

Leckhampton Riots Centenary

By Eric Miller

On Sunday 16th April the Society led the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of a momentous episode in the history of the area - the Leckhampton Hill riot, which had been a blow for freedom provoked by the quarry owner's closure of the footpaths. It put Leckhampton on the map, but it had wider significance in the struggle for what later came to be known as 'the right to roam'. The present-day heirs of the 'Leckhampton Stalwarts', who were sent to prison for their destruction of the quarry foreman's cottage, are action groups like LEGLAG and FOLK. To set the scene there follows a very brief account of the riots and what led up to them.

The conflict began after 1894, when the Trye family sold the entire Leckhampton estate, including the quarries on the hill. Their new owner was the Cheltenham music dealer Henry Dale, who was keen to develop them and refused to recognise any of the traditional rights of way. There was much local opposition, and this conflict has sometimes been portrayed as a tale of 'heroes and villains', or cast as a battle in the class war. It was spearheaded by working men, and it was they that suffered most from Dale's actions, but they also had the practical and financial support of the gentry whose houses backed on to the hill - including the historian Robert Cary Barnard and George Backhouse Witts of Hill House, who was in the remarkable position of also being a magistrate and chairman of the Rural District Council. In the town, Miss Beale, the Headmistress of the Ladies' College, showed her indignation by asking Dale to withdraw the pianos which had been hired from his firm.

To be fair to Dale, he did not want to be held responsible for injuries to people who might stray into the area of operations, where blasting sometimes took place. But over the next few years he went on to obstruct footpaths, fence off a large area, planted trees and even built a house for the foreman in an old gravel pit beside Daisybank Road ('Tramway Cottage'), right over the main footpath and on the very spot where on bank holidays people from all around would gather to enjoy swings, slides, coconut shies and refreshments.

On several occasions crowds destroyed fences which Dale had erected. In July 1902 four ringleaders were charged with obstructing the police - Walter Ballinger, Charlie Burford, Leonard Luce and John Price. They were acquitted, which encouraged as many as 2000 people in Cheltenham to stage a march. They made for Tramway Cottage, which they dismantled until hardly a stone was left standing.

Writs were issued in due course against five of the perpetrators, while G B Witts set up a fund to help the ringleader, Walter Ballinger, in a joint defence with the Rural District Council, hoping to have the paths declared open. However, a judge found in favour of Dale's enclosure and only three paths were granted as public rights of way. Dale then rebuilt the cottage exactly where it had been.

Resentment smouldered, especially as the authorities were seen to be dragging their feet over a decision. More marches were held, but the last and greatest battle was on Good Friday 1906 - the event we are remembering - when a crowd again gathered at Tramway Cottage. Walter Ballinger shouted out to pull it down. The police fetched G B Witts, who read the Riot Act. The crowd dispersed and arrests were made. At a trial in Gloucester sentences of 4 - 6 months' hard labour (reduced on appeal) were handed down to the following eight men: Walter Ballinger, Charles Barrett, William Heaven, Leonard Luce, William Sparrow, Henry Wallace, James Williams and Ernest Young.

Other names to be mentioned are Francis Mourton and George Townsend, Chairman and Secretary of the Stalwarts committee, whose unofficial HQ was here at the Wheatsheaf (though in an earlier building). George Townsend wrote 'The Ballad of Leckhampton Hill' and another called 'The Writ'

about the events. A few weeks ago I had the thrill of hearing Johnny Coppin and the group Decameron perform their arrangement of 'The Writ' at the Wheatsheaf Inn: this is now available on DVD.

The story had a happy ending, however. By 1929, the Quarry Company had gone out of business and Cheltenham Town Council was in a position to purchase the 400-acre estate, and people could walk freely over it. If you want to know more, you can't do better than read the book 'Old Leckhampton', by David Bick, who sadly died earlier this year. The Society has some copies for sale (at £8.95).

Over 150 people set out from the skittle alley of the Wheatsheaf Inn in Old Bath Road (generously put at our disposal by Maurice Dominey, the new manager of the inn). When they arrived at Tramway Cottage, they were met by an officer of the law in period police uniform, who read out the Riot Act. Eric Miller then handed over the chastened marchers to Dr Ray Wilson, of the Gloucestershire Society for Industrial Archaeology, who led the continuation of the walk, pointing out remaining features of the quarries, the limekilns, the quarry plateway, the Devil's Chimney and the Iron Age fort. All agreed that it had been a good outing (helped by the warm spring sunshine), and everyone had learned something from the varied activities.