

The Kids Report: Clearwell Caves

For Museums and Galleries month, young journalists are enthralled by the lives of child labourers, discovered at Gloucestershire's Ancient Iron Mines.

Young journalists from Children's Express tell us what they thought of Museums and Galleries Month events around the country.

Clearwell Caves Ancient Iron Mines, Gloucestershire

We couldn't bear to think what our lives might have been like if we had lived at this time.

People have been mining the iron ore at Clearwell in the Forest of Dean for more than 7000 years. It was fully industrialised in the eighteenth century, and employed hundreds of children to carry the iron ore towards the surface. Today its main business is tourism.

The most exciting part of the visit was climbing through the small tunnels, which were quite damp and cold. None of us have ever been in a mine before; we don't like the dark, and we were worried we would not fit through the tunnels.

We were all given overalls, boots and hard hats with lamps. Once you have crawled through the cramped tunnels there was tons of space in the caves. We went 100 feet down, and it wasn't scary at all.

Our guide in the mines was Jonathan, who was really friendly and informative although he sometimes went too far ahead. He told us how children as young as eight were once used to carry the ore up from the mines in boxes called 'Billies'.

We each picked up a piece of iron ore that was so heavy it felt like our arms were going to fall off. This was a typical size and weight of the pieces of iron that the children had to carry.

The children worked 10 hours a day, which made us feel sad and strange – we thought about how we go to school and they worked long hours in the cold mines six days a week. We couldn't bear to think what our lives might have been like if we had lived at this time.

100 feet down our guide told us to switch off our lights and lit a candle to show us how the children would have seen the mine. It was chilling. When he blew the candle out we were all scared and held on to each other. Back home you never see real darkness, but in the caves it was totally dark, and brought the phrase 'pitch black' to life. It was like being blind.

We had worried the caves might be quite boring, but they weren't. We found out lots and it was fun because we climbed through very small mine tunnels, found iron on the floor and on the walls, and got very dirty! We all wish we could go again, and give Clearwell Caves 9 out of 10.

About the team

This review was produced by Vicky Palmer, 13, Thomas Hemsley, 12, and Ann-Marie Palmer 11, from the Children's Express Plymouth bureau, and was published in the Museums Journal. For more reviews, see column, left.

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