

MILLCLOSE MINE STRIKES - A POSTSCRIPT

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Abstract: A report to the Ministry of Munitions by H.F. Collins in 1918 throws further light on labour and economic conditions at Millclose Mine, supplementing the recent article on strikes there. A further, anonymous report, c.1936 has somewhat acid comments on labour practices at the old, pre-1923 mine and the very low level of efficiency there.

The recent article on Millclose (Willies 1996) has clearly intrigued some readers and has had the positive result of reminding Terry Worthington of a report in his possession which he has been kind enough to pass a copy to me. It was written by Henry F. Collins, then a senior mining engineer and a not infrequent contributor, for example, to discussions at the Institute of Mining and Metallurgy. It followed a meeting of the employers and workmen's representatives on 20-21st of September 1918 at the Ministry of Munitions. Collins dated his report 21st of October 1918 so presumably visited the mine a few days earlier. The second report cited here is from the Arthur Corker Collection, recently donated to PDMHS, which is anonymous, undated and untitled, but from internal evidence is c.1937. The comments in it relating to the period twenty years earlier may have been hearsay only and served to enhance later developments.

Collins' report followed a decision of the management to stop men working at three working places in the mine on the grounds that the work was uneconomic. These were Bateman's, Boam's and Ingman's (places were known after the gang leader), which occupied seven, seven and fourteen men respectively. They were to displace men working at surface or to be given whatever other work could be found, presumably at lower wages, or be laid-off. The displacement of general workmen at surface did not seem to concern the workmen's representatives, who were probably officials of the Derbyshire Miners' Association. The gangs, as well as including those who broke ground, also included the trammers working in the district, and all worked on a bargain or piece rate.

Collins was careful to define what economic meant for the purposes of the report: workable at a profit under the prevailing conditions at the mine. To do this required an examination of the working costs, which must have proved somewhat embarrassing for both sides in the dispute.

Millclose was enormously affected by water and pumping charges were 14/10 (14 shillings and 10 pence) per ton of ore produced of which 12/3 was for coal alone. The total cost per ton were 52/5, of which 29/7 was due to mining including tramping and hoisting. Tramping, because of the nature of the deposit and difficult layout which resulted in many handlings, the number of different ownerships of ore to be kept separate, lack of flexibility where trammers served only one gang and undoubtedly also poor management and lax labour practices, was also abnormally high when compared to other mines (the costs of one each in Wales, northern England and Scotland were also cited), but it was clear that the Millclose costs of breaking ground were still almost twice as high as the average elsewhere. The principal reason was the conspicuous inefficiency of the underground labour, possibly originally because of the former low rates of wages, though it was difficult to ascertain blame in such "vicious circles". "Roughly speaking", Collins said "for more than a generation past, two men have been employed underground to do the work of one; and output per man has been very little improved by the comparatively

recent introduction of rock drills, which are not utilised to advantage by the men". The result was that ore-getting places which would be payable elsewhere were hopelessly uneconomic at Millclose. Between 1890 and 1913 the mine was the richest in Britain, so rich it would stand any amount of haphazard working underground.

During the war years the number of rich places had become fewer. The custom of working was such that gangs of seven, fourteen, even twenty-one or twenty-eight men worked several places in a "district" with good places designedly subsidising poorer with the proceeds being divided between all the men. This allowed the poorer places to be thoroughly tried, but this system had begun to break down with the lack of good places. With the large rise in wages (the 45% war bonus) over the last eighteen months many places had become unpayable. The mine's working profits emphasised this, having fallen from £17426 in 1916, to £6098 in 1917 and had disappeared altogether in the first half of 1918. If Collins upheld the management position, this would leave a very depleted workforce in the mine: twenty in all working on Taylor's Drive, Goodall's Drive and the Ministry Drive; seven each in Taylor's and Stokes' places, fourteen in the two places in Moseley's section and eight trammers, onsets and daymen, making a total of fifty six men underground in all. With this depleted amount of ore-getting places, it is not hard to see why pumping costs per ton were so high, and likely to be higher and to appreciate the mine was economically on its last legs.

Collins did agree with the management, with respect to the places he visited with representatives of the men, and to other places - possible trials - pointed out by others in the mine at the time. At Ingman's there were two working places, worked each by the usual seven men. One was so poor it had been suspended by mutual consent and the seven men employed at surface, the other had no more than two months work in it rather than the six months required and was anyway too poor to work profitably. Boam's men were driving on the 66 fathom level following a thin stringer of lead enlarged here and there to two or three inches: a rise put up to the "blackbed" (Longstone Mudstones?) failed to find payable ground. The management proposed to employ them at surface. One possibility in Boam's ground could more economically be worked from one of the remaining places, Mosley's, which Collins recommended. Bateman's men were employed scratching in scattered places between the 50 and 57 fathom levels. Much ground had to be broken for little lead and there was deal of stacking of waste rock to be done. Any actually containing ore had to be wheel-barrowed or run in small waggons on 12 inch track for 20 yards to an incline shoot (sic) where it was tipped down to the 57 fathom level there to be again shoveled into a somewhat larger size waggon which was wheeled 70 yards to a winze below the 50 fathom level, up which the ore was hoisted using a compressed air winch, then trammed half a mile to the hoisting shaft. Bateman's might, he felt be economically worked from a rise he proposed should be put up from the Ministry Drive on the

73 fathom level, immediately beneath. In the meantime, however, this area too was uneconomic. He could find no other places capable of sustaining six months profitable employment. The proprietors' view was thus legitimately sound.

Collins's made several further points which were strictly outside his brief, to benefit the workmen rather than the proprietors, he said. There was the rise from the 73 fathom, but the most important was a proposal to establish a "floating gang" of six hand-drillers who were to be selected, at "their unfettered discretion", by the management from all gangs in the mine. These were to make rapid trials in the hope of locating sufficient working places to allow more men to be employed. Their remuneration was to be different from others as were their hours and whether they were to be on bargain or day work. This was to be agreed between the men concerned and the management and no one else. Unless this was accepted by the men and by the Union, this suggestion would fall to the ground. This and the possibility of finding good ground in the Ministry and Goodall's Drives might mean a transformation in six months time - Collins clearly shared the optimism of any miner. He also suggested that tramming (meaning in the actual district worked by the men) should be done by men employed on piece work by the mine, since they could thus be more efficiently utilised. Two ponies and two driving lads of sixteen or seventeen in the 73 fathom level could allow half of the tramming force to be laid off.

Finally Collins suggested the formation of a Mine Committee, which, without management reducing its responsibility and powers of decision, might, with the right spirit of amicable discussion and conciliation - the crux of the matter - mean the avoiding of industrial disputes in the future. The mine did adopt this last suggestion, though not until some time later after it had discharged strikers involved in the major and final strike.

Though not expressed at length, Collin's view of the lax management and organisation of the mine was clearly a disparaging one and justly so. The system was old-fashioned and supervision, where carried out, was clearly as inefficient as the men themselves. Collins did not distinguish between officials and men when he commented that scarcely any had experience of mining in lead mines in other parts of the Kingdom. "they have mostly been brought up in the places their fathers worked before them". If they could walk to work, they stayed there. The affairs at Millclose did not reflect well on either side and little was learnt which might have averted the later events.

The "Corker" report mainly concerns the later period, but contains somewhat acid comments about the mine before 1923 and its "many curious aspects". The writer comments that the bargaining process did not, in fact, involve bargaining - presumably the availability of labour was such as to allow the mine normally to totally dictate prices for labour. The more difficult period after 1917 led to some simple specialisation, in that men on day wages in the ore caverns did not waste time cleaning-up. Instead they had to be followed by men called "spritchers", culled from older but less competent men. These were on higher bargain rates (these must not be confused this with wages - they were lower), removing patches of ore, hoping these would lead them on to a rich patch. This occasionally happened so that they enjoyed, for the remainder of their period, the pleasure of earning a little more than usual. Behind them came the "Hospital" - very old men who were enabled to earn a pittance on what was left. The writer commented that the old workings do not carry much ore now.

There was comment, too, on the practice of combining poorer places with better. Even in 1937 there was a place left in the mine, known as the "Standing Dish", which every party feared to have thrust on it. The term probably, a pun, referred to the still then in use practice of measuring the ore using a wooden standardised dish. Presumably it was left standing rather than being worked.

Perhaps the worst feature he noted was "factionalism". Each shift, when day wages were paid belonged to a different faction, perhaps from a different village who did little to assist each other. For instance, no ore was broken or left for the succeeding shift whilst trammers would not convey any material not got by their own team on their own shift, leaving them under-employed. The use of deputies appears to have been for safety only. They did not otherwise control the work.

The introduction of rock drills had not resulted in much rise in production either. The production in a hand-held machine shift was only some 0.7 tons of ore. On drivage, the average rate of progress was only about a foot a day for six men at work. This poor result he ascribed to the position of drill man being highly valued and bestowed on seniority. Average age of the machine men, in 1923, was 55 years, with some "sports" of 70 years or over.

In what the writer refers to as a "patriarchal system" the winning of ore was still in the hands of old men and the rate of production was woefully low. Exploration followed joints in the limestone and presented a maze in which between 50 and 64 fathoms there were levels at every fathom. There was only one chute in use in the mine. Passages looped and were not later cut through, whilst curves were railed in a series of straight lines, so that derailling took place on every corner. There were 11, 16 and 17 inch gauges in use. Washers were carried to adjust waggon-wheel gauges when necessary.

The measuring was then still carried out in some style. This was at the end of a bargain, and the day was a holiday with a cask of beer available. The ore was measured by the agent for each group of men in the presence of all. Ritual was observed in the filling of the measuring dish, with the ore poured from a certain height, levelled off and weighed. The value was estimated by the weight of the dish of ore.

There was a fear that more rapid working would lead to the whittling down of personel and the shutting down of the mine, but part of these inefficiencies and animosities he attributed to the aftermath of the 1917 strikes and to the fact that son followed father and that practically no-one had experience in mines elsewhere.

The unique organisation left behind by Wass had "never been subjected to foreign influences". The men felt their traditional knowledge and skill were not equalled by any other body of men in the world. Their attitude to the introduction of new methods was one of patient forbearance and Christian charity. It was clearly due for a change. No doubt this came about after the new company took over after 1923.

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SOURCES

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