

Imaging the Coalfields: Industrial Heritage and ‘Slower Field Practices’

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Introduction

A defining characteristic of archaeological and anthropological research and teaching is the time spent in the field, whether excavating sites of interest or exploring communities in context to understand the relationship between people, place, and space. By contrast, at the ethnographic end of sociology, fieldwork practice is often confined to lectures and seminars for researchers and students alike. Moreover, given funding constraints across the social sciences, opportunities either to participate in ethnographic fieldwork or to learn the practicalities of fieldwork ‘on site’ and firsthand appear to have diminished since the 1960s heyday of community ethnographies (see Crow 2014) [1]. Yet ethnographically oriented sociology, like archaeology, anthropology and human geography, is, if anything, a practice-based, field-centred discipline. Indeed, if one is interested in the realities of lived experience, or seeks to obtain reality-congruent knowledge, then observing from afar—or, worse, listening to ‘others’ discuss fieldwork in the abstract—is less than ideal. For several years, therefore, I have advocated both ‘live sociology’ and ‘slower sociology’ as means of learning and practising the skills required for fieldwork and of improving engagement with data observed in the field (see, for example, Goodwin et al 2018a; Goodwin 2023 and Goodwin 2026 and Garey et al 2014; Vostal 2016) [2-6].

My immediate locality—a large city in the English Midlands—has rich, multifaceted layers of industrial history that intersect with complex histories of ethnicity, migration and social class. This makes it an ideal location in which to examine the lived experience of issues central to sociology by simply stepping outside the University and walking the field. The city has also been at the heart of textile manufacturing since the nineteenth century and was surrounded by the coalfields required to fuel these burgeoning industries. The remnants of both textiles and coal remain visible, whether in abandoned or repurposed factories, in the industrial scars of deep mining to the west of the city, or in the railway lines that connected the two.

To help others develop their craft through observing, recording, and reflecting in the community, I lead field visits to Snibston Colliery in Coalville, Leicestershire (British National Grid reference SK419144) [7]. By visiting the colliery and walking the adjacent streets, it becomes possible to consider the relationship between the coal industry’s history, the town of Coalville and its wider connections. Rather than asking students or early-career researchers simply to read about the community impacts of deindustrialisation, a more effective pedagogic approach is to stand physically in the shadow of the now-defunct mine headstocks and hear directly from ex-miners. Taking participants into the field and asking what they see and hear enables direct engagement with industrial decline and with former workers’ accounts, not only of the physical mechanics of working at the pit face, but also of the devastating community-wide consequences of mine closures. This approach is not limited to industrial history; I have also led walking tours of the streets documented in Norbert Elias and John Scotson’s classic sociological text *The Established and the Outsiders* (1965) [8]. By walking the field and observing how spaces are transformed, participants can begin to bridge the gap between historical theory and contemporary reality and to consider the long-term social changes that have brought society to this point (see Goodwin 2018) [9]. Such immersive practice brings old ‘dusty books’ to life and transforms participants into active practitioners.

This paper argues that post-industrial coalfield landscapes are not simply sites of memory or heritage, but pedagogic and methodological spaces through which sociologists can learn the craft of fieldwork. Bringing together visual methods, field walking, live sociology and slower sociology, I examine how Coalville and its surrounding mining landscapes can be used to train sociological attention, cultivate observational practice and generate reality-congruent knowledge. I begin by outlining Coalville as a paradigmatic UK post-industrial landscape. I then develop the concepts of live sociology and slower sociology before showing,

through a series of field images, how these ideas can be applied to the analysis of industrial remains, memorials, and preserved mining artefacts.

The Post-Industrial Landscapes: ‘Coal Was Our Life’

The East Midlands was part of the huge Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire coalfield, which formed a single geological unit... Coal mining historically formed the bedrock of the East Midlands’ regional economy, and mining activity can be dated back to the people of the Roman era, who mined lead in Derbyshire...The final contraction of the industry was rapid and by the 1980s around 70% of mines in the UK had closed. When the last mine closed in July 2015, the impact on local communities was devastating. (Thorpe and Barber 2025: 201-202) [10].

Thorpe and Barber’s (2025) [10] discussion of mining language situates the East Midlands within a much larger extractive region whose communities were shaped over generations by coal. In Leicestershire, collieries such as Bagworth, which operated between 1825 and 1991, and Desford, which operated between 1901 and 1984, helped supply the energy on which Leicester’s hosiery and textile factories depended. The industrial histories of coal and textiles were therefore closely interwoven. Coalville and neighboring settlements developed within this relationship between extraction, manufacturing and transport; by 2015, however, deep coal mining had disappeared entirely. What had once been a nationally significant industrial region was left to negotiate the material, economic and social consequences of deindustrialisation during the late twentieth century. The politics of this process were intensely contested. The power of organised labour was opposed by the neo-liberal right that became openly hostile to the mining industry, with miners famously cast as the ‘enemy within’ (see Milne 2014) [11]. The closure of pits left not only physical traces in the landscape, but also continuing social and cultural afterlives in the communities built around them (see, for example, Bennett 2009; Walker 2021) [12,13]. Existing research has shown how mining shaped local identities, occupational solidarities, shared language and forms of mutual dependence that outlived the industry itself. Deindustrialisation also brought economic loss,

weakened social infrastructure and deepened political alienation (see, for example, Braber 2018; Strangle man 2001; Ackers and Payne 2002; Hil horst 2025; Thorpe and Barber 2025) [10,14-16]. Yet the coalfield has not simply vanished. Pit wheels, monuments, colliery buildings and other traces remain available to be read sociologically. This historical and material context matters because it establishes Coalville not merely as a case study, but as a field in which the relationship between memory, deindustrialisation, place and sociological practice can be examined. The question, then, is how places such as Coalville can be used in ways that are relevant not only to researchers but also to the training of future field-based ethnographers and sociologists.

Researching and Learning in the Post-Industrial Landscape

Having established Coalville as a historically charged and materially legible post-industrial landscape, the next step is to consider how such a landscape can be used pedagogically and methodologically. Fieldwork training in sociology is often mediated through classrooms, lecture theatres or (worse) retrospective accounts of research rather than through direct encounter. Against this tendency, Mills’s (1959) [17] account of the sociological imagination reminds us that sociology is learned as a craft: through habits of attention, observation, note-taking, interpretation, and reflection. To fully cultivate this craft, students and researchers need opportunities to practice sociology in situ. ‘Live sociology’ is one way to move from abstract discussion to embodied engagement with the social world (see Goodwin at al 2018a) [2]. This involves treating the surrounding locality not as background scenery, but as a social setting in which sociological questions can be pursued (see also Milgram 1970) [18]. In this model, students learn through participation in the practices of field observation, note-taking, image-making and discussion. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) [19] concept of ‘communities of practice’ is useful here because it frames learning as a gradual movement into competent participation through situated activity with more experienced practitioners. Live sociology, then, is less a discrete method than a pedagogic orientation: it asks students to experience the social landscape actively rather than study it only from a distance Table 1.

Table 1: Key Characteristics of Live Sociology.

Moving Beyond the Classroom	You cannot learn everything about the discipline from a lecture theatre, book, or journal article. It rejects the “symbolic, decontextualised and abstract formulations” that often drive traditional classroom learning.
“Do” Sociology	Go out into the field to observe, record, and reflect on the social world as an active researcher.
Using the Locality as an “Empirical Crucible”	The approach treats the surrounding town, city, or local community as a living laboratory.
Situated Learning in Authentic Contexts	Practice is honed not just by developing skills, but by immersion in authentic sociocultural environments and interacting with experienced practitioners.
Walking the Field	Physically walking through communities helps bridge the gap between historical theory and contemporary reality. Asking of what you see, ‘How did this come to be?’, transforms abstract concepts into vivid, real-world experiences.

I recognise that such a call for more practice-based fieldwork may seem unusual to archaeological and anthropological colleagues, for whom field-based practice is more firmly established. In sociology, however, this tradition has become increasingly attenuated. Being in the field remains central. Alongside the acquisition of skills and the development of a creative, practice-based habitus, a key feature of live sociology—and of fieldwork more broadly—is direct interaction with, observation of, and participation in relevant spaces, places, communities and contexts. As noted elsewhere, perhaps the most effective way to do this is to walk the field and observe (see, for example, Jephcott 1964; O'Connor and Goodwin 2012; Goodwin et al 2018a; Goodwin and Parsons 2021; Parsons and Goodwin 2025; Jackson 2026; Bates and Jackson 2026). Milgram's (1970) [10,18,20-25] formulation of overload provides a useful example. This was not a laboratory-based idea, but one developed through observations made while walking in New York. He writes:

Observation is the indispensable starting point. Any observer in the streets of midtown Manhattan will see (i) large numbers of people, (ii) a high population density, and (iii) heterogeneity of population. These three factors need to be at the root of any sociopsychological theory of city life... (Milgram 1970: 1461) [18].

Effective observation requires being 'out', walking the field and engaging with what is seen, not only to help stimulate the imagination (Mills 1959) [17], but also to access reality-congruent knowledge and insights (O'Connor and Goodwin 2012) [21]. The argument so far is therefore twofold: post-industrial landscapes such as Coalville provide rich empirical material, and live sociology provides a means of engaging that material directly. The next step is to consider the tempo of that engagement, and particularly why sociological fieldwork may require slower, more deliberate practices of looking, recording and interpreting.

Slowing Down Sociologies: The Visual

A second element of the process is the need to slow down sociological practice (see Garey et al. 2014; Vostal 2016; Goodwin 2023) [3,5,6]. Engagement and understanding take time, yet

academic work is often organised around expectations of speed, productivity and visible impact. These pressures can encourage compressed forms of research in which the pace of data collection overtakes the work of noticing. Visual methods make this tension especially clear. The widespread availability of smartphone cameras means that many, though not all, researchers can produce large numbers of high-resolution images with ease (Hjorth and Hendry 2015) [26]. This convenience can be valuable, but it can also encourage a mode of passing through the field in which images are accumulated rapidly and interpreted later, rather than composed through sustained attention. As Hjorth and Pink (2014: 40) [27] observe, 'with location-based services (LBS) smartphone apps like Instagram, geotagging is increasingly the default, rather than choice'.

The point is not to reject digital photography, but to ask what different technologies make possible, encourage or inhibit. Speed and convenience do not always serve the purposes of ethnographic attention. When research depends on grasping the textures of historically charged industrial landscapes, the researcher may need practices that interrupt rapid capture and create time for more deliberate looking. I have argued elsewhere [3] that analogue technologies can help create this interruption. Older cameras impose limits: a restricted number of exposures, no instant preview and no opportunity to correct the image in the moment. These constraints change the researcher's relationship to the scene. When photographing former coal-mining sites with a 1959 Kodak Brownie 127, for example, I worked with a spool that allowed only ten exposures (see Figure 1). The possibility that some images would fail to develop made each frame consequential. It required waiting, looking again, considering position and thinking about what the image might do analytically. Although the Brownie 127 is technically simple by contemporary standards, its limitations become methodological resources. They turn the act of photographing into an embodied practice of attention rather than a routine act of capture. Other analogue devices—such as 110 cartridge cameras, Kodak Instamatic cameras, Polaroid Land cameras or modern Instax cameras—can generate similar forms of slowed engagement.



Figure 1: Source: Headstock and Signal Box, 29024. Snibston: Author's own work.

The marks left by older photographic technologies should therefore be treated as part of the analytic encounter rather than as technical defects to be removed. Grain, blur, uneven exposure and other imperfections can draw attention to the contingency of the research process and to the material conditions under which an image is made (see Goodwin 2023; Higgins 2013) [3,28]. In the Coalville photographs, the imperfect surfaces of expired film and old cameras sit in productive tension with rusted

headstocks, abandoned industrial structures and memorialised labour. The image does not simply document a site; it registers a slowed encounter with a place already marked by absence, decay and memory. The following section therefore moves from methodological argument to empirical demonstration. The photographs are not merely illustrative additions, but examples of how slow, live sociological practice can cultivate analytic attention to post-industrial space Table 2.

Table 2: Key Characteristics of Slower Sociology.

Immerse and Slow down	Rather than briefly rushing through a space, slowing down allows the researcher to become physically and socially embedded with-in the landscape. Participate in authentic real-world contexts.
Consider the image	Deliberate reflection invites deeper interrogation of what a scene offers and what meaning can be derived.
Use Analogue as well as digital	Using older cameras with strict shot limits naturally forces a much-needed pause, giving sociologists the time to observe their environment in an unhurried manner. Combine with digital methods where appropriate.
Embrace Imperfection	Analogue photography frequently produces visual flaws. Rather than being discarded, these imperfect, gritty images should be valued because they reveal the authentic, messy reality of the research process.

Imaging the Coal Mining Landscapes: Monuments to a Bygone Era

The following section therefore demonstrates how these methodological commitments can be put into practice. It presents a selection of monochrome photographs focused on underground coal-mining operations and the memorialisation of the mining industry. The images were captured during slow, deliberate field walks using a combination of vintage and contemporary camera equipment and expired photographic film. They form part of a

longer, slower ethnography of Coalville and related areas, and have therefore been taken—and, in some cases, retaken—over several years. The images are organised around three related analytic concerns: the survival of industrial infrastructure, the civic memorialisation of labour, and the preserved artefacts through which danger, discipline and bodily labour are remembered. In this way, the visual material extends the paper’s central argument by showing how slower field practices make post-industrial landscapes available for sociological interpretation.



Figure 2: Pit Wheels as Civic Ornamentation, Ellistown 2026 and Thornton 2020. Source: Author’s own work.



Figure 3: Pit Wheels as Civic Ornamentation, Bagworth 2023. Source: Author's own work.

Figure 2 brings together two views of Snibston's industrial infrastructure. One image shows the original colliery headstock, known locally as Smokey, a name linked to the practice of lighting a fire at the base of the shaft to draw cooler air downwards. Framed through the skeletal ironwork that once supported the shaft and the weight of the surrounding rock, the photograph emphasises both engineering scale and social dependency. The second image shows the signal box that coordinated rail movement as coal left the colliery. Read together, the images foreground the systems through which mining organised landscape, labour and movement. Away from the colliery itself, mining remains are incorporated into the everyday spatial order of nearby villages. Repurposed pit wheels, or winding wheels, appear at entrances and exits in places such as Ellistown, Thornton and Bagworth. Their placement turns machinery once used for extraction into civic markers of belonging and remembrance. This transformation is sociologically revealing.

Equipment designed for the movement of coal and workers underground now frames flower beds, welcome signs and village thresholds Figure 3. The images show how industrial objects can be detached from their original function and reworked as signs of local identity, even as the labour relations that produced them recede from everyday view.

The kneeling miner in Figure 4 offers a different register of remembrance. The pose evokes the bodily demands of work underground, where miners may be required to kneel, crouch, or lie to cut coal from the seam. The figure presents labour as disciplined, muscular and dignified, but it also carries a sense of loss. The occupation it honours has disappeared from the locality, and the bodies, skills and solidarities associated with that work have been displaced into memory. Figure 5 extends this visual language through the image of a miner mid-swing with a pickaxe.



Figure 4: Kneeling Miner, Bagworth 2025. Source: Author's own work.



Figure 5: Miner Statue, Coalville 2025. Source: Author's own work.

The sculpture emphasizes the intense physical toll and idealised masculinity of the profession. This statue is situated in the Centre of Coalville, cementing the individual worker's physical exertion in public memory.

A different form of memorialisation can be found at the *Thringstone Miners Social Centre* – see Figure 6. In most mining

communities, there would be social, sports and community clubs known locally as 'miners' welfare'. These clubs and social centers would typically have a subscription-based membership, through which miners could access subsidised beer and alcohol, entertainment and education, and participate in sports teams. They were often the social hub of the community, supporting the miners and their families.



Figure 6: Thringstone Miners Social Centre 2026. Source: Author's own work.

The metal silhouette of a miner on the brick wall of the *Thringstone Miners Social Centre* highlights the continuing symbolic presence of mining in the community.

It demonstrates how, even long after the physical mines have closed, the industry's enduring cultural legacy and the shared identity of the 'miner' remain powerful, unifying symbols of community cohesion and social gathering. Also symbolic, perhaps, is the fact that the lettering accompanying the silhouette has

become displaced and disrupted, echoing the displacement and disruption of the industry it seeks to represent.

As illustrated above, many old pit wheels have been positioned at village entrances and exits to serve as public memorials. However, as shown in Figure 7, the imposing headstock and winding wheels at Snibston Colliery in Coalville remain in place and intact, though idle.



Figure 7: Snibston Headstock 2025. Source: Author's own work.

During its operational years, cages hung from these massive wheels, suspended on cables, repeatedly lowering men into the pit and lifting them out again at the end of their shifts. Closed in 1986, the preserved headstock now stands as an architectural

ghost, stripped of its original noise, danger and workforce: a site transformed from active economic production into passive historical consumption.

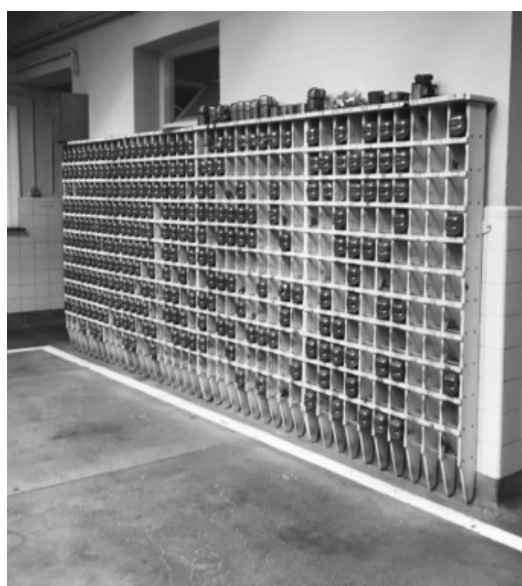


Figure 8: Self-Rescuers 2019. Source: Author's own work.

Within the preserved mine at Snibston, smaller artefacts shift attention from public memorials to the lived conditions of underground work. Figure 8 shows a wall of mining 'self-rescuers': breathing devices intended to give workers limited protection in the event of toxic gases, fire or explosion. These objects speak to the routine presence of danger within the labour process. Former miners' accounts of using such devices emphasise the urgency and fear involved in fitting them quickly underground. One recalled that a self-rescuer gave him just enough time to reach the cage at the bottom of the headstock before he collapsed from the effects of gas.

Figure 9, a 'performance and production' chalkboard, shifts the analysis again, this time toward the measurement and management

of labour. The faded chalk marks record cuts, tonnages and financial variances, translating bodily effort into figures that could be monitored, compared and judged. Displayed where miners could see it, the board made productivity visible and evaluative. Human exertion, risk and fatigue were reduced to columns of output and budgetary performance. Taken together, these images show how slower field practice can disclose the layered meanings of the coalfield landscape: infrastructure, memorialisation, danger, discipline and the organisation of labour. The visual analysis therefore returns to the broader methodological claim that walking, looking and recording slowly can transform familiar heritage settings into sociologically generative fields.



Figure 9: Performance Management, Snibston Colliery, 2025. Source: Author's own work.

A slower approach also makes minor traces visible that might otherwise be overlooked. Figure 10 shows the remains of a no-parking sign near the former entrance to Bagworth Colliery. Its dark blue and yellow colouring recalls the visual language of the National Coal Board, but its fragmentary condition marks the

fading of the institution it once served. Such signs are modest and easily overlooked, yet they matter precisely because they show how industrial memory persists in small, partial and deteriorating forms.



Figure 10: Ghost Signs, Bagworth, 2025. Source: Author's own work.

Conclusion:

This paper has argued that the remains of the coal industry in the English Midlands should be understood as active sites of sociological inquiry rather than as static reminders of a lost industrial past. By locating Coalville within histories of deindustrialisation, developing live sociology as a field-based pedagogic practice and framing slower sociology as a deliberate mode of visual engagement, the paper has shown how post-industrial landscapes can train sociological attention. Statues, winding wheels, preserved headstocks, scheduled monuments and minor remnants all invite close observation because they hold together questions of labour, memory, identity, loss and place. Slower visual practice, including the use of analogue cameras, offers one way of engaging these sites with greater patience, reflexivity and physical presence than rapid digital capture alone might allow.

The contribution is therefore both substantive and methodological. Coalville is important because it bears the marks of deindustrialisation, but also because it demonstrates how such landscapes can become readable through field walking, careful observation and slower visual practice. This mode of attention should form part of the training of future sociologists. Moving beyond the lecture theatre and entering the local community as an empirical field enables students and researchers to encounter the social world as something lived, material and historically layered. Whether standing beneath the winding wheels of Snibston Colliery or composing an imperfect analogue photograph of a fading industrial sign, the value lies in practising sociology as an engaged, embodied and interpretive craft.

Additional information

<https://miningheritage.co.uk/snibston-colliery/>

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1018472>

<https://miningheritage.co.uk/snibston-colliery-40th-anniversary-of-closure/>

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