

Revisiting the history of the British coal industry: the politics of legacy, memory and heritage

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Abstract

This paper revisits the history of the British coal industry in the context of deindustrialisation, ruptures in electoral politics, and attempts by former miners to preserve a mining past. Methodologically it draws on an oral history project that involved over 100 participants in England, Scotland and Wales. The life stories conveyed by the former miners provide entry points to various aspects of the industrial, social and cultural life of coal communities. The specific focus here is on the ways in which the miners themselves are striving to create and curate their own stories and experiences through local heritage projects in the town of Leigh in north west England and the former mining villages of the north Wales coast. The interviews are indicative of the sense of isolation they continue to experience in the contemporary economic context of deindustrialisation and challenges to their sense of class, community and nation. Tensions between former miners and the wider social and political culture of their communities hinge on narratives and histories of the 1984/5 miners' strike. Heritage projects developed in both localities have become battlegrounds for what kind of history should be presented to the public, where memorials should be located, and which memories and experiences should be preserved. Miners who took part in the strike understandably want to centre their histories and narratives through the lens of 1984/5, while those who continued to work through the dispute argue that it should be given a more marginal position in commemoration and heritage. The interviews offer more complex readings of the social and cultural politics of the coal industry and challenge some of the prevailing orthodoxies in the historiography.



Introduction

The last deep coal mine in Britain, Kellingley Colliery, closed in late 2015 bringing an end to an industry that economically, socially and politically had lain at the heart of the British economy and society since the Victorian period. The coal industry's social and economic importance to Britain is evident from the fact that on nationalisation of the industry in 1947, it still employed 695,000 at 1,400 coal mines, while as late as 1960, 'King Coal' accounted for 99 per cent of UK energy production. The speed and scale of its decline is evident from the fact that by 1990, only 27 per cent and 30 per cent of the energy output and use in Britain was derived from coal, and on privatisation of the industry in 1994 there were only 15 operational deep mines left in Britain employing around 15,000.⁽¹⁸⁾ However, if the closure of Kellingley signalled the disappearance of the coal mining industry from Britain, a 'way of life' and particular forms of occupational and cultural identity have not dissipated from thousands of memories, experi-

⁽¹⁸⁾ For an overview of the history of the industry see David Powell, *The Power Game: The Struggle for Coal* (London, 1993).

ences, organisations and the bodies and minds of former employees.⁽¹⁹⁾ In late-2019, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust delivered a dismal judgment on the legacy of the demise of the industry, outlining that the combined coalfield areas, with a population of around 5.7 million, continued to suffer disproportionately from higher rates of unemployment, deprivation, outmigration, and poor educational outcomes, with the historical scars identified as a key factor.⁽²⁰⁾

The shifting political context that has accompanied the contraction of the industry has been significant, including devolution for Scotland and Wales in the late-1990s. Concurrent to the industry's closure, reforms to public utilities and services, and the sale of public housing stock impacted on mining communities across the UK. The legacy of deindustrialisation in the Scottish coalfields has fed into a national narrative which is linked to the case for independence.⁽²¹⁾ In the last six years, there has been speculation on voting habits in former coalfield areas, especially in light of the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (Brexit). In particular, there has been much media speculation around purported support for Brexit in former mining constituencies in the Midlands, Yorkshire, Lancashire and Wales. The most significant recent development in terms of coal communities was the result of the 2019 general election. In the two historic coal localities that form the basis of this paper a long period of Labour Party hegemony was overturned with the election of Conservative Members of Parliament. The most dramatic example of this was the election of a Conservative MP for Leigh (former location of Bickershaw Colliery which had been a safe Labour seat since 1922). Similarly in Delyn, north Wales, the site of the now closed Point of Ayr colliery the Conservatives took the seat that had been held by the Labour Party since 1992.

The politics of coal mining heritage in Lancashire and North Wales

In 2020 the former the former coalfields of Lancashire and North Wales are visually very different from the days when the industry was a substantial employer. The site of Bickershaw Colliery in the town of Leigh is now a modern housing estate next to a pretty marina revealing little of its industrial past. The neighbouring Parsonage Colliery that formed part of the Bickershaw complex is a modern retail site with American fast food outlets, clothing stores and associated shopping experiences. The only indication of its mining past is an image of a colliery head-gear etched into the sign indicating the entrance to the site. Close to the village of Ffynnongroyw, on the coast of the Dee Estuary in north Wales, the former site of Point of Ayr Colliery is used for the maintenance of wind farm equipment and the surrounding beaches include a nature and heritage trail that attract a steady stream of tourists. The mines in both locations have gone yet they remain the home of many former employees who left the industry on the closure of Bickershaw in 1992 and Point of Ayr in 1996. Former miners now inhabit a landscape that is similar yet different. In Leigh many pubs have closed along with the erosion of a broader working-class culture connected to coal. Similarly, in Ffynnongroyw, the Miners Institute has been demolished. The visual markers of a mining past have gone, but former miners remain in an environment where the legacy of the industry has become the site of a struggle about preserving a history that was built on coal.

Coal might have been swept from the landscape of Lancashire and North Wales, but the memories of the industry remains etched on the bodies, minds, and memories of those who toiled underground. Former miners across England, Scotland and Wales have been at the forefront of maintaining coal's place in the twentieth century history of what were significant industrial localities. In Lancashire and North Wales they have led grass roots initiatives in developing heritage projects and organisations to ensure that the industry and the concomitant struggles of the min-

(19) Interviews used in this paper are drawn from a much larger project 'On Behalf of the People: Work, Community, and Class in the British Coal Industry, 1947-1994' funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council 2017-2020 grant reference AP/P007244/1.

(20) Christina Beatty, Steve Fothergill, and Tony Gore, *The State of the Coalfields 2019 Report*, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust (2019).

(21) Andrew Perchard, ' "Broken Men" and "Thatcher's Children": Memory and Legacy in Scotland's Coalfields', *International Labor and Working Class History* 84 (2013), pp. 78-98.

ers for social justice are recognised and commemorated. These acts of remembrance have taken a variety of forms including the organisation of miners' reunions, fund raising to create commemorative plaques, memorials for victims of disasters and the preservation of various artefacts and documents relating to particular collieries. Yet such initiatives have exposed fault lines in miners' heritage organisations in terms of what aspects of the history of coal should be preserved, displayed and commemorated. Some ex-miners have been critical of the way in which heritage organisations have produced what they perceive to be sanitised versions of the history of coal. Others have felt marginalised in projects developed and led by ex-miners who they feel have avoided commemorating particular aspects of mining history, in particular the strike of 1984/5. These tensions have informed such acts of remembrance and the politics of coal mining heritage in Lancashire and North Wales.

The last pit in the Lancashire coalfield, Parkside Colliery closed in 1993, some of the miners being recent transferees from Bickershaw that had closed a year earlier. The Lancashire Mining Museum (located on the site of Astley Green Colliery) is a hive of activity involving many volunteers that have worked to preserve the surface buildings, winding house, mining equipment and artefacts drawn from a number of collieries from across the county. Former miners from Bickershaw Colliery have been involved in the museum, but some have chosen to organise independently to generate support for specific public memorial in the centre of Leigh. This group has been led by a small group of ex-Bickershaw miners who were active in the strike of 1984/5.²² Some of them have been critical of the way in which the dispute has been marginalised at specific sites. Yet they share the view that the coal industry and its miners should be recognised and memorialised more substantially at both the national and local level.

Heritage projects in Lancashire have rekindled former working relationships and ensured that miners themselves play an active role in memorialisation. The experiences of Stuart Brown, formerly of Bold and Bickershaw collieries is indicative: "after thirty years of non-mining ... maybe thirty lads turned up, far and wide, as brothers. And ... for four hours, five hours, you could probably cut more coal in a pub than we ever cut underground ... But the comradeship is exactly the same. You know, it's a special, we're a special breed".²³ For Brown the strike of 1984/5 was a seminal moment for the industry and his life as a miner. His arm bears a tattoo of the dispute and he gives talks in local schools on the role he played in picketing and in sustaining support for the strike. The moves in Leigh and surrounding towns to ensure the preservation of memories of a mining life were crucial in maintaining networks of former miners yet they were also driven by a sense that local and national governments in the United Kingdom were not doing enough in supporting specific heritage projects. Mick Shaw another Bickershaw miner and his wife Gill who were also active in the 1984/5 dispute are purveyors of such views. Gill notes that: "within a few years of a pit closing ... there's no remnants of it ... There's nothing". Mick adds that 'there's no plaque or anything. You wouldn't know there'd been a pit there'.²⁴

Mick and Gill Shaw have been at the forefront of raising money for the Bickershaw Colliery memorial that is still at the time of writing yet to be completed. They have faced problems in generating council support for a specific location for the site and have felt frustrated by the wider politics of the heritage industry. As in other former coalfields the politics of heritage has been driven by the inclusion and exclusion of particular narratives. In former coalfields such as Lancashire and North Wales that were divided in the strike of 1984/5 it is the dispute that forms a substantial fault line in the politics of memorialisation. In Leigh and across the wider Lancashire coalfield those who supported the strike for the full twelve months are working to ensure that the dispute is wrapped into the narratives of a mining past . They are critical of the ways in which more substantial projects such as the Lancashire Mining Museum present a romanticised reconstruction of a past built on coal, but one in which particular narratives and

²² For the strike at Bickershaw see David Howell, *The Politics of the NUM: A Lancashire View* (Manchester, 1989) chapters 7 and 8.

²³ Stuart Brown interview, 14 December 2018.

²⁴ Mick and Gill Shaw interview, 26 October 2018.

experiences are pushed to the margins. Former miners' acts of remembrance are underpinned by a politics from the events of 1984 that remain undiluted. This process is even more evident in the neighbouring North Wales coalfield.

Point of Ayr Colliery was located on the north Wales coast and drew miners from surrounding villages and the major towns of Rhyl, Prestatyn, Flint and Wrexham. Since the closure of the colliery in 1996 a small but active group of ex-miners have been successful in preserving the colliery head-gear, coal tubs and associated artefacts. The visible makers of the colliery and its miners can be found in the village of Ffynnongroyw, at points on a heritage trail at Talacre Beach and displayed in a small museum in the town of Holywell. The memorialisation of the colliery has been driven and led by the energy and enthusiasm of John Wiltshire and other ex-miners who have a desire to preserve the history of the colliery. Here he explains his motivations: "I thought, I've got to do something for Point, I've got to make something. And I started it all on my own like. All I wanted was a simple plaque ... With a picture of Point of Ayr on it ... I got in touch with a fella called Alan Taylor from the Coalfields Regeneration. 'John', he says, 'have you got a committee?' I says 'nope' [chuckles]. He says 'have you got a bank account?' I says 'nope' [chuckles]. 'I advise you to do this John', he says, 'and then come back to us'. So I got a committee down in Ffynnongroyw ... There was wives and daughters of miners ... I wanted women involved in it, because they're good at organising".⁽²⁵⁾ In recent years the Point of Ayr initiative has generated Heritage Lottery Funding and continues to develop both the heritage trail and the museum.

The Point of Ayr group has been much more successful to date than the Bickershaw project. However, it shares some of the political tensions resulting from the 1984/5 strike and its aftermath. During the dispute the majority of miners at Point of Ayr continued to work with around 90 miners committed to the dispute for the full twelve months.⁽²⁶⁾ From the beginning of the formation of the heritage group some ex-striking miners remained hostile to the endeavour while others were happy to play an active role. There are also two annual reunions of former miners; one dominated by ex-strikers and the other a larger gathering of those who worked through the strike, a minority of strikers, and representatives of management. Brian Baldwin, an ex-striker, was supportive of both the general reunion and the heritage project: "I think it's a good thing ... because if you look round you've got a generation now of people who don't remember the mining industry. You've got young people who are in their twenties and thirties, they don't remember".⁽²⁷⁾ Paul Parry another ex-striker, was also fully supportive of making sure that visible makers of a mining past at Point of Ayr should be developed: "you wouldn't know there had been a pit there ... It was a disgrace. So they done well, I believe now they've got some tubs, eight tubs ... Point of Ayr tubs, and they're going to go in each village". Yet Parry also shared the view of other-ex strikers that the dispute should have been a feature of the plaques that were attached to the head-gear site. Nonetheless, he recognised that the history of the colliery was more than one year: "I was only there bloody nine years, one year on strike. These people have been there, some of them since they were fifteen, you know? And ... you think of the heritage and culture ... they know hundreds of things more than I know about bloody Point of Ayr".⁽²⁸⁾

The absence of any record of the role played by Point of Ayr miners in the 1984/5 strike from existing acts of remembrance and commemoration projects has led to the formation of a small group that have been working to get a plaque erected on the site of the head-gear or in an alternative location on the heritage trail. The striking miners meet twice a year and at one of their recent gatherings voiced concerns that the contribution they made to the dispute was being written out of the history of the colliery. They approached the local village council and the owners of the site where the head gear was erected. After being given initial approval in principle to erect a plaque commemorating the

(25) John Wiltshire interview, 10 February 2018.

(26) For the strike at Point of Ayr see Keith Gildart, *North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity 1945-1996* (2001) chapter 4.

(27) Brian Baldwin interview, 26 September 2018.

(28) Paul Parry interview, 9 March 2019.

1984/5 strike at Point of Ayr the request was subsequently rejected. They were informed that any commemoration of the dispute could be seen ‘as too political’. The ex-strikers are still seeking to develop alternative sites for a display or plaque but to date have been unsuccessful. This has exposed a fault-line in the moves in north Wales to create a substantial and inclusive mining heritage culture that gives voice to the marginal and the silenced.

In both Bickershaw and Point of Ayr cases it is evident that small-scale heritage projects remain prone to political factionalism and tensions over what stories should be told and who gets to tell them. Ex-miners and their families have a burning desire to define and shape their own acts of remembrance. Yet such histories and experiences can be difficult to convey through conventional artefacts and visual displays of collieries that are now closed. In many coalfields the strike of 1984/5 presents a particular set of problems. In Lancashire and North Wales there has been a tendency to at best marginalise the voices and experiences of striking miners and at worst to ensure that they do not appear in any prominent way in heritage projects. This is linked to a wider problem illustrating the tensions between the former miners, local councils and charitable funding bodies. The miners themselves want to retain control of their own past and remain suspicious of how ‘their’ heritage is moulded and shaped in specific ways by individuals and organisations that want to preserve a particular version of coalfield history.

Conclusion

Revisiting the history of the British coal industry through the lens of mining heritage projects exposes the nuance, complexity and tensions that underpin miners’ attempts to come to terms with their own past. Each coalfield was part of the a wider mining culture promoted by the publicly owned industry under the organisation of the National Coal Board and the dominant trade union the National Union of Mineworkers. Yet each coalfield contained a multitude of histories, peculiarities and mythologies. In Lancashire and North Wales this was particularly acute given the ruptures that came to the fore in the strike of 1984/5 and the development of heritage projects around Bickershaw and Point of Ayr collieries. This brief insight into the politics of heritage in former coalfields has highlighted the tensions and schisms in attempts to commemorate and memorialise an individual and collective past. Yet what remains clear that is the former miners see themselves as best placed to create, curate, and interpret the specific histories of their collieries and communities. The central role played by miners in this process provides an entry point for historians to understand how the recent past in mining history impinges on heritage initiatives in former coalfields. In Lancashire and North Wales the spectre of the 1984/5 strike continues to haunt the memories of advocates and critics.