

THE CHARTERMASTER SYSTEM OF MINE MANAGEMENT IN SHROPSHIRE

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Abstract: From the mid 18th to the late 19th century, mining in the Shropshire coalfield was largely in the hands of chartermasters who contracted with owners to produce coal at a fixed price. Although owners paid for major developments such as shafts and drainage, the chartermasters were thereafter in charge of the actual mining operation and both employed the miners and supplied the necessary tools and equipment. In earlier years chartermasters had profitable sidelines in running shops and pubs but from the mid-nineteenth century became leaders of the local communities often serving as social organisers and local preachers.

INTRODUCTION

The Coalbrookdale Coalfield in Shropshire is a small, relatively isolated coalfield with a history of mineral exploitation going back well beyond the 14th Century and probably even to Roman times. The Coalfield is only about 650 ha in area but its geology including valuable seams of coal, ironstone, fireclay and limestone and its geography, generally hilly with fast flowing streams leading to a deep incised valley containing a navigable river, have given birth to a wide range of important heavy industries. Some of these industries became leaders in their particular fields in the 18th and 19th centuries, they included the smelting of iron, bridge and steam engine construction, and the manufacture of bricks, tiles and various forms of pipe.

Being rather isolated the area has gained a reputation for its own particular vocabulary, its own organisational, technical and social systems. Its people are well known for their sturdy independence.

Industrialisation came rather early to the coalfield following several important developments in iron production and use by local entrepreneurs. These included the first successful use of coke in iron smelting, the first usable iron cylinders and iron rails, first iron bridge of any size, first iron boat as well as some very early steam engine developments. These products demanded ever increasing volumes of local mineral and from the early years of the 18th to the early 19th century the area advanced rapidly. Following developments elsewhere however decline set in from the 1850s and in the 1880s the industries started to collapse. The next 50 years saw a rapid rundown in all basic industries and an escalation in emigration of the work force (Brown 1976).

MINE MANAGEMENT

The Chartermaster System of mine management progressed in a parallel manner. Prior to the eighteenth century the local mines had been operated by master-colliers, working men who had acquired a little capital and had taken a lease on a small area of coal or other mineral and employed only a few men. The mineral areas were leased from local landed gentry or from the monasteries. One of these, Buildwas, even gave its name to a system of not paying miners for delays and waiting time. Known as "Buildsases", this device continued for over 200 years after the monasteries were dissolved. In the smaller leased mines the method of mining used was

pillar and stall. As the demand for mineral increased however, this method gradually evolved into a longwall system, a system which it is believed was first developed in this area and it became the one predominantly used in Britain,

The chartermaster system was a method of contracting which grew up in response to the development of the longwall system and the general industrialisation of the district. The bigger companies demanded larger guaranteed outputs which in turn demanded larger numbers of men. The work of mining mineral became more specialised with different groups carrying out different tasks (Trinder 1973).

The land and mineral was owned and leased by a company and the company used a special group of skilled workers known as "the sinkers" to produce a shaft or adit and main roadways for a mine. Thereafter the actual production was put in the hands of superintendents or engineers employed by the company and chartermasters who held a contract to produce the mineral. The system is well described in a letter written by Mr J.P.G. Smith who accompanied the local Member of Parliament Sir A.H. Brown around a mine at Madeley in November 1869 (J.P.G. Smith to his wife, 5 November 1869. IGM. Coalbrookdale Archive Coll. Box 193). At the pit mouth these gentlemen were met by the owner (Captain Anstice) "together with the head underground superintendent and two of the chartermasters of the mine". Smith then stated:

In Shropshire the owner of the mine contracts with one or more men, who usually have themselves been originally working miners, to take in the coal at so much per ton, these men are called chartermasters and they in turn agree with working men at so much per day. Those chartermasters looking after the men see that they do a fair day's labour, by experience they soon arrive at the knowledge of how much coal under each set of special conditions the men can fairly excavate in 12 hours - This quantity, if a man be so hardworking or skilful, he can generally accomplish in 10 hours. This quantity is called a day's work, if the man be willing to work on for the remainder of the day he is paid extra.

Further, according to Smith,

The general superintendent is the engineer who looks after the safety of the system of ventilation, the machinery, the sufficiency of materials used in propping. The chartermasters

are expected to attend to the general safety of the miners, to supply tools, candles, and all the appliances of winning the coal. If anything in the mine should seem wrong to the men they could directly call the attention of the chartermaster to the same and if he did not see to it, they would call the owner who would send the chief superintendent. This is the outline of the management.

THE CHARTERMASTERS AS MANAGERS

The above outline covers all the main aspects of a system of management which lasted for about 150 years from the 1750s to 1900. A chartermaster would contract with a mine owner to get and raise a given quantity of mineral at an agreed price either at so much per ton or as a fixed sum for an agreed amount. The owner bore the charges of sinking shafts, of drainage, ventilation and haulage in the shaft and of removing the mineral from the mine. The chartermaster hired all the workmen and provided horses, wagons, tools and timber to be used underground. Most chartermasters operated on monthly contracts, so that their incomes and those of their workers could suffer violent fluctuation. The Inspector of Mines recorded that at some larger mines the chartermasters had to rotate from one shaft to another and from surface to underground work, all at monthly intervals.

Most chartermasters rose from the ranks of working men but the work often ran in families, brothers would frequently work a mine together and there are references to "chartermaster's trainees". For example, the 1881 Census lists William Watkiss age 36 and Miles Watkiss age 43 as chartermasters and Thomas Watkiss age 17 (son of Miles) as "chartermaster's trainee".

The chartermaster, or 'butty' as he was sometimes called after a similar system used in neighbouring Staffordshire, was historically considered to be "rich, fat and illiterate" - in fact the word "butty" often means a "great belly" or stomach. There is however much evidence to show that this was not normally the case particularly in the 19th century although the death of at least one chartermaster by murder is recorded in 1812. In the early years of the 19th century some chartermasters did keep inns and public houses and as reports concerning Chartism in Shropshire show, some also kept food or "tommy" shops and so manipulated their workers payments that they only had tokens which could only be spent in the chartermaster's own shop. There are some metal tokens in existence with on one side "G. Bulger, Gate Inn, St Georges, Chartermaster", and on the reverse "Pay 2 Pints". In 1894 Mr Bulger became an original member of the Oakengates Council so the tokens must have been issued in the second half of the 19th century. After the riots of the 1840s, which led to the Midlands' Mining Commission Report, all the principal mineowners tried to ensure that their chartermasters did not operate in this way and that all payments were made in cash at places well away from beer houses and shops. The riots of this period brought to light many grievances against the chartermasters. Some would not distribute coins only "notes" arguing that they had insufficient change or they made the workers wait for their payments but allowed them goods on credit. Others still used the "buildase" system, or gave half days, quarter days or "holy-days" all of which meant that the miner's income was reduced usually as a form of punishment or to keep in check miners who stepped out of line. The mine-owners of the area did try honestly to bring things to order but as the riots faded away the local landowners showed their true feelings. For example in a

letter from T.C. Eyton of Donnerville to the Lord Lieutenant, the Earl of Powis, dated 8th September 1842, Eyton explains,

Everything quiet at funeral of men knocked on head by police, constabulary will return to stations and specials will be dismissed. Men, for most part are at work for 3 or 4 days a week, hope they will shortly have a full week. Having now no colliers to wage war against [he had now] set to work at good earnest against the partridges (Anon 1844).

The Children's Employment Commission Report of 1842 also provides an insight into the relationship between the chartermaster and his workers. The Commissioners visited several pits and met the chartermasters and at one, (at Hills Mine, Madeley) they were accompanied by the owner's representative, two chartermasters and a "labouring collier" on a tour of the mine. The owners representative is reported as saying to the one chartermaster, "I say Jonas there are very few children in this mine, I think we have none under 10 or 11". But before Jonas could respond the collier said "Sir, my boy is only a little more than 4". Quickly the representative retorted "Well, I suppose you take good care of him, you take him down and up when you go yourself". Jonas, the chartermaster referred to here, was almost certainly the same Jonas Jones shown in the family tree later in this paper (Anon 1842).

The Commissioners' report also referred to the taking of boys aged under ten from the workhouse and "binding" them to chartermasters although they didn't think this had been done for some time. An alternative system had been to take them and bind them for seven years from the age thirteen or fourteen, by which means the chartermaster could expect to get three or four years "when the boy would do the work of a man and only the chartermaster would profit".

The Commissioners questioned the pit boys about their treatment. Isaac Tipton aged 16 of Wombridge Collieries said that if the workmen beat or thumped him he could complain to the chartermaster or butty but if the butty beat him there was nobody he could complain to. He admitted,

The men did not thump me very often, I was not very bad, only middling, I sometimes deserved it because I would not do as they told me. They sometimes thumped me with the fist and sometimes with the stick, they made marks, I seldom complained unless they gave it to me very bad.

Robert North, also of Wombridge said that the "butties do not beat big boys" and that they don't beat any boy "unless they deserve it". If a butty did allow undeserved beating "it was not likely that he would get more boys to work for him"

In some of the larger mines the chartermaster employed a foreman to support him, the foreman was called a "doggy" or occasionally a "reeve". The term "doggy" for a foreman persisted at the Shropshire mines until their closure in the 1960s and 70s.

THE CHARTERMASTER IN THE COMMUNITY

The chartermasters were very much part of the social system of the area, they were the organisers and often the leaders of the local community. They were an important part of the system since they were not so far removed in background or education from those they controlled that they did not command some respect. They were also persons who the

owners could trust because of their financial commitment to the mines. Not only did they provide the local skill in management and technique but also much of the financial risk fell on the chartermaster (Trinder 1973). As well as organising the working miners' labour the chartermaster often organised their out-of-work activities. Recreations like bull baiting are recorded in Broseley as being organised by chartermasters and throughout the Coalfield the chartermasters were an important part of the religious life. The Methodist societies were often led by chartermasters and their organising ability was used in the building of many churches. The Fletcher Methodist Church at Madeley, for example, had at least three chartermasters amongst its founders in 1842. Many also became influential Sunday School teachers and local preachers, some surprisingly running beerhouses alongside their churchwork and prayer meetings. Some of the chartermasters were also quite paternalistic, for example, after giving details of his family in the 1851 Census, William Lloyd age 56, a Chartermaster of Madeley, added "employs 22 men, 12 boys and 15 girls".

PEAK YEARS AND DECLINE

From at least the 17th century, mines in the coalfield have been named after their operator. In the earlier days this was almost certainly the name of the master collier but later it was used for the chartermaster or pairs of chartermasters at the smaller mines. As an example the oldest surviving mine plans from the Severn Valley had the inscription "Mr Cages Insetts" on it when published about 1620 ("The Plott" of Broseley c.1621 by Samuel Parson, SRO. 1224/1/23), whilst the probate inventory of Jane Hartshorne in 1737 refers to John Howle's Pit, Wallett's Pit, Price's Pit, amongst many others (Trinder and Cox 1980).

During the 18th and 19th century the major local industrial combines were being developed and all operated a large number of mines. Many of these had formerly been under the control of individuals with leases from the landowners. It is said that there were about 300 on Earl Gower's estate in the north and east of the coalfield alone and these were operated under a form of chartermaster system. In 1765 Earl Gower's Lilleshall Company introduced a chartermasters' ledger system for the proper regulation of the pits and a book for 1785 to 1803 still survives. The chartermasters were required to enter all transactions, on one side debits are shown (paid fortnightly) including money spent on buckets, shovels, candles, chains, ropes and even coffins (one for "poor old Joe, killed in the pit", cost ten shillings). On the other side were the credits. This Company's chartermasters received a basic wage plus the balance of the monthly account based on the selling price at which he undertook to produce the coal (Gale and Nicholls 1979).

In the south eastern part of the coalfield the chartermaster system was extensively employed by the Coalbrookdale, Madeley Wood, Madeley Court, Old Park and Stirchley Companies. In Madeley many disused pit sites are still known by the name of the chartermasters of the mid 19th century, Tom Rowe's Pit, Holmes and Dainties (partnership), Fletcher and Jones' Pits etc. Local Directories list many of the chartermasters. In 1879 Kelly's Directory lists twenty five chartermasters in Madeley alone including many of the same family, for example, two Clarkes, three Edwards and four Guys. Many of these lived in groups of company houses, for example, the Madeley Wood Company provided houses in Park Street, Madeley. The census of 1881 shows the situation

clearly (CM = chartermaster)-

Henry Edwards	No 25 Park St	age 44	CM in iron mine
Benjamin Rogers	No 35 Park St	age 63	CM in coal mine
Leonard Perks	No 27 Park St	age 52	CM in coal mine
Thomas Rowe	No 28 Park St	age 24	CM in coal mine
William Rowe	No 30 Park St	age 62	CM in coal mine

The last two are shown in the 1879 Directory as Wm Rowe and Son. Of the nine chartermasters shown in the census in 1881 as living in Madeley the youngest is 24 years, the oldest is 63, the average age is 49 years.

During the 1870s the chartermaster system was probably at its zenith but there were clouds on the horizon. The chartermasters felt threatened by the tightening grip of legislation on the management of mines and it was probable this together with the collapse of the iron industry at the turn of the century which led to the system's demise.

In 1873 however the local newspaper, the *Wellington Journal*, in the issue of May 24 contained the item "Anniversary of the Shropshire Charter Masters' Association", it continued,

On Saturday last the members of this association celebrated their anniversary by dining together at the Oxford Arms Hotel, where a sumptuous repast was provided by Mr Corbett. The large room was crowded to excess, nearly the whole of the members being present. After the withdrawal of the cloth, Mr E. Ferriday, the president of the association, was unanimously elected to the chair, and Mr G. Fletcher of the Madeley Wood Colliery, to the vice-chair. The president remarked that the first part of the business would be to call upon the secretary to read over the accounts of the society. The secretary stated that the past year had been one of great prosperity, as they had been able to pay a dividend to the members of even more than they had paid in during the year and had in reserve at the present time more than £100 to meet future exigencies.

From remarks made it appeared that the society was not formed for the purpose of taking undue advantage of the men, but for the protection of the members from any unjust prosecution in connection with the Mines Act. It was deemed desirable to retain the services of a solicitor and J. Leake Esq., who was present by invitation, was unanimously chosen. The officers of the different collieries, which embrace Lilleshall, (Priorslee and Donington Wood), Old Park, Stirchley, Madeley Court, Madeley Wood, and Coalbrookdale, were unanimously re-elected. Mr Ferriday was requested to retain his office as President, Mr Hopley was re-elected treasurer, and Mr J. Howells secretary for another year; after which the usual loyal and patriotic toasts were duly honoured and in succession a host of others, which drew forth speeches from the gentlemen whose names were appended. The greatest unanimity prevailed throughout the meeting.

THE LAST YEARS

But such success was not to last. In 1891 the Madeley Wood Company, for example, ceased to use the chartermaster System at its principal mines, all control being passed to the mine management. The Directories show that the number of chartermasters had fallen to half what it had been in the 1870s, and many of these were at the smaller mines or retained the title in retirement. A few still worked for the

