Despite its intrinsic interest, as well as its wider significance, I stumbled across this topic almost by accident. While greatly admiring Gareth Stedman Jones’ monumental study of Outcast London when it first appeared, only much later did I pay any attention to his occasional references to labour colonies. What triggered my interest was a reminiscence by Len Edmondson, a trade union militant and Independent Labour Party member who had been active in the National Unemployed Worker’s Movement during the 1930s. Edmondson briefly mentioned that one of his brothers had been sent to a work camp at Kielder, while he himself spent time in a camp at Brandon. At the time, I was teaching a course on interwar Britain, and drew on both Edmondson’s memoirs and a chapter from another contemporary account, Wal Hannington’s Problems of the Distressed Areas. Subsequently, one of my students decided to tackle the Ministry of Labour’s camps for his diploma dissertation; Dave Colledge was determined and systematic in tracing men who had worked in the camps, and published his findings in a study that has too long been out of print. I disagree with his interpretation of the period, which seems to me heavily reliant on the Marxist views and language of Wal Hannington (of whom more later on), but I have drawn on the oral and written testimony that Dave gathered, some of which is available in his book.

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Notes