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## **The Meanings of Coal Community in Britain since 1947**

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### **Abstract**

This article offers an original contribution to the literature on coal communities and the history of the coal industry in Britain by examining changes and contested interests within Britain’s coal territories since nationalisation in 1947. The analysis is organized around three distinct but overlapping meanings of coal community: economic locality; ideological communality; and occupational group. As economic localities mining communities became stronger in the 1960s, even as the coal industry itself was shrinking, but then less viable as all forms of industrial employment dwindled in the 1980s. In ideological terms coal communities were divided by gender as well as class, but became more cohesive with social change and greater opportunities for women. A network of increasingly solid localities contributed – despite the divisions of 1984-85 and subsequent job losses – to the strengthening of a national occupational community, partly because deindustrialisation was a common working class disaster that transcended regional boundaries.

In 2014 the Coalfields Regeneration Trust reported that colliery closures in the 1980s and 1990s had resulted in long-term absolute and relative social deprivation in the former mining areas which constituted around nine per cent of the population of Great Britain. Well in excess of 200,000 mainly male jobs had been lost in the coal industry since 1981. The consequence, measured in employment, earnings, housing, health and well-being, and welfare benefits, was severe relative disadvantage for people in these localities.<sup>1</sup> Cathy Jamieson, Labour MP for Kilmarnock and Loudon, with many ex-miners among her constituents, said the report showed that while ‘closures may be fading from the collective memory, the communities affected are still feeling the impact’. Coalfield unemployment, she noted, significantly exceeded the Scottish average: ‘For a community steeped in the values of solidarity and hard work, that is truly heart-breaking’.<sup>2</sup>

Jamieson's focus on the impact of coalfield change on community and communities was not unusual. The words 'coal' and 'community' are often conjoined in discussion of mines, miners and mining. Taking a recent example, Hillary Clinton's unsuccessful Presidential campaign in the USA in 2016 included a policy promise to 'revitalize struggling coal communities'.<sup>3</sup> Community is a warm and positive term, which partly explains the frequency with which it is used to frame understanding of localities, and also of groups, sometimes spread over a broad and even international geographical area, whose members share real interests or constructed identities. 'Imagined Communities', the term applied by Benedict Anderson to nations, could equally hold for other diffused communities, bound by political ideology, ethnicity, faith, occupation or even leisure activity.<sup>4</sup> Given this wide application, however, community is also a fuzzy, ambiguous, and even problematic term. Jamieson's usage of community in 2014 implied longevity, stability, cohesion. But mining communities across Britain were neither uniformly stable nor entirely cohesive. They were subject to substantial economic and social change in the decades following nationalisation of coal in 1947, and characterised by an array of competing economic, social and political interests. The varied nature of coal communities, indeed, is a central feature of coalfield sociology and history, in US as well as British literature. The 'isolated mass' thesis in particular has been interpreted as both useful and a misdirection in making sense of the highly variegated social relations across different localities. The diversity of these localities – their residential and occupational mixes, their scale, their proximity to larger urban centres – has been emphasised, along with the importance of explaining how they changed over time. The interactive and dynamic connection – the dialectic – between class and community is a recurrent theme.<sup>5</sup>

This article offers an original contribution to the literature on coal communities and the history of the coal industry in Britain by examining changes and contested interests within Britain's coal territories since nationalisation in 1947. The key feature of the analysis is the identification and sustained analysis of three distinct although over-lapping meanings of coal community:

- An **economic locality**, geographically bounded, where coal was a major source of male employment;
- An **ideological communality**, also geographically bounded, with shared cultural, political and social norms, and emphasis on solidarity and mutuality;
- An **occupational group**, imagined to some extent, although channelled through trade union organisation, and operating across local, regional and – within the United Kingdom – national boundaries.

The first and second of these meanings overlap in their common emphasis on the primacy of locality; all three were implied in Jamieson's response to the Coalfields Regeneration Trust report. Closures resulted in lost employment and earnings in her Parliamentary constituency which had been reliant on the industry for material well-being: the viability of coal localities as economic communities was incrementally eroded; wider problems followed, including elevated instances of physical and mental ill-health, as a recent study of Ayrshire emphatically confirms.<sup>6</sup> Closures also threatened the ideological basis of coal localities, although the internal cohesion of coal communities before deindustrialisation had been qualified by important although changing gender inequalities, and differences of class and material interest. Yet Jamieson's assertion that the coalfields were characterised by solidarity was not unusual, and carried particular weight in the 2010s because of the third meaning of community. As an occupational group the ex-miners of Kilmarnock and Loudon *were not alone* in experiencing the material and existential losses of deindustrialisation. The Coalfields Regeneration Trust, after all, was reporting on the shared disadvantages commonly encountered in ex-mining areas in all parts of Britain. These losses were general and close to universal across the coalfields, stemming from economic, industrial and social policies pursued by UK national governments that were hostile to the interests of coal miners and organised labour in the 1980s and 1990s. Only in five relatively small areas of the former UK coalfield were inhabitants more advantaged than the population as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

The third meaning overlaps with the second: ideology was important to the notion of a national or, thinking about England, Wales and Scotland, a multi-national, mining community. This third meaning of community is complicated. The 'national' interests of miners could require the subordination of important localised mining interest; and divisions between miners in different parts of the coalfield can clearly be discerned at various times in the history of the nationalised industry. The 1984-85 strike against pit closures and job losses encapsulated these various divisions of class, gender, and territory, although the situation was highly complex. In Nottinghamshire a clear majority of the workforce neither supported nor observed the strike. Elsewhere in England, Wales and Scotland the strike was solid from March until June 1984. A majority remained on strike until the end of February 1985, but with increasingly significant minorities returning to work, especially from November 1984 onwards. Localities were both united and divided by the strike. Some communities were brought together by the shared hardship of the strike; in the areas where the clear majority of miners continued working, the act of not striking offered a distinct type of localised cohesion; in both striking and working areas there were dissenting minorities which qualify the salience of

community as ideological communality. In the majority of areas where most miners were on strike, however, the 1984-85 campaign against the common threat of closures and job losses played a powerful role in generating substantial unity across the coalfields. The subsequent process of deindustrialisation, which accelerated after the privatisation of the coal industry in 1994, brought national and local coalfield communities closer together, although personal, territorial and political divisions arising from 1984-85 could not entirely be overcome.

The argument here is that economic changes from the 1950s to the 1970s, and specifically the establishment of wider employment opportunities in the coalfields, offered the prospect of materially sustainable mining communities, but the manner of deindustrialisation's management from the 1980s onwards had the opposite effect. So mining communities as economic localities actually became more viable in the 1960s, even as the coal industry itself was shrinking, and then less viable as all forms of industrial employment dwindled in the 1980s. In ideological terms coal communities were far from cohesive before the 1980s, but then became less divided, in the context of greater gender equality and the external threat of deindustrialisation. A network of local communities that were progressively more solid in ideological terms contributed – in the decades after the strike – to the increasing salience of a national occupational community, despite the major loss of coal industry employment, partly because deindustrialisation was a common working class disaster that transcended local, regional and national boundaries. The article is a work of synthesis, offering an original interpretation of coal communities on the basis of official inquiries and publications, and academic historical and social science literature. This material is integrated with government, employer and union documentary sources, along with oral history interviews conducted by the author in 2009-11.

### **Community as economic locality**

Coal was a major source of male employment in Britain in 1947, when the industry was nationalised by Clement Attlee's Labour government.<sup>8</sup> Table 1 shows the broad pattern, with a significant drop in overall industry employment in the decade or so from 1957, a slower decline in the late 1960s and 1970s, and then a precipitous drop after 1984-85.

**Table 1, Employment in Deep Coal Mining in the UK (Thousands), Selected Years, 1925-1987**

Year	UK
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1947	707
1957	710
1967	390
1977	248
1982	208
1987	75

Sources: Department of Energy and Climate Change, *Historical Coal Data: Coal Production, 1853 to 2014* (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/historical-coal-data-coal-production-availability-and-consumption-1853-to-2011>, accessed 20 November 2015); W. Ashworth, *The History of the British Coal Industry, Volume Five, 1946–1982: the nationalised industry* (Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 672-5.

This employment was concentrated geographically in the coalfields of central Scotland, northern England and the Midlands, and south Wales, with small outcrops elsewhere, notably Kent. In Scotland one-third of the mining workforce at the time of nationalisation was deployed in Fife, where roughly one in four men worked in the coal industry in 1951 and one in ten in 1971.<sup>9</sup> The contraction of employment in Fife from the 1950s illuminates two related components of this analysis: coal was a dynamic sector prior to the 1980s, with a number of important changes; and these changes were deliberately sought by policy-makers but managed carefully from the 1950s to the 1970s, with an emphasis on consulting the workers affected and preserving the economic viability of their communities. Coal is an extractive and therefore mobile industry. Across the developed world there has been recurrent tension between stability and temporality in the coal industry.<sup>10</sup> In Britain after nationalisation in 1947 change was an accepted feature so long as local economic and mining workforce interests were protected. The industry was managed by the National Coal Board (NCB), which was compelled to negotiate pit closures with representatives of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and other unions, within the joint industrial structures of the nationalised enterprise. Economic security of individuals and localities was generally maintained until around 1980.<sup>11</sup> Key changes negotiated by union representatives after employment peaked in 1957 included the advance of mechanisation, especially power loading in the early 1960s, and the concentration of production in larger collieries. The NCB depicted this process in positive terms. Its publicity films, aimed at miners as much as cinema-goers more generally, emphasised that the process was negotiated carefully, pit by pit, and closures generally required the agreement of local union representatives and the workers involved. The long-term sustainability of the industry was

also presented as crucial: closures usually affected mines with less scope for mechanisation, and experienced workers moved to units where power loading was already the norm.<sup>12</sup>

Employment more than halved in the 1960s as a result of this restructuring, which was strongly contested in the areas most affected.<sup>13</sup> Workforce pressure secured the establishment of alternatives, including the provision of jobs in assembly goods manufacturing.<sup>14</sup> This process was encouraged by UK governments, especially Harold Wilson's 1964-70 Labour administrations. Wilson's *National Plan* of 1965 promoted more rapid economic growth by moving labour and capital from coal and other basic industries into higher value added manufacturing.<sup>15</sup> The new jobs in assembly goods were subsidised by a substantially increased volume of grants and loans to private firms establishing operations in the coalfields.<sup>16</sup> This was a major reconstruction of life and work in the coalfields. From 1957 NCB investment was progressively concentrated in what W. Ashworth, official historian of the industry, characterised as the 'low-cost', 'productive and profitable central coalfields of Yorkshire, East Midlands and West Midlands'. These areas combined were responsible for 51.9 per cent of output and 42.6 per cent of manpower in 1957, but 63.8 per cent of output and 53.5 per cent of manpower in 1972-3.<sup>17</sup> This was at substantial social cost to the so-called 'peripheral' coalfields of Scotland, Northumberland, Durham, Kent and South Wales.<sup>18</sup> Scotland's relative share of NCB employment shrank from 12.2 per cent in 1957 to 10.2 per cent in 1972-3. There was also a loosened connection between residence and employment, arising from the consolidation of production in larger units, which involved mine closures in many coal settlements.<sup>19</sup> In Scotland by the early 1970s the majority of miners were making daily journeys, travelling from mining villages without pits to one of the six 'cosmopolitan' collieries in Ayrshire, the Lothians and Fife that each employed more than 2,000, and collectively were responsible for more than 75 per cent of Scottish output by 1982.<sup>20</sup> By 1984 only one village pit remained in Scotland, Polmaise, in the Stirlingshire settlement of Fallin.<sup>21</sup>

Industrial concentration plus greater mechanisation, and a widening of the employment mix in mining areas, was nevertheless economically beneficial. Here the position in Fife can be further elaborated, with comparative reference to Lanarkshire, which it succeeded as the most important area of the Scottish coalfield after the Second World War. In Fife from 1951 to 1971 industries other than coal increased their share of male employment from 31 per cent to 34 per cent. The overall industry share of male employment in Fife in 1971, including coal, was 44 per cent, down from 56 per cent in 1951, but above the Scottish national average of 40 per cent.<sup>22</sup> In Lanarkshire coal contracted from 15.5 per cent of male employment in 1951 to 2.8 per cent in 1971, but UK government regional incentives helped to stimulate a significant growth of engineering, which

increased its share of male employment from 9.9 in 1951 to 25.6 per cent in 1971. So the male employment share of engineering plus coal increased in Lanarkshire across this twenty-year period, from 25.4 per cent to 28.4 per cent.<sup>23</sup> This highlights the managed nature of economic changes within coal communities, and the continued importance attached by policy-makers to industrial employment, which union representatives insisted upon as a prerequisite of accepting coal industry closures. 'We had to get these factories into Scotland', said Alex Moffat, National Union of Mineworkers Scottish Area President in 1962, when discussing the terms under which miners could accept contraction of their own industry.<sup>24</sup>

So the employment make-up of coal localities was changing in the decades following nationalisation. There was an 'ideal type' of occupational community in the coalfields, hypothesised by Michael Bulmer, where mining employment was so predominant among male workers that it structured the broader pattern of non-workplace social relations, influencing the local character of civic institutions, schools and churches as well as clubs, pubs and other entertainment facilities.<sup>25</sup> Such a community was increasingly unusual by the late 1960s, with the possible exception of the South Wales valleys.<sup>26</sup> The economic viability of coal localities was nevertheless strengthened, not least because the diversification of industrial activity had one further significant feature: the expansion of opportunities for women, especially in assembly manufacturing. In Fife the ratio of males to females in employment was 2.6 to 1 in 1961 but just 1.5 to 1 in 1981.<sup>27</sup> More than eight per cent of all women in Fife were employed in electrical engineering in 1971, most of these in Glenrothes, one of five New Towns built to relieve housing congestion in Glasgow.<sup>28</sup> In Glenrothes 55 per cent of female jobs were in industrial sectors. The post-1945 expansion of the public sector was important too: state education, the National Health Service and other welfare services, including those provided by local authorities, furnished coal territory women with an increased range and volume of opportunities.<sup>29</sup> This further bolstered the economic sustainability of coal communities, and gradually altered social relations in progressive ways, a development examined in the following section of this analysis. Earnings from female part-time and full-time work would be vital in sustaining the strike in mining households and localities in 1984-85.<sup>30</sup>

The gender effects of the acceleration of deindustrialisation after the strike were complex. The share of female employment became more important as 250,000 or so male jobs in coal were eradicated across England, Scotland and Wales. Women were compelled to carry this greater burden with lower paid service sector wages, because many engineering jobs were also eliminated. More positively, in a number of coalfield territories women as well as men built on local traditions of trade union organisation to secure better service sector pay and conditions in supermarkets and care



homes than those which applied elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> This only mitigated slightly the negative effects of the transformed management of deindustrialisation from the 1980s onwards. There was a shift away from job stimulation through regional incentives, and a concentration instead on re-training, with limited beneficial effects, particularly for older workers,<sup>32</sup> along with maintenance of ex-industrial workers through the social security system. A related development was the incentivisation of older ex-industrial workers to withdraw from economic activity altogether on disability grounds. This masked the 'real' level of unemployment, often double the official social security benefit claimant count. Coal communities duly became less economically viable, a process exacerbated in the 2010s by further reductions in the relative value of welfare benefits and a narrowing of the eligibility terms for welfare claimants.<sup>33</sup> The long-term consequences were summarised in the 2014 Coalfields Regeneration Trust report. In the 1980s and 1990s the majority of those on disability benefits in the coalfields were ex-miners, usually in their forties and fifties. These men by the 2010s were of pensionable age, so disability claimants were younger, with limited skills and educational attainments, struggling 'to work in a difficult and competitive labour market'. In August 2013 across Great Britain the out of work benefit claimant rate, aggregating incapacity benefit, job seekers' allowance and income support, was 10.9 per cent. In the coalfields as a whole it was 14.1 per cent, and 15.7 per cent and 15.2 per cent in the ex-coal communities of Fife and Ayrshire/Lanarkshire respectively.<sup>34</sup>

### **Community as ideological communality**

The classic study of post-1945 coalfield social relations is Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques and Clifford Slaughter, *Coal Is Our Life*. Community in this study featured in occupational group and class terms. Miners in 'Ashton', the authors' pseudonym for Featherstone in West Yorkshire, were likened to miners elsewhere and to manual workers more broadly, as wage earners. A powerful sense of class was emphasised, with miners interpreting any and every managerial initiative as a hidden attempt to extract greater surplus value from their labour. They were impatient too with the employment structures and relations of the nationalised industry, with some seeing the NCB's emphasis on conciliation and consultation as weakening collective bargaining and the advocate-representative function of workplace trade unionism.<sup>35</sup> A similar pattern of conflict was identified in a detailed comparative study of morale and conflict at two Lancashire collieries in the 1950s.<sup>36</sup> This emphasis on discord between rank and file workers and their union officials is valuable, but industry unions – especially the NUM – did not follow the same industrial and political agenda as the NCB. In the early years of nationalisation joint industrial partnership was clearly circumscribed by the

attachment of union officials as well as workers to adversarial collective bargaining.<sup>37</sup> It can be concluded that there was at work a matrix of tensions within the industry: between the NCB and the NUM institutionally; between managers and employees in the workplace; and, at times, between union officials and members. This reinforces the importance of ideology. Miners in Ashton articulated a common working class feeling, based on a shared collective memory of historical conflict. Many in the 1950s were still talking about the 1893 national lock-out,<sup>38</sup> when two Featherstone miners were shot dead outside Acton Hall colliery by members of the South Staffordshire infantry regiment, ordered to this action after the Riot Act had been read. In Scotland similar continuities of class conflict were present in collective memory from the 1950s to the 1980s, but here the reference point was the pitiless wage-cutting of employers, plus their victimisation of union activists after the 1921 and 1926 lock-outs.<sup>39</sup>

Such class feeling and collective memory underwrote coal community as ideological communality. In Fife the intense working-class communalism of the 'Little Moscows', various settlements in the conurbation that connects Lochgelly, Lumphinans and Cowdenbeath, has been emphasised in older and more recent historical literature.<sup>40</sup> This is where Alex Moffat and his brother Abe, who preceded him as NUM Scottish Area President, came from, with the Red Flag flown annually above Cowdenbeath Town Hall to celebrate the anniversary of the October Revolution.<sup>41</sup> Class was not, however, the only important marker of social identity in the coalfields. Everyday experience was structured by gender.<sup>42</sup> The most striking feature of *Coal Is Our Life*, reading it in the 2010s, is the fundamentally unequal division of labour in Ashton between working class men and working class women. Organised leisure was structured around the activities of male wage earners. Female participation in and membership of welfare and working men's clubs, the key institutions of coalfield leisure, were circumscribed in a highly gendered social world. In households and the family gender divisions were likewise demarcated. The needs of women were subordinate to those of men. Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter acknowledged these inequalities, but nevertheless emphasised the primacy of class loyalty and identity. Married women especially, they implied, were reconciled to gender inequality because 'they share the sense of injustice felt by miners and support their husbands against the enemy'.<sup>43</sup> Similar claims appear elsewhere. Alan Campbell's history of Scottish miners prior to nationalisation makes qualified reference to women's enforced monopoly of domestic labour as an exercise in working class solidarity, enabling men to earn the family wage and fight the employers for improved living standards.<sup>44</sup> The partnership was far from equal, however, with women fulfilling a supporting and therefore subordinate role within the broader pattern of class relations. This is and was a major qualifier to the notion of coal community as ideological communality. In the early 1980s Beatrix Campbell argued that coalfield gender relations were barely

altered from the 1950s or even the 1930s, and still overwhelmingly privileged male over female interests.<sup>45</sup>

Elsewhere in this special edition Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson analyse the complex gender effects of the 1984-85 strike.<sup>46</sup> The campaign clearly increased the personal and collective confidence of the tens of thousands of women who defended the economic substance of their communities. Women were vital in establishing contacts with supporters beyond the coalfields, speaking at trade union, workplace and community meetings and rallies, including events held by their national organisation, Women Against Pit Closures.<sup>47</sup> Yet the extent to which gender relations and politics were transformed in 1984-85 can be exaggerated. Beatrix Campbell's characterisation of an unchanging world in the 1980s overlooked evidence that moderate progress was discernible as early as the 1950s, even in Ashton, with widening labour market opportunities encouraging women to hold less restricted social, emotional and sexual attitudes.<sup>48</sup> The further extension of female paid employment combined with wider cultural and social changes to narrow gender inequalities at least in some coalfield territories. Pre-strike miners were not homogeneously chauvinistic, and neither were coalfield women passive victims of gender oppression. So in gender relations the strike marked an important transition rather than an abrupt departure.<sup>49</sup> Many women remained active politically after the strike, becoming elected councillors or trade union officers, and acquired formal educational qualifications or training that enabled them to secure more attractive jobs and careers. But progress was not linear and remained contested. After the strike 'old patterns were reasserted by force of circumstance', as women's lives were once more organised around men's shifts.<sup>50</sup> The NUM Scottish Area sought to have women admitted as members but this was blocked by the union nationally, chiefly owing to opposition in Yorkshire. Moreover, subsequent closures were as punishing in material and emotional terms for women as they were for men.<sup>51</sup>

Ethnicity and sexuality were further spheres of inequality in the coalfields. Polish migrant workers in Scotland after the Second World War were ostracised because of their national status as refugees from Stalinised Poland, and stigmatised as renegades by Communist miners.<sup>52</sup> Sexuality in the coalfields was the theme of *Pride*, the 2014 feature film written by Stephen Beresford and directed by Matthew Warchus. This depicted the gay and lesbian activists whose support for the 1984-85 strike helped to dismantle homophobia in mining communities. Diarmaid Kelliher has shown that these activists included men and women from coalfield communities who had felt marginalised on the basis of their sexuality, and moved to live and work in metropolitan centres. There, however, they often associated with other gay and lesbian people whose individualised and sometimes anti-working class views clashed with the collectivist politics which the activists retained

from the coalfields.<sup>53</sup> Place and politics were important factors in challenging prejudice. Daryl Leeworthy stresses the importance of the South Wales connection, where Communist politics in the strike placed a premium on broadening the social alliance against the Thatcher government. Coalfield strike activists, especially women, empathised with the gay and lesbian activists because of their common experience of oppressive state force, with shared working class identity an important bond.<sup>54</sup> The lesbian and gay activists included a number of Communists, who also saw the importance of alliance-building. Mark Ashton, Mike Jackson, Roy James and others recognised an affinity with the strikers in class terms and shared experience of oppression, and saw an opportunity, working with the miners, to place gay rights on the labour movement's political agenda.<sup>55</sup> Leeworthy shows that similar common experience also structured links established in 1984-85 between coalfield strikers and black activists in metropolitan centres. Working class identity was again important, along with a profound sense of injustice arising from encounters with discriminatory policing and the law. The net effect was an erosion of racist ignorance and prejudice at least in some areas of the coalfields, perhaps particularly where Communist politics were prevalent, notably in South Wales.<sup>56</sup>

While divisions of gender, sexuality and ethnicity in mining communities were gradually narrowing, class was also evolving. Changes in occupational and residential structures, arising from economic restructuring since the 1950s, were important in this respect. The class feeling evident in *Coal Is Our Life* was incrementally diluted, as the industry's economic centrality diminished and mining households became more isolated residentially. Iain Chalmers, a union activist at Seafield Colliery in Fife in the 1970s and 1980s, believed that the New Town of Glenrothes was deliberately constructed to diminish the miners' communalism. The local authority in Fife used the allocation of housing to disperse miners, placing them apart and in streets alongside factory workers, shop workers and local authority ancillary workers.<sup>57</sup> In South Wales in 1984-85 strike solidarity was strongest in the single occupational mining communities of Cynon and Rhondda valleys, and weakest at Cynheidre, the most westerly of the area's collieries, where the workforce was spatially more diffuse than elsewhere.<sup>58</sup> Residential dispersal apparently had a material impact on class identity and politics in the coalfields more broadly, compounded by cross-regional migration. In the NCB film *Miners*, produced in 1976, a miner's wife in Leicestershire spoke about the varied attractions of living in an occupationally-mixed modern housing estate. She contrasted this with the social monotony of the small Durham village where she and her husband had spent the earlier years of their marriage, where 'everyone' was a miner.<sup>59</sup> Her husband was one of 15,000 miners helped by the NCB to move from Scotland, Durham and Northumberland between 1962 and 1971 to work in the Midlands and Yorkshire.<sup>60</sup> Their presence, especially in Nottinghamshire, is sometimes

emphasised as a factor in the divisions evident in 1984-85. Pressed by union representatives to take action to protect miners in their former home coalfields, these migrants asked, 'Where did they fight for my job?'<sup>61</sup> Bagworth, where *Miners* was filmed in 1976, 'remained defiantly open' – its employees working, in other words – throughout the strike.<sup>62</sup>

Cross-coalfield political differences were also shaped by divergences in housing tenure. In Mansfield in North Nottinghamshire the rate of owner occupation was 42 per cent in 1961 and 53 per cent in 1971. In the Ashfield area in South Nottinghamshire owner occupation was 47.4 per cent in 1971, but 58.5 per cent ten years later.<sup>63</sup> In Scotland the trend was to greater density of local authority housing tenure, more than 50 per cent in the coalfields of Ayr, Fife, Lanarkshire and Midlothian in 1961.<sup>64</sup> By 1981 – with further changes – 74 per cent of households in Scottish coalfield settlements lived in council houses. This helped sustain solidarity in 1984-85, with the cost of striking reduced by Labour councils in Fife, the Lothians, Lanarkshire and Ayrshire, all of which deferred or lowered rents.<sup>65</sup> In the Nottinghamshire coalfield districts council housing density was significantly lower. In 1981 in Ashfield district and in Mansfield and the surrounding area it was about 33 per cent, and just over 25 per cent in Newark.<sup>66</sup> Miners can plausibly be presented as aspirational and perhaps even affluent workers of the 1970s, with wage rises after the 1972 and 1974 national strikes reversing the fall of their earnings relative to other manual workers in the 1960s. In the 1966 NCB Film Unit production of 1966, *Portrait of a Miner*, structured around a young worker who drives to start the day shift at Thoresby, there are important signifiers of individual ambition and household affluence: the car, the modern home, the kitchen furnishings brochure, the day-release learning at the University of Nottingham.<sup>67</sup> But Thoresby's Nottinghamshire location reinforces the suggestion that territorial distinctions in housing tenure, admittedly in broad terms, contributed to varying social conditions and material aspirations in different parts of the coalfield.<sup>68</sup>

There were other social tensions in the coalfields. The disciplinary control of the ideological coal community could be oppressive. Not everyone in coal localities was a manual worker, and among those who were, many did not identify with collective working class interests. Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter noted the implications for the minority who stood apart from the working class, particularly in times of crisis, when individuals opposed to collective action would be coerced or shunned: 'made to feel the weight of the community's displeasure'.<sup>69</sup> Wight observed similar disciplinary forces operating in the early 1980s in Cauldmoss, a pseudonym for a small town in central Scotland on the boundary between the West Lothian and Lanarkshire coalfields,<sup>70</sup> and Colin Griffin has written that at least some coal communities were more 'repositories of internal conflict and dissent' than solid neighbourhoods.<sup>71</sup> Internal working class divisions were highlighted in 1984-

85 by the fissure between working and striking areas, although it could be argued that within areas where working was the norm, the dispute actively consolidated internal localised cohesion.<sup>72</sup> Solidarity was further qualified in striking areas by the existence of working miners, albeit small in number until deep into the winter of 1984, and hugely incentivised with tax-free pre-Christmas bonuses by the NCB.<sup>73</sup> These strike-breakers were abused verbally and occasionally physically, in gendered as well as class terms, as effete or lesser men. In South Wales they are remembered in moral terms as ‘wife-beaters, reprobates’.<sup>74</sup> In Scottish coalfield memory they are characterised as ‘weak’ individuals: problem drinkers and gamblers as well as poor workers.<sup>75</sup> There may be an element here of what oral historians call ‘composure’.<sup>76</sup> To fit the dominant collective memory of class solidarity, those who returned to work within the areas on strike are socially-distanced as deviants, or ‘wasters’, the pejorative and highly subjective term often used in Scotland to shame those who allegedly transgress a community’s normative values.<sup>77</sup>

These tensions of class – within striking areas, and between striking and working areas – are important in assessing the reach of ideological community in the coalfields. The solidarity of the strike in Scotland, Northumberland, Durham, Yorkshire, Kent and especially in South Wales, was nevertheless hugely impressive. With justification Raphael Samuel argued that the prolonged atmosphere and experience of crisis had rebuilt ‘community’ in the coalfields.<sup>78</sup> Economic and industrial changes had eroded the centrality of coal employment; the linkages between residence and work had become more diffuse over time; and the acceleration of deindustrialisation after the strikers’ defeat further diminished the economic viability of coal localities. But in many localities the strike – mobilising against the unambiguous class enemies of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government and NCB management – had solidified the ideological and political basis of community. In the longer term this greater ideological cohesion helped to develop the strength of miners and later ex-miners across the English, Welsh and Scottish coalfields as an occupational community too.

### **Community as occupational group**

The political aims of miners as an occupational group were usually compatible with those of the working class more broadly. Yet the needs of the occupational group and even the working class as a whole could conflict with local priorities. Restructuring was presented in the 1950s and 1960s as offering more viable production and therefore greater employment protection for the workforce generally. In similar vein the 1964-70 Labour governments accelerated the rundown of coal to facilitate increased investment in manufacturing, to stimulate more rapid economic growth and

improve living standards generally. These prospective gains for the majority encompassed social cost for those whose pits and jobs were lost. This is important: miners as an occupational group did not have homogeneous material interests. These differences preceded closures and intensified with mechanisation in the 1960s. The study of the two Lancashire collieries in the 1950s identified significant intra-occupational differences among coal miners, particularly between face and non-face workers. Face workers exhibited higher morale than non-face workers, articulated a stronger collective identity, and were more likely to pursue goals through formal union and bargaining channels. Non-face workers were more likely to utilise informal and individualised methods in defending their interests, rationing labour through absenteeism or moving to jobs in other collieries or leaving the sector altogether.<sup>79</sup>

The NUM was established in 1944 as a federated amalgamation of the regional and craft unions that had operated in the private industry.<sup>80</sup> The new union worked to build an occupational class identity within the nationalised industry. But local, regional and, in South Wales and Scotland, national identities remained strong. This can be witnessed in the ‘invented traditions’ of the annual Durham, Scottish and South Wales miners’ galas. The Durham event originated in 1869,<sup>81</sup> but was built up after nationalisation by Sam Watson, the area’s NUM General Secretary, who sought to establish its primacy as the major meeting point for miners from all regions and nations of the British coalfields. Watson was a senior figure in the Labour Party nationally by the 1950s, and a persistent Cold War opponent of Communism, but deliberately ran an ideologically inclusive gala, providing space for Communists such as Arthur Horner, and Abe and Alex Moffat, welcomed as the representatives of the South Wales and Scottish miners.<sup>82</sup> The Scottish and South Wales galas were established after nationalisation, and commonly celebrated distinct national features. The Scottish gala was held in Edinburgh, the capital city, rather than within the coalfields, and included ‘traditional’ cultural paraphernalia: bagpipes, dancing, and Highland games as well as boxing and football, along with a political agenda that fused working class, Scottish, and internationalist themes.<sup>83</sup> The South Welsh gala was likewise held in the capital, Cardiff, and featured brass bands, arts and craft exhibitions, and popular coalfield sports in Wales, notably rugby union, as opposed to rugby league, which captured the attention of miners in Yorkshire and Lancashire. There was, significantly, also a parallel Miners’ Eisteddfod, usually held in Welsh-speaking areas of the western coalfield.<sup>84</sup>

These events helped to consolidate area identities, but a strong national or multi-national British mining identity remained elusive, even after the successful industry-wide strikes had secured significant pay increases in 1972 and 1974. The momentum towards increased unity was then

disrupted by the introduction of area incentive pay schemes in the mid-1970s, sought by miners especially in the English Midlands, including Nottinghamshire. These were opposed by miners in the geologically more complex 'peripheral areas' and were interpreted by the political left in the coalfields as unjust and divisive.<sup>85</sup> David Hamilton, NUM delegate at Monktonhall Colliery in Midlothian, was sacked during the strike. Interviewed by the author in 2009, he recalled a year as a young miner in Nottinghamshire in the late 1960s, where he enjoyed life but disliked the authoritarian pattern of social relations in the workplace, with miners obliged to address their overseers as 'sir'. Here was an alleged demonstration of the continued attachment among Nottinghamshire miners to 'Spencerism',<sup>86</sup> the area's inter-war model of collaborative industrial relations. This, according to Hamilton, had survived nationalisation, and partly explained the existence of support in Nottinghamshire for incentive pay schemes in the 1970s, and opposition to the strike in 1984-85,<sup>87</sup> when a big majority – perhaps 90 per cent – of the area's 34,000 or so miners worked throughout.<sup>88</sup> Members of this working majority said they were defending union rules and principles which the NUM nationally had contravened by attempting to secure a national stoppage without a national ballot.<sup>89</sup> The subsequent break from the NUM by a large number of Nottinghamshire miners, to form the Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM), formalised the rupture. Those who remained loyal to the NUM saw the new union in the terms articulated by Hamilton, as the collaborationist tool of employers, although UDM officials and members insisted that they were committed to protecting the distinct collective interests of miners.<sup>90</sup>

Looking back from the 2010s Huw Beynon analysed these divisions in terms of the limited knowledge that miners from different areas had of each other. Cross-coalfield links were generally through official union structures alone, and the result was limited understanding between miners in higher and lower producing areas.<sup>91</sup> Rab Amos, a Scottish craft union delegate at Monktonhall, remembers the early 1980s in terms of a localised and even parochial insularity among miners. The NUM was not equipped to undertake the major programme of political education required to overcome this.<sup>92</sup> Explaining the meaning of the strike to its members and society more broadly was one of the union's biggest difficulties. The NUM leadership, and perhaps especially its President, Arthur Scargill, concentrated on aims that could appear unrealistic or even selfish to those outside the threatened coalfields, defending pits and jobs that the Conservative government skilfully argued were inefficient and redundant in economic terms.<sup>93</sup> The government recast striking miners in discursive terms, from the working class heroes of the 1970s, deserving of special treatment because their labour was both vital and dangerous, to greedy self-seekers whose opposition to pit closures on economic grounds was a major social hazard.<sup>94</sup> The government was determined to remove meaningful union involvement from decisions about pit closures, and to secure this end during the



strike recurrently destabilised negotiations between the NUM and NCB.<sup>95</sup> In these terms the strike was only indirectly concerned with the economics of coal. It was really about the right of management to manage, and the silencing of meaningful union voice in the industry. Raymond Williams argued that the core issue was the character of 'social order' in Britain. The NUM and its members on strike were defending social democracy, where the economic security of coal communities was protected, as it had been from the 1950s to the 1970s, and where changes were effected on the basis of dialogue and agreement. The Conservative government was seeking to replace this with a new compact of anti-trade union management practices, market liberalisation, and privatisation.<sup>96</sup>

The government pursued its objectives through the intensive commitment of state resources, assisted by the police and the courts, which disciplined strike leaders in order to intimidate the strikers collectively.<sup>97</sup> This war against the miners, and the subsequent process of accelerated deindustrialisation, reinforced the saliency of the coalfield occupational community, even although the divisions of 1984-85 had lasting organisational consequences. The UDM became central to workplace bargaining in Nottinghamshire and other parts of the English Midlands.<sup>98</sup> Although encouraged by NCB managers, notably in Scotland,<sup>99</sup> the new organisation was unable to establish a substantial position anywhere else.<sup>100</sup> Relations between the UDM and the NUM remained hostile, but divisions between coal localities were gradually eroded by their continued economic fragmentation. This is not an optimistic conclusion. The varied and serious difficulties confronting the coalfields were described by ex-miners in Ken Loach's film 2013, *The Spirit of '45*. David Hopper, Secretary of the Durham Miners' Association, said mining 'communities are full of drugs, full of problems of all sorts of types that were never there when the mines were working'.<sup>101</sup> These are common economic and social experiences across the coalfields, arising from deindustrialisation. They reinforce the importance of thinking about miners and ex-miners as a common social group, with powerful class connotations. This applies not only to ex-coalfields in Britain, but to those across mature industrial economies, notably Nord-Pas De Calais in France, the Ruhrgebiet in Germany and the Appalachians in the USA.<sup>102</sup> Deindustrialisation diminished the coalfields greatly in economic terms, but the idea – imagined, constructed, articulated and defended – of 'coal communities', socially embattled but politically resilient, retains currency more than two decades after the industry ceased to be a significant employer.<sup>103</sup>

The reach of this cross-coalfield community is nevertheless qualified by varied electoral-political responses to deindustrialisation. Voting patterns reflect understanding of deindustrialisation as the consequence or possibly the ineffectiveness of government policy. The loss

of industrial jobs was not a direct policy aim of the Conservative governments from 1979. But it was certainly accelerated by the deliberate moves away from state regulation, public ownership, and trade union voice in policy-making, which had each operated as a brake on the erosion of industrial activity and employment. The ‘policy consequence’ understanding of deindustrialisation explains why in ex-coalfield territories there has been a move away from support for the Conservative Party, although less so in England and perhaps Wales than in Scotland, and in England less so in Nottinghamshire and even Yorkshire than in Northumberland and Durham. In the Nottinghamshire constituencies of Sherwood and Mansfield, each with substantial mining interests, there were significant moves from Labour to Conservative from the 1983 to the 1987 general elections, certainly influenced by the Labour Party’s compromised position during the strike. A significant trend back to Labour in each constituency was evident in the 1992 and 1997 general elections, but was not sustained. In Nottinghamshire – as elsewhere, indeed – the ‘policy ineffectiveness’ understanding has structured a palpable erosion of popular confidence in Labour in the 2000s and 2010s. The Coalfields Regeneration Trust, a social enterprise and charity established in 1999 with encouragement from the Labour government, has sponsored the growth of new businesses and jobs, and promoted skills training, particularly among younger people.<sup>104</sup> But Labour has accrued limited political capital from this regeneration effort. In England in the summer of 2016 the long-term political consequences of deindustrialisation appeared to include substantial working class disaffection with mainstream parties and existing structures in ex-coalfield localities. In the referendum on UK membership of the European Union there were large majorities in favour of leaving in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Yorkshire: 70.9 per cent in Mansfield, 70.8 per cent in Bolsover, and 68.3 per cent in Barnsley. There were smaller but significant majorities in the north-east: 57.5 per cent in Durham and 54.1 per cent in Northumberland.<sup>105</sup>

In Scotland deindustrialisation’s long-term impact has been different. The move away from Labour in the coalfields involved greater support for Scottish nationalism and independence, with the political-constitutional structures of the UK seen as an economic threat to everyday material security. The extent of Scotland’s distinct coalfield politics – and particularly the understanding and memory of deindustrialisation in Scottish coal communities – can be read in three closely-entwined events: the death of Margaret Thatcher in 2013, and the thirtieth anniversary of the strike, followed by the Scottish Independence Referendum, both in 2014. Thatcher’s death was celebrated, this verb consciously emphasised, by ex-miners and their supporters interviewed by reporters in Midlothian. The former Prime Minister had ‘destroyed’ Scotland through policies that destabilised and then destroyed industrial production and employment. The position was seen in Midlothian in class terms, as it was by those ‘rejoicing’ in Durham and Yorkshire. This reinforces the sense that

deindustrialisation was a common and shared working class disaster in all parts of Britain,<sup>106</sup> yet nationalist imperatives could not be ignored. These were evident in Scotland during the thirtieth anniversary of the miners' strike, when nationalist discourses competed with class narratives in framing public memory. In a Scottish Parliament debate in March 2014 Labour MSPs, notably Neil Findlay, sought to explain the strike and its legacy in class terms, focusing on the solidarity of mining communities and the injustices experienced by the strikers. Findlay and others called for an inquiry into the conduct of policing in Scotland in 1984-85. The Scottish government rejected this call, with Scottish National Party MSPs not interested in the class dimensions of the strike, which they baldly characterised as an external imposition on coal communities by the Thatcher governments and the NUM's national leadership.<sup>107</sup> The results of the September 2014 independence referendum indicated extensive popular acceptance of the view that deindustrialisation and its legacy were as much a question of nation as class. Overall 44.7 per cent of voters cast their ballots for Yes to Scottish Independence. The Yes vote exceeded this in five of the ex-coalfield local authority areas: East Ayrshire, North Lanarkshire, where there was a Yes majority, South Lanarkshire, Clackmannan, and Fife.<sup>108</sup> In similar terms the SNP share of the vote exceeded the national average in a number of ex-coalfield constituencies in the Scottish Parliament Election of 2016. Yet class was not eclipsed entirely. Labour's share – greatly diminished overall – fell relatively softly in ex-mining areas. The complexities of the deindustrialisation legacy were encapsulated in the constituencies of Airdrie & Shotts in Lanarkshire, where closures had been initiated by the NCB in the late 1940s and early 1950s,<sup>109</sup> and Cowdenbeath in Fife, the core of the old 'Little Moscovs', where restructuring in the 1960s had compelled miners to travel daily to more distant cosmopolitan collieries. In each of these constituencies the combined SNP and Labour vote share was 82 per cent, suggesting that a powerful element of class alignment survived alongside a greater emphasis on distinctly Scottish priorities.<sup>110</sup> This remained the case even in the UK General Election of 2017. In the context of a Conservative – or, more accurately, a Unionist – 'resurgence' in Scotland, the combined SNP-Labour share of votes in both of these constituencies exceeded 73 per cent.<sup>111</sup>

## Conclusion

This analysis has examined three distinct meanings of community. They over-lapped at times, and strengthened each other in some ways, particularly when intersecting around working class interests and identity. There is tension between class and community as analytical and social categories, but in the coalfields they were not incompatible and indeed often were mutually reinforcing. Class was expressed at community level, in workplaces and in localities, and community identity was

recurrently recomposed on the basis of class, particularly in times of crisis. The key factor was the centrality of coal industry employment until the early 1980s, despite the economic changes of the later 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. This ensured the maintenance of common political bonds and goals, shared to an extent across coalfield boundaries, although regional and national distinctions remained prominent, and in Scotland at least emerged powerfully in the 2000s and 2010s.

The first of the meanings explored here, coal community as economic locality, gradually altered as employment and industrial structures slowly changed from the mid-1950s onwards. This process was accelerated when the management of industrial change was transformed by the Thatcher government. Coal communities as economic localities, strengthened through diversification in the 1960s, became much less viable from the 1980s onwards, and they remain in substantial material difficulty. The second and third meanings, coal community as ideological communality and occupational community, over-lapped, and were subjected to immense strain by the transformed political order of the 1980s. Working miners and differential territorial support for the strike in 1984-85 demonstrated that mining communities were not ideologically sealed units; there were powerful divisions within and between coalfield localities. These divisions were, in the short run, compounded by the aftermath of the strike, with rival union organisations in different regions. In the longer run, however, coal communities emerged from the crisis of the strike and the painful aftermath of deindustrialisation with renewed ideological and political solidarity. In mining or increasingly ex-mining localities, social differences other than those of class gradually subsided. Gender relations, slowly evolving from the 1960s as employment opportunities for women increased, changed in further progressive ways, partly as a result of women's political activism during the strike. This headway was contested, as the refusal of the NUM nationally to countenance female membership demonstrated. But in some areas of the coalfield women enjoyed a substantial increase in their social esteem as well as their employment situation. Deindustrialisation – its experience, consequences and memory – has contributed to the construction of a new cross-coalfield community identity: in profound economic and social difficulty, but politically resilient and even defiant. The case of Scotland admittedly qualifies the notion of a politically-integrated, pan-British coalfield community, given the orientation towards Scottish nationalism and independence in the country's former coal constituencies. But Scotland's national turn remains freighted with clear enough class connotations to reinforce the argument that Scottish ex-miners belong to the same imagined community as ex-miners in the English and Welsh coalfields, commonly confronting unemployment and its social penalties, and the absence of workplace esteem and comradeship that were lost with the collieries.

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<sup>2</sup> Hector Martinez, 'Coalfield Shock', *Cumnock Chronicle*, 26 June 2014.

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- <sup>4</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6-7.
- <sup>5</sup> Barron, *1926 Miners' Lockout*, 4-13, 268-72; Bulmer, 'Sociological Models of the Mining Community', , 61-92; Campbell, *Scottish Miners*, 6-13, 159-207; Gilbert, *Class, Community and Collective Action*; McIlroy, 'Look Back in Anger'; Portelli, *Harlan County*, 118-34; Richards, *Miners on Strike*, 16-38; Kerr and Siegel, 'The Interindustry Propensity to Strike'; Wight, *Workers Not Wasters*.
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- <sup>7</sup> Foden, Fothergill and Gore, *State of the Coalfields*, 6.
- <sup>8</sup> Kynaston, *Austerity Britain*, 453; Morgan, *Labour in Power*.
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- <sup>11</sup> Turner, 'Post-War Pit Closures'.
- <sup>12</sup> *A story from South Wales*, NCB Film Unit, 1963, directed by Lionel Griffiths, presented in Mining Review, 16<sup>th</sup> Year, No. 6. The film is preserved by the BFI National Archive, and features on the DVD two disc-set, *National Coal Board Collection, Volume One, Portrait of a Miner* (London, 2009).
- <sup>13</sup> Allen, *Militancy of British Miners*, 66-69, 118-35.
- <sup>14</sup> Phillips, 'Moral Economy and Deindustrialization'.
- <sup>15</sup> *The National Plan* (London, 1965), Cmnd. 2764, 84-100, 120-22.
- <sup>16</sup> Scott, 'Regional development and policy'.
- <sup>17</sup> Ashworth, *British Coal Industry*, 253, 261 and 264.
- <sup>18</sup> Curtis, *South Wales Miners*, 47-89.
- <sup>19</sup> Perchard, "'Broken Men" and "Thatcher's Children"".
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- <sup>22</sup> *Census 1951 Scotland*, Table 13, and *Census 1971 Scotland*, Table 3.
- <sup>23</sup> Gibbs, 'Confronting Deindustrialization'.
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