

Fighting for Survival- The Durham Miners in Crisis and War 1919-45

Teesdale U3A Monthly Meeting

The speaker at the April meeting was Professor Rick Garside whose topic was the history of the Durham miners 1917 to 1960. Rick was widely travelled and had held academic posts in economic history at Universities in the UK as well as in New Zealand and Japan.

Rick started his research into the Durham miners following discussion with miners' leaders in the 1960s. One of the early and incidental outcomes was the establishment of the Beamish Museum following discussions with Frank Atkinson, who became Director.

During WW1, the state had taken over the running of the mines. These involved wages being set at a national level. After the war the variation in supply and demand meant there was no guarantee of regular payments, so the treasury agreed to extra payments being made (dole) as necessary, The King is reported as saying that 'it's cheaper than a revolution'.

Following the depression of 1921, the government could no longer support this policy and the industry was denationalised. The policy that wages would be the first call on profits could no longer be maintained and wages would now be on an equal footing with profits, with no minimum wage. In 1925, Stanley Baldwin stated that all workers (including the miners) should take a cut in wages.

Throughout this period there was a lack of capital investment in the industry which might have led to industrial revival, which then made it difficult for the industry to compete. The government was fearful that additional capital spending would cause inflation. A means tested insurance scheme was introduced and labour transfers between areas were encouraged. The latter were not successful in Durham and in addition the local boards refused to make reduced payments resulting in Commissioners being sent in.

The long-awaited revival did come in 1935 as the demand for coal, iron and steel increased as the nation prepared for WW2. After WW2 the Miners' Federation pressed for renationalisation. The government purchased the coal mines in 1947 and put them under the control of the National Coal Board. However, the earlier problems of poor mechanisation and an aging workforce made it difficult to improve productivity and the policy became one of managed decline. In Durham there was limited alternative employment.

When Edward Heath became PM he was a supporter of regional policy. It is said that when he was asked by a sceptical senior civil servant why this was necessary he took him to view a realistic painting of a miner hewing coal underground and said 'that's why'.

This was an excellent and detailed gallop through the issues involving the Durham miners over those years. We were left wondering whether there might have been a different outcome if the governments of the day had introduced a regional investment policy. Many of the problems still exist today.

The vote of thanks was given by incoming Chairman Tim Meacham who also thanked outgoing Chairman Alan Swindale for his work during the previous year.

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 24th May when the speaker will be Gerald Blake whose topic is 'The Surprising Geography of the Holy Land'.

For further information about U3A contact Ian Reid 01833 631304

Ian Reid