

We all remember Dickens' description of the apprenticing of Oliver Twist and how narrowly he escaped from the clutches of Gamfield the chimney sweep. That was "a nasty trade," as Mr. Limbkins the Poor Law guardian said, but it could hardly have been worse than the trade of butty's boy to which thousands of lads were condemned—we can hardly use any other word—in the early decades of last century.¹

This practice of apprenticing was extremely common in South Staffordshire. In the words of the Midland Mining Commissioner: "These apprentices are paupers or orphans, and are wholly in the power of the butties; such is the demand of this class of children by the butties that there are scarcely any boys in the Union Workhouses of Walsall, Wolverhampton, Dudley and Stourbridge; these boys are sent on trial to the butties between the ages of eight and nine, and at nine are bound as apprentices for *twelve years*, that is, to the age of twenty-one years complete; notwithstanding this long apprenticeship, there is nothing whatever in the coal-mines to learn beyond a little dexterity, readily acquired by short practice, the orphan whom necessity has driven into a workhouse is made to labour in the mines until the age of twenty-one, solely for the benefit of another."

These apprentices received no pay at all. They

¹ Even greater abuses existed in some other trades in regard to apprenticing. It was a very widespread evil.