The History of the Durham Miners’ Association - formation of the D.M.A.

by Raymond Chesterfield

I have chosen this work as a tribute to my grandfather, George Lister Sargeant, who was awarded the Pioneers Diploma for 50 years service in the Durham Miners’ Association. To the best of my knowledge, he spent all of his working life at Cornsay Colliery.

I will present the work in three stages.
1. The formation of the Durham Miners’ Association
2. The growth and expansion of the Association leading up to joining the Miners’ Federation of Great Britain
3. The formation of the National Union of Mineworkers and its demise:
   a) Brought into existence on 1st January 1945
   b) Sam Watson School of Thought – The Tradition of Moderation 1950s
   c) The move towards the left and militancy 1960s to 1980s

Conclusion – The demise of Redhills on which the strength of the Durham Miners’ Association was built.

The Formation of the D.M.A.

The Methodists were the great orators of the early 1800s but it was the Primitive Methodists who had the greatest effect on the Durham Miners. In 1822 they met a 20 year old miner called Thomas Hepburn and he became a Lay Preacher. As he walked between mining villages preaching and talking to the miners, he met many who held similar views to himself. Primitive Methodism was sowing the seeds of a union religion. It was in 1825, after the repeal of the Combinations Acts, that the union was called ‘The Colliers of the United Association of Durham and Northumberland’. The miners of this new pitman’s union elected
Thomas Hepburn as its undisputed leader with the mining village of Hetton as its base of operations where they produced a pamphlet entitled ‘A Voice from the Coal Mines’.

The union was, at first, a hewers union but this was to change and the base of the membership broadened to encompass all classes of miners and boys. Because of the violent clashes between miners and coal owners in previous years, Thomas Hepburn appealed to the pitmen to shun violence in case it provoked the government. The new found legality of the pitmen’s union allowed it to publish its propaganda and increase its membership. Unfortunately just as the union was laying solid foundations, the coal trade deteriorated and the owners contemplated reducing the pitmen’s wages. The conflicts were about to start. While Thomas Hepburn came to epitomise the values of trade unionism, the Marquis of Londonderry became the hate figure of the miners.

By 1831, the miners of Durham and Northumberland were at the end of their tether. For fifteen years the coal trade had lurched from one crisis to another and it was the pitmen who suffered the brunt of the recession. The terms of the bond deteriorated and binding money had been reduced dramatically from 30 guineas in the boom of 1800 to one shilling by 1830. As a show of strength and solidarity, in March 1830 the union called a huge meeting at Black Fell and another on the Town Moor where 20,000 pitmen turned out. Later there were conflicts with the soldiers and the owners but Londonderry had severe financial problems and he was the first owner to cave in. On 13th August 1831, fired up by their victory, the pitmen’s union held a big meeting on Boldon Fell. Pitmen marched to this meeting in their thousands behind bands and banners. Perhaps this was the start of the Durham Big meeting. The first business of the meeting was to elect Thomas Hepburn as a full-time official of the union and by this time the union included Blacksmiths, Joiners, Deputies and Overmen. There were many difficult times and setbacks for the union during the 1830s. Clashes with the owners and the authorities continued to weaken the union to
the point where the miners turned against Thomas Hepburn who ended up a broken man at one stage.

Digitised by George Muncaster

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