

Mining Days In Abram

By
Richard
Ridyard

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Mining Days in Abram

Or

Sixty Years Reminiscences of
Abram Coal Company
And Abram Township

By

Richard Ridyard

2004

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Abram Coal Company - Pit shafts
From OS 6" map 1892

years ago², that I had my first experience of looking down a pit shaft, and going into a winding engine house.

Bamfurlong Collieries were in process of being sunk, and a young cousin of my friend, engaged upon the work, took us to have a look round. I remember that I was greatly interested in what I saw, particularly by the winding engines, but I never thought that all my working life would be spent at a colliery, or that I was destined to be a winding engine man for more than forty-four years.

I attended Lowton St. Mary's school until I was twelve and a half years old. It was during the summer holidays in 1874 that I determined to seek my fortune, by applying for a job at Abram Coal Company's Collieries, better known at the time as Strangeways, or in the local vernacular, Strangewage. The explanation of this peculiar naming will come later in my story. How far I had been influenced in the matter by a school friend, who had started working there, I cannot say, but his gloating account of his work and his wage of two shillings³ per day, made him appear a veritable Croesus, and I resolved to go and do likewise.

Without acquainting my parents of my intentions, I started from home one fine morning to walk the three miles distance to the collieries. I remember that while I was loitering about the colliery yard, anxiously waiting to see the boss, several of the lads twitted me about my dress; and

² 1931

³ Old money had twenty shillings to the pound, so the equivalent of two shillings in modern money is 10p.

hinted that my cloth suit, starched white collar, silk necktie and polished boots would be against my getting on, as the orthodox working dress of the period was corduroy and clogs.

However, I was not daunted by their criticism and finally I approached the late Mr. Owen Gough, who was then, and until his death, surface foreman of the screen hands and general labourers. I boldly asked him if he could find me a job. After he had eyed me over, spat out a mouthful of tobacco juice, for he was an inveterate chewer of the fragrant weed, he asked me whose lad I was, where I lived and if I had worked anywhere before. I replied to his questions and, of course, told him that I had only just left school, but if he would find me a job I would do my best to give satisfaction. I somehow felt that my answers to his questioning had impressed him, for I was a sturdy little chap for my age. Finally he said that I could start work the following Tuesday, the day after making up day. The engagement so simply entered into lasted for more than fifty-five years and never for a moment did I regret the step I had taken. I have always retained an affectionate regard for 'Owd Owen', as he was familiarly called, by both young and old, about the pits. He was a genial personality and undoubtedly he knew how to get the best out of the men under his charge. He had the reputation of being clever with his fists, as some of the unruly Bickershawites knew from experience. He died on April 7th 1904 and lies buried in Abram Churchyard.⁴

⁴ In the census for 1901 Owen Gough was listed as a colliery overman, aged 64, living with his wife, Catherine at 48 Victoria Terrace, Bickershaw. He was born in Northwich, Cheshire and his wife in Handley, Staffordshire.

That day I returned home rejoicing at my success, full of hope for the future and elated at the prospect of earning two shillings a day, but somewhat perturbed with the thought of what my parents would say concerning my conduct. My mother was sympathetic, as mothers usually are toward the waywardness of their children, but my father was furious, because he had intended that I should follow him in his trade as a joiner. I only escaped a sound thrashing through the intervention of my mother. It was a great disappointment to both parents that not one of their three sons desired to learn their father's trade. All three must have had an engineering bent of mind. The second son served his time as a blacksmith and for thirty-six years held an official position with Robert Hall and Sons, textile machinists, Bury. The youngest son was an apprenticed fitter and turner and ultimately became rolling stock superintendent for Robert Hall and Sons, Liverpool Corporation Tramways Department.

Viewed from a worldly standpoint my brothers succeeded better than myself, but I am sure that neither of them had a happier time, or more contentment of mind, when following their respective avocations than I had in following mine.

Thus in brief outline is the story of how I became initiated into industrial activities and acquaintance with Abram and Abram Coal Company.

I was ordered to join some lads, who were engaged picking pieces of coal out of small heaps of dirt, which had been sent up the pit shaft in tubs. I soon learned that every kind of strata that comes out of a mine, except coal, is dirt.

The work consisted in overturning the tubs and picking the coal from the dirt. We wheeled the coal to the boilers to be used as boiler fuel, the dirt being refilled into the tubs and taken to the dirt tip to be emptied. We then placed the empty tubs in position, ready to be sent down to the pit again. For this apparently uninteresting work I received two shillings per day and I remember with what pride and joy I carried home my first fortnights wages to my mother. I gave her the twenty-four shillings I had been paid, less four pence, deducted for the Miners' Permanent Relief Society. She returned to me three shillings, strictly advising me to deposit two and six pence⁵ in the Sunday School Savings Bank. This I did and to my mother's advice in this small beginning of thrift, I attribute my never having been without a few pounds in the bank.

My work was of absorbing interest to me, for on some of the dirt I noticed what seemed to be imprints of various kinds of fern leaves, stems of plants and cockle and mussel shells, firmly embedded in it. I was also interested by the difference in the hardness of the dirt, some of it being as hard as paving stone, while most of it, although seeming hard when first brought to the surface, fell to pieces when exposed to rain or a damp atmosphere. For a time I was in a world of wonderment and curiosity, as to how these beautiful markings had been brought about and why shells of shellfish were found deep in the bowels of the earth. I wondered why coal was black and would burn and was so different from the dirt from which it was my duty to separate it. I questioned the other lads on the matter, but found it was as much a

⁵ Old money had twelve pence to the shilling so two shillings and six pence in new money is 12½ p.

mystery to them as it was to me. I fear that I was often searching for good specimens and pondering over them, when I should have been otherwise engaged.

Fortunately, I read an advertisement relating to a series of lectures on scientific subjects, which had been given, in Manchester, by eminent scientists of the period. I bought the lectures, and to my delight, there were several dealing with the very subject that was perplexing me. The title of one of the lectures was, *How coal and the strata in which it is found was formed*. Another was on *Coal Colours* and it dealt with the many beautiful colours derived from coal. A third explained the *Importance of coal in manufacture and trade*. What a wonderful story these lectures unfolded, a story much more bewitching in everything related to coal.

I had not been working many weeks when one of my companions challenged to fight me, but as we had not quarrelled I refused. On my refusal becoming known to the other lads, they taunted me with being afraid. Of course, I smarted under their ridicule, but the climax came when one day, during the dinner hour, I, along with other lads were sailing on one of the water lodges, on which we had placed a self-constructed raft. We were enjoying ourselves when, without any provocation, my challenger deliberately pushed me headlong into the water, which at the time was about a yard⁶ deep. This was more than I could stand, and on having scrambled out of the water, I immediately challenged him to fight me after we had finished work.

⁶ About 0.9 metres

The fight took place and I must have given a satisfactory display of my prowess, for peace reigned among the brotherhood during the remainder of the short time I was permitted to work with them. Almost sixty years have elapsed since this my last fight with fisticuffs. My opponent and myself were the best of friends until his death, which took place many years ago. The referee, however, is still alive⁷ and I called upon him some months ago to have a talk over old times.

At the time of which I write Abram Coal Company owned two winding shafts situated to the northeast of the township, and not more than 100 yards from the brook which forms the boundary between Abram and Leigh Borough. The founder of the company was a Mr. William Hayes, a Cheshire gentleman, living at the time at either Frodsham or Helsby. He was also proprietor of Strangeways Hall Collieries, Hindley, which he had worked for some years previous to his leasing, in 1869, three seams of coal underlying the Bickershaw Estate, Abram. To get to these seams, two shafts were sunk, one to the six feet seam, the other to the four and five feet seams.

When I commenced work, in July 1874, the pits had each developed a daily output of about 200 tons, and were working full time, that is eleven days per fortnight. The six-foot seam was wound up Number 1 shaft, the four and five foot seams up Number 2. The first officials of the company were Mr. James Henry Johnson, Agent, Mr. Green, Mine Manager, Mr Tarbuck, Surveyor, Mr. James Entwistle, engine-wright, Mr. Owen Gough, surface foreman and Mr.

⁷ In 1933

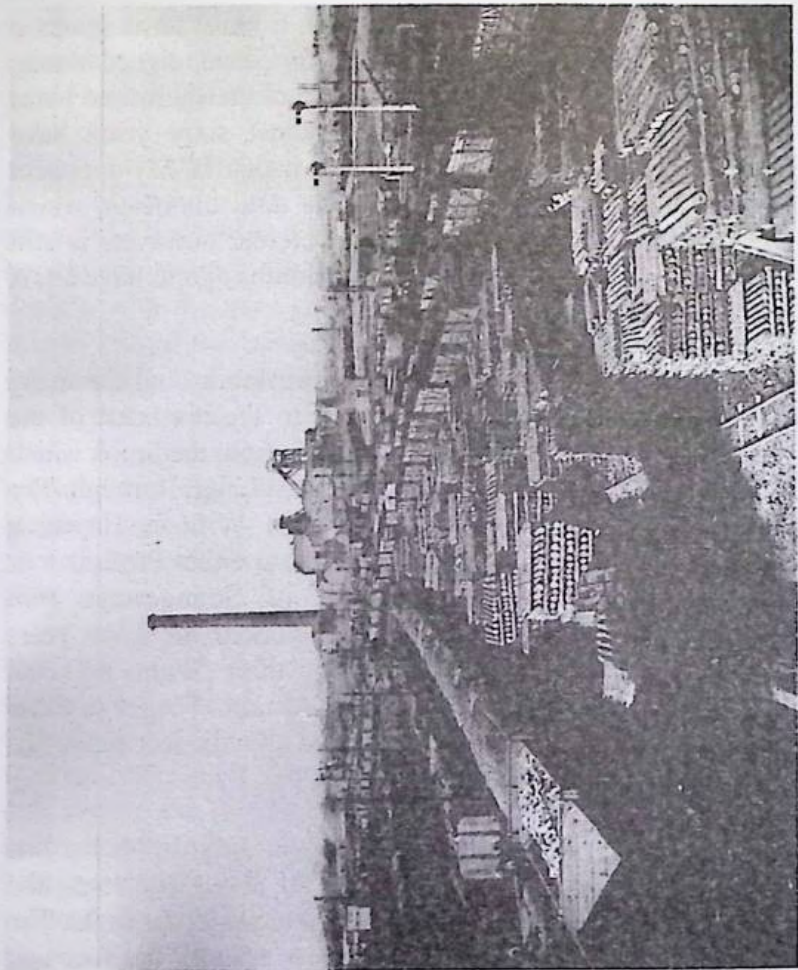


Figure 1 Abram Colliery - 1 and 2 Pits

Hilton, John Hilton acted as time and store keeper. Mr. William Johnson, eldest son of Mr. J.H.Johnson, Agent was at the time a young man, serving his apprenticeship as a mining engineer. There was also a son of Mr.Hayes, who visited the collieries several times each week, but he never seemed to act officially. Meanwhile Mr.Hayes had sold his Hindley Collieries to Messrs. Crompton and Shawcross and, I think I am right in saying that, after the transactions, all the above named officials, excepting Mr. Tarbuck, were transferred from the Hindley Collieries to Bickershaw.

Before concluding my memoirs I shall again refer to several of the above gentlemen. Coal wagons belonging to the Hindley Collieries were for a brief period used at Bickershaw, and it is owing to the temporary use of these wagons, which had Strangeways Hall Collieries painted on their sides, that Abram Coal Company's pits are still often called 'Strangeways'. Quite recently an aged miner told me that he, 'Worked deawn Strangewage four feet between fifty and sixty yere sin.'

This four feet seam must have been a veritable gold mine, for it was one of the finest seams of cannel coal in the British coal field and, at one time, it was sold for several times as much per ton as the best house fire coal. It was used for gas making and, although there is still plenty of cannel underlying Abram, it is no longer wanted for gas manufacture and, not being altogether suitable for household purposes, it is now, more or less, a drag on the market.

The mines were ventilated by a furnace built near the bottom of Number 1 shaft, which was called the furnace pit and upcast shaft, and I well remember the dense volumes of smoke being emitted, to the detriment of the whole country side. This mode of ventilating the mines was, however, of short duration, as an old disused shaft, near to the Forester's Arms Hotel, was utilised by the company, who had its diameter enlarged and sunk deeper. Here an up-to-date ventilating plant was installed, consisting of a forty-six diameter Guibal Fan, driven by a pair of high and low pressure engines, supplied by steam from two Lancashire boilers. This was known as Number 3 and used solely as the upcast ventilating shaft of Numbers 1 and 2 pits for about forty years.

Meanwhile the company had leased two other seams of coal and decided, in the autumn of 1874, to sink two more shafts down to the Arley and Yard mines respectively. Plans were prepared for sinking the shafts about a quarter of a mile south of Numbers 1 and 2 and, sinking operations were first begun about eighty yards south of the present Arley mine shaft. Unfortunately a bed of quicksand and water was tapped about a dozen yards from the surface. As little, or no, progress had been made after several months of continuous winding of sand and water, it was decided to cease operations, fill up the pit and make a fresh start on the site where the present Arley, or Number 5 shaft is now situated. Strange to relate, during the whole of the sinking of Numbers 4 and 5 shafts, no water was experienced, notwithstanding their close proximity to the one discarded.

The winding apparatus was a portable, combined engine and boiler, geared by cogwheels to about four revolutions of the engine. Two lads were required, each to work alternate weeks, night and day shifts. Mr. Gough (Owd Owen) asked me if I would accept the job along with his eldest son. I replied that I would like the job very much, but I should have to ask my parents' consent, as they might object to me working night duty. He told me to tell them that I should be paid two and threepence per day and seven and a half days per week. On placing the matter before them, to my surprise, they raised no objections, but I was not aware of what was passing through their minds concerning my future career. I started my new job, and before many weeks had passed over, I felt that my future was bound to engines and boilers. The work appealed to me and I determined, that if possible, I would be an engine winder when I became a man. I was happy and content in my work, buoyed with the hope that some day I should attain the height of my ambition.

My hopes, however, were destined to be almost shattered, for unknown to me, my father had decided, foolishly as it seemed to me, that I should get a living with a jacket on my back. He was acquainted with Mr. Barnes, who was chief of the goods department at the Leigh and Tyldesley railway stations. They had arranged that I should become office boy at Tyldesley goods station. On my arriving home from work one evening, my father told me he had got another job for me, and said I must give notice to leave the work I was doing. Of course I protested and wept when I learned what the new job was, but to no avail, as he

had definitely decided that I should not work at the pit for a living.

During the following two weeks, my parents were under the impression I was serving my notice, but I was not, as I had planned otherwise. I remember how reluctantly I started from home to enter upon my new duties on that dull November morning, which seemed in sympathy with my feelings and tears, for it rained heavily all day.

As I sat in the office copying invoices, I was planning what to do and say to my parents on my arrival home. I decided I would tell all about my not having given in my notice, and that it was my intention to go back to my old job the following morning. Of course, my father stormed and told my mother not to prepare any food to take with me. I said little, but cried much during the night, and early in the morning I quietly crept downstairs and was quickly on my way to Bickershaw. The previous day's rain had caused water to a depth of about a foot⁸ to be over the roadway near to Plank Lane, but undeterred I walked through it, and arrive at my work in good time to relieve my mate, who had been on duty thirty six hours. Being without food and drink did not trouble me, as I had money in my pocket and I knew I could buy some at the village shop. I have never regretted taking the stand I did against my parents' wishes in the matter, as I am sure I should have proved a failure as a clerk. None of the officials of Abram Coal Company have ever known that I once left their employ for a day.

⁸ There were three feet to a yard, so a foot was 0.3 metre.

The portable engine sank the Number 4 and 5 pit shafts to a depth of about 160 yards and was in commission about eighteen months, after which, engines of greater power were required. In the meantime Mr. Entwistle, the engine-wright, had left the company's employ and a Mr. Haydock was engaged to fill the position. This gentleman became greatly interested in me, and was a benefactor to me in many ways. Calling me to him one day, he told me that my job with the portable engine was coming to an end, but he said I should not be out of work. He gave me the choice of, either going in the fitting shop and becoming a fitter, or, entering the joiner's shop and becoming a carpenter. He also said that he was wanting a lad to be up among the engines and boilers, to make an engine man out of him. He told me to consult my parent's on the matter, and let him know their decision the following day. To my surprise they would not advise one way or the other, but told me to accept the job I thought best. They probably had in mind the result of their interference on a previous occasion. When I told Mr. Haydock the following day of my decision, he expressed himself as being highly pleased, and said I should have experience on every engine and boiler the company possessed. That Mr. Haydock fulfilled his promise will be seen from the following outline of my industrial career from this time onwards.

When my work with the portable engine came to an end, I was ordered to go to the Number 3 pit, where the Guibal Fan and engines, previously referred to were being erected. My duties here consisted in cleaning machinery and generally assisting the erectors. I also helped to connect the boiler fittings preparatory to my putting the first fire under them and getting up steam. On the day the engines and fan

were set in motion, the chief officials of Abram Coal Company and of Messrs. Walker Bros. Engineers, also Mr. Henry Hall, who was at the time chief inspector of mines for the district, were present. I was deputed to pour oil on the fan-shaft bearings, which had a tendency to become overheated. A few days after the fan and engines had been in commission, a messenger came to tell me that Mr. Haydock and Mr. William Johnson (Young Will) wished to see me at once near the Number 1 and Number 2 pit water reservoirs. On my arrival I found the two gentlemen standing by a small, newly made reservoir, out of which a double-acting Cameron pump, with engine and vertical boiler, was pumping and delivering water into the larger reservoirs, the machinery inspector being in charge. Mr. Haydock asked if I thought I could manage the job, and questioned me as to my understanding of the working of pumps. My answers must have been satisfactory as he then told me he wanted me to take charge, at the same time warning me that if I allowed the boiler to go short of water there would be an explosion. I suppose to impress me more, Mr. Johnson said that, they would then find my head in Leigh and my legs at Platt Bridge. I was instructed to go home and come back with enough food to last me through the night and the following day. I returned in good time and light heartedly took over from the man in charge. I managed all right, but have not forgotten the feeling of fear and dread I had during the darkness of that night, situated, as I was, in an open field, without shelter of any kind and only a hand oil lamp with which to see my way about. I had not been pumping for many days, when I received my first insight into the harsh way legal water rights can be used. The water I was engaged in pumping drained from adjoining land, which formed part

of the estate of the late M. James Diggle, and ordinarily found its way into the brook which divides that portion of Westleigh from Abram.

On my arrival at work one morning I saw that there was little, or, no water to pump. On examination I found that the clay dam, which had been put across the brook to change its course, had been cut through; thereby allowing the water to flow away down the brook, instead of into the small reservoir. I reported the matter to Mr. Haydock, who, of course, made use of some unparliamentary language. He immediately got on touch with one of Mr. Diggle's officials and by mid-day the trouble had been adjusted and the pump again working. The pumping job only lasted a few months, arrangements having been made with the Wigan Junction Colliery Company, later with the Maypole Colliery Company, for a supply of water as and when required.

Up to this time all the bricks required by the firm had been hand-made, but a brick-making plant was installed. On the closing of the pumping station, I was transferred to the brick-making shed to look after the engine, oil the machinery and wind the clay up an inclined plane. A Mr. Green had contracted with the company to make the bricks at a fixed price per thousand. What went wrong I never learned, but something occurred which caused the agreement to come to an end. One day, when the brick-making had progressed several months, all the workers, myself included, were informed that Mr. Green was finishing at the end of the day, the works closing, and we should be paid our wages up to date.

Meanwhile the Arley Mine winding-engine house was ready for the slaters. Mr. Haydock ordered me to meet him there the following morning as he had a job ready for me. The job consisted in winding the slates and mortar, as required by the slaters, from the ground floor on to a scaffold fixed in the rafters. The winding apparatus was my old friend the portable engine. To its crankshaft a small drum had been fastened, having a flexible wire rope attached, reaching to the ground over a pulley, fixed in a frame directly over a square hole in the scaffold. The receptacle at the end of the rope, into which the slates and mortar were placed, was a wooden box about eighteen inches square.⁹ A qualified winder, named George Sixsmith, was on the job, and after I had watched him manipulate the levers for a short time, I was asked to have a try. With care I made several windings to the satisfaction of Mr. Haydock and the men concerned. Sixsmith was found other work, and I became winder of the slates and mortar until the roof was slated, the work completed.

By this time the large stone blocks, on which the iron bedplates of the winding rest, were ready to be lifted on to the brick pillars. To accomplish this, a grooved pulley was keyed on the crankshaft of the portable engine. A cotton rope was run round this and another pulley attached to the travelling crane, which had been erected as a permanent fixture.

With the engine and crane I hoisted into position all the stone blocks, each weighing several tons, and also, the varied iron castings and parts of the engines. When not

⁹ About 46 centimetres

engaged with my engine hoisting material, I worked along with the engine fitters, and the variety of work involved was all very interesting and valuable to me. Altogether the job lasted nine or ten months and it was a great day on which the engines were first set in motion. Representatives of the makers, Messrs. Dalglish, St. Helens, were present, with Mr. William Johnson, Mr. Haydock and other officials of the Abram Coal Company. After a small bottle of wine had been poured on one of the cranks, the steam was turned on and the engines began to work. Mr. Johnson, on behalf of the firm, expressed himself as well satisfied with the working of the engines, congratulated the makers, and all concerned, in having carried the job through without serious accident, and promised to give five pounds, if the makers would give a similar sum, towards a dinner in commemoration of the event. The engines were among the largest of their kind in the country and attracted many visitors. The cylinders were forty inches diameter and seven feet long. The winding drum was twenty-four feet diameter and weighed about eighty tons, whilst the weight of the cranks was fifty hundredweight each.

The dinner, at which I was present, was provided by the proprietress of the Forester's Arms Hotel, who had the reputation of being an expert cook, and she certainly did provide a sumptuous repast. About twenty persons partook of the dinner, my seat being at the side of Mr. Adam Mason, the bachelor foreman fitter, of Messrs. Dalglish, who from my first meeting with him, had taken a great interest in me. After the dinner the evening was spent in giving the usual toasts, impromptu speaking, and songs by the gentlemen

present. Mr Gough, I remember, sang his favourite song, *The Farmer's Boy*, the rest of the company joining in the chorus.

For a short time after the engines had been brought into commission, I was kept cleaning and oiling them. I was then drafted to the locomotive shed, to assist in stripping and overhauling the locomotives. When this work was drawing to a close, Mr. Haydock told me that the stokers attending the Number 1 and Number 2 pit boilers wanted assistance on the day shift, and he wished me to accept the position. At the same time he said that a few months as a boiler attendant would be of benefit to me as a future engine man.

I had been stoking about six months when Mr. Haydock informed me that the old man who attended the air compressor engines was retiring, and asked me if I could manage to look after them. I replied that I could, and he ordered me to spend the rest of the week in the engine room with the man in charge, and take over the job on the following Monday morning. This appointment was strongly resented by several of the stokers, their contention being that it was their turn for promotion before mine. Their opposition, however, came to nothing, and I started on my new job as arranged.

The engines were of the non-condensing type and very wasteful in steam power, the dimensions of both the steam and air cylinders being twenty-eight inches diameter and five feet six inches long. Shortly after my appointment, the makers of the engines had instructions to convert them into condensing engines, and preparations were immediately commenced. When all the requisite apparatus was ready orders were given that, when the pits had finished coal-

winding on Friday afternoon, the work of putting in the condenser etcetera was to be proceeded with and continued until completed. There were five of us to carry out the work, two fitters, myself and two labourers. Strict injunctions were given us that all must be ready for the pits to begin coal winding at 6 a.m. the following Monday morning.

Apart from meal times, we worked continuously until 7 a.m. Monday, having completed the job within one hour of the time allotted us. We had been on duty for seventy-three hours. From Friday teatime to Sunday night we had all our meals at the Forester's Arms, where an order had been placed to provide rations for five fitters. During my career I have, through a variety of causes, been on duty thirty-six hours at a stretch scores of times and an occasional forty-eight hours; but the above instance is the only time I have been called upon to work seventy-three consecutive hours.

I attended the air engines for about two years and had attained eighteen years of age. In the meantime the sinking of Numbers 4 and 5 shafts had been finished. The coal was being wound up the Number 5 shaft from both the Arley and Yard seams, which respectively lie 650 and 520 yards below the surface. For the ventilation of the mines a Guibal fan, forty-six feet in diameter, driven by engines similar to those previously mentioned, had been erected near to the Number 4 shaft, the surface of which was planked over, as it was being used for ventilating purposes. Over all stood a small headgear to be used in case of emergency. I was appointed one of the two attendants on the new fan-engines, my colleague being a fully qualified winder. We

were on duty eighty-four hours per week, working night and day shifts of twelve hours each, alternate weeks. I was paid four shillings a day and seven days per week, whilst my mate was paid the winder's rate of five shillings per day.

About this time, 1879-80, mine workers' wages had been reduced to a very low point. The pits were not working more than three, or four days per week, so I thought I was in a good position compared with most colliery workers.

Six years, or so, had now passed by since my leaving school. Although my having to work night duty and much overtime made it impossible for me to attend regularly to evening class, I had not altogether neglected my education. During the first two winters after my leaving school I attended, when I could, the night classes conducted by my old school master. I shall always feel grateful to him for allowing me to attend the classes, when it was convenient for me to do so, and for specialising with me in mensuration and geometry.

About 1880 science classes began to be held in the upper rooms of the Local Board Offices in King Street, Leigh. I entered as a student on two evenings each week, my choice of subjects being steam and steam engines, applied mechanics, machine construction and geometry. To enable me to attend the classes when I was on night duty, I had arranged with my work-mate to stay on duty, until I could liberate him at 10 p.m. For doing this I gave him half my day's wage, that is two shillings, on each occasion. I attended the classes for two sessions, walking from Lowton to Leigh to attend the classes, after which I had to trudge on to Bickershaw. Of course there were no cars, or, buses in

those days. Before the following winter I had a new mate, and when I questioned him as to whether he would do as his predecessor had done, he refused, thereby bringing my attendance at the classes to an end.

During the time I was acting as a fan engine attendant, an accident occurred which might reasonably have brought my career with Abram Coal Company to an end. Attached to the engines was a speed recorder, to which was connected a small tap, which the man on duty had to open every hour. The apparatus was an invention of Mr. Henry Hall, the Chief Inspector of Mines for the district. It was to all appearance an ordinary clock, on the face of which was placed, every morning and evening, by an official, a paper disc, marked like a clock face. If the engines were kept running the stipulated number of revolutions, a circle was drawn on the disc by a lead pencil pressing upon it. If the speed of the engines increased, or decreased, the pencil mark was shown correspondingly above, or below, the circle. If the tap was opened the mark fell to the centre of the disc.

One night the two stokers came into the engine room for a chat, and at twenty minutes to twelve I drew their attention to the steam pressure going down. They left me, with the intention of seeing to the boiler fires and getting up steam. Instead, they started to pump water into the boilers, then fell asleep. After the stokers had left me I had my supper. At twelve o'clock I opened the tap and then sat down and dozed off to sleep also. At twelve minutes past twelve I wakened and found the engines running at less than half their normal speed and the steam gauge registering thirty pounds instead of sixty. I immediately opened the throttle and

expansion valves to the full, thereby increasing the speed of the engines by several revolutions per minute. I then went round and roused the sleepers, who at once stopped the pump and attended the boiler fires, which had almost died out. When the steam pressure had risen the stokers came to see me and wanted me to agree to a cock and bull story about an imaginary blow out steam joint being the cause of the trouble. I told them I should tell the truth, whatever the consequences might be.

I was very much concerned about the matter and I slept little during the following day, as I felt sure that I would have to give an explanation of the affair, to the officials, when I arrived on duty in the evening. Sure enough, Mr. Nelson, the manager and Mr. Haydock were in the engine room on my arrival. They had brought with them, as I expected they would, the telltale disc of paper. I was closely questioned as to the meaning and cause of the erratic diagram on the disc. I truthfully explained to them the whole of the circumstances. The markings on the disc corroborated my statement in every detail, the time I opened the tap, the gradual slowing down of the engines and, also, their slight increase in speed at the time I opened the valves. I received a severe reprimand. The stokers had the choice of being fined a sovereign each, or being discharged for neglect of duty. They paid the fine and were glad to have got off so easily, knowing that the law, for an offence of this kind, is very severe.

Monday, 19th December 1881 was one of those damp dull days, usually associated by miners with pit explosions. It was my week on the day shift. On this

particular day, as I sat having my dinner, a few minutes past twelve, I noticed an unusual lull in the noise made by the down rush of air. The fan was running normally. I also saw that the plaster, on the wall that divided the fan race from the engine room, was crumbling and falling. The thought flashed through my mind that the fan, or its ten-ton shaft had collapsed, and I immediately jumped up from my seat to shut off steam. Before I could do this there was a loud noise and the whole building vibrated to its foundations.

I ran outside and found the surrounding atmosphere black with smoke and dust, and could hear men shouting, "Pit's fired! Pit's fired!" a cry which proved to be only too true. The devastation was indescribable. The covering over the up cast shaft was blown away, and the door leading into the fan race, as also, the two, connecting the air chamber with the air drift, were blown from their hinges and smashed to pieces.

The seat of the explosion proved to be in the Yard seam, in which, on the day of the explosion, seventy-two men were working, of whom forty-eight lost their lives. The sad catastrophe cast a gloom over the district for a considerable time, and the sad scenes I witnessed will never be eradicated from my memory.

Some time after the explosion preparations began to be made for winding the Yard seams of coal up the up cast shaft.

The plant consisted of winding engine house, headgear and an up-to-date screening plant. The engines were made and erected by Messrs. Walker Bros., Wigan: the

dimensions of the cylinders being thirty-two inches in diameter and six feet long and the winding drum being eighteen feet in diameter.

By the beginning of the year 1885, all was ready for winding coal, but it was found that much repair work was required to the brickwork in the shaft that had been damaged by the explosion. Many hundreds of tons of dirt had to be wound up from the bottom, and I was given permission to practice winding it. Previously I had occasionally handled the Number 2 and Number 5 pit winding engines, but it was not until 1885 that I became recognised as a qualified winder on the newly erected engines at Number 4 pit.

From the above time to my retiring, through failing eyesight, in September 1929, I was engaged winding for the Company. I had charge at various times, of six pairs of winding engines. It was a severe shock to me when my respected benefactor, Mr. Haydock, died in August 1888. I have always felt that he more than fulfilled the promise he made to me when I was a boy. He had, however, for three years, the satisfaction of knowing that I had attained to my ambition. Whether I ever attained that degree of efficiency he hoped for, others must judge.

So soon as I became eligible I joined the Wigan, Bolton and District Colliery Engine-Winders Association, and I retained my membership until my winding career ended. I was soon elected on to the committee and for many years was President of the Organisation. On the formation of the County Conciliation Board, I was appointed one of the winders' representatives on that important body.

Some time after the outbreak of the war,¹⁰ the government took control of the coal industry. During the whole period of control, I was one of the National Federation delegates, appointed to interview the Control Board, on matters affecting the interests of the men we represented. All the business of the Board was transacted in London, and in the course of my many visits to the city, I met most members of the War Cabinet, including the Premier, Mr. Lloyd George. One of the meetings I attended was held in the War Council Chamber, at either 8 or 10 Downing Street. On that occasion, I was introduced, along with my colleagues to Sir Douglas Haig, Commander in Chief.

During the winter of 1917-1918 the position of the Allied Armies in France was precarious. Alarming criticisms appeared, in some sections of the press, concerning the treatment of the soldiers on the Western Front. To assist in allaying the fear, which this criticism created, in the minds of many of the British public, the government invited a number of accredited Trade Union representatives to visit the war area. I was accepted as a delegate, and on March 10th 1918, I sailed from Dover to Calais, with twelve others, from various parts of the British coalfields, on a tour of enquiry among the soldiers in Northern France.

We travelled hundreds of miles by motor, visiting the principal centres where the soldiers were quartered. The officer, Captain White, who accompanied the party, gave every facility for us to mingle and converse with soldiers, who we met under all kinds of conditions and not one word of complaint was made to us. The tour was a unique, but

¹⁰ First World War, 1914-1918

trying, experience to a civilian approaching sixty years of age, as I was at the time. Especially was this the case, as we stood in a trench at the extreme end of Vimy Ridge, watching the British bombarding the German trenches outside Lens.

Abram Coal Company has been remarkably free from serious over-winding accidents. Since 1874 to the present time, there must have been ten or twelve million men wound down and up the four coal-winding shafts, yet not one has ever sustained the slightest injury through an over-wind. There have been several cases of slightly over running the stopping marks when coal was being wound, but the damage has been insignificant. I attribute the freedom from this kind of accident, largely to the high standard of efficiency in which everything relating to the winding apparatus has always been kept.

Another important factor has been the good relationship existing between the winders and the heads of the company. Almost fifty years ago I was one of a deputation appointed to interview the management on a matter affecting the winders. On that occasion Mr. William Johnson said, that he believed in his winders coming to their work as happy and contented as when they were going home.

This spirit of respect and appreciation shown by one of the company's acting directors seemed to become diffused among the other officials, and was certainly reciprocated by most of the forty or so winders, whom I have known to be in the company's employ during the past sixty years.

While the firm has so far escaped serious winding accidents, it has not been so fortunate in other directions. Beside the explosion in 1881, the Arley Mine winding-engine house was gutted by fire on 6th May 1890; the cause of the outbreak being sparks from the drum brake. Everything in the building that would burn was destroyed. The roof collapsed, the winding ropes broke with the great heat and crashed with the cages to the bottom of the shaft. Fortunately, no one was injured and the several fire brigades that were quickly in attendance prevented the fire from spreading to the pit brow and screening plant. Otherwise, the several weeks' stoppage of the pit would have been much prolonged.

In 1912, a gob fire, caused by spontaneous combustion, started in a worked out portion of the Yard Mine, the combating of which, in ensuing years, caused much anxiety and great loss of capital to the firm. In 1921 the fire became so serious that the mine had to be flooded with water and sealed up. It has never been worked since. It is doubtful if there is any industry, where the risk to capital and labour is so great as that of coal mining.

The capacity for the output from the Company's four coal-winding pits has been approximately 2,000 tons per day. However, as the pits have never been at their peak of output at one and the same time, I think I am right in saying that a few tons over 10,000 has been the maximum output in any week of six days.

Like most other colliery companies, Abram has suffered through the depressed state of trade, and at present¹¹ only one of the four pits is working, the rest having been idle, for a considerable time. This is to be regretted, as the surface equipment is quite modern and will compare favourably with the latest and best-planned colliery. I am informed that there is still plenty of coal in the district, but at the moment it is not an economic proposition to work the pits. I am, however, sufficiently optimistic to believe that some day the potential value in the coal, now lying dormant in the bowels of the earth, will be required, and used for the benefit of mankind.

Bickershaw and Abram Coal Company are synonymous terms, the one cannot be thought of without associating it with the other. The district has always been represented, on the governing body of Abram Township, and this has, undoubtedly, been of benefit to the inhabitants. Many of the amenities, which they enjoy, have, however, been provided by the generosity of the company. One was the early provision of a number of houses, much above the average cottage type, and let to the employees at a comparatively low rental.

In 1880 the company erected Abram Colliery Schools, providing accommodation for 400 children, and for a number of years, divine service and a Sunday school were held on the premises. The beautiful little church that stands by the school was built by¹² the late James Henry Johnson, one of the proprietors, at a cost of about £5,000.

¹¹ 1933

¹² It was in fact built by the Johnson family, in 1905, in memory of the late Mr. J. H. Johnson

More than sixty years ago the company inaugurated what came to be known as the Abram Old Folks' Treat. The



Figure 2. Miners' cottages in Victoria Terrace, Bickershaw

Treat was an annual event and consisted of a substantial tea and entertainment. All sixty-years-of-age and over, living in Abram, were invited. The function was held in the Colliery

School. One or more of the heads of the firm were always present, and assisted in the distribution of rum punch, tobacco, etc. to the old people.

The recreative side of village life has not been neglected, as witness the Colliery Institute, with its billiard room, reading room and small library of books. Provision was also made for cricket, bowling and lawn tennis. All these amenities are indications of the solicitude, which the company has had for the well being of their workpeople and local inhabitants.

The climax of the firm's generosity and good will, however, came a few year's ago, when at the initiative of our present general manager, Major E. Hart, M.C., a pension scheme was adopted. Many old, retired servants of the company are now enjoying a gratuitous, weekly pension, and many expressions of gratitude I have heard, made by pensioners, for this tangible proof of the firm's appreciation of their past services. About two years ago Abram Coal Company and Bickershaw Colliery combined, with Major Hart as managing director, and I understand that the pension scheme is now operative throughout the amalgamated collieries, and must be costing the directorate several thousand pounds per annum.

During the existence of Abram Coal Company there have been five general managers, or managing directors and nine managers. Of course, all these gentlemen had characteristics peculiarly their own. I remember many illuminating incidents; a few, however, will suffice.

The first managing director was Mr. J.H. Johnson. When I was in charge of the air compression engines, one of my duties was to blow the steam whistle, whereby the workmen started, or stopped work. One day at noon, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Haydock, the engine-wright, were standing, unknown to me, near the entrance door of the engine house. At the time I was standing, with my watch in my hand, ready to blow the whistle at twelve o' clock, when Mr. Johnson appeared at the top of the engine room stairs just as the whistle began to sound. He hurriedly went back without speaking, and during the afternoon Mr. Haydock came to tell me that, the only remark made by Mr. Johnson was that I was ten seconds wrong.

On the retirement of Mr. Johnson, his eldest son, Mr. William, took his place. On one occasion he, in the company of the then manger, came into the winding-engine house, in which I was at the time located. The winders at a neighbouring colliery were on strike for an advance in wages, and the manager, in his customary bombastic manner, asked me how the winders' strike was going on. I replied that I had not heard anything about it for a few days, to which the manger said, they were a lot of damned fools, as any number of winders could be obtained for 4/6 per day. Mr. William immediately said, "Come, come, that's enough. How many managers could I get for considerably less than you are being paid?" The manager collapsed, and he certainly looked as if some of his self-esteem had been knocked out of him.

Mr. Alfred Johnson followed his brother William as managing director. I remember him once introducing a

very interesting conversation relative to the merit or otherwise of a profit sharing scheme with the employees. He expressed himself as favourably inclined, but he recognised the difficulty of working such a scheme with the miners, as there was so much changing from one colliery to another by them. The conversation caused me to think that some such arrangement might come to fruition among a section of the employees, but it never extended beyond the official staff.

With the death of Mr. Alfred Johnson, which took place in 1914, at the early age of fifty-one years, all the original members of the firm, who had been directly interested in the management of the collieries, had now passed away. The late Mr. Augustus Hart was appointed managing director. I remember this gentleman starting as an office boy for the company, and by his assiduous attention to duty, he rose, step by step, to be entrusted with the highest position the company could bestow upon him.

He was interested in everything appertaining to the welfare of the employees, especially the winders, to whom he conceded, shortly after his appointment, the privilege of being off duty, when not particularly required at weekends and holiday times. I shall always feel indebted to him for the facilities he granted me to attend meetings in London, during the sitting of the Sankey Commission and the period of coal control by the government.

Of the nine managers, who have been in the company's employ, only one might be considered to have been unpopular with the employees. This gentleman, on one occasion, issued instructions to which the winders strongly objected. Mr. X, as I will call him, and Mr. W, another

official, came to see me upon what grounds we opposed the order. I told him it was contrary to our trade union rules, that such an order had never before been pressed upon us, and that it was not strictly in accordance with the law. At this Mr. X. began to pour out a torrent of oaths ---- a feature which he had reduced to a fine art. He said that if he found we were trying to get our knives into him, he would sack every bl--dy one of us. I replied that if he was going to argue the matter in that way, I should leave him, and meet him when he was in a better temper. At this he stormed all the more and as I turned to walk away, he took hold of me and said, "You are a socialist." I replied that he might call me what he liked, but I hoped that I should always have the sense never to use the language he was doing. He calmed down and asked W if he had any tobacco. W said he had left his pouch at home, whereupon I said, "I have some Mr. X and handed it to him. He charged his pipe and I struck a match and held it to the bowl of his pipe to light it, at the same time remarking that I hoped it would be the 'pipe of peace'. At this Mr. X burst into laughter and off they went. The following night Mr W came and told me that on their departure, Mr X said, " You know W the d----d men are right, but it wouldn't do to tell them so.

The reign of this manager was of short duration and when it became known that he was leaving, the pit poet composed a half dozen verses of doggerel in commemoration thereof. The first verse was as follows,

Oh X we shall miss you
As our manager chief,

But none of us wish to kiss you,
Even now when you are in grief.
You've had your chance and missed it,
As we prophesied you would,
Because you were a misfit
For the office in which you stood.

At one time there were three officials in the company's employ, sons of Church of England ministers, and it seemed quite natural that the employees should name them after the biblical terms of Faith, Hope and Charity.

In 1924 Mr. A. Hart retired from the position of managing director, and his only son, Major E. Hart, was appointed to fill the vacancy. I have known this gentleman from boyhood and I have followed his career with interest. On his leaving school, he was apprenticed to Messrs. Walker Bros., Pagefield Iron Works, Wigan. On the outbreak of the war in 1914, he joined the north Lancashire regiment as Lieutenant, retiring at the end of the war with the rank of Major, having gained the distinction of the Military Cross for conspicuous bravery.

His army service has undoubtedly left its military impress upon him. By accepting the managing directorship of the Abram and Bickershaw Collieries, in the period of depression in the coal industry, it is evident that he has faith in the future of the industry as a whole, and in his ability to steer his company through this most difficult time. A faith, which I firmly believe, will be justified. In temperament, I should say that he is strict, but just, in his dealings with others, and with wrongdoers he would temper justice with mercy.

In 1925 it became known to him that I had completed more than fifty years service with the company, and he sent me a handsome present, appropriately inscribed. In reply to my letter informing him of my resignation, he replied as follows:

Abram Coal Company
Bickershaw
Nr. Wigan

9th October 1929

Dear Richard,

I am much obliged for your nice letter of the 4th which I only received yesterday, and it is with really personal regret that I have no alternative than to accept your resignation.

I have known a good deal of your capabilities and activities over a considerable period of the past, more particularly of course since I came up from London five years ago, and I have frankly always had the greatest admiration of your ability, integrity and capacity to substantiate the soundest relationship between all those you come in contact with, not only at the colliery. The energy you have put forward in public services has no doubt contributed in some measure to the trouble with which you are now beset, but I sincerely hope that the operations you are having will prove very effective, that your eyesight will be restored, and that you will live long in healthy happiness to enjoy a well earned period of retirement

In keeping with my promise to you, I shall be pleased if you can come and see me, some time when you are a little better, so that we can discuss some little assistance which I feel might be a tangible token of appreciation. With kind wishes,

I am yours sincerely,

E Hart

Needless to say I value these tokens of appreciation more than anything I possess.

A short time ago, I stood near Bickershaw Church and I counted ten pits, which a few years ago were all busy hives of industry. Today they are closed, and some of them dismantled altogether. I felt sad in my contemplation of what used to be and the quietude of the scene today. I thought how true are the last four lines of Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted Village*, which reads,

That trades proud empire hastes to swift decay
As ocean sweeps the laboured mole away,
While self-dependant power can time defy,
As rocks resist the billows and the sky.

Chapter 2

I have always held the opinion that a two or three-mile walk, or cycle ride, to and from work was beneficial to health and this may have influenced me in my never having lived in Abram. My long association with it has, however, always caused me to be interested in its history, its people, growth and development, as if it was the place of my nativity and upbringing.

When reading Baines' *History of Lancashire* many years ago, I found that he refers to the township of Abram as follows. He says that the township was originally called Adburgham¹³, then Abraham and finally Abram. The district gave the name to an ancient family of landowners. Richard de Edburgham held the land by gift of Henry II, who reigned in the twelfth century. He further states that there are, in this township, three ancient houses. Abram Hall was once a moated brick mansion, existing in the time of Henry VI, who reigned in the fifteenth century. Bamfurlong Hall was a wood, plaster and brick building, contemporaneous with Abram Hall. In this there existed a Catholic Chapel, now long disused. Bickershaw Hall was, until late years, a moated, massive, brick house, approached by a gateway and drawbridge. In pulling down this gateway some years since,

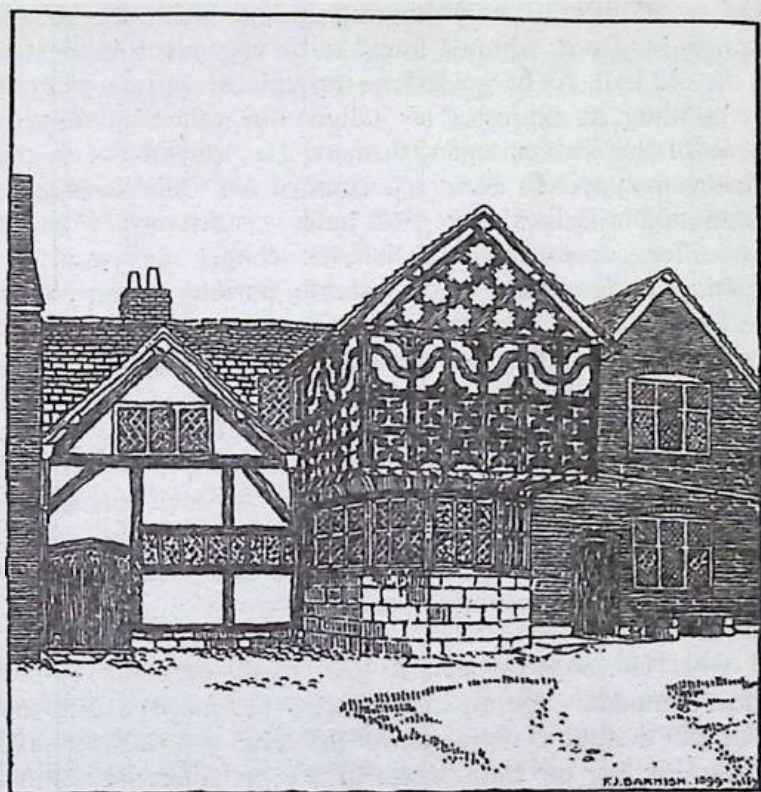
¹³ Adburgham is a compound of the name Eadburgh + ham (Old English for home) Eadburgh, which is a woman's name, may have been the head of the first group to settle in Abram in the seventh century.

three celts, or ancient war weapons were discovered. That is all Baines says on the subject.

For a more comprehensive and detailed history of the district, I commend the late Mr. John Leyland's book *Memorials of Abram*, published in 1888. Therein is a record, not only of the pedigree of the various owners of the estates, but also much of local historical interest. It is to this book that I am indebted for much of my information relating to this district, previous to my becoming acquainted with it sixty years ago. According to Leyland the original owners of Abram Hall estate bore the name of the township, which, as I explained, changed to Abraham and finally to Abram.

In a recent visit to the district, I found that of Abram Hall nothing now remained, it having been pulled down about 150 years ago and the present substantial farmhouse built on the site. The old bridge is still there and the ancient stone gateposts still stand on their old site, silent reminders of a now vanished glory. About one half of the moat is still open and, on the day I saw it, contained a considerable amount of water.

I was pleased to find, on my visit to Bamfurlong Hall, that there was sufficient of the old building still standing to indicate what a fine manor house it must, at some time, have been. Originally it was doubtless built of wood and plaster. A notable feature is the bay window, resting on a stone foundation, the window frame being made of oak timber, filled in with leaded diamond-shaped panes of glass. Above the window is a fine specimen of lath and plasterwork, painted in back and white. It is supposed to have been built by Thomas Ashton, one of the owners of the



BAMFURLONG HALL

FROM THE MOAT · ❧ ❧ ❧

From Phillips' *Halls and houses of Lancashire.*

estate, judging from his initials T A being carved on the upper portion of the window, with the date 1575. The woodwork of the entrance gable is evidently much older, as a piece of the oak frame shown to me, had carved upon it the date 1377. About a quarter of the old moat is still open, but contains no water.

I spent a very interesting hour with the tenant farmer, Mr Lord, whom I found to be very much interested in the old hall. As he guided me through the various parts of the building, he expressed his indignation at the vandalism of some of the former tenant farmers. He pointed out to me what was supposed to be a portion of the Catholic chapel, mentioned in Baines' history. A hook was fastened to one of the rafters, from which, when the chapel was used for worship, hung a lamp, kept constantly burning, directly over the altar. Some of the internal division walls are made of oak frames, the space between the stretchers and diagonals being filled in with plaster. The joints of the framework are held together by oak plugs, about an inch in diameter. The timber, which had probably been grown on the estate, is so hard and solid that I found it impossible to force my knife blade into it, although it must now be five, or six-hundred years old. What a wonderful timber is the British oak! Wisely did our forefathers hymn its praise in song and story.

There is a legend that there used to be an underground passage, running between the chapel and Brynn Hall, but that the construction of the canal and railway have blocked it. For the truthfulness of this, or otherwise, I have no evidence, but Mr. Lord said that, in the basement of the hall there is a large flag, covering a hole which he thought might lead into the subterranean tunnel.

As I stood on the old moat bridge at Abram Hall, surveying the lay of the surrounding land, my thoughts dwelt on the sound judgement of the builders of the two halls. Abram is very flat, but the halls are erected on two of the highest knolls in the township, about half a mile apart. The

intervening land forms a slight valley, with a rivulet meandering through it, which I imagine, in the long ago, would have provided excellent fishing.

The present owners of Abram Hall now live at Biggleswade in Hampshire. They are the descendants of John Whitley, Esq., who bought it from a Mr. Peter Arrowsmith in 1828 for £4,200. John Whitley was a founder of Messrs. Ackers, Whitley and Company, Colliery Proprietors. It was this John Whitley who gave the land for Abram Church and churchyard, with an adjoining piece for a parsonage.¹⁴

Bamfurlong estate came to the Walmesley family by one, John Walmesley, of Wigan,¹⁵ marrying in the eighteenth century, Mary, co-heiress of William Gerrard, the then owner.

With respect to Bickershaw Hall estate, investigation into its history takes us no further back than to the time when a Mrs. Frances Dukenfield was the owner, she having purchased it from a Mr. Edward Bolton, on the 25th December 1671. It is very probable that Mr. Bolton bought the present Bolton House, and from him the house and the road leading to it derive their respective name. In the eighteenth century Sir Richard Clayton was the owner of the estate and he sold it to Mr. Edward Ackers, surgeon of Newton-le-Willows, for £3500. Bolton House was purchased

¹⁴ No parsonage was built on the land, which now forms part of an extended churchyard.

¹⁵ The Walmesleys had the Westwood Hall estate. The old Westwood Estate office is on Rodney Street, Wigan, part of the one way system near the baths.

by the same gentleman from a Mr. Stirrup on the 30th August 1783.

Edward Ackers died on January 27th 1810, leaving the estate to three trustees for the benefit of Edward Ackers, son of his cousin, John, who then lived at Holt, near Prescott. This Edward Ackers died in September 1818 intestate and unmarried. Consequently, his brother, Abraham Ackers, came to the property by right of inheritance. He was twice married and was the father of a rather numerous family, his first wife bearing him three children, the second wife seven. I remember all the children by the second marriage, two sons and five daughters, and was more or less acquainted with them all.

The mother of the above family, whose Christian name was Catherine, was a kind and benevolent old lady. At least I thought her to be so, for on occasion, when I was sent to the Hall with a message from the colliery office, she gave me apples, grown in the well stocked orchard, and once she gave me a piece of apple tart. That was an act sufficient to make any strong, healthy lad remember her forever.

In Abram churchyard there stands a monument over a vault and it bears the following inscription:

Sacred to the memory of Abraham Ackers, Esq.
Of Bickershaw Hall, Abram
Born August 24th 1796
Died January 15th 1864

The coffins of the husband and his wife, Catherine, were made out of the parts of two fine elm trees that grew in the hall grounds, to which had been given the names of



Figure 4. Ackers monument in Abram

Abraham and Catherine. A stump of the tree known as Catherine is still to be seen in the hall grounds.

When Abraham Ackers came into possession of

the estate in 1819, the hall was a three-storied building, but he had not long been in possession before he decided to modernise the house. He had the roof pulled off, the height reduced, part of the moat filled in, and the old gatehouse cleared away. It was when the gateway was being destroyed that the celts, already referred to, were found. One was sent to the British Museum, another being in the possession of the

Perrin family, who at the time lived at Ivy Cottage, Abram Brow. I shall again refer to this

ancient war weapon and the Perrin family further on in my narrative.

Like many old houses, Bickershaw Hall has its ghost stories. These legends were much more firmly believed in when I was a boy than they are today. I had not been working long in the district before the village lads, who

certainly adhered to them, told me of the unearthly visitants that haunted the spot.

One of the legends avers that a warrior knight, in his journeyings, came to the hall. While talking to a daughter of the family, the lady's lover, also a knight came on the scene and at once offered battle to the stranger. The fight took place on the drawbridge and one of them fell badly wounded. He was carried to a farm nearby, called Pocket Nook, and died. The survivor escaped with the lady to Lowe Hall, and was at once married by a priest in the house. At times, on wild and stormy nights, the slaughtered knight, it is said, may be seen, riding furiously towards the drawbridge where the fatal encounter took place. It is also said that, in a certain room in the hall, an aged lady, of low stature, with grey hair and dark eyes, is frequently seen, dressed in a figured gown and a shawl muffled round her head.

Although during the miners' strike in 1893, I patrolled the district for three months, at all times of the night, I never saw the ghostly knight; but a friend of mine, who used to reside in the district, was convinced in his own mind that he had.

The late Mr. Herbert Gough, a son of Mr. Owen Gough, used to tell me the story of how, having been to a convivial party, he was making his way home along Bickershaw Lane, on a dark and stormy night, when, as Mr. Gilbert has it:

The night wind howls in the chimney cowl;
And the bat in the moonlight flies'
And inky clouds like funeral shrouds.

Ride on the midnight skies;
When the footpads quail at the night birds wail;
And the black dogs bay at the moon,
Then is the spectre's holiday,
Then is the ghost's high noon

It was on such a night that Herbert, on approaching the bend of the road, near the Pocket Nook, thought he heard the rattle of horse's hooves behind him. On looking round he saw the ghostly horse with its rider galloping towards him. Panic-stricken he started to run, faster than he had ever run before, towards his home, imagining all the way that the horse and its rider were closely following. On his arriving home, he burst into the kitchen, with hair on end, frightening his wife, who thought he'd gone mad. Of course, I never could persuade him into the belief that it was but the product of his over-heated brain, brought on by over-indulgence at the party, and an excess of, what he termed, barley water.

Concerning the apparition of the lady, Mr. Charles Ackers, a grandson of the late Abraham and Catherine Ackers, some time ago, related to me the following incident. When quite young he lived with his parent's at Brookside House, Bickershaw Lane. It was customary for his father, along with other gentlemen, to go shooting over the estate, which in those days was fairly well stocked with game, especially quail and plover. The sportsmen had often promised young Charlie that they would some time take him with them. One day, he found that they had gone and again left him behind. Unknown to the rest of the family he determined to set out to try and find them, and, of course, was soon beyond his bearings and lost. When the shooters returned home and found that the boy was missing, a search

party was organised late in the afternoon. In the meantime he had been found by some villagers, wandering in the fields, a goodly distance from home, tired, hungry and full of distress. They had taken him to the hall where he had been put to bed in the very room where the lady ghost was mostly to be seen. He was soon asleep, but his slumbers were disturbed by dreams. In one he saw the lady, just as she had often been described to him by the servants of the house, who are not always wise in the tales they tell to children.

On such slender evidence do ghost stories and spirit manifestations rest, that I have long been of the opinion that they are the outcome of mental aberrations, on the part of those who profess to have them.

The house is now empty, mining subsidence having rendered it damp, insanitary and unfit for human habitation. Through the kindness of Major E. Hart, M.C., the last tenant, I recently had the privilege of being conducted through the building and grounds.

Not a vestige of the old moat is now to be seen, the last portion having been filled up between thirty and forty years ago. A neatly laid out rose garden and grass lawn now occupies the site.

The brickwork of the oldest portion of the building is still well preserved and most of the internal woodwork, fittings, etc. are in a fairly good condition. I found no ingle-nooked fireplaces, or low rafted rooms, to remind a visitor of ancient days. All the rooms are lofty, of good size and well lighted by modern windows. It was not until I entered the

garrets that I saw anything, which seriously attracted my attention by reason of its antiquity.

There, in a good sized room, is a grooved wooden pulley, about four feet in diameter, fastened on to a square oak shaft, the whole turning on its bearings as easily as it probably did two hundred years ago. I surmise that this room would at one time have been a granary, where the corn grown on the estate would have been stored. The pulley would be used for raising and lowering the sacks of grain, as required by the household. I find that many of the old manor houses had similar arrangements for storing corn, and were in fact self-supporting as regards water supply and all essential foodstuffs. Near to the main entrance is a square stone, which bears the inscription J.L.C.H.W., 1783. The meaning and origin of this I have not been able to trace.

Of course, I visited the ghost room, but saw no ghost; but then it was daylight and I had not been to a party gathering. As I stood on the lawn facing the house, I thought of what its future might be. Standing foursquare it seemed to me defiant both of time and those who would destroy it. Will it be allowed to fall into decay and ruin, or will the sewage and drainage scheme recently begun by the local authorities make it again fit for human habitation? I trust the latter will be the case.

Bickershaw estate comprises about 200 statute acres, which in 1870 were valued by James Tarbuck and a Mr. Elias Dorning of Manchester. The valuation included all the land and all the unworked coal seams, all growing timber, fifty-two cottages, one dwelling house called the Gorses, two farm houses, one brewery, two licensed houses, respectively

named The Foresters' Arms and The Queen's Arms, the Hall and grounds and a cottage adjoining. At the time the survey was made, the above James Tarbuck was surveyor for the old firm of Ackers, Whitley and Company, but when I started work he had transferred his allegiance to the Abram Coal Company.

The surface was valued at £23,000, the rest being placed on the coal, which had been leased to Mr. William Hayes, John Norris and Messrs. John Scowcroft, at a footage rent of about £65 per acre. Three seams, however, were leased to Mr. Hayes, two at £80 and one at £70 footage rent per acre, for a term of fifty years. The income from the cottages, namely £280 per annum, shows that rents were on the average 2s. 6p per week. The Hall, grounds and cottage were valued at £35 and at the time of the valuation was occupied by the widow of the testator Abraham Ackers, who in his will had left it to her, free from rent, inclusive of £3,000 and an annuity out of the estate of £150 for the remainder of her life. Originally there were ten legatees amongst whom the estate was to be divided, after making the above payments to Mrs. Ackers.

The two sons of the second marriage of Mr. Ackers were named respectively Charles Peter and Abraham. Charles was born at Bolton House and became a surveyor and brewer, the brewery being situated at the bottom of Bolton House Road. It was closed in the early seventies of last century,¹⁶ the building being converted into cottages, which are still standing, forming part of the group of cottages in the above neighbourhood. He sold his share in

¹⁶ That is the Nineteenth Century.

the Bickershaw estate to the late James Henry Johnson, one of the founders of the Abram Coal Company.

The other son, Abraham was a chemist, but never practised the business. He was the last of the Ackers family to occupy the Hall. The



Figure 4. Crest of Ackers Family in memorial window, Abram Parish

crest of the Ackers family is a lion, sitting on its haunches, holding in one of its front paws a sprig of three acorns. Underneath is a shield with a diagonal bar, on which is inset three separate acorns, with a motto, *Deo, Patria,*

Amicus, the translation being, For God, King and Friends.

The area of Abram is about 2,000 acres. Underlying it there was originally fifty feet of merchantable coal. Owing to this fact, the district became transformed, from a rather indifferent agricultural area, into an important coal-mining centre. Although coal mining in Bickershaw commenced previous to 1850, no real development took place until about 1870, when mining had then been formed.

Previous to 1880 the township had been governed by a parochial committee, but in the above years it was constituted a Local Government District. In 1894 further

governing powers were applied for and obtained, and it became an Urban District, governed by a council of twelve members, elected by the ratepayers. How the township has grown and developed, during the past sixty years, will be seen from the following statistics.

In 1871 the population was about 1,100 and the number of inhabited houses was 200. There are now about 1,550 houses, 200 of them having been erected by the local council, and the population, according to the last census is 6,600.¹⁷ With this growth of population, the amenities requisite for the general wellbeing of the inhabitants have grown apace. Sixty years ago¹⁸ there was only one place of worship, today there are six of various denominations.¹⁹ The only day schools were St. John's, Abram Brow, built in 1871, and a cottage school in Bickershaw Lane, known locally as 'Owd David Cronshaw's Schoo'.

Owd David was undoubtedly a character and, by all accounts of him, believed in the old proverb, 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'. He was minus a left arm, it having been taken off just above the elbow, leaving a more or less convenient stump. Many were the tales told by the lads who had attended his school, of how they had been held down by that stump, while he belaboured them with a cudgel held in his right hand. It was customary for him, both in the forenoon and after, to leave the school and the lads to look after themselves, while he slipped across to the Foresters' Arms nearby, for his pint of beer. During the bowling season

¹⁷ 1931

¹⁸ 1871

¹⁹ 2 Church of England, 3 Methodist, 1 Congregational

he would often stay to have a game. When Abram Colliery Schools were opened in 1880, Cronshaw's school came to an end. Today there are three denominational schools, and one Council school, with accommodation for 1,500 children.

Previous to the formation of the Local Board in 1880, the inhabitants had to rely on wells, rain tubs and cisterns for their domestic water supply. The sewage was disposed of by allowing it to drain into the ditches and brooks, while the roads were atrocious. Warrington Road was paved with cobblestones. Lily Lane was a lane, but, of course, without the lilies. Bickershaw Lane was an abomination, much of it being, during winter months, a quagmire of mud and water, with cartwheel ruts axle deep. Today these roadways are well-constructed highways, well lighted by gas, and, in every way, compare favourably with any of the highways in the county.²⁰

As the borrowing power of the Local Authority increased, improvements followed in quick succession. A good water supply was connected to every house and public building, a sewage disposal works inaugurated, a fever hospital erected and a substantial Council Office built. Land was bought on which to build houses, for the better accommodation of the people, and recreation grounds for the children were opened. From being a somewhat neglected township, I have watched it become an up-to-date, progressive Urban District.

²⁰ That is the old Lancashire County.

In 1876 the first sod of the Wigan Junction Railway was cut and, when completed, gave better facilities for journeying to the outlying districts.

Isolated from the outside world of people, it is not surprising that many of the old generation of inhabitants became clannish, superstitious and contracted habits which scarcely conformed to modern ideas and customs. It is recorded that, if a stranger came to settle in the district, he had either to fight, or have his 'yed pulled off'. That they were prone to using their feet when fighting, the following incident will I think confirm.

Coming home from work one Saturday afternoon, and following the footpath that still leads through the fields between Park Lane and Crankwood Road, I saw in the distance three men. On my approaching near, I observed that two of them were fighting naked of clothing, except for their iron-shod clogs and stockings, and I could hear their clogs rattling against each other's shins and bodies. The third man was, I presume, acting as umpire. This way of settling disputes, or fighting for a wager, was quite common among the miners, not only in Abram, but also in Wigan and surrounding districts. When the fight was over, the two combatants, along with their backers, would adjourn to the nearest public house to spend their evenings.

Many miners had a theory that to wash the body all over weakened the constitution, and it was the custom for them to wash the face, neck and arms up to the elbows, leaving the rest of the body to become almost as black as the coal they hewed.

I well remember how superstitious some of the older generation of miners were, from the many weird tales told to me when I was a boy. One old fireman and shot-lighter used to tell how, when going his rounds alone in the mine, he sometimes heard the voices of men who had been killed by falls of roof; seen their lighted lamps; and heard their picks striking the coal, in their ghostly attempts to hew it down. With the passing of time and the advance of education, the old customs and superstitions died with the people.

In the late forties of the last century, Mr. Abraham Ackers began to mine the coal underlying his Bickershaw estate, and in association with Mr. John Whitley, the owner of Abram Hall a company was formed, trading as Messrs. Ackers, Whitley and company.²¹ The company worked the surface mines only, sinking no less than eight shafts. In 1874 only three of those shafts were working. The last to close being situated about 100 yards north-east of the Number 4 pit belonging to Abram Coal Company. The shaft was known locally as 'Th'Owd Ladther Pit'

The surface plant was of a very primitive kind, the boilers being of the low-pressure egg end type, and the one coal screen, a revolving tubular riddle. Most of the coal raised was put into wagons of about four tons capacity, these being taken to Plank Lane by two small locomotives named respectively, 'Bee' and 'Wasp'. The coal was then tipped into canal boats, which carried it to its destination. The locomotives were housed in a building that stood near to where the present water tank, belonging to Abram Coal

²¹ The author is a decade late. There is evidence that the mines were operational in the mid-1830s. John Whitley died in 1838.

Company, is now erected. It was always referred to as 'Th' Owd Bee Shade'.

At this period the engine-wright, or mechanical engineer, for Ackers, Whitley and Company was a Mr. Thomas Burns, a native of Abram. A story is told that he once conceived the idea that he could overcome the law of gravitation. His theory, so far as I remember, was to the effect that, if he produced a vacuum in a tube, reaching from the bottom to the surface of the shaft, and the coal put into the tube, it would bound upward and all that would be required was a mechanical arrangement to control its ascent and delivery on reaching the surface.

To test his theory he had erected on land near to the old Shevington Pit, which was situated a short distance from Shuttle Hillock Farm, a column of large iron pipes, similar I suppose to what he contemplated placing in the pit shaft. After much experimenting, his theory ended in disappointment. That Mr. Burns possessed engineering ability is evidenced by his becoming engine-wright for Bickershaw Company, Plank Lane. There he had the supervision of the making and erection of the head gearing, the layout of most of the buildings and of the machinery necessary for the working of these well-known collieries. He had peculiar notions respecting his winding-engine men and safeguards against over-winding accidents.

In the early seventies of last century²², Mr. Ormrod, the then engine-wright for Messrs. Fletcher, Burrows and Company, Atherton, invented a mechanical device, which in

²² Nineteenth century.

case of over-wind, detached the winding rope from the ascending cage, thereby preventing it being drawn into the pulleys. Although almost every colliery company in the district had attached this ingenious and valuable invention to their winding gears, Mr. Burns would have nothing to do with it. He contended that all such arrangements would cause the engine men to rely too much on the efficacy of the safety appliances, and more accidents would be the result. One day, however, a cage was over-wound, the rope broke and down crashed the cage, with its three tons of coal and boxes, 600 yards to the bottom of the shaft. The accident must have cost the company several thousands of pounds, besides causing the pit to be idle for a fortnight. Of course, immediately after the accident, Ormrod's patent was attached to all the company's winding gear.

About 1880 Mr. Burns gained considerable notoriety by his inventing a winding drum brake, which was popularised by a medical friend named James Beswick Perrin. This gentleman delivered a lecture before the Manchester Geological Society, which has as members many colliery managers, in which he explained the mechanism and action of the brake and extolled, what he thought to be, its many good qualities. Theoretically, it may be all that the good doctor said it was, but from my own experience, I know it fell far short of the claims made for it. It has long since been superseded by brakes much more powerful and easier of application. Mr. Burns died on the 26th August 1900, aged seventy-five years, and was buried in Abram Churchyard.

Dr. Perrin was undoubtedly one of the most brilliant men Abram had produced. He was born at Ivy House, Abram Brow in 1842. His father at the time of his birth was cashier for the old firm of Ackers, Whitley and Company. Young Perrin commenced his medical career with Dr. James Brideoak, who lived in Bridge Street, Leigh, in a house, which is still a doctor's surgery, opposite the Avenue²³. He studied at the Royal School of Medicine in Manchester, subsequently completing his studies at King's College in London. His skill as a surgeon obtained him many important appointments. For four years he was Demonstrator in Anatomy at King's College and, for a time, was Demonstrator in Biology and Practical Physiology under Professor Huxley and Professor Rutherford at the Science School, South Kensington. He was a profuse and industrious writer, author of many published scientific papers on biology and anatomy. . He was also a geologist and botanist of some note. He had a fine collection of fossils and geological specimens, and the celt, previously mentioned, came into his possession.

He married a daughter of Dr. Brideoak, his former tutor, and ultimately settled in Leigh as a surgeon and medical practitioner. He died a comparatively young man, and singular to relate, he prophesied the year of his own death. I remember an occasion, when he was on a professional visit to my parent's home, that he told my mother that he could not possibly live to be more than forty-two years of age. He died in 1884, aged forty-two years. What became of his geological collection after his death, I

²³ Now demolished and part of the site of Netto supermarket.

have not been able to find out, although I have gone to considerable trouble to do so.

On a recent visit to Manchester University Museum I was interested in a perforated stone axe, or hammer, shown to me by the curator. From the attached label I gathered that it was found in, or near, the moat which at one time surrounded Bickershaw Hall. It was presented to the Museum by a Mr. Mark Stirrup, who had been Secretary to the Manchester Geological Society. The stone is almost perfect in shape, the hole for the shaft being as round as when it was first made. It is a fine specimen of workmanship of the later Stone Age, and is supposed to be at least 3,000 years old.

Chapter 3

By the middle of the last century²⁴ Great Britain was fast becoming the workshop of the world. Railway construction at home and abroad, the displacement of wooden ships by those built of iron and steel, propelled by steam power, the development of the cotton and wool industries, and the manufacture of machinery, for home use and for export, created such a demand for coal that the supply was not equal to the demand.

Previous to 1870 there were very few deep seams of coal being worked in Lancashire. Boring proved that underlying several hundred square miles in the south and south-west of the county, rich deposits of coal existed. This knowledge gave an impetus to the sinking of deeper and larger shafts than had previously been attempted. I can locate upwards of a hundred that were sunk during the ten or twelve years, ending in 1880.

These combined activities brought about a shortage of labour and thousands of men, of Irish, Welsh and other nationalities, flocked into the industrial areas of Lancashire. Many farm labourers, from Cheshire and other agricultural counties, migrated into Abram and neighbourhood with their

²⁴ Nineteenth century.

families, tempted by the comparatively high wages; and many of their descendants still live in the district.

If ever there was a 'golden age' for the Lancashire miner, and particularly in the Wigan Coal Field, I would say that it was during the first four or five years in the seventies of the last century. Probably the war between France and Germany, which began in 1870 and ended in 1871, also helped to bring prosperity to the mining industry. Work of all kinds was plentiful, the pits were working eleven days a fortnight, wages were high, house rents and the cost of living low. At many of the collieries in the Wigan District a forty-seven and a half-hour week was in force.

It was during this period of prosperity that the well known saying, 'Eight hours work, eight hours play and eight shillings a day', became popular among the miners, as expressing their ideal conditions of employment. The press published exaggerated statements, relating how some of the men fetched home their newly acquired earnings, in a carriage drawn by two horses. Songs were composed and sung in the music halls by female artistes, telling how they loved the miners. One song I remember had a refrain to the effect that in case they married, 'It must be a collier boy for me'.

Wages were paid fortnightly and the Monday following the Saturday pay day, was recognised as a holiday and called Reckoning Monday. On this day the miners made merry with their wages, dog racing, pigeon flying and sparrow shooting being among the most popular and innocent ways of spending the day. This hey day of prosperity was, however, doomed to be short lived. When

the numerous shafts, which I have previously referred to, became developed, with their increased capacity for the output of coal, along with many others in the various parts of the British coal fields, the supply of the commodity became greater than the demand.

The pits began to work short time, and to secure orders the owners almost gave away their coal, particularly slack²⁵, to other industries that were making large profits. This led inevitably to a demand for the reduction of wages and increase in the hours of labour. The men resisted these attacks upon their standard of living; strikes and lockouts were frequent occurrences, but as the miners were badly organised their resistance availed them little. By 1880 wages had been reduced to what must have been starvation level.

I find from statistics compiled by the government, that for many years in succession, the earnings, per annum per person employed in and about mines in Great Britain, was only £35, or about 13/6 per week. Day wage men working down the pits were paid 3/6 per shift, which was for many of them, one of eleven or twelve hours duration. These men, during the winter months, if they were fortunate enough to be working full-time, would only see daylight at weekends. Adult surface workers were paid from 3/- to 3/6 per day and boys and girls 1/- per day. Craftsmen, such as mechanics, carpenters and blacksmiths, received from 4/- to 4/6 per day of ten hours. Boiler stokers had 3/4 per shift of twelve hours and engine winders from 4/6 to 5/- per shift of twelve hours. Engine winders have always been considered the most highly favoured of colliery employees, because of

²⁵ Coal consisting of very small pieces.

their regularity of employment, which in the Wigan District has seldom been less than seven days per week, thus making their earnings at least respectable.

Considering the short time worked by the Lancashire collieries during the last fifty years, I have indeed been fortunate, in having been ordered to play only one day, from the time I commenced work down to 1921. This was on the occasion of the employees' trip to the Liverpool exhibition, about forty years ago.

At the time of which I write, low wages not only affected the colliery employees, but the salaried officials were miserably underpaid. A personal friend of mine, who held a second class mine manager's certificate, was some thirty-five years ago, under-manager at one of the largest collieries in Leigh District. He was in charge of a mine and several hundred men, and for faithfully carrying out his onerous duties, he received 35/- per week. As time passed some little advance in salary was conceded to this important body of men, but nothing commensurate to their position and responsibilities. In fact, at the outbreak of the war in 1914 it is doubtful if the average salary, paid to these men in Lancashire and Cheshire, would be more than 50/- per week. Many of them had, however, free house and coal, which somewhat improved their position.

Many first-class certificated managers had, up to the outbreak of the war, fared little better in this respect than their subordinates. On the evidence supplied to the Sankey Commission of Inquiry into the coal industry, there were in 1913, several hundred first-class certificated managers in the British coal industry, in receipt of a salary of only £100 to

£200 per annum. During the war, however, all colliery officials obtained a considerable advance, but in the case of the under-managers, this came after a hard struggle, since until this time, these men had no organisation. Each colliery company had always dealt with their officials individually.

The war had not progressed many months when the cost of living began to rise by leaps and bounds. While the ordinary employees' wages, through the efforts of their trade union leaders, advanced somewhat near proportionally, nothing was given to the officials. Some of them had individually approached their superiors on the subject, but without material results. This caused a few of the men to meet in a certain hotel in Wigan to talk over the matter. The decision arrived at was that they should first organise their class, then make application to the colliery owners as a united body.

A secretary was appointed and he was instructed to write to the late Sir Thomas Ellis, who was secretary, at the time, for the owners' association, asking for an interview with his board, to discuss the question of an advance in wages. In the course of a few days, a courteous letter was received from Sir Thomas, stating that he had placed the men's request before the owners, and they had decided that 'no good purpose could be served' by having such a meeting. In their dilemma at this refusal, the men's leaders approached the late Mr. T. Watson, who was then the engine-winders' secretary and agent, for advice on the matter.

He suggested that they should formally join his association. If they decided to do so, he would write to the

owners' secretary. They agreed that this course should be taken. As I was, at the time, President of the Wigan and District Engine-winders' Association, Mr. Watson consulted me concerning the matter. I, at once, agreed to his suggestion and he immediately despatched a letter to Sir Thomas, expressing surprise that the owners had refused to meet the representatives of so important a body of men. He informed him that they had now joined his union, and unless a meeting was granted there might be trouble, which was undesirable during a time of national crisis. Mr. Watson's letter had the desired effect. A meeting was arranged, the outcome being in every way satisfactory, a minimum salary of £5 per week, with all prevailing perquisites being agreed upon.

At a meeting of the men, held in Wigan, at which Mr. Watson and myself were present, there was great rejoicing over the satisfactory ending of their difficulties. We were thanked for the part we had played in the matter, and so ended the temporary union of under-managers and engine-winders. Although a little deception was practised upon the owners, I have always felt that the end justified the means taken.

It is doubtful whether any other industry has been subjected to so much unrest, strikes and lockouts, as the coal industry. What have been the underlying causes it is not for me to express an opinion, but I know that it has been a continual struggle, on the part of the miner to improve his conditions of employment. Coal is the basis of Britain's commercial prosperity, and nature has been kind in giving us a plentiful supply of the commodity, but the history of

winning the precious mineral is one of suffering and calamity to the miners and their families.

The winter of 1880/81 was one of the severest I remember. After a heavy fall of snow, a keen frost, which lasted many weeks, froze all the Lancashire lakes and ponds to a depth of eight or ten inches. The canals were ice-bound and the country highways and lanes were covered in frozen snow. At the time I was living with my parents in Hesketh Meadow Lane, Lowton. One morning, after returning from a thirteen hour shift night duty, I put on my skates, after having had my breakfast, and skated along the highway to Plank Lane Bridge, where I got on the canal and skated to Poolstock Junction, Wigan. On arrival I doffed my skates and spent an hour or so looking round the town and market. I returned by the same method, arriving in time to enjoy a substantial dinner. I think I am right in saying that during the last sixty years it is the only occasion when such a feat has been possible.

It was during the above severe winter that the Lancashire miners, who had, as I have previously stated, been reduced to a miserably low wage, working long hours, and only three or four days a week, decided, in December 1880, to tender notice for a fifteen percent advance in wages and weekly pays. The employers retaliated by posting notices on pit brows to the effect that all contracts of service would cease. The men, on again signing for service, must sign to contract out of the 'Employers' Liability Act', which became law on the 1st January 1881. Early in January most of the pits in the county were closed. Although the colliery owners withdrew the notice relating to the Employers'

Liability Act, the men refused to return to work, until an advance in wages and weekly pay had been conceded. By the end of January an advance had been granted in several districts and the men resumed work. In Ashton-under-Lyne and Oldham districts the men obtained an advance of twelve and a half per cent, after a stoppage of about three weeks.

In south-west and south-east Lancashire, an area embracing Skelmersdale, Wigan, St. Helens, Leigh, and on to Manchester district, the strike continued spasmodically until the end of March. In the above districts some of the employers opened their pits, and a few men were induced to start work. After being employed a few days, crowds of men from other districts came and demanded that those at work should be withdrawn, which request was carried out in order to avoid trouble. As the strike proceeded, both horse and foot soldiers were drafted into Leigh, Wigan, St. Helens and other disturbed areas.

I remember a crowd of several thousand, many of whom carried stout cudgels, visited Abram Coal Company, Numbers 1 and 2 pits. Although they were told that there was no one working below ground, they demanded that several of their number should be lowered down the pit to see for themselves. On returning to the surface they reported all clear, and the crowd immediately began to disperse. No damage was done, but an empty coal tub was lifted over the fence gate and dropped down the shaft.

In several of the mining districts, the strikers and police came into conflict, many on both sides receiving ugly bruises, and much blood was spilled. The most serious affray

took place at Chowbent, and the incident is still referred to as the 'Chowbent Feight'.

About mid-day on Friday, 25th January 1881, several thousand men from Wigan, St. Helens and intermediate mining villages, marched to Leigh Market Place, where they met hundreds of Leigh miners, already assembled. It was reported that men were working at one of the pits belonging to Messrs. Fletcher, Burrows and Company, situated at Howebridge. The meeting decided that they should march to the colliery, led by their brass band, and demand that the men should be drawn from the pit. As soon as the march started, stones began to be thrown, by some of the young hotheads in the procession, at the police, who were present, in full force, under the supervision of Superintendent Jackson.

On approaching Howebridge, the crowd became so threatening that the attendance of the soldiers was summoned, and the Riot Act was read by Mr. Jabez Johnson, a local magistrate, and orders were given to the military and to the police to disperse the crowd. During the melee, which followed, many of the rioters were batoned by the police, and others received blows from the flat sides of the sabres with which the horse soldiers were armed. Although many on both sides were bruised during the fight, no serious injury was inflicted. One man, however, died from injuries received in jumping off one of the pit brows. Late in the afternoon quiet was restored. To commemorate the event, Mr. Richard Greenough, a local brass founder, had a brass medal cast, bearing the inscription, 'Chowbent, Battle of Howebridge, January 25th 1881. Some of the soldiers had been billeted in

Leigh about ten weeks, and before their departure, the officers were presented with the medal.

By the end of March all the pits were again working, the men having obtained an advance in wages, averaging from five to twelve and a half per cent of weekly pays, and the withdrawal of the notice relative to the Employers Liability Act.

During the summer of 1881 the Lancashire and Cheshire Miners' Federation was formed. From this time onward the miners in the two counties gradually became strongly organised. Several advances in wages were obtained before 1889, in which year the Miners' Federation of Great Britain came into existence. This caused the mine owners to join forces and form the Colliery Owners Association of Great Britain.

In 1892/ 93 the coal industry was at a very low ebb, and although the pits were working no more than three or four days per week, large amounts of coal and slack were stacked on the surface at almost every colliery. It was stated, at the time, that one Lancashire Colliery had no less than 250,000 tons in stock, and wages outside Lancashire and the midland counties had been reduced to the 1879 level.

Such were the conditions prevailing in the coal industry, when in the spring of 1893, the owners gave the men fourteen days notice for a reduction of twenty-five per cent in their wages. On the termination of their notice the men brought their tools out of the pits, and thus commenced the first national strike of miners. The strike lasted sixteen weeks and was settled at a meeting held in the Foreign

Office, on Friday, 17th November 1893, Lord Rosebury being in the chair. The terms of the settlement were that the men should resume work, at once, at the old rate of wages, until 1st February 1894.

The sufferings of the miners and their families during this strike will never be known, but to alleviate the distress among them, soup kitchens were opened in every mining centre. The general public throughout the country subscribed handsomely, both money and food, until the end of the stoppage.

There have been three other national strikes, or lockouts of miners, but these are of so recent occurrence that they cannot be considered as ancient history. They took place in 1912, 1921 and 1926.

As I have before stated, the history of winning coal is one of suffering and calamity among the mining community. At the moment, as I pen these lines, I learn that an explosion has taken place, in the early morning, at Garswood Hall Colliery, Edge Green, Golborne²⁶, involving the death of twenty-five miners. On the 10th of the previous month nineteen men lost their lives through a cage accident at Bickershaw Collieries, Leigh. It is only when disasters of such magnitude occur that the public mind is impressed with the hazardous and dangerous nature of the miners' vocation. Yet, the possibility of being killed, or injured, is the ever present lot of men who get the coal, which keeps our home fires burning.

²⁶ 1832

While such fatalities emphasis the risks and suffering the miners and their families have to face, it is the daily and hourly tragedies, of which the public hear nothing, that swell the number of mine accidents into almost unbelievable magnitude. From returns under the Coal Mines Acts, covering the period from 1869 to 1919, showing accidents, fatal and non-fatal, in mines, I find that one miner has been killed every six hours, one seriously injured every two hours, and the number of minor accidents necessitating more than seven days off duty, one every few minutes. Truly the miner's lot is a tragic one.

The average miner is as brave as the proverbial lion, and ever ready to risk his life, in the endeavour to save that of his fellow work-mate, who may have been trapped by a fall of roof, of the victim of an explosion.

I read from my daily paper that after the catastrophe at Garswood Hall Colliery, the manager called for volunteers to accompany him down the pit. Immediately a hundred or more men sprang forward, all anxious to try and rescue their mates. They knew that they were risking their own lives in the deadly gases that always follow in the wake of a mine explosion. I remember witnessing a similar scene when the explosion occurred at the Abram Coal Company's Pit.

When I first became acquainted with mining life there was no source, except charity, which could be drawn upon by miners' families during periods of distress and privation, caused by accident to the breadwinner.

In 1872 The Lancashire and Cheshire Miners' Permanent Relief Society was inaugurated and it has been a

blessing to thousands of mining families. In 1881 the Employers' Liability Act became law and this was succeeded by the present Workmen's Compensation Act. In recent years the Widows' and Orphans' Pensions Act became operative. In case of death or injury to a miner by accident, these funds can be drawn upon, according to circumstances. While no money payment can compensate for the pain and suffering caused by accident, it is a consolation to me, to know that those, whose livelihood is bound up with the mining industry, are, to a certain extent, secure against the privations which they suffered sixty years ago. Further ameliorative measures were the introduction of ambulance carriages and the spread of first aid knowledge among the employees.

Abram Coal Company was, I believe, the first Colliery Company in Lancashire to possess an ambulance carriage, and also one of the first to have classes for employees to be taught first aid, under the auspices of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. These were conducted, at the company's expense. Dr. Brayton, of Hindley, was the first teacher, ably supported by the late Mr. Augustus Hart, who at the time was a young man, full of enthusiasm for the cause. Each student, who passed his final examination, was presented with a gold medallion by the company directors. The innovation of a carriage was a great boon to the injured miner, after the old order of things, which consisted of a spring, or heavy cart, with straw spread on the bottom. On this the miner was placed, a horse cloth thrown over him, and in this way was jolted over the rough roads, either to his home, the doctor, or the infirmary. It is not unreasonable to believe that, under such conditions, many had what little of

life they had left jogged out of them, before reaching their destination.

The natural conditions of mining are against it ever being an ideal occupation, but the many improvements and amenities that have been introduced, since I first became acquainted with it, have undoubtedly been for the betterment and greater comfort of the mining community.

What of the coal industry's future? I admit the outlook, at present, is not very encouraging, but as I have previously stated, I am an optimist concerning the matter, disregarding the fact that more than 140 pits, in Lancashire, Cheshire and North Wales, have closed since 1926, and that other mining areas are similarly affected. Geologists compute that there is still about 180, 000 million tons of coal underlying Britain. This is sufficient to last eight, or nine hundred years, at the present rate of consumption. I cannot think that a beneficent Nature, which laboured ages to produce it, will permit its energies to be cast to the void. Rather would I believe that, in no distant future, the many virtues which coal contains, will be needed in abundance, to help forward that brighter and better day towards which, as Tennyson says, 'The whole creation moves'.

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