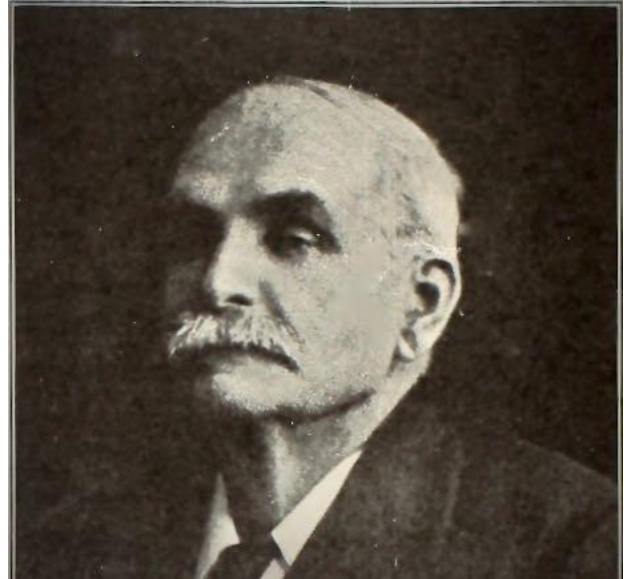


Better Working Conditions and a Fair Return on our Labour!

John M. Smith

William Latham of Donnington Wood, often known as the “Shropshire Miners’ Agent”, was my great-uncle. Born in 1860 into a mining family living in Waxhill Barracks, he only received a very basic education. As an adult, he fought doggedly against powerful opponents to raise the living and working conditions of his fellow miners. In doing so, he won appointments to leadership positions in the Trade Union movement, and to seats on Town and County Councils. He was also a Primitive Methodist preacher and a member of the Wellington Board of Guardians. His manner was forceful, forthright and down-to-earth.

William started work at age 10 as a boy labourer on a farm earning 6d. for a 13 hour day. The next year he joined his father at the Freehold Colliery in Donnington Wood. The mine had a reputation for being extremely wet and the miners tied up their trousers with string to stay as comfortable as possible. As a boy miner, William earned 2s. 6d. for a 52 hour week, and quickly witnessed the squalid and perilous conditions of working underground. These experiences spurred his determination to improve the circumstances of miners and, when the opportunity arose, other long-suffering workers.



William recognized that change is brought about through power ... the power of a Town or County Councillor to improve local living conditions, or the power of a Trade Union leader to negotiate wages with mine owners. William became an active member of his Trade Union, the Shropshire Miners’ Association. He was appointed Secretary of the Association in 1887. A year later, the Association became affiliated with the Miners’ Federation of Great Britain which greatly expanded William’s reach and influence.

In 1907, William was appointed Agent of the Shropshire Miners’ Association which meant that he worked for, and was paid by, the Association. His first major responsibility as Agent was to present evidence to the Royal Commission on Mines in December 1907. Based on his personal experience of 36 years as a miner, William advocated for improved mining regulations to increase the safety of miners. He was particularly concerned about the prevention of common mining “accidents”, and for holding mine owners to account when safety rules were not followed.

William’s next major endeavor was to lead the Shropshire miners in the 1912 National Coal Strike. The issue was miners’ wages. Under existing rules, wages fluctuated based on the market price of coal and sometimes fell to subsistence levels. The miners wanted a decent minimum wage to be set. The strike lasted over 5 weeks, during which the Miners’ Federation could not reach an agreement with the mine owners. The strike crippled industry across the country, and brought some of the miners’ families near to destitution. Finally, the Asquith government stepped in and passed the Coal Mine (Minimum Wage) 1912 Act. Apparently, the Act did not yield immediate benefit to the Shropshire Miners as their wages were already at or above the minimum, but they had no choice but to return to work.

During the years of the First World War, the miners and mine owners were focused on meeting the needs of the war effort. Nevertheless, the rising costs of coal production, the diminishing returns from the old coalfields, and increasing coal production in other countries were building a bow wave of troubles that would later culminate in the 1926 General Strike.

By 1914, William (still the Shropshire Miners' Agent) had been elected to the Salop County Council, and he was serving on the Education Committee. F. E. Green recounts an episode involving William and the Education Committee in his book, "A History of the English Agricultural Labourer, 1879-1920".

Early in the war, agricultural labourers were leaving the farms to join up for the Armed Forces. This created a shortage of farm workers to provide the nation's food supply. Women were registering at Labour Exchanges to volunteer for land work with the Women's Land Army. However, the farmers did not want these volunteers -- they much preferred to have young boys and girls who were paid less and easier to manage. Education Committees controlled by farmers in some rural County Councils were allowing boys and girls aged between 11 and 13 to be taken out of school to work on the farms. When this issue came up to the Salop Council's Education Committee, William Latham was appalled.

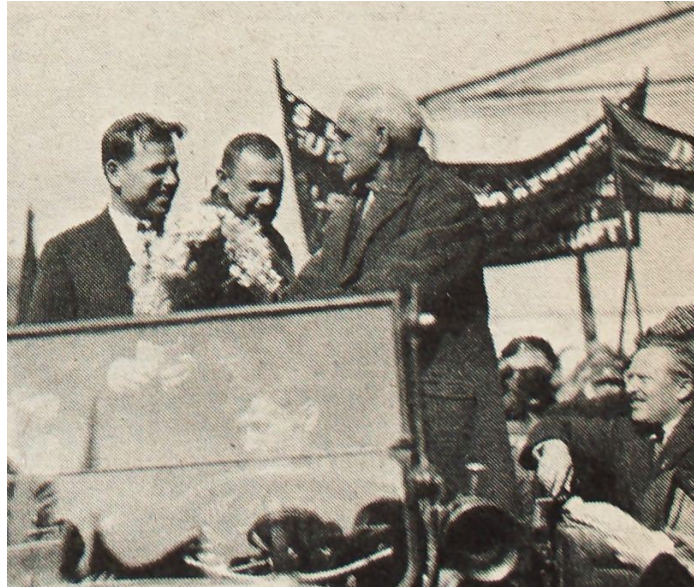
F. E. Green writes: "William spoke as one who had been under that foul system of boy labour on the farm. Soon after he was ten years of age he was at work on a farm with a whip in his hand ... (cries of 'Order', 'Order' from the Committee), and the farmer at night too drunk to pay him. (Loud cries of 'Order' and 'Chair'). Could they wonder that he was on his feet, protesting? He was there to protect the lads of the agricultural workers, 90 per cent of whom ... were not represented on that Council. The farm labourer was tied hand and foot to the farmer. He was reminded of the saying that -- *To be Shropshire born and bred, Is to be strong in the muscle, And weak in the yed.* And it is to keep these children weak in the head that they had this request for boys of twelve on the land."

In 1926, miners' wages were decreasing in real terms, but at the same time coal production had become unprofitable for the mine owners. The miners wanted a pay raise, and the mine owners wanted either a pay reduction or longer working hours. It was the job of William Latham to help the Shropshire miners find a way through this intractable conflict. In May, the mine owners locked out the miners. Three days later, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) called a General Strike in support of the miners. The strike lasted 9 days and brought out 1 million miners and 1.75 million other workers. There was considerable violence including the derailing of the Flying Scotsman. In the end, the TUC called off the strike leaving the miners to fend for themselves. By November, the Miners' Federation capitulated due to the deprivation of the miners and their families. Most miners returned to work for reduced pay or increased hours, but some remained unemployed for years.

Cyril Nicholls, a retired Finance Director and Secretary of the Lilleshall Company, probably knew William personally, and certainly had access to some of his photographs. Cyril wrote a fitting tribute to William Latham in the Shropshire Magazine of June, 1976 and included some photographs. Two of those photographs are used in this article and, as I continue my account of William's life, I will borrow from Cyril's writing.

Cyril provides the following story about the 1926 strike. During the time of poverty, William had a small poultry holding in his garden. One day, he addressed a large gathering of miners, saying "My religious principles would not allow me to advise stealing, but it is difficult to see one's children go hungry". Next morning, William's poultry houses were empty, and chalked across the door was "*Thanks Bill*".

From August to October 1926, during the aftermath of the General Strike, William attended a conference in Russia as the representative of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain. The conference was hosted by the Miners' Union of the USSR. Cyril reports: "He made dramatic speeches of appeal for international co-operation in coal production and usage, and for mutual support of the miners' cause for better wages and living conditions." "At the end of the conference, he was presented with a photographic record album of the meetings in Leningrad, Moscow and Kharkov. One photograph represents William Latham proudly being presented with a bouquet as the main speaker at the Moscover Trade Union Council."



In the following years, the mining industry was in turmoil and the Shropshire miners continued to struggle. These years were undoubtedly hard for William. He felt disillusioned about the conflicts within the Trade Union movement, and how the TUC had let down the Miners' Federation in their great hour of need. He was disappointed that the Baldwin government had resisted pressure from the Miners' Federation to nationalize the mining industry. He must have wondered, when push came to shove, what more the Miners' Federation could have done to achieve progress in the face of a recalcitrant government and hard economic conditions. Nevertheless, his work provided guidance and continuing hope for the struggles that still lay ahead for collieries in Shropshire and around the country.

William died aged 73 in January 1933 leaving behind his wife Elizabeth (Gittins) and his eight children. Cyril provides some appropriate last words: "Shropshire miners and all trade unionists could not pay a better tribute to the memory of William Latham than by repeating the message they left for him in 1926, *Thanks Bill.*"