

by Harry Barnes

For most of the 106 years since 1906, this north-eastern Derbyshire has been represented by one or more MPs who originated as coal miners and had been officials of their local miners' lodge and/or of the Derbyshire Miners Association. In all, there have been ten such MPs. Anyone born in the area who is now a pensioner could well have come across six of these. I deal with these below in pairs.

The local mining MP Henry White retired in 1959, then Harold Neal retired in 1970. They had both been returned to parliament via by-elections during the Second World War and participated in the legislation to fulfil a long-time aim of the miners – the nationalisation of their industry, which became operative in 1947. Harold Neal was then the MP for Bolsover. Appropriately, he later became Parliamentary Secretary to Philip Noel-Baker the Minister for Fuel and Power. Henry White was the MP for North East Derbyshire and both his first and final contributions in the Commons were typical of him, in being about the mining industry.

Henry White was succeeded by the miners Tom Swain and then Ray Ellis. Tom was a larger than life character, who after 20 years as an MP was killed on the Norbriggs to Woodthorpe Road when a Coal Board lorry ran into the mini he was driving. This was both a personal and political tragedy. Four weeks after his death, the Callaghan Government lost a vote of confidence by a single vote and this led to the General Election of 1979 which brought Margaret Thatcher to power. If Tom hadn't been killed, the vote of confidence would have ended in a tie and by precedent the Speaker's casting vote would have gone to the Callaghan Government and the General Election would not have been called. Tom was followed by Ray Ellis who became Secretary of the Miners' Group of MPs during the 1984 Miners' Strike and used avenues inside and outside of the Commons to argue their case.

Eric Varley and Dennis Skinner are the two remaining post-war mining MPs. They were both MPs in early 1974 when the miners followed up a work-to-rule over poor wages, with a strike. In response the Heath Government instigated a three-day-working week to save fuel and then called a General Election under the slogan "Who Governs Britain?". The electorate decided that the answer to the question was not to be the Conservatives. A minority Labour Government

then acted quickly to settle the strike, aided by appointing Eric as a former miner to the post of Secretary of State for Energy. Eric later became Secretary for State for Industry, eventually resigning his seat in 1984 prior to that year's protracted miners' strike. Dennis Skinner as the MP for Bolsover was a leading figure both inside and outside of parliament on the side of the miners in the major disputes of 1972, 1974 and 1984-5 as well as in struggles against the privatisation of the coal industry and against the final closure of deep mine pits in Derbyshire. Dennis remains fully active in parliament today, but will almost certainly be the last pitman MP from Derbyshire.

A characteristic of all the above six post-war pitmen politicians is that they were all firmly Labour MPs. But the four earlier DMA parliamentarians came from a different era and differed from this clear pattern.

Our first two miners' MPs were James Haslam and William Harvey whose statues stand outside the former Miners' Offices on Saltergate. They both started work as ten year olds in the harsh circumstances of the mid 19th Century at collieries at Clay Cross and Grassmoor. Later they became active as both methodist lay preachers and trade unionists. In time they came to feel that north Derbyshire needed its own mining association separate from the rather distant South Yorkshire Miners Association which they had been active in until then.

Along with three other miners, in 1879 they met at the old Sun Inn on West Bars (which preceded the current building) to plan to set up the Derbyshire Miners' Association (DMA). James Haslam became the DMA's first secretary, initially being unpaid and running the Association from his home. By 1893 it had 10,000 members in 69 local lodges and was able to open its offices on Saltergate that year. Haslam and Harvey became known as 'The Twin Pillars of the DMA'.

For some time in the 19th Century, Parliamentary representation had been seen as a must by mining trade unions. They needed legislation to check that they weren't cheated over payments for the amount of coal they produced, to improve safety conditions, to end the employment of children, to reduce excessive working hours, to seek minimum wages, to set up conciliation procedures and to regulate the structure of their industry. There was also a deep need to improve housing, education, health and social provisions within their communities.

But there were three major hurdles to overcome in order to get miners into parliament. First, although many miners as male householders had first achieved franchise rights in 1884, they

needed organising to ensure that they were registered to vote. The system for registration was not then an easy one. So when Haslam stood as Independent Labour in 1885 in Chesterfield, he finished bottom of the poll in a three cornered fight. There had not been time in just a year to mobilise the registration of enough miners. Secondly, MPs were not paid and had the costs of travel and accommodation in London to meet. It was not until 1901 that the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) to whom the DMA were affiliated, came up with a modest scheme to cover these needs for successful mining candidates. Finally, to win a candidate needed the backing of one of the main political parties of the 19th Century – the Conservatives or the Liberals. The embryo Labour Party wasn't set up until 1900 and at that time the MFGB was not even affiliated to it.

So after his initial electoral defeat, Haslam backed by the DMA sort the Liberal nomination. When he narrowly failed to achieve this he bided his time until the candidature became vacant once more. He was then successfully elected to parliament for Chesterfield in 1906 supported by both the DMA and the local Liberal Association and was known as a Lib-Lab candidate. In a 1907 by-election in what was then called North *Eastern* Derbyshire, William Harvey also won as a Lib-Lab.

In 1909, however, the MFGB (covering the DMA) affiliated to the Labour Party and Haslam and Harvey accepted the Labour whip, standing successfully in the next two elections of 1910 as Labour candidates.

We could then have expected there to have been a seamless transition to the ranks of the Labour Party by the DMA and its candidates. If we ignore what happened in the Chesterfield seat this is exactly what occurred in the two neighbouring seats. Both ran a number of DMA candidates under the Labour banner. But they did not initially win their seats. There were no further Labour victories by a miner until Frank Lee (at his second attempt) took the North East Derbyshire seat following the 1922 General Election, but only after a drawn out procedure. There were eight recounts, then the matter went to the courts and only seven months later was Lee able to enter parliament after finally being declared the winner by 15 votes. He held his seat until his death in 1942, apart from the 1931-35 period when Labour collapsed nationally following the consequences of the 1931 financial crisis.

Lee was a solid Labour man in parliament involved in issues such the Miners' Lock-Out of 1926, its associated General Strike and criticism of the break-away Spencer's Miners' Union in Notts which was seen as a "scabs union". He also worked hard on the wide range of communal concerns in his constituency. But although Lee stood in seven General Elections as a Labour Candidate and won five times, like Haslam and Harvey his early political involvement had been

of a Lib-Lab nature and he had even been a local Liberal agent.

But whilst Haslam, Harvey and Lee moved away from the Liberals to the Labour Party, there was one official of the DMA who finally moved in the opposite direction – Barnet Kenyon. On the death of Haslam in 1913 he became the Secretary and then the Agent of the DMA. The DMA supported him to stand for the Chesterfield seat and he was then endorsed by the Chesterfield Trade Union Council, which in those days also fulfilled the role of what would now be a Constituency Labour Party. But when Kenyon then agreed to address the local Liberal Association at their annual meetings and accepted their support in the coming by-election, the MFGB Annual Conference spent a whole day discussing his case and then refused to endorse his candidature. The Labour Party's Executive Committee also rejected him. Kenyon ended up as the Liberal Party Candidate and held the seat as such from 1913 until his retirement in 1929. The DMA finally removing Kenyon from his post as their Agent in 1923, around the time Lee was finally able to take his seat in parliament as a Labour MP.

Essentially the DMA had moved from the Lib-Lab to the Labour camp in 1909, except for the strange case of Kenyon in Chesterfield. A complexity about the Chesterfield seat being that it was not as solid a mining area as its neighbouring seats, which eventually became designated as Bolsover and North East Derbyshire. Chesterfield was less homogeneous, for alongside mining it developed Chemical and Steel works at Staveley, plus engineering works and a range of commercial and business institutions. It was a town, distinct from the surrounding rural areas which were pock marked with pits. Between 1913 and 1964 it did not have a mining MP, which was normally a contrast with its two neighbouring seats.

Nevertheless Chesterfield became a centre for the DMA. The statues of Haslam and Harvey were unveiled in 1915 after their deaths, with thousands of miners and their families from the wider coalfield being crammed in front of the Miners' Offices on Saltergate.