

NCB reveals secret plan that kept coal moving during miners' strike

From Peter Davenport, Nottingham

The secret planning that kept coal supplies moving from the working pits in the Midlands during the miners' strike thwarting Mr Arthur Scargill, the miners' leader's hopes of power cuts and shutdowns in industry was revealed yesterday.

A big switch from rail to road transport involving more than 800,000 lorries' journeys kept the supply lifeline open to power stations, factories and domestic consumers.

The operation had to be kept largely secret because of the risk of raids by militant flying pickets.

It involved close liaison between National Coal Board officials, customers, independent haulage firms from as far afield as Scotland and the south coast and the police.

Lorry drivers equipped their vehicles with CB radios to warn each other of trouble spots at pits and power stations.

At the height of the strike 25,000 lorry movements a week, with each vehicle carrying 20 tonnes of coal, were organized and throughout the year-long dispute there was a total of 800,000 such journeys.

The road convoys were organized to compensate for the lack of trains after the refusal of rail unions to handle coal. Before the strike they were running at the rate of 565 a week in the Midlands coalfield and some of that business may now have been lost permanently to British Rail, although the use of rail is now up to about 350 trains a week.

Some weeks the numbers of trains dropped to 70 but in spite of union claims of completely ending the traffic the board insisted yesterday that some coal moved every day by train.

At a press conference yesterday

at the board's Midlands sales headquarters at Eastwood Hall, Nottinghamshire - the new location for key planning sections announced by the board this week - the men behind the supply operation said it had helped safeguard the future of the industry by guaranteeing supplies to customers and had played a critical part in ensuring the collapse of the strike.

Mr Martin Cruttenden, the regional marketing director said: "Only now can the story be told. We were just not in a position to say much about how coal was reaching customers during the dispute for very obvious reasons."

"It was a very considerable achievement, a great deal more coal was moved than people realised at the time."

The supplies were vital, he said, in ensuring that existing customers did not break away from the board to enter long term contracts with overseas suppliers, mainly America and Poland.

"At the end of the day it is not the Government, Mr MacGregor of Mr Scargill who determine the size of the industry, it is the customer," he said.

The Midlands area, the coalfield of north and south Nottinghamshire, north Derbyshire and the south Midlands, normally supplies about half the demand of British industry and the domestic market.

The operation was so successful that 26½ million tonnes of coal were delivered during the strike, only 8½ million tonnes down on normal.

Yesterday's conference detailed the operation:

By rail: During normal, non-strike time British Rail ran 565 coal trains a week from the

Midlands pits. But by May the figure was fewer than 200 a week dropping to a low of 74

The Nottinghamshire coalfield alone would normally have 300 trains a week taking coal to the Trent Valley power stations.

By road (see table): A big operation switched the main responsibility for coal supplies from rail to road

"There were so many lorries we wondered where they all came from. Drivers would arrive on a Sunday evening and stay until Friday, parking in lay-bys and sleeping in their cabs", Br Bookes said.

Supplies to customers (see table): During the strike 26.6 million tonnes, including 19.5 million tonnes to 15 power stations mainly in the Trent Valley, were delivered.

Supplies to industry actually increased by 18 per cent to four million tonnes. The area also supplied one million tonnes to the domestic market, even managing to sustain deliveries to such diverse customers as steam engine rallies, and tomato and flower growers

Average number of 20 tonne lorry deliveries per week during strike

Area	Apr-Mar 83-84	Apr-Feb 84-85
North Notts	1,375	4,455
South Notts	800	3,375
South Midlands	1,740	5,975
North Derbys.	1,600	1,080
Opencast	360	2,490

Coal despatches during strike

Customer	M. tonnes
CEGB	19.03
Industry	4.17
Domestic	1.13
Coke ovens and others	1.68
Total	26.03

Nacods fail to halt closure

By Barrie Clement
Labour Reporter

The High Court yesterday rejected an application from the pit deputies' union to prevent the National Coal Board closing collieries, and immediately cast the industry into a new round of confusion and possible conflict.

The National Association of Colliery Overman Deputies and Shotfirers brought the case over the impending closure of Bedwas colliery, near Newport, which it claimed was being closed without reference to the review procedure instrumental in heading off the union's strike threat last October.

Mr Justice Woolf refused Nacods permission to challenge the board on the basis that it was acting in breach of its statutory duty. The union also sought an injunction stopping

the NCBB closing any mine until the new review system was in place.

After the hearing Mr Peter McNestry, general secretary of the union, said there would be an urgent meeting of his national executive. "We have tried going through the legal procedures and it hasn't worked," he said.

"The agreement we made last October was clear: no pit would close except under the modified procedure. We have been lied to by Ian MacGregor and Mrs Thatcher. Mr MacGregor has torn up the existing review procedure and he will now close any pit he wishes. I feel sickened by it. Sickened and betrayed."

Mr Justice Woolf said Nacods had not made out a strong enough case to justify court action. There was insuf-

ficient *prima facie* evidence to show that the coal board had not fulfilled any legal obligation to establish consultative machinery.

Mr Konrad Dehn, QC, for the coal board, argued that the Nacods case was misconceived.

⊗ A leader of the National Working Miners' Committee has been voted out of his post as branch secretary of Lea Hall colliery, Staffordshire, where 90 per cent of pitmen were working at the end of the strike.

Mr Tony Morris, secretary of the moderate miners' group, lost his full-time post to Mr Graham Warner, a striking pitman, who polled just six votes more than him.

The voting figures at the pit were Mr Warner 559, Mr Morris 553 and Mr Bert Miller 57.

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