

Getting a Job at the pit, 1957

by John Burston

Although still only fourteen, I thought I would try to get a job. I had discussed my future employment with my parents, and told them I wanted to go in the pit.

So off I went to Florence Colliery dressed in my only suit, a white shirt and yellow tie. As I walked up the drive, I was terrified. The surface was a mixture of the very old and the brand new. The headgears towered above me, the wheels at the top spinning against the blue sky. Steam and smoke and steam issued from various chimneys. To my left half way up the dirt tip was a big Euclid truck labouring under full load, engine screaming in protest belching yellow diesel fumes. The road up the side of the tip was at an angle of least 45 degrees. Little did I know that a few months later I would sit by one these intrepid drivers on thankfully my one and only visit to the top of Florence dirt tip.

As I approached the top of the shafts, I was caught up in the melee of the shift change. Suddenly I was surrounded by dozens of black-faced, sweat streaked, and dust covered men. I was amazed how the white of their eyes and the redness of their lips stood out against the blackness of their skin. They were dressed or better described as half dressed in an array of clothing, most of it ripped and flapping in the wind. Many of them were wearing kneepads that made it look as if there was a metal hinge between thigh and calf. I managed to stop one of them and asked if he would point me in the direction of the training office.



An early photograph of Florence Colliery, No1 pit on the right, No2 second right.

Following his directions I made my way around the side of a building and under some stairs over piles of dirt then along a short corridor, passed an ancient toilet that could best be described as primitive and knocked on a door marked "Training Officer" someone shouted, "come in".

I opened the door and stepped inside what seemed to be a very small office. It was like a scene from a Dickens novel. The sort of place where you wiped your feet when you came out! The room was full of furniture, desks, chairs tables, and I swear a lectern. Piles of papers, forms, and books were strewn about. They were covered in thick layer of dust and only seemed small because of all the furniture. At one end there was a small window, out of which I could see debris falling from an overhead gantry. There was a real danger that this debris which was already three quarters of the way up the window would shortly plunge the room into complete darkness.

Sitting behind a desk that was far too big for him, was a small thin man, wearing a flat cap. His name was Josh Sloane, a sort of assistant to the training officer. Now Josh spoke broad pottery, whereas I had a strong Welsh accent. Add to this the noise of pit boots tramping up and down the stairs above us you can imagine our conversation was somewhat truncated. The gist of it was he asked me what I wanted. I said a job. He said where does your father work? I told him he was a ripper at Florence. He shuffled piles of dust-covered papers and came up with some forms, and said sign here. I was given a note to take to the employment exchange in Rutland Road, Longton so I could obtain a National Insurance Number and a note to take to Berry Hill Colliery for a medical. However, I had to wait until my fifteenth birthday, which was still a week away. Finally, he asked me if I wanted to join the mineworker's pension scheme. I thought he was kidding as I was only fourteen, he said it was nearer than you think. He was right.

The following week I made my way to Berry Hill Colliery in Fenton for a medical where various measurements were taken. The doctor listened to my heart checked that I had two of everything and they were more or less in the right place, before finally asking me to cough. It seems I had passed the first examination as I was then sent up the road to Kemball Training Centre, for an X-Ray. Following the X-Ray, I was told I was fit for underground work so it was back to Florence with the precious certificate. This time when I arrived back at Florence, I saw the proper Training Officer. He explained that as soon as possible after my fifteenth birthday I would go back and he would set me on. I left the pit feeling great as I would soon be part of this huge industrial business.



Berry Hill colliery

When I arrived home and told mam and dad, I had passed the medical and that I would start in a week or so I am not sure they were glad or sorry. The following week a letter arrived from the Training Officer at Florence asking me to report at 8:30 to Kemball Training Centre near Heron Cross, Fenton the same place where I had my X-Ray. It was fortunate that a number of lads off the estate were going the same place so they were able to help with bus times and where I changed buses.

So, the following Monday carrying my OXO tin box full of sandwiches and cake, I caught the bus to Longton where I changed buses and climbed aboard the bus to Kemball. The first day was rather dull it was all form filling and being shown around. We went round the lamphouse, canteen, classrooms and finally the baths. It was here where I saw for the first- and last-time metal baskets with a number on the top in which you deposited your clothes. It was explained that this was then hung above the heaters to dry. At the end of the shift you collected your clean clothes had a shower put your clean clothes on and hung your dirty clothes on the frame to be hung over the dryers.



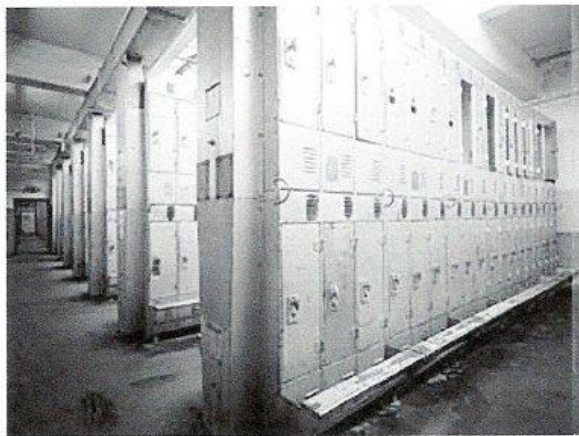
Kemball Training Centre near Heron Cross, Fenton.

The course at Kemball was to last for five days and was called the Induction Course. There I was taught basic First Aid, studied colliery layouts and most importantly learnt how to stop a coal tub by using an iron rod about 18 inches long with a looped handle called a “locker”. I would also be giving a helmet, overalls, boots and belt all free of charge. At the end of the

Five days I would return to Florence and would work on the surface. It was further explained that when I was about 15 and half, I would do 16 weeks training shared between Kemball and Tunstall Tech which was part of the Library. At Kemball I would have my first experience of underground work, whilst at Tunstall would be taught mining theory and basic engineering. Afterwards I would go back to the colliery until my sixteenth birthday when I would go down the pit. The people on this course were of all ages, most of them wanted to work in the pit but some of them had been sent by the Department of Labour and Employment (Dole) and clearly would have rather been somewhere else.

The following week it was back to Florence but now the starting time was 7:00am. If my father was on days, he would make me two rounds of toast then call me at about 5:30am. Then we would leave the house at ten to six to catch the bus at the top of the estate. It was a special, run by Beresford's buses. You didn't have to pay as it was taken out of your wages. Within a few minutes of leaving the estate the bus was filled with smoke and the sound of men coughing it was like a sanatorium. It was as if these men who were to go down the pit were trying to get a big fix of nicotine after all it would be their last opportunity before going underground where smoking was forbidden. The bus picked men up all along the route so by the time we arrived at the pit it was standing room only.

When I got off the bus, I noticed that the other men went in various directions. Some went to the canteen some straight to the pit head baths, whereas the surface workers disappeared into small cabins dotted about the place. I had to go to the baths. There I was given keys to my clean and dirty lockers, and told that after I had changed, I was to report to Mr. Dean by the lamphouse.



Typical Pit Head baths and showers

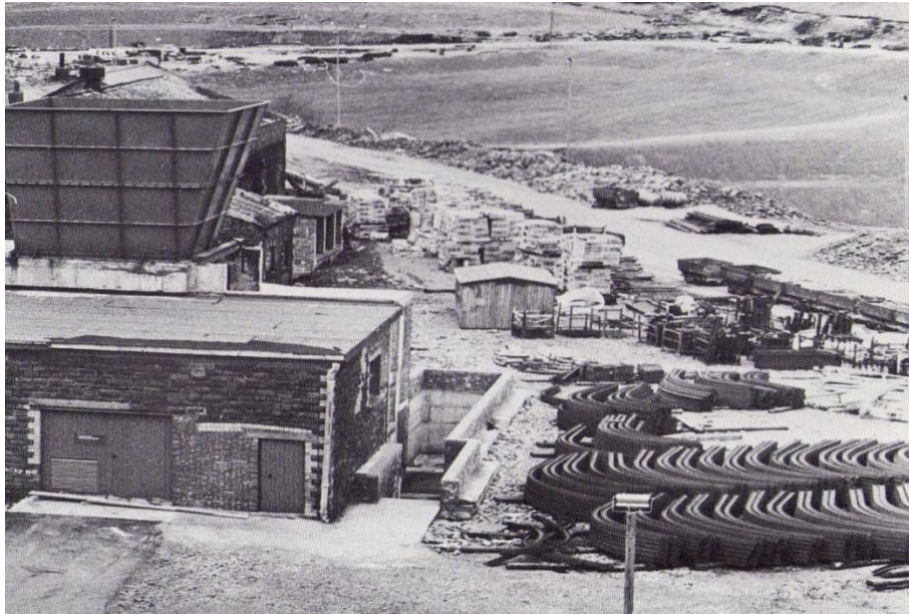
I found my locker and along with everyone else I striped off trying to give the impression that I had been doing this sort of thing all my life. The clothes I was wearing went into the clean locker and I soon learned they had to be hung in a certain way i.e. the first things you put on after your shower were the last things you took off at the start of your shift. I had packed my new boots, overalls, belt and helmet in a brown paper carrier bag to which my mother had added a bar of soap and a towel. Then I went to the dirty side of the baths and again found my other locker. This side was busier than the clean side because along with those going on shift the nightshift workers had started to get changed before having a shower. I put on my brand-new free helmet, overalls, boots and belt, and then put my towel and soap into the locker. I notice a very old man slowly and methodically going through the process of changing. He was

short but powerfully built with sparkling eyes and a face that had spent a lot of time laughing. He caught my eye and said “first day” I replied “yes.” He looked down at my boots and said “if I was you, I would undo the lace from the top two holes then you won’t get many blisters.” I thought I wasn’t expecting to get any but did what he suggested anyway. I stood up to go and my helmet fell down over my eyes. I heard the old man chuckle then he told me to come over to him. He took off my misbehaving helmet and adjusted it so that it fitted like an old slipper, then asked me where I was working. I told him about Mr. Dean and asked him if he could show me the way to the lamp house. He told me he would do better than that he was going past there and would take me. We exchanged names and he told me his was Tom McGarry.

Tom met up with his mate Bob Wain and we made our way to the lamphouse where he pointed out Mr. Dean. We walked over and Bob spoke “Cyril this boy is one of ours.” Cyril asked me who I was before ticking me off list. Then he handed me a round alloy disc about one and half inches across with a number on it, 3034. This was to be my number and I was to look after the disc and present it every day to a man in the lamphouse who would book my time. I would also need it to collect my wages in two weeks’ time as I had to work a week in hand. But most importantly I was to carry it with me at all times. He then pointed me in the direction of a small set of stairs with a large door at the top and told me to wait in the cabin.

With some trepidation I climbed the stairs and opened the door. It was very dark but I could see the room was long and narrow and again filled with smoke. Along one side was a long bench with an equally long wooden table. Sitting on the benches were a mixture of old men and young boys. Through the gloom I could just make out my new friend Bob. Scattered about on the table were glass bottles filled with tea, mugs of all shapes and sizes, tin Billy cans and newspapers. Some of these were opened others wrapped around what I assumed were sandwiches; I soon learned this food was called “snapping”. I also noticed I was not the only newcomer. There were two or three others and I wondered to myself if they were as terrified as me.

Within a few minutes Mr. Dean came in. He was much shorter than I had imagined and was wearing a pair of wellingtons which on him, because he was so short, looked like waders. He then started to deploy the lads to different jobs. Me and two others were sent up the top yard. We were told to follow another boy about our age but a veteran of three weeks at the pit. As the others left the cabin, I notice their glass bottles full of tea were put under the benches onto and hot water pipe to keep warm. We were told to take our other stuff with us as we would be away all day.



Typical colliery stock yard

We made our way across the pit top passed the offices of the manager and undermanager then passed the huge building on my left that housed the steam engine that brought the coal out of the pit. As we passed the windows, I could see the engine steaming away the drum spinning so fast you could hardly see the wire ropes that seemed to bounce as it left the drum. I leaned on the wall and to my surprise I found it was shaking with the strain of controlling this beast. On the right was a wall. Looking over I could see that there was a drop of about 20 feet to a number of rails with wagons on them. These were being filled with debris from a chute sticking out of the wall further along nearer to number two pit.

The top yard was where materials destined for number two pit were stored. There were huge piles of wooden props and steel arches, chains, girders, pipes and all manner of other stuff covering a wide area. When we reached the top yard, a man called Pasquale told us to put our belongings in a tall building that housed the machine that straightened rails, posts and steel arches, then go to a small shed around the corner and put fishplates together. Pasquale was an Italian Prisoner of War who had stayed on in England. He used to work underground but had been blinded in one eye, so he had been given a job as a crane driver. The lad who was in charge of us asked Pasquale how many sets of fishplates did he want us to make. He was told to work on them until we were fed up then he would find us something else to do. For the next two hours the group of us sat around and by the end we had a huge pile of completed sets. To me the sights and sounds around seemed to be ever changing, crashing and banging coming from the mechanical and electrical shops and there were flashing lights even in broad daylight from the welding shop. Wagons big and small passing by, some of them had strange words written on them like Grow, Crow and Whay. I soon learned these were the names of parts of the pit to where this load of materials or piece of machinery was to be taken. So, Grow became Great Row, Crow became Cannel Row and Whay was of course Winghay. All morning as we sat and made up the plates, I could hear the sounds of the pit, banging and hammering, saws and compressed air, bells ringing and an endless stream of people walking one way and then the other.

About 10 o'clock the colliery hooter went and on the instruction of our intrepid leader that meant it was "snapping time" so we made our way back to where we had left our stuff. We sat one side of the room whilst a group of about six adult men sat the other side, Pasquale among them. Before we began to eat, he told us that after snapping he would bring a large wagon to put the fishplates in then we had to go to the bottom yard as we were wanted for a special job. After about 20 minutes the colliery hooter went again signaling the end of snapping, so off we went to fill Pasquale's wagon.



Top: men in one of the decks of a cage, Btm: coal going up the pit in a two decked caged

Afterwards, we made our way down to the bottom yard, as we passed No.2 Pit I stood a moment and watched the cage arriving at the surface. As it landed, I could see it had four decks with two wagons in each. Decks one and three were emptied first. Deck one was done on the bottom landing, deck three on the top landing. The method of removing the full wagons from the cages was very simple, on a given signal two men standing behind two empty wagons would send them crashing into the full wagons standing in the cage thereby driving them out. Following a series of bells, the cage would drop and whole thing was repeated on cages two and four. Then more bells and the cages now full of empty wagon plunged down the shaft to be replaced by full ones coming up. It was brute force and ignorance.

The bottom yard was even bigger than the top yard and was there to supply No.3 Pit. This pit was in the process of being rebuilt. The shaft had been widened and the pit top had been renewed to accommodate the large mine cars that carried coal out of the pit and materials in. Unlike the smaller tubs over in No.2 Pits that held about half a ton the mine cars held about two tons. Our brave leader who was now known to us as Ocha, led us to a small shed where we met the boss of the bottom yard. He told us he had a great job for us that many of the other lads wanted but had been saved just for us. There was a look of horror on Ocha's face and he said "it's not the marl is it"? The boss with a sly smile on his face nodded his head. "There's a fresh batch arrived today but don't thank me there's no one else better suited for that job than you because you know how important it is to the running of the



Large Mine Cars underground

When we left the boss Ocha was fuming, effing and blinding all the way across to the far end of the yard. I wondered how bad this job could be. Then we saw it a huge pile of wet slimy cold brown coloured marl. Ocha explained that the marl was used underground to fill or stem shot holes (explosives) before firing. We had to dig it out with our bare hands and drop it into hessian bags then place them into the wagon marked "Greens Crut". The trick was not to put too much into each bag. We may have been able to carry more on the surface but for the men underground it was not so easy. Within a few minutes we were covered in the stuff it stuck to everything my new free overalls were a mess so were my free boots, belt and helmet. To this day I can't explain how it got on the helmet. For the rest of the shift we slogged away at the pile filling close on a hundred small bags and putting them into the mine car. Finally, the colliery hooter sounded again it was the end of the shift and was known to the locals as "loose it."

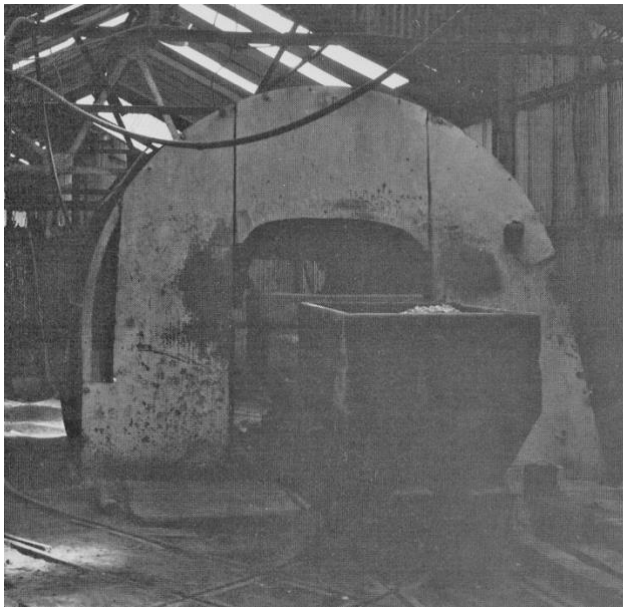
As we made our way back to the baths, I could hear the other boys laughing, they had all been through what we had and knew what an awful job it was. In the baths I took off my still free but clay encrusted overalls, boots, and belt and put them in the locker in such a way that they would dry for tomorrow's shift. As for my new helmet I hung that on the hooks that moments before had held my towel. I looked down at my feet and there were the blisters I had been promised and my belt had left the skin around my waist covered in red welts. So that was the end of my first day, a day that had been exciting, funny, scary, grown up, hard work and as I was soon to learn fairly typical.

On Fridays I would stand with all the other men outside the wage office to be paid. There you had to present your pay check to the lady through a window. In return she would hand me a small envelope. Typed along the top were my name, number and wages. My first weeks' pay was £4 pounds 16 shillings and 8 pence, or about £4.84. My mother had decided what my pocket money should be it was £1.00, of which I would get £0.75 and £0.25 was to be saved. There was another part of the agreement, if I worked over or at the weekend all that money was mine there were times when I felt like a millionaire.

Within the first month of being at the pit I heard of my first fatality. An Italian ex-prisoner of war by the name of Vincenzo Deramo who was killed by a fall of rocks, he was 34 years old. I wondered how his family felt all those miles away when they heard the news. On the first Friday after the death a collection was taken. As usual it was done by placing a number of buckets by the pay office and throughout the day as the buckets were filled they would be replaced and a running count kept. The men at the pit were always very generous when someone lost their life it was not unusual to see a pound or ten-shilling note (£0.50) in the bucket. This may not seem much by today's standard but at that time it was about a day's wage for most people. Can you imagine someone throwing £15 or £20 in a collection today, I think not? We should also remember until recently Vincenzo was one of our enemies.

Florence pit was being spoken as "the death trap pit." In October 1957 another death occurred. This time it was a man working as a packer on the face, he was killed when the roof collapsed. He was 40-year-old James Galloway. It looked as if the new name was catching on.

At work I had become good mates with a lad named Don who lived in Normacot. We would always try to get on the same working gang. One of the jobs at the top of number two pit that nobody liked was "behind the tippler." Although under cover, on warm days it was red hot



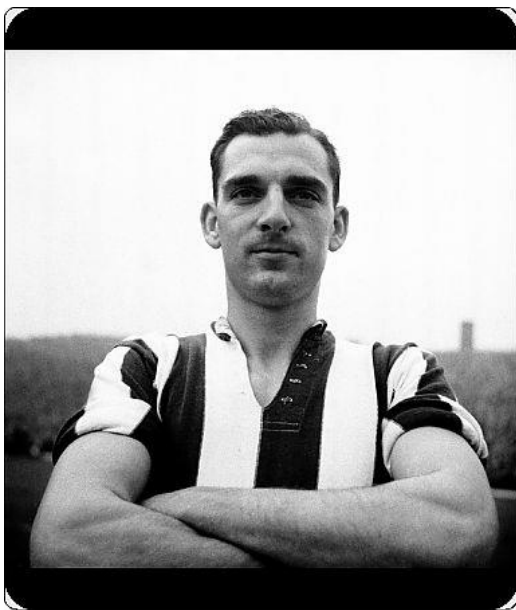
and cold days it was freezing, but Don and I loved it. The full wagons from the pit used to arrive in front of the tippler where a very old man would gently shove it into this revolving drum. The tippler man would then take off a sort of brake and the drum would rotate violently. The trick was to stop the drum in the right spot so the empty wagon could be pulled out to be replaced by another full one. Don and I would then push and shove each empty around a very sharp bend before sending it on its journey back to the pit. It was very hard work but Don and I used to make it easier by having games like guessing the names of films and film stars or pop singers' records and people on the radio.

A surface tippler

The days used to fly by.

At the pit, things were changing rapidly; new buildings were going up all over the surface. I had been moved to the new baths where after months getting changed with one wall of the shower half missing, the other half was a curtain that didn't always save our blushes, but soon the wall was finished. We were also made to work shifts days and afternoons. I didn't mind this, as on the noon shift, we used to finish at 9:15, because as we were still only fifteen, we had to be on our way home before 10pm. Another benefit to me was that I had a regular job on the top landing with my friend Tom McGarry. It was great we had so many laughs working with the old men. It was hard work though. But Tom used to show us how to make life easier by using wooden leavers to put tubs of coal back on the rails and how to slow down tubs by using lockers without breaking your arm. He also taught me how to work the compressed air tippler. Tom and his mate Bob would always be giving advice on how to keep safe when we went underground.

In early December 1957 Don and I moved on to the next phase of our training this was to work 16 weeks split equally between Kemble Training Centre and the Mining College at Tunstall which was the first week. For me it was quite a trek, catching the bus at Weston Coyney crossroads we took the main route through Hanley, Cobridge, Burslem into Tunstall. There were a number of classes at the top of the building above the Library. For physical training we used a large room at the back. The instructor was a very famous Stoke footballer by the name



of John McCue. The classrooms were not that big and the teachers were mainly ex mining officials and engineers. Their job, I thought was to teach us the various theories of mining. But that wasn't all, they were also on the lookout for bright young lads to go forward and become apprentices. I had not grasped this at all and so I didn't do perhaps as well as I should have.

I remember that a couple of weeks prior to leaving the college one of the tutors came to me and told me that if in the last two exams I could get 80% or 85% I could get a place on the list. Even with this information I can't say that I was particularly bothered. But my mate Don was and towards the end of the course he was selected to train as an underground Electrician.

John McCue of Stoke City

As a break from lessons we used to have a couple of hours in the Gym with Stoke City full back John McCue. This mainly consisted of playing football with an extremely heavy medicine ball. You didn't stand up to play this game you had to make your way around on your backside with your hands acting as supports behind you. John also had some very strict and unusual rules. If you were late, last, or last getting changed, last getting in the gym, talking when he was, not talking when you should have been, shouting, not shouting, or swearing you were subjected to numerous press-ups and many other torturous punishments. There was no punishment for fighting. It's obvious to me now this was all part of getting you ready for the pit.

Every other week it was Kemball's turn to enjoy our company. Early morning, I would catch the bus to Longton then change to the Stoke bus that went via Heron Cross, stopping at the road down to Kemball and Stafford Collieries we made our way to the lamp house.

There on the wall was a typed written list, when you found your name, you looked across and there was the name of the instructor you were to work with for the week. I had a cup of tea in the canteen before getting changed and collecting my lamp my number which was 231.

As I made my way to the pit top, I could see lots of other lads of the same age as me. Many of them were being deployed to surface work either on the screens or up the tip or loading the tubs with materials destined to go to various places around the training pit. I waited in line for my turn to ride the cage to the pit bottom. The cage was quite small compared with the one at Florence. I think there were only two decks, when in use, it was able to hold two wagons in each deck. As I climbed in, I could feel the cage swinging in the shaft I shuffled along and crouched next to the lad in front. There would be about 16 of us all packed in like sardines. I heard the banksman ring the signal and we started to drop down the shaft. I looked up and, through the holes in the top of the cage, watched the halo of light at the shaft top get smaller and smaller, but it never disappeared I could still see it when the cage stopped at the bottom. As we were in the top deck, we had to wait for the bottom deck to be emptied first. Finally, after a series of signals we were able to get out into the brightly lit pit bottom of Kemball Training Pit.

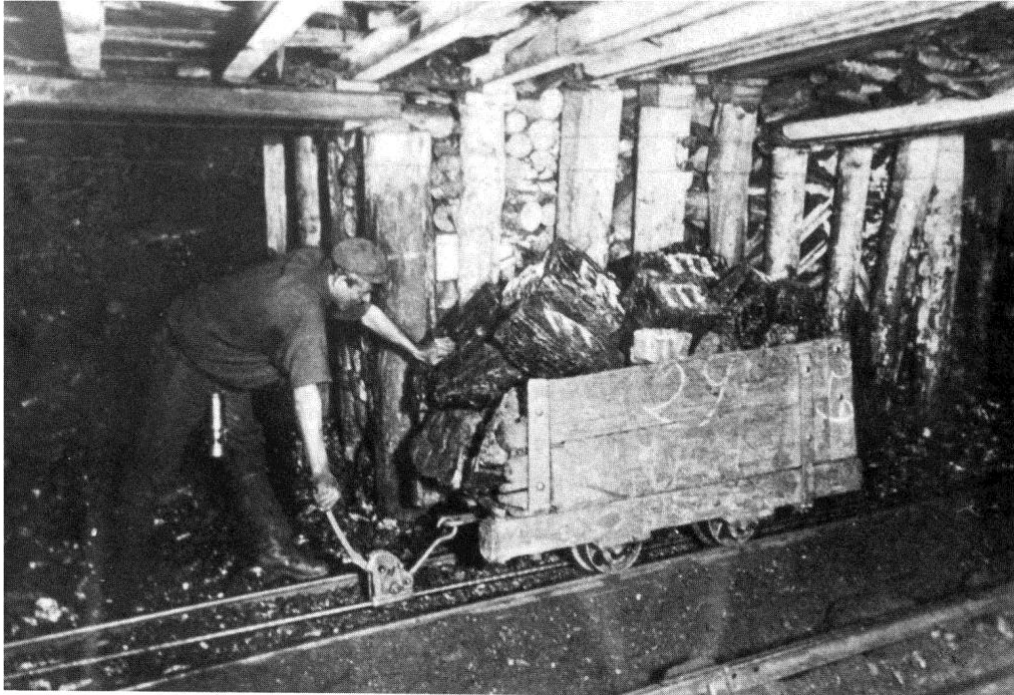


Small wagons on their way to the pit bottom

The walls painted white, were built of brick with large steel girders on top, this place was of course made to last the life of the pit. There were two sets of rails stretching for about 50 yds with full tubs of coal waiting to be sent to the surface when all the men were down the pit. We walked about 30 yds then turned slightly to the left to a place called the "Deputies Meeting Station." It was hear that my instructor was waiting for us, his name was Sam Evans, or as he was best known "big Sam."

There were four of us in Sam's team. We followed him for about half a mile during which time he pointed out things of interest to us. After 20 minutes or so we had made three right turns along well-lit roadways and finally ended up slightly lower than when we started. Sam

explained that each of the roads we travelled was supported differently and equipped with various types of haulage systems so trainees like us could get acquainted with each one. This mainly involved attaching the wagons to the haulage ropes using steel chains or clips. These types of haulage systems became very familiar to me over the next four months as in turn I was, so to speak shown the ropes.



These two old photographs dated around 1900 show two haulage systems that were still in use at Kemball T.C. in 1957. Above this man is coupling a wagon to the haulage rope by way of a "Clip" below these men are using a lashing chain to attach the wagons to the rope.



Anyway, back to Sam, at the end of the third road we once again turned right. This next road was called the Peacock Dip. From top to bottom it was about 600 yds at 1in4. Many years ago, it had followed the Peacock seam down with coal faces running off both sides. These had long since been worked out except for a couple of faces on the right-hand side about 400 yds down, and we were making for one of these.

I don't know which was worse going down the dip or walking up it. My free hobnail boots afforded some grip coming up the dip but going downhill they were a menace, most of our small band fell on their arse's in the Peacock Dip. Eventually we turned right off the Dip towards the face return. There were three air doors to go through each one to be closed before opening the next to ensure that the air didn't short circuit thereby reducing the volume on the face. The first thing I noticed on the other side of the doors was that the temperature had risen about 10 degrees Fahrenheit and was a little dustier. Big Sam gathered us around him and made us aware of his rules.

He started, "never turn off your lamp, never take your free helmet off, don't wander off on your own, be on your guard at all times, never take anything for granted, always carry your brass time check with you, try to remember where safety equipment like fire extinguishers and manholes are and never travel the main roadways while the haulage is running, never leave your place of work without the permission of the deputy, and never, never fall asleep". Sam was a big man well over six feet and about twenty stone but strangely quietly spoken. I remember thinking I am going to listen very carefully to this man, any thought that I would break his rules never entered my head. After our talk we had a short walk to the place where we were to work.

Our job for the next week was very simple. The roadway had been subjected to floor lift, so much so that in places it was only 3 feet high. We would remove this floor lift so the road would be about 5 feet high. This was called "beating up." Big Sam removed the tools from his tool bar and shared them out. There were three shovels two picks and a sledge hammer. We soon got in the swing of it. The lads with the picks loosened up the floor and the lads with the shovels threw the dirt and rocks in the empty wagon, when full this wagon was manhandled along the rails through the ventilation doors to the side of the Peacock Dip. There it waited until it was joined by the three or four others we filled by the end of shift. That first day between us we advanced the "beat up" by about 6 feet. Big Sam seemed pleased with our efforts. About half an hour before "Loose It" (Shift End) we put the tools back on the bar and made our way with the last wagon to the Peacock Dip. There Sam showed us how to couple the tubs together; he then contacted the engine driver and told him he was going to send the loads up the dip. We watch as Sam attached a long heavy chain with a large hook on one end to our first wagon then he twisted the chain on to the moving haulage rope before finishing off the job by giving the chain a sort of half hitch with the hook. As the chain tightened the wagons began to move away Sam attached a drag to the last wagon in case the chain came off the rope this would stop the loads running backwards and do some real damage as they thundered down the dip. We watch with some trepidation as the loads disappeared. Shortly afterwards the rope stopped and the bell signaled that the dip was safe to travel so we made our way out of the pit. At the pit bottom Big Sam said he would meet us at the same place tomorrow.

In the showers we exchanged stories of the jobs we had done and I had no doubt that ours was the best. As I walked away from Kemball Pit towards Whieldon Road I thought maybe working underground would not be so bad after all. Over the next four months my life at work had a sort of routine of class work which I didn't particularly enjoy and pit work which I did.



*This photograph shows how the floor has lifted and has considerably reduced the height of the road.
When this floor lift is removed it is called "beating up."*

The instructors changed each week. So, at other times we were transporting materials to the face and headings. Some weeks we were on the surface unloading the same type of materials that the previous week we had shunted around underground. Other days we worked on the coal screens. We would stand either side of a steel plated conveyor that crashed and banged its way from the tippler to a chute and down to a large railway wagon. As screen hands it was our job to remove dirt and rocks from the coal by chucking it into a wagon placed either side of the screen. This would then be transported by some unfortunate up the dirt tip. The man in charge of the screens was known to everyone as "gravel guts," he used to talk or rather shout as if his throat was filled with gravel. But like all the instructors he was always fair. Gravel guts especially so in as much as he gave everyone a bollocking.

I remember one funny incident when the center's Training Officer a Mr. Powell was stood watching the trainees pushing and pulling wagons from the shaft to the screens. He was continually shouting to watch this or that and to keep your hands from between the tub. As I watched him, I notice he was leaning on a stationary wagon with his glove covered hand resting on one end. As he was shouting out yet another warning, another wagon sort of crept up and without saying a word squashed the gloved covered hand. He quickly removed the injured hand and looked about to see if anyone had noticed. I looked away in case I became a suspect. When I looked back, I saw him hurrying away in the direction of the first aid room. I had a good chuckle to myself when I heard the Training Officer was off work with an old "war injury."

Sometimes a couple of us would have to go to the lower sidings to make sure that the coal from the above screens delivered properly into the wagons. Of course, the lads on the screen took great delight in spitting on you from their elevated position. When you looked up all you could

see was a row of heads peering down at us over a wall. One day it was me and my mate Mac's turn to run the gauntlet. Mac, although not very big was not known for his diplomacy, so when a dark headed youth appeared above the wall, we soon found out that as well as producing copious amounts of saliva and phlegm he was particularly accurate. Mac soon lost it and told this youth what he would do if he caught hold of him. Well pretty soon it became very personal as insults flowed between them and try as I might I was unable to calm the situation down. Anyway, following a particularly nasty exchange when doubts were cast over their mothers' marriage certificates, the head above the wall disappeared and all went quiet. Mac seemed happy at this outcome then he suddenly spotted, coming along the railway line, the dark headed youth accompanied by the body of a heavyweight boxer. Mac exclaimed "oh shit" but to his credit didn't do what many would have done, including me, that was to run off. As the lad approached, I tried to calm the situation down by getting between him and Mac. Well, he just brushed me aside as if I wasn't there and marched straight up to my mate and stood inches away from his face. "So why don't you show me what you are going to do," he said to Mac. Not wishing to make matters worse Mac didn't reply. "I thought so" said the heavyweight "big mouth but nothing to back it up." With that he reached out and caught hold of one of Mac's coat lapels and tore it off, then did the same to the other. But he wasn't finished next it was the top pocket followed by those on the side. As the heavyweight walked away, he told Mac that he would be waiting for him anytime he was ready. Mac heaved a huge sigh of relief and slowly sunk to the floor. I tried to lighten the moment by saying I thought the jacket, although greatly changed, had some redeeming features and would be particularly cool on warm days. Mac told me to go away but not quite in those terms.

In February 1958 I was returning home from a day at Tunstall Tech. when news began to filter out of a terrible air crash in Munich involving the Manchester United football team known as the Busby Babes. It seemed that in an attempt to leave the airport for the third time in a blizzard the aircraft, an Airspeed Ambassador, crashed with 21 fatalities out of the 44 on board. Eight of those who were to die were from the team. Everyone you spoke to were profoundly shocked by the tragedy. This team was wonderful and years ahead of its time. I have no doubt that they would have become the greatest team ever had they survived.



Tunstall technical school on the right and the mangled wreck of Man Utd aircraft after the crash.

Not long after the air crash I returned to Florence but this time without my mate Don. He had gone off to start his new life as an electrical apprentice. This was bad news for me but was offset somewhat as I was given the opportunity to work with my old friend Tom McGarry at least while his mate Bob Wain was off work. For me it was a real pleasure to work with Tom. From time to time if he saw you do something stupid or unsafe, he would take me to one side

and explain why what I had done was wrong. He was very fair but could be firm when necessary.

On the 1st of April 1958, as usual I was working on the top landing with my old friend Tom. Not long after the shift began a rumor started that there had been an accident on one of the faces in number two pit. It soon transpired that two men had been buried and attempts were being made to rescue them. Our banksman was acting like a sort of link to what was happening underground. Every now and then he would give us the latest information which then circulated around the pit top.

Production on the affected face had of course ceased as desperate colliers clawed at rocks and dirt covering their mates. At about 11:00am news arrived on the bank that one man had been found, sadly he was dead. At this time the rescuers had a dilemma, should they recover this man or put all their efforts in to finding the other man. They rightly concentrated on the other man. An hour or so later news that other man involved in this accident had been found alive though he was in a bad way.

About 1:15pm the pit bell rang out signaling for man riders. As the cage arrived at the surface, I could see that decks one and two were filled with lights from men's lamps. As soon as the cages stopped, those involved in the rescue and recovery of these two colliers removed the stretchers from the decks and carried them away from the shaft. We all stood in silence and removed our helmets and caps, then bowed our heads as we watched these brave but exhausted men carry their comrades to the waiting ambulances. As I looked down, I saw the blanket covering one of the stretchers began to slip away from the left corner. It slowly exposed a dust covered blood streaked bandage wrapped around an incredibly white foot. This image has stayed with me all my life. The dead man was 56 years old Joseph Herrod, his mate Edward Reid age 55 died a week later. They had been buried under a massive fall of coal and rock. At the inquest the face Deputy said the face was 162yds long and was being used to train young men for face work. At the time of the accident there were 18 miners and 18 trainees at work. Mr. Herrod and Mr. Reid were trying to remove a girder from a dangerous position. The inquest returned a verdict of accidental death on both men; their mates and rescuers were rightly given unstinting praise by the Coroner.

Whenever people like me look back over 50 years they are amazed how the prices of goods have changed. Recently I did a comparison and this is just a sample of prices at that time. A semidetached bungalow was £3400, a three piece £40, men's shoes £1.30 with women's shoes around £2.00. There was also a new washing up liquid called "Gay," obviously years ahead of it time.

One afternoon I was as usual working on the top landing with Tom McGarry. During snapping time he whispered to me that he had arranged something special for me and I was to follow him. Without any fuss he and I descended the iron ladder to the bottom landing and made our way round towards the shaft entrance and the banksman Cyril. He said to Tom "are you ready then" Tom nodded and Cyril rang the bell. I recognised the signal it was to call the cage for man riders. As the cage decked Tom said "right, get in, you and me are going down the shaft to the Great Row level". I was so surprised I clambered into the cage without thinking. We sat in the middle of the deck and I clung on to the metal hand rail. I said "Tom you will get the sack if anything goes wrong" he told me it was OK as he had cleared it with the winder. Soon the cage plunged into the darkness leaving the sunny afternoon and my stomach behind. Within minutes we were at the Great Row level, we climbed out and walked away from the shaft. Tom

told me he used to work at this inset before he was injured and knew it like the back of his hand. We had a brisk walk through the pit bottom roadways through some air doors and ended up in number three pit bottom. It was a fascinating journey and all too soon it was over as we had to make our way back to the number two shaft for our ride to the surface where I found the sun and my stomach were still where I had left them. As we left the shaft, I thanked the banksman Cyril for his help he replied "I have no idea what you are talking about." As far as I know it was never mentioned again by anyone.

Me and some mates went on holidays that year. Soon we would begin the next stage of our lives. Of the five of us there all but one would be off on our next adventure. We kept in touch but three of us found pasture new. In my case I did my face training at Kemball, went back to Florence and became a packer on the Winghay Seam. This was the first shearer face at Florence. In 1964 I left and went to Hem Heath. In all I worked in the coal industry for 37 years and finally I must say when the mines closed, I had few regrets.

John B, May 2020