



THE KEEL ROW, AFTER RALPH HEDLEY.

# I.—THE HISTORY OF THE KEELMEN AND THEIR STRIKE IN 1822.

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[Read on 25th September 1935.]

Certain broadsheets and documents, relating to the keelmen's strike on Tyneside in October 1822, have recently come into my possession, which, it has been suggested, might be of interest to the society.

It is, however, necessary in the first place to refer to the history of the keelmen and their keels in order to appreciate the circumstances affecting the strike.

The word "keel" appears to have been derived from the Anglo-Saxon word "CEOL," which was the general term for a ship or boat. The ancient Scandinavian rovers are said to have called their vessels "chiules," or "yols," and it has been suggested that the modern term yawl is derived from this.

The first local account of keels which I have come across is mentioned under the date 1329-30 in the Rolls of the parish of Norham contained in Raine's *History of North Durham*, p. 271. Under the heading "Expenses and payments" there is an entry "for a kele with the wool from Newcastle to Wardeley XX<sup>d</sup>." Wardeley was a manor belonging to the prior and convent of Durham near Gateshead.

Keels are also referred to in various other documents as engaged in the coal trade on the Tyne in the fourteenth century. In the Chartulary of Tynemouth monastery the keelmen are mentioned, in the fourteenth century, as

“servants of the Priors of Tinmouth who wrought in the barges,” and are also spoken of as “kelers.” The priors had been coal owners at Elswick and elsewhere since the early fourteenth century.

The keelmen are mentioned in a decree of the Star Chamber in 1516 as the craft and fraternity of keelmen in Newcastle upon Tyne, and in 1556 they are spoken of as an independent society, but they never became a company although they petitioned for this privilege on more than one occasion. One reason for their failure appears to have been the opposition of the hostmen, who included a number of their employers.

Mackenzie, in his *History of Newcastle*, speaks of the keelmen as being “more robust than any other tribe in England,” and states that during a “stick” (strike) sailors with extra hands aboard found it impossible to manage the keels and do the necessary work.

They are one of the classes into which Northumberland was divided in the eighteenth century by a writer to whom reference is made in the late John Bell’s collection of local documents covering the period 1775-1850, the others being farmers, inhabitants of the mountainous districts, lead miners, pitmen and seamen. In the early part of the eighteenth century the records show that 1,600 keelmen were employed in 400 keels and that about a quarter of a million chaldrons of coal were shipped from the Tyne. The keelmen intermarried to a large extent and formed a distinct community apart from the rest of the inhabitants of Newcastle—their stronghold was in the neighbourhood of Sandgate.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a considerable number of the keelmen were of Scottish origin, and many of these men were accustomed to return to Scotland in the winter. Lists of keelmen at the town hall dated 1739 show a surprising number of keelmen originating from near Edinburgh, and in some lists as many as fifty per cent of the keelmen came from Scotland. There were also a

good many keelmen who hailed from Redesdale and Tyne-dale and they were generally reckoned as particularly tough customers.

The type of vessel manned by these men was called a "keel" on the Tyne and those on the Wear were similar. There were also keels on the Humber, but these again were a different type of craft, and I understand that the word was not in common use on Scottish rivers. The Holy Island keels were like the original Norwegian herring boats. The term "keel" was also used to denote a measure of coals equal to eight Newcastle chaldrons or 21 tons 4 cwts., and even towards the end of the nineteenth century, vessels were chartered to load coals at a freight of so much per keel and coals were also sold on this measure.

Eight Newcastle chaldrons equalled about fifteen London chaldrons, and it appears that latterly the size of the Newcastle chaldron had been increased very considerably from its original proportion. It is perhaps worth noting that in 1421 commissioners were appointed to measure the keels and mark their capacity as the revenue was being defrauded of the dues of 2d. per chaldron. The colliery companies had wagons which contained exactly a chaldron of coals, and quantities delivered were easily calculated in this way. Later, these wagons were extended by boards being added to the top so that they contained fifty per cent more and they were then known as "4 ton box wagons"—they are still to be seen on certain colliery sidings.

The keels were generally manned by the skipper, two keel bullies and a boy known as the "Pee-Dee," who was maintained by contributions from the rest of the crew. Brockett suggests various origins of the word, but possibly the truth is that this was "too coarse for repetition."

The keels were broad vessels of light draft with stem and stern alike and with a long shallow open hold amidships. (Plate II, 2.) The hold ceiling or "shuts" was very high to facilitate casting the coals into a vessel along-

side. Scantlings were fixed at the sides of the hold, which were called "jells," within which the coals were built up in a conical fashion. The dimensions of a keel were approximately 40 ft. by 15 ft. 6 ins. by 6 ft. 6 ins. They were generally propelled by a single oar forward worked by two keel bullies and the Pee-Dee. There was another oar at the stern called the "swape" with which the skipper rowed and steered the boat, and also at a later date there was a rudder which was unshipped when not required. The keels were sometimes poled along by "puoys," and in addition they had a lug sail (until the end of the eighteenth century) when fore and aft rig was introduced. The mast, which was fitted in a "tabernackle," could be lowered when the keel went under a bridge.

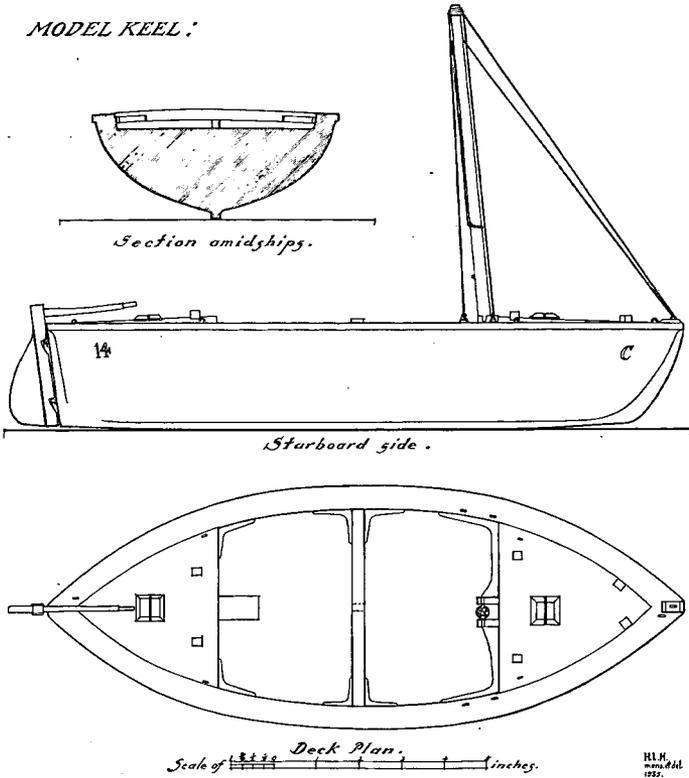
They were carvel or caulker built and wooden pegs or "irinnels" were used to fasten the planks. Latterly wherries, which were not keels properly so-called, were clinker built. The cabin of the keels was called the "huddock" or "hurrick," and the "keel-detters," that is the wives or female relatives of the keelmen, kept the keels more or less clean; by way of recompense they were entitled to the sweepings. Incidentally, Brockett says that "deet" in the northern language means to make clean.

The keelmen were employed by the fitters of the collieries adjacent to the Tyne for the purposes of working the keels which belonged to the colliery companies, and one of the terms of their employment was that they were not permitted to sell coals to other people. The keels transported the coals from the riverside staiths to the ships where they lay in the river. As the ships' ports were generally considerably higher out of the water than the keel, the work of "casting" the coals on board must have required very great strength and endurance.

An annual ceremony known as "the binding" took place when the fitters made a bargain with or "arled" the keelmen for their services during the coming year, and, prior to 1820, a gratuity of 21s. was generally given to

each man. The keelmen were engaged from Christmas to Christmas, and the keelmen's supper formed an important part of the binding ceremony. There is an indenture dated 1799 in the Newcastle upon Tyne Municipal Museum recording the binding of fourteen skippers and keelmen or

*MODEL KEEL :*



shovelmen to one David Crawford—the terms of which are interesting.

During the time the keelmen were bound they were liable to severe penalties if they left their employment, and public notices were generally exhibited when this occurred, giving particulars of the "wanted" men. If anyone else

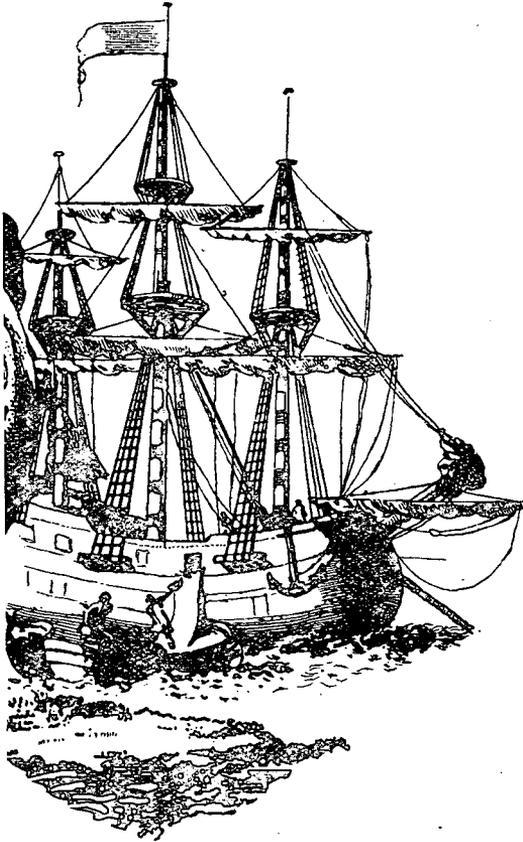
employed them after this warning, apparently they also became liable to prosecution. In 1872 bindings from year to year fell into disuse and thereafter men were engaged by the fortnight.

The *Shipowners' Manual*, printed in Newcastle in 1782, gives a list of the rates payable to the keelmen for conveying coals between different places, and shows that for taking a keel from Stella to Dent's Hole the dues were 7s. 6d., owners' wages 3s. 8d., making 11s. 2d. in all per chaldron. A note explains that "the total sum is to be paid to the keelmen according to the respective place in which the keel is cast, the 'dues' being what the fitter charges the ship, while the 'owners' wages' is the sum allowed to the fitter by the coal owner for keelmen's beer, steerage-money, etc." Incidentally, there is a further note in this *Manual* that "every keel that shall cast on board of any ship shall have the usual quantity of beer, and if refused then shall be paid 1s. 4d." On this subject the town clerk has an agreement dated 1719 made between the magistrates of this city and the fitters, setting out the dues and wages to be paid to the keelmen at that time. The agreement concludes, "No Fitter shall employ Pann Boats, and whoever shall do so shall forfeit dues to the hospital." This referred to numerous complaints by the keelmen against the men employed on the "Pann Boats." These were lightermen who did not belong to the keelmen's fraternity and were not subject to their rules. The keelmen in effect contended that they had a monopoly in the coal trade and that *Pann Boats*, or "Pann Keels" as they were sometimes called, could only be used in other trades, such as carrying salt.

It also appears that the keelmen complained about the quality of the beer supplied to them at the can-houses, which was termed "savage," pointing out that "while this was only fit for savages they were nevertheless charged the gentlemen's price for it."

The keelmen's holiday attire in the eighteenth century

is said to have consisted of a short blue jacket, yellow waistcoat and slate-coloured trousers. The trousers were cut tight at the knees and bellied out below. They had black hats with flat brims, and round them was tied a black ribbon



in two bows with five or six inches of ends left streaming. A black neckerchief tied in a reef knot round their necks completed their outfit.

The keelmen were always keen sportsmen, and were

particularly interested in rowing. Harry Clasper, champion sculler of the world in his day, was a Tyneside keelman, and each of his seven brothers were noted scullers. Harry Clasper also claimed to be the inventor of the outrigger which marked the evolution of the light rowing skiff, and he designed one of the earliest of these craft.

The *Keel Row* will always be associated with the Tyneside keelmen. The first known version appears in a manuscript volume of tunes dated 1752, but unfortunately the composer and author of this well-known song is himself unknown. However, the available evidence indicates clearly that both the words and tune are of Northumbrian origin, and it was evidently a popular melody on Tyneside in the eighteenth century.

The *Keelrow* was also at one time a popular local dance, and I saw it danced, of course to the famous tune, at a *kirn* held at Low Trewhitt a few weeks ago.

John Bell's collection of local documents includes a large number of songs relating to the keelmen, such as *The Keelman's Mistake*, *The Little Pee-Dee*, *The Keelman's Lamentation* and *The Bonnie Keel Laddie*, which are interesting as they show the part played by keelmen on Tyneside in the eighteenth century.

William Armstrong in one of his songs recounts the story of the skipper of a keel who lost his way in a fog after a celebration ashore. The skipper declared that the keel had drifted out to sea as he could smell the salt water and see the outline of Marsden Rock. So—

“ The anchor let's drop till the weather it clears  
 For fear we be nabb'd by the French privateers.  
 The anchor was dropt; when the weather cleared up  
 They found the keel moor'd at the awd Javil Group.

The Skipper was vex'd and he cursed and he swore  
 That his nose had ne'er led him se far wrang before,  
 But what most of all did surprisè these four people  
 Was Marsden Rock chang'd into Gyetside Chorch Steeple.”

Lord Runcimen tells me that he knew the keelmen well when he served in collier brigs, and in particular refers to the *Northumberland*, known to the sailor folk at Blyth as "the large brig," in which he served in 1866 when it took on board 100 tons of coals from keels manned by keelmen. He states that "a few were fanatically religious, but the bulk (as I knew them) were the reverse. They had a spirited belief that their keels and themselves were sacred to the coal trade."

The only other matter which I need mention before dealing with the great strike is the history of the Keelmen's Hospital which was frequently referred to during the strike in 1822.

Some time before 1700 the keelmen raised a fund for the support of their aged or distressed brethren by allowing a deduction of 1d. per week to be made from their wages for this purpose, and this fund was administered by members of the Hostmen's Company as trustees.

In 1700 the mayor and burgesses of Newcastle upon Tyne leased for ninety-nine years a piece of ground to the hostmen for the benefit of the keelmen, between the Carpenters' Tower and Sandgate, for the purpose of building a hospital. This hospital was built by the keelmen in 1704 and maintained at their own expense by means of a levy of 4d. a tide known as *Keelmen's Groats*. This 4d. was, with their consent, stopped out of their wages by their employers. The first governor of the hospital was Matthew White, a member of the Hostmen's Company. In the early part of the eighteenth century the keelmen complained at various times that the money was not properly expended on the hospital and they also wished to manage the hospital themselves and appoint their own governor. Several petitions by the keelmen to this effect addressed to the mayor and aldermen of Newcastle upon Tyne are in the town clerk's office, together with replies from the hostmen, who stated that when the keelmen did obtain money they spent it in riots and extravagances and that they were

“without religion or manners and unable to govern themselves.” It is perhaps only fair to remark that on a previous occasion the keelmen had petitioned the hostmen to assist them with a chapel and minister but without success.

On the day of the annual general meeting, or *Head Meeting Day*, the keelmen used to march through the town in procession with bands and afterwards dined together in state.

In 1788, after previous attempts, notably in 1711 and 1718, a permanent fund for the benefit of old keelmen on the Tyne was established by Act of Parliament by means of a levy of 1d. per chaldron. A further Act to the same effect was passed in 1820. However, in 1872 an Act was passed abolishing levies made by charitable corporations, including the hostmen and keelmen.

In 1898 the lease of the hospital which had been renewed finally fell in, and thereafter the Newcastle upon Tyne corporation let the fifty-eight small rooms as they became vacant to poor people, so that the hospital no longer exists as a charity although the building still stands. A copy of the *Rules and Regulations of the Keelmen's Hospital Society*, together with various books on the subject, are to be found in the Newcastle upon Tyne Central Library.

The history of the Keelmen's Hospital and Keelmen's Groats is of interest in connection with the Friendly Society movement, and shows that they were not entirely improvident in spite of what was said to the contrary by their employers.

The keelmen were never backward in “asserting their rights,” and one finds records of serious *sticks* or mutinies by them in 1671, 1708, 1719, 1740, 1749, 1771, 1794, and 1822. In 1719 many of the strikers were “pressed,” which had the effect of breaking the strike. The story is told of a keelman who had been caught by the press gang and who noticed that one of the men taken was released by the magistrates because he was an American sailor. He therefore

thought he would "try it on," and on entering the box unhesitatingly declared in broad Tyneside, "Aa's a Yankee tee, hinny." In 1740 the keelmen broke into the Guildhall by force and carried off £1,200, and about this period many of them appear to have been Jacobite supporters as they were prosecuted for showing their sympathies. In 1794 very considerable damage was done to the staiths, and there is an interesting file of the proceedings against the keelmen in the town clerk's office which, incidentally, gives a short account of the keelmen's rights and duties at that time.

The interesting feature about the keelmen's strike, which began in October and ended in December 1822, is that it illustrates a phase of the industrial revolution, and also marks the beginning of the end of the keelmen as a fraternity. The documents show that there were other matters in dispute, but the main subject of controversy was that ships were at this time loading direct from alongside the spouts which had been built below the bridge, and the livelihood of the keelmen had thereby become greatly prejudiced. They had, of course, protested against the staiths on previous occasions, and it is stated that they petitioned Charles I against erections in the nature of staiths which had been put up at that time.

The papers in my possession on this subject include a number of addresses representing the keelmen's point of view (which incidentally were for sale at a penny each, the profits to go to the Keelmen's Hospital Fund) together with pamphlets wherein the coal owners and fitters set out their case.

The anonymous gentleman who wrote the addresses on behalf of the keelmen starts with a text from the Bible, and his third and fourth papers are entitled "A reply to the snake in the grass who calls himself a friend of the coal trade." The text which he chooses for the purpose of dealing with the "snake" is taken from Solomon—"A bridle for the ass and a rod for the fool's back." In these addresses the writer suggests that the quantity

of coals taken in by the vessels from the spouts should be limited to six keels per vessel. He argues that the legislature in granting a monopoly to the coal owners of Newcastle—"by which the inhabitants of certain parts of the county are deprived from the advantage of working mines in their neighbourhood"—did not intend that they should use their property without restrictions and regulations. The writer also contends that the spouts projecting into the river have impeded navigation and caused serious accumulations of mud and sand.

He complains that the binding money of £2 a keel and a guinea for the binding supper have been stopped, and further says that some of the fitters have recently been demanding a rental of 1s. 6d. per keel per tide.

Other complaints are that "while previously the men were arled three months before the expiration of their engagements, they now did not know whether they would be re-employed until the last minute." The writer points out that the keelmen supported through the hospital fund their sick and aged brethren to the extent of £2,583 in the previous year and that if the present state of affairs continued they would no longer be able to do so, so that this expense would fall upon the city. He mentions that if the keelmen were to disappear, the navy would lose some of its best seamen, and there is no doubt that the press gang paid particular attention to the keelmen as on occasions the hostmen petitioned the government that they had not been left with sufficient men to man their keels. There is a good deal of correspondence dated 1811 between the mayor of Newcastle and the Admiralty on the subject, which appears to have been a burning question at the time, in the town clerk's office. It was evidently possible during times of peace, under certain conditions, to obtain exemption from impressment for keelmen on account of the national importance of the coal trade on Tyneside, and endeavours were made to extend this privilege as far as possible.

The letters written by the "snake in the grass" appear to have brought the keelmen's advocate to the height of fury, and the epithets which he calls down upon the "snake" are worth reading by anyone who wishes to enlarge his vocabulary.

The coal owners' pamphlet contained arguments in support of their case to the effect that they were entitled to the free and lawful enjoyment of their property, and they ended by calling upon the civil power to prosecute the keelmen for breaking their engagements.

There seems to have been a good deal of rioting during the strike, in particular at Scotswood and North Shields. Some of the keels were sunk, and the police, who were endeavouring to take charge of the keels and guard the spouts, were driven off. On two occasions the mob got out of hand at North Shields and near the Castle Garth and the Riot Act had to be read. Military and marines were, however, called in, and after a time succeeded in maintaining order.

The authorities appear to have taken a very serious view of affairs, as at one time during the strike seven men-of-war were lying in Shields harbour, and in addition the following military forces were brought into the district: Colonel Leigh's Lancashire Light Dragoons, the Earl of Darlington's Durham Rangers, and the North Yorks and West Yorks Militia. Special constables were also recruited in large numbers.

It is interesting to note that a Court of Inquest with a full bench of magistrates, under the chairmanship of Thomas Clennell, was held at the County Court under the provisions of an Act passed in the reign of Henry IV. The jurors found that riots within the meaning of the Act had taken place, and those proved to have been present were fined or imprisoned.

Some seamen employed on the vessels loading coal came out in sympathy and prevented their ships from going under the spouts, but they appear to have been

chiefly concerned in attempting to obtain a rise of wages and an increased manning scale. In passing, it is interesting to note from a shipping list published about this time that there were over a thousand small sailing vessels registered at the port of Newcastle, nearly all of which were engaged in the coal trade.

The position of the colliery owners below the bridge was much better than those above, since the latter were entirely dependent on the keels because vessels could not at this time come up above the bridge, but they all appear to have acted together.

During the strike a locomotive built by William Hedley, which had been running on the Wylam collieries line—one of his famous “Wylam Dillies”—was mounted on a keel and fitted up with wheels as a sort of paddle tug. This was called the “Tom and Jerry” (plate II, 1). It was used to tow keels up and down the river under a guard of marines, and successfully ran the blockade which the strikers attempted to enforce. This locomotive was reinstated as a steam engine on the Wylam line some time after the strike, and is now in the Royal Scottish Museum.

The keelmen returned to work in December without having achieved their principal aim in limiting the quantity of coal loaded at the spouts.

After the strike, instead of the “Pee-Dee,” another man was employed in the keels, but while this may have reduced unemployment, it did not help the regular keelmen as they had to pay for the extra man out of their wages. The keelmen, however, still maintained that the spouts amounted to a public nuisance, and on these grounds an information was lodged. Proceedings were brought against a representative of Wallsend colliery, and the case under the title of “Rex v. Russell” was tried at the York Assizes in August 1824. The prosecution contended that the spouts represented a danger and impediment to navigation and had caused the river to silt. How-

ever, after a prolonged hearing the jury returned a verdict for the defendant.

A song was published about this time, under the name *The Keelmen's Trial*, which refers to what took place and mentions the celebrities concerned. Brougham, the keelmen's counsel, afterwards became Lord Chancellor, and Scarlett, the coal owner's counsel, became Lord Chief Baron of the Exchequer.

The keelmen, however, were not satisfied with this defeat and applied for the verdict to be set aside on the ground of misdirection by the judge. The case was heard before three judges in October 1824, who, after taking eighteen months to make up their minds, decided in favour of the defendant by a majority of two to one.

Further proceedings took place at Carlisle in 1828, when the jury returned the following verdict :

“ We find that part of the navigable Channel of the river Tyne opposite to Wallsend has been straightened narrowed lessened and obstructed by the gears described in the indictment; but we find nevertheless that the trade of the town of Newcastle and the harbour of the Tyne has at the same time been greatly improved.”

A report of these proceedings, together with a plan of the Tyne exhibited at the last hearing at Carlisle, is to be found at the Central Library.

From this time forward the employment of keels and keelmen for conveying coal decreased, and this was accelerated in the latter part of the nineteenth century when the Swing Bridge was built, thus enabling vessels to go alongside the spouts which were then constructed by the upriver collieries. At the beginning of this century there were very few keels constantly employed for the purpose of carrying coals and the word is no longer in common use.

In conclusion I wish to record my grateful acknowledgments to those who have assisted me in the preparation of this paper, more particularly to Mr. H. L. Honeyman who prepared the drawings of a keel, and to Sir Arthur M.

Oliver, who allowed me to have access to all the papers on this subject at the Town Hall.

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- Chartulary of Tynemouth Monastery.



Fig. 2. TYNE KEELS IN 1745.

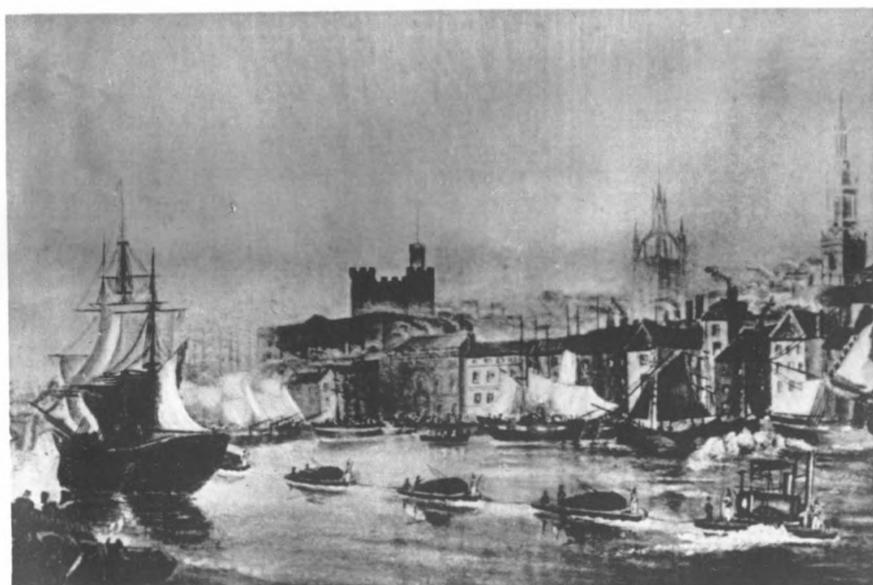


Fig. 1. TYNE KEELMEN'S STRIKE—1822.

