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Wellcome HISTORY

ENGAGING LIVES

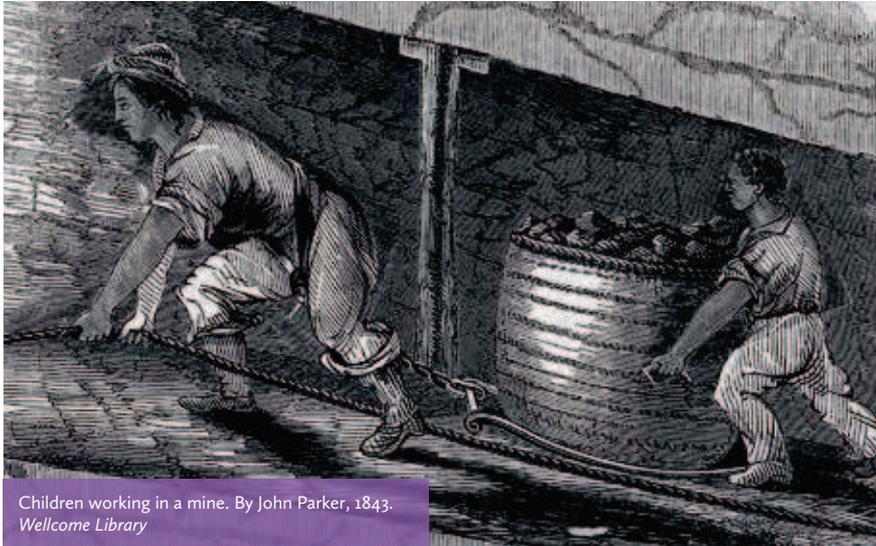
Historic Royal Palaces and
the medical humanities



Disability and industrial society

A comparative cultural history of British coalfields, 1780–1948

Anne Borsay



Children working in a mine. By John Parker, 1843.
Wellcome Library

How important was industrialisation in shaping cultural perceptions and experiences of disability between 1780 and 1948? This is the question that we are investigating in a new programme of work based at Swansea University.

We are exploring this with reference to the British coal industry, comparing the south Wales, north-east England and Scottish coalfields. We are pursuing four main themes: the effects of economic and technological developments; the role of medical and welfare services; the consequences of politics, trade unionism and social relations; and the implications of these historical factors for the literary genre of coalfield narrative. Disability is broadly defined to include physical and sensory impairments and chronic conditions but not mental illness and learning difficulty.

The research, supported by a major Wellcome Trust grant, is being carried out over five years from October 2011 by the College of Human and Health Sciences (CHSS) and the College of Arts and Humanities (COAH), working in collaboration with Aberystwyth, Northumbria and Strathclyde Universities.

I am the principal investigator and co-director, at the CHSS. There are also three Swansea co-investigators: Dr David Turner (History and Classics,

COAH; also a co-director), Dr Andrew Hull (CHHS) and Dr Kirsti Bohata (English, COAH). At Aberystwyth, Northumbria and Strathclyde, the respective co-investigators are Dr Steven Thompson (History and Welsh History), Professor Don MacRaild (Humanities) and Professor Arthur McIvor (Humanities). Dr Vicky Long of Glasgow Caledonian University will also be involved.

How important was industrialisation in shaping perceptions and experiences of disability?

To carry out the research, the award is funding three research associates, two research fellows and a PhD student. The research associates – all three-year appointments – have started work on sources for their regional coalfields between 1780 and 1948: Dr Ben Curtis at Aberystwyth, Victoria Brown at Northumbria and Dr Angela Turner at Strathclyde. The two research fellows will be employed by Swansea University for three years from October 2012. Both will focus primarily on national sources, one concentrating on 1780–1880 and the other on 1880–1948. The PhD studentship on a theme relating to disability and coalfield literature in all three coalfields

will be held at Swansea University for three years from October 2012.

A public engagement programme will make the research findings accessible to disabled, professional and lay audiences:

- A roadshow will be run in south Wales during 2012 and rolled out to north-east England and Scotland in 2013. These events will offer disabled people and the general public informal talks and films about coalfield disability, and the chance to bring along documents and artefacts for discussion with historians, archivists and curators.
- A workshop for health and social care professionals will also be trialled in south Wales during 2013 and extended to the north-east and Scotland in 2014. This event will provide them an opportunity to get together with disabled people and jointly reflect on what coalfield disability history reveals about the relationships between service users and providers.
- An exhibition on coalfield disability – including a web version – will be held at Swansea's National Waterfront Museum during 2015/16 and then tour sites in Wales.
- A project website will present our findings in an accessible format and invite comment, and we will engage with a wide range of news media.

A Disabled People's Panel will be convened throughout the project to ensure that the research and public engagement are informed by disabled peoples' perspectives. An Advisory Board will bring together disabled people, academics, politicians and representatives of professional and public bodies. This will help to relay the policy implications of the project to central and local government organisations, including the NHS.

Anne Borsay is Professor in Healthcare and Medical Humanities at Swansea University (E a.borsay@swan.ac.uk) Anyone interested in the 'Disability and Industrial Society: A comparative cultural history of British coalfields, 1780–1948' programme is welcome to get in touch.