

1765: The Pitmen's Great Stand

It was the coal industry, which gave the North-East of England its opportunity to develop economically into what became one of the first industrial regions in the world and it was against this background that the struggle for basic human rights would develop within North-east England, during the years from 1750. In terms of the industry itself, this would be a struggle for economic and social rights, but this would also be played out against the background of a vigorous fight for civil and political rights. The fight for basic rights would include the battle to be treated with respect at work and was helped by the development of a collective consciousness amongst the miners of the region. This struggle was marked by two important disputes; strikes in 1731 and 1765.

The abundance of coal under the ground in the region was mentioned as far back as the Boldon Book of 1183 (1), and it has also been noted that coal was shipped from the River Wear during the reign of Richard II (2). The period when coal mining was well established as the major industry of north-east England, can really be traced back to the years between 1565 and 1625, when the industry really took off in the region. (3). While it can be said fairly that the coal trade in North-east England really originates from medieval times, it was still relatively small by the time of the Tudors. In the mid-16th century, only around 15 000 tons was being shipped annually to London. This grew as the century went on, as the demand from London grew. By the late 1580's 50 000 tons of coal were being shipped from the North-east to London. This amount grew again during the next century, as the Grand Lease of collieries in Whickham and Gateshead was fully exploited, with coal shipments from the region reaching 150 000 tons. More colliery developments saw this increase to 300 000 tons going to London by 1650, with perhaps as much as a further 200 000 tons going to other ports. Another major coal producing area developed around the Wear and this helped to push the annual trade in coal from the region up to 700 000 tons by 1700. (4) It is argued that by the beginning of the 18th century, the Tyne coal industry had reached a critical stage as the relatively shallow seams to the south of the Tyne around Gateshead and Whickham were largely worked out. (5) The development of new, deeper pits would be crucial in the establishment of a collective consciousness amongst the pitmen and the struggles of 1731 and 1765.

At this time of initial industrial development, the political system was deeply undemocratic. Very few men in the region had any say in the political system of the time and no women at all had the vote. The political power was held in the hands of a few powerful families, the so-called grand alliance, which had been formed as far back as 1726 and for long periods of the 18th century members of the landed gentry represented North-east towns and cities in parliament. (6). The importance of this grand alliance was not lost on prominent North-east people of the time. Four years earlier, Aldermen Ridley of Newcastle had written that, "the power of the coal trade being thus vested in the Town of Newcastle,

they will have an entire dominion over the country for whoever are the chief Proprietors in the coal trade of Tine (sic) will have influence over the people....” (7) Yet it was arguably to be the very same coal industry, which gave these families their economic and political power, which was to bring working people together in ways which enabled them to begin to challenge this undemocratic hegemony. It was the power of interconnectedness which was to allow working people from different parts of the region to combine to fight for their basic rights. As part of this, there was also a coalescence of struggles for both economic and social rights and civil and political rights.

The coal industry began to act as a factor which bound the region together as links between different parts of north-east England were to be strengthened in some respects by this industrial growth, as coal went from Newcastle to London, and at the same time a parallel trade developed with copper being taken from Keswick to Newcastle and then on to London. Part of the reason for this growth in trade was a lack of material for fuel in London, and so when “wood supplies were low in 16th century London and charcoal failed to meet the needs of a nascent metallurgical industry, the Newcastle coal trade was born.” (8) The fact that the region was bound together economically was an important factor in the struggles, which were to come. It was partly because of this, that it was possible for an organised working-class to emerge, which would be effective in demanding its rights.

The coal trade was to become so successful that William Ellis writing in *News from Newcastle* stated that

“England’s a perfect world! Has Indies too!
Correct your maps: Newcastle is Peru!” (9)

Purdue maintains that the “the term ‘England’s Peru’, was applied to the coal-field about Newcastle in the mid-seventeenth century anda recent study of the parish of Whickham has seen it as ‘Britain’s first industrial society’. The former is probably a more accurate description than the latter, for black gold was what made the area tick, even if there existed in the iron-works of Abraham Cowley at Winlaton and Swalwell one of the most substantial manufacturing businesses of the day.” (10) Here then we can see how the industry was becoming such an important part of the identity of the region, and how north-east England was a region which was pioneering the industrial revolution. It was to be the coal industry which was to be the natural amphitheatre for the struggles to come. As North-East England became one of the first modern industrial regions in the world, so it was also here that there would be a parallel pioneering effort in terms of campaigning for the rights which people demand the world over, in relation to their work and lives in the modern industrial world.

It is argued that the huge growth in the coal industry was the beginning of a new phase for the region, and that “reference has been made to the ‘first’ modern Newcastle dating from the 16th century. Its new element was industrial

production undertaken by wage-labour on the one hand and capital on the other...(with) no place for craft guilds". This was also a time of the changing of the guard with respect to the powerful families in the region. "In this period which lasted until the beginning of the 19th century, the men who dominated Newcastle were not Novos. They were the Grand Allies – the great coal owners: Brandlings, Liddells, Russells, Ridleys, Wortleys, Bells, and Strathmores. From their castles and country houses and from their offices in Newcastle they ruled the town and river." As a result of this burgeoning trade, Newcastle was also intimately linked with Northumberland and County Durham, or at least those parts which were to constitute the coalfield. (11)

The growth of the coal trade however, could not disguise the fact that 17th century north-east England was still by no means the wealthiest part of the country. Indeed in many respects, it was only just beginning to recover from its position as a wild, borderland region, with an often hostile Scottish state just to the north. Consequently, hearth tax figures worked out in 1662, in terms of acres per hearth, ranked "Durham, Westmorland, Northumberland and Cumberland, respectively thirty-seventh to fortieth". (12) The region was to grow wealthier as the coal trade developed, and there can be no doubt that from the late 17th century onwards it was to become a major part of the identity of the region as more and more of the population of north east England either worked in the industry or in the attendant industries. One can imagine the patriarchal leaders of these families, as they gazed out from the windows of their mansions on their vast estates and assuming that the present state of affairs would continue for ever. Watching the summer sun shine on the beautifully kept gardens, all must have seemed well and ordered with the world. Yet the very source of their prosperity was to be the home to the same forces which would come to challenge this ordered view of the world. It was then that the lack of empathy among the wealthy, for those who were struggling to provide them with the lifestyle to which they had become accustomed would come back to haunt them. For the coal industry also enabled those in the lower ranks of society to find new ways of expressing their desire for greater rights.

While the Grand Allies, may have controlled the coal trade, there was also a growing working-class, many immigrants into the region, which was actually acquiring the coal and beginning to work in the attendant industries, which inevitably sprang up around the pits. It has been noted that, "the industrial workforce was large. It was also geographically concentrated and it was mobile". (13) This meant that it was relatively easy for the industrial workers of the region to organise in order to address their grievances and accordingly, the region of North-east England saw a number of strikes in the second half of the 18th century as workers began to struggle for their rights. Indeed it has been noted that, "from an early date some of the more coherent groups of workers showed very impressive capacity in the defence of their own interests". (14) There was an interest from the early days of the growth of the modern industrial North-East, in

the desire of working people to struggle so that they could win the rights they felt they deserved.

It was the 18th century which was to see the real growth of the Northumberland and Durham coalfield and with it a collective regional identity of a nature not seen before in north east England – an industrial identity, with workers' organisations established to fight for the rights of the workers. As far back as 1701, the keelmen, who helped to transport the coal down the Tyne to larger ships, had established what has been described as a benevolent society (15). The keelmen were among the groups of workers involved in one of the first recorded protests of the developing industrial era, when, along with pitmen and the poor of Newcastle, they took part in the Corn riots of 1740. The first riots were caused by a sharp increase in the price of corn and were only put down by the raising of the local militia and an official promise that the price of corn would be reduced. (16) However, despite the corporation disbanding the militia, after two weeks the price of corn remained at its high level while the shops and warehouses. In response to this the mayor,

“convened a meeting of leading townsmen to discuss the situation.

The venue was the Guildhall on the Sandhill which was rapidly surrounded by a blustering mob, bent on mischief. The unlucky committee member detailed to report progress to the crowd was knocked down and trampled underfoot by a seething mass who stormed the Guildhall, attacked the committee and ransacked the rooms, destroying the public records and making off with whatever they could carry away. All that day the rioters roamed the streets and the quayside, where a grain-ship was lying, terrorising passers-by and threatening to burn the town. By evening three companies of Howard's regiment arrived from Alnwick and dispersed the trouble-makers, taking forty prisoners.” (17) How would events like these move those who claimed to represent the people of the region?

Events like these were to have an effect upon the actions of the representatives sent from the region to the House of Commons as local issues were the staple of politics in the 18th century. These included the Wear Navigation in 1747 and 1760 and the threat to the time-honoured grazing rights of freemen on the Town Moor. It was rare that northern members said anything in the House of Commons and in the few occasions they did say something it was usually to reflect local issues and concerns. In 1749, George Bowes made his one recorded speech when he opposed a proposal by the government to grant £10 000 to the city of Glasgow as compensation for losses incurred during the rebellion of 1745-6. Bowes claimed that Newcastle had been just as loyal and had, “a better plea for relief than Glasgow”. (18) But would such compensation have really been to help the working people of the city?

A lack of concern with the interests of ordinary people in Newcastle, can be demonstrated with regards to one other matter of particular interest to the northern members and that was the question of the corn laws. In 1766, Lord

Ravensworth, “earnestly applied to all the King’s ministers”, for a bill to allow rye to be imported duty free as it was, “so necessary for the sustenance of the North”. In 1782, Sir Thomas Clavering and Sir Edward Blackett moved resolutions which would prohibit the export of any home-grown rye as it was a staple of bread in the region and the local hierarchy wanted to prevent riots by mutinous keelmen and colliers. (19). This is a key point; it suggests that the likes of Clavering and Blackett wanted to prevent riots, which would threaten their authority in the region, rather than really care about the possibility of keelmen, colliers and their families starving. Would these working people accept this situation?

As previously mentioned, the Grand Allies formed a cartel, who usually worked together to fix the price of coal. However, in 1731 Bowes of Gibside defected and unilaterally cut prices.(20) As a result of this, there was less work in many Northeast pits as an attempt to drive up prices (21) This was a huge blow to many pitmen and indeed Wearside pitmen became desperate as it was difficult to gain credit (22) In a striking parallel with the zero hours contracts of today, the Grand Allies kept underemployed pitmen on a day or two notice (23) It has been argued that the 1731 dispute showed how pitmen had developed a real sense of their basic entitlements and a sense of collective identity (24) The pitmen were willing to negotiate in 1731, but also prepared to strike (25) They were well organised and well disciplined pitmen; Tyne Water Men chose delegates by colliery whilst Wear Water Men, whose trade in coal had developed since Elizabethan times (26), also organised to plan a meeting at Chester-le-Street. It has been argued that this was an exceptional action. (27)

The collective identity of workers in the region coming together to struggle for their interests, was displayed when pitmen from the Tyne and Wear met together, and instituted strike action. They met in the dark of the woods around Chester-le-Street, so as not to have unwelcome attention from the forces of law and order. Perhaps one can imagine the feelings of excitement and danger, which the men felt as their clandestine meeting proceeded. I can’t help but feel that it must have been an exhilarating feeling which coursed through their veins as they defied the oppressive authorities and began to realise the potential that as ordinary people they had in their grasp. And surely that is one of the main points about human rights – it allows people to strive to fulfil their potential. They knew that they deserved better working rights and this meeting can be seen as an important point in the development of a regional identity among the ordinary working people of north east England. Indeed it is stated that “they already possessed a strong sense of collective identity at the sub-regional level – as is indicated by their self-description as ‘Tyne Water Men’ and ‘Wear Water Men’. And equally clearly those two bodies of men were sufficiently aware of their broader common interest to co-operate in the furtherance of their cause”. (28) The struggle for rights, was to be not merely at the local level, but was often at a regional level also, so giving it a much greater resonance as the years wore on.

This was to be another major strike in 1765. The great pitmen's 'Insurrection' started due to a rumour or 'common fame', going round the coalfield that, "no coal owners should hire another's man unless they produced a certificate to leave from their last master" (29) The situation for the pitmen was so serious that it has been argued that, "the miners of the North East during the 18th and early 19th centuries lived in conditions of near slavery".(30) In the middle of the 18th century the coalfield began to spread eastwards into deeper seams due to the development of new ventilation techniques and better drainage systems. Added to this was the rising demand for coal from London. Here was a golden opportunity for pitmen who wished to move. (31) The new ventilation techniques would have been particularly important to pitmen as it has been noted that, "early mines, shallow and of small extent, would not require assisted ventilation"(32), but as the coalfield moved eastwards so deeper mines would require better ventilation.

In the 1750's and early 1760's newspaper advertisements written by colliery managers were placed in newspapers, tempting pitmen to move, whilst other advertisements threatened pitmen who had 'eloped; from older pits. (33) On or about 14th August 1765, pitmen ceased to work almost all at the same time, at every colliery on the Tyne and the Wear. The date was not coincidental. 13th August had been binding day. There had been waggonways on the Northeast Coalfield since at least the 1670's (34) and the strike was further consolidated by the closing of these waggon-ways by pitmen, to prevent the transportation of coal. (35) By September 200 ships lay idle on the Tyne.

The Colliery owners did have the power to send men who broke their bonds to jail, although this was not always used. (36) In response to the strike, colliery owners had already put out handbills on 31st August ordering men back to work as they were obliged to do by law until, "the expiration of their present bonds', and assured them, 'that each Pitman shall receive a Discharge in Writing, if he shall require it, that he may be at Liberty to engage in the service of any other Master; and that no Agreement is entered into by the Gentlemen of the Coal Trade, to refuse any Pitman, on Account of his having served in any other Colliery the Year before.'" (37) The pitmen decided to stay out and press their advantage. It was now not a strike over wages, but over the entire balance of power between men and masters. (38)

Coal owners placed advertisements in the *Newcastle Journal* on 7th September which were repeated in other local newspapers on 14th and 21st September which stated that, "'most of the Bound Pitmen....have lately deserted their respective Employments, before the Expiration of their Bonds, and refuse to return or serve any other'" (39) Despite this, pitmen began to win the battle for public opinion in the London press. (40) A number of letters in support of the pitmen were published and pressure began to build upon the coal owners. Influenced by public opinion, their financial losses and talk of an enquiry, the coal owners placed a report in Newcastle papers on 21st September, stating that they

never intended to refuse to employ each other's men. Negotiations re-opened on 27th September (41) and by 4th October it was reported that the "parties were reconciled" (42) The 1765 strike had ended in a 'stand-off'. The pitmen accepted new bonds without it being simultaneous, but it has been argued that the pitmen's 'stand' of 1765 demonstrated their "powerful sense of their collective identity and interest; their capacity for organised, effective and remarkably sustained action across the whole coalfield; their tactical skill; their restraint; their articulate leadership; their realistic sense of what they could and could not hope to achieve; their rejection of deferential submissiveness; their subscription to, and ability to manipulate to their advantage, the libertarian ideology of the age. They were not, as one letter to a London paper put it, 'a rabble of Coal-heavers'. They were pitmen, and they also conceived themselves to be free-born Englishmen". (43)

Benedict Anderson developed the idea of imagined communities, in his book of the the same name. In this, Anderson talks of how nations are imagined because, "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their comunion." (44) What Anderson said about nations can surely also be said about regions and a workforce such as the pitmen within a region. The pitmen of the coalfield similarly couldn't have all known each other and indeed in those days before the railways, may have really known very few people outside their own village.. However, they were able to imagine themselves as one community and develop a collective identity which meant that the stand of 1765 , undertaken by the community of pitmen in the Northeast, could stop the idea of binding during the will of the master. (45) The binding would continue, but at least the pitmen had made it clear that they had to be treated with a certain amount of respect.

The seeds of the radicalism, which was to flourish in 19th century Northeast England were sown in the 18th century as a united workforce in and around the growing coalfield began to see itself, to borrow Benedict Anderson's phrase, as an imagined community There was no way that mining families across the Northumberland and Durham coalfield, in a time before railways could know many fellow mining families in other parts of the coalfield. However, the successful 1765 strike showed that they were beginning to imagine themselves as one working-class community, and one which could start to defend its interests and challenge the hegemony of the coal-owning classes. This was the time of the Enlightenment and of Thomas Paine, whose book *The Rights of Man*, was so poular that, "a hostile report claimed that every pitmen (in the region) carried it in his back pocket". (46) When the development of a collective identity among the pit villages across the coalfield was added to the radicalism of centres such as Newcastle, with figures such as Reverend James Murray, Thomas Spence and Thomas Bewick, then it is little wonder that the region would become fertile ground for many of the radical movements of the 19th century and the most unionised region in Britain by 1900.

2015 will mark the 250th anniversary of the 1765 strike. It seems to me that this an anniversary which is well worth remembering, both to show our respect to those whose collective campaigning pre-dated formal trade unions, whilst paving the way for them and to remind the people of Northeast England of just how deep their collectivist and trade union roots are.

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FOOTNOTES

1. N. Emery; *The Durham Miners*, p.4
2. Sunderland Corporation; *The Official Guide and Handbook 1950*. p.54
3. H. Jewell; *The North-South Divide: the Origins of Northern Consciousness In England*, p.103
4. K. Wrightson, in Northumbria, *History and Identity* (ed. By R. Colls), p. 136
5. E. Hughes, *North Country Life in 18th Century, The North-east 1700-1750*, p.151
6. *ibid.* p. 259
7. *ibid.* p. 70
8. P. Cadogan; *Early Radical Newcastle*, p.1
9. A.J. Purdue; *Merchants and Gentry*, p.123
10. *ibid.* p.124
11. P. Cadogan; *Early Radical Newcastle*, p.2
12. H. Jewell; *The North-South Divide; the Origins of the Northern Consciousness In England*, p.95
13. K. Wrightson in, *Northumbria, History and Identity* (ed. By R. Colls), p. 146
14. N. McCord, *NE England 1760-1960*, p. 80

15. C.M. Fraser and K. Emsley, *Tyneside*, p. 111
16. P.M. Horsley, *Eighteenth Century Newcastle*, p. 9
17. *ibid.*, p. 9 and 11
18. E. Hughes, *North Country Life in North-east England; the North-east 1700-1750*, ?
19. *ibid.* p. 303
20. D. Levine and K. Wrightson; *The Making of the Industrial Working-Class*, p. 399
21. *ibid.*
22. *ibid.* p. 400
23. *ibid.*
24. *ibid.* 404
25. *ibid.*
26. J.E. McCutcheon, *A Wearside Mining Story*, p. 42
27. D. Levine and K. Wrightson; *The Making of the Industrial Working-Class*, p.407
28. *ibid.* p.404
29. *ibid.* p. 407
30. K. and J. Smith, *The Great Northern Miners*, p. 24
31. D. Levine and K. Wrightson; *The Making of the Industrial Working-Class*, p. 410
32. F. Atkinson, *The Great Northern Coalfield*, p.16
33. D. Levine and K. Wrightson; *The Making of the Industrial Working-Class*, p. 411

34. F. Atkinson, *The Great Northern Coalfield*, p.48
35. D. Levine and K. Wrightson; *The Making of the Industrial Working-Class*, p. 412
36. K. and J. Smith, *The Great Northern Miners*, p. 24
37. D. Levine and K. Wrightson; *The Making of the Industrial Working-Class*, p. 414
38. *ibid.*
39. *ibid.* p. 415
40. *ibid.*p. 421
41. *ibid.*, p. 424
42. *ibid.*
43. *ibid.* p. 425
44. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 6
45. D. Levine and K. Wrightson; *The Making of the Industrial Working-Class*, p. 426
46. J. Charlton, *Hidden Chains, the Slavery Business and North-east England 1600-1865*,
p. 26