



STUDY GUIDE · SECONDARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Skin and Coal

A documentary by Claudine Boothe · 1986 · 52 minutes

Black British miners in Doncaster, Leeds and Nottingham, in their own words. Teaching notes, discussion questions and activities for history, Black studies, labour history and documentary film courses.

About this guide

This guide accompanies *Skin and Coal*, a 52-minute documentary made in 1986 by Claudine Boothe. It is written for teachers and lecturers who want to use the film in class, and it can be adapted for:

- **Key Stage 4 / GCSE History**, in units on migration to Britain and on post-war British society.
- **Key Stage 5** History, Sociology and Media Studies.
- **Undergraduate modules** in modern British history, Black British studies, labour and industrial history, oral history and documentary film.

The film runs 52 minutes and fits a double lesson or a seminar with time for discussion. Where it is used with younger students, teachers should preview it: it contains adult testimony about dangerous work and racism.

Synopsis

“Skin and Coal” is Claudine Boothe’s first independent documentary. It tells the story of two generations of coal mine workers of African and Caribbean descent, living and working in Doncaster, Leeds and Nottingham during the final years of Britain’s coal mining industry.

Through first-hand testimony from the miners and their families, the film records how Black workers moved up from the lowest-paid and most dangerous jobs to most roles underground, the conditions they worked in, and the discrimination they went on meeting outside the pits.

Filmed in 1986, “Skin and Coal” stands as the only known audio-visual record of Caribbean people’s presence in this historic British industry.

Why the film is used in teaching

The film is listed and used as educational material by the University of Nottingham and is frequently sourced by academic researchers. It is catalogued by the Black Miners Museum, the oral history archive of Black British coal mining heritage. Because it was filmed while the pits were still working, it is a primary source as well as a documentary: the people speaking are the workers themselves, recorded at the time.

Historical background

Four short blocks that teachers can expand with their own material. They are deliberately general; the film itself supplies the detail.

1. The Windrush generation

After 1948, people from the Caribbean travelled to Britain to work and settle, encouraged to fill labour shortages in industries and public services. Their arrival and their treatment in housing, work and public life are central to the history of post-war Britain, and to the questions the film asks about who is remembered as part of that history.

2. Work in the pits

The coal industry was one of the employers that took on Caribbean and African workers in the 1950s and 1960s, in coalfields including Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire. According to the Black Miners Museum, Gedling Colliery in Nottinghamshire became known as “the Pit of Nations” because of the diversity of its workforce. Mining was dangerous, physically demanding work with its own hierarchy of jobs; the film shows how Black workers began in the lowest-paid roles and moved through that hierarchy.

3. The 1984–85 strike and the closures

The miners’ strike of 1984–85 and the pit closures of the 1980s and 1990s transformed the coalfield communities in which the film was made. *Skin and Coal* was filmed in 1986, in the aftermath of the strike and during the decline of the industry. Students can use it to ask what that decline meant for workers who had come to Britain to do this work.

4. Archive and memory

The presence of Black miners in Britain was largely left out of the popular memory of the coal industry. Since the 2010s, projects such as the Black Miners Museum and research at the University of Nottingham have gathered oral histories and records. *Skin and Coal*, made decades earlier, is one of the few audio-visual sources those projects can draw on.

Before watching

- 1 What do you already know about coal mining in Britain? Who do you picture when you think of a British miner, and where does that picture come from?
 - 2 Why might people who came to Britain from the Caribbean in the 1950s and 60s have taken jobs in the mines? What might have attracted them, and what might they have expected?
 - 3 What is the difference between a documentary made at the time of the events and one made years later? What can each one show that the other cannot?
 - 4 The film is described as “the only known audio-visual record” of Caribbean people in the British coal industry. What does it mean for a community when so little of its history has been recorded?
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While watching

Ask students to keep notes under four headings:

Testimony. Who speaks, and from where (at work, at home, in the community)? What do the miners say in their own words about the work, and what do their families add?

Two generations. What differences and continuities appear between the older and the younger workers: expectations, treatment, opportunities, attitude to the industry?

Inside and outside the pit. How is life underground described, and how does it compare with the treatment the miners describe outside the pit: in the town, in housing, in everyday life?

The filmmaker's choices. What does the director let people say at length? What images accompany the testimony? Where does the film begin and end, and why might that be?

After watching

- 1 Summarise the story the film tells in three sentences. Which voice stayed with you most, and why?
- 2 The film records that Black workers moved from the lowest-paid and most dangerous jobs to most roles underground. What does this suggest about the pit as a workplace, compared with society outside it?
- 3 Several speakers describe discrimination outside the pits. What forms does it take in the film? How do the speakers respond to it?
- 4 How do the two generations in the film see the industry differently? Whose expectations were met, and whose were not?
- 5 What is the role of family in the film? What do the miners' families reveal that the miners themselves do not say?
- 6 The film was made in 1986, after the miners' strike and as pits were closing. What signs of that moment can you find in it?
- 7 Why do you think the story of Black British miners was largely absent from the public memory of the coal industry? Who decides what is remembered?
- 8 The director, Claudine Boothe, is a Black British filmmaker who has spent her career on Africa-centred history. How might that shape what the film chooses to show?
- 9 Compare the film with another source on the same period (a newspaper report, an oral history recording, a photograph). What does each source add, and what does each leave out?
- 10 Forty years on, why does this film still matter? Write a short paragraph arguing for or against the idea that it should be part of the history curriculum.

Classroom and seminar activities

A. An oral history of work

Students interview an older relative, neighbour or community member about their first job in Britain, or about a workplace that no longer exists. They prepare five questions, record the answers with permission, and write a 300-word account. Compare the accounts in class with the testimony in the film: what makes a good interviewer, and what makes testimony trustworthy?

B. Comparing sources

Give students two or three sources on Black British miners: a clip from the film, an entry from the Black Miners Museum website, and a press article such as the British Safety Council's "The lost story of Britain's Black miners". Students identify who made each source, when, for whom and why, and rank them for reliability on a specific question of their choosing.

C. Sequence analysis

Choose a five-minute sequence. Students note every choice the filmmaker made: who is on screen, where the camera is, what is heard, how long each shot lasts, where the sequence is placed in the film. They then rewrite the sequence as if it were a written report, and discuss what is lost when testimony becomes text.

D. Mapping the coalfields

On a map of England, mark Doncaster, Leeds and Nottingham and the coalfields around them. Research which pits were open in 1986 and when they closed. Students present what happened to one of these towns after its colliery closed.

Documentary craft

Points to raise in media and film courses: the film relies on first-hand testimony rather than a narrator's argument; the subjects are recorded across two generations, which gives the film its structure; it was made by an independent Black production company at a time when such companies were rare in Britain; and it was filmed while the industry was still alive, which is why it works today both as a documentary and as a primary source.

How to cite the film

Harvard	Boothe, C. (1986) <i>Skin and Coal</i> . [Film]. Social Film and Video Ltd. Distributed by Concord Media.
MLA	Boothe, Claudine, director. <i>Skin and Coal</i> . Social Film and Video Ltd, 1986. Concord Media.
Chicago	Boothe, Claudine, dir. <i>Skin and Coal</i> . Social Film and Video Ltd, 1986. Distributed by Concord Media.

Further reading and links

- Black Miners Museum, oral histories and archive of Black British coal mining heritage — blackcoalminers.com
- University of Nottingham, “Digging deeper: unearthing narratives of black British coal miners” — exchange.nottingham.ac.uk
- British Safety Council, “The lost story of Britain’s Black miners” (2021) — britsafe.org
- BFI Player, “Coal on Film” collection — player.bfi.org.uk
- Concord Media, catalogue entry for *Skin and Coal* — concordmedia.org.uk
- Claudine Boothe, *No Virginity, No Nationality* (1981), free on BFI Player — player.bfi.org.uk

Licensing for classrooms and screenings

Copies for teaching. DVD, USB and online rental or purchase from Concord Media (link above).

Public screenings, institutional licences, conferences and interviews with the director. Write to projects@bukimage.com.

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