



## **“Boy Labour” in County Durham during the First World War**

### **1915**

By the middle of 1915 the number of men volunteering for military service had dropped significantly and the government embarked on a policy of conscription. This was introduced in January 1916, for men aged 18 to 41. A few months later this was extended to married men.

While this programme was effective in building up the armed forces it meant that a number of industries, especially agriculture and coal mining would lose many workers. This was a critical issue, for the smooth conduct of the war and also domestic life depended on steady supplies of key goods, in particular, agricultural produce and coal.



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The employment of women in many sectors of industry is well documented but less well known is the use of boy workers, and even some girls, as replacement labour, in County Durham as in other parts of the country.

## 1916

In May 1916 the Home Secretary, Herbert Samuel, asked the Durham Colliery Recruiting Committee to consider the issue of labour supply for the mines, stressing the crucial importance of coal output during wartime.

Later that month a delegation of that recruiting committee attended a special meeting of the County Education Committee on Wednesday 24 May at Shire Hall in Durham.

One member of the group, John Robert Robinson Wilson, was the official government inspector of mines for the Northern division. He proposed to the education committee that certain boys between the ages of 13 and 14 should



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be released from school to undertake surface work at local collieries. He estimated that around 500 to 600 boys would be needed.

The committee would not agree to a general exemption of boys aged 13 but the committee was prepared to consider the case of any boy between 13 and 14 years and the application would have to be from a parent or a prospective employer.

Each case would be considered according to the circumstances of each case.

In the following months the issue of boy workers continued to be the focus of various meetings by councillors and it is clear that not all of them were enthusiastic about releasing boys from school. The Chairman of the Education Committee in 1916, Alderman H. Curry Wood, was certainly uneasy about allowing such a measure. He argued that the applications for the release of the boys tended to come from the parents rather than the colliery owners. He was convinced that these parents simply wanted the money that the boys could earn. He stated, “ It is not the result of a demand for labour so much as a



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demand from the parents in order to make the best use of the children that they can”.

He claimed that a substantial number of children, over 2000 in all, had left school after passing their labour examination between April 1915 and July 1916. If 600 boys were required by the colliery deputation, then surely that target had been met by this group of school leavers, 1500 of whom were boys.

Another figure who expressed his concern about releasing the boys was Frank Goldstone, MP for Sunderland between 1910 and 1918, and Chief Whip from 1915 to 1916.

In May 1916 he tabled a question in Parliament to the Home Secretary, asking whether education bye-laws in Durham were going to be relaxed. The Home Secretary gave quite a vague reply.



Frank Goldstone was a former teacher who eventually became General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers after his career as an Member of Parliament. Clearly, he was worried that many boys would be deprived of education by being propelled too early into this work.

Despite such reservations a substantial number of applications for early release were made and a large number were approved.

### **Farm work**

By July 1916 around 128 applications for release for farm work had been made, and the majority were granted. It is not always clear why some applications were refused. In some cases the reason is clearly stated. John William Burton of Darlington, for example, was refused permission because he was needed to care for his younger brothers and sisters, since his mother was already fully employed on a local farm. If the proposed work did not appear to be genuine farm work then the application was turned down. This happened to Matthew Brougham of Hookergate, who was probably going to be employed as a milk delivery boy both in the morning and at night. George Reuben was



also refused early release since he had applied to do light labour with a builder. Again this was not recognised as agricultural work. In a number of cases, no reason was given for refusing the application.

Girls were also applying for early release. In February 1916, Alice Clark, aged 13 years and 6 months, was granted permission to leave Chopwell East Council School for housework and attending to poultry. The girls were in a minority, however.

The first applications for exemption in order to undertake colliery work were made in June 1916. By July, a total of 181 applications had been made. The education sub-committee made it clear that the boys were not to work for 7 days each week, only 6, and they should work no more than 8 hours each day. This still seems a very intense working load for these children who were no older than 13 or 14 years old. Quite a few of the boys who applied for colliery work were from mining families so the pressure on the boys to leave school and start work is not really surprising.



A large number of colliery applications were approved but on occasion action was taken against employers who employed pupils illegally. Such an action was taken against John Pringle, of Houghton-le-Spring, for employing a scholar, William Reed, in March 1916.

Another firm, Bolckow, Vaughan and Company, were prosecuted for illegally employing boys at Shildon Lodge Colliery. This firm was a major producer of iron and steel at the time and it also owned around 20 collieries, so it was a powerful business. It is interesting that the case, which the County Council had considered taking to the High Court, was eventually dismissed.



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