

The forgotten history of miners' further education

Robin Simmons recalls the post-compulsory education and training that once existed in Britain's former coalmining communities.

Introduction

There has been much talk of late about the White working classes becoming angry, marginalised, or 'left behind'. Rhetorically, such claims are usually associated with the notion that working-class youth have somehow failed to 'upskill' themselves to meet the challenges of globalisation and the new knowledge economy. Britain's former coalfield communities, which are both 'Whiter' and more working-class than much of the country, are often seen as particularly problematic in policy discourse - and, in some ways, this is understandable. White working-class boys especially tend to do less well at school than others and only 11 per cent of young men from the former coalfields go to university. Unemployment, poverty, and ill-health are also substantially higher in the former coalfields than UK averages, and those jobs which exist are disproportionately low-skilled and low-paid. But this is not the full story. Much has been written about the demise of the coal industry, especially the mass pit closures which took place following the Great Strike of 1984-85 - a vicious year-long struggle ending in comprehensive defeat for the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Turner (2000) and Waddington et al. (2001) have described the pernicious effects of pit closures including family breakdown, vandalism, boredom, and alcohol and drug abuse. More recently, Nicky Stubbs (2022) has written about how de-industrialisation profoundly damaged all aspects of social, cultural and political life in the former coalmining community where he lives. Forced de-industrialisation has, in other words, had a deep scarring effect on the fabric of daily life in the former coalfields.

The former coalfields are, of course, not the only communities to have been hurt by de-industrialisation. They have not, however, managed to reinvent themselves in the same way as some of Britain's major cities, many of which have had significant 'makeovers' of late and are now often presented as fashionable cosmopolitan places, even though much poverty and deprivation continues to exist in such locales. There has nevertheless been

something of a revival of interest in the social and cultural legacy of coal, including an increased focus on processes of schooling in the former coalfields. Much less is being written about post-compulsory education and training in Britain's former coalfield communities, although work I am doing with my former Huddersfield University colleague Martyn Walker seeks to address this deficit.

This article draws on an oral history project which Martyn and I have been involved in since 2011 and is ongoing. It focuses on former coalminers' experiences of post-compulsory education and training both during their time as colliers and after they left the coal industry. The discussion below summarises some of the key findings of the research, which has involved a series of narrative interviews with former miners who worked across three different coalfields across the north of England. Those who are interested in the detail of the men's stories should read Martyn's chapter in the book *Education, Work and Social Change in Britain's Former Coalfield Communities* (Walker 2022).

Work-based learning

The National Coal Board (NCB) was not only one of Britain's biggest employers, but one of the largest providers of work-based learning. Every new collier was required to complete the Introductory Coalmining Certificate and all mineworkers were required to undertake extensive training throughout their careers. For coalface workers, this might entail learning how to use new tools and machinery or adapt to new methods of mining. For electricians, surveyors or engineers, training would focus on hydraulics, pneumatics, tunnelling, caving, or other technological advances - much of which took place onsite or underground. The origins of all this can be traced back to the development of deep-shaft mining from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, which necessitated new technology and methods of working, although mine owners were also concerned about losing production due to death and injury, and

the costs associated with damaged or badly maintained equipment. Either way, the incremental closure of exhausted collieries in Scotland, Wales and the North-East of England and the growth of deep-shaft mines in Yorkshire and the Midlands increased the demand for new technology. Nationalisation after the end of World War Two provided state investment but growing competition from alternative energy sources such as gas and oil also meant the NCB had to invest in new technology to remain competitive. The corollary of all this, our participants explained, was that miners frequently engaged in significant programmes of formal and informal learning both in the workplace and via other institutions and organisations related to coal. The NUM, for example, ran numerous programmes for its members, some of whom then went on to further study, including degree-level work, and the NCB ran its own training courses for aspiring colliery managers, deputies, and other aspirant workers.

Further education

FE colleges - or technical colleges as they were once known - are multi-functional organisations, but their main role has always entailed providing vocational education and training for the world of work. In the former coalfields, this meant that providing 'day-release' training programmes for young men employed by the NCB as apprentice electricians, fitters and surveyors constituted many colleges' core business for much of the twentieth century. Typically, courses were designed to provide the broader contextual and theoretical knowledge to support the more practical learning which took place at work, and led to nationally recognised qualifications. Two of our participants, Rob and Andrew, both of whom studied mining surveying at their local college, explained how their studies provided them with transferable knowledge and skills which helped them find work in other industries once the mines shut down. Rob went into the construction industry and now runs his own building company; Andrew became a health and safety consultant; another participant, Pete, talked about how FE teaching could provide mining technicians and engineers with a second career and the status and prestige associated with passing on skills and knowledge to younger workers.

Higher education

Coalmining is generally associated with the tradition of day-release technical education described above. It is often forgotten that many universities, including

Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield, were important providers of degrees and higher degrees for those who worked in the industry. The NCB's role in providing funding to enable students from coalmining communities to attend university is also largely overlooked - a function which was particularly important before the introduction of mandatory student grants in the 1960s. It is also worth noting that mining degrees were highly prized qualifications. One participant, Jack, who eventually became a senior NCB manager, explained how he had initially planned to study medicine after leaving grammar school, but decided on a career in the coal industry after visiting Ashington Colliery, then one of the largest and most productive coalmines in Europe. Jack described how the NCB sponsored him to study near his home (at Newcastle University) and extolled the benefits of the 'sandwich course' which enabled him to take a degree whilst in paid employment. There are a number of important points associated with all this, not least the fact that a career in the coal industry was seen as a viable option to medicine for a 'bright' working-class boy like Jack. It is also noteworthy that Jack saw being able to remain in his local community as a significant benefit both to him and his family, rather than having to 'go away' to university. Pete commented that: 'The public think that the first generation of [working-class] graduates are quite recent . . . but this is not true. The first working-class graduates came from mining communities . . .' He also talked about how these men acted as positive role models for others in the community, and how young people now have to leave the local area in order to 'get on' in life.

Informal learning

Coalmining communities are often associated with solidarity, camaraderie, and a certain proletarian 'togetherness' - although we need to avoid viewing the past through rose-tinted glasses. On one hand, the nature, culture, and spirit of different coalmining communities varied substantially across different parts of Britain, but it is also fair to say they could sometimes be parochial, inward-looking, and intolerant of difference. Certain institutions nevertheless played a key role in mining communities, not least Miners' Institutes, which provided something of a cultural and social hub for a broad range of pastimes and activities, including sport and leisure (angling, bowls, cricket, football, rugby); music (brass bands, choirs); and various forms of creative learning (literature, painting, poetry and other classes). Some of our participants talked at length about how the 'Stute' played a key role in

holding former mining communities together socially and culturally and described the opportunities for learning which were lost, especially for young people, when Miners' Institutes shut down.

Conclusion

Nowadays, the former coalfields lag behind the rest of Britain across multiple indices of deprivation, and perform relatively poorly in terms of education and employment. Frankly, this is unsurprising. Coalmining was not just an occupation, it was a way of life (see Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter, 1956) and the destruction of the coal industry has had a profound and sustained effect on former coalfield communities. The work I am doing with Martyn Walker highlights a number of important points about the relationship between education, work and social change in post-industrial Britain. Nowadays, for example, social mobility seems to have become something of a holy grail in political circles, with education presented as a mechanism through which to promote the most able and talented sections of working-class youth into well-paid professional employment which will, in turn, enable them to acquire the trappings and habits of the higher orders. Effectively this is a Pygmalion model of social mobility imbued with various wrongheaded and inaccurate assumptions about the relationship between education and employment. It also, as Patrick Ainley (2016) reminds us, ignores the possibility of downward as well as upward mobility. The plight of the former coalfields vividly illustrates this. The destruction of the coal industry not only greatly reduced the availability of secure, well-paid employment, especially for young men, it extinguished the many opportunities for education and training associated with it. A whole world of learning - and the accompanying opportunities for personal and professional development - was lost with the demise of coal. It is difficult to appreciate the extent of that loss.

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For further information, contact the Secretary:

Kirit Patel
19 Greenhill Road
Middx HA1 1LD
CAFAS website: www.cafas.org.uk