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Community, Class, and Identity: An Analysis of The Harle Syke Strike, 1915

Jack Southern

Abstract

This article analyses the Harle Syke strike, 1915. Although the incident was understood to be significant by contemporary observers, the strike has been overlooked when examining tensions between trade unionism, class, and local autonomy in Lancashire at the time of the Great War. Using a combination of cotton industry records and newspaper archives, the article examines the relationship between Harle Syke and the rest of Lancashire, with specific focus on the local rivalry between the village and its closest neighbour, Burnley. It provides a narrative of the strike, as well as analysis of the dynamics of the relationship between trade unionism and the village. It also examines local community input into industry, local protectionism, and responses to county-wide standardisation and centralisation.

Introduction

In August 1915, the Burnley and District Weavers', Winders' and Beamers' Association (hereafter BWA) launched strike action against the 11 cotton firms in the village of Harle Syke. They acted on behalf of the Amalgamated Weavers' Association (hereafter AWA), of which they were the largest federate member, to force the village's employers to recognise trade unionism and pay the same wage rates, based on the 'Uniform List', that the majority of the weaving sector adhered to. The strike was expected to be a swift victory for the trade unionists. The village's employers were regarded across the county to have been exploiting their operatives; undercutting the rest of the industry by paying the operatives up to 12 per cent less than the list. The strike lasted for eight months and cost the AWA more than £30,000.¹ It also cost the BWA £12,300, a considerable amount for an organisation with a typical monthly income of just £2000. The 'fly in the ointment', according to AWA officials were Harle Syke's 'knobstick' nonunion operatives who kept the mills working throughout the strike, and actively resisted any form of trade union membership.² Instead of siding with their fellow cotton operatives, and their own 'class' as expected, these villagers chose to collaborate with their employers to collectively undermine the trade union movement and protect the village's working system. The *Cotton Factory Times* (hereafter *CFT*) asked, 'The employers cannot defeat the weavers;

¹ A. Bullen, *The Lancashire Weavers Union: A Commemorative History* (Lancashire, 1984), 72.

² *Cotton Factory Times* (hereafter *CFT*), 27 August 1915.

the weavers can only be defeated by their own class ... would it not be wise ... to take the plunge and help their own comrades?’³ Yet, even when the federated employers, the Cotton Spinners’ and Manufacturers’ Association (hereafter CSMA) withheld a weaving-wide war bonus to alleviate distress caused by the outbreak of the Great War, these villagers remained resolute in their determination to maintain their local autonomy.

The Harle Syke strike came during a period of introspection across the cotton weaving area. Issues of trade unionism, class loyalty, and the concept of a Lancashire-wide identity were contentious topics. Although subsumed by the Great War, they remained salient issues, made more complex by notions of patriotism. In the aftermath of the War, these issues were still present across Lancastrian communities. As Mansfield suggests, there was consternation across British society as to whether post-1918 would be ‘never the same again’ or ‘business as usual’?⁴ His work, amongst others, such as that of Bland and Carr, highlights the complex patchwork of experiences of communities throughout this period, as well as reiterates the atypical nature of Lancastrian industrial settlements compared to broader national narratives.⁵ The First World War centenary also reiterated the different degrees of Lancastrian exceptionalism, and placed greater emphasis on microhistorical analysis of the home front through local case studies. Although especially popular amongst local community groups, other forms of public engagement have seen new avenues for analysis develop.⁶

Concepts of ‘community’ were central to how the home front engaged with and understood the War, and that the press was instrumental in this. Finn has argued that this manifested in different ways across British society,⁷ and a range of historians have studied the intersections of patriotism, labour politics, and gender, amongst others.⁸ The experience of war strengthened collective identities in some larger towns, but this process also challenged the autonomy of smaller communities.⁹ Soldiers who had previously ‘lived their lives at a local level’ became part of broader ‘sub-national’ units that began to merge into regional identities, but it was not always an easy transition.¹⁰

Like Britain’s other industrial areas, Lancashire weaving towns were restless in the period of the ‘Great Labour Unrest’, 1911–1914.¹¹ As Wrigley argued, during this period,

³ *CFT*, 24 September 1915.

⁴ N. Mansfield, and C. Horner (eds), *The Great War: Localities and Regional Identities* (Newcastle 2014); ‘The Great War and the North West’, *Manchester Region History Review*, 24 (2013).

⁵ See Mansfield and Horner, *The Great War*, and L. Bland and R. Carr (eds), *Labour, British Radicalism and the First World War* (Manchester 2018).

⁶ See for example The Everyday Lives in War Project, <<https://everydaylivesinwar.herts.ac.uk/>>.

⁷ M. Finn, ‘Local Heroes: War News and the Construction of “Community” in Britain, 1914–1918’, *Historical Research*, 83: 221 (2010), 510–38.

⁸ For a range of different case studies, see Mansfield and Horner, ‘The Great War and the North West’.

⁹ See J. Southern, ‘A Stronghold of Liberalism?’, in Bland and Carr (eds), *Labour, British Radicalism and the First World War* (Manchester 2018), 91–107.

¹⁰ See H.B. McCartney, ‘North-West Infantry Battalions and Local Patriotism in the First World War’, *Manchester Region History Review*, 24 (2013), 1–15.

¹¹ See, for example, the special edition on ‘The Great Labour Unrest’ of *Labour History Review*, 79: 1 (2014).

‘Trade unions not only grew in size but also in financial strength’.¹² Quoting the Government’s Chief Industrial Advisor, Sir George Askwith, Pelling attributed the unrest to a combination of rising living costs and stagnant wages, the displays of wealth by the rich, and the growth of the press and improved communications.¹³ Fowler has argued that this period marked a radical change in how the operatives’ unions approached industrial relations, becoming more centralised and pursuing – although ultimately failing to achieve – ‘one Industrial Union’ to cover all.¹⁴ In weaving, operatives had undergone around a decade of attacks on wages, and trade depressions in 1902 and 1908. In response, the AWA launched a successful recruitment drive in pursuit of a closed shop.¹⁵ Frustrated by operative refusals to work with non-unionists, the CSMA launched a four-week weaving-wide lockout in December 1911. The settlement of the dispute came with concessions. The most significant was that the AWA take ‘immediate steps’ to combat mills in non-federated districts; those outside of the CSMA.¹⁶

The Harle Syke strike generated great interest. The *CFT* declared that ‘Harle Syke had suddenly become famous’,¹⁷ whilst publications as distant as *The Northern Whig* in Antrim suggested that the dispute had ‘more than a local significance’.¹⁸ Yet, the strike has been overlooked even within the history of the British textile industry. Notable works by Labour historians Jowitt and McIvor, White, Bullen, and Fowler have tended to present brief and generalised overviews as part of wider studies.¹⁹ Richardson has made similar arguments in his analysis of the Bliss Tweed Mill strike 1913, noting how in his case, small, localised disputes in rural areas ‘tend to be overlooked’ or consigned to ‘local history’. His analysis, however, reiterates the importance of such studies to develop understanding of wider societal issues.²⁰

This article reconstructs the narrative of the strike and examines the notions of localism and community identity through a combination of archival material related to cotton weaving, and through the local and regional press. Snell has discussed rivalry

¹² C. Wrigley, ‘Labour, Labour Movements, Trade Unions and Strikes (Great Britain and Ireland)’, *International* in U. Daniel et al., *1914–1918 online, International Encyclopaedia of the First World War* (Berlin, 2014).

¹³ H. Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (London, 1968), 147.

¹⁴ A. Fowler and L. Fowler, *The History of the Nelson Weavers Association* (Nelson, 1984), 27.

¹⁵ Bullen, *Lancashire Weavers*, 30–3.

¹⁶ Debate rages over the ‘victor’ of the action, but ultimately the concessions of the AWA meant that the Employers secured themselves a position of neutrality over non-union operatives, whilst forcing the AWA to combat non-union mills. See J.L. White, *Limits of Trade Union Militancy* (Connecticut, 1978).

¹⁷ *CFT*, 27 August 1915.

¹⁸ *Northern Whig*, 31 August 1915.

¹⁹ See J.A. Jowitt and A.J. McIvor, *Employers and Labour in the English Textile Industries: 1850–1939* (London, 1988); White *Limits of Trade Union Militancy*; Bullen, *Lancashire Weavers*; and Fowler, *Nelson Weavers*.

²⁰ M. Richardson, ‘Bliss Tweed Mill Strike, 1913–1914: Causes, Conduct and Consequences’, in M. Richardson and P. Nichols (eds), *A Business and Labour History of Britain* (London, 2011), 60–83.

between settlements throughout the industrial period, and how this offers tremendous scope to understanding the relationship between communities and their 'places'.²¹ Particular attention is given to the letters pages of the local press, the *Burnley Express* (hereafter *BE*), and the *Burnley News* (hereafter *BN*) which became the main outlets to debate and articulate the strike. Hobbs' work has shown the significance of the local press throughout this period, as well as the veracity of readership letter writing.²² The inclusion of substantial quotations here, as Gregory has done in his analysis of society and Great War, is an attempt to situate the discourse as central to the everyday comprehension of the contemporary events.²³ Alice Goldfarb Marquis' discussion of British propaganda during the War is also relevant, for in this period, the use of language and diffusion of information went through great changes. She argued that 'words were seen as powerful movers of men and women; they became mobilizers of the national spirit, calls to courage, to sacrifice and, finally, to simple endurance'.²⁴ The discourse of the strike was distinctive. It served the purpose of framing the dispute through a combination of moralistic and financial terms, but it also expressed significant facets of local identity, rivalry, and conceptualisations of class. It was used to generate wider support via the latter, but it also represented the self-articulation of these issues, primarily from an urban, trade union perspective that contrasted to village attitudes. The combination of these factors was most clearly articulated by the *CFT* poet Con Corrigan, in his 1915 call to arms, 'Harle Syke, Rally to the Union Flag':

If Harle Syke should go on strike
 The struggle may be long and bitter,
 And workers all must heed the call,
 Each strive to be the hardest hitter.
 Too long they've slept while others kept
 The Flag of Labour boldly flying;
 The faithful few could little do,
 And futile's always been their trying.

Had you been true, as was your due,
 And joined in Labour's combination,
 Full long ago you'd have laid low
 Your bosses' smug congratulation.

²¹ See K.D.M Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community: Identity and welfare in England and Wales, 1700–1950* (Cambridge, 2006).

²² See A. Hobbs, 'When the Provincial Press was the National Press (c. 1836–c. 1900)', *The International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 5:1 (2009), 16–43, and 'Readers' Letters to Victorian Local Newspapers as Journalistic Genre', *Letters to the Editor* (Cambridge, 2019), 129–46.

²³ A. Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2008).

²⁴ A. Goldfarb Marquis, 'Words as Weapons: Propaganda in Britain and Germany during the First World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 13:3 (1978), 467.

But now's your chance "Tention! Advance!"
 You've got the Union force behind you.
 Let bosses rave who'd still enslave,
 And say no more you'll let them bind you.

Think of the List, and what you've missed;
 Think of the harm you've done to others;
 Stand by the men who'll fight for you,
 And hail you all as friends and brothers.
 Go to the fight with all your might,
 And let none falter like a craven;
 Stand to your guns like Briton's sons-
 Let full list prices be your haven.

A long pull now, and you'll see how
 They'll have to fall in line and pay up,
 Or men and masters, one and all
 Will surely kick a pretty fray up.
 So if you're wise you'll organise,
 Pay up without the least demur,
 And Syke you'll see full soon will be
 In truth in good old Lancashire!²⁵

The Development of Harle Syke

By the mid-nineteenth century, cotton weaving became concentrated around Blackburn, and the Burnley, Nelson, and Colne conurbation in north-east Lancashire. Urban population centres grew quickly and haphazardly as cotton production expanded. Rural Settlements that relied on handloom weaving suffered decline and depopulation as industrial centres boomed through the adoption of powerloom weaving. Burnley's population, for example, grew from around 3,500 in 1801 to 110,000 in 1911. Refinements, such as the 'Lancashire loom' developed by Bullough and Kenworthy in 1842 and changes in national legislation that culminated in the Companies Act of 1862 led to a boom in company formation across Lancashire, financed through shares and debentures, and offering investors limited liability.²⁶ Joint-stock companies and 'room and power' mills became popular around north-east Lancashire, and presented an opportunity for working-class investment. As Jackson's analysis of the latter explains, this was certainly true until the 1890s, and in some cases up until 1914.²⁷

²⁵ *CFT*, 27 August 1915.

²⁶ G. Timmins, *Four Centuries of Lancashire Cotton* (Lancashire, 1996), 50–72.

²⁷ K.C. Jackson, 'Enterprise in Some Working-Class Communities: Cotton Manufacturing in North-east Lancashire and West Craven, c. 1880–1914', *Textile History*, 37: 1 (2004), 52–81.

Harle Syke was a late developing settlement. Roughly three miles north of Burnley, it is on the fringes of the Burnley-Nelson-Colne conurbation.²⁸ As with other settlements on the periphery of the main weaving areas, the textile industry classified Harle Syke as a 'country' or 'out' district. Over approximately 50 years, it went from empty moorland between the handloom weaving hamlets of Cop Row, Haggate and Lane Head, to a thriving village. It was the largest settlement in Briercliffe-with-Extwistle, but the total population of this township peaked at only 3042, in 1911.²⁹ Harle Syke effectively started with the founding of Haggate Joint Stock Commercial Company and the building of Harle Syke Mill in 1856. According to historians and Briercliffe natives, Bythell and Frost, this was to 'inaugurate a new era of prosperity, security, and independence based on the powerloom'.³⁰ Local autonomy thrived, partly out of necessity, due to the village's remoteness, and both employer and operative trade unions struggled to maintain a presence in the village.³¹ Redfern's study of Mossley, a town between Ashton-Under-Lyne and Saddleworth, has shown how other smaller textile settlements exhibited similar behaviour around this period. He argued that Mossley's isolation was the central feature that shaped the local character, 'sealing it off' to ideas that competed against the 'millocracy', suggesting that 'Mossley people tended to be as isolated as the town itself'.³² In comparison, Harle Syke lacked transport links until the arrival of the tram in 1912, but even so, by the time of the strike only around 500 of the village's 2000 cotton operatives travelled commuted to work.³³ It remained a small, generally homogenous community, existing in what the AWA would later term 'pernicious isolation'.³⁴ The *CFT* observed on the eve of the strike that 'the village – to its inhabitants – is the centre of the world, and all persons not living in it are "far-comers", as foreign almost as a Frenchman or a German'.³⁵

As a result of this insularity, familial networks, extended through religious ties, dominated work and social life for the majority of villagers. Furthermore, the overlapping of work and social spheres created blurred class boundaries. Local writer, Th' Owd Syker highlighted some of this complexity in his reflections of growing up in the village around the time of the strike, recounted some years later in a series of piece in the *BE*:

I would just like to mention two families who worked there during my period. First Richard Thornton, director at one time, and a teacher. He was followed by his son

²⁸ This classification was widely used locally and later lent the name to the post-Second World War North East Lancashire Development Area scheme.

²⁹ R. Frost, *A Lancashire Township: The History of Briercliffe-with-Extwistle* (Burnley, 1982), 26.

³⁰ D. Bythell and R. Frost, *A Lancashire Weaving Company and its Community* (Burnley, 2009), 11.

³¹ The propensity of circulars and ephemera issued by the AWA also demonstrates the lack of success they had in these areas. See AWA files, Lancashire Archives (hereafter LA), DDX/1123/12.

³² N. Redfern, 'Labour Failure and Liberal Survival: The Impact of the Great War on the Labour Movement in Mossley', *Manchester Regional History Journal*, 24 (2013), 15–31.

³³ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 27 August 1915.

³⁴ *Burnley News* (hereafter *BN*), 13 October 1915.

³⁵ *CFT*, 26 November 1915.

Tom on the same set of looms. Tom was killed in the war and the youngest son Walter took over the set. The oldest son John and his three sisters – Jane, Betty and Clara all worked as weavers during what I would think was all their working lives ... Another family was Roger Greenwood's brood of 12 children. I am sure 10 of them worked there at one period of their working lives. James Henry was a tackler and the rest were weavers. James Henry lived to be over 90.³⁶

Harle Syke soon gained a reputation for the entrepreneurial spirit and relative affluence of local operatives. The *Manchester Guardian* (hereafter *MG*) noted how 'the thrift of the weavers ... was a matter of repute throughout the weaving centres of Lancashire'.³⁷ By 1914, the village housed 11 cotton firms, with a total of just under 8000 looms.³⁸ Of these, Haggate, Harle Syke, Hill Lane, Queen Street and Walshaw mills were at least partially financed through local joint-stock shares. Local investment was popular across the village, and its economy rapidly grew to serve industrial expansion. An array of other local amenities such as the reading rooms in neighbouring Haggate the local Bowling Green Society, and the employer's insurance association were financed through joint-stock principles, maintaining a sense of local ownership across all aspects of village life.³⁹ The late development of the village also meant that vast majority of housing was of high standard, with running water, gas lighting, and toilets.⁴⁰ The pace and success of this process, driven by cotton weaving that was conducted outside of trade unionism, attracted the attention of large, neighbouring, cotton settlements where trade unionism was strong, and that through urban expansion now directly bordered the village. The *MG* summarised the situation on the eve of the strike:

So long as Harle Syke remained a small weaving district little or nothing was heard in the way of complaint from the federated employers in Burnley, Blackburn, Nelson, and other big centres, but its expansion during the last 15 or 20 years has altered the situation.⁴¹

³⁶ *Burnley Express* (hereafter *BE*), 19 March 1983.

³⁷ *Manchester Guardian* (hereafter *MG*), 20 August 1915.

³⁸ These were: The Haggate Weaving Co.: 448 looms; Harle Syke Mill Co.: 1290 looms; Hill Lane Mill Co.: 480 looms; Queen Street Manufacturing Co.: 1514 looms; J Thornton and Co.: 403 looms; Walshaw Mill Co.: 1,092 looms; Mason, Bather and Co.: 1,004 looms; Heasandford Mill Co.: 482 looms; Messers Crowther: 408 looms; Messers Atkinson: 408 looms; Messers Hargreaves: 408 looms.

³⁹ For the records relating to this see National Archives (hereafter NA), BT 15/58 and BT 31/31994/97593.

⁴⁰ Burnley Borough Council, *Harle Syke Conservation Area Appraisal* (2018).

⁴¹ *MG*, 20 August 1915.

Harle Syke, Trade Unionism, and Local Rivalries

The Harle Syke strike was the culmination of local tensions and industry-wide issues. AWA victory was widely believed to be a formality, and they boasted that it was to be 'the first move' in the 'crusade' to bring standardisation to the whole of the cotton weaving areas. They pledged the 'whole resources of the organisation' to it, with the intention to 'turn to the other districts later'.⁴² News of the strike was overwhelmingly well received across the county.⁴³ It would be beneficial for both the AWA and CSMA, and would reassert the strength of trade unionism across the industry, and as such, it had strong support from the wider trade union movement.⁴⁴

The AWA approach to industrial relations had generally been successful from its formation, in 1884, until the lockout 1911–1912. It aimed to be a more cooperative and 'comprehensive' form of operative amalgamation than the various previous attempts,⁴⁵ sought to 'establish and maintain an uniform and fair rate of wages' and when possible 'obtain an advance in the rate of wages'.⁴⁶ Initially, the AWA fought a series of disputes to seek recognition in various districts and to protect wages, but by the late 1890s they had reached a joint relationship with the CSMA.⁴⁷ The 'Uniform List', used for calculating operative wages, was agreed in 1892 and superseded various local district lists. The Brooklands Agreement of 1893, but later amended in 1897, and eventually codified as the Joint Rules in 1908, sought to establish methods and procedures to minimise disruption to the industry.⁴⁸ Industrial peace and stability were thus overarching principles for both the AWA and CSMA.

In the smaller, remote districts, the attempts to form local weavers associations had been costly and difficult.⁴⁹ These had generally ended in stalemate, but with a begrudged acceptance of their unique wage positions through 'force majeure'.⁵⁰ The country employers argued that they had to make deductions, in some places rumoured to be up to 17 per cent, to the Uniform List rates on account of structural and geographic issues – so-called 'local disadvantages' – which included higher carriage costs and limited

⁴² *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 26 August 1915.

⁴³ *CFT*, 13 August 1915.

⁴⁴ This included the support of the Northern Counties Textile Trades Federation (NCTTF), and the other branches of the cotton industry's trade unions which it represented, including Loom Overlookers, Twisters and Drawers, the Textile Warehousemen, the Warp Dressers, Tape Sizers and other smaller associations.

⁴⁵ E. Hopwood, *A History of the Lancashire Cotton Industry and the Amalgamated Weavers' Association: The Lancashire Weavers Story* (Lancashire, 1968), 54–60.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ A. Fowler, *Lancashire Cotton Operatives and Work, 1900–1950: A Social History of Lancashire Cotton Operatives in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot, 2003), 12–37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Several large disputes were fought over both the recognition of trade unionism and adherence to the list, for example Barnoldswick in 1895 and Skipton in 1911.

⁵⁰ LA/DDX1123/6/2/421b.

labour.⁵¹ This group of owners accounted for around 10 per cent of Britain's total loomage, so were a sizable group that utilised the deductions to undercut trade union affiliated mills.⁵² Although, this was of equal concern to the CSMA, the settlement of the lockout in 1912 meant that the responsibility to tackle them was firmly placed on the AWA.

The outbreak of war in 1914 caused conditions to quickly deteriorate in the larger weaving towns, and a combination of stagnant wages and rising living costs over the previous decade exacerbated the situation.⁵³ The AWA pursued a war bonus that was to cover approximately 180,000 operatives to help alleviate the distress. The CSMA rejected these requests, with the application in March 1915 for example, dismissed 'owing to the unprofitable and depressed state of business'.⁵⁴ This became a recurrent excuse. When the spinning section of the cotton industry gained increases in July 1915, partly through threats of large-scale industrial action, the AWA were shocked to be met with their own threat of a wage reduction issued by the CSMA 'unless the wages paid in outside districts are brought up by your efforts or by legislation'. The *CFT* called this reasoning 'the most illogical we have ever come across'.⁵⁵ But, as McIvor has shown, it was a calculated move that utilised the perceived collective strength of the AWA, and forced them to bear the cost of industrial action.⁵⁶ The mixture of protecting operatives, the state of the industry, and the impact of the war thus left the AWA in a difficult position. The Secretary of the Manchester, Salford, and Pendleton Weavers' Society summarised the complexity of issues that faced cotton's trade unionists:

There are people who do not scruple to say that trade unionists are entirely selfish people, who care nothing what becomes of the country or the brave lads abroad, so long as they can secure a rise of a paltry shilling or two in wages. It is not true ... for the State, for the people, we are ready to sacrifice to the uttermost, but our patriotism, our loyalty, our devotion to the country's cause must not be seized upon and made the excuse for undermining our economic and social status. We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our brave comrades who have gone to fight the foe, to maintain that status. When they return home, they shall not have to say that while they were away offering their lives for us, we were betraying them and their wives and children to the exploiter.⁵⁷

At the local level, tensions between Burnley and Harle Syke were a significant factor in the strike action. Of the 38 AWA associations, the BWA had the largest membership,

⁵¹ Although the classification of these places altered, they were settlements primarily on the flanks of the Burnley-Nelson-Colne conurbation, with outliers in places such as the Fylde and Wigan.

⁵² *BN*, 25 August 1915.

⁵³ See Southern, 'A Stronghold of Liberalism?', 91–5.

⁵⁴ *MG*, 27 March 1915.

⁵⁵ *CFT*, 20 August 1915.

⁵⁶ Jowitt and McIvor, *Organised Capital*, 174.

⁵⁷ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 21 August 1915.

with 28,740 according to the annual reports in April 1914.⁵⁸ The BWA had spearheaded the campaign in Harle Syke for around a decade. As Harle Syke continued to grow, the BWA tactics became more aggressive. They had some success in creating unrest, and in 1910 and 1913 they managed to instigate small disputes over wages. Both incidents were petered out quickly, but the BWA used their involvement to encourage, and predicate future involvement on village operative membership of the union.⁵⁹

Preparations for the strike began in earnest in July 1914 when the Secretary of the BWA Secretary was granted powers to 'adopt any system for the collection of information' by the AWA.⁶⁰ 'Spies' were sent to the village to gauge the mood amongst the operatives, and a raft of men employed to undertake what the AWA termed 'special work' in the village, although their exact function is unclear. Door-to-door canvassers were appointed, and handbills were distributed in Harle Syke and Burnley. The majority of the canvassers and handbill distributors named in AWA records resided outside of the village, and were male.⁶¹ In the neighbouring village of Lane Head, the BWA dispatched two men to the family homes of those union members known to be unsure of the strike action to convince them to take part. This tactic had been used previously as a method of collecting subscriptions.⁶² These representatives discovered their destination as late as possible to guarantee secrecy. It was clearly intimidatory, but deemed to be effective. A letter to the AWA dated 19 August, for example, indicated that some non-members were willing to join the union but would prefer to pay subscriptions to J.W. Spencer, in order to avoid dealing with one of the other collectors.⁶³ But, by August 1915, The BWA somewhat optimistically estimated that they had reached around 60 per cent membership of the operatives working in Harle Syke.⁶⁴

A Narrative of the Strike

The Harle Syke strike lasted for 30 weeks, but the village's mills never fully stopped working, bar the usual holidays. The strike notice expired 'at the dinner hour' on 25 August. Around 1200 operatives left their mills and were greeted by AWA officials and supportive pickets, primarily from Burnley. The mills at Haggate and Hill End were initially excluded from the action,⁶⁵ and the former lost only two operatives.⁶⁶ A meeting later in the day organised

⁵⁸ *BN*, 23 May 1914.

⁵⁹ Bullen, *Lancashire Weavers*, 37.

⁶⁰ LA/DDX 1274/2/1.

⁶¹ Handbills distributed by E.E. Birtwhistle, J. Green, A. Lomax, J. Hoyle, M. Holland, J.P. Wilson, W. Bowen, J. Bentley, H. Holden, R. Baldwin, Spencer, LA/DDX/1274/2/1.

⁶² Collectors named in July 1914 for that district included Jacob Heist and George Fielding of Williams Road, Burnley and another, John Crashaw, of 8 Granville Street, Harle Syke, although he was originally from Derbyshire. LA/DDX/1274/2/1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *BN*, 21 August 1915.

⁶⁵ LA/DDX1274/2/1.

⁶⁶ *BN*, 21 August 1915.

by the AWA, and including other notable figures from the industry attracted around 500 people.⁶⁷ According the *MG*, ‘Those who resumed work were hissed and hooted as they returned home or made for the Burnley tram.’⁶⁸ On 26 August, the AWA sent a deputation to Westminster to meet with Sir George Askwith and state their case for the war bonus, but they also raised the strike, although no further action was taken.

Harle Syke’s mills closed for holidays in September, and the AWA officials met with several operatives on the 10th. Soon after, the BWA reported that a further 25 per cent of the operatives had resumed work, but that more of the village’s weavers had become members.⁶⁹ The latter point was refuted by the correspondent in the *BE*, who explained that as of the 18th, 51 per cent of the village’s looms were running. This in-turn was denied by the AWA, who estimated 70 per cent of operatives had joined their ranks.⁷⁰ Further statements made in the *CFT* maintained that the strike was going ‘merrily on, and all the signs point to a complete defeat of the employers’.⁷¹ Yet, the striking male weavers began to enrol at the Burnley Labour Exchange for munitions work, whilst some families looked to work alternative or two-day weeks in other districts to supplement the strike pay they were receiving. One family was said to be running a set of looms with a different member each day. With the strike at deadlock, representatives from both sides held clandestine negotiations. Eventually two employers, Herbert Crowther and James Hargreaves, appeared receptive to negotiation. They facilitated an invitation to the village’s other employers on 29 September for a meeting, and further correspondence encouraged the involvement of the local vicar, the Reverend Knox, to act as chair.⁷² Although this did not come to fruition, the village employers raised their wages rates to 5 per cent below the list.⁷³

The BWA issued a manifesto in October that traced the history of various efforts at Harle Syke. An intervention by respected former MP, Lord Shuttleworth of Gawthorpe Hall in November resulted a joint meeting with the Northern Counties Textile Trades Federation (hereafter NCTTF) held in Manchester, but no agreement was made. The AWA offered to accept 2.5 per cent below the list prices for the duration of the war, with full prices introduced after settlement. Rumour then spread throughout the village that an agreement had been reached on the 2.5 per cent figure, the granting full AWA recognition, and other concessions. The Harle Syke operatives who were still working, incensed that they had not been consulted, then went out on strike, the ‘strike within a strike’, closing all of the mills in the village for the day. They returned back to work within a short time, but a warning had been issued to their employers.

⁶⁷ *MG*, 26 August 1915.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *MG.*, 15 September 1915.

⁷⁰ *Manchester Evening News* (hereafter MEN), 20 September 1915.

⁷¹ *CFT*, 24 September 1915.

⁷² LA/DDX/1123/5/1.

⁷³ Bullen, *Lancashire Weavers*, 37.

In January 1916, the 5 per cent war bonus was granted across the weaving sector. It was estimated that 1,150 operatives were still on strike, and 950 were working.⁷⁴ Negotiations restarted in late January but broke down due to the reluctance to reinstate striking operatives. In solidarity with the trade union, a number of Burnley coal pits refused to supply the village, and the NCTTF met with the Lancashire and Cheshire Miners Federation to explore extending the boycott across other pits and collieries. The Harle Syke employers made some concessions to try to end the dispute. They agreed to work to 4 per cent under the standard list, and to guarantee this, a wages board was formed comprised of two representatives from each mill in the village that served to ensure that wages were paid according to the list prices posted in the mills.⁷⁵ But, the Harle Syke employers still refused to guarantee the reinstatement of every striking operative. Instead, they declared that they would protect the jobs of their still working operatives. The BWA voted 780 to 8 to continue the strike in early February.⁷⁶ The reinstatement issue continued to be contentious until terms were agreed, and passed by the operatives on 23 March. There continued to be arguments over the rehiring of striking operatives, on account of trade downturn, and picketing commenced at Hill End Manufacturing Co and Haggate Weaving co. who did not agree a settlement. This was short lived, and Harle Syke now officially operated at 4 per cent under the standard list, striking operatives would be permitted to return, and the AWA would be recognised in the village for the first time.⁷⁷

A War of Words: From Solidarity to ‘Trench Warfare’

The way in which Harle Syke was conceptualised by trade unionists and the rest of the industry significantly shaped the strike. When the BWA became openly involved in Harle Syke in 1910, there was little nuance in the attempts to convert country operatives. Primarily this involved a mixture of rebuking their past behaviours, stressing the benefits of trade unionism along class-lines, and encouraging operatives to join for a combination of moral and personal gain. A circular issued in early 1910 asked those in Harle Syke ‘How long are you going to allow the weavers in other parts of Lancashire to fight for better wages and conditions, whilst you yourselves are standing by and reaping the advantages of their work in the past? We appeal to you to join the society.’⁷⁸

In 1911, the non-unionist issue took precedent for the AWA, and the more aggressive attitude towards non-unionism in general reflected in the BWA tactics. In August of that year, they sought to explicitly ‘promote agitation’ amongst the operatives. They focussed speeches, as before, on the apparent low wages in the village, but further reiterated a Lancashire-wide, class-based solidarity, and the moral responsibilities attached to this. In several speeches, the village’s operatives were portrayed as ‘tools’ of their exploitative

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷⁵ *BN*, 15 January 1916.

⁷⁶ *MEN*, 3 February 1916.

⁷⁷ *MG*, 24 March 1916.

⁷⁸ *BE*, 7 May 1910.

employers.⁷⁹ The BWA sent a letter to the operatives in Harle Syke to ‘protest against the weavers of that district competing unfairly with the operatives of Burnley district’. This, several newspapers suggested, was of interest to ‘cotton workers, especially trade unionists’, but also reported on across other large industrial towns, from Sunderland to Bristol.⁸⁰ In November 1911, AWA President Joseph Cross made an impassioned speech accusing Harle Syke and other villages outside of the trade union of ‘unfair competition’.⁸¹ This was proven to be true during the lockout as the village capitalised on the county-wide stoppage by working at increased capacity. For many of the trade unionist operatives, who battled to remove nonunionists in their mills, only to be locked out of work, the reports of the village’s actions must have been antagonistic. For example, the *Manchester Courier* reported that the weekly loss of wages in the Burnley District in December 1911 had been calculated at £50,000, whilst at the same time Harle Syke, Cliviger and Worsthorne ran as normal.⁸² An incendiary letter in the local press from a Harle Syke resident reiterated the lack of solidarity from the village operatives by explaining that the village’s position outside of trade unionism meant that ‘while the weavers of Lancashire at present are playing in the streets and talking about unionists and nonunionists, the Harle Syke weavers are in full work’.⁸³

After the lockout, a more nuanced analysis of the village emerged. The focus on the greed and exploitation by the village’s employers began to include different aspects of the operatives’ actions. These were broadly divided into two classes. The first, the ‘fly in the ointment’, were the ‘knobstick’ non-union operatives that were shareholders in the mills.⁸⁴ They were portrayed as the main element that undermined trade unionism. On 13 August, the *CFT* explained how the ‘chief difficulty’ in introducing trade unionism was ‘the weavers themselves, or, at least that section of them who have not yet made up their minds’.⁸⁵ This group, with an ‘apathy and indifference towards trades union methods’,⁸⁶ ‘ran the show’, accepting lower wages for the promise of dividend pay-outs, and greater job security through familial and social networks.⁸⁷ The *MG* went as far as to suggest that the second group of operatives, those from Burnley, were ‘playing’ whereas the real ‘difference of opinion’ was within the village where ‘the shareholders are strong and numerous’.⁸⁸

The AWA officials were clearly influenced by the outbreak of war, and in the weeks leading up to the strike framed Harle Syke as an ‘enemy’, with wider allusion to warfare,

⁷⁹ *CFT*, 1 September 1914.

⁸⁰ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser* (hereafter *MC*), 12 August 1911.

⁸¹ LA/DDX1123/6/2/421a.

⁸² *MC*, 30 December 1911.

⁸³ *BE*, 30 December 1911.

⁸⁴ *CFT*, 27 August 1915.

⁸⁵ *CFT*, 13 August 1915.

⁸⁶ *BN*, 30 August 1913.

⁸⁷ Jackson has discussed the various debates around the continued existence of shareholder operatives. See K.C. Jackson, ‘The Room and Power System in the Cotton Weaving Industry of North-east Lancashire and West Craven’, *Textile History*, 35:1 (2004), 58–89.

⁸⁸ *MG*, 28 August 1915.

battles and morality. Representative James Hindle spoke proudly of the gallantry of 140 BWA members who had gone to war from Harle Syke, but declared that 'it was the duty of their relatives and others left behind to stand up for their industrial rights, exactly as these boys were standing up for the country's rights'.⁸⁹ The *BN* likened these tactics to 'trench warfare ... the policy of sitting tight and gradually strengthening their position or at least allowing no weakening'. Furthermore, the adoption of militaristic approaches such as the cutting-off of supply-lines was suggested, with hope that the village employers and operatives would 'be the first to feel the effects of the strike should a complete stoppage be brought about'.⁹⁰ Harle Syke was portrayed as akin to Germany, as something distinctly non-British. At the open-air meeting held at Burnley fairground on 19 August, J. Ogden of the AWA launched an emotional attack on the village, declaring that 'the weavers of Harle Syke were not doing justice to themselves nor the rest of the operatives in the county'. This was more clearly expressed by fellow representative Tom Shaw who declared:

Harle Syke is the only place that said we won't recognise your union. Either the Harle Syke employer was superhuman in his majesty or the weaver a little below human in his capacity. Either Harle Syke was right and the rest of the county wrong, or Harle Syke was wrong and the rest of the county right ... the weaver who really had British blood in his or her veins would refuse to accept German methods either from German soldiers or English employers ... the policy of terrorism would be no more successful than the policy of non-recognition of the union ... they expected every clean-thinking man and woman there to be like soldiers in the trenches, each supporting each other and no running away. The soldier at the front who ran away would be called a coward and shot ... weavers who didn't strike would be a knobstick for life.⁹¹

The AWA representatives used similar arguments at other mass-audience events and through the press. The agitation reached crescendo in August 1915, where the *Burnley Express* declared that 'battle lines were being drawn'.⁹² The BWA held what the press termed a 'plebiscite' of the Harle Syke operatives on the 13th. On the 19th the BWA concurrently distributed handbills seeking operatives willing to take action,⁹³ and held an open-air meeting in Burnley to discuss three main topics: progress over the war bonus; progress in Harle Syke, and crucially:

To ascertain whether the weavers in Harle Syke are disposed to allow themselves to be used as an instrument for defeating all the weavers in the county in their efforts

⁸⁹ *BN*, 7 August 1915.

⁹⁰ *BN*, 1 August 1915.

⁹¹ *BE*, 21 August 1915.

⁹² *BE*, 28 August 1915.

⁹³ *BE*, 14 August 1915.

to obtain a war bonus, which will in some measure reduce the burden of the high prices of commodities.⁹⁴

Th'Owd Syker again reflected of his experiences of the strike as a boy in his column in the *BE*. He recalled placards being held by picketers outside the mill which read 'What did you do in the Great War, Daddy?', and how the BWA later issued handbills asking 'What did you do in the Harle Syke strike, Daddy?' writing *KNOBSTICK* on and posting them through the letterboxes of known strikebreakers.⁹⁵

Throughout the duration of the strike, the war-like discourse continued in a similar fashion, but with greater emphasis on the exceptionalism of the villagers that kept working and their lack of class solidarity. Tom Shaw again 'appealed to their sense of honour', stating that 'they did owe something to the weavers in the rest of the county ... As a matter of fact they had been simply living as parasites on the work done and the money subscribed by other people'.⁹⁶

By the time that the BWA issued their manifesto in October 1915 that the history of their efforts to gather members in the village, the emphasis had clearly shifted. They remarked how:

Previous to the year 1911, when the Burnley Association numbered its membership by tens of thousands, the operatives at Harle Syke had been unresponsive to the appeals of trades unionism- particularly no doubt on account of the comparatively large number of shareholders- and when in 1911 the Burnley association increased its memberships in so dramatic a manner, the pulse of Harle Syke was not measurably stirred. Harle Syke was still a little world of its own, with a bad trades union tradition, and without a modern labour aspiration.⁹⁷

The presentation of Harle Sykers as being 'different' to the rest of the county was also reflected in other correspondence. The letters pages of the local newspapers became a forum for debate over their actions. A letter from 'A Burnley Female Trade Unionist', that sparked a multifaceted exchange, for example, gave telling insight into the experience of being an 'outsider' in the village. Targeting the prominent Harle Syke villagers she argued that 'It is said ... that they can do without other townspeople; but who has helped to build up Harle Syke in the last ten years? Why people from other towns, Burnley in particular'. Furthermore, she articulates the clear resistance to trade unionism amongst the natives, and desire for it from those outside the village:

⁹⁴ *BE*, 7 August 1915.

⁹⁵ *BE*, 1 August 1918.

⁹⁶ *BN*, 7 August 1915.

⁹⁷ *BE*, 13 October 1915.

Some have said if they had lived in Burnley they would be in the union as it was a case of necessity, but no use here. Such people overlook the fact that the same class of exploiters exist at Harle Syke as elsewhere ... They have made money their idol. We want something else besides. Natives of the district overlook this. They have neglected to inspire their offspring with a desire for knowledge for things higher, so that when a more intelligent race intermingles with them they are ignored. The old inhabitants who have lived their lives in a small place find themselves unprepared to receive the enlightenment of the more progressive.⁹⁸

Harle Syke's shareholding operatives therefore came to embody more than a simple difference in approach to business. They represented the negative aspects of industry, and of cotton operatives more generally. At a time of war, when communities pulled together, to outside observers the villagers sought to protect only themselves, through a backward way of life. Although the shift was subtle, the development of portraying Harle Syke's employers as the enemy to the villagers as whole was significant in framing the strike. Those outside of the village also failed to adequately understand the local circumstances and the desire to protect them.

The Harle Syke System: Peculiar Local Conditions?

After several months, when it became clear that Harle Syke could continue to work indefinitely, both the AWA and the press began to blame the resistance of the operatives to 'peculiar local conditions'.⁹⁹ It was certainly the case that other small weaving towns and villages operated with certain degrees of autonomy, but bar perhaps Barnoldswick, few had the economic success that Harle Syke did. It is clear that the system in place was perceived to be different, and that for some presented a viable alternative to the methods in other places. Moreover, a significant proportion of villagers wished to maintain it. The relationship could superficially be dismissed as a hangover of Victorian era deference; but the reality seems to be more complex, with blurred class distinctions, and local, religious and familial networks being strong.¹⁰⁰ One letter to the *Burnley Express* best summarised this when in reply to a previously published letter, they questioned 'a Burnley trade unionist' whether she knew that 'some of our manufacturers wear clogs on Sunday? Thus there cannot be much of Sunday saints and Monday devils.'¹⁰¹

One of the earliest attempts to publicly defend Harle Syke was a provocative letter to the *Burnley Express* dated 28 December 1911, amidst the weaving lockout. Written by 'Harle Syke', it was to spark great debate across several local newspapers. In it, the writer articulates the situation in the village and the reasons for its successes. They go so far as to suggest that the rest of Lancashire 'learn' from and follow Harle Syke's methods.

⁹⁸ *BE*, 25 September 1915.

⁹⁹ *CFT*, 22 October 1915.

¹⁰⁰ See D. Read, "Deference" in the Nineteenth-Century North', *Northern History*, 17:1 (1981), 279–83.

¹⁰¹ *BE*, 26 September 1915.

This meant that, ultimately, the trade unions disband to allow weavers to 'belong to the mills'. Rather than relying on the 'trade union or government', the people of the village 'saved the money to build their sheds'.¹⁰² The notion of both belonging to the mills and of saving and investing money reiterated the significance of the shareholding, but moreover explained the passivity of the operatives. This was often repeated in discussions over the Harle Syke system. For example, a letter *Burnley Express* in 1912, argued that:

With all their faults they work on a better system. They are managing their sheds better. All the weavers may not be shareholders, but the pioneers are and they control the show; that is why there is no strike or lockout.¹⁰³

One of these village pioneers was Fred Leaver, a deacon, schoolteacher, JP, and Chairman of Burnley Rural District Council. He became a frequent contributor to the correspondence pages, arguing the village's perspective. His societal standing coupled with an active role in local Liberal politics was reflected in his arguments, showing belief in local independence and village individualism. He wrote several letters that hint at the unique approach to business, but also reflect the sense of persecution amongst the locals, arguing that 'they ought to bring some new argument as the old one is getting rather stale'. He further described how:

One begins to think that all the virtues of heaven are on the side of the weavers union and the vices of hell at Harle Syke. The leaders of organised labour at Burnley ... openly boast that that their case is the only one worth considering ... the so-called leaders have not learnt an atom of true political economy. If they want to hear the other side of the argument, let them take a room in the village.¹⁰⁴

The sense of persecution was reflected in the response of the villagers to the strike. The *BN* Briercliffe correspondent reported that 'so far there seems to be little feeling about the matter, the general opinion being that it is the "outsiders" who are causing it and not the villagers themselves'.¹⁰⁵ A further interview by the *CFT* with one of the 'knobstick' workers questioned the 'secrets' of the village, and the respondent, a 'God-fearing, straight-living working man' explained that:

We are ... doing very well; our wages are good, better than those in some districts where full list prices are being paid. We have no stream, we are not driven, the village is most prosperous, and we have no need for a union, no need for a list, and we are afraid that if the list is paid our prosperity will be a thing of the past.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² *BE*, 30 December 1911.

¹⁰³ *BE*, 4 January 1912.

¹⁰⁴ *BE*, 18 August 1915.

¹⁰⁵ *BN*, 25 August 1915.

¹⁰⁶ *CFT*, 26 November 1915.

The issue of wages was clearly contentious. Even the AWA struggled to conclusively deduce the exact level of deductions that the village had operated under, but regardless, the working conditions in the village were felt to be superior to other places and negated the issue. For example, the combination of natural humidity and better-quality materials reduced the need for steaming – artificially creating humidity – that was practiced in Burnley.¹⁰⁷ John Hebron, a regular contributor to the letters pages around the time of the strike reiterated the difference in conditions:

The average wage per loom at Harle Syke is 6/6, perhaps a trifle over; we have no steam in the mills, and no driving; men were earning 38 shillings to £2.00 per week off 6 looms, without a tenter; previous to the strike, 'children' at 14 and 15 years of age were put on four looms; old men were also respected, and many of them had six looms without even a tenter; when a worker came late no one was put in his place; during working hours weavers went out for a smoke five, and even ten minutes every morning and afternoon.¹⁰⁸

Although wages were officially lower than in those places paying the Standard List, those operatives that were shareholders had their wages topped-up by the dividend. How this worked in the case of Queen Street Mill and likely with the other joint-stock mills was explained by Th' Owd Syker:

Financially the shares were very profitable to the shareholder ... Accounts were audited every six months, and balance sheets with directors recommendations as to dividends were sent to shareholders. The shareholders meetings were held at Haggate School. Only shareholders outside the village received their balance sheets by post, those in the village were delivered by Ezra Berry or myself.¹⁰⁹

The combination of these two things seems to have reflected in the attitudes to the strike from within the village. The *Burnley News* canvassed the village and found that:

It would appear that a considerable proportion of the workpeople are not supporting the strike and it is argued by these that working conditions where list prices are being paid do not come up to the standard of those which obtain at Harle Syke. Moreover, many of the weavers have an interest of their own in the manufacturing concerns, being shareholders themselves and in a sense they are their own masters; they can make their own conditions, and enjoy privileges which operatives elsewhere cannot. It is also stated that the class of work in the mills of Harle Syke tends to

¹⁰⁷ *BN*, 18 August 1915.

¹⁰⁸ Steaming refers to the creation of artificial humidity, whereas driving involves the practice of forcing more work out of a weaver. *BE*, 13 October 1915.

¹⁰⁹ *BE*, 19 April 1983.

be weavers turning out more cloth and earning more in a week than is possible in Burnley, where, in many mills, artificial means have been resorted to in order to make weaving a success.¹¹⁰

For those non-shareholders, the promise of stable work, generally free from strike action and significant trade fluctuations offered an extra sense of security. Th' Owd Syker hints at this in his recollections:

There was no weaving to stock or speculating at Queen Street. Immediately an order was taken the yarn and weft was bought at the price quoted when the price was calculated. Many times I heard it said – there was no profit at that price ... but it kept the looms running!¹¹¹

As seen in the above excerpts, Harle Syke operatives were regarded as having certain 'privileges' that those in other places did not have, although these were vaguely defined. A portion of the operatives certainly had greater input into the running of the mills than was to be expected. At first this appears to have been the shareholding operatives, but the non-shareholding, non-union operatives seem to have also been included in decision making. Several mills had 'committees' who liaised with their employers, which enabled the village maintain production at around 50 per cent for the majority of the dispute.¹¹² To do this, shift patterns were devised, with salesmen and company directors along with their wives taking looms, older children working around school, and elderly people up to the age of seventy working some hours. The suspicion of illegal child labour is discussed in the AWA's letters.¹¹³ Despite this rumour spreading, a newspaper reporter present in the village confirmed it as false.¹¹⁴ Ancillary positions such cut lookers ran looms with their excess time. The level of work was also increased, and adapted, with reports of younger women running six looms, and men and women- increasingly the latter due to the war efforts – up to eleven looms. The remaining operatives were also shared across the mills in the village, to give a fairer distribution of the workload.¹¹⁵

How much the facilitation of these changes reflected the reality of class relationships under normal conditions is unclear, but the level of input that the operatives had in the mills was further evidenced through the 'strike within a strike' incident. Rumours had spread across the village that the local employers had reached an agreement with the AWA, and settled on 4 per cent under the list price, and full recognition of the union. Incensed, on 5 November 1915, the strikebreaking operatives in Harle Syke walked out of

¹¹⁰ *BN*, 21 August 1915.

¹¹¹ *BE*, 19 April 1983.

¹¹² *BE*, 18 September 1915.

¹¹³ LA/DDX 1274/10/4.

¹¹⁴ *BN*, 29 September 1915.

¹¹⁵ *BN*, 27 November 1915.

their mills to hold a parallel strike to the trade union members who had been picketing the village for four months. The situation was described as ‘unique in the history of textile disputes’,¹¹⁶ by the *BN*, whilst most of the regional press declared the incident as ‘Gilbertian in its ludicrousness’, as to the outside world, the ‘knobstick’ operatives now launched their own strike against the promise of wage increases.¹¹⁷ In reality, the issue was twofold. Firstly, the operatives resented the lack of consultation, and secondly, they feared being ‘thrown over’ to the union.¹¹⁸ The Harle Syke employers had offered to operate at 4 per cent under the list prices, instead of the AWA’s demands of 2.5 per cent. The non-union operatives agreed to the 4 per cent in principle, but in a meeting with their employers urged them to ‘stand firm against any recognition of the weavers’ union’. They also requested that they be consulted on terms before any agreement was reached.¹¹⁹ They ultimately convinced the employers to break off negotiations for a time. The *CFT* declared that ‘Such a decision by knobsticks would generally be ignored, but at Harle Syke things are rather different, as the knobsticks there are mostly, as one of them said, workers and money finders. They were shareholders, and they just demonstrated to show their determination to be considered in any settlement.’¹²⁰

The Harle Syke system, then, was clearly perceived to be different, both within and outside of the village. That the villagers were so determined to maintain it, and that it was such a source of perturbation for the AWA is significant in understanding the strike, but also the wider concepts of how communities made sense of the relationship between work and capital.

Conclusion

The Harle Syke strike as an individual incident highlighted many of the tensions amongst Lancastrian industrial communities around the outbreak of the Great War. Locally, it combined issues that had developed over at least a decade, as trade unionism and class-based solidarity contested with notions of autonomy and localism. With the outbreak of the war, greater emphasis was placed on solidarity and wider concepts of community, but as shown here, how applicable this was amongst smaller settlements requires much more analysis. In at least in some of the smaller weaving districts, community control of the local economy trumped the benefits of wider-regional organisation. The desire of some villagers to resist becoming trade union members is something seen in various ‘country’ settings, but in Harle Syke’s case the determination to protect their way of life is especially relevant in the context of the changes that were to come post-1918. The move towards greater standardisation and centralisation of the state in Britain was

¹¹⁶ *BN*, 10 November 1915.

¹¹⁷ Although later appearing across the regional press as quoted, the strike was called both a ‘Gilbertian situation’ and ‘Gilbertian, almost, in its ludicrousness’ by the *CFT*, 12 November 1915.

¹¹⁸ *CFT*, 12 November 1915.

¹¹⁹ *MG*, 9 November 1915.

¹²⁰ *CFT*, 12 November 1915.

to have great impact on class, politics, gender etc. yet the process was clearly underway earlier within the cotton industry. Yet, the strike shows that, at least in some cases, localism, and the protection of the direct, local community was a significantly important principle in some places.

Despite the trade unions officially presenting the settlement of the strike as a victory, it was effectively a costly stalemate that further undermined their collective strength.¹²¹ The AWA gained recognition in the village for the first time and managed to raise the rates to within 4 per cent of the official list, but they now accepted the principles of 'local disadvantages'. Moreover, despite the disparity in resources between both sides, their lack of a clear victory was an embarrassment. The resistance of a significant proportion of the villagers to trade unionism is an important facet in understanding the intersections of community, trade unionism, class and identity during the Edwardian to Interwar period. It would take two industrial court cases, in 1920 and 1936, to try to settle the issue, but the position of country districts was never really resolved, and Harle Syke continued to be seen as an 'anomaly',¹²² but how true this is amongst weaving settlements and more widely across Britain is an issue with much work still to be done.

¹²¹ LA/DDX 1274/2/1.

¹²² *CFT*, 7 May 1920.