



DURHAM
In Time

Mining in County Durham

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Introduction

The introduction will start with a brief reference to mining in the area, starting from Roman times, and will follow, in a chronological order, the development of the coalfields and the forming of the mining communities up to the turbulent years of the 1800s. As an example of how the growth of villages was affected with the introduction of new mines, I have used an extract from Francis Whellan & Co., *History, Topography and Directory of the County Palatine of Durham*, (1894), which shows how the population of Dalton-le-Dale parish expanded during the 19th century, especially after the commencement of Murton Colliery in 1838. In the first three decades of the century, the population increased from 75 to 98, but by the end of the century the population numbered 5,052. The difficulties faced when sinking the first shaft, to the Hutton Seam, at a depth of 246 fathoms, will be examined. The sinking of this shaft started on 19 February 1838, but it was not until 5 April 1843 that the Hutton seam was reached. Three shafts were sunk in total, and further seams won in the sinking were the Five Quarter Seam, Main Coal and Low Main. By the end of the century, 2,000 men and boys were employed at the pit.

The Unions and their Struggle against the Mine Owners

This section will deal with the formation of the mining unions and their struggle against the owners. I refer to the 1800s as the turbulent years, because it was in this century that the first Union was formed, the leader being Thomas Hepburn, to challenge to mine owners on several areas within the industry, including working conditions, the miner's bond and, most importantly, safety in the mines. Accidents, resulting deaths, and the deprivation of the





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widows and orphans left behind, will be studied in depth using both primary evidence and secondary sources. Strikes played a large part in the miners' struggle to improve their status and break away from the yearly bond, which legally bound the miners to their place of work. We will also see in this section how the mine owners had control of the miners, and their families, very existence.

During the great strike of 1844, workers were recruited from as far away as Cornwall, Wales and Scotland to fill the places of the local striking miners. To provide accommodation for these 'blackleg' workers, miners who refused to return to work were turned out of their tied cottages. The aged, women and children, were turned out, along with their furniture, into the lanes and hedgerows where they sought whatever shelter they could find from the elements. In many cases however, miners were evicted before the owners had any need for the houses for newcomers. As Fynes remarked in his book first published in 1873, 'Throughout the counties of Durham and Northumberland there were thousands of cottages tenantless, whilst their late inmates were camping in the open air, exposed to the inclemency of the weather (1).

"Tommy Shops" were another example of how the owners exerted their influence over their employees. Part, or all, of the miner's wages were often paid in vouchers which could then be exchanged for goods at shops, known as Tommy Shops, which belonged to the mine owners. Exorbitant prices were charged at these shops, but as the vouchers could only be exchanged there, the miners had no way of taking their custom elsewhere (2).

Earnings were also restricted because of the separation system. Hewers were made to separate small coals and stone from the rounds [large coals]. When the tubs reached the surface, they were examined by inspectors appointed by the owners, and any tubs that contained a certain quantity of small coals or stone were forfeited to the owners. There are many instances of miners, when coming to the end of their shift, finding that they had worked for nothing or, because of fines levied, were even in debt to the owners. It was





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because of agitation by the unions that new legislation was implemented throughout the century to force the mine owners to act. Many of the miners rose from being humble manual workers, through the ranks of the unions, to become politicians and carry on the fight for their former associates.

Reluctance to Implement Extra Safety Measures, and the Consequences

The reasons why there were so many 19th-century mining disasters merits special attention. Mine owners exerted tremendous influence, and fought long and hard against attempts to introduce legislation to force them to implement extra safety features, including the sinking of extra ventilation shafts to increase the flow of air to reduce the build-up of toxic and explosive gasses. Their view was obviously that money came before lives. Using the disaster that occurred at Hartley Colliery, 9 miles north of Newcastle, as an example, it can see how the sinking of an extra shaft or shafts would have played a vital role in the safety of the miners.

Although this colliery was situated in Northumberland and not Durham, the huge loss of life in the disaster (an incident is only referred to as a disaster when 5 or more are killed) makes it a fitting example of the dire consequences that could result from the resistance by the owners to implement extra safety measures. The disaster occurred on 16 January 1862, just after the back shift men had gone down to relieve the fore shift.

Some of the latter had succeeded in reaching the back when, without warning, the cast iron beam of the pumping engine which weighed 43 tons, snapped in two sending a large section of it, weighing 21 tons, down the only working shaft. During the descent of the debris and all of the gearing, the walls of the shaft were ripped away and the shaft was blocked with machinery. Stone and spars packed tightly together made it impossible to either enter or exit the seam for a considerable time. Two hundred and four men and boys were entombed in the pit. Because of the difficulty in clearing the shaft, it was several days before the seam





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could be accessed, and it was then found that all of the entombed miners were dead. Hardly a house in the large village of Hartley was untouched by the disaster, while in some there were two, three, four or even five bodies laid out. Had an extra shaft been in existence at the time, no doubt the death toll would have been significantly reduced.

Many disasters occurred throughout the Durham coalfields during the 19th century. An account of these and the number of lives lost will be considered. It is interesting to note that, after the Davy lamp was introduced c1815, the number of explosions, increased and not, as is commonly believed, decreased. As Fynes comments (3), 'Experience, however, proved that they [Davy lamps] were the most deadly instrument ever devised in mining operations, and were the cause of more sacrifice of human life than ever occurred before. Undoubtedly, the introduction of the Davy lamp was extremely beneficial in respect of production, but lack of adequate instruction as to how the lamp should be used and to its limitations was catastrophic. Before the lamp was adopted for use in the mines, the only light the hewers had to work with in fiery mines, where candles could not be burned, was produced by flint and steel mills. The flint was positioned to catch the steel wheel which produced a steady stream of sparks so long as the wheel was kept turning. This meant that the hewers were working in almost complete darkness.

Much has been written about the loss of life among young children in the mines, but up to now I have been unable to find any evidence of girls or women killed whilst working underground in the Durham coalfield. Further research should reveal whether or not girls or women were even employed as underground workers in Durham. What I had not considered until unearthing some evidence, was the age up to which some of the miners worked. Whilst accessing a web site, I discovered 'A small sample of how senior citizens were killed in coalmines'. This sample gives details of how 12 miners were killed and the job they were employed in. Unbelievably, their ages range from 72 to 84 (4).

Religious Influence





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Religion played a huge part in bringing discipline and cohesion to mining villagers. Primitive Methodism exerted the biggest influence. In the 1820s Primitive Methodism was introduced to the miners by way of outdoor meetings or meetings in local buildings. It will be seen that the mine owners supported this as miners converted to Methodism were expected to shun their unruly lifestyle of drinking and gambling. It also encouraged hard work and thrift, which resulted in higher output and less work hours lost. E.P. Thompson supports the theory that Methodism was encouraged by employers because it resulted in honest, upright, sober and thrifty workers when he remarks that 'Methodism created discipline and repressed disposition(5). This discipline was to stand the miners in great stead when they showed strong resolve during the long and bitter strikes as the unions fought long and hard to improve the lot of their members.

Although Thompson supports the theory that Methodism was indeed encouraged, Moore argues that 'Methodism ceased to be a means to an end: they sowed the seeds of their own destruction by educating their children and discouraging them from becoming miners (6). Religion was not, of course, confined to Methodism. Other dominations need to be considered to see what influence they too had on mining. Many Irish Catholics migrated to the area seeking work and I intend to study this area to ascertain what influence, if any, these workers had, both within the industry and politically.

Working and living conditions I will examine together because inevitably, the two overlap. This section will examine the role played by the wives of the miners in the home and the struggle to maintain the family in the face of near poverty. Working conditions down the mines were atrocious with men, boys and even women working in temperatures so high that at times women and young girls were forced to work with naked or near-naked men. Boys as young as 6 often worked extremely long hours. There are stories of some of the youngest being carried to work, still asleep, on the backs of their fathers or older brothers, and then being woken when they reached the mine to start work. After they had worked their shift,





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they would then be carried home, again, asleep. In wintertime, some of these youngsters would not see daylight from one day to the next. However, the Royal Commission of the 1840s resulted in the 1842 Mines and Collieries Act, which banned all women, and children under 10, from working underground.

Conclusion

The final part of this study will be the conclusion. The areas studied in each section will be brought together to give an oversight on how the mining communities were unique in their existence. Whereas the Industrial Revolution resulted in agricultural workers flocking to the cities to seek work in the newly-built factories, the miners, out of necessity, flocked to the newly-opened mines, sometimes within or near large towns, but also in isolated spots within the county.

Transport available to the workers at that time was limited. In most instances travel was made on foot. These isolated communities therefore, by and large, remained just that - isolated, and therefore developed without undue outside influence. This perhaps is why there are so many dialects within the county. An example of this is the village of Shiney Row. Although just 5 or 6 miles from the centre of Sunderland, the locals still use such words as thee, thou and thine, a reminder of the time when Shiney Row was itself an isolated mining community.

An inordinate number of Methodist churches are still in existence, not just in County Durham, but also in other parts of Britain that were heavily involved in the production of coal. In areas not associated with the coal industry, it will be found that the Church of England and the Catholic denominations far outweigh Methodism. Disasters were a feature of life, with many thousands of lives being sacrificed in the struggle to bring coal to the surface. Although records of mining deaths are extensive, it must be remembered that it





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was not until 1806 that it became mandatory to record all deaths. Therefore the complete number of fatalities within the industry will never be known.

References:

(1) Fynes, R, The Miners of Northumberland and Durham, Co-operative Press Printing Society Group, Third Reprint (1972) , p.80.

(2) Fynes p18,

(3) Fynes p.147.

(4) <http://www.pitwork.net/deaths.htm> accessed 30/7/03. Coal Mining Deaths p.4 .

(5) Thompson, E.P., The Making of the English Working Class, Pelican Books, p.183.

(6) Moore, R., Pitmen, Preachers and Politics, Cambridge University Press (1974), p.84.

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