

Benjamin Lee, Bolsover Miners' Leader: 1885-1961.

Malcolm Ball

Born in Stonebroom in Derbyshire in 1885, Benjamin Lee, was the son of William Lee and his wife Amey. He had five sisters and one brother. Stonebroom was mainly a coal mining town in South Derbyshire and it was quite natural for the son to follow the father into the coal mining industry, and he found employment at Morton Colliery near to Stonebroom.

By 1911 Benjamin had married and moved to Bolsover. The census of that year records him living at 9 Sutton Hall Road, Carr Vale. This is a small village of mainly terrace houses built by the owners of Bolsover colliery to accommodate the inward migration of labour in the years after 1900, and is in the valley approximately one mile from Bolsover town centre. By 1908, at age 23, he had become an active member of the Morton No.2 Lodge of the Derbyshire Miners' Association (D.M.A.). The D.M.A. was the local miners' union in Derbyshire and was a constituent association of the national Miners' Federation of Great Britain (M.F.G.B.) (Williams, 1962).

At this time the D.M.A. was one of a number of unions which sponsored students to attend Ruskin College, Oxford. Recognised, by the leadership of the D.M.A., as a potential future leader of the D.M.A. he was provided with the opportunity to attend Ruskin College. The union paid his course and accommodation costs and provided other modest funds to support him. He returned from Ruskin College in 1910, by which time he was living at Sutton Hall Road with his wife Elizabeth and daughter Phyllis.

It is noteworthy that the young Lee was one of the earliest nominees of the Derbyshire Miners' to attend Ruskin College. Although there was to be an hiatus the D.M.A. and later the NUM (Derbyshire Area) continued to support members at Ruskin College so long as it had a working membership in the 1990's.⁽¹⁾ It is also noteworthy that the young Lee was at Ruskin College during the early years of the college and during one of the most significant episodes of its history.

Ruskin College was founded as Ruskin Hall in 1899. The two principal founders, Walter Vrooman and Charles Beard, intended to provide 'higher education' for working men within the, then growing, tradition of humanitarian and philanthropic education provided by University Extension. The Workers' Educational Association (W.E.A.) was founded in Oxford in 1903 (Ball, 2012). The two founders had left within two years but helped by charitable donations and trade union support, in the form of sponsored students and donations, Ruskin College emerged from the chrysalis of Ruskin Hall (Simon, 1965,p.319). The new college provided a "...course of study, in the main of economics, sociology and politics..."(Ibid.,p.311).

The students were young working class men drawn from many parts of industrial Britain and so were required to be residents of the college. Interestingly, the Ruskin scheme also included classes in many parts of the country and some postal courses (Fieldhouse, 1987,p.37). By 1907 Ruskin College was successfully established as a residential college with some fifty residential students selected mostly, from labour organisations (Simon,Op.cit.,p.211). It had a governing body composed mainly of Oxford academics but which included Richard Bell of the Railway Servants (union) and David Shackleton of the Weavers' Union (Simon,Ibid.,p.318). Trade union support for Ruskin College was sufficiently clear and strong by 1907 that the TUC launched a financial appeal (Simon, Ibid.,p.219).

The strike by Ruskin College students in 1909 was the consequence of a number of coalescing events and was also a key feature in the emergence of 'Independent Working Class Education'. Prior to 1907 there was increasing dissatisfaction by some students with the college curriculum. In response the students organised regular public classes and lectures in economics and politics reflecting the growing interest in Marxist and socialist ideas. This was a direct challenge to the dominant ideas, among Oxford academics, which reflected social harmony. In addition, senior Oxford academics were exploring the relationship of Ruskin College to the Oxford University and the curriculum which Ruskin was offering, including the introduction of an examination (Simon, *Ibid.*, pp.319-23). The students and the Principal, Dennis Hird, did not support the proposals but the governors did. The Principal was placed under constraints which limited his role before finally dismissing him. This was the immediate catalyst for the strike, which lasted one week (Simon *Ibid.*, pp.322-23). A number of the most prominent student activists had their scholarships withdrawn and were obliged to return to their hometowns. Ultimately, the dissidents formed the Plebs League and the Central Labour College.

Ruskin College was never absorbed into Oxford University although in later years it did adopt the tutorial method of Oxford University and a curriculum which matched the entry requirements for Oxford and other universities, and towards the end of their studies students were entered for an Oxford University Diploma examination. Ruskin College continued to build its role in conjunction with sympathetic trades unions, including the M.F.G.B., and these unions continued to sponsor students. Benjamin Lee was one of those students from 1907-1909. The events of 1907-09 and the launch of the Central Labour College have led some of the young radicals away from Ruskin College but it did not, and probably could not, have politically sterilized the whole student body. The heterogeneous ideological composition of the Labour Movement continued to be reflected in the student body.

In the aftermath of the Ruskin dispute Lee was prompted to justify his union sponsorship, and to protect future scholarships, by writing to the *Derbyshire Times*:

"The students have a thorough training to become excellent politicians; but although politics enters so largely in their studies, the work is strictly educational, and the teaching is absolutely impartial...It is a fine field for training trade union officials and political agitators; for moulding social reformers, and giving them the knowledge which will enable them to lift their class higher in the social scale." (*Derbyshire Times*, August 29, 1908 quoted in Williams, pp.472-73).

Unfortunately, this message failed to assuage other reports reaching the D.M.A. leadership from Ruskin College and an application from T. Mosley of the Williamthorpe Lodge for a scholarship was refused (*Ibid.*, p.473 from D.M.A. records August 7, 1909).

The period at Ruskin College equipped Benjamin Lee to become an active and important leader of the D.M.A. The study of the *Derbyshire Miners'*, by J.E. Williams, reports that, in 1911, there was strong opposition to the butty system among the Bolsover miners. "They were no doubt influenced by Benjamin Lee, the president of the local I.L.P., who had recently returned from Ruskin College. 'The feeling among the men at Bolsover...' he said, 'is that we must be firm on the subject of an 8s. Per day minimum.'" (*Ibid.*, p.411 from *Derbyshire Times* October 7, 1911).

The leadership of the D.M.A. was politically moderate and supported Lib-Labism before the formation of the Labour Party. However, in the local areas radical ideas were taking root and radical action being taken. In Chesterfield, there was an active branch of the Social Democratic Party (Ibid., p.500). At Alfreton there was a strong branch of the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.) (Ibid.,p.498). Alfreton was quite close to Stonebroom and so it is possible that this local connection reinforced his experience at Ruskin. The I.L.P. branch at Bolsover, with Benjamin Lee, as President, and J.Thornhill, as Secretary, were challenging Harvey to respond to a rumour that he intended to stand as a Lib-Lab candidate in the forthcoming election. Harvey responded to the Bolsover Challenge at a meeting of the North-East Derbyshire Federation in November 1910, and denied any ambition to stand as a Lib-Lab candidate (Ibid.,p.503). The following year Bolsover I.L.P. were again challenging Harvey over a pay dispute involving the South Wales Miners Federation (S.W.M.F.). During his time at Ruskin College, Lee would have met trade union members from other areas including the South Wales miners', including W.J.Edwards (H.Francis & D.Smith,1980,p.25). It was therefore understandable that the South Wales miners would use these contacts to build support, and they sent a delegation to Derbyshire. The local lodges of the D.M.A. warmly greeted them, but the leadership in Saltergate (the Derbyshire office which housed the officials) rebuffed them and refused to give them the addresses of local officials. The response of the Bolsover I.L.P. was to instruct their secretary, J.Thornhill, to obtain full information about Harvey's part in the Cambrian dispute (Williams,Op.cit., p.405).

Although the Labour Party was formed in 1906 it was not until after adopting the 1918 Constitution, largely written by Sidney Webb, that local membership was opened up to individual membership (Pelling,1972,p.43).Prior to 1918 it was the practice for trade unionists to share affiliated membership through their trade union and for working class radicals to have individual membership of the I.L.P., S.D.P. or S.D.F. (Cohen,G.2007). In Derbyshire the I.L.P. was the most likely political organisation (Williams, Op.Cit., pp.498-507). The I.L.P. was characterised by a mixture of Methodist and Socialist, including Marxist, ideas (Cohen, 2007. Macintyre,1980). By 1919 there was an extensive network of Labour Party branches with strong support from the D.M.A. (Williams,Op.Cit Cohen,p29-63).In 1917, the Boundary Commission proposed changes to the Bolsover Constituency by adjusting the boundaries and renaming it the North-East Derbyshire Constituency. In the following year the former Bolsover Constituency Labour Party adopted Frank Lee, as their candidate for the forthcoming general election (Williams,Op.cit., pp.543-546).

Following Lee's period at Ruskin College he was living at Carr Vale and working at Bolsover Colliery. It is possible that he may have been encouraged, by the D.M.A. leadership, to find employment at Bolsover Colliery to build union membership. The years up to the eve of the First World war saw significant inward migration from South Derbyshire to the Bolsover area for employment at Bolsover Colliery. It would have been a strategically important task for the D.M.A. to have trustworthy members among the growing workforce at Bolsover Colliery and Benjamin Lee, just returning from Ruskin College, would have been an ideal agent.

By 1919 Benjamin Lee was among a group of men who could be described as the leadership of the Derbyshire Miners. Although not officials or based at Saltergate they were involved in the daily activity of fact finding and decision making. An example of this is taken from October 1918-19 and

involved a pay dispute at Winstar, in the south of the D.M.A. area. The men at Winstar were involved in dispute with management over the employment of non-unionists and had called on the union for support. "The Council considered that the Winstar men needed more support and dispatched Hicken (2)(who was not yet an official), Samuel Sales, Thomas Kyte, James Randle, William Taylor and Benjamin Lee,'with plenary powers, for the purpose of creating an atmosphere of surrounding the Mill Close Mine, which the men who are continuing to work will find too strong for them to oppose.' " (Ibid.,p.601 from D.M.A. October 11, 1919).

By 1924 Lee and William Spray were checkweighmen at Bolsover Colliery and a members of the local miners welfare committee. Other members of the miners' welfare committee were Samuel Evans (the colliery agent), and Albert Davies (the colliery manager). In February 1924 the four representatives of the miners welfare committee received the legal transfer of a local plot of land, each of the men signing the legal documents, for the use of the Miners' Welfare (Document Ref: P1 E12/6/5/76/1-36).

Following the formation of the 'Spencer' Industrial Union the coal owners and colliery officials at Bolsover and Cresswell collieries encouraged the Industrial Union in preference to the D.M.A. The majority of miners at both of these collieries followed the employers lead and the membership of the D.M.A. declined. A small number of men remained loyal to the D.M.A. It is unclear whether Lee and Spray continued in their role as checkweighmen but branches of the D.M.A. did continue to function at both collieries. In 1944 Benjamin Lee..."one of the Bolsover veterans, was appointed collector, for which he received a small fee..." (Ibid., p.770 from D.M.A. January 15,1944).

Intriguingly, the previous year Lee had been made manager of the newly opened Blackpool Convalescent Home (Ibid.,p.864). The official historian of the Derbyshire Miners', J.E.Williams, was given every freedom and encouragement by the Derbyshire N.U.M. leadership with his task of researching and writing the history. This lends support to the impression that his references to Benjamin Lee reflect official opinion about this '...veteran Bolsover miners' leader...' (Ibid., p.864). The book was published in 1962 and Benjamin Lee had died in Scarsdale Hospital, Chesterfield on November 11, 1961. The years before his death he had moved home, the short distance, from Carr Vale to 3 Portland Crescent, Bolsover.

Notes.

- 1) Benjamin Lee was the first of three Derbyshire men with their home in Carr Vale to attend Ruskin College. The other two were John Armstrong, who interestingly, also lived on Sutton Hall Road and Malcolm Ball. John Armstrong attended the Derbyshire Miners' day release course 1962-65 and attended Ruskin College 1965-67. He progressed to Hull University and successfully completed B.Sc Hons in Economics 1967-1970 and tragically died in a car accident on the night of his final examination. The third, Malcolm Ball, was also a student of the Derbyshire Miners day release course 1963-66. He attended Ruskin College 1966-68 and Hull University 1969-72 and successfully completed a BA Hons in Sociology and SEAS. He did not return to the coal industry but worked for the TUC Educational service until his retirement.
- 2) For short biographies of Henry Hicken, WE Harvey and James Haslam see Dictionary of Labour Biography, volume 1.

Sources.

Ball, M. (2012) *Independent Working Class Education: The Lost Sonnet of Impossibilism?*. Personal unpublished essay.

Cohen, G. (2007) *The Failure of a Dream*. Taurus Academic Studies.

Fieldhouse, R. (1987) *The 1908 Report: Antidote to Class Struggle?* In Harrop, S (ed) *Oxford and Working-Class Education*. University of Nottingham.

Francis, H, and Smith, D. (1980) *The Fed: a history of the South Wales Miners in the twentieth century*. Lawrence & Wishart.

Harrop, S (ed.), (1987) *Oxford and Working-Class Education*, University of Nottingham.

Howell, D. (1986) *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party, 1888-1906*. Manchester University Press.

Macintyre, S. (1980) *Little Moscows: Communism and Working-class Militancy in inter-war Britain*, Croom Helm.

Minkin, L. (1991) *The Contentious Alliance: Trade Unions and the Labour Party*. Edinburgh University Press.

Pelling, H. (1972) *A short History of the Labour Party*. Macmillan.

Pollins, H. (1984) *A History of Ruskin College*, Ruskin College Library.

Simon, B. (1965) *Education and the Labour Movement 1870-1920*. Lawrence & Wishart.

Williams, J.E. (1962) *The Derbyshire Miners*. George Allen & Unwin.

MJB/Nov2013.