The Lancashire Pit Brow Lasses and the campaign to remove women from surface labour 1842 -87

By Angela V John

The exclusion of females from underground colliery labour in the 1842 Mines and Collieries Act led before long to the natural concomitant of a demand for prohibiting their work on the surface. The issue was raised in Parliament in 1872 and then urged with greater force by Ellis Lever a Cheshire coal contractor. From 1883 onwards Lever, with official union endorsement of exclusion, urged the removal of women from such apparently unsavoury work.

The controversy reached its height in 1886-7 when attempts were made to incorporate exclusion clauses into the proposals for Liberal colliery legislation in 1886 and then into the Conservative Bill of the following year..

In retaliation meetings on behalf of these pit brow lasses (known in Cumberland as screen lasses and in South Wales as Tip girls) were organised in districts which employed them.

In West Lancashire an effective pressure group emerged. Based at Pemberton, South West of Wigan, it was led by the Vicar Harry Mitchell and ably assisted by Mrs. Park, wife of the Mayor of Wigan. A series of meetings were organised in defence of the girls - 200 of them for example, attended at a Bryn meeting in 1886 - and on the 17th May 1887, 23 pit women (20 from Lancashire and 3 from Cumberland) went on a deputation to the Home Secretary to protest against the threat to their work.

They were favourably received and the press espoused their cause. A test division taken after a protracted debate on the subject on 23rd June ensured that Parliament would not interfere. The eventual act of 16 September 1887 allowed all females over 12 to continue to work at collieries.

Although the fate of only 4,131 females (or 4.49% of the total surface colliery force) was at stake in 1886, the cause became a testing ground for the survival of outdoor female labour.

The colliery women epitomised for many the ultimate in degradation and the struggle became embroiled in conflicts beyond the sphere of coal mining. Interests concerning the rights of women (the early Suffragists resented the attack by an all male Parliament) and the liberty of the individual (the National Association for the Defence of Personal Rights invited 3 pit women from the Deputation to their 1887 A.G.M.) were coalesced in this one cause. At a time when the avenues of female employment at last seemed to be expanding, it was deemed retrogressive to prohibit them in this way.

All who worked at the surface of coal mines were included in the attacks. Their jobs demanded varying degrees of skill. Not only did women help at the brow or top of the pit helping unload and run or thrutch tubs of coal from the shaft entrance to the shoots but they also worked at the screens sorting coal. Others acted as greasers and pointswomen. There was also work to be done in filling, trimming and moving heavy waggons. The women and girls were chiefly employed in the coalfields of East Scotland, Shropshire, South Staffordshire, Cumberland and South Wales. The area of greatest employment was West Lancashire which accounted for 31.974 of the total female surface labour force.

The womens' work was criticised on 3 major grounds. Firstly it was alleged that their employment was physically injurious and dangerous. In this and other criticisms accounts on both sides vary so much that it is sometimes difficult to believe that both groups were considering the same people 4

In assessing the validity of the arguments one has also to beware of the assumptions of common values made by middle class commentators on both sides of the controversy who probably knew little about actual working and living conditions. There were also frequent generalisations and simplifications. Whilst it is true that some work required considerable physical exertion and exposure to the elements - for example helping unload tubs or pushing waggons - other work such as being a tally-taker or number counter was far less exacting. Conditions varied enormously from pit to pit. Many of the visitors saw only the larger, more advanced concern's such as Fletcher and Burrow's Atherton Colliery with covered brows and modern screens.

Although some claimed that the work could lead to illness, it was often admitted in the same breath that the women were unfeminine, because they were too strong: A.J. Munby, the self-styled champion of female labour provided some insight into the state of their health and although his constant equation of muscular strength with happiness has to be treated with some caution, his information about these 'Muscular Maids' is valuable since it was based on 30 years observation by a keen investigator who was neither a colliery official nor a government reporter. Many of Munby's friends were ex pit women over 60, still enjoying good health.

It was also argued that the womens' work was dangerous. By the 1880's the installation of self-acting fences at the mouth of shafts had at least reduced the high proportion of shaft accidents of the 1850's. But fatal accidents still occurred,3. many of them being caused by waggons. Out of 114 known deaths of British colliery women between 1852-90, 34% were caused in this way. The exacting work of moving these waggons was finally recognised in the 1887 Act which did make the concession of forbidding boys, girls and women to move them. They could, however, still operate skips or tubs.

Dangers existed in a number of surface jobs but were not exclusively restricted to females. The work was dangerous for all, particularly the young of both sexes. In only one sphere was the criterion of sex really applicable in considering the element of danger. This was where women wore long skirts because they easily became entangled in machinery.

However, north of Haydock to Wigan and for another 10 miles, women wore trousers. They were less dangerous, more practical strong and warm yet they outraged the Victorian sense of decency. Described as an article of clothing which women ought only to wear in a figure of speech, they evoked disgust amongst those unfamiliar with the practice and represented the outward manifestation of unsexing and immorality, the second major criticism levied against the women.

Attacks on the appearance and morals of the women were counteracted by testimony from Ministers stressing that the pit lases attended Sunday school and that their behaviour compared favourably with that of mill girls. It was stressed that roughness was not synonymous with immorality and that dirty faces did not denote degraded souls. And remembering the problems of alternative employment raised by the exclusion of 1842, it was stressed that forcibly ejecting them might lead to even greater dangers - Josephine Butler was at hand to warn of the immorality which might then ensue.

Some of those demanding exclusion jumped to hasty conclusions. The fact that between 1875 - 1883 the illegitimacy rate for Wigan was nearly double the national average did not mean that pit girls were all immoral. In Wigan colliery life existed, perhaps uneasily, but nevertheless, side by side with mill life and there is evidence from Munby that the actual separation of pit girls from the rest of the community might have been over- stressed. There appears to have been a certain amount of

occupational differentiation within families and particularly in the years during and after the cotton famine, many girls had experience of working at both mills and mines.

Allegations of immorality led to the charge that women not only lost their self-respect but also caused their husbands' downfall Their lack of domesticity apparently drove the latter to seek solace elsewhere - generally at the public house and much of the basis of the exclusionists argument rested on a belief that the woman's true place was in the home. This definition of the home assumed that not working was respectable and therefore presumed that working would lead to ruin. The rich might easily subscribe to this doctrine but, although no doubt attractive to many working women, for them financial necessity dictated that it remained largely theory and not practice. Many of the critics of pit women ignored the fact that the majority were not married women with children but were young single girls or widows. Out of 164 pit women in the Pemberton district in 1886, 131 were single and 7 were widows.

The controversy was intrinsically intertwined with Union attitudes. The Miners Association had condemned underground labour and in particular deprecated the consequent evasion of the law by the coal owners, the law-makers who were acting as law breakers. Official union opinion now attacked surface labour through Conferences, deputations to the Home Office and in the House of Commons were Burt acted as spokesman.

Miners from non-female employing districts were particularly vehement in their attacks. William Pickard of Wigan - also strongly condemned the practice although he was no ordinary rank and file miner and had moved some distance from the ordinary mining family where the daughter might be working, her money badly needed and where this practice was the way to stop a home becoming miserable. Moreover, some Lancashire trades unionists (for example, William Kay, President of the St. Helens Miners Association) resented attacks on Lancashire, viewing them as a slut on their customs and supported the women. Local pride was a deteluinant of miners allegiances.

The third major criticism was that the women were cheap labour. This seriously disturbed miners who felt that the women were usurping mens jobs. The question of wages was of paramount importance on both sides although few would admit it. In 1886 when a man could earn 2/6d per day, women were being paid. between 1/- and 1/6d for the same work and this ratio continued. By 1887 women were earning a maximum of 2/- per day and it was argued that they were doing twice the work of men for half the wages. Many miners wanted the unprotected women to be replaced by union men who could not be exploited in the same way. And related to this was the fact that the country had a million surplus women who were seen to be depriving men of their rightful jobs.

But the answer to the womens inequality was not to raise their wages to the level of men but to replace them. Quite apart from the novelty of theory of equal wages, the miners also knew only too well that the good times of the early 1870Is were past and that coal owners were hardly likely to consider raising womens wages. The Miners Association representatives were anyway in a delicate position since opponents viewed the controversy as a good opportunity to attack the power of the unions.

And if it could be shown that true altruistic motives could not always be found amongst union members, neither was altruism the keynote of the coalowners attitudes. The latter wanted the women to continue working since they cost little to employ, The proprietor of a large Shropshire concern had admitted to the Select Committee on Mines of 1866 that replacing his surface labour with men was not practical since it would cost 30 - 40% more money. Munby commented that he

could see nobody who "will deal with the thing on principle and in that great bustling strife of business men I grow saddened and maddened to think that the strength and purity of womanhood which I have seen at the pit mouth in Lancashire and Wales may be about to vanish for ever."

As for the women themselves, Munby found some ready to take strike action if necessary to combat the threat of exclusion. And although his infectious enthusiasm might have slightly influenced their attitudes, he did find that the work was popular. There was never a shortage of applications for jobs and mothers encouraged their daughters to apply for pit work.

Few groups can have been so minutely examined under the Victorian microscope. At times the women seem to have become fascinating objects rather than subjects for concern. Yet the exposition and a second successful deputation in 1911 did have one valuable advantage. The probing had revealed that shocking conditions still persisted - one reporter found women still doing night work at Leigh in 1886 although this had been made illegal in 1872. In order to meet criticisms, improvements would have to be made and working conditions made more congenial and ultimately the state would have to assume greater responsibility for its workers.