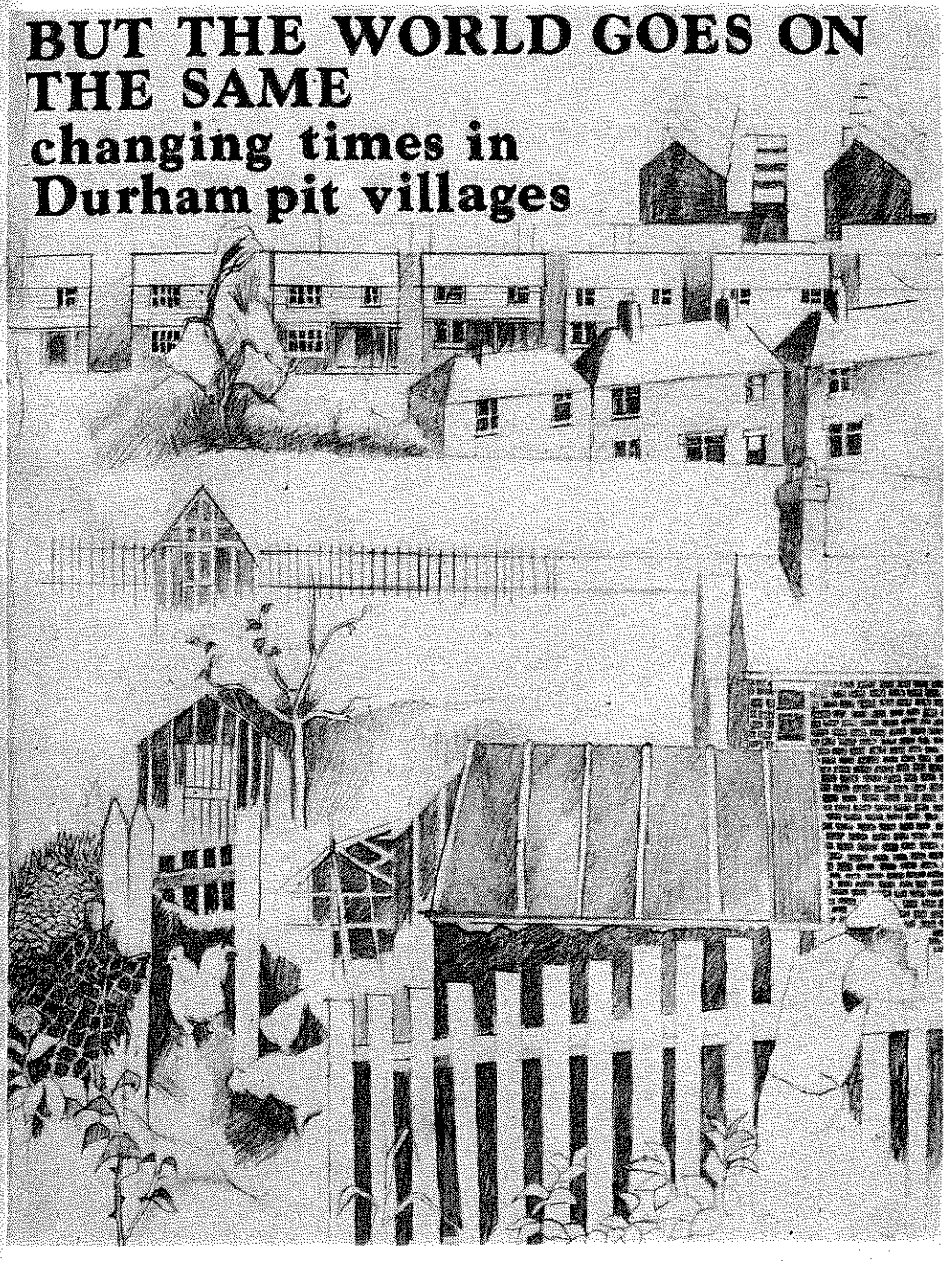
BUT THE WORLD GOES ON THE SAME

changing times in Durham pit villages



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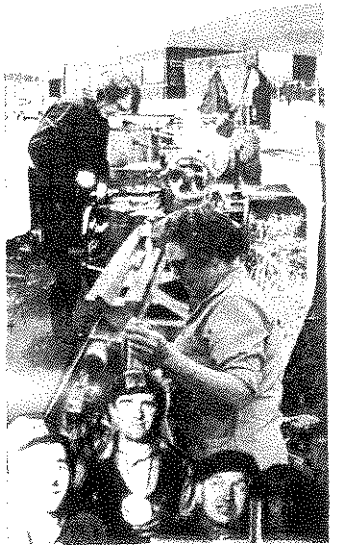

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Contents

Everyone is going through changes,
No—one knows what's going on
Everybody changes places
— but the world still carries on.

Love must always change to sorrow
Everyone must play the game
Here today and gone tomorrow
— but the world goes on the same.

Alan Price

Introduction

The first *Strong. Words* publication 'Hello Are You Working?' presented accounts by people who lived through he last depression in the North East of England. 'But the World Goes on the Same' is a sequel; it looks at the way in which working class people of County Durham have experienced the changes that have taken place since the 1930s.

The Durham coalfield is the oldest in Britain and most of the pits have now closed. In 1922, 154,837 men worked underground in Durham. By 1962 and after nationalisation only 77,900 remained, and these were reduced to 34,500 by Lord Robens' 'ten year stint' at the coalboard. Today the figure is near 20,000. In 1945 there were some 200 collieries operating in the coalfield; today there are just twenty. Pit heaps have been landscaped, winding gear dismantled; people have moved onto council estates nearer to the new factories that were attracted to the area by government grants and subsidies; for the first time, women have experienced the routine of factory work.

The changes have been profound ones (socially, politically, even sensually – the area smells and looks very different today) and people have mixed feelings about them. One woman we talked with put it like this 'When I was a girl I thought poverty was *the* problem; the *only* problem really, If that was solved everything would be solved. I was wrong of course'. Living standards have increased but unemployment is still severe – firms like Courtauld's didn't come to stay – and as young lads and lasses stand around on corner ends, older people think of the past and of what has been lost.

These people – pitmen textile workers and shop assistants; school children and housewives; trade union officials, shop stewards and political activists; old people and young people – are brought together in the following pages. They all live in the west of the county – the part where all the pits were closed – and, in their own words, they tell of their lives, their experiences, their hopes and fears. In this way they raise questions about the way things have changed and about the place of 'ordinary' people in a society dominated by planners and giant corporations.

Many people have helped us over the last eighteen months as we have worked to bring together this collection. Our thanks go to all the other members of the Strong Words group who have assisted in any number of ways, and put up with the flexibility of our 'deadlines'. Also to the Benwell ideas group whose financial assistance rescued us as a viable publishing project, to Sheila Shippen who helped with the manuscript typing and to Derrick Graham at the Chopwell Community Centre. Dewi deserves a special mention for all the meetings he's sat through.

Most important are our thanks to the people of County Durham who have talked with us in their homes, in pubs and in clubs and especially of course those whose contributions are included in this booklet. They haye taught us a lot.

Editorial Collective

1. PAST AND PRESENT

The past exerts a powerful presence upon the lives of people in County Durham. The pit heaps have gone but they are still remembered, as is the severity of life under the old coal owners and the political battles that were fought with them. As they sit, people try to sort things out in their minds – how *were* things then? How different are they nowAnd why?

Instinctive Socialism

Dave Ayre.

The day I was born my dad got the sack from the pit. So I was a bad omen, he said. That was in 1931. It was the depression and all the men got their notice. My father never had any money anyway so my parents had a really tough time.

One of the things that appalled me as a kid was the housing. We lived in Gladstone Terrace, Sunniside, a long terrace of back to back cottages, which was one of the openings leading to the pit. They were tied cottages. I can remember two old people who lived in these cottages. The old man had retired from the pit and they weren't allowed to carry on living in the house. They were turned out. I remember going to school one day and when I came back they were out on the streets. To us kids the woman was an old crabby bugger and no doubt we were pests; but having said that, she was a real likeable sort, an upstanding woman who went to chapel and so on. To see these old people - they must have been between 65 and 70 - and the furniture that they struggled for all their lives out in the rain had a really moving effect on me. Even at that age - I was only five or six at that time - I thought that there's something wrong that allows this to happen. All the people in the street booed when the bailiffs came. But that was it. They dragged the furniture out. Finally some neighbours took them in.

At one time my dad worked at the Hedleyhope pit, in the Deerness Valley. They never had any transport so he had to walk to the valley and back in all weathers. I can remember one night in particular when he hadn't come back after working overnight. There was a terrific storm and a hell of a blizzard and naturally my mother was really upset. I heard her stirring around so I got up and said that I'd better go out and find him. I'd only be seven years old but I was the eldest. Anyway, she went out with some others to look for the men and eventually he came

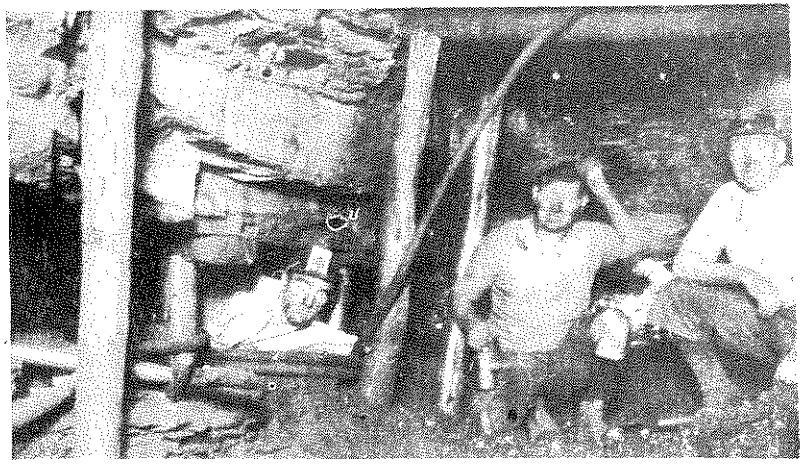
came in. He was absolutely clapped out, soaked to the skin and black. He just collapsed on the floor. He lay there for half an hour before he got up, and he was a big stout feller then, in his forties. He was absolutely buggered. He went back to work next day! To do all that just for a living, and half the village were having to do this. You can imagine the impact it had on us kids.

There was a ritual my father did of spitting the jet black phlegm that built up on the fire. It was something he had to do. On warm and humid nights when there wasn't any air it was terrible to see him, he could hardly walk or breath. I've heard my father say that it was bad down the pits and even with their lights on they couldn't see their hands because the dust was so bad. Eventually he was told that he'd got 25% pneumoconiosis. He died in hospital in the end. He had a hernia and the doctor persuaded him to go in. He had just got over the operation when he had a heart attack. What with his lungs it was all too much. There was an inquest and they did an autopsy. When I went down they showed me his lungs, and the part where you breath, well, it was just like a lump of coal! After that we got compensation. But *he* was dead. That's the sort of thing that happened and is still happening. You can pick out all the old miners. These things affect your politics, and I think made me an instinctive socialist.

The Big Meeting

I left school when I was thirteen and I was working by the time I was fourteen. I didn't go down the pit but into the building trade and my father was pleased about that. He didn't want me to go down. Living in this area though, and with my father a pitman, I got to know all about the coal industry. My father used to carry me on his shoulders to the Big Meeting in Durham, when I was a baby, and I still go every year. I can positively remember going myself when I was about seven years old and the only time I have missed it was when I was in the army. To be honest, it still puts a lump in my throat when I see all the banners. And although it's developed into more of a carnival now. It could still be a good political demonstration. In fact we've tried, through the trades council to move it in that direction but the N.U.M. have never accepted it. We've wanted to expand it by including other trade unions and trade councils, because there aren't that many miners' lodges left now - except round the coast. But the N.U.M. won't have any other union representation; they want to keep it as a miners' gala.

I've only been down the pit once, when I was 12. My father took me down one Friday night when the pit was closed. It was a terrible experience. With the machinery shut off, you could hear the moan and groan of the woodwork and props. The area around the bottom of the shaft was O.K. but where the men worked, the seams were only eighteen inches high and often less. My father was a six footer so you can imagine the struggle he had. It was really frightening and when you're a kid you think 'Bloody hell'. Some of the lads thought it was smashing - they'd see some of the kids that had left school earlier whitewashing the walls or screening the coal, who'd tell them that it was 'a piece of cake', 'nobody bothers yer'. which, for kids, was great.To me it was bloody frightening. The coal cutters - we never saw them working but you could see the huge machinery and how they ever worked with it



I don't know. Up to their eyes in muck and water - some of the seams were wet you see. It was quite an experience. Although it was terrible at the time, I would never have missed it because it's something I've remembered all my life.

Sweet Tunes

As long as I can remember, there's never been a militant tradition among the miners in this area and I think one of the important reasons has been the moderate and even right wing leadership of the Durham Miners Association. I am sure it would have been the union leadership which killed any opposition to the closure of the pits in this area. Mind the joint consultative committees would hinder any confrontation - in the N.C.B. scheme, you consult your members out of a job. The conditions in the pits were bloody shocking though and the miners were in the situation where there were sweet tunes coming out about new factories that were being built, a much better environment and much better than working down the pits - which it was.

My dad had had a rough time in the mines and I could well understand how the miners fell for it especially as there was quite a bit of redundancy pay which was a completely new thing then. The employment which exists for men now is mostly casual. Even with the new industry that has moved here there isn't stable employment. That's how it is. With the pits closing there was an availability of cheap labour that wasn't very likely to be militant. Any businessman would take that into consideration. So that was an attraction. It's also been part of the Labour Government's policy to extend advanced factories and industrial estates by handing out grants and I am sure that this partly explains the instability of some of these factories. Once the grants go the factories close.

In my village a chap came to me only the other week with this story. He'd been made redundant from the pits and then got a job in the pulverising plant in Willington. He was made redundant there and managed to get a job in Marshall Richards and again he's been made redundant. As he said, 'There seems to be no end to it. I thought when I got a job in the engineering firm, well this is it, at least I'll be there until I retire. But that's just not the case.' And redundancy payments have deadened the resistance to closures. We had a viable direct labour organisation in this area with over a hundred people but it was wrapped up, and with the redundancy payments we couldn't build up any resistance. The council asked for voluntary redundancies and they got over fifty. I can well understand that because most working people have never had that much money. They say 'Oh well, I'll have the redundancy and then I'll drop into another job.' This is particularly true in the building industry where at one time you could drop into another job the next day. But not any more.

Schools and Schooling

It was a tradition in this area that when you left school you would go down the pits because there was nothing else for you. This was the line fed out by the schools. The headmaster at my school was a councillor and supposed to be radical but I never thought so. In fact I thought he was a real bastard. We always had a dunces section and he would positively discriminate against the kids from large families and neglected homes. He used to pick them out of the class and humiliate them in front of the school. It was appalling. I hated school.

If you passed for the grammar school at Wolsingham, then you were in the elite group, and then, as now, it led to a good job. We always argued that most of the people who went to the grammar school didn't get there on their abilities but because of their background. My wife went to Wolsingham Grammar and she hated it. She didn't like the sort of segregated system it developed and, although she's not really interested in politics, she's still very aware of the system.

School used to be regimented. You had to file in, stand in long narrow lines when the whistle went, and when they blew it again march in, line by line. The education was a narrow simple one based on the three Rs. I didn't know then that there were subjects such as economics, politics, sociology, not even geography and history! It was a bare education conditioning you for when you were 14. I distinctly remember teachers saying 'You will have to be good at adding and subtracting because when you start work you'll have to be able to calculate your wage packet'. For the girls it was just oriented around the family, because they were expected to get married and keep house, not develop themselves towards a career. We all got bad reports, the lot of us.

Basically education has not changed a lot. On the Crook Trades Council, reports were coming through to us that some schools were operating discriminatory practices on school meals for kids whose parents were either unemployed or on the sick. Instead of formally contacting the schools in this area we went to have a chat with the kids themselves and we found that it was true; children from unemployed families were getting a different coloured meal ticket and that they had to queue

separately for their meals. There was some talk among the children about having a strike but they realised that those in the top stream (the elite one) wouldn't come out in support. So divisions are still being created - even in kids' minds.

Mind, there have been some changes. One of my sons goes to Parkside Comprehensive and he does have some choice in his subjects. But the teachers there didn't seem to know the aptitudes of the kids they are involved with. When my son came to choose his subjects he was handed a form and told to hand it back by lunch-time. But its not the sort of thing you can do in four hours or even four days. He was really worried by this because he felt he hadn't the time to consider his choice. Maybe we're a one-off family, but its one of the things we talk about and I felt that they ought to have involved the families. Anyway, we did discuss it in the family and I had to go down to the school to see the foreman. It completely changed after discussing it with him, but other kids in the school didn't have that opportunity. Today I know for a fact that some of them are doing subjects they're just not interested in. No wonder kids aren't interested in school.

Nothing has really changed. Shirley Williams is saying now that examinations ought to be abolished up to the age of sixteen, but they ought to be abolished altogether. Because the big problem with the whole education system is that it kills any idea of creativity that people would ever dream they had. Before they go to school most kids play together, black or white, it doesn't matter what their

religion is, they paint and draw their ideas. I remember my own children before they went to school. In the house we had plain flush doors and they made all sorts of patterns - just their own ideas. But once you go to school you're told what to do; you're taught what they want you to be taught; you're told about differences between the races and religions; your whole creative sense is destroyed. And it continues outside of school. Architects tell you what type of house to live in, you're told what sort of transport system to use. Creative instincts are destroyed and that's not socialism, that's authoritarianism!

Conservative Socialism

The Labour Party is conservative up here but it's always had control of Durham County Council since I can remember. It's a tradition of the area and anyway, the Tories have a shocking historical record. I mean they turned the troops on the workers in the past. I can remember my father talking about Churchill and the troops in Wales. No, the Tories are taboo. There's no alternative and people wouldn't vote for the Tories even now. I had the shock of my life this year when the Tory candidate came canvassing in Stanley. It's the first time in my memory that that has happened. He knocked on my door and asked to speak to me, I don't know how he dug us out. Anyway, we invited him in and he went on about trade unions and taxes, a real right winger. All my sons were at home and we sat for about half an hour trying to pin him down. In the end we told him that we were all trade unionists involved in the labour movement and eventually that we were Marxists. He got up and ran out of the door 'I want nowt to do with you' he says. He tried to do the village but I don't think he got anywhere. We've never seen him again. So the Tories haven't got any chance, but there's still no militant tradition round here.

The churches have been significant in this. They have definitely tempered the political situation. The present M.P. comes from a methodist background, as did the one before. Much of the Labour Party is now methodist and they still adopt the message of methodism. It fits the situation. It gives the line about thrift, hard work and so on - a sort of moderation. You can see that the whole area is based on that. The other side of the religious situation, the Anglican church, was almost run by the colliery management. The higher management and the officials of Pease and Partners, the coal owners, all went to church. When I once went through the records of Stanley Church, I found that in times of depression and dispute that the collections in the church actually increased. They probably felt that it would save them if they put their money into the collection!

A bit of Aggro

The Trades Council in Crook, which I'm involved in as a U.C.A.T.T. delegate, has improved greatly over the last few years. It's developed a campaigning stance and it's getting a lot of publicity. Maybe it's beginning to alter things - the way people think about things - in a small way. People now come up to me (people who are not trade unionists) and say 'I get the *Auckland Chronicle* every week just to see what the bloody Trades Council's up to.' That's smashing.

We also keep in regular touch with the M.P., Ernest Armstrong, and meet once or twice a year. He says that he likes to keep in touch with us. But if we write to him, and we write quite regularly, both from the Trades Council and the union, he just acknowledges it and tells us that he has passed it on to the relevant minister. And that's it, he never gives an opinion. Politically he is a moderate and he doesn't take the same line as we do. In fact, we've had quite a bit of aggro with him and once he called us political hardliners in the *Chronicle*.

I remember one meeting in Crook between him and the Trades Council. He was very late because his car had broken down. The room was absolutely packed with about forty people all patiently waiting for him to arrive. Eventually he came in, and everybody, to a man jack, got up and walked out. The poor bugger went deathly white and although he apologised for being late some members of the Trades Council never forgave him even to this day. They said at least he could have phoned up from somewhere.

A big problem in Crook, which we are aware of is that there isn't anywhere for the unemployed to go or for there to be a political or industrial meeting place. There's no building or any sort of physical trade union forum. It's been a problem for us in the U.C.A.T.T. branch because we've been kicked out of pubs and we've had problems getting rooms. The excuse was that we wouldn't drink the beer, but I'm sure it wasn't that! They also said that they weren't very keen on people coming in with their overalls on, but people wear overalls.

Getting Organised

A lot needs to be done in this area. And I think there are signs that things are changing. I felt that in 1972, during the building workers' strike. In Crook we were out for six weeks, although the dispute as a whole lasted thirteen. All building work was stopped in County Durham. Once we joined the strike we decided to organise a campaign through the branch. We decided to hold meetings weekly instead of fortnightly. At that time we met in the Mill House pub and we got the shock of our lives at the first meeting because we couldn't get everybody into the room! Not even in the big room. There were about 150 of us, including workers from other unions, and even people who weren't union members. We moved out onto Crook green and held the meeting there. The police didn't know what the hell was up nor did the Crook people. It was a beautiful summer's night in June and you can imagine the impact of over a hundred building workers sitting out on the grass, in front of the church. The police had never seen anything like it, and we hadn't either. We were absolutely staggered. After that meeting we hired the Elite Hall every week and we packed it out each meeting. We built the campaign up from there. The union bureaucracy didn't like the militancy in Crook and the regional secretary complained that we were a 'law unto yourselves'. As far as we were concerned, we could never step down or the lads would have crucified us. We never got what we asked for, we never got the 35 hours nor the £10 a week, but we got the biggest increase that the building workers have ever had in their history.

Jobs are one thing, but housing is also a really important issue in this area. We all call the housing estates 'reservations'. That's just what they are. The council have rehoused people, but that's all they've done. They've stuck people in one part of the town, built a few houses and that's it; there are hardly any shops on them even. This is where they expect people to live and this is the environment they expect people to respect. I've heard people ('important' people, councillors and M.P.s) say that it doesn't matter what is done for people, whether we give them smart houses and bathrooms, that they've never had before, whatever you do, that they don't respect it. They expect some sort of respect just because the council build houses. But people weren't allowed to be involved in the creation of the estates, or in the type of housing. People have no say. Middle class architects design houses in a middle class type for working people who haven't got the resources to keep up with any middle class concepts. Who can afford £13 rent from £38 net pay that some get from the factories in Crook? People from Stanley moved to Billy Row. All these houses had expensive central heating installed.Some of them were getting bills for £70 to £100 a quarter, having moved from comparatively cheap housing with coal fires. With an open fire you have some flexibility. If you're short of money you can go to the woods and get some timber or go down to the slag heap. But in Billy Row, this wasn't possible. There was only one form of heating available.

The local authority will only respond if they are pressed. And that means people need to be organised. A good example was in South End Villas. When those houses were revitalised by the Direct Labour organisation, some of the people who lived there took an interest in what was happening. Some of the women weren't happy about the way the insides were being reorganised. They felt the kitchens were too small and that sort of thing. They went to the council in ones and twos to make their point but got no response. So they got together *collectively* and went across as a body and put their ideas to the council. It was then that they got their ideas accepted, the designs were changed. So it can be done. But it's got to be organised and it has to be persistent.

No Escape, 1979

Dennis Lawther.

Memory:

Moving and working, working and moving,
muscle and mind and that mysterious
organic link from which there's no escape:
fifty years' distilling of memory
has concentrated pride within the blood
and laced with shame my inactivity.
You are the womb of my undying dream
of man to man in brotherhood: Chopwell.

1920s Media:

These pillagers must learn to live by laws
passed by governments, approved by the king,
and not obey the edicts of a source
stemming from a foreign and monstrous thing.
'Tis so, 'tis so, the superintendent said
and verified the truth: a brigand bars
the highway to the lorry bringing bread.
Folk dare not go out in their motor-cars!
The Home Secretary must be informed
of hundreds who intimidate the few:
the mobs who into private homes have stormed
led by avowed communists. This we view
with great alarm. We are but prisoners
within our own houses. It is so, alas,
that ways of Bolsheviks and blusterers
are turning hope into an upturned glass.

Memory:

But it was never like that . . .
Me grand-da Joe, defiant, puckish and hollering
'Come on Steve' to me proud and cocky on a
roundabout horse.
The soup-kitchen: ladies and ladles, lentils and leeks,
potpie, broth, pease-pudding. Memories mix.
Man, concertina, chain and brown dancing bear;
dangerous and black it seemed: a huge lolloping louper
with claws and a grin of teeth.
I crouched under the couch, terrified.
It was all the things Aunt Hannah warned would happen
if I didn't believe fairies brought the monkey nuts
from the Paddies Market on Fridays.
Miss Grice. All Miss Grice am beautiful . . .

Echo:

All Miss Grice am beautiful
was all I had to show.
Words just never meant a thing.
Did teachers ever know?
The rich man at his castle, the poor man at the gate,
God made the high and lowly each lord of his estate.

All Miss Grice am beautiful.
slates, button-hooks an' all
and Miss Grice so beautiful
have gone beyond recall.

Memory: I sang and played in the school where the three R's
were implanted with a care for my roots and the stones
of that village nestling between the tyne and the Derwent.
Me da swimming in the reservoir where the rats were.
Grandma Forth Street and Grandma Trent Street:
one had Joe, a picture, memories and spurs in a box;
the other had Grand-da Trent Street, Uncle Andra
and a houseful of loaves, lads, shouts and dubbing.
But living was with Joe. Or was it in the tip burn?

Echo: Or was it in the tip burn? I will never know
whether that tip burn was really running free
or, simply, pit water escaping. It flowed past reeds
and settled-down diamonds.
But even the tip has gone now.
I could ask, 'is that how it was?' but
I'm scared stiff they'll answer, 'Na!'
and make my cameo vanish with the burn
beneath the neat suburban post-war grass.

1920s Media: What's in the blood will come out in the bone.
Just look. Have you seen such a motley crew?
These Bolshies surely tend to lower the tone
and turn to scum froth on so fine a brew.
At Askew Road, the constable averred,
this noisy drunken crowd led by a band
and a banner, looking almost like a herd
of fearsome cattle, turned, as by command,
upon the small posse of constables
who were following. What gives them the right
to come in procession? What enables such a
terrifying display of might?
The brazened audacity of such folk!
Coming to county court en masse to free
men who treat regulations as a joke
robs governments of authenticity.

Memory: But it was never like that . . .
The recounted jostles with the experienced
which seldom sees the light. The past is a shuggy-boat
now here, now gone: a distillation of vapoured moments
like me da telling me . . . 'cos he was there at Askew Road.

Echo: 'At Askew Road we saw the face of lies and roguery.
We'd marched from court where we had shown our comrades sympathy

Policemen came, diverted us to shift us off our course
and then with ruthless truncheon blows split up our ranks by force.
They scattered us! The police we turned on them.
They'll even say there are two sides, to keep a balanced view:
they don't need you to tell their tale, they won't tell yours for you!
The reflection of a word is not like its object. Pass
not by the subtle difference: it reflects shades of class.
Democracy and Liberty, Freedom, Tradition too:
each word (which has a double face) speaks both for them and you.
Because of this you have to show your inner-self your hand;
'til then reflections will arise you'll never understand.'

Memory: Jonty moves like a pitman: carefully.
My cousin whittles sticks for whistles.
The women scold the oilman whose cart tangles the washing.
Joe and me sitting on the tree roots in Chopwell woods.

Echo: Sitting on the tree roots in Chopwell woods
(reminders of long ago
before even the Sandy Lonnen was trodden
or the pit sunk)
I spat with the older folk
Baccy-chewing, claypipe-sucking.
One Sunday afternoon the weakening sun
watched Jonty leave Hannah, Elsie Nancy and me
to go and check the airdale's stool
and the wormcake's efficacy.
What did the pineneedles think?
Foxgloves grew there and it was dark
off the track where the sun caught.

Memory: Folk were on an embankment picking coals.
Rain drizzled as we stood in the shop doorway.
'They'll be alang in a tick. Patsy Newton's leading'.
But I never did find out who won the foot race.
Why was I in the scullery with the prams
while other folk were in the front room with ham and cakes?
'The silly bugger was sunnin' hissel' by the midden door'.
The voice was weeping in its chiding because Joe was dead.

1920s Media: These burns and woods and we, like solid rocks,
can easily withstand the thunderclap,
can easily survive the frantic shocks
of transient mobs. That life-giving sap
of ancient vintage dies then thrives again,
again and again fed by faith in kings.
As sure as warmth and sunshine follow rain
the people of this land accept these things.
Yet, mercy is the hallmark of such strength
those who erred will not feel vengeance done;
that we shall never go to such a length
is certain as our empire greets the sun.

Memory:

But it was never like that . . .
I am on a train heading south and watch
the telephone wires race towards the ground
to be swept up by the oncoming poles always oncoming.
In the other track is a trough of water, mile on mile.
Uncle Will explains in a broad Bedlington brogue:
the engine lets its gob down, scoops up water, inhaling food.
Men carry distemper to London, 200 miles.
We were to be the Kenties now,
the erring, nudged off the doorstep
by the benevolence of northern owners.

Echo:

The benevolence of northern owners
is in a blacklist, which you may think grows
inside a man's mind like some parasite.
Or, do you think it's something deep and stagnant
like a dull pool that only comes to life
when poked or stirred? It's nothing of the like
that can be labelled rancour or revenge.
'Tis something sharp and clinical and cool,
incisive, decisive, always ready:
a simple list of names for reference
with which the keen-eyed gaffer prosecutes,
robbing a man of heritage and roots.

Memory:

At Victoria in the rain my father laughed:
this is the railway of Sunny South Sam!
Here we are, then, he said, hoisting me up.
High up on his back I looked down upon
wheat, scabious, poppies, hops and clematis.
The world was new and growing: not at all the same.
I recall looking at the Moor's Head. It was sad
like the moving head of the darkie-toy in the Chopwell shop.
Tut-tut-tut the head shook and I only saw his face was sad.

Echo:

I only saw his face was sad
and big eyes were for me alone,
that he'd come from those places of
candy sticks, bibles, harvest-moons.
spanish and pomegranates too,
where banjoes ring and darkies sing
along the shores of moonlight bay.
Not once to me, as yet unschooled
in scientific matter facts,
did it occur to pause and think
what started such hand-shaking acts:
not once, as home from school I walked
and glimpses of his face I stole,
did I think, as I window-stared,
all this was branding on my soul.

2. MINERS

Pitmen have a curious attachment to their craft. They talk endlessly about it, often with bravado. They tell endless tales about life in the pits and their jokes frequently revolve around the hardship and dangers that they face. Yet, all this apart, miners have, for generations, resisted their sons following them underground. The camaraderie of the pit has built upon hardship and necessity; a struggle which affected the men, women and children who grew up and lived around the colliery shaft.

A Kind of Socialism

George Also

I was born just two streets away from where I'm sitting now, Mersey Street in Chopwell. That was in 1911. I was born into a family of eight brothers and seven sisters. My dad was a miner all his life. But that wasn't all; he was a breeder of pigs and my mother used to keep lodgers. She was just a little woman, used to do all her own baking and all her own washing. She'd look after anybody in the street that happened to be pregnant, taking the men meals in when they were coming in from the pit and so on. She used to run up and down the streets with white cloths over a steaming hot dinner ready for the man coming in from the pit. That was a tradition then with most women (it lasts even today) a man coming in from the pit must have a good hot dinner. My dad used to always say that if you got one good meal a day you would take no hurt after that!

We had lodgers, pigs and gardens. We used to come in from school after playing marbles and my father would shout. 'Hey, feed the pigs'. And after you'd fed the pigs you would have to go and seek horse muck; follow the horses around!

My dad worked in the colliery and we lived in a normal sized four roomed colliery house. The sitting room, kitchen, two bedrooms and a small kitchenette with a tap on the wall and everywhere home-made mats on the floor. We often used to have a pig lying on the pantry floor. We used to kill our own pigs of course and we used to cure them. We used to go to the store and get a big block of salt and would rub the salt into the pig (into the various joints, cover it with salt) and it would lie six weeks. Then you turned it over and you did the same with the other side. Then it was cured and ready for eating. We used to have legs of ham, and we used to hang them from big hooks in the ceiling.

My mother used to have a big round frying pan. It used to take the whole fireplace up - the old fashioned fireplace. And she'd fry big slices of beef. We used to get the old stotty cake out and dip our bread in the juice. There used to be flakes of brown meat on the bottom of the pan - dip your stotty cake in them and the grease used to be running down your chin. There used to be a pot at the side of the old fireplace and we used to half fill it with broth, leek soup, turnips and carrots and potatoes and peas. A piece of ham hoyed in. That was our house.

Men and Women

My father worked down the pit but he would never have his back washed. Never. It used to be filthy. The theory was - if you washed your back it weakened your back; you never washed your back. My mother used to go on to him about the bed clothes being filthy, about his clothes being filthy but n

he wouldn't wash his back. So she had to wash more sheets.

Being married to a miner was a full-time job for a woman, especially if she had sons who worked in the pit too. My mother had sons and lodgers! In those days it was considered the duty of the wife to be up to see that her man's pit clothes were warmed by the fire; his breakfast was ready. She'd just get him out to work and somebody would be coming in - bath in front of the fire, poss tub out (his pit clothes would be filthy dirty and sopping wet) in with the clothes, wash them and dry them. It's marvellous how they survived really; and my mother was just a little woman.

The men didn't give their wives all their wages either. They used to have what they called 'keepy back', money which they used to hide from their wives. Men used to get up to some amazing tricks to hide the money. Men coming home from the pit would have to bath, take their clothes off and keep a half gold sovereign in their hand. They'd wash themselves with their hand in a fist. They'd hide them in their carbide lamps, all sorts of things. There'd be hell to play when the woman found out but, in these villages, you weren't a man if you didn't have some 'keepy back'. You were the boss of the house. If the husband died, the woman was expected to go into mourning. If she went to the pictures nine months after the funeral the talk would start. 'Did you see Mrs. So and So. Her man's not cold yet'. The women weren't supposed to go anywhere. They had to stop the clock, turn the pictures to the wall; white handkerchiefs with black edges round. All of this done by the woman. After the funeral the men would be standing in the yard, looking at their watches, to see when it was opening time. And they'd be in the pub everyday after that. But if the woman went to the pictures, nine months or a year after, she'd be the talk of the place.

And women weren't supposed to drink. They weren't supposed to go into the pubs or the clubs. Any woman who went to the clubs was considered to be a floosie. But my mother used to like a drink of beer. She used to like to go out and mostly on a Friday night she'd slip over for a drink. She'd go across to the pub. She wasn't allowed into the pub itself. There was a little ducket place on the side where the women would stand and have a glass of beer. Maybe they'd take a jug of beer home. On a Friday night my mother would say to me 'I'm going across for a glass of beer - don't tell your father mind'. I wouldn't tell him, if he got to know, Good God, there used to be hell's flames around the house. He was a big fella.

A Militant Village

Chopwell was known as a militant village; it got itself a reputation for that. The lodge banner played a big part: it had Karl Marx and Keir Hardie and Lenin on it and it was the only banner in Durham with those portraits on. This banner is now in the Community Centre at Chopwell. Then there was the street names - Marx, Engels and Lenin Terrace. And of course, the village was very active in the Friends of Russia after the revolution. This is

where the 'Little Moscow' idea came from. (I remember getting a letter in the 1960s from down south. It was addressed to 'Lodge Secretary', 'Little Moscow', Durham' and I got it). It was a militant village. Always staunch Labour, left Labour. I remember during the Jubilee in the 1930s they raised the Union Jack on Blaydon Council Offices. It didn't stay long. A chap called Poskitt climbed up and pulled it down.

The football team were 'the Soviets'. They wouldn't let them join the league under that name. They said they would if they changed their name. But they wouldn't change their name. It was quite a good team as well. Lads, hand putters from the pit, came straight out and played football. They never got washed sometimes. They used to go on the field black. Some of them went away, playing league football.

Chopwell was out on strike, nine months before the 1926 strike began. There was a local dispute, over the prices in the pit. The men were advocating and struggling for an increase in the prices. The only offer that they got from the management was that they were prepared to give one group a rise, but there would have to be a reduction in other parts of the pit: robbing Peter to pay Paul. They struck nine months before the General Strike started. I'd just left school at the time, fourteen years of age, and the main thing I can remember was the way in which the Council of Action organised things in the village for the children. Bits of dances, sport days: footrunning, sack running and that sort of thing. We used to participate. It was all organised to entertain the young ones.

And then there were the soup kitchens. Everything was so organised that at least the children got something to eat. There was one thing that they were all bent on and that was that they weren't going to see the children either go hungry or without heating. The farms used to give them chickens and this sort of thing. Of course they knew that if they didn't give them it they would go and steal it.

I remember one lodger in our house, they called him Joe Herron. He used to sleep through the day and turn out at night. Right through the strike; he never used to turn out until midnight. He used to raid the farms - he'd get turkeys, geese, chickens - all sorts. They used to give some of the geese to the soup kitchens to keep them going. This is why some of the farmers used to say 'If you want a goose or a couple of chickens, come and ask us'. They used to willingly give it.

The women folk used to make great sacrifices. They used to do the cooking and looking after the bairns and seeing that they got their proper share, and they used to see them to school. It was amazing to see the organisation behind it, while they were still restricted in the starving sense. It used to be a good feeling that you were all one family.

The men started little drift mines. They found some coal down in the wood and, they got permission to mine it. They used to organise it properly, proper shifts and deputies and safety regulations. They used to raid the

trucks, the coal trucks up on the line, just above the tops of the street there. There was maybe three, twenty ton trucks of coal. They would drop the bottom boards and they'd have buckets, bath tins, bags and barrows. They used to raid the trucks and the coal.

But I don't suppose Chopwell was any more militant than other villages. It was the political background that seemed to draw the attention. This 'Little Moscow' business. They concentrated on Chopwell. They were fetching policemen down from Wales and Nottinghamshire: drafting them into the village. I remember one sergeant that came here. All the men congregated at the corner-end on the Sunday morning and he got onto a box and he introduced himself. He says 'I'm the new sergeant and there's one thing I'm going to do in Chopwell, I'm going to stop this raiding of coal from the trucks.' A week after he went to his coalhouse and some bugger had raided it - pinched all his coals.

The other thing that sticks in your mind is the blacklegs. They used to be escorted backwards and forwards to the mine; and I remember the processions very well. The whole village would be standing around; the lads used to be humming the dead march. There were hundreds of police there, escorting the blacklegs and there used to be some heavy struggles you know.

The Council of Action really organised the village during the General Strike. The leading trade unionists in the village - people like Harry Bolton, the Lawther brothers, Jack Gillilands, my father, who was Chairman of the Lodge for some time, and so on - used to meet regularly in the working men's club. Most of the activities were organised from the club rather than the trade union branch meeting. The facilities of the club were put at the disposal of the Council of Action committee. They had big premises and they had the facilities for boiling soup and this sort of thing. They'd sit, have a pint or two, and plan out all the activities. The Council of Action really controlled the village. If a lorry came in with some produce or stuff on the wagon, they used to say 'What is it?' and they used to give them a permit to go to the shop and drop it. If they didn't get a permit into the village to go to the shop they couldn't come in. The Council negotiated with the shop, asking that they allow people to have credit on the guarantee of the union that the people would pay it back monthly when they got back to work. And this is what happened. Some people sharked of course, some of them went away, but the majority of them conscientiously went to the shops and said 'Tack that off the back'. This is how we all survived; without this credit we wouldn't have survived - neither would the shopkeepers of course. Also they knew, that if they didn't agree to this sort of thing, they'd come in one morning and there'd be nought in the shop!

The Council of Action organised all these things. But in the end the strike was defeated, and the leaders were all blacklisted. My family was blacklisted. We didn't get a start in the pit until 1928. Some never worked again in Chopwell. Following the strike, it was just a continuous struggle; the miners had to go back on less wages, and longer hours. The struggle had to start all over again.

Economic Cirmumstances

I can remember the strike, but there is one thing that stands even more clearly in my mind. It was before the strike, I was about ten or eleven year old, and they were fetching a man, dead, from the pit. He'd been killed. They had him on a flat cart and there was a man in the shafts with another two in the back shoving. They just had ordinary sacks, coal sacks, thrown over him. And they just pulled him along the tops of the streets to take him home. If I shut my eyes I can see myself standing at the top of Mersey Street there and the men pulling this cart along with the corpse in.

I didn't want to go down the pit, I really didn't, but I hadn't any other option. Economic circumstances dictated it. After the strike I was off work for two years and I was only getting 1/6d a week from the assistance. I always remember my father. With it being a big family he used to point at me and say 'He's not ganning in the pit', being the youngest, 'you're not ganning in the pit'. But I had to. There wasn't any other jobs available, other than the Council. But you had to be very fortunate to fall in for a Council job; because once a bloke got one of these jobs he didn't let it go. So I had to go down the pit. There was nothing else. And the pit wasn't much.

I got married when I was twenty-one years of age and at that time my wage was 6/6½d a shift; if you worked six shifts that was 36/- a week, less deductions. Then, we had two children, sharp, and I had eight bob rent, eight bob furniture, and that left us with a pound to feed and clothe and do all the necessary. It was quite hard times.

The first job I had down the pit was the job called 'hand pumping'. There used to be a big swally of water where the putters used to have to cut through and if the water wasn't kept down to a certain level, the place wouldn't be workable. The place was no higher than the height of a table and we used to sit crouched down for seven and a quarter hours every day. I used to put a chalk mark on the rail and I would pump for about an hour. Then I would go and see how far the water had come down and put another chalk mark on to see if I was beating the water. You used to sit and get your bait, a little bottle of cold water and maybe a jam sandwich; our bait. I progressed from there to driving tubs, and then to a number of other jobs until I ended up splicing - splicing steel ropes. That was a very exclusive craft. Once you learned to rope splice you never taught anybody else - not unless he was closely related to you.

But I was lucky. There was an old fella called Johnny Den and he taught me how to splice.

'There's nowt tivett really', old Johnny used to say, to me. 'There's nowt tivett - I'll show thee how to do it!' And he showed me how to rope splice. Then I progressed from there up to head rope man; that was after the war.

When I got married I used to think hard about what to do. Six and sixpence a shift; and two bairns. This was my train of thinking at that time:

'If I could only get a colliery house I would get my coals'. Two big things. You got a free supply of coal and you got a free house. Now that tied you to the colliery. The last thing that you thought about then was going somewhere else to find another job. You never thought about branching out to say 'Wey, I wonder if I could get a different job oot the pit'. You used to complain every day about going to the pit. You'd complain about the conditions that you were working under and that you weren't seeing that your family was brought up properly. But it seemed as if you were shackled. You thought 'Wey, if I gan and get another job I'll have to get oot the hoose; forst thing I'll have to do when I gan for a job is to be sure that I get a hoose'. So you were more or less tied.

Tied cottages, that's what they were. I had a sister put out on the streets through the tied cottage. Furniture and everything was put out on the street, because her husband wasn't working at the colliery. He couldn't work at the colliery, and she tried to get a rented place in the village. But such places were very hard to get in them times, and they come and put the whole lot - furniture and the kiddies - in the street.

You were left at the mercy of the management. You see, priority was given to the collier, the hewers, the men who worked on the coal face. If you were a collier and you had three sons - 'Start tomorrow'. There was a colliery house for you. But if you were a putter or a datal worker with two daughters, well you were at the bottom of the list. You were completely at the mercy of the management. I remember when I was on datal work, when I was asking why datal workers couldn't claim. This is why I started taking an interest in the trade union movement and why I got a lot of support.

'Why is it a hand putter cannot get a colliery hoose, Mr. Chairman?' I said.

'Cos, it's the policy of this colliery that only colliers gets them, if there's not plenty...if there's houses empty and there's nee colliers, then the putter gets a chance and then the datal worker after that'. And I got hold of the old 1911 'Coal and House Agreement' and the first paragraph in the agreement says that 'All the workmen', and they had this underlined twice, 'are entitled to free coal and house. If the house is not available then they get a rent allowance for 4/3d a week'. I took it to the Lodge and showed it to them. I didn't blame the company; I blamed the union. I blamed the union for not carrying out the agreement that was laid down between the workmen and the coal owners.

But that was the way things were. We had no choice in these matters. The colliery dictated our life. And this is the fallacy in what some lads say; 'Wey, what made me stop in the pit was the comradeship'. I think that's stupid. That's bloody nonsense to me. It was just necessity. And there wasn't always comradeship either. At one time, men used to come out of the pit and they used to fight over what they called 'the odd tub'. Down the pit, the hand putter, had to take tubs to maybe five men in various parts of the mine. He had to shove the empty tub into his place and bring the full tub out. You used to keep them in their turns, because they were paid by the number of tubs

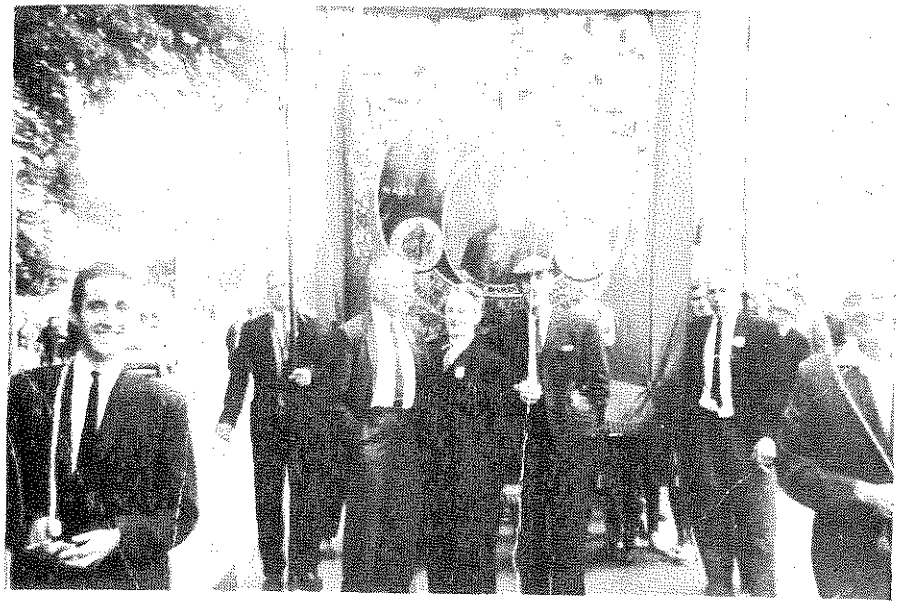
filled. If they got to know that one man got one tub more than the other (because the putter might be his relation or a friend of his or something) they used to actually strip off bare buff in the football field, just below the old institute, and have a bloody battle. And the colliery officials used to look down from the colliery office directly onto the football field and watch men fighting each other. It was their philosophy; keep the men divided and we'll succeed, get the men fighting over trivial things.

Union Activist

After I got married, I started to think hard about things. I used to think to myself 'Something wrong somewhere, why should a man have to go to work eight hours a day for a measily 6/6½d?' At one weekend all we had was a chop to try and make a bit of dinner. Just one chop. I used to say to myself, 'There's something wrong you knaa'. So I started taking an interest in politics and I joined the Communist Party in 1941 because I thought that the Communist Party had got the philosophy for changing society altogether. So that set me away thinking. And then I took an active part, I started to attend my union meetings. And when the Secretary retired in 1952 they asked me if I was prepared to stand. I'd taken an active part, and I was taking these correspondence courses through the National Council of Labour Colleges, preparing myself for this sort of thing. I was elected secretary.

As secretary of the Lodge your main problem was with the colliers; the coal face workers. And whilst I understood the system, I didn't have the actual experience of working on the coal face. So I decided, at 45 years of age, that I would go to the coal face. The colliery manager refused to let me go. He says, 'You're the head rope man we cannot do without you'. He agreed that he couldn't stop me, so I trained to be a face worker. However, when it came for me to work on the coal face it was a different story. The cavils, for sorting out who works on which part of the face, go in every quarter and I filled the cavil in as a fully trained face worker. That was it; the manager sent my notice to the clerk! He came knocking on the door, and gave me the envelope with my notice; fourteen days notice. So I went up to the colliery, 'What's this about?' He says 'It's your notice, can you not read?' I says, 'Ay I can read, I'll tell you something. This doesn't end the trouble you know. This just starts it'. He says 'The notice stands'. So I went home. I hadn't been in the house long before I had to go back up, and he withdrew my notice. I got what I wanted. I got to the coal face. I sometimes rued the day after I'd done it though. Many a time.

When I worked in the face we were using the pneumatic picks - the windy picks as they were called. The biggest scourge that was ever brought into the mining industry. They were about sixteen pound in weight, and we had to hold them up. They worked by compressed air. The pick had an exhaust on it, all the small coal dust was just circulating around. You were breathing it in, you were black as the roads. I rued it a time or two, but I gained the experience that I was after and I was able to understand really what I was talking about when we got any problems.



The biggest problem of course, was the bonus system. The piece rate system of payment was always a divisive influence in the pits. That was the most important thing about the power loading system. It got rid of piece work. Everyone was guaranteed a wage. If there was a stoppage in the pit, and it was no fault of the men, they still got their wage. But under the old system if it stopped it was just your hard luck. If you didn't produce the coal well you just couldn't get anything. And that was the most valuable thing as far as I could see under the power loading. I used to argue this in the branch meeting. The men accepted it finally. People would still grumble. Mind when you were on the power loading you were a team of men, and someone would say 'I'm keeping him - he cannot de half as much work as me ye knaa' and I used to say 'Wey, get that silly idea oot of your head because you're aal on the same wage and it creates unity amongst yourselves'. That was the real advantage of the power loading agreement; and it proved that. It did result in greater unity in the pits and between the coal fields. But now they've introduced bonus payments once again. Not at Chopwell though. Chopwell was closed in 1966. That was in the middle of the period when they were closing down all the pits. Oil was cheap, and they thought they could close the pits and get oil cheaper than they could get coal. But as soon as they closed the pits the price of oil shot up. Today there's millions of tons of coal left underground. Millions and millions of tons. They're talking about opencasting now. There's eight miles square of coal over in the Whittonstall area. Mind, I believe in opencasting. If you can get coal by open cast rather than deep mine, by all means get it by the opencast. You see far too many men running around with pneumoconiosis and bronchitis and that sort of thing. They cannot breath. Fellas come along to the club (two of them in

particular - only thirty-odd) and you can hear them wheezing. They cannot get their breath. There's thousands like them. And modern mining's no different. The dust is always there.

Anyway, Chopwell pit was closed. That was in 1966 and at the time there were quite a lot of men in their fifties working there; men who were getting on a bit. They accepted the chance of redundancy and retirement at the age of fifty five. This was their chance of getting out of the pit. The area union at Durham put up some token resistance to the closures; but they were regarded as inevitable. There was no organised campaign against the closure. In fact it was more collaboration. Durham Area Union knew in advance the collieries that were going to close but they would never divulge that information to us.

I was lodge secretary at Chopwell right up until the time the pit closed in 1966. It was the lodge policy that every official position must come up for re-election, every twelve months and from 1952 until 1966, despite the fact that I was a well known Communist and I ran for the council two or three times, I was never contested for my position in the Lodge. Every other official position in the Lodge was contested one time or another in those years but nobody contested my nomination. So I took it from that they were satisfied with my efforts.

Having said that, there was a bit of a contradiction in the support they gave me. So much so that I used to think, 'Well, I must be a Jekyll and Hyde'. I was accepted as a good trade unionist, they used to trust me in the Lodge, they would trust me to argue their cases and take my advice. But when I contested the Council election, (which was a political issue of course) I was always 'the Communist'. I ran three times and I was defeated each time. I just wanted to prove that I could do as much on the council as I could in the trade union. To my mind, you cannot separate politics from trade unionism - one goes with the other. If you're a politician you understand trade unionism. You've got to. And vice versa; if you're a trade unionist you've got to understand politics. Surely this was one of the reasons why the miners decided to have a political levy. Because they saw that they weren't getting anywhere with just the industrial struggle. They had to couple this up with politics. And that was my version. It still is my version and this is why I took an active part. But I never got anywhere in political elections in Chopwell. When I used to sell the **Daily Worker**, some people used to say, 'Oh George man, I would buy one but it just puts in what the Communist party want'. I says 'That's true, it's perfectly true'. But what do you think the Tory press puts in? They just put in what they want too. And you buy that'.

This political activity has interfered quite a lot with my personal life. Particularly when I was on the National Executive Committee of the Communist Party and the Durham Miners Executive. These sort of things took up a lot of time. I had very little family life. The wife brought my family up, I didn't bring my family up. She looked after them, stopped in the house all the time I was out and this sort of thing. It created a little bit of a difference between the wife and I, but we've got over that.

I finally left the pits in 1967; not in very happy circumstances. In 1966, after the closure of the pit at Chopwell, I was transferred to Marley Hill. Then, in the November of 1967 I happened an accident; I got both my legs broken at Marley Hill. As they fetched me up in the cage I had my mind made up. My dad worked until he was seventy years of age, seventy years o age and he was still going down the pit. They used to set what they call an 'old man's flat' away for the over sixty fives. Twelve of them, they used to work on this particular flat. Lying in the cage at Marley Hill I knew that wasn't for me. I decided there and then; 'That's my last shift', and I've neve gone into the pit again and I wouldn't advise anybody else to go down either

The Changing World

The first time we went for our holidays in an aeroplane, we went to Jersey. When we were in the plane I thought back to the time when we were children. They used to have a 'sunshine trip'. A few fellas got together and said 'We'll organise a day to the seaside for the youngsters and they used to have draws on at the club and running bits of concerts. Maybe twenty or thirty buses would leave the corner end, full of children and I would be one of them going to the seaside for a day. You would get one and sixpence, an orange and an apple, and then as soon as you got to Whitley Bay you were straight on to the sands or into the Spanish City; spend 1/6d and play on the sand. That was your life. Parents never used to get holidays at all. Now we were going to Jersey. Looking out the plane, I said to the Mrs. 'Vera, did you ever imagine for one moment that you would get to Jersey for your holidays and fly in a plane?' She says, 'I didn't, never for one moment'. Taking your mind back, in my short life time, I could never imagine for one moment, not in my wildest dreams, that I could ever be placed in the position that I am in now. And it isn't just that I have been fortunate. Everyone's position has changed.

Chopwell used to be a pit village. At one time, there were over two thousand miners working at the Chopwell colliery; there were 1,400 when I took over as secretary in 1952. Then in 1966, the colliery closed. And since the closure there have been a lot of changes. The pit heaps have gone. Being a mining village, Chopwell had pit heaps; two big filthy nasty, pit heaps. They've landscaped them. They've done the fronts two. There used to be air raid shelters in this road during the war. When they were dismantled they jus pulled the air raid shelters out and left great big gaping holes. There were great big boulders of stones lying around for ages. They took them all up and grassed the lot. The welfare park is nicely situated; it's got one of the nicest views in the Derwent Valley, bowls, tennis and this sort of thing. All these facilities have been provided. And this is where I give credit to the local councillors. They're limited to what they can do but they've done quite a good job for the village. They've tidied it up and made it look respectable.

And the miner himself is considerably better off now than he was in the days of the dark period. It's still a terrible job, but the wages are much better today. And that's not all. At one time a man who had pneumoconiosis was lucky if he got any compensation. Now you've got a situation where some fellas have received eight, nine and ten thousand pounds for contracting pneumoconiosis. Now they have every right to that money. And they've used this money to bring themselves out of the gutter into a little bit of a higher strata if you can see what I mean. They're looking at life in a different way now. Whilst they might remember what things were like, they're not prepared to argue in the same way now. In a sense people have been raised up to a standard where it's difficult to get them to fight for something. If they're going to take anything off you you'll fight. But if you're just arguing about how much more you're going to get, you'll say 'We've got sixty or seventy now, so what's the good of striking. What's the good of hoying seventy away in a strike for say five? Let's try and negotiate, let's open negotiations up again, and see what we can get'.

Another important thing in this village has been the purchase of houses. The Coal Board offered all sitting tenants their houses to purchase in 1966. You got them for about £250; and that was quite a bargain. The people who had been made redundant got somewhere between £500 and £800 in redundancy money and they used this to purchase the houses. Most people did that. Out of 800 and odd tied cottages in this village, there were only 70 left with the N.C.B. and the council have since purchased them and rented them out to the various tenants. So you can say that there's been quite a change in that respect, and it's changed the whole environment. People have got a different outlook altogether. People are now getting the idea that 'I own my own property'. To give an instance, if somebody owns a house and he has a car, he'll stand his car at that door. Suppose somebody wants to pass; 'Wey, move your car'. 'Wey, what do I want to move me car for? It's standing at me own door, it's me own property'. And it rather disturbs you to think that they came through the struggle. It's a different situation, different person, and it disturbs me sometimes.

It's not just housing alone, I suppose it's also because people have got more leisured time, the living standards are considerably better than they used to be and there's not the need to co-operate with each other on the one struggle. But this idea of property owning has a great psychological effect.

In the 1920s, Chopwell was really a little Communist community. All the activists and the trade union leaders and the political leaders were members of the Communist party, or in the I.L.P. and the left of the Labour Party. They used to have Sunday Schools, political Sunday Schools at the old Hall. It used to be packed on a Sunday afternoon. Political lectures and political speakers. They used to break up into groups and discuss the situation and there used to be fellows come from other Councils of Action co-ordinating their experience and activities. All this has gone. It's more than

just the result of affluence. After the 1926 strike all the leaders were blacklisted, some of them drifted away. Gradually over the years it just fizzled out more or less.

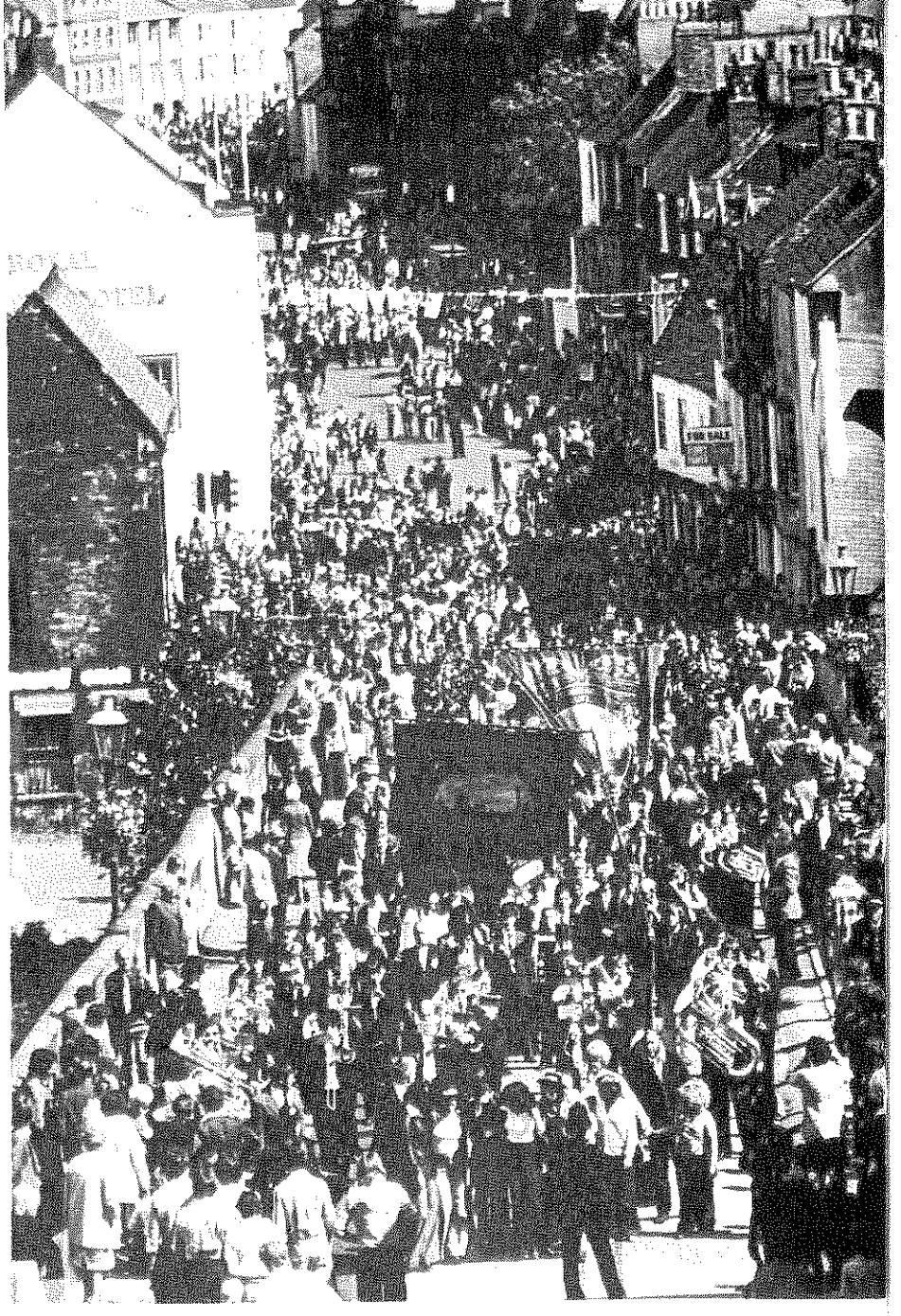
The trade union has altered too. I've been amongst a few of them and they're not there in the interests of the trade union or anything else. This is the main reason for the situation that we've got in the Labour Party today. It's the careerism, it's not a political belief that they'll ever change society, it's a career, they're making a career of it. I could name quite a few that could prove that they are, and that riles me more than anything else.

Take the Durham Big Meeting. That's altered. That used to be a really big day. A big political day, and a right booze up too. But the last time that I was at Durham I saw a contrast. It's more of a carnival now, everyone's in bands - brass bands and these jazz bands. It hasn't got the political significance that it had. You used to go to Durham for your rights, more or less, for your political rights. But today it's treated more or less as a carnival. The time is fast approaching when it'll fizzle out. You may get your carnival queens, and your competitions, this sort of thing, but as a political event it will fizzle out. Because it's not there, it's just not there.

Contradictions all the Way

When you try to understand what's happened, in your mind there's contradictions all the way. Some things you really cannot understand. There is some things that I cannot understand. It's difficult to put into words. There isn't any doubt that the majority of people in this locality are more or less accepting the situation and they're quite happy in their present situation. There aren't any real grumbles. You might get a grumble about prices going up, but after they've said it they just put their hands in their pocket and they pay it. They more or less accept the situation. They'll not do anything about it. They've learned to rely, too much on legislation from higher up. Television is a big problem in this respect. It takes all the activities of politics away. If you wanted to hear a political speaker at one time you had to go to the corner end, or you had to go to the Store Hall. When you listened to them speak you could ask them a question, but you can't ask these fellas on the television a question. They tell you something and you've got to accept it, because if you want to contradict it you've got to get all kinds of arrangements. You've got to write to the M.P. to see if you can get a bloody interview. In the last analysis in my opinion, we're brainwashed through the television, the radio and the whole media.

But there's another side to this, and in a sense, people have got a point. We all own our own houses; canny little houses. I've got my old age pension, and due to my accident - which was an unhappy event but makes things easier now, financially - I've got my compensation and I've got my miner's pension. You couldn't visualise these sort of things in the days that we've been talking about. You couldn't visualise claiming compensation on a weekly



basis; or retiring and getting three tons for £14. These kinds of concessions and benefits were unheard of. I'm able to go across the street and pay cash for my produce; I can go to the town and pay cash for my clothes. I couldn't do this at one time, I've got me own 'property'. It's a colliery house, a canny little house. I've got a fire. So in a sense you can see how people say 'What better do I want than this?' They've achieved a better standard of life. A form of 'socialism'. I've achieved something in that form. Not through my struggles but through legislation that's been brought on by the Labour Government and the trade union movement mainly, and I give them credit for this.

But my thoughts were always in the sense of a complete revolution. I felt that my conditions wouldn't get any better without it. My thoughts were always that society would have to change completely, take a complete circle, before the working man could be emancipated. But there's lots of people have been emancipated through the process of capitalism. The astute capitalists have been able to shove a few crumbs off the table and achieve this present situation. They've still got the majority of the people - the working class - where they want them.

When I first took an active part in the trade union, an old activist said this to me: 'George, before you go into negotiate with the manager remember, you'll only get what you're strong enough to take. He'll not give you anything out of good heart or because he's a good manager. You'll only get what you're strong enough to take'. It's as true today as it was then. In industry and in society generally, we've received all these crumbs off the table to keep us quiet; to keep us under control.

That's why I cannot see a radical change in this country in my lifetime. I think that we'll just progress along this in out, in out road. In Labour, out Tory, in Tory, out Labour, little bits of reforms, and then you can come back to square one. All this talk about inflation. I've heard this story all my life. The Labour Party had a 140 odd majority in 1945; it was the same tale then: 'We'll have to put inflation right and the biggest thing for causing inflation is wages. We'll have to reduce the wages'. I cannot for the life of me see where you can have socialism inside a society that gives a free role to capitalism. It's impossible. It's an impossibility. The process of changing from capitalism to socialism will take for ever at this rate.

You see, I had it in mind one time that I could change the world myself. Change the whole world. But it didn't come fast enough. But it's going to change. The whole world, where it was a capitalist-controlled world will, one day, be a socialist-controlled world. I still believe that. Maybe it will happen sooner than I think. You've got the African situation and the situation in Vietnam. I can visualise the whole world taking a complete change. A world revolution is taking place and it's coming from the struggle of the blacks and the other oppressed peoples. This is where a world revolution will come from. We've not changed the world, but it will change. It has to change.

Where the Miners Had Been

Eric Bell.

I saw them through a baby's eyes,
Many times it seems,
Between the building blocks - the toys,
Between the childhood dreams.

Up through the houses, faces black,
White teëth gleamed in laughs,
Banter rang, and hob-nailed boots
Clattered home to their baths.

I heard them through small ears,
Singing and shouting - full of beer;
Late at night, wending home,
Full of artificial cheer.

Snippets of their talk I heard,
As drifting by they went.
Tail gate, mother gate, kenna bait,
I never knew what they meant.

I never knew where they had been,
The phrases didn't tell
That these happy-go-lucky, sooty men
Were coming home from Hell.

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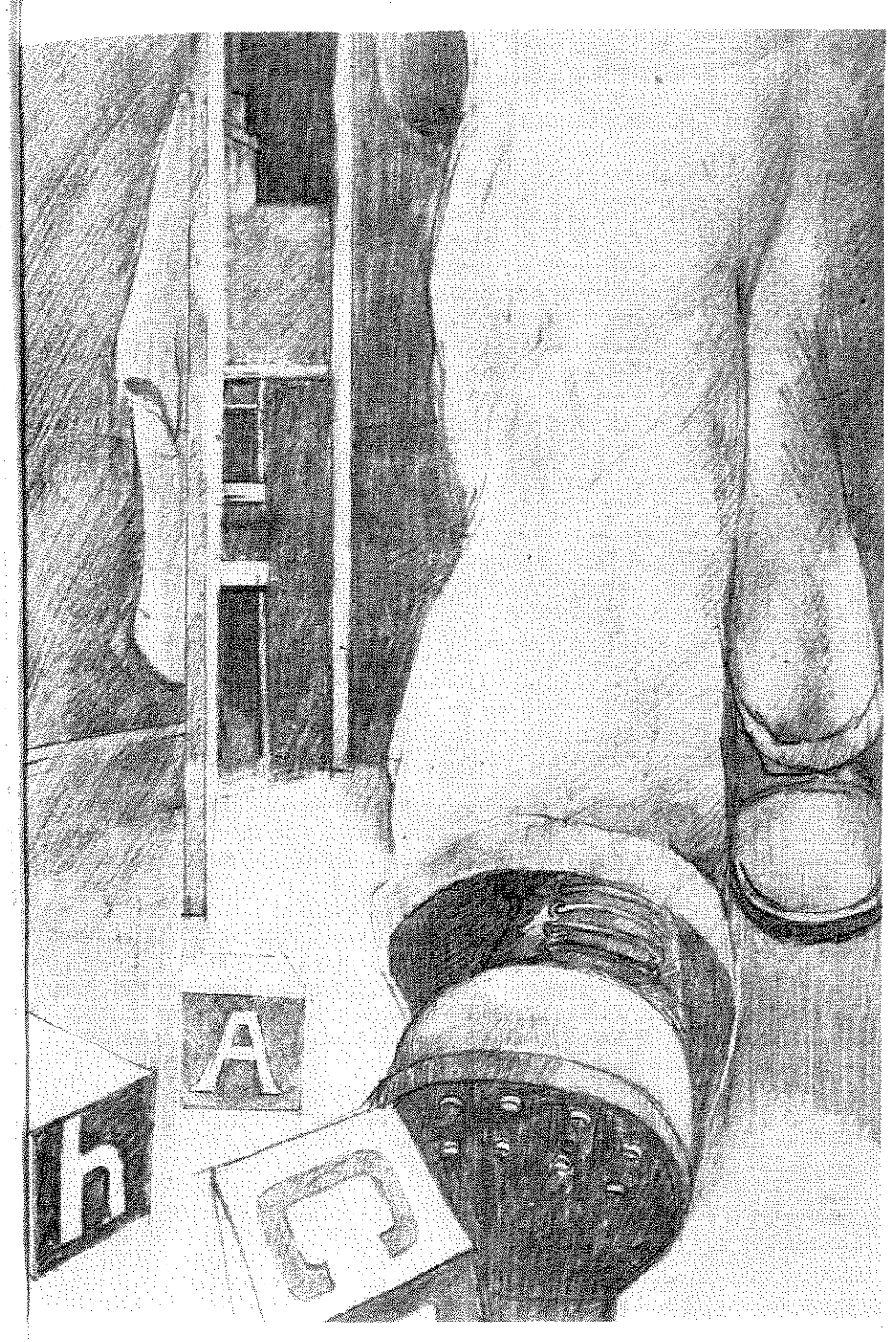
The years went by, and as things changed
The town became more clean.
Men in macs and softer shoes
Walked where the miners had been.

But the miners were there, those I'd seen as a child,
Not black, not happy, not gay,
Shuffling up through the houses
In a painful, slow, old man's way.

And yet, these were not old men,
In years, still in their prime.
They were worked out, worn and useless now
And doomed to die before their time.

Die they did, before they should,
The coal dust got them one by one.
And pigeons pits and pitheaps,
And pitmen all are gone.



Changing Times

Ron Rooney

I've done nearly everything in the pit. I started off as a pony driver, then a putter, then a coal hewer, and finally as a face worker, when they got more mechanised. I was on the coal face when I had to retire from the mines because of ill health.

In my opinion we were slaves, we were definitely slaves. I would never go back. Even if they paid double what the miners have been asking for they would never get me back in the pits again.

Down the Pit

The pits round here were bloody terrible. The seams here were totally different to those on the coast where they had six foot seams. Here we were working in seams of eighteen inches up to twenty inches and sometimes less, with water on the bottom and coming down on top of you. You had to lie in the seams. Lie in the water. The seam I worked at Wooley was between eighteen inches and two foot high. I had to lie down all the time, often in water all day long. The only time you sat up was when you came out to fill the tub, or to come out and have your bait. And there you only had 4 foot or 4 foot six at the most. For miners this was their life, lying down and coming out to fill the tub and then back in to lie down again.

And we weren't paid much for it either. Up until 1964 we used to get 6d a day extra for working in the wet. Sometimes you got paid extra if there was 'top water', as well, but sometimes you didn't. All you were entitled to was 6d a day, 2/6d a week for lying in water all day.

I started down the mines in the Depression, in December, 1937, at the East Hedleyhope colliery. You had to fight for a job in those days, especially if you were union minded. My father used to be interested in the unions - he was involved with the 1926 strike and he suffered a lot through that. He travelled through County Durham, travelled through Yorkshire, trying to get work. If you were involved with the unions in any way in those days you were classed as agitators. You were marked.

About 1936-7 he was able to get a job in the pit in Durham. But it was thanks to me and my brothers. When I left school we all went to the pit - myself and my brothers; my father and his brother-in-law went in the office, leaving us boys outside. But the manager was adamant - he could not get a job at the colliery; there was no vacancy, nothing at all. They came out of the door and the manager happened to see us three, sitting on the wall.

'Who are they?'

'Oh, they're my three sons - they're wanting a job an all'.

He was taken straight back in the manager's office - 'Sign on the dotted line'. He could start the next day. Just because there were three sons willing to go down the pit. In those days if you had sons working in the mine the amount of money what you received decreased. You got your house and coal and the wage was reduced because of your sons.

If you went into a colliery house and you had any sons they automatically had to go in the pit when they left school. If they didn't you were chucked out of your colliery house. A lot of people didn't realise this - they used to say 'Like father, like son'. They didn't realise that in those days when the management were management and they controlled it all, that you had to go into the pit. That was the main reason why my father wouldn't have a tied colliery house and that's why a lot of miners moved out of colliery houses. They moved into a rented house or they bought their own. And this was the sole reason.

When I started in the pit, and as a young lad, when we were sitting getting our baits, at lunchtime, breaktime, the old miners would tell stories about their young days and what used to happen. It was common, they said, for the overman to come and lash you across the back with his yardstick. If anybody was off the day before, they had to stand to attention to see whether they were allowed to go in, or not. And it wasn't so different in my lifetime. In the days gone by, they used to make slaves of the people. But I can remember when I got fined 2/6d for threatening the overman. He had threatened to hit me with a stick so I took the stick off him and broke it. And I was accused of threatening behaviour and fined 2/6d. People living now don't realise what the mines were. They don't understand why the miners are so bitter now. They're bitter because they remember what it used to be in days gone by.

'If I stick in that house my son is going to be like me - he's going to work in the pit, but my son doesn't want to work in the pit'.

Nationalisation and Closure

When nationalisation first started it was all right. It went the way the miners expected. But then it came to the position where it became a family affair. If you had a decent position on the Coal Board then your relatives also got a decent job, and it came about that there were more chiefs than there were indians. This didn't go down well with the working class down the mine. Before nationalisation, we were against the mine owners. But when the pits were taken over, who became the managers? The owners again. The very same men who we were trying to get rid of. We weren't altering the top men but just their terminology.

One of the positive things that did come out of nationalisation, was a greater emphasis on safety in the pits. They introduced safety officers, who had the authority to tell the management what they had to do. In the years before nationalisation the only the thing the coal owners wanted was coal. If anyone got hurt or killed they could put someone else in their place as there were always three or four men standing on the doorstep waiting for a job. Human lives weren't taken into account by the owners of the mines.

But, of course, under nationalisation and Lord Robens the mines were closed. A tremendous number of collieries were closed in this coalfield. It affected me personally. I was made redundant in 1952 from Wooley Colliery and was transferred to the Hole in the Wall Colliery in Crook. In 1964 I was made redundant again and I was transferred once more.

Looking back I don't think we fought hard enough to stop the closures. If we'd known then as much as what we know now, I think there'd have been a different fight. The mines closed because they said there was no coal and yet today there's open cast mines taking that same coal out. The miners knew that the coal was there. I think if we'd stuck and fought it there could have been a lot of mines saved in this area. But those closures were a new departure. You never heard of a mine being closed permanently before that and we didn't know how to take it. We thought 'Well, that's right, if they say it's closed, we've got to accept it being closed'. I think we were conned a bit by Sam Watson and the union. We accepted travelling all sorts of distance to another pit. Today a lot of folk would never accept it. When I left the Hole in the Wall we couldn't claim redundancy payments because there was another job twenty six miles away - twenty six mile there and twenty six mile back. That was the sort of job we were offered and the miners accepted travelling that distance. Today that would be grounds for refusing to go, and to claim redundancy payment. You learn as you go on!

The Best Thing that Ever Happened

We'd been miners all our lives, and we'd run away with the idea that we were only good enough for one thing and that was digging coal, nothing else. Everybody thought 'Aw, if the mines close, we'll starve.' So in a way the closures were one of the best things that's ever happened to the miners. They've got jobs in other industries; jobs which they'd have never thought about getting, and they've realised that the conditions are a lot better - a hundred per cent better. If the mines had never closed in this area we would have still been down there working. We wouldn't have known what it was like to work outside the pits.

For example, Courtaulds employ all male textile workers, Courtaulds at Spennymoor, and when it opened I would say it employed 85-90 per cent ex-miners. These men adapted themselves from digging coal to producing yarn, far more expertly than anybody expected them to do. It's different hewing coal out of the coal face and coming to a factory and getting hold of a very thin strand of wool.

They realise now that the jobs what's outside is more beneficial to them, not easier, but you've got your light, you're clean, you can come home and you're clean and everything like that, where in the mines you were physically exhausted. Not tired, physically exhausted. When you worked seven and a half hours in the mine you could only crawl home. Plenty of times you could hardly walk up there. You could be mentally tired if you worked in the factories, you could work in the factories twelve hours yes, you'll be tired

when you finish but I don't think you'll be physically tired as what you were in the pits. I don't think it takes it out of you as much. I think people when they come home from the factories can get dressed, they can go straight out. In the mines the only place you went to was the pub, that was the only convenient place there was.

I went into the textile industry and then became a full-time trade union officer. And today I wouldn't advise anybody to go down the pits. Although there's a big improvement in the mines now - it's all big seams, so the conditions are not as bad - but I would never advise anyone to go down.

The ex-miners going into the textile factories, have automatically accepted the union. They've been brought up with the union, and I've found that management in the North-East has accepted that it's far better to deal with the union than not to deal with it. They recognise that the atmosphere up here is different. We still get one or two awkward bosses - the management that come up from the Bradford, Yorkshire area who still have the opinion that they lash the whip and everybody has to run. We still get some of these. But we've had to teach them our way of thinking. On the whole though, management have accepted unions as being part and parcel of the working class. They realise that if you haven't got the unions in, you're dealing with a lot of individuals, and this could cause more problems than dealing with one

body - the union. All the factories that I deal with have 100 percent union membership. These companies have accepted that workers who join the company have to join the union as a condition of employment.

A Sense of Community

Things have changed a lot though. In the pit community you could leave your back door open. You never locked your doors in the night. Folks came in, folks went out. On a weekend when they came away from the clubs and the pubs, you used to have a sing-song in the streets. Everybody joined in, everybody knew everybody. But as the mines went the community went too. Although there is some good community spirit on the housing estates it's not what it was in the mining villages. In the mining community when you went in the mines to work you became united. Because once you went in the mine you were in danger until you came back into the light again. You could fight outside, he could be your worst enemy outside, but underground, if you needed help they were there to help you. When you came out of the mine that spirit came out with you. Where there's mines now; in Horden and Easington, you've still got that community feeling. So it must be created from working underground together. You don't get the same atmosphere in the factories like you get in the mines.

Crook has certainly changed. In some ways for the better - let's be honest. When you look at the situation at Crook in 1946 and you look at the situation in Crook now there's a hell of an improvement. The facilities for the retired, one of the best parks in the area, tennis, bowling, lovely parks to look at, the market place, free car parks, new council houses, and so on. You've only to look at the history of the football team in Crook. I can remember when Crook Town had as big a support as some of the first division teams today. And that wasn't so long ago. The team was restarted during the war and it was run by the miners and the manager of the Hole in the Wall Colliery. Harry Laws was a miner in the Hole in the Wall Colliery and he became secretary. Crook had a good team and then they hit the headlines; they won the F.A. Amateur cup and when this happened the businessmen started taking an interest in the team, taking it away from the miners. This was in 1954 when they got to the final. They didn't want it when it was nothing. They got themselves voted on the committee. And the people what had worked for the job of the football team got pushed out, shoved aside.

The year they beat Bishop Auckland was tremendous. At Wembley they played a draw, twos apiece and then played another, twos apiece, at Newcastle. Then they beat them, one - nothing at Middlesbrough. What I remember was the friendly atmosphere. Although they were at loggerheads with each other, Bishop and Crook, I can remember after the match at Wembley we drunk together in the pub. They were shouting abuse at each other, but drinking together in the same pub.

In those days Bishop Auckland, Crook and Willington, all had decent football teams with good support. And they were **local** teams. Once they started getting famous though it changed. It ceased to be amateur. They started fetching people in from outside. It stopped being a family affair - the

team became outsiders. And it changed. In those days I would be standing in Crook field, it could be rain, hail or snowing, it didn't matter what it was - I would be standing watching Crook playing. We used to go to the football match, the visitors used to come from Romford and places - you used to mix in with them on the football field. They would stop on until late in the night and you would say 'Well, what about coming home for tea?' After the match, whether you lost or won, you used to take them home - some would take two or three. And then you'd go down on the bus at midnight and away home. But nowadays if Arsenal or Liverpool came to Crook and it was a wet day I would be sitting watching the television. I think television has taken control of the sport.

As it is I'm frightened that Crook is becoming a dead town. You just have to look down Hope Street now - and what do you find? The shops are closing down. Full way, both sides, closed, empty shops. We even lost Woolworth's. All that's left is solicitors. Even the banks have moved out of town. This has me frightened. If the trend continues, and the rest of the shops disappear, no one will visit the place.

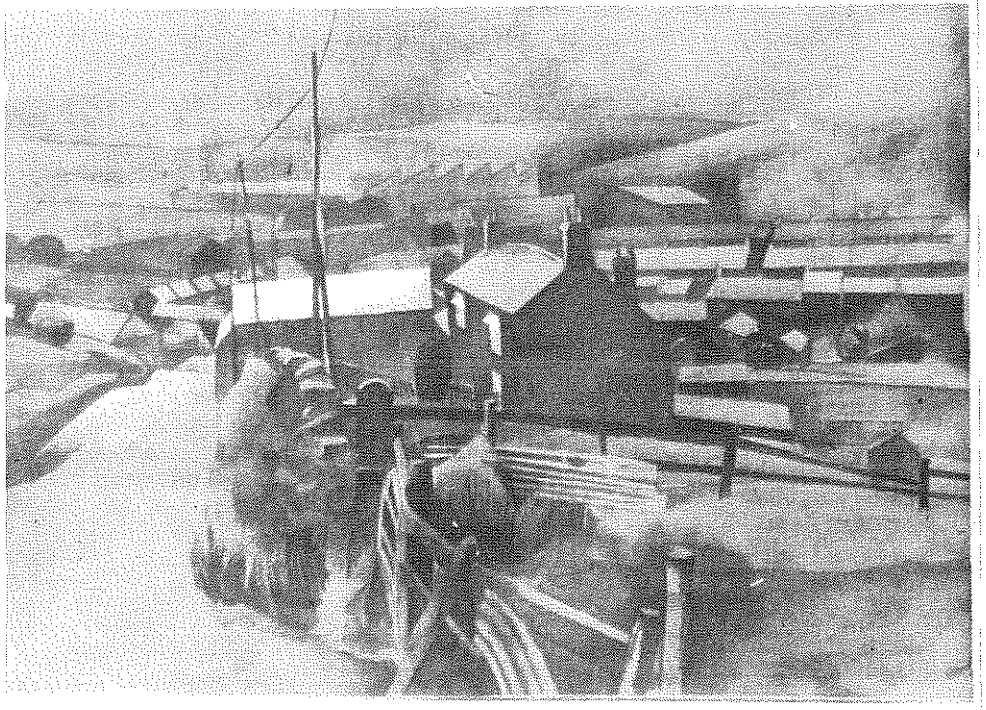
The Co-operative store was an excellent idea. It was to be organised by the working class and run for the use of the working class. But now it's run as a profitable business, it's not what it was set out to be. In years gone by the store was to help the working class. As long as they kept it in the black (not to make a massive profit) this is what they wanted. But now, it's become a business, not what it was in years gone by.

At the moment they're building these supermarkets well outside the places so folks are not coming into the cities or the towns. They either become dead places or just residential areas. Once your business goes away a lot of jobs are lost. Building Societies don't employ a lot of people. Somebody, somewhere has got to try and get business back into Crook. And not just shops. Somebody's going to have to try and introduce more industry. One time there was a plan to fetch the motor industry up here. This is what you want - something massive and something essential. But I'm not optimistic. The technology nowadays! This is a frightening thing. Where it used to take twenty to do a job today they can put one man on. So you've got nineteen people out.

I don't think people have realised the problem of all this. We've seen a big change in the textile industry with machinery. It's getting better, and these silicon chips could make it better still. They're improving the machinery but it's doing people out of a job. How far can you go? Can you live with the majority unemployed? We're talking about the future of our children and their children. It's all very frightening.

3. COKE TOWN

In the 1960s the pits of West Durham were closed down. These closures were quite different from those which took place in the 1930s. In that decade pits closed in times of 'bad trade', opened again as trade improved. In contrast the closures of the 1960s were final. Places like Crook were badly hit at both times. In the 1930s the town – built around several pits and drifts and a large coke works – had one the highest rates of unemployment in England. But for all this, to the people who lived there it remained a miners' town. Today, with the pits gone and replaced by the new insecurities of factory employment, they feel that their futures are uncertain.



Coal and Life

Arthur Turnbull.

I was born in Bankfoot Cottages, they are down now and it is all back to agricultural land. In the early days they found coal there, and coal needs workers, it needs people. The coal owners who had the houses were mainly concerned to get the people in to produce the coal. There was one row of over a hundred houses. That was Wooley Terrace, two rows of fifty houses with a break in the middle. Local gossip had it that that was the quickest way of communication, tapping on the fire back. The fire places were back to back and the messages could go right down the row. The man next door could be on a completely different shift

These houses had no bathrooms of course and the toilets were across the road. There were no 'mod cons'. We used to have an earth closet and the farmers would clean them out and use it as fertiliser. And there was a lot of illness. T.B. was accepted. In those days it was accepted that people would have T.B., diptheria, and scarlet fever. Both me and my wife have been in Helmington Row (hospital) with scarlet fever.

We had two allotments both of which had vegetables in. Potatoes were a main source of supply and the greens especially if you were like my father who had two boys at home. He would grow his own near the house. The only thing in the house garden was rhubarb, that was in the house for my mother. The main staple was potatoes. When a chap has been down the pit six days a week he needs fresh air and he could go out on his allotment.

Bankfoot coke works was fed by a number of drifts which fed the coal to the landings where it was sorted. There were two sets of coke ovens. There were those where my father worked which were designed by a German company, so these were called the German side. These were fed automatically from the top by a huge hopper with ovens either side. On the other side there was the French side. Here the coke was shoved out by a ram straight out onto a loading bay where it was hosed down by men. When it was cold it was shovelled manually into the trucks. On the German side it was all automatic.

My father died while the colliery was still working and I was left with my mother. My mother knew that she would eventually have to leave the house, but the company wouldn't push her out straight away. They weren't that bad, they would give her time. Once the man died, the company would assist the widow to find another house so another worker could move in. In a sense it was like a tied cottage. But it so happened that a house came empty at High Grange, a small village of sixty five houses, where she used to work in service. So my mother went into service when she was thirteen, and this was the accepted job for a girl in those days. She would work for the local gentry, starting by scrubbing floors in the kitchen. You were the lowest of the low until you worked yourself up into a responsible position. Anyway, she knew of this house and so we were able to move out of Bankfoot within three or four weeks of my father dying.

School and a Job

I went to school in Peases West, which is now called Billy Row. I won a free scholarship from there to go to the grammar school at Wolsingham. I was very pleased to pass although it was an extra burden on my mother,moneywise. She had to provide the uniform and you could only buy it from the local outfitters in Wolsingham. That prevails to this day. We used to go to school from Crook by train.The train would come down from Tow Law picking up the pupils there, then to Crook, Howden-le-Wear, the Junction and then to Witton Park.

Before you left school you would go round the shops saying 'Can you put me down for a job?' I tried for a job at the Co-op as a messenger boy, pushing a bike, and there was about a hundred boys for that job. This was in 1933. I left school in 1934. I tried for the job in Burton's in Bishop Auckland, there were twelve there for interview. To get a job in Burton's in those days you had to have a grammar school education. It didn't matter about qualifications, the fact that you had been educated at a grammar school was sufficient for a job at the outfitters. My father wouldn't let me go for a job at the colliery. I was interested in chemistry and I used to do fairly well in this subject, so what I wanted to do was to go into the chem. lab at Bankfoot. My father said no. Being the youngest left in the family I don't think he wanted me to be tied up in the coal industry. My eldest brother was a welder with the company. Most of the people ended up in the colliery. I didn't plan my occupation, I didn't say that I wanted to go into a shop, it was just the fact that that was available and I applied and was lucky to get taken on. It was the time of the depression and there were hundreds of men and women without work who would congregate at the Mechanics Institute. There was a billiard hall there and the other half was a library and a Labour Exchange where you had to go to sign on. You could always tell when it was signing on day, with the great flow of people going up the street.

In those days you were looked up to because you were working in a shop; it was classed as a middle class job. You wore a black coat and waist coat and striped trouser black shoes polished, white shirt and tie and you were expected to wear a bowler hat sixteen. We had to pay for these things. From my wage of eight shillings and ten pence my mother had to buy me a stiff white collar, supply me with my dinners, and my bu fares to Bishop Auckland. In those days Burton's was a family business, you were sec there were no problems. When Sir Montague was alive he would come round and treat you like a father. In the war I was discharged from the services with ill health and I ended up in Harrogate where he lived. He would come round every morning and see how we were. It was one of the done things with Burton shops that once they opened for business in the morning the door stayed open. But it was a cold shop, in Harrogate, and in the winter he would shut the door behind him.

The shop catered for everybody. In Crook, which was a mining area the father, grandfather and son would all come. In Darlington, which was more upper class they would be more particular than in Crook. Harrogate was a class higher. There you wou get the man who came for his Burton's suit but he wouldn't want any labels in. He knew he was getting good value for money but he didn't want to lower his status by someone saying that he had been to Burton's. In Crook we didn't sell working clothes we catered for jackets and trousers and suits, raincoats and overcoats. For work cloth people went to the Store. You could even get a suit at the Store as they had their ow cutters on the premises. The only thing we sold in those days for a suit would be blue or black serge. The miner's Sunday suit was a plain cloth, usually blue serge.

The Co-op was the largest complex within Crook. Outside at the back there were huge garages for the horses and carts. It used to be huge. There was a grocery section, drapery; men's wear; furniture and fashions, watches and jewellers and a cobblers. Every week a man would come from the Co-op with an order. The order forms in those days were big, long and narrow. You used to order for the next week and pay for what you already had. You could get anything on a white bill which meant that you were going to pay for it later. You didn't have to pay for it straight away, you would have an account. You could add to that bill as long as you paid off all you owed at the end of each week. I remember him coming from the Store every week and asking my mother what she wanted. At one time Crook Store went through a crisis, financial crisis, and so all white bills were stopped and everything had to be paid for except for those who had been regular with payments who were allowed to buy a limited amount on credit. The Co-op survived this financial crisis, they weathered the storm. As time progressed the Store came under competition from the supermarkets. Walter Willson's were about the first supermarket in Crook. The Co-op unfortunately, plodded along in its own sweet way until they realised that they had to compete with the supermarkets and outside competition.

The Life Blood

Coal was the life blood of Crook. But the miners are very adaptable. It is because they are adaptable that you can get your industrial estates. Where Ramar's and ATM are now there used to be houses and allotments. Of course when Peases closed down there was upset, for where were the miners to go? Many of them were transferred to other collieries.

In my short life-time the changes in the area have been terrific. And it's not all been for the better. It has spoilt village life.

Nowhere to Go

Mr. Walker.

I was born in Crook in 1893. My family were grocers and farmers. I left school when I was 14, in 1907. There was work then. You could more or less go and serve your time in a trade, or the collieries or the brick-works. There were always vacancies where lads leaving school could get in.

I served my time as a cabinet maker for 5½ years, but I didn't go into the trade because the amount of wages they were offering when I'd finished my time didn't satisfy me. Instead I started on my own cabinet-making business. I ran that business until I was 70, I've been retired for 15 years now.

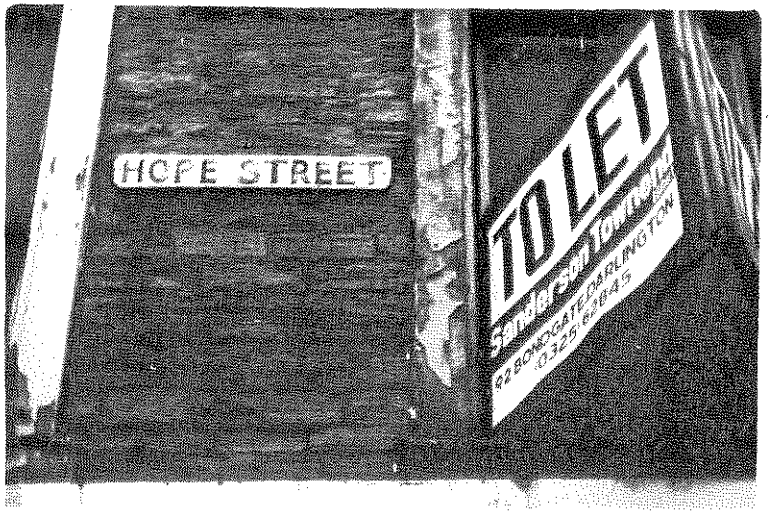
There was just me. I made sideboards, bedroom suites, chests of drawers and tables - scores of kitchen tables. But when the big furniture companies started manufacturing, the likes of me, working by hand, couldn't compete. From a price point of view I couldn't pretend to get anywhere near the prices that they were asking. That happened towards the back part of my time in business, so I had to turn over to joinery work instead of cabinet-making. - that is making doors and windows and that sort of thing.

Crook mostly depended on coke, coal and chemicals. Towards Billy Row, at Bankfoot, they made pitch, they made tar, they made benzole and during the First World War, they made T.N.T. But you go up to that site now and you'd have to be told where it was, because there isn't a brick left. In my schooldays, the Bankfoot beehive coke ovens were the biggest coke yard in County Durham. There was also a colliery, way down the bottom end of town. - just away down South End Villas - with coke ovens. And up the West Road, there was another colliery. There also used to be Anderson's leather works. That firm must have gone for 50 years. Presto's is there now.

In the 1930s, of course wages were low. We had poverty and unemployment then. People would go at night to the relieving officers for the assistance money so they wouldn't be seen. When they closed Bankfoot down, that was the start of the unemployment here. Men couldn't find other work - they were beat because there was nowhere else for them to go unless they moved away from Crook.

My own son left for London when he was 16. He's been working for the same firm down there up to this present day - 45 or 46 years. As far as my wife and I were concerned it was hard, very hard. After six weeks it was a question of whether we could stand it any longer or whether we should bring him back here. It had such an effect on us. It was a big wrench. The dole moved a lot of work people down South, especially to London.

That was the beginning of the end for Crook. I would describe Crook today as being in a state of flux. The shops have gone. Burton's has gone, John Collier's has gone. There used to be five or six butcher's shops in Hope Street, now there are just three. Where two of the butcher's shops were, there are two building societies. The council have put seats in the street, but only one in 10,000 would want to sit on a seat in Hope Street. There's only a bank or a shop window to look in if you sit there.



Low Wages and Big Gardens

Alf Machell

I left school on the Friday and started work on the Saturday. I started work as a plumber, an apprentice. I didn't work for my father who had a building firm. He had seven sons, nine actually, two died, one was a joiner, three bricklayers, they were all going into building. He was going to have a building business second to none, every department was going to be managed with a son. Then the war came along and that was the end of that.

I had a wounded arm from the first war, there was places I couldn't get with a blow lamp. So I went to work for the coke ovens in Crook as a concreter. I had a concrete gang: part of our work was mending the ovens. There must have been about 600 or 700 men working there. All Crook men who mainly lived in Crook. It all closed just after 1960.

The cokeworks are buried, gone. And the pits and the brickworks. There's nothing. I can walk along and wonder where was this, where was that. There's cows grazing now where we had the coke ovens less than twenty years ago. Cows grazing grass.

Changing Times

Crook market used to be a green. That was common land. The police tried to chase away the lads playing football there once. There were stores nearby and the balls used to land through the windows. The old men who used to sit there would tell the police to get away, 'They were there before the rest, you can't stop them from playing football'. It was a resting place for cattle as well on the way to Durham. They'd rest for the night.

All the houses had allotments, had allotments and pig styes out at the back. The effluent from the pigs would seep through the walls. Even the private houses would have a pig at the bottom of the garden. They would kill it themselves and cur them. The union men met in Chester-le-Street once and these men were talking and said of the Crook men; 'Aye, you work for the firm that pays poor wages and gives big gardens'.

The houses were not good. They were built back to back - no ventilation. Beckside was an open sewer with pig styes by it. All pouring into the beck. In 1924-25 all the back streets were ash. People threw their fire ashes out to keep the passages dry. Then they later paved the sewers and drains in with granite blocks. Before then many of the drains had collapsed, many were over-flowing, effluent in back yards. Diptheria was rife and so was smallpox, and scarlet fever. We had an isolation hospital up near Helmington Row. Nothing else but fever cases were up at Homelands. The number of bairns that died of diptheria was no-one's business, T.B. too.

One of the major changes for the better in Crook is the air. The atmosphere is better. You were getting tremendous dust and small coal through the windows. It wasn't dust but small coal. Open your windows and keep your fire going! The air is good now, that's a big difference. Once you could smell the coke ovens in your house.

Coke and Closure

The ovens were built in 1908. They were big ovens. German ovens, and the German engineer who came with them stayed as manager. He didn't naturalise himself so that when war broke out in 1914 they interned him. That was him out . . . He was a good man, he knew his job. He got the place settled and through its teething troubles. Wherever he was, there was always a remedy. He got it all modernised and tightened up. All new walls in the ovens. The men pushed the coke when it was ready. When they had pushed their quota - say thirteen - he would let them go on. And that became the system, when they finished the ovens they went home. The men worked six till two and were going home at 12 o'clock; two till ten men were going home at 8 o'clock. They had thirteen ovens to draw. They'd go to work, 'push ovens' whether the coke was good enough, 'push ovens'.

The work wasn't very dangerous as long as men were careful. Men sometimes fell into tanks. Two boilermen were killed in 1912. They were going to repair a boiler. One of the men was a big ginger Scotsman, he went to the pub for his dinner and he was a fair heavy lad, and he got a bellyful of beer for his dinner. They both collapsed

when they got to the boiler as they bent down and got a lungful of this terrible gas, a lot of this gas. Put your face in it and you were dead. These two men collapsed, and another two men came to pull them away. They went out as well. The rescue party came and pulled them out and only one man survived, the one who had a good load of beer. The gas couldn't get in him, he was blowing the gas out. They took them into a field near the works, they dug a hole in the field and they surrounded the faces with earth to see if the earth would draw the gas out. It was too late.

The coke from Bankfoot was the best coke in the world. We made super coke for the smelting of aluminium in the Second World War. Never mind the cost, the ministry said, we want super coke. You could hardly break the super coke with a hammer, it was so hard.

And they closed the coke works. The manager wanted to modernise the ovens and make the men work for eight hours. He wanted to burn the ovens for longer because the extra 20 minutes, half hour would make all the difference to the quality of the coke. But the men wanted to push ovens quickly and finish early. And the union was strong; one out all out. The men would not work the extra two hours being asked. But it was more than that though. It was beginning to get that the ovens weren't a paying proposition. Wages were getting higher. The coal was costing more because the coal was further away, they were bringing the coal more than three mile underground out of the hillside.

When they closed the coke works and the drift mines there were men crying because of the good coal that was left. It was low, low seams, but if only they left men alone they could have got in there and picked it out. It didn't matter how low. They used to say that the pitmen went into the pubs and got under the seats to show how they got the coal out. It was all low and narrow seams. When the coke works went they closed the lot. All the drifts went as well. That was the finish.

The Hope of the Future

The youngsters are better today, I have confidence in them. They are better learned and more confident. You have a chance for education today, but so little work at the end. I can't see any improvement unless there's a miracle. Best thing is to emigrate, I think, because in this country the youngsters today don't have much of a future. Prior to 1914 every shop and business had apprentices. There was one little cobbler shop that had three apprentices and there was so little room that they had to keep minding their elbows. Butchers' shops would have at least one or two. Most places had apprentices. Now there's no apprentices to speak of, and now the government is trying all sorts of schemes, pleading with firms to take on young people. The work situation is very bad for youngsters up here now. It breaks my heart . . . my grandson lives in Kent and was then about ready for work. My daughter, his mother, said 'I want to come home'. I had to be sharp, I didn't want to be, but I had to say 'You'd better stay where you are'. He's gone now to serve an apprenticeship and they now realise what I meant. There was no chance of work for him here. What chance would that boy have had if they brought him up here?

Crook is more like a village now. We are cut off from good communication, the arteries. The train has been taken away, the bus fares are out of people's reach,

we're almost back to the village life, and we have too many people for a village life. The life blood of the place has gone. The town is like an old man and an old woman, it's on the decline. It seems as though it's gone to sleep: it's retiring. I don't know if it is waiting to die. Is it going to become derelict? I don't want it to happen.

The Three R's

Miss Parkin

I was born in West Roddymoor. There are only a few houses left there now. My mother stayed at home and my father worked in the colliery as a colliery boiler minder, at Bankfoot. He worked partly in connection with the coke works and partly with the power station. (The power stations, there were two,provided the colliery with electricity. They had it before the rest of the town.) He worked there all of his life. He had an accident just before he retired which made him an invalid for the rest of his life. He had damaged his neck.

I started school at the elementary school in Crook, and then I went on to the County School in Bishop Auckland. From there I went to St. Mary's College, Durham, to study English and German. It was very unusual to go the grammar school and especially unusual to go on to University. There was very few of us who went. There had to be a lot of parental sacrifice. It was very difficult, even though I was an only child. It was also unusual because I was a girl and there seemed to be a general opinion that education was wasted on a girl: that she would soon get married and that it would be lost. But my parents felt that it was very important for me to have something behind me. I had a very wise father who saw education as giving me an independence. But they had to make sacrifices for me to have such an education. The costs were high and his wages weren't very good.

I spent two years at my first school, which was on the other side of the County at Deaf Hill, near Trimdon. It was a primary school. I wanted to go into a grammar school, but there were many teachers without jobs at all and it was as difficult then as it is today. That was in 1926.

In the early days teaching was parrot like. They had to do a lot of hard graft. and learning by heart. It was good on the three Rs. That's where the main emphasis was. When they left school most of the girls found work in shops, with the occasional one going into an office. There was also domestic work for girls. The boys went down the colliery. The 'cream' had already gone off to Wolsingham Grammar School.

I was teaching during the 1926 General Strike. I was in Deaf Hill and that was a very strong Labour place. The teachers had to help feed the children and we would take them down to the kitchens to see that they had jam and bread in the mornings, and soup at lunchtime. A few men stayed in work . . . blacklegs, and I remember being at the boys school then and they all jumped up on their desks and shouted 'Blacklegs' as these men went past on the way to work. You can imagine children doing that today but they did that then. Jumped on their desks . . 'Blacklegs'.

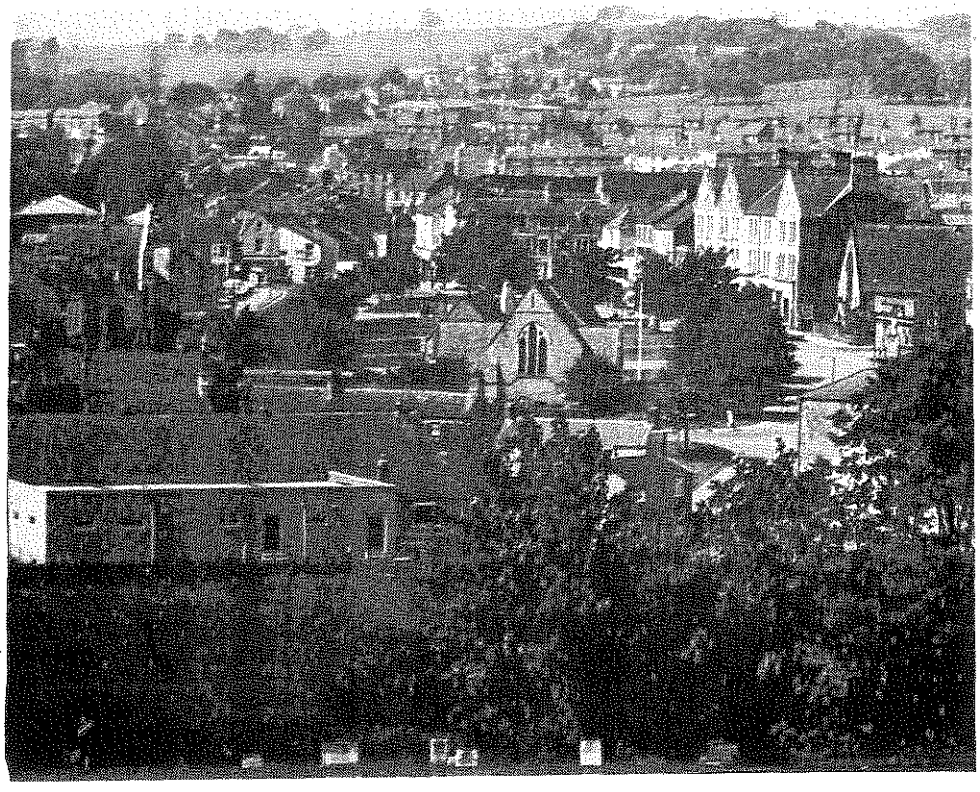
Beauty through Sadness

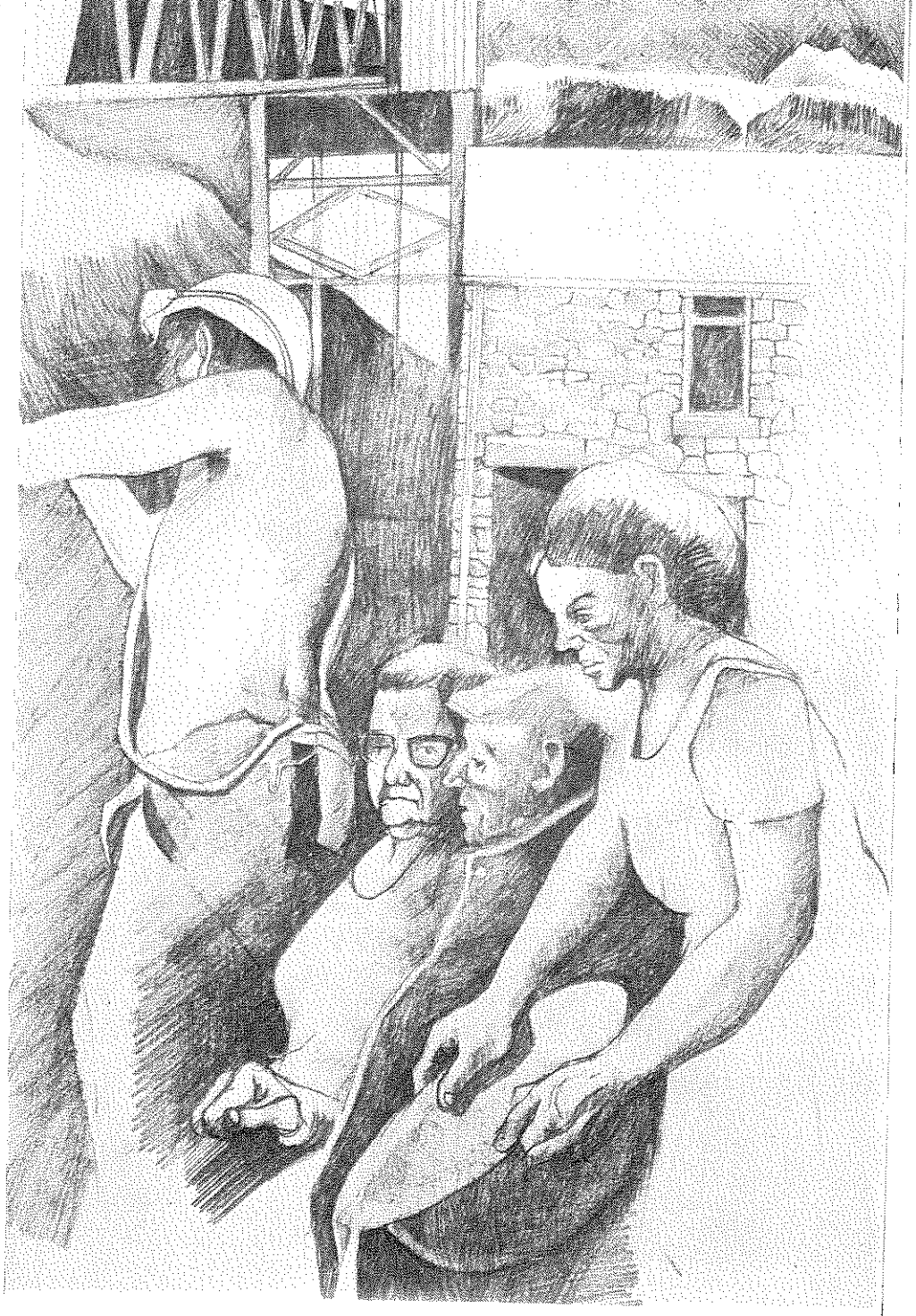
I had my first taste of opera at the Crook theatre. There used to be some good companies. They had full houses. Television has seen the end of the cinemas and theatre in Crook. You have to go to Bishop Auckland to see a film.

When I remember Crook as it was I remember the coke works. The coke works stood out with its big chimneys. There was also a smell over the town from the works. There would be a smell of the coke work fumes in the houses. The closure broke many people's hearts. It saddened the town. It made it a little dead really. The place has become more beautiful since, but that has come through sadness.

I don't always agree with the Council and what they do and say but you've got to hand it to them they have done a lot to beautify Crook. All the pit heaps have been cleared away and where Bankfoot was there are now green fields.

A lot of people moved away when the pits and coke works closed. They went gradually, they didn't all move away in a body Some saw what was happening and took their chance and moved away. Quite a lot of them went to the Midlands. It was a terrible time for those who had to leave as they had grown up here.





4. RELATIONSHIPS

Everything in County Durham, or so it seems, has been affected by coal. The past struggles were massive ones, between miners and coal owners, and the miner's union came to dominate the Labour Party in the County. The Durham miners' Gala – the Big Meeting – was a symbol of the Labour Movement. With the closure of the pits the politics of the area (while still 'solid Labour') have altered as have many of the social relationships which made up village life. This is most noticeable in the changed position of women. Pit work was 'men's work'; in the villages work for women – and a woman's place – was restricted to the home. The new factories altered things. For the first time women could work for a wage and the money they earned provided the basis for the 'new prosperity' of the 1960s. A real change then, but for all that, many still say that it's a man's world.

The Left-Out Ones

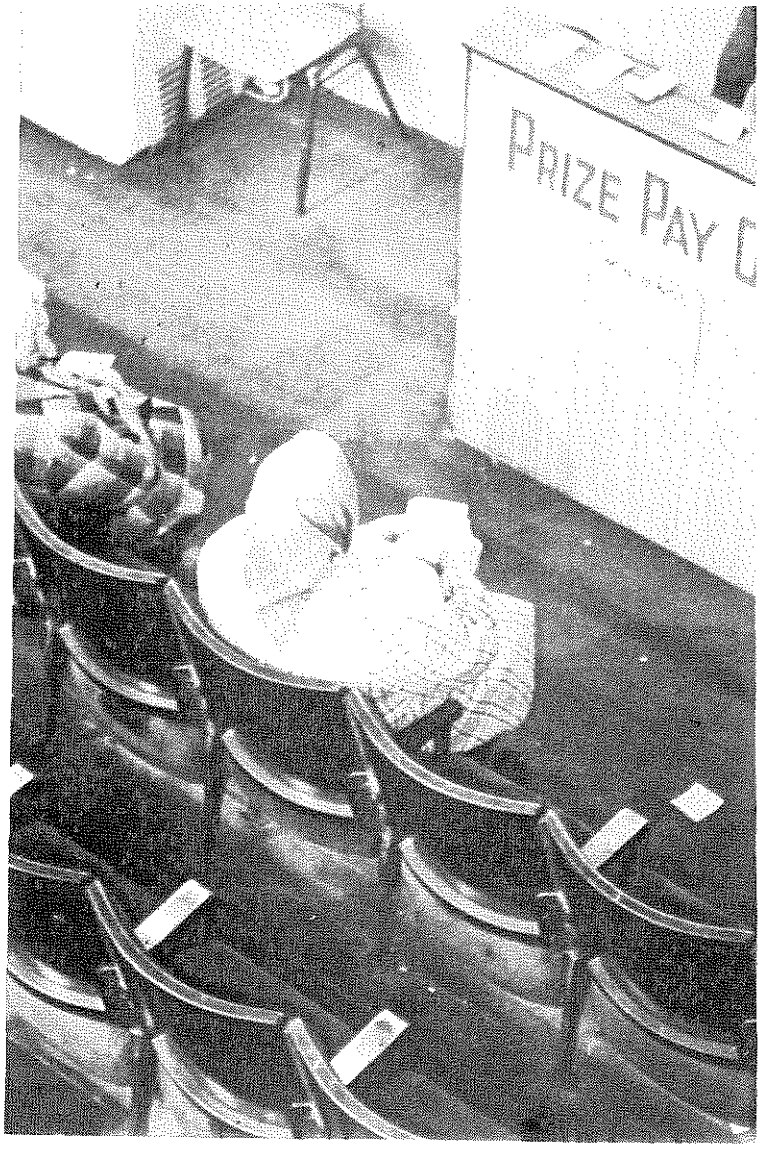
Beryl Burnip

We were talking the other day about wash days and how things have changed. Once wash day took all day and was hard work. Now you can put it in the machine and it does almost overnight.

I don't think women will ever be equal with men, but that apart, they do have a lot more than they used to have. My impression of a pit village is of women working morning till night, with the pitmen coming in, and making meals. They had no social life . . . it seemed all work.

That's changed a lot. But I would never go out to a public house on my own or even with another woman. I would feel out of place. There are a lot of bingo places in Crook. I think that women go to the Bingo instead of going to the public houses. The women come from all over to play Bingo in Crook, from Willington and Wolsingham and all over. The men have the best life in any case. All right they have to go out to work but when they come in they have their meals made and then they can go out. It's the same old story of women working all day.

When I left school I went to work in a grocery shop. I was there for two months before I went on to Doggart's, which was one of the biggest shops in Crook at the time. To get in to Doggart's you had to go on a



long list. It was a good job there. I had my name on the list when I took this other job and it just came up that they wanted someone,so I took it. Doggart's has closed now.

I got married of course and had the children. Now I'm working in a shop again! It made a big difference for me to go out and work at Mary's. I used to be very shy just being in the house all day with the children. I saw very little of anyone. It's brought me out a lot by going to work. Now there's an awful lot of married women out at work. A lot work part-time at Ramar's dress factory. There's a lot of women work round here now and the men seem to have more of a struggle to get work. A lot of the pitmen who lived here have had to move away.

Politics and Education

People up here support the Labour Party mostly through tradition. Little pit towns are always Labour. Our parents voted Labour so we vote Labour more or less. That's the case for most. People know the councillors as they are part of the community. But people aren't always bothering to vote now. They don't see the difference between them,and some don't feel that they get any satisfaction from either side. It's not that there haven't been changes. The council have made a lot of changes; the park for instance, the swimming baths which is a bit extra for the children that they've never had before.

But there's a lot that isn't right. Particularly with the schools. We've got comprehensive education in Crook and from what I've seen of it so far I don't think much of it.

My son goes to the comprehensive school - he's in his second year - and it has been a struggle. He has been put in a very low stream and by him talking, it seems that he could do a lot harder work than he is doing. I've been over to the school and talked about it and they tell me that every so often they review the children and that he could go up at any time. But he's been in that grade for over a year and at the end of his first year he got a very good report. He was very disappointed when he didn't go up a grade. His report was excellent and all the remarks on the side of it said how well he had done but he has not been moved up. That's why I went over. If he gets nowhere after trying he might give up. They said they would keep an eye on it and I'll have to see where it goes from there. He feels very disappointed. He feels that he is one of the left over ones. He said they don't bother with those at the bottom. It's only the ones at the top (who get their exams and suchlike) that they bother about. He's had a word with the head teacher and she told him that he could go up at anytime and that's given him some heart and so he's not given up yet.

I don't know whether I would have preferred to go to the comprehensive or the secondary modern school. The secondary school seemed to segregate them more. All the bright ones went up to Wolsingham

and the dull, and left over ones went to Alderman Cape. They weren't supposed to be graded in this new system but they do. They have made it clear that there is a grammar school stream and if you are not in that then you feel very left out. It is getting through to my son. The same feelings as I had when I was at the Alderman Cape. At least when I went to the secondary modern you felt that you were all on the same level altogether but in a comprehensive you begin to feel that there are some bright ones there and that you don't belong.

Mind I wouldn't want to return to the eleven plus. Because then we were the left overs, just to be pushed through. I felt like one of the left overs. You were made to feel that you weren't clever enough and you weren't pushed at all.

Wolsingham, the grammar school always had a good reputation. That's why some children now have gone up there rather than the comprehensive. One of the doctor's sons has gone up. I don't know how they've managed that. Under the comprehensive system they were all supposed to go to the school in their area. It looks as though some people have managed to pull some strings.

A lot of people were worried that there would be a lot of bother at the comprehensive (there were tales about feuds between Willington and Crook children.) I think now that it's rough but in my day there were teddy boys from Witton Park and they would come over and fight the boys from Crook. I don't know why. I worry about my son when I hear about all the trouble, there seems to be fights here and fights there. But when I look back, there were some awful fights in Crook with the Witton Park boys.

Social Life

There was a lot more social life in Crook once. There were three cinemas, the bottom house, the middle house and the top house. There were also dances at the Elite on Friday nights for the younger ones. There were snooker halls for the boys but not much else for girls. I didn't mind too much as I was a quiet girl. There's not much now other than a disco at the Elite on a Saturday and something at the Boys Club. My eldest is very keen on football and he plays a lot and he also goes round on his bike. He's not at the age yet for discos and things. There's not a lot here for him though. There's more public houses in Crook then anything else. They've got to go all the way to Bishop Auckland if they want to see a film and that's very expensive with the costs to get in and the bus fares. It was much easier once with the railway but now that's gone. Crook's a bit more cut off now. Mind I don't go out of Crook very often.

Making a Contribution

Maurice Ridley

I was born in 1911 in a small mining village in Durham County, Flint Hill, Dipton; near Stanley. I grew up in a mining household, in a pit village. Everyone working, (with very few exceptions) directly or indirectly at the local collieries. I became just a member of what was chronic poverty and struggle– a battle.

Being a mining area there was nothing else but going into one or other of the local pits. You were destined to go into the pits through being the son of your father. It was an automatic thing – unquestioned. The girls either stayed at home and helped mother or they went into domestic service. There was no such thing as commercial or other training for girls, and the only clerical employment which a girl could get would be in a place like Consett Iron Company. And those jobs were already tied up for the daughters of the Consett Iron Company workers in any case; so that was it.

We were definitely deprived, and the many children of real ability were as deprived of further education as anything else. We were set to be hewers of wood and drawers of water. Lads and lasses practically all from the same backgrounds without the opportunity of any wide reading apart from our school library and the effort of the teachers. If a teacher was absent I was scheduled to go in and take a class of nine year olds and do the hour's teaching. 'Right you are, Ridley, you will go in there, this is the arithmetical form you will show them'. And we just used to do this automatically at twelve and thirteen because our basic education was finished. Looking back I think we reached a high basic standard. We had no chance of getting out of the situation we were in, none whatsoever. It's something that I've never forgotten. Later on in life I was able to get an education by my own effort, but there must have been at least twenty lads and lasses my own age who had all the qualities and abilities that I had and many of them, I am sure much better.

However at fourteen, the day you finished, you went down to the local colliery. Friday night you finished and our father would say 'Right, Pit Office, Monday'. and you'd be interviewed and straight into the pit on the Monday. That was me. I had twelve month's work at the local colliery prior to the 1926 lockout. This was my introduction to the real hard world. Although I wasn't involved in the hard work at the coal face (working with ponies and so on) it was a bitter experience. To have to go down there and do the really heavy type of work under conditions that were not really suitable for any human being. Let's face it, I'm very clear in my own mind that coal mining is one of the occupations that (if one could organise or run one's life without it) should not be on. You're living like a mole and working under conditions that human beings should never have to work under. Unfortunately, as a kid, even in those few months before the miners' 1926 strike I realised that we were expected to do things that the horses couldn't do. We were more expendable really than the ponies that we were working with. But neither of us should have been in such a situation – horses nor men. However as long as we need coal I suppose it's got to be done. So there we are.

Strike and Liberation

With the strike of course it meant that as a youngster of 15 I was liberated from the pit. All my pals of fifteen and sixteen – all of us – we were really liberated. It was a magnificent glorious summer so that we spent the time more or less tramping and getting into Newcastle with collecting boxes and getting support in places like Gateshead, from those people who were working. Working people from all over Tyneside helped to fill our collecting boxes. We had football knockout competitions to raise funds. We had our musicians going out for money.

The main problem was how to feed the children. This dreadful situation had to be tackled and therefore the collecting boxes had to get out. The money had to come in. The soup kitchens in the villages carried on and gave

us at least a solid bowl of broth every day and the youngsters going to school were fed by the miners' wives. The committees organised near to the schools. They were fed at breakfast time, at lunchtime, all voluntary, all magnificently organised and all on the basis of 'Get the money the best way you can'. Something from the Co–op, something from the butcher; local tradesmen who were sympathetic and whose livelihood depended on the people in the community. Doing their best to help out. A fantastic organisation of effort by ordinary men and women who went in there and organised the meals, morning and afternoon for hundreds of youngsters. They were basic, but they kept things going. The bread was baked, the soup was made, the tatties were put on. They were collected and a whole community, those at school and those on strike, the old and the sick, one way or another they were all fed. At least you got one meal and certainly the kids got priority whatever the situation was. It was a marvellous collective effort by ordinary people. But for youngsters, fifteen and sixteen like myself, with the glorious summer it was also a kind of liberation. And we really enjoyed it.

It was a magnificent experience in community solidarity. I've never met the like since. It was tragic that, at the end of a long and bitter struggle, they had to be defeated. Not because they hadn't the spirit to see it through, but defeated by other things. The 1926 strike was really a lockout, it was a massive lockout by employers and the issue was very simple. You must work longer hours for less pay. It was a condition that trade unions couldn't accept. However difficult, however bad conditions were, you had to stand up and fight and the miners, quite correctly, took it on. A completely different kind of industrial struggle to what we get nowadays. We were let down badly by the Trades Union Council by abdicating in the General Strike. The majority of the T.U.C. leadership shit themselves when they saw the full power of the State moving into action with Churchill in the driving seat, complete with police, troops and the courts working overtime, so they called it off, fast.

We were let down, not by trade unionists from other walks of life, but by the leadership who didn't organise big campaigns after the General Strike, that could have sustained the miners much better than they did. The miners were the first to be attacked in a big way in 1926. This was part of the whole general attack on wages and conditions which was carried through, right through into the early thirties and the miners had to bear the full brunt. If the leadership of trade unions like the engineers and others, had organised a regular weekly levy they could have got a substantial regular fund. This kind of levy – it could have been sixpence a week – might have turned the scales the right way. Because, in our part of the country and many other parts, the great majority of the miners stood four square for weeks and months on end. Just imagine three quarters of a million miners, but with eight or nine million other trade unionists behind them. If each week the funds had regularly been guaranteed and coming in. But it wasn't to be, after a long bitter struggle the miners were defeated.

During the early weeks of the strike the Durham Miners Gala was held. Usually, of course, the Gala is held in Durham but in 1926, for a number of

reasons, it was held at Burnhope: a mining village in the Stanley area. I walked there with other young locked-out miners and our parents, and it was my first real experience of the leadership that was really in charge of our struggle. I should say that the speech of Arthur Cook, who was the secretary of the miners, affected me for the rest of my life. His ability, the way in which he pointed out what was at stake, the role of the miners and so on left an impression on me that is still as strong today as at the time when I heard it, well over fifty years ago. Cook was without doubt one of the most outstanding trade union leaders that this country has produced in the last 100 years. And the support which he got from the miners in Durham, and naturally of course in Wales and throughout the mining community, was probably greater than any other trade union leader before or probably since. Arthur was a man of action, very similar to Tom Mann, whom I knew in later years. He could speak with an understanding based on his background and he could get to the heart of the situation and to the hearts of the people he was talking to in a way that politicians and others couldn't do. And you knew that he was a man who was dedicated to the cause of the mining community and to the improvement of the lot of miners. And this struck you as you listened to him. He was very eloquent. He had that tremendous ability that was as good on the public platform doing a job of work in politics as many of them were in the chapels. Something that is a peculiar characteristic of the Welsh and which was understood fully in a County like Durham.

There were at least thirty thousand miners at the meeting. It was a magnificent turnout and of course they had to get there the best way they could and many of them walked from goodness knows where.

We walked five or six miles, but many of the people there that day walked much further. But that didn't matter. Even although it wasn't held in Durham, it was recognised that this meeting taking place at Burnhope was to be addressed by the leadership of the miners and the politicians within the labour movement who were supporting us. For any ordinary trade unionist it would have been a crime not to be able to go. I mean you just automatically had to go because you were in the midst of the struggle.

Cattle Sales

With the end of the strike, I was not able to get into the pits again for three and a half years, and my dad for four. We did odd jobs, I sold newspapers, I sold ice-cream, I helped the shoe repairer, we went potato picking, we scrabbled on the pit heaps to get coal for the house. There were holes in many places where we could more or less burrow in and get coal.
We just soldiered on as best we could with little or no hope once it was clear that we couldn't get back. To go to the local colliery at Dipton was a weekly ritual that didn't mean anything. We would go on a Friday night, which was the main night, and there would be thirty or forty of us between fifteen and seventeen years of age. Our fathers hadn't got in, they were blacklisted and

we were part of that list. We just used to queue up there and wait of the manager to come out and say 'Nobody'. That was it. It was just like going to a cattle sale. After two or three years you realised that there was just nothing, ant there was no possibility of anything. But we, as laddies, still had a considerable amount of enjoyment. We enjoyed our football and cricket; out with the lasses at night-time. And we just made the best of a really grim situation, but we had fun at the same time. It was amazing how we came to terms with life, even although we were very poor, getting an odd copper to go to the pictures, you got in for about two old pence, and we just came to terms with the situation.

Men and Women

The real people who suffered were not the unemployed members like my dad and myself. The real sufferers, without a doubt, were the women folk. Scratting and scraping and having to do all the cooking. The miner's home had its own bake house. The oven next to the fire was a little bakehouse and however difficult it was, the homemade bread, white or brown, the stotty cakes and the tea cakes were laid on, the Shields kippers and herring. It was the wives who put in the sixty and seventy hour a week, week in and week out. And the dedication to doing what they could with so little is something that the modern generation probably cannot understand. And I hope it is never placed in the same position of having to understand it. It had to be seen to be believed. The women were really wonderful, almost without exception, they had to be able to cook and keep things together, without any of the modern helps and it was amazing how they did it. I was lucky in the sense that my mother was very good at this. But there was an enormous amount of self-help as well. Tom, along the street, had a big allotment and he kept pigs, and when a pig was killed . . . boom . . . bonanza! The day a pig was killed, (it was all done locally by the local butcher) you had your pork chops for the weekend, and black puddings of course. This was taking place all the time and the fellas who were keeping the pigs were running allotments, they were getting their potato peelings and so on and we had regularly pork meals and shiploads of broth. It was marvellous how the mums were able to sustain big families on very little, they were very resourceful indeed. Chancellors of the Exchequer! those women could buy and sell them.

The men weren't involved in any of the so-called domestic duties. How shall I put it? Essentially the duties had been laid out beforehand; the miner or the iron and steel worker did his stint and was responsible for his wife and family. But the domestic side was completely under the control of the mother with the help of any daughters that might be there. Interference wasn't wanted and very rarely given. Mother was in charge domestically, 100 per cent and the man's role was as a breadwinner, wherever it was and there was a clear division of labour. Very, very clear division of labour.And the pattern had been set generations before, you grew up and you had to conform. A male who involved himself too much in the domestic side was unfortunately looked upon as a bit of a sissy in the community.

The working men's clubs were another part of this division. These were the

places where the males, generally at a weekend sometimes during the week, used to go for their 'crack', discussion and drinking. The social life of the mining community, for the males, was centred around the club or the miners' welfare institute. And the club was a complete male preserve. No females. These clubs had very often been started in this area by Lodge Officials and active miners and the same with regard to the steel workers and others. These clubs did a great job from the point of view of providing good quality beer, cheaper than the big private concerns could or would provide. The people who formed them, established the same rules at the club as operated in their own household. The division of labour was the same. A social club is for men, a place of work is for men; the women's role is in the home. And the pattern was established and it followed itself through into the social life. A great pity, and we've learnt how to do it much better since.

The Slave Driver

I started at the Morrison Busty, one of the new collieries within a few miles of where I lived, in 1929 and renewed my acquaintance with the pit. At the same time I took up W.E.A. class studies on Economics and also (as this wouldn't provide me with the possibility of a job) evening classes in English, shorthand, and Accounts, studies which I felt would probably enable me to get a clerical job of some kind. I was doing this simultaneously with my work in the pits. By that time I was almost nineteen years of age and beginning to have a different attitude to many things. I became involved in the union lodge. It was quite unusual for nineteen and twenty year old miners to be active trade union–wise and the older miners gave me every help and support. They thought it was great that I was taking an interest so young. So I was involved 60–70 hours a week. But it was all interesting and the only thing that I hated about it all was the fact that I was back in the pit. I only weighed 8 stone, I wasn't strong enough and big enough to do what I had to do as a hand putter, alongside lads eleven and twelve stone. I never ever came to terms with that. I was physically exhausted and mentally almost around the bend. The only thing that the second introduction to mining did for me was to increase my determination to get out of the pits! Nothing could change my attitude on the importance of miners or mining communities but for me, with my physique I didn't think I could survive. I decided that I had to fight out of the dreadful situation I was placed in. I just worked and worked to get out.

In 1934 I had my last week in the pit and my first really delightful experience of getting my own back. The manager of the Morrison Busty colliery was a Captain who had done some time in the Gold Mines in South Africa and was, I thought, a bloody slave driver, though I don't doubt efficient. Anyway one of the teachers in the evening class arranged for me to be interviewed for a clerical job in Gateshead and I got it. I was out of the pit! Right away. I went straight to the clerk in the office,

'Now look here, will you tell that bugger that young Ridley wants to see him as soon as ever he's finished'. I remember going into the office. He was a big powerful florid man. I just said 'Well, Captain Browell, this is my moment,' and he looked at me and said 'What do you mean?'

'Well in spite of you, in spite of a number of things, I've got a job out of the pits. Never mind about a week's notice, I just want my bloody cards no and get the hell out of this. You did nothing for me and I understand why of course, but this is one of the happiest days of my life, that I can say goodby to this set–up. Thank you for nothing, Bugger you.' I said things that I couldn't have said if I hadn't had the job lined up. It gave me an enormous amount of satisfaction to be able to do it. From then on it was 9 to 5 administrative work and I was very fortunate.

Politics – A Socialist Education

Within twelve months I was able to switch the job and start work for an employer in Gateshead who was very left wing and progressive. As a result right up to going in the forces in 1940, I was able then to continue in a trad union, but particularly a political role. For five years I was able to finish work at the required time and know that the job was never in doubt. I was free to involve myself politically in the whole of the Tyneside area. By then I'd joined the Communist Party after being in the I.L.P. Guild of Youth.

If there had been the possibility within the local mining area of getting in a youth section of the Labour Party I would automatically have been in at sixteen. But membership of the Labour Party was not for kids. The I.L.P. sensibly had a youth section but in County Durham the local Labour Party set–up had little to do with young people at all. So we went into the left wi section of the Labour Party, which was the I.L.P, and we participated in there and did our political work as young left wingers. But very quickly, by meeting with other young people in Newcastle and so on, I began to associate with people in the Young Communist League and they said 'Well, you haven't got an organised set–up in your area, why not join the Y.C.L.?' And I thought it was the natural thing to do. If there had been, at that time, lively section of the official Labour Party within the Stanley area I would have been an active member of it. But it either existed on paper and didn't operate with practice or it was completely non–existent. So if you wanted to get cracking and do things it was fairly natural to just move on to the C.P.

In 1936 we started a branch in Stanley. The opening speaker was that magnificent old trade unionist revolutionary, Tom Mann – one of the great figures of the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. He wa real fire brand; magnificent orator and over eighty years of age then. I remember that opening meeting so well. It was on a week night and the miners' hall was packed to the doors. Tom Mann coming to just a twopence ha'penny pit village between Annfield Plain and Stanley. It was absolutely packed and talked about for a long time afterwards.

In the 1930s many of us were members of the Left Book Club and we sol more books month by month than some booksellers in the North. I was a travelling bookshop. And other people were doing the same. I used to take books as far as Crook on a bicycle – because my orders were there.

It was all part of a left wing education. The W.E.A. ran its classes, the N.C.L.C. ran its classes, the Left Book Club was publishing books about economics, politics, economic and social history, drama and so forth. This did an enormous amount of good in improving one's knowledge. It did a fundamental basic job and you could do it in your own home. Very often, if the group was big enough, you had a Left Book Club society in the area. After everybody had read the 'book of the month', you would have a local teacher who was progressive, or myself, or anybody else, who would say 'Right, let's have a discussion on the book'. Thirty or forty of you, housewives, miners, teachers, joiners and so on, sitting around; you would seriously discuss that 'book of the month'. It was really good; fulfilling a basic educational role that was tremendously important, and opening new avenues. It did a tremendous amount of good work and it's a pity that it wasn't carried on in the same way afterwards. However, having said that, it fitted the needs of the times, and it was a good job that a man like Gollancz, the Publisher, and others made it possible. It was a grand job of work that was done, and it must have improved enormously the general understanding of thousands and thousands of people. *Red Star Over China* was one of the books – I've had many copies of that and I've got none left – the people who read it, they understood what was happening in China and they were able to follow, without blinkers, the revolution and the other events in China in the late 1940s.

There was a lot of interest in amateur drama in this area and we were also involved in a Left Book Club Theatre Group. Miners and their wives, students and unemployed, all having a whale of a time putting over left wing stuff and plays like *Waiting for Lefty*. Fantastic propaganda material at that time. It was better than the tough day–to–day 'political work' and we enjoyed this. In all this, we were involved with left wing members of the Labour Party and large numbers of active trade unionists at all levels.

Spain

During the 'united front' days of the middle thirties there was quite a clear agreement between the I.L.P., certain sections of the Labour Party and the C.P. There was a united platform, and it really operated. It kept the Labour movement going in actual fact. Probably the most worthwhile thing I was ever involved in took place at that time the struggle for a successful outcome in Spain. From the start of the Spanish conflict I threw myself into it and devoted the next three years to getting support for the people of Spain and our lads who were out there in the International Brigade. Some of my best friends went out there, never to return. I volunteered myself but for some reason – probably because I was still barely over eight stone and not very strong – but an experienced public speaker, it was felt that I'd be more help if I stayed and organised support at home. Daily and weekly as the struggle was going on I realised (like many others in the trade union, labour and the communist movement) that this was a rehearsal for something bigger that was coming. We were not under any illusions about this at all, and we just spent the whole of our leisure time and sometimes part of our work time in doing whatever we could to help.

We had an enormous amount of trade union support, particularly among the Durham miners. Miners' lodges came on a large scale to big public meetings addressed by top class speakers from all over the country. Speakers from the Labour Party, Communist Party or the I.L.P. – on this issue there was a tremendous amount of unity. It wasn't difficult – especially in the Stanley area – for us to organise a big meeting, with five, six and seven hundred miners and their wives to be there, a full house; miners' lodges handing up cheques for £10, £15 and £20. On one occasion in the Stanley Co-op the total collection, in the middle of the 1930s was £250, which was a fantastic amount. The meetings were usually on a Sunday evening, starting at seven and finishing at nine. Then the lads could get along to the local club for a jar or two and the wives go back to get the supper ready.

We had competitions to see who could raise the most cash or who could get the most food for a ship going to Spain from Tyneside.

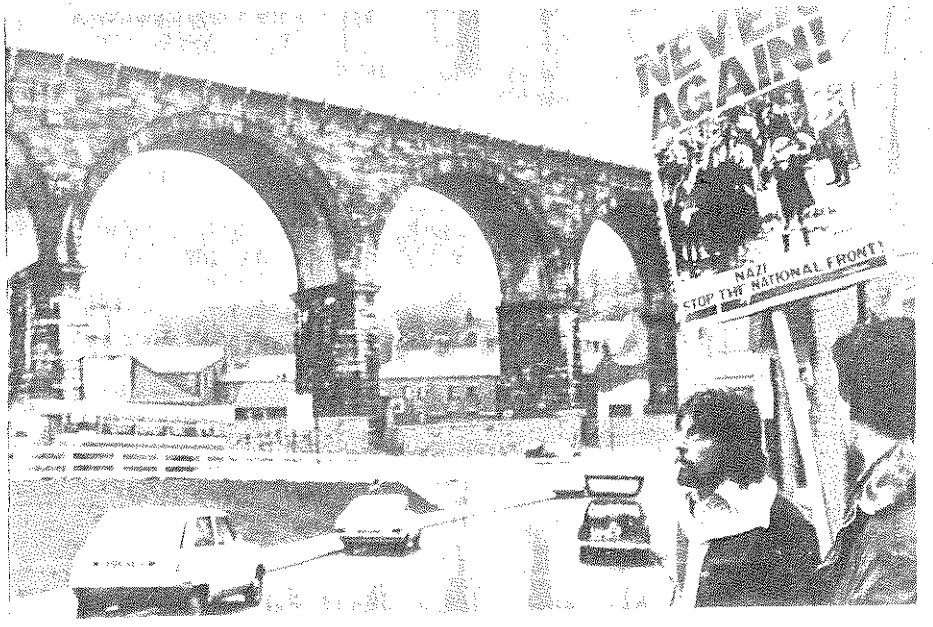
We organised the lads who were skilled tradesmen in Vickers, Newcastle. Many of them spending weekends, making up ambulances from old tattybye vehicles, putting their skill to this and that use for the Spanish people. New motors in, good second hand material and converting vehicles to go out. And they did go out.

We knew without a doubt unless something drastic was done that a big world war was around the corner. If they were defeated in Spain, that was it. So there was a constant telling of the message: this is it. Where is it going to end?

Politics and Power

It's much easier to develop a push from the right wing than the left in this country. They've got so much built-in help. They are linked with powerful sectors who still own the main sources of wealth in this country. The racialist attitude of many of them has got to be heard to be believed. You can see this in Northern Ireland with the Protestant attitudes. We should never forget that well over 60% of the main sources of wealth is still controlled and owned by less than 10% of the community. That aspect has not changed very much. It has been reduced a wee bit but it's still there today in spite of what has happened. So when the chips are down, when it's necessary, they can call upon a lot of forces and I'm afraid they will get the 'unthinking people', often the very poor, to mouth the most disgusting racialist ideas. I always look upon any hard right wing activities as being very dangerous and harmful. I'm really worried because I know the kind of support that they can get behind the scenes. There are people in powerful places in this country who could, and would, if they were seriously threatened, try and hold on to what they have or solve their problems by utilising that kind of movement. It worries me considerably, and always has done.

I think myself that if you take some of the economic power from the people who have it, then you can do much more with the resources from this lovely country of ours than you can do with getting a few million extra in taxation.



Nye Bevan termed it with wonderful clarity and precision as 'capturing the commanding heights'. It opens up all kinds of perspectives. I think of the nationalisation of land which we were advocating in 1935. If it had been carried out, say any time between then and 1939 what a difference it could have made. I know that the farmers do a great job in this country but the bloody landowners; the Lord this and the Lord that. They're still reaping the benefits in because their tenants are paying the rent. This could have been sorted out years ago and instead of land being available at £1,000 an acre to £2,000 an acre to build houses on, the state could have been saying 'You can have it for buttons'. It's a free gift of nature. Think of the cost houses and other items could have been. But we haven't done it that way. And if we were to think about taking the land from them now it's going to cost a bomb. Unless we take it from them in the old fashioned way, but it seems that this is not the way which they want it to be done in this country. I wouldn't shed a tear if every acre of land belonging to Lord Bute and the Duke of Northumberland and the Marquis of Londonderry etc. was taken over tomorrow and they were told 'Anything extra that you can prove over recent years that you've put in to improve that land you're going to be paid and nowt else!' After all they 'nicked' a *free gift of nature.*

For example, in 1926 there was a minority feeling in the labour movement that the general strike was the great test between capitalism and the rising forces of socialism. It was possible to have this idea, but looking back I don't think it was right. The struggle was an economic attack on the standard of

living of the miners and then right into the thirties on every other section of the working class. But it was not a revolutionary situation. The great majority of miners looked upon it as being just a struggle against worsening working conditions, less pay and so on. If the General Strike had gone on any longer it could have developed into a real political shindig involving troops but really in essence it was a battle between coalmaster and miners in which the government of the day was heavily committed to supporting the coalmasters one hundred per cent. I'm very sure, looking back that in the whole of my period of involvement, whatever I may have thought about it at the time, the question of complete political change and transforming society, root and branch was not on the agenda as yet. Neither was it in the programme.There *were* dedicted people like Keir Hardie who were interested in complete, basic, fundamental change but they were in a minority. And over the years, rightly or wrongly, I am convinced now that the majority of people in this country have just got used to the established party system and a mixed economy.

Changing the World

But there have been some changes for the good. Some people are inclined to suggest that the kind of efforts that were made in the post–war period, on the basis of a Labour government, were not big and were not really of very much importance. I disagree, because I personally can show you the immediate benefit. You see I have three youngsters, two of them just carried on through a normal secondary modern kind of education but the change in opportunity was such that both of them received sound financial support from the Durham County Council and were able to go right through and take good degrees. I was able to come home from the Forces, take up another job and after four years of work and study I was able to get straight into a technical training college and take up teaching at forty years of age. Something that could never have happened before the war. So, my whole family have benefitted. Personally I am very grateful that I was able to take advantage of it and I am only sorry that many other people with ability better than mine did not take the same advantage. Many changes for the good have taken place. From the point of view of social legislation, working hours, holidays, and so on; then the importance of trade union representation, the tremendously important role of shop stewards on the factory floor, a whole number of things – institutions which had been developed; educational facilities and opportunities. All of these are important. But having said that we haven't changed society basically. There's a lot that is fundamentally the same as it was in the twenties and thirties. It still has got to be tackled. And today we are faced with something as difficult as in the twenties. Having 'solved some problems' without basically changing society, we are still in the position where we cannot say to the youngsters leaving school that they are able to start work, and note they are our capital for the future. In this respect we are as badly off now in 1979 as we were in 1924. This is a dreadful thing to say after sixty years! It's the most shocking commentary that one can make.

Sixty years ago, we had little or no opportunity; today we can give a basic training and education to youngsters but far too many aren't allowed to make a meaningful contribution to society. These youngsters may well pull this society of ours to pieces in sheer frustration. Some of them come from really close families and their parents don't want them to go to Birmingham or Coventry. And they don't want to go themselves. So they hang on and hang on. It gets worse and worse. It can nearly make you cry at times. While all the struggle was going on, we thought one thing at least; that we will sort things out and we'll make it better for the kids. At least the kids can all be guaranteed a job; and in any worthwhile society at the backend of the twentieth century this is the least we should expect. This is the thing that worries me more than anything else. I don't think it's going to get better, it's going to get worse, unless something radical is done about it.

A Political Life

I stayed in the Communist Party right up until 1956. Then, after the Hungary business, I left. I had been going around the miners' lodges and factories over the Suez affair and criticising Eden's invasion of Suez. And then the Russians invaded Hungary. I couldn't turn the argument round again. Working people aren't daft. They would have said to me 'But isn't this the same as Suez?' I couldn't possibly soldier on both with Hungary and the attitude of the Russians on a whole number of things.

I was having to take a new look at my attitude. Is a one party system basically socialist and democratic in modern terms? Is this the thing that really will answer all political and economic questions? And I was coming up with the answer that it's not on the basis of a highly centralised and highly structured political party that operates without opposition, that socialism will be builit. It may give you a form of socialism, but is this any different to some of the aspects of fascism that we've been thinking and fighting about?

I'm still trying to come to terms with this; to grasp fully some of the conclusions. I still take the *Morning Star* for the trade union side but I read the *Guardian* regularly too. I feel that in many ways, in modern society you mustn't have a narrow view: 'I know all the answers' sort of thing. I used to think that. It may seem incredible but I started getting the *Times* in1939 and took it regularly until 1970. Merely, on the basis of understanding what the other side are doing and thinking about. It fulfilled that role very well. Now I read things more openly: to read a fairly good quality newspaper and to enjoy two or three hours reading, and say 'I now know a little more about the world in which I live', that to me is good positive stuff. I enjoy that first hour and a half from seven until half past eight in bed in the morning, reading the *Guardian*. After I've read and studied the contents I say 'Right I know a bit more than I did yesterday'.

For a short time, after I left the Communist Party, I was in a vacuum politically. For about a couple of years I was pushing my energies in other channels, like becoming a county exhibitor of chrysanthymums and being active in chrysanthymum societies and growing flowers. I spent more time

walking, gardening, and reading widely. And with my family too. While I was involved in all this political work I also had a young family. Looking back they were neglected to a certain degree. But the wife , who was also very politically involved,soldiered on because she is a great mother, really outstanding. She made up for the gap you know. She did two jobs, she was both mum and dad while I was doing the so–called 'bigger' things?

After some time I felt that I had to be politically involved in some way. People were saying: 'Have you dropped off, I haven't seen you?' And I was beginning to get worried about it. Fortunately my own trade union branch at Consett, largely due to my requesting it, decided to, affiliate to the Consett Trades Union Council. Then for years I did the majority of my political and trade union work through the executive of the union council. Happily again I was able to marry my socialist and my trade union involvement and do it regularly all the time. This carried on right up until I was 65 when I just decided to call it a day and engage in other interesting activities.

So stage after stage I've been in a position that if a door is shut then open another one. I haven't had to say 'Well my trade union or political work must stop' or 'I'm packing it in and all my social or progressive attitudes and all kinds of things that I'm deeply concerned with are finished'. I've never been in that position. My views have changed. I would have been a dogmatic ridiculous parrot if I hadn't been changed by what has happened. But looking back I can say that I've done it without any qualms of conscience and without any feeling of 'That was a complete bloody waste of time'. No, whatever you may do wrongly, as long as you're really trying to improve many aspects of human life for yourself, your family, and the ordinary people in the society which you have been a part of, you have squared your conscience. I really feel I have made a little contribution towards this goal.

The Woman's Part

Vera Alsop.

I was born in Hamsterley Colliery, just outside Chopwell, in 1915. My father was killed at the Dardanelles soon after I was born. He had been a miner and he was also a cornet player. He was very good; he had stood on the stage of the Queen's Theatre and played a cornet solo when he was eight. He played in the band and they wanted him to play in one of the army bands. But he wouldn't, because he said that people would call him a coward. He wanted to be in active service. If he had gone into the band he might have been alive today.

Of course I never knew him but I have a reminder of him. It seems that he was given compassionate leave to see my mother and me. My mother had already decided to call me Vera but at the time the British troops had just retaken a city in Belgium – Louvain and my father asked if that could be my middle name. So I was Vera Louvain Oakes.

My mother and I lived at Hamsterley with my father's parents until she married again. That was when I was seven years old. Then we went to live in Leadgate. I missed Hamsterley and my granny. When we went to visit my grandparents I used to cry when it was time to go. Then, when I was eight I ran away from home. I walked from Leadgate to Hamsterley; I can remember wearing a flowered pinafore and going over the little bridge where the tubs from the colliery used to go. I can remember standing in the door of my granny's house and the surprised look on her face. 'Where's your mother?' They took me back to Leadgate and my mother was frantic looking for me. Then I became poorly and I kept saying 'I want my Granny'. The doctor advised mymotherto let me go back to my granny's to live or I would fret away. So I returned to Hamsterley and I stayed there until I got married. I visited my mother every month (she had six more children) but I was brought up by my granny.

The Boss

In those old days, the days we've been talking about, the man was the boss. He was the boss of the house. And if he wasn't the boss of the house he wasn't considered to be a man. Some bashings went on. I often heard my granny talk about it. She was a midwife at Hamsterley and if anyone was taken ill they'd call for my granny. She'd come back and say 'Bye, so and so has been knocking her around again'. Men used to come in from the pub – big bullies of men – and they'd beat their wives if things weren't as they should be, or if the woman complained. They thought that was the proper thing to do. 'I can go out and enjoy myself but you're to stay in the house'. The woman was supposed to sit there with a little black shawl on and wait for him coming in. And that's what most women did.

George's mother – my mother–in–law – was a little woman who always retaliated. My father–in–law was a very big man but she used to stand upto him. She used to go out. He'd say 'You're supposed to be in at such and such a time' and if she wasn't in by that time he used to lock her out. She was late getting home this one night and she got one of the lasses to let her in. She goes into the sitting room which was in darkness. Well, he heard her and ran in after her saying what he was going to do to her. And he was a big man. Anyway she got up on a chair and she took this tray of toffee (she used to make toffee to give to the bairns). My father–in–law had a baldy head and everytime he walked passed her she hit him on top of the head with the toffee. There was toffee all over the sitting room. Another time he came in drunk and started acting up so she got these rolls of paper. Hit him over the head with the rolls of paper. The next morning he couldn't remember. 'Bye, I don't know what's happened to me but my head's sore'. She says 'Will you look at all that paper! That got broke over your head last night'.

This is what women's lib is all about you see. I don't go as far as they go perhaps but it's nice to know you have some rights. Because in those days you had no rights at all.

Dancing and Walking

My grandfather and granny were the caretakers of Hamsterley School for thirty seven years. My grandfather was a nice man. He was the exact opposite to most men at the time. He never drank, but he didn't mind other people drinking. My granny, for example. She liked a drink. On this particular day they went together to the town and he knew she liked a glass of beer.

'Do you fancy a glass of beer?'

'No, I'm not bothered but go on I'll wait.'

And she'd slip into the lounge bar to have herself a glass and my grandfather would be walking up and down. He likedhis pipe but he never drank. He was a nice man.

Young men and women used to meet on Sundays. There was what the lads called the 'hen run'. Every Sunday night the lasses would go along this walk where the Consett to Rowlands Gill Road is now. There used to be hundreds of lads and lasses. Walking backwards and forwards between Hamsterley and Lintzford,You'd stop and talk. There was never any carry on. But that's where the lads and lasses used to meet. There and at the dances. I used to love dancing. I met George at a dance in the church hall in Hamsterley. I started to go to the dances when I was about fifteen; seven o'clock to eleven. I was sixteen when the ten till two dances câme on. And I'll always remember – – I can picture it as if it was yesterday – I said to my granny 'I've got this ticket to go to this dance from ten till two'.

'Your grandad will not let you go'.

'But I've got the ticket'.

'You're not going. Two in the morning! You're not.' Anyway eventually I went. I had my key, let myself in and a voice came from upstairs.

'You'd enjoyed yourself hinny? That's good.' So I was allowed to go to the dances.

My granny wasn't very strict with me so long as I came straight home after the dance finished. I've walked from High Fields dance all the way home down Chopwell Road, to Hamsterley in my stocking feet. My feet burning from dancing. Many's the time I did that. The only thing my granny *was* strict upon was sex. She wouldn't allow me to be near any talk about sex. If the woman next door was talking about a woman having a child, or something; 'Go for a walk, this isn't for your ears'. Sex was a forbidden topic. People found out about sex the hard way, or the dirty way; through dirty books and so on. I remember going to school and seeing the lasses sniggering, laughing – 'I've got a book'. In the playtime we'd be standing around sniggering – learning it as a dirty subject. In our days when we had children it was ignorance really.

That's why I agree with sex education in schools. I believe that children should be taught about sex and taught properly. Because sex is a wonderful thing. I don't believe in miracles but there is one miracle that I do believe in, the birth of a child or an animal or a bird or whatever is a marvellous thing. It's a wonderful thing if you're taught properly but I think it's the filthy way which sex is portrayed that makes it filthy. Sniggers and looks. But it shouldn't be that. I don't agree with a lot of the plays they put on the television today; those which leave nothing to the imagination. They needn't go as far as they do. But I don't think sex is a subject that should be taboo.

I went to Blackhall Mill school until I was fourteen and then I got the chance to stay on for another two years. I wasn't too bothered about it but my grandparents insisted; they wanted me to be a teacher. But when I was only 14 years and 8 months my grandmother badly scalded her feet so I had to leave. I was needed to help with the house–work and also with the school. And I did that until I got married.

Changes

We've been married forty seven years come November. It's not a long time really, in history, but in that time so much has changed. Aeroplanes, television. If my granny came back and sat in this room she wouldn't know what the television was. When we were first married I had a little cabinet gramophone on legs. It was the first one to come into Hamsterley Colliery. It had a winder, it was my granny's and she said 'It's yours when you get married'. Well, when I brought it up to George's house they couldn't get over it. My mother–in–law thought it was great. She couldn't get over it. But now you've got speakers all over the house; music centres all that sort of thing. We've seen a lot of things changed.

We were in one room when we first got married. It was a room we sub–let off a council tenant. Then we went into a cottage and we had a downstairs room and a bedroom upstairs. I had to cook on a little fire in my bedroom. We had 2 babies while we lived there, they were just nineteen months apart (no pills in those days) and I had had both of them by the time I was twenty. Then George was just on a small wage at the pit. By the time I paid my room rent and furniture I was lucky to get 3d worth of pie meat for the Sunday dinner. George got no pocket money, sometimes he would say 'Have you got 3d to spare?' If I had he would go to the local institute and play skittles. If he won he would call at the fish shop and bring fish and chips and we would share them.(Fish and a pennyworth for 3d). Every winter he got a pleurisy pain and he would be off work for weeks. We would have 15/– Lloyd George (sick money) and 5/– rent money to live on.

My granny helped me as much as she could but there was a limit to what she could do. She said I would have to go the Public Relief. I was frightened to go, but she said there wasn't anything to be ashamed of as it came out of the rates, and if the King could live off the rates why couldn't I? I went once but I never went back.

We were in that room for about 4 years before we got our first house; a council house which we had for twelve years. Then we moved down Mill Road for an extra bedroom. We had three daughters then and one had asthma and had to have a room of her own. At that time we couldn't have a colliery house, but it came that we could. So we moved into Mersey Street, then Humber Street and we've been here about eighteen years. So we've moved a bit, but always in the village, in Chopwell.

But Chopwell has changed too. Chopwell used to be a pit village – all Chopwell was pit families. But now they're working in factories; there's people come in from outside and they've never been in the pits. There's just the small minority of miners left here now. This is why it's changed.

Women's Work

When I was a girl the only work for women was domestic employment. In those days you'd hear girls say 'I'm going to London to service'. They'd be going to be a domestic servant in one of the big houses in London. That's changed a lot too. In my married life I've done any number of jobs, in between having children. I had my fourth child when I was 38. I've worked nearly all my married life with different jobs – I liked to do something. There was some work in the village (I've worked in a fish shop, I've been a domestic help, I've gone round with butter and eggs, I've been a barmaid at the R.A.O.B. Club) but the majority of work in the area for women was at Prudhoe Hospital. A busload of women leave the village every morning – full. I started working there when I was fifty and I stayed there for almost eleven years, until I retired. After I'd been there a while I wished that I'd gone there years ago instead of the bit jobs I'd done before that.

At the Club I used to see men come in night after night, spending money on beer, and I know for a fact that their wives and bairns didn't know which way to turn. I used to think that was awful. When we were hard up George used to do without but at the Club men used to come in, pass pound notes over the bar and stand there drinking beer and their bairns were running about in bare feet. It used to sicken me. But at Prudhoe I used to think I was doing a job that was worthwhile. You were looking after somebody that wasn't capable of looking after themselves. If they were in pain you could ease their pain. You could care for them.And, in the end it was better money too. But I liked the work and I liked the company. I made a lot of friends at Prudhoe.

I wasn't keen to go in the beginning though. I was fifty and our Pauline was at home and we wanted to give her an education. Everyone kept saying 'Wey, gan to Prudhoe,man'. You know, as an auxilliary nurse. Well, I'd heard about Prudhoe and the dirty jobs there, about the people who were like cabbages and did everything where they sat, and I thought 'I'll never go there. I'll never be able to do that job.' But in the end I applied and I got on. I was to be a nurse on a ward where there was all cripples. All the way on the bus on the first day my insides were churning. The others said to me 'Just

put up with it for two weeks and when you get your first pay it will be lovely'.

Six pound odd, that was my pay. And we had to work hard. We had to do all the domestic work, scrubbing the floors, everything – we hadn't any time for the patients. On one occasion the sister, myself and another nurse were on our knees scrubbing the floor when these people arrived unexpectedly. (They were somebody important, from some important place.) The sister said 'You'll have to excuse me'; she had to wash her hands before she could shake hands. This man said 'But you are the nurses on here, what are you doing this for?' So they went up to the office and the next week they set the domestic cleaners on. By the time I left they were earning as much as the nurses and I thought 'It must have been slave labour with us the first few years; they were getting their work done cheap'.

Another time, they wanted to change our hours. A lot of the women who were working at Prudhoe were married women who were working times to suit themselves and their families. They were *suggesting* changing our times to start at seven in the morning instead of eight. Well I was up at six to get there for eight. I'd have had to get up in the middle of the night to get to work if they changed the hours. So I went to the meeting and I got up and I asked him 'I would like to know if we're wasting our time sitting here, asking questions. He said 'I don't understand what you mean'. I said 'Well, isn't it all cut and dried, and this meeting just a formality. Because if it is we're all wasting our time. I've plenty work up on the ward!' Then he assured us that we weren't wasting our time. In the end the times stayed as they were.

At work they used to love to get me talking – different things, different experiences and whatnot. And they used to say 'Aye, you bugger, get on a soap box'. But I wasn't always like that. When I was married I would spend all day and all night in company and never speak. I was so shy. I would speak if somebody spoke to me; I would answer them, but I used to hold my glove over my mouth for fear of saying something wrong. I had such an inferiority complex I would never say anything to anyone. The Buff's Club fetched me out a lot because I had to stand up for myself; I had to backchat. That taught me a lot. And then being at Prudhoe. When I started sister would say 'Would you go down with a message'. I used to fly down and fly all the way back and it was up back all the way. I used to get in breathless. One day I had to go on a message and I met this other nurse and she said 'I'm on a message and I've been out nearly an hour; I generally stop and have a bit crack before I go back'. So I learned my lesson – if she can do it so can I; I can pop in to see some of my friends for a talk. I learned you had to stick up for yourself. If anyone had said 'Boo' to me when I was first married I would have just sat down and cried. But not now.

Two Wages

All my money went into the house. I've heard people say 'The women were talking as though they were the breadwinners'. I know we couldn't have lived on my wage alone, but his wage and my wage combined helped us to

get a couple of bits and pieces together. It's only because we've had two wages that we've got these things. Old people living today, just on their pension, with nothing behind them, I don't know how they exist. Because our pension would be £28. Now you have heating, we have coals to buy (it's six and two threes whether you use electric or you have coal) and then the old people have their television rental. Twenty eight pound – I don't know how they exist. We have that plus his compensation and we've bought this house. So I don't know how anybody (and there's quite a lot) who just have their pension and nothing else behind them, manage to survive.

A lot of what's been gained has been through women working. It's not been through 'socialism'. We've never had socialism in this country. It's been a bit of reform here and a bit of reform there. Just to keep us quiet. The middle of the road. Whenever I have an argument, or a debate, over this I always say; 'I was always told when I was little never to walk in the middle of the road. I either had to walk on the one side or the other, but never the middle – it's dangerous'.

A Place to Meet

Mary Samuels.

Until the dress-making factory came there wasn't work in the town for women. If you didn't work in a shop, there was no work for women. The biggest majority of women are working now though. Even women with families are working: nine till three. They can still get their children to and from school. In the first place they went out to work for the luxuries, but now it is for necessities, because the cost of living has gone up so much. The standard of living has definitely gone up too. People are much better off. There are more things to help you. Grant you, you've got to go out to work. If there is only one worker, they feel the pinch today. People want the car, the washing machine, they want the holidays, and they get them, mainly because the women go out to work.

I started work in the shop 33 years ago. In 33 years, the shop has seen big changes, especially in the stock. Nearly every thing at one time was loose and had to be weighed out. You had to weigh up all your butter, your lard, there was no packaging. Not even in dried fruit or flour. It all came in big sacks when I first started. To me, life is busier now, but it's much easier. At least as far as selling goes. You don't have to sell like you had to in the early days. You had to keep a cat, an unheard of thing now. If you didn't have a cat, you would be overrun with mice. When the pits were there, you didn't sell the convenience foods, you sold the things that the heavy workers needed. The men wanted dinners, the heavy foods that a heavy manual worker needed.

The corner shop is important as a place where people can meet and have a chat. Some come in and say 'I've never spoken to a soul until I came in here'. It's the older people who like to have a chat. The younger ones don't seem to have time.

Things were different when the pits were open. When it was Durham Big Meeting, we used to get up early, and the bands would be playing outside. Before they ever set off for Durham, the place was alive with people. The bands used to play before they left. And the queues for the buses would be at least 100 yards long. It was a big day. My dad used to put a stall outside of the shop in the early morning with fruit and pop and that sort of thing. That's all gone. Now no-one mentions Durham Big Meeting. It just passes by. No-one says now, 'I'm going to the Meeting'. We suffered when the pits closed down. People moved away. We lost an awful lot of customers that had to move. Many of them went down to Nottingham and Doncaster, to the pits down there. Lots of them didn't want to go, but they had to, there was no work here. When you talked to them it was clear that they didn't know what to do. I suppose because they had been brought up in the town, they didn't want to move away. There wasn't much opposition to the closure. I don't think the unions were so strong then. When the pits closed you felt as though there was just nothing left for the people. One of the doctors at the the time, who was retiring, said that Crook was going to be a place for just old people. Because the young would all move away. You just didn't know what was going to happen.

There was nothing in Crook. Then some factories came, and for those who didn't move away, they got work at those factories.

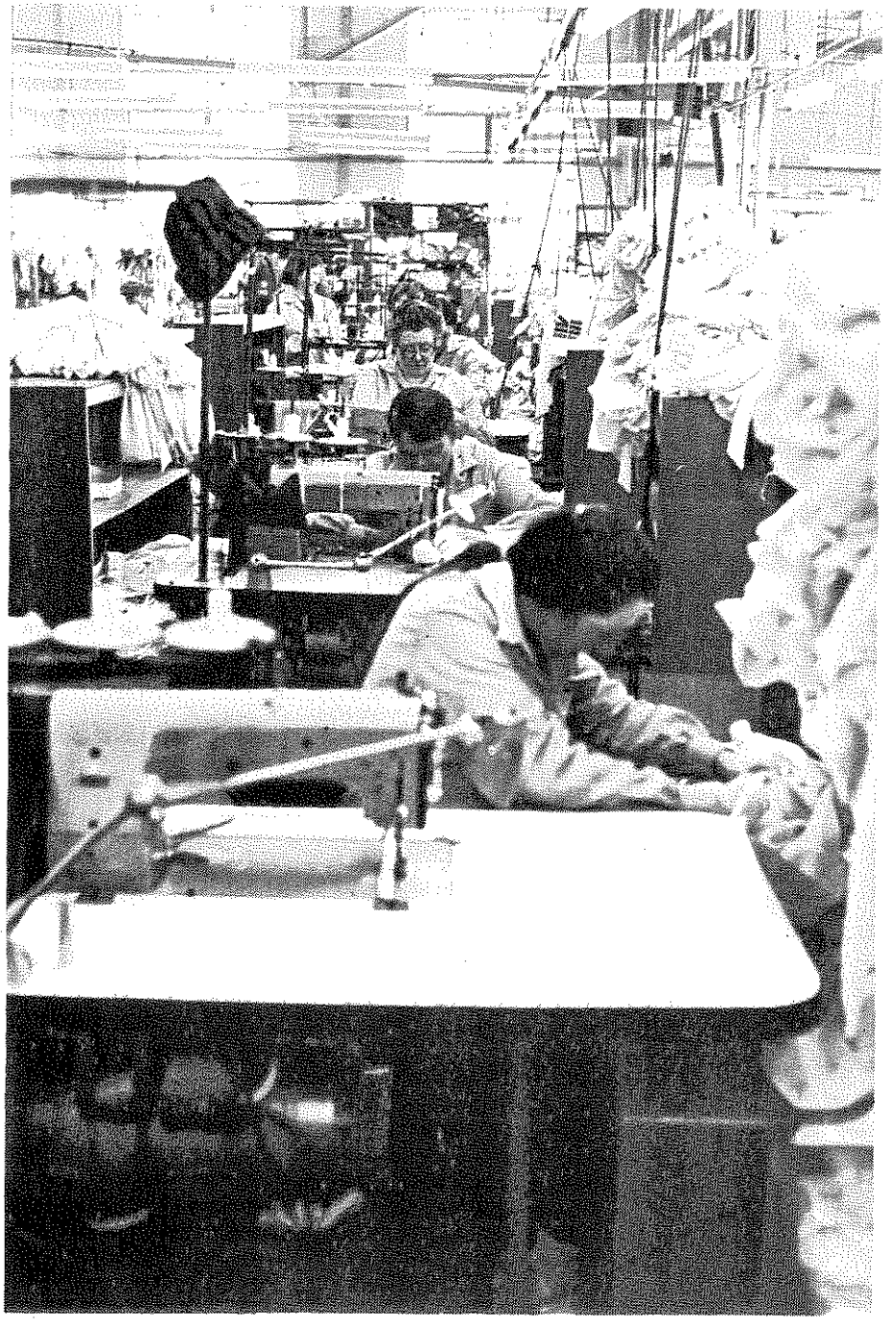
5. HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

The pits were closed, but only on the promise of alternative employment. The promise was for a new 'manufacturing base' which would provide jobs for miners and their wives – and also for their sons and daughters. At the time, while people were sure that wool *was* being pulled over their eyes, it seemed like a good deal. Today, as the new factories close, they are not so sure.

The Needy Not the Greedy

Elizabeth Harrison.

When I came from India I thought that women who worked in factories were rough people and I got a great shock when I started in the dress factory to find so many nice and good people. I have made some very good friends. Soon after I arrived in CrookI can remember going to the post office with my husband when we saw all the factory girls staring at us from a window. I was the only coloured girl in the town then. Peter, my husband, just turned me around and shouted up 'Have a good look'. We all laughed and waved. When I went to the larger factory I did find some prejudice but it wasn't anything like you read about today. I blame Enoch Powell for that. There are many coloured people who can't get jobs today just because of their colour and that is terribly wrong. In my case I felt that my ambition to be an examiner in the factory was held back because of my colour. At one time the firm had put adverts in the paper saying they wanted examiners who had had experience of working with garments. I had worked there for fifteen years then and I still couldn't get an examiners job. I did in the end though.



The Needy

From my own experience, I can say that there are some really good women working in the factory. Most of the women were driven out to work because they needed money to keep the home going and for their children. Many of us wouldn't be working if we had enough money. There was a saying that if you worked in the factory that you were either among the needy or the greedy. Most of us were needy. For the women with families, work was possible because of the part-time system. At one time one of the managers tried to move everyone on to a full-time basis, but then who was going to look after the children; take and collect them from school? We wouldn't have any of it, so the management never got it through. I only moved to full-time when my husband became disabled. Most were like me, we were working out of necessity.

I moved to the bigger factory in Crook through my husband. He had been working at the pitchworks at Bankfoot but the intense heat had caused him a lot of ill health. The doctor told him he had to have lighter work. So he finished there and went down to the Labour Exchange. In those days it was difficult to turn work down from the Exchange and they had given him a cleaners job at a dress factory which he hated. Anyway, he had to take it and I moved to the same place soon after. I was ready to move in some ways as I was having a real struggle to get my proper bonus from Meadowfield, and the travelling was much easier.

We made dresses and blouses of good quality. The firm had big orders from Marks and Spencers for example and a lot was exported. Nearly all the work there was done by women and there were no men on the line although some men did do some cutting and pressing. Other men did cleaning and the unloading and driving of the vans. Without this factory there would be very little work for women in this area. If there had been other opportunities for work I would have taken them. Slowly though, opportunities for women are widening and more of us are getting the same wages as men where we are doing the same work. That is my idea of women's equality: where a woman is doing the same job as a man she must get the same pay.

When I started work at a small textile factory in Meadowfield, my hours were from 8.15. in the morning until a quarter to six in the evening. By three or four in the afternoon I would be dead tired and I was no good at all when I eventually got home. But I had to run my home, get the evening meal and be back at work for quarter past eight in the morning. They were very heavy hours, and there was also the problem of travelling a long way each day from Stanley. The bus service wasn't very good and it was so cold waiting in the winter to get home. Still, I liked that factory as it was small and the people were very friendly and we had some good times. There was one lady who was very fair and whenever she timed you for a job she would always go through it with you and so gave us a decent target for the bonus system. In those days if you achieved 60% of the target you got no bonus. Now, you get no bonus at all for the first six hours.

Organising

When I started work the wages were very low and the hours were long. The union wasn't strong then, but as it grew in strength we began to get better wages and conditions. I was very grateful to the union for fighting for shorter hours for us, although I do think that they could have done more with regard to wages. Most of of the women in the factory joined the union but there were some non-union people as well. What we said about them was that the union was fighting for higher wages and better conditions which they would get the same as us. That's what we had against them: that they would get what we were fighting for so why not join the union. Some still wouldn't join.

Many of us hadn't much experience of organising. I remember that some years ago a handsewer came up from Leeds. She argued that we should be given time to move from one piece of work to another and time to settle in. The other girls had laughed and wanted to know what should be the settling in time. She said five minutes minutes for moving and five minutes for settling in, and it was through her that we got it. Before, we were losing both money and time as we were on bonus.

The work was hard. We always had to ask for retiming, and they never gave it unless we asked. The overlookers and machinists had to keep their eyes glued on their work or it would all go wrong. It was a great strain. And the pressers had to work in terrible heat. One of the jobs I had to do was pressing stiffeners in collars and lapels and because of the stretching I got terrible back pains. The doctor told me that this aggravated a curvature in my spine and slight arthritis and that I should change jobs to one where I didn't have to stretch. I told them at the factory but all the foreman said was 'That's too bad, but you can't move as there isn't another job' It was a funny thing, but others could change jobs around. They always say, it's not what you know but who you know.

Five Years Over

I'm 65 now. Once the union had no rules about having to retire at sixty, and if you were useful to the firm they kept you on. There were some women over seventy and one who was 78 who cleaned the toilets. Anyway, on one day all of us over sixty were called in to the canteen. We were told that with inflation and all that sort of thing that the factory wasn't getting the work as it used to. Also, that with so much unemployment up here, especially among the teenagers, that the government had set up a scheme for teenagers to come into the factory to learn the work. So they started to bring in the teenagers and they really would have to be no good for the management to say that they didn't want them. They would try and fit them in somewhere. Naturally, the firm had to make room for these people and so my age group, all those over sixty, got the chop. This was helped by the union who brought in a rule which said that you could only work until you were sixty. That's fair really. I had got five years longer than my time so I couldn't grumble. And the young people do need work and the money.

Chances

Paul Aiston
Keith Anderson
Helen Atkinson
Alan Bowden
Colin Bowden
David Bowden
Susan Donnelly
Laurence Hawley
Richard Hawley
Robert Hawley
Joan Jopling
Deborah King
Drew Mangan
Neil Morgan
Derrick Shepherd
Sandra Talbot
Karen Teesdale
Barbara Wilkinson

In Chopwell, like many of the other villages in the County there is a community centre. The Chopwell Centre was provided after a campaign organised throughout the village and the Chopwell miners' banner now hangs on one of its walls. For the youngsters who live in the area, the Community Centre is one of the few places to go on an evening, and they meet there for the Youth Club on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We visited the Youth Club on several of these evenings and the young people there talked to us about their lives in the village. We tape-recorded some of these discussions, and in the next few pages we try to recapture something of the to and fro of discussion and argument, as the lads and lasses talked about the past, the present and their futures. Hope, myths aspirations, realism . . . . young people assessing their chances and imagining what they might be . . . in Chopwell,1979.

I work for a builder's now – I was out of work for four, five months A lot who left school with us couldn't get jobs. There was a lad I know that's been on the dole for two and a half year. Well, he's only worked about three weeks in the 2 ½ year . When I was on the dole for just two weeks I was getting bored with it – just doing nothing. It's awful, you cannot get a job. I didn't have much chance; I failed all my tests.

I would like to be a joiner, me. You'd have to have G.C.E. O-level.. I would like to be a fitter. I'd like to be an electrician, something where a skill applies. When I was little I always used to like playing with tools and wood and that. We're doing metal work at school now – we're making ashtrays, I

enjoy doing practical work. I'm going to try and get an apprenticeship somewhere. I've tried to get one but there's not many. You have to have canny high qualifications – you have to have G.C.E. and C.S.E. The best part of lads in Chopwell work for the council. You can go in for a trade like a joiner, plumber electrician, council waggons, architect and all that. Then you can leave and get a job anywhere. But it's not easy to get a job with the council. When I went for a job there were was six hundred and odd people for thirty jobs, round the Gateshead area.

There's jobs in the N.C.B. or Vickers. There is Vickers – you'd have to travel to Newcastle – two big places where you can go in for a trade. But there's not many places for lads from this area. For us it's either the pits or Consett Iron Company.

I went for a test two weeks ago for a job up at Consett Iron Company – I'd take a job anywhere if I could get one, even in the mine.

I wouldn't work down the pit. My father used to work down the pit at Chopwell.

My father's at the brickworks factory he was down the pit. He says you cannot stand up, all the rats eat your bait, all the rats crawl around and eat your bait.

I would have gone down the pit if it was still open – it's good money – you'd get a canny job.

My grandfather took me to show me where the Chopwell pit used to be. He was just showing me where the pit used to be – he used to say it was just horrible, he just says it was awful down the pit. The seams what they had to get the coal from were just eighteen inches high. You had to crawl across.

My grandad used to work down there – it was damp and wet. He wouldn't have wanted us to go.

Leaving Chopwell

I'd leave Chopwell – straight away – I'd go abroad – to California. There's no opportunities here.

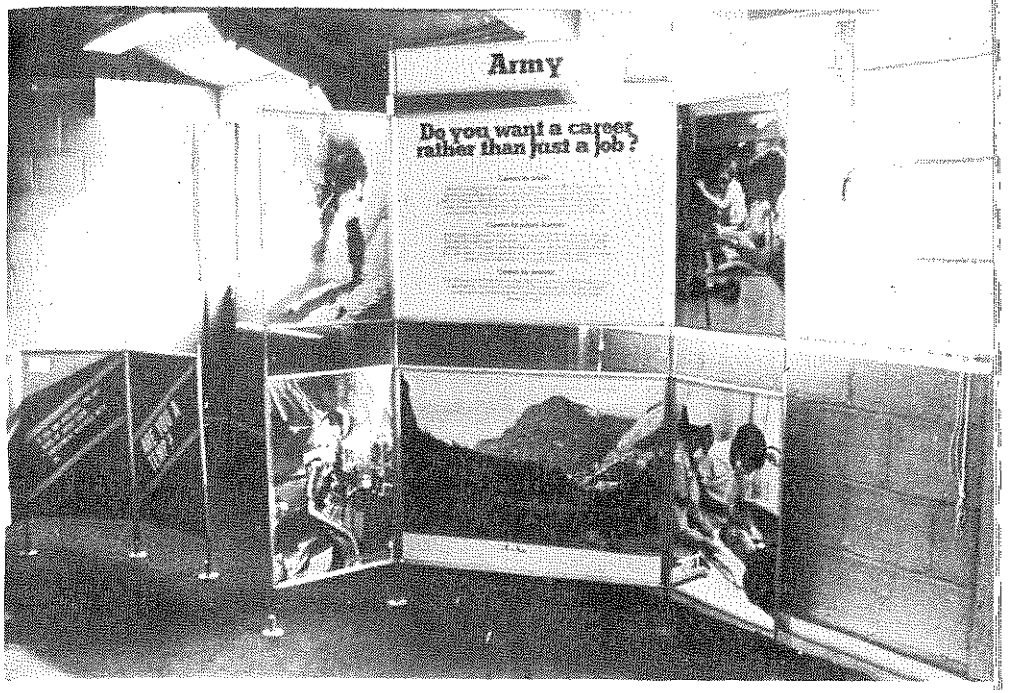
I haven't got a job. If I haven't got a job by the time I'm eighteen I'm going either in the merchant navy or the royal navy. When I go up to the Job Centre there's only jobs like *flat machinists*. There's nothing that pays the sort of money you'd get in the pit. Your best bet of getting money saved up is to go in the forces.

I would join the forces – just as an interest. Activities and all that. If you gan the forces your pay gets put away into savings for you every week. You get all over the world, you get places that you mebbies wouldn't get if you were in civvies. Northern Ireland at the time being doesn't bother us, but I suppose I'd just have to wait until I got there. But if I had a family I would much rather work at home then.

I wouldn't go in the forces, I'm just not interested in that.

I think the only chance of a job in civilian life would be to go to college, do my City and Guilds in welding and then work for someone like BP and go to Alaska or Iran and work on the pipelines. That's the best place for making money. That's what I'd do, or driving lorries. When you're a welder you can hire yourself out to firms. You could have a car and a nice place to live and all that.

I want to make some money when I get older and so I'll have to wheel off. There isn't any chance in Chopwell. There's no jobs up here that pay you good. I'll not be staying at British Steel. The pay's no good. I would like to set my own thing up if I had the money – I'll not find it at the Consett Iron Company. I'd like to live down in Yorkshire somewhere. If I get married I'm going to try and get a job for a good few year and with the money that I save up emigrate to America. I wouldn't want to stay in England. The food's cheaper over there – why most things are. The rules in this country are far too strict. I've looked at books, just what I've learned in geography at school, and I've got relatives that have been there. You can geta decent house and loads of land. I'd like to live in the Rocky Mountains and go out there to drive heavy goods waggons. I wouldn't forget my background though.



My Auntie Betty went over to Canada. Why these people, they're not rich or nothing and they had a house and a massive garden thing that was about the size of a golf course or something like that. They're just like ordinary people.

In America you'd save up your life just for your funeral!

There's no way I'll be living round here when I get married – it's just boring, the whole lot. Yorkshire or Cornwall I'd go to because there's places to go to when you're like twenty or that.

My brother moved away but he came back to live up here. He got a job on British Rail but he got a transfer up here from Bristol. He was happier here – I'd like to stay here.

Women's work

There's some jobs for girls at the offices in Consett Iron Company. The main block employ about twenty five – thirty but that's not many.

Where I work now there's more women than men. It's all right in a way like. The women do all the jobs, we just set them up. We just set the jobs up and they do them. And they get less money. The lasses do all the hard work for less pay. I've been there nearly two year. I've been looking for another job but I cannot get one.

When I'm married I'd want my wife to stay in the house and work. I wouldn't –I would say 'Gan me', it's her own fault – if she *wants* to go out to work she can go.

It's going to be hard to get work. I'd like to go out to work but there's going to be a lot of lasses trying to get work. Last week we were in Newcastle trying to get a Saturday job but we couldn't get one. There's some shop work in Chopwell, hairdresser's, factories. The brush factory, that takes women as well as men.

I do voluntary work at the home for the mentally handicapped. You just feed them, take them to the toilet – shoving the wheelchairs kills you but it's all right –you just treat them as normal. I did want to be a nursery nurse but I don't want to go to college.

I work at the hairdresser's – I like washing their hair and that. I might like putting the rollers in and doing the hairs but I can't do that the minute. I'm not allowed. I wouldn't like to cut people's hairs in case I did it wrong.

I don't want to be stuck in an office or anything like that. I want to be out and about – it would be a bit boring after a while but you've got to take what you can get nowadays. It's boring in a shop just standing there waiting on customers coming in but you've got to face up to that.

The women used to go down the pit. My dad's always telling us about the pit. They have showers at the pit head now but my mamthinks washing the clothes is a big job. It's a mucky job – because she works all day in the shop and then she's got to come back and tidy up and make the tea. It's hard like because my mamstarts at half past seven in the morning and she doesn't come in till quarter to three. My mam cleans up before she goes out – she goes out at nine and she doesn't come in till four. My mamhates ironing because it takes up so much of her time. I do the ironing for my mum, even if I don't want to. And if she's had a hard day I make her a cuppa. Her tea and her coffee keeps her going. She likes to get out on a night time but sometimes she can't because she's too busy with the work and that. There's bingo and the club. My mam goes to see her relatives and that. My mam likes cooking but she doesn't really get enough time to do it. Mine likes to bake but not if she's got to work.

My brother helps – he can cook – he minds doing it but he has to. My brother'll not do a thing – he'll just lie in the house – 'Get us this, get us that', he'll not even get the coal; he sends me for the coal.

The Countryside

Canny good isn't it? We usually go the sand quarry, in the summer; jump off the cliffs. There's cliffs and there's like sand at the bottom and sometimes you get chased when you're all over there. There's like a big mud pond over there, full of mud and everybody goes through it and it goes round your ankles and sometimes people have to drag you out. And we can go down the

divi for a swim. Aye, in the summer everybody piles down the divi for a swim and gets thrown in. In the River Derwent people say 'Ooh, there's a leech, there's a leech, I'm oot', but I just dive down there.

Someone said *I* had a leech on my back and I came out screaming. I was saying 'Get the matches' and everybody was running about saying 'Get the matches'. Me hair was wet and I was screaming and everyone was saying 'There's a leech', but there was none.

It's better than being stuck in a town. Chopwell wood used to be famous – they made ships from the wood. It used to be an old oak forest and now it's pine; there's not much oak left in it.

I like it – you see rabbits, pheasants, you might get the odd fox or a badger when it gets dark, and then there's squirrels. I go every day or something now – I generally go every day in the summer. I used to have some ferrets, used to catch rabbits but near Christmas, unfortunately someone poisoned them.

I used to have a snake but someone's dad ran over it, a grass snake. I bought it off a lad.

I once found a kestrel but I ended up letting it go after about three month or something like that and that used to come back every day.

I had a magpie for ages; it used to come in the house, sit on a chair, and drink milk and that. It used to come up to anybody. It would fly in the hedge and stay in there till I got back. It pinched a set of keys and it somehow got locked in a man's house and wrecked the place, broke plates and everything. He just flew away but we've seen it since, down our school at High Spen. We were playing football and it came on the football pitch. It comes to you when you call it. We called it Ollie after Oliver Twist – it used to go 'Aah,Aah'. It was greedy when it was young, it used to come to my ma in the shop and she used to give it strawberries. I used to have two foxes when I was little, and we once found a baby deer.

I have a border terrier. It catches rabbits, kills them and brings them back to us. There's not many rabbits now, they've got myxie, man, they've all got myxie. It's like flies going down their ears and that. Their eyes are popping out when you find them. I think it's a waste when I find a rabbit that's got myxie. If I find one that's not got it I take it home and give it to my ferret. He's never had any for a bit because I've never been over the place where these rabbits are because the bloke caught us and he said he was going to brain us. He says 'There's three things I can do. One, I can brain you. Two take you to the police' and then – he just warned us. My grandad used to go long netting. They used to get two long nets and they'd go through the field and get about sixty rabbits or something in the net. They used to twank them on the backside and they just used to run into the net. They used to sell them. They'd go up to the dam and the reservoir. That was when he was a young lad. I think he had permission off one farmer.

You need money

I would like the pictures and an ice rink nearer us. It costs about three quid to go to the ice rink, with bus fares and hiring the skates. I used to go every week to the baths but I packed it in. It was too expensive with the bus fares – it's twenty nine pence for half fare and they make you pay full fare if they think you look older.

Spen – it's boring but if you shift you've got to go to a different school – make new friends. If there was a shopping centre and a leisure centre it would be better; there would be more to do. I go up to Newcastle when I've got some money. They should open the old picture hall up and do it out. There's been changes; this community centre used to be five shops. I can remember the shops. They've knocked down more in our lifetime than in the fifty years previous.

I work in the house; you need extra money. If I don't help my mam I don't get my pocket money and that's that. You need money for discos, the pictures so you can go places. I go up the town on a Saturday and have a look around. I still need money during the week; these bus fares are too expensive. There's nothing at Rowlands Gill, that's why I come up Chopwell. There's karate on but we cannot sit and watch. I'd like to join the karate but my mam won't let us – she says I'm a lass not a lad. I'd like to join – it would be self defence.

Restrictions

The school – it used to be over there where the juniors is and the juniors used to be with the infants. Why now we've got to gan three miles up to Spen. Laurence just has to jump over the fence.

You can't even wear a badge on your coat. You can't wear these kind of coats for school and if you wear jeans or something you get sent home. There's a unit or something like that where they put you if you're in trouble. You're not allowed to see anybody, like in break you're not allowed to talk to anybody, you've just got to sit there all day. The isolation unit.

You get put in isolation, you get the whack, you get the strap, you get the slippery cupboard. You get all sorts. If you put windows out or just tell a teacher what to do or something – or smoking – they put you in the slippy cupboard. About a year ago, when the snow was here we used to see who could put the most windows out.

In the slippy cupboard, his hands slips and his feet slips and the teacher get you all over. One lad was in there every day and it didn't do him any good.

It's the same outside school. There's a big wood over there; you cannot walk in it because the gamekeeper does his shooting there. All the posts have signs on saying 'Trepassers will be prosecuted'.

There's not much trouble around here, but the police have got nothing better to do half the time. A policeman once just came up to us and booked us and took us to the cells – he couldn't charge us because we were doing nothing wrong. But he still took us to the police station. You get wrong for standing on the corner. We weren't intending doing nothing wrong either like.

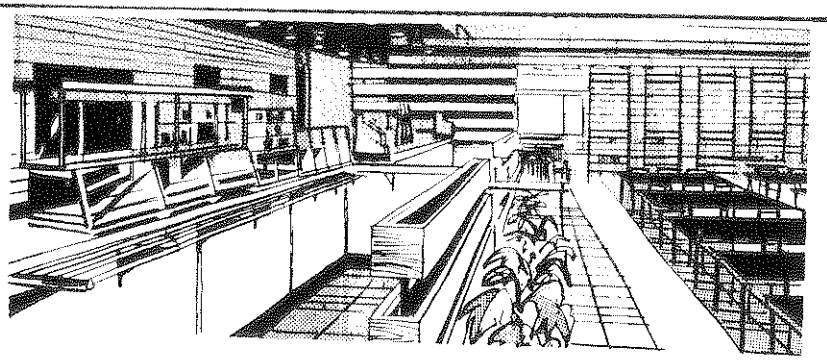
They're always after people; I was standing at a bus stop and I got taken in. They should fetch the Robin Hood days back so you can rob the rich and give to the poor.

A New Way of Life –at Courtauld's

In May 1979 a Courtauld's factory employing 1,500 people at Spennymoor, closed down. It was one of the most advanced worsted spinning factories in the world and it had opened just ten years earlier with the assistance of local and national government. At that time the company had offered unemployed miners 'a good wage and a job for life'. In its recruitment leaflet it made plain that 'above all else a job at Courtauld's offers you security with an excellent weekly wage and employment consistently throughout the year'. Things however did not turn out that way and in 1979 the workers there were faced with an ultimatum; 'accept a £7 wage cut and 560 redundancies or the plant closes'. At mass meetings the company's 'offer' was rejected out of hand and a campaign was set up to 'stop the axe at Spennymoor'. At the end of the day however, the campaign was defeated. Workers accepted the closure as inevitable, and took their redundancy payments. Here, two of the shop stewards who were active in the campaign (Paul Ellis and Bernie Fahey) talk about the time they spent working for Courtauld's.

The Route to Courtauld's

Bernie When I left school I started an apprenticeship. The pay was about £2.75p (or £2.15/– as it was then) a week, and all my friends were with the N.C.B. at Shildon Drift or Chilton, making about £9 or £10. My father worked in the pit for 22 years and he often said 'You'll never work down a pit, two lads and neither of you are going down a pit'. So I went behind his back and wrote away for pit training. When the letter came I was straight to the post and opened it. I had been accepted. I never let my dad see it. I went on the Monday for the pit training; to give you some idea of safety and such as that. Then on the Tuesday morning they took us to the pit and put us in the cage and took us down. It was the most frightening experience. It would frighten the bravest man. But I had started. We stayed down for about three or four hours and when I got back up the bank my father was waiting there for me and that was it. He took me home and he made it very clear that I wasn't going back: I was pleased he did. We needed the money. We could really have done with my contribution to the house. My father was



A good wage and a job for life

Above all else a job at Courtaulds, Spennymoor, offers you security with an excellent weekly wage and employment consistently throughout the year.

unemployed at the time and he was taking *me* home to be unemployed. He felt that strongly about it. He wasn't having me down the pit. He was a terrific bloke.

So, I took up a trade, panel beating and welding. I was there for four years, and then I took up another trade – I got married. We had a bairn on the way and I couldn't afford to live on the apprentice's wages, so I left. I was nineteen then and I went to work for an asbestos firm. (I've lived a dangerous life really!) But you've got to have a wage coming in and if anything affects that you've got look for something else. So I've had a few jobs but I ended up at Courtaulds.

Paul I got the job a funny way round because I used to work in Torquay, a bar–cellar man. It was about £20 a week in the summer, and fortunately I was kept on in the winter as well, when the pay was just £8. But my wife comes from Jarrow and I used to come up at New Year. Coming from the Midlands, I had never seen anything like the kind of celebrations they had up here. So we used to make a special trip. I think it was my third visit when my brother–in–law, who worked at Courtaulds, said 'Why don't you come and have a look at Courtaulds and fill a form in?'. I said 'Well, it's a long way to travel from Torquay without sandwiches!', but I filled a form in and they said 'You can start next week'. At that time they had this big publicity campaign with pamphlets talking about 'A New Way of Life', drawings of houses and parklands with squirrels running across the road. Really idyllic. So I went all the way back to Torquay and filled the car up with all our gear. I broke three pistons on the way up, but I got the job and when I started at Courtaulds I

was paying more in tax than what I was earning in Torquay in the winter. So I was happy with that. What I didn't realise though was that the life span of any Courtauld's factory is only ten years!

Working for Courtauld's

Paul I got lost the first couple of days. It was so big. I wasn't used to anything like that. It was noisy. It was a bit frightening. Especially with me being a stranger to the area. I talk with a Birmingham accent, I still do a little bit because I used to live in Wolverhampton before I went to Torquay. Everybody used to come up and say 'Oh, it's that Brummy'. It was a bit off–putting at first. You felt as if nobody wanted to know you, but gradually – I would say it was about six months – I got worked in with the lads. Then I wouldn't have worked anywhere else. A great bunch of lads. But the Company wasn't so good.

Bernie In the early days after the plant opened, the lads had some satisfaction from working at Courtauld's. They gave a fair days work for a fair day's pay. But about two or three years ago, they found out that the reward for a fair day's work was short–time working. Once you filled the warehouse up something would happen – Grimsby would have some trouble, or there's bother over in France, or at Marks & Spencer or British Home Stores. 'They don't want as much again for a while'. Something, anything would do just to lay you off. The lads soon worked this out and after that there was no incentive to work. In fact, it was in reverse, because they knew that if they filled the warehouses they were out of work. They were frightened to work. Courtauld's gave us all this crap about 'If you produce it, we can sell it. Produce as much as you like, we can sell it'. But it just didn't work. You filled the warehouse and you were off work.

There was no carrying passengers at Courtaulds. They didn't take prisoners they just shot you down. They wouldn't keep you on over a slack period. They looked a everything in the same way – if there's any problem at all, cut the wage bill. 'You have to do without to solve our problems'. The management in the plant was hopeless. They couldn't plan things, they were useless and we paid for their mistakes. It's not a working man's responsibility to sell the product. That's not our job. We get up in the morning and do a day's work – it's their job to sell the stuff. But at Courtaulds you'd do your work and then they'd lay you off. That was the anti–incentive to work at Courtauld's. Last year our average wage was £75.30 a week, there was no more you could make. Yet when I got my P60 it worked out at £69. The rest was lay offs.

Paul Little bits of dips here and dips there. My average wage for last year was just over £69 a week too. The year before that we were on £68.38 but it averaged out at just under £64. They're marvellous at that; marvellous at finding an excuse to lay off and stop paying you – 'Scottish and Newcastle

Breweries are on strike, we're going to have to lay you off – we cannot get any beer into the Boardroom' – anything to save wage costs! The A.U.E.W. were out on strike for fifteen weeks in 1975 and when they went back to work they had the cheek to tell the convenor that if they had stayed out for another two weeks the plant would have broken even for the year.

Bernie If anyone caused the trouble in that factory it was the management. You always knew when the order books were failing a bit because the shift managers became militant. You worked with these blokes every day and there would be a bit of give and take on both sides. You come to some sort of understanding. But, suddenly they'd become militant. Whereas in the past they'd be prepared to help sort a problem out they'd just say 'No'. They *wanted* an industrial dispute, because it would help them out. And we used to say 'There's something up here'. To react would be to play right into their hands. But it was difficult.

They must be the worst employer in the Country without a doubt. With most firms you are just a clock number but with them you are not even that. You are just a method of making profit. We had a joke, that once a man gets a supervisor's blue coat they take him away and drill Courtauld's policy into him. Because once they got that blue coat on they became different people altogether. If you talked to a member of line management, middle management or senior management they all had the same Courtauld's, policy. And that policy had no social aspect about it.

My mate Eddie was a lorry driver, 51 year old. He thought he might like a factory job so he went to see if he could get a start at Courtauld's in August. Now they knew in June that there was going to be a closure, or at least a strong possibility of it. They certainly knew the situation wasn't very stable, so why didn't they just say to this guy, 'Listen, your age is against you, just keep the job you've got'. But they didn't, no – 'A job for life, get yourself in here'. He's been there since August, he's finished now – he was up the dole there with me. It was his decision but why didn't they bum him off? He'd been there nine months, and now he's got nothing. That's the sort of firm Courtauld's was.

One time they wanted short time working and after a while we gave them it. They split the workforce into two groups, one group to come in one week and the other missed. We said to the plant manager – Walter Bruce – 'How are you going to put them into two lists?' He said '*We* will pick them'. Now seventy–five percent of the people who work at the factory relied on the other twenty five percent to take them there, so we needed to have some system so that they could all get in. But Walter Bruce said 'It's every man's responsibility to get to work himself'. Then you'd mention it to a blue coat – 'The marra who I travel with has been put on the other shift'. He just repeated, 'It's your responsbility to get to work yourself'. I mean it was a joke amongst us, but it was true; they take them away to an office and it's drilled into them – Courtauld's policy.

Paul We also used to say that they were like sticks of rock; if you broke them in half, they'd have *Courtauld's* right the way through them. Three or four months after I got there, I noticed what the Company was like. I thought 'This isn't the way to treat people, you don't do this to people, we're human beings'. It was serious. On this one occasion, about two years after I'd started, we had been working overtime for weeks, and on Wednesday, they said 'The overtime's finished and you'll be on short time this Friday. There's been a drop in orders'. And I thought 'This isn't right'. The workforce were just numbers to them. Around October last year there was a guy in our shift who had been there for 9½ years and he was a bit worried about the redundancy situation that might be coming on. So he went down and he said 'Look, I've been here 9½ years, how much notice would I have to give you if I want to leave?' They said 'Put your coat on now and you can go if you like'. It was that type of attitude. They just didn't care.

For me, it was all summed up when we got a new shift manager. The first few days he was on the shift we had a hell of a lot of bother with him (there were four stewards on each shift) and we took him down to personnel two or three times, because we thought he was trying to mess us about. His first statement to us when he was moved onto our shift in 1968 was 'When you work for Courtauld's you've got to prepared to be fucked about'. That was it, that was his attitude toward us – that was the attitude of Couutauld's management. He just *caused* trouble on our shift. After about three or four weeks we shaped him up a little bit and he was getting to be a good guy and then after a few months he went and died on us. The weekend we had the big snow storm, he killed himself trying to get to work. That's what Courtauld's men are like. I didn't bother trying to get in, but he killed himself trying to shovel his way into Courtauld's. That's the type of management they had. They'd do *anything* for Courtauld's. It was blind loyalty with those blokes.

Bernie It applied right through management. They all had their orders from the Board. Line management, senior management, even the likes of Walter Bruce, the plant manager, they all carried out orders. Even if they didn't like it they carried on with it because it was Courtauld's policy. They carried it out because they were told to.

A Hell of a Team

Paul Before I went to Courtauld's I'd never had much experience of trade unions. I'd read about them in the paper; about how they called people out on strike. Going to Courtauld's really opened my eyes. I had to go to Courtauld's to find out the truth. That's where I found out why we need trade unions.

I always went to the branch meeting to keep informed about what was going on but I didn't become really involved until we had a problem on the night shift. The fire door was off and it was freezing. It was in the middle of December and so I said 'Is there going to be anything done about this?' You know, everybody had got blue fingers on the section – it was that cold. And

we were trying to tie knots in yarn. So I said 'Look lads, if we don't get anything done I'm going to sit in the rest room and I'm not coming back'. And I walked off the machines. Everybody said 'Oh well, if you're going then I'm going'. And they all walked off – just on the spur of the moment. So they went and got the shift manager. He says 'Look, give us about half an hour and we'll fix it – you carry on as best you can'. So we all sat in the rest room a little bit longer and the blue coat came back and said 'It's alright, we've fixed the doors'. It must have taken them twenty or twenty five minutes – so we said 'It's time for a cup of tea.' When we got back we found they'd nailed the fire door on with 6 inch nails. So we said 'Oh no, we're not having this – what if there is a fire?' So we went back again. Then he says 'We are going to send you off the site if you don't go back'. So we had a little conference between us (there were about eight or ten of us on the section), and we decided to go back but not with the fire door closed. One of the lads went over to the fire door and kicked it open. After that it was too cold again. In the end they covered the door with some sheets of heavy polythene.

About two days later I was transferred of the section on to spinning. I was getting a lot of comments off the shift supervisors, 'Is it warm enough down here for you? Are you alright?' I was on there for about three months and then the lads said 'Why don't you put in for shop steward?' It was too late at the time but I was elected twelve months later and I've been one ever since. It's changed my life totally.

Bernie I have always been a supporter of the trade union movement. I supported them, but I had never been an active supporter. I took it up because I felt that the shop steward on our section didn't represent the interests of the members. On one occasion I refused to work because of the heat. I rapped the machines off. But I got no satisfaction, nor did the rest of the lads. The shop steward and me were called into the manager's office and there the *shop steward* asked me to carry on working 'under protest'. That was his answer – the shop steward – 'Do it under protest'. So I put up against him at the next election and I beat him.

Paul A good shop steward organisation was built up at Spennymoor. We were democratic; we held regular meetings with the members, especially in the last six months. We had a meeting almost every week to inform the members what went on, what was taking place; and they took a vote on it. They decided what went on, we didn't dictate to them at all. Everything was decided by the membership.

Bernie The Union of Dyers and Bleachers isn't very strong nationally but at Spennymoor we had a really good system. When we talked to some of our fellow members in the Bradford area, they couldn't believe what we'd negotiated – on movement of labour and such like – they couldn't believe it. They said 'How the hell did you get that?' For example, we would never accept the principle of short time working. Courtauld's just expected us to accept it but we refused to co–operate with that type of policy. ut in

Bradford they just accepted it. They used to ask 'Why aren't you accepting short–time working, you must do in this industry, why don't you accept it?' But we never did.

My brother–in–law John works for G.E.C. in Coventry. He is a steward. They have something good going there as well – a good team. He came up to visit me and came to the factory. He had to wait in the union office while I went down to Personnel. He was amazed at the system we had. There are filing cabinets with all our procedures and all our agreements. The phone was ringing all the time, there were guys coming in, it was a very active union office. And when we came out he said 'I've never seen anything like that. It will be a pity when this place closes down and that organisation has to disband'. The shop stewards were a hell of a team. It just happened that we bumped Courtauld's that's all.

Paul I think we bent over backwards to help Courtauld's. We kept stepping back all the time saying 'We can't take action, the men don't want to take action.' We said 'We'll just give them this little bit', and in the end we gave a hell of a lot away. We could have been a lot tighter than we were but we just stepped back every time. After Walter Bruce took over we gave away too much as far as I'm concerned. Yet we still had a good organisation, better probably than most textile factories.

Bernie There's something that people don't always understand. They say that there has always been trouble at Courtauld's – but we've only been on strike twice. Once was when the company broke an agreement. A signed agreement about movement of labour, written and signed by management and union saying that no man could be moved after 8.00 a.m. We started at 7 o'clock and in the first hour they decided where they wanted to place the men. After eight o'clock the only way they can move a man is when his yarn runs out or his machine breaks down. That was the agreement. You see what had been happening was that guys were going in at seven o'clock in the morning and belting away until one o'clock. Instead of doing six hours work in six hours (we had twelve hour shifts there) they'd do about eight or eight and a half, so that in the last six hours they could just saunter on. But management were coming up at one o'clock and saying 'Leave that and go along there'. So they were really getting one hundred percent out of you' We had to have that agreement, and we got it. But Courtauld's broke it; and then when one guy refused to move he was taken off the clock and the whole factory walked out. Courtauld's sent an industrial relations officer up and he said 'Yes, we know you've got an agreement, we know it's signed by Courtauld's but Courtauld's policy over–rules all agreements'. That was one strike.

The other time was for the right to full–time work. We were put on some short–time work but they weren't content with that, they wanted us to produce one hundred percent with people laid off.

Paul What they wanted was to keep the machinery going all the time but with half the workforce. Grimsby, the suppliers had been on strike for eight or nine weeks and we hadn't been receiving any stuff from them. In fact we were getting it from the Courtauld's plant in France. But then, when Grimsby eventually went back to work, they said 'We'll have to lay you off because there is no stuff'. They said 'What we want to do is lay half the factory off for two weeks and the other half off for the second two weeks'. We said 'It's too long, you could have laid us off while the strike was on not when we are back at work'. So he said 'Alright, we'll make it two weeks, one week on and one week off'. But they were going to lay off certain sections in the factory and keep the machines running so that the production would still be just about one hundred percent. We refused to accept that.

Closure

Bernie Short–time working has been accepted right throughout the history of textiles and at Spennymoor we refused to accept it. Walter Bruce once said 'You are in an industry where short–time working is part of the industry and you are going to have to accept it'. You could see that he really believed it; he genuinely believed it. And he was really upset that he couldn't get us to understand. Because we would *never* accept lay offs as part and parcel of the trade. We always insisted on the 'right to work'. Down in Bradford the manager just calls them in one morning and says 'You are going on a four day week for the next few weeks'. and they say 'Right' and go back to the machines. That's as much negotiations as you get. But we've never accepted it, never. I think that's one of the reasons why we were closed.

Paul The company had a long term plan for closure. They'd been planning it for three or four years. They had definitely been preparing for a closure, for a good time. They were a bad company, and everybody was just that sick of being laid off. The threat has been there for four or five years – 'Something is going to happen here' – 'You're at the end of the line, lads, you're not making enough money. Every month the story was the same,'We are losing £250,000, £300,000, £400,000'. It just got too incredible and guys got sick of working there.

Bernie The previous manager there, Atkins, was a fair bloke. You could negotiate with him. He would at least look at our side. But when Bruce took over in 1974 Atkins resigned because he wouldn't accommodate to the new policy. He said that to us.

Paul So the closure didn't come out of the blue. When they told us that they wanted 560 redundancies and £7 cut in our wage rate we thought 'This is it'. They had done the same thing at Skelmersdale. The workforce had gone along with what they wanted there, but they still closed the factory. So it seemed pretty clear to us that this was their attempt to close Spennymoor.

Bernie But even without Skelmersdale we wouldn't have sold our jobs. We always said 'We all work here or none of us will'. We knew what the threat was, we knew that it was a genuine one. We knew that. In the last three years, we'd always negotiated under threats of closure. Every time we pushed for anything they said, 'The market's bad'. We've always negotiated under that type of thing. Personally I would never see 560 men out of work just to keep me in a job. That's they way we looked at it

Paul And there was a reverse of that – we wouldn't let 560 people vote on accepting redundancies knowing that they were voting on cutting somebody else's wages. But the company wouldn't even separate the issue of the wage cut from the redundancies. We had redundancies before, but they left the people in the factory on exactly the same terms and conditions. But this time they wanted to knock twelve percent of your wages as well. The Company said, 'It's volunteers, nobody will go out the gate who doesn't want to go out – we will take volunteers'. But by one man volunteering for redundancy, he was giving another man a £7 wage cut.

Bernie Giving credit to the workforce; there was unanimous decision to fight against the closure; it was brilliant. We didn't expect that, we expected a majority, but it was unanimous. I went home and I said to my wife 'Listen Steph, it looks as though it's a closure.' And she said 'We're starving before you accept a drop in wages'. That was the general feeling. A lot of people - whether members of the public, line management, councillors, the lot – thought that once the workers at Spennymoor took a wage cut the problem would be solved. But we knew it wasn't the answer. We knew that the talk about redundancies and wage cuts was just a way of closing the factory and blaming the workforce at the same time. They'd done it before; at Skelmersdale and Flint in North Wales. They were out to close down Spennymoor. It was difficult to get it over to our members, but we did. We told them about Skelmersdale. But blue coats, and middle management were never worried. They said 'We'll be alright as soon as they take a wage cut'.

Campaign

Bernie We used any method and every method to fight for our jobs. We went down to Bradford, we went to the other Courtauld's factories at Grimsby, Bramley and Westcroft. We went to London, we tried to get support from the local council and we got involved in an attempt to set up a shop stewards' campaign against unemployment. We would have turned to the Devil if he'd have helped us out. We were fighting for our livelihoods. Over six weeks we never had a day off. We either worked on the shift and when we weren't working we were off somewhere campaigning. But our union didn't like it – they wanted us just to let them handle it. We didn't have as much backing from our executive as we should have done.

Paul It was difficult. In the factory we were continuing to work, although there wasn't really any co–operation with the company. The problem was that, even though the men were opposed to redundancies, they didn't want to do anything to jeopardise the redundancy money. So I spoke to everyone and I said 'It's not your job I'm worried about, I don't care whether you work here or not, so long as somebody works here, as long as somebody else's kids can work here in the future'. I wasn't doing it for the people who worked there then, I was doing it for the area and the kids. There's 1500 jobs gone down there but it's 1500 jobs that won't be there in ten year's time for the lads coming through. In the end I got it over to them – the dangers and threats.

Bernie We did have a lot of problems with the other Courtauld's factories. We telephoned the convenor at Grimsby and we were put through to the Personnel Department. They put us on to the bloke who we thought was the convenor. But it turned out that he had been out of office for twelve months. He was our contact at Grimsby and we were asking him 'Are you increasing your capacity down there?' and other general questions; trying to help our fight, and he was answering them after being out of office for twelve months! Everything we were passing on to him was going straight to Courtauld's management.

Paul When we went down to Bramley and Westcroft we stood outside the factories handing leaflets out and you could see the workers there thinking 'Guerrillas from Spennymoor' because we wereall big guys. At Westcroft we made the mistake of reporting at the Gatehouse and straight away the barrier had come down. So at Bramley we just wandered into the factory and this guy came up to us, who was obviously some sort of manager because he had a communications bleeper. We told him we were from Spennymoor and that we wanted to hand out some leaflets about the threatened closure of Spennymoor; 'Could we speak to a union representative?' He said 'Are you official, I mean do they know about you?' We said 'Oh, yes,' – we had already had a letter from Union Head Office saying 'Keep out of the way, stop up there and we will work it all out for you.' In the end we met this lass in one of the manager's offices. When she saw the four of us you could see her draw back and she said 'We want no trouble at t'mill, we never have any bother here'.

Bernie We had made that decision to just walk in at Bramley and we were amazed. Litter boxes everywhere. The factory inspectorate should never have allowed it; boxes, pieces of wood, pallet boards with nails sticking up, the lighting was bad, the ceiling was low. *Serious* conditions to work in. It was like walking back in history about twenty years. It was like something out of the 1930s. But, upstairs in reception it was whipped with luxury – carpets, lime green seats, everything in glass, spiral open staircases, more like the 1980s. It was a big difference.

Paul It got straight back to Bradford, our union headquarters, that we were down there. We were put on the carpet for not asking permission to go down

to leaflet other companies. So it was very difficult really. We didn't have much support from the union officials. It got so bad that on one occasion we even went down to picket a meeting that our full time officials were having. We thought we were going to be sold down the river and that they would accept Courtauld's terms and conditions.

Bernie We went everywhere. We were down in London seven times in three weeks. By the end I was talking Cockney. We lobbied M.P.s with the lads from the Tyne, the Vickers shop stewards and the Head Wrightson's lads. But the guys that we saw down at Parliament the M.P.s who were really interested, Cryer, Skinner and Max Madden, couldn't really help us. We were wanting Armstrong, Hughes, Boyden and Fletcher, our Northern M.P.s to get off their asses and do something about it, but they just weren't interested. The first meeting we had with Alan Williams, who was then Secretary for Industry, he said 'Don't rock the boat'. All they were concerned about was that Rothman's moved into the empty Courtauld's factory. We had threatened to black all the machinery and not let Rothman's get in until we got our jobs sorted out. There were 850 jobs with Rothman's, but there were 1500 going from Courtauld's!

In all the meetings we had with management we had been instructed by the full stewards' meeting that if Courtauld's started talking about the 560 redundancies and the wage cut then we should get out of the meeting and not even listen to them. But on one occasion we thought, rightly or wrongly, 'Well, while we were here, we'd talk about it to try and sketch it out a little bit, to talk it over just to see if Courtauld's were really serious about it'. And it must have seemed to them that we were going to accept it because when we came back after dinner it was 'Oh, by the way if you do accept the 560 redundancies and £7 wage cut we cannot guarantee full–time employment. In fact it looks as though we will be going into a short–time working'.

Paul All they were really concerned about was closing the factory. They tried all sorts. When they found we were together with the A.U.E.W., they tried to split us. They told us that we would have to take £7 a week wage cut and at the same time offered the skilled men £101 a week, which was a twenty eight percent rise. Brian, the A.U.E.W convenor, could have pulled out of the joint negotiations then. If he had wanted to he could have said 'Look, I'm going to take this to my lads' but he didn't. That was a true trade unionist to me, you know a true socialist. He wouldn't sell our jobs for the sake of his lads getting more money. And they didn't, when they voted on it at the mass meeting they were still all unanimously against accepting the company's terms.

Bernie It was terrific. The Company's plan was to try and split us, but in fact they bonded us by attempting to do that.

Paul The last meeting in London was with Sir Arthur Knight and he said then that even if we had accepted the terms and conditions that they wanted to impose on us that he would still have been looking for a closure date. We

were certain then that we had done the right thing. We *had* been right all along. The Board had said to Sir Arthur Knight 'Get rid of Spennymoor or we'll get rid of you'. It was his job or ours.

This was what Sedgefield Council couldn't understand. They thought it was just a problem – one of the phases like we always had at Spennymoor. They saw it just as another industrial relations problem and they didn't want to get involved. For us it was a problem for Spennymoor, but for them it was a case of not aggravating a large ratepayer. We told them 'Well you are going to have 1,500 ratepayers who are going to be claiming rate rebates shortly if you don't do something about it'. And eventually they did get involved and they came out with that Social Audit, which points out how much Courtauld's have had off loans and how much it is going to cost local and national government in the next twelve months if nobody finds a job. And they offered £500 three weeks before the factory closed down. But it was a bit late by then, Sir Arthur Knight had kept his job and we'd lost ours. If they had come early on we might have got somewhere.

What can the people of Durham do?

Bernie By the time the closure was announced most of the people who were in the Spennymoor factory didn't want to work for Courtauld's any more. They were that fed up of being messed around. They're such a bad firm. The people themselves will probably look back in a while and say 'Do y ou know that was the best thing that ever happened to me when that closed'. It was a terrible thing for the area – the loss of 1,500 jobs – but it could well have been the best thing to ever happen for the lads who were working in the factory. We need employment in this area badly, but we don't need that type of employer.

Paul But it is going to damage the whole of the area. It is going to affect the shops, (there's going to be less money spent in shops). Then there are the people who supply or do the transport for Courtauld's – Williams– they are going to lay people off. They relied on Courtauld's. Williams was a furniture remover with about three vans when Courtauld's opened up butnow they've got a fleet of wagons. Unless he can find alternative customers, he'll have to lay off three quarters of his workforce because there's just not going to be any work for them. There'll be no end of pie factories shut down because that's all they ever served in the canteen!

Bernie Did you ever look out of a window and see a man walking past on a Monday afternoon or a Tuesday – the first question you asked was 'What's he doing off work?' Now you go down to town and nobody questions it. But twenty years ago the first question you said was 'What's he doing off work?'. Now there's hundreds and hundreds and nobody wants to know why they are off.

We are unemployed now and even though they have known all these months what was coming our wives have applauded every move. They've applauded, and they are hard decisions to take for a woman. But right through, my wife and Paul's wife have said the same; 'You've got to do it.

It's got to be done, there's no way you can't fight '

When you think about it you have to ask 'What can the people of Durham do?'. This is a staunch Labour area. We elect the people in, year after year, who they think are the right men for the job. But it turns out that they aren't the right men. They are just better than others at getting elected. So what can the people of Durham do? It's so simple we cannot provide it ourselves, we elect these fellas in, the likes of Armstrong and they just do nothing about it. I think he is an awful bloke him, real awful bloke.

Paul He's that middle of the road he should be run over.

Bernie He won't look at you when he's talking to you, you know there's something wrong with him. All along he wanted us to accept the wage cut. He wanted us to just accept what Courtauld's was doing. He said to us; 'I''ve got a company in my constituency, Cumberland Fibres, only earning £61 a week and you're turning £68 down'. We were on £75 and they wanted us to accept £68, and that was his answer, 'You're turning £68 a week down'. The guy who took over Bishop Auckland from Boyden, Derek Foster, I was talking to him in the town with a mate of mine, Ernie Foster. Ernie said to him 'What's your views about the closure at Spennymoor?' We didn't tell. him we worked there or that we were shop stewards, we just asked him about it. His answer was 'Half a cake's better than none'. What do you do? The

insult of a drop in wages and that's the answer you get off the fellas you need. They want you to keep in work irrespective of what you are getting. It's a slur to them I suppose, a closure in their constituency. They just want you to carry on working at any cost. But they won't fight with you against these companies.

Paul Regional policy has been a disaster. The companies have just taken the grants but they haven't provided stable employment for people in this area. Courtauld's must have taken millions off the Labour Government but in the end it didn't create any jobs at all. Now with the Tories in, anything could happen. Maybe they'll dig a big trench around the north and float it out in the North Sea. That's what Thatcher will do; build a wall at Richmond and flood it.

Bernie But now I'm unemployed. And there's no work here. In the past I've talked about leaving the North East once or twice. I've been offered jobs here and there, abroad even (My mate's on an oil rig). But I'm a true Geordie, a true Durham lad, I love the area, I love the people,. Paul will tell you that, he belongs to Wolverhampton and he loves this area already. So I always used to say when we talked about it in the past 'I would rather be unemployed in Durham than employed in another area'. I've always said that, but I've got a young lad, he's eleven now and he's going to leave school and I've no right to make that decision for him. He's not a true Geordie. If I was to say to him 'You're going down to Lancashire to work', he would go,no problem. I'm not saying I'm going to do it but I'm giving it more thought now. I don't like it but I would do it for the sake of the bairns. I have two young lads, one two and one eleven. There's going to be nothing for up here you know. Absolutely nothing if the trend carries on the way it is now. The way me and Paul look at it, we live in Durham, we demand work here, we have a right for it. But if it's not going to work, we are going to have to go where the work is. It's Tory policy to go where the work is. It doesn't matter how strong y ou feel about it, how strong your trade union feelings are, you still have a family, and they've got to be looked after. I'm giving it some consideration now although I'd rather not.

Paul I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm thinking about taking a full–time education course in Barnsley. I wouldn't move down to Barnsley. I'd still keep my house on here and come each weekend. But I'm not sure. What I am sure of is that if I did go into any other industry I would want to work in a unionised factory. I wouldn't go into a non–unionised factory. No way. I would have to start and try and organise it and possibly get the sack anyway.

I'm still involved in the union. We are all still involved as shop stewards, although we're not shop stewards in practice. We still have the branch and we still have shop stewards meetings. We're pressing for the public inquiry, so I can still see it taking up a lot of my time. I would rather carry on doing that then divert my attention away from what I think is the most important thing. I think it's not important for us, at Spennymoor, but it's important for the rest of the people who still work for Courtauld's. There's still another

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Courtaulds' good news day

By Clive Woodcock, Northern Industrial Correspondent

News of a £100 millions programme of capital spending on top of an increase in profits which came up to expectations boosted the shares of Courtaulds, the textiles and fibres group, yesterday.

Pre-tax profit for the full year recorded a rise of almost 20 per cent from £53.7 millions to £64 millions, one of the factors in the improvement being more buoyant conditions in the home market. Courtaulds shareholders are to receive a maximum total dividend of 8.438p.

Capital spending by the group last year amounted to £50 millions but the company points out that this was a low point for Courtaulds, which is the largest textiles group in Europe. The re-equipment programme, revealed yesterday is already under way and is aimed at reducing costs, improving quality and increasing capacity in certain areas.

100,000 of them. It could happen to them tomorrow. They've now moved Walter Bruce to British Cellophane, so I wouldn't be surprised if it happened to them in about three or four years.

Our situation here in Durham is the same as workers in Italy and in France, where the steel workers have been demonstrating and fighting in the streets. We have had these 1,500 redundancies, we've made no trouble but we have still been called thugs who have been going round blowing things up, thugs, vandals and terrorists. That's the impression you get from the press, the media. But all we want is work.

When you look at our record as the Dyers and Bleachers we've had 11 or 13 day's stoppage in 11½ years. That's not bad industrial relations. The threats *always* came from the Company and we couldn't just say 'Fair enough', we had to react, we always reacted in some way. And that always got into the press and we always ended up as the baddies.

Bernie That is just what's happening. Companies like Courtauld's and the other textile companies are using closure and redundancy as a threat. 'You organised yourself and we'll close you'. They like it the way it is, half membership or part membership. The threat's always there. The more organised you are, the more the threat's there.

Paul We went to the union's national conference last week. It was a fantastic experience but it seemed that everyone who got up and spoke had been made redundant. Two or three members of our Executive had been made redundant.

When our convenor was making his speech he mentioned that for all we'd lost our jobs we hadn't actually lost the battle, because we stuck to our principles, we stuck to our guns and there was no way we were going to back down and we won in that respect.

That's when the tears started to flow. It would have been much worse if we had backed down because we would have knocked the trade union movement in this area back at least 40 or 50 years. A £7 wage cut – if we had accepted that they could have all started doing it.

It was definitely a shattering experience. But it was still worth it just for that one moment on Monday afternoon. All the weight was taken off your shoulders. I felt about 12 foot tall walking out of that conference. After they'd given Dennis a standing ovation at the end there – in the omnibus resolution where they thanked everybody who'd been at the conference – the last part was thanks for all the efforts of the Spennymoor delegation, and they all stood up again and applauded for three minutes. There only four of us sitting down, everybody else was standing. And when I walked out there I thought 'It's really been worthwhile because we've done something positive. Although we lost the jobs we've done something positive for the trade union movement.' This is what it's all about, it's not about nationalisation, it's not about jobs, socialism is about this, the feeling that working people have when they're in a common struggle.

Bernie That's what I found down that conference. It might be a small union but there's some terrific trade unionists amongst them. I was meeting some guys down there that were terrific, you have to be terrific to be a good trade unionist in this industry.

Courtauld's is built the same as any other multi—national, they are too big for the workforce of a particular plant, they're too big for certain unions. (They're certainly too big for the National Union of Dyers and Bleachers and Textile Workers). But they're not as big as the trade union movement in this country, they're not as big as the working class, the working people, if they were to retaliate against them. We need work, but we don't need that type of employer. I think they can be beat, we can't beat them on our own because we attempted to do it and failed. But if we got together, everybody through combines and local organisation, we'd suffer for it, everybody would suffer, but we'd beat them in the end.