North East Group for the Study of Labour History

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WORKER'S CHRONICLE.

Monday, 10th. May. 1926.

EDITED BY C.H. LAWSON, 47 Leazes Tce, Newcastle Trades Council of Action.

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SCABBING AT QUAYSIDE.

MASS PICKETS MUST BE OUR ANSWER!

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attempt in being organised by the Government to handle goods the Quayside. For this purpose, the landing stages have n barricaded in. The O.M.S. is the organisation which suppos the scabs, and, in order that we may be thoroughly intimid-d, the warships are lying handy.

ood at the Quayside not much good to an e, and so, let us be good cheer, and get y building up our ots into mass formation.

he Government have laced WAR on the ERS.

eir forces are org-ed and disciplined. US IS LIKEWISE!

---o---

ALITY OF BIRTLEY OLICE.

icial Picket Attack-ed.

night the Birtley ail of action organ-ed a picket for duccording to official uction. There was efore no reason for olice to mistake official picket for gang.

noon as the picket to work, 25 police upon the scene and ut a word of warn-drew their batons et busy.

ERS! Let this be ON to us. There WAR ON. There are to be casualties, BE MEN! Only cow-flinch in face of few.

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THE MINE BELONGS TO THE MINERS!

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THE PART BELONGED TO THE BOURGEOISIE!

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WE ARE MANY !---------THEY ARE FEW.

Bulletin 10 October 1976

N.E. GROUP FOR THE STUDY OF LABOUR HISTORY

Name: The name of the group shall be The North East Group for the Study of Labour History.

Objects:

(a) To bring together those interested in research into Labour history in the North East.

(b) To encourage and help organise such research.

(c) To assist in the preservation of existing records.

(d) To organise support for these aims by such means as seminars, lectures, bibliographical guides, etc.

Membership: Membership shall be open to all those actively interested in the aims of the Group.

Subscriptions: The annual subscription shall be £1.00 per individual or institution, student members 25p. This shall fall due on 1st October each year.

Officers and Committee: The business of the Group shall be conducted by a committee composed of Chairman, Vice-chairman, Treasurer, two Secretaries, and two ordinary members. The committee shall have the power to co-opt additional members. The committee and officers shall be elected at the Annual General Meeting.

Finance: All money raised by or on behalf of the Group shall be applied to further the above objects. An audited account shall be presented to the Annual General Meeting.

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THE GENERAL STRIKE IN THE NORTH EAST

The Editorial Board of the Bulletin has decided to devote most of the current issue to commemorating the 50th anniversary of the General Strike. The North East figured prominently in the struggles of 1926. From the Government's standpoint, it was almost certainly one of the regions where its authority was most severely challenged. Councils of Action sprung up throughout Northumberland and Durham. Their activities were co-ordinated and, for a time, the strikers possessed very real power.

The history of the General Strike in the North East has already been written in some detail. Dr Anthony Mason of Warwick University has produced a valuable study published by Hull University in pamphlet form. One of the participants - veteran historian Robin Page Arnot - has also written a gripping account of his experiences in the region. Then, of course, there has been the fine collection of documents on the subject, with explanatory notes by Joe Clarke and Jim Lennard, which were published as a teaching unit by Newcastle University Education Department.

In view of this wealth of material already available, it may be thought that little remains to be written. However, each of the five contributions contained in this Bulletin provides fresh and valuable information. R W Morris was employed as a mechanic at Pelton Colliery, County Durham, in 1926 and his piece, part of his autobiography, is unique: it is the first extended account by one of that small band of mineworkers who opposed the stoppage and their union's policy. In contrast to this, William Muckle, a militant miner, tells how he, along with a small band of others, derailed the Flying Scotsman. A third miner, Bill Carr, shows how, for some of the participants, 1926 was a traumatic experience, moulding their attitudes for the rest of their lives. After the capitulation of the General Council, Bill Carr expressed his disgust by defiantly joining the Communist Party and he remains one of its leading cadres in the coal industry right down to the present day.

The other two contributions come from members of the Society. Horace Green has sought to unravel the problems facing the Government's supporters in the North East as they attempted to counter the strikers' moves. Connie Pickard describes the Durham mining village of Chopwell. She discusses the background to the events of 1926 and how the village gained the sobriquet "Little Moscow". Mrs Pickard has been working as a BBC researcher on this subject. The programme, which should be of interest to members of the Society, is scheduled to be screened on BBC One in early November.

The articles of Horace Green and William Muckle first appeared in Labour Monthly and that of Bill Carr in Marxism Today. They are reprinted here by courtesy of their editors.

The cover of the Bulletin shows the front page of the Newcastle Workers' Chronicle for 10th May 1926. Over a hundred local strike bulletins are known to have been produced throughout the country. The first issue of the Workers' Chronicle appeared on 5th May, declaring the intention "to provide our class with correct news or the great struggle into which we have entered in defence of our wages and hours". Other local strike bulletins were the Northern Light, issued by the Blaydon and Chopwell District Council of Action, and the Midgie, published by a Communist Party Group in Northumberland.

THE GENERAL STRIKE by R W Morris of Pelton Colliery

As is well known, the General Strike lasted just ten days. Sir John Simon's threat to jail the TUC leaders was enough to call it off. Unfortunately, the miners chose to fight on. It was a tragic mistake, with all the consequent misery and suffering of the following nine months. In addition, it sounded the death knell of the mining industry.

Those of us who went through the strike will never forget it. I look back now and wonder how it was done. The womenfolk were the real heroines in the battle, for it was they who had the task of producing meals from literally nothing, and nowhere. Whilst the menfolk, right from the start, spent most of their time getting coal wherever we could, which was a hard enough task in itself, this would have been of little value had our meals not been forthcoming. We were harrassed and chased from place to place in our coal getting. We scraped and scratted every available source, from what was left in the empty trucks to digging in the most dangerous places in the pit tips and hillsides. Even the usually friendly Bobby became our enemy. Yet coal was an absolute necessity. Our fireplaces were designed to use large amounts of coal. In normal times the fire was hardly ever out. In the strike we had to work like beavers to get enough to keep any sort of fire at all. The summer of 1926 was one of the best on record, for which most of us were eternally grateful. We ranged far and wide to get the easiest coal, and of course everybody was doing the same. All the existing sources had been exploited many times before, so it generally meant there was a lot of dirt and rubbish to be removed or dug out before you ever got to the seam itself. As I said, it was almost a full time job with our big fireplaces. We were a big family, so we could pool our labour force.

Just one example of how we went about it might be of interest. Six of us got up at four o'clock one Monday morning. Two of the lads were married and would expect their share of the coal we got. We had a general idea of where we should start to dig to uncover the seam. There were two seams in the Dene where we lived, and the Dene itself was between 100 and 120 feet deep, with a stream called the Cong Burn running through it. The first seam was roughly about half way down the bank, but it had been exploited

in the past, so it was very much a hitty missy affair trying to locate it without having to remove very large amounts of dirt, earth, clay, and all sorts of other rubbish. I never thought it worthwhile myself, but very often others did, with varying degrees of success. On this occasion, however, we decided to go for the lower seam. The Dene ran in an East/West direction and the village of Newfield was on the North side. We decided to try our luck on the South side and, as the lower seam was known to be at or near the level of the Burn, we chose a place where we thought we would have the least amount of dirt to shift to reach the seam. It was a lovely morning, so we peeled off our clothes and set to in earnest. Long experience of pit work instinctively teaches one how to set about such a task. There is no point on shifting more muck than is necessary. So we set about sinking a small narrow shaft at about the level we knew the seam had been located some days beforehand. While some worked at the shaft, the others were casting back the dirt out of our way. As the sun came up, we soon began to sweat, and to ease the burden we kept changing places. At the end of three strenuous hours we located the seam. It was then only a matter of making ourselves safe and opening up the hole we had made so that we could get at the coal more easily. By eight o'clock we were all ready to start coal getting. The point where we were working was roughly about ten yards from the Burn and almost at its level. It wasn't very deep at this point, but it was full of rocks and rubbish, and difficult to cross. We therefore set about making a simple bridge, and to do this we felled a couple of small trees at the narrowest place handy and soon had a suitable crossing in place. Meanwhile the lads more used to coal getting had been digging away, and had quite a nice pile all ready for the rest of us to start carrying it across the Burn. The whole operation had to be done in relays to relieve the tedium. We used small bags weighing about half a hundredweight when full. It was quite enough to carry and the method adopted was to get as much coal as possible from the seam, bearing in mind there was no timber available to prop up the place where you were working. This meant that the most careful watch was necessary so as not to endanger the man digging. The further you went in, the greater the danger, and it required a very firm understanding on the part of all concerned not to exceed the ultimate danger point. We had got about two tons of coal by the time the place was no longer safe, so we called it a day. The coal was all on the far side of the Burn, and we were now faced with the task of getting it up to the top of the bank. Now the six of us set about carrying a half hundredweight sack each up that long steep bank. It was about 11 a.m. but we still had a long way to go before that coal was in our coalhouses. By about 5 p.m. we had most of it at the top of the bank, then we began the job of filling the coal into bigger bags for transport to our respective homes by wheelbarrow. We had taken sandwiches to last us all day, and without scarcely a break we finished about 8 p.m. It had been a very hard day indeed. By the weekend we were faced with the task of doing

the same thing all over again the following week. And so it went on right through the strike. Towards the end of the first month the constant dread that someone would be killed through the grave risks that were being taken, the added aggravation of being chased and chivied by the police, prompted the union officials to approach the colliery manager to see if the seam could be opened officially. I am more than pleased to report that he agreed at once, his only condition that the whole operation be supervised by a deputy. Everything necessary for the job was soon forthcoming. A hand winch was soon anchored on the village side or the Dene and a wire rope fastened to a tall tree on the other side, then a hand line and running block and we were in business. This changed the whole situation, in that it supplied our basic need. A rota system was drawn up and the digging of coal so supervised that each household got a basic allowance. From then on it was not too bad getting what extra we needed from other outcrop sources. Many other places were not so fortunate and it is sad to report that there were many lives lost through men being buried in banksides and other holes in the ground. About two months after the strike began all sorts of proposals were being put forward to end the strike. Amongst these were those of the Bishops. In effect, these would have allowed the men to go back on the old terms and get negotiations going for a mutually agreed settlement. Unfortunately, this was stubbornly rejected by the miners' executive. If there are any of them left, I hope they have long since regretted the folly of that decision. I do not know how deeply the miners' executive was involved with the Communist Party but there is no doubt that A J Cook, the miners' secretary, was the chief culprit in the whole sad business. If an almost completely National Stoppage could not succeed there was no chance whatever of one section, however important, succeeding. It occurred to me then, and I have had no reason to alter my opinion since, that if a career as a trade union leader is to be the passport to political leadership, and by this to a seat in the affairs of Government, then heaven help this nation of ours. As the long weary weeks and months dragged on, the situation became really heartbreaking. Nothing coming in, and what bits of savings we had at the beginning were very quickly used up. Our parents drawing on their dividend savings from the Co-ops. Tick became the order of the day, and here the Co-ops became our real friend in need. The small shopkeepers were quickly in trouble, and I am sure a lot of them never recovered from this setback. Whatever union funds there were in the kitty to start with must have been quickly swallowed up, for we received little, if anything, from that quarter. Things became so desperate, that after repeated appeals to the Board of Guardians for help had been ignored a mass march on the offices at Chester-le-Street almost led to a riot. Had it not been for the intervention of one or two well known and respected trade union officials there would have been serious trouble. In the end the Board agreed to grant each man two shillings and sixpence a week. As is now well known, the Boards of Chester-le-Street and Poplar were quickly set aside and superseded by the Government's own nominees. That was the only money we got, and from then on until the end of the strike

things really did become grim. Few people in the mining areas escaped the hardships, the shopkeepers especially. I am quite certain that these people had never realised, until now, just how dependent they were on a mining community for their living. I attended one meeting in the recreation field where a decision was being taken whether or not to return to work. When a show of hands was called for I noticed that quite a few people who were not miners, but railwaymen and shopkeepers, had their hands up, and drew the meeting's attention to this. A new motion was put but the result was just the same. Quite early, steps were taken to open soup kitchens and an arrangement was made with a local horse and flat owner to go down to South Shields and buy fish leftovers on the quay side. This was fish that was left over from the usual daily sales, and it proved to be a valuable addition to our daily diet. A shoe repair group was set up to help with everybody's repair problems and this, too, proved a great boon. Bread was collected from wherever we could get it, but this too became more difficult as time went on, and it is true to say that but for self-help communal efforts it is difficult to know what might have happened. Above all, though, the sun shone. That fact, I believe, was our saving grace. It enabled everybody who could to get out of doors. Another problem cropped up that summer, however, quite early on: because of the long spell of sunshine the water taps went off. Our water supply came from the Waskerly reservoir high up in the Wear valley. I do not know to this day whether it was because of an inadequate supply source, or mains, but whatever it was if the sun shone for any length of time the taps just trickled, or went off altogether. It was then a case of carrying it from the wells down the Dene. The water from these wells came from the accumulated water in the two top seams of the 5/4 (five-quarter) pit. They ran for most of my life in the village, and I often wonder if they are still running. How well I remember that water carrying when I was at school. We used to set off from the well with two full buckets and finish up at home with two half-empty ones, and with very wet feet. As more houses were built the situation got steadily worse, until eventually the county council took over the water supply. It must have cost an enormous amount of money to reorganise that company's water supply. Meanwhile, the strike went on and the search for coal got steadily worse. All the places where it had been easy to get it at first were far too dangerous, and opening up new places became more and more difficult. This meant we had to go further and further afield with all the attendant difficulty of getting the coal home after the hard work of digging it out. For a short time we tried cutting up the trees which were falling in the Dene due to taking out the coal, and so causing ground subsidence. This proved to be an even harder task, for it meant some very hard work with a cross-cut saw. Some of these trees were two feet or more in diameter and it was no use cutting off more than about a foot at a time. It then had to be split into carriable portions, a bag of which, although weighing a lot less than a similar bag of coal, was far more bulky, and thus far more difficult to carry up the bank. Even

when you got it home it went up the chimney in smoke far more quickly than did even the poorest quality coal we could find. So woodcutting was not a popular pastime, even though at times we had very little choice, in our attempts to keep the home fires burning. The lads I felt very sorry for were the single ones: those who had no parents and were in lodgings and, even more so, the older ones amongst them. These men were the first to feel the pinch, with nothing coming in at all with which to pay their way. In many cases it was a heart breaking decision for the family with whom they had been living, but they had very little choice, for they themselves had nothing coming in. In most cases the men themselves made the decision to leave. One lad I know tried to get into the workhouse, but they refused to take him. In the end some of them began living in garden sheds and greenhouses on the allotments, with the kind permission of the allotment holders. How they managed to live I do not know, but the soup kitchens helped. For the first time in their lives these men knew real poverty and, when the strike was over, even then they scarcely had time to get readjusted when the pits closed down and many of them never found any kind of employment again. After nine months of misery the miners were compelled to accept whatever terms they could get and go back to work. We, as colliery mechanics, lost more than the miners did. We had previously been able to negotiate some quite good conditions for working underground. All these were swept away and instead of a seven hour pit shift we had to work eight hours underground and then take our tools back to the shop on the surface, and arrange for any spare or new parts to be made, or ordered, in our own time before we could go home. Our overtime rates were drastically cut and, the worst blow of all, we had to take our orders from the pit staff, whereas previously the engineer had been our boss. This caused a lot of trouble and led to a great deal of friction between all parties concerned. On the first day back at work everybody knew we had lost the day. The officials had been instructed to make this obvious in every possible way. In our case both the Overmen and the Deputies began a campaign of intimidation designed primarily to let us be shown that they were now "in charge; and don't you forget it". We didn't, because if you wanted to keep your job, we daren't. So we just did the best we could and got on with the job. The best sequel to all this that I remember was some weeks after the pit finally closed down. From the very earliest days of the closure there was (in spite of all the talk about the men not looking for work) a wild rush to all the other pits round about, and in some cases right down to Yorkshire and even in some cases to the Kent pits. In the case of the local ones, we soon realised the folly of this. We should have known it was quite impossible for them to absorb so many men. Yet, even some of our officials were themselves caught up in the scramble for jobs. The Miners' Strike of 1926 was finally called off in October and, as I have said, we went back on far worse terms than before it started. The Pelton Collieries were not very badly affected by the long stoppage, but like a lot of the others round about they were

becoming uneconomic, in that the seams were now a long way from the shaft with no new ones left to exploit. It was a case of getting what coal was left in the most economical way and it was becoming evident that it could no longer support the existing manpower, and some sort of reorganisation was necessary. Almost as soon as the strike ended the management began to plan for this reorganisation. It was decided to concentrate all future output on the Low Pit and abandon the Busty Pit completely. For some weeks all efforts were concentrated on this project. In the Tilley seam a new innovation was tried in the shape of a coal-sucking plant (a development of the well known grain sucking plants). Theoretically, this may (and I only say may) have had some place in a coal mine but personally I could not see it. Anyway the machine was installed under conditions of great difficulty, and a new long wall face prepared for a trial run of this new and novel means of getting coal off a face. In essence, it was supposed to supersede the conventional conveyor belt, the suction pipes themselves being much smaller, and thus requiring much less room than the usual belt mechanism. It must have been obvious to even the most unintelligent man in the pit, though, that there would be complications. Right from the start of the trials there was trouble and, apart from the foreseen ones, the unseen and most unexpected one turned out to be coal dust. As any schoolboy knows, the mechanics of a vacuum require that the exhaust end of the machine is as important to its efficient working as the suction end. This monster was doomed from the start in this respect. The exhaust dust from it soon proved to be a highly dangerous mining hazard for, as all miners know, coal dust itself constitutes one of the most dangerous elements in mine explosions. Every available expedient was tried in an attempt to eliminate this problem, from leading the exhaust pipe into the back return, to passing it through a trough of water. It was so fine that it could almost have been turned into black paint. Those who had to work anywhere near the thing got thoroughly impregnated with the stuff, body and lungs.

It had a very fair trial, a lot more than it deserved, and I am certain everybody was glad to see it stripped down and taken away. Even during the short time it was in use, it became almost impossible to creep along the coal face mainly, it seemed to me, because the sponsors of the project were trying to prove just how much it could save in timber and other costs but, in my opinion, at the expense of safety. As I said previously, this was one of several expedients that were tried to make the concern pay its way. When the end did come, however, it came like a bolt from the blue. No-one that I knew expected such a thing; some sort of reorganisation was certainly on the cards, but all the notice we got was a notice put up on the official notice board near the lamp cabin, on the Friday morning, to the effect that the pit would work on the Saturday morning in order that the men could collect their tools, and that was that. Some time later the concern was split up into lots and put up for auction. I have no

details of any particular transaction but, as it turned out, the Low Pit was bought by another mineowner, who caused quite a stir by insisting upon employing who, and upon what terms he liked, and when and where he liked, thus ignoring all the previous precedents for consulting the trade unions. It was during this period that the village began to fall apart. At first the unions got together to try and sort out the problems involved in an effort to preserve the greatest number of jobs for all concerned. It was agreed that a meeting be sought with the new management to arrange who should be given the chance to return to work, in what order, and under what conditions. Anyone who had not been in continuous employment over the last three or four years would be automatically excluded, as well as those engaged during that period. This, they believed, would give employment to those who were the real natives and with most entitlement to remain in the village. Whether this idea was ever accepted by the new management I do not know, but it quickly became evident they had no intention of doing anything of the kind. They say Human Nature is very frail, but the village was soon to be treated to a spectacle no-one ever thought possible. All sorts of clandestine approaches were soon seen to be made to the new officials' homes and to the colliery offices. The new officials were waylaid, in every possible way, both in daylight and darkness. Families quarrelled amongst themselves, long standing friendships came to an end, and a bitterness established that lasted for years. I was soon resigned to my fate, for I had been away from the pit on two separate occasions. I must admit, though, I did not fully appreciate the seriousness of the situation. I had the feeling that a single man prepared to move anywhere would easily find a job, even though a family man might not find it so easy. How differently it all turned out, and like the rest I was to have my share of trouble over the next year or so.

I mentioned a little while back that the officials of the old regime let us see we had lost the strike, and treated us very badly on occasion. Some of these men were also amongst the victims of the final closure and it was one such particularly obnoxious specimen we met on one of our daily scrambles for work. About a dozen of us were on our way to Craghead when we were joined by this odious specimen of the human family. Every one of us had often wished for just such an opportunity in the past few months. Few of us ever thought we would get the chance, but here it was and that man will never forget it as long as he lives. We didn't leave him the lickings of a dog by the time we got far less than half way to Craghead. There is a gate somewhere on that railway line and the last I ever saw of him he was disappearing over it making for the road. I am sure he must have thought we were going to set about him with physical violence. He had bubbled and blustered his excuses that it was not his fault, that he was only doing what he was told, etc., etc., until the snivelling little rat made me feel sorry for him. He wasn't the only one, worse luck. There was one in particular who

had the habit of chiding me in a nasty sarcastic manner of my relationship with my Grandfather. I never knew the old man, for he went off to South Africa within a month or two of my birth. From those who knew him, I gathered he was a particularly good pitman, albeit a bit rough tongued and given to calling a spade a spade. This man had evidently come in contact with the old man in his early mining days, for they used to go from place to place doing all kinds of special jobs such as shaft sinking and drift driving. This was why he went off to Africa. Here again I had the questionable pleasure of seeing him in the same old dole queue as myself. It must have been a far greater blow to his ego than it was to mine, as I couldn't help reminding him. I often look back and wonder what they gained by it all. Men in authority bullying their fellow men just to show their authority, knowing full well that they couldn't or daren't retaliate without their bread and butter being at stake. Even at this distance in time I can not remember them without a feeling of pity.

One very important episode I missed out of my account of the 1926 strike occurred about half way through the strike. There can be no doubt lots of men were getting sick of seeing the awful mess we were in and would have given almost anything to get back to work, except that the stigma of being called a blackleg held them back. There couldn't be any wonder that some men at some places did attempt to break away and return to work, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain solidarity for the strike. The Owners were well aware of this and doing everything they could to encourage this move, by dangling all sorts of schemes in front of them to get them back to work. Rumours spread that the Ouston Collieries were being prepared to reopen and meetings were called at Pelaw and Pelton Fell with a view to picketing the pits to stop any such re-opening. Whether there was every any truth in these rumours or not I never discovered. But what happened I will never forget. Hundreds of men concentrated at Ouston E pit and even the local people seemed mesmerised at the gathering and wondered what it was all about. To my knowledge no speeches were made and no attempt was made to approach the pit itself. The houses at Ouston were exactly like ours, facing the pit and quite close to it. To this day I don't know who set it in motion, or why but quite suddenly a large furniture van appeared at the end of the street, the doors were flung open and out poured a couple of dozen policemen with their batons drawn and they began laying about them in all directions. For a moment or two the crowd was completely stunned, then broke in panic in all directions. One of my pals and I nipped into the yard of one of the houses, and crouched down behind the postub. The crowd continued to flee in all directions away from the pit and its vicinity, followed by the baton flaying policemen. When they had all passed our hiding place, we too hopped it, and quick. We were told later that the police had been informed there was likely to be violence and came prepared to prevent it.

They did but at the expense of a good few lumps and bumps on a lot of people's heads. I never did get to know who was responsible for that police raid, or who started those malicious rumours at Ouston Colliery.

There was another incident towards the end of the strike that might easily have had serious consequences. As I have said, some men were under pressure from their wives to have the strike called off, so as to end the increasing hardship. As many efforts to this end failed, some men resorted to digging coals from outcrop seams, on a large scale, in an effort to relieve the family hardship. Groups of men got together in an organised way and started out at Waldridge Fell, where the seam outcropped in places quite near the surface. For a while, nothing happened, but as their efforts became so blatently obvious threats of violence against the operators began to be made. In an effort to persuade these men peacefully to stop coal digging, a mass meeting of all the men employed at Pelaw and Pelton Fell was called and it was agreed to go to Waldridge and try and persuade them to stop. I think there was a general feeling that if they did not agree the diggings would be destroyed. There were rumours that these men would seek police protection, although their activities were illegal. I myself thought it was a dangerous situation, but that night some hundreds of men duly arrived on the Fell. There were three or four field gates at different places on the Fell to contain the cattle grazing there and to proclaim the rights of way. It was at one of these gates that the crowd came up against the Law in the shape of a group of policemen. Besides some local miners' lodge officials, there were a couple of local magistrates present, and they asked to be allowed to meet some of the diggers. The police said there were none on the Fell and that we should all turn round and go home. Alas, while this parleying was going on groups of men had broken away from the crowd and were roaming the Fell in search of the diggers. It was a bright moonlight night and the Fell is a rough place at any time, and difficult to navigate even in moonlight, so some of them began to set fire to the prickly whinn and yellow gorse bushes and, with the exceptionally dry summer, soon the whole Fell side was ablaze from end to end. As soon as we saw this we made for home as quickly as we could as we feared the military would be turned out upon us. This was no idle thought either, for right from the start troops had been drafted into the mining areas for just such contingencies and armoured cars were a frequent sight on the roads throughout the strike.

Nobody had any idea whether or not there were coal diggers on the Fell that night, as all sorts of rumours were abroad. It took the passing of a couple of days before anyone could be

sure there had not been someone burnt to death at Waldridge that night. Whatever the effect it had on most of us who were there, it did not stop the digging. A day or two respite, and they were at it again even better organised than ever. I believe they realised just how frightened everyone had been at the possibility of the terrible tragedy that might have happened, and cashed in on the belief they would not do anything so stupid again. It is quite possible the only casualties were a large amount of game as well as birds and rabbits.

Another event occurs to me which took place about the middle of the strike. I have said that many attempts were made to bring the strike to an end, but about this time the Miners' Executive mounted a morale boosting campaign, with members of the Labour Party, MPs, but especially the miners' secretary, A J Cook touring the mining areas. If nothing else, Cook had the gift of public speaking, especially as a propagandist. I had heard him on three previous occasions and although I did not know he was a member of the Communist Party until about the middle of the strike I somehow feel I ought to have guessed he was. The Communist Party had very little support in the Durham mining areas, although it is possible that the influence of a tiny minority might have had a good deal more effect than many of us realised. By half way through the strike I think it would be true to say that the will to continue was waning and no-one could be surprised at it.

So those who wished the struggle to continue brought up A J Cook to tour the country. I do not know who chose the location but on this occasion it was a stroke of genius on their part, whoever it was. The spot chosen might have, and no doubt did, surprise many people. It surprised me. Burnhope is a tiny village, with a small pit, on an almost unknown side road from Craghead to Lanchester, on the west side of the county. You could not have had a more rural setting, and the particular spot chosen proved to be a natural amphitheatre for just such an occasion. Seldom have I seen so many miners and their families in one huge throng, except perhaps at the Big Meeting on their Gala Day at Durham. Once again, the sun shone, and it brought out the bands and banners from miles away, and I am positive there were few buses, if any, in sight of the place. A farm waggon had been brought to the centre of this natural agricultural bowl and it must have seemed an inspiring sight of solidarity from that platform. A vast sea of faces, of men and women, boys and girls, from a very wide area, gathered there to hear a miners' leader. I said it was a beautiful warm day, and many were soon in their shirt sleeves. A couple of members of the Durham Miners' Executive opened the meeting with appeals for closed ranks and unity. Then Cook rose. He began in his usual slow measured tones, stating the facts as he saw them, but as on the two previous occasions, when I had seen him, gradually, almost imperceptibly,

he was subtly applying the art of persuasive propaganda of which I came to know he was a master. Appealing, pleading, cajoling, taunting, and accusing, he worked from side to side of that limited platform, facing first one part of the audience and then the other, and so obviously carrying them with him. He peeled off his coat and rolled up his sleeves as he warmed to his task. It was a masterly performance as he carried his audience along with him in his mesmeric peroration. You could not help being carried away. He was cheered to the echo, and for a while at any rate little more was heard of breakaways. He was not always so well received though, and at one of his later meetings in some other part of the country, he was kicked by some irate person, and I understand the injury eventually led to his death.

CRAMLINGTON by William Muckle

I was getting 6s 9½d per shift, and a 40 per cent reduction in pay had been threatened by the mine-owners. The conditions were wet, with foul air. There was no annual or statutory holiday pay. There were no pit-head baths. We lived in hovels. The toilets were earth closets, and water was drawn from a standpipe 30 feet from the house.

On May 10, 1926, a meeting of the Cramlington Lodge was held in the Miners' Institute. One of the lodge officials ended the meeting with A J Cook's slogan: "Stop the wheels turning". Someone in the meeting called for them all to come back after dinner and have a rail up to stop the blackleg coal trains going through.

The men returned about 1.30 p.m., and just as they all met they saw blackleg platelayers working in their "plus fours" on the line. The miners stoned and chased them away. Then someone called out: 'Come on lads, we'll have a rail out'. Over two dozen miners participated. As a precaution to save injury to anyone, one of the miners went about 400 yards up the line, sat on the bank and tried to wave the train down to stop, while two others nearer to where the rail had been removed also gave a second warning to stop the train by waving it down. But the blackleg crew did not heed the warnings, although it was common talk at the time that the blackleg platelayers had waved the train down at Nelson village, about a mile away, to warn the blackleg train crew to expect trouble at Cramlington. That would account for the train only travelling 20 miles an hour as it reached the gap in the line, which the engine almost cleared before toppling over on its side. To our astonishment the train was the Flying Scotsman and not the coal train, as the trains were not running to the usual schedule. Fortunately no one was killed and only one was detained in hospital with an ankle injury.

Following the derailment the police were very busy trying to trace those responsible, and for weeks nobody cracked. But eventually Lionel Waugh, whose uncle was a police superintendent and whose brother was a policeman, turned King's evidence and with his two witnesses, Robert Taylor and George Wardle who had taken part in the derailment, provided the evidence on which eight of us were arrested at 1.30 a.m. in the morning of a day in June. Three of us were sentenced to four years penal servitude, two to six years and three to eight years. After short stays at Durham, Leeds and Pentonville prisons, we were finally sent to Maidstone prison to serve our sentences.

Meanwhile, an organisation called the International Class War Prisoners' Aid, of which Bob Lovell was secretary of the British section, began to organise a campaign for our release, raise funds to help our families and make it possible for them to visit us in jail. We did not know of the existence of this organisation until we received our first visits, and it lightened the load of our sentences considerably to know we were not forgotten and our dependents were being cared for.

The campaign was a great success. Those sentenced to four years were released after two years and three months, those to six years after three years, and those to eight years after 3½ years. And it must be remembered that the ICWPA was not only campaigning for us: there were hundreds of general strike and miners' lock-out prisoners; the twelve Communist leaders were in prison; and there were great campaigns for the release of Sacco and Vanzetti in America and the prisoners of fascism in Europe, all going on at the same time.

Great meetings in London, Newcastle, Dudley and Cramlington welcomed us home on our release, I remember, when I was released with the first three, the great welcome we received at Poplar Town Hall, then at Newcastle by a great demonstration led by Will Lawther, the national chairman of the ICWPA, followed by a packed-out meeting at Cramlington Co-op Hall and finally at the Dudley Co-op Hall where we were presented with ICWPA silver medals.

No doubt when the mass media deal with the fiftieth anniversary of the general strike, the derailment of the Flying Scotsman will be cited as an example of violence. We were not violent men, and had the middle class "plus four" train crews and platelayers not sought to break the strike, the incident would never have occurred.

Our aim was to stop blackleg coal trains only, and for this we have no regrets. We were on starvation wages and fighting to preserve outselves and our families from further degradation.

MEMORIES OF THE GENERAL STRIKE by Bill Carr

Over the last 110 years my grandfather, father and myself, have worked in the coal mining industry. Grandfather started at the age of 11. Throughout this period little had changed in the practice of obtaining coal from the seams at knock-down prices; never was there a commodity that had produced such huge fortunes - for the owner. And however the industry suffered from time to time through a fall in demand, the owner escaped hardship. He usually could find ways to pass on the fruits of the crisis to the man in the darkness - the miner. Which was really the crux of the great 1926 strike, the strike which nearly brought about the downfall of a Government, and but for a betrayal of the miners, would have succeeded.

I was 18 years old at the time, living in Millfield, a few miles from Newcastle-on-Tyne, and working at Maria Pit.

Councils of Action were set up in our area. The plans outlined at these TUC-organised groups in the villages, which I attended, were in effect to set up at strategic points, barriers which would be manned by appointed pickets to control the movement of any vehicle in and out of the village. Any article delivered would be scrutinised, but only those needed for the sustenance of the community would be allowed. The vehicle driver would need a chit to grant him free passage.

In only one short term of a fortnight, masses of workers learned of their tremendous political power.

Inevitably, VIPs of many shades of honesty were driven to the conclusion that their whole future depended on the goodwill of the local Council of Action. Though they supported the Government, they had no scruples in applying to the Council for preferential treatment in the issuing of chits. To my delight they were rebuffed.

Picketing of the pit was intensive, though I cannot recollect any person at that time who would have dreamt of blacklegging in the face of the complete solidarity of the miners and their families.

This was a most exciting period of my life. The collapse of the General Strike, while disheartening to the miners, did not lead to any weakening of resolve. My family expressed the reactions of everyone around us when they vilified the traitors who left us to struggle alone, though care was taken not to denounce the workers who had responded to the call. Miners' leaders throughout Britain redoubled their efforts to rally the miners for struggle, at the same time spelling out the causes of the desertions. Arrests of miners' leaders were denounced and at the several mass meetings I attended on Newcastle Town Moor, the anger of the miners was clearly shown by calls for more retaliation in reply to the attacks by the Government.

It seemed nothing but death could silence this great roar, a demand for justice. Great fighters without a doubt! Meanwhile, each day in the villages was marked by some new event. The women organised all kinds of supper evenings. The supper my aunt provided was from a wash boiler, chips fried in fat provided free by a local butcher. Others produced boiled peas, and there was always plenty of home-baked loaves standing on window ledges to cool off for consumption later in the day. Herrings were ten a penny. Living on the fringe of the Northumbrian moors, netting rabbits was a nightly pursuit. Wild birds' eggs we could obtain easily. We even helped farmers in their fields for the reward of a bag of potatoes. Pinching went on too, but it was mostly from public or private property which had little or no relevance for the owners.

Fuel was needed for cooking too, there were no such luxuries as electric cookers for mining families. There were plenty of trees in the area, but on a solid fuel cooking range had little value. So the miners made their own coal-mine in a nearby wood, Walbottle Dene. Very thin seams of poor brown coal had always been known to exist in the Dene and a start was made by odd individuals to exploit it, purely for local domestic use, of course.

My two brawny uncles and myself set out our "claim" in the Dene, breaking into the three-foot seam on the sides of a steep ravine. Roof supports for the tunnel were obtained from the sawn wood from the trees around us. Driving in a pilot heading, and then fanning out further tunnelling to the left and right, providing essential ventilation, was an exhibition of good technical skill in mining engineering.

My uncles needed no lessons in this. They were experts. My role in the venture was haulage: I had a large tin bath which I pushed in ahead of me empty into the heading. With a clothes line attached to the handle, my uncle, hewing the coal, then filled the tin bath with coal. I then dragged the bath back out of the heading. My other uncle at the heading entrance would then empty the coal out of the bath tin into a sack.

When we had obtained sufficient coal for our use, we then discontinued our mining until more coal was needed. We did, of course, provide coal for the less fortunate where we could. The coal was carted away from the heading to the village by cycles - at night time. A tricky operation through the Dene in the dark. The "Specials", too, were very active in stopping and searching anyone carrying anything suspicious. Later in the strike, they clamped down on the "Dene" coal digging operations; presumably it was far too successful for the liking of authorities directing the crushing of the strike. But steathily it still went on. I must say, too, that a "Black Market", unwholesome in many respects

to the strikers, did develop, but people were in many cases being deprived of necessities. Selling coal could buy food.

From the period of the beginning of the General Strike, the local Council of Action had organised morale boosting, social events and these events were carried on in the village long after the General Strike ended. On special days children participated in concerts on waste land; buns and cocoa were distributed. The women excelled in soup kitchen work, various charitable organisations helped.

Sports days were plentiful. Football and cricket matches for men and women as well as walking and running competitions, swimming races in the Tyne (a half mile away) were skilfully planned and executed. No effort was spared in the pursuit of solidifying the unity of the people, a necessity for victory.

My sister, 19 years of age, still a beautiful woman now at 67, was quite an expert at track and long distance running. Her winning trophies were, fortunately, a parcel of groceries donated by a local grocer. Such local characters as these made splendid contributions of credit to miners during the strike, with really little hope of ever recovering their losses. They never had much themselves to tide them over difficult times. No others were employed in the shops but themselves. Most miners remembered them and gave loyal customer support to the end of their lives.

The "Means Test" applied by the "Board of Guardians" at that time was always the subject of bitterness. Then, as now, miners were receiving heavy blows from the press and authority. Shiftlessness on the part of the miner was the main charge laid against him. True, the fantastic lovely summer weather did not give me any incentive to want to resume back-breaking underground toil, but then I had no dependants to keep.

But it was degrading for any family applying for "Guardian" relief. Many did not bother to have the humiliating experience, and refused to join the queue. Union hand-outs to the strikers were already small, and weekly getting less. The miners' leaders worked incessantly to obtain financial support for us, internationally, as well as nationally, but whatever they obtained was shared out among many. Baldwin, the Prime Minister, parried the appeal of our leaders to the USA for financial aid for the miners, by publishing a message to them that there was no hardship or destitution amongst the miners. The miners regarded this as a definite intention of the Government to assist the coal-owners to starve the men back to work.

Evan Williams, coal-owners' representative, said in a meeting with miners' leaders in August 1926, when they were still searching for an honourable settlement - "I do not know whether, with your recent ecclesiastical associations, you have developed the habit of starting the proceedings with a prayer and a hymn, and I hope you will not find it strange if we do away with it this afternoon,

and get straight down to business". This was a reference to Church Bishops' meetings with union leaders trying to find a formula for ending the strike. Typical attitude of contempt and ridicule of the tyrant class, arrogant in their might, merciless in what they felt was to be their victory.

My gentle though rough family, slow to react to cruelty, were enraged. I think they knew the nature of the beast from past experience; this clinched it.

I think also that despite the great hardship experienced, these well-publicised arrogant expressions of overwhelming power against the more helpless, helped greatly to decide the miners, come what may, that they would not submit. As their resources grew less, the miners' firmness grew stronger.

Page Arnot correctly states the position in his reference to this period by quoting a few lines from the Song of the Fight at Malden:

"Mind shall be harder
Heart the keener
Mood shall be greater
As our might lessens."

A J Cook, miners' leader, was regarded as a heroic figure of great stature in our village. His ceaseless campaigning to stem any breach in the wall had a remarkable impact in the struggle. Some say he gave his life for the miners. The Soviet Union had made £1 million donation to the miners, a subject of ridicule and hatred from coal-owners, press and government. I can mark my entry into active radical politics from this period. The example of a naked class confrontation with all allied forces of the Establishment, there for all to see, to crush a section of the community down to semi-starvation level was the final confirmation of what I needed to know of class society. And I had not even read a Marxist sheet! The hand-out of strike pay amounted to 4 shillings a head - half for juniors. Even this meagre sum was the subject of violent attacks by government and press. The patient courage shown by the miners was exemplified by the torrent of hatred and abuse showered on them. Lying about supposed stealing and cheating by the miners was commonplace. The picture was complete with the "Specials" strutting around in their scores, watching, searching, overlooking any ordinary action. We experienced the embryo of a Fascist state. And as the strike went on, contributions to the miners grew less, and little as it was, the few shillings a week we had received as strike pay, dried up. It was sorely missed. With rare exceptions, these small sums had been used to buy food.

Opposite where we lived was a steelworks. For the first three months of the strike, coal had been poured into the smelting

yard. Picketing had not succeeded in preventing this; there was a "Special" for every yard of ground. Harassment of the people by these "supermen" could, and did, receive counter-action. Night after night raids on the coalstocks took place within a hundred yards of where the "Specials" were stationed. Coal wagons were raided on their way to the yard; many of them arrived empty, the drop floor of the wagon expertly released. Some of the men were caught and fined, but most of them were not. This was entirely unorganised, in some ways counter-productive, but who can say that it was any more criminal than the never-ending attempts by authority to starve the miners' families into submission.

A colliery nearby, "Coronation", newly constructed had re-opened, and some of the first blacklegs appeared. In the beginning none of these came from our village. Coal was transported from the pit for some two miles by a rope-drawn tubway. The blacklegs at this pit were the scum of Newcastle City. Of no mining experience and without any training, they were guided and coerced by pit officials to produce coal by direction. It needed an army of "Specials" to guard them night and day from the pickets. For the coal to reach its destination at the rail terminals at Lemington, there were many open fields, part woodlands and culverts to pass through.

Obtaining fuel for home use was a difficult problem, and I, along with several other young mates, decided we would, like the Red Indians of old, raid these wagon trains without impeding their progress, fill up our bags with coal from the train (their speed was about 2 miles an hour) and proceed home with the booty. This had been done many times before successfully. The "Specials" rarely knew where to be to meet the many demands made of them; stretching them out over a two-mile area made their job harder. Well, there we were, mid-day, contemptuous of any intervention, eight of us marching in single file, each carrying a sack of coal on our shoulders. All at once a mass surge of police and "Specials" burst through the bushes, pouncing on the nearest. Being at the rear of the file, I had the advantage, dropping my bag and running. I ran like a hare across the ploughed fields but, looking back, there were two uniforms travelling faster, and in a short time I was hooked, taken to the police station and detained, and put in a cell with another lad. Done to frighten us! The gruff sergeant had invited us to promise to go back to work. Idleness, he claimed, was the breeder of crime. After a few hours we were released, but the village was agog with excitement over our confinement.

Our appropriated coal, stored in the police station yard, later disappeared from the yard in the night. And we did not go back to work.

Our first blackleg in the village was a sensation. An ex-sergeant-major of the last war, he always walked about with the arrogance of a ruler. He had little credit as a miner, nor did his usual loud voice give him respect.

What makes a blackleg? They vary in type. What they have in common is a shrinking away from any social responsibility, they can be expert at fawning on the boss, almost serf-like in appreciation of authority.

Our whole village seemed to turn out for the hero's return from his first day's work blacklegging. Marching at the head of what looked like an army of "Specials", it was indeed a spectacle of state might. The blackleg even appeared to be enjoying his glory, pathetic posing under the umbrella of a doubtful kind of protection. He chose his way, he certainly could not expect the manly joy of being recognised as a man of principle. Rather he was treated as one would a snake.

The younger element in the village, having agreed that this blackleg should not enjoy some of the spoils of his traitorous action, decided to extract the concessionary coal delivered to him by a grateful boss. This was done in the middle of the night by the simple unscrewing of his coal-house door hinges, and removing the coal in bags. Daily cat-calling of the man on his return from work must have made his life wretched. Or is their brain specially insulated against such deprecation?

But, back at home, the continuous pressure of trying to provide an adequate meal brought strains and stresses. While the family spirit of togetherness was of a deep character, great hardship could be borne. There were other cases though where ill-health had already existed before any strike had started; where existence had depended for a long time on pittances, these suffered the cruellest blows. A neighbour, in such a plight, cut her throat, but her life was saved by other neighbours. Another chap hanged himself in the yard of the steelworks. These tragedies to people not connected with the mining industry were linked to the strike I believe by the venomous action of local "Boards of Guardians". In hindsight I can see that any unfortunate family could be denied the financial help needed to sustain them, if only to use such cases as proof of what harm the wicked miners were causing to the community.

There was, of course, as strike funds dried up, a growing number of men returning to work. It was not serious in our village, but not all the village worked in the pits. One of my own firm friends, young, vital, and naturally loving the bright lights went back to work. He was not a rat; the sheer boredom of non-preoccupation with the pit that at least gave him, as a single man, a reasonable social life, was denied him, coupled with family pressures and (father a non-miner) all this finally caused him to make the break. It was a deep, sad blow to me. He was blacklisted from our home for ever. Many more young people were attracted back by the apparent hopelessness. Our family stuck to their guns. I believe many more were influenced by their decisions. By November, the majority of miners were

still standing firm, but a quarter of the work force, nearly a quarter of a million had gone back to work. The Government now offered what they thought were reasonable terms as conquerors:

(a) Immediate resumption of work.

(b) Longer hours to be discussed at district level.

(c) "Temporarily" rates of pay at pre-strike level (but conditional on acceptance of longer hours).

(d) No guarantee against victimisation, etc.

Not surprising, after these humuliating terms were referred by the Miners' Executive to the districts, they were rejected. The end, we knew though, was near. On November 29 it was all over. The lockout had lasted seven months, and things would never be the same again. The bitter hatred of the miners against the Tories was deep indeed, and has continued until today. This is reflected in the almost obsessional desire in every miners' family to vote Labour in every mining village. The fact that the few Labour Governments since 1926 have betrayed the ideals set in the minds of the miners by the Socialist Pioneers, does not allow a miner to forget the maniacal enemy of 1926. Easy to forgive wrongs done to themselves, our lads know of the tortures inflicted on their innocent families, and it will never be forgotten.

Our pit was by this time completely manned by blacklegs, most of them from other parts of Britain. None of my family were accepted when they presented themselves for work. The blacklist was thoroughly operated, no mercy was shown, nor even expected by the miner from the coal-owner. Yet the locked-out men were rated among the most highly qualified, conscientious pitmen in Britain. Conversely, the men who had returned to work during the lock-out forming the basis of the new man-power in the industry, were largely raw, limited in conception of struggle against geological conditions in the primitive mining existing then.

Their productive results were not outstanding, so that over a period of a few months after the end of the strike, managements were coming to see the necessity of little by little re-employing the old hands, but not at the pits they worked at prior to the strike.

I finally got a job at a pit near Blaydon across the river from where we lived - called "Stargate". Appalling conditions, water coming in through the roof in cascades. Earning power in the circumstances was poor. My uncles had similar problems where they finally got a job, and in 1928 we left the North for the new Yorkshire coalfields, where we joined, at a new Thorne

Colliery, hundreds of colliers from other areas of Britain, victims of blacklisting.

NEWCASTLE : THE OTHER SIDE by Horace Green

The story of the general strike, on balance, often deals predominantly with the actions of the struggle of the trade unions and then the miners, but the other side of the picture shows long prepared work by those in power to meet this challenge.

In Newcastle upon Tyne, the City Council meeting on December 15, 1925, saw Councillor Locke putting a question to the Town Clerk on a query about the contents of a "secret circular" issued by the Ministry of Health, on what actions needed to be taken, anticipating that a "national stoppage" might take place at some time.

This circular, it was asserted, indicated what expenditure might be incurred and Councillor Locke wished to know whether an opportunity would be given to the Council to discuss this and to consider whether the city should bear any expenditure.

The Town Clerk's reply was that there had been no "secret circular" but there was a public circular which he had and which, if the Council wished it, could be printed for consideration.

In discussion which followed it was asked if officials had already been appointed on this directive, and an Aldermen, Sir George Lunn, said that "a similar circular to this had been issued by Mr Arthur Henderson when he was Home Secretary."

The Lord Mayor said that the questions were 'irrelevant' and that they would have the circular 'printed and circulated'. On a show of hands it was agreed that this be done. This led to a circular from the Ministry of Health, dated November 20, 1925, being printed and circulated in which it was stated that "local authorities" were directed by the Minister of Health to refer to a circular sent to them in May 1922, which called for arrangements for the "maintenance of local services, as may be thought to be required in the event arising" of an industrial dispute which "may be so extended as to interfere seriously with communications", conveyance of food, etc., light and power supplies, health and the "means of livelihood of the population at large".

It set out in detail the machinery and organisation to be set up: a Minister to act as "Civil Commissioner" in each of ten divisions in England and Wales, with a staff of representatives from government departments to deal with "transport, food, postal services, coal"; this body to keep in touch with local

authorities in each division, and "empowered if necessary to give decisions on behalf of the government".

Each division was to be divided into "areas" for administration, and to recruit volunteers, and in each area there was to be a "local food officer, local road officer, a haulage committee and a coal officer" along with a chairman selected by the government to convene and preside over a "volunteer service committee".

There was to be consultation with principal local "traders", and the document set out detailed plans, which included co-operation with police, to ensure "law and order" with local authorities taking steps in this co-operation by, "for instance, securing able bodied citizens of good character to serve as special constables".

This led to a debate on a resolution moved by Councillor Adams at the City Council meeting held on May 5, the second day of the general strike, "that this Council, whilst adopting a strictly neutral attitude, recognising the widespread injury to the country arising out of a national stoppage, hereby respectfully urges the government to resume negotiations with the contending parties". Standing Orders were suspended to discuss this motion. Alderman Millican moved an amendment to alter the motion to add the suggestion that it be sent to the TUC as well as the government, asking for a resumption of negotiations, and Mr Adams accepted this.

A defence of the miners and the TUC was put, in the debate, and eventually Alderman Sir George Lunn said he wanted to move that the general strike order be withdrawn, and that negotiations be resumed as early as possible, saying the motion before the Council was "a good horse, but it wanted a better rider". He finally moved "that the general strike order be withdrawn and that the coal owners re-open the mines at the existing rates of wages and conditions for a time long enough to arrive at a settlement, with the continuance of the government subsidy for that period". Mr Adams agreed to this, and the motion was then carried, with decision that copies be sent to the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, and to local MPs.

In September of 1925 there did appear newspaper adverts calling on citizens who were prepared to volunteer to "maintain supplies and vital services in the event of a general strike", and a leaflet urging them to "join now", issued with the heading OMS: Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, setting out its objects and how to enrol, was published and distributed in the north-east, giving the chairman as Sir Alexander Leith, MC, vice-chairman Viscount Allendale, MC, and secretary Captain A E Brooks, with address at 21 Louvaine Place, Newcastle upon Tyne.

This folder declared that it was not a political or aggresive organisation but was aimed at compiling a register of members for the "use of the government of the day should a "state of emergency" be declared". It outlined the tasks of maintaining law and order, essential public services, food, heat, light, power, transport and sanitation, setting out five classes needed:

A Protection: age limit 45, to be sworn in, if required, as special constables.

B Workers: those with knowledge of work in connection with railways, tramways, electrical power, gas, food supplies, water, sanitary services, clerical, canteen and other social services, postal, inland waterways, dock services, loaders for foodstuffs (state fully on page 4 your special qualifications).

C Transport: 1. lorry, omnibus and motor car drivers, mechanics, horse transport drivers and stablemen (state fully on page 4 your special qualifications, type of vehicle you are accustomed to and whether able to do own running repairs);

2. Particulars on page 4 of any lorry, van or car (horse power accommodation, etc) you are willing to offer for use.

D Messengers: small car drivers, motor cyclists, cyclists, mounted or foot messengers (state fully on page 4 if any special qualifications).

E Members: who are willing to take an energetic part in recruiting for classes A, B, C and D, or who subscribe to the funds of the OMS.

Note: women are eligible for classes B, C, D and E, but in no circumstances will they be employed where there is any danger of rough handling.

And page 4 set out the form for joining, with details asked for and at the foot a section for contributions to the fund.

A meeting at Durham was held on April 15, 1926, to set up OMS organisation with a Dr A Robinson in the chair. Amongst those there and who played an active part throughout the period on this side of the struggle was Lord Londonderry's local agent, Malcolm Dillon.

A Captain Matthews set out an explanation of the need for and role of OMS organisation. Officials were appointed and a "strong financial committee" formed to appeal for funds. The Finance Committee included Lord Barnard as chairman, Sir Alfred Palmer, Sir Henry Havelock - Allen and Colonel Sadler amongst its members.

A Declaration of Objects was set out, this included the statement that "the OMS is an association of loyal citizens organised in the Public interest, without political or class partisanship," the objects being to provide the government, in times of emergency, with "those who will assist in maintaining essential public services ...", declaring that "such co-operation is the natural duty of every citizen, but it can only be effective with organisation".

Under the heading of "Who will the OMS benefit by its operations?" it stated: "The general community whose vital interests must not be compromised to secure those of a particular section, or for the purposes of promoting political aims".

The minutes of the Newcastle upon Tyne Watch Committee for May 21, 1926, reported that the city was often a "centre of unrest", that for the use of the mounted police horses had been provided "gratuitously", and having to use the St James Park Football Ground had been charged for. The Chief Constable in his report said that "during the emergency a total of 1,500 special constables were enrolled".

The report was accepted with tributes to the Chief Constable and everyone else concerned on the services rendered. Confidence was expressed that "at any time in the future if occasion demanded it" reliance could be placed on the "help and assistance of the citizens to assist in protecting life and property and maintaining good order throughout the city".

CHOPWELL - "Little Moscow" by Connie Pickard

It is difficult to pin down the date when Chopwell was first referred to as "Little Moscow". The term was certainly fostered by the press and was clearly intended as a term of abuse in the wake of rumours that Chopwell had set itself up as a Soviet. The only reference I have found to the latter was to the football team Chopwell Soviet which, though known locally by that name, was unable to prevail upon the Football Association to be permitted to use it and had to be content with the title Chopwell White Star. A Communist Club was set up in Chopwell in 1912, founded by an anarchist photographer called George Davison. But the term "Communist" had something of a religious connotation in those days, and the club owed more to the ideas of William Morris and Edward Carpenter than to Marx.

The streets built by the Blaydon Urban District Council in the early twenties bear the names Lenin Terrace and Engels Street but they also commemorate E D Morel and Robert Owen. On the Chopwell Miners' Lodge banner the portraits of Marx and Lenin appear, but so does that of Keir Hardie and the words of the American poet Walt Whitman.

"We take up the task eternal, the burden and the lesson.
Pioneers! Oh Pioneers'. "

On the other side of the banner there is a group of miners, before them a globe bearing the words:

"The world for workers and he who would be free must strike the first blow."

and above that the words "Cooperative Commonwealth".

The lodge banner was controversial in its day. Some people in the village described it as a Communist banner and the first time it was taken out of Chopwell the banner party was attacked by an angry crowd as they marched to board the train at Westwood station.

This banner now stands in the Museum of Trade Unions in Moscow, and this story goes back to 1926. During the period of the great strike the miners of the Donbas coalfield, though hard-pressed themselves, collected half a million pounds to assist Britain's miners. Some of this money eventually reached Chopwell, after much talk in the House of Commons and elsewhere about "Moscow gold". Actually the money was raised by the Donbas miners and did not come from the Soviet Government. Thirty years later a delegation of Donbas miners visited Chopwell on their way to the Durham Miners Gala. As this coincided with the replacement of the Chopwell Lodge banner the lodge chairman, Len Hawkshaw, presented the Soviet delegation with the old one, which they took back to Russia. On a return visit to Russia in the following year Len Hawkshaw was presented with a scarlet banner from the Donbas miners. Both the Donbas banner and the present lodge banner now hang in the Chopwell Community Centre.

Chopwell's militancy had long roots. In its heyday Chopwell was producing 11,000 tons of coal a week and employing 12,500 men. These men had come to Chopwell to work the colliery and they founded a virile mining community. Unlike the older pit villages in Durham Chopwell with its three pits - the first sunk on 13 May 1895 - created a Klondyke in the middle of a forest and attracted some of the most fearless, energetic and free-thinking families from the older mining areas. Men and women who were ready to put the spirit of the "New Unionism" into the old-established Durham Miners Association and the Spen and District Labour Representation Committee.

The Lawthers came from Choppington in Northumberland and the Boltons from the Welsh coalfield. Harry Bolton's journey to socialism travelled a difficult route. The Bolton family were Wesleyan Methodists and Harry Bolton rebelled against the chapel's attitude to the First World War. The preachers were gripped by the same patriotic fever that held the rest of the country, but Harry argued that "War is murder". His own son, Wesley, went to

prison as a conscientious objector. Rumour has it that Bolton burned his bible and replaced it with Das Capital. He also ran a Socialist Sunday School which had people like Jack Parks preaching evolution. There was the singing of Socialist hymns and readings from William Morris and Edward Carpenter; and, no doubt, from E D Morel, for when Bolton was chairman of the Blaydon UDC he named one of the new streets after Morel, the champion against militarism. Unlike some other local leaders Harry Bolton never left Chopwell, preferring to play the part of a people's advocate, and he made a deep mark on Chopwell.

The Gillilands came to Chopwell around the same time as the Lawthers and the Boltons. Jack Gillilands was elected to the Blaydon Council in 1926, the year Labour swept the board in the local elections, and this enabled Gillilands and his colleagues to use the local Board of Guardians to channel relief to striking miners. There is a story that two buses arrived in Chopwell, the first with "Newcastle" on its destination board and the second with the words "Relief". "Oh'." went up the cry, "Don't say Jack Gillilands is laying on buses now as well".

Chopwell folk never lost their sense of humour even in the hardest times. During the great strike there was a soup kitchen, which used all kinds of wild creatures to flavour its soup, and a favourite quip was "You might have taken the wool off that beast before you chucked it in the soup." Or, again, when the Gestetner duplicator, which was used to produce the local strike bulletin Northern Light, had to be kept moving to escape police surveillance, the cry was "Who's for the mangle the night then?".

The produce of the allotments proved crucial to family budgets as a means of supplementing supplies obtained from "the Store". Chopwell had to be almost self-sufficient to hold out for the length of time it did, for not only was it the last colliery to go back after the 7 months national strike it was also on strike for 11 months before the great strike began. However, the Coop certainly played a key role in sustaining the strikers. There were, in fact, three Co-op branches in Chopwell: Annfield Plain, Leadgate and Blaydon. The miners' union had arranged a grocery ticket system with the Co-op: each union member was allowed half a crown of groceries every week for each member of his family and after the strike members repaid the money at the rate of half a crown a week.

I have briefly outlined here some of the social, cultural and political factors which lay behind the designation of Chopwell as "Little Moscow", and have tried to show that the roots of Chopwell's militancy sprang from English soil but were nurtured by an idealism that looked outside the village to the formation of some kind of international workers' commonwealth.

OBITUARY ARTICLE

SIR WILLIAM LAWTHER, 1889-1976

Will Lawther, probably the best-known labour leader to come from the Great Northern coalfield, died on 1st February 1976 in his eighty-seventh year.

Unlike his contemporary, Sam Watson, who wielded national political influence from a base in the Durham Miners' Association, Lawther's base was the presidency, first of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain during the Second World War, and then for nine crucial and formative years of the National Union of Mineworkers in the post-war period. Prior to taking national office in 1939, he had however pursued a long and distinguished career from lodge chairman to checkweighman, DMA agent, Durham County Council and Member of the House of Commons. The purpose of this note of appreciation is to outline briefly the genesis of his intellectual and political development in the social and industrial conditions which characterised Northern England at the turn of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth.

The Early Years

Will was the first of fifteen children born to Edward and Catherine Lawther, on 20th May 1889 at First Row, Choppington. Although Choppington was in "Burt country" (Thomas Burt was returned to Parliament as Liberal for Morpeth in 1884, one of the first two workingmen Members, and was distantly related to the Lawthers by marriage), Edward Lawther did not take a detailed interest in political affairs.

He was, however, a trade unionist of unswerving dedication, and was studious and phlegmatic, his main interest being the writings of Burns and Shakespeare, which Will recalled him quoting with phenomenal accuracy. Will's grandfather (also Edward) was secretary of the Blyth chartists and had been arrested and imprisoned after disturbances at a meeting in Cowpen in 1841.

Lawther's mother exerted considerable influence on his early social thinking. She, the daughter of a South Shields river pilot, a close-knit community of some social prestige, may have been considered within the ethics of Victorian class structure to have "married beneath herself", though this is conjecture. At any event, she succeeded in instilling a keen sense of social injustice as the lot of the working classes in all eleven of her fifteen children who survived infancy.

In addition to the embryonic socialism imbibed from birth, the Lawther family were influenced by the mores of Primitive Methodism. In some ways this is paradoxical, since most of the family remained throughout life agnostic or aetheist. Indeed, Will's detestation

of what he perceived as the monolithic conformity imposed by the Catholic Church was second only to his anti-communism. Yet the Ranters were strong in the mining and agricultural communities in Northumberland during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and often provided the only continuous forum for an attack on secular injustice, allied to their quest for spiritual salvation in the Life Hereafter. In this sense, the Lawthers forged ideological bonds which strengthened their trade union and political aspirations.

Barrington Miners' Institute

In 1901 at the age of 12, Lawther began work as a trapper at Barrington Colliery, to where the family had moved two years earlier. In one respect Barrington was a more favoured community than Choppington: it contained a Miners' Institute complete with a reasonable stock of pamphlets, books and newspapers. It was one of Lawther's earliest tasks to read aloud to an assembled group from the available prints, among them The Newcastle Chronicle and sometimes The Times. It was in Barrington that Lawther was loaned a copy of Blatchford's pamphlet Merrie England by the radical wife of the union official, the reading of which was a cathartic experience in the young miner's life. Following his father's example, he consigned whole sections verbatim to memory; the first of many socialist and radical tracts to enrich his intellect.

After seven years in Barrington, the Lawthers migrated to Chopwell, after a brief stay in Walbottle. Edward Lawther and three of his sons - Will, Bob and Joe - all secured work at the Consett Iron Company's mine. Will was elected to the Lodge Committee, in a year became chairman and, in 1907, became delegate to the DMA. In this capacity he developed the abrasive and polemical debating style which characterised so well his later style of national leadership. At first, this was necessary to establish the credentials of youth in the eyes of an elderly union hierarchy; later it became infused with firebrand politics as he agitated on behalf of the Miners' Unofficial Reform Committee, the colourful rank-and-file organisation particularly active in Durham which identified its cause with the "Wobblies" and argued cogently for one national industrial union.

At the DMA Lawther met Peter Lee, who - though not a member of the Unofficial Reform Committee - befriended and proferred assistance of both a practical and intellectual nature to the young radical. It was Lee's influence that gradually brought Lawther into the orthodoxy of the Labour Party.

Formal Education and the Move to Orthodoxy

In 1911 he attended the Central Labour College with the aid of Lodge and family money, which extended his reading into history and economic theory. Here he read Shaw, Marx (his favourite monograph being The Eighteenth Brumaire), Ruskin and especially William

Morris, who as he later said made "an appeal for life against the machine horrors. On his return from a two-year period in London, he was elected checkweighman at Victoria Garesfield Colliery, where he remained until the general election of 1929.

In these years at Chopwell he variously described himself as a Marxist, syndicalist, anarchist and member of the ILP. On the surface, the politics of "Little Moscow" between 1907 and 1926 appeared extraordinarily schismatic. Yet in reality political labelling imposes division which mattered little in practice. There is, for instance, no evidence that communists and other socialists did not on almost all occasions work closely together in the 'twenties.

Lawther's writings reflect the move from factionalist extremism to party orthodoxy during this period. In 1912, the apex of his anarchism, he was advocating non-voting; writing to the editor of The Daily Chronicle from the Central Labour College, he roundly attacked John Wilson for the "old fashioned notion of conciliation", preferring a policy of conflict to attack "the concentration of capital". On his return to the Durham coalfield, he published a series of articles in The Blaydon Courier, ranging from an advocacy of The Miners' Next Step to a study of Paul Lafarque. He was particularly active in setting up (together with his old school colleague, Ebby Edwards) a group of study circles among Lodges which helped to build the National Council of Labour Colleges. By the 'twenties he was firmly in the Labour Party, being elected to the National Executive and to the County Council in 1925.

Durham Jail

Lawther's arrest and imprisonment during the General Strike has become a classic incident. On Sunday, 9th May, at the time of the arrest, Lawther and Henry Bolton (lodge delegate, Justice of the Peace, and chairman of Blaydon UDC) should have been addressing a strike meeting at Esh, but their progress en route was interrupted by news of a police baton charge at Blaydon. The plan to speak at Esh abandoned, the two men headed for Blaydon only to find the news quite unfounded.

Returning to Chopwell, Lawther and Bolton observed a food convoy drawn up outside the Winlaton Mill public house. Mason's comment (in The General Strike in the North East) that the meeting occurred by chance is therefore more accurate than Symon's remark that "the circumstances bear the marks of deliberate planning". Lawther persuaded Bolton to enter the pub, the latter's reluctance stemming from his strict teetotalism. Early exchanges between the two men and Inspector Thompson, in charge of the convoy, appeared to have been fairly good-humoured. A list of food carried was provided for scrutiny. But when Lawther asked the Inspector to produce his permit of authorisation from the Council of Action, the atmosphere changed. The Inspector, in return, asked the two to help deliver the cargo by using their permits to cross the picket line. This they refused: and according to Lawther many years later, Bolton then issued threats about what might happen

if attempts were made to deliver the food, whereupon he was arrested. Intervening on behalf of his friend, Lawther too was arrested.

Bail was denied and the following Thursday the two were fined £50 or two months in jail at Gateshead Police Court. Their refusal to pay led automatically to confinement in Durham prison. Outside the court there was a demonstration by a crowd estimated at more than 1,000 who jeered and hooted at the news until dispersed, somewhat ironically, by a baton charge.

The secretary of Lawther's Lodge immediately wrote to him seeking permission to pay the fine and so release him for useful work outside the jail. The letter was never acted upon, because it was only delivered to prisoner A3/35 (Lawther, W) on his final day inside. Like reading Merrie England and meeting Peter Lee, the prison episode marked Lawther for life: it certainly enhanced an already formidable local reputation, but perhaps more importantly it consolidated his emerging pragmatism - the avoidance of means to ends which in themselves were self-defeating. Ten years later, speaking at Durham Miners' Hall in support of new negotiated terms, an elderly lodge delegate asked sceptically: "Is this the Will Lawther of '26?" "Yes", came the reply, "ten years older and twenty years wiser".

The House of Commons

Lawther was adopted at Labour candidate for South Shields and stood unsuccessfully three times in 1922, 1923 and 1924. After the General Strike he was adopted at Barnard Castle where he narrowly succeeded - by under 900 votes - in unseating Lt. Col. Cuthbert Headlam, the Conservative, in 1929. His address to the electors appealed strongly to the newly-unfranchised women voters: "The transfer of the vote from property to human being, and from the privileged classes to all men, has not been won without much sacrifice." On unemployment, he urged the right to work or maintenance, and on mining matters he advocated the abolition of the Eight Hours Act.

In Westminster, he eschewed the normal protocol of non-controversy in making maiden speeches, and attacked the Conservative opposition for their "centuries of power, largely because they have used the miseries of the unemployed and have used it to the utmost". He spoke frequently on mining matters, sought Government assistance for the ailing lead industry and was actively involved in moves to preserve the Roman Wall by the use of Ministry of Works funds. His parliamentary triumph was the passage of the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1931.

The Bill had been introduced under the House Ten-minute rule, and Lawther adopted it after gaining third place in the ballot for Private Members' Bills. A principal aim of the Bill was to incorporate the disease of nystagmus, a disability of the eyeball,

into the schedule of diseases for which compensation was payable. As a DMA delegate, Lawther had lost several cases of members with this complaint, largely because the condition was not constant but varied from partial blindness to virtual non-existence in an individual on a day-to-day basis. Also in the 1929 parliament, the Eight-hour Act was repealed, miners' hours being reduced to seven-and-a-half.

Unemployment - and National Office

But his parliamentary career ended with the 1931 general election, when Barnard Castle was among the 238 seats lost by Labour, Lt. Col. Headlam winning by a majority of 2,434. Lawther actually increased his vote, but with no Liberal candidate it was to no avail. He returned to Durham and, for the first time, to unemployment. He lived on Public Assistance, supplemented by occasional fees from lecturing and journalism.

In 1933 he was elected checkweighman at Wheatley Hill Colliery, and was again active in the DMA. A year later he was elected Vice-President of the Miners' Federation, and in 1935 he became a DMA agent and a member of the TUC General Council. In these roles, he began a series of international visits as Miners' representative: to Brussels for the Miners' International; to Geneva for the International Labour Conference; to Spain as a guest of the Republican Government (his brother, Clifford, was fighting in the International Brigade against the Falangist forces, and he lost his life at the Jarama front); and to the Soviet Union for a second visit, his first being ten years earlier in 1927 in much more euphoric days. This interest in international affairs continued throughout the remainder of his career and into his retirement, when he made official visits to Northern Rhodesia to help the formation of an African miners' union.

By the outbreak of World War II he was President of the MFGB, now the national miners' leader during War and its aftermath. He lived in Wembley until his retirement in 1954 brought him back to the North East. He played a leading part in anti-Nazi propaganda: visiting the USA in 1941 at the invitation of Churchill to explain Britain's War effort to the Americans; persuading and cajoling the British miners to increase productivity; and broadcasting occasionally in the series of Sunday evening radio talks predominantly given by J B Priestley.

The Cold War Years

It was because of his attitudes and activities during the fifteen years he led the miners that he gained the reputation as a left-winger who had sold out to the soft centre. With Arthur Deakin and Sir Tom Williamson, he consistently cast union block votes against leftist resolutions in both TUC and Labour Party

conferences. He was stridently anti-Communist, losing no opportunity to publicly outflank Arthur Horner, his Communist general secretary, and used procedural devices as conference chairman to thwart Communist aspirations. In fact, he did not busy himself with detailed administration, leaving wage negotiations largely to Horner.

He believed that the election of the 1945 Labour Government, and the onset of coal nationalisation, had changed the rules of the game in which the union was playing, and he sought to redirect the energies of the union accordingly. Unofficial strikes, both in War-time and after nationalisation, were perceived as an attack against the commonweal, being either ignorantly or maliciously inspired. "Today is more than an ordinary New Year's Day to British miners", he wrote in a message to his members on Vesting Day, "it marks the end of an epoch ..... To the nation, it means that never again will there be turmoil, strife and suffering of the human element, to give the heat and power which it needs." "The mine owners," he had observed, "were like Hitler: they thought they had come to rule for a thousand years". His view of the union was that it had to step from the politics of confrontation to those of co-operation, a form of partnership he regarded as industrial democracy.

He undoubtedly lost friends among miners who found work in 1947 pretty much the same as it had been in 1946. Yet it cannot truly be said that he lost touch with the people from whom he came. He never lost his keen sense of geographic place, his strong Northumbrian accent, his sense of his purpose in serving working people. He did enjoy minor trappings of power - his knighthood (much against some of his family's judgment), good food and drink, privileged seats at the Cup Final, and friendships with establishment figures like Lord Beaverbrook. Yet he was incorruptible, neither by power itself (in the sense in which he regarded Ramsay MacDonald's defection in 1931 as being corrupted by power), nor by bribes of money or female flesh, though he was offered both.

Reflections

In later years of reflection, he regretted none of his outspoken views against Communists and Fascists, but he was able to understand that the miners' sense of grievance was not removed merely by an Act of nationalisation. But he did regret his sudden loss of contact with the world of trade unions and politics on reaching the age of 65. He would have liked to have played some part in the affairs of the House of Lords. But, simply, by the time the Life Peerages Act was passed he was seven years into retirement, and it was left to younger trade union leaders to be elevated. In addition to his knighthood, he had received the French Croix de Guerre, and he often reflected he was a "knight of two countries but could speak the language of neither".

From the early days at Chopwell, he strongly identified with the cause of women's suffrage, and he rejoiced last year in the passage of the Sex Discrimination Act. His wife, Lottie, whom he married in 1915 and who died in 1962, took a keen interest in his career. Their marriage was childless, which partly helps explain why she was able to be involved in her husband's affairs more than perhaps was the norm in the '20s, '30s and '40s.

In personal terms he was a large man, literally and figuratively. He was shrewd yet often reckless; abrasive yet capable of immense acts of kindness; he bent the rules if that suited his ends yet never declined to expound those ends for the world to see. In the heat of debate at the 1953 Labour Party conference, he uttered in frustration the phrase: "Shut your gobs" which was remembered long after his many literary references had been forgotten. He was hurt that his remark (which incidentally had its effect!) was characterised as reflecting a basic anti-intellectualism. Yet from the Barrington days of Merrie England and Stead's Penny Poets - notably Shelley and James Russell Lowell - he consumed and retained a veritable mountain of historical comment and social criticism, novel and biography. His personal copy of The Eighteenth Brumaire is heavily scored under the sentence: "Him whom we must convince we recognise as the master of the situation". And with the League of Plebs he adopted as a motto Goethe's phrase: "I can promise to be candid but never impartial". This is the mark of a life-long polemicist.

Robin Smith
University of Durham

(NB Robin Smith is writing a full-length biography of Will Lawther which he hopes to complete next year. Editors)

BOOK REVIEWS

Early Radical Newcastle, by Peter Cadogan : Sagittarius Press, Ann Street, Consett, 1975,pp.153, £3.95

This is an atrocious book. It consists of a jumble of facts and quotations without any attempt to show their significance. There is no reference to anything written after 1949. As a result, the very considerable advances in the understanding of working class movements achieved in recent years, by men like Edward Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm nationally as well as Norman McCord and David Rowe in this region, completely escape the notice of Peter Cadogan. Even those things that do catch his eye are liable to be recorded inaccurately. For example, the great miners' strike of 1844, becomes 1843-4, while Richard Fynes becomes transformed into "Richard Fines". In a period of financial stringency, when many good manuscripts remain unpublished, it is a pity that this book has found a publisher; for Cadogan's work may have the negative effect of making it just that little bit more difficult for a historian to obtain a publisher on a subject that is interesting and deserves doing well - namely, Newcastle Radicalism.

Raymond Challinor

The Shipwrights by David Dougan : Frank Graham, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1975,pp.341, £5.00

There is much useful information in this history of the Ship-constructors' and Shipwrights' Association which was founded in 1882 and finally amalgamated with the Boilermakers and Blacksmiths in 1963. The style of presentation is at times fragmented, partly the price paid for a routine type chronological order. This means that topics such as "the shipwrights and the Navy" recur when they would have been presented much more satisfactorily if treated comprehensively. Generally, I found the lines of argument weak and there are too many slips to inspire confidence. For example, on page 28 - "in Dundee an employer posted notices of reductions of a halfpenny an hour, or six shillings and ninepence a week" - surely they didn't work a 162 hour week? Readers will not lack for details of the finances of the union and there are many quotations from quarterly and annual reports which help show the development of union policy. This book rattles the occasional skeleton in the cupboard, for example, payment of members at Greenock or the seizure of the union books at Dublin in 1896.

The book is, of course, the story of a union and not the shipwrights. The skill of the "wright" is a very ancient one. By 1882 these craftsmen who exercised this skill had been overshadowed by the "black squad", members of the Boilermakers' Society who built in iron while the shipwrights remained mostly workers in wood. There is remarkably little about the relationship between Knight of the Boilermakers and Wilkie of the Shipwrights whose offices were within walking distance of each other in Newcastle. This is a pity because co-operation between these two men could have profoundly affected industrial relations in shipbuilding. Dougan writes very briefly about the years before

the Association was formed to overcome what some shipwrights regarded as the ineffectiveness of the older Federation of local unions, the Amalgamated Society of Shipwrights. Such "pre-History" is always difficult and in this case not notably successful, a good study of the shipwrights up to the 1880s is needed. This book underestimates the strength of the local societies of the Shipwrights and their will for independence, such a recognition would partly explain why it was not until after the First World War that the last of these, the Liverpool Provident Shipwrights' Association, joined the national union. The London Provident only joined in 1913. Dougan, in discussing Ireland, notes "Six of the port unions had clung to their independence fiercely as late as 1895 ..." following a reference to "the innate conservatism of some local societies and their strong sense of independence". However, this was typical of the shipwright rather than the exception. An understanding of the importance of these local societies to the growth of membership would have been helped by precise figures - we cannot distinguish the recruitment of non-unionists from amalgamations. Take as an example 1908 when the Wear shipwrights were "absorbed". Dougan writes that it was agreed "to open new branches at Monkwearmouth, Southwick, Deptford and Hylton while Sunderland itself was to have as second branch ... Wearside ...should have their own delegate". The Wear Society had 1650 members in 1907 (equal to 8½% of the Association's membership) but this fact is omitted. This Society had enjoyed a continuous existence since 1845, a period of forty-two years disregarding the earlier port unions. Its membership had increased by almost 100 in its last year and had grown from about 1000 in the mid-1890s. Such persisting local strength and growth so near the Association's headquarters in Newcastle suggests just how strong a local tradition could be and how it was not obvious to all how "ineffective" the old forms were. However, the likeliest reason for the Wear men joining was the ending by the employers in 1907 of the Wear Shipbuilding Conciliation Board (formed in 1885 and so inadequately treated on p.63) but this is not mentioned.

Only five men were general secretaries of this union, Alex Wilkie for first 46 years until his death in 1928, and the next four men sharing the remaining 35 years. William Westwood, a driller by trade, was effectively secretary for 11 years, because although his term of office was 1929-1945 he was active in Government service for the war years with an office in the Admiralty. John Willcocks became acting secretary and continued to lead the union until his retirement in 1948. Nine years was the term of office of Sidney Ombler who prepared the way for the last holder of the office: a driller, Arthur Williams, who held office from 1957-1963. Little wonder that Wilkie dominates two-thirds of this book. This Scot at the age of 27 displayed great skill before an Arbitration Court in 1877, and fifty years later he was still leading his Union - the Association. Once the union's head-quarters were moved to Newcastle, Wilkie was involved in local trade union affairs, such as the Trades Council, as well as local politics. He was a late entrant to the parliamentary election at Sunderland with the shipbuilder G B Hunter in 1900 but they were defeated by two Conservatives; despite Wilkie telling a meeting 'that since three-quarters of the Sunderland electors were working class, he thought they had a right to be represented by one of their own kind". However, Wilkie

was to reach Westminster by winning Dundee in 1906 by defeating one of the two Liberal opponents. The cost of his campaign seems remarkably high "£925 (or 2s. 10d. per Vote)". Wilkie was the man who built the union but with early help from the Tynesider Joseph Heslop, who was one of the chief inspirers of the new union outside of Scotland. Heslop, from Walker, became the Union's second full-time official in the midst of slump in 1886. Wilkie and Heslop made the TUC meeting at Swansea the starting point for a joint personal campaign of recruiting on the south coast. After which Wilkie wrote:

> "We must state that our experience at this time had been that if we had waited as some suggested until we could get correspondence with these places, we would have had to wait for ever as it is only by a personal representative visit that we can arouse the members of the trade in some places even to attend a meeting."

This is one of the few places where one gets a little of the feel of the problems of building a union in the streets and shipyards. Wilkie's career can be traced through this book, although the author's interpretation is not always sympathetic to him there seems to be an assumption that any lack of militancy could and even should be laid on Wilkie's desk if not doorstep.

Dougan frequently chides Wilkie for his concern in regard to the funds "..... almost the only time any emotion crept into his writing was in relation to finance" and later "..... even in 1900 when ..... the reserves per member (were) over £6. 3s. he was still urging the same caution in expenditure and the same diplomatic and conciliatory approach to labour relations". Surely this concern in regard to funds is understandable; these trade union leaders were honest men and the ability to meet the benefits was of prime importance to them. Indeed, just how critical this might be is made clear on p.221 when for 1928 it is noted: "assuming ... he joined ... as a full member as soon as he ended his apprenticeship a member would pay just over £100 in contributions. At 8s. Od. a week, he would receive £100 in five years as a union pensioner". A militant policy cannot rest upon reserves of £6 per head for these could be totally exhausted in a single 12 weeks dispute and no craft union would have tolerated such a dissipation of funds, for example, the ASE separated their reserves into categories. Almost as an aside, at the end of Chapter 6, the position is properly recognised: "For Wilkie and for the members as a whole there could be no question of throwing this (their reserves of £23,000) away". The closed shop was the Shipwrights' weapon of greatest value but even this could be found to have a blunt edge if there was a major structural change taking place in the industry or if there was a general recession. Elsewhere it is said that "there was a failure to espouse a higher sense of idealism that represented by joint benefit between master and men. In short, there was no political commitment as we would recognise it today", (pp 37-8). Many might doubt if "a political commitment" would of itself represent "a higher sense of idealism". More important, however, is the lack of evidence, in this book at any rate, of the desire amongst the rank and file for a different policy. Class solidarity is noticeably absent. The Navy shipwrights are described as firstly complaining of "status" "they were regarded as ordinary seamen and ... expected to share menial tasks ... also expected to mess with the crew ..." On the General Strike we are told: "The shipwrights

were reluctant to stop work ... while a mass meeting of all shipyard trades at Middlesbrough decided that they would not come out with their respective unions ..." (p.218). Not long after this in the interests of economy, it was decided to "pull out of its membership of the Labour Party, the Trades Union Congress and the General Federation of Trade Unions". (They rejoined the TUC in 1936.) Finally in 1947 the General Secretary is said to have argued that "by amalgamating with the boilermakers (sic) the shipwrights could ensure that the craft unions rather than the labouring unions remained dominant in the shipyards" (p.296). Craft unions had limited objectives and did wish to defend their privileges. We should, I think, be careful about our comments about "idealism". Dougan quotes Wilkie, writing in 1910 : "By our rules ... the many have to assist the few, the fortunate to aid the unfortunate, the employed and unemployed, the healthy and the sick, the aged the young ..." and rightly comments "As fine a declaration as one could find of the brotherhood of man ..." but this also required the protection of the funds.

And now to the almost usual allegation of a lack of democracy - Dougan writes "... power was largely concentrated in the hands of the General Secretary, Alex Wilkie. This was perhaps inevitable ... an outstanding personality, a man of great ability, of undoubted dedication and of powerful presence ... he had the authority of his position ... senior full-time official and remained in office while the Committee members changed every six months". I do not wish to re-examine here the points I made in Bulletin 8 when discussing Mortimer's History of the Boilermakers, for the argument is the same. It is true that national conferences were infrequent but they compared favourably to the duration of a parliament. There were the frequent ballots and members could, and did, remove officials, such as Heslop, from office.

I think we should accept that the policy was what they wanted, and indeed at times this is acknowledged. What an arrogance it is to suggest that these craftsmen were bamboozled by one man. This union was built from the 1880s, its membership was down to 3,732 in 1886 but was almost doubled by 1890 and exceeded 10,000 the following year. The men and local unions who joined had ample time to know Wilkie and union policy before coming in. A final point of comparison on this issue - why, I wonder, is there "No doubt" that Westwood's statements in the 1930s "had the full backing of the Executive Committee and the majority of members". Particularly when we are told "they had not polled members about stopping the (superannuation) benefit in August 1931. No doubt they felt that on such an emotional issue the members would vote with their hearts rather than their heads and would block a course of action which the Committee knew was essential".

This humiliation of the stopping of a benefit was surely the nadir of the long sequence of booms and slumps which haunted all those in shipbuilding. This book will show how the early membership peak of 4,600 was cut back in the slump of the mid-1880s to 3,578. The details of the payment of unemployment benefit emerge no less than £373,584 in the first forty years: in 1921 alone the amount was £116,000. Membership had peaked the previous year to 47,000; this would never be reached again. By 1928 the numbers were down to 22,000 and six

years later had slumped to 17361; there followed a slow steady rise to the peak of World War II. In his final summing up Dougan writes "Security of employment was little better than in the 1880s; perhaps, but it is genuinely difficult to know what the union per se could do about it. This may, however, be linked with the dilemma reflected below in the comments quoted on war work or other social benefits. In 1910 Wilkie is writing:

> "It is said that the money now spent on naval preparations could be spent more profitably in other channels of social reform; that may be, but of that we have no proof as yet. But what we do know is that a wholesale reduction of armaments would create an army of unemployed workmen which there is no guarantee would be relieved". (p.153)

The attempt which is made to describe the general economic, social and political background, while admirable in intention leaves much to be desired. One example, the comment is made of the naval orders about 1890 - "What a pity these orders were not placed three years previously when they would have gone a long way to offset the slump". But it is much nearer the end of the book before Dougan enlightens his readers on how late such policies might have been considered in Britain - "to be fair even its greatest proponent, J M Keynes, did not work out the theory in full until 1936".

Another major matter of internal development which is not adequately explored concerns the changes within the union. In 1889 Wilkie set forth what he regarded as the work of the shipwright

> "That whatever work is for the utility; strength and safety of the vessel to be shipwright work and that whatever may contribute to the elegance and luxury of passenger accommodation as the cabins to be joiner work."

This clearly recognised a division between woodworkers, but a significant change was recognised when in 1907 the name was changed to "The Constructive and Shipwrights' Association" this was linked in part with the Admiralty shipwrights but also to include "mast builders, blockmakers, drillers and holecutters". Unfortunately we do not know enough about the effects of the amalgamations with the drillers. This trade might have joined the Boilermakers but that Society would not have them. The shipwrights traditionally were opposed to the piecework but the drillers and holecutters were pieceworkers. Although Dougan describes the early developments of the "new unionism" in 1886-9 he fails to mention the almost mushrooming of drillers societies on Tyneside which were to provide such an important part of the societies' membership. By the time amalgamation is taking place Dougan writes of

> "the traditional shipwrights trades were naturally included: shipwrights, ship constructors, carpenters, eye-arc operators, profile machine cutters, modellers, constructional workers, blacksmiths, sailmakers and ship riggers".

This is surely an abuse of the word "traditional" but there is certainly not nearly enough on why this union developed in this way almost as a receptacle for the trades not admitted to the Boilermakers.

This leads rather naturally to the question of amalgamation. One must hope that Mortimer's second volume will provide a more comprehensive account of this than can be gained from this book since at best it gives the view from the shipwrights. The full account of this very important amalgamation needs to draw simultaneously on the records of all the unions involved. The first significant move towards amalgamation was begun in October 1912 when "representative committees" of the Boilermakers and the Shipwrights met, but it was November 1913 before they met again, with further meetings in January 1914. The Shipwrights later voted 2,427 to 2,185 in favour but "the Boilermakers' vote was even more confused" - it is not clear to me what this means. On the initiative of the Boilermakers the two Executive Committees met on 1st June 1917. Again we are left a little bewoldered - the shipwrights voted 4,878 to 988 in favour "while the Boilermakers too accepted the practical agreement as the way forward". The Executives met again on 18th August 1917 but "strangely there is no official comment about the scheme in the annual report". In 1919 it is suggested that TUC policy may be helping to bring in the Blacksmiths as well and this time the votes are strongly in favour and posts are allocated - Wilkie to be president; Hill, of the Boilermakers, General Secretary; and Lorimer, of the Blacksmiths, Finance Secretary. But again the snags. February 1921 Wilkie at South Shields "seemed full of foreboding"! Later that year the Shipwrights voted 20,364 and 4,213 not to proceed. Over those two years of negotiations there was some joint financing but a fuller account is needed. After the Second World War TUC policy is again a stimulus, and in April 1947 the Executive Committee met again to "discuss the question". Joint meetings followed in May and August. Dougan writes "From that moment onward 'we have heard nothing more from the Boilermakers'. The line of communication went dead. The talks stopped as suddenly as they had started". What a pity these three histories have not been co-ordinated in some way.

Living standards and working conditions are vital parts of a trade union history but more care is needed in attempting to assess these changes than is displayed here; consider the following:

> "In that year (1920), shipwrights in the Tyneside area had received £4.60, now (1940) they received £3.75. What is more, the increases only kept pace with the cost of living. According to the Ministry of Labour statistics, retail prices went up by 77% between July 1914 and February 1940. In the same period the wages of shipwrights ... went up from 44s. to 78s. or 75%. Despite the increases they were no better off than they had been 26 years before. They were simply keeping pace with inflation."

This last sentence surely reflects a man writing in the 1970s but this quotation contains much more to cause me anxiety. Firstly, presumably a careless slip, the £4.60 is the rate for "old work" and the £3.75 for "new work", the correct comparison is £3.90 (see pp.335-6). More significantly the standards of living comparison is based upon 1914 and 1940. Before discussing that, consider 1920 and 1940.

	1920	1940	reduction
Retail price index	249	177	28.9%
Wages, old work	£4.60	£3.90	15.2%

On the basis of these figures a shipwright buying the same "packet of items" in 1940 as he did in 1920 could buy 19% more! The matter is, of course, much more complex. The basis of the Index used here was based on the budgets of working class households collected before 1914 and was widely recognised as being out of date by the 1930s, because patterns of spending had changed considerably. There were many articles available (radios, electric lighting, etc.) which were not used by workers before 1914, many of these items contribute to the workers being "better off" - it should not be overlooked that working people do benefit from general advances in technology. A revised cost of living index, based on the Budget Enquiry of 1937-8, would undoubtedly have been higher than the figure used by Dougan. But he has surely left out other factors which had changed between 1914 and 1940. The working week was reduced from 53 hours to 48 hours and there was also a paid week's holiday. It would indeed be a sign of inadequacy on behalf of the trade union movement if nothing was gained over a quarter of a century. Comparisons between any one year and another are full of perils.

Nothing I have just written should be read in any way as failing to recognise the misery and failings of the years 1919 to 1939. The years between the wars were disastrous ones for all those in shipbuilding. As far as the north east was concerned it is almost certain that the years just before 1914 were the high point in earnings terms compared with other parts of the country. The waste of human resources over the years 1921-1938 are inexcusable by any standard of social policy, but such comment is not helped by imprecise comparisons.

A further general judgment which I find difficult to accept: "Working conditions were not much improved while the work itself, for all the introduction of new machinery and techniques, remained as arduous and demanding as ever" on the last page. As "demanding" yes! that is in the nature of all our work (I hope) but have not accidents been reduced? Do as many men die in our shipyards as they did in the 19th century? Too many are still maimed and killed, but let us acknowledge that the workplace, including the shipyard, did improve between 1880 and 1963. My two last points are "new money" and the index.

Are we to be plagued with decimal money? Happily the South Shields shipwrights of 1795 are left with their "½d. in the shilling" but by p.19 we read "At this time (1882) the average wage for a shipwright was about £1.70 - £2.00 a week." From then on we bounce backwards and forwards, sometimes "old money" then "new" or else ( ). Trouble was bound to result from this approach, hence in 1932 "the Executive Committee decided to impose a contribution of 3d. (7p) sic! but on the very next page it is simply "3d. a week". I presume it is 3d. and not 14.8 pence which is the "old money" equivalent of 7p. Surely publishers could accept that a table of equivalence would meet the needs of all readers?

A good index is a boon but what inspired this one? Personal names, towns and remarkably "Dilution of Labour", but the following do not appear - apprentices, demarcation, strikes and wages, such topics and many others would have been more useful than "Mussolini, Benito, 239". There is much more I should like to comment on but I must leave the readers of the book to make their own critical assessments. Let us hope that before too long trade union records are more readily available to all historians.

Joe Clarke

Flames across the Tyne by Gerard March : E F Peterson and Son, South Shields 1974, pp.127. £1.50 (limp cover), £3.50 (hard cover).

On 1 April 1974 the Newcastle and Gateshead Fire Service was merged with the fire services of neighbouring districts to form the new Tyne and Wear Metropolitan Fire Brigade and it was to mark the end of the old Tyneside brigade that this book was commissioned. The Chief Fire Officer's first thought was to approach a professional historian to undertake the writing of the history, but he finally considered that "authenticity would only ring true if the book was actually written and illustrated by firemen". A suitable writer was conveniently at hand in Gerard March, a journalist before he joined the fire services and a regular contributor to fire service journals. To those interested in North Eastern labour history, particularly those who have complained that too much attention has been paid to coalminers and shipyard workers to the detriment of other work groups, here is a book which takes a look at the Tyneside firemen. For although most space is devoted, quite rightly, to the organisation, technology and even uniforms of the Newcastle and Gateshead Fire Service, and to Tyneside's major fire-fighting operations, the author does not neglect to examine the working lives of the firemen themselves in this history of the brigade.

Before 1857 the Newcastle and Gateshead corporations relied upon the fire services provided by the insurance companies but, after the great Gateshead fire of 1854, when a warehouse of sulphur and nitrate of soda went up in flames, the Gateshead Corporation decided to form its own fire brigade and Newcastle followed suit ten years later. The Gateshead brigade consisted of 33 policemen who also did duty as firemen, and Newcastle started with a small brigade of 6 policemen-firemen. Newcastle's first fire-engine needed 22 men to work the handles and the work was so strenuous that relief pumpers had to stand by. Not that there was usually any lack of volunteers, March observes, because each pumper was paid a shilling a fire and supplied with free beer for as long as he pumped. Indeed there were often fights to man the pumps. Beer was always carried on the engine and it was disastrous to allow the supply to run out as the men would immediately stop pumping and shout: "No beer - no water!". Surely one of the oddest forms of strike on record.

In 1874 Tyneside firemen were paid 25/- a week - not a bad wage at that time - but bronchitis, consumption and rheumatism were occupational hazards and there were no pension schemes. If a fireman died in the course of duty the best his widow could hope for was to receive something from a charitable fund supported by public subscription. Hours of duty were long: up to 1905 a Newcastle fireman was allowed one day off every month, and the top wage for a fireman was then £1 13s. Od. a week. Married men were provided with living quarters, including free coal and gas, at the fire station for a rent of 2/- a week. In 1919 Newcastle's 10 full-time firemen shocked the Watch Committee by asking for an eight-hour working day. The Chairman said this was impossible but the Committee granted them one leave period of 17 hours every 8 days. This involved the appointment of 4 additional firemen and the men expressed complete satisfaction with this improvement in their conditions. The passing of the Fire Brigades' Pensions Act in 1925 was a great step forward for firemen. Under the terms of the Act a fireman who reached the age of 55, with 25 years service behind him, could retire on a pension equal to half pay, and if he had 30 years service he qualified for a pension of two-thirds of his pay. Men injured on duty were also eligible for a pension, as were the widows of firemen killed on duty. This was the first legislation to place a definite obligation on fire authorities and it meant that the fireman was no longer dependent on charity. The Newcastle and Gateshead brigades were *nationalised* in August 1941 and became part of the National Fire Service under central government control. Hours of duty were then standardised throughout the country at 120 hours a week and a national weekly wage for firemen was fixed at £3 10s. Od. The Tyneside fire services were restored to local control in 1947, but pay rates and conditions of service continued to be negotiated at the national level.

Yet in tracing the improvements in firemen's pay and conditions over the years there is no mention of the part played by trade

unionism. It would have been interesting to learn, for example, when Tyneside firemen first joined a union, if there was a Tyneside firemen's union in existence before the formation of the nationally-based Fire Brigades' Union, and what was the attitude of the authorities - and particularly the fire officers - to the growth of trade unionism in the Tyneside fire service. No doubt the author would argue that these questions lay outside his terms of reference, and perhaps he would be right. The story of trade unionism in the Tyneside fire brigade could well form the subject of a further book, and on the strength of Flames across the Tyne Gerard March should be encouraged to write it. Finally, mention must be made of Ross Hickling, another talented fireman, whose photographs and illustrations admirably complement March's narrative and help to make this such an attractive publication.

Archie Potts

Stand True : NCMA - NUM 1875-1975 by A Potts and E Wade : NUM, Northumberland Mechanics, Blyth 1975, pp.36, page size A4, published for private circulation.

This is an unpretentious and brief account of the history of the Northumberland Colliery Mechanics Association from its official start in 1875 to the present day. It was undertaken by the two authors at the request of the Executive Committee of the NUM, Northumberland Mechanics Group No 1 Area: it has a tantalisingly spelt and affectionate "Forward" (sic) by Sid Chaplin (he was himself a time-served mechanic "over the river"). It is most attractively illustrated and presented by a number of helpers whose contributions are acknowledged on the back cover: and it has been put together with sincere and conscientious scholarship.

The Executive Committee must feel well pleased with this centennial account of their history which Eric Wade and Archie Potts have done for them, and the student of Labour History may equally feel grateful to them for putting on record this account of a small but technically highly significant group of workpeople whose history might otherwise have been overshadowed and lost to view by the histories of the more massive groups of workpeople with whom the livelihoods of colliery mechanics have been inextricably intertwined. But it is not only as a pleasant and well-ordered memento of a group of workers whose history might so easily have been neglected that this study is to be welcomed.

The account the authors give triggers off questions in the reader's mind which invite a little analytical reflection and might well be a stimulus to further research. For example, take the phrase used in this review just a sentence or so ago - "inextricably intertwined":

colliery mechanics - a generic term, as the authors show, covering a host of auxiliary trades, from blacksmiths and boilersmiths to joiners and painters, began by being members of the Northumberland Miners' Union: they broke away: they saw a need for a separate union of their own: they are now an integral part of the National Union of Mineworkers and style themselves The Northumberland Mechanics Group No. 1 Area: they have, one might say, returned to the fold: now why?: There is a clue in the evolutionary forces which have woven the cloth of workers' organisations, not only in mining but in other areas of working class involvement. Or, again: the technology of the working of coal seams has changed dramatically and significantly over the hundred years covered by this study. As the authors show, in the list of trades covered by the generic label "colliery mechanic" there was, at the beginning, one trade missing, that of "electrician": today, with the highly sophisticated techniques for coal-working, the electrician is an indispensable and key figure, underground, at the face, as well as "on top". The colliery mechanic, particularly if he calls himself "electrician" or "fitter", is called upon to acquire and to apply skills of the highest order. This evolution from what might perhaps be called "the pick-sharpening" end of the occupational spectrum to its present sophisticated, automated and electronic end, has left its mark upon the evolution of the wages-structure and the attitude of the leaders of colliery mechanics at different periods. The influences, in response to which the leaders have shaped their tactics and strategies over the years, may be perhaps summed up as the growing technical demands upon the mechanic to improve and extend his knowledge and, secondly, their increasing involvement in the operations of the pit, both underground and on top. The implications of this for wages policy have been that they have been compelled to keep an eye on the rates of pay and conditions of work of not only coalminers but also of engineers in other activities outside the range of coal mining. The authors of this study have not the space to develop extensively ideas of this nature, nor indeed does the purpose for which they engaged in it require that they should, but what they write readily and easily prompts them.

E Allen

IN BULLETIN 11 IT IS HOPED TO INCLUDE THE FIRST OF A SERIES OF BIBLIOGRAPHIES OF NORTH EASTERN LABOUR HISTORY AND A REGISTER OF RESEARCH WORK IN PROGRESS IN THE REGION.