

Wartime interrelationship of the Bevin Boys and the coalminers

(Summary of the paper given at the University of Sussex, March 2004)

©Ann Kneif (18/3/2004)

This paper is concerned with the coalmining communities during and just after the Second World War and the relationship with the Bevin Boys, who were sent into the mines by Ernest Bevin, the Minister of Labour and National Service, in an attempt to increase the production of coal. The material I am using comes from two main sources. Interviews with Bevin Boys carried out between 2000 and 2003 and information found in the Mass-Observation Archive at Sussex University, which gives a contemporary perspective.

But first a look at the background which led Bevin to take the step of directing men into the mines. At the outbreak of war the government had allowed many coal miners to join the Forces. It soon became apparent that not enough men were left in the industry. In 1941 an Essential Work Order was applied to coal mining but by 1943 there was a serious shortage of coal, which was a vital product in the war effort. A call for volunteers had not produced the required numbers and it was estimated that there was a shortfall of 50,000 miners. As a result a Mining Optants Scheme was introduced allowing men under the age of 25 (later changed to any age) to have the option of transferring to underground mining as an alternative to serving in the Forces. This, however, produced less than 3,000 new recruits. Bevin, addressing a miners' conference at Blackpool in July 1943, stated: 'At the end of this coal year there won't be enough men or boys in the industry to carry it on. It is the one great difficulty in this war effort ... At the same time we are carrying out this invasion and every bit of territory we take from the enemy we have got to find coal for ... It is quite obvious that I will have to resort to some desperate remedies during the coming year. I shall have to direct young men to you.'¹ At the end of 1943 Bevin told the House of Commons: 'I therefore propose to resort to the most impartial method of all, that of the ballot. A draw will be made from time to time of the numbers from 0 to 9 and those whose National Service Registration Certificates happen to end with the figure will be transferred to coal mining.'² These conscripts, together with the volunteers and optants, became known as Bevin Boys. The majority were young men of 18, some direct from school. They had assumed that they would be going into one of the Services and were often bitter that they were not allowed to fight for their country. As Peter M. said:

'Having been in the Army Cadet Corp I had expected to go into the Services. It was a smack in the face and very difficult to explain today. Then, having been at war for four years, with everything that Nazi Germany had thrown at us and with the recent landings in Normandy, one wanted and expected to be part of the action.'³

¹ Quoted in A. Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin – Vol.II Labour 1940 – 1945*, (London, 1967), p256

² Hansard, Volume 395, 2.12.1943, col. 521

³ Peter M., 17.8.1986, Interviewed by the Oaten Hill and District Society

In all over 40,000 men were brought into the coalmines under Bevin's scheme, which ceased in 1945 with the end of the war. The last Bevin Boys left the mines in 1948 on completion of National Service.

The Bevin Boys suddenly found themselves thrust into a completely different society from that which they had been used to. On the one side were the left-wing miners and on the other the Bevin Boys, from all different backgrounds and often unused to manual labour. To understand the reception and treatment the miners gave to the Bevin Boys it is necessary to understand the mentality of the miner and how the mining community lived. This, of course, depended to some extent on the area in which the mines were situated, although there were certain common factors. The miner's whole life centred on his work. Nearly everyone in the village in which he lived would have been to some degree dependent on the mine. The mines were often in depressed, isolated areas, where, before the war, no other employment would have been available.

Gerry G. a Bevin Boy from a middle class background and coming from the southeast had this to say about South Wales:

'You've got the coast and then you've got the valleys going up and the valleys are quite separated from each other by mountains so, although there was a valley a mile or two away from you, you had to virtually climb over a mountain to get to it or go right down the valley to Newport and then along and up the valley. So they tended to be isolated little communities and I felt so sorry for the men and women. The women in particular had a very limited life.'⁴

The constant fear of unemployment together with the daily proximity of danger, where accidents and even death were common, led to a great feeling of solidarity. As Philip C. said: 'Your life is in the hands of your friends. Because they can protect you, you must protect them. There was always the unseen danger.'⁵ The miners and their families formed a tight knit community, often going back over generations. The Bevin Boys were not used to this way of living. Gerry G. again:

'Coming from anonymous London suburbia, where we hardly knew our neighbours names, it was quite a culture shock to go to a closely knit, ... gossiping village, where everybody knew everybody else. And I was told that if a boy went out with a girl more than twice they were engaged ... I went out with the same girl twice and in the eyes of the village was engaged.'⁶

The housewife had a constant struggle to make ends meet on the miners' meagre wage. There was also the battle to keep the house clean and tidy in the coal-dust ridden environment, the constant heating of water for baths and washing and drying pit clothes. A mining engineer, speaking to a M-O investigator, gave his opinion of the conditions in the Swinton (Manchester) area.

'You have only got to go around Little Hulton and places like that to find how terrible miners' cottages can be. You have got to walk about twenty yards down the road to your lavatory, which is communal. Of course the older miners have only got intelligence as far as horse racing is concerned, and as far as home comforts go their outlook does not extend any further than the old oil lamp on the table, and the zinc tub full of hot water in front of the fire.'⁷

⁴ Interview with Gerry G., 26.3.2002

⁵ Interview with Philip C., 1.10.2002

⁶ Interview with Gerry G., 26.3.2002

⁷ Mass-Observation Archive, 64/2/B, Coalmining 1938 – 48, Mines opinions (22.5.1944)

A report by M-O in 1942 shows just how bad some of the housing could be. The following refers to Blaina, a mining village in South Wales but it could be equally applicable to other mining areas:

‘Housing conditions, generally, are very poor, in some cases quite primitive. Houses are mostly of old-fashioned design and badly in need of repairs. There are back-to-back houses, some not even official back-to-backs, but single houses divided into two, the same staircase serving both families; there are still solo dwellings, houses without through ventilation and houses with a very tiny and practically useless window let in at the back. There are other houses with their backs against a wall of earth. Few houses in the roads verging on to the main street have anything worth calling a garden.’⁸

And from the same report the words of a sanitary inspector:

‘Bathroom accommodation is inadequate, some of the smaller houses of two or three rooms have not even a sink indoors, let alone a bathroom, and pithead baths, though they are excellent, do not ... solve the problems for the rest of the family.’⁹

Other than the Miners’ Welfare, where a pint of beer and a game of cards were on offer, there was little in the way of organised entertainment. Much of the miner’s free time was spent in the open-air, gardening, racing pigeons and dogs and walking.

It was into these isolated communities that the Bevin Boy arrived. For many it was the first time away from home. John B. said: ‘(I)n those days, during the war, we hadn’t travelled very far and for me to go from Winchester, across London and to catch the steam train from Paddington up to Chesterfield was quite an experience.’¹⁰ Many were from large towns and it was the first time they had been confronted with a colliery.

A debate in the House of Commons on the mining industry brought reassurances from several MPs that their constituents would welcome the Bevin Boys. One MP said:

‘I have no doubt, however, that wherever these lads come from they will be received kindly in the coalmining areas. They will be received courteously in the villages, they will get the best lodgings that can be obtained, and they will be treated kindly by their fellow workers underground. I know of no class of people who would treat these boys more generously than the miners.’¹¹

The harshest comments from Bevin Boys came from those drafted to Wales. It appeared that the Welsh miners were more concerned than those from other areas about unemployment once the war was over. Welsh coalfields had always been the most depressed in the coalmining industry. Warwick T., who was sent to Wales, said:

‘Now this doesn’t apply to other parts of the country, but down in South Wales there was a resentment from the public at large to the fact that we were down there in the mines. We got a lot of abuse in the streets and it’s understandable because the wives thought that we’d come

⁸ Mass-Observation Archive, Report No. 1498, Blaina

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Interview with John B., 18.9.2002

¹¹ Hansard, Volume 395, 17.12.1943, col. 1847

down there to take away the jobs from their own kith and kin, from their husbands, from their brothers, from their sons and so on. So there was a certain amount of resentment.¹²

The Welsh miners had long memories when it came to past confrontations and they had never forgotten that Churchill had sent in the troops as reinforcements for the police after miners' riots at Tonypany in November 1910, following a strike by 15,000 men over piecework rates at the coalface imposed by the owners. The owners had attempted to bring in blackleg labour.¹³

Bevin had been keen to point out that the Bevin Boys would not be competing with the miners after the war. In areas other than Wales this seems to have been accepted. A typical comment being: 'We were not taking their jobs you see and there was no animosity at all.'¹⁴ And another:

'My relationship with the other miners was excellent. The community could not understand why inexperienced labour was being drafted into the mines when many miners were away in the Forces. However, there was no animosity towards me or my fellow draftees.'¹⁵

John B. thought he was fortunate in being sent to Nottingham.

'Because they received us well with no animosity. I mean Bevin Boys who went to Wales for instance were criminalized really. They thought they were taking their boys' jobs but it didn't happen to us. We were made most welcome.'¹⁶

Not all Bevin Boys felt they were badly treated in Wales. Gerry G. was more pragmatic about the experience of being sent to the Welsh coalfields.

'It was a culture shock of course for us, middle class schoolboys from suburban London to be thrust into a Welsh coalmining community. A culture shock I suspect as much for them as for us. I expected a certain amount of hostility, because believe it or not coalmining is quite a skilled industry. You are not only shovelling coal but you have to be something of a carpenter, something of a builder. All sorts of skills are needed to be a coalminer and we had none of them. Nor of course did we have the muscles. We were really quite weaklings compared with the miners themselves. So I was expecting a somewhat hostile reception, but in fact we were warmly welcomed, the reason being that the Welsh coalminers felt, and I think with reason, that nobody in the outside world really understood them and their problems. ... And they looked upon us as it were as ambassadors, who would go back to the wide world and tell the wide world what coalmining was really like.'¹⁷

This opinion was borne out by a South Wales miner, who told the M-O investigator: 'We welcomed you chaps into the mines. Because you will be able to tell people the facts in circles in which we do not move.'¹⁸

If a Bevin Boy was not pulling his weight at work it is understandable that the miner would feel less friendly towards him. In the words of Peter H.:

¹² Interview with Warwick T., 18.4.2002

¹³ Horner, A., *Incorrigible Rebel*, (London, 1960), pp15-16

¹⁴ A Questionnaire was returned from 76 Bevin Boys in September and October 2002. This is a comment in an open-ended question asking about relationships.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Interview with John B., 18.9.2002

¹⁷ Interview with Gerry G., 26.3.2002

¹⁸ Mass-Observation Archive, 64/2/B, Coalmining 1938 – 48, Mines opinions

‘You had to do your job because if you shim shranked [sic] at all then you were beyond the pale, but that was because that was the ethos of the miner. Everyone pulled his weight. Everyone depended on everybody else. And once you understood that, that it was necessary to pull your weight otherwise you’d be a burden on everybody else, once you accepted that, and they saw you accepted that and you were ready to pull your weight, then you were in. You were part of the mining community.’¹⁹

The majority of Bevin Boys had not wanted to go to the mines, which had some bearing on their attitude. As one Bevin Boy said:

‘Relations between Bevin Boys and miners were rather prickly, most [Bevin Boys] were furious that they were not allowed into the army and their manner was deliberately provocative.’²⁰

Others found that if their attitude were positive they would be far more likely to be accepted by the miners. Ken P. was certainly of this opinion and he is still in touch with some of the people he met as a Bevin Boy.

‘It’s a question of yourself. ... I think I could have walked into any house in that village for a cup of tea. ... I never had a cross word with any of the guys —ever.’²¹

And Jack M., who took an active part in trade union meetings, had the following to say:

‘Well, I felt actually in spite of the stories that went around about the inapproachability of the Pottery folk and about their unreadiness to accept people into the community, I didn’t find that at all. I found that if one approached people in a friendly way and open way they’d respond in the same open and friendly fashion. As a result of that I was able to make not only new acquaintanceships but new friendships very quickly indeed. ... I found it a very compatible community. One that was easy to get drawn into because I thought the same way as they did, felt the same way as they did, had the same sort of aspirations for the long term objectives as well as the immediate “win the war” objective.’²²

Acceptance by the miners was something that was often remembered later by the Bevin Boys. Roland T. had this to say:

‘My relationships with the miners with whom I worked were always good and the best compliment that I received was from one of the contract men with whom I had worked ... who told me of all the Bevin Boys he had worked with I was the only one who could handle a shovel as well as he could and that view was shared by the rest of them ... I felt that I had been accepted by the men for whom I had the highest regard. Their loyalty to each other and sense of humour was an education and had a big influence in my later life.’²³

Whilst for Norman B. his acceptance was somewhat different.

‘While I was standing up I suddenly found myself surrounded - my trousers were pulled down around my ankles and I was forced to the floor. The cap of an oil drums was removed and its thick black contents poured all over my genitals - the result was great hilarity. What a mess!! Then I was told - " Nah then Norman lad - tha's one of us". ... I had been accepted.’²⁴

¹⁹ Interview with peter H., 20.4.2000

²⁰ Questionnaire, September – October 2002

²¹ Interview with Ken P., 11.7.2000

²² Interview with Jack M., 25.5.2002

²³ Roland T., *Drawn from a Hat*, unpublished manuscript based on personal diaries (undated)

²⁴ Norman B., E-mails to Ann Kneif (September 2002)

Many of the Bevin Boys found that they were shown kindness and were given a friendly welcome. The impression of Peter H.:

‘I found they were kindly, generous and very protective. Many times they were extremely sympathetic. ... And I must say they are the nicest people that, up to that time, I had ever met in my life. London commercial life was not a bit like that and I never liked it very much but then I moved up ... into this kind of society and communities of this kind and it was a revelation to me. Here were people who were not thrown together because of wartime contingencies, but because this was their way of life. They lived for each other and each man’s safety was the responsibility of himself and every other man. So I never found any hostility. I never found anything but friendliness.’²⁵

And from another Bevin Boy, Ivor H., who was sent to the Kent coalfield and who went on to become a Methodist minister:

‘A thing that, looking back, impresses me is the way we were welcomed and received by the miners. ... I never worked with men for whom I’ve had a greater respect. They could not have been more helpful. They sympathised with us having to go and work in the pit and they did what they could to make it bearable. So it wasn’t a bad experience on the whole.’²⁶

Many of the regular miners had gone down the pits at 14 years old. They were often people with very little education but that did not necessarily mean that they were not intelligent, although they came from a different cultural background. Philip C., who later went on to study at Oxford said:

‘I think one of the most interesting things for me in retrospect was to see the effect of these incoming town boys, comparatively sophisticated, civilised and you had these very isolated village communities of miners, with two different cults almost, coming together. I found that fascinating because what happened was, and this is only fair, a bit of each rubbed off on each other. For instance I noticed that some of the miners started to wear sort of better shirts or maybe even a tie coming ... off their shift and the boys started to chew tobacco and spit. ... so it was really a very good levelling process.’²⁷

The Bevin Boy had two possibilities when it came to accommodation. They could either stay in a billet or in a purpose built industrial hostel. It has been shown that Bevin Boys living in a hostel were less likely to get on well with the miners. Ken P. felt that it was because those living in a hostel would be more likely to create their own amusements and not join in with village life. He said: ‘So you’re going to be a little clique, you’re probably going to walk around town and get yourself into trouble all the time.’²⁸ He lived in lodgings in the village.

‘I couldn’t have stood hostel life. I’d have had to come home. ... I lived with the people, which was nice. Very basic, everything was basic – shared the same towel, food basic well that’s how it was. I am proud to have known those people and I have no regrets.’²⁹

We can see from the comments that generally the Bevin Boys found they had a good relationship both with the miners and the mining community. The Bevin Boys who joined the trade union often felt that they were accepted more readily than those who

²⁵ Interview with Peter H., 20.4.2000

²⁶ Interview with Ivor H., 2.10.2002

²⁷ Interview with Philip C., 1.10.2002

²⁸ Interview with Ken P., 11.7.2000

²⁹ Ibid.

did not join. Those in lodgings were more likely to stay in contact with their landladies or others from the area, sometimes forming lifelong bonds. Where problems arose it was often the fault of the Bevin Boy. One admitted that he was not very popular with the miners because he had refused to take part in a strike that he felt was unjustified. Others did not work as hard as they should and thereby caused problems for the regular miners, whose wages often depended on output and who saw them as shirkers. The miners usually realised that the Bevin Boys were not interested in the work and accepted this. They had some sympathy with the Bevin Boys and felt sorry for the fact that they had been forced to do something against their will. The Bevin Boy scheme can be seen as a social experiment in bringing together a closed community with young outsiders from various backgrounds. Under normal circumstances the miners and the young men directed to the pits would have been unlikely ever to have contact with each other. However, it shows that it was possible for both sides to adjust and adapt.