As many as one in five coal miners were injured or killed at work each year. This often caused extreme hardship for families, and the Durham Miners’ Association Compensation Department worked assiduously to secure adequate compensation for its members.

In a review of the Department’s work in 1924, the Arbitration Committee commented on the Workmen’s Compensation Act of 1923, which raised the maximum benefit in fatal claims from £300 to £600:

‘This has given to widows with children under 15 years considerably more than what could be obtained under the 1906 Act. Where no dependency existed under the old Act, £10 funeral expenses was allowed; present law £15. We are profoundly conscious of the inadequacy. The value of human life and those who have lost their bread winner is too low; whilst £15 to the parents for the loss of a son just blossoming into manhood is wicked. To replenish a pit pony will cost more than double that amount.’

**The Copeland Family**

One consequence of so many colliery accidents is the number of records left behind for family historians. There are reports of the inspectors of mines, and compensation records of both the colliery owners and the unions. Sometimes the records are detailed enough to tell a graphic story of family breakdown. Hudson Copeland, a hewer at Dawdon Colliery, was killed by a fall of stone in April 1915, leaving a widow, Catherine, and five children. By June 1915 a sixth child had been born. In 1918 she had to ask for an advance from her share of compensation to pay debts. The next entry in the records states that Catherine Copeland died on 21 January 1921 in Easington workhouse. In March the Easington Board of Guardians applied for payment of the compensation which was due to the four children left in the workhouse. This was refused and by June 1921 the family had been split up. All four children were taken out of the workhouse and placed in care with separate carers.

**The Blind Boy**

Other records describe quiet acts of charity by the mine owner Major W. Joicey. Some compensation schemes covered all members of a miner’s family, and the records show payments for domestic and road traffic accidents, and even falls into open cellars late at night.

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**Family Stories**

Claydon Colliery, 1915 (DCRO D/Ph 327/224)

DMAs Arbitration Committee minutes, 1906-1917 (DCRO DMA Acc 215/30 Box 310, Volume 2)

Dawdon Colliery, n.d. [mid 20th c.] (DCRO D/Ph 327/224)

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Easington Workhouse, OS Durham Sheet 21.15, 1919 edition (DCRO)

DMA Arbitration Committee minutes, 1915—a—1917 (DCRO DMA Acc 215/30 Box 310, Volume 2)

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