

THE SACKING OF THE FRANCISES BY JOHN TAYLOR 1841-42

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In April 1841 Absalom Francis was sacked from his position as Agent to John Taylor for his mining enterprises in Wales. In July 1842 Matthew Francis was sacked as Taylor's Agent in Cardiganshire. Seeing that the Taylors and the Francises were among the best-known families of mining engineers in Britain and in many places overseas, the matter is of great interest; it does not appear to have been previously investigated. We have been enabled to study it through the discovery of a good deal of correspondence relating to it, and to the difficulties which led up to it, in a large, previously unsorted collection of documents at the National Library of Wales. (1).

John Taylor (1779-1863) was a very distinguished mining engineer who not only worked and managed numerous mining enterprises all over the world, later with the help of his sons, but also published many papers of a technical and scientific nature, and became a Fellow of the Royal Society. He was introduced to the lead mines of North Wales by Lord Grosvenor at Halkyn Mountain (2) in the early 1820's, and embarked on major mining undertakings in Cardiganshire from 1834, notably the Lisburne Mines of which Fron-goch became, under the direction of Taylor and his son John (junior), a remarkably successful individual mine (3).

The Francis family (4) hailed from Cornwall, and many members of it worked in Wales and settled there in the mid-19th century. The two we are mainly concerned with here are Absalom, born around 1790 and therefore somewhat younger than John Taylor (senior), and Matthew, born in 1810 and of roughly the same age as John Taylor (jr), and nephew to Absalom. There was another Absalom Francis, who wrote on the mines of Cardiganshire (5), and was Matthew's younger brother, but he plays little part in our story. Absalom (sen.) had come to Flintshire in 1826 (6) to work for the Grosvenors (later the Dukes of Westminster) and drain the hitherto unsuccessful Halkyn Mines. Although we can nowhere find any explicit reference to the fact, we feel sure he must have been put in charge of the work under the general superintendence of John Taylor, and we know the mine became successful. When, in 1834, Taylor took over the Lisburne mines in Cardiganshire, he appears to have given Absalom some responsibility in respect of them, and it was probably through Absalom that Matthew was appointed Agent there. Matthew made a success of his work, and became Taylor's representative for all his Cardiganshire enterprises. Matthew had just returned from two years work in mines in South America, and would undoubtedly have much valuable experience to offer Taylor. His appointment with Taylor was not apparently a full-time one, for he had connections with other mines in the area which were independent of Taylor, e.g. Llewernog and Pen-y-Cefn. (7)

Relations between the Francises and Taylor were very cordial for some time. Just when John Taylor (jr) came on the scene in Wales is not clear, but it does seem from the letters that the deteriorating relationship has more connection with him than with his father. The first sign of trouble came in July 1836, when Absalom Francis's brother George was in some sort of strained relationship with the management of Wheal Betsy in Cornwall; this was one of the Taylors' mines, but there is no evidence that any of the Taylors had personally been involved in trouble with George. (8)

For the years up to 1840, the correspondence between Absalom and Matthew concentrated on the problems of working the Taylor mines in Cardiganshire, with Absalom clearly taking the responsibility for directing Matthew as to how to proceed at each critical point. They are clearly anxious to do well for the Taylors, but that some criticism of their work has been made in 1838 is apparent from a letter from Absalom to Matthew:-(9)

"...The thing I have to remind you of at present is that you must do everything to make the profits of this year £6000. I have told Mr. Taylor £4000 but he refers to your letter stating the returns to be 170 tons per month. Now he says if Capt. M's statement is true the profit must be more. I have endeavoured to explain this away by saying that we have not more than 10 months in the year at Lisburne Mines. I mean by the machinery and dressing being frozen 2 months in winter. However let us try to do our best this year at all events. To do this great attention must be paid to every department of the costs as well the returns must be drawn and getting the most ore from the best places will as well be a great object with you...."

These comments relate to Goginan Mine, which was being vigorously developed at the time.

By February 1840 Absalom was complaining to Matthew of 'the Queerness of the Taylors' and of 'their discontent'. (10). A month later he wrote:- (11)

"...I find...that Mr. Taylor from Ireland (this was Meadows Taylor, another son of John senior) is appointed cashier and manager of accounts for Cardiganshire but he will not I think stop with the management of the accounts. I have no doubt he will be interfering in the management of the mines also... How this and other matters will end I am sure I don't know but must be prepared for the worst...

...I would not ask the Taylors a favour if I could help it -- a short time now must throw some light on the subject. My salary at present amounts only to £400 per annum but they must make it as agreed £600. Mr. John (presumably John junior) has insulted Capt. Barratt of Coniston and Barratt kicks very much. It appears to me that they are tired of their agents or that they know too much of them or too much for them...."

It was at this time that Absalom's brother George, who had apparently been transferred by Taylor to one of his mines in Ireland, was finally dismissed from Taylor's service. Matthew's father, Henry Francis, wrote to him in April:- (12)

"I have received from Brother George, hope ere long we shall see him in a good situation. What is the stir between Brother Absalom and Mr. John Taylor. I am sorry for it but what can induce Mr. T. to carry it against another branch of the family."

During this difficult time Absalom was clearly trying hard to please the Taylors. He administered a sharp rebuke to Matthew for a mistake in his accounts which he thought would anger them, (13) and he told him that Taylor required regular accounts from the Goginan Mine whether or not shortage of water prevented it from working.(14). He added: "The Taylors are very queer".

By the beginning of 1841 John Taylor (sen) had been writing directly to Matthew, who had given his younger brother, another Absalom, some temporary employment at one of Taylor's mines. Matthew replied: (15)

"...In your letter in which you were vexed you said that Mr. Taylor (jr) said that the mines connected with you in the County are worse managed

than any of his other mines....With respect to my Brother being at Darren Mine, was a secondary thing to me as he was only attending while Capt.Reid was and is busy putting in the adit at Cwmsymlog and which I had agreed to without consulting you...."

Clearly matters were coming to a head, and in April 1841 we learn that Absalom, Matthew's uncle, had already been dismissed. Matthew was to continue with the Taylors, but under the direct supervision of John (jr) and with a resident consulting engineer, James Morcom, to advise him.(16) Two months later we learn that George Fossett, Taylor's son-in-law, and an old friend of Matthew's, was being sent to Cardiganshire instead of Meadows Taylor, whose appointment there had been threatened over a year earlier. (17) It would seem that the Taylors were closing in around Matthew. He must have suggested as much to his uncle, for a few weeks later the latter wrote: "...do you think they have an eye still further in lopping off the Franciss from them." (18) He was evidently still smarting from his dismissal, for he added:-

"I know it will be right to try and make ourselves prepared for the worst, as it is impossible to say to what extent pride and ignorance may carry them."

By April 1842 there had been an angry exchange of letters between John Taylor (jr) and Matthew, which, although later made public, we first learn of from a letter from Fossett, (19) who seems to have taken Matthew's side, at least according to what he told Matthew. Fossett said that John Taylor (sen) had been much impressed by Matthew's arguments regarding the proper way to run the mines. Nevertheless, the blow fell finally on 4 July 1842, when John Taylor (sen) wrote to Matthew as follows:-(20)

"It is with considerable pain that I find myself called upon to announce to you that the connection which has subsisted between us for some time must be terminated and that I cannot continue you in the management of the mines lately under your charge.

It would be useless and disagreeable to me to enter upon the reasons which compel me to take this step. I will only say that I have as carefully as I can, considered the subject with every disposition to give a preponderance in your favour and that I have come reluctantly to the conviction that it is my duty to make an essential alteration in the whole system that has been pursued and that this could not be effectively done while you continued to direct our affairs.

You will therefore please communicate at once with my son and surrender your charge of the mines to him or such person as he may appoint, and I shall desire Mr.Fossett to pay you your salary to the end of September Month.

It is my sincere wish to part with you in the most amicable manner and be of any service to you hereafter that may lay in my power or that circumstances may permit and with every wish for your future welfare, I am, Yours very truly, John Taylor".

So ended the Taylor-Francis connection.

What were the real causes of the bad feeling between the Taylors and the Francises? It is surprising how little comes out of the quite lengthy correspondence. Of course, it is only a fragment that has survived; we have none of Matthew's letters to his uncle, and very little of the correspondence between the Taylors and the Francises. It is easy enough to see the

bad feeling between Matthew and John (jr), and this may have been due to faults on both sides. It is apparent that Matthew was somewhat slipshod in his management of the accounts and this may have annoyed and frustrated the efficient Taylors. Moreover, we know from our general study of Matthew's later activities that he was not over-scrupulous in his business, was often untruthful, and was quite callous about not paying his bills. However capable he was technically, it is not difficult to see how he might have annoyed the Taylors. It is more puzzling that Absalom should have been sacked first, for we have no reason to doubt his integrity, sincerity, and competence. He was very highly regarded in the mining world. One clue may lie in the interest - financial and managerial interest, that is - which the Francises took in other mines in Wales and elsewhere, mines which were competing with the Taylors. One can perhaps sense the resentment which the Taylors might have felt at some of their senior agents holding shares in such competing companies. Absalom sensed this when he wrote to Matthew in February 1840 thus:- (21)

"...you must decide for yourself about the number of shares you carry on in Darrian (sic) and Cwmsymlog. I have taken two only and two in (illegible name). I should have taken more but for the Queerness of the Taylors and have written Mr. Dick Williams in answer to a letter from him stating his regret at my not carrying on larger shares stating my reasons for not carrying on the shares affixed to my name.....I begin to think he is the cause of their discontent...."

Unfortunately we know nothing about the man Williams.

There are still many puzzling questions in this matter, and it is to be hoped that more relevant papers may come to light.

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REFERENCES

1. The Druid Inn MSS (hereafter referred to as DI). For a short general account of this collection see Mary Tucker, "Source material for metal mining history: the Druid Inn Papers at the National Library of Wales", Bull Peak Dist. Mines Hist. Soc, 7, 1977
2. W.J. Lewis, "Lead Mining in Wales", Cardiff, 1967, p.210
3. Ibid, p175
4. For a family tree and other brief notes, see D.E. Bick, "The Old Metal Mines of Mid-Wales", Part 1, Pound House, Newent, Glos, 1974 pp.48-9
5. A. Francis, "History of the Cardiganshire Mines", Aberystwyth, 1874
6. This date is suggested by a letter from R. Bennett to J.W. Chilcott, dated 8 March 1826, Cornwall C.R.O. DDJ 1383A, but Lewis, op.cit. suggests it was 'around 1820'.
7. See, e.g. various letters from R. Dunkin to M. Francis in 1840, DI (Smythe collection)
8. Letter from Absalom to Matthew, 1 July 1836, DI
9. Ibid, 22 April 1838
10. Ibid, 24 Feb. 1840
11. Ibid, 29 March 1840

12. Letter from Henry Francis to Matthew, 27 April 1840, DI
13. Letter from Absalom to Matthews, 17 April 1840, DI
14. Ibid, 30 April 1840
15. Letter from Matthew Francis to John Taylor (sen), 12 Jan 1841, DI
16. Two Letters from John Taylor (jr) to Matthew, both 17 April 1841, DI
17. Letter from Geo. Fossett to Matthew, 30 June 1841, DI
18. Letter from Absalom to Matthew, 20 Aug. 1841, DI
19. Letter from Geo. Fossett to Matthew, 26 April 1842, DI
20. Letter from John Taylor (sen) to Matthew, 4 July 1842, DI
21. Letter from Absalom to Matthew, 24 Feb. 1840, DI