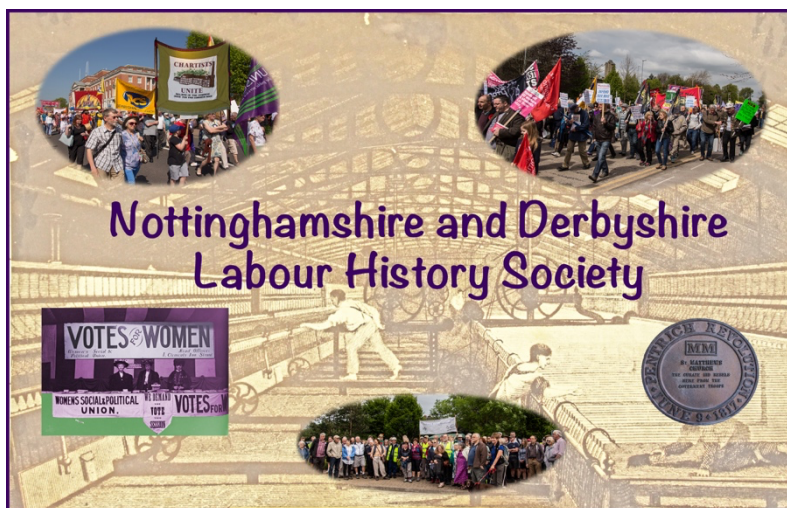


November
2020



Newsletter

The History of Anti-apartheid Activism in Nottingham and Notts

We are researchers at the University of Nottingham studying anti-apartheid activism in Nottinghamshire, c.1960-1994. South Africa's system of apartheid, the brutal regime of institutionalised racism and white supremacy, was finally dismantled in 1994 after democratic elections saw the African National Congress rise to government after a decades-long liberation struggle. International solidarity with this struggle – including a powerful and wide-ranging movement in Britain – played an influential role.

Why study this now and why Nottingham? The era of anti-apartheid protest represents a long and rich chapter in Nottingham's proud history of protest and dissent. While the stories of local A-A activism are still in living memory it is vital to capture and record them. We want Nottingham to have its place alongside cities such as Bristol and Leeds whose anti-apartheid history has been documented. The topic of anti-racism campaigning and transnational solidarity is more relevant than ever as we reflect on the recent Black Lives Matter protests.

The research so far Our project began in February 2020, a month which marked the 30th anniversary of Nelson Mandela's freedom. Over the spring and summer we gathered memories of local anti-apartheid activism via our online questionnaire and oral history interviews. We're delighted with the variety and richness of the stories recounted by participants so far. Our earliest anecdote is from 1963: an alumnus of Nottingham University recalled writing an article for *Gongster* challenging the apartheid-sympathetic views of the then president of the student union and starting a long debate in the union. Our contributor's stance was informed by a year spent with the VSO in Botswana. Fast forward to 1994 and dedicated members of Nottingham's branch of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) were holding information stalls in the city centre to raise awareness about financial support needed by the African National Congress (ANC) for the upcoming democratic elections. A huge benefit gig was held at the Marcus Garvey Centre, headlined by the Zimbabwean band the Bhundu Boys. Funds raised were sent direct to the ANC in Eastern Transvaal (then twinned with Nottinghamshire). Far from being a thing of the 'past' our research has taught us that the resonance of anti-apartheid activity is alive in the region. For instance, anti-apartheid songs like *Shona Malanga* and *Senzeni Na* are still sung (for different campaign contexts) by Nottingham Clarion Choir.



British miners march in Nottingham to protest against coal imports from South Africa. © Martin Jenkinson Image Library

Focus on the trade union movement Readers of the NDLS Newsletter will not be surprised to learn that a dominant emerging theme is the role played by trade unionists in Nottinghamshire especially through the 1980s. (By 1990, 43 national trade unions, including every major union, were formally affiliated to the British AAM.) The Nottingham & District Trade Union Council and local members worked with Nottingham AAM on campaigns including the central pillar – the consumer boycott and economic isolation of South Africa. Crucially, the TUC and members also forged powerful *direct* links with black trade unions representing oppressed South African workers. Our research will spotlight the connections built with the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA, formerly MAWU) particularly the support given to strikers led by Moses Mayekiso in the dispute with multinational British Tyre

and Rubber. The plight and the spirit of the strikers and their community found wide public attention in Notts and all over the country thanks to the tours of two plays dramatising the dispute, *The Long March* (1987) and *Sisters of the Long March* (1988), written by and starring the workers themselves. Also in 1987, British miners marched in solidarity with South African miners and protested the import of South African coal by Burnett & Hallamshire. The blockade of that company's Worksop depot was recalled by one of our participants – a member of Mansfield AAM – as perhaps his most meaningful contribution to the movement.

We welcome more stories We'd be delighted to hear from readers who have memories of anti-apartheid activism to share, whether as part of the trade union movement or the AAM, or within other constituencies such as faith groups and local African Caribbean and Asian community organisations. No story is too small! Perhaps you were a long-running, active campaigner or you might simply have reflections on when you became fully aware of the injustices of apartheid and the importance of not buying South African goods. You may have gone on marches for Soweto or demonstrations in the city centre calling for government sanctions and the release of political prisoners. Perhaps you attended one of the many fundraising concerts at the Marcus Garvey Centre or Hyson Green Boys Club. We'd love to hear more.

Getting involved Contributing is easy. Go to our project webpage at www.nottingham.ac.uk/go/anti-apartheid. Follow the links to the 'online story form'. Or email us at anti-apartheid@nottingham.ac.uk. We are also keen to see any photos, documents or memorabilia (leaflets, badges, banners, T-shirts) you would be willing to show us.

Sharing the research findings Our dissemination plans have evolved with the impact of Covid-19. Our physical exhibition, originally scheduled for Nottingham area libraries from October 2020, has been postponed to 2021. In the meantime, we will produce an online taster this Autumn. Selected stories of anti-apartheid activism will be published on historypin.org, 'pinned' to notable places and spaces in Nottingham city and county. Interested users are encouraged to comment on each pinned vignette, adding their own memories or opinions.

*Dr Kate Law and Lisa Clarkson
University of Nottingham
August 2020*

Fighting the Colour Bar on Nottinghamshire's Buses

The Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963 has been rightly lauded as a landmark in the fight against racial discrimination when the city's black community boycotted buses and blockaded roads. In Nottingham the fight to bring an end to the Colour Bar on the city's buses began nearly ten years earlier.

"I applied for a job as a bus conductor and was told that I wasn't intelligent enough to be a conductor," recalled George Powe, who was to go on to become a Maths teacher.¹

"I remember the job we had to get people working on the Nottingham Corporation Buses, even with a Labour controlled council. They seemed afraid we might drink out of the same cups."²

The records of Nottingham and District Trades Council (NTUC)³ through 1954 record the fight to kick out the Colour Bar.



In April 1954 reports of discrimination had reached the NTUC executive, with the Secretary, Jack Charlesworth receiving allegations from the Council of Social Services. It was agreed to arrange a meeting with Mr de Souza of the Colonial Office to discuss the matter. However by the end of the year the Secretary could report in the Annual Report: "It gives us no cause for gratification to relate that prejudice against the employment of coloured workers amongst a certain section of local workers has occupied much of the time of the Council during 1954."

At the 5th May Executive Committee (EC) a motion on "Racial Discrimination" was submitted by the Nottingham branch of the Clerical and Administrative Workers Union (CAWU) for the May Council agenda. In addition a Colour Bar Sub-Committee was set up, to hold its first meeting on 14th July; appointing Mrs M. Shaw (CAWU), Miss Ellis (Tobacco Workers Union) and Mr L. Jacobs (Tailors and Garment Workers Union) to this committee.

On 19th May 1954 the Council, attended by 102 delegates, considered the motion on "Racial Discrimination" moved by Mrs Mickie Shaw. Carried by 100 votes to 2 against it was to represent an important stand against Colour Bar.

"That this Trades Council expresses grave concern at reports that racial discrimination is being practised in Nottingham and that Colonial workers are finding difficulty in obtaining employment.

Council declares its opposition to the colour bar in any form, it recognises the rights of all workers to earn a living, irrespective of race or colour and condemns the action of employers and trades people who discriminate against coloured people.

Council records its intention to render all possible assistance to colonial workers in Nottingham to ensure that they have every opportunity of securing employment and of enjoying full Trade Union rights and conditions and calls upon all local employers and trade associations to co-operate in the endeavour to help the colonial people in Nottingham to fully integrate themselves with the rest of the community."

1 p.385 Edit. Ruth I Johns "St Ann's, Nottingham: inner-city voices" 2006 Nottingham

2 p.27 quoted in Edit. Andrina Louis "Trailblazers"(1997) Nottinghamshire County Council

3 Records of Nottingham and District Trades Union Council , Nottingham University Archives

Copies of the Motion were widely circulated, with "Socialist Outlook" headlining "Nottingham Fights Colour Bar: Trades Council Takes A Lead"⁴

Nottingham City Transport was specifically in the firing line. The Trades Council had already been heavily concerned throughout 1953 over the abolition of cheap fares and the threats to end night buses for shift workers and were calling for "an enquiry into the administration and structure of the City Transport Department". Meeting the East Midlands Traffic Commissioner the NTUC made clear: "In our view the wages are insufficient and most certainly this opinion is reflected in the turnover of labour and the scarcity of bus crews." Despite crew shortages Nottingham City Transport would not employ black workers. As Birmingham Daily Post was to report on 7th December 1954 "Nottingham drivers and conductors have expressed unwillingness to work with coloured people."

The TGWU delegates representing transport staff had a poor record of attendance at NTUC meetings and failed to respond to the Secretary's letters through June, July and August. It was not until November that a letter from the TGWU (5/91 branch) was reported to Council stating its "regretted intention to disaffiliate." By the end of the year three branches of the TGWU (5/91, 5/92, 5/89) had disaffiliated. As the Secretary stated in the Annual Report for that year "Each of these four disaffiliations were in consequence of Council's adherence to Trades Union Congress Policy; the Schoolmasters on the basis of their opposition to Equal Pay; the three branches of the TGWU, whilst not declaring their reasons, announced their withdrawal as a result of differences concerning the employment of coloured workers." (Though it can be noted that three new union branches affiliated by the end of 1954, leaving the total of affiliated organisations at 165.)

The NTUC had made a significant statement about the importance of a stand against racial discrimination in the workplace. However this was a serious split in the trade unions and it was to be seven years before the TGWU branches returned to the Trades Council.

Meanwhile an emergency motion in the name of the E.C. be placed before Council was presented by Mrs M. Shaw.

"That this Trades Council recommends the City Labour Party to take such action on the City Council as is necessary to remove any racial discrimination that may exist on the City's municipal undertakings."

It was carried by 90 votes to 3 against.

The fight was now also taken into the City Labour Party and Labour-controlled Nottingham Council. Its Transport Committee met and agreed that coloured people should be employed. In early December 1954 it was reported: "Nottingham City Transport decided yesterday to send a deputation to meet members of the Transport Committee to discuss the "colour bar" question."⁵ However a change of policy by the City Council was not the same as its implementation.

The views of the bus crews and their TGWU representatives remained unchanged. Jack Charlesworth remembered that the City Council "started employing coloured people on Nottingham City Transport and the union objected, said they weren't going to have them."⁶

A similar situation existed in other parts of the country. Early in 1954, a controversy developed over "the employment of coloured colonials in Birmingham as drivers and conductors on municipal transport. They had previously been employed on maintenance work but not work that would bring them into

4 "Socialist Outlook" 28h May 1954

5 Birmingham Daily Post 7th December 1954

6 p.72 Jack Charlesworth "Fighting in the Byways" Labour Research Department

contact with the public.”⁷ In 1955 Wolverhampton Transport Committee, which also faced understaffing, reported that it was “not prepared to agree to a demand by the TGWU that the number of coloured workers employed in their undertaking should not exceed five per cent of the total”... and “reaffirmed their opposition to the colour bar.”⁸

The objections appeared to be that “if the number of drivers and conductors was brought up to full establishment by employing colonials, then opportunities for earning considerable sums as overtime would be reduced.”⁹ Similar arguments would have been used in the Nottingham TGWU branches. But underlying these arguments lay a good measure of racial prejudice.

The newly established Nottingham Consultative Committee for the Welfare of Coloured People (NCCWCP) joined the call for an end to the colour bar in September 1955. In reply to a letter from the Committee the Transport Manager explained that “the training of coloured workers as drivers was still subject to negotiations between TGWU and the Department and, as a result, it was impossible to give the Committee any assurances about future recruitment policy.” The TGWU replied similarly in December. Eventually, in January 1956, a further letter was received from the City Transport Department saying that “in future there would be no discrimination and that coloured applicants would be treated as anyone else.”¹⁰ The City Transport Department agreed with the union “to employ coloured bus-drivers as opposed to conductors only,” though with only a limited quota being taken on for training as drivers.

Nottingham City Transport began to actively recruit black workers. “I went to the Labour Exchange and they interviewed me, tested my sums. They were not employing any black people as drivers in 1956, I was a conductor,” recalled Dick Skyers who arrived in U.K. in 1956. “I got to know people who did train as drivers. Desmond was one driver I knew. Nottingham City Transport had a quota and were only going to take on a certain number, so they had about half a dozen (*black*) drivers that they trained and that was it. There was stuff about how husbands would complain that their wife turned up late at night after having done a shift with a black man.”¹¹ It would be some years before there was equal access to better paid jobs with Nottingham City Transport.

Nottingham Trades Council continued to be guided by the motion passed in May 1954 through the work of its Colour Bar sub-committee and delegates on the C.S.S., and later the NCCWCP. It continued to invite two coloured workers as observers to Council meetings and sought to encourage coloured workers to join trade unions, producing information material on trade unions or sending speakers to black workers organisations (such as W. H. Blanchard and L. Jacobs addressed meetings of the Afro West Indian Union on “Trade Unionism” in 1956). It also took up cases of discrimination in the workplace, issuing an appeal in the Evening Post in 1954 for details of the colour bar so that it can be challenged.¹² However the recorded cases that were taken up failed to achieve much success as reports were hard to prove, with employers or landlords denying prejudice, and discrimination in employment and housing not covered by legislation until the 1968 Race Relations Act.

Black workers continued to find work in low paid, often dirty and unpleasant work, in smaller and poorly organised workplaces, shunned by most white workers. Lower pay rates continued to be given to black workers for doing the same job as white work mates. Trade union practices of closed shops and the labelling of black workers as “dilutees” further isolated even those who were sympathetic to the trade unions. Racial discrimination at work continued. Going into the 1960s the Colour Bar was still practised at large firms like Raleigh and would be challenged by black workers organisations like the

7 p.267/8 Anthony H. Richmond “The Colour Problem”(1955) London

8 Birmingham Daily Post 8th September 1955

9 p. 267/8 Richmond (1955)

10 p.180/181 Daniel Lawrence “Black Migrants: white natives” 1974 Cambridge

11 Interview with the author

12 p.25 Evening Post 1954 in “Trailblazers”

Afro West Indian Union. By the early 1970s Asian workers in Nottinghamshire factories would challenge discrimination at work even against the advice of trade union officials.

In 1954 an important stand had been made but the fight against racial discrimination in employment was far from over.

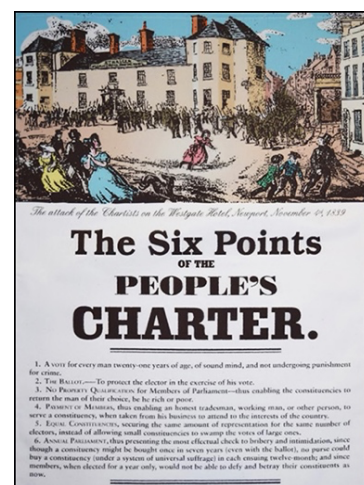
Roger Tanner

Chartist Electoral Strategy in Nottingham

The traditional ideas about why Chartists stood in elections, what was the purpose of the Charter and what was the strategic aim of Chartism are challenged in a series of interesting ideas put forward by Tom Scriven.¹³ He argues "... the overarching strategic purpose of electioneering ... was to ensure Chartist leadership of parliamentary Liberalism through either the promise of electoral endorsement or the threat of divisive opposition ... its origins (*were*) in the 1837 general election, study of which reveals that the antagonistic aspiration of forcing Radical MPs to form a new party responsive to extra-parliamentary leadership was a foundational strategy of the movement."¹⁴ This "strategic purpose" was operational according to Scriven whether the Chartists supported or opposed the Radical/Liberals at elections. If the Radicals threatened to dominate this new Parliamentary faction, they were opposed whereas if they accepted the leadership of Chartism they were supported.

Other historians, such as Dorothy Thompson had seen the People's Charter as a draft Parliamentary Bill and the petitioning was to have the Bill implemented. Scriven issues a correction: "This petitioning was in fact an attempt to directly and decisively alter the composition of Parliament..."¹⁵

There are some imprecisions in this undoubtedly fascinating argument. The putative Parliamentary faction of Chartist MPs and Radicals under the control of the Chartists never amount to much more than a handful; and sometimes the hand had lost some of its fingers. The issue of just how to measure Chartist control over Radical Parliamentary candidates is not capable of exact metrification. This certainly gives the theory the advantage of flexibility. However, it is less than precise in its operation: since a toss coming up heads "I support" or tails "I oppose" this candidate can both be claimed to be equally correct without unambiguous criteria for making the judgement. The major difficulty is determining what is this "Chartism" that had an "overarching strategic purpose"? The Chartism of Lovett and the London Working Men's Association and that of the Northern Star, Feargus O'Connor and most of the rank and file Chartists of the Midlands and the North were often not in step. Furthermore, the motivations of the rank and file were not always the same as that of the leaders. Demands for the "Bifurcation of Radicalism" were rarely heard in the streets.



¹³ Tom Scriven "Chartism's Electoral Strategy and the Bifurcation of Radicalism 1837-1852" pp. 99-126 *Labour History Review* Volume 85, Number 2, July 2020

¹⁴ Scriven op.cit. p.99

¹⁵ ibid p.101

Scriven, several times in his article, makes references to elections in Nottingham to buttress his argument. This enables an opportunity to move from broad sweep of macro analysis to a detailed examination of these local elections. For Scriven, "The sole purpose of Chartist cooperation with Liberal MPs was the preservation of Chartism's leadership of Parliament's Radicals, and to these ends cooperation could be either deployed or withheld. Because of this Chartists were far more ambivalent about supporting the CSU's candidate Thomas Gisborne in the 1843 Nottingham by-election, even though he advocated the Charter and was standing once again against a candidate who had utilized corruption."¹⁶ In 1843 the Chartists supported Gisborne but in 1847 they opposed him and ran Feargus O'Connor.

Before these two elections are examined, it is necessary to consider the abortive election of 1842. The Tory candidate was John Walter whilst the Chartists supported Joseph Sturge the originator of the Complete Suffrage Union. The election was corrupt and rough even by Nottingham standards.¹⁷ O'Connor came to support Sturge against Walter. O'Connor and Sturge addressed a meeting of several thousands in the market place. Showing typical physical bravery, O'Connor led a charge against the Tory hired thugs who were attacking the meeting and drove the "lambs" away. Sturge, a Quaker and pacifist, quietly absented himself from the mayhem.¹⁸ Walter won by 84 votes but was then unseated because of his bribing of electors.

Walter stood again in the rerun 1843 election and was opposed by Thomas Gisborne, a radical who supported the points of the Charter, or possibly only some of them, but was also a firm believer in laissez-faire and the virtues of the market. He was connected by marriage to the rich cotton manufacturing Evans family of Darley Dale. Gisborne was not quite a knight in shining armour if the election was primarily about opposition to corruption. He had first entered Parliament when he bought the voters of Stafford where votes were relatively cheap to buy. He defended this since it allowed men of talent to outflank local controlling interests. The Cavendish family did not regard him as "reputable". Disraeli, however, was impressed by him as a performer on the floor of the Commons especially when "he is tipsy and is not prepared".¹⁹ High praise indeed!

Gisborne was supported by the big guns of Chartism. At the nomination meeting O'Connor got Gisborne off the hook when he was questioned about how complete his support for the Charter actually was. A huge meeting was held in the Market Place and a crowd of ten thousand was claimed. The line up to endorse Gisborne included Feargus O'Connor, Thomas Slingsby Duncombe (the Chartist supporting MP), Thomas Cooper and George Julian Harney. Gisborne won by 1839 votes to Walter's 1728.²⁰

Fissures soon occurred between Gisborne and local Chartists over employment rights. This period was one of reciprocal benevolence: manufacturing Liberals were appalled by the difficulties of agricultural workers, whereas Tory landowners found the distress of the factory worker anguishing. Benjamin Humphries, secretary of the framework knitters' union and a Chartist, drew up a petition to ask the Commons to look into the conditions of the stockingers.²¹ A Commission was set up and Mr Richard Muggerridge was sent to make an

¹⁶ *ibid* p.117

¹⁷ Julian Atkinson and Roger Tanner: *Chartism in Nottingham: Themes and Overview*, Mansfield 2020 p.14

¹⁸ *Northern Star* 4 June 1842

¹⁹ <http://historyofparliamentonline.org>

²⁰ *Nottingham Review* 7 April 1843

²¹ *N.R.* 21 April 1843

inspection. At a meeting of the union to discuss this, the Chartist George Woodward explained how necessary such a Commission was. Johnathan Barber, a Chartist stockinger, agreed but warned them not to expect too much. The precondition for advance was the Charter.²² The mantra that the Charter came first and only then could reforms take place that alleviated the condition of the hard pressed workers became less valid as some reforms were passed in the 1840's. The rank and file of Nottingham Chartism were mainly desperately poor framework knitters. Help with their economic situation became as important as an extension of voting rights.

A further example where Chartists were sharply differentiated from the middle-class on the issue of employment legislation was when James Sweet, a local Chartist leader, opposed night working in factories.²³ He also called for shorter hours for shop-men and warehousemen, but warned that this could not be resolved until the workers had obtained their political rights. He ended with the classic formula: "I remain...the advocate of a fair day's wage for a fair day's work."²⁴ The Chartists held a public meeting in favour of the Ten Hour Bill which limited the hours of work. A resolution was carried calling on the Whig M.P. Gisborne, who had been elected with Chartist support, to vote for the Bill.²⁵ Gisborne refused.

The next attempt to legislate for the framework knitters was Sir Henry Helford's Bill which was intended to abolish frame rent and limit the ability of employers to impose stoppages on the wages of the workers. The union and the Chartists held a meeting to support the Bill where Jonathan Barber and James Sowter spoke. Sowter pointed out the Halford was "an out and out Tory but he did not care if Halford was the devil as long as he did the poor any good."²⁶ The sitting Whig MP Gisborne voted against the Bill which fell. O'Connor announced he would stand in Nottingham against Gisborne.²⁷

In 1847 the Chartists supported O'Connor and the Tory Walter against Gisborne and John Hobhouse for the two member constituency of Nottingham. This was because Gisborne, despite his support for an extension of the suffrage, had opposed the Halford Framework knitters Bill. O'Connor's election victory in July 1847 was unexpected. He had spent most of his time on Land Plan business away from Nottingham. The *Northern Star* did not even send a reporter and was forced to lift an article straight from *The Times*. The two Whig candidates had not bothered to canvass and the Tory was unable even to attend the hustings.²⁸ The two Whig candidates both had problems: Gisborne had not voted for the Framework Knitters Bill which aggrieved the Chartists; Sir John Cam Hobhouse had voted for the Education Bill which favoured the Church of England, so many Dissenters would not support him. The Tory Walter supported the Framework Knitters Bill but, unlike Gisborne, did not support an extension of the franchise.

In the July 1847 election O'Connor was in a de facto alliance with the Tory Walter. The nomination meeting crowd was hostile to Gisborne. A local Chartist leader William Hemm accused him of not supporting the Framework Knitters Bill and calling the stockingers "a profligate class". Gisborne made his case but was interrupted with shouts of "frame rent". He was in favour of extended suffrage but had opposed the Ten Hours Bill since it was

²²N.R. 24 November 1843

²³ N.R. 19 January 1844

²⁴ N.R. 9 February 1844

²⁵ N.R. 12 April 1844

²⁶N.R. 9 April 1847

²⁷N.R. 11 June 1847

²⁸Malcolm Chase: *Chartism a new history*, Manchester, 2007, p 283

"oppressive to the working classes." The Bill would have shortened the working hours and that would mean that workers could not earn sufficient to feed their families. There were then cries of "The framework-knitters bill – let's have that." Gisborne answered that he had opposed that bill as imperfect. Also, he voted against "the education of the people being undertaken by Government... the Government take it out of taxes, it must first come out of your pockets..." O'Connor waded in to attack him for refusing to support the Halford Framework Knitters Bill. Walter and O'Connor were elected and Gisborne was defeated despite his support for the points of the Charter.²⁹

Chartism incorporated many policy goals and on some occasions getting "universal" suffrage was not the priority. The issue of control of the Parliamentary radical faction that Scriven advances as of strategic importance appears not to have featured in this election. It was the economic issues that motivated the Chartist rank and file as much as an extended suffrage, and far more than building a faction of compliant MPs in faraway Westminster. Scriven does make a good case that the national Chartist leadership was anxious to avoid the Radical/Whig tail wagging the dog of Chartism; but such plans were overridden by the immediate needs of the Chartist workers of Nottingham.

Julian Atkinson

Greetings to our friends in NDLHS from the Scottish Labour History Society!

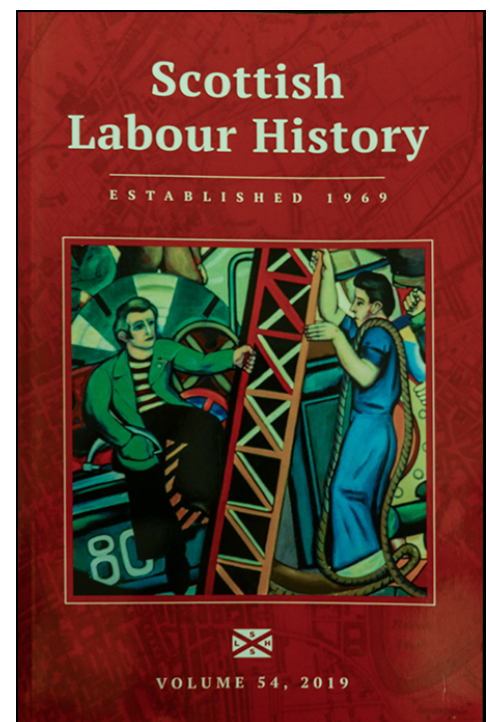
The Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH) aside, we are the oldest labour history organisation in the UK. Formed in 1961 as the Scottish Committee of the SSLH, an amicable autonomy established the Scottish Labour History Society (SLHS) in 1965, thus preceding the rest of Scotland in devolution by over thirty years.

Sadly, Ian MacDougall, our founder and Secretary for over thirty years was lost to coronavirus this year, aged 86, leaving a published legacy of almost thirty volumes.

In 1969, SLHS commenced publication of the Scottish Labour History Journal (SLH), initially cyclo-styled, now a 200-page, peer-reviewed annual production soon to reach its fifty-fifth edition. Under the joint editorship of Professors Gregor Gall and Jim Phillips, the new issue carries a major analysis of the 1820 Rising by the outstanding Marxist thinker Neil Davidson (who also died this year) with Jamie Allison, an extended review of new histories of the rising by W. Hamish Fraser, profiles of labour movement feminists Jessie Stephen and Helen Crawford, book reviews by Neville Kirk and Sheila Rowbotham, with many other features.

Grant funding from the Amiel and Melburn Trust has enabled SLHS to make available on our website – www.scottishlabourhistorysociety.scot – the entire archive of SLH: its some two hundred historical studies have already become an authoritative research source worldwide. Subscription to SLH – and to the archive – is free to all SLHS members.

Whilst our output of occasional publications cannot yet match NDLHS's excellent series of pamphlets, we published in 2017 "Cowie Miners, Polmaise Colliery and the 1984-85 Miners' Strike", and marked the



²⁹N.R. 30 July 1847

centenary of John Maclean's renowned Speech From the Dock at his sedition trial by reprinting the text with accompanying essays. Plans for the publication of "Banner Tales", an illustrated study of Scottish campaign banners, have had to be deferred but it is hoped to proceed as soon as practicable. Meanwhile, SLHS has organised with its author the publication of "'Sanny' Sloan, the Miners' MP", a profile of the miners' leader and left-wing MP Alexander Sloan by his great-granddaughter, Esther Davies.

Lockdown and its aftermath have drastically curtailed the public activities which normally form the core of the SLHS agenda: conferences, seminars, lectures and labour heritage walks have lapsed and provide a busy schedule to revive and resume when conditions allow. Our energies have therefore been devoted to the production of this year's SLH Journal and, particularly, to the further development of our website. Initiated in its new format last year, it now includes a regular newsletter and subscription and publication purchase facilities.

Individual members of SLHS have successfully seen projects come to fruition, notably Alex Cathcart, whose film "A Lion Rose in Paisley" dramatically narrates the life of William Gallacher, Communist MP for West Fife, 1935-50 (and Paisley "buddy") and can be seen on <https://www.renfrewshireleisure.com/ren/u>. Authors in our ranks include Ian Gasse, who has published an illustrated guide to the history of labour in his home town of Dumfries, and Ewan Gibbs, whose study of de-industrialisation, "Coal Country" will be published by the University of Liverpool Press as a free e-book next year.

Although enjoying wide support from trade union and labour movement organisations, SLHS is a independent organisation funded and sustained by its subscribers. Our individual subscription rates remain at £15 per year (£10 for unwaged): organisational subscriptions are £48 (print & online), or £30 (print only). Members receive SLH Journal as part of their subscription, and full access to our website as described above. Despite present circumstances, we receive a steady stream of new members via our website, and our welcome is always ready for more!

STEWART MACLENNAN, Chair
Scottish Labour History Society.
(stewart_macleNNAN@btinternet.com)

'The Air of Freedom' The Derbyshire Boot and Shoemakers Strike 1918-1920

An extraordinary event took place in Derbyshire in March 1918. Boot and shoemakers at 8 factories in Eyam and Stoney Middleton came out on strike. The strike was to last nearly 2 ½ years, and the workers also started their own cooperative factory.

How was it that one of the longest strikes in the footwear trade, and one of the longest involving a group of women workers in any industry, could take place in two small villages, in an area without a strong Trade Union presence, and start during a World War?

To begin to answer, it's important to know something about the local footwear trade at the time, and about the impact of the war in the villages and on the industry.

The footwear trade in Eyam and Stoney Middleton

Shoe and boot making were already well established in both villages in the 19th century. Materials, tools and machinery were available e.g. leather from a local tannery, and suppliers in the East Midlands, the centre of the national trade. There was a skilled workforce, used to factory conditions, and with experience of making and repairing shoes in a 'cottage industry'. Limited local employment opportunities, and a weak trade union presence meant it was also easier for employers to pay low wages. Buildings were available for conversion into footwear factories such as a former silk mill, a corn mill, and an old school. There were ready markets for work boots, for example in local industries

like quarrying, spar mining, agriculture, and the metal trades in nearby towns. There was also potential for wholesale manufacture of shoes, both for the expanding domestic market and for exports (especially to the empire). There were also men with the money or access to money to invest.

Mason Bros & Lennon, which some readers will know as the present-day Wm. Lennon's boot factory, was one of six firms in Stoney Middleton, making mainly work boots before the First World War. In neighbouring Eyam, there were 3 main companies producing shoes. The fortunes of local firms fluctuated, as they faced competition with bigger companies in places like Northampton which had more modern machinery. But the overall growth of the industry in the late 19th and early 20th century enabled local businesses to establish themselves. One Derbyshire newspaper described them as 'a thorn in the flesh' of the bigger firms, probably because their lower wages and longer hours gave them a competitive edge on prices.

In the 1911 census there were 322 people in the two villages recorded as working in the footwear trade, around a fifth of the population. Four in ten households had at least one person, and often several family members in the trade. Many of the census entries showed fathers and daughters both working in a boot or shoe factory. It was apparently common for men to be told by their employer to make sure their daughters started work at the factory as soon as they left school, with a threat of the sack if they failed to comply.

Working conditions

The union organiser, the appropriately named Johnnie Buckle, said the working conditions in Eyam and Stoney were amongst the worst he'd seen. He called it 'another Eyam plague'. The typical working week was around 61 hours at the start of the war, about 58-59 by 1918, but often women were taking work home to finish, in order to eke out a slightly higher wage so their hours were longer. Their conditions could be compared to the 'sweating' prevalent in trades like tailoring at the time. Intense labour conditions, a poor working environment, low wages paid by the piece, a ready supply of labour and a lack of trade union organisation were characteristic of both factory and home working.

Harry Dawson, a clicker at Ridgeway Brothers in Eyam for over 30 years was sacked for alleged union activity. He wrote a detailed description of the labour process in the factories at the time, a rare 'worker's eye view'. He described how 'girls who sit over sewing machines become round shouldered and lose their eyesight by continual straining when the light is bad. One of the contemptible actions of our firm is refusing to light the gas at early morning or on a dull day.' Harry was married to Margaret Dawson, who before the strike was periodically an 'out-worker' at home, stitching uppers on children's shoes for the factories when they had orders to meet, a practice known locally as 'felling'. It was very poorly paid (4½d for an evening in 1906). During the strike, her daughter Doris recalls her mother vainly trudging around the bigger houses trying to get domestic work. They were desperate for money. Doris wrote a wonderful memoir about growing up in Eyam at the time of the war and the strike. Her book, 'Tunes on a Penny Whistle' inspired me (and my colleague Phil Taylor, co-author of our book) to do further research. Doris was later one of the many daughters, mentioned earlier, whom the employers tried to get into their factories by threatening the fathers. Teenagers, as young as 12 or 13, boys as well as girls were paid from about 6 shillings a week in 1918. They played a crucial role during the war especially, when many young men joined or were conscripted into the armed forces. And the younger children earned pennies running errands for neighbours and doing other odd jobs, to help keep household budgets afloat.

The war

The war had a big impact on the trade nationally, on local factories and on village life. The National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives (NUBSO) had over a fifth of its members in the forces (around 20,000) of whom 2,591 were killed and over 3,600 were injured. Most of the younger men in the 2

villages either joined in 1914/15 or were conscripted in 1916, and older men were brought into the forces as the age range for conscription was increased.

After conscription came in, employers put appeals for exemptions for essential workers to the local tribunals. But when their employees started to join the union, they stopped doing this. It would be up to individuals, sometimes with union support to make claims. In Eyam, about a third of the men who signed up were from the shoe factories. Something like 47 million pairs of boots were made during the war (*Imperial War Museum estimate*), mostly in the East Midlands. Heginbotham's in Stoney Middleton had a contract to make army boots; Mason Brothers and Lennon were engaged in repairs of army boots.

Women took on jobs previously done by men. Some women went to work in Sheffield on munitions. Factories not involved in war work had problems getting materials and labour, as priority was given to war contracts. At least 2 of the local firms were shut for large parts of the war because they didn't have enough workers.

The Union starts to organise

Companies doing war work were supposed to adhere to nationally agreed wage rates and hours. NUBSO wanted to make sure all firms were complying, to avoid undercutting. The union sent its district representative, John Buckle (at the time a branch official in Leeds) to Stoney Middleton in 1916 to try and get Heginbotham's to come into line – so that they didn't threaten his members jobs elsewhere. Buckle succeeded in getting the company to raise wages, but struggled to recruit members to the union. However, he saw potential to do so and returned in December 1917, this time as one of the new national organisers for the union. His task was assisted by the big increase in union membership across the country, especially amongst women workers.

Due to the pioneering work of Mary Bell in Leicester and others, some 20,000 women joined NUBSO, about a quarter of the membership by 1918. There was also a breakaway women's shoemakers union under the leadership of Lizzie Wilson, also based in Leicester. This probably encouraged the women in Eyam and Stoney Middleton to feel more confident about joining a union and thinking they could achieve something. Nonetheless, joining a trade union in a small village was still a big decision given the employers' power over jobs, and also as landlords and influential people in the community. A letter sent to one of the local newspapers gives a telling indication of what this must have felt like for the new union members:

".....those who know the employers ... know that their deep rooted objection to a trade union is because it means an end to their autocratic powers and an end to victimisation of any of their operatives who dare to cross their wishes either in the factory, the club room, the institute or in the social or parochial life."

The crucial breakthrough came on 3rd January 1918, when a meeting for women workers was held with Buckle in the Bull's Head in Eyam and 46 of them decided to join NUBSO. A group of men had joined two days previously, but the women's decision was vital because they were now a majority in the factories and without them the union couldn't have got far. It also challenged the argument heard elsewhere in the country that women were being used to undercut men's wages. (*In our mobile exhibition and in the book, we have a list of all the local NUBSO members we could trace from the time of the strike.*)

The employers' response to workers joining NUBSO was however swift and stark. They sacked 11 workers, including 2 teenagers, who they believed were the main union activists. They also tried to get workers to sign documents saying they wouldn't join the union and threatened to close factories if they didn't sign.

Many of the workers wanted to strike straight away to get their colleagues reinstated, but John Buckle persuaded them to wait and see if the union's efforts to secure talks were successful. Arbitration had been standard practice in the industry since the 1890s, and had been reinforced by the

wartime agreements between the Government and unions, whereby strikes in essential industries were outlawed, and all disputes were supposed to go to arbitration. The local employers weren't in the *national* employer's federation, and therefore didn't feel bound by the arbitration procedures. But the union wanted to ensure it had done everything possible to try and avert a strike – in order to garner the maximum support, comply with wartime agreements, and be able to lay responsibility for the dispute on the shoulders of the employers.

In March 1918 the outcome of the war was in the balance, and the difficulties of workers taking any action that might be seen to undermine the war effort were significant. The union certainly wanted to avoid a strike if possible. But they also wanted decent jobs and trade union rights on the 'home front' and felt they owed it to their members in the forces to hold things 'in trust' for those who returned after the war. Also, by March 1918, it seems none of the local factories had war contracts (Heginbotham's had finished theirs), so there wouldn't be a direct impact on war production. Union officials felt they couldn't allow the employers to get away with sacking members and refusing recognition of the union.

There was a debate in the unions and the women's movement at the time about how far workers could or should go in taking industrial action during the war. In Sheffield, there'd been a big strike in 1916 over the conscription of an engineer named Leonard Hargreaves; a new shop stewards' movement was developing, and criticism of the way the war was being conducted were growing. But this was still very sensitive ground, and of course following the Bolshevik revolution, Government surveillance of industrial unrest at home was on heightened alert.

In Eyam and Stoney Middleton, NUBSO had 4 demands: recognition of the union; reduction of hours from 59 to 52.5; payment of a national war bonus; and reinstatement of all those discharged for joining the union.

Wages were low in comparison with well-organized areas – 36s a week for men locally, compared to 75-100s in Leicester; 12-16s for women compared to 50s in the better paid districts. Hours were longer; working conditions were unhealthy. Pulmonary TB was notably prevalent in the trade – the average age of death was just 44 for men, 45 for women so the demand for shorter hours was especially important.

Workers put their demands to the bosses in the factories, but to no avail. National union officials came up from London and visited all the companies. None of the employers would speak to NUBSO. "We'll have nowt to do wi' the union" was the response reported by the union organisers. Two attempts were made by Edward Poulton, NUBSO General Secretary to get the Government's Chief Industrial Commissioner to intervene and seek a joint meeting with the employers but the employers said they didn't see the need for a meeting. It was only when all these attempts had been made and had been rebuffed by the employers that the union decided strike action was their only option.

The Strike Starts

The law at that time required workers to individually hand in their notice before they could go on strike. The majority of workers in the 8 factories operating duly gave their notice, with the strike due to start in Eyam on March 7th and in the Stoney Middleton factories the day after. From the very start of the strike, workers held regular



parades to garner wider support and maintain morale. The parades were lively community events, with bands playing, and young children and other family members and friends joining in. Women were very prominent, often dressed in their best clothes and hats.

Writing about the National Federation of Women Workers, historian Cathy Hunt describes the sudden welling up of confidence amongst women workers in the years up to the War.

"They marched in their Sunday best, picketed, organized and raised funds with gusto."

For many women, she noted, strikes represented the first time in their lives that they had collectively challenged authority. A glimpse of this spirit is evident in local newspaper reports and some of the photographs of the Derbyshire strikers.

The strikers' appeals for support generally had a good response. They got donations from other NUBSO branches, and a lot of financial support from workers in Sheffield, especially from members of the National Union of General Workers (NUGW, formerly the Gasworkers) and the Workers' Union, many of whom worked in armaments and munitions.

The strikers' appeal to the Railway Workers (NUR) for practical support however wasn't successful. It's not clear why this was the case, as rank and file NUR members actively supported strikes elsewhere such as the Burston school strike in Norfolk. Had the NUR taken action it could have turned the fortunes of the Eyam and Stoney Middleton strike because of the importance of the Hope Valley rail line, both for supplies and sales.

The members got strike pay - £1 for married men, 15s for single men, 12s 6d for women, but with prices having doubled during the war, families were struggling to make ends meet. They had to maintain rent payments because many of the homes were owned by the employers or their friends. Eviction was an ever present threat.

Several attempts were made to resolve the dispute in the early months. Firstly, there was an intervention by a local vicar, John Riddlesden, who invited the strikers into his church (St Martins, Stoney Middleton) and appealed to the consciences of the employers. He may have had one convert, Heginbotham's, the company which had obtained a war contract in 1916. They made a settlement with the union in May 1918, the only company to do so. This was probably a pragmatic move, more than anything else - if the firm wanted more war contracts it needed to be paying union rates. But NUBSO achieved a large wage rise and shorter hours. The union hoped this would set a precedent and the other companies would follow suit, but none of them did.

Will Thorne MP, leader of the Gasworkers, now the NUGW, visited Eyam to lend his support. NUGW branches were also set up in Eyam and Bradwell with the help of NUBSO. Thorne asked questions in Parliament and tried again to get the Ministry of Labour to intervene but was unsuccessful. A local magistrate and Sheffield cutlery employer, William Nixon who lived in Eyam offered to mediate. He entered into extensive correspondence with Edward Poulton, NUBSO general secretary, and local employers in an effort to bring the two sides together. He also met union officials. Nixon felt the union was being flexible and constructive, but became appalled and exasperated at the employers' attitude. He felt they misunderstood what the union was trying to do and were being intransigent in refusing to meet the union or even go into a mediation process. He was very worried for the future of the villages, the possible collapse of the trade locally, and the social tensions that were emerging. His efforts were supported by the union, but spurned by the employers who thought the coming winter would cause the strike to collapse. (1)

The employers were wrong. The strikers remained solid and they continued into 1919 and the following year. This demonstrated a remarkable determination and organisational effort, given the absence of a strong union base in the local villages, what Doris Coates called 'the privations brought about by the

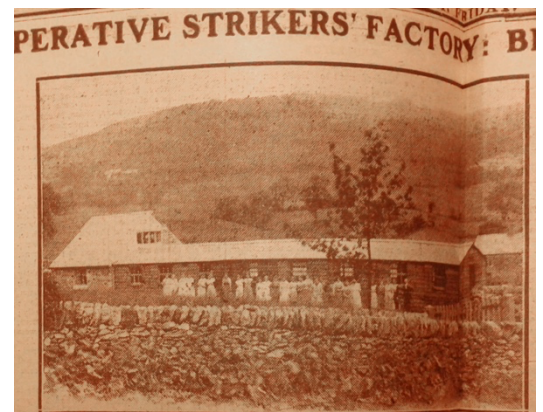
war', the food shortages, and the 'Spanish flu' epidemic which had a devastating effect in Britain (with approximately 220,000 deaths), and across the world.

A national agreement between footwear employers and NUBSO on wages and conditions in 1919, showed how big the gap was between the Eyam and Stoney firms and other areas. The minimum wage for men over 23 was raised to 56s a week, and for women over 20 to 30s. With piecework, it was expected that many workers would earn an additional 25%. Hours were reduced to 48. This compares to the 36s a week earned by men and 12-16s for women in the local factories before the strike, and hours ranging from 55 to 59. (Employers did improve wages and reduce hours in some of the factories during the strike, but made clear the new rates were only for workers who didn't join the union and the strike.)

The Cooperative Factory

What the workers did next was also a testimony to their determination and inventiveness – they set up their own factory.

The factory was to run on cooperative lines. Money was raised from supporters, from the Daily Herald newspaper, and a loan from the union which enabled John Buckle to buy an old army hut. Around 40 women were employed on trade union rates and hours, an enormous improvement on their previous jobs and a welcome boost after 2 years struggling to make ends meet. They started well and began to show what an alternative form of production and organisation could look like. (2)



In light of the new enterprise, and the fact that many of the men had by now found other work e.g. in spar mines and gravel pits, NUBSO decided to call off the strike in the summer of 1920. Only one firm had settled with the union, but the other companies were now paying higher wages and had reduced hours. Despite their earlier threats to union members, and blacklisting of some workers, the firms did start to take back other strikers, though they wouldn't recognise the union.

After its early promise, the new factory started to find its position becoming more difficult. There was continued opposition from local employers. The industry went into recession, and the cooperative struggled to get orders and build up its capital. Buckle had planned to build a further factory in Eyam so that all the strikers could be employed and a complete production process could be established rather than just a finishing operation. This proved to be too ambitious in the circumstances. The factory's main customer pulled out, and the difficult decision was made to close. The co-op was eventually wound up in 1923. The long struggle which had started 5 years earlier was over. The strike had failed, with the exception of one firm, to win its demands. But the strikers had still achieved a great deal, and they left a legacy which would be picked up by others and would bear fruit in later years.

The Legacy

Many of the strikers got involved in the 1918 election campaign of Charles White – Independent Liberal candidate in West Derbyshire, standing against the Earl of Kerry, brother in law of the Duke of Devonshire. White pulled off an extraordinary victory – the first ever defeat for the Devonshire/Cavendish family who'd controlled the seat for 300 years. Doris Coates said 'working people have challenged the rich and powerful and triumphed.' (There was no Labour candidate – White's refusal to back Lloyd George's coalition with the Tories, and his support for women's suffrage and many Labour policies would have won him Labour supporters). Millions of women over 30 could now vote in the General Election and White reckoned they were a crucial factor in his success.

The strike unintentionally became part of a massive wave of social and industrial unrest which swept across the country after the end of the war and lasted for over 3 years. The boot and shoemakers strike inspired other workers in the area to join unions. The Eyam NUBSO branch helped in the establishment of local branches of the National Union of General Workers. The NUGW organised in a diverse range of local industries, including limestone quarries, spar mines, the Derwent Valley Water Board, the Edale cotton mill and lead mines in Bradwell. They secured good wage increases for many workers

It's hard to trace the impact of the strike on the children of those involved in the strike and co-op factory, but it is unlikely that Doris Coates was the only one to have been inspired to seek out new horizons and to help others,.

" My parents and their friends taught me how to survive through self-help, and to fight injustice as they had done by their involvement in industrial action and political struggles above all their sense of humour and capacity for fun had prevented me from becoming too solemn."

Doris went on to become the first woman accepted at Goldsmith's College on a teacher training course who hadn't been to a grammar school.

Johnny Buckle, who had developed a very close bond with workers and their families in the two villages became a Labour MP for Eccles in 1922 and was in Parliament when the first Labour Government took office. He died aged just 58 in 1925.

During the Second World War a new NUBSO branch was established in the area. The union succeeded in getting recognition from all four of the firms which had survived, and national wages and conditions were agreed locally. The seeds sown over 20 years earlier had at last borne fruit!

Some of the same workers involved in the original dispute in 1918 rejoined the union and helped re-establish a local branch. It survived after the war and workers at Wm. Lennon's (the only one of the original firms still producing in the 21st century) have been represented by Community, the union which now organises in the boot and shoe trade. (NUBSO went through several mergers and its successor became part of Community in 2004. The union recruits in a diverse range of industries with a focus on linking workplace and community organising).

We had a message of solidarity from the Community union for the commemorative events held in 2018 to mark the 100th anniversary of the strike:

"We pay tribute to the strikers and their families for their courage and determination to achieve the basic right to belong to a union. The strike and cooperative factory provide an inspiration for all of us today defending the rights of working people. The need for unions is greater than ever considering things like zero hours contracts, the increasing use of food banks for people to feed their families and a minimum wage that doesn't allow workers access to a decent standard of living. We stand with you in recognizing all those who paved the way."

A group of local residents came together to organise a series of commemorative events. We tried to bring the history to life, working with schools, the Stoney Middleton Heritage group, Eyam Museum and other community organisations. The highlight was a march and dramatic reconstruction of the events of April 1918 when there was a labour parade and service in support of the strike, following an invitation from the vicar of Stoney Middleton.

Commemorative exhibitions and plaques

We made two exhibitions about the strike for the 100th anniversary. One was displayed at Eyam Museum. The other is on smaller panels, so that it can be moved more easily. It has been on display in a range of local venues over the last two years. Some of the photos from the exhibition were also

put on the website of the Working Class Movement Library, as the COVID restrictions sadly prevented us from displaying the exhibition at the Library itself in Salford.

We raised money locally to pay for commemorative strike plaques. Again, the coronavirus pandemic (shades of the 'Spanish flu' of 1918-19) prevented us installing the plaques in the villages as planned this year. But hopefully we can have installation ceremonies in 2021.

"It was the lives of our people and their bread and butter we were thinking of. We were struggling to lift ourselves out ofpoverty into the fresh air of freedom." Will Thorne

Note: 'The Air of Freedom', a book about the strike written by myself and Philip Taylor is available by mail order. You can send a cheque for £8 (this includes postage) made out to S. Bond, with your address to: The Cordwainer, Unit 8, Brough Business Centre, Bradwell, Hope Valley, S33 9HG.

Steve Bond, October 2020

- 1) Nixon's correspondence, along with other key documents from the strike are available in the NUBSO archive at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick Library.
- 2) There was a very positive account of the workers' efforts in the Derby Mercury, October 1st 1920.

Chris Richardson

Chris Richardson, a committee member of the NDLS and, until recently our treasurer, has died after a long illness caused by cancer. He died peacefully on October 29th at home with those he loved around him. We send our heartfelt condolences to his partner Richard.

Chris was a long-time activist in the Labour Party as well as the LGBT and Cooperative movements. He was an historian of distinction, writing on Cooperation, Secularism, Socialism and Chartism. He will be long remembered for his book "A City of Light" - the definitive account of working class politics in Nottingham in the 1840's. He will also be remembered for his gentle, courteous and delightful presence.

A full commemoration and appreciation of his life will be held when virus restrictions allow.



Reading Matter for Lockdown

As you cannot currently buy pamphlets at our meetings, we are offering them by post with free p&p. Please note that our most recent pamphlet on Chartism has not yet been available for sale at meetings so will be new to most of you.

If you wish to buy one, please send the name or number of the pamphlet plus your name and postal address together with a cheque made out to NDLS to: **35 Compton Road, Nottingham. NG5 2NH**

Alternatively pay by BACS transfer to the NDLHS Santander Account No 29032134, sort code 09-01-29 with your surname as reference. If paying by BACS also email your order to:

rogerntanner@yahoo.co.uk

Pamphlets published by NDLHS

1. "Women in British Coal Mining", Chris Wrigley, £2.00
2. "Who Dips in the Tin? The Butty System in Notts Coalfield", Barry Johnson, £2.50
3. "Bravery and Deception: The Pentrich Revolt of 1817", Julian Atkinson, £2.00
4. "Volunteers for Liberty: Notts and Derbys Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War", £2.50
5. "Luddism in the East Midlands", Julian Atkinson and Roger Tanner, £3.00
6. "Florence Paton M.P.", Val Wood, £2.50
7. "Chartism in Nottingham", Julian Atkinson and Roger Tanner, £5.00

NDLHS Members and Supporters books/pamphlets from other publishers:

1. "Rebel's Way", Gwyneth Francis, £5
2. "Glossop's Oldest Textile Trade Unionist", Joe Doyle's interview with Mr E Watts pub. 'The Wheatsheaf' Co-op paper, February 1926, £2
3. "The Co-operative Movement in Nottingham", Christopher Richardson, £3
4. "Remembering the 1968 Revolts: Voices from Nottingham", Various, £4.99
5. "Nine Days That Shook Mansfield", Barry Johnson, £3
6. "Nottingham Miners Do Strike", Keith Stanley, £7
7. "The Lost Missionary", Chris Richardson, £2
8. "Nottingham and the Pentrich Rising of 1817", Roger Tanner, £5
9. "Pentrich to Peterloo", Ed. Richard Gaunt, £8
10. "Kettling the Unions", Alan Tuckman, £14.99
11. "How Glossop Supported the Miners", Gwyneth Francis, £3
12. "Changing Derbyshire NUM", Malcolm Ball, £5

If you wish to join/rejoin the NDLHS, please send a cheque for £10.00 payable to NDLHS to Roger Tanner at the above address.