Dust, Diesel, and Disability in the British Coal Industry: A View from the Coal Face, 1985-1992

Abstract

In September 1992, I worked my last shift as an underground coal miner at Point of Ayr Colliery in the small North Wales coalfield. Yet I never really left the industry. As a researcher and academic my work has been underpinned by my own background as a coal miner and continued engagement with the collective memory of coal. The article reflects on this process using memory, autobiography, archival research and ethnography. Drawing on personal experiences of working in the coal industry between the years 1985-1992, it examines the shifting attitudes to health, safety and disability in one colliery, and how such responses were mediated by masculinity, humour, and the shifting industrial relations culture of the British coal industry. In 1989, the Labour Research Department published a pamphlet, *The Hazards of Coal Mining*, which became a crucial source for trade union officials in stressing the continued problems of miners' health and safety. Yet the reception of the publication proved problematic in the context of colliery closures, new forms of coal extraction and payment, and an emphasis on increased production. This examination of miners' attitudes to health and injury was complemented by ethnographic work in one Welsh mining community. The legacy of coal in this locality is still apparent with miners conveying both the physical and mental scars of exposure to dust, diesel and noise, yet working to create their own histories and representations of a mining past.

Introduction

The historiography of the British coal industry has tended to prioritise analyses of major industrial disputes such as the national lock-out of 1926 and the strike against colliery closures in 1984/5.[1] More broadly historians have mapped the rise and fall of the industry against the shifting industrial relations culture of the privatised industry of the nineteenth and early twentieth century and the nationalisation period from 1947 to 1994.[2] A range of books, articles and edited collections have deployed particular tropes in highlighting the militancy, heroism and masculinity of coal miners and their associated localities and cultures.[3] In recent years, ground breaking research on the impact of coal mining on the body has deepened our understanding of the relationship between the mine, the miner and disability.[4] This article engages with this current trend in the historiography by using a range

[1] The literature on 1984/5 is now substantial. The most recent book length study of strike is Francis Beckett and David Henke, *Marching to the Fault Line: The Miners' Strike and the Battle for Industrial Britain* (Constable, 2009). Many of the individual coalfields have also been the focus for the 1984/5 dispute for example Jim Phillips, *Collieries Communities and the Miners' Strike in Scotland 1984/5* (Manchester University Press, 2012). For the 1926 lockout see John McIlroy, Alan Campbell and Keith Gildart (eds), *Industrial Politics and the 1926 Mining Lockout: The Struggle for Dignity* (University of Wales Press, 1984).

[2] For a comprehensive survey of the industry in the post-war period through the lens of the National Union of Mineworkers see Andrew Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics: Volume 1 1944-1968* and *Volume 2 1969-1995* (Ashgate, 2005, 2008).

[3] For a substantive and critical collection on industrial relations in the British coal industry see Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and David Howell (eds), *Miners, Unions and Politics 1910-1947* (Ashgate, 1996).

[4] For example see Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston, *Miners' Lung: A History of Dust Disease in British Coal Mining* (Ashgate, 2007), Catherine Mills, *Regulating Health and Safety in the British Mining Industries 1800-1914* (Ashgate, 2010) and David M. Turner and Daniel Blackie, *Disability in the Industrial Revolution: Physical Impairment in British Coal Mining 1780-1880* (Manchester University Press, 2018) .

of research methods. The approach deployed here is one that mixes reflexive autobiography, oral history, archival research and ethnography in examining the impact of coal mining on personal health and its long term impact on the body and the senses.[5] Drawing on my personal experiences of working in the coal industry between the years 1985-1992, it examines the shifting attitudes to health, safety and disability in one colliery, and how such responses were mediated by masculinity, humour, and the shifting industrial relations culture of the British coal Industry.

Injury, sickness and disability remain a feature of the everyday lives of former miners, their families and communities. Coal extraction to fuel the energy of the nation left both physical and mental scars on thousands of workers. The dangers of coal mining and the resultant impact on the health of miners is something that remains firmly etched in the collective memories of former coal communities. Oral histories, autobiographies and personal recollections are often punctuated with the dangers that were encountered by miners on a daily basis.[6] The geographical focus in this article is quite narrow being a study and insight into one colliery in the small north Wales coalfield.[7] Nonetheless, the changing working conditions in the colliery in the 1980s-90s, the inhalation of coal dust, rock particles, diesel fumes and the level of injury, disability and trauma is a scene, experience and legacy that was and still remains a feature of former mining communities across England, Scotland and Wales.

Point of Ayr Colliery

The Point of Ayr Colliery Company was established in 1883 located close to the villages of Ffynnongroyw, Berthengam, and Mostyn in Flintshire on the coast of the Dee Estuary, north Wales. In 1888, Edward Hughes (1856-1925) from Berthengam led a successful strike at the colliery and soon after established a lodge of the Denbighshire and Flintshire Miners' Association.[8] The predominant language at the colliery was Welsh through to the 1930s. In the aftermath of the 1926 lockout a number of miners were victimised. Throughout the 1930s there were serious divisions at the colliery between members of the North Wales Miners Association (the predominant trade union) and the company backed Point of Ayr Industrial Union.[9] The workforce became unified under the North Wales Area of the National Union of Mineworkers when the coal industry was nationalised in 1947. On the eve of public ownership it was the only colliery in Flintshire and one of eight that remained in north Wales.[10] With mechanisation and modernisation it soon began to break production

[5] For an earlier example of my research in this area see Keith Gildart, 'Mining Memories: Reading Coalfield Autobiographies', *Labor History*, 50, 2 (2009) 139-161.

[6] See for example Michael Pollard, *The Hardest Work Under Heaven: The Life and Death of the British Coal Miner* (Hutchinson, 1984) and in the family history of miners uncovered by Richard Benson, *The Valley: A Hundred Years in the Life of a Yorkshire Family* (Bloomsbury, 2015).

[7] For general histories of the coalfield and its communities see G.G. Lerry, *Collieries of Denbighshire* (Wynn Williams, 1968) and Keith Gildart, *North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity, 1945-1996* (Cardiff, 2001).

[8] For the early years of union organisation in the coalfield see Keith Gildart, 'Men of Coal: miners' leaders in north-east Wales 1890-1961', *Llafur: Journal of Welsh Labour History*,8, 1 (2000) 111-130.

[9] For the political culture of the colliery see Keith Gildart, 'The Struggle Against Company Unionism in the North Wales Coalfield, 1926-1944', *The Welsh History Review, 20, 3* (2001) 532-564.

[10] The promise of nationalisation and its transformation of industrial relations and safety is noted by a former north Wales colliery manger in Tom Ellis, *After the Dust has Settled: The Autobiography of Tom Ellis* (Bridge Books, 2004).

records.[11] Yet mechanisation also generated higher levels of dust and a new range of dangers that miners were exposed to on a daily basis. This was managed and monitored through health and safety legislation and a much more consensual culture of industrial relations that had not been a feature of many collieries in the period prior to nationalisation. Yet the fact remained that coal mining was a very dangerous occupation. On 4 July 1952, six men were killed and others injured at Point of Ayr when working on developing a new shaft. The process had involved a number of outside contractors.[12] The employment of outside contractors to temporarily complement the existing workforce was an issue that led to the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) raising concerns around safety particularly in the 1980s. The dangers of coal mining were periodically raised by Labour Members of Parliament and in the columns of local newspapers. However, there was also daily exposure to hazards such as noise, water, variations in temperature that took a longer term toll on the miners' body that often went unrecorded.

From the 1950s the local workforce at Point of Ayr was complemented by miners from England, Ireland, Poland, Germany, Spain and the Caribbean. The colliery had its own brass band, welfare club and sports teams. The *Rhyl and Prestatyn Gazette* now described the pit 'with its 150 Joneses, its Germans, among the 600 labour force … as the happy colliery'.[13] In 1968 around thirty miners moved to Point of Ayr after the closure of Bradford Colliery in Manchester and Mosley Common in nearby Salford.[14] After the national miners' strike of 1974, Point of Ayr along with Bersham Colliery near Wrexham was one of only two pits left in the North Wales coalfield. In 1982 miners from the recently closed Hapton Valley Colliery near Burnley joined the workforce. Up to this period the NUM played a central role in the running of the colliery; lodge officials sat on various committees relating to health and safety, were involved in planning new developments, consulted on new technology and sat on recruitment panels. This consensual culture of industrial relations that reached its apotheosis in the 1950s/60s has been framed by some historians in terms of Thompson's concept of 'moral economy'.[15] There is some validity to this characterisation although it masks some of the micro-dramas and strugglers underground that often left little trace in the archival sources. Nonetheless, the cracks that began to appear in the industrial relations culture of the National Coal Board (NCB) in the 1970s became more acute with the rising number of colliery closures, productivity drives and attempts to undermine national pay scales.[16]

The symbolic event that shattered what was left of an already fragile consensual industrial relations culture was the strike of 1984/5. In this dispute against colliery closures the majority of the 600 miners at Point of Ayr continued to work with around 86 remaining on strike for the whole twelve months.[17] The now substantial literature on the dispute has

[11] For mechanisation in the North Wales coalfield see Tom Ellis, *Mines and Men: Mining Engineering* (Educational Explorers, 1971) chapter 7.
[12] NCB Report on accident at Point of Ayr Colliery, 4 July 1952, Flintshire Record Office, D/NM40.
[13] *Rhyl and Prestatyn Gazette*, 16 February 1968.
[14] For the cultural and social impact of this inward migration see Gildart, *North Wales Miners*, chapters 3 and 4.
[15] See Andrew Perchard and Jim Phillips, 'Transgressing the Moral Economy: Wheelerism and Management of the Nationalised Coal Industry in Scotland', *Contemporary British History*, 25, 3 (2011) 387-405.
[16] For a then contemporary account of the transformation of industrial relations in the coalfields and the trade union responses see Vic Allen, *The Militancy of British Miners* (The Moor Press, 1981).
[17] For the strike at Point of Ayr see David Howell, 'The 1984/5 Miners' Strike in North Wales', *Contemporary Wales*, 4 (1991) 67-98 and Gildart, *North Wales Miners*, chapter 4.

tended to focus on the high politics and personalities, the community responses, women's activism and international solidarity.[18] Yet here again, the physical and mental impact of the dispute on those who remained on strike and others who continued to work has been marginalised. The mental stresses that were unleashed on Point of Ayr miners are difficult to deduce from many of the primary sources, but have been apparent in my many discussions with them.[19] The men on strike were faced with poverty, the loss of the rhythm and culture of daily work routines, and pressures from within the community and sometimes individual families in terms of remaining loyal to the strike or returning to work.[20] Similarly, miners that refused to endorse the decision of the lodge committee, the North Area Executive and the NUM to support the strike were exposed to working conditions that were more dangerous than they were prior to the beginning of the dispute. The lodge committee members were on strike so that the monitoring of health and safety was largely left to management. Moreover, prominent older face workers and craftsmen who often informally enforced safety through respect and deference remained on strike resulting in the further deterioration of working conditions.

Miners who continued to cross picket lines also had to face the indignity of being verbally attacked by former workmates and neighbours.[21] This aspect of the dispute and its impact on the mental wellbeing of Point of Ayr miners is again difficult to document and quantify. Yet this was clearly a situation that would have increased levels of stress and anxiety.[22] A number of scenes and episodes give impressionistic insights: a miner who led the breakaway Union of Democratic Mineworkers being spat on; a working miner finding it difficult to get another man to wash his back in the shower; two families at the colliery being fragmented when the father continued to work and the sons were on strike. On the other side there are also examples of wives of striking miners being marginalised in the community and voluntary organisations; and the children of those on strike facing hostility in the school playground and out on the street.[23]

The 1984/5 strike represented a crucial turning point for the industrial relations culture of the industry and the health of coal miners. To coin a phrase used by the Marxist historian of the English Civil War it really was a case of the 'world turned upside down'.[24] The vast majority of Point of Ayr miners had not lost a day of work through the twelve months of the dispute whereas a significant minority of strikers had faced poverty, denigration, marital breakdown and a range of stress related conditions. In 1986 some miners from the recently closed Bersham Colliery moved to Point of Ayr (all of whom had been on strike for at least 9

[18] For a recent collection of insightful essays see David Allsop, Carol Stephenson and David Wray (eds), *Justice Denied: Friends, Foes and the Miners' Strike* (The Merlin Press, 2017).
[19] Notes of recent discussion at Point of Ayr strikers' reunion event August 2017.
[20] For specific examples see Gildart, *North Wales Miners*, pp. 180-201.
[21] The literature on strike breakers in 1984/5 is scant. For examples see the oral testimony in Andrew Richards, *Miners on Strike: Class Solidarity and Division in Britain* (Berg, 1996) chapter 7.
[22] For example interview with North Wales miners leader Ted McKay online at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/8550787.stm
[23] Information drawn from observations of the author in discussions with Point of Ayr miners at various reunion events held between 1998 and 2017.
[24] Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1991).

months), but between 1986-1992 the number of workers was cut to 494.[25] The immediate aftermath of the dispute and the years that followed were ones of constant changes in terms of industrial relations, new methods of extraction, calls for greater production, and the constant threat of closure.[26] Between 1985 and 1990 many of the older miners aged 54 and above opted for enhanced redundancy payments. Yet within months many started to show the signs of the impact of a miners' life on the body and mind. Long-term exposure to coal and rock dust could was now audibly perceptible in local doctor's waiting rooms, in the local pubs and on the street. The union officials were now spending much of their time helping miners in compensation cases for pneumoconiosis, silicosis and other coal related conditions. The number of miners sitting in the corners of the pubs and clubs coughing and spluttering that had long been a feature of coal communities now took on a greater poignancy in the context of mass colliery closures and the fragmentation of traditional social networks.

The reduction in the workforce at Point of Ayr also transformed the nature of work and the more general cultural environment underground. With the emphasis on maximum production miners were now impelled to work harder and faster under the threat of redundancy and closure. Much of the ancillary work associated with general maintenance of the roadways disappeared. This increased the number of smaller incidents and the concomitant impact on miners' health; slips and falls on unmaintained roadways and headings, less care in terms of stone dusting to prevent explosions, the positioning of signage and instructions, and the weakening of what older miners referred to as 'pit sense'. Younger miners often grappled with what it meant to be miner in period when the union had suffered a cataclysmic defeat. The future seemed bleak and in some localities miners were seen as an anachronism in an emerging economy that would no longer be primarily industrial. This rupturing of the bond between a mining past that had been built on the promise of nationalisation and the 1974 Plan for Coal that promised a long-term future and a present where the industry was being transformed produced its own stresses on mind and body.[27]

This was the colliery environment I entered on my first day underground on 21 May 1985. I had been steeped in the culture of mining from a very early age. Both my grandfathers had worked in the Lancashire coalfield at Bickershaw and Parsonage collieries. My father, Brian, went underground at aged 15 in 1951 and by this time was a deputy at Point of Ayr. My uncle, Alf, was an official of the Plank Lane Branch of the Lancashire NUM and had been on strike for 12 months.[28] His wife later recalled the stress of the longevity of the dispute and reliance on family support and food parcels.[29] The divisions at Point of Ayr between miners were still apparent and I remember being asked by a striking miner who my father was; some whose fathers had worked through the strike were subject to verbal abuse. Yet on the

[25] For background to the dispute at Bersham and the transferees' entry to Point of Ayr see Gildart, *North Wales Miners*, chapters 4 and 5.
[26] The constant quest for greater production and the impact on safety can be traced through the minutes of the Point of Ayr Lodge Committee, 1987-1995, in possession of the author.
[27] For a personal recollection of this process see David John Douglass, *Ghost Dancers: The Miners' Last Generation* (Central Books, 2010).
[28] For the 1984/5 strike at Bickershaw Colliery see David Howell, *The Politics of the NUM: A Lancashire View* (Manchester University Press, 1989) chapters 7 and 8.
[29] Interview with Joan Gildart, 12 June 2018.

whole there remained a sense of collective endeavour both in the working practices and response to management on specific issues relating to planning and production. A small number of strikers continued to refuse to mix with those who had crossed picket lines, while some others reverted to their pre-strike work-teams and social circles.[30]

The underground environment formed a constant attack on the body and the senses.[31] The cold of the journey down the shaft, the extreme heat of some of the roadways; this combined with the dust, the noise, and in some places water to create a hostile yet fascinating subterranean world with its own geography and soundscape which was populated by a diverse range of characters. For miners there was a constant struggle against dust, diesel fumes, cold water, heat, and in some places almost freezing conditions. The journey from the 'pit bottom' (in winter this area was extremely cold with icicles visible in the shaft) to the access roadways (strong breeze) to the headings and cold faces (very hot) could take up to 45 minutes by locomotive, conveyor and then a significant trek. There were no toilet or washing facilities and miners consumed food often contaminated by heat and coal dust. This human struggle against the elements provided the nation with coal, but did so in a context of intense stress on the mind and body of the miner. The challenges posed to health in the workplace were complemented by a miner's life in the broader working-class culture of the north Wales coast.[32] I had already been inculcated with the miners' propensity for drink, tobacco, gambling and casual violence in the home and on the street. However, for the next seven years I would now witness such behaviour at close quarters and participated in the weekend rituals of younger miners.[33]

Health and safety: monitoring, negotiation, and coping strategies

In the aftermath of the 1984/5 dispute Point of Ayr employed fewer men, produced more coal and was a more hazardous place than it had been in the years leading up to the dispute. The underground environment was dustier, increasingly noisy, and miners were exposed to new forms of hazardous materials and working practices. Such circumstances were made more acute through management strategies devised to ensure that miners would work harder in order to secure the enhancement of incentives/bonus payments and high levels of overtime to supplement wage levels.[34] This was in a period that even given the effectiveness of trade union activity since the advent of nationalisation miners were still not paid if they missed a shift because of injury and sickness.[35] With rent, mortgages and cars to pay for, miners would be forced to go to work even if they needed respite from the rigours of mining. Men suffering from coughs, colds and related conditions would drag themselves

[30] No striking miners were victimised at Point of Ayr, but two men (Alan Jones and Eddie O'Grady) simply refused to return to work after the first day back after the dispute.

[31] For a personal and detailed description of the underground environment of a colliery see early sections of Malcolm Pitt, *The World on Our Backs: The Kent Miners and the 1972 Miners' Strike* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1979).

[32] For the social life of Point of Ayr miners see Gildart, 'Mining Memories', pp. 150-153.

[33] For experiences of Lancashire miners in north Wales see Gildart, *North Wales Miners*, pp. 102-109.

[34] For union debates on incentives after their introduction in 1977 see Allen, *Militancy of British Miners*, pp. 272-280.

[35] Miners leaders continually pressed for a similar deal in terms of 'sick pay' enjoyed by deputies and officials who were granted full-pay for missing days through sickness and injury, They also noted that the level of existing sick pay had been eroded by the productivity bonus scheme. See motions passed by the NUM Annual Conference 1988-92.

to the colliery and given the close proximity of work underground it created an environment where bacteria and viruses could be easily spread. A delegate at the 1988 NUM annual conference in Yarmouth claimed that 'miners could no longer afford to be ill' with sick pay 'less than 50 per cent of the average wage'.[36]

In the 1980s, Point of Ayr moved towards the use of large free-steered vehicles (fsvs or dump trucks) in place of traditional methods of hauling supplies to the coal face in tubs on tracks powered by rope haulage systems. The introduction of fsvs brought new hazards and dangers to the miners exposed to them. The engines were diesel powered. This added to the expulsion of fumes that filled the roadways on which they travelled.[37] Even with the use of paper masks miners who worked down wind of the vehicles were forced to breath in the hot dangerous expulsions. The giant tyres of the vehicles also churned up the dormant coal, rock and stone dust from the roadways further polluting large sections of the underground environment. They also produced high levels of noise that could cut through the basic ear guards that the operators wore as minimum protection. Driving an fsv was also a stressful occupation in which the operator had to steer the vehicle in tightly confined spaces. The drivers cab would often hit the roof girders and in some cases the protective cage would be ripped off. In order to enter and exit particular headings in districts further from the shaft miners would illegally ride on the flatbeds of the fsv. Again, this was highly dangerous practice in which miners would bounce around on the flatbed while in transit and in some cases be thrown from the vehicle. Drivers would complain that minimum clearances for the operation were being breached due to pressure to deliver supplies to the coal face to increase production. There were formal regulations regarding the operation of fsvs, but as with other safety regulations in the context of the industrial relations culture of the late-1980s they were invariably breached.

The increase in the production of coal dust was complemented by a concomitant management culture that simultaneously promoted safe working practices, yet created an economic context in which such practices would be undermined, neglected, or in some cases completely ignored. The case of dust suppression is a case point. At the colliery the coal was extracted at the face and the transported out of the colliery all the way to the surface by miles of interconnecting conveyer belts. Water spray systems were in place at the head of each section of the conveyor from the face through to the top of the drift mine where the coal reached the washery. The major problem was that the use of water to quell the levels of dust led to the conveyor belts slipping or dragging. The outcome of this was that production would be stopped until the belts were dried and could be re-started. As a result there was sometimes a reluctance to turn on the sprays leading to even greater levels of dust inhalation. As a transfer point attendant I was often berated for keeping sprays on for too long thus leading to conveyor problems and the slowing of production.

The biggest change in mining methods at the colliery came with the introduction of American methods of roof bolting in place of traditional steel supports. This was developed alongside the phasing out of traditional long-wall faces and their replacement with the 'pillar and stall' method. This process required fewer miners and for many was seen as a

[36] *The Miner*, July/August 1988.
[37] For the hazardous nature of fsvs see the Labour Research Department booklet *The Hazards of Coal Mining* (LRD Publications, 1989), pp. 20-22.

much more dangerous method of mining.[38] For the remaining older miners (aged 50 and above) the visual sight of a roadway containing no steel girders to support the roof was completely unsettling. The NUM at the local and national level voiced their concerns about the use of 'roof bolting' as a means of support. They were in agreement that roof bolts could be used as a supplementary method but 'did not subscribe to the use of roof bolts as the total means of support in mine roadways'.[39] However, given the weakening bargaining power of the union in many collieries it is not unsurprising that this method of mining was allowed to take root and expand.[40]

The role of the union at the colliery remained important in monitoring and enforcing health and safety. Yet there were countervailing pressures coming from management and miners themselves that sometimes undermined such interventions. The colliery manager and the safety office would comprehensively log accidents and injuries and promote the latest advice on ways of working safely produced by the NCB. Regular features in the industry newspaper *Coal News* focussed on health and safety.[41] In 1976 the NCB even produced a recording by Max Bygraves, a popular British crooner and light entertainer accompanied by the Grimethorpe Colliery titled 'Do It the Safety Way'. The lyrics were written by Jack Birchall a clerical worker from Bickershaw Colliery. Max reminds miners that 'unless the roof's supported it's odds on it will fall, and if you're underneath it, it's not very nice at all'.[42] This could have been used as a later critique of roof bolting mining methods. It is difficult to assess how the record was received by miners, but it is probably fair to say that it was at best treated with mirth or at worst completely ignored. The NCB often relied on media gimmicks, video presentations broadcast at the colliery surface and in canteens to deliver messages related to health and safety. One particular innovation in the late 1980s was the introduction of prizes for falls in reported accidents over a given period of time. The obvious outcome of this was a reluctance of miners to report accidents that should have been documented.

The monitoring of health and safety underground was also minimised by the fact that the undermanager and manger would usually only carry out inspections on the day shift and would be in a given district, heading or face for a short period of time. The more intense monitoring of safety was left to a colliery deputy, an active member of the NUM or an established older miner who had a reputation of authority and gravitas amongst his peers. The countervailing pressures that impacted on the implementation of safety had a detrimental impact on miners' health. The introduction of a colliery incentive or 'bonus scheme' in 1977 had done much to undermine the effectiveness of the National Power Loading Agreement (NPLA) creating uniform pay grades that had been implemented in 1966.[43] In the aftermath of the 1984/5 strike both bonus and overtime payments were making up a greater proportion of miners pay. This led to miners taking more risks in order to enhance production. The broader context of occupational instability and the wave of

[38] For dangers of roof bolting methods of roof support see LRD, *The Hazards of Coal Mining*, pp. 22-23.
[39] NUM Annual Report 1988.
[40] The trade union response to the introduction of roof bolting can be examined through the NUM Point of Ayr Lodge minute book 1987-1995.
[41] For a critical reading of the content and impact of *Coal News* see Allen, *Militancy of British Miners*, pp. 67-8.
[42] Max Bygraves with the Grimethorpe Colliery Band, 'Do It The Safety Way', (Jack Birchall and Ron Goodwin, NCB, 1976)
[43] For the NPLA and its impact in North Wales see Gildart, *North Wales Miners*, pp. 78-82.

colliery closures that were a feature of the late 1980s also led to miners developing the mind-set of making as much money as possible while the colliery remained open.

The ever-present culture, practice and discourse of masculinity was another countervailing force that often impeded the trade union quest for safer working practices.[44] Wearing protective clothing, gloves, masks, goggles were sometimes viewed as a sign of timidity, weakness and individuality.[45] Miners conversation was often underpinned by physical prowess, episodes of violence, the size of biceps, the ability to attract women, and related attributes led to the mental and physical imagery of the 'ultimate miner'. Humour, 'banter', and initiation ceremonies were also underpinned by a hyper masculinity, which again clashed with what were perceived to be the feminine aspects of safety. Younger miners and those that did not fit the archetype of the 'ultimate miner' were subjected to name-calling, bullying and in some cases physical and sexual assault. Here miners were subjected to more acute attacks on the senses and the body: the greasing of genitals, tools and pieces of wood forced into the anus, miners left in dangerous locations and being deprived of their lamp, others stripped naked and humiliated.[46]

The danger of working underground was also reinforced by the broader cultural practices of mining communities. Here again a form of hyper masculinity that had been developed and reinforced by the very act of 'being a miner' had broader health implications. Many miners would smoke cigarettes before entering the cage; underground there would be further exposure to carcinogens through the chewing of tobacco. At the end of a shift at Point of Ayr the first call would be one of the multiplicity of pubs and clubs where there would be significant consumption of alcohol. The miners' diet remained one heavy on carbohydrates and fat; fish and chips, pies, red meat, and bread. The food produced in the home and in the colliery canteen led to high cholesterol levels, diabetes and heart disease. By the age of 50 many miners were already suffering from these conditions. In his early 60s my father was a diabetic and had already undergone a triple heart bypass operation. Younger miners bore the scars of growing up in heavily demarcated domestic spheres with clear conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Memories of solidarity, love, and communal comfort were meshed with darker images of abuse, violence, poverty, and alcohol fuelled domestic strife. Miners who did not conform to the dominant conceptions and behaviours of mining life were subject to marginalisation. The mental stresses that were borne by victims of such actions is difficult to quantify as evasion and silence left many of these issues outside of dominant discourses and written sources.[47]

Inside/outside: once a miner

As a coal miner at the colliery between the years 1985-1992 I had experiences of intervening in the monitoring of safety. Subsequently as a researcher involved in a longer oral history project focussed on Point of Ayr and a broad chronological ethnography of its miners (1995-2018) I charted the centrality of illness and disability that has left its mark on the legacy of

[44] For masculinity and mining culture see Gildart, 'Mining Memories', pp. 145-8.
[45] This aspect of mining culture and its impact on safety was also explored by McIvor and Johnstone, *Miners' Lung*, chapter 8.
[46] Such episodes are often recalled at the miners' reunions the author attended in recent years.
[47] Fictional characterisations of the impact of the brutality of some miners' lives offer some insight. The psychotic Francis Begbie character created by Irvine Welsh in his novel *Trainspotting* (Secker and Warburg, 1993) was the son of a Scottish miner.

the industry. As an underground mining trainee at the colliery between May-June 1985 I worked under the 'close personal supervision' of two older miners who were close to retirement. Albert Davies and Walter Evans were products of nationalisation and its ethos of 'moral economy'. I was not only tutored in the practicalities of mining, but also gained a sense of the history of the industry. These men had a particular pride in their job and were primarily responsible for my safety. Working with Davies and Evans took me to every part of the colliery; from the cold and wind swept pit bottom, the steep haulage roots, the noisy headings, the long motorways developed for the fsvs, through to the mini-city of noise, dust, clatter and drama of the coal face. As such, I was both a participant and observer. I assisted with the construction of air doors, conveyor belt repair and replacement, roof bolting, roadway maintenance, stone dusting and transfer point attendant ('button boy'). Simultaneously, I observed miners young and old boring for gas, operating fsvs, driving diesel locomotives and extracting coal from the headings and the coal face. Within three years I had moved from 'button boy', to 'haulage lad', 'pit bottom shackler' and finally fsv driver. All of these positions brought their own specific dangers and stresses. The 'button boy' was responsible for monitoring the continuous running of the conveyors. The boredom associated with this task was mind numbing. Many hours spent trying to keep awake in an extremely noisy environment often in darkness without the sight of another miner for much of the shift. Haulage work required heavy lifting and loading of steel and wood supplies in confined spaces. The 'pit-bottom shackler' spent the whole shift constantly bending over to connect empty tubs as they exited the shaft for transportation into the mine to collect more coal. The fsv operator required skills to drive in a dark, dusty environment while breathing in coal dust and diesel fumes.

I was elected youth delegate for the Point of Ayr lodge of the NUM in 1987. One of my roles as a lodge official was to monitor safety, attend colliery consultative meetings and undertake education courses organised by the NCB, NUM and the Trades Union Congress (TUC). I was now undergoing a process whereby I was still a miner in terms of my primary work, but through my role as a trade union official and someone who through education was also now looking at miners from multiple perspectives I was now both an insider and outsider. My inside/outside position in the underground environment allowed me to reflect on the changing nature of coal mining and how it impacted on my fellow workers, but also my introduction to basic readings in industrial relations and sociology gave me analytical tools to observe miners' reactions to management initiatives in a more critical way. The position of lodge official also exposed miners to cultures and practices of other coalfields through organised day-release courses and weekend schools organised by the NUM. Attendance at these forums allowed me to compare conditions and experiences across different collieries.

In January 1988 the management of Point of Ayr launched an offensive on safety matters as part of their involvement in the area and national pit safety campaign that had been launched by British Coal.[48] The primary aim was to reduce accidents involving fsvs at the colliery.[49] A year later the NUM armed lodge officials with a new publication published by the Labour Research Department titled *The Hazards of Coal Mining* in order to provide miners with a sense of the new dangers and health risks associated with modern mining

[48] The NCB changed its name to British Coal in 1987.
[49] For details and images of the underground environment see *Coal News*, February 1988.

methods of coal extraction.[50] The booklet was prefaced with a foreword by Peter Heathfield the General Secretary of the NUM and Peter McNestry the General Secretary of the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS). Both Heathfield and McNestry noted that the Conservatives had announced a year earlier that the coal would 'be the ultimate privatisation' meaning that 'the safety and working conditions of miners and deputies are under threat in a way which they have not been for over 40 years'.[51] Here was a clear warning that the whole ethos of nationalisation that had been underpinned by improvements to miners' safety was under threat from a hostile Conservative government. The text contained an array of statistics and illustrations linking rising accident rates to the introduction of payment incentives, new technology and the adversarial industrial relations culture advocated by some mangers in the aftermath of the 1984/5 dispute.[52]

According to the figures calculated by the Labour Research Department, in 1985/6 there had been a general increase in dust levels. Managers advocated the donning of protective masks but 'miners complain that these are uncomfortable to wear'.[53] This was certainly the case at Point of Ayr where most workers away from the coal face tended not to wear masks for prolonged periods. One of the problems was that they enhanced heat and sweating and irritated the skin. Even amongst face workers very few opted to wear the expensive but more effective Racal Airstream masks. The impact of noise underground had also increased in the 1980s with a concomitant upsurge of miners suffering from industrial deafness and making compensation claims against British Coal. As with dust masks the use of ear protectors was sporadic. The issue with both dust masks and hearing protection was that the wearing of such apparatus was not fully enforced. There was no sanction or system of fines associated with non-compliance as there were with some other breaches of safety regulations. Moreover, miners themselves responded in diverse ways to the availability of protection; some older miners were reluctant to wear them, some younger miners found the masks uncomfortable, others would only don the masks and ear protectors when noise or dust levels reached a particular level of intolerability.

One section of *The Hazards of Coal Mining* was particularly insightful in which it details the incidence of rising levels of stress in the industry.[54] Given the hyper masculinity associated with coal miners and the nature of work stress was something that never formed part of underground discourse or appeared in trade union records and the minutes of meetings. Yet in the late 1980s miners were being forced to work harder and more importantly in terms of stress levels having to multi-task and quickly adopt the skills required for new methods of coal extraction. At Point of Ayr the introduction of roof bolting and the replacement of long-wall face production with the pillar and stall method is just one example of this process. Between 1987 and 1989 the use of roof bolts across the coalfields had doubled.[55] As noted earlier, jut the visual impact of roadways supported by roof bolts only could be a

[50] LRD, *The Hazards of Coal Mining* (LRD Publications, 1989).
[51] LRD, *The Hazards of Coal Mining*, p. 1.
[52] For the transformation management culture in the NCB see Andrew Perchard and Keith Gildart', 'Run with the fox and hunt with the hounds: Managerial Trade Unionism and the British Association of Colliery Management 1947-1994', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations,* 39 (2018) 79-110.
[53] LRD, *The Hazards of Coal Mining*, pp. 7-9.
[54] LRD, *The Hazards of Coal Mining*, p. 13.
[55] LRD, *The Hazards of Coal Mining*, p. 22.

disconcerting experience. The pillar and stall method of coal extraction was also more individualistic. Large face teams working the long-wall system were broken up with the pillar and stall method requiring a much smaller number of men; the roof bolters and the shuttle car driver. Larger groups of miners working together were likely to be more aware of safety given the prominence of older workers. The fragmentation and atomisation of particular underground working practices transformed the more traditional aspects of coal extraction.

As a lodge official I would carry a copy of *The Hazards of Coal Mining* in my jacket and would use it as basis for discussion with my co-workers driving fsvs and other miners during 'snap time' (meal break). Yet the impact the information had on miners generally seemed minimal. There was general agreement on the content of the booklet and the inherent dangers that it exposed, but many felt that there was nothing to be done given the need to produce coal, enhance bonus payments and ultimately secure the future of the colliery. Others were totally disinterested in anything related to the union and just wanted to get through the shift as quickly as possible with minimal interference. As an fsv driver, I wanted to use the dangers associated with their use to force the union and management to address the points raised by the Labour Research Department. The clearances required for the operation of fsvs in some heading developments were completely lacking with drivers almost being decapitated on some shifts when the protective cabs were ripped off by low roofs. Many of these incidents went unreported in the quest for production. On one shift a 'button boy' (transfer point attendant) was run over by an fsv and was transported to the surface with a broken leg. The issue of clearances was noted by the lodge committee and discussed at the colliery consultative meeting, but ultimately the matter remained unresolved. Amongst miners the issue also proved to be divisive. If production was stopped for any reason, or supplies failed to reach the point of extraction at a given time, pressure was put on out-bye workers (usually younger miners) to rectify the problem as soon as possible. Divisions were also apparent between fsv drivers with some noting the dangers of the vehicles and attempting to work within the legislation/guidelines for operation while others who could be characterised as 'ultimate miners' remaining critical of any attempts to slow production.

In my last two years as a miner (1990-1992) I was aware that health and safety underground was being compromised by the aim of maximising production and the reluctance of many miners to fully comply with existing regulations and recommendations. In this period I was spending 8 week blocks in college and returning to the colliery in between courses. I was going through a further transition from insider to outsider, still belonging, but also being constructed by some as different from the majority of miners. Throughout this period the number of employees was cut further rendering once busy sections of the mine strangely quiet and lacking in activity. There was also an increase in the number of outside contractors. This process again impacted on health and safety in the colliery. Contractors had been periodically employed in British mines through companies such as Cementation, ATC and Thyssens. They were paid on different wage scales to the rest of the workforce and relied on bonus and overtime payments. As they were not fully integrated into the workforce or the culture of particular collieries they took greater risks leading to injury, disability and in some cases fatalities.[56]

[56] LRD, *The Hazards of Coal Mining*, pp. 16-18.

In September 1992 I left the colliery and a month later British Coal announced that it would be one if 31 earmarked for closure. In the same period Point of Ayr had broken its production record with the 429 miners hoping that this would secure its long-term future. In January 1993 the colliery was given a reprieve. It was privatised in 1994 and closed completely in 1996/7.[57] Yet with the closure of the colliery the miners themselves ensured that the memory legacy and history of the colliery would be remembered. This was driven by the view of miners that those that had been injured or killed by work in the coal mines should be given a fitting tribute through public memorials.

Memory, reminiscences, reunions and collective trauma

With the closure of the colliery the health problems associated with working underground remained a feature of everyday life in the former mining localities of Ffynnongroyw, Mostyn and other villages. The trade union officials who dealt with the compensation claims of Point of Ayr miners were faced with an avalanche of cases. The Area Secretary Les Kelly and the long serving administrative assistant Rosemary Williams occupied a small office in the centre of Wrexham.[58] The service they provided was not only administrative, but they also provided tea, biscuits and a forum in which miners families felt at ease in discussing the problems associated with long-term care. Hundreds of miners were now left with a disability and carried the physical and mental scars of working underground. Dust was the most prominent problem with miners attending appointments at the NUM offices in order to seek some financial redress for their suffering. The availability of legal redress and compensation was promoted by the NUM both nationally and locally, but was also effectively passed on through conversation between miners in pubs, clubs and betting shops.

From 1996 onwards I periodically returned to the coalfield and met with groups of former miners. It was apparent that many of these once proud and strong men had been seriously weakened by exposure to dust, diesel, noise and the inhospitable terrain of underground roadways. Some were cared for by wives, partners and families with others were left to seek solace in the clubs and pubs of the north Wales coast. Those whose domestic situation had fragmented faced not only disability from work underground but also the mental trauma of separation and divorce. Some of these men quickly descended into heavy drinking, spent much of their redundancy payments and were quickly prematurely aged by their social and domestic environment. My father was diagnosed with pneumoconiosis and silicosis soon after his retirement when he 55. He had suffered a range of episodes and injuries since starting working in the industry including almost losing his life when buried by a roof fall at Bickershaw colliery in 1956.[59] Within months of leaving the colliery he suffered breathlessness and associated mobility problems. He was compensated for dust damage to his lungs and industrial deafness, but many others had to wait longer with some families involved in prolonged cases.

The domestic sphere now became site of care and the management of the traumatic experiences associated with ill-health, unemployment and trauma. Women were largely

[57] For campaign against the closure of Point of Ayr see Gildart, *North Wales Miners*, pp. 222-228.
[58] For the union career of Les Kelly see relevant sections of Gildart, *North Wales Miners*, and his substantial unpublished autobiography 'The Tory Revenge' in possession of the author.
[59] Discussions with Brian Gildart in November 2017.

responsible for dealing with the impact of coal mining on body and mind. Some saw their husbands ageing rapidly and turning into old men by the age of 55. In some cases this led to miners having to give up their homes and move into sheltered accommodation to better deal with problems of mobility. Those that remained in their original dwellings had to install stair lifts and convert bathrooms into 'wet rooms'. Family holidays became less arduous and confined to gentle strolls along the promenades of coastal resorts such as Blackpool, Llandudno and traditional working-class overseas locations such as Benidorm and Tenerife. Days and weeks became punctuated by appointments with doctors, chest x-rays, meetings with trade union representatives and appeals processes. Some women noted that they were not used to seeing so much of their husbands now that they had left the colliery.[60] On visiting many of these homes, I noticed that breathing apparatus and a range of medications shared shelf space with symbols of a mining past; personalised underground safety lamps, commemorative plaques and plates, and items displaying the iconography of coal.

Industrial deafness was a condition that most former miners experienced once they had left the colliery. A succession of successful claims meant that ex-miners as young as 25 had experienced permanent hearing loss as a result of exposure to excessive noise levels underground. In its later years the soundscape of Point of Ayr colliery had been transformed from where in some sections of the mine you could once hear laughter, chatter and song to one which the huge cutting machines, fsvs, hydraulic power tools and industrial air fans constantly bombarded the ears of miners. In miners' domestic dwellings, I was often struck by the piercing volume levels of televisions and radios. The paltry compensation that most miners received for hearing loss was little consolation for deafness in middle age. Similarly, the use of hydraulic power tools meant that miners sustained long-term damage to hands. The incidence of 'vibration white finger' affected thousands of men whose hands had been constantly shaken by gas boring machinery and hydraulic picks and drills used for 'dinting' roadways and drilling into rock and coal. Cold hands and fingers that could no longer adequately grip cups, pint glasses and cutlery were another feature of the former miner's life. Strained back and shattered knees also hindered mobility. Even with the introduction of modern mining methods that advanced through thicker seams miners were still required to twist their bodies into small spaces to extract coal and carry out crucial maintenance in order to ensure continued production. The number of former miners using walking sticks multiplied after the closure of the colliery in 1996/7.

The leisure time of miners was also transformed through ill health and particularly diseases associated with coal and rock dust inhalation. Injured miners found it difficult to maintain activities such as crown green bowling, pigeon racing, allotment tending and more physical sports that they had once enjoyed. This was replaced by home-centred relaxation; watching football and rugby on the television and spending quality time with children and grandchildren. Broken bones and shattered nerves impacted on the everyday lives of miners and their families. Basic household tasks, DIY and gardening became more difficult. Injuries sustained in the colliery would quickly become even more acute with age. One aspect of this conversion from coal miner to unemployed or retired worker with a disability that cannot be adequately quantified was the impact of loss and bereavement. Every few weeks when I returned to the village of Mostyn (close to the former site of Point of Ayr colliery) I was often informed of the death of a former coal miner. I was also struck how quickly former

[60] Discussion with Joan Jones, March 2018.

miners seemed to physically rapidly age within a short number of years after they had left the workplace.

My uncle Alf died in 2002 and my father in 2018. Both men had suffered from pneumoconiosis, silicosis, industrial deafness and problems with mobility. Funerals became part of the diaries and calendars of former miners. Such events gave space for men to recall memorable incidents through which they expressed a collective industrial identity that had been rapidly undermined by the economics of energy production, government policy and deindustrialisation. It is through these scenes of collective grief that we bear witness to both the positive and negative aspects of mining life. They are fading symbols of an industrial and political past built on collective identities, solidarities and the links forged between the workplace, the community and the nation. Yet the deaths of miners and the suffering of their families are also a stark reminder of the ways in which millions of men since the Victorian period have been injured, rendered disabled or suffered a premature death through working underground.

The legacy and impact of mining life is still notable in the families that deceased miners have left behind. Women's and children's experiences of mining life yet to be fully explored in the historiography of the coal industry that has tended to focus on the institutional and formally political aspects of women's contributions and interventions.[61] The politics, cultures and forms of masculinity and femininity that pervaded mining communities have left strong traces in modes of behaviour and memories. Much of this has recently informed a strong sense of injustice related to a number of separate but related movements; the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, the continued legal fight led by the NUM for compensation for injury, disablement and death, and the move to protect the funds of the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme. [62] The annual Durham Miners' Gala remains a significant event in the calendar of the British labour movement bringing together former miners and their families, supporting organisations and leading figures in Labour Party and international progressive organisations.

Since leaving the coal industry I have returned at least twice a year to meet with formers miners and to chart their transition from the colliery to alternative forms of employment and retirement and old age. I have visited individual homes of old friends, but also more formal reunions organised by miners who participated in the 1984/5 dispute meeting twice a year in local pub in Llanasa. A larger annual event including miners, officials, managers and those who rejected the strike call is held in Rhyl on the north Wales coast. The discourse of Llanasa reunions involving around thirty miners is underpinned by discussions of the strike and contemporary politics. At the Rhyl event, there is no mention of the dispute and more conversation related to humorous tales of underground life. Yet one aspect of mining life that unites the themes of both events is the impact that coal mining had on the miner's body. This collective trauma exhibited by former miners takes on both physical and mental characteristics. Many men bear the scars of working underground; shattered knees, twisted fingers, poor posture, weak lungs, diminished eyesight and a range of chest ailments.

[61] The literature on women on mining communities in the post-war period is overwhelmingly focussed on their role in the 1984/5 strike. For one example of the many books and articles see Triona Holden, *Queen Coal: Women and the Miners' Strike* (Sutton, 2005).
[62] For details see https://otjc.org.uk/

Conversations amongst former miners are now predominantly focussed on the anatomy. The discourses of injury, illness and disablement revolve around lungs, ears, fingers, knees and backs. The reunions still attract substantial numbers, but at each event there are reports of the recently deceased and memories are dredged in order to convey a brief survey of the mining life that had been erased yet remained very much alive in the individual and collective memory of those that were still breathing and living. The population of the former mining villages in the vicinity of the colliery has been transformed. Many of the pubs and clubs have been closed. The Point of Ayr Miners Institute was demolished and in the village of Mostyn where there was once a club and 4 pubs only one now remains. The proliferation of disability scooters on the streets of the villages is also noticeable with many of them being driven by former miners. Yet in retirement the colliery's miners have retained a sense of the important of the coal industry and the role that they played in its history. The Point of Ayr Community and Heritage (POACH) group has been instrumental in promoting the cause of former miners and preserving the memory of the colliery. POACH has been successful in attracting funding to erect a permanent tribute to the miners in the form of the pit head gear situated on the edge of the village of Ffynnongroyw on the A548 coast road. The group also used social media in order to promote campaigns for miners who continue to be denied adequate compensation for injury and disablement sustained while working at the colliery.[63] For them coal remains a constant. It provided work, money, food, consumer goods, comradeship and solidarity, but also ingrained itself in their lungs, skin, ears and bones.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article makes a small personal contribution to the growing literature on miners' health. Yet there is still much to be done in the impact of coal extraction on the miners' body. The nationalisation of the coal industry in 1947 was underpinned by substantial measures to minimise the risk of explosions in the colliery and protect miners from injury and disablement. Significant advances were made in this respect and in terms of international comparisons the general record of the NCB was commendable. Nonetheless, miners continued to be killed in roof collapses, rock falls and explosions. Across the British coalfields miners retuned from home from shifts with cuts, bruises and shattered bones. The longer term damage was more substantial with thousands of miners rendered disabled through dust disease. The changing economics of coal and the management culture of the 1980s multiplied the risks of underground work. Incentive payment schemes, the cutting of manpower for particular tasks, the implementation of greater production targets, demographic changes in the workforce and the threat of closure and unemployment were also causal factors. Memories and the daily experiences of Point of Ayr miners are still informed and affected by the trauma sustained through working in the bowels of the earth. The north Wales coast between Flint and Rhyl continues to bears the geographical, physical and mental scars of a mining past. My own journey from coal miner to university professor has been one where I have benefited greatly from being embedded within the industry and the sociology of its aftermath. I entered the colliery not knowing that I would be the last generation of coal miners to work underground in the British coal industry. I left the colliery also not knowing that some years later I would be unpicking its histories, complexities, idiosyncrasies and nuances. I myself now carry the mental scars of being working class and a

[63] See details of activities at https://poachblog.wordpress.com/

former coal miner; such scars are periodically reopened through the injustices that I witness in the everyday lives of the people struggling to survive in the former mining communities of England, Scotland and Wales.