

Darkhill Ironworks and the Mushets

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In the Forest of Dean, the name Mushet will always be associated with the coal and iron trade, but previous to this connection it had been well known in Scotland, after the discovery by Davis Mushet (1772-1847) of the black band ironstone, which formed the basis of the Scottish iron industry. Mushet also wrote various scientific papers and was well versed in metallurgy. In 1810 he moved south, to Coleford with his wife and children of which there were eventually six - Margaret, Henrietta, William, Agnes, David and Robert (born 1811).

Once settled, Mushet became active as a partner in a blast furnace enterprise at Whitecliff but the venture resulted in a large financial loss. Other similar trials following in which he was frequently involved, but were so uniformly unsuccessful as to lead him to the eventual though erroneous conclusion that the forest geography would forever prevent profitable development of an iron industry. By 1830, big ironworks had been formed at Cinderford, Parkend and elsewhere, and were soon extended. Mushet again involved himself in iron making and was in possession of an iron furnace at Darkhill, between Coleford and Parkend, joined by tramroad to the Severn at Lydney.

During the period under review (1844-7), the family was unhappily worn down by feud and litigation. Of the sons, only Robert was to make a name in the world. Indeed, his fame eventually equalled if not exceeded, that of his father in the metallurgical circles and both became the subject of a biography 'The Story of the Mushets.'

By 1844 the family home had moved to Mornmouth and Mushet was running his works at Darkhill together with two coal levels nearby, known as Shutcastle and Darkhill. He also had an iron level at Oakwood Mill, some one and a half miles away.

The ironworks, which were in a pretty ruinous state, included a steam engine with a 60 inch cylinder for blowing, and a furnace of about 1,000 cubic feet capacity 'much worn and wasted'. There were however, schemes for improvement including overhauling the engine and building a new blast furnace 45 feet high and 4,000 cubic feet volume. Two new boilers and two air heating stoves for the hot blast, a weighing machine and other additions were also planned. Most, if not all, of these developments were sooner or later effected.

In order to establish the sons, Agnes Mushet pressed her husband strongly to settle £1,000 on each, but by June, 1845 only William had received this amount. David was then described as an artist living at 5, Oxford Place, Cheltenham and supported largely by his wife. He later dabbled in engineering and commerce.

At this time the father had already conveyed to the three sons his Darkhill coal and iron works but shortage of cash inhibited business. He claimed that David and Robert had received property worth £10,000, and would give no more - a valuation, by the way, which seems excessive in view of the dilapidated state of the works and his earlier opinions of ironmaking in the region.

These works turned out to be a great source of trouble. Robert alone had the necessary technical experience; David was satisfied to be associated only so long as some quick financial return might be expected, whilst William did not wish to be involved in running the concern at any price. Attempts were made to raise further capital from Thomas Greatrex the banker, using Darkhill as security and to this end,

Robert proposed formation of the 'Darkhill Iron Co.', the profits to be equally divided between the brothers with himself in sole management. The father was prepared to offer advice and to grant a twenty one year lease of his Oakwood iron mine.

There had however, between collusion between William and David senior, to gain the former a half share in Darkhill instead of an equal third. At the time he was apart from his wife, and living with a woman in Cheltenham. Agnes was concerned and spent much effort composing interminably long letters to Powles the family solicitor, regarding his reprehensible conduct and the oppressed Robert, at the same time imploring him to say nothing about her interjection 'in this extraordinary case'.

The collusion led nowhere and in November 1845, William consented to lease his one-third share to his brothers and to give them control of Darkhill, but he withdrew after a family row. Then followed a vituperative attack from David, stigmatising him as a bigamist and 'a debauched profligate' and threatening to expose him. He was also furious with his father for 'bestowing his offerings on vice.'

Darkhill however, continued in work but with David complaining of his father's interference with the management. Robert now attempted an arrangement with William but should terms be refused, he wished to wash his hands of the whole concern, giving his share to David. But William agreed and leased to his brothers as from 1st January 1846 for twenty one years. The enterprise seems then to have traded for a time as 'Robert Mushet & Co.', but was badly in debt and now very heavily mortgaged to Crawshay Bailey & Greatrex, the bankers.

In May, 1846 Robert leased the Easter mine to supply the works with iron ore. Three months later he had fallen out with David, who had for some time been claiming that he lacked knowledge and experience, and

insisting that the blast furnace should come under Mr. Walkinshaw, a capable and perhaps even indispensable workman, who had come with the family from Scotland in 1810.

Surprisingly at so critical a time when the new blowing in - a rather tricky process - was due to take place (8th August) Robert was residing in Cheltenham at 5, Northwick Terrace, from whence he attempted to direct operations. At the same moment he was also considering whether to accept an invitation from Sir Thomas Lethbridge to inspect a haematite mine in West Somerset, with a view to making use of the ores at Darkhill. The visit was almost certainly made and samples of ore were later tried, though the cost of transport must have been a serious obstacle. (The Somerset mines were eventually developed on a large scale and a full sized railway laid down.)

Robert Mushet eventually returned to Darkhill and on 23rd November 1846 corresponded from Coleford with his father concerning the new furnace - 'The iron last night was dark grey; This morning bright grey; 28 changes yesterday, 30 last night, 22 at one o'clock today. They will stop 2 hours today, to mend the Tymp; (channel where the molten iron runs out) and the Tuyere (orifice through which the air is forced) will be fitted in at the same time.

There is no iron sent down to Lydney I cannot get even the 4 tons of iron sent to Hewlett (he had a forge at Ayleford) who has written an angry letter about the delay. Taylor the haulier affirms that I am bankrupt; and as he has a long bill against me, he is of course as troublesome as he pleases. _____

Your affectionate son, Robert Mushet.'

Things were in fact, in a very serious state. By December, there was insufficient cash to pay the men and David, who had been dragging his feet for months, was now demanding that the works should be put under the hammer.

Her husband having positively refused further help, Agnes tried all possible means of raising loans or credit and again corresponded with Powles, pointing out 'the penniless condition of my dear Robert', and hinting that Greatrex might be able to ward off the crash. She secretly enclosed a copy of a letter which Robert had written to the latter in which it was stated that he was 'wholly unassisted by Mr Walkinshaw and no pains are spared by him and by brother to frustrate and nullify all my labours'. He also wrote that the furnace would produce forty tons of good forge iron per week and thought that the works could make £4,000 annually with iron at eighty shillings per ton at Lydney. The proposed sale was welcomed as a release 'from my present state of worse than Egyptian bondage.'

Old David Mushet died at Monmouth on 7th June 1847, with Robert and his mother still struggling to keep Darkhill at work, until a sale could be arranged, - 'the strongest possible inducement to a purchaser.'

The auction took place on 13th July at the Bell Inn, Gloucester, being advertised as follows :

'The newly erected and valuable BLAST FURNACE for the smelting of Iron, called DARK HILL FURNACE, with the engines, machinery, apparatus and other appurtenances.

ALSO, the two very desirable COAL MINES, GALES or LEVELS of COAL, called 'DARK HILL & SHUTCASTLE COLLIERIES

The whole was offered in a single lot, as two thirds freehold, the remaining part being held by lease from William Mushet. But in spite of Robert's efforts, no acceptable offers were forthcoming and he was obliged to carry on as before.

Further difficulties arose from his father's will; this was of considerable complexity and had been frequently altered and amended. In essentials, after sundry bequests, the residue of the estate was

divided, four ninths to William, three ninths to Robert and two ninths to David.

With the aim of eventual sale, trustees were appointed to run various unbequeathed mineral properties, the proceeds of which were to pay off numerous debts and legacies. The final remaining assets were to be divided between the sons. The trustees were friends of the deceased; Alexander Gibbon of Staunton, Charles Frederick Cliffe of Gloucester and his son-in-law, Rev. George Roberts (husband of Henrietta). Several collieries were amongst the property to be administered, including Bicslade, Howlers Slade Deep Engine and Old Furnace. Gibbon however, for some reason would have nothing to do with the trusteeship, a refusal which troubled Mrs Mushet greatly as she lacked faith in the other two trustees. Indeed, Rev. George Roberts was already trying to evict Robert and his wife and children from their house and was disputing his management of the estate. He had done well out of the family and if further reason for doubt was wanted, Mrs. Mushet had only to recall how she, with several friends, had financed him through university whilst he was involved in a clandestine affair with Henrietta. As another insult, the poor woman's intentions were later misconstrued by the friends as buying the girl a husband !

Meanwhile, Davis Mushet instituted chancery proceedings concerning administration of his father's estate, and to get authority for the trustees to carry on the works and to appoint a manager. By September 1847 he had agreed with Robert to dissolve their partnership and was personally administering the estate with the intention of paying off the whole of various debts to a total value not exceeding £4,800. Further, he promised to use his best endeavours to appoint Robert as manager. Various other conditions were specified concerning the moiety of the old partnership and other matters.

The story has not been studied beyond this point but the foregoing amply demonstrates the scale of worries and difficulties facing Robert Mushet in his early years. Such problems, largely of a domestic nature, are not uncommon and their existence in this instance may serve as a caution against assessing the results of a man's efforts solely in terms of technical and commercial success.

Sources

G.R.O. D.637

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