

Starting Points Series

4. Bevin Boys

Background

During World War II, there was a shortage of manpower in coal mining, an essential industry in war time. Ernest Bevin, then Minister for Labour, introduced a scheme whereby young boys were trained as miners instead of being sent to fight.

All boys registering for National Service were given a number. Each week the Minister would pick a number out of a hat. If a boy's number ended in the number pulled out that week, he would be sent to the mines. He became one of Bevin's Boys.

Although this scheme was successful in maintaining employment levels in the mines, it also meant that young men unsuitable for the work found themselves underground. Some miners resented their presence and many of the Bevin boys themselves did not want to be there, so it led to a lot of social and personal problems. Absenteeism being a major problem.

The Bevin Boys did not receive the same privileges as those in the armed services. Their service did not contribute towards pension rights or a superannuation scheme. At the end of the war, the Bevin Boys were the last to demobilise and were almost forgotten. Although urged to stay on in mining, the majority were glad to leave the industry.

In 2007, the government announced a special honour for Bevin Boys to recognise their work down the mines. The first awards will be given in March 2008, to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the demobilisation of the last Bevin Boys.

Sources in the Museum Library

Holloway, Ted, 1993. *A Bevin boy remembers [Artwork & text]*
McManners, R, 1997. *Tom McGuinness : the art of an underground miner*
Benney, M, 1978. *Charity Main : a coalfield chronicle*
Stephens, M, 1981. *Ernest Bevin : unskilled labourer and world statesman, 1881-1951*
Day, David. *The Bevin boy*
Taylor, Warwick, 1995. *The forgotten conscript : a history of the Bevin boy*
Taylor, R, 2004. *Bevin Boy – a reluctant miner.*

Other sources to try

The Public Records Office catalogue (www.catalogue.nationalarchives.gov.uk)

Interesting Facts

- It is believed that the first Bevin Boy to be killed in an accident was Henry Robert Hale aged 18. He came from London and was working for the Heworth Colliery Company in Durham. He had only been working a month after his training when he was struck by the cage and killed. (*Colliery Guardian* 12th May 1943 p. 601)
- At the end of the war, there were approximately 45,000 Bevin Boys. (Ashworth, W. (1986) *History of the British Coal Industry*. Oxford p.163)
- It was only in 2004 that the Bevin Boys were allowed to march as service men in the Remembrance Day parade, and so acknowledged for their efforts in the war.
- Sir Jimmy Saville and Lord Brian Rix were both Bevin Boys.
- In the first year that the scheme was introduced, 500 Bevin Boys were prosecuted for refusal to obey the Direction Order to report to the colliery, of whom 147 were sent to prison.