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# Yorkshire's 'Sloughs of Despond': An Inter-War Perspective on Resource Development in Britain

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## ABSTRACT

Not only do questions of environmental management have an intrinsic importance, but the manner in which they were addressed may offer insight into the relevance and robustness of the mechanisms by which they might be resolved. The paper provides a case study of the range of preoccupations which the statutory planner, agricultural interests and mineral developer brought to bear on the conflict arising from the early twentieth-century development of the Yorkshire 'concealed' coalfield. Where mechanisms existed for reconciling the sectoral interests within, say, a city and its immediate environs, there was increasing need in the inter-war years for such accommodation to extend to whole river-catchments or regions. Where the geographically-largest unit in local government, the county council, might appear to favour agriculture, central government was especially protective of local mining interests. Whilst the consequent impact of surface subsidence on land drainage created considerable acrimony, the raised political consciousness proved essential in sustaining the ill-defined, four-fold process by which agreement was achieved for the ameliorative action required.

## KEYWORDS

Planning history, coal mining, agriculture, subsidence, land drainage

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The emergence of what might be called 'self-conscious environmental history' has encouraged the historian to look afresh at printed and manuscript sources, both to explain the physical state of past environments and to trace, where relevant, how their degradation occurred and what steps were taken to mitigate the effect. As Britain was one of the first nations to experience the impact of large-scale industrialisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there is obvious interest in the British experience.

Inspiration may be drawn from writings on both the past and present. In terms of historical writing, the ground has been well prepared. Wohl described, in his book, *Endangered Lives*, the pioneering efforts of the Victorians, as they confronted public-health issues of an unprecedented scale and complexity. The scope for erroneous prescription was enormous. Ameliorative measures could so easily exacerbate the problems they were intended to resolve.<sup>1</sup> Even if the strategy pursued was one of trial and error, Hamlin has emphasised how it nevertheless implied that there was an institutional structure which permitted, and perhaps encouraged foresight, competence, co-operation and persistence in overcoming both physical and social environmental problems.<sup>2</sup> Turning to the modern environment, Driessen and Vermeulen similarly emphasised the institutional element in terms of the significance of what they called the 'network management' of problem resolution. There were four stages in 'the integrative and communicating process', namely the interactive, cognitive, productive and formalising phases.<sup>3</sup> An obvious challenge for the environmental historian is to assess the relevance of such a model to interpreting the management of environmental issues emerging, say, between the much-researched Victorian period and the environmental preoccupations of the present day.

The present paper accordingly explores, as a case study, the range of preoccupations brought to bear on conflict resolution in the early twentieth-century development of the Yorkshire 'concealed' coalfield (Figure 1). Second only to South Wales in 1913, the Yorkshire coalfield had become the premier coal-producing part of Britain by 1931. Such prominence was largely brought about by the sinking of considerably-deeper mines in the 'concealed' part of the coalfield in South Yorkshire, the most easterly shaft being opened, in 1925, some 10 miles north-east of Doncaster and only 6 miles from the head of the river Humber, at Goole.<sup>4</sup> Not only was it confidently expected that the area would undergo radical change as the deeper coal-reserves were exploited, but that, if left unregulated, such development would severely disrupt the existing pattern of resource use and livelihood and, therefore, a system of local government that took pride in its ability to sustain and advance local vested-interests. The paper illustrates how such expertise and experience, acquired locally, might both conflict with, but ultimately inform, policy-making at a more national-scale.

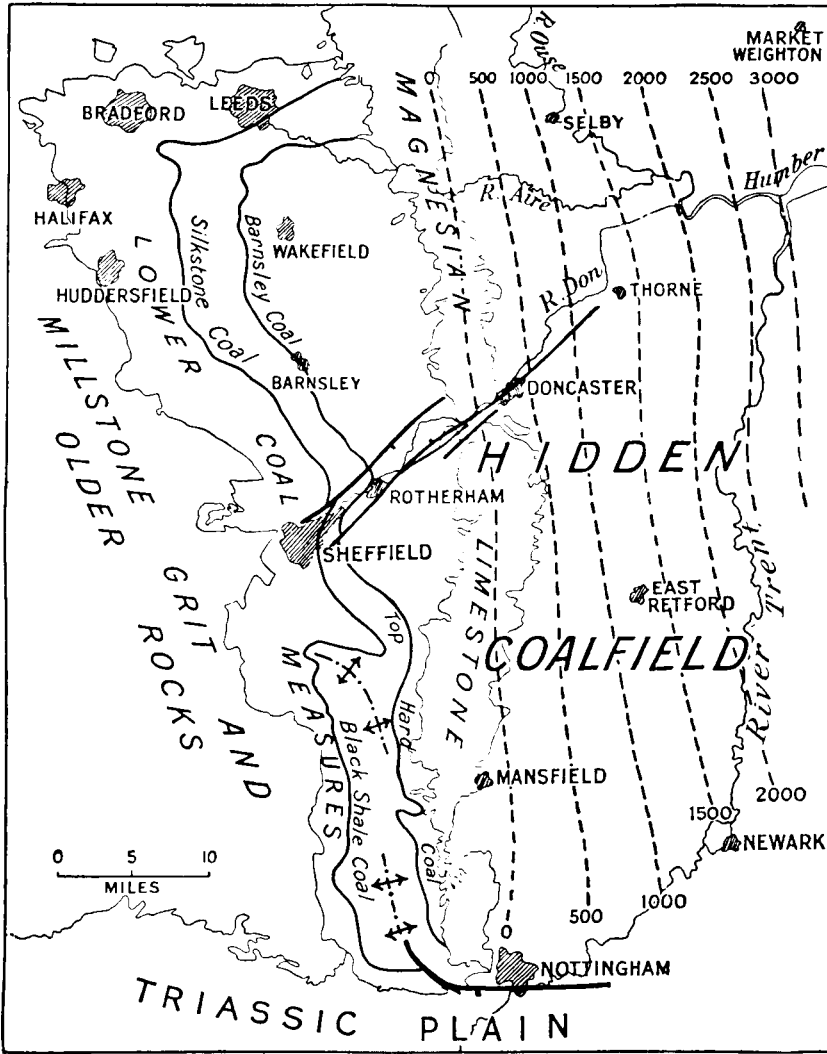


FIGURE 1. The extent and major features of the Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire coalfield, the broken lines to the east indicating the depth in feet below sea-level at which Coal Measures were reached (from L.D. Stamp and S.H. Beaver *The British Isles. A Geographical and Economic Survey* (London, 1933), p. 297).

## THE INITIATION PHASE

In their outline of the four stages in 'network' management, Driessen and Vermeulen described 'the initiation phase' as the time when the various parties had to be brought together, and persuaded of the feasibility and added value of participating in what was being attempted. In responding to such opportunity, each party was considerably affected by both the context in which it operated and the powers and responsibilities vested in it.

In his volume, *Legality and Locality*, Loughlin emphasised the increasingly complex relationship where, in the nineteenth century, it was not so much a case of central government delegating responsibility, but of local councils exercising a 'broad discretionary authority' through 'an interdependence network of government'.<sup>5</sup> As Bellamy wrote of the period before the first world war, it was the purpose of local authorities to assert the interest of the real or immovable property that gave the locality its unique identity. Such expression of 'local possessive pluralism', which arose from the distinctive mixes of local housing, parks, rivers, farms, mines, factories and markets, entirely contradicted any sense of unitary or transcendental governance.<sup>6</sup> Where new responsibilities were taken up, their historical significance was to be found not in their being typical of what happened elsewhere, but rather as exemplars of what could be achieved through local empowerment.

If that was the context in which local authorities operated, what kind of powers were vested in them? In his study, *Liberty and Locality*, Prest described how a distinction emerged in the eighteenth century, whereby a person might do anything not forbidden by law, but a corporation or public body was not allowed to undertake anything unless specifically permitted by statute. It was expected that a local authority wishing to carry out works affecting the rights of property, a levy of rates, or imposition of bye-laws, would petition parliament for a Local Act.<sup>7</sup> A city of the stature of Leeds acquired over twenty such Acts between 1835 and 1914.<sup>8</sup> For the locality, it meant such entitlement could not be overthrown by the courts: for parliament, it ensured that such arrangements were scrutinised. Right up to the twentieth century, permissive legislation remained embedded in what Prest described as 'the entire structure of local government at every level', enabling local authorities to experiment with the provision of new services.<sup>9</sup> Government departments were drawn into the scrutiny process, not so much to develop public policy but to help protect individual and corporate rights. Beyond the further guidance given by model-clause Bills, such Departments might draft and introduce 'Public and General' Bills which made powers generally available to those local authorities that chose to avail themselves of the responsibility. Although such measures were informed by the findings of Royal Commissions and other forms of enquiry, the most positive recommendation of such generalising and permissive Bills came from the experience of earlier 'Local and Private Bills'.<sup>10</sup>

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The scale and complexity of such enabling measures became so considerable that parliament had no alternative but to delegate much of the responsibility for hammering out the detail as to their scope and method of application to Ministers.<sup>11</sup> Typical of such legislation was the Housing, Town Planning, &c Act of 1909 which, for the first time, empowered local authorities to regulate the location of housing and street development. The permissive powers were to be exercised according to criteria laid down by the Local Government Board.<sup>12</sup> Over time, the initially small number of professional planners, in public and private practice, ranged beyond such modest powers to pursue much larger non-statutory initiatives, confident of their becoming a precedent for considerably more ambitious enabling-legislation. It was in this context that the parties to Driessen and Vermeulen's 'initiation' stage, namely those in planning, agriculture and the mining industry itself, responded to the environmental impacts arising from the development of the Yorkshire 'concealed' coalfield, and more particularly the impact of surface subsidence.

## A REGIONAL PLANNING SCHEME

The prospect of enlarging the richest and most extensive coalfield in Britain for industrial and urban development offered an exciting prospect for those of a post-war generation consciously trying to learn from the lessons of the past. It also promised valuable insight into the potential for 'regional planning', a term first used extensively in the inter-war years. The region was an obvious 'negotiating arena', where both local authorities and central government could join in developing notions as to the public regulation of land use, without their individual and existing responsibilities appearing threatened.<sup>13</sup>

A heady mixture of confidence and uncertainty informed those attending a conference of local authorities, convened by the Ministry of Health, in January 1920, to discuss the industrial development of the new coalfield. The architect and town planner, Professor Patrick Abercrombie, and the architect and surveyor of the Doncaster Borough Council, Henry Johnson, were commissioned to prepare a Regional Planning Scheme. Published in 1922 (Table 1), it was the first of its kind to be prepared for any part of Britain. They wrote enthusiastically of a district where there was such opportunity for 'showing that industrial prosperity can be achieved without loss of amenity or health'. Rather than a single city of the size and density of Leeds or Sheffield, the report proposed the establishment of ten or more moderately-sized communities, each around one of the very deep collieries some two or three miles apart. Central to these communities, but in no sense dominating their individual existence, there should be a city, neither swollen nor tentacular but, in the truest meaning of the word, metropolitan, centred on the City of Doncaster.<sup>14</sup>

1918	Coal Conservation Committee report
1919	Acquisition and Valuation of Land Committee report
1922	Doncaster Regional Planning Scheme report
1923	Mines (Working Facilities and Support) Act West Riding of Yorkshire County Council (Drainage) Act
1926	Royal Commission on Mining Subsidence report
1927	Royal Commission on Land Drainage report
1928	Special Commission on Mining and Drainage in the Doncaster Area report
1929	Doncaster Area Drainage Act
1930	Land Drainage Act
1933	Doncaster Area Drainage Act
1957	Coal Mining (Subsidence) Act

TABLE 1. A Select Chronology

Here a dichotomy in historical treatment may be discerned. For the planning historian, the Doncaster Regional Planning report offers further opportunity to reconstruct how Ebenezer Howard's garden-city ideals and Arthur Crow's 'ten cities of health' evolved through attempts to apply them to specific parts of the country, reaching their apogee in the form of Abercrombie's ambitious schemes for Greater London during the second world war. There is also abundant opportunity for the historian to illustrate how neither individual authorities nor the Joint Town Planning Committee as a whole felt sufficiently moved, nor competent, to take the executive action required. Despite the enlargement of permissive powers granted by the town-planning Acts and guidance of the Ministry of Health, most notably through its Town Planning Officer, George Pepler, the Doncaster region provided simply another example of the striking shortfall between what was proposed and actually achieved.<sup>15</sup>

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The environmental historian might argue, however, that this is only half the story. Of more immediate significance were the warnings of economic and social disruption caused by the physical consequences of 'coal getting', in terms of land-surface subsidence. An appendix to the Report, drafted by the local mining-consultant, Joseph Humble, in January 1921, described the extent of the problem and how it might be mitigated. The coal seams were so thick that their removal might cause land levels to fall ultimately by 21 feet. Long before that, surface drainage would have collapsed. Rather than leaving it to the separate interests to work out their own salvation, there was 'enormous benefit' to be gained from taking 'Unity of Action' before any damage occurred. In Humble's words, 'the amount of expenditure by united effort will absolutely eclipse in moderation the individual effort of the various interested parties whose interests are bound to clash'. In terms of developing a dialogue for action, it was a task that fell by default to a development interest.<sup>16</sup>

## A REGIONAL DRAINAGE SCHEME

However well understood, a problem could only be resolved by a body with the requisite motivation and powers. Fraser has written of how the large industrialising-cities became both a forcing house for municipal reform and a model for local administration that, through the County Councils Act of 1888, was extended to the whole country. In every case, the 'great turning point' was not so much the act of incorporation but the date of their first local legislation.<sup>17</sup> Bellamy wrote of how the more active county councils quickly set about enhancing their powers.<sup>18</sup> A priority for the West Riding of Yorkshire County Council, for example, was to extend its powers to regulate river pollution.<sup>19</sup>

It was through the responsibility of its Agriculture Committee for protecting the agricultural potential of the county, that the West Riding of Yorkshire County Council became directly involved in land-drainage issues and, before long, in the problems arising from mining subsidence. By the casting vote of its Chairman, the Council resolved, in January 1922, to promote a Local Bill, constituting itself as the central drainage authority for the administrative county. Whilst there was 'a multiplicity of drainage authorities' on paper, most were moribund. The Bill consciously drew on the county's experience in the use of wartime emergency powers, that had enabled 70 miles of watercourses to be improved, and their adjacent fields cultivated, often for the first time in 30 years. During recent winters, a further 20 miles of neglected and obstructed drains had been cleared and strengthened by the County Agricultural Committee, acting as agent to the Ministry of Agriculture under the Government's Unemployment Relief Works Scheme. Not only did such works demonstrate what could be achieved through control and co-ordination of drainage effort, but the lack of any means of



preventing the watercourses reverting to their former condition emphasised the need for some permanently-constituted drainage body.<sup>20</sup>

By the end of 1922, the scope of the Bill had been considerably widened. Although 'a complete code' for improving the drainage of 'the whole county' was still sought, a further part was added to cover the consequences of surface subsidence caused by coal working. Of an estimated area of 211,000 acres, some 165,000 acres of the 'concealed' coalfield were below the 25-foot contour. Although now rich farmland, the area to the east of Doncaster that extended into the Lindsey part of Lincolnshire and into north Nottinghamshire had historically been little more than swamp. It still depended on a 'very delicate system' of drains, sluices and pumps, the origin of which dated from the seventeenth-century engineering scheme of the Dutchman, Cornelius de Vermuyden. Such exceptional powers as sought in the further part of the Bill seemed the only way of protecting the countryside and rapidly-growing settlements alongside the river Don, as it flowed northeastwards from Doncaster to Goole (Figure 2).<sup>21</sup>

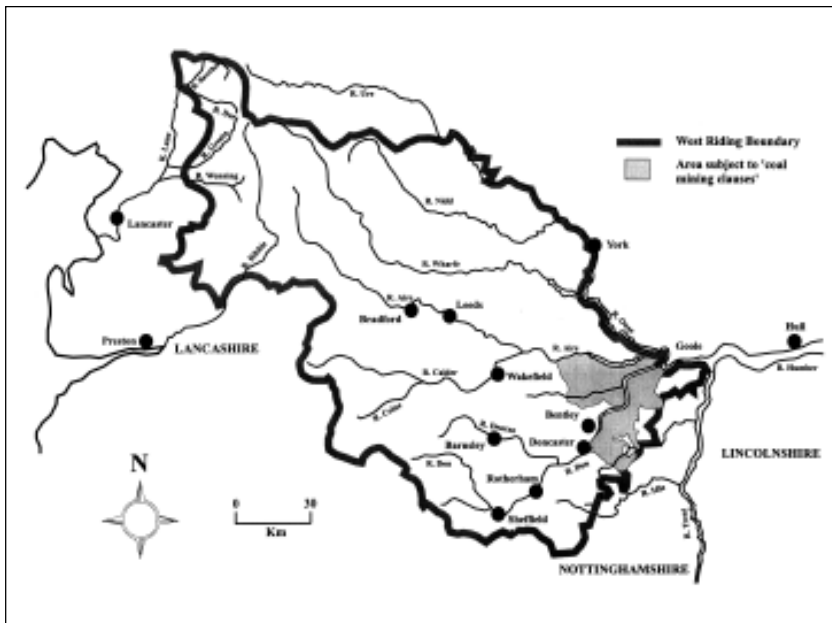


FIGURE 2. From the 'cartoon' prepared for the promotion of the West Riding County Council Drainage Bill of 1923, identifying that part of the county to which 'the mining classes' were intended to apply (West Yorkshire Record Office, RD 1/5/9, Box 7, Part 2).

## YORKSHIRE'S 'SLOUGHS OF DESPOND'

If the engineer's solution to the effects of subsidence was simply to raise the banks and install more pumps, the County Council's Agriculture Committee recognised (as Humble had done) that the administrative solution had to be considerably more innovative. Proponents of the enlarged Bill argued that, whilst it was equitable to levy acreage charges on the lands to benefit, where flooding was natural, those who obtained profit from coalworking should make a special contribution where flooding was caused by subsidence. Under the additional part of the Bill, the County Council would notify colliery companies of the works required to combat the effects of subsidence. They might either undertake the works themselves, or meet the cost of the Council doing so. A fund was to be established to cover any costs incurred after the pits had closed. The colliery companies might recoup up to three-quarters of their outlay from royalty owners. After considerable debate, at its meeting of October 1922, the Council approved the enlarged Bill by a majority of 92 to 9 votes.<sup>22</sup>

## COAL CONSERVATION

If the County Council, in protecting its own agricultural properties, as well as farmland generally, acted on behalf of one developmental sector, it soon found itself ranged against an even more powerful set of interests, namely the mineral developer. Not only did so much depend on the decisions of those who owned and worked the minerals as to whether mines were sunk and extended, but only they had the ability and resources to mitigate the deleterious effects. With local and central government, they too had to look beyond the immediate post-war years to the time when, in the words of the *Doncaster Chronicle*, there was 'hardly a mile where pit-head workings' did not break the skyline, displacing 'the old-fashioned windmills ... as a sign and emblem of rural prosperity'.<sup>23</sup> For the mineral interests, the immediate priority was to respond to central-government's concern to avoid unnecessary waste. The industry would, in any case, benefit from working the coal seams more efficiently. The over-riding priority was to find a way of achieving such conservation measures with minimal interference with rights of ownership. The prospect of developing the new Yorkshire coalfield had brought such questions to a head.

There were two Committees of Inquiry. A Coal Conservation Committee under Lord Haldane assessed the most effective ways of working and utilising coal reserves.<sup>24</sup> A further study, under the distinguished lawyer, Sir Leslie Scott, focused on the wastage caused by fragmented ownership of surface and sub-surface rights. Barriers of coal had to be left between different properties. An owner might be unable or unwilling to treat, or demanded exorbitant terms. Piecemeal removal at a later date was rarely economic. Whilst the individual amounts might be small, the aggregate loss of coal to the nation would be

considerable.<sup>25</sup> Both enquiries recommended compulsory reference of such questions to a new Ministry of Mines and Minerals, equipped with such 'conservation' powers as were required to reduce the permanent and avoidable loss of coal. Committees of practical men with local mining-experience might be appointed to advise on how such local co-operation might be achieved.

A new Mines Department was established within the Board of Trade charged with securing 'the most effective development of the mineral resources of the UK'. A Bill was introduced in February 1923, which sought the vigorous promotion of economy, efficiency and volume in mineral production, whilst leaving private ownership and initiative unimpaired. Although the power to make a compulsory Order was vested in the Board of Trade (so as to preserve ministerial accountability), each Order had to follow precisely the recommendations of the Railway and Canal Commission, a long-standing body with a reputation for impartiality in adjudicating between local vested interests. There were safeguards to ensure no right was granted until the scope for private negotiation had been exhausted. The outcome of such prolonged negotiation and compromise was the enactment of the Mines (Working Facilities and Support) Bill, with comparatively little opposition, in July 1923. Its enactment provided the essential context for discussions as to how the industry might cope with the less direct demands of resource conservation.<sup>26</sup>

#### 'YORKSHIRE'S SLOUGHS OF DESPOND'

As the parties became committed to 'a management network', so they embarked on what Driessen and Vermeulen defined as the 'cognitive' stage, mapping out the different perceptions, as a means of opening dialogue and fostering concentrated effort. Each aspect had to be considered, both from the perspective of the individual party and, increasingly, by all the parties consciously behaving as a 'network'. In as much as the conservation of underground coal-stocks was of obvious and immediate concern to the colliery and royalty owners, it was well within the industry's means to find a solution, given the necessary willpower. Surface subsidence was far more complex. Although caused by the same community of interests, its deleterious effects bore more heavily on the statutory planning and farming interests. Each party brought strikingly different perspectives to the negotiations. No party could be confident of the outcome.

Whilst there was no history of large-scale subsidence in generally-flat, low-lying tracts of countryside, the tributary valleys of the 'exposed' Yorkshire coalfield provided plenty of evidence of what might be expected. In the *Yorkshire Post*, of January 1923, a Special Correspondent wrote of how there was nothing in the 'Dismal Swamps' so beloved by American novelists to compare with the repulsive landscapes to be seen for a distance of 9 miles along the Dearne valley, or the 'appallingly ugly patch fringes of the Aire above

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Knottingley'. Whereas the American examples represented 'Nature in sullen mood', the 'Yorkshire Sloughs of Despond' were, like the German devastation of the French Border in the War, 'detestable because they are man-made and signify the ruin of a beautiful country'. As the Special Correspondent recounted, the priority must be to prevent the low-lying lands between the present coalfield and the Humber estuary becoming similarly desolate. Five pits had already been sunk. Each was expected to work a hundred acres a year.<sup>27</sup>

A combination of reasoned explanation and high rhetoric might be required in establishing the basis for a working relationship. The Clerk to the West Riding of Yorkshire County Council, W.R. Vibart Dixon, emphasised how such drainage works would protect both farmland and the colliery companies themselves, in terms of the health and wellbeing of their workforce. The population of the Bentley Urban District had more than doubled between 1911 and 1921. Even if it were possible to confine new housing to the higher ground, it would inevitably be interspersed with swampy ground unless precautionary measures were taken. As lengths of valley in the 'exposed' coalfield already demonstrated, the new lagoons would act as catch-pits for sewage effluent which, in the Doncaster area, might threaten the purity of the underground water-supplies increasingly exploited for public supply. The County Medical Officer of Health warned of how malaria, the 'common scourge of medieval times', might re-establish itself.<sup>28</sup>

However self-assertive the respective parties might appear publicly, each sought examples of co-operation which, if generalised, could meet the desired objectives with minimal disruption to any one of them. At meetings with the colliery and royalty owners, in December 1922, Vibart Dixon cited how the first collieries at Bentley and Bullcroft had, within four years of their opening in 1909–10 implemented a series of remedial measures. The banks of local watercourses were raised to exclude 'foreign water'. Traction engines (within corrugated tin sheds) acted as pumping stations, moving as 'the edge of subsidence' advanced. By such means, some thousand acres of subsided farmland remained in good heart. In addition to such precautions, a local drainage body, the Hatfield Chase Corporation, had drawn up a lease in 1917 requiring the colliery syndicate in the Fillingley district to establish a capital sum over the first five years, as a sinking fund for insurance against any works being required after the mine closed.<sup>29</sup>

'The warm opposition from coal interests', and the 'urgent memorials' sent to each Member, forced further debate on the Bill at the Council meeting in January 1923. According to the *South Kirby and Hemsworth Times*, the closing speech of the Chairman of the Drainage Sub-committee, P.R. Jackson, made a considerable impression. Even if its present value did not warrant such protection, the Council had a duty to protect the land. With proper looking-after, land increased in value. As one of God's greatest blessings, it brought wealth to the nation. In Jackson's words, children already suffered from the failure of the

previous generations to acknowledge how, once let go, land could never be reclaimed. With the Labour Party 'in front of the battleground', and support from the Liberals and agricultural representatives, the main resolution was carried by 77 to 19 votes.<sup>30</sup>

#### THE WEST RIDING OF YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL DRAINAGE ACT

Through sustained dialogue, it was hoped the individual parties to a 'management network' would not only become better informed, but more practised in managing the vertical and horizontal inter-dependencies that would be so critical in making the strategic decisions required. Driessen and Vermeulen characterised this as the third 'productive' stage in their four part iterative process.

Such progress would be severely prejudiced by any one party taking up a polarised position. Within the West Riding, such a situation seemed highly likely as the majority in local government appeared to favour agricultural interests, whereas central government seemed heavily inclined towards the mining interests. In the private correspondence that so often complements the more formal exchanges, an official of the Ministry of Agriculture warned Vibart Dixon of the 'heavy trouble' that lay ahead. In a later letter to the Mines Department of the Board of Trade, the same official confirmed that the Ministry also found the additional part of the Council's Bill 'most objectionable'. It stemmed from the obsession of the Labour Party on the County Council 'to get at the Royalty owners'.<sup>31</sup>

The Mines Department had been kept informed of the detail of the Bill through personal correspondence between the (Yorkshire) Royalty Owners Joint Committee and the Secretary (political head) of the Department, Col. G.R. Lane-Fox, a West Riding landowner, County Councillor and Conservative Member of Parliament. Rather than attend Council meetings, Lane-Fox had warned 'responsible people' less publicly of his support for the colliery and royalty owners. In correspondence with other Government departments, officials of the Mines Department protested at how, by imposing 'a new and special liability', the County Council was 'entering on the very sacred ground of private contractual relationships'. In as much as the surface owners had 'the right of support' to their land, somebody must always be responsible for making good the damage caused by subsidence. That person's identity depended on what had been voluntarily and expressly agreed in the title deeds to the land. As officials reasoned, in internal memoranda, the Council's justification for such 'unblushing violence to the rights of property' rested entirely on the generalisation that the people who caused the damage should pay for it. This was another way of saying that 'the man who gets the benefit should pay for the damage which is involved in getting it'. The Council had chosen not to express itself in that manner, since

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this would have drawn attention to the enormous benefits which ratepayers would gain from development of the area. That being so, 'What justice or wisdom can there be in trying to escape the little bit of lean which is the inevitable concomitant of all the fat?'<sup>32</sup>

The device of the deputation was used to gain access to the key figures in decision making. Lane-Fox readily agreed to his receiving, with the Minister of Agriculture, Sir Robert Sanders, a deputation of opponents to the Bill in March 1923. Spokesmen for the industry warned of how such unwarranted interference in private contracts would undermine the faith by which 'the credit and business of the country so largely depended'. The industry objected not so much to meeting the costs arising from subsidence, but to the imposition of 'a hard and fast rule'. Nothing should be done to disrupt the output of the Kingdom's premier coalfield. As the senior Minister, Sanders interjected to say that he too believed that subsidence was 'too big a question to be settled by a private Bill'. The proper course was to wait until the Government was ready to legislate for the country as a whole. Both the Ministry and County Council were anxious, however, not to lose the wider drainage provisions of the Bill. A deputation from the Council, in April 1923, won Sanders' consent to a procedure whereby, following speeches by representatives of the mineral interests and other opponents of the Second Reading debate of the Bill in parliament, and a reply from a Member representing the Council's 'side', the Minister would indicate that, if 'the mining clauses' were withdrawn, the Bill should be allowed to pass. The Council's Member would indicate that, in deference to the Government's attitude, the clauses would be withdrawn. By following this procedure, the Bill received a Second Reading by 243 votes to 82.<sup>33</sup>

## THE DONCASTER AREA DRAINAGE ACT, 1929

Experience of the promotion of such Local Bills would seem to support the observation of Glasbergen and others that dissent and controversy can stimulate a positive outcome. In making issues appear even more acute, there might be even greater incentive to find alternative and, ultimately, more appropriate courses of action.<sup>34</sup> Whilst it had lost 'the mining clauses', the County Council had secured perhaps the larger goal of a Government commitment to further enquiry. It was assumed that the Royal Commission on Mining Subsidence, appointed in June 1923, would give high priority to the plight of the Doncaster area. Such anticipation was fulfilled, in as much as the Commission affirmed the issue was more fundamental than 'a mere conflict between mineral and surface owners'. Public interest was 'very vitally enlisted'. No party should be called upon to make sacrifices until there had been 'comprehensive, exhaustive and disinterested preliminary investigations' by a Special Commission.<sup>35</sup> By the time the Commission, which included representatives of the mining interests and

county councils, was appointed in June 1926, some 5,500 acres had been affected by subsidence.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps the greatest advance made by the Commission was to elicit, from each of the 23 parties giving evidence, an admission that a comprehensive drainage authority was required. It should control the main watercourses and generally supervise the existing internal drainage bodies. The fact that the mineral interests acknowledged this need made it easier for the Commission to reject the recommendation of the County Council for 'a supreme drainage authority', in favour of one more closely based on local initiative and expertise. On the one hand, colliery companies should be placed under a statutory obligation 'to obviate or remedy any loss of efficiency in the drainage system resulting from subsidence'. They might either undertake the works themselves, or meet the cost of the drainage authority doing so. Royalty owners would contribute both to these costs and to the fund created to meet outgoings after the mines had closed. On the other hand, both colliery and royalty owners should be represented, through their respective organisations, on the proposed Doncaster Area Drainage Board. By drafting a Bill so closely based on these recommendations, the Ministry hoped to avoid any 'violent opposition'. Indeed, the Mine Owners' Association pressed for its immediate introduction, lest the consensus which it had achieved after 'considerable negotiation' within its membership, and with other mineral interests, should dissipate as changes in ownership and operating conditions occurred.<sup>37</sup>

In moving the Second Reading of the Bill, the Minister, Walter Guinness, spoke of how he already had the power, by Order, to authorise the levying of drainage rates on surface owners, but there was no precedent for imposing them on the owners of the subsoil. A hybrid Bill was therefore necessary. Although moved by the Government, it was scrutinised by a Joint Committee of both Houses of Parliament under Local Bill procedures. The Doncaster Area Drainage Bill received the Royal Assent in May 1929.<sup>38</sup>

#### THE DONCASTER AREA DRAINAGE ACT, 1933

The fourth, and final, stage of Driessen and Vermeulen's model was that of 'formalising' the executive decisions that had been taken, in the sense of giving them external legitimacy. In terms of the drainage of the Yorkshire coalfield, it had been hard enough to persuade the various parties to accept the sacrifices required by the eventual Bill. An even greater effort was required to prevent the eventual 'package' of measures from being unravelled by exogenous forces, even before there was time for implementation.

Throughout the debates on the Doncaster Area Drainage Bill, the Minister took credit for having recognised the urgency of the Doncaster situation by bringing forward what he described as a first instalment of the Government's

eventual Land Drainage Bill, covering all of England and Wales. Events were, however, moving so fast in the wider affairs of Government that each of the interested parties came to regret the precipitate action taken. Not only was the Land Drainage Bill enacted within 15 months (far sooner than any had dared to hope), but its two 'central features of modern drainage law', namely the catchment board and a more equitable means of raising revenue, destroyed the presumptions on which the Doncaster Area Drainage Board had been based.<sup>39</sup>

The new Catchment Boards would be responsible for all works on what were to be defined as 'main rivers'. Their expenses would be met by grants from the Ministry towards new and improved works, contributions from the internal drainage boards, and precepts on the relevant county and county borough councils. The area of the Doncaster Area Drainage Board was divided between the Yorkshire Ouse and Trent Catchment Boards. As for the river Don, the Ministry concluded that it was impossible to go beyond the demands of the County Boroughs that the upper part of the river (beyond the jurisdiction of the Area Drainage Board) should be marked as a 'main river'. To have designated the whole river, as the Doncaster Corporation demanded, would have required the transference of the powers and obligations of the Area Drainage Board to the Catchment Board. On the premise that there could be 'no taxation without representation', and there was no means by which mineral interests could be appointed to a Catchment Board under the Land Drainage Act, 'the coal mining powers' would have had to lapse, or a further hybrid Bill promoted. In rejecting both as impracticable, there was no alternative but to retain the Area Drainage Board and to impose upon it the whole cost of the works on the lower 21 miles of the Don. The Town Clerk for Doncaster protested, in November 1932, at how 'the juxtapositioning of the two Acts' had allowed 'a most absurd and unfair position to arise'. Improvements made by the Catchment Board to the upper course were likely to exacerbate conditions downstream.<sup>40</sup> In Parliamentary Questions and debate, the local Member of Parliament, Tom Williams, described how, of every 8 gallons of water in the lower Don, only one originated in the Doncaster area. As the Socialist Member for Hemsworth remarked, the problem was one of *river*, as opposed to *land*, drainage.<sup>41</sup>

It was a series of disastrous land floods that persuaded the Government of the political inevitability of further legislation. A thousand families had to abandon their homes in the Bentley area for several weeks in September 1931. It was only through the most strenuous efforts that engineers prevented the pit itself from being flooded. A week before the flood, the national economic crisis had caused the Ministry to withdraw any prospect of grant aid for drainage works. It was estimated the Area Board would require a further year at least to prepare the new rate books.<sup>42</sup> An even more disastrous flood struck in May 1932. As well as further dislocation to residents and the inundation of 11,000 acres of farmland, work at the collieries had to be suspended for a fortnight. Although the newly-raised ring-bank was sufficiently advanced to protect the Bentley pit itself, the



efficacy of such remedial works depended on large-scale improvements being carried out by a drainage authority with access to the commensurate scale of resources. Without them, the expenditure of the mineral interests might be wasted and many tons of valuable coal left unworked.<sup>43</sup>

A deputation from the two Catchment Boards, and Doncaster Area Drainage Board, asked the Minister, on 1 July 1932, to promote a hybrid Bill abolishing the Area Board and transferring its responsibilities, including 'the coal mining powers' to the two Catchment Boards. 'Such united application' provided the Minister with the evidence required to persuade the Cabinet of the Bill's urgency and its 'mainly non-contentious' nature. In as much as the mineral interests were represented on the Area Board, they were a party to the application for its abolition. On 6 July, the Cabinet approved a further hybrid Bill that placed the two Catchment Boards in the position they would have occupied if the Area Board had never existed, but with the added responsibility for enforcing 'the mining powers'. Mineral interests would have representation on the Boards in respect of the exercise of these powers.<sup>44</sup>

## MANAGEMENT NETWORKS

In a study of the Lake Superior copper mines of Michigan state in the nineteenth century, Lankton set out to describe the process by which an industry and its accompanying society might grow up together, both aware of their dependence on the other. It was nevertheless a relationship where the society was a reluctant pioneer, in as much as it also sought to ensure there was at least a decent measure of comfort, control and security.<sup>45</sup> The inter-war Yorkshire coalfield offers opportunity to explore such tensions in a considerably more complex relationship where, in contemplating major expansion, both developer and its accompanying society, had to take close account of other user-interests in the affected area. Not only did questions of environmental management have an intrinsic importance, but the manner in which they were addressed offers further insight into the relevance and robustness of the bonding mechanisms within and between local and central government.

As Gutcher wrote, the nineteenth century found England 'in the process of learning to administer its localities under conditions for which there were no precedents'. In wrestling with the physical manifestations of both wealth and appalling deprivation found in the rapidly-industrialising cities, there were bound to be acute political implications.<sup>46</sup> In gaining a fuller perspective of how communities coped, the documentation on the expansion of the Yorkshire coalfield highlights both the opportunities and constraints for the West Riding of Yorkshire County Council, in simply adopting the tactics of a city corporation in addressing issues on so extensive a basis as the catchment or even region. Where it had previously been necessary to accommodate the respective sectoral

interests within, say, the city and its immediate environs, there was now increasing need for such reconciliation to extend to every urban and rural part of entire regions or catchments.

That larger spatial-context made even greater demands on the management process, as characterised by Driessen and Vermeulen. The paper suggests that the first two phases, namely the 'initiation' and 'cognitive' stages, were by no means discrete. The deliberations required over the Doncaster Regional Planning Scheme and the county-wide drainage scheme, the various meetings with leading figures in local and central government, and the representations made before the various committees of enquiry, provided not only a means of forging relationships but raised mutual awareness of the complexity of the issues. It was not a question of whether the coalfield should be abandoned, or whether the interests of farming and public health could be ignored. As the Royal Commission on Mining Subsidence observed, in its report of December 1925, the challenge was to discover whether the consequences of coal-working were as serious as feared. Was there a way of protecting the interests of each policy 'community', wherever they appeared threatened?

Again the distinction may be blurred between the 'productive' stage, when the various parties began to recognise the benefits and sacrifices required by the eventual 'package', and the fourth and final 'formalising' phase. Policy making and implementation were intensively interactive where shortcomings were quickly revealed and further adaptation urgently called for. As the Minister later conceded, the first Doncaster Area Drainage Act, although ingenious and far-sighted, had proved seriously deficient.<sup>47</sup> Although 'very considerable sums' were spent by mineral interests in combating the effects of subsidence, a second measure was needed to secure full and lasting benefit. Under a comprehensive river improvement scheme, eventually completed in 1963, channels were widened and deepened, embankments raised, and extensive washlands constructed on the upper river.<sup>48</sup> But perhaps the most striking representation of the success that developed from this inter-war dialogue was the generalisation of the 'basic principle of the Doncaster Act' under the Coal Mining (Subsidence) Act of 1957. By that measure, such powers could be applied to any part of Britain where there was 'serious danger with consequent loss both to individuals and the nation'.<sup>49</sup>

If the overall trend was unmistakably towards centralisation, the present paper would seem to emphasise a continuing desire, on the part of ministers and their officials, to improve the efficacy of self-help and, therefore, of local councils remaining a dominant element. Particularly at a time when local government was becoming ever more strikingly, in Robson's words, 'a series of highly technical functions',<sup>50</sup> it made sense for central government to encourage the establishment of the kind of joint committees that G.L. Pepler was so active in creating for town planning, and the *ad hoc* bodies that were established for land drainage. Such moves would seem to extend into the inter-war period Fraser's

view of the Victorian and Edwardian society, namely that the more important consequences of the strongly-held, anti-centralist sentiments was not so much its negative effect on central government, but the way such feelings encouraged a more vigorous and creative role for local bodies.<sup>51</sup>

The inter-war case study of the management of the Yorkshire coalfield illustrates what Cronon noted in his review of 'the uses of environmental history', namely that there was not one big 'environmental problem', but more usually 'a near infinitude of smaller problems, each expressing a different relationship of use and meaning between people and the world around them'. The diversity of these experiences, past and present, constituted 'a laboratory for exploring the multitude of choices we ourselves face'.<sup>52</sup> But where it is possible to dwell negatively on the problems and threats, such inter-war initiatives as the advisory Regional Planning Reports and promotion of Local Bills sought, more positively, to set out a larger vision of what might be desirable. Such reports as that by Abercrombie and Johnson for the Doncaster area highlighted how, through co-operation, there were 'unrivalled opportunities' of 'great mutual benefit' for 'inhabitants, local authorities, industry and the estate developer'. Where the greater complexities and confusion of this larger, more positive agenda, seemed to call for greater regional and even national governance, the challenge was twofold. Not only did the central departments and agencies have to be equipped for the task, but it was just as important to retain and further develop, through their active and substantive participation, the commitment of local communities to the necessarily ill-defined stages of environmental decision-making.

## NOTES

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