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Pit Banners: icons or lifeblood of the mining community's culture?

The purpose of this paper is not to answer the question posed in the title but to tell the story of the banner in a simple manner and leave it to you to make your own decision on the role of the pit banner.

Banners have historically been used to mark a place to rally to. On the battlefields they served to guide the soldiers towards their respective camps and were paraded as symbols of victory. Banners have been paraded and used for decoration of altars and gravesides. It is thought that the mining banner is derived from the guilds banner. Guilds represented various crafts and trades and were the fore runners of trades unions. The Guilds banners were paraded at various pageants and public entertainments where the Guilds helped organise these performances.

Around the middle of the nineteenth century pit banners were used to unify and rally the communities in the coalfields, although there are no longer any working mines in the area the attendance at the Durham Miners Gala is increasing and the banner still has a pivotal role in the life of a mining community. The banner was a public display of a cry for justice. Life was cheap and the death toll in explosions and other disasters was horrendous. Miners were becoming more educated and less insular, although there was always a strong spirit of community in mining areas and this included women. The Big Meeting was an outward display of the increasing confidence and solidarity amongst miners. While this discussion will be based primarily on the banners of Durham and Northumberland area it acknowledges that many more areas with a similarly proud tradition exist and some of these frequently make the journey to be part of the 'Big Meeting'.

The first Durham Miners Gala was held in 1871. The lodge banner would be paraded through the village and then make its way to what is known as the 'Big Meeting' to be paraded through the streets of Durham, the banners are usually preceded by a brass band. Banners are blessed at Durham Cathedral on the day of the 'Big Meeting'. This may include new banners, replications, and existing banners may be re-blessed. Generally there were three banners and their attendant bands attending the Cathedral but recent years have witnessed more than three. The parading of the banner is an emotional time and as each band and banner passes by the hotel where the invited speakers are gathered on the balcony they halt while the band plays a couple of tunes. The band and banner then make their way down to the Racecourse on the riverside. A black crepe drape adorns the banner if any miner had been killed at the colliery in the previous year.

The perimeter of the field on the racecourse is festooned with the rich tapestries of the banners telling the history of mining communities. The social concerns, political allegiances, and cultural currents are woven into the fabric of these proud flags. Taken in chronological order the icons used on the banners can be seen to reflect the changing influences within and across communities.

A number of themes run as a constant throughout the banners. Unity amongst the workers, universal brotherhood, all men are brethren, and an injury to one is an injury to all are the most dominant themes. Others include; miners rights, welfare provision, and social justice. It has been said that although the miners have a reputation of militancy the motto was 'defence not defiance' even during the 1984 strike. There is however some evidence to show that currently there is a feeling of fighting for justice in the aftermath of the strike and the banner is pivotal in focussing efforts on this. Portraits of favoured political leaders and significant figures within the mining community figure on many banners. Red Hill, the miners' union hall and Conishead Priory the convalescent home for miners (opened 1930) appear on banners frequently from the early 1900's onwards.

There is a feeling that the banner belongs to the community, not the Miners' Lodge. Banners too old or frail to be carried are usually laid up in community centres, churches, working men's clubs etc. With disasters occurring with regular monotony those outside mining began to ask questions and they took the side of the miner rather than that of the 'establishment'.

Early banners were generally allegorical and often had a biblical feel to them. The Methodist church was often closely involved with the miners. Notable figures in the struggle for justice and the improvement of working terms and conditions came from the church. One such person was A.J Cook, an agent and secretary of the miners' federation, active during the 1926 strike. He had been a lay preacher in the Methodist church and was an eloquent speaker and well respected by the men. The close involvement of the church may account for the religious and biblical aspect to the iconography used in the banners.

The religious tone and depiction can be seen even when the topic is deeply political. A prime example of this is the banner of Clara Vale. This banner shows the popular theme of '*Workers of all lands unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains*', an adaptation of a quote from Marx, and yet the pictorial representation is very stylised and biblical. The combination of political statement with biblical icon may be a reflection of the intertwining influences of church and workers struggle or the limitations of the available images in the banner maker's catalogue. Tuthill made banners for other organisations including; orange lodges in Northern Ireland, temperance societies, and Sunday schools.

Banners have been used in demonstrations to publicly state the cause being fought for. Indeed the Durham Big Meeting has its origins in the 1831 Black Fell meeting of Miners where the streets were filled with miners and banners with slogans telling of the current struggle between miners and their employers. The tradition of publicising struggles through slogans on banners is carried on in the pit banners. The fight for nationalisation, the cancelling of the yearly bond, and miners' welfare rights and provision are some of the themes depicted on banners.

The majority of banners have portraits of political leaders or miners' activists. Most of these are only featured after their death due to the feeling that Ramsay McDonald, once featured on banners, had betrayed the miners and their cause. His portrait was removed from the banners which had borne it. The 'live' portraits include; Harold Wilson, Manny Shinwell, Kier Hardie, A.J Cook, and Tony Benn. A direct insight into the allegiances of mining communities is possible through an examination of the portraits placed on the banners.

Parading the banner at the Big Meeting was a source of community pride before the strike of 1984. After the defeat of the miners the numbers began to dwindle and up and down the country other miners' gala's ceased to be celebrated. This was due closure of the mines and not a loss of interest in carrying on the tradition. Durham Gala continued although the numbers attending fell dramatically. There was talk of Red Hill the Durham Miners Association hall being sold and hard times were experienced. A generous donation from a New Zealand millionaire kept the gala going through the hard times. While the money will have helped it must be remembered that the stalwart miners and their families who continued attend the Big Meeting during the post strike years played the most important part in keeping the Gala going. No amount of money in the world can generate the enthusiasm and loyalty at grass roots level to keep a tradition alive. The combination of the concrete faith of one person on the other side of the world and the loyalty and determination of the communities kept the Durham Big Meeting alive.

The increase in attendance at the Big Meeting is accompanied by the massive resurgence in pride in the heritage of coming from a mining community. The Gala organiser notes that there isn't a week goes by without him being asked to unveil a new memorial or new banner. The replication of banners and the production of new banners is phenomenal. All over the area members of mining communities are coming together to form groups dedicated to raising the money to replace their banner. This year a total of seven banners were unfurled for their first outing at the Big Meeting. Two of these were unveiled by Tony Benn and were not replications of existing banners but new banners and Dave Guy President and Dave Hopper General Secretary of the DMA have their portraits on the Coxhoe banner.

A group who had been successful in raising money and gaining funds to have their banner renewed reported that they get frequent calls from other groups for advice. They approach other groups in the village to join with them and work together for the whole community and note that they have had a small amount of success but would like more people to become actively involved, although there is a huge amount of support for them in the village. Not content with renewing the banner the group remained together and are actively seeking funds and raising money to; open a mining museum, provide community resources within the village, hold a celebratory picnic in the park, preserve the mining heritage and memory, and send a message to Thatcher 'we are all here'. The group notes that the heritage they want to preserve includes:

- 'Mining community is a community on its own and never match that in world'
- People have gone and moved therefore existing community is not interested.
- 'How many kids now have seen coal?'
- Still live in community but grand kids won't know what it was.
- Want to tell them what it was about and the community is very special, it was your family, every body knew everybody else.
- Want proper history, peoples history, the truth, we have to help keep it alive and no one will tell them what its about and how it has changed.
- 'Dadding clothes off the wall'
- Memories of sharing pit boots with brother on opposite shifts, waiting for one brother to come up in the cage and get his boots of him to go down onto the next shift.

In 2002 a research team spoke to 35 people who had come to the Big Meeting with a banner. The purpose was to find out why they had brought their banner and why they thought the Gala was enjoying increased popularity. One of the questions asked was 'What does the banner mean to you?' Pride and tradition were the overwhelming responses. Tradition was frequently qualified as the tradition of the fight for justice and of unity amongst mining communities. The responses included;

- 'Nothing personally but an association with the band + the community, feel proud'
- 'Proud of banner, Marx, Lenin, Kier Hardie, believe in their values '
- 'Fellowship, identity, representation, see people who you worked with years ago'
- 'Tradition, pride, men work for, teamwork, reliance on each other in the pit and community'
- 'For the village unity, regeneration of village area'
- 'peoples rights, icon of the past'
- 'Lifeline to Fishburn, honour'

No dry retelling of the story of the banner can ever fully capture its richness and complexity and now we leave you to draw your own conclusions as to the role of the banner in for a mining community.

References

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