



Life at the New Fancy coal face in 1928

By Harry Roberts

Henry William R (Harry) Roberts was born in Cinderford in 1914. Unfortunately his father was killed in the First World War and Harry had to start work at New Fancy Colliery in 1928 at the age of 14. In 1930 his mother decided to return to London with the family, so Harry ceased work at New Fancy and started a new life in London. He returned to the Forest of Dean some 45 years later, and provided this graphic account of 'life at the New Fancy coal face' to researchers at Dean Heritage centre in 1983. Harry died in 2005.

Please note that the article as presented is an edited version of Harry Robert's original version.

Mr Andrews lived in the house opposite the pit, and when I knocked on the door of the house he had just returned from his work. After a few minutes of conversation he was almost convinced I might not be strong enough for Hodding, but seeing my determination he relented. The pay was 20p per day and I was to start on the following Monday, other jobs for boys none of which I wanted were, 'Road Zwippin', which was sweeping rails and tongues at the pit bottom with a besom, (a 'witches broom') made from brush wood from the birch tree, and there was Pumping, by the operation of a hand pump somewhere between the pit bottom and the workings often standing in water and seeing few men during the day. The wages for both jobs were just under 10p a day. I cycled back home to prepare for the day I was to go underground for the first time and I was just 14 years of age.

There were standard items to be bought, a packet of Prices' number 8 candles, cost, just under 3p., Moleskin trousers pure white and fully lined, and made from cotton, at 44p a pair, Pit Boots all leather with iron heel and toe tips with triple iron studs all over the soles, they cost just under 45p a pair, and it was a lot of money for me to spend as I was not yet earning, I had to work nearly five shifts to replace the money. One only wore old clothes in the pit and there was always a neighbour somewhere willing to supply, my jacket was light in colour and too big for me but the pockets were right, there was a rabbiting or poacher's pocket on the inside useful for the six candles I was to use each day and the food I was to take. There was a waist coat to match the jacket with four useful pockets and I kept a box of England's Glory and separate stubs of candles in them. The collarless shirt and muffler completed the work clothes except for the vest, my mother always knitted vests with fine cream coloured wool and I was to be grateful for this garment as I worked in the narrow confines of the coal face and although it did not prevent the pain when my back scraped in the rough top of the workings it saved the skin from being torn. Most miners took a 'Snowl of Brad and

Cheese' to eat in their 20 minute break at the coal face, it was the round top of the cottage loaf pulled from the bottom piece, and scooping a cone shaped hole in the soft underneath part with a sharp knife, butter was placed into it and the wedge of bread replaced. Three or four ounces of Cheddar Cheese was separately wrapped and after making a parcel of all the 'vittles ' it was placed in the tommy bag. These bags were made from cuttings of cloth left over from the making of a kitchen table cloth or kitchen curtains.

There was nowhere to wash underground at bread time and the top of the cottage loaf upside down could be held safely in a dirty dry cupped hand without contamination. We all had our shut knives and it was a simple matter to spread the butter and cut the cheese without touching it. In the beginning I took a pint bottle of water to drink at bread time but due to the hard physical work I was perspiring freely most of the time and needed frequent sips, and I found I required an intake of 3 pints which I took each day in a brown enamelled can. My mother rose at 4.30am on Monday morning to make preparations for my departure, the fire place was raked from the day before and lighted, there was no gas or electricity so the coal fire was the sole means of heating water and cooking food. I was awakened at 5.15am, there was a quick wash under the cold tap in the back kitchen, and the breakfast was on the table. At 5.45am I began cycling to the pit, I was somewhat apprehensive about it all to say the least.

The system of going down the pit shaft had previously been explained, and arriving at the office about 6.10am I drew my Bond Ticket and the brass disc with a number stamped on it. When the disc was on its hook in the office it was proof of the employee being out of the pit, the paper Bond Ticket allowed each man or boy to come out of the pit at the end of the day in the same sequence as going down, the last down was not the first up. I stood my bicycle by a number of others, none were chained up, bicycles were not stolen in those days. The cage had a capacity of 11, the men all packed in tight with the boys in the middle of them, there was an iron bar in a fixed position at knee level, and an adjustable one which was brought down when everyone was ready to descend, sometimes the man in charge of the cage had to push with his knee standing on one leg to get the bar down to the backs of the nearest men. I glanced up at the date stone to see it was 1829, and I was about to descend one hundred years later. The shaft was about 9ft by 9ft and like the chimney stack nearby it was constructed of locally quarried stone, the twin winding gear allowed one cage to be at the top of the shaft and the other at the bottom. An assortment of trucks and trams stood around on rails of different gauges, there was the saw mill where timber was cut for supporting the roof of the various workings, and there were various sheds one of which was used for men working at the top of the pit and on the dirt mount, it was a place for them to have their meal and to dry their clothes in wet weather, then there was the Weighbridge. The Company employed a man to weigh the coal still in the trams as it came out of the cage, there was also a Check Weigh Man put there by the Miner's Federation. The cage actually fell three quarters of the way down the shaft before the application of the brake giving the sensation of going back up. There was no roof on the cage and the water poured from the sides of the shaft at about the rate of rain in a heavy storm, we were all soaking wet when we stepped out into the pit bottom. I had yet to meet the two brothers I was going to work with, and after stepping over the lower bar of the cage preparing to light a candle I found brick archways, electric lights burning and a row of men squatting on their heels, some talking and smoking and some looking at the cage discharging the men and boys.

My 'Butties' were looking for me and I was looking for them. A voice said, "Bist thy name Roberts?" and I said, "Oy it is", then another voice said, "we be thy Butties let's goo to work". The eldest was Car short for Cornelius and his brother was Charlie, this was their introduction. I told them my name was Harry and we began to walk down the clean whitewashed tunnel all nicely lighted but not for long, because not only did we run out of brickwork but the lighting came to an abrupt end. It was then the candles were lighted to be cupped in the hand and shielded from the eyes, there were lumps of coal to fall over and there were invisible rails and sleepers, the sudden darkness affected the sense of balance which took some minutes to adjust. We began to walk down hill, the floor of the road being rather steep. We came to the bottom of the dipple and the road leveled out, here I discovered was the main 'Passby', an intersection of the main road by one on the left and a similar one on the right, so the width became about sixteen or eighteen feet with several oak tree trunks supporting the roof. Our journey continued straight on and it seemed to be the main road to the workings, but shortly we were searching for the small wooden sleepers to walk on as we found about 9 inches of very liquid mud just deep enough to flow over the tops of our ankle boots, and we made squelching noises with every step, my new boots were being tested, and we were all still wet from the journey down the shaft. After about 150 yards the road became dry, there was a slight gradient and there was a door completely blocking the road, it was an air door made from wood and covered with bradish, (tarred hessian) and self closing, it with others were instrumental in keeping the air circulating in the workings. The road was now dry right up to the coal face but at the last few hundred yards it went sharply upwards where there must have been a fault in the seam. The gradient was too steep for the horses to even pull empty trams and at the cross roads near the top there was a 'Jinny Wheel' mounted in a horizontal position for the 'endless rope' to take them to the cross roads where the horses were then able to take over. We turned off to the right and in a few minutes we were at "our stage". I was surprised at the absence of timber supporting the roof in the roads but the slate like rock didn't seem to need it. I had arrived at 'No Coal', my place of work for the next 8 hours. There was no pay for travelling to and from the coal face although the 20 minutes bread time was part of the paid shift.

The coal was easy to get in the beginning, it was there in the side of the road for the distance allocated to our place. The thickness of the seam varied in other pits but here it was 2ft 2ins with a thin layer of mixed coal and shale which would be left behind in the gob with other dirt and stone. The Butty system of getting coal was mainly a piece work system, and the two brothers were to be paid just over 18.5p a ton for the winning and loading, the average capacity of each tram being 1.25 tons. The coal was not hard neither was it 'nesh', two conditions we were to experience later. The three of us sent out 6 tons on that first day, our combined statutory wages were 95p and we had earned £1 12.5p, it seemed very encouraging, but at that time I did not know about re-pricing. Sometimes we had an extra day's pay at the end of the week due to increased tonnage then the job was re-priced, it fell from 18.5p decreasing four times in six months to about 14p a ton for cutting and loading and because of it we could not get our money so the Company was obliged to make it up to the statutory amount.

There were only a few candles burnt in the first week or two, but later I had six in use at one time as the Hod Road got longer. There was no sense of time and like most miners the brothers had watches, often they were made of silver with a silver chain, with two or three medallions suspended on the links, and frequently handed down from father to son. On Sundays and evenings they were worn on the waistcoat which had a special button hole to insert the silver bar of the chain and if the

watch slipped out of the waistcoat pocket when stooping down or squatting on the tump it would not fall to the ground . When taking the watch to work the chain was removed to be replaced by a leather boot lace, and the watch was then protected by a brass case which had an aperture in the front just large enough to see the positions of the hands.

We sat on short lengths of timber to have our bread at 11am, our clothes were still damp, and our boots caked with dry mud inside and out. The horse and driver appeared at regular intervals to replace the full trams with empties and the smell of the horse and the almost crude oil on the wheels hung in the atmosphere. At the end of the day I was sent back to the pit bottom first, and I was hoping I would not get lost, it seemed that men and boys left the workings in ones and twos as if to reduce casualties in the event of a major fall. The clothes and feet had dried during the day and now the gauntlet was about to be run again, the mud was over the tops of the boots again and there would be the drenching going up the shaft. I presented my bond ticket and joined the others with similar tickets, we all had black faces and we clambered over the lower bar of the cage the water was pouring at the same rate, the man in charge gave the signal and as we neared the top of the shaft the cage slowly came to a stop with our eyes about eighteen inches above ground level, a pair of boots came towards us and as we all looked up to daylight and breathed deeply the fresh air a voice said, "This is what you have missed today lads!". The cage continued its upward journey and rested on the massive iron stop under the floor of it and the chains went slack. The man slipped the bar up and we quickly got out to go on our different ways home, my bicycle was still where I left it and with all the dirt and mud on me I was soon to be home in Cinderford to clean up.

My mother had prepared hot water heated in a large saucepan on the open fire and the galvanized bath had already been brought in from the back kitchen and was standing by a bucket of cold water. The bathing had to be done in two parts, first above the waist with someone to wash the back, then the lower part followed by dressing in 'evening ' clothes which was an ordinary suit worn after work. It was all done in front of the kitchen fire with the main meal of the already prepared and keeping warm in the oven. One did not refer to the meal as dinner or lunch, it was 'cook', there was a form of snobbery regarding it and one could hear boasts of "We da 'ave cook every day of the wik", cook being meat and vegetables.

The number of days work in the pit depended on how thick the order book was, the New Fancy worked mostly a four day week, Wednesday and Saturday being 'Playdays'. If there hadn't been the midweek break I could not have physically done the job, and in spite of a ravenous appetite I was still very thin. After a few weeks the coal which was so easy to get in the beginning had become more difficult, having extracted it from the side of the road there was timbering up to be done, and I soon became accomplished in this particular job. Measurements were made by folding the fingers of both hands and placing the outstretched thumbs end to end, the hands so spanned (about 12ins) would be placed on a 'stick' and then, left over right they would move the length of timber required.

When coal was removed the exposed roof (top) was immediately 'sounded' with the head of the pick, the resultant noise would tell if timber was required immediately, or in an hours time, or not at all. The height of the working was 2ft 10ins and tools were made to be used in that height, the shovel with a pointed blade had a short wooden handle, the pick, hammer, and thresher had their shafts cut down to suit the user. The pick was light weight and the cutting blade needle sharp each

end, it was easily detached by striking a captive iron wedge positioned under it with another blade, blunted blades, about four, were taken out of the workings at the end of the day to the Blacksmith's Shop at the pit bottom and collected the next day after being "drawn out".

The top and bottom of the coal seam had a thin layer of sooty slag, this was removed by the use of the pick for as far as the blade could reach, the thresher, a tool with a heavy duty point about ten inches long on one end, and a hammer head the other was struck into a suitable position of the coal to be removed and by levering on the robust handle the section of coal seam would be pulled forward, if there was no movement the 71b hammer would be used to strike the hammer head and two or three hundredweights of coal released. When the coal ran hard little impression was made by the thresher and the coal was left until the next day when the air now able to get to the top and bottom made it easier to remove.

The Hod was made from locally grown oak, the four corners were reinforced with metal and the wooden runners were faced with strap iron, the size of it was about 22ins wide and 3ft long, there were shallow sides to it about 3ins high and a metal ring at each end allowed the Hod Strap to be attached. The weight of coal on it when loaded ranged between 1cwt and 1.5cwt, the Hod Strap was made from leather and 0.5inch chain links in the workshop at the surface, the leather was about 2ins wide and the straps over each of the boy's shoulders terminated between the legs where a metal attachment fixed it to a length of chain about 18ins terminating in a 2in hook. A boy could wear the strap in any position below a stooping stance and it was particularly efficient when the wearer was in a crawling position, he could throw his full weight forward to get the loaded hod moving and crawl along the coal face to the Hod Road being careful not to allow it to collide with timber supporting the roof before continuing his journey to the loading stage. The Hod Road like the coal face had a height of 2ft 10ins but when the stage was reached it was possible to stand up. The floor of the workings and consequently the Hod Road was at a slight gradient and because of it the loaded hod was easier to pull, the danger being the load would sometimes run unassisted to collide with the boy's heels. This happened to me on a number of occasions, and in an effort to get away from the moving load, and instinctively leaping forward the back hits the roof with a sickening pain and the boy falls exhausted, after discharging his burden at the stage he quickly crawls back to the workings pulling the empty hod to be greeted by, "Where have you been all the time"? By running in a crawling position I was able to keep ahead of the load and at speed on reaching the stage unhook the hod with my heel and turning, now I was able to stand up, lift the still moving load and throw it with the hod into one of the two trams. I was taught how to load a tram, building a roof like structure from the larger coal above the wooden sides so that one third of the weight was on top with the smaller coal being contained in the tram, I was paid 2.5p a day extra for this job as it allowed the brothers more time for cutting coal. Many tears were shed by boys of my age at that time but some were in worse conditions than I, in Thin Lowery at the Fancy and Lightmoor the height was 18ins, with the boys pulling their loads by using the toes, stomach, and elbows.

The trams of coal were identified by a number painted on the sides of the tram and on the lumps of coal comprising the top, most miners did the marking by watering down a penny ball of whitening, but one of the brothers used to go to the dirt mount of an abandoned iron mine and fill an empty cocoa tin with ochre and our number, 29 was in red. On Fridays there were arguments at the Pay Office where men having kept account of their trams sent up during the week found they were short and consequently the tonnage was down, most miners lost two or three like this so the little extra

they worked so hard for they didn't get in spite of the "checking" by the Check Weigh Man, and the miners considered the "lost" tonnage was stolen from them.

The coal sometimes ran 'Nesh', as the tools cut into it large sections disintegrated like granulated sugar, and if this type of coal found its way to the surface there was no pay for it. There was no pay for dirt except where a Deep Head was being driven, so dirt and small coal was thrown into the gob, being the space behind the miner where all the coal had been removed. There were no toilet facilities and by digging a hole and making sure it was filled in afterwards the gob had another use. One of the brothers I worked with was of a religious nature and would often sing hymns while working at the coal face, I never once heard him swear, but when the coal ran hard and when trams of dirt had to be filled, if there was a fall in the hod road, or at the stage, he would sing as if to reproach The Almighty;

"Jesu lover of my soul,
Two of dirt and one of coal"

Of the 300 men working at the pit about 20 came from Cinderford, and I had come to recognise some of them I had seen in the town, I found they were taken to end from the pit in the lorry built from a 'T type' Ford sitting on two backless wooden benches, and with me cycling I was the odd man out. The prospect of a five mile ride was rather daunting being physically weak after the day's work so I too became a passenger in the lorry, it cost 2.5p a day and it started from Somerset Road at 6am and soon I was to know all the men who travelled on it, there was no other boy passenger at that time.

I was not yet 15 years of age, I had become competent in other work besides Hodding, and my pay had increased to 25p a day, I could cut and erect timber, load up and mark the trams for the journey to the pit bottom, sound the top and estimate the degree of safety, and cut coal. These additional jobs were necessary when one of the Butties were away sick, which was a frequent occurrence, by today's health standard those two men would not be permitted to work, they both had a number of blue tinted scars, indicating coal dust under the skin from injuries received by falling rock, a few years later one was to lose a finger from a small fall of rock. They sometimes had difficulty in breathing, which added to the many hazards. During one shift Cornelius came rapidly away from a section of the coal face where he was levering with the thresher colliding with me in the process, as the coal came away about 3cwt of the top came with it, he escaped injury but the sole of one of his boots was torn completely away. All the candles had gone out with the wind created by the disturbance, and the atmosphere was full of dust. We moved away and lighted the candles, I found he was badly shocked and the next day we were a man short. When both Butties were away sick on the same day I was sent to another 'place' where three men, all brothers worked and there was no boy, the two younger ones took turns to do the hodding and now with me to assist the three Butties were cutting coal at a faster rate. I had complaints of not being fast enough, the result being I was running in a crawling position with both a full and an empty hod. At the end of the day I had to lay flat on the floor of the hod road until I had recovered enough strength to walk back to the pit bottom, I was glad to see my own Butties back at work.

Our place, number 29 was next to the Deep Head, the horse road being driven by Mr Parker, his son, and son in law, they received piece work rates for cutting cubic yards of rock in addition to the coal. When the rock ran hard a hole was drilled into it with a hand operated ratchet drill, the gelignite and fuse were inserted and clay sealed the hole, everyone in the immediate vicinity were alerted and they moved to a safe distance. Mr Parker always fired the fuse, there was a muffled 'CRUMP' and

about a ton of rock fell with very few fragments outside the explosion area. It was usual to take shelter behind the trams on the stage and our place was the only one likely to be affected by flying fragments, the Parkers sheltered with me and there was a man who seemed old enough to have long since retired from work who sometimes helped in the Deep Head, he said to me, "Bist thou the boy 'oddin ' fer them Evans's?" I assured him I was and he replied, "Then thou bist lucky, I done 'oddin' when I was thy age fer 6d (2.5p) a day, and 10 'owers on't, and we didn't 'ave such a good 'odd strap as thee, I 'ad one around the waist with a chain at the back o'nt and it pulled thee spine and crippled some of the boys, and thou's get paid vower bob (20p) per day fer only 8 hours." I told him things had improved in the last 50 years.

Where coal is removed the rock is seen to be smooth end glossy, and much of the exposed area has recessed patterns of ferns and grasses, sometimes the surface of the exposed top had a rippled effect, it was usually an indication of a 'bell' about to be uncovered. A bell to me seemed to be the end of a petrified tree trunk with a thin layer of coal around the cylindrical length of rock found mostly in a vertical position. As if to confirm the rippling the top assumes the shape of a bell mouth with the cylinder of rock in the centre. Great care had to be taken in exposing the bell and thick timber had to be fixed as quickly as possible to support the immense weight bearing down, even though the timber would be close against the coal face. There would be no indication of safety by sounding with the head of the pick or mattock, and it could be two weeks before the extraction of coal allowed the face to advance sufficiently for the bell to be in the gob causing little harm if it fell. Meanwhile the weight on the timber may have broken it within 24 hours and the bell may have come down some inches, when another shorter timber would be erected to be replaced three or four times in the fortnight until the end of the tree if one can call it that, was resting on the floor of the workings. Sometimes the pressure was so great that the whole bell would drop like a piston within a few hours in spite of the timber, and it was nerve racking to have to pass or work around it.

The Deputy or 'Doggie 'made his daily rounds of inspection by crawling along the coal face of all the places and talking to each man in turn about safety and making suggestions of where coal should be extracted to straighten the workings and so ensure an emergency way out in other places in the event of a major fall. He was concerned with the well being of the men, at the same time he didn't worry too much about the bad working conditions. He told me boys were required to work in the Brazzily seam which had been closed for some time, and was about to be re-opened, he told me the advantages of working there, a three foot high working space, hod roads not very long, a shorter walk from the pit bottom, and 6d(2p)a day extra. There was one thing he did not tell me which I already knew about, there was a 2ft depth of water in the 3ft space, and when a boy was in the hodding position the water was up to his arm pits, and the loaded hod under water. Sheets of galvanized iron had to be fixed above the timber in an effort to prevent the wet top from falling. I told the Deputy I knew about the water and I refused to work there, so he tried me with Thin Lowery where the working height was 16 to 18 inches, and again I refused, he was so annoyed and did not speak to me for many weeks. Mr Parker's son was talked into working in the Brazzily, and about 18 months later after leaving the pit and coming back on a weeks' holiday from London I enquired about Mr Parker's boy and found he had died from rheumatic fever due to working in the water.

Water in the coal measures has a high sulphur content, it is difficult to filter out, and consequently cannot be used for domestic purposes, and in certain conditions it can be harmful. Wet sores appeared on four of the toes on my right foot, slight rubbing of the skin must have occurred during

the walking underground, and it was said the water set up an infection, the largest sore was about five eighths of an inch in diameter, and the daily application of Vaseline and small bandages seemed to help in clearing up the trouble, bearing in mind the feet were wet twice on every working day, and after four weeks the sores completely cleared leaving faint scars.

The horses working underground were a heavy breed and were capable of pulling about 2.5 tons, all the loaded trams were taken to the Jinney Wheel where they were attached to the endless rope and a train of about ten was assembled to start the long journey to the pit bottom. The man in charge was called the Bond Rider, he sat on the front corner of the leading tram, he started and stopped the movement of the train by the simple expedient of touching the two bare wires fixed to the roof of the road with a short piece of metal. The wires spanned the distance to the pit bottom, probably over a mile away, a bell would sound in the engine house and the operator would respond to 1 ring to stop, and 2 to start, these signals were necessary in getting the train through the wind doors, and once opened, a curved bar fixed to the door would be rubbed by each passing tram keeping it open until the last one was through when the self closing door would seal off the air and so keep it circulating in the working area. Sometimes the leading tram would leave the rails and plough into the side of the road, the Bond Rider jumping for his life quickly gave the stop signal, he then had the job of getting the vehicle back on the rails. He removed the hooked end of the hauser and allowed it to dig into the wooden side of the tram, the engine operator at the pit bottom sensed the trouble, and at a given signal carefully allowed a small movement to pull it in a more central position near the rails where it was manhandled on to them, and after a signal of 3 rings the train continued its journey. The main passby at the bottom of the dipple was a collecting place for trams and a few more would be attached to the train before the final stage of travel. Arriving at the pit bottom the trams were unhooked to be manhandled one at a time into the cage and quickly hauled to the surface. The twin cage now at the bottom of the shaft was loaded in a similar way, but on the return journey the trams now free of their loads sometimes contained timber props, metal for the blacksmith's and farriers, or oats and hay for the stables. Sometimes a message would be chalked on the side of a tram known to be going to the surface, 'NO TIMBER TODAY', and when it was seen by the colliers they had to decide if work could continue at the risk of the top coming down, or to go out of the pit and lose part of the money for the shift, they usually continued working, all too aware of the additional danger.

At this time my consumption of candles was 6 to a each day, and I found it more economic to use a carbide lamp, these lamps were made from brass, weighed about 8 ounces, and the flat hook at the rear made it suitable to be attached to a modified trilby hat, protective helmets had not been introduced at this time. The brim of the hat was removed except for a 2 inch wide section in the front, slots were cut into the base of the crown and cord threaded in and out, a knot was tied at the right tension and the man's hat fitted a boy's head, this was important as the weight of the lamp could pull the front of the hat down and so affect the vision. The remainder of the brim was pulled down on to the forehead to protect the skin from heat, the JUSTRITE lamp then hung on the front loop of cord end the brim section was slotted for inserting the flat handle at the rear to stop the sideways movement when walking. One advantage of having a lamp in this position was, it left both hands free, spare carbide at 3d a pound (1.5p) was kept in the small size Andrews Liver Salt tin and carried in one of the waistcoat pockets.

The two Butties would still burn their candles which were stuck on the coal face with a ball of clay gripping the lower end so it was still possible to detect bad air visually. Once or twice the ventilation system seemed to break down and foul air came back from the workings causing the candle flame to get smaller, when it reduced to about a quarter of an inch the flame seemed to detach itself from the wick and hover two inches above it. The two men, now on the stage with me discussed the possibility of going out of the pit and lose money, or stay and wait for fresh air to circulate. The decision was to stay, and laying face down to get the maximum air, our eyes concentrated on the small light of one candle, we saw the flame jump back on to the wick, and in 25 minutes the air was back to normal, and we proceeded to make up for the lost time.

The whole area of the No Coal seam was free of running water, it was a big advantage, it probably accounted for the minimum of timbering in the horse roads, the top was fairly stable, and although it flaked off in various places during the night it rarely happened during the day. Almost every morning there were small falls to step over, perhaps two or three in our area alone adding up to about half a ton of rock to be cleared by the Company Men before the horse could get to work. There were hazards to overcome on the way out at the end of the day, and men seemed to develop a sense which enabled them to detect danger, the horses too had this sixth sense.

I was about halfway to the pit bottom when I came to a horse and its driver, he was older than I, probably seventeen or eighteen years of age, he said he could not get the horse to move. I suggested that we backed up a few yards as the animal was showing signs of fear. By this time my two Butties had joined us, peering ahead with their cupped candles held out in front, we went back a few more yards, there was only the sound of breathing, then a slight noise as if two lumps of sugar had been thrown to the ground, in the next few seconds the top came down for a distance of about 40 feet in the position where the horse had stopped in the first place, and we all realized our lives had been saved by the horse. When the dust had settled three of us got over the obstruction by climbing into the hole the fall had made, and on arriving at the surface reported to the management that the horse and driver were trapped although most of the men arriving at the fall were able to get through, the driver, young as he was would not leave the horse. The Company's Men were sent to clear the fall releasing the animal, and some of the older men not agile enough to climb over the tons of rock.

A similar incident occurred at the bottom of the Dipple, here the roof of the Main Passby was supported by the complete trunk of an oak tree about 12 or 15 inches thick and 18 feet long. About twelve men were in a small crowd when we joined them, they seemed to have had an indication of danger, suddenly there was a loud cracking noise, we all backed away hastily, and the oak broke in the centre taking the shape of a shallow V as it slowly came down to the floor followed by about ten tons of the top. Everyone was shaken by this, we expected a larger fall in view of the wide roof span, then slowly one by one we got around the sides of the fall by edging past the still vertical timbers and made our ways up the dipple. When this sort of thing happened men talked about the "safety" way out at the Speech House Hill Pit, the idea was to go back to the workings in the event of a big fall and make a quick exit by the alternative shaft, but no one seemed to know how to get to it.

At the end of the day drivers unhooked the horses from the trams leaving them in a convenient position for the next day and walked behind their charges to the stables. In common with the horses working in the woods they could be controlled at a distance by commands of, 'Come Here' (turn to

the left), 'See Back' (turn to the right) 'Gee Up' and 'Woa Back' (start and stop). After the first half of the journey had been covered they broke into a gallop leaving the drivers behind, at the bottom of the Dipple their speed seemed to increase and it was every man for himself. There were recesses in the sides of most of the roads for men to stand aside to allow the animals to pass in their race through the darkness. In the Dipple brick sections had 'man holes' built into them large enough to accommodate about ten men 'to protect them from runaway trains and galloping horses. I had to run to one of them and keep out of the way of three horses in their high speed journey to the stables, suddenly the leading horse stopped and turned as if to enter the manhole, I was alone and very much afraid, but fortunately for me it must have remembered its destination and ran off again up the steep slope of the Dipple slipping and stumbling on the rails followed by the two other horses. Sometimes a last train would be run as men were walking the long roads to the pit bottom and horses were running at speed through the darkness.

Trains were moved by the endless rope from the main passby at the bottom of the Dipple to the area at the bottom of the shaft and no Bond Rider was required, a distance of about half a mile and a gradient of about 1 in 6. A slight movement of the rope lying between the rails was a warning to move quickly to one side as often when the strain on the line of trams was taken up the rope smacked against the roof so it was highly dangerous to find one's legs each side of it. On one of these occasions I was again in a man hole at the side of the Dipple avoiding a running horse when the rope normally at rest between the rails suddenly slapped against the roof as the breathless animal passed the entrance of the man hole. With legs each side it was tossed into the air just two yards away, and falling on its side quickly scrambled up to run terrified to the stables. I was joined by other men who were keeping in front of the train by running up the gradient, and breathlessly they threw themselves into the safety of the manhole.

On arriving at the pit bottom Bond Tickets were shown, the men were packed into the cage, and the upward journey commenced. Both cages must have been in their original condition, each corner of the iron sides had a small section of U shaped metal channel, and four lengths of timber quartering ran from top to bottom of the shaft, they engaged in the channeling and had the effect of steadying the cage in the up and down movement. The cages passing each other halfway down the shaft swayed considerably, the wooden quartering being inefficient and affected by the water cascading upon it made a sideways movement of up to 12 inches, and there was one occasion when both cages moved towards each other at the passing point, and stuck. They were as solid as if bolted together, and one or two of the men became a little upset at the sudden stop, I was hard up against one of the two sides of the cage, one middle aged, well experienced man panicked and went berserk, he happened to be in the middle of the 11 of us and he was kicking and fighting the other men in an effort to get out of the cage to climb on to the now slack chains above us. He was knocked unconscious with blows to the head by the other men, but due to the cramped conditions he was still in an upright position, arms and heads were the only parts of the body which could be moved. Within half an hour a man came down to us on a rope ladder, he banged at metal parts of the cages with a hammer and we soon continued our upward journey with our rescuer holding on to the chain assembly above us, we were packed too tight for him to join us in the cage. The man in the middle had by now recovered his senses and no reference was made about his behaviour or how the other men had beaten him. The cage did not pause when our eyes were above ground level this time, but the sun was decidedly brighter.

The double winding allowed one cage to be at the surface and the other at the pit bottom, the signals were given at the top and bottom of the shaft to regulate the movement of both cages, a metal hammer pivoted to a framework was at each end of the shaft, and in turn handles at each end of the shaft were attached to haulers to their respective hammers. A pull on the handle at the pit bottom moved the pivoted hammer at ground level causing it to strike a shallow cone shaped iron gong suspended at its centre. The noise of the signal could be heard half way to the Speech House, and such was the range of the vibrations the driver of the winding engine could not fail to hear it.

The man in charge of the cage at ground level gave information if there was no work on the following day by calling out, "Narbody in, Play tomorrow" and if no hauliers were required the call would be, "Colliers only". If there were two consecutive Play Days a steam operated hooter would sound at 4pm on the first Play Day, it continued for 15 minutes and could be heard by careful listening as far away as Cinderford, a distance of 4 or 5 miles. Other mines in the area had different times of the day for their "hooter", Lightmoor was unmistakable being so much nearer to the town, and working only one or two days a week. Three or four days a week on Play Days money would be made up at the Labour Exchange, and for a man under 21 years of age the amount was 5p a day.

The hooter sounded on every hour as a time check, and although in close proximity it was completely ignored by the horse, but at 3pm when work was finished for the day it galloped to the stable sometimes still harnessed to the trams which became wedged in the doorway in its effort to reach the manger. Most 'dirt mounts' were so steep that a Jinney Wheel and Endless Rope had to be used to get the tram loads of waste to the end of it where two men upended the load.

National Health Contributions were not payable by workers under the age of 16, but money was taken from all wages to support the Dilke Hospital to ensure medical treatment for miners in the event of accident. Stretchers and First Aid equipment were not very much in evidence in some of the mines and there was an instance when the vehicle we travelled in to the New Fancy was held up one morning to allow four men to cross the road near the Dilke Hospital. They had walked from Lightmoor Colliery nearby carrying a badly injured miner on a sheet of bradish, the men each held a corner of the material and the patient laid in it as if in a hammock .

Some of the Forest mines made free issue of coal to their employees, but at the New Fancy a charge was made. A coal ticket was issued to a man, or boy if his mother was a widow, it entitled the holder to the amount of coal in a tram after it was released by the weighbridge the weight varying between 23-28 cwt, the cost was 37.5p, just short of a collier's pay for the day. The ticket was issued every six weeks and haulage was an additional cost, bringing the total to 62.5p. Off cuts of timber could be bought for 5p a hundredweight, the bag of blocks was thrown on top of the lorry load of coal by the goodwill of the haulier. Coal and wood was the only means of cooking and boiling water in many of the cottages and it was important to have a regular supply, but in the event of a family having no money for coal, wood could be, and was gathered from the floor of the Forest, the Foresters looked upon it as a right without recourse to the "wood keeper". Bundles were made up wherever dead wood could be found, wooden wheel barrows were used for transportation, the three sons of one family used a two wheeled cart to get firewood to burn, and bracken for the pigs to lie on. Wherever the Woodcutters were at work children were there with their trolleys and sacks waiting for the chips of wood to be released by the great axes.

My memory of the events of 1928- 1930 remain indelible, I still see my two Butties with their blue tinged scars puffing and wheezing to get their breath, the trilby hat of Cornelius, the tattered cap of Charlie, and the voice of one or the other saying, "Come on old Butt we be waiting for thee and thy 'odd". There 'Car' chiding God because handling extra dirt was losing us money. His brother was so worried about the few hundred pounds he owed for his bungalow, he grew cabbages in his large garden in an effort to get a little extra money, only to be told by the greengrocer in Cinderford he would pay 0.25p each for the 400 if cleaned, bagged, and delivered. I have remembered Mr Parker firing the gelignite still sucking his clay pipe turned upside down with the blackened stem a little more than an inch long, the tragedy of his son in the water of Brazzilly, the scarred faces of the men swaying around corners seated on the two hard benches in the lorry taking them back to their homes weary, dirty, and talking about "the bloody coal runnin' nesh", or "them buggers not sendin' thick lot of timber down". There was the stream of curses from Old Man Worgan burning his nose as he struggled to get his short stemmed pipe alight, it seemed when the lorry was turning by the Speech House the lighted match always touched his nose. Tom, always seated in the corner, silent for the whole journey seemed resentful of the indignities we had to suffer for our few shillings each day, even now I could draw the shape of those two blue scars on his nose, and the piece of his cheek which had never been stitched back into position.

My mother came to the Forest in 1907 from London, she was determined to go back one day, that day arrived early in 1930, and Frank Popejoy took us there with all our furniture in his brand new lorry for £5.

Now I have returned to the Forest 45 years after these events to find the Fancy mine shaft a shallow hole in the ground, and most of the dirt mount missing and turned into a tourist attraction, few of the visitors can have any idea of the struggle to get enough money for a mere existence, it all seems remote as the Middle Ages. I have looked in vain for men I knew in the pit, in other circumstances some should be here but they have all died, many before their time, probably due to the hard physical work they had to endure, how I wish I could tell them life would be so much easier for them now. I got away from it all in good time, my health did not suffer under the harsh conditions.

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