



The National Coal Board (NCB) was the statutory corporation created to run the nationalised coal mining industry in the United Kingdom. Set up under the Coal Industry Nationalisation Act 1946, it took over the mines on "vesting day", 1 January 1947. In 1987 it was renamed the British Coal Corporation, whose assets were subsequently privatised.

Predecessors

Coal mines had been taken under government control during First and Second World Wars. A Royal Commission in 1919 gave R.H. Tawney, Sidney Webb, and Sir Leo Chiozza Money the opportunity to publicly advocate nationalisation, but this was rejected as a solution at that time. Coal reserves were nationalised in 1942 and placed under the control of the Coal Commission, but the mining industry itself remained in private hands. Many of the coal companies were very small, although consolidation was underway in the years running up to nationalisation.

Formation and history

The NCB was one of several public corporations created by Clement Attlee's post-war Labour government to run nationalised industries. The Coal Industry Nationalisation Act received the Royal Assent on 12 July 1946 and the NCB was formally constituted on 15 July, with Lord Hyndley as Chairman. The number of companies taken over by the Board was about two hundred, at a cost of £338 million (£11.5 billion in 2012 money).

The headquarters of the Board were established in Hobart House, London. The board supplied free coal to its employees, giving rise to the myth that miners in Yorkshire kept coal in the bath instead of using it for ablutions. The NCB employed over 700,000 people in 1950 and 634,000 in 1960, but successive governments reduced the size of the industry by closing geographically impaired or low productivity pits.

Closures were originally concentrated in Scotland, but then moved into North East England, Lancashire, and South Wales in the 1960s. Closures in all coalfields began in the 1980s as demand for British coal was weakened by large subsidies that other European governments gave to their coal industries (West Germany subsidised coal by four times as much and France by three times as much in 1984) and the availability of lower cost, often open-cast, coal mined in Australia, Colombia, Poland and the United States.

The NCB saw three major national strikes. The 1972 and 1974 strikes were both about pay and saw success for the National Union of Mineworkers. The miners' strike of 1984–1985 ended in victory for the government and is still bitterly resented in some parts of Britain that suffered from the aftermath of pit closures. With the passing of the Coal Industry Act 1994, the industry-wide administrative functions of British Coal were transferred to a new Coal Authority. Its economic assets were privatised, the English mining operations being merged with RJB Mining to form UK Coal plc. By the time of privatisation, only 15 pits remained in production.

Other activities

The NCB used many industrial locomotives, many of them bought from British Railways, including this ex-Great Western Railway 5700 Class pannier tank number 7754, which is preserved. The NCB operated extensive industrial railways at its collieries, employing steam traction until the late 1970s/early 1980s.

The NCB's research establishment at Stoke Orchard in Gloucestershire was founded in 1950 with Jacob Bronowski as Director of Research. It closed following privatisation of the coal mining industry. NCB subsidiaries managed coal-based chemical products (Coal Products Division) and the production of helmets and other mining equipment (Tredomen Engineering Ltd). In the mid-1970s, the activities of Coal Products Division were transferred to two new companies; National Smokeless Fuels Ltd and Thomas Ness Ltd, although they remained wholly owned by the NCB. In coalfield areas, the NCB was also a major landowner, both of colliery housing and of farmland originally acquired by private owners for its mining rights or to avoid subsidence claims. It also owned a number of brickworks companies.