

ONE YEAR!

Photographs and the Miners' Strike 1984 - 85

To coincide with the 40th anniversary of the 1984-85 miners' strike this exhibition looks at the vital role photographs played during the year-long struggle against pit closures.

Industrial disputes occurred regularly throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, forcing the hands of both Labour and Conservative governments as deindustrialisation became a looming prospect. But none of these strikes were met with the same militancy as the one called (controversially without a national ballot) on March, 4th 1984, in opposition to the proposed pit closures by the National Coal Board.

When the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher faced off against the National Union of Mineworkers, led by Arthur Scargill, a political fault line formed. The government's plans to reshape Britain from an industrial nation into one driven by global market forces collided with a clear and committed opposition. It resulted in a year-long battle waged across the industrial regions of Britain, spilling into the major cities, becoming one of our longest and most bitter industrial disputes.

This exhibition displays photographs made during the strike and looks at how they were used and disseminated through the visual media of the time, another frontier this war was waged along. One side used images to illustrate chaos on picket lines being sprung by a so-called 'enemy within'. While those in support of the strike attempted to debase such media bias, by instead showing the violence acted out by the state physically in police brutality, as well as the humiliating cruelty of the economic destitution endured.

Many of the works show the solidarity between communities out on strike and document the wide-ranging support for the miners from people across vast geographies and demographics. Brenda Prince's depictions of women in Nottinghamshire, picketing and travelling to fundraise whilst also organising food packages, counteract the stereotypical portrayals of women at the time.

Images covering the essential participation in the strike by groups such as *Women Against Pit Closures*, and *Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM)* helped to forge new representations of people often marginalised or objectified by visual media. An example of the catharsis and blurring of social barriers during the strike is profoundly felt in Imogen Young's photograph showing

the joyful dancing by members of LGSM with the members of Neath Coelbren miners club on St. David's Day in 1985.

These affirming scenes of humanity captured the imaginations of journalists, activists and photographers, many of whom used their positions to champion the miners' cause. Photojournalists John Harris and John Sturrock showed the day-to-day activities such as union meetings, winter picket lines, and coal riddling. These more mundane depictions of the strike are suddenly punctured by police violence administered with impunity during the mismatched battles on picket lines. Sturrock's coverage of the strike begins on the first picket line at Cortonwood Colliery in early March 1984 and continues until the return to work marches a whole year later, covering picket lines from Bilston Glen in Scotland all the way down to Didcot in South East England. Both photographers' images were used by left wing and union press, as they made careful decisions around who to licence to, knowing well the fractious mediatic landscape and its potential pitfalls.

Displayed in the exhibition are numerous iterations of John Harris' iconic image from Orgreave, depicting a police officer swinging his truncheon at Lesley Boulton, an activist from *Women Against Pit Closures*. The photograph epitomised the violence applied by

the state through policing and, when emblazoned on badges, posters, and t-shirts, became a ubiquitous image of the oppressed versus oppressor.

These ephemera materials reconnect us to the urgent ways photographs and visual media were utilised during the strike. They also show the fundraising efforts during the miners' strike, such as postcards, plates, badges and LP's produced by record labels featuring artists like the Flying Pickets and Billy Bragg. Satire, comedy, and the colloquial language of those being downtrodden by the government was also emblazoned on posters and in publications for all to hear and see. The working classes in Britain, so often ignored, overlooked and patronised now took centre stage; the visibility of numbers in support forming an archive of resistance that is now etched into the country's history.

As the strike intensified, police forces from other regions were drafted in to control areas with which they had no connection; this desensitising of the relations between police and the communities on strike was controversial and seen as a strategy by the state to strengthen its offence against picketing. A collection of snapshots by Swansea Police visiting Derbyshire for picket-line duties shows photography in its most vernacular usage. These personal images

made for sharing hand-to-hand cover ordinary moments such as group portraits, visits to local sites and picnicking. Although these glimpses behind police-lines on the surface feel quotidian, the violence percolating around these disarming scenes is often betrayed through subtle details like the shin-pads poking out from a sitting policeman's trousers.

An intimate view from the other side of the dispute is illustrated by the photo albums compiled by Philip Winnard, made whilst on strike from Houghton Main Colliery. Winnard began a rigorous documentation of his experience picketing, chronologically spanning the entire year of the strike. Day-to-day activities such as handing out newsletters, attending marches and waiting on picket-lines show a genuine camaraderie between the miners and Winnard's camera, at what was a tense time for photographers due to the skewed media coverage. His images of strike-breakers have a profound tension, in particular the long shots of workers loading coal - each isolated by the camera, surveillance-style. Visually they hold a heavy ambiguity, yet act as powerful records for the conflicted positions that the strike put individuals in. Altogether the album pages have a sequential quality throughout, where multiple images of an event accumulate, in a sense mapping the territories in which the dispute took place.

The geography of the strike was broad and in the exhibition are photographs from Scotland to South Wales as well as key mining areas in England, from County Durham to Yorkshire. Coal fields were often based quite far from metropolitan areas, and in the majority of such cases were the main employer of a region, making the decision to close pits much more than a simple political move. Chris Killip's seminal book *In Flagrante* charted this changing landscape in the North East from 1973 to 1985, observing the affect that these changes had on the surrounding communities. As part of this work, Killip photographed extensively during the miners' strike, for which he was awarded a miners' lamp by Arthur Scargill.

Within the areas documented the coal industry symbolised tradition, history and heritage, with the communities inextricably connected to it. Photographers Roger Tiley and Howard Sooley, both grew up in areas affected by the strike, Tiley in the Gwent valleys and Sooley in Doncaster. Each took to photography as a line of work, deviating away from what was expected of them as members of coal mining communities. Both were to capture the events of the 1984-85 strike, in some of their earliest published photographs.

There is one work included in this exhibition that was not made in 1984 or 1985. In 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic, another seismic moment that has highlighted inequity in British society, Jenny Matthews began revisiting her archive, allowing the tactile nature of embroidery to reactivate the causes and issues she covered during a forty year career. Images of the miners' strike taken whilst a member of the photo agency Format, are weaved together into a photo-quilt, reminiscent of the banners held up at miners' galas.

It brings us to the point of the present and questions how we should best reflect on this seismic moment, or even try to commemorate the sacrifice and upheaval communities went through during the strike. Those born after the period will gain a vivid understanding of Britain in the 1980s through the images, footage, art and music that was produced during this anxious and divided time. The legacy of the State's actions are also profoundly felt in the now, manifesting in a lack of organised labour, tribalised politics, a weaponised media, and a level of privatisation unimaginable 40 years ago.

It is hard to gauge the impact that photographs contribute to actual change in society, but they do clearly divert, express and galvanise support and momentum during social movements. They also form a powerful record, and forty years on, the miners' strike presented here through the photographs and ephemera collectively bring it all alive again. Regardless of the strike's outcome, these photographs survive to remind us of the imagination, unity and hope of those who came together in defence of their communities and the basic right to work and to survive.

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