

The Miners Welfare Fund in Shropshire 1920-1947

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The facilities provided from the Miners' Welfare Fund in most Shropshire mining villages are still, by and large, giving good service, although nowadays to a different clientele and under new control. Their "Halls" and "Institutes" are now being recognised as much a part of our industrial heritage as the mine buildings themselves, even though the present users may have little understanding of their beginnings. Shropshire is fortunate that it has so many survivals, they are a real memorial to both the owners and the miners who had such foresight.

The First World War did much to break the mould of 19th century British society. Not only did it cruelly remove so many of the heirs of the mine owners by its indiscriminate killing of young men (Sir Arthur Anstice of the Madeley Wood Coal & Iron Company lost his son in 1915 for example) but it gave the working man aspirations for a better life. One result of this was the passing of a statute in 1920 which inaugurated the "Miners' Welfare Fund". Its aim was to provide educational, welfare and recreational facilities for miners and their communities. Money for the fund was to come from two basic sources :-

1. The mine owners, who were required to contribute one penny (0.42 new pence) per ton of saleable coal produced
2. The coal owners, who were required to contribute one shilling (5 new pence) in the pound on net mining royalties.

Coal was effectively nationalised in 1938, so that the Government would then become liable for the levy on royalty. The coal mines themselves were nationalised in 1947 so that the nationalised industry (NCB) then became liable for the tonnage levy also.

In any case, the sum available annually was relatively small and, even in the 1930s, the Shropshire District Fund Committee set up to disperse the money were always complaining that they really hadn't sufficient to do all that was required. The sum was only about £800 and this had to cover new projects and maintenance of those existing. The Committee was in 1939, for example, made up of 10 persons :-

- 5 representing mine owners :-
- St V Champion Jones, Lilleshall Company
 - T H Stonehouse, Highley
 - J A Jackson, Madeley Wood
 - A N Fielden, Hanwood
 - T E Freestone, other mines (he was also Chairman).

5 representing miners :-

- R Ward
- A Robinson
- S Gill
- G Davies
- A Hoggins.

Ifton Colliery was, as usual, taken to be part of North Wales District but is included here due to its location in Shropshire.

The general policy of the Fund was firstly to obtain land for a recreation ground (or "rec" as it was called locally), then if necessary provide a Welfare Hall or Institute, then as soon as practicable provide a pit head baths complex at the mine itself. In the years under consideration, grants were provided as follows :-

- Recreational 14 (but some were extensions to existing schemes and this included sports grounds, halls and institutes)
- Pit Head Baths 1
- Canteen 1
- Cycle Store 1
- Educational 11 (including 2 mining science labs and 9 general education)
- plus a number of individual scholarships for study

There had also been grants to provide classroom accommodation for war-time evacuees at Hanwood and a grant for a colliery band (possibly the Lilleshall Collieries Band).

"Recs" were provided at least at the following centres beginning early in the 1920s (although this list is not in chronological order) - Ifton, Madeley, Highley, Hanwood, Donnington Wood, Wrockwardine Wood, Priorslee, St Georges, Oakengates and Dawley. Then beginning about 1929, substantial welfare halls were provided at St Georges (1929), Ifton (1932), Highley (1933), The Nabb (1936) and Hanwood (1938). These are described in the Appendix (there could be others at yet unidentified). Madeley does not seem to have had a hall at this stage (although it had a "rec" from 1922), probably due to the Anstice Memorial Hall & Working Mens Institute being available. This was already miner-biased, owing to its origins as a Memorial Hall to the local mine owner John Anstice. The Madeley miners, however, became the first to obtain a Miners' Welfare pit head baths / canteen complex in 1941. A modern recreational hall was provided at Madeley later in that decade.

The Welfare Fund Committee was also keen to improve "the landscape", particularly in town centres, and their most commendable work was the removal of a large spoil mound to form a "rec" in Oakengates. This was situated between the Hartshill and Hadley Roads and was opened by Herbert Smith, then President of the Miners Federation of Great Britain. Opposite this was another

site reclaimed by the international peace volunteers in the 1930s. The Committee were not always successful in removing pitmounds, however, such as in 1935 when they added a bowls pavilion at St Georges on a site which lay at the foot of a tip. No encroachment onto other property was permitted. To overcome this, they had to burrow into the tip and, using reinforced concrete walls which doubled as retaining walls, produced a half-buried structure. This had "... two small rooms, one for men and one for women", with a "combined glazed metal screen and doors opening onto a small veranda". The total cost was £198 and it was opened in December 1935.

Financial problems were beginning to be experienced in the mid-1930s. It was reported in 1938 that annual income was still only £800 due to the depression and "... this small sum must be eked out to supply the needs of 4 district areas and 9 separate schemes". In the main area (Coalbrookdale?) where the schemes were normally self-supporting, there was now severe unemployment. On the other hand, two schemes serving outlying areas were maintained by means of contributions from the parent colliery company and by a colliery levy on the men of so much per week out of wages. It was also reported that a re-appraisal was to be carried out. One site (Dawley?) had already been disposed of and it was hoped to concentrate activities in another area on one site (St Georges). On the brighter side, a hall had been opened at Hanwood and planning was underway for a pit-head baths at Madeley.

The report for 1939 was still quite gloomy, although employment had picked up because of the war. The costs of maintenance, however, were still a problem. No new schemes had started and a proposal for a bathing pool at Priorslee had been dropped, as had a new football ground at Wrockwardine Wood. The Committee was critical of the local reactions to its centralisation plans "... the difficulties at Priorslee were impossible to overcome but it is felt that, if local restrictions could be set aside, the difficulties at Wrockwardine Wood could be solved by centralising the football section at St Georges". The sites at The Nabb, St Georges and Donnington Wood had, however, been well maintained with a new hockey pitch and hard tennis court provided at the second site and tennis courts at the third.

The Committee was always keen on education and, over the years, had provided new mining laboratories at the Walker Technical College (1924) and a substantial grant to Oswestry Technical College. Educational classes had been held in all the halls but were particularly successful at Highley and Hanwood. The latter was notable because, after its construction in 1938, "... the paint was scarcely dry before the first lecture was delivered, the torch of learning must needs burn brightly for the electricity supply is not yet available in the area".

Except for the construction of the pit-head baths at Madeley, against many difficulties (see separate paper by the writer), no new schemes were developed during the Second World War. Immediately after the war, the income and

responsibilities for pit-head baths were taken away from the Fund Committee but it still continued to develop the recreational side. Perhaps its major achievement in this period was the new hall at Madeley but this has since been demolished. It is understood that none of the surviving schemes are maintained by the Welfare Fund at the present time.

Appendices

Miners' Welfare Halls in Shropshire, as described at opening date (this may not be a complete list).

1. 1929 St Georges - Replaced an old wooden hut, new one is brick with cement asbestos tiled roof, cost £920. It has two large dressing rooms, each having a bath 9ft 6ins x 3ft 6ins x 2ft deep attached to it. There is a folding partition so that the rooms can be combined on special occasions. The grounds include a football ground with cycling and running tracks around it, also 2 grandstands, a cricket ground, 4 tennis courts, bowling green, quoits pitches and associated pavilions.

2. 1932 Ifton - A large institute of brick with artificial stone dressings and a slate roof, cost £7,500 (furnishings £950 extra). Consists of a hall to seat 444, with stage and cinema projector and rewinding rooms. Also rooms for billiards, games, reading, library and kitchen. There is in addition a lean-to with separate rooms for bowls and tennis players and a groundsman. "... As there is no electricity within several miles a power plant has been installed".

3. 1933 Highley - A hall to seat 260 persons, constructed of timber framing, roughcast on metal lathing and lined with matchboard and insulating boarding. Foundations are of brick and roof of asbestos tiles, cost £1,892, including furnishings.

4. 1935 St Georges Bowls Pavilion - as described previously.

5. 1936 Nabb Institute - Replaced an earlier corrugated iron building. No details available but had a brick base and appeared to be of timber.

6. 1938 Hanwood - A hall of brick and tile construction, cost £1,000. Has a central club room large enough for social functions and educational classes.

7. 1941 Kemberton Pit-Head Baths - "... the only pit-head baths in operation in this District" (Shropshire). Built of brick to accommodate 560 men at a cost of £13,853. A canteen is included at a cost of £785.

Note 1 - The present condition of the above buildings has not been checked and I would like to know of any changes. Also of any demolitions and any other Miners' Welfare buildings discovered in the county.

Note 2 - Madeley Miners' Welfare Hall was built in 1950 (outside the period considered in this paper but included for sake of completeness). It was a large single room of concrete block construction with a kitchen-annexe. Demolition took place about 1970 as part of the Madeley By-pass project. The Anstice Memorial Hall & Working Men's Institute at Madeley was built in 1869 as a memorial to a well-respected local mine owner. It survives, crammed into a 1960s shopping complex.