

The Price of Coal

Ben Curtis, Research Associate for Disability and Industrial Society: A Comparative Cultural History of British Coalfields, 1780–1948, tells YFH more about this exciting and revealing Wellcome Trust project

Most of us will have ancestors who were disabled in one way or another. With the dramatic growth of employment in such dangerous workplaces as coal mines, ironworks and factories in Britain from the 18th century onwards, the risk of being maimed or injured increased correspondingly. Accordingly, disability was a common experience of a very large proportion of the population. Most coal miners, for instance, could expect to receive a number of disabling injuries each year and some kind of significant injury resulting in a permanent disability during the course of their working lives.

The records of charities, hospitals and other medical institutions can be useful sources of information, but other organisations and institutions can also provide insightful material. An on-going research project involving historians from Swansea, Aberystwyth, Strathclyde, Northumbria and Glasgow Caledonian universities into disability and industrial society is uncovering all sorts of other sources that shed light on this topic. These sources can be used by family historians to get a better understanding of the lives of

their ancestors.

County archive and record offices hold a variety of different sources that include material on disability which would be of interest to genealogists. Below are several examples.

Industrial records

Landmark legislation such as the Employers' Liability Act of 1880 and the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1897 placed a statutory obligation on employers to pay compensation for accidental injuries sustained in the workplace. For large companies in particularly dangerous industries, this had the effect of generating a vast amount of material on the details of injuries sustained by their workforce. Similarly, some trade unions – such as the Miners' Federation of Great Britain and its constituent coalfield unions – fought hard to ensure adequate compensation for members who were injured at work. The South Wales Coalfield Collection at Swansea University, for example, holds an extensive collection of the miners' union branch accident and compensation books. Both these types of records

THE FAR-RIGHT column of this record book details inmates' physical impairments and ailments. Courtesy of Glamorgan Archives

MERTHYR TYDFIL UNION.		INMATES' CLOTHES			DELIVERED TO PORTE		
Work	Date	NAME	Calling, &c.	Address of	Friends.	Religion.	Age.
	1908						
Jan 25 th	1908	George Morgan	Son of James.	John Florence Lane	Pengamiddhu	CofE	9
		Albert Smith	Miner	Miss Arthur Smith	73 Care St	Bapt	22
		David Bryn	Miner	Dawson L H / Beard	St Ponslotygn	CofE	68
		Nora Powell	Daughter of Henry	8 Hall Place	Paddington London	CofE	15
		John Lewis	Miner	Son The Lewis Railway	Terrace Ponslotygn	Bapt	7
		John Jay	Miner	James L H	Aberdare	R C	



Patients at the "Rest," Porthcawl

THIS PHOTOGRAPH, taken in about 1920, depicts a nurse and four patients at 'The Rest' Convalescent Home in Porthcawl, South Wales. Courtesy of the South Wales Coalfield Collection, Swansea University

include a great many details on the lives of individuals in the past and will prove of real interest to genealogists.

Poor Law records

Workhouse admissions registers often note the occupations of individuals entering the workhouse. They sometimes also include some details of whether or not entrants had any significant physical impairments or ailments, as the far-right column of the image of the record book below shows.

Charity and hospital records

Hospital records can contain a lot of information (but personal records are generally sealed for 100 years). Records from disability-related charities are another good place to look.

Parish	Time	Whose Order	Disease	Date of Order
M.H.	1 30	L Batten	Deviated by Father	
M.C.	3 20	J Davies	Pneumonia	
G.C.	3 30	Master	Crippled leg Fell down hurt head	
M.C.		Master	London when she sold Program in Institute transferred from	
G.C.	4 30	W.J. Thomas	Bronchitis	6
A.C.	5 0	J Young	General disease	
	4 50	Master	Month improvement respecting his Dist by Impie Thomas, Father	



IN THIS EARLY 20th-century photograph a miner is shown wearing technically sophisticated artificial legs (one full length, the other from the knee down) rather than simple wooden 'peg legs' – although, according to his granddaughter, he rarely wore them as they were not particularly comfortable. Courtesy of National Museum Wales



BEN CURTIS is a Research Associate at Aberystwyth University, employed by the Wellcome Trust-funded research project Disability and Industrial Society: A Comparative Cultural History of British Coalfields, 1780–1948. He obtained his PhD from Glamorgan University in 2007 and his book *The South Wales Miners, 1964–1985* will be published by University of Wales Press in May 2013.

INDUSTRIAL INJURY and disability in the coal mines is the focus for an event entitled *The Price of Coal*, which is being held at the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea on Saturday 23 March 2013 (see www.dis-ind-soc.org.uk for further details). The event, similarly to the historical sources that shed light on disability and industry, will demonstrate how our fathers and grandfathers, working in the bowels of the earth, faced danger, disease and death in the course of their daily lives and paid the heavy price of coal.