

80th Anniversary of the Jarrow March

5-31 October 1936



The March

After suffering years of high unemployment and deprived social conditions, it was decided by the Jarrow Borough Council on 20 July 1936 to present a petition to Parliament asking for the re-establishment of industry in the town. To deliver it, a deputation of 200 men from Jarrow would march 300 miles to London, raising awareness of the town's situation.

The march was referred to as a "crusade", partly to emphasise the seriousness of the situation and partly to distinguish themselves from the "hunger marches" carried out by the National Unemployed Worker's Movement during the 1920s and 30s. The NUWM had Communist connections, and the Jarrow crusade was firmly non-partisan. The march attracted broad local support, including that of the local political parties (Labour, Conservative and Liberal), and the marchers included Labour, Liberal, Conservative and Communist supporters. The town could not spend taxpayers' money on the demonstration, but about 200,000 letters were sent to other corporations, trade unions and cooperative societies, raising money for a march fund. The initial target was £800; by 13 October the fund contained £850, and ultimately nearly double the target amount was raised.

The marchers left Jarrow on 5 October 1936. They carried blue and white banners and the petition, bearing 11,000 signatures, bound in blue hand-tooled leather and kept in an oak box with gold lettering. Only men were appointed to march, having first been medically checked by the Local Medical Officer; however, they were accompanied for much of the journey by the MP for Jarrow, Ellen Wilkinson. Before the marchers set out, their boots were heeled and soled; two pairs of socks and two iodine soles were issued to each marcher. All men were provided with waterproofs and 1s 6d pocket money and two 1d stamps a week. A second-hand bus was bought for £20 to carry cooking equipment, and groundsheets were provided for outside rests. Medical students from the Inter-Hospital Socialist society accompanied the marchers, in relays of two at a time, as medical attendants. One unexpected addition was a Labrador, Paddy. Music provided by a mouth-organ band encouraged the marchers on.

On arrival in London, the marchers were well-received; large crowds watched them make their way to Marble Arch. A demonstration was held in Hyde Park Corner, and a public meeting in Memorial Hall in Farringdon Street, with speakers including the founder of the Peace Pledge Union. Ellen Wilkinson presented the Jarrow petition to the House of Commons on 4 November, watched from the gallery by some of the marchers; a second petition, signed by residents of other Tyneside towns, was handed in by Conservative Sir Nicholas Gratton-Doyle, the longest-serving MP in the Newcastle area. Unfortunately, there was little immediate effect. Wilkinson asked the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, to receive a deputation of the men after they arrived in London, but he said he was “too busy”. The petition was not debated in Parliament. However, a ship-breaking yard and engineering works were established in Jarrow in 1938; the Consett Iron Company started a steelworks in 1939, and the start of the Second World War led to industry prospering because of the need for rearmament. Today, a statue stands in Jarrow’s town centre to commemorate the crusade.



Spirit of Jarrow statue

The route

Route of Jarrow March, October 1936

Stage	Date (1936) ^[95]	From ^[95]	To ^[95]	Distance ^[95]
1	5 October	Jarrow	Chester-le-Street	12 miles (19 km)
2	6 October	Chester-le-Street	Ferryhill	12 miles (19 km)
3	7 October	Ferryhill	Darlington	12 miles (19 km)
4	8 October	Darlington	Northallerton	16 miles (26 km)
5	9 October	Northallerton	Ripon	17 miles (27 km)
	10 October	Rest day		—
	11 October	Rest day		—
6	12 October	Ripon	Harrogate	11 miles (18 km)
7	13 October	Harrogate	Leeds	15 miles (24 km)
8	14 October	Leeds	Wakefield	9 miles (14 km)
9	15 October	Wakefield	Barnsley	10 miles (16 km)
10	16 October	Barnsley	Sheffield	13 miles (21 km)
11	17 October	Sheffield	Chesterfield	12 miles (19 km)
	18 October	Rest day		—
12	19 October	Chesterfield	Mansfield	12 miles (19 km)
13	20 October	Mansfield	Nottingham	14 miles (23 km)
14	21 October	Nottingham	Loughborough	15 miles (24 km)
15	22 October	Loughborough	Leicester	11 miles (18 km)
16	23 October	Leicester	Market Harborough	14 miles (23 km)
17	24 October	Market Harborough	Northampton	17 miles (27 km)
	25 October	Rest day		—
18	26 October	Northampton	Bedford	21 miles (34 km)
	27 October	Rest day		—
19	28 October	Bedford	Luton	19 miles (31 km)
20	29 October	Luton	St Albans	10 miles (16 km)
21	30 October	St Albans	Edgware	11 miles (18 km)
22	31 October	Edgware	Marble Arch, London	8 miles (13 km)
			Total	291 miles (468 km)

At every stopping point along the route meetings were held to raise awareness of Jarrow (and other areas like it) and its demands. One marcher said that “We were more or less missionaries of the distressed areas, [not just] Jarrow”. They met with extremely positive responses throughout the crusade. When they reached the Harrogate Concert Rooms, hundreds were there to cheer them on, with a banner saying “Harrogate workers welcome the Jarrow marchers”. At Ripley and Killinghall, on the road from Ripon, villagers rushed to their doors to see the marchers go by; motorists waved as they passed. At Leeds, the marchers were given a donation to pay for their return trip by train; at Barnsley, they were able to use the municipal baths, which were heated specially (and Ellen Wilkinson had the women’s foam bath all to herself). In Nottingham, the marchers were given gifts of clothes and underwear from the city’s manufacturers, and at Leicester the Co-operative Society’s bootmakers worked through the night without pay to repair the marchers’ boots. Hospitality was offered by local branches of all the main political parties; Council David Riley, the march’s main organiser and chief marshal, said, “I never thought there was so much generosity and good nature in the world”.



Inter-Hospital Socialist Society students treating blisters

Social Context: Jarrow and the north-east

Jarrow, like much of Tyneside, was reliant on the shipbuilding and steel industries for jobs. Palmer's shipyard was founded in Jarrow in 1852, and launched more than 1000 ships. At one point, it was the largest shipbuilder in the country. However, it suffered a decline in the 1920s, partly due to mismanagement and partly in line with conditions elsewhere. Britain's economy experienced an initial boom after the First World War, but was hit by a slump in April 1920; it continued to suffer throughout the 1920s and 30s, particularly after the Great Depression began in 1929. Unemployment figures were particularly high in industries such as coal mining, shipbuilding, iron and steel and textiles, which were concentrated in the north of England. One-third of all British shipyards closed between the end of the First World War and the mid-1930s, one of which, in 1934, was Palmer's. Losing such a major employer hit Jarrow hard. The town already had problems with poverty, overcrowding, poor housing and high mortality rates; this compounded them. Ellen Wilkinson, elected as MP for Jarrow in 1935, wrote about it in a book called *The Town that was Murdered*, describing Jarrow as "utterly stagnant. There was no work. No one had a job except a few railwaymen, officials, the workers in the co-operative stores, and a few workmen who went out of town [...] the plain fact [is] that if people have to live and bear and bring up their children in bad houses on too little food, their resistance to disease is lowered and they die before they should".

Residents were dying of malnutrition: the death rates of both adults and children in Jarrow were among the highest in the country, and the incidence of deaths from tuberculosis was double the national average. One helper along the route described how he saw a marcher take the ham from inside his sandwich and put it in an envelope. When asked what he was doing he replied, "I'm sending it home ... my family haven't had meat in the house for six weeks."

Plans to replace Palmer's with a steelworks plant were frustrated by opposition from the British Iron and Steel Federation, whose members wished to avoid competition. The President of the Board of Trade, Walter Runciman, insisted that "Jarrow must work out its own salvation". The failure of the steelworks plan, and the lack of prospects for long-term employment, was a major factor in the decision to march.



Unemployed men, Jarrow, 1934

History of industrial disputes in the UK

The Jarrow Crusade was just one action among many in the history of the labour movement in the UK. This list gives a brief overview of some other protests and industrial disputes which took place in the UK.

- **1775—Liverpool Seamen's Revolt.** After receiving a cut in wages seamen cut down the rigging of all ships in the harbour, held protest marches and (after being fired upon, despite being unarmed) bombarded the Town Hall with cannons.
- **1834—Tolpuddle Martyrs.** Six men from Tolpuddle, Dorset, founded the Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers, protesting the lowering of agricultural wages and refusing to work for less than 10 shillings a week. Trade unions had not been illegal since the repeal of the Combination Acts ten years previously but the men were convicted of “swearing secret oaths” under the Unlawful Oaths Act and transported to Australia. A protest march was held, and they were pardoned.
- **1857-58—Aberdare strike.** After rumours of a reduction of wages for coal miners in South Wales, attempts were made to negotiate with the mineowners to limit the reduction if possible. When these attempts failed, thousands of miners went on strike.
- **1888—London matchgirls' strike.** Workers at the Bryant & May factory went on strike over poor working conditions, which included 14-hour work days, low pay and the serious (sometimes fatal) health problems caused by working with white phosphorus. The strike resulted in improved conditions for the workers, and in 1901 the factory stopped using white phosphorus.
- **1889—London dock strike.** 100,000 dock workers went on strike for higher pay, establishing several trade unions in the process. While craft unions were already in existence, this marked the growing importance of the New Unions of casual, unskilled and poorly-paid workers. The strike attracted a great deal of public support.

- **1911—Liverpool general transport strike.** After the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union announced a nationwide merchant seamen's strike in June 1911, other groups of workers, including dockers, railway workers, tramworkers and sailors, went on strike in solidarity. Liverpool commerce was severely affected for most of the summer of 1911. Major increases in union membership resulted, and general trade unions were greatly strengthened; Merseyside trade unionism was transformed.
- **1926—The General Strike.** When plans to cut miners' wages were announced, the TUC promised to support them, calling a general strike; the participants were railwaymen, transport workers, printers, dockers, ironworkers and steelworkers. The TUC were surprised by the workers' reaction; on the first day of the strike, the number of strikers was over 1.5 million. Transport was brought to a standstill. The strike lasted nine days and remains the only general strike in British history.
- **1975-78—Grunwick dispute.** Workers from Grunwick Film Processing Laboratories struck over low pay and poor working conditions. The strike was notable for receiving widespread union support despite being composed mainly of female workers from ethnic minorities (unlike previous similar disputes), and was seen as a turning point for UK race relations.
- **1984-85—Miners' strike.** In response to the increased closure of collieries, the National Union of Miners called a strike. This was the largest British strike since the 1926 General Strike, with over 26 million days of work lost. There was strong opposition from the Thatcher government, and violent clashes between strikers and police; it was the most violent British industrial dispute of the 20th century. After almost a year, the strike ended, with little success. The defeat of the NUM significantly weakened the UK trade union movement.

Relevant titles in the Inner Temple Library

The law of industrial action and trade union recognition (2011) - Bowers, Duggan and Reade (TEXTS: Bow)

Contracts of employment (1997) - Dix (TEXTS: Dix)

Harvey on industrial relations and employment law (1972) - Perrons (ed.) (TEXTS: Har)

Labour relations and the law: a comparative study (1965) - Kahn-Freund (INT. LAW: Kah)

Labour law and industrial relations in Great Britain (1986) - Hepple and Fredman (LEGAL MISC: Hep)

The legal history of trade unionism (1930) - Hedges and Winterbottom (LEGAL HIST: Hed)

The Tolpuddle martyrs (1934) - Firth (HIST: Fir)

Trade union law (1979) - Kidner (EDS: Kid)

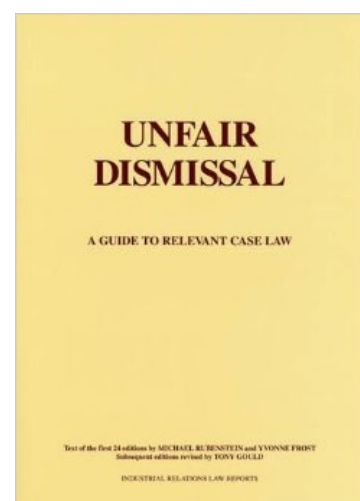
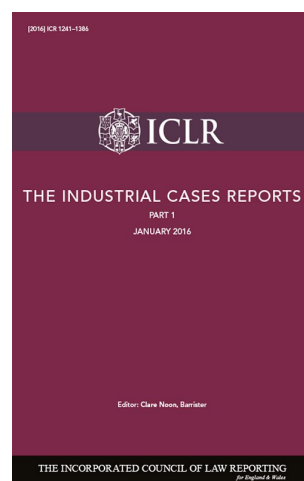
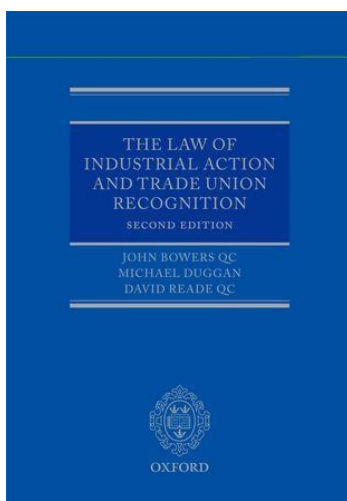
Industrial Cases Reports (LAW REPS)

Industrial Court Reports (LAW REPS)

Industrial Relations Law Reports (LAW REPS)

Knight's Industrial Law Reports (LAW REPS)

Unfair dismissal: a guide to relevant case law (2016) - revised by Tony Gould (LAW REPS—with Industrial Relations Law Reports)



HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Wednesday, 4th November, 1936.

The House met at a Quarter before Three of the Clock, Mr. SPEAKER in the Chair.

PETITIONS (JARROW).

Miss WILKINSON: I beg to ask leave to present to this Honourable House the Petition of the people of Jarrow praying for assistance in the resuscitation of its industry. During the last 15 years Jarrow has passed through a period of industrial depression without parallel in the town's history. Its shipyard is closed. Its steelworks have been denied the right to reopen. Where formerly 8,000 people, many of them skilled workers, were employed, only 100 men are now employed on a temporary scheme. The town cannot be left derelict, and therefore your Petitioners humbly pray that His Majesty's Government and this honourable House should realise the urgent need that work should be provided for the town without further delay.

Sir NICHOLAS GRATTAN-DOYLE: I beg to ask leave to present a Petition signed by 68,502 people on Tyneside and adjacent areas on behalf of the town of Jarrow. This humble Petition sheweth that, whereas for 15 years Jarrow has endured industrial depression without parallel in the town's history, all efforts for the resuscitation of the industry have failed, and the future holds no prospect of work for its many thousands of unemployed. Therefore, your Petitioners humbly pray that the necessary act of assistance be given by the Government for the provision of work in the town of Jarrow.

The petitions are presented to the House