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# 'PIT BROW STIR'

written and researched by EILEEN MURPHY  
music written and directed by KEITH MORRIS

ACT I TAKES PLACE BETWEEN AUGUST AND NOVEMBER 1911  
ACT II TAKES PLACE IN MARCH 1912  
POSTSCRIPT.....THE PRESENT

DIRECTOR.....ROMY BASKERVILLE  
DESIGNER.....NEIL DUFFIELD

## CAST

Theresa O'Neill.....Jane Cox  
Dermot O'Neill.....John Middleton  
Maggsie Henderson.....Francesca Ryan  
Jem Henderson.....James Hennessy  
Eunice Cooper.....Barbara Peirson  
Mr Prentiss } .....Gordon Wiseman  
Plumber }  
Annie Kenney }  
Jimmy } .....Eileen Kinsale  
Cleaner }  
-----  
Stage Manager.....Leo Atkin  
Costumes made by.....Christine Smalley  
Liz Fuller  
Debbie Rodgers  
-----  
Hair by Gypsy of Atherton.

PIT PROP IS A PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY THEATRE COMPANY BASED IN THE WIGAN METRO AND FUNDED BY NORTH WEST ARTS AND WIGAN EDUCATION AUTHORITY.

Artistic and Administrative Co-ordinator.....Cora Williams.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At every stage of this production, from the initial research to the final rehearsals, the company has received enormous and invaluable assistance from a huge range of local people. We would like to mention them all by name but there are far too many. They include ex-pit Brow lasses, miners and ex-miners, surface workers, NCB and union officials, everyone at Bickershaw, Parsonage and Quaker House Collieries, the staff at Boothstown Rescue Station, library staff, museum services, many local businesses who have helped us sell tickets or display posters, and many other individuals who do not fit into any of these categories. To every one of those people we extend our warmest thanks.

The picking belt on the set was made to our design and loaned to us by.....TONY HOLDEN, Bk LEIGH LANE, HORWICH.  
Photographs for the programme were provided by CLIFF WEBB, ANGELA JOHN, AND JOHN HANNAVY.

Our thanks also to ANGELA JOHN, author of 'By the Sweat of their Brow' for her continual help and support during the working period.

## **The Pit Brow Lasses**

The Lancashire pit brow lasses are now no more than a memory, sometimes romanticised and sometimes seen as just one aspect of harder times long gone. But those who imagine the pit brow lasses belong only to the distant past are quite mistaken. There were women working in the Wigan coalfield up to the mid-1950's.

Their history had been a long one. Having been prohibited from working underground in 1842 they fought off several attempts to exclude them from working on the surface. Our play focusses on one such attempt in 1911. It was argued that the work was 'unsuitable for women', but the women found strong support among the suffragettes and they were supported too by their own employers who were undoubtedly less concerned with women's right to work than they were with the cheap labour the girls provided.

The miners' union was against female employment and although within Lancashire itself opinion among miners was divided, the union as a whole consistently argued that the work done by the women should be given to men (especially disabled miners). The same attitude continued even after the women themselves were allowed to join the union in 1919.

Although increasing mechanisation gradually reduced the number of female surface workers there were still about 600 pit brow lasses in the Wigan area in 1953. Their employment was finally brought to an end as the result of an agreement in 1954 between the recently-formed NCB and the miners' union. No more pit brow women were to be recruited and many of the existing ones were sacked. Disabled miners were to be favoured for surface work. The very last pit brow lass finished work at a Whitehaven pit on 1st July 1972.

An ironic twist is that very shortly after this, women began working underground in American coal mines. Over 2000 of them are now employed in a whole variety of jobs, including facework. A similar situation exists in parts of present-day China. But attitudes in this country have not altered. NUM president Joe Gormley had this to say earlier this year:

'We worked too hard and too long to get women and kids out of the pits to put them back there now, and I bloody well won't have a woman down a mine as long as I'm president.'



A woman miner waits to go underground in Virginia, USA.

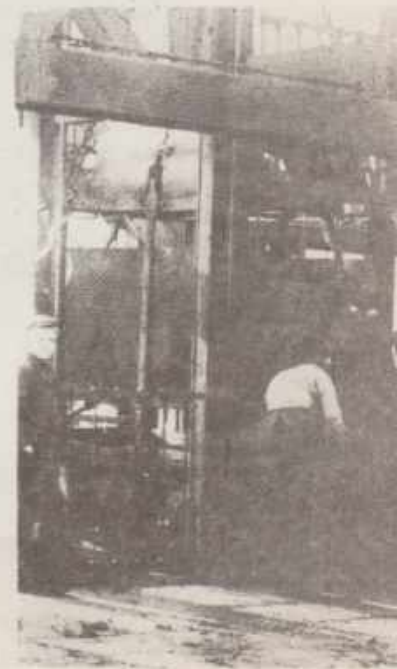
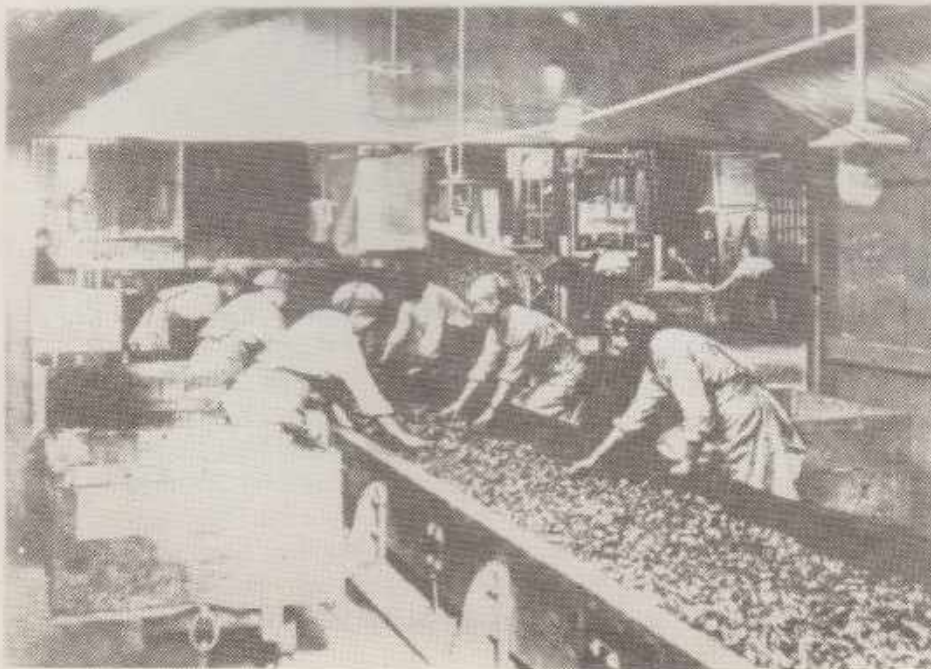
## **Research and preparation**

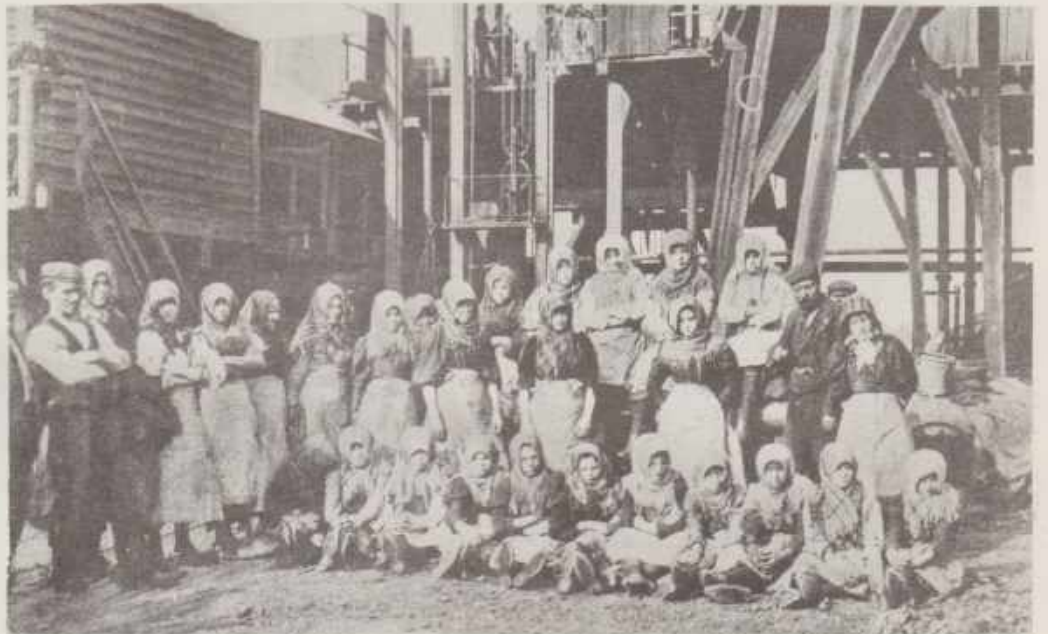
As well as spending a great deal of time researching the written history of the pit brow lasses and ploughing through contemporary newspapers, Eileen Murphy interviewed about 40 local ex-pit brow women as well as miners, NCB officials, union officials and a mine owner. The whole company went down Parsonage Colliery, visited the coal preparation plant at Bickershaw Colliery, the Salford Mining Museum and Windy Arbour pit. The men spent half a day working in a simulated mine at Boothstown Rescue Station and crawling beneath the floorboards at the Briarcroft Centre. The women were





Wigan Colliery Lasses







## **The work**

Pit brow lasses worked at a whole range of jobs on the pit surface. In the early days they cleaned the dirt and slack out of the coal with hand-riddles and shovelled the coal into wagons for transportation. As more pits introduced mechanisation women were employed to pull full tubs of coal (weighing between 8 and 11 cwts) out of the cage and into 'tipplers' which emptied out the coal onto belts and screens where more women picked out the dirt by hand. Though conditions varied from pit to pit, very often they worked in the open air in all weathers and in extremely dusty conditions. They were also employed as points women and tally snatchers, they filled railway wagons and barges. They worked on the dirt rooks and in the lamp room. But as time went on they were confined more and more to the coal-cleaning belts where they worked mostly in teams of between 10 and 20 women to a belt. At no time were they ever trained to operate machinery. So as mechanisation gradually took over many of the manual tasks on the surface, at the same time making the work easier, lighter and safer, the women were employed in fewer and fewer numbers and limited to work on the picking belts. However there were exceptions. We interviewed one ex-pit brow lass who was still 'kecking' coal tubs at Golborne Colliery in 1954.

## **The working clothes**

The Lancashire coalfield was one of the main female employing areas and what made the area around Wigan and Leigh unique from the rest of the country was the wearing of trousers.

Although these were obviously the safest and most sensible things to wear, conventional Victorian society was horrified by the 'sickening sight' of 'girls and women who had been created and designed for a much nobler sphere of action, clad in man's attire on the pit banks .... day by day losing everything modest and womanly'.

A combination of attitudes like these and changing nature of the work itself brought a gradual end to the wearing of trousers around the turn of the century. Definite fashions of dress were established which varied from pit to pit. A few pits, like Blundell's at Pemberton, provided their girls with a uniform designed by the coal owner's wife. But even where this didn't happen the women themselves tended to dress almost identically within a particular pit - the exception sometimes being older women who sometimes continued to dress in the fashion most prevalent in their own youth.

## **Pay and conditions**

During the period of our play the lasses started work 'on the broo' at the age of 13. Hours varied in the different collieries but the most common shift was 6am to 3pm with one half-hour break for breakfast. In winter the women worked five and a half days a week but this was often reduced in the summer months when demand for coal was reduced. Pay varied too, not only between pits but also according to age and the type of work done. In the 1911 - 1912 period lasses were earning between 1/- and 2/6 a shift. Pit head baths at this time were virtually non-existent even for men; the first one in the country opened at Gibfield Colliery, Atherton in 1911. It wasn't until 1931 that bathing facilities were made available for women, the first being the Maypole Colliery, Abram. However by 1945 there were bathing facilities for 1,150 women at pits throughout the country, most of them in the Wigan/Leigh area.



# The miners strike of 1912

The miners' strike of 1912 was the first ever national miners strike and until that point in time no larger stoppage of workers had ever taken place. The miners wanted a minimum wage for all underground workers. They were paid according to how much coal they got out, but often a miner would be allocated a place where conditions made it impossible for him to take home a living wage. Moreover the allocation of difficult places was often used to victimise union activists.

The strike began on 1st March 1912 and lasted 6 weeks. Industry began grinding to a halt almost immediately in many areas, and the Government moved in at once to act as mediator between the owners and the men. A compromise was proposed. The Government would pass an Act forcing the owners to pay a minimum, but the amount of the minimum would only be negotiated after a return to work. The union held a ballot of its members on whether to continue the strike or not. A majority favoured continuing the strike but it was not the required 2/3 majority. And

after much dissension the miners decided to return to work. But the return was not smooth. In the Leigh, Tyldesley, Atherton area the pits stayed shut and 'roaming bands of strikers' invaded the Wigan area



where the miners had returned to work. There were a few pitched battles between miners and police, some of the Wigan pits were forced to close under the pressure, but after a few days of this, the military was called in to put a stop to the rioting and within a short time all pits were working normally. But the bitterness remained, many miners feeling they had been cheated of outright victory.

During the strike itself, many miners began mining their own little pits (or 'day-eyes'), digging straight into the ground where the coal seams out-cropped. This was illegal of course, but it was sometimes done so successfully that some strikers established thriving little concerns, selling coal to the mills and even to their own coal owners. Actions such as these were of course much criticised by the majority of strikers who saw it as a form of strike-breaking.

Everyone picked coal for their own use though. And these photos from the Wigan Observer show operations in progress at Bryn.





# The Mining Crisis.

## Interviews with Local Miners' Leaders.

## How the Wigan District is Affected.

## Withdrawals & Alterations of Local Passenger Trains.

The deadlock in the mining world is making itself felt keenly all over the country, for the stoppage of coal supplies following the closing of the collieries is having a severe effect on many industries. Many ironworks and engineering and other establishments are coming to a standstill. In the Wigan district coal has been stored in considerable quantities at most of the works, but there are cases where the supplies are running out. The Wigan Rolling Mills, which employs some four hundred men, have been stopped since Saturday, on account of the scarcity in fuel. The Inco Forge is partially stopped, and the coal supplies are being conserved for the purpose of keeping up steam. Mr. S. Mellor, on being interviewed, stating that his firm were hoping to be able to continue at their works, with the exception of this distention at the forge, without stoppage until the strike was settled.

Consequent upon the stoppage in the coal trade the railway companies have found it necessary to revise and curtail considerably the existing passenger train services, and it is stated by one company that in the event of the strike being prolonged further revision of the train services will probably become necessary. The company also gives notice that they cannot guarantee the punctuality of the trains which are laid down to run, and will not be responsible for any delay, loss, or damage, which may occur to passenger traffic.

# The Mining Crisis.

## MASS MEETING OF MINERS AT ASHTON.

## MR. TWIST EXPLAINS THE PRESENT SITUATION.

## ADVICE TO THE MEN.

## MR. H. TWIST ON THE SITUATION.

### THE MINERS' CAUSE AND PUBLIC SYMPATHY

A mass meeting of miners was convened at Ashton yesterday (Friday) morning, for the purpose of hearing a statement of the present position of affairs. The speaker was rather optimistic, but a crowded assembly packed the Congregational Schoolroom to the doors. Mr. T. Shaw presided, and among those on the platform were Mr. H. Twist, J.P., Mr. J. Parkinson, J.P., and Councillors E. Walden, A. Jones, J. Roberts, and others.

The Chairman said, as they were well aware, they were passing through a crisis such as had never been known before, either in the history of England or in the history of the world. He would call upon Mr. Twist to address them.

## THE WORKING OF THE OUTCROP SEAMS.

Since the strike began a large number of strikers have mapped out claims in the various districts of Wigan where shallow mines abound. In the Whalley district particularly almost 100 men have been engaged in working outcrop seams. As in 1893, they have had more than an average amount of success, and they have worked up enthusiasm to such a pitch that family groups have been formed to work by claims under their own names. This has brought a certain amount of resentment on the part of the other strikers, and on Sunday an impromptu assembly on the Market Square declined upon the injustice of this action, and expressed determination that it must cease, since it served to stultify their own action and self-sacrifice. They went further, and said they would take possession of the mines. It is stated that coal has been sold to mill owners inside and outside the town, and even to coal merchants, at 18s. per ton. A voluntary contingent of the malcontents said they would go next morning and "close them down their pits." In anticipation there was a large assembly of people on the scene on Monday morning. But the threats of Sunday failed out, and happily no police interference was necessary.

## THE STRIKE IN WIGAN.

### GETTING COAL FROM OUTCROP SEAMS.

The deadlock in the mining world is making itself felt keenly all over the country, for the stoppage of coal supplies following the closing of the collieries is having a severe effect on many industries. Many ironworks and engineering and other establishments are coming to a standstill. In the Wigan district coal has been stored in considerable quantities at most of the works, but there are cases where the supplies are running out. The Wigan Rolling Mills, which employs some four hundred men, have been stopped since Saturday, on account of the scarcity in fuel. The Inco Forge is partially stopped, and the coal supplies are being conserved for the purpose of keeping up steam. Mr. S. Mellor, on being interviewed, stating that his firm were hoping to be able to continue at their works, with the exception of this distention at the forge, without stoppage until the strike was settled.

Mining operations have been going on in the Batting Wood district during the past week. On the easterly side of the Douglas a seam of coal crops out, at a sharp angle, practically on the river embankment, and a considerable quantity of coal has been got here in the early part of the week. Some old residents remembered that when the road was cut from Batting Wood to Whalley the outcrop was cut into, and some of the colliers in the locality were soon at work removing the clay and shale. The seam is said to be of the best quality, and the coal is yields in splendid quality. That got by the workers from the place of the outcrop was somewhat weathered, being damp and having lost some of its brightness in consequence of being so near the surface, but it was excellent in other respects. On Monday a collier went as far into the embankment as to have a little mine of his own, and he brought the wooden load-pots from his house to use for spragging purposes. He informed a visitor that he got four tons of coal that day, and sold it for ten shillings a ton. "That was a decent day's wage," commented the visitor. "Aye," replied the man, "it was, but I'd spent all day on Sunday getting the place ready. If I'd only about two cart loads of timber to use for spragging I'd soon be independent of 'C' pit." It is said that some of the coal has found its way into the market, and has been carted round the town.

The men were coming down Wigan-lane with a wheeled wagon full, and passing a group of men they called after him, 'Tha'll 'a' to put a scotch on 'em' down there.'

Mining has also been in operation at Whalley, it is said, and in Riding-lane, Ashton.

Many of the colliery proprietors are not objecting to the men on strike picking coal at the dirt heaps, and many of the slag hills in the neighbourhood of the collieries have been seen of great amount.

### THE FIND OF COAL AT BRYN.

The mining operations in the disused clay-hole at Rose Hill ceased on Friday afternoon last week, when a staff of police officers were directed to put a stop to any more coal being got. A few tons were already on the embankment, but the authorities were very generous in allowing the "coolers" to cart it away.

## THE COTTON MILLS AND PICKED COAL.

The special correspondent of the London "Daily Telegraph" at Wigan says:

It is in Wigan that the fact that the cotton mills were able to keep running has really proved the social and economic salvation of the borough. The wages brought into many a Wigan miner's house by the grace of the family have means all the difference between gaunt distress and hunger on the one hand, and merely a depleted larder and short ration on the other. And the curious part of the business is that the local mills have been materially assisted in the matter of their fuel supplies by the miners themselves. The mills would certainly not have been able to run so they have had it not been for the "picked coal" with which the miners who were out to paralyse all industry, if that should be necessary to ensure the extinction of their minimum wage, were out above helping the local firms that paid their daughters' wages. But the mills, I am told, were getting perilously near the end of their tether. Indeed, had it not been for the present boom in the cotton trade, certain of the mills would probably have decided to curtail their operations long ago. It is, then, the coal picked off the pit waste heaps or dug out of their lazily controlled surface mines that has saved the situation in Wigan. Indeed, I have spoken to responsible colliery officials, who declare that picked coal has proved the salvation of the country in the late emergency. Not only has it kept the strikers out of harm's way, but it has provided the fuel that has saved many an industrial concern from stagnation. There is something positively grotesque in the way in which this coal-picking has occasionally been conducted. I know of one important colliery firm in this district which has actually paid £2,000 for coal picked from its own waste heaps by its own men. No doubt the colliers sold some of this coal at a profit, but a proportion of it went to feed the pit furnaces, and in any event the company took the risk. Another episode in connection with coal picking is almost as farcical in character. The miners at one large colliery heretofore were so successful in their picking operations that they actually approached the management for the use of railway wagons to carry it away! Their request was granted, and when certain accounts afterwards came through it appeared that one contractor alone had disposed of something like 600 tons of the coal. With these and other circumstances it is estimated that no less than 1,000 tons of coal were picked

## TROUBLE AT THE PITS.

## BANDS ON THE MOVE BETWEEN HOLTON AND WIGAN.

### ROAD REPAIRERS BROUGHT UP.

There were lively doings during Sunday night and Monday morning all over the colliery district lying between Bolton, Tyldesley, Leigh, Horwich, and Wigan. Bands of youths and miners visited many of the pits, and insisted on such work as was going on being stopped. The proceedings were much alike at all the pits, and no leaving one colliery band would go on to another. The bands seemed to be composed chiefly of the younger elements, many of them boys, and their action was a surprise to the local miners' officials. On Monday night mounted police were drafted to several places in the district.

A mob of between 2,000 and 3,000 on Monday afternoon entered the Wigan district from the Atherton direction, and visited the collieries of the Abram Coal Company, the Maypole Colliery, and the Hindley Field Collieries. The demand made to the management in each instance was that the men should be withdrawn from the pits, and although no threats were used the officials speedily withdrew the workers from the mines.

Several colliery proprietors had decided not to re-open their pits until adequate protection was forthcoming, and the county police authorities on Monday night drafted contingents of mounted men into the affected districts.

### POLICE PELTED WITH EGGS AT BLACKFOD.

There was much commotion at Blackford on Monday. Although the miners did not resume work, a big mob, however, had decided not to resume work, on receipt of a telegram from the miners' agent, it was decided to re-start, and in the morning, at the Sea-lane Collieries, over 500 men went down the No. 1 Pit, and over 80 down the No. 4 Pit. Soon after nine o'clock a crowd from the direction of Westhouse, presumably south, appeared on the pit banking at the Bone Pit, clamouring for the men to be called up. There is no defence for the pit head, and the manager, after some perceiving, decided to recall the men. Meanwhile a small body of police kept the cheering mob somewhat in hand, and when the mob saw the men emerge from the pit they rushed across the fields to the other pit a mile away. Orders, however, had been given by telephone for the men to come up, and beyond cheering and yelling, the crowd did not attempt to do anything here, but they had other work in hand.

At Dawson-lane Mill, within view of this pit, there has been a severe dispute, and seventy women have been on strike, supported by the Wigan Workers' Association. There was a rumour that some were going to break the strike, and the ladies of the mill determined to fetch out the non-striking workers, who were at work in the village. They were joined by women and children, and a great crowd surrounded the mill. Seventy police officers and a staff of police kept them in check for a time, but they broke the windows in the boiler-house, and pelted the police with eggs, causing a great uproar. Eventually the dispersal of the mob was arranged, and the mill closed work for the day.

### INTIMIDATION AND DAMAGE BY STRIKERS.

A band of some 2,000 young men, armed with sticks, made another incursion in the Wigan district on Tuesday afternoon, and estimated considerable damage. A visit was first made to the Maypole Collieries, Abram, where the second shift of miners was prevented from entering the various mines, while the windows of the colliery offices were smashed. The men then proceeded to the pits of the Abram Colliery Company, only to find that the pits were not working. A visit was next paid to the Easthouse Collieries, where the management were compelled to withdraw their men. Subsequently the men proceeded to Hunter Field Colliery, where damage was committed, the colliery staying being knocked down. In the evening a force of mounted police was employed in driving the marauders into the Leigh district, from which neighbourhood they had recruited their strength. The only explanation on the part of these rising bands is that they are of opinion that the prices should be definitely settled between agricultural firms and the pits. A further feature of these incursions has been the fact that in most cases they have not ventured to assault the authorities, the crowd promptly dispersing upon the arrival of the police.

# THE MILITARY IN WIGAN.

## OUTSIDE STRIKERS INTERFERE WITH LOCAL COLLIERY WORKERS.

## DISTURBANCES AT GOLBORNE AND ELLERBECK.

Troops were brought into Wigan on Wednesday in consequence of the serious aspect of affairs caused by the bands of roving strikers from the districts of Leigh and Pendlebury, paying visits to collieries, and demanding the withdrawal of the miners who in compliance with the decision of the Miners' Federation had resumed work in the pits. The miners from these outside districts marched to the miners where work was in progress, and displayed such a threatening attitude that the authorities decided to send troops to the scene. Accordingly the whole regiment of the 15th Lancers,