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# THOMAS DODDS – 18TH CENTURY MINING VISIONARY OR PROFITEER?

by John Lawson

## SYNOPSIS

*This article tries to evaluate the work of Thomas Dodds, the London Lead Company's agent from 1780 to 1815. It also attempts to look objectively at the contemporary criticisms levelled against him and to assess them. It is divided into four parts, these being (1) an introduction; (2) a review of the contemporary, documented, criticisms; (3) documented rebuttal of some of the criticisms; and (4) an overall assessment of his achievements.*

## INTRODUCTION

The historical evidence available on this agent is unfortunately rather limited and, to date, the author has only seen the papers listed in the bibliography. However, he is quite aware that the documentary evidence is far from complete and that other papers may be discovered, which may give a clearer picture of the events described in this review which tries to evaluate Thomas Dodds' achievements in the Nenthead area.

He seems to have been both socially and politically aware, supplying the London Lead Company's Court with useful background information as when, for example, he told them in 1808 that Fredrick Hall's cousin was married to the Lord Chancellor and was a sister to the Countess of Newcastle.<sup>1</sup> This information would have been invaluable to them when they sold their Derwent Mines to Fredrick Hall at about this time.

Bound by the Court to work the mines as economically as possible, he nonetheless complained to the Court every time he had to lay off work people. For example, on Lady Day 1811 he wrote that, "*they would be thrown on their respective parishes for support, and often could not feed their families*".<sup>2</sup> All the same, he had to lay off 146 men later that year.<sup>3</sup> At the same time he employed some men simply to keep the leases open and in 1815 he wrote to the Court to ask if he could employ some miners in old workings at a higher rate to give them a job.<sup>4</sup> In April of the same year, he wrote to the Court to see if they would give a small donation to the mother of a boy who had fallen down a shaft at Rampgill Mine.<sup>5</sup>

It is not known when Thomas Dodds was appointed to the post of chief agent for the Governor and Company (otherwise known as the London Lead Company), but he was in post by 1778 as, according to Hilton, the Rampgill Low Level had been started before this date and the Dickensons, referring to Hilton's comments, state that Mr Dodds was responsible for laying out this level. (See later in this article under criticisms).<sup>6,7</sup>

In these early comments we have only an overall view of his responsibilities, but by April 1806 (Lady Day) we have a much clearer picture of what was

taking place under his direction, as there is a copy of a book called "*Letter Book of quarterly reports from the district agent at Nenthead*" in the Northumberland Record Office. This book is a hand-written duplicate of all Thomas Dodds' correspondence with the headquarters of the London Lead Company and refers in some detail to the bargains let each quarter day in the mines leased by the Company. Unfortunately it is not possible to say if this is written in Dodd's hand or if it was written before or after he sent his letter to London. The handwriting changes after 1814, when the part of the report detailing the Teesdale mines is signed by Robert Stagg who presumably may also have written it. The London Lead Company's minute books also give us information about Mr Dodds. On June 2nd 1795 they state that he should continue to be their chief mining agent in Alston Moor and that his remit should also include Whitfield Colliery. Nine months later, the Court gave him the superintendence of all the purchases of materials necessary for the working of the mines. It was further resolved that his pay should be £130 from Lady Day 1796.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately the next relevant entry is on April 18th 1816, saying that a special Court was to be held on April 25th to consider the company's affairs in the North following the death of Thomas Dodds. At this meeting, Robert Stagg was appointed General Superintendent for the company's affairs in the North from Lady Day last and his salary was to be increased by £100.<sup>9</sup>

All of this begs the question of how old was Thomas Dodds when he died? We know that he was in charge before 1778, which probably suggests that he was appointed at least five years before this and so he must have been the principal agent for 34 years on his death in 1816. If he was appointed to the job when he was 30, then obviously he must have been 64 when he died. This minor speculation and other facts refute what has been written elsewhere that he was dismissed for other reasons.<sup>10</sup>

Whatever Dodds died of, it seems to have been coming for some time. In the Letter Book for Lady Day 1816, the writing appears to be that of Robert Stagg and it states that Dodds was not feeling well and, because of this, he was not able to visit the mines. Instead his son and others had done so, "*So that the [Company's] service suffered no loss*".<sup>11</sup>

Managers and persons in charge of major undertakings are often subject to both written and spoken criticisms. In this respect Thomas Dodds was no exception, and clearly he was aware of some of them. In January 1808, he wrote in the letter book "*... poverty begins to stare this country very much in the face, and the general murmur of the labouring class render the lives of public men very troublesome.*"<sup>12</sup> (As we shall see later, he had had to reduce the number of men on dead work by 58 at this time and clearly he was not popular for this decision.) However, he also had his friends who helped to defend his reputation and actions and the next part of this review is to look at both these aspects in some detail.

## THE CRITICISMS

The first major criticism was made by Mr Hilton, who was probably the mine agent for the Greenwich Hospital Company, which had been given the area of Alston Moor and several other estates in the North of England after the confiscation of the Earl of Derwentwater's lands in 1715, following the failure of the first Jacobite rebellion in which the Earl had taken the side of the Old Pretender. Hilton's criticisms were threefold.

1 - Thomas Dodds did not drive the Rampgill Horse Level from the bank of the river Nent and so lost several feet of valuable height, which would have enabled the water from the mine to drain away more easily.<sup>13</sup>

2 - He did not regard the development of Scaleburn Vein as being of paramount importance. Hilton thought that this vein would be like Rampgill, since it was very close to it and had a similar bearing. Rampgill had been extremely rich so Scaleburn was, in Hilton's mind, a potential bonanza. He stated that: "*if Scaleburn Vein be as good a Vein as Rampgill has been, she is a better prospect than when the Governor and Co., [another name for the London Lead Co.], took her, for Rampgill was then robbed to the bottom of the Firestone and Scaleburn is whole from the surface.*"<sup>14</sup> Other criticisms were made of the way the dressing floors on Scaleburn Vein were laid out around the shaft tops and of the fact that the Scaleburn Horse Level did not have enough passing places for maximum efficient working of the mine.<sup>15</sup>

3 - Hilton further suggested that Dodds should have continued the Deep Level in Carr's mine, northward towards Rampgill-Burnhead, to look for further east-west veins similar to Carr's Vein itself.<sup>16</sup>

A fourth criticism is found in documents at Durham Record Office.<sup>17</sup> Recently reviewed by J. Dent, these papers refer to a disagreement between Thomas Dodds and Robert Hayton, one of his employees, in which Dodds is said to have hit Hayton with a large book and thrown him downstairs.<sup>10</sup> As a result of this altercation, Hayton was sacked, but in one document Hayton suggests that he was dismissed so that his position could be taken over by Thomas Dodds junior.<sup>18</sup> Later documents, supported by others in the deposit which are signed by Joseph Stagg, suggest that Thomas Dodds was selling the miners gunpowder owned by him at a dearer rate than that sold by the company.<sup>19</sup> This was in contravention of the edict of the Court, dated October 6th 1785, which states that no Agent be permitted to deal in any commodity made use of by Miners or Smelters, nor be permitted to be concerned underhandedly with any person who shall deal in goods supplied to them.<sup>20</sup> It was also suggested that amounts were added to the miners' bills at the Nenthead shop, which was run by Thomas Dodds junior and partners.<sup>21</sup> Other criticisms in this deposit state that Thomas Dodds (Senior) was receiving free coal and candles, contrary to the company's directions, and also that he was arranging for Ireshopeburn mine to be worked in an irregular way and falsifying it so as to conform to the company's practice.<sup>21</sup>

A fifth source of criticism comes indirectly from George Hethrington, the discoverer of Smallcleugh Flatts, and can be seen in a photocopy of part of his notebook, deposited in Cumbria Record Office.<sup>22</sup> It is scribbled over dialling details and presumably represents someone's later thoughts about this issue, as it reads, "*Had Hethrington gotten his due he should have gotten a pension served upon him for his lifetime him and his sons. Cut about 20 fathoms dead ground for nothing. After a quarter's working, Mr Dodd's favourite partnership cut them off and went with their forehead. When they were cutting the dead ground people used to make game of them. Also Old Dodds thought he might work on partnership after this grove was cut. He acknowledged him to be a better miner than himself.*" This handwriting is especially difficult to decipher, but seems to make the point that Dodds did not let George Hethrington work on in the best part of the lucrative Flatt he had discovered. This is in part confirmed in a now lost document, originally attached to W. Wallace's Smallcleugh plan and deposited in the Mines Record Office. A copy of the missing paper confirms that the other miners thought Hethrington was stupid when he was driving what is now called Hethrington's Crosscut in Smallcleugh Mine, and also suggests that Hethrington did not do very well from his discovery.<sup>23</sup> (This will be further reviewed in a forthcoming paper on the history of Smallcleugh Mine).

## THE DEFENCE

**Criticism 1.** In spite of all the criticisms levelled at Thomas Dodds, he had his defenders, the most forthright of these being the Greenwich Hospital's Moor Masters - John and Thomas Dickenson. In reply to the criticism that Rampgill Horse Level was driven too high, they state that Mr Dodds first obtained the consent of the Governor & Company and began a horse level a little above Rampgill Low Level mouth (presumably the old level), in order to get a fall for turning the work from the waggons. By keeping a true level, he got into the old level, and afterwards under it. As the old level was quite a small one, merely for the purpose of taking off the water, it suggests that, prior to the driving of the new horse level, all the ore was drawn from the mine from surface shafts.<sup>24</sup> (See later.)

Dodds himself might have been aware of this particular criticism, as writing on October 31st 1808, he said, "*Rampgill & Scaleburn mines are both doing well. The deep level by which the ore and the rubbish is brought out is of such utility that it will prove the grand mean of these mines working successfully for a great number of years. These two mines having very little dead work on them at present will make a very considerable gain, being upon a very advantageous plan for working and the mouth of the level commodiously situated for working the ore*".<sup>25</sup>

**Criticism 2.** The Dickensons, writing in 1821, state that Thomas Dodds was responsible for laying out and driving up a branch of Rampgill Low Level to Scaleburn Vein, showing that he was not ignorant of the mineral potential of

this vein.<sup>26</sup> Whilst driving it, in April 1812, the miners discovered the rich ore deposits of Scaleburn Cross Vein.<sup>27</sup>

Hilton's criticism of the lack of turning spaces in the horse level might be valid as, in the recent opening up of Scaleburn Mine by the author and others, only one passing place was seen, although other provision could have been made in the area of the underground Scaleburn Whimsey.<sup>28</sup> Hilton's other criticism of the poor dressing facilities might also be valid, but two points must be made in mitigation. Firstly, Scaleburn Vein was extremely hard and hence difficult to work. This was confirmed by Wallace who in 1866 wrote that part of the vein could not be worked because of this, while the Nenthead miners had an expression, "*as hard as a Scaleburn Twitch*".<sup>29</sup> Secondly, the poor provision of the dressing floors presumably referred to some time before Rampgill Low Level was driven to the vein and all the ore was dressed around the surface whimsey shafts.

**Criticism 3.** The Dickensons answered this criticism and wrote as follows, "*by taking a cross cut out of Mr Wilkinson's Deep Level it is very probable that he might well have spent a large sum of money and not met with anything, as his cross cut we presume would have been on the East side of Smallcleugh Cross Vein and would have been under the Smallcleugh Flatts so that he would have in all probability have missed both these objects*".<sup>30</sup>

**Criticism 4.** These criticisms are divided into several distinct ones, some of which will be more fully discussed in the final summing up. Certainly no love was lost between Robert Hayton and Thomas Dodds, and the latter, writing at Lady Day 1808, expresses himself in the following terms, "*I requested in my letter of the 26th past to have a person appointed in Hayton's place and I beg the Court will give me immediate orders on that point - I never had so much trouble and vexation with any man on earth as Hayton, but I am resolved never to have any more from that quarter*".<sup>31</sup>

In the papers reviewed by Dent, Joseph Stagg states that Mr Briggs had been appointed as Robert Hayton's successor, so either Hayton's original charge was malicious or the Court had taken the decision not to appoint Dodds' son to this post.<sup>10,32</sup>

The selling of gunpowder was clearly a problem, however, as in February 1809 Dodds wrote to the Court saying that he had not yet heard of the gunpowder, which the Court said was ordered.<sup>33</sup> In January 1810 he complained about it again, as follows: "*The gunpowder is now all gone that came last and such an article as never came to lead mines. The workmen were obliged to dry it before the fire, before they could use it, and it is well that no misfortune happened by it. I wrote for a quantity to be sent in the last parcel marked F.B. but not one cask of it came. I was obliged to send to Newcastle for 20 half barrels to mix with the bad, which was the same price as that order'd by the Court, and better gunpowder I never saw. The Court*

*will now please order 60 half barrels F.B. and 40 C.B. but it except it be good the workmen won't use it".*<sup>34</sup> In January 1811 he wrote to ask the Court when the gunpowder was shipped and to name its price, while in July 1812 he asked them to order gunpowder marked C.B. and F.B., wanting 50 hogsheads & 50 quarters of the former and 50 hogsheads and 150 quarters of the latter.<sup>35</sup> He further urged them to hurry as, "*we get none elsewhere and are almost out*".<sup>36</sup> In January 1814 he was once more asking when could he expect delivery of it from London.<sup>37</sup>

In analysing these gunpowder entries in the journal, the question which springs to mind is why did Thomas Dodds only bring this subject to the Court's attention after 1809? One possibility is that the Court reacted to the complaints regarding the sale of gunpowder by Dodds, following the report by Masterman, and either banned him from doing this or alternatively decided to supply the workmen themselves, as apparently the Greenwich Hospital's agents did.<sup>38,39</sup> This policy would certainly have benefited the miners who were being overcharged for the gunpowder, but at least with Dodds they had it when they needed it and it was presumably of a better quality than that provided by the Court. It must also be pointed out that gunpowder was usually made wet so as to avoid premature explosions and drying it could be rather 'tricky'. Unfortunately no information on the coal and candle situation has yet been found and so these accusations might well be true. Similarly no documentary evidence has yet been found to contradict the accusation of extra charges on the miners' accounts at the Nenthead shop. However, Dodds' brother, a partner in the gunpowder business, was dismissed in the summer of 1812, and Dodds claimed that his brother did not know the reason for his dismissal.<sup>40</sup> It would not be unreasonable to speculate that this was the company tidying up the gunpowder business.

That Thomas Dodds ran the Ireshopeburn Mine in a way which was contrary to the London Lead Company's practices, and compounded this by altering the records to show that it was in fact worked in the correct manner, is fully described in a letter to the Court dated January 1812 (see below).<sup>41</sup>

There is other documentary evidence in the Cumbria Record Office, which enables us to decide when the mine was first leased by the company and to estimate its profitability from its first appearance in 1792 when it gained £61 2s 9d.<sup>42</sup> Entries then appear, usually on the 'loss' page, up to the last of these documents, dated 1808. In that year the mine had lost £179 7s 0d, whilst in the previous year it had gained £40 5s 3d. Entries in the letter book are rather sparse and usually state that "[the] *mine is poor*". In spite of this, these sources suggest that Ireshopeburn mine was a marginally profitable operation during this period.

In the letter book referred to earlier, Dodds stated that, "*they employ 12 pickmen [miners] and this number can be exceeded in summer when they employ not less than 10 men and lads to wash the ore, having so much rubbish*

*in it that it requires many hands to clean it*".<sup>41</sup> He went to justify altering the Court's usual mining practices i.e. letting by the bing or by doing fresh trials, as the mine was so poor. (What Dodds had done was to sublet the mine to a team of miners who paid the Court £55 per annum for it. This was deducted from the money paid to them when they sold their ore to the company. Since it also made a further profit on the smelting of the ore, the company obtained another bite of the cherry!)

Dodds also said that, in view of this, it was not worth informing the Court of these arrangements, so he presented them in the usual way. He further explained that the miners working by sub-leasing worked harder than when they were working by the bing. When they worked in the former way, they started work on Monday morning and continued work until Saturday night, and so did nearly double the work that was normally carried out if the latter method of working was adopted. Dodds further justified his actions by stating that, if he had not invoked the subletting arrangement, then the working of this mine would have been a large loss to the concern, instead of a reasonable profit. He completed this report by stating that in all his actions he was only thinking of the good of the company, suggesting that this criticism was in fact 'nit picking'.

**Criticism 5.** In view of two independent documentary sources referring to Dodds' treatment of George Hethrington, it seems that this must be accepted as a just criticism. However, in mitigation, it must be mentioned that it was Thomas Dodds' idea to drive the Smallcleugh Horse Level forward on September 22nd 1787, and, if he had not done that, then the Smallcleugh Flatts would not have been discovered.

### **THOMAS DODDS' ACHIEVEMENTS**

1. He set out the Rampgill Horse Level, to give access to the Rampgill complex of veins, i.e. Rampgill Sun and Cross Veins, and also the Scaleburn complex, North Vein and Sun Veins. It is to his credit that this level can still be used today by mine explorers to visit these particular mines.
2. It was his idea to recommence the driving of the Smallcleugh Horse Level which led to the discovery of probably the richest deposits of lead ore on Alston Moor.
3. In the spring of 1809 he set a partnership to drive Broomsberry Horse Level towards the Scaleburn and Rampgill Mines.<sup>43</sup> The idea was to provide extra drainage depth for them, "*so as to unwater these Veins ... [which] will in a few years put an end to these expensive engines in the company's works*". (These engines, one in Rampgill and the other in Smallcleugh, were probably underground waterwheels, for in September 1809 Dodds wrote to the Court to tell them that it would be necessary to arch the wheel case with stone since the timber was all rotten.)<sup>44</sup> He also added the rider that Broomsberry (an alternative name for Brownhill) Horse Level was 10 fathoms deeper



than Rampgill and would be a general drain for both the Scaleburn and Smallcleugh mines. Since the time taken to drive this level to Scaleburn – it was never driven to Smallcleugh – would be very many years, it is a measure of his vision that he could contemplate such an ambitious project.

4. Dodds was always in favour of using machinery if it made a mine more profitable and he arranged for a waterwheel-powered crusher to be sent to the Middlehope mine to improve the ore-working there. Writing in the summer of 1808, he said, “*experience has shown that nothing is more beneficial to lead mines as the use of crushing machines.*”<sup>45</sup>

5. Under his direction, for the period 1791 to 1808, the London Lead Company’s mines made a total profit of £242,967, which in today’s values would have to be multiplied by at least 100 times or more!<sup>42</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Thomas Dodds would certainly be regarded as a hard man and, if crossed, would probably bear a grudge. (See references to Hayton earlier). He was prepared to go if Hayton was not dismissed and, as Joseph Stagg stated in the document already referred to, “*he knew no one the country who could be more suitable for Mr Dodd’s place.*”<sup>46</sup>

As the London Lead Company’s chief agent, Dodds had almost complete control of a very large organisation, employing 541 pickmen in December 1815, made up of 364 in Alston & Weardale, and 177 in Teesdale.<sup>47</sup> As this does not take into account smelters, coal miners, hauliers, and the other various workers such as ore washers etc, it would probably not be unreasonable to assume that he would be managing over 1000 people. The area he was expected to look after, in 1791, stretched from the Isle of Man to the Closehouse Mine in the south and to the Derwent Mines in the north-east.<sup>36</sup> As well this, he was expected to travel around the country to view prospective mine sites, make reports and take the decision on whether or not to proceed with the taking up of leases on them. Writing in July 1806, he said “*on the 29th I intend to set out for South Wales. On Saturday the 2nd I hope to be on the mineral ground.*”<sup>48</sup> Considering that the only means of transport at his disposal was a horse or coach, this was no mean feat. Earlier he had been unwell, for in the same document he thanks the Court for inquiring after his health, but nonetheless he was expected to make this assessment (of the Bishop of St. David’s land) and willingly did so.

Since he was in a very powerful and trusted position, with his bosses hundreds of miles away, he carried out things to suit himself and clearly from time to time took advantage of the situation. Perhaps as a result of this – and of the setting up of the Nenthead shop – more opportunities came his way to make sure that he had some extra financial reward. However, the running of the shop might have been carried out by other members of his family and he might simply have received a ‘cut’.

## THOMAS DODDS – 18TH CENTURY MINING VISIONARY OR PROFITEER?

One document in the D.R.O., dated August 29th 1794 and witnessed by Isaac Hornsby, a sub-agent and a partner in the shop, and John Dickenson, Moor Master for the Greenwich Hospital Company, states that Thomas Dodds, Robert French and Christopher Walton had to submit a bond of £500 to the Governor & Company, and this seems to become payable to the London Lead Company if any of them left the company's service, or defaulted the company in a financial way. This might easily have been applied to the Nenthead shop and suggests that the L.L.C. protected its interests as much as humanly possible.<sup>49</sup>

The disagreement with Hayton clearly led to the company's tightening up on what Dodds could do, and the dismissal of a brother in the summer of 1812 must also have weakened his authority. After 1814, the letter books' details of the Teesdale Mines are all signed by Robert Stagg and it would be easy to suggest that this was a further restriction on Dodds' authority.<sup>40</sup> However, earlier correspondence would suggest that he had felt it very difficult to visit these mines, especially in the winter. For example, in January 1808 he wrote, "*if the Court would relieve me [of visiting the Teesdale Mines], I would thank them but should this not meet with their approbation I will endeavour to struggle on a little longer.*"<sup>50</sup>

Everything that appears in the letter book suggests that he was a good 'company man', even when he was in poor health, as on Lady Day 1816, just before his death, when he wrote that, "*my health, [was] preventing me from viewing the mines, but the reviewing part was by my son and others so that the service suffered no loss*".<sup>11</sup>

In summing up, however, Thomas Dodds seems to have abused his position and a further example of this can be seen in documents in the Cumbria Record Office, where in the Smallcleugh account for 1797 we read:<sup>51</sup>

Thomas Dodds one years salary	£130
Ditto, gratuity	£ 20
Ditto sundry expenses	<u>£ 30 18s 8d</u>
Total	£180 18s 8d

To put this in perspective, in the same account Isa Hornsby received four shillings per week for 52 weeks, for attending at the Smallcleugh Engine, making a total of £10 8s 0d. He also received £1 11s 0d for laying rails and a further £3 12s 9d for sundry jobs at the engine. This brought his income for the year to £15 11s 9d – a lot less than Thomas Dodd's gratuity. In spite of this, Dodds' understanding and love of lead mining could not be bettered, and he had a long term vision for the Nenthead area, the results of which still survive today.

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**ABBREVIATIONS:**

Mul. Mulcaster papers. Wigan Public Library  
 Lt. Letter Book of quarterly reports from the district agent at Nenthead. N.R.O.  
 N.R.O. Northumberland Record Office.  
 L.L.C. Minute Books of the London Lead Company. N.R.O.  
 C.R.O. Cumbria Record Office.  
 D.R.O. Durham Record Office.

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Paper submitted - September 23rd 1998: J. Lawson,  
 36 Robb Place,  
 CASTLE DOUGLAS  
 Kirkcudbrightshire  
 DG7 1LW