

THE SOMERSET COAL COMBINATION - A Further note

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In BIAS Journal 20, 1988, Robin Stiles gave an entertaining account of how the existence of the Somerset Coal Combination, or 'Tale', was brought to light in 1828 during enquiries at the Committee stage of the Avon & Gloucestershire Rail Road Bill. However, the 'Tale' was not killed off by this exposure; it survived, or was revived after a decent interval, and was certainly in full activity in 1846, as is shown by a document in the Somerset Record Office (Waldegrave Papers)(1). This gives details of the tonnage landed at various pits in Somerset in the period 24 May 1845 to 23 May 1846, together with details of each pit's 'Tale' allowance, as follows:

		Landings	Tale
Radstock			
	Old Pit)		
	Middle Pit)	31,103	31,044
	Ludlows)		
	Tynning	11,940	11,940
	Wellsway	11,940	11,940
Huish & Writhlington			
	Huish)		
	Old Writhlington)	31,044	31,044
	New Writhlington)		
Timsbury			
	Grove)		
	Withy Mills)	20,286	20,298
	Hays Wood	1,917	1,980
	Conygre	11,943	11,940
Paulton			
	Ham)		
	Hill)	6,013	14,328
	Engine	9,761	10,746
Clandown		13,850	13,850
Old Welton		13,838	13,850
Welton Hill		10,746	10,746
Smallcombe		6,067	9,552
Fry's Bottom		8,508	9,552
Grayfield		11,900	11,940
Farrington		5,138	9,552
Radford		10,459	10,746
Braysdown		8,469	11,940

Camerton two pits not in the Tale: Landed last year 30,540 tons but sold at reduced price

From this it will be seen that total landings were 224,922 tons, or 255,462 including Camerton, against a permitted total of 246,988 tons. The figures in the 'Tale' and 'Landings' columns are mostly so close as to show that the cartel was tightly run in a disciplined and efficient manner.

Certain observations may be made on the statistics:

1. At roughly 255,000 tons the total production, including the Camerton Collieries, is somewhat less than might have been expected and seems to indicate that the coalfield had enjoyed only a modest growth over the preceding 40-odd years. From figures given by Billingsley (1798) we may estimate production in that year at 130,000 tons; and from Warner(1801) we can derive an estimate of 170,000. (These figures depend on how we convert from bushels to tons and are thus subject to some uncertainty. What is interesting is how close they are to each other.) The first reliable statistic is 400,000 tons, given by Hunt (1860). It seems, therefore, that production rose very rapidly in the period 1845-1860 and, if this is so, it is probably due to the activities of that redoubtable lady, Frances Dowager Countess Waldegrave, in developing her collieries in Radstock.
2. It would be interesting to know on what basis the 'Tale' allowances were calculated. All that can be deduced from the table is that many of the figures are multiples (either in whole numbers or to 0.5) of 2388 ; though what conclusions, if any, can be drawn from that it is hard to say.

References

1. The transcript was made some 25 years ago when the only reference given was the general one DD/WG; it may very well be that it now has a more precise retrieval number.
2. John Billingsley, General view of the agriculture of the county of Somerset (2nd ed., 1798) pp 26-30 and 317.
3. Richard Warner, The history of Bath (1801) Section 3, Ch 2.
4. Geological Survey Memoirs. Mining records: mineral statistics of the United Kingdom for [the years 1853 to 1880] by Robert Hunt. The first reliable coal mining statistics to be generally published, being compiled by Hunt from information collected by the Inspectors of Mines. Hunt usually gives a single figure for the whole of the South-western Coal District (Bristol, Somerset and Forest of Dean) but for certain years there are separate county figures, the earliest being 1860.