

SOCIAL HISTORY

Revealing the hidden stories of Britain's disabled miners

Pioneering new research is challenging widely held beliefs about the experiences of people with disabilities during the industrial revolution. **Matt Elton** reports

The industrial revolution is often seen as having had a negative impact on people with disabilities, leaving them socially marginalised and dependent on others. Yet, argue the authors of a new study, many miners who suffered physical impairments were able to continue to work.

The research is the largest disability history project ever carried out in the UK and covers three coalfields – in south Wales, north-east England and Scotland – in the years from 1780 to 1948. Experts explored roughly 2,000 sources, including medical records, autobiographies, and trade union reports, to discover more about people injured while working in the mining industry.

One of the project's researchers, Dr Daniel Blackie from Swansea University, argues that its findings may overturn some accepted beliefs about disability in the period. "The idea that the industrial revolution had a profound effect on how disability was understood, and the experiences of disabled people, is a common one," he told *BBC History Magazine*. "This view holds that, before industrial capitalism, people with physical impairments were fairly well integrated into everyday life, and not especially marginalised.

"The industrial revolution changed that – or so the argu-

ment goes. People with a diverse range of physical impairments were labelled 'disabled', and increasingly seen as a 'problem' that necessitated government and philanthropic intervention."

However, the new research indicates that, on the contrary, injured miners often returned to work. "Despite the undoubted challenges faced by such miners and their families, our findings suggest that it is inaccurate to automatically equate disability with dependency," says Blackie. "Many seriously injured miners returned to work after a period of recuperation, sometimes in their former roles, or to take up lighter jobs inside and outside the mining sector."

Among the examples featured in the study, led by Swansea University in conjunction with Aberystwyth, Strathclyde and Glasgow Caledonian universities – and funded by the Wellcome Trust – is that of Billy Davy Richards, a former miner.

"A visitor to south Wales commented that its streets were 'thronged with the maimed and the mutilated'"



Down but not out
A miner poses with his artificial legs, c1909. A new study explores the experiences of people with such disabilities

According to a local newspaper report, he "lost his leg, injured his arm, and then very wisely, forsook that unpleasant calling for the easier one of teaching boys". Some disabled miners took jobs as 'lampmen', maintaining safety lamps, while others found work as musicians or street hawkers. Yet not all changes were problem-free: many of the jobs that miners took up were both of lower status and more poorly paid. A visitor to south Wales in the 1850s noted that its streets were "thronged with the maimed and the mutilated".

Although the lack of national statistics before the 20th century makes it hard to establish how many miners were disabled, figures for the period 1910–14 indicate that 16.5 per cent of miners were injured at work and 0.14 per cent killed. Indeed,

Blackie is keen to stress that, despite the impact of large-scale mining disasters that produced great loss of life, non-fatal injuries were far more common.

And it is the ways in which these individuals adjusted to life that needs more attention, he argues. "One of the main views that we'd like to change is that the economic transformations of the period were perhaps not as disruptive for disabled people as has often been assumed," he says. "They were not passive bystanders watching economic developments from the sidelines, either. In many cases, they were among the workers who helped make the industrial revolution."

An exhibition at the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea will explore the study's findings from 20 June. See dis-ind-soc.org.uk for more details