

Emotive meeting after two days of violence

Police chief gives public apology to angry village

From Peter Davenport, Grimethorpe

A senior police officer, stung by a barrage of complaints about police operations in a Yorkshire pit village, and after hearing the chairman of his own police committee liken officers to Nazi stormtroopers, gave a remarkable public apology yesterday.

For almost an hour Mr Frank Gutsell, Deputy Chief Constable of South Yorkshire, sat before an angry crowd of 200 villagers at an emotive meeting in the red-bricked community hall at Grimethorpe, near Barnsley.

They had gathered after two days of street disturbances and confrontations with police, including a vicious attack on a woman sergeant. The intense feelings displayed yesterday were a microcosm of the pre-mistrust and resentment prevalent in pit villages throughout the coalfield as a result of the spillover of picket line violence.

Housewives, nursing crying babies, striking miners, even the local mayor, took it in turns to stand up and complain of police over-reaction, of beatings, harassment, and name calling.

Mr Harold Hancock, a striking miner, drew the largest applause of the morning when, in an impassioned plea to the police, he said: "We are moral, hard working, principled people in this village, and we want treating like that."

Mr Gutsell listened silently as the catalogue of disenchantment was spelled out. Then he stepped from his seat at the side of the stage to address the suddenly hushed audience. "I read the Bible, and there is something in there about 'Blessed are the peacemakers'. His first comment brought only laughter.

But he went on: "That is why I have come here today. It is meant to be conciliation. 'I have heard, and I have shuddered at many of the things said against police officers. Some of the things they have done wrong I unreservedly apologize for. But I hope there are some here now who would say they are not entirely blameless, too."

"We are not on the side of the Government or the NUM. We are in the middle, and we don't wish to be there."

He sat down to a loud burst of applause from those who came initially to complain. The meeting was intended to defuse the discontent in Grimethorpe that resulted in two days of confrontation and stone throwing attacks on the police.

The violence followed two police raids on Sunday to arrest villagers stealing coal from the local colliery stockyard. Twenty-two people were arrested and 19 are due to appear in court at Barnsley today.

Police are also investigating allegations that the coal is being stolen not for personal use, but for sale on a thriving black market at up to £40 a ton, half the normal commercial price.

There were accusations from the floor yesterday that the NCB had changed its "blind eye" policy towards the traditional picking of coal from storage sites to try and break the community.

Mr Hancock, the striking miner, said: "Legally, it isn't ours, and we know that, but morally, we think it is. There

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— Grimethorpe villager
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— Deputy Chief Constable
"They come into the forces as decent chaps, and we send them away to training centres and they come back like Nazi stormtroopers."

— Police committee chairman
"The chairman of the police committee is against the police service and on the side of those breaking the law. The sensible thing for him to do would be to resign."

— Local Police Federation
are men in the cemeteries here who died in explosions, their legs blown off and gassed, and they paid for that coal."

Local councillors on the platform urged the villagers to keep away from the coal, because, if the NCB made a complaint, the police were bound to act.

Reference was made to Monday's attack on Sergeant Janet Smith, who was punched and kicked by a 50-strong mob after being rugby-tackled to the ground trying to escape an attack on the village police house. One miner complained about her attitude when patrolling the village. "She walked around like Irma Greth, the Nazi camp guard, showing no compunction..."

It was then that Councillor George Moores, a former miner and chairman of the Labour controlled South Yorkshire Police Committee, made his outspoken attack on the police.

"They come into the force as decent chaps, and we send them away to training centres, and they come back like Nazi stormtroopers."

He criticized Mr Leon Brittain, the Home Secretary, for recent comments about possible sentences on law-breaking miners and said: "It is my humble opinion that nobody, but nobody, can expect justice in the courts of this country. The Prime Minister and the Home Secretary would be well advised to keep their damned mouths shut."

Mr Moores's comments clearly angered Mr Gutsell, who said: "I resent the implication that my officers are regarded as stormtroopers."

The remark also brought an angry reaction from PC Paul Middup the Police Federation representative in South Yorkshire, and a national spokesman for constables in England and Wales.

He said: "I find it difficult to understand how anybody can remain (police committee) chairman and think so badly of us. The sensible thing for him to do would be to resign."

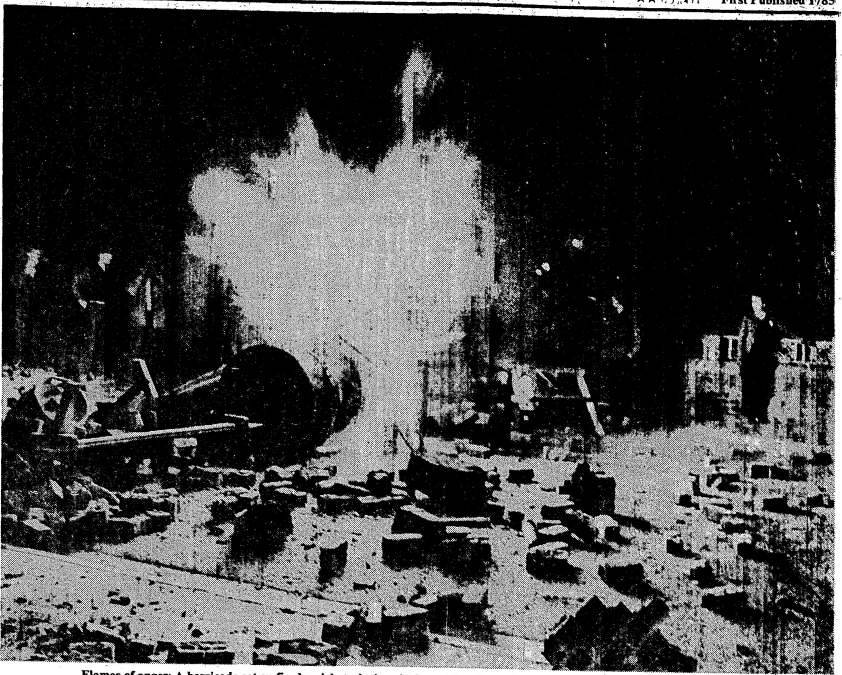
"He is against the police service and on the side of those breaking the law, and it is obvious to anybody who is obvious to anybody that he is treated with contempt."

● A policeman on picket line duty was hit by two darts in the latest outbreak of violence in the Yorkshire coalfield yesterday.

PC Glynn Leasing was one of 23 officers injured in a confrontation with 2,000 pickets trying to prevent Mr Tony Haller from reporting for work at Wooley Colliery near Wakefield.

Meanwhile two police officers who saved the life of a striking miner during picket line violence in which they were stoned are to receive bravery awards (the Press Association reports).

Sergeant Dan McAree and PC David Cross, both from the Midlands, gave Mr John Gas-kill, a picket, the kiss of life and heart massage after he collapsed at Ograve, Yorkshire, in June.



Flames of anger: A barricade set on fire by pickets during clashes with police at Rossington colliery, near Doncaster yesterday.



Words of anger: Mr Gutsell listening in silence as Grimethorpe villagers spell out their complaints. (Photographs: John Arthur).

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From Peter Davenport.

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