

## Thomas Hepburn - 1796 to 1864



### Great Leader of 'The Colliers of the United Association of Durham and Northumberland'

Thomas Hepburn was a coal hewer working at Hetton Colliery in 1822 when he became a Primitive Methodist lay preacher. As a hewer at the mine doing intensive manual work, he did shorter shifts than the other miners and this allowed him to attend night classes to further his education, an educated miner was a rare thing at the time. As a lay preacher Hepburn railed against the evils of drunkenness, among men whose life could be ended prematurely by roof falls or explosions, he would appeal to men to trust in God and save themselves through education and unionism. Walking between mining villages preaching and talking to the miners, he would meet many who held similar views to himself, Primitive Methodism was sowing the seeds of a union religion. It was in 1825, after the repeal of the Combinations Acts, that a union was legally formed called 'The Colliers of the United Association of Durham and Northumberland'. The miners of this new pitmen's union elected Thomas Hepburn as its undisputed leader with the mining village of Hetton as its base of operations where they produced a pamphlet entitled 'A Voice from the Coal Mines'.

The union was, at first, a hewers union, as was the semi-secret Brotherhood which preceded it, but this was to change and the base of the membership broadened to encompass all classes of miners and boys. Because of the violent clashes between miners and coal owners in previous years, Thomas Hepburn appealed to the pitmen to shun violence in case it provoked the government. It was to be remembered that the Peterloo Massacre had occurred only a decade before in 1815 and had provoked a mass disciplined protest of up to 100,000 miners, keelmen, seamen, etc on the Newcastle Town Moor. The new found legality of the pitmen's union allowed it to publish its propaganda and increase its membership. Unfortunately just as the union was laying solid foundations, the coal trade deteriorated and the owners contemplated reducing the pitmen's wages. The conflicts were about to start.

By 1831, the miners of Durham and Northumberland were at the end of their tether. For fifteen years the coal trade had lurched from one crisis to another and it was the pitmen who suffered the brunt of the recession. The terms of the bond deteriorated and binding money had been reduced dramatically from 30 guineas in the boom of 1800 to one shilling by 1830. As a show of strength and solidarity, in March 1830 the union called a huge meeting at Black Fell and another on the Town Moor where 20,000 pitmen turned out, passing a number of resolutions on pay and hours of work, they called for a levy on pitmen to petition parliament and decided they would not be bound in the coming April. If the employers agreed they would work unbound, if not, they would refuse to work. Later there were conflicts with the soldiers and the owners, but Londonderry, a leading coal owner hated by the miners, had severe financial problems and he was the first owner to cave in. On 13th August 1831, fired up by their victory, the pitmen's union held a big meeting on Boldon Fell. Pitmen marched to this meeting in their thousands behind bands and banners. Perhaps this was the start of the

Durham Big meeting. The first business of the meeting was to elect Thomas Hepburn as a full-time official of the union which by this time the union included Blacksmiths, Joiners, Deputies and Overmen. However, success was short lived.

The mine owners now had one aim – to smash unionism in the north east. In 1832, they refused to sign on union members and a new strike began. Hepburn tried hard to maintain law and order in the major meetings at Black Fell and Boldon Colliery which followed. However, he found he was unable to prevent other violence that occurred.

At Hetton, Hepburn's home base, the owners were determined to eliminate the union. A contingent of metropolitan police were drafted into the village, assisted by special constables and a contingent of the Queen's Bay's, none union members were issued with arms for their own protection. When more than one or two men gathered together they were arrested and tied up in the colliery stables and workshops. Active union men were singled out to be the first evicted from their houses, to make way for the blacklegs. The evictions began on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April 1832, there was no retaliation, but that night a miner who had returned to work called John Errington, was found shot dead. Four Hetton men were charged with wilful murder and were marched off to jail to the cheers of their work mates, whereas the funeral of Errington was accompanied by jeers and booing.

In May 1832 a major disturbance took place at Friar's Goose. As mine workers refused to work underground, 42 lead miners from Cumberland were brought in. Local miners pelted the incomers with stones and rubbish and two men were seriously injured. The miners refused both to work and to leave their cottages. Special constables were sworn in to deal with the emergency. Several families were evicted from their homes. This enraged the miners and brought in support from pitmen in Heworth and Windy Nook. Eventually the constables fled. The Rector of Gateshead, John Collinson was unable to deal with the affray and appealed to the Mayor of Newcastle for support. Reinforcements arrived and confronted the striking mineworkers. In the conflict which followed guns were fired and five mineworkers and two policemen were injured. The town marshal from Newcastle sent for more reinforcements and also called out the military.

On 11 June 1832, Nicholas Fairless, a South Shields magistrate, was dragged from his horse and so savagely beaten that he died from his injuries. William Jobbing, a pitman, was convicted and hanged and his body hung on the gibbet at Jarrow for several weeks. In July, Cuthbert Skipsey, a miner from North Shields, was shot by a constable, whilst trying to restore order, he received a six months sentence.

The tactic of allowing men to return to work if they could reach a settlement was not working and in addition there was a cholera outbreak in the villages. Heworth held a delegate meeting at South Shields on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1832 and proposed a total stoppage, this was rejected and they voted to continue for a further ten weeks. Eventually the strike petered out. Whilst most of the miners, given time, regained employment, the leaders of the strike became scapegoats and were outlawed. The Union crumbled and Thomas Hepburn was banned from the coalfield. Eventually a coal-owner offered him a job at Felling on condition that he never again joined a trade union, he accepted and worked there until he retired in 1859

Richard Fynes, the coalfield historian, described Hepburn as follows:

'Hepburn was not only a great leader among the miners, but his sympathies extended to the broad platform of politics. He was a man with a strong constitution, an intelligent mind, active and ever ready to lend a hand to any movement that had for its object the elevation of the people... He was one of the most active men in the Chartist agitation (q.v.). Fergus O'Connor, speaking of him, said: 'He is a noble specimen of human nature, and the people of the North of England have a right to be proud of him...' When the Miners Union was broken up, he spent a number of the remaining years of his laborious and useful life in agitating for parliamentary reform, and in educating the young ones with whom he came in contact.' Thomas Hepburn is buried in Heworth churchyard.