LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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Response to Dr Gibson’s article; mining remains a hazardous occupation

Dear Sir,

The numbers of miners killed in colliery accidents in the United Kingdom, quoted by Dr Kirstie Gibson in her piece, ‘In search of the black stuff’ (OM 2012;62:16), make sombre reading, but the tally is far from complete. In 1912, the Dinas Porth mines rescue station was built by the local coal owners’ association, near the point where the Rhondda Fawr and Rhondda Fach valleys meet. It is still in operation and a visitor may read the first entry in the station’s log of call-outs; it was to the Senghenydd colliery in the neighbouring valley; an explosion and fire killed four hundred and thirty-nine men and boys. No family in the valley was untouched by the disaster. The monument in the village bears the names of all those who were killed that day in October 1913.

I never drive through the unremarkable ex-mining village of Cresswell in Derbyshire, without reflecting on a day in September 1950 when, just 3 years after the National Coal Board (NCB) took over the management of the UK’s coal mines, an underground explosion killed 80 miners. Here too, the village memorial is a permanent reminder of a dark cloud cast over the whole community.

Nationalized industries are out of vogue now, and not everyone remembers the NCB (later the British Coal Corporation) with affection, but during its 48-year history, the corporation put a lot of effort into not only defining and controlling pneumoconiosis but also measures to reduce the industry’s appalling death and serious injury rates. By 1995, when the industry was privatized, fatal and serious injury rates, per numbers of miners employed, had fallen significantly, but not unfortunately to zero.

I myself was involved in the aftermath of the accident at Bilsthorpe colliery in Nottinghamshire, in 1993, when an unprecedented fall of a massive segment of rock beginning in the strata far above the workings killed three men and left three more trapped for several days. A year or so later, an inrush of oil threatened a group of men working underground at nearby Thoresby colliery; they were escaping, but one decided to return to the heading to retrieve his tools; tragically, he never made it. Mining remains a hazardous occupation.

The memorials at Senghenydd, Aberfan, Cresswell and elsewhere bear witness to the way in which communities come together to help each other after great disasters. But the loss is just as great for the lone family that has lost a father or a son in an industrial accident. There may be no civic memorial, but every personal tragedy is one too many.

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