

EXPLOSIONS, STRIKES, RIOTS & ROYALTY: my relative's life in the Durham Coalfield

When my late father, Jack Heckels, retired from the National Coal Board in 1973, after working for forty-five years in the coal industry, his colleagues presented him with a facsimile copy of "A History of the Coal, Coke & Coal Fields in the North of England" by W. Fordyce originally published in 1860. He was fascinated to see references to "Mr. Heckels" working in the area in the mid-nineteenth century and wondered if we might be related. When, a few years later, I began researching the family history I was eager to find if Richard might fit into our family tree. I soon discovered that he was my father's second cousin three times removed but the story turned out not to be just a tale of our family history but a fascinating insight into life in the Durham coalfield.

Richard Heckels was born on 13th September 1818 at Chirton, North Shields, Northumberland, the first son of George Heckels and Rebecca Dawson. In 1829 his father was appointed as viewer (chief engineer) to the Hibernian Mining Company in Ireland. The family moved to Drumglass, County Tyrone where they eventually completed their family of fourteen children. It is not known how long Richard remained there but by 1841 the family had returned to North Shields and Richard had already followed his father into the coal industry. He must have been remarkably talented as by 1839, at the age of only 19, he was appointed the viewer of Thornley colliery, Co. Durham.

The Chartists

Around this time great unrest was brewing in the coalfield following the establishment of the Chartist movement. In 1832 the Great Reform Act had been passed abolishing "rotten boroughs" and granting the vote to male property owners. It was followed in 1834 by the Poor Law Amendment Act which established the workhouse system. These acts did nothing to improve the life of the disenfranchised working class, who felt they had been betrayed by the middle classes, and led to the establishment of the Chartist movement with the aim of giving working men political influence. In 1838 a group of working men led by William Lovett and six MPs published the "Peoples Charter" which demanded Universal suffrage (for men), equal electoral districts, abolition of the requirement that MPs be property owners, payment for MPs, a secret ballot and annual General Elections. This led to nationwide mass meetings and occasional outbreaks of violence.

It was during this time of unrest that Richard was appointed as viewer at Thornley. Following the formation of the Durham Charter association in 1838, many miners became members, with Thornley miners being particularly militant. At the time of Richard's arrival the colliery workshops were involved in the illicit making of pikes which were sold to other villages. In July 1839 the leaders of the Thornley Chartists led their men behind the pit banner to a rally

at Pittington Hill which was addressed George Julian Harney, the delegate to the Chartist Northern Convention. Harney was subsequently arrested and charged with making seditious speeches. When the news reached Thornley the men in the workshops stopped work and took over the colliery engine house. They then hijacked a locomotive and rode the train to a Chartist rally in Sunderland. The colliery remained closed for a week and on 13th July a rally was held at Fatfield where pikes were openly distributed. On returning to Thornley the Chartists surrounded a public house which had been occupied by colliery officials. The police arrived and read the riot act. The crowd attacked the police and beat them with their own truncheons. They were saved from further harm when Richard Heckels arrived with a band of men he had recruited. On the following day a company of the 98th Regiment of Foot arrived in the village, peace was temporarily restored and the pit returned to work.

Thornley Disaster

In the late afternoon of Thursday 5th August 1841 an explosion occurred at Thornley which had previously been regarded as one of the best ventilated in the neighbourhood. Most of the hewers had finished their shift but other workers were still below ground. While crowds gathered at the pithead for news Richard, his deputy and an overman descended the shaft and found eight killed and four seriously wounded, one of whom later died. Later in the day Richard and Mr. Seymour the viewer of Wingate Colliery descended to carry out an investigation found that a ventilation trap door had been left open at the site of the explosion.

The explosion made national news, being reported in the Times the following week. It gave details of the victims and tragedies which had struck families in the village. George Ord, age seventeen, was an orphan who had gone to sea as a youth but returned to land for a "safer" job. Brothers Jonathan and George Graham, aged sixteen and seventeen, were putters, whose job was to push the coal tubs in the low seams. They were the principal breadwinners of a family of thirteen who had moved to Thornley only a few months earlier. Another family the Gardeners also lost two sons, Jonathan a putter age sixteen and Robert aged only nine, a trapper whose job was to open and close a trapdoor responsible for maintaining ventilation. Robert also had a twin brother who had not been at work due to an accident the previous week but his father and older brother had been working that day in another area of the mine. A local reporter visited the family and found the bodies of the boys laid out on a bed and their distraught mother who was heavily pregnant. She had prepared celebratory refreshments in anticipation of the forthcoming birth which were now providing for the wake instead.

The inquest was held the following day. The deaths were not caused by the explosion itself but by burns or due to suffocation caused by "after damp", a lack of oxygen following the explosion. Richard Heckels and other witnesses were of the opinion the accident was caused by young Robert Gardner failing to shut the trapdoor that he was in charge of, leading to a build-up of gas. He or someone else then lit a candle (a normal occurrence in the mine at that time) and the explosion occurred. Richard

said that it was common practice at the time for candles to be used in mines because of deficiencies in the Davey safety lamp which gave out a poor light and was liable to be extinguished when moved or placed in a draft. The jury returned a verdict that they "were accidentally killed by an accumulation of inflammable gas" but "by how or what means such an explosion was caused, the jurors cannot say". The newspapers reported that the jurors were of the opinion that the accident had arisen from neglect at the trapdoor, but they deemed it best to return a general verdict (avoiding placing the blame on young Robert). The funerals of the victims were held at Kelloe that evening with several hundred people attending. The incident led to Richard's lifelong concern with mine safety and, in particular, the use of safety lamps.

It was at this time that Richard returned to Tyneside in May 1843 for his marriage to Dorothy Nicholson at Christchurch Tynemouth. She was the daughter of a master mariner who had died when she was only a year old. They returned to live at Thornley House.

The Strike

However unrest in the Durham coalfield had continued. The miners were forced to sign a yearly bond which laid down the legal conditions regulating their employment. While some owners were flexible and overlooked misdemeanours such as absenteeism and short weight of coal, others were not, including the owners of Thornley colliery, John Gully and partners. Gully was a flamboyant character who had been a champion prize-fighter, successful

race horse owner, racing manager for the Prince of Wales and former MP for Pontefract. Gully and his



John Gully By Joseph Brown - Engraving by Joseph Brown, 1860, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=35187881>

partners were not sympathetic to the men's complaints and instructed Richard to apply the rules rigorously. During 1842 the Thornley miners were instrumental in the formation of the Northumberland and Durham miner's union and on 23rd November 1843 they called a strike at the pit. Richard Heckels fined all the men a half-crown and ordered them to make up the lost day by working on their next day off. The men continued the strike so Richard invoked the 1823 "Master and Servant Act" which required workers to obey terms of their contract with infringements subject to punishment at law. Warrants were issued for the arrest of sixty-eight men. A special court was convened in Durham where the owners agreed that the terms of the

miners bond were harsh but argued that the men had entered into it freely and should therefore follow its terms. The men were represented by their solicitor, William Prowling Roberts, a chartist and early supporter of trade unions who became known as the miner's lawyer. Under questioning by Mr. Roberts, Richard agreed that a man could be fined as much as 22 shillings in one week for underweight wagons and stone in the coal. The miner's case was based on the fact that the weighing machine was faulty and was uncertificated. Roberts informed the magistrates that he would call three hundred witnesses who would say that impossible for them to earn a living under the bond and they would rather go to jail than work under its terms.

Faced with the prospect of hearing the same testimony repeated over again the magistrates adjourned the case overnight in the hope that negotiations could produce a resolution. However the next day Roberts reported that no agreement could be reached with Mr. Heckels and the owners and the case proceeded with the men giving evidence all day. Eventually the magistrates found the men guilty and they were sentenced to six weeks in the Durham house of correction. However Roberts then travelled to London and obtained a writ of habeas corpus. The case was transferred to the Queen's Bench division; the men

were acquitted and returned to Thornley in triumph.

Their victory led the miners to become more confident, further unrest continued and in 1844 a mass meeting of Northumberland and Durham miners was called. On 2nd March around 20,000 men walked up to thirty miles through heavy snow to the meeting at Shandon's Hill near Birtley and rejected the terms of the bond. The men appealed for support to the forthcoming National Union Conference in Glasgow. However men from other areas were fearful for their own jobs and the Conference rejected support for a strike. The Northumberland and Durham miners then terminated their agreement with the owners on 5th April 1844 and called a strike. Another meeting of the men was held at Shandon's Hill, attended by up to 40,000 men who unanimously supported the strike which laid idle every pit in the two counties. Much bitterness ensued. The owners evicted families from their tied cottages, the military were called in to many villages and families ended up living in camps close to the villages. In an attempt to keep mines



Pitmen encamped - Illustrated London News 1844

operating the owners the owners recruited men from other coalfields, particularly Wales, and also unskilled Irish navvies.

Many local shopkeepers having lost their main custom were sympathetic to the men and offered them credit. However at Seaham the Marquis of Londonderry wrote to the shopkeepers ordering them to refrain from giving any supplies or credit to the men or their families, with the threat of him withdrawing all future custom. The strike continued for weeks with increasing hardship for the men and their families, but a series of mass meetings on Newcastle Town Moor, Durham Sands and at Bishop Auckland reaffirmed their support. Eventually after eighteen weeks men started to return to work under the old terms. Eventually at a series of meetings at individual collieries men voted to return to work and the strike ended. Much resentment had been stoked up between the local men and their Welsh and Irish replacements and riots occurred with the army again being called in. Even the young sons of the Welsh men who had been acting as putters and trappers were attacked by their local equivalents.

Another Explosion

Soon after the return, on Saturday 28th September 1844 one of the worst disasters in the Durham coalfield occurred. An explosion of fire damp occurred at Haswell Colliery causing the death of ninety-five men and boys. An inquest was held the following Monday and despite their previous dispute Richard Heckels was called as an expert witness on behalf of the men of the colliery. His evidence was that one of the men's Davy lamps had the oil plug removed,

probably to top up the lamp of another man. He stated he was of the opinion the Davey was the best lamp available, safer than the "Geordie" lamp. However removal of the plug was dangerous since it was believed that tilting of the lamp to pour oil allowed the flame to escape through the gauze. He later demonstrated that when the oil level was low the flame would pass through the wick into the oil reservoir. If the plug was removed the flame could escape and explode inflammable gas. The miners were in the habit of removing the plug to assisting each other with oil. After his evidence the practice was forbidden and no more such incidents occurred.

Family Life

Soon afterwards, Richard and Dorothy had their first child, Mary Jane, born in February 1845 at Thornley. However Dorothy suffered from ill health, she returned to Tynemouth to be looked after by her family but died there on 28th January 1852, the cause of death was given as "disease of the heart". After her funeral at Christchurch she was not buried there but in the cemetery attached to Tynemouth Priory. Her grave, marked by a large obelisk, still stands in a prominent position at on the promontory. Left with a six year old daughter Richard soon remarried. In December 1853 he married Miss Mary Fothergill, at Trinity Church, Darlington where Mary had been owner and headmistress of a private school for girls. She was a daughter of the late Joseph Fothergill, a member of a wealthy ship-owning family from Horton, Northumberland. In the next six years they lived at Bunker Hill, Newbottle where their family grew with the birth of daughters Dora Ann, Rosina Gertrude, Ada Florence and

Richard's only son Charles Frederick born in August 1857.

The Earl of Durham and Saving Lambton Castle

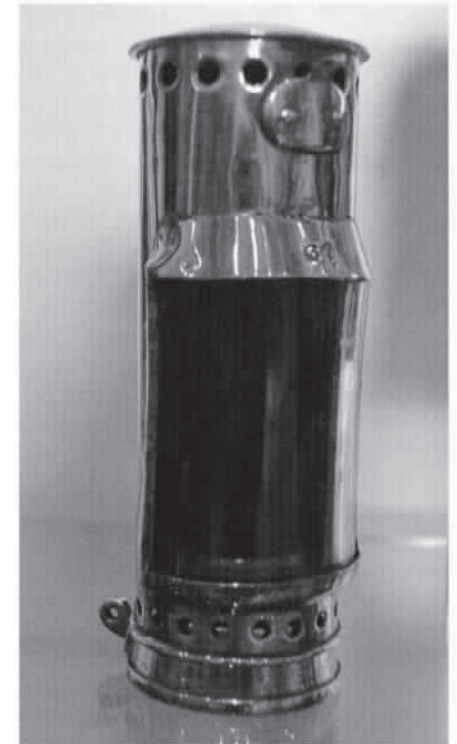
During this time Richard's career prospered. He became a member of the North of England Institute of Mining Engineers and in 1854 he was appointed the Chief Viewer to the mines owned by the Earl of Durham, Lord Lambton. In May 1857 the Prince of Wales (the future Edward VII) visited Newcastle and the following morning travelled by train to Fence Houses Station and by carriage to Houghton Colliery where he was met by Richard Heckels who conducted the party on a tour. Newspapers reported that they descended the shaft and travelled to the workings in coal tubs where the prince hewed some coal. From that time the area of the mine became known as "Princes Way".

After his appointment Richard was asked by the Earl for his advice concerning his home, Lambton Castle. Following enlargement of the castle subsidence occurred and it was in danger of collapse; the original castle having been built over old coal workings. Richard descended the old engine shaft and discovered that the seams had collapsed because the pillars of coal left to support the roofs were not thick enough to support the increased weight of the building. He began an operation to fill the old workings with solid brickwork, a process which took six years using almost ten million bricks at a cost of over £33,500. The castle was saved and the Earl engaged the famous architect John Dobson, to supervise the refurbishment of the interior. During this time Dobson

began to suffer ill health and was unable to continue his work. Richard Heckels took over and directed the work to completion. To celebrate the completion the Earl invited members of the Northern Union of the Mechanics Institute to the castle, where Richard presented a paper describing the work carried out.

The Miner's Lamp

After experiencing explosions early in his career Richard maintained a lifelong interest in mine safety and in particular the problems associated with the use of the Davy Safety Lamp, which was very effective in detecting fire damp but gave problems when moved around or placed in a strong draft. The breeze could push the flame in the Davy lamp so that could touch the gauze and pass through



causing an explosion. He spent many years experimenting and produced a modified design in which the lantern was placed in an additional container. Companies such as Laidler of Newcastle produced lamps to this design which, as the container resembled a miner's tin can, became known as "the tin can lamp".

Later years and another strike

Richard appears to have begun to suffer from ill health which may explain him relinquishing his role with the Earl and taking an appointment as the viewer of Monkwearmouth colliery in 1867. However life was certainly no easier for him. By 1869 there was a national depression with the coal trade particularly suffering and prices fell. To reflect the situation, when a new bond became due the Durham owners reduced pay by 10-20% and accepting the situation the men signed. However in March 1896, after four weeks of the new bond, men at Monkwearmouth struck saying that they could not live under the new terms. This produced another standoff between the owners and the men with Richard Heckels and the company director, Mr Stobart, at the centre. Another court case ensued with four men charged under the Master and Servant act. The magistrates again enforced the terms of the bond but gave a two week cooling-off period. On reconvening the owners agreed to the cancellation of the bond and the four men vacated their tied houses. At a number of meetings on Roker beach the men reinforced their demands particularly that their pay returned to the rates before the introduction of the new bond. The Newcastle Journal noted that the strike was unusual for the calm

and orderly spirit of the men, the forbearance and consideration of the masters and the conciliatory bearing of Mr. Heckels" and suggested that if "the most intelligent of the pitmen met Mr. Heckels in a friendly conference ---- we should have great confidence in the success of the experiment". Eventually the owners conceded the wage demand and the men resumed work on 27th July 1869. This success increased the resolve of the men and in subsequent months a series of meetings were held mainly in the Market Tavern Durham, which led to the formation of the Durham Miners Association and building of its imposing headquarters, the building still standing on North Road, Durham City.

Final years and legacy

By 1871 Richard was living in St. Bede's Terrace, Sunderland. His household contained not only his immediate family but other relatives, including his widowed sister Alice and family, two nephews John Ramsay, a mining engineer and William Heckels, an apprentice mining engineer. However he suffered failing health and was unable to work for two years before his death on 24th February 1877. The cause of death was congestive heart disease. In his will he left his wines and spirits to his wife Mary, with the remainder of the estate in trust to her and to be divided among his children on her death with his only son, Charles Frederick, receiving a double share. He empowered the trustees to continue his investments in collieries, shipping, farming and manufacturing business, the estate being valued at the substantial sum of £35,000. Soon afterwards Mary sold the house and moved south

to Bournemouth with unmarried daughters Ada and Dora. Mary Jane married John William Davy, a banker. Rosina Gertrude married William Henry Langley Browne, a surgeon, who became chairman of the council of the British Medical Association, a member of the General Medical Council and a life governor of Birmingham University. Charles Frederick emigrated to Canada where he became a successful farmer, mill owner and sheriff of the town of Lisgar, Manitoba. After Mary's death Ada and Dora became wealthy women, but Ada died at the age of forty-three while they were on a trip to Florence. Dora became a philanthropist and was a particular supporter of the Women's Suffrage movement. In addition to her financial contributions she became secretary of the local branch of the National Society for Women's Suffrage (suffragists). During WWI when the campaign was in abeyance she purchased a hotel in Bournemouth and has it refurbished to accommodate returning wounded soldiers.

Despite their long family tradition none of Richard Heckels' children or grandchildren became involved in coal mining. However it is likely he supported his sister Ann and family. When their family were living in Ireland Ann married William Ramsay a native of Newburn. They returned to England where William became viewer at Blaydon Burn Colliery but died in 1854, leaving Ann a widow with seven children. Probably with Richard's support, Ann, her children and their families all emigrated to the coalfields of the USA, initially around LaSalle County, Illinois. The sons all became involved in owning and operating mines including

George Heckels Ramsay a mine owner in Oskaloosa, Iowa who was succeeded by his son John Heckels Ramsay. After her emigration Ann became the matriarch of a branch of the Ramsay family in the USA with several hundred known descendants and the Heckels name was associated with the coal trade for at least three further generations.

Sources

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If you are changing your postal address or your email address...

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