In the history of Durham and Northumberland Miners written in 1873 the author Richard Fynes gives an account of the struggle against oppression, which happened on a horrendous scale. The early history of the Durham miners was a foreboding one. The bond system was introduced which meant a worker was tied to that pit for one year. At the yearly binding of the collieries, which took place in October when the owners decided among themselves that the binding, should be a quarter or a year and a quarter. The men at first agreed but on deliberation they decided against. A meeting took place on the 16th October 1810 when it was agreed to resist the alteration and a strike should take place. The owners refused to listen so the miners struck after binding day.

The delegates from different collieries held frequent meetings in both Durham and Northumberland to keep the men united but they were hunted from place to place by the owners, Magistrates and the military, and committed to prison in such large numbers, till the prisons could hold no more. The old gaol and house of correction were so full, that for fear of infection a number of prisoners were removed to the stable and stable yards of the Bishop of Durham till the final number reached 300. This shows that the owners and the authorities would not tolerate strike action or any kind of dissent.

In the year 1843 the men at Thornley, one of the largest pits in Durham came out on strike. Warrants were issued against 68 persons for absenting themselves from their work. The men’s grievances were over the bond. The Viewer at this time was a Mr. Heckles. Owners were Thomas Wood, Rowland Webster, John Gully and John Burrell. The men’s complaints were that wages were not paid on time. In some collieries a fine for four quarts, in some three, and in others for two quarts of foul coal, but at Thornley there was a fine for one
quart of splint out of 6cwt. (Splint - a hard variety of bituminous coal). It has to be considered that men working in poor light had no means of testing the quantities of foul coal. Men had been fined 8s, 7s, 6s and 5s a day. One man Andrew Hope was fined 22s 6d. Another man was fined 22s when he could only earn 6s. Thomas Dermot Moran stated that he was fined 27s the last fortnight he worked. John Stephenson a hewer for twenty years said: "No man can earn a living under the bond. The black brass and splint comes down with the coal and working by the light of a Davy lamp it is impossible to separate". William Anderson said he was bound to receive 26s a fortnight; had received for one fortnight, 3s 7d; another, 17s 6d; another 27s. Jabez Wonders was fined 12s for three days work and stood 3s in debt and so it went on throughout the coalfield.

Over the years unions were formed and unions were broken. The owners and the establishment refused them employment and persecuted the leaders. During strikes owners would bring in the Candy men who would proceed to evict the miners and their families from their dwellings and at times the police and the military assisted. Mothers with babes in arms, pregnant women, the old and infirm with their worldly possessions were put out onto the streets no matter what the weather, to sleep in makeshift shelters or even in the hedgerows.

During the strike in 1844, which again was for better conditions for the miners, the committee of the Miners Association drew up an address and it was sent to the Coal Owners Committee. This was totally ignored by the owners. At Seaham where Lord Londonderry owned the mine the conduct of the Marquis was at its most despicable. Families were turned out of their hovels, the military was located at every colliery and a new act of cruelty was perpetrated.

The workhouses were closed to the miner’s hungry wives and starving children, and Magistrates and Clergy alike condoned this action. At Seaham Lord Londonderry threatened to ruin any tradesman who offered bread or shelter to these people. Many newspapers of
1844 carried accounts of this strike. Local journals of that period as often before took the side of the owners.

Over the years unions were formed many times and many times they were broken. Conditions in the mines still continued to be hazardous and in Fyne’s history he writes that from minutes of a select committee and from a manuscript list furnished by T.J. Taylor that from January 1810 to June 1849 there were 122 accidents with a loss of 1831 lives in the Northern Coalfield. In 1863 on 6th June a delegate meeting was held in The Victoria Hotel, Newcastle with a view to forming a general union for the two counties. In a short time a great number of collieries in Durham joined the union. Mr. Crawford who was delegate to the Auckland district went about advising men to join the union. The men took his advice and not less than 1,200 members were enrolled during the month at Cassop, Thornley, Haswell, and Trimdon collieries.

One strike that did occur at Willington was caused by, after tubs that were filled in-bye and were packed together as close as possible for filling, in low places they were often shaken in going out and when they came to bank they were just filled to the brim. Any deficiency arising from this cause, the tub would be confiscated, and to rectify the problem the men had to rock the tubs while they were being filled which was an arduous task. The weighman received a commission on every tub that was laid out and so was anxious to find light tubs. It became so bad the miners were losing eight to ten tubs per fortnight and this practise could not go on. Men asked that the tubs be weighed at bank and asked for an increase on the score price of five per cent. The management agreed that when the tubs came to bank each tub should weigh 10-¾ cwt and if they were less than 10 cwt they should be laid out. The request for an increase was refused.

While the miner was paid a mere pittance, from 1704 - 1710 Sunderland’s annual export was 65,760 chaldrons. It must be pointed out that a chaldron of coal prior to 1695 was 42 cwts and after that date it was standardized as a Newcastle chaldron of 53 cwts. In the year 1395
coal was sold at Whitby Abbey, at 3s 4d per chaldron, in 1655 coals sold in London for 20s, and in Newcastle for 12s per chaldron. By 1872 the price in London was £3 per ton and in Newcastle they varied from 18s to 25s per ton. In 1863 the average wage of the Durham miner was 4s 2d per day, if the owners reduced wages by 1d per ton it would mean more hardship for the miner and his family. As the years went by leaders of the union such as Thomas Hepburn and William Crawford continued the struggle but sadly in the summer of 1873 Thomas Hepburn died.

Even in good times the bond gave owners the right to fine workers even for trivial offences. With the miners living in tied houses the owners had complete domination. The bond was finally abolished in 1872 thanks to the efforts of the Durham Miners Association, which had been formed in 1869. In 1868 an annual event was established: the Durham Miners Gala, which is still celebrated today.

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