The Management of Labor

Interwar coalmining was a labor-intensive business. On the average, wages in Britain accounted for two-thirds of the cost of mining one ton of coal in the period 1922–38. In Northumberland labor costs were slightly less than the national average, while wages in the two Yorkshire coal industries together constituted a somewhat larger fraction of total costs than in Britain as a whole. In both regions coal companies paid their wage earners at least six and one-half of every ten pounds they spent.¹

The highly labor-intensive nature of British coalmining suggests that a firm’s profitability depended on management’s ability to secure an adequate supply of competent employees and to ensure that they worked efficiently. While this would always have been true, the depressed state of the coal trade during the 1920s and 1930s ought to have rendered the effective control of a firm’s labor supply all the more imperative. Management’s task was not necessarily an easy one, even though the market for coalmining labor was over-supplied for most of the period. The legendary readiness of British miners to disrupt the flow of labor to the pits by means of strikes hardly requires extensive elaboration. No other occupational group in interwar Britain was so prone to stoppages. Between 1921 and 1938, 3,171 major strikes occurred in the British coal industry, involving more than 4.65 million men and resulting in the loss of more than 237 million working days.² Miners in West Yorkshire and Northumberland, however, were not among the most militant colliers. In the period 1921–38, West Yorkshire accounted for 5.9 percent of British coal-miners and only 5.2 percent of the days lost to major strikes nationally. Northumberland provided 5.3 percent of Britain’s miners but accounted for less than 1 percent of the days lost to major strikes.³

 Strikes were not the only obstacle facing coalowners bent on minimizing labor costs. Individual miners regularly absented themselves from work voluntarily. The Royal Commission on the Coal Industry (1925) estimated that the average British miner skipped work ten to eleven times
in 1924, equivalent to about 3.5 percent of the working year. There was also the problem of unavoidable absenteeism due to injury and illness which, the Royal Commission estimated, resulted in the loss of twelve to thirteen days per individual miner in 1924. In addition, some miners, particularly those working underground and out of reach of frequent supervision, no doubt varied the intensity of their efforts both in the course of a shift and from one shift to another.

To ensure regular attendance and to encourage maximum effort, British coalowners could resort to a variety of labor-management strategies. They could cultivate good relations with their workmen and the union officials representing them, thereby creating an atmosphere conducive to the peaceful settlement of differences and the speedy termination of stoppages. Alternatively, a firm could adopt an unyielding posture and attempt to cow its workmen into obedience and diligence. By attending to the men's welfare through the provision of medical services, housing, and recreational facilities, coalowners could attempt to mitigate losses to productivity through injury, illness, and unhealthy recreations and to instill a sense of loyalty to the enterprise. Management could also seek to discourage absenteeism and slowdowns through the ostentatious sacking of the worst offenders.

Such strategies could be pursued only within the narrow limits set by the intervention of outside agencies in colliery industrial relations. Hours and wages agreements settled at the district and sometimes the national level defined the basic material relationship between a colliery company and its employees. Working practices, such as the rules governing the introduction of machine-mining, were also frequently the subject of collective bargaining at the district level. Hiring and dismissal procedures, though ultimately a matter of managerial prerogative, were often contested by the miners' unions. In the North East, the practice of cavilling further constrained management in its dealings with its miners.

In this chapter we examine the labor-management strategies of the Ashington, Throckley, Briggs, and Waterloo Main coal companies. Against the backdrop of changes in the size and composition of their labor forces, we investigate the companies' relations with their employees and the miners' unions, their welfare policies, and their efforts to combat strikes and absenteeism. Finally, we consider the contribution of industrial relations to the efficiency of operations at the four firms. Did Ashington, Briggs, and Waterloo Main owe their competitive advantage over neighboring producers on the Northumberland and West Yorkshire coal-
fields to their success in managing labor? Did Throckley's inability to compete originate at the point of production?

The Ashington Coal Company's labor-management strategy in the period between the two world wars combined generous provision for the well-being of its miners with flexibility and tact in handling points of contention between the firm and its workmen. Ashington paid at least some of its miners at wage rates that yielded earnings considerably higher than the Northumbrian average. The company endeavored to place its workers in housing of a high standard and, where possible, to enable them to purchase their own homes. The firm also operated an extensive welfare program that catered to the recreational, educational, and medical requirements of its workers. Ashington looked favorably on the unionization of its miners and had no qualms about making this view known to the nonunion men on its payroll. When disputes between management and men arose, the company routinely adopted a conciliatory posture, the peaceful resolution of differences taking precedence over the defense of managerial authority.

Ashington sustained this expensive labor-management policy even though miners were abundant during the 1920s and 1930s. The company reduced its work force by 12 percent between 1921–22 and 1938–39, and the shrinkage was greatest at the coalface (table 4.1). The mechanization of coal extraction at Ashington all but eliminated the hewers, men whose expertise and strength had made them the highest-paid mineworkers and the natural leaders of miners' organizations. Initially the use of mechanical coal-cutters increased the demand for fillers, the men who loaded the freshly cut coal into the tubs in which it was moved to the main haulage roads; but progress in the mechanization of coal handling limited the number required. The two categories of faceworkers together accounted for 70 percent of the decline in Ashington's underground work force between 1925–26 and 1938–39. Economies in labor use were also achieved away from the coalface down Ashington's mines; but deputies, onsetters, putters, transport hands, stonemen, and shifters saw a 10 percent increase in their share of total underground employment in the period. 5

Employment on the surface at Ashington's collieries increased absolutely as well as in relation to the opportunities underground (table 4.1). Between 1921–22 and 1938–39 the company took on an additional 291 workers above ground, and the surface workers' share of total employment rose by almost one-third. The increase, however, did not offset the
losses below ground. Nor did the jobs on the surface require the skills or pay the wage rates of those lost underground. The men who filled the vacancies above ground, therefore, possessed little of the moral authority among their workmates that the hewers had once enjoyed.

The long-term transformation of Ashington’s labor force was punctuated by temporary layoffs and short-time working. In March 1925 Ashington closed down the Carl pit at Ashington Colliery and the Yard seam of the Bothal pit, and 1,700–1,800 men were dismissed. Many of them were rehired when the workings were reopened the following September and October. From September 1927 to February 1928, 1,400 of Ashington’s miners were left without work while the Duke pit at Ashington was shut down. At the same time a partial closure affected Woodhorn Colliery. Temporary closures tossed some two thousand to three thousand men out of work at Ashington and Woodhorn Collieries in 1930, and both collieries were shut for spells in 1931 and again in 1932. Short-time work-
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ing was endemic at all five of Ashington's collieries during the downturn of the coal trade in 1938–39.  

The Ashington Coal Company on a number of occasions sought to take advantage of its diminished need for labor to reduce piecework rates and to bring average earnings at the firm closer in line with earnings elsewhere on the coalfield. Its efforts were only partially successful. Following the layoffs at the Carl and Bothal pits in March 1925, Ashington's management called on the miners remaining at work to make a pecuniary sacrifice for the well-being of the firm. In May the men voted to accept a reduction in piecework rates. According to the agreement, the rates for all those classes of workmen whose average earnings exceeded 12/6 per week were to be reduced so that average earnings would equal that amount, which was still some 17.5 percent higher than the average pay of hewers in Northumberland. This arrangement lasted only until December when the miners rejected the continuation of the accord in a second ballot. Piecework rates then returned to their previous level. In September 1927 the firm presented miners at its Duke pit with the choice between reductions in wages for all or dismissal notices for two-thirds of them. The men voted for layoffs. Thereafter Ashington made no attempt to revise its wage rates in the direction of the norms prevailing on the Northumberland coalfield.  

Neither the abundant supply of labor nor its inability to reverse its policy of paying above-average piecework rates induced the Ashington Coal Company to abandon its efforts to provide its workmen with good quality housing, though economic conditions inevitably shaped the nature of the company's housing initiatives and their timing during the interwar years. During the First World War Ashington had acquired seventy-two houses, bringing its total to 2,644 as of 1 January 1919. Over the next five years, the company added another 556 houses. Thereafter the acquisition of additional houses became a secondary objective. Between 1924 and 1937 Ashington's housing stock grew by only 4 percent—meager growth except that it occurred during a period when there was an absolute reduction in the size of the firm's work force.  

Altogether the Ashington Coal Company built 788 houses during the interwar years. In design and construction Ashington's houses compared favorably with the standards set by the local authorities. Each house was equipped with hot and cold running water, a bathroom, and a water closet and was wired for electric lighting. Nor did the firm neglect the setting in which its houses were situated. An anonymous contributor to Garden Cities and Town Planning paid tribute in 1929 to the village Ashington was
constructing at Lynemouth. In particular he praised the concern’s decision to provide allotments as well as front gardens so that the residents might keep “poultry, pigeons, etc.” while “enabling the house garden to be free from unsightly erections and the residential portion kept in a clean and tidy manner.”

Such success notwithstanding, improving old houses, not constructing new ones, stood at the center of Ashington’s interwar housing program. In the early 1920s when the coal trade enjoyed some prosperous years, Ashington equipped all of its 3,200 houses with electric lighting. As the coal industry emerged from the slump in the mid-1930s the firm installed “water services and wash-up sinks” in those houses that had been built before such facilities were standard provision and converted “dry closets to water carriage.” Some twenty-five hundred houses were thereby improved. In the course of the 1920s and 1930s, Ashington also improved the streets in its villages and built concrete service roads.

In 1923 Ashington instituted a house-purchase scheme for its employees. Under its terms the company, with financial assistance from the Ashington Urban District Council and the Ministry of Health, was to build houses for sale to its miners. Payment for the houses was to be made over a fifteen-year period and upon terms agreed to by the firm and the buyer. Priority in the selection of purchasers was to be given to men who desired homes for their own use, but workmen who already lived in free company houses or received rent allowances were also eligible to participate. Men who wanted to acquire houses that they would then let out were free to do so, and the company waived the requirement that the owners select their tenants from among Ashington’s employees. Initially 332 miners applied to participate in the scheme, 304 of whom were accepted. Under a second scheme, thirty-nine houses were built for purchase in the village of Lynemouth.

Ashington’s employee house-purchase plan was formulated at a bright moment in the interwar history of the British coal industry (net proceeds per ton for the industry as a whole were higher in 1923 than in any other year between 1921 and 1939), and the calculation of the miners’ ability to meet mortgage obligations apparently assumed that the trade would continue to be as prosperous as it had been before the Great War. That assumption soon proved erroneous; and the plan’s participants, buffeted by unemployment, short-time working, and diminished earnings, were increasingly unable to make their payments. Ashington went to considerable lengths to help the purchasers hold onto their houses. When the
national stoppage of 1926 left some of the Lynemouth purchasers without the required £5 down payment, the company advanced them the money. Two years later the firm remitted three months’ worth of payments (minus a sum equal to rent allowances) to seventy-five hardpressed buyers. In 1929 Ashington reduced the rates of payment for a number of purchasers in the hope that it would enable them “to clear off their arrears of [local] rates.” When local rates proved a continuing burden for the buyers, the firm contemplated making regular deductions from the men’s pay to allow them to meet these charges. Despite these measures the depression of the coal trade took its toll on Ashington’s house-purchase scheme. By June 1933, 108 of the houses had reverted to the company’s ownership. The situation must have improved over the next four years, for in April 1937 Ashington was considering “commencing a new House Purchase Scheme.”

Ashington’s concern for the welfare of its employees also led the firm to provide recreational, educational, and medical facilities for its workers and their families during the interwar years. Such initiatives at Ashington were not unique to the 1920s and 1930s. Before the turn of the century, the firm had provided institutes and libraries for its miners. Nor were welfare services at Ashington in the interwar period purely a company affair. The Mining Industry Act (1920) provided for a Miners’ Welfare Fund. Endowed by a levy on the coalowners of 1d. per ton, the fund was to be used for “purposes connected with the social well-being, recreations, and conditions of living of workers in or about coal mines, and with mining education and research.” The contributions began in March 1921, and Ashington’s miners were among the very first to benefit from them. In 1923 a grant from the welfare fund financed the construction of pithead baths and a canteen at Ellington Colliery, the first such facilities to be erected on the Northumberland coalfield. Over the next eight years monies from the fund were applied to the building of pithead baths and canteens at Linton and Woodhorn Collieries, to the workmen’s institutes at Ashington and Widdrington, and to medical and educational purposes. Valuable though the grants from the Miners’ Welfare Fund undoubtedly were, they served only as a supplement to the extensive welfare program that the Ashington Coal Company organized and financed during the interwar years.

Ashington began to expand its welfare activities beyond the sponsorship of workingmen’s institutes in September 1920 when it hired a full-time welfare officer. Company records shed no light on the reasoning that
lay behind this appointment, but there are grounds for thinking that peaceful industrial relations may have been management’s principal motivation. First, there is the timing of the firm’s initiative. The welfare officer’s appointment came after three years of unprecedented labor unrest at Ashington. Second, there is the fact that the firm was eager to enlist labor’s support for its welfare activities. When the company’s directors first decided to launch a welfare scheme, they invited local trade union leaders to take part in its development. The latter replied that, while they would watch the scheme’s progress with interest, they could not support it.  

Whatever the objectives underlying the scheme, the welfare officer, Commander F. B. Kemp, sought to create a program in which the men would participate voluntarily, rather than one that aimed to induce them to conform to behavior valued by the management. Thus Kemp decided to “make a beginning with sports and games.” “Football being the popular pastime of the North,” Kemp’s first project involved acquiring a field of thirteen acres, marking it off into four football pitches, and organizing senior and junior divisions. The conversion of a dilapidated brick building into a recreation hall complete with gymnasium (at an expense of between £1,000 and £1,200), and the laying out of cricket grounds, tennis courts, and bowling greens soon followed.  

Kemp’s decision to emphasize sports was an astute one. Enthusiasm for games was great at Ashington, and the company had to expand its facilities rapidly to keep pace with demand. By 1924 fifty acres, divided among seven football pitches, four cricket grounds, and twenty tennis courts, had been turned over to recreational use. To use the facilities it was necessary to join the Ashington Welfare Club. Membership dues were 1d. per week for those under eighteen and 2d. for those eighteen and over, and payments were deducted from the members’ pay. Employees’ wives and daughters were eligible for separate memberships. In May 1924 the welfare club claimed three thousand members, enough to enable it to field twenty-seven football teams, eighteen cricket teams, three hockey teams, and two rugby teams. Thirteen years later membership stood at thirty-five hundred—roughly 10 percent of the population of the towns and villages surrounding Ashington’s collieries. During this period the company had added ten acres and four football pitches, fifteen tennis courts, a rugby ground, and a hockey ground. Welfare club members also had access to two gymnasiums and the services of a full-time physical training instructor, dances, whist and billiards at six institutes, two li-
braries, and a cinema. Young members were entitled to use the camp that the company set up at one of its farms near the seashore during the summer months. It was estimated in 1926 that membership dues covered approximately one-third of the cost of maintaining this extensive recreational establishment. The company met the remainder of the program's expenses.  

The Ashington Coal Company's entrance into the educational arena followed soon after the beginning of its recreational program. Before the year 1920 was out, the company, in collaboration with the educational committee of the Northumberland County Council, established a day continuation school. The object of this school was to allow promising boys in the firm's employ "to improve" their general education and "to lay the foundations for a technical education" that would enable them "to qualify for responsible positions." Each year about forty young men who had completed two years of study at a secondary school or an evening continuation school and who had been recommended jointly by their schoolmasters and colliery supervisors were admitted. They attended classes two full days each week and worked their jobs the remainder of the time. They were paid as if they were at work full-time. At the school they were instructed by two full-time teachers in courses that were drawn up by a committee, half of which was selected by the educational committee of the county council and half by the company. Between twenty and twenty-four pupils survived the first year, continuing on to two more years of study. At the end of the three years, the students took up preparations for the qualifying exams for colliery managers, engineers, and the higher clerical grades. In some cases Ashington made scholarships to Durham University available.  

Ashington's day continuation school was the first of its kind in Britain, and as late as 1929 it was the only one in existence. The company had not established the school purely out of altruistic motives. It was intended to provide a corps of "properly trained personnel" from which "the Company could recruit its supervisory and technical staffs." That in the process the firm afforded opportunities for advancement to a select group of young employees was not overlooked by the school's many admirers. Among them was William Straker, general secretary of the Northumberland Miners' Association. He paid the school and the company this tribute: "When the employers in all our great industries recognize a moral obligation and pleasure in following the example of the Ashington Coal Co. [in establishing the school], a better state of things will exist among
all those engaged in these industries, whether they are employers or employees."19

Ashington expanded its educational provision in 1930 by appointing a full-time training and safety officer. Under his auspices, and with the assistance of a "suitable staff," the company developed "comprehensive training arrangements for juveniles." Members of the safety department interviewed all the boys taken on by the company, explained their jobs to them, and instructed them in the safest methods of discharging their duties underground. In conjunction with the county education inspector and H.M. Inspector of Mines, Ashington's training and safety officer devised a "Safety First" class for fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds that included eighteen hours of lectures, demonstrations, and sessions at the colliery face and was intended to fit the students "to become fully trained miners." The safety department also assumed responsibility for investigating accidents at the collieries and made proposals for their prevention. Like the day continuation school, Ashington's safety department was a pioneering effort. It eventually formed the basis of legislation mandating the appointment of safety officers and laying down training regulations for the entire British coal industry.20

Education and prevention could never entirely eliminate accidents in coal mining; so Ashington, like all colliery companies, had to ensure that medical care was available to its workmen. The medical facilities at Ashington were hardly commonplace. The Ashington Hospital was a cooperative venture, financed and run jointly by the miners and the company. A "whole-time senior surgeon and three assistants" presided over its fifty beds. They were also responsible for originating a rehabilitation program for fractures "which was subsequently taken up" by the Miners' Welfare Commission and implemented nationally.21

The crowning glory of the Ashington Coal Company's welfare program was its works journal, the Ashington Collieries Magazine. Intended to chronicle "the various doings of Colliery people at play, and occasionally . . . at work," the first issue appeared in January 1921.22 Its twenty pages were divided between four pages covering local affairs and a sixteen-page insert prepared in London by the Industrial Welfare Society. Ashington's work force gave the new arrival a rather chilly reception. It took an entire month to sell out the run of 750 copies. In response, the company decided to rely less on the services of the Industrial Welfare Society and to concentrate on local material. The change proved to be a wise one. By 1925 the magazine (now numbering between thirty-six and forty-four pages)
was selling out thirty-seven hundred copies on the first day of each month.23

The majority of the Ashington Collieries Magazine’s space was given over to popular diversions: sports news, games, puzzles, cartoons, a “Kid-
dies Korner,” advice on such things as “The Game of Draughts” and gar-
dening, short stories, and notes on welfare club activities. During its early
years, the magazine also carried many articles and editorials emphasizing
the essential community of interest between capital and labor. An article
by William Graham, Labour M.P. for Edinburgh Central, published in
the August 1921 issue carried the message that “the coming conception
in industry is not a conception of servitude in economic effort; it is a
conception of association and partnership for the common good.” Fre-
quently this appeal was couched in terms readily accessible to the people
of Ashington: an analogy between an industrial enterprise and a sports
team. In the February 1926 issue there appeared (on the same page as
William Straker’s “New Year’s Letter”) in a prominently displayed box
the following message: “That which is most urgently needed in industry
today among all ranks from managing director to boy is that which is the
most valuable asset on any field of play, namely the ‘team spirit.’” On
occasion the message was wrapped in the legitimating cloak of Chris-
tianity. The editorial of March 1925 suggested that “it was only logical to
expect that businesses which have incorporated something of the Sermon
on the Mount should be in a better position to withstand the onslaught
of the depression than are those where the spirit of hate, jealousy, and
antagonism still obtains between Master, Management and Men.”24 After
the seven-month national stoppage in 1926, exhortations to cooperation
and homilies about teamwork became less frequent. In their place ap-
ppeared editorials on such subjects as “Football for Boys,” “Happiness
and Hobbies,” and “A Glimpse at the Games.” Such moralizing pieces
as the Ashington Collieries Magazine continued to print were mainly con-
fined to subjects with little direct relevance to industrial relations: Bible
reading and temperance. Space also was regularly devoted to promoting
safety at work.

The Ashington Collieries Magazine did afford the company’s manage-
ment one regular vehicle to broadcast its views about the coal trade and
company affairs. Each issue carried a one-page commentary on “The
Coal Position” by Ridley Warham, the firm’s managing director.25 War-
ham used this column in a variety of ways. First, it enabled him to keep
Ashington’s workers informed about the vicissitudes of the coal trade and
to provide explanations for the fluctuations. Second, "The Coal Position" allowed Warham to air his views about government involvement in the industry. Several columns were devoted to the Coal Mines Act (1930) in 1930 and 1931, and the mid-1930s found him commenting on the bilateral trade agreements regulating coal exports that Britain was then negotiating with a number of countries. Third, Warham used his column to describe Ashington's expenditures to improve its works and to stress the firm's strategy of reducing costs through investment in new equipment. Fourth, Warham's statement gave him the opportunity to urge employees to improve their work habits—more regular attendance, economies in the use of materials, and greater care in the handling of the coal.

Finally, "The Coal Position" gave the company a platform from which it could state its case on matters dividing masters and men. Throughout 1922 Warham lobbied against the North Eastern practice of quarterly cavilling. In 1925 Warham used his column to conduct the company's campaign for reductions in piecework rates at its collieries. In the run-up to the 1926 stoppage and during the strike, Warham vigorously presented the coalowners' brief for longer hours, reduced wages, and county-level collective bargaining. Calls for reductions in piecework rates filled the column again in 1927, and in 1929–30 Warham tried to detach Ashington's miners from the Miners' Federation of Great Britain's campaign for a national reduction in miners' hours of work. When the federation pressed for an across-the-board increase in miners' wages in 1935, Warham spoke out against it in "The Coal Position."

Whether the Ashington Collieries Magazine was a propagandistic success is debatable. It is possible that very few of its readers bothered with the editorials, the articles devoted to the ideal relations between capital and labor, or Warham's "The Coal Position." None of the letters to the editor published in the magazine addressed the issues raised in these contributions. Moreover, if the magazine's readers did trouble over the articles addressing their working lives, the evidence suggests that their reading had little effect on their behavior. If strike statistics and rates of absenteeism are any guide, Ashington's miners were no more inclined to adopt the team spirit at work than were the bulk of Northumberland's miners, whose reading did not include the Ashington Collieries Magazine. Ashington's miners showed no inclination to abandon the practice of quarterly cavilling. Even Warham's compromise proposals—the confinement of cavilling to individual seams and the separate cavilling of hewers and fillers—fell on deaf ears. Warham's campaign for reductions in
piecework rates met with mixed results. The miners agreed to reductions in May 1925, rejected their continuation in December 1925, and refused new reductions in 1927. The miners also refused the company’s invitation to distance themselves from the bargaining postures adopted by the Miners’ Federation. Despite Warham’s monthly appeals, the men at Ashington refused to concede that the solution to the coal industry’s ills in 1926 lay with the district-level negotiation of lower wages and longer hours until seven months of material privation left them no choice. During the 1926 dispute, very few men accepted the firm’s conditions for immediate reinstatement, certainly not enough to permit regular working even on a greatly reduced scale.  

If the Ashington Coal Company distinguished itself by trying to win employee support for its positions on industry issues, the concern also displayed an unusual determination to minimize the labor-management tensions that inevitably arose. Nowhere was this more evident than in Ashington’s responses to the attempts by the Ashington Mineworkers’ Federation to expand its membership. Throughout the interwar years, Ashington was willing to accommodate the organization of its workers, provided that the principle of voluntarism was never explicitly breached. Such a stance placed the firm in advance of the position held by the Northumberland Coal Owners’ Association.

In November 1921 when the Ashington Mineworkers’ Federation asked the company to deduct union dues from the members’ pay, the directors agreed, pending the approval of the NCOA. Following the NCOA’s rejection of the scheme, Warham promised to work to reverse its decision. In July 1922 federation representatives informed the company that the union had decided to exclude nonunion men from the next quarter’s cavilling and asked the firm to take supportive action. The firm agreed to publicize its approval of unionization by posting notices of the union’s decision on the pit heaps, provided that the federation submit an official announcement and that no stoppage of work would occur. The bargain was kept. The federation made a similar request again in September, and this time Ashington appealed to the NCOA for advice “as to whether any means of compromise could be adopted or whether the proposal of the men should be adopted.” The NCOA’s reply that the proposed changes in cavilling arrangements were unacceptable and that Ashington should “resist the men’s demands” contrasted starkly with the firm’s readiness to accommodate the union.  

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1934, the Ashington Mineworkers' Federation threatened to strike unless the company enforced a closed shop. The firm replied that while it "would not compel any man to join any union," it was "prepared to do anything [it] reasonably could to help" the federation achieve 100 percent membership. Subsequently, the company gave the mineworkers' federation a letter outlining its position and authorized it "to make use of it in their efforts to increase their membership." The federation withdrew its strike notices soon thereafter.\(^{30}\)

Ashington's determination to compromise over disagreements rather than allow them to lead to stoppages was also manifest in matters other than unionization. Consider the dispute over the composition of workmen's delegations to management in which the firm became embroiled in 1929. Previously Ashington had made it a rule that such delegations be composed entirely of company employees, thereby excluding checkweighmen and full-time union officials. In April the Ashington Mineworkers' Federation appointed a full-time secretary for the first time and requested that the company receive him as a member of miners' delegations. Ashington's directors were reluctant to agree, but they proposed that the secretary be received for a period not exceeding twelve months. The federation rejected the offer, and it was withdrawn. There the matter rested until June when it arose once more, albeit with a new twist.

At its Woodhorn Colliery the firm had regularly received an assistant checkweighman as a member of delegations because he was also an employee of the company. After his election to the post of checkweighman, the firm made an exception to its own rule and continued to receive him. Now management proposed that it would formally acknowledge this checkweighman's right to join delegations to management if the federation dropped its secretary's case. In an effort to defuse the tensions between Ashington and the mineworkers' federation, Straker proposed that the company continue to meet with the checkweighman and that the question of the secretary be referred as a matter of general principle to the collective bargaining machinery operated jointly by the NMA and the NCOA. The firm accepted this arrangement, and the threatened strike was averted.\(^{31}\)

Ashington displayed a similar readiness to meet its miners halfway when colliers at Linton threatened to strike over the operation of mechanical coal-cutters. The men complained that the dust produced when the machines were set in bands of stone, rather than in the coal seams
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just above, constituted a health hazard. The company suggested that a specialist be hired to study the problem and that the firm and the miners share his expenses.32

The conduct of the Ashington Coal Company while strikes were in progress also bespeaks the high priority that the firm accorded the maintenance of harmonious relations with its workpeople. The record of employer-employee relations at Ashington during the bitter national stoppage that began on 1 May 1926 bears this out. At their first meeting after the stoppage began, Ashington’s directors decided that nine hundred hundredweights of free coal should be delivered to its idle work force at the rate of one hundredweight per house per week. As the stoppage entered its second month and the miners and their families began to feel the pinch, relief funds were set up in colliery villages across Britain to feed miners’ children. When approached for contributions to the local fund, the company agreed to provide assistance in kind. At the same time, the directors declined to contribute to a fund being raised in recognition of the service performed by local police in maintaining order and essential services during the general strike in May, even though the money was to be used to endow a bed at a local infirmary.33

The return to work at the end of November following the miners’ capitulation to the coalowners’ demands was generally free of reprisals and recrimination at Ashington. At three of the company’s four collieries, men were taken on in the order of the lots they had drawn. The sole dispute concerned the rehiring of three Woodhorn miners who had received summonses under the emergency regulations. When pressed by the union, the firm agreed to interview them with a view to taking them back. Only at Ashington’s Ellington Colliery, where the manager insisted on selecting men and not “taking them in turn,” was victimization an issue. Here seventy-two men of a total of more than fourteen hundred were denied work in the order of the lots they had drawn. After eight of the seventy-two had been rehired, a delegation of workmen prevailed on the manager to take the rest of the men on again “as he could,” but he remained adamant about determining the order himself. There the union allowed the matter to rest. Warham reinforced Ashington’s conciliatory rehiring practices with mollifying words in his column in the Ashington Collieries Magazine. In the December 1926 issue he wrote that the appalling losses suffered by both sides “will not quite have been in vain” if we have learned “the lesson that the question of greatest importance to all of us is the prosperity of our industry.” In the next issue he commended
Ashington's miners for "doing their best to recover some of the ground lost in the past year."\textsuperscript{34}

Ashington's pacific approach to industrial relations was not lost on the Northumberland Miners' Association. A conciliatory body by tradition, the association exercised a restraining influence on the Ashington Mineworkers' Federation. On at least five separate occasions, the NMA's top-ranking officials prevailed upon the federation not to go ahead with strikes it was threatening.\textsuperscript{35} Nor did the NMA sanction a single strike against the Ashington Coal Company during the interwar years, the national stoppages of 1921 and 1926 aside. The company's pronounced efforts to promote industrial peace and the NMA's cooperation, however, were not sufficient to give the company complete immunity from strikes. Spontaneous stoppages disrupted work at one or another of Ashington's collieries four times between 1921 and 1939. Altogether more than thirty-two thousand working days were lost. In this regard Ashington's record was scarcely better than that of the whole of the NCOA, few, if any, of whose members were strict adherents of the Ashington approach to labor management. During the years 1921–38 Ashington accounted for 19 percent of NCOA employment and 18 percent of the days NCOA members lost to strikes.\textsuperscript{36}

The combination of paternalism and tolerance that Ashington brought to labor management proved no more successful in encouraging regular attendance at work than it did in discouraging strikes. In the first half of the 1920s, absenteeism at the company's collieries was quite high. Hewers and fillers missed 15 percent of all the shifts they possibly could have worked in the first six months of 1922 and 14 percent in the first six months of 1923. Absenteeism among faceworkers ran at the same high rates during two two-week periods in 1924, and the work force as a whole was absent from 12–13 percent of the shifts that could have been worked. A survey undertaken for the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry (1925) revealed that in Northumberland absenteeism during the week ending 17 October 1925 averaged only 9 percent at the coalface and just 7 percent overall.\textsuperscript{37}

As the demand for coal and miners slackened, absenteeism at Ashington declined, but it never fell below what might charitably be termed a moderate level. Faceworkers' absenteeism in the month of March averaged about 13 percent in the years 1927–29 even though from June 1928 management used irregular attendance as a criterion in pruning its work force. Absenteeism among fillers and the few hewers who remained in

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1930–34 was still 12 percent, and for the work force as a whole annual absenteeism averaged 7–8 percent throughout the 1930s—about as high as it had been in the British coal industry as a whole in 1924 when the trade was relatively prosperous.38

The hospitable climate that the Ashington Coal Company attempted to provide for its workers might have been expected to inspire them to perform at high levels of efficiency. Was labor productivity at the firm great enough to offset the financial burdens imposed by the concern’s labor policy? The limited evidence available suggests that it was not (table 4.2). In 1936 the cost of labor (wages only) required to produce one ton of coal at Ashington was 6.5 percent higher than the cost of labor in Northumberland as a whole, and the differential was again 6.5 percent in 1937. In 1938 it rose to 10 percent. Were welfare expenditures included in these calculations, Ashington’s cost disadvantage would be greater still.39

The Ashington Coal Company pursued an expensive strategy of labor management in the period 1921–39. It invested heavily in the well-being of its work force, and it incurred the costs of a conciliatory approach to industrial relations at its collieries. Such a policy did not produce very impressive results. Absenteeism among Ashington’s workers was moderate at best. The firm’s miners were scarcely less inclined to strike than those employed by other Northumberland coal companies. Labor productivity was not high enough to compensate for the firm’s welfare costs. Perhaps unit labor costs at Ashington would have been higher still had generosity and flexibility not governed labor management at the firm. Perhaps absenteeism would have been greater and strikes more frequent and prolonged. We cannot know. What we do know is that during some of Ashington’s best years between the wars, the firm’s labor policies did not give it an edge over its Northumberland rivals. Rather, Ashington’s labor policies entailed costs that had to be offset by other means.

The Throckley Coal Company was tightfisted and hardnosed in its management of labor during the 1920s and 1930s. When seeking economies in its operating costs, the firm turned first to labor and welfare expenditures. It was hostile to the unionization of its work force, and it brought to industrial disputes a rigid insistence on management’s right to manage without outside interference. Throckley’s weak financial position certainly limited the concern’s freedom of maneuver in labor matters. Yet the firm’s reluctance to impose economies in other areas of its operations
### TABLE 4.2
Labor Costs Per Ton, 1921–1938: Northumberland, Ashington, and Throckley

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Northumberland</th>
<th>Ashington</th>
<th>Throckley</th>
<th>Differential (%)</th>
<th>Differential (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>£ 1.5s.</td>
<td>11/9.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 7.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>10/11.5</td>
<td>11/9.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 9.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>12/7.75</td>
<td>13/9.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 12.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>12/6</td>
<td>14/0.96</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 12.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>11/2.75(^c)</td>
<td>11/2.4(^d)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>− .26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>8/7.25</td>
<td>9/11.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 15.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>7/4</td>
<td>8/5.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 15.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>8/3.6</td>
<td>8/2.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 17.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>8/2.64</td>
<td>8/2.64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 20.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>7/1.5</td>
<td>8/4.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 20.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>7/0.34</td>
<td>8/5.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 25.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>6/10.95</td>
<td>8/7.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 25.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>7/0.15</td>
<td>8/0.61</td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 6.49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>8/1.28</td>
<td>8/7.60</td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 6.49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>8/11.96</td>
<td>9/10.73</td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 9.97</td>
<td>11/4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCES:**

\(^a\) Per ton commercially disposable.
\(^b\) Per ton raised.
\(^c\) Including subvention.
\(^d\) It is unclear whether or not this figure includes the subvention.

and its willingness to spend precious cash to disrupt unionization suggest that its pugnacious labor-management strategy was consciously willed by management and not dictated solely by circumstances.

Throckley operated its stern labor policy in the context of a major re-
duction in the size of its work force. Between 1921–22 and 1938–39 the number of miners in its employ fell by one-third (table 4.3). Management, however, did little to alter the structure of employment at the firm’s collieries. Men working underground and surface workers were made redundant in roughly equal proportions, leaving the balance between these two sections of the work force unchanged. Below ground there was but a limited redeployment of personnel. The introduction of mechanical coal-cutters from 1931 decimated the hewers’ ranks, but the firm was slow to mechanize coal-handling at the face, and 431 fillers had been added by 1938–39. Over the interwar period as a whole, the proportion of Throckley’s underground work force employed at the coalface declined only from 49 percent to 44 percent.

If Throckley’s miners were spared a major reorganization of the firm’s work force, they were subject to frequent and sometimes prolonged layoffs and to extensive short-time working. In 1921 the Blucher pit, then employing more than 600 miners, was closed from August through October. During November and into December it worked only one shift in twenty-four hours. The Throckley, Margaret, and Maria pits were also confined to that restricted schedule. In July 1924 Throckley again closed the Blucher pit and with it the Throckley pit. Fifteen hundred men were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Surface</th>
<th>Underground</th>
<th>Coal Face</th>
<th>Hewers</th>
<th>Fillers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>av. 1921–22</td>
<td>2,271</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>1,817</td>
<td>887</td>
<td>887</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(20)</td>
<td>(80)</td>
<td>(49)</td>
<td>(49)</td>
<td>(49)</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>av. 1938–1939</td>
<td>1,514</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>1,196</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(21)</td>
<td>(79)</td>
<td>(44)</td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>(36)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921/22–1938/39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-33</td>
<td>-30</td>
<td>-34</td>
<td>-41</td>
<td>-89</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(+5)</td>
<td>(-1)</td>
<td>(-10)</td>
<td>(-84)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Numbers in parentheses show share of total employment and % change in share.

*Numbers in parentheses show share of underground employment and % change in share.
made idle. Operations commenced again, though on a very limited basis, at Throckley Colliery in October 1925. The Blucher pit was not reopened until the late 1930s. Some three hundred men at the Margaret pit were left without work when Throckley closed the mine for more than twenty weeks in 1927 and for a similar length of time in 1928. In 1931 the Maria pit worked only about seventeen weeks, and the Throckley and Coronation pits were each shut for more than two weeks. The following year, two hundred of Throckley’s miners had leisure forced upon them as the Coronation pit was closed for ten weeks. Short-time working at Throckley’s collieries was sufficiently extensive in 1933 to cause the miners to advance a detailed plan for work-sharing.  

The Throckley Coal Company regarded the weakened state to which unemployment and short-time working reduced the miners as a prime opportunity for reducing its costs. Since county-level collective bargaining governed wage rates on the Northumberland coalfield, the firm had to content itself with petty economies. In August 1921 Throckley ceased paying rent allowances to men who had not been rehired in the wake of the national stoppage. The following year it paid substandard wages to men receiving light-work compensation and imposed dayrates in place of piece-rates on its banksmen.  

When the firm transferred a number of joiners from a workshop at Throckley Colliery to one at the Coronation pit in 1924, it declined to compensate them for the additional travel time involved. Later the same year the Enginemen’s Association charged the company with using its officials to run the winding engines instead of rehiring the enginemen who had been laid off. Throckley’s actions in these cases were not always without some foundation. When it refused to compensate the joiners transferred to the Coronation pit, the firm could appeal to the fact that the NCOA had never actually ratified a 1913 code governing such matters. One may wonder, though, whether the savings the company achieved in this way made for a substantial reduction in a budget that totaled more than £370,860 in 1924. Moreover, if even such trifling savings were essential to Throckley, why were officials’ salaries and directors’ fees left virtually untouched?  

Throckley’s economizing efforts were also directed toward welfare expenditures. In November 1924 the company “decided to defer completion of the alterations to the yards at the colliery houses” then in progress. Such alterations apparently represented the full extent of the company’s welfare program. Throckley made no contribution to mining education and research. Nor is there any evidence that it promoted recreational ac-
tivities. Those facilities that Throckley’s miners had at their disposal—eight acres of bowling greens, lawn tennis courts, and a recreation ground for children and pithead baths—were paid for by grants from the Miners’ Welfare Fund. Whether the company voluntarily contributed to the maintenance of the facilities before 1930 is unclear, but in that year it decided that its financial position did not allow it to assist in their upkeep.44

Throckley’s penny-pinching treatment of its work force was combined with a steadfast determination to prevent its miners from organizing in their own defense. With its conduct during the Browell incident in 1920, the firm had raised suspicions that it was intolerant of trade union activism. In the course of the 1920s, those suspicions found ample confirmation. When work resumed after the 1926 stoppage, Throckley showed a preference for employing nonunion men. Twenty-two members of the Northumberland Miners’ Association were not reinstated at Throckley Colliery, and their places were given to “strangers.” At the Maria pit fifty union men were passed over in favor of “blacklegs.” The firm’s readiness to victimize union members was manifest again in March 1928. In the wake of an unofficial strike by putters to protest the county wage agreement, Throckley dismissed the local union branch’s secretary and treasurer and several of its committeemen from work at the Maria pit. At Throckley Colliery only the branch secretary and two committeemen were allowed to resume their positions after the stoppage, though “some 30 men from another pit” were taken on at the same time. When the NMA formally challenged the company over these dismissals, Throckley replied that they had occurred “in the ordinary course of working the pits and without any regard to their being officials of the local lodges.” Perhaps management was again streamlining the work force in September 1928 when it sacked George Carr, president of the Maria branch of the NMA, “for claiming county average wages for working in an abnormal place.” In sharp contrast to the harsh treatment that greeted union activists at Throckley was the favor shown to those who resisted the appeal of trade unionism. Not only were nonunion men granted preferential treatment when the company was hiring, they also received monetary rewards for defying union policies. At their meeting on 18 November 1926, Throckley’s directors “agreed that a bonus be given at the end of the year to men who had resumed work at the collieries during the strike.”45

When the victimization of trade unionists and the preferential treatment of nonunionists failed to destroy the miners’ union at Throckley’s pits, the company endeavored to make the union’s work as difficult as
possible. Indeed, the firm went so far as to interfere with the union’s welfare work. In April 1927 Throckley discontinued deducting levies for maintenance of the welfare facilities from the men’s pay. The committee that handled those funds, the company claimed, was not representative of the men because its secretary no longer worked for Throckley. Three years later the firm refused to deduct from the miners’ pay contributions that were to be used to purchase coal for aged miners unless each employee gave his consent in writing.46

Unwilling to help the miners carry out their welfare activities, the Throckley Coal Company was all the more concerned to deny the union any involvement in the operation of the collieries. When Throckley Colliery reopened in October 1925 after a closure of fifteen months, the union requested that men be reemployed in the order of the lots they had drawn. The company responded that it had the right to hire whomever it wanted whenever it wanted. The union then referred the matter to the joint committee of the NCOA and the NMA. In reply, Throckley informed the committee that there was no need for it to involve itself with the problem since the firm had no intention of hiring any more men. Under pressure from the union’s general secretary Straker, the joint committee prevailed upon the company to attend another meeting and to offer the union a compromise. Throckley proposed that the union cooperate with it in drawing up a list of men eligible for reemployment. When work became available, the men on the list would be taken on in the order of their cavils. The union at first rejected the plan on the grounds that it imposed upon it the responsibility for denying some men the possibility of reemployment. When it became apparent that the alternative was no union say in Throckley’s hiring practices and the abolition of the system of drawing lots, it reversed its position. Eight years later the Isabella Lodge of the NMA brought forward a plan to govern the distribution of available employment during periods of short-time working. The scheme proposed that (1) work was to be shared by those in work and those dismissed previously; (2) when dismissals were unavoidable, nonunion men should be the first to be let go; (3) when additional men were required, all available men should draw lots; (4) temporary jobs should be assigned in accordance with the lots drawn; and (5) overtime should be banned as long as there remained unemployed miners. As in 1925, Throckley was loath to limit its discretion in selecting its work force. It agreed only to selecting men according to lots when “a bulk of men were required.”47

Throckley’s style of labor management paid some dividends. The most
notable of these came during the national stoppage of 1926. When the
dispute began in May, all of the concern’s collieries ceased working. By
July, support for the strike was waning at at least one mine. The men at
the Coronation pit, the directors learned on 15 July, “had had a final
meeting, & . . . they were not willing to return to work.” On 12 August,
however, the colliery reopened. Throckley Colliery resumed operations
on 14 October, and the company’s other two mines started up in the last
week of October. Elsewhere in Northumberland most collieries reopened
only at the end of November. The early return to work was of dramatic,
if short-lived, benefit to Throckley’s finances. The firm’s current account
showed a surplus of £5,216 on 16 December 1926. It was the first time
since June 1924 that the company was in the black. Only three months
before, its account had shown a deficit of £23,037.48

A more permanent consequence of Throckley’s treatment of its work
force was a reduction in union membership among employees. During
1921–24 union membership, though fluctuating considerably, averaged 81
percent of the work force at Throckley; and it was still 76 percent in 1927.
Membership dropped to 55 percent in 1929; but with the improvement in
the company’s fortunes in 1930–31, the number of miners on the NMA’s
books in the Throckley area increased to two-thirds of the firm’s total
employment. Throckley’s new-found prosperity proved short-lived though,
and union membership hovered around 61 percent for the remainder of
the decade.49

There were limits, however, to the gains that Throckley derived from
its provocative management of its labor force. The company’s policy, even
when reinforced by economic circumstances, did not completely deter its
miners from striking. The unofficial county-wide putters strike of March
1928 shut down the collieries for two days, and 385 working days were
lost at the Coronation pit in December 1938 when the miners struck to
protest the sacking of two men who had refused a change in their work
assignments. Over the course of the interwar years, Throckley was hardly
less strike-prone than the members of the NCOA as a whole. During the
period 1921–38, Throckley was responsible for 3.4 percent of the em-
ployment provided by NCOA firms and 3 percent of the days NCOA
members lost to strikes. If the national disputes of 1921 and 1926 are
excluded, and the early return to work at Throckley in 1926 left aside,
Throckley’s share of the days lost to strikes rises to 3.3 percent.50

Low unit labor costs also were not among the benefits that the Throck-
ley Coal Company reaped by virtue of its conduct of labor relations.
Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Throckley paid more in wages per ton of coal mined than did the Northumberland coal industry as a whole (table 4.2). In fact, the gap between Throckley’s wage costs and those of Northumberland widened considerably over time. During the period 1922–25 Throckley’s annual wage costs per ton were about 7 percent higher on average than those of Northumberland as a whole. By 1927–28 the disparity was more than twice as great, and in 1933 the 8/5.6 that Throckley paid in wages per ton of coal mined was 20.5 percent greater than the wages per ton paid by the Northumberland coal industry as a whole. At the close of the interwar period, Throckley’s unit labor costs were 27 percent above the county level.\(^{51}\)

For Throckley, managing labor meant saving money and compelling obedience. The firm kept its provision for the well-being of its work force to a minimum, retrenching wherever possible. It placed as many obstacles as it could in the path of unionization, hoping in this way to maximize management’s freedom of action. This strategy brought results in the form of an early end to the stoppage of work in 1926 and a low level of union membership in the 1930s. It did not eliminate strikes. Nor did it inspire exceptional levels of labor productivity. Throckley’s high unit labor costs cannot be explained solely by reference to the baleful effects that the company’s labor policy may have had upon its workmen. The concern’s working practices were rife with inefficiencies. Perhaps the stringent regulation of its work force appealed to Throckley’s managers because it represented a means of negating those inefficiencies. If so, they must have been disappointed; for in that respect Throckley’s labor policy simply did not accomplish enough. By the 1930s it may have been doing more harm than good.

Henry Briggs, Son and Company’s approach to labor management was neither as generous and accommodating as that of Ashington nor as mean-spirited and obstructive as that of Throckley. Briggs assumed only a modest responsibility for the welfare of its employees, but it went beyond the bounds of its commitments when economic and political circumstances reduced the miners’ capacity to provide for their own well-being. Toward the unionization of its work force, the firm was indifferent. While it did little to encourage its miners to join the Yorkshire Mineworkers’ Association, it made no attempt to hamper the union’s organizing activities. Briggs’s management had no reservations about negotiating working practices with the union if it would advance production objectives. Nor
was the firm reluctant to appeal directly to its workmen over the head of the union if the union’s cooperation was not forthcoming.

Briggs both reduced the size of its work force and altered its composition in the course of the interwar years. Employment at the company declined by more than one-fifth between the early 1920s and the late 1930s (table 4.4). In the process, surface workers increased in proportion to 23 percent of the work force. It also seems likely that the number of men Briggs employed at the coalface decreased considerably. The portion of the firm’s output cut by machine rose to 70 percent in 1937. This ought to have reduced sharply the number of hewers required, and Briggs’s increasing reliance on mechanical conveyors probably limited the expansion of the fillers’ ranks.

Briggs, like Ashington and Throckley, found it necessary to close parts of its operations temporarily and to work on a short-time basis. Already in 1924 the firm was forced to prolong its August bank holiday by an extra day owing to a “shortage of trade.” More extensive cutbacks in operations

### TABLE 4.4

Size and Composition of Briggs’s Work Force, 1921/22–1938/39

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Employment</th>
<th>Surface Employment</th>
<th>Underground Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>av. 1921–22</td>
<td>6,213</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>av. 1923–24</td>
<td>6,544</td>
<td>1,420</td>
<td>5,124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(22)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>av. 1938–39 (A)</td>
<td>4,140</td>
<td>1,030</td>
<td>3,110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(25)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>av. 1938–39 (B)</td>
<td>4,906</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% change 1921/22–1938/39 (A)</td>
<td>−33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% change 1921/22–1938/39 (B)</td>
<td>−21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% change 1923/24–1938/39 (A)</td>
<td>−37</td>
<td>−28</td>
<td>−39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(+14)</td>
<td>(−4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% change 1923/24–1938/39 (B)</td>
<td>−25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Figures in parentheses show share of total employment and % change in share.*

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took place the following year. The mining of the Warren House seam at Briggs's Snydale Colliery was suspended from 17 June 1925 to 25 November 1926. At the Water Haigh Colliery, work ceased in the Flockton seam on 6 April 1925 and began again only on 27 January 1927, while operations in the Yard and Little Coal seams were shut from 17 June 1925 to the beginning of February 1926. The closure of the latter two seams alone left three hundred men without work. Taking fiscal year 1925 in its entirety, the working week at Briggs's pits averaged between 4.5 and 4.75 days. While this was comfortably above the 3-day level at which "very heavy losses were a certainty," it was well below the 5.5-day level at which "profits were well assured." In April 1927 the company's chairman and managing director, Walter Hargreaves, reported that "we are working three days, and some of our Pits, 2 ½ days." In May 150 miners were dismissed from the firm's Water Haigh Colliery, and a similar number were let go when the working of the Silkstone seam at Whitwood Colliery was suspended in April 1928.52

After the coal trade slackened in the early 1930s, Briggs's reliance on temporary layoffs and short-time working became more pronounced. Between 750 and 800 men were laid off at the Water Haigh Colliery in May 1930 after the "falling-off of trade for all classes of coal" had reduced the number of working days at the pit to 2.5 per week. Some 225 were made idle in June when operations in the Silkstone seam at Whitwood Colliery were discontinued once more, and another eighty were laid off in August when the company closed its workings in the Warren House and Haigh Moor seams at Snydale Colliery. During fiscal year 1930 the firm's collieries worked just 173 days, "only a little better than half time," and the pits worked only 182 days in 1932, or 3.5 days per week. Operations were even more irregular in 1933, with Briggs's collieries winding coal on just 149 days, 2.7 days per week. The average number of shifts per employee measured 3.87. This figure improved to 4.15 in 1934, but this was scarcely better than the level attained in 1932. Even in the fiscal year that ended 30 June 1939 "the full time work available" at Briggs "only represented 4.62 shifts per week."53

Throughout the years of layoffs and short-time working, Briggs contributed to the material welfare of its employees. The firm supplemented the miners' contributions to the employees' old-age pension fund and shared with the men the responsibility for maintaining the Castleford, Normanton, and District Hospital. It also sponsored ambulance classes at its collieries, and it held an annual interpit ambulance competition. By
1937 Briggs owned more than six hundred houses, though only eighteen of these had been built by the company during the preceding two decades. Such recreational facilities as were available to the firm’s employees owed their existence to the Miners’ Welfare Fund. These included welfare centers with halls “for lectures, dances and other functions” and cricket grounds, tennis courts, and bowling greens at Whitwood, Methley, Wodlesford, and Snydale. Money from the Miners’ Welfare Fund also paid for pithead baths at Water Haigh Colliery in 1935 and a “Convalescent Home scheme . . . to assist workmen to recuperate after accident or illness.”

If Henry Briggs, Son and Company’s welfare commitments were limited, humanitarian and not business considerations governed their management. The company’s directors never sought improvements in the concern’s finances at the expense of its welfare expenditures. Moreover, when Briggs’s miners were unable to maintain their contributions to the welfare schemes, management was willing to step in and make up the difference. Following the dispute of 1926, the balance of the old-age pension fund fell below “the amount originally agreed upon.” To restore it, the firm donated £500. In May 1929 Briggs made a “lump subscription of £110” to the Castleford, Normanton, and District Hospital “to clear the year 1928.” Briggs directors agreed in January 1931 to make a grant of £250 to the pension fund, so that the company’s contribution for the fiscal year ending 30 June 1931 would be “up to that of the preceding year.” Since the company’s annual obligation to the scheme required a fixed sum per employee and since the number of miners on its books was then decreasing considerably, the donation was in excess of what the firm was bound to contribute. Certainly the sums that Briggs advanced in this way were minute compared with the company’s operating expenses. The £250 Briggs added to the pension fund in 1931, for example, amounted to but a fraction of 1 percent of the £772,290 spent on coal production that year. They appear rather less trivial when one considers what a burden it would have been to the miners to have raised them. Nor should it be overlooked that they were made voluntarily at a time when relations between coalowners and miners were at a low ebb and when other concerns were seizing upon welfare expenditures in their determination to economize.

Briggs took the view that it was none of the firm’s business whether its employees chose to affiliate with a trade union. “The policy of this company,” joint managing director D. H. Currer Briggs told a correspondent in 1935, “has always been to refrain from enquiring from any workmen
as to whether or not they were members of a Union, or if so, what Union they were members of . . .” He continued, “We do not interfere with the Branch officials from organising, if they wish to do so, provided they do not thereby interfere with the proper working of the Pit.” The result was that Briggs’s pits were heavily unionized, at least in the mid-1930s when the industry enjoyed something of an upswing. According to an account in the Colliery Guardian in September 1936, about 95 percent of the firm’s miners belonged to the Yorkshire Mineworkers’ Association. When the refusal of the remaining 5 percent to join the union threatened to cause a strike, Briggs’s managers responded sympathetically to the YMA’s desire for 100 percent membership. “Friendly discussions” took place. The company agreed to an interim agreement whereby the men would withdraw their strike notices but would retain the right to replace them “immediately . . . if necessary.” The dispute over nonunionism was thus resolved peacefully. Thanks to “the assistance of the management, the position of the pits had been made satisfactory.” Should “similar circumstances again arise,” it was understood that Briggs’s “management would render assistance.”

Tolerant of trade unionism, Briggs sought to enlist the support of local union branches when changes in working practices promised to improve the firm’s performance. In early 1921 the company found itself losing custom because of the dirtiness of its coals and threatened with short-time working. To remedy the situation, the management instructed its supervisors to do all they could to promote the filling of clean coal, up to and including dismissing habitual offenders. Hargreaves also appealed to the secretaries of the Whitwood and Water Haigh branches of the YMA to use their influence with the men to encourage better work habits. In January 1922 a bottleneck in the winding of coal at Whitwood was causing a shortage of empty tubs at the coalface. Both the company and the face-workers were losing money as a result. Working a quarter-hour of overtime, Hargreaves thought, would provide the extra winding-time necessary to solve the problem. Though the additional minutes were to be voluntary, the managing director thought it best to seek the union’s endorsement before instituting the change. The terms in which Hargreaves addressed the Whitwood branch secretary give a good indication of the type of relationship Briggs’s management sought to establish with the union: “I am taking the course of writing to you on the subject as I should like your influence to be used in the best interests of all parties, as I have always found it to be in the past.”
The local branches of the Yorkshire Mineworkers’ Association did not always come to Briggs’s support. When they did not, the firm’s management appealed directly to the workmen to secure its objectives. The behavior of Briggs’s management during the 1926 stoppage brings this out clearly. The dispute began at the firm with an act of bad faith on the part of the local union branches: they “declined to agree on the employment of safety men.” This effort “to prevent” the mines from “being kept in order” was particularly effective at the Water Haigh Colliery where “not a single shift” was worked “towards keeping the Pit right” during the first two months of the stoppage. In response, Hargreaves attempted to detach the firm’s workmen from the union and to induce them to return to work. On 11 June he wrote to the public relations director of the Mining Association, Philip Gee, requesting a copy of The Miners’ Next Step, the syndicalist pamphlet produced by the Unofficial Reform Committee in South Wales in 1912. He had been speaking with the workmen in his village, Hargreaves told Gee, and “they cannot believe that a pamphlet such as this was ever written by Mr. [A. J.] Cook.” Three days later one hundred copies of a Mining Association leaflet containing extracts from the syndicalist tract arrived.58

Hargreaves’s bid to discredit the miners’ union by attributing political motives to its dispute over wages and hours evidently met with some success. By the end of June, safety men had returned to work at three of Briggs’s four mines; and maintenance work had been resumed. Enough other men had resumed working for the company to begin profitable activities, though not actual coal extraction. Hargreaves bluntly told Herbert Smith, who had written in his capacity as president of both the Yorkshire Mineworkers’ Association and the Miners’ Federation to complain that Briggs was using safety men to perform tasks of a nonessential nature, that the firm was finding a ready market for “smudge or washery settlings, which you know have been paid for as coal, [and which] are being filled by Officials and Staff, and such of our men who desire to work at that work” (emphasis added).59 In subsequent weeks the drift back to work at Briggs accelerated, and normal colliery operations resumed in the autumn. Work at the Savile pit was in full swing by 29 October. At Water Haigh seven hundred of the nineteen hundred miners normally employed reported to work by the same date; and output during the last week of October totaled 2,300 tons, by far the biggest output of any pit in the Eastern Division of West Yorkshire, Hargreaves thought. Normal working began again on 11 November. Output from Briggs’s Snydale Col-
liery rose steadily from the end of October, reaching full production at the end of November. Only at the Whitwood Colliery did the resumption of work await a settlement between the West Yorkshire Coal Owners’ Association and the Yorkshire Mineworkers’ Association.60

The events of 1926 did not cause Henry Briggs, Son and Company to abandon its practice of negotiating working practices with the YMA. In October 1929 the union approached the company with a request to discuss a set of rules governing employment at Briggs’s collieries during temporary closures. The two sides quickly agreed that when a pit was shut down the firm would keep 10 percent of the miners on, pay them a full day’s wage, and confine their activities to safety work. Trouble threatened, however, when the company declined to satisfy the men’s demand that the bargain be put in writing. Following a meeting of Edward Haugh (vice-president of the YMA), local union leaders, and the “colliery management including Maj. [D. H.] Currer Briggs,” the miners relented and accepted management’s verbal promise. The refusal of Briggs’s management to sign a written agreement suggests that it did not want to allow company-union cooperation in this instance to become too constraining. That it entered into a verbal commitment indicates that it made no fetish of management’s unfettered right to deploy labor as it saw fit.61

Briggs’s pragmatic approach to labor management brought the firm immunity from local strikes during the 1920s and 1930s. One searches in vain among company papers and in the trade and local press for even the barest hint of a stoppage at Briggs aside from national disputes. If any strikes afflicted the firm’s mines, they must have been brief, limited, and amicably settled. A description of the collieries that Briggs published in 1938 spoke of “the good feeling between owners and men which exists to-day” and saw in this harmony a legacy of the profit-sharing scheme that the firm had operated more than sixty years earlier.62

During the interwar years the management of Briggs, Son and Company achieved a notable reduction in absenteeism among the firm’s miners. At the beginning of the period, absenteeism ran high. Among productive men absenteeism from all causes registered 12 percent in 1922 and 15 percent in 1924. According to Hargreaves, willful absenteeism in the latter year cost the men £52,000 in wages. In 1925, a year of closures and layoffs, eighty thousand shifts were missed, reducing the miners’ earnings by some £50,000. The slump of 1929–33 put a serious dent in those figures. Only £11,000 in wages was lost owing to absenteeism in 1930 and £6,000 in 1933 (the result of twelve thousand missed shifts). The
absenteeism rate at Briggs remained low even after the coal industry began to benefit from rearmament. Willful absenteeism in both 1938 and 1939 still measured less than 2 percent.\textsuperscript{63}

Brigg's accomplishments in labor management appear rather ambiguous when viewed from the perspective of unit labor costs (table 4.5). In fiscal year 1928 the company's expenditure on wages per ton was 8 percent

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{Labor Costs Per Ton, 1921–1938: Yorkshire and Briggs}
\begin{tabular}{lcc}
\hline
Year & Yorkshire & Briggs* & Differential \\
& & & (\%) \\
\hline
1921 & 20/4.84 & & \\
1922 & 15/6.23 & & \\
1923 & 10/6.77 & & \\
1924 & 12/0.73 & & \\
1925 & 12/8.29 & & \\
1926 & 10/9.90 & & \\
1927 & 10/8.25 & 11/10.23 & \\
1928 & 9/10.19 & -7.84\textsuperscript{b} & \\
1929 & 9/2.50 & 9/5.49 & +2.70 \\
1930 & 10/0.83 & & \\
1931 & 9/9.66 & & \\
1932 & 9/0.50 & 9/8.75 & +7.60 \\
1933 & 8/7.77 & 9/2.33 & +6.32 \\
1934 & 8/4.87 & 9/1.05 & +8.10 \\
1935 & 8/4.35 & 8/7.73 & +3.36 \\
1936 & 9/1.46 & 8/9.81 & -3.33 \\
1938 & 10/7.05 & 9/7.82 & -8.83 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}


\textsuperscript{*}Fiscal year ending 30 June.

\textsuperscript{b}In order to avoid the distortions induced by the 1926 stoppage, this calculation compares Briggs's 1928 fiscal year with the nearest calendar year for which Yorkshire data are available, 1927.
The Management of Labor

less than that of the Yorkshire coal industry. By 1929, however, Briggs's advantage in unit labor costs had vanished; and the firm's wage costs per ton were 3 percent higher than those of Yorkshire as a whole. During the period 1932–35 Briggs's unit labor costs were regularly higher than those of the district, the disparity averaging more than 6 percent. The situation then changed once more. Briggs expended 3 percent less on wages per ton than did Yorkshire in 1936 and more than 8 percent less in 1937 and 1938.

No apparent correlation exists between the differences in Briggs's unit labor costs in relation to those of the county and the company's financial performance. Briggs's profit per ton exceeded Yorkshire's by a considerable margin in every year for which data are available and regardless of the relationship of unit labor costs (table 3.4). In none of the years when Briggs's labor costs exceeded Yorkshire's was the firm's profit per ton less than half again as great as the district's. In fact, the firm achieved some of its largest margins of superiority in net proceeds when its labor cost disadvantage was most pronounced. Briggs's profit per ton was 210 percent greater than the district's in 1932 when its labor costs were 8 percent above Yorkshire's, and 52 percent greater in 1934 despite a gap of 8 percent between its labor costs and the county's. By contrast, in 1936, when it enjoyed a 3 percent advantage in wage costs per ton, the firm's profit was only 34 percent above Yorkshire's.

Moderation and flexibility were the hallmarks of Henry Briggs, Son and Company's management of its labor force between the wars. Its welfare efforts were limited but guided by considerations of the miners' well-being—which led to acts of generosity exceeding the responsibilities the company had assumed. The firm's view of unionization and of company-union relations was guided by the principle that whatever advanced production was acceptable. When cooperation with the YMA offered to enhance Briggs's performance, management embraced the union. When, less frequently, union policies threatened production, the company worked to minimize the union's influence. For its troubles the firm secured freedom from strikes and a reduction in avoidable absenteeism. Briggs's approach to labor management did not produce uniformly low unit labor costs. That the firm prospered anyway suggests that the analysis of labor management does not take us very far toward understanding the company's performance during the 1920s and 1930s.

The Waterloo Main Colliery Company, like Ashington and Briggs, both shed labor and altered the composition of its work force during the
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interwar years. The firm also resorted to short-time working of considerable dimensions. The surviving sources do not reveal management’s attitude toward its workmen and their unions while it carried out these policies, but the data available suggest that the transformation of the firm’s labor force provoked a minimum of disruption. Certainly the costs that Waterloo Main’s labor-management strategy entailed were consistent with the company’s financial success.

Total employment at Waterloo Main declined by 36 percent between 1921–22 and 1936 and 1938 (table 4.6). As it did so, the balance between surface workers and those underground shifted in the former’s favor—as it did also at Ashington and Briggs. From 17 percent in 1921–22, the surface workers’ share of the work force rose to 20 percent. Job losses underground at Waterloo Main probably did not fall with special severity among those employed at the coalface. The proportion of output cut by machine rose from under 1 percent in 1921 to 23 percent in 1935–36, and this no doubt diminished the number of hewers. A concomitant increase in the number of fillers needed to load the coal into the tubs in all likelihood did much to offset the decrease among those actually cutting the coal. The work force that experienced these developments was also sub-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Employment</th>
<th>Surface Employment</th>
<th>Underground Employment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>av. 1921–22</td>
<td>1,237</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>1,023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(17)</td>
<td>(83)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>av. 1936 &amp; 1938</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>630</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(20)</td>
<td>(80)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>% change 1921/22–1936 &amp; 1938</td>
<td>-36</td>
<td>-25</td>
<td>-38</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(+18)</td>
<td>(−4)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures in parentheses show share of total employment and % change in share.

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ject to prolonged periods of underemployment. The average employee at Waterloo Main worked more than 16 percent fewer shifts per annum in the period 1931–34 than he did in 1929–30 and 15 percent fewer than in 1935–38.64

The available records shed no light on Waterloo Main’s treatment of its miners. It is possible that the firm’s location in an urban area where municipal authorities provided educational, medical, and recreational facilities enabled management to forego welfare expenditures. We do not know for certain that this was the case. Nor do we know whether the concern adopted a conciliatory or a hostile stance toward the local branches of the Yorkshire Mineworkers’ Association.

Our knowledge of the consequences of Waterloo Main’s labor policy is more extensive. Waterloo Main’s pits, it is safe to say, were free from major industrial conflicts during the 1920s and 1930s. The trade press carried no news whatsoever of strikes at the company. The Ministry of Labour Gazette listed no major colliery stoppages in the Leeds area, and the firm’s output figures show none of the aberrations characteristic of large-scale or persistent industrial unrest. Reluctant to strike, the miners employed at Waterloo Main were also diligent about attending work. The annual rate of absenteeism averaged less than 4 percent during the period 1929–38. As this includes absenteeism due to injury and illness, the rate of willful absenteeism at the firm’s mines must have been low indeed.65

While information about unit labor costs at Waterloo Main is lacking, it is clear that the Stringers were under no compulsion to achieve striking results in labor management. Their company was quite successful in its commercial operations. The annual sale value of a ton of Waterloo Main’s coal averaged 12.7 percent more than the sale value of a ton of West Yorkshire coal in the period 1921–38 (table 3.12). With an advantage of this magnitude, the concern could have made substantial contributions to the welfare of its miners or tolerated inefficient working practices for the sake of good industrial relations. In other words, cost-effective labor management may have contributed to Waterloo Main’s profitability during the 1920s and 1930s, but it was not essential to it.

The colliery concerns in this study adopted a variety of labor-management strategies. Ashington invested heavily in the welfare and cooperation of its work force. Throckley, seemingly indifferent to the disposition of its miners, endeavored to economize at its workers’ expense. Briggs
limited its welfare commitments but labored persistently to win the support of its labor force for the company's production objectives.

The results of their efforts failed to reflect the firms' different strategies. Ashington was no more immune to strikes than Throckley was, and both firms lost more days to stoppages than did Briggs. Ashington, always so solicitous of its miners, was repaid with rates of absenteeism higher than those recorded by Briggs, a far less paternalistic employer.

More striking still was the absence of a correlation between labor policies and unit labor costs. Extensive welfare expenditures and a conciliatory approach to industrial relations coincided with unit labor costs above the district average at Ashington. Throckley's costs exceeded the Northumberland standard by a much greater margin despite the concern's cheese-paring approach to labor management. Briggs's pragmatic labor policy brought mixed results: in some years unit labor costs were below the county norm; in others they were above it.

Nor was there a direct relationship between unit labor costs and financial performance. The Throckley Coal Company, with its high unit labor costs, lost money throughout most of the interwar period. Ashington, however, made profits exceeding the Northumberland average despite above-average labor costs. Briggs's net profit per ton regularly exceeded Yorkshire's net proceeds whether its unit labor costs were below the county standard or not. Waterloo Main's superiority in the sale value of its coals was such that the firm could have absorbed above-average unit labor costs.

Labor management was not a crucial determinant of the fortunes of the Ashington, Throckley, Briggs, and Waterloo Main coal companies in the 1920s and 1930s even though theirs was a highly labor-intensive business. In the first place, the skillful management of mining work forces did not translate directly into low unit labor costs. Had it done so, Ashington and Briggs would have been low-cost producers consistently. In the second place, low unit labor costs were not a necessary condition of success in the coal trade. Ashington and Briggs prospered in the face of above-average labor costs, and Waterloo Main may also have done so.

The unimportance of industrial relations to the financial performances of the four firms compels us to consider how they managed their physical plants and the marketing of their coals. Were Ashington, Briggs, and Waterloo Main able to achieve costs of production competitive with their rivals on the Northumberland and West Yorkshire coalfields by economizing on non-labor expenditures? Did the commercial policies of Ash-
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ington and Briggs yield sale prices high enough above the district norms to compensate for their above-average labor costs? What explains the superior sale value of Waterloo Main’s coal? To what extent was the poor state of Throckley’s works responsible for its exorbitant unit labor costs? And what part, if any, did marketing play in the difficulties of the firm?

In the next two chapters we take up these questions. Chapter 5 focuses on works management at the Ashington, Throckley, Briggs, and Waterloo Main coal companies. In chapter 6 we turn our attention to the commercial side of operations at the firms.