

**OUR MINERS' MOMENT:
THE BATTLE TO SAVE HIGHER EDUCATION
FOR WORKING CLASS STUDENTS**

Alex Lockwood

The abandoned site of Easington Colliery is situated on England's North East Coast, less than nine miles from where I work at the University of Sunderland, teaching journalism. The mine was opened in 1899, and in its lifetime at least 180 miners lost their lives down the mine. It closed its last pit in [1993](#). Eight years earlier, between 1984 and 1985, miners from Easington Colliery went on strike with their fellow miners around the country to protest the Thatcher Government's planned changes to their jobs and industry. The [miners and their families suffered](#) loss of income, community, housing, livelihoods and, in the end, their sense of dignity and their sense of security. Take a look at the pictures in Keith Pattison's record of the strike in his stunning book of photography, [No Redemption](#). And look up the town now.

In the introduction to the book, David Peace writes:

The 1984–85 miners' strike was the most cataclysmic event in post-war British history. And the many legacies of the strike, and of the defeat of the National Union of Mineworkers, are spectres that still haunt Britain, and ruptures that still divide Britain, to an extent that is often difficult to comprehend, such is the enormity of the changes that the defeat of 1985 has wrought upon British society.

One fact, however, is easy to grasp – in 1983, there were approximately 200,000 miners working in 200 pits in Britain; in 2010, there are less than 4,000 miners working in less than 10 pits. (2010: 7)

On the eve of the [first ever joint march by the NUS and the UCU unions](#), protesting against the coalition government's proposed cuts to higher education, it was Easington I thought about. Perhaps this was inappropriate, because of the scale of the miners' strike compared with today's strike. But I thought not. And that's for two reasons:

1. Many of the students who come to study at my institution, Sunderland University, come from local wards such as Easington;

and

2. Take David Peace's quote; now change 'miners' for 'educators' and 'pits' for 'lecture theatres', and you have what could be, for the newer universities at least, in cities such as Sunderland and serving wards such as Easington, a complete catastrophe.

Will the changes to higher education have as cataclysmic an effect on British life as the miners' defeat? I don't know. Many people fear it will. All I can talk about is my experience here in the North East, the place I work for, and the students I teach. Will it divide Britain? The UCU, the NUS, the NUT and many other organisations believe it will. It could divide Britain again along class and economic lines, where higher education becomes once again a reserve of those who can afford it. But what makes nonsense of the cuts and raised tuition fees is that research shows [investment in higher education benefits the economy and society](#).

Easington is infamous for the way it is always name-checked when commentators discuss the government's measurement of poverty, [the Index of Multiple Deprivation](#), which measures health, education, unemployment, crime, living environment and income deprivation.

According to the government's communities department, in [2007](#) (PDF) 18% of all wards (officially called Lower layer Super Output Areas – or LSOAs) in the North East were amongst the 10% most

deprived in England; and nearly 50% of all wards in the North East were amongst the 30% most deprived in England.

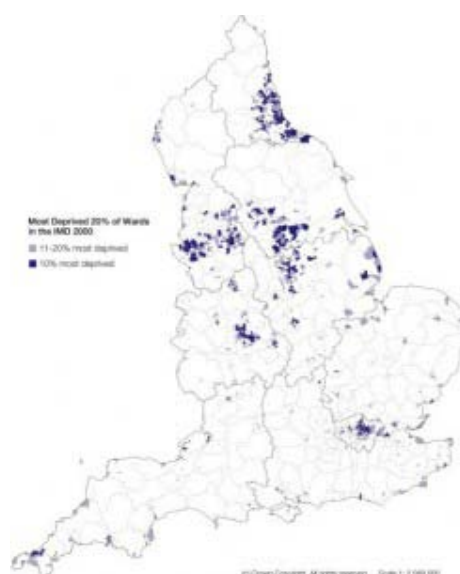


Fig. 1: Most deprived 20% of wards in 2000.
Click on the map to see a more detailed version

Look at the map: it charts the old cities of heavy industry. The North West, the North East. If Scotland and Wales were on this map, they too would carry the dark scars. Inner London and the old Cornish mining communities too. Surrey? No. Hertfordshire? No, again. While 50% of North East wards are in the worst 20%, only 7.5% of wards in the South East are in the same worst 20% in terms of deprivation.

Sunderland as a city was once the biggest shipbuilding city in the world. The last shipyard closed in 1988. The university's media centre was built on the site of the old shipyards, on the banks of the river Wear. The University is the second largest employer in the city. The public sector is part of life in the North East, because 20 or 25 years is still a very short period of time to regenerate a region devastated by the Thatcher era policies and the end of its history.

The university has done incredible work for the city and the region. Even so, I once spoke to the local MP, Chris Mullin, complaining about the lack of cultural activity in the city. 'You should have seen it 20 years ago', he said, affably. I'm glad I didn't.

Twenty years ago I was still growing up in London, its Croydon borough, hundreds of miles away from the mines of Yorkshire, County Durham or mid-Wales.

But I did grow up on an inner-city council estate. My mother was a single-parent for much of my childhood, and benefits supported her income from two jobs (a payroll clerk for Nestle and a cashier in the evenings for William Hill). She needed two jobs, plus child benefit, to support her children, me and my sister.

And an inner-city life would have been my fate if it wasn't for education—a free education, the same free education David Cameron and Nick Clegg have benefited from—that gave me opportunities to grow: first at college, and then at Cardiff University. I was the first of my family ever to go to University, and was recipient of a government grant that allowed me to benefit from the maturation that the university experience—critical thinking, volunteering, a social and active community—gave me.

I've come full-circle. I now teach students from similar lower socio-economic backgrounds. Students from some of the poorest wards in the UK: Washington, Peterlee, Sunderland, Gateshead, and Easington.

Sunderland University recruits somewhere in the region of 60% of its intake from this local area. But can I see these students from Easington, who have done so much just to get so far, coming to study at Sunderland when the level of debt they face taking on is upwards of £30,000? They come from debt-averse families, with low levels of income. So no, I can't. That's because I've gotten to know the students, hear their stories, hear about their families and their struggles.

I've been self-sufficient because I was given, rightly, the opportunities to better myself through education. But for [my students who are worried now](#), and [for my future students](#) of the [Jilted Generation](#), I am worried.

There is plenty about higher education that needs changing. Some students *do* drink their way through their three years. But very few give nothing back. Yes, there are performance issues within old, behemoth institutions that don't know how to performance manage staff. But thousands of academic struggle every day with bureaucracy, administration, changing goalposts, ridiculous

government attacks, budget cuts, and the diminution of the academic role, and *still* provide excellent teaching for their students. Vice-chancellors and universities have written letters to the newspapers to remind [MPs that they have a choice](#)—and that none of the UK's competitors are cutting teaching budgets for higher education.

Will 2012-13 be the moment when dozens of universities look at recruitment numbers and realise their business, which survives on critical mass, will have to fold? Students from Easington and towns like it all round the country will not take on that debt—nor should they. [A survey of over 900 NUT student and newly qualified teachers](#) (NQTs) shows a staggering 88% of students are already finding it difficult to make ends meet, while 49% are finding it either very difficult or impossible.

Large departments that do fantastic if stretched jobs in educating students in how to learn, in delivering pedagogical care and personal commitment, will simply cease to be. This government has wholesale sold out their future, and the future of a higher education of the newer universities that have widening participation and social mobility at their institutional cores. In 25 years, will we be looking at another map of deprivation where worsening poverty, living environment and health factors are linked to the closure of university departments, or whole universities? I hope not. [But that's what this government seems to intend](#).

There are alternatives. The [NUS has a blueprint for an alternative system](#). There are also ways to pay for education that don't shift the burden to the graduate. What about [the Tobin Tax on financial transactions to fund education](#) (and development, and poverty alleviation, and health...)? We must not let this government do to us what Thatcher did to the miners, the mining communities, and a generation of working-class people. Education is so much more than a consumer choice. Education is so much more than private enterprise. [As Martin McQuillan says](#):

This is a culture war in which critical thought is threatened with extinction. It is time to stop writing the monograph on the footnotes of Henry James, drop the myth of 'research' and 'teaching' institutions, and do something quickly to save everything any academic worthy of the name holds dear.

References

Peace, D. (2010) 'People Deserve Better' in Pattison, K. *No Redemption: The 1984-85 Miners' Strike in the Durham Coalfield*. Newcastle: Flambard Press.

Alex Lockwood is Senior Lecturer in Journalism at the University of Sunderland.