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## Reframing history: Commemorating one of the world's biggest industrial disasters

The Oaks Colliery disaster killed at least 360 miners in December 1866 – just two weeks before Christmas – and was the world's biggest industrial disaster of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it remained virtually unknown for 150 years.

Even the names of all those who died were not documented until the local community tried to set the record straight and remember the victims of the tragedy. This resulted in (among other things) a documentary called *Black Snow* which won the Best Research Film of the Year award at The AHRC *Research in Film Awards* 2018. The director of *Black Snow*, Stephen Linstead and colleagues from different agencies who collaborated on the memorial project, explain why the men and women who have died in the course of their work, including those from accidents and disasters, should be commemorated on a special day.

### Why does the Oaks Colliery Disaster still matter?



Professor Stephen Linstead, pictured at the Oaks Colliery Disaster Memorial in Barnsley Town Centre. Photo courtesy Victor De Jesus.

On December 12th, 1866 an explosion of methane and coal dust at the Oaks Colliery, Barnsley, killed a reported 334 miners. A second explosion, so violent that it blew the cage out of the second shaft and lodged it in the headgear, killed a further 27 rescuers the following day. But the pit hadn't finished yet – though there were no more deaths, it exploded a further 15 times over the following days. It remains the worst mining disaster in England; at the time it was the worst in the world, and remained so for the rest of the century. But although the two Command Reports laid in Parliament on May 7, 1867 agreed on a figure for the dead of 361, there is no list of specific names to be found. Several lists at the time appeared in various newspapers, but none have the figure of 361. None have the same list of names, and in each list there are obvious errors, repetitions, and misspellings.

Furthermore, the report submitted by the substitute mines inspector, Dickinson, favoured the explanation of shot-firing as being the cause. Dickinson was very critical of the work system employed, and this would have tended to place blame or at least responsibility on management. Blackwell, the government commissioner appointed to report on the inquest, formed a judgment, based on the locations of the dead and their injuries, that a faulty lamp was likely to have been the cause. This would have placed culpability firmly on the workers. The coroner avoided coming down on either side, and held back from recommending a specific and full inquiry into the cause of the disaster. The response was press and public outrage, with local gossip of conspiracy and cover-up, but to no avail.

The dead were buried in local cemeteries including St Paul's at Monk Bretton and Christ Church, Ardsley, where a memorial raised by subscription in 1879 names 35 parishioners laid to rest there and mentions a total of 354 total victims, though not by name. In 1913, a local benefactor, Samuel Cooper, raised a private memorial to the 27 named brave rescuers who died. But there was no memorial that recorded accurately in number or name the total number of victims. Several were in paupers' graves, and recent research led by Stephen Miller suggests that as many as 169 may remain underground today. There was no tally system at the mines and no requirement on mine owners to record a death and receive a death certificate. Given the confusion surrounding the disaster, it was easy for the owners to resist the charge that they were at fault, a widely and passionately held public view.

Rentier capitalist landowners, some of whom were in parliament, were anxious to play the disaster down. The minority Conservative government of Derby and Disraeli was trying to deal with the concurrent effects of a financial crash, a massive spike in industrial deaths and injuries, and extreme pressure for political reform. If the government wished to achieve its objectives it would be unwise for them to risk losing their collective support. The overdue but game-changing Great Reform Bill was passed in 1867, whilst the Oaks, instead of being *cause celebre*, became absorbed into the wider industrial safety review – where it did nevertheless influence change, especially in the codification of training for mine managers and operators. Soon it was all but forgotten in both the public mind and scholarship – only a handful of articles and chapters are devoted to it in the following century and a half. Families that had lost their menfolk became matriarchies and carried on with the work of survival.

## Marking 150 years since the disaster



The approach to the Oaks Colliery. Photo courtesy Alan Andrews.

In 2016 two parallel projects set out to mark the 150th Anniversary of the disaster. One, led by Stephen Miller of the Dearne Valley Landscape Partnership, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), used volunteers to carry out 5,000 hours of archive research into registrar's and parish records to try to correct some of the errors in existing lists and provide more information about the dead, what they did, and where they came from. This research underpinned the Barnsley Museums exhibition *When the Oaks Fired*, which Stephen curated in 2016-7. They came up with a potential list of 383 names of possible victims. Another, led by the charity People and Mining and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), also relied on volunteers to raise money for a remarkable memorial statue, created by "people's sculptor" Graham Ibbeson.

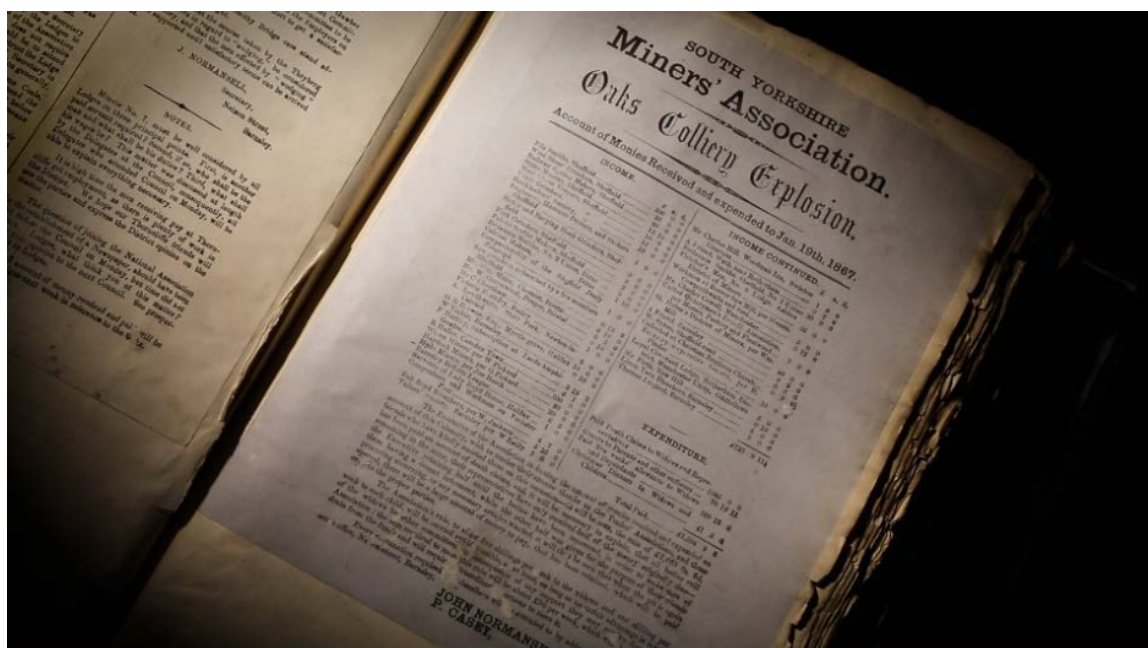
**Dr Sarah Hughes supported People and Mining and the NUM** in their efforts, and the HLF awarded funding for research and educational resources as part of this second initiative, which included a book, website, and a short film. Arts and Humanities Research Council funding allowed this to expand into a multimedia Roadshow (Stephen Linstead with musical director Jed Grimes, which played the 2018 Edinburgh Fringe) and a CD. The film, *Black Snow*, directed by Stephen and co-produced with Andy Lawrence, uses virtual reality by examiner Alan Andrews to recreate the disaster and has garnered several international artistic, technical and humanitarian awards, including one from Hollywood, and, most recently Best Research Film of 2018 at the AHRC *Research in Film Awards* at BAFTA.

So why is all this attention merited? How is the Oaks still relevant to us today? To take the second question first, one story the film tells is of a "left-behind" community finding itself in rediscovering and remembering a forgotten disaster. The heroic, as the Greeks knew well, resides as much in enduring, being resilient and overcoming trials. Despite the fact that this community has almost been written off for three decades, like the Oaks widows it remained

very much alive, and very much still possessed of those essential survival qualities of forbearance, creativity, discipline, good humour, practicality, sociality and mutual caring. *It's extraordinary in its ordinariness.*

The interviewees involved in research by Sarah Hughes emphasised a focus on a collective approach within their local communities. They described how the pit was a place of learning where experienced workers passed on skills and knowledge in relation to their work in the colliery, but also in a wider sense in relation to ideas, institutions and practices. A deeper understanding of the values and motivations held by those living within post-industrial communities, in which local institutions and practices are rooted, can only enrich policy-making seeking to tackle the challenges of such communities.

## Bringing local histories to the fore



South Yorkshire Miners Federation - Donations and Payouts Jan 1867. Photo courtesy Andy Lawrence.

Regarding the first question, our inability to resolve some simple questions about the facts of the Oaks should provoke some thought about what else we customarily overlook in our social history. *The contributions of those who cannot be named was just as important as the contributions of those on whom history's spotlight has shone.* This can only be recognised if we educate today's young on the context in which their ancestors' lives were lived, what was and what might have been otherwise. Hughes' participants showed great enthusiasm for this and described the passing on, from one generation to another, of ideas, knowledge and a sense of history. Paul Darlow noted one comment that 'you've got to fight for a consciousness about what's happened in the past, because all history is subjective, isn't it?'

Darlow's work has shown how this sense of collectivity imbued the Oaks memorial projects' success in bringing together both like-minded individuals, communities and agencies. The effects are already tangible, as hundreds of primary-age schoolchildren in the area now know the Oaks disaster story and importantly its relevance to their local histories. In 2016 at the

time of the disaster's 150th anniversary, few, if any, local schools covered the disaster in their curriculum and few local people had any familiarity with it. Demand for both the book and DVD and AHRC supported "Roadshow" activities, currently extending between Scotland and Kent, has revealed keen and passionate interest from a much wider audience of teachers, lecturers and the general public.

The film has had exposure in international competition and through various media outlets – press, magazines, radio, and TV – and around seven million people have now seen or heard about the disaster. England's worst mining cataclysm is slowly finding its unforgettable place in the national memory. Remembering the events at the Oaks Colliery in 1866 enabled the communities of the former coalfield areas to share their history and importantly *reignite their sense of place and tradition*. In the face of economic, social and political changes which have eroded the class solidarity of these areas, the importance of this cannot be overestimated and the challenge is to build upon and extend this awareness. As Stephen Linstead said in his AHRC Best Research Film Award acceptance speech, his film is "not about the past, it's about the future."

## A call for commemoration



Professor Stephen Linstead, pictured at the Miners Hall, at the NUM Yorkshire office in Barnsley, pictured with a 'Davy' lamp, similar to those that would have been used at the time of the Oaks Colliery Disaster. Photo courtesy of Victor De Jesus.

Social, economic and political successes were achieved on the back of the service and sacrifice of industrial and support workers no less than military victories – wars are fought between economies as much as armies, after all. Even when a few major disasters are memorialized, incidents where one, two or three were killed were routinely unremarked and unreported. It's time that we, as the UK, made an occasion – a day in the year – to simply and with due respect, remember and *bestow deserved dignity on those who served and*

*sacrificed in the non-military everyday.* Those who, whether managers, workers, or public servants, on land, underground, on sea or in the air, in a single incident or through long-term effects, expended themselves in the national interest and died trying to make a living. They deserve no less, and should need to wait no longer.

### **This feature was co-authored by**

**Stephen Linstead:** Professor of Management Humanities and leader of the Management and Humanities Research Theme at The York Management School, University of York.

**Dr Sarah Hughes:** a consultant with over 15 years of experience managing projects and programmes in the museums and heritage sector. Her PhD, from the University of Leicester School of Museum Studies, explores cultural participation and value in former coal mining communities in South Yorkshire.

**Stephen Miller:** Former Community Engagement Officer for the Dearne Valley Landscape Partnership, curating the exhibition *When the Oaks Fired* (2016-17). He is currently a freelance heritage consultant.

**Paul Darlow:** A former miner, and Education and Research Officer for the HLF-funded Oaks Memorial project, authoring *The Oaks Disaster: A Living History* (2017). He is currently working with the NUM on archive preservation.