty little cheeks. Then, he took off his shirt, rolled it up into a pillow, and stretched out on the wet straw bed, ready for a night of peaceful sleep.
Works Cited


