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ARTHUR LAWRENCE AND THE BUTTY SYSTEM

DAVID AMOS

Arthur Lawrence (1846–1924), father of D. H. Lawrence, was one of four brothers who worked in the coal mining industry around Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For a significant part of his working life Arthur was a mining contractor, or butty as they were known locally. He is portrayed as Walter Morel in his son's semi-autobiographical novel *Sons and Lovers* (1913), in which the colliery company of Barber Walker Co. is portrayed as Carston, Waite and Co. and the butty company as Morel, Barker and Wesson (SL 510). Many Lawrence biographies and publications describe Arthur as a miner, which would have been correct whilst plying his trade, but later he became a butty.

Butties were middlemen, mainly coal-getters of mature years with organisational ability, who decided on the best way the coal could be worked. They employed teams of miners to extract coal from stalls on longwall coalfaces on piece rates (contract work). The butty system has a bad reputation in British coal mining history and was the cause of many a local pit dispute over pay. This essay reviews some of the literature on the butty system, discusses how the butty's social standing differed from that of the ordinary miner, and considers where Arthur Lawrence fitted in with the scheme of things. Evidence from a mining point of view supplements academic research.

The butty system operated in the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire coalfields from the nineteenth century until the 1930s, when the face conveyors (known locally as stint belts to differentiate them from larger roadway conveyors) introduced to convey large volumes of coal away from the coal face made the system impractical. It had been the economic arm of the coal-

getting operation and worked on a subcontract system. Generally, landowners leased the mineral rights to mining companies and in return got royalties for each ton of coal. The mining companies then subcontracted the coal-getting operation to butties, who employed colliers/hewers to win the coal and they in turn employed ganger lads, often relatives, to transport the coal to the pit bottom. As L. Beardsley noted, during most of the nineteenth century there were no colliery managers as such and no statutory government regulations to fulfil, as there were later, and the butties were in complete charge.¹

The “big buttie” system initially operated when collieries were much smaller, but as they grew, in terms of production and size of the workforce, the “little buttie” system evolved. A big buttie would oversee the complete running of a smaller colliery and be responsible for production, the supply of the workforce, materials, transport, plus other issues involved with the mining operation, such as providing lamps, explosives and pit ponies. In comparison, nowadays he would be the Managing Director of a small to medium enterprise. My great-great-grandfather, Isaiah Rigley, was a big buttie at Portland No. 1 Colliery, near Selston, sunk by the Butterley Company in 1821. Old Isaiah’s is the name given to the pit locally. The remains of the colliery were uncovered during ground-clearing operations in 2006. The Portland Collieries complex was a multi-shaft operation, Portland Nos 1–7, which mined coal from 1821 to 1916. The last to close was Portland No. 2 Colliery, called Jerry Pit, after the big buttie, Jeremiah Lowe. These collieries were of a type known locally as shonky pits (smaller in size and workforce than the collieries to come in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). There was an underground connection roadway from Portland No. 2 colliery in the Top Hard seam to nearby Kirkby (Summit) Colliery which was used as an emergency exit for many years.

As collieries extended, along with the development of the longwall coal-getting operation, the little buttie system evolved. Roger F. Moore links this evolution to coal mining becoming more

complex and capital intensive as operations grew with the problem of effective control becoming more crucial.² Alan R. Griffin suggests the little butty system lowered the divide that once separated butties and colliers, and, by the late Victorian period, the butty was more of a worker than previously.³

The coal was worked from long working “faces” or “walls”, hence the name given to the system of coal-getting. The longwall system can be split into various periods of development, all affected by technological innovation, dating from the second half of the nineteenth century up to the end of deep coal mining in Britain in 2015.⁴ Initially, a longwall coalface was split into sections called “stalls” and these were operated by little butties. Colliers and hewers working on the coalface were allocated a particular length of face, known as a “stint”. They were responsible for the extraction of their stint and were paid on piece rates. This method of mining is referred to locally as “stinting” and was the cause of many a local pit dispute over piece rates. Lord Roben, National Coal Board (NCB) chairman from 1961 to 1971, titled his autobiography *Ten Year Stint*.⁵

Ron Storer’s fictional account, ‘A Day in the Life of Arthur Lawrence’ (1985), is set at Brinsley Colliery in 1884/85.⁶ The stall is made up of seven men: a dayman paid by the Barber Walker Company and six stall men including two butties (Arthur’s fellow butty was off work with an injured foot), two holers, one waggoner/spare loader and a new-recruit loader. As butty, Arthur’s duties would include helping to set timber roof supports at the face, assisting with the packs on the gate side, assisting with the hand-holing (undercutting of the coal seam), then making sure as much coal as possible was got from the stall and ensuring it was correctly loaded. Lump coal was needed as there was no market for small coal and slack. The loaded tubs were either trammed (pushed) by hand or hauled by pit ponies to the end of the gate, where ganger lads clipped the tubs onto a steel haulage rope that took them to the pit bottom for travelling the shaft to the surface. Each tub would be marked with the stall number and once they had come off the cage

at the pit-top, they would go to the checkweighman for weighing and checking.

The 1872 Coal Mines Act allowed for the miners to appoint a checkweighman to represent them. He was the forerunner of the Union Branch Secretary. Every so often, a tub's contents would be checked. Small coal and dirt could not be sold and most fines in colliery disciplinary books from the time are for "bad filling". The colliery company required large lump coal for its sales.

Nowadays, when former coalminers refer to stinting they mean the process of hand-got coal. In many British coalfields stinting was superseded in the late 1950s and through the 1960s by machine-won coal, with the coal then being cut and loaded by shearers and trepanners. Incorporated with this technology were Armoured Flexible Conveyors (AFC's), or panzers as they were known, and hydraulic coalface supports known as chocks. However, hand-won methods on sections of coalfaces remained on rippings (extending the roadways/gates to the coal face) and in stable holes until the late 1980s.⁷ The author worked on coalfaces like this from 1975 to 1986 in the Deep Soft and Deep Hard seams at Annesley Colliery.

Differences in social status between the butties and the miners were marked in a number of ways, especially income, living accommodation and property ownership. In terms of pay differentials, retired mining surveyor, Robert Bradley (b. 1936), explains as follows:

Let us assume a butty had negotiated getting an amount of coal from a stall at £23 with a total of six men including himself. He would take £2 out of the amount as his cut for organising, supervising etc. leaving £21. The £21 would then be divided between the men, including himself, but the butty would have two shares. Therefore, the butty would receive £6 in total from this contract and the colliers £3 each. In total from this contract the butty would get £8 and each of the men £3.⁸

With this influx of capital, many butties bought properties, becoming landlords and renting them out. A 1924 valuation list by the Overseers of the Poor for the Parish of Selston lists Isaiah Rigley as the owner of seven properties, all on Chapel Street in Selston. This was twenty-seven years after his death! The Assessment Committee of the Basford Union required the rateable value of the properties and details of the tenants to enable the Overseers to arrive at a just and equitable assessment in each case.⁹

In British coal mining history the butty system has not got a good reputation. Barry Johnson cited the worst aspects as the bribery, corruption and bullying which accompanied it:

The old butty system was responsible for a condition of things which should never be tolerated ... bullying of men, which often led to accidents, bribery and corruption of all forms to get control of the best stalls ... even a wife's honour has been sacrificed in thousands of cases in order to gain favour of this wretched system.¹⁰

Eric Walker recalled the brutality of working for his Uncle Rupert Cooke, a butty at the Butterley Company's Kirkby Summit Colliery in the early twentieth century, who:

hired and fired and paid you what he thought you were worth. It was a bad system and more than often abused. Blood was said to be thicker than water and the butties wanted blood, all the work out of you they could get. The coal owners supported the system to the hilt.¹¹

Griffin refers to the butties at Bestwood Colliery (sunk in 1872) as being called "Bestwood Twist Hands"; their work only required two implements: a loud voice and a big stick!¹²

However, Storer saw another side to a butty's work, believing he had earned his position by hard work and reliability, in return for his higher pay:

he trained and supervised men on face work ... Even when they were skilled, he relieved them of all responsibility to the management and the law for the good and safe working of the stalls, whilst maintaining quantity and quality of production. He would be a spokesman for his men on discussions with the management and would help them with personnel matters and visit them after being involved in accidents. He knew the families and the environment.¹³

Beardsley noted, perhaps controversially, that of the total workforce at a pit, 25% would be good workers, 50% average and 25% poor.¹⁴ He suggested that the same applied to organising work, with some of the older good workers being unable to do it. The butt's main task was organisation and therefore older men, who were past their best physically, often became competent butties. He went on to say that some men at the pit preferred others to give the orders and were happy to have no responsibility.

So where does Arthur Lawrence fit in? Many lads around Eastwood at the time followed their father's footsteps into the pit, but Arthur's father, John Lawrence, was a tailor for the Barber Walker Company, providing pit clothes (pit togs) for coalminers. Nevertheless, his four sons – George, James, Walter and Arthur – did go to work in the pits. Born in 1846, Arthur started work on the pit top at Brinsley Colliery aged seven, following the 1842 legislation, which banned boys aged under ten and all women and girls from working underground. Eventually he would go underground to learn his trade, progressing from dayman to holer. As dayman he would have loaded tubs at the stalls and ensured their safe passage to the pit bottom for riding the shaft.

The Lawrences lived at Quarry Cottage, near Brinsley Colliery, where three of the sons worked, while one was a checkweighman at Moorgreen Colliery (Minton Colliery in *Sons and Lovers*). James was killed at Brinsley Colliery in a roof fall (cave in) on 15 December 1880.¹⁵ This fatality was the catalyst for D. H.

Lawrence's short story, 'Odour of Chrysanthemums', and also *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd*.

Some accounts suggest Arthur Lawrence went shaft sinking at Clifton Colliery (1868–1968), near Nottingham. But this is unlikely, as Storer noted, because the mining practices of coal-face contracting and shaft sinking were not compatible. Shaft sinking was entrusted to the specialist work of sinkers. Arthur's occupation on the marriage certificate to Lydia Beardsley, dated 27 December 1875, is that of a mining contractor. This is the first existing evidence stating that he was a butty. After this he is mentioned as being a mining contractor (butty) in various Brinsley Colliery documentation. Storer suggests he was a butty until 1909.¹⁶ An example of this documentation was a Brinsley Colliery Book of Workmen, which was one of the mining artefacts at the Lound Hall Mining Museum, near Retford, Nottinghamshire. Following the museum's closure in 1989, the Brinsley wooden tandem headstocks were re-erected back at Brinsley in 1991, while much of the documentation and artefacts went to the Chatterley Whitfield mining museum, planned as a national coal mining museum at the time. This was not to be and, controversially, much of the mining artefacts and documentation were sold at auction in 1994.

There was a social hierarchy of housing in pit communities which, as Chris Matthews and Clare Hartwell state, reflected the management structure of the colliery companies.¹⁷ The colliery manager's house was usually a large, detached house, separate from the miners' housing but in view of the colliery. Prime locations were reserved for under-managers, colliery clerks and engineers. New Annesley is a good local example of the development of a Victorian coal mining community with its hierarchy of housing.

As a butty, Arthur Lawrence met the criteria for superior accommodation to the ordinary miner. From 1887 to 1891 the Lawrences lived in an end house at the Breach, a set of model pit housing at Eastwood built by Barber Walker Co. As John Worthen noted, being a butty for Barber Walker Co. would not only give him the benefit of living in one of the company's houses but also a

priority for better housing.¹⁸ During this period, Arthur's name is assigned to a haberdashery business on Victoria Street, Eastwood, their previous residence and now the D. H. Lawrence Birthplace Museum. Roy Spencer states that the venture for the shop started in 1886.¹⁹ Trade Directories from the time list the business venture as Arthur Lawrence Haberdashery in 1888 and as a Small Wear and Lace Dealer in 1891.²⁰ Lydia Lawrence would have run the business to supplement Arthur's wages from the pit, which fluctuated depending on the state of the stall and the markets for coal. These supplementary earnings were locally called pin money. Spencer suggested Arthur would not have been working at the pit at this time but more likely there would be seasonal working with more work available in the autumn/winter period than in the late spring/summer period. However, it could be that the trade directory entries are incorrect, that the information has been repeated from previous editions and the Lawrences didn't trade there during their stay at the Breach.

Over the years, Arthur Lawrence has been portrayed as a stereotype of a rough, drunken coalminer, notably as Walter Morel in *Sons and Lovers*. In later life, D. H. Lawrence reconsidered his views on his father and some critics have mentioned that his love of nature stemmed from his father. As John Worthen noted, it was not correct to lay particular emphasis on his drinking as nearly all colliers drank, and Arthur drank no more than the rest.²¹ Drinking for most miners went with the territory of working in a dark, dusty and cramped atmosphere. Following a shift in the pit, the author has seen miners knock back the first two or three pints without them touching the sides! The pints afterwards would be drunk more steadily.

Some accounts refer to Arthur Lawrence as being a respected member of the community, a "gentleman collier" as they were often called. Many old Annesley miners used to refer to my paternal Grandfather, Frederick Robert Amos (1902–1977), as a "gentleman collier", as was the controversial Nottinghamshire Miners leader, George Alfred Spencer (1872–1957). He led the breakaway mining

trade union, The Nottingham Miners Industrial Union, from 1926 to 1937, often referred to as the Spencer Union. The late Ron Storer recalled many complimentary accounts of Arthur Lawrence from Eastwood residents, who referred to him as being kind-hearted, a hard worker and a gentleman.²² Worthen refers to a fellow workman of Arthur's stating that he was a perfect gentlemen to work with to the day of his retirement.²³ In the lead up to the fiftieth anniversary of D. H. Lawrence's death in 1980, an elderly Eastwood resident recalled Mrs Lawrence as being a "stuck up, Lady Muck" character, who made him leave the house when her superior acquaintances visited. She recalled that Mr Lawrence was not the type of man to be ashamed of: he was always smartly dressed and never went out without a buttonhole, even if it was only a dandelion.²⁴

From the evidence, it can probably be determined that Arthur Lawrence was not a butty with a reputation of being unfair and corrupt, as is often the case in other accounts of butties. John S. Poynter suggested that butties had an almost entrepreneurial attitude, which paralleled that of the mine-owners themselves.²⁵ As a butty, Arthur Lawrence would have needed a business ethic to negotiate with the coal company for the amounts of coal to be won, work out his cut for the organising and supervise work in the stalls. At the same time, he would have acted as an arbitrator at times of disagreement: an Industrial Relations Officer of his day.

Some evidence points to the fact that the Lawrences were above the norm of an ordinary Eastwood mining family due to the fact of Arthur being a butty. Their upwardly social move from Victoria Street eventually to Lynncroft is not that of an ordinary mining family of the time. Bleak House, the Lawrence's third Eastwood house on Walker Street, where D. H. Lawrence spent his formative years, was known locally as 'Piano Row' and was built by the Mellors Pottery Co. The fourth and final Eastwood house, 97 Lynncroft, where the Lawrence's moved in 1905, was rented from Tom Cooper, a colliery checkweighman. No doubt Arthur Lawrence's colliery connections were influential here.

D. H. Lawrence received some benefits not many other miners' children would get. Significantly, following his success in an exam, he received a place at Nottingham High School subsidised by a scholarship from Nottinghamshire County Council which, because of Lydia Lawrence's efforts and sacrifices, he was able to take up; there were additional costs involved in accepting an educational place like this which the family would have to finance. For many a bright miner's son this would not be an option, as within large families the finances were not available, and often they educated themselves through industry. This was the case of my late father, Eric Amos (1933–2006), a Senior Colliery Overman, who achieved a Class 1 Certificate in Mining (A Manager's Ticket) in 1958 after studying at evening class for several years. He was from a family of ten children, five boys and five girls, all born between 1926 and 1942. Four of the boys ended up working at the pit with the eldest, Gerald (Ged) being a Fireman on the railways at Annesley locomotive sheds.

John Worthen suggested that the Lawrence children stood out as being advantaged.²⁶ Evidence of this is D. H. Lawrence receiving 6d when collecting his father's wages when other children got 1d. It is also stated that he had a brand-new bicycle. Children having new bicycles in a mining community was a rare occasion, as the author can recall from growing up in a Nottinghamshire coal mining community in the 1960's. Paul Fillingham, brought up in Blidworth Colliery village, recalled it was sons of Deputies who got new Raleigh Chopper cycles in 1970. However, an important factor to consider is whether Lydia was more stringent with the household budget rather than having extra family income all the time. Whether the Lawrences were upper working class or lower middle class is open to debate. In Amos family circles, it was often stated that my buttty great-great-grandfather, Isaiah Rigley, never considered himself working class. There are several factors to consider in the class debate beyond just cash.

Malcolm Gray offered a counsel for the defence of Arthur Lawrence at the D. H. Lawrence Society's online conference in

2021 He referred to him as a man more sinned against than sinning, concluding that he had a zest for life, scorned materialism, loved nature and exerted as much literary influence on D. H. Lawrence as Lydia.²⁷ This was a much-needed revisionist view on the character of Arthur Lawrence. The same is required of the butty system in British coal mining and labour history.

¹ L. Beardsley, *Coal Mining History, Parts 1 and 2*, unpublished, 1969. Reference copies in Ilkeston Library.

² Roger F. Moore, *Community and Conflict in Eastwood: A Study from the Nottinghamshire Coalfield before 1914* (Nottingham: U of Nottingham, 1995), 12–13.

³ Alan R. Griffin, *History of the Nottinghamshire Miners: Vol 1, 1881-1914* (Nottingham: The Nottingham Printers, 1955), 175.

⁴ British Coal, *British Coal Mining: An Introduction* (British Coal Technical Department: Stanhope Bretby, 1989), 14–25.

⁵ Alfred Robens, *Ten Year Stint* (London: Cassell, 1972).

⁶ Ron Storer, *Some Aspects of Brinsley Colliery and the Lawrence Connection* (Selston: self-published, 1985).

⁷ A stable hole was an extended section at each end of the coalface to allow the coal-cutting machine to gain depth of cut before shearing back again.

⁸ Robert Bradley in discussion with the author.

⁹ Basford Union Valuation List, dated 8th March 1924.

¹⁰ Barry Johnson, *Who Dips in the Tin? The Butty System in the Nottinghamshire Coalfield* (Notts and Derbyshire Labour History Society, 2015), 15.

¹¹ Eric Walker, *Radford Colliery: The Bread and Herring Pit* (n.d. ?1990's).

¹² Griffin, *History of the Nottinghamshire Miners*, 73.

¹³ Storer, *Some Aspects of Brinsley Colliery & the Lawrence Connection*, 35.

¹⁴ L. Beardsley, *Coal Mining History, Part 1*.

¹⁵ <<http://www.healeyhero.co.uk/rescue/Fatalities/Notts/Notts-C3.html>>.

¹⁶ Storer, *Some Aspects of Brinsley Colliery*, 37.

¹⁷ Chris Matthews and Clare Hartwell, *Model Villages of the Nottinghamshire Coalfield* (Moorgreen: Notts County Council, 2022).

¹⁸ John Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence: The Early Years, 1885–1912* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 33.

¹⁹ Roy Spencer, *D. H. Lawrence Country: A Portrait of His Early Life and Background with Illustrations, Maps and Guides* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1980), 9.

²⁰ Kelly's Directory 1888 and Wrights Directory 1891.

²¹ Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence: The Early Years*, 21.

²² Storer, *Some Aspects of Brinsley Colliery and the Lawrence Connection*, 37.

²³ Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence: The Early Years*, 11.

²⁴ 'Eastwood Ho', *Observer Magazine* (16 July 1978).

²⁵ John. S. Poynter, 'Miner and Mine-owner at the Time of Lawrence's Setting of *Sons and Lovers*', *Journal of the D. H. Lawrence Society*, 2.3 (1981), 20.

²⁶ Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence: The Early Years*, 38.

²⁷ Malcolm J. Gray, 'Arthur Lawrence', a paper presented at the 2021 D. H. Lawrence Society Festival: <<https://soundcloud.com/mia-foster-586365394/sets/dh-lawrence-festival-2021>>.