

Hathern Brick and Terracotta Company Industrial Dispute 1917

A long running dispute at the Hathern Brick and Terra Cotta Company based at Hathern Station, took place in 1917. This was a significant dispute for a number of reasons related to the situation faced by working people in the First World War.

Hathern, a village now of 1000 houses, is located on the A6 north of Loughborough. Many don't know where Hathern Station is or rather was. When the railways were built, stations took the name of a local village often quite distant. This gave rise to a situation in many places where a second village then grew up around the station. The station where the Midland Railway crossed the A6006 was given the name of Hathern Station despite being nearly 2 miles away and in another county – Nottinghamshire!

It was in 1874 that brothers George and James Hodson set up a brick works next to Hathern Station. Their venture had a great advantage in that it was next to a source of clay (Keuper Marl), and being adjacent to the railway, transportation of the wares was straightforward – the company building its own railway sidings. It started producing terracotta products in the 1890s (using clay from Tamworth) and added the name to become the Hathern Brick and Terra Cotta Company Ltd. The business expanded and by 1900 it was offering not only blue engineering bricks but a wide range of clay goods from chimney pots to ornamental figures of all types. In 1914 the company was very successfully supplying architectural terra cotta far and wide.

When the First World War started there was a collapse in the building trade and the company had no work in three months. At the same time the government was engaged in trying to find suppliers for products which were formerly imported from Germany. They held trade fairs showing the products they wanted manufactured and one was held in Leicester. One of these was a stoneware pan around 1m square by 600mm deep which was used to treat cotton with nitric acid to produce the explosive guncotton. G A Hodson head of the Hathern company approached the government to produce pans and after trials, supplied the pans from August 1915. By the end of the war they were supplying a range of chemical equipment and were making a great deal of money.

But let's go back to the late 1880s. This was a time of a significant change in the trade union movement with the rise of the new unions. These differed from the older craft unions in several respects.

- They were generally less exclusive than craft unions and attempted to recruit a wide range of workers. To encourage more workers to join, the new unions kept their entrance fees and contributions at a relatively low level.
- They recruited unskilled and semi-skilled workers, such as dockers, seamen, gasworkers and general labourers
- At the outset, the new unions were associated with militancy and willingness to take industrial action, unlike the more conciliatory craft unions. Notable strikes associated with the new unions were the London matchgirls strike of 1888 and the London Dock Strike of 1889
- Many of the new unions had leaders who espoused socialist ideas. Such leaders included Tom Mann, Ben Tillett, Will Thorne and John Burns.

New general unions came on the scene and one was the optimistically named The Workers' Union. This was established in 1898. It aimed to be an all-inclusive union and recruited members from a large cross-section of trades, including labourers of all types, machinists, chemical workers, municipal and other local and central government employees (it actually aimed to replace the other local and central government unions), cocoa workers, brewery workers, file cutters, grinders and hardeners, riddle-makers, packing case makers, sanitary pipe workers, quarrymen, farm and rural workers, and factory workers of all kinds. It absorbed several smaller unions, including the London Cloth Workers' Union and the Small Arms Employees' Union in 1914.

Trade union membership had been significantly rising before the First World War, from 1910 to 1913 membership expanded from 2.6 million to 4.1 million, a 58 per cent growth. This period was marked by recruitment in new industries and different occupations.

The British Government introduced conscription in March 1916 because voluntary enlistment could no longer meet the army's need for recruits. Under the terms of the Military Service Act, all medically fit single men between the ages of 19 and 41 were deemed to have enlisted in the armed forces on 2 March. In May 1916 a second Government act extended conscription to married men and the age limit was lowered to 18. Conscripted men had no choice about which service, regiment or unit they joined.

However, some men were exempted from the draft. Clergymen, teachers and some classes of industrial worker were not required to join. These roles were described as 'Scheduled (or reserved) Occupations' and included coal miners, doctors, and those working in the iron and steel industries which produced vital ammunition and equipment for the war.

From 1915 to 1918, the First World War, trade union membership soared from 4.3 to 6.5 million. Here gains were widespread - but notable growth areas included agriculture and construction as well as white-collar work.

The First World War gave a massive boost to collective bargaining. Large sectors of the economy came within the scope of the Munitions of War Act of 1915 and the later amendments to it. The 1915 Act made provision for compulsory arbitration for industrial disputes which were not settled by other means. Strikes and lockouts were illegal, however in practice there were few prosecutions. The government realised that they couldn't imprison thousands of strikers.

In practice both unions and employers often welcomed these restrictions in war conditions; the former because the results of such arbitration were legally enforceable through munitions tribunals, and the latter because in a full labour market with the government purchasing a high proportion of output they could avoid leapfrogging local settlements and could pass on rising labour cost, while their prices were not liable to be undercut by overseas competitors. The much greater role of the state in the economy also led to national wage bargaining in more industries such as gas supply, flour milling, chemicals, soap and tramways.

Workers benefited as a result of the full labour market and could negotiate higher wages and improved conditions, however this was against a background of massive inflation which was 12% in 1915, 18% in 1916 and 25% in 1917 – the highest inflation rate ever seen in the UK (although almost matched in 1975 with a rate over 24%). Workers were also aware that trade unionism was now seen by the government as a necessary requirement in a controlled war economy – it

pointed a way as to how society and the economy could be organised in peacetime – and this gave the socialist movement a great boost.

With men being sent to fight, there was a need for substitute labour to keep the factories and transport going – and it was the nation's women who stepped into the breach. Women replaced unskilled men but weren't paid the same. On average half the pay of men, but for many women it was more than they'd earned before. Many became trade unionists, and some shop stewards fought for them to receive equal pay.

Also whether or not to welcome the breaking-down of a skilled man's work into many parts which different women could do; for while it maintained as sacrosanct the skilled male's preserve, it made it easier for employers later to de-skill aspects of such work. The hostility of craftsmen towards women was not obviously different from their hostility to unskilled men when they felt threatened by competitors.

So what was the situation faced by the Hathern workers in 1917?

Hathern became a controlled company important to the war effort. There were supposed to be no strikes and the company wasn't supposed to sack anyone.

Many of the workers were in reserved occupations and though undoubtedly the work was hard and conditions poor, they were not being killed in the trenches. The company they worked for was doing well out of government contracts and making substantial profit, yet workers were finding it difficult to make ends meet. They had not had a pay increase for two years yet in many munition factories workers were receiving pay rises to keep pace with dramatic increases in inflation. At the beginning of 1917 the pound was worth 15/- compared to the beginning of 1915.

The first information we have that the Hathern workers were going to do something about their situation was that 41 of the workers joined the Workers Union on 13 April and a meeting was held the next day presided by W Godsmark of the Workers Union in Loughborough. The workers at Hathern Brick requested an increase in wages which was refused, the company objecting also to the men having joined a union and sacked the four union organisers, Watts, Harrad, Pilkington and Gamble, between 18 and 26 May. They were replaced with female labour.

The men went on strike and the next report we have is from 28 June which says that 60 men are involved and although union leaders have made attempts to settle the strike, there had been no breakthrough. Large enthusiastic meetings were being held in Sutton Bonington and Hathern.

A big meeting was held in Loughborough Market Place on Sunday 1 July to hear speeches from Alex Dalgarno, official of the Workers Union from Hathern, G Morris from Coventry and Mr Taylor from Leicester. It's not clear if Alex Dalgarno worked at the company, but unlikely as he would have been sacked as a union organiser.

The procession to Loughborough was headed by Hathern United Prize Band and was a significant event in the band's history. Hathern Band is a top brass band today and was formed in 1856, making it the oldest brass band in the Midlands. However, in 1890 there was a fall out and a second band was formed. It appears that the rift had a political dimension as some were Liberal supporters and some were Conservative. For the next 27 years there were two bands and relations were acrimonious at times with even a court case. In 1917 a band was required to lead the Hathern strikers' procession, but because of the war, neither band could muster enough players, so as a result the bands amalgamated.

On Monday evening 2 July a large number of people of Hathern visited Shepshed and headed by a band marched in procession to the Bull Ring. There were a number of banners and bannerettes which had reference to the strike at Hathern Station Brick and Terra Cotta Co. and the procession included several Shepshed men who had been employed there. A large crowd congregated in the Bull Ring where addresses were given and listened to with attention, the general sympathy evidently being with the men. Then on the next Saturday afternoon the strikers paraded around Hathern again with the united band and a substantial sum was collected. It is worth noting that enjoyed considerable support not only from the community, but also the reports in the Loughborough Herald were generally sympathetic.

On 17 August a meeting was held on the Round Bank, Hathern again with the band, then adjourned to the Liberal Club skittle alley because of the weather. Alex Dalgarno and Charles Duncan MP for Barrow in Furness and secretary of the Workers Union spoke. Charles Duncan said in his 30 years trade union experience he had never come across a more deserving case. They had now been on strike for 11 weeks.

On 7 September the government took the company to court under the Munitions of War Act 1915 for causing a lock out and for introducing a rule requiring that employees would not join a trade union. It appears that the case was taken forward by the Workers Union as the charge is careful to say that the company caused a lock out, not that the workers went on strike. 50 workers cycled to Nottingham to attend the proceedings, waving flags. After many hours an agreement was reached, the charges would be withdrawn and the question of whether the company had been right to dismiss the four men would be referred to an arbitrator (Sir Alfred Hopkinson KC). The arbitrator was also required to act if there was any victimisation of workers in the three months following the agreement.

The firm would take back as many men as the Ministry of Munitions deemed proper, having regard to the engagement of other men, and particularly women who had been taken on in their place. Counsel for the Ministry of Munitions expressed the hope that all the men would be taken back and if not places would be found elsewhere. All the men would be back at work in the next few days. Counsel said that the dilution of labour by women was used to get rid of the four trade unionists, and when the firm was pressed to release men for military service, they selected prominent trade unionists. The company strongly denied the charge. There was no mention of an increase in wages.

At a meeting of the Loughborough Trades Council on 11 September, Mr. Godsmark, secretary of the Workers Union made a statement on the Hathern dispute. He said the matter had been settled very satisfactorily to the union. If the union thought any man had been unjustly discharged there was a right of appeal. It would thus be seen that the power of discharge had been taken away and they ought to work together well in the future. The men would need help for that week only and he was instructed to thank every society affiliated to the Loughborough TC for their assistance during the strike for they had received considerable help from Loughborough. The men had been granted the full rate strike pay 12/6 although they were not entitled to it by the rules. With the help sent by many societies this pay had been supplemented until it reached 22/6. (Loughborough Herald 13 Sept 1917)

However, things did not turn out as expected as the company reneged on the agreement. At the beginning of November, the men who had now been out of work for 22 weeks had for some time been expecting to return to work almost every day but for some reason difficult to understand this has been delayed. According to information available, the matter was left in the hands of the Ministry of Munitions and the union authorities. The men were informed that work was to be resumed from 5 November.

The company, however, prepared two lists of names. The first list of 18 received letters telling them to report for work on 5 November. Another 18 received a letter saying that they were on the list, but until the Ministry found work for those who would be displaced, they could not start work. As a result, the 36 presented for work and following discussion with company representatives all walked out and deadlock continued. Eventually it appeared that 35 men resumed work around the 22 November. Then eight of the men were given notice. The Workers Union reported the situation to the Ministry of Munitions

A meeting of workers in engineering trades was held in Loughborough on 28 November 1917, chaired by Alex Dalgarno and addressed by S Taylor, the district organiser of the Workers Union. The following motion was agreed:

That this meeting of engineering workers emphatically protests to the Ministry of Munitions against the action of the Hatherly Brick and Terra Cotta Co. Ltd. By continuing to dismiss trade unionists from their employ in spite of the Minister's instructions. Failing the cancellation of the notices served out to the eight trade unionists, this meeting will not be responsible for the ensuing consequences.

An expression of support, but a threat without any substance. On 1 December the arbitrator appointed under the 7 September agreement (Sir Alfred Hopkinson KC) took evidence at a hearing in Loughborough. The complaint was that eight workers had been victimised and wrongfully dismissed. The arbitrator's decision was a blow for the workers and their union. He determined that the eight had been discharged because it had become necessary to reduce the number of people employed due to shortage and diminution of work, and that the company exercised a bona fide discretion in deciding which workers could be dispensed with, and there had been no victimisation in the case of the eight workers.

There was no report of any investigation by the arbitrator into the original dismissal of the four workers which started the dispute, as he was required to do under the 7 September agreement.

And there, at present, the trail runs cold. I don't know whether the eight got their jobs back. I don't know whether they received a pay rise during the war. Where to look for more evidence? The records of the Workers Union exist and are kept at the University of Warwick, though strangely in the list of documents there is no mention of this dispute.

What happened next? The Workers Union branch continued in Hathern during 1918. A largely attended Workers Union meeting was held on 21 February in Hathern with Alex Dalgarno presiding. An instructive address on labour questions was given by Mrs. Arnold from Birmingham. The Workers' Union amalgamated with the Transport and General Workers' Union in 1929.

On 5 April a May Day Meeting was held on the Round Bank. Headed by the United Prize Band, a procession with banners started from the Cross to the Round Bank where a public meeting was held under the chairmanship of Alex Dalgarno who remarked that this was the first time a Labour Day had been observed at Hathern. Addresses were given by Miss Arnold (Mrs., Arnold?), Mr. G. Morris and Mr. Syd Taylor of Leicester, District Secretary.

Hathern Brick and Terra Cotta Co. Ltd continued as a successful company renowned for its high quality artistic terracotta products and changed its name to Hathernware Ltd. In 1934. In 1961 it merged with Shaw's of Darwen Shaw-Hathernware. Demerged in 1980, the site was purchased by Trent Industries who set up Hathernware Ceramics Ltd. In 1990 it became Ibstock Hathernware having been acquired by Ibstock Building Products. In 1997 Naylor took over industrial ceramics as Naylor Hathernware.

In 2004, Ibstock Hathernware closed the business. There was no further work at the factory, however four moulders were employed by Shaws of Darwen at a different unit on same site – not producing terracotta, but plaster models and moulds to around 2009. Ibstock continued to own site and operated it as an industrial estate.

In 2008 Naylor Hathernware became insolvent and in 2009 Hathernware was trading as part of Charnwood Forest Brick Company at Shepshed, part of the

Michelmersh Group. Some ex-employees who lived in Shepshed went to Charnwood for a job and Geoff Hollis, former Commercial Manager and Director of Hatherware, discussed with Charnwood about starting up terracotta production there. It currently employs eight crafts producing high quality terracotta models. As for the factory, it is now an industrial estate – and the old canteen is now a café. The main tenant is Insula Ltd who make balconies and thermal breaks.

Dave Neville 2018 (with additional information 2020)