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Reimagining the role of coal mining heritage in the context of the fortieth anniversary of the 1984–85 UK Miners' strike, green energy transitions and the Carbocene

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the presentation of coal mining-related industrial heritage sites in the UK in the context of the conjuncture of the fortieth anniversary of the 1984–1985 UK miners' strike, the closure of the last coal-fired power station in the UK and contemporary global transitions away from fossil fuels. In addition to the national coal mining museums in each of the devolved nations, I analyse a number of exhibitions, events and commemorations relating to the anniversary of the miners' strike, considering their key messages or metanarratives. Given the circumstances leading up to and following the strike are widely acknowledged to have represented an extremely *unjust* historical energy and labour transition, I consider the potential contemporary role of such forms of industrial heritage in supporting communities and organisations in the transition away from fossil fuels, and the extent to which the existing suite of heritage narratives communicated by such institutions might in fact hamper or disincentivise such transitions. I do so as part of a broader reconsideration of the role of museums and heritage in the Anthropocene/Capitalocene, or to take Timothy Le Cain's (2021) term, the *Carbocene*, and the context of global climate breakdown.

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Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that coal production and consumption was central to the emergence of modern Britain and its identity as an industrial nation. Coal had been mined in Britain since before the Roman invasion (Hatcher 1993), but its production and consumption increased dramatically during the first industrial revolution, as fuel for steam engines and later steam locomotives, and for coke in the production of iron, as well as for domestic heating (Flinn and Stoker 1984). Many of the key technological developments of the industrial revolution were British, and by the middle of the eighteenth century, Britain was a dominant geopolitical power, both in terms of commerce, as the world's leading trading nation, and empire, controlling a vast global trading network with colonies throughout the world (Church, Hall, and Kanefsky

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1986). Coal production in the UK peaked in 1913 at 292 million tonnes, and in 1920, there were over a million people employed in coal mining in the UK (Supple 1988). While pay and working conditions increased for miners over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, often as a result of earlier strike action and worker's rights movements, the number of jobs slowly decreased after this peak, with new technological developments and the increased mechanisation of the industry, along with globalisation and the use of cheaper coal from elsewhere, as coal seams were depleted and became increasingly difficult and expensive to mine. This led to significant numbers of pit closures (Supple 1988), mirroring a more general decline in employment in the industry in other early industrialised countries such as the United States of America (see Aldrich 2025). Collieries throughout the UK were temporarily nationalised during the first and second world wars, and coal reserves themselves were permanently nationalised in 1942 (before this time underground coal reserves were owned by the owners of the land above them; Supple 1988). In 1947, all of Britain's collieries were nationalised by the Coal Industry Nationalisation Act 1946 and were run by the newly established National Coal Board (NCB, later known as British Coal) (Ashworth and Pegg 1986).

Until the late 1960s, coal was nonetheless still the main fuel used to produce energy in the UK, but this shifted dramatically over the following decades as power stations increasingly switched to cleaner and cheaper energy sources such as natural gas, nuclear and biomass, and indeed, to cheaper coal sources from overseas. Between 1947 and 1994, 950 mines were closed by UK governments. In 1994, Prime Minister John Major privatised British Coal after announcing 55 further pit closures, with the majority of operations transferred to the new company UK Coal. By the year 2000, the amount of coal imported for energy production overtook the amount produced nationally, a trend which has continued over the last two decades (Ashworth and Pegg 1986). In November 2015, the UK Government announced that all of the remaining 14 coal-fired power stations would be closed by 2025 as part of its international commitments as signatories to the United Nations Framework on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement, as well as its own Climate Change Act of 2008, to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2050. The last deep coal mine in the UK closed the same year (open-cast and drift mines continued for longer, although their numbers are diminishing and production is low). By 2024 there was only one active coal-fired power station operating in the United Kingdom, at Ratcliffe-on-Soar in Nottinghamshire. The Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station received its final shipment of coal by rail on Friday 28th of June 2024 (Hare 2024) and ceased operating in September 2024. The site is to be decommissioned and redeveloped as a 'zero-carbon technology and energy hub for the East Midlands' by Arup (2025).

In summary, over the past 50 years, Britain has moved from a nation built on coal mining and the industrial revolutions powered by coal, to a post-coal present. But what of coal's heritage and the ways in which it is interpreted and memorialised? The climate crisis and the coincidence of the fortieth anniversary of the UK coal miners' strike with the end of coal-fired power generation in the UK marks, in the words of Stuart Hall, a specific *conjuncture* (e.g. Hall 2012; Hall et al. 1978) which makes a consideration of these questions, in the light of an emerging 'greenlash' (Forni 2024) against national and international sustainability policies, particularly meaningful.

The 1984–1985 UK miners’ strike

The 1984–1985 United Kingdom miners’ strike is largely understood to represent a defining moment in the history of British coal mining and the biggest industrial dispute in post-war Britain. It also constitutes a pivotal moment in the UK’s shift from a social democratic economic and political model to a market-led, neoliberal one (for detailed accounts of the strike, its context and aftermath see, for example, Adeney and Lloyd 1986; Beynon and Hudson 2021; Gildea 2024; Hencke and Beckett 2009; Milne 1994; Samuel 1977; Samuel, Bloomfield, and Boanas 1987; Williams 2014, 2016, 2019).¹ The strike, called for by Arthur Scargill, President of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) against the National Coal Board (NCB), began as a result of the proposed economic closure of 20 pits by prime minister Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government and associated job losses. It ran from the 6th of March 1984 to the 3rd of March 1985 and involved more than 142,000 people. It saw violent confrontations between police, and picketers and demonstrators supporting the picket, and ultimately resulted in the defeat of the union by the government, leading to a weakening of the power of trade unions, job losses and a significant reduction in the scale of the UK coal mining industry. Many mine workers and their families experienced significant hardships during and after the strike. The accompanying pit closures and job losses – which often impacted whole villages, towns and cities and which came without a clear or fair pathway for transition to new employment opportunities – have contributed to serious long-term poverty, and conflicting attitudes towards the union and strikes has led to long-term political and social fragmentation between strikers and strike-breakers, their families and friends in effected areas, which included parts of Scotland, North East England, Derbyshire, Yorkshire, South Wales and Kent (see Beynon and Hudson 2021; Gildea 2024).

Although this was also a feature of early writing on the strike (e.g. Massey and Wainwright 1985; Morris 1986), it is worth noting that an increasing number of research projects and publications have led to a significant reconsideration of wider issues of race, gender and sexuality to engage intersectionally with the strike’s wider socio-historical context (e.g. Kelliher 2021; Yusoff 2015). Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the Black Miners Museum project, founded in 2013 as part of an initiative led by Nottingham News Centre CIC, and directed by historian Norma Gregory (Black Miners Museum 2025). This project has also curated a number of temporary touring exhibitions throughout the UK. Collections related to the Lesbians and Gay Men Support the Miners (LGSM) group, a campaign group whose story was popularised by the film ‘Pride’ in 2014, and the associated group Lesbians Against Pit Closures (LAPC), are now held in the collections of Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, Bishopsgate Institute and Manchester Peoples History Museum (see further discussion in Kelliher 2014; Leeworthy 2016; E. Smith and Leeworthy 2016; Tate 2017). A number of revisionist histories have also focussed on the important role of women in the strike (e.g. Shaw and Mundy 2005; Spence and Stephenson 2007, 2009; Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson 2013). There has similarly been a significant wave of recent publication concerned precisely with learning from the history of the social transitions involved with the decline of coal, connecting this with the need for more just and fair contemporary labour transitions in the contemporary push for green energy transition, in the UK and elsewhere (e.g. see

Abraham 2017; Conde 2017; Cushing 2001; Martinez-Alier 2003; Strambo, Thazin Aung, and Atteridge 2019; Tomassetti 2023).

A number of museums, coal mining heritage sites and art galleries throughout the UK hosted exhibitions and events on the theme of the strike during 2024, the fortieth anniversary of the beginning of the strike. This provided an opportunity to explore the ways in which the strike, and the history of coal mining in Britain more generally, were presented and narrated, and the extent to which these narratives were connected with contemporary discussions of climate change and just green energy transitions. It was also an opportunity to consider the extent to which some of these newer, intersectional understandings of the history of the strike were reflected in these events and exhibitions, particularly in the light of the UK's current febrile political environment and the ways in which other recent efforts to address historical gaps and representational absences at heritage sites in the UK have become embroiled in heated political debate.² I will briefly provide a more general overview of officially designated and exhibited coal mining heritage in the UK by way of context, before turning to discuss the fortieth anniversary exhibitions themselves in more detail.

Coal mining heritage in the UK

There are a number of national and regional mining museums based at former colliery sites throughout the UK. These include the Big Pit National Coal Museum (which ceased production in 1981, opened as a museum in 1983 and was incorporated into National Museums and Galleries of Wales in 2001) at Blaenavon World Heritage Site (inscribed by UNESCO in 2000) in Wales (Figure 1); the former Caphouse Colliery in South Yorkshire, now The National Coal Mining Museum for England (which ceased production in 1985, opened as a museum in 1988 as the Yorkshire Mining Museum and was granted national status in 1995); and the former Lady Victoria Colliery at Newtongrange, south of Edinburgh, now the National Mining Museum Scotland (which ceased production in 1981 and opened as a museum in 1984). These are still operated as 'working mines' for the purposes of tourism (even though coal extraction no longer continues), governed by relevant legislation, and some continue to need to have the ground water which percolates into them pumped out and treated for toxins before being released into the environment, as do a number of other former coal mines throughout the UK (Johnston et al. 2008). It is relevant that these three national mining museums are all operated on sites that closed either immediately before or shortly after 1984, and as such, all relate directly to the events of or immediately leading up to the 1984–85 Strike. These former mines now run as museums are generally associated with other heritage sites, either as part of a former industrial landscape, or as clusters of tourist sites, which invites one to think collectively about the interpretation and messages that such clusters of sites, in addition to individual exhibitions, provide as part of a visitor experience. In addition, there are a number of regional coal mining museums, memorials, galleries, chapels and monuments to mining or miners throughout the country. Mining heritage also features significantly in local and regional museums in former coal mining regions. At the time of writing, the Historic England National Heritage List for England listed 3246 coal/colliery-related scheduled ancient monuments; Cadw, the National Heritage List for Wales listed 4232 coal-related scheduled ancient monuments; and the Historic Environment Scotland



Figure 1. The Big Pit National Coal Museum, Wales. Photograph by the author.

National Heritage List listed 68 colliery sites and 477 additional coal-related scheduled monuments.

Although not necessarily formally recognised as such, intangible mining heritage exists in the form of events such as the Durham Miners' Gala, an annual gathering and labour festival described as the world's largest celebration of working-class culture (Bowden 2024). The event consists of speeches and a parade of brass bands and miners' village and union banners, the newest of which are blessed as part of a service in Durham Cathedral (Figure 2). The banners themselves are considered to be a significant aspect of mining labour heritage, and feature prominently in museums and heritage sites associated with the industry and trade unionism. During the 2024 gala, we observed banners not only from former collieries and mine workers' unions and associations, but also from other trade unions and environmental organisations (one memorable banner read 'Coal is our Heritage, Green Energy is our Future'). This is consistent with other similar events which have demonstrated an important coalition of environmental/green transition and social/community issues, such as the Wakefield Banners Held High Festival, Yorkshire's own annual trade union and community festival which remembers the impact of the miners' strike and the theme of which in 2023 was 'sustainable energy and sustainable lives'. Indeed, the logo for that year's event, which is still in widespread use, contains the words 'The Past We Inherit, A Green Future We Build' (see Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign 2023).



Figure 2. Marching with colliery band and union banners at the Durham Miners' Gala, 2024. Photograph by the author.

In addition to those which are run as heritage sites, many former mining sites have been significantly landscaped and rehabilitated. Some of these are now managed as parks and nature reserves. Such sites may or may not be actively interpreted as former colliery sites, although the interpretation is often minimal due to the significant landscaping and loss of cultural landscape which takes place during the colliery regeneration process. Examples of rehabilitated collieries which are now managed as nature reserves include RSPB Old Moor (Barnsley/Rotherham) and Woodland Trust Silverwood Colliery Rotherham.

Exhibiting the 1984–85 miners' strike

Eighteen exhibitions and/or linked initiatives which were run by museums, galleries or heritage sites in the UK which commemorated the fortieth anniversary of the 1984–85 miners' strike were identified (Figure 3; see Appendix A). These varied in scale and duration, from one-off events to exhibitions and associated year-long programmes. Members of my team visited and documented a number of these exhibitions, heritage sites and memorials and participated in several of the events. We visited clusters of exhibitions and related heritage sites and museums in South Yorkshire, South Wales, Durham, Manchester and Scotland. We interviewed eight curators involved in staging fortieth anniversary commemorative exhibitions and



Figure 3. 'STREIC! 84–85 STRIKE!' exhibition at the National Museum of Wales. Photograph by the author.

events. Where fortieth anniversary temporary exhibitions and/or events were hosted by existing heritage sites and museums, we also considered the narratives of coal which were exhibited in the permanent exhibitions of the museums or heritage sites in which they were hosted. To give some context to our work, we also visited and documented national and regional coal mining and industrial heritage museums in a number of other countries throughout the year of 2024 to gain a sense of the ways in which coal heritage is exhibited in the UK might be seen to be distinctive, or to exhibit certain national 'styles'. I will comment further on this in the discussion.

Methodologically, my analysis of the exhibitions employs thematic and contextual visual, material and textual discourse analysis, drawing particularly on the work of Gillian Rose (2023), Stephanie Moser (2010), and Christopher Whitehead (2025). This was supplemented by thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with eight of the curators who had been involved in working on various of the fortieth anniversary exhibitions and events, several of whom were also based at existing mining heritage museums and sites. These interviews were primarily undertaken online via Teams/Zoom in the second half of 2024 and lasted approximately one to two hours each. Mindful of earlier observations of the lack of environmental narratives in the interpretation of coal mining heritage in these regions (e.g. Price and Rhodes 2020), I wanted to be particularly attentive to both what *was* said and presented and what *was not*, drawing on Mason and Sayner's (2018) work on different ways of understanding museal silences.

There were significant variations across the exhibitions, museums and heritage sites, partially based on their audiences and how the exhibitions had been curated, but partially based on other factors (including the nature of the host museum or gallery itself). Nonetheless, a number of narrative themes and patterns were common to several or all of the exhibitions in ways which were particularly striking. Most of the anniversary exhibitions tended to stick very closely to the ‘facts’ of the strike year, with only minor analysis of the political and historical contexts and aftermath. This is exemplified by the names of the exhibitions: ‘84/85-The Longest Year’, ‘STREIC! 84–85 STRIKE!’, ‘Days of Laughter, Days of Pain: The Miners’ Strike in Rotherham, 1984–5’, ‘One Year! Photographs from the Miners’ Strike 1984–1985’, ‘1984–85 Miners’ Strike: A Year in the Life of our Mining Communities’, and so on. In the national coal mining museums, the permanent exhibitions tended to put the strike more clearly in a political and historical context, in clear contrast with the temporary exhibitions which were also hosted by them, often in the same building or exhibition hall. Most of the exhibitions were accompanied by other events such as panel discussions or film screenings.

The exhibitions generally included a mix of photographs of protests, miners’ banners, protest signs, buttons and t-shirts with protest slogans, miners’ artwork and contemporary television footage of the strikes (Figure 4). Contemporary and historical statements from community members, oral accounts or media coverage of the strike were also



Figure 4. One of three display cases, ‘Before the strikes’, ‘During the strikes’, and ‘After the strikes’, in the temporary exhibition “1984–1985 Miners’ Strike: a Year in the Life of our Mining Communities” at Danum, Doncaster. Photograph by the author.



Figure 5. Part of the '84/85-The Longest Year' exhibition at the National Coal Mining Museum for England in Wakefield. Photograph by the author.

prominently featured in the exhibitions (Figure 5). Many featured the slogan 'Coal not Dole' which is particularly associated with the strike.

Many of the temporary exhibitions engaged either directly or indirectly with more recent revisionist approaches to the history of the strike, making direct or indirect references to the contributions of women, LGBTQ+ rights activists, and black and minority ethnic communities to the strike and solidarity with mine workers. For example, Doncaster Museum held an International Women's Day event associated with their temporary exhibition based on the role of women in the miners' strike aimed specifically at women and girls, and had a screening of the 2014 film, 'Pride', that was aimed specifically at engaging members of the LGBTQ+ community. They also ran an event on the contribution of black and minority ethnic communities to mining in the region. Barnsley Museums had a small temporary exhibition in their archives associated with the group Women Against Pit Closures. Engaging with women's histories of protest was also a stated aim of the exhibition at the Mining Art Gallery, Bishop Auckland, and engagement with the story of LGBTQ+ supporters was specifically mentioned by the curator at the exhibition held jointly at the Big Pit National Coal Museum and National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. The small exhibition at the Manchester People's Museum included 'Black People Support the Miners' and 'Lesbians and Gays Support Miners' (LGSM) badges.



Figure 6. Part of the small temporary exhibition ‘Wentworth’s Coal Story’, held in two of the ground floor rooms of the mansion in 2024. Photograph by the author.

One of the exhibitions which stood out from the rest of the anniversary events was that hosted at Wentworth Woodhouse (Figure 6), a Grade 1 listed country house in Rotherham and one of the largest in Europe, whose family’s wealth was largely derived from the labour of others in coal mines associated with the property. Whilst clearly timed to coincide with the anniversary of the strike, it engaged more broadly with ‘Wentworth’s Coal Story’ and only mentioned the strike once in the exhibition, in a panel titled ‘Strikes and Unions’. The text of the panel is worth replicating as it shows some of the ways in which, even in an exhibition on coal miners, Authorized Heritage Discourses (L. Smith 2016) relating to class within the English country house are maintained.

It is 40 years since the UK national coal strike of 1984 to 1985, and over 150 years since the trade union movement was decriminalised in 1871.

The Fitzwilliams were considerate employers. They expected loyalty, gratitude, and obedience. However, in 1844 some miners wanted to join a union demanding shorter hours and more pay. The Fifth Earl swiftly ordered that anyone joining the union would be sacked and evicted from their homes.

During the general strike in 1926 the Fitzwilliams were more sympathetic, Lady Maud organised for 2500 miners children to receive one midday meal of water grow tea cakes and sandwiches each week (later increased to one meal a day) during the eight month strike.

This exhibition was also noteworthy as it was entirely curated by volunteers, and although they had done a good job of telling the longer history of coal at Wentworth, it had clearly been curated on a shoestring budget, meaning that its presentation ‘stuck out’ as quite temporary and makeshift, given the grand surroundings.

It was clear from the interviews with curators involved in these various exhibitions that all were aware of the sensitivities in exhibiting the strike and how it might be perceived by different parts of their communities and audiences. Several directly referenced the broader political context of contemporary sensitivities relating to ‘heritage’ in the UK. In some cases, these sensitivities appear to have been a disincentive to exhibiting parts of the history of the strike, and in more than one case disapproval of something in an exhibition by local government authorities led to exhibitions or documentary films closing early or not being shown as planned. Most emphasised that they had tried to be ‘even-handed’ or to ‘show both sides of the story’ given the divisive nature of the history of the strike. In many ways this seems to have led to a fairly modest telling of the story, which it would not be an overstatement to say is the key formative moment in the contemporary histories of many of the communities and places in which the vast majority of these exhibitions were hosted. None included any international context or comparison with labour movements or discussion of global patterns in deindustrialisation in other parts of the world. None included any real engagement with broader questions of workers’ rights beyond the issues of the hardship faced by striking workers, and the conflicts in communities for those who continued to work. In the majority of cases, each temporary exhibition was self-contained, focussed quite strictly on the years 1984–1985.

Given observations of the ways in which climate and environmental issues appeared to have crossed over far more actively with those of workers’ rights in events such as the Durham Miners’ Gala and Wakefield Banners Held High Festival, it was particularly striking that only one of the curators said that there had been an ambition to touch on decarbonisation and current discussions relating to just green transitions in these exhibitions, and in this case it wasn’t something the community co-curators were interested in emphasising, so it was not included. There was very little evidence in the exhibitions and mining heritage sites we visited of an engagement with contemporary discussions of climate change and the need for just energy transitions, observations which echo previous work in South Wales by Price and Rhodes (2020). Indeed, there was very little engagement with questions of the future, or what L. Smith and Campbell term ‘progressive nostalgia’—which they define as ‘a particular and unashamedly overtly emotional way of remembering that actively and self-consciously aims to use the past to contextualise the achievements and gains of present day living and working conditions and to set a politically progressive agenda for the future’ (2017, 613) – in their observations of the possibilities of mining and other industrial and working-class heritages, and most focussed very explicitly only on the events of the year of the strike itself. Most of the curators interviewed noted the feeling that it was important to do ‘something’ to commemorate the strike and its impacts, but many also found the timeframe of organising an exhibition or event hampered efforts to solicit wider participation from effected communities and their representative organisations and created a degree of uncertainty or anxiety about how the strike should be approached.

Coal heritage and fossil carbon nostalgia

My thematic visual and textual discourse analysis of the various exhibitions marking the fortieth anniversary of the miners' strike, and the permanent coal mining heritage sites in the UK that hosted them that we visited as part of this research, suggest five inter-related general metanarratives of industrial heritage which are regularly deployed in such sites in Britain. These are as follows:

Progress narratives

Progress narratives are common in many museums, as they represent a significant part of the embodied practice of narrative 'backtelling' which was at the heart of the nineteenth century museum's project of reform, in which 'evolutionary narratives ... aimed at modernizing the individual, bringing (and I use the term advisedly) him more into line with the high point of civilization's advance' (Bennett 2017, 115). In the context of coal-related heritage, the industrial heritage object or site is exhibited as representing one of a series of linear, historical advances in technology which allowed for increased production or productivity along the road to modernity (Figure 7). These progress narratives are often present in museums of science and technology which emphasise the role of coal in the industrial revolution in Britain. The progress from coal-fired steam to oil power is



Figure 7. Progress narratives at the National Coal Mining Museum for England, Wakefield. Photograph by the author.

presented as a line through history represented by various forms of engines, each more efficient than the last. Coal itself is present throughout but in a minor or background role, despite the ways in which it literally fuelled these developments (see also Jørgensen and Thorade, this issue).

Boom, crisis, heritage

This narrative focusses on the human story of coal, and the eventual impact of coal's decline on dependent communities (Figure 8). This is a familiar trope which draws heavily on cinematic and televised representations of the miners' strike and the decline of the mining industry in the 1980s. British films such as 'Brassed Off' (released in 1996) and 'Billy Elliot' (released in 2000), which depict the decline of former coal mining communities in the north of England, alongside the lived experience of many former coal mining communities themselves and their genuine experience of increased rates of poverty today, provide a touchstone for these narratives. The boom, crisis, heritage narrative was the main theme of all of the exhibitions commemorating the anniversary of the strike. Here, the human scale of the story provides a distraction from a wider ecological frame and longer scale narrative about historical and contemporary transitions. In his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh (2016) reflects on the ways in which contemporary literature has struggled to address



Figure 8. Boom, crisis, heritage in the '84/85: The Longest Year' exhibition at the National Coal Mining Museum for England, Wakefield. Photograph by the author.

the climate crisis because of its focus on the scale of the human protagonist and its inability to treat as ‘real’ the unimaginable changes which have been and are currently occurring on the planet. Here lies the same cultural crisis of imagination in which it seems almost impossible to connect the story of coal to the story of climate change, but instead relegates it to a story of individual or collective human fortunes.

The inevitability of extraction and extractivism

Mining and mineral extraction more generally are regularly normalised in the narratives of coal mining heritage in museums and heritage sites (see also Dias and Affiki, this issue). This not only relates to the absence of engagement with climate and environmental discourses, but emerges through a more fundamental assumption that mineral resources are present in the earth for humans to exploit, and despite changes in ownership and profit (from private ownership to state ownership, for example), that this extractive relationship with mineral resources is inevitable and beyond critical examination (see Figure 9). This is a common narrative to all of the national coal mining museums, and one which is also reflected (as a kind of museal absence) in the fortieth anniversary exhibitions. The geological formation of coal is related only to its eventual extraction, lying dormant in the



Figure 9. Power from the past: inevitable extractivism at the Big Pit National Coal Museum, Wales. Photograph by the author.

earth, awaiting its activation by humans. The historical, colonial, and geopolitical factors determining coal's unequal distribution and uptake as a fossil fuel are not discussed.

Inequalities as part of the 'natural' order of things

The fourth of the coal mining heritage metanarratives presents a normative stance towards historical (and one could argue by extension, towards contemporary) social inequalities in Britain. Despite the focus of the interpretation of much coal mining heritage on the progressive improvement of conditions for coal miners themselves – particularly through the cessation of children's and women's labour in the mines, and the introduction of pithead baths and other hygienic measures intended to improve the working conditions of miners – social and economic inequalities often go unchallenged in such narratives, which reinforce a normative view of social and economic inequality. A good example of this is the imbrication of various coal mining heritage sites in and around South Yorkshire (including the nearby industrial complex at Elsecar Heritage Centre) with Wentworth Woodhouse (Figure 10), and indeed the narratives in the anniversary exhibition which was hosted there, which I have already mentioned. Rather than challenge the inequalities present in the juxtaposition of working and landed class heritages, these sites instead reinforce such inequalities as 'normal' and part of the natural order.



Figure 10. Wentworth Woodhouse, Rotherham. Photograph by the author.

Imperial nostalgia/post-colonial melancholia

Many of the UK's coal-related heritage sites explicitly connect the history of coal mining and industrialisation to the great age of empire as a romanticised and glorified past. In the Blaenavon World Heritage Centre, the former St Peter's School, which operated from 1816 to 1982 and could have been interpreted in any of those 160-odd years, is interpreted as a Victorian classroom, complete with portrait of Queen Victoria and maps of the British Empire (Figure 11). Many former collieries and ironworks include maps showing the places around the world where their iron was sent in support of imperial and colonial projects as a way of explaining the significance and reach of the site. Union Jack bunting and cartoon characters of smiling mine overseers create a sense of a venerable colonial history without any engagement with the troubled aspects of that past (Figure 12). The overall effect of the juxtaposition of descriptions of such glorified pasts (see also metanarrative 4) with presents in decline (metanarrative 2) creates a sense of what Paul Gilroy terms 'postcolonial melancholia' (Gilroy 2004) which in turn reinforces a turn to, and longing for, an idealised imperial past.

The strong connection between past narratives of progress and imperial greatness and their contrast with contemporary and historical narratives of imperial, industrial, social and economic decline in the interpretation of UK coal-related heritage sites and museums



Figure 11. St Peter's School, now Blaenavon World Heritage Centre in Wales, interpreted as Victorian classroom. Photograph by the author.



Figure 12. Made in Elsecar. Elsecar Heritage Centre, Barnsley. Photograph by the author.

is interpreted collectively as a representing a form of ‘fossil carbon nostalgia’. Rather than an opportunity to discuss the relationship between the demise of coal and historic and contemporary energy transitions, these five metanarratives present a significant *disincensive* to just green transition, and a form of museological *resistance* to climate mitigation and adaptation.

Deindustrialisation, neoliberalisation and the rise of the heritage industry and its academic critique

It was not just coal mining heritage that emerged during the 1980s, but indeed, the whole heritage ‘industry’ as we now know it in Europe today. Although the phenomenon of the preservation of cultural heritage objects, places and practices has a much longer history in European and Anglophone contexts (e.g. Harvey 2001), heritage in what we might call its late capitalist form – in which it exists as part of a highly commercialised ‘experience economy’ (see discussion in Harrison 2013) – developed alongside broader processes of deindustrialisation, neoliberalism, privatisation and other 1980s market reforms. Deindustrialisation not only produced the redundant buildings and objects which would come to be preserved as industrial heritage, but its underlying neoliberal logics was in turn reinforced by heritage narratives which had long emphasised human exceptionalism and the separation of humans from nature, a logics of extractivism (in

which valuable heritage objects were removed from one place to be preserved in colonial and metropolitan centres), hierarchical understandings of race, culture, class and gender, and linear conceptualisations of progress.

Much of what we would now see as the origins of critical heritage studies scholarship also emerged at this time, particularly in Britain, where a number of academics began to observe these developments and the particular forms of imperial and industrial nostalgias which were associated with them. Work by Patrick Wright (1985), David Lowenthal (1985), Paul Gilroy (1987), Tony Bennett (e.g. Bennett 1988), Raphael Samuel (1994), and Stuart Hall (e.g. Hall 1999), each in different ways highlighted and reflected upon these movements and others which preceded them, in which a new narrative – ‘boom, crisis, heritage’ – emerged to sit amongst these earlier ones. Laurajane Smith’s well know work on the concept of the authorised and authorising discourse (AHD) itself emerged in dialogue with the distinction between the forms of heritage in Britain which are dominant and frame understandings of what heritage ‘is’ and ‘should be’ (largely those associated with the landed classes), contrasted with the forms and manifestations of working-class heritages such as those associated with coal mining. Indeed, the front cover of the paperback version of her book *Uses of Heritage* (L. Smith 1996) includes a picture of a miners’ banner and part of the empirical material on which the book draws focusses on the ways in which heritage is mobilised in the active negotiation of contemporary identity by communities in the former coal mining area of Castleford, Yorkshire. These are motifs and themes to which she and Gary Campbell have returned in subsequent work (e.g. chapters in L. Smith, Shackel, and Campbell 2011; see also L. Smith and Campbell 2017). It is my contention that this earlier conjuncture contributed not only to contemporary British understandings of heritage and its role in an emerging neoliberal society, but that contemporary critical heritage studies scholarship also (at least partially) emerged from it (see further discussion in Harrison 2013).

I take the ‘boom, crisis, heritage’ phrase from the title of a book edited by Bluma, Farrenkopf, and Meyer (2021) which considers the role of coal in the European energy market after 1945. This book is important as I also draw closely on Timothy LeCain’s conceptualisation of the inter-relationship between humans and carbon in this book, and the role of coal, oil and gas as agents in forming a human ‘addiction’ to carbon, and in turn in terraforming the planet.

... it seems clear that the vast beds of coal here in the Rhur fuelled not only a regional industrial and economic ‘Boom’, but also played a role in a much broader global boom of modernization – a shift in the material nature of human society that was powerful enough to convince some of us that humans had slipped the surly bonds of nature and become god like in their ability to reshape the world. Yet if I often forgot or chose to ignore the material things that had fuelled our rise to power, the coal itself did not. Indeed, the Crisis that followed the economic Boom in the Ruhr, and many other similar booms elsewhere, might be read as a larger crisis of modernity: In which humans were forced to confront the reality that I could not so easily dominate coal and our other material partners, because these were never truly ‘ours’ in the first place, that they had agencies and potentialities that I did not fully understand and only imperfectly controlled. Coal was not merely a ‘raw material’ to humans used, but rather was the very stuff from which a radically new and often breath-takingly arrogant human culture and society emerged. *In this sense, the greatest ‘Heritage’ of*

the Rhur region might well be its potential to convey a much needed message to the contemporary world: that I live not in the Anthropocene, an age made solely by humans, but in the Carbocene, an age made by the intimate partnership between humans and coal. What better place could there be to challenge our dangerous tendency towards anthropocentrism than here in the Rhur, where many of the modernist illusions of unbounded human power and separation from material nature had their origins? (LeCain 2021, 291; my emphasis)

LeCain's provocation to heritage is an enticing one – could the industrial heritage of coal, oil and gas tell a different story about the ways in which fossil carbon and humans became so deeply intertwined that our unhealthy relationship with it came to dominate the histories and futures of the planet? It was with this question in mind that I approached these exhibitions, wondering about the possibilities of connecting contemporary discussions about climate, energy transitions and justice to what is largely understood to be an unjust historical energy transition.

Coal heritage as an opportunity to promote both just and green transitions

How might we draw on LeCain's (2021) conceptualisation of the Carbocene as the age of human-fossil carbon interdependencies to develop new narratives for coal mining heritage to promote just green transitions? Elsewhere, Harrison and Sterling (2023; see also Harrison 2015; Sterling 2020; Harrison and Sterling 2021) argue for the urgent need for heritage and museums to begin to imagine new ways of valuing, caring for and conserving the past in the present; ways that might take us 'beyond saving' to explore new forms of heritage thinking and practice in the Anthropocene. We develop two key concepts through which we believe heritage and museums might be reimaged for precarious times—the *speculative* (Dunne and Raby 2013) and the *profane* (Agamben 2009; Foucault 1980).

Where the *speculative* gestures towards possible worlds that might take us beyond the conventions of current social, economic, or political systems, the *profane* seeks to undo the varied processes of subjectification that define the workings of any apparatus (an expansive term in Agamben's reading) ... [And] while the speculative is always turned towards the future, the profane is ultimately concerned with unravelling and reconfiguring those innumerable ideas, practices, and phenomena inherited from the past that continue to structure the present. (Harrison and Sterling 2023, 94; see also Harrison et al. 2020; Harrison, Rose, and Sterling 2024)

We might think of the combined work of profaning and speculating in critically informed heritage work as a particular form of conjunctural analysis, which emphasises, in Gilbert's description of Stuart Hall's work, 'the importance of mapping the specificity of the present, of situating current developments historically, [and] of looking out for political threats and opportunities' (Gilbert 2019, 5), or in Michel Foucault's terms, as a kind of genealogical 'archaeology of the present' (Foucault 1970), or indeed, to rephrase this again in Jason W. Moore's words, a dialectical method which must necessarily underpin 'world-ecology, as a framework for unifying the production of nature, the pursuit of power, and the accumulation of capital ... as unavoidably, irreducibly, socio-historical' (Moore 2015, 291). These are ways of critically examining and emphasising the coming together of particular long and short-term trajectories in the present and their

relations with one another as part of an underlying system, with a view to intervening actively in the future.

All of the exhibitions visited had the potential to draw attention to the relationship between coal and climate change, an act of *profaning*. Out of more than 20 exhibitions visited as part of this research (including the national mining museums, the temporary exhibitions and events and the permanent exhibitions of their hosts), in only one instance was the connection between coal burning and climate change made explicit. However, even in this one instance, the observation of the connection between coal burning and climate change was not developed or connected with any of the other themes of the exhibition. It was presented as an end point, rather than a provocation to develop something new. The cognitive dissonance associated with a linear progress narrative which does not end in a glorious, civilised present, as is generally the case, could be employed effectively to draw attention to the climate crisis and the need for green energy transitions, but instead, the climate emergency is presented as the end of the timeline, and one without any kind of solution. Similarly, Jørgensen and Thorade (this volume) argue that progress narratives in museums of science and technology could be improved by employing an interwoven narrative of environmental history and history of technology which focusses on power sources and their social, ecological and material effects (see also Cameron, Dibley, and Ellsworth 2023).

In contrast, there are also a range of *speculative* narratives that could be deployed at such sites, which could, for example, focus on futures, climate adaptation, concepts of justice, contemporary and future energy transitions, or decarbonisation whilst also *profaning* the legacies (Harrison 2021; Sterling and Harrison 2023) or ‘involuntary’ (c.f. Breithoff 2025) forms of heritage – such as pollution and climate change – which were produced by them. The need for a just green transition is one obvious theme which resonates with the exhibitions related to the 1984–5 miners’ strike, as it shows very clearly what the consequences of unplanned transitions are for working people and their communities. Similarly, as Das et al. (2021), Harvey (2023) and Natanel et al. (2024) argue, efforts to decarbonise heritage should also go alongside efforts to decolonise them, which is itself another form of *profaning* and critical unravelling for the purposes of drawing attention to the conditions of the present. The particular nexus of extractivist and imperial logics present in the UK’s coal mining industry, alongside the strong emphasis on worker’s rights which is present in much of the modern history of coal mining, could prove particularly rich for such efforts. What seems to hold industrial heritage sites and museums back from such efforts is not so much a lack of desire to do so, but a kind of failure in heritage imaginaries, in which stories about the past can only be told in very conventional and restrictive ways which reinforce, rather than challenge, the problems of the present moment. Earlier in the article I drew on Amitav Ghosh’s parallel arguments in *The Great Derangement* (Ghosh 2016) which consider the common narrative frames of literature as a similar failure of the imagination and disincentive to engage with the narratives of climate change. It is only by introducing new practices and conceptualisations to narrate and contextualise the legacies of the fossil fuel era across the museum and heritage field that the heritage sector will begin to play a role in imagining and shaping a post-fossil fuel society (see also Pletz, Kuijt and Vonk 2025). As such, the heritage sector needs to begin to develop more speculative, progressive (L. Smith and Campbell 2017), future-oriented, even *hopeful* narratives (given hope is, of course, its

own kind of temporal disposition towards the future-see further discussion in Harrison 2017) which both engage honestly with pasts-in-the-present, but also utilise those pasts as a platform for building more just and sustainable futures.

One question that emerges from this work, and the comparative aspects of the broader project in which it is nested, is whether such an approach is inevitable, or whether it is a product of a particular national or regional context? While a comprehensive comparison of global approaches to coal mining heritages is outside of the scope of this paper, some examples from outside of the UK context are informative. Other papers in this special issue, along with its editorial introduction, address other aspects of the distinct national and regional 'styles' of carbon cultures in other European, American and East Asian contexts. My own work on heritage and green transitions in China shows again how carbon cultures might be approached and interpreted differently. For example, the Liuzhou Industrial Museum in Guangxi Province in southwest China, provides an interesting counterpoint and something I have rarely ever seen in industrial heritage museum or site interpretation in Europe. Here the museum interprets and communicates not only the history of industry in the city, but also devotes one of three of its pavilions to the impacts of industrialisation on the environment and what the city has done to adapt to, address and mitigate these environmental impacts. From a period in the 1990s when the city was experiencing some of the most extreme acid rain and other pollution in China, the cultural sector has supported its transformation into a clean manufacturing hub by clearly and honestly explaining why such transitions are necessary. Importantly, its focus on speculative and progressive futures (see also Harrison et al. 2020; L. Smith and Campbell 2017) allows it to support and map out more sustainable social as well as political, ecological and economic futures. Given China's key role in green energy transitions, this suggests there are many things to learn from the ways in which the cultural sector has supported such moves in other contexts. Similarly, Stefan Berger's (eg. Berger 2019, 2023) and colleagues' (e.g. Berger, Golombek, and Wicke 2018; Berger, Wicke, and Golombek 2017) work on the Ruhr, for example, shows how things look different again in that context, where green transitions and 'industrial nature' (*Industrienatur*) are reflected more prominently in the interpretation of coal mining heritage landscapes (but see Bangstad's 2021 critique of this concept as a form of 'greenwashing'). These few brief examples not only indicate the possibilities of doing heritage otherwise, but also emphasise the benefits of international comparative perspectives.

Conclusion

This paper has focussed on the UK's presentation and management of coal mining-related heritage, in the context of the fortieth anniversary of the 1984–1985 UK miners' strike, the closure of the last coal-fired power station in Britain and contemporary global transitions towards sustainable energy sources and away from fossil fuels. It has identified five metanarratives which are dominant in these sites and exhibitions, arguing that these metanarratives present a significant disincentive to just green transition, and a form of museological resistance to climate mitigation and adaptation. Drawing on LeCain's

(2021) notion of the Carbocene, it suggests possible alternatives to these narratives which could educate about, support and build citizen confidence in just green transitions, and also help draw attention to the interrelations of fossil capitalism and the various crises of the present. The findings have significant implications for the interpretation of fossil fuel-related industrial heritage in other major coal, oil and gas producing and using countries around the world. There is an urgent need for heritage sites and museums everywhere to rethink their implication in carbon nostalgias and other narratives which act as disincentives to the rapid, global just green transitions required to address the challenge of the climate emergency. While the whole of the sector have a range of different roles they can assume in relation to these issues (see also Harrison and Sterling 2021, 2023), industrial heritage in particular has an important role to play in communicating the interdependence of humans and fossil carbon, the unjust systems which emerged to underpin this interdependence, and the need to pursue alternatives.

Notes

1. While these various accounts are far from homogenous and represent a range of different opinions about the strike, tactics, and leadership, a detailed consideration of the historiography of the miners' strike is outside of the scope of this paper.
2. Two particularly noteworthy examples of this are the responses to the National Trust's 'Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery' (National Trust 2020; see further discussion in Natanel et al. 2024) and the UK's former Conservative Government's 'Retain and Explain' policies, which were established in response to the removal of statues in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests across the UK (see further discussion in Harrison, Rose, and Sterling 2024).

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Appendix A. List of fortieth anniversary of the miners' strike exhibitions and memorial events

Venue	Exhibition title	Dates	Description
Auckland Mining Art Gallery	40th anniversary of the miners' strike	2024	Temporary art exhibition
Barnsley Museums (including Elsecar Heritage Centre)	various activities and events	06/ 03/2024–06/ 03/2025	Programme of events
Big Pit National Coal Museum, Wales/National Museum of Wales, Cardiff	STREIC! 1984–1985 STRIKE!	2024	Travelling temporary exhibition and programme of events
Clifton Park Museum, Rotherham	Days of Laughter, Days of Pain: The Miners' Strike in Rotherham, 1984–5	27/ 01/24–30/ 06/24	Temporary exhibition and programme of events
Danum Gallery, Library and Museum, Doncaster	1984–85 Miners' Strike: A Year in the Life of our Mining Communities	02/ 03/24–30/ 09/24	Temporary exhibition and programme of events
Heritage Doncaster	Heritage Doncaster Miners' Strike 40	various 2024	Programme of events
Martin Parr Foundation, Bristol	One Year! Photographs from the Miners' Strike 1984–1985	18/ 01/24–31/ 03/24	Temporary exhibition and programme of events
National Coal Mining Museum for England, Wakefield	84/85 – The Longest Year	06/ 03/24–03/ 03/25	Temporary exhibition and programme of events
National Galleries Scotland	Before and After Coal Images and Voices from Scotland's Mining Communities	23/ 03/2024–15/ 09/2024	Temporary art exhibition
National Mining Museum, Scotland	various	various 2024	Film screening, activities, story part of permanent exhibition
People's History Museum, Manchester	various	various 2024	Tours, events, archive openings, temporary banner exhibition, collections spotlight focussing on solidarity between women's, LGBT+, ethnic minority groups and miners during the strike.
Queens Mill, Wakefield	Backbone of the Nation – 40 Years on from the Miners' Strike	01/ 03/24–12/ 04/24	Temporary exhibition and programme of events
St Elvan's, Wales	Voices from Underground	2024	Temporary photography exhibition, events and activities
Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum, Stirling	Andrew Hay, Darkness on the Edge of Democracy – The Miners' Strike, 40 Years On.	19/ 04/24–30/ 06/24	Artist exhibition
Wentworth Woodhouse	Wentworth's Coal Story	09/ 07/2024–06/ 10/2024	temporary exhibition
Whitburn Community Museum, West Lothian	Coal Not Dole, The Miners' Strike 40 Years On	2024–2025	temporary exhibition
Woodhorn Museum, Ashington	Northumberland Miners' picnic	08/06/2024	Event, memorial service, brass bands
Yorkshire and North East Film Archives, in partnership with Teesside University	In the Veins: Coal Communities	various 2024	15 minute film