Coal mining was (and remains) an extremely dangerous industry in which miners worked in an unpredictable environment where their bodies were exposed to a variety of hazards ranging from gas and explosions to dust, rock falls and equipment failure. As a result, they were more at risk of accidents and diseases than other industrial workers. Between 1910 and 1914, for example, 16.52 per cent of British miners were injured at work and 0.14 per cent were killed, whereas for cotton workers the figures were 1.98 per cent and 0.007 per cent respectively.

The three papers in this session will explore how workers, owners and trade unions responded to the risk of disability in three British coalfields: south Wales, the north east and central Scotland. By covering the period 1800 – 1949, the session will allow comparisons over time as well as place and enable an engagement with other industries and other national contexts.

**Paper 1: Mutual Interest or Distrust? Managing the Risk of Injury in the Nineteenth-Century Coalfields of North East England.**
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**Paper 2: Shattered Bodies: Risk, Disability and Compensation in the Scottish Coalfields 1897-1930.**
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**Paper 3: The South Wales Miners’ Federation and the Perception and Representation of Risk and Danger in the Coal Industry, 1898-1947.**
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All three papers stem from a Wellcome Trust Programme Award entitled ‘Disability and Industrial Society: A Comparative Cultural History of British Coalfields, c.1780-1948’. The project is a joint venture between staff at Swansea, Aberystwyth, Northumbria, Strathclyde and Glasgow Caledonian Universities, and over a five-year period will examine how disability was conceptualized and experienced by those living and working in three of the foremost coalmining regions of Britain: south Wales, the north east, and central Scotland.

**Keywords:** Disability, coal, owners, miner.

Coal mining was a hazardous occupation which caused a high incidence of traumatic injury. Drawing upon the records of local collieries, trade unions, friendly societies and mutual protection associations, this paper traces the incremental growth of methods to manage this risk in the North East of England over the course of the nineteenth century. Focusing on the role played by mine workers and mine owners, the paper examines the extent to which these two groups collaborated to minimise risk, and the political and economic factors which shaped their responses.

Regional responses appear to have been initiated by miners, but facilitated by employers. At the end of the eighteenth century, coal owners in the area responded to demands from miners by implementing smart money, a discretionary form of compensation for injured mine workers. The scheme was funded by coal owners, and miners whose injuries arose through what could be construed as their own negligence at work were not eligible for compensation. Miners also played a pivotal part in the establishment of the Permanent Relief Fund in 1862. Registered as a friendly society, this body provided members with a source of income should they become disabled at work and by the end of the nineteenth century, virtually all miners within the region had joined the scheme. Seemingly, the Fund represented a mechanism for compensation run by miners, for miners, with coal owners having only a peripheral role. Yet closer study reveals that coal owners were keen to promote the Fund and sought covertly to exert some control over its operations.

Under the 1880 Employers’ Liability Act and the 1897 Workmen’s Compensation Act, employers became legally responsible for injuries and death sustained by employees in the workplace. The paper will examine how these national measures mediated existing regional solutions to the problem of mining-related injuries. New mutual protection associations formed to provide insurance for coal owners against claims by injured workers. These associations disputed employers’ liability and sought to prove that injured mineworkers had been negligent. However, employers continued to offer smart money in an attempt to discourage men applying for compensation – and get them back to work.

Analysing the extent to which miners and coal owners collaborated to implement and run these different forms of insurance and payment strategies over the course of the century, this paper will tease out where the interests of miners and employers converged – and diverged. In so doing, it seeks to shed light on the strategies adopted by both groups towards the risk of workplace injury, and account for the favouring of financial solutions over preventive measures.

Keywords: Disability, coal, compensation, accidents

Taking risks was an inherent part of the dangerous work that coal miners did and the result was that mining communities had a higher proportion of disabled people than any others before Second World War. Studies of how workers negotiated risk and danger and were compensated for such bodily damage have tended to focus on the formulation and operation of policy at the national level whilst neglecting the specificities of the local context (including cultural dimensions) and failing to draw out the competing discourses of the key players around disability. The coming of ‘no-fault’ workmen’s compensation systems for such disabilities in Europe and North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries has been hailed as a revolutionary reform. This paper will examine the practical working of the system on the ground, as it were, in the Scottish coalfields over the first thirty years or so of its operation. We will discuss the nature and levels of injuries and disabilities in coal mining in Scotland in the early twentieth century and the ways in which changes in workmen’s compensation after 1897 allowed miners to claim against their employers for their injuries and resulting disablement in new ways (including for a range of chronic occupational disabilities associated with knee and elbow damage (bursitis) and eye disease (nystagmus). It will be argued that this story needs to be understood within the local context, because Scotland had a particularly entrenched anti-trade union and authoritarian managerial culture and more advanced levels of mechanisation than elsewhere. Both impacted upon the body, as did the prevailing high risk macho work culture that characterised mining communities at this time.

The paper will draw on material collected from coal company accident books, court cases, insurance claims and trade union papers to investigate how different actors described, presented and experienced disability and just how miners sought to gain compensation for their work-induced disabilities. It will reveal the contested terrain of disability compensation struggles and the ways in which the miners, employers and medical professionals framed narratives of disability and bodily damage in ways that strengthened their arguments for/against monetary awards. This reveals much about prevailing attitudes towards disability at the community level in the pre-Second World War period. Building on and engaging with Bloor, Melling and Bufton’s work relating to South Wales, our argument will emphasise the agency of disabled miners and their advocates in Scotland who campaigned for higher compensation pay-outs in cases of permanent disability and evaluate the outcomes of this power struggle over responsibility for the damaged body.

The period covered will situate this analysis of risk and compensation within both a phase of tight labour markets pre-First World War and the onset of the interwar depression and mass unemployment in the 1920s. A key question will be to what extent did miners and their advocates (the trade unions) in Scotland prioritise disability and how did they develop strategies/tactics to mitigate the characteristic poverty and social exclusion that went along with disability through representing victims in compensation cases that a) provided some limited wage substitute in the case of permanent disability, and b) raised the likelihood of re-employment (and hence an opportunity to sustain self-esteem, independence and gender norms and identities associated with working class masculinity). Through a case study approach and examination of a cluster of primary sources not previously analysed, the paper will directly engage with and contribute to the ongoing debates on trade unions and the body.
Key words: Disability, coal, trade union; miner.

This paper will focus on the perceptions and representations of risks and dangers to the health, well-being and lives of workers in the coal industry of south Wales and will focus specifically on the South Wales Miners’ Federation, the main miners’ trade union for the region. It will focus on the period from 1898, the year of the Federation’s establishment, to the nationalisation of the industry in 1947. This period witnessed the south Wales coalfield becoming the largest coal-producing region of Britain and, in the spheres of medicine and occupational disease research, considerable scientific research into the risks faced by coalminers and the consequences of working conditions for their health and well-being.

More numerous and larger disasters, greater accident rates and higher levels of industrial injury, and a greater incidence of occupational disease all meant that south Wales was marked as the coalfield with the greatest risks to health and life in Britain. In addition, in the South Wales Miners’ Federation, founded in 1898, the region possessed a powerful and relatively militant trade union that was at the forefront of British industrial politics in the first half of the twentieth century and one that became one of the leading organisations in industrial welfare, workplace safety and occupational disease campaigning in the British labour movement. As such, south Wales offers an ideal case study to assess perceptions and representations of risk and danger in a particular context in which such concerns affected a large proportion of the population and were an important and highly contested political issue.

The South Wales Miners’ Federation took a keen interest in matters of safety, working conditions and health right from its inception and, in a variety of ways, attempted to ameliorate the worst effects of difficult working conditions on its members and place pressure on coal companies and the government to address these important issues. New technology was investigated and recommended by the Federation, lay Workmen Inspectors were appointed to assess working conditions, and repeated and detailed representations on working conditions and safety were made both at the local level of individual collieries but also on the national stage in negotiations with government departments and experts. Most of this campaigning was done in formalised negotiations between trade union, employers and the government but there were instances in which a more dramatic rhetoric was utilised by the Federation in the public sphere to raise awareness of the risks and dangers inherent in mining, and such variations in representations will form an important part of the paper.

In addition, the paper will avoid presenting the Federation as some sort of monolithic organisation and will focus on the varied and complicated nature of perceptions within the union. In particular, miners themselves were aware of the risks they faced in the course of their work and accepted them as part of the job but nevertheless campaigned, through the Federation, for the lessening of such risks. More than that, oral testimony suggests that a macho working culture at the coalface and a wage system based on piece-rates could, at times, undermine efforts to adopt recommended working practices. In such instances, trade union rhetoric and campaigning sat at odds with the work culture of its members.