

## The Making of Militancy: The Bliss Tweed Mill Strike 1913-14

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**On December 19th 2013 *The Guardian* editorial was 'In praise of...the Bliss Mill strikers'; it commented that 'It seems a safe bet that the prime minister was too busy on Wednesday to get to his constituency to attend the 100th anniversary commemoration of the start of the legendary strike at Chipping Norton's tweed mills' reminding its readers that Chipping Norton is the constituency of the Prime Minister David Cameron. The editorial drew upon Mike Richardson's pamphlet on the strike published as part of the Bristol Radical Pamphleteer series by the Bristol Radical History Group.**

The years 1910 to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 witnessed an upsurge in strike activity in Great Britain and Ireland, as significant sections of the trade union rank-and-file began to express their frustration at the lack of progress made in their struggle for better working conditions and a new social order. Worker unrest combined with clashes over Home Rule for Ireland, and the militant tactics of suffrage campaigners, which added to the problems of the ruling class.

Most accounts of the labour unrest in Britain during this period have rightly focused on areas such as Liverpool, London, Manchester, Glasgow, Dublin and South Wales where labour militancy was at its most intense<sup>1</sup>. Industrial struggle, however, was geographically widespread, although chiefly concentrated in the coal, cotton, transport, metal, engineering, shipbuilding and construction industries. The most significant of these industrial struggles was the Dublin lockout of 1913. Jim Larkin, leader of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, whose members were locked out, became notorious as a revolutionary syndicalist and a fighter for Irish freedom. Larkin toured Britain to garner support against the employers' attempt to destroy his union. Towards the end of the year, as the battle reached a climax, one lesser-known strike began in the Cotswold market town of Chipping Norton.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the Glasgow experience see M. V. Wilson, 'The Waterfront Strikes in Glasgow: Trade Unions and Rank-and-File Militancy in the Labour Unrest of 1910 – 1914', *International Review of Social History*, 53, (2008); For Liverpool see E. Taplin, 'The Liverpool Transport Strike, 1911', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, Vol. 33 (Liverpool University Press for the Keele University Centre for Industrial Relations: 2012); For Dublin, see F. Devine (ed) *A Capital in Conflict: Dublin City and the 1913 Lockout* (Dublin City Council: 1913). For broader classic accounts see

G. Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, (Serif: 1997; first published 1935) and H. Pelling, 'The Labour Unrest, 1911 – 1914', *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (Macmillan: 1968); H. A. Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889: Volume 2 1911–1933* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1987, first published 1985).

<sup>2</sup> For a full account of the strike see M. Richardson, *Bliss Tweed Mill Strike, 1913-14: Causes, Conduct and Consequences*, Bristol Radical History Pamphlet, 26, 2013, first published in *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* (HSIR) 25/26 (Spring/Autumn)

The upsurge of rebellion raises interesting questions about the growth of workers' consciousness before World War One. The strikes were indicative of an increasing dissatisfaction with the economic and political climate in Britain that was manifest even in remote rural areas, such as Chipping Norton. Moreover, as the young left-wing Oxford 'fellows', G. N. Clark and G.D. H. Cole, recognised:

*"The strike now in progress at Chipping Norton is of exceptional significance. Wages in Oxfordshire are notoriously low. The Oxford tram strike of last year showed conclusively that there is no hope of improving the deplorably bad conditions of workers in Oxford unless there is a general upward movement in the surrounding country districts. Till the country worker is better off, he will always be tempted into towns to take the place of any town worker who endeavours to raise his wages."*<sup>3</sup>

The strike is, however, also an interesting case study of the outcome of a change in local management style, as Bliss Tweed Mill converted from a family owned firm to being part of a dispersed stock ownership company, against the backdrop of a changing national, and indeed international, trading environment in the woollen industry.

The workers, having experienced a paternalist employer, reacted angrily to this new style of management, which represented a new world of laissez faire views of the economy and society. The mill had prospered under the ownership and paternalist practice of William Bliss during the golden years of British manufacturing industry, the 1850s to the early 1870s. He secured workers' subordination and commitment at the mill through a practice of shared rights and obligations that carried with it 'the expression and validation of a sense of superiority, of being master in one's own factory.'<sup>4</sup>

In 1872 disaster struck. A fire destroyed the lower mill killing three employees. Undeterred, Bliss rebuilt the mill in grand Palladian style to reflect his social standing. The cost of restoration, however, coupled with the downturn in the woollen industry, placed a severe burden on the third William Bliss who took over the firm after his father's death in 1883. He borrowed heavily from the Birmingham Bank Company, but this came at a price. Investment and expenditure decisions required the bank's approval. In 1889, the Metropolitan Bank, a joint stock bank, took over the Birmingham Bank and sent its representatives to monitor Bliss Mill's business activity. A further decline in trading conditions in the early 1890s resulted in the Bliss family leaving the business and handing full control to the bank. The new regime installed its man, Arthur Dunstan, the Mill's General Manager, as the Mill's Managing Director. Born in Nottingham, and trained in Birmingham as a chartered accountant, the 29 year old Dunstan had established a reputation for his single-mindedness and forceful manner in running the mill.

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<sup>3</sup> G. N. Clark and G.D.H. Cole, 'The Strike at Chipping Norton' (unpublished document: 1914), Oxfordshire Studies.

<sup>4</sup> P. Joyce, *Work, Society & Politics; The culture of the factory in later Victorian England* (Methuen: 1982), p. 140. For a discussion on the meaning, strengths and limitations of the concept of paternalism see P. Ackers, 'On Paternalism: Seven Observations on the Uses and Abuses of the Concept in Industrial Relations, Past and Present', *HSIR* 5 (Spring 1998), pp. 173–94.

At his leaving presentation in November 1896, William Bliss was forthright about what his employees could expect from the new regime, but beseeched them to continue to work conscientiously and honestly as they always had:

*“He [Bliss] had always felt and acted upon the principle that there was a difference between the machine and the person who worked it. In future, however, all present must scarcely expect to find the same consideration, which from the exceptional nature of the case had previously been accorded to them. Their services at the same time should be just as conscientious straightforward and honest, as it had been for him, even if there could not be mingled with the service a little sugar in the cup represented by affection and regard.”<sup>5</sup>*

This was a condemnation of the Bank introducing professional management and the separation of ownership and control. However, the Bliss family had contributed to its own downfall, and the ostensible display of workers’ gratitude and deference at William Bliss’s departure, ‘expressing in a humble manner the great admiration’ they had for him,<sup>6</sup> was more to do with their past dependence on Bliss as an employer than his paternalistic overtures.

Bliss’s prediction that the workforce would be shown little ‘affection or regard’ turned out to be not far off the mark. Dunstan became to be despised by the workforce and, indeed, those in the community concerned about the environment did not particularly like him. In the early 1900s dyes from the mill regularly polluted the local stream killing off the fish. By 1913, men and women at the mill were open to the idea of joining a union to combat by collective means the injustice of Dunstan’s management regime, and its refusal to countenance increasing wages to levels paid elsewhere in the industry.

The Mill provided work for around 380 hands and was the largest employer in the town. In November 1913 the Workers’ Union mounted a recruitment campaign enlisting around two-thirds of the workers employed at the Mill. To organise workers in an isolated factory in a small market town with a population of 3,972, comprising just 918 households was a significant achievement. Arthur Dunstan, the Mill’s managing director, viewed the formation of a union branch at his works as a direct threat to his authority. His initial reaction to the union organising campaign was to issue a warning that he would dismiss any employee joining the union. Not to be intimidated, two-thirds of the workforce responded by enrolling with the union, thus he was compelled to adopt another tactic. He dismissed three union activists hoping to instil fear and bring his workers to heel. Rather than surrender their union cards, however, on 18 December 1913, 237 woollen textile workers, 125 women and 112 men, stopped work and walked out demanding the reinstatement of their colleagues.

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<sup>5</sup> A report of William Bliss’s final speech at his leaving presentation, November 1896, cited in Laidlow, A Brief History of the Manufacture of Cloth in Chipping Norton (unpublished and unpaginated account from an employee of Bliss Mills: late 1940s approx.), Chipping Norton Museum.

<sup>6</sup> Statement signed by Sarah Jacques and Walter Thomas Hawkins on behalf of 250 Bliss Mill employees, 31 October, 1896, cited in Laidlow, A Brief History of the Manufacture of Cloth in Chipping Norton.

Dunstan reacted by proposing the establishment of a company union that would automatically take into membership all male and female employees over twenty-one years of age and disbar them from becoming 'members of any other union or outside organisation of similar character'. This move was seen as an attack on his workers' right to combine, and the offer was treated with disdain. Charles Gore, the Bishop of Oxford, sent a letter in support of the strikers' stand, which was read out at a strikers' meeting held on 30 December. It said:

*"I am convinced that nothing is of more importance than that of workers of all grades and all trades should be encouraged to combine freely in trade unions with the view to collective bargaining. I am sure that the proposal of Messrs Bliss to form an inside association of their workers and to exclude membership of an outside organisation or trade union, is a proposal that should be strongly resisted."*<sup>7</sup>

It was at this point Dunstan agreed to meet an official from the Workers' Union. On 2 January 1914, a deal was struck between him and the union that conceded the forgoing of the union demand for the reinstatement of the sacked men in return for a union recognition agreement, and the return to work of all the strikers. The terms of this settlement were, however, loosely worded. The union expected that 'all the workers would

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return to work as soon as things could be got into running order.'<sup>8</sup> When the strikers turned up for work on Monday 5 January, Dunstan would only agree to re-engage around half of them pronouncing that 'it could be weeks or months before they were taken back.'<sup>9</sup> Fury raged; the strikers believed that Dunstan had reneged on the terms of settlement and refused to return to work on Dunstan's new conditions. Their compromise offer was to submit to the terms of arbitration by a Board of Trade official, but the company turned this down. It proved a turning point; the Bliss Mill strikers realised that they were no longer prepared to buy peace at any price. Regardless of adversity, they stepped up their determination to remedy what they perceived as a great injustice, venting long-repressed feelings of discontent by establishing a daily picket of the mill and demonstrations in the town.

Supported by the Metropolitan Bank, which had been experiencing diminishing profits, Dunstan proved to be obdurate. The woollen industry faced a slump and Dunstan used this to his advantage. Despite six months valiant resistance, from the workforce and their supporters, during which a fifty year old striker, Annie Cooper, was jailed for fourteen days, the Bliss Mill union branch conceded defeat in June 1914. Only one hundred strikers were taken back, and many of these were not rehired until after the start of the First World War when the demand for military attire soared. Not long after the end of the strike, the bank would sell the business to Dunstan who in turn resold it to Fox Brothers the Quaker company, of Wellington in Somerset, in 1917.

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Gore's letter cited in Oxfordshire Weekly News, 31 December, 1913. Charles Gore was the first bishop to take the Labour Whip in the House of Lords.

<sup>8</sup> G. N. Clark and G. D. H. Cole, 'The Strike at Chipping Norton' (unpublished document: 1914), Oxfordshire Studies.

<sup>9</sup> Report on the mass meeting of strikers and sympathisers held in Chipping Norton Town Hall, 10 January, 1914, Oxfordshire Weekly News, 14 January, 1914.

An economic defeat can lead workers to turn to political alternatives. As the historian E.P. Thompson observed, the rise of the Independent Labour Party in 1893 came about partly from the defeat of the strike at Manningham Mills in Bradford in 1891 . Similarly, after the First World War, many of the activists who were involved in the Bliss Tweed Mill strike were to be drawn into working-class politics. A Chipping Norton Branch of the Labour Party was formed that included many former strikers; in 1920 it boasted 120 members. However, no branch of the union was to be formed at the Mill until 1945.

The story of the Bliss Tweed Mill has several contemporary echoes. Between 1906 and 1913 earnings had failed to keep pace with inflation and low wages were one of the triggers for working class discontent. Financial interests with little commitment to a manufacturing workforce predominated and the authoritarian rule of Dunstan at Bliss Tweed Mill, resembling some of the command and control practices of large companies in Britain today, were factors stoking the fires of discontent that led to the strike.

Memories of the strike have survived in the town and divided opinions on the dispute are still evident in the community. On the 18th December 2013, the one-hundredth anniversary of the Bliss Tweed Mill strike was commemorated in the town with a gathering of trade unionists and descendants of strikers' families. The occasion provided the opportunity for the local labour movement to explore the possible re-establishment of the Chipping Norton Trades Council as well as attracting comment in The Guardian editorial. The brave defiance of the strikers, who had much to lose, has a relevance one hundred years later in an era when anti-trade union sentiments have seen a resurgence.

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