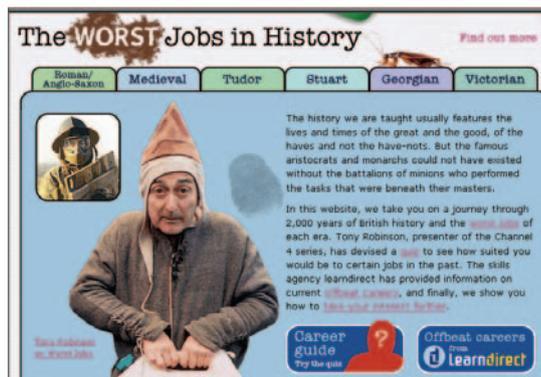


It's All Relative

Ever get the feeling you've been trapped in a Dilbertian universe of despair? The days of the week are grinding slower, endlessly repeating themselves, and you're thinking about a change. Maybe something outdoors, away from a desk and file cabinets, out in the sunshine. You wonder about how much simpler life must have been before electricity and telephones. Well, don't wander too far. For a sobering look back at employment in the good old days, you need travel no farther than www.channel4.com/history/microsites/W/worstjobs/index.html. That's Britain's TV Channel 4, and the site is based on Tony Robinson's book, *The Worst Jobs in History*.

There's something of a Catastrophic Aptitude Test on a page called "Career Guide." Answer 10 questions and you'll be directed to the kinds of ancient employment that most fit your aptitude. That or you can go directly to any of the tabbed areas that range over 2000 years of the most horrible careers ever from Roman to Victorian times.

Mineral collecting sound interesting? In Roman times you have your choice. Be a bog iron hunter or gold miner. As the former you'll be standing all day in a bog, cutting and peeling layers of peat to harvest pea-sized nodules of iron deposited in the muck as mountain streams filter through the peat. It's warmer in the narrow shafts of the gold mines, but the air is rank, and you're likely to spend the day on your side



or back working in feeble candlelight. "[And] the heat was intense; the earth frequently gave way, quartz in the rock released arsenic fumes." Careers to avoid during the era would include leech collector and fuller. In fact, you don't even want to know what a fuller did.

Have a military flair born of your addiction to action films? Imagine employment as an arming squire or petardier. The arming squire was a five-year apprenticeship during which "you must be willing to run, unprotected, into combat to replace broken armor on your knight." After the battle, you are left to clean and polish the muddied, bloodied suit for tomorrow. Petardier was, admittedly, more exciting. "Picture yourself in flimsy clothes, blind drunk, carrying a bell-shaped gunpowder-filled container of brass or iron fixed to a wooden board—the petard—being shot at by musketeers as you try to reach the enemy's castle gate. You attach the petard to the gate, light the fuse, and start to run away very, very fast." Those less swift were "hoisted by their own petard."

From nit-picker to ploughman, fishwife to chimney sweep, the catalog of these worst forms of employment should return a pleasant coloring of reality to your office-bound sinecure. You might want to bookmark the site so the next time you're asked to look over a stack of annual reports, you can restore your motivation by just clicking over to what once were the alternatives. ■