Banners of Durham Miners' Union 1869 to the present

by John Foster

Introduction

What are the banners, what is their purpose and use? I have deliberately started at 1869 for two reasons. Firstly this was the year of the formation of the Durham Miners' Association or DMA. Secondly, because while there had been unions before then, notably Thomas Hepburn’s of 1832, and many large meetings, the banners are only described as flags with colliery names and devices.

I include a quote from Woodhorn Museum's Northumberland Banner Exhibition: “Members of the earliest miners' unions soon realised the value of flags and banners. They can be used to promote the benefits of being in the union. They also provide a union with an identity, and act as a rallying point for its members. To the outside world they proudly proclaim the past achievements and aims for the future.”

What are they?

Banners are large silk sheets, with painted devices on both sides, not embroidered as often stated. There are two basic shapes - an upturned rectangle, and an elongated rectangle - what we would now call portrait and landscape. On these would be painted ‘devices’ on either a roundel or rectangle. Through these sheets would be carrying poles, one each side, joined to a cross member, attached to which would be four guide ropes. All sorts of colours and shapes are used, and not only red as
believed. Red, blue, green, yellow and orange, and I have also seen a brown one. The Haswell banner is a very dark blue colour, almost black.

**Purpose**

Durham banners are carried for DMA purposes. Basically as stated above they represent the hopes, aspirations, and achievements and, yes, demands of the union. In Durham the union is called a lodge, probably coming from the early secret societies when unions were illegal, and it is thought that early leaders were members of the freemasons. Also, it has to be reported, that membership of unions was not compulsory, what is called a ‘closed shop’, until 1947. In fact B.R. Mitchell, in his *Economic Development of the British Coal Industry 1800-1914* gives figures for membership of 71% in 1900, 72% in 1905, 77% in 1907 and 80% in 1909.

The main use associated with banners is the Big Meeting, when each lodge would march proudly into Durham City to the racecourse for their “spot”. That is the commonly-held belief, but of course they were used on other occasions. Both Moyes and N. Emery in his *Banners of the Durham Coalfield* have a list. For example, the Washington area had a Miners’ Service at Rogation-tide, the Stanley area a Miners' Sunday, Hetton its Miners' Festival. Another use was the annual Mayday, one of the best was the Easington District where it would rotate around the mining villages.

The real use was for funerals, particularly after the main disasters, such as Seaham in 1880 (164 men lost), Trimdon Grange in 1882 (74), Usworth in 1885 (41), Wingate in 1906 (26) and West Stanley in 1909 (168). But of course there were smaller disasters i.e. Murton 1942, or of single deaths at the pit, or some leader.
By 1970 the banners were to be seen outside the county. In 1971 they were well-represented in the protest against the Tory Industrial Relations Bill, both at London and Newcastle. By the 1980s banners were seen all over. The 1984-85 strike brought old banners out as lodges were sometimes at two separate demonstrations. The 1992 closures saw many banners throughout the country and beyond. In fact banners were also turned out for other north-east workers in dispute, without involvement of the miners, such as nurses, local government etc. in their rallies, marches even pickets, also the recent fire dispute.

Another thing that banners have been used for are exhibitions, when again banners have been paraded throughout the county. In 1976 Durham banners were in the Fifty Years After the General Strike Exhibitions in London and Newcastle. Some other banners went on tour for exhibition purposes. Some notable exhibitions were

1 Durham Light Infantry Museum in 1973. This resulted in two books on banners by W.A. Moyes, *Banner Parade* (an introduction to the exhibition), followed by *The Banner Book* in 1974

2 15 Banners displayed at the Art Gallery in Scarborough

3 Gateshead Miners at Shipley Art Gallery in Gateshead in 1990

4 Exhibition at Vardy Gallery in Sunderland

5 East Durham Banners at the East Durham Show in 1994

6 In 1986 over 100 Banners displayed at the Big Meeting
Banners have also been used for plays including “Close the Coal House Door”.

Icons of the Banners

Early Victorian Banners contained a lot of iconology. A bit of everything - religious, unionism, portraits, mottos, even 5-6 lines of poetry. Classic mythology was also used, but bearing in mind that compulsory education did not start until 1871, and even then not really for working-class children, of course that was part of the pattern to prove the miners were not ‘underground savages’.

Heroes

These were in 3 forms:

1 Portrait

2 Full length

3 Cameo

Firstly there were local union leaders, followed by regional, then national. The early union leaders were simply called agents, what we would call Regional Secretary. Indeed most of the early speakers at Galas etc. were other agents from other areas.

Secondly there were political leaders, such as Gladstone of the Liberals, as the Labour Party wasn’t formed until 1900. Then Labour leaders, from Hardie to Wilson, will Tony Blair make it? There were also local MPs, eg. Dalton of West Auckland, and Shinwell of Easington. In his autobiography, Shinwell asked why he was on the back of the Horden banner, and joked it was to keep an eye on Harold Wilson who was on
the front. Other MPs appeared, such as Nye Bevan, founder of the Health Service, and Tony Benn is on the 2001 Blackhall banner. Others who appeared included Marx and Lenin, Lord Sankey, Chairman of the Coal Industry 1919, who was in favour of the miners and nationalisation, and J.P. Roberts, the miners' attorney, appears on the 2003 Willington banner. Non-political and non-union figures also appear, such as Burns, Shakespeare etc. The only woman to appear was Nurse Edith Cavell on Bowburn’s, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the pit had German connections, and after the war, sacking, even closure, was threatened, so it didn’t last long.

Heroes were not always single figures. The record was set by Ryhope with 7 figures, although there is a mechanics' banner that has the executive committee on. One problem was that many pictures never carried a name, which made recognition difficult.

Religious

There are a number of reasons why one side has a religious theme.

1 There was a strong religious ethos, many local leaders were lay preachers

2 Banner makers sent out catalogues which made the purchase cheaper

3 The basic tenets of the Labour Movement, the union and politicians, were the same eg ‘Good Samaritan’, ‘the strong should help the weak’ and ‘rich and poor’

4 Also contemporary thought suggests hidden meaning, so we talk of not only a religious faith but faith in the union leaders
5 Lastly it was to give two sides. There could be a hard message on the front eg ‘Strike the blow to be free’, and a soft one on the back.

There were a number of favourite religious subjects, including the Good Samaritan, Suffer Little Children, Walking on Water etc. Another topic is Durham Cathedral, or local churches eg Lanchester or Horden. Angels are also often used.

**Unionism**

This was the main purpose of the banners, but one can only generalise on general themes

1 Consolation – the simple need to talk, particularly when faced with coal-owners who locked out the miners, reduced wages, even closed pits. So they were shown round the table, asking for ‘justice’, or even Britiannia, to intervene, or there were scens of semi-naked pitmen talking to top-hatted owners

2 Unity very important - such as the parable of the sticks – a young child can break 1 stick whereas a strong man cannot break a bundle of faggots. Unity was also shown as miners shaking hands with other workers, or as an international theme, such as Austrian workers with British, or four nations of Britain and other nations

3 Payments to widows and orphans for accidents or death

4 Importance of the two-sided benefit of the union versus non-union i.e. membership, organised or unorganised

5 Health rights for miners eg pneumoconiosis
Pride in union buildings, eg the Miners' Halls at North Road and Redhills, also local welfare halls

Politics

Parliament features, also Acts of Parliament, such as those concerning Mines Regulations and Nationalisation, which were celebrated.

Mining

Banners depicted great pride in the industry, and scenes ranged from pit heads to full views of the colliery. ‘Beamish Air’ banners showed on one side the pit prior to nationalisation, and after on the other side. ‘Crook Hall’ had a lump of coal and all the industry from it. Miners themselves featured, and tools from the basic pick and shovel to machinery, as well as a pit pony.

Health and Welfare

Miners were among the first to provide for the aged and the sick. The first Aged Miners' Homes were built in 1899 at Haswell Moor. Conishead Priory was opened in 1930 as a convalescent home. The Hermitage at Chester-le-Street was opened in 1943 as a rehabilitation centre, and the Sam Watson’s Home at Richmond, North Yorkshire, was opened in 1962. Norman Emery in his book about Banners in County Durham informs us that welfare only appears briefly, a bowls pavilion on ‘Brandon’ and a bowls game on ‘Blackhall’.

Locations
Burnhope Reservoir was shown on Brancepeth's banner. On Hylton Castle's there is a picture of South Shields pier. St. Hilda’s, Murton and Elemore had war memorials. Tudhoe had the village green, whilst East Tanfield had 'before and after' housing.

**Mottos and Devices**

The old badge of the Labour Party appears on Whitworth Park's banner. On Chilton’s banner the wheatsheaf emblem of the Co-op appears, this was because miners were among the first in the north-east to form Co-ops due to the company shops (Thommy). The Co-ops were a great help during many of the strikes.

As well as biblical quotations there were those of many classical writers, up to Marx.

The Big Meeting itself appears simply on a band banner.

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