

The Castlecomer Mine and Quarry Union

by Pat Feeley

Coal has been mined in the Castlecomer area since the earliest times but it was not until the seventeenth century that the mining was tackled on an organized basis.

In 1637 Thomas Wentworth, Lord Deputy of Ireland, subsequently to become Lord Lieutenant and Earl of Strafford, invited Christopher Wandesforde, a gentleman farmer from Yorkshire, to Ireland. Wandesforde was made Master of the Rolls and granted a large estate round about Castlecomer. When Strafford was later tried for high treason and executed Wandesforde became Lord Deputy for a brief period after his death. Wandesforde himself died in 1642.

The land that fell to Wandesforde included the Castlecomer coalfield. Castlecomer is the acknowledged centre of the Leinster coalfield which is located for the most part in north Kilkenny but also extends into part of County Laois. The coal here was anthracite and the depth of the seams varied, but in general the veins were not as deep as in the bituminous coal fields of Britain, and it was quite common for a Castlecomer miner to have to work on his side picking out the face in a pit eighteen inches high. On the other hand, it was possible to use naked lights in the Kilkenny mines because anthracite does not contain methane gas and the number of underground deaths was lower than in other mines.

Wandesforde began to work the mines about 1640. The first seam he opened was called the "Old Three Foot". This extended for about eight square miles at depths varying from 40 to 100 ft. It was worked for about 150 years, and in 1874 a mining engineer named Meadows estimated that it had produced about 14 million tons of coal.

The Old Three Foot seam produced the famous Kilkenny coal which was of excellent quality, free burning with a very low sulphur content. The seam extended from Coolbawn to Crettyard and was worked for many years.

The mining method at that time was called "Bell Pits". First of all two shafts were sunk about fifty yards apart and these were joined by an underground passage in order to allow free circulation of air. When this was done the miners went down and began to dig out the coal on each side of the connecting passage.

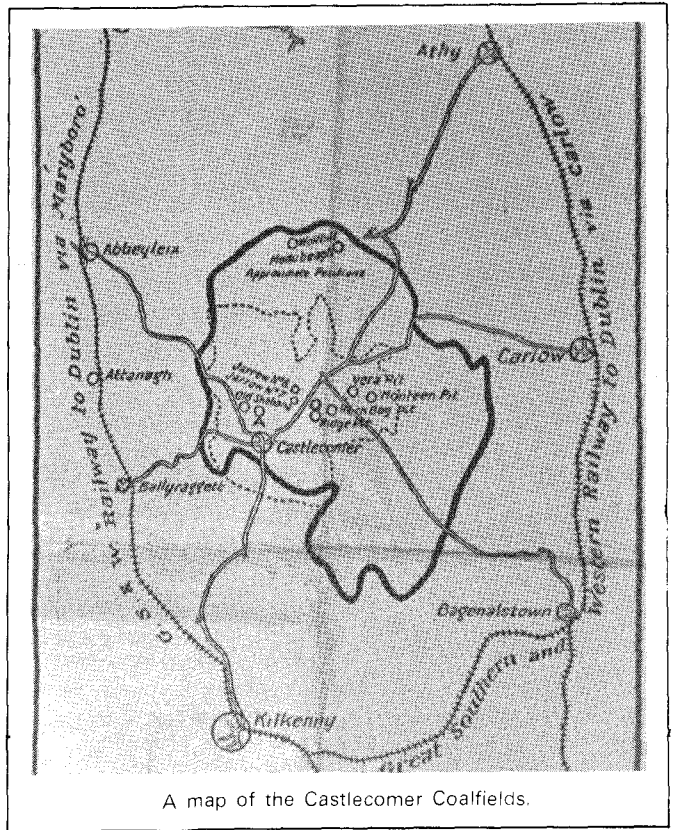
All of the coal could not be taken out as the roof would have collapsed, so pillars of coal were left as supports. At the time explosives had not been invented, so the coal had to be dug out and broken up with wedges and hammers. On the British mainland it was found that the miners were able to extract about 60% of the coal from these old pits and in the twentieth century open casting was used to mine the remaining 40%.

In Castlecomer, however, the old miners removed up to 85% of the coal and open casting was found to be uneconomical when it was tried out. These pits had to be spaced very close together, sometimes as close as fifty yards, as there were no water pumps or ventilation fans available.

In those early days the owner or his agent would sink three pairs of pits. He would then enter into an agreement with master miners as to the price per cubic yard for the coal produced. The master miners would bring together the miners and make a deal with them to extract the coal.

In the eighteenth century there seems to have been some kind of light rail system in the district, probably horse drawn, and a crossroads near Coalbawn still known as Railyard is thought to have been the despatch centre for coal in the area. (1)

The Old Three Foot began to run out about 1810 and the Wandesfordes brought in geologists to study the possibilities of other workable seams. Numerous bore holes were sunk by hand operated tools before it was decided to sink a shaft in the townland of Cloneen. This was sunk to the depth of about two hundred feet and was called the Jarrow seam, after the famous colliery in Northumberland. Subsequently further pits were sunk mostly in the Moneenroe area but also on higher ground in the



A map of the Castlecomer Coalfields.

east around Monteen and Little Castle. These pits were deeper and more extensive than the primitive shallow pits in the earlier working.

Geologically the Jarrow seam was in the shape of a horseshoe with a depth of up to four feet in places. Pits were sunk into the seam and they were known as the number 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 Jarrow. Steam pumps were introduced into the Kilkenny coal field in the early decades of the nineteenth century and steam was used to drive the machinery until the advent of electricity. Pit ponies were used to transport the coal underground right up to the 1950s. (2)

In 1842 a commission set up by the British government to investigate the employment of children issued a report on children working in mines in the United Kingdom. Frederick Roper, one of the commissioners, visited mines in the south of Ireland. Writing of the coal field on the borders of Kilkenny and Laois, or Queen's County as it was then called, he said:

I inspected about a dozen of the different shafts, worked by contractors and found none but men employed; indeed, I was informed that none but strong, able young men would be of any use in the pits, the labour being severe; I did not see any apparently under eighteen years of age.

He goes on to say that he went down into the pit and saw the people at their work and even the "hurries" who draw the coals to the foot of the shaft, were mostly strong young men". Elsewhere Roper stated that no female of any age was employed in mining. It was not necessary to employ child labour as there was a surplus of adult workers. He was told that none but

'strong, able young men would be of any use in the pits, the labour being severe'. He described the 'hurries' in the collieries of Kilkenny - Queen's County going along...

the narrow low passages of seldom more than three feet high and often less, on their hands and feet, the body stretched out, they draw the sledges, on which wooden boxes containing the coals are placed, by a girdle round the loins and a long chain fastened to the sledge going down between the legs. It was a matter of wonderment to me how these 'hurries', many of whom were stout men upwards of six feet high, could manage to get along these very narrow low passages at such a rate as they do.

Roper himself found it difficult to crawl through the passages. The 'hurries' complained that their work was very hard, there were neither railways nor tramways in the pits and that boxes of coal had to be pulled along the uneven ground on sledges. Strong men were required for this kind of heavy work. (3)

Just before the outbreak of the first World War another seam was discovered at Skehana. This was first worked at a pit in West Skehana and then at the Deerpark, which opened in 1924. This coal proved to be of a high quality and compared with the best anthracite found anywhere in the world being practically free of sulphur and of good heating power.

By the early nineteen thirties there were five major pits in the Castlecomer coalfield, the Jarrow, the Deerpark, the Rock Bog, the Monteen and the Vera, named after the Wandesfordes eldest daughter. The Wandesfordes owned, and, except for brief periods of leasing, ran the mines. In the late 1880s Captain R.H. Prior-Wandesforde inherited the family estate. He inherited a position of great power in the area. The family had amassed a substantial fortune from mining and owned thousands of acres of woodland and farmland as well as the game and fishing rights of this land. The Captain had a great interest in the mines and carried out considerable expansions. He had an overhead ropeway constructed connecting the various mines so that the coal could be brought together at a point in the Deerpark where there was a terminus for a branch line that carried it to Kilkenny. He was a paternal autocrat who looked on the miners not so much as his employees but as his people. In manner he was withdrawn and reserved, and regarded by the men as stern and hard.

Most of the miners in the nineteen twenties saw him as their total lord and master, determining salaries and conditions. Normally the agent or his officials presented them with a contract and they accepted what they were offered. The family boasted of never having yielded to pressure or to strikes.

In the late 'twenties the colliers were paid 6/6 a ton for "clean coal", coal of a certain quality and size. For the best of the fine stuff that passed through an 1 1/4" screen they received 6d a ton. Wages were linked to the market price of the coal. If the price rose the miners got an increase, if it fell their wages were reduced. They did not regard this as unfair at the time but wage reductions when they did come undoubtedly brought with them hardship and suffering. Drawers, jobbers, trammers and others were paid less than colliers on a sliding scale.

A collier, Jimmy Walshe, was paid as follows for the week ending December 15, 1928.

	£ S D
12 tons 3 cwts , 11/2	6 15 8
1 tons 12 cwts , 7/-	11 3
4 tons 0 cwts , 2/-	8 0
2 yds 0 ft. cutting	8 8
Total earnings	8 3 7

From his wages the miner had to pay for fuses, gellignite, candles, detonators and so on. The rent was deducted, as was a weekly payment towards the church then being built in Moneenroe. Walshe's take home pay after total deductions for the week ending December 15 came to £4.0s.11d, less than half his total earnings.

CASTLECOMER COLLIERIES, LTD.			
No. 25	Day	15	1928
Name <i>Jimmy Walshe</i>			
Tons	Cwts. at		
12	3	11/2	6 15 8
1	12	7/-	11 3
4	0	2/-	8 0
2	0	Foot Cutting	8 8
Consideration			
Days at			
Total Earnings			8 3 7
DEDUCTIONS			
Paid on A/c			2 10 0
Candles			2 6
Power			18 4
Fuses			2 6
Gellignite			
Detonators			
Blades			1 6
Sockets			
Shafts			
Rammers			
Jumpers			
Shovels			
Powder Cans			
Boxes & Kegs			
Grease			
Wedges & Hammers			
Rent			1 10
Insurance			1 0
<i>Wages</i>			1 0
<i>Church</i>			1 0
<i>Other</i>			1 0
Total Deductions			2 3 6

Jimmy Walshe's paysheet, 15 December, 1928.

There was also dissatisfaction about housing conditions and the lack of washing and showering facilities. The management were blamed for accidents and fatalities in the pits, and miners from England and Scotland who came to work there from time to time regarded the working conditions as greatly inferior to those in Britain.

In the nineteen twenties a miners' leader named Nicholas (Nixie) Boran emerged. Boran was born at Massford, the site of the Jarrow coal seam, in 1903. Like the children of other mining families, he was sent into the pits while still a child and began work as a trammer's assistant at the Modubeagh colliery, Co. Laois at the age of fourteen. From 1919 to 1921 Boran was tending pumps in the pits at Glenmullen.

Boran learned the art of 'gunning a tram' at the Modubeagh colliery for 4 shillings a day. When he went to work at Glenmullen he was earning 4s 3d for a ten-hour day. In his teens he joined the I.R.A. and took the republican side in the Civil War in which he was wounded and hospitalised in Limerick. He was admitted to hospital under an assumed name and was said to be suffering from wounds sustained in an accident involving a hayknife. The Catholic Bishop of Limerick visited the hospital, spoke to him and discovered he was not who he said he was. Boran had to be rescued from hospital by Dan Breen and Dinny Lacy. So, although still a very young man in 1930, in the Castlecomer area he was something of a folk hero. (4)

Boran was a man of intelligence, courage and determination, a man with a mission, to improve the working and living conditions of the Kilkenny miners. In the late nineteen twenties he was attracted towards communism and a branch of the Revolutionary Workers' Group was formed in the mines in 1930. The first members were Boran himself, Paddy O'Carroll and Jimmy and Tom Walshe. The miners were invited to send a

delegate to the congress of the Red International of Labour Unions, held in Moscow in August 1930. Boran was selected as a delegate but was refused a visa by the government, against which he had fought during the Civil War. However, he was smuggled out of the country, on a ship with a cargo of cement, and succeeded in reaching Russia where he stayed for three months. During these months he travelled extensively in the country, up to the great mineral centre of the Urals, to Samara where he visited collective, state and commune farms and then down to the coal mining area in the Donetz Basin. In between he lived in either Moscow or Leningrad where he met and talked to revolutionaries, including Irish students at the Lenin school in Moscow. After three months he left Russia for Ireland.

Boran returned from Moscow at the end of November. When the bus in which he was travelling came to Crettyard, Co. Kilkenny, it was boarded by two guards, one of them a sergeant. They told him they were taking him for questioning to the police barracks at Massford. Boran's followers and supporters had gathered at Railyard to welcome him, and he was cheered and applauded when the bus stopped. The crowd protested at his detention, jeered the police and followed the bus to Massford.

In the barracks he was searched, all his belongings were carefully scrutinised and his passport was examined. Detective-Officer Spain questioned him about his absence and on how he had travelled to Russia and back. Boran refused to answer any questions. The miners had waited outside and when he emerged they cheered and then walked him home. He told them of his adventures and of the difficulties he had encountered on his journey to and from Russia. (5)

On the following Sunday Fr. Cavanagh, the parish priest of Clough, preached during Mass against communism in Moneenroe, he referred to Boran and his trip to Moscow which he said had been paid for in "red gold". In the week that followed the priests visited the schools of the parish and spoke to the children on the evils of Russian communism. Boran had a meeting of his own on the following Sunday and gave a detailed account of what he saw and heard during his three months in Russia.

After his return, Boran began directing his energies to the foundation of a miners' union. Up to then the unionised miners in the pits - many of the colliery workers belonged to no union - were members of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. The general feeling about the Transport Union at the time

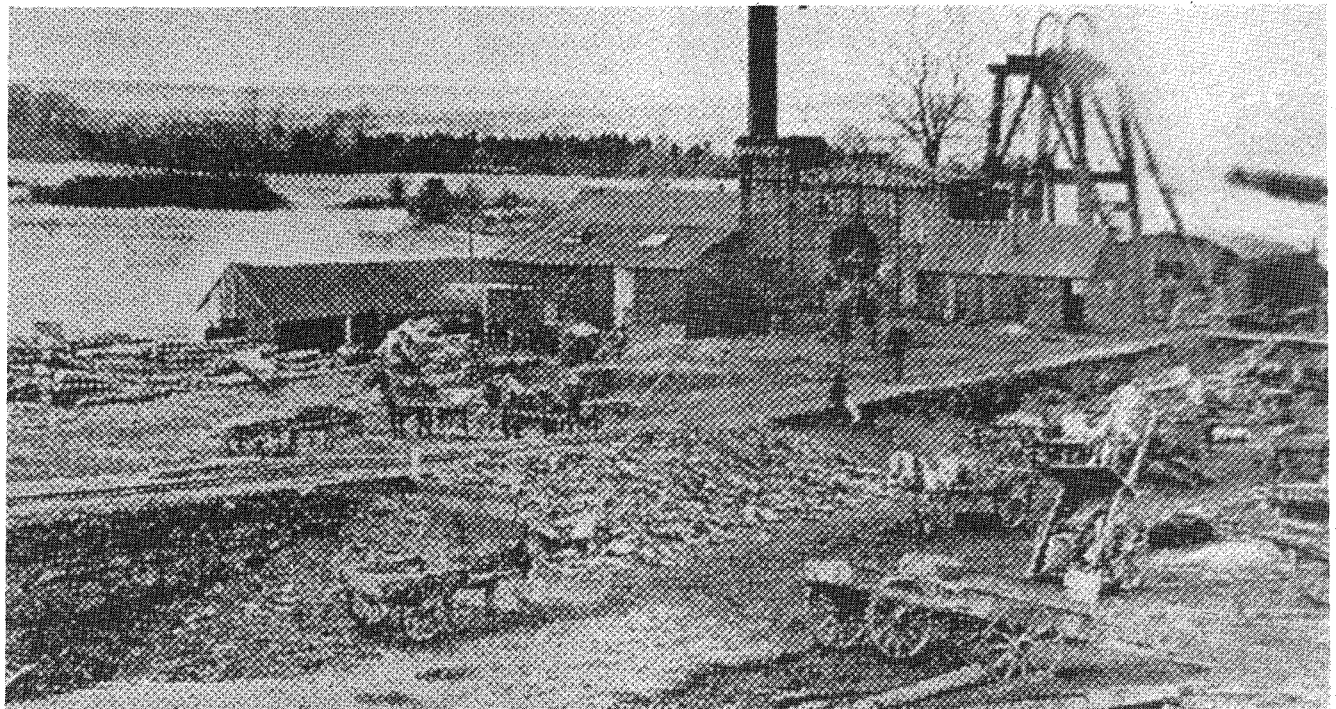
was that it knew little about mining and did not understand miners' problems. Across the channel the British miners had their own union, and some of the Kilkenny miners felt that they also should have a union of their own. The communist leaders encouraged and supported this idea, seeing in it a possibility for Ireland's first red union: Boran himself was familiar with the United Mine Workers Union in Scotland and is believed to have used it as the prototype for the Kilkenny union.

Bob Stewart, a prominent member of the British Communist Party, and a leader of the Scottish miners with a wide knowledge of mining and miners' unions was in Moneenroe in December 1930 to give advice and help in setting up the new union. He told them to expect total opposition from the combined forces of church and state, congratulated them on their fighting spirit and encouraged them to be ambitious, pointing out that there was a wide field of unorganized workers in mining and quarrying and that these could become a base on which to build a really big union. (6)

The union was officially launched on the evening of Wednesday December 3, 1930 in Moneenroe - the heart of the mining district.

The first item on the agenda was the forming and naming of the new union. On the motion of J. Buggy it was decided that it was to be known as the Castlecomer Workers' Union. This was to subsequently cause some confusion, with Boran having to write to the **Kilkenny Journal** to point out that they were not affiliated in any way to the Workers' Union of Ireland, Larkin's union. Probably because of this the union was later renamed and came to be known as the Irish Mine and Quarry Workers' Union or the Irish Mine Quarry and Allied Workers' Union. People in the area called it simply the Mine and Quarry Union.

From the beginning there was no attempt made to pretend that the new union was politically non-aligned. The two other items on the agenda were the formation of a Revolutionary Workers' Group and local sales of the **Workers' Voice**. Speaking at the meeting Boran dealt with local opposition to the paper, the difficulties in distribution and its importance in the overall scheme of what was to be done. To increase sales the area was divided into districts. Again on Boran's advice it was decided to set up a branch of the R.W.G. to give political guidance to the union. (7) So from the beginning it was publicly seen to be a communist union and as such could expect total opposition from the clergy, the majority of the local population,



The Jarrow colliery

he mine owner, the gardai and the local politicians.

In a confidential report submitted by the Department of Justice to the government around this time, Boran is described as 'a worker in a small coal mine who has since his return from Moscow formed a Communist Club amongst his fellow workers'(8).

Boran wrote regularly in the **Workers' Voice** on the working and living conditions of the miners. In December 1930 he described the house of Jack Brien of Timber Row as 'a wooden hut' with a corrugated iron roof full of holes, the walls of which consisted of two single boards and a four-inch mud cavity, with the rain coming in through the roof, broken windows and drains. He further stated that the houses were 50 years old and that no repairs had been carried out by the coal company since 1919.

Brien paid 2s.3d. a fortnight rent and the house, which was a single apartment partitioned in two, was occupied by a family of fourteen.

Of the two types of coal which the miners were forced to burn at 6½d. and 4½d. a cwt., this being all they could afford, Boran described one as 'a stone covering for the coal' which had to be broken with hammers and gave off sparks in the fire, and the other as a dust which had to be mixed with mud and water and trampled into a sticky substance before it would 'burn'.(9).

The Mine and Quarry Union asked the company for a ton of coal per household per month, which for the whole mining population would have meant about 100 tons a month, or about a half-day's production.

The company frequently dropped the men down to half time on the basis that there was no demand for the coal. At such times the coal was stockpiled in the yards, and some free coal would have been a goodwill gesture and would not have impaired the financial state of the company.

Nor was the new union slow to take up the cudgels. Boran formulated a demand to the company for an adequate supply of house coal for the miners at production cost, 8s.4½d. per ton, complaining that because of low wages they were being forced to buy dust and inferior grade coal while thousands of tons of quality coal lay stockpiled in the Deerpark and in the coal yards. The management replied that the demands were 'so unreasonable that they could not be considered'.

The union complained that a time check introduced six months previously whereby miners had to be at the pithead five minutes before going down or lose a day's work was unfair, and that the overtime being worked by some of the men was in violation of an agreement with the company, which fixed the maximum number of work hours for the miners. The company did not reply to these complaints.

In mid-December the police raided the Walshe home where there were seven sons, all miners, and all members of the union. The house was searched thoroughly and, according to a report in the **Workers' Voice**, the father's measurement books (he was a tailor) were suspected of being codes and were examined in detail by the gardai.(10).

Preaching at Sunday Mass Fr. Cavanagh said the **Workers' Voice** was the devil's voice, that Boran was little better than the gent with the cloven hoof and that communists were in receipt of Russian gold. He canvassed each member of the union committee separately to break with the union but without much success. When he visited the Walshe's home angry words were exchanged and Jimmy Walshe said he 'had a right to his opinion'. Fr. Cavanagh replied: "You are too ignorant to have an opinion". Thomas and Jimmy Walshe were members of both the union committee and the revolutionary group and were members of the Communist Party for many years afterwards.

The miners did not take these attacks lying down. The committee sent a long statement to the **Workers' Voice** in which they attacked the activities of Fr. Cavanagh. They said they were fighting a combination of the boss, the police and the priest and that Fr. Cavanagh was leading the attack on them from the pulpit every Sunday. The contributions of the Walshe's to the new church at Gazebo were six shillings a fortnight. The priest supported the employer against the workers but he



Nicholas Boran as a young man.

looked to the workers for financial support. Contrary to anything Fr. Cavanagh might wish to imply the union was financed by the miners themselves, not that they would be averse to accepting help from English or Russian workers if it were offered. The statement concluded on the defiant note that thirty new members had joined the union as a result of the attack and that the building up of the Revolutionary Workers' Group and sales of the **Workers' Voice** were progressing. The statement was signed by 'Comrade Boran', P. Carroll, J. Buggy, Thos. Walsh, Jas. Walsh, J. Bryan, D. O'Dowd, R. Ryan, Jas. Kelly, P. Campion and John Fitzgerald.(11).

SOURCES

- (1) **Castlecomer Centre of Coal Mining** by R.C. Prior-Wandesforde Paper written in 1961.
- (2) **Coal Mining in the Castlecomer Area** by R.C. Prior-Wandesforde Paper for Carlowviana Old Carlow Society, Oct. 1975.
- (3) British Parliamentary Papers **Childrens Employment Commission** First Report of the Commissioners. Mines I.U.P.
- (4) **The Kilkenny People**, 12/11/1971.
- (5) **Workers' Voice**, 29/11/1930.
(After June 1932, **Irish Workers' Voice**)
- (6) **Workers' Voice**, 3/1/1931
- (7) **Ibid.** 6/12/1930.
- (8) State Paper Office, S 5864 A-D.
- (9) **Workers' Voice**, 6/12/1930.
- (10) **Ibid.** 20/12/1930.
- (11) **Ibid.**