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**Re-examining the Battle of Saltley Gate: inter-  
pretations of leadership, violence and legacy**

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**Re-examining the Battle of  
Saltley Gate: interpretations  
of leadership, violence and  
legacy.**

**Candidate Number: 18836**

**Undergraduate Dissertation, Bristol University 2010.**

### **List of Abbreviations ~**

AUEW	Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union
EEPTU	Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union
NUGMW	National Union of General and Municipal Workers
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NUVB	National Union of Vehicle Builders
SDP	Social Democratic Party
SWP	Socialist Workers Party
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union

## Introduction.

The 1972 miners' strike was the first official national miners' strike since their defeat in 1926. The strike, which ran for several weeks from the 9<sup>th</sup> January, secured significant advances in wages for the miners, breaking the Heath government's informal wage restraint that was central to its economic policy.<sup>1</sup> The most enduring image of the strike is the closing of the gates at Saltley Coke depot in Nechells Place, Birmingham on the 10<sup>th</sup> February, 1972.<sup>2</sup> It is ironic therefore that Saltley only became significant during the 1972 miners' strike because the West Midlands Gas Board took a more legalistic and restrictive view of industrial disputes that was not yet widely shared in Britain. Saltley, like other coke depots, had been given 'guidelines' agreed between the government and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM); it should continue to supply only 'priority customers' such as hospitals and the vulnerable. However, unlike other coke depots, it belonged to a gas company; the West Midlands Gas Board who argued the guidelines did not apply at Saltley as the gas industry was not on strike. Thus, Saltley coke depot became an issue in the strike.<sup>3</sup> By the beginning of February Saltley was receiving and filling several hundred trucks from all over the country. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> February, the *Birmingham Evening Mail* reported there was a mile-long traffic jam as 'lorries from all over the country waited at Saltley'.<sup>4</sup> The Midlands NUM had known about activity at the depot for a fortnight, but it was a small, politically cautious part of the union and it had not the manpower or the will to block the site. After negotiations with the Gas Board had failed, picketing at the depot began on the Friday 4 February 1972. However, in the following two days the 50 pickets had little success in stemming the flow of lorries entering the depot.<sup>5</sup> Eventually the right-wing Midlands area NUM secretary, Jack Lally, appealed to NUM headquarters for extra pickets. By Sunday morning, 6<sup>th</sup> February,

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<sup>1</sup> J. Phillips, "1972 Miner's Strike: Popular Agency and Industrial politics in Britain" in *Contemporary British History* (2006) 20 (2) p. 188.

<sup>2</sup> Millennibrum, Birmingham Oral History Archive, MS 2255/2/108, Bill Shreeve, Gas Engineer, Saltley Gas Works; Charles Parker Archive, MS 1611/B/9/2, Don Perrygrove, AUEW shop steward, Birmingham.

Many commentators have discussed the mythology surrounding the 'The Battle of Saltley Gate' yet its most obvious myth – its name – has often been overlooked. The confrontation actually took place at the gate for Nechells Gas works. The Saltley Gas works and its 'gates' were on the other side of the Saltley Viaduct adjacent to the Nechells works. As local trade unionist Bill Shreeve declared, 'the press, and the media kept insisting on calling it Saltley Gate and that's gone down in the history books'. Don Perrygrove, explained, 'next to Saltley gas works there's also a locality where there used to be a tollgate, and that is called 'Saltley Gate' and when people were trying to close the gas works which was in the district of Saltley, they assumed that it was one of the same. This shows the potential for historical inaccuracy and the endurance of misinterpretations.

<sup>3</sup> A. Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (London, 2009), p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> R. Darlington & D. Lyddon, *Glorious Summer: Class struggle in Britain, 1972* (London, 2001), p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 67.

around 2000 miners had arrived from Yorkshire, South Wales and the Midlands.<sup>6</sup> Mass picketing at the depot started on Monday, 7<sup>th</sup> February, the following three days the pickets decreased the number of lorries entering the depot to just under 50. Yet, with the presence of 400 police officers the gates remained open. On Thursday, 10<sup>th</sup> February however, due to the force of 15,000 pickets the police had no option but to close the gates under such pressure. On this day, many of the workers of Birmingham emphatically answered the miners' call to help them achieve their goal of closing Saltley coke depot.<sup>7</sup>

This dissertation will investigate what actually took place at Saltley and whether the lessons from Saltley were the correct ones. One may assume that as the stand-out confrontation of the 1972 miners' strike there would be a clear accurate account of what happened at Saltley. However, there are issues about two aspects of events surrounding Saltley. Firstly, who should be given responsibility for the victory of Saltley? Secondly, what was the degree of violence used to secure the victory? This leads the legacy to examine the interpretation of the event since 1972.

In existing literature on both the 1972 strike and industrial politics more generally, there is a tension between 'top down' accounts that privilege 'high politics' with developments engineered by government ministers and officials, 'peak level' business representatives and trade union executives, and work that focuses on agency 'from below' with 'rank and file' pressure the predominant historical contingency.<sup>8</sup> Commentators of the 1972 strike which undertake a 'high politics' approach argue that 'top down' militancy was enforced unwittingly or even unwillingly on the rank and file by left wing leaders on the NUM executive.<sup>9</sup> In the 1972 strike special prominence has been given to the influence in 1972 of Laurence Daly, leftist Labourite and NUM General Secretary, and Mick McGahey, Communist and President of Scottish NUM.<sup>10</sup> In regards to Saltley this high politics perspective applies of course to Arthur Scargill. Yet, it must be remembered Scargill only

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<sup>6</sup> Darlington & Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> D. Lyddon, "'Glorious Summer'", 1972: the High Tide of Rank and File Militancy' in A. Campbell, N. Fishman, J. McIlroy, *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Volume 2 The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (Aldershot, 1999), p. 331.

<sup>8</sup> Phillips, '1972 Miner's Strike' in *Contemporary British History*, p. 189.

<sup>9</sup> W. Ashworth, *The History of the British Coal Industry, Vol.5, 1946-1982: The Nationalized Industry*, (Oxford, 1986), p. 289-315; J. Campbell, *Edward Heath: A Biography*, (London, 1993), p. 406-22; E. Heath, *The Course of My Life: My Autobiography*, (London, 1998), p. 325-53; K. Jefferys, *Finest and Darkest Hours, The Decisive Events in British Politics from Churchill to Blair*, (London, 2003), p.162-85; K. O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History, 1945-1990*, (Oxford, 1992), p. 326; M. Thatcher, *The Path to Power*, (London, 1995), p. 201-22.

<sup>10</sup> Phillips, '1972 Miner's Strike' in *Contemporary British History*, p. 189.

came to national attention at Saltley, at the time he was only a branch delegate to the Barnsley Area.<sup>11</sup> In 1993, Thatcher personalises the events at Saltley to Scargill the ‘mass pickets led by Arthur Scargill’.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Kenneth Morgan refers to the pickets as ‘Arthur Scargill’s massed legions’ and ‘Arthur Scargill’s “flying pickets”’.<sup>13</sup>

In turn the role of the rank and file at Saltley has been ignored and undervalued by some historians and commentators. For example, Morgan, Keith Middlemas and Phil Scranton all fail to even mention the presence of non-miners on the picket lines in their accounts of Saltley.<sup>14</sup> This dissertation will show that this is a startling omission. Other historians have taken the role of the rank and file into account during the 1972 strike in general and specifically at Saltley. Ralph Darlington and Dave Lyddon outline the ‘spirit of aggression and zeal’ displayed by the rank and file as a key reason for the success of Saltley and the strike in general, and Jim Phillips argues that the strike was shaped more by the ‘attitudes of union members than the inclinations of union leaders’.<sup>15</sup>

Chapter one of this dissertation will show that ‘top down’ approaches have often led to an exaggeration of the role of Scargill at Saltley, most probably due to his pivotal role as NUM President in the 1984-5 miners’ strike. Although, firstly, this chapter will show that Scargill certainly had a significant role at Saltley. This chapter will then demonstrate the importance of other union and Labour movement leaders, middle ranking officials – the shop stewards, and lastly the crucial role of the rank and file – the Birmingham workers at Saltley. Lastly this chapter will show that working class solidarity was crucial in achieving the victory of Saltley.

Certainly, commentators from the far left have not underplayed the role of the rank and file. To them Saltley was the perfect example of the potential strength of trade unionism and

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<sup>11</sup> R. Clutterbuck, *Britain in agony: the growth of political violence* (London, 1978), p. 61; Watters, “*Being Frank*”, p. 2.

<[http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11](http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11)> 10 October 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street years*, (London, 1993), p. 340.

<sup>13</sup> Morgan, *People's Peace*, p. 326.

<sup>14</sup> K. Middlemas, *Power, Competition and the State, Vol. 2: Threats to post-war settlement Britain, 1961-74*, (Basingstoke, 1990), p. 366; Morgan, *People's Peace*, p. 326; p. 366; P. Scranton ‘From Saltley Gates to Orgreave’ in B. Fine & R. Miller (eds.), *Policing the miners’ strike*, (1985), p. 150.

<sup>15</sup> Darlington & Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, p. 72; Phillips, ‘1972 Miner’s Strike’ in *Contemporary British History*, p. 190.

working class solidarity.<sup>16</sup> One of the most vociferous promoters of this perspective was Scargill himself, for him Saltley ‘was living proof that the working class had only to flex its muscles and it could bring governments, employers, society to a total standstill’.<sup>17</sup> Was Scargill correct in his assessment that Saltley represented working class solidarity or is this romanticising the facts?

This study will then investigate the extent of violence that occurred at Saltley as there are major disagreements in the literature. Some commentators such as Margaret Thatcher have argued: ‘there is no distinguishing that this was a victory for violence’.<sup>18</sup> William Ashworth concluded that all ‘mass actions during the strike’, such as at Saltley involved ‘breaches of law and bore little resemblance to peaceful picketing’.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, the far left have been critical of the policing at Saltley. In 1975, Scargill declared that some the police’s treatment of the pickets were ‘absolutely appalling’; accusing officers of ‘punching with their heels into the crowd’ and ‘hitting with their elbows’.<sup>20</sup> In 1992, former Labour and SDP MP, John Grant, stated that the ‘large-scale picketing and violence’ at Saltley had been ‘a new british phenomenon in British industrial relations’.<sup>21</sup> However, other commentators such as Roger Geary argue that there was in fact little violence during the dispute rather that it only consisted of a large number of strikers pushing and shoving against smaller numbers of police.<sup>22</sup> Whilst, Richard Clutterbuck puts forward the case both sides were ‘reasonable’ in their actions and that there was little depth of hatred between the pickets and most of the police.<sup>23</sup>

Chapter two will analyse the extent to which Saltley was a victory for violence, it will declare that actually very little ‘real’ violence occurred at Saltley, the relationship between the pickets and police will be shown as generally healthy. Additionally any instances of violence were most likely from a militant minority – from both the pickets *and* the police – or unavoidable given the context of the situation.

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<sup>16</sup> Darlington & Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, p. 56-62.

<sup>17</sup> A. Scargill, ‘New Unionism’ interview by Robin Blackburn in *New Left Review*, 92 (July-August, 1975), p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Thatcher, *Downing Street years*, p. 340.

<sup>19</sup> Ashworth, *History of the British Coal Industry*, p. 340.

<sup>20</sup> Scargill, ‘New Unionism’ in *New Left Review*, p. 15-6.

<sup>21</sup> J. Grant, *Blood Brothers: The Division and Decline of Britain's Trade Unions*, (London, 1992), p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> R. Geary, *Policing industrial disputes: 1893 to 1985* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 77-8.

<sup>23</sup> Clutterbuck, *Britain in agony*, p. 67.



The events of the 'Battle of Saltley Gates' has had a considerable legacy. The short term consequence of the closure of the gates was that it became the symbolic moment the NUM defeated the Heath government during the strike; Jim Prior, then leader of the House of Commons marked it as the 'turning point in the strike'.<sup>24</sup> But this study will examine whether this is actually true.

For Thatcher and others on the political right, the events at Saltley represented everything that was wrong with the influence and 'militancy' of trade unions in Britain at the time. Thatcher was in the Heath Cabinet, as Education Secretary, that digested Home Secretary Reginald Maudling's humiliating news that the gates at Saltley had been closed. Thatcher admitted:

For me what happened at Saltley took no less significance than it did to the Left. I understood as they did that the struggle to bring trade unions properly within the law would be decided not in the debating chamber...but in and around the pits and factories where intimidation had been allowed to prevail.<sup>25</sup>

This dissertation will analyse how Thatcherite Conservatives have often used their interpretation of Saltley – one of violent picketing by miners – to justify their anti-trade union legislation and future policing of industrial disputes, especially during the 1984-5 miners' strike.

However, for those on far left, such as Scargill, Saltley became an example of the power of working class solidarity. The phrase 'Do a Saltley' was used by miners and trade unionist during later industrial disputes, especially at the 'Battle of Orgreave' in 1984.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the legacy of Saltley still resonates with some of the far left even today.<sup>27</sup>

Chapter three of this dissertation will examine how the legacy of Saltley has since been interpreted. Firstly, it will state that Saltley was mainly symbolically rather than practically important in ending the strike. Moreover, this chapter will show that the far left correctly realized the importance of working class solidarity at Saltley which has provided inspiration to their cause in future industrial disputes. Lastly, this chapter will argue that the political

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<sup>24</sup> J. Prior, *A Balance of Power* (London, 1986), p. 73.

<sup>25</sup> Thatcher, *Path to Power*, (London, 1995), p. 218.

<sup>26</sup> Scranton, 'From Saltley Gates to Orgreave' in Fine & Millar, (eds.), *Policing the miners' strike*, p.54.

<sup>27</sup> S. Ruddick 'A history of repression and strike breaking' *Socialist worker*, 28 April 2009. <<http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=17751>> 10 March 2010.

right have since Saltley wrongly exaggerated the extent of violence and underplayed the significance of solidarity action by the Birmingham workers at Saltley often to justify their actions in future industrial disputes and attitude to industrial relations in general. However, this dissertation will conclude that after Saltley both left and right were taught the wrong lessons which were to have negative impacts for both in the future.

Any examination of these three related aspects of the events at Saltley partly depends upon sources from deeply committed observers which renders the analysis fraught with difficulty. Unusually, there is a rich source of oral testimonies ‘from below’ which have most often not been heard in relation to Saltley. These testimonies are the result of interviews conducted by the Birmingham based Banner Theatre of Actuality. Banner conducted audio interviews of many of the participants of Saltley – miners from different collieries, Birmingham workers from different factories, housewives and union organisers. Moreover, those already present in historical literature – the leading trade union figures at Saltley – were also interviewed by Banner.<sup>28</sup> Banner carried out the interviews to create the stage production ‘*Saltley Gate*’ which was first performed in 1976.<sup>29</sup> However, Banner produced ‘*Saltley Gate*’ as a celebration of working class solidarity.<sup>30</sup> This leads to two problems. Firstly, there could be an obvious bias to interview people who held strong views of working class solidarity. Secondly, with the question of violence there may be a bias to present the pickets in a positive light to avoid contradicting their previous celebration of the actions of such pickets. Nevertheless, as this dissertation will demonstrate, Banners’ interviews still show that a significant number of participants at Saltley did hold such opinions of working class solidarity and police violence. Moreover, other oral testimonies<sup>31</sup> and other sources such as newspaper and television reports, at the time will be analysed in relation to these interviews.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Parker Archive, MS 1611/B/9/1,

These interviews are located in the Charles Parker Archive at Birmingham Central Library. Charles Parker was senior features producer at the BBC, from 1954-1972, famed for creating radio ballads and a series of musical documentaries, each featuring a different section of working people. Parker was one of the co-founders of the Banner Theatre of Actuality.

<sup>29</sup> MS 1611/B/9/1, ‘*Saltley Gate*’ was scripted by Dave Rogers, Chris Rogers, Rhona Bowdler and Charles Parker. In 1977 it was performed in support of the Grunwick strikers in a campaign call for mass support from Labour movement. In the early 1990s it was performed by Dave Rogers and Dave Dale as a concert version in response to requests from NUM activists to help with the campaign against pit closures; Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 67. Last known performance of show was in 2004, Sheffield, for a day of commemorative events for miners.

<sup>30</sup> MS 2255/2/116, Dave Rodgers – co-founder of Banner Theatre of Actuality.

Banner’s philosophy was to produce theatre productions using the actual testimonies of those involved in events such as Saltley as a declaration of these opinions.

<sup>31</sup> Author interviews - David Riding, Engineer, Rover worker, Solihull, 1 March 2010; John Bradley, Prestcold worker, Birmingham EEPTU member, 5 March 2010; Helen Lloyd’s Oral History archive

Another possible issue with the Banner interviews are that they would have been subjectively edited by the Banner interviewers. Dave Rodgers a co-founder of Banner Theatre readily admitted in creating the actual show of 'Saltley Gate' himself and his colleagues would, 'listen to tapes – make notes, fine detail observation about what was good and what was coloured and what wasn't.' Fortunately, however the original interviews in full, prior to the editing are still in the collection.<sup>33</sup> Editing and misrepresentation can also of course be an issue with the media, in particular this dissertation will examine that this has often been the case with the legacy of Saltley in the media.

The Banner interviews were conducted from 1973-4 which could be beneficial as the memories were relatively fresh in the mind.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, hindsight could still distort these oral testimonies, for example, in assessing the violence present at Saltley; interviewees are unlikely to be willing to admit to taking part in violence or perhaps even accuse their colleagues of violence. Additionally, there is possibly the potential for the memories of ordinary workers to overplay the importance of working class solidarity as a motivation over more mundane reasons such as following instructions from union leaders.<sup>35</sup> Although, the testimonies could have been influenced by the 1973-4 miners' strike, this dissertation will be able to deliver an account of those that took part in Saltley without influence from the future decline of trade unionism, the NUM and the bitterness caused by the 1984-5 miners' strike and Thatcherism.

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<[www.oralhistoryconsultancy.co.uk](http://www.oralhistoryconsultancy.co.uk)> 21 March 2010; R. K, Kirby, 'Phenomenology and the problems of oral history', *The Oral History Review*, 35, 1 (2008), p. 24; A, Thomson, 'Making the most of memories: the empirical and subjective value of oral history', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 9 (1999), p. 292-3. It would have been beneficial to have been able to conducted more interviews first hand as the interview process of oral testimonies often provides additional information to the feelings and opinions of the interviewee. The tone, body language, pauses and possible tensions of a testimony can provide historians with more information to the attitude and experience of the interviewee.

<sup>32</sup> House of Commons Debates <<http://handsard.millbanksystem.com>> 4 December 2009; *The Times* Digital Archive <[http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/111/1/1/purl=rc6\\_TTDA?sw\\_aep=univbri](http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/111/1/1/purl=rc6_TTDA?sw_aep=univbri)> 15 February 2010; News film online <<http://service.nfo.ac.uk/WebZ/html/sea.html?sessionid=01-38570-918164869>> 25 November 2009.

<sup>33</sup> MS 2255/2/116, Dave Rodgers – co-founder of Banner Theatre of Actuality.

<sup>34</sup> MS 1611/B/9/1, Specific dates for every interview are now not accessible in the collection.

<sup>35</sup> Kirby, 'Phenomenology and the problems of oral history', *Oral History Review*, p. 24-5.

## Chapter 1: Scargill's flying pickets?

As shown in the introduction even historians such as Morgan have personalised the events of Saltley to Scargill.<sup>36</sup> Saltley certainly brought Scargill to national attention. Yet, the significant role Scargill played leading the 1984-5 miners' strike has perhaps meant an over-exaggeration of his role at Saltley at the expense of other high-level leaders of the picket, the middle-level shop stewards and undoubtedly the role and attitude of the mass pickets who on the day of closure numbered an estimated peak of 15,000.

Scargill unquestionably had a leading role at Saltley. Firstly he displayed his energy, commitment and organisation abilities. Other strike committees who received the call to get pickets down to Birmingham hesitated unsure how to mount a mass picket in an inner-city suburb far from most mining areas.<sup>37</sup> Scargill however, leapt into action. Upon receiving the call at 4pm on Saturday night, Scargill had 200 pickets on their way to Saltley in coaches, within 3 hours and another 200 were following.<sup>38</sup>

The national media have also encouraged the centrality and importance of Scargill's role at Saltley thus underplaying the importance of the pickets themselves. In July 1987, *The Times* stated that the pickets at Saltley were Scargill's to control:

The defeat of the miners' strike during the last parliament ended a series of victories which began when the pickets of the then unknown Mr Arthur Scargill closed the Saltley Coke Depot and thus ensured the success of the strike of 1972.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, *The Guardian*, in July 1993 stated that Scargill had 'masterminded the closure of Saltley coke depot in Birmingham through mass picketing'.<sup>40</sup> The *London Evening Standard* in October 1987 also credited Scargill personally with producing the victory:

Arthur Scargill...delivered a psychological blow from which the Heath government never recovered, closing a big coal depot in a symbolic show of union muscle.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Thatcher, *Downing Street years*, p. 340; Morgan, *People's Peace*, p. 326.

<sup>37</sup> Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 72.

<sup>38</sup> Clutterbuck, *Britain in Agony*, p. 65.

<sup>39</sup> 'Emotions at Pithead' *The Times*, 21 July 1987.

<<http://www.lexisnexis.com/uk/legal/results/docview>> 3 December 2009.

<sup>40</sup> 'MI5 Link Follows Surveillance Saga' *The Guardian*, 22 July 1993, p. 2.  
<<http://www.lexisnexis.com/uk/legal/results/docview>> 3 December 2009.

<sup>41</sup> J. Williams, 'Last tango in Westminster could have fox on the run' *Evening Standard*, 21 October 1987, p. 4.  
<<http://www.lexisnexis.com/uk/legal/results/docview>> 3 December 2009.

It is interesting to note that in recent interviews of those present at Saltley there are examples of how either the Scargill interpretation or his subsequent notoriety may have retrospectively influenced their view of his role at Saltley. For example, in 2004 Beckett interviewed Richard Webb, a police constable at the confrontations. He stated he believed his fellow officers had been agitated into taking a more aggressive attitude towards their policing because of Scargill, 'I think what got us was Arthur Scargill on top of the toilets egging them on'.<sup>42</sup> Throughout the mass picketing of Saltley, Scargill did encourage the pickets with a loudspeaker on top of the public toilets outside the depot and was probably trying to rile the police with shouts of 'we've got them on the run, lads, they can only last half an hour'.<sup>43</sup> However, did Webb remember this as the cause of police aggression because it was Scargill and the national divisive figure he later became or did he think his colleagues were really riled into action by the goading of a man on top of the urinals?

Scargill's contribution must be first weighed against other high level leaders who made vital contributions. Thus Dai Francis, the President of the South Wales NUM mobilised many miners from South Wales to Saltley and mining leaders in the Midlands also sent pickets. Yet, often in the accounts of Saltley only Scargill and his speedy action is mentioned.<sup>44</sup> Jock Kane, the Communist financial secretary in the Yorkshire NUM allowed sufficient funds to be given to the mass picket at Saltley. Frank Watters argues it was that because Kane was paymaster that the Yorkshire pickets were able to go in the first place.<sup>45</sup>

Watters himself (the General Secretary of the Birmingham Communist Party) had a significant role in the victory of Saltley Gate. The party only had about 800 members but they had a vital network of industrial contacts in Birmingham, including leading shop stewards and conveners in factories across the city. As Mick Rice an Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AUEW) district committee member, explained:

I don't remember the CP [Communist Party] putting out any leaflets...but...[b]ecause the CP put the main players together they were important.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 76.

<sup>43</sup> Clutterbuck, *Britain in Agony*, p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 72; Clutterbuck, *Britain in Agony*, p. 67.

<sup>45</sup> Watters, "Being Frank", p. 1-2.

[http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11](http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11) > 10 October 2009. Watters states that right winger, Sid Schofield, National Vice-President NUM, was against unlimited pickets at Saltley and thus refused to 'countersign the cheque needed to pay miners to get down to Birmingham' but Kane said that he would 'sign the cheque in spite of Schofield.'

<sup>46</sup> Darlington & Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, p. 59-60.

Lyddon and Darlington argue that Watters used his contacts to ensure the NUM obtained the support from the district committees of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and the National Union of Vehicle Builders (NUVB).<sup>47</sup> An example of these contacts can be seen in the account of Bill Shreeve, a gas engineer at the Saltley works; Shreeve knew exactly how much coke there was at the Saltley depot and how long, at the rate of transportation, it would take for all the coke to be used up: ‘I relayed this information to certain quarters...first to the strike committee...and then to Frank Watters.’<sup>48</sup>

On the first day of picketing, 596 lorries defied the 200 pickets and entered the depot. The following week with the number of pickets now increased to around 2000 the number of lorries entering the depot significantly reduced, only 47 out of 91 lorries being loaded on the Monday and 39 out of 50 loaded on the Tuesday.<sup>49</sup> Despite this huge success, miners around the country were involved in their own ‘Saltley Gates’ and it was unlikely in the near future that the 2000 miners on the picket from the Monday would be joined by any more significant reinforcements from NUM members; it was both Scargill and Watters who realised to completely close the coke depot they would need the additional support.<sup>50</sup> They called a meeting on Tuesday of the East District, AUEW shop stewards asking for a one day strike and mass pickets.<sup>51</sup> This was vital to secure the support of the local Birmingham workers which ultimately enforced the closure of the coke depot.

Scargill used his oratorical powers to gain backing from the shop stewards – making an impassioned speech at the meeting:

We don’t want your pound notes. Will you go down in history as the working class of Birmingham who stood by while the miners were battered, or will you become immortal? I do not ask you – I demand you come out on strike.<sup>52</sup>

Scargill’s speech appears to have had the desired influence on many. When interviewed by Banner, Ernest Smith a shop steward at Cartwright recalled:

Arthur Scargill put up a wonderful case for the miners on the day and undoubtedly, he swung the day for the miners. It was after the meeting that Arthur [Harper] and the secretary [of the Birmingham West District AUEW]

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<sup>47</sup> Darlington & Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, p. 59. NUVB merged with the TGWU later in 1972

<sup>48</sup> MS 2255/2/108, Bill Shreeve, Gas Engineer, Saltley Gas Works.

<sup>49</sup> Clutterbuck, *Britain in Agony*, p. 66-8.

<sup>50</sup> Darlington & Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, p. 58.

<sup>51</sup> Watters, “*Being Frank*”, p. 6.

<[http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11](http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11)> 10  
October 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Clutterbuck, *Britain in Agony*, p. 68.

Norman came down and said “right, we’ve got the message what can we do about it?”<sup>53</sup>

President of the Birmingham East District AEUW, Arthur Harper’s, account corroborates Smith’s opinion:

Scargill came to district committee and give us permission, the go – ahead...he wanted support, it was no good having a pound note, conscience money wasn’t enough, so we took it from there, we called all the stewards together of Birmingham East, the die was cast we’d go back to our factories and bring our men on Saltley.<sup>54</sup>

However, some historians of the event have perhaps overplayed on Scargill’s role organising solidarity action by the Birmingham workers, in part because of this impassioned speech which as seen was effective and perhaps because of the national figure he later became. Darlington and Lyddon have also identified the ‘pivotal’ role Arthur Harper played at Saltley; they interviewed Mick Rice an AUEW district committee member:

Without Arthur Harper it couldn’t have happened, no one else would have had the status to push something as strong with the district committee. And once he got it through...the ball was rolling...because Harper was a natural militant and happened to be the [AUEW] district president he could give a lead.<sup>55</sup>

The shop stewards of Birmingham also had major influence. Actions by local trade unionists in support of the miners’ had also taken place *before* the meeting on Tuesday. Most significantly, the TGWU 5/35 branch had decided from the very first day of picketing at Saltley, not to cross the picket line and had a branch member permanently on picket duty to turn back TGWU lorries.<sup>56</sup> On Monday, workers from SU Carburettors and Bryant’s and McAlpine’s building sites, struck in support of the miners and some joined the picket line at Saltley gate. Additionally, on Tuesday, the miners were joined by car delivery workers, 200 workers from H. F Ward and delegations from the British Leyland, Tractors and Transmissions, Thorn Electrical and Thorn Radiation plants.<sup>57</sup> The Birmingham officialdom of the Labour movement had also already provided accommodation for the miners, the Birmingham TGWU building was donated and Birmingham Council provided 4,000 blankets.<sup>58</sup> Moira Simmons, Secretary of the Birmingham Labour Party was central to organising accommodation for the miners, Watters describes her role although unknown in

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<sup>53</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2, Ernest Smith, shop steward Cartwright, Birmingham.

<sup>54</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2, Arthur Harper, President of East District AUEW, Birmingham.

<sup>55</sup> Darlington & Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, p. 59-60.

<sup>56</sup> Lyddon, “‘Glorious Summer’” in Campbell, Fishman, McIlroy, *British Trade Unions, Volume 2*, p. 332-3.

<sup>57</sup> Darlington & Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, p. 58.

<sup>58</sup> Scargill ‘New Unionism’ in *New Left Review*, p. 20.

the media was ‘indispensable’ to achieving victory at Saltley.<sup>59</sup> Simmons herself felt that, ‘people felt like they really had a stake in the miners’ strike because they were able to give hospitality’.<sup>60</sup>

The day after the East District meeting of the AUEW 200 AUEW shop stewards still had to independently take the decision whether to accept the district committee’s recommendation to join the picket line, they voted unanimously to join the picket line.<sup>61</sup> It must also be taken into account that the NUVB and TGWU also held district meetings independent of Scargill, at these meetings NUM members other than Scargill made speeches which employed the same rhetoric to Scargill; such as Jim Doherty a shop steward from Keresley Colliery, West Midlands:

I met the stewards at a big factory – Scargill was addressing the Trades Council at another meeting and I said “There’s no support that you must withhold from us at this hour, it’s not the miners that are under attack, it’s the working class and the trade union movement in this country.”<sup>62</sup>

In the Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union (EETPU) and National Union of General and Municipal Workers (NUGMW), rank and file activists actually agreed to try and get their members out unofficially, given the refusal of their local union leadership to call official action.<sup>63</sup>

It appears that the Tuesday meetings of the shop stewards and NUM leaders instigated action by the local shop stewards. George Evans, shop steward with the NUVB admitted that before the meeting ‘there was nothing that we’d done really to provoke our people’ into effective support for the miners. Evans argues that the meeting was the ‘trigger of’ this support, ‘It was spontaneous I say the shop stewards meeting we had with NUM leaders was sufficient to trigger of and really make the support quite massive as far as we were concerned’.<sup>64</sup> Alan Law, Midlands Regional Secretary of the TGWU shared Evans’ view ‘I think that their spontaneous personal action grasped the imaginations of the Birmingham people’.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Watters, “*Being Frank*”, p. 6.

<[http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11](http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11)> 10 October 2009.

<sup>60</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Moira Simmons, Secretary of Birmingham Labour Party.

<sup>61</sup> Darlington & Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, p. 59.

<sup>62</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Jim Doherty, shop steward Keresley Colliery, West Midlands.

<sup>63</sup> Darlington & Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, p. 59.

<sup>64</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2 George Evans, NUVB Midlands District Organiser.

<sup>65</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2 Alan Law, TGWU Midlands Regional Secretary.



It can be seen that the shop stewards were certainly influential. However, there is evidence that ‘low level’ trade unionists had a major impact on ensuring a mass picket at Saltley. The organisation of the trade unions in Birmingham certainly enabled the spread of the message of solidarity action quickly and effectively to the Birmingham workers.<sup>66</sup> Lyddon and Darlington comment that calls for mass pickets spread through the city:

Birmingham was buzzing with stories about the picket. Accounts by union activists who had visited the picket line were told and retold in numerous workplaces.

The Birmingham Trades Council also put an advert in the *Birmingham Evening Mail* calling for support for the picket line the following day.<sup>67</sup>

The shop stewards would not have been successful if the pleas for ‘class support’ had not resonated with ordinary workers. As Evans states, ‘we [Birmingham trade unions] also needed sympathy and understanding of the miners’ cause from the worker to produce the “miracle of Saltley”’. Furthermore, Evans recalls that the sympathy and understanding was overwhelmingly forthcoming:

The issue [of the miners] was such a great one and so well understood that any problems we had previously faced in organising mass demonstration were overcome and on this occasion we were able to get something done effectively and immediately.<sup>68</sup>

Many ordinary workers of Birmingham still had to make their decision; the shop stewards could persuade them to come out in strike in sympathy of the miners’ but it was an individual decision to Saltley and actually picket in solidarity with the miners. This fact can be seen in the account of Colin Pitzer, the Secretary of the Rover Works TGWU:

After the impromptu meeting of the shop stewards the decision was taken that they *recommend* to the factory that their labour be withdrawn for that particular day and as many people as wished to, would go down to Saltley Gate.<sup>69</sup>

An article by *The Times* in August 1972, effectively summarises this point:

When the thousands of engineering workers blockaded the Gas Board’s coke storage depot at Saltley, Birmingham they were not doing so as part of a formal, inter union pact which committed the rank-and-file to supporting another group of workers... The men’s action was near enough spontaneous,

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<sup>66</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2 George Evans, NUVB Midlands District Organiser.

In particular Evans argued that because the NUVB had their own separate union (prior to merger with TGWU later in 1972) the relationship between the big car factories in Birmingham was very intimate and they also had a very strong shop steward movement. which meant that at events such as Saltley almost a moment’s notice they were able to organise a massed demonstration.

<sup>67</sup> Darlington & Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, p. 59.

<sup>68</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2, George Evans, NUVB Midlands District Organiser.

<sup>69</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2, Colin Pitzer, TGWU Secretary of Rover Works, Solihull.

needing little direction at local level by shop stewards and minor officials of union.<sup>70</sup>

It would seem the intervention of these low level workers was crucial because some picketing miners the day before the closure of Saltley feared the worst:

I thought we were on a losing fight. I didn't think we'd ever shut this bloody place down with the police superiority.<sup>71</sup>

A fellow miner held a similar sentiment:

You were shut up, you were hurt, you were disillusioned...On the Wednesday night I thought we were on a losing side. I didn't think we stood a cat-in-hell's chance.<sup>72</sup>

These feelings were reversed as Birmingham workers marched to Saltley in support of the miners. A miner from Fernhill Colliery recalls:

I seen them all marching in and blocked the whole area completely...that's my finest feeling of Saltley because my spirits rose a mile. I thought by Christ boys we've got 'em now.<sup>73</sup>

Although estimates have varied, most commonly it is approximated that at peak there were 15,000 pickets at Saltley of which an estimated 12,000-13,000 were Birmingham trade unionists.<sup>74</sup> Scargill believed this action of worker solidarity 'transformed the whole situation' at Saltley.<sup>75</sup> The police, overwhelmingly outnumbered (800), were forced to close the gates.<sup>76</sup> At 10.43am on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> February the 'Battle of Saltley' had been won.<sup>77</sup>

It appears that for many of the industrial workers of Birmingham, the idea of working class solidarity was the, or part of the motivation for participation at Saltley. The fact that people took the time in their thousands in Saltley suggest at least that there was a real sympathy for the miners' cause. Some recollections of local workers that turned out to picket at Saltley actually state their real desire to help the miners in their cause. When interviewed by historian Helen Lloyd, Henry Cockerill remembered that, 'It was a great feeling that we was actually doing something for these miners'.<sup>78</sup> David Riding, a worker at Rover, Solihull,

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<sup>70</sup> P. Routledge, 'Does the Triple Alliance march again?' *The Times*, 2 August 1972, p. 21.

<sup>71</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Anonymous miner, Woolley Colliery, Yorkshire.

<sup>72</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Anon miner, Woolley Colliery.

<sup>73</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Anon miner, Fernhill Colliery, South Wales.

<sup>74</sup> Clutterbuck, *Britain in Agony*, p. 69; Geary, *Policing industrial disputes*, p. 77. Clutterbuck, *Britain in Agony*, p. 69; Allen, V. L. Allen, *The Militancy of British Miners*, (Shingley, 1981), p. 199. Although there are some different estimates for example Allen states there were 12,000 pickets at peak but 15,000 is the most common estimate.

<sup>75</sup> Scargill, 'New Unionism' in *New Left Review*, p. 20.

<sup>76</sup> Geary, *Policing industrial disputes*, p. 77.

<sup>77</sup> Darlington & Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, p. 61.

<sup>78</sup> H. Lloyd interview with Henry Cockerill. <[www.oralhistoryconsultancy.co.uk](http://www.oralhistoryconsultancy.co.uk)> 21 March 2010.

recalled the feeling of solidarity at Saltley was ‘tremendous’.<sup>79</sup> For Colin Pitzer, Saltley was more than just helping the striking miners it was also about a self pride in belonging to the working class:

As a Birmingham Trade Unionist, I didn’t feel proud to be a Brummy I felt proud to be part of the working class, who showed all the finer things of human nature that day...I felt nothing for being a Brummy. It just happened in Birmingham.<sup>80</sup>

Hayden Matthews from Maerdy Colliery believes that whilst Saltley provided the opportunity for the ‘industrial workers of Birmingham to show their solidarity with the miners and their own class,’ it also showed ‘the resentment of the working class as a whole, regardless of the trade they worked in, towards the imposition to the Tory Government.’<sup>81</sup> On the day of the closure, a news report from ITN displayed marching Birmingham trade unionists marching down to Saltley shouting ‘Heath Out! Heath Out!’ which corroborates Matthews’s opinion.<sup>82</sup> It is unsurprising that there were such shouts given that it was a march by industrial trade unionists. Generally though, it appears that the main motivation of the Birmingham workers that picketed Saltley was a working class solidarity for the miners’ cause rather than a political course of action aiming to bring down the Heath government.

Whilst such labour movement solidarity had not been seen for many years it must not be overstated. It should be remembered a significant number of local workers chose not to march to Saltley on Thursday. As previously mentioned the local EEPTU and NUGMW union leaders decided against solidarity action on Thursday although some ran-and-file activists did get their members out unofficially. One such rank and file member of EEPTU, John Bradley, explained how his union’s attitude was different to many others in Birmingham at the time:

As I remember it, there was very little support for strikers and a general antipathy to union activity in general...I read that there was wide support from other unions but I don’t remember it that way and in the end I just parked my van as close as I could and walked to the masses gathered outside the depot.<sup>83</sup>

Not all Birmingham locals appeared to have been accommodating to the miners. Mike Richards from Maerdy Colliery recalls getting ‘mixed feelings’ when asking locals advice on

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<sup>79</sup> David Riding, Rover worker, Solihull. 1 March 2010.

<sup>80</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2, Colin Pitzer, TGWU Secretary of Rover Works, Solihull

<sup>81</sup> MS 4000/6/1/74/1/C, Hayden Matthews, miner, Maerdy Colliery, South Wales.

<sup>82</sup> ITN *Late Evening News*, 10 February 1972, reporter Antony Carthew.

<<http://service.nfo.ac.uk/WebZ/html/sea.html?sessionid=01-38570-918164869>> 25 November 2009.

<sup>83</sup> John Bradley, Prestcold worker, EEPTU member. 5 March 2010.

where exactly Saltley was: ‘Some were cooperative, others wouldn’t help you in any way.’<sup>84</sup> Moreover, it should be remembered that mass solidarity was only shown on one day, what would have happened if the government had been able to keep the gates open? Would the Birmingham working class have continued to show their support in such numbers day after day?

However, for those involved in Saltley it appears to have been an emotional experience; for these participants it obviously appears to be about more than just turning up. John Bradley, a member of EEPTU when interviewed in 2010 said ‘It was an exhilarating few hours...it defines the decade for me.’<sup>85</sup> Ernest Smith a shop steward at Cartwright recalls, ‘It was a very emotional demonstration, the car workers were definitely crying, the miners were definitely crying.’<sup>86</sup> Moreover, the feeling of closing the gate appears to have brought out genuine jubilation, not just from the miners but also the Birmingham workers. David Riding remembered the ‘huge feeling of elation and success when the gates closed, there was loads of cheering’.<sup>87</sup> Eric Winstanley from Woolley Colliery describes the day of the closure:

The cheer that went up when them gates were shut – it were marvellous! It nearly lifted all these coke stokes and blew them away when they shouted, it were great.<sup>88</sup>

Yet, individuals of the labour movement equally showed such support. Many families offered out of pure generosity to house miners, Scargill recalls that miners were:

stationed all over Birmingham in houses...the people of Birmingham were absolutely fantastic. The lads were really overcome by the tremendous friendship that was displayed. The solidarity of the working class was never more evident.<sup>89</sup>

John Forester a Yorkshire miner echoed this sentiment:

I was utterly amazed at the consideration that other people were putting out towards the miners. You know, they’re somebody they’d never seen in their lives before.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Mike Richards, miner, Maerdy Colliery.

<sup>85</sup> John Bradley, Prestcold worker, EEPTU member. 5 March 2010.

<sup>86</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2, Ernest Smith, shop steward.

<sup>87</sup> David Riding, Rover worker, Solihull. 1 March 2010.

<sup>88</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Eric Winstanley, Miner Woolley Colliery, Yorkshire; ITN *Late Evening News*, 10 February 1972, reporter Antony Carthew. <<http://service.nfo.ac.uk/WebZ/html/sea.html?sessionid=01-38570-918164869>> 25 November 2009. The footage of ITN’s report on the day of closure does show that when the gates closed there was a sudden outbreak of very loud cheering and clapping.

<sup>89</sup> Scargill, ‘New Unionism’ in *New Left Review*, p. 18.

<sup>90</sup> MS 4000/2/152, John Forester, Miner, Woolley Colliery.

In conclusion, the responsibility of the success of Saltley appears to be a triangle of high, medium and low level operators. Labour movement leaders saw the strategic importance of closing Saltley and began the mobilisation of miners. They realised it was not enough and appealed to the shop stewards. Who responded and their own appeals were met by sufficient worker support to put together an overwhelming picket. A brief but genuine surge of solidarity was enough to win the 'Battle of Saltley Gate. Chapter three will investigate the legacy of the dispute and the consequences of this will be seen from both the left and right wing perspectives.

## **Chapter 2: Saltley - A ‘victory for violence’?**

*On the 10<sup>th</sup> February 1972, Home Secretary, Reginald Maudling interrupted a Cabinet discussion about the law on picketing to convey the news that Birmingham’s Chief Constable had been obliged to ‘request the closure’ of the depot. Cabinet concluded that this outcome, with the depot closed and no further stocks leaving, ‘represented a victory for violence against the lawful activities of the Gas Board and the coal merchants.’<sup>91</sup>*

This chapter will examine whether this conclusion is justified. Certainly, there is a case that the media at the time influenced public opinion in terms of the idea that Saltley was a ‘victory for violence’. By the Monday evening after the first day of mass pickets had assembled at Saltley gate the *Birmingham Evening Mail* had already dubbed it the ‘Battle of Saltley’.<sup>92</sup> This emotive language as this study has shown was not necessarily justified but continued unabated in many of the reports of the events at Saltley.<sup>93</sup> On 9<sup>th</sup> February, 1972 the *Birmingham Post* made the emotive and exaggerated comment that there was ‘the need to defuse this barrel of explosives so that blood does not flow in our city streets’.<sup>94</sup>

It is not surprising given the situation there were some confrontations at Saltley. From Monday until Wednesday there were around 2,000 miners pushing against an estimated 800 police officers, with 64 arrests and 31 injuries.<sup>95</sup> Before the arrival of mass pickets the picketing at Saltley had been almost completely peaceful with only 4 arrests in 3 days.<sup>96</sup> Sir Derrick Capper, Chief Constable of Birmingham and the police officer in charge at Saltley admitted that because of the situation there was a risk of confrontations and injuries at Saltley ‘in trying to hold back large crowds struggles develop, it is understandable that minor injuries occur to both the police and demonstrators’.<sup>97</sup>

On the day that Saltley coke depot closed there was notably little violence, only 8 arrests were made out of the 76 for the week and there was only one injury to a policeman.<sup>98</sup> The

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<sup>91</sup>Cabinet Conclusions, 10 February 1972, CAB/128/50/7.

[http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/detailsresult.asp?queryType=1&resultcount=1&Edoc\\_Id=7980672](http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/detailsresult.asp?queryType=1&resultcount=1&Edoc_Id=7980672)> 13 November 2009.

<sup>92</sup>Darlington & Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, p. 58.

<sup>93</sup>*Birmingham Post*, 11 February 1972, p. 3. After the day of closure the *Birmingham Post* declared, ‘the siege of Nechells was over’.

<sup>94</sup>*Birmingham Post*, 9 February 1972, p. 1.

<sup>95</sup>Gear, *Policing industrial disputes*, p. 77. Of those injured 16 were police and 15 were pickets.

<sup>96</sup>*Birmingham Post*, 5 February 1972, p. 1. On Saturday the *Birmingham Post* reported that ‘more pickets may join the amiable line trying to seal off the coke stockpile.’

<sup>97</sup>A. Osman, ‘Saltley’s coke mountain has blood on it, miners say’ *The Times*, 9 February 1972, p. 2.

[http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/111/1/1/purl=rc6\\_TTDA?sw\\_aep=univbri](http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/111/1/1/purl=rc6_TTDA?sw_aep=univbri)> 15 February 2010.

<sup>98</sup>Gear, *Policing industrial disputes*, p. 77.

police would have probably be resigned to defeat given they were so outnumbered, confronting the pickets at this stage would have most likely put themselves in a highly dangerous situation. Also, there was no source of confrontation between the police and pickets, when the Birmingham trade unionists arrived on the picket line it became impossible for any lorries to enter the depot.<sup>99</sup> Bob Smith, a NUVB shop steward recalled how before the day of closure the police, ‘were a bit rough they were pushing and they couldn’t care less’ but after the gate was closed then the police were congratulatory, ‘You’ve done a good job boys’.<sup>100</sup>

Significantly television journalists and the footage used on the news did not show violence. The BBC’s coverage of the day of closure at Saltley was in actually in favour of the pickets, the report mentioned there had been ‘fierce struggles between the police and the pickets’ significantly it also stated that ‘some strikers had complained that the police had taken away men who’d been behaving in a perfectly orderly manner’. Moreover, the pickets were described ‘in good humour but determined’.<sup>101</sup> ITN’s *Late Evening News* on the day of closure shows footage of pickets pushing against the police in an attempt to block an incoming lorry which supports Geary’s argument that mainly there was only pushing and shoving at Saltley. Moreover, ITN’s reporter Andrew Carthew stated there had only been ‘a certain amount of scuffling’ and that ‘most of those arrested were released almost immediately.’<sup>102</sup>

Rather than bitter violence it appears that for much of the confrontation at Saltley a relatively cordial relationship existed between the majority of pickets and police for much at Saltley. A day after the closure of Saltley the *Birmingham Post* remarked:

Behind the headlines of punch-ups and arrests – there has been good natured discourse between pickets and police outside the gates of Saltley this week and there has been humour full and unconditional...all days after initial skirmishes miners and police have relaxed into a kind of tired joviality.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Geary, *Policing industrial disputes*, p. 77.

Only 8 out of the 76 arrests at Saltley occurred on the day of closure, and most likely occurred when lorries were still trying to get into the depot, before the arrival of the majority of the Birmingham workers.

<sup>100</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2, Bob Smith, NUVB shop steward, Birmingham.

<sup>101</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2, BBC Coverage, 10 February 1972.

<sup>102</sup> ITN, *Late Evening News*, 10 February 1972, Reporter Antony Carthew.

<<http://service.nfo.ac.uk/WebZ/html/sea.html?sessionid=01-38570-918164869>> 25 November 2009.

<sup>103</sup> *Birmingham Post*, 11 February 1972, p. 8.

Equally Webb states that there was sympathy amongst the police in general at Saltley because they, 'were on poor money too, so we [the police] had sympathy with the miners.'<sup>104</sup>

There were also instances during the confrontation at Saltley which showed that safety rather than violence was the primary concern of both police and pickets. Clutterbuck highlights the fact that the police made a gentleman's agreement with the NUM and Gas Board to use only one of the two gates into the depot and keep the other one closed for safety reasons. It was taken for granted that this agreement would be honoured and displayed that the police were not so single minded in their aim to keep the gates open as to ignore safety concerns.<sup>105</sup>

Another example of reasonable attitudes and concerns for safety at Saltley was displayed when a speeding lorry injured three policemen and two pickets; one policeman, Chief Inspector Shelley, fractured his thigh. Immediately it became clear that someone had been seriously injured, all activity stopped and everyone cooperated in helping the ambulance through to the injured men.<sup>106</sup> Moreover the following day, the *Birmingham Post* reported, 'after yesterday's incident with the lorry the pickets became more subdued'. Chief Superintendent Arthur Brannigan believed 'many of them [pickets] were genuinely shocked by the accident'. If one serious injury, caused by a lorry driver, had this effect it is probably unlikely that either the majority of the police or pickets were determined to inflict physical violence on the other side. However, Brannigan is unfair to blame the incident on the pickets 'they [pickets] realised what could result from *their* behaviour if they continued to allow emotions to run so high and tempers to get so frayed.'<sup>107</sup> The speeding lorry driver was responsible for the incident and was even arrested later by the police.<sup>108</sup> Brannigan's account again shows how each side often blamed each other for the confrontations at Saltley.

Despite the *Birmingham Post's* labelling of Saltley as a 'battle' this dissertation's examination of the *Birmingham Post* during the confrontation at Saltley shows that it took a fairly balanced line when reporting the extent of the violence at Saltley. Both sides, police

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<sup>104</sup> Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 78.

<sup>105</sup> Clutterbuck, *Britain in Agony*, p.66-7.

<sup>106</sup> Clutterbuck, *Britain in Agony*, p. 67; Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 75. The recent death of miner Fred Matthews the previous week in similar circumstances on a picket line at Keadby Power Station, Scarborough would have most likely heightened the sensitivity to safety concerns Saltley.

<sup>107</sup> *Birmingham Post*, 9 February 1972, p. 7.

<sup>108</sup> Geary, *Policing industrial disputes*, p. 75.



and pickets were represented and evidence of both confrontations and of good relationships on the picket lines were presented. On occasions the language of the paper seems biased:

The Police have been absolutely marvellous. I've seen them just stand there with their arms linked while they've been punched and kicked from behind.<sup>109</sup> However, a voice had been given in the paper the previous day to miner John Burrows who (admittedly after criticising some of the actions of the minority of 'aggressive pickets') stated:

And don't forget this – the police weren't slow in getting stuck in either. I saw a number of constables kicking and punching the lads.<sup>110</sup>

The relationship between pickets and lorry drivers during the 'Battle of Saltley' was certainly a tense one. Clutterbuck argues that the 'real hatred' at Saltley 'was between the miners and the drivers'.<sup>111</sup> John Bradley, an EEPTU member picketed at Saltley in support of the miners felt that the strikebreaking and actions by the lorry drivers at Saltley has led him to 'despise lorry drivers ever since.'<sup>112</sup> ITN's *Late Evening News* shows an example of this anger when a lorry made it through the picket line the pickets repeatedly shouted 'scab' at the driver but the report did not show any violence directed against the driver, only intimidation in terms of shouting.<sup>113</sup> McLaren recalled that if the 'incoming lorry was caught in the sudden crush of pickets, the encounter could be volatile pickets would 'bang on the sides of the truck' and that some pickets would 'climb up to the cab windows and cling on'.<sup>114</sup> Occasionally miners even threw pies at the lorry driver.<sup>115</sup> However, according to Hall stones and bottles were also thrown at incoming lorries.<sup>116</sup> In addition, the *Birmingham Evening Mail* reported on the Monday 'bottles, bricks, [and] stones' were being thrown and that there were crush injuries' and 'one driver...almost dragged from his cab' before defending himself with an iron bar.<sup>117</sup> So whilst the fractious relationship between some of the lorry drivers and the pickets occasionally spilled over into violence. Overall, it appears that physical violence between the two groups was limited.

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<sup>109</sup> *Birmingham Post*, 9 February 1972, p. 7.

<sup>110</sup> *Birmingham Post*, 8 February 1972, p. 1.

<sup>111</sup> Clutterbuck, *Britain in Agony*, p. 67.

<sup>112</sup> John Bradley, Prestcold worker, EEPTU member. 5 March 2010.

<sup>113</sup> ITN, *Late Evening News*, 9 February 1972, Reporter Antony Carthew.

<<http://service.nfo.ac.uk/WebZ/html/sea.html?sessionid=01-38570-918164869>> 25 November 2009.

<sup>114</sup> Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 74.

<sup>115</sup> Watters, "Being Frank" p.3.

<[http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11](http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11)> 10 October 2009.

<sup>116</sup> Hall, *King Coal*, p. 190.

<sup>117</sup> Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 76.

Many participants and observers of Saltley, both at the time and on reflection, put forward the opinion that what violence there was at Saltley was only the product of militant individuals not the majority. The *Birmingham Post*'s headline on the second day of mass pickets was 'A few militants and the miners lost their dignity', the article contains the voice of an 'ordinary' miner who is angry at the few militants in the pickets ranks, 'these stupid idiots have to come along and cause trouble and get us bad publicity'.<sup>118</sup> Again, in the editorial column of the *Birmingham Post*, Peter Williams stated the majority of pickets 'were not a mob bent on physical aggression, but add a platoon of militants to ten battalions of frustrated strikers and the situation becomes suggestive to say the least.'<sup>119</sup>

Some police officers also agreed that only a minority of pickets increased tensions on Saltley's picket line. Assistant Chief Inspector, William Donaldson told the *Birmingham Post*: 'Generally speaking the humour between the police and the pickets is very good, occasionally when a lorry pulls up a few hotheads in the crowd start mass swaying and the tension builds up.'<sup>120</sup> Donaldson does not mention any actual physical violence that followed this tension building up, perhaps again suggesting that a lot of the 'violence' was mostly spirited pushing and shoving. Webb also held the opinion that there were 'one or two hotheads, the rest were ordinary working blokes looking after their interests.'<sup>121</sup> Perhaps, an example of such a 'hothead' can be seen in an interview with an anonymous picketer in *The Grapevine* 'There's no such thing a peaceful picketing if the picket is going to be effective...the police used force'. The pause in the speech of the picketer could suggest the use of violence and the following 'the police used force' is most probably employed to justify this suggestion.<sup>122</sup>

This dissertation must examine the counter charge of violence by the police at Saltley. Scargill argued that the policing was brutal. In 1975, he stated, 'in spite of assurances from the police that there would be no violence, they were really putting in the boot.'<sup>123</sup>

They [the police] had one lad fifteen years of age from Woolley Colliery, the police dragged him and one of them hit him, smash in the face. The kid's nose burst open...This sort of thing went on all week.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> *Birmingham Post*, 8 February 1972, p. 1.

<sup>119</sup> *Birmingham Post*, 11 February 1972, p. 8.

<sup>120</sup> *Birmingham Post*, 10 February 1972, p. 1.

<sup>121</sup> Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 75.

<sup>122</sup> MS 4000/2/152, *The Grapevine*, April 1972, p. 22.

<sup>123</sup> Scargill, 'New Unionism' in *New Left Review*, p. 15-6.

<sup>124</sup> Scargill, 'New Unionism' in *New Left Review*, p. 16.

Scargill's allegations are supported by reports after the event. In April 1972, *The Miner* commented that when the pickets threatened to overwhelm the police line more policemen were hurriedly called up in an attempt to push the pickets back but the policemen were not 'tender in their treatment of the men. I have signed statements by witnesses, of police kicking pickets who had been knocked down.'<sup>125</sup> The far left wing journals *The Grapevine*, documents a similar experience from an anonymous miner at Saltley, 'from Monday onwards we witnessed police brutality the police were shoving and kicking and within ten minutes of arriving on the picket line one of my men was picked up for no reason whatsoever.'<sup>126</sup>

Certainly, some of the pickets interviewed by Banner agreed with the sentiments of Scargill regarding the tough tactics of the police at Saltley, such as Brian Bird a Birmingham shop steward who went to the Saltley picket line on the first day of mass picketing (Monday 7<sup>th</sup>):

Without a doubt brutality was taking place. People were being kicked and things like this. It was terrible. We hadn't witnessed anything like this before.<sup>127</sup>

Additionally, many of Banner's interviewees stated that the police were deliberately attempting to provoke them into violence themselves, accusing the police when they were pushing backwards against the forward pushing pickets, of deliberately kicking backwards into picket line.<sup>128</sup> Roy Hunter from Woolley Colliery stated: 'the police were getting the heel of their boot and rubbing it down you shinbone.'<sup>129</sup> Similarly, Mike Richards, from Maerdy Colliery recalled 'the back heels were going in...one of the boys with us was kneed between the legs by the policemen.'<sup>130</sup> Hayden Matthews, also from Maerdy recalled the injury he sustained from police 'back heeling': 'from my knees right down to my ankles was a mass of blood'.<sup>131</sup>

How common was this 'back heeling' at Saltley? Matthews argued that it was 'typical of this kind of action by the police'; suggesting that back heeling was common during the

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<sup>125</sup> *The Miner*, (April, 1972) in Geary, *Policing industrial disputes*, p. 75.

<sup>126</sup> MS 4000/2/152, *The Grapevine*, (April, 1972) p. 22.

<sup>127</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Brian Bird, shop steward, Rover, Solihull.

<sup>128</sup> ITN *Late Evening News*, 10 February 1972, reporter Andrew Carthew.

<http://service.nfo.ac.uk/WebZ/html/sea.html?sessionid=01-38570-918164869>> 25 November 2009.

This type of violence – kicking out against a crowded line – is hard to observe from the television coverage of the picketing as the picket and police line were many men deep, it was hard to observe what was taking place where the pickets and police actually met especially towards the ground where the alleged kicking would be occurring.

<sup>129</sup> MS 1611/B/4, Roy Hunter, Miner, Woolley Colliery.

<sup>130</sup> MS 4000/6/1/74/1/C, Mike Richards, Miner, Maerdy Colliery.

<sup>131</sup> MS 4000/6/1/74/1/C, Hayden Matthews, Miner, Maerdy Colliery.

confrontation at Saltley.<sup>132</sup> Webb a police constable at Saltley, when asked if there had been kicking by the police at Saltley replied ‘there probably was’.<sup>133</sup> Yet, McLaren only remembers it as happening on ‘one day’. Moreover, Peter Tinsley’s, a student picketer at Saltley, also suggests ‘back-heeling by the police was short-lived: ‘the police were back-heeling them...but the miners have got big boots and after they’d used their boots a bit there wasn’t much violence – not against the people as a mass’.<sup>134</sup> Similarly, Watters argues that on the day of closure:

The police were in an affable mood. Public opinion was not on their side because of the reports of brutality and they were responsible for it. And they knew it.<sup>135</sup>

Such accusations of police kicking could intentionally be put across by pickets to promote the view that the police ‘threw the first stone’ and to justify their own aggressiveness towards the police. For example, picketer Mike Richards admitted there was ‘a certain amount of kicking from our boys’ but this was ‘in retaliation’.<sup>136</sup> Roy Hunter argued, ‘if they’re doing this, you’ve going to be a bit violent back aren’t you’.<sup>137</sup> Hayden Matthews justifies the aggressive pushing against the police line because of police brutality:

We saw how the police would behave and this immediately charged us up. It was like a herd of rumpant elephants...we then started to counter push’.<sup>138</sup>

*The Times* report on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1972, the day before the closure of Saltley, suggests that both police and pickets were responsibly for aggression against the other:

‘Birmingham police...appeared to be severe with the miners. Equally it could be said that not a few officers now bear the marks of pit boots on their shins’.<sup>139</sup>

There are also testimonies of police violence from politicians who visited the picket line at Saltley such Labour MP, Les Huckfield, who told the Commons of

cases of cut lips and bruises of the pickets who had to be carted off to hospital...because they had been engaged in altercations that the police

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<sup>132</sup> MS 4000/6/1/74/1/C, Hayden Matthews, Miner, Maerdy Colliery.

<sup>133</sup> Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 75.

<sup>134</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2, Peter Tinsley, Student, University of Birmingham.

<sup>135</sup> Watters, “*Being Frank*”, p. 7.

<[http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11](http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11)> 10 October 2009.

<sup>136</sup> MS 4000/6/1/74/C, Mike Richards, Maerdy Colliery.

<sup>137</sup> MS 1611/B/4, Roy Hunter, Miner, Woolley Colliery.

<sup>138</sup> MS 4000/6/1/74/1/C, Hayden Matthews, Miner, Maerdy Colliery.

<sup>139</sup> A. Osman, ‘Saltley’s coke mountain has blood on it, miners say’ *The Times*, 9 February 1972, p. 1.

<[http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/111/1/1/purl=rc6\\_TTDA?sw\\_aep=univbri](http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/111/1/1/purl=rc6_TTDA?sw_aep=univbri)> 15 February 2010.

themselves were not too happy to explain. Those are the kind of things that happened on the picket lines at Saltley last week.<sup>140</sup> Labour Councillor for Birmingham, Louis Bamford also argued at a Birmingham council meeting during the dispute that, ‘the situation has deteriorated to such a degree that already individual complaints had been made of excessive force and ill treatment of pickets by the police.’ However, Bamford was less aggressive than Huckfield in his criticism of the police, adding that ‘goodwill and courtesy had been extended by police officers of all ranks’.<sup>141</sup> Conceivably, Bamford was suggesting that there were instances of brutality by the police but at the same time the majority of the policing had been fair and non violent. The Conservative Councillors stated they ‘regretted the hooliganism and assaults on the police’ they believed had taken place at Saltley, applauded the action of the police in ensuring that the law in relation to peaceful picketing was being ‘properly observed’. Again this is a clear example of how observers of the confrontation at Saltley have interpreted it in different ways.<sup>142</sup>

Some pickets argued that the police arrests at Saltley could be rough and indiscriminate. David Riding states that the ‘occasions where individuals in the crowd appeared to be identified and police ‘snatch squads’ went in and grabbed them and led them away’ was ‘pretty ugly as I recall.’<sup>143</sup> Moreover, Terry Cooper’s recollection was that he

was caught up and carried with them [the pickets] as they surged forward, the next thing I knew was my hair being pulled from behind by a police sergeant was pulling me out of the crowd. I asked him what he was doing; his reply was only “Got you”.<sup>144</sup>

It seems that there are clear examples of policing that were violent; when ‘snatch squads went into a crowd and kicking of pickets when pushing against a crowd of pickets. Furthermore, perhaps there were one or two occasions when this violence by the police involved punching although the testimonies of these instances are not as prevalent and are found only in testimonies of Scargill and Watters and far left wing journals all of which may want to portray the police in a bad light. Though, whether it was the police who initiated the violence and deliberately agitated the pickets into taking a more aggressive attitude is difficult to answer, it is perhaps more likely that small groups of individuals on both sides were guilty of initiating confrontations because they were throughout the day pushing against each other.

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<sup>140</sup> HC Debates, 14 February 1972, ‘Emergency Powers’ vol. 831 cc33-169. <<http://handsard.millbanksystem.com>> 4 December 2009.

<sup>141</sup> *Birmingham Post*, 9 February 1972, p. 1.

<sup>142</sup> *Birmingham Post*, 9 February 1972, p. 1.

<sup>143</sup> David Riding, Rover worker, Solihull. 1 March 2010.

<sup>144</sup> MS 4000/2/152, *The Grapevine*, (April 1972) p. 23.

The Cabinet's conclusion of a 'victory for violence' misrepresents the situation. Rather it was a victory for mass picketing. Whilst such picketing was a challenge to the state, it was by no means the same thing as sustained violence; even Capper, the police officer in charge at Saltley only used the words, 'crowd struggles' and 'minor injuries' to describe the confrontation.<sup>145</sup> Moreover, the relatively small number of arrests given the situation, the mild description of events by two national television channels and local newspaper and the concern for safety all point to Saltley being a victory for a largely non-violent but mass picket.

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<sup>145</sup> A. Osman, 'Saltley's coke mountain has blood on it, miners say' *The Times*, 9 February 1972, p. 2.  
<[http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/111/1/1/purl=rc6\\_TTDA?sw\\_aep=univbri](http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/111/1/1/purl=rc6_TTDA?sw_aep=univbri)> 15 February 2010.

### Chapter 3: The legacy of Saltley Gate

Firstly, what was the importance of Saltley closing in the miners' strike? Miners such as Gary Hunter at Saltley certainly believed in the practical impact of the closure, 'Once Saltley were shut that were it, strike were done we'd beaten them really, we'd stopped the coke going out from one of the biggest stockpiles in England.'<sup>146</sup> However, most historians now accept that the closing of Saltley gates did not actually bring an end to the strike in itself and have moved away from interpretations such as Robert Taylor's that place Saltley as an imperative.<sup>147</sup> Before picketing had even began at Saltley, the miners had been starving power stations of energy across the country; throughout January, coal stocks held at power stations had been falling by 1.6 million tons a week.<sup>148</sup> Scargill later inflated the extent of coke at Saltley describing it as an 'Eldorado of Coke' with a 'million tons of coke'.<sup>149</sup> In reality when Saltley was first picketed there was an estimated 138,000 to 100,000 tons of coke left. Still, this was certainly a significant amount but the fact remained that it could not alleviate the increasing shortages across the country.<sup>150</sup> The day before Saltley closed there was only two weeks supply of coal nationally.<sup>151</sup> Additionally, by the end of the strike according to David Beavis, West Midlands Gas Board Chairman, there were actually only 20,000 tons left at Saltley. The closure had very little empirical impact on the strike itself.<sup>152</sup>

So, why and how has Saltley become the symbol of the defeat of the Heath government in the 1972 miners' strike? As Beckett states, it was the manner and visibility of the union's success at Saltley that gave it an immediate as well as long-term importance.<sup>153</sup> Likewise, NUM-sponsored Labour MP Dennis Skinner, recalled the event was 'symbolic, it was psychological and it helped impress the establishment'.<sup>154</sup> Don Perrygrove said: 'What won the miners' strike was Saltley because if they couldn't keep that gate open because of popular

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<sup>146</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Gary Hunter, Miner, Maerdy Colliery.

<sup>147</sup> Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 86; P. Routledge, *Scargill: The Unauthorised Biography* (London, 1993), p. 74; Watters, "Being Frank", p. 3; R. Taylor, *The Fifth Estate: Britain's unions in the Seventies*, (London, 1978), p.265.

<[http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11](http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11)> 10 October 2009; Phillips, '1972 Miner's Strike' in *Contemporary British History*, p. 195. Phillips argues that the picketing of Longannet Power station in Fife was actually more significant in contributing to the end of the strike.

<sup>148</sup> Hall, *King Coal*, p. 192.

<sup>149</sup> Scargill, 'New Unionism' in *New Left Review*, p.15.

<sup>150</sup> Allen, *Militancy of British Miners*, p. 198.

<sup>151</sup> Hall, *King Coal*, p. 192.

<sup>152</sup> M. Crick, *Scargill and the Miners* (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 61.

<sup>153</sup> Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 86.

<sup>154</sup> Whitehead, *Writing on the Wall*, p. 76.

support for the miners struggle, the solidarity – they was licked.<sup>155</sup> Certainly, the media influenced the importance of Saltley in the public mind with stories of a ‘mountain of coke’.<sup>156</sup> Darlington and Lyddon argue the pictures of the ‘mountain of coke’ in the press and television took on a symbolic significance for the miners nationwide.<sup>157</sup> The recollection of Jimmy Miller, a striking miner in Scotland supports this:

We were up here doing a more mundane kind of picketing...we knew we had a great deal of public support. But to see reports in the press and above all to see it on TV was the most uplifting experiences I think the miners ever had in their entire history it was clear to me then that we’d won, no matter what the government could do.<sup>158</sup>

The symbolic importance of Saltley was also heightened as the public was waiting which side in the standoff confrontation between massed police and pickets would win. Watters described it as the ‘icing on the cake’.<sup>159</sup> For example, the Lodge Chairman of Fernhill Colliery, argued the:

vital importance of Saltley was never realised until our own men went there and the build-up of the police force started to take place. Then the significance and the importance of Saltley to the government ...began to emerge.<sup>160</sup>

Saltley Gate became important because the union was seen to have won. When the pickets did gain the upper hand the government and police felt humiliated. The 800 police officers were obviously helpless to prevent an estimated 15,000 pickets from enforcing the closure of the depot. To the public, the fact that the Saltley closure occurred towards the end of the strike also heightened its significance.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2, Don Perrygrove, AUEW shop steward, Birmingham.

<sup>156</sup> Hall, *King Coal*, p. 189; *The Times*, 9 February 1972, p. 1

<[http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/111/1/1/purl=rc6\\_TTDA?sw\\_aep=univbri](http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/111/1/1/purl=rc6_TTDA?sw_aep=univbri)> 15 February 2010.

<sup>157</sup> Darlington & Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, p.72; MS4000/2/152, Ken Morton, Woolley Colliery. Certainly such an impression was made on Ken Morton: ‘The impression was that we’d just been wasting our time all over the country. This was where all the fuel was; in my eyes...You could see it. You could see it! It were just like mountains high’.

<sup>158</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Jimmy Miller, miner, Scotland.

<sup>159</sup> Watters, “*Being Frank*”, p. 3.

<[http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11](http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=665&Itemid=11)> 10 October 2009.

<sup>160</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Lodge Chairman, Fernhill Colliery.

<sup>161</sup> Geary, *Policing industrial disputes*, p. 77. A state of emergency was declared on 9 February and on the 11February a three-day week was imposed with restrictions on office heating and display lighting, which perhaps enhanced the importance of Saltley in ending the strike to some of the public.



It also appears from the statements of a number of pickets at Saltley, working class solidarity was the legacy they wished to take from the events. For example, a miner from Fernhill Colliery stated:

The working class have got to stick together and the working class will stick together this is what I did get out of Saltley. A bond between working people in this country is a strong bond.<sup>162</sup>

Another miner from Fernhill recalls he realised the importance of working class solidarity when he first saw the Birmingham workers marching towards the Saltley picket line, ‘this is when it came over me about working class solidarity, we must stand together, divided we are going to fall.’<sup>163</sup> A miner from Maerdy agreed, ‘this is the only way you’ll ever achieve something – when people stick together.’<sup>164</sup> Again, a young engineering shop steward from Birmingham when interviewed by J. Charlton for *International Socialism* in 1973 stated:

For the first time in my life I had a practical demonstration of what workers’ solidarity meant. We all felt so powerful. We felt we could rule the world.<sup>165</sup>

Some participants at Saltley also took the message of the actual potential *power* of working class solidarity that Scargill so famously propagated after the closure of the depot.<sup>166</sup> For example, many participants talk with a confidence that they would be able to win a dispute like Saltley again, John Mitchell a Birmingham worker illustrated this opinion:

The power of the working class providing their united can never be defeated that’s the lesson as far as I’m concerned...Christ Almighty there’s no power in the earth can face up to them.<sup>167</sup>

Similarly, John Mitchell a miner from Keresley believed that the ‘whole lesson of Saltley is the point of the working class – how they can leave the Establishment helpless.’<sup>168</sup> Charlie McLaren remembered that, ‘You felt that if need be that can happen again.’<sup>169</sup> John Podmore, a miner from Maerdy stated after Saltley he believed, ‘if the working class stick together, they can win any battle they go for.’<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Anon Miner, Fernhill Colliery.

<sup>163</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Anon Miner, Fernhill Colliery.

<sup>164</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Anon Miner, Maerdy Colliery.

<sup>165</sup> J. Charlton, ‘The Miners: The Triumph of 1972 and the way Ahead’ in *International Socialism*, (April, 1973) (57), p.14.

<sup>166</sup> Scargill, ‘New Unionism’ in *New Left Review*, p. 19. See introduction (p. 4.) ‘here was living proof that the working class had only to flex its muscles and it could bring governments, employers, society to a total standstill.’

<sup>167</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Richard Spencer, TGWU member.

<sup>168</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2, John Mitchell, miner Keresley Colliery.

<sup>169</sup> Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 83.

<sup>170</sup> MS 1611/B/9/2, Colin Pitzer, TGWU Secretary, Rover Works, Birmingham.

The confidence in the potential of working class solidarity from Saltley did not influence only those that took part in Saltley but also infected the trade union movement in general: the establishment – the government and the police had been roundly beaten at Saltley and it had been beaten by working class solidarity. In the major industrial disputes that followed Saltley, its memory and the success was summoned by both union leaders and the rank and file to inspire confidence that such a success could happen again. The thinking was if the working class had shown solidarity at Saltley, the working class would show solidarity in any similar industrial dispute anywhere in the country. Saltley had become legend as Hall correctly stated in 1981: ‘for trade unionists it was the apotheosis of their movement.’<sup>171</sup>

The first instance of inspiration from Saltley was actually towards the end of the 1972 strike, Scottish miners had picketed Longannet Power Station’s a substantial coke depot in Fife during the strike. When the picketing at Longannet started to escalate to over 2,000 pickets, Scottish NUM President, Mick McGahey, allegedly declared ‘We shall do a Birmingham on them.’<sup>172</sup> During the Grunwick strike in 1977 McGahey also declared ‘We certainly hope we will do a “Saltley”’.<sup>173</sup>

The victory seemed to influence Scargill’s leadership of the 1984-5 strike. He believed that Orgreave, through working class solidarity and mass picketing would be the Saltley of the 1984-5 strike and deal the government a symbolic and practical blow. Prior to Saltley there was much talk of ‘Doing a Saltley’ at Orgreave. One miner recalls seeing ‘hundreds of new Socialist Worker Party placards with the slogan, “Turn Orgreave into Saltley”’ prior to and during the confrontation.<sup>174</sup>

The perceived humiliation of Saltley for the Conservatives and police force ultimately led to a right wing backlash against the events from Saltley. Observers at the time foresaw this: *The Economist*, argued, ‘the miners had forfeited their right to argue in the future for protection against industrial decline because they had used their power to disrupt the economy and

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<sup>171</sup> Hall, *King Coal*, p. 191; Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, p. 86. It appears that many miners wanted to be part of the legend of Saltley; in 2004 Beckett attended a day of commemorative events for former miners in Sheffield. The day included the show ‘Saltley Gate’ by Banner. Interestingly, when he asked a miner at the event if he had been present at Saltley he replied, ‘No, but everyone says they were.’

<sup>172</sup> Phillips, ‘1972 Miner’s Strike’ in *Contemporary British History*, p. 196.

<sup>173</sup> C. Thomas & C. Seton, ‘TUC urges unions to intensify aid in Grunwick strike’ *The Times*, 23 June 1977, p.

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<sup>174</sup> <<http://normanstrike.wordpress.com/tag/turn-orgreave-into-saltley/>> 23 March 2010.

inflict a “crushing defeat” on the government.’<sup>175</sup> When interviewed by Banner in 1973/4 Dai Francis, General Secretary of the South Wales NUM gave a prescient warning:

There’s no doubt that we’ll see some very serious battles in the not too distant future, because they didn’t take their defeat gracefully did they? The government. They may be having their revenge on the miner now do you see?<sup>176</sup>

Francis was certainly correct in the fact there would be serious battles in the future but the Heath government would not have their revenge in 1973-4, it would take until 1984-5 under Thatcher for the Conservatives to have their revenge.<sup>177</sup> It was a challenge they thoroughly prepared for and when won would define for many the success of the Thatcher governments.

One of the most significant legacies of Saltley was that it caused a fundamental rethink in Whitehall to civil contingency planning. In response to Saltley the old Home office Emergencies Committee was dismantled and the Civil Contingencies Unit (CCU) in the Cabinet Office was formed to make sure that the government was prepared to meet any emergency such as Saltley.<sup>178</sup> In addition, the policing of mass picketing also substantially changed in the light of the helplessness of the police at Saltley.<sup>179</sup> However, an in depth study of these developments in planning and policing in reference to Saltley would require further study and is something that has been thoroughly discussed in historical literature.<sup>180</sup>

The concept of ‘victory for violence’ which this dissertation shows was overplayed did not actually resonate with the public in 1972. The Conservative party commissioned the Opinion Research Centre to monitor public opinion. Immediately after Saltley on 14 February, 66 per cent of 642 ‘representative members of the electorate’ agreed that the miners were justified in striking for higher wages – an increase from 54 per cent who held this view on 1 February prior to Saltley. Of course, other factors apart from Saltley would have influenced these

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<sup>175</sup> *The Economist*, 19 February 1972, p. 16.

<<http://www.tlmea.com/economist/home.asp>> 1 December 2009.

<sup>176</sup> MS 4000/2/152, Dai Francis, General Secretary South Wales NUM.

<sup>177</sup> For the details of how the 1972 miners’ strike and the events of Saltley influenced the 1973-4 miners strike see: Clutterbuck, *Britain in Agony*, p. 73; A. Taylor, *The NUM and British politics; Volume 2: 1969-1995* (Aldershot, 2003). p. 72-102.

<sup>178</sup> Taylor, *NUM and British politics*, p. 75. The CCU was first called the National Security Committee but was renamed under Wilson Labour government 1974-76.

<sup>179</sup> See: T. Bunyan, ‘From Saltley to Orgreave via Brixton’ in *Journal of Law and Society*, 12, (3) (Winter, 1985), p.293-303; Scranton, “From Saltley Gates to Orgreave: A history of recent Industrial disputes”, in Fine, & Millar (eds.) *Policing the Miners’ Strike*.

<sup>180</sup> Bunyan, ‘From Saltley to Orgreave via Brixton’ in *Journal of Law and Society*, p.293-303; Geary, *Policing industrial disputes* p.73-143; Scranton, “From Saltley Gates to Orgreave: A history of recent Industrial disputes”, in Fine, & Millar (eds.) *Policing the Miners’ Strike*.

opinions, but it does suggest that the majority public opinion at the time regarding ‘violence’ and Saltley was certainly different from the opinions put forward by certain politicians and the media.<sup>181</sup>

The previous chapter has shown that the violence at Saltley was mostly pushing and shoving between two groups. There were many instances of a healthy relationship between the pickets and the police. Any overt violence by the pickets appeared to be from a minority of militants. Yet, many Conservatives ignored such evidence and began to transmit a fixed, narrow view that Saltley was a perfect example of the violence and intimidation that mass picketing and ‘excessive’ trade union power caused. The Conservatives were most unwilling to acknowledge the class solidarity at Saltley as displayed in chapter one.

*The Times* in November 1979 also underplayed the role of the Birmingham workers in an account of Saltley: ‘Saltley coke depot, in Birmingham, was closed after a six day struggle involving at peak moments, 800 police and 15,000 massed secondary pickets, many of whom were “flying pickets” transported from all over the country.’<sup>182</sup> Flying pickets were certainly hugely effective in reducing the number of lorries entering the depot but not to mention that local workers were crucial in the event pulls the focus away from class solidarity and popular support and towards men of violence who needed dealing with.

Conservative MPs began to use the ‘victory of violence’ of Saltley as evidence for their historic ending-of-consensus, anti-trade union legislation. For example, Lyell referred to the events of Saltley in the demonstration of his support for the anti-picketing laws of the Employment Act of 1980:

Recalling the excesses at the Saltley coke works – and I suspect that there are only two members of this House who did not regard that as disgraceful... the whole country will applaud the fact that such picketing has now been restricted to an employee’s own place of work.<sup>183</sup>

Conservative MP, Leon Brittan, also used Saltley to justify the use of new police powers against mass picketing:

If mass picketing is inherently likely to cause violence, how is the number of pickets to be kept down to prevent intimidation?..Let us not forget that in

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<sup>181</sup> Phillips, ‘1972 Miner’s Strike’ in *Contemporary British History*, p. 195.

<sup>182</sup> P. Hennessy, ‘Sustained disputes bring home the strength of monopoly unions’ *The Times*, 22 November 1979, p. 3. <<http://www.lexisnexis.com/uk/legal/results/docview>> 3 December 2009.

<sup>183</sup> HC Debates, 30 April 1980, ‘Repeals’ vol. 983 cc1499-518. <<http://handsard.millbanksystem.com>> 4 December 2009.

1972 it was numbers alone that forced the closure of Saltley coke depot. If the police are to prevent vast numbers from building up and creating intimidation in that way, they have to use the pre-emptive power which as the Attorney-General has made clear they have under common law to prevent a breach of the peace.<sup>184</sup>

Scargill's personal account of the 1972 strike in general had provided Thatcherites with evidence of the fact that the strike and its stand-out event – Saltley – was a 'victory for violence'. For despite refuting the violence of the pickets and criticising the police at Saltley in his interview with *New Left Review* in 1975, Scargill also used strong military-style rhetoric to describe his interpretation of the view of the miners:

We took the view we were in a class war. We were not playing cricket on the village green, like they did in '26. We were out to defeat Heath and Heath's policies because we were fighting a government. We had to declare *war* on them and the only way you could declare war was to attack the vulnerable points. They were the points of energy: the power stations, the coke depots, the points of supply. And this is what we did...We were fighting a class war and you don't fight a war with sticks and bladders. You fight a war with weapons that are going to win it.<sup>185</sup>

This interpretation would come back to haunt him. Conservative MP, Gerald Howarth, justified and made clear the government's determination in the 1984-5 miners' strike because of the very success of Saltley in 1972:

The dispute was not of the Government's making. It was born in Saltley in 1972, when the present leader of the National Union of Mineworkers made his first endeavour to bring down the Government, and succeeded. But he shall not be allowed to succeed this time. It is thanks to the determination of...the Prime Minister and the Government that democracy in Britain will be upheld and the will of the people will be preserved against the intimidators and the men of violence.<sup>186</sup>

The extent of violence at Saltley was heavily distorted during the 1984-5 strike. The 'violence' at Saltley was often used to justify the government's decision to take on the NUM and the strong policing tactics they endorsed during the strike. After the outbreak of the strike Conservative MP, Sir Nicholas Lyell, sought confirmation from Thatcher that she would:

Condemn those who seek to frustrate them by violence and intimidation?  
Above all, will she make it crystal clear that there will be no repeat of the

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<sup>184</sup> HC Debates, 10 April 1984, 'Coal Industry Dispute' vol. 58 cc203-47. <<http://handsard.millbanksystem.com>> 4 December 2009.

<sup>185</sup> Scargill, 'New Unionism' in *New Left Review*, p. 13-4.

<sup>186</sup> HC Debates, 26 November 1984, 'Coal Industry' vol. 68 cc717-54. <<http://handsard.millbanksystem.com>> 4 December 2009.

events at Saltley coke works under the present Government and that the law will be fairly but firmly enforced.<sup>187</sup>

The link between the Saltley and ‘violence and intimidation’ is obvious. MP Mark Carlisle, in April 1984 also used the ‘violence’ at Saltley to justify policing in the 1984-5 miners’ strike:

It was a sad day for Britain. I am glad that, over the years, the police have learnt, through experience, to cope with the problems of picketing, mass picketing and violent picketing.<sup>188</sup>

Many commentators saw the 1984-5 miners’ strike as revenge for the defeats inflicted on the Conservative party at the hands of the NUM in 1972 and 1974.<sup>189</sup> In particular, there was discussion that the failure of the 1984-5 strike laid to rest for the Conservatives the ghost of Saltley. Thus, *The Guardian* explained in March 1985:

Mass picketing had been seen to fail. For the government it showed that resolution paid and that the Heath Government defeat at Saltley was due to an absence of nerve and organisation.<sup>190</sup>

The most ugly and violent confrontation during 1984-5 miners’ strike was the Battle of Orgreave on 18 June 1984. The Conservatives propagated memories of the ‘victory for violence’ at Saltley to justify the harsh policing at Orgreave. For example, in the Commons the day after the Battle of Orgreave, Jonathan Aitken vindicated the policing in the context of what its contrast at Saltley had resulted in:

Would my right hon. and learned Friend not agree that the only thing that could be worse than the vicious scenes of violence that we saw yesterday would be another Saltley, in which the police were overpowered and mob rule prevailed?<sup>191</sup>

Phillip Whitehead argues that Orgreave, for the Conservatives, was revenge for Saltley: ‘carefully staged in Scargill country but in terrain favourable to the mounted police, the

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<sup>187</sup> HC Debates, 15 March 1984, ‘Engagements’ vol. 56 cc503-6. <<http://handsard.millbanksystem.com>> 4 December 2009.

<sup>188</sup> HC Debates, 15 March 1984, ‘Coal Industry Dispute (Police Operations)’ vol. 58 cc203-47. <<http://handsard.millbanksystem.com>> 4 December 2009.

<sup>189</sup> HC Debates, 21 October 1992, ‘Pit Closures’ vol. 212 cc439-535. <<http://handsard.millbanksystem.com>> 4 December 2009.

During the pit closures debates of 1992, MP for Birmingham, Small Heath, Roger Godsiff, argued that the Conservatives were still seeking revenge for Saltley, this would possibly appear an exaggeration as the NUM had virtually already been destroyed after the 1984-5 miners strike. Yet, Godsiff’s account provides an example of how even the most basic of facts such as the year that the ‘Battle of Saltley’ took place have occurred: ‘I am not alone in believing that the roots of the Government’s decision go back not five or 10 years but to what happened in 1974 right in the middle of my constituency at the Saltley gas works.’

<sup>190</sup> K. Harper, & P. Wintour, ‘The Bitter Battle that Ended an Era’ *The Guardian*, 5 March 1985. <<http://www.lexisnexis.com/uk/legal/results/docview>> 3 December 2009.

<sup>191</sup> HC Debates, 19 June 1984, ‘Coal Industry Dispute’ vol. 62 cc141-52. <<http://handsard.millbanksystem.com>> 4 December 2009.

virtual occupation of the militant coalfields can be seen as making amends for the inactivity of the adipose Maudling in 1972.<sup>192</sup>

Such was its symbolic importance to the Right that Saltley was still being used years after the much more violent 1984-5 strike to attack the Left. Conservative MP Nigel Hamilton's warned in December 1989:

We shall return to the mass intimidation that we saw during the miners' strike, which was not opposed but supported by the Labour party at the time. We shall return to things such as the Saltley coke works picket, to riots and to the Grunwick picket lines.<sup>193</sup>

Similarly, Conservative MP David Nicolson stated in May 1990:

Will my right hon. Friend spend a few moments today recalling the material damage done to this nation, and the damage to its reputation and to individual liberties, by the episodes at Saltley, Grunwick, Wapping and during the 1984-5 miners' strike?<sup>194</sup>

More recently, in January 2003, the *Daily Telegraph's* brief description of the dispute followed the tradition of failing to mention the role of the Birmingham trade unionists: 'pickets organised by Arthur Scargill, then a relatively unknown Yorkshire militant, besieged the Saltley coke works near Birmingham for three days, eventually forcing its gates to close.'<sup>195</sup> Scargill alone is at the forefront of the events at Saltley and the emotive 'besieged' is employed to suggest wide-scale disruption and intimidation took place at Saltley. Given that Saltley was such a demonstration of working class solidarity it is puzzling that this has been eradicated from their historical account. A more balanced view was taken by the *Daily Mirror* in 2005: Saltley is described as, 'when striking miners led by Arthur Scargill and sympathetic workers in Birmingham closed down a coke depot despite powerful police protection.'<sup>196</sup> Moreover, the article also mentions the 'powerful police protection' whereas the previous articles fail to mention the significant numbers of police.

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<sup>192</sup> P. Whitehead, 'Rubbing Saltley in the wound' *The Times*, 12 February 1985, p. 14.

<sup>193</sup> HC Debates, 15 December 1989, 'Future of Socialism' vol. 163 cc1301-65. <<http://handsard.millbanksystem.com>> 4 December 2009.

<sup>194</sup> HC Debates, 22 May 1990, 'Engagements' vol. 173 cc166-70. <<http://handsard.millbanksystem.com>> 4 December 2009.

<sup>195</sup> P. Johnston P. Day & S. O'Neill 'Troops were ready to smash Scargill pickets' *Daily Telegraph*, 1 January 2003, p. 6. <<http://www.lexisnexis.com/uk/legal/results/docview>> 3 December 2009.

<sup>196</sup> P Roulledge, 'Mark Miners' Full Nelson' *The Mirror*, 1 July 2005, p. 25. <<http://www.lexisnexis.com/uk/legal/results/docview>> 3 December 2009.

## Conclusions

This dissertation has shown that many of the interpretations surrounding the events at Saltley are based on mistaken premises; varying interpretations have been made by observers from both the political right and left, the media, and individual participants at Saltley. Firstly, although the leading role of Scargill at Saltley has rightly been mentioned by many and credited by some, it has also been over-exaggerated in some instances at the cost of the significant contribution of others. This dissertation has shown that other high level regional union and Labour movement leaders played a major role in organising elements which led to the successful picket. Moreover, the 'high'-'low' politics construct in the case of Saltley would in fact be better described 'high'-'middle'-'low', to include the crucial role of the middle-ranking officials at Saltley – the shop stewards. Also, many observers gloss over the critical role played by the thousands of rank and file trade unionists of Birmingham who came out and marched to Saltley to support the miners. We have seen the Thatcherite right-wing backlash against Saltley, trying to interpret the events and personalise them to the hated Arthur Scargill and the violent, militant 'flying pickets' rather than recognising it as mass action of solidarity by others who identified their interests with the miners and the largely peaceful picketing that was present at Saltley.

Phillip Whitehead argued cogently in *The Times* in 1985, both sides, right and left ultimately took the wrong lessons from Saltley.<sup>197</sup> For Scargill and the far left it became a heroic moment for working class solidarity and as this dissertation has shown it also spread confidence to many in the trade union movement that a Saltley scenario could occur again. In this respect it masked the changes for many that were actually taking place in British industrial relations and more generally in Britain's class divisions. Whilst after the election of Thatcher to the Conservative leadership in 1975 and subsequent general election victory in 1979 the Conservative party moved on a decisive and determined course against industrial trade unionism in Britain. Unsurprisingly, such a Conservative party was elected in 1979 at an end of a decade filled with industrial disputes where the unions had sometimes wielded their significant power, culminating in the 1979 'winter of discontent'. By the end of the decade many of the public viewed the unions with antipathy, an opinion that would hold for many years. Perhaps, even more importantly, however, was the fact that working class

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<sup>197</sup> Whitehead, Phillip. 'Rubbing Saltley in the wound' *The Times*, 12 February 1985, p. 14.



identity which had made the ‘miracle of Saltley’ possible, was rapidly collapsing in Britain. Its large scale manufacturing base began terminal decline in the 1980s; jobs and new unions would increasingly be found in the white-collar service sector. This, and rising living standards with increased home ownership, (even share ownership), eroded working class solidarity. Saltley perhaps contributed to many on the political left believing that such displays of working class solidarity could be summoned up again, when arguably it would be increasingly difficult given these structural changes to create working class solidarity especially in the face of a government determined to break union power.

Moreover, the actual events of Saltley were not actually a suitable blueprint for future battles of the unions and working class that many believed it to be. Working class solidarity was certainly evident at Saltley prior to and most emphatically on the day of closure – but the authorities did not test this solidarity. In reality there was practically little need to test this solidarity as what coke Saltley coke depot had left could not alleviate the shortages around the country. Later major industrial disputes such as Grunwick in 1976-8 and Wapping 1986-7 were stretched over a longer period and showed that if an employer did not weaken ultimately working class solidarity (so difficult to obtain) could be beaten. Mass action in Britain would prove successful again – the poll tax riots ended Thatcher’s premiership as much as any other factor. Those seeking to use examples of labour solidarity must accept that there is an element of unique circumstances which lead to one mass action being successful and another not.

Thatcherite Conservatives will undoubtedly argue that the correct lesson of, ‘victory for violence’ and the problem of militant leaders such as Scargill were taken from Saltley. However, the violence that both Heath’s Cabinet and Thatcher described was in reality false; there was not wide-scale physical violence. What Heath, Thatcher and other observers were scared of was that Saltley constituted a violation against of the power of the State. The NUM and a mass demonstration of industrial workers roundly beat them at Saltley in full public view. For many in the Conservative party and the police such a defeat was intolerable.

The Conservatives appeared to overcompensate for the defeat they had suffered at Saltley in their ruthless aim of smashing the NUM in the 1984-5 miners’ strike at whatever cost to the Treasury, mining communities and society. This would be achieved especially in set piece confrontations such as Orgreave where policing was often brutal, making Saltley, it’s supposed originator appear so mild in comparison.

Yet, given the significance of these misinterpreted legacies of Saltley, perhaps overall the search for what actually happened loses its importance. The events of Saltley were able to fit into both the left's and right's political perspectives. Both were thus able to draw lessons and conclusions from Saltley which, whether accurate or not, they could use to determine actions in future political and industrial conflicts with the self-confident belief that the history the 'Battle of Saltley Gate' was firmly on their side.

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