Abstract The Durham Miners' Gala has taken place annually for over a hundred years. In its heyday it was an immensely popular occasion. In the post-war period it became an established part of the British Labour calendar, being attended regularly by Prime Ministers, Cabinet Ministers and foreign ambassadors. The Gala can be understood as a ceremony which links twenty-first century class politics with the more spontaneous and religious forms of political activity in the nineteenth century. This historical continuity is rooted in the culture of mining and mining villages, developed by the social isolation of miners and their particular legal status and adapted periodically by the formal structures of the mining union.

The Durham coalfield is the oldest in England. There, coal mining dates back to the 16th century, and intensive capitalistic operations existed throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. As one writer has observed, 'in no other English coalfield is there a miners' subculture so deeply engrained' (Leister 1975).

For the past ten years we have been studying the development of trade unionism on this coalfield. Our researches were based upon documentary archives, and also upon extensive interviewing with miners and their wives, many of them born around the turn of the century. As we talked with these old people, discussion turned to the Gala, or 'The Big Meeting'. This is the occasion in July, when miners and their families through this century have paraded behind their banners and bands through the ancient city of Durham. In these discussions it became clear that 'The Gala' was being used almost as metaphor through which the past could be grasped and historical change explained. Often, with these old people it seemed as if 'the past were simply an adjoining room' (Mannheim 1922: 22) and the Gala brought it into the room with us. 'You should have seen it hinnie; it was a sight to behold'. As one man put it, eloquently:

It stirred the insides of your soul and you didn't know whether to laugh or burst out crying all day. It's part of our heritage that. Part of the working class. Part of our lives. It was something we always treasured.

Michael Foot, the ex-leader of the Labour Party spoke at the Durham Miners' Gala on many occasions and he remembers it in this way:

I started there in 1947. That's when I shared the platform with Arthur Horner. It was strange because the Durham area emerged as a Right wing within the union and the
Labour Party, but I was elected to go there regularly. The Durham Miners' Gala is a fine occasion today, taking place as it does in that beautiful city. But in those days it was absolutely sensational. There were so many lodges you see and they had to start bringing them in at half past eight in the morning. The whole city absolutely throbbed with the thing from early in the morning right through until you left. And you left absolutely drunk with it - I mean that metaphorically because there was very little actual drunkenness in my opinion - the music, the banners and all in that beautiful city. It overwhelmed you really. In those days it was, far and away, the best working class festival that there was in this country. Far and away the best. It was just marvellous.

This occasion, this Gala, is clearly an event of some significance, which is worthy of description and analysis in its own right. As a miners' Gala, however, it has an additional importance. The miners were a vital group in the history of the British working class. In 1910 the miners' unions had six times as many members as the next largest union (Clegg 1985). When Michael Foot first visited Durham there were three quarters of a million miners organised in the NUM. The coalfields provided the basis of Labour Party representation at Westminster, and the Durham miners' unions exerted a very important influence in this. The Gala then may help us in our understanding of mining life and also British Labour politics. In this it will be helpful to start at the beginning, and the first Gala.

On 20th November 1869 a meeting took place of miners in the Market Tavern in the centre of Durham City. They met to establish, across the coalfield, a trade union which they called the Durham Miners' Association (D.M.A.). They sat under the shadow of a statue of the man who had been the county's main coal owner, and central organiser within the Conservative Party. The Third Marquis of Londonderry (half brother to Castlereagh) had insisted that this statue of himself in full military uniform, astride a horse, be placed in the Market Square. He threatened the Tory council with the sinking of a pit in their ancient city unless they agreed. The meeting place was an appropriate one perhaps, for it made clear the problems that trade unionists had encountered throughout the nineteenth century. In Durham aristocratic capitalists (of whom the Lords Londonderry and Durham were the main voices) had established a deeply ingrained paternal system. Miners were employed as bonded labourers until 1872, and the coal companies operated a system where houses and fuel were provided as a part of the wage. Early attempts at unionism influenced by Chartism and Primitive Methodism, had been broken in major strikes in 1831, 1832 and 1844 (see Challinor and Ripley 1968; Fynes 1973; Wilson 1988). The leaders (notably Thomas Hepburn and Martin Jude) died blacklisted and isolated in sorry circumstances. Little wonder then that in 1869 voices were heard expressing doubt as to the possibility of ever establishing a permanent union across the County. Nevertheless in
1871 its General Secretary, William Crawford, could say with some confidence that 'we need not tell you, that there is established in Durham an Association of coal miners whose aim is to seek by legal and moral means an improved social condition' (Wilson 1907).

One of the first decisions of that Association was to affirm the 'desirability of holding a general meeting of miners in the Central district, the expenses of such to be paid by the central fund' (Metcalfe 1947). This general meeting was first held in Wharton's Park in Durham in 1871. The following year it moved to the Racecourse where it has met (as the Annual Gala or 'Big Meeting') on most years since. At the time, the DMA had taken 40,000 pitmen into its membership and a newspaper report estimated that 25,000 of these took part in the Gala.

In addition, not less than from forty to fifty thousand men, women and children were present, making a total of between 70 and 80,000. Each of the lodges and its accompanying friends marched in procession through the town from the railway stations at Shincliffe and North Road to the meeting place, and a great feature was the banners they carried...

Mr. J. Foreman of Reddymoor Colliery was called upon to preside. In opening the proceedings he said that it had been reported by many newspapers that they were met there for the purposes of inaugurating or agitating a general strike of all miners in the County of Durham (laughter) and it had given great alarm to the public, and more especially to the timid people of the City of Durham. Nothing was more utterly destitute of foundation than that statement, at least as far as they were concerned. Their object in meeting was to have a day's pleasure and enjoyment, to congratulate each other on their past success, to bond themselves more closely, if they possibly could, in the bond of brotherhood, and to show the country at large that the Durham Miners' Association was not a myth or a creature of the imagination, but a stupendous fact - (applause).

(Sunderland Times 20th July 1871).

The following year another lengthy report appeared in the local press, and here the correspondent paid particular attention to the parade and the banners:

The display of banners was a very prominent and pleasing feature of the demonstration. Altogether there were upwards of 70 flags on the ground. They were ranged around the full length of the field near the water's edge and thence across the end of the field opposite to that on which the platform had been erected and it is hardly necessary to state, composed as they were of every imaginable colour and hue, that they formed, as they fluttered in the breeze a very pretty and imposing spectacle. The greater proportion of them were indeed artistic productions both in design and execution. (Durham Chronicle 18 July 1872)

In Durham, then as now, the banner and its motif was seen to represent the lodge and the village. Great care was taken over the choice of image and of the words and phrases used. These issues were the matter of debate and disagreements were settled by votes at lodge
meetings. Absent on these banners are paintings of leaders. This practice developed later in the twentieth century. In 1872, only Alexander Macdonald (leader of the National Union) is mentioned. (For a full account see Moyes 1974). More general are themes which relate to work in the mines and to the advantages of union and unity. Overarching this is a reference to brotherly love, and the hope for cooperation in industry. The banner of the Boldon lodge - opened in N.E. Durham in 1866 - was paraded at the first ever Gala in 1872. Its design mixed the themes of religion and justice. On its leading side was an arbitration scene - a female figure of justice with scales standing between groups of masters and workmen. On the reverse side a religious motif in the form of two hands locked in a firm grip and the words, 'Masters, know ye that ye too have a Master in Heaven'. At the same Gala the banner of the Roddymoor pit, owned by Pease and Partners in West Durham, had on one side a representation of Master and Man emblematical of capital and labour, with the words underneath 'May we ever be united, let us love one another'. On the reverse was an emblem of charity with the aphorism, 'An evil balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is his delight' and the words 'let brotherly love continue'. As if to make these words real, Pease himself marched to the Durham Gala with his workers in 1912.

We shall see that these motifs change over time. What appears constant (to a degree at least) is the form of the Gala. In most of the villages, the banners would have paraded on the Friday evening. Here the women would have been involved in cooking and preparing sandwiches for the following day. Early on the Saturday (often as early as 5.00 a.m.) the banner would once again be unfurled and paraded through the village, followed by the lodge officials, the committee and the miners and their families. These people would then travel (sometimes on foot, mostly by train) into Durham city. There, Jack Lawson provides us with an account of the parade from his memories of the early decades of this century:

First comes the great banner carried by picked men, who must know how to carry themselves, or their strength will avail them little. Positing the poles in the brass cup resting on the chest, and held by leather straps on the shoulders, is a great art.

The colliery banner is almost a personality. Much thought has been given to colour, design, and size. Many have been the consultations with the artist and the firm chosen to carry out the wishes of the Lodge in the matter of bringing this banner to life, and one of the great days in the history of the colliery was the unveiling of it. A colliery without a banner is almost unthinkable. Deep debate on design and finance go to the making of it, and he is an honoured man who is chosen to cut the silken cord and speak to the great crowd which gathers at its unfurling. No regimental flag is dearer to the soldier than that emblem, showing the Good Samaritan tending the stricken wayfarer, in a setting of red, blue and gold, is to the miner. The officials of the Lodge walk with pride beneath their banner, while behind comes the band and
the men and women of the colliery. Down the main street they walk, between walls of spectators massed together on either side. Greetings are called by the onlookers to friends and relatives in the procession, and hands are gripped as they pass on. Sometimes the march is slowed down; sometimes it is stopped. Marchers and spectators blocking the long street as far as eye can see.

Above the fluttering banners, the old square Castle, on its foundation of rock, rises clear cut against the sky, seeming to block further passage that way. But the procession moves on, and as it passes slowly over the bridge one can see the tree shadows like etched pictures in the seemingly still waters of the river below. Gradually the marchers wedge themselves into the narrow street which is called Silver, and past the mighty squat Cathedral. 'Half church of God, half castle 'gainst the Scot', standing there so grey and quiet in its own grounds. Turning and twisting round narrow hairpin bends, the procession sweeps into the broad street that leads past the handsome red Shire Hall and the great gloomy prison, until it finally reaches the wide, spacious racecourse by which the River Wear runs. (Lawson 1931).

Here too then the past was retained and reworked. Metcalfe in his assessment of the Gala and the purpose it fulfilled within the new union wrote:

the idea of holding an annual Gala, or 'Big Meeting', was an inspiration which Crawford could readily appreciate in its vastness of eventual usefulness. This annual meeting, touched with emotion, and symbolic of the spirit of friendship and united action sealed the process of establishment. (Metcalfe 1947: 470).

This sealing process drew upon a range of nineteenth century tradition and practices. In this respect the Gala is illustrative of this critical feature of mining and mining trade unionism. The miners were far and away the largest group within the British working class. Yet within the expansion of capitalist production and modern society they (socially and politically) expressed a clear continuity across the centuries.

An Occupational Ceremony

To some extent for example the Gala can be seen as the symbolic replacement of the annual hiring meetings associated with the bond. These meetings had an important social function and were often treated as festive occasions and holidays. The Gala too became recognised in this way. In 1903 as part of the Davey award it was established as an annual holiday. It became the one occasion in the year when people from across the coalfield met and renewed old friendships. This was particularly significant in mining, with its patterns of labour mobility associated with the closure of exhausted collieries and the opening of new ones.

Every year people would sit in the same place on the Racecourse. Families you know. This was especially after people from the West of the county had moved across to the
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new pits on the East coast. The Gala was when they would meet every year, the Gala and Christmas Day. Every year in the same place. It was plain; that’s what it was.

Here was a day, a public meeting, organised by the union which was a popular social occasion. People remember the ‘good day out’ afforded by the ‘Big Meeting’.

In Crook the Banner used to turn out at six o’clock in the morning. All the pubs were open. All over Durham. No closing time. Many a time we never got to Durham.

His friend agreed:

I used to go down to the Forrester’s Arms first at 5.30 and get warmed up there. When the banner left I would leave with them. ... I remember Wooley banner going in one year. They were smart as new pins going in ... By the time the last banner got in the first was lifting to go out. And you should have seen the Wooley lot coming out, they were hanging on the cord to keep them up.

For some Gala Day had a lasting effect upon their lives. Edie Bestford:

But the Big Meeting in those days, the streets were crammed; packed with hundreds of thousands of people. The Gala today is but a shadow of what it used to be. I can remember we used to walk two and a half mile from Annfield Plain down to Lanchester station, and on to Durham by train. That was when I was younger. Then, of course I had to go to work.

I met George at a Durham Big Meeting Day. I was there with a friend. When we were young we used to go every year with my mother and father. And when the men went for a drink the women and the kiddies either had a picnic or they had tea which was served in some of the hotels and public houses. Well my friend and I went up Claypath and went in the General Gordon thinking we could get some tea. We walked through but there was no tea: the marquee was taken up with the men drinking. George came over and got us a seat each. He told his friend ‘I’m going to marry that girl’. And so he did. (Armstrong and Beynon 1977)

In these, and other ways, the Gala became patterned into the village life and custom. Jack Lawson once again is helpful in conveying the significance of this:

The Big Meeting is almost as much a part of our mining life as the Cathedral is of Durham City. Like every other miner, I early found my way to the annual demonstration, and went regularly for many years. In time I went with my Lodge with band and banner, and a good following of members and their wives. I still go every year, for it is to me one of the most impressive and inspiring experiences any man can have. It is exhilarating to march with your band and banner, and also to watch this stirring spectacle from some high point of vantage, where you see it as a long continuous whole. Officially this gathering is called a gala, but to the miners and their wives, who come in from every part of Durham, it is ‘The Big Meeting’.

Banner after banner, band after band, followed by the members of the Lodges and their wives. From remote places on moor and fell, and from huge collieries near the towns, they have marched down from the boundaries of the coalfield, and up from the centre they have come keeping step all along the roads to lively tunes. Since eight
In the morning they have been coming into the city of Durham, and even at noon the apparently endless march goes on. (Lawson 1932).

This tendency for miners to hold their own social festivals has been noted in relation to central Europe, where writers have drawn attention to the singularity of mining as an occupation, the unifying force of its special legal status and the town-like character of the mining settlements [which] provided the essential structure for a separate festive culture ... (Tenfelde 1978). These festivals were 'saturated with practices derived from religion, communal and courtly festivals', and were based upon

the desire of the miners' fraternities for a distinct and separate social life of their own (arising) first and foremost out of the special legal status of mining as an occupation and of mining society. Even outside the work situation the microcosmic world of the trade gave rise to ways of thinking and forms of conduct which soon proved a fertile soil for the idea of a separate miners' festival (Tenfelde 1978).

Clearly, similar processes to those were at work in Durham. The extent to which the miners, and the mining industry, were regulated by legal enactments has been the subject of too little comment. So too their union, many of its leading activists being checkweighmen, a position guaranteed by Acts of Parliament. This separate legal position was combined with a deep sense of exclusion from Durham society. The presence of aristocratic capitalism was one thing (Disraeli, for example, made the astute observation that Lord Durham lived the life of a feudal lord based upon capitalist methods of surplus extraction). Another was the isolation of the mining village and the tightly regulated nature of these local labour markets. Miners were often thought of by other workers as living a separate existence. This is brought out in an account by an early union leader in Durham. He sailed to London on a collier and whilst there, explained, when asked, that he was 'a pit man':

Pressed for more information, he asked how long I had been down the pit. 'Seven years' was the answer. In most surprised tones he said, 'have you not been up until now?' I was surprised at him, and replied, 'Yes, every day except on rare occasions'. 'Why, I thought you pitmen lived down there always!' said the querist. It was not long before I gathered from many other questions that he was not alone in his ideas, for there was a generally held opinion that the coals their ships brought here were dug out of the bowels of the earth by a class of people who were little removed from barbarism, and whose home was down in the eternal darkness. (Wilson 1910)

In more tragic vein, the Gala also registered death. Coal mining exercised the most devastating toll upon the lives of miners. By 1851 there had been thirteen major mine disasters recorded in County Durham, with the combined death of some 525 men. This trend
continued through the nineteenth century with major loss of life at Berrham, Seaham, Trindon, Tudhoe, Usworth, Elemore, Fancehouse and Wingate. In 1909, 168 men were killed in West Stanley when the Burns' pit exploded. But those disasters were but the tip of the iceberg. Daily miners risked their lives in the mines. The reports of the Shotton and District Inspection Board, for example, record that in every year between 1926 and 1946 at least one man was killed in the Horden Colliery in East Durham, the most modern mine in the coalfield. Records from the nearby Murton colliery show that in the years between 1887 and 1946, 218 men died underground - an average of four deaths a year. Ned Cohen remembers how the Ann pit in North Durham was known as the 'butchers shop' (Cohen n.d.). Others remember that the Ferryhill colliery was known universally as 'the slaughter house'. When old miners talk of there being 'blood on the coal' it has to be taken literally. And it was this blood that was also remembered on Gala Day. Lodges where a member had been killed carried their banners draped in a black cloth. Since the last war the speeches at the Gala have been preceded by a collier band playing Gressford, the hymn written by a Durham miner after the fearful disaster at the Gressford mine in North Wales. This deep significance of death as a source of unity (and exclusion) came over powerfully at Galas that took place after such major losses of life. In 1951, for example, two major explosions took place in Durham mines, the worst was at the Easington Colliery. There, 83 men died. In that year, an enormous number of miners attended the Gala. So dense were the crowds that the speeches had begun before all the lodges had paraded through to the Racecourse. Then:

Away up on the brow of the hill was a lone banner, moving slowly over the heads of the vast crowds. Standing with the Lodge officials was the vicar of the local church. There was no band, no fuss, just a banner like scores of others stationed around the Racecourse. The Banner, with its black drape, had last been carried in respect and honour of men who were lost in the great disaster, and in that same respect and honour it was carried and greeted through its long day.

Yes, it was Easington. This Banner became the synonym of every eye as it was borne aloft through the tens of thousands in the streets of Durham, along North Road up the steep Silver Street, and over Elvet to the Racecourse. Reverend Beddoes, Vicar of Easington, said of its reception: 'It was met by all the expressions of sympathy and love that the good hearts of Durham could command. It was met with bared heads, with cheers and with silence and with tears, and our men will never have a better memorial than the one which lives in the hearts of Durham mining folk. Men and women fondled the cloth as though they were trying to shake hands with the men who gave their lives.' (D.M.A. 1952)

In these ways then, the Gala can be seen as a dramatic occupational ceremony; it is also a village festival in which 'Durham mining folk' came together in the city at the centre of the coalfield.
Here it is worth remembering Metcalfe’s comments. The Durham Gala was (and is) a particular kind of festival. In the 1870s it was linked powerfully to the union and thereby to the symbolic struggle within the reformed Durham society. It was, in the broadest sense, a political as well as a social occasion. In this, the Gala can be seen to rest on more than the miners’ occupation. It stretched back and drew upon those other occasions for mass assembly in the nineteenth century - strikes, demonstrations and religious meetings. In these, the habit of registering death through the black drape on the banner was established. And other things too.

In 1831, for example, the miners of Durham and Northumberland were on strike and Richard Fynes provides an account of their meeting:

Bolden Fell between Sunderland and Gateshead. During the forenoon, the roads in the vicinity of the meeting place presented an unusual battle, the men walking in procession from the different collieries, bearing flags and banners and accompanied by bands of music. The banners were numerous and of the gayest description, nearly all being embellished with a painted design and with a motto more or less connected with the recent struggle between the miners and their employers. (Fynes 1873)

Again, during the strike which affected the coalfield in 1844, a meeting took place at Shaddons Hill, between Wrekenton and Birtley:

many thousand miners were present and took part in the proceedings. On reaching the ground there was presented one of the most splendid and magnificent sights ever witnessed. The music of various bands was heard, and flags and banners were flying in every direction. The part of the Fell where the meeting was held was of the shape of an amphitheatre, at the bottom of which was placed a waggon, which served for a platform, from which as far as the eye could reach, was observed a mass of human beings, there being upon a fair calculation 35,000 to 40,000 present. (Fynes 1873)

In these strikes the influence of the Chartists and Primitive Methodists was critical, and more generally in the nineteenth century the linkage between political and religious forms was important in working class movements.

Certainly there is much evidence to support Moyes’ view that:

the idea of the mass meeting was well established before the first Durham Miners’ Gala. Not only that, the essential elements of procession by collieries in order, distinguished by banners bearing colliery names and inscriptions, marked by black crepe to token fatal accidents and accompanied by bands playing appropriate music, were all there - a well-established pattern of mass assembly. (Moyes 1974)

Ostrogorski, writing in 1902, commented on how:

In the field of religious propaganda dissent long ago popularised outdoor meetings. The great founders of Methodism, John Wesley and Whitefield deserting the
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consecrated places of worship and the respectable people who frequented them, preached in the open air, amid the fields, to thousands of brutalised miners, and it was there that they achieved their greatest successes ... (Ostrogorski 1902).

By the late nineteenth century this was the predominant form of the political meeting. Here, Ostrogorski's account of such meetings helps to place the Gala in its historical context:

These are large extraordinary gatherings, the principal object of which is to convey an impression of the numerical strength of the party and its enthusiasm ... Those who take part in the demonstrations arrive in a procession with flags and banners to the sound of drums and flutes. Special trains were organised to bring people from the neighbourhood at reduced fares. If the meeting is a particularly large one, improvised speakers address the crowd which has not been able to get into the hall ... When the demonstration takes place out of doors, several platforms are erected from which the orators speak simultaneously. The voting of the resolutions is sometimes accompanied by blasts from a trumpet ... Every meeting of exceptional importance assumes the character of a demonstration. (Ostrogorski 1902).

This was the form taken up by the Gala. It became, in the words of one President of the D.M.A. (Charlie Pick) 'the greatest unorganised ceremony in the world'. Here he echoes John Wilson, who in 1912, as General Secretary, saw the Gala as 'the demonstration par excellence'. For Wilson the Gala, in symbolic form, 'incorporated us in the permanent institutions of the county'. This was made clear in 1896 when the Durham miners were invited to a Cathedral service in the afternoon of the Gala by Bishop Westcott. Today, the Gala still ends with this ceremony, strongly evoking this sense of permanence.

However, it would be wrong to overemphasize the stability of the incorporation that was so valued by Wilson. From the earliest days members of 'Durham Society' were keenly aware of this 'other-side' of the Gala - the fact that the occasion could be seen as the occupation of the City by the 'lower orders'. This 'occupation' was symbolic perhaps, but it raised the possibility of a threat and this is something of which the inhabitants of that city have always been mindful. On the event of the first Gala on the Racecourse, for example, John Wilson writes of 'the public feeling, and in many quarters, fear which was felt as to the consequence of bringing such a large number of miners and massing them in the City'. Tradesmen barricaded their shop windows and 'an urgent request was made to the Mayor to have soldiers in readiness' (Wilson 1907). Wilson, forever concerned to represent and demonstrate the moderate and respectable side of the Durham miners, and their fitness to occupy a place in the City of Durham, was keenly aware of the feelings of 'Durham society'. In his concern to placate these, and also to encourage sobriety amongst his members, he reveals an important edge to the integrative process. In a monthly circular, written before the 1897 Gala, he pointed out that:
The Durham Miners’ Gala is no mere formal affair, although it has become one of the fixed institutions of the county. If it were omitted, a serious vacuum would be made in the yearly gatherings, for it holds the premier place in those occasions. It has proved its fitness, and, therefore, its continuance is more than a tolerated one. It is a clear instance of the survival of the fittest. It has borne down oppositions; and by its character cleared away prejudices of long standing, known only to those who took part in the first, and have the privilege of being a real portion in the present demonstration. Ideas of the crudest kind - which were surprising, because they were formed about people close at the doors of the citizens of Durham, and not of the inhabitants of some far-off savage land - have been modified and corrected, and fears founded upon those ideas have been turned into feelings of welcome.

He went on to outline those prejudices and ideas in this way:

The approach of the ruthless Goth upon the ancient City of Rome, filling, as it did, the inhabitants with terror and dismay, was no more alarming than was the knowledge that the miners were about to hold their first Gala in Durham. The fact itself was synonymous with ruin. If so many thousands of those people were gathered together, there could be but one result, and it behoved the peaceful and more civilised and order-loving citizens of the city, to prepare for it. This was done by invoking the aid of powers, both civil and military, at least by requesting the chief magistrate, at the time to have those forces in readiness for the outbreak, which was sure to take place; but our old friend, Mr. Fowler (who was then Mayor) had more sense than listen to such fearful and unfounded anticipations, and he refused, and at the conclusion, the City stood on its old site, and no one suffered even in the smallest item. (D.M.A. Circular June 1897)

In later years, however, especially in times of industrial strikes and conflict in the coalfield, the fears of the local inhabitants and the sensibilities of the union leaders led to the occasional cancellation of the Gala. (This fact has often been forgotten in accounts of the Gala, see eg. Rodger 1981). This was the case, for example, in 1921 and 1922. Equally in 1926, the occasion of the General Strike and lockout, the miners’ union desisted from its annual celebration and meeting. The cancellation in 1926 was influenced by an incident that had taken place on the Racecourse the previous year. An anonymous correspondent (P.H. R.) to the union’s annual report remembers that during the week prior to the Gala the Bishop of Durham (Dr. Hensley Henson) who had a seat in the House of Lords had roundly criticised the Labour County Council of Durham for what he described as their ‘unexampled extravagance’ in laying down six miles of new road between Durham and Lancashire. This pronouncement had been widely quoted, and it set up a feeling of resentment among the miners which was reflected in the atmosphere of the Miners’ Gala. So much so indeed that in the procession through the streets on the Saturday there was one banner which bore the grim words - ‘To Hell with Bishop and Deans’. (D.M.A. 1953)

This slogan was quickly translated into action when the Dean of Durham (Dr. J.E.L. Weldon) arrived on the Racecourse to address a Temperance meeting. He was mistaken for the Bishop:
He was always punctual at his meetings and he was there a few minutes before he was due to ascend the platform. He was tapping the miners on the shoulder as he came along and laughing and joking with them, little prepared for the drama in which he would so soon be the central figure.

I never remember seeing him in a happier mood than he was at that moment; his bright red face beamed. "Here's the Bishop!" went up from scores of people. and then came a chorus of voices, "Hoy him! The river!"

Everybody on the platform heard the cry and must have been aware that something terrible was about to happen, but the speeches went on.

The crowd surged towards the Dean who was then well past the allotted three score years and ten. To the river he was going and I could see it all from the platform. A miner with a long cane was trying to remove the Dean's tall hat. Twice the cane got underneath it, but it fell back each time. On the third occasion it toppled off his head and disappeared. This huge man was now being pushed and hustled by an angry heated crowd towards the river. To this day I can still see him at the head of the crowd moving inexorably forward to the water and then he disappeared.

The Dean, in fact, escaped by motor launch to the safety of his home and a 'glass of lemonade ... brought in on a silver tray'. To miners of that generation though (and everyone we have talked with mentions the incident and being there) the Bishop was 'hoyed in the river'.

In 1926, the cancelled Gala was replaced by an 'unofficial' massed meeting of thousands at the pit village of Burnhope. As one union activist recalls:

The DMA Executive Committee decided not to hold the Big Meeting at Durham in July; a decision with which many of the members disagreed and that minority decided to hold the Gala at Burnhope, and it proved to be an outstanding success ... The preliminary and final arrangements were the responsibility of the Burnhope lodge and the major task of organising fell upon the shoulders of Jim Hobbs their secretary. The Gala followed much the same pattern as Durham Big Meeting, the bands, banner and followers sorting themselves out into single file order as they approached the field. (Farbridge n.d.)

By this time, the symbolic representation of the lodges had altered from the Methodist and Liberal frameworks of the turn of the century to more overtly Labour and class-based motifs. The Boldon Lodge, for example, had moved clearly to secular Labourist themes of co-operation and union. On one side its banner featured the Boldon Miners' Hall, built in 1891, and on the other the Wheatsheaf emblem and the slogan 'Each for All, All for Each'. The 1932 banner carried the same picture of the Miners' Hall but backed it with the emblem of the co-operative movement.

The contrasting images represented on the three Boldon banners record the shift from the Liberal politics of the first trade unionists to the Labourist politics of the post-1918 period. This political change might have appeared more marked had the outcome of a special lodge meeting on the 1932 banner accepted the sub-committee's recommendation of a portrait of Lenin! At that time three lodges
(Bewicke Main, Chopwell and Follonsby) had revolutionary designs on their banners. Chopwell’s banner, unfurled in 1921 carried images of Marx, Lenin and Keir Hardie. The Follonsby lodge, strongly influenced by its syndicalist secretary and checkweighman George Harvey carried portraits of Lenin, Cook, Keir Hardie, James Connolly and Harvey himself (Douglas 1972, Moyes 1974). These however represented a minority. Chopwell’s banner was stoned on the first occasion it was paraded in Durham at the Gala (Durham Advertiser, 25 July 1924). More general was a change which retained broadly diverse references to work in the mine together with realistic or symbolic reference to the idea of progress through Labour. With the change in local leadership, the Methodist influence waned, and religious motifs declined in number. This pattern was reinforced after 1945 when the mines were nationalised and the Labour Party came to power.

The Gala and Popular Culture

The Durham Miners’ Gala was a unique event, unlike anything found in any other coalfield, or amongst any other group of workers. Its historical origins in the nineteenth century, the Methodist influence on its banners, and the near medieval setting of the City of Durham were elements which combined to produce an extraordinary working class occasion. It was a combination of parade, family reunion, political and revivalist meeting. Over decades ‘the Big Meeting’ supported two platforms of speakers who would address miners and their families on the green expanse of the Race Course. The Anarchist Prince, Peter Kropotkin spoke here as did Joseph Arch, Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant, Tom Mann, Keir Hardie, Henderson, Snowden, Macdonald, Lansbury... In 1927 and 1929, Oswald Mosley was a guest speaker, and the form of the Gala conveyed to him ideas about forms of political assembly which he attempted to implement in the 1930s. In a different way, Will Paynter, when President of the South Wales Miners, saw in the celebratory strength of that Saturday in July a festival form which he attempted to introduce into the Calendar of the South Wales miners.

In the post-war period, the platform at Durham became dominated by leading figures from the Labour Party. Attlee spoke in 1946 and 1949, as Prime Minister and again in 1951, 1953 and 1955. With Attlee’s departure, Hugh Gaitskell became a regular attender, and thereafter all Labour Party leaders, in and out of Government travelled to Durham in July.

By this time the Gala had become a state occasion and an international diplomatic event. Throughout the 1950s the American, Israeli and Yugoslav ambassadors were continuously invited to
witness the spectacle and in their company Sam Watson, the powerful General Secretary of the DMA, would continually make references to the Gala as a ‘demonstration of free people’:

Miners, their wives and families started from their homes in the early morning, and with their bands and banners, travelled by bus and train and even on foot to do just what they liked within the limits of the law. There were no orders rapped out from the Miners’ Hall. The people could shout, sing, dance and drink all day, and members of the Association were free to attend or to absent themselves from the Gala as they chose. No thought of regimentation. They could criticise or even ridicule their leaders or the political speakers who addressed them. There were no secret police, indeed the Durham police, led by their Chief Constable (Mr. A.A. Muir) seemed to be enjoying themselves just as much as the miners. (D.M.A. 1953)

Of course there is a great deal of cold war hyperbole in this account, but it is interesting for all that. It recalls 1926, when the Gala was ‘ unofficially’ moved to another place. It gels well with Charlie Pick’s earlier emphasis upon the ‘unorganised’ nature of the Gala. Something of this quality can be seen in one of the earlier circulars sent to the Durham lodges in relation to the Big Meeting. In May 1878, William Crawford asked that the lodge secretaries provide information as to ‘the probable number of persons which will be coming from your place to the Annual Gala, and from which station they will come’. It adds: ‘all we want is a good guess’. He would of course have got no more, and this says a lot about the occasion.

The democratic elements of popular culture displayed by the Gala are significant, as are its roots in pre-modern society. Yet it is easy (and tempting) to over-simplify any interpretation of this occasion. Certainly that is the case with the banners. In their motifs we can discern an important change from a Liberal-Methodist influence to Labour-Socialist forms. But even here there is continuity. Until it closed in 1983 the East Hutton banner displayed the Good Samaritan, and the militantly socialist Wearmouth lodge today parades behind a banner carrying the words ‘in God is all our trust’. What this suggests perhaps is the need to consider the diffuseness of the image contained in the banner, rather than a strict formal political interpretation. The banner through the union provided the unifying element through which village life becomes established as ‘community’, the banner had to embrace all the village; this was its purpose. This too is an important way to understand the parade in Durham.

In many ways, descriptions of the Gala (and the experience of it) mirror that of the Mardi Gras which takes place every February in New Orleans. In its size and spectacle the parallel is a clear one. Mardi Gras is carnival with fancy dress, music and dancing. It is a parade in which the ordinary world is turned upside down. There were
elements of this in the Gala (men came dressed as women, women as pit men and miners dressed as aristocrats) but, as we have seen, there was order also. No more so than in the pattern of the parade.

In Durham the miners’ bands and banners congregated and marched down Silver Street or along Church Street to the focal point of the County Hotel. There they marched beneath the balcony upon which their leaders stood. It was almost akin to a military march-past. Unlike Carnival it acknowledges a distinction between actors and spectators. Even before nationalisation it was always an occasion in which leaders looked on. But they did not look on to a ‘mass’ of people. Some may have seen it like that, but to the people, they marched through with their friends and family as a village. The lodge banner represented them and their collective endeavours. On Gala Day the people marched behind their own banners and their own bands. It was those bands and banners which provide the pageantry in their colour and sound. In 1946 it was miners who played at the Cathedral service. As one old bandsman put it: ‘it was an honour in those days to play at the Cathedral. You had to be a leading band in the county’. Their music, like the Gala, was in an important sense their own. And they adapted it, playing formal classical marches as they arrived and more popular tunes and marches, as they left - many of them drunk, most of them happy. In this way the Gala (especially in those post-war years) can be seen as a deeply popular occasion. It was theirs; but it was made, inside that enormous political compromise represented by mining unionism and the Labourist state. Sadly it is nearing its end. In 1988 the Durham miners Association became merged into a new Northern Area of the Miners union. Just six pits remain in the Durham coalfield, and their long term future is in doubt.

References
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D.M.A. 1953 General Secretary’s Annual Report, Durham.


