

The Leckhampton Riots 1902 and 1906

In 1894 the Trye family sold the entire Leckhampton Estate, including the quarries on the hill. The new quarry owner was Henry Dale, of Dale, Forty Company, who made and sold pianos in Cheltenham.

For years, the hill had been popular as a place of leisure and thoroughfare for local people. Being keen to develop the quarries on the hill, Dale refused to recognise any of the informal paths and rights of way.

In 1897 Dale built Tramway Cottage on the site which had been regularly used on bank holidays for swings, slides, coconut shies, stalls and refreshments. This cottage also blocked the main footpath to the hill.

There was much opposition! After a parish meeting on March 8th 1902 several hundred people gathered on the hill and removed fences and obstructions left by Mr Dale. They repeated this on Good Friday and 7th July, which led to four "Leckhampton Stalwarts" appearing in court.



Demolishing the fences after the Parish Meeting

On July 15th, after their acquittal, the four men and a crowd of 2,000 people left Cheltenham and made for the hill. They attacked the Quarryman's Cottage (Tramway Cottage) setting it alight and razing it to the ground.



Stalwarts at Cheltenham Police Station

Ballinger is wearing a bowler hat and Heaven a flat cap

A committee was set up (the "Leckhampton Stalwarts"), which included Messrs Ballinger, Burford, Harding, Sparrow, Francis Mourton and George Townsend.

The ringleaders were working men but were supported by professional residents on the hill, including G B Witts, a magistrate and Chairman of the Rural District Council.



The "Leckhampton Stalwarts" standing in the ruins of Tramway Cottage

Townsend, Barrett,--, Luce, Tom Field, Ballinger, Heaven, Price (seated), Sparrow, Burford, Mourton and George Richings.



George Backhouse Witts, who set up a defence fund for the stalwarts...and had to read the Riot Act in 1906



...and the box in which he kept the paperwork!



Miss Dorothea Beale, Principal of Cheltenham Ladies' College

Miss Beale, showed her indignation by asking Dale to remove the pianos from the school, which had been hired from his firm.



COMMENCING TO ASCEND THE HILL.

Good Friday 1902 Comic Procession for Rights of Way Dispute



GOOD FRIDAY 1906 RIOTS

Good Friday 13th April 1906

Thousands of people thronged Leckhampton Hill, as they had always done on a bank holiday. Trams ran up to the top of Leckhampton Road every 5 minutes. Coconut shies and drinks stalls lined Daisy Bank Road.

The dispute was now focussed on "16 acre piece" where fencing closed off the paths



Cartoon from Cheltenham Chronicle and Graphic

Eight rioters were charged with "***being riotously and tumultuously assembled together to the disturbance of the public peace and feloniously unlawfully and with force begin to demolish a certain house.***"

It started with six men breaking down fencing on Middle Jenny path and setting it alight. Eventually 400 ft of fencing was on fire.

Then, more people threw stones, breaking 23 windows at the rebuilt Tramway Cottage. More stones rained down on the roof, breaking tiles.



Mr. Witts tried warning the crowd, to no avail. Stones knocked a policeman's helmet off. Then the cottage door was broken down. Mr Witts had no choice but to read The Riot Act and the crowd had to disperse.



Reading the Riot Act outside Tramway Cottage



Middle Jenny with Fencing in place



Destroying Middle Jenny fencing

Burning trees and fencing



The evening of 13th April 1906

Twenty fires raged in and near the woods and bushes were aflame on the hill. The *Echo* described it as "*the line of brilliant flame, overhung with a pall of smoke, stretched away down the slope, gorse fires in all directions.*"

The story of the fight

An extract

By George Townsend, who lived next to The Wheatsheaf in Old Bath Road

In simple language I'll relate
A story I've brought up to date
Please give attention if you will
My subject is Leckhampton Hill.

For twenty years, as I can tell,
I've roamed upon Leckhampton Hill,
And no one ever dared to say,
You have no right to come this way.

People came from miles around
A healthier spot could not be found:
The scenery, too, is something grand,
For miles below is table land.

At Easter and at Whitsuntide
Children came for a donkey ride
The boys they would their sweethearts bring
And play at kissing in a ring.

The cocoanut shies were there of course,
And the "Frosty Green" with his long purse:
And all our faces seemed to say
How we've enjoyed our holiday.

But alas! Here come a tale;
The hill is sold to H. J. Dale;
Who says, all this I can not stand,
You have no right upon this land!

I'll fence it in, the old man thought,
Though only four rights I've bought:
The turf and trees, the game, and stone—
But when it's fenced " 'twill be my own".

And so it goes on to tell the tale of the Riots

PRISON AND AFTERWARDS

Friday 6th July 1906 The 8 stalwarts were found guilty of creating a riot and the attempt to demolish Tramway Cottage.

Williams, Sparrow, Barrett, Wallace, Young and Luce were sentenced to 4 months Hard Labour.

Ballinger and Heaven's sentences were for 6 months Hard Labour

11th July The Home Secretary agreed to look at the case, after the local MP appealed to him.

16th July A petition of 9000 signatures was sent to the Home Secretary Mr. Herbert Gladstone to appeal against the bias of the judge and asking for the sentences to be quashed or mitigated as the men acted in the defence of public rights.

The Home Secretary reduced the sentences by one third.

Walter Ballinger in WW1



Ballinger is standing at the back in the bowler hat.

Walter Ballinger volunteered for 1st Gloucestershire Royal Engineer Volunteers and was in the 113th (Railway Company) of the Royal Engineers. As he left Cheltenham 6th January 1915 he told the Echo reporter:

"I'm off to fight for what I'm not allowed to walk over."

Ballinger wrote from the Front

"Yes, I am often reminded of my native town by surroundings, especially when I see the hills in the distance. My mind wanders back to the days when I was but a youth, when roaming Leckhampton Hill ...every part was free to the public. But alas! When I see the barbed-wire here, I am reminded of the narrow paths with a wire fence either side, so that no one shall swerve either to the right or to the left, but keep to the footpath and that is on Leckhampton Hill! Today we are fighting a different foe, and we will never quit the field until we have conquered this foe". I remain, yours very sincerely, Walter Ballinger, Corpl R.E. In the Field 22nd July 1915."

Walter Ballinger, described by his Commanding Officer: *"Corporal Ballinger, who, big fellow that he is, writes with the smallest hand of the 451 soldiers whose notes we have read, has carried very poignant recollections of his beloved hill with him to the front."*

Walter Ballinger survived the war and returned to live back in sight of his beloved hills until 1939.



29th October 1906 Ballinger and Heaven on their release from Gloucester gaol at 1 Karoo Cottages, Church Lane, Leckhampton, home of Ballinger's mother.

Left back: George Townsend . Front: Young, Mrs Ballinger , Heaven and Ballinger



George Townsend, ran a bakery next to the Wheatsheaf, in Old Bath Road and wrote poems and ballads of the riots.

On the evening of their release, the Leckhampton Riots Committee held a **Smoking Concert in the Skittle Alley of the Wheatsheaf** with speeches and songs. Over 100 of the men smoked using "Church Warden's" pipes.



By 1927, the Quarry Company had gone out of business. 1929 Cheltenham Town Council bought the 400 acre estate. Everyone now could walk freely over Leckhampton Hill.

The Mayor dedicated the Hill to Public Use on 25th September, before a large crowd that included the remaining Leckhampton Stalwarts who were still alive, seen at the bottom left of the above picture: Walter Ballinger, Ernest Young and Leonard Luce.

The victory was theirs.