

## Pride vies with sadness as Britain's last coal pit closes

December 18 2015, by Jill Lawless

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An unidentified miner comes off the last shift at Kellingley Colliery in Knottingley, northern England, on the final day of production, Friday Dec. 18, 2015. Once, coal fueled the British Empire, employed armies of men and shook

the power of governments. On Friday, workers at Britain's last operating deep coal mine finish their final shift. The last haul of coal from the pit is destined for a museum, as a once-mighty industry fades into history. (John Giles/PA via AP)

Coal once fueled the British Empire, employed armies of men and shook the power of governments.

On Friday, workers at Britain's last operating deep [coal](#) mine finished their final shift, emerging—soot-blackened and live on television news channels—to cheers, applause and tears.

Some of the men carried lumps of coal as mementoes from the Kellingley Colliery, 200 miles (320 kilometers) north of London. The last haul of coal from the pit is destined for a mining museum as a once-mighty industry fades into history.

"There's a few lads shedding tears, just getting all emotional," said miner Neil Townend, 51.

Defiant to the end, the Kellingley miners sang a hit by Tom Jones—the son of a Welsh coal miner—as they headed underground for the last time.

"This is what makes us very special, the mining community," said Nigel Kemp, who worked at the mine for more than 30 years. "The men have gone down today singing 'My, my, my, Delilah.' Every single man on the cage, you could hear them 400 feet down singing."

At its peak in the 1920s, Britain's [mining industry](#) employed more than 1 million people, as coal powered trains, fueled factories and heated homes. After World War II, the country still had 750,000 underground

miners at almost 1,000 coal pits, but the industry's days were already numbered.

With gas and nuclear power on the rise, hundreds of [coal mines](#) had closed by 1984, when a showdown between the British government and the miners cemented the industry's central—and contested—place in Britain's national mythology.



Miners come off the last shift at Kellingley Colliery in Knottingley, northern England, on the final day of production, Friday Dec. 18, 2015. Once, coal fueled the British Empire, employed armies of men and shook the power of governments. On Friday, workers at Britain's last operating deep coal mine finish their final shift. The last haul of coal from the pit is destined for a museum, as a once-mighty industry fades into history. (John Giles/PA via AP)

Thousands of miners went on strike hoping to scuttle then-Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's plan to shut down 20 pits and lose 20,000 jobs in an effort to destroy the powerful mining unions, which for years had used their economic clout to extract concessions from British governments.

The bitter, yearlong struggle brought violent picket-line clashes and ended in victory for the government. Since then, changing economic demands and cheap imported coal have all but wiped out Britain's mining industry.

Britain still gets a fifth of its electricity from coal, although that is giving way to cleaner alternatives. Almost half the country's power now comes from nuclear or renewable sources like wind and solar, and Britain has agreed to sharply cut its greenhouse gas emissions under an international deal to limit climate change signed in Paris last week.

And it's not just Britain—the world as a whole agreed to move away from using fossil fuels, including coal, that are blamed for global warming.



Mark Bainbridge, who has worked at Kellingley Colliery for 32 years, starts his final shift maintaining the miners' lamps, Friday Dec. 18, 2015. Once, coal fueled the British Empire, employed armies of men and shook the power of governments. On Friday, workers at Britain's last operating deep coal mine finish their final shift. The last haul of coal from the pit is destined for a museum, as a once-mighty industry fades into history. (John Giles/PA via AP)

With coal prices lower than they have been for years, it's cheaper to import coal from countries including Russia, Colombia and the United States than to dig it out of British soil. Critics say some of those countries have lower wages and worse safety records than Britain.

Britain still has several open-cast mines as well as a handful of idle pits that could be reopened if needed, but Kellingley was the last deep mine producing coal on a large scale. Its closure marks the end of an industry that was dirty and dangerous but brought pride and purpose to close-knit

communities.

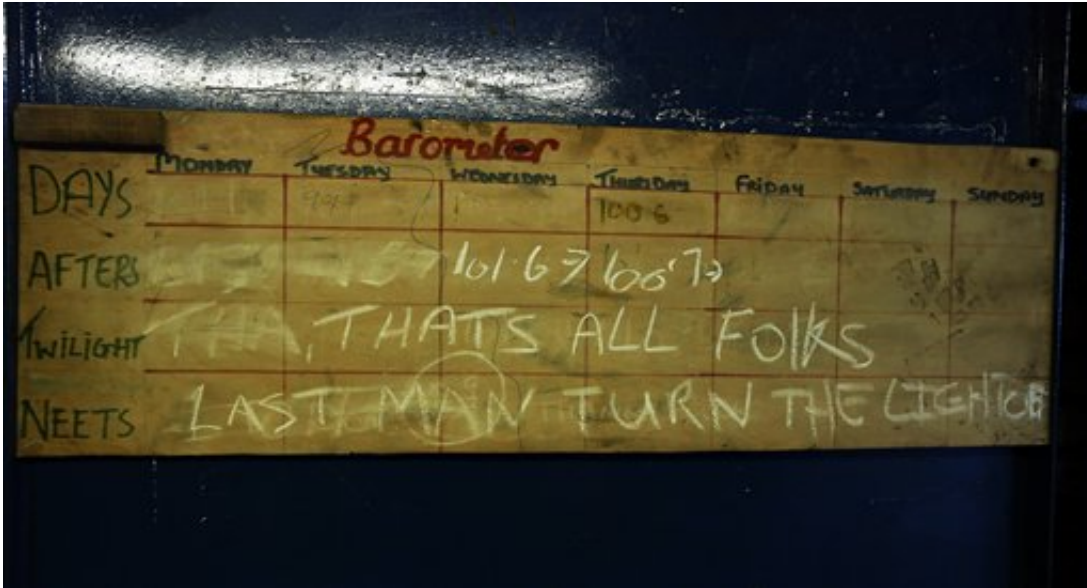


Miners at Kellingley Colliery hold lumps of coal they are keeping as mementoes of their last day working at the colliery in Knottingley, northern England, as the final shift works underground, Friday Dec. 18, 2015. Once, coal fueled the British Empire, employed armies of men and shook the power of governments. On Friday, workers at Britain's last operating deep coal mine finish their final shift. The last haul of coal from the pit is destined for a museum, as a once-mighty industry fades into history. (John Giles/PA via AP)

"Everything spread from the pit," said Andy Smith, acting director of the National Coal Mining Museum, which plans to put the last ton of coal from Kellingley on display.

"Community spirit came from working in the pit. If you didn't work in the pit, you were involved in making mine machinery, or supplying the

mine canteen with bread or pork pies. (There were) sports and social clubs," he said. "Every pit that has shut over the last 50 years, the community has suffered."



A message chalked on a board at Kellingley Colliery in Knottingley, northern England as the final shift works underground, Friday Dec. 18, 2015. Once, coal fueled the British Empire, employed armies of men and shook the power of governments. On Friday, workers at Britain's last operating deep coal mine finish their final shift. The last haul of coal from the pit is destined for a museum, as a once-mighty industry fades into history. (John Giles/PA via AP)



Miner Phil Kelsey, who has worked at Kellingley Colliery in Knottingley, northern England, for 32 years, leaves the lamp room as the last shift finishes on the final day of production, Friday Dec. 18, 2015. Once, coal fueled the British Empire, employed armies of men and shook the power of governments. On Friday, workers at Britain's last operating deep coal mine finish their final shift. The last haul of coal from the pit is destined for a museum, as a once-mighty industry fades into history. (John Giles/PA via AP)

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