

April 2024

Mr Bevin's Raffle – the Bevin Boys of WWII

Speaker: Dr Liz O'Donnell

As World War II progressed, the desperate need to recruit workers for the coalmining industry became apparent. In the first two weeks of the war some 27,000 young, fit pit workers had left to join the military, attracted by better pay and a 'glamorous' uniform (perhaps more attractive to the girls!).

In 1940 Prime Minister Winston Churchill asked Ernest Bevin – a Labour Party politician who as General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union was thought to be able to work well with the unions – to join the War Cabinet as Minister of Labour and National Service.

By 1941, 40% of the mining work-force were over 40 years of age, and in June 1941 few ex-miners responded to the government's appeal to return to the mines. Poor industrial relations, pre-existing vacancies, chronic absenteeism, and positioned 57th out of 97 in the league table of industrial wages all contributed to the problem.

By 1942 fuel shortages prompted a campaign for 'Fuel Economy' to save domestic electricity, & rationing was considered. Miners' conditions of work were generally very poor and dangerous – it was a cold, wet, dirty, low-paid job. Portrayals of life in star-studded commercial films at the time, such as 'The Stars Look Down' and 'How Green is My Valley', also had a negative effect on the industry and its workers.

In January 1942 pit workers held unofficial strikes for improved pay, showing their industrial muscle. The Government was forced to encourage the privately owned mining companies to provide better conditions including pithead bath and canteens. Public sympathy was stretched to the limit by miners' working practices, and both miners and mine owners were suspicious of the 'reforms', but by 1943 miners wages had increased to 10th place.

In December 1943 Mr Bevin established a lottery to select 10% of all conscripts for the mines. Each week, one conscript's number, (sometimes two) out of ten was drawn from a hat (possibly Mr Bevin's bowler hat), hence the title of the talk. These conscripts were to work in the coal mines rather than join the armed forces. The 'raffle' began on 14th December 1943 and continued until V.E Day, 8th May 1945, and by this method some 21,000 pit workers were recruited, in addition to 30,000 volunteers for the work. However, despite the increased workforce, output from the mines fell continuously throughout the war.

Once conscripted there was little chance of escape, as coalmining became a reserved occupation. Although 40% appealed, 95% of the appeals were rejected, including those from men protesting that they were too tall (a height of 6 feet was surely too tall for a cramped 2-foot-high coal seam) or too well qualified (an electronics engineer surely would be better employed in the military). The Bevin Boys had to be fitter than men recruited for

the army, Medical Grade 1. Initial training took place across the UK in training pits. It was an unfamiliar world, much disliked by many who thought it a death sentence. Little money was left after living expenses. However, with improved conditions and pay it became slightly more tolerable. Those living in hostels appreciated the comradeship, whereas the experiences of those living in private lodgings varied greatly depending on the relationships formed..

At the end of the war the 'Bevin Boys' were not included in demob plans. They were not demobbed until 1948 because of the need for fuel (similarly prisoners of war were also required for agricultural work for several years after the war ended). They received little money & not even demob suits.

Many felt their contribution to the war effort was insufficiently recognised. For many years the British Legion did not permit them to march past the Cenotaph along with other veterans. They received no medals, but they were finally awarded a commemorative badge.

Mining was dirty, gruelling work; recruits were often embarrassed to do what was widely seen as a socially inferior work; the mining villages were very insular with their own pitmatic language. However, these conscripts did not face armed conflict.

Our speaker told us she'd been privileged to interview 19 Bevin Boys, 9 in Northumberland and 10 from Scotland, London and the North-West. GLHS members felt equally privileged to hear Dr O'Donnell's detailed presentation.