Migration of miners to County Durham

by Enid Lee

Although the main part of my research has been centred around the 1861 Census, my main aim in taking part in this project was to find out about the migration of workers to the Durham coal fields from other parts of the country, Suffolk in particular. This necessitated the ordering of lots of books on mining from the library (thanks, Carol and Pat at Wolsingham!), as well as books on Suffolk (my particular interest!).

Immigration

“An Historical Atlas of County Durham” by Durham County Local History Society 1992 examines the census records of 1851 as follows:

“The census records of Durham mining villages in 1851 show a male-dominated sex ratio (56:44 at Crook and Billy Row) with heavy reliance on the colliery for employment (70% at Thornley, 92.5% at Monkwearmouth Colliery). The population tended to be youthful, usually more than 50% under 20 and more than 90% under 50. Even in new greenfield sites, the majority of villagers tended to be born close by; about 70% of adults in most Durham pit villages were likely to come from within the county: 48% at Monkwearmouth have been born within 10 miles, and over 90% came from Durham or Northumberland. Invariably, though, some men had come from further afield, from declining mining areas in the south-west or from Ireland, which supplied 10% of Crooks’ adult males in 1851. These generalisations mask subtle small-scale variations within the village.”

Although about the Deerness Valley, Robert Moore's book “Pit-men, Preachers and Politics: The Effects of Methodism in a Durham Mining Community” tells of the population of the
valley growing with the coal and coke trade from the 1860s onwards and that by 1901 over three quarters of all employed men were working in the industry.

"The main source of population increase was immigration; from Weardale, Lincolnshire (where Pease and Partners had a recruiting office), and indirectly from Ireland. The scope of the migration can be shown by the fact that in June 1860 the Witton Park P.M. anniversary celebration included an afternoon sermon in Welsh. *1 In 1871 unemployed workers were being encouraged to move from Deptford, in south-east London, to the Willington pit and in June 1871 Pease and Partners opened a recruiting office in the East End of London." *2 (p66)

"Durham County gained 130,000 persons between 1851 and 1871. From 1875 to 1887 the labour force remained stable. From 1881 to 1911 there was a net emigration of about 70,000." *3

His sources

*1 Durham Chronicle 15.6.60
*2 Durham Chronicle 13.5.71, 30.6.71
*3 As above and B Thomas, "The Migration of Labour in the Glamorganshire Coalfield (1861-1911)" in W.E.Minchinton (ed), Industrial South Wales 1750-1914 (Frank Cass, 1969), p55, n46

While checking through the 1861 census records in areas near to Edmonsley, I found one household (RG9/3759 f52 Chester le Street) with 8 lodgers born in Leicester, Bermuda, Ireland, Cape of Good Hope, Buckinghamshire, Ireland, Gloucestershire and one place of birth not known! There seems to have been quite a shift in the decade since the previously noted illustration that “even in new greenfield sites, the majority of villagers tended to be born close by”.

The Irish
Robert Moore's book (p230) in describing his research strategy says that "The Irish clearly paid an important role in the villages, but there is no study of the Irish in County Durham to which the data can be referred". (The book was published in 1974, so that may not now be true).

And, on page 75, states that "The history of the Irish in the county may prove to be extremely interesting, on the basis of reading newspapers - without intending to construct a history of the Irish - the following impressions emerge: Irish labour was used in the 1840s to build the railways in the county; there followed a period of unemployment during which a number of Irish turned to highway robbery, some forming bands of footpads. Irish robbers seem to have been the terror of the good citizens of Durham City who had to walk the roads to Shincliffe, Gilesgate and Neville's Cross. With the sinking of the shafts in mid-Durham (as, for example in Esh Winning) new jobs were found for Irishmen, again the heavy labouring involved in shaft sinking. When the shafts were sunk the Irish were employed in labouring and on the coke-ovens in the valley, according to some aged informants. Only slowly were the Irish able to gain skilled, piece-rate jobs at the face".

(While trawling through the 1861 census, I found quite an influx of Irish born miners, especially in the Sacriston area).

**Suffolk Exodus**

The following extract from “A History of Suffolk” by David Dymond and Peter Northeast describes the movement from Suffolk viewed through census records.

“The census of 1851 revealed that well over 50,000 people born in Suffolk were already living elsewhere in England and Wales, more than half of them in London.

Countrymen were attracted to town and industrial districts by the hope of more consistent
employment, better pay and a generally more rewarding life. Parish officials, hoping to reduce the number of paupers ‘on the parish’, actively encouraged them to leave. And, after the Amendment Act of 1834, the new Unions pursued the same policy.

Nearly 2,500 men, women and children were moved from Suffolk villages to ‘manufacturing districts’, mainly in Lancashire, Cheshire and Yorkshire, between 1835 and 1837. The great exodus continued throughout the century. Over 23,000 Suffolk-born people were living in the northern counties, and over 50,000 were living in London by 1891.”

“A Short History of Suffolk” by Derek Wilson, a wonderful, sensitively written book, gives its reader very clear pictures of life in Suffolk, surveying the life of Suffolk between 1760 and 1880, “through the eyes of a glorious company of sensitive observers”, including Constable and Gainsborough.

“Between 1835 and 1837, a period of particular hardship, the steady trickle of people leaving the county became a flood, after the Poor Law Amendment Act provided for financial assistance for those wishing to emigrate. Of the 6,403 people who took advantage of the scheme, 1083 were from Suffolk; most of them emigrated to Canada. At the same time more than 2,000 left home to try their fortunes in the industrial North.”

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