

3 Britten in the cinema: *Coal Face*

PHILIP REED

During the 1930s under the visionary leadership of John Grierson, the film units of two government agencies, the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) and the General Post Office (GPO), produced documentary films of interest and quality – and occasionally of innovation. While the EMB's earliest films had been 'silents', the acquisition of sound-recording equipment by the GPO Film Unit led to some deliberate experimentation in the sound film, and striking results were achieved. *Pett and Pott* and *The Song of Ceylon*, both with music by Walter Leigh, are possibly the most fascinating examples of the GPO Film Unit's earliest consciously experimental sound films and evidently provided useful role-models for the youthful Britten when he arrived as a new member of Grierson's team in May 1935.

Although Britten was first engaged to write a through-composed twenty-minute score for *The King's Stamp*, a documentary tracing the history and production of postage stamps, he was soon seconded to a more challenging and controversial project: a social documentary examining the conditions prevailing at the time in the mining industry. While *The King's Stamp* possessed some experimental qualities, it can hardly be claimed they extend to its soundtrack or musical score – whatever their respective merits overall.¹ Britten's next film score, however, shows a remarkable grasp of many experimental techniques; having demonstrated to his colleagues at the Unit what he could achieve in conventional circumstances, Britten was now chosen for *Coal Face*, from the outset a highly experimental production.

The composer's diary for 24 May 1935 recounts a significant event in relation to the nature of the *Coal Face* score:

Go to Soho Square GPO Film offices at 10.30 to see some of the GPO Films with Cavalcanti. A very lovely one on 'Ceylon' with good musical effects – tho' not perfect – some of the music not particularly int[eresting]. A lovely little comedy by C[avalcanti]. 'Mr Pett & Mr Pott' work of genius – which the charming English Distributors won't buy! it being too silly! Also the famous 'Weather Forecast'.²

[54] The following day Britten had further discussions with Alberto Cavalcanti and viewed more films including the 'charming and lovely' *Spring on the Farm*.³ It is clear that Cavalcanti was demonstrating

possibilities for film music to Britten, as a prelude to employing him on his own avant-garde project. The experimental values in circulation at the GPO Film Unit are crucial to our forming a complete understanding of the achievement of *Coal Face*. Never again was Britten to be quite so overtly modernistic in his film work, although certain later scores approach its level of attainment. While *Coal Face* was an exceptional artistic event – if for no other reason than it marked the first occasion that Britten set a text by W. H. Auden – it must, for all its innovations, be considered as a link in the chain of GPO Films principally concerned with the development of sound techniques. Britten advanced his own skills by observing Leigh's and Cavalcanti's earlier example.

The subject-matter of *Coal Face* – an impressionistic study of the mining world – is in fact unconnected with the visual topics of Post Office documentaries; nor was it produced under the auspices of an outside sponsor. Why, then, was a government-department film team making a documentary wholly unconnected with their normal professional brief? Part of the answer lies in the fact that from the outset *Coal Face* was considered an experimental production. The visual material was compiled from existing footage, including some discarded material shot by the distinguished director Robert Flaherty originally for the EMB Film Unit (the predecessor of the GPO Film Unit); while Cavalcanti indicated that Harry Watt (later to be responsible for *Night Mail* (1936) and *The Saving of Bill Blewitt* (1937), both with incidental music by Britten), Humphrey Jennings and Basil Wright also filmed miscellaneous sequences. Another member of the Unit, Stuart Legg, recalled the following concerning the film's genesis:

[Grierson] gave me a lot of material to cut which had been shot in coal mines. He asked me to make it into a two-reeler. And this was the beginning of *Coal Face*, because when it was cut, I somehow managed to make it look like a film. And then somebody had the idea of carrying much further . . . and putting this whole interwoven soundtrack into it with Britten. Cavalcanti was in it by that time.⁴

In recent years, the finished appearance of the film has come to be considered the responsibility of Cavalcanti, in spite of numerous prints of the film displaying misleading credits – Britten's and Auden's names only, or simply those of Cavalcanti and Grierson. The latter recalled that Cavalcanti requested his name be deliberately omitted from any of the Unit's experimental productions – e.g. *Coal Face* and *Night Mail* – lest it jeopardize his employment prospects in the British feature-film industry.⁵ Cavalcanti's close involvement in the project is not surprising, for he had been specifically engaged by Grierson to teach and experiment

with sound techniques, and it was his interest in music that brought Britten into Grierson's fold. *The King's Stamp* presented the composer with a *fait accompli*; in *Coal Face*, however, Cavalcanti took the opportunity to involve the musician from the earliest moment the soundtrack was discussed, and at all levels of possible collaboration. He accorded the composer the same respect as any other member of the production team.

An equally important reason for making this film, despite its Post Office origins, was the political significance of the subject in question. Coal-mining was an industry in which five employees were killed every day in the course of their work (a statistic underlined in the film) and where the pits were still privately owned and (mis-)managed in contrast to the post-war national organization. From the outset the film intended to focus on society's prevalent attitude to miners, and emphasize their poor working conditions and the extent to which their lives were dominated by their employment. In so doing, *Coal Face* joined a succession of similar protesting politicized art works which sought to place the plight of the miners in the 1930s before the general public. Other examples include Montagu Slater's *Stay Down Miner*, for which Britten composed incidental music;⁶ a play entitled *In Memoriam* by H. Cooper examining mining conditions in the Durham coalfield, which was submitted to the Left Theatre's 1935 play competition;⁷ and a BBC Features Department production entitled *Coal* (1938), also devoted to the Durham miners.

The collective responsibility taken for the visual material was similarly adopted for the tightly constructed script of *Coal Face*. Britten's diaries afford us the opportunity to trace the daily development of the project and, with the surviving textual and musical sources held by the composer's archive, allow us to scrutinize the composer's immersion in all aspects of the film.

Following an interview with Cavalcanti on 27 May, Britten was evidently contracted to compose music for several films, most notably *Coal Face*. (The other projects included *C.T.O. – The Story of the Central Telegraph Office*, *Telegrams* and *The Tocher*.⁸) Work began on the script of *Coal Face* – at this stage provisionally entitled 'Miners' – two days later; Britten wrote in his diary for 29 May: 'Odd jobs at Films before a committee meeting on script of film on Mining in aft.' The next two days were similarly spent in this collective attempt to create a suitable text, and Britten indicates, apart from himself, the involvement of Cavalcanti, Legg, the artist William Coldstream (then working at the Unit) and Ralph Bond. As might be expected from the number of personnel engaged, progress was painfully slow. The composer wrote on 3 June:

Go off to Soho Square at 10.30 [...] Spend morning & aft. at Soho & then to Blackheath 4.0–6.30 working at libretto of Mining film, with various people, & getting the full attention of none – hopeless job.

For several days Britten and Coldstream were sent out to undertake research for the film at various libraries, newspaper offices (the *Daily Herald*) and bookshops, in a bid to locate appropriate words. On 6 June their quest for authentic material led them to interview a Welsh miner. The script progressed more quickly under the triumvirate of Britten, Cavalcanti and Coldstream, and by 12 June, when Britten obtained a further (unidentified) book on mining, a prototype format and text were determined.

The literary sketches for *Coal Face* are unique in Britten's film oeuvre: they provide documentary evidence to substantiate the chronology unfolded above, indicating how intimately Britten influenced the shape and content of the script. The documents divide into two principal categories: typed material (*TSS I–III*) and seven handwritten sheets either pre- or post-dating the corresponding typescript versions. Probably the earliest surviving item is the draft scenario, *TS I* (Plate 4), which delineates a basic outline of the principal sections of the film; film-footage and corresponding durations have been subsequently added by Britten in pencil. The typescript has also been annotated by Britten to introduce three new subdivisions in section 2 and one additional item in section 4. The whole document is entitled 'Underground' – the film's first working title – in an unidentified hand in pencil.⁹ The numeration of the sections used in this scenario appears in both subsequent typescripts (*TS II* and *TS III*), though it was eventually abandoned by Britten in his full score.

TS II forms the second page of a draft (page 1 is missing), comprising commentary material for sections 3(b), 4(a), 4(b) and 5 of *TS I*. Section 5 has been expanded to include two additional subdivisions: coal as an exportable commodity, and as a fuel for industry. (See also white notepapers *Wia–iiia* below for Britten's handwritten drafts of the same material.)

TS III (Plate 5) – entitled 'Miners', a later working title closer to the 'mining film' which appears in Britten's diary entries – represents an important stage, i.e. the closest that is known to the final version of the text set by Britten in his full score. It contains full details of the commentary, verbal descriptions of the music (including sung texts where applicable) and the accompanying visual material; a column has been reserved for the film-footage but remains unused (although there is a calculation in Britten's hand at the top of the first page). There are, however, several crucial items missing, including the male chorus chants (full score, Sequence VI/*TS III*, II(f); full score, Sequence IX/*TS III*, II(a)–(c));

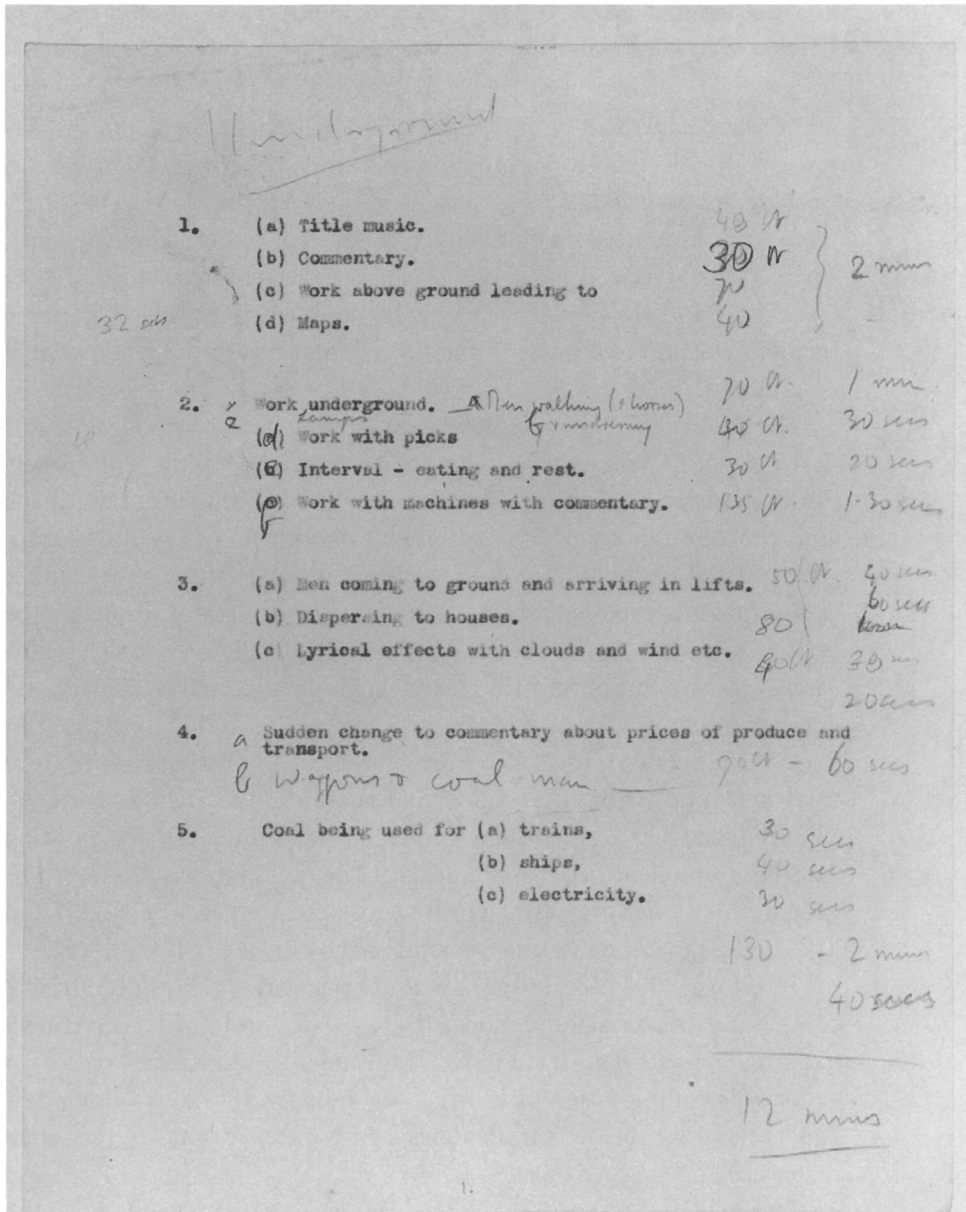


Plate 4 Draft scenario for *Coal Face (TS I)*, showing Britten's pencilled annotations

however, it is just possible to decipher the words 'Scientific definition' in the music column at II(a) of this typescript. Most notably absent is the famous Auden lyric 'O lurcher-loving collier, black as night', although the heavy pencil blocks and lines around the sections presumably denote an absent text. Furthermore, it is clear from the typescript that the team of writers recognized that something was required even when the actual text

had yet to be written: 'Chant gathering speed with women's voices calling. / Introduction of children's voices / Rising to lyrical climax.'

The assortment of pencil annotations and deletions suggests that *TS III* represents a working copy. The *verso* of page 1 included Britten's handwritten drafts for full score, Sequence VII/*TS III*, II(e) – originally missing from the typescript and included at a later stage – which is concerned with the miners' resting and eating, and a list of possible first names for the miners' wives to call out (see *TS III*, III(b) – 'with women's voices calling'/full score, Sequence IX).

One miscellaneous (though significant) typed item is the final page of an alphabetical glossary of various specialist mining occupations; the previous page(s) is now missing. This fragment corresponds to the chanted list of miners' occupations used by Britten in Sequence IV (*TS III*, II(a)), and was probably assembled by Britten and Coldstream after one of their research forays. Charles Osborne has suggested that Auden compiled this list, but since it is merely alphabetical in structure its compilation would hardly have required a poet's literary skills.¹⁰ Moreover, its presence in *TS III* and the conspicuous absence of the authentic Auden text further suggests it is not the poet's work.

The seven handwritten sheets divide neatly into two sets: those written on white notepaper (*Wi-iii*) and those written on blue notepaper (*Bi-iv*). They are all chiefly in Britten's hand and give a partial indication of the composer's involvement in the creation of the draft text for musical setting.

The three white notepapers (*Wi-iii*) contain two distinct elements. The *recto* pages form a neat draft in Britten's hand of *TS II*; they are paginated 7–9, so presumably the missing pages 1–6 related to the missing typescript page from *TS II*. This draft was probably written out by Britten preparatory to typing. The *verso* sides of two sheets (*Wi-ii*) were used by Britten for transcriptions of poetical texts, including 'Lerner than fleshless misery' from Shelley's *Queen Mab*, 'Yet to be just to these poor men' by Pope, an extract from Keats's *Isabella* and 'In the depths of the deep' from Shelley's *Prometheus*. *Wii* has an unattributed text beginning 'And the vast engines labouring in the mine' written in an unidentified hand, possibly that of Coldstream; the first line of the same poem also appears in Britten's hand on the fourth sheet of the blue notepapers (*Biv*). Two final poetry transcriptions can be discovered among the blue notepapers (*Bii recto*): in Britten's hand 'Such are born and reared at the mine's mouth under impending rocks', identified by Britten as Wordsworth; and the line 'Coal-mines & all that is down there, the lamps in the darkness, echoes, songs, what vast native thoughts looking through smutched faces', not identified by Britten but in fact by Walt Whitman.

76
72
62
13
10000

MINERS.

	Commentary.	Music.	Shot.	Footage.
I a.		Title music.		
		Song.		
		A sterile landscape covers the ore -		
		There is the mine		
		There are the miners & head-stocks		
		and always - some		
		at hand -		
G.	The coal mines of Gt. Britain employ 774,000 men. Since the war foreign competition and loss of markets brought poverty to the miners. 200,000 men are unemployed.	Piñe and Percussion.	Long shots of pit-heads.	
30				
C.	Head-stocks, winding gear, conveyor belt, washing sprays, shunting yards, slag heaps, this is the surface plant of every mine. Slag is the waste product from the pit. It must be separated from the coal. Overhead transporters deposit the slag on these heaps. At the pithead the coal is washed and graded. The principle bye products of coal are: - gas, coke, tar, dyes, oil.	" " "	" "	
d.	The chief coal produc-ing centres are in, S. Wales, Central Scotland, Durham and Northumberland, Yorkshire and Lancashire, and the Midlands.	" " "	Maps.	
	South Wales 140,000 men, 37 million tons a year.			
	Central Scotland 86,000 men, 31 million tons.			
	Durham and Northumberland 146,000 men, 46 million tons.	15000		
	Yorkshire and Lancashire ?			
	The Midlands ?			
			
II a.	The night shift. The coal face is a mile from the shaft.	Chant:- Banksman, Barrowman, Caster, Changer, Check-weigher, Coupler, Crane-man, Flat-lad, Driver, Greaser, headsmen, foal, helper-up, hewer, inspector, master-shifter, master-wasteman, onsetter, overman, Peedee, Rolley- way-man, running-fitter, shaft to coalface, skipper, screenman, trapper, wailer, waste-man.	Miners walking from	
	Temperature often reaches 80°.	Pft. and per.	Miners undressing.	

93082E

Plate 5 Typescript for *Coal Face* entitled 'Miners' (TS III)

61 *Britten in the cinema: Coal Face*

	Commentary.	Music.	Shot.	Footage.
c	The Davy Safety Lamp. The flame is enclosed against fire-damp. In this Scottish Pit there is no gas-the miner can work with a naked flame!	Pft. and Per.	Lamps.	
d	The seven and-a-half hour shift begins. The miner works in a cramped position. Often he has scarcely room to swing his pick. Sometimes he must stand up to his knees in water. He he works along the seams heaving out the coal. His average output is 20 cwt. per shift.	Chant. [Scribbled out]	Miner working with pick.	
e	<i>about half</i> Machines are replacing the pick. An electric coal-cutter. It moves along the seams undercutting the coal. The machine team shovels it into trucks.	Chant. [Scribbled out]	Miners resting and eating.	
f	Every working day five miners are killed and over 450 injured and maimed in Gt. Britain. Every year one in xxxxxx every five miners is injured.		Miners working with machines.	
III a	The shift is finished.			
b	The miners life is bound up with the pit. The miners house is often owned by the pit. The life of the village depends on the pit.	Chant gathering speed with women voices calling. Introduction of childrens voices.	Shots of cage rising to surface. Miners dispersing from pit-head.	
c		Building to lyrical climax.	Houses and backyards of miners panning on to country and up to sky.	
IV a	Transport and distribution double the price of coal. Making up coal trains. In this yard 3,000 waggons are shunted every day. The points are moved electrically.	Pft. and per.	Waggons The movement of points.	
b	40 million tons of coal are sold every year for household use.		London coal cart.	
c	10 million tons for the production of electricity.		Electrical plant.	
d	12 million tons for locomotives.		locomotives.	
e	18 million tons for shipping.		Ships.	
f	54 million tons are exported.		Ships, and barges.	
g	86 million tons are used for industry.		factories.	
V		Song Serves all great works on land - And all great works on the sea Served all the works on the sea as they - that served the world.	General shots.	

Plate 5 (cont.)

The Whitman text found on one of the blue notepapers (*Bii recto*) is taken from the American poet's *Leaves of Grass – Calamus: 'A Song for Occupation'*. Examination of Britten's copy of this poem reveals that the relevant page is annotated in pencil.¹¹ Also marked is the 'Song of the Broad-Axe',¹² which proves to be the source of the text for the title and end-title music drafts of *TS III*, I(a) and V:

A sterile landscape covers the ore, there is as good as the best
 for all the forbidding appearance,
 There is the mine, there are the miners,
 The forge-furnace is there, the melt is accomplis'd, the hammersmen are at
 hand with their tongs and hammers,
 What always served and always serves is at hand.

The pencil deletions on *TS III* indicate that the chosen texts were revised before being set by Britten. Evidently Coldstream's and Britten's search was not in vain. *Wii verso* comprises a sketch-plan for an unidentified male chorus sequence and the sentence, 'This is a stiff piece of coal', in Britten's hand.

Bi recto is not in Britten's hand and provides a 'Scientific definition' of coal missing from *TS III*, II(d). It reads:

understood
 By coal is ~~comprehended~~ all the fossil fuels contained in the earth's crust.
 Being an amorphous substance of variable composition, it cannot be as
 strictly defined as can a crystallized or definite mineral. Thus is:–

The passage was almost certainly transcribed from a reference book, possibly by Coldstream. The deleted lines, with the exception of the substitution of 'understood', correspond to the first part of the text used by Britten for Sequence VI in the full score. The second part of the text for Sequence VI comprises a chanted list of the different categories of coal. It can be found in two versions in the blue notepapers, both in Britten's hand: on *Bii recto*, where it is surrounded by the Wordsworth and Whitman quotations mentioned above, and the entire textual compilation entitled 'IId. Chant' (presumably the whole sequence of Wordsworth, the different coal-types and Whitman comprised an early version of the missing text); and on *Biii recto* where they are simply listed.

In the spring of 1935 Auden wrote to Basil Wright, who was working at the GPO Film Unit and whom he had first met at Oxford in 1927, asking if there might be an opportunity of some suitable employment at the Unit. He was immediately offered a full-time post from September that year, but in the meantime was invited to write material for two films, *Coal Face*

and *Night Mail*. Wright has recalled Grierson's enthusiasm to enlist Auden on the staff,¹³ and Grierson himself had already recognized the tremendous possibilities of poetry in the sound-film.¹⁴ Auden for his part was keen to leave school teaching and was interested in the work of the Unit.

The extent and chronology of Auden's contribution to *Coal Face* is not altogether clear. The authorship of the seven-line lyric 'O lurcher-loving collier, black as night' is universally acknowledged; it was published and reprinted in Auden's lifetime, and appeared as the first of 'Three Fragments for Films' in *The English Auden* (p. 290), where Edward Mendelson dates it to June 1935. (For further discussion of this lyric, see pp. 47–9 above.) We have previously noted how Coldstream and Britten – and presumably Cavalcanti – felt the need for poetry to provide a fitting lyrical climax to the film; they had not found much success with their own efforts, as is perhaps suggested by the intermediate script. It would be perfectly natural to turn to Auden, an established poet, to fill the gaps; but to establish the form Auden's involvement took, and at what juncture it occurred, we must turn to Britten's diary entries and the genesis of the musical composition of *Coal Face* for circumstantial evidence.

Britten's first attempt at composing some of the music for the score took place on 6 June, probably before *TS III* had been settled: 'Spend morning sketching music for "Mining" film'. Further composing did not occur until 13–15 June, and this was not without difficulties; by the 15th enough had been achieved for the music to be copied, though Britten was not specific about which sequences were transcribed. However, on 18 June Britten held a chorus rehearsal:

Straight back to Poland St. Rehearsing Rooms where for 4 hours (about 6–10) I struggle to make 18 members of the Covent Garden chorus fall in with my ideas – with some success in end. Everyone's very pleased with the stuff & I must say it comes off.

On the 19th the recording session took place:

In aft. prepare matters; then percussion, piano (Howard Ferguson) & two extra perc from Blackheath Conservatoire (to play chains, rewinders, sandpaper, whistles, carts, water, etc.) arr. at 4.0; choir at 5.30 & 6.30; then with commentator – we rehearse time & again & gradually record, finishing with men at 12.0, & with commentator at 12.30. Return (like the rest of the crowd) by taxi at 1.30 with Cavalcanti & Grierson – absolutely dead.

Two points should be noted. First, throughout Britten's diary entries concerning the film there is no mention of Auden or his provision of a text of any kind; secondly, there was apparently no subsequent recording session

for *Coal Face* after 19 June – all the music (including the choruses) was recorded on that single occasion. It appears that by 19 June ‘O lurcher-loving collier, black as night’ had been written, set by Britten and recorded by the Unit; Auden had fulfilled a specific role assigned to him by those already working more closely on the script (Cavalcanti, Coldstream and Britten). Whether Auden worked without personal contact with the Unit other than by letter or telephone is not clear; but we know that the first recorded meeting between Britten and the poet took place on 5 July 1935, i.e. after *Coal Face* had been completed. Britten recorded in his diary for that date:

Have a quick haircut before Basil Wright calls for me in his car at 10.0 & takes me down to Colwall (near Malvern). Very lovely journey via Maidenhead, Oxford, Tewkesbury. Arr. 1.45 – lunch at Park Hotel where we put up. We come here to talk over matters for films with Wystan Auden (who is a master at the Downs School here – incidentally Bobby [Britten’s elder brother, Robert] was a master at the Elms, another school in Colwall). Auden is the most amazing man, a very brilliant & attractive personality – he was at Fairfield, Gresham’s but before my time. Work with him in aft. & then tea in Malvern. After that, watch the boys have a rag – and then eat at the Park. After that we have a drinking party with most of the Downs Masters (about 7) – but very boring.

Although Britten does not identify the film projects which he, Auden and Wright discussed during this visit (Britten and Wright remained at Colwall until 8 July), Humphrey Carpenter cites a letter by Auden probably dating from July 1935, in which Auden recounts composing verses ‘for a film about the Night Mail to Scotland’.¹⁵ That Wright (who scripted *Night Mail*) rather than Coldstream or Cavalcanti (who were involved in *Coal Face*) accompanied Britten points to early preparations for what was originally known as the ‘Travelling Post Office’ film. It has been suggested by Charles Osborne that Auden contributed to other parts of the *Coal Face* text: the list of specialist mining occupations; the mining disaster reports (‘Fire followed explosions; five hundred men trapped half a mile underground’); and the chant text leading into ‘O lurcher-loving collier’ (‘How much did we hew? how much fined for dirt?’).¹⁶ This additional level of involvement is less clear-cut, for if we examine *TS III* the passages cited by Osborne (with the exception of the list of mining occupations) are indicated by the word ‘Chant’ (see *TS III*, II(f) and III (a)). However, the absence of any exact text is hardly conclusive evidence of Auden’s authorship; equally, it does not deny the possibility of his writing these texts. While the mining disaster reports were possibly researched by Britten and Coldstream from newspaper accounts (perhaps while they were at the offices of the *Daily Herald*), the chant as the miners return to

the surface may possibly be Auden's work. There is, however, no documentary evidence to support either argument. Auden's own recollections of his collaboration on this film, while characteristically vague, seem definitive:

In the summer of 1935 Mr John Grierson . . . asked me to write a chorus for the conclusion of a GPO Documentary film called *Coal Face*. All I now remember about this film was that it seemed to have been shot in total darkness, and a factual statement in the commentary – the miner works in a cramped position. My chorus, he told me, would be set by a brilliant young composer he had hired to work for him, called Benjamin Britten.¹⁷

One final observation concerning the script may account for the authorship of those male chorus chants. Montagu Slater, poet, playwright and librettist of *Peter Grimes*, has been cited by his widow, Enid, as being involved with the GPO Film Unit and with *Coal Face* in particular, a suggestion which Rachael Low corroborates. Moreover, Mrs Slater claims that Slater and Britten met for the first time while working on *Coal Face*. We can find, however, no further evidence to suggest that Slater was involved in this film project. Rachael Low is evasive about her source for including Slater's name in the list of credits for the *Coal Face* entry in her filmography, and the present author has never seen Slater's name appear on the title credits of prints of *Coal Face*; like Auden, neither is he mentioned in Britten's diary entries concerning this film. This does not necessarily preclude the possibility that Slater was consulted or contributed in the same way as Auden, i.e. apparently at a distance, for Slater possessed enviable knowledge of mining conditions¹⁸ and, earlier in 1935, had gathered material in South Wales for a reportage account of the miners' sit-in strikes.¹⁹

Auden's lyric provided the opportunity to make a specific effect in the film. With the exception of the title and end-title music (see Plate 6 below) it is the only sung (as opposed to chanted) chorus in the film; moreover, its impact is heightened because it comprises the sole example of sung part-writing in Britten's score, and thus contrasts sharply with the stark octave sounds of the title and end-title music. Britten's striking setting for women's voices (SSAA) – representing the miners' wives – marks out this setting as the emotional peak of *Coal Face* (Ex. 3.1).

While *Coal Face* was intended to depict the conditions existing in the mining industry, it equally identified the industry's importance to national prosperity. This dichotomy is neatly balanced over the film's five sections, in which the miner is depicted as both machine and human being. These opposing elements are expressed by means of the interlocking parameters of the film: the visual material and the various

Example 3.1

Molto più lento

The musical score consists of five staves. The top staff is for the Commentator, with lyrics: "The mi-ner's life is bound up with the pit." The second and third staves are for Sopranos and Altos respectively, with lyrics: "O lur-cher lov-ing col-lier black as night. Fol-low Gin-ger Tom". The fourth and fifth staves are for the Pianoforte, with lyrics: "Bill Dick". The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (f, sf), articulation (legato, e espress.), and phrasing slurs. A tempo marking "Molto più lento" is at the top. A fermata is placed over the final measure of the vocal parts.

subdivisions of the virtually continuous soundtrack. Britten's setting of 'O lurcher-loving collier' coincides with that moment in the structure at which the miner-as-machine/miner-as-human-being conflict is brought to its most extreme position (i.e. at the end of the third section). At this juncture he is now revealed as an ordinary man with wife and children; and, as such, unusual forces (within the prevailing stark sound of this score) were required. Britten explores the inherent contrast by means of a sophisticated hierarchy of sound-components, the interplay of which comprises the complete soundtrack. The technique is not dissimilar to that evolved by Walter Leigh for the soundtrack of *The Song of Ceylon*, where a comparably dichotomous relationship – between Western and Eastern cultures – was explored. Although Leigh's pioneering and penetrating analysis of his technical achievements in that film²⁰ had not yet been published when his younger colleague was composing *Coal Face*, experimentation was part of the GPO Film Unit's daily activities; we also have established that Cavalcanti had deliberately shown Britten some of their best experimental sound-films including *The Song of Ceylon*, and that Britten may possibly have had personal access to Leigh. These factors point to Britten's taking his cue from Leigh's special achievements in *The Song of Ceylon* as a basis for the organization of the soundtrack for *Coal Face*.

We can represent the range of Britten's approach to word-setting diagrammatically:

Prose			Verse
Miner as machine			Miner as human being
(Dark)			(Light)
(a) Commentary: unmetricated spoken text	(b) Commentary: metricated spoken text (one voice)	(c) Chant: metricated spoken text (chorus)	(d) Sung text

These categories may briefly be commented upon:

(a) *Commentary: unmetricated spoken text* is hardly ever used in *Coal Face*. The only substantial section begins ‘The chief coal producing centres are in South Wales, Central Scotland . . .’ Unlike in *The King’s Stamp*, this straightforward method is not used here without some kind of background musical support, in this particular instance a repetition of the title music, Sequence I (‘A sterile landscape covers the ore’), reproduced at an artificially subdued level. Even when that ceases Britten provides a short percussion *ad lib.* link to effect the changeover to the subsequent sequence, for the composer is at pains to provide a virtually continuous scored soundtrack in this film.

Within Britten’s scheme the statistical nature of the text, accompanied by maps in the visuals, is used to represent an extreme position in the film: the miner regarded as merely a unit of productivity.

(b) *Commentary: metricated spoken text (one voice)*, and (c) *Chant: metricated spoken text (chorus)* are the most widely deployed methods of word-setting in *Coal Face*, whether the text be straightforward prose or a contrived attempt at verse. The commentator’s voice is exclusively reserved for factual statement (see Ex. 3.2), where the metricated text imbues an appropriate air of formality matched by his own authoritative voice. The control exercised over the spoken text – as much as would be possible if it were sung – permits accurate alignment with any desired imagistic effects in the instrumental ensemble of percussion and piano. Furthermore, this precision could be most beneficial at the later, editing stage. Whereas the commentary clearly represents the miner-as-machine aspect of *Coal Face*, the spoken (chorus) chant, echoing similar devices employed in *Pett and Pott* and *The Song of Ceylon*, tends towards the humanity of the miner. The first chant, Sequence IV (an alphabetical recitation of the different mining jobs), reinforces this intention by

Example 3.2

The musical score for Example 3.2 consists of three staves. The top staff is for the Commentator, with lyrics: "The coal mines of the coun-try em-ploy se-ven hun-dred & fif-ty thou-sand". The middle staff is for Percussion, featuring a cymbal roll marked "[cym.] pp". The bottom staff is for Pianoforte, with markings "pp trem." and "pp ma marc.". The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings.

coinciding with the first appearance of the miners on the screen, and subsequent references to mining disasters (in Sequence VIII) and the social life of the miner (in Sequence IX) confirm the meaning. For Sequences IV, VI, VII, VIII and IX, Britten has annotated his score with detailed indications in respect of the position of each chorus part in relation to the microphone; with the exception of Sequence VII, all the annotated sequences are examples of this chant technique. These markings represent a brave attempt to provide an additional layer of dynamic and spatial control which was probably influenced by Cavalcanti's experiments in sound recording. The intention suggests a dramatization of the text, enlivened by purely technical means. Ultimately the concept was doomed, if not to failure, then to a very limited success at the mercy of the poor quality of the recording equipment and the even greater inferiority of the reproduction facilities available in the cinemas of the period. Britten's diary for 18 June suggests that the idiom provided considerable difficulties for a chorus of experienced performers. These drawbacks serve to indicate the technically adventurous nature of this film. The often-cited reversed recording of a cymbal clash to represent a train passing through a tunnel is a clear development of Leigh's 'swinging microphone' technique in *The Song of Ceylon*, incidentally also involving cymbals. This stroke of recording inventiveness is the only sound in the entire film which is not (obviously) present in Britten's score, but was later edited into place. Ironically, in some prints of *Coal Face* the alignment of the imagistic device is miscalculated for the sound fails to coincide with the train.²¹

(d) *Sung text* represents the opposite extreme from the unmetricated spoken word, possessing both pitch and rhythm, and forms the apotheosis of the human element of the film. It is adopted on three occasions during *Coal Face*: the title music (Sequence I); a shortened version of the end-title music (Sequence XIII); and the Auden setting in Sequence IX.

The title music (Plate 6) immediately places the important contrast between man and machine by juxtaposing the lyrical, arching contours of the chorus (E minor tonality) with punctuating chords from the percussion and piano (ill-defined tonality). Particularly telling is the rising arpeggio to the word ‘mine’ and the more emphatic minor ninth to ‘miners’, further strengthened by the descending octave leap and move away from the prevalent harmonic foundation.

Sequence IX (Plate 7) develops a typical imagistic device employed throughout this score, and first heard in the title music (see Plate 6): rising scales usually beginning low in the register, and undoubtedly associated with the depth and darkness of the mines. Organic development of the motivic concept can be observed in Sequences II (see Ex. 3.2), V and XII (the shortened reprise of Sequence I). In Sequence IX this imagistic technique is developed more subtly, by evolving a fragmentary melodic contour in the very lowest regions of the piano keyboard coupled to the chanting male chorus. As it rises through the keyboard register, the contour becomes more continuous, the frequency of the chanted words from the male chorus intensifies, and the general dynamic level increases from *piano* to *forte*. The complexity of the sound image is intended to dramatize musically the visual images of the miners rising to the surface after their shift. We should further note the suspended cymbal representing the whirring sound of the colliery lift. The subject-matter of the text relates to the miners’ sense of anticipation, readily conveyed by Britten’s setting. As the whole short section reaches its peak – highest, loudest notes from the piano, and loudest and most intense chanted text – women’s voices are introduced calling the names of their menfolk.

The naturally lyrical quality of the women’s voices in ‘O lurcher-loving collier’ is emphasized by the style of the piano accompaniment employed. Whereas in *The King’s Stamp* the role of the two pianos was largely confined to providing a traditional harmonic and melodic support (although when the pianos were used imagistically the results were most impressive), in *Coal Face*, where the composer’s concept of the score as a whole was far more imagistically orientated, a greater part of the soundtrack’s experimentation lies in the use of the piano as an extension of the resourceful percussion ensemble. Thus, when in *Coal Face* the piano-writing resorts to a more conventional type the impact is all the greater. In Sequence IX this quality is felt most strongly in the piano’s arpeggio figuration (see bar 5 of the Auden setting) which relates to the rising triadic motif in Plate 6 (at ‘There is the mine’), and by the complete absence of any percussive timbres.

In this sequence we should note the nature of Britten’s word-setting, which adumbrates a favourite device of the mature composer: the overlapping of phrases of the text and the judicious repetition of certain

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the title music of 'Coal Face'. The score is divided into two main sections. The top section is marked 'Andante' and features vocal parts for Soprano and Alto, Tenor, and Bass, along with Percussion and Piano/Guitar. The vocal parts have lyrics: 'A sterile land', 'A sterile land', 'A sterile land'. The Percussion part includes a 'Ban down' instruction. The Piano/Guitar part has a 'pp' dynamic marking. The bottom section includes lyrics and accompaniment for the vocal parts. The lyrics are: '- scape covers the ore. This is the', '- scape covers the ore. This is that'. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (pp, p, mf, f), articulation (accents), and performance instructions like 'Ban down' and 'Cymbals (with d. stick)'.

Plate 6 Coal Face, full score, Sequence I (title music), pp. 2-3

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the piece "Coal Face". The score is divided into two systems. The first system contains vocal parts and piano accompaniment. The vocal parts are written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are: "mine, there are the men" and "mine, there are the men". The piano accompaniment includes a piano part with a 7/3 time signature and a percussion part. The second system is for the piano and includes a "Commentator" part with the text: "Coal mining is the basis industry of Britain." The piano part includes a 7/3 time signature and a 5/4 time signature. The score is marked with various dynamics such as *f*, *ff*, *sf*, and *pp*. There is a small circular logo in the bottom left corner of the page.

Plate 6 (cont.)

Handwritten musical score for "Coal Face", Sequence IX, pp. 28-9. The score is written on ten staves, including vocal parts and piano accompaniment. It features lyrics such as "we're going up!", "Bill!", "Dick!", "soccer game", and "we're going up!". The score includes dynamic markings like "p", "mf", "f", and "ff", and performance instructions like "(calling)". The piece is in 3/4 time and D major. The page number "28." is visible at the bottom center of the manuscript.

Plate 7 *Coal Face*, full score, Sequence IX, pp. 28-9

Handwritten musical score for "Coal Face" by Benjamin Britten. The score is written on ten staves, including vocal lines and piano accompaniment. It features lyrics in English and German, such as "This is the best of times", "We're going up", and "We're going down". The score includes dynamic markings like *p*, *f*, *mf*, *ff*, *pizz*, and *arco*, as well as performance instructions like "more notes" and "more notes". The tempo is marked "Med." and "C". The score is numbered "28" at the bottom center.

Plate 7 (cont.)

words for enhanced effect,²² intended on this occasion to be further emphasized by the microphone markings indicated on the score. In the first part of Sequence IX such a manner of word-setting is employed, whereby a simple line of text, e.g. 'If all you soccer fans had by mistake any gumption you'd play northern union like sensible beggars', is split between all four parts of the chanting male chorus (see bars 18–23).

The persistent refrain 'We're going up' is notated in such a way as to suggest the visual images it accompanies, with stems rising on the staff and a crescendo each time it appears (see bars 12–15, for example). It also provides a vital factor in the sense of anticipation within the movement itself.

A similar practice of word-setting is adopted for the Auden text itself, where antiphonal effects between the divided vocal lines are emphasized by the slower tempo. Britten's setting alternates the first two pairs of lines of Auden's poem between the sopranos and altos, before moving to a richer two-part texture at 'For Sunday soon is past and, Kate, fly not so fast'; the repetition of 'Kate' for dramatic emphasis is characteristic of the mature composer. Equally typical is the approach to the final pair of lines ('For Monday comes when none may kiss: / Be marble to his soot, and to his black be white') where Britten splits the text between the sopranos ('For Monday . . .') and the altos ('Be marble . . .'); however, by overlapping phrases he is able to produce an unusual collusion of phrases (see bars 62–77).

In spite of its wide-ranging modulatory character – a consequence of the principal melodic idea – the Auden setting settles upon a conclusive E minor chord sounding in the highest register of the women's voices; Auden's matchless words succumb to wordless, siren-like sounds. The final tonality is important for it forms part of a loosely linked chain of identical tonalities (sometimes only suggested) across the span of the score, namely: Sequence I; the end of Sequence III (a prominent reminiscence of Sequence I); the final bars of Sequence V (itself presenting motivic elements properly belonging to the Auden lyric); and the first version of Sequence XII, the end-title music. In *Coal Face*, the conventional musical unity, through thematic, harmonic and tonal control, is not as obvious or rigorously schematic as in *The King's Stamp*; the experimental nature of the project apparently allowed timbral values to be more significant than motivic ones. However, the cited examples do present evidence of a deliberate motivic and conceptual association of which this pointing of a home tonality is another significant example, similar in function to that of C major in *The King's Stamp*. If E minor is to represent the tonality of the miners in *Coal Face*, then it will equally well serve as the ultimate tonal resting-point for their womenfolk, in spite of having been reached in the Auden setting by a circuitous route of shifting tonalities beginning in A.

Example 3.3

The musical score for Example 3.3 consists of three staves: Whistler (top), Tenor (middle), and Bass (bottom). The Whistler part begins with a series of eighth notes, followed by a phrase marked *dim.* and *pp*. The Tenor part has a few notes in the second bar, marked *p*. The Bass part starts with a series of eighth notes, marked *p*, followed by a phrase marked *cresc.* and *dim.*. The score is in 4/4 time and features various dynamic markings and phrasing slurs.

We have discussed at some length the nature of the methods of word-setting in this film score, but one final use of the singing voice requires our attention. Sequence VII employs wordless singing (humming) from tenor and bass soloists with the addition of a whistler to evoke the strange, brooding atmosphere of the mine at night (see Ex. 3.3: the second bar of the whistler's part of this extract is crossed through in the manuscript). It accompanies a brief exchange of dialogue between two miners as they eat and rest. The texture comprises a layered tripartite combination, each vocal element possessing its own character, metre and tonality (C, E \flat and E). There would appear to be no direct precedent for this hummed/whistled montage among the GPO Film Unit's previous documentaries, although the technique is obviously an extension of the kind of overlaid choral patterns advocated by Grierson in his article 'The G.P.O. Gets Sound'.²³ The inclusion of hummed pitches was hardly an orthodox musical procedure but we may be more surprised by the incorporation of whistling in the score.²⁴ The latter is a notoriously difficult skill to acquire, particularly when precision of pitch and rhythm is required by the elaborate effect envisaged here.

Sequences X and XIa represent a specific experiment in imagistic development in which an expanded percussion ensemble replaces conventional post-synchronized natural sound. Each successive visual image is represented by a highly imaginative percussion gesture: shunting coal waggons by side drum, chains, sandpaper and whistles (bars 1ff.); horse-drawn coal carts by two sizes of coconut shell (an obvious effect but with a less obvious rhythm) and the wheeling of a small cart on asbestos (bars 31ff.); the whirring of an electricity generator by the combination of a triangle, a suspended cymbal struck by a side-drum stick and trip gear (bars 48ff.); locomotives by the bass drum, small and large drills, sandpaper and whistle (bars 61ff.); ships by a complex mixture of a cup in a bucket of water (both emptying and filling), a rewriter, cymbals, bass drum, notched wood with wooden sticks, and a cardboard cylinder to act

as a hooter (bars 85ff.); and the industrial consumption of coal (scenes of factories) by a sheet of metal struck by a wooden mallet, a gong, chains and a whistle (bars 115ff.).

This sequence was composed last of all, on 17 June, and formed the outcome of close discussion with Cavalcanti. As Britten's diary reveals, the composer himself was fully aware of the innovative nature of the sequence:

Spend day at studio experimenting & talking over details, & measuring feet of film for Coal-face, with Coldstream. Back here by dinner & then work till 12.30 [a.m.] at some more music for the film – it is entirely experimental stuff – written for blocks of wood, chains, rewinders, cups of water etc. etc.

There can be no doubt that the enlarged percussion group, resourcefully combining conventional instruments with household objects, was a development of Walter Leigh's instrumentation of the title music for *Six-Thirty Collection* (GPO Film Unit, 1933), which was scored for a rewriter, a pair of typewriters, an empty beer bottle (blown to mimic a ship's siren), a projector, two pieces of sandpaper, and the studio bell, with the addition of cymbals, triangle and trumpet.²⁵ In Britten's hands, however, the concept is developed to such a degree as to employ no fewer than twenty-two 'instruments', including 'sheet of metal & wooden mallet', 'small cart on sandy asbestos' and 'cup in bucket of water', deployed in four groups. It is extraordinary that in *Coal Face* every single noise heard on the soundtrack – while apparently 'natural' in origin – is, in fact, the product of Britten's detailed instrumentation, both in this sequence and earlier in the score. Britten was to return to this type of percussion scoring in *Night Mail* for the sequences depicting the locomotive pulling away from the station platform.

Throughout the present discussion we have suggested that Britten built upon his predecessors' achievements in creating such a formidably interesting score. The work of Leigh stands out as the prime example: films such as *Six-Thirty Collection*, *Pett and Pott* and *The Song of Ceylon* must be considered in relation to *Coal Face* and vice versa. From our present vantage point, we can recognize a typical trait of work in *Coal Face*: Britten's impressive ability to transcend his eclectic tastes by absorbing a wide variety of compositional approaches into a distinctive personal style.

Coal Face can also be recognized as a prime example of the collective creative act, in which director, producer, script-writers, cameramen, editor and musician all made meaningful and interrelated contributions to the overall concept. One of the most significant features was the extent

of the composer's contribution, both to the scenario and the text. Unlike *The King's Stamp*, where Britten was presented with a *fait accompli*, in *Coal Face* he was fully involved in the project from an early stage. The group method of working was to form the basis for the most successful of his subsequent film scores and was to spread to his work in the theatre and the radio studio. Furthermore, it formed the successful pattern of his later working life in the opera house, and in his multifarious collaborations with solo instrumentalists and singers.

