HELLO, ARE YOU WORKING?

MEMORIES OF THE THIRTIES IN THE NORTH EAST OF ENGLAND

Published by Strong Words, Erdesdun Publications, 10, Greenhaugh Road, South Wellfield, Whitley Bay, Tyne & Wear, NE25 9HF, U.K. with the financial assistance of Northern Arts.

Typed by Pat Beynon and printed by the Tyneside Free Press Workshop, 5, Charlotte Square, Newcastle NE1 4XF, U.K.

CONTENTS

Photographic portraits of the contributors appear opposite each particular piece. Len Edmondson is pictured with his brother and is on the left of the photograph.

INTRODUCTION

In this collection we have brought together the words of some sixteen people who - in a variety of different ways - experienced the severity of the last Depression in the North East of England.

They have been brought together here because they all had things to say - to write down or to talk over - about an experience that was of great importance in their lives. A time which they often think about and reflect upon. Things which we felt were important for other people to read and listen to.

The nineteen thirties are remembered - perhaps above all else - for the unemployment. In 1929 some 1,341,000 people were registered as unemployed. By 1932 the figure had doubled and it stayed over the two million mark for three years. The North East then (as today) was one of the worst hit areas. The Hunger March from Jarrow - a town virtually made redundant by the closure of the steelworks and the shipyards - became a National symbol. In other parts of the area unemployment was as bad - in mining villages such as Crook and Stanley in County Durham over half the people were unemployed.

The effects of unemployment were deep and far reaching. Families were disrupted by the imposition of the Means Test and enforced migration of many sons and daughters out of the area. It affected work too. Even in the North East more people were at work than not (nationally, of course, new industries like motors and chemicals were established in these years) and there in factories and mines, the presence of the unemployed gave more power to the boss.

In reflecting upon these things, the need to relate to the present is a pressing one. In many respects things have changed so much. (One man we talked to mentioned that his father had always wished it were possible to return a hundred years after death to see what life was like; 'By damn, he'd think he was on a different planet if he did, wouldn't he?') But the similarities are there too.

Unemployment, the talk of 'scroungers' on the Dole, of Social Security 'snoopers' and the threat of fascism and the National Front are all important reminders of a past that will not stay locked away in the cupboards of historians.

To be born into a working class family in Britain around the turn of the century involved living a life that encompassed two world wars, a General Strike and a depression that lasted over ten years. In that same time the Labour Party was formed, elected into office and had its leadership incorporated into a National Government. On the world stage Russia was transformed by Bolshevism and in America the United States were emerging as the powerful centre of a new world capitalism.

Our hope is that this booklet does justice to some of the ideas feelings and experiences of that generation. Also that, in reading it, people of later generations will gain a greater understanding of their grandparents and of the past; of the nature of capitalism and the forces within it which create perpetual problems for working class people. Above all then, we hope that this booklet will be a help - today.

Several people have helped in making this booklet. All the people we talked to (including those whose accounts could not be included because of limited space) have our thanks. As do Nigel Gray, who initially encouraged several of the contributors to write down their experiences and Val Gillespie who interviewed John Bell.

D.LAWTHER

I collected, marched and read

I collected in small lots (each one was a gain),
tea, sugar tins of food for fighters out in Spain.
Pennies, bobs and tanners, we hoped would help support
their cause. On street corners we young folk would exhort
each passer-by, be they worker or his wife,
to offer what they could for men who offered life.
In nineteen-thirty-seven people could not hear
the rifle next-door as the jackboot swaggered near.
Insulated by the sea and reports anon.,
in bulk, the pale, pathetic peoples plodded on.
Collect, collect. Give pamphlets out, speak up and say
defeat in Spain will be Europe's blackest day.
Our frantic cries were a whisper. The dying groans
of Brigadiers were not news like Potato Jones.
Clifford Lawther, Fox and Nothan, Jobling, Johnson,
Edward and William Tattam, Bright, Denison -
names of the dead vanguard in 'Thirty-Eight, a few
of those whose ranks, within two years to millions grew!

I marched on May Days with the miners;
marched with dozens to protest
against the Munich agreement -
only dozens, but the best.

Marched in London to hear Robeson,
marched with Peace Pledge Union folk
and with communists and others,
tens of thousands, ranks unbroke.
I remember how the police
shuvved us, and the marshall's call:
'Don't shuv back, or the procession
will be bust-up,flags an' all!'

I read pamphlets, minutes, speeches,
joined the R.P.A. and read
books by humanists, freethinkers,
some still living, some long dead.
Read the Herald, John Bull, Reynolds,
Plebs and Sunday Referee,
read the Worker and the Tribune,
Challenge and my Arthur Mee.
Swallowed up Gollancz's Book Club
Fast as they could turn them out.
Where have all the papers gone to?
Where's a truly angry shout?

TERENCE MONAGHAN

Hello, are you working?

The Depression days were bitter days, never to be forgotten days, which left myself and many better equipped people with a complex we have never shed. We were so short of things, so belittled in every way, in every aspect of life that we grew up to manhood with a complex. When you met somebody in those days the greeting wasn't 'Hello, how are you?' or 'How's the family?' Always the greeting was 'Hello, are you working?' You grew up with this complex. You were afraid of things. You were nulled. It means that you were afraid. There's more to it than just being afraid. You were humbled, cowed. There's a tremendous lot of descriptions you can apply to the word 'nulled'. You were nulled because of circumstances. Because of life.

Families

I never got close to my father but I got very close to my mother because she was that kind of a person. My father was a very quiet man. Never laid a hand on any of us in our lives. A reserved man. He was very deaf. That also made him an introvert. My own children remember him as the man who sat behind the newspaper. That's how they remember their grandfather. He was a selfish man. If there was three scones he'd want the biggest one. He'd sit at the table with his knife and fork on the table before the meal was even prepared. He'd pick the newspaper up at night and read it as

quick as he could. Nobody would get the newspaper till he had read it. There was 2 newspapers on a Sunday. He would read one and sit on one.

There's no doubt about it men in that generation were the kingpin of the house. Other people cleaned their shoes. They had a special seat. Nobody dared sit in their seat. This kind of thing. My wife's father, nobody dared pass him in case their shadow went on his newspaper. This was a general kind of thing at that time. They were tyrants really in their own way.

My mother was a very kind person. She absolutely gave of herself completely. Like thousands of other women in those days, they gave of their all. She was a very strong woman. She used to go out to work. And apart from that she would bake huge batches of bread for the family. She took washing in just for coppers. We carried this washing considerable distances. They had to be washed. They had to be ironed very often. And they had to be carried away. She used to carry food from the market on a Saturday. As a child I couldn't lift the bags. And she would carry it because a tramcar was maybe tuppence. She was like lots of other women who were having to do the same thing. They would be in the market late on a Saturday night because they would get meat at a reasonable price. They would get maybe a few links of sausage wrapped around the meat. Very useful. They were wonderful folk, the women. She would buy fish heads and shoulders. She knew one fishmonger where she'd go where she always got decent shoulders on the fish head. She would boil them and she would extract the fish from them. Quite a considerable amount of fish too. With potato and parsley she made the most wonderful batches of fish cakes. It was another satisfying and good meal. She was always using her ingenuity. She would buy goose fat. So much a pound. She'd put that in the oven and render it down. This would produce a dripping and it made the most wonderful pastries.

Selling Yourself

As soon as I'd finished serving my time as a fitter I was out of work. When I was about 22 years of age I got employment with

Electrolux and underwent a week's training to sell water softeners. It was something that extracted the chalk from the water supply. The cheapest one was about £8 or £9. And people hardly had money for a loaf then. Well anyway, you had to knock at houses. And you had first of all to go to the public library and you had to procure from there the voters' register and you had to get all the names and addresses to cover enough streets for you to canvass in a week. You went to the door and you knocked at the door and you'd say 'Mrs. Nugent or 'Mrs. Monaghan' and immediately it broke the ice. But they didn't know it had been preconceived, that you'd been to the public library. You got no wage. Only commission on sales and a stamp on your card. Now, it must be remembered that after a certain number of stamps on your card you were in benefit again. So it was important for you to get these stamps on by hook or crook. Business was bad. People hadn't money for bread, let alone the luxury of a water softener. Sales were not up to expectations and a circular was distributed throughout the Newcastle area for all personnel to attend a meeting in the City Hall at a certain time and date. I attended and the room was very full of men, covering all age groups from early sixties to early twenties. When everyone was settled a very big man stood beside the blackboard. And he said 'Now this is what I think of you gathered here.' And on the blackboard he wrote in very large letters in white chalk the word 'SHITS'.

I looked around the room and not one moved or uttered one word of protest. Not one word. Not one man stood on his feet. The men of that period were completely demoralised. Needless to say, I informed the office in leaving that I knew we were down but there was no reason why we should also be kicked, and I would be handing in my demonstration gear the next day. The speaker was a big chap whose name was Mr. Bullen. I've never seen him from that day in the early thirties till now but if I had ever met him, no matter where, I would personally assault him.
He criticised the whole assembly for lack of sales. Not enough drive. Not enough canvassing. We were not pulling our weight. We'd have to do something about it. He was a very tall, burly man, impeccably dressed, and looked well fed. Some of the men in the room didn't look well fed.

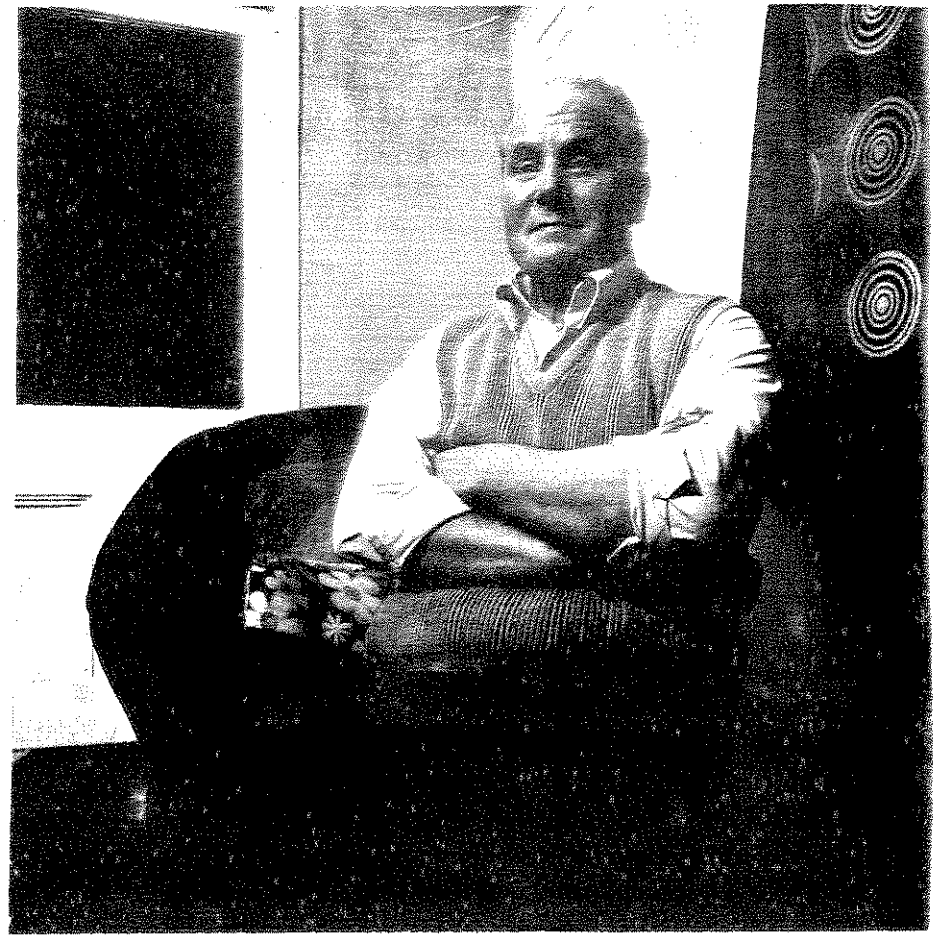
Getting By

One of the many impressions left with me is the processions of men, women and children that went scratting on the pit heaps and railway sidings for coal of any kind. The men pushed old cycles, without tyres; the women used old prams, and the children pushed pulled or trundled buggies and barrows of every description. I never had to do it myself but I remember seeing these people, white-faced and exhausted.

Men with a small tin of cheap black paint painted door knockers for 2d a time. If they made a shilling a day it was worth having. There were certain people who would repair kettles and pans. You couldn't replace a kettle or pan very easily. You had to try to keep the one going that you were using. And if you got a hole in it it was a catastrophe. My father couldn't do it. He couldn't hang a picture. If we wanted a kettle or a pan repaired we used to take it to one of these men and they would solder and repair it.It kept the vessel in use and it gave the man tuppence for himself. Word got round that Mr. So-and-So in Such-and-Such a street would do one thing and someone else would do a little bit of cobbling. They were trying to get by and you were trying to get it done as cheap as you could and this was the way it went on in communities. Even though we were living in a city there was a kind of rural community spirit. Within an area of several streets, you knew who the midwife was, you knew the best one to cobble a pair of shoes for 1/6d for you, and this kind of thing. You had to know these things. It was essential.

Politics never meant a thing to me at all. I was too mad keen on sport. I didn't wish to be involved. I remember the day the Jarrow marchers set off though. I remember speaking to one of the chaps when I was signing at the Dole at that time. I said, 'What about you and I going down to Jarrow and going with the marchers?' He said 'No, I'm not interested in marching.' Maybe if I'd got a pal I would have gone. But it was filthy weather I remember.

I wasn't too politically conscious - most people of my age weren't really politically conscious - but I remember Mosley and his Black Shirts vividly. The ones that I saw on Tyneside around Mosley at his meetings were all known for what they were – they were a lot of villains. I heard him speaking but I wasn't influenced by him at all. What I didn't like was, and I was involved in this in the city one day, I saw two Black Shirts giving a Jew in Blackett Street a hammering and of course I was young and I was fit and I jumped in, and I would do the same today if I saw two Black Shirts or two of the National Front assaulting somebody - I'd feel duty bound to go to that person's assistance. I was incensed that day because I'd seen it for the first time with my very own eyes. Now that was the Black Shirts attitude to a man who was born a Jew - I mean 'there but for the grace of God . . .' it could have been us, we could have been born a Jew just the same way. I thought that there's something basically wrong with this political party and I could never have thought of supporting it.



DICKIE BEAVIS

Never again

The miners felt betrayed after the 1926 strike. Betrayed and left on their own. A lot of people said, 'Never again, never again'. They had bills that long, to pay - from the colliery houses and all that. They were in debt to the masters and they wouldn't get a start if they didn't repay the debt. I was in the office one day and there was a bloody row on. They were setting men on, and when we came away from the office this lad was calling them 'rotten buggers' and I says to him 'What's the matter now?' He owed money from the '26 strike. They wouldn't give him a start. Right through the 1930s I remember that, 'Never again, Dickie . . . the bloody bills we've got to pay.'

The colliery houses have always been like the farmers' tied cottages, exactly the same. The owners had the whip hand, always the threat of eviction. And it was the same after nationalisation, you know. When they closed this pit in 1966 not one man would have gone and accepted it if they hadn't had the threat of eviction hanging over their heads. 'If you don't go we'll have to evict you from your houses.' It frightened the bloody life out of them. That's why I never had a colliery house. I was sent for twice to have one and I refused it both times because of that.

Down the Pit

When I started in the pit my mother said, 'You're not going.' And my eldest brother said, 'You're not going'. The whole family was in uproar because I dared to say I wanted to start in the pit. I was fourteen in 1928 and my mother kept me at school for another year. You know there was everybody standing about at the corner end. As a kid I didn't understand

it all, I just didn't understand. My mother said, 'There's no work, there's either the pits or the 'Hirings'. You had to go to Bishop Auckland where the farmers examined you - to see if you were fit enough to milk a cow. Well, the stories that used to come back from lads who'd been to the Hirings. They were living in little tiny white-washed huts miles away from anywhere. And my mother said 'You don't want to go up there!' So that left the pit.

Anyway, I started down there. When I went to get a start he said 'Come in the early morning shift.' You know about half-past twelve in the morning, and my mother wouldn't have got me up. I said, 'Oh! Can I come in the back shift?' He said 'What's the matter?' and I said, 'It's the lads I'm friendly with'. So he said, 'O.K. come in the back shift.' And I can tell you I went down that shift with a bloody little oil lamp, in the dark. The stables were about a hundred yards from the shaft and all the men were stripping off. The coal hewers would strip off just down to their shorts and boots and carry a big round water tank on their back. And then they went out along what they called the 'travelling roads' to the coal face. It was really hot and humid. And my job with the other lads, was tracing the tubs up the line from the putters who had brought them from the face, and they'd leave them for us and we'd trace up and down a thousand times in a shift! And the poor old ponies would be bumping their backs. And your lamp would go out and you'd be in the dark and have to light it again . . up and down.

So there I was, working eight hours, coming home black as the ace of spades, and as soon as I got home there was a squabble. Three brothers, all working in the pit - who got washed first. What a carry on! My poor old mother, she had the big washing pan and the first one in got the water, the second one followed on, and the next got what was left.

During the 1930s we were laid off quite often, and at one time the pit closed for about six months. (For 'economic reasons' although a lot of development went on down the pit during that time.) Anyway I spent my six months sojourn from the pit, picking coals from the pit heaps. Almost everyone in my young life experienced unemployment. It was just like self-preservation. The hardship was really severe. As a kid the first time I saw the River Wear I went with my father and elder brother right down to a pit heap about three or four miles from here - with the barrow. And there'd be people there all night digging huge

holes in the side of the pit heap to get coal for the fires. There were mothers and wives and younger ones fetching sandwiches and a can of tea.

You've got to understand that then, everything was cooked on the fire. We hadn't even a gas ring in them days. And my old mother was only too glad when I came back with a barrowful of coal and some bits of wood for her to do the baking. Because it was baking one day, w ishing the next day, serving the next day and hookey mats the next day. That was my old mother's life. When I look back - she was a proper slave to all of us. A slave and nothing else. She was a real good mother, she brought up a big family, and now I appreciate everything she did for us . .

Blood on the Coal

I always remember as I was walking to school passing the graveyard where all the miners who were killed in the Tudhoe Colliery were buried. On each tombstone was the inscription:

> Here lies the body of . . . . .
> Who died, not on the battlefield red
> Where the red blood is shed
> But at Tudhoe Colliery
> Earning his daily bread.

A hell of a lot of miners were killed down the mines after that. There was an explosion in Dean and Chapter in 1931. And one man was killed. I wasn't down the pit at that time but there was a controversy over it. The man who was killed was unfinancial (he hadn't kept up with his union dues) like hundreds of others and the union wouldn't recognise him so he had no legal representation at the Inquiry. And I talked with the Deputy who gave evidence - he was a near nervous wreck. Within two weeks he had had his notice and had left the pit.

There have been no end of accidents in the pits. Ferryhill pit used to be called 'The Slaughterhouse' - one a week used to die over there.

My brother was killed down the pit. He was a pumper. There were a lot of dips in the pits and the water used to be pumped out of the dip - where the miners would be working - into another dip. Just chasing it around the pit. It was one Sunday morning my brother and the Deputy went down to see that everything was safe. Legally the Deputy should have gone

around the whole pit with my brother, but he didn't. He did one half and my brother did the other. When they found my brother he was lying fast where the hanging stone had fallen and pinned him down. Lying there in the water for four or five hours. He died soon after they got him to the hospital. So that's our family's blood on the coal.

The Land

In the 1930s I spent a lot of my time poaching, I was the 'knitter'. I used to knit all the nets for the lads. Put them over the holes, you know and put the ferret in. I found that more interesting than pit heaps. And that's how I learned my political thoughts. Well, whose was the land? You go on all these neglected heaps. I used to think what harm are we doing? We were caught by the police and when we received our summons it said that we were catching 'conies'. We didn't know what that was for. (It wasn't until later in my life that I discovered that 'conies' is the old English name for rabbits. Rabbits are classified as vermin - and so you could say you were catching vermin - but 'conies' is not.) So the magistrate looked at me and he said, 'Where did you get them?' And I said 'I found them ,Sir.' Well, he said he'd never heard such a bloody tale and fined us all.

The land around here actually belongs to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners (the Church), Durham. Down the pit twenty-one tubs was the score, we always had to put (or fill) twenty one tubs for the score - twenty tubs and one for the Royalty to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. And I used to say this to the lads - twenty-one to the score! And we are still paying this to this day. The Government now owns all the Royalties. They bought them out in about 1938, about £75 million they bought them out for. And the interest on top of that. So they got a very good living just because they happened to own the land that the coal was under. Lord Londonderry and the Bishop of Durham and people like that had a very good living, all the money that really should have belonged to the miners. They've had their pound of flesh out of us, with that and the compensation for nationalisation. Plenty of money for them but not for the miners and their families.

Men and Ponies

It was private enterprise then in its most ruthless form. It was coal, King Coal and the Devil take the hindmost. If anybody got lamed then, hurt or anything, the only bandages that were kept were at the shaft bottom. So you had to tear the man's shirt to bandage him. And if there was a fall of stone you can bet your life the man would come and say, 'How is the pony?'; it wasn't the man, always the pony.

But those poor old ponies. I used to think if ever I came back into this world I wouldn't want to be a pit pony. Dear me! They worked them into the ground: the little ponies used to work a double shift. I always remember one day when some inspectors were supposed to come into the pit and the ponies backs were all skinned the way we were from catching on the roof. And they dug holes between the way so that the ponies wouldn't catch. But then that made it a thousand times worse for us because it was an up and a down, an up and a down, and with the oil lamp and bumping your head.

Another day the horse keeper says 'I want you to take this pony in bye: besides your own. Just tie it up when you get in.' 'But' I said, 'I've plenty to do looking after my own.' 'Just take it in bye and do what you're told, will you?' 'What's the matter?' The pony was all scabs and the inspector was coming! 'Tie it away from any prop so it can't scrub itself.' Dear me, at the end of the shift that poor thing had scrubbed all its scabs off! You can imagine what it was like. The inspector should have been in the pit, not just stopping at the stables. When the ponies were lamed, there were no humane killers you know. Just the hammer or the pick. Then roll them over, saw their legs off and take them out. My heart used to bleed for them.

As a kid I used to think that there ought to be police down the pit to see some of the things that went on. It was terrible under private enterprise in the thirties . . . terrible. The men would only be paid for coal and not stone. And the kids used to be on the belts picking the stone. And you only had your oil lamp and you could hardly see the tubs never mind pick the stones out. But the owners had what was called 'laid outs', and 'set outs'; fines against the men if their tubs weren't filled with coal. You were penalised from going down to coming out. This is how you were. To me you were nothing else but wage slaves.

Sometimes they'd add insult to injury. I remember one putter was trying to beat the minimum, and so he decided to try to fill an extra tub. So he went up this old working with a lump of old canvas - getting bits of coal, putting them on the corners dragging it down putting it at the top. Oil lamp swinging around his neck, foul air . . . And he was sweating, the sweat was oozing out of the lad. Anyhow, he got the tub just full and this overman came in with his fancy walking - stick and knee-pads, and his shining little oil lamp. (Just to let you know he was somebody important you know). 'Caught red-handed.' And the lad was fined ten shillings for filling an extra tub of coals.

I remember when they first brought in the pneumatic picks. The men were complaining about the compressed air. They were trying their damndest to fill the tubs of coal to beat the minimum rate of pay (because if you didn't get the minimum you were hauled up to the office, threatened with your notice or your minimum pay stopped because you weren't trying). You know no pressure, no wind, for the pneumatic picks. And this agent turned round and said 'Yes - my wind's bad this morning!' That was the typical type of them - arrogant.

When I first started down the pit my job was to have the rope end in my hand and when the tubs came up I used to clink it on, you see. Well, this day I had this damned overman standing there looking at me with his stick and his white hat. I got a bit frustrated and I missed the damn thing and all the tubs went back. 'What's your name?. I said, 'It's Beavis.' 'Beavis! It will be 'leave-us' if you carry on like that.'

They were really arrogant men And you daren't cheek them or answer them back. There was one occasion though. The payments used to be handed out through a little pigeon-hole by the overmen, and one day there was an argument over the laid-outs. Suddenly this fella shot his hand through the pigeon-hole and caught hold of the overman by the tie and pulled him right up against the hole! I always remember that.

Creeping Paralysis

The men were very demoralised during the 1930s. They had stood together in 1926 and held out for almost a year but they had to go back to longer hours, and huge debts. The older men

would never again trust anyone. It was as if they lost faith. And from then onwards Durham became politically dormant. Creeping paralysis I've called it!

When you look back the union was very weak in the pits. They were more like collaborators. Looking back now I wouldn't tolerate them for a moment. They were all 'yes men', more liberals than anything. They seemed to be a cut above you. They didn't like to be interfered with. When I started to go to the Lodge meetings I used to ask questions. I remember one day this chap said to me 'Oh - you're the little fella that dared attack Joe Sutch' because I had dared to stand up and criticise the outstanding Lodge Secretary who was a very prominent person at that time. I said, 'I didn't think he was right, that was all.' I used to shout my mouth off I suppose.

There were demonstrations against unemployment in Durham though. And one of our outstanding leaders at the Dean and Chapter – a lad called Billy Todd - was active in the unemployed movement. He was leading a demonstration and he was attacked by the police. I've talked with some of the lads, who were at the head of the banner and all the parading police said, 'That's him there!' And Billy Todd was struck down - it was a peaceful march. And they say it was from that blow - the repercussions afterwards - that he had died in 1946. They will always believe that it was that blow that led to his early death.

We used to talk about all those things though. At the shaft bottom, the men from all over the pit, maybe a hundred and fifty men men, would meet at the end of the shift at what they called 'the steps'. They would sit there and put their clothes on and wait for a few minutes before getting in the cage. And that's where the different men would argue and put the pros and cons of this and that. I was discussing this day with an old Welsh man - Teddy Jones was his name - I always admired him for his views; he was a very straightforward man. And I said to him 'What's your opinion of Ramsay MacDonald?' What did you think when he turned away and went on to the National Government?' And he looked at me and he said 'He should have been hung on the back of the Brockwell cage and sent up coal work.' And those words are as true today as ever they were.

CHARLES GRAHAM

Dead-end jobs; 'Dead bodies'

At the peak of the slump, men and women would sell their soul for a job of work. Even ship's captains, whose ships, as world trade diminished, were tied up in the River Tyne four deep. Most of these ships were to lay idle until mid-1938 when they were sailed and sold to Japan for scrap, about the date when skippers were to be in great demand. At first a ship's officer would sell his valuables (he was not entitled to Dole) then furniture, then his house. Some would finish up with their families living aboard ship acting as watchmen, main duty being to keep the fore and aft lights on their idle ships.

As a youth of 17,I stood with scores of men, old and young, on the Mill Dam, South Shields, watching the Irish potato boats being unloaded by women at the rate of 6d per hour - no tea breaks until these coasters were empty. I watched police, called from as far as Newcastle on horse-back, baton-charge seamen who were rioting because Lascars were being signed and then they were not. The Lascars, who lived alongside the river, were used as cheap labour, as firemen, stoking boilers etc. There was a great amount of corruption when a ship signed on. The chief mate would tell the seamen's union official that he needed so many firemen. The union official would tell the local hotel come shipchandler's owner (an Indian) that he needed so many crew. The Indian hotel owner would pick out the number of Lascars needed and tell them that it would cost them a month's pay for signing on. When they signed on they received their month's pay in the form of a ticket which had to be taken or sent to Newcastle. On the Mill Dam were ticket changers who charged 2/- in the £1 interest, to buy certain articles such as 'donkey's breakfast', straw mattress, overalls, etc. So the poor blighters sailed a month's pay in the red. A portion of the bribe went to the union officials and another portion to the chief mate.

My brother was due to sign on as a cabin boy for the first time. A union official demanded a month's pay for his first payment to join the seamen's union. The rest of the crew objected and told him not to sign on, but with their help he stowed away until the ship arrived at Burnt Island in Scotland. where he was signed on and had only to pay the proper dues which was about 2/-. I spent many hours on the River Tyne sharing a very small sculler boat with a friend.

We earned a few shillings here and there. As ships came in and moored off-shore at the buoys we would take the crew and baggage ashore, or dredge coal from the bottom of the river below the coal chutes loading coal. There were many ways one could earn a shilling or two on the river. One chap on the river was known as 'Dead Bodies'. There were quite a lot of suicides during the Depression, a great many of these suicides finished in the River Tyne, starting from the Tyne Bridge. This chap 'Dead Bodies' kept his ears to the ground (or water) to hear of anyone jumping in. He knew every tide and current on the river and knew within a couple of yards where the body would come ashore three days or so later, even if the victim was from Newcastle, ten miles away. He would use a hook on a long pole to tow the body to the River Police morgue; for this service he would receive 7/6d.

On the river regular gangs were employed, to unload ships. To get into one of these gangs was impossible unless a relative, such as a father, had died. However, there were casual workers who would wait outside the dock gates hoping a ship would be due in. The ganger would choose from the desperate men waiting for a job. The nature of a person who had power to hire or fire changed with the Depression. He became a God among men, an evil God, his family suffered through this power, he could buy other women, and did. If the person who was trying to obtain a day's work was called Smith he had more chance than a man whose name was Carruthers; the ganger found it easier to write Smith than Carruthers - such was the arrogance. The ganger would arrange to pay the men at a public house opposite the docks a couple of hours after knocking off work. If there was no treat or bribe from a paid worker that worker would never get another job at that dock.

A Gamble

In the early 1930s, Italians imported and controlled the one-armed-bandits which were installed in almost every corner shop. The temptation of the kitty which was in full view in the form of about £1 worth of pennies, was too much for many poor housewives who had popped in for a 1d packet of tea or 2d of liver-sausage. Very often they would leave the shop without the tea, with an empty purse and nasty temper, which would usually be vented on the children. There was so much distress caused that in about 1936 some legislation was

passed, police raided and confiscated all these machines and took them to the police yard where they destroyed them with 14lb hammers, took them out to sea and dumped them.

Another evil was 'pitch and toss', in most back alleys and lanes where young and old men would play their few pennies away, especially on Sunday mornings. These antics were harmless compared to what happened at the Trow Rocks on the beach at South Shields where the temptation by many married men to win the great prize of about £40 was too much for them. Men, including bookmakers, would arrive there from as far afield as Newcastle and Sunderland. On the seaward side of the rocks was an alcove with a sand floor, and on the promenade side, about 200 yards of open sand. So, unless you were watching from the sea, you could not see what was going on. There were usually two lookouts who had a good view all around to warn of the approach of police. Sometimes the police mingled and dressed as holiday-makers and caught them in the act; taking them to court. When a lucky winner had a good run in the bigger school, where they played for 1d or 2d, he could afford to go into the smaller school where the bookmakers were playing for 5/- a time. As this became smaller (men going broke) the stakes would rise to 10/- then £1, until there were only two men who would gamble winner-take- all which, as I said before, would be about £40. This winner would tip the chap who placed the two bright and well-worn pennies on the small piece of wood in the tosser's hand ready for the toss and, of course, he would pay the lookouts. Police pressure eventually disbanded such schools.

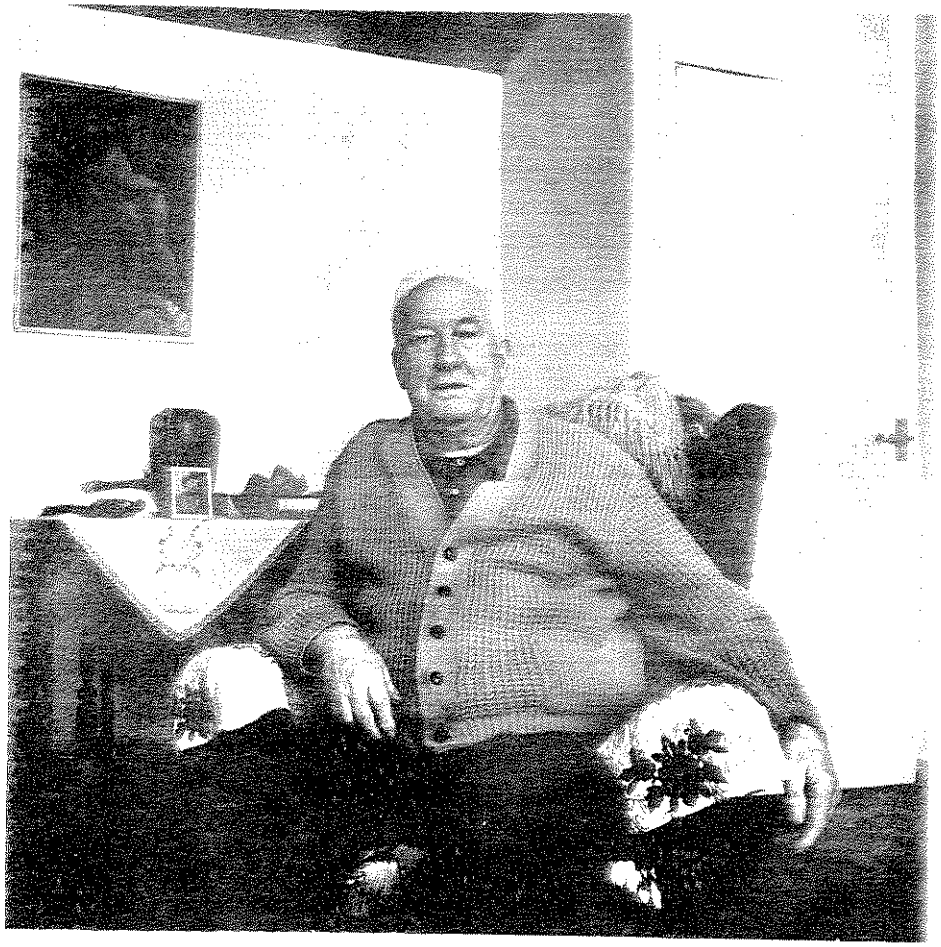
From Pawnshop to Workhouse

Most working class children played in their bare feet, or rope slippers. Some children would be lucky enough to have what we called 'Police Boots'. According to the circumstances of the family, widows' children etc., would be allowed to go to the police station and be fitted with boots. Both boots would be punctured at the top with three holes, this was to stop parents from pawning the children's boots.

Pawn shops were as common as betting shops are today. In almost every street there was an old woman who offered her services as messenger to and from the pawn shops, for those people who were too proud to be seen going into a pawn shop. She was usually well-known to the Pawnbroker and could be trusted. The average housewife would be broke by Monday or Tuesday so she would give the old man's suit to the messenger who would get, say, £1 loan. The pawn shop would charge 2d per week until redeemed,

which would usually be on Thursday. The messenger would get 3d or 4d from the housewife. At first the pawn shops would be taking watches, jewellery, etc. but as the slump became worse and people were unable to redeem the articles the old man's suit would be in on Tuesday and out on Thursday until it was too worn out to be pawned. The old messenger, however, had her regular customers who could be trusted and was able to take a parcel of rags to pawn for a pound. This parcel would never be opened, the pawn shop got its 2d per week and the old woman received her reward.

The Means Test broke up many homes. After 26 weeks on unemployment pay one had to apply to this dreaded court. They would inspect one's belonging; piano, watch, all had to go before one was allowed a few shillings. If there was a family of father, son, mother and daughter and one or the other was earning say 26/-, daughter and son included, there would be no relief. If the daughter was of marriageable age (or the son) they would naturally be wanting to save up to be married, so in order to do this they would have to leave home and get rough board and lodging for about 13/- per week. Young couples, very often with the help of friends, made their own furniture from boxes. A great many young married couples had the terrible ordeal of having no money offered but only two tickets - one for the male workhouse and one for the female workhouse.



JOHN BELL

The market

I was very lucky, I went straight on the Dock and got a job, but I know fellas who left school with me in 1925 and didn't get a job until 1939. Many of these fellas got a job and that was their last job. They went to sea and were blown up. I'm bitter, perhaps I shouldn't be, but I am - when you think people were telling us how to live and they were going shooting on the Moors and spending five pounds on a meal, or something. This happened right up to 1930 and the people of this country were bitter about it. They only shifted one set of gaffers out to put another same type of gaffer in under a different name. They were really bad days.

The English 'Gestapo'

We had the brutal, vile Means Test. It was the birth-child of the 1929-1931 Labour Government and, being a member of the Management Committee of the local Labour Party and in the Trades Council, we fought this Act as much as we could. Anyway, the National Government put it in full - they didn't pull any punches. They put a figure down, and if your Father was getting that figure, you got put off the Dole. So it meant that the father was keeping the son. Now if the son was getting an income which was above a certain figure then the father got reduced. You got a six month benefit and then the man came round to your house. The Gestapo wasn't in it. Some of these fellas had the same style as coming in: 'Where's this?' and 'What's that?' and you had to show them everything. You hadn't to show you had a radio, you hadn't to have this or that - honest people made themselves liars because they were afraid of these fellas. I think the National Government at that particular time broke more families up than at any time in our history. We had lads running down, and taking little attics so they could get an address. If you got an address - you had to have an address - you got your Dole. If you were fortunate enough to be on the Dole

like some of the dockers were you had to attend twice a day, and on a Friday you had to attend three times a day. So you had to go and get your stamp in the morning, stamp in the afternoon and then you got your pay, so you had to attend that Dole three times a day. Every other day you had to stamp twice a day.

Well, in 1931 everybody had to take a cut. Now the cut in 1931 under the infamous National Government was ten per cent, so the rich only had lost ten per cent of their's, but the fella on the Dole with fifteen shillings a week to keep him on, he also got ten per cent taken off.

Batons and Demonstrations

You see, these were starvation days. We had people writing in the paper telling us how you could live well on fifteen shillings.

These were the days of the Depression, the days of the baton charges. Some of these policemen were nice sort of fellas, but others of them weren't. Some of them brought down their batons and they glorified in it. Especially in North Shields. There were demonstrations all round the country. The National Unemployment Movement led these demonstrations. We got very little support off the T.U.C. In fact, the T.U.C. brought out a black circular. They told us not to go and demonstrate. Anyway, we were demonstrating and people were hungry and practically walking on the top of their shoes. These people weren't revolutionaries at all - I knew best part of them in this town - these people were just ordinary people driven to desperation by the conditions they had to live under. So all round the country we had baton charges, and they were charging people who were just asking for a little bit bread - they weren't asking for the moon. Right through the thirties we had this fight.

Dockland

If you read the whole history of Dockland it's one series of battles, because it was vile work. The conditions were bad, in fact, I thought they were violent. You went and stood on the Dock at 8 o'clock in the morning - you had to stand twice a day - and you stood there and one of the foremen would get up there and he

used to pick his men. He used to say: 'You with the dirty shirt', 'You there, go do a job and feed your kids'. You stood there and you had to fight to catch the gaffers eye. We knew before we went that we wouldn't get a job. We knew through our own little secret service that some of the fellas had been picked the night before. We knew that some of them had been round with the gaffer. So in the North East we had 'the markets'. It was the same in Liverpool - Liverpool was the 'pens' - they put you all together, just like cattle, and the men were picked there. You had the 'stones' in London with the big chain and a couple of policemen there. So, you see, it didn't matter what part of the country you went to. People were fighting for jobs - and I'm talking about dockers now - fighting for jobs, this is the proper history of Dockland. You had to stand there and listen to the people, and if you said anything you were a marked man and you didn't get a job - and it didn't only concern you, you knew you had a wife and kiddies - so you see, it made these fellas fighters. Right through the history of Dockland we fought, and my people before me. We fought to try and get some kind of decency in Dockland, where a man could say he is a man. My grandfather often told me this, when he went in the Bar - he was an old docker - people wouldn't even talk to dockers, they used to walk away from them, and in many cases they were even called 'toe rags'. So you see all the power in the world was left to a few people,we used to talk about this sort of thing. At that particular time, they used 'the King and Country', they used everybody to gain their own particular ends.

War

In 1938 there was the bluff called - Chamberlain went over there and Douglas Home, they backed down. We thought, and still think, we were betrayed then because if Hitler had been stopped then it would never have happened. We said in the Spanish Civil War - and I was on the left wing of the Labour Party then - if the Spanish Civil War had been stopped, instead of Hitler and Mussolini trying these plans out against the Spanish people, then I don't think this War would have started because I think there was a lot of bluff with Hitler.

In 1940 I said 'Oh, I'll have a go'. 'I'm going to hang my washing on the Siegfried Line' and all that. The phoney war. On the 5th May I joined the Army at Ashington and they said: 'Champion, just the fella we want for the Army dockers'. What we said in the Barrack Room then was 'It's your Country now, mate, but when the war's over it'll not be your Country then'. It's a farce to see on a Memorial to the dead; 'died for God, King and Country', because none of us fellas ever owned the country at all. I've paid rent now for forty odd years, I don't even own a brick.

HENRY ASHBY 'Send your sons into the mines..'

The 1930s were a period of abject poverty whether you worked or whether you didn't work. I worked for some of these years at the Derwent Colliery in Meadowsley; owned by the Consett Iron Company. Mostly we were on short time; on three or four days a week. I remember going around the countryside looking for motor bike tyres. You couldn't afford to send your shoes to the cobbler but if you could get a piece of rubber from a motor bike tyre you could repair them.

I was a miner but I can always remember that the job of someone sweeping the roads was the envy of everybody. It would be a big step up in the world if you could get a job as a council road man. They had about £2/14/- a week. Which was, to us, a decent wage, and security as well, without working like hell like we were down the pit.

Defeated

In 1925 we went on strike for 7 months, stopped for three months and then the national strike came on and we were out for another ten months. We went back with the wages cut right down: defeated. And the company operated the Black List. It wasn't only militants either. If you were known to have attended union meetings you weren't sent for.

Before the strike we worked seven hours a day and when we went back we had to work an extra hour. This was because 'in Poland

miners only got 4/- a day and they had captured the market: we had to produce coals cheaper and so we had to work eight hours to make ourselves more competitive'. This is the sort of thing they told us. 'Work the extra hour just for a short time until we recapture the markets from the Poles and then you'll have the seven hours back'. We haven't got the seven hours back yet!

The places in the pit where we worked were called 'cavils'. You worked in a place for three months and when the three months was up all the piece workers put their names in the hat for a different place. This would be organised by the men themselves because some places were bad, very bad, and you could not make anything at all. Other places were decent, a bit better, and you had the chance of making a few shillings. So we had 'good cavils' and 'bad cavils'. On the bad cavils you couldn't make anything. You were working on the minimum. The minimum wage was about seven shillings, and the piece rates were so low that you had to work very hard to earn more than that seven shillings. And a lot of men - in a bad place - couldn't get near the seven shillings. And so it was left to the colliery manager, and he could say to them 'You haven't worked hard enough, so you're not going to get the minimum. You're only going to get what you really earned according to the piece work rate'. Which meant four or five shillings or six shillings. And every Friday night there was a queue at the manager's office. Men who hadn't earned enough to earn the minimum. No matter how hard they'd work. You had to go begging, cap in hand, to ask him, to plead with him saying you'd worked as hard as you can so could you have the minimum rate. But men used to dread that. Every time these cavils went in, if you couldn't get a place where you could earn the minimum. Because you had to work harder just trying to get near it. If you got very near it, you see, he'd give you the seven shillings, which you were supposed to get and be entitled to. It was heartbreaking to see the men on the minimum begging at the manager's office.

At the end of the three months you'd have a 'revision of prices'. And if somebody had worked hard, and been in a good place and earned say fifteen shillings a day, that was too much. They'd chop the rate, take threepence or tuppence a ton off there and put it on a place where they were maybe earning four or five shillings a ton. You know,

where it wouldn't make much difference because the men wouldn't get above the minimum anyway. So you'd earn less money for the same work.

The unions were so weak then, you see. They used to ride rough shod over them. There was no fear of the men going on strike again after they'd been flattened down in the 1926 stoppage. There was no possibility of the men being able to resist.

A lot of men decided to never let their sons go down the pit. But in those days you had to leave a record of your family with the pit manager. And on the fourteenth birthday the manager would say 'Send your son along to see me tomorrow'. 'No, he's not going down the pit.' And then 'Look, you have a colliery house? You work in the colliery? If you want to keep your home and your job just send him along.' That was how it was. You see, they had to produce the next generation of miners. I remember the last time that it happened. It was during the war and the chap was able to reply: 'I don't live in a colliery house - I live in a council house.' And his son didn't go down the pit. The colliery house was a tremendous hold on a man.

Looking for Work

All the villages had places where man would stand at the corner in a bunch and talk and have a cigarette. You'd have about two draws out of it and then out. You'd light it up about five or six times to make it last. A weekend treat in these days would be to walk up to Consett and walk around the market place looking in the shop windows. You couldn't afford to buy anything. Just look in the windows and walk back home.

Each village had its Institute with a billiard table in a room. Billiards was only 3d a game and it lasted twenty minutes. Or there was dominoes, chequers and sometimes chess. And it would get newspapers in, sometimes magazines. And men used to meet there in the evening. I used to play a lot of billiards and the dream I had was that I would get locked in all night. So that I could play billiards right through the night for nothing!

In those days if you'd been on the dole for so long you had to go on what they called the Tribunal. A man would come down to the house to interview you. So, you went up before the Tribunal. And he would say 'Where have you been looking for work?' If you weren't 'looking

for work' they'd suspend your Dole or stop it altogether because you weren't trying to get work. Well, looking for work then was absolutely farcical. Because we used to get a bicycle and go all around the district and, everywhere you went, there were hundreds of men sitting around. There was no chance for you - all unskilled men - when there were men on the spot. Anyway we had to go in front of this chap to explain. And he'd say 'Where were you on Monday?' and you had to have the name of the place where you'd been looking for work. 'Where were you on Tuesday?' right through the week. Then they'd try to trip you up 'Where were you on Tuesday again?' And if he tripped you up and you couldn't remember or give the same name, he'd scratch your name off and stop your Dole. So I had a little square piece of cardboard with a name on for every day of the week and I used to carry it here inside the cuff of my jacket. 'Where were you on Wednesday again?' And I'd look out of the corner of my eye. They never tripped me up. You'd go to places and ask 'Is there any chance of a job here?' and they'd look at you as if you were daft!

We thought of these people, the Tribunal and the Means Test, as the enemy. I can remember the time when there was a Relieving Officer (this was before the 1930s) and he would look around your house - 'that sideboard, you don't need that'. You had to be absolutely penniless before they let you have anything.

They'd send you to Canada for the harvest. They'd pay your passage out and you would work the harvest and pay back your fare and return. But this was just for a limited number of people. Like the retraining camps where they were supposed to learn you a trade, although there were any number of fully trained tradesmen in this area who couldn't get work.

Today and Yesterday

There's something different now amongst the trade unions and that. I think they're more united than what they were then. During the time after the strike in 1926, the leaders were victimised. But now if you have a dispute the men will stand by the leaders and if the leaders are sacked on some pretext the men will just down tools. The management can't pick the ring leaders out and give them the sack now, with the ease that they could in those days. Management could always find some fault with a worker and use it as a reason to give him the sack. And do it with impunity. But they can't do that now. He'll think twice if he knows the whole lot will stop for a week or two.

Many a time during the 1930s I'd look at the rent man with dark thoughts in my mind. But I never did anything, nor did other people, there was very little robbery during that time, but I'm sure there would be now if people were reduced to such a state. People today just wouldn't stand for it. Life is better now than what it was then. We can live a normal life now as pensioners while, then, anybody in our position, who had finished work, could hardly live. People have struggled for this, we don't just get these things given to us. My father worked down the pit until he was fifty and he had rheumatism, he couldn't work any more. He was on the sick, and his sick benefit was 15/- a week. After he'd been on it for a certain time, it was reduced by a half to 7/6d a week. And that's all my mother had to live on for the rest of her life. Seven and six a week. He had a few hens and a couple of gardens. Without that he wouldn't have survived.

Nowadays I sit and read and sleep. About eleven o'clock at night I think about putting on my pit clothes and going off to the pit. I think I don't have to do that now. I used to be a stone man and you had to get the face ready for the hewers to come in. And it was all so arranged that you had to work like hell right to the last minute to get the face ready for the next shift! For the wages you got when you finished, I choke when I think about it. I used to say 'We must be mad, nobody with any sense would do this!' Lying at the face, about two foot high in the wet with all the water raining down on you. Soaking wet and working like mad.

There were three men in the pits - brothers - they were great workers. The colliery manager used to say 'if I had a dozen like them I could close the pit.' I was working on this face one day, it was about one hundred yards long and these brothers used to put the machinery up. And this particular place was only about eighteen inches high and the rain was falling down. So this fella was coming along. You couldn't creep, you just had to pull yourself along on your stomach, ease yourself along. Well, he was coming along, water was streaked down his face, like little streams. And this was in 1940 and they had a big campaign on 'Send your sons into the mine: make mining your career'. And his face came up to about a foot off mine and he said 'Send your sons into the mine. Make mining your career'. I'll never forget that! Asked him once 'If you had your time to begin again, do you think you'd go down the mine?' And he said 'If I thought I had to go through all this again I'd cut my throat now!'.

HILDA ASHBY

Wait till the banner comes home!

I was brought up in Chopwell. I lived there right through the 1926 strike and the thirties. Right up until I got married and moved to Consett in 1940. Chopwell was a very militant village you know. The Chopwell banner has Karl Marx and Lenin and Keir Hardie on and the streets in Chopwell - Lenin Terrace, Marx Terrace. It was a very militant village.

I was going to the grammar school at Blaydon during the 1926 strike. We had to walk to Westwood Station to catch the train, and I can always remember sitting in the carriage full of girls - we were all miners' daughters. I was twelve and we were all talking about the strike and one of the girls said 'I hardly dare tell you this . . .' And we were just getting to know where babies came from and we said 'Are you going to have a baby?' And she said 'No - my father's going to be a blackleg.' Very shamefaced you know. I remember running home to tell my father 'Mary Wilson's father's going to blackleg' and my father saying 'By he's a 'card joker', he'll get nae coal oot'.

After that strike we always remembered who the black legs were. You know, 'what can you expect - he blacklegged.' The whole village used to go out to see the blacklegs. Chopwell had - oh, about two hundred police at that time. You know how you see the police with the National Front. Well it was like that, bringing the blacklegs home in Chopwell.

The Colliery Car

After the 1926 strike in Chopwell none of the militants were employed. After the strike just a trickle went back to work and it depended upon the degree of militancy when they would take you back. A lot of militants had to leave the village to find work. And the whole feeling in the village during the 1930s was that 'strikes do you no good'. Particularly amongst the women who had had to bear the brunt of the suffering anyway.

But just after the strike, when they were taking men back, one at a time, all the conversation in the village would be about 'the colliery car'. When the colliery car called at somebody's house they were getting sent for at the pit. All the gossip would be 'Ah, the colliery car's gone down Seventh Street. I wonder who got sent for there?' Well, my father wasn't sent for until 1928 - for two years. And he spent all his time in the Reading Room in Chopwell above the Co-op. It used to have all the Left literature, the 'Daily Worker', 'Labour Monthly', 'Russia Today', 'New Statesman' all this literature was in the Co-op. And all the men met, played cards and read the papers and spent all their spare time in this reading room. I can remember this day when the colliery car stopped at our door. And all the street used to be out, you know, seeing where the colliery car stopped. The clerk used to call down and of course my mother was excited because my father was at last going to be set on at work. 'Run over to the Reading Room to tell your dad that the colliery car has come and he's to go up to the colliery.' I go up to the Reading Room and my father comes back and my mother looks at him and says, 'By, you don't seem very excited about it.' And my father looked at her and said 'Why Ada, there's nowt exciting about having to gan doon that pit agen'. You know my mother and father got on really well, there were never any rows between them, but I remember there was a row then because my father wasn't excited about 'going down that pit'. It was awful you know starting work in the pit after being off three years - aches and pains and that.

Well, my father just worked ten weeks when a great stone fell on his wrist and smashed his hand. He had to work about three miles from the pit (they didn't have a colliery ambulance in those days) and I can remember my father coming home - pouring with rain and he was drenched and black with this broken hand. And I had to run for the District Nurse and the doctor came the next day. But it got worse and worse and I remember my father banging the table with the pain. All the doctor advised was to hold it in a jar of hot water.

He became so ill he had to go to bed with it. And we had no hot water - we didn't have a sink, just a tap – and we had to keep the fire going all through the night to ease the pain in my father's hand. Apparently blood poisoning had set in and his hand was all locked together and he could never work again. We had twenty-two shillings a week for mother and father and three children. And an awful thing was that your coals were stopped by the colliery. Miners always got their coals free but if you had an accident at the pit your coals were stopped. But there was a great community spirit so whenever anybody had a load of coals they'd say 'Come and get ten pailfulls.' We didn't have to buy any coals but it was just out of the goodness of the other miners that we had coals. But they were hard days, I can tell you.

Hard-up Times

'Upstanding' - that was the thing. 'Upstanding jobs', you know, where you had your pay if you were off sick. Oh, that was it, that was the Mecca. I lived in Chopwell right through the thirties and all the colliery houses there had earth closets (a hole in the wall where you threw all your rubbish) and the Council men had to jump in there and then shovel all this out. Well, you had to be in the know to get one of these jobs. To have a council job - oh, that was something! In Chopwell they had a Labour Council and they had this scheme where you got your turn at ten weeks working on the roads. Ten weeks when you knew you were going to have a pay. That was a big thing.

Those times - they were hard-up times - nobody had an overcoat. And at Chopwell , at every corner end on bitter cold nights, all the men with nothing but a jacket on, talking and stamping their feet. And the things people used to do to make ends meet or get those few extra coppers!

My father and my uncle used to take bets for the local bookies. And it was illegal and every now and then the police would catch you and you'd be fined. And my father got 1/6d in the pound for every pound he took the bookie.

It was quite common for people to take lodgers. This old Irish woman who lived next door kept lodgers. She had pitmen who slept in the beds during the day and she had men who worked in the

coke yards during the night. On different shifts you see. When one would get out of bed the other would go in. My friend's family; there were two sons working at the pit and the father working at the pit and two lodgers. That was five men working at the pit. The father kept pigs and hens and he took in cobbling! All these things to eke out the pay. And that house always had a pan boiling with potato peelings and we all used to take our peelings there and we'd get a sweet. And it was a regular thing to see a pig hanging in the yard - because in those days you could kill them yourselves. And some people would make ginger beer and sell it, other people would make toffee.

We didn't have a scullery or anything you know, we just had the living room. And on a washing day there was all these pots on the fire and this poss tub in the middle of the floor. And nobody washed once a week. Once a fortnight was washing day. You had to be thrifty and save on the hot water. And then - because hot water was so scarce - you'd poss the white clothes first, and then the coloureds and so on and the pit clothes, they would go in the poss tub last of all.

And every miner's house used suet. That was like the basic. Everyday you'd have something with suet in for the main meal of the day. To fill you up. You'd buy a big piece of suet from the butcher's for tuppence and every day you grated a bit of the suet into the flour. Monday's dinner was always a plain suet pudding with what was left from Sunday's dinner. Another day 'pot pie' we called it. Then 'Spotted Dick', with currants in it or you'd roll it out and put blackberries in the middle, tie a cloth around it and put it in the pan.

At Chopwell, of course, everyone bought at the Co-op and the Co-op allowed the miners' families to have credit during the strike. And as a kid I always knew that we were in debt at the Co-op. And it always used to bother me no end, even as a kid. If you dealt at the Co-op and the man or woman died you'd get an insurance on what you'd purchased over the years. And when my mother died it was that insurance that cleared the debt off. We were in debt right until my mother died and it was the Co-op insurance money that cleared the debt off.

This was the Means Test period too you know. And my father was unemployed and I had this job at the picture hall, and my father never reported it because if they knew I was earning 12/6d a week they would deduct that from his dole. And I had a sister who was working in an office in Newcastle and she had it down that she was lodging at Blaydon -

somebody we knew at Blaydon. This Means Test man used to come periodically and we used to be terrified of him. We just had a big living room and a pantry where the tap was. And as soon as this Means Test man came I'd go in the pantry. 'Your daughter isn't working?' And my father would say 'No.' He never turned a hair and I was terrified that we'd be put in jail! And people did all these things you see. All the sons were supposed to be lodging elsewhere because you'd lose your Dole.

It was a regular thing during the thirties for people to go to Canada, Australia, America. Our Billy went south to London and got a job there, sweeping the roads, for three pounds a week. And really he was just the same as we were up here on the Dole you know, with the higher rents and everything and no coals. They had one child and then she thought she was pregnant again. When Billy used to come in from work he used to pick her up and dance her around the room three times, to try and induce a miscarriage! But as it turned out it was a false alarm. The things we used to have to do!

Women's Work

All the girls in the village - if ever you got boyfriends - if you went to a dance and you met a boy, the first thing you'd ask - 'Are you working?' Oh, if you could get a boy friend who was working you knew you were quids in! I can remember when I started going with Jock Marshall, my father said 'What are you doing with him? He's not working. You want nowt with him. You want somebody who's working.' You had to look for a man who was working.

In a mining village there was no work for girls. A lot of women would have loved the extra work but there was no work. Not like the mill towns. Some women would take in washing or do papering, but in a colliery village there was no prosperous people either. Maybe a doctor or the colliery manager. My auntie used to take in washing and she would do a fortnight's washing for four people. Wash and starch and iron four people's clothes for a fortnight for ten shillings. One family in Chopwell had three daughters. They never married, and they used to make quilts and clippie mats. And they would work all week around this big frame and every week they would deliver either a mat or a quilt. People would pay so much a week for them. And they'd get £3. Out of that they'd have to buy the wool for at least a pound which would leave the three of them £2 for a week's work.

All the girls, when they became fourteen used to go down to Newcastle in service. And they used to get a half day off every fortnight. And every Wednesday in Chopwell you'd see all the girls coming home and then on every other Sunday afternoon. They used to get about ten bob a week and their keep. The two girls next door to us were in service. There were no washing machines and so they had to do all the washing. I know those two used to hate it. They were always leaving and coming home and their mother was always going mad. And she was always saying 'You want to get yourselves a boy friend'. Someone who would marry them to take them off their hands. And this day she went on about them not having boy friends and Florrie, she says, 'Mother, there's two million surplus women in the country so somebody has to go without a man.' 'But aye,' she says, 'bonny hard lines when two out of my family have to go without.'

But I would have hated to go into service. I was in dread of it. And if I hadn't had to look after my father I would have had to go. As it was I got one of the very few jobs in the village for a girl. I was favoured to have that job I had. I used to clean the picture hall in the morning and take the tickets at night. For 12/6d a week. But to be in service - I would have hated that.

Henry's sisters both had to go. And in this one place there was this great big cupboard full of cut glass. And every Monday she had to wash it - and with a toothbrush! Another thing they used to do over in Jesmond at the time when they were getting their houses modernised would be to take a girl on and it would be just like labouring. Cleaning up all the mess. Really hard work every day. And then when it was modernised they could manage without a maid. The girls used to dread to come home to tell their mothers that they'd got the sack again.

Chopwell and Politics

Gala Day was always a big day in Chopwell. At seven o'clock in the morning they'd march with the banner around the village and then up to Blackhall Mill and to Westwood Station, and they'd all get on the train there and go to Durham. At night time everybody who hadn't gone to Durham for the Big Meeting Day would wait around in the street for the banner coming back. They would get off the train and march all the way up with the band playing. It was always a big thing: 'Wait till the banner

comes home . . .' - 'the banner's coming home.' The Friday before Durham Big Meeting Day everybody used to bake plate pies with meat in for people to take away with them. And before the 1926 strike there were always political meetings in Chopwell. The Lawthers were very active there and they'd arrange for Page Arnot, Emile Burns and all these to come to talk at Chopwell. I've heard my father say that they had weekly lectures on socialism and the first week there were about twenty there and the next week about fifty and the week after over a hundred.

But this was all before the strike. My father was a member of the Labour Party but he and a lot of people became disillusioned. Not that they 'd ever vote Tory, but with all the strike they became disheartened. But I remember in 1935, the Black Shirts came out to hold an open air meeting. Well, the local people knew they were coming. And the open meetings at Chopwell were held at the Hotel Corner and the local Labour lads started a meeting and as one finished the others would get up and start. And the Black Shirts had to go away. They never got a chance to speak.

And in 1935, that same year, I went to Hitler's Germany. Some of the girls that I had gone to grammar school with went to College. Well, I couldn't go. We were always in debt. In 1935 they were having a trip to Germany, youth hostelling. I had a job then, of course, so I decided I wanted to go. I saved up £8 and I went to Germany for a fortnight on £8 in 1935. We went by boat from the Tyne to London (12/6d it was but it was terrible - just like cargo, you know, twenty-six hours it took). And from there we went to Germany. Hitler was at his height then. We were staying in these Youth Hostels which were beautifully made and very cheap, but every night they'd be parading outside, the flags hoisted every night with ceremony. Well, we got to know some young German girls and one night we were having a sing-song and someone struck up 'Jerusalem' but oh, straight away they said 'You mustn't sing that.' I was young but I was politically conscious enough to know what was going on in Germany at that time.

Anyway, at this Reading Room where all the literature came, you could buy the old issue afterwards. Just coppers, but when the next issue came you could buy the old one. Anyway, my father had bought this magazine called 'Russia Today' and he brought it home and I was reading it. And I thought 'I wonder if they've got any Youth Hostels in Russia, I could go there next year.' Just then, the local Communists were going door to door selling the 'Daily Worker' and I said to this Sid Sutherland, 'Do you know if there are any Youth Hostels in Russia?' And he said 'Oh, no,'

and that was it.

Later a representative of the 'Russia Today' society came to Chopwell to say that they were sending a women's delegation to Russia for Women's International Year, 8th March. And she came to the local Communist Party and said that it cost £20 to send a delegate to Russia for a month. Well, the local Communist Party didn't have twenty pence, let alone twenty pounds and so the person said, 'Do you know anybody in the village who would have twenty pounds?' And Sid Sutherland said 'Well, Hilda Harbottle asked me about Russia.' So they came up to our house and I had £2 . That was all I had . Well this woman said, 'Do you think you could raise £10 and then you could pay the other £10 later?' because I had this job earning 12/6d a week. Well, I reckoned it up on how much I could save out of my wages and they gave me this collecting sheet and I got this £10.

So I went to the Soviet Union in 1936 and I was greatly impressed. In 1936 bread rationing had just finished but it was the spirit of the people that affected me. Our train came to the borders of the Soviet Union and there was this big banner across the railway lines - 'Workers of the World Unite'. And I was so small they made a great fuss of me. They saw me as a real victim of capitalist exploitation! The spirit was great though - 'Have you seen this? have you seen that?' 'Have you seen the new school we're having built?' and so on.

Then when I came back I didn't join the Communist Party straight away. I thought 'Ugh.' Going and selling 'Daily Worker' and that lot. Knocking on people's doors. You know I didn't fancy doing that lot. I admired the sort of work they did you know, but I didn't want to do it myself. I was very reluctant. But I did join the Communist Party. And I remember the local Communist Party going around Chopwell with a crake. (Anything that was on in the village, there was a crake-man, and every Saturday he'd go around every street 'There'll be a union meeting tomorrow in the Top Club' or sometimes the local cinema would get him to go around 'There's a picture showing in the King's Theatre tonight'). Well this time it was 'Hilda Harbottle has just returned from the Soviet Union, come to hear her speak of her experiences.' And so I spoke on what I'd seen. And I remember we had quite a decent crowd turned up.

And then, of course, the Spanish Civil War broke out. We collected loads of food in 1936. We had women making bandages and sheets for Spain. Its so different nowadays. Sometimes I wonder if people know what socialism is about anymore. There are no socialist lectures or classes. It's a bit disheartening sometimes.

CONNIE LEWCOCK The pursuit of happiness

It was a very terrible time. I remember going to a meeting in Jarrow, which was a meeting of the local Labour Party, and it was crowded, absolutely full, because people were saving gas in their homes and they wanted to come to any meeting where gas was provided. And at the meeting, Paddy Scullion, who later became the Mayor of Jarrow, was particularly critical of my husband and I said, when I came away, 'What a horrible man' and my husband said to me 'You want to remember that the conditions make him opposed to everybody whose got a regular wage' and I took that answer, and later, when Paddy Scullion became the Mayor of Jarrow, he invited Will and myself to a meeting, the usual Mayoral reception. And he came up to us and he said 'I've given you a great deal of trouble in times past but I was a rat then, not a man, now I'm a man again': that made a very big impression on me.

The Boot Fund

People used to collect a penny a week for membership of the Labour Party and we paid them one penny as a result of all their collection and they were thankful to have it and we had a principle by which, if the collector was behind hand with his books that they were called into the office and they were told that they weren't going to collect anymore and I don't think that anybody ever had to be disciplined in that way and I knew one of the friends that was a bookie's runner and he was also a collector for the Labour Party. He used to hang about the streets getting very, very small amounts - twopence and threepence - to have a bet. I remember particularly the Boot Fund (the Boot Fund was a mayoral function). It was particularly directed to supplying boots for school children and we had a preliminary meeting of parents who wanted their

great many more parents than ever got boots. I remember also that I was on the leaving committee of the school and I went down and one boy said that he was interested in Art and his mother said, 'Oh, no, you're going to have a job with your uncle who's a cobbler', and we were compelled to accept it because he had a job and I feel now, occasionally when I think about it, that possibly we lost a great artist to the world.

Jarrow March

I felt that the Jarrow March was a very great thing. It was terrific for people who were weakened by malnutrition to walk all the way to London, it was terrific. I think it was the general feeling that people were entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and the pursuit of happiness was a thing that was impossible with unemployment at that level. I don't think it brought any more jobs to the North East but I think it focussed people's attention on the fact that there was an area of the country which did suffer very badly from unemployment. I think that they were courageous, very courageous indeed, and the organisation that lay behind it must be praised. I think it did get through to the Government. I think it did get through, but it didn't alter their method of government.

The National Government was a total fiasco and the proof of it is that no Labour Party in the whole of the country followed Ramsay MacDonald. I've heard a story of Josh Ritson who was a member for one of the Durham constituencies at the time, he travelled down with Ramsay MacDonald in a first class compartment after the Miners' Gala or something like that, and he said that Ramsay MacDonald went on to him about the charms of Lady Londonderry, that she was a very spiritual person and of very high intelligence and so on, and Josh's comment was 'I thought the bugger was daft'. He dismissed it completely! You see what was failing the Labour Movement at the time was that a great many people had never experienced the intelligence of the middle class and the upper class.

Fascism

I've written down my autobiography and I've got to the establishment in later years and I do record in it the growing sense of anxiety that Will and I had about our family, and the young people who were growing up and the fact that Churchill and Mussolini and Hitler seemed to be pally. I feel more or more or less about the National Front as I did about Mussolini and Hitler in the years preceding the war and I felt a growing uneasiness and everything that seemed to occur deepened

the feeling. We supported Mosley when he was a member of the Labour Government but we certainly didn't support him after he came out of the Labour Government and we certainly didn't support the Black Shirts. In fact, when the war broke out, and this is later, 1939, I put down my youngest daughter to be evacuated to Canada because I thought all of us would be on Hitler's list and we'd better save one of the family. I did think it was a war worth fighting. I thought that it was important to fight Hitler.

I've never bought anything from Spain since Franco won, though I'm now allowing myself to buy a few things - Spanish oranges! I was in Spain in 1932 - my aunt died in '31 and she'd left me £25 which was enough to pay to go with the camping club to Northern Spain, and what got me was that people said to me, in Spanish and English, 'we're going to be like you now, we're going to be a democracy, and we're going to have hospitals and education and so on' and Franco was already plotting the civil war.

I don't think the National Front should be allowed to speak. I would ban them because I think the principles that they advocate are a denial of liberty to other people. I think a great deal of blame is on the current television and press stunt that 'all politicians are the same' and I think that this is a very widely held opinion and that it tends to obliterate the dangers ahead. You see, we could see the dangers ahead when Mussolini invaded Ethopia and we could see the dangers ahead when Hitler invaded Alsace Lorraine, but we didn't see it in the beginnings.. I think we should fight the National Front now. You see, I'm on the Community Relations Council and it seems to me that if you accept the principles of equality and freedom, you've got to accept it for everybody and I've very happy relations with the West Indians and the Indians and so on. Because they are my brothers and sisters, I feel that their cause is my cause.

Voluntary Work

Married women weren't employed in the thirties so I had to do voluntary work. I was a convinced socialist and a convinced egalitarian and freedom was important to me. I had to do voluntary work to achieve that object. But what I think at the moment is that everybody thinks money will get them happiness and it doesn't. I don't think they are as happy as when their neighbours were interested in them and I think a great many more people can make themselves happier if they take on some kind of voluntary work. My husband,

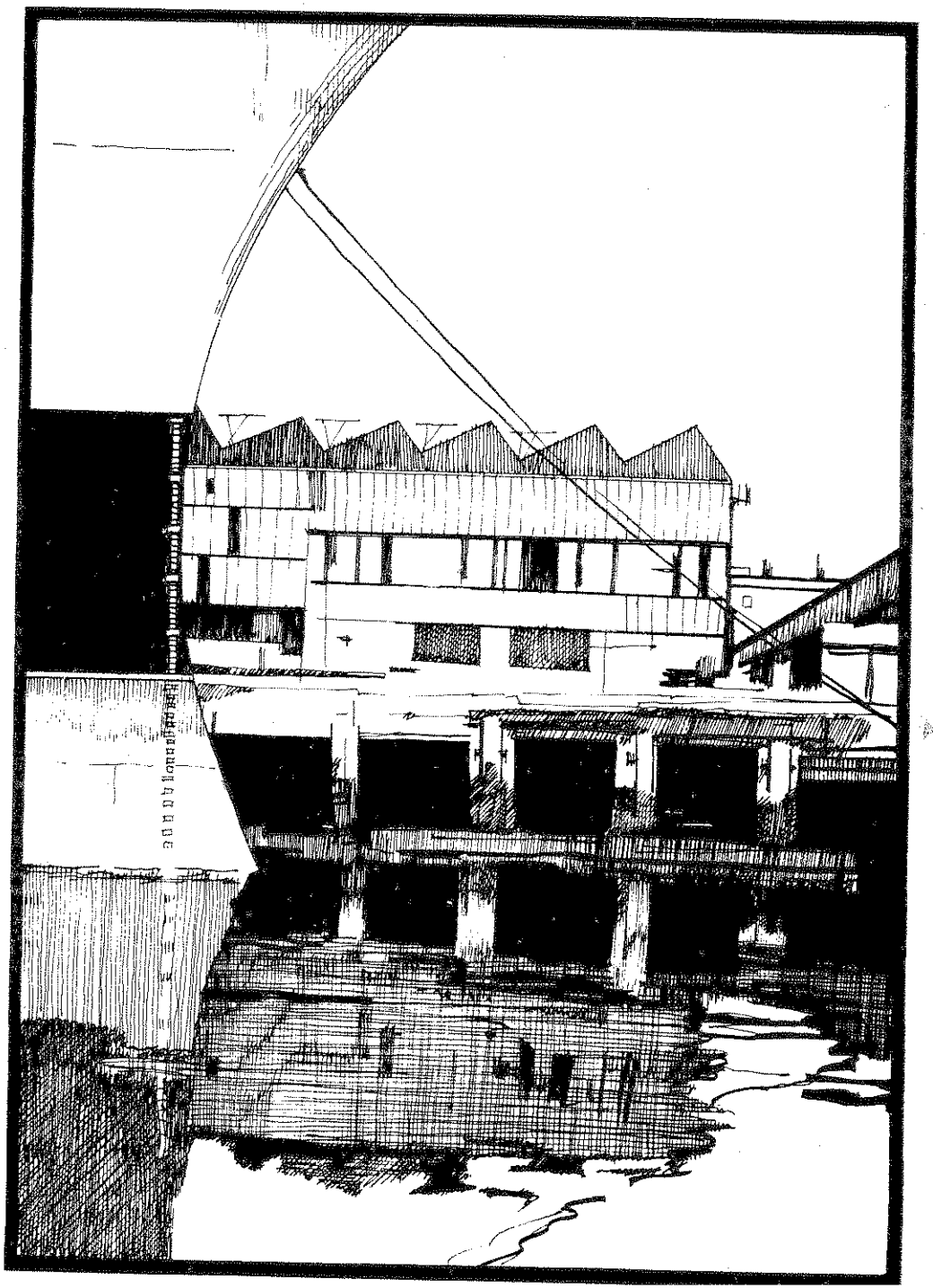
when I had my first baby, used to say to me 'If you were in the North now, you'd have somebody come in and make your bread and you'd have somebody come in and do the washing and somebody come in and tidy up the house for you, and you would have it as long as you wanted it.' I don't think it's so now. People are tending to think it's either a case for the police or the Social Services.

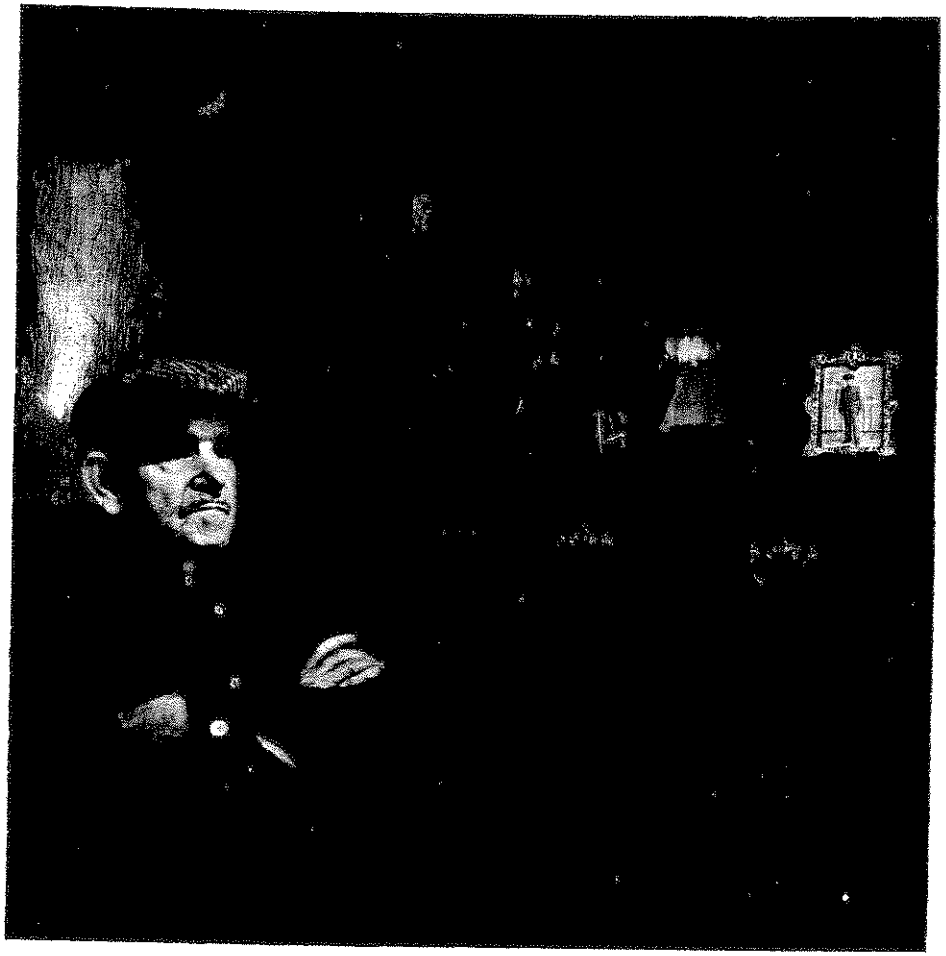
People are looked after better now than they were in the thirties because they had very small amounts to draw on and I hear people talk about the Dole now but it was a dole really then, in the thirties and they were given the smallest amount that would keep them alive as a family. And there was no provision for free school meals or anything like that. And you had to go round to jumble sales. Jumble sales were a terrific success in those days because people who wanted to come and buy things for their children rushed into the door and we had to have two stalwarts at the door to protect any Labour Party jumble sale from too many people getting in.

Signs of Hope

I think, gradually, as I became older, I realised that it would take a long time to change society and I became reconciled to the fact that that it would take a long time, but I felt when my husband died that one person had got to do as much work as two persons had done before. And I feel that I haven't got very much time to spare. I could live to be a hundred but I could die tomorrow and today, in fact, but I feel that it takes a long time to change society. It did to get the vote. It took 135 years from the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's 'Vindication of the Rights of Women' and I think, possibly I'm more reconciled to it taking a long time to alter society, but I certainly am prepared to accept the point of view of people who can't wait.

I think there are signs of hope because if there weren't, I'd have died long ago in despair.





THOMAS BROWN

Slave labour

Only the people who lived in the period during the years of Depression knew what it was really like living in those dark days of mass unemployment. It was a case of survival of the fittest for the working class. The Jarrow hunger marchers - hunger was an appropriate name for this crusade. During the years of Depression, thousands of people succumbed to tuberculosis, a disease which stemmed from malnutrition - lack of food, hunger, starvation and poverty. In those days there was an abundance of good wholesome food for the people who could afford to purchase it - the upper class. It has been the same for generations, people with plenty of the good things in life, the living-it-up brigade, while thousands have to struggle to make ends meet to survive. Class distinction has been the bugbear throughout the world right down the ages.

Thousands of women were exploited by slave labour. Employed in domestic service, working for these money-bags from eight in the morning till six in the evening for wages which were a mere pittance. The kippering houses were thriving in those days from the result of sweated labour. Women working in these kippering houses worked in deplorable conditions, standing on saturated floors, hand-splitting herrings from six in the morning till twelve and one in the morning, and for the princely sum of two pence per hour for experienced women and three halfpence for

learners. My mother was one of these women. During her lifetime she worked in every one of these sweatshops in North Shields and travelled as far afield as Yarmouth, Lowestoft, Harwich, Mallaig and many other places.

Where I lived, in the East end of the town, the women-folk used to set to work at seven o'clock in the morning, get the wash-house boiler going and then for the best part of the morning they were scrubbing clothes on the wash house bench to endeavour to make up a bundle to take to their one and only friend, the pawnbroker, who, in those days, had a thriving business. There were very few people who did not go to the pawnshop, especially those women with large families. This was the only means of getting food, otherwise, if it had not been the pawnbroker, many a poor family would have succumbed to starvation. These people were poor but, by heaven, the women folk had guts and were never lacking in spirit. Everything was scrupulously clean, where-ever anyone went one would smell carbolic. Yes, the womenfolk of yesterday were born at the wrong period, no washing machines or carpet cleaners in those days. As a matter of fact, many women never had any canvas on their floors let alone carpets. When one hears these people talking about the good old days, it was good for some, but it was certainly grim for thousands of others. To my way of thinking the only things that were good were the neighbours. If anyone had a bereavement or gave birth to a child there were always plenty of willing hands to cope with the situation, such as cleaning the house, doing the washing and every-thing in general. The old timers gave birth to a child one day and the next few days they were back to work, no grants in those days and convalescence was unheard of.

One of the diabolical Acts of Parliament - the Means Test - came into being in these years. The persons responsible for passing this Act should have been hung, drawn and quartered when this Means Test came into force. If there was any worker in the family employed that worker was responsible for maintaining the entire family. If you had anything of value in the house, you were forced by these people to sell it. If there were any sons in the family and their Dole money was stopped, no help was forthcoming from any quarter due to this barbaric Act. The last resort was to apply for help from

that benevolent body of puppet dictators who sat on the Board of Guardians. Anyone who appeared before this Board were cross-examined with ridiculous questions like 'Where have you been looking for work?' This was typical of those bureaucrats in the days of so-called democracy. The unfortunate people who appeared before this Board seeking help were exceedingly lucky if they received any help. It was like getting blood out of a stone, a real bunch of Hitlers. I knew several good, decent men who appeared before this Board for help and they were told their families would be provided for on one condition, that these men should enter the Poor Law institution, namely the workhouse. In those days this institution was one of the most depressing and foreboding places anyone could enter. These men had the proud distinction of serving their country throughout the first World War.

FENWICK WHITFIELD

And, of course, I've got some dust

All my family were leadminers. I was three-and-a-half when we came to Leadgate (Co. Durham) with my mother; and I can remember it as if it were yesterday, although it's seventy-nine years since. My mother came to keep house for a chap - he was a blacksmith - and eventually he became my stepfather. So I was fetched up in that house. It was called the 'back kitchens'. It was one up and one down and you went upstairs through a ladder; there wasn't staircases in them. Eleven of us children were fetched up there.

The stepfather had started in the pit when he was nine. His mother used to carry him over to the Busty pit. He was married three times. His first wife died in childbirth, I think, and then he married her sister. And she died.

There were three streets of 'back kitchens' in Leadgate. They'd been improved by taking off the coalhouses and such like off the back and building on a back kitchen. The toilets were just earth closets - open ash heaps - and when I went to work at the Eden Colliery the first colliery house I had was that type. Outside there was an open drainage system. There was a common channel that came down the back and there would be a sink half way down and one at the bottom. They were always a bone of contention and people would often fall out

over them. People wouldn't wash their share of the gutter until the people above them had washed theirs, you see, because all the muck would come down. I've seen women tearing the hair out of each other over these gutters.

Tommy Armstrong, the pitman poet who lived in Stanley, wrote a song about these quarrels :

> One day I went walking
> I heard some folk talking
> With voices as loud as the one o'clock gun
> And though I could hear them
> I couldn't get near them
> For folks of all kind were enjoying the fun.

There were about half a dozen verses like this. I've always had an interest in the Tyneside songs and such like. They were the things I was fetched up on: and kept myself going on. I got myself a copy of Tommy Armstrong's songs and I used to sing them down in the Club.

War, Work and Pain

The Consett Iron Company owned the whole countryside around Leadgate. They owned seven pits, they even had a pit in Langley Park, four miles out of Durham. Oh, they owned the whole lot - farms and everything. But because the Iron Company kept working, the pits kept working right through the 1930s. We lost some shifts but the pits didn't close.

I left school when I was thirteen and started in the pit. I started piece work when I was fourteen years old - putting. Then the very day before I was twenty-one a chap got his leg broken and I was called and told to start coal hewing the next day. So the day I was twenty-one was the day I started hewing coals. And right up into the 1950s I was working piece rates - hewing coals. I've hewed coals with a hand pick for 6½d a ton up in the Eden Colliery.

When I was young I got the idea of fancying being a soldier and I joined the Territorials. There was any amount of propaganda for that sort of thing. That's how you were brought up - reading boys' papers and such like. I went to the war in 1915 and a week after I left Newcastle I was wounded. One bullet went through my leg and came out by the side of my ankle. I had a splinter through my other foot and one near the thumb – right through the joint. And when I was lying on the ground with those feet wounds I had a bullet in the behind. In fact that was the only one I felt because it seemed to go in off the bone and out again. There were eighteen holes in the greatcoat I had on at the time . . . so it was a bit of a close thing.

I was in hospital in Dublin for five months before I came back to Leadgate. I got £60 compensation as they decided I was alright for earning a living so I went back down the pit. I think that was the beginnings of my political consciousness: seeing them selling stuff to both sides and making profits; how they were crying out for the miner now they needed him - they didn't give a damn before.

So I went back to Eden. And I think I must have had the record for accidents along there. I've had cuts and broken bones - all sorts. In fact I've had the same ankle that the bullet smashed broken, in the pit too. I was off eleven months with that. It was the top coal that I was filling at that time . . . I remember I was taking the last of the coal down and the wedge was fast. So I took the pick and tried to ease it and then the whole lot came down on top of me. The coal hit me on the top of an ankle. I just thought it was a bad strain and I didn't want to go to the hospital. I couldn't sleep and as soon as I'd get to sleep I'd wake up with these dreams - the stones chasing me. I'd been off eleven weeks and the X-ray in Newcastle showed that the ankle was badly shattered. The company doctor said I'd be no good in the pit any more. They wouldn't give me a light job. But I had to go back and I went back to my own work. I just decided that I wasn't going to be a cripple.

In 1935 I had an injury to an eye. In fact two days running I got a blow in the eye from the pick-point. After the second one I got up in the morning and I couldn't see out of the eye at all ; there was a great ulcer over the whole of the pupil. I went up to the Doctor's and he said 'how sharp can you get away down to Newcastle to the Eye Infirmary?'

I was in there for twelve days (and that was at the time of the march of the fascists - Mosley's crowd). I was off four months all together at that time. They gave me no hopes of the eye becoming normal again, or even improving. And it was making reading difficult. I had to shut the bad eye and read with just one for a bit. So I had to get glasses. The Cooperative had an optician who used to come out here once a month. The first opportunity I had, he finished at four o'clock, and I was down the pit, so I missed him and had to wait for the next month. By the next time I got there - it was four months after - I thought 'they must be like false teeth, you've got to get used to the damn things'. The one was a very thick lens you know. But it seems that my eye had improved.

Then I had a nasty gash across my knee. It was a Saturday morning shift and I'd only just started. A chap had put a prop under this miniature fault (where there had been small streams when the coal was being laid down). And it meant that I couldn't work properly, I just touched it with my pick and the damn thing fell out and down it all came. I was sitting on the cracket (you know the small stool the miners used). It was a terrible mess, there was small coals all over the top of the gash. So they sent for the ambulance and I arrived at the Consett Iron Company Infirmary at about two o'clock in the morning. Well, the nurse who was there tried her best, poor soul. She had to clean the damn thing and she was using swabs and she kept saying 'Am I hurting you?' I said 'You get away. You can use a scrubbing brush if you've got one to take that stuff out. It's got to come out.' Oh, it was a hell of a mess. I was sat there with this great gaping wound and there was this lad sitting beside me. He was looking at me, and then the wound, and back at me. The nurse looked at him and she said 'You get out of here'. And she chased him out: he looked like somebody dying just at the sight of the business. Anyway she stitched it up but it was that dirty she couldn't clean it properly, so in two or three days time it turned septic and the stitching had to be taken out again. They had to hold the wound together with elastoplast but that couldn't draw it together enough - it left a bad scar.

Then after the last war a piece of stone fell between two planks and hit me over the kidney. The company doctor said 'I'll make you off for light work' but the National Insurance doctor reckoned I'd recovered. So I went back to hewing. This one day there was

water on the face and the belt was slipping and I got my finger caught in the coupling pin. So I had to have a piece taken out of my arm and grafted on. And, of course, I've got some dust. But not enough for compensation. Perhaps when they open me up they'll find different.

An Education

For a couple of years before I left school I did very little school work. I was mostly sent to help the teachers in the lower standards. The headmaster would send you down after you'd done a card of sums or something and say 'Whitfield - slip down to Miss Craig's (or Miss Parker's) and give her a hand.' That's what I did for the last two years I was in school. I passed what they called the Labour Examination: but they just learned you enough to make you fit for using your back and getting into some work.

I began to take an interest in socialist writing from 1916 and I tell you it stopped me taking an interest in any Party, because I thought I wasn't up to it. I didn't know enough. I didn't have enough knowledge. In fact, I didn't do any trade union work because I felt I wasn't intelligent enough for it. But I started to read quite a lot of books, apart from books of my own I used to borrow books from the Labour Library in Annfield Plain. The wife and I used to walk the three miles over there and back again to get hold of the books.

After the 1926 strike we'd been out for seven months, we'd all been given out notice and we went back to work in the November. I was the last man to sign on for work at the Eden. I remember the final meeting prior to signing on for the pit at the miners' hall and everybody was that eager in case they didn't get a job that when it came to the time when they were released from the meeting to fall in and march away and go down to the pit in an orderly manner. Well they smashed the doors off the meeting room in their hurry to get out. When I saw that, I said 'Well, that's the finish as far as Fenwick's concerned.' So I went and sat on the platform and watched the struggle! Then I went out and turned down to the house and the first person I met was the wife. She said 'Where are you going?' I said 'I'm going home for me tea.' 'But,' she said, 'they're all signing on.' 'Ah, but I'm not going with them. I'm not going along with a mob like that even if I never work again. We've managed seven months, we've struggled through. I'm going back decently when I do go back.' So I went home and had my tea

and then walked up to see what was going on. Well, they were around there, all milling around. So I said 'To hell with them and their pit!' I didn't go until the next day.

I went into the office and the manager was sitting there. And there was a policeman there. (I don't know whether they were afraid of the boss being attacked!) 'Come in,' the boss said' 'you've been a long time coming along, Fenwick - I'm sorry we've nothing for you.' But seven days time I was sent for, and I've been stuck at the pit ever since. I should have just hopped away! But the wife wasn't prepared to shift, jobs being so scarce.

It was just then that the County Delegate left and they proposed me for the job. But I thought I wasn't well enough versed in the business to take a job like that on, and I refused to let my name go forward. In the following year at the annual election of the Lodge, people allowed their names to go forward and were elected - but they didn't turn up to the meeting. They weren't taking any chances. People were afraid to do trade union work, you know. So it was in 1927 that I took up trade union work - as auditor in place of one of the chaps who didn't turn up. Then in the next year we had a situation where an old school mate of mine was victimised. The company wouldn't allow him back into the pit at any price. He was a pit inspector - a lodge official - but they wouldn't let him in even for a pit explosion. So I allowed my name to go forward as pit inspector. Four men were killed in the first year I had the job and that really worried me because I felt I wasn't versed in it enough to deal with the job.

Then in 1929 the chap who had taken the delegate's job was elected as Relieving Officer for the District! On the old parish council. Well he wasn't to my way at all. So I thought if he can do the Delegate's job, I can do it, I'm as capable as he is. In fact he used to plagiarize my ideas anyway so I allowed my name to go forward and I was the Delegate to Durham right through until the war.

Politics

As a delegate to Durham in the 1930s it was very difficult. There were some progressive-minded people, but there were some queer fellas going there at that time too. We had people who took religious objections to any fight we were putting up. They threatened to withdraw their membership from the union if certain ideas were put forward

which were progressive - on religious grounds! And we had a few that were just there as show-pieces - they were careerists, just there for their own glorification, and they proved it afterwards.

As I told you, I saw the Mosleyites as they took their march out of Lovaine Place in Newcastle when I was at the Eye Hospital. The type of chap they attracted were what we call 'the corner ends'. The chap who would be standing around on the street corner. This type of chap has been used time and time again. They were used during the 1926 stoppage. They were put in the uniform of 'Special Constable'. We know all about their antics. Fellas with no opinion at all, bruisers. Here in the 1920s when the first Labour M.P. was elected, we had guys going around here in support of the Conservative candidate. They were boxers and ex-boxers and I don't know what, going around smashing meetings up. In fact, I don't think we'd have had a Labour M.P. if it hadn't been for that. He got sympathy instead of losing support. I remember one of the blokes, I was in the army with him, he was a heavyweight boxer - strong in the back and no brains. You couldn't talk with them about anything.

I can say now though that I've had a university education! I went for a weekend school at the University of Durham. Up in the Castle there And in the Hall was a big painting of Lord Londonderry. And I looked up at him and thought 'Ah, you bugger'.

LEN EDMONDSON Labour and the labour camps

It was in the early part of 1926 that our own family was hit with unemployment. The firm at which my father and brothers were employed was taken over by a large combine and some departments were closed whilst changes took place in the managerial departments. Everyone felt uncertain about the future and I remember the evening my father returned from work and said to my mother 'I have more bad news, the whole place is closing down.' The whole family my father and two brothers were hit with unemployment in one blow.

A large number of unemployed took to the roads during the Depression period and slept in the casual wards of the workhouses at night. The Gateshead workhouse, with a large casual ward, was near to where I lived and those who were going down for a night's sleep frequently asked us the way to the workhouse and stopped for a chat before going in for the night. These people were not tramps or drop-outs who had fallen from society. They were honest working people who were tramping around looking for work. Some of them were married with families whilst others were single and had left home because they had no income whatever and did not desire to be a burden on their parents.

During the period I was serving my apprenticeship some of my unemployed friends used to go off on the road. They usually went in groups of three or four and when they returned they all had the same story - after several weeks of tramping around there was no work to be found. They slept in the casual wards of the workhouses at night and, during the day, often knocked

at the doors of houses in the more prosperous parts of towns and cities to beg not for money but for bread.

Labour Camps

During the thirties the Government introduced what were known as Ministry of Labour camps. These camps were in various parts of the country and anyone who was in receipt of benefit of any description, whether it was Unemployment Benefit or Public Assistance, would be disallowed benefit if requested to go to a camp and refused to do so. Theoretically those who had no income whatever, such as my brother, could not be compelled to go to a camp but, of course, many agreed to go because they said they would at least receive their food. My brother was sent to a camp in County Durham where the men were employed digging stone and helping to make roads for forestry work. They were accommodated in huts and following breakfast the Union Jack was hoisted whilst they were all lined up and marched to the place of work. In the evening they were again lined up and marched back to the camp when the Union Jack was then lowered. All that they received for doing the work was their food and a few shillings pocket money. The work was obviously being done on the cheap instead of employing labour at correct trade union rates.

When my brother arrived at the camp there was insufficient food and it was of very poor quality. Along with a few others, he succeeded in organising a 'stay in' strike as a protest against the food. They barricaded the doors of the huts and refused to go out to work. They had, of course, taken the preliminary steps of storing up in the huts some food which they had taken from the store-house before they commenced the strike. The strike committee met the camp manager who threatened to have them all prosecuted. His threats did not have any effect as the strikers remained solid and after several days agreement was reached resulting in the quality and quantity of the food being greatly improved. Shortly afterwards, however, all of the strike committee were transferred to other camps. No two members of the strike committee were sent to the same camp and my brother was sent to one at Carshalton in the south of England.

Whilst he was at the Carshalton camp we received by post two visiting cards from Kingston Municipal Hospital. We immediately instituted enquiries and discovered that he had collapsed with pneumonia whilst working in the camp. The Ministry of Labour did not take any trouble to contact the relatives but apparently thought their responsibility ended when they sent for an ambulance to take him to hospital.

My eldest brother was sent to a Ministry of Labour camp at Kielder where the men were employed on forestry work. It was very isolated with no village and there was more than one case of suicide during the existence of the camp. One can only assume that in the suicide cases the individuals were so broken in spirit, and perhaps physically weak through the years of unemployment, that the isolation and hard work at Kielder caused them to have a complete breakdown.

Boxing

Boxing was a popular sport in the North-East during the twenties and thirties and the largest boxing hall was situated in Newcastle. When a big fight was to take place the weigh-in was held round about midday and large numbers of unemployed would walk miles to attend the weigh-in just to see the boxers walk from their dressing room, take off their dressing gowns, stand on the scales and then hear the weights announced. This was as much as the unemployed saw of the boxers because they could never find the cash to attend the match. During mid-week, the boxing hall used to stage a number of three-round contests. Those who participated in the three-round contests were new starters and if they could win a few of the three-round fights they would be offered a minor contest on one of the principal nights. My unemployed friends often volunteered for the three-round contests. Some of them could box and some of them could not. Those who could not box just received a good punching-up and the fee which was paid to the boxers was five shillings, out of which they paid two shilling to the seconds. One night at the hall there was a man who looked so weak and tired that it was obvious he should not have been in the ring. He appeared to have no idea of how to box and was just punched around the ring by his opponent. He survived the first round but, in the second round, was so badly punched-up that, when he went down, the referee stopped the fight without even counting him out. The crowd were just beginning to voice their disapproval of his poor show when the referee waved for the crowd to be quiet and explained that the man was on the road, had not had anything to eat all day, but had come along to the Hall and volunteered for the fight.

In the early thirties after I had completed my apprenticeship, I became active in the unemployed workers' struggles, participating in marches and demonstrations. Our slogan used to be 'Work or Full Maintenance' and we agitated against the low rates of unemployment benefit and public assistance allowances whilst, at the same time, agitating that schemes should be introduced to provide work for the workless. In 1934, some particularly vicious and inhuman regulations were introduced, hundreds of thousands of unemployed workers suffered large cuts in their benefits. In many cases, where there was an employed worker in the house,

the unemployed workers was disallowed benefit completely. I clearly recall at that time the case of two brothers who were unemployed and living together in a house - probably the house in which their late parents had lived. They were each in receipt of 15/3d per week unemployment benefit but, under the new regulations, they were classed as 'man and wife' and given 23/3d between them. These regulations caused a revolt throughout the country and, in one week, we had three massive demonstrations in Gateshead and Newcastle. Twelve thousand people marched the streets of Gateshead and demonstrated outside the Unemployment Assistance Board offices. Then we sent in a deputation to request the manager to send a telegram to the Government demanding that the regulations be repealed. Later in the week we had a demonstration and march to the Gateshead Town Hall where we arranged for a deputation to meet the Town Council with a request that the Town Council should send a telegram to the Government demanding the repeal of the regulations, and in the same week we had a march to the City Hall, Newcastle-on-Tyne where the then Minister of Labour who introduced the regulations was addressing a meeting. These marches and demonstrations were always well disciplined without any violence being displayed by the unemployed. The organisers of the demonstrations had no funds so they could not publicise the intended marches by posters or leaflets, and the Press and radio did not give any publicity to intended marches or demonstrations in those days. The whole of the organising had to be done by chalking the streets, calling upon everyone to assemble at a particular place and line up for a march against the Dole cuts or to demand employment. Sometimes to announce the demonstrations a few men would go into the streets, ring a bell, and when the people came out they announced that a march was to be held and called upon everyone to join in.

In the immediate post-war years I was a member of the National Insurance Tribunals, being a trade union nominee. Those who had been unemployed for about twelve months or more were interviewed by the Tribunal to ascertain that they were cooperating with the Employment Exchange to obtain work. Frequently men over forty years of age would appear and it was evident when they entered the room that they were suffering mental anxiety, fear could be seen in their expression. They had the fear that it was a return to the conditions of the thirties when their only income could be taken away from them.

MARY LOUISE WALKER DE MEDICI

A land for heroes?

The Means Test lives in memory,
A scar upon their soul.
The land they'd fought for heroes to live in
Had put them on the Dole.

Being on the Means Test was all that could be expected in the great poverty-ridden thirties, at the height of the Depression. Unemployment, soup kitchens, marches and processions, great unrest all over the country, distress, and feelings of despair, fear and misery. Who hasn't heard of the Jarrow March, when a group of men, ill-clad and on the Dole and Means Test were led by a little red-haired woman, who instilled fire into their hearts. She gave them courage, hope and fortitude to march to London and demand work. This fiery woman was Ellen Wilkinson, one of their M.P.s, who saw them on their way, encouraging them to sing as they went, and then at their head, led them into London to pillory the Government to draw attention to their plight. Everywhere they passed through villages on the March, inhabitants cheered them on because their cause was the same problem as they had - no work. This Jarrow March alone in the thirties is blazoned across the pages of history. These men were

sad, and bitter, because they had fought and sacrificed their all in the First World War and had been promised a land for heroes to live in.

Next many younger unemployed who were tired of facing day after day of emptiness with empty bellies and blank despair and with time on their hands went to fight in Spain where Civil War had broken out. They had ideals risking their lives to help their fellow man, receiving the action that their bodies needed as well as adventure. Some were killed, but others gained experience - training in how to shoot - which later stood them in good stead for Hitler's war, which was looming up.

The Means Test

Clerks and managers behind the counters, where the men had to sign on, could be very disparaging and even exceeded their authority by the way they treated the unfortunate men who were unluckly enough to find themselves in their out-of-work situation. They were like little tin Gods, with enforcement of strict rules, and there was unnecessary antagonism on both sides of the counter. Men had to sign on with their buff-coloured card at set times and, if they for any reason whatever, did not turn up at that time, they were hauled up in front of a Board to give an explanation. Sometimes, if they didn't accept your explanation, these Board's would stop their Dole, usually for six weeks and an appeal was necessary to have it restored. If you had been ill, a certificate had to be produced from a doctor, and you had to pay for certificates then. So most unemployed did without. Men had to stand in queues, long queues, in pouring rain and move up, one by one, towards the counter. God help them if they needed to relieve themselves, as they lost their place in the queue and had to go to the end and start up again. Most of them had no overcoats or means to keep the rain off and so they got soaked.

But note, there would be various political men, imploring people to vote for them in the next Election. One Communist speaker, on May Day, dished out sweets to the children, who came to listen with their parents and small loaves of bread were handed out. This soon got around, and people, out of work and hungry, flocked to these meetings. The sweets were throw-outs– from a nearby factory. Further along, bread loaves, which had been spoilt in the oven, were thrown out of the bakery.

One man who was the father of 10 sons and one daughter,was on the Means Test and was given a green card by the Employment Bureau to go for a job in a factory, but when he got there the job had already been taken. This angered him, dejection set in and he went on the drink. It was when he was on the drink that his wife fell pregnant with another child. He tried for another job, and found out the wage was less than what he was receiving on the Means Test. When he refused the job, one word 'Refusal' was put on the green card. When he returned the card to the Labour Exchange he was told he'd be up before the Board for an interview, which resulted in the loss of six weeks' allowance. His wife was trying to keep body and soul together in one room, and a small bedroom, only the size of a gloriful coalhouse. The bedroom door couldn't be shut, it had to be left open against the wall. They had one shabby double bed and the only way to get into bed, was by crawling in. When the seven boys were in, top to tail, they were like sardines in a tin. The three older boys went to sleep at their grandfather's, who had a room nearby and he fed with the family.

The daughter looked after her old father then, as her mother had died early in her life and his 10/- pension helped towards the family finances. The mother, father and baby girl slept in a bed they made up most nights by putting chairs against an old couch and a mattress or two very thick blankets or coats, even a hookey mat on top. Many people had to sleep in these makeshift beds because there was no money to buy a bed and you could not get H.P. being on the Dole or Means Test.

Making Do

We had an allotment and we shared some of our vegetables with the old man next to us. He would swap if our vegetables had come up better than his. He, like us, had to be wary to avoid the snoopers who went around. You could not cut an old person's hedge or garden or paper a room. If these snoopers saw you when going around, they'd come and ask you what you were doing, were you receiving money, so you dare not do anything until after 5 p.m. when these snoopers were off the street.

I was due to have a child in 1935 and we went down to the Maternity Hospital on City Road. I was starved when I went in there. Because we were out of work, I had to scrub floors and I had to pay 30/- as well– the lowest amount you could pay. My daughter was born on a horse–hair couch because there were no beds, and there was 15 children born that night. It was abominable - you were crowded in. You could have a private ward but there was only one or two - most private patients went up to a Nursing Home in Gosforth, Newcastle.

They give you a right slap on the behind if you were late or you didn't behave yourself. It was really fantastic some of the horrible things they did to you, you wouldn't believe it. It was worse in a way, I should think, than being in jail.

The nurses were very,very badly treated in the sense that they got poor pay and they got nothing to eat. If you had anything left over they'd come and beg it off you and they would beg your fruit and everything. They worked hard and they only got one day off a month.

The lady, who sold flowers in the Bigg Market, had these three children, three girls they were, one after the other and she said to me one day, but of course,I never tried it, but she said to me one day 'You're daft for having kids when you're out of work'. She said 'I'll give you an address and if you care to go to Daisy Hill and take 10/- there's a woman who'll put you right, give you an abortion.' This shocked me and I never tried it, I was too scared, but she'd had one and two or three more had had one.

I was green as grass, having been in the orphanage, for all I had two kids. I never learnt about half the things until I went nursing. I didn't know what things like masturbation were. I don't know where I'd been, but that's the way we were brought up: you never had any idea. When you had your first child you thought it was going to come out of your tummy.

GEORGE BESTFORD

When you're starving it's pretty tough

My grandfather was a Cornish miner and he came to Coxhoe in County Durham when the mines were closing down in Cornwall. There was a dispute at the Coxhoe pit at the time - that's why they were sent for, as blacklegs - and my grandfather and the others refused to start. The people from Coxhoe took them into their homes until the pits started again. If they hadn't been taken in they would have starved. In those days you'd have to be dying before the Parish would give you anything.

The Pit and the Dole

My mother didn't want me to go down the pit. She took me away on the Saturday to an uncle of hers who was going to train me to be a saddler. When we got there he was as deaf as a stone. In those days they had a big trumpet that you had to shout down, like a horn. He'd put it in his ear and I had to shout down it. Well I thought, I'm not stopping here! My mother went back and I'll bet before she was home in Tursdale I was at Dawdon with my grandfather. And I was down the pit on the Monday. My mother didn't know for a while but eventually she found out I was in the pit and she said that if I was to be a miner I had just as well go down the pit at Tursdale nearer where we lived. So that's what I did.

A lot of the lads were very kind to the ponies. They'd get very attached to them. Particularly if one was a good worker. They'd pinch carrots and turnips from the fields on the way to work for them. Some of the lad's mothers used to give apples. You'd tell your mother, you know, about the pony - how it was a good pony - and she'd say 'Oh, take an apple for the poor thing!' My mother was always giving me apples - one for me, the other for the pony.

Right through the Depression years I remember lads with their ponies. Sometimes on the main drive ways of the pit they would ride the ponies out - flying out like cowboys. And the overman would be standing there with a riding crop covered in chalk. And he'd tap you on the shoulder with it. All those who had a white mark would be fined.

It was a hard job for a 'politician' to get a job in the thirties. If he was a 'politician' he had to keep it under his cap because if it once got out that he was a bit of an agitator, and fighting for better conditions, there was no chance of a job for him. There were a lot of good workers who never worked after the 1926 strike, you know. In fact I had an uncle who was in the 1921 strike and never worked another day in the pit again! Anyone who was a bit of an agitator couldn't get a job in the pit. And I was always shouting about something. I don't know what it was but I couldn't see anything wrong and not say something. But they had everyone taped. They knew what you were - if you were a bit of a shouter they didn't want you there. So you'd go to the Dole: 'Where have you been today, Bestford?' 'I've been to Trimdon and I've been to Tudhoe and here and there.' I'd never been because we knew there was no point in going! We used to meet men coming back you see and they'd tell you it was no point going there. So you could walk your feet off but there was no bloody chance of a job. But you had to tell the Dole you'd been because you had to be 'looking for work'. There were some men - dole clerks - who had worked with you down the pit and yet were bloody awful. They'd make you take your caps off before you came in. 'Have you forgotten anything?' 'No, I'm looking for work'; 'Well take that cap off'. In a nasty, snotty way you know. Just to show their authority. It used to vex me. But you had to be very very careful you know. If you used any violence they soon picked you up.

At that time, my father was getting about 35 bob, and my brother 15 bob. Under the Means Test if your father was earning you got less - and they got my Dole down to ninepence a week. We had two sisters and a younger brother and we all had to live on that. It was a bit tough. So I went into Durham and played hell about it! They told me that if I didn't behave myself they'd send for the police and I'd be in trouble. So I just had to keep quiet, you see.

At the Dole they had notices up for Training Centres, 4/- a week and they'd train you to be something different. So I went there; to Brandon in Norfolk and we were living in tin huts. We were making fire roads and digging trenches - just to harden us up, you know, so that we could take work. And if a contractor such as McAlpine and Wimpey wanted a navvy they'd send to the Centre and they'd send him, it was a good idea but McAlpine had a racket going. If you worked for them so many weeks the little section that you were working on was stopped - supposed to be finished, and then you went back on to the Dole again. But they were opening other sections further along and they were taking a new batch in. They were getting so much a head from the government for setting them on.

We were working in Middlesex for 11d an hour and then we learned that they were paying the locals a shilling. It wasn't much more like but it was more. So they were bringing us down and using us as cheap labour you see. Some of us packed in and started again at a shilling an hour. They were mostly non-union people who were working, you see. You were moved on to different jobs. You just got to know the union men and joined and you were moved again.

I met a lot of Welsh lads who had gone through just the same as we had gone through. Exactly the same. Some of them had never worked from leaving school. In those Training Centres four bob and a meal was better than nothing at all. But they were always more militant than the Durham lads. They were always sitting in batches, talking politics and playing hell about the four bob and the work we had to do for it.

And Back to the Pit

I was never satisfied with navvying work. I kept writing to my father asking him if there was any work; any chance of a start.

My father was a good worker, he'd always been a good worker, he never lost work. And eventually he got me a start. He wrote down to me where I was working and told me he'd got me a job as an engine man. And I loved engines. So I started work again and it nearly killed me. It's awful when you've not been working bent, and crouched up. Getting back into the form again. I used to come home so tired my mother had to wash my back for me; I couldn't get my arms round.

But the 1926 strike knocked hell out of the Durham miners. They were very nearly starving and when you're starving it's pretty tough. Up to that time there were lots of little strikes all over the country. Strikes that people didn't hear of. One I remember in a very fine summer, when the putters wanted some time off you know. So they had to have a strike about something! There was one pony down the pit that had this horrible bad leg; and by God it used to stink. But for all it had this diseased leg it was a hell of a worker! So they had a strike. It was only for a day but it was a fine day. The pony was taken out of the pit until its leg recovered. So it was good for the pony: and they all had a day off!

But in the 1930s people were afraid to strike - with so many out of work. The managers used to say to you; 'If you're not satisfied you know what to do . . . You can pack it in now if you like.' They weren't long in telling you! Back-answer the boss and you were sacked, you know.

There was an awful lot of bullying down the pit. I could get young lads to work for me and the overman used to say; 'George, I don't know how the hell you do it but these lads like to work with you.' I was kind to them you see. I didn't used to bully them around. Some of the overmen down there were real bullies. One of them had been a professional wrestler and he was a big man but he never frightened me. I used to say to him 'anytime you're ready Jack. I'll have a go at you.' Some pits used to set men on like that. Big strong men who would frighten people, bully them.

Different pits had different conditions and different prices. If you were strong enough and it was a good pit you could get better prices. At Cornforth the money was always better. The

checkweighman there was a Communist -- George Cole - and he was a hell of a fighter. The Cornforth Colliery didn't start right away after 1926 - they blacklisted the lot! But when the demand for coal increased they opened it and the men wouldn't go back without George Cole and they elected him checkweighman. The pit closed a few times but when it started up the men voted George checkweighman again. He was checkweighman for years and years. And they always had better prices at Cornforth. If it was 6d - 6½d a ton at Bowburn you could bet it was 7d - 8d at Cornforth. They used to fight like hell.

Survival

Because of the Means Test there were men who were leaving home to live in sheds in the allotments in Cornforth - in order to get the Dole. They wouldn't allow their fathers to work to keep them so they just left you know. Quite a number used to live in the gardens Sometimes they'd go home to have a meal - unofficially! That's what they had to do if they didn't want their mothers and fathers to suffer. They did some awful things around here.

With a bit of land you could get by with living out of the gardens. But rabbits were the thing! And a good dog was half the battle. And I did have a good whippet! I think we'd have starved if it hadn't been for this dog. Away he'd go and back with a rabbit. They always had the game keepers out and they were there watching to make sure you didn't get any of their game you know. They always saw that the miners didn't get anything. I was lucky because I was well in with a farmer and he used to let us have half of what we caught on his land. So on a moonlit night - away with the dogs and catch a few rabbits! Some of the farmers were very good. They would give you some potatoes or a turnip. But some would give you nothing; not a sausage. We used to pinch off them.

Work and Play

If we had our Dole cards we could go to the pictures twice a week for twopence. We used to walk from Tursdale to the Gaiety in Ferryhill and spend the afternoon at the pictures. That was a good entertainment - twice a week! We forgot all our troubles - cowboys and Charlie Chaplin. It was a two hour show and we'd walk back for tea. That's how most of us learned to read! In

the picture house everybody would be reading the words out to people who couldn't read you know - 'Will he catch her?'

People used to walk about together in age groups. And you'd walk about for miles. and play football. I've seen games of football last all day. We were lucky in Tursdale we had a leather ball which lasted a long time. I've seen twenty a side. People used to come along - old men, young ones - 'Which way do I kick?' Other places, people used to sew their caps together or blow up a pig's bladder. If you were a good footballer - or a cricketer - you could always get work in the pits. In Tursdale you were on if you were a sportsman. We had sixteen horsekeepers at Tursdale - all professional footballers. The trainer for Durham City was one of the overmen, the undermanager was one of the Directors! One of those horsekeepers told me how he'd sleep hours down the pit before a match! A lot of the men didn't mind. They liked a good worker or a good sportsman you know! I do. I love sport you know.

Politics and Jazz Bands

The social security payments and Dole nowadays are really preventing riots. There would be a revolution if they did now what they did then. In the thirties a lot of young lads were ready! I was in a state myself. I used to think it was awful being out of work! If I had had a gun at that particular time I would have gone with it. Because I was fed up of being out of work and out of money. And there was no prospect of getting work, you see. But if there had been any fight made we'd have had sticks and stones and they'd have had guns you see. Sticks and stones are no good against guns.

When Ramsay MacDonald went over we all played hell about it, because we knew what it would be. 'You can come on our side but you have to do what we tell you.' That's what it all boiled down to. 'Follow our policy or you're out.' It would be the same today if there was a coalition government. Everybody knew what MacDonald would get; whether he was too stupid or whether he thought he was stronger than the whole Conservative Party I don't know. He was taken on as the Leader just to quieten the majority of the working people down. He had had a big following you see. He had been a damn good man; that coalition broke him. He should never have had a coalition government. You cannot work with the bloody devil, and that's what the Tories were. It was impossible to work with them and you can't work with them yet.

The jazz bands came along in the thirties when things were getting a bit tough you know. They needed something to keep the men busy! There were some military minded men who had been in the Army and the Territorials and they started these things. Just to take people's minds away from politics and things like that. It was a racket. There's always been a love of uniform amongst some Englishmen you know; give them a uniform and a bloody drum and they'll follow for miles. That was the attraction of the Fascist party, you know because of the uniform and the riding breeches. That was the thing. Men, grown men, in the jazz bands with fancy feathers in their hats and knocking hell out of a drum. They never learned to play an instrument. But it kept them away from politics. The lads who didn't get involved in these carry-ons used to discuss politics and world affairs - and sit and listen to the old men talking about their experiences and how they had to fight all the way through. But these were enjoying themselves! They had assistance from people with money to buy the uniforms and so on! Like in America - with competitions for men pushing the pea with their nose - it was quite a diversion. If they were learning to play an instrument or appreciate music it would be different. I tell you if you were a bit sensitive and you went to listen to them you'd want to be away as sharp as possible or you'd soon have a bad head! A lot of people cannot stand the racket. Bump, bump, bump; biff, biff. The colliery bands were different. They were great bandsmen and they loved music. The jazz bands came with the Depression. If everyone who was in the jazz bands had marched to London and demanded work! They were just as hungry as those who walked on the hunger march but they marched around blowing whistles. It was to keep them away from politics.

Prosperity

In 1926 they cut the rate down 7 bob to 6/6d. And our hours went up from 7½ hours to 8 hours. And after the Strike we had the Depression. But as the thirties went on and the trouble was starting with Germany they tried the carrot to try to please us. And we were almost back to the 7 shillings. Before the war broke out we were getting quite prosperous. But we knew what was coming. They'd been calling up the reserve to practise on their new guns, you know. The writing was on the wall. There were a lot of lads by 1939 who were sick of being out of work. So they gave them something else to do.

EDIE BESTFORD
My father and brother are miners!

I was born in a place called Happy Land, near Annfield Plain in County Durham. All my family had been involved in the mines. My grandmother worked underground and that was years after it had been made illegal to employ women in the mines. And I've a brother killed in the mines. So my family has had it's share out of coal mining.

Finding a Place

In a coal mining area the mining girls had to find work. My mother was one of seven sisters and they all worked as domestic workers for farmers. She told me that she used to have to get up at 3 o'clock in the morning on a washing day and go down the garden to wring out the clothes that had been steeped in tubs overnight, ready to be washed. Often in the winter she had to break the ice.

I had to go into service, more or less like the men who had to go down the mine. It was a living. My mother would have liked to put us to a trade. She wanted me to be a dressmaker but, of course, having a family she couldn't wait until a dressmaker could take me. There was a very good dressmaker in the village but she couldn't take me for about a year or a year and a half. So that was how I got into service or into a place' as we used to say.

When I was fourteen and a half I went to a day place not far from home. Then a year later I went to work for Lady Eden - the mother of Anthony Eden - at Windleston Hall. I left there and went to Northumberland to work for Lord Armstrong's sister. I left there because my younger sister was then at a place in Newcastle and my mother thought it would be better if we were together. So I worked at a house in Jesmond in Newcastle, then I went to Scotland and then I came back to Newcastle to work in a hostel at a girls' Training College. You were really tied. You had three days off a fortnight and for the rest of the time you were tied to the house. You were practically always on duty you know. If there was a knock on the door in the middle of the night you had to get up and answer it.

The Edens weren't nice people! You could tell they hadn't much time for the workers. I remember I had to be in at seven o'clock. One day cook told us that 'Her ladyship says that you all have to be in at seven. Because these awful miners are about and you never know what might happen to you'. I told her, 'I'm not frightened of the miners. My father and brothers are miners!' Well then, of course, they became bankrupt and soon after I left.

I wasn't involved in the worst of the Depression like they were in the villages. Living in Jesmond I was out of the way of it. There weren't so many good mistresses in those days. It was like the colliery bosses - you never got an hour more than your time. I used to go home on my half day. I would go down to Marlborough Crescent and get the bus out through Chopwell to Annfield. I used to help my mother out with my ten shillings a week but I didn't see as much of the suffering as my sister and brothers.

In Jesmond all the houses were occupied by the middle classes (some of them struggling) and they'd each have a maid. One of the women I worked for was a widow. Her husband was the son of the owner of a colliery near Sunderland and he had got into trouble - embezzlement or something - and went abroad and left her with a son and a daughter. The son was killed in the first world war. It was very sad really. She took in two paying guests, her daughter was a high school teacher and I worked as the maid. There were hundreds of girls in that area - Gosforth, Jesmond and Heaton - who were from the mining villages. We had a club in Westgate Road. It was the Y.W.C.A. and it was a great place for the girls. On your nights off you could go to

the club and you could get a cup of tea and a biscuit. It was somewhere to go, off the streets you see. And hundreds of girls used to go there.

Labour and Socialism

I met George at a Durham Big Meeting Day. I was there with with a friend. When we were young we used to go every year with my mother and father. And when the men went for a drink the women and the kiddies either had a picnic or they had tea which was served in some of the hotels and public houses. Well my friend and I went up Claypath and went in the General Gordon thinking we could get some tea. We walked through but there was no tea: the marquee was taken up with the men drinking. George came over and got us a seat each. He told his friend 'I'm going to marry that girl'. And so he did.

But the Big Meeting in those days: the streets were crammed; packed with hundreds of thousands of people. The Gala today is but a shadow of what it used to be. I can remember we used to walk two and a half mile from Annfield Plain down to Lanchester station, and on to Durham by train. That was when I was younger. Then, of course I had to go to work.

My father was a union man: he was Treasurer of the union. He was interested in politics and so was my mother. They always took newspapers and my father always used to explain things to us. For a long time I wasn't very interested in politics so when I had the vote he explained to me who I should vote for - he explained the reasons. He explained that the Labour Party was the party of the working class: as far as it went. I remember clearly the first time I went to vote, 'Well, Edie,' he said, 'the best one for you to vote for is the Labour Party, it's nearer the working class. But it's socialism we want and the Labour Party isn't socialist.' I can remember as if he told me it last week. 'You'll have to vote' he said, 'but you'll never get in.' And this was at Jesmond and Conan Doyle's brother was the M.P. there. He'd been an M.P. for years; all his political life. I think the Labour man only got two thousand votes but still I thought it was alright because my vote was one of them!

ERNIE LAWS

An out~of~work man's life

As a lad I had every boy's ambition for a good job, to marry a nice girl and have a home and family - but all I had was frustration. The Dole queues were a misery - twice a week signing-on periods, long waits and plenty of cheek from the supercilious clerks hiding behind their desks, warm and with full bellies.

I was serving my apprenticeship as a plumber at Doxford's shipyard in Sunderland. Then, suddenly, everyone seemed to be on the dole. The figures of unemployment had reached the 2½ million mark. Like Mother Hubbard and her cupboard all the shipyards looked like skeletons, showing the open spines between the bones. Not a ship on the stocks, no hurry, no flurry, just a deadly silence, not unlike our cemetaries, the grass and weeds growing madly as if in a jungle.

I became a member of the Territorials. I had discarded my troop leader's Sea Scout uniform for the khaki tunic, spurs and riding breeches - though our unit was horseless! The few extra shillings I got from this I gave to my mother for there were seven of us in the family. My father was also unemployed, giving up his chance of returning to the pit, after the 1926 strike, but my younger brother worked as a putter at Silksworth Colliery. It was quite a journey from where we lived and how often we sat in fear and dread when he failed to turn up at his usual time. Mothers, wives and relatives were never removed from this constant worry.

I can still laugh, when I recall our effort at starting up a window-cleaners' business. My pal - an apprentice joiner - and myself, bought some timber from which we made several ladders but due to lack of publicity, the only windows we ever cleaned were his mother's and mine. Result - a tragic loss, we sold the ladders for next-to-nowt. I then tried a few days of snow-shovelling for the Sunderland Corporation. You know, I could hardly lift the empty shovel, never mind the weight of the slushy snow. My good-natured workmates saw my distress and told me, 'Just rake it together.' In those days, you tried anything that came along. I next tried some casual work at Jopling's Glass Works - 4/2d a day. How I sweated in my bare skin, as the molten glass was pouring into the basement. That was near slavery.

Necessity decided matters during those hungry days. The most popular page in the Sunderland 'Daily Echo' was 'Situations Vacant'. 'Ambitious Salesmen Wanted - apply so and so address - bring attache-case'. I did. Ten very ambitious hopefuls were accepted. Our cases were filled with several articles: toothpaste, hair-oils, vaseline, shaving soap, etc., all supposedly products of a famous chemical company. They kindly offered two for the price of one. After the first week, I was the only salesman left, the rest had retired swiftly back to the Dole queue.

My greatest customers were the miners' wives of Easington and Spennymoor; in fact, all the colliery villages. 'Throw away your sandwiches and come in and have some hot broth' was a regular answer. I was a good salesman - you had to be to clear £3 a week. Then came the day I saw the Manager sticking on the bottles of smelling salts, a gilt label marked British Made over the word Foreign. He said I was a fool to pack a good job in 'You could be the next under-manager', he snarled. I refused to carry on. I kept thinking of those kindhearted collier-wives spending their frugal cash on rubbish.

In 1931, I decided to join the Regular Army but I received a terrific blow after the M.O.'s inspection. He said I was under-weight and had a slight murmur in my heart. This I confirmed with my doctor. The days and months dragged on, with no respite in the gloomy Depression. I was approaching that should-be-wonderful

age of 21. The firm of ship-builders where I had begun my apprenticeship to be a plumber, gave each apprentice the opportunity to finish out his time. So for three weeks I worked with the charge-hand at the 'rich' sum of 10/3d. Then back to the dole queue. The weeds and grass in the shipyards were growing higher and higher - but no new ships to fill the berths.
Next morning I began a trek to the Newcastle Recruiting
I began a trek to the Newcastle Army Recruiting Centre at Rye Hill, for I thought the Sunderland recruiter would not have forfotten me. To make sure of my weight, I drank pints and pints of water and, to my delight, passed all the M.O. and intelligence tests. My choice - the Royal Corps of Signals. I forgot my hunger and sore feet. I hadn't a penny. My thought as I trudged home were of Wolfe and Montecalm. of the Indian Mutiny, the Battle of Mons, of every soldier I had read about.

Having kept no diaries, I cannot fix any dates. All jobs have a certain monotony. Only the very rich can have variety - the spice of life. So those years, though long and soul-destroying, do not merit many words in an out-of-work man's life.

FRED SCOTT

They're living off your back

You hadn't the money. Them were hard times; even more when you were working. You were working at the pit for nothing.

Some of the places were terrible for to get coals out of. I thought I'd served the wrong occupation and that I'd better get scrapping and start to make headways for to get further advancement. It was then that I started away at night schools.

It was just bed and work and bed and work and into the College and back to work again on a Saturday. I paid my own money for to sit my first tickets to be an undermanager. My first course and I paid £5 to sit them.

There was men gannin to the pit; they had their feet strapped up. They hadn't the money to buy a pair of laces. The management were greedy. The coal owners lived in their big halls all over the county but you weren't allowed in them circles. You did see them but they didn't recognise you. They were only men the same as me, the only thing was they had more money than me.

We're all born the same and we all go back the same, and I say they shouldn't be allowed to hold as much land, none of them, because, they're strangling the people with what they're doing. It's still going on. The whole lot of them are living off your back. The working man has no rights whatsoever if 'they' say 'no'. It's the tie. Money. It's money talks to someone everyday. But I've never been able to get on speaking terms with it; all it's ever said to me is 'goodbye'. These people are born into it, they've got it, and they're going to make sure you don't get it - but you're the man who's working, you're the man that's using the shovel.