

The big coal quiz

Test your knowledge of coalfield history and mining life – and ask your family to have a go, too.

1. What was the main purpose of a canary in a coal mine?

- A. To entertain the miners
- B. To detect toxic gases
- C. To deliver messages
- D. To signal the end of a shift

2. Which UK coalfield was the largest by output during the early 20th century?

- A. South Wales
- B. Northumberland
- C. Yorkshire
- D. Kent

3. What was a 'putter' in the early days of mining?

- A. A miner who cut coal at the face
- B. A boy or girl who pushed coal tubs along the roadways
- C. A surface worker who sorted coal
- D. A man who operated the winding gear

4. What year did the nationalisation of the coal industry take effect in the UK?

- A. 1926
- B. 1939
- C. 1947
- D. 1956

5. What was the name of the tall structure used to hoist coal and men from underground?

- A. Shaft tower
- B. Pit wheel
- C. Headframe
- D. Winding house

6. What would a deputy be responsible for underground?

- A. Making tea
- B. Checking safety and managing the team
- C. Sharpening tools
- D. Driving the coal carts

7. What was a snap tin used for?

- A. Carrying coal samples
- B. Keeping fuses dry
- C. Storing a miner's lunch
- D. Carrying tools

8. Which crucial piece of emergency gear is this, with the vowels removed?

SLFRSC

Clue: You wore it on your belt and hoped you'd never need it.

9. What role did cats sometimes play in coal mines?

- A. Detecting gas leaks
- B. Acting as mascots for mining teams
- C. Catching rats and keeping down vermin
- D. Warning of roof falls

10. What made the Davy lamp so clever at preventing mine explosions?

- A. It used a special type of candle that wouldn't ignite methane gas
- B. It had a wire mesh around the flame that absorbed heat and stopped gas igniting outside the lamp
- C. It was battery-powered so didn't need a naked flame at all
- D. It was made from fireproof materials that couldn't catch light

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Answers

1. (B) To detect toxic gases.

Canaries were more sensitive to carbon monoxide than humans. If the bird stopped singing or collapsed, it was a warning to evacuate.

2. (A) South Wales.

In the early 1900s, the South Wales Coalfield was the most productive in the UK, with millions of tonnes extracted annually. The Powell Duffryn company alone controlled over 40 pits and produced more than 12 million tonnes in 1935.

3. (B) A boy or girl who pushed coal tubs along the roadways.

In older mining days, a putter was often a young lad tasked with moving loaded tubs from the coal face to the shaft.

4. (C) 1947.

The coal industry was nationalised by the Labour government as part of post-war reconstruction.

5. (C) Headframe.

These structures supported the winding gear that raised and lowered cages deep into the shaft.

6. (B) Checking safety and managing the team.

Deputies carried out inspections and were legally responsible for underground safety in their area.

7. (C) Storing a miner's lunch.

Snap tins were rat-proof, airtight, and a daily fixture – many held butties or a meat pie.

8. Self-rescuer.

These small emergency devices filtered toxic gases and could be life-saving after an explosion or fire.

9. (C) Catching rats and keeping down vermin.

Pit cats were loved members of the team, often named and cared for by miners.

10. (B) It had a wire mesh around the flame that absorbed heat and stopped gas igniting outside the lamp.

The wire mesh was the key innovation. It let methane reach the flame to burn safely inside, but absorbed the heat to prevent gas igniting outside the lamp.

How did you do?

Give yourself a mark out of 10 and see where you stand:

0-3: Not quite firing on all cylinders

Some of it might be buried a bit deep – but well done for giving it a go.

4-6: A decent shift

You've held on to the essentials. Respectable effort.

7-9: You know your way around the pit

Clearly kept sharp. You've not forgotten much.

10/10: Spot on

Top marks. Like you've never been away.