

The Durham Miner Illustrated

Glynn Wales Thursday October 9th 2025

Enterprise House

Glynn was a History teacher at Ferryhill Grammar School who went on to train teachers at Durham. His wife, Gillian, set up the Gemini Collection with Dr Robert McManners and they all live in Bishop Auckland. They have collected over 400 paintings of coal miners, their families and their way of life, which forms the nucleus of the Mining Art Gallery in Bishop Auckland.

Glynn gave a fascinating talk to a packed house. He had been brought up in a mining village, where his father owned a corner shop, having chosen not to go down the pit. He discussed the population explosion in County Durham through the 19th century as workers flooded in from all over Britain. Many would work in the pits, others in the iron and steel works, locomotive works and shipyards.

Some miners became artists through the Spennymoor Settlement. Some left mining and painted full-time, even entering academic life. They had come to the pits from different directions, some followed in the family's footsteps, others had been "Bevan Boys". The talk was illustrated throughout with appropriate images from the artists, such as Norman Cornish, Tom McGuinness, Tom Lamb, Ted Holloway and many others.

Glynn took us underground, with images of Hewers and Putters, who worked closely together and were "Marras". The equipment changed from a simple pick to hew the coalface, to pneumatic tools. Development of the mines had been fragmented, under-mechanised, undercapitalised and strife/strike torn. However, the pits created intensely loyal communities, often tribally at odds with their neighbours!

We went into miners' homes, with the tin bath in front of the range; into their pubs, where they replaced the fluid losses from their hot, sweaty work. Mining was hard work and dangerous and we saw the harrowing faces of those who waited at the surface for news of loved ones after an accident or explosion underground.

Workers in the pits had limited prospects, with maximum earning capacity for the majority actually reducing with age as they were overtaken by fitter, younger men. Bright children went to the grammar schools and on to further education, with only a minority returning to their geographical roots. Glynn, his wife and Bob McManners were exceptions.

Pits closed - Harold Wilson overseeing the closure of more pits than Margaret Thatcher. There was unemployment and the descendants of the men who had travelled far to come to County Durham did not wish to leave their tight-knit communities.

These artists reflected on all facets of life in the Durham Coalfields. They developed their own characteristic techniques and styles of painting, when working underground using whatever media came to hand - bright, resourceful men, recognised now for their art and for the archive that they have left us of an era that has passed.