



DURHAM
In Time

Great Strike of the Northumberland and Durham Coalfield in 1844 - (Part 01 of 11)

by Derrik Scott

“Come Let us Reason Together”

Introduction

Of all the recorded strikes in the great Northumberland and Durham Coalfield from 1765 until the closing of the mines at the end of the twentieth century, certain strikes have been “famous” (or infamous, depending on one’s viewpoint) and have passed into mining folklore and legend.

The earliest recorded strike was in 1765 when the miners struck over a clause in the Yearly Bond which meant that they would have to obtain a “leaving certificate” from their colliery manager before being employed at another mine. The miners, who were not unionised at that time, saw the implications and the power this would give the employers, so together, they struck work and stayed out for six weeks until the owners gave in. There was no trouble in the mining villages although Dragoons were drafted in “just in case”. The leaving certificate was dropped and was not heard of again.

The next notable recorded strike was the Bindings Strike of 1810 when the owners wanted to change the date of binding from October to January. Finally the men agreed to be “bound” from April. Although there was no miners’ union, the men were united and solid in their resolve and finally won the day.

The Great Strike of 1831 ended in victory for the miners. Under their leader, Thomas Hepburn, a union of Northumberland and Durham miners had been formed much to the annoyance of the coal owners. The men refused to be bound in April and went on strike. There was no trouble to the owners since it was not uncommon for corves, etc. to be thrown





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down the shaft and damage done to the mine surface and property of the owner or manager. The men were victorious in the middle of June and one of the concessions granted by the owners was a reduction in the hours of boys working underground from 17 or 18 to 12 per day.

In 1832, the owners, jealous of the growing strength of the union decided that at the next yearly binding, no man being a member of the Miners' Union should be bound. The men resented this clause and struck on 3rd of March. Evictions of miners, their wives and families took place from their "tied" cottages and blackleg miners were brought in from other parts of the British Isles. The owners were determined to break the union and after a few weeks the men gave in having been starved into submission. Thomas Hepburn was blacklisted and could not find work at any colliery in Northumberland or Durham. The union was smashed then the owners started to systematically reduce the men's wages since they had no power to resist.

The next "great" strike was in 1844. This was a particularly long and bitter struggle. Miners and their families were evicted from their "tied" cottages and blackleg labour brought in from all over the country. There was great hardship and deprivation and finally, once again, the miners were starved back to submission.

The tragedy of the 1844 strike is that it was avoidable. The men were not in a union but a letter was sent from the Mining Association of Great Britain and Ireland to the coal owners in general and Londonderry in particular requesting "amicable adjustments" rather than resorting to a strike but the letter was not acknowledged. During the strike another letter was sent to the coal owners but this, too, was ignored.

The strike was caused mainly by the intransigent attitude of the coal owners. However, they suffered financially because it has been calculated that collectively they lost half a million pounds.





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At the end of a strike the warring factions have to “come together and reason.” Hence the title of the essay “Come, Let Us Reason Together”. The great pity is that the “coming together” and the “reasoning” took place after a long and bitter dispute instead of before it started.

The 1844 Strike is well documented by Richard Fynes in his History of the Northumberland and Durham Miners but references are made in other documents. This essay is an attempt to integrate much of the information available about the strike into one document.

Politics

The coal owners allied themselves to the Tory Party in the 19th and part of the 20th centuries. They did not want trade unions, regulations of the mines (in spite of a spate of disasters) or inspection of mines.

On the other hand the miners in the mid 19th century allied themselves to the Liberal Party, which was the radical party of the day. The miners wanted the mines to be regulated and inspected and have the right to form trade unions. Later, some miners’ leaders became Liberal MPs. In 1899 and 1900, with the formation of the Independent Labour Party and later, the Labour Party, miners allied themselves to the new political party. Miners became Labour MPs and their union sponsored many MPs in mining constituencies.

A former miner in the Durham coalfield, a qualified mining engineer and Safety Engineer at a large, modern coalmine, writes this essay on the North East coast with a bias towards the trade union and Labour movements.

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The seeds of the strike of 1844 by the coalminers of Northumberland and Durham were sown well before that year. The following is a brief history of the 14 years prior to the strike commencing. There was no union of Durham and Northumberland miners until 1830 when the two counties joined together in one large union, which was called “Hepburn’s Union”. Thomas Hepburn (1795 – 1864) who gave his name to the union was a man of whom it could be said, “was born years before his time”. In an age of mass illiteracy among the working class Hepburn was literate, intelligent, tactful, persevering and with an honesty of purpose. A Primitive Methodist and lay-preacher his word was his bond. He was a miner himself from the age of 8 years, his father having been killed in a colliery accident leaving him the breadwinner. He moved from Pelton to Hetton to work.

It was about 1830 when signs of intelligence were beginning to emerge from the miners. They began to understand the value of public sympathy and to put grievances before the public. So it came about that the public began to realise for the first time that miners were treated in a barbarous manner by their employers. Hours of work were up to 17 and 18 per day – and these for boys!

In 1831 all the miners of Northumberland and Durham came out on strike for a general wage increase and shorter hours. The strike was successful and two of the victories won by the miners were a shortening of hours worked to 12 per day and that wages would be paid in money and an end to the so called “Tommy Shops”. This was a system by which miners and their families had to buy provisions from a shop usually owned by a relative of the viewer (or manager) of the colliery. His wages were confiscated at the pay-day to settle any balance that may be owed to the shopkeeper.

Following the success of the 1831 strike, Hepburn brought the men out on strike again in 1832. At the “annual binding” of the miners in March/April, the owners decided that no miner who was a member of the Union would be “bound”. Those Union members had become convinced of the advantages of unity and showed no interest in leaving their union





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at the behest of their employers. A decision was taken that non-union would not sign the Yearly Bond unless the union men were also bound.

The two counties of Northumberland and Durham were laid idle again and the dispute was to become long, bitter and bloody. Evictions of miners and their families took place at Hetton and Friar's Goose (Gateshead) Collieries. Fortunately the weather was good so that the furniture, which was cast into the street, did not suffer much damage. Farmer's byres and haylofts as well as public house longrooms became repositories as well.

Strike-breakers ("scabs") were brought in by the employers and inhabited the vacant colliery houses after the original tenants had been evicted.

The yearly bond continued and the strike ended successfully for the owners. At the subsequent binding, no miner who was a member of the union was re-employed and so the union was smashed – which was the ultimate object of the employers.

It was during the course of this strike that the duplicity of the judiciary was demonstrated. A magistrate for the County of Durham by the name of Nicholas Fairless of South Shields was riding to Jarrow Colliery when he was accosted by two miners who seized and dragged him from his horse and felled him to the ground. He was left badly injured and died some ten days later. One man was apprehended but the other escaped. In spite of a reward of £300 (a vast amount of money in those days) the other man was never caught. It is strongly suspected that the one who escaped was the murderer, the other being an accomplice. William Jobling, a miner, was tried at Durham Assizes for the murder of Nicholas Fairless, found guilty and sentenced to be hanged and his body to be hung in chains near the scene of the murder. (This was the first person to be gibbeted in England). The sentence was carried out. It is thought that the actual murderer witnessed the execution of Jobling then escaped to America.





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At a meeting of miners, which took place at Chirton, near North Shields on 8th July 1832, an affray took place between strikers and special constables. A miner from Percy Main Colliery named Cuthbert Skipsey, a mild-mannered, inoffensive man, tried to make peace between the parties when he was shot in the head by a policeman named George Weddell. Skipsey was a married man with six children.

Weddell was subsequently tried for the manslaughter of Skipsey, was found guilty and sentenced to six months imprisonment with hard labour. One law for a policeman, another law for a miner.

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The Yearly Bond

The owners were educated and intelligent men. By having the Bond, which was a legal system, backed up by the Master and Servants Act, they had a hold over their employees. The miners, being ignorant, were totally opposed to the Bond but didn't possess the wit or the money to fight it. It was left to W.P. Roberts, the pitmen's attorney, to defend many miners and to ultimately have the Bond cancelled.

Since references have been made, and will be made to the Yearly Bond it is felt that some explanation is required. The annual bond in Northumberland and Durham had its origins in the traditional method of binding farm servants and labourers and the signing ceremony was in many areas, accompanied by a feast day comparable to the hiring fairs in rural districts. Reflecting its agricultural origins, the colliers' bond ran originally from autumn to autumn, but as this caused a hitch in production at a time of peak sales of coal, the term was altered in 1812 to run from April to April. Initially, it was the custom for the clauses of the bond to be read out before the colliers signed it, but this could take some time since by the 1830s





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the document had increased in complexity and could be several thousands of words long, including details of payment, instructions on methods of working, colliery regulations, and where colliery housing was provided, as was usual in the north-east, conditions of tenancy. (Glass to be kept in good repair, fourteen days to get out if employment ceased, no dogs to be kept, were typical conditions). It even contained a provision for arbitration in the case of disputes.

The bond was couched in such legal language, which submerged itself from time to time into reams of dependant clauses that it can have meant little to those literate colliers able to read it at leisure, and must have meant even less to those who heard it gabbled at top speed. An official present at one signing questioned some of the colliers about the bond and, “scarcely one of the witnesses whom I examined could give any outline of the provisions of the agreement to which they had thus formally consented, though well acquainted with the bearing of some stipulations which they considered grievances”. ‘Signing’ was something of a misnomer, because, regardless of whether a collier could sign his name in script, it had become the practice, for the sake of speed, to make a mark. The same official reported, “I observed more than one hundred persons indicate their assent and signature by stretching their hands over the shoulder of the agent and touching the top of his pen while he was affixing the cross to their names, and this, I was told, was a common practice”.

Although the bond gave colliers a measure of security and even contained in some instances, provisions for short time working, or what would today be called a guaranteed working week, it had a number of drawbacks. Because the demand for labour was variable – a cold snap in London, the north-east’s main market, or the not infrequent sinking of a London bound coaster could result in an unexpected leap in demand – extra short term help was obtained by taking on unbound men, who might be migrants or men whom former employers had refused to sign again. In Durham, in 1841, it was that as much as one quarter of the collier workforce was “floating”. Although the unbound men were subject to the same





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conditions as those who had signed the bond, there was always the suspicion that they might, in the event of a dispute, work on regardless or accept a lower rate for the job. Indeed, this often happened, and here lies the germ of the blackleg problem for which the Northumberland and Durham coalfield was, in the latter half of the 19th century to become notorious. The bond was a legal document, and a man who broke its terms laid himself open to fines, dismissal, or, if he left his place of work before he had worked out his time, a term in prison. In the South Durham district in the year 1839 – 40, 172 men spent periods in Durham jail for various bond offences. Not being under these constraints, the unbound men were resented and so the bond became associated with the beginnings of trade union activity, sporadic though this was.

The disadvantage of the annual bond from the points of view of both employer and employed was that it focussed the heat of negotiations on one month or less in the year. Until 1812, the autumn signings gave the colliers an advantage, since the pressure of demand was an incentive for the masters to settle. After 1812, with the spring signing, the advantage switched; the masters could bear with a dispute during the quiet summer months. But, either way, the signing of the bond became an occasion for on the one hand, a tightening of the screws on colliers, or, on the other, the rehearsal of old and new grievances. An early demand from the colliers, in 1826, was that the bond should be available for inspection two weeks in advance of the signing, a call which was rejected. Over 4000 colliers were said to have joined the Association of Colliers on the rivers Tyne and Wear, which was founded around the bond issue and was the first trade union – short-lived though it was – in British coalfields. Five years later, before the 1831 signing, the Association called a strike for improvements in the terms and no work was done for two months. Despite calls for good order from the men's leaders, there were a few outbreaks of violence. This was the year after the revolt of farm workers, when barns, ricks, farms and poor houses had been mobbed and set alight. But the army commander for the North of England reported, after an inspection of the north east, that the men were "perfectly peaceable in





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their behaviour, extremely civil when met on the road, and that everything was conducted with the most orderly manner". (From 'The hardest work under Heaven. The life and death of the British Coal-miner' by Michael Pollard, publisher Hutchinson 1984).

Thomas Hepburn was refused employment by the coal owners of Northumberland and Durham and was "blacklisted". He turned to teaching then became an itinerant tea seller but mining folk were scared to purchase his tea for fear of victimisation. Finally, the viewer of Felling Colliery, knowing Hepburn to be a man of his word agreed to engage him at the colliery on condition that he renounced all his trade union activities. Almost starving and with a wife and child to support he agreed to the terms.

Following the dissolution of Hepburn's union in 1832, some miners formed themselves into the Miners' Association of Great Britain and Ireland. It made little progress at first but began to develop itself in 1842 and 1843.

Since 1832 the miners had many grievances. Wages had been consistently and systematically "whittled away" and owners were defrauding their employees. The men were subjected to petty tyranny and domineering tactics so it came as no surprise when their patience snapped, their cries for redress being universal throughout the two counties but falling on deaf ears.

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Letter to the Coal Owners of Great Britain and Ireland

The members of the association drew up the following address and sent it to the coal owners.

"To the Coal Owners of Great Britain and Ireland.





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Gentlemen –

We, the members of the Miners' Association of Great Britain and Ireland, do hereby set forth and declare what our objects and intentions are in forming the above association; and we feel it is our duty to do so on account of the many and serious reports got up and set abroad by parties whose own conscience must decide the motive for so doing. Our object in forming the above association is to better our condition, and we beg to apprise you that we would rather by far that could be done by an amicable adjustment of all differences, than by having recourse to a strike, which we feel inclined to believe is equally disadvantageous to you as to us, and the inevitable result of which would be to engender feelings of such a kind as ought not to exist between master and servant.

We intend to lay before you the following specific and simple plan, viz., that each colliery owner shall be furnished with a copy of such prices as shall be thought necessary and reasonable, and in which it is tended to go on the principle of making the cost price, as far as labour is concerned, equally or nearly so on every colliery in the trade, and to such uniformity of cost price the masters to add what they deem a proper and reasonable return for their capital. It being our firm and decided opinion that, as we risk ourselves and your money to dig from the bowels of the earth a commodity on which it may truly be said the existence of Great Britain as a nation depends, it is not too much to request that the price of that article shall be such as to give ample remuneration to both the labour and capital employed. Something of this kind must be done. We have had to submit this year to a very great reduction in prices, and this we opine, if you as coal owners get once into the path of ruinous competition by underselling each other in the market and then endeavouring to reduce wages to still keep a market, is a process which is alike ruinous to both parties, and which must have a tendency to keep up a contentious war of strikes and stagnation – labour and capital contending for the mastery; while the public who are





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consumers, reap the benefit, without so much as soiling a finger in the dangerous undertaking of raising the article indispensably necessary to their comfort and existence.

The moral and physical consequences of a contentious warfare between capital and labour, appeared to us to be fully illustrated by the fable of two noble animals combating or fighting for a piece of prey, and while the combat was going on, another animal of diminutive size and strength, came and carried off the prize; while neither of the two, such was the state of exhaustion, could prevent him.

To conclude, we entreat you to bestow on this, our earnest and sincere requisition, your careful and best consideration, and if you should be pleased to agree with us as respects the principle on which it is founded, it will be alike creditable to your judgement and interest.

We remain, yours, etc.,

The Members of The Miners' Association".

The address, which was written in a mild and respectful manner was neither acknowledged nor answered. In fact, it was totally ignored.

(from 'The Miners of Northumberland and Durham; A history of their social and political progress' by Richard Fynes.)

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Petition to the House of Commons

On 2nd March 1844, a large meeting of miners took place at Shadon's Hill, between Wrekenton and Birtley, where an estimated 20,000 pitmen from the two counties attended.





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It was decided there and then that the miners would not be bound until after the Glasgow Conference which was due to meet on 25th March 1844.

A petition was forwarded to the House of Commons from that meeting as follows: -

“To the Honourable the Knights and Burgesses of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, in Parliament assembled – The petition of the coal and other miners of the counties of Northumberland and Durham, in public meeting assembled, humbly sheweth: -

That your petitioners, miners of the coal and other mines of Great Britain and Ireland, have, by sad and manifold experience, been subject to frequent disastrous explosions of inflammable gas whilst following their respective employments, which have been invariably attended with great sacrifice of human life, and consequently entailing a serious and extensive amount of privation and misery. We, therefore, humbly pray that your honourable house would be pleased to enact and direct that the plan or method of James Ryan, Esq., be taken into consideration, and demonstrated, beyond all controversy, to be worthy of such investigation.

That your Honourable House would be pleased to enact and appoint inspectors of mines (as of factories) to see to the safety of ropes and other machinery connected with the danger of life and property, also to inspect the ventilation at proper periods, so as to prevent the recurrence of explosion, partial or extensive.

That your Honourable House would enact and make provision for the prevention of the application of wire ropes for the purpose of miners descending or ascending on the same, they being by their nature and texture subject to deterioration from extreme heat and extreme cold, and consequently rendered unsafe by this liability to damage.

That your Honourable House would cause to be enacted a law compelling proper weighing machines, on the beam and scale principle, so that your petitioners may have the produce of





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their labour accurately weighed, and such weighing machines to be under the surveillance of the proper authorities, and subject to be tested and adjusted by them, without notice, at all reasonable times, with a power to remove and condemn the same if found defective.

That your Honourable House would enact and pass into law that the wages earned by your petitioners be paid weekly and up to the last work performed, with the exception of one day allowed for the making up of accounts thereof.

And your petitioners as in duty bound will ever pray”.

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Second letter to the Coal Owners

As the annual bindings of the miners of the two counties were drawing to a close the following circular was sent to the coal owners.

“To the Coal Owners of Durham and Northumberland.

Gentlemen, - We, the miners of the said counties, beg respectfully to apprise you that the time is now at hand when we as workmen, and you as masters, must enter into an agreement for the purpose of carrying on the respective works, etc., and as during the present engagement, prices have been extremely low, we desire that you will give us your attention.

Gentlemen, we have officially requested to be met by a deputation from your agents the viewers, which request remains as yet unattended to, we therefore deem it our imperative duty to solicit you to appoint a deputation from your own body, to meet a deputation from





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the Miners' Association in order to arrange matters, so as to prevent that last of all resources – a strike.

By order of the delegate meeting.

Durham, March 20th, 1844.

Mark Dent, Chairman.”

The gentlemen of the coal trade took no more notice of this second letter than they had done of the first.

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Grievances of the Miners

On 5th April 1844, the miners of Northumberland and Durham terminated the contract between their employers and themselves, which had been entered into for the year 1843/44. They would not enter into any fresh contract until their grievances had been met. Another mass meeting was held at Shadon's Hill with an estimated attendance of 35,000 – 40,000 and bands of music and banners.

There were many “bones of contention” but the principle one was the “bond” system. In an attempt to break the association the owners had introduced a monthly bond instead of the yearly bond so that union men would be found out and not bound.

The miners, having been treated with scorn by the owners had suffered many grievances – some petty, some trivial, but many justified. To give but two examples, a putter lad was fined £10 because his pony turned restive, was always wild, ran away and was killed.





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Another lad was fined £5 because he had the misfortune to drive a pony, which had killed itself.

Then there was the injustice of tubs of coal being “laid out” if they contained too much stone or “splint” or were suspected of being underweight. The hewer received no money for the coal produced and was often “fined” whilst the coal produced went to the owner! Weighmen at this time were engaged by the coal owners and were only too pleased to find “light” tubs since they received a payment. It was not until 1863 following the “Rocking” Strike at Sunnybrow Colliery, near Willington, County Durham that checkweighmen, appointed democratically by the miners themselves were introduced throughout the Durham coalfield.

When the owners realised that the miners were determined in their efforts to strike and remain out until their grievances were met, they had the horses brought out of the mine to the surface. However, the employers wanted the mines to produce coal so had the horses sent underground again and with the assistance of colliery officials, “loafers” blackguard and off-handed men from the large towns attempted to start up the pits.

Agents were dispatched all over England, Wales and Scotland to seek men to take the place of the rebellious miners. After a while, their attempts were successful and men and their families arrived from all over the country. This brought the problem of accommodation in its wake. At first, the miners were asked to leave their “tied” cottages voluntarily, but they refused so the owners resorted to the physical eviction of families and their furniture and other belongings. Men were engaged by the owners from towns (usually the “low ends”) to evict the inhabitants of the colliery house and their belongings. Backed by the Police, the men (known as “candyman”) would ask the miner if he would return to work. On hearing the word “no” the candyman would then physically evict the occupants and their belongings – and were usually heavy handed in the operation, often aided and abetted by the police! Heartbreaking tales have been recorded of pregnant women, elderly folk the sick and very





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young being turned out of their homes in all kinds of weather. An 80 year old miner who had given 30 years of service to the colliery and his 74 year old wife were turned out. Age and sex were disregarded, no person was too weak, no child too young, no grandma or grandsire too old, but all must go forth. At Pelton Fell a blind woman was turned out in the cold and rain.

Strikers received a small sum, possibly 2s 6d (12½ p) per week from the union. This did not go far and people pawned their possessions after selling any valuables. There was a great community spirit. In this strike, as in many future disputes, women were 100% behind their men folk.

Fynes reports that according to a return published at the time, the following were the number of miners employed in April 1844 in the several districts: -

The Tyne	15,556
Blyth	1,051
Wear	13,172
Tees	4,211
Total	33,990

As a matter of interest the number of collieries were: -

The Tyne	70
Wear	28
Tees	22
Hartley & Blyth	6
Total	126

Collections were taken throughout the country to help the miners and their wives and families. At a mass strike meeting at Shadon's Hill, a motion was passed "thanking the trades





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of London, Edinburgh, Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle, the carpet weavers of Durham and Barnard Castle and to the trades of various towns, also to the miners generally of the United Kingdom for support during the recent troubles". W.P. Roberts (the pitmen's attorney) while in London strove to gain financial support for the strike. From the 4th June until the end of the dispute £429 10s came from London. However, whilst this was useful, it was inadequate to sustain the strike.

N.B. The Workhouse was closed to miners during the strike.

In some places, shopkeepers allowed miners to run up credit. At meetings, traders were thanked for their sympathy and support. Pledges were offered to pay for the goods once the dispute ended. However, there were limits to the amount of credit small shopkeepers could give. Moreover the coal owners, wanting to starve the men into submission were liable to take action against anyone who befriended the miners.

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Letter to Shopkeepers from Lord Londonderry

On 20th July, the following letter was sent to all shopkeepers and tradesmen of the town of Seaham, County Durham.

"Lord Londonderry again warns all the shopkeepers and tradesmen in his town of Seaham that if they still give credit to pitmen who hold off work, and continue in the Union, such men will be marked by his agents and overmen, and will never be employed in his collieries again, and the shopkeepers may be assured that they will never have any custom or dealings with them from Lord Londonderry's large concerns that he can in any manner prevent.





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Lord Londonderry further informs the traders and shopkeepers, that having by his measures increased very largely the last year's trade to Seaham, and if his credit is so improperly and so fatally given to his unreasonable pitmen, thereby prolonging the injurious strike, it is firm determination to carry back all the outlay of his concerns even to Newcastle.

Because it is neither fair, just or equitable that the resident traders in his own town should combine and assist the infatuated workmen and pitmen in prolonging their own miseries by continuing an insane strike, and an unjust and senseless warfare against their proprietors and masters".

(It is quoted by Sidney and Beatrice Webb in their History of Trade Unionism and is reproduced in The Miners A History of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain 1889 –1910 by R. Page Arnot).

Meetings were held at Shadon's Hill, Scaffold Hill and Newcastle Town Moor where 72 banners were paraded.

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Address by the Committee of the Miner's Association.

An address by the Committee of the Miners' Association was drawn up and sent to the coal owners' committee: -

"Gentlemen, - The pitmen of Northumberland and Durham have been off work now three months, and to all appearance will hold out for many weeks longer sooner than go to work on the terms offered by your agents, the viewers; and they are seemingly as determined not to agree to the terms offered by the men. Thus the parties are at opposite extremes, and one or both parties must be considered not only culpable, but also amenable for any





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amount of distress or privation to which hundreds of other persons are subjected, through the protracted nature of the strike, seeing they do not move from the position first taken up, so as to meet and make some approximation to an amicable adjustment of all differences. Gentlemen, we must be convinced that what has been repeatedly stated (we beg to refer you to our former reports) is proof sufficient that all means resorted to on our part for obtaining an interview in order to effect an amicable adjustment of all points in dispute, have been treated with silent contempt, or what is worse, we have been told that no concession would be made to our demands. Seeing then that every other means had proved failures, we in the end proposed – and again proposed to submit all matters of dispute to the arbitration of disinterested persons – to be chosen by the masters on one part, and by the men on the other.

Reference has been made to a vexatious line of proceedings to which the masters have been subjected, which for the future they are determined not to tolerate, without once specifying what the proceedings are. Here it may be stated that the workmen have been considerably annoyed by the attempts of the (so-called) masters to withhold their earnings, and when those earnings were requested to be paid, though the application was ever so humble, it was generally treated with contempt and insult; and such treatment frequently led the workmen to adopt other proceedings, which might be considered by the owners vexatious, and however determined they, the masters, may be to put an end to such, the only effectual method be to give a fair remuneration to their workmen and treat them with kindness and consideration.

Once more we appeal to you; can we obtain an interview? Tell us how, and by what means? From a consciousness that such an interview would be highly desirable, we entreat you to bestow on this our address your speedy and serious attention.

We are, gentlemen, on behalf of the miners of Northumberland and Durham,





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William Richardson,

Edward Richardson,

John Clark, District Secretary.

Miners' Association Committee Room, Newcastle."

The coal owners took no notice of the miners' proposition but treated the address with utter contempt. When the miners failed with their letter to the coal owners' committee they addressed a letter to Lord Londonderry requesting him to exert his influence to bring about a meeting between the coal owners and their late workmen. However, this brought about a saucy, impertinent and overbearing reply to the effect "that he had nothing whatever to say to such a committee".

The Strike dragged on

Dirty tricks were employed by the coal owners and their agents in order to entice workers from all over the country to work in the mines of the north-east of England. An overman from Marley Hill Colliery, Co. Durham trying to recruit men in Staffordshire reported that the strike in Northumberland and Durham was settled, but Marley Hill, being a new colliery, needed men. The agents of Radcliffe Colliery in the north brought 32 miners from Cornwall to replace their workers with promises of 4s per day. When they received their pay of 3s or 2s 6d per day they struck for two days until they received assurances that the 4s would be paid. (This cost the owners money because the Cornish men were poor coal hewers – not so good as the north-east pitmen). When the owners offered the Cornish men 4d per tub (they only filled about four tubs per day) they absconded. A reward of £50 was offered for their capture but some escaped (possibly to go home). Some were captured and tried at Alnwick but were acquitted.





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After about 15 weeks, practically every colliery was working with some officials and strangers. Reports were circulated that men were breaking away from the union ranks and returning to work. The unionists, being alarmed at such reports held meetings to reassure their members but abject poverty, misery and deprivation were beginning to take their toll.

The local press reported that the strike was crumbling and was only kept going by a handful of agitators from the union. To show their determination and to give lie to the press reports a general meeting was held at the Newcastle Town Moor on 30th July. 72 banners were paraded and an estimated 30,000 persons attended on a rainy day. Another meeting was held at Bishop Auckland about the same time. It was reported at the Town Moor meeting that a writ had been issued headed "The Attorney General v. Dodds" against the printers of the "Miners Advocate" because it was not stamped. It was only a trade paper and did not contain news or meddle with religion or politics. It had been established for about a year when it was discovered that it was not stamped. The Advocate was fined for printing news that was not a month old. The Advocate ceased publication because the £600 required to make it a "stamped paper" was not raised.

After a period of 18 weeks on strike, great numbers of the men began to break away from the ranks of the union and return to work. The owners had succeeded in inducing a large number of men to come to work in the north-east from many parts of the country. The Durham men were the first to yield but let it be known they had suffered more hardship by the cruel treatment of the coal owners than their brethren in Northumberland. The Northumberland men stuck out but at a meeting called at Newcastle Town Moor, only about 1,200 turned up.

After 20 weeks the strike was over. The men had to return to work on the owners' terms but the dispute was the greatest show of working class solidarity against the united forces of capital to date.





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The monthly bond was forgotten, but not the actions and reputations of the men! The owners re-employed the men they wanted with assurances that, where possible, they would re-inhabit the houses from which they were evicted – assuming of course, that the present occupant didn't want to continue working at the mine. Union activists were “blacklisted” and could not find work at any pit in the two counties.

After the resumption of work old scores were settled. Some Welshmen were particularly harshly treated. A riot took place at Seaton Delaval with the Welshmen coming off second best! Another riot took place at East Holywell where the miners took their revenge on strikebreakers who happened to be Irish. Writing in his book “Pit Life in County Durham” David Douglass mentions the neighbouring villages of Seaton Delaval, Seghill and Cramlington (all in the county of Northumberland). After the defeat of the miners in the great strike of 1844, they took in hand the task of disciplining the blacklegs. At Delaval and Holywell lines of cable were stretched across underground roadways to catch the heads, throats and bodies of the Welsh blacklegs as they rode past on tubs, with ponies or on man riding equipment. At Delaval, Seghill and Cramlington the tools of the blacklegs were hurled down the shaft. N.B. the above villages, together with some in Co. Durham were known as “red villages” because of their left wing activities in the 19th and first part of the 20th centuries.

The Durham miners have long memories. The Rev. Colin C. Short, a Methodist Minister writing in “Bands and Banners” vol. 3, Autumn 1999 reports that when he first came to the north-east to be minister of churches at Burnhope, South Moor and Craghead in the Stanley Circuit in 1980, he was asked by the husband of one of his members where he came from? On replying “East Cornwall” he was called a “black jack”. Apparently, this was the term used by the Durham miners of the 19th century to Cornish men who were “strike-breakers” in the 1832 and 1844 strikes.

In strikes it has often been said that there are no winners, only losers.





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It is interesting to note that an economist has estimated that collectively the 1844 strike cost the coal owners more than £500,000 – enough to have settled the strike several times over without having recourse to strike action with all the misery it caused. Of course, it can be argued that by allowing the strike to proceed in the first place, the owners proved “who were the bosses!”

However, there was a disagreement amongst the coal owners following resumption of work in the mines after the strike. There was a severe depression in the coal trade, which was not helped by the construction of railroads, which meant that there was competition from other coalfields, which had previously been the domain of Northumberland and Durham. There was a system in the north-east, operated by the owners called “the vend”. This determined the amount of coal, which could be produced, and the price at which it was to be sold. It was to cosset the coal trade from the worst effects of competition. However, there were differences amongst the owners. Those with rich mines complained of having to restrict output in order to allow the less fortunate a market share. Bickering broke out as to the price to charge for the various grades of coal. As previously stated, there was competition from other coalfields. Owners in north-east tried to counter this by restricting output. By 1843 they were only producing 43% of the coal known as “the vend”. After the 1844 strike, some collieries resumed production sooner than others did, with variations in performance. An audit found that some owners had increased the amount for 1844 (“overs”) while others had produced far less (“shorts”).

According to rules laid down by the Coal Trades Committee, a fine should be paid by those producing “overs” to compensate those who had produced less. The penalties for the “overs” came to £49,700 of which £10,000 were owed by three owners. Due to financial constraints the fine was reduced to £29,874 but the owners did not pay. The vend was at an end. N.B. soon afterwards the owners “made up” and were reunited.

Great Strike of the Northumberland and Durham Coalfield in 1844 (Part 11 of 11)





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Conclusions

1. The Arrogance of the Coal Owners. The miners wanting to be reasonable and avoid a strike sent a letter from their association, the Miners' Association of Great Britain and Ireland, to the coal owners, which was conciliatory in tone setting out a way of avoiding a disruption of work. This was totally ignored. A second letter, sent before the stoppage, was similarly ignored; also, a third letter after three months strike was treated with utter contempt. The intransigent attitude of the coal owners was largely responsible for the strike.
2. The Strike was Unnecessary. An economist estimated that the dispute cost the coal owners in excess of £500,000 sterling, sufficient to have settled the strike several times over. However, it served the purpose of showing the miners "who were the bosses".
3. The Unity and Solidarity of the Miners. In spite of starvation, deprivation, eviction from their homes and great hardship the men were solidly behind the strike and their leaders. The miners' wives were solidly behind their menfolk. This solidarity has been evident over the years in strikes in the coalfields of Great Britain. Those miners who were working levied themselves so much per shift or per week to support those who were out of work. The unity and solidarity of miners in Great Britain has been evident over at least two centuries of struggle. Miners have not only helped fellow workers in other coalfields but in the 1980's went on strike in sympathy with nurses who were in dispute with the (Tory) Government of the day over pay. (It was the same Tory Government under Mrs Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, which outlawed sympathy strikes). Miners have even helped the miners of other countries, notably in South Africa but also in such countries as Turkey, Russia and Albania. "Unity is Strength" and "All Men are Brethren" are not just slogans on their banners – they are ideals, which have been demonstrated over and over again.





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