

Archive photographs in their context #1 - The 1893 miner's strike

We have a couple of photographs in our archive that date from the late nineteenth-century and, from the text that's been added to them, appear to relate to a miner's strike that took place in 1893.



These photographs show a group of local coal merchants idly sitting or standing around waiting for a delivery of coal and were taken at Kildwick goods yard, near the old Kildwick station. The upper one is annotated:

Coal Merchants Conversing. Miner's Strike 1893

While the lower one says:

Waiting for Coal. Collier's Strike 1893

So what's the story behind these ?

The 1893 miner's strike was triggered by a significant drop in the price of coal. In an attempt to maintain profits, colliery owners tried to introduced a 25% reduction in miners' wages. This was rejected by the Miners Federation who called for a "living wage". The result was a lock-out that went on for much of the summer.

The dispute came to a head at the Ackton Hall pit in Featherstone which was owned by Samuel Cunliffe Lister, Lord Masham. On September 7th a large crowd gathered at the pit head trying to prevent coal being loaded and transported to Lord Masham's textile works in Bradford. The mine manager sent word to the local police of impending trouble, asking for assistance. Unfortunately no local men were available as more than 200 officers were on duty at the Doncaster races and, instead, about 30 soldiers were called-in.

At the sight of troops the increasingly large crowd became angry and fires were started. By early evening, with a mob of around 2000 armed with sticks and throwing stones facing-down the soldiers, the local magistrate read the Riot Act instructing them to disperse within the hour.

About thirty minutes later, when the crowd did not retreat, the soldiers were given the order and fired two volleys into the crowd. Eight people were injured and two men were killed. Both of the dead were miners, but they were not thought to have been involved in any violent action.

Two separate inquests were held into the deaths. At the first, held in Wakefield, the jury took less than ten minutes to return a verdict of justifiable homicide on James Arthur Duggan. The second inquest, that of James Gibbs, was held in Featherstone itself. There the jury, which included three miners and at least six people who had been present outside the pit on September 7th, insisted on a far-wider inquiry. Amongst other witnesses, both the mine manager and the magistrate were called to give evidence and after deliberating for more than two hours the jury, despite being brow-beaten by the coroner, refused to return a justifiable homicide verdict – threatening, at one point to “stay here ‘till Christmas” rather than do so.

The text of the open verdict delivered by the jury included the following statements:

... James Gibbs was killed by a bullet wound inflicted by soldiers firing into a crowd ... and since James Gibbs was a peaceable man and took no part in any riotous proceedings the jury record their sympathy with the deceased's relatives and friends. The jury also find that if the whole district had not been deprived of police, who had been sent to the Doncaster races, there would have been no necessity to call the military at all ...

The lock-out/strike was finally settled by Government intervention, the first time a British government had become involved in an industrial dispute. In November, the miners agreed to return to work – with their original rate of pay guaranteed until February 1894 – and the government agreed to establish a Conciliation Board, consisting of equal numbers of miners and the mine-owners, chaired by a government official.

In July 1894 the mine-owners put their case to the Conciliation Board for an immediate 10% reduction in miners' wages – to which the miners eventually agreed, with proviso that this should be reviewed no later than January 1896. In January 1896 the owners called for a further 10% reduction and the Conciliation Board collapsed.

Further Information

http://www.wvmm.org/storie/storia.asp?id_storia=215&pagina=1

<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/history/id/1198219/>

<http://deceasedonlineblog.blogspot.co.uk/2013/07/1893-featherstone-massacre.html>

History of the Yorkshire Miners 1881-1918 by Caroline Baylies; publ. Routledge, 1993

<https://libcom.org/files/The%20featherstone%20massacre.pdf>