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**THE PROGRESS OF TRADE UNIONISM  
AT THE LEADHILLS MINES: 1836 to 1914.**

W.S. Harvey

**SYNOPSIS**

*The British lead miner is often portrayed as lacking the element of social awareness and militant spirit found in the colliers. The picture may be a valid generalisation, but it does not apply to all lead miners. For example, some of the miners in Wales and Teesdale organised a number of strikes;<sup>1</sup> and the author finds the “docile” miners at Leadhills have a remarkable history of combinations. This paper looks at developments there prior to 1914.*

The sometime mining communities of Leadhills and nearby Wanlockhead are in South West Scotland on the high moors of the Lowther Hills. The mines were worked from the seventeenth century until the 1930s and, although small by British standards, they were the largest lead mines in Scotland.

Over and over one finds writers using the most fullsome praises about the compliant character of the miners at Leadhills, and such comments are not confined to those who might have been inclined to take a sentimental view. Sir Archibald Alison, Sheriff of Lanarkshire and a man who saw any whiff of radicalism as a threat to the whole structure of society, wrote after the strike in 1836 that he believed most of the workmen at Leadhills were “orderly and respectable”.<sup>2</sup> These are admirable qualities, but the weight of such comment turned into disparagement. The description “docile”, first used by the Earl’s chaplain in 1784, came to imply the Leadhills miners lacked the spirit to make a stand for those principles that moved their fellows in the Lanarkshire coal field.

It took a local historian, J.M. Harkness, to put the Leadhills miners in a somewhat different light for, writing in 1925, he recorded how –

time and time again (they) have taken a stand for justice ... and by a slow and painful process secured higher wages and the recognition of their union.<sup>3</sup>

The process can be said to have begun in the 1830s, and at a time of economic decline. In 1808 the Scots Mines Company, the major operator, paid a dividend amounting to about 50% of the paid-up shares. But twenty years later, when J.A. Borron and his son William took over as managers, the price of lead had tumbled and the mines faced hard times. The Borrons made various attempts to reduce production costs, and 1836 began with a tightening of managerial control. In contemporary letters one of the miners, William Gibson, referred to men being paid off and also remarked, ominously, the “power here at present is tyrannical to the utmost degree”.<sup>4</sup>

In April things came to a head, and on the first of the month the overseer, Thomas Weir, recorded how he had attended the “rendesvous” at six am but –

Not a single man appeared they having informed Mr. Borron Esq. by letter that they were determined to strike work.<sup>5</sup>

The entire workforce of the Scots Mines Company, over two hundred men, had formed a “Union or Society” and all were on strike. The reason was not recorded.

By July, the directors looked for decisive action to end the strike. They claimed the strikers were in a riotous mood so the Duke of Hamilton agreed that the Sheriff of Lanarkshire, Archibald Alison, should send in troops. Alison pointed out that no riot had taken place and there was no suggestion that order had broken down, but the Company pressed, the Duke insisted, and on the 20th July an officer, and NCO, and “twenty men of the 96th” marched out of Glasgow for Leadhills, fifty miles away.<sup>6</sup>

The Sheriff Depute, Daniel Vere, was put in charge of the operation, and he hurried to Leadhills and met the strikers. He later wrote that he informed them “as to what they were, and were not, entitled to do”, and the delegation “affirmed their right to make a stand for the terms they thought fit.” But by the afternoon of the 21st July the strike was over and the attempt to combine had collapsed. The opportunity was taken to get the miners to sign a declaration to the effect that they would “belong to no Union”.<sup>7</sup> Although an Act of 1825 meant strikes were no longer illegal, such declarations were common practice. Ten of the miners, their names were not recorded, refused.

An examination of the bargain records before and after the strike shows there are 45 names missing from the latter, and others had been taken on to make up the total number employed.<sup>8</sup> Some degree of turn-over could be expected, but it seems probable that the opportunity was taken to weed-out not just the ten who refused to sign, but others whose attitudes were considered suspect.

There is no certain record of the origin of the dispute, or the incentive to combine. That the men gave notice “by letter” of their intention to strike work, shows it was no sudden notion but a considered action. The affair could have been sparked off by an unacceptable rate for a bargain, although there is no specific reference in the Bargain Books. Such disagreements were not unusual among lead miners, but what was unusual on this occasion was that the situation led to the “union or society” and a strike.

The 1830s also saw problems at Wanlockhead. At that time the Marquis of Bute had taken over the mines with the elder Borron as his agent, but operations were in decline and seemed likely to cease altogether. Rather than let this happen, the landlord, the Duke of Buccleuch took over the mines in 1842. It was not to be a philanthropic rule and James Stewart, the manager, kept a very tight hand on his miners. In February, 1845, eight men disputed a bargain and, finding Stewart would not listen to their case, they agreed to “stand together” and hold out for a better price. The other miners were apparently unwilling to support them and, after a few days, three of the men backed down leaving the remaining five isolated. In the end they lost their jobs and recorded how they also had to:

leave our homes for no fault that we was aware of but for pleading for a fair living.<sup>9</sup>

In the years that followed, the solidarity of the Leadhills miners was strained by the effects of two upheavals. As a result of the Disruption in the Church of Scotland many left their fellows of the Leadhills congregation to worship at the Free Church in Wanlockhead,<sup>10</sup> and in the 1840s and 50s, a quarrel between

the Scots Mines Company and the Leadhills Company over water rights set miner against miner, with rival groups breaking down leats and blocking adits.<sup>11</sup>

An outcome of the water dispute was that the Scots Mines Company gave up their lease, and in 1864 a re-formed Leadhills Company began an expansion and reinvestment that provided activity and prosperity for a number of years.

A successor to the Leadhills Mining Company, the Leadhills Silver-lead Mining & Smelting Company, was floated in 1877, and, with what was later described as “a flourish of trumpets”, it announced it would not only produce lead and silver, but gold as well.<sup>12</sup> As was often the case with mining ventures at that time, the optimism seems to have reflected the need to puff the share price rather than the Company’s real prospects. By 1896 the price of lead had fallen to £9 per ton, and the Company was in such straits that the landowner, the Earl of Hopetoun, was persuaded to reduce his rental; and the miners to take a cut in wages.<sup>13</sup> Two years later the lead market had recovered to £14 per ton, but the wage rates were not restored.

Faced again with the need for combined action, the miners chose to join the Lanarkshire Union of Mine Workers and, at a Union meeting in July, 1898, its Council stated it would support the Leadhill’s claim for a wage increase of 27%.<sup>14</sup> The Company refused to consider the matter, and a month later the Union Executive recommended the men should be brought out on strike.<sup>15</sup>

The strike of 1836 was perhaps remarkable in that it occurred at all. What made the strike of 1898 remarkable is that it was one of the few occasions prior to 1900 when lead miners joined a main-stream trade union, and perhaps the only time when a colliers’ union brought lead miners out on strike.

All the miners were involved in the 1836 dispute, but in the case of the second strike, only 71 men out of a workforce of 163 stopped work.<sup>16</sup> They got support from the Lanarkshire colliers and by December the Union was paying a double strike allowance and providing coal as well.<sup>17</sup>

The Company refused to negotiate and a year later most of the strikers were said to have left the village; and operations there were in decline for the smelt mill had closed.<sup>18</sup> In fact by that time much of the ore in sight had been worked out and efforts were being made to develop new ground with a minimum number of men. The dispute therefore could have been seen as an excuse to keep the numbers down and the total workforce was allowed to fall to 77.<sup>19</sup>

The dispute dragged on into the next century for, in a letter to the *Mining Journal* dated 25th March 1901, a shareholder complained about the “apathy” of the Board, and asked “can nothing be done to terminate the strike?”<sup>20</sup> It was later claimed that all the strikers had found other work by that time and, that being the case, the dispute was terminated soon after, having lasted “3½ years”.<sup>21</sup>

The “slow and painful process” began again in 1909 with disputes over bargain rates. In 1903 the Leadhills Silver Lead Mining & Smelting Company was re-structured as the Leadhills Company, and began to develop an ore body in the Brow Vein. There were disputes over wage rates while sinking the shaft, and Baden Skewis, the manager, refused any concession.<sup>22</sup> The men met and again decided to combine. They had heard how lead miners in County Durham

had bettered their conditions through the efforts of a new Union, the Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers, and it was agreed that a letter be sent to the Union's Northern delegate seeking support.<sup>23</sup>

The Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers had been founded in London in 1889, and by 1900 it was expanding so as to include workers outside the traditional unions. The miners working for the Weardale Lead Company joined in 1908 and, as a result, a conciliatory committee was set up to "adjudicate on questions between the Company and the men".<sup>24</sup> In March a branch of the Union was set up at Leadhills and in August, the Union's president, Will Thorne, visited the village and sought a meeting with the Company. Skewis refused any discussion with the Union, and stated that grievances would be dealt with on an individual basis, as had always been the practice at the lead mines.<sup>25</sup>

To reinforce the Company's position, Skewis asserted there was not enough work for all the men and among those he laid off were the officials of the new Branch. Those still employed were required to sign conditions of employment which demanded they would repudiate Union membership.<sup>26</sup> By November forty had signed and the rest had been locked out. This situation moved the influential *Glasgow Herald* to publish a lengthy article on the dispute. This not only brought the affair to the attention of the public, but the editor's impartial assessment provided support for the miners' cause.<sup>27</sup>

The 1836 strike had been largely ignored by the papers of the day, that of 1898 got scant mention save in reports on Union meetings; now, the events at Leadhills became a cause celebre with reports in every paper in the West of Scotland. In particular, *Forward*, the paper of the Independent Labour Party, took the strike to its own, and through its pages the ILP began to orchestrate support for the strikers.<sup>28</sup>

During the previous dispute the strikers had been in a minority. Now the situation was reversed and the Glengonnar mine was picketed against the men who continued to work there. In December seven pickets, including two women, were arrested and charged at the Sheriff Court.<sup>29</sup>

By then new machinery had been installed, so if the results of this investment were to be realised, Skewis had to find some way to maintain output. After an abortive attempt to hire miners from the South of England, he turned to the Glasgow Labour Exchange in an effort to secure men; 12 arrived in March and more followed.<sup>30</sup>

The use of the Labour Exchange as a source of strike breakers enabled Thorne, now an MP, to raise questions in Parliament relevant to the strike,<sup>31</sup> which must have brought the matter to the notice of the City establishment. At Leadhills, the arrival of the men from Glasgow caused a further furore; villagers paraded from the railway station singing a derisory chant "Tattie Wullie Shaw", and there were more arrests.<sup>32</sup>

By June all the strike breakers had left the village, and the undiminished support for the dispute meant Skewis sought a compromise. He offered to withdraw the demand that the men gave up union membership, but he insisted that the rest of the conditions stood. The committee balked, but the strikers were said to have been becoming exasperated.<sup>33</sup>

A settlement was probably in sight, but the strike was destined to end in a rally of support that can have few equals in mining history. On the 6th June an estimated 5000 people travelled to Leadhills in a demonstration of solidarity, and were addressed by a galaxy of Scottish socialists. Two days later the directors met in London and the strike was over. The terms of the agreement proved far from clear, but bells were pealed in Leadhills and the editor of the *Glasgow Herald* proclaimed the outcome was a triumph for the “principles of combination”.<sup>34</sup>

In the event the joy was short lived. The Leadhills Company might have said it would recognise the Union, but it did not recognise any obligation to employ its members and, even a year later, forty of them were without employment.<sup>35</sup>

There were more strikes in the years that followed, strikes in which the Wanlockhead miners joined, but by the time the painful process achieved its goal, the end of lead mining in Scotland was in sight.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

The paper draws on the author’s researches towards a history of the Leadhills miners.

1. See C.J. Williams. The Lead Miners of Flintshire and Denbighshire. In *Journal of the Welsh Labour History Society*. V.3 1980. p.91 and R.P. Hastings. Strikes without a Union. *Journal of Durham County History Society*, pp.40-58. I am indebted to Mike Gill for drawing my attention to this publication.
2. W.S. Harvey. The Strike at the Leadhills Mines in 1836. *The Local Historian*. Vol.17.2 May, 1986. pp 104.
3. J.M. Harkness. *Among Scotland’s Lead Miners*. Dumfries. 1925. p.68.
4. Allan Ramsay Library, Leadhills. (ARL) Gibson Letters. W. Gibson to R. Gibson. 30th January, 1836.  
No letters remain for the period of the strike.
5. ARL. Mines Journals. Vol.15. 1834-36. Entry April, 1st 1836.
6. W.S. Harvey. Op Cit. p.102 & 103.
7. W.S. Harvey. Op Cit. p.103.
8. This was explored as part a History Workshop held in the Allan Ramsay Library, Leadhills in 1988.
9. Wanlockhead Museum Archive. “Statement of Transactions between The Stewart and the Petitioners”, and “Paper torn from the door of the Smithy”. I am indebted to G. Downs-Rose of the Wanlockhead Museum for these references.  
Stewart had been appointed overseer at Leadhills by young Borron in 1830, but had been sacked four years later, accused of having misaligned a cross-cut.
10. I am indebted to G. Downs-Rose for providing this information from the Free Church records held in the Wanlockhead Museum Archive.
11. Appendix of Litigation. *House of Lords Appeal*. 1859. The Advocates Library, Edinburgh. and ARL. *Mine Journals*. 1840-54.

12. *Mining Journal*. Vol.47.1877. p.1078. Also Vol. 49.1879. p.557.
13. *Glasgow Herald*. 2nd September, 1898.
14. *Hamilton Advertiser*. 2nd July, 1898.
15. *ibid*. 13th August. 1898.
16. *Mining Journal*. Vol. 68. 1898. p.1170.
17. *Glasgow Herald*. 30th December, 1898.
18. *Mining Journal*. Vol. 69. 1899. p.452.
19. The employment of not less than 50 pickmen was a condition of the Lease, and of these about a quarter were to be kept extending the drainage levels. The requirement could be waived in the event of "strikes or combinations."
20. *Mining Journal* Vol. 71. 1901. p.385.
21. *Glasgow Herald*. March 18th, 1910. Report of a Meeting of Scottish Miners' Federation.
22. *Glasgow Herald*. 25th November, 1909.
23. *ibid*.
24. *Mining Journal*. Vol. 84. 1908. p.248 and Vol.85. 1909. p.249. For reference to the Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers, see Henry Pelling. *A History of British Trade Unionism*. Penguin. 1981.
25. *Glasgow Herald* 25th November, 1909
26. *ibid*.
27. *ibid*.
28. *Forward*. 5th March, 1910. et al.
29. *Glasgow Herald*. 22nd December, 1909 and 14th January, 1910.
30. *ibid*. 15th and 19th March, and 10th May, 1910
31. *ibid*. 16th and 18th March, 1910
32. *ibid*. 19th March, 1910.
33. *ibid*. 27th May, and 3rd June, 1910
34. *ibid*. 6th and 8th June, 1910.
35. *ibid*. 15th June, 1911.

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