

Background to the film

When Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979 she quoted St Francis of Assisi;

Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may we bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope.

- Over the following 11 years her policies, which did make the United Kingdom a competitor in the world market, divided the country.
- She privatises 20 State controlled companies (eg. telecommunications, power, petroleum, railways, airports, airlines, public transport, health care, postal services) and attacked the trade union movement.
- She tackled high inflation by raising interest rates and slashing public spending which resulted in an unemployment figure of 3.6 million. Recession hit the Northern region hardest.
- The Ridley Plan was a 1974 report on the nationalised industries in the UK. It was drawn up by the right-wing Conservative MP Nicholas Ridley. In the report he proposed how the next Conservative government could fight, and defeat, a major strike in a nationalised industry. These tactics were successfully employed during the miners' strike of 1984-85, when the National Union of Mineworkers was defeated by the Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher.
- She was determined to break the power of the miners. In 1984 The National Union of Mineworkers went on strike for a year over planned pit closures. They lost, the coal industry was sold off and communities had their hearts ripped out.
- The miner's strike became a symbolic struggle. When they lost there was great bitterness amongst blue collar workers.
- Coal was a nationalised industry – it was heavily subsidised.
- The government wanted to close unprofitable pits. Mines left open were to be operated under different conditions which greater mechanisation resulting in job losses), and greater efficiency resulting in higher profit.
- Thatcher brought in Ian McGregor who had already turned around British Steel – he halved the workforce in 2 years.
- In 1983 Britain had 170 working mines (in 2009 there are only 4 working deep mines)
- McGregor intended to close 20 mines – 20, 000 jobs lost and many communities would lose their primary source of employment.
- The government was prepared – 20, 000 police were deployed at £500, 00/day. Riot gear was assembled, riot shields, dogs, horses, helicopters.
- Police were encouraged to use intimidatory tactics – batons banging on shields, batons as weapon.
- From March 5 1984 various pits went on strike – on 12 March Arthur Scargill (Pres of NUM) declared the strike national.
- Over the next year miners struck.
- On 18 June what has become known as the Battle of Orgreave 10, 000 miners and 10, 000 police faced each other.

- Because the strike was declared illegal no benefits were available to strikers – had to rely on handouts, donations and charity.
- Over the year union funds were running out, over the winter many couldn't afford to pay for heating. Some families scavenged for coal in slag heaps – 3 teenagers died picking coal.
- The strike ended 3 March 1985 – some workers had already returned to whatever work they could get.
- Unemployment reaches 50% in some villages – industries dependant on the mines also suffered (engineering, transport) – migration to look for work left ghost towns.
- There was bitterness in communities between those who returning to work and those who held out, even though their families suffered. There were attacks on people deemed scabs, on their property, families, even pets. Tensions between pickets and scabs lasted for years (passed down from generation to generation) breaking the traditional sense of community.
- 6 pickets were killed over the year.
- Thatcher used police squads to protect scabs and control the picket lines. Hostility towards police is still felt in some communities.

With the Industrial revolution dependant on coal production mines and their associated communities of workers became an independent element in the British countryside. Small communities grew around the mines. Cottages were owned by companies and generations of families worked for the same company. An extraordinary sense of community developed around the shared conditions, needs, troubles associated with mining.

The cultural inheritance of coalmining communities

- Often physically and geographically isolated, with little contact with the outside world (recall Billy knows nothing of Durham's famous cathedral and Jacky has seen no need to ever go to London because there are no mines there).
- Economic dependence on mining – the town was virtually a company town – women were employed in the shops, libraries etc set up to support the community.
- The nature of work – dangerous, unhealthy, but a source of pride in that they worked hard and were the foundation of industry.
- The occupational homogeneity of the community with shared backgrounds, interests, social class.
- Leisure activities were shared with workmates.
- Within families there was the shared pride and link between generations (Jacky and Tony wear the same black leather jacket, and are seen going off together at the end – and we know Billy's boxing gloves belonged to Jacky's father who would also have been a miner).
- Employers had the power of ownership and worked found their power through trade union membership. Pit villagers would have had strong associations with their union and what it provided (the soup kitchen, the boxing lessons run by George, the works sitting around the hall).