

**THE UNIVERSITY OF RHEIMS, FRANCE
and
THE UNIVERSITY OF KENT at CANTERBURY, ENGLAND.**

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF COMMUNITY AND
MILITANCY IN TWO COALMINING SETTLEMENTS
IN BRITAIN.
Volume I.**

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Abstract.

Miners' militancy and close-knit community have become synonymous terms in many people's minds. Miners displayed solidaristic tendencies above ground in their union activities as a mirror image of their relationships below ground. The toughness of their job translated into toughness in their political and industrial attitudes. Living in traditionally isolated communities miners could rely only upon each other for support and understanding. The women living precarious existences in these settlements were likewise. Children were socialised into their respective male/female, dominant/submissive roles. Such was the reputation of coalminers - the vanguard of the labour movement. It permeated media images and informed the general public's opinion of miners, their womenfolk and their communities. Miners themselves fell victim to their own mythologising. The literature on the subject, fictional and non-fictional, has often been semi-hagiographic, adding to the myth.

Recent historiography, however, has done much to deconstruct this, largely sentimental, notion of miners and their communities. Close examination of miners' history shows a tradition of splits and rivalries rather than solidarity - federalism rather than national unity. *Isolated mass* and occupational community have been shown to be concepts applicable to some coalmining settlements, not all. As an attempt at universality they fall far short. Indeed, the whole ideal of *community* has been so seriously questioned as a useful or workable construct that it remains stuck at the level of abstract. That, however, has not stopped the term being increasingly used and abused by politicians, sociologists, historians and journalists. We are all *communitarians* now.

The 1984-85 miners' strike served to inform traditional and radical opinion of the nature of miners and their militant, solidaristic tendencies. Miners on strike for a whole year, supported by their communities was the traditional image. Miners who worked and crossed picket lines was the radical. Historically aware observers understood, however, that what was radical was in fact traditional and that the solidarity displayed by striking miners throughout twelve months was a radical break with the past. Militancy/moderacy levels and the nature of community maybe linked, but generalisations about specific miners and their penchant for industrial action are inappropriate. All miners are capable of extreme militancy and moderacy. Individual areas must be examined in the context of their whole history rather than that of specific events. And as more case studies, written from a national as well as regional viewpoint, are added to the historiography of mining, the whole picture of miners, their communities and their (un)willingness to take industrial action starts to become complete. With the rundown of the mining industry virtually completed, writing about miners and their lives has an air of finality - a genuine sense of history rather than journalism.

Résumé.

Dans l'esprit de beaucoup, militantisme des mineurs et communauté soudée sont devenus des synonymes. Dans leur action syndicale, les mineurs ont fait preuve, à l'air libre, d'une solidarité qui reflète leurs relations sous terre. La rudesse de leur travail se manifesta par de la fermeté en matière de politique et d'industrie. Parce qu'ils habitaient dans des communautés traditionnellement isolées, les mineurs ne pouvaient compter que les uns sur les autres pour obtenir soutien et compréhension. Il en allait de même pour leurs épouses qui menaient une existence précaire dans ces villages. Très rapidement, les enfants étaient conditionnés dans les rôles respectifs: homme/femme; dominant/dominée. Telle était la réputation des mineurs - l'avant-garde du mouvement travailliste. Cette image s'imposa dans les médias et influença la façon dont l'opinion publique percevait les mineurs, leurs femmes et leurs communautés. Les mineurs eux-mêmes étaient victimes de leur propre mythe. La littérature les concernant: histoires vraies ou romans a souvent été en partie hagiographique, alimentant ainsi le mythe.

Les récents développements de l'historiographie ont cependant beaucoup contribué à déconstruire cette vision en grande partie romantique des mineurs et de leurs communautés. Un examen précis de l'histoire des mineurs fait apparaître une tendance aux divisions et aux rivalités plutôt qu'à la solidarité, au fédéralisme plutôt qu'à l'unité nationale. Il a été montré que la *masse isolée* et la communauté professionnelle sont des concepts applicables à certains villages miniers, pas à tous. Leur prétention à l'universalité était bien loin d'aboutir. En effet, l'idée même de *communauté* a été si sérieusement remise en question en tant que critère utile et exploitable qu'elle est restée abstraite. Cela n'a cependant pas empêché les politiciens, sociologues, historiens et journalistes d'utiliser de plus en plus ce mot, et d'en abuser. Nous sommes tous dans l'optique communautaire désormais.

La grève des mineurs de 1984-85 a porté à la connaissance de l'opinion traditionnelle et radicale l'engagement des mineurs, le militantisme et la solidarité dont ils étaient capables. L'image traditionnelle était celle des mineurs en grève une année durant, soutenus par leur communauté. L'image radicale était celle de mineurs qui franchissaient le piquet de grève pour se rendre au travail. Or, des observateurs éclairés comprirent qu'historiquement que ce qui était radical était en fait traditionnel et que la solidarité dont faisait preuve les mineurs grévistes pendant douze mois représentait une rupture radicale avec le passé. Les niveaux de militantisme et de modération ainsi que la nature de la communauté sont interdépendants, mais les généralisations à propos de certains mineurs et de leur penchant pour l'action industrielle sont hors de propos. Tout mineur est capable d'un militantisme extrême comme de modération. Des régions particulières doivent être étudiées dans leur contexte historique entier et non en regard d'événements spécifiques. C'est en multipliant les études de cas, rédigées d'un point de

national que régional, et en les ajoutant à l'historiographie des mines, que l'on peut commencer à obtenir une image complète des mineurs, de leurs communautés et de leur volonté ou non à mener une action industrielle. L'affaiblissement extrême de l'industrie minière confère aux études sur les mineurs et leurs vies un air de finalité, une dimension historique plutôt que journalistique.

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Anyone who has ever embarked upon a doctoral thesis (and arrived at the end) will know how much pleasure is to be had in writing the 'Acknowledgements'.

To have had one good thesis supervisor may be considered luck; to have had two is downright good fortune (apologies to Oscar Wilde). Such was my case. The thesis began its life under the supervision of Dr. John Lovell at the University of Kent at Canterbury. His encouragement and constructive criticism were vital in helping me understand just what was required of a doctoral thesis. He also helped me through some difficult personal times and negotiated on my behalf with the University. However, it was his willingness to become a co-director of the thesis with Professor Michel Delecroix at the University of Rheims, France, after a gap of several years, during which there was no contact, for which I will always be grateful. Dr. Lovell has truly deserved his *coupe de champagne*.

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The final thank-you must go abstractly to the village of Aylesham. It is a peculiar place with a very special history and, despite what the 'experts' say, it did have a real sense of *community*. It instilled a sense of confidence in many of the children who grew up there in the 1950s and '60s. It does not require any special qualification in psychoanalysis to realise that this thesis, like so many theses, is part-autobiographical. It is also an attempt to record something of the history, the 'specialness', of Aylesham.

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Introduction.

The theme of community is on everyone's lips. Politicians, social workers, teachers, parents - everyone wants to resurrect a lost golden age of community as a way of saving the world from some awful fate of lawlessness and anarchy, brought on by people not being able to place themselves within a structure, within clearly defined societal limits. Margaret Thatcher could not have struck a more raw nerve than when she boldly declared that there was no such thing as society, only families and individuals. Her unsentimental approach to Britain in the 1980s was frighteningly close to the truth. The cult of individualism was at its peak and 'community', with its awful connotations of communism and communal living were the antithesis of everything that Thatcherism seemed to stand for. While church leaders and left-leaning sociologists bemoaned the passing of society a battle took place in the middle of the 1980s which took on epic, heroic proportions - the miners' strike. Miners and their settlements were, in most people's minds, the archetypal exponents of community living. That, above all else, explained how they, and only they, could take on the might of the State and survive for a whole year without any regular or traditional form of income. The fact that the miners lost the strike has been somewhat incidental to many, it was their determination, their struggle, their *heroism* which has captured the hearts, if not the minds, of academics and authors in the years since the strike ended. Above all, writers have tried to discover just what it is that singles the miners out as a special case in labour history.

This thesis grew out of just such a desire combined with the wish to commit to print the history of a mining village which was so unusual, being situated in the heart of the 'Garden of England', and with a reputation as one of the most militant mining communities in Britain. However, it was felt that trying to establish reasons for its militancy, without some kind of outside reference or 'control', would be rather difficult. After all, what precisely did militancy actually mean? It could only have a meaning in relation to at least one other community which, preferably, was not considered militant. As a result, the scope of the research was widened to include Coalville in the Leicestershire Coalfield.

Coalville, a town which, as its name suggests, was founded on coal, was part of the South Midlands Division of the NCB which the Kent Coalfield joined in 1975. It also had a reputation for being one of the most moderate coalfields in Britain. Administratively linked with Kent but politically and industrially 'miles apart', Coalville was considered a suitable comparison to try and establish precisely what was meant by militancy/moderacy, and, of course, to try and discover just what the origins of such apparently contrasting levels of industrial behaviour were. There were methodological problems with the comparison, particularly because Coalville was the town which served many collieries in the surrounding district and had a population of nearly thirty thousand. Aylesham is an overgrown village of nearly five thousand people and only ever had one colliery, although several were originally planned. Consequently, the thesis interchanges between talking about Aylesham and Kent miners in order to have a larger base for the comparison. However, the interviews took place exclusively with Aylesham miners and their families to represent Kent, while those representing the Leicestershire Coalfield were scattered over the villages of Ellistown, Hugglescote, Bagworth and Coalville itself. While not entirely satisfactory, the results of the interviews were very pleasing, miners in both coalfields falling very neatly into the roles that had been ascribed to them, largely by the media and other miners.

The Design of the Research.

Mining history has come a long way since J.R. Williams complained about the lack of case studies in his seminal article on the historiography of mining published in 1962. At that time Williams complained:

Geographically and chronologically, then, there are still many serious gaps in the history of labour in the coalfields.¹

¹ J.E. Williams, "Labour in the Coalfields: A Critical Bibliography". *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, No. 4, Spring 1962, 24-55.

It was the serious lack of regional studies which Williams noted, and those which did exist he criticised for their "antiquarianism" - relating in too much detail the events at local level while losing sight of the grander national picture.

The national historian, however, cannot be expected to deal with the minutiae of the regions, except in so far as they play some decisive part in national events. The regional historian, on the other hand, is bound to relate his findings closely to national events. Failure to do this leads to antiquarianism rather than history. The relation of local to national events involves the regional historian in difficult problems, especially if the existing treatment of national events is unsatisfactory or incomplete.²

Since this article appeared much has been done to correct the situation in mining historiography, particularly at the local level. A plethora of regional studies has been published either as theses, books or short pamphlets, most of them dealing with union or lodge histories. Relating politics or industrial action to the nature of the local community was, however, something to be avoided, the concept of 'community' having so many methodological problems surrounding it that mining historians preferred to give it a wide berth. That is until the 1980s and the miners' strike when 'community' was rediscovered as the driving force behind miners' unions and their ability to take collective action over sustained periods of time.

This present thesis follows in the footsteps of such writers who were not afraid to tread a path which others had previously precluded. The plan of the research is to begin with a review of the literature on community and collective action. Chapter One takes us from the beginnings of the study of community around the turn of the century, through to the American experience in the 1940s and '50s. It looks at the British experience from the 1950s onwards beginning with the 'classic' case study on mining, *Coal is Our Life*. At the same time there were two constructs of mining communities which were postulated as a way of explaining their peculiar strike proneness: *isolated mass* and occupational community. However, almost as soon as these theories were published they were attacked for their lack of universality, and the

² Williams, 25.

whole concept of 'community' as an area for serious sociological study came under serious and sustained attack. This chapter considers these criticisms before concluding on a rather more hopeful note which sees some rehabilitation of the concept.

Chapter Two looks at the history of Coalville from its origins in the nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War and the founding of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). The early unions in Leicestershire are considered as are the disputes which took place. An attempt is made to consider the origins of Leicestershire's tradition of moderacy in industrial relations by comparing what was happening in the coalfield with events at national level. This approach, it is hoped, will help to avoid the "antiquarianism" which Williams warns against. Sources for the chapter are largely secondary as the aim is to give a background understanding rather than present original research, that being particularly difficult in this area as events at both local and national level have been well and truly covered. It is the aim, however, to give a different reading of the secondary texts.

Chapter Three follows on from Chapter Two looking at the Leicestershire Coalfield and the NUM post-nationalisation, again in a national context. The introduction of first a daywage structure and then the National Power Loading Agreement are treated and the extent to which they helped create a greater national unity in the NUM is examined. The increasing involvement of the Leicestershire NUM at national level is dealt with as is the Leicestershire miners' participation in the national strikes of the 1970s. This was undoubtedly the high point of militancy for the Leicestershire miners from which they were rapidly to retreat. Sources for this chapter are a mixture of primary and secondary documents, the primary sources including published biographies, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, local and national newspapers, radio recordings and published and personal interviews. It was while researching this chapter that one of the great disappointments occurred: the Minutes for the NUM Leicestershire Area since 1945 have apparently been destroyed. Dr. Colin Griffin, at Nottingham Trent University, used these Minutes for his three volume work on the Leicestershire Coalfield and informed me that they were the best kept union minutes he had ever worked with. After he had finished with them he returned them to Jack Jones, the Area Secretary at the time. Jones died in September 1991, and it seems that the Minutes were burned along with much other 'rubbish' when his

house was emptied. Dr. Griffin was appalled when I told him of the destruction. There are some Minutes in files at Mantle Lane in Coalville dating from 1986-91, when the coalfield was finally closed. But they are neither well catalogued nor very extensive. Such are the 'tragedies' that researchers have to cope with! It was not to be the last.

Our attention turns to the Kent Coalfield in general and Snowdown Colliery and Aylesham village in particular in Chapter Four. The origins of mining in Kent are traced as are the early trade unions. Getting coal in this county was always a difficult business, and there were many false starts to the industry before it finally got under way in the late '20s, when Snowdown was re-opened and the construction of the village of Aylesham got under way. The arrival of miners and their families to this quiet corner of the 'Garden of England' caused consternation among the indigenous population, and sometimes not without good reason. The chapter looks at the grandiose plans for Aylesham and its first inhabitants and how they did or did not settle. Sources are again a mixture of primary and secondary. The secondary sources include unpublished theses and essays, perhaps the most interesting of which is the Ph.D. thesis by Violet Hughes. Completed in 1934 it must surely be the first social survey of the Kent Coalfield. It was particularly helpful because it concentrated on Aylesham miners and included photographs. The date and nature of Hughes' research almost makes it a primary source today. Actual primary sources include official publications, Hansard, local and national newspapers, architectural and engineering plans and documents, video recordings and personal interviews. This chapter follows the history of the Kent Coalfield up to 1945, by which time the miners were beginning to earn themselves a reputation for militancy.

Following the end of the War in 1945 and the introduction of nationalisation in 1947 the Kent Coalfield began to establish itself as a small but active mining settlement. The village of Aylesham developed its own characteristics largely as a result of its physical and social isolation from the surrounding Kent countryside. The coming of 'community' is the subject of Chapter Five. The 1950s was a 'golden age' in the history of Aylesham as the people began to benefit from the security of stable incomes and a stable community with its own peculiar identity. But it was short-lived as talk of closure and job losses in Kent suddenly became the 'norm' in the 1960s as the coal industry began to contract on a national basis. How the Kent

miners dealt with this crisis and how Snowdown miners began to develop their own militancy, equal to that of their colleagues at Betteshanger Colliery, is also examined in this chapter. As a result of the increased militancy, all Kent miners were actively involved in the strikes of the 1970s. The chapter ends with the Kent miners proud of their involvement in bringing down a government, and determined to go on to ever greater levels of political action through the auspices of the Union. Leicestershire miners, on the other hand, were not ready to use their industrial muscle for political purposes, and, following February 1974, they reverted to their traditional moderacy.

Sources for this chapter are largely primary. They include newspapers, regional and national; the NUM Kent Area Minutes 1945-74; National Coal Board publications; NUM publications; Government publications; Hansard; television and radio recordings; published and personal interviews; biographies and autobiographies; video recordings. It was during this stage in the research that a second disappointment was encountered: while the Minutes for the NUM Kent Area are very well kept and lodged at the County Record Office, Maidstone, the Branch Minutes for Snowdown Colliery seemed to have completely disappeared. Some have been burned in similar circumstances to those in Leicestershire, but others, dating from the 1970s have simply vanished. All the union officials contacted and interviewed were at a loss to explain their whereabouts. One day, hopefully, they will turn up in someone's garage or attic.

The two coalfields of Kent and Leicestershire are brought together for Chapter Six which deal with the relatively short period 1974-84. During these ten years, however, there was the introduction of the Productivity Bonus Scheme which not only dissipated the unity of the NUM, but it also created distrust over the use and abuse of ballots. Democracy in the NUM was seen to mean whatever various miners and regional unions wanted it to mean. The stage was set for the terminal splits of the mid-'80s. Just before the discord there was a last, brief moment of harmony in 1981 when the NUM was able to unite and threaten industrial action over the pit closures plan. Thatcher was humbled into a 'U-turn', her last, as far as the miners were concerned. Following 1981 it became apparent to all in the industry that closures were coming and that it would be the battleground between the NUM and the Government, nobody believing that the NCB was anything but an instrument of government policy. This

chapter follows the events that led to the outbreak of 'war' in March 1984 and looks at how the divisions within the NUM, which occurred during the strike, really should not have surprised anyone, they were more than evident well before the strike began. The focal point for these divisions was Arthur Scargill. No matter how much we may wish to avoid the cult of the individual, it is impossible to ignore the central role of Scargill in determining the nature and progress of the strike.

Sources for this chapter are largely primary and similar to those of Chapter Five except a wider range of newspapers was consulted and more NUM and NCB documents were available. A personal diary was donated which proved very useful in dating certain events although no personal information was actually expressed. Census returns were also consulted for the two areas under examination.

Chapter Seven is easily the longest chapter and is divided into three sections. Because it deals with such a pivotal event as the 1984-85 miners' strike, it was felt justified in including a second literary review, in Section One, there having been so much written about this event in such a short space of time. The review takes the form of a critique of the issues surrounding the origins of the strike, the strike's progress, and reasons for its failure. The sources are, naturally, predominantly secondary, but they serve to give background information and tell something of the story of the strike from the national viewpoint.

Section Two, however, is principally concerned with the progress of the strike at regional level, looking at how the Kent miners prepared for the strike and managed to survive a whole year without formal income. It also deals with the issue of picketing and the Kent miners' experience in Coalville. Most miners in Coalville continued working but there was a small minority which did not - the 'Dirty Thirty'. Interviews with some of these men were conducted notably with one who had begun his mining career at Snowdown Colliery and then moved to Leicestershire after getting married to a local woman. He took with him his Aylesham attitudes towards striking and the issue of crossing picket lines.

Much of the information in this section was obtained through personal interviews. These were conducted over a period of several years. Contacts in Aylesham were established through personal and familial relationships. While this had the obvious advantages of familiarity

it also had the concomitant disadvantage of familiarity breeding contempt. There is always a little suspicion about an 'insider' wanting personal information in a community in which it could be used for negative purposes. On the whole, however, the interviewees were happy to talk and had no problem about their real names being used. For that reason the interviewers traditional technique of camouflaging the identities of the subjects has been discarded.

Interviews in Coalville were, initially, more difficult to set up. There is also suspicion about an 'outsider' wanting information. This was made more complicated when the subject was the 1984-85 miners' strike, which the Leicestershire miners, to some extent, are hesitant to talk about, for obvious reasons. They were doubly suspicious when they learned that their interviewer came from a Kent mining community with whom they had not had the best of relations. Contacts were established through the Mantle Lane Oral History Project which exists in Coalville. The leaders of this Project, Jeanne Carswell and Tracy Roberts, had already carried out extensive interviewing in the region and this helped prepare the way for another researcher who wanted to ask a lot of questions. Once one or two contacts had been established others followed as names and addresses of likely willing candidates were passed on.

In both mining settlements a questionnaire was used as a guide to the interview and a small tape recorder was placed in front of the interviewee. This had the immediate effect of silencing the candidate - not very helpful - but once the initial 'fear' was overcome, the proximity of the recorder gave the candidates security as they had access to the pause button which they could use at any time when they wanted to say something unrecorded. The pause button was used on many occasions. Informal, unrecorded interviews also took place, and on two occasions the presence of children in the room rendered the taped recordings unusable. An interviewer invited into someone's home can hardly ask the kids to leave!

The interviews were used against each other where possible to support objective information about the strike, or give further back-up to ideas and opinions about such issues as to why the strike failed. Women were interviewed either with or without their husbands present, a great deal of marital freedom and or trust now exists in ex-mining settlements. They are no longer the 'macho' male dominated societies that they were once purported to be.

Section Three deals with the failure of the strike, suggested reasons for that failure, and the aftermath of the strike and the developments in the two communities under examination since March 1985 up to the closing of the respective coalfields at the beginning of the 1990s.

The final chapter, Chapter Eight, takes a last look at the issues of community and militancy as they relate to Aylesham and Coalville. *Isolated mass* is once again examined to see to what extent it could be applied to either community at any stage in their historical development. The conclusion suggests the continuing influence of mining in Aylesham now that the pit has been closed. There is a large residue of militancy left which will survive for at least the next two generations. In Coalville, however, mining as the dominant industry had long since ceased to exist, and the lack of occupational homogeneity is proposed as a reason for that community's historical moderacy.

Introduction (Version française).

Le thème de la communauté est sur toutes les lèvres. Les politiciens, les assistants sociaux, les enseignants, les parents - tout le monde veut ressusciter un âge d'or perdu de la communauté, comme pour sauver le monde d'un horrible destin de chaos et d'anarchie conséquent à l'incapacité des gens à se placer à l'intérieur d'une structure, dans les limites clairement posées d'une société. Margaret Thatcher n'aurait pu toucher de point plus sensible en déclarant audacieusement qu'il n'y a pas de société, seulement des familles et des individus. Son approche dépourvue de tout sentimentalisme de la Grande Bretagne des années 80 était effroyablement réaliste. Le culte de l'individualisme était à son apogée et la 'communauté', souvent associée à l'épouvantail du communisme et de la vie en commun était à l'opposé de tout ce que le Thatcherisme semblait représenter. Alors que les chefs religieux et les sociologues de gauche pleuraient la mort de la société dans les années 80, une bataille aux proportions épiques et héroïques s'engagea: la grève des mineurs. Dans l'esprit de beaucoup, les mineurs et leurs villages étaient l'archétype de la vie en communauté. C'est ce qui explique,

plus que toute autre chose, comment les mineurs, et seulement eux, purent défier la puissance de l'état et survivre une année entière sans aucune forme de revenu traditionnel ou régulier. Que la grève fût sans résultats, beaucoup le considèrent comme anecdotique; c'est la détermination des mineurs, leur lutte, leur héroïsme qui a su toucher le coeur, sinon les esprits, des universitaires et des auteurs dans les années qui suivirent la grève. Plus que tout, ce que les auteurs ont cherché à découvrir, c'est ce qui singularisait les mineurs et faisait d'eux un cas particulier dans l'histoire du travail.

Cette thèse naquit de cette aspiration à percer le mystère et à voir imprimer l'histoire d'un village minier des plus originaux, étant situé au coeur du "jardin de l'Angleterre" et possédant la réputation d'être l'un des plus militants de Grande-Bretagne. Cependant, il est vite apparu qu'il serait délicat d'essayer d'établir les raisons de son militantisme sans avoir de référence ou de 'moyen de contrôle' externe. Après tout, que signifie exactement le mot militantisme? Il ne peut avoir de sens que si l'on met en relation au moins deux communautés, la seconde étant de préférence considérée non-militante. Par conséquent, notre recherche s'élargit pour inclure Coalville, cité minière située dans le bassin houiller du Leicestershire. Coalville qui, comme son nom l'indique (Charbonville), s'organisa autour du charbon, faisait partie de la division Midlands du Sud du NCB que les bassins houillers du Kent rejoignirent en 1975. Elle avait aussi la réputation d'être un des bassins houillers les plus modérés de Grande-Bretagne. Associée administrativement au Kent, mais politiquement et industriellement à des "années-lumière", Coalville fut considérée comme un point de comparaison acceptable pour essayer d'établir en détails ce que l'on entendait par militantisme et modération, et, bien sûr, pour essayer de découvrir les raisons qui expliquent ces deux types de comportements sociaux apparemment si contrastés. La comparaison ne fut pas sans problèmes méthodologiques, notamment parce que de nombreuses mines de la région dépendaient de Coalville qui avait une population de presque trente mille habitants. Aylesham est un grand village de presque cinq mille habitants et n'a jamais eu qu'une seule mine, bien que plusieurs aient été prévues au début. Par conséquent, la thèse alterne entre Aylesham et les mineurs du Kent, de façon à avoir une base de comparaison plus importante dans l'analyse. Cependant, nous devons signaler que, pour le Kent, seuls des mineurs de Aylesham furent consultés, alors que les représentants du

bassin houiller du Leicestershire étaient dispersés entre les villages d'Ellistown, Hugglescote, Bagworth et Coalville elle-même. Bien que les résultats ne fussent pas totalement satisfaisants, ils ne furent tout de même sans intérêt, révélant que les mineurs de chaque bassin houiller retombaient très nettement dans les rôles qui leur avaient été attribués, surtout par les médias et les autres mineurs.

Organisation de la Recherche.

L'histoire des mines a fait du chemin depuis que J.R. Williams s'est plaint du manque de cas d'études dans son article fondateur sur l'historiographie des mines publié en 1962. A l'époque Williams regrettait que:

Tant sur le plan géographique que chronologique, il y a encore de sérieuses lacunes dans l'histoire du travail dans les mines.³

Ce que Williams déplorait, c'était le manque cruel d'études régionales; et lorsqu'elles existaient malgré tout, il les critiquait, leur reprochant leur traitement "d'antiquaire" qui dépeint les événements locaux avec moult détails et, de ce fait, ne parvient pas à rendre compte du contexte national plus important.

Cependant, on ne peut pas attendre de l'historien national, qu'il traite avec minutie des régions, sauf dans la mesure où elles jouent un rôle décisif dans les événements nationaux. L'historien régional, au contraire, se doit de rapporter scrupuleusement ses découvertes aux événements nationaux. Echouer dans cette tâche, c'est faire oeuvre "d'antiquaire", pas d'historien. Mettre en relation événements locaux et événements nationaux entraîne l'historien régional dans de sérieux problèmes, surtout si les événement nationaux, tels qu'on les a traités jusqu'alors, n'offrent pas de vision satisfaisante ou complète.⁴

³ J.E. Williams, "Labour in the Coalfields: A Critical Bibliography", *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, No.4, Spring 1962, 24-55.

⁴ Williams, 25.

Depuis la parution de cet article, beaucoup a été fait pour pallier le manque dans l'historiographie minière, surtout au niveau local. Une pléthore d'études régionales a fait l'objet de publications: thèses, livres, courts pamphlets, la plupart au sujet du logement ou du syndicalisme. Or, il fallait éviter d'associer la politique ou l'action industrielle avec la nature de la communauté locale, le concept de "communauté" étant source de tels problèmes méthodologiques que les historiens des mines eux-mêmes ont préféré le laisser totalement de côté. Le changement s'opéra dans les années 80 avec la grève des mineurs: on redécouvrit la "communauté", le moteur des syndicats de mineurs qui donnait aux mineurs la force d'agir dans l'intérêt de la collectivité et ce, à long terme.

Cette thèse est écrite dans la même optique que celle d'auteurs qui n'ont pas eut peur de s'aventurer sur des chantiers déjà empruntés maintes fois. Notre recherche commence par une revue de la littérature concernant la communauté et l'action collective. Le premier chapitre couvre une période qui s'étend des premières études sur la communauté au tournant de ce siècle jusqu'à l'expérience américaine des années 40 et 50. Il porte également sur l'expérience britannique à partir des années 50, commençant par le désormais classique: *Coal is Our Life*. (*Le charbon est notre vie.*) Deux hypothèses concurrentes apparurent pour expliquer la propension particulière des communautés minières à se mettre en grève: celle de *la masse isolée* et celle de la communauté professionnelle. Cependant, presque aussitôt après leur publication, ces théories furent critiquées pour leur manque universalité, et le concept même de communauté, en tant que domaine d'étude sérieux de la sociologie fut l'objet d'attaques graves et constantes. Ce chapitre rend compte de ces attaques avant de conclure sur une note plus optimiste qui réhabilite dans une certaine mesure le concept de communauté.

Le second chapitre s'intéresse à l'histoire de Coalville, de ses origines, au dix-neuvième siècle, jusqu'à la fin de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale et à la création du Syndicat National des Mineurs (National Union of Mineworkers NUM). Nous examinons les premiers syndicats dans le Leicestershire au même titre que les conflits qui surgirent. Nous essayons de comprendre les raisons de l'attitude traditionnellement modérée du Leicestershire en comparant ce qui se passait dans le bassin houiller avec les événements nationaux. Nous espérons ainsi éviter l'écueil de "l'antiquaire" contre laquelle Williams nous met en garde. Les sources utilisées dans

l'élaboration de ce chapitre sont en majorité des sources secondaires puisque l'objectif est de comprendre l'arrière plan historique plutôt que de fournir une recherche originale, ce qui est particulièrement difficile si l'on sait que les événements de cette région ont été couverts parfaitement au niveau local et régional. Notre but est cependant d'avoir une lecture différente de ces textes secondaires.

Le troisième chapitre est étroitement lié au deuxième puisqu'il étudie le bassin houiller du Leicestershire et de la période après la nationalisation du NUM à nouveau dans un contexte national. Après avoir analysé la première mise en place du salaire quotidien et le National Power Loading Agreement, nous essayons de voir jusqu'à quel point ils contribuèrent à créer une plus grande unité nationale au sein du NUM. Nous examinons l'engagement croissant du NUM du Leicestershire au niveau national mais aussi le degré de participation dans les grèves nationales des années 70. Ce fut sans aucun doute l'apogée du militantisme des mineurs du Leicestershire avant que ne s'amorce la chute. Les sources utilisées pour ce chapitre sont à la fois primaires et secondaires, les documents primaires comportant des biographies personnelles et publiées, des comptes-rendus de débat Hansard, des coupures de journaux locaux et nationaux, des enregistrements radiophoniques, des entretiens publiés ou personnels. L'une des plus grandes déconvenues liées à mes recherches fut de découvrir que les comptes-rendus du NUM de la région du Leicestershire depuis 1945 avaient, selon toute vraisemblance, été détruits. Le professeur Colin Griffin de l'université de Nottingham avait utilisé ces comptes-rendus pour son étude en trois volumes sur le bassin houiller du Leicestershire et m'avait informé qu'ils étaient les mieux conservés qu'il lui ait jamais été donné d'utiliser. Une fois son ouvrage terminé, il les renvoya à Jack Jones, le secrétaire de la région à l'époque. Jones mourût en septembre 1991, et il semble que les comptes-rendus furent brûlés avec beaucoup d'autres 'vieilles' quand on vida sa maison. Griffin fut consterné lorsque je lui appris la destruction de ces documents. Il y a quelques comptes-rendus dans les archives à Mantle Lane à Coalville qui datent de 1986-91, lors de la fermeture du bassin; mais, ils ne sont ni bien répertoriés ni très nombreux. Voilà les tragédies auxquelles doivent faire face les chercheurs. Cela n'allait pas être la dernière.

Notre attention se porte ensuite, au chapitre quatre, sur le bassin houiller du Kent en général, et plus précisément sur la mine de Snowdown et en particulier le village d'Aylesham. Nous retraçons l'histoire de l'extraction minière dans le Kent et nous étudions les premiers syndicats. Il a toujours été difficile d'extraire du charbon dans ce comté, ce qui explique des démarrages infructueux avant que cette industrie ne s'implante vraiment à la fin des années 20, quand Snowdown fut rouverte et la construction du village d'Aylesham entreprise. L'arrivée des mineurs et de leurs familles dans cet endroit calme du 'jardin de l'Angleterre' provoqua la consternation de la population locale, non sans bonne raison. Ce chapitre explore les vastes projets pour Aylesham et ses premiers habitants puis comment ils réussirent ou échouèrent à s'établir. Les sources sont à nouveau des documents primaires et secondaires. Les sources secondaires comprennent des thèses et des essais non publiés, la plus intéressante des thèses étant la thèse de doctorat de Violet Hughes achevée en 1934; c'est sans doute la première étude sociale sur le bassin houiller du Kent. Elle est particulièrement intéressante car elle se concentre sur les mineurs d'Aylesham et contient des photographies. La date et la nature de la recherche de Hughes en font presque un document primaire aujourd'hui. Les véritables documents primaires comportent des publications officielles, le Hansard, des journaux locaux et nationaux, des plans et des documents de construction et d'aménagement du terrain, des enregistrements vidéo et des entretiens personnels. Ce chapitre couvre l'histoire du bassin houiller du Kent jusqu'en 1945, date à laquelle les mineurs commencèrent à acquérir une réputation de militants.

Après la fin de la guerre en 1945 et les débuts de la nationalisation en 1947, le bassin houiller du Kent commença à s'établir comme une région certes petite, mais néanmoins active. Le village d'Aylesham développa ses propres caractéristiques principalement à cause de son isolement physique et social dans la campagne du Kent avoisinante. La naissance de la communauté est l'objet du chapitre cinq. Les années 50 représentent 'l'âge d'or' dans l'histoire d'Aylesham, c'est alors que les gens commençaient à profiter de la sécurité de revenus stables et du statut de communauté stable possédant sa propre identité. Cela fut de courte durée car on parla soudain de fermeture des mines et de pertes d'emplois dans le Kent des années 60 alors que l'industrie du charbon commençait à s'éteindre au niveau national. Nous examinons

également dans ce chapitre comment les mineurs du Kent réagirent face à cette crise et comment les mineurs de Snowdown commencèrent à développer leur propre militantisme, pour qu'il atteigne les mêmes proportions que celui de leurs collègues de la mine de Betteshanger. La conséquence du militantisme croissant fut que tous les mineurs du Kent participèrent activement aux grèves des années 70. Le chapitre se clôt sur les mineurs du Kent fiers d'avoir pu, par leur participation, faire fléchir un gouvernement, et bien déterminés à poursuivre leur action politique à de plus hauts niveaux sous les auspices du syndicat. Les mineurs du Leicestershire, au contraire, n'étaient pas prêts à utiliser leur poids social à des fins politiques; et après février 1974, ils retournèrent à leur attitude modérée traditionnelle.

Les sources pour ce chapitre sont en grande partie primaires. Elles comprennent des journaux locaux et nationaux; les comptes-rendus du NUM de la région du Kent de 1945-74; les publications du National Coal Board; les publications du NUM; les publications du gouvernement; les publications Hansard; des enregistrements télévisés et radiophoniques; des entretiens publiés et personnels; des biographies et des autobiographies; des enregistrements vidéo. A cette étape de la recherche nous découvrîmes avec horreur que, si les comptes-rendus pour le NUM de la région du Kent étaient tous bien conservés au Public Record Office, à Maidstone; les comptes-rendus de la mine de Snowdown semblaient avoir complètement disparus. Certains avaient été brûlés dans des conditions similaires à celles du Leicestershire, mais d'autres, datant des années 70, avaient tout bonnement disparu. Tous les membres officiels du syndicat qui furent contactés et interrogés ne purent expliquer ce qui était advenu de ces documents. Un jour peut-être, ils réapparaîtront dans le garage ou le grenier de quelqu'un.

Les deux bassins houillers du Kent et du Leicestershire sont étudiés ensemble dans le chapitre six qui traite de la relativement courte période qui s'étend de 1974 à 1984. Or, durant ces dix années, il fut introduit le Bonus Productivity Scheme qui non seulement brisa l'unité du NUM, mais engendra aussi une certaine méfiance quant au recours parfois abusif de votes. La démocratie au sein du NUM n'était perçue que comme le reflet de l'opinion de certains mineurs et syndicats régionaux. Tout était prêt pour les dernières dissensions de la fin des années 80. Juste avant la discorde, il y eut un dernier moment d'harmonie en 1981, quand le NUM put

s'unifier et menacer d'une action sociale le projet de fermeture des mines. Thatcher fut contrainte de faire 'demi-tour', son dernier en ce qui concerne les mineurs. Après 1981, il devint évident pour tous dans l'industrie minière que des fermetures étaient imminentes et que cela serait le champ de bataille qui opposerait le NUM au gouvernement; tout le monde savait que le NCB n'était que l'instrument de la politique gouvernementale. Ce chapitre retrace les événements qui ont mené à la 'guerre' en Mars 1984 et essaie de comprendre comment les divisions au sein du NUM, qui eurent lieu durant la grève, n'auraient en fait dû surprendre personne; ils étaient plus qu'évidents bien avant la grève. Le centre nerveux de ces divisions était Arthur Scargill. Peu importe notre méfiance vis-à-vis du culte de la personnalité, il est indéniable que Scargill ait joué un rôle central dans la nature et l'évolution de la grève.

Les sources qui ont servi à ce chapitre sont en grande partie primaires et semblables à celles du chapitre cinq; mais nous avons eu la possibilité de consulter un plus grand nombre de journaux et davantage de documents du NUM et du NCB. Un journal intime qui fut l'objet d'un don nous fut d'une grande utilité pour dater certains événements bien qu'il ne contienne aucune information personnelle. Nous avons également consulté les cahiers du recensement pour les deux régions examinées.

Le chapitre sept est de loin le plus long et se divise en trois sections. Puisqu'il traite de l'événement pivot qu'est la grève des mineurs de 1984-85, il nous a paru justifié d'inclure dans la septième partie une nouvelle revue de la littérature s'y rapportant - tant de choses ayant été écrites en si peu de temps. La revue prend la forme d'une analyse critique des problèmes entourant les origines de la grève, et les raisons de son échec. Les sources sont bien entendu, de manière prédominante, secondaires, mais elles servent d'arrière plan historique et nous racontent l'histoire de la grève d'un point de vue national.

La seconde partie, cependant, concerne principalement les développements de la grève au niveau régional, s'attarde sur la façon dont les mineurs du Kent s'étaient préparés à la grève et réussirent à vivre toute une année sans revenu. Elle traite aussi du problème du piquet de grève et de l'expérience des mineurs du Kent à Coalville. La plupart des mineurs de Coalville continuèrent à travailler, mais il y eut une petite minorité qui s'y refusa: les "Dirty Thirty." Nous avons conduit des interviews avec certains de ces hommes, en particulier avec un mineur

qui avait commencé sa carrière à la mine de Snowdown puis avait déménagé dans le Leicestershire après avoir épousé une femme de là-bas. Il avait gardé ses opinions (celle des gens d'Aylesham) envers toute grève et ceux qui franchissaient le piquet de grève.

Un grand nombre des informations de cette partie fut obtenu grâce à des interviews personnelles. Elles eurent lieu sur une période de plusieurs années. Les contacts à Aylesham furent établis par des relations personnelles et familiales. Alors que cela représentait certains avantages évidents de familiarité, cela avait en même temps tout le désavantage de la familiarité engendrant le mépris. On se méfie toujours d'un "habitant" qui requiert des informations personnelles dans une communauté où elles pourraient être utilisées à mauvais essient. Mais en général, les personnes interviewées étaient heureuses de parler et cela ne leur a posé aucun problème d'apparaître sous leur véritable identité. Pour cette raison, les techniques d'interview traditionnelles pour dissimuler l'identité des personnes furent abandonnées.

Les entretiens de Coalville furent, au début, plus difficiles à organiser. Qu'un étranger requiert des informations est suspect. Cela compliqua énormément les choses lorsqu'ils découvrirent que le sujet était la grève des mineurs de 1984-85, à propos de laquelle les mineurs de Leicester sont peu loquaces pour des raisons évidentes. Ils furent doublement méfiants quand ils apprirent que leur interviewer était originaire d'une communauté minière du Kent avec laquelle ils n'avaient pas été dans les meilleurs termes. Les contacts s'établirent par l'intermédiaire du Mantle Lane Oral History Project de Coalville. Les organisatrices du projet, Jeanne Carswell et Tracy Roberts avaient déjà mené de nombreuses interviews dans la région, ce qui fut d'une aide certaine au chercheur prodigue en questions. Une fois qu'un ou deux contacts furent établis, d'autres suivirent: le nom et l'adresse de candidats susceptibles nous furent communiqués

Dans les deux communautés minières on eut recours à un questionnaire qu'on utilisa comme guide pour l'interview et un petit magnétophone fut placé devant l'interviewé. Cela eut comme premier effet de réduire le candidat au silence, ce qui n'aidait pas beaucoup; mais une fois la première 'peur' surmontée, la proximité du magnétophone procura un sentiment de sécurité car ils avaient accès au bouton pause qu'ils pouvaient presser à n'importe quel moment lorsqu'ils souhaitaient parler sans être enregistrés. Le bouton pause fut utilisé de nombreuses

fois. Des interviews officieuses eurent lieu et ne furent pas enregistrées; par deux fois la présence d'enfants dans la pièce rendit l'interview inutilisable. Un hôte peut difficilement demander aux enfants de se retirer!

Les interviews furent utilisées pour qu'elles se recoupent afin de pouvoir avancer des informations objectives sur la grève, ou de confirmer des idées ou des opinions à propos de sujets tels que l'échec que connut la grève. Des femmes furent interviewées avec ou sans leurs maris; il existe désormais une liberté dans le couple ainsi qu'une confiance qui étaient absentes dans les anciens villages miniers. Le temps de la société machiste est révolu.

La troisième partie analyse l'échec de la grève, les raisons évoquées pour expliquer cet échec, ainsi que l'après-grève, les différentes retombées dans les deux communautés étudiées depuis Mars 1985 jusqu'à la fermeture des différentes mines au début des années 90.

Le dernier chapitre, le chapitre huit, se penche une dernière fois sur des problèmes de communauté et de militantisme en ce qui concerne Aylesham et Coalville. *La masse isolée* est de nouveau étudiée pour évaluer dans quelle mesure ce concept peut convenir à l'une ou l'autre des communautés à une quelconque étape de leur développement historique. La conclusion suggère que l'influence de la mine à Aylesham se poursuit même maintenant que la mine est fermée. Il demeure une tradition de militantisme non négligeable qui devrait perdurer encore deux générations. A Coalville, cependant, le charbon a depuis longtemps cessé d'être l'industrie dominante, et le manque d'homogénéité professionnelle est une raison évoquée pour expliquer l'histoire de modération de cette communauté.

Chapter One.

Community: A Chequered History.

" 'Community': the greatest single weasel word."

- Richard Hoggart, series 'Hometruths', BBC Radio 4, 23 May, 1993.

Introduction.

"Why have community studies in Britain undergone such a decline?"¹ This is the question posed by a seemingly depressed Martin Bulmer at the beginning of his article on community/locality studies. He bemoans the loss of interest amongst British sociologists in continuing the great tradition of the community studies which saw their heyday in the 1950s and '60s. This almost total absence is even more marked by the fact that:

Community studies are alive and well in the United States.^{2 +3}

Bulmer then goes on to give a selection of recent works from the thriving field of community studies in American sociological literature concluding with the fact that even the famous 'Middletown' (Muncie, Indiana) has been the subject of a "major re-study".⁴ He does make reference to his own work in the field during the 1970s, but says it was:

... more in the nature of regional sociology than classical community studies.⁵

¹ Martin Bulmer, "The rejuvenation of community studies? Neighbours, networks and policy," in *Sociological Review*, 33/3, (August 1985), 430-48.

² Bulmer, "Community Studies".

³ Bulmer does note the existence of the "rare exception" in current British sociology. See Howard Bell and Colin Newby, *Community Studies*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971). Margaret Stacey, et al., *Power, Persistence and Change: A Second Study of Banbury*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975). A.P. Cohen, (ed.), *Belonging: Identity and Social Organisation in British Rural Culture*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983).

⁴ T. Caplow, et al., *Middletown Families: Fifty Years of Change and Continuity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

⁵ Bulmer, "Community Studies".

And, in fact, he points out that in one of those works,⁶

... explicit discussion of theories of community was relegated to an appendix, where it was noted that community studies were distinctly unfashionable.⁷

So why have specifically British community studies declined and is there any hope for the future? Are we, perhaps, already experiencing the "rejuvenation" Bulmer tentatively predicted in the title of his article? Before we consider these and other questions we must first look at some of the pioneering studies.

Community Studies: a Well Worn Path. The Theory.

The founding father of the theory of community is generally recognised to be Ferdinand Tonnies. Bell and Newby comment:

If there is a founding father of the theory of community, however, the label perhaps suits Ferdinand Tonnies more than any other individual.⁸

And the American sociologist, Dennis E. Poplin, agrees:

The typological tradition is an extremely old one...however, the German scholar Ferdinand Tonnies(1855-1936) can be considered the father of the typological tradition in sociology.⁹

⁶ M. Bulmer, (ed.) *Mining and Social Change: Durham County in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Croom Helm, 1978).

⁷ Bulmer, "Community Studies".

⁸ Bell and Newby, 23.

⁹ Dennis Poplin, *Communities: A Survey of Theories and Methods of Research*, (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1979), 125.

Tonnies' seminal work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* is usually translated as *Community and Society*,¹⁰ although others prefer *Community and Association*.¹¹ For Tonnies *gemeinschaft* is community and is characterised by three aspects: blood (kinship), place (neighbourhood) and mind (friendship). In *gemeinschaft* relationships individualism is reduced in importance in favour of shared,

...sacred traditions and a spirit of brotherhood that grows out of bonds of blood, common locality, or common mind.¹²

Place is of central importance to Tonnies' theory of community as it determines the mode of relationships between the inhabitants:

...at the very core of the community concept is the sentimental attachment to the conventions and mores of a beloved place.¹³

Personal worth in *gemeinschaft* relationships depends not on what one has done but on who one is within the community. In Bell and Newby's words:

...status is ascriptive, rather than achieved.¹⁴

This type of relationship and concentration on place results in a construct of community where,

...everyone is known and can be placed in the social structure.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ferdinand Tonnies, *Community and Society*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

¹¹ Ferdinand Tonnies, *Community and Association*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955).

¹² Poplin, 127.

¹³ Bell and Newby, 24.

¹⁴ Bell and Newby, 24.

¹⁵ Bell and Newby, 24.

In direct opposition to *gemeinschaft* is *gesellschaft* society. While the fundamental basis of *gemeinschaft* relationships is the "natural will" ideally expressed in families where sentiment reigns at the expense of personal gain, *gesellschaft* relationships are dominated by the "rational will."¹⁶ Here the individual is supreme and relationships are based on obligation, purpose and their specific function in society. Tonnies argues that human society is gradually changing/evolving from *gemeinschaft* into *gesellschaft*, particularly as a medieval craft based society is replaced by a modern capitalist economy where mass production and financial gain are the guiding principles.

It is Tonnies' theory of community and society which acts as a starting point for many of the 20th century community studies in both America and Britain. And it was not until the 1950s, and more importantly the 1960s and '70s, that writers on community seriously criticised Tonnies' concept of community, particularly his stress on the importance of place as a specifically delineated geographical area. We will consider the criticisms later.

Graeme Salaman in his book *Community and Occupation*¹⁷ deals not only with Tonnies but also with Marx, Weber, Durkheim and the Symbolic Interactionists in order to have a clearer understanding of the theoretical background to community. He reviews Marx's theory of alienation, Weber's concept of rationalisation and Durkheim's seminal work on suicide. Salaman argues that each of these writers, although not specifically concerned with the concept of community and society, as was Tonnies, did in some very important ways add to our understanding and definition of the concept. Marx pre-empted Tonnies by showing the negative effects of the increasing influence of capital on individuals transforming them into its mere servants and making work, not in itself a bad thing, inherently alienating.¹⁸ However, Marx concludes, famously and very differently from Tonnies, that there will be an increase, not a decrease, as Tonnies predicts, in solidary relationships resulting in the proletariat becoming:

¹⁶ Poplin, 128.

¹⁷ Graeme Salaman, *Community and Occupation: An Exploration of Work/Leisure Relationships*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

¹⁸ "Owing to the extensive use of machinery and to the division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine..." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 87.

...a class as a community, a class with a self-conscious sharing of interests and true class consciousness - a class for itself.¹⁹

Salaman shows Durkheim's work to be of considerable importance to the role of occupational communities, a concept to which we shall soon return. According to Durkheim modern industrial society is becoming 'anomic' - anomie being defined as a condition of lawlessness and indiscipline. Durkheim saw a direct link between this and the dramatic increase in the number of suicides, "anomic suicides" being:

...those that occur when there are industrial or financial crises or other 'disturbances of equilibrium'.²⁰

And the only way of controlling such anomie is with "...the moral forces...[existing] ... in the professional groupings..."²¹ or as Salaman concludes: the "occupational communities".²²

In his discussion of the Symbolic Interactionists and the work of G.H. Mead, Salaman comes very close to a structuralist psychoanalytical approach to the relationship between the individual and society. He quotes Mead:

The human individual is a self only in so far as he takes the attitude of another toward himself.²³

Salaman then goes on to summarise Mead:

This is the self, the Me. Co-operative behaviour then follows peoples' ability and propensity to internalise the other and react predictably, regularly and reliably

¹⁹ Salaman, 4.

²⁰ Salaman, 11.

²¹ Emile Durkheim, *Socialism*, (New York: Collier Books and Antioch Press, 1962), 245; quoted in Salaman, 13.

²² Salaman, 13.

²³ G.H. Mead *The Philosophy of the Present*, (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1932), 132: quoted in Salaman, 14.

through the sharing of symbols, meanings and values. Society is seen as resting on a consensus of agreed expectations, symbols, 'typifications', taken-for-granted regularities and shared knowledge.²⁴

The theories of the Symbolic Interactionists are directly related to the philosophy of semiotics - the science of signs and symbols as propounded by Ferdinand de Saussure(1857-1913). They are also linked to the work of the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan (1901-81). In Mead we have the 'Me' or for Lacan the 'je', and when Mead speaks of individuals in relation to each other Lacan would say 'l'autre' - the Other. For the Symbolic Interactionists the relationship between the individual and society only works when the 'I' successfully internalises the values of the significant 'Other'. And it is the significant 'Other' which is the immediate reference for "the 'I'" giving him his specific identity. For Lacan the significant 'Other' is initially mother but certain anthropologists have pioneered this structuralist methodology in their analysis of various social forms such as kinship systems, and the significant 'Other' is then widened to include family, friends and, subsequently, society. The link between psychoanalysis and the Symbolic Interactionists is not therefore as tenuous as it may at first appear to be as both are very much concerned with the identity giving process which is, of course, crucial to the concept of community and its effects on its inhabitants.

The Practice.

If Ferdinand Tonnies is widely regarded as the founding father of the theory of community the 'parents' of the practice of community studies are often considered to be an American couple, Robert and Helen Lynd:²⁵

They started work in a condition of almost total theoretical naiveté, and having set out to collect the facts adopted a current anthropological framework into which to fit them

²⁴ Salaman, 14.

²⁵ Robert S. Lynd and M. Helen, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929).

... they came to recognise a need for a theory - Lynd admits to reading Marx between the two studies.²⁶

Bell and Newby make no bones of their admiration for the Lynds and the fundamental importance of *Middletown* for the students of community:

Middletown is for the sociologist of the community what Durkheim's *Suicide* is for sociology as a whole.²⁷

If comparison with Emile Durkheim was already not praise enough Bell and Newby go on:

It represents a magnificent and imaginative leap forward. The Lynds' contribution is such that, just as *Suicide* has shaped the development of the whole discipline, *Middletown* has shaped the development of community studies ... many later achievements were only possible because of the innovations of both Durkheim and the Lynds.²⁸

And as a final superlative Bell and Newby add:

We are now on the shoulders of giants.²⁹

So just what was it the Lynds did to merit such praise from the likes of Bell and Newby?

Initially they did not set out to give a total picture of 'Middletown' - Muncie, Indiana. Their objective was to examine how religion was provided for and practised in a typical small town in mid - U.S.A. However, they soon realised that the study of one aspect of a town in

²⁶ Bell and Newby, 90.

²⁷ Bell and Newby, 82.

²⁸ Bell and Newby, 82.

²⁹ Bell and Newby, 82.

isolation, in this case religion, was meaningless, and it was necessary to relate religion to all the other activities in which the inhabitants ('actors') were implicated. The Lynds worked on the assumption that all peoples' activities can be classified under the following headings:

Getting a Living, Making a Home, Training the Young, Using Leisure, Engaging in Religious Practices, and Engaging in Community Activities.³⁰

This led the Lynds to regard the community as a whole and they subsequently wrote chapters on each of the above topics in relation to Muncie. They therefore adopted an 'ethnographic' methodology in their research, that is they attempted:

... to describe the community ... as a totality and to see the manifold and complex interrelations of its parts.³¹

The Lynds were also innovative in that they actually lived in the place of research for a period of eighteen months during 1924 - 25, and conducted interviews with the actors. They consulted a wide range of primary sources related to Muncie so that their findings were not entirely impressionistic or anecdotal, and they even discuss some of the problems in choosing Muncie and the difficulties involved with the term 'typical' claiming that:

... 'a typical city, strictly speaking does not exist' ...³²

Finally the Lynds set the pattern for future researchers by returning to Muncie ten years later, for a major re-study, along exactly the same lines as the first,³³ which Bell and Newby, ever glowing in their praise, describe as:

³⁰ R.S. Lynd and M. Helen, quoted in Bell and Newby, 83.

³¹ Poplin, 275.

³² Bell and Newby, 83.

³³ R.S. Lynd and M. Helen, *Middletown in Transition*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1937).

... an equally good, some would say better, community study ...³⁴

After the Lynds had blazed the trail, so to speak, a whole host of community researchers followed in their tracks, many of them coming from, and concentrating on, the city of Chicago, thereby forming the Chicago school, led by Robert E. Park.³⁵ One of the principle differences between them and the Lynds was that the members of the Chicago school had a very clear theoretical base, they were members of the classical school of human ecology, a methodology developed by Park, among others.³⁶ Briefly, Park argues that human society consists of the biotic and the social. The biotic exists for all creatures and plants that live communally and have developed shared patterns of co-existence. In this humans are no different from the birds and the bees. Where human society differs is in its ability to exist on a social level: people sharing a wide range of complicated relationships involving emotions, hopes and ideals. Thus human society exists on a dichotomous level: the impersonal/personal - biotic/social, and it was the intention of the Chicago school to conduct its research along these lines.

Among other American community studies reviewed by Bell and Newby and Dennis Poplin is the Yankee City Project³⁷ and a study of a suburban community.³⁸ Bell and Newby are more critical of Warner than they were of either the Lynds or the Chicago school, even though Warner does at least attempt to give a definition of community:

... 'a body of people having a common organisation or common interests and living in the same place under the same laws and regulations' .³⁹

³⁴ Bell and Newby, 84.

³⁵ Bell and Newby, 91-101.

³⁶ Robert E. Park, "Human Ecology" in *The American Journal of Sociology*, 42, (July, 1936).
Amos Hawley, *Human Ecology: A Theory of Community Structure*, (New York: Ronald, 1950).

³⁷ This was an enormous project directed by W. Lloyd Warner, the findings of which are published in five separate volumes between 1941-59 by New Haven, Yale University Press.

³⁸ Herbert J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers*, (New York: The Free Press, 1962).

³⁹ W. Lloyd Warner and Paul S. Lunt, *The Social Life of a Modern Community*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 16; quoted in Bell and Newby, 103.

However, having recognised the need for a definition, a theoretical premise upon which to work, Warner then goes on to describe community as a "'convenient microcosm for field study' and a 'laboratory'."⁴⁰ Bell and Newby are particularly angry at this opportunistic and naive approach of Warner's, and more specifically at his choice of Yankee City (Newburyport) for its assumed typicality. Indeed, Bell and Newby even criticise Warner's use of the pseudonym 'Yankee City' because it is:

... a verbal manifestation of his assumptions of the broader generalisation of his study.⁴¹

Thus Warner's sweeping generalisations and largely unsupported sociological conclusions render his studies not only unscientific, but also, in Bell and Newby's opinion, ahistorical:

His unwillingness to consult the historical record and his complete dependence on materials susceptible to traditional anthropological analysis, i.e. the acts and opinions of living members of the community, served to obliterate the distinction between the actual past and current myths about the past.⁴²

This approach led the Warner team,

... to accept uncritically the community's legends about itself.⁴³

With such damning criticism one is forced to wonder why the Yankee City project has not been confined to the dustbin of sociological history. One of the reasons it hasn't is that it has great historical value to current sociologists for being one of the first community studies of its kind: an enormous project stretching over many years concentrating on one town, and although under the auspices of one man, actually involving a fairly large team of writers,

⁴⁰ Bell and Newby, 103.

⁴¹ Bell and Newby, 101.

⁴² Bell and Newby, 102.

⁴³ Bell and Newby, 102.

analysts and fieldworkers. Another reason must be the reputation of the dynamic personality of Warner himself. Before embarking on the Yankee City project he had spent three years among the Australian aborigines; and while directing the Yankee City project he was also responsible for two other major community studies:

... a study of a southern town of about 10,000 population (Old City), and a study of a midwestern town with a population of about 6,000 (Jonesville).⁴⁴

Poplin praises the Warner studies for,

... the thoroughgoing manner in which the investigators describe and explore the class system of each community.⁴⁵

And although Warner's theories and conclusions have been subjected to heavy criticisms Poplin argues that his work is still worth reading and discussing because Warner was,

... a pioneer in the study of local stratificational systems and he has exerted great influence on subsequent research on social stratification.⁴⁶

Finally it may be argued that the glaring weaknesses and errors of over-simplification and generalisation in the Warner studies have been, and continue to be, invaluable for later researchers on community. Surely, one of the reasons for acquainting ourselves with the works of our predecessors is not only to learn what we must do, but also in order to avoid their mistakes, even if in so doing, we invent a few of our own!

⁴⁴ Poplin, 278. The results of these two studies are published, respectively, in Allison Davis, et al., *Deep South*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941); W. Loyd Warner et al., *Democracy in Jonesville*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1949).

⁴⁵ Poplin, 278.

⁴⁶ Poplin, 279. (N.B. Poplin cites several works adopting various approaches to Warner in his footnotes on p. 279).

The British Experience.

By the 1950s the concept of community studies was rapidly becoming the problem of community studies. In many ways the Lynds were fortunate in that they were entering virgin territory untroubled by theoretical arguments. However, we have seen that by 1941 Lloyd Warner felt constrained to offer a definition of community which, albeit rather simplistic, indeed perhaps because of its simplicity, was not only part of the origin of the theories but also the problems. One of the earliest and most severe criticisms came from two American sociologists, Pfantz and Duncan, who were themselves members of the Chicago school. They wrote:

The traditional anthropological perspective of Warner et. al., together with their studied indifference to previous sociological literature leads them to a failure to distinguish between 'community' on the one hand and 'society' on the other.⁴⁷

This failure, on the part of Warner and his team, to consult the background literature (sparse though it may have been) and thereby to form a solid theoretical concept of community upon which to premise was repeated by Norman Dennis et. al. in their now classic study of a coal mining community in West Yorkshire.⁴⁸ Although written some forty years ago and wide open to criticism, as we shall see, it is still seminal in the literature on the sociology of coal mining, and as thus cannot be ignored or dismissed. The number of articles and books dealing with the subject of coal and/or community published today citing *Coal Is Our Life* is proof of its continuing importance in the corpus. The reason for this being that Dennis et al. knowledgeably and authoritatively wrote about a 'typical' coal mining community and in so doing concretised for many their preconceptions about male-dominated, close-knit and politically militant, mining communities.

⁴⁷ Harold W. Pfantz and Otis Dudley Duncan, "A Critical Evaluation of Warner's Work in Stratification", in *American Sociological Review*, 15, (April 1950); quoted in Bell and Newby, 196.

⁴⁸ Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques and Clifford Slaughter, *Coal Is Our Life*, (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1956); 2nd. edition, (Tavistock Publications, 1969).

Like the Lynds, the Chicago school and Warner et al., Dennis et al. lived and interacted with the community members for a long period before publishing their results. And despite the fact that the authors deny their study is an attempt to:

... describe completely the social life of Ashton men and women,⁴⁹

Coal Is Our Life is essentially an ethnographic approach to the study of a community. The results are published in a single volume with chapters on Place and People; The Miner at Work; Trade Unionism in Ashton; Leisure and the Family; and within these chapters observations on religious practices, educational facilities and even sexual mores. The completed study does not have so much as bibliography, it has very few footnotes and no discussion of methodology, sampling techniques or the theoretical problems in doing a community study. Without any introduction the Lynds are briefly referred to and quoted for the support their study gives to Dennis et al. ideas on the importance of sport to the community.⁵⁰ In fact the section on sport in *Coal Is Our Life* is typical of much of the rest of their work: it is impressionistic and anecdotal, as with the story of what happens when the Ashton rugby team is defeated:

... "two thousand teas are thrown at t' back o' t' fire." The men are said to be too distressed to eat.⁵¹

This story is recounted without any reference or proper discussion of the significance of sport, and in particular, rugby, to the lives of the miners. Indeed this anecdote is actually referred to as "a joke"⁵² without any consideration given to the feelings of the person responsible for preparing this meal, probably the wife or mother, rejected in such a high-handed and violent fashion. And even if the "joke" is not to be taken too literally, and it is not clear that it is not,

⁴⁹ Dennis et al., 246.

⁵⁰ Dennis et al., 156.

⁵¹ Dennis et al., 157.

⁵² Dennis et al., 157.

the authors give no justification for the inclusion of this anecdote. We are simply expected to accept it at face value and form our own conclusions. But this is not the stuff of scientific sociology.

Dennis et al. analysis of other features of the community of Ashton is equally superficial, particularly in their discussion of the miner and his work and class and community solidarity. Their approach to the miner as a worker is classic marxian:

... the miner enters into the process of production by selling his labour power to an owner of capital.⁵³

The authors then go on to describe the miner's relationship to his work and his employer in order to conclude with what would seem to be a very obvious and simple fact: that for reasons of economic security the miner "... is *bound* to his work."⁵⁴ Surely very few workers in any job if suddenly granted lifetime economic independence would continue turning up at the office/school/hospital on Monday morning as usual. The man who wins a fortune on the lottery and then declares that this is not going to change his lifestyle is simply either a myth or a lunatic, for why would he bother buying a lottery ticket if he was content with his status quo? Dennis et al. spend some time in proving what the majority of people know, and certainly one hundred per cent of miners are aware of, that for a miner:

... work is the opposite of freedom, as he sees it, and yet no freedom is possible without it.⁵⁵

There then follows a discussion on industrial relations within coal mining and the miners' concept of class consciousness. These are explained in a very simplistic and somewhat condescending fashion:

⁵³ Dennis et al., 27.

⁵⁴ Dennis et al., 29.

⁵⁵ Dennis et al., 31.

He thinks not in the abstract terms of social and economic relations ... but in a more concrete way ... his pride in being a worker and his solidarity with other workers is a pride in the fact that they are real men who work hard for their living, and without them nothing in society could function.⁵⁶

This analysis was given without any oral evidence to support it and nothing to support the idea of solidarity with other workers. What do Dennis et al. mean by class solidarity? With which workers did miners have these solidary relationships? Answers to these questions are never given, they are simply assumed, and wrongly so, for the history of miners' relationships with other workers and even with other miners was not always one of solidarity but often of betrayal.⁵⁷

However, the single most important criticism of *Coal Is Our Life* is of its representation of Ashton as a typical stable coal mining community. Although the authors warn against extrapolating the findings of one community study onto the " ... whole society and its culture",⁵⁸ stating tentatively that:

... it might be entirely misleading to draw conclusions about the whole society from the study of one English community.⁵⁹

That is in effect precisely what they do do. In the penultimate sentence in the book the authors state quite categorically:

⁵⁶ Dennis et al., 33.

⁵⁷ The obvious example of this is the 1926 General Strike which Dennis et al. do not mention. However in direct contradiction of their analysis they do actually give examples of the miners divided amongst themselves. They state that "... since 1939 every single dispute has been unofficial, unsupported by the National Union of Mineworkers." They go on to cite the example of the 1947 Grimethorpe dispute in which the NUM leadership joined forces with the National Coal Board and the Government " ... in urging the miners back to work." And finally in the Winders' Strike of December 1952 the NUM actually promised to supply the NCB with substitute winders in order to break the strike. - Dennis, 63.

⁵⁸ Dennis et al., 246.

⁵⁹ Dennis et al., 246.

... we are convinced that in many respects Ashton is typical of mining communities and of the industrial working class generally.⁶⁰

The authors do accept the existence of variables in the notion of industrial community, but the nature of their study and the conclusions they reach set the pattern for future community studies and helped to establish the idea of what a typical traditional mining community looks like, even if such a thing does not actually exist. In this Dennis et al. did a disservice to future researchers of mining communities. For a long time their conclusions were accepted without contradiction; the image of Ashton and its inhabitants neatly fitted people's often sentimental ideas of miners and their communities and the nature of their work and relationships both below and above ground. These were concepts that originated in literature rather than historical sociology,⁶¹ and related to this, Ruth Glass' critical conclusion on the value of community studies may well be applied to *Coal Is Our Life*:

The poor sociologist's substitute for the novel.⁶²

Much of the myth of community has pervaded sociological thought in the last forty years and in the words of Butterworth and Weir the word 'community' has become:

... a God word. In many circumstances, when it is mentioned, we are expected to abase ourselves before it rather than attempt to define it.⁶³

⁶⁰ Dennis et al., 249-50.

⁶¹ Perhaps the two greatest exponents and founding fathers of this literary genre were Emile Zola author of *Germinal*, and D.H. Lawrence, much of whose work is dominated by his first hand observations of miners and their lives in the Nottinghamshire coalfield. This tradition has continued throughout the 20th century with various writers using mining communities as the backdrop for their novels. The list is too long and irrelevant to include in this study, but mention should be made of one fine example of the genre Clancy Sigal's *Weekend in Dinlock*, (London: Penguin, 1962); and a more recent example: Mark Hudson, *Coming Back Brockens: A Year in a Mining Village*, (London: Vintage, 1995).

⁶² Ruth Glass, "Conflict in Cities", in *Conflict in Society*, (London: Churchill, 1966), 148; quoted in Bell and Newby, 13.

⁶³ E. Butterworth and D. Weir, *The Sociology of Modern Britain*, (London: Fontana, 1970), 58.

And, as will be seen later in the discussion of the 1984-85 miners' strike, the notion of community and its preservation was at the centre of the argument as to why pits should be kept open. On many of the marches, particularly those including the women (and there were not many that didn't) placards could be seen carrying the words "Close a pit: kill a community". Similarly, when the Government announced its pit closure programme in October 1992, without having gone through the proper procedures, there was uproar on the *Conservative* back benches, and 'middle England' demanded that the decision be revoked. Arthur Scargill, the demon of 1984-85, became, overnight, a hero as he was seen to be fighting not just for miner's jobs but the preservation of a way of life.⁶⁴ And at the time of writing, and as a general election approaches, politicians are falling over themselves to be seen as communitarians (not of the European variety we might add!) arguing that the demise of community, and with it traditional family values, is possibly the single most important cause of the increase in crime.⁶⁵ This, arguably sentimental, attitude to community was noted by Bell and Newby:

For sociologists, no more than other individuals, have not always been immune to the emotive overtones that the word community consistently carry with it. Everyone - even sociologists - has wanted to live in a community.⁶⁶

However, before we continue with the critique of the concept of community, and therefore the value of community studies, it is necessary to look first at two further attempts to define community which, although severely criticised today, were groundbreaking in their time.

⁶⁴ See for example the front page of the *Daily Mirror*, 22 October 1992, showing an almost jubilant Arthur Scargill holding aloft a bouquet of flowers surrounded by well wishers and *smiling* policemen.

⁶⁵ An excellent example can be found in BBC Radio 4's series "The Unfamiliar Family", particularly Episode Three, hosted by Glenys Kinnock MEP, 20 January, 1994.

However, in an earlier BBC Radio 4 series, "Hometruths" the author, Richard Hoggart, criticised the constant reference to 'community' for being a spurious catch-all word used, particularly by those on the left, in a very sentimental way. He denied that it is at all possible to speak realistically of the 'immigrant community' or the 'gay community'. - BBC Radio 4, 23 May, 1993.

⁶⁶ Bell and Newby, 21.

Occupational Community and Isolated Mass: A Critique.

Although the term 'occupational community' is never used by Dennis et al. in their study of Ashton, that is in effect what they were writing about. The term was first coined by Blauner in 1960,⁶⁷ and was quickly adopted by sociologists of community for its convenience. According to Blauner's construct there are three defining characteristics of occupational community:

1. work relations tend to spill over into leisure-time activities - workers socialise with each other;
2. during these leisure-time activities the workers 'talk shop';
3. occupational communities are usually geographically isolated and self-enclosed, they are "little worlds in themselves", the community becomes a reference point for the residents and the occupation determines behaviour and status both at work and in the community.⁶⁸

Blauner stresses the importance of spatial isolation as a vital ingredient of the construct observing that:

... occupational communities rarely exist among urban factory workers.⁶⁹

He also argues that occupational communities are more likely to exist where there is shift work.

The importance of Blauner's work is testified to by the enormous number of books and articles that have been written since 1960, which use the term 'occupational community' either in their title or as one of their central themes. The phrase has certainly become an established part of sociological language, and the concept was almost certainly guaranteed success when

⁶⁷ R. Blauner, "Work Satisfaction and Industrial Trends in Modern Society", in W. Galenson and S.M. Lipsett, (eds.), *Labour and Trade Unionism*, (New York: Wiley, 1960).

⁶⁸ Blauner, 351.

⁶⁹ Blauner, 352.

eminent sociologists took it upon themselves to criticise it! Two such sociologists were Allcorn and Marsh.⁷⁰ In their paper Allcorn and Marsh argue that of the three criteria propounded by Blauner, only the first is easily quantifiable. The second, they believe, is more difficult for empirical research, although they do give examples which have been successful in this area, of which *Coal Is Our Life* is one. However, according to Allcorn and Marsh, the third criteria is much more complex. They argue that there are many professions/occupations where status and rank are very rigorously applied but that this does not automatically qualify them for being "little worlds in themselves".⁷¹ Thus, if Blauner insists (and it is not clear that he does) that in order to qualify as an occupational community a community must satisfy all three criteria at the same time, then Allcorn and Marsh conclude that sociologists would be hard put to find one. Interestingly, they note that perhaps only fishing and mining communities may be occupational communities according to Blauner's criteria; and, even then, it is questionable whether a community like Ashton can satisfy the criteria for long periods of time. And on that point it must be stated immediately that one of the central themes of this present research project is to determine the effect of pit closure on two mining communities.

To Blauner's criteria Allcorn and Marsh suggest some more of their own, which far from clarifying or simplifying the definition of occupational community would seem to make the construct even more complicated. They suggest that occupational communities are more likely to flourish where sons succeed their fathers and have therefore undergone some kind of,

... anticipatory socialisation in the elements of an occupational culture and are therefore somewhat more likely to remain the bearers of such a culture.⁷²

Allcorn and Marsh also include high wages as an important contributing factor to creating an occupational community. They argue that where there are high levels of earnings,

⁷⁰ D.H. Allcorn and C.M. Marsh, "Occupational Communities - Communities of What?" in Martin Bulmer, (ed.), *Working Class Images of Society*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 206-18.

⁷¹ Allcorn and Marsh, 208.

⁷² Allcorn and Marsh, 210.

... higher than those which could be obtained by leaving the industry, it seems likely that a fairly stable labour force will emerge, itself one of the possible preconditions of the development of occupational communities.⁷³

It would seem that once again only mining and fishing communities are capable of qualifying as occupational communities if these extra criteria are added to Blauner's, although both Allcorn and Marsh and Blauner seem to have forgotten or ignored the very specific work conditions of groups such as dockers and Smithfield porters which may well qualify them as comprising occupational communities. In addition, Allcorn and Marsh do not discuss at any length the unreliable nature of mining and fishing, both depending on capricious 'Mother Earth' for their economic fortunes as well as their actual lives. Even when they go on to discuss levels of sociability and solidarity this factor in mining and fishing of men's lives literally depending on one another is not mentioned as an ingredient as to why these two occupations, perhaps more than any other, are able to fit the criteria of occupational community so precisely. Added to this is the complete dismissal of the role of women as social and economic managers of the home in the face of the constant fear that one day the 'breadwinner' may not come home. Women for long regarded as passive, by the likes of Dennis et al., are only now being regarded in their true, unsentimental light. This will also be a significant point of research in this study.

In their passage on sociability and solidarity Allcorn and Marsh do at least go further than Dennis et al. did in not assuming that they are one and the same thing. Allcorn and Marsh point out that:

In some discussions of work and community, sociability and solidarity are used as more or less as interchangeable terms. Alternatively it may be supposed that solidarity is a necessary consequence of sociability.⁷⁴

⁷³ Allcorn and Marsh, 210.

⁷⁴ Allcorn and Marsh, 211.

Certainly this was the assumption made by Dennis et al. of miners in Ashton, and although Allcorn and Marsh recognise the enormous importance of friends in helping to develop personal standards and political opinions:

... groups of friends may thereby comprise the primary units of status groups in a Weberian sense...⁷⁵

they argue that sociability does not equal solidarity:

People need not like one another greatly in order to co-operate sufficiently to complete the tasks which the constraints of their common employment require. Indeed when the occasion demands, solidarity may be exhibited among those who otherwise greatly dislike one another.⁷⁶

Allcorn and Marsh develop this line of thought one stage further by suggesting that solidarity among a group or groups of workers does not imply a class solidarity or consciousness. Rather, they say, it is more likely to be evidence of occupational solidarity and/or trade union consciousness. They therefore dismiss any notion of a general working class solidarity amongst and with the miners in their 1972 strike arguing that this was probably:

... more like collective action undertaken in defence of their immediate economic interests by the workers directly concerned than like concerted action undertaken of behalf of a class.⁷⁷

This is an enormously important comment by Allcorn and Marsh which, if true, poses many problems for socio-historians of the 1970s when trade unions, particularly the NUM, began to exhibit what was widely regarded as a class consciousness and solidarity. The miners

⁷⁵ Allcorn and Marsh, 212.

⁷⁶ Allcorn and Marsh, 212-13.

⁷⁷ Allcorn and Marsh, 213.

support for the nurses in their dispute in 1977 was a case in point. Also, Allcorn and Marsh fail to differentiate between grass roots motives for industrial action and those of the various union leaders, some of whom were expressing publicly their radical political objectives, most notably Scargill himself, who at that time was leader of the Yorkshire miners. Concerning the 1972 and 1974 miners' strikes he made it quite clear that his objectives were not solely for increasing miners' wages:

You see, we took the view that we were in a class war ... We were out to defeat Heath and Heath's policies because we were fighting a government ... We had to declare WAR on them... It's as simple as that ...⁷⁸

Thus, Allcorn and Marsh's comments are problematic for an interpretation of the industrial action of the 1970s particularly because they fail to clarify their distinction between class and trade union consciousness. The one is not implicitly the other as will be seen in the strike actions of some miners. Loyalty to the union sometimes meant loyalty to the district or lodge and was not automatically given to the national union and certainly did not imply a heightened awareness of a wider class loyalty. Conversely, the majority of miners who disobey union calls for action, be they local or national, still consider themselves very much as working class and would never dream of voting for any other party than the Labour Party. This may go a long way towards explaining the almost complete lack of solidarity amongst the working class, the trade union movement and most startlingly, the NUM itself, during the 1980s. It is a theme to which we shall return.

Despite the difficulties in finding an occupational community which meets all the criteria set by Blauner, many sociologists, having adopted the term, set about describing what they regarded as occupational communities and their various components. In his book *Community and Occupation*, Salaman offers a very useful review and critique of much of the work done on occupational communities, and elsewhere⁷⁹ he rejects the by now traditional

⁷⁸ *New Left Review*, No. 92, (July-August 1975).

⁷⁹ G. Salaman, "Occupations, Community and Consciousness", in M. Bulmer, (ed.), *Working Class Images*, 219-36.

'Blauner type' occupational community while insisting on retaining the term as a very useful sociological construct. He argues that membership of an occupation equals membership of a community and he therefore concentrates on workers' conceptions of themselves, and other workers and society in general, not from either a class or a specifically geographical place point of view, but from the point of view of the workers' own membership of an occupation. Salaman suggests a possible alternative to the phrase 'occupational community': "occupational consciousness"⁸⁰ arguing that members,

... see themselves in terms of their occupational title, orient their behaviour towards their occupational colleagues (or some section of them) share an occupationally based value and belief system, associate in their non-work time with these colleagues and base their interests on their work in some way.⁸¹

Salaman believes that applying such a definition makes the term 'occupational community' both useful and empirically provable. Furthermore, it addresses the most important criticism of the term 'occupational community' which is that it is only useful as an historical, not contemporary sociological, concept, as traditional industries decline, society changes and old 'stable' occupational communities disappear. Salaman argues that only an investigation of occupation, using the concept of 'occupational community' as he defines it, can help us to analyse the individual's concept of himself in society - his social imagery. But we need to understand, says Salaman, that occupation is not simply a job title/description - it is a way of life, of sharing collective responsibilities. For Salaman, there are three principal determinants of an occupational community - "relationships, values and identity":

... being a member of an occupation as a collectivity can have consequences, significances and meanings for members of the occupation such that they tend to behave towards each other, towards members of other occupations, and towards their

⁸⁰ Salaman, "Occupations", 221.

⁸¹ Salaman, "Occupations", 222-3.

publics in similar ways and to share definitions and experiences which are significantly related to their view of society and the distribution of interests within it.⁸²

Of course Salaman recognises that there are considerable differences in occupational ideologies which are directly related to the position of the occupation, politically, economically and socially, in society. Certain occupations are able to equate their job interests with the national interest, a position described as the "privilege of power".⁸³ However, Salaman argues that this situation is only likely to come about when the occupation is a high-ranking one. And such occupations are almost entirely self-regulatory, and they control entry into, and promotion within, the occupation.

One of the most obvious examples of such an occupation is the medical profession. This fits all the criteria including, of course, that of being high-ranking. But Salaman fails to realise that many industrial occupations, miners, dockers and railwaymen, for example, while not being high-ranking have developed their own distinctive forms of self-regulation, entry into and even promotion within, their occupations. And, when a national strike in any one of these industries is imminent, the workers are often reminded, by the government and the media, how vital their industry is to the national interest and how striking is a betrayal of that interest. Remarkably, Salaman also makes no mention of the craft trades and guilds, the oldest forms of working class trade organisations which developed their own rigid systems of professional protection and self-regulation, particularly through the apprentice system which controlled who entered the profession, the working standards required, prices, wages and promotions. However, Salaman does recognise the existence of occupational value-belief systems in working class, as well as middle class, occupations, contending that class action or consciousness is:

⁸² Salaman, "Occupations", 224.

⁸³ E. Krause, *The Sociology of Occupations*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 98; quoted in Salaman, "Occupations", 226.

... more frequently a characteristic of particular occupational groups than of the working class as whole.⁸⁴

Consequently, the occupational community gives its members a sense of personal identity, of self-image, and they judge and are judged by the value-belief system, the ideology, in the community. It is for this reason, Salaman argues, that members of occupational communities resist economic or technological change within their particular profession/industry because of the subsequent, often deleterious, effects on member's status within their community.

Once again Salaman touches upon the subject of social psychology which has great significance for this study of miners in their communities. Traditionally considered as having a high level of working class consciousness resulting in militant union activity, did miners in fact have an extreme form of occupational community consciousness? To what extent was the 1984-85 miners' strike not about protecting the economic fortunes of the miners and their families, but about protecting sub-conscious factors such as status and identity which are a consequence of being a member of a very specific occupational community? This would certainly help to explain the extreme militancy of Kent miners who were not faced with the prospect of unemployment to the same extent as miners in other parts of the country. They were not fighting for their jobs for economic reasons alone but for the personal identity that came with being a miner, and it is for that reason, as we shall see later in the interviews, that almost all the Kent miners interviewed spoke longingly, sentimentally, about the past, and many said they would return to mining if given the opportunity. This hypothesis may also go some way towards explaining the traditional lack of militancy among Leicester miners. What has often been interpreted as a lack of class solidarity/consciousness among Midlands miners may in fact be a reduced sense of occupational community consciousness.

These are important but difficult questions to answer as they often involve analysing not what the miners have actually said but the *way* they say things and what has been left unsaid. It is a field more associated with deconstructive psychoanalysis and structural socio-linguistics than historical sociology, but it is one which promises rich rewards.

⁸⁴ Salaman, "Occupations", 228.

In an earlier work, Salaman develops in more detail his definition of occupational communities, establishing what he believes are their significant components and determinants by which he is able to link such diverse professions as poolroom hustlers, jazz musicians, shipbuilders, fishermen and the police.⁸⁵ In so doing Salaman is able to argue the case for the universality of the concept 'occupational community', as he defines it. However, he also makes the distinction between 'true' and 'quasi' occupational communities, the latter being:

... those communities that are the result of a geographically isolated or spatially segregated area or work place, dominated by a single firm or industry.⁸⁶

Salaman contends that these are forced communities and therefore not relevant to his definition. Unfortunately, he gives no examples of such communities, and the two obvious examples which spring to mind: mining and fishing, Salaman exempts, referring to them as 'true' occupational communities, stating, without discussion, that even without the geographical/spatial isolation they would still form communities. This 'true' - 'quasi' distinction is somewhat opaque, and at times a little irritating especially as elsewhere Salaman, having exempted mining communities from the 'quasi' definition, actually argues that they may,

... be regarded as 'quasi' occupational community ... in that they are based upon men who live together (and who may be related) and work together, rather than men who work together deciding in some sense, to live together ...⁸⁷

Salaman is unclear about whether his 'quasi' occupational community definition includes company towns which are forced occupational communities bringing men together to live in a specifically delimited area for the single purpose of work. Consequently they lack any real solidary relationships, at least at the outset, and surely mining communities are classic examples of exactly that. Therefore by what criteria are they exempted from Salaman's 'quasi'

⁸⁵ Salaman, *Community and Occupation*.

⁸⁶ Salaman, *Community and Occupation*, 20.

⁸⁷ Salaman, "Occupations", 233.

definition? He seems to be skating on thin ice as far as mining communities are concerned and one wonders to what extent he has been enticed by some of the classic, perhaps sometimes sentimental (cf. Dennis et al.) mining studies. The picture is confusing and tends to distract from Salaman's generally excellent application of the term 'occupational community' to various professions.

Salaman also goes on to use the local/cosmopolitan distinction between the two types of occupational community first defined by R.K. Merton.⁸⁸ According to this typology members of local occupational communities use as their reference group only those people with whom they actually work, and it is likely that they will also live together in spatially isolated milieu. Unfortunately Salaman again ignores craft workers who were a prime example of working class cosmopolitan occupational communities, thus exhibiting a depressing lack of historical context on his part. Cosmopolitan occupational communities are composed of all the members of a specific occupation and are linked either by their professional organisation, a feature which Salaman refers to as "organisational pervasiveness";⁸⁹ or by their own view of themselves as 'marginal' in society causing them to,

... regard their occupational peers as the only people who are suitable as friends and as the people with whom they have the most in common.⁹⁰

The first type is usually applied to working class communities whereas the second type is often used to describe middle class occupational communities. However, there are occupations which may be both local and cosmopolitan at the same time, and mining is a fine example, although Salaman does not proffer any of his own. Mining communities meet all of the criteria of the 'local' type distinction, but many miners also have a strong, well developed sense of their occupational links with other miners, including, as will be seen in the interviews, with miners in other countries. Miners, therefore, fulfill both criteria and may be unique

⁸⁸ R.K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structures*, (New York: Free Press, 1957).

⁸⁹ Salaman, *Community and Occupation*, 41.

⁹⁰ Salaman, *Community and Occupation*, 41.

amongst the working class occupations for their internationalism and acute sense of betrayal when let down by miners, anywhere.

In his review of some accounts of occupational communities Salaman looks at the work done on shipbuilders, the police, fishermen and jazz musicians, concluding that all four qualify as occupational communities. He then goes on to examine the occupations of architects, in London, and railwaymen, in Cambridge. Salaman has a specific hypothesis to test on these occupations in order to discover whether they can be considered as occupational communities. He argues that:

... involvement in work skills and tasks is a necessary, but not a sufficient determinant of an occupational community. In any particular case *involvement and at least one other determinant are present*.⁹¹

The three determinants Salaman sets out to test are: involvement in work skills and tasks, marginality and inclusivity. He also wishes to test the local/cosmopolitan distinction. Finally he intends to test the components of the occupational community model, that is: do the members regard themselves in terms of their occupational titles? Is there an occupational reference group and shared values? Is there a close relationship between work and non-work activities and interests?

In his study of railwaymen Salaman argues that almost all the necessary components and determinants of 'occupational community' are present. The railwaymen certainly saw themselves in terms of their occupation and felt pride and satisfaction in their work equating themselves, in importance, with air-line pilots and air traffic controllers, while insisting on their identity as working class. They also insisted that becoming a railwayman was not easy, but took years, and final acceptance into the occupation, an acceptance given by other railwaymen, was so important:

... for it meant that they had entered an elite brotherhood...⁹²

⁹¹ Salaman, *Community and Occupation*, 61.

Salaman quotes M. Sherif and H. Cantril in referring to this process as "ego-striving":

'Ego-striving, then, is the individual's effort to place himself in those constellations of human relationships that represent for him desirable values that will make his status or position secure.'⁹³

Once again Salaman introduces a pscho-analytical perspective and in order to explain the psychological significance of work and professional acceptance into an occupation and an occupational community he adopts a symbolic interactionist methodology. He writes:

This emphasises the ways in which man's identity is derived from his location in society - and particularly his place in the division of labour - and how this identity involves social categories and is dependent on the support and confirmation of certain significant others - in these cases, colleagues.⁹⁴

This methodology is directly related to miners and their occupational communities for, as we shall see, the occupational title 'miner' is something the men are very proud of, and it is not given lightly. And, once obtained, it is something they are loathe to part with, to the extent that even when their pit is closed and they have found alternative employment many of them still insist on their being a miner, even though they may be doing something completely different. This sense of the importance of the title 'miner' is expressed in the autobiographical story of a Bevin Boy sent to work in Snowdown Colliery in Kent in 1942: *Once a Miner*.⁹⁵ Although this book does not add anything to our study of community it does give an interesting account of work relationships below ground, and is primarily concerned with Harrison's own progress to the exalted height of 'collier'. Indeed, the title *Once a Miner*, written after the author had left mining, implies what many miners in the 1980s believe: once a

⁹² Salaman, *Community and Occupation*, 87.

⁹³ M. Sherif and H. Cantril, *The Psychology of Ego-Involvements*, (New York: Wiley, 1947), 115; quoted in Salaman, *Community and Occupation*, 87.

⁹⁴ Salaman, *Community and Occupation*, 91.

⁹⁵ Norman Harrison, *Once a Miner*, (Oxford, Geoffrey Cumberledge, Oxford University Press, 1954).

miner always a miner. Again, Salaman, using psychoanalytical terminology assesses the significance for workers, middle and working class, of being accepted into the occupation and the occupational reference group: the community:

... members of occupational communities see themselves in terms of the culture they derive from their occupational reference group, and their self-images are based upon the support of their occupational peers - or some of them - who function as their significant other, their 'audience'.⁹⁶

This non-relationship between self-imagery, occupation, community and class is explored further in a seminal paper by David Lockwood.⁹⁷ Lockwood begins his paper with a very important comment:

For the most part men visualise the class structure of their society from the vantage points of their own particular milieu, and their perceptions of the larger society will vary according to their experiences of social inequality in the smaller societies in which they live out their daily lives.⁹⁸

And to support this hypothesis Lockwood quotes E. Bott:

'In other words, the ingredients, the raw materials, of class ideology are located in the individual's various primary social experiences, rather than in his position in a socio-economic category.'⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Salaman, *Community and Occupation*, 92.

⁹⁷ David Lockwood, "Sources of Variation in Working Class Images of Society", reprinted in Bulmer, *Working Class Images*, 16-34.

⁹⁸ Lockwood, 16.

⁹⁹ E. Bott, *Family and Social Network*, (London: Tavistock, 1957), 168; quoted in Lockwood, 16.

Lockwood develops this hypothesis in order to explain such 'deviant' groups of voters as working class Conservatives, and in so doing argues the case for the existence of three types of worker: traditional 'proletarian', traditional 'deferential' and the 'privatised' worker.

In the first category are to be found such 'traditional' workers as miners, dockers, shipbuilders and, although Lockwood does not cite them, fishermen. In each case these are men in:

... industries which tend to concentrate men together in solidary communities and to isolate them from the influences of the wider society.¹⁰⁰

This is, then, Lockwood's definition of 'occupational community' but it is also a reference to a much more controversial, and much less accepted, concept of working class community: 'isolated mass',¹⁰¹ a concept to which we shall soon return. According to Lockwood such communities pressurise their members to conform to certain social patterns and actively denounce any attempts 'to be different'. They also encourage a dichotomous view of society, an 'us' and 'them' social imagery, 'them' being the:

... Bosses, managers, white-collar workers, and ultimately, the public authorities of the larger society.¹⁰²

These people are the power-holders outside the community but with the ability to influence events within it. Thus, Lockwood argues, members of such 'traditional' occupational communities have a highly developed notion of class and class conflict. This is epitomised by their often desperate attempts, usually through industrial action, to safeguard their occupation and therefore their occupational community. However, Lockwood believes that the traditional occupational communities are disappearing and:

¹⁰⁰ Lockwood, 17.

¹⁰¹ C. Kerr and A. Siegal, "The Inter-Industry Propensity to Strike - an International Comparison", in A. Kornhauser, et al., (eds.), *Industrial Conflict*, (New York: McGraw, 1954).

¹⁰² Lockwood, 18.

... the close link between place of work and community is being broken down.¹⁰³

For Lockwood the 'deferential' and 'privatised' worker does not have a notion of occupational community, and for Lockwood this means a lack of class consciousness/conflict. Either the worker accepts his position in society and neither wants nor believes it is right to aspire to a higher social category - deferential; or he has a 'pecuniary' model of society, that is a society based on wealth and income - privatised. For the latter work is a means to an end, it is not part of life, and work relationships are very limited and usually not reproduced outside. This, Lockwood points out, is the classic example of 'alienated' labour:

... unlikely to possess a strongly developed class consciousness because his involvement in work is too low to allow for strong feelings of any kind, except perhaps the desire to escape from it altogether.¹⁰⁴

Miners are, of course, not traditionally associated with this type but their being classified as entirely traditional proletarian with a keen sense of solidary relationships in an occupational community is often based on sentimental supposition rather than empirical evidence. Many Leicester miners, it will be argued, had close links with Lockwood's deferential and privatised types and showed clear evidence of pecuniary traits in their working and union relationships. And it will be seen that it is too simplistic to place workers in one of three categories when traits of all three can be found in one worker. Also, we need to understand to what extent workers, in this case miners, lose or develop one or more of Lockwood's traits when they change occupations. To what extent do ex-miners, while retaining the pride associated with their former occupation also retain their traditional proletarian status? It will be argued that while they have a reduced sense of class consciousness/loyalty, the manner in which they were deprived of their occupations as miners has in fact increased their dichotomous view of society, their sense of class conflict. And at the same time, because they

¹⁰³ Lockwood, 21.

¹⁰⁴ Lockwood, 22.

can no longer be considered as members of a single industry occupational community the pressures to conform have been removed, and ex-miners are gradually developing a more individual and pecuniary model of society, where outward shows of wealth and income are becoming more important. How far this leads to a change in political attitudes and voting behaviour will also be discussed.

Isolated Mass.

In his comparative study of South Wales and Nottinghamshire miners David Gilbert dismisses Kerr and Siegal's 'isolated mass' hypothesis as being intellectually unfashionable and generally discredited.¹⁰⁵ However, Gilbert notes the persistent interest in Kerr and Siegal's hypothesis amongst mining sociologists because it at least poses a very pertinent question concerning:

... the relationships between geo-social characteristics and collective behaviour.¹⁰⁶

Kerr and Siegal were concerned with the propensity to strike in various industries, and although their hypothesis has been well rehearsed since it first appeared in 1954, it is worth quoting the famous passage in which they themselves summarise their hypothesis:

(a) industries will be highly strike prone when the workers (i) form a relatively homogenous group which (ii) is unusually isolated from the general community and which (iii) is capable of cohesion; and (b) industries will be relatively strike free when their workers (i) are individually integrated into the larger society, (ii) are members of

¹⁰⁵ David Gilbert, *Class, Community and Collective Action: Social Change in Two British Coalfields, 1850-1926*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 9.

¹⁰⁶ Gilbert, 9.

the trade groups which are coerced by the government or the market to avoid strikes, or (iii) are so individually isolated that strike action is impossible.¹⁰⁷

One can understand the attractiveness of such a hypothesis for mining sociologists in that it attempts to explain the nature of mining communities and miners' relatively high propensity to strike. The first part of the hypothesis seems to fit precisely traditional views of mining communities and was rapidly confirmed in 1956 by Dennis et al. in *Coal Is Our Life* which established it as a 'fact'. Thus for a short time the relationship between miners' militancy and place of residence was 'proved' and this hypothesis served to satisfy the curiosity of many at a time when, as Roy Church and others have shown, miners' militancy, in Britain, was at its peak:

... by the 1950s no fewer than seventy per cent of all strikes in the U.K. were in mining and quarrying, a peak from which there was a subsequent decline both absolutely and in relative terms.¹⁰⁸

However, general acceptance of the 'isolated mass' hypothesis was relatively short-lived as there soon developed a body of criticism pointing out the discrepancies in Kerr and Siegal's argument. Rimlinger led the way with his comparative study of strikes in coal mining in Britain, France and Germany, and the United States.¹⁰⁹ He argues that mining may not automatically be a strike prone industry and that 'isolated mass' is an irrelevant concept if it is not considered alongside a country's political and cultural environment. Indeed, even if applied unilaterally to Britain the 'isolated mass' hypothesis does not satisfy the strike trends in mining since the 1950s when miners have shown less solidarity with each other than has often been suspected. Indeed,

¹⁰⁷ Kerr and Siegal, 195.

¹⁰⁸ Roy Church, Quentin Outram and David N. Smith, "Essay in Historiography: Towards a History of British Miners' Militancy" in *Bulletin for the Society of the Study of Labour History*, vol. 54, Part 1, (Spring 1989).

¹⁰⁹ G.V. Rimlinger, "International Differences in the Strike-Propensity of Coal Miners: Experiences in Four Countries", in *Industrial and Labour Relations Review*, Vol. 12, 1959, 389-405.

James MacFarlane, writing about the Denaby Main dispute in 1869 questions whether 'isolated mass' may ever have been a useful construct:

... the great struggle of 1869 was a more than local antiquarian interest. It affords more than one caution against the temptation to explain miners militancy as a function of 'isolated mass'. The coincidence between place of work and place of residence may be more apparent than real. Thus ... it will be seen that the majority of men who *lived* in Denaby were miners, but the majority of those who *worked* there lived in Mexborough and Conisborough. There is nothing to suggest that differences in place of residence were decisive. On the other hand, there is very clear evidence that it was a decided advantage to the miners to have the support of their neighbours, the well-organised glass workers and potters. In perceiving the struggle as a class conflict they helped to redefine a community by enlarging it. Communities depend upon the choices people make, and have made in the past, and cannot be understood simply in terms of measurable geographical and occupational characteristics.¹¹⁰

And Alan Campbell proves in his brilliant study of the Coatbridge and Larkhall districts in the Lanarkshire coalfield in Scotland, that, while the miners constituted a large minority of the working population, they:

... cannot be conceived of as either a geographically isolated or mono-occupational 'mass'.¹¹¹

Campbell contends that it is more useful to consider mining populations as being socially, rather than geographically, isolated. This concurs with Rimlinger's acceptance of the

¹¹⁰ James MacFarlane, "Counter-Offensive for a South Yorkshire Mining Community" in Royden Harrison, (ed.), *Independent Collier: The Coal Miner as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 180-98.

¹¹¹ Alan B. Campbell, *The Lanarkshire Miners: A Social History of their Trade Unions, 1775-1974*. (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1979), 147.

miner's own sense of his separateness, his apartness from society and indeed with Kerr and Siegal themselves who contested that mineworkers are:

... almost a 'race apart'. They live in their own separate communities ... These communities have their own codes, myths, heroes and social standards.¹¹²

However, this is not enough to prove the existence of an 'isolated mass'. Perhaps Martin Bulmer believed he had put paid to the hypothesis when he wrote:

... the 'isolated mass' hypothesis is an oversimplified view of the social structure of mining communities. In a sense it replaces the over-emphasis on class factors in the 'archetypal proletarian' view, with an over-emphasis upon the *industrial* characteristics of mining settlements ... Not only is the hypothesis empirically falsifiable, but its conceptualisation of the social structure of a mining settlement is altogether too crude and simplified. Though common industrial, occupational and derived social characteristics are indeed shared by miners everywhere, the concept of 'isolated mass' is not the way to represent them.¹¹³

Bulmer goes on to state the case for the continued use of the construct 'occupational community' believing it is more inclusive than either 'isolated mass' or 'separatist group', and it is more practical than the 'archetypal proletarian' view of the miner which is an,

... ideal type ... only a starting point, a heuristic device or standard of comparison...¹¹⁴

And, very importantly, Bulmer, contradicting Salaman's idea that if the geographical isolation or self-sufficiency of the area breaks down so will community, states that:

¹¹² Kerr and Siegal, 191.

¹¹³ Martin Bulmer, "Sociological Models of the Mining Community", in *Sociological Review*, No. 2, 1975, 61-92.

¹¹⁴ Bulmer, "Sociological Models", 82.

... the breakdown of local community autonomy of itself need not lead to the weakening of the strength of the occupational community.¹¹⁵

Bulmer's hypothesis is of vital importance to this study of miners and their families in two very different communities in Kent and Leicestershire. How did the socio-economic structures of their communities reflect the changing circumstances in their work position when their pits were first rundown and then closed?

By way of conclusion Bulmer lists his eight characteristics of an ideal type occupational community arguing that such a construct of an ideal type should serve,

... as a lens to focus the earlier theoretical discussion upon actual mining settlements.¹¹⁶

And, rather wisely, he argues that community studies should be concentrating not on confirming but disconfirming the mining community as an ideal type. If contradictions are found we should not be disillusioned:

On the contrary, the interest lies in identifying and explaining *departures from* the ideal type, in the expectation that such discrepancies will be found to occur.¹¹⁷

If Bulmer did intend to end once and for all the debate on 'isolated mass' he must be disappointed. The hypothesis continues to appear in books and articles concerned with mining communities if only, as Gilbert notes, ... to be ritually dismissed.¹¹⁸

However, one recent article is not entirely dismissive, in fact it attempts to rescue and rehabilitate the notion of 'isolated mass', but in a different form.¹¹⁹ Church and others argue that while many of the criticisms levelled at the 'isolated mass' hypothesis are justified it has in

¹¹⁵ Bulmer, "Sociological Models", 81.

¹¹⁶ Bulmer, "Sociological Models", 88.

¹¹⁷ Bulmer, "Sociological Models", 88.

¹¹⁸ Gilbert, 9.

¹¹⁹ Roy Church, Quentin Outram and David N. Smith, "The 'isolated mass' revisited: strikes in British coal mining" in *The Sociological Review*, vol. 39, No. 1, (February 1991), 55-87.

fact been too emphatically rejected. They distinguish between a 'weak form' and a 'strong form' 'isolated mass' hypothesis, that is:

... the less developed views which are to be found in the post - as well as the pre-Kerr and Siegal formulation...

are to be referred to as the 'weak form', and to Kerr and Siegal themselves as the 'strong form'.¹²⁰ Church and others contend that the growing catalogue of exceptions to the Kerr and Siegal hypothesis is not in itself sufficient to falsify it. Rather they believe:

... it may indicate no more than a need to specify the field of validity of the thesis with more precision or a need for modification.¹²¹

This would seem to be, at least in part, also in accordance with Bulmer's desired objective for contradiction and discrepancy rather than confirmation. Church and others concur with those who criticise Kerr and Siegal's hypothesis along conceptual and methodological lines but insist that the 'weak form' hypothesis is still very much a part of common currency in publications:

... which stress the relationship between coal miners' industrial activity and the characteristics of their settlements.¹²²

And with special reference to the 1984-85 miners' strike the authors note the numerous studies of the strike which:

... by focusing on the strike in the pit village or coal town, give particular importance to local social institutions in the conduct of the strike.¹²³

¹²⁰ Church et al., "The 'isolated mass' revisited", 58.

¹²¹ Church et al., "The 'isolated mass' revisited", 60.

¹²² Church et al., "The 'isolated mass' revisited", 62.

As a result of this, perhaps inadvertent, renewed interest in 'isolated mass' in one form or another, Church and others feel justified in reopening the debate over:

... the presumed relation between miners as an isolated mass and a high strike propensity...¹²⁴

The authors then embark upon a very detailed analysis of strike activity in a selection of collieries, not looking at the causes of the strikes but at the place, its distance from urban areas and the occupational concentration within it. Using a set of highly complex (at least to this researcher!) graphs and statistical formulations they conclude that:

The group of large - scale collieries in areas of high occupational concentration experienced notably higher levels of strike activity than other groups of collieries.¹²⁵

And they go on to say:

... that rurality and geographical isolation had a positive effect on local strike activity. In short, Kerr and Siegal's hypothesis does help to explain inter - colliery variations in strike activity in inter-war England and Wales.¹²⁶

Although Church and others insist that they are rejecting, rather than rehabilitating, the Kerr and Siegal hypothesis, the net effect of their research is to rehabilitate it at least in its 'weak form', thereby keeping alive the whole hypothesis just by talking and writing about it. They also bemoan the lack of community studies in recent years of the type which flourished in the 1960s and '70s. This, they believe, has caused a decrease in our understanding of industrial relations, arguing that community may well be just as important as workplace.

¹²³ Church et al., "The 'isolated mass' revisited", 62.

¹²⁴ Church et al., "The 'isolated mass' revisited", 62.

¹²⁵ Church et al., "The 'isolated mass' revisited", 62.

¹²⁶ Church et al., "The 'isolated mass' revisited", 62.

It is this 'weak form' of the Kerr and Siegal hypothesis which will be tested in the analysis of militancy/moderacy in the Kent and Leicester coal fields during 1984-85. And this will include an examination of how the very real geographical rural isolation of Aylesham in Kent compared with the town life atmosphere of Coalville in Leicester may be responsible for the heightened awareness of 'isolated mass'/occupational community in Aylesham and subsequently its increased militancy.

Conclusion.

The debate over the usefulness and relevance of community studies and more precisely over the concept 'community' has raged virtually since the onset of such studies. One of the earliest and one of the most often cited criticisms of the concept is G.A. Hillery Jr.'s article "Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement".¹²⁷ The title of his paper is ironic. Hillery gives *ninety-four* definitions of community and concludes that the only area of agreement is that 'community' deals with people. From that point on the race was on to find either a ninety fifth definition, or more commonly, and certainly more usefully, to find a single all-embracing definition. In their review of theories of community, Bell and Newby cite several attempts at defining 'community', some of which are included here as a way of showing not only the methodological problems facing anyone embarking upon a community study, but also of illustrating that there are, in fact, significant areas of agreement which even conform to Tonnies' *gemeinschaft* relations. First Marvin Sussman:

'A community is said to exist when interaction between individuals has the purpose of meeting individual needs and obtaining group goals ... a limited geographical area is another feature of community... The features of social interaction, structures for the gratification of physical, social and psychological needs, and limited geographical area are basic to the definition of community.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ G.A. Hillery Jr., "Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement", in *Rural Sociology*, 20, 1955.

¹²⁸ Marvin B. Sussman, (ed.), *Community Structure and Analysis*, (New York: Crowell, 1959), 1-2; in Bell

Bell and Newby refer to this as an "omnibus definition"¹²⁹ but criticise it for its lack of specificity in defining individual/group needs and goals. They then go on to cite Sutton and Kolaja who defined community as:

...'families residing in a relatively small area within which they have developed a more or less complete socio-cultural definition imbued with collective identification and by means of which they solve problems arising from the sharing of an area.'¹³⁰

However, as Poplin has pointed out, Sutton has more recently been party to a paper which gives *one hundred and twenty-five* definitions of community.¹³¹ More succinctly Gideon Sjoberg defines community as:

...'a collectivity of actors sharing in a limited territorial area as the base for carrying out the greatest share of their daily activities.'¹³²

Although the picture is somewhat confused clearly there are some areas of agreement about what constituents there are in 'community'. There must be common, familial ties, a delimited geographical/territorial area and common social objectives. So the wheel has turned full circle for are not these synonyms for Tonnies' *gemeinschaft* relations of blood, place and mind? And yet the debate continues as sociologists attempt more precise definitions of terms.

It is not surprising that, with confusion reigning over the precise meaning of 'community', sociologists should begin to deconstruct the concept rather than attempt to find new, more accurate definitions. Ray Pahl contributed to this new methodology in the 1960s with his paper on the rural-urban continuum.¹³³ In it Pahl notes that the phrase 'rural-urban

and Newby, 29-30.

¹²⁹ Bell and Newby, 30.

¹³⁰ Willis A. Sutton Jr. and Jivi Kolaja, "The Concept of Community" in *Rural Sociology*, 25, 1960; quoted in Bell and Newby, 31.

¹³¹ Willis A. Sutton Jr. and Thomas Munson, "Definitions of Community: 1954 through 1973". Paper presented to the American Sociological Association, New York, (August 30, 1976); quoted in Poplin, 8.

¹³² Gideon Sjoberg, "Community" in J. Gould and W.L. Kolb, *Dictionary of Sociology*, (London: Tavistock, 1965), 115; quoted in Bell and Newby, 31.

¹³³ R.E. Pahl, "The Rural-Urban Continuum", in R.E. Pahl, (ed.), *Readings in Urban Sociology*, (Oxford:

continuum' has been used to refer to the process of urbanisation. And he warns against stressing the economic, geographic and demographic influences on this process at the expense of the social forces. This was shown to be true, most famously, in Young and Willmott's study of community life in an inner-city working class area of London.¹³⁴ The authors note how a Mrs. Landon, a resident in the Bethnal Green area under study, agreed to keep a record of all the people she met and knew in the locality during one week of going out to the shops:

There were sixty-three people in all, some seen many times and thirty-eight of them relatives of at least one other person out of the sixty-three. Her story showed how she had built up a series of connexions with people she had known in school, work, or street, and, even more forcefully, how her mother and other kin acted as a means of communication between herself and the other people in her social world.¹³⁵

Young and Willmott observe later that personal characteristics are the most important way of judging people in the community rather than by their economic or educational background. Individuals are recognised by who their parents are, who they are married to or by some particular personality trait, such as being a heavy drinker or womaniser. They write:

In a community of long-standing, status, in so far as it is determined by job and income and education, is more or less irrelevant to a person's worth. He is judged instead, if he is judged at all, more in the round, as a person with the usual mixture of all kinds of qualities, some good, some bad, many indefinable. He is more of a life portrait than a figure on a scale.¹³⁶

This is the living out of *gemeinschaft* relationships where personal worth is ascribed by the community to individuals on the basis of their family and character rather than by

Pergamon, 1968), 263-297.

¹³⁴ Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, (London: Penguin, 1957);

¹³⁵ Young and Willmott, 107.

¹³⁶ Young and Willmott, 161-2.

traditional middle class standards of education and job. And, very importantly, Young and Willmott go on to note that when many of the residents were rehoused out of the area into smart new suburban housing estates the vital support system of family and kinship broke down. Interestingly what was missing from the Bethnal Green community was the solidarity provided by people (men) doing largely the same job. This was not a constructed community as is the case with mining communities but nobody can doubt the level of cohesiveness that existed there, not normally associated with city life but more traditionally associated with mining communities in rural areas. Clearly then Pahl was correct when he noted that, contrary to sentimental anti-urban tradition, urban villages/communities,

... exist in the centre of cities in which there is a high level of social cohesion based on interwoven kinship networks and a high level of primary contact with *familiar* faces.¹³⁷

And closely related, in social terms, to these is what Pahl calls the 'metropolitan village' more commonly known as commuter settlements. As a result of increased wealth for the middle and lower-middle classes, and the dramatic improvement in communications and transportation, members of these classes choose to live in rural areas while continuing to work in towns and cities. Consequently rural/urban values and lifestyles are interspersed in the rural-urban continuum, and in an oft-quoted sentence he says:

Any attempt to tie particular patterns of social relationships to specific geographical milieux is a singularly fruitless exercise.¹³⁸

Margaret Stacey, herself a reputable student of community for her work on Banbury, Oxfordshire, takes up this theme in her paper, "The Myth of Community Studies."¹³⁹ She argues that community studies must provide data about *how* particular aspects of society

¹³⁷ Pahl, 267.

¹³⁸ Pahl, 293.

¹³⁹ Margaret Stacey, "The Myth of Community Studies" in *British Journal of Sociology*, 20, 1969, 134-48.

work" in order for us to develop ideas on the larger question "Why society?"¹⁴⁰ And she believes the central question concerning 'community' is:

Is this a particular aspect of society the workings of which it is reasonable or even possible to isolate in order to examine the 'how' questions?¹⁴¹

In answer to this question Stacey writes:

It is doubtful whether the concept 'community' refers to a useful abstraction.¹⁴²

Thus in the introduction to her paper Stacey seems to have rendered community studies irrelevant. Following Pahl's argument she disputes the geographical/territorial definition of community asking:

... what system of social relations can one say has any geographic boundary except a global one?¹⁴³

She goes on to say that even that definition may soon be deficient as it may be possible to have some kind of social relations with people living on the moon!

However, despite this seemingly ludicrous and irrelevant remark, Stacey is concerned with not throwing out the baby with the bathwater. She says that it would be more useful to study the sociology of industry, religion, politics and family, and that in so doing we may well find ourselves confined to specific geographical areas. As a result she concludes that what we should be conducting is not community studies but "locality studies". She believes that discernible local social systems have developed in relatively confined localities where all the components of social life are to be found. For Stacey a 'social system' is:

¹⁴⁰ Stacey, 134.

¹⁴¹ Stacey, 134.

¹⁴² Stacey, 134.

¹⁴³ Stacey, 136.

... a set of inter-related social institutions covering all aspects of social life...¹⁴⁴

and:

A 'local social system' occurs when such a set of inter-relations exists in a geographically defined locality.¹⁴⁵

Stacey argues that a complete local social system is a theoretical model - an ideal type, and does not, indeed cannot, exist. The purpose of such an ideal type is to present a model against which locality studies may be measured. She then goes on to give thirty-one "tentative propositions"¹⁴⁶ for her ideal type 'local social system', some of which sound remarkably like definitions of 'community'! Indeed, throughout her paper Stacey never quite makes it clear her distinction between community/locality, and it is somewhat strange that her preferred phrase is 'locality studies' when she specifically concurs with Pahl's dismissal of the value of studying social relationships within the context of a particular place.

Perhaps a more useful construct is that of Norman Dennis'.¹⁴⁷ He distinguishes between 'neighbourhood communities' - generally places where people live but go elsewhere for work, education, shopping and entertainment, and 'locality communities' - communities in which people are born, live, get married, work and die. For Dennis the locality community is "a micro-cosmic social system",¹⁴⁸ and he disputes the use of the word 'community' to describe modern housing estates, stating that:

They were from the beginning archetypes of the 'not-community'...¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ Stacey, 140.

¹⁴⁵ Stacey, 140.

¹⁴⁶ Stacey, 141.

¹⁴⁷ N. Dennis, "The Popularity of the Neighbourhood Community Idea", in R. Pahl, (ed.), 74-92.

¹⁴⁸ Dennis, 80.

¹⁴⁹ Dennis, 81.

He also regrets the use of the title 'community leaders' for people within these estates because they are pre-occupied with improving only the environmental aspects of the estate - parks, gardens, lighting and so on, and are not interested in the political power structures which control the lives of the inhabitants. Dennis almost suggests that this de-politicisation may have been deliberate:

Once a large proportion of the working class population has become suburban, then attempts to make the separate residential estates into inward-looking communities, would, if successful, still further reduce the evil of class conflict. A potential trade union leader, or a potential member of the Communist Party, is obviously less threatening if he is engaged in Community Association activities instead.¹⁵⁰

Whether or not this process has been deliberate policy is, in a way, irrelevant. What is important is: is it true? Does the dismantling of local social systems/occupational communities result in a decrease in political awareness/activity? This is an important question directly relevant to this study an essential part of which is the effects of pit closures on political attitudes.

The concept of 'community' received a further blow when Alan Macfarlane dismissed it as meaningless and wrote that the belief that stable and tightly knit communities existed in Britain, and continue to exist in some pre-industrial countries, is:

... one of the most powerful myths in industrial society, shaping not only policy and government ... but also affecting thought and research.¹⁵¹

Macfarlane argues that the impossibility of sociologists to arrive at an agreed definition of 'community' is perhaps the biggest fundamental criticism of the community study method. He recommends a combination of anthropological techniques with historical method - the

¹⁵⁰ Dennis, 90.

¹⁵¹ Alan Macfarlane, "History, Anthropology and the Study of Communities", in *Social History*, 5, 1977, 631-58.

collecting of data. He also believes that 'network analysis' is a useful methodology as it looks at individuals and their inter-personal relationships. But, while recognising the usefulness of these various techniques and how historians and social anthropologists may assist each other, he fails to give an alternative to the term 'community' and to the methodology of the community study.

An interesting and useful paper on the concept of 'neighbourliness' and his personal experiences of it in a small town in Northern Ireland has been written by Anthony Buckley, "a nomadic English anthropologist".¹⁵² Upon moving into a cul-de-sac in Northern Ireland, after leaving England, Buckley soon discovered a much valued quality of 'neighbourliness' and was surprised to learn that very few of its inhabitants had lived there for more than eight years. This was not then a long established '*stable*' community and yet many of the social determinants of 'community' were present. Following this discovery of 'community' on a new housing estate, Buckley examines the concept of 'neighbourliness' in an agricultural village, Kearney, in County Down, one of his principle objectives being:

... to challenge that popular wisdom which associates 'community spirit' with settled 'communities'.¹⁵³

In order to do this he analyses the social networks of the farmers - the wealthy and permanent residents of the village, and their labourers - a highly mobile group of men as a result of unstable employment prospects. Buckley discovered amongst the labourers a highly developed sense of neighbourliness so much so that:

It was possible ... to walk into any house in the village and find your tea waiting for you.¹⁵⁴

The reason for this was, not surprisingly, economic necessity:

¹⁵² Anthony Buckley, "Neighbourliness - Myth and History", in *Oral History Journal*, vol. 11, No. 1, (Spring 1983), 44-51.

¹⁵³ Buckley, 44.

¹⁵⁴ Buckley, 48.

You could not afford to fall out with your neighbours ... because you could never be certain that tomorrow you would not need their assistance.¹⁵⁵

Thus, Buckley observes, that the need for neighbourliness amongst this mobile and insecure group of men was:

... a stratagem of cultivating ties with strangers. And it was one which was appropriate to people who felt themselves to be insecure outsiders, constantly on the move.¹⁵⁶

And because of this lifestyle:

... the need for fellowship made it necessary to cultivate intense, if short-lived relationships with people whom at first they scarcely knew.¹⁵⁷

Relating this to his own experience Buckley concludes that:

... he has discovered a sense of community among people who, like himself, are permanent strangers.¹⁵⁸

This a useful addition to the debate on community because it introduces the concept of a community of strangers. Naturally this would normally be considered as a contradiction in terms, an anathema to sociologists, but Buckley shows the necessary economic conditions which make such a community not only a reality but vital. Analysis of this idea needs to be developed with regard to constructed mining communities in order to understand to what extent 'neighbourliness' existed at their origins when the miners and their families were strangers to each other.

¹⁵⁵ Buckley, 48.

¹⁵⁶ Buckley, 50.

¹⁵⁷ Buckley, 50.

¹⁵⁸ Buckley, 51.

Of course neighbourliness is only one type of primary group relationship, a point taken up by Bulmer in the article which began this survey of community and community studies. He notes that neighbourliness is significant in:

... certain types of locality and in all localities ... at times of social stress.¹⁵⁹

And the advantage of the study of neighbourliness is that it:

...focuses upon the social relationships of geographical propinquity...one is not studying settlement patterns but social networks and the ways in which people construct their primary group relationships.¹⁶⁰

Consequently, the abstract problem of community and geographical space is avoided. However, there arises the almost biblical question, 'What constitutes a neighbour?' This question will be looked at in more detail, through interview techniques, with regard to past and present social relations in Aylesham and Coalville.

The question posed by Bulmer at the beginning of his article is answered at the end. He concludes:

The study of primary groups at the local level, of local informal social networks, is thus being renewed ... carried out by sociologists and anthropologists. The local level, the informal group, the personal tie are again receiving some of the attention that they deserve, but from new perspectives.¹⁶¹

So, community studies may be said to be alive and well in Britain too. The theoretical and methodological problems remain and must be addressed at the outset of each new study. The volume of work in the field continues to increase and with each new study comes new

¹⁵⁹ Bulmer, "Rejuvenation of Community Studies", 433.

¹⁶⁰ Bulmer, "Rejuvenation of Community Studies", 434.

¹⁶¹ Bulmer, "Rejuvenation of Community Studies", 443.

'definitions', some intended others not. But each one helps to confirm the notion that some form of study of social relationships at local level does assist us in our understanding of the fundamental sociological question: 'Why society?' It is not one of the intentional objectives of this piece of research to add new definitions to the concept of 'community', but in some small way to contribute to the answer to that question.

In recent years even the very notion of society existing as a construct which can be studied has been questioned, most (in)famously by Margaret Thatcher when she said:

There is no such thing as Society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.¹⁶²

This notion received a remarkably pre-emptive rebuff from Edward Carr writing in 1961. He identified this cult of the individual long before Thatcher hi-jacked it as part of her own political philosophy in the 1980s. What Carr said was:

Individualism, in the sense no longer of a great social movement but of false opposition between individual and society, has become today the slogan of an interested group and, because of its controversial character, a barrier to our understanding of what goes on in the World ... we shall arrive at no real understanding either of the past or of the present if we attempt to operate with the concept of an abstract individual standing outside society.¹⁶³

And later he writes:

The individual is by definition a member of a society, or probably of more than one society - call it a group, class, tribe, nation or what you will.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² *Women's Own*, 31 October, 1987.

¹⁶³ E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, (London: Penguin, 1975), 34-5.

¹⁶⁴ Carr, 47.

He could have added 'community' of course, but perhaps he was aware of the possibly dangerous intellectual ramifications already attached to that word! What is certainly very interesting for this study of coal miners is the potential for their membership of a multiplicity of socio-political groups to which individual miners felt varying levels of attachment/solidarity. And, unusual though it may be to put forward a conclusion to a thesis in an introductory chapter, it may not be possible to produce a universal definition of mining communities with a neat flawless argument for their militant/moderate behavioural patterns. For as Carr says:

Sociology is concerned with historical societies, every one of which is unique and moulded by specific historical antecedents and conditions.¹⁶⁵

However, this does not mean we down pens and take up origami as a more useful pastime with our filing pads. No, we keep trying, examining and investigating both individuals and their societies in an attempt to understand the nature of their singular and collective actions. And we do this not only because we are interested in the past, in understanding "Why?", but also because according to Carr, "good historians ... also ask the question 'Whither?'"¹⁶⁶ Consequently, if this study does minutely add to an understanding of the question 'Why Society?' then it is to be hoped, if it is good sociology, it will also contribute to the question 'Whither Society?'

¹⁶⁵ Carr, 66.

¹⁶⁶ Carr, 108.

Chapter Two.

The Leicestershire Coalfield: The National Context.

Society with a big S is as misleading a fallacy as History with a big H.

... the more sociological history becomes, and the more historical sociology becomes, the better for both.

E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, Penguin, 1975, 65-6.

Introduction: Towards a Methodology.

Edward Carr's lectures, delivered at Cambridge University in 1961, today provide as sound a methodological base for a history chapter, in what is predominantly a socio-historical thesis, as they could have done thirty-five years ago. In searching through the histories of countries, institutions and/or people(s), the historian is enormously grateful:

... for the vast winnowing process which, over the years, has put at his disposal a manageable corpus of facts.¹

A student of seventeenth-century England, for example, can hardly begin to thank Christopher Hill for having probably read more than anyone else alive on that particular subject and for continuing to present syntheses of his vast knowledge in wonderfully radical and beautifully written texts.² Unfortunately for the student of very specific local histories, concentrating on a single industry within the locality, no such giant exists. For him, the somewhat pompous statement of Lytton Strachey's, ...'ignorance is the first requisite of the historian, ignorance which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits,³ is almost a nirvana-like state at which to aim. The local historian must deal with an array of information,

¹ E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 14.

² See his most recent book, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994) in which he argues that the cause of both the English Civil War and the execution of Charles I was the Bible.

³ Lytton Strachey in Preface to *Eminent Victorians*; Carr, 14.

often extremely subjective and idiosyncratic, as is usually the case with regional newspapers and is almost always the case with short local histories lovingly written by amateur local historians who regularly entitle their tracts "A Short Walk Through ..." Not for the research student of local history the luxury of never having to read such monologues, or being able to discard them within two minutes of picking them up. No, for him everything must be collected and treasured as a possibly valuable primary source which may yield that vital piece of information raising his thesis to the level of the extraordinary. And for the student of *modern* local history, attempting to write a scholarly thesis on very recent times, there are other problems apart from the lack of authoritative texts. He is in the excitingly difficult position of having to write the history himself. As Carr points out, he "enjoys none of the advantages of this built-in ignorance"⁴ which is the stock-in-trade of the averagely competent historian; indeed:

He must cultivate this necessary ignorance for himself - the more so the nearer he comes to his own times.⁵

Thus, the writer of modern local history must first commit the heresy (according to Carr) of emulating the nineteenth century Positivist or empiricist historians, that is, to gather "the maximum number of irrefutable facts",⁶ before being able to select and discard in order to interpret and ultimately write history. In addition to this, the local historian must also be constantly aware of the national context within which he is working. Failure to do so "leads to antiquarianism rather than history."⁷ In attempting to resolve the local/national dichotomy, the historian is realising, and consequently, it is to be hoped, avoiding the pitfall of extrapolating conclusions from the unique and applying them to the general. He is then, wisely, following F. Hearn's very specific advice for the socio-historian:

⁴ Carr, 14.

⁵ Carr, 14.

⁶ Carr, 14.

⁷ J.E. Williams, "Labour in the Coalfields: A Critical Bibliography," *Society for the Study of Labour History*, (hereinafter known as the *Bulletin*), (Spring 1962), 4.

If sociohistorical critique is to be successful it must overcome the tendency toward abstract generalisation associated with the empirical - analytical approach and the kind of contextual determinism (which neglects significant historical trends) we find employed in the historical interpretative approach. To do this is to resolve the tension between the unique and the general.⁸

Interpreting history inevitably raises the dilemma of ob(sub)jectivity. This dilemma increases with almost mathematical proportionality in relation to the level of personal involvement the historian has with his chosen area of study. When that area is the one in which the historian spent the first eighteen years of his life and has remained in constant contact throughout the ensuing twenty-odd years (as is the case with this would-be historian), then it may validly be argued that intellectual objectivity is impossible. Such writers may take solace in Carr's view (this one certainly does!) that all history is subjective:

The facts of history cannot be purely objective, since they become facts of history only in virtue of the significance attached to them by the historian.⁹

Carr argues that historians, good historians, can never be totally objective because they are always involved in their study area, whatever it may be, and consequently care about it. Indeed, adding to Carr's argument, if close personal involvement precludes the writer from producing serious and valuable history, then the ultimate worthless history is the autobiography. And yet while recognising the inherent dangers in this form of historical writing, who can deny the value of such works by the likes of Winston Churchill and more recent politicians such as Dennis Healey?

Bill Williamson must surely have been apprehensive about accusations of overriding subjectivity when he set about writing a study of social change in mining, seen through the eyes

⁸ F. Hearn, *Domination, Legitimation and Resistance: The Incorporation of the Nineteenth Century English Working Class* (Greenwood Press, 1978), 4.

⁹ Carr, 120.

of his grandfather, in his own Northumberland pit village of Throckley.¹⁰ Williamson justifies his choice of subject on the very first page, to be the better forearmed, arguing:

... that biography is a form of writing and analysis appropriate to the study of social change and representing a way of reconciling the work of historians and sociologists.¹¹

And he echoes Carr's point that:

Society and the individual are inseparable; they are necessary and complimentary to each other, not opposites ... the individual apart from society would be both speechless and mindless.¹²

Williamson states that the:

... actions of men are subjectively meaningful and explanation involves taking into account the viewpoint of the men themselves ...[the] subjective world of the person is a shared one patterned by culture.¹³

And perhaps feeling that further justification of his methodology is required, Williamson refers to the now classic study *The Polish Peasant*, which argued that:

Social institutions cannot fully be understood unless studied in relation to the personal experience of their members.¹⁴

Williamson goes on to quote the authors directly:

¹⁰ Bill Williamson, *Class, Culture and Community: A Biographical Study of Social Change in Mining*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).

¹¹ Williamson, 1.

¹² Carr, 31.

¹³ Williamson, 4.

¹⁴ Williamson, 10.

"Personal life records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material."¹⁵

Oral history as method is also very important to Williamson's study, as it is to this one, and although more will be said about this later, it is interesting to note that Williamson wishes to re-claim the oral history method from the realms of literary tradition, so that it,

... should not be something left entirely to the imaginative pen of the writer; it is meat, too, for the historian and the sociologist.¹⁶

Having justified his methodology, Williamson then goes on to show that the subjective historian is capable of producing first-class analysis of the people and institutions closest to him. His account of union militancy/moderacy, the 1926 lock-out and the role of women in a mining village are themes to which this thesis will return on a regular basis.

Finally, in this introduction, before getting down to the business of writing history, we return to Carr for a brief look at the responsibilities of the historian in the modern age. He begins by rejecting the notion that there are universal laws or rules in sociology; sociology is not an exact science. Thus, quoting the great French social historian, Georges Sorel, he says:

"One should proceed by feeling one's way; one should try out probable and partial hypotheses, and be satisfied with provisional approximations so as always to leave the door open to progressive correction."¹⁷

This finds an echo in Alan Campbell's thorough and excellent account of two distinct mining communities in Lanarkshire, Scotland, in the second half of the nineteenth century.

¹⁵ W.I. Thomas, and F. Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, (New York: Dover, 1958), Vol. II, 1832; in Williamson, 10.

¹⁶ Williamson, 4.

¹⁷ Georges Sorel, *Materiaux d'une Théorie du Proletariat*, (1919), 7; Carr, 61.

Having examined the classic socio-political theory 'isolated mass' as a way of explaining miners' militancy, or the lack thereof, and miners' unions, he rejects it as inappropriate, claiming that:

... the differing patterns of trade unionism in the two districts were the result of a complex interrelation of forces and defy reduction to a set of discrete sociological equations.¹⁸

Although perhaps frustratingly over-cautious for those wishing to produce universal theses, Sorel's advice and Campbell's conclusion should be pinned above the desk of every would be socio-historian, particularly those entering the veritable minefield of the history of coal mining communities in an attempt to understand the origins of the militant/moderate coal miner and his community. And in a phrase directly applicable to this problem, Carr says:

The sociologist, the economist, or the historian need to penetrate into forms of human behaviour in which the will is active, to ascertain why the human beings who are the object of his study willed to act as they did.¹⁹

Using this as a methodology it is perfectly reasonable and correct to examine the (un)conscious motives of those miners and their families who consistently supported militant/direct action against the National Coal Board and/or the Government, and those who did not. But first some history ...

Coalville: Early Origins.

The history of coal mining in the North West Leicestershire region is a very long one and may go back to Roman times, although only archeological, not documentary, evidence

¹⁸ Alan Campbell, *The Lanarkshire Miners: A Social History of their Trade Unions* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1979).

¹⁹ Carr, 70.

exists for it. Dennis Baker in his history of the origins of Coalville has done some vital research using both primary and secondary sources, and he shows that the first written evidence of coal mining in the area comes from 1204:

In 1204 Philip, son of Eilnod, is recorded as giving to Rudulf, son of Gerbold, a piece of land worth two shillings 'in Swannington where cole is found' ...²⁰

The extraction of coal in the thirteenth century in this region was clearly a profitable business, coal being used for the payment of rents and to buy land in the area.²¹ There is also evidence that it was used locally for the smelting of iron.²² Coal mining in the medieval period would have been a relatively (relative to today) simple affair as the coal came to the surface on the hillsides, and miners, or more accurately, diggers, were able to shovel the coal from the outcropping seams. This method could not last long, however, as the surface coal was rapidly exhausted and the men had to mine into the sides of the hills, creating what are known as 'drift mines', or sink narrow shafts and get the coal in as wide a circumference as was safely possible around the shaft, creating a cavity with a bell-like appearance, hence the name: 'bell pits'. Both methods were obviously more complicated than the simple shovelling technique and consequently more sophisticated machinery and technology were required. This necessitated the involvement of men with capital who were prepared to invest in 'large scale' coal mining enterprises. Colin Griffin, in his three-volume history of the Leicestershire miners, notes the existence of the Beaumont family at Coleorton, who, "... were probably the most active of the large landowners cum colliery owners in the coalfield."²³

Griffin draws on his own enormous doctoral thesis²⁴ to provide detailed evidence of other gentry families such as the Willoughbys and the smaller landowners such as William Bale

²⁰ C. Fox-Strangways, *The Geology of the Leicestershire and South-Derbyshire Coalfield*, (London, 1907)1; in Dennis W. Baker, *Coalville: The First Seventy-Five Years, 1833-1908*, (Leicestershire Libraries and Information Service, 1983), 14.

²¹ Baker, 14.

²² Baker, 14

²³ Colin Griffin, *The Leicestershire and South Derbyshire Miners, Volume I 1840-1914*, (Leicestershire: National Union of Mineworkers, 1981) 1.

²⁴ Colin Griffin, *The Economic and Social Development of the Leicestershire and South Derbyshire Coalfield, 1550-1914*, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Nottingham, 1969.

and Thomas Henshaw who were actively involved in coal mining in the Leicestershire area in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²⁵

As timber became more scarce in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, due to the large-scale felling of forests, the demand for coal as a source of energy and fuel increased. Consequently the shallow bell pits worked by a mere handful of miners were quite inadequate. Deeper mines had to be sunk and new techniques of getting the coal devised. The most common were 'pillar and stall' or 'longwall' methods. By both methods a shaft was sunk and the miners would then cut or 'head' horizontally into the coal seams. Clearly the most pressing danger was that of roof falls. By the pillar and stall method the miners would not take all the coal available but would leave small columns of coal at regular intervals which acted as natural supports. Using the longwall method the miners would cut *all* the coal and use pieces of timber as roof supports. Both methods continued to be used by British miners right up to the middle of the twentieth century when steel-pressurised 'chocks' replaced the timber or coal supports.

With the increase in mining technology came the need for a more stable, larger and trained workforce at each pit. As the job was now far more dangerous, attracting men into the industry and keeping them there became increasingly more difficult. It was in the mineowner's interests, therefore, to provide some form of insurance and pension schemes as well as subsidised tied housing. Thus began the necessary tradition of the socialisation of miners and their sons into the psychology of mining and the resigned acceptance of its inherent dangers by their wives and mothers. Added to this was the vital ingredient of high wages, that is, higher than those of the local agricultural workers,²⁶ and we have all the principal components of Allcorn and Marsh's occupational community.²⁷ However, before one begins to nurture ideas of friendly close-knit communities inhabited by prosperous healthy miners, one should read Baker's account of beatings, sackings and injuries.²⁸

Throughout the life of the Leicestershire coalfield, water was a consistent problem. Mineowners cut soughs, often brick-lined, to drain off the water, and crude waterwheel

²⁵ Griffin, 1981, 2-3.

²⁶ Griffin, 6.

²⁷ D.H. Allcorn, C.M. Marsh, "Occupational Communities - Communities of What?" in Martin Bulmer, (ed.), *Working Class Images of Society*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975).

²⁸ Baker, 17.

engines were used in sometimes vain attempts to save the mines - in 1684 the Silver Hill pit at Coleorton was finally abandoned due to flooding.²⁹ Miners were sometimes paid extra for working in wet conditions.³⁰ The problem was greatly alleviated, although never completely solved, by the arrival of Thomas Newcomen's atmospheric steam pump engine in 1708, which was perfected by Newcomen and Thomas Savery in 1712.

Another problem for the mineowners was the inadequate communications network. The roads from the pits to the city of Leicester were very poor and sometimes impassable in winter. Transporting coal over distances of fifteen miles was a major undertaking and sometimes either physically impossible or financially unviable. Consequently there was a very limited market for Leicestershire coal, often consisting of just the local villages. And despite the improvements in road transport in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, thanks to the introduction of turnpike roads and the invention of tarmac, it was not until the coming of the railways that the Leicestershire coalfield could truly develop and expand to take advantage of the enormous industrial and domestic demand for coal.

The Birth of Coalville.

The town of Coalville owes its origins to William Stenson, a mining engineer from Coleorton. In the 1820s he began to test for coal in a farming area just north of a road named Long Lane, in the parish of Whitwick. Realising that he would meet with the perennial problem of how to transport any coal produced, he decided to talk with John Ellis, a local landowner and entrepreneur, about the possibility of constructing a rail link with Leicester. Ellis, who had personal connections with the great railway and steam train engineers, George and Robert Stephenson, approved of Stenson's plan and invited the Stephensons to investigate the possibilities. George Stephenson readily agreed and in 1829 a committee was set up in Leicester in order to draft a formal application for planning permission to Parliament. Parliament approved the scheme on 29 May 1830, authorising the Leicester and Swannington

²⁹ Baker, 16.

³⁰ Griffin, 6.

Railway Company (as it had become known) to construct a railway from West Bridge in Leicester to Swannington, with branch lines to the principle collieries at Bagworth, Ibstock and Long Lane.³¹ The line reached Long Lane in April 1833 and finally arrived at Swannington in August of the same year. The success of the line for the collieries was immediate, coal selling in Leicester at ten shillings per ton, compared with Derbyshire coal, which benefited from a canal link with Leicester, selling at sixteen shillings per ton.³²

The involvement of the Stephensons in the area continued beyond the construction of the railway when George bought the Snibston Estate in 1831 and sank a shaft opposite Whitwick colliery, and a second shaft next to Long Lane. This second shaft proved to be the more successful, operating right up to 1983 as Snibston Colliery.

When the new pits at Whitwick and Long Lane became operational, a new labour force was obviously required. It seems that Stenson employed local men, either miners from the closed pits in Swannington³³ or agricultural labourers who wanted the higher wages available in coal mining. (Although, as Engels sardonically pointed out in his classic study of the English working class, miners' wages were higher than agricultural labourers', only because these labourers were living "at starvation rates".³⁴) Stephenson, on the other hand, wanted a more experienced workforce and invited Durham workers to come to Leicester, offering them free rail passage (that was the least *George Stephenson* could do!) and good accommodation.³⁵ The houses he built were made of stone, possibly got from the colliery itself, and were placed conveniently next to Snibstone mine. They were known as Coalville Place and Baker suggests that this is possibly the origin of the town's name, although he also points out that Stenson had built a house on Long Lane naming it 'Coalville House', and perhaps this was at the origin of the town's name.³⁶ Whatever the origin, Baker indicates that the place - Coalville - clearly

³¹ Baker, 31.

³² Baker, 35.

³³ Baker, 42.

³⁴ Frederik Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1984), 270. Griffin also draws the comparison between miners' and agricultural labourers' wages in Griffin, ch. 5.

³⁵ Baker, 42.

³⁶ Baker, 42.

existed by the 1840s, although it remained synonymous with the name 'Long Lane' for many years.³⁷

By 1841, about fourteen hundred miners were employed in the Leicestershire coalfield.³⁸ There were three sources of labour: the natural growth of the mining population, the vast majority of sons following their fathers down the pit, immigrant miners, and men from other occupations, for the pecuniary reason noted above. However, this last category were the least popular, both with experienced miners and employers. There was an ingrained prejudice against outsiders which can be seen in the comment of W.G. Philips, a colliery manager:

... 'good colliers are the sons of colliers, you cannot make them out of anybody. You can make good labouring men out of agricultural labourers but not colliers upon whom the safety of the mine falls. Stallmen cannot be made out of the surplus agricultural labour or any other labour that exists in the country.'³⁹

Such prejudice continued into the twentieth century and was certainly the experience of many a 'Bevin Boy'.⁴⁰

There exists early evidence of company paternalism in Coalville, in the traditional form of company villages. Stephenson built good quality houses for his mining officials, known as 'Deputies Row', and he insisted that these men:

... appear about the town clean and well dressed at all times.⁴¹

Stephenson was also involved in constructing a community for his ordinary miners and their families, building miners' cottages with gardens, churches and church schools. Stephenson's miners did not work on Sundays or religious holidays and were given a half day

³⁷ Baker, 42.

³⁸ Griffin, 72.

³⁹ Griffin, 74-5.

⁴⁰ For the experience of one such miner see Norman Harrison, *Once a Miner*, (Oxford: Geoffrey Cumberledge, Oxford University Press, 1954).

⁴¹ Baker, 42.

off on pay day every fortnight.⁴² Whether his attitudes stemmed from his well known Quaker beliefs, or whether it was a deliberate attempt to control miners' behaviour and, with it, their political consciousness/activity, we do not know. In a way the question is irrelevant. As we shall see, the conclusions reached by Waller concerning the effects of company villages on miners' moderate political tendencies in the Nottinghamshire coalfield;⁴³ and the similar results of company paternalism at Cresswell colliery in Derbyshire,⁴⁴ are equally borne out in the markedly deferential and acquiescent attitudes of the Coalville miners. Griffin identifies three types of colliery owner in the Coalville region:

... landowners mining their own coal, partnerships of mining entrepreneurs and ... private and public limited liability companies.⁴⁵

The first category, the landowners, like the Beaumonts, gradually withdrew from mining during the nineteenth century due to the high costs and financial risks involved, although they continued to lease their lands for mining operations to the other two types of colliery owners.

The second category, the entrepreneurial partnerships, was also rare for the same reason as the first, although it did include, of course, the Stephensons.

By far the most important category of colliery owners was the third - the limited liability companies. Griffin shows how the three companies operating in the Coalville region: Whitwick, Ibstock and South Leicester, were able to invest huge sums of money in the industry, thereby ensuring a period of expansion and the long-term survival of the coalfield.⁴⁶

Wages and conditions are obviously of vital interest to the miner and his family, but they are also crucial to the sociologist who is attempting to understand causes of militant/moderate behaviour. For much of the nineteenth century, Coalville miners' wages

⁴² Janet Spavold, "The Opening and early working of Snibston Colliery" in Baker, 55-8.

⁴³ Robert J. Waller, *The Dukeries Transformed: The Social and Political Development of a Twentieth Century Coalfield*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), ch. 4.

⁴⁴ "Essay in Oral History: Company Paternalism and the Butty System. - Conversations with Cresswell residents," in the *Bulletin*, 46, (Spring 1983).

⁴⁵ Griffin, 16.

⁴⁶ Griffin, 20.

fluctuated according to the season as they would often find themselves working a three day week during the summer months when demand was low. And as miners were paid on a piece-rate basis, then their income varied from week to week according to production figures. This meant significant wage differences between collieries in the region and even differences between miners within the same colliery, as some miners were working on harder stints (less rich seams) than others.⁴⁷ Most miners were also paid under the detested 'butty system', whereby one miner, the 'butty', a sub-contractor, was responsible for a certain stint; he chose the men who would work with him and paid them out of a set sum of money given him by the company. Consequently, a man who fell foul of his butty could find himself working in a difficult area and/or receiving less in his pay packet.⁴⁸ Such practices were hardly conducive to miners' solidarity, even though they did engender militant feelings of injustice. However, the target of such injustices were very often other miners - the butties, who were obviously the victims not only of their own avarice, but also of the colliers' frustrated projections of anger against the real perpetrators of such a divisive system: the employers. We shall return to the 'butty system' in our discussion of miners' militancy.

Pit conditions are also an important determinant in a miner's level of political consciousness and militancy. Griffin shows that during their early years, Coalville pits were especially dangerous, particularly in comparison with other Midlands collieries.⁴⁹ This he puts down to unsafe practices by the men who were keen to work faster in order to earn more.⁵⁰ This would certainly go a long way towards explaining why roof falls were the single most important cause of mortality, accounting for 138 deaths, 47% of all mortalities, during the period 1854-1909.⁵¹ However, by the 1870s the safety record in Coalville had improved, as the following table shows:

⁴⁷ Griffin, 80.

⁴⁸ The 'butty system' is of enormous importance to an understanding of the Kent coalfield and has been well researched by Bob Goffee; R. Goffee, "The Butty System and the Kent Coalfield" in the *Bulletin*, No. 34, (Spring 1977).

⁴⁹ Griffin, 93.

⁵⁰ It is important to note that Leicester was once again at the forefront of the debate about the re-introduction of the productivity bonus scheme in 1977, refusing to accept arguments that it would increase dangers and ruin miners' hard won solidarity. It is another important subject which has its place at a later stage in this thesis.

⁵¹ Griffin, 95.

Date	No. of Deaths in the Leics. region
1860-69	64
1870-79	46
1880-89	30
1890-99	70
1900-09	35

Source: HM Inspector of Mines Reports; Midland District 1860-1909.⁵²

The aberration in the 1890s was due to the Whitwick colliery disaster on 19 April 1898, when a fire underground killed thirty-five men. Griffin notes one comment in 1919 (although rather irritatingly he gives no source) on the improved safety record being due:

'partly [to] improved methods of mining, partly to greater knowledge and skill, better discipline and greater loyalty to one another of those engaged in the industry.'⁵³

The formation of a miners' union in the Coalville area, to fight for better wages and conditions and to protect the miners from discrimination and unfair dismissal, was a long and arduous process, as it was in other areas throughout the country, with the miners themselves sometimes being their own worst enemies.

The first serious attempt at organising in Coalville was in August 1842, when the miners formed a strike committee led by Samuel Smith of Whitwick, Robert Howe of Snibston and William Walker of Coleorton.⁵⁴ The grievance was a local one - the owners wished to increase the tonnage without increasing wages, and the miners were angry about the practice of not being paid for tubs which were deemed too full of slack. Although theirs was a strictly local grievance, the Coalville miners were probably encouraged by the national sympathy for miners after the Royal Commission on Mines in 1842 brought to the bourgeois public's attention, for the first time, the conditions in the mines. It seems that the Chartist Movement

⁵² Griffin, 93.

⁵³ Griffin, 95.

⁵⁴ Griffin, 113.

also tried to take advantage of the Coalville miners' anger but were unwelcome.⁵⁵ Indeed, very early signs of Leicester miners' moderacy can be identified in their manner of opening mass meetings:

... with prayers for the political establishment and 'more particularly for the masters whose hearts they implored Heaven to open.'⁵⁶

The strike lasted three weeks and was solid until Snibston miners accepted the owners offer of no change in the tonnage rate and no pay for tubs containing slack. Whitwick rejected this compromise, but the miners were now openly split and everybody was back at work on the owners' terms by 25 August.⁵⁷

Despite the failure of the 1842 dispute, the Coalville miners continued to organise, affiliating in 1844 to the Miners' Association of Great Britain and Ireland. This had been formed in 1841 in the Scottish and northern English coalfields and rapidly spread southwards into Lancashire, Yorkshire and Staffordshire. It was led by an ex-miner turned publican from Newcastle, Martin Jude, and a Chartist solicitor from Bristol, W.P. Roberts, who was paid £1000 per year out of union funds and became known as the 'pitmen's Attorney General'.⁵⁸ Roberts was a remarkably able and dynamic man and totally committed to the miners, appearing all over the country to represent them in court cases.⁵⁹ He was particularly active in drawing up proposals for a new agreement which was presented to the mine-owners in the Durham coalfield in March 1844. The miners wanted public inspectors to control conditions and the coal weights (disputes often occurring over methods of weighing the coal), guaranteed four days work per week (miners often working as little as two or three days during the summer period when demand was low) and an end to the contract system, whereby the owners had the annual option on whether or not to renew their miners' contracts, obviously creating great instability among the workforce. This latter point was particularly important as the

⁵⁵ Colin Griffin, "Chartism and the Miners in the early 1840s" in the *Bulletin*, 22, (Spring 1971).

⁵⁶ The Leicester Chronicle, 19 August, 1842; Griffin, (1981), 114.

⁵⁷ The Leicester Chronicle, 26 August, 1842; Griffin, 114.

⁵⁸ Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815-1870*, (Oxford University Press, 1979), 156.

⁵⁹ Engels, 278-85.

contracts in Durham were due for renewal on 31 March. The Miners Association also wished to restrict production in order to push up the price of coal, thereby increasing profits which it hoped would lead to an increase in wages. All proposals were rejected by the owners and the Miners Association called for a national miners' strike, which began on 31 March 1844.

The strike in the north lasted nearly four months and was marked by an impressive display of solidarity and determination by the miners and their wives before it was crushed by the owners' decision to turn the miners and their families out of their tied cottages onto the streets. This was done, regardless of age or health, by the police and armed soldiers. Robert Colls argues that, in spite of its failure, the 1844 dispute was a major turning point in the development of community and union militancy in the northern coalfield. He says:

The classic mining community of the late nineteenth century took its structure - indeed it took its 'community' - from the associations and conflicts of work, culture and protest ... The pit village was an overwhelmingly proletarian place based upon a glaring division of Labour and Capital. It had long been such. What was different, what was 'classic', was the way in which the pit village corresponded to descriptive and prescriptive images of an English working class. The consciousness of this class could no longer be denied ... the new accent was on union, benefit, education, the regulation of labour, by labour.⁶⁰

Although rather romantic and sweeping in its generalisations, Coll's study does show the growing class consciousness of the miners, their awareness of their position in the inherently conflictual capitalist system. They were models of Edward Thompson's now famous thesis:

The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Robert Colls, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield: Work, Culture and Protest 1790-1850*, (Manchester University Press, 1987), 305-6.

⁶¹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 8.

The miners' emphasis on union and collective responsibility, and their detestation of those among them who broke with it, is summed up in Hobsbawm's analysis of the solidarity and the loyalty of what he calls:

... the new proletariat. They were not held together by the fact of being poor in the same place, but by the fact that working together in large numbers, co-operating in work, relying on each other, was their very life. Unbroken solidarity was their only weapon, for only thus could they demonstrate their single but decisive asset, collective indispensability. 'No strike-breaking' ... was - and has remained - the first commandment in their moral code; the breaker of solidarity (described by the morally loaded adjective 'black' as in 'blackleg') was the Judas of their community.⁶²

Describing the militancy of the proletariat, Hobsbawm, in language reminiscent of Engels' passionate and stirring style when he described the onset of the 1844 miners' strike, "War was thus declared"⁶³, wrote:

Once they had acquired even a flickering of political consciousness, their demonstrations were not the mere occasional eruptions of an exasperated 'mob', which easily relapsed into apathy. They were the stirrings of an army.⁶⁴

The experience of the Leicester miners in the 1844 strike does not, however, bear out the high ideals of community and working class solidarity described by Colls, Thompson and Hobsbawm. In March 1844, they had agreed, in line with national policy, to reduce output by one third, thereby hoping to increase profits and wages. The Coalville miners also held regular public mass meetings in Coalville and Leicester town centre in order to boost morale and raise public sympathy, as well as funds, of course. However, solidarity in the union was undermined

⁶² Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848*, (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1995), 211-12.

⁶³ Engels, 279.

⁶⁴ Hobsbawm, 212.

by the fact that the leaders themselves were split. Two of them, James Bowers and Joseph Mason, wished to fight the strike in pursuance of the policies of the Miners Association. But a third, Robert Howe, from Snibston, believed that Coalville miners should concentrate on local grievances.⁶⁵

The coal owners in Leicester actually benefited from the strike. In the first two months of April the fall in production increased the price of coal stocks to eight shillings per ton; this did not benefit the miners, as no wages were being paid. The owners also exhibited far more solidarity amongst themselves than did the Coalville miners. In the words of Cole and Postgate:

The enemy, the capitalist class ... was enormously stronger than ... believed... So far from being in decay, it had during this period ... begun to use fully its economic powers of expansion for the first time, and had provided itself with legal instruments which enabled its progress to astonish the world.⁶⁶

This was certainly the case of the Coalville mine-owners, who did not hesitate to use the magistrates courts to stop the miners from marching and holding public meetings. And on 26 April they imposed a general lock-out, clearly showing they were prepared for a long dispute, and thereby putting pressure on the miners. By the beginning of May many miners had returned to work on the owners' terms: they must leave the union. The Snibston owners also offered increased wages in order to take advantage of the inflated price of coal by maximising output. The trickle back to work then became, in Griffin's word, a "stampede".⁶⁷

The defeats of 1842 and 1844 had a devastating effect on the attempts of Leicester miners to organise. Echoing the thesis of Cole and Postgate, Griffin writes:

⁶⁵ Griffin, 115.

⁶⁶ G.D.H. Cole, and Raymond Postgate, *The Common People, 1746-1946*. (London: Methuen, 1981), 291.

⁶⁷ Griffin, 116.

... the miners felt not so much content with their lot as impotent in the face of a more powerful enemy determined to stamp out any nascent trade union that might be organised.⁶⁸

Throughout the 1850s and '60s miners all over the country were on the defensive except perhaps in Scotland where the very able and paradoxical Alexander MacDonald played a central role in the formation of the Miners National Association (MNA) in 1863.⁶⁹ This was a relatively moderate union which concentrated, not upon militating for better wages and conditions, but on lobbying parliament for improved mines regulations. Thus was established a long tradition of moderacy among British miners and a belief in the democratic processes, not a tradition in line with the public perception of miners as essentially militant political animals. Indeed, it is important to point out that the miners played no real part in the formation of the Labour Party at the end of the nineteenth century, refusing to sever their ties with the Liberal Party until 1909, when they officially associated with the Labour Party.

Following the creation of the MNA, the Coalville miners regrouped and in 1864 struck for an increase of two pennies in the tonnage rate. The strike was solid for two weeks and the owners were forced to concede to the miners' demands. Encouraged by this success, the Coalville union survived, meeting at lodge level only and not taking an active part in national union politics.⁷⁰

The next major dispute was in January 1872 and was less successful. The issue at stake this time was hours - the union wanting a standard nine hour day. Whitwick and Bagworth owners gave in, but those at Snibston and Coleorton offered a two penny increase in the tonnage rate. This appeal to the pecuniary nature of the miners was too great for the men at Snibston who returned to work, deserting their Coleorton colleagues.⁷¹ Such divisiveness in

⁶⁸ Griffin, 118.

⁶⁹ The political and personal character of MacDonald are important both for an understanding of the aims and methods of the MNA and later the Lib-Lab M.P.s. It is not within the scope or the remit of this thesis to do so but those wishing to delve further into his activities could certainly do worse than starting with Campbell and/or Fred Reid, "Alexander MacDonald and the Crisis of the Independent Collier, 1872-1874", in Royden Harrison, (ed.), *Independent Collier: The Coal Miner as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered*, (London: St. Martin's Press, 1978).

⁷⁰ Griffin 118.

⁷¹ Griffin, 119.

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⁷⁰ Griffin 118.

⁷¹ Griffin, 119.

the Leicestershire coalfield at both local and national level is to show itself time and again throughout its history. Another example is in April 1873 when the Leicester miners struck for a six penny increase in the tonnage rate. The owners refused and this time it was the Whitwick men who broke ranks and went back to work first, on the owners' terms, soon to be followed by the miners from the other pits. However, in stark contrast to these experiences was the strike that took place in the summer of 1873.

Once again, the miners demanded a six penny increase; this time they were offered a five penny increase. They accepted. But they also demanded the implementation of the 1872 Mines Act clause concerning the weighing of coal. This said a ton was to consist of twenty hundredweight, not twenty-one as previously, and that a checkweighman, appointed by the union at each pit, was to verify the weights. The Coalville owners rejected these demands and an area strike broke out. Within two weeks the owners' opposition collapsed and all union demands conceded to.⁷² What was different? What had happened in the few short months since their defeats in January 1872 and April 1873 and their dramatic success in August 1873?

Firstly, in June 1873 the Leicester miners' union joined with that of Warwickshire's to form the Leicestershire and Warwickshire Amalgamated Union of Miners (LWAUM), and affiliated to the Amalgamated Association of Miners (AAM), not the MNA. The AAM had been formed in 1869 in Lancashire and was led by Thomas Halliday. It was more of a national union than MacDonald's MNA, which was primarily an inter-county or federal union; and it was more radical in its aims and methods, agitating for increased wages and a reduction in hours. It was also prepared to use the strike weapon on a national level to forward such aims. Halliday rightly understood that the economics of the coal industry was national (if not international) and that remedies to the problems within the industry had to be national as well, rather than confined to, "... the economically meaningless borders of a 'county'."⁷³

The union with neighbouring Warwickshire and the subsequent affiliation with the AAM must clearly have served to decrease the Coalville miner's sense of isolation and to heighten his awareness of the national identity of the industry and its miners and their

⁷² Griffin, 120.

⁷³ Chris Fisher, and John Smethurst, "'War on the Law of Supply and Demand': The Amalgamated Association of Miners and the Forest of Dean Colliers, 1869-1875", R. Harrison, 114-155.

problems. In addition to this was the financial and moral support given to the Coalville miners from outside their own area and visits from speakers such as MacDonald who, despite his moderacy, was still a union man who believed in the inalienable right of miners to organise.⁷⁴

Such unity and solidarity with fellow miners did not survive long in Coalville, although it may be argued that its disintegration did not begin with the Leicester miners.

In 1874 the coal owners throughout the country asked for a reduction in wages following the fall in the price of coal. The LWAUM came out on strike in March and it looked for a while as if it may have been successful in Coalville, as Ibstock and Nailstone owners re-opened without implementing the wage reductions. However, in May the Warwickshire miners returned to work after accepting the reduction, thereby deserting their Leicester colleagues, who were determined to stay out, but through lack of funds were forced to return at the end of May, on the owners terms.⁷⁵

The following year, in June 1875, the Warwickshire miners struck against wage reductions and demanded that Coalville miners do the same. They refused and withdrew from the local affiliation. As we shall see, this 'tit for tat' attitude of Leicester miners, justifiable or not, became a hallmark of their union's relations with other coalfields throughout the twentieth century.

The union's strength and solidarity is also inextricably linked to the size of its membership and the success of its actions. Non-union labour was an eternal problem for the miners' associations in their infancy and the 'closed shop' was one of the goals of the AAM and later the Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB). Union membership of the Leicestershire Miners Association fluctuated during the period 1888-1914, as the table overleaf shows, although the general trend was always upwards. A period of rising and falling membership, as in the 1890s, can be directly linked to the two major disputes of that period in 1893 and 1898. In both cases expectations were high and disappointments at failure severe.

⁷⁴ Griffin, 120.

⁷⁵ Griffin, 120-21.

Leicestershire Miners Association Membership Figures 1888-1910

Year	LMA members	Total Leics. miners	% in union
1888	1143	3367	34
89	2541	3727	68
90	2595	4107	63
91	3235	4412	73
92	2758	4686	59
93	2859	4889	59
94	2731	5046	54
95	2541	4494	51
96	2499	5079	49
97	2443	4959	49
98	2990	4950	60
99	2431	5164	47
1900	3301	5624	59
01	3289	5923	56
02	3304	6235	53
04	3272	6435	51
05	3320	6610	51
06	3693	6737	55
07	4724	7421	64
08	5019	7524	67
09	5280	7975	67
1910	5491	8479	65
11	5500*	8297	67
12	6000*	7897	76
13	6100*	8384	73
14	6650*	8259	81

Source: Board of Trade Annual Report on Trade Unions 1890-1910.

H.M. Inspector of Mines Annual Reports Midland District 1888-1914.

*MFGB Minute Books Annual Report on the District of the MFGB⁷⁶

In February 1887, the Leicester miners organised themselves into the Coalville and District Miners Association and played an active role in the founding of the Miners Federation

⁷⁶ Griffin, 151.

of Great Britain (MFGB) in 1888, which was to survive as the national union until the creation of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in 1945. The MFGB enjoyed some successes in its early years in maintaining and increasing wages in the areas affiliated to it. Durham and Northumberland were the two most important areas which did not immediately affiliate, finally joining in 1908. At its inception, the primary aims of the MFGB were an eight hour day and the abolition of the sliding scale system in favour of a national minimum wage for all miners. The sliding scale system linked wages to changes in standard coal prices and was reasonably popular during boom periods when demand, and therefore prices, were high. But such periods were unsustainable and depressions led to pressure on miners to accept reductions in their wages.⁷⁷ Such a situation occurred in 1893 - the first big test of the fledgling MFGB.

After a boom period in the late 1880s, coal prices began to fall at the beginning of the 1890s. In 1893 there was a reported 30% fall in the price of coal.⁷⁸ The owners, who had their own organisation, the Mining Association of Great Britain (MAGB), demanded a 25% reduction in wages, in June. This was rejected unanimously by the district union affiliates of the MFGB and in July a lock-out began.

In the Coalville area, individual owners tried to negotiate separate independent deals with their men; some were desperate to get their pits working again to take advantage of the lack of coal on the market, thereby exploiting the predicament of the other owners - their competitors. However, Coalville miners were united, aided by food and financial donations from local people and tradesmen.⁷⁹ In mid-October the Leicester mineowners decided to re-open and let the men return to work with no reductions in their wage rates. The lock-out in the Coalville area was over with the miners victorious, although it could be argued that they should have stayed out until at least a similar deal was reached by their MFGB colleagues in the other areas. The national lock-out ended on 17 November with the miners going back to work at existing wage rates - this after government intervention had set up a conciliation board to determine miners' wages.

⁷⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the sliding scale system see M.W. Kirby. *The British Coalmining Industry 1870-1946*, (London, 1977).

⁷⁸ Griffin, 133.

⁷⁹ Griffin, 136-7.

of Great Britain (MFGB) in 1888, which was to survive as the national union until the creation of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in 1945. The MFGB enjoyed some successes in its early years in maintaining and increasing wages in the areas affiliated to it. Durham and Northumberland were the two most important areas which did not immediately affiliate, finally joining in 1908. At its inception, the primary aims of the MFGB were an eight hour day and the abolition of the sliding scale system in favour of a national minimum wage for all miners. The sliding scale system linked wages to changes in standard coal prices and was reasonably popular during boom periods when demand, and therefore prices, were high. But such periods were unsustainable and depressions led to pressure on miners to accept reductions in their wages.⁷⁷ Such a situation occurred in 1893 - the first big test of the fledgling MFGB.

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⁷⁸ Griffin, 133.

⁷⁹ Griffin, 136-7.

Despite the debate over the miners' success or lack of it in the 1893 lock-out, what is certain is that the mineowners had been forced to recognise and deal with the MFGB.⁸⁰ And for the first time the government had recognised its responsibility by intervening in a dispute between men and management in the national economic interest. An important precedent had been set.

The next time the government intervened in the coal industry was also the first time that legislation was passed limiting the number of hours adult males could work underground. This came in the form of the 1908 Eight Hours Act, which had long been one of the goals of the MFGB. Moving the Second Reading of the Eight Hours Bill, the Liberal President of the Board of Trade concluded:

The general march of industrial democracy is not towards inadequate hours of work, but towards sufficient hours of leisure. That is the movement among the working people all over the country... They demand time to look about them, time to see their homes by daylight, to see their children, time to think and read and cultivate their gardens - time, in short, to live...⁸¹

That President of the Board of Trade was none other than Winston Churchill, not a politician famous for being 'the miners' friend'!

The eight hour day was not welcomed by all the coalfields. Durham and Northumberland areas, which only affiliated to the MFGB after the passing of the Act, had been largely against it as they had already negotiated with their owners six to seven hour days. Naturally, they feared the Eight Hours Act would actually increase their working day. In South Wales the owners took advantage of the Act:

⁸⁰ The pervading view is that 1893 was a success for the miners. Amongst others, proponents of this view are R. Page Arnot, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain*, vol. 1 (Allen and Unwin, 1949) and A.R. Griffin, *Mining in the East Midlands, 1550-1947*, (London, 1971). For an alternative point of view see J.E. Williams, "The Miners' Lock-out of 1893", *Bulletin*, 24, (Spring 1972). The above table of union membership figures would tend to show that Williams' thesis is perhaps the more probable, or certainly that the miners' own perceptions were not of having won a great victory, hence their lack of enthusiasm for the union. The jury is still out...

⁸¹ *Hansard*, Parliamentary Debates, 4th Series, Vol. 191, 6 July, 1908, col. 1330.

... imposing new working methods and more rigid discipline, and reducing or eliminating payments made in addition to the basic piece-work rate. Customary payments were cut to those working in 'abnormal places'.⁸²

'Abnormal places' payments were made to miners working in thin or difficult seams and were sometimes vital to his weekly wage packet. The threat of their abolition led the South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF, or simply "the Fed") to call a strike in the coalfield in November 1910. The strike lasted ten months and became famous for the physical struggles between miners and police and armed troops, some of whom were actually billeted on the striking miners' families; and for the death of a miner at Tonypandy. It was for this, and his other actions during the 1926 lock-out, that Churchill, Home Secretary at the time, became infamous with the miners, rather than for the above statement in support of improving their conditions.

Following the dispute in South Wales, the MFGB adopted a policy that there should be minimum 'abnormal places' payments of five shillings per day for men and two shillings for boys.⁸³ Coalville supported the MFGB policy and called upon the Leicester mineowners to implement it. Throughout the country owners refused, as they did in Leicester, and subsequently the first national miners' strike began on 1 March 1912.

The strike lasted six weeks from 1 March to 6 April. Both locally, in Coalville, and nationally, the strike was solid, miners everywhere realising that more than just the principle of a minimum wage was at stake - there was the whole question of the unity of the MFGB in the face of the owners who were determined to maintain the principle that miners' living standards should rise and fall with the market price of coal. Coalville miners remained out despite the fact that a basic minimum of five or six shillings a week was less than they were earning pre-strike, and some of them complained:

⁸² David Gilbert. *Class, Community and Collective Action: Social Change in Two British Coalfields, 1850-1926*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 75.

⁸³ Griffin, (1981), 165.

... that they were being 'sacrificed to meet the demands of hot-headed Welshmen.'⁸⁴

Once again we see the pecuniary nature of the Leicester miners. The divisions between districts were quite apparent and any solidarity seems to have originated more from a sense of obligation to the principle rather than any profoundly held beliefs in working class consciousness. Thus as early as 1912 the Coalville miners were exhibiting classic signs of *gesellschaft* relationships, and not for the last time.

The strike ended in April after the government had rushed through a Minimum Wage Bill establishing, finally, the principle of a minimum wage for all miners. It was to be calculated by a joint board of owners and union representatives, with an independent chairman, on a district wage basis. Thus the principle was conceded, but the reality was that each district could impose its own minimum. A national minimum wage was still a long way off and higher-earning districts, like Leicestershire, were still alienated from other districts, a factor clearly not conducive to creating more long term and genuine feelings of class solidarity.

However, the 1912 strike did mark an important point in the history of the MFGB in particular and the coal industry in general. It proved that the MFGB was capable of calling, and maintaining, a national stoppage of coal production, thus provoking a crisis in the economy, and forcing, once again, the government to become involved. There was clearly a growing trend of state intervention in the coal industry, an industry of such vital importance to the national economy, that questions were raised about the need for full state control. This was certainly what leaders like Keir Hardie wanted, he himself having introduced a mines nationalisation bill into the House of Commons in 1896. The outbreak of a pan-European war in 1914, while serving to dissipate the miners' militancy, gave them a taste of what they imagined life could be like under nationalisation.

⁸⁴ Griffin, (1981). 165.

War and its Aftermath: Coalville and the Miners.

The War confirmed and intensified the need for direct state involvement in the coal industry. And the sudden, and dramatic, increase in the demand for coal, to fuel the war industry, improved the miners' bargaining power, so that, in March 1915, the MFGB could demand a 20% wage increase. In July 'the Fed' in South Wales, arguably the most militant coalfield since the experiences of 1910 and 1912, went on strike in support of the pay claim. The government declared the strike illegal under the Munitions of War Act (passed in July 1915), but Lloyd George, the Minister for Munitions, realising both the logistical impossibility and the physical and political danger of attempting to prosecute large numbers of miners (about 200,000!) went to South Wales and conceded all the miners' demands.

At the beginning of 1915 the government set up a Committee on Production to report and arbitrate on relations between employers and employees in the essential war industries, which of course included coal. The Committee on Production, the Munitions of War Act and the Defence of the Realm Acts all served to promulgate the notion that essential industries, whether in time of war or peace, should and would be under state control. In February 1918 the government passed the Coal Mines Agreement (Confirmation) Act which codified all existing controls, thus establishing in the miners' minds the idea that nationalisation was about to happen. The MFGB demanded a 30% wage increase and a form of joint control of the industry by miners and the state. The government agreed to a 25% increase and appointed a Royal Commission on the Coal Mines under the chairmanship of Justice John Sankey to investigate the question of nationalisation.

The story of the Sankey Commission and Lloyd George's duplicity is now well known.⁸⁵ Suffice it to say that the Commission recommended nationalisation; John Sankey

⁸⁵ For useful accounts of the Commission and its proceedings see M.W. Kirby, *British Coalmining*; K.O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government 1918-22* (Oxford: 1979); Ross Terrill, *R.H. Tawney and His Times: Socialism as Fellowship* (Harvard University Press, 1975); Hugh Armstrong Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889: Volume II, 1911-1933*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

himself, originally a Conservative, was persuaded by the force of the miners' arguments.⁸⁶ And Arthur Bonar Law wrote to the MFGB secretary, Frank Hodges, saying:

"Dear Sir,

... I have pleasure in confirming, as I understand you wish me to do, my statement that the Government are prepared to carry out in the spirit and in the letter the recommendations of Sir John Sankey's report.

Yours faithfully,

A. Bonar Law."⁸⁷

As is well known, the miners were to be disappointed, some would say tricked:

... it is widely believed that the Sankey Commission was ... merely a device to outmanoeuvre the MFGB.⁸⁸

The mines reverted to private hands and remained therein for another twenty-five years.

In 1914 there were ten collieries operating in the Coalville region, producing between 1% and 1.5% of the national output.⁸⁹ At the beginning of the War there was no centralised planning of industry, even the government having been persuaded by the rhetoric of it 'all being over by Christmas.' Consequently, no able-bodied worker was exempt from the massive recruitment drive, and thousands of miners throughout the country gave up the chance of being drowned or gassed down their local pit for the opportunity of dying in the same manner in a European field. By May 1915 more than six hundred Leicester miners⁹⁰ had obeyed the call to show a far greater solidarity for a much less tangible cause than they had ever been asked to do

⁸⁶ Graham D. Goodlad, "Lord Sankey and Labour: The Radicalisation of a Conservative." *Labour History Review*, 59, Part I, (1994): 16-26.

⁸⁷ Cole and Postgate. 549.

⁸⁸ Kirby. 37.

⁸⁹ Colin Griffin, *The Leicestershire Miners: Volume II, 1914-45*, (Leicester Area National Union of Mineworkers: 1988) 1.

⁹⁰ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 21.

in any industrial action. The numbers leaving the coalfield provoked a crisis in the industry, with owners complaining they were unable to keep up production figures. Consequently, when in January 1916 the first Military Service act ended voluntary recruitment and introduced the principle of compulsory service, miners, along with munitions workers, were exempted.⁹¹ For the rest of the War both manpower and production were maintained in the Leicester area, and, due to the enormous demand for coal, wages increased dramatically.

Average Wage Per Shift for various categories of Mineworkers in Leicestershire in
June 1914 and November 1918.*

	1914	1918
	s. d.	s. d.
Underground		
Piecework Coal getters	7 0 (51.6)	16 3 (46.9)
Putters, Fillers	5 8 (7.7)	10 4 (6.9)
Deputies	7 10 (1.5)	14 10 (2.2)
Youths under 21	3 8 (11.0)	7 0 (12.0)
Labourers	5 10 (5.1)	11 3 (5.8)
Surface		
Winding Enginemen	6 9 (0.5)	12 10 (0.6)
Screens	4 6 (5.7)	8 9 (5.2)
Tradesmen (e.g. blacksmiths)	5 1 (2.4)	10 7 (2.4)
Labourers	4 6 (4.0)	9 1 (3.0)
Youths under 21	2 2 (3.6)	4 4 (4.7)

*Proportion of total workforce receiving respective wage rates in brackets.

Source: Sankey Commission, 1919.⁹²

⁹¹ A.J.P. Taylor, *English History 1914-45*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1965) 53-5.

⁹² Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 73.

This improvement in the miners' economic bargaining power was reflected in the political position of their union. The Leicester miners had attempted to operate a 'closed shop' policy and this had been vaguely supported by the owners, themselves organised in the Leicester Colliery Owners Association (LCOA). The closed shop principle was not so abhorrent to the owners; indeed it often made industrial relations easier when all the men were organised into one union, under the control of a few specific union leaders with whom management could negotiate. The man at the head of the Leicester Miners Association (LMA) in 1914 was Levi Lovett, the only full-time official. After much campaigning by Lovett, a full time permanent financial secretary was appointed in 1918 - Thomas Gowdridge. The men took a long time to be persuaded of the need for a second full-time official, they were not a little suspicious of miners wishing to get out of the pit in order to join the ranks of the white collar (perceived as bosses) workers.

The LMA worked closely with the LCOA during the War in order to increase output, or at least to maintain it in the face of reduced labour numbers. Consequently there were shorter holidays and shorter week-ends, and a drop in voluntary absenteeism, one of the perennial problems of the coal industry, particularly at times of higher wages, as miners would not work six days if they could survive on five. Speaking at a mass meeting in Coalville in October 1918, as the War was drawing to a close, Lovett declared:

... 'that voluntary absenteeism was only 0.23% or one shift lost in 400, which spoke well for the way Leicestershire collieries were attending to their work.'⁹³

Despite the Coalville miners' attempts to help the war effort, there were local criticisms of their wage claims, which were in fact necessary to keep up with rapid inflation. Two such criticisms came from the vicar of Swannington and Lady Beaumont, who expressed themselves through the local newspaper, the *Coalville Times*. The vicar argued that the miners:

⁹³ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 115.

'... ought to realise that they owed a duty to the men who were fighting their battles ... [and] their conceptions of life and service were not what they ought to be.'⁹⁴

Lady Beaumont complained that:

'... the men working at home getting the coal earned a good deal more than the men who were fighting, and should bear their share of self denial.'⁹⁵

The Coalville miners offered an unusually robust reply, detailing the rise in coal prices and the cost of living, and inviting the vicar to take his shirt off and dig coal for six days a week so that his conception of life and service would parallel the miners'. And in a stinging attack on the Church in general, one miner makes a sarcastic reference to:

'... the Bishops, starving on £10,000 a year.'⁹⁶

After summarising this lively correspondence, Griffin notes that:

...there was plenty of class tension in the coalfield by 1917...⁹⁷

However, this did not translate into industrial action in Coalville as it did in South Wales; indeed, the only dispute in the Leicester coalfield during the War was not between men and management but between men and men, over the issue of poaching within the various miners' craft unions. This actually resulted in the National Amalgamated Union of Enginemen, Firemen, Mechanics, Motormen and Electrical Workers (Coalville Branch) withdrawing its members from all but three of the Leicester pits, causing a pit strike which lasted one week.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Coalville Times, 19.10.17; Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 129.

⁹⁵ Coalville Times, 26.10.17; Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 129-30.

⁹⁶ Coalville Times, 3.11.17; Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 130.

⁹⁷ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 130.

⁹⁸ Griffin goes into detail on the very complicated but somewhat parochial nature of this dispute. Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 130-32.

Internal divisions and a sense of separateness among the skilled miner, leading later to the formation of the Power Workers' branch within the NUM, was a peculiarly consistent characteristic of the Midlands coalfield.

One particular victory which the Coalville miners won was over the issue of the use of forks with which to fill the coal tubs. The owners preferred fork filling as it guaranteed coal of a certain size and avoided stones and dirt or slack. The miners hated it as it was slow and a lot of coal was lost. Finally, in January 1919, the owners gave way and allowed shovel filling, but only because the demand for coal of any quality was so high, and only as a temporary measure. The issue of fork filling was to return.

The most pressing problem in the coal industry immediately after the War was, of course, the question of private or state control. The LMA voted 5,167 to 457 in favour of strike action in support of the MFGB demand for nationalisation.⁹⁹ However, like miners throughout the country, they did not pursue the demands when the government rejected the recommendations of the Sankey Commission.

In June 1920, the government passed the Mining Industry Act, which stipulated that state control of the industry must be ended by 31 August 1921. The MFGB was furious and demanded the continuation of state control and a wage increase. Sir Robert Horne, the President of the Board of Trade, asked the miners to maintain, or increase, output above an agreed figure, referred to as the 'datum line'. Robert Smillie, President of the MFGB, recommended acceptance of this proposal but was massively overruled. Smillie believed the honourable thing for him to do now was to resign, arguing:

You will have enough to face without carrying about with you a Jonah in the shape of your President.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 135.

¹⁰⁰ Clegg, 296.

However, despite his defeat in the ballot, he was prevailed upon to stay, which he did. It is also interesting to note his use of biblical metaphor which his great successor, A.J. Cook, employed to such powerful effect, as we shall see.

In Coalville over 85% voted against the proposal¹⁰¹ and on 16 October 1920, the 'datum line strike' began.¹⁰² The National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) also threatened to strike in support of the miners. The Triple Alliance of miners, dockers and railwaymen, formed in 1914, looked deceptively healthy, so healthy that the government rushed through the Emergency Powers Act, giving it the powers to break any strike which threatened:

'the supply and distribution of food, water, fuel or light or ... the means of locomotion.'¹⁰³

In fact, despite its intimidating comportment, the government was not yet in a position of real strength, and at the beginning of November 1920, it conceded a wage increase of two shillings per shift, exactly what the MFGB had demanded. It also agreed to set up a National Wage Board which would have the power to produce a new and permanent scheme of wage settlements. Recommended by Lovett to accept the government's offer the Coalville miners voted to return to work, but only half-heartedly: 3,913 voted for acceptance and 2,891 against, hardly an overwhelming majority for the government's proposal.¹⁰⁴

Smillie's fears in 1920 were unfounded, but in a portent of what was to come, in 1926, and then again in 1984-5, he said:

If this great organisation fights nationally and fails I fear it would take many years to build it up again to its present strength. If we fail, the mineowners ... helped by the government ... would take the opportunity of attacking us sectionally and endeavour to bring us back to the very early days of this organisation.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 137-8.

¹⁰² For a detailed account of the 'datum line' dispute see Kirby, ch. 3.

¹⁰³ Cole and Postgate, 558.

¹⁰⁴ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 139.

¹⁰⁵ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 138.

In fact, Smillie's fears were to be partly realised, as early as 1921.

The post-war economic boom period was finished by the end of 1920, thus hastening the date when government subsidies to the coal industry would be terminated, along with state control. In fact, de-control occurred on 31 March 1921, five months ahead of time, exasperating the MFGB and even surprising Evan Williams, the leader of the Mining Association, with its rapidity. He warned that:

... the industry as a whole cannot exist without a very great reduction in wages.¹⁰⁶

In preparation for the handing back of the mines, the owners had, in March, posted their district wage rates, which in some cases included significant wage cuts; the national average reduction was 22%, although in Leicester it was only 1%.¹⁰⁷ On 1 April 1921, the Coalville miners stopped working as part of a national miners' lock-out, having refused the owners conditions. The threat of a general strike loomed as the miners called upon the Triple Alliance to act, on 15 April. Through the National Wages Board the government helped to negotiate a temporary solution, based on a national scheme, but the MFGB rejected it. This gave the railwaymen's and the transport workers' leaders, which included the future foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, the opportunity to withdraw their offer of assistance to the miners. Consequently the planned strike on Friday 15 April, 'Black Friday', was called off, and the miners were left to fight on alone throughout the next ten weeks. The dispute was ended on 1 July 1921, when the miners went back to work, forced to accept district wage rates, which meant cuts, but with an agreed minimum. The Triple Alliance, which had promised so much and frightened so many, in government and management circles, had collapsed into ignominy, and the pre-war socio-economic world was restored, as Kirby so rightly observes:

... despite the ravages of total war, the newly-emergent world was still recognisable as something familiar and unchanging. Again, in the economic sphere, this was reflected in

¹⁰⁶ Kirby, 56.

¹⁰⁷ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 144.

the desire to restore the pre-1914 international economic infrastructure as soon as practically possible with the old pattern of markets served by the same industries organised in the same way. Radical experiments in economic organisation - even without their overt political connotations - would be unlikely to secure favourable consideration in this atmosphere.¹⁰⁸

For most of the 1921 lock-out the Coalville miners remained solidly out. Financial and food aid came from the union and local collections in Coalville town centre. Small local businesses and shops also helped, thus recognising their own economic interest in having a reasonably well-paid mining population ready and willing to spend money. However, by June the situation in Coalville, as elsewhere, was desperate, with union funds running out along with the financial goodwill of the local population. Some miners attempted to return to work at Ibstock, but after a discussion between management and the union leaders they were refused entry and were:

... 'escorted to their homes to the accompaniment of tin-panning by a number of women, and many uncomplimentary remarks from the crowd.'¹⁰⁹

This was uncommon solidarity indeed, all the more remarkable considering the late and painful stage of the dispute. However, the compliance of management must be noted, clearly making small victories for the miners much easier in the short term, and contributing to good union/management relations in the much longer term. Another startling example of Leicester owners' leniency during this period was their negotiations with local magistrates, ensuring that miners arrested on charges of stealing coal were not prosecuted to the full extent of the law, and were only bound over to keep the peace.¹¹⁰ Such significant corporatist behaviour on the part of the Leicester mineowners was characteristic of their attitude throughout the period of private ownership and was copied, by management, post-nationalisation. Consequently, when

¹⁰⁸ Kirby, 63.

¹⁰⁹ Coalville Times 24.06.21; Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 147.

¹¹⁰ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 148.

the dispute ended, on 1 July 1921, the Coalville miners went peacefully back to work, and their leader, Lovett, declared that "there was no bitter feeling towards the owners."¹¹¹

However, it must not be believed that the Leicester owners were a race apart, come to do good to the Coalville miners. Having defeated them in a lengthy national dispute, they now turned their attentions to pressing local matters, most notably that of the cankerous issue of fork/shovel filling. The owners were determined to re-introduce fork filling, and with the threat of dismissal hanging over them, the miners conceded, on 23 November 1921.¹¹² This inevitably led once again to men being dismissed if discovered using a shovel, as Roy Ottey, from Bagworth, recounts:

Then one day a great calamity befell us: Dad lost his job. He had been sacked - for 'filling with the shovel'.¹¹³

The owners also took advantage of the union's weakness to end the closed shop agreement, thereby guaranteeing a further reduction in union numbers, as disillusion and apathy set in.

A Period of Phoney War

Following the lock-out of 1921, there was an uneasy truce between the coalowners and the miners, aided by the temporary increase in the economic fortunes of British coal. This was a direct result of a sixteen-week, almost nationwide American coal strike in 1922¹¹⁴ and the dramatic fall in German coal output after the French military occupation of the Ruhr in 1923. With British coal thus dominating the international market, its price increased, and the minority Labour Government of 1924 prompted the owners to put up miners' wages. This they did in May 1924, with a complex and deliberately opaque set of arrangements, proposed by

¹¹¹ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 150.

¹¹² Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 152.

¹¹³ Roy Ottey, *The Strike: An Insider's Story*, (London: Sidgwick and Jackson: 1985), 6.

¹¹⁴ Samuel Eliot Morison et al., *The Growth of the American Republic*, Volume II, (Oxford University Press, 1969), 421.

Shinwell, the Minister for Mines. He was proud of his part in the wage negotiations during which he claimed he bluffed the coal owners with threats of "drastic measures" without specifying what they would be.¹¹⁵ However, by this time both German and American coal was back on the market, forcing the British coal industry, once again, to compete in more realistic economic conditions. The response of the owners was largely predictable: increase hours and reduce pay - prompting the now famous slogan of the miners' at that time: 'not a minute on the day, not a penny off the pay.'

In June 1925, the Mining Association announced it would be returning to a district-based wage system with a subsequent reduction in wages varying from 9% to 48%. The hardest hit areas were Northumberland and Durham.¹¹⁶ Not surprisingly, the MFGB, now led by Arthur J. Cook, an inspiring orator, one-time Baptist preacher and ex-member of the British Communist Party, rejected all the Association's proposals, and appealed to the General Council of the Trades Union Congress for support. This time the support was forthcoming and on 25 July the Council announced a complete and immediate embargo on the movement of coal, unless the lock-out notices, served on the miners, were withdrawn. It also promised a sympathy strike, if deemed necessary. Prime-minister Baldwin, and his new Conservative administration, were surprised by the workers' display of unity and were unprepared for a confrontation. Faced with the prospect of a general strike, Baldwin famously backed down, and promised a ten million pound subsidy to the mining industry to maintain current hours and wages, and a Royal Commission, under the chairmanship of Sir Herbert Samuel, an ex-Liberal minister, to investigate the possibility of the reorganisation of the industry. This was a great victory for the miners and the TUC, who dubbed the day that Baldwin retreated, 31 July 1925, 'Red Friday', in stark contrast to the shame of 'Black Friday', just a few years previous.

Whether or not Baldwin's retreat was, in fact, a delaying tactic to give the government more time, writers like Williamson openly admit, is an insoluble question.¹¹⁷ He writes:

It bought time, in fact, for both parties.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Clegg, 374.

¹¹⁶ Williamson, 169.

¹¹⁷ Williamson, 170.

Clegg believes that the Cabinet was divided and that Baldwin by no means believed a clash with the miners was inevitable, although he did regard the government subsidies as a method of buying preparation time.¹¹⁹ Cole and Postgate, on the other, much earlier hand, are more sure of Baldwin's duplicity, detailing the subsequent preparations made by the government:

... to smash both the miners and General Council ... if it repeated its threat in nine months' time. Large reserves of coal were piled up. An elaborate organisation was set up, divided into ten areas, under Civil Commissioners... Ex-viceeroys and ex-admirals were put at the head of a voluntary strike-breaking organisation, called the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies... All the machinery was ready by April 1926, to move on receipt of one telegraphed word: 'Action'.¹²⁰

And if Baldwin's announcement did buy time for both sides, it seems the government's military-like preparations were not emulated by either the miners or the TUC:

On the Labour side a mixture of inopportune pacifism and over-confidence had produced an exactly opposite result. No organisation, local or national, to carry out a General Strike was countenanced, let alone started.¹²¹

Cole and Postgate are not entirely accurate in their assessment of the events of this period. A special industrial committee was established to report to the TUC General Council on the action to be taken once the government subsidies to the coal industry had ended. This committee declared its support for the miners, saying that the whole trade union movement:

¹¹⁸ Williamson, 170.

¹¹⁹ Clegg, 391.

¹²⁰ Cole and Postgate, 578.

¹²¹ Cole and Postgate, 578-9.

... would stand firmly and unitedly against any attempt further to degrade the standard of life in the coalfields. There is to be no reduction of wages, no increase in working hours, and no interference with the principle of national agreements. This is the position of the trade union movement today.¹²²

However, the committee also decided against extending the powers of the General Council in the event of a national miners' strike, arguing that spontaneous support from individual unions would be much more effective.¹²³ In the light of what happened when the General Strike commenced, it seems that although Cole and Postgate's hypothesis may be slightly exaggerated, the significance of the TUC General Council's inaction amounted to just the same.

In March 1926 the Samuel Commission published its report.¹²⁴ It offered long term improvements, such as pithead baths and amalgamations of smaller pits. Samuel also proposed a continuation of the seven hour day, but said that an immediate reduction in wages was necessary. Neither miners nor owners accepted the Report, Clegg assessing the authors' efforts thus:

They fudged the evidence and upset the miners, the owners, and the government with their recommendations... they had ... misled themselves by their emphasis on the efficiency of the large, new Yorkshire pits... They offered no calculations of the benefits that would accrue from colliery amalgamation or from closer co-operation with related industries.¹²⁵

As the end of the government subsidy¹²⁶ at the end of April loomed into sight, the owners posted their district-based wage settlements, with the threat of a lock-out, if they were

¹²² Gordon A. Phillips, *The General Strike: The Politics of Industrial Conflict*, (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1976), 89.

¹²³ Clegg, 395; John Lovell, "The TUC Special Industrial Committee: January-April 1926," Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History 1918-39*, (London: Croom Helm, 1977).

¹²⁴ "Report of the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry, 1925", Cmnd. 2600, 1926.

¹²⁵ Clegg, 397-98.

¹²⁶ A.J.P. Taylor points out that the subsidy was just as much a subsidy of profits as it was of wages; Taylor

not accepted. Frantic negotiations continued throughout April, but neither the miners nor the owners were prepared to give way. Finally, on the 30 April the government subsidy ended and a national lock-out commenced.

The miners were confident. The MFGB had handed negotiating powers to the General Council, which now included Ernest Bevin. Smith stated that according to the miners:

... the position was that all negotiations would now be carried on through the General Council, but that they, the Miners' Federation, would be consulted.¹²⁷

However, the miners believed that the Council's remit was only to negotiate the maintaining of current hours and wages with the threat of sympathetic strikes if necessary. Bevin thought differently, and, although not wishing to repeat 'Black Friday', was unenthusiastic about a general, or national strike, as he preferred to call it, since only selected industries were to be involved. Bevin also believed some reduction in miners' wages was unavoidable. Events overtook him as the lock-out forced the Council to ask the TUC for a mandate to call a general strike. The results were overwhelming: 49,911 against strike action, 3,653,529 for.¹²⁸ A general strike would begin at midnight on 3 May. Even then the Council continued negotiating with the government, offering a solution based on limited wage reductions. But on Sunday night, 2 May, Baldwin broke off negotiations after receiving information that the *Daily Mail* printers had refused to set the type for an editorial entitled "King and Country" which both attacked the union leadership and called for volunteers to help break the strike. Thus the government had decided to fight the strike on a constitutional issue, thereby guaranteeing the support of the middle classes.

Throughout the period 1922-26, the issue of fork filling and the closed shop union policy continued to be a source of irritation in the Leicestershire coalfield. Jack Smith, one of

241.

¹²⁷ Trades Union Congress, *Mining Dispute National Strike*, 8: Clegg, 400.

¹²⁸ Cole and Postgate, 579.

the Coalville miners' leaders, raised the fork filling issue at the 1924 MFGB Conference. With an innate sense of dry sardonic humour, common to many miners, he said:

... during the abnormal period of the war, when we could get any concession, we were allowed to fill anything so long as it was black... the pit is not the place to sort out the coal.¹²⁹

And in a remarkable attack on the piece-rate, later to be called the productivity bonus scheme, W. Carter, also representing the LMA, said:

No doubt all those present here today who have at sometime worked in the pit, have run risks to try and get out another ton of coal without troubling about a bar, so that he could increase his wage at the week-end... Men are running risks because of the economic circumstances under which they work.¹³⁰

This eloquent criticism of the piece-rate system fades into tragic irony in the 1970s, when Coalville miners and their leaders campaigned for the re-introduction of such a divisive pay system, as we shall see later.

The 1923 MFGB Conference proposed a national ballot of its members on the termination of the existing wages agreement, recommending a 'yes' vote in the belief that better wages could be achieved if strike action was threatened. The Leicester leaders were in disagreement, George Brooks, their president, declaring:

Some of us do object to being made political tools again. The miners were the only big association where industrial and political questions were being mixed. Nationalisation and matters of that kind should be dealt with at the ballot box.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*.156.

¹³⁰ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 157.

¹³¹ Coalville Times, 11.01.24; Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 159-60.

Nevertheless, the Coalville miners rejected their leaders' advice and voted to end the wages agreement. Not for the first, and certainly not for the last, time was rank and file opinion unaligned with that of their elected leaders. We shall see further examples of a moderate leadership holding back a more determined and sometimes more militant membership as we progress; and this will become particularly distinctive during the 1984-85 dispute.

When the findings of the Samuel Commission were published, Coalville miners were as disappointed as any, and although union funds were still low, after the 1921 lock-out, they were equally determined to resist the owners' demands. But, enslaved by the loose change in their pockets, they went heavy-hearted into what became one of the most famous and tragic disputes in British industrial history.

The Real War: 1926.

With the collapse of negotiations on Sunday 2 May, the TUC General Council had no option but to call on its members to strike, immediately. And so began, on Monday 3 May, at midnight, the General Strike, or, more accurately, "the nine days", because it was not, and was never intended to be, a general strike. Indeed, life outside the main industrial cities carried on normally, with people either reading about the strike in the official government mouthpiece, the *'British Gazette'*, brought out by Churchill, now safely ensconced on the Tory government benches after his sojourn in the Liberal Party, or listening to the government controlled BBC on wireless sets. In stark contrast to the rural areas, the total cessation of the industrial and transport industries in towns like London, Birmingham and Manchester produced an atmosphere which was "strange and even eerie."¹³² By 11 May a total of four million workers were on strike in an amazing display of union (class?) solidarity which A.J.P. Taylor describes in an almost elegiac manner:

¹³² Henry Pelling. *A History of British Trade Unionism*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1965) 174.

The response of union members was fantastic... These were the very men who had rallied to the defence of Belgium in 1914. The voluntary recruitment of the first World war and the strike of 1926 were acts of spontaneous generosity... Such nobility deserves more than a passing tribute... The strikers asked nothing for themselves... They merely wanted the miners to have a living wage.¹³³

Apart from the classic overviews of the General Strike more and more attention is now being devoted to the local nature of the strike. One such is Robert Sephton's work on Oxford. He himself was originally a *Bevin Boy* at Bickershaw Colliery who subsequently developed an interest in the labour movement, especially in Oxford. Sephton shows that the traditional image of dons and under-graduates enjoying themselves driving buses and trams in an attempt to break the strike was not the whole picture for Oxford. There was also much pro-strike activity, especially among the local railwaymen and sections of the general public. This is useful information as it shows that support for the miners was not confined to the large industrial areas as is traditionally believed.¹³⁴ And Hywel Francis, writing about South Wales, shows how it was not just workers, or even just the working class, which became actively involved in supporting the miners, but in fact the entire local community:

... the whole village through miners' lodges, local women, the local post office, woodworkers, the NUR, the NUT, the unemployed, the Dulais Co-operative society and its employees, the Labour Party, the Communist Party and the various religious bodies.¹³⁵

Yet this undoubted enthusiasm and support for the strike weapon at grass roots level was not mirrored in the TUC General Council. Various historians have commented on this disparity between the rank and file and their leaders. Of the Council, Cole and Postgate write:

¹³³ Taylor, 244-5.

¹³⁴ Robert S. Sephton, *Oxford and the General Strike, 1926*. (Oxford: The Author, PO Box 210, Oxford, OX1 4TU, 1993).

¹³⁵ Hywel Francis, "South Wales"; J. Skelley (ed.). *The General Strike 1926*. (London, 1976), 244-45.

Muddle and fear reigned there. Fear among many Council members who dreaded the strike weapon they had chosen and wanted to lay it down; muddle between the miners and the Council itself.¹³⁶

And in a penetrating and devastating analysis of what he calls the "supine leadership" of the TUC, Gregory Elliot goes further than most when he writes:

... the TUC had no stomach for the fight - not only because it did not believe it could be won, but out of anxiety at the consequences if it were to be.¹³⁷

Support for Elliot's radical interpretation can be found in the now (in)famous statement by John Thomas, the leader of the National Union of Railwaymen:

I have never disguised that in a challenge to the constitution, God help us unless the government won.¹³⁸

Thomas had no cause to worry. Help for the reluctant General Council was at hand in the form of the Samuel Memorandum. Samuel, still chairman of the Coal Commission, agreed to consult with the prime-minister and afterwards produced a Memorandum. This proposed that immediate wage cuts were necessary but should be dependent on firm guarantees concerning reorganisation of the industry. Even had A.J. Cook been prepared to back down over wage cuts at this point, the miners' position was still very precarious, as the government had made no promise to implement the Memorandum. However, for Thomas, Bevin and Arthur Pugh, the Council members in negotiation with the government on behalf of the TUC *and* the miners, the printed copy of the Memorandum was worth more than the paper it was written on. It provided a way out. All the more so because the MFGB rejected the Memorandum, (not least

¹³⁶ Cole and Postgate, 583-4.

¹³⁷ Gregory Elliot, *Labourism and the English Genius: The Strange Death of Labour England?*. (London: Verso, 1993), 38.

¹³⁸ G. Blaxland, *J.H. Thomas, A Life for Unity*, (London: Muller, 1964), 194.

because of its lack of official status), thereby 'proving' the miners' intransigence, and allowing the Council to negotiate an end to the strike without them. Thus it was that the Council met with Baldwin on Wednesday 12 May to announce its decision to call off the strike - immediately and unconditionally.

That the strike was called off so abruptly and with no guarantees against victimisation of returning workers, surprising and dismaying the rank and file, is in no doubt. Strikers up and down the country went back to work in a state of shock that their sacrifice and solidarity had been in vain. Jack Langley, a railway worker, caught the mood of the time when he wrote that the General Strike,

... was a ruthless strike, absolutely ruthless. The strange part about it, what wasn't realised, was the strength of the trade union movement... Everybody was coming out, our foreman, everybody in authority came out with us, so long as they were on a wage basis. We stopped everything, we were so powerful... There was terrific enthusiasm for it. It was remorseless...

We had the power then, and we should have gone on, but it was too much for us. The power was too big. We couldn't grasp it - it was like going to the moon.¹³⁹

The heady enthusiasm expressed in Langley's language of revolution betrays the deep sense of dismay at an opportunity lost, an opportunity for the rank and file of the trade union movement to take the reins of state power into their own hands. Although it would clearly be incorrect to state that all British workers/strikers in May 1926 were ready for all-out class war, it is also equally clear that the General Council was not in step with its troops, and was nervous of losing its command:

... having no revolutionary purpose in mind, they were as much afraid of a state of political chaos as the Government was.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ John Langley. "Always a Layman", (Brighton, 1975). 43-4; cited in J.F.C. Harrison. *The Common People: A History from the Norman Conquest to the Present*. (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1989). 368-9.

¹⁴⁰ Pelling. 176.

David Gilbert, writing elsewhere, agrees with such conclusions about the general effectiveness of the strike and the reasons for the General Council's reticence in pursuing it:

When the TUC ended the strike on May 12, leaving the miners to fight on their own, many supporters of the strike were completely incredulous, given the evidence of their local areas, and felt deeply betrayed. There is little evidence that support for the strike was waning, especially in its heartlands. It was not worry that the strike was disintegrating which caused the TUC to call it off as much as fear that it would escape their control.¹⁴¹

The sense of betrayal felt by the miners was acute and has passed into their folklore. This will be seen all too clearly in the history repeating itself as tragic farce scenario of the 1984-85 miners' strike, to be discussed in a later chapter. Needless to say, the miners continued to fight on alone throughout the long hot summer of 1926.

The financial situation for the MFGB looked relatively healthy with a balance of three million pounds, one million pounds having been donated by Russia. This had originally been intended for the TUC General Council. However, fear of public criticism over ties to communist Russia caused the TUC to reject the money which was then paid into the miners' bank account, they being only too pleased to take donations whatever their source. (Obvious parallels with 1984 and the Libyan connection need not be forced.) Donations from Russia continued to arrive and during the summer a delegation of miners and their wives, including Cook's wife, went there to meet with trade unionists and obtain further funds. £300,000 was pledged.¹⁴² George Lansbury M.P., wrote very enthusiastically, if not perhaps, a little exaggeratedly, about the Russians' support for the British miners:

I want to tell the British miners that in Russia, whence I have just come back, nothing else is talked about except the miners' struggle in this country... while we were waiting

¹⁴¹ David Gilbert, "The General Strike of 1926." David Gilbert et al., *An Atlas Of Industrial Protest In Britain 1750-1990*, (London: Macmillan, 1996), 144.

¹⁴² *The Miner*, 11 September, 1926.

to be taken back to Leningrad all sorts of people came up and talked to us. Again, nobody talked about anything except the miners' struggle. It struck me that the workers in England could not have shown so much knowledge of the dispute and the issues involved as did these ordinary Russians.¹⁴³

However, on the financial issue it must be stated, in order to put things into their proper perspective, that three million pounds was in fact the *weekly* wage bill for British miners.¹⁴⁴

On 19 August the MFGB entered into unconditional talks with the government and the coal owners in what was to be their last meeting. The owners, who even Baldwin described as "stupid and discourteous",¹⁴⁵ insisted on complete surrender by the miners and *carte blanche* to do as they wished with *their own* industry. It seems that Cook was prepared, at this stage, to compromise, having realised the futility of the situation and staring in the face of daily return-to-work figures throughout the country. However, he was at odds with the MFGB president, Herbert Smith, who rejected all forms of compromise. A. Scheeps comments:

By now Cook was openly prepared to accept the inevitability of wage reductions and was angered by Smith's sustained intransigence.¹⁴⁶

Throughout the month of September, the negotiations continued, with Churchill speaking for the government while Baldwin was out of the country - on holiday. The MFGB agreed to accept wage reductions, but on a national, not district, basis. Again the owners refused, leaving an exasperated Churchill, and the dispute continued. Cook wrote in bitter contempt of the attitude of the owners after he had made it known he was prepared to make concessions:

¹⁴³ *The Miner*, 11 September, 1926.

¹⁴⁴ Clegg, 412.

¹⁴⁵ Taylor, 247-8.

¹⁴⁶ A. Scheeps, "Trade Unions and the Government 1925-27, with special reference to the General Strike", unpublished D. Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1972, 385; Kirby, 100.

We have agreed to negotiate on the basis of a lowering of the cost of production, not because we believe this is right or necessary, but because we are forced to it by the strength of our opponents. And now the owners are not only delaying peace, but making it impossible by refusing to meet the Federation nationally.¹⁴⁷

Encountering such obduracy on the part of the owners, who were clearly determined to emasculate the MFGB of any of its remaining power, Cook and Smith could do nothing but sit and wait for government intervention, which was not forthcoming. The miners themselves could not afford such inaction and began to vote with their feet. The back-to-work movement grew, and by the end of October 218,000 men, almost a quarter of the total workforce, was back at work, having accepted district arrangements.¹⁴⁸ Combined with this was the growing split in the MFGB led by George Spencer, a right-wing Labour M.P., who formed a 'non-political' breakaway union in the Nottinghamshire coalfield. He was against the continuation of the strike, knowing that some owners in the more prosperous areas, Nottinghamshire, for example, were prepared to settle on more favourable terms.

Faced with the prospect of the destruction of the MFGB, and the reality that the dispute could no longer be won, the Executive Council recommended that each district negotiate its own terms for an official return to work. By the end of November most miners were back at work on the basis of reduced wages and increased hours. The defeat was total and the miners knew it. Their union had been bankrupted and split, and the miners' anger was not directed at the owners or the government - after all they were the 'natural enemy' and no favours were expected - but at their 'natural allies' in the labour movement. Cook, using his biblical background, eloquently summed up the miners' attitude to the likes of Thomas and Pugh:

Judas, at least, had the decency to hang himself in Alcemada. He did not write articles recommending peace and co-operation with Herod and the Romans; that work he left

¹⁴⁷ *The Miner*, 11 September, 1926.

¹⁴⁸ Kirby, 101.

to the scribes and the pharisees. There is no miner now, no miner's wife, no miner's child above the age of ten or younger, who does not know that in this great fight the people who helped to starve them were not only the coal owners, but the policemen, the magistrates, the Boards of Guardians, the Cabinet ministers, and the whole array of the state, both in the natural organs and in its local organs, and that in addition even against all this force they would have won had it not been for the open treachery of some Labour leaders who should have been their friends.¹⁴⁹

1926 was a watershed in British political and trade union history. Apart from the crushing and subsequent humiliation of the miners, the most immediate effect was the vindictive 1927 Trades Disputes and Trade Union Act, passed through parliament with the aid of a guillotine. This Act replaced the 'contracting-out' system of the unions' political levy to the Labour Party with a 'contracting-in' system, whereby individual union members had to make a conscious and deliberate effort to have money taken from their wages for the Labour Party. The immediate result was a fall of more than a million trade union members affiliated to the Labour Party, with the subsequent decrease in the Party's funds amounting to a third by the time the act was finally repealed in 1946.¹⁵⁰

Contrary to most 'leftist' historians' analysis of the 1927 Act, Chris Williams has argued that the government restrained the more reactionary members of the National Confederation of Employers' Organisation thereby insisting on a much watered-down piece of legislation. He also argues that the unions themselves, despite their anti-capitalist rhetoric, were tacitly happy to operate within an economic context which gave them bargaining power.¹⁵¹ Consequently, both employers and union leaders were eagerly awaiting the dust to settle after the disaster of 1926 so that relations could be normalised.

Arguably more significant than the devastating financial implications for the Labour Party was the Act's banning of sympathy strikes and the retroactive illegalisation of the General

¹⁴⁹ Newcastle Journal, 27.11.26; Williamson, 192.

¹⁵⁰ Paul Adelman, *The Rise of the Labour Party 1880-1945*, (London: Longman, 1995), 66.

¹⁵¹ Chris Williams, "Britain", Stefan Berger and David Broughton. (eds.), *The Force of Labour: The Western European Labour Movement and the Working Class in the Twentieth Century*. (Oxford: Berg, 1995), 112.

Strike, showing that even time itself could be reversed by the seemingly omnipotent House of Commons. The implications of this were far-reaching for the unions: clearly they could not take on the might of the state again unless and until they were in a much better condition of preparedness, and in the aftermath of 1926 and the 1927 Act that looked highly improbable. The unions had been well and truly tamed, as illustrated by the dramatic reduction in instances of direct action following 1926:

Days lost through strikes:

1919-25	194,107,000
1926	162,233,000
1927-32	28,719,000
1933-39	11,918,000 ¹⁵²

Although fear, and experience, of unemployment throughout the Depression years of the 1930s must obviously be taken into consideration as at least part of the explanation for the timidity of workers during this period, the effects of 1926 and the 1927 Act in intimidating the unions must also not be underestimated.

When the strike began, the problem for the Leicestershire Miners' Association, as for most other district unions, was not lack of solidarity but of funds, especially as the effects of the drain on funds after the 1921 lock-out were still being felt. By the end of June, less than two months into the strike, LMA funds were exhausted and Coalville miners were receiving no strike pay. Consequently, they, and their families, relied upon poor law relief organised on a regional level by the Boards of Guardians. But relief came in the form of loans, thereby causing the miners to incur debts at a time when they least needed them, and which made sure the miners would be tied to their work for a long time when eventually they did go back. By September even these loans were at an end, and Griffin concludes quite starkly:

¹⁵² D.E. Butler and J. Freeman, "British Political Facts 1900-67", 1968, 219; in T.O. Lloyd, *Empire to Welfare State: English History 1906-67*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 146.

The message was clear enough, the miners were to be starved back to work.¹⁵³

The 'starvation' process was to be long and messy and would create splits in the LMA and splits between the LMA and the MFGB, resulting in its near expulsion from that body and inducing several of its members to advocate joining Spencer's company union in Nottinghamshire.

After the LMA funds ran out and assistance from the Guardians had virtually dried up, the miners depended on a local charity, the Coalville and District Central Relief Committee, the secretary of which was a highly controversial character, the Roman Catholic minister for Coalville, Father Joseph Degan. Controversial because he used his considerable energy in not only organising financial and food relief for the miners and their families, but also in arranging dances and film shows for them in the Catholic Institute; he also made his political support for them very clear by becoming a close friend and public admirer of A.J. Cook.¹⁵⁴ Such support from such a public figure also succeeded in rousing the anger of some people, who wrote to Father Degan to inform him that miners:

... were smoking ... dressed like dukes eating fish and chips ...¹⁵⁵

and their daughters were:

... the most fashionably dressed girls in Leicestershire ... [with] their Russian boots, their gold wrist watches, their slave bangles and their all too short silk dresses ... spending money on paint, powder and perfume ... silk stockings and up-to-date garters ...¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*. 168.

¹⁵⁴ Coalville Times, 6.8.26; in Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*. Appendix IV, 194-5.

¹⁵⁵ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*. 170.

¹⁵⁶ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*. 195.

The fantastical idea of miners' daughters dressed in the above fashion clearly excited the febrile imagination of this member of the public, who reveals himself by protesting too much.

Apart from official charities giving assistance, the miners themselves were quite effective at helping themselves. Many of them grew vegetables and kept chickens. They also 'poached' rabbits and 'scrumped' fruit from the nearby farms. Frank Smith, leader of the NUM Leicester Area, 1945-76, recalls:

... sunshine all the time, no rain, catching rabbits with your dad, you know digging them out and using ferrets and dogs to catch them ... they say rabbit's beautiful but not when you have it for breakfast, dinner and tea. It was rabbit, rabbit, rabbit. Of course we stole a potato or two from the monastery and apples ...¹⁵⁷

Getting coal for personal use was also not too much of a problem, as many of the miners took advantage of the geological fault lines in the Leicestershire coalfield, which forced coal to the surface and could simply be picked up in many cases:

... in the stream they saw this black substance ... and found out it was coal ... It was a yard thick seam of coal. We used to go up there as children with anything, prams, any old barrows, bring the coal down ... We'd always got a good fire at home but very little food ...¹⁵⁸

However, this was also a rather dubious lucrative activity, dubious because the coal got was not always strictly for personal use, but was sometimes sold to local firms:

... there was one ... where quite a few had little shafts and lorries coming from Leicester to fetch it, three or four lorries a day ... getting perhaps ten tons a day ...¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Jeanne Carswell and Tracey Roberts. (eds.), *Getting the Coal: Impressions of a Twentieth Century Mining Community*, (Coalville: Mantle Oral History Project, 1992), 128.

¹⁵⁸ Carswell and Roberts, 129.

¹⁵⁹ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 171.

This was, strictly speaking, strike-breaking, but the miners were either unaware of this or believed that it was acceptable, providing they did not go to work officially. And as the practice was seemingly widespread in the Coalville area, the miners saw no reason to discontinue it, obviously showing limited evidence of greater solidarity with miners beyond their region. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the practice, no-one can doubt the ingenuity of the miners at one particular outcrop:

They went down ... about thirty or forty feet and there was a shallow seam of coal and they used to pull it up with a bike wheel and a bucket and a rope.¹⁶⁰

But again this coal was used for commercial purposes:

Then there was a fella named Booth, a haulage contractor ... he used to buy this coal off them ... Then the brewery lorries used to come from Burton on Trent and fetch it to use on the boilers, you see.¹⁶¹

Frank Smith confirms that this practice was indeed widespread:

Most of the Coalville miners were involved in this thing, I mean, it used to be like a station in the morning, people queuing up to get down this cut ... it was part of your life, it was something to do and in fact you were earning it.¹⁶²

Even when some miners broke the strike by returning to work on the owners' terms, they did not attract the same opprobrium as strike-breaking miners in other districts where stories/anecdotes of fathers and sons and brothers not speaking to each other after one had broken the strike are numerous, and were heart-rendingly repeated in 1984-85, as if to add

¹⁶⁰ Carswell and Roberts, 128.

¹⁶¹ Carswell and Roberts, 128-9.

¹⁶² Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 172.

tragic emphasis to the historic parallels. Williamson explains what happened between his grandfather and a workmate in 1926, in the Northumberland district:

... Mr. Guthrie ... went back to work. He spoke to my grandfather about it ... Unable to persuade him to change his mind, my grandfather explained that he could have no more to do with him, and to the end of his life he never spoke to George Guthrie again.¹⁶³

And the violent hatred reserved for strike-breakers in South Wales is now well known.¹⁶⁴

The reaction in Coalville against strike-breakers was nowhere near as virulent. At first they were accompanied to work by the traditional tin-panning and jeers from the crowd, the women often being the loudest. However, prompt action by the police in arresting and charging a few ringleaders served to stop any really violent behaviour, and "... the working miners ... 'proceeded quietly to and from their houses.'"¹⁶⁵ Griffin puts this passive resistance down to:

An awareness of personal circumstances in the closed mining community [which] generated mixed emotions towards those that broke its unwritten codes of behaviour.¹⁶⁶

This is too facile an explanation. Coalville as a mining community was no more closed than those in the north and was certainly a great deal more open than those in South Wales. Indeed, it was the *lack* of cohesive community culture that enabled certain miners to break ranks with impunity. Coalville was already a thriving town with a variety of industries and businesses, and although mining was without doubt the most important, Coalville was by no means a single industry town. By the 1920s it was already the antithesis of *isolated mass*. It is

¹⁶³ Williamson, 191.

¹⁶⁴ See Gilbert for a full account and analysis of strikebreaking and its consequences in South Wales during the 1926 lock-out. Also, H. Francis and D. Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*. (London, 1980).

¹⁶⁵ Coalville Times, 3.9.26; Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 175.

¹⁶⁶ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 176.

also highly probable that the majority of Coalville miners were not so hard on their strike-breaking colleagues because they too were contemplating going back to work, and a combination of hypocrisy and short term self-interest held them back from going too far. In fact, by the end of September over four thousand Coalville miners were back at work, just over half of the total workforce.¹⁶⁷ Unusually, for this district, one of its leaders, Jack Smith, was a radical socialist and ardent supporter of A.J. Cook. In one of his speeches to the Coalville miners, in August 1926, he declared:

If capitalism cannot find the means of existence for the whole race it must make way for some saner system which will do ... if the country cannot afford to pay miners a living wage, let the capitalists train some of their own sons to go and get coal.¹⁶⁸

This was fighting talk which was not matched by the other leaders of the LMA, notably Thomas Gowdridge and the President, George Brooks. In a comment on the owners, "the capitalists" so angrily attacked by Smith, Brooks said they were:

... as good ... in Leicestershire as in any other coalfield in the country and that no doubt as a district they could make favourable terms.¹⁶⁹

This comment was far more typical of the LMA leaders than Smith's, and it was typical of Midlands' leaders in general, where the coal was much more easily won, and consequently always more profitable for both owners and miners. Thus in a battle between Smith and his colleagues on the LMA council for the hearts and minds of the men, it was not surprising that militancy lost. At the beginning of October the LMA resolved to open negotiations with the owners in order to agree terms for an official return to work. This meeting had to be secret, as MFGB policy was still strictly against district settlements. The discussions ended in failure as the Leicester Colliery Owners Association (LCOA) refused to compromise over hours or pay.

¹⁶⁷ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 178.

¹⁶⁸ Coalville Times, 6.8.26; Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 179.

¹⁶⁹ Coalville Times, 7.8.26; Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 179.

The astonishing 'cap-in-hand' type deference shown by the LMA leaders to the owners is clear in Gowdridge's comment on the end of the meeting:

The council expressed their regret that they could not accept the terms offered [but] passed a vote of thanks to the Owners for the courteous way they had been received...¹⁷⁰

By 11 October, the dispute was virtually over in the Leicestershire coalfield, as 90% of the men had voted with their feet and returned to work.¹⁷¹ In view of this, the LMA wrote to Cook to explain that, although it had not officially ended the dispute in Leicestershire, it was obliged to accept the majority will of the men and the reality of the situation. Jack Smith, who had been on a fund raising tour in Russia, attempted to get the men out again, but without success. He was fighting against a disheartened workforce, a compromised local leadership and a determined LCOA which offered a 10% bonus to all those men back at work by 30 October. With debts accruing and Christmas looming, this was an clearly an offer too far and 6,700 men out of seven thousand returned to work. The dispute in the Leicestershire district was at an end and the LMA narrowly avoided expulsion from the MFGB. The parallels with 1984-5 are remarkable and will be drawn in a later chapter.

Following the end of the dispute in Leicestershire, there were calls to form a breakaway 'non-political' union along the lines of the Spencer union in Nottinghamshire. Two of the most significant proposals came from B. Abell, a member of the LMA Council, and Brooks, who was now ex-president. Brooks advised the LMA thus:

Sever your connections with the Miners' Federation for the time being ... then build a Federation up pledged to work and use your money for industrial purposes only. If you want political action, use your vote at the ballot box...¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*. 187.

¹⁷¹ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*. 188.

¹⁷² Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*. 220-21.

And in a somewhat perverse turn of events, Jack Smith, who had parted company with the LMA on rather acrimonious terms, also attempted to form a new union, a breakaway from the LMA, which he said had become a "bosses' union".¹⁷³ His 'New Miners' Union' would be affiliated to the MFGB and he promised unwavering support for A.J. Cook, who was asked to give Smith's union recognition. Cook was in a terribly difficult position: breakaway unions were anathema to him, and yet here was one led by a personal friend and political ally, and which promised him total loyalty. In the end Cook opted to support the LMA against Smith on the grounds of unity, and he persuaded Smith to drop his ill-advised union venture in March 1927.¹⁷⁴ From that point on Smith was sidelined and the much reduced membership of the LMA, now led by Gowdridge, continued as an affiliate of the MFGB, but only just, and without much commitment.

Back to the Future?

In May 1929 Labour was once again in office but not in power, having failed to gain an overall majority in the Commons, and therefore, as in 1924, dependent upon Liberal support. Nationalisation of the mines was out of the question, and it is doubtful whether, even with a commons majority, MacDonald would have had the political will to push such a controversially *socialist* measure through. He was committed, however, to a reduction in miners' working hours from eight to seven, with no reduction in their wages. The Mining Association was strenuously opposed to this, arguing that it would put up prices and harm the British export trade, which was finding life increasingly difficult, in the face of growing competition coming, not only from Germany and America, but also from oil. Faced with such 'sound' economic arguments, MacDonald agreed that the miners' working day should be reduced, but to seven and a half hours. In fact a 'spread-over' system was introduced whereby miners worked a ninety hour fortnight, consisting of eight hours a day Monday to Friday, with only five hours on Saturday. This was enacted in the Coal Mines Act, 1 August 1930. In return, the owners

¹⁷³ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 208.

¹⁷⁴ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 210.

were empowered to fix minimum prices and production quotas. The Act also introduced the Coal Mines Reorganisation Commission (CMRC) with statutory powers to close inefficient mines and force amalgamations where necessary. This was indeed a significant move away from the principle of a freely operating market economy, and a step towards a more *dirigiste* approach to state capitalism. During the debate in the Commons on the Coal Mines Bill it is interesting to note perhaps the first official recognition of the social effects of pit closure on a community. William Graham, President of the Board of Trade, said:

I beg Honourable Members also to remember that every colliery that is closed leaves either a village or a derelict community, or a social problem behind.¹⁷⁵

The following year, 8 July 1931, the Government passed a second Coal Mines Act which guaranteed district wage levels for one year. This act of benevolence on the part of the Government was its last before it was engulfed in the flames of financial ruin in the banking crisis of August 1931.

Throughout the 1930s, the so-called National Government, led first by MacDonald and later by Baldwin, attempted to deal with the dilemma of an over-productive industry in an ever decreasing market. Wholesale pit closures were not the solution, as they would simply have aggravated the enormous problem of unemployment in those areas where it was already dangerously high. Instead, the provisions of the 1930 Act were used in an attempt to regulate output and control prices. This was not always successful as the owners sometimes succeeded in evading price controls, and in the summer of 1935 the MFGB put in for a pay rise of two shillings a day and actually got rises of up to one shilling, district settlements, of course, still being the norm.

In 1935, Lord Sankey showed that despite his political vacillations, joining the Labour Party in the 1920s, leaving it to follow MacDonald in 1931 and then criticising him bitterly and re-joining the Labour fold in 1935, he did remain consistently true to his belief, formed in 1919, that the mines should be nationalised. In a debate in the House of Lords in December

¹⁷⁵ Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, 5th Series, vol. 233, col. 1266, 17 December 1929.

1935, he urged the Baldwin government to go beyond its decision to nationalise the coal mining royalties and nationalise the whole industry, this being the only solution, he argued, to the current crisis. In a vivid phrase he exclaimed:

The canker in the coalfields is not a case for the doctor's mandate - it is a case for the surgeon's knife.¹⁷⁶

In 1938 the Government passed the second Coal Mines Act which, with the historian's benefit of hindsight, appears as the prelude to the nationalisation of the industry. This Act reinforced obligatory amalgamations but provided the CMRC with more consultative and fewer compulsory powers as a method of achieving them. But the most important point was, in fact, the nationalisation of mining royalties, with compensation paid to the owners at a level fixed by independent arbitration. As A.J.P. Taylor points out, this,

... set a precedent both in principle and in method. In principle, because if royalties could be nationalised, so could the mines.¹⁷⁷

The owners resisted both the principle and the method of compensation, and continued to resist amalgamations, resenting Government interference in their affairs. The MFGB also resisted amalgamations, but not for the same reasons as the owners: it wanted maximum Government interference, but amalgamations meant job losses in what was already a contracting industry. The coal industry challenged a fundamentally C(c)onservative Government to re-think its political and economic philosophy on state intervention. But the Government's response was to fumble along, taking a series of half measures between intervention and *laissez faire* which pleased neither side and solved nothing. However, an event was just around the corner which would restore the fortunes of an ailing coal industry and change its economic and political direction for ever: another European War.

¹⁷⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 12 December 1935; Goodlad, 23.

¹⁷⁷ Taylor, 340.

The period after the 1926 lock-out up to the beginning of the Second World War in the Leicestershire coalfield was one of conciliation for the owners and reconstruction and reconciliation for the LMA. The LCOA continued to recognise the union but refused to negotiate with any delegation that included Jack Smith. It also refused to accept the 'closed shop' and, of course, shovel filling. Smith ceased to be an 'official' problem after his resignation from the union in February 1927, although he continued to be a source of irritation and embarrassment until he left Coalville in 1936.¹⁷⁸

In 1927 and again in 1929 Gowdridge led 'back to the Union' campaigns in attempts, not only to rebuild LMA membership, but also to put a halt to the worrying calls, even from his own friend George Brooks, for Leicester to break from the MFGB, and either join with Spencer in Nottingham, or form their own independent non-political union. A proposal to do precisely that was only just defeated in March 1927.¹⁷⁹ The failure of those advocating a breakaway union was largely due to general apathy and the lack of money as a result of short time working, rather than loyalty to the MFGB.

The 1930 Coal Mines Bill was bitterly opposed in Coalville, as the miners feared another reduction in wages if hours were reduced. A.J. Cook, himself, spoke at a mass meeting in Coalville, in June 1930, arguing the case for reduced hours, as this would increase employment levels.¹⁸⁰ The 'spread-over' system, introduced in the 1930 Act, resolved the problem, temporarily, although many miners argued that this was "simply a disguised eight hour day."¹⁸¹ The issue of working hours and allegiance to the MFGB once again caused the Coalville miners to think about a breakaway union. Only Gowdridge's firm opposition to any such move guaranteed its failure.¹⁸²

Rather surprisingly, in view of Leicestershire's lukewarm support for the MFGB since 1926, the LMA voted overwhelmingly in favour of a strike over pay levels in November 1935. The MFGB, somewhat optimistically, demanded a two shilling a day increase throughout the coalfield. Gowdridge was unenthusiastic about direct action, arguing that "No-one wants

¹⁷⁸ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 212.

¹⁷⁹ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 209.

¹⁸⁰ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 213.

¹⁸¹ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 213.

¹⁸² Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 213.

another 1926."¹⁸³ However, it seems that Sir Stafford Cripps, the militantly left-wing aristocrat in the Labour Party, was more in tune with the feelings of the men when he spoke to a mass meeting in Coalville. The Coalville miners voted 1,641 for, and only 104 against, direct action in pursuit of their wage claim.¹⁸⁴ The owners' associations backed down and made district agreements, Leicestershire once again coming out on top with the highest increase of one shilling.¹⁸⁵ The LMA, understandably, and the MFGB, reluctantly, voted to accept the offer. Once again an initial display of national unity had forced the unions to give way, and once again district agreements, with some miners getting more than others, had destroyed it.

The 1935 'dispute' was the last national event that the LMA was involved in before the Second World War. Ironically, the War, which was to claim the lives of so many, offered new life to the British coal industry, and new hope to the men who battled in its dark underground trenches.

The Miners, World War II and Nationalisation.

The Second World War had a transforming effect on the British coal industry and the miners' unions. Immediately, the Government asked for an increase in coal production from 260 million tonnes per annum to 270 million tonnes.¹⁸⁶ This was a seemingly reasonable request except that it was being made of an ageing and contracting industry with many miners having left to take better paid jobs elsewhere, and owners having refused to invest capital in either men or machinery. And, in September 1939, 27,000 miners left to join the forces.¹⁸⁷ Suddenly, miners' leaders such as Ebby Edwards and Will Lawther, Secretary and President of the MFGB, were being called to meet with Government officials at the highest level, and with

¹⁸³ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 214.

¹⁸⁴ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 230.

¹⁸⁵ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 231.

¹⁸⁶ R. Page Arnot, *The Miners: One Union, One Industry. A History of the National Union of Mineworkers 1939-46*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979), 10.

¹⁸⁷ Page Arnot, 14.

representatives of the MAGB, to discuss the coal shortage crisis. The decline in the fortunes of the MFGB was in reverse.

One of the first signs of this reversal was the success of the MFGB Executive Committee in securing, in October 1939, a wage increase which would be applied nationally rather than on a district basis.¹⁸⁸ And in May 1940, Ernest Bevin, that redoubtable figure of the 1920s who had risen to the dizzy heights of Labour's National Executive and who was soon (September 1940) to be a member of Churchill's War Cabinet as Minister of Labour, promised Dai Grenfell, the new Secretary for Mines, that there would be guaranteed supplies of both labour and machinery. The workforce was to be stabilised at 800,000 and miners would no longer be recruited for the military.¹⁸⁹

Despite this Government assurance, miners were actually laid off in the Summer and Autumn of 1940 in the coalfields of South Wales and Durham. France was the principal beneficiary of coal from these regions, and when she fell to the Germans in May/June 1940, that export market collapsed also, with the resultant job losses. The colliery owners were an unreconstructed bunch who had learned nothing since the days of the First World War and the Sankey Commission:

If there was no market and if there was no sale then from the standpoint of the colliery owner there was no need for labour. Although there was a national need for coal and for 800,000 colliers, miners began to be turned off, thrown upon the streets in area after area...¹⁹⁰

This neanderthal economic policy on the part of the owners, who clearly considered their own needs as paramount at a time of real national crisis, when the majority of people were 'pulling together in the national interest', and were seen to be doing so, was yet another nail in the coffin of private ownership of the mines. There would be no industrial

¹⁸⁸ Page Arnot, 24.

¹⁸⁹ Page Arnot, 31-2.

¹⁹⁰ Page Arnot, 33.

nationalisation more popular with the general public than that of the coal mines, when it eventually came.

Calls for nationalisation came thick and fast from the MFGB, the district associations and the Labour Party, as a solution to the crisis in the coal industry in time of war. And, of course, they hoped that there would be no return to private ownership, as had occurred after the First World War. However, the Conservative-dominated Coalition Government, not yet fully understanding the extent of the coal crisis, rejected such demands in a letter to Ebby Edwards on 16 January 1941. This said that:

... the promotion of legislation to implement the Labour Plan for the Mining Industry is not feasible in present circumstances...¹⁹¹

And it asked the MFGB to consider:

... the possibilities of securing a scheme of national control and national pooling as a War Emergency measure...¹⁹²

Adding, as a 'carrot' at the end, that this was:

... a preliminary to the adoption of the wider and fundamental policy of nationalisation.¹⁹³

Page Arnot draws his conclusion about this period of inaction and wasted opportunity with measured acerbity. He states that only in the Spring of 1941 did the Coalition Government realise:

¹⁹¹ Page Arnot, 49.

¹⁹² Page Arnot, 49.

¹⁹³ Page Arnot, 49.

... that there was a coal crisis, created partly by the fascist enemies and partly by acts and policies of their own making in their many ministries...¹⁹⁴

In May 1941 Bevin pushed through parliament the Essential Work (Coal Mining Industry) Order under which miners could neither leave, nor be laid off from, their place of work. This element of compulsion originally alarmed the MFGB as it threatened to return the miner to the status of 'tied' worker, or serf miner as had existed in Scotland into the 19th century.¹⁹⁵ The compulsion order was reluctantly assented to by the MFGB because it also guaranteed miners a minimum day-wage whether or not short-time was being worked. However, Alexander Sloan MP and Secretary of the National Union of Scottish Mineworkers commented:

The worst acts of aggression have been carried out against the common people when their sons were fighting on foreign battlefields... If there is any trade or industry in the country that has no need for an Essential Work Order, it is the mining industry. There is no more loyal, patriotic, industrious, painstaking and hardworking people than the mining community. There is no body of men with a greater sense of responsibility than the miners. They require no Essential Work Order to compel them to do their work. They require no conscription or compulsion. They require no big stick... This Essential Work Order will fail. It will not bring one more ton of coal.¹⁹⁶

His prediction proved to be all too true. Far from reaching the required 270 million tonnes, production levels during the winter of 1941-2 actually threatened to drop below 200 million tonnes.¹⁹⁷ With consumer, and more particularly industrial, demand rising, the pressure on the Government to do something about manning levels in, and reorganisation of, the coal industry increased. Predictably, the Government under-reacted in March 1942 with half-

¹⁹⁴ Page Arnot, 52.

¹⁹⁵ See Campbell for a detailed historical analysis of the Scottish serf miners.

¹⁹⁶ Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, 5th Series, vol. 371, col. 1925-26, 28 May 1941.

¹⁹⁷ Taylor, 547.

hearted proposals for rationing domestic consumers which it then withdrew, even before implementation, due to Conservative back-bench opposition.

Then with uncharacteristic speed and determination the Government acted. In April 1942 it set up a committee of miners and owners to be chaired by Sir John Anderson MP, Lord President of the Council (the person responsible for presiding over meetings of the Privy Council). The Anderson Committee rejected both nationalisation and requisitioning as solutions to the problems of the coal industry. Instead it offered a system of dual control: the owners would control the finance, and the State, mining operations. Anderson also recommended that miners' wages be raised to encourage more production and less absenteeism; also 7,800 ex-miners were to be recruited from the armed forces and coalmining was to be offered as an option to conscripts. But the most far reaching proposal was the creation of the Ministry of Fuel and Power with the Minister presiding over the new National Coal Board. All these proposals were presented to parliament in the form of a White Paper and were accepted in June 1942.¹⁹⁸

Clearly the Government could no longer be accused of inaction and indecision and the MFGB responded with equal speed and clarity. On 5 June, two days after the publication of the White Paper, the MFGB Executive Committee announced that it:

... reaffirms its views that ownership and control of the Mines is essential to efficient organisation. Whilst acknowledging that the Government's Plan will give an increased measure of control and organisation in the Coal Mining Industry, the Federation is of the opinion that such Plan does not provide for a complete solution of the coal production problem.¹⁹⁹

Thus the MFGB, careful not to appear too negative, accepted to operate within the boundaries of what it regarded as a "second rate compromise."²⁰⁰ However, one aspect of the White Paper which it did accept without any compunction was the immediate setting up of a

¹⁹⁸ "Coal", White Paper, Cmnd. 6364, June 1942.

¹⁹⁹ Page Arnot, 73.

²⁰⁰ Kirby, 179.

Board of Investigation to deal primarily with the question of miners' wages. This Board was headed by the Rt. Hon. Lord Greene, Master of the Rolls, who, after hearing arguments for a wage increase from a very well prepared Ebby Edwards, and those against from an ill-prepared Sir Evan Williams, speaking on behalf of the MAGB, recommended the introduction of a national minimum wage of £4-3s-0d. Both the Government and the MFGB Executive Committee voted for acceptance and it was implemented.²⁰¹ But the ultimate objective of nationalisation seemed as far off as ever it had been. Moreover, the MFGB was struggling with itself over the questions of whether and how it should turn itself into a national union, as opposed to its present condition of a federated union. The MFGB annual conference of July 1942 was held at Blackpool and it passed Resolution 11, the first part of which proposed:

To merge all the individual district and sectional miners' unions into one national organisation covering all mineworkers employed in or around the collieries of Great Britain.²⁰²

The formation of a national union was hastened by the Third Greene Report in March 1943, which proposed the creation of a National Conciliation Board comprising members of both the MFGB and the MAGB. This Board established a formal national conciliation machinery rendering the district based structures obsolete, thereby necessitating a national union to negotiate national wage settlements. The creation of such a union was now no longer in doubt and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) formally came into existence on 1 January 1945.²⁰³ Thus was ended, at least on paper, if not in reality, what one miners' leader, Noah Ablett, had called in 1932 "the tribal system in operation, with all the little chieftains."²⁰⁴

Meanwhile, the Government was still trying to address the problem of manning levels in the industry. The option presented to the conscripts of working in the mines, rather than in the military, had not been successful. Few chose that option, probably for a variety of reasons.

²⁰¹ Kirby, 183.

²⁰² Page Arnot, 76.

²⁰³ For a more detailed account of the birth of the NUM see R. Page Arnot, *The History of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain: The Miners in Crisis and War*, Vol. III, (Allen and Unwin, 1961).

²⁰⁴ Pelling, 220.

We can only guess at them: the notoriously difficult working conditions, combined with the reputation of hard living, closed coal communities, offering an unfriendly 'welcome' to outsiders, must have been among them. Consequently, Bevin decided to dispose of the option and impose compulsion. From December 1943, young conscripts were chosen by a random ballot system and sent to be miners. These became the famous *Bevin Boys*. Their personal stories make for interesting reading, but how much they contributed to increasing coal production is debateable. By 1946, there were about 15,000 *Bevin Boys* and:

... output per man shift (all workers) was about 1.03 tons, compared with an average 1.16 tons in the year just before the war.²⁰⁵

As the end of the war and victory in Europe loomed into view by 1944, the question of what to do with the coal industry in a post-war society began to be posed with increasing urgency by all sides. In January 1945, the MAGB under its new President, Robert Foot, produced its proposals. The 'Foot Plan' simply showed that the owners had understood very little about the catastrophic conditions within their own industry and the changing mood of public opinion against them. Foot proposed a central Coal Board consisting only of coal owners; representatives of the Government and unions specifically to be excluded. The Board would have mandatory powers over every district but would be independent of Government. This astonishing declaration of the owners' intention to take one giant leap backwards was quickly rejected by the NUM, but adopted, with some moderations, by Gwyllim Lloyd George, the original Minister for Fuel and Power in Churchill's War Cabinet, who continued to hold the post in Churchill's Caretaker Government, formed in May 1945, after the withdrawal of the Labour members, following the collapse of Germany.

At the same time as the Foot Report was being prepared, another report was in process which, inadvertently, would become the blue-print for nationalisation: the Reid Report.²⁰⁶ This was prepared by a committee of mining engineers, chaired by Charles Reid, under the auspices

²⁰⁵ "The State of the Industry under Private Enterprise": First Annual Report of the NCB. 15 July-31 December 1946; Page Arnot, 204.

²⁰⁶ "Coal Mining: Report of the Technical Advisory Committee", Cmd. 6610, March 1945.

of the Ministry of Fuel and Power. The Report was detailed in its account of the technical history of mining up to 1939, in its comparison with other coal exporting nations and in its proposals for changes in the technical aspects of coal mining. However, the really significant point, politically, was the Report's criticism of the way the industry was run by private owners, and its favourable review of the European coal industry, which in most cases was owned and organised by the various nation-states. Although the Reid Report never recommended nationalisation, only the merging and amalgamation of unprofitable mines, nationalisation as the only solution was implicit. *The Economist* magazine, not known for its socialist sympathies, wrote:

If it can be proved that some form of public ownership is technically necessary for efficient production, then the opposition to it in this pragmatic land, will melt away. And the proof is now very nearly complete.²⁰⁷

Page Arnot concludes:

The Reid Report was an example of overkill. The intention was to prove the need for a complete overhaul and reorganisation of the coal trade. In the early summer of 1945 they found that they had proved much more, that they had convinced the general public that private enterprise in coal must be swept out of existence.²⁰⁸

Thus with public support and a majority Labour Government, for the first time in office and in power, the issue of coal nationalisation was no longer an 'if' but a 'when' and a 'how'.

In the new Labour Administration, Emanuel ('Manny') Shinwell was the new Minister of Fuel and Power and was responsible for preparing the Coal Industry Nationalisation Bill in consultation with the TUC, the NUM and the MAGB. The First Reading of the Bill was on 19 December 1945. The Second Reading, the time for the Commons debate on bills, began on 29

²⁰⁷ *The Economist*, 7 April, 1945; Page Arnot, 93.

²⁰⁸ Page Arnot, 93-4.

January 1946. Shinwell led the debate in a mocking tone, criticising private mismanagement of the coal industry, and the Tories' failure to do anything about it. Anthony Eden, deputising for Churchill, led the Opposition, criticising, not the principle of nationalisation, that had been reluctantly accepted by most Tories and even the owners, but the Bill's failure to explain how the industry was to be organised under state control. In this Eden was absolutely correct as Shinwell himself was to accept in 1948, when he admitted that the Labour Government was not as ready as it might have been to take over the coal industry, and that the new structure put in place was inadequate when faced with a fuel crisis, as occurred in the bitterly cold early months of 1947.²⁰⁹ Indeed, Shinwell was a rare politician who readily admitted the government's limited ability to affect change simply by enacting political policy:

We do not produce coal at the Ministry of Power. People seem to think we do. Coal is not produced by statistics, or by Government departments, or even by speeches however eloquent they may be. Coal is produced by miners working underground.²¹⁰

But in the heady days of 1945-6 such pessimism would have been considered heresy on the Labour benches.

The Tories fought a rearguard action, and many of them who dared to rise and speak in the debate on the Second Reading were mocked and jeered from the Labour benches.²¹¹ Only Harold Macmillan, Conservative M.P. for Bromley, made a really constructive and incisive comment from the Tory benches:

This is not syndicalism, Socialism or the 'mines for the miners'. Compare the Bills of 1924, 1936 and 1937. Under every one of those Bills, for which the Labour Party were responsible, the miners were to obtain a large measure of control at the centre, in the regions, and in the districts. By this Bill all they do is exchange one set of owners for

²⁰⁹ Kirby, 198; Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History 1945-1990*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 35-6.

²¹⁰ M. Sissons and P. French, (eds.) *The Age of Austerity, 1945-51*, (London, 1963), 258.

²¹¹ For a full account of the debate see Page Arnot, 130-47.

another, and rather more remote owners - what I might call the 'nine bright shiners' of the Coal Board.²¹²

And in the Third Reading he went even further, in making a comment which, years later, radical Socialists would adopt as their own in their analysis of the nationalisation of the coal mines:

This Bill wants the ownership of all the colliery undertakings in a board of nine men - nine men not elected by, not even containing a single elected representative of, the mining community. It is not nationalisation in the old sense of the word ... This is not Socialism; it is State capitalism. There is not too much participation by the mineworkers in the affairs of the industry; there is far too little. There is not too much syndicalism; there is none at all.²¹³

Who knows what motivated this paragon of the capitalist classes and future Tory premier to make such a radical speech, which would surely be worthy of the present self-declared Marxist NUM President, Arthur Scargill? Perhaps Macmillan had a better understanding of the *moderacy* of the British coalminers and the *divisive* nature of their union relationships than many communitarian sociologists, with their idealised descriptive accounts of mining settlements and solidary relations. Whatever his reasons, the Labour-dominated Commons was in no mood to listen to a prophetic discourse on the mining industry from a member of the British aristocracy, if only by marriage. The Bill completed its Commons stages on 20 May 1946 and moved on to the Lords.

The Bill's passage through the Lords, its return to the Commons, and its final journey through the Lords before receiving the Royal Assent was not without some hiccups.²¹⁴ But it finally became law on Friday 12 July 1946 and Vesting Day was fixed for 1 January 1947, the

²¹² Page Arnot, 146.

²¹³ Page Arnot, 158.

²¹⁴ The Coal Industry Nationalisation Bill was presented before the 1949 Parliament Act which greatly reduced the complicated legislative procedures controversial Commons bills. especially those from the Labour benches, usually had to pass through.

day when, at coalmines all over the country, usually the oldest miner or ex-miner in the community was privileged to raise the flag of the NCB, symbolising that the long-awaited dream of public ownership had arrived. Kenneth Morgan, rather prosaically, writes:

Public ownership ... was enthusiastically celebrated in the coalfields of Britain from Kirkcaldy to Kent on 1 January 1947 - 'Today the mines belong to the people.'²¹⁵

World War II, Nationalisation and the Leicestershire Miners.

As was the case for miners throughout the British coalfield, the War improved the bargaining power of Coalville miners. Two smouldering issues immediately returned to the fore in the Leicestershire coalfield: the closed shop and fork filling. By June 1940 the LMA had succeeded once again in establishing a virtual closed shop; and in May of the following year, the country's desperation for coal of any quality meant the end of fork filling.²¹⁶ The single most important cause of disputes between men and management in the Leicestershire coalfield, during the War, was the issue of voluntary absenteeism and the consequent shortfalls in coal production. The coalminer was accused of:

... prospering from the requirements of 'total war' and not giving of his utmost to win the tonnage of coal that his country required for survival and victory.²¹⁷

The absenteeism debate between the LMA, still led by Gowdridge, and the LCOA, headed by Frank Hodges, managing director of Lount colliery, rumbled on, mainly through the pages of the local press, throughout the early years of the War. Various 'solutions' were suggested: fines and loss of bonuses, proposed by the LCOA, and fewer, not more, working

²¹⁵ Morgan, 35.

²¹⁶ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 231.

²¹⁷ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 231.

hours, as a way of relieving fatigue and tension, proposed by the LMA. Whatever the truth about absenteeism, coal production certainly increased, the Joint Coal Production Committee (JCPC) reporting, in January 1942, that:

... during 1941, as compared with 1940, the output in the District had been increased by 32,078 tons...²¹⁸

And *The Billet*, a news and entertainment magazine published in Coalville during the War, reported that the Leicestershire coalfield regularly topped the national production league, and was the only district where the miners consistently gained an output bonus.²¹⁹ The goodwill of Coalville miners, and British miners in general, also seems to have extended to applauding Churchill at a special meeting of miners at Central Hall, Westminster on 31 October 1942. Churchill intended the occasion to be used as a rallying cry to British miners to produce more coal for the war effort. F.H.W. Moore, a teenager in 1942, went with his father, a coalminer, and recounts the final words of Churchill's speech:

... 'and someday when your children ask "What did you do Daddy to win this great inheritance for us?" One will say - I flew a Spitfire during the Battle of Britain - another will say I braved the Nazi wolf packs in the Atlantic Ocean - a third will say - I marched with Montgomery at El Alamein, but you in your turn will say with equal right and with equal pride - "I CUT THE COAL". The miners, many of whom had detested this man from the 1926 era, gave him a lengthy standing ovation.²²⁰

However, permanent forgiveness for Churchill was not forthcoming, and the NUM, when it came into existence, actively campaigned for a Labour government, committed to nationalisation of the mines, a policy to which Churchill remained vehemently opposed.

²¹⁸ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 234.

²¹⁹ "The Billet: Coalville News Magazine for the Forces and the Home Front"; Jeanne Carswell (ed.). *At Home and Away*, (Coalville: Coalville Publishing Company Ltd., 1995), 90.

²²⁰ Carswell, 12.

Although the LMA was also convinced of the need for nationalisation, its officials were far less sure of the idea of a single national union for mineworkers. George Spencer and the Nottinghamshire district were re-united with the MFGB in 1937; Spencer spoke at the Annual Conference in 1939, seemingly without any hint of sorrow or shame at having split the unity of the miners for over ten years. He argued, unsurprisingly, against the formation of a national union, which he believed would destroy district autonomy, and, daring to bring up 1926, he said:

... 'it was not the lack of unity at those times that defeated us. It was the overpowering economic difficulties of the moment that defeated us...'²²¹

Whether he realised it or not, Spencer was stating forcefully and unashamedly management's economic analysis of the situation: that in times of depression or crisis in the capitalist system the workers must bear the brunt. He completely failed to realise that it was lack of leadership and the miners' attempts to act within the confines of the prevailing economic system, rather than propose an alternative system, that pitted miner against miner, and thus led to the collapse of the industrial action. The LMA, geographically and politically always very close to Nottinghamshire, supported Spencer's arguments and voted against a single union. In September 1943 it did so again.²²² A proposal by a Leicestershire miner, Arthur Hinds, argued:

That the time is not opportune, nor is it beneficial for us in Leicestershire to change the form of our present organisation and we therefore are not in favour of any such change.²²³

Frank Smith supported the reorganisation scheme but on this occasion was defeated. However, events would now overtake the LMA and George Spencer. The creation of the

²²¹ Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 238-9.

²²² Griffin, *Leicestershire Miners*, 239.

²²³ NUM Minute Book, DE 3350/25, 17 September 1943. (Leicestershire Public Record Office).

National Conciliation Board on miners' wages, in March 1943, virtually necessitated a single union, a fact that the Coalville rank and file realised before their own district Council. Against the advice of the LMA Council they, along with the rest of the country's miners, voted massively in favour of a national union, a majority of ten to one.²²⁴ The actual voting figures on 31 October 1944, were:

For 2033

Against 219

Source: NUM (Leicester) Minute Book, DE 3350/25, 31.10.44.

Once again the Leicestershire miners' leaders were out of step with rank and file opinion; and the relations between Leicester and Nottingham and the national union were to remain ambiguous and contentious at best, and downright schismatic at worst, for the whole of the history of the NUM.

In 1945 the new General Secretary of the Leicestershire Area of the NUM was Frank Smith, Gowdridge having retired. Smith remained Secretary until 1976, and, although a communist in the 1920s and '30s, he won a reputation for being a tough, but *moderate*, union leader. He it was who, along with the Whitwick manager, raised the blue and white NCB flag over Whitwick colliery on Vesting Day. And although Smith realised, later, that nationalisation was not the panacea it promised to be, he did comment that:

... nationalisation was a good thing for the coal industry. It saved it ... at the end of the war the pits would have gone back to decadence and inefficiency and all sorts of things - but nationalisation saved it in 1947. There's no doubt about that.²²⁵

²²⁴ Page Arnot, (1961), 430.

²²⁵ Carswell and Roberts, 100.

Chapter Three.

Dream or Nightmare? Nationalisation or State Capitalism? - The Leicestershire Coalfield 1945-1974.

A reasonable estimate of economic organisation must allow for the fact that, unless industry is to be paralysed by recurrent revolts on the part of outraged human nature, it must satisfy criteria which are not purely economic.

R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 278.

Introduction - Coalville in the 1950s.

Perhaps Macmillan's warning in the House of Commons that nationalisation of the coal industry was simply about changing one set of owners for another, and would not significantly alter the working practices of the miners, was correct. Certainly Frank Smith of Whitwick colliery soon became aware that nationalisation was rather a placebo than a panacea:

And, same as our men thought, January 2nd we'd have a different day completely. What a shock we got. The same management were in, the same deputies, the same overmen, the same systems, nothing had changed whatsoever. There were no roses around the door, it was still as hard as whatever it could be and there was no change.¹

This disappointment at the apparent lack of change at the coalface was compounded by the miners' inability to take industrial action for fear of behaving treacherously towards the Labour Government. As early as September 1945, just two months after the Labour Party had taken office, the Yorkshire miners passed a resolution:

¹ Colin Griffin, *The Leicestershire Miners: Volume III 1945-1988*, (Leicester: National Union of Mineworkers, 1989), 23.

... attacking unofficial strikes for "sabotaging their own interests and those for which the present Government has been elected", a good example of coal production being elevated to an index of political loyalty.²

The NUM leadership readily accepted the task of re-educating the miners into assimilating the Government's and management's interests as their own, particularly after nationalisation. At the 1947 NUM Conference, Will Lawther, NUM President, announced:

There are now no opposing sides in the industry.³

However, this was patently not true and many miners, despite being happy with nationalisation as an important political principle, were not so easily convinced that managers who had worked happily for private owners would suddenly be transformed into believing they were managers now working for the miners. This was most apparent with the appointment of Lord Hyndley, a former coal owner, as chairman of the National Coal Board (NCB). Most miners were in no doubt as to where his sympathies would lie. Aubrey Peace, a Coalville miner, assessed the problem very succinctly:

It was the finest thing that ever happened, nationalisation, but it was run wrong. Well, because when it come in it was run by Tory managers. That was the trouble. Coal owners, managers, they'd still run it. Well, they wouldn't run it for the people, they wouldn't. They were running it for themselves.⁴

Combined with this nurtured cynicism at the continuation of policies and personnel associated with the pre-nationalisation era was the fact that the Labour government had taken over a decaying and declining industry at a time when the industrial economy was desperate for

² Andrew Taylor, *The Politics of the Yorkshire Miners*, (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 14.

³ NUM Annual Conference Report, 1947, 13-14; cited in Taylor, 15.

⁴ Carswell and Roberts, 100.

increased coal production. On Vesting Day the number of registered miners was 692,000, down from 766,000 in 1939,⁵ despite desperate government attempts to keep men in the industry during the war years. And in 1947, although the NUM refused to sanction any strikes, the number of stoppages actually increased in comparison with those of 1946.⁶ The most affected areas were the traditionally militant areas of South Wales and Yorkshire, especially Grimethorpe colliery, which went on strike for over a month in the summer of 1947. Clearly the government and the NCB's belief that nationalisation would encourage the miners to work harder, believing that they were working for themselves, was countered by rank and file attitudes that if the miners were the masters now, then they would not be exploited underground or in their pockets as they had been when they were merely the servants. If nationalisation meant anything to these men, then it was not some distant notion of working in the national interest, but a means of ending wrongdoing at the coalface and compensating, financially, for the decades of injustices experienced by all miners under private ownership. Considered in this light, it should not be surprising that strikes continued after 1947, but that they should be limited to only a couple of areas. In 1948 there were 1,528 disputes, but by 1956 this had increased to 3,771; in the four year period 1947-51 6.5 million tonnes were lost through industrial action, usually unofficial. But, during the next four years, 1952-56, this had risen to 10.1 million tonnes.⁷ Although Yorkshire continued to be at the centre of disputes, other areas such as the Scottish, North Eastern and South Western Divisions became increasingly involved. With this increase in certain miners' militancy following nationalisation came a decrease in public sympathy for their case and for the principle of nationalisation. The beginning of 1947 has entered the record books for being one of the coldest and longest winter periods, lasting well into March. Many working days were lost and much of the coal that was produced lay useless in railway wagons, unable to be transported due to the severe weather conditions. This, coupled with the increased demand for coal from both industrial and domestic

⁵ William Ashworth, *The History of the British Coal Industry, Volume 5, 1946-82: The Nationalised Industry*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 3.

⁶ Ashworth, 167.

⁷ Ashworth, 169.

consumers, produced a fuel crisis. By mid-February power cuts affecting all consumers were in operation and there were reduced levels of gas pressure. Public discontent was tangible, and, manipulated by the Conservative Party, was aimed at the Minister for Fuel and Power, Manny Shinwell. The phrase "Shiver with Shinwell" was coined and put to effective political use. Of course, neither the miners nor the NCB or the government were responsible for the bad weather, but neither were they responsible for the failure to produce and transport the coal. The industry was literally and metaphorically creaking at the seams due to years of neglect and lack of investment. But public perception was that those involved in the industry, at all levels, *were* responsible and were failing. Thus it was that in both its industrial and its public relations the fledgling NCB would have received a baptism by fire - had there been any spare coal to burn.

In the Leicestershire coalfield the pre- and post-nationalisation period was relatively and typically trouble-free. On 1 January 1947 there were eight pits operating in the Leicestershire area producing annually 3.3 million tons of coal which was about two per cent of the national output.⁸ Throughout the 1950s output per manshift (OMS) in the Leicestershire coalfield was the highest in the country as was the profit per ton. It is, therefore, not surprising that Coalville miners were among the best paid in the country and labour relations among the most peaceful. However, that is, of course, not the whole story...

When the NUM came into being on the 1 January 1945, the LMA disappeared, in name, and became the NUM Leicester Area. Gowdridge retired as general secretary and was replaced by Frank Smith. Smith, a dapper young man in the 1920s and '30s,⁹ had been victimised during the 1926 lock-out, and in 1945 he was a member of the British Communist Party. But he was also committed to nationalisation in the form in which it was introduced in 1947, and was determined that the conciliation process should work. He therefore joined the moderate wing of the NUM and his long stint as general secretary of the Leicester Area NUM,

⁸ Griffin, *Volume III*, 1.

⁹ Roy Ottey describes him thus, "In the streets of Coalville he was instantly recognisable for he had an Errol Flynn moustache, wore spats and carried a rolled umbrella." Ottey, 16.

1945-76, was a period of gradual personal shifting along the political spectrum towards the right-wing.

Disputes in the Leicestershire coalfield were minor at this time, certainly in comparison with those in other areas such as the Yorkshire coalfield. They centred upon largely personal problems between the men and sometimes between miners and officials, as occurred at Whitwick in August 1947 when a miner was dismissed for attacking an official. The miners stopped work for a day in support of their colleague, whom they believed to have been provoked by the official, and management agreed to reinstate the sacked miner.¹⁰

Many of the other localised disputes revolved around the niggling problems of wet working conditions and the appropriate pay commensurate with them. There was also the problem of yardage payments, when men came up against stone walls and, despite their working very hard, produced very little coal, resulting in wage loss. Invariably these disputes produced tensions not between men and management, but among the men themselves, as one group of miners working at thicker mechanised faces would earn more than those at thin, stony, non-mechanised faces. Disputes of this nature were generally solved by meetings between management and union representatives, usually at the pit and union lodge level. Although the union demanded the right to represent and the management the right to manage, it was in everyone's interests to solve disputes quickly and amicably. Griffin concludes:

It was such flexibility which helped to preserve industrial peace in the coalfield in the interests of the NCB, who were eager to complete the work and maintain production, and the workmen who wanted rewarding for their efforts in keeping the coalfield at the top of the productivity league.¹¹

Thus it was that Leicestershire, after nationalisation, enhanced its reputation for being one of the most moderate areas with perhaps the best man/management relations. The attitude

¹⁰ Griffin, *Volume III*, 47.

¹¹ Griffin, *Volume III*, 57-58. Note: Griffin uses the word "rewarding" in place of wages without any sense of irony.

of management, often backing down over what it regarded as trivial local disputes, succeeded in convincing the union representatives, and, subsequently, the men, that it was prepared to listen and was sympathetic. This by itself did not make the Leicestershire coalfield "... one of the least strike prone in the country..,"¹² but it certainly contributed to that fact.

After nationalisation, the driving force behind successive governments, the NCB and the NUM was the urgency to produce coal and then more coal. At a Blackpool Labour Party election campaign meeting in 1945, Nye Bevan famously declared:

This island is made mainly of coal and surrounded by fish. Only an organising genius could produce a shortage of coal and fish at the same time.¹³

Although Bevan was, of course, referring to the Conservatives in May 1945, by 1950 the sardonic mantle of "organising genius" could equally have been worn by the Labour Government, of which, it must be noted, Bevan was a prominent member. From 1947-48 fifty-six collieries were closed, thirty-four on economic grounds, not exhaustion.¹⁴ As a result, more than five hundred miners were made redundant at the same time as 20,000 *Bevin Boys*, released from compulsory service, also left the industry.¹⁵ A prolonged advertising scheme by the NCB and the government, pay increases and house building plans in mining areas succeeded in recruiting some men into the industry, and numbers fluctuated around the 700,000 mark throughout the period 1947-57.¹⁶ During the same period coal production steadily increased from 200 million tons to 210.8 million tons per annum.¹⁷ This was largely due to increased mechanisation and the opening up of new faces. In each of these years tonnage lost through unofficial disputes averaged around 1.5 million tons, but was particularly

¹² Griffin, *Volume III*, 61.

¹³ *Daily Herald*, 25 May, 1945.

¹⁴ Ashworth, 160.

¹⁵ Ashworth, 161 and 163.

¹⁶ Ashworth, 162.

¹⁷ Ashworth, Appendix A1.

high in 1955 when 3.3 million tons were lost due to the widespread action in the Yorkshire coalfield.

The mechanisation and opening up of coal faces was NCB policy as published in its reconstruction scheme in October 1950 under the title "Plan for Coal".¹⁸ Memories of the winter of 1947 were still bitterly fresh in everyone's memories (if not in their bones) and "Plan for Coal" was an expansionist policy document for the coal industry, the last of its kind. The NCB predicted that by 1961 244 million tons of coal would be needed per annum, an increase of 18 per cent on the 1949 output.¹⁹ Expansion would in effect mean large-scale reconstruction of many existing collieries, although twenty-two new collieries were envisaged. Although the NCB acknowledged, in a later document, "Investing in Coal",²⁰ the increasing importance of oil and the growing prospect of nuclear power influencing the energy market, it "...concluded that 'even in the longer term the problems of over-production for the coal industry can scarcely arise'."²¹ This optimism on the part of the NCB for the future of the British coal industry was to be short lived. The expansionist policies set out in "Plan for Coal" were hardly implemented. Ashworth shows that this was due, not to lack of investment or political bad faith, but on the failure, on the part of the NCB, to estimate correctly the financial cost of its "Plan for Coal".²² Thus, by 1957, despite a total of £661 million having been invested in the industry since nationalisation, only a quarter of the reconstruction schemes had been completed.²³ And by 1957 the nature of the national and international markets for coal were changing ineluctably.

For the NUM during this period the principal problem was that of the enormous disparity in wages between districts. With nationalisation came the hope, longheld, that at last a national wage structure might be put into place. However, the enormity of such a task can be understood when one considers that in 1954:

¹⁸ National Coal Board, *Plan for Coal*, October, 1950.

¹⁹ Ashworth, 200.

²⁰ *Investing in Coal: Progress and Prospects under the Plan for Coal*, NCB, 1956.

²¹ Ashworth, 204.

²² Ashworth, 202-04.

²³ Ashworth, 205.

... for 300,000 workers there were 10,000 different wage rates in operation, and the scatter of wage rates was haphazard in relation to ... skill and responsibility...²⁴

The idea of harmonising wage rates nationally was clearly attractive to both the NCB and the NUM, as this would make wage bargaining, now conducted at a national level, infinitely more simple. But for many of the men, particularly in the higher paid districts of the Midlands and, surprisingly, Kent, the prospect was worrying, as they feared at best a wage freeze, and at worst, a drop in wages in order to bring them into line with other districts. The men most troubled by this project were the pieceworkers, the elite of the mining workforce: the face-workers, rippers, borers and power loaders. As small groups they had traditionally negotiated their own wage rates with management. Consequently these 'shock troops' of the labour movement were at the top of the miners' earnings league: the real 'labour aristocracy'. The matter would finally be resolved, and then not to everyone's complete satisfaction, when the National Power Loading Agreement (NPLA) was introduced in 1966. But in 1955 a national daywage structure was implemented affecting some 400,000 men. The NCB with the NUM established precise differentials between the jobs and the grades of both surface and underground workers, and craftsmen. Nobody was to suffer a wage reduction and 95 per cent would have an increase of at least one shilling per shift.²⁵ That this was achieved with relatively little opposition from the rank and file was remarkable and bode well for the future unity of the industry. But it was not wages which provoked a furore among the men in the late '50s and into the 1960s, but the unheard of phenomenon of large-scale pit closures.

²⁴ Ashworth, 211.

²⁵ Ashworth, 211. For a more detailed, and sometimes very complex account of wages in the coal industry see L.J. Handy, *Wages Policy in the British Coalmining Industry: A Study of National Wage Bargaining*. (Cambridge: 1981).

The Swingeing Sixties.

1957 was the turning point. In that exceptionally warm year, coal consumption dropped, although energy use increased. Obviously the long summer had little to do with the fortunes of the coal industry. The problem for coal was oil. Due to the shortage of coal in the 1950s, successive governments had urged some coal-fired power stations to convert to oil; and British Rail began replacing steam engines with diesels. Oil had many advantages over coal: it was cleaner, easier to handle, it left no residue and, most importantly, it was as cheap as coal despite the fact that it had to be imported. Consumption of coal continued to decline: from a peak in 1956 of 221 million tons, it fell, by 1959, to 192.4 million tons.²⁶ In that year the NCB announced its intention to close thirty-six pits, an announcement which sent shock waves throughout the industry, particularly the NUM. At a special conference of Scottish miners in Conway Hall, London, in February 1959, the NUM President, Ernest Jones, spoke prophetically:

The Middle East is an unstable area of the world, and we believe we cannot afford to link up our fuel and power policy and our economy to that extent with oil.²⁷

Jones' words went unheeded. In the summer of 1959 the NCB published its "Revised Plan for Coal" in which production targets were to be reduced and a further 205 to 240 collieries to be closed, mostly on economic grounds rather than through exhaustion. Most of the closures were to be in the northern coalfields, with the future of the industry clearly centred upon the high productivity, low cost districts of Yorkshire, East and West Midlands. The future for Leicestershire was, for the meantime, assured. However, the industry as a whole took a severe beating; the table below shows its extent. In the 1960s the number of collieries in

²⁶ Ashworth, Appendix A1.

²⁷ Tony Hall, *King Coal: Miners, Coal and Britain's Industrial Future*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 107.

Britain was reduced from 698 to 299, with the resultant halving of the workforce from about 600,000 to around 300,000.

Number of colliery closures, 1958 to 1972-73.

	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963-	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970-	1971	1972
Closed on economic grounds	13	36	6	4	15	15	13	21	25	31	38	10	2	0	0
Closed for other reasons	15	17	29	25	37	25	27	31	21	20	17	9	4	3	8
Total closures	28	53	35	29	52	40	40	52	46	51	55	19	6	3	8
Mergers	4	7	9	3	5	4	5	2	1	11	4	0	1	0	0

Source: NCB Statistics Dept. in Ashworth, 256.

The man at the head of the Coal Board during this dramatic rundown of the industry was a Labour politician, Alf (later Lord) Robens. He tells his story, in which he attempts to justify his overseeing of the decimation of the British coal industry, in his aptly named autobiography *Ten Year Stint*.¹ To what extent Robens acquiesced with government fuel policy, which favoured oil over coal, is still unclear. His version is that he tried but failed to persuade the Labour Government of 1964-70 to support the indigenous fuel supplies of coal. Others, particularly union leaders like Scargill and Mick McGahey, lay a large part of the blame for the pit closures at Robens' door, and for establishing the political precedent of closures for reasons other than exhaustion, a precedent which was to prove expedient for the Conservative Government under Mrs. Thatcher. However, Will Paynter, General Secretary of the NUM during the period 1959-68, assessed the period of the 1960s and Robens' role in it more accurately and more succinctly than most when he said,

A lot of people in the union attack the Coal Board. I don't attack the Coal Board. I attack the Government. It was the fuel policy of the Tories and the Labour Government that determined the background in which the Coal Board had to operate. Robens was carrying out Government policy and in his public utterances he had very often to justify it. He used to fume a lot, but he was essentially subordinate.²

The role of the NUM during this period is also open to criticism. That the miners saw their best interests tied up with having a Labour Government is in no doubt. This goes some way towards explaining their relative (relative to the 1950s and later the 1970s and '80s) docility during the period 1964-66. Labour was in office but with a very slim majority and Sydney Ford, President of the NUM 1961-71, said at the 1965 NUM Annual Conference:

²⁸ Lord Robens, *Ten Year Stint*, (London). 1972.

²⁹ Hall, 121.

We shall make clear where our own interests lie ... we have a right to do this. On the other hand, we shall win no support ... if the pursuit of our own interests reaches a point at which it endangers the success of the Government itself. There can be no rocking the boat ... there will be no forgiveness for anyone ... who willingly helps to bring the Government down. We shall sometimes have to subordinate our own interests to those of the great majority.³⁰

Such compliance from potentially the most dangerous union gave the Government a green light to go ahead with its more radical fuel policies. In September 1965 "The National Plan" was published for the coal industry which established a production limit of 170-180 million tonnes by 1970, thereby abandoning the 200 million tonnes target. This meant further rationalisation and the closure of high cost pits "irrespective of their coal reserves."³¹ Coupled with this was a White Paper, "Fuel Policy", which recognised the growing competition for coal from oil and gas and stated that the industry would be concentrated on Yorkshire and the East Midlands. It also noted that wage restraint was essential if the industry was to have any chance of becoming viable.³² Clearly the Labour Government was intending to continue the previous Conservative Government's policy of pit closures on a large scale, even, indeed, speeding up the process. After this became apparent, the NUM was determined to be less compliant, and Ford, himself a Yorkshireman, although not a miner, but a member of the Colliery Officials Staff Association (COSA), had difficulty in holding back the more militant members of the district unions. The NUM's federal nature has in turn been one of its strengths and its weaknesses over the years. At the NUM Annual Conference in July 1967, a young Yorkshire delegate by the name of Arthur Scargill went to the rostrum to speak on the issue of pit closures:

³⁰ NUM Annual Conference, 1965; Taylor, 53.

³¹ Taylor, 54.

³² Taylor, 55.

I can honestly say that I never heard flannel like we got from the Minister ... he said that we have nuclear power stations with us, whether we like it or not. I suggest to this Conference that we have coal mines with us ... but they did something about the problem: they closed them down. This was a complete reversal of the policy ... that was promised by the Labour Government before it was put into office ... this represents a betrayal of the mining industry.³³

One criticism that may not be levelled at Arthur Scargill is that he has changed his tune over the last thirty years!

However, in 1967 his was a lone voice, as miners up and down the country were not prepared to take on a *Labour* Government over this issue. Added to this natural/historical hesitancy to tackle a Labour Government, with the concurrent question regularly posed by those on the right wing of the NUM: 'Look at the alternative party waiting to get its hands on power', was the aforementioned problem of the federal nature of the NUM. Certain districts, most notably the East Midlands, whose futures seemed assured, were not prepared to go to battle to save what were being publicised as dying coalfields. And if a national strike were ever to be called, it would have to be sanctioned by the National Executive Committee of the NUM, which, under Ford's leadership, was highly unlikely. Finally, fear played its part in taming the miners during this period. Those miners whose pits were "under review" by the NCB felt that any industrial action would jeopardise *their* chances of survival. Added to this was the fact that the average age of miners had actually increased to nearly forty-four years by 1969³⁴ due to the unwillingness of young men to follow their fathers into what was clearly, in more ways than one, a risky industry. Consequently, those men remaining in the industry feared for their future as their age precluded them, in most cases, from embarking upon a new career. Even finding ordinary manual work would not be very easy. A Newcastle University study on the effects of

³³ NUM Annual Conference, 1967, 249; Taylor, 60.

³⁴ Ashworth, Appendix A1.

pit closures in the North Eastern region showed that in some mining communities the closure of the pit resulted in unemployment levels of 43 per cent among men aged 56-65.³⁵

Thus it was that the miners of Great Britain, unlike their counterparts in the Ruhr of West Germany and the Massif Central of France,³⁶ complied, albeit bitterly, with the rundown of their industry. There was, however, one significant achievement of the period, from the NUM's point of view, which in itself helped both to pacify the more militant sections and create a new and powerful unity which would stand them in good stead in the not too distant future: the introduction of a national daywage system - the National Power Loading Agreement.

The National Power Loading Agreement.

Throughout this survey of the history of the miners and their unions, it has been evident that, time and time again, the most divisive issue was that of district based wage settlements. The leaders of the early 'national' unions such as MacDonald with the MNA and Halliday with the AAM, and then later the leaders of the MFGB and finally of the NUM, were constantly frustrated in their attempts to unite the miners. They were frustrated by the coal owners' ability to split the miners by offering some districts better financial deals and incentives. When a national union and nationalisation finally became a reality in 1945 and 1947, it was hoped, by miners' leaders, that regional wage differentials would, like private ownership, become a thing of the past. However, disposing of them was not to prove an easy task, and some of the strongest opponents to this policy were certain sections of the miners themselves. Apart from the vast array of job titles resulting in a truly fantastic number of pay differentials (see p. 151), there were also problems over concessionary coal and subsidised housing not being granted or applied on a uniform level, which needed to be taken into consideration. These, and other

³⁵ J.W. House and E.M.Knight, *Pit Closure and the Community: Report to the Ministry of Labour, Papers on Migration and Mobility in Northern England, No.5*, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1967, 43.

³⁶ D. Reid, *The Miners of Decazeville: A Genealogy of Deindustrialisation*, (Harvard University Press, 1985).

problems and resentments, had already manifested themselves at the introduction of the national day-wage system in April 1955. High wage districts like Nottingham had had to practice wage restraint while other districts caught up. At the Annual Conference of that year one Nottinghamshire delegate spoke of the bitterness and frustration of his members, declaring that:

... our day workers' loyalty to the organisation was tested to the limit.³⁷

That the NPLA was ever introduced came about as a result of pressure from the NCB and the ability of NUM leaders, most notably Will Paynter, General Secretary of the NUM 1959-68, and an unapologetic Communist, to convince the rank and file that the NPLA was in the interests of national unity. The NCB believed that the abolition of district based wage settlements would bring about greater harmony in the coalfield. And it did not want its attempts to increase the number of mechanised coal faces to be hindered by disputes over district pay differentials. The NUM argued that piecework was totally outdated as productivity no longer depended upon the muscular effort of individual miners, but on mechanisation, which was the great leveller as faceworkers, wherever they were, were now making the same physical effort.

Thus it was that an agreement was drawn up between the NCB and the NUM and was presented to the men for their approval. The agreement announced that:

The Board and the Union have agreed to introduce a uniform national shift rate for men employed on power loading faces not later than 31st December 1971.³⁸

Shift rates were to be equal for all faceworkers, who were to be carefully and very specifically defined. They were to be worked out on the basis of the average of the previous six

³⁷ Hall, 145.

³⁸ Ashworth. 294.

months' earnings. Consequently, district wage differentials would still exist, initially, but over a five year period those miners in the highest paid districts would take little or no pay rises, while the others caught up. The terms of, and justification for, the Agreement were presented to the rank and file at a special conference in April 1966. Paynter spoke passionately:

This union has been built up on certain principles of solidarity and unity. An injury to one is an injury to all and it is necessary, even in our wage negotiations and in our advance to national wage agreements, that we embrace these principles in our actions as well as in the speeches that we make.³⁹

However, it would be a sentimental mistake to say that Paynter's words appealed to the class solidarity of the miners. The NPLA was accepted but by a narrow margin: 269,000 for, 226,000 against, with all the higher paid districts voting against.⁴⁰

Notions of miners being at the pinnacle of working class consciousness and solidarity clearly need to be re-examined if we are to have a more accurate understanding of their role in labour history. But the NPLA *was* introduced and did mark a revolution in the miners' wages system. It also created great frustrations in those areas that had to practice NCB/NUM inflicted wage restraint for five years. And by the 1970s it was those areas in particular, and the whole coalfield in general, which had suffered a depression in wages in relation to the rising inflation of the time. When a *Conservative* Government, elected in 1970, demanded further wage restraint, there was no reason why an angry NUM membership, strangely united by the NPLA as it had never been before, should not resort to national direct action for the first time since 1926.

³⁹ Hall, 147.

⁴⁰ Ashworth, 295.

Leicestershire Miners: Nationalisation to NPLA.

Throughout the 1950s LNUM membership remained stable at six to six and a half thousand miners, divided between eight collieries. In 1959 the number dipped below six thousand,⁴¹ and thus began an inexorable decline which continued right up to the final closure of the coalfield in the 1990s. Union funds were generally well managed and Griffin notes that:

... there was always a healthy balance in the Union's General Fund because of its prudent investment policy and it served the union well during the periods of crisis, such as 1972.⁴²

While local union affairs generally ran quite smoothly in Coalville, and industrial strife was rare in comparison with other areas like Yorkshire, the prospect of a national daywage system did provoke some trouble as Coalville miners feared, correctly as it turned out, that such a system would affect them adversely. When a limited daywage structure was proposed in 1955, certain sections of the LNUM argued for its rejection "... in view of the fact that Leicestershire would gain little."⁴³ But Frank Smith, while recognising that Leicestershire would not benefit as much as other areas, insisted on acceptance of the new system:

... for the sake of Nationalisation, unification and equality of all mineworkers throughout the Industry.⁴⁴

On this occasion the appeal to the altruistic side of the Coalville miners won out, and the LNUM Council voted to accept the new wage structure. However, as we shall see, the decision to introduce the NPLA was much less well accepted in Leicestershire.

⁴¹ Griffin, *Volume III*, 37.

⁴² Griffin, *Volume III*, 35.

⁴³ Griffin, *Volume III*, 123.

⁴⁴ Griffin, 1989, 123.

By 1961, Smith's own attitude had changed. The introduction of the daywage system in 1955 had forced wage negotiations and bargaining from area to national level. Consequently, Smith's attempts to argue for wage increases for Coalville miners were constantly met by NCB comparisons with other districts. Wage negotiations were, then, necessarily very complex, certainly more complex than when they were conducted at district level, and thus, often very frustrating.

Smith was the first Leicestershire delegate to make a major speech at Conference when, in 1962, he made an impassioned plea for more consideration for surface workers, particularly those in the screening plants. These were:

... men who have broken their bodies on the anvil of industry ... men who know what conditions can be like underground and who, but for their misfortune, would still be there; men with the lowest rate of pay and the lowest working status.⁴⁵

With this speech an important psychological barrier had been overcome and the Leicestershire Area had entered the national stage. Smith's usage of powerful metaphor and painful imagery, describing precisely what lay in store for the vast majority of the miners listening to him, ensured that his appeal would receive a warm welcome. And it was Smith's growing reputation at a national level which aided him when it came to persuading his own men to accept the NPLA.

The justification for the NPLA was relatively straightforward. In 1964 Will Paynter told Conference:

... above seventy per cent of the coal ... is being produced on the basis of power loading systems, where the getting of the coal and the loading of the coal is done by machines and not on the basis of physical human labour.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Griffin, 1989. 115.

⁴⁶ Griffin, *Volume III*, 125.

Thus the NPLA was needed in order to dispose of the wide differentials in wages which existed as a result of district based wage settlements. And, with so much of the coal now being got by machines, such differentials:

... were unjustified because, with power loading, "output performance is determined *more* by the efficiency of the machines than by the labour effort of the men" ...⁴⁷

Leicestershire was a prime example of a district which did well through locally negotiated settlements, and its faceworkers were among the highest paid in the country. It was also the most mechanised district with ninety per cent of the coal being power loaded. Consequently, few were surprised when Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire, another highly mechanised and highly paid area, rejected the NPLA proposals. Miners in these districts feared a drop in wages while other areas caught up with them. And, of course, in real terms, this is precisely what would happen. David Lockwood's *privatised* worker type with his pecuniary model of society is clearly evident in Leicestershire at this time as shown by Griffin's comment at the miners there:

... were purchasing homes and cars and just could not afford the drop in their earnings.⁴⁸

There was then deep resentment in Leicestershire when the NPLA was voted through by a very slim majority vote (see footnote 40) and Griffin believes that its forced imposition was one of the key factors in making Leicestershire miners more militant than they had ever been. And he argues that this contributed to their commitment to the national strikes of 1972 and 1974 in a way not normally expected of such traditionally moderate miners.

⁴⁷ Ashworth, 294.

⁴⁸ Griffin, *Volume III*, 127.

This is undoubtedly true, in part, and once again helps to dispel sentimental notions of solidary working relationships between *all* miners. If the introduction of the NPLA provoked unhistorical and unnatural feelings of militancy in Leicestershire, then it was militant frustration at their being *held back* financially in order to create a fairer wages system. A system which the NUM leadership believed would help to instil a greater depth of inter-district solidarity. Thus, Leicestershire's participation, as we shall see, in the industrial action of the 1970s was born out of their frustrated pecuniary desires rather than feelings of working class solidarity. And, if the introduction of the NPLA explains the origins of Leicestershire's *militancy* in the 1970s, it also helps us to understand the *temporary* nature of such militancy. Once the bitter memories of 1966 had faded, and the wage discrepancies were repaired after 1974, then Leicestershire's militancy was also dissipated. And with the introduction of the productivity bonus scheme in 1978 Leicestershire miners were back at the top of the wages league and the NPLA had virtually disappeared, along with Leicestershire's brief flirtation with industrial militancy. But we are racing ahead of ourselves...

1972 and 1974: Revenge for 1926.

The origins of the industrial militancy of the 1970s are widely believed to be found in the so called *October Revolution* of 1969.⁴⁹ The rundown of the coal industry throughout the 1960s in favour of nuclear power and the prospect of North Sea oil and gas coming on tap in the not too distant future contributed to a sense of gloom and doom amongst the miners of Great Britain. This, plus the very real depression in their wages, caused many miners to put aside their traditional *moderacy* when faced with a Labour Government. The 1960s, when Labour was in office for six consecutive years 1964-70, was a decade in which the mining industry showed a distinct desire to lose its reputation as being the most strike prone. In 1957 the industry was responsible for 78 per cent of all industrial work stoppages. By 1970 this

⁴⁹ Hall, 149.

figure had declined to just four per cent.⁵⁰ Even when taking into consideration the dramatic decline in the number of men employed in coalmining, 703,000 in 1957 down to 305,000 by 1970,⁵¹ the reduction in industrial disputes is still astonishing. And the statistics may have been even more remarkable were it not for the outbreak of unofficial action in the Yorkshire coalfield in October 1969.

The focus of this action was not, as was traditional, on the physical and political musclemen of the industry - the faceworkers - but on the industry's forgotten yesterday's men, the surface workers. Their claim for a reduction in hours to forty per week, including mealtimes, was rejected by the NCB. While negotiations continued, the Yorkshire miners decided to take matters into their own hands, embarking upon unofficial strike action. The mood of the men was summed up in a local newspaper editorial:

The bitterness of a decade has welled up ... grievances are now knitting together to threaten the industrial peace of the coalfield ... the campaign in favour of the lower hours is now so firmly rooted among the rank and file miners that it now appears that little short of an NCB climb down will satisfy them.⁵²

On Monday 13 October, the Yorkshire coalfield came to a standstill, as every pit in the district stopped production. And what was clearly a regional dispute threatened to become the first national pit strike since 1926, as the unofficial stoppage spilled over into the Midlands, Scotland and South Wales. By the following week Kent had also been affected and a total of 140 pits throughout Britain were on unofficial strike, this out of a total of 306 pits.⁵³ Both the NCB and the leadership of the NUM were in a quandary, as they had been caught completely unprepared for such a display of national solidarity. The NCB offered a settlement of the wage claim in full but refused to back down over the issue of hours. Sydney Ford was desperate to

⁵⁰ Handy, 213-16 and Ashworth, 299.

⁵¹ Ashworth, Table A₂

⁵² *Morning Telegraph*, 8 October, 1969; in Taylor, 192.

⁵³ Hall, 155 and Ashworth, 192.

end the dispute, as this unconstitutional action by such a large number of his membership was not only threatening his personal position, but also the NUM rule book. He and the rest of the NEC recommended acceptance of the NCB's wages offer, while promising further talks on the hours issue. When the Barnsley Panel, the committee responsible for organising the action in Yorkshire, voted to return to work by 25 October, the strike was over, but the widespread discontent was by no means dissipated. And rank and file action, which had even shaken the Labour Government and its left-wing Employment Secretary, Barbara Castle, while not producing solutions to the grievances in the industry, had produced a new sense of militant solidarity which would stand the miners in good stead in the not too distant future.

It was left to a Conservative administration, elected, against expectations and opinion poll predictions, in June 1970, to reap what the Labour Government had sown in the late 1960s. The pent up frustration and bitterness felt by the miners was now allowed to run its natural course once a right-wing and officially anti-union party was in office. The irony was that only a supposedly *socialist* party could actually run a capitalist economy without too much hindrance thanks to the brotherly, not to mention financial, allegiance of the unions. It was this complacency, indeed psychological impotency, in the face of a Labour administration which caused the NUM to comply with the rundown of the mining industry when a pit a week was closed during the period 1966-68. However, the events of October 1969 gave the miners an increased awareness of their industrial muscle, and this, combined with a complete lack of any sense of loyalty to a Conservative Government, meant that after 1970 an all-out clash between miners and politicians was increasingly likely.

At first the new government's economic policy of *laissez faire* seemed to have also spread into its industrial policy. A dock strike, led by the militant communist, Jack Dash, and a power workers' strike, resulting in domestic electricity cuts in December 1970,⁵⁴ were both marked by the Government's distinct lack of intervention. "Lame duck" companies were to be allowed to 'go to the wall', and the previous administration's prices and incomes policy was scrapped. However, this tough, 'new', market-led policy did not survive long, and the phrase

⁴ Tony Benn, *The Benn Diaries*, (London: Arrow Books, 1996), 237.

'U-turn' entered the political and public psyche when, in February 1971, the Government nationalised the bankrupted Rolls Royce company and just one year later gave a large financial subsidy of £35 million to the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders in order to save it from closure.⁵⁵

In the same year, 1971, further embarrassment ensued for the Government. The Minister for Labour, Robert Carr, had pushed through Parliament, despite intense opposition from the Labour Opposition, the TUC and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Industrial Relations Bill. The objective of the bill was to reform industrial relations essentially by abolishing the *closed shop*, and making trade unions more responsible/respectable by requiring them to register in a Register of Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, in order for them to be legally recognised. The provisions of the bill were to be enforced by a National Industrial Relations Court (NIRC) which would also have the power to impose pre-strike ballots and a waiting or *cooling-off* period of up to sixty days before a strike could commence. Opposition to the bill was both enormous and intense, culminating in a protest march through London of up to 140,000 people on Sunday 21 February 1971. On this occasion the union leader addressing the crowd, Vic Feather, General Secretary of the TUC, did not employ words full of sentimentality and empty rhetoric when he declared from the podium in Trafalgar Square:

Never was our Movement more united. Never was it more resolute in its resistance to attack.⁵⁶

The *Daily Mirror*, in its editorial, enthused about the size and good-naturedness of the protest:

140,000 join the 'Sunday outing' demo ... and not one was arrested... it was the jolliest, friendliest protest that the ranks of London's bobbies have ever kept eye on.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Hugo Young. *One of Us*, (London: Pan Books, 1990), 75; Morgan, 323.

⁵⁶ *The Great March*, Trades Union Congress, 1971, 20.

⁵⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 22 February 1971.

John Pilger, writing in the same edition, speaks more radically, even perhaps, romantically, about a "revolution":

A British revolution was joined yesterday. There can be no doubt about that. By their massive and peaceful presence in the heart of London, the People gave notice that their struggle for freedom, begun in earnest by the trade union movement about two centuries ago, had begun again. Not since VE Day, and not ever before that, have so many ordinary Britons come together to march, and to express their opposition to a proposed law.⁵⁸

But, despite such warning signs the bill became law and the TUC immediately instructed its members not to comply with the terms of the Act. Strike action, largely unofficial, ensued, and the number of working days lost rose dramatically:

From an average of less than four million days a year during 1964-70, 24 million were lost in 1972 alone, the worst total since 1926.⁵⁹

The Industrial Relations Act (IRA) reached its apogee in public alienation in July 1972 when five London dockers were sent to Pentonville Prison for contempt of the NIRC after they had broken an order banning picketing of the Midland Cold Store in the east London dockyards. The "Pentonville Five", as they were known, became the focal point for TUC action against the IRA, and the General Council called for a one day general strike on 31 July. Already the country was on the verge of an unofficial general strike with all 144,000 dockers out and other unions, particularly the printers', on sympathy strike. The Government, recognising its self-induced plight, resurrected a hitherto virtually unknown legal appointee, the

⁵⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 22 February 1971.

⁵⁹ Joe England and Brian Weekes, "Trade Unions and the State: A Review of the Crisis" in W.E.J. McCarthy (ed.), *Trade Unions*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 421; and Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein, *The Labour Party: A Marxist History*, (London: Bookmarks, 1988), 309.

Official Solicitor, who released the "Five" on a conveniently found legal technicality, thereby avoiding a head-on collision with the unions.⁶⁰ It was in this febrile atmosphere of the widespread industrial unrest of 1971-72 that the miners, conscious of the Government's vulnerability and of a renaissance in union militancy and solidarity, launched their first national strike since 1926.

1971 was a fortuitous year for the miners.⁶¹ Derek Ezra, widely regarded as sympathetic to their case and largely inexperienced in negotiating, was appointed chairman of the NCB. At the same time, Joe Gormley became President of the NUM. Gormley was the acceptable face of miners' militancy, a moderate right-winger with whom the government could do business while he held back his more militant colleagues such as Lawrence Daly, General Secretary, and Mick McGahey, the Scottish miners' President. This change of personnel at the top was accompanied by a change in the NUM rule book at its July 1971 Conference in Aberdeen. Previously, national strike action required a 'yes' vote of 66.6 per cent in a national pithead ballot. This was reduced to 55 per cent, making a national strike over pay and conditions much more likely. At the same conference it was agreed to submit a pay claim for increases which would give surface workers a basic weekly wage of £26 per week and those on the NPLA £35.⁶² At its meeting in September, the NCB announced that a maximum wage increase of only six per cent was viable. This was four per cent lower than the annual inflation rate and thus represented a drop in wages in real terms. This NCB offer was presented to the NUM on 12 October 1971 and the new NUM President had no problem in rejecting it and recommending a pithead ballot on strike action. It seemed that the NCB, with the tacit support of the Government, was going to ignore Gormley's direct personal advice to the Prime Minister, Edward Heath, at an informal meeting between the two in August 1971:

⁶⁰ The IRA had to wait for the advent of another Labour Government in 1974 before it was officially laid to rest, but, practically speaking, it was essentially comatosed by July 1972.

⁶¹ The account of the 1972 miners' strike which follows is taken from a wide variety of sources, both primary and secondary. Where specific details are used then the relevant source is cited.

⁶² Ashworth, 306.

Ted, you can do the biggest disservice for Britain if you allow a strike to happen because I shall win it.⁶³

On 1 November, an overtime ban came into force and was strictly adhered to. Inroads into Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) coal stocks were soon made, stocks which, according to Daly, had been frantically built up:

For the past six months the Central Electricity Generating Board have been pushing coal into every hole and corner they can find in preparation for a miners' strike.⁶⁴

The overtime ban also had the effect of proving to the miners themselves just how low and inadequate their basic wage really was, thereby hardening their resolve to seek redress for what they regarded as an injustice. Meanwhile, the NEC campaigned throughout the coalfield for a 'yes' vote in the forthcoming pithead ballot. Voting began on the 22 November and the results were announced on Thursday 2 December. The overall vote gave a 59 per cent vote in favour of strike action.⁶⁵ Now, unless the Government intervened and instructed the NCB to improve their pay offer, a national miners' strike would take place, beginning on 9 January 1972. No such instruction was given and the strike went ahead as planned.

Many objective factors and particular incidents make this strike unique in mining history, not least of which was the almost total solidarity of the miners from the outset and throughout the dispute. On the morning of Monday 9 January, every single pit in the land stood at a standstill. Miners picketing pits, very often their own, such a prevalent feature of the 1984-85 strike, was unheard of, indeed unthinkable, in 1972. Consequently, all efforts could be concentrated on restricting and/or stopping the movement of coal supplies from existing stocks.

⁶³ Hall, 168; and Joe Gormley *Battered Cherub*, (London, 1982).

⁶⁴ Malcolm Pitt, *The World On Our Backs: The Kent Miners and the 1972 Miners' Strike*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), 111; Hall, 170.

⁶⁵ Ashworth, 307; Hall, 171.

Within a week a full Commons debate on the coal industry dispute took place. Opening the debate on 18 January, Mr. John Davies, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and President of the Board of Trade, commented:

The issue of a national coal strike, ... provokes inevitably depths of feeling and concern that go even beyond the serious industrial facts that are involved.

There are many reasons for this - the character of the industry, with its ruggedness and dangers; the men who work in it and who rightly evoke our sympathy and our admiration; the historical place that the industry holds in the whole evolution of British industry; the special links that it has with this House; the numbers of people involved and their unity and union membership; the remarkable history of the National Union of Mineworkers; and the impact that the industry has on every section of the community, geographically, industrially, socially and domestically.

This catalogue by no means exhausts the many reasons why the events that have recently occurred elicit a response throughout the country which is perhaps more profound and emotional than the plain industrial issues involved.⁶⁶

This highly patronising and sentimental description of miners, their industry and union, was typical of those who had never had anything to do with the industry, and in some cases, as we shall see, even those who were closely connected to it. Davies' use of words like "ruggedness", "dangers", "sympathy" and "admiration" was a disingenuous and forced response to a situation which the Government had not anticipated. His attempts to mollify the miners with reference to their unique place in British history echoes those of politicians in the past when faced with miners on strike. Appeals to the national interest had been exhausted and the miners in 1972 saw their action as being precisely about "serious industrial facts" - their low pay - and nothing else. Sentimentality had no place in this dispute. And if one had any doubts about the real sentiments of the Government, then one only has to look at its final offer

⁶⁶ Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 1971-72, Vol. 829, col. 229, January 17-January 28.

to the miners, the week-end before the strike began. Harold Lever, Shadow spokesman on Trade and Industry, replying to Davies' speech showed the hypocrisy of his attempt to ingratiate himself with the miners. Lever pointed out that during the final talks the Government:

... told the miners that the offer it had made to them would necessarily not be open if they persisted in their strike. That is like saying, "You take our *diktat* or, if you fight, you will not get what we have acknowledged is a minimum fair deal." Analysed, this is a simple call to the miners for unconditional surrender.⁶⁷

But even Lever could not resist the temptation to employ the same kind of sentimental rhetoric in some vain attempt to increase support for the miners. Indeed, he goes several miles further down the road of gross exaggeration:

These are the yeomen of England, Scotland and Wales. These are the men who rarely turn against their fellow men... They had the faces of men who have spent long years wrestling in comradeship against the grim hazards of nature, not wriggling foxily, determined to outwit their fellow men.⁶⁸

Medieval references to the miners as some kind of Agincourt foot soldiers is almost hilarious. And as for miners' loyalty to each other, well, Lever had clearly never heard of the 'butty system'.

These naïve and superficial accounts of miners, their industry and their communities is further continued by Patrick Cormack, a Conservative M.P. who actually represented a mining constituency, Cannock, and who sounds astonished, almost incredulous, that he had won an

⁷ Hansard, Vol. 829, col. 244.

³⁸ Hansard, Vol. 829, col. 244.

election in such a place. Given his limited understanding of it and miners perhaps he was right to be:

... one can never appreciate just what makes a mining community tick. I do not pretend, after fighting elections in two mining constituencies and representing one for nineteen months, to know all about it, but I have been able to detect something. Mining is a dangerous calling and it creates a community spirit.⁶⁹

Referring to mining as a "calling", giving it an almost religious definition, is contemptuous. Miners, while proud of their status and working class imagery, are hardly in the industry out of a sense of vocation. They do it because in most cases it is the only job available in their area which pays a vaguely living wage. And when better job prospects come along, they are not slow to avail themselves of them. The miners' strike in 1972 was simply about restoring their previously held position as one of the better paid industrial jobs. The Government failed to understand that and comments by politicians like those cited did not help matters.

The miners' picketing activities culminated in the now legendary picket of Saltley Gate coke depot in Birmingham, an event which has often been described as the making of Arthur Scargill, when for the first time he entered the national consciousness, and an occasion which he himself called the "greatest day in my life."⁷⁰

The 'Battle of Saltley Gate' began on Friday 4 February in an atmosphere of extreme tension and anger. The previous day a Yorkshire miner, Fred Matthews, had been killed by a lorry breaking through a picket line outside Keadby power station near Scunthorpe.⁷¹ Martyrdom for a cause, intentional or not, is, of course, always provocative for those left behind. Statements in the House of Commons by NUM sponsored M.P.s illustrate the rage felt

⁶⁹ Hansard, Vol. 829, col. 261.

⁷⁰ *New Left Review(NLR)*, No. 92, (July/August 1975).

⁷¹ Hall, 187-88; Taylor. 224-25.

by those in the industry, even if the comparison with Ulster, made by Tom Swain, may have been somewhat exaggerated:

This could be the start of another Ulster in the Yorkshire coalfield.

I warn the Government here and now that if there is not an immediate statement from a responsible minister, I shall go back to my constituency tonight and advocate violence.⁷²

Such inflammatory comments were both rare and highly irregular, advocating, as they did, direct law-breaking. But they vividly express the mood of militancy in the national mining community, a mood which Scargill tapped into when he organised the picket of Saltley coke depot, the day after Matthews' death.

On the first day, about two hundred pickets moved on Nechells Gas Works at Saltley, Birmingham, and were met by a large police contingent, determined to facilitate the free movement of coke lorries. The initial pickets came from Leicestershire and Warwickshire and were insufficient in numbers to close down the depot. Lawrence Daly was informed of the situation and Scargill took it upon himself to organise a mass picket. He arrived very early Sunday morning with 6-700 men from the Barnsley Area, thus forcing the temporary closure of the depot. On Monday 7 February, it was re-opened and the NUM called for further reinforcements. By Tuesday well over a thousand men were picketing the depot, but still the police managed to keep it open. That day workers at Midland car works and Thorn Lighting struck in sympathy with the miners, and on Thursday 10 February a further 40,000 Birmingham workers came out in sympathy; 10,000 of them marched on Saltley Gate. Scargill's description of these workers appearing from over the brow of a hill, banners waving, is like a scene from a *bad* Hollywood movie.⁷³ However, it must not be denied that the miners

⁷² Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 1971-72, Vol. 830, col. 678, January 31-February 11.

⁷³ *NLR*, 1975.

were saved. The Chief Police Constable, Sir Derek Capper, ordered the gates closed and allowed Scargill to make an impromptu speech to the massed crowd in which he declared:

This will go down in trade union history. It will also go down in history as the Battle of Saltley Gate. The working people have united in a mass stand.⁷⁴

Scargill had been catapulted into the national consciousness and, for many, had acquired instant demonic status. The Conservative Party, stupefied by this almost unprecedented display of working class unity, attacked the Tory Home Secretary, Reginald Maudling, for not sending in the troops. He retorted by asking, in thinly disguised contempt for their naïveté,

... if they had been sent in, should they have gone in with their rifles loaded or unloaded?⁷⁵

E.P. Thompson gave his inimical and highly provocative explanation for Maudling's inaction:

And why was this not done? Not (one may be certain) because the government was squeamish about such intervention. It would surely have considered this if the strikers had been 'unofficial' or less formidable. Not even because Mr. Maudling has other uses for his troops in Londonderry or Newry. It was because that energy, glowing in the alternate culture of an alternate 'nation', would have been ignited in a flash. And that ignition would have burned on towards a General Strike more potent of decisive change than that of 1926...⁷⁶

⁷⁴ *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 10 February 1972; in *Labour Research*, Vol. 61, No. 4, (April 1972).

⁷⁵ Jonathan Winterton and Ruth Winterton. *Coal, Crisis and Conflict: The Miners' Strike in Yorkshire*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 145.

⁷⁶ E.P. Thompson, "A Special Case" in E.P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight*, (London: Merlin, 1980), 76.

Thompson's fluent writing and clever use of burning metaphors, so apt for the period when coal fires were, by their very absence, so present in the nation's minds if not in their hearths, is typical of him. Whether his analysis of the situation was correct or not we will probably never know, but Saltley Gate has indeed gone down in the annals of trade union history, taking upon itself almost legendary status. It also galvanised a shocked Conservative administration into action and a determination that it would not be caught out again by such mass picketing confronting a largely unprepared police force. In 1973 the Civil Contingencies Unit (CCU) was developed to ensure the availability of vital supplies and to form links between the nation's chief constables and the heads of military districts.⁷⁷ Although never used, the CCU stood symbolically for the government's recognition of the power of a united trade union movement. It must also not be overlooked that a certain Margaret Thatcher was a member of the Cabinet at the time of Saltley Gate. Despite the fact that she has consistently refused to divulge either information about Cabinet talks at that time or her personal opinion on the events of February 1972,⁷⁸ the actions of *her* government in 1984-85, and her public sidelining of Edward Heath, make it quite clear how frustrated she must have been and how contemptuous of her former leader she was. Only when the Cabinet papers of 1972 are opened to the public in 2002 will we have a clearer idea of what really went on.

In the same week as Saltley Gate, events at a national level developed in such a way as to make the government's insistence on non-interference in the strike quite ridiculous. On Monday 7 February, three-hour power cuts were introduced nationwide, on Tuesday a State of Emergency was announced and on Friday the Government imposed a three-day week on industry. The Employment Secretary, Robert Carr, now intervened directly, offering to chair negotiations between the NCB and the NUM. When the NUM rejected an improved offer, Carr decided to set up a Court of Enquiry under the chairmanship of Lord Wilberforce. The NUM's willingness to assist the Court in its deliberations, while refusing from the outset to be

⁷⁷ M. Adeney and J. Lloyd. *The Miners' Strike: Loss Without Limit*. (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1986), 72.

⁷⁸ Young, 77.

bound by its findings,⁷⁹ shows a confident militancy rare in British industrial history. The Government's own panic stricken action in the week of Saltley Gate was certainly a significant contributory factor towards this.

The Wilberforce Enquiry met hurriedly and reviewed written and oral evidence from both sides.⁸⁰ Lawrence Daly presented the case for the NUM, assisted by Professor Hugh Clegg of Warwick University, Michael Meacher M.P., and the Trade Union Research Unit of Ruskin College, Oxford. Their evidence concentrated on wage trends since 1945, showing how miners had fallen dramatically in the industrial wages league. They also showed how the miners had been peculiarly moderate in their compliance with the government rundown of their industry during the 1960s while managing to increase coal production. The NCB concentrated on its legal obligations to both the NUM and the Government as well as its genuinely limited financial resources, which made it impossible to meet the miners' demands without government assistance. After hearing the evidence the Wilberforce Enquiry concluded:

... that the present is a time when a definite and substantial adjustment in wage levels is called for in the coal industry ... we think it an essential part of the present settlement that the miners' basic claim for a general and exceptional increase should be recognised.⁸¹

And, most importantly, it went on:

⁷⁹ Gormley. 82-109. This gives the NUM President's personal, and of course, highly subjective account of the 1972 strike.

⁸⁰ Several official documents give detailed information on the proceedings and findings of the Wilberforce Enquiry two of which are: *NCB Annual Report, 1971-72*; and *Department of Employment Report of a Court Inquiry into a Dispute between the National Coal Board and the National Union of Mineworkers*, Cmnd. 4903, 1972. For a personal and analytical as well as highly subjective account giving the miners' point of view, besides that of Gormley's see J.Hughes and R. Moore (eds.), *A Special Case? Social Justice and the Miners*, (Harmondsworth, 1972).

⁸¹ Hall, 195.

We believe this is accepted by public opinion and if it cannot be paid for out of the NCB's revenue accounts, in accordance with its statutory obligations, we think that the public, through the Government, should accept the charge.⁸²

Recognition of general public opinion in favour of the miners was an important factor in helping them to win against an initially intransigent government which had relied upon alienating support for the miners through its policy of power cuts and short-term working. But the miners would have to wait twenty years, until 1992 and the announcement of the closure of thirty pits, before they again enjoyed such popular acclaim.

Although Wilberforce recommended an "exceptional increase," he did not meet the miners' initial demands. Surface workers were to get £23 and NPLA faceworkers £34.50. Gormley and the NEC, aware of the frustration and anger of the miners who had received no money for five weeks, and seeing the opportunity to push for further concessions, rejected Wilberforce's recommendations. Now the Prime Minister himself intervened and the two sides were called to Downing Street on 19 February.⁸³ Most of the NUM's subsidiary demands were accorded, including an extra five days holiday, pay increases for ancillary staff and the establishment of a five shift week. The NEC now felt able to go back to its members and recommend a return to work. Picketing was also immediately suspended and a pithead ballot organised for Wednesday 23 February. The result was announced on 25 February - 210,039 (96.5%) voting for acceptance of the offer.⁸⁴ Normal work resumed on Monday 28 February.

The first national miners' strike since 1926 was over, and the outcome this time was very different. A Conservative Government had been brought to its knees by the miners who, up to that point, had been generally regarded as a spent force in the modern industrial economy powered by oil and nuclear energy. *The Times* on 6 January had written:

⁸² *Report*, para. 42; in Taylor, 229-30.

⁸³ Ashworth, 311.

⁸⁴ Ashworth, 313; Hall, 196.

Coal stocks are large enough to withstand a strike for weeks ... the National Union of Mineworkers is much less of a power in the councils of the labour movement than it was.⁸⁵

The Times was by no means alone; other national newspapers wrote similar obituaries for the NUM right up to the end of the strike.⁸⁶ But this remarkable victory by the miners, quickly followed by that of 1974, which actually brought down the Conservative Government, led to a widespread feeling amongst the public, and even the miners themselves, who should have known better, that their union enjoyed an unparalleled and unbreakable solidarity. One writer, Dave Douglass, himself a miner, revels in this kind of sentimental hyperbole:

For most people the miners were reborn in 1972. It was a renaissance of general class militancy muffled and shuffling for forty years prior. The year 1972 is seen as a turning point in miners' history...⁸⁷

And a little later on he continues in an even more exaggerated vein:

A new feeling was sweeping the coalfields. Mass meetings at area and village levels saw new faces voicing an old message...⁸⁸

Douglass exults in such images and metaphors as "new found power", "flexing long tired muscles", "solidarity", and so on. And for a short time, a very short time, it may well have been true that the miners were living up to their traditional public persona. But the tragedy for the miners was that they began to believe the myth, the myth of solidary relationships being a result of their uniqueness, their isolation, their continued values being common to all

⁸⁵ *The Times*, 6 January, 1972.

⁸⁶ *Labour Research*, 67.

⁸⁷ Dave Douglass and Joel Krieger, *A Miner's Life*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 90.

⁸⁸ Douglass and Krieger, 92.

coalmining communities. And yet a simple glance at the voting figures (below) for strike action in a selection of coalfields would surely have alerted the miners to the potentiality for splits within the NUM, if not in 1972, then not much later:

	"Yes" vote	"No" vote	"Yes" vote as % of total
Yorkshire	41,290	13,833	75
South Wales	19,187	10,062	65.5
Kent	1,873	672	73.5
Scotland	12,008	8,132	59.5
Durham	10,493	8,701	54.75
Leicestershire	1,076	1,815	37
South Derbyshire	932	1,741	35
Nottinghamshire	15,134	12,813	54

Source: NUM Leicester Area Records. Circular to Lodges, 3 December 1971 in Griffin, (1987), 158.

Leicester Area: You shall go to the Ball.

Once Frank Smith had breached the psychological barrier of speaking at Conference in 1962, Leicestershire NUM began to play a more inclusive role in the national union. However, Leicestershire's sense of a long history of apartness or otherness resulted in its miners feeling forgotten, or worse, deliberately ignored by their big brothers in areas such as Yorkshire and South Wales. This led one Ellistown miner, Jim Watts, speaking at the 1971 Conference, to refer to the Leicester Area as "the Cinderella of the National Union of Mineworkers."⁸⁹

⁸⁹ NUM Annual Conference, 1971; in Griffin, *Volume III*, 119.

Perhaps it was precisely this feeling of being the outsider, true or not, that made the Leicester Area more introverted and more determined to concentrate its energy on fighting local issues, and for supporting ancillary staff, genuinely, if not literally, the underdogs in the mining industry. Thus it was that Frank Smith's 1962 speech was a demand for better pay and conditions for surface workers. And in 1965 the Leicester Area asked the NEC for an improved pay offer for canteen workers, who were largely women.⁹⁰ In the late 1960s Leicester delegates pressed the NEC to fight for free issues of boots, gloves and tools; and they asked to be admitted to the national subsidised transport scheme.⁹¹ Originally set up in 1952, the Leicester Area had opted not to join as most of its miners could comfortably walk to their local pit. But with the merging of Nailstone with Bagworth in 1967 and the closure of New Lount in 1968, this was no longer the case. *The issue, potentially moderate and trouble-free, became quite divisive as the NCB proposed to extend the transport scheme but only if it was allowed to increase fares. On these grounds Kent rejected the extension of the scheme, which Leicester regarded as unfair and opposed to the principle of a united national union. This was what provoked Jim Watts into making his speech at the 1971 Conference, a speech quite astonishing in its content and its portent for the future (dis)unity of the NUM:*

The feeling is such at my own particular branch (Ellistown) that I was asked to move the resolution some months back calling for the abolition of the National Union of Mineworkers, because we feel that the National Union of Mineworkers have no longer anything to offer the Leicestershire Area.⁹²

Once again Leicester's natural and historical antipathy to a national miners' union was exhibited, and this at a conference which was in the process of submitting a large pay claim and calling upon its members for national strike action in support of it. Leicestershire's unwillingness to get involved was already clear from its reaction to the 1969 wave of unofficial

⁹⁰ Griffin, *Volume III*, 116-17.

⁹¹ Griffin, *Volume III*, 117-18.

⁹² NUM Annual Conference Report, 1971; in Griffin, *Volume III*, 118.

strikes, despite their being over an issue supposedly dear to Leicester miners' hearts - surface workers' pay and conditions. Frank Smith successfully steered his men clear of the action declaring that:

... there was, despite the intention to draw special reference to the issue of hours of surface workers, a Political slant. It was fortunate that the Leicester Area did not get involved.⁹³

In this, Smith was in complete agreement with Sid Schofield, the NUM vice-president and General Secretary of the Yorkshire Area. His analysis of the 'October Revolution' was quite clear:

"We must not allow the minority," he stated, "who are already holding unofficial meetings, to formulate policies that undermine the whole concept of Trade Unionism... I am quite satisfied that the minorities in our Union, who are arranging unofficial meetings, printing and issuing pamphlets, ignoring the policies agreed upon at Annual Conferences, have a purpose in mind to try to undermine the status of Area and National Officials of our Union, and to incite our members into taking unconstitutional action, on an issue that they will choose."⁹⁴

The "minority" attempting to influence the Yorkshire Area NUM included Arthur Scargill, on his own admission;⁹⁵ and Schofield's warning in the last phrase is uncanny in its accuracy when one considers the principle accusation against Scargill in 1984 was that the miners' strike was unconstitutional because there had been no official national ballot. Moreover, Smith's determination to avoid what he regarded as a political strike in 1969 set the scene for Leicester's non-involvement in 1984-85 on the same grounds. However, Smith was in

⁹³ Leicester Area Minute Book, 27 October 1969; in Griffin, *Volume III*, 141.

⁹⁴ V.L. Allen, *The Militancy of British Miners*. (Shipley: Moor Press, 1981), 145.

⁹⁵ *NLR*, 1975.

favour of action in support of a pay claim and he attempted, along with other representatives of the Leicester Area, to persuade his members likewise. This would be difficult, as Leicester miners already had a reputation for being "woolly backs," anti-strike.⁹⁶ Indeed, the task in 1970 proved too difficult and Leicester miners voted against strike action. Throughout the NUM the vote in favour was 55 per cent, less than the required two thirds. But the patience of even Leicester miners was now stretched to its limit.

1971 was a year of change in personnel in the mining industry at both national and local level. Derek Ezra took over from Alf Robens as NCB chairman, there was a new NUM President in the shape of Joe Gormley, and the Leicester Area also had a vociferous new union delegate, Jack Jones. Robens had a special retirement message for the Leicester miners. Commenting upon the output figures for the Leicestershire coalfield, and the local newspaper's headline, "Local miners prove they are the best in Europe, he said these figure were:

... the best ever achieved by any European coalfield of comparable size. This is indeed a most gratifying farewell present.⁹⁷

Once again the patronising pat-on-the-back attitude towards Leicestershire miners is prevalent, helping them to internalise feelings of inclusiveness in the industry, if not the union, which they were loathe to attack in the form of strike action. But a breaking point in NCB/NUM relations was rapidly approaching which would engulf even the moderate Leicester miner.

It is interesting to note that Gormley owed his election victory partly to the decision of a Leicester man, Roy Ottey, leader of the craftsmen's section within the NUM, the Power Group, to withdraw his candidacy for the presidency.⁹⁸ Had Ottey insisted on running he would almost certainly have lost but would probably have split the right-wing vote, thereby letting in the radical left-wing candidate, Mick McGahey. Had that happened, then the 1970s

⁹⁶ Griffin, *Volume III*, 143.

⁹⁷ *Coalville Times*, 2 July 1971.

⁹⁸ Roy Ottey, *The Strike: An Insider's Story*, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1985, 26-27.

and '80s might have been very different decades for the miners, and not necessarily better. But this kind of speculation belongs to the "what if" school of history, interesting for Radio Four listeners, but academically redundant.

Jack Jones also belonged to the moderate wing of the NUM, and, although in favour of the NUM pay claim passed by Conference in 1971, he also expressed a viewpoint which could have been dictated by a member of the NCB.

I have listened to all the speeches today, but I have heard nothing said about economics, nothing said about where the eventual pay packet is going to come from...⁹⁹

The job of worrying about how a pay rise is going to be financed is not normally that of a trade union leader, but Jack Jones seems to have taken upon himself this rather dubious role. He was soon to be General Secretary of the Leicester Area, replacing Frank Smith upon his retirement.

As a pre-emptive assault, the national overtime ban came into force on 1 November 1971. This gave miners everywhere the 'chance' to see what living on their basic wage was like. And in Leicester it created previously non-existent tension between men and management, as there were several instances of the overtime ban being broken.¹⁰⁰ A national pithead ballot was planned for 22 November. Smith warned his men that one third of the pits nationally would close if the strike went ahead, due to lost markets and power stations and the CEEB converting to oil and gas. He also criticised the Yorkshire activists for attempting to politicise the NUM.¹⁰¹ When the strike ballot results were announced Leicester had voted overwhelmingly against - 63 per cent voting "no", a total of 2,891 miners against strike action.¹⁰² One can only guess at what the result might have been if they had not had the initial politicising experience of the overtime ban. However, the results nationwide showed 58.8 per

⁹⁹ NUM Annual Conference Report, 1971; in Griffin, *Volume III*, 145.

¹⁰⁰ Griffin, *Volume III*, 146-47.

¹⁰¹ *Coalville Times*, 5 November 1971.

¹⁰² *Coalville Times*, 10 December 1971.

cent in favour of strike action and Frank Smith announced that the Leicester Area would "abide by the majority decision."¹⁰³ He also seems to have at least recognised the low pay the miners were getting, calling the NCB offer of eight per cent an "insult", and promising that Leicester miners will support the strike.¹⁰⁴ The *Coalville Times* did not support the miners, claiming that their pay was not so bad in comparison with other industries.¹⁰⁵ It also gave exaggerated publicity to two Coalville miners' wives who were trying to organise a "go back" campaign.¹⁰⁶ And, when the strike was over, and the miners had won, after the Wilberforce inquiry had proved that miners' pay was well below other comparable industries, the *Coalville Times* made no mention of any of these details until page seven of the newspaper.¹⁰⁷ Detailing the local newspaper's lack of support for the miners is important because it shows just how relatively unimportant they had become for the local economy. Coalville had an urban population of 28, 334, according to the 1971 census, of which only about two thousand were involved in mining within the specific area of Coalville. The attitude of the *Coalville Times* is similar to that of the *Dover Express* in Kent where the miners were also a small part of the local economy by the 1970s. However, in Deal the miners constituted a significant section of the population and this is reflected in the much more sympathetic editorial policy of its local paper, the *East Kent Mercury*. This we shall see when looking at the miners' strikes in Kent, particularly that of 1984-85.

Generally speaking, the strike in Leicester was solid, with few instances of strike-breaking being reported, but picketing activities were rather half-heartedly agreed to. Or, as Griffin generously puts it, the lack of commitment was a result of "inexperience."¹⁰⁸ This, in fact, is a rather weak excuse as it shows up, again, Leicestershire's history of political and industrial moderacy. Smith seemed to think, however, that the atmosphere among Leicester miners was changing when he declared:

¹⁰³ Griffin, *Volume III*, 147.

¹⁰⁴ *Coalville Times*, 7 January 1972.

¹⁰⁵ *Coalville Times*, 21 January 1972.

¹⁰⁶ *Coalville Times*, 4 February 1972.

¹⁰⁷ *Coalville Times*, 25 February 1972.

¹⁰⁸ Griffin, *Volume III*, 148.

This dispute is now turning into a political battle which is tragic for the country... It has changed us from industrial pygmies to political giants.¹⁰⁹

Smith's somewhat exaggerated claims, miners were never "industrial pygmies" and it would be stretching a point to describe them as "political giants", could perhaps be partly substantiated by the one hugely significant event during the 1972 strike for which Leicestershire pickets could claim a large responsibility - the Battle of Saltley Gate. Along with their Warwickshire colleagues, the Leicestershire miners were responsible for picketing Windsor Street coke depot in Birmingham. It was while doing this that they spotted other coke lorries driving by, *en route*, they discovered, for Saltley Gate. Reinforcements were necessary and they informed Jack Jones who contacted the Yorkshire Area. As noted above, Scargill arrived during the week-end, and, when more pickets were required, it was Roy Ottey, with Scargill beside him, who telephoned Sid Schofield, from a public telephone, demanding more men.¹¹⁰ It is somewhat ironic, considering later events, that Leicestershire men should have played such key roles in the greatest day in Arthur Scargill's life. Such comradely unity was not to last.

The end of the strike was, naturally, greeted with triumphal cheers in Coalville, as in other coalfields throughout the country. What is interesting about Leicester, however, was that it was one of the only areas, perhaps South Derbyshire being another, where the Area leadership was more militant than the rank and file. In other areas, such as Yorkshire, as we have seen, it was the militancy of the grass roots members which pushed moderates like Schofield into action. And it was men like Scargill who organised, with almost military precision, the series of flying pickets who played such a vital role in halting the movement of coal and coke. In Leicester the rank and file had to be goaded into picketing power stations in their region beyond the hours of nine to five.¹¹¹ This hesitancy on their part can only be

¹⁰⁹ *Coalville Times*, 14 January 1972.

¹¹⁰ Ottey takes great pleasure in recounting his central role in what was certainly the most militant event of his career. Ottey, 27-9.

¹¹¹ Griffin, *Volume III*, 148.

understood with reference to a long tradition of political and industrial moderacy. And that must be explained with reference to their geographical situation and their position as a community within a wider community, with regular economic and social links with people outside of mining. Indeed, even at the beginning of the twentieth century, Coalville was no longer simply a coal town, and the mining community, although very significant, had already lost any sense of homogeneity as it was well on the way to developing *gemeinschaft* in opposition to *gesellschaft* relationships. In addition to this, we must also consider the geological conditions of Leicestershire pits, which permitted the men to produce coal much more easily and quickly than in many other areas, thereby enabling them to earn large bonuses. This was also a contributory factor to good man/management relations which existed in the days of private ownership, when a form of company paternalism prevailed. In fact, the Leicester miners seem to fall into that definition of a subaltern working class and "one dimensionality" proposed by F. Hearn.¹¹² Hearn argues that capitalist society is based on technologically determined structures of thought and patterns of behaviour from which all forms of rebellion and protest have been evacuated. It is a society where bureaucratic domination is seen as normal and is welcomed as the only true representation of rationality. Such a society has found the means to contain radical change while critical thought has been displaced or replaced in favour of conformity. Hence the labour movement has abandoned its role as offering an alternative society in favour of consumerism and affluence. And here we see precisely the dilemma posed for the left-wing of the NUM: while leaders like Scargill and McGahey were clearly calling for the overthrow of the capitalist system, they also had to contain and satisfy the more limited and purely pecuniary desires of their members. Although Scargill refuses to see this as a dilemma,¹¹³ the Leicestershire miners are clear examples of what happens to industrial and political militancy when wage packets are flattened and subsequently enlarged.

¹¹² F. Hearn, *Domination, Legitimation and Resistance: The Incorporation of the Nineteenth Century English Working Class*, (Greenwood Press, 1978).

¹¹³ *NLR*, 1975.

Hearn develops his thesis by arguing that communal and festive features of working-class culture were either weakened or institutionalised. Consequently, culture is gradually stripped of what Hearn believes is its emancipatory role, and, as a result, 'community' also loses both its identity and its meaning. The geographical contiguity of Leicestershire mining communities such as Ellistown, Hugglescote and Whitwick with the largely non-mining town of Coalville, would suggest that such a watering-down of community consciousness, with the subsequent loss of class and cultural identity, is precisely what happened in the Leicestershire coalfield. Thus:

For the English workers of the nineteenth century, one-dimensionality rested on the physical destruction of community traditions, values and customs.¹¹⁴

And in a phrase directly relevant to British miners as a whole after 1972 and 1974, and Leicestershire miners in particular, Hearn writes:

The advance of industrialisation has made domination, in most cases, materially less uncomfortable but spiritually more debasing.¹¹⁵

Thus it may be said (by an acquaintance of this researcher) that while the chains are now made of gold, they are, nonetheless, chains.

M. Benney's very early definition of miners' militancy and its origins, his work was first published in 1946, is remarkably similar to the theory of *isolated mass*, and therefore open to all the same criticisms. But it is specifically relevant to this study of Coalville and Aylesham miners for its pertinence to their respective moderacy/militancy:

¹¹⁴ Hearn. 287.

¹¹⁵ Hearn. 287.

Three factors are of decisive importance here. The social isolation of most mining villages; the industrial isolation, which makes the income of a whole village population dependent on the fortunes of a single pit; and the physical isolation imposed by geography.¹¹⁶

This is a theme to which we must return. But all these factors must be borne in mind throughout this historical analysis of Coalville and Aylesham miners and their persistently low/high levels of industrial militancy. However, an aberration did occur in the tradition of Leicestershire's moderacy in 1974 when a majority voted *in favour* of industrial action in support of their new pay claim.

1974: Forward to the Past.

The Wilberforce settlement, which was set to expire in February 1973, brought only a temporary peace to the mining industry, a truce between the NUM and the Government. Once that truce was broken battle would again be joined, and this time it was to be to the death.

1972 had shown the country just how important coal still was to the national energy policy. It had also given the miners a revived sense of solidarity and a new confidence about what they could achieve - together. This showed itself in the NUM's resistance to the IRA and its united call for a one day general strike in opposition to the Act and in support of the release of the "Pentonville five".¹¹⁷ However, despite public statements of wider working-class solidarity, wages remained the most sensitive and potentially explosive issue for the miners.

In its battle against inflation, the Government imposed a wage freeze in November 1972, and then implemented its Phase II pay policy with a limit on wages of £1 plus four per cent. With Wilberforce nearing its end, the NUM submitted a wage claim in January 1973 which broke the Government's pay policy. Once again the NUM, the NCB, the Government

¹¹⁶ M. Benney, *Charity Main - A Coalfield Chronicle*. (London: E.P. Publications Ltd., 1978), 171.

¹¹⁷ Taylor, 240.

and this time the TUC, were locked in negotiations over miners' pay. However, calls from the left-wing of the NUM for a one-day general strike were rejected by both the TUC General Council and the leadership of the NUM. Gormley spoke forcefully against such proposals:

There will be many critics who will say that this would be an attempt to get the Trade Union Movement to use its industrial strength to defeat the Government and thereby bring about a General Election... It is against the Government's policy and therefore can be termed a political strike.¹¹⁸

Gormley was acutely aware of the media accusations, since 1972, of the miners being manipulated as tools of the hard left who had their own hidden agenda. He was also conscious of losing the support of his own membership, particularly areas like Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire, who would not participate in strike action if they were even slightly suspicious that it was a political strike. Gormley, more than Scargill, understood the delicate nature of the intra-area relationships which had turned the Miners' Federation into the National Union. And therefore, by definition, he realised the potentiality for schism: the ghost of 1926 and Spencerism still hung heavy over Gormley's generation; and his assessment of the NUM membership's mood was correct. When the NEC rejected the pay offer of an average increase of £2.29 per week, it proposed a pithead ballot recommending industrial action.¹¹⁹ However, the vote was decidedly against any such action, 143,000 against and only 82,361 for, with only Yorkshire and Scotland, as areas, voting in favour.¹²⁰ But it must not be believed that the miners were content with the status quo. They were not. Inflation had eaten away at their 1972 pay rise, and memories of that strike and what they had achieved when they were united were still fresh. The meagre rise of 1973 simply added to their sense of frustration and bitterness. And, by October 1973, a faceworker's earnings, in comparison with the average in

¹¹⁸ Report of a Special TUC, 7 March 1973; in Taylor, 243.

¹¹⁹ Ashworth, 315.

¹²⁰ Taylor, 244.

manufacturing, were actually lower than they had been in October 1971.¹²¹ The conditions were now ripe for another mammoth industrial confrontation.

The case for coal, British coal, was dramatically strengthened in October 1973 with the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War. Immediately, the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) showed that it had no compunction about using oil as a political weapon when it increased its price by seventy per cent and rationed its supply to nations sympathetic to Israel, which included the United Kingdom.¹²² A signal had been sent out and only the congenitally stupid could fail to understand its implications for British energy policy. Fortunately for the miners, no-one on the NEC, despite what some sections of the British media said, fell into that category. Gormley, Daly and McGahey knew that they once again had the upper hand. The most hesitant of the three was Gormley. He had direct access to the Prime Minister and perhaps in one of their conversations Heath let it be known to the NUM President that if the miners struck again he would go to the country, asking for a mandate to govern. This was certainly at the forefront of Gormley's mind when he told a gathering of NUM members in September 1973:

If they could go to the country when there was an energy crisis, they might possibly go to the country on that one issue and win it, and we would be castigated by the whole trade union movement for having given them the opportunity.¹²³

Although, as we shall see, Gormley's predictions turned out to be partly correct, his fears of a divided NUM over a 'political' strike were completely unfounded.

By the Autumn of 1973 the Government had moved on to Phase III of its pay policy. This allowed for increases of seven per cent, but included a special provision for the miners, namely shift allowances amounting to a further one per cent and improved holiday and sick

¹²¹ Handy, 183-84.

¹²² Ashworth, 330; Hall, 199.

¹²³ Hall, 203.

pay.¹²⁴ Unfortunately, this did not satisfy the NUM claim for increases of £8-£13 per week, which would give £45 to faceworkers, £40 to all other underground workers and £35 to surface workers. Consequently the NEC decided to recommend an overtime ban beginning on 12 November. This time the Government did not hesitate in getting involved and being seen to be involved. On 23 October, an NUM delegation was invited to Downing Street only to be told by Heath that the NCB offer could be improved upon. Thus the overtime ban went ahead, and this time it was to be much more rigid, with no safety or maintenance work authorised. And, if the ban was strictly enforced it would, in effect, mean very few pits could continue working after a couple of weeks due to flooding problems.

Within twenty-four hours of the overtime ban coming into force, the Government declared a State of Emergency, its fifth in less than four years in office. Meetings between the various bodies continued throughout November and December but without success, the Government being determined not to break its Phase III policy for fear of opening the floodgates to other inflationary pay demands. Just before Christmas 1973, Heath announced that another three-day week in industry would begin, on 1 January. This led one analyst to observe, rather acidly, that it was:

... a novel system of Government by catastrophe.¹²⁵

And if the Government was prepared to use such tactics to alienate public support for the miners, then the miners, in turn, were ready to set aside their squeamishness about embarking upon a political strike. Indeed, if there was any doubt about whether this was a political, as opposed to a purely economic or industrial issue, the Government put paid to it by its actions in February 1974.

On 24 January, the NEC decided to give its members a pithead ballot on strike action. The ballot was held on 31 January-1 February and produced an enormous majority in favour of

¹²⁴ Taylor, 245-46; Hall, 202.

¹²⁵ Royden Harrison, Introduction in R. Harrison, (ed.), *Independent Collier: The Coal Miner as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 1.

striking: 188,393 for, and only 44,222 against (81% for and 19% against).¹²⁶ Even traditionally moderate areas like Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire voted for strike action. On 5 February, Joe Gormley announced that a national miners' strike would commence at midnight on Saturday 9 February. In turn, the Prime Minister announced on 7 February that there would be a General Election on 28 February.¹²⁷ Although widely expected, this was, in fact, an astonishing decision on Heath's part. Coal stocks at power stations were still fairly high and the NUM itself believed that the CEGB:

... can easily continue with the present coal burn until the end of March, and as result of the longer day and milder weather can immediately fulfil all its responsibilities, even if Britain returns to a full working week.¹²⁸

Public opinion, unlike the press, which again was firmly against the miners, seemed more equivocal than in 1972. In January 1974 the Conservatives had a two per cent lead over Labour according to one Gallup poll,¹²⁹ and Thatcher was convinced that this time the public was behind the Government:

We went to the country on a point of principle and all the signs at the start were that the country was with us on it.¹³⁰

So with healthy coal stocks, the support of the press and at least a large section of the public, and a comfortable working majority in the House of Commons, why did Heath call an election? Part of the answer lies in the Conservatives' belief that the public *was* behind the Government and that this should be taken advantage of immediately rather than wait until 1975 when an election would have been obligatory and economic circumstances probably much less

¹²⁶ Taylor, 249; Ashworth, 336.

¹²⁷ Benn, 280.

¹²⁸ Taylor, 249.

¹²⁹ R.M. Punnett, *British Government and Politics*, (London: Heinemann, 1977), 33; Morgan, 350.

¹³⁰ Young, 81-2.

favourable. The rest of the answer lies in the phrase which became the theme of the campaign, "Who governs Britain?" Heath was cynically attempting to suggest that the NUM was part of a union/Communist plot to take the reins of political and economic power.¹³¹ During the campaign he declared that some NUM leaders were "dedicated to destroy our society."¹³² Now it was clear, whether the miners agreed to it or not, the strike *was* political for it had provoked a very political general election. Once again the Thirty Year rule on Cabinet papers means we will have to wait before we can know the content of those Cabinet discussions of January/February 1974.

Once the election had been called and the miners' strike had gone ahead, the miners needed nerves of steel, for they were well aware of the warning given to them by Gormley in September 1973. And if Heath had won another five year mandate the NUM leadership was cognisant of the consequences for the reputation of the miners within the TUC as a whole. However, Heath's enormous miscalculation became clear after the preliminary results of the Phase III Pay Board enquiry were published on 21 February. It showed that the miners were entitled to considerably more than they had been offered, even within the limits of Phase III, and that the Wilberforce settlement had been a temporary measure only.¹³³ The *Report* also showed that, far from being above the national average for manual workers, miners' wages were, in fact, eight per cent below them. Nicholas Ridley, future Industry Minister under Thatcher, was a mere backbench M.P. in 1974. Retrospectively, he recognised the muddle the Government had got itself into:

The Government was saying that it wouldn't pay the increase in the wages of miners which it was clearly necessary to pay to bring the dispute to an end. At the same time it was saying it was going to set up a Relativities Board in order to work out how much more it should pay the miners in order to settle the strike. Well those two positions were totally inconsistent because if it was an election to decide who runs the country:

¹³¹ Morgan, 347.

¹³² Mervyn Jones, *Michael Foot*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1995), 348.

¹³³ Pay Board, *Special Report: Relative Pay of Mineworkers*, Cmnd. 5567, 1974.

the miners or the Government, then you don't say at the same time but anyway we're going to give you a pay rise through a Relativities Board.¹³⁴

The fact that the Pay Board published preliminary results of its findings, which showed the Government in a bad light right in the middle of a general election campaign, is in itself very controversial. Harold Wilson, the Labour Party leader, lost no time in turning this to his political advantage:

The nation now knows that the hundreds of thousands of pounds of lost wages, the thousands of millions of lost hours of production from which workers and their employers suffered from the past eight weeks, was never necessary. The Government have brought Britain to the edge of ruin - and now they have to concede that the miners have had a stronger case all along than they would ever admit.¹³⁵

Heath had lost the political initiative. Thatcher recognised this when she commented that the Pay Board Report had:

... suddenly cut the ground of principle from under the Government.¹³⁶

In fact, the results of the election showed just how divided the nation actually was. Labour won 301 seats, the Conservatives 296, the Liberals 14 and other parties together had 23 seats. Thus Labour had no overall majority, and indeed, an actual minority of votes - 37 per cent as compared with the Conservatives who had 38 per cent. Of course, only the vagaries of Britain's (in)famous first-past-the-post electoral system permitted Labour to 'win' the election. After a week-end of vacillation and political wheeling and dealing, Heath finally resigned and

¹³⁴ The B.B.C., *The Brothers - A History of the Trade Union Movement: Part II - The 1970s - "Get your tanks off my lawn."* Presented by Anthony Howard. 1995.

¹³⁵ Hall. 219.

¹³⁶ Young. 82.

Harold Wilson was invited to form a government on Monday 4 March. As part of his new Cabinet, Wilson placed Michael Foot, the old Tribunite and Bevanite, at the Ministry for Employment, with special responsibility for ending the miners' strike.¹³⁷ In the end this was not difficult. The new Government would not be constrained by Phase III, but in fact the Pay Board was able to make recommendations which even the Conservatives would have accepted. So Heath had lost office on a non-issue, and only part of Gormley's ideas of September had come to pass.

Within two days of taking office, Foot had negotiated a settlement with the NUM which did not give the miners all that they had asked for, as the following table shows:

Mineworkers' pay claim and settlement, 1974. (£ per week - basic)

	1973(actual)	Claim	Settlement
Minimum surface	25.3	35	32
Minimum underground	27.3	40	36
Coal face (NPLA)	36.8	45	45

Source: NCB Annual Report 1973-74; in Ashworth, 338.

Only the faceworkers were offered their claim in full, but it was enough for the NEC to recommend acceptance and a return to work on Monday 11 March. The second national miners' strike in two years was over, and, once again, the pitmen were able to march back to work, victorious. It was to be the last time.

The period 1972-74 is probably responsible, to a large extent, for the public image of coalminers as being the most militant group of workers in Britain. During the two national strikes teams of journalists and television crews invaded various pit villages in order to show to

¹³⁷ Foot was also the M.P. for Ebbw Vale, Nye Bevan's old constituency and a mining stronghold. He was therefore no stranger to their lives and their customs, an advantage which he put to good use when meeting with the NUM leaders.

an incredulous public the close-knit working and social lives of this strange breed of men *and* women. Suddenly the objective conditions for this political militancy were laid bare for all to see and understand: hard working conditions where the men depended upon each other for their lives, while, on the surface, difficult social conditions caused the women to depend upon each other for their livelihoods. It was no wonder such intense solidary relations existed. E.P. Thompson, among other intellectual historians, added gravitas to such popular notions, when he opined in sarcastic admiration:

They have had for centuries this deplorable communistic tendency, arising from the very conditions of their work and community life, the egalitarianism of necessity.¹³⁸

And less academic observers wrote in painfully sentimental tones:

They were a special breed of men, with their own language, customs, attitudes and traditions of struggle and organisation created by the harsh nature of pit work and the isolation of pit villages... The pit and the village isolated the miners from their fellow industrial workers and turned them inwards, away from the outside world and towards their workmates, wives and families. A social bond and solidarity was created which protected the mining community against the cruel consequences of accident, illness and death in the pits. This social solidarity was the foundation of a strong trade union organisation able to resist the coal owners' attacks on the living standards and working conditions of the miners.¹³⁹

Such eulogies were taken as fact. The coal miner was the *archetypal proletarian* and entered into folklore where even his songs and poetry have been documented and sentimentalised in a fashion akin to those of the Celtic Irish of today.¹⁴⁰ Who would or could

³⁸ E.P. Thompson, "'A Special Case", *New Society*, 24 February, 1972, 66.

⁹ Pitt, 22-23.

A few worthy examples are: A.L. Lloyd, *Come all ye Bold Miners: Ballads and Songs of the Coalfields*.

stand in the way of such a deserving and horribly united band of people especially when, in eighteenth century manner they,

... would erupt suddenly from their communities upon the local market town, "a great crowd of men, women and children with oaken bludgeons coming down the street bawling out, 'One and all - one and all.'"¹⁴¹

Such solidarity was clearly inbred, hereditary, genetic, common to all miners and unbreakable. The misfortune for the miners was that they believed these idealised notions, these myths. 1972 and 1974 had expunged all memories of the tragedy of 1926, thereby condemning the miners to re-live it all over again in 1984-85, only this time, of course, as farce. And one of the key players in that epic tragi-farce was someone who had had a mere bit part in the events of the 1970s, but who was determined not to forget the lesson of recent history, thus ensuring that it would not repeat itself. This was of course, Margaret Thatcher:

No name was scarred more deeply on the Conservative soul than that of the NUM. For Margaret Thatcher the miners were where she came in. If they hadn't humiliated the Heath Government into fighting an election which it lost, she would not ... be party leader and prime minister. But this mattered less than the memory of that bloody defeat itself, and the apprehension that it might always be capable of happening again.¹⁴²

London, 1952; Robert Colls, *The Collier's Rant: Song and Culture in the Industrial Village*. (London, 1977); A.E. Green, "Only Kidding: Joking among Coal Miners", Papers on Language and Folklore presented at the Annual Conference of the British Sociological Association, April 1978 in A.E. Green and John D.A. Widdowson (eds.), *Language, Culture and Tradition*. Institute of Dialect and Folklife Studies, (University of Leeds, 1981).

¹⁴¹ Thompson, "Special Case", 66.

¹⁴² Young, 366.

Conclusion: Fun at the Ball.

The reaction of the Leicestershire miners to first the overtime ban and then the strike of 1973-74 was very different from that of 1972. What remained the same was that the Area leadership was once again out of step with its own membership. Whereas Frank Smith had had to cajole the men into supporting the strike in 1972, by 1973 he was trying, and failing, to hold them back. The local rank and file had overtaken him in its preparedness to use industrial action in pursuit of financial objectives. In January 1974 Smith asked the NEC to call off the ban and accept the Government's offer, arguing, rather lamely, that:

... there was no point in carrying on with the ban if the Government was not prepared to pay more than was offered... There is always another day to press our claim. We should not destroy our industry in the process.¹⁴³

And, as if writing to the local press were not enough, Smith also had a letter published in *The Times*, in which he said:

... the bulk of the mineworkers are not politically motivated. They are very typical of British workmen... There is no excuse for using the failure of the Conservative Government as a springboard for furthering the Communist cause... The membership in general is fed up to the back teeth with politics and politicians and certainly, with the exception of the politically motivated, are not veering to the left or right.¹⁴⁴

Smith's public utterances provoked fury among his own membership and precipitated an increase in the industrial action within his own area, with walk-outs at five pits and

¹⁴³ *Coalville Times*, 4.1.74; in Griffin, *Volume III*, 171.

¹⁴⁴ *The Times*, 8.1.74; in Griffin, *Volume III*, Appendix 2, 36.

discussion of his comments at a Desford Lodge general meeting. The men at that meeting issued a statement making it clear that Smith's comments were:

.. completely out of character with the feelings of the men... Desford Lodge fully supports the NEC in its actions to date, and is of the opinion that the complete overtime ban must continue until our wage claim is justifiably recognised... Desford Lodge has no confidence in Mr. F.A.Smith following the public statement recently made by him on the present confrontation.¹⁴⁵

What had happened? How had Frank Smith so badly misjudged the mood of his men? He could be forgiven for believing that the Leicestershire miners would continue their tradition of moderation and he simply spoke out in that vein, counting upon their support. Indeed, from past and recent experience of industrial action in Leicestershire, Smith probably believed that even if he was not ahead of it, he was certainly in line with his own membership, and that his demand for the overtime ban to be lifted, appealing to the pecuniary nature of the men he thought he knew so well, would have been widely welcomed. He may also have been encouraged by his one time colleague, Roy Ottey, who prided himself on being asked for advice by Ted Heath and Peter Walker, the Trade and Industry Secretary, at one of their meetings at Downing Street:

Joe Gormley was, I sense, ready to settle for the proposed offer... As we filed out of the meeting room, Ted Heath and Peter Walker stood together watching us go out. One of them asked as I went past, "What are our chances, Mr. Ottey?" I did not hesitate to advise them to 'stick', meaning that I thought the offer would be accepted.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Griffin, *Volume III*, Appendix 3, 182.

¹⁴⁶ Ottey, 31.

Of course, as it turned out, both Ottey and Smith were wrong. Smith admitted as much when, after a meeting with Area President, Jack Jones, he said that he had been shocked by the militancy of his members, and announced:

It is obvious that I have offended the membership of the area by the public statements on the situation as I see it. For that, of course, I am deeply sorry and I herewith categorically state that the public observations were purely my own and not those of the membership.¹⁴⁷

This public act of humility by Smith was enough to keep him in office until his official retirement in 1976, when Jones took over as Area General Secretary.

In fact, asking how Smith had lost touch with his own membership is really the wrong question. He had remained consistent with his views of the recent past. The interesting question is, why did the Leicestershire miners move to a radically more left-wing position than they had ever held before? And was this shift towards an untraditional militancy permanent?

It is easier to answer the second question first: no, it wasn't. Later events in the 1970s, and then more famously in the 1980s, show Leicestershire miners reverting to their previous tradition of moderacy and refusal to participate in what they regarded as political industrial action. Essentially, that meant action against NCB/Government official policy and action which did not attempt to improve wages.

The first question is in essence more complicated and more controversial. Leicester voted 61.6 per cent in favour of strike action in 1974,¹⁴⁸ still the lowest percentage for any area in the country, but a huge increase on the 37 per cent 'yes' vote in December 1971. Colin Griffin quotes an unnamed "Communist spokesman" from Desford who gave his analysis for the increased militancy in Leicestershire:

¹⁴⁷ Griffin, *Volume III*, 172.

¹⁴⁸ Griffin, *Volume III*, Appendix 2. 181.

... the influence of miners from the more extreme areas like Scotland ... may have gingered up the Leicestershire men.¹⁴⁹

This explanation, however, is insufficient. There is no record of an influx of miners from any area during the period 1972-74. Movement did take place in the 1960s and the 'immigrants' were housed together along the same lines and for the same socio-cultural reasons as for the Asians and West Indians in the major towns and cities of Britain during the same period. This led to one housing estate in Thringstone, near Coalville, being nicknamed the "Scotch Estate". Peter Kane, a Coalville miner recalls:

I lived on what was commonly called the Scotch Estate, which was the housing estate built for the incoming miners from Scotland and the Durham area, built ... in the early sixties.¹⁵⁰

The problem with Griffin's "Communist spokesman's" analysis is that the influx of miners occurred in the 1960s, while there is no evidence of a rise in industrial militancy in Leicestershire throughout the 1960s or the early 1970s. Indeed, as we have seen, the 1972 ballot in Leicestershire was decidedly against strike action. And if the sudden militancy of 1974 was a result of extremist immigrants influencing the situation, then it is very difficult to account for the rapid decline in that militancy after 1974. Surely no-one is suggesting that these angry Scotsmen all went home again!

No, it is the temporary nature of the militancy in Leicestershire which accounts for its suddenness. 1972 had been a great, and, in Leicestershire, an unexpected success. Miners everywhere had seen what could be achieved by a mass showing of solidarity, and Coalville miners' direct involvement in the pivotal event of 1972, Saltley Gate, had contributed to their sense of inclusiveness. Cinderella had been invited to the ball. Thus it was as a part of a huge

¹⁴⁹ *Coalville Times*, 11.1.74; in Griffin, *Volume III*, 171.

¹⁵⁰ Carswell, 108.

national movement that Leicester miners voted 'yes' in the 1974 ballot. And once that second battle had been won and the head of a Conservative Government in the bag then, perhaps, it is not so surprising that Leicestershire miners back-pedalled, somewhat, into their normal reticence, aided and abetted by what was for them a generous incentive scheme. This we shall return to later while attempting to discover the answers to the more general questions concerning the origins and survival of Leicestershire's moderacy.

Chapter Four.

The Kent Coalfield - Coalminers and Cherry Pickers.

Kent, sir - everybody knows Kent - apples, cherries, hops and women.

Charles Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*, 1837, ch. 2.

Introduction.

Apples, cherries, hops and women - Kent: the Garden of England. But for a short period of time, hidden in its south-eastern corner was a coalfield, home to some of the most militant and politically conscious coalminers in Britain. This chapter will trace the history of the Kent coalfield from the first searches for coal in the nineteenth century through the early development of the area as coal began to be commercially produced at the beginning of the twentieth century. We will follow the construction of mining villages, most notably Aylesham, in the 1920s, and look at their socio-political development up to the 1970s when the coalfield was already undergoing a process of contraction and its miners were at the forefront of national industrial action. And, in the course of this chronological survey, it is our intention to look into the origins of the Kent miners' (in)famous militancy.

Britain's position as the cradle of the industrial revolution and her desperation for fuel to power her factories, her trains and her ships led to an incredible thirst for coal. Hence, engineers like Stephenson were prepared to invest huge sums of money in opening up new coalfields like that in Leicestershire in the 1820s. And as early as 1826 it was noted that there was a similarity between the coalfields of Somerset in south-west England, and the coalfield in northern France.¹ In 1846 it was suggested by an English geologist, Sir Henry de la Becha, that there might be coal in southern England as part of a seam running from Somerset through Kent, under the Channel into northern France and on into Belgium.² At this stage, however,

¹ Walford Johnson, *The Development of the Kent Coalfield, 1896-1939*, unpublished article. University of Kent at Canterbury, January 1967, 2.

² A.E. Ritchie, *The Kent Coalfield*, Iron and Coal Trades Review. (London: 1919).

the existence of coal in southern England was merely a hypothesis, and if it did exist it was so deep that there were no outcroppings, so that drift mining was out of the question.

More evidence for coal in Kent came with the discovery of coal in France in the Nord Pas-de-Calais region in 1846. This gave weight to the Kent coal hypothesis, for the coal in northern France lay concealed beneath chalk formations similar to those in south-eastern Kent. The fossil flora of the two regions was also nearly identical.³ Coal was first commercially produced in the Pas-de-Calais in the mid-1850s, at the same time as the eminent geologist, R.A.C. Godwin-Austen, F.R.S., delivered a paper to the Geological Society entitled, "On the Possible Extension of the Coal Measures beneath the South-Eastern Part of England."⁴ This paper was about precisely what it said it was: the "possible extension", because at this point in time the existence of coal in Kent still remained just a theory. Godwin-Austen simply exposed his idea that it was highly probable that there was coal in Kent. However, it was not until 1871 that a serious attempt was made to find coal when Sir Joseph Prestwich prepared a report for the Royal Commission on Coal, arguing that coal probably did exist in the south of England but that it was almost certainly at great depths and consequently very difficult, expensive and dangerous to extract. He also believed that the coal may not be of very good quality.⁵ However, despite his reservations, Sir Joseph recommended a few trial borings, and this was done, not in Kent, but in the Weald of Sussex at Netherfield near Battle, during the years 1872-75. These searches proved fruitless even after penetrating 1,900 feet of rocks.⁶ At the same time the Kent Exploration Committee was formed but failed to attract sufficient finance as Kent coal was not a proven worthwhile investment.

The existence of coal was finally proved in 1890, but almost by accident. In 1882 Sir Edward Watkin, Chairman of the South-Eastern Railway and founder of the Channel Tunnel Company, was ordered, by the Government, to cease work on his tunnel project. The British military establishment feared a tunnel to the Continent would threaten the military security of

³ H. Stanley Jevons, *The British Coal Trade*, (London: Kegan Paul, 1915). 160.

⁴ R.A.C. Godwin-Austen, "On the Possible Extension of the Coal Measures beneath the South-Eastern Part of England", *Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society*. Vol. XII. 1856.

⁵ "The History of the Kent Coalfields", in the *Joint Stock Companies Journal*, October 1913 - May 1914: Stanley Jevons, 162.

⁶ Johnson, 2.

England. In the hope that the Government would reconsider its position on the tunnel, Watkin kept his men on and agreed to a request from Professor Boyd Dawkins that in the meantime he should use his equipment to test for coal. Coal was reached at a depth of 1,157 feet through a borehole at the foot of Shakespeare Cliff. The engineer in charge was Francis Brady, engineer to the South-Eastern Railway and Channel Tunnel Companies. Subsequently the borehole became known as the 'Brady Borehole'.

Boring continued at Shakespeare Cliff but Watkin was not interested in establishing a fully working colliery on the site. Indeed the rules of his South-Eastern Railway Company prohibited working a coal mine.⁷ It was only after the arrival of Arthur Burr, a survey land speculator, that there was serious commercial interest in Kent coal. In 1896 he set up the Kent Coalfields Syndicate which took over the site and equipment at Shakespeare Cliff, Watkin having finally accepted that there would be no tunnel, at least not in his lifetime. Sinking at Shakespeare Cliff continued but without due regard for the problem of flooding from underground waters. No pumps were installed, resulting in two sudden inrushes, the second of which, in March 1897, caused the death of eight sinkers.⁸ The Kent coalfield had claimed its first victims. The Syndicate collapsed but Burr persisted in his belief that the Kent coalfield could be as economically successful as the Pas de Calais coalfield was at the end of the nineteenth century.⁹ He set up a new company in 1897, the Kent Collieries Corporation, and this time floated it on the stock market in an effort to obtain extra finances.¹⁰

Flooding continued to be a problem, as it would throughout the whole short life of the Kent coalfield. Indeed, E.O. Forster Brown, writing on the geological difficulties of the Kent coalfield, noted that flooding was *the* problem plaguing the extraction of Kent coal:

... the great difficulty met with developing this great national asset was the presence of water.¹¹

⁷ Johnson, 16 footnote 5.

⁸ Richard Richardson, *The Kent Coalfield*, a private paper.

⁹ Johnson, 16, fnt. 7.

¹⁰ Stanley Jevons, 163.

¹¹ E.O. Forster Brown, *Underground Waters in the Kent Coalfield and their Incidence in Mining Development*, (William Clowes and Sons Ltd., London, Great George Street, Westminster SW1, 1923), 68.

Closely linked to this difficulty was the problem of geological faults or fractures which became waterlogged, known as *puddled fractures*. Such problems led to further delays in the sinking operations and, unsurprisingly, more financial strictures. In 1899, out of sheer necessity, Burr's company amalgamated with three others to form the Consolidated Kent Collieries Corporation.¹² This new company also attracted French financial support and technical expertise and for a short time sinking operations progressed much more rapidly. But only for a short time, because, in 1901, with the shaft having reached a depth of 1,100 feet, just 100 feet from an expected coal seam, the steel winding rope snapped, and as it fell down the shaft it smashed the pumping plant equipment.¹³ Once again the pit flooded, bringing work to a standstill and creating more financial problems. At this point Burr left the company but not the business of coalmining. Instead he decided to begin new operations, exploring for coal further inland. In 1901 he set up the Dover Coalfield Extension and it was Burr who was really to prove the existence of an economically viable Kent coalfield.

Work at the Shakespeare Cliff site re-commenced in 1903 but was soon in difficulty again due to the perennial problem of water, and, not surprisingly, disagreements at management level as a result of the huge losses incurred. These disagreements led to the French pulling out and a new company being formed in 1905: Kent Collieries Ltd. However, this company fared no better and in 1910 there was another new company: Channel Collieries Trust.¹⁴ Such repeated failures led to several adverse comments in the specialist as well as the national press. The "Financier and Bullionist" commented on 17 February, 1909:

While on the subject of rubbish, I may mention that the Kent Collieries shares today experienced their final spasm dropping from one shilling and sixpence to the normal price of three pennies. Thus ends the lamentable history of the attempt to convert the Garden of England into a second Black Country.¹⁵

¹² Johnson. 3.

¹³ Richardson. 5.

¹⁴ Johnson. 4.

¹⁵ Richardson. 5-6.

And the "Daily Mail" wrote on 20 February, 1909:

Of all the Kent coal companies in existence, Kent Collieries Ltd. seemed the only one to have any chance of success, and now that has fallen there seems more reason than ever to stand clear of the others. By good authority the Kent coal experiment is now regarded as unsuccessfully completed.¹⁶

Despite such public discouragement, as well as the lack of finance and continual geological problems, work at the Shakespeare Cliff continued for a few more years without ever making a profit through coal. Coal was produced, however, reaching a peak of production in 1912 with twelve ten-ton wagonloads being brought to the surface.¹⁷ Finally, in 1917, ownership of the site was transferred to the Channel Steel Company, which decided to work the iron ore deposits found at about 650 feet and almost ignored in the desperate attempt to get coal.¹⁸

If press comments in 1909 concerning the attempted extraction of coal at Dover proved to be correct, reports of the premature death of the Kent coalfield were, to coin a phrase, highly exaggerated. We return to that very significant character in the history of the Kent coalfield, Arthur Burr. He was convinced that the coalfield stretched beyond Dover and began putting down new boreholes, in 1905, at Waldershare, about six miles inland from Dover, near Lord Guilford's park. These tests were much more successful, three of them finding seams of over three feet in thickness at just over 1000 feet in depth.¹⁹ And by 1906 an extensive East Kent coalfield had been proved, after half a century of speculation. It was no longer mere hypothesis.²⁰ Later, the extent of the coalfield was estimated at 150 square miles on land and 50 square miles at sea.²¹

¹⁶ Richardson, 6.

¹⁷ Patrick Abercrombie and John Archibald, *East Kent Regional Planning Scheme: Final Report*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1928), 29n.

¹⁸ Abercrombie and Archibald, 38.

¹⁹ Abercrombie and Archibald, 29.

²⁰ Malcolm Burr, *The South-East Coalfield: An Introduction to the Study of its Geology*, Kent Coal Concessions Ltd., 1906.

²¹ Abercrombie and Archibald, 31.

After 1906 Burr began establishing companies which would be responsible for building collieries within the east Kent coalfield. Work at Tilmanstone began in 1906, at Guilford in 1907 and at Snowdown in 1908.²² The proposed colliery at Snowdown had the distinct advantage of being sited next to an established railway line which linked Dover and Canterbury and went on to Chatham dockyards and finally London itself. For the transportation of materials with which to build the colliery, and of coal to eagerly awaiting domestic and industrial markets, this ready made line of communication was invaluable. It would also help to attract miners and their families from other coalfields. This was absolutely vital for the success of the coalfield as Kent, largely by-passed by the industrial revolution, had no resident industrialised working class to speak of. Hence Dickens' observations on Kent. And, of course, it is precisely that imported labour force which is our primary concern.

The vital importance of a railway link was obvious and in 1911 work began on constructing the East Kent Light Railway which would serve the collieries at Tilmanstone, Guilford, Wingham and Woodnesborough, and would link up with the Canterbury-Dover line at Sheperdswell. This railway finally became operational in 1916,²³ but the five-year delay had already provoked a change of policy amongst the coal companies:

... the intention is to construct a railway beforehand to every point fixed upon for sinking a colliery, as this so much reduces the cost of hauling to the site the necessary machinery and materials.²⁴

As it turned out, this never happened, because the predictions about the size of the coalfield and the number of collieries were wildly optimistic. Some believed as many as twenty pits would be operating in the area but Archibald and Abercrombie, writing in 1928, made their housing plans on the slightly more conservative estimate of just eighteen pits!²⁵ In the end only four pits came into being: Snowdown, Tilmanstone, Betteshanger and Chislet.

²² Abercrombie and Archibald, 32.

²³ Johnson, 6.

²⁴ Stanley Jevons, 174.

²⁵ Archibald and Abercrombie, 35.

Snowdown took the longest to build, as resources were concentrated on developing Tilmanstone and Guilford. This was an unfortunate decision on the part of the Foncage Syndicate, the company responsible for these collieries, as Snowdown turned out to be the least troubled by water, and, despite the lack of investment, the first to arrive at workable coal. The Beresford seam, 4'4" thick, was reached at a depth of 1,490 feet in January 1913,²⁶ although some coal had been produced in November 1912.²⁷

At the outbreak of European war in 1914 Snowdown and Tilmanstone were the only working collieries in Kent. As the country moved rapidly towards a war-based economy the demand for coal increased. In Kent local demand for coal expanded, particularly from the gasworks and electricity companies. Kent coal has excellent coking properties as was noted in 1947:

Kent coal is bitumous, semi-anthracite and generally friable, making it excellent coking coal.²⁸

To meet the local demand, Tilmanstone changed its mining methods in 1914 from pillar and stall to the longwall method, which required very solid walls and roofs. Unfortunately, this was not the case at Tilmanstone and flooding occurred which brought mining to a halt until the end of 1915.²⁹ Consequently, Snowdown was the only colliery operating in Kent and 1916 was the first year in which it made a working profit.³⁰ In 1915 work had begun on a new shaft, the Snowdown No.2 shaft, which reached the "Snowdown Hard" seam in 1916 and ended in April 1917 at the Kent No.6 seam, the "Millyard" seam, 4'5" thick at a depth of 3,000 feet.³¹

As Snowdown was the only Kent pit which operated continuously throughout the War, producing about 3,000 tons a week by 1917, the Government provisions for control of the coal industry in time of national emergency did not extend to the Kent coalfield. The geographical

²⁶ Archibald and Abercrombie, 35.

²⁷ Richardson, 12.

²⁸ The Institution of Municipal Engineers. *Report on Mining Subsidence*, The Institution of Municipal Engineers, 30 May, 1947.

²⁹ Johnson, 7.

³⁰ Johnson, 8.

³¹ Archibald and Abercrombie, 35.

position of the two Kent pits, tucked away in the south-east corner of England, two hundred miles from the nearest established coalfield - Leicestershire - meant that the Kent coalfield was metaphorically, as well as literally, hidden from view. If anybody had cause to complain about being the 'Cinderellas' of the coal industry at that time, it was the Kent miners. As a result, the question of nationalisation of the coal industry after the War was not such an important issue in Kent as it was elsewhere in the British coalfield. Indeed, if it was raised at all it was raised, not by the miners, but by the scientific engineers and by one of the directors of Snowdown colliery, A.E. Ritchie. William Reid Bell was one of the experts who, reluctantly, accepted the principle of nationalisation, but only of the Kent Coalfield. Having noted Forster Brown's survey of the geological difficulties in Kent, he commented:

... from a national point of view, nothing less than the complete removal of the coal by longwall working should be aimed at ... an exhaustive survey of the fault systems was required ... [and] the necessary explorations could only be made in process of working the coal. It appeared to be an undertaking almost beyond the means of private ownership.³²

And, writing even earlier, in 1919, at the time of the Sankey Commission, Ritchie, who had just been appointed one of Snowdown's directors, expressed a similar viewpoint:

... as private enterprise has proved so inadequate, and notwithstanding that I am opposed to the principle of nationalisation being applied to the old established coalfields, I believe that the experiment might well be made in Kent... Nationalisation of the whole coal industry, to my mind, would be a national calamity.³³

³² Forster Brown, 95.

³³ Ritchie, 297.

The reason for Ritchie's reticence becomes clear just a little later when he states that nationalisation in Kent would be a success but, and here comes the all important proviso, only if,

... those responsible for its workings were entirely free from political influences and intrigues.³⁴

So there we have it: politics must be kept out of the pits. However, the obverse message was also clear: why should individual entrepreneurs take risks with their own money in trying to get at a national asset if no profits were to be made? Naturally, if losses were to be incurred they should be borne by the nation as a whole. Whereas profits...

By 1920 there was no question of either of the Kent pits making a profit. Coal prices had fallen nationally, and, in Kent, were reduced by half, between 1920-22.³⁵ Combined with this was a fall in output at both collieries: Tilmanstone suffered more flooding in 1922 and the quality of the Beresford seam at Snowdown had declined. Snowdown was taken over by a new company, formed in 1922, Pearson and Dorman Long Ltd.³⁶ In 1924 Snowdown was closed by its new owners while work was carried out on enlarging the shafts and installing new machinery.³⁷

By 1924 a third Kent pit had already been in operation for six years, at Chislet, west of Canterbury, and in that year work began on sinking a new pit at Betteshanger, three miles east of Deal. Chislet and Betteshanger with Snowdown and Tilmanstone were the four pits which constituted the Kent coalfield throughout its very short life.

³⁴ Ritchie, 298.

³⁵ Johnson, 8.

³⁶ Johnson, 9.

³⁷ Archibald and Abercrombie, 35.

Early Unions - Militant seeds.

Less than one year after the first hoppit of coal was produced at Snowdown Colliery, in November 1912, the Kent miners began to organise. In October 1913, separate working men's committees were established at Tilmanstone and Snowdown. And, as war broke out in Europe, in August 1914, the two committees agreed to form a joint committee which became the Kent Miners' Association (KMA) in 1915.³⁸ In September of that year the KMWA, as it had been renamed, applied for and received affiliate membership of the MFGB, thanks to the enthusiasm and initiative of its first elected secretary, Joe Challinor. According to Johnson we see that the KMWA enjoyed almost full support from its workforce, establishing an unofficial closed shop:

KMWA membership figures 1916-18.

	KMWA membership	percentage total of workforce
1916	810	71.8
1917	905	82.4
1918	1,145	88.1 ³⁹

However, I.J.Harding, working on the same period in the Kent coalfield, has union membership statistics which are far more conservative:

	Total labour force in the Kent coalfield	KMWA membership	% of union membership
1915	962	840	87
1916	1,128	650	58
1917	1,318	870	66
1918	1,299	950	73 ⁴⁰

³⁸ Johnson

³⁹ Johnson.

⁴⁰ I.J. Harding. "The Kent Miner: 1915-26: A Social History of the Kent Mining Community - Its Organisation, Leadership, and Militancy." University of Kent at Canterbury, Extended Essay, 1971.

The discrepancies are difficult to explain and impossible to resolve. Johnson calculates his figures using the KMWA's own Annual Returns. As a fledgling district union in an isolated corner of England with only two working collieries, the KMWA may have been guilty of exaggeration in order to win recognition from its important parent body - the MFGB. This could easily have been done, deliberately or inadvertently, by keeping the names of casual workers or miners who had recently left the coalfield on the books. Harding's figures are from the NUM and NCB Research Department, which were compiled after the Second World War, and may contain their own inaccuracies. It is difficult, if not impossible, to say which statistics are closest to the truth. Certainly the drop in membership 1915-16, as shown by Harding, is more in keeping with national trends, as miners left the industry to join the armed forces. However, what both Johnson and Harding show is that during most of the early days a large majority of Kent miners were union members. One can only hypothesise as to the reasons for this: miners continuing a tradition of union membership as they moved from area to area; miners wishing to retain their links with their original districts through the umbrella organisation of the MFGB; and miners who felt threatened by the new and precarious nature of the Kent coalfield and who needed the psychological, as well as the physical, support of the union lodge. Suffice it to say that, the reasons for union membership were probably an amalgamation of all of the above.

Early signs of union solidarity appeared in October 1918, when 85 per cent of the KMWA voted for strike action in support of district-based wages for surface workers. This was in opposition to the separate pit-based wages, the system preferred by the owners. Negotiations took place in London and Canterbury over a period of two years. An agreement was finally signed in Canterbury on 6 December 1920 - the Canterbury Agreement - which was favourable to the KMWA.⁴¹ During these protracted negotiations, Chislet Colliery, the third colliery in Kent, had begun producing not only coal, but skilled union negotiators in the person of Wilf Twigger.⁴² And in the year of the Canterbury Agreement, the Snowdown delegate, Jack Elks, was elected as the first full-time General Secretary of the KMWA, a post he was to

⁴¹ Harding, 16.

⁴² Harding, 17.

hold until his retirement in 1950.⁴³ Thus, by 1920 the mould was set as these two men, Twigger and Elks, helped to plant the seeds of Kent's later (in)famous militancy.

The first serious industrial dispute in the Kent coalfield, resulting in a major stoppage, had actually taken place one year before the Canterbury Agreement, in 1919. In February of that year, 89 per cent of the KMWA voted for strike action against the government's pay offer of one shilling extra per day and its promise of a Commission of Inquiry into the question of nationalisation.⁴⁴ The strike did not go ahead as the MFGB was split over the issue. However, there was a strike in Kent over a local issue: the length of the working week. The KMWA was agitating for a thirty-nine hour week spread over six shifts and on 15 July 1919, 1,300 KMWA members struck.⁴⁵ The action, initially well supported, lasted only three days at Snowdown but went on until 29 July at the other two Kent pits. When the men went back to work it was to a forty-one hour week, a compromise solution as the owners had demanded forty-two hours.

These early disputes were important in developing the socio-political character of the Kent miners and their union. Harding comments:

The years from 1918 to 1919 had definitely seen the development of a maturity and strength in the KMWA in preparation for the progressive and militant policy it was to play in the future.⁴⁶

Harding's observation on the pioneering spirit of the KMWA and its original leaders is an important one. While it would be ludicrous to speak of a *tradition* of union militancy in Kent in those early days, it is clear that such a tradition was, accidentally or not, being established. And by 1936, Ebby Edwards, General Secretary of the MFGB, was able to inform the Royal Commission on Safety in Coal Mines:

⁴³ Elks is still remembered by the older residents of Aylesham as a dedicated union man, firm but fair in his dealings with both men and management.

⁴⁴ Harding, 19.

⁴⁵ Harding, 19.

⁴⁶ Harding, 22.

Kent is our strongest section. The miners are better organised as a trade union in Kent than in any other section.⁴⁷

At the beginning of the 1920s, the projected Kent coalmining revolution was looking decidedly unsure. In 1920 Guilford Colliery was finally closed, abandoned before having produced a single lump of saleable coal. And in January 1922, Snowdown Colliery closed. The Beresford seam was exhausted and there now followed the difficult and expensive task of developing the Millyard seam at 3000 feet. With the closure of Snowdown, over three hundred miners were dismissed, only the pumpmen and a skeleton staff being kept on. The following table makes the slump in the workforce evident,

Snowdown Colliery Workforce 1921-27

	Underground	Surface	Total
1921	393	165	558
1922	106	82	188
1923	142	100	242
1924	53	77	130
1925	124	140	264
1926	365	192	557
1927	808	212	1,020 ⁴⁸

The closure of Snowdown caused great anger and bitterness among the laid-off miners. Not only the company, Kent Coal Concessions Ltd., was blamed, but also the men who were kept on. For several months there were problems outside Snowdown Colliery between the unemployed miners and the men going to work. There were no obvious displays of class solidarity in 1922. However, this year in fact proved fortuitous for Snowdown and for the Kent coalfield as it was the year Pearson and Dorman Long Ltd. bought up the mineral rights under

⁴⁷ Royal Commission on Safety in Coal Mines, 1936-38. Minutes of Evidence. Vol. I, 207; in Johnson, 358.

⁴⁸ NCB Research Department, *Harding*, 45.

the Betteshanger estates, and the colliery sites at Wingham and Sandwich. And, in January 1924, they bought Snowdown Colliery with the express intention of developing a fully operational colliery and building a colliery village to serve it. By September 1925, two shafts had been sunk to the Millyard seam, and in November of that year, sample coal was being raised.⁴⁹ April 1926 was set as the date when Snowdown would re-start but this was delayed by the events leading up to the May General strike and the owners' lock-out.

In an effort to avoid a dispute in Kent, which was seemingly inevitable elsewhere throughout Britain, Pearson and Dorman Long posted notices, in April 1926, announcing that work would continue normally at Snowdown. There were to be no wage cuts, no increase in hours and therefore no lock-out.⁵⁰ But when the national call for unity of action came from the MFGB, the KMWA called its men out and work ceased in the Kent coalfield. However, this solidarity did not last at Snowdown, and, by September, about 250 men were back at work. And when the lock-out officially ended, over three hundred Snowdown miners had broken rank and returned to work. Most miners at the other two Kent pits, Chislet and Tilmanstone, stayed out until the bitter end.

The reasons for Snowdown's lack of solidarity with the MFGB and with the other Kent miners are easy to guess at. Pearson and Dorman Long's promise of no cuts and no increase in hours must have been very tempting for the Snowdown colliers, many of whom had returned to the colliery after its temporary closure. The company's assurances must also have convinced the miners of its commitment to Snowdown, and its belief that it did have a future. In the light of the very recent past, this was surely uppermost in most of the miners' minds. A working pit with a good future was rare at this time of closures and wage reductions. And a protracted dispute could only jeopardise the pit's future.

There was also the problem of *community*, or lack of it, in 1926. Unlike Chislet and Tilmanstone collieries, which drew their labour force from a fairly restricted network of villages around their collieries, Snowdown miners came from a widespread area covering Canterbury, Dover, Ramsgate and Sandwich. They either went to work using public transport,

⁴⁹ Harding, 65.

⁵⁰ Harding, 66.

or they cycled or walked. And, of course, at the end of their shifts they would go back their separate ways. There was neither time nor place for them to meet to *talk shop* or, in time of industrial trouble, to organise effectively. And, should a miner break rank and go back to work during a dispute, there was little or no social exclusion or public opprobrium. All that was to change with the building of Aylesham village and the huge increase in miners at Snowdown, following the 1926 dispute.

Mining Workforce in Kent 1926 - 30.

		1926	1927	1928	1929	1930
Snowdown						
	(underground)	365	808	1020	1509	1493
	(surface)	192	212	229	307	269
Tilmanstone	(U)	685	754	746	788	907
	(S)	216	225	247	259	271
Chislet	(U)	531	735	874	1009	1037
	(S)	138	158	152	154	180
Betteshanger	(U)	96	136	283	480	847
	(S)	150	135	208	257	264
Total	(U)	1677	2433	2923	3783	4284
	(S)	696	730	836	977	984
Total		2373	3163	3759	4760	5268 ⁵¹

⁵¹ NCB Research Department; Harding, 77.

Aylesham: "Sunshine Corner" or "Hell in the Garden of England"?

With the prospect of a coalfield opening up in Kent at the end of the nineteenth century came the fear that this "Garden of England" would be transformed into another industrialised Black Country. Stanley Jevons' apocalyptic vision of the future for Kent is worth quoting in detail:

... some hundreds of miles of railways will be wanted to tap the coalfield. Great docks will also be needed for shipping the coal abroad, and to London. A number of ironworks are sure to be started on a large scale and other new industries depending upon cheap coal will arise; and all these surprising new industries will mean the growth in Kent of a hundred villages and many large towns. A strange transformation of the "Garden of England"!⁵²

Stanley Jevons' sense of awe and foreboding about what lay in store for *poor* Kent is barely concealed. He goes on to lecture the reader on the merits of Arthur Burr's housing policy for his employees:

... I am glad to be able to say that he is an enthusiastic and practical housing reformer; and Kent Coal Concessions has itself on his initiative built three garden villages for housing the miners ... there are large gardens and spacious roads, and the villages are in every way models...⁵³

We have, then, the beginnings of company villages in Kent similar to those established in Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire. However, as we shall see, the coal villages in Kent did not develop in the same way as those in the Midlands, and the contrasting political character of the Kent coalfield was assured.

² Stanley Jevons, 155.

³ Stanley Jevons, 175.

It is not sure whether Stanley Jevons' concerns are more for the miners and their families or for the Kent countryside:

... every one will wish that Kent may be spared from the hideous rows of slate-roofed cottages which have defiled the beautiful valleys of the South Wales and Northern coalfields.⁵⁴

Indeed, he concludes his chapter on the Kent coalfield by stating quite categorically:

There must be no Black Country in Kent.⁵⁵

Such concern for preserving the natural beauty of Kent from the uglifying influence of the coal industry and, implicitly, the invasion of coalminers, was also expressed in the official survey into how *miners were to be accommodated and entertained*. The authors, Patrick Abercrombie and John Archibald, set out their objectives and, by the nature of their language, their prejudices, on the first page of their Preliminary Survey:

The vestiges of its [Kent's] glorious history are indeed visible in the city of Canterbury, the head of Christianity in these islands; in Sandwich and Dover, two of the Cinque ports that are the cradle of our national navy; in its fine old villages that epitomise our country life, instinct with the very spirit of England; and its manifold antiquities...⁵⁶

They go on to add with almost undisguised regret,

Into the calm pool of this comfortable existence is suddenly dropped the disturbing element of Coal...⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Stanley Jevons, 656.

⁵⁵ Stanley Jevons, 175.

⁵⁶ John Archibald and Patrick Abercrombie, *Preliminary Survey*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1925).

⁵⁷ Archibald and Abercrombie, 1925.

The authors' contempt for this product and the fact that, regrettably, it is of such tremendous importance is barely concealed. Indeed, when they write:

There could be no thought of omitting to develop this unexpected natural resource...⁵⁸

one can feel that they had done just that: thought of leaving the coal where it was in order to avoid,

... the existing civilisation [being] engulfed by an industrial tidal wave...⁵⁹

Of course the "tidal wave" would be the miners and their families who would necessarily be imported into the region and who were, by implication, not civilised. It was this superior attitude towards miners, adopted by the indigenous Kent population from the outset, which set the Kent miners apart and increased their sense of isolation. It was this which largely forced them to look in upon themselves and to look to their own interests, knowing nobody else would. And, while not the only explanation for Kent miners' industrial militancy, it was, as we shall see, a vital ingredient in the mixture; and, amazingly, it was in place before the miners were.

Despite, or perhaps as a result of, their patronising attitude, Abercrombie and Archibald were determined that *their* pit villages would be vastly superior to the 'traditional' pit villages of South Wales and the northern coalfields. By the time the Final Report was published in 1928, estimates for the number of Kent pits had been reduced to twelve, which would produce a combined output of ten million tons per annum.⁶⁰ Projections for the population increase in Kent were put at between 10-12,000 people per pit if one put the number of actual miners at each pit at about 3,000 and assumed that they would have families of 3-4 members each.⁶¹ On these estimates, construction work on accommodation had to be carried out on a

⁵⁸ Archibald and Abercrombie, 1925.

⁵⁹ Archibald and Abercrombie, 1925.

⁶⁰ Archibald and Abercrombie, 1928, 46.

⁶¹ Archibald and Abercrombie, 1928, 46.

very large scale. Already small mining communities from the early days of the coalfield existed, with men like Burr having built a limited number of miners' cottages. However, with the projected population explosion expected within the next ten years, men like Abercrombie and Archibald realised that whole new towns would have to be constructed, and quickly. The first, and as it turned out, the only 'new town' to be purpose-built on a large scale design was Aylesham. This mining settlement was to serve Snowdown colliery which had re-opened in 1925 under its new owners, Pearson and Dorman Long. Aylesham would also provide miners for the prospected new pit at Adisham, just one mile to the north. It was a site conveniently placed mid-way between two pits and located on a hill, away from the two pit heads, and thus, away from the dirt and smoke which made other mining villages such unpleasant and unhealthy environments. It was also completely isolated from other villages and towns with natural as well as man-made delimitations. This is another important point for consideration when analysing the 'peculiar' nature of Aylesham's inhabitants and their reputation for industrial militancy. It is also important in that it contributes to the fact that Aylesham, perhaps more than most pit villages, and certainly more than Coalville, falls neatly into the *isolated mass* hypothesis.

The decision to develop Aylesham rather than continue adding miners' dwellings onto already existing settlements was taken by Kent County Council in 1925.⁶² Planning for the new colliery town got under way immediately and was directed by John Archibald, representing Eastry Rural District Council, within whose jurisdiction Aylesham would come, and Patrick Abercrombie, acting as an independent adviser. By 1927, following their *Preliminary Survey* of 1925, the layout of Aylesham had been planned and four hundred houses were in the process of being constructed. The architects commented upon the location of the new town in the following prosaic terms:

The site is a superb one - a simple bare fold in the chalk, gradually rising from the railway and closed at the top by a mighty beech wood...⁶³

⁶² Margaret Lilley, *Aylesham: A Study of the Development of an East Kent Mining Community*, unpublished B.Ed. Dissertation, Eastbourne College of Education, April 1974, 5.

⁶³ Archibald and Abercrombie, 1928, 50.

Taking advantage of Aylesham's rural location Abercrombie intended the village to be developed along Ebenezer Howard's "garden city" concept: it was to be a self-contained community with both rural and urban amenities and green belts. These were the specific objectives for each prospective new colliery town envisaged for Kent:

It was determined that the houses required for the working of each pit should be concentrated in a separate area, within a reasonable distance of the pit they were designed to serve, on a site selected with a view, so far as possible, to preserving the amenities of the surrounding country, avoiding the construction of costly new roads and affording the best possible facilities for the provision of public services...⁶⁴

Aylesham clearly satisfied all these criteria and the architects envisioned great things including banks, hospitals, libraries as well as the more traditional facilities: schools, shops and, of course, public houses. The *Final Report* was quite definite about the future of Aylesham:

This is to be a small town, not an overgrown village.⁶⁵

But, if one looks at the original drawing of how Aylesham was to look, then, even allowing for artistic licence, Abercrombie and Archibald must surely have been disappointed by the actual realisation of their project. In fact, Aylesham can best be described as an *overgrown village*: a population of 4,500 with facilities such as shops, public houses and a very small library, but no banks, cinemas, nor even, today, a secondary school. The architects' plans were frustrated largely as a result of the fact that Adisham pit was never opened, so the projected population of the new colliery town was reduced by half. And Snowdown colliery, even at its peak in the mid-1930s, never employed more than 2,200 men,⁶⁶ eight hundred short of the expected three thousand. So, Aylesham, the proclaimed first new colliery town in Kent, whose original design plans were exhibited at the 1926 International Housing Conference in Vienna as

⁶⁴ *Kentish Express and Ashford News*, November, 1927.

⁶⁵ Archibald and Abercrombie, 1928, 51.

⁶⁶ Johnson, 17 n.25.

a model of their kind,⁶⁷ in the end never actually became more than an *overgrown village*. However, that it is not say that because the design plans were frustrated, the spirit of the mining community was poorer. Indeed, had Abercrombie and Archibald's original ideas been carried out, then the political and industrial history of Aylesham village and Snowdown colliery may well have been very different. The architects' notions of miners mixing with ancillary workers in an extended community sounds like the precise recipe for the *not community* ideal type as defined by Norman Dennis.⁶⁸ And, as previously stated, the socio-demographic make-up of the new colliery town would have been remarkably similar to Coalville's, with its resultant watering down of single occupational community status. As it turned out, Aylesham, in the 1930s, developed solely as a pit village, isolated and *half finished, on a hill, but almost* hidden from view by a ring of woods. Travellers can, and have, passed right by Aylesham without ever knowing of the existence of this industrial village in the heart of *olde worlde* Kent. Even the fact of there once having been a coalfield in Kent still manages to draw expressions of surprise and disbelief from people who did not live too far from it. Violet Hughes, probably the first sociologist to observe the Kent coalfield, made this observation, although she seems to have been unaware of the psychological as well as the socio-political implications of Aylesham's physical isolation:

... the mining estates are in most instances hidden away so that one is unaware of their existence until one comes suddenly upon them.⁶⁹

But it is to the people who knew all too well of its existence, the people who came and inhabited this failed experiment in architectural planning that we now turn.

⁶⁷ *Kentish Express*, November, 1927.

⁶⁸ Norman Dennis, "The Popularity of the Neighbourhood Community Idea," Ray Pahl (ed.), *Readings in Urban Sociology*, (Oxford: Pergamon, 1968), 74-92.

⁶⁹ Violet Hughes, "A Social Survey of the East Kent Coalfield," unpublished PhD. thesis, University of London, 1934, 181.

The People of Aylesham - "Them on the Hill."

The fact that Aylesham was not how it was intended to be was an irrelevancy to the early inhabitants. That they were ignorant of the two East Kent Regional Planning schemes and names like Abercrombie and Archibald is not historically provable, but may be taken as a given. Idealised notions of living in constructed garden cities were hardly priorities in the minds of the new arrivals. These were people continuing a tradition among miners and their families: when work came to an end at a pit they "upped stakes" and moved on "lock, stock and barrel" to another coalmine, and often another coalfield, thus earning themselves the epithet of *gypsy miners*. The Samuel Commission had noted this aspect of the mining industry when it wrote:

... obsolescence and closing of collieries ... a normal feature of the industry, and indeed, essential to its nature.⁷⁰

This mobility was not a respected tradition, as it meant the disruption of families and social ties and the loosening of any solidaristic community bonds. Rather, it was a tradition respected out of sheer economic necessity and the geological nature of the extractive coal industry. When a mine was exhausted or the coal deemed too difficult to get, then it was closed; and in the days of private ownership this was a decision taken solely by management and shareholders. In the 1920s, however, there was another reason which, while not new, was more widespread than ever before in forcing men to move on in search of work: being blacklisted. 1926 and its aftermath left coalfields up and down the country split at their socio-political seams as miners, bearing the brunt of their colleagues' vocal, and sometimes physical, abuse, drifted back to work. When the lock-out was over and the miners forced back on the owners' harsh terms, many men involved in their local union and at the forefront of the dispute found themselves sacked and blacklisted. This meant that they were unable to get work at their own pits or throughout their local coalfield, such was the solidarity and 'community' bonds of the Owners' Association, although one can hardly say it was based on a delimited geographical

⁷⁰ Royal Commission on the Coal Industry, Vol. 1, London, 1926, 46.

area. (This is an almost totally unexplored subject in the history of coalmining and worthy of further research.) Many of those blacklisted, desperate for work, decided to respond to the notices in their areas which advertised jobs in the new Kent coalfield. Miners who wished to move were assisted by the Industrial Transference Board set up by the Conservative Government in 1928.

Although housing and living conditions in Kent were not the principal attraction for miners, they became some of the main reasons to remain, in spite of the notoriously difficult working conditions and the hostile reception from surrounding village people and townsfolk. Anecdotal evidence for this abounds, and, despite problems with the historical nature of such evidence, examples will be used when appropriate. Indeed, this kind of oral history is invaluable in attempting to recreate and subsequently analyse the social conditions in those fledgling Kent mining villages. Writing about a totally different subject, courtship and marriage in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Professor Lawrence Stone nonetheless uses a similar methodology: studying individuals and attempting to recreate their actual thoughts and emotions. In that sense his justification can be cited here:

If the historian's prime task is to explain change over time, another equally important function is surely to bring the past alive. As any anthropologist who has done field-work will testify, other people are other. If Marc Bloch was right when he asserted that "in the last analysis it is the human consciousness which is the subject matter of history", then the case-study has an irreplaceable role to play.⁷¹

This is directly relevant to our study of individuals in specific coalmining communities in the attempt to understand (non)collective action. And, if some of the evidence appears to be somewhat hyperbolic and even contradictory, in places, it is still important in helping us understand private perceptions of the past held by the *actors* involved.

⁷¹ Lawrence Stone, *Uncertain Unions: Marriage in England 1660-1753*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 4.

Sometimes these *actors* are obscure or even forgotten *bit-players* and therefore, according to E.H. Carr, are unhistorical since not everyone who has lived and not everything that has happened is part of history. One is occasionally forced to admit that those two (in)famous 'historians', Sellar and Yeatman, may have been closer to the mark in their definition of what history is than we would normally care to admit, at least in public!

History is not what you thought. *It is what you can remember*. All other history defeats itself.⁷²

Famously, and still very funnily, the Sellar and Yeatman version of English history chronicles events in terms of well known kings and queens and great happenings. Simplistic, and specifically and deliberately 'schoolboyish' (by implication girls aren't so silly) though this may have been, it sometimes seems that social historians have invested all their efforts over the past sixty years in trying to refute Sellar and Yeatman. One of the advantages of one aspect of the methodology used in this current piece of research, is that it writes the people's history as remembered by them. Professor Stone's citing of a seventeenth century historical methodology is once again directly pertinent to this research:

"The retrieving of these forgotten things from oblivion in some sort resembles the art of a conjuror, who makes those walk and appear that have been in their graves many hundreds of years; and represents as it were to the eye the places, customs, and fashions that were of the old time."⁷³

Of course, the miracle of resurrection is largely unnecessary in this case as many of the actors are still alive, but the principle of rescuing history in an attempt to understand it through the recreation of ideas and feelings remains the same.

⁷² Walter Curruthers Sellar and Robert Julian Yeatman, *1066 And All That*, (London: The Folio Society Ltd., 1997), xxxiii.

⁷³ Stone, 4.

However, one of the disadvantages of this methodology is that people tend to recount personal experiences and history in a context directly relevant to their present circumstances and currently held political ideologies, if any. Thus, the anger and the bitterness or the humour and the lightheartedness about the past which comes through in oral history must be interpreted, at least partly, in a contemporary context.

One Kent miner who has become part of history proper is Jack Dunn.⁷⁴ He arrived in Aylesham in 1930 at the age of fifteen, having moved with his parents from Nuneaton in Warwickshire. He began work at Snowdown colliery and quickly became involved in the union, earning a reputation (for which he is still proud) as a communist. Dunn ended his working career as Area Secretary of the Kent NUM, having been in the forefront of the strikes in 1972 and 1974. Speaking of the early days and the terrible conditions at Snowdown, Dunn recalls how one young man dropped dead on his very first day at work, after having just walked down from Scotland.⁷⁵ He also speaks of other strange occurrences:

I remember a chap from South Wales who hadn't worked since he left school and he was in his twenties, who came to work with me on haulage. The heat was so tremendous he couldn't stick it. He came, signed on, so pleased he'd got a job and then - he disappeared.⁷⁶

Similar stories are told by other miners:

There was a fella tramped from Durham, took him seven weeks to get here, and he got his job on the Monday night, he sat down at 2 o'clock and said, "I do feel bad", and the next thing there was he just keeled over - as dead as doornails.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ The quotations attributed to Dunn are cited, but much of the personal information about him comes from familial acquaintance.

⁷⁵ "The Wheel Stops for Kent's Defiant Miners", *Financial Times*, 2 September, 1989.

⁷⁶ Gina Harkell, "The Migration of Mining Families to the Kent Coalfield between the Wars," *Oral History*, Vol. 6, No. 1, (Spring 1978), 101.

⁷⁷ Harkell, 99.

Such tales have become part of Aylesham's folklore. The truth of these stories is difficult to verify, and in a way that does not matter for sociological history at this level; dealing with people's long term recollections is not, and cannot ever be, an exact science. Whether or not men literally died on, or disappeared after, their first shift at work, is irrelevant, for these 'memories' give a general and very vivid picture of working conditions at Snowdown Colliery. It must also be noted that they serve to enhance not only the righteous anger of the men but their *macho* appeal for having survived working in one of Britain's deepest and hottest pits - 3000 feet deep with temperatures regularly touching 100° F (37.5° C).

Stories of local hostility towards the miners in their isolated and foreboding communities are also commonplace. Any historian writing about the Kent coalfield in the 1930s is almost obligated to include anecdotes of miners and their families being considered and treated as an *inferior* "race apart." Boarding house windows containing "No Miners" signs, butchers reserving poor quality meat cuts and advertising them as "miners' bacon", and local newspapers always referring to miners by their profession, "Man and miner in fight", are some of the more popular tales to be found and heard, as they are still recounted by the older village residents. There is almost a sense of ironic pride when Aylesham people speak of the reputation of the village in the 1930s, referring to it as a "wild west sort of place" or even comparing it to the Klondyke.⁷⁸

In her ethnographical study of the East Kent coalfield, carried out and written in the early 1930s, Violet Hughes wrote:

... there undoubtedly exists a prejudice in certain neighbourhoods on the part of the natives of Kent against accepting miners and their families either as tenants or as lodgers.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Pitt, 74.

And this researcher knows from experience how as a timid and diminutive eleven year old in a new secondary school outside of the village his Aylesham origins, once known, earned a grudging respect from his peers beyond all proportion to his size!

⁷⁹ Hughes, 56.

Indeed, Hughes goes much further in her analysis of the clash of cultures which took place when the hardest of industrial workers arrived in one of Britain's most rural and agricultural areas. She describes the existence of a feudal society in Kent, where the agricultural labourer is deferential before the local squire or aristocrat:

But the miner is a democrat, with an attitude of 'I'm as good as you', which is sturdy and independent and is not intended as rudeness.⁸⁰

Rude or not, that is how it was interpreted by the local population, and how the reputation of the uncouthness of the miners was established. Hughes further raises the stakes when she adds:

He [the miner] finds the agricultural labourer servile. The agricultural labourer finds him mannerless and uncouth. He accuses the miner of thieving, poaching and making bad debts.⁸¹

And, in an amazingly patronising comment, Hughes concludes her section on attitudes towards, and customs of, the miners with:

The accusations may not be entirely groundless. The first two 'crimes' are due partly to the miners' inability to understand his new surroundings... Seeing many acres of land all belonging to one person, he asks the question, 'Why shouldn't I have this?' and finds no satisfying answer.⁸²

It has been argued that a combination of the extreme working conditions in the pit and the social isolation of the village, affecting the women in particular, led to a very high turnover

⁸⁰ Hughes, 184.

⁸¹ Hughes, 184.

⁸² Hughes, 184-85.

of labour and a period of anti-communal instability in Aylesham during the 1930s.⁸³ Certainly the evidence of miners like Mr. Sumner would testify to this:

When we went to Snowdown all the coal face - 120 yards was marked out, and each man had his own stint and you had what you got and each man didn't care what happened to the next... Snowdown was the absolute ultimate in rat races - one man willing to cut another's throat. Talk about comradeship in the mines, I didn't find much in Snowdown I'll tell you. Snowdown was rock bottom, it was the most brutalising pit that I'd ever worked in.⁸⁴

As for the women, their material life seems to have been almost as precarious:

If you put a towel on the line or a rug, you got to keep your eye on it for if you come inside it'd gone.⁸⁵

The reputation for dishonesty among the early settlers was enhanced by a practice known as 'moonlight flitting'. Initially, the high wages paid to attract miners to Kent made them 'safe bets' in the eyes of local shopkeepers and traders. Furniture stores gave credit easily and it was they who suffered the most from 'moonlight flitting'. This was a practice which entailed families leaving the village in the middle of the night, taking all their new 'possessions' with them, and leaving no forwarding address. Malcolm Pitt comments:

Many a family in Aylesham village woke up to find that its new neighbours had done a moonlight flit to escape the horrors of Snowdown colliery, and a mass of unpaid debts.⁸⁶

⁸³ Robert Goffee, "Kent Miners: Stability and Change in Work and Community 1927-76", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Kent, 1978. Violet Hughes also makes this observation, although, of course, much earlier.

⁸⁴ Harkell, 100.

⁸⁵ Harkell, 103.

⁸⁶ Pitt, 80-81.

The shopkeepers were soon alerted to the practice and hire-purchase arrangements became very difficult to obtain. Hughes thought this practice important and widespread enough to make mention of it:

A certain amount of antagonism between local trades-people and the mining population appears to exist. Many of the shop-keepers in the towns dislike the miners as customers because some have a reputation for not paying their debts.⁸⁷

And such is the notoriety of the practice that a scene showing it happening was included in a recent play about the history of Aylesham performed in the village by the local residents and directed by an experienced professional in producing community theatre.⁸⁸

Harkell argues that an unusual factor in the high turnover of labour was the desire of the women to return to their native regions. "Unusual" because studies of social migratory patterns have, traditionally, concentrated on the economic pressures on the man as the sole breadwinner, assuming that housework is the same wherever it is performed. The politics of housework and the role of women in a mining community is a subject to which we shall return, in more detail, later. But it is appropriate at this point to look at the early role of women in the formative years of Aylesham as a community. Although there are historical and methodological flaws in Harkell's thesis, which will be dealt with, her observations are very important for a deeper understanding of that still little understood, often silent, majority. Harkell sums up her argument thus:

It is therefore particularly striking that, in the migration of mining families to Kent between the wars, the 'working conditions' of miners' wives in the hostile towns and villages of East Kent played as important a role in determining whether the family returned to their previous home as the conditions in the pits themselves.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Hughes, 185.

⁸⁸ Colway Theatre Trust presents The Aylesham Community Play, "Over and Under the Earth" by Jon Oram, June-July, 1996.

⁸⁹ Harkell, 98.

In support of this thesis, Harkell cites women such as Eileen Watkins:

I hated Aylesham. I wouldn't put the baby outside because the kids didn't trouble if they tipped the pram up... it was so rough and I wasn't used to that... I wouldn't go out on my own at night.⁹⁰

Another example given comes from a Mrs. Unwin:

I didn't like it, I used to cry, used to cry night after night for a long time, I broke my heart to go back, but what could you do? We was married and had a baby then. I missed my home life and there was nothing in the village you see... there was no shops, there was only one co-op.⁹¹

It is the hopelessness expressed in Mrs. Unwin's phrase, "but what could you do?" and the recognition of her commitment/tie to her husband and child which illustrates the weakness in Harkell's romantic ideal of women exercising as much power as the men in deciding whether or not to stay in Kent. It is precisely because of the impecunious state of women which, apart from using emotional blackmail, meant they had very little power. And it is perhaps worth noting that Harkell's citations, in support of her argument are all taken from women who, despite expressing their early sadness, even desperation at being in Aylesham, stayed. Had she read Goffee more closely (she does cite him) she would have understood that the prime reason for families returning to their roots was once again economic: from 1933 onwards, the coal industry in the Midlands and the North was recovering from the Depression and was once again recruiting miners. But in Scotland, the north-east and South Wales the industry remained in deep depression and it was largely miners from those regions who remained in Aylesham.⁹²

Describing the position of women in Aylesham, Hughes' own sexuality probably made her more sensitive to their problems. It was certainly unusual for sociologists, writing about

⁹⁰ Harkell, 107.

⁹¹ Harkell, 107.

⁹² Goffee, ch. 6.

mining communities in the 1930s, to treat women as anything other than subservient to the men. And that without questioning the rightness of their social status. Hughes was particularly acute in her observations on women:

When they [the miners] first came to Kent they and their families are often complete strangers to one another as well as to the native Kentish people. The men meet at their work, at the Miners' Welfare Institute etc..., and in time barriers among groups of miners tend to disappear. But the women folk living at home are more isolated.⁹³

Perhaps, then, it is the miners' wives who form the true and original *isolated mass*. This is something to which we shall certainly return when dealing with the role of women in the militant action of the 1970s and '80s.

What Harkell generally ignores is that there were many miners, and their wives, who were not only very happy to be getting a weekly income (something which many must have thought they would never have again), but were genuinely impressed by the quality of life on offer in this corner of Kent. One man *is* cited, a Mr. McEwan, who appreciated the countryside of Kent and its fresh air in comparison with his industrial home town of St. Helens in Lancashire.⁹⁴ She also quotes a Mrs. Sumner:

We thought it was heaven... Kent we thought was paradise. Trees everywhere, flowers everywhere, sunshine... Fields for miles and miles around... It was a happy life altogether, you knew everybody, everybody knew you. Relations came over here of course, on holiday because it was a seaside place and that kept us all in touch.⁹⁵

But, Harkell says, this woman was the only one she met with such a positive attitude; and it is difficult to imagine that she was unable to interview anyone else with ideas similar to those of Mrs. Sumner's. This is especially surprising when one considers the opinions of Janet

⁹³ Hughes, 97-8.

⁹⁴ Harkell, 108-9.

⁹⁵ Harkell, 109.

Dunn, the wife of Jack Dunn, whom Harkell did interview. Mrs. Dunn remembers how, despite the tensions in the village caused by families from all over the country being forced to live together:

... Kent was the soft and civilised south. There was the seaside, lights that turned on at the flick of a switch, lavatories that flushed and the novelty of going upstairs to your bed.⁹⁶

Hughes also noted the difficulties caused by forcing people of different geographical and cultural backgrounds to live together. But, unlike Harkell, she wrote about it in a positive light:

... one of the most striking problems in Kent is how the barriers between social groups may be broken down within and without the mining population, so that a united and self-conscious community may be created.⁹⁷

Hughes anticipates the need for the abstract - community, while Janet Dunn remembers what was concretely important. Similarly, Ella Watson, who arrived in Aylesham in 1926 from Ashington, in Northumberland, recalls:

... oh there was lights. Never had electric lights before. I was at the bottom of the stair and our John was at the top of the stair switching lights on an' off. Oh, it was lovely... There was trees, thousands and thousands of trees.⁹⁸

The domestic luxuries of electricity and inside bathrooms were secondary to the fact that these families had their own houses immediately upon arriving in Aylesham. The ease with which a house was procured is somewhat difficult to imagine today. An old Aylesham miner, Jack Henderson, explains how it worked:

⁹⁶ Financial Times, 2 September 1989.

⁹⁷ Hughes, 97.

⁹⁸ *Aylesham: Sunshine Corner*, copyright Keith Owen, Sunshine Corner Films, 1995.

You'd go to Snowdown colliery, start work and you'd get a house. You'd go see the housing manager ... and he'd gie yer keys ... and he'd say, "'ere, go and try one, see what one you want."⁹⁹

Such a generously casual attitude is corroborated by another Aylesham resident, Meg Plews, who arrived when she was a young girl:

My father ... he got us a house in Aylesham; could have any house you wanted in Aylesham then, they were just building them.¹⁰⁰

What was equally surprising was the quality of the houses on offer. These were solid iron-framed houses with large back gardens and spaciouly separated by wide roads, lawns and sometimes, fields. For people coming from industrial towns with houses built back-to-back in the nineteenth century, Aylesham must really have seemed like a "sunshine corner", even if amenities like shops and schools were slow in coming.

Concerning education, junior-aged children went to a small wooden construction at one end of the village which acted as a temporary school until May 1969 when this researcher was eleven years old and able to help with the transfer of books and other equipment to a modern, purpose-built primary school. A secondary modern school was opened in the village in 1933, but closed in 1989, when arrangements were made to bus all the village's teenagers to a secondary school at Sandwich, ten miles away. Educational opportunity, or lack of it, in Aylesham, has been, and still is, a source of contention among the residents.

Physical links with the outside world were much quicker in coming as a railway link Dover, Canterbury and London was opened on 1 July, 1928.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ *Sunshine Corner*.

¹⁰⁰ *Sunshine Corner*.

¹⁰¹ *Dover Express and East Kent News*, 6 July 1928.

The Coming of Community.

Bob Goffee has argued, very convincingly, that stability in single occupational communities, like that of the coal community of Aylesham, follows one stage behind the actual occupation in its development. Thus we see coalmining in three stages: origins, expansion and stability, followed, inevitably, by contraction and decline. However, the life of the community does not develop in tandem with the life of the pit. Goffee shows that during the 1930s, when the Kent coalfield, and Snowdown colliery in particular, was enjoying a period of rapid growth and offering excellent economic prospects, the community in Aylesham was unsure of itself, was unstable and constantly changing its demographic make-up due to the high levels of (im)migration.¹⁰²

Hughes had, much earlier, of course, noticed the distinct lack of community in Aylesham when she described relationships between the first settlers:

... [they] do not easily mix or make friends, partly because they scarcely understand the language of their neighbours who have migrated from other coalfield regions. Cliques are inevitably formed ... and these must be broken down before a united community spirit can grow up.¹⁰³

The reference to "cliques" confirms previous descriptions of Aylesham being "clannish", but it is Hughes' innocent insistence upon the need for "community", she being blissfully unaware of the methodological problems involved in the construct, which is most interesting. Indeed, in her conclusion on the probable nature of the Kent coal communities in the not too distant future, that is, the 1930s and '40s, Hughes predicts that social relations between miners and the local indigenous population will become even more distant and therefore hostile. And, in arriving at this conclusion, she half anticipates the construct *isolated mass*, over twenty years before Kerr and Siegal:

¹⁰² Goffee, ch.3.

¹⁰³ Hughes, 184.

The women hardly ever meet each other. The men meet in the colliery and the Institute and talk shop. They have nothing else to talk about. They drink and gamble. They have nothing else to do.¹⁰⁴

Only Hughes' patronising attitude towards the miners' and their wives' abilities and potential to think beyond the pit spoils her otherwise advanced way of thinking. Expounding further on this increasing sense of isolation in the village of Aylesham, Hughes writes:

... the problem of generating sympathy and understanding between the native population and the Kentish people is a much more ominous one to solve... It may be argued with much good reason that the barriers are growing and will tend to grow more and more, as the mining estates grow in size; as they become self conscious and self contained societies, able themselves to provide more and more of their material and spiritual needs. Often one hears that the new estates are becoming more isolated, as they grow more self dependent.¹⁰⁵

Hughes' anticipation of the problems Aylesham was to face in the future is remarkable for its insight, and town planners would have done well to have listened to her analysis to avoid the kind of social exclusion which Aylesham residents were to complain of in the 1950s.

By the 1950s and '60s, when the coal industry was in decline nationally, and in Kent 'closure' was a word beginning to be whispered, Goffee believes that the community in Aylesham had developed its own identity having reached full maturity and therefore achieving a form of stability. Thus, Goffee was able to conclude that a mining community had taken shape in Aylesham, and the:

... pit persisted, in a symbolic sense, powerfully determining attitudes and behaviour beyond the colliery gates.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Hughes. 200.

¹⁰⁵ Hughes. 215.

¹⁰⁶ Goffee. ch.3.

This capacity for work relationships to extend beyond the confines of the pit was also shown to exist in other coalfields. M.J. Daunton in his comparative study of the Great Northern and South Wales coalfields argued that:

... it was surely the social relationships of work ... which largely determined the social relationships of the mining villages.¹⁰⁷

It was this intangible sense of community along the lines of Tonnies' *gemeinschaft* typology which had developed in Aylesham. As we have already noted, the village had clearly defined geographical boundaries, thereby intensifying Tonnies' conception of the importance of place, and while everyone 'knew' each other, personal worth *did* depend, not on what one had done, but on who one was within the community. Ray Pahl, reiterating and reinforcing, to a certain extent, Tonnies' hypothesis, assessed the importance of such communal relationships when he wrote:

Kinship and neighbourhood ties may represent for the working class what property does for the middle class: 'an important source of economic security and support.'¹⁰⁸

Such descriptive sentiments may well describe relationships in Aylesham in the 1950s and '60s, but are totally irrelevant to the Aylesham of the 1920s and '30s. Tales still abound of how women would not leave washing out on the line for fear of it being taken. And fighting in the market square on Friday and Saturday nights seems to have been commonplace. Considering the unstructured non-communal life in Aylesham at this time, it is not surprising that the absence of solidaristic values in the village persisted and powerfully determined attitudes and behaviour beyond the village limits and down into the pit bottom. The *clannishness* which existed in the early days in Aylesham extended to the pit, where separate work teams or 'gangs' of Yorkshiremen, Geordies, Scots and Welshmen were formed, resulting

¹⁰⁷ M.J.Daunton, "Down the pit: work in the Great Northern and South Wales coalfields, 1870-1914". *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 24, 1981, 578-97.

¹⁰⁸ Pahl. 76.

in a divisive workforce.¹⁰⁹ This divisiveness was heightened by the existence of the 'butty system' in operation at Snowdown during the 1920s and much of the 1930s.

The origin of the term *butty* seems to be derived from the sixteenth century phrase "to lay booty", meaning to share out the plunder. Certainly the word *booty* is very common in eighteenth century parlance in connection with pirates and in this case means the stolen treasure. In coalmining, references to treasure, in connection with miners' wages, hardly seems appropriate, but the principle of sharing out, however unequally, among a group of men is quite apposite. Essentially, the butty system was a form of sub-contracting whereby a gang leader, the buttyman, would receive the week's wages for his team and he alone would decide how it was to be divided up. The buttyman achieved his position often as a result of his mining experience and his intimidating physical strength, combined with a manipulative way with words. He acted as the mediator between men and management, often taking the place of the union where a strong independent union did not exist.

Although there were regional variations in the butty system, the general practice seems to have been fairly widespread throughout the northern coalfields by the end of the eighteenth century, and had reached the midlands by the nineteenth century.¹¹⁰ The principal difference in how the system was practised was between the 'big butty' and the 'little butty' systems. Under the former, the butties virtually ran the pits as miners and managers, dealing directly with faceworkers and owners. This was expedient in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when coal production was still, in financial terms, a fairly uncomplicated operation, and largely confined to local and regional markets. However, as the coal industry expanded and pits deepened, the number of employees both below and above ground increased and owners felt it necessary to have full-time colliery officials acting as intermediaries. Consequently, the buttyman was confined to dealing with the men and the pit managers, and his responsibilities limited to picking the members of his gang and paying out their wages at the end of the week. Otherwise he was considered, by the owners, at least, as just another miner, but by the miners he was regarded as, if not management, then at the least as a 'bosses' man'. The buttyman's

¹⁰⁹ Harkell, 102.

¹¹⁰ R.E. Goffee, "The Butty System and the Kent Coalfield," *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 34, 1977, 43.

'working class' self-imagery is made clear by Alan Campbell's study of the system in Scotland. There they referred to themselves as "underground managers" when they filled in their census returns, obviously feeling this was a step up from the more lowly collier or faceworker.¹¹¹ In Scotland, as elsewhere in Britain by the end of the nineteenth century, it was the 'little butty' system which operated throughout the coalfields.

Despite its long history and pervasive influence on work and community relationships the butty system, both 'big' and 'little', has received very little academic treatment and is more commonly to be found, with just a few page references next to it, in the indexes of books on the coal industry. And some well received micro-studies, like Bill Williamson's *Class, Culture and Community*, make no mention of the system at all. Exceptions to this dismaying rule are the aforementioned study by Goffee, and another micro-study at Cresswell in Derbyshire.¹¹² A.J. Taylor's study shows how the system operated nation-wide in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹¹³ However, what *is* clear, wherever the butty system is mentioned, is that, despite the regional variations in its practice, it is almost uniformly condemned by ordinary miners.

The reasons for the universal contempt for the butty system and, logically, the buttyman, were twofold: first the miners generally felt they were not being fairly paid and the buttyman was keeping more than he should for himself; and second, the independence of the collier, once he was at his workplace, out of sight of managers and owners, was severely curtailed by the butty who acted as a kind of foreman down the pit, and in whose interests it was to get as much work out of his gang as possible.

Naturally the first complaint - the unjust sharing out of the booty - was the one felt immediately and most acutely by the collier, and, of course, his family. Waller discovered vivid and bitter memories of the butty system in the Dukeries coalfield:

¹¹¹ Alan Campbell, *The Lanarkshire Miners: A Social History of their Trade Unions*, (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1979), 214.

¹¹² "Essay in Oral History: Company Paternalism and the Butty System - Conversations with Cresswell residents", the *Bulletin*, 46, Spring 1983.

¹¹³ A.J. Taylor, "The sub-contract system in the British coal industry", in L.S. Pressnall, (ed.), *Studies in the Industrial Revolution*, (London: 1960).

"Your father would earn more than my father ... because he was a butty ... the butty took the money and paid out what he wanted to pay them... The butties' children always had more than we did."¹¹⁴

Waller's interviews go on to speak of a buttyman who, due to illness, had to send his wife to collect the week's wages:

"... I can remember his wife coming in a small Austin 7, '30s Austin 7, and she came, drew the money from the pit and paid through the window of her Austin 7 the men who'd actually done the work!"¹¹⁵

Clearly what was shocking here was not the role of the women in the incident but that the butty continued to control wages, despite his absence, and the presence of a car, a sure sign of real wealth in the 1930s. Malcolm Pitt makes a similar observation in the Kent coalfield:

He alone decided how much each member of the team would receive in wages, and made sure that his own share was two or three times as much as that of any other man... The buttyman was an object of hatred and scorn as he paraded his wealth in expensive plus fours and one of the first Ford cars.¹¹⁶

Edward Nehls, writing about D.H. Lawrence's family situation, explained how his father's position as a buttyman,

... enabled the family to move to a larger house, "a modern bay-windowed house", where "they felt they had gone up a step in society".¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ R.J. Waller, *The Dukeries Transformed: The Social and Political Development of a Twentieth Century Coalfield*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 125.

¹¹⁵ Waller, 125.

¹¹⁶ Pitt, 81.

¹¹⁷ Edward Nehls, "D.H. Lawrence: A Composite Biography. Vol. 1, 1885-1919", in *Gilbert*, 157.

Apart from the financial inequality stemming from the buttyman's control over the wages, there was an equally virulent, but perhaps less evident or conscious, disgust for the butty as a result of his implicit role as representative of management down the pit. Images of working-class identity were confused, as Chris Fisher and Pat Spaven have argued:

Many of the small pits lacked the clear owner-employee dichotomy, and many of the larger ones were complicated by the intervention of the little buttymen.¹¹⁸

In the Scottish pits during the 1840s there was a series of disputes, not only over wages, but over the introduction of new working practices and longer hours. For the independent-minded Scottish collier this affront to his inherent labouring liberty was as serious as an attack on his financial security, as a Glaswegian journalist remarked at the time:

The reduction of wages is considered by them as a mere nothing to the giving up of their rights - rights which belong to every free born son of Britain.¹¹⁹

But once down the pit, how were a miner's work practices regulated, apart from checking how much coal was actually produced? Campbell has shown the significance of the buttyman, or contractor, in performing the role of 'underground manager':

The independence of the men is broken by the slavish contracts they make with their employers... there is not a mining district in the United Kingdom where the miners are so badly managed, and so much under the influence of petty contractors and tyrannical oversmen.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Chris Fisher and Pat Spaven, "Edward Rymer and 'The Moral Workman' - The Dilemma of the Radical Miner under MacDonaldism", in Harrison, *Independent Collier*, 247.

¹¹⁹ Glasgow Saturday Post, 11 February, 1843; in Campbell, 211.

¹²⁰ Glasgow Sentinel, 4 January 1851; in Campbell, 212.

The 'petty contractors' were, of course, the little buttymen, and their main incentive for working the men so hard was that they were paid according to the tonnage produced by their gang. The miners, on the other hand, wished to restrict output, which would result in a reduction of coal stocks, giving the miner a twofold advantage: the price of coal would increase and with it wages (or so the miners hoped); and more importantly, with low or dwindling stocks the political leverage of the miners is greatly enhanced in the event of a strike. It was, therefore, in the interests of the buttyman to control the miners' working practices and their attempts to unionise pits. The anti-union stance of the buttymen was seen at its most extreme form in the Nottinghamshire coalfield during the disputes of the 1920s, as Gilbert has shown:

During the strikes in the 1920s, many letters to the local press attacked the butties for their lack of solidarity with the rest of the men.¹²¹

And in the Dukeries coalfield the butty was considered:

... as a company man, rather than a fellow employee; the classic contradictory commitments of the foreman to the worker and the firm seemed to have been resolved in favour of the latter.¹²²

But it was during and after the 1926 lock-out that the buttymen really exhibited the true nature of their political allegiance. Throughout the midlands coalfields they agitated for their local branch unions to disaffiliate from the MFGB and join the newly formed company union organised by George Spencer. At Gedling colliery, in Nottinghamshire, they achieved their aim when they organised a union meeting during a week night while many known militant miners were working, and voted to dissolve their local NMA branch and join the Spencer Industrial Union.¹²³ And it was the butties who had been the first to break the solidarity of

¹²¹ Gilbert, 158.

¹²² Waller, 126.

¹²³ Gilbert, 201.

1926, and who, by using threats and economic bribery, forced other miners back to work and then to join the Spencer union.¹²⁴

The economic and professional disparities below ground between butty and miner were mirrored in the social divisions which existed above ground in the pit village. These were clearly visible in the better quality clothes the butties wore and the fact that many possessed a car, as mentioned above. However, in some villages there seems to have been a socio-spatial divide as well, since the butties occupied the best houses, segregated from the ordinary miners' houses.¹²⁵ They even had their own churches in some Nottinghamshire mining villages.¹²⁶ This sense of social superiority stemming from their higher economic status led to a sense of apartness in the minds of the butties, and their involvement in the work process was clearly limited to pecuniary gain. Consequently, these miners, who were, after all, coalminers, were a classic form of Lockwood's 'privatised worker'.¹²⁷ For the buttyman work was a means to a tangible end, not part of life, and the very nature of his economic and political control over miners down the pit meant that friendly social relationships with them above ground were neither possible nor desirable. The butty miner was alienated from his work and subsequently had a limited sense of working class imagery and, of course, notions of class solidarity. On the other hand, the advantages of the little butty system to owners and managers need hardly be stated. Suffice it to say the butty system acted as a divisory measure and served to deflect criticism and anger away from the bosses and onto fellow miners.

The butty system seems to have existed in Kent from the very beginning of mining there, and was despised by the Kent miners as much as by miners anywhere else in Britain. Kent union branches voted on several occasions not to accept buttyman as members.¹²⁸ However, the very fact that buttyman were 'excluded' more than once from the union would appear to show that the votes were ineffective and that the buttyman succeeded in infiltrating and influencing the union. That Kent miners also hated the butty system is hardly surprising

¹²⁴ Gilbert, 239.

¹²⁵ Waller, 126.

¹²⁶ Gilbert, 157 and 252.

¹²⁷ David Lockwood, "Sources of variation in working-class images of society", in M. Bulmer (ed.), *Working Class Images of Society*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 16-34.

¹²⁸ Goffe, (1977), 43.

when one considers the injustices perpetrated under it, and that these miners had probably experienced it in their previous pits. Without mentioning the system by name, this was clearly what Hughes is referring to when she wrote:

The custom exists, at least at some of the collieries, for a manager or sub-manager to be appointed, and he brings with him to Kent a group of workers who have been known to him in the area whence he came.¹²⁹

In 1928, the Kent Mineworker's Association (KMWA) made its feelings about the butty system very clear:

The Constitution and Rules of Association are against the butty system and therefore all the powers of the Association must be directed against this pernicious system.¹³⁰

And in August 1932, the Snowdown branch voted overwhelmingly in favour of abolition of the butty system, seemingly without immediate success, because the *Dover Express* carries a report in March 1935 of a dispute between miners and a buttyman.¹³¹

According to Goffee, the butty system at Snowdown disappeared gradually from 1936-39, and not solely as a result of union agitation. It seems that the arrival of a new manager in 1936, replacing the butty-favouring Derbyshire manager, Ellison, had some impact. He changed work practices, introducing more face conveyors and the yardage, rather than the tonnage, system of payment.¹³² This reduced the number of 'gangs' down the pit and consequently the buttyman's power and influence was eventually broken. However, the yardage system of payment was also divisive as it was still based on productivity, and as a result miners were still in competition, if not directly with each other, then with the system. So careless work practices crept in, most notably the failure to install chocs at proper intervals,

¹²⁹ Hughes, 183.

¹³⁰ KMWA Minutes, 19 December 1928, in Goffee (1977), 44.

¹³¹ *Dover Express*, 22 March 1935, in Goffee, (1977), 44.

¹³² Goffee, (1977), 49.

when the time could be used to gain an extra yard before 'knocking-off'. And slow or 'lazy' colleagues down the pit were a financial burden and the phrase a 'good worker' or 'good miner' took on different meanings for men and women. For the women a 'good worker' was a miner who worked regularly and brought his wages home intact, having passed by the working men's club and the bookmaker's. For the men it simply meant a hard and fast worker. For neither gender did the phrase have political meaning implying union solidarity. Such notions only became widely held definitions in Kent much later on, after the introduction of the NPLA and the politicising effects of the 1970s. But such idealised images of the archetypal proletarian community are far removed from the reality of Aylesham in the 1930s.

The Kent Coalfield and the Second World War.

The outbreak of war in September 1939 brought with it the very real threat of an immediate German invasion of England through Kent. This would, of course, have meant the loss of the Kent coalfield at a time when every lump of coal, and even the slack which came with it, usually considered useless, was regarded as invaluable. Suddenly the tiny Kent coalfield and its relatively small production rate of 30,000 tons per week became both economically and psychologically significant. Following the astonishing debacle of Dunkirk, the civil and military authorities began to prepare for the evacuation of the coastal towns. They were:

... seriously considering withdrawal of the entire civilian population from the area and arrangements were made for evacuation at a few hours notice.¹³³

The calamity of such an event, had it occurred, does not need to be stressed. The Kent coalfield would have fallen into enemy hands, and the miners may have been forced to continue working in order to produce coal for German industry. This was precisely what had happened to French miners working in the eastern coalfields of France. 'Slave labour' would have taken

¹³³ W.H.B. Court, *Coal*, (London: H.M.S.O., 1951), 133.

on a new meaning in these circumstances, and with very low labour costs the Germans may have made Kent coal more profitable than it had ever been! Remote thought this prospect may seem to us, with the benefit of nearly sixty years hindsight, it was very real to the Government, the KMWA and the Kent Coal Owners' Association (KCOA) in 1940. There was even the suggestion of closing down the Kent coalfield as part of a 'scorched earth' policy, as this extract from a speech by Dai Grenfell to the House of Commons on 16 July 1940 shows:

There are 2000 mines in this country ... Jack Elks is here and he knows what pressure was put upon himself and us to abandon the Kent coalfield. They are still working. All honour to those men. You cannot estimate the amount of moral damage that might have been done in this country even if one coalfield was abandoned because of enemy action. Would the panic spread? You are not quite sure. But the men of Kent have helped to steady us by steadying themselves... You cannot allow a pit to close down. We must try to keep going all the pits that are going today.¹³⁴

Such kind words about, and praise for, the Kent miners from a government minister were to become rare as the war progressed and the miners began to take advantage of their renewed industrial strength and economic importance. Indeed, a later Home Office report suggested that praise for the miners was, in fact, counter-productive:

*Propaganda impressing workers of their importance, rather than encouraging their war effort, appears merely to incite them to use their increased bargaining power.*¹³⁵

Industrial relations at the beginning of the war were relatively harmonious in Kent, as in other coalfields. Indeed, a period of peace had broken out throughout British industry as a sense of foreboding enveloped the country in the early years of the war. P. Inman has argued that the rhythm of industrial (dis)harmony followed closely that of Allied fortunes in battle:

¹³⁴ Hansard, House of Commons, 5th series, 17 July, 1940.

¹³⁵ Home Intelligence Reports, Ministry of Information. Vol. 292, June 1942; in François Poirier, "Les Syndicats Britanniques et la Seconde Guerre Mondiale," *Qwerty*, Paris, December 1996, 201-05.

The incidence of stoppages was strongly influenced by the state of the war. During the Dunkirk period the number of strikes was at a minimum; in the long period of waiting before D-Day, from mid-1943 to March 1944 it was high.¹³⁶

This hypothesis certainly holds true for the Kent coalfield, although as we shall soon see, Kent's most militant period during the war came at the beginning of 1942. Most of the early-war difficulties in Kent were not below ground but above, in the pit villages. Aylesham residents were notoriously careless about abiding by the black-out laws at night. A reading of the local press for the war years shows a constant stream of Aylesham people being prosecuted in the local magistrates' courts at Wingham and Canterbury for allowing light to escape from their homes. This may have been due to sheer carelessness or perhaps a general disbelief in the German intention to bomb Aylesham. However, it must also be noted that the high number of prosecutions may have been due to the particular zealotry of the village policeman, Sergeant Robson, who seems to have ruled the community with a rod of iron, and whose name still provokes a quiet sense of awe and respect among the older residents of today, who were, of course, teenagers during the war.¹³⁷

One incident which must rank as one of the most crass pieces of social and political insensitivity committed by anyone during the war was a comment made by the Church of England vicar, Frederick Lewis. He had only just arrived in the village, having been inducted on 15 July 1941, and he wrote an article in the October edition of the parish magazine, in which he said:

... there are enough miners in Aylesham playing Hitler's game, ... it was quite necessary to drop bombs.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ P. Inman, *Labour in the Munitions Industries*, (London: H.M.S.O., 1957), 395.

¹³⁷ Mary Park and Joyce McMahon, personal interview, 28 January 1998. Mary Park re-calls how on one occasion as a sixteen year old and in full-time employment, she was standing talking in the street to a mixed group of friends one evening when P.S. Robson happened along, recognised her, and told her to go home to bed. And the amazing point in the story is that she did just that!

¹³⁸ *Dover Express*, (D.E.), 17.10.41. Unfortunately St. Peter's Church in Aylesham does not keep copies of its parish magazine dating back to the 1940s so it is impossible to verify the precise contents of the offending article. However, the fact that the *Dover Express* reported it and published a full reply from the KMWA, Snowdown branch, suggests that there is more than just a hint of truth in the story.

The vicar's comment was a direct criticism of miners' absenteeism, against which there was a constant struggle by the government and, in Kent, the KCOA. It was also a reference to a stray bomb which landed on Aylesham on 11 April 1941, destroying two houses and killing ten people. Lewis' Old Testament approach to the philosophy of war provoked a righteously angry response from Tom Hall, Secretary of the Snowdown branch of the KMWA:

That is a statement we consider to be very unjust and refute it absolutely... Armchair criticism is what quite a lot of people are fond of, especially when someone else has to do the work. We would remind you that the men of Snowdown have to work hard, in a hole in the ground 3000 feet deep, the pressure, heat, etc. does not make life comfortable. The meat ration of 1s.2d. per week is certainly not enough to feed a man who has to work hard under such adverse conditions. Yet the tonnage today is higher than it was pre-war, with less men. There may be a few habituals, nothing like the numbers you suggest, but we can assure you that adequate machinery exists under the Essential Work Order to deal with any question which may arise with regard to output, and the National Service Officer is, so far as we know, quite capable of doing his job without any outside interference. We, therefore, suggest to you, Sir, that instead of rushing into print, why not call a meeting in the village, or we will arrange one for you, and there give the men the benefit of your views.¹³⁹

Hall's anger is barely contained and his reference to the efficiency of the Essential Work Order is tinged with cynicism as the miners had accepted Bevin's edicts very reluctantly indeed. Order 58A, passed in May 1940, and the Conditions of Employment and National Arbitration Order, Order 1305, passed on 25 July 1940, had given Bevin dictatorial powers over the coal industry, and, particularly, over the miners. He was to have power to control and direct the labour supply, and strikes and lock-outs were outlawed. In May 1940, Bevin informed the National Joint Advisory Council:

¹³⁹ D.E. 17.10.41.

We came to the conclusion that with the goodwill of the Trades Union Congress and the Unions of the Employers' Federation a little less democracy and a little more trust in these difficult times, we could maintain to a very large extent intact the peacetime arrangements merely adapting them to suit these extraordinary circumstances.¹⁴⁰

Bevin betrays himself here - for a change. Always wishing to be in charge, the views of his members only being important when they concurred with his own; he was not a democrat. Democracy was expendable and trust a one-way ticket, for he certainly showed little or no trust in the working-class people who elected him. Following on from the Orders of 1940, he issued the Essential Work (Coalmining Industry) Order in May 1941, which determined that miners could not be sacked nor employers be deserted. Absenteeism was also made an offence under law. Despite the security it gave miners against being laid-off or short-time working, this latest government edict was accepted by the MFGB only very reluctantly. In essence, this Order reduced the miner to the position of serf or tied-worker, a status which English and Welsh miners had endured up to the end of the seventeenth century, and which Scottish miners had only succeeded in discarding in the nineteenth century. Hence the contempt in Tom Hall's language for the Order and his disdain for the Reverend Lewis. Needless to say, no meeting between Church and miners took place in Aylesham.

At the end of November 1941, a branch meeting took place at Snowdown which showed a distinct sympathy for communism and a very precise political awareness. A resolution was passed and forwarded to M. Maisky, the Russian ambassador and well known anglophile:

That this meeting of the Snowdown branch of the Kent Mineworkers' Association notes with pride that miner guerrillas from the Donetz Basin assisted the Red Army in the re-capture of Rostov. We send warmest greetings to our comrades, and

¹⁴⁰ Hugh Armstrong Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889: Volume III: 1934-1951*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 177.

congratulate them on their latest success, which will greatly help in the common victory over Nazi gangsters.¹⁴¹

It is well-known that this was a period of great sympathy for Russia and 'Uncle Joe', when British industry was working flat-out to produce heavy armaments for export to the besieged Soviet army.¹⁴² However, despite this popular pro-Soviet sympathy, Snowdown's resolution is still very striking for the political militancy of its language and the expressed sense of class solidarity with Russian miners against a common enemy of the working-class. And it is interesting to note the absence of nationalism and the lack of accusatory identification of the German people with Nazism. This was in keeping with the TUC declaration at the beginning of the war when it appealed to:

... those of the German people who are conscious of the dreadful crime their ruler [had] committed in [forcing] the war...

and to the German workers:

... who, we believe, have never lost their sense of comradeship and loyalty to the principles upon which the cause of the organised workers is founded.¹⁴³

One final comment on Snowdown's resolution, putting it into a national perspective, and, of course, directly relevant to this piece of research: it is difficult to imagine such an internationalist approach being adopted by the Leicestershire miners.

The event which marked out Kent miners during the war, earning them a reputation for extreme militancy and a complete disinterest in the 'national interest', was the Betteshanger Strike of 1941-42. And, although it hardly involved Aylesham and the Snowdown miners, its

¹⁴¹ *D.E.*, 5.12.41.

¹⁴² Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-45*. (London: Pimlico, 1996), 363-65.

¹⁴³ T.U.C. Annual Report, 1939, 288 and 337-38; T.D. Burridge, *British Labour and Hitler's War*. (London: Deutsch, 1976), 24.

important contribution to the general reputation of Kent miners justifies its inclusion in this chapter.

The Betteshanger Strike 1941-42.

Trouble began in December 1941 at No. 2 face, where geological faults had resulted in a fall in coal production. As a consequence management decided to pay the miners on that face 7s.4d. per shift rather than the minimum wage of 10s.4d. established under the County agreement. Management also accused the men of 'ca-cannyng', a Scottish term meaning 'go-slow'.¹⁴⁴ The President and Secretary of the Betteshanger branch, Albert Housley and George Daughtrey, resigned in favour of the more active and more militant Tudor Davies and William Powell.¹⁴⁵ These men supported the miners in their action while the Ministry of Mines endorsed management.¹⁴⁶ In the New Year some miners agreed to work normally accepting the lower shift rate, while others continued with the 'go-slow'. On Friday 9 January, the branch committee called for an immediate strike and organised a ballot for Tuesday 20 January. This ballot produced a two-to-one majority in favour of continuing the strike action.

Results of strike ballot:

For the action	667
Against the action	305
Majority	362

Source: *Dover Express* 23 January, 1942.

Prior to the ballot twenty-eight miners were summoned to appear before Wingham Petty Sessions Court. The action had been brought by Pearson and Dorman Long under the rules of the 1875 Employers and Workers Act. However, the Company was persuaded by the Ministries of Labour and of Mines and the National Service Officer to withdraw the

¹⁴⁴ *D.E.*, 16.1.42.

¹⁴⁵ *D.E.*, 16.1.42.

¹⁴⁶ Johnson, 397.

summonses. And, once the Betteshanger miners had voted to go ahead with their strike action the Ministry of Labour issued summonses against 1050 miners under Articles two and four of Order 1305. The men were to appear before St. Augustine's Court, Canterbury, on Friday 23 January.

The KMWA did not support the strike, declaring it unofficial. But tensions were running high at Betteshanger and most of the men were determined to go ahead with their action. The *Dover Express* reported the comments of two miners, the first from Scotland and the other from Durham:

We did not want to strike; we want to work for a total war against Hitler. We are fighting now for the principle of a minimum wage.¹⁴⁷

It is interesting to note that the *Dover Express* still referred to the miners in Kent by their geographical origins. They were clearly still regarded as an alien breed. The Durham miner even shows a heightened level of political awareness and class solidarity, despite the lack of support from his comrades in the other Kent pits:

We are fighting to retain the minimum wage. We are accused of betraying the war effort; but if we did not fight we should be betraying the miners in the Army and the other coalfields.¹⁴⁸

His reference to accusations of disloyalty and unpatriotic behaviour came not just from local criticism, but also from a vitriolic national press campaign, of which an article in *The Daily Telegraph* was a prime example. This criticised the miners for their 'go-slow' action and for their unreasonable behaviour in not accepting the agreement negotiated between the Ministry of Mines and management.¹⁴⁹ The *Dover Express* reported the comment of

¹⁴⁷ *D.E.*, 16.1.42.

¹⁴⁸ *D.E.*, 16.1.42.

¹⁴⁹ *The Daily Telegraph*, 15.1.42.

Betteshanger Colliery manager, C. McGee, who invoked the traditional and populist appeal to the 'national interest':

Should the company accede to this demand by paying men who are deliberately withholding work it would be detrimental to the national interest.¹⁵⁰

The decision of the Canterbury magistrates was surprisingly harsh. Surprising, because one would have thought they would have wished to avoid stirring any further action at Betteshanger, with the possibility that the other pits may be provoked into some form of sympathy strike. Powell was sentenced to two months hard labour (all things being relative this would probably not have been as hard as working down a Kent coalmine), and Davies was given one month's hard labour along with another committee member, Isaac Methuen. And 1050 miners were fined sums of one or three pounds.¹⁵¹ The Chairman of the Bench, Lord Harwarden, clearly an 'expert' in the sociology of mining, summed up the case thus:

Everyone appreciated how miners stuck together and backed each other up.¹⁵²

Lord Hawarden's superficial and relatively inaccurate assessment of the situation, at least as far as Kent miners were concerned on this occasion, proved, in fact, to be a portent for the immediate future. Following the Court's decision, Betteshanger miners refused to go back to work, and the Branch union instructed non-payment of fines. This prompted the arrival in Kent, on Tuesday 27 January, of Dai Grenfell and Ebby Edwards. After hurried negotiations the Company agreed to make-up the miners' wages, backdated to December 1941. The Branch union, led by acting President, Richard Ball and the Financial Secretary, E. Lawther (brother of Will) insisted upon the immediate release and return to work of the imprisoned leaders. On the understanding that this would be acceded to, the miners voted on Wednesday 23 January to

¹⁵⁰ *D.E.*, 16.1.42.

¹⁵¹ *D.E.*, 30.1.42.

¹⁵² *D.E.*, 30.1.42.

return to work. And in a reply to a question about the imprisoned men from a miners' M.P., A. Sloan, representing South Ayrshire, the Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, said:

I have considered these and other representations and have consulted the justices before whom the cases were heard... I regard the amicable settlement of the dispute as an earnest of the determination of the workers at the Betteshanger Colliery to make the fullest contribution to the national effort and in these circumstances I felt justified in recommending the remission of the remainder of the sentences of imprisonment imposed on the miners' leaders. The three men were released last night.¹⁵³

The day of release was 2 February 1942. The remarkable extent of the climbdown by government and management is revealed in the letter which Pearson and Dorman Long sent to the three men, just prior to their release:

Having regard to the terms of your contract with the Company and in the national interest, you are urgently requested to return to your work. Your job is waiting for you on whichever is your normal shift.¹⁵⁴

The strike had lasted nineteen days, one of the longest strikes of the war, and had resulted in the loss of 21,000 tons of coal in production. *However, far more significant was the damage it did to the credibility of Order 1305. Clearly it could only work with a compliant workforce. Bevin applied it very sparingly after the Betteshanger experience, and then only in individual cases. And, in the coal strike of January to March 1944, a strike which, although it involved thousands of miners in Scotland, the North-East and Yorkshire, did not affect Kent, there was absolutely no question of applying Order 1305. The frustrated anger at the Government's forced U-turn over the Betteshanger miners is evident in the comments of*

¹⁵³ Hansard Official Report, 5th Series: Parliamentary Debates, 1941-42. Vol. 377, 1059.

¹⁵⁴ *D.E.*, 30.1.42.

several Conservative politicians. Sir John Mellor M.P. questioned the wisdom of Morrison's decision to release the miners and asked him whether he was aware that:

... his release of these three men has created a most unfortunate impression in the country?¹⁵⁵

Mellor gives no evidence to support his argument that there was national disapproval of the Home Secretary's action. One prospective Conservative M.P. from the Midlands went much further than elected politicians dared go when he said:

Without the least hesitation I say I would never have released these men from prison, except for one purpose - to put them against a wall and shoot them.¹⁵⁶

The point that the war was being fought against such attitudes, so prevalent in Nazi Germany, where trade union leaders really were executed for public displays of independence, disobedience and class solidarity, would almost certainly have been lost on this would-be M.P.¹⁵⁷

Absenteeism in the Kent Coalfield.

After the highly publicised events at Betteshanger, the most contentious problem in the Kent coalfield was that of absenteeism. Indeed, this was a nation-wide problem which provoked questions in the House of Commons to Major Gwilym Lloyd George, Minister of Fuel and Power. In response to a question on the average number of shifts worked in each of the coalfields, Lloyd George published the following table, in a written answer:

¹⁵⁵ Hansard, 5th Series, 12 February 1942, 1579-80.

¹⁵⁶ Staffordshire Evening Sentinel, 7.2.42; in *Liberal Magazine*, May-June 1942; in Calder, 436.

¹⁵⁷ For more detailed coverage of this pivotal event in industrial history during the Second World War see, H.M.D. Parker, *Manpower*, London, H.M.S.O., 1957, 460-62 and 468-70; Report of Royal Commission on Trades Unions and Employers' Associations 1965-68 (Donovan Commission), Cmnd.3623; Peter Gillman, "Strike Law 1942", *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 28.2.71; T.W. Emms, "The Betteshanger Coal Strike of 1942", Extended Essay, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1972.

**Average number of Shifts worked per Wage-Earner per week
in the Coal Mining Industry**

	1940	1941	1942	1943(Jan.-Sept.)
Scotland	5.99	5.92	5.88	5.55
Northumberland	5.19	5.14	5.23	5.12
Durham	4.95	5.39	5.39	5.21
S.Wales and Monmouth.	5.22	5.30	5.24	5.03
Yorkshire	5.06	5.16	5.16	4.97
N.Derbyshire	5.32	5.42	5.41	5.15
Nottinghamshire	4.97	5.18	5.18	4.96
S.Derbyshire	5.49	5.62	5.62	5.61
Leicestershire	5.61	5.61	5.54	5.34
Cannock Chase	5.37	5.29	5.28	5.13
Warwickshire	5.14	5.09	5.04	4.90
Lancs. and Cheshire	5.41	5.48	5.43	5.16
N.Staffordshire	5.26	5.21	5.07	4.87
Cumberland	5.60	5.52	5.21	5.30
N.Wales	5.68	5.65	5.57	5.14
S.Staffordshire	5.89	5.83	5.71	5.14
Shropshire	5.59	5.42	5.24	5.02
Bristol	5.77	5.58	5.48	5.33
Forest of Dean	5.51	5.45	5.39	5.02
Somerset	5.58	5.46	5.43	5.32
Kent	5.22	5.12	4.86	4.79
Total average for Great Britain	5.27	5.37	5.33	5.13

Source: Hansard, Official Report, 5th Series: Parliamentary Debates,
1942-43, Vol. 393, 26 October 1943, 55-56.

These statistics show Kent consistently vying for bottom place with areas like Warwickshire and Nottinghamshire. An editorial in *The Times* on 23 September 1942 entitled "The Coal Gap" posed the question as to how many of the absences in the coal industry were avoidable. L.N.Watts, Secretary of the KCOA, wrote to the *Dover Express* giving a statistical breakdown of the absenteeism problem in Kent. His figures were for a seven week period ending on 12 September 1942. The following are his findings:

Sickness and Accidents: 7.6%
 Voluntary Absenteeism: 16.5%

Absences excluding sickness and accidents:

Losing 1 shift per week 30.1%
 Losing 2 shifts per week 13.4%
 Losing 3 shifts per week 7.8%

Days lost:

Mondays 24%
 Tuesdays 14.1%
 Wednesdays 12.0%
 Thursdays 15.1%
 Fridays 16.3%
 Saturdays 17.4%

Absenteeism by age:

14-30yrs. 18.9%
 31-40yrs 16.9%
 41-65yrs 15%

Source: KCOA Statistics in *Dover Express*, 2.10.42.

Watts concludes:

My Association does not propose to comment on these figures, but suggest that they speak for themselves... Needless to say, several hundreds of thousands of tons are being lost annually in this small district by avoidable absenteeism.¹⁵⁸

Saying that he is not going to comment on the figures, thus giving the reader the impression that he is free to give his own interpretation, and then doing exactly the opposite, leading the reader to a desired conclusion, is rather disingenuous of Mr. Watts. What is certainly true is that he offers no *explanation* of the statistics. He fails to mention the universally acknowledged fact that the Kent pits offered some of the most difficult working

¹⁵⁸ *D.E.*, 2.10.42.

conditions in the country. This would certainly account for large numbers of older miners taking time off, often without bothering to see a doctor to get a sick-note. Thus the absence would be recorded as 'unofficial'. And it must be noted that the increase in miners' wages meant that many, particularly the young single miners, could afford not to work a full six shift week. Sunday nights in the local clubs were popular as there was usually music and dancing, and young miners with some spare cash to spend took full advantage of such evenings, hence the high rate of absenteeism among their age group, especially on Mondays. One further point which Watts fails to mention was that Kent miners, due to their coastal position, were also required to perform Fire and Home Guard duties on top of their pit work. Miners in other coalfields were not required to perform such extra duties.

Watts' letter provoked the wrath of Kent miners, and Billy Newman, President of the Tilmanstone branch, wrote an angry and emotional reply:

... We feel convinced that if Mr. Watts, and any other persons who read these statistics knew ... the conditions under which men have to work in the pits, their view with regard to these statistics would be very different from that gained by an uninformed reading... We have a holiday agreement but have not pressed for it to be carried out for three years because of the war situation. The officials, however, have been granted their annual holidays, at least for 1941 and 1942, and they are therefore not morally entitled to refuse requests for time off from the men... It seems to us that the men are justified in taking a holiday ... and ... instead of reducing output, it would result in increased output as the men would be fit and ready for the hardest work.¹⁵⁹

The point concerning holidays is an important one as one of the most common defences for absenteeism forwarded by miners, when facing local magistrates, was exhaustion. The issue rumbled on throughout the war, becoming worse, rather than better, especially as the number of conscripts, *Bevin Boys*, increased. These reluctant miners were notorious for their persistent absenteeism.

¹⁵⁹ D.E., 4.12.42.

Throughout 1943 the Local Sessions at Wingham were busy issuing fines for absenteeism, and the occasional prison sentence. Criticism of this policy came from some Labour M.P.s, such as Manny Shinwell, and from the one Communist M.P., Willie Gallacher. In a debate in the House of Commons on the issue of imprisoned miners, Gallacher made the following caustic comment:

The miners go in and Mosley comes out.¹⁶⁰

As the number of offenders increased, so did the fines, presumably, in an attempt to act as a deterrent. On one occasion a persistent absentee was fined twenty-one pounds, equivalent to one month's wages.¹⁶¹ Correspondence in the local press once again illustrated the intensity of feeling on both sides of the argument. One letter, sure to raise passions, came from a Sergeant F.S. Dunn, an ex-miner who was, at the time of writing, serving in North Africa. He wrote:

... cannot these few slackers (and they are a few) see a little further than their nose, cannot they pull their weight and help shorten this war?... Their hardships are nought compared with the sacrifices the soldier is making for his country.¹⁶²

The *Dover Express* itself adopted a very critical line over the issue. Using highly emotive language it wrote in one of its editorials:

When the war is over, there will be quite a lot of miners returning from facing death on the battlefield, on which so many comrades fell, who will be very candid about those

¹⁶⁰ Hansard, Official Report, 5th Series, Parliamentary Debates, Vol.393, 23.11.43, 1425-26. This comment was a reference to the recent release, on medical grounds, of the fascist leader, Oswald Mosley, imprisoned since May 1940.

¹⁶¹ *D.E.*, 8.10.43.

¹⁶² *D.E.*, 30.7.43.

who stayed at home but did not do their job, and often dodged Fire Guard and Home Guard as well.¹⁶³

The letter from Sergeant Dunn provoked several responses from readers who defended miners' rights to take occasional time off, and who argued that mining was as difficult and as dangerous as soldiering. One particular letter, rich in poetic metaphor and politically astute, came from a certain Albert Beard, himself an ex-miner.

Those who ... fight in that savage, brutal, raw and oftimes bloody front line of those primeval forests of the underground are the only ones in a true position to pass judgement... People who know not this world ... do no service to the battle for coal or its warriors by constantly talking of miners' absenteeism ... they cast a stigma on all miners, and thereby impede and imperil their war effort. Why are not other people's absenteeism given such prominence? Members of Parliament, for instance, coal owners, and editors who write vitriolic editorials on miners' absenteeism.¹⁶⁴

This kind of epistolical battle continued throughout the summer of 1943, and to its credit the *Dover Express*, although clearly expressing its own critical view of miners' absenteeism, allowed equal space to both sides of the argument. One can only wonder to what extent the Kent miners were aware of the debate being conducted, literally above their heads, from the pages of the local 'rag' to the corridors of power in the Houses of Parliament. And, judging by the absenteeism rates, one is entitled to ask just how much the collier actually cared about the finer points of the debate about *his* work practices. As the vast majority of the people involved in the debate had never seen, and were never likely to see, the inside of a coalmine, the miner could justify his behaviour on the simple basis that only he understood the real issues at stake. And for him the issues were a fine balance between an adequate wage packet enabling him and his family to survive, and a fit and able body enabling him to produce the coal. In this sense he

¹⁶³ *D.E.*, 6.8.43.

¹⁶⁴ *D.E.*, 20.8.43.

contradicts Dennis et al.' famous stereotypical characterisation of him as "having no thought for the morrow"¹⁶⁵, as he juggles with future economic and physical needs. But, when this relaxed approach to work practices was threatened by concrete proposals, rather than by newspaper editorials and correspondence, then the miners reacted, and swiftly.

One such proposal was announced by the Ministry of Fuel and Power on 23 September 1943. As a way of increasing coal production, it suggested that on top of the six-shift week, miners should also work one Sunday in four. The MFGB reacted firmly with its own policy document published on 7 October, "Statement of the Mineworker's Federation in Respect of the Proposals of the Ministry of Fuel and Power for Increasing Coal Production."¹⁶⁶ Essentially this was a demand for the government to take full control of the industry, rather than the system of dual control, which currently existed, thus paving the way for nationalisation after the war.

In Kent the miners at Snowdown reacted even more quickly. A mass meeting was held on Sunday 26 September and a declaration unanimously agreed to. The main points of this statement were:

- The Report would "lead to chaos and anarchy, and in no way increase production."
- The Ministry of Fuel and Power must take "operational" and "financial" control of all the mines.
- The immediate direction without discrimination of sufficient personnel to man the mining industry.¹⁶⁷

The prediction of "chaos and anarchy" was potentially a threat of industrial action should the Report be implemented. Certainly the possibility of an occasional seven-shift week being added to the existing six-shift week was very alarming. It must also have aroused a certain amount of mirth among miners who had an average attendance of around five shifts.

¹⁶⁵ Dennis et al., 130.

¹⁶⁶ Robin Page Arnot, *The Miners: One Union, One Industry. A History of the National Union of Mineworkers 1939-46*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979), 78.

¹⁶⁷ D.E., 1.10.43.

The reference to "operational" and "financial" control of the mines was clearly in line with the MFGB policy of nationalisation. Kent's wholehearted support for the policy was in distinct contrast with Leicestershire's at that time. It was also the desire for a small, new and remote coalfield to be recognised and accepted by the larger and historically established coalfields whose political credentials were incontrovertibly time-honoured. The third point of the Snowdown statement, demanding more miners, was a piece of practical advice which the government was already considering and, in fact, which it implemented at the end of 1943 in the form of the *Bevin Boys* scheme. Although, once enacted, it is not sure just how effective this scheme was in producing more coal. One final comment on the Ministry of Fuel and Power's Report: it was quickly shuffled aside. The strength of the antagonism towards the Report felt by the miners was enough to convince the government that it was best forgotten.

Trouble between miners at Betteshanger and Pearson and Dorman Long broke out again, in October 1943. This time the dispute did include Snowdown, and evidence of the miners' concern to carry public opinion with them is shown by their desire to abide by Government regulations concerning industrial disputes. The issue was once again over payments on difficult faces, management at Snowdown having unilaterally taken the decision to reduce the price, agreed in 1927, for ripping sandstone, by 1d. per inch. Management's justification for this reduction was that the stone cut was not always sandstone. At Betteshanger, the problem was over management's decision not to pay for ripping, in narrow headings, from the top of the coal, a practice which had operated, without controversy, for fourteen years.¹⁶⁸ The union branches at Snowdown and Betteshanger issued a joint statement signed by Jack Elks and Edward Lawther. The tone is one of restrained anger and determination that the miners shall not be accused by the government of acting outside the law, and criticised by the general public for acting selfishly and once again threatening the war effort by reducing coal production. The statement begins:

¹⁶⁸ *D.E.*, 22.10.43.

The necessary twenty-one days' notice of the existence of a trade dispute at Snowdown and Betteshanger Collieries has been given to the Ministry of Labour by the Executive Council of the KMWA.

The men at the Collieries are making no demands for better wages or conditions. They are demanding the restoration of payments in accordance with price lists, agreements and customs.¹⁶⁹

Having set the legal position and the men's claims, making it clear that they are nothing more than the continuation of established practices, the statement continues in a rather conciliatory tone.

... The men at both Collieries are embittered because of these violations of agreements, but they have accepted the Executive's advice to continue at work.¹⁷⁰

The KMWA was palpably coming of age in its political awareness and handling of public relations. And it paid off. A meeting between KMWA representatives and management officials to discuss the problem had already taken place, and this was attended by Mr. W.L. Cook, Chief Conciliation Officer from the Ministry of Fuel and Power. A temporary arrangement was arrived at:

That all payments, including arrears be restored and continued in accordance with price lists, agreements and customs, and that any suggested alterations in price lists, agreements or customs are matters to be dealt with by the recognised machinery in the district.¹⁷¹

Citing the above agreement, the KMWA statement makes a final appeal to the good nature and common sense of the public:

¹⁶⁹ *D.E.*, 22.10.43.

¹⁷⁰ *D.E.*, 22.10.43.

¹⁷¹ *D.E.*, 22.10.43.

The Executive Council and all Officials of the Association will do everything in their power to prevent a stoppage of work, and we place the above facts before the public so that, if a stoppage does unfortunately take place, they will know who to blame.¹⁷²

The KMWA was evidently bracing itself for a stoppage and was cleverly trying to close off any possible avenue of criticism or prosecution. The agreement with the management was temporary while talks continued to find a more permanent solution, Pearson and Dorman Long having accepted the principle that the Union should be involved in any long-term decision making. On 5 November the talks collapsed in deadlock and industrial action looked likely. Once again problems in the Kent coalfield were the subject of discussion in the House of Commons. On Tuesday 9 November, Major Lloyd George, replying to a question from Durham miners' M.P., J. Ritson, said:

I am aware of the Betteshanger and Snowdown disputes. My conciliation officer has already met the two parties concerned, and he is meeting them again on the 10 November to help them arrange a satisfactory settlement.¹⁷³

Mr. Ritson, in an attempt to point out the ridiculous nature of the dispute, argued, rhetorically:

Is the Minister aware that there is only a penny an inch difference on this issue? Can we afford to lose 20,000 tons a week? Will he do his best to find a solution as quickly as possible?¹⁷⁴

Lloyd George, not possessing the parliamentary skills of his father, simply replied that he hoped a solution would be found on the 10 November. However, the meeting was postponed for one week, an act which exasperated the KMWA. On the 11 November, it issued

¹⁷² *D.E.*, 22.10.43.

¹⁷³ *Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, 5th Series*, vol. 393, 9 November, 1943, 1061.

¹⁷⁴ *Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, 5th Series*, vol. 393, 9 November, 1943, 1062.

fourteen days notice of its intention to cease working unless a permanent agreement was arrived at. This seems to have concentrated the minds of the Ministry of Fuel and Power, and Mr. Cook was despatched to Kent to negotiate a settlement, immediately. The dispute was settled, and Pearson and Dorman Long were once again forced to back down, accepting all the KMWA demands, which, as stated, were simply to continue normal payment practices.¹⁷⁵ Not a single day was lost through strike action.

It is interesting and relevant to note, in this comparative study of levels of militancy in Kent and Leicestershire, that, throughout the war years, the only time the House of Commons had cause to discuss problems in the latter's coalfield was on 28 October 1943. This was over a prize of four tons of coal being donated by the LCOA to the winner of a *whist drive* at Coalville. Lloyd George was asked whether this was legal, and he replied that he was making enquiries.¹⁷⁶

One further dispute occurred in Kent, at Snowdown, during the war, although the details are rather hazy. On Monday 24 January 1944, miners downed tools in a lightning strike which lasted just two days and involved the whole workforce of 1750 men. The issue, it seems, were the political views of a deputy, although precisely what they were was not reported. By Wednesday 26 January, all the men were back at work. There is no record of what happened to the deputy, but presumably he was told to keep his opinions to himself.¹⁷⁷

Kent was not involved in the pay dispute over the Porter Award which spread throughout Scotland, the North-East, Yorkshire and South Wales, and which constituted the largest and most protracted industrial dispute of the Second World War. This dispute lasted three months from January to April 1944, and coincided with the engineers' and shipbuilders' apprentices' strike on the Tyne and in Belfast. This at the time when the government was hurriedly preparing for the military invasion of France in the summer of 1944.

¹⁷⁵ *D.E.*, 26.11.43.

¹⁷⁶ Hansard, Official Report, 5th Series, Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 393, 28 October, 1943, 400.

¹⁷⁷ *D.E.*, 28.1.44.

Conclusion.

The Second World War provided the Kent miners with the opportunity to flex their industrial muscles in a way they had been unable to do since the end of the First World War. It also helped them to develop and mature their union machinery in the confident knowledge that Kent coal was, for the first time in its short history, needed desperately at whatever cost. The early unsure years of sinking and developing shafts were long gone as was talk of closure, redundancies and short-time working. Pay levels of the pre-1926 period had been restored nationally, and in Kent, exceeded. Indeed, the price of Kent coal, and, consequently the wages paid to its miners, were consistently above the national average.¹⁷⁸ The principle reason for this was the geographical position of the coalfield: proximity to south-eastern markets, particularly the large paper mills and cement factories in the Medway region, and, of course, London. As a result of this, the Kent coal owners enjoyed low transportation costs compared with their colleagues elsewhere in Britain.

Because Kent miners were among the best paid in the country, disputes were not about increasing wages, but maintaining them. Hence the two principle stoppages of January 1942 at Betteshanger, during which the miners took on the owners and the government in unusual circumstances, and won; and the second near strike at Snowdown and Betteshanger in November 1943. Militancy in Kent, which certainly did increase during the Second World War, was totally pecuniary and geographically limited - hence its non-involvement in the wage dispute of 1944. However, one must always bear in mind the insecure backgrounds many of the Kent miners had, and the sub-conscious fear that the good days might not last forever. And, ironically, the war years were "good days" for the miners in general, and for Kent miners in particular. High wages in Kent also seemed to be the natural reward for men who had persisted in working in the most difficult conditions in order to produce the fuel so urgently needed in the "national interest", a phrase very readily invoked whenever the miners looked as though they might down tools. It must also not be forgotten that the Kent coalfield was in the

¹⁷⁸ Johnson, 245.

front-line during the war, and that the miners would have been among the first to fall under the Nazi jackboot, had England been invaded after the fiasco at Dunkirk.

Finally, the KMWA felt a new confidence during this period due to the stability among the workforce, imposed by war regulations, which limited the movement of labour. The comings-and-goings of the 1930s were over and miners and their families were forced to settle down in the increasingly familiar surrounds of south-east Kent. Such stability could only have been beneficial to the union, which was thus able to develop its own identity and its own strengths, based on a regular workforce which was developing its own homogeneity. However, the Kent miners had not forgotten their origins; among other things the local population, aided and abetted by the *Dover Express*, would not let them. And the KMWA did not have a long history to protect when it came to giving up a certain amount of independence in order to be absorbed into the newly formed NUM. Hence, there were not the same anguished debates about loss of identity, and the internal political struggles which occurred in Leicestershire. Kent miners welcomed the formation of a national union, unreservedly, as a way of increasing their sense of inclusiveness. They really were the original "Cinderellas" of the mining industry. But, with the creation of the NUM and the prospect of nationalisation just around the corner, the metaphorical "Palace Ball" looked decidedly glittering to men used only to seeing the colour black, both industrially and politically. Perhaps this hell-hole in the 'Garden of England' might just turn out to be 'Sunshine Corner' after all.

Chapter Five.

The Kent Coalfield - 1945-74: The Golden Age of Community.

The year and the hour which robs us of the fair day warn us not to hope for things to last forever.

Horace, *Odes*, Book 4, No. 7, line 7.

Introduction - Aylesham 1945-60: The Arrival of Community.

The post-war period began *fortuitously* for the Kent coalfield in general, and Aylesham in particular. Pearson and Dorman Long seem to have accepted the principle of nationalisation rather more readily than mineowners elsewhere in Britain. As early as December 1942, they had surrendered a number of leases to mining rights due to the geological and financial difficulties involved in carrying out developments of mineral properties. The government purchased the company's royalties and paid compensation. In August 1945, the Kent Colliery Owner's Association (KCOA) unanimously agreed to:

... place themselves fully at the disposal of the Government, both in connection with the working out of the necessary organisation to be created and in connection with the arrangements which will be necessary to ensure that the transfer from private ownership to the new organisation will be accomplished in a smooth and efficient manner.¹

The reasons for this co-operative attitude are not stated, but the government's extraordinarily generous compensation terms must surely have had some influence. Compensation was set at £164,660,000 nationally, while the three companies operating in Kent: Chislet Colliery, Tilmanstone Holdings and Pearson and Dorman Long were to receive,

¹ KCOA Minutes. 24.12.45; in Johnson, 342.

collectively, £1,094,000.² These terms would have been particularly attractive to the Kent companies as the coalfield had been operating at a loss throughout the whole of the war period. Massive capital investment was required in order to establish the modern mechanised coal faces existing in other coalfields, such as Leicestershire. The Kent companies were clearly not prepared to invest further in what was obviously a difficult coalfield, geologically, and which was showing signs of becoming a difficult coalfield, politically.

At the end of the war the Ministry of Fuel and Power issued a Report on the Kent coalfield.³ The purpose of this survey was twofold: to consider the present and future positions of the Kent coalfield with a view to seeing what needed to be done in terms of mechanisation and to decide whether new sinkings were required, and, secondly, to look at the provision of housing and social amenities for the mining community.

As far as the first objective is concerned the Report predicted a life-span of one hundred years for the Kent coalfield. This was calculated on the basis that there were probably about a thousand million tons of coal in Kent being worked out at a rate of ten million tons per year. Some predictions, however, put the total of unworked coal at 3000 million tons, thus giving the coalfield a life-span of three hundred years.⁴ These predictions were, as we now know, wildly optimistic, and were made at a time when coal was considered worth getting no matter what the difficulty or cost involved. However, the authors of the Report would surely have been stupefied had they been informed that the Kent coalfield would be closed down within two generations, before even half a century had passed. And that, not for reasons of exhaustion, but ostensibly for economic factors.

One of the problems restricting output, the Report concluded, was the lack of mechanisation. The blame for this was not put upon the mineowners for lack of investment, but on the geological nature of the coalfield:

² *Dover Express (D.E.)*, 23.12.49.

³ Great Britain, Ministry of Fuel and Power, *The Kent Coalfield: Regional Survey Report* (London: HMSO, 1945).

⁴ *Kent Report*, 28.

... the undulating character of the seams in Kent and the faults and variations in thickness in the seams (excepting Beresford...) invites caution before adopting a policy of complete mechanisation.⁵

It also went on to say that even if mechanisation was introduced, there could be problems as the miners would have to accept lower rates of pay per ton due to the resultant increase in output. The authors tread very carefully here, not wishing to pre-empt any industrial action, for which Kent was beginning to earn a reputation.

Concerning housing and the general social conditions of the mining communities, the Report is rather scathing, particularly about Aylesham. Estimating that about seventy per cent of miners lived in mining villages in Kent, it describes those villages, singling out Aylesham, as being "monotonous" characterised by a "sense of isolation" similar to the pit villages of Durham and South Wales.⁶ The solution proposed by the Report was to build more houses, not in the existing communities, but on the outskirts of towns like Dover and Canterbury. This would result in a mixing of the various populations bringing miners and their families into contact with ancillary workers, and even, perhaps, other social classes. This, of course, was Archibald and Abercrombie's original stated objective, but they had wished that such mixing and dilution of the social classes would occur *within* the village of Aylesham, with its originally projected population of 30-40,000.⁷ In 1945, however, when the Report was published, expansion, not contraction, of the Kent coalfield was planned, and social engineering through housing schemes was *de rigueur* in this new world of the "People's Britain".

The political constituency of Dover and Deal, which, of course, included most of the Kent coalfield (Chislet was part of the constituency of Canterbury) reflected the national mood of the nation in the General Election following the end of the war in Europe. For the first time in its history, this south-eastern tip of Britain returned a Labour member in what was a straight two-horse race between the Conservatives and the Labour Party. The results were:

⁵ *Kent Report*, 30.

⁶ *Kent Report*, 35.

⁷ Archibald and Abercrombie, *Preliminary Survey*, 46.

J.R. Thomas (Labour)	17,373
Major J. Arbuthnot (Conservative)	15,691.

Turnout: 73%.

Source: *Dover Express*, 27 July 1945.

Part of the explanation for Dover and Deal choosing a Labour representative for the first time must be the presence of over five thousand miners and their families, many of them voting for the first time in Kent. Thomas' political career is noteworthy for its mundaneness. A loyal Party man, he seems only to have stirred slight interest by his continual refusal ever to share a public platform with Communist Party candidates. He obviously shared the 'Red Scare' paranoia prevalent in right-wing Labour circles at that time.

The Report on the Kent coalfield provoked a flurry of activity within the Kent County Council, especially as far as the future of Aylesham was concerned. A Planning Committee was initiated, under the direction of Patrick Abercrombie, who, from the conclusions in the Committee's Report, published in February 1946, was clearly still trying to rescue something from his original plans for Aylesham. The KCC Report noted serious problems in the development of the mining community:

... from the planning, economic and sociological point of view, [it is] an unbalanced community ... the settlement suffers from arrested development, with many of the sites in the centre of the town still rough grassland.⁸

Abercrombie's personal feelings about Aylesham and his thwarted goal of a 'garden city' for Kent's coalminers are not recorded. One can only surmise as to the sense of frustration he must have felt when he looked at his original plans for Aylesham town and saw the reality of an unfinished, overgrown mining village, in 1946. The KCC Report was generally long on criticism but short on solutions, the Planning Committee members clearly being aware of the

⁸ Kent County Council: *Report of the Planning Committee*, (Kent: February 1946). Details in *D.E.* 22.2.46.

financial restraints and shortage of building materials in the immediate aftermath of the war. However, it did say:

... an attempt should be made to convert Aylesham into a properly balanced community.⁹

As a way of achieving this the KCC Report's authors suggested that Aylesham could be used as an 'overspill' for the rapidly increasing number of London commuters. Thus was born an idea which survived for several years, occasionally looking as though it may come to fruition, before being finally frustrated, just as the original concept of Aylesham had been.

In its attempts to "balance the community" of Aylesham, Kent County Council and more particularly the Eastry Rural District Council (ERDC), within whose boundaries Aylesham lay, tried to attract light industry to the village. This would achieve several goals at once: it would provide employment prospects for the female population and for those men who were unable to work at the colliery. Thus the community would receive a form of economic stability in the shape of a second wage packet in many households. New industry would also add a different dimension to the complexion of the village, and if there were enough factory jobs then Aylesham would eventually cease to be a single occupational community. And, whether they realised it or not, the council planners, by inviting other industries into Aylesham, would be responsible for a watering-down of the community's industrial and political cohesion. The story and reputation of the Kent coalfield could have been so very different.

In March 1946, the Clerk to the ERDC received a planning application for a factory site at Aylesham from a London company, I. Miller and Co.¹⁰ The company manufactured children's clothes and would provide employment for about three hundred women and a small number of men. However, although ERDC approved the application, the company never arrived as there was no appropriate standing building and it was not prepared to invest in constructing one. A meeting of the Dover and District Local Employment Committee in March

⁹ D.E. 22.2.46.

¹⁰ D.E. 22.3.46.

1947, discussed the nature of the employment problem at Aylesham. Mr. Hale, Secretary of the Committee, said that they often received enquiries from London firms concerning Aylesham, but the difficulty was always the lack of existing utilities.¹¹ Added to this difficulty was the larger question of how the Kent coalfield would develop. In February 1947, the East Kent Joint Planning Committee had said it was unable to make a recommendation on the future planning of Aylesham until it had a clearer idea of the prospects for Kent coal. Various projects for Aylesham had been mooted which would have increased the population to around 20,000, and in one plan to 45,000. A population of 20,000 was suggested as the minimum needed to displace coalmining as the predominant industry.¹²

Light industry did arrive in Aylesham in 1947 in the shape of a shirt factory owned by Rego Clothiers Ltd. Based in Edmonton, London, the company was suffering from a labour shortage and therefore proposed transferring to Aylesham, bringing its own building along.¹³ Desperate to get this contract, ERDC offered to charge Rego an annual ground rent of only twenty pounds. Not surprisingly the company accepted the terms and promised jobs for around 250 women and a very small, unspecified, number of men.¹⁴ The company was in production by November 1948, the site chosen being a piece of wasteland on the outskirts of the village behind the railway station. The Rego shirt factory remained the principle employer of Aylesham's female population right up to the late 1960s. Although it changed hands several times, it was always known as Rego's. It also became an alternative source of social entertainment to the working men's clubs. Dances, various kinds of competitions and other social evenings were organised on a weekly basis in the factory canteen, and there were regular works outings. Kath Henderson, one of the first supervisors in the factory, was also secretary of its social club:

¹¹ *D.E.* 21.3.47.

¹² *D.E.* 7.2.47.

¹³ *D.E.* 16.5.47.

¹⁴ *D.E.* 23.5.47.

We had a good social club ... and we used to have lots of outings to London ... and to Southend and to Chatham ... we also had these social nights down there ... dances and that down there, we had some good nights down there as well.¹⁵

Apart from the obvious financial advantages it gave to the Aylesham women, the Rego factory also gave them an outlet. The women's domain had traditionally been the private domain - the family house; and their only social outings, within the village, were to the shops or to the working men's clubs, when their husbands took them. No woman who cared about her reputation would enter such a place alone. With the arrival of the Rego factory women had a place of work which they could call their own and with which they clearly identified - they were known as the 'Rego girls'. And it provided them with a social base to which men were *invited*, on occasions. Otherwise it was 'women only'. Comparisons with men and mining would be more than a little exaggerated, but what is clear is that now the women could and did 'talk shop', and *did, albeit subconsciously, develop a sense of their own working-class imagery*. What was missing was an *organised* workforce with a high level of union activity. This is an area of research beyond the remit of this study, but one which may provide useful pointers to students of women's role in the workplace and their levels of class consciousness and self-imagery.

Following the ending of the war and the election of a Labour government with an unprecedented majority, the Kent miners, like their colleagues throughout Britain, eagerly awaited nationalisation. However, there were early signs that the Labour Party in government *might not be as radical and as sympathetic to the miners as it was in opposition*. Manny Shinwell, that most militant of 'Clydesiders' during the 1920s, and ardent and outspoken supporter of the miners throughout the 1930s and the war years, now found himself, in 1945, shackled by the responsibility of *actual* power. In June 1946, he visited the Kent coalfield as Minister of Fuel and Power, and spoke to the Betteshanger miners. The tone of his language is remarkable for its sudden moderation and willingness to criticise the miners:

¹⁵ *Sunshine Corner*, 1995.

He, as their Minister, had to answer to the House of Commons and to the public for the miners' occasional misdeeds. When there was the need he had defended them, and would continue to do so, but on the other hand, when there was an occasion to speak to them in a forthright fashion he would do so without fear or favour.¹⁶

The patronising tone of his language towards the miners is unmistakeable, and indeed, only a Labour politician could have got away with addressing them in such a way, to their faces. Compare Shinwell's unmitigated respect for politicians with the contempt he shows for them in an earlier speech, to the TUC Annual Congress, in 1919:

... this huge Congress of labour possesses as much capacity and more creative genius than the ... mediocrities assembled at Westminster.¹⁷

The miners, post-1945, were being prepared for a form of nationalisation which would fall short of their desired objectives. Many of the rank-and-file were aware of the situation, as this letter from a Tilmanstone collier, Fred Pepper, illustrates:

The key to Britain's economic recovery is buried deep beneath our soil ... That the industry is a dying concern is a well-known fact, what is not so well known is the effect years of capitalist mismanagement has had on the physical condition of the men... The Government would do well to remember that buying the industry is not sufficient to get the coal we need now... A grand opportunity to gain the miners' confidence is being lost ... Don't let him be made to feel he is still under the same or similar bosses.¹⁸

This miner's insight into the condition of the economy and the mining industry is remarkable, as is his foresight regarding the feelings of the miners under nationalisation. Within a few short months of Vesting Day, miners throughout the country felt that nothing had really

¹⁶ *D.E.* 7.6.46.

¹⁷ Cliff and Gluckstein, 82.

¹⁸ *D.E.* 12.7.46.

changed, except, perhaps, a few names on office doors. If the government and the NUM had really wanted a radical change in how the mining industry was to be managed, they would have done well to have listened to the views of miners like Fred Pepper. However, all miners, including Pepper, were in favour of the government's plans for nationalisation rather than no nationalisation at all. A resolution passed by the Snowdown branch of the Kent NUM in December 1946, demonstrates the nervous excitement felt by the miners on the eve of nationalisation:

We, the miners of Snowdown ... wish to place on record our appreciation of the efforts of the whole labour movement, and especially the efforts of the miners of the past, who began the struggle for Socialism, which is now beginning to bear fruit in the mining industry ... we are determined to be on guard against any attempt to sabotage this experiment and to continue the struggle until the final victory of Socialism.¹⁹

Recognition of past miners' battles to establish a Socialist society is a form of heroic history which does not bear too much investigation if the Snowdown miners' illusions are to be safeguarded. This study, so far, has shown how little grand ideological overviews of how society should be, played on the minds of miners in their disputes with governments and coalowners. Day to day issues such as working conditions and shift rates were far more to the fore. Furthermore, the Snowdown Branch resolution's insistence that this "experiment" in nationalisation was a step in the right direction towards Socialism sounds more like an attempt at self-delusion than genuine conviction in what is being proclaimed. What is certain, however, is that miners regarded the criticism of nationalisation, in what ever form it was established, as a threat to their own chances of improving conditions and wages. Consequently, nationalisation was welcomed in Kent, as it was throughout the whole of the British coalfield, as a significant advance towards a better deal for *miners*, if not, actually, for society at large.

As at other pits on Vesting Day, Snowdown chose its oldest miner to hoist the NCB flag. His name was Sam Pritchard and he had arrived in Aylesham, from South Wales, in 1934.

¹⁹ D.E. 3.1.47.

Some people may have thought this honour should have been afforded Jack Elks who was one of the oldest Kent miners, having started at Snowdown in January 1913. He had also served the miners long and well as Secretary of the KMWA and then the NUM Kent Area. However, he showed no hint of bitterness when he spoke with elation of how he had "longed for this day."²⁰

With nationalisation the Kent coalfield came under the South Eastern Divisional Coal Board with its head offices at Richborough, Sandwich, formerly the offices of Pearson and Dorman Long. On Vesting Day, Ebby Edwards raised the flag at the new NCB offices, and in his speech he struck a note of political enthusiasm combined with realistic caution:

All in the industry ... had the task of making nationalisation an economic success. It would not be easy. They would still have to go to the pits, coal would still be black, and geological and transport difficulties would still exist, but with harmony based on interest and efficiency nothing could prevent the industry being a success.²¹

The members of the NCB South Eastern Board were: Rear Admiral H.R.M. Woodhouse (independent Chairman); E.L. Chiverton (Production Director); A.E. Cogden (Marketing Director); G.M. Fotheringham (Finance Director); and G.W. Twigger (Labour Director), one of Kent's original union agitators and contemporary of Elks. Pronouncements from both Woodhouse and Chiverton gave Kent miners hope and a sense of security, as they made it clear that not only did the Kent coalfield have a promising future with the four existing pits, but that there was every likelihood of at least one, and possibly as many as three, new pits being sunk in Kent.²²

In November 1947, Chiverton presented NCB plans for the Kent coalfield to a meeting of the Trades Council in Deal. He suggested various methods for increasing productivity, including mechanisation and replacement of old machinery, as well as the sinking of two new pits: one, just a couple of miles west of Betteshanger, the other, five miles north of Dover.

²⁰ *D.E.* 10.1.47.

²¹ *D.E.* 10.1.47.

²² *D.E.* 3.1.47.

Everything depended upon an NCB survey on the viability of new pits, now underway.²³ Boring actually began at Sheperdswell, near the old Guilford Colliery, in March 1948. A private company, Richardson, Timmins and Co. of Bletchley, was hired, and it followed to the letter the advice given by Arthur Burr, in 1908, to the Kent Collieries Ltd:

My gratuitous advice would be for the directors of the Kent Collieries Ltd. to suspend operations on their Dover pits ... and to put down a pair of shafts alongside the railway about half-way between Lydden and Ropersole.²⁴

It had taken some time for Burr's advice to be accepted partly because of his personal reputation as a bankrupt and a fraudster.²⁵

Tests to examine the extent and quality of Kent coal continued throughout 1948, another borehole being sunk at Littlebourne, near Canterbury. However, the NCB announced that this borehole and the one at Sheperdswell were not preliminaries to sinking new shafts, but were solely to test the coal reserves at Snowdown and Chislet. An NCB spokesman said that if there were to be new shafts they would probably be sunk at East Langdon, four miles inland from Dover, and at Wingham, three miles east of Canterbury.²⁶

Disputes in the Kent coalfield were relatively rare in the post-war/nationalisation period, although the miners were becoming increasingly confident of their new political and industrial position. In March 1948, there was a two-day unofficial strike at Snowdown over non-payment of allowances, such as the allowance for working in water. The dispute was settled in the miners' favour,²⁷ but two weeks later, at the beginning of April, there was another stoppage, again unofficial. This time it was the haulage men, who had not struck in March, but

²³ D.E. 21.11.47.

²⁴ D.E. 12.3.48.

²⁵ Full details of Burr's financial dealings are contained in a very damning document: Kent Coal Concessions Ltd., *Fiasco - The Part Played by One Arthur Burr*. No date is given for this document but I would place it around 1910. The original is held at the *Dover Express* offices. Its sub-heading is also very interesting: *A Strictly Private, Privileged and Confidential Communication for Shareholders in Kent Coal Concessions, Ltd. and Allied Companies and Syndicates only*.

²⁶ D.E., 4.2.49.

²⁷ D.E. 26.3.48.

had been unable to work while the faceworkers were out, and had not been paid even though they had turned up for work. The dispute was also settled in their favour.²⁸

In May 1948, the Kent miners held a May Day rally in Dover. The speeches were unusually critical of nationalisation in the form it had been implemented. T. Wall, from Snowdown, was reported by the *Dover Express*:

... it was not the nationalisation he had expected, but it was a step in the right direction. They had a very small share in the management of the collieries through the Consultative Committees and that power would certainly have to be augmented before they got some things done in the pits which they wanted done.²⁹

The kind of improvements Snowdown miners wanted were specifically related to the terrible dust problem which caused silicosis in so many Aylesham men. Kent coal, and Snowdown Colliery in particular, was notorious for its dust, but management made good use of it, selling it to industry, largely for cement and paper making.³⁰ Coal dust, an inevitable product of coal getting, could be controlled through the use of water sprays on the cutting machines. However, management were unpersuaded of the necessity for this investment as they did not readily accept the relation between coal dust and silicosis.

Other speeches at the May Day rally also criticised the method of nationalising the coal industry until Jack Elks, now elder statesman of the Kent Coalfield, put a stop to such attacks by warning the miners of the possibility of a "return to the bad old days."³¹ Jack Dunn, who had transferred to Betteshanger Colliery, and was earning himself a reputation as a young radical, made an overtly political speech about the current international tensions. Refusing to criticise the Soviet Union, he argued that the threat of war came from "the satellites of Wall Street."³²

²⁸ *D.E.* 9.4.48.

²⁹ *D.E.* 7.5.48.

³⁰ William Ashworth, *The History of the British Coal Industry. Volume 5, 1946-1982: The Nationalised Industry*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 19.

³¹ *D.E.*, 7.5.48.

³² *D.E.*, 7.5.48.

A comrade, and one with, potentially, real power, was Arthur Horner, General Secretary of the NUM (1946-59) and a member of the Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Horner was in Kent speaking to the general meeting of the NUM Kent Area (KNUM) on Sunday 20 June 1948, at Deal Odeon Theatre. Addressing the miners in very moderate terms, he defended nationalisation in its present form, even though he had refused Walter Citrine's place on the NCB when the latter had left, in 1947, to join the British Electricity Authority. Horner argued that mass unemployment had been avoided because the mines, working at a loss, were now in the hands of the State which recognised the need for coal over and above the profit motive. And he praised the moderate complicity of the miners while acknowledging the Samson-like enormity of their potential power:

Had they used the law of supply and demand as it was used against them between the wars, when miners were ten a penny, stood on street corners and were bought dirt cheap, their wages might be £20 a week minimum... They could have pulled the temple down but chose not to. They did not hold the country to ransom, but sought reforms years overdue.³³

Later, on the same day, Horner spoke in much less restrained tones when he delivered a speech to a Communist Party meeting at Dover Co-Operative Hall. His theme was the international situation and his ideas were much the same as Jack Dunn's. Dunn was also present at the meeting. Horner warned against Britain being manipulated into a war, arguing that she would be "... the aircraft carrier for a war waged by another nation."³⁴ Communist sympathy among Kent miners was never very widespread, but in the hysteria of the period, industrial workers involved in strike action were often accused of having been infiltrated by communists. This was particularly the case with the dockers in the summer of 1948, whose strike over wage rates provoked the Government to call in the troops, invoking the 1920

³³ D.E., 25.6.48.

³⁴ D.E., 25.6.48.

Emergency Powers Act for the first time since the 1926 General Strike. Even Nye Bevan was moved to declare:

It would be prudent to have wide powers in order to deal with any trouble that might arise if relations between troops and strikers become strained.³⁵

There was widespread belief that this industrial action was communist inspired and consequently the Kent miners did themselves no good at all, in the eyes of the moderate British public, when their Area Council passed the following resolution:

That this Executive Council of the Kent Area national Union of Mineworkers Expresses its support for the dockers in their efforts to secure a more humane and Socialist approach to their grievances, and further expresses its dismay at the Labour Government's support for the present outmoded ideas of discipline.

We also wish to remind Mr. Attlee that it is still necessary to fight capitalists in this country, and calls upon the workers to increase their efforts to eradicate capitalism and capitalist elements from their industries.³⁶

The resolution had been carried unanimously just three days after the Emergency Powers Act had been enforced by royal proclamation. The Kent miners were clearly showing a sense of the class solidarity that would become their hallmark in later years. They also had an intelligent critical awareness of the Labour Government's reversion to traditionally Conservative methods of ruling the country in the face of industrial unrest. Thus, by 1948, the mould for the Kent miners' subsequent reputation for militancy stretching beyond the bounds of their own region and, indeed, their own industry, was beginning to be set. W.S. Fisher, Secretary of the Dover Labour Party, attempted to brush aside the Kent resolution as being largely irrelevant, arguing that:

³⁵ K.O. Morgan, *Labour in Power, 1945-1951*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 375.

³⁶ KNUM Minutes, 30.6.48.

The Executive Committee was composed mostly of Communist Party members. Since that time elections for the Executive Committee have taken place and now ... comprises a majority of Labour Party members... the miners of Kent deserve all praise for the loyal way in which they have supported this Government and the war-time Coalition Government.³⁷

Fisher's attempt to reclaim the Kent miners from an 'unpatriotic' political creed is both patronising and ignorant of recent history. The industrial record of the Kent (Betteshanger) miners during the war was still fresh in most people's minds, even if Fisher was practising selective amnesia, and it was not one of unbroken national loyalty. But his accusations of communist infiltration were quickly laid bare by two correspondents to the *Dover Express*. The first is from Fred Pepper, evidently a keen epistler, and a member of the KNUM Executive Council:

I wish to correct Mr. Fisher's statement regarding the composition of the Executive Council which, as he should know, had a Labour majority. I would remind Mr. Fisher that any system of thought which sets forth by flouting facts, leads to a swamp of contradictions and can have no future. There is plenty of scope for local Labour leaders, who must learn to direct constructive criticism at the Government to get the kind of Britain we voted for.³⁸

The second missive is from an H.C.G. Wright, a miner living in Dover, who writes succinctly and with a certain authority that indicates that he knew what he was talking about:

On 30 June last, the exact number of persons within the Kent Miners' Executive Committee holding Communist Party cards, happened to be two.³⁹

³⁷ *D.E.*, 23.7.48.

³⁸ *D.E.*, 30.7.48.

³⁹ *D.E.*, 30.7.48.

Fisher's comments had clearly stirred feelings among miners who would, perhaps, not mind being called communists, if it were true, but who were not prepared to accept distortions of reality. This has been a characteristic of miners for a very long time, and Fisher really ought to have known that he would not be allowed to get away with such unfounded allegations.

By the end of 1948 rumours were rife that Betteshanger Colliery would close despite the fact that it was the largest producer in the Kent Coalfield, regularly meeting its monthly production target of 11,500 tons, the only Kent pit to do so. NCB figures for 1947 show the poor financial situation of the Kent Coalfield. There was a loss of 7/6d per ton, and at Betteshanger this amounted to a deficit of £300,000 for the year. Average weekly wages in Kent were £6-18s-9d, and the number of Kent miners on the books on Vesting Day was 6,357. Their average OMS (output per manshift) was 0.93 tons compared with the national average of 1.07 tons. The highest average was in the East Midlands with 1.53 tons. Absenteeism in Kent was still the highest in the country, although tonnage lost through industrial disputes was the lowest.⁴⁰

The specific problem was, ironically, that it was producing large amounts of coal. It was one of the best equipped mines in the country, hundreds of thousands of pounds having been invested in new machinery. Furthermore, Betteshanger did not suffer from the same geological faults and narrow seams as found at the other three Kent pits. Consequently, Betteshanger miners were the highest paid in the country with average weekly wages of between eight and nine pounds. The NCB insisted it could not support such high labour costs and demanded a new, more realistic, revised price list in line with the new mechanised faces. Negotiations began after the annual August holiday, the 'miners' fortnight', and Rear Admiral Woodhouse announced that there was:

... always a definite possibility of closure in the event of the negotiations breaking down.⁴¹

⁴⁰ NCB Annual Report, 1947.

⁴¹ D.E., 17.9.48.

But, at the beginning of November, at the annual dinner of the Deal Chamber of Trade, Woodhouse praised the quantity and quality of Betteshanger coal, and said he was determined to save the colliery from closure.⁴² Meanwhile, arbitration continued throughout the months of November and December and into the New Year, a decision, rather than an agreement, being announced at the end of March 1949. This decision meant cuts of up to four pounds a week for Betteshanger miners, the NCB arguing:

... that increased production resulting from mechanisation had been offset by considerably increased earnings of face-workers still operating on a price list designed to meet conditions before mechanisation.⁴³

Immediately after the NCB decision was announced, the Betteshanger miners began a 'go-slow', thereby reducing both production and labour costs. But, this was not the solution the NCB had wished for. It wanted to maintain the high production levels. Consequently, on 15 April 1949, 'Good Friday', the NCB issued fourteen days' notice to 2,300 Betteshanger miners thus indicating its intention to close the colliery. The miners, faced with a straight choice of cuts in wages or no wages at all, and with no support forthcoming from the local or national union, voted to end the 'go-slow' and accept the NCB offer. As a result the notices were withdrawn and talk of closure was ended, for the meantime.⁴⁴

The financial situation for the Kent Coalfield began, slowly, to improve after nationalisation. The NCB Report for 1948 showed coal production in Kent up by 9.8 per cent over the 1947 figures, while the national average was only a 5.6 per cent increase. OMS figures for Kent also showed an increase, 11.1 per cent, while only 0.3 per cent of coal was lost through disputes, still the lowest figure in Britain, equal with the Midlands. Absenteeism in Kent remained high at 13 per cent, the national average being 11.5 per cent. But even this was down from the 1947 high of 16.4 per cent. The financial loss for the Kent Coalfield for 1948

⁴² D.E., 12.11.48.

⁴³ D.E., 22.4.49.

⁴⁴ D.E., 29.4.49.

was £229,511, compared with £490,526 for 1947.⁴⁵ And, in July 1949, an NCB half-yearly report showed a small, but significant, profit of £2,252 for the first quarter of that year.⁴⁶ The NCB Chairman, Viscount Hyndley, was in Dover in July 1949, for a meeting with NCB and NUM representatives of the Kent Coalfield. He spoke about the improved situation in Kent, adding:

. . . there is no doubt that this coalfield has an immense geographical advantage in the markets of south-east England.⁴⁷

A breakdown of the market for Kent coal shows just how true this comment was:

South Eastern Railways	16%	General industry	8.5%
Electricity	19%	Non-industrial	4.5%
Gas	8%	Domestic	2.5%
Paper mills	21.5%	Miscellaneous	3.5%
Cement	16.5%		

Source: Press Statement, NCB South Eastern Division, 31 January 1949.

Kent coal was totally confined to markets in Kent, Surrey, Sussex and, of course, London. Transportation costs were therefore at a minimum in comparison with those in other coalfields.

On the subject of absenteeism, the veteran union leader, Jack Elks, spoke frankly and fearlessly at the meeting with Hyndley, although somewhat tardily, given the recent Betteshanger experience:

... regarding absenteeism, with Snowdown pit three thousand feet deep, if the men sometimes preferred to go and pick a few cherries who could blame them?... I hope we shall carry on in the future and there will be a profit made and things will go evenly and

⁴⁵ NCB, *Annual Report*, 1948.

⁴⁶ *D.E.*, 29.7.49.

⁴⁷ *D.E.*, 22.7.49.

smoothly, not that we are going to allow you in any shape or form to touch the wages or conditions of the workmen in this coalfield.⁴⁸

The reference to cherry-picking was neither a joke nor a metaphor. Coal production dropped as absenteeism rose in converse relation to each other during the month of September when fruit pickers were needed in the Kent orchards.

Elk's long term as General Secretary of the Kent miners' union came to an end on Sunday 30 April 1950, when he officially retired, aged sixty-five. Tragically, he hardly had the time to get out of his 'pit black' and to remove the mascara-like effect, permanently under working miners' eyes, when he died on Tuesday 2 May.⁴⁹

A potentially serious dispute occurred at Snowdown Colliery less than one week after Elks' death. On Monday 8 May, fourteen miners walked out in a lightning strike over the always thorny issue of allowance payments. Pursuing their hard-line policy the NCB issued the following statement:

"At Snowdown Colliery fourteen colliers walked out of the pit on Monday, contrary to agreement. In accordance with the usual practice in such cases, the Manager issued fourteen days' notice to the fourteen men."⁵⁰

On Wednesday, the afternoon shift held a meeting and decided, out of solidarity with the sacked miners, not to go down the shaft unless the dismissal notices were withdrawn. The management met with the union leaders and said it was prepared to discuss the matter, providing the men went back to work. On Thursday the men agreed to go back and on Friday the dismissal notices were withdrawn. But, the men did not get what they wanted concerning the allowance payments, and they had lost four shifts pay. It is evident that the management was determined to head off any militant tendency in the Kent Coalfield using its own tough and uncompromising tactics. With the whole coalfield in such a precarious position, the miners did

⁴⁸ *D.E.*, 22.7.49.

⁴⁹ *D.E.*, 5.5.50.

⁵⁰ *D.E.*, 12.5.50.

not take threats of closure lightly. And yet conversely, almost perversely, management still spoke about the desperate need for Kent coal, and even the likelihood of opening new pits. At a meeting between management and men in Dover Town Hall on 29 July 1950, the new Minister of Fuel and Power, Philip Noel-Baker, spoke in grandiose terms about the international importance of miners:

Every extra ton of coal that you give us will help stop a Third World War, will help to make our own future secure and will pave the way for peace and prosperity for all mankind.⁵¹

Such patronising language would not have impressed the Kent miners who, by 1950, were more inclined to believe in contraction, rather than expansion, of the Kent Coalfield. However, the NCB *Plan for Coal* in 1950 did envisage a long and prosperous future for Kent coal. Nine million pounds was proposed for investment in sinking a new shaft, the site yet to be determined, and the new pit to be working by 1965. This would increase the annual output in Kent from 1.6 million tons of saleable coal to 2.5 million. The NCB *Plan* concluded:

In Kent there are good reserves of special coals for which the demand is strong. The seams are inconsistent and mining conditions are difficult. But the coalfield has a big geographical advantage, for it is near to markets which can only be supplied at a high transport cost from other coalfields.⁵²

With such mixed messages coming from the NCB at local and national level, it is hard to imagine how an independent homogeneous union, with its own identity and political reputation, could develop. But this is precisely what happened in all of the Kent collieries, and especially at Snowdown Colliery, where what happened in the Branch union and in the village of Aylesham were largely interrelated.

⁵¹ *D.E.*, 4.8.50.

⁵² NCB *Plan for Coal*, 1950; in *D.E.*, 17.11.50.

The relative stability and prosperity of the Snowdown miners, relative to the past and to other regions, translated into a village community enjoying the benefits. With the workforce stabilised, by the war restrictions, the women, as well as the men, began to form longer-lasting and more meaningful relationships. And, of course, as the children grew up and married, ties with previous areas of origin loosened and memories faded. Preserving the local colliery, Snowdown, the only real source of employment for young men, and improving social and recreational facilities within the village, became the prime concerns for both men and women.

The predominant features of Aylesham, which were both its 'problem' and its 'saving-grace', as far as its socio-political development was concerned, was its status as a single-occupational community and its very real physical isolation. Much discussion took place at parish and county council level as to how these features could be altered in order to make Aylesham more 'attractive'. We have seen, already, how attempts were made to attract light industry into the village, resulting in the Rego shirt factory. But this could hardly be said to have altered the economic and demographic constitution of Aylesham. As for the village's isolation, proposals were put forward to build a road to the B2046, which was the main road linking Wingham with the A2 Dover-Canterbury-London route, and which by-passed Aylesham. It is remarkable that Aylesham had been built with only one exit road. This intensified the sense of apartness felt by its people, and the post-war discussions about ending this sense of isolation appear to have been somewhat half-hearted on both sides of the social divide. The Dover Employment Committee, meeting in June 1950, concluded that:

Aylesham was almost isolated as far as heavy road traffic was concerned and road transport counted a lot in modern industry.⁵³

But in the same month the Kent County Council decided not to build a new road due to expense and lack of materials. At a Council meeting in Maidstone on 8 November 1950, James W.R. Adams, the County Planning Officer, described Aylesham in the following, disparaging, terms:

⁵³ *D.E.*, 23.6.50.

Aylesham is, from the planning, economic and sociological point of view, an unbalanced community. It comprises, almost exclusively, miners and their families and has a most depressing effect on all who have to live there or visit the place.⁵⁴

This description encapsulated external social attitudes towards Aylesham and helped to define the village residents' own negative ideas about their community. Joe Mather, an Aylesham miner, wrote:

... the town has a depressing effect and there is an air of neglect about the whole place... It is not a town, it is a dump for miners.⁵⁵

And another resident miner made this very astute comment:

We in Aylesham are the guinea-pigs for muddling social experimenters.⁵⁶

Such bitterness, such resentment, at being deliberately treated as second class citizens was widespread in Aylesham and hardened attitudes to outsiders, 'meddlers'. Only miners and their families could be expected to understand the social dynamics of the community and only they could be entrusted to have the well-being of the village at heart. In this sense, Aylesham miners in particular, although not miners in general, could be said to fit in with the Duke of Edinburgh's definition of fishermen and their communities, in 1883:

In no section of our population is heredity of occupation so rigidly preserved as amongst our fishermen; they are a class apart, intermarrying, having their own peculiar customs, modes of life and thought, and mixing but little with people outside their own little communities.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *D.E.*, 10.11.50.

⁵⁵ *D.E.*, 17.11.50.

⁵⁶ *D.E.*, 24.11.50.

⁵⁷ Trevor Lummis. *Occupation and Society: The East Anglian Fishermen 1880-1914*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 73.

This was certainly the experience of Aylesham residents by 1950. The reputation of the village as closed and a "rough sort of place" had been imposed from without but internalised by the inhabitants so that, true or false, it became 'reality'. In his attempt to define 'community', and related industrial action, Lummis worries that:

... what the concept of community lacks is a satisfactory link between the industrial values of the workplace and their transfer to the residential milieu.⁵⁸

In fact, Lummis is too narrow in his search for a definition of 'community' when he looks only to the occupation of the men within a delimited geographical and occupational area. While men's shared work experience will determine relationships beyond the place of work, women live daily within the construct and feel both the physical and psychological restrictions placed upon them by external factors. In the example of mining villages, Aylesham is a 'classic' case, the construct 'community' being as much an external definition as it is internal. The reputation of Aylesham was initially imposed from without, and then lived up to from within. This must also be born in mind when considering levels of militancy/moderacy with reference to the reputations of Aylesham/Coalville.

While attempts to improve Aylesham's contact with the outside world were thwarted at each turn, there were achievements in improving the conditions and facilities within the village, most notably in the areas of housing and education.

The halcyon days of the late 1920s and early 1930s, when miners could pick any house they wanted were long gone. Without any sense of irony or sarcasm, Keith Owen, an ex-miner, speaks about the waiting list for a house in Aylesham in the 1940s and early 1950s:

If you wanted a council house ... there wasn't a big problem in getting one; you'd only have to wait eighteen months, two years, and you could get a house in the village.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Lummis, 76.

⁵⁹ Sunshine Video.

The original mining families of Aylesham had produced large numbers of offspring who were, by the early 1950s, adults themselves, and it was commonplace for young married couples, often with a baby, to begin their married life living in the bride's family home. Given that there had been no extra building in Aylesham since the 1930s, there was an acute shortage of housing, despite what Mr. Owen says. In February 1947, Eastry Rural District Council (ERDC) proposed fifty new houses for Aylesham, but there were severe delays in building them due to the shortage of materials and the indeciveness on the part of the East Kent Joint Planning Committee. It argued that it was unable to make a decision on the future planning of Aylesham until it knew more precisely how the Kent Coalfield would develop.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, families occupied wooden huts that were constructed in the centre of the village, in the Market Square, and one family squatted in the small two-roomed concrete building next to the Market Square, which had served as a bank during the 1930s, but which had stood empty since the war.⁶¹

Pressured by the obvious physical need, and encouraged by the announcement that Rego Clothiers Ltd. had agreed to transfer to Aylesham, the Kent County Council Housing Committee announced that it would be building forty-six 'Airey-type' houses in the north of the village, on wasteland opposite St. Peter's Anglican Church.⁶² These were light-framed houses with a style of pebble-dashed outer walls. They were cramped as well as dark inside due to the very small and infrequent windows. "Airey" as a noun soon became an adjective as they gained a reputation for being very cold. The families which were housed in them were invariably the poorest or those with social problems. It is often forgotten, ignored, or simply misunderstood that even distinctly working-class communities have their own intra-social systems. Aylesham may have been a single-occupational community, but it was never a strictly single-class community, even working-class people having their own intra-class barriers.⁶³

⁶⁰ *D.E.*, 7.2.47.

⁶¹ Interview, Mary Park. 2.4.98.

⁶² *D.E.*, 23.5.47.

⁶³ At the time of writing these houses are being systematically emptied as their inhabitants either die or request alternative housing. The houses are condemned, although it is not known what will take their place.

In January 1948, the ERDC announced that eighty aluminium prefabricated bungalows ('prefabs') were to be erected on a site behind the 'Airey types'.⁶⁴ These were 'temporary' structures that were hurriedly erected throughout the country in an attempt to deal with the national housing shortage which plagued Nye Bevan, the Minister responsible, not to mention the homeless. The term 'temporary', for politicians, clearly had a very elastic definition, the last 'prefabs' in Aylesham being dismantled in the mid-60s, nearly twenty years after their arrival.

Further accomodation was added in the shape of 'flats', the first being built in 1949 as part of blocks of shops with apartments above them, eight in total. In October 1950, planning permission was granted to the ERDC to build a further twelve two-bedroom apartments.⁶⁵ This limited house-building programme alleviated the problem, but only slightly, and the District Council was still waiting for the planning permission to build fifty three-bedroomed houses which it had applied for in April 1950.⁶⁶

Education was also an important issue in Aylesham, especially for the younger children, there being only one junior school, the wooden construction, another 'temporary' building. Discussions for its replacement began in March 1949 at a meeting of the Dover, Deal and District Divisional Executive of the Kent Education Committee.⁶⁷ No decision was made, although it was agreed, in April 1950, that an alternative infant/junior school should be provided for the very large Roman Catholic population in the village.⁶⁸

One political change which occurred in the administrative structure of Aylesham was the decision to break away from the neighbouring village of Nonington in order to form the Aylesham Parish Council. Aylesham had automatically been part of the Nonington P.C. since the 1920s. But, by 1950, councillors from both villages believed a friendly schism was appropriate. Aylesham, with a population of over three thousand, and growing, had only four representatives on the Nonington P.C. Nonington, with a population of less than a thousand, and stagnant, had seven. Consequently, Aylesham's request for its own parish council seemed eminently reasonable and justified. Nonington councillors also agreed. With talk of Aylesham

⁶⁴ *D.E.*, 23.1.48.

⁶⁵ *D.E.*, 20.10.50.

⁶⁶ *D.E.*, 22.4.49.

⁶⁷ *D.E.*, 18.3.49.

⁶⁸ *D.E.*, 28.4.50.

expanding to twenty thousand, Nonington would obviously be subsumed in any future council. One of its councillors, C.W. Gair, argued that the two villages were far apart geographically, socially and historically, his village being distinctly middle-class and with the honour of being mentioned in the Domesday Book.⁶⁹ In July 1950, an official boundary line separating the two villages was agreed upon;⁷⁰ and in 1951 Aylesham Parish Council was formed, its first meeting being held in the Secondary School in February 1951. The effect of the creation of Aylesham P.C. was a heightened sense of separation, apartness. Aylesham was now, officially, alone. Ironically, the first meeting discussed the nature of Aylesham's isolation and called for improved bus services to the surrounding towns.⁷¹

Socially, the village began to 'come alive' after the war. Left to their own devices and with very little opportunity to mix with people outside, the residents of Aylesham began organising their own activities. These took the shape of dances and concerts organised on a weekly basis involving village jazz bands and the Snowdown Colliery Brass Band and Male Voice Choir. The Brass Band was particularly popular and not without success, reaching the National Finals at Crystal Palace in 1952.⁷² Sport was also very important, there being thriving football and rugby teams, the football team memorably winning the Kent Senior League Cup in 1951.⁷³ The children of the village were not forgotten either, with summer sports days and fancy dress competitions being held. The Aylesham Working Men's Club, 'The Legion', also played a central role in the social life of the people, not just the men, in order to relieve "the monotony of life in the village."⁷⁴ It organised day-trip outings for its members and their families, hiring trains to take them to the coastal resort of Margate, and *giving pocket money* to all the children and pensioners for the day. This annual event on the first Thursday of the August 'miners' fortnight' became a village highlight, eagerly looked forward to by adults and children alike, and sentimentally remembered today.⁷⁵ The Legion also handed out Christmas

⁶⁹ *D.E.*, 7.5.50.

⁷⁰ *D.E.*, 21.7.50.

⁷¹ Sunshine Video.

⁷² Howard Carr. Sunshine Video.

⁷³ *D.E.*, 30.3.51.

⁷⁴ *D.E.*, 2.12.49.

⁷⁵ *Over and Under the Earth*. By Jon Oram. Directed by Jon Oram. Produced by the Colway Theatre Trust, 24 June-6 July 1996.

presents to all its members' children. Funds for these acts of philanthropy came from membership fees, club profits and contributions from the Union.⁷⁶ And in the summer of 1952 the first Aylesham Carnival was held and a 'tradition' had begun. Keith Owen sums up the atmosphere in Aylesham at that time:

... there was lots of things going on in the village at that time, the place was bubbling ... after years of depression most people thought, well, at last, we have got a future, we've got something to work for, to look forward to... And that makes a big difference to people's attitudes about life.⁷⁷

However, the question concerning the possible expansion of Aylesham remained unresolved that is, until Adams announced, in December 1952, that Aylesham was once again being considered as an 'overspill' for London commuters.⁷⁸ This would mean an increase in the population to about 40,000, Adams stating:

It is quite obvious that both Dover and Aylesham are ideally situated for expansion.⁷⁹

But, he also warned that no final decision had been taken. That became clear in March 1953, when a government report on development plans for the south-east failed even to mention Aylesham.⁸⁰ Once again the village had been passed over and Ianto Hill, the Parish Chairman, called it a "Real knock-out blow".⁸¹

Each time there was speculation about Aylesham becoming a 'proper town' there was genuine anticipation in the village about the improved social, recreational and educational amenities that would arrive. And each time the plans proved fruitless there was real frustration

⁷⁶ For accounts of the principles of the working men's clubs and their origins at the end of the nineteenth century see: J. Taylor, *From Self-Help to Glamour: The Working Men's Club 1860-1972*, (Oxford: History Workshop Pamphlet, Ruskin College, 1973). G. Tremlett, *The First Century*, (London: The Working Men's Club and Institute Union Ltd., 1962).

⁷⁷ Keith Owen, Sunshine Video.

⁷⁸ *D.E.*, 29.12.52.

⁷⁹ *D.E.*, 29.12.52.

⁸⁰ *D.E.*, 20.3.53.

⁸¹ *D.E.*, 20.3.53.

at lost opportunities and the feeling that there was a conspiracy theory against Aylesham. Councillor W.P. Farrington addressing the ERDC complained:

Someone at the top has been stopping the development of this village for years.⁸²

Yet, had Aylesham been developed into a commuter town, then we would certainly have heard the bemoaning of the loss of 'community' much earlier. Its status as a single-occupational settlement with close and closed social networks determined that Aylesham would become the 'classic' archetypal community along the lines described by the likes of Blauner and Kerr and Siegal. And, of course, the frustrated development plans meant that Aylesham did not become like Coalville with its weakened sense of solidary relationships. However, Aylesham people, in the 1950s, did not feel any sense of relief that their community had been 'saved' from some dreadful watering-down of working-class unity. These ideas came later in the 1970s and '80s when Snowdown Colliery was under serious threat of closure.

While Aylesham remained frustrated at its stunted growth, the colliery began again to be optimistic about its future prospects. In January 1953, the NCB announced its intention to go ahead with the nine million pound investment plan announced in the 1950 *Plan for Coal*.⁸³ The money would be used for modernising the colliery which meant increased mechanisation. At Snowdown, this specifically entailed installing conveyor belts at the pit bottom, diesel locomotives to transport the men the two miles to the coal face, and a refrigeration plant to pump cold air into those areas of the pit which produced tropical conditions for the men to cut coal in. The *Dover Express* welcomed the new investment but was also painfully realistic about the economic condition of the Kent Coalfield:

Although many millions of pounds have been invested in Kent coal over the last half a century, it is probably true to say that scarcely a penny has ever been made by way of profits on the actual mining. Kent coal will never be cheap. It is too difficult to work

⁸² Sunshine Video.

⁸³ *D.E.*, 23.1.53.

for that. Statistics show that the coal seams worked in Kent are among the thickest in the country, but the seams are inconsistent and at great depth. In consequence, production costs are higher than the national average and are always likely to be so... [But the] Kent Coalfield has one big advantage. It is the nearest source of supply for a large and important part of the country. Lower freight charges for the shorter rail journey to consuming areas mean that coal from the Kent pits can successfully compete, at retail price, with coal from other parts of the country where the pithead price may be much lower.⁸⁴

This was the perennial problem which bedevilled the Kent Coalfield throughout its short lifetime. Its good quality coal was always difficult and expensive to get, but once got it was easy to sell and vital for local markets. Such was the demand for Kent coal that talk of a fifth pit persisted and the NCB announced, early in 1954, its active search for a suitable site to sink the new shaft:

An aerial survey of the area in which the new pit is likely to be sunk has been completed... Officials and their staffs are already working on the detailed planning of the new colliery and an announcement of the chosen site may be made within the year... There is not an able-bodied miner without work in Kent and, in view of the expansion going on, that happy position is one which is likely to continue as far ahead as anyone can foresee.⁸⁵

Most of the testing for coal went on at St. Margaret's Bay, two miles north of Dover, and speculation was rife that this would be the site of the fifth Kent colliery. Tests were also carried out further along the coast at Kingsdown, just south of Deal.⁸⁶ The NCB was clearly serious about its intentions and was determined to get the siting of the new colliery right. However, as we now know, the foreseeable future turned out to be much closer than was

⁸⁴ *D.E.*, 23.1.53.

⁸⁵ *D.E.*, 29.1.54.

⁸⁶ *D.E.*, 25.2.55.

imagined by either the NCB or the Kent miners. A small cloud on the horizon, which should have acted as a portent of future troubles, did appear in August 1954. John Arbuthnot, who had re-captured the Dover and Deal constituency for the Conservatives in 1950, spoke at a Dover Sea Front meeting on Saturday 28 August:

The coal position was causing concern... If the coal was not forthcoming the great mining industry would have to be helped by the great oil industry. A start had already been made and the new Marchwood electricity station would be oil-fired.⁸⁷

This deliberate change in direction in energy policy by the government seems to have passed unnoticed by the Kent miners' unions, there being no mention of it in their Area minutes. Such was the confidence in the future for British coal. This was to be very short-lived, and, as we shall see, the method of firing the new power station at Richborough, which came on stream at the beginning of the 1960s, was to be a very contentious issue for the Kent miners.

Arbuthnot, mindful of the large mining population in his constituency, was usually careful not to upset them with ungracious comments. On one occasion, writing in the local newspaper, he comes close to pre-empting Kerr and Siegal in his attempt to understand the nature of mining communities and miners' militancy. He comments:

Perhaps it is tied in with the closed community life in which some miners find themselves. It was a tragedy, perhaps unavoidable, when mining colonies isolated from the rest of the community developed in our midst.

They should be dispersed as far as possible, because he is a much happier man, who, during his hours away from work, can get to know the outlook of other members of the community... It may be that the hazards of life underground tend to throw men together and build up a comradeship to the exclusion of outsiders.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ *D.E.*, 3.9.54.

⁸⁸ *D.E.*, 19.9.52.

One is forced to wonder whether a Conservative MP's concern for miners' happiness should not really be translated into anxiety to dissipate their militant solidarity. Certainly the break-up of communities like Aylesham would have had this desired? effect. Arbuthnot also made a point of touring the Kent Coalfield at least once a year and going down the pits of Snowdown, Betteshanger and Tilmanstone. Chislet was outside his political constituency although some of its miners may have lived within it. On one occasion when the Dover Conservative Party agent, C.H. Wethered, spoke of communists "worming their way into" the mining unions,⁸⁹ Arbuthnot at the same meeting at the Dover Town Hall on Friday 20 March, had only praise for the miners and, rather surprisingly for a government MP, argued that they were not paid enough. He pointed out that the,

... increase in the price of coal averaged 5s.6d. per ton, and there had been a tendency to say that it has been due to the increase in miners' wages. But that is not true. Only 6d. of that 5s.6d. is represented by the increase in miners' wages.⁹⁰

Although the nationalised coal industry had its detractors on all sides nobody spoke seriously in terms of re-privatising it, no government until Thatcher's wishing or daring to take on the NUM over such an emotive issue. Kenneth Morgan argues that even Churchill, the great "enemy" of the miners,

... was anxious to preserve domestic peace in 1951-55, to pave the way for achievements in world diplomacy and to exorcize working-class memories of Tonypandy and the General Strike.⁹¹

The consensus in industrial policy, certainly as far as the miners were concerned, combined with a general improvement in wages and conditions for miners, led Arbuthnot to

⁸⁹ *D.E.*, 27.3.53.

⁹⁰ *D.E.*, 27.3.53.

⁹¹ Morgan. 490.

claim, during the 1955 General Election campaign, that many coalminers now voted Conservative:

They have begun to realise that they are better off under a Conservative Government than ever they were when the Socialists were in control.⁹²

This was almost certainly a piece of electioneering by Arbuthnot, at least as far as Aylesham, which has never returned a Conservative parish councillor, was concerned. Indeed, on only one occasion, in May 1969, has the Conservative Party even bothered to present a candidate at Aylesham. The results of that election were:

Ianto Hill (Labour)	550
John McMahon (Lab)	514
Annie Parry (Lab)	435
Don Jack (Liberal)	474
Chris Osmond (Conservative)	118.

Source: *Dover Express*, 9 May 1969.

The rather high vote for the Liberal candidate was a result of Don Jack being connected with the mining industry, (he was a deputy), and due to the fact that he lived in Aylesham and had a high personal standing. It should also not be too much of a surprise, considering their not so distant past, that miners have a tendency towards the Liberal Party. And it should serve as a warning to political writers who try to portray the Kent Coalfield as a hotbed of militant communism. It was not.

However, Arbuthnot's comments may be excused considering he was on the campaign trail, and taken with a pinch of salt in the light of the actual results:

⁹² *D.E.*, 20.5.55.

J. Arbuthnot (Conservative)	27,316
H.W. Lee (Labour)	24,298
Majority: 3,018 (1951: 3,516)	
Turnout: 81.2%.	

Source: *Dover Express*, 3 June 1955.

Arbuthnot had been re-elected, but with a reduced majority, whereas the Conservative Government, nationally, had been re-elected with an increased majority of forty-three seats. Although area breakdowns of voting patterns at parish level are not available, the actual parish council results in Aylesham during the 1950s and '60s would seem to suggest that Arbuthnot's tenancy of the Dover and Deal constituency had very little to do with the increased wealth and security of the Kent coalminers provoking an about-turn in their voting behaviour.

The general growth in living standards in Britain in the early 1950s and the widespread confidence among miners did not lead to an extension of union militancy in the political arena, rather it provoked the miners into demanding a larger share of the capitalist cake. At the beginning of 1954, Abe Moffat, the Communist Scottish miners' leader, went for the more immediate gratification of extra money rather than agitating for political change, as he may have been expected to do now that the miners were in a position of real industrial power. This, of course, was arguably the correct role of union leaders: to improve the pay and conditions of their members while leaving them to exercise individual political influence through the ballot box. It was certainly the role that all miners' leaders have adopted throughout the twentieth century, mindful of the diversity of their own constituency. All miners' leaders, that is, until the advent of Arthur Scargill.

Moffat demanded a minimum weekly wage of eight pounds for underground workers and seven pounds for surface workers. At the time they earned £7-6s. and £6-7s. respectively. And he declared:

If this claim is turned down we must act quickly and with all the power at our command. We must expose the abominable hypocrisy of the Tory Government which has been praising our efforts yet refusing our rightful claims... Flattery, even from a

Tory is all very well, but what the miner needs is hard cash in order that his wife and family may be able to make ends meet.⁹³

Moffat's veiled threat to use union power to attack a democratically elected government may well have offended many of Britain's moderate miners who preferred to keep politics out of union affairs. But he probably struck a chord with the Kent Union which, in the 1950s was beginning to develop its own characteristics and ideology which definitely did not preclude it from delving into national and even international affairs.

The early post-war period for the NUM Kent Area (KNUM) was dominated by that veteran union activist, Tudor Davies. This was partly due to his reputation established in 1942, but also due to the fact that Betteshanger was the largest Kent colliery and was able to dominate the Area union. The National President in the early days of nationalisation was Will Lawther, a Durham miner originally, but with long experience of NUM and Labour Party politics. Ashworth's reasoned view of Lawther is expressed thus:

His long experience gave him considerable sway in the development of union policy and he sought to exert this in a balanced and reasonable way...⁹⁴

Despite his early flirtation with the British Socialist Party (forerunner of the Communist Party of Great Britain) Lawther, like other members of the BSP, most notably Ernie Bevin and Walter Citrine, earned a reputation as a moderate, even right-wing union leader. This led him into not infrequent conflict with area presidents who had retained their communist beliefs. These included Arthur Horner of South Wales and NUM Secretary since 1946;⁹⁵ Abe Moffat;⁹⁶ and even Ebby Edwards who was no communist, but was the respected Northumberland miners' leader, TUC Chairman and member of the NCB.⁹⁷ Lawther also

⁹³ *D.E.*, 15.1.54.

⁹⁴ Ashworth, 127.

⁹⁵ Hugh Armstrong Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889: Volume III, 1934-1951*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 314.

⁹⁶ Abe Moffat, *My Life With The Miners*, (London, 1965).

⁹⁷ R. Page Arnot, *The Miners: One Union, One Industry. A History of the National Union of Mineworkers 1939-46*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979), 51.

succeeded in offending the KNUM with what can only be described as a crass comment in a press statement issued to the *Daily Telegraph* on 25 January 1951. Part of this statement read:

All BBC programmes should be closed down at 11pm to save electricity used by transmitters and to stop late night listening... All football league games and cup-ties should be played on Sundays instead of Saturdays. (Some miners do not go to work on Saturday so that they can attend football league matches.)⁹⁸

That a miners' leader should make such remarks to a national daily newspaper with well known Conservative sympathies was bound to provoke an angry response from sections of his own union. This was the KNUM reaction:

... with a National Leader making such utterances in spite of the effort they [the miners] are making and have always made in the past with their contribution to the Nation's basic industry, some little bit of freedom in the way of recreation in the few leisure moments which are available to them, should not be interfered with... We look to our leaders for consideration and common sense and not wild sweeping statements for press publicity... It must be agreed that their work is uncongenial and with present day modern speed-up only about five per cent can take an active part in outdoor sport ... therefore they must be content to be spectators which pleasure no-one must endeavour to take from them.⁹⁹

The problems between the KNUM and Lawther did not stop there. The following year, 1952, was the year of the now notorious Labour Party Conference at Morecambe. Mervyn Jones, Michael Foot's biographer, has written:

⁹⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 25.1.51. NUM Kent Area Minutes (Kent Minutes), 6.3.51.

⁹⁹ Kent Minutes, 6.3.51.

Few people who endured that supremely unenjoyable week ever forgot the atmosphere of hostility amounting even to hatred, in which adherents of the rival factions glared at each other before marching off to different cafés or pubs.¹⁰⁰

The different factions were the Bevanites and the Gaitskellites representing the left and right wings of the Party. Lawther placed himself squarely with the Gaitskellites, and while speaking from the rostrum was constantly heckled by a delegate from the floor. Lawther, in his brash Northumbrian accent, famously shouted at the delegate: "Shut your gob!"¹⁰¹ This unruly behaviour seemed to typify the intensely bad atmosphere at the Conference and gave the KNUM another chance to issue an official criticism of the national President:

This Area is greatly disturbed at the conduct of the President, Sir William Lawther, on the attitude taken up by him and his manner of expression.

We are making no attempt to suppress freedom of speech or even cramp it, for this right we will always defend one hundred per cent ... we expect a standard of decorum and dignity from our President.¹⁰²

The Betteshanger Branch, led by Jack Dunn, went even further and demanded Lawther's resignation. In a letter, dated 10 October 1952, sent to the KNUM, Dunn shows quite clearly his own sympathies with the Bevanites as well as his own increasingly public communistic tendencies:

We, the members of Betteshanger Branch NUM, are deeply disturbed and most strongly protest against the statement of Sir William Lawther ... concerning Aneurin Bevan, as printed in the *Daily Herald* on 8 October last ... when he referred to Mr.

¹⁰⁰ Mervyn Jones, *Michael Foot*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1995), 191.

¹⁰¹ K.O Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History 1945-1990*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 97; Jones, 191.

¹⁰² Kent Minutes, 3.11.52.

Bevan as a man with his feet in Moscow and his eyes on Number Ten Downing Street...

Anyone who seeks by such cheap propaganda as Lawther had done, to discredit and belittle a fellow Countryman and Trade Unionist for the sake of rotten Capitalist Sympathy in a Capitalist Country, with its same soul destroying doctrine, is no longer fitted, nor worthy to be our leader.¹⁰³

Betteshanger miners, already (in)famous after 1942, were evidently continuing their militant tendency in having elected Jack Dunn as their Branch Secretary. Dunn was determined to use his union platform as a political rostrum as well; and throughout his long career as a Kent miners' leader he had no dilemma combining attempts to improve wages and conditions for his members with his personal wider political objectives. He was first elected Kent Area President in June 1953 following the departure of Tudor Davies. There were five candidates for the position including two from Betteshanger. With collieries generally voting for their own men the risk for Dunn was that the Betteshanger vote would be split, which, as we can see from the results, was precisely what happened. However, Tilmanstone did not propose a candidate and most of its support went to Dunn. And with a sizeable vote from Snowdown miners, who probably remembered him from his time there in the 1930s and early '40s, plus the fact that Snowdown also presented two candidates thus splitting that vote, Dunn's election was guaranteed.

	Betteshanger	Chislet	Snowdown	Tilmanstone	Total
Bert Adams (Btts)	653	36	38	118	845
Jack Dunn (Btts)	690	141	150	387	1368
Harold Flowers (Chis)	47	634	37	94	812
Joe Holmes (Snd)	32	15	312	58	417
Walter Swinhoe (Snd)	21	10	475	34	540

Source: NUM Kent Area Minutes, 25 June 1953.

¹⁰³ Kent Minutes, 3.11.52.

Despite the criticism Lawther did not resign and continued as President until his retirement in 1954, and succession by another moderate, Ernest Jones. He also continued being a thorn in the side of the KNUM with his provocative attacks on the Bevanites, at one time comparing them, again in an article written for the *Daily Telegraph*, with fascists.¹⁰⁴ Naturally this infuriated the left-wing of the NUM and the Labour Party, and the KNUM remarked upon the fact that Conservative MPs were actually quoting from the article.¹⁰⁵ However, no letters of protest were sent this time, presumably because the previous ones had had such little effect.

Bevan was a favourite politician with miners throughout the country and Kent was no exception. They invited him to be their guest speaker at the first Kent Area Miners' Gala held at Deal on Saturday 18 June 1955. Bevan was famous for his fiery and passionate oratory and on this occasion he did not disappoint. Those who were there remember not what he said but the power and the passion in his manner of saying it.¹⁰⁶ Fortunately, for us, a *Dover Express* journalist was there to take down and paraphrase Bevan's speech, extracts of which give us a flavour of the man's style:

What the young miners of today had to remember was that the better conditions were a consequence of more than three decades of constant struggle and that they could be lost quickly and easily. Don't think you have these advantages because of the colour of your eyes, because of your good looks or because the Tories like you... [the worker] could now use the scarcity of labour to improve the reward of his own efforts... Didn't they [Conservatives] believe that one should take advantage of market conditions to improve one's own position? Our product is labour and when labour is scarce we try to push up the price. We are genuine Tories in that respect... How lovely it would be for them if only they could have what they call controlled unemployment, say a million of us out of work. Believe me when I say that they are racking their brains to bring that about.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 27.1.53; *Kent Minutes*, 18.2.53.

¹⁰⁵ *Kent Minutes*, 12.3.53.

¹⁰⁶ Interview, Mary Park, 28 January 1998.

¹⁰⁷ *D.E.*, 24.6.55.

Bevan's more than slightly ironic claim to being a "genuine Tory" is the classic expression of the free collective bargaining so popular with strong unions such as the NUM post-1939. There, in the economic jungle, it is the natural law of the survival of the fittest. This philosophy of union power depended not only on a steadily rising economy for workers to participate in and share out, but also upon a full employment economy where workers were in demand and thus in a position to bargain higher prices for their labour. The 1950s and '60s were ideal decades, the 'age of affluence', providing a corporatist form of managed economy which suited the likes of the NUM and the NCB. Bevan's prediction of "controlled unemployment" must have sounded, in 1955, like some kind of prophecy of doom, the conspiracy theory of a ranting left-winger. Yet who would argue, today, that unemployment has not been deliberately used by successive Labour and Conservative governments, since 1976, as a way of controlling inflation and taming the unions? Certainly not two recent economists: Richard Tur and Colin Crouch. Tur, plagiarising Hegel, speaks of the "hidden-hand mechanism". By this he means market forces operating freely and constrained only by the natural limits of the economy itself. This was the *laissez faire* model which was at the theoretical heart of Thatcherism. Tur writes:

... the primary role of government is to free the economy from forces which obstruct or distort the operation of the hidden-hand mechanism. Thus restrictive practices, 'unreasonable' restraint of trade, job protectionism and 'artificially' high wage settlements, born of union power and privilege, all contribute to the inefficiency of the economy... Viewed in this light, trade unions must be under severe attack because they inevitably distort the operation of the hidden-hand mechanism.¹⁰⁸

Having established the obstructive role of unions in this economic model, Tur goes on to explain the relationship between unemployment and inflation and the advantages obtained

¹⁰⁸ Richard Tur, "The Legitimacy of Industrial Action: Trade Unionism at the Crossroads", in W.E.J. McCarthy (ed.), *Trade Unions*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 485-96.

through having a more modest trade union power, limited by the abandonment of free collective bargaining:

... if primacy is given to controlling inflation, even at the expense of savage unemployment, unions must be under even greater attack... Allow free collective bargaining full operation and the artificial powers, privileges and immunities of the unions will so distort the operation of the market that wages will be artificially high, manufacturers will require higher prices and an inflationary spiral will be set in motion... Abandon full employment as a goal, refuse to print more money ... and unemployment will steadily rise. In the face of massive unemployment, a new 'realism' may pervade collective bargaining... Only by the substitution of true market forces for the anarchy of collective bargaining can the injustices of union power be constrained.¹⁰⁹

Colin Crouch similarly argues that with the end of corporatism, free collective bargaining is no longer a viable option without subsequent inflation or rising unemployment or both:

... in the circumstances of the current British and world economies, there is no way that free collective bargaining can be maintained alongside full employment without a high rate of inflation... The government response is almost certain to be action to restrict demand, and thus brings unemployment, especially if wages are rising fast. And of course a major consequence of rising unemployment is a check to trade union strength and thus to the free collective bargaining option itself.¹¹⁰

Crouch's article first appeared in 1979 before full-blown monetarism had seen the light of day. His predictions were not, therefore, based on the experience of Thatcherism but on that of the Labour Government which, since 1976, had abandoned Keynesian remedies and

¹⁰⁹ Tur, 490.

¹¹⁰ Colin Crouch, "Alternative Policy Developments", in McCarthy (ed.), 433-47.

committed itself to meeting monetary targets imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Thatcher was, thus, able to continue and expand upon this fledgling monetarist economy, her government intending:

... that its inflexible financial strategy would gradually restore sound money and squeeze inflationary expectations out of the economy. This would inevitably cause a small rise in unemployment... Falling inflation and slightly higher unemployment would accompany faster growth... Trade-union power in particular would be curbed.¹¹¹

Bevan could not possibly have known on that June day in 1955 how *terribly accurate* his assessment of future political and economic thinking was. Certainly the people listening to him would not have realised and the *Dover Express* preferred to comment, with evident wonder, on the strange ethnic mix of the miners and their families, present at the Gala, who had implanted themselves in the south-eastern corner of England:

Thousands of Kent *mineworkers and their families, many of them still speaking the* dialects of parts of the country far removed from this corner of England gathered at Mill Hill, Deal... Those who had come as squatters had long enjoyed full citizenship and there was now a generation of Kent-born miners doing a great job for the nation.¹¹²

Industrial relations in the Kent coalfield during the 1950s were relatively calm, relative to the Yorkshire coalfield, that is. Short, localised disputes sometimes occurred, usually over working conditions and allowance payments. These were normally solved quickly and amicably between Branch officials and management, and very often in the men's favour.¹¹³ With peace prevailing in Kent, the Branch and Area unions were able to develop a more outward looking

¹¹¹ Andrew Gamble, *Britain in Decline: Economic Policy, Political Strategy and the British State*, (London: Macmillan, 1985), 193-94.

¹¹² *D.E.*, 24.6.55.

¹¹³ See, for example, Minutes of 26 and 29 November 1952, for details of a stoppage at Betteshanger over dangerous face conditions; and 23 September 1953, for details of a dispute at Tilmanstone over pieceworker's rates.

policy which brought the Kent miners into the area of politics and international relations. This was always sure to be controversial, especially with a moderate national leadership determined to avoid any accusations from a Conservative Government of being a political union with anti-democratic and extra-parliamentary ambitions. On one specific occasion a resolution sent by the KNUM to the National Executive Committee of the NUM shows quite clearly how Kent were prepared to use their industrial muscle to obtain certain political policies:

Kent Area are very anxious about the outcome of the proposed imposition of a charge on prescriptions, dental treatment and surgical appliances in the NHS. We believe this to be a backward step which will penalise the lower income groups and prevent early and adequate treatment and rapid recovery. We furthermore strongly resent the cuts which the Ministry of Education is imposing on education authorities... This Area is adamant that if the Government insist on these cuts no further negotiations should take place on Extended Hours, the present agreement to be carried out until its date of termination: furthermore the total abolition of any overtime must be the Union's policy.¹¹⁴

This was precisely the kind of language the national leadership was keen to prevent, believing, as it did, that such rhetoric provided the Government with ammunition which could be used against unions in general, and the NUM in particular. Nobody, least of all the Conservatives, wished (publicly) to dismantle the NHS in 1952, but it had, after all, been a Labour Government which had imposed the first NHS charges, in 1951. This had led to the very public arguments and splits in the Labour Party which many union leaders blamed for the collapse of *their* government. The NUM Executive Committee felt, therefore, moved to deliver this slap on the wrist to Kent and other Areas which had wished to meddle in politics:

... the NEC ... gave consideration to letters from several of the Areas protesting against the economy cuts imposed by the Government, and it was decided that such matters

¹¹⁴ Kent Minutes, 11.3.52.

should be dealt with through Parliament... I am sure you will appreciate that although the National Union is strongly opposed to the politics of the present Government, it would be unwise to confuse industrial and political activities ... and any attempt to oppose Government legislation by industrial action would only be detrimental to the interests of our members, as any loss of coal production will affect the economy of the country as a whole, and the workers in particular.¹¹⁵

As far as the KNUM was concerned, however, it did not mend its ways, believing that it had a legitimate interest in furthering what it considered to be correct socio-economic and even foreign policies. In May 1952, a May Day Resolution was issued by the KNUM which declared its support for the principle of nationalisation. And, clearly aware of the potential for criticism of its 'anti-democratic' behaviour, the KNUM couched its obvious political intentions *in diplomatic language*:

We ... pledge ourselves wholeheartedly ... to do everything democratically within our power, to work for the return of a Labour Government within the shortest possible time, with a greater majority than ever before, for them to complete the programme for a Socialist Britain, and on this May Day morning, we express our greetings to the workers in all countries, irrespective of Colour or Creed.¹¹⁶

A few years later, in 1955, the KNUM issued the following resolution, which was to be submitted to the NUM Annual Conference held, that year, in July at Rothesay:

This Conference of the National Union of Mineworkers calls upon all nations to take action to preserve peace and as a first step calls for a prohibition in the use and manufacture of nuclear weapons and that every effort should be made to hold Fire-Power talks for total disarmament by all nations.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Kent Minutes, 11.3.52.

¹¹⁶ Kent Minutes, 29.4.52.

¹¹⁷ Kent Minutes, 27.6.55.

The Kent miners' concern about such issues as nuclear weapons and the German rearmament question, led them to participate in a national demonstration in London on 25 January 1955, and to their first, but by no means their last, serious clash with the police. The purpose of the march was to protest against the decision to re-arm Germany, a decision narrowly endorsed by the Labour Party Conference in 1954, but actively and continually opposed by the Bevanites. At one point during the march, details are hazy, it seems that mounted police rode into the demonstrators and encountered the Kent miners. According to Jack Dunn:

... mounted police rounded the Pipe Band and charged into the Betteshanger miners' banner, which was ripped as the horses trampled over it.¹¹⁸

Tilmanstone Branch, meeting on 29 January, sent an Emergency Resolution to the Area Conference, the tenor of which shows quite clearly the furious indignation of the miners:

This Area Conference demands from the Police Commissioner, London Area, an immediate written apology for the unwarranted and cowardly attack which was made by a detachment of mounted police upon the Delegation from this Area who were taking part in a peaceful demonstration ... failing a satisfactory reply ... this Area Conference demands that the NEC call for an immediate stoppage of work of all coalfields throughout the country.¹¹⁹

However, with uncharacteristic reserve, tinged, no doubt, with a sense of reality, the KNUM Conference decided not to include the call for strike action, adopting only the first part of Tilmanstone's resolution and sending it to the Police Commissioner, Arthur Horner and selected MPs. In February, the Dover Labour Party sent a letter of complaint about the police behaviour to the Home Secretary.¹²⁰ This angry episode in the history of the Kent miners

¹¹⁸ *D.E.*, 28.1.55.

¹¹⁹ *Kent Minutes*, 7.2.55.

¹²⁰ *D.E.*, 25.2.55.

fizzled out somewhat, as support was not forthcoming from the Parliamentary Labour Party (an election was pending), nor the NUM. And, despite his previous kind words for the miners, the local MP, Arbuthnot, showed his true sentiments in a letter he sent to the KNUM, dated 14 February:

Thank-you for your letter of 9 February... I had better tell you straight out that my sympathies are with the police... I cannot escape from the view that the object of making this demonstration, particularly with a provocative banner encouraging people to agitate, is not as peaceful as you try to make out. It would seem to me that the demonstrators asked for trouble.¹²¹

This was no Valentine letter, despite its date, and the Kent miners were at the beginning of a slow learning curve which would reach its zenith only in 1984.

The increase in affluence in Britain during the 1950s and the confidence among the working-class, inspired by full employment, led to a rise in trade union membership and intra-union solidarity. The days of betrayal and unions left to fight alone were seemingly long gone, and the miners were at the forefront of the tendency to forgive and forget. In October 1954, the KNUM donated fifty pounds to the headquarters of the Amalgamated Stevedores Union which was on unofficial strike.¹²² The following year the NUM officially supported the Associated Society of Locomotive, Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF), in its rail strike beginning on 1 May. There was no suggestion of a sympathy strike by the NUM, Horner and Jones being determined that the pits would keep turning coal. However, they were also clear that no NUM member would do anything detrimental to ASLEF's action, declaring in a national circular issued to all Areas:

... none of our members will be asked to perform any task normally performed by members of the ASLEF.¹²³

¹²¹ Kent Minutes, 14.3.55.

¹²² Kent Minutes. 27.10.54; Jones, 197.

¹²³ NUM Circular A.S. 74/55, Kent Minutes. 30.4.55.

And in a second circular, issued soon after, indicating that there may be some problem with NCB management asking NUM members to overstep demarcation lines:

... all our members should be advised to co-operate with the Coal Board in performing any reasonable alternative work, provided that they are not requested to undertake any task which is normally carried out by a member of the ASLEF.¹²⁴

A Special Area Conference in Kent, however, typically went much further than the National Union, offering advice to the Government on how to solve the dispute, as well as outright support for the ASLEF. Two resolutions were passed, the first beginning with a tone which barely conceals the Kent miners' resentment at the national leadership's conciliatory manner towards the NCB:

That this Area Conference accepts the necessity for co-operation with the NCB but declares its opposition to the use of extra lorries to transport coal from the Kent pits. It views with serious concern the Government's action invoking the Emergency Powers Act, and if any further action is taken to break the strike by the use of State Power, this Area will review its policy immediately. It further declares its opinion that Government pressure would be more wisely used in getting the British Transport Commission to meet the modest demands of the Railwaymen's Union.¹²⁵

And the second resolution declared in solidaristic tone:

That this Area Conference congratulates the ASLEF Union on their stand. We will do nothing during this strike to injure them in their struggle and we wish them success in their fight.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ NUM Circular A.S. 99/55, Kent Minutes, 3.6.55.

¹²⁵ Kent Minutes, 4.6.55.

¹²⁶ Kent Minutes, 4.6.55.

All four Kent Branches accepted both resolutions from the Area Conference. The Kent miners were evidently learning how to win friends and influence people, an influence they themselves would be able to take advantage of in the not too distant future.

One of the issues which bedevilled the nationalised coal industry, and particularly the Kent Area, was the question of financial losses related to the interest payments on the capital outlay for the compensation of £164,660,000 to the former colliery owners. Aside from the actual compensation, which was widely regarded to have been over-generous, there was the contentious issue of a government-owned industry repaying a loan to the government, in effect to itself. As a result of taking this into the financial equation, Areas like Kent showed annual losses in every year from 1947, except 1951, when it showed a slight operating profit of £2,000. Many miners and economists argued that this was an incorrect and unfair method of calculating coal losses. A letter to the *Dover Express* from a George Smith of Whitfield, explains the complications of the economics of the coal industry and concludes:

... there are no losses at all in the actual working of the country's coal mines. In fact a substantial profit is being made ... the public have the right to know the true financial position relating to the mining industry of this country.¹²⁷

In its editorial, in the same issue, the *Dover Express* agrees that there are anomalies in the Coal Board's accounting methods, anomalies which need to be clarified:

... the accounts of the NCB are not very clearly stated. For the year 1954, the NCB revenue account showed a profit of £20,338,506 before deducting the loss of five million pounds on imported coal. This twenty million pounds represents about 12.5 per cent on the sum of £164,660,000 which was set as the total compensation to be paid to the former colliery owners. Another point which is not clear is whether the twenty million pounds profit is arrived at after making adequate provision for depreciation of plant, etc... In judging profit it is clearly right to regard interest payments as equivalent

¹²⁷ *D.E.*, 7.10.55.

to the dividends which a private company would pay to its shareholders if profits warranted.¹²⁸

This issue of interest repayments and the question of what constituted an economic coalfield plagued the Kent area once coal was no longer the preferred fuel option. And, of course, it was an issue at the heart of the miners' strike 1984-85. Joe Mather, an Aylesham miner and regular correspondent to the *Dover Express*, pointed out the absurdity of including payment for coal imports in the Coal Board's calculations. He draws a comparison with the farming industry:

If the farmers, who can produce only a fraction of the nation's food, had to pay for all the food imported into the country, wouldn't they shout that they were being treated unjustly? Of course they would - and they would be right. But the mining industry has to pay up and look happy.¹²⁹

And in a subsequent letter Mather answers accusations that he is an agitator. He employs his knowledge of history and natural wit which made him a popular man in Aylesham.

I am proud of this title, because I am certainly in good company ... for example, Moses, The Twelve Apostles, St. Thomas of Canterbury, William Wilberforce, Charles Dickens, G.B. Shaw and the Duke of Edinburgh. The first-named led the greatest walk-out in history.¹³⁰

NCB figures for 1956, published in June 1957, showed another loss for the Kent Coalfield - £300,410. The total deficit for the Areas, since nationalisation, now exceeded two million pounds.¹³¹

¹²⁸ *D.E.*, 7.10.55.

¹²⁹ *D.E.*, 1.3.57.

¹³⁰ *D.E.*, 5.4.57.

¹³¹ *D.E.*, 7.6.57.

On Monday 31 December 1956 the NCB issued a review of the first ten years of nationalisation,¹³² and the South Eastern Division produced its own report on the four Kent collieries. The comparative figures for 1946 and 1956 were as follows:

Colliery	1946		1956		Increase in Output (Tons)	
	Annual Output (Tons)	Manpower	Annual Output	Manpower		%
Betteshanger	382,034	2,081	535,266	2,447	153,232	40
Chislet	267,618	1,334	449,587	1,585	181,969	68
Snowdown	402,457	1,725	424,227	2,008	21,770	5.5
Tilmanstone	248,861	877	270,920	1,012	22,059	9
South Eastern Division	1,300,970	6,017	1,680,000	7,052	28,657,000	29
Great Britain	181,243,000	696,660	209,900,000	703,300	28,657,000	16

Source: *The First Ten Years of Nationalisation in the South Eastern Division*, NCB South Eastern Division, 31 December 1956.

The South Eastern Division was very pleased with itself, having a 29 per cent increase in output over the ten-year period which compared very favourably with the 16 per cent increase for the whole British coalfield. However, it was admitted by the Board that there was much scope for improvement in Kent and that manpower had also been increased by about 17 per cent, whereas for the country as a whole it had "remained roughly static."¹³³ The Report concludes, somewhat optimistically:

In a new and comparatively unexplored coalfield such as Kent there is always a pressing need to push on with underground developments and exploration. Much has been done in the ten years since nationalisation ... there is likely to be a new colliery in Kent one day. But it is still too early to say when this will be.¹³⁴

¹³² *British Coal: The Rebirth of an Industry. The First Ten Years.* (National Coal Board, December, 1956.)

¹³³ *The First Ten Years.*

¹³⁴ *The First Ten Years.*

The NCB South Eastern Division had itself been restructured in 1956, the Board of Directors responsible for the Area having been abolished and one man placed in charge as General Manager.¹³⁵ In the first instance this was John H. Plumptre. At the time of his *appointment he lived in Nonington, and it was rather an appropriate choice. He and his family had had close associations with the Kent Coalfield ever since his mother had cut the first sod for sinking the first shaft at Snowdown in 1907.*

With speculation continuing about expansion of the coalfield, the community of Aylesham endured uncertainty about its future development. By 1956 there was still no community hall, the 'temporary' wooden school was approaching its thirtieth birthday and there was still only one road into the village. *At a meeting of the Council on Wednesday 16 May 1956, a Chatham councillor, G.W. Paget, said he had:*

... visited the village at odd times and was horrified to find such a big community practically isolated from the rest of the world ... this small amount of money could and should be found to give a decent access to a community which had added materially to the wealth of the country over the past twenty-five years.¹³⁶

On Saturday 13 October 1956, the North Islington Labour Party visited Aylesham and among them was Jack Lee, the Labour candidate for the Dover and Deal constituency. He gave a Benthamite utilitarian analysis of 'community' in his assessment of what had happened at Aylesham over the last thirty years:

He felt that Aylesham was an example of what Toryism had done in the past when miners from all parts of Great Britain had had to travel hundreds of miles in search of work. The way they had knitted together into a community was due to their determination to work together for the good of the whole.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ *D.E.*, 6.7.56.

¹³⁶ *D.E.*, 18.4.56.

¹³⁷ *D.E.*, 19.10.56.

Lee's comments were, of course, electioneering, although that was hardly necessary for a Labour politician in Aylesham. They were also sentimental. The community that had come about at Aylesham was not born of a conscious desire or a "determination" on the part of the residents. As we have seen, families at Aylesham had been flung together through economic circumstances in the 1920s and '30s. Many had left due to the almost unbearable conditions at Snowdown Colliery and the terrible isolation of Aylesham village. Those who stayed did so largely out of economic necessity and their lack of occupational choice. There had been no *altruistic intent to stay and build a 'community'*. Rather, the 'community' had developed in spite of the people, out of a necessity to look after each other because, clearly, outside authorities could not be relied upon. Comments like Lee's and Paget's only served to heighten Aylesham people's sense of isolation, forcing them to turn ever more inwardly upon themselves. And at the metaphoric heart of this community stood the powerful symbol of the reason for Aylesham's existence and the concomitant community spirit: the pit head winding gear. The role of the pit and the union in the social life of the community was emphasised by Ernest Jones when he visited Aylesham on Saturday 12 October 1957, to open the Welfare Club Community Centre which had finally been built with the aid of Snowdown Branch funds:

The union ... had worked for and obtained for the [Kent] miners the highest pay in the country - their just due for the hardest work in existence - and better working conditions had been secured, but the duty of the union did not end there. They had also to provide social facilities for the mining communities. They had now carried out this duty in Aylesham.¹³⁸

The extension of the union's responsibility beyond the pay and conditions of its members was thus established by the 1950s, and local union leaders became involved in village politics, several of them being elected onto the parish council. There was no debate about whether it was correct for the union to be engaged in such affairs, no accusations that it was beyond the union's remit. On the contrary, involvement was expected of the union. Pit and

¹³⁸ D.E., 18.10.57.

parish not only co-existed geographically, but were inter-dependent. The social and environmental conditions of the miner's life, beyond the confines of the dark underground passageways where he worked, his home and village life, were an integral part of the responsibility of the union. As a result Branch leaders had their authority extended beyond the limits of the pit gates and into the village where they were often respected figures and could be consulted on a whole range of issues such as housing or social security benefits. A miners' leader was not just a union member down the pit, he was also a union man in his leisure time, and his house a legitimate port of call for miners with all manner of problems.

The union thus pervaded many aspects of a miner's life; and a miner's loyalty was first to his branch, then to his Area, and only then to the National Union. This aspect of mining and its unions needs to be understood in order to better understand the militant/moderate behaviour of miners at certain times and in certain areas. It also helps towards an understanding of Snowdown's relative moderacy during the 1950 and '60s, relative, that is, to Betteshanger's militancy during the same period. Betteshanger had consistently elected actively militant officials such as Tudor Davies and Jack Dunn, the latter being a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Snowdown, on the other hand, was dominated by more moderate officials who had a reputation, which continues to this day, of being too heavily influenced by the Catholic Church. Of course this is impossible to substantiate because neither they nor the Church would admit to such a thing. But it is what is believed by the older residents of Aylesham and by the younger more militant generation of union leaders who wrested control of the Snowdown Branch in the late 1960s, early 1970s. Philip Sutcliffe, a young miner in the 1960s, who became Branch Secretary in the 1980s, remembers the union in his early days. When asked whether Snowdown was militant in the 1960s he replied:

No. I'd say it wasn't. In fact I'd stick my neck out and say it was far too Catholic dominated... In them days Snowdown was considered a very moderate type pit as opposed to Betteshanger [which was] certainly the more militant... That was my impression.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Interview, Philip Sutcliffe, 2.9.93.

Terry Jones, another Snowdown miner reiterates the suspicion of Catholic interference influencing the industrial and political nature of the Branch union:

Betteshanger was a militant pit ... more militant than what Snowdown was ... in the '30s and '40s when it first started up Snowdown was a Catholic pit, there were more Catholics ... the Church had a lot to do with the way things went. Whether Betteshanger was something different, whether or not it just happened to have a lot more communist ideas or leaders or what I don't know.¹⁴⁰

The difficulty in substantiating such claims does not, however, stop Malcolm Pitt from going much further in his comment on the role and influence of the Catholic Church in Snowdown Branch affairs:

In Aylesham ... the Roman Catholic priest used to instruct the faithful how to vote in the branch elections to keep the wicked communists out.¹⁴¹

That Snowdown elected moderate leaders while Betteshanger chose militants is also an accurate reflection of the real political attitudes of the miners. Few men were prepared to stand for election, so those that did usually found it relatively easy to be elected. And, once elected it was notoriously difficult to displace them, providing they did their job and were seen to be doing it. Such was the loyalty of the men to their branch officials that anybody who did put up against them were usually easily defeated. The old guard at Snowdown was removed in the 1960s not through the electoral process but the ageing process. Some of the younger, more militant, committee members, notably John McMahon, then began to move up the branch ladder thus opening the way for a new style of union politics at Snowdown, more in line with those at Betteshanger. And once again it was the loyalty of the rank and file to their elected branch officials which determined that Snowdown earned a reputation for being a more

¹⁴⁰ Interview, Terry Jones, 29.12.93.

¹⁴¹ Malcolm Pitt *The World on our Backs: The Kent Miners and the 1972 Miners' Strike*. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), 88.

militant left-wing pit in the latter years of its life. There is no evidence that the men themselves had experienced a wholesale conversion to radicalism. But the political colour of the branch became as red as the famous Kent miners' banner.¹⁴² This loyalty to branch officials is characteristic of miners throughout Britain and was an important determinant in the action of 1984-85, which, as we shall see, was largely directed from below at grass roots level.

The 1950s, which had begun so optimistically for the British coal industry, ended for Kent on high and low notes, the industry sending out rather confused signals. For Snowdown Colliery and Aylesham village there was continued optimism. A new access road had finally been authorised by Kent County Council on Wednesday 20 November 1957¹⁴³ and was officially opened on Monday 6 April 1959.¹⁴⁴ At the opening ceremony A. E. Marwick, Chairman of the ERDC, made a speech which described the present unsatisfactory state of Aylesham, but looked forward to its being developed into a small town, thereby fulfilling its original destiny:

... the new road marked the culmination of long years of effort and was another recognition of the fact that Aylesham was, as yet, only in the initial stages of its development. The unfinished appearance of Aylesham was, of course, obvious ... but it should be understood that the layout of Aylesham was based on the assumption that the township would, *within a few years reach a population of some 20,000...* Aylesham must be developed so as to form a properly balanced community.¹⁴⁵

Snowdown Colliery's future also looked assured with a two million pound restructuring programme finished in August 1959 and the NCB making the following positive assessment:

¹⁴² Conversation with Paddy and Philip Sutcliffe, brothers who were raised in a militant household, thanks to their father who was originally a Yorkshire miner, from Barnsley. They both said that they were "groomed" by John McMahon in the late '60s having been encouraged to take part in the union and to go on week-end and summer school courses at Ruskin College. 27 May 1998.

¹⁴³ *D.E.*, 22.11.57.

¹⁴⁴ *D.E.*, 10.4.59.

¹⁴⁵ *D.E.*, 10.4.59.

... last year Snowdown was the only one of the four Kent pits to increase its output ... a vast change has come over Snowdown - a change which the NCB acknowledges as one of the most encouraging signs in the Kent coalfield.¹⁴⁶

And at the same time, on Friday 14 August 1959, Hugh Gaitskell, the Labour Party leader, went underground at Snowdown, and afterwards made this comment:

I know there is a certain amount of anxiety among the people of Snowdown and Aylesham as to the future of the colliery. But I'm happy to say those fears, to a great extent, have been allayed. There doesn't seem to be any serious danger of Snowdown being closed... I don't think the people of Aylesham have anything to worry about.¹⁴⁷

These assessments, plus the fact that a new power station was being built at Richborough, near *Sandwich*, to be fired by Kent coal, offered a seemingly promising new decade for the Kent miners. However, the contraction of the coal industry, nationally, had already begun and this seemed certain to affect the Kent coalfield. In January 1959, Betteshanger Colliery, which had been consistently missing production targets, was given one year to show that it could succeed. The NCB and the NUM issued a joint statement which listed the major problems at Betteshanger:

... overall and faceworker productivity, average face earnings at the colliery, the levels of proceeds and the losses incurred ... the introduction of new techniques, the use of the agreed conciliation machinery and the level of absenteeism at the colliery.¹⁴⁸

Plumptre added this comment on the problems at Betteshanger and made it quite clear what he believed to be largely responsible for the present situation:

¹⁴⁶ *D.E.*, 14.8.59.

¹⁴⁷ *D.E.*, 21.8.59.

¹⁴⁸ *D.E.*, 30.1.59.

... the colliery had always been a difficult one and difficult collieries tended to lead to difficult relationships.¹⁴⁹

In making this judgement, Plumtre unwittingly stumbled across one of the classic theories of miners' militancy: the parallel between hard working conditions and radical behavioural patterns, the first having a direct and proportional influence on the latter.

In August 1959, British Rail Southern Region announced its intention to convert its rail track to electric and thus to phase out its steam-powered, coal-fired trains. This, not unexpected, announcement still constituted a severe blow for the Kent collieries which had sold 150,000 tons to BR in 1958.¹⁵⁰

But the most important news for the Kent miners, as well as miners throughout the country, came in October 1959 with the publication by the NCB of the *Revised Plan for Coal*. This gave a much less optimistic forecast for the coal industry than the 1950 *Plan for Coal* had given. Apart from a few high-production, low-cost areas (Yorkshire, East and West Midlands, South Wales and Scotland) all other areas were scheduled for contraction.¹⁵¹ The Kent coalfield was to undergo a downsizing in manpower from seven thousand to about 5,500; and unless demand for Kent coal was either maintained or, preferably, increased, then the *Revised Plan* assumed the closure of at least one Kent colliery.¹⁵² The NCB justified this revision of the coal industry in the following terms:

... as recently as three years ago, it was the general view, here and in Europe, that there would be an ever-increasing demand for fuel and power and a continuing shortage of coal. But towards the end of 1957 the picture began to change. A moderate depression in industry reduced the demand for coal... All collieries must eventually die, but the decision to end the life of one prematurely must not be taken without regard to the effect on the community and the social assets dependent on or associated with it.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ *D.E.*, 30.1.59.

¹⁵⁰ *D.E.*, 14.8.59.

¹⁵¹ Ashworth, 253.

¹⁵² *D.E.*, 23.10.59.

¹⁵³ *Revised Plan for Coal*, (NCB, October 1959), *D.E.*, 23.10.59.

A three million pound investment plan for the Kent coalfield would go ahead, however. So much money had been poured into Kent since nationalisation, it was considered cheaper to continue with operations rather than close them down. Clearly the NCB believed a point of no return had been crossed. But, Kent was certainly going to experience some form of contraction and the most likely target for closure was Betteshanger. Jack Dunn led the KNUM in expressing the miners' anger at the situation and blaming the government for favouring oil over coal. The KNUM issued a statement, which, while angry about the government's energy policy, is surprisingly moderate on the general principle of pit closures:

If the NCB were allowed the resources for research, development and service to consumers on a similar scale to the oil combines, then the political and economic power of these private interests could be combatted.

In a price war in a declining market the NCB is fighting an unequal battle and there will be catastrophic consequences unless there is some safeguard to the present standard of living and the future of the British coal industry. The Union will insist that there should be no pit closures until or unless alternative employment, either within the industry, or another industry, is available to fully accommodate the displaced men. The Union is not against technical progress, and if Britain's energy requirements can be met in better ways, and if adequate and satisfactory work can be found for the men, the Union will not be against it... Unless there is co-ordination and planning, there is danger of creating scores of derelict villages and very heavy localised unemployment.¹⁵⁴

Clearly the primary concern of the Union was for the economic circumstances of its members, the theoretical relationship of pit with community, so prevalent in the discussions and disputes of the 1980s, not having fully matured by 1959. The pecuniary consideration of the Union for the men and the subsequent loyalty of the men to the Union seemed to preclude any regard for the women and consequently any feelings for 'community'. The real debate

¹⁵⁴ Kent Minutes, 25.10.59; D.E., 30.10.59.

about the relationship of pit to 'community', the debate at grass roots level, had to wait until the 1970s and '80s and the entry of women into the public arena.

The 1960s - Swings and Roundabouts.

The new decade began ominously for the Kent coalfield. In line with the *Revised Plan for Coal*, the NCB South Eastern Division announced one thousand job losses by the end of 1960, two hundred of them from Snowdown Colliery.¹⁵⁵ In February 1960, 140 compulsory redundancy notices were issued at Betteshanger. The KNUM asked for these to be spread over a six month period when 'natural wastage' would normally see around three hundred men leave the colliery. The NCB refused and 370 Betteshanger miners began a stay-down strike on Thursday 11 February.¹⁵⁶ With the possibility of the three other Kent pits coming out as well, Plumtre issued a firm warning:

... a strike might result in customers going elsewhere for their coal. If they could not rely upon a steady flow of coal from the pit - or the other Kent pits - there were other fields to which the customer could turn.¹⁵⁷

Plumtre need not have worried about any solidarity strikes. Despite the Area Executive recommending an all-out strike in Kent, the other pits continued working normally. Although not stated by the miners in those pits, their decision not to strike was probably based on a combination of resigned acceptance in the face of the *Revised Plan for Coal*, a desire to protect their own jobs, plus a certain amount of resentment at Betteshanger, the largest of the four pits, dominating the Area Union and its policies.

On Monday 15 February, while their colleagues were still down the pit, one thousand Betteshanger miners marched on the NCB offices at Dover and demanded the withdrawal of

¹⁵⁵ D.E., 8.1.60.

¹⁵⁶ D.E., 12.2.60.

¹⁵⁷ D.E., 12.2.60.

the redundancy notices. Plumptre refused, and Lester Magness, the Chairman of the Betteshanger Branch, declared:

Therefore, comrades, the fight will go on to the bitter end... Don't be dispirited because we have not had 100 per cent support from our colleagues in the other three pits. Rest assured that before many days are gone they will be with us.¹⁵⁸

Magness' claim about the other pits must surely have been tainted with a little scepticism - he calls his own men "comrades", and the other Kent miners "colleagues". If he *was* doubtful about their capacity for solidarity then he was right to be. The other pits never came out. The Betteshanger miners were left to fight alone. Indeed, even an appeal to the National Union fell on deaf ears when Ernest Jones declared the action unofficial.¹⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the men on 'stay-down' had surfaced on Wednesday 17 February, after 152 hours down the pit, and the strike continued until Monday 1 March when the men went back to work with only a promise from the NCB that it would investigate the question of redundancies in Kent.¹⁶⁰

The first real test of the Kent miners' solidarity in the face of pit closures had found them wanting. Betteshanger miners and the Area Executive, dominated by men like Dunn, had reacted true to form. The NCB must have expected their action. What the Board needed to know, however, was how the other pits would react. And it got the answer it wanted. In the face of the threat to their own jobs the men of Snowdown, Chislet and Tilmanstone carried on working. The famed militant solidarity of the Kent miners was not yet a tradition in the history of the NUM.

With the Kent coalfield now officially in contraction it came as no surprise to anyone when, in July 1960, the NCB announced that there would be no fifth pit in this Area.¹⁶¹ But it was not all doom and gloom in Kent. On Tuesday 11 April 1961, Plumptre gave a press

¹⁵⁸ *D.E.*, 19.2.60.

¹⁵⁹ *D.E.*, 26.2.60.

¹⁶⁰ *D.E.*, 4.3.60.

¹⁶¹ *D.E.*, 29.7.60.

conference and announced that "the tide had turned in the Kent coalfield."¹⁶² This was as a result of an increase in sales of Kent coal. 1.6 million tons had been sold in 1960 while the coalfield had produced 1.5 million tons in the same year. Consequently, 100,000 tons had had to be sold from stock. The *Dover Express* portrayed a very hopeful picture of the coalfield:

The Board could expect a good customer in the Richborough Power Station which was designed to burn Kent coal exclusively. It would come into operation in the middle of next year and its consumption of Kent coal would ultimately build up to an annual consumption of about 750,000 tons - about half of the coalfield's current annual output ... limited recruitment for the collieries in Kent began again.¹⁶³

But, just six months later Plumptre reported a half-yearly loss of £354,523 for 1961, the worst such loss since 1955.¹⁶⁴ This was not due to any industrial problems or the lack of markets. Rather it was the notoriously unpredictable geological conditions of the coalfield which provoked miners, who could sometimes feel the seams shifting, to comment: "Kent's on the move again."¹⁶⁵ Added to these natural difficulties there were two serious mechanical breakdowns at Betteshanger and Tilmanstone which caused a drastic reduction in output.¹⁶⁶ Once again the talk was of job losses and closures. The new Chairman of the NCB, Alf Robens, visited Tilmanstone on Friday 20 October and informed the men that the future of the Kent coalfield would be reviewed in 1962. He said:

Continued losses would mean the gradual closure of pits one by one. There is a limit to how much you can stand losses in the industry... My visit is an indication that one is looking at the coalfield to see what we can do from a policy point of view, a

¹⁶² *D.E.*, 14.4.61.

¹⁶³ *D.E.*, 14.4.61.

¹⁶⁴ *D.E.*, 6.10.61.

¹⁶⁵ Pitt, 24.

¹⁶⁶ *D.E.*, 6.10.61.

management point of view, and a technical point of view, to make it survive and become an economical and viable asset of the Coal Board.¹⁶⁷

An extremely gloomy prediction for the Kent coalfield was made by John Baker-White, the ex-Conservative MP for Canterbury. He wrote an article for *Invicta* magazine, published in October 1961 by the Canterbury Division Conservative Association. In this article Baker-White forecast that the coalfield would be closed by the winter of 1963 and there would be:

Colliery yards silent and deserted ... miners' clubs places of alarm and foreboding ...
pithead gear silent and rusting.¹⁶⁸

This provoked a storm of protest from both the KNUM and the NCB. Jack Dunn was first off the mark:

But let me make it perfectly clear that, no matter what people like Mr. Baker-White write, the National Union of Mineworkers has every confidence in the Kent coalfield... We hope, in fact we fully expect, that in spite of the adverse geological conditions which are being encountered at the moment, the coming year's figures will show some marked improvement.¹⁶⁹

The NCB, also wishing to impress upon miners and the general public its confidence in the future for Kent, wrote the following week:

The South Eastern Division of the NCB enter 1962 on a note of hope and confidence that the Kent collieries will succeed and will continue to be an integral part of the economic and social life of East Kent... Considerable progress is already being achieved with the mechanisation drive. Only about seventeen per cent of the coalfield's output

¹⁶⁷ *D.E.*, 27.10.61.

¹⁶⁸ *D.E.*, 5.1.62.

¹⁶⁹ Jack Dunn, letter. *D.E.*, 5.1.62.

was obtained from mechanised faces at the beginning of 1961, but this had been increased to more than thirty per cent by the end of the year, and it was planned to increase the mechanised output to fifty per cent before the end of 1962... In the last quarter of 1961 the average face output per manshift (OMS) on mechanised faces was 105cwts. compared with an average OMS on conventional faces of 68cwts.¹⁷⁰

So, once again, Kent miners and their families had reason to be hopeful, although they, more than anyone, understood the nature of the industry. They had experienced good times, in the 1940s and '50s, and uncertain times, in the 1920s-'30s and now again in the 1960s. But it was Betteshanger which was under most threat. In March 1963, the NCB announced the closure of one of the two seams at Betteshanger by the end of the year. However, there would be no job losses; one thousand miners would be either transferred to the remaining seam or to Tilamanstone or Chislet.¹⁷¹ The Betteshanger branch and the KNUM realised that as there were no job losses projected they had very little chance of support from the other Kent pits should they decide to protest. They, therefore, accepted the NCB plan which Dunn said was not even the responsibility of the NCB, but the:

... crazy government economic policy. The closure of No.7 seam at Betteshanger will mean abandoning over thirty million tons of some of the best coal in the country and, if we think of tomorrow as well as today, that, in itself, is nothing short of reckless, diabolical misplanning.¹⁷²

Dunn's anger that coal at Betteshanger would not be mined shows that he was moving towards a socio-political justification of the economics of the coal industry in line with Scargill's "loss without limit" philosophy of the 1980s. If there was coal in a colliery then it should be got whatever the current cost because that cost could never match the investment of

¹⁷⁰ NCB, letter. *D.E.*, 12.1.62.

¹⁷¹ *D.E.*, 1.3.63.

¹⁷² *D.E.*, 8.3.63.

generations of men in the past and the social cost for pit communities without pits in the future. The arguments of the 1980s were beginning to take shape in the 1960s.

Snowdown Colliery and Aylesham village were rather distant from the troubles at Betteshanger. Of course, the miners knew each other, many of them being related in some form or another. But Snowdown was going from strength to strength, and an NCB statement, issued in September 1960, predicted a long and profitable life for the colliery. After describing the reorganisation which had taken place at Snowdown - principally mechanisation of the faces, improved methods of transporting the coal and bringing it to the surface, as well as more advanced methods of ventilating the pit and suppressing dust, it concluded:

The future of Snowdown Colliery is well assured as there are reserves of coal for at least another 100 years. But as the workings get further away from the shafts and deeper seams will have to be worked in the future, the ventilation at these depths will need to be of the highest order and the driving of large roadways and the new fan equipment has been planned with that end in view.¹⁷³

And, while the miners were confident of their economic future, they and their families concentrated their efforts on the physical and social aspects of their village. After having got a community hall and a new access road, all attention was turned towards replacing the wooden junior school. Councillor Hill, Chairman of the Aylesham Parish Council, spoke in typically rugged fashion at a village meeting on Thursday 23 March 1961, called to discuss the school issue:

Whatever we have got in this community we have fought for - and we are determined to fight for this.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ *Snowdown Colliery*, (Dover: NCB South Eastern Division, September 1960).

¹⁷⁴ *D.E.*, 31.3.61.

The *Dover Express*, noting the increasing reputation of Aylesham residents for being outspoken, while continuing to write about them rather patronisingly and treating them as if they were still a race apart, commented:

The Aylesham folk, never slow to raise their voices in protest if they feel they are not getting a 'square deal', made it abundantly clear ... that they intend to fight tooth and nail for a new junior school to replace the 'temporary' wooden building constructed in 1927.¹⁷⁵

In an editorial a few years later, in 1964, the *Dover Express* went even further, encapsulating the local Kent attitude towards Aylesham, and describing the present social conditions and its geographical position which explains why the village and its people were still treated rather suspiciously by the surrounding villages and towns:

A-Y-L-E-S-H-A-M - even today, it seems, that name is something of an enigma capable of conjuring up pictures of the mid- and early-'30s, reviving memories of those early years when an area of farmland fringing the Barham Downs became the new hope of the Kent coalfield... Aylesham 1964 is still an industrial township ... sadly neglected by the politicians and left to make its own way in the no-man's land between Dover and Canterbury... Aylesham is no longer a village fighting for survival. It is a township that has arrived at success on the determination of its people in spite of the reluctance of the authorities to take it seriously.¹⁷⁶

The defensive tone of the editorial shows very clearly just how Aylesham, or more to the point, its people, were regarded as recently as 1964. Indeed, the suspicions continue, to a certain extent, today.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ *D.E.*, 31.3.61.

¹⁷⁶ *D.E.*, 23.10.64.

¹⁷⁷ Conversation with Trevor Hughes, Dover shopkeeper, 25 May 1998.

People who were not from Aylesham had no reason to go there; it was not on the way to anywhere. It still isn't. And if anybody did visit the village, for whatever reason, they were usually struck by the monotonous rows of houses and overgrown grass fields, more in keeping with northern mining settlements but so untypical of south-eastern Kent. Councillor Hill commented on one occasion, with understandable reluctance:

I don't like saying this but if people want to see a first-class example of disgraceful planning they ought to pay us a visit.¹⁷⁸

This comment raised the hackles of Mr. C. J. Fawcett-Martindale, the sole surviving member of the firm of Abercrombie, Archibald and Martindale. In defence of the original plan for Aylesham, and, of course, of his company, he wrote:

... the layout was impressive and typical of Professor Abercrombie's earlier work. The programme started with 1200 houses but unforeseen difficulties arose in some of the pits. The depression of the 1930s brought further troubles. The pits envisaged at Adisham and Wingham never materialised. Only about 400 houses were completed... Aylesham died in its tracks and stands today not as a "first-class example of disgraceful planning", but as a sober warning to enthusiastic planners.¹⁷⁹

The *Dover Express* editorial had been written soon after it was announced by Sir Keith Joseph, Minister for Housing, that the government had no plans for the development of Aylesham either as an 'overspill' for London commuters, or as a township in its own right with independent commercial and industrial activities. This announcement came at a press conference in London on Thursday 19 March 1964, when the government published its South East Study Plan with proposals for the development of Kent.¹⁸⁰ Aylesham had been passed

¹⁷⁸ *D.E.*, 20.12.63.

¹⁷⁹ Mr. C.J. Fawcett-Martindale, letter, *D.E.*, 3.1.64.

¹⁸⁰ *D.E.*, 20.3.64.

over yet again leaving the villagers to their fate and to their isolated, but socially cohesive, community. The seeds of community militancy were being sown.

The village did, however, get its junior school and a second factory. The factory was built by Fontaberry Insulated Buildings Ltd. on Spinney Lane, the original access road to Aylesham, and was operating by June 1966. Employment was provided for six hundred men and women producing sections for Canadian style timber-framed houses for export.¹⁸¹

Obtaining a new junior school proved more problematic as it involved getting money out of the government. The KNUM also took part in the campaign, showing once again how its responsibilities extended beyond the pit gates. Jack Dunn and Lester Magness attended a meeting in Aylesham on Wednesday 23 November 1966 to discuss the issue, and Dunn was "elected to serve on a deputation formed to promote such a campaign."¹⁸² In December 1966, the Department of Education's building plans for 1967 did not include a new school for Aylesham. The Parish Council was furious and Councillor Parry made a highly emotive statement:

This school could be a second Aberfan. The way it is built with a maze of corridors and up on stilts, the way it's heated and the rotten state of the timber make it a terrible fire risk.¹⁸³

The reference to Aberfan was clearly designed to shock. This village in South Wales had suffered an appalling tragedy on the morning of Friday 21 October 1966, when a mountainous coal tip collapsed onto the village. A total of 144 people were killed, including 109 children, in the Pantglas junior school which was in the pathway of the moving slag heap. Councillor Parry's comment was apposite. Aberfan had been a disaster waiting to happen which no amount of compensation, financial or verbal, could assuage. Aylesham junior school, a completely wooden structure, raised off the ground by brick pillars, heated by coke-fired stoves and with a school roll approaching three hundred could have been another disaster story

¹⁸¹ *D.E.*, 29.6.66.

¹⁸² Kent Minutes, 28.11.66.

¹⁸³ *D.E.*, 2.12.66.

with government officials wringing their hands in despair, once the damage was done. On Tuesday 4 April 1967, Anthony Crosland, Minister for Education, announced that a new junior school would be built at Aylesham at a cost of £86,000.¹⁸⁴ The school was completed and in use by June 1969.

The KNUM even tried to get involved in housing policy in Aylesham. In May 1968 all the Coal Board houses in the village, which had, in fact, unbeknown to most residents in the village, been on lease from the ERDC, were returned to the District Council. Dunn wrote to the Board expressing the anger of the Union at the Board's "unilateral action" over this decision.¹⁸⁵ But on this issue corporatism never even saw the light of day. The Board informed the Union that this question was outside of its jurisdiction as the Union had "never been a party to any agreements on colliery housing", consequently the NCB was perfectly within its right to act on this issue without pursuing any consultation procedure.¹⁸⁶

One factor which Bob Goffee believes greatly contributed to an increase in union solidarity in Kent was the introduction of the NPLA. Although he also argues that the lack of competition down the pit decreased the miners' personal sense of job satisfaction now that the 'hustle and the chase' were gone. He also suggests that power-loading faces with their massive ploughs cutting and ripping the coal heightened the miners' feelings of alienation, many of whom hark back to the days of hand-got coal.¹⁸⁷

During the period of negotiations for, and the introduction of, the NPLA, the Kent coalfield was experiencing one of its temporary revivals in its fortunes. By the beginning of 1965 demand for Kent coal was 8000 tons in excess of weekly production. This was due to Richborough and Croyden power stations coming on stream and an increased demand from local paper mills.¹⁸⁸ OMS in Kent had also improved, reaching a record of 33.8cwt. Individual pit figures for 1965 were:

¹⁸⁴ *D.E.*, 7.4.67.

¹⁸⁵ Kent Minutes, 28.4.68.

¹⁸⁶ Kent Minutes, 14.8.68.

¹⁸⁷ R. Goffee, "Kent Miners: Stability and Change in Work and Community, 1927-76", unpublished Ph.D. thesis. University of Kent, 1978. ch. 6.

¹⁸⁸ *D.E.*, 12.2.65.

Betteshanger	39.8cwt.
Chislet	37.8cwt.
Snowdown	30.8cwt.
Tilmanstone	30.8cwt.

Source: *Dover Express*, 8 October 1965.

The annual demand for Kent coal for the year 1965-66 had increased to 1,750,000 tons, 250,000 tons over the annual output, thus causing stocks to be reduced to an all-time low of 100,000 tons.¹⁸⁹ This more optimistic situation caused Merrick Spanton, NCB South Eastern Division General Manager since August 1964, to address the problem of falling manpower in the coalfield:

Continued reports of threats of closure have lowered the morale of men working in the pits - and many have left because of this... This trend must be arrested and, indeed, reversed... We sincerely hope that when these men see the progress which the coalfield continues to make they will rejoin the industry. We shall certainly welcome them back.¹⁹⁰

At the end of 1965 Spanton announced that the Kent coalfield would have exhausted its stocks by March 1966 and for that reason it was planned to expand output by 4000 tons per week.¹⁹¹ However, it would not be kind words and vague promises which would attract men back into the industry, but hard cash. And this was not forthcoming. At Aylesham the colliery remained the principle employer and most people in the village had some familial connection with it, but it was no longer the only job on offer. In 1961 sixty-nine per cent of Aylesham's male population worked at Snowdown Colliery; by 1966 this had reduced to fifty-three per cent, and by 1971 to forty-two per cent.¹⁹² With unemployment hovering around five per cent

¹⁸⁹ *D.E.*, 22.10.65. Note: The NCB 'year' had been changed in 1964 so that it began in March. Statistics are then calculated on a six-monthly basis, March-August and September-February. This was considered to be a more logical and accurate method as these periods corresponded to the summer and winter periods when there were corresponding falls and increases in the demand for coal.

¹⁹⁰ *D.E.*, 22.10.65.

¹⁹¹ *Coal News*, December 1965.

¹⁹² Margaret Lilley, "Aylesham: A Study of the Development of an East Kent Mining Community",

throughout the period, the remaining men found work outside the village mainly with British Rail, the Channel ferries and as labourers in the local towns. Clearly there would have to be more than just job security on offer to tempt men back underground to what, in many cases, as Ashworth has pointed out, would actually have been lower wages:

... in the late sixties miners were not faring well in relation either to prices or to the movement of wages in manufacturing industry.¹⁹³

The NPLA was considered by the NCB as a means of harmonising the complicated wages structure within the industry. The NUM regarded it as a way of uniting further a national union with distinctive and worrying federalistic tendencies. Jack Dunn reported to the Kent Area on the discussions at national level. He informed the KNUM of the justification for the NPLA given by the General Secretary, Will Paynter:

Generally speaking, piecework was an expression of self-exploitation - but as the character of work content had changed dramatically, the basic factor of power loading was now on machine achievement and not the physical effort of the men. This new agreement ... would remove the controversial wage arrangements which in themselves were an injustice to a National Union within a nationalised industry. For the first time, it would ... halt the growing iniquitous widening of wage rates.¹⁹⁴

The NUM leaders at both national and regional level knew that there were going to be difficulties in getting the agreement through. Requiring miners in certain areas to accept lower percentage pay rises than others, and in some cases to forgo pay rises, was stretching already loose comradely ties. Dunn, with an eye on the possibility of increased solidarity in the Union, attempted to persuade his own Area of the advantages of such a system, appealing not to the miners' solidarity, but to their pecuniary nature:

unpublished B.Ed. dissertation, Eastbourne College of Education, April 1974.

¹⁹³ Ashworth, 295.

¹⁹⁴ Kent Minutes, 25.4.66.

Scotland had already been operating a daywage agreement for pieceworkers for eighteen months and in fact production had increased. Fifty-five per cent of all workers were even now on daywage rates and no-one inferred that they limited their efforts as a result. Most unofficial strikes arose out of wage difficulties and created bad relationships between officials and men, but by the introduction of this agreement, this would be eliminated... It was inevitable that some workers would suffer a small loss here and there but the level of average wages would be increased as a result of the agreement.¹⁹⁵

The national vote to accept the NPLA was, as we know, very narrow: 269,000 for and 236,000 against. (cf. chap. 3). The vote in Kent was equally close, although no precise figures are given:

Betteshanger: accepted by a majority vote.

Chislet: accepted by a majority vote.

Tilmanstone: accepted by a majority vote.

Snowdown: rejected by a majority vote.

Source: Kent Area Minutes, 2 May 1966.

That Snowdown was the only Kent colliery to reject the agreement was once again in line with its moderate reputation and its sense of apartness, even from other miners. But Snowdown miners did abide by the majority decision; they had just as highly a developed sense of democracy as other miners, including those in Leicestershire, despite what was said about them. Thus the KNUM was able to pass the following brief resolution knowing that all Kent miners would accept it:

That the proposed NPLA be accepted and the National Union to be informed accordingly.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Kent Minutes, 25.4.66.

¹⁹⁶ Kent Minutes, 2.5.66.

The NPLA was, then, implemented on Monday 6 June 1966, with neither Areas nor individual collieries being allowed to opt out. It is somewhat ironic that Kent generally, and Snowdown Colliery in particular, as we shall see, was to the fore in the battle to preserve the NPLA from the re-introduction of productivity schemes in 1977-78, when Area and colliery opt-outs from the NPLA were encouraged. However, once the NPLA was in force, Kent miners accepted it with few problems. Besides they had more pressing concerns which had reappeared: threatened pit closures.

On Tuesday 25 July 1967, Dunn met with Jack Lewis, the new Area General Manager since March, and Norman Siddall, the NCB Director-General of Production. The meeting was solely to discuss the future of the Kent Coalfield, and Siddall informed the meeting that he was:

... somewhat pessimistic about the prospect of Kent maintaining four collieries particularly in view of the economics of the coalfield.¹⁹⁷

Dunn, speaking at an Area Conference on Saturday 19 August, reiterated the thoughts of Siddall and made a thinly veiled attack on the workforce. The tone of frustration in his speech is evident as he attempts to impress upon the men not only their responsibility to keep the coalfield open, but also their obligations to the wider mining community:

Bearing in mind the economics of the coalfield they could not expect immunity, Kent could have no special protection... They must have not only a collective responsibility but an individual, personal one for all their members ... retired ... disabled and their families. The future security of the coalfield was of utmost importance to all and they must do nothing to prejudice its future ... in spite of increased mechanisation and effort, face output for the three months in 1967 was 4cwts. less than the comparable period in 1966... While it might be completely true that bad conditions or poor geological factors

¹⁹⁷ Kent Minutes, 14.8.67.

contributed to the position, it could not be used as an excuse or defence - it would become a reason for closures.¹⁹⁸

Some miners present called for union action to force the government into a change of energy policy. Perhaps not surprisingly the loudest of these calls came from Betteshanger and equally unsurprisingly there were opposing demands from Snowdown miners, one of whom, J. Bence, insisted that the discussion should stick to the industrial implications and not become political.¹⁹⁹ However, like the Leicestershire miners, these Snowdown miners were being naïve. The issue was political as well as economic whether they liked it or not. Successive governments, since 1957, had made very clear decisions to move away from home-based coal towards oil, gas, nuclear power and coal imports. Short-term gain was the prevailing philosophy, ignoring the massive social and economic costs of pit closures and the very real danger of becoming over-reliant upon imports from politically sensitive areas. The wars in the Middle East in 1967 and 1973 briefly alerted governments to such dangers - but only briefly.

The KNUM found involvement in politics irresistible as it awaited the publication of the government's White Paper on fuel policy. In October 1967, Tilmanstone was under threat of closure over its method of saline water disposal into the chalk strata. The Thanet Water Board (TWB) wanted the NCB to construct a pipeline within two years to carry the water out to sea. Costs for this were estimated at £400,000.²⁰⁰ Jack Lewis issued a statement to the unions at a Special Area Conference:

For some years the traditional method of disposal of Tilmanstone minewater on to the chalk in the Eastry area has been questioned by the Thanet Water Board who claimed that it affected an essential area of water resources ... the TWB has been pressing the NCB for a decision on the construction of a pipeline to take the minewater to the sea... The NCB have told the TWB that they are unable to take a decision to spend a large sum of capital on the pipeline until the Government's Fuel Policy is announced in the

¹⁹⁸ Kent Minutes, 19.8.67.

¹⁹⁹ Kent Minutes, 19.8.67.

²⁰⁰ D.E., 27.10.67.

White paper later this month and an opportunity ... has been had to assess the future market available for Tilmanstone Colliery.²⁰¹

Dunn could not accept that the NCB did not know already what was in the White Paper and predicted that in the near future even economically viable pits would have to be closed. He was not wrong. The White Paper was published on Tuesday 14 November, and as the unions had expected there was to be a reduction in coal output with more emphasis on North Sea gas, nuclear power, hydro-electricity and oil imports.²⁰² Any talk now of the mining unions not having a legitimate interest in the politics of energy rapidly dissipated. The KNUM demanded that David Ennals²⁰³ vote against the White Paper, and Magness informed a Special Area Conference that if Ennals:

... voted against the miners then the Union would put up a candidate against him at the next General Election. If the Dover Constituency Labour Party would not accept this, then he was prepared to stand himself and use his savings for it... [Ennals should] be prepared to resign his Government post if necessary in order to support the miners on the floor of the House of Commons.²⁰⁴

That a miner, sponsored by the NUM, should stand for parliament was, of course, a long established tradition. The NUM's tardy affiliation to the Labour Party in 1909, had guaranteed the Party an extra dozen or so seats. But that a miner should stand against a sitting *Labour* MP was unheard of except in the special circumstances of the 1930s, when the Party itself was split. However, such potentially damaging action (Magness would probably have split the Labour vote in what was a marginal constituency, thereby allowing a Conservative to take the seat) was unnecessary. On Saturday 18 November, it was announced by the

²⁰¹ Kent Minutes, 23.10.67.

²⁰² *D.E.*, 17.11.67.

²⁰³ Ennals was the Labour MP for Dover and Deal, elected in 1964 and re-elected in 1966. By November 1967 he was a junior minister in the Ministry of Defence.

²⁰⁴ Kent Minutes, 17.11.67.

Government that the pound would be devalued by 14.3 per cent from \$2.80 to \$2.40.²⁰⁵ This *volte-face* in government financial policy led to the White Paper being withdrawn on Wednesday 22 November, in order to review the effects of devaluation on oil imports. Ennals had been temporarily let off the hook, but Dunn was cynical:

... the White Paper had not been withdrawn ... no change in policy had been made; it would simply be reviewed in the light of devaluation. Unless sufficient pressure could be brought to bear upon the Government, the future of the coal industry - especially in Kent, was in extreme jeopardy.²⁰⁶

In the midst of the sterling crisis the government's Coal Industry Bill was passing through its various stages. During the Second Reading, on Tuesday 28 November, it was left to a Conservative, John Wells, MP for Maidstone to speak up for the Kent coalfield and the beleaguered Kent miners:

If ... there are to be any closures in the Kent coalfield I hope they will be only Tilmanstone and Chislet. I trust that we shall have a firm assurance from the Parliamentary Secretary that the other two collieries, Betteshanger and Snowdown will be definitely kept open for the foreseeable future... I hope that the Government will not jump to the false conclusion that, because there is full employment in most of the South-East, all is well in the extreme east of Kent.²⁰⁷

The debate on the government's energy policy continued in Kent fuelled by speculation that Tilmanstone was to be closed. On Saturday 16 December, there was a packed meeting of miners at Deal with David Ennals and Will Paynter. Ennals refused to criticise the government,

²⁰⁵ Dennis Healey, *The Time of my Life*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 333-34.

²⁰⁶ Kent Minutes, 30.11.67.

²⁰⁷ Hansard. Official Report 5th Series: Parliamentary Debates. House of Commons. Vol. 755, Tuesday 28 November 1967, col. 325-26.

but the KNUM passed a resolution, unopposed by the miners, which illustrates how far the Kent Union had gone down the political path in just a few years:

Unless Government policy is changed, decreasing morale and confidence will lead to a virtual collapse of the coal industry with possible catastrophic consequences to the nation's economy. The Middle-East situation demonstrates conclusively the absolute danger to the British Economy of increased dependence upon imported fuel.²⁰⁸

Paynter, a respected left-wing member of the NUM Executive, was always more interested in preserving jobs than increasing miners' wages. He told the assembled audience:

But we say this Government has not got its sums right in assessing what is cheap power and what is not cheap power... The cost of nuclear power had not been proved and the cost of military expenditure protecting the oil interests in the Middle East were not included in the price of imported oil. This White Paper strengthens private enterprise at the expense of the nationalised industries.²⁰⁹

The political nature of the debate could no longer be denied. And if the NUM generally, and specific Areas like Kent, became politicised during this period then government had only itself to blame. Consistent downgrading of the importance of coal to the economy with the subsequent reduction in wages in line with inflation and in comparison with other industries, pushed the miners into a corner from which they could only come out fighting. And Kent, which had over twenty years of relatively peaceful industrial relations, would be at the forefront of the reaction to energy and wages policy. The NCB was not the target - the government was.

At the end of 1967, on Thursday 28 December, Tilmanstone Colliery was officially placed *in jeopardy*, which meant it now had three months to meet a set weekly output target.

²⁰⁸ *D.E.*, 22.12.67.

²⁰⁹ *Coal News*, January 1968; *D.E.*, 22.12.67.

OMS, averaging 25-30cwt. had to reach 49cwt. by the end of March 1968.²¹⁰ The situation was now very serious and Geoffrey Moore, a Tilmanstone miner, was brief but lucid in his understanding of the relationship between pit and community:

The pit is the life of Elvington. Take away that life and you've got a ghost village.²¹¹

Jack Lewis, however, made a statement to the Union intimating that the *jeopardy* notice did not mean inevitable closure:

... the Board indicated that Tilmanstone had a potential for levels of productivity in excess of the average for the Kent coalfield or indeed Great Britain as a whole.²¹²

In February 1968, the KNUM produced a document outlining the economic history of the nationalised coal industry, the importance of Kent coal to the local economy and a critique of the government's increasing dependence on nuclear power, natural gas and oil.²¹³ It is a very well-written and reasoned analysis of the situation, past, present and future showing that the KNUM had arrived at a mature understanding of the economics of its own industry. It argues the case for coal, of course, but not in a one-sided manner. The reality of the situation, that coal is no longer the sole source of energy that it once was, is admitted:

As a Union we are not unaware that the pattern of life and society as well as industry is in process of constant change and it would be both futile and wrong as well as against the national interest to simply argue the case for Coal that only reflected a sectional interest.²¹⁴

²¹⁰ D.E., 29.12.67.

²¹¹ D.E., 29.12.67.

²¹² Kent Minutes, 28.12.67.

²¹³ *Government Fuel Policy: Kent Coalfield*, (NUM Kent Area, 27 February 1968).

²¹⁴ *Government Fuel Policy: Kent Coalfield*.

However, the document is keen to point out just how economical British coal is and how politically safe it is in comparison with oil from the Middle East, an increasingly volatile area. The KNUM shows an awareness of socio-economic conditions in that region which the government was ignoring not at its own peril, but, ironically, that of the nation's.

We do not think it necessary to be political theoreticians to estimate that the people of the Middle East who like ourselves are anxious to assure and improve standards of living, will in fact demand just that. This eventually can change the whole relationship of oil prices with other fuels, and long term, represents a critical economic factor in the costing of the Nation's Fuel.²¹⁵

The document ends with a call for a change in government fuel policy in favour of indigenous resources, no colliery closures except on grounds of exhaustion and a fairer financial regime for the NCB with regard to interest repayments. These proposals also formed the basis of a Kent resolution to be presented to the NUM Annual Conference.²¹⁶ Rather surprisingly, perhaps, the resolution was defeated by Conference, the demand for no pit closures except through exhaustion being considered unreasonable.²¹⁷

With the threat of closure hanging over their heads the Tilmanstone miners began to make an enormous effort to increase output. They were assisted by two new faces being opened in February and a stream of good quality coal coming from the Milyard seam. In the same month Edith Hadden, the first woman President of Dover Trades Council, sent a resolution to the Minister of Power:

The fullest use of coal is not only in the interests of the miners - but the best interests of the British economy... We are of the opinion that the devaluation of the pound and

²¹⁵ *Government Fuel Policy: Kent Coalfield.*

²¹⁶ Kent Minutes, 26.2.68.

²¹⁷ Kent Minutes, 10.7.68.

the uncertainty of the Middle East situation clearly indicates the absolute danger to the British economy of increased dependency on imported fuel.²¹⁸

By the end of February 1968, OMS had increased at Tilmanstone to 34cwt.²¹⁹ Less than a month later this had risen further to 42.5cwt., and Magness spoke with new confidence about the situation at Tilmanstone:

The men at Tilmanstone have made a tremendous effort and are succeeding. Now the other three pits will have to pull up their socks to keep up with manshift output at Tilmanstone.²²⁰

By the beginning of April OMS had reached a record 51cwt. and Ennals asked for the *jeopardy* notice to be withdrawn. But the NCB would only agree to a further two month reprieve.²²¹ The Tilmanstone miners continued their efforts and maintained their high production levels aided by good geological conditions. Meanwhile, Chislet miners were not having so much luck, and the NCB began to look seriously at the colliery's future:

We have gone to Chislet and put forward to them a proposal for a revised method of working, to deal with the geological conditions... We have said this method must be successful for the pit to remain open.²²²

On 12 June, the *jeopardy* notice at Tilmanstone was lifted, the NCB releasing a press statement:

On 28 December 1967 the Board advised representatives of the Unions concerned that the future of Tilmanstone Colliery was in jeopardy because of heavy losses running at

²¹⁸ *Coal News*, February, 1968.

²¹⁹ *D.E.*, 1.3.68.

²²⁰ *D.E.*, 29.3.68.

²²¹ *D.E.*, 26.4.68.

²²² *D.E.*, 31.5.68.

an annual rate in excess of £500,000... Improved results have continued to be achieved at Tilmanstone and the Board are very pleased to announce that the *jeopardy* notice has been removed.²²³

And, as if to reiterate the new belief in the pit, a Tilmanstone miner, Joe Holmes, was elected Area President, taking up his duties on 1 July.²²⁴ However, with the pressure on Tilmanstone relieved, nobody seriously believed that four pits in Kent was a viable proposition. NCB statistics for the year 1967-68 showed yet another enormous loss - £1,744,000 for the Kent coalfield with output down to 1,454,000 tons. In one of his first public statements since becoming Area President, Holmes sounded rather less than convincing:

We knew there was going to be a heavy loss but the extent of it was a big shock to us... But I am confident that the progress now being made will result in the figures for the next six months going a long way to wiping out the losses during the last six months.²²⁵

Holmes' 'confidence' was misplaced. For the six month period of March-September 1968, the NCB announced losses of £1,012,000 with output at 640,000 tons.²²⁶ On 10 December Chislet Colliery was officially placed *in jeopardy* with the statutory three months to prove its viability. But there was a distinct lack of confidence about saving the pit this time, shown by the downbeat manner in which Dunn, usually so forceful, treated the question at an Area Conference meeting:

Mr. Dunn reported that arising from a recent meeting he had with the Industrial relations Member of the Board, Sir William Webber, it had been suggested that one pit in Kent might have to close and it could well be Chislet... He [Dunn] had expressed his complete disagreement with his conclusions.²²⁷

²²³ NCB South Eastern Division, *Press Statement*, 12 June 1968.

²²⁴ Kent Minutes. 29.5.68.

²²⁵ *D.E.*, 20.9.68.

²²⁶ *D.E.*, 27.12.68.

²²⁷ Kent Minutes. 17.12.68.

Disagreement, yes, but no talk or threat of industrial action. And so it was that the end of the sixties saw the beginning of the end for the Kent coalfield. In April 1969, the NCB announced that Chislet would close at the end of July.²²⁸ There were to be no compulsory redundancies, the workforce "to be labour-cannibalised to provide workers for the other three Kent pits."²²⁹ Hardly a murmur of protest was heard from the KNUM, Dunn expressing concern about the social consequences of closure, but not wishing to take any action that might endanger the prospects of the remaining three collieries. Chislet duly closed in July 1969, and those of its miners who wished were transferred. 168 went to Snowdown Colliery, among whom was a young firebrand Communist, Jack Collins, who, along with Dunn, helped to push the Kent miners along the militant path for which they became famous.

Early signs of Kent's renewed interest in direct action came towards the end of 1969 with the unofficial strikes which began in Yorkshire and looked like they would spread into a national strike. Ashworth has shown that the mining industry was "decreasingly strike prone" from the late 1950s throughout most of the 1960s.²³⁰ This at a time when strikes in other industries were on the increase. Reasons given for the miners' more moderate behaviour centre upon the corporatist philosophy which prevailed and was made easier by so many men in management having started their careers at the pit bottom, literally working their way up. Also, the miners themselves are credited with an appreciation of the reality of an industry in contraction and the speeding up of that process which would result from widespread industrial action. However, the NPLA agreement, besides creating a simplified national wages structure, also generated a greater sense of homogeneity within the NUM. Miners all over the country now knew precisely what each other was earning and there was an increased consciousness of worker, if not class, solidarity.

The issue at stake in October 1969 was pay and hours. The NUM demanded a minimum weekly wage of £15 for surface workers and £16 for underground workers. It also wanted surface workers to have a maximum forty-hour week, including meal times. The NCB conceded the wage claim but not the surfacemen's hours. Unofficial strike action began in the

²²⁸ NCB South Eastern Division, *Press Statement*, 17.4.69.

²²⁹ *D.E.*, 25.4.69.

²³⁰ Ashworth, 299-300.

Yorkshire coalfield on Monday 13 October. It was widespread and well supported. In Kent, Jack Dunn announced:

Unless a satisfactory solution is obtained this week-end our Executive recommend that work should stop at 6 a. m. on Monday. It will be an indefinite strike.²³¹

Pithead meetings were held at the three Kent pits on Thursday 16 October in order to explain the issues to the rank-and-file. Tilmanstone and Betteshanger Collieries voted for strike action but Snowdown Colliery postponed its vote until the following Thursday on a "wait and see" basis.²³² However, on Tuesday 21 October the KNUM Executive learned that the NCB had not agreed to the hours issue and, therefore, recommended strike action which all three collieries obeyed.²³³ The strike did not last long, as the Yorkshire men agreed, on Saturday 25 October, to go back to work the following Monday, pending talks. Kent did likewise.

This was a brief but important episode in the history of the Kent coalfield. For the first time since nationalisation it had participated in strike action which had not been called, initially, by its own Area. Even the traditionally reticent Snowdown miners had come out. Clearly there had been a mood swing in Kent. The miners had shown they were not afraid to take action, when pushed, and after October 1969 they had acquired a taste for it. It would not be so difficult the next time now that a psychological barrier had been breached. The *Dover Express* understood well the root cause of the growing discontent in this isolated south-eastern coalfield:

In June 1966, the national minimum for a shift was increased to 65s. Kent miners at that time were getting 87s.5d. Since then there have been four national increases - including the present agreement - and the Kent men have had only a 4s.8d. a shift rise, compared with the 17s.10d. for some other areas.²³⁴

²³¹ *D.E.*, 17.10.69.

²³² *D.E.*, 24.10.69.

²³³ *D.E.*, 24.10.69.

²³⁴ *D.E.*, 31.10.69.

Obviously this situation could not continue. The Kent miners were being threatened with closure while at the same time their wages were being held back. They were angry and frustrated, and that frustration was at the point of exploding into action.

The 1970s - A New Diet for the Kent Miners.

The new decade began where the old one had left off: with the miners, nationally, in militant mood over pay, and Kent prepared to support industrial action. Indeed, at times in this decade, the KNUM took the lead as it did over opposition to the incentive scheme. Snowdown miners also began to exhibit an increasing willingness to take industrial action.

On Friday 15 May three Snowdown colliers were fined £2 each for "lack of effort" leading to reduced output.²³⁵ The Branch officials objected, and it was agreed to pay the men their wages, but downgraded from the NPLA. The afternoon shift that day struck in protest, blaming lack of supplies and faulty equipment for the inadvertant 'go-slow'. They also pointed out that one of the three men had actually been injured by his machine.²³⁶ A special Branch meeting was held on Tuesday 19 May, where it was decided to strike until full NPLA was restored to the men, with no punishment. Management agreed to the first demand but not the second, and a strike ensued. This lasted until Wednesday 27 May when management agreed to withdraw the action and pay full wages pending a remedial enquiry. Hobart House was also showing concern about the apparent lack of communication between management and men at Snowdown.²³⁷ The inspection took place on Monday 1 June, and it found faults in machinery and equipment thereby constituting "bad pit practices".²³⁸ Consequently, the NCB Area General Manager ordered the disciplinary action to be dropped, a spokesman stating:

In the interests of all the men and the pit the Board has decided not to impose a fine on the three men concerned.²³⁹

²³⁵ *D.E.*, 29.5.70.

²³⁶ *Kent Minutes*, 2.6.70.

²³⁷ *D.E.*, 29.5.70.

²³⁸ *Kent Minutes*, 2.6.70.

²³⁹ *D.E.*, 5.6.70.

The Snowdown miners had won their first serious dispute with local management since nationalisation. It was a lesson well learnt, not just about the potential of a united workforce, but also about the *capacity for management to oppose the men*. The coal industry evidently still had two sides, as men like Dunn had been saying for years. Now Snowdown was waking up to this idea, and the Branch ballot of June 1970 reflected the men's anger over the recent dispute, and their growing militancy, with the election of a known left-winger as Secretary: John McMahan.²⁴⁰

Before Kent was involved in any further industrial action a decision by the newly elected Conservative Government rocked the coalfield and resurrected fears that all three pits would be closed. This was the decision to convert Richborough Power Station to oil burning. The KNUM was not only worried about the serious loss of a very important customer for Kent coal, but was also furious about the total lack of consultation with the Union. Dunn summed up the mood of the men:

We are very angry that the Board and the Ministry have obviously been in discussion over this without consulting us. In the mining industry there should be the closest liaison and consultation about important policy matters such as this. It is disgraceful that such a thing could be contemplated; and apparently agreed in principle, without the Union being invited to consultations at any level.²⁴¹

Once again there had been a serious breakdown of communications between management and men. Deliberate or not, management's lack of negotiations with the Union contributed to a local collapse in corporatism and a heightened sense of alienation felt by the Union. This could only but lead to an intensification of the old 'them and us' interpretation of industrial relations thereby increasing union hostility. On 22 July the KNUM sent a strong protest to the Board and received a reply that the Union would be consulted at all times.²⁴² This can only have served to have further rubbed salt into the wound. Assurances were also

²⁴⁰ Kent Minutes, 22.6.70.

²⁴¹ D.E., 17.7.70.

²⁴² Kent Minutes, 13.8.70.

given that the Kent coalfield would not suffer as a result of this decision as there was an increasing demand for coking coal, for the manufacture of steel, for which Kent coal was ideal.

The NCB stated:

We are satisfied that the future of the coalfield will not be affected... There is a worldwide shortage of ... coking blender. We are therefore actively considering plans to use Kent coal for this purpose.²⁴³

The KNUM accepted the truth of this but were not consoled:

The Kent Officials accepted there was a worldwide shortage of coking coal but pointed out that steel companies were investigating alternatives, and in this situation where Kent was losing their markets in the paper and cement industries they considered they should have some additional security.²⁴⁴

The KNUM also issued a press statement:

There is little doubt that the failure to afford consultation (which in the Mining Industry is a statutory and elementary right) has unnecessarily caused alarm in the mining community.²⁴⁵

The Union might also have added the increased propensity for militancy in those communities as well. Corporatism, the collapse of which is at the centre of so many debates concerning 1984-85, was clearly showing signs of terminal fatigue in Kent at the beginning of the 1970s. In September a Special Conference passed a four-point resolution condemning the NCB/Government for denying the "statutory and the elementary entitlement" to consultation; demanding dual-firing capacity at Richborough; welcoming the new coking market in the steel

²⁴³ *D.E.*, 24.7.70.

²⁴⁴ Kent Minutes, 19.8.70.

²⁴⁵ NUM Kent Area: *Press Statement*, 20.8.70.

industry; calling for the examination of sales of Kent coal in the smokeless fuel market.²⁴⁶ Confidence in the Board was clearly at a low ebb, and with a Conservative government once again in office, the miners felt no reason to constrain themselves should the opportunity present itself. It was not long in coming.

The NUM Annual Conference in 1970 had passed resolutions demanding weekly wage rates of £20 (surface), £22 (underground) and £30 (NPLA). Conference also recommended strike action if the wage demand was not conceded. The Joint National Negotiating Committee (JNNC) met on 16 September, and, despite the very real threat of national strike action, the NCB rejected the pay claim. Joe Burke, the Kent National Delegate present at the meeting, reported back to his Area on the mood of the meeting:

... this was a very dramatic meeting - for the first occasion since 1926 they were confronted with the fact that the Union had unanimously rejected the Board's offer ... it was unanimously agreed that a national ballot should be taken on the NEC recommendation for strike action.²⁴⁷

The KNUM seized upon this opportunity to confront the Board which in recent months had shown such disdain for the Union after having received full co-operation over attempts to increase production and the closure of Chislet Colliery. A resolution was passed, the tone of which makes it obvious in which direction the KNUM was heading:

The Area Conference enthusiastically welcomes the NEC recommendation for strike action. Conference agrees that every effort should be made to win members' support for strike action.²⁴⁸

Balloting took place around the coalfields in October, and when the national results were announced on 23 October a majority had voted for strike action, 55 per cent. But this was

²⁴⁶ *D.E.*, 4.9.70.

²⁴⁷ Kent Minutes, 18.9.70.

²⁴⁸ Kent Minutes, 18.9.70.

short of the 66.6 per cent required under Rule 43. The Kent Area results were rather more convincing:

	For	Against
Betteshanger	1078	239
Snowdown	412	400
Tilmanstone	358	265
Total	1848(67.2%)	904(32.8%)

NUM Kent Area Minutes, 26 October 1970.

Snowdown Colliery was still dragging its feet in comparison with the other two collieries, but had voted in favour of strike action and would, of course, abide by the Area vote. Kent, like other areas, such as Scotland, South Wales and Yorkshire, was now straining at the leash but decided to wait in order to see what came of a further meeting between the NUM National Executive and the NCB on 27 October. The NCB increased its offer by ten shillings a week for all men, and, while the NEC prevaricated, miners throughout the Yorkshire coalfield were walking out on unofficial strike. By the end of October, 20,000 Yorkshire miners were on strike.²⁴⁹ The strike quickly spread into Scotland and South Wales, and on 6 November, the KNUM held a Special Area Executive Meeting and passed the following resolution:

That it be recommended to the Area Conference that strike action be taken in favour of the justified wage demand... Conference welcomes the action of members in other Areas in support of our just wage demand and calls upon all members in the Kent Area to support strike action.²⁵⁰

Once again Kent miners voted for strike action, and their Area Union called them out on strike on Wednesday 11 November. There were some reports of a handful of Snowdown miners trying to go to work but who were stopped at the pit gates and persuaded to return

²⁴⁹ Andrew Taylor, *The Politics of the Yorkshire Miners*, (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 198.

²⁵⁰ Kent Minutes, 6.11.70.

home.²⁵¹ The *Dover Express*, up till then reasonably sympathetic to the miners' case, began to adopt a more hostile line of reporting. Two Aylesham miners' wives were reported, their sentiments about the strike being quite clear. Kath Loomer commented:

I just do not know how I am going to manage... If it turns into a long strike we will be forced to go out to work while our husbands take over our roles at home and look after the children... Is it worth it?²⁵²

Kath Loomer came to regret such sentiments. She was one of the leading women in the Aylesham Women's Support Group in 1984-85 and supported her husband and two sons on strike for over a year. Such reticence as she expressed in 1970 never entered her head in 1984-85, and if *her* men had to do some housework, then so be it.

The second Aylesham miner's wife, quoted by the *Dover Express*, is unnamed, but she goes even further than Kath Loomer in her criticism of the strike:

... is unofficial striking the answer? That is only going to hurt the miners' families and could eventually cause Snowdown to close down.²⁵³

This woman expresses precisely the NCB argument, clearly a cogent one for Snowdown miners. And the seeming lack of support from Aylesham women, or at least the readiness for two of them to speak out against the action in 1970 is remarkable in the light of their frontline role in 1984-85. Indeed, as we shall see, the women were, like the men, becoming more militant as the 1970s progressed, a direct result of having to juggle with a dwindling wage packet. By 1972 and 1974, the women, as well as the men, had had enough and were ready to fight.

The *Dover Express*, in an editorial entitled "What We Think", gave this analysis of the 1970 strike action and the position of the Kent coalfield:

²⁵¹ *D.E.*, 13.11.70.

²⁵² *D.E.*, 13.11.70.

²⁵³ *D.E.*, 13.11.70.

There is nothing immoral in a miner deciding to go on strike in support of a wages claim... Miners in other, highly productive coalfields are bargaining from a position of strength ... in Wales the traditional Welsh unity is now conditioned by a confidence in the future of fewer pits in a contracting industry... In Kent the strike is a luxury the men cannot, at this moment, afford... Everything is stacked against the Kent miners... There is an understrength labour force, geological conditions are seldom favourable, morale is low and the coalfield is losing millions a year. Add to this the present disruption of output and from a common sense point of view it would seem better for the NCB to pour all its resources into one colliery. No-one wants to see this happen but by striking the Kent men are reducing their chances of avoiding it.²⁵⁴

And, showing a complete lack of understanding of the principles of trade unionism and united action the *Express* concludes its editorial with this call to self-interest:

And knowing that whatever the final national settlement figure they will get their share, they could have deferred striking for a month to be sure that what they throw away is going to be less than they eventually receive.²⁵⁵

It has, of course, always been true that striking is an expensive action for any worker, especially if the action lasts for more than a couple of weeks. Even if the workers' demands are met, the extra few pounds will not make-up for the lost wages. But that is missing the point. In a free-market economy, governed by supply and demand, the trade union exists largely to bargain the highest price for the labour of its members. As labour is the one thing the unions possess, then it is natural for them to use the threat of its withdrawal as a weapon if they feel the labour price has fallen below an acceptable level. This basic law of natural economics was understood by the English peasantry as long ago as the mid-fourteenth century, after the Black Death had ravaged the countryside causing a shortage in the labour force and a subsequent

²⁵⁴ "What We Think," editorial, *D.E.*, 13.11.70.

²⁵⁵ "What We Think," editorial, *D.E.*, 13.11.70.

demand by the peasants for an increase in wages. The employers, with representation in parliament, reacted in typical fashion passing the Statute of Labourers (1351), imposing a ceiling on wages. Philip Ziegler has written of that episode:

But, though any analogy to the twentieth century would be ridiculous, it must be admitted that, as prices and incomes policies go, the fourteenth-century freeze was remarkably successful.²⁵⁶

And, since the Industrial Revolution, history is littered with examples of employers acting collectively to reduce wages by the simple expedient of sacking or locking-out the workforce. The key word, of course, is *collective*, and by encouraging the Kent miners to continue working while their colleagues elsewhere were striking, and then to benefit from their action by taking the higher wages won, the *Dover Express* was asking them to betray the fundamental principle of "... unity, that completeness of the organisation of trade unions which is the foundation of their strength."²⁵⁷

Jack Dunn, feeling the *Dover Express* needed a lesson in the principles of trade unionism, replied to their editorial:

As a Union we are compelled to do our work for our members on the basis of collective decisions ... by a majority of our members... WE DO NOT WANT OR LIKE STRIKES and our record will bear testimony to this, but when years of tolerance, forbearing and conciliation lead to a drastic reduction in the living standards of our members AND we are unable to obtain justice by conciliatory means, we have no option but to stand and fight. This is what trade unionism is about.²⁵⁸

However, by the time Dunn's riposte was published, the strike had collapsed and the NCB offer accepted. On 17 November, the KNUM had recommended a return to work but a

²⁵⁶ Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death*, (London: The Folio Society, 1997), 217.

²⁵⁷ Allan Flanders, "What are Trade Unions For?" in McCarthy, (ed.), 26-34.

²⁵⁸ Jack Dunn, letter, *D.E.* 27.11.70.

rejection of the NCB pay offer in the forthcoming ballot. Dunn was not hopeful of getting a majority.²⁵⁹ In fact he was wrong; Kent did vote against the offer, but only marginally:

1,221 for the NCB offer.

1,299 against the NCB offer.

Source: *Dover Express*, 4 December 1970.

But nationally there was a large majority in favour of the offer:

For 158,239

Against 82,079.

Source: NUM Kent Area Minutes, 1 December 1970.

The miners were back at work, but were not happy. The successive 'October Revolutions' had largely failed in their objective of increased wages. But they had had the inadvertant success of bringing miners throughout the British coalfield into a form of collective action not seen since 1926. And the tiny Kent coalfield had been included and had acquired the taste for union militancy on a national level. The next time such an opportunity for action came its way the Kent Area would make sure its voice was heard.

Kent Miners in 1972 and 1974: The Mouse that Roared.

The new militant mood in the Kent coalfield was reflected in the election of Jack Collins, in April 1971, as the Kent national delegate.²⁶⁰ And, despite a further massive loss reported for the year 1970-71 - £2,132,000, bringing the total losses for the Kent coalfield since Vesting Day to £20,600,000,²⁶¹ the Kent miners gave enthusiastic support to the overtime ban, called in October 1971, in support of their new wage claim. Indeed, it was the

²⁵⁹ *D.E.*, 20.11.70.

²⁶⁰ *D.E.*, 23.4.71.

²⁶¹ *D.E.*, 10.9.71.

Kent Area which seconded the resolution at the Annual Conference to amend Rule 43 and reduce the majority required for a national strike to fifty-five per cent. The resolution was carried by a card vote of 215 votes to 98.²⁶² Most observers agreed that this decision made a national miners' strike virtually inevitable.

With the overtime ban in full operation from 1 November, the Kent Union leaders set about convincing the men of the need for an overwhelming majority in favour of strike action in the coming ballot. A public meeting was held in Deal, on Sunday 14 November, to be addressed by Lawrence Daly, General Secretary of the NUM and Mick McGahey, President of the Scottish NUM, as well as by Kent officials. The miners heard Jack Collins express disbelief at their long history of passivity. Joe Holmes called for solidarity:

The wages can only be won by unity. The claim is a modest one. We are only trying to catch up with what we have lost over the years.²⁶³

The plea for unity was heeded by the Kent miners, and if there had been any waverers at Snowdown, management inadvertantly saw to it that they were persuaded to join the pro-strike camp. On Monday 29 November eighty-two miners were sent home from Snowdown Colliery because "essential underground repair work" had not been carried out due to the overtime ban.²⁶⁴ Dunn accused the NCB of trying to split the Union because it had deliberately refused to offer alternative employment to the men while the repair work was carried out in normal working time. Whatever the Board's intentions, the result was to confirm its own alienation from the men. The ballot results were announced on Thursday 2 December and the Kent Area had voted 73.5 per cent in favour of strike action.²⁶⁵ This was the second highest result in the country. Nationally fifty-nine per cent had voted for a strike, which, under the new Rule 43, was enough. The strike would begin on Monday 9 January 1972, and the Kent Area was to

²⁶² Pitt, 110.

²⁶³ *D.E.*, 19.11.71.

²⁶⁴ *D.E.*, 3.12.71.

²⁶⁵ Colin Griffin, *The Leicestershire Miners, Volume III 1945-88*. (Coalville: NUM Leicester Area, 1989), 158.

play a major role which would enhance its growing reputation as one of the most militant coalfields.

On the eve of the strike, 8 January, the NCB announced that all pay offers made during the previous months of negotiations had been withdrawn and that whatever settlement was finally agreed upon would not be backdated. This determined hard-line stance by the Board pushed many moderate miners over the edge. All miners now knew they had a real fight on their hands and that it could only be won through solid, united action on their part. From Day One of the strike every colliery in the country stood at a standstill and miners could concentrate their efforts on picketing power stations and restricting the movement of coal around the country. The TUC issued orders to its members not to cross NUM picket lines but did not promise any form of supportive direct action. Joe Gormley, having forgotten the lessons of the 1920s, was bitterly disappointed:

I am extremely disappointed to know that they did not consider this serious enough to get together to form some concerted ideas. I would have thought this was one time the TUC could have shown itself to be united.²⁶⁶

With other workers promising not to cross picket lines, the NUM had to be sure that its pickets were in the right place. The KNUM was responsible for the whole of the south-east, London and Essex. It was assisted by other unions such as the NUR, NUS and ASLEF, which promised that in addition to not crossing picket lines they would inform the miners of any coal movements. And, of all the ports within the KNUM's area of responsibility, only Dover and Shoreham refused co-operation.²⁶⁷

The KNUM very quickly appreciated the importance of London as a source of support, and, within two weeks of the commencement of the strike, small teams of men were being sent to address meetings. Supporters were also invited to social evenings arranged in the Kent pit

²⁶⁶ Pitt, 123; Tony Hall, *King Coal: Miners, Coal and Britain's Industrial Future*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 176.

²⁶⁷ *D.E.*, 21.1.72.

villages as a way of forging stronger links.²⁶⁸ This was extremely successful because not only did the London support groups turn up with financial donations and food parcels, but the alliances created in 1972 were quickly re-established in 1974 and were still in place ten years later when the London supporters made an invaluable contribution.

Picketing was extraordinarily successful throughout Britain thanks to the miners' enthusiasm and the co-operation received from other workers. While media and parliamentary attention focussed on the big events like Saltley Gate, the Kent miners were enjoying considerable success in their own area thanks to not a little ingenuity on their part. Realising that much of the fuel for London power stations was delivered via the Thames, Joe Holmes approached the Lightermen's Union for assistance. Three of the Union's boats were loaned to the KNUM and were used as patrol boats to form an official picket of the Thames.²⁶⁹ The effectiveness of the river picket is difficult to assess, but what is sure is that the 'Miners' Navy' or 'Armada', as it came to be known,

... gained wide national publicity, and caught the imagination of working-class people throughout Britain.²⁷⁰

Picketing was, then, largely peaceful because the miners enjoyed such widespread support. Arthur Loomer's experience of picketing in 1972 was typical:

We never had no bloody trouble... We used to go to these power stations, and put a picket on. We used to go in and see the convenor of the power station ... and ask, "Have we got your support?" "Yeah, you got our support," and that was it, no bloody problem whatsoever.²⁷¹

Philip Sutcliffe tells a similar story about other workers' solidarity with the miners in 1972:

²⁶⁸ *D.E.*, 11.2.72.

²⁶⁹ *D.E.*, 28.1.72.

²⁷⁰ Pitt, 162.

²⁷¹ Interview, Arthur Loomer, 17.8.93.

If there was a picket on and they'd been instructed by their people not to cross it then they wouldn't cross it... They'd turn back.²⁷²

As a result of the national co-operation with the miners, antagonism between the police and miners was minimal. After one month on strike, with about nine thousand miners manning one thousand picket lines daily, there had been only forty-eight arrests up to 8 February,²⁷³ twelve of those being Kent miners.²⁷⁴ However, these moderate statistics should not hide the fact that one miner, Fred Matthews from Yorkshire, had lost his life on 3 February, on a picket line at Keadby power station, near Scunthorpe.

The women from the Kent coal communities, far from being reticent about the strike and worried about the financial consequences, began to play a more public role in supporting their men. Trisha Sutcliffe remembers the strike as the first time she went on a picket line. She was to experience many more picket lines in 1984-85.²⁷⁵ On Sunday 6 February, over a thousand miners and their female family members went to Trafalgar Square for a mass rally of unions in support of the miners. One Kent woman, Cynthia Brailsford, the wife of a Betteshanger miner, made an impassioned speech to the thousands gathered in the Square:

It is normally the wife, the mother who has to manage the family budget and truthfully we cannot manage on present wages. This is why miners' wives support the miners' struggle - the Miners' Strike - but many other workers and families suffer similar problems. This is why the organised trade union and labour movement must support the miners. Our struggle is their struggle. Our victory is their victory.²⁷⁶

This was one of the first examples of women moving out of the domestic/private domain of the home and into the public domain of politics - the traditional male stronghold. Had the strike lasted longer than it did then we would probably have had more examples of

²⁷² Interview, Philip Sutcliffe, 2.9.93.

²⁷³ Hansard, Official Report 5th Series, Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Vol. 830, col. 1209.

²⁷⁴ *D.E.*, 11.2.72.

²⁷⁵ Interview, Trisha Sutcliffe, 27.12.88.

²⁷⁶ Pitt, 170-71.

women's public involvement. As it was, most women supported their husbands in 1972, but behind the scenes in more traditional roles - serving in canteens and soup kitchens.

Peter Rees, the Conservative MP for Dover and Deal since 1970, like all Conservative MPs with pits in their constituencies, had to tread a very careful path. While supporting his government he also expressed sympathy for the miners' case, and suggested the re-introduction of a pay and productivity scheme. On one occasion, on Saturday 12 February, he even ventured into the Greyhound public house in Aylesham, to speak with the miners.²⁷⁷ However, in a debate in the Commons he was unequivocal in his condemnation of the NUM leaders and what he considered were extra-parliamentary political groups trying to manipulate the miners. He compared the Union Executive with World War One Western Front generals, not noted for their military or organisational skills on the battlefield:

Their handling of the Western Front was a miracle of finesse compared with the handling by the NUM of this strike, whether through malevolence or ineptitude I do not know... I believe they have made a classic error of tactics in projecting this strike as a struggle against the Government. In doing so they have acquired some curious bedfellows. In my part of the world the International Marxist Group, students of Essex University and the Kent Communist Party have lined up beside the NUM. They must make extremely uncomfortable allies.²⁷⁸

Rees' judgement could not have been further from the truth, particularly as far as the Kent miners were concerned. The NCB/Government's handling of the strike combined with some hostile media representation of the miners served to alienate and politicise traditionally moderate miners, thus delivering them into the hands of militant left-wing organisations. These rather intellectual, usually bourgeois, radicals, often struck a nerve with the miners, and their analysis of the capitalist system and the workers' position within it could not have been more relevant to men who had complied with the rundown of their industry while actually increasing

²⁷⁷ *D.E.*, 18.2.72.

²⁷⁸ Hansard, Vol. 830, 8 February, col. 1194-95.

production. Left-wing activists were welcome visitors in the working-men's clubs of Aylesham, especially with those miners who wished to give intellectual theory to their industrial and class position. The Snowdown miners' experience of such groups mirrored those of the Yorkshire miners' at the University of East Anglia:

... our people were becoming politically educated and were becoming aware of what the class war was. In a matter of days they were changing. Never mind about a thousand lectures, this was it!²⁷⁹

What in fact was happening was that while the academics were giving a theoretical base to the miners' experience, the miners were giving a practical experience to the academics' theory.

The end of the miners' strike came soon after the publication of the findings of the Wilberforce Inquiry on Friday 18 September. Jack Collins had played a major part in the proceedings giving a graphic account of conditions at Snowdown Colliery and his decreasing wage packet and subsequent fall in living standards. Collins was also part of the NUM Executive which went to Downing Street on the evening of 18 February, immediately after the NEC had rejected the Wilberforce proposals. Once more concessions had been squeezed out of the government the NEC voted 16 to 9 to recommend a return to work. Collins was furious that a return to work had been recommended with the subsequent lifting of pickets. This was pre-judging the ballot result and thus sidestepping the union's democratic process. He also believed that more could have been obtained, especially for surface workers, if the NEC had been prepared to resist a little longer.²⁸⁰ A Special Area Council meeting was held on Sunday 20 February, where it was decided to call a Special Area Conference in Dover Working Men's Club on the following day, where the following recommendations were to be put to the three branch committees:

²⁷⁹ Arthur Scargill, interview, *New Left Review*, No. 92, July/August, 1975, 14-20.

²⁸⁰ Pitt, 203.

1. That the wages offer be rejected.
2. That a proposed productivity deal be rejected.
3. That a strong letter of protest be sent to the National Union against the premature withdrawal of pickets before the ballot result was known.²⁸¹

Twenty-four branch committee men met in Dover on Monday 21 February to discuss the Wilberforce offer and their Area Executive's recommendations. The meeting lasted three hours and it was felt that rejecting the offer, while other Areas were recommending acceptance, would have been a futile gesture. Thus acceptance was recommended.²⁸² On Wednesday 23 February, pithead ballots were held in Kent, and the result was overwhelmingly in favour of acceptance:

1,895 for the offer

186 against the offer.

Source: *Dover Express*, 3 March 1972.

The men went back to work on Monday 28 February, and on Sunday 26 March a victory celebration was held at the Winter Gardens, Margate. The KNUM, and, more importantly, the Kent rank-and-file miners had come of age. Unlike in other districts, there was to be no going back.

Following the success of 1972, the KNUM, like Area unions up and down the country, were brimming with confidence. The Annual Conference of that year put in a wages claim of £30 (surface workers); £32 (underground); and £40 (NPLA). The claim was passed unanimously and, discussing this at the beginning of 1973, the KNUM also wished, eventually, to fight for a thirty-hour week.²⁸³ Although most miners probably agreed with the principle of the claim, they had no financial stomach for another fight so soon after the last one. The ballot

²⁸¹ Pitt, 203.

²⁸² *D.E.*, 25.2.72.

²⁸³ Kent Minutes. 15.1.73.

for industrial action in April 1973 produced a big majority against industrial action, nationally, but only a small one in Kent:

Nationally:	36.62% for industrial action.
	63.38% against industrial action.
Kent:	49.25% for industrial action.
	50.75% against industrial action.

Source: *Dover Express*, 6 April 1973.

In August the NCB published its statistics for 1972-73, and for Kent they were terribly disappointing. The coalfield had lost £4,800,000, bringing its total losses since Vesting Day to £25 million. Output was down to one million tons and OMS was 27.4cwt., a slight improvement on 1971-72 when it was 25.7cwt.²⁸⁴ Jack Lewis had already had a meeting with Jack Dunn at Hobart House on Wednesday 30 May, during which he warned of the possible closure of Snowdown Colliery.²⁸⁵ Now Lewis was even more downcast, especially as the Kent coalfield had one hundred per cent power loading faces by 1973. His comment was decidedly unenthusiastic:

The need is to get the best from this equipment and obtain higher levels of face production to secure the coalfield's future. We know we have secure markets providing our total costs of production can be reduced.²⁸⁶

The future for the Kent coalfield was once again in doubt and may well have ended even more prematurely than it eventually did had it not been for events in that region which the KNUM had long since warned successive governments of: the Middle East. OPEC, unlike the NUM, had absolutely no reservations about using its fuel source as a political weapon. Almost immediately after the beginning of the Yom Kippur War on 6 October 1973, OPEC cut its crude oil output and announced a price rise of seventy per cent. This resulted in the price of

²⁸⁴ D.E., 3.8.73.

²⁸⁵ Kent Minutes, 1.6.73.

²⁸⁶ D.E., 3.8.73.

fuel oil to the United Kingdom doubling almost overnight.²⁸⁷ And, within a year, the price of oil doubled again. Writing a few years later the government commented:

The five-fold increase in oil prices in 1973-74, and the associated realisation that oil would never again be as cheap and abundant as in the past, transformed the prospects for the coal industry.²⁸⁸

Coal, even Kent coal, was suddenly in demand again and was economically competitive. The NUM July Conference decision to put in a wage claim of £35 (surface); £40 (underground); and £45 (NPLA), began to look not only justifiable but obtainable. The KNUM agreed:

That Kent Area fall in line with the NEC recommendation - a letter be sent to Mr. Daly requesting that an overtime ban commence as from 1 November 1973, and any offer should be dated from the 1 November 1973. That a letter be sent rejecting the Board's offer and that the full implementation of Conference should be adhered to.²⁸⁹

A mass meeting was held at Aylesham Welfare Club on Sunday 28 October, where the main speakers were Lawrence Daly and Bill McLean, General Secretary of the Scottish NUM. The mood of the meeting was militant, matching McClean's speech which called for the miners' participation in the defeat of the Conservative Government, as well as the full wage claim:

Our claim for £35 and £45 is now indeed far too moderate. I am sure this is the feeling among miners throughout the length and breadth of this country... If they don't cough up they can have the bloody pits and put the troops in. We don't want to know.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁷ Ashworth, 330.

²⁸⁸ *Energy Policy - A Consultative Document*, (London, HMSO, February 1978, Cmnd. 7101).

²⁸⁹ Kent Minutes, 16.10.73.

²⁹⁰ D.E., 2.11.73.

The overtime ban began on Monday 12 November and was fully supported in Kent, weekly production figures falling by sixty per cent reducing stocks to 485,000 tons.²⁹¹ The Heath Government's decision to fight the miners on the constitutional question of "Who governs the country?" is now well known and related in an earlier chapter. For the Kent miners the issue was also political, as well as economic. At the beginning of 1974 the KNUM ordered the weekly distribution of 3000 copies of the *Morning Star*, the Communist Party's mouthpiece.²⁹² Peter Rees' earlier claim that miners and militants were "uncomfortable allies" was not now repeated.

On 24 January the NUM Executive resolved to hold a strike ballot on 31 January and 1 February, and gave provisional notice that a strike would commence on 9 February. The results were convincing: 188,393 for strike action; 44,222 against. The turnout was 81 per cent.²⁹³ The results in Kent were even more impressive:

2117 (89.7%) for strike action.

243 (10.3%) against strike action.

Turnout: 87%.

Source: *Dover Express*, 8 February 1974.

The Kent miners were now clearly determined to maintain their militant reputation, and when the strike began their organisational skills, perfected in 1972, were soon in operation again. In fact, much of the organisation was unnecessary in 1974 due to Heath having called a General Election for 28 February. The miners' strike was, therefore, to coincide with an election campaign, and the NUM was obviously concerned that nothing should happen which may jeopardise the chances of the election of a Labour Government. No miners attempted to go back to work in Kent, and token pickets were placed at the power stations within its area. As Pitt has written, it was a period of "phoney war".²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ *D.E.*, 30.11.73 and 7.12.73.

²⁹² Kent Minutes, 15.1.74.

²⁹³ Ashworth, 336.

²⁹⁴ Pitt, 210.

With the election of a Labour Government, albeit a minority one, and with Michael Foot at the Ministry of Employment, the KNUM accepted the new wage offer without even a discussion.²⁹⁵ It had got what it really wanted on 28 February.

Conclusion.

The history of the Kent coalfield since the end of the Second World War, and more precisely, since nationalisation, is a history of great social and economic change. It was also a period in which there was a distinct shift in the balance of political power away from moderates, who favoured a corporatist style of social contract with a Labour government, but were prepared to work on a similar basis with a Conservative government, towards a more militant left position which favoured imposing its version of socialism upon a Labour government and would not tolerate even the *idea* of working with the Conservatives. This happened at national level with the rise of the left in the coalfields of Yorkshire, Scotland and South Wales, thereby dominating the NEC by the 1970s, and was mirrored in Kent with the triumph of men like Dunn and Collins.

Of the four collieries in Kent during the post-nationalisation period up to the 1972 strike, the most militant was clearly Betteshanger, and the most moderate, Snowdown. During the first decades of the coalfield's life, instability in the workforce and insecurity about the coalfield's future contributed to a lack of political tradition in the KMWA. Men like Twigger and Elks had attempted to steer the union towards, if not a militant political position, a position where the men would stand up, not only for their own rights, but those of their colleagues. This was largely achieved on a pit by pit basis, made easier by the growing sense of security about the coalfield's future which began to prevail by the late 1930s, combined with the increasing demographic stability in the pit villages, especially Aylesham. However, very little inter-pit solidarity existed, most vividly shown by the total lack of support for Betteshanger miners in January 1942. This event established Betteshanger's reputation for militancy which

²⁹⁵ Kent Minutes, 18.3.74.

was then superimposed, inaccurately, upon the whole tiny coalfield. But, Betteshanger had taken on the might of a wartime government and won, and the miners and their families wore the cloak of militancy with pride. Conversely, the other pits, especially Snowdown, which had refused solidarity, could not share in Betteshanger's glory, and, therefore, retreated further into their moderate shell. This militant/moderate, Betteshanger/Snowdown division continued right up to the 1970s. The domination of the branch unions over their men and their villages was thus complete, with the two political traditions, once established, reproducing themselves. The conversion of Snowdown miners to a more militant and solidaristic standpoint occurred quite rapidly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and was a result of various factors: economic, social and industrial.

Economically, the miners in Kent became increasingly worse off after the introduction of the NPLA. Having been established as the highest earning coalfield in the country in 1966, the miners had to forgo real pay rises for five years until the other areas caught up. Jack Collins' evidence to the Wilberforce inquiry in 1972 famously showed how a Snowdown faceworker actually earned less in 1971 than he had done pre-NPLA. And a normal underground, (or surface) worker, not on NPLA, had to rely on social security benefits once he stopped overtime working. This decrease in wages, felt nationally, was perhaps more acutely felt in Kent, and even more specifically at Snowdown where conditions were the hardest and high wages a justified tradition for accepting to work in such conditions. The growing discontent among Snowdown miners, politically and industrially moderate as long as their wage packets would allow it, began to be directed at the most immediate and visible 'culprits' - the branch union. Whether or not it was infiltrated by the Catholic Church is neither here nor there, but it is true that the Snowdown branch had consistently encouraged its membership into inactivity when questions of wider union solidarity arose. Thus it was that Betteshanger was once again isolated in the 'stay-down' stike of 1960. But, once wages were severely restricted by the abolition of all productivity bonus schemes and the imposition of the NPLA (Snowdown had voted against) then the frustration of the men developed into blaming their branch representatives. The 'Old Guard' lost its grip and new - if not revolutionary, certainly less moderate - men, began to take their places. These were men who were more

open to liaison with the other collieries in Kent and, indeed, with other coalfields. They were also encouraged to go on week-end and summer schools, especially at Ruskin College, Oxford, where they met up, not only with other trade union officials, but also with 'theory'. The political education of miners was one of Jack Dunn's primary goals, and the KNUM, under his leadership, contributed regularly to Ruskin College.

Socially, Snowdown miners developed, naturally, more solidaristic tendencies through the growing cohesiveness of the village of Aylesham. By the 1950s and '60s the core population had been established with second and third generation children, often intermarrying. The physical isolation of the village, combined with its social exclusion as a result of hostility from neighbouring villages and towns, caused the Aylesham residents to turn inwardly, looking to themselves for support. The difficulties which the parish council had had in securing basic amenities such as roads, schools and community centres, only served to heighten the paranoia felt by Aylesham people that they were being singled-out for special ill-treatment. However, while the village was served by a secure colliery with men earning 'good' wages, the isolation did not seem to matter. Entertainment was provided from within the village with children and old people being catered for by the working men's clubs, the committees of which were dominated by miners and often branch officials. Thus it was that there was a yearly round of concerts, sports days, carnivals, outings and Christmas presents, all provided by the clubs and subsidised by the branch. But once the colliery looked insecure, by the mid-'60s, and wages were down, the sense of need for assistance from outside increased, and there was a concomitant desire to look to the National Union and the Labour Party for support. When Snowdown branch officials began to look outward, from around 1970 onwards, this affected both the men and the village. Community meant 'following my leader', whichever direction 'he' was going in.

Finally, industrially, the threat to the coalfield which had resulted in redundancies at Betteshanger, a *jeopardy* notice at Tilmanstone, and the closure of Chislet Colliery had its effects on the psyche of all the men. Similar events in the Leicestershire coalfield in the 1960s resulted in the miners there adopting an attitude of fatalistic resignation, many of them getting out of the industry before being forced out. But they had choices. At the beginning of the

1970s Coalville was a thriving town with a population of 28,325,²⁹⁶ and a variety of alternative employment. Aylesham was not. It was an isolated village with a population of 4,238,²⁹⁷ and, although some light industry was arriving in the village by the end of the 1960s, it was not enough to end Aylesham's single-occupational community status. The pit was still perceived as the major employer, which indeed, it was. Notions of pit and community being inter-dependent were nascent and would reach their full maturity in the fight to preserve both in the 1980s. The militancy of 1972 and 1974 opened Kent miners' eyes to the possibilities of concerted union action. Higher wages had been won. A hostile government had been brought down. Other unions had assisted the miners in their struggles. There was a debt to be paid, and Kent miners were not slow in realising it. Philip Sutcliffe expresses the change that came over the Snowdown branch:

Whenever there was anything going on, I remember the postmen's strike ... any demonstrations in London, we used to ask for volunteers and send people up there... I bet I went on every one of them... After the support we had, anyone that was struggling for whatever reason, we'd be up.²⁹⁸

This heightened sense of class consciousness and solidarity now became the leading principles at Snowdown Colliery, and young miners who had never experienced local moderate leadership, but who had heard plenty about it, saw the pecuniary achievements of militancy. There was no reason to go back. 'Nothing succeeds like success' is the old saying, and 1972 and 1974 certainly proved that as far as the Kent miners were concerned. What is interesting is that the Coalville miners were not so enamoured of militancy, preferring, as the 1970s progressed into the 1980s, to return to their moderate traditions. Or were they really 'moderate'? Were not both Kent and Leicestershire miners following behavioural patterns which were fundamentally designed to protect what they perceived as best for them? The period after 1974 and before the 1984-85 miners' strike was a period when Kent miners went

²⁹⁶ Government Statistical Service. *Office of Population Censuses and Surveys*, (OPCS), 1971.

²⁹⁷ OPCS. 1971.

²⁹⁸ Personal interview. Philip Sutcliffe, 2 September 1993.

on to greater levels of militancy and involvement in other workers' struggles, believing they were, in effect, struggles of their own. Leicestershire miners developed the idea that political battles were, in reality, economic, and higher wages came before job security. Their diluted sense of community limited their solidary relations with other workers, including other miners; and their industrial outlook was not limited to the pit. It is to this period, 1974-84, and the parallel histories of Kent and Leicestershire that we now turn.