

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Be a Miner”: Constructions and Contestations of Masculinity in the British Coalfields, 1975–1983

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Abstract

In 1975, the National Coal Board (NCB) produced a short film, “People Will Always Need Coal”, to encourage recruitment into mining. It was extraordinarily attention-grabbing, presenting miners as cosmopolitan playboys. It defined the industry in hyper-masculine terms, encouraging would-be recruits to “be a miner”. This article uses the film as a starting point for a discussion of the complex interactions between the material realities of masculinity, class, and culture within Britain’s coalfields in the period 1975–1983. A critical reading of the film is complemented by archival research and oral testimony drawn from interviews with 96 former miners and their families. At a time when the industry was positioning itself as an employer with a long-term future, mining was presented on screen as a modern masculine occupation that was far removed from the dominant imagery of coal for much of the twentieth century. The National Union of Mineworkers’ (NUM) victories in the strikes of 1972 and 1974, the drafting of a Government Plan for Coal, and rising living standards, created a short period of optimism before the cataclysmic closures of the 1980s and 1990s. This was a time when masculinity in the coalfields was being reproduced, modified, contested, and subverted. The years 1975–1983 offer valuable insight into such masculinity and the ways it was mediated and challenged through work, the domestic sphere, leisure, and popular culture.

Introduction

Coal mining remained a significant industry in 1970s Britain, employing around 250,000 people in 241 collieries, and it was emblematic of both the imagined and the real muscularity of the organized working class.¹ Men and women had clearly defined occupational and domestic roles within the industry and the wider culture of mining regions. Such roles were inculcated into generations of children within coalfield communities, which had proved resistant to the social and cultural

¹William Ashworth, *The History of the British Coal Industry Volume 5. 1946–1982 The Nationalized Industry* (Oxford, 1986), p. 675.

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changes that impacted on British society in the immediate post-war period.² However, from the mid-1960s onwards, conceptions, characterizations, and performances of masculinity in the workplace, the home, and the community were subject to reinforcement, challenge, modification, and transgression.

For the purpose of this article, in line with recent historiographical advances, we see masculinity “as a process, rather than a category of analysis [...] through which men’s lives took shape [and] were always part of a particular time and a particular place”.³ In the British coal industry, we can locate this in a diverse range of mines in the period 1975–1983, which marked a significant moment when, for a brief period, mining was seen as having a long-term future. We share Griffin’s critique⁴ of the concept of “hegemonic masculinity”, demonstrating that power relations between masculinities were also important. In the case of the coal industry, this tension was underpinned by regional, generational, and cultural differences.⁵ We also build here on the work of scholars such as Suzanne E. Tallichet, Carolyn Brown, Lena Abrahamson, Margaret Somerville, and Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, who have offered critical reflections and penetrating insights into the relationship between coal mining and masculinity in Africa, India, and Australia, and interventions in terms of the British coal industry by Arthur McIvor, Ronnie Johnston, Ewan Gibbs, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, and Natalie Thomlinson.⁶ As Brown has shown in the case of Nigeria, young miners’ masculinity could be “progressive, modern, and disruptive”.⁷ Meanwhile, Abrahamson and Somerville have demonstrated that Australian miners did not always live their working and social lives according to constructed expectations of what it was “to be a miner”. In the case of the British miner in this period, we explore this through the lens of subcultural activity and identity, which posed a challenge to more traditional forms of masculinity. We argue that masculinity, both underground and overground, was contingent, contested, and fragmented.

In what follows, we explore the association of coal mining with masculinity through a reading of National Coal Board (NCB) and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM)

²For the pre-World War II period, see Stephanie Ward, “Miners’ Bodies and Masculine Identity in Britain c.1900–1950”, *Cultural and Social History*, 18:3 (2021), pp. 443–462.

³M. Houlbrook, K. Jones, and B. Mechen, “Introduction”, *Men and Masculinities in Modern Britain: A History of the Present* (Manchester, 2024).

⁴B. Griffin, “Perceptions of Crisis in the History of Masculinity”, in Houlbrook *et al.*, *Men and Masculinities in Modern Britain*.

⁵For critique of “hegemonic masculinity” by Jones and others, see Helen Smith, “Re-Imagining Working-Class Masculinities in the Twenty-First Century”, in Houlbrook *et al.*, *Men and Masculinities in Modern Britain*.

⁶Suzanne E. Tallichet, “Gender Relations in the Mines and the Division of Labour Underground”, *Gender and Society*, 9:6 (1995), pp. 697–711; Carolyn Brown, “Race and the Construction of Working-Class Masculinity in the Nigerian Coal Industry: The Initial Phase, 1914–1930”, *International Labor and Working Class History*, 69 (2006), pp. 35–56; Leni Abrahamson and Margaret Somerville, “Changing Storylines and Masculine Bodies in Australian Coal Mining Organisations”, *Nordic Journal of Masculinity Studies*, 2:1 (2007), pp. 53–69; Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, “Bodies In/Out of Place: Hegemonic Masculinity and Kamins’ Motherhood in Indian Coal Mines”, *South Asian History and Culture*, 4:2 (2013), pp. 213–229; Ewan Gibbs and R. Scothorne, “Accusers of Capitalism: Masculinity and Populism on the Scottish Radical Left in the Late Twentieth Century”, *Social History*, 45:2 (2020), pp. 218–245; Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, *Women and the Miners’ Strike* (Oxford, 2023).

⁷Brown, “Race and the Construction of Working-Class Masculinity”, p. 37.

publications, newspaper articles, developments in working-class youth culture, and a comprehensive oral history project that collected testimony from ninety-six former miners and their families.⁸ The article provides material that can generate further explorations in comparative studies of masculinity across international mining regions. We explore various forms and practices of masculinity through to the eve of the strike of 1984–1985: an event that further eroded what it meant to “be a miner” in a local/regional world that was undergoing dramatic reconfiguration through colliery closures. Yet, in contrast to the existing literature on the British coal industry, we also reveal how particularly dominant forms of masculinity were challenged and subverted in the workplace, the home, and through engagement with aspects of shifting forms of popular culture.⁹

Representations of masculinity in coal mining were sustained against a developing backdrop of deindustrialization. As Smith has noted, “region and work had the greatest impact on how men [...] conceptualised a sense of self”.¹⁰ In Britain’s coalfields, deindustrialization was a staggered process experienced at different times (with the northeast of England, Scotland, and Wales at the sharp end of closures).¹¹ Yet, the masculinity of miners continued to be projected onto specific locations, national narratives, and regional identities. Wales, Scotland, and the “industrial north” were indelibly linked in cultural depictions of coal and through a popular consciousness that associated the pinnacle of occupational masculinity with mining (Figure 1). Similarly, the industry was attached to a sense of Englishness underpinned by masculine constructions of empire, industrial innovation, and a working-class culture of pubs, sport, and popular leisure.¹² In Scotland and Wales, coal mining (alongside steelmaking and shipbuilding) was central to images of working-class masculinity and, in the former case, redolent in images of the “hard man”.¹³ Yet, as

⁸An issue that should be noted here is the problem inherent in oral testimony, memory, and the passage of time. To mitigate some of this, we have drawn substantially on sources from the chronological period that forms the focus of the article.

⁹For an account of this process in the British steel industry see Smith, “Reimagining Working-Class Masculinities”, p. 136–157.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Andrew Perchard, Keith Gildart, Ben Curtis, and Grace Millar, “Fighting for the Soul of Coal: Colliery Closures and the Moral Economy of Nationalisation in Britain, 1947–1994”, *Enterprise and Society*, forthcoming. For Scotland, for example, see: Andrew Perchard, *Mine Management Professions in the Twentieth-Century Scottish Coal Mining Industry* (Lampeter, 2007); Ewan Gibbs, “The Moral Economy of the Scottish Coalfields: Managing Deindustrialization under Nationalization, 1947–1983”, *Enterprise and Society*, 19:1 (2018), pp. 124–152.

¹²For a recent example of the centrality of coal to the English/British nation, see Jeremy Paxman, *Black Gold: The History of How Coal Made Britain* (London, 2021).

¹³Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston, “Dangerous Work, Hard Men and Broken Bodies: Masculinity in the Clydeside Heavy Industries”, *Labour History Review*, 69 (2004), pp. 135–152; Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston, *Miners’ Lung: A History of Dust Disease in British Coal Mining* (Aldershot, 2007); Perchard, *The Mine Management Professions*; *idem*, “‘Broken Men’ and ‘Thatcher’s Children’: Memory and Legacy in Scotland’s Coalfields”, *International Labor and Working Class History*, 84 (2013), pp. 78–98; Ben Curtis, *The South Wales Miners: 1964–1985*, Studies in Welsh History (Cardiff, 2013); Jim Phillips, Valerie Wright, and Jim Tomlinson, “Being a ‘Clydesider’ in the Age of Deindustrialisation: Skilled Male Identity and Economic Restructuring in the West of Scotland since the 1960s”, *Labor History*, 61:2 (2020), pp. 151–169; Ewan Gibbs, *Coal Country: The Meaning and Memory of Deindustrialization in Postwar Scotland* (London, 2020). For shipbuilding and steelmaking: Alan McKinlay, *Making Ships, Making Men*:



Figure 1. “Northumberland Coal Queen” Frances Cogan, representing Brenkley Colliery. Miners’ daughters, wives, and sisters, as well as women who worked for the National Coal Board (NCB) could enter the Coal Queen beauty contest, showcasing the glamorous side of mining.
Source: Northumberland Archives, NRO 10403/2, with permission.

Working for John Brown’s between the Wars (Clydebank, 1991); Ronald Johnston and Arthur McIvor, *Lethal Work: A History of the Asbestos Tragedy in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2000); James Patrick Ferns, “Workers’ Identities in Transition: Deindustrialisation and Scottish Steelworkers”, *Journal of Working Class Studies*, 4 (2019), pp. 55–78.

we argue in this article, this image of the masculinity of coal miners was contested in relation to the domestic and industrial fronts, not least given the implications and a legacy of disablement from such dangerous work, the impact of the cultural changes in the 1960s and 1970s, and the rapid process of deindustrialization in the 1980s.¹⁴

People Will Always Need Coal

In 1975, the NCB released a recruitment film, entitled *People Will Always Need Coal*, to encourage more men into the industry.¹⁵ The NCB had its own film unit producing in-house instructional and technical films for the industry itself, but some intended for public viewing were produced by external companies, the most significant being Data Film Productions.¹⁶ While the industry had experienced large-scale colliery closures in the 1960s, the situation had changed by the mid-1970s: the combined effect of the international oil crisis of 1973 and the publication of the NCB's Plan for Coal in 1974 seemed to offer the possibility of a stable and secure future for the industry.¹⁷ *People Will Always Need Coal* was shown in local cinemas and presented mining in clearly defined masculine terms, encouraging would-be recruits to "be a miner".¹⁸ The film represented the epitome of a masculinity that, in mining communities, remained rooted in an industrial past.¹⁹

In the 1970s, British coal communities existed and functioned within a broader transatlantic and gendered anglophone popular culture. The young prospective miners who the recruitment drive was aimed at would have watched the same films and television programmes, and listened to the same music, as many of their counterparts elsewhere in the UK and the US.²⁰ With its use of a pulsing rhythm and blues soundtrack and images of modernity, affluence and consumption, it is a

¹⁴In addition to the aforementioned literature: Lynn Abrams, "There Was Nobody Like My Daddy": Fathers, the Family and the Marginalisation of Men in Modern Scotland", *Scottish Historical Review*, 78 (1999), pp. 219–242; Alison Chand, *Masculinities on Clydeside: Men in Reserved Occupations During the Second World War* (Edinburgh, 2018); Arthur McIvor, "Deindustrialization Embodied: Work, Health and Disability in the United Kingdom since the Mid-Twentieth Century", in Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon, and Andrew Perchard (eds), *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Post-industrial Places* (Vancouver, 2017).

¹⁵The film itself is viewable via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILJkqbq9gJM>. The slogan also appeared on NCB recruitment posters in newspapers, magazines, and billboards throughout 1974–1975.

¹⁶The National Archives website. Available at: <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C15626549>; last accessed 30 November 2023.

¹⁷For the dramatic decline of the industry in the 1960s in Durham and South Wales, see Huw Beynon and Ray Hudson, *The Shadow of the Mine: Coal and the End of Industrial Britain* (London, 2021).

¹⁸For a recent reappraisal of masculinity and British history, see Houlbrook *et al.*, *Men and Masculinities in Modern Britain*.

¹⁹For a theoretical analysis of masculinity, see R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Oakland, 1995). For how masculinity shaped and restricted the social and economic roles available for women in coalfield communities, see Rossana Barragán Romano and Leda Papastefanaki, "Women and Gender in the Mines: Challenging Masculinity through History: An Introduction", *International Review of Social History*, 65:2 (2020), pp. 191–230.

²⁰For youth culture in mining communities in England and Wales in the 1970s, see Stephen Catterall and Keith Gildart, *Keeping the Faith: A History of Northern Soul* (Manchester, 2020), ch. 6. For the transatlantic connections of popular culture, see John F. Lyons, *America in the British Imagination: 1945 to the Present* (Basingstoke, 2013).

reminder that young miners in 1975 were more likely to be interested in pop, rock, and soul music than more traditional coalfield cultural forms, such as male voice choirs and brass bands.²¹ The film is directed in an exciting, dramatic style, reminiscent of some of the action-packed television series and films of the period, including the latest in the James Bond franchise, *The Man with the Golden Gun*, which had premiered in December 1974, and the macho antics in the police drama *The Sweeney*, which aired on television in January 1975. With the skiing, champagne, and playboy imagery, the purpose of the film was aspirational (“Live your life the way you want it to be”), to illustrate the rich rewards and financial security for young men opting for a career in mining. The accompanying song claimed that being a miner meant access to “money – lots of money”. After the success of the strikes of 1972 and 1974, miners’ pay had already increased by nineteen per cent in 1975, complemented by enhanced pension benefits.²²

With its commodification of glamorous women, alongside its depiction of all male leisure pursuits (white-water canoeing and shooting), the framing of *People Will Always Need Coal* expressly associated “being a miner” with being a man (Figure 2). One scene shows men going to the pub together, a space that is presented as exclusively male. The film captures a moment when the industry envisaged a secure, long-term future for its employees with ever-increasing wages, career opportunities, and middle-class lifestyles. The miner is presented as the primary family earner, with increasing leisure time and an affluence to enjoy expensive pursuits that had once been the preserve of social elites. It delivers a more avowedly individualistic and consumerist message than the more collectivist appeals of previous recruitment strategies. The narrator claims that young workers entering a career in mining can “get more out of life”. In one image, the young miner is seen sharing a romantic dinner with his partner in a “fine dining” restaurant. A year later, in 1976, the modernity of the industry was highlighted in the NCB short film *Miners*, shot in the Leicestershire coalfield, mixing familiar underground imagery with scenes of the contemporary miners’ home.²³ *People Will Always Need Coal* thus provides a specific moment when miners’ masculinity was both reinforced and subject to change. It is a valuable entry point for exploring the intersections of masculinity, class, gender, and popular culture in the British coalfields.²⁴

Becoming a Miner: Physical Prowess and Camaraderie

In the British coalfields, notions of masculinity had been perpetuated by legal enforcement; following the prohibition of female employment underground by the Coal Mines Act of 1842, mining was overwhelmingly a job done by men. In this

²¹For recent research on brass bands, see Marion Henry, “Every Village Would Have a Band: Building Community with Music – A Social and Cultural History of Brass Bands in the British Coalfields, 1947–1984”, unpublished PhD thesis (Sciences Po, Paris, 2021).

²²Ashworth, *The History of the British Coal Industry*, pp. 228–339.

²³NCB Film Unit, *Miners* (1976), *Portrait of a Miner: National Coal Board Collection Volume 1* (BFI, 2009).

²⁴For masculinity and industrial identity, see: J. Begiato, *Manliness in Britain: Bodies, Emotion and Material Culture* (Manchester, 2020); McIvor and Johnston, “Dangerous Work, Hard Men and Broken Bodies.



Figure 2. Still from *People Will Always Need Coal*.
 © BFI / Courtesy of the BFI National Archive.

respect, it was earlier to impose these restrictions than many other countries (France, 1874; Sweden, 1900; and Japan and India, 1947). Conversely, as late as 1982, there were 2,500 female coal miners in the United States.²⁵ The legal prohibition of female employment in the British coal industry, coupled with the numerous dangers and arduous physical exertion, which were an intrinsic part of the work, led inevitably to the development of a heightened sense of masculinity amongst miners.²⁶ Such codes, practices, and symbols of masculinity were confirmed by the oral testimony of former miners who were interviewed as part of the research for this article.²⁷ As such, the masculinity of coal communities had been a long time in the making and was passed on through genealogies of coal through to the terminal decline of the industry in the 1980s.

The dangers and risks involved in mining underpinned the construction, practice, and culture of masculinity. In North Wales, John Wiltshire described in detail the roof fall that smashed through his foot in the 1980s as leading to long-term disability: “I turned to run away and this bloody big stone came down and ‘bang’”.²⁸ Such

²⁵A. Perchard, “Workplace Cultures”, in D. Walkowitz (ed.), *A Cultural History of Work in the Modern Age* (London, 2018), pp. 77–92. For women in the US coal industry, see Marat Moore, *Women in the Mines: Stories of Life and Work* (New York, 1996).

²⁶For changing opportunities for women in the industry under public ownership, see the NCB short film *She* (1969), BFI, *Portrait of a Miner: National Coal Board Collection Volume 1*.

²⁷For audio extracts from the interviews used for this article, see “On Behalf of the People”, project website www.coalandcommunity.org.uk.

²⁸Interview with John Wiltshire, 10 February 2018.

struggles with “mother nature” also led to loss of life. Neal Rigby, a miner at Golborne Colliery in Lancashire, was visibly moved when recalling the scene of a disaster underground in 1979 leading to the deaths of ten miners: “I came across the first casualty, and then another, and then another [...] and [...] found the lads who were dead and buried. So that was it like. No counselling or anything like that. That’s how it was in them days”.²⁹ During the interview, Rigby was visibly upset when recounting this traumatic event. Other interviewees expressed similar emotions, thus exhibiting a brittleness in contrast to a masculinity that was more apparent outside of the interview space. Injuries and scars, both physical and mental, were often deployed as badges of masculine pride and caught the attention of young miners who aspired to adopt the physical attributes and charisma of “colliery legends”.

Danger was an inescapable part of the working experience of miners, with the physically arduous conditions inevitably creating a culture in which a degree of risk-taking was accepted and even encouraged. Equally, those who broke the rules by, for example, bringing contraband such as cigarettes underground, were harshly penalized by fellow miners.³⁰ Miners who did not conform to particular masculine norms could be bullied, marginalized, and excluded. These men would be given more isolated tasks underground, such as monitoring conveyors (button boys), driving haulage engines, or given light work such as “dust suppression”. The recollections of South Wales miner Lyn Evans are indicative of how a sense of masculine pride was passed down from fathers to sons:

Most of the boys I was with [...] had parents who, fathers who worked underground [...] you felt tighter [...] with your friends, your comrades [...] They were brothers in arms then, you know? You were proper coming home with your eyeliner on from the coal dust, you felt a proper working man.³¹

For boys who had grown up in a mining village, starting work at a colliery once they left school was an introduction to a new world, but one with which they were already intimately acquainted. This world was reflected metaphorically in terms of the transformative effect upon their position within the community and their sense of self and identity. There were various ways that boys were inducted into this new life and the absorption of an occupational masculinity – not just the formal administrative processes of commencing employment with the NCB, but also a range of informal experiences and “rites of passage”. Recalling when he started mining work, Derbyshire miner David Watson reflected upon his sense of disorientation at how his relationship with older miners changed as he went from being a friend of their sons to being their co-worker:

²⁹Interview with Stuart Rigby, 6 December 2018.

³⁰McIvor and Johnston, *Miners’ Lung*; John Benson, *Coal in Victorian Britain, Part I* (London, 2011); Ben Curtis, “The South Wales Miners’ Federation and the Perception and Representation of Risk and Danger in the Coal Industry, 1898–1947”, *Morgannwg: Journal of Glamorgan History*, 58 (2014), p. 83; Andrew Perchard and Keith Gildart, “Managerial Ideology and Identity in the Nationalised British Coal Industry, 1947–1994”, *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 44:1 (2023), pp. 230–261.

³¹Interview with Lyn Evans, 19 March 2019.

When you were a kid, when you used to go into somebody's house and you'd say, "hello Mr Smith, how are you going on?" sort of stuff. But when you're actually working with them [...] [i]t were quite hard actually, because, you know, because [...] you never used to swear in front of them. But when they were down the pit you heard them swearing, and it were total shock like, "Oh god, Mr Smith swears. I never knew that".³²

Glynn Power, another Derbyshire miner, described a feature of going underground that many young men initially found shocking. The experience of having to undress and shower in the company of a large number of older men also reinforced a sense of masculinity:

Well you think, woah, everybody's running about with nowt on. So, and then somebody'll say, they'd just slap a sponge on your back, rub you down like that. That's because they wanted their back washing. So then you'd have to wash their back.³³

Nonetheless, some younger miners resisted such collective washing and would opt for the shower cubicle rather than the dominant open-plan bathing areas. Others were reluctant to take off their underwear until out of sight of the group. Here, too, dominant forms of masculinity were subject to modification and challenge. Juvenile miners, aged 16–18, were still developing a sense of individual and collective identity, which some embraced and others navigated with more trepidation.

Having commenced work as a miner, young men quickly assumed a distinct occupational identity, and felt a corresponding sense of pride in their own burgeoning masculinity arising as a direct consequence of their work. Looking back on mining life in the 1970s, Phillip White from South Wales recalled:

I felt a man. At fifteen. Felt really top of the world [...] I remember we used to all hang about around the cafes [chuckles] [...] a lot of girlfriends [...] And we'd be proud about talking about what we were doing. They were interested to hear because it wasn't just a factory job, you know?³⁴

A Nottinghamshire miner's daughter, Kathleen Bartholomew, recalled that, when her father died at a young age, her brother David's response was to go and work at Bentinck Colliery, as a way of defiantly asserting his masculinity:

I do believe he went in the mines to show himself as a man, or show everybody that he could break away from the family and do what he liked and, you know, it was a purpose for him. But my mum really didn't want that. She did not want her son to go down pit, but he did.³⁵

³²Interview with David Watson, 12 March 2019.

³³Interview with Glynn Power, 2 May 2019

³⁴Interview with Phil White, 21 January 2019.

³⁵Interview with Kathleen Bartholomew, 30 October 2018.

One of the socio-cultural consequences of a sense of close-knit occupational identity and resultant workplace camaraderie was the ubiquity of “pit humour” amongst miners.³⁶ While the precise manifestations of this obviously differed according to the individuals involved, it was axiomatic that such humour was frequently expressed in distinctively masculine terms, such as initiation ceremonies, “leg-pulling”, and physical pranks. Functionally, such humour served to strengthen the bonds between miners. As former Nottinghamshire miner Pete Field expressed it, “I worked with a set of comedians, you know? Yeah, some of the jokes they come out with [...] they were good blokes [...] Wouldn’t see anybody in trouble, you know what I mean?”³⁷ Yet, such humour, deployed through a wider lexicon of masculinity, could no doubt also be exclusionary and intimidating. Each colliery had miners and officials who gained reputations as bullies and tyrants, and this came through quite strongly in interviews. Paul Parry from Point of Ayr Colliery in North Wales claimed that: “the old guys, that had been working there since they left school [...] were so used to being bullied they didn’t know what the difference was [...] I’d never seen anything like Point of Ayr, as in bullying, you know, genuine bullying. Especially young lads”.³⁸ This was also confirmed by the undermanager, who stated in his autobiography that “the verbal and physical abuse meted out was beyond anything I guess went on in other industries”.³⁹

“Banter” was also an integral element of pit humour in terms of reinforcing the inherent masculinity of the colliery. It played an increasingly important role in the 1970s, with a growing number of groups of miners transferred from one colliery (and, indeed, coalfield) to another. Often, such humour was highly idiosyncratic. At Point of Ayr, transferees from Wrexham and Burnley were known, respectively, as “jackos” and “ecky thumpers”.⁴⁰ South Wales miner Wayne Thomas, who transferred collieries from Abernant to Tower in the 1980s, recounted a vivid example of this phenomenon:

And you soon got to know the guys, they got to know you. Great. Banter then of course with my Welsh accent, from deep west Wales. From the moment we got off the coaches we were known as jam eaters. “What the hell are you, what are you on about, jam eaters?” Glyn Roberts, I’ll never forget Glyn back then, “come here”, he said, “let me tell you why” [...] There was a guy on pit bottom from Cynheidre [...] I think he moved up to Aberdare or Hirwaun. And that’s all he used to have every day, was jam sandwiches [...] So, everybody now west of Glynneath was known as a bloody jam eater [laughs]. And that’s stuck to this day. We even go to the Tower reunion [...] and some lads will say “oh this is Wayne, the jam eater”.⁴¹

³⁶For a critical analysis of coal mining camaraderie, see Lee Waddington, “Revisiting the Legacy of Deindustrialisation: Towards a History of Emotion, Camaraderie and Class in a Former Coalmining Borough in South Yorkshire, 1970s to the Present” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 2022).

³⁷Interview with Peter Field, 9 April 2019.

³⁸Interview with Paul Parry, 9 March 2019.

³⁹Micheal Morton, *The Undermanager* (2020) p. 9.

⁴⁰Personal recollections of one of the authors, who was himself a miner at Point of Ayr Colliery from 1985 to 1992.

⁴¹Interview with Wayne Thomas, 24 May 2019.

While much of this “pit banter” was no doubt intended to be good-humoured, it could sometimes be felt to have an unwelcome, alienating, “othering” effect upon those who were on the receiving end of it and who perhaps did not conform to the more dominant characteristics of miners’ masculinity. One Derbyshire miner had long hair when he started work at the colliery; he later recalled: “I got named Polly, because they thought I were a young lass [...] Still get called that by the lads now when I see them [...] I thought, I’m having this cut”.⁴² In North Wales, one miner was stuck with the name “John Lady”, because he once dressed as a woman to a party. Another was labelled “Betty” for his perceived effeminacy. One Welsh miner was the butt of jokes for his role in designing dresses for Coal Queens who competed in regional and national beauty contests; another was labelled “Walter the Dancer” due to his interest in ballroom dancing. Yet, these were also examples of power relationships that worked to both reinforce and challenge dominant forms of masculine behaviour and identities. An anecdote recalled by a former Nottinghamshire miner illustrates how such “banter” could get out of hand:

The new driver was an old fella named Tich Vbranch; he was a Welshman who had lived in Kent, he was a decent chap and would laugh and joke with us. On the day in question [...] snap eaten, jokes told, and all was quiet when [...] Bob Toplass said lets get old Tich’s todger out [...] Tich went berserk, he grabbed the sweeping brush and began thrashing anyone who was near to him.⁴³

Masculinity was weaponized against individuals deemed insufficiently “manly” and therefore deserving of ridicule and symbolic emasculation. As Bill Marshall, a former miner and then manager from Scotland, recalled:

I know other under-managers [...] who really got money for doing nothing [...] there was one of them and he was reviled by the men [...] He had an office underground and the men used to go up and piss on his door.⁴⁴

Masculinity was often expressed through physical prowess such as height, muscles, fighting skills, and penis size. Each colliery had a “Darren big dick” or “Charlie tripod”. Showers were mostly open plan and younger miners were initially intimidated by the hundreds of naked bodies on display.⁴⁵ Danger, risk, camaraderie, and humour formed the building blocks of masculinity. This engendered solidarity and collective values, but could also be othering and alienating to those miners who did not conform to the subterranean norms of the colliery.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, such masculinity was subject to internal tensions, critique, and challenge.

⁴²Interview with Glynn Power, Alfreton, 2 May 2019.

⁴³Unpublished autobiography of an anonymized Annesley Colliery mineworker (n/d), ch. 5, “Working Underground”, On Behalf of the People Collection, University of Wolverhampton.

⁴⁴Interview with Bill Marshall, 21 April 2004.

⁴⁵Discussion with Point of Ayr miners, Rhyl Rugby Club, 2021.

⁴⁶Miners in the NCB film *Miners* (1976) note that to “be a miner” you had to be able to “take a joke”. *Portrait of a Miner: National Coal Board Collection Volume One* (BFI, 2009).

Hierarchies of Masculinity

Although work in the mines was largely identified as exclusively masculine, there were many different occupations and pay grades within the industry, with miners seeing some jobs as having a higher status than others (Figure 3). Mining accidents also meant the ever-present prospect of disability, which, in turn, could lead to a sense of a loss of masculinity. Although coal mining was heavily male dominated, the process of socialization was not exclusively the reserve of men, with women working in the canteens, as nurses, and in clerical posts.⁴⁷ As the factors determining this status were the highest rates of pay and the greatest physical danger and exertion, this hierarchy of status was also expressed through masculinity: faceworkers, as the biggest earners, were seen as the “ultimate miners”; in contrast, surface workers could sometimes be “othered” as less masculine and therefore not really “proper” miners.⁴⁸ This phenomenon was further complicated by the tendency of careers to follow a distinct trajectory, sometimes described in terms of being the “miners’ lifecycle”.⁴⁹ Within the hierarchy of masculinity, “ultimate miners” and “big hitters” generated their own myths and these were filtered through the workforce and wider coal communities.

The intense physicality of coalface work meant that it was usually done by “alpha male” miners in their thirties; in contrast, older miners were progressively moved to less arduous work underground, before often ending up working on the colliery surface. Veteran miners would resent this transition: both in terms of reduced earnings and a loss of status. Recalling some of the older men that he knew at the beginning of his career at Annesley Colliery, one former mineworker commented:

My memory of Bill was of a surly old man who could never speak to any of the lads in a civil voice, he was always making derogatory remarks about us and as a result he did not get much respect [...] I realized that most of the old men had this attitude and it was not until later that I was told some of their bitterness was due to the fact that as they had got older and could no longer do coal face work the management moved them on to what was called button work and immediately dropped their pay to the bottom rate taking no account of the work and service he had done.⁵⁰

All of these factors also applied to the large number of miners who had become impaired during the course of their employment. They tended to be transferred to surface work and comparatively light duties; this further underlined the symbiotic

⁴⁷When coal was nationalized in 1947 there were still over 600 women working on the surface sorting coal; the last women were phased out in Lancashire in 1968.

⁴⁸This was also reflected in trade union politics and was a criticism levelled at Sidney Ford, NUM President (1960–1971), who had never worked as a miner. V.L. Allen, *The Militancy of British Miners* (Shingley, 1981) p. 119. For the experiences of a female colliery nurse, see Joan Hart and Veronica Clark, *At the Coalface: The Heart-Warming True Story of a Yorkshire Pit Nurse* (London, 2015).

⁴⁹Ben Curtis and Steven Thompson, “‘This is the Country of Premature Old Men’: Ageing and Aged Miners in the South Wales Coalfield, c.1880–1947”, *Cultural and Social History*, 12:4 (2015), pp. 587–606.

⁵⁰Unpublished autobiography of an anonymized Annesley Colliery mineworker.

Get the best Industrial Training in Britain and nearly £10 a week at 15

GET LOST. I ONLY GO OUT WITH REAL MEN.

I DON'T GET IT. YOU'RE ALWAYS CHATTING THE BIRDS AND I NEVER GET ANYWHERE.

WHY DON'T YOU TAKE ON A REAL MAN'S JOB AND JOIN ME AND MY MATES IN MINING.

IT WAS ALWAYS THE SAME WITH GIRLS FOR PAUL. THEY JUST DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW.

WE GET A DARN GOOD TRAINING IN BASIC ENGINEERING AS WELL AS MINING.

YOU'D BE SURPRISED AT THE NUMBER OF DIFFERENT JOBS THERE ARE. YOU GET TO SEE A LOT OF THEM DURING TRAINING.

AND THEN WE DO ALL SORTS OF PRACTICAL WORK AT THE PIT

YOU CAN ALSO GO TO THE TECH. ON DAY RELEASE- I DO AND HOPE TO MAKE IT TO COLLIERY DEPUTY AT LEAST.

HONESTLY MATE, YOU CAN'T GO WRONG IN MINING. FOR A START YOU GET NEARLY £10 A WEEK AT 15...

I'M GLAD YOU JOINED US PAUL- YOU'VE GOT A GOOD JOB AND WE'VE GOT A GOOD CENTRE FORWARD.

For further details of the Mining Training Scheme and Mining Craft Apprenticeship Scheme go to your nearest colliery or complete the coupon below.

To: NCB Mining Recruitment, National Coal Board, Industrial Relations Dept, Room 193, Hobart House, Grosvenor Place, London S.W.1.

8W-10-01

Name _____
Address _____

NCB

Figure 3. NCB recruitment advert c.1968–1970. The narrative notes that “real men” ride motorcycles and work as coal miners. However, the “hyper masculinity” of the miner here is tempered by the fact that the industry also offered technical and professional educational opportunities. Many young men took advantage of this and were able to gain qualifications and training leading to career progression into white-collar positions in the industry or trade union officialdom. As with similar recruitment campaigns from the same period, the miner of the 1970s was presented as masculine, but also someone who was at ease with the new opportunities offered by modernity and the affluent society.

Source: National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) Archives, Barnsley, UK, Box NCB Material, Miscellaneous.

link between physical prowess and masculinity in determining the “pecking order” or hierarchy amongst miners.⁵¹

Throughout the post-war period, the NUM worked diligently to ameliorate the disabilities experienced by the many impaired individuals within its membership.⁵² Even so, in communities where their physical prowess was respected, many miners internalized a sense of shame at feeling themselves to be emasculated by physical impairments wrought upon their bodies, whether via workplace accident or industrial diseases such as pneumoconiosis and silicosis. In such a pressurized and dangerous working environment, the potential for industrial relations friction between workers and management was also omnipresent; various masculine tropes were the medium through which these disputes and disagreements were articulated. Masculinity could be utilized and exploited by management in various ways. Alistair Moore, a mines surveyor, recalled:

I’ve got to say that some of the friction at colliery level was caused by the attitude of management. And that’s because some managers were more manpower friendly than others. It brings to mind a wee manager across in Fife. Now, he never had any friction at any of the collieries he was at because he understood men. Now there were other managers who beat their chest and said, “Now, I am the manager and you will do.”⁵³

Inevitably, such “macho” expressions of managerial authority could shade easily into intimidation and bullying. As one miner from Point of Ayr Colliery commented: “I’d say [...] it was bullying really, by the bosses.”⁵⁴ Michael Morton, an official at the same colliery, welcomed the fact that one manager had left, stating that “it went without saying, he’d been an absolute twat”.⁵⁵ In contrast to this approach, some managers favoured a less confrontational style. As Arthur Hendy, manager of Goldthorpe Colliery in Yorkshire, explained in an interview for the industry journal *Coal News*,

Macho management isn’t my style. You have to let men know you’re prepared to listen to their ideas [...] without the co-operation of the men, you’re spitting in the wind. I make a point of talking to men on the job face-to-face [...] [Y]ou can’t beat the personal touch.⁵⁶

Another way that colliery management could utilize their masculinity to obtain miners’ cooperation was by showing that they were not afraid of doing physical

⁵¹For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Curtis and Thompson, “This is the Country of Premature Old Men”; McIvor and Johnston, *Miners’ Lung*, pp. 273–307.

⁵²For example, see Ben Curtis, “More Than a Union? The National Union of Mineworkers South Wales Area and Industrial Disability in the South Wales Coalfield, 1947–1994”, in Yong-an Zhang and Arthur McIvor (eds), *The Body and Health of Coal Miners*, Special Issue of *Journal of the Social History of Medicine and Health*, 4:1 (2019), pp. 33–54.

⁵³Interview with Alistair Moore, 12 March 2004.

⁵⁴Interview with John Wiltshire, 10 February 2018.

⁵⁵Morton, *The Undermanager*, p. 187.

⁵⁶*Coal News*, February 1992, p. 4.

work themselves. Bill Marshall identified his own strategies of man management, in which physical prowess was maintained as essential for asserting masculine dominance. It abounds with the military analogies of leading from the front:

I always tried to be straight with men. I was a hands-on guy. If there was a bad roof or something, I wasnae fiert of getting mucked about 'cos I wouldnae ask anybody to do what I wouldnae do maesel'. That was mae culture. So I put maesel' in harm's way a few times [...] You got guys who tried different ways of doing it – they delegated. But when it got hot, I didnae delegate, I was there. That was my way.⁵⁷

Miners' opposition to managerial dictates was often expressed in masculine terms of "standing up for yourself". This later became a feature of the background and duration of the miners' strike of 1984–1985. Yet, "standing up for yourself" was also presented in gendered terms, with picket line placards extolling strike breakers to "get off your knees and fight like men".⁵⁸ Such framing of solidarity through a masculine lens was thus both unifying and divisive. During the 1984–1985 strike, women were instrumental in fighting pit closures, drawing the support of LGBT+ groups.⁵⁹ In an act of solidarity, miners then attended marches for Gay Pride and sexual equality, further emphasizing the malleability and adaptability of miners' masculinities in coalfield communities.

Masculinity and the Limits of the Idealized Miner

According to Linda McDowell, "places are made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries. These boundaries are both social and spatial – they define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded".⁶⁰ This was evident in the mine, the community, and the wider culture of the coalfields. Yet, miners' masculinity was also linked to time, place, and the traditions of particular regions. In Nottinghamshire, miners' wives often worked in factories, less so in other regions such as South Wales. Collieries that were close to large cities, such as Bradford Colliery in Manchester, were often more open to cosmopolitan cultures that engendered transgression as opposed to the isolated villages that were more distant from urban centres.

The British coal industry was not entirely male dominated. Small numbers of women were themselves colliery workers, employed in the canteens and offices, and as nurses – and by their very existence, they both complicate and reinforce the idealized masculine miner trope. When asked about this topic, one woman (who

⁵⁷Interview with Bill Marshall, 21 April 2004.

⁵⁸See image in Keith Gildart, *North Wales Miners: A Fragile Unity, 1945–1996*, Studies in Welsh History (Cardiff, 2003), pp. 64–66.

⁵⁹Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson, *Women and the Miners' Strike*; Lucy Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left in Post-War Britain* (Manchester, 2007); Diarmid Kelliher, *Making Cultures of Solidarity: London and the 1984–5 Miners' Strike* (London, 2021).

⁶⁰Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Minneapolis, MN, 1999).

started working in a colliery canteen in the 1980s) replied: “Oh wow. It was a male environment [...] You had to be strong about it, you know? They weren’t that bad. There was one or two that could be quite nasty about it, but most of them, they just thought the world of us really”.⁶¹ These intra-colliery gender relations were themselves conditioned by the fact that the women held jobs that could be readily coded as “traditional female work”, which was considered less valuable than the work of the men. Yet, women could access the masculine world of the mine and the wider community through membership of trade unions, political activism, friendship networks, and participation in brass bands and youth subcultures.

Men were dominant both socially and spatially, and the power relations reduced women to positions where they had to endure either “quite nasty” behaviour or be at the mercy of men’s kindness and patronage. Few women were able to infiltrate the masculine subterranean world of the mine, and when they did they were subjected to forms of everyday sexual harassment that were a feature of British society in the 1970s. Joan Hart was a nurse in the Yorkshire coalfield at Hatfield Colliery, and before going underground she was informed that the men “see it as their domain not yours. You can’t change that”.⁶² One miner exposed himself to her in the medical centre, to which she replied “It’s rather small [...] it looks like it’s rubbing on your trousers [...] I’ll get you a plaster.”⁶³ Another miner apologized to her for using expletives and she replied that there was no need, “I’m in your world; you’re not in mine.”⁶⁴ Similarly, women were employed in the offices of the NUM at the area and national level. Here, they were witness to the political factionalism of the union in the 1970s, but excluded from the formal decision-making processes that were the preserve of men. Yet, many were able to enter the male spaces of the union office, the meeting hall, and the negotiating table and provided sound advice to elected representatives. Rosemary Williams from Wrexham, North Wales, had worked in the NUM office for over forty years, and her knowledge of the union and the industry was substantial. Williams and others became unofficial confidants and advisors to elected officials who wielded considerable industrial and political power.

In order to survive the spaces of masculinity, women needed strategies for navigating men’s behaviour, which, in the cases of Hart, medical room employees, canteen workers, and administrators, ranged from subverting sexual power relations with put downs to providing traditional forms of feminized care. She describes how she was also often on duty “holding impromptu meetings underground – a kind of pit marriage-guidance service”.⁶⁵ Night-shift workers often worried about their wives having affairs and, in some cases, transgressors were transferred to other collieries and coalfields. This process reinforced idealistic and moralistic conceptions of fidelity, which worked to cement gender norms in coal communities. The masculinity of particular miners was undermined when rumours of their wives’ illicit dalliances were whispered in pubs

⁶¹Interview with Jenny Williams, 20 May 2019.

⁶²Hart and Clark, *At the Coalface*, p. 124.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 165.

and clubs and daubed onto the coal tubs underground.⁶⁶ Yet, such women were also playing essential roles in challenging orthodox identities in mining villages through cultural and sexual transgression.

Men utilized the masculinity of “the miner” for the purposes of sexual dominance. All collieries had their “jack-the-lads”, “womanizers”, and “club pin-ups”. One miner at Point of Ayr colliery gained extra income as a male model and “page 7 hunk” in the *Sun* newspaper, a national tabloid that promoted conventional tropes of masculinity, femininity, and sexual heteronormativity. The proliferation of pornographic magazines underground in some collieries also reinforced such images and expectations. Similar to the lifestyle of the young miner presented in *People Will Always Need Coal*, magazines such as *Penthouse* contained “adverts for cars, cigarettes, and alcohol”.⁶⁷ At Point of Ayr, two miners gained extra income through renting pirated films such as the latest Hollywood blockbusters, “video nasties”, and hard-core pornographic films, which were now more widely available due to the affordability of video recorders and popular demand. Yet, some younger miners proved resistant to attempts at enforcing a rigid masculinity. In the late 1970s and 1980s, wider cultural changes contributed to generational tensions underground in terms of discussions of sex, relationships, and movements for equality.

A strong sense of occupational identity and community culture was articulated through a distinct sense of both the real and imagined status of miners as “idealized proletarians”. In the words of Tam Coulter from Scotland: “We thought we were the best in the world. We were the elite.”⁶⁸ Yet, the close affinity between colliery and community was not necessarily always and everywhere an unambiguously positive phenomenon. For example, Kathleen Bartholomew, the sister of a miner at Bentinck Colliery, observed:

[Miners] ruled the roost here. It was their town and that was it. Every town around here belonged to some mine or other. And in Kirkby-in-Ashfield, Bentinck belonged to Old Kirkby and Summit belonged to East Kirkby. Kirkby-in-Ashfield was split in two by the pits. And there the twain shall never meet [...] [I]t was like that; you didn't mix the two areas of Kirkby-in-Ashfield [...] It was [...] territorial. Incredibly territorial.⁶⁹

In the South Wales coalfield, miners enjoyed a degree of cultural kudos within “valleys communities” that left a lasting legacy into the 1980s.⁷⁰ As the famous Welsh actor Richard Burton commented, in a television interview broadcast in July 1980, reflecting on his childhood in a mining family in Pontrhydyfen, “Every little boy's

⁶⁶Two specific cases of this were relayed to one of the authors “off the record” in an interview with a Point of Ayr miner, 3 September 2019.

⁶⁷Ben Mechen, “Dirty Magazines, Clean Consciences: Men and Pornography in the 1970s”, in Houlbrook *et al.*, *Men and Masculinities in Modern Britain*.

⁶⁸Interview with Tam Coulter, quoted in Perchard, “‘Broken Men’ and ‘Thatcher's Children’”.

⁶⁹Interview with Kathleen Bartholomew, 30 October 2018.

⁷⁰For a recent analysis of this, see Mike Ward, *From Labouring to Learning: Working Class Masculinities, Education and Deindustrialisation* (London, 2015).

ambition in my valley was to become a miner.”⁷¹ Coal thus reinforced the dominant masculinity of its associated communities. Looking back on the 1970s, miners who were teenagers or young men at that time later reflected on the sense of social status. Phil White from Nantyffyllon, near Maesteg, demonstrated this vividly:

Being a miner. I thought, yeah listen I'm in a tough industry, that makes me a tough person, you know? [...] “You work in the factory, I work in the pit”, there's a difference [...] it was just a buzz around the town, especially on the Friday afternoon when the boys would be coming off shift, the last shift of the week, all going out for a few pints on the Friday afternoon, for a drink in the pubs. Pubs would be chock-a-block with miners at the end of their day shifts, you know? Especially on the weekend when we had something to spend [laughter]. And then we were broke in [sic] the rest of the week. But yeah it was, just the sense of it all was, and like I said you didn't get that amongst the factory workers.⁷²

Within this, there was an awareness within “valleys’ communities” – particularly amongst those who were active within the South Wales NUM – of the historical significance of the role played by the miners in the history of the British labour movement. As Glyn Roberts from Tower Colliery recalled, “If you was living in the Valleys, yes, you can go and be a bus driver or anything else, but to be a *miner*, to follow your father's footsteps was a tradition, part of the culture.”⁷³ The view of miners as a “special breed” also comes across strongly in the range of autobiographies produced by men with a background in the industry. This was often also linked to industrial militancy, political radicalism, and social and cultural hedonism. In the Northeast and Yorkshire coalfields, Dave Douglass was a gadfly involved in a range of domestic and international causes, travelling the world in support of the revolutionary left, while simultaneously bedding numerous women through his incursions into the politics of counter-culture in the 1970s.⁷⁴

Class remained a central feature in the lives and identities of British miners and their respective communities – indeed, miners often were (and still are) seen as “archetypal proletarians”, the quintessential exemplars of a strong working-class occupational identity. This idealization retains a lasting power in the popular consciousness. It was exactly this association of miners and class identity that Emlyn Williams, the president of the South Wales NUM, was referring to in his 1981 presidential address, when he told the assembled delegates that miners “are associated in people's minds with resistance and struggles [...] There is no doubt in my mind that miners have an historical mission to lead in class struggles.”⁷⁵ This class politics was often articulated in masculine terms, whether consciously or

⁷¹Richard Burton on “The Dick Cavett Show”, July 1980. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D49O5obqhiA>; last accessed 5 September 2019.

⁷²Interview with Phil White, 21 January 2019.

⁷³Interview with Glyn Roberts, 19 March 2004.

⁷⁴See the three volumes of autobiography by the anarchist coal miner Dave Douglass. The title of the first volume is illustrative, *Geordies – Wa Mental! Wa Off Wa Fuckin Heeds* (2008).

⁷⁵*South Wales Miner*, May/June 1981, p. 4.

subconsciously personified by the political activism of miners such as Dave Douglass and the area and national leaders of the NUM.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, between 1926 and 1972, there had not been a national strike in the coal industry, thus further problematizing the link between miners and militancy.

In the practical realities of miners' daily lives, it was typically the case that intersectionality meant that categories of gender and class rarely existed entirely separately from each other but rather intertwined and overlapped in a multitude of different ways. This excerpt from an interview with a miner from Resolven, South Wales, who described why he decided to start work in the industry in the early 1980s, is revealing:

You just wanted to work [...] I'd had enough of school. I just wanted to be out earning money, going out with my friends, drinking, whatever, playing rugby, that sort of thing [...] I was lucky enough to get in with the Coal Board, and I loved it, you know? You were so proud to get a job [...] the miners still had that sort of thing in the valley where you'd see the boys going on the bus for afternoon shift or night shift and you always thought [...] it was a man's job [...] a bit sexist I know, but it was a man's sort of job that you were proud to do. And then, you know, you learn about the history of it as well once you're there. The history of the union, the strikes that had gone on, the characters. It was a great place, a great place to work, it really was.⁷⁷

Miners' sense of masculinity, deriving from their work but also helping to strengthen bonds within the wider community, is also conveyed by Huw Jones of Tower Colliery:

You had respect and they were tough men, do you know what I mean? You didn't lip them men because they'd give you a clout basically [...] And I mean that level of respect you were growing up with like [...] and then going to work with some of these men you saw how tough they were, you know? [...] they were just physically strong because their job made them strong, you know?⁷⁸

Reflecting its important role within coalfield communities, every issue of the industry magazine *Coal News* had a sports page: this focused on "masculine" activities such as football, rugby, or horse racing, and particularly on intra-industry sports teams and miners who excelled in these fields. Activities were generally supported and sustained by CISWO (Coal Industry Social Welfare Organization). One example of this, from Markham Colliery, Derbyshire, in the 1980s, features activities including golf, fishing, clay pigeon shooting, bowls, rugby, snooker, cricket, martial arts, and scuba diving.⁷⁹ Although the wide array of activities discussed in this particular source ranges from traditional (football and cricket), to special trip-based (sea

⁷⁶For a recent article on this theme, see Ewan Gibbs and Rory Scothorne, "Accusers of Capitalism: Masculinity and Populism on the Scottish Radical Left in the Late Twentieth Century", *Social History*, 45:2 (2020), pp. 218–245.

⁷⁷Interview with Lyn Evans, 19 March 2019.

⁷⁸Interview with Huw Jones, 26 October 2018.

⁷⁹*Markham Forward*, colliery newsletter, March 1989, p. 2, Derbyshire Record Office.

fishing), to more modern (martial arts), almost all of them are the types of pastimes that, in Britain, have historically been culturally “coded” as masculine.⁸⁰ As such, industry publications also played an essential role in reinforcing the signifiers of masculinity that underpinned coal mining.

Masculine identity, originating in a clearly defined occupational milieu and reinforced by the influence of the overwhelmingly working-class socio-cultural environment, which characterized many mining communities, was further shaped by leisure. This was often collectively organized through the colliery, the pub, and the welfare club. Down to the 1980s, pubs and clubs in mining communities were largely unambiguously coded as masculine spaces and, with their closure in the 1980s and 1990s, the image of the “idealized miner” has become relatively fixed. Retired miners are now read as being the dominant example of a wider “crisis of masculinity”, yet such masculinity was more nuanced, complex, and multi-faceted.

Miners and the Contestation of Masculinity

In the 1970s, coal mining was still viewed in robustly masculine terms, building upon both traditional notions of the “male breadwinner” and the physically arduous and hazardous nature of the work itself. Such masculinity was reframed through a modern lens in recruitment films like *People Will Always Need Coal* with the construction of miners as playboys and proletarian James Bonds. While it is impossible to quantify with any degree of accuracy, the carrying over of masculine occupational/sociocultural identities into the domestic sphere would almost certainly have increased the likelihood of many miners holding sexist ideas about the appropriate respective societal roles for men and women, with the consequent instance upon some tasks being deemed “men’s work” and others being “women’s work”.⁸¹ In the 1970s, this was reinforced through the sale and distribution of pornographic magazines in local shops, which then found their way into the underground environs of the colliery.⁸² Nonetheless, in this most gendered of industries, particular forms of masculinity were not entirely hegemonic.⁸³

The material basis for the trope of the “male breadwinner” as the sole source of household income was challenged by the growth of new employment opportunities for women.⁸⁴ These jobs were mainly in the new manufacturing industries and the

⁸⁰A recent examination of “hegemonic masculinity” and its reinforcement through sport can be found in B. Jones, “Casual Culture and Football Hooligan Autobiographies: Popular Memory, Working Class Men and Racialised Identities in de-industrialising Britain, 1970s–1990s”, *Contemporary British History*, 38:1 (2003), pp. 1–23.

⁸¹This can be seen in NCB film unit’s *Miners* (1976), *Portrait of a Miner: National Coal Board Collection Volume One* (BFI, 2009).

⁸²For pornography and masculinity in the 1970s, see Mechen, “Dirty Magazines, Clean Consciences”.

⁸³For a discussion of challenges to hegemonic masculinity, see B. Griffin, “Perceptions of Crisis in the History of Masculinity”, in Houlbrook *et al.*, *Men and Masculinities in Modern Britain*.

⁸⁴For more on this topic, see Catrin Stevens, *Voices from the Factory Floor: The Experiences of Women Who Worked in the Manufacturing Industries in Wales, 1945–75* (Stroud, 2017); Victoria Cooper, “‘If I Was a Boy I Would Have Had to Go to the Pits. It’s Your Gender That Puts You Where You Are’: The Artificial Construction of ‘Women’s Work’ in the Manufacturing Industries of Post-War South Wales, 1945–75”, *Llafur: Journal of Welsh People’s History*, 12:3 (2018), pp. 122–149.

expanding service sector – even if many jobs were low-paid, part-time, and semi-skilled. Between 1951 and 1971, for example, female employment in Wales grew by forty-nine per cent, while male employment decreased by six per cent. Women comprised twenty-eight per cent of the Welsh workforce in 1961; this proportion had risen to forty-five per cent by the mid-1970s.⁸⁵ Similar trends were also true of England and Scotland. In keeping with Phillips’ observations about the female labour market participation in the Scottish coalfields, it was Margaret Glover, the wife of an Ayrshire miner, who kept her family supported through the 1984–1985 miners’ strike, with her job as a cleaner in a local hospital.⁸⁶ However, this did not lead to any large-scale redistribution of the burden of domestic labour. As Cooper has argued in relation to Wales, working women would work the “double shift”, returning from their job only to face another shift of cleaning the house and caring for children. Husbands often “never lifted a finger” or did very little.⁸⁷

The connection between coal mining and gendered domestic, occupational, and social roles remained relatively fixed in the popular consciousness. Nonetheless, this picture is too one-dimensional. As Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson have recently argued, the post-war decades saw the establishment and consolidation of vernacular discourses of gender equality within the British working class.⁸⁸ This led to critiques of the objectification of women in regional NUM publications such as the *Yorkshire Miner*. Evidence from interviews suggests that, at an individual level, the domestic situation could sometimes be more complicated and nuanced, with some miners readily performing “unmanly” duties such as domestic work and childcare.⁸⁹ This excerpt from an interview with John Bowen, a miner from Aberdare, in the South Wales coalfield, discussing his married life, illustrates the point succinctly:

INT: So, you were both working in your early years of married life. How did you divide up – how did things work in terms of, kind of, domestic work around the house?

JB: Oh, through and through.

INT: What sort of stuff did you used to do?

JB: Use the vacuum cleaner, wash the dishes, you know.⁹⁰

Similarly, discussing her childhood in Hirwaun in the 1950s, Jenny Williams recalled that her father swapped his shift pattern to be able to fulfil childcare duties:

⁸⁵John Davies, *A History of Wales* (London, 2007), p. 610; *idem*, “Wales in the Nineteen Sixties”, *Llafur: The Journal of the Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History*, 4:4 (1987), p. 79.

⁸⁶Interview with Margaret Glover, 26 March 2019; Jim Phillips, *Collieries, Communities and the Miners’ Strike in Scotland, 1984–85* (Manchester, 2012).

⁸⁷Cooper, “If I Was a Boy”, p. 143.

⁸⁸Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, “Vernacular Discourses of Gender Equality in the Post-War British Working Class”, *Past and Present*, 254:1 (2022), pp. 277–313.

⁸⁹For a discussion of these themes, see Siân Rhiannon Williams (eds), *Struggle or Starve: Women’s Lives in the South Wales Valleys between the Two World Wars* (Dinas Powys, 1998), p. 15.

⁹⁰Interview with John Bowen, 29 April 2019.

When I started school [...] I kept running home [...] so my dad [...] started working afternoon shifts. So then to keep me at school, and because I was quite timid [...] he used to come down in the playtime [...] and used to stay there. And he used to sort of chat with me and all that, and then he'd go back home after playtime, and then he'd go off to work on the afternoon shift.⁹¹

This was by no means confined to South Wales. Morris Steel from Easington Colliery in County Durham recalled that both mining and domestic duties were part of his daily routine:

the coal came off the face on armoured conveyors and then onto a belt, and it was those belts that I was on at that time [...] I used to work five double shifts a week [...] Go down at twenty past three in the afternoon and come out at six o'clock the next morning [...] You came in, I had an allotment at that time, so I went to the allotment and then went and had breakfast, got the kids off to school, and then went to bed. Got up about two o'clock and went back to work.⁹²

Perhaps the most illuminating example is from an interview with Glyn Roberts, a South Wales miner discussing his recollections of his father:

Well my father, he was different to other people [...] The women in them days, they done just with the children and they, with the food and whatever, and do the beds and different things. Well my father would do as much more than, he was way above his time because he was, my mother, very rare she cooked. She could cook but he'd do all the cooking, and if he's nights he'd wait for the children to go to school, he'd go and do the beds and whatever, and whatever else is going to need done. And like we'd, because he was six foot two, six foot three, right? And he could punch, he used to box, rugby and everything, and so nobody would, they'd have a little joke with him, you know? You know, "where's your pinny?" and different things, right?⁹³

Roberts confirmed that, while his father was not unique in this respect, he would probably have been in a minority. His recollection that other miners poked fun at his father's readiness to do domestic work is illustrative of the role of peer pressure in attempting to enforce community norms about typical and acceptable gendered codes of behaviour. Equally, the fact that his father could successfully shrug off such taunts was precisely because, in other respects, he was a quintessential exemplar of robust, physical masculinity – as a tall, tough miner, boxer, and rugby player. Glyn explained that his father's readiness to partake in domestic jobs was a result of his strong socialist beliefs and his consequent support for feminism and sexual equality.⁹⁴ Margaret Glover similarly spoke of her miner father raising all his

⁹¹Interview with Jenny Williams, 20 May 2019.

⁹²Interview with Morris Steel, 23 July 2020.

⁹³Interview with Glyn Roberts, 22 November 2018.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*

children, alongside his shifts at the colliery, after her mother left when she was young.⁹⁵ The image she paints is of a devoted family man, alongside the stoical masculinity of pit work. This echoes scholarship by historians such as Lynn Abrams and Aimee McCullough on working class fatherhood in Scotland.⁹⁶

Many conventional histories of the British coal industry presuppose a static picture in which employment roles and identities within a family unit did not alter over time; in practice, the reality was more complex.⁹⁷ The commencement of work as a miner by a young male member of the family – with the likelihood of his consequent adoption of a masculine mining occupational identity – had the potential to dramatically affect familial relationships. One manifestation of this could be the assumed adoption of a more senior role in the “pecking order” by the young mineworker; as Scottish miner Tam Coulter, and a former Vice President of the NUM Scottish Area, reflected:

Once you were a producer, ah think it’s maybe like something similar tae the animal kingdom, now the lion has tae get the grub first. Ah think once yī’ wir a producer and handing in, contributing more tae the household, you got maybe a wee bit better treated than a younger brother or whatever, you know or a sister.⁹⁸

It was by no means certain that such changes would have been universally welcomed by other family members; in some cases, at least, the opposite was true, with relationships becoming adversely affected on a long-term or permanent basis. Recalling her brother, who worked at Bentinck Colliery during the 1970s, Kathleen Bartholomew commented:

He kind of liked that impression that he gave to people. He kind of liked being a miner because they could be very big, you know? [...] it was a tough job and he made everybody know it, you know? [...] When he went into the mines we got coal, and he said “move away from the fire. That’s my coal” [...] he definitely changed. He became not a nice person [...] even though he were my soulmate [...] I think he became above himself with going down the pits. And he became, we have a word for it, manny. Like it’s almost a bully [...] he became like that, and he also became very socialist and angry.⁹⁹

The continuity of 1970s masculine cultural influences (music, film, TV, sports) was unlikely to have encouraged a greater degree of equality between the sexes. Heroes of American western films, along with James Bond, Bruce Lee (international martial

⁹⁵Interview with Margaret Glover, 26 March 2019.

⁹⁶Abrams, “‘Nobody Was Like My Daddy’”; Aimee McCullough, “‘On the Margins of Family and Home Life?’: Working-Class Fatherhood and Masculinity in Post-war Scotland” (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2017).

⁹⁷For a more detailed discussion of relationship dynamics within mining families from a disability-history perspective, see Ben Curtis and Steven Thompson, “Disability and the Family in South Wales Coalfield Society, c.1920–1939”, *Family & Community History*, 20:1 (2017), pp. 25–44.

⁹⁸Interview with Tam Coulter, in Perchard, “‘Broken Men’ and ‘Thatcher’s Children’”.

⁹⁹Interview with Kathleen Bartholomew, 30 October 2018.

arts superstar), championship boxers, and local and national football “terrace heroes”, bedecked the bedroom walls of young men in mining communities. Pubs, clubs, and discotheques also retained their particular codes and “norms” around the cultural practices of men and women. Young miners who carried umbrellas, wore coats in mild weather, or stood out from the crowd were subject to both verbal and physical abuse. In North Wales, one miner bore the brunt of jokes for being sighted hanging his wife’s laundered underwear on the washing line. He gained the nickname “Don Dish” because of his penchant for “washing the pots” after meals.¹⁰⁰ Yet, in all these spaces, miners and others within these communities were unmaking and remaking particular versions of masculinity that became more malleable over time.

Some miners actively subverted such masculine “norms” through involvement in youth subcultures and engagement with contemporary trends in popular music. Each colliery was represented in the various tribes that brought colour and critique to mining communities in the 1970s: mods; rockers; soul boys; skinheads; Bowie boys; and punks. Bryan Ferry, a miner’s son from Washington, County Durham, was, by the summer of 1972, appearing with his group Roxy Music performing “Virginia Plane” on the BBC music show *Top of the Pops*, wearing glitter and make-up.¹⁰¹ In the same year, at a music festival held close to Bickershaw Colliery in the Lancashire coalfield, the Kinks performed their recent hit single “Lola” about a dalliance with a “drag queen”.¹⁰² A few miles from the festival site, in Leigh, miner’s son Pete Shelley was devouring popular music and, within three years, would be at the forefront of punk rock with his group the Buzzcocks.¹⁰³ Talking of his childhood in the West Fife mining village of Ballingry, the lead singer of the Scottish punk band The Skids, Richard (“Rick”) Jobson, grew up on a diet of both Bowie and Roxy Music and pushing the masculine norms in his community.¹⁰⁴

A strong contender – both literally and figuratively – for the example par excellence of an individual from a coalfield community who subverted particular notions of masculinity in the 1970s was Adrian Street, who found international fame as a professional wrestler.¹⁰⁵ Billed as “the Exotic One” and “the Sadist in Sequins”, Street’s public persona was flamboyant and sexually ambiguous, and he made extensive and lavish use of outrageous clothes, hairstyles, and make-up as his trademark image. Born in Brynmawr, South Wales, in 1940, Street was taken out of school by his coalmining father in 1955, to work alongside him at Beynon’s Colliery in Blaina, but then ran away to London to become a wrestler, to the incredulous scepticism of his father and workmates. His first professional wrestling match took

¹⁰⁰Discussion with Point of Ayr miners at a 2021 reunion of the Rhyl Rugby Club.

¹⁰¹For the cultural genesis of Roxy Music, see Michael Bracewell, *Re-make/Re-model: Art, Pop, Fashion and the Making of Roxy Music, 1953–1972* (London, 2007).

¹⁰²For the Kinks and working-class culture, see Keith Gildart, “From Dead End Streets to Shangri-Las: Negotiating Social Class and Post-War Politics with Ray Davies and the Kinks”, *Contemporary British History*, 26:3 (2012). pp. 272–298.

¹⁰³For an insight into the music of the Buzzcocks, see Pete Shelley (with Louie Shelley), *Ever Fallen in Love: The Lost Buzzcocks Tapes* (London, 2021).

¹⁰⁴Richard Jobson, *Into the Valley: The Autobiography* (Bedford, 2018).

¹⁰⁵For a survey of the popularity of the sport in the 1970s, see Simon Garfield, *The Wrestling* (London, 2007).



Figure 4. Adrian Street pictured with his father, a coal miner, at the pithead of Bryn Mawr Colliery, Wales. Source: *Mirrorpix/Getty Images*. Photographer: *Dennis Hutchinson*.

place in August 1957 and his first big break occurred in 1961; his popularity, fame, and success increased thereafter, culminating eventually in a move to the US in 1982.¹⁰⁶

When Street won the European Middleweight title in 1973, the national press sent a photographer to cover his story. He insisted that the photo shoot take place back at the colliery, where his ambition had been mocked and ridiculed. The resultant photographs are extraordinary, contrasting Street's glittering, lavish, full-costume appearance with his father and his workmates in dirt-covered pit attire (Figure 4). Reflecting upon this in 2014, Street commented that: "That photo is my way of making a two-finger salute to the lot of them. I think by now I've proved my Dad and the other coal miners wrong."¹⁰⁷ Street's reaction against traditional norms of coalfield society and hegemonic masculinity was to prove incredibly influential in a wider sense, complementing both the "glam rock" and punk era of the 1970s. Marc Bolan, of the internationally famous rock band T-Rex, credited Street as one inspiration for his glam-rock style.¹⁰⁸ Both underground, overground, and in the

¹⁰⁶Street has published a number of autobiographies. For an insight into the hegemonic masculinity of his childhood mining community, see Adrian Street, *My Pink Gas Mask* (Scotts Valley, CA, 2012).

¹⁰⁷BBC, "Exotic Adrian Street and the Picture That 'Won't Shut Its Gob'", 29 October 2014. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-27889890>; last accessed 21 April 2022.

¹⁰⁸"Meet Adrian Street, the Miner Who Forged a Career in Wrestling to Become 'The Sadist in Sequins'", 4 May 2018. Available at: <https://inews.co.uk/inews-lifestyle/people/wrestling-adrian-street-sadist-sequins-151260>; last accessed 21 April 2022.

domestic sphere, young miners continued to transgress gender norms by subverting dominant characterizations of masculinity into the 1980s and 1990s.

Conclusion

This article has explored the complex dynamics of masculinity in British coal mining between 1975 and 1983; a period when a long-term future was envisaged for the industry. In 1975, *People Will Always Need Coal* captured a moment of optimism. It was anticipated that, in the 1980s and 1990s, work in the industry would be cleaner and less dangerous, and deliver high pay, skills, and long-term career prospects to potential employees. Miners could aspire to not just owning homes and cars, but also having leisure and cultural lifestyles that were enjoyed by the affluent middle class. This was sold through traditional forms of masculinity that positioned “pit work” as “man’s work”. The images of modernity, affluence, and social mobility portrayed in the recruitment film held some truth. By the 1980s, many collieries had their own golf clubs and miners were taking holidays in Spain, Italy, and the US.¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless, the rigid muscularity of miners presented on the screen masked a more complex process of “becoming a miner” and developing masculine tropes that had always defined the industry. In the years 1975–1983, there were numerous challenges and subversions to what it meant to “be a miner”.

The contribution made by this article to the histories of both masculinity and coal miners builds on recent interventions in the fields of gender politics and studies of mining communities in the second half of the twentieth century.¹¹⁰ The decline of the coal industry across Western economies has presented a blueprint for contemporary concerns around the “crisis of masculinity”, a trope that has recently been critiqued by historians who have found new ways to use masculinity to explore the social history of Britain.¹¹¹ If there was such a “crisis of masculinity” in Britain’s coalfields it was a long time in the making. As we have outlined in this intervention, there may have been a dominant form of masculinity in mining communities, but it was never entirely hegemonic. Ex-coal miners such as Jack Palance and Charles Bronson continued to purvey images of the “hyper masculinity” of the Hollywood “hard man” on the cinema screen in the 1970s and 1980s, but sons of miners in Britain, such as Adrian Street and Bryan Ferry, were adorning feminine clothing, wearing make-up, and posing a challenge to the masculinity of popular sports, entertainment, and the music industry.

Through an examination of the various aspects of miners’ masculinity, such as danger/risk, humour/camaraderie, and a sense of history and status, we have shown how this could be a basis for collectivism and solidarity, but also exclusionary and divisive. However, men and women, both in the workplace and the domestic sphere, did not always conform to the culture of mining life and attempted to

¹⁰⁹*Coal News* remains an essential source here in documenting the continuities and shifts in the culture of mining communities.

¹¹⁰See Jorg Arnold, *The British Miner in the Age of De-Industrialisation: A Political and Cultural History* (Oxford, 2023).

¹¹¹See Houlbrook *et al.*, “Introduction”, *Men and Masculinities in Modern Britain*.

subvert such masculinity. Women, young miners, and those who developed subcultural affiliations through popular music and subcultural identities were able to challenge and, in some cases, subvert the dominant forms of masculinity underground and in the wider community. However, with the rapid decline of the industry after 1983, the defeat of the NUM in the 1984–1985 strike, and the closure of the last colliery in 2015, the dominant tropes of mining life and linear coalfield masculinities have once again become largely fixed in the popular imagination. *People Will Always Need Coal* was bursting with optimism for the future of the industry in 1975, but such optimism and the masculinities that it contained were slowly dissolved by the shifting economics of energy, the politics of Thatcherism, and the deindustrialization of Britain. This article, in common with other international studies by Brown, Abrahamson, and Somerville, demonstrates the liminality and complexities of navigating miners' identities in an industry often held up as being a bastion of "hegemonic masculinity".