CONCLUSION

The Industrial Revolution produced injury, illness and disablement on a large scale and nowhere was this more visible than in coalmining. While the loss of lives in large-scale mining disasters is still commemorated today, and forms part of the cultural memory of coalmining in areas where pits have long since closed down, there are no memorials to the many thousands who were disabled in the industry.¹ Yet the experiences of those whose bones were broken, whose bodies were crushed, 'lamed' or maimed, or who entered old age prematurely as a result of being 'worn out' by their labours or by the shortness of breath brought on by lung disease, matter just as much to mining's history as those who lost their lives. Some were rendered incapable of work, either permanently or temporarily. Others 'worked through' chronic illness or impairment, or took up other roles within their communities. The incidence of injury and impairment in coalmining and other dangerous trades led to a range of medical, welfare and political responses, some of which have left a lasting legacy. These include the statutory regulation of workplace health and safety, the principle, albeit contested, that employers should bear some responsibility for accidents at work and the belief that the welfare needs of disabled people differ from those of the general poor and unemployed.

Disability was essential to the Industrial Revolution, but historical experiences of disability are far more complex than previously argued. Historical materialist accounts have emphasised that the advent of industrial capitalism led to the marginalisation of disabled people as economically unproductive 'burdens', whose inability to conform to more stringent productivity demands, work or time discipline meant that they could no longer compete in the workplace. Yet the coal industry during its period of rapid expansion between 1780 and 1880 presents a more complicated picture. On the one hand, the idea that coalminers were a 'picked' body of workers probably meant that people

with certain congenital impairments or 'weak' constitutions had long been excluded from mine work, although such exclusion was never universal. On the other hand, if British coalminers were admired for their physical prowess, the acquired diseases and injuries associated with their toils meant that many experienced some degree of impairment. Our evidence shows that rather than leaving the world of work, these 'disabled' miners were expected to return to productive employment if capable of doing so. Such workers were valued for their skills and experience, even more so when labour was scarce, such as during strikes. For much of our period, elements of the 'somatic flexibility' believed to have enabled disabled people to remain economically productive in the 'pre-industrial' era remained intact. The practice of working in family groups relatively free from supervision, for instance, continued at many mines throughout the nineteenth century. Combined with customs such as piecework and worker-controlled restriction of output, such practices enabled some 'disabled' miners to remain active in the workforce.

Despite labour historians' acknowledgement that impairment has been a common consequence of work in the past, disabled people rarely appear as *workers* in the histories they have written.² This absence 'naturalises' the idea that disabled bodies are, to borrow Ava Baron's phrase about the gender bias of labour history, 'out of place' in the world of work.³ If, on the one hand, the risks to health from accident or disease increased as a result of coalmining's expansion, potentially leading to greater disablement, on the other hand workers with impairments also contributed to the expanding coal industry through their own labour. In this respect, disabled mineworkers helped make the Industrial Revolution. Some of this work was relatively low status and poorly remunerated. Putting adult men made 'cripples' in mine accidents to 'boys' work' could be demeaning in an industry where the status of work related to hierarchies of age. However, we should not assume that the work done by 'cripples' was automatically devalued. Such work could still invoke feelings of pride or represent an important contribution to an individual or family's efforts to 'make ends meet'. As feminist historians have taught us, just as we should not dismiss or devalue women's work in the past simply because it was considered 'lowly', neither should we do the same with the labour disabled people have performed.⁴ Rather than judging disabled people's relationship with work in the past simply in terms of their 'inclusion' or 'exclusion', we need to pay attention to the meanings and value of their work within particular occupational or familial contexts.

Accounts of seriously injured miners returning to work are appealing because they show the economic productivity of disabled people in the past. Yet this does not mean collieries, or pit villages, were free of prejudice, or that it

was always easy for disabled mineworkers to return to work or make a living. A person's experiences depended on many factors – from geological conditions and their own physical capacities and skills to the attitudes of employers and neighbours alike. In a society where moral assessments of causes of impairment were as important as its consequences in determining sympathy and support, responses to disablement could vary widely. Mining communities might come together to help disabled men find new employment, but could be hostile to strangers with impairments, particularly beggars. Similarly, unions might support disabled miners, but drew a line at helping those whose behaviour had endangered themselves or their workmates.⁵

Undoubtedly those who were reliant on poor relief, or payments from friendly societies, were at risk of impoverishment as these benefits were often far less than what they could earn, especially if they had previously been employed in lucrative jobs such as coal-cutting. In early nineteenth-century Scotland in particular, women's employment as coal bearers had made an important contribution to the income of households where men were incapacitated, and the banning of females from working underground in 1842 robbed these families of this source of support. Women's unpaid work in supporting their husbands and sons by washing clothes, carrying water for baths and keeping house made an important – if seldom acknowledged – contribution to the domestic economy, and the loss of miners' wives' labour through incapacity could also place pressure on households. In communities where the productivity of the adult male breadwinner was considered particularly important – symbolically as well as economically – some men undoubtedly viewed incapability for paid work with despondency.

While disability might modify family dynamics in mining communities and challenge men's status, emasculation was never inevitable – not even for miners unable to maintain main breadwinner status. There were many options available to disabled men to prove their manliness beyond the world of work. Some injured mineworkers appropriated the old image of miners as tough, hard drinking and prone to violence to assert their strength, while others embraced new opportunities for spiritual leadership through evangelical non-conformity. Still more insulated themselves, to a degree, from the emasculating potential of disability through marriage and fatherhood. Although women might, on occasion, view suitors with impairments in a negative light, there is little evidence that injury or chronic illness in the coalfields was ever an absolute barrier to the formation or maintenance of enduring and meaningful relationships. Neither did it deprive miners of the ability to express themselves as men sexually – a fact amply demonstrated by the many children fathered by disabled colliers long after the onset of impairment, but often forgotten in

history books. As husbands, fathers and lovers, then, it was hard for disabled miners to be *completely* unmanned by work-related incapacity, either in their own eyes or in others.

Disablement may also have provided an opportunity for some to escape a dangerous and physically demanding workplace. Two fifteen-year-old boys, Morgan Thomas and Giles Giles, who lost limbs at Hirwaun Colliery near Merthyr Tydfil, told the 1842 Children's Employment Commission that during their lay off from work they had been able to go to school and learn to write. At a time when educational opportunities were scarce for youngsters who were under pressure to go to work at an early age, such experiences were valuable despite their circumstances. Though both lads saw their future as uncertain, the acquisition of literacy was intended to provide opportunities to earn a living in clerical work.⁶

Over time, some of the 'somatic flexibility' that had enabled disabled mineworkers to work in collieries was eroded. The spread of longwall mining and the increasing reliance on winding machinery as the demand for coal grew and deep mining expanded, for instance, reduced the autonomy of mineworkers to determine their own work routines and rhythms. Legal changes were also significant. 'Special rules' and increased supervision of workers intended to improve safety at mines similarly affected miners' ability to choose how they worked, while employers' liability and compensation laws designed to protect injured employees laid the basis for greater discrimination against 'at risk' workers in the future. Yet we should not exaggerate the impact of these changes. Coalmining remained an industry receptive to the re-employment of men after serious injury well into the twentieth century, despite the downturn in the sector's economic fortunes between the First and Second World Wars.⁷

The development of industrial society is also important to the history of medical and welfare responses to disablement. The dangers of mine work meant that British coalminers were among the first occupational groups to receive dedicated medical care, first via surgeons funded through colliery 'sick clubs' and later on through specialist institutions aimed at supporting recuperation. During this period, mining communities were increasingly viewed as profitable medical markets, for both orthodox and irregular practitioners. Although access to medical services was uneven, providing medical care was a means for employers to demonstrate both their paternalistic concern for their employees and to discipline them. Medical experts played an increasingly important role as the gatekeepers to welfare services, but their authority was sometimes challenged. Many diseased and disabled mineworkers sought independence and negotiation in their dealings with doctors, and some decisions, whether to dissect the bodies of those who had succumbed to lung

diseases or to amputate damaged limbs, were opposed outright by miners and their families. Therefore, although the injuries and diseases of coalminers were subject to much medical theorising in this period, the process of 'medicalisation' was far from smooth. Right up to the end of our period, the authority of medical men in diagnosing conditions or prescribing a course of treatment was never absolute.⁸

As well as increasing the demand for medical services within the coalfields, the large number of mining accidents also put pressure on existing welfare resources such as the Poor Law, stimulating new responses. While friendly societies flourished in coalmining areas, some were reluctant to admit those working in such a dangerous occupation lest they bankrupt schemes based on shaky actuarial foundations. This problem was addressed by the amalgamation of societies into affiliated orders, but mineworkers were sometimes asked to pay higher subscriptions. Friendly societies and trade union accident funds provided important assistance to injured mineworkers, but only on a relatively short-term basis and with payments often decreasing over time. From 1862 the Northumberland and Durham Permanent Relief Fund established a new model of relief, which recognised that disabled members needed lasting support rather than the diminishing returns of friendly society payments. This model soon spread to other mining districts and was well entrenched in most English coalfields by the end of our period.⁹ While miners continued to receive support from a variety of sources, sometimes simultaneously, the permanent relief fund movement symbolically represented a significant staging post in the development of the modern idea of disability as a long-term, permanent state of incapacity that required dedicated welfare responses.¹⁰

The physical toll of coalmining affected how miners were viewed by others and how they saw themselves. It was common for middle-class commentators to describe coalminers as a 'distinct race of men', whose working conditions produced certain physical and intellectual characteristics and whose exposure to accident affected their social and moral 'habits'. Occupationally specific deformities were viewed as 'trade marks' that delineated coalminers and other groups of workers in industrialising Britain, demonstrating the importance of the body in social classification. Within mining communities, the shared risk of death or disablement fostered a strong sense of mutualism and helped to shape working-class identity.¹¹ The figure of the disabled miner was a powerful rhetorical tool for trade unionists, used to support their campaigns for better safety and provision for the injured, as well as to stand for the sufferings of all coalminers in the face of what mining activist Edward Rymer (himself 'half blind' and a 'cripple') termed the 'mighty Juggernaut' of industrial capitalism.¹² The perceived 'victimhood' of disabled people could be a powerful resource in

highlighting the cruel practices of employers during disputes, as the stories of elderly and impaired persons being evicted from company housing during the 1844 strike in north-east England illustrated. Yet disabled miners were involved more proactively in industrial politics, sometimes independently of trade unions, which might not always sympathise with their cause. Breaking terms of employment to escape unhealthy or dangerous collieries, seeking to supply shortages of labour during strikes, challenging colliery doctors, or fighting for compensation in the courtroom were all means by which disabled miners asserted themselves politically during this period.

While this book has opened up new perspectives on disability in Britain's coalfields, it points to the need for further research. First, more work is needed to compare the experiences of coalminers with those disabled in other important economic sectors such as textiles, metallurgy, transport and agriculture. If the medical and welfare needs of other British disabled workers were similar to those of miners, how did their different occupational backgrounds and cultures affect their experiences of care, of work, of family and how others treated and perceived them during the Industrial Revolution? By exploring other sectors of the industrialising economy, and by comparing further the experiences of workers in the industrial areas of Europe, North America, and the Majority World, a more nuanced picture still of disability and industrialisation will emerge.¹³ Second, more research is needed on gendered understandings and experiences of disablement in relation to work. Even in areas where women were employed underground before 1842, mining was considered a 'masculine' occupation, and it is men's experiences of disability that were foregrounded in our sources. However, when female Scottish coal bearers complained to the 1842 Children's Employment Commission of their ability to bear children being affected by their bodily toil, they presented different fears about disablement to those expressed by their husbands and sons. When disability is seen as inability to work, it is often the ability to do *paid* work that is had in mind. Opening up definitions of work to include the numerous unpaid tasks traditionally performed by women, from the emotional labour of caring to domestic chores, will allow new perspectives on the relationship between disability and work to emerge.

Finally, it is likely that the experiences of those disabled in coalmining, an industry valued by contemporaries for its vital role in fuelling industrial expansion, differed from those disabled people whose economic activities took place within asylums or sheltered workshops.¹⁴ Trade unionists and others, while often emphasising the suffering of disabled miners also claimed status for them, seeing them as deserving the same level of recognition as military veterans who sacrificed their limbs in battle.¹⁵ Such honorific – and deeply

gendered – claims were rarely made for disabled people working in institutional settings.¹⁶ Previously able-bodied workers who experienced impairment through bodily ‘sacrifice’ might be able to claim a sense of heroism or worth that was not as easily accessible for those with congenital impairments or who had become disabled before starting work. Future research needs to explore more closely the varying experience of work between different disabled populations rather than focusing simply on the ‘disabled’/‘able-bodied’ dichotomy.

Analysing historical experiences of disability and work reminds us that disabled people have always worked in the past whenever they had the opportunity or ability to do so.¹⁷ We need to recognise and value the economic contributions of disabled people, but not use the past to make unrealistic policies or demands in the present. Finding people with crutches and wooden legs in Britain’s nineteenth-century coal mines shatters preconceptions that such work was the sole preserve of the ‘able-bodied’, but their history is not intended to be ‘inspirational’. Their presence reflects more the struggle for survival and the inadequacies of other sources of support than it does economic empowerment. And while aspects of Victorian paternalism may look attractive in the context of the increasing casualisation of labour in twenty-first-century Britain that has left many without access to sick pay, it would be anachronistic to use it as evidence of a more ‘positive’ attitude towards disabled people’s employment in the past.¹⁸ Those who made the journey from pithead to sickbed and beyond faced significant challenges but their story is crucial to understanding our industrial past.

Notes

- 1 ‘Felling Pit Disaster Remembered on 200th Anniversary’, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-18194972>, accessed 26 March 2017.
- 2 Sarah F. Rose, ‘“Crippled Hands: Disability in Labor and Working Class History”, *Labor*, 2:1 (2005), 45–7.
- 3 Ava Baron, ‘Masculinity, the Embodied Male Worker, and the Historians’ Gaze’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 69 (2006), 154.
- 4 Joanna Bourke, ‘Housewifery in Working-Class England 1860–1914’, *Past and Present*, 143 (1994), 163–97.
- 5 For a comparative case study, see John Williams-Searle, ‘Cold Charity: Manhood, Brotherhood and the Transformation of Disability, 1870–1900’, in Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (eds), *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 157–86.
- 6 PP 1842 (382), *Children’s Employment Commission. Appendix to the First Report of Commissioners. Mines. Part II*, 552.
- 7 Kirsti Bohata, Alexandra Jones, Mike Mantin and Steven Thompson, *Disability in*

Industrial Britain: A Cultural History of Illness, Injury and Impairment in the Coal Industry, 1880–1948 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

- 8 See also James C. Riley, *Sick Not Dead: the Health of British Workingmen during the Mortality Decline* (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), ch. 3.
- 9 George L. Campbell, *Miners' Insurance Funds: their Origins and Extent* (London: Waterlow and Sons, 1880).
- 10 Roger Cooter, 'The Disabled Body' in Roger Cooter and John Pickstone (eds), *Companion to Medicine in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 367–84.
- 11 See also Rose, "'Crippled" Hands', 41–2.
- 12 Edward Rymer, 'The Poor Miner', *Miner and Workmen's Advocate*, no. 112, 22 April 1865.
- 13 Daniel Blackie, 'Disability and Work during the Industrial Revolution in Britain', in Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick and Kim E. Nielsen (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
- 14 Sarah F. Rose, 'Work', in Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss and David Serlin (eds), *Keywords for Disability Studies* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015), 188.
- 15 For example, 'Institution for Disabled Miners', *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 18 February 1837.
- 16 Cf. Gordon Phillips, *The Blind in British Society: Charity, State and Community, c. 1780–1930* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), ch. 3.
- 17 Rose, 'Work', 187.
- 18 Emma Jacobs, 'The Gig Economy: Freedom From a Boss, or Just a Con?', *New Statesman*, 20 March 2017, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/economy/2017/03/gig-economy-freedom-boss-or-just-con>, accessed 28 March 2017.