

MINING THE PAST: A NEW INITIATIVE AT THE NATIONAL COAL MINING MUSEUM FOR ENGLAND

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The National Coal Mining Museum for England is based at a late-eighteenth century colliery site in the West Yorkshire region. From its inception its aim was to tell the story of coal mining and mining communities; it has never seen itself as a purely technological site. The site covers two small mines, Caphouse colliery and Hope Pit, and its collections of coal mining art, photography, social history and technology are shown within its surface galleries. Visitors can travel down the shaft to authentic underground workings at the Caphouse site, guided by ex-miners, and much of what they learn about mining life comes from this interaction with men from mining communities.

Photo 1

Caphouse colliery viewed from the Hope Pit reed beds

Although the story that the Museum aims to tell is very much about people's lives, the collections are much richer in engineering and technology items than they are in social history. The majority of the collecting for the Museum's first phase took place during a period of rapid mine closure in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Because of this the Museum acquired widely from the nationalised industry in the region. Transport was freely available, and closing collieries were very keen to see their immediate heritage, which they saw disappearing before their eyes, preserved for future generations. The same impetus which created the Museum provided a large collection of narrow range, concentrated in the period twenty to thirty years previously, and which brought problems in terms of collections storage and care. At the same time the British Coal collection, objects from England, Wales and Scotland, acquired by the nationalised industry and brought together in the English Midlands, also came to the Museum.

Photo 2

Shearer cutter loader before transfer into store

One section of this latter collection was an important range of machines used for under-cutting the coal. This process, which provided a free face for the coal seam to be brought down, was a mechanical development of the techniques used for hand-getting coal. Although most common during the mid-twentieth century, and familiar as a technique to many miners, it was still currently in use at some small mines into the twenty-first century. These cutters were relatively small, and did not present the same engineering complexities as the modern cutting machines in use at collieries today. Perhaps more importantly, many of them had been manufactured locally within the region, and catalogues and a photographic archive linked with these cutters had been given to the Museum. Some members of the work-force employed at the local manufacturing base were still in the area, with all the possibilities for interaction that this implied. It seemed like the ideal collection to consider for conservation, access and widening participation.

Photo 3

Joy shortwall coal cutter on display outside

Until 2002 most of these machines had been displayed outside, as there was insufficient indoor gallery space to accommodate all objects. To protect them there had been an irregular care and maintenance programme which involved painting some in the original manufacturing firm's livery. Many of the machines had, in fact, never been painted in this colour while working, as for many years machines delivered to nationalised coal mines were painted white for high visibility. A previous phase of work at the Museum, which involved the building of a large object store, had allowed the majority of these machines to be brought inside. Conditions there were relatively environmentally stable and secure, and public access was available on store open days.

Photo 4

Coal cutting machines on display in the gallery

These machines and others were to become the training ground to assist in developing skills and awareness of engineering and its links with conservation. The Museum had already identified a future skills shortage, as the coal mining industry in Britain contracted. This had the potential to affect not just the running of the underground mine workings, a fundamental part of the Museum's unique offer, but also the ability to conserve and maintain the *in situ* working machinery on site. At the same time the Museum had many items in its collections about which curatorial knowledge was restricted. The curators relied heavily on the expertise of the mining staff to provide detailed interpretation of the objects within the collections, and also give depth to the bare bones of identification. When the Museum was established there were twenty six working deep mines in Yorkshire; by 2006 there were only three. There was already discussion about where the next generation of miners might come from, and how the pit might be enabled to be kept open. Knowledge and expertise about maintenance and use of the collections had to be preserved, and could not just be allowed to die away. There was also the issue of retaining the interest and involvement of future generations, who might no longer wish to learn about mining life when they no longer had a direct link to it through their own families or communities.

Photo 5

Hope Pit winding engine restored to working order by mining staff at the Museum

A new programme, 'Cutting Edge Heritage', funded through the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Museum's own revenue budgets, was developed to address these issues. There were three interlinked aspects of the programme, which all related to the need to develop a skills base and set coal mining in its community context.

The first section of this work relates most closely to the transferring of skills and raising awareness of conservation needs when dealing with industrial collections. This area is one where the Museum is itself learning, and this is a great deal to do with the way the

engineering skills in coal mines are utilised. Fitters and electricians in a mining context are under daily pressure to repair and maintain so that there is never a stoppage in coal production. This inculcates on the positive side very rapid responses and outstanding problem-solving skills. However, on the negative side there is less attention paid, sometimes, to the delicacy and consideration that a conservator might bring to a museum task. The present programme aims to encourage the transfer of skills and understanding, by engineer and conservator working side by side, which is essential for the correct conservation of the museum object. At present the Museum is reliant for its engineering skills on a workforce trained by the nationalised industry. To work underground mining qualifications must be kept up-to-date by regular training, at present available through the present private working mine system. The new programme, funded initially for three years, will enable young engineering students to work with mining staff to learn new skills. They will work with the collections in a combined engineering and conservation role, and will work closely with the conservator appointed to the project.

The work programme is devised around nine cutters in the collection, but the conservator will also work on small objects with links to the engineering firm and other material which might be of interest to the public. The first cutter to enter the workshops should provide the template for future work on the others. None of them has been worked on since they arrived at the museum fourteen years ago, so what might be found is an unknown quantity. There is an agreement to clean, record, and conserve. For the engineers there is the hope that at least one of the duplicate machines will prove sufficiently intact to be restored to run.

Photo 6

Miner guide and conservator unloading the cutter in the workshop

In this part of the programme there will be two sections for access and skills learning. The first will be with colleges in the immediate locality, working with young engineering students from two colleges in the sixteen to eighteen age group. There are several sections to the work they will be doing. One sector will look at the engineering work taking place in the mine workshops on a day to day basis, as an example of the application of the engineering skills which they themselves are learning. At the same time they will be working with a real object from the museum's unaccessioned items. For this item they will be stripping down and seeing what repairs might be required, making new parts where appropriate, recording the process as they go, and seeing the object on show at the Museum when completed. Students would not be able to work directly with accessioned items, but one advantage to the large collections acquired in the 1980s and 1990s is that there is duplicate material which can be utilised for the project.

The college tutors have already identified that they may have older students who might want to take on an individual project, but this would be based on particular individuals rather than a group activity. Groups may also include students who have been excluded from school. These are groups that the Museum already works with on an *ad hoc* basis, and is encouraged to do so by its funding body, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. In some areas the colleges are better equipped than the Museum. For instance their

ability to use CAD systems to design and make new parts for machinery might well be something that the Museum would consider for demonstration machines.

The second initiative, also based around this programme, is to work within the community, recording experiences but also encouraging a volunteer workforce at the museum site itself. The Museum has used volunteers from the mining industry, but these have been in very specific areas, and some have then moved on to work for the museum as employees, lost to the volunteer pool. However, the museum has not considered working with volunteers from mining machinery manufacturers, and this will be a first trial of the success of this as a way of building knowledge both about the firm itself and its products. The project team is approaching ex-employees through community meetings, where people will be invited to offer their help and support to the project in two areas. One will be working directly as advisers on the machines themselves, and the second will be adding to the oral history resource already established at the Museum.

Photo 7

Coal cutters in the manufacturer's workshop, original print

This initial work uses original objects, and the coal-cutter manufacturer's photographic archive, but the methodology could work equally well for other industries. The work on the photographic collections sits side by side with the conservation of the coal cutters. There are two major collections, one of photographic prints, in albums, and one of photographic negatives, the latter in deteriorating condition. Neither collection can be easily accessed in its present form, although the albums once formed part of the company's annual social gathering for pensioners at Christmas. Oral history has been a part of the Museum's work for many years, generally linked closely with the exhibition programme. However, there are many gaps still to be filled in terms of recording the engineering and technology behind both building machines and their maintenance. The Museum staff will be using a standard recording template for this work, and may encourage the volunteer workforce to take up this work, as has been achieved successfully at other institutions.

The third strand is about engaging and involving a new generation with coal mining, perhaps who have never seen coal used, and for whom a colliery is as remote as an iron-age hill fort. Cross-generational work will take place with children's out-of-school clubs, which in Britain would include scouts, guides, cubs and brownies. They will work with an older generation to compare and record stories and experiences, and also work on conserving the collections as part of learning about society and the environment they live in.

The three strands of the programme, an innovative experiment for the Museum, are designed to reflect the Museum's main aim, 'Keeping coal mining alive'