

# IS THE UK'S COAL INDUSTRY ON THE VERGE OF REVIVAL?

THERE ARE NOW ONLY A HANDFUL OF COAL MINES LEFT IN THE UK, EMPLOYING FEWER THAN 6,000 PEOPLE AND PRODUCING A MERE 18 MILLION TONS A YEAR. THIS IS DOWN FROM 1980'S 211 MINES WHERE 230,000 WORKERS PRODUCED 127 MILLION TONS.



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To put this into perspective, according to the National Coal Mining Museum in 1900 there were 3,384 mines with 780,000 workers producing some 225 million tons. After rising to just over 1.2 million workers in 1920 the industry has been in a steady, and of late precipitous, decline.

Some argue this is a good thing despite the devastation wrought on mining communities. Coal fired power stations produce more than a quarter of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions. Yet, even in the face of consistent efforts to wean the country off this dirty fuel and move it to renewable energy, the UK still uses more than 50 million tons of coal a year, mostly imported, to supply its 19 coal power stations. These employ more than 4,000 people and produce over a quarter of the country's electricity, rising to more than 50% in peak times.

Recent developments mean coal needn't be the carbon monster that it traditionally has been and 'clean coal' is possible. However, a proper investment in carbon capture and storage (CCS) is needed to make this happen.

The reality is that, as attractive as dumping fossil fuels completely may sound, the world economy, and indeed the UK economy, is a long way away from being able to do that. Other countries, with more impressive green credentials, are even building new, albeit cleaner, coal fired power stations to ensure security of supply and lower energy costs – even Germany is building several.

The UK's proved reserves are a small percentage of the world's total of 861,000 million tons but there is enough there to make it imperative that it makes the most of its remaining natural endowment and, without being irresponsible, develops and exploits it for both local and export markets.

There is certainly enough there to create space for the UK to become a leader in CCS technology – a leadership position that would stand it, and its industrial northern heartland, in good stead over the century or so that coal will, despite the legitimate efforts of the green lobby, remain a cornerstone of global energy policy.

Further developing the domestic energy sector would encourage re-industrialisation and help establish new small, medium and large scale manufacturers to service the mines and ancillary industries. There are also opportunities for equipment manufacturers and resellers to set-up shop.

**But one of the most important benefits of strengthening the British mining industry and the new technologies associated with it will be the demand it will create for artisans and the impetus that this will give the country's nascent apprenticeship programme.**

Experience shows that many businesses get started by artisans, not only in manufacturing but also in the services and repair sectors of the economy. Small and medium businesses are the major driver of employment and beefing up the small scale manufacturing sector in the UK would provide a fantastic opportunity for its economy to absorb the millions of young people not currently in employment, education or training.

While the arguments for the reestablishment of the UK coal mining industry are powerful, there are no magic bullets. Take the example of South Africa, which has an abundance of minerals but which missed the last two commodity booms because politics and damaged confidence levels stopped it from putting in place the logistics and policies needed to take advantage of the opportunities.

If the UK's coal industry is to be revived, it will undoubtedly require support from the state. This need not take the form of direct subsidies to miners and ancillary industries (although the fiscus may be required to derisk investments through tax and other incentives). Support must come primarily through the building and upgrading of the physical, social, legal and financial infrastructure needed to successfully mine and beneficiate minerals in a modern economy.

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