



## ‘On Behalf of the People’

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The ‘On behalf of the People’ research project at the University of Wolverhampton is focusing on the political and social history of the British coal industry from nationalisation to privatisation. Part of this project is focusing on the communities around collieries in the North East. In this article Dr Grace Millar, a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Wolverhampton, and Dr Andrew Perchard, senior lecturer in the history of business and work at the University of Stirling, write about the aims of the project and how you can get involved.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1947, collieries around the UK became the property of the National Coal board, to be managed ‘on behalf of the people’. Two days later *Durham Chronicle and Seaham Weekly* published a poem by ‘a collier’ to mark nationalisation. It ended:

*Noo though the Bill’s got through the hoose,  
With a majoritee.  
The tubs will still have four wheels,  
For such as you and me.*

*And when the set gets off the way,  
Coal Boards won’t put it on.  
Its still a job for Geordie lad.  
To bend his back upon.*

*There’s one hard fact about the mines:  
Coal can’t be figured oot.  
We’ll still need spit and baccy chow,  
And hard work there’s nee doot.*

*So if the nation needs the coal,  
To see it thru rought weather.  
We’ll hev to dron the idle dreams,  
And arl work hard together.*



*Easington Colliery in the 1980s  
(Photograph by Simon Chapman)*

‘On Behalf of The People: Work, Community, and Class in the British Coal Industry 1947-1994’ is an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project examining the history of the coal industry from nationalisation to privatisation.





The project examines at eight case study pits. In the North East, the focus has been on Easington; the other pits are: Bickershaw Colliery (Lancashire, 1830–1992), Prince of Wales Colliery (Yorkshire, 1860–2002), Annesley-Bentnck Colliery (Nottinghamshire, 1865–2000), Markham Colliery (Derbyshire, 1882–1993), Barony Colliery (Ayrshire, 1910–1989), Tower Colliery (Cynon Valley, 1864–2008), and Point of Ayr Colliery (Flintshire, 1890–1996). The case study approach allows the project to explore the details of community life and also the similarities and differences between coalfields.

The project is using both oral history and archival research. In some areas, such as County Durham, both the National Coal Board and the National Union of Mineworkers have deposited their records in the local record office and therefore substantial material about the history of coalfield is available. In addition, many workers have material related to the coal industry in their homes and we have been digitising or collecting material people have shared with us. We would be very interested in talking to anyone who has material relating to any of the case study pits.

We have also interviewed people connected to our pits and are interested in interviewing more. Oral history gives access to aspects of the history of mining communities that are less available in other sources. National Coal Board records can tell you a lot about pithead baths, but they cannot convey what it was like for a teenage boy who was starting work : “Going in the shower – that were an experience as well the first time [...] Well you think woah! Everyone’s running about with nowt on. [...] They’d just slap a sponge on your back and rub you down, like that, that’s because they wanted a back washing.”

Oral history can also provide access to how people have experienced change. When interviewee after interviewee describe in detail the shops that used to be on Seaside Lane, the main street in Easington Colliery, they are both describing how the town used to be and also articulating what has been lost since the pit has closed.

We want to speak to miners, fitters, electricians, officials (deputies, overmen, shot firers, engineers and managers) and other National Coal Board employees (including canteen, nursing, and office staff) to hear their experiences of the workplace, community and home life. We are also keen to interview the wider mining community: family members, owners of shops or pubs, and anyone else whose life was affected by the pit.



*The cage from Easington Colliery (Photograph by Roger Muggleton)*

The project will hold community events near each of the case study pits, produce educational materials educational materials for schools and colleges, as well as a book and articles about our research. In the meantime, more information can be found at our website (<https://www.wlv.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/centre-for-historical-research/coal-and-community/>) or contact [g.millar@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:g.millar@wlv.ac.uk).

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