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# COBDEN AND BRIGHT AT DYLIFE

C. J. Williams

**Abstract**: Richard Cobden, the radical MP who was the leading light in the campaign for the repeal of the corn laws in the 1840s, married Catherine Williams, the daughter of one the two partners in the Dylife mines, in 1840. From 1849 to 1858 Cobden was heavily involved in the disputes that afflicted Dylife. In 1858 a new company, the Dylife Mining Company, was formed to work the mines, chaired by Cobden's great friend, John Bright, MP. John Taylor junior, who advised the company, as well as acting as mineral agent to the Wynnstay estate, the mineral owners, ensured that large sums were invested to develop the mines which, under Bright's chairmanship, became the most productive in mid-Wales. The wealth of archives that survives, particularly for the 1850s, makes it possible to tell the story of the mines in unusual detail.

In 1814 the Dylife mines were leased by Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn to two Machynlleth men, Hugh Williams and John Pughe. They were related, for Pughe was married to Williams's sister, but despite this, they did not get on. Even before the lease was signed, Williams complained to the Wynnstay estate agent that he was receiving 'but a very slight assistance' from his partner. Eventually, they were not on speaking terms, and the mines were run by the extraordinary expedient of dividing all payments into halves. No accounts were kept, but each partner paid his exact half of every bill; even the wages were paid in halves, on different days, and the income from the lead smelters was paid in halves in the same way. This made it difficult to raise capital to pay for new equipment, and it is clear that, although the mines were worked continuously, they did not achieve the level of production that might be expected if they were better managed.

In 1840 one of Hugh Williams's daughters, Catherine, married Richard Cobden (1804 65), then a successful calico-printer, who was elected MP for Stockport in the following year. Cobden was then at the beginning of his involvement with the Anti-Corn Law League. This saw the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, and the end of protection for the farmers. Britain entered an era of cheap food, which suited the manufacturing interest, and the export of manufactured goods. Cobden became a household name; a few years later, he was invited to become one of the commissioners of the Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace, and was offered a knighthood (which he declined) as a result. His fame made him a most influential man in the story of the Dylife mines in the years 1849-58, when they were beset by disputes, and brought to a standstill for a time. Two of his brothers-in-law, Hugh and John Williams, also became involved, as they bought two-thirds of their father's half share of the mine when he was in financial difficulties. Both brothers were lawyers: John, who shared a house with Cobden and his wife for a time, worked in London. Hugh Williams (1796-1874), who lived in Carmarthenshire, was a man of far more radical political views than Cobden. He was a Chartist, and a leading figure in the Rebecca agitation in south-west Wales in the 1840s, which saw the smashing of turnpike gates by men dressed in women's clothes, and resulted in the turnpike trusts in south Wales being taken over by elected road boards. But both Hugh Williams and his brother John had somewhat shady reputations, and Cobden, their brother-in-law, became a more acceptable figure to the other side, and to the Wynnstay estate's agents and solicitors, in the disputes that beset the mines.

In 1848 John Pughe, one of the partners in the Dylife mines, died, leaving his widow and young daughter with considerable debts which were to embarrass them for years to come. She was unable to provide any capital for the mine, and any income that came to her from her share of the ore sales was swallowed up by her debts. It was at this juncture that a report on the mines was commissioned from Captain Matthew Francis, a Cornish mining engineer working in Cardiganshire. Francis's report, made in 1849, recommended the construction of several large reservoirs and other surface works to bring the mine up to date. In March 1850 John Williams managed to get the consent of Mrs Pughe and her trustees to these, and set to work. Two new reservoirs, the Rhyd-y-porthmyn and Nant-ddeiliog pools, and an extensive leat system were constructed, and two new waterwheels erected. One, of 40 feet diameter, known as the Black Wheel, was for pumping and drawing materials at Esgairgaled shaft. The other, the Red Wheel, of 63 feet diameter, fulfilled the same function for Llechwedd Du engine shaft, where it replaced an earlier wheel, erected in 1839. The enormous Red Wheel is believed to be the biggest ever installed in Wales, and was one of the biggest ever erected at a mine in Britain. (The biggest wheel erected at a mine in Britain was the Lady Isabella wheel, 72½ feet diameter, erected at the Laxey mines in the Isle of Man, and still preserved.) With two other existing, smaller, wheels and dressing machinery, as well as a row of twenty miners' cottages, Rhanc-y-mynydd, Dylife became an extremely well-equipped mine. The work was done under the direction of the mine captain, Edward Williams, and with John Williams as the active partner, representing his father.

Despite these advances, Mrs Pughe was still not paying her share of the mine costs, and after a series of letters of complaint from John Williams to her trustees, an attempt was made to resolve the situation by convening a meeting of all the parties. This was held on 16 April 1852 in the Wynnstay Arms, Oswestry, with both Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn and his auditor present. A new part-time captain, Absalom Francis of Halkyn, was appointed as a result, but this proved to be an unfortunate move, as he did not get on with the resident captain, Edward Williams, and soon lost the confidence of Cobden and the Williams family. Hugh Williams died shortly after the Oswestry meeting, leaving Cobden as his executor, and in charge of his affairs. In the years 1853 and 1854 first John Williams, then Cobden himself, tried to resolve matters at Dylife, but without success. Eventually Cobden tried to put pressure on Mrs Pughe, who was still short of money and

unable to pay her share of the costs, by giving notice that he and the Williams brothers would suspend the mine from 1 November 1854 until it was sold or some plan for working it properly was adopted. However, Absalom Francis, on Mrs Pughe's orders, refused to do so. A few days later, on 4 November, extraordinary scenes took place at the mines when the letting of the monthly bargains was due to take place. The Williams brothers, armed with a letter of support from Cobden, arrived and addressed the men in Welsh. They told them that Francis had no right to let bargains, and that Mrs Pughe had no money to pay them. Francis, who had a poor command of the Welsh language, was unable to intervene, and the miners downed tools, bringing the mine to a standstill. After a short interval, Cobden and the Williams brother worked it in a small way on their own, Mrs Pughe having retired from the scene.

*Rhod Goch, Dylife, 1904. Simon Hughes Collection.*

On 13 January 1856 the lease of the mine from Sir Watkin expired. Cobden and the Williams brothers applied to the court of Chancery for an order which at last achieved Cobden's goal of one account for the mine. All income was paid into a bank in Machynlleth, and only when a credit balance of £300 was reached was any surplus divided among the partners. John Taylor junior, who also acted as mineral agent for Sir Watkin's Wynnstay estate, was appointed manager, and at last the mine began to be worked properly. Production improved from 192 tons of ore in 1855 to 489 in 1856 and 828 in 1857. The lease to the existing parties was renewed for a few months at a time, and negotiations began on the terms of a new lease. Eventually, in early 1858, Cobden persuaded his great friend John Bright MP (1811-89) to become chairman of a new limited company, whose shareholders were mostly wealthy Manchester businessmen. Under the new company, the Dylife Mining Company, the Dylife mines entered their golden age.

In the years 1845-1901 the Dylife mines produced 38,682 tons of lead ore, nearly 60 per cent of it raised by the Dylife Mining Company, 1859-73, making it for a time the most productive mine in mid-Wales. This was a direct result of the difficulties and disputes of the 1850s, for Sir Watkin's representatives were determined that sufficient capital should be invested for the mine to be worked properly. The company was required to spend £5,000 on new works and machinery within two years, and a further £4,000 within seven years. A new deep adit was to be driven from the River Twymyn towards the Dylife vein, and then westwards on the vein itself. Four men at least were to be kept at work on this, day and night. On each of the three main veins, a shaft was to be sunk within seven years to an increased depth of thirty fathoms below the existing workings, and in addition a level on each vein was to be driven eastwards and westwards, with four men at work on each. Dylife was already a well-equipped mine, as a result of the improvements made in the early 1850s, and those made by the new company put it in advance of any other metal mine in Wales in its arrangements for raising and dressing ore. At this period, most Welsh metalliferous mines were backward in their winding arrangements compared to collieries, where shafts were sunk vertically, and mechanisation was essential to deal with the much greater tonnages that had to be wound to the surface. Lead and copper mines worked inclined veins, and to save on capital expenditure, the shafts frequently followed the vein instead of being vertical. In coal pits, men were raised and lowered in cages, but in metal mines the men usually descended on ladders, often for a depth of many hundreds of feet; they faced an exhausting climb back to the surface at the end of their shift. Miners might spend a third of their effort simply travelling to and from their workplace underground. Ore was usually raised in iron kibbles that swung loose in the shaft, in which the men were prohibited from riding, and the ore was often carried in wheelbarrows underground and shovelled into the kibbles to be wound up the shaft. At Dylife, the new shafts stipulated in the lease were all sunk vertically, so that cages could be installed. At the west end of the mine, adjoining the Dyfngwm mine on the same vein, where good ore was being worked, the Boundary shaft was sunk to open out this ground. Another was sunk close to the dressing floors. This was Bradford's shaft, named after William Bradford, a Manchester brassfounder who was managing director of the Dylife company. This shaft exploited the eastern workings on the Llechwedd Du vein which, in 1858, were down to 85 fathoms below the surface at the engine shaft. The high cost of transport to Dylife, and its remoteness from a coalfield, resulted in much greater reliance on water power than was the case in Flintshire and Denbighshire. At Dylife, another 50-ft. waterwheel was installed beside the river, downstream of the dressing floors, in order to draw materials from the Old Engine and Boundary shafts over a mile away, an incredible feat made possible only by the availability of wire rope. Bright told Cobden that work on this wheel, 'rather a heavy job', was under way in August 1860. It was completed in the following year.

Elsewhere, improvements were made on the dressing floors, and in the tramming and drawing of the ore. Standard wagons were introduced, made in Manchester for £5 each, and into which ore broken in the most remote ends of the mine was loaded. A double-decked cage was installed in Llechwedd Du engine shaft, and cages were also put in later at Bradford's shaft and Esgairgaled shaft; the wagons were drawn to the

surface in the cages and trammed direct to the dressing floors. Such methods were well in advance of those at any other Welsh metal mine. When the Kinnaird Commission reported on conditions in metalliferous mines in 1864, the inspector appointed to report on the mines of north Wales considered the winding machinery at Dylife to be 'the most perfect to be found in the metallic mines visited'.

Dylife was also unusual in having proper changing facilities for the miners. At most mines, the men walked home, wet and dirty, in their working clothes. There was already a changing house of some sort at Dylife when Bright's company took over in 1858. Sir Watkin had undertaken to build cottages for the men out of the profits of the mine while it was in his hands in 1858, and when he met Bright at the mine in the summer of 1859 a new inn was also suggested. John Taylor, in an early meeting with the new company, proposed that a new changing house should be built out of the same funds. Sir Watkin also contributed to the cost of a new parsonage, for an Anglican church had been built at Dylife in 1856. The estate was dilatory in building the cottages, but the changing house was in use by 1863 when the Kinnaird Commission took evidence. Dylife was then the only lead mine in mid- and north Wales and Shropshire to have such a facility.

At the time of Cobden's death in 1865, the deepest workings at Dylife were on the Llechwedd Du vein, 115 fathoms below the surface at Bradford's shaft. Dylife itself had reached a depth of 87 fathoms, and Esgairgaled 45 fathoms. Production was 2,161 tons in 1867, but in later years it fell to less than a third of its peak in 1862. By then, the British lead-mining industry was suffering from increasing competition from mines overseas. Imports of lead ore rose rapidly from the 1850s. In 1866 they exceeded exports for the first time, and by the late 1870s were at more than twice the level of domestic production, and the price of lead went into a long fall. The Dylife mines were eclipsed as the most productive in mid-Wales by the Van mine, near Llanidloes, where a major ore-body had been discovered in 1865. By 1870 output at Van was over 4,000 tons of ore annually, nearly double that of Dylife at its peak. Such was the potential of Van that a standard-gauge branch railway was constructed from the mine to the Cambrian Railway at Caersws, six miles away, and the mine was worked until 1921.

Clearly the Dylife mines were in decline, and at the end of April 1873 Bright's company agreed to sell them to a new concern, the Dylife Lead Mining Co. The price paid was the enormous sum of £73,000, at a time when, according to a correspondent in the Mining Journal, 'not an end in the mine would produce one cwt per fathom'. The sale took place on 26 May, and Bright's Dylife Mining Co. was wound up in London on 4 June. The new company tried to copy the success of Bright's by spending large sums on development, particularly at the west end of the mine, at Boundary shaft, but without much success. The company was reconstituted as the Great Dylife Lead Mining Co. in 1876, in which year just over 1,000 tons of ore were raised, but output dwindled rapidly thereafter, and the village of Dylife went into terminal decline. The last recorded production was in 1901.

For a more detailed account of Cobden and Bright at Dylife, see C J Williams, 'Cobden and Bright and the Dylife lead mines', *Welsh History Review*, 21:1 (June 2002).

Christopher Williams became interested in mines as a teenager. He worked as an archivist, becoming county archivist for the former County of Clwyd, before turning freelance. He has written on various aspects of history in north Wales.