

Warden Fisher and the General Strike in 1926

The long series of industrial disputes which had dogged the coal industry since the end of the First World War resulted in the Trades Union Congress calling for the first ever General Strike in the UK in support of miners who were making a stand against enforced pay-cuts. On 3 May 1926 two million dockers, railway men, bus drivers and power station workers went on strike, and the Government responded by calling in the army and university students to help non-union workers keep food supplies and public transport running. The exuberant response to 'the Call' by the fictitious Oxford friends of Charles Ryder, as captured in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, seems only slightly exaggerated when compared with the letters to Warden Fisher from those New College men who flocked to London, Hull, Bristol and Southampton to help unload ships, escort food lorries, and act as Special Constables.

The relevant papers in the college archives (NCA 2802) indicate that Warden Fisher responded with enthusiasm to the call for assistance, giving leave to go out of college to those who wished to help, on strict instructions that they should provide details of their exact whereabouts and have the approval of their parents (which seems usually to have been gained retrospectively). Some parents were clearly supportive: in one sub-bundle, labelled 'Strike. Parent's Acknowledgements' most of the letters reflect the views of Edward Renwick's mother that she fully agreed with her son 'that it was his duty to enrol as a Special Constable'. One or two parents took the line that a couple of weeks of hard physical labour could do their offspring no harm, while others sought reassurance that 'the University will take into consideration the time lost by those responding to the Call' as Schools loomed. The Reverend Skipwith was simply grateful to learn from Fisher exactly where his son was 'for I have not heard from him'.

As for the students, they thought the whole thing was great fun as well as being a worthy cause, and they wrote enthusiastically to Fisher describing their work with some glee. Only George Allport, writing from London, admitted to being so bored that he was going to get on with 'reading for Schools until the strike breaks' – but he was writing from the Bonnington Hotel in Bloomsbury where 'things are so normal that there does not seem much to do'. His frame of mind was in sharp contrast to Billie Astor's breathless account of life as an Undergraduate Special ('a special corps of about 300 'shock troops'...living on the floors of the London Scottish Drill Hall with our own M. Transport ready to be rushed to any disturbances. It is a bit uncomfortable but if there is a row we'll be in a position to 'see sport'. The Scotland Yard Flying Squads of Specials have already done a lot of work. Razors have been used against them'...). Or to the sixteen New College students camped out as Special Constables in the Victoria Rifles Drill Hall under the command of the Economics Fellow Harold Salvesen, and finding all the training and no action just a little tedious. Not so Willard Connely, whose hilarious account of working in the offices of *The Times* included 'preparing to ride a little with the mail bags tonight, with a truncheon' and coping with dreadful digs in Bedford Place ('It is very quiet where I am staying, all but the wall-paper').

Paris, 1. 7.

CITY LINE
TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS
"AMICUS" GLASGOW.
GEORGE SMITH & SONS,
MANAGERS
GLASGOW

s.s. *City of Paris*
at Hull
St George's Dock 10

Dear Warden

We arrived without
difficulty last night, and after
sleeping in the R. A. Barracks
came here this morning in a
to Service Digger, and settled
down to a hard day's work
— chiefly bacon and sugar.
The state of Hull is very

disturbed, but the docks are strongly
patrolled and guarded by Naval
pickets, so that no one interferes
with us. We have not so far,
however, been able to go
into Hull.

We have no news
whatsoever — not even strike
bulletins or the British
Gazette — so we have ~~no~~ little
idea what goes on elsewhere.
We are very comfortably settled
down in luxurious club-rooms.

Yours sincerely
John Daykin

The New College contingent working in the docks at Hull were lodged each night on board SS *City of Paris* in the King George Dock, to avoid confrontations with the strikers, while the New College tram-drivers were lodged in the Constitutional Club, but very few of them reported much trouble despite the wish voiced by one to 'see a few brickbats flying about'. Stanley Revill was highly amused at the willingness of elderly residents of Hull to 'be bumped about by a distinctly amateurish [tram] driver', and at the hostility of the strikers who were 'apparently unable to differentiate between black-legs and Oxford undergraduates. Most of them, especially the ladies, are surprisingly rude, with marvellous vocabularies'.

13th May, 1926.

Dear Wright,

Many thanks for your kind letter. I am glad to hear that the New College contingent are in good spirits, and I have no doubt that you will have all found the experience very interesting. Now that the Strike has been happily called off, an event which we celebrated by ringing the New College bells yesterday afternoon, you will all I hope be speedily released and able to return here, where you will be very welcome.

Yours sincerely,

F.H.Wright Esq.
Police Posts Post Office,
Southampton.

By 13th May it was all over, and Warden Fisher wrote to the volunteers urging their swift return to Oxford and academic life. The documents in NCA 2802, which are clearly not complete, indicate that at least 83 New College students responded to the national emergency: over one third of the 266 junior members of college at that time.

Jennifer Thorp (Archivist, New College)