

## **Horden Colliery, Co. Durham\***

Huw Beynon, Ray Hudson and Dave Sadler

### **Horden and the background to closure**

The Horden Colliery is situated in the south east of the Durham coalfield. This was the last part of the coalfield to be developed. While most of the pits in Durham were sunk in the mid-nineteenth century, Horden first drew coals in 1904 and it is one of the few pits in the North East sunk in this century. Blackhall, to the South, and Easington and Dawdon to the North were sunk at the same time. In the inter-war period Horden, under the control of the Horden Coal Company, emerged as the largest mine in Britain with three shafts and an extensive surface operation involving a washery, brick works and coke works.

Nor is this ascendance merely an historic one. It was in 1960 that Lord Robens, newly appointed head of the National Coal Board,

---

\* This chapter is based upon a report which was prepared for the Durham mining unions at the Work and Employment Research Unit at the University of Durham in 1985.

travelled to the North East and announced, on a boring ship off Blackhall, that there was enough coal beneath the North Sea to guarantee a future of over a hundred years for the East Coast mines. This claim was substantiated in 1965 in an enthusiastic report in the NCB's house journal *Coal News*:

Vigorous North Sea exploration by an NCB boring tower over the last seven years has revealed that at least 550 million tonnes of workable coal lies in the undersea coalfield now being 'attacked' by Durham coastal collieries. It will be enough to keep 20,000 miners who work in these pits working for many years to come.

The article commented that reserves in the areas of the Blackhall-Horden-Easington collieries totalled 200 million tonnes. In 1974, under the newly agreed Plan for Coal, this complex of pits was pointed out as being central to the NCB's investment strategy for the area. Horden was a key pit in the plan to deliver almost 2 million tonnes a year of blended coking coal to the new British Steel Corporation complex on Teesside. At that time the future of coal mining in Horden, and South East Durham generally, seemed secure.

This view was supported forcefully in 1977 when the NCB launched a recruiting drive in the area, focusing upon the Horden and Dawdon collieries. The campaign was aimed at recruiting 'experienced miners' who had left the industry in despair in the 1960s. 'Come back into the top league' read the copy; 'Come back to Big Pay' it continued; 'come back to a secure job'. The coal industry, and Horden Colliery, was totally secure, 'the demand for coal is greater than ever'. This was the message then. And it convinced people. Horden was not a 'Victorian hole in the ground', it was a modern super-pit. While pits in the West might continue to close because of exhausted or limited reserves, Horden on the East Coast was a pit with a future. It was a pit which attracted new recruits; it was a 'receiving colliery' for transferred men from closed pits in the West of Durham. It was a pit with a future. This was the view developed by the NCB in the area. It was a view which was generally accepted by the people who worked at Horden and lived in the village; it was accepted by their trade union representatives.

In 1985, however, after the strike, the NCB announced the closure of the colliery. Horden – in NCB's 'newspeak' – was to be a 'manpower reservoir', a function it would share with Bates Colliery in Northumberland. In these pits 'the men would be given the opportunity to transfer to the high-priority pits to facilitate redundancy on a one-for-one basis'. There would be 'no compulsory redundancy' but, in the words of the Area Director, pits like Horden and Bates were a 'cancer' which needed to be

cut out if the area was to survive.

This is quite a change. And in truth it does not come completely out of the blue. The signs were there well before the strike began. People look back ruefully to the closure of the Blackhall Colliery in 1981. This pit had been linked to Horden, and it had also been promised a long life. There the lodge committee had cooperated as the NCB asked for a run-down in manpower to improve efficiency. Barry Chambers remembers how:

'On the day that the last of the men involved in the run-down were transferred we were called in to Team Valley to be told that the pit was going to close – on the very last day!'

In his view, the Board played a 'dirty trick' on the Blackhall men and they then proceeded to play the same trick on the Horden men. 'It's like a domino effect along the coast. They closed Blackhall then moved the men to Horden increasing their costs and putting the burden of the pumping costs on to them as well.'

In spite of assurances to the contrary, it had been clear for some time that Horden had something less than 'super-pit' status in the overall plans of the Area board. And there were a number of reasons for this. To begin with, as we shall see, the collieries of the south-east of Durham experienced greater geological problems than had been anticipated by the Board, and these problems were exacerbated by the increasing amounts of water which seeped into the pit from the limestone which overlays the coal seams in Durham. This water problem increased in scale as the NCB closed down pits and pumping stations across the region. The pattern of run-down in the County (*twenty* pits were closed in the 1970s) increased the pressure – of water and costs – in the pits that remained open. This pressure became all the more intense after the collapse of the coking coal market in the later 1970s. Like the geology, steel production never lived up to the NCB's plans, and with the change in BSC's ordering policies (away from Durham coal and toward imports) a crisis was created for domestic coking coal production. This crisis revealed itself in Durham in the closure of Blackhall and the subsequent closures of Boldon, Eden, Houghton, South Hetton and East Hetton. Pit after pit; each of them a coking coal producer; each of them closed for reasons of 'safety' or 'exhaustion'. Read against this list, the closure of Horden (the last major coking coal producer in the area) seems entirely predictable. And it is this which rankles most with the men who work at the pit, their trade union representatives and their families.

As the crisis developed, the men at Horden asked questions. What was the future for the pit? Was there a 'hit list' and were

they on it? How important were the losses they were making? Didn't the closure of Blackhall and the transfer of men to Horden make their pit vulnerable? To these questions they received repeated assurances to the effect that the pit was losing money but it was 'within budget'; that there was no 'hit list'; that there were no plans to close Horden in the foreseeable future. The people at Horden look back on these words with some bitterness.

Their claim is a simple one: the NCB tells lies as a matter of course and their management have behaved in a deceitful manner towards the workers' representatives and the agreed consultative machinery. Many men who work in the pits are now convinced that the NCB's main area of expertise is in colliery closures. To this task they have developed numerous engineering, economic and psychological skills. One man put it like this: 'I'm convinced there's planners up there not planning to mine coal but planning for to close pits.'

To 'outsiders' this might appear an overtly cynical or exaggerated view. At Horden men repeatedly point back to particular incidents which lead to this conclusion, to agreements made with the Board and to statements made by the Board's representatives. These claims – made by reasonable men who would describe themselves as 'moderate' politically – are disturbing ones, which require investigation. In themselves they raise important questions in relation to the manner of the operation of one of the country's major state-owned industries.

### Consultation

In October 1981 the year that Blackham closed, the NCB announced its intention to withdraw Horden from the area of the pit known as Zone 6 where faces had been developed in the E seam. At the meeting of the pit's consultative committee convened on 1 October 1981, Tom Callan, General Secretary of the Durham Miners' Association, expressed his complete surprise at the decision. Zone 6 was seen as the future of Horden Colliery as the source of bulk output of coking coal. Already rumours were circulating around the village to the effect that the pit's future was in doubt. Gordon Proctor, the NCB's D District Production Manager, was at pains to alleviate these fears. He explained the problems encountered in Zone 6 (two faces, E80 and E81, had encountered water problems) but added that:

'The colliery was certainly recording a financial loss and it was imperative to increase production . . . production of the G seam (in Zone 6) could not be expected before 1983, and in the mean time a

concentrated effort will be made in the seams currently worked to raise output to 3,000 tonnes per day. There were sufficient reserves in these seams to employ current manpower for a further ten years. There was no plan to reduce manpower.'

The trade unions were unhappy with the situation and expressed the view that decisions were certainly being taken by the NCB without prior consultation, and that these decisions deeply affected the future of the colliery. Nevertheless, the trade union representatives were reassured by the statements of Mr Proctor, and also his reaffirmation of the fact that the reserves in the G seam in Zone 6 were clearly 'in the Horden Colliery take'. Also the statements to the effect that, although Easington Colliery *could* work the G seam 'there was no plan for Easington to work any section of this seam in the next fifteen years', and that 'subject to the "E" seam being left sterile' there was every hope that the G seam would be dry and workable from Horden. Their confidence in the future of the pit was bolstered further by the assertive words of Mr Atkinson, the Area Industrial relations Officer. The rumours and worries, he said, were based upon a misinterpretation of events: 'There were reserves for ten years' production with the present level of manpower. . . .' Worries about the pumping costs increased by Blackhall's closure were also unfounded: 'this had been discussed at Area level and full cognizance taken in both budgets and appraisal of results'.

In response to the worries expressed by the General Secretary of the Durham Mechanics – Mr Tom Bartle – Mr Atkinson could not have been plainer. While no one had guaranteed manpower levels – because no one could

'The production manager had said that there were existing reserves for ten years with the current level of manpower. There was no plan to run down manpower at this colliery, and nothing had been said about job losses in the next ten years – the production manager had said that if a wrong decision was made now this could result in job losses in the future.'

He added, however, that in spite of the union's protestations and suggestions, 'the subject for discussion is a management decision'.

Five months later, at another special meeting of the pit's consultative committee held on 5 March 1982, the Board reported back on these developments, with a Five-Year Working Plan for the colliery which was presented on a wall board. Mining would continue at this pit in *four* seams over the period. Beneath the overwhelming optimism of this plan, a worry was expressed about the future of the Zone 6 reserves. These events were to become the subject of detailed boundary changes, conducted by

the Board without consultation with the trade unions. In 1982 it was clear that Easington Colliery had been allowed to work the G seam in the Zone 6 area.

With relation to this development, the Board expressed a general reluctance for Horden workings to enter the Zone 6 area above the workings of the neighbouring Easington Colliery. The Board pressed the view that Easington Colliery had not to be endangered and pointed to the need for 'information obtained from developments and boreholes over the next 3-3½ years'. While the union representatives at Horden expressed impatience over these delays, the Board's Five-Year Plan seemed to offer an assurance that time was on their side and that there were extensive reserves available before Zone 6 was mined. So, while the union representatives pressed with questions on Zone 6, management made reassuring noises about Zone 5. This area of coal had been ceded to Horden from the reserves of Easington Colliery as a token exchange for the Zone 6 take. Easington had experienced enormous difficulties in mining in the Zone 5 area. At Horden, however, the Board seemed optimistic and pointed to the possibility that 'the drift currently being driven from seam "E" to seam "G" in Zone 5 could continue to the seam "J"' thereby offering a serious expansion in the pit's reserves and more time before Zone 6 reserves were explored. Even without this, the pit had a Five-Year Plan and the minutes of the meeting record how Mr Proctor reassured the union representatives with the opinion that:

'there were reserves from existing seams for five years plus – they afforded ample time to get the information required and to decide what seams are to be worked [in Zone 6].'

When pressed on this by Mr Tom Bartle of the Durham Mechanics who suggested that 'the closure of Horden may be imminent', Mr Proctor was categorical in his denial, and Mr Atkinson added that:

'there was no threat of an early closure, although eventually all pits must close. What was being said was that care had to be exercised as Easington Colliery had the greater resources and therefore had a longer production life.'

The worries expressed by Mr Bartle, however, extended to the other union representatives present. Everyone had a sense that the Board was not being straightforward, or even honest. The assurances seemed too pat. Lodge officials knew that the men in the pit were extremely worried. Stan Langley of the Durham Miners' Association felt that the Board was: 'sowing seeds of doubt in the minds of the work-force by means of propaganda to

precondition them to the possible closure of the mine'. Furthermore, Tom Callan was sure that 'economics had a large part to play in the current situation'. This view – that the losses attributed to the Horden pit were the essential background to all the discussion of the pit's reserves – was supported by certain references to markets and reinforced by the Board's insistence on the need to shed manpower. The Five-Year Plan had, as its immediate aim:

to boost output from 2,500 tonnes a day to 3,000 tonnes per day.

This would reduce the envisaged financial loss by £5 million.

Manpower for the Horden/Blackhall mine would reduce (by redundancies and natural wastage) to 2,000 in the next eighteen months thus further reducing the loss.

The Board added that: 'If manpower saving schemes were introduced then further reductions could be obtained – a reduction of 100 men would result in the loss being reduced by £1 million.' (Our emphasis.) Within all this, though, the Board's representatives were bland in their assurances. While all pits closed at some point Horden's early demise was not being planned. All that was required was time to investigate further the strata in the Zone 6 area.

This investigation, with water problems in the G seam, eventually led the NCB to announce its decision (made some months earlier) to cede the whole of the Zone 6 reserves to the Easington Colliery, thereby severely limiting Horden's future development. As Tom McGee, the union's engineer, stated in June 1983 when he investigated the decision:

'The Coal Board believed that there could be undue risks to Easington Colliery associated with the Permian water if the High Main (E) remained intact and the Yard Seam (G) was exploited. This appraisal by the Board induced them to change the boundary line between Horden and Easington Collieries. . . . This change meant that 3.6 million tonnes of High Main reserves and 3.3 million tonnes of Yard Seam reserves would be removed from earlier estimates of Horden Colliery future reserves.'

While Mr McGee accepted the Board's view that 'Easington Colliery takes priority over Horden', he was unconvinced that 'leaving the High Main intact and working the Yard Seam after fully exploiting the Low Main from Easington would present an unacceptable risk to Easington Colliery'.

McGee's point was clear. There was no need to redraw the boundaries. No colliery would proceed into Zone 6 until such time that Easington had completed the extraction of coal from the Low Main seam. However, this was likely to take between



ten and fifteen years. Horden *could* enter Zone 6 at that time. If Mr Proctor's assessment of the other reserves in the colliery was accurate, it was simply a question of planning and not one which required boundary revision.

This, however, was not to be. Once again, it seemed, the Board's assessments were not correct. The situation was spelled out to the union representatives at a consultative committee just three months later on 14 September 1983. By this time the situation had become 'so severe' that the Area Chief Mining Engineer, Mr Burn, 'had not yet made any recommendations to the Area Board'. He intended to read a 'prepared statement' with a view to receiving 'constructive comments'. The tone was very different from two years ago.

The pit was losing money; pumping costs were £3.5 million per annum; results in the E seam were 'extremely disappointing': in the face of this there was only one 'realistic plan', and this looked different from the Five-Year Plan discussed earlier:

There had been good faces in 'F' and 'G' seams. . . . The best plan would be to concentrate production on four faces in these seams with associated developments – this should produce 3,000 tonnes per day. However, to arrive at/near this break-even figure on this tonnage would entail reducing manpower to 1,200.

Mr Burn was clear that

'implementation of plans must be carried out as quickly as possible . . . there must be evidence in this financial year that attempts were being made to reduce losses . . . no colliery had a guaranteed life . . . the smaller the number of men employed the longer the life of the colliery.'

This 'new realism' had clearly affected Mr McGee who said that while he would

'like to say that all reserves would be worked, in the present economic climate this was not possible – elsewhere in the country, collieries were being closed. Today the Board had given an indication of the road to follow to attain a near-viable situation.'

The unions agreed. The Mechanics Lodge Secretary, Derek Gray, discussed the mechanisms of reducing the manpower by 500. In reply to his questioning the Area Chief Mining Engineer reiterated that 'the acceptable figure would be attained if the output was raised to 3,000 tonnes per day, and manpower reduced to 1,200 men'. He added: 'if a positive proposal was not submitted in the short term then there was the distinct possibility of one being enforced from other channels.'

The plan was accepted. Horden went through a manpower

rundown. There followed a period of quite intense discussion of problems over the organisation of production in the pit. In this it was clear that the men and their union representative were intent upon achieving the 3,000 tonne target set by the Board. They had agreed to cooperate with Mr Burn's arithmetic and with it the prospect of a secure future. However, Mr McGee's appraisal of the pit's reserves signalled a major problem: 'It is likely that the G seam in the area currently being worked will be exhausted in about five years. The F seam also has about five years' life on the area currently being worked.' Cost-effective the pit may be. But without a settlement on Zone 6 it would be cost-ineffective and short-lived. This was the situation in early 1984; before the strike which affected the Durham coalfield for a twelve-month period.