MY LIFE IN BROMLEY COLLIERY 1917 - 1922

by A.H.Parsons

This article by Mr. Parsons is an authentic and remarkably vivid recollection by a member of BIAS about his early life as a coal miner in Bromley Colliery, at a time when the North Somerset Coal-field was still in full production. On 30 May 1970 Mr. Parsons led a BIAS Field Party to visit the sites of Pensford and Bromley Collieries. The occasion was a fascinating piece of industrial archaeology, enlivened by Mr. Parsons' commentary, and it was as a result of this that we asked him to set down his reminiscences on paper. We are delighted to publish them here.
Editor

It was in 1917 that I reached the age of 14 and this meant I could join my brothers Clarence and Frank in this colliery and could now be a wage earner and have pocket money, and also the privilege of wearing "long trousers" for the first time. My father bought me a second-hand, hard-tyred bicycle and equipped it with 2 oil lamps, front and rear. I found the local Bobbie was usually out waiting for miners without lights, especially rear lights. Mother fitted me out with moleskin trousers, which were white but tough for the wear they were put to.

We three set off from Tyning, Timsbury Bottom, at about 4.30 a.m. for the 5 mile journey and I noticed that we all speeded up about a mile from the pit. This was because according to what cage you went down in, so you came up at the end of the shift.

We parked our cycles in a tin shed belonging to Mr. Slocombe, for which we paid 3d per week, then went to draw our candles from the candle house. Sometimes you drew tallow, sometimes wax candles; the tallow ones were meant for working where there was plenty of air, the wax ones for where there was little air, as they would last longer. Our cottage had boxes full of these candles because sometimes we brought home spare candles. With tallow ones we greased our boots and father his leggings.

The cage we went down the shaft in was three-tier and held 10 of us, 4 standing up in the top deck, 3 crouched in the second and 3 crouched in the third. At a given signal the Banksman would pull a lever, signal to the Winding Engine man, and down we would plunge. For a time it took one's breath away and half-way down there was a steam pump which belched out steam. I soon learnt to cover my face with my hat to prevent being scalded.

On reaching the bottom, approximately 400 ft. down, we could walk erect for about half a mile to the top of the incline where we stopped and were allocated our jobs. My first job was to go with Charlie Beacham as an air coursing boy. For this I was given a roll of hessian, hammer and felt nails and my job was to enter old workings, where only a small boy could go, and nail the hessian up to divert the air to where the men were working. This was unpleasant because of the smell of decaying timber and stones falling from the roof. The stones had to be raked aside to enable one to crawl through.

My next job was to keep opening a huge door to allow the pit pony to come through with his load of trucks laden with coal. This door was hard to open and close because of the wind coming through the pit at this point!

After six months I was "promoted" to carting boy. This meant I had to find a miner who could make a guss for me, so off I went to find Joe Bailey, an ex-pert at this. He made the guss with a piece of rope 2 ins. wide and 4 ft. long, and a length of chain about 3 ft. long. The large link of the chain was then put through the rope, and the rope tied in a special knot, so with a crook of 3/8 in. mild steel, I was ready.

The putt was easy to come by underground. This was similar to a sledge and would hold, with the side-boards up, about 3 cwt. The putt was about 4 ft. long by 2 ft. 6 ins. wide and 10 ins. deep. The coal was collected from the men at the seam and you would then crawl out to the toppo and put the sideboards up. Then, having filled the putt as high as possible, it was trigged against the side. You then got in front, released the putt and this lowered you down to the bottom quite rapidly ready for loading into the truck which held about 10 cwt. You marked it with your number and the runner would come, leave an empty and take your load off. If the empty truck was wet it meant it was raining up above and your number might wash off, which meant you lost the load and also had a wet ride home. These trucks were occasion-ally referred to as Drams. On reaching the top they were sometimes tipped over and checked for stone or slate. If they contained more than 31 pounds of this material you would lose the whole load. When we reached home, Mother would have to get a meal

ready for the three of us and also sufficient hot water for three baths, all from kettles or saucepans heated over the coal fire in the kitchen. My elder brother was first to have his bath, the next one got ready to wash his back and so on. It was about 4.30 before my turn came.

The chalk for marking our trucks was bought from Rag and Bone travellers for 2d. It was discarded plate moulds 2 ins. thick that they got from Poultneys Potteries. These were soaked in a bucket of water for 2 or 3 hours, then placed in the oven over night and by the morning we broke them into quarters.

Mother always kept a box for each of us to put our pit clothes in. She was forever sewing patches on our trousers and if it was raining on our way home, you can imagine the clutter of clothes hanging around. If it rained going to work we just had to work in wet clothing, but as we never wore shirts underground, only our trousers mattered.

During the winter months we often had but an hour of daylight and we looked forward to Sunday to enjoy daylight and rest. Our cycles needed a lot of attention because in those days plenty of thorns, etc., caused punctures, or the chain would break and the free-wheel frequently let us down. On a Saturday, when Bristol City was playing at home, or if there was a local match on, we would leave home about 3.30 a.m. to catch the first cage clown and come up early.

About 1919 carbide lamps came in, which were a great step forward from candles. This was a lamp with a bowl about the size of a tennis ball, a stem to place in your hat and a sort of spout which contained the wick which led into the chamber of paraffin. These caused a dirty smeach and filled the area with black smoke. The oil lamps, however, were still used by those running the trucks in.

Some parts of the workings were very wet and this meant keeping a look-out for what we called "Bell Molds". These were fossilised tree trunks and they came down without warning, except that the pit props would give you a warning by cracking

– this meant a quick getaway.
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A toppo was cut out about 4 ft. high and 5 ft. wide then the men would work to either side 8 to 10 yards.

A new toppo meant a pretty easy day for the carting boy; he just loaded into his truck until the men worked farther up.

In place of the coal seams, which were about 2 ft. high, the "muck" as we called it, was thrown into the gaps; a wall was built on either side of the toppo to keep the roof up. Behind this wall, which we called "the gob", we went up to 100 yds., then commenced a fresh one.

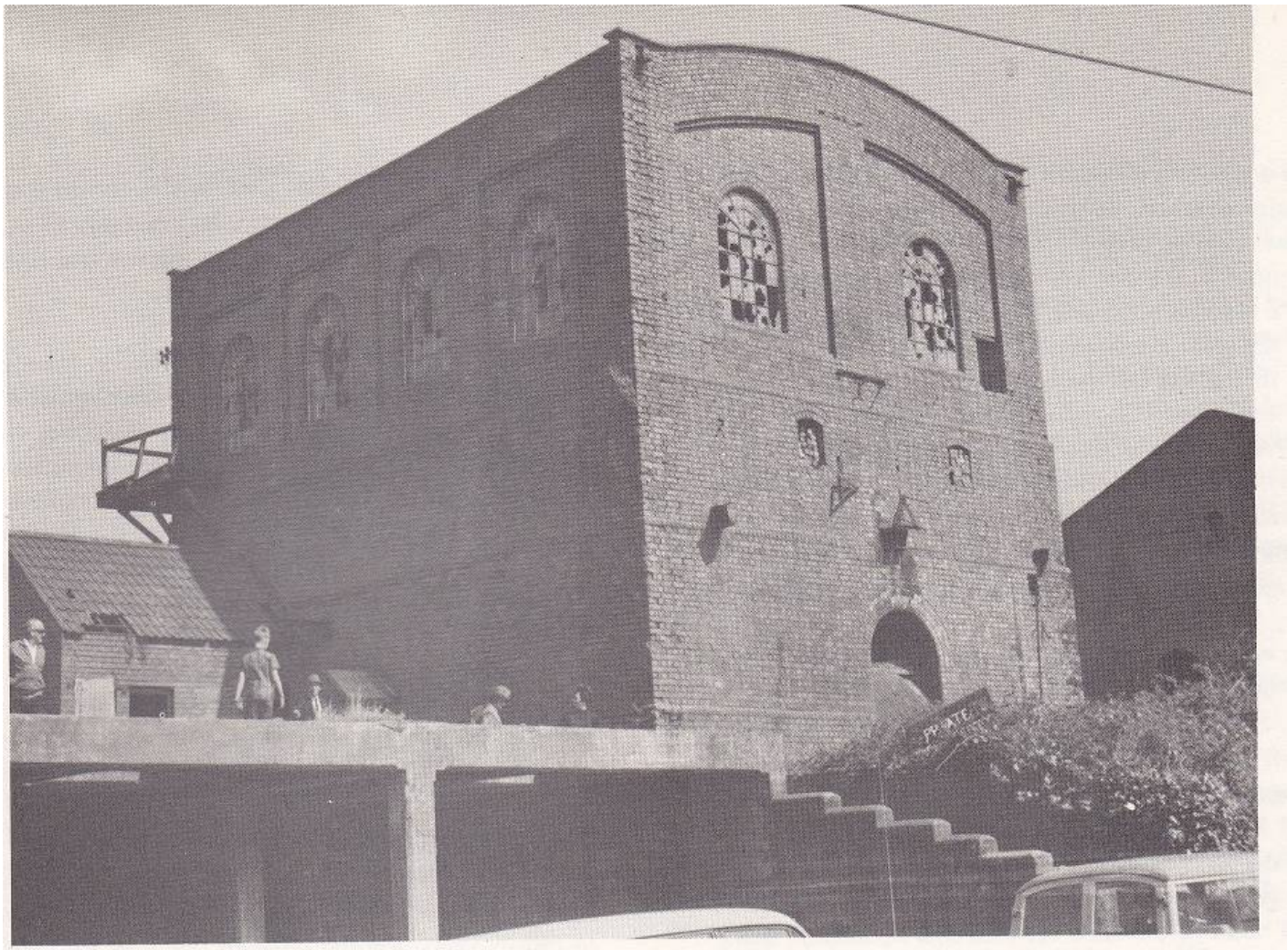
It was another easy day when the men had to bore the roof in the toppo to maintain the 4 ft. height. They bored into the rock a 2 in. hole for about 4 ft. This was done on the ratchet system and took two hours. Then the night shift fireman would come in with his explosives and blow it down. The debris was thrown in the gob.

The custom of old hands was to play jokes on new arrivals, whom they sent on all sorts of queer errands, such as to fetch a left-handed saw, etc.

The ponies in the pit were well cared for, good stables and plenty of oats and hay, but they wore blinkers all the time. To place the pony in the cage they took the centre deck floor out, trussed the pony up like a chicken ready for the oven, sat him on his behind and down he went. Any time the men were out for three days or more, the ponies were taken up and placed in a field.

The Underground Manager we had was too fond of smacking you on the naked back, as we never wore shirts, and wishing you ‘Good Morning’. In my early days he did this and made me cry. My brother asked me what was wrong and l told him. He waited in his toppo until the Manager came up and placed his arm over the timber, caught hold of his scarf and held him. It was a good job another man released him. My brother was called to the office the next day, but was let off. Mr. Sparks, the General Manager, knew of the habits of this boss and the value my brother was to him.

In 1919 we moved from Timsbury to Chelwood to be nearer the pits. From then until 1921 came a series of strikes and lockouts; this meant a rough time for our parents, so I joined the Wiltshire Regiment and was sent to Dublin in January 1922, where the I.R.A. was causing trouble - then to India for 4 years and China 3 years.



Pensford Colliery
The red-brick engine house photographed during the visit led by Mr. Parsons in May 1970.

Rhino Mine
A party being shown round by John Cornwell (centre). The entrance to the mine can be seen underneath the tree. The "hut" in the foreground houses the winding gear.

Smitham Chimney
The deteriorating condition of the stone- and brick-work can be clearly seen in this view of the chimney in April 1970.

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