



Marks on Men: Disability, Medical Research and Coalminers 1920-1948

Dr Julie Anderson, University of Kent

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Scottish Oral History Centre, University of Strathclyde
6th floor (624) Curran Bld, Cathedral St

ALL WELCOME

In the same way that coal mining permanently altered the British landscape, coal miners' bodies were also changed by their experience of mining. While some marks were evident such as missing fingers or a permanent limp, still others were unseen – the marks on lungs, nerves and bones. These marks were a costly consequence of the mining industry.

Miners took pride in their fundamental importance to the British economy and also in the dangers associated with their job. Their masculine identity was steeped in coal and they accepted that going down the mines for a shift meant that they were risking their lives daily and in the long term, their bodily integrity. Accidents and the long-term health implications of working in coalmines meant that miners could be off work for considerable periods of time. The costs of chronic ill health and disability for the industry and the miner and his family were significant.

Throughout the period 1920-1948, the Medical Research Council (MRC) conducted studies into the impact of mining on the body including disability and chronic ill health. The MRC endeavoured to deal with some of the conditions associated with mining such as 'beat hand, knee and elbow', respiratory diseases, sensory damage and the result of accident. Safety measures were adopted in order to decrease the dangers of coal mining and ensure that miners were protected in this most dangerous of environments.

This paper will track the changing nature of disability, chronic ill health and the impact of accidents between 1920-48. It will also explore the nature of the masculine nature of mining, its importance to the British economy and measures taken by groups such as the MRC to control the impact of coal mining and limit the marks on men.