

+ TEN PENCE !

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 * THE BULLETIN *
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The Bulletin is a journal by and for socialists who live in East Shropshire. There is no censorship or editorial control, but articles must be by socialists who broadly employ a materialist analysis and be less than 1000 words long (except by special arrangement with the editor).

The copy date for the July edition, and closing date for entries to the ever popular "Leftie Quiz" is 25th June 1980. Please send letters, parcel bombs etc. to C/O College Farm House, Mill Lane, Wellington. NOTE THE CHANGE OF ADDRESS.

We will not be producing an August edition, unless the amount of copy exceeds our expectations. See you at the "Bulletin Goes Oral" meetings.

JOHN MORGAN - Editor.

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RED NOTES

May Day:

The May Day march, despite being missed by several people because it moved off on time (serves them right !), was twice the size of last years and really quite an impressive show for the Left in Telford. Last years silver prize band (able only to play two dirges out of tune) were not missed. Holding the rally in a packed Labour Club instead of a nearly empty Oakengates Town Hall also improved matters. Jerry Fowler's speech was terrible, a tired old statement of the Alternative Economic Policy with no sign of his usual "sparkel"; still, atleast he bourght a Bulletin.

Another thing surprised a few of us and shed a new light on the ex-minister. After the Red Flag (which he muttered through) we sang - for the first time in Telford - the Internationale and Mr. Fowler not only knew all the words, but sang with gusto! The revolution must be round the corner.

Congratulations then to the Trades Council, can we now assume that the May Day march and rally will be an annual event ?

Day of Action:

And more pats on the back for the Trades Council for making the best of a bad job on May 14th. The Day of Action, with only the Midland Red drivers coming out in any numbers, went off half cock in Telford as it did everywhere else. Les Holbrook was a brave man to insist on a lunch-time rally rather than an evening do, and it paid off, about 500 people attended. The rally itself degenerated into a scrappie exchange between the right and left of the Labour Party. In a notable CP coup they managed to get the colledtion voted to the Morning Star. This despite the fact that although CP members were doubtless active in agitating individually for the success of May 14th, the local branch did not, as far as I know, do anything toward it. In the evening the Trades Council organised the door to door distribution of 30,000 leaflets explaining what the Day of Action was all about and the TUC's alternative policies.

Maddox's:

The putting of John Maddox and Co. in the hands of a Receiver and the making of a further 130 workers redundant will come as no great surprise to the work forse. Maddox's was always a small jobbing foundry, doing the contracts the bigger works could not afford to tool-up for, and as such was particularly vulnerable to the depression in the engineering industry. The workers may be asking themselves, however, why capitalism should create conditions whereby a company which was only three years ago taking on more men and bragging about big new orders should suddenly be throwing men on the dole. Maddox's is a unpleasant place to work, my own grandfather worked in the foundry for the latter part of his life and as a result died, still in his fifties, of silicosis. Over the years the owners (its still owned and run by the Maddox family) have lived well of the profits creamed from the products of sweated labour of many a man like my old grandfather. But now the antiquated foundry is short of orders and cannot compete with larger and more modern highly capitalised concerns, so those men are no longer needed. One question I would like to ask - have any of the Maddox family ever died of silicosis?

County Council Nominations:

Local Labour Parties are now scratching around for nominations for the County elections - May 1981. I note that Dawley LP has solved the problem of shortages of candidates by deciding to nominate candidates already serving as District Councillors. What a lot of free time you must have comrades.

THE HISTORY OF THE EAST SHROPSHIRE PROLETARIAT

The Workers Fight Back - Proletarian Uprisings 1756-1842 (Part 3). John Morgan

The booming iron trade of the late 1830s revitalised the ailing East Shropshire iron industry and raised wages in the furnaces and mines. In 1830 a pikeman's (iron trade) ~~weekly~~^{daily} wage was 2s 10d, by 1836 it had increased to 3s 1d. As the 1840s started, however, the boom began to falter, and by 1842 the iron industry was, once more, moving into depression, effecting the East Shropshire worker atleast as grievously as in other regions. In 1842 a pikeman's wage was just 2s a day. As the vicar of Wellington wrote in June 1842:

"Several furnaces are blown out, wages very much reduced and what can be obtained is limited to half-time or even less. The consequence is that the poor house is crowded, and the rates very much increased, and great numbers are subsisting on the private charity of individuals".

The price of bread was high, and against the background of the iniquitous charter-master system (see part 1 of this essay) and the appalling working conditions - especially in the mines - the scene was set for a major confrontation between the workers and the bourgeoisie. Throughout the Midlands, the North and Scotland workers struck work protesting against wage cuts and bad conditions. In Shropshire the summer of 1842 was to see more industrial unrest than ever before.

The bourgeoisie press was hysterical, the "Salopian Journal" blamed all the "disturbances" on the Chartist movement - usually, and quite ~~ridiculously~~ on outside agitators from Staffordshire. Causes like unemployment, wage cuts and grievances against the Butties and their tommy shops were ignored. So was what is commonly called the 1842 miners' strike inspired by the Chartists? Let us examine the case of the Chartist influence in the area of East Shropshire.

The story of Chartism in East Shropshire, as elsewhere, is one of a political movement of labour aristocracy and small traders whose principle interest was to gain for themselves greater political rights under the developing bourgeoisie democracy. Because chartism was the major radical movement of the age, and because at this stage of development in the capitalist economy the interests of the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat to some extent co-incided, it attracted to it men with revolutionary ideas and in some regions, South Wales and West Yorkshire, briefly held the allegiance of the working masses.

The origins of the Chartist movement go back to the organisation of radicals in London formed to pay the fines imposed on anti-government printers and journal editors. On the 16th June 1836 they (among them William Hetherington, James Watson and William Lovett) formed the London Working Mans' Association. The LWMA worked out the six points of the Charter which was formally launched at a rally at New Hall, Birmingham on 6th August 1838. The six points of the Charter were:-

1. Universal male suffrage.
2. Equal electoral districts.
3. Annual parliaments.
4. The payment of M.P.s
5. Secret ballots.
6. No property qualifications for M.P.s

The interests of the industrial proletariat was not, however, primarily in the achievement of universal male suffrage but, for better working conditions and higher wages. Their forms of organisation: lightening strikes, sabotage and close community solidarity, were very different from the committee meetings, newspapers, petitions and insurrectionism of the Chartists - in the main they were also more effective.

The Chartist movement had been divided between those who wanted to restrict its activities to peaceful political protest aimed at parliamentary reform, and those who wanted revolutionary insurrection. On 12th July 1839 the Chartist petition with more than 1 1/4 million signatures was rejected out of hand by parliament. At this time the leader of the more radical section, Fergus O'Connor, was greatly expanding his influence through the sale of his newspaper the "Northern Star" which sold 32,000 copies. The Monmouth Rising of 1839, led by Jack Frost, was supposed to be the start of a national Chartist insurrection. 4,000 miners took part but, the whole thing was a disorganised disaster, ending when the revolutionary forces were dispersed by a mere 30 soldiers firing from the cover of buildings in Monmouth.

The Monmouth Rising did not kill Chartism and in 1841 the movement regrouped under the banner of the National Charter Association. By February 1842 the NCA had 40,000 members and, fueled by the growing economic crisis, was growing, reaching 48,000 by the summer of the same year.

In East Shropshire there seems to have been two local Chartist associations. The best organised and the one we know the most about was the Coalbrookdale Association which was based in the Dale, but also drew members from Broseley and Madeley. The other local group was in Oakengates and little or nothing is known of its activities. The Dale Association was certainly active in the period leading up to the 1842 confrontation, but there is no evidence that its members took any part in the July/August strikes. Why should they, they were in the main petty bourgeoisie and there is no evidence that any miner ever belonged to the NCA? The only Dale Association member arrested in 1842 was Thomas Halford, a ~~hatter~~ shoemaker and Methodist preacher accused of exciting and using seditious language at a meeting in Madeley.

The period April to June 1842 was certainly the high point of Chartism in East Shropshire. The Dale Association organised a strike against the sliding scale of wages in the Dale works, printed hand-bills and held a local meeting attended by 500 people. A meeting held in Oakengates in either late April or early May 1842 formed the Oakengates Association (and was the subject of an extremely bitter attack in the "Salopian Journal"). Other meetings in May 1842 were held at Watling Street (a formally independent settlement between the Cock and the Bucks Head), Wellington and Broseley. On 16th May a major meeting was held on the summit of the Wrekin. 2,000 people heard local and national Chartist speakers, the police constables prevented women and children from attending. The meeting also re-elected John (warehouse foreman at the Dale works) as chairman of the Dale Association. Other members of the Dale Association committee (according to the "Book of Demonstrators" a contemporary and rather sympathetic ~~xxxxx~~ satire) were: Thomas Corbett of Quenn St., Broseley; John of Jiggers Bank; William, a linen garment maker of Madeley; John, "a water bibber" ((tee-totaller)) and "lecturer in Theolog-a-li-ty" of Coalport; John, a mechanic; Thomas, a weaver; and William a baker.

Although throughout the struggles of July and August the Chartists were blamed for the disturbances by the bourgeoisie press (e.g. the "Salopian Journal" which was the principle local organ of the time), the evidence of the latter trials and the Midland Mining Commission (set up to "investigate" the grievances afterwards) suggests that the motivations of the striking miners and iron workers were nothing to do with Chartism. It is a wrong ~~xx~~ analysis to say, as is often the case with British leftists, that Chartism was a workers' movement. In East Shropshire, as elsewhere, it certainly espoused the workers' cause, but its principle direction - parliamentary reform - reflects the aspirations of the petty bourgeoisie class. At a time when the East Shropshire proletariat was one of the most defensible in England, made up of miners, furnace and foundry labourers, skilled casters, pattern makers, turners and potters etc., the Dale Association committee is staffed by warehouse foremen, and small ~~xxxxx~~ business men like weavers, bakers and wollen garment makers.

What then actually occurred in East Shropshire in the summer of 1842. Riots and strikes had started in Stourbridge and Dudley in June, but it was not until July that unrest began in our district. The immediate cause was, as ever, wage reductions. First off the mark for the bosses was the Ketley Company who cut 3d a day, but it was not until the larger Lilleshal Company followed suit on July 19th cutting the daily rate from 2s 9d to 2s 6d that the workers responded. At six o'clock on the morning of Wednesday July 20th the workers assembled outside Donnington Wood iron works and marched from there through Wrockwardine Wood, Pains Lane (now called St. Georges), Snedshill and Priors Lee stopping all the Lilleshall Company pits. About 2,000 men were involved. The method used to close those pits still working was to call up the men still underground and then to cut the winding rope; this happened at the Lawn, Dairy and West Croft pits in Priors Lee (between them employing 200-300 men). Although the prosecution at the latter trials claimed that a lot of intimidation was used, the strike action seems to have been pretty well supported from the outset. ~~Most prosecution~~ Most prosecution witnesses were, in any case, company men like the charter-masters son who claimed that the strikers threatened to throw him in the canal if he didn't go with them. At one pit in Priors Lee the company bailiff, William Bulger, refused to draw up the men still underground. Six miners held him over the scalding water of the steam engine until he decided to change his mind, one of them saying "he is just like the masters, he wants to clem us to death".

The Lord Lieutenant for the county at this time was the infamous Duke of Sutherland. He never left his seat in Scotland but still managed a letter to the "Morning Chronicle" explaining that the strike did not originate in the area "but was occasioned in the Shropshire collieries by strangers, who misled some and compelled others to join them". In Sutherland's absence local government power was in the hands of his deputy the Earl of Powis who called in the yeomanry. The Wellington South Shropshire yeomanry were barracked at Priors Lee hall, arriving on Thursday morning to be joined later in the day by a troop from ~~Bridgnorth~~ Bridgnorth. At that time Priors Lee Hall was the office and residence of John Horton, general manager of the Lilleshall Company.

Powis was rather better informed than Sutherland and although he publically attacked the strikers and made statements about Chartist agitators he came to realise during the course of the strikes that the real problem was the gross excesses of the charter-masters and that reforms would have to be made. He was also resolved to use a softer approach than had been used in earlier confrontations. Warned in advance by the troubles in Staffordshire, Powis had made careful plans with his principle agent on the ground, the Wellington magistrate Thomas Eyton. In 1842 Shropshire had 58 police constables, 50 of them were stationed on the coalfield. Eyton also attempted to swear in special constables, but found this task difficult and wrote to Sir James Graham, the Home Secretary:

"We have sworn in ~~several~~ some Special Constables, but the fact is that in the collieries few, if any, can be depended upon in that capacity".

On the day following the Priors Lee pits closures, the striking miners reassembled on the Holyhead Road above Oakengates. Marching to Old Park they called out the pits belonging to the Botfields' Old Park Company and went on to Ketley Bank. There they were met by a party of constables armed with pistols and cutlasses. A running skirmish developed ~~between~~ with the police chasing the miners over the pit banks "between Bank House and the Schools". Eventually the crowd dispersed, many of them reportedly escaping arrest by mingling with the crowds in Wellington market. Other disturbances occurred at the same time at Dawley and Langley Field. Some miners were arrested and others added when the police raided workers' barrack houses in Donnington on Friday morning.

The arrested men, all miners from the Donnington-Oakengates area, were taken to Wellington Police Court and from there remanded to the Shrewsbury Assizes. The eventual sentences were rather slight and contrast sharply with those received by the Cinderloc prisoners (or indeed the 1973 UCATT flying pickets). All the

defendants were found guilty. Thomas Bould, Henry Edwards, William Haughton, William Smith and Thomas Williams got two months hard labour and the rest - John Brothwood, Emanuel Lovekin, Benjamin Nicholas, Moses Stanwoth and John Tonks - were all discharged.

The July strike gradually petered out after the arrests without much progress being made on the demand for 4s a day for 8 hours work. The return to work, however, was brief; by the middle of August nearly all the pits north of the severn were idle. On 15th August the exasperated Eyton wrote to Powis that the miners "have again struck for wages". The new strike lasted for over a fortnight, closing the mines, but not effecting the iron works. Again the strike was enforced by direct action, but this time boilers were plugged and ropes cut during the night. Notices were posted at pitheads threatening scabs who went back whilst the strike lasted. By 31st August the Madeley men were back, to be followed a few days later by the miners of Donnington Wood, Wombridge and Ketley. The Priors Lee and Old Park men seem to have stayed out longer than any of the others. The only direct concessions made by the bosses during the strike was the abolition of 1/2 day working (1/2 day became the minimum) and an agreed 20 minutes for lunch and 40 minutes for dinner. A major victory had been won, however, in the fight against the double exploitation of the butties. The bourgeoisie had been taught that the workers would not tolerate the bad conditions indeffinately and how now begun to learn how to use the weapons of class power. Although, in the absence of a developed bureaucratic class to "manage" the capitalist economy, the charter-master system persisted for a long time after 1842, its days were numbered from then on and thenceforth the full force of its brutality was to be blunted.

During the strike the Wellington and Shifnal magistrates passed a resolution stating that the mal-practise of the charter-masters was one of the causes of the present conflict. No doubt it was this statement together with ~~firm~~ promises of reform from Sutherland and others that encouraged many miners to return to work. It is interesting to note that the owners least willing to make concessions were John Anstice (Madley Wood Company) and Abraham and Alfred Darby (Coalbrookdale Company) who were supposed to be the leading liberals of the bourgeoisie. Right wing reactionaries William and Beriah Botfield (Old Park Company) negotiated with their workers and agreed to reforms will the men were still out on strike. Then again the strike was a lot firmer in Old Park than it was in Madeley and Horsehay.

Powis and Eyton both seem to have become convinced by the strike that reforms of the charter-master system were necessary to prevent production being threatened by continued industrial action. On 30th August Powis wrote to Sir James Graham:

"The recipient can hardly form a judgment of the tyranny fraud and injustice constantly practised upon the men by the middle men who are denominated butties, charter masters, etc..... They ~~fix~~ frequently keep beer shops, frequently tommy shops, and when the men use these they are favoured, but otherwise they receive the treatment expected from persons who have power and exercise it to their own advantage."

On the 3rd September the masters held a meeting, chaired by Anstice, at the Jerningham Arms in Shifnal, and finally resolved to accept reform of the charter-master system. A resolution committed them to ending the truck system by putting down the proceedings by which the butties through beer shops and provision notes, exploited the men.

Powis also wrote to the government requesting legislation to outlaw truck and other unacceptable faces of capitalism. He recognised that bourgeois democratic reform was essential to the continuation of the system. The bourgeoisie had, for the first time really, succeeded to the demands of the proletariat. Legislation to outlaw truck did eventually pass ~~through parliament (1887 & 1896)~~ through parliament (1887 & 1896), but the Home Secretary's 1842 reply is interesting.

It is a most perceptive statement:

"no legislative remedy can be applied to the undoubted evils which prevail to an extent most dangerous to the public peace. They are inherent in the state of society at which they have arrived and which is highly artificial. It will be seen that a manufacturing people is not so happy as a rural population, and this is a foretaste of becoming the 'Workshop of the World'."

Only one statement can cap that. Thomas Eyton writing to Powis on 8th September 1842, following the end of the strike, announced:

"Having no colliers to wage war against, I shall set to work in good earnest at the patridges".

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Epilogue:-

Last year saw the publication of a long awaited volume - the History of the Lilleshall Company by Cyril Nicholls and Keith Gale. Readers may be surprised to see that it is not in my list of sources, this is because although it is a reasonably substantial volume it does not only contain any usefull information about the involvement of the Lilleshall Company in the industrial troubles of the period my essay covers, it does not even mention them! Yet the Lilleshall Company was one of the largest, and sometime the largest, employers in East Shropshire from its foundation in 1764 and throughout the nineteenth century. I know for a fact that Nicholls, a former Lilleshal Company secretary, has been researching this book for twenty years, it is ~~mm~~ inconceivable that the central role of the Lilleshall Company in the history making events of 1842, for example, could have escaped his notice. I am also informed, by a now retired more junior Lilleshall Company ~~xxxxx~~ ex-employee, that rather than Nicholls' forebears being, as he claims "engineers", they were butties for several generations. Trinder is a much better historian than Nicholls (I recommend his Industrial Revolution in Shropshire very strongly) and is often sympathetic to the plight of the proletariat. But Trinder is essentially as much a bourgoise historian as is Nicholls and despite his excellent details often reached the wrong conclusions, e.g. "the Chartist inspired miners strike of 1842", and never attempts any global analyses. The question I leave you with then is - who should write our history?