

COLLIERY DEVELOPMENT IN THE INTER-WAR PERIOD—THE OPENING OF THE MARKHAM COLLIERIES, DERBYSHIRE, BETWEEN 1924 AND 1930

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The purpose of this paper, which is part of wider research into the mining industry of the East Midlands, is to look at colliery opening and development from an economic and social viewpoint, an aspect of the British coal industry's history which has been largely neglected.

The continuous sellers' market which seemed to contemporaries a constant feature of the immediate post-war coal industry¹ prompted the Staveley Coal and Iron Company to intensify the development of their Markham collieries near Chesterfield from 1924 onwards. The expansion of the complex began in October 1924 when work was commenced on the Number 2 pit, while sinking operations were started in September 1925 at the adjoining Number 1 pit. By February 1926 coal had been struck at a depth of 691 yards.² As a result of this expansion the production of coal at Markham, mostly for home consumption, increased from nearly 30,000 tons per month in 1924, to well over 50,000 tons by December 1929. To carry out this scheme the Company as a whole had increased its capital from £3,000,000 to £4,000,000 in 1925 and had encouraged over 1,100 working men to become shareholders in the Company.³

The new seams developed by February 1926 provided potential employment for some 1,500 extra mine workers⁴ and between 1924 and 1929 the number of workers employed at the two pits rose from 1,363 to 1,832.⁵ Initially miners for the new developments were largely recruited from outside the area. In the early months of 1924 a campaign to secure additional coal getters for the Number 2 pit resulted in the signing of 241 miners from Nottingham, Dudley, Tamworth, Sheffield and Eckington. However, within a few months nearly 60 per cent of them had returned home, including just over half of those from Tamworth, three-quarters of those from Dudley, and all of the Sheffield and Nottingham intake.⁶ In contrast, three quarters of those recruited from nearby Eckington remained. The likelihood of problems when dealing with a migrant labour force was therefore indicated from the beginning.

As a consequence, when additional workers were required in 1925 with the expansion of Number 1 pit, the Company's Agent first tried to recruit local unemployed workers. However, after a very limited response, he was told by Frank Hall, an official of the Derbyshire Miners' Association (the miners' local trade union), that 'there were no unemployed miners in the area',⁷ a statement borne out by the Ministry of Labour's figures for the period. Although some 10 per cent of the national workforce was unemployed in February 1926, the figure for Derbyshire was a remarkably low one per cent.⁸ The Company was again forced to recruit from outside the area therefore, and Durham with an unemployment rate of 17 per cent was an obvious target. The process was facilitated by the connections the colliery manager had in the North East, being born in Durham himself. At his initiative a recruiting campaign was launched via the local Durham labour exchanges which were becoming an increasingly important source of labour. Indeed, Beveridge's study of unemployment analysed labour exchange placings and found that by 1929 some 275,000 vacancies had been filled by applicants transferring to other districts through these agencies.⁹ Thus in the second week of February 1926, 117 unemployed miners, chiefly from the West Auckland area, migrated to Chesterfield. Many of these men had been long unemployed and were naturally attracted by the prospect of employment. Further, there was the additional

incentive of the higher wages paid in Derbyshire, which was second only to Nottinghamshire in a wages 'league table' produced by the Miners' Federation of Great Britain in July 1925.¹⁰

Within a few days of the transfer it became clear that there were many unanticipated problems. The *Derbyshire Times*, for instance, noted on 20th February 1926 that:

'The 120 miners who arrived at Staveley last week to work at Markham No. 2 Colliery are finding some little difficulty in settling down to their new work. They find that the working conditions they have been used to in Durham are very different from the working conditions in Derbyshire'.¹¹

By 27th February the majority of the miners who had migrated from the Bishop Auckland district had returned home, a local reporter noting that one of the main reasons for the return of the miners was the fact that 'they have left their hearts behind them in Durham'.¹² This statement concealed several important points. Firstly, the miners had travelled to Derbyshire alone, their families on the whole remaining in Durham. There was to be a probationary period, which if completed satisfactorily, would result in the miners being allocated houses in the villages of Poolsbrook and Duckmanton.¹³ Unwelcome receptions at the lodging houses where many of them temporarily lived exacerbated the problem. Secondly, further complications were added by the high cost of removal from Durham. A 45 year-old miner interviewed for the *Derbyshire Times* said that it would cost him £68 to move house, and although the Staveley Company would bear this at the outset, he would have to pay it back out of his wages, a task that would put too much of a burden on his living standards.¹⁴ Thirdly, the feeling of social deprivation appears to have permeated even the miners' leisure time. Some of those who had returned to Durham were reported as saying that 'the social amenities of the place are not what they have been accustomed to and that there are no facilities for enjoying their leisure time'.¹⁵

The reception by the local trade union did nothing to ease the social problems which the miners encountered as they were greeted by the Derbyshire Miners' Association with suspicion. The union was anticipating a stoppage at the end of April 1926 and was concerned that the Durham miners would only have made a limited number of contributions by that date. Consequently the Markham branches were advised 'to take into account the questions under the rules so that we may give definite instructions to our secretaries as to whether to accept contributions or advise the men to pay into their own union'.¹⁶

Working conditions in the Derbyshire pits added yet further problems. A major complaint arose from the face workers having to do their own 'tramping', the pushing of full tubs from the coal face to an underground roadway and then returning with empty ones. In the Durham area it was a job usually done by boys, and it was particularly objected to by the older migrants.¹⁷ A further objection was the system of contract working in Derbyshire—the 'butty system' as it was called. It involved paying the total earnings of a particular section of the coal face to a chargeman who would then divide these in unequal proportions between himself and the ordinary face workers under him. It had long been abandoned in Durham and, as one of the miners commented, 'it was not a fair system. They ought to share and share alike for the same work instead of stallmen taking the lion's share'.¹⁸

After these experiences with a migrant labour force in the early months of 1926, the Staveley Company laid down some important criteria for future recruitment, the chief one being the rigid adoption of a 'work to work' policy. This was based on the Company's view that the previous batch of miners 'preferred the dole to employment',¹⁹ a conclusion offered to the Court of Appeal when the returning miners were in danger of losing their unemployment benefits. The second criterion was that the migrants should not be from the Bishop Auckland area, but from other parts of Durham. These two considerations were put into practice after March 1926. The colliery manager told a *Derbyshire Times* representative that a second batch of miners who had transferred from Durham that month were 'taking kindly to the Derbyshire working conditions': he thought it strange that the others did not. He pointed out, however, that 'none of the

men come from the Bishop Auckland area where the others came from, but from other parts of Durham, and none of them were dole men'.²⁰ Despite the relative success of this second wave of migration, only 16 more miners came to the Markham collieries from Durham up to 1930.²¹

The collieries' signing-on book shows that in 1927, for instance, recruitment from outside Derbyshire constituted only 21 per cent of the total. By 1929 this figure had decreased to 10 per cent, and by 1930 to six per cent. South Yorkshire, South Wales and Nottinghamshire were the main areas of recruitment. Many of these migrants were skilled or semi-skilled workers, well versed in the more exacting underground occupations. 69 per cent of the 1927 migrants were employed as either deputies, chargemen, contractors, stallmen, loaders, rippers or cutters, all skilled jobs.

Another characteristic of many 1927-1930 migrants was a tendency to gravitate to the same communities. All the South Wales miners recruited in 1927 lived in the village of Poolsbrook, for instance, whilst the Durham miners lived in either Poolsbrook, Duckmanton or Arkwright. The majority of the newcomers in 1930 lived in Poolsbrook. Some 200 houses had been erected in Poolsbrook and Duckmanton in 1923,²² many of them by the Industrial Housing Association, an agglomeration of large coal and iron companies desirous of providing adequate housing for their workforces.²³ There is some evidence that this accommodation was superior to any other area, Charles Markham informing the Samuel Commission in 1925 that 'At nearly all my houses in the Derbyshire area there is boiling hot water day and night'.²⁴

Following the problems with the largely unemployed migrants early in 1926, recruitment between 1927 and 1930 therefore was predominantly of local men already in jobs at other collieries, over half of them originating from the immediately adjacent villages or the Chesterfield area, and while the problems associated with migrants are of special interest, several other points emerge regarding the workforce as a whole that are worthy of attention. The Staveley Company appears to have operated a form of internal promotion system, the most important and desirable underground jobs such as chargemen and deputies being reserved for employees moving to Markham from the Company's other pits in the area such as Campbell, Hartington, Ireland or Calow. At the other extreme, the most menial underground tasks such as haulage were usually undertaken by younger men from either non-Staveley collieries, jobs outside the coal industry or straight from school. Further, the recruitment of school leavers to the Markham collieries correlates with the general trend of juvenile unemployment for particular years. For instance, between 1927 and 1929 there was a slight fall in the recruitment of school leavers from 5.5 per cent of the total to 4.6 per cent, reflecting the fall in the corresponding national figure from 3.4 per cent to 3.2 per cent. In 1930 unemployment nationally among school leavers had risen to 5.5 per cent, and recruitment of school leavers at Markham duly increased to 9.2 per cent of the total.²⁵ Further increases in the proportional intake of school leavers took place in the 1930's as the position worsened nationally.

Finally, analysis of the signing-on book for Markham demonstrates a good deal of occupational mobility among the collieries' workers in the period under review. In 1927 48 per cent of the total new signees were employed in a different job than before the 1926 strike. By 1929 this figure had increased to 69 per cent and by 1930 to 71 per cent. Thus by the latter year seven out of every 10 new signees had changed jobs in the previous four years. Fear of unemployment or short time working was already a critical factor in this high turnover rate.

There have been several studies in recent years of problems associated with colliery closures. This short paper has examined the issues involved in colliery opening. It is hoped that this will lead to more studies of this important, but neglected, area of mining history.

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