The Dusty Decade

The ten years between September 1920, when I “went down the pit”, and October 1930, when I went to Oxford, I often call “The Dusty Decade”. While I still worked at Evanstown brickworks, Charlie and Mam were trying hard to get me “in” at Coytrahen - and one day this fairy-tale plan began. I liked swimming in the river and one fine day I was frolicking in a pool we called “Kitchener”, opposite Tondu Cricket Club ground.

Further down river, some other kids were playing “cock-hen-goose-gander”, skimming flat, smooth stones on the water. Somebody must have had an extra strong arm, for a stone was just about to reach the magic “gander” when it hit me hard just above the bridge of my nose as I was about to stand up in the shallows. The only one who seemed to notice my plight was a man just passing by, who promptly helped me to the grassy bank, helped me to dress and gave me a clean hanky to staunch the bleeding. His name was Barry, he said.

I was telling Mam. “Mr Barry! That’s the manager of Coytrahen.” So, the fairy tale plan. Me in my “tidy clothes”, Mr Barry’s washed and ironed hanky in my pocket, I am being shown into the Manager’s office. Yes, you’ve guessed it; he was a totally different Mr Barry! Red-faced Stanley, and Mam? Well!!!

But I got “in” quite soon after that episode. I was very small and skinny, and ever so shy I remember. One not only had to get used to working in the colliery but also used to working alternate shifts - “days” one week, then “nights”, then “afternoons” or, as I remember, we called it then “Traffic Shift”.

Working almost a year at the brickworks must have helped, but it was all so very different, especially going to bed in the daytime after the night shift. After a while, I began to appreciate that nights and afternoons meant Saturday off. We got paid six shifts for five worked, and if we lost a shift, we were docked one and one fifth shifts.

When I started at Coytrahen, preparing to go to work was much different from the same operation for Evanstown brickworks or, farther back, for school. Let’s make it a day shift. Mam would already have taken the dry kindling for the oven and got a good fire round the kettle. If there was time, we might have porridge and tea, if not, a slice of bread and whatever was going and tea. While I ate my breakfast, Mam would have packed my tommy-box with bread and cheese and cake (mostly), and filled my “jack” or bottle with cold tea.

I would be wearing long pants (!), a vest, a Welsh-flannel shirt and black stockings. My trousers were ex-Army khaki, much too big for me. With strong string, I tied "Yorks" below the knees and above my ankles. Later, the shirt and trousers were to become much patched and the stockings much darned.

I wore heavy hob-nailed boots ("naily boots") with leather laces which Charlie showed me how to keep supple with "Company oil". Later, these too were greatly patched and cobbled with a do-it-yourself shoemaker's last and old rubber tyres. Next, came my waistcoat in which I sometimes had a couple of smelly "nips"(dog-ends of cigarettes). Then my coat (jacket) into which, again prompted by Charlie, Mam had sewn a poacher's pocket each side.

On went my scarf and my cap.

Into my inside coat pocket went my candles - three or four wrapped in newspaper. (Later I would learn to tell the time with these). One poacher's pocket held my tommy-box, the other my jack or bottle. Sometimes I carried matches, but more often I would leave that to the grown-ups. Later, I included a pair of homemade kneepads. Very occasionally, I would carry an orange, an apple or a few toffees.

Right then! Out the back door. "Ta! Ta! Mam". "Ta! Ta! Stanley. Be careful, won't ee!". Across the yard, past Chappel's stable and cart shed down the gully, past Chappel's bakehouse turn right into Bridgend Road past the "Star", the cinema and the "Angel". Down the Rock Hill, past the "Rock" and the "Bell", the Workmen's' Institute, the "Lion" and the Post Office. Then past a pub I can't remember the name of, the Square, the "Collier's Arms" and the "Prince" up the Catholic Hill, past St John's Church and the Catholic Church. On into Tondu, past Evanstown brickworks, under the Red Bridge, past Tondu School, the wagon works and the crusher, the "Llynvie Arms" and I am nearly there.

With almost every step, I have been joined with miners and boys and the sound of our hobnailed boots echoes like an Army on the march. Turn right into Coytrahen Park Drive, march, march, march - and at last I have arrived at the colliery bank. Must have been well over a mile.

Coming home, our teeth and eyes gleaming white through the sweaty coal-dust, we would be travelling lighter, having used up our food and drink and most of our candles. But, almost without fail, there would be one valuable addition, a "block", for each of us carried a "Norway" off-cut under one arm. There would be much chatter about sport, politics or whatever, but those in front of the column had better keep a tighter grip on their blocks, for the jokers behind them could often throw their own block with such speed and precision that the unwary one's offcut went hurtling ahead, being neatly replaced under his arm with that of the marksman in the rear ranks. That was a normal day, decent weather and no trouble. Bad weather - I will leave that to your own imagination.

When the dead-cart had been in use or the ambulance had rushed a miner or miners at top speed to Cardiff Infirmary, the mood was not so chirpy. Again, arriving at the Bank only to be told "No work today. Stop tracks." was infuriating. No good shouting and swearing about Mr Baldwin and "them". Turn around, shrug

your shoulders and go back home. Get the bath water on and get cleaned up and into your tidy togs.

Bank meetings, except in special cases, were taboo. Union meetings were usually held in the top room of a pub, extra-big ones in the cinema. One special pithead meeting I well remember. A miner, well known to, and popular with, almost everybody on the three shifts had been killed under a fall in the night. The day shift wanted to take the day off as a mark of respect to the dead man. The upshot was that we all gathered around the manager, who stood on top of a tram of coal. After explaining where his sympathies lay in this shocking tragedy, he quietly pleaded for common sense, pointing out that we would still have to "break the ice" tomorrow whatever happened.

In the end we did go down, albeit a little later than usual, and, at least in my Section, it was a sad, quiet and thoughtful day. But it wasn't always sad, quiet and thoughtful. We did have a few laughs and among the many miners I worked with, young and old big and little fat and thin there were those species found in all walks of life (and thank God for them!), the inveterate joker, ever-smiling, determined to get a laugh out of life. Their practical jokes and sometimes-bawdy banter were too numerous to mention here.

Most miners carried a lump of chalk, chiefly for marking trams or scribbling a message on a shovel for the on-coming shift, graffiti was quite common. I will mention two only. One is a mixture. A much-disliked collier came back after a spell at home, sick, to find his epitaph on the filling-stage ("Shaft"). Some wags had used small coal and rubble to build a six-foot grave on the staging. Towards the "headstone" had been placed a bunch of very dead dandelions. On the "headstone", a rude cross, made from old sleepers, was chalked: "R.I.P. you miserable old bugger".

Several chaps were quite good at drawing caricatures, chiefly of one of "them", the bosses but the best one?

The oncoming night shift paused agog at the outer door of 15 West. There, illuminated by their cap-lamps and candles, was a monster cartoon. It depicted a rampant pony, with shafts still attached, fleeing from an upset cart, from which flew in all directions carrots and cauliflowers, apples and pears, bananas and oranges, swedes, turnips and parsnips, and I don't know what - all while a chap, with open mouth and flying hair, gazed aghast at the wreckage and confusion. We all recognised him immediately.

He was a young miner, whom we all liked, who had arranged to work "nights-regular" while he tried to work up a fruit-and-vegetable round during the daytime. Unfortunately, he and his outfit had run into trouble, and our "artist", as usual, had hugely magnified the unlucky incident on the very big wooden door. Yes, we all were amused.

Many of the men were members of various male-voice choirs and glee-singers and the strains of popular songs, ballads, oratorios and hymns would often compete with the sound of pick and shovel, escaping "blast" and the rattle of trams. These, as

the saying goes, are “far too many to mention”. A few?

“Sospan Fach”, “Peggy O’Neill”, “Yes, we have no Bananas”, “Jerusalem”, “The Holy City”, “Comrades in Arms”, “Guide me, O Thy Great Redeemer”, “Calun Llan”, etc, etc. Me? I sang (?) some of those but added a few Boy Scout campfire ditties. After all, wasn’t I in the choir at Llansantffraid Church? Even to this day, I remember oodles of hymns. I always enjoy “Songs of Praise” on Sunday on the “telly” - when I often recall those far-off days. Cut it out, boyo! Too sentimental, mun.

“Holing”, as we called undercutting the seam at the coal-face, was an art as well as a trial of strength. Lying on your side, chipping, chipping at the hard coal (not the rock bottom) was best performed with an easy rhythm - achieved only after long practice with patience and “elbow grease”. Sometimes, it could go on for hours and, with experience, if one was able to roll over and do it left-handed, very rewarding.

Before I graduated to general handyman, I was lucky to be able to do this with mandrill and shovel. The mandrill (looking back 60 years) was a good example of the toolmaker’s art. A smooth, oval-shaped shaft about 3 feet long was capped at the business end with a steel “box” to take the removable blade. The blade was about 15 inches long, slotted in the centre to fit the box, sharpened to needle point at each end and finely tempered. The box held a steel key, burred at one end to retain it when the blade was removed. To use, the blade was slotted into the box and the key tapped in to retain it. How long the blade lasted depended largely on the toughness of the coal. I seem to recall that we generally used two or three blades per shift.

At the end of the stint, it was the boy’s job to pop the blunt blades in the blade-box and deposit them in the blacksmith’s shop on top, where they would be sharpened, tempered, and placed in the blade-box for collection by the boy at the beginning of the next shift. Each blade was stamped with the miner’s number, which coincided, of course, with the number on the box. The blade-box was made of strong tin with a small carrying handle. Inside, at the bottom of the box and the lid, wooden discs were fitted to protect the points of the blades. There was a small latch which could take a snap-lock - but I can’t remember this being used all that often.

We also required a scoop-shovel, a sledge and a wedge and, sometimes, a measuring-stick. Other necessities, in open-light pits, were a cap-lamp (not for everyone), candles, and a candle-spike. A spike could be bought for a few coppers (old money) in the ironmonger’s shop. We also made our own. Saw a couple of inches off an old mandrill-shaft bore a hole through the middle with a red-hot poker then drive a long nail safely into one end, cut off the nail-head and sharpen the end into a point. Another method, and much the cheaper one, was to use a handy ball of damp clay.

As the tools had to be bought by the miners themselves, Dai often borrowed from Ianto when they were starting to work “a stall of your own”. The most borrowed tools were hatchets (with a warning about cutting stones with it) sledge and wedge

and the ratchet coal-boring machine, which, looking back again, now seems a very primitive gadget but, with a bit of contortionism, patience, and not a few choice swear words, did the job it was made for.

Specialist workers, driving headings or main returns, and certain repairers, had their own toolbox with a good lock. Miners working stalls in three-shift gangs, didn't usually need to lock their tools, these being shared. When a miner worked a stall with his mate on their own ("days regular"), he usually secured his tools very simply. Boring holes with a red-hot poker in the shafts of his mandrill, sledge, shovel and hatchet, he threaded them on to a tool-bar, a slim, steel rod with a ring or crosspiece at one end and ring at the other for his lock. Any tool he could lock on he did.

Besides the kit I have mentioned, there were certainly others I have forgotten (sixty years is a very long time). There were also other aids which we called "Doofers"-do-for-now, maybe an old sleeper, a short piece of rail, a crooked lag, and so on-too many to mention but, in certain circumstances, "just the job".

The coal-boring ratchet was, of course, used only to bore holes in the coal-face, already holed. Rock-boring was a quite different operation. The coal-borer (then) was a steel, ratcheted frame which, by means of adjustable parts, was fixed firmly top and bottom. The steel drill (about one inch in diameter?) was really auger-shaped-"twisty"-pointed at one end, squared for the handle at the other end. After a period of sweating and swearing and handle turning (all in very low height, usually), you cleared the hole with a useful little raking-rod, pushed home the right amount of black-powder.

Into the outside powder-packet (They looked like half-ounce packets of tobacco), a detonator, attached to the fuse, was fixed and gently pushed home with a ramrod. Next came the "ramming"-balls of clay mostly, rammed one behind the other until the hole was filled. The fuse was cut to a safe length, places of safety sought, fuse lit, "FIRE", a sizzle from the fuse, a small pause-----, then "BANG!", a cloud of acrid smoke, and down came a couple of trams of coal-on good days!

It was, like too many things down under, not very nice, but, as always, I soon got used to it. Where the white powder comes in, some more tools do also, solid steel drills for boring rock in driving headings. At the face of a heading (at least a mile from pit bottom in 15 West), if the coal seam is a narrow one, there is much more muck (stone and shale) than coal. The coal was got in the same manner as in a stall, but the "bottom" was a different matter. As much as possible would be removed with the mandrill's big brother, a pick, or sledge and wedge.

When this method was exhausted, the rock would have to be bored and blasted. This was real hard labour. We called it "hammer-and-clink". I am sure that's where the term "boring" came from, for if ever there was a monotonous chore this was it. (How the modern miner would laugh at it!). A suitable spot would be chosen and the job would begin.

Turn and turn about, the man and his mate would hold the sharp end of the shortest drill on the chosen spot, while the other swung the heavy sledge and

banged the blunt end. A half turn of the drill, another bang of the sledge, a pause to scrape out the stone-dust and so on and on. Get your breath back while scraping-out and changing to a longer drill as the hole bites deeper and so on and on.

At long last, when a couple of holes have been driven after umpteen swings of the heavy sledge and I-don't-know-how-many-slow bites of the crawling drill you are ready for blast -off. (The holes I remember best were about 3ft 6 inches). Certainly you've earned a breather and certainly the drills have become another labour of love for the blacksmith.

The whole system of firing is the same as I described before, except that white powder is used-and round about now I remember the shotsman and his battery-blaster. And round about now (it must have been shortly before I left Coytrahen) a new method was born. They were substituting "hammer-and-clink" with a machine I think was called a "Flopman". This, as I remember, resembled a modern road-drill. Driven by "blast" (compressed air), it was even noisier and, as I never used one and seem to have left the scene forever, that is all I can say about it. One memory will never fade. Trying to sleep by day after a night shift on "narrow work" in the stall nearest the face of the heading, I kept hearing the echoing "clink" and "boom" in my tortured ears. But, as I said before, I got used to it.

A change from the old to the new was being made. A new vein was being opened up way, way down The Deep (the main slant) below where I normally worked. Here it was found necessary to prohibit open lights (candles and oil cap-lamps). Smoking, of course, was banned and electric safety lamps were issued to the men. So a lamp-room was opened where a lamp was issued to each man and the lamp batteries were recharged when the lamps were off duty. Each lamp was numbered and each miner was issued with a metal "check" similar to a coin (about the size of a florin or "two-bob-bit"). Going on duty, I (transferred temporarily to this heading), handed in my check, received a lamp, twisted the bottom to test the battery, did my shift and handed back the lamp for the check in exchange.

One day I was involved in a slight accident and my lamp suffered the worst of it. On top, I handed the lamp to the lamp-man, David Lewis, and muttered something like "Lamp is busted". After a slight hesitation, he handed my check to me and off home I went. I knew David quite well. He knew I was attending evening classes and encouraged me to "do a bit of scribbling" as I called it. I had eaten my dinner and was getting ready for my bath when David was at the back door of No. 1 Mount Pleasant. "I was on my way home and thought I'd better warn you", said he. "I felt it my duty to report the lackadaisical manner in which you reported the accident, Stanley". "Oh!" I said. "So", he went on, "You are to see the under-manager in his office before you go down tomorrow". "Ta! David". He went on his way and I worried a bit. Mam was quite worried. The sack? Anti-climax. In the morning, all went well. "Lucky it was the bloody lamp and not you", was the Big Man's verdict. And that was that.

One temporary job I was given I enjoyed a lot. It was a bit offbeat: assistant surveyor. Detailed plans of all workings, old and new, were held in the offices up top. These were kept up to date by management with the help of qualified surveyors and played a most important part in running the pit. Anyway, I was to wait each

day at the fireman's cabin for this surveyor's arrival. He turned out to be a very pleasant young man who knew his job well.

It was believed that a couple of the longer holdings were approaching the boundary agreed upon by the powers that be. One of these headings, 15 West, I knew "inside out" even though it must have been about a mile long. The surveyor was to prove distance and direction, especially at the heading's face and the inside working stalls. First, we shared the equipment. He carried his maps and plans, a sighting stick-and his precious theodolite, which I'd never seen before. I carried a couple of sighting sticks and the large, heavy measuring tape.

Not much was said during the sighting and measuring and note taking, but when we stopped briefly at grub-time he could talk. Why didn't I study for a miner's certificate and, later, under-manager, manager? What about qualifying for surveying? Did I want to be at the coal-face all my life, etc., etc.! My answer was I did go to evening classes and I was studying, in my own little way. And, these days, I did not see much of the actual coal-face and I was enjoying a variety of jobs I was given. I suppose because of this I later sometimes accompanied the under-manager, as guide and companion, through the main returns and airways while he tested the airflow with a mysterious instrument (an anemometer?). When Morgan and I were working in the main return from 15 West upwards, we savoured a variety of smells borne on the fan-sucked air for over a mile to the heading face and back another mile through the narrow airways.

Though diluted by distance, we could pick out almost each smell and identify it. There was the fowsty, earthy tang of coal-dust and timber after snap time, newspaper, bread -and-cheese, and onions after shot-firing, the acrid smell of gunpowder almost every breath carried the overriding stink of sweating horses and humans-and their excreta. New brattice-cloth was detected by a sharp, tarry odour cigarette-and tobacco smoke were easy. The cigarettes were usually "Wild Woodbines" and the tobacco "Franklyn's Shag". The stink of company oil burning in cap-lamps and candle grease and smoke were sometimes mixed with what I considered the sweetest smell of them all-the lovely nostril caressing aroma of a juicy orange.

Maintaining the airways was a most important job because, besides keeping the life-giving air flowing freely through the workings, it was a possible means of escape or rescue when serious accidents occurred. (As I have related elsewhere, I was able to drag a nosebag of feed to a trapped horse to keep him going until rescued). Miles from the nearest miners, when it was time to put on our nosebags, the problem for old Morgan and I was to find a safe spot, sheltered from the strong draught, and dry.

How we managed to do so was certainly experience and know-how, and foresight. But one day, a long way from the nearest workings, tired and hungry, we realised that we were too far from one of our known snap-spots. In desperation, we were forced to make a tiny island in a murky pool just off one of the old headings. This we did with large stones, old sleepers and shattered timbers. There we sat, fully clothed, tightly buttoned up, our tommy-boxes in our laps; bottom perched on one support, feet on another.

One day, we discovered an airway, which, due to all-round pressure, had shrunk below the permitted dimensions. We decided to examine the airway from separate ends. (We rarely separated and, now, I for one felt a wee bit scared. As I crawled around and into my end of the passage, I heard a muffled shout. It was Morgan. Having more belly than I did, girded by a thick, wide leather belt with a brass buckle, he had got stuck, and he wasn't very happy. Stifling a giggle, which calmed me a bit, I said I'd go round and through the other end, which I did but pull as hard as I could, I didn't budge him. Knocking the blade from a mandrill, I chipped and scraped at the bottom nearest Morgan's belly, while he wriggled and squirmed on his elbows. It took a long time, but we did it. We had a bit of a laugh when it was all over-but it was by no means a hearty laugh.

One job I carefully avoided like the plague was that of the haulier, who, perilously balanced on the "gun" behind his pony, was a vital link in coal production, driving a "journey" of empty trams into the stalls and face of the heading, sometimes a mile away, collecting the full trams, shackling up and driving them out to the parting near the Deep-over and over again. He wore his greasy cap back-to-front like a jockey, his large pot-lamp tied to his cap, flaming, smoking and smelling like mad. Inevitably, a tram would jump the rails now and then. Very occasionally, an elderly roadman may be working in that area who would help the haulier. More often, he was on his own. A simple derailment was easily put right. His back against the offending tram a good hand-grip underneath feet planted firmly against the nearest sleeper a deep, deep, breath then a mighty heave, accompanied by a torrent of super swear-words, usually did the trick.

A nasty jump-off with a full journey was much more difficult, requiring all the haulier's experience, plus patience-and his ever present "coaxers". These were sprags (billets of wood used for braking the tram wheels), short lengths of old sleepers and a couple of guide rails. Arranged cunningly under the offending wheels, a click of the tongue to the horse, "Whoa there, Tiger!" usually managed to perform a minor miracle.

His pony was his pal and this affection was mutual. (As always, there were exceptions, few enough to be ignored here). I have often seen a haulier, while he waited for the boys to fill the trams, swabbing his horse's legs and belly with water from the gutter running at the bottom-side of the heading. A thankful whinny, an affectionate pat and stroke on the nose and neck, the presentation of a sweet - smelling apple-and both were happy deep down in the dark pit. Sentimental? Well, why not?

If ever anything took a real battering at Coytrahen Park Colliery, it was the trams. Built of steel plating, on solid steel chassis, with flanged wheels, they were designed to hold a ton of coal. But, undergoing a fantastic battering until they could no longer be repaired, they sometimes leaked like a colander, generally in the corners, where the plating had sprung. It was up to a miner to teach his new boy how to plug these holes with suitable lumps before the filling began. If this were not done, the tram would leak like a sieve all the way out of the heading, up the Deep, over the bank to the weighing machine-and the miner would scratch his dusty head in dismay, wondering what had happened to his tonnage bonus.

Also, good boys soon learned to add weight by cunningly “racing” the top of the loaded tram with large lumps of coal. These boys got tips on paydays. The staging at the bottom of a stall, we called it a shaft, was most important-to the boy, which I found out early on to my advantage. Ideally, it should have a smooth bottom, for easy shovelling, at standing tram-top level as near as possible to the edge of the tram. It should be big enough to stock enough coal to quickly fill a couple of trams (a “doubler”) and have plenty of elbowroom for the boy, even though he should be ambidextrous.

A strong, stout stop should be placed correctly at the back of the staging, to take the wheels of the loaded cart from the face of the stall, so that the door can be knocked up and the coal slide easily on to the shaft with a minimum of shovelling. (Ignore this and you have the full cart dumped on to the shaft-and a lot of unnecessary trouble). Most of my mates, with a little prompting from me, took time and trouble to make a good job of it, Consequently, I could stick my spike into a handy post, my sheltered candle giving me enough light to plug and fill a tram in jolly quick time. Production, production bonus for my mate, and my tip benefited considerably.

Benefiting from my experience, my mate and I one memorable day managed to salvage the whole side of a shattered tram, which we flattened out with the sledge-hammer and fitted to the shaft. It made filling fast and easy. Solid, flat rock and a few old sleepers also made a good filling surface. (By the way, even today I get a belly laugh watching some hapless individual making hard labour of moving a heap of coal, coke, earth or what-have-you by digging into it with a shovel or spade!).

In my mind’s eye, I can see and smell a well-stocked shaft, lumps at the front for hole-plugging a thin candle shining in the right-hand corner the haulier squatting and puffing at a Woodbine and a patient pit-pony, jingling his harness and occasionally scraping a mud-spattered hoof. Sentiment? Again? Ah, well.

The parting at 15 West is where we all congregated briefly at the end of the shift, usually squatting, miner-fashion, on our haunches at the topside in the bigger height. The big rope and the clattering of the journey of carriages going down to the lower levels. Hearing this, we would proceed to our positions east and West of the Deep, ready to climb aboard the “journey” on our way to the brow. One day, we were all strangely silent and studious. Each of us was studying the first slim copy of the “Daily Herald”, handed out to us on top by the Union that morning, free.

After a while, one wag on the end of the row of squatters touched his paper to his candle and tossed it to his neighbour, who did likewise-and so on. In a moment, the whole area seemed to be ablaze. An old roadman, scared, tried to get to his feet, bumped his head on the unyielding top, and sat down quickly, rubbing his aching spot.

Flames, smoke and the acrid stink of burning paper were almost overwhelming and panic was beginning to bloom. Fortunately, this early copy was only a skeleton of what the journal was to become later and, a combination of that fact and some smart smothering work on the part of the wiser men and boys restored order. Many

smarting hands and singed eyebrows led to a determined move towards the frightened perpetrator of this stupid prank-but the carriages were on there way up and we had to "catch the journey".

In "The Land of Song", when only a few homes boasted a crude "wireless-set", and before television was heard of, it was only natural for the miners to sing at work and play. Now and again, memorably, one sweet melodic voice is heard above all the others, and due homage is paid. On the same 15 West parting, it is again the end of the shift and the miners have again assembled to wait for the journey up.

But this time, instead of squatting, they are all on their feet, gathered around a full tram of coal, upon which stands the small figure of a young lad who hasn't been "down" very long. He is singing, and his pure, sweet treble voice is rising, caressing the rocky roof and the gnarled old timbers with lovely, almost angelic, music. The work-weary miners are enthralled, hardly moving a limb. When at last the boy sang his final lovely note, there was such an outburst of cheering and clapping which made the roof tremble. The nearest miner lifted him down from the tram, hugged him and gave him a friendly pat on the bottom-as the sound of rushing wheels came from the Deep, and we all scampered to catch the journey up. I cannot tell you the name of the song or the singer, but, at the time, it was the only song there was, sung so beautifully in such unlikely surroundings. A memory to treasure.

Once, when I was working as a roving repairer in Coytrahen Park Colliery, my old mate and I arrived, after a long walk, at the scene of our next job. Taking off our coats and waistcoats, we were about to hang them up as high as we could on the timbers (to keep the rats away from our candles and "tommy-boxes"), when I spotted a woollen scarf hanging nearby. I asked a passing miner, "whose scarf is that?" "Bryn's", he whispered, and, hot as I was after our long walk, I shivered. Bryn was the lad who had been crushed to death the day before under the very fall of rock Morgan and I had come to clear.

Another time, as that same Morgan and I were hiding our tools and preparing to catch the "journey" to the surface, John Williams, a foreman, hurried up, all sweat and lather, with a request for me to do a good turn for a pit pony. "Collier", the pony was trapped behind a fall in the heading below and could not be released until the afternoon and night shifts cleared the fall. He was quite safe the other side of the fall, there was plenty of running water in the gutter of the heading - but he must be hungry. "Stanley", said John, "you know the airways and returns. I want you to take the old 'orse a bag of feed. Yes?"

Stripping to my singlet, I made my way back through the double air doors, down the main "return", through several connecting "airways", until I reached the "stall" John had told me was nearest to the trapped horse, all the time dragging the large, heavy feed-bag behind me. My knees and elbows got very sore and I sweat buckets but when I finally gave "Collier" his feed, the hungry way he tucked into it was a rich reward, and it was a lot easier crawling back to my clothes! No feedbag.

Another time, when I was a "butty" filling coal, I filled the first tram of my

"doubler" and stood in front of the pony to draw the next tram forward in front of the "shaft" I was filling from. He lurched forward. I shouted "Whoa!" and he promptly brought his near front hoof down on my right foot, trapped between the sleepers. Panic! Just as I felt the bones of my foot were bound to be crushed, I clung to his halter, swung up and kicked him with my free foot, sweating with fright - and in a moment I was free. But I carried the bruises for some time.

Another time, I was kneeling near the entrance to our "airway" back to the next "stall", filling a "cart". Shovel poised, I heard a "crack!" from a nearby post "pit-prop). In a split second, I dropped my shovel and somehow or other managed to leapfrog into the airway out of harm's way. With a nasty roar, down came a darn great boulder on the place where I had been kneeling.

In the awful silence which followed, and when the dust had cleared, I found all that I'd lost was the heel of my right boot. But my heart was beating nineteen to the dozen. I remember (I'll never forget) one night shift. We were nearly a mile from the fireman's cabin. My mate was "holing" at the coal-face with his mandrill, and I was turning coal back with my scooped shovel. Running feet, and a light appearing at the bottom of our stall. A screaming voice "Quick! Come quick! Tommy's cut 'is finger off!" My mate still clutched his "mandrill", petrified.

Grabbing my candle, I scurried crab-wise towards the other light and the frightened voice. When I reached "Tommy", I found a gory mess - coal-dust mixed with blood and wood-chips. He'd been fashioning a wedge to fix a pit prop to the roof. In the confined space, his hatchet had slipped and taken the top off one of his fingers. Tearing chunks of his singlet, I bound the bloodied finger and tied his wrist and forearm to his upper arm and told him and his boy to get out as quickly as possible to the fireman's cabin - and the ambulance box.

Later, the fireman told me I had "Done a damn good job, Stan, bach". It was in the same pit but in a different seam that my mate and I were trapped behind a thirty-yard fall. It was a "wet" seam called The Malthouse. We were both at the coal-face, Bill Lear and I, 30 yards up the slope from the heading. He was cutting coal; I was filling it into a low, wide-winged, four-wheeled cart. The cart was attached to a strong chain, which went through a "sheave" and all the way down to an empty cart at our filling "shaft".

The sheave was attached to a sheave-post, the main, middle pit-prop supporting the roof, which was the last of a line of similar props - until we moved upwards through the seam. The carts ran on a light railway, nailed to sleepers, which Bill and I laid as we moved further and further upwards. So, thirty yards of light railway, 30 yards of sleepers, and 30 yards of middle or sheave posts. When the face cart was full, I would remove the sheave-brake (an old mandrill shaft or, sometimes, a piece of sleeper). Bill's candle was in a ball of clay at his elbow; mine was in a "spike" stuck into the sheave-post.

When I removed the brake (or eased it a little, depending), I gave the full cart a push and down it went, pulling the empty cart up to the face to be filled - and so on, and on. The tailboard of the cart would be knocked off, the coal emptied on to our filling shaft, and I would fill it into trams for its journey out of the heading

and up to the “top”. This particular shift was “measuring day” and the firemen had already visited our stall and done his stuff to fix the “section” payment per ton we produced according to the confined height we worked in. Gingerly, I eased the brake on the sheave and gave the cart an encouraging shove, crouched on my hands and knees, of course. There was an almighty crack of timber, a swoosh of air darkness an ominous roar of falling, grinding, rock. I was flat on my face, my eyes and nose filled with dust - speechless, winded.

Bill’s voice, squeaky with dust and fright: “Stanley! Stanley! Jesus!” I recovered my voice and said something. I don’t know what I said. “Th-hank God”, from Bill, and then “Matches? Candles?” “Waistcoat matches, candles coat” I said breathlessly. But somehow I had crawled to the face and found both - and Bill had crawled and found me. I’ll never forget somehow lighting a candle and, shielding the flame with our hands, gaping at the tumbled mass of rock and timber cutting us off from the heading below.

Looking back, well over 50 years, it now seems incredible that Bill and I put on our waistcoats, jackets, scarves and caps and, dragging shovels, hatchet and picks, managed to worm our way through the settling boulders and mangled timber to reach the safety of the heading. Just as incredible was that Bill sat on our filling-shaft (the only dry spot) dangling his feet and smoking a Woodbine.

A very bright light and clumping feet and stick came towards us. “Manager”, I said, knowing that carbide lamp. And indeed, it was the manager himself. He stared at Bill and me - dressed and sitting down! “What the -“, he began holding up his lamp and shielding his eyes with a hand. Bill removed his half-smoked Woodbine, spat, and gestured behind him. “Stall’s in”. “Good God!” Where were you and the boy?”

Bill told him. I don’t remember saying anything. Sequel? I left the pits and went to Oxford in October 1930. Came “home” for Christmas. Among other things, I asked how was Bill Lear, who lived on Sarn. Dead, I was told. Killed in the pit? No, died of ‘flu - in bed.

For a time, I can’t remember how long, I became the “Brattice-man”, my duties being to persuade fresh air to chase foul air from the coal faces through the various narrow airways and returns to the upcast shaft, sucked up by the big fans “on top”, which is what we always called the surface. For this, I used “brattice-cloth” (a sort of tarred sacking), a hammer (a broad head on one side, a claw on the other) and stout, broad-headed brattice nails. The rolls of brattice were heavy and cumbersome, and a bag of brattice-nails was also heavy.

The trick of the trade was getting the equipment to where it was required quickly and with the least effort. Sometimes, this was easier said than done, especially in an emergency - one of which I well remember. An experiment with a “conveyor-face”, as opposed to a “stall and pillar”, coal getting was well under way. This meant a very long “face” of coal was being undercut by a machine powered by compressed air shot-holes bored into the seam and charged with powder the face cleared of miners while the shotsman fired the charges and the coal blown down for a team of men to shovel on to moving conveyors, which emptied into the trunk conveyor.

This particular shift, the fireman's early morning inspection had found the face totally fouled. So, while the men were held back from the face, I had to crawl slowly forward with my brattice, hammer and nails and persuade the good, fresh air to follow my brattice channel and chase the foul air away. It took quite a lot of brattice and nails and effort (and know-how!), and it took a lot out of me too! The delighted fireman said I could take a breather. Believe me, I couldn't do anything else - for some time.

In certain cases, I would use portable air-pipes to help out. These, I remember, were about two feet in diameter and six feet long - made of what I thought was tin (?). They slotted into each other. Number one would be at an air source, the others slotted and secured. Then, I would continue the flow with brattice nailed to pit props already in position.

In the old "stall and pillar" method, airways were always driven back to the next stall about ten yards up from the heading, and a wall of brattice would be fixed below each airway in such a manner that the carts (empty up and full down) could travel through without tearing the cloth. Thus, the fresh air was drawn in through the heading, circulating up each stall as far as the brattice wall, on and on until it reached the face of the heading, up the innermost stall and back through each airway, to the face of each stall and so on until it reached the "return" to the upcast shaft.

So, it will be obvious that brattice was a most important part of the whole ventilation system.

Keeping supplies of brattice and nails up-to-date meant know-how between the officials on each shift down below and the storekeepers "up top" but sometimes, not too often, a sudden demand would call for quick action on somebody's part.

Once, I remember vividly, it fell to me to make a quick move. I badly needed a bag of nails to finish an important stretch of bratticing - and it meant me going up top and fetching it. Sounds easy, but not so. Coytrahen was not a straight up-and-down pit, but a slant with a railroad all the way from top to bottom. Lines of trams, shackled together (empties down and full ones up) were wound by the big rope which was controlled from the engine room. These were called "journies".

A tough guy called the "rider", with a smelly, smoky cap-lamp blazing, controlled these journies by means of double signal wires stretched from the engine-room to the lowest "parting" (like a miniature railway-siding). This he did by making contact with a small piece of cake, bringing the two wires together the necessary number of times. I had to cling like a limpet (a very scared limpet!) between two full trams, riding the shackles, (child's play to the rider) and was I glad to see the daylight and put my naily boots on firm ground. I got my bag of nails as quickly as I could, jumped into an empty tram on the down journey and suffered another frightening ride into the darkness.

Curiously, this reminds me of a similar, but slightly less bumpy ride in the same slant. I was to be confirmed by the Bishop, among others, we being so hard up, could just not afford to lose a shift. (I was on days that week) So arrangements

were made for me to go “up” on the “Fireman’s journey”. This train of trams was laid on to take the fireman to the surface, about an hour before the miners’ knocking-off time.

I supposed the management considered it a waste to use the transport carriages, so a journey of empty trams was used in which the firemen (and me) crouched down to keep our heads below the level of the roof. For this trip, of course, the rider would signal “men on”, which meant that we reached the “bank” up top not too knocked about, just a little breathless and bruised.

In case I have not fully described elsewhere how we got “down” and then back “up”, here goes. When we reached Coytrahen Park Colliery, the first call was to the checkweigher’s office, where we were given a scrap of paper with a number on it, say 17E/1 or 22W/2, indicating a seat on the “journey” of carriages. These carriages were very low bogeys made of wood and metal. A wooden rail divided each carriage fore and aft, with seats each side, seven each side. Seven or eight carriages made up the “journey”. There was of necessity very little room between each seat. Space, up, down, and all around was very limited.

Your scrap of numbered paper was your ticket to your seat. 17E/1 meant your seat was the third seat on the third carriage on the East side on the first journey to go down, and, of course, the same seat on the same journey to come up. 22W/2 meant that your seat was the first seat on the fourth carriage on the West Side and the same seat to come up. I said these carriages were low, and we passengers had to sit low too, which meant we had to more or less lay down on the seats, squatting between each other’s legs - at all a comfortable ride. Heads had to be crouched down and elbows tucked in to avoid contact with the roof or sides, timbered or bare rock. And every miner (we all wore caps and scarves) had a tommy-box and drinking jack or bottle. In addition, one sometimes had a new shovel, hatchet or mandrill-shaft.

Almost every day we boys would carry down a box of sharpened mandrill blades, collected from the blacksmith’s shop and, quite often, a full powder-tin (LOCKED), collected from the powder magazine (an extra walk on top). I almost forgot to mention candles, matches and a pot-bellied oil-lamp. Hard to believe, but true nevertheless, those who could afford them also carried cigarettes or a pipe and tobacco.

Sad to mention, but part of the business of mining, the other form of transport was the “dead-cart”, once seen always remembered. When I became redundant at Coytrahen, I suffered a period of unemployment (there was no such thing as redundancy pay then!). Then I managed to get a job at Powell Duffryn (PDs), Llanharran - 9 long miles away.

At first, a chap took us there and brought us back for four shillings (“old” money) a week but when this failed to pay him, we had to find alternative transport. I went to Dunlop’s in Bridgend and got a Hercules bike on the “glad and sorry”, paying them the four bob each week until I had paid off £3-19-9 (again “old” money).

The worst ride was coming home, especially after leaving Pencoed behind and

heading for Heol-y-cyw across Pant Common. Head down and bum up, with the smoke from Brynwyth's chimney always coming towards you tired and filthy hungry and thirsty often wet and cold it was a huge relief at last to free-wheel down Sarn hill, whizz past Llansantffraid church, over Pandy bridge, into Aberkenfig, up Rock hill - and home sweet home at last.

And I now find it most remarkable how quickly I recovered after a hot cup of tea, a hot dinner, and a hot bath in Mam's old washtub in front of a hot fire. Some Vaseline around my eyes and on my hair, changed into my "second-best" clothes - and I was a new man. PDs was a real pit. We, and the coal, went up and down in cages. There were no pit ponies. The coal was worked with "blast"-driven coal-cutters and carried to pit-bottom on "conveyors", driven by "blast" engines. ("Blast" was our name for compressed air). It was all so very different to Coytrahen, but I quickly got used to it and was soon, as before, doing a variety of jobs.

Once, because I was, at the time, assistant to the conveyor maintenance man, I was invited to work a Sunday shift. I gladly accepted - extra money for Mam and me. It was a long and lonely ride to work. There were only a few of us down below, all on some kind of maintenance work. Gilbert was testing the crosscut conveyor and needed another spanner. As the conveyor was running slowly, and empty, I decided that the easiest and quickest way to get the spanner to Gilbert was to squat low on the conveyor trays and be "jigged" along the cross-cut.

Head bent very low, shoulder hunched, resting my electric safety lamp in my lap, I rode along, the spanner in my left hand. Losing caution for only a moment, my hand became trapped between the edge of the tray and the rocky side. Squelch! Quickly, yelling with pain as I did so, I transferred the spanner to my other hand and clutched a fold of my sweaty vest with my gory left hand. The pain was a bit much and I felt sick. I gave the spanner to my mate, who said I would find an ambulance-box with the main-and-tail engine driver. Pulling my vest loose from my trousers, and wrapping some more around my bloody hand, I managed to get to the little engine-house.

That was the day, the only day ever, said he, when the driver hadn't brought the box in. Where next? I was getting a bit shaky. Pit bottom I was told. Bound to be a box there, mun.

It was a long walk and, in my vest, my bloodied vest, I was getting cold. The couple of chaps at pit-bottom "tut-tutted" at the sight of my wound, but told me there was no ambulance box there either. Cold, shaky and getting rather fed up in general, I demanded they ring up top to send down an ambulance box. And they did - right away. A cold and anxious wait for the cage - but the ambulance box contained only a dirty ball of cotton wool! My God! Furious, I jumped into the cage and demanded that they ring "Men on" and send me up. They did and, livid with rage, almost crying with the cold and the pain, I found the ambulance shed.

It was much better there, warmer too. After a lot of sympathy, a clean-up, lint and bandage on my poor finger, a mug of hot tea and a friendly pat on the back, I felt more like Stan Parkhouse. Eventually, repeating the journey in reverse, Gilbert

wanted to know where the hell I had been all this time. In the dimness I stuck my bandaged hand in front of his face, took a deep breath - and what I told him he would never forget. And neither shall I!

In the same pit (PDs), another incident occurred which I have just remembered - but there was no blood spilled this time. It was the end of a day shift and, as usual, we were congregated at pit-bottom, waiting our turn to be taken to the surface in the cage. Through the buzz of conversation, I became aware of bells ringing, a sudden hush among the miners nearest the cage, then an angry outburst in top-grade Welsh miners' swear words.

There was some trouble in the winding-shed up top, with the engine or the ropes; we couldn't discover the exact cause. Anyway, one thing was very plain - we couldn't go up top until something or other was repaired. Although there was still life in our battery lamps and pit-bottom was reasonably well-lit with roof-lamps, it wasn't the warmest of places to hang about when one was tired, dirty, disappointed and, suddenly, very thirsty and hungry. And for those of us who came from the Aberkenfig area, about a dozen of us, there was a new worry. What would my Mam, and for the others, Mams and Dads, be thinking when we didn't arrive home at the usual time. We knew the answer. As always, with mining families, they would imagine the worst had happened.

It was all right for the locals. Surface workers, going home at the usual time, would be able to pass the news of the delay to the families of those waiting below. Telephones? Never heard of 'em. "Won't be long now, boys bach, some of the older miners tried to console us - and we cheered up a bit. But not much. It was a miserable, anxious, hungry wait, and some of us found odd spots out of the draught and huddled together for warmth, saying very little, but wondering what those at home were thinking.

As well as I can remember, it was about two long, long, hours before we at last were lifted to the top. I soon warmed up on my bike and pedalled like hell on the nine miles home. And - surprise! Surprise! There was no panic with Mam and the others when I finally walked in to No. 1 Mount Pleasant. Cyril Drake, one of our area boys, had overslept that morning - but, as it was Friday and pay-day he'd biked over to collect his wage-packet, heard the news, biked back as quickly as he could and told all our families. Good old Cyril! There followed, in quick succession, the best cup of tea I have ever tasted, the best dinner our Mam ever cooked and the most luxurious bath in the old tub that I have ever enjoyed.

A change of job at Powell Duffryn: I was "looking after" the trunk-conveyor which led to the loading-bay below. All the coal from the conveyors in the cross-cuts ("headings" in Coytrahen) was fed into the trunk. It was my job to keep an eye on the lad who controlled the compressed-air engine and, on no account allow a blockage to occur. It was a noisy, windy, lonely job-but there was a consolation. After "snap time", when the men had eaten their lunches, some of the newspaper wrapping came floating down in the coal on the conveyor. I became adept at rescuing a good percentage of these and later became quite good at reading with one eye, keeping one eye on the conveyor and reading an interesting tit-bit with the other.

Some of these tit-bits were very interesting and taught me a lot. When I tell you that the biggest danger on this job was the extra large lumps of coal going berserk when they entered the trunk from the cross-cuts, you will realise that it would have been an advantage to possess three eyes - one in the back of my head.

However, it had to happen. One day, (and from what you will gather shortly, it must have been in 1926), it did happen. While taking avoiding action against a monster lump of flying coal, I ducked into his mate. I was nearly stunned. A large lump formed on my head - a sticky, bloody, lump but, as it was almost knocking-off time, I decided that getting home was more important than finding the ambulance-box. I paid special attention to washing the bump, but for a few days it was hell.

Then it was Christmas, and Charlie was on his first visit home from Oxford. (That's how I know it was 1926). I couldn't hide it from him. He took charge. Sitting on the "big kitchen" sofa, he got me to kneel on the cokernut mat while he examined my bump. "Good God!" said Charlie. Quickly, a bowl of hot water, a flannel, a towel and Mam's scissors. As gently as he could, he gave the lump a haircut and swamped the place with very hot water. "Now", he said, "Hang on." He squeezed. "Ouch! Oh, hell!"

From Mam: "Stanley!" "Sorry, Mam, but it hurts." More hot water. More squeezing. And then, mercifully, the pain lifted and almost went away, and I sighed with relief. Charlie said "Dammo, mun, you ought to see the muck I got out!" I said "No thanks!" Then I thanked him, and I was about to light a Woodbine when he offered me one of his, Ardath, from Oxford. No expense spared. Good old Charlie!

Biking to and from PDs could, curiously enough, be almost a pleasure in the summer, but it was pretty grim in the winter. Rain and wind was bad enough hail and wind and icy roads were worse but snow was worst of all. The snow was bad one morning and we had had a hard job to collect our lamp-checks on time. It continued to snow all day, and when we collected our bikes from some local back-garden sheds (bob a week), we knew we had to face a rough ride home. After a short conference, we decided (6 or 7 mates) to ride follow-my-leader in the deepest ruts made by the wheels of the heaviest transport. Terry led the way. I was third from last, but the lead changed hands several times as first one, and the other, tumbled into the snow and scrambled back into the saddle.

For a few miles, we shared a few breathless laughs at each other's antics, but soon we had to save our breath. We reached the crest of a well-known down-slope near Pencoed. Normally, it would have been an enjoyable free-wheel scamper, but not today. In the distance, I saw one of the lads picking himself out of the snow and carrying on. Halfway down. So far, so good. I heard a big bus grinding along behind me. Almost too late, I realised that the nearside wheels of the bus were travelling in the same rut as my bike, and I heaved like made to the left, going head-over-heels. As the bus surged by, I caught the sight of frightened faces through the iced-up windows, mouths wide open with words I never heard. Some of the lads were taking a breather at the bottom of the hill - and all agreed that I'd just had a lucky escape, but when I got home, Mam's welcome was very special.

And the tea was hot, the dinner lovely, the water hot, beside a fire half way up the chimney.

One time, near Christmas, I was mate to Charlie Kendrick, driving a “cross-cut”, which we called a heading in Coytrahen (He eventually emigrated to Australia). He lived at Pencoed. Charlie was selling Christmas raffle tickets for a local charity. As usual, Mam and the rest of us bought a book of tickets between us. Cyril’s name was on one of the winning tickets - for a duck. Lovely! A duck for Christmas dinner! We were all excited and smacking our greedy lips. The snag was, Charlie pointed out, the duck had not been killed yet! Arrangements had to be made to collect the prize from Charlie’s house in Pencoed on Sunday, the day before Christmas. Well, the only choice was obvious, wasn’t it? “Our Stanley’s got a bike. Our Stanley knows the way. Our Stanley knows this Mr Kendrick”. So I went.

There followed one of my blackest, wettest, windiest, coldest rides on a bike. It rained all the way there and all the way back. Had I been built in the same manner as that confounded duck, it wouldn’t have mattered! Water not only ran off me in cold rivers, but through me. And when the old joke was cracked, “a ducking as well as a duck---!” But when it appeared in all its glory at our Christmas dinner with all and plenty of the trimmings, I concentrated on the duck and forgot about my ducking.

Roof and side support at Coytrahen was timber, pit props (“posts”) and wooden “lids” and wedges. These were used chiefly in “stalls”. Where there was necessarily more height and width, the Deep, headings and returns, longer and stouter timber was used as “pairs of timber”(arms and collars) with small lagging timber laid behind and, where necessary, above. Where “muck”, waste, was available, this would be filled in behind the lagging, and, most important, firmly fixed.

Suitable space being cleared each side, allowing for an angle on each arm, arms and collars would be “offered up”, the measuring stick, plus “hands” and “fingers” would be used. This was in conjunction with a simple system of sighting. Mate holds a candle (or lamp) on each new arm in turn boss goes back several pairs of timber and “sights” new arm’s light. Here’s where the hatchet (and know-how) came into its own. A point, not too sharp would be cut at the bottom of each arm to slot into the hole pecked into the rock bottom at the spot decided upon. The top end of each collar (measured to a “finger”) would have two “breasts” shaped upon it, short one in front, and longer one behind.

The arm, similarly measured, would have slots cut at each end to exactly fit the “breasts” on the collars at the agreed angle. Here’s where you needed more pairs of hands than were usually available. The line is right, the length and angle of each arm and the collar are right, but you just can’t stand there, Tin holding one arm and Tom the other to fix the “pair” upright. “Collier’s aids” are used. Some legs extending from behind the last pair of timbers and fixed temporarily, some old sleepers, a nice big lump of rock (“stone”) - but don’t use your measuring stick. You’ll need that for the next pair of timbers, and the next, and so on. And keep that hatchet sharp, boyo!

Pit props were much simpler. These were usually peeled spruce from abroad, the

most popular length being six feet six inches long, “six-and-a-halves”, of various circumferences; we called them “Norways”. Being used chiefly in stalls, as sheave-posts mainly, and the height nowhere near their length, the off-cuts yielded “lids” and “wedges” - and “blocks”. Every man was entitled to a block a day. (At No 1 Mount Pleasant, we split our block into kindling and placed enough in the oven to start a fire to boil the kettle quickly in the morning).

PDs was quite different. Here, steel “rings” were used. Two “arms” and no “collar”, for, joined together in the centre with nuts and bolts and fishplates. They made a half-circle. But “logs” were used above and behind and securely fastened as at Coytrahen. They needed a good solid slot in the bottom. Here also you needed more hands than were available for fixing. Favourite method was one man holding each ring against his back, one arm to steady, and one over his shoulder to manoeuvre it into position - and God help the learner who let the upper hand grasp the metal with his fingers outside the ring! The smallest stone falling out of a hole in the roof could cut off your finger against the metal. So, you soon learned.

But the job I hated most was perching on top of a tram, bolting the fishplates together. “Left a bit. Right a bit. Down a bit. Up a bit”. With a shadowy, gaping hole in the roof and the occasional dribble of loose stuff, I wasn’t very keen on it. And all done by lamplight. The rings I remember best were grooved and about eleven feet long. There were other methods of roof support, but I don’t want to be too boring. No doubt these will emerge later when I talk about “gobbing” and “pulling the stumps” - the latter being working on the retreat in the stall and pillar system.

On the last day of March 1921, Charlie and I were both on the night shift, he in 9 West, I in 15 West. As we turned into the long drive leading to the pit-head, we, and our colleagues, noticed how still the air had become but, no matter, our business was way, way, down below. I was on “narrow-work” with Joe Coles, which meant that, while I was busy filling a tram on the heading, he was in sight about 9 yards up, holing the face by the light of his candle. I blinked my eyes when the next journey of empty trams were pulled in. “Ay, mun”, grinned the haulier, “it’s snow alright. Wondered what was coming with that funny air on top.”

And it was - snow clinging to the sides and bottom of the trams - and snow means - This was a God-sent chance. He looked at the snow, then at me, then at Joe, sweating away at the face of the stall. He rolled a snowball, and I followed suit. We crawled to the lip of the shaft and took aim. “Now!” said the haulier, and we threw our snowballs! We should never have done it.

Joe Coles was not a bad-language man, but at that moment, he taught us a few new words we had never heard before. He rolled away from the face as fast as the limited space allowed him, terrorised. Quickly, we crawled up to him, tried to explain, tried to apologise. Then we dragged him down and showed him the snow in the trams. He took a long time to calm down. Then I spotted a bright carbide lamp, and heard the clump of a pair of heavy boots and a walking stick coming through the darkness. It was John “Goch”, the fireman. “All out, boys bach. Snowed up on top it is”. “Pull the other one John Goch. April Fool is it?”

(For, after midnight, it was indeed April 1st - and tomorrow was my 15th birthday).

There was little further delay, for the snow in the trams was evidence enough. So, tools put away, caps, scarves and coats on, we walked the long uphill drag to the brow. The sight was incredible. There was snow everywhere - in the "wee small hours" of April the First. Duw! Duw! Trudging homeward, we tended to bunch together. Somehow Big Brother Charlie was at Stanley's side, with a word of encouragement. By the time we made it up the gully to No. 1 Mount Pleasant, we were exhausted. At a sign from Charlie, I popped into our outside "dub" to shelter from the whirling snow.

When Charlie finally succeeded in rousing our Mam, she threw up the back bedroom window, spotted Charlie at the back door and screamed, "Stanley! Where's Stanley? Oh my God!" Quickly, I showed myself, and Mam let us in. I remember the lovely big fire we soon got going, the hot cups of tea, and the bath in the old tub. And I'll never forget April 1st 1921. (Much later, I found out that John "Goch" was Blanche's mother's brother.)

Even today (1983) I don't suppose a 15-year-old would know, or care, much about Trade Unions. Anyway, my mate at the time took enough interest in me to try to improve my political education and when a "special" Miners Union meeting was announced, he persuaded me to attend. Trade Union subscriptions then were only 2 or 3 pence. Now (1983) I am told they are around 30p or 40p, more than I was paid for one shift!

(Here I have decided not to use "real" names in case the incident arouses the wrong kind of reaction in any possible survivors). We were in a large room, which was crowded with miners and tobacco-smoke - and very noisy. Behind the speaker's dais, high on the wall, was a stuffed buffalo's head, which I understood was one of the signs of a "royal and ancient order", which held their "lodge" there, whose natty suitings, I later discovered were supplied made-to-measure by Tom Lewis, the draper.

Today, cloth caps and scarves were everywhere, even one or two up front among the speakers. As the speeches progressed, even I could gather that there was an (alleged) traitor in our midst. The chairman spoke the miners' agent spoke some of the committee spoke - and there certainly was some heckling. Hector (the "accused") was undoubtedly squirming uncomfortably in his chair, sweating a bit. Then he got to his feet and he spoke. Even to a tyro like me it was obvious that he was trying to bluster his way out of the "trial". So young, I was getting fed-up and my chair was hard on my bony bottom. Mam had taught me good manners, so I stifled a yawn. Where and when would it end?

Then, as quick as a flash, it was all over - for me anyway. Ianto "Pigeon" was in the aisle about 10 yards from the speaker. Big bloke he was. Pointing a finger dramatically, he said: "Aw, Hector, mun, what did old Judas do?"

Shortly afterwards, I joined (from compulsion) my first strike (or was it a lock-out?). I can't remember what it was all about and I don't think it lasted very long.

I have vague memories of enjoying myself. The weather was good. We swam in our favourite places, played cricket on the common, and went for long walks up Mynydd Bach and over Court Coleman. But it did not leave any lasting scars on me or the family, as did the one to come - in 1926.

I believe my "penny-notebook period" had started by now and I would wander off on my own and try to write poems "on the sky". Advice to the boys came, sometimes in a torrent of words, from their older mates on any subject, such as courting, mending a puncture in a bicycle tyre, billiards, snooker, singing, and so on and on, but seldom on the job in hand. You were expected to pick that up as you went along - which is one reason, I think, why I accepted so many different jobs below ground. (I wonder, now, why I never set my eyes on a job "on top" for a change. Must have been because surface jobs, unless skilled, were less well paid).

During snap-time at the stall-face one day, Bill went all-serious. First he described, sketchily, how he had done his courting - on horseback.

For the life of me I can't remember whether his sweetheart also had a horse - but anyway it was my courting he wanted to talk about. It went deeper than that in fact. He wanted to give me some sound advice, from the store of his experience. We were taking a longer break than usual and (being an open mine) Bill had a Woodbine going. "It's like this, Stan," he was telling me "you may know the girl well enough to take her for a day out, say to Porthcawl, isn't it?" "Ay", I answered, trying to be as serious as Bill, whom I knew was doing this for his butty's own good.

The shadowy light of our candles helped me to keep a straight face while he went on: "Well, um, a day's a long time, like, and you couldn't expect the young lady not to want to go, um, you know, go somewhere. Right?" I agreed. He stubbed his fag and went on, "Well, now, this is the way of it see. You walk her towards the shops. Main street, like. And you're bound to see one of them, you know, public conveniences for ladies and gents." "Ay. That's right. I get you, Bill: where we could both—"

He stopped me so suddenly that he almost blew my candle out. "Now listen, listen a minute, this is the way you do it, Stan bach, the gentleman's way". "As you know", (and now he seemed to relax a little) "there's always a shop where you can buy fags near these, um, places, yes?" "Ay, I agreed". "Well then" (completely relaxed now) "there you are, boyo. And—take—your—time, see. The little girl will be pleased and, if she's a proper lady, you'll have bags of time to—you know, go yourself."

He grabbed his mandrill and began to attack the coal-face furiously, and I scurried down the stall, picked up my shovel and began filling the tram the haulier had just left at my shaft. Good, sensible, shy old Bill! If it's any comfort to you wherever you are (without a shovel, I hope!) that hesitant, well-meant advice did a power of good to me.

In another "Bill yarn" I can reveal that "Go slow" in work began long before the Second World War. Bill's stall was booming. "Free dig" and bags of trams filled.

In the phrase of the day, both he and I “sweat our guts out”. He got a good wage packet and I got a nice tip, which pleased our Mam and me, for we always shared my tips. Then it happened. One payday, Bill handed me my wages, paid my stoppages, but NO TIP! I was rampant, mad with temper. Mam just as disappointed as I was - for we had come to expect the extra money - tried to calm me down. “P’raps he forgot, Stanley. Maybe he’ll give to you Monday”. Monday came. No tip. No explanation from William.

“My God!” I swore, “What the heck. I’ve sweated and slaved, begged extra trams - and that bugger gets all the benefit. And what do I get? Hell’s bells.” Furiously, I filled the first tram in record time. But my temper had a stranglehold on me. I came to my senses, slung my shovel down and squatted at ease on the shaft. It was my brain that got busy then. Now if --. Leisurely, I crawled up to the face where, as usual, Bill was as busy as a beaver - and sweating like a pig, a nice pile of coal waiting to be shovelled into the empty cart. I decided it could wait a bit longer.

As I fixed the hooked door of the cart, the darned thing “jumped the rails”. I swore something awful as I heaved the wheels back on to the rails - which made it take longer and longer. Eventually, I sent the full cart down and got the empty up. No word from Bill. Twice I had to disappear to an old stall down wind to empty my bowels. Bill only grunted. Tuesday. I found a lot of things wrong on the shaft - and one full cart ended up where it shouldn’t have. Wednesday. “Blimey! My knees are sore!” Bill gave more of a squeak than a grunt. Thursday. Bill said he wanted to tell me something. “It’s a free country”, I told him.

It was a sound story and I believed every word of it, only - well, from my point of view, he had handled the situation rather crudely, like a ruptured duck or a camel on stilts. Bill, puffing the inevitable Woodbine, explained how he had bought new false teeth (No, we didn’t call ‘em dentures!) for which he was paying by instalments. Doing so well of late, a rush of blood had gone to his head and he’d finished the payments right off. So, no tip for Stanley last Friday. So, fair enough, William. What next?”

He swore on everything most precious that he would “Make it up” to me - soon. Did he? He did. Again, good old Bill! I forgive you (Wish I could figure out how many trams of coal we missed that week). Anyway, I filled a “doubler” next journey.

Home - We lived in Aberkenfig, once described as the “most human of villages” by one of the Tondu Pugh brothers. (Glamorgan Gazette) - and it was just that. Home was No. 1 Mount Pleasant, up a gully off the Bridgend Road by Chappel, the bakers. As its name suggests, it was on a hillside. Numbers 1,2,3 and 4 were on a ledge overlooking the main road below. The rest of the houses stretched in a row upward to a small plateau, where, in a rather larger house, dwelt “Fitzgerald’s, the Orchard”. Next came a stony outcrop we called “The Rocks”, surrounded by a few scraggy trees and bushes.

Then came “Randall’s Wood”, leading up to Penylan Farm, which crowned the hillside. Here, I later learnt, was unearthed a valuable hoard of Roman coins, last

seen in The National Museum of Wales, in Cardiff. (Visiting the National Museum of Wales, in Cardiff, I saw those very coins, so I carefully copied the particulars from the card in the showcase, and told my T&H (Gazette) readers all about it. A couple of weeks later, the Gazette printed a reader's letter from - I think Brecon? - from a man who was a relative of the farmer who was the occupant of Penylan Farm at the time of the discovery of the coins).

To the right of "The Rocks", was a mound we called "The Tump", and a bit of wasteland called "The Moulders", from which a small path led off to meet the road at Mynydd Bach. Closer home, just below the little plateau, was "The Spout" from which pure, icy spring-water flowed on forever. This formed a streamlet, which was supposed to find a drain as an outlet to the Ogmore River down below. But it didn't always behave itself, and took great pleasure in meandering merrily down our gully!

Below the Tump, stretching down to the back of Chappel's house, was "The Bog", a squelchy, messy, delightful haunt of my younger days. The pine end of No. 1 (blank then, but not now) stared disconsolately at Chappel's cart-shed and stable. Its centre was always warm, from our fire. To get to Nos. 2,3 and 4, you had to duck under our Mam's clothesline, which was hardly ever clear of "washing". We had a front door, which faced the road below, but we seldom used it. This led to a tiled passage as far as the foot of the stairs, which had worn lino on the treads. Halfway along the passage, on the right, was our "front-room", the family's pride and joy - but more later.

We always used the back door, which led directly into a lean-to back kitchen. Our water supply came from a single tap fitted into the back-kitchen wall (outside) below the lean-to's chimney. The back-kitchen contained a plain table, a bench with bucket and bowl, and a copper in the corner under the chimney, a small window and, in the far corner, under the stairs, a "pantry", which I often called "The Black Hole of Calcutta". (The younger members of the family will remember with horror being imprisoned there by the Chief Wardress - Mam - for bad behaviour).

Around the corner from the tap, just past the little back-kitchen window was the WC, which we called "the dub". You flushed it with a bucket of water - and we'd never been told about toilet paper. When it went wrong, it was very nasty. But, as Mam often pointed out, we were lucky. Many, many, people had to take a walk down the bottom of the garden to a much more primitive privy. (Seeing that we didn't have a garden, I used to try to puzzle out how this affected us). We washed in a bucket or a bowl on a bench in the back-kitchen with a bar of carbolic soap and a piece of pumice stone, but we had a bath in Mam's wash-tub in front of the fire in the front kitchen.

This front kitchen was larger and had a higher ceiling than the lean-to in fact compared to some homes I knew, it was warm and snug and cosy. The fireplace was wide with a large metal guard in front and a square of cokernut-matting on the tiled floor in front of that. The grate was large with ovens on both sides, an iron kettle and other pots and pans on the hobs (and no Welsh kitchen would be complete without the iron bakestone - Welsh cakes - yum!). Two or three trivets completed the fixtures - and there were always half-a-dozen flatirons, smooth and shiny,

big and small, winking in the firelight.

All the ironwork was regularly “black-leaded”, hearthstone was liberally applied and this was enclosed by a monster shiny steel fender. Each night, as the fire was dying down, “sticks” (kindling wood) were popped into the oven, ready to start a quick fire for tea, porridge and toast first thing next morning. A couple of toasting forks hung from hooks in the fireplace, one a lovely brass, the other an ordinary wire one. I can’t remember ever needing a bellows.

The high, wide mantelpiece was edged with some pretty fringe material. Among other things I remember was a china dog, some ornaments, and a big tea caddy. We had several pictures on the wall. Four, I specially remember. In bamboo frames, they recalled the Boer War - General Redvers-Buller, Baden-Powell, The Relief of Mafeking, and The Relief of Ladysmith.

I nearly forgot the old-fashioned clock, bought by Dad at a sale. Fair-sized, its dark frame had brass inlays. It was wound and powered by long brass chains and weights, 1 large, 1 small, which were lead covered with brass. When one weight went up, the other came down. It held the place of honour in the middle of the Boer War pictures. It “warned” at 10 to the hour and chimed the hours.

In one corner, rested a massive chest-of-drawers. The centrepiece, as in every home in those far-off days was the table. Ours was a large, strong, plain deal one with knife drawers in the end. I can assure you that there was ample sitting- and elbowroom for Mam, Charlie, Stanley, Cyril, Bertha, Doris and Jimmy. While Bertha, Doris and Jimmy were small, the tiled floor was sanded daily - sand being sold at a penny a bucket. Until the electric light came, we used two large oil table-lamps, one for everyday (kept in the front-kitchen) and one for best (kept in the front room). We took a candlestick with a lighted candle “Up the Wooden Lane” when we went to bed.

No, we never used newspaper for a tablecloth! Mam’s linen cloths may have been a wee bit threadbare, but they were always “whiter than white”. We had no telly, “wireless”, or gramophone - not even a mouth organ or tin-whistle. In the dark winter evenings, we would drop the paper blinds over the window, pull the lacy curtains across, put the best cloth on the table; the lamp dead centre with the wick turned up, and pull up our chairs.

Another bit of coal on the fire, a shovel-full of small coal, damped with tea-leaves, patted down at the back and—a hectic game of snakes-and-ladders, ludo, or draughts a game of cards all the time each of us nattering away about our favourite topic, Mam keeping order and making sure that she got a word in and so on and so on --.

And so to bed. But before that, I forgot to mention our sofa. Stuffed horsehair, placed near enough to the fire to be comfortable without cooking - almost the shabbier twin to the one in the front room (later!). The stairs were steep and draughty, being opposite the front door. We shielded our candles with one hand and went into one of the three bedrooms. One bedroom was at the back, looking out over the lean-to kitchen two were in the front, looking out over the roofs and the river to

Llansantffraid church, the railway and Sarn Hill.

All the windows were straight up-and-down sash windows. Many a blackened fingernail or badly bruised hand has resulted from a broken sash-cord. The beds were getting on a bit, iron bedsteads, with brass knobs, sagging wire mattresses - and squeaky. To supplement the meagre supply of blankets, we used jackets, overcoats, shawls or what have you. Being a mining family, they would be used both by night and day - which saved a certain amount of sharing. Under each bed, was a “po”, a china chamber pot.

The front room, rarely used, was something special - to us anyway. It was only a little smaller than the kitchen. Opposite the door, it had a small open fireplace, with a brass fender in front, and a set of fire irons. There was a lovely overmantel above the mantelpiece, with lots of mirrors and cunning little shelves with tiny ornaments. The window had roll-up paper blinds and lace curtains, with a pot-geranium on the window-ledge. The centrepiece was a glossy little round table on which was our bestest tablecloth, with “bobbles” hanging around the fringe, and the best oil-lamp in the middle.

There was a suite of matching furniture, all stuffed with horsehair and covered with oilcloth (?). There were pictures on the wall, which I believe were chiefly family portraits. I remember Mam telling us proudly when we were smaller that Jim (our Dad) had saved up no end and spent a lot of money on that room. Somehow, even though we rarely used it then, I am sure it was worth every moment and each penny.

I suppose the reason why we never kept our coal in the bath is because we didn’t have one. Instead, we built a shed which used the wall of the garden of the next house up for the back wall and that of Chappel’s stable for one of the side walls (economy plus!). Chappel’s stable also supported our rabbit hutch. Our immediate neighbours were all friendly and kindly people. There had been a settling-in period when Mam, essentially a shy lady, felt that her Somerset accent made her a stranger, her being a widow and all with so many boys and girls. But even the miner husbands and older boys made her feel at home in the end.

At No. 2, was the large Jones family, who later moved in to Rose Cottage, Back Road, when it was left to them in a legacy. Then the Mainey’s, another large family took over and were no less friendly. No. 3 housed the Riley’s and No. 4 the Maloney’s, with whom we were especially friendly. (When poor Barty Maloney was badly crushed in a fall and spent a long time in the Cardiff Royal Infirmary, our front-room sofa was borrowed by them so he could come home to convalescence without going upstairs).

If anyone, young or old or middle-aged, fell ill in our neighbourhood, help was immediately at hand. You often saw a steaming cooked dinner between two plates being taken into a house where someone lay ill. As for our Mam - how she managed it I will never understand - she was “Parkhouse Bread and Jam”. Almost every child in Mount Pleasant at that time stood at the back door of No. 1 and said “Fank-ew, Parkhouse” with jammy lips. Good old Mam. God bless!

The miners in and around Aberkenfig had plenty of pubs wherein to “whet their whistles” and their wives had a fair few shops to choose from. The scarcest item was money. There was also no shortage of churches and chapels - and, in those days, no shortage of faithful worshippers. The nearest town was a few miles down the road: Bridgend, then no more than a pleasant old market town. Further on was the sea, Ogmore-by-Sea, less than ten miles away. A little farther on was Porthcawl, which, it must be said, did not encourage “those rough old miners” - but they are more than welcome now - in “Miners’ Fortnight”.

Further on still was the big city, Cardiff, home of Ninian Park and Cardiff Arms Park. If you had the money, you would have a bus ride to Bridgend. If not, there were two options open to you: “shanks’ pony” or a bicycle. Not many colliers had bikes. Did anyone have a motorcar? So it’s “shanks’ pony” then. The main road, past Agelton Asylum and under Cwm Bridge. Even a couple of street lamps near the brewery.

But it’s a nice, sunny day and I’ve decided to stroll along the old tram-road and come into Bridgend the other side of the river. In those days, you could go to Cardiff on the luxury coach for half-a-crown return and buy 5 Woodbines for twopence. Back in Aberkenfig. Bridgend Road led to Bridgend, and we called it Front Road. Penyfai Road led where it should, but we called it Back Road.

The middle of Aberkenfig lies in a bowl formed by the Rock Hill and the Catholic Hill. From what we used to call the Square, you can turn left up Dunraven Terrace and reach Park Slip Colliery, where hundreds of men and boys were killed in a tragic explosion long ago. (So many, many of their graves can be seen in St John’s Churchyard at the foot of the Catholic Hill.)

Back at the Square. There used to be a chapel on the opposite corner and, almost leaning against its wall, was the tiny shop of Charlie Jenkins, barber, where I was a lather-boy during the First World War. Duw! I must have lathered thousands of colliers’ bristly chins - and put a few of their pennies in my pocket to share with Mam. But where’s the chapel now? Gone. And who wants a lather-boy now? Nobody.

Anyway, carry on past where the chapel used to be, the Police Station on the left, Workmen’s’ Institute on the right, turn the corner past the school and come to Pandy Bridge with my old church, Llansantffraid, just beyond. Dammo! What is this? Road closed. Why. Well, why don’t you open your eyes and see all those lovely new roads and flyovers? No, I’ll go back to the square. I know I should be able to get to Tondu railway station (if its still there!) where I can board a train and another train and another train up to the Valleys to meet all those other colliers. Up to Blaengarw (“the Garw”), Maesteg and Ogmore Vale and Nantymoel. I wonder what’s happened to them?

Can any of them remember the dreadful depression, the shattering 1926 strike, the long, long, dole queues, the bloody Means Test? I can. Ugh!

And I remember the Cinema in Aberkenfig. Up the top of the Rock Hill and umpteen concrete steps. “Buttons”, the chucker-out flexing his muscles and casting

his beady eye on the noisy ones. Davies the Cinema, manager, selling the tickets, playing the piano and crossing his fingers. He was crossing his fingers in sympathy with the old engine and the older projector. Why? Well, they always broke down, see, if more than two people coughed at once. Good old Davies the Cinema! We all had a hell of a lot to thank you for in those days.

For instance: the "big picture" was "Moon of Israel", all about the bible, like. Well afternoon-shift colliers and some of 'em on nights couldn't see it unless— Davies the Cinema opened his doors in the morning so they (and I) could see it. Enough to nearly fill the "fivepennies" turned up - and we did have a treat, boyo. Icy cold it was, but we huddled up and soon forgot the cold and the hard wooden forms. We even saw them open up the Red Sea to get to the Promised Land." There's clever", we said.

Colliers in those days, of necessity, did a lot of walking. Men employed at the brickworks, the railway, the wagon-works, the crusher, the washery plant, the coke-ovens, the shops, banks or other offices were at work almost immediately. On the other hand, because of lack of transport, the collier walked to the pit, queued up for the cage or journey down to pit-bottom - the trudged between the sleepers with stooped shoulders to reach his stall. Then he had to do it all over again in reverse at the end of each shift. Of course, not every miner worked as far from pit-bottom as my little lot did - but it makes me wonder sometimes in these days of arguments and strikes about "unsocial hours" and "special conditions" and so on!

In the twenties - my dusty decade - the Gospel of Jesus Christ was booming in the mining valleys. In the Land of Song, psalms, hymns, cantatas and oratorios echoed and re-echoed up and over the hills, through the vales and into every town and village, accompanied by the band of the Salvation Army, the fine organs of the cathedrals and churches and the little harmoniums of the chapels. Places of worship, of every known denomination, outnumbered the pubs. Great preachers were more famous than footballers and film stars.

Apart from the main Sunday services, there were the everyday offshoots, such as prayer-meetings, bible-study classes, choir practice, Mothers' Union, Young Peoples' Guild, YMCA, and many others too numerous to mention, such as "Cwmanfa Ganu". Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Wolf Cubs and Brownies all functioned in close liaison with the churches and chapels and their members (such as myself) not only attended the regular services, but were ever ready to do a lot of donkey-work in organising any activity designed both to amuse and entertain and raise funds.

(The troop I belonged to was closely connected with my own parish church, Llansantffraid. The Rector made available the old stables behind the Rectory and the adjoining paddock - a Godsend! Our enthusiastic scrubbing, cleaning, scraping, painting, sweat and elbow-grease was richly rewarded with a lovely room, which was also later used by the Boys' Club and others in turn. Thank you, Rector!)

Miners and their families formed a large proportion of each congregation, some of which outnumbered the audience at the local cinema, and their humble offerings (largely pennies and halfpennies) were the fuel to keep the Christian kettle boiling. And boil it did. The Christian Herald and the Sunday Companion was devoured and

shared liberally. Parish magazines thrived also. Many of the miners became staunch pillars of chapel or church. They sat (Nonconformists) in the big seats on the platform with the minister. They were lay-preachers, deacons and prayer-leaders.

Our St Johns and St Brides Minor (Llansantffraid) had a prayer book with a set Order of Service as well as a hymnbook and psalm-book. Not so the Wesleyans, Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists and such-like. Apart from a hymnbook (Welsh and English), they made their own prayers and confessions, often to a vociferous chorus of "Praise the Lord!" "Alleluia!" "Thank you, Lord!" - which never happened in our church.

Some of the places of worship around Aberkenfig are easily recalled: St Johns, St Brides Minor, St Roberts (Roman Catholic), Ebenezer, Jerusalem, Beulah, Carey and the Pentecostal Hall. I forget the name of the one, which used to stand on one corner of the Square but is no longer there.

One of the biggest struggles of every Mam in a miner's family, second only to paying the rent and providing meals, was obtaining and maintaining "Sunday best" clothes for her (often many) girls and boys. Traditionally, extra efforts would be made by her to have new clothes for them on Psalm Sunday and Easter Sunday. Here and now I can assure you that each little boy and girl looked a picture: hair brushed and combed (and often "Vaselined") until it shone hands and faces scrubbed and also shining dresses or suits immaculate socks or stockings straight and unwrinkled boots - or shoes, which were becoming more popular - also shining. There would be coloured ribbons in the girls' hair, and the boys' hair was parted, either in the middle or the side, cut short.

On Monday ("wash-day"), the clothes would be vigorously brushed, washed and ironed where necessary, folded carefully, and put away in the chest-of-drawers with a handful of mothballs. I also did my share of church work. I was a choirboy, organ-blower, assistant bell-ringer and lamplighter among other things.

I was a Sunday-school teacher and a secretary of the Young Peoples' Guild. I was a Rover Scout, Assistant Cub-master, Troop Scribe and Court of Honour Scribe. Was I busy! (The latter reminds me of an occasion when I found it necessary to cheat a little). One of our Scouts was "tried" by the Troop Court of Honour. His punishment was to write an essay on bad temper. As the result of a secret "confab" of two, I did a short essay for him to copy, concluding with the words "Bad temper is to be avoided, like a leaky tent or crumbs in camp). God, forgive me! I often get "het-up" even now.

Neighbours and friends, miners, railwaymen, and what have you were therefore a mixed bunch of Baptists, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Church of England (Wales?) and so on, but when there was a need, we all pulled together on the same rope. So I never blinked an eyelid when I saw our Mam take a hot dinner between two plates into the home of a Catholic or a Methodist - and vice-versa.

Our Nonconformist community never stopped beating the Gospel drum. Revival meetings were held frequently, one of which, I remember, went on for two or three weeks. There would be an early evening session to cater for the children coming

home from school, at which one of the songs would be “Be Careful, Little Hands What You Do”. Substituting “eyes, ears, and lips” for “hands”; it would be sung heartily, accompanied by suitable actions. At the evening session, always crowded, hymns would be sung, prayers said, a trenchant sermon preached - and “confessions” called for.

I well remember one revivalist, a biggish chap with plenty of hair, flinging off his jacket and prancing about Jack Peterson style. “Let me get at the devil with my coat off”, he cried. For me, he blotted his copybook when I went to see him after one service for my T and AP. “Put a column in about me. Put my picture in”. BIGHEAD. This mission continues to fill the so-and-so chapel with enthusiastic worshippers, both young and old”.

At this time, the congregation would be implored to “testify” why they were giving their heart to the Lord.

Partly to keep my T and A column readers in touch, and because I loved to sing the lively hymns anyhow, I would go along whenever possible. Once, I sat next to Dai Thomas in the gallery. When a lot of “converts” had settled down on their knees before the minister, Dai shot out of his seat, leaned over the parapet, dramatically tossed his cigarette-case into the well below, and cried with a loud voice: “I give my heart to the Lord!” Yes, you might have guessed. Outside, Dai said, “Give us a fag, Stan”.

Of course, he was in the minority. For every two-timer like Dai there were hundreds whose testimony was a sacred oath. Of all yes, these people were the stiff backbone of their chapels, and worked like beavers to me just a little more than Good Samaritans. (When the 1926 strike came, it was their staunch Christians who did so much to “keep the wolf from the door”.)

Another mission. A different chapel, with a lot of Welsh hymns. Several young men, at least one of whom later became a parson, were sharing with me a long pew, so near to the minister’s pulpit that we had to look up when seated. Confession time came. No. 1 young man stood up, testified, and said: “And I call upon my cousin to do the same.” No. 2 young man stood up, testified, and said “And I call upon my cousin to do the same”. This went on until the only worshipper left in that pew was me, yours truly, almost piddling myself with anxiety. The minister looked - no, glared - down at me. I looked up and tried to “stare him out”. In the unusual hush, it went on and on. “Any more cousins to give their heart to the Lord?” An awful pause. I was sweating worse than down the bloody pit.

The voice went on: “Any more cousins? Any more? Now, before the gates of Heaven are closed”. You’ve read in books about “merciful relief”? Well that’s how it was with me. Outside, I can’t remember saying a word to a soul - but I must have coughed and puffed my way through three Woodbines on the trot.

The last one I recall was in a Methodist chapel I forgot to mention before, up Back Road it was. At the end of a Mission service here, so very determined was one of the deacons to hook me into his flock, that I was forced to beat a hasty and undignified retreat over a low stone wall topped by iron railings and dash down the

road like a longdog.

We were much more decorous (and boring I now realise) in our church, although we sang just as lustily at times and listened enthralled to words of wisdom from mighty men of God - a few of whom sported medals gained in World War 1.

One of the highlights of the Christian year was the Harvest Festival evensong, celebrated in autumn. With my close friends, brothers Bill Cole (a railwayman), Fred Cole (a bootmaker) and Bill Reeks (a butcher), I contrived to attend at least half-a-dozen, church and chapels in turn. At these services, the clergy could bank on a full house and a bumper collection. Indeed, at times, all pews were taken long before the "second bell" had ceased ringing and it was a case of standing room only. A "guest preacher" would always give us a good sermon (discussed at length afterwards in those days).

The hymn-writers of old have done the Harvest Festival proud. Bill, Fred, Reg, and I would know from a quick glance at the hymn-board, hanging on a stone pillar near the pulpit, that all of our favourites were to be sung: "Come Ye Thankful People, Come", "We Plough the Fields and Scatter", "The Sower Went Forth Sowing", "All Things Bright and Beautiful" - and so on. My pen pauses a while as I sing those lovely old words over again in my mind:

"The sower went forth sowing, The seed in secret slept through weeks of faith and patience, Till out the green blade crept. Then, warmed by golden sunshine and fed by silver rain, at last the fields were whitened

To harvest once again."

Harvest Festivals in the chapels seemed much more boisterous. We sang some of the favourite "church" hymns, but one song I remember above all was "Bringing in the Sheaves". Each verse was sung with gusto, melodious gusto. But when it came to the refrain: "Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves, Welcome home, rejoicing, bringing in sheaves" this seems to have been repeated ad lib time and time over again until the walls and roof of Penyfai Chapel re-echoed triumphantly and the choir and congregation just had to take a breath. Is that the "hwyl"?

No wonder, is it, that when I heard a tune hummed or whistled, it was a Welsh hymn tune? I am sure, (for I have done just that) that in the dusty darkness of the colliery, these ancient airs do much to comfort one and "soothe the savage breast". Neither was I the only miner to send up a silent "Please God, help me". Sentimental? Try it and see.

Many a miner did his best to carry his Christian principles down with him on the journey and into his working place - and what a struggle it was. Some never gave up the fight against the Devil. Some gave up and tried again, regularly. Like this one. He was in the Salvation Army, whose leading enemy at the time was called "Demon Drink", a subject I knew little about then because the only time I went near a pub was to fetch Mam's jug of "supper stout" from the Swan - where Mr Sweet was the landlord in those days.

Well, this middle-aged miner-cum-Salvation Army man, complete with collecting-

box, stood at the ready every Friday evening (Payday!) near the cinema ticket office. Interested, I had a friendly chat. While he rattled his box, he told me the story of how he was rescued from "Demon Drink" by the Army. Just before I bought my ninepenny ticket to romance and adventure, he confided: "Mind you, boyo, if I wander off the straight and narrow into the "Rock" or the "Lion" to wash the coal-dust down my throat, not to worry. No, no. Not to worry. Every time it happens, every time, "the Army" will find me and put me back on the road to Jesus. Alleluia! Amen! He meant every word - and I was well on the way to understanding a great truth: it takes all sorts to make a world, miners, millionaires, and murderers in Wales, Warsaw or Waikiki.

Good old Salvation Army, especially your silver- and brass bands with their stirring martial-like music. And bless you, General Booth, and all your mates. (A digression, for which I apologise. A short while ago, I sat on the stone steps of the Martyrs' Memorial in Oxford and listened with joy to the Junior Salvation Army band. So, at least 50 years on, the Salvation Army is still marching on to glory.)

Many of the older men in the mines, roadmen, labourers, repairers, and such, were the most devout, though they never carried God on their coat-sleeves. They were many, but two will serve for now: John "Cwmbychan", and Morgan "Gwaengwaddod", nearing their seventieth year. When I was Morgan's mate, I often joined them for a bit of food and a drink from my tea-jack. They would chatter away "nineteen to the dozen" in Welsh, of which I knew only the odd word or two, like "bara caws", "ceffyl", and "mochyn" - bread and cheese, horse, and pig, I hope!

They both smoked pipes, John a clay with a long stem, Morgan an old briar with a stem almost too short for comfort. John liked to spit, and put a lot of tongue into the action. Morgan, when he puffed, made a pleasant "coooo" sound. Perhaps the saying "Pipe dreams" came from such dear old miners as these. At times like these, the dim, flickering light of our candles would hide my embarrassment until it was "Well, boyo, let's be up and at it, then".

One interesting item, which also applied when I worked at an Oxford motor-car factory from 1930 on, was a sort of workers' bush-telegraph, which operated in this way: "Who scored the winning goal for Cardiff City in the Cup Final?" or "What is this telepathy they're talking about?" or some other problem. I didn't know my Mate didn't know the haulier had forgotten the haulier asked the boy in the next stall, who also didn't know the answer.

When he went up to the face to fill the next cart, the boy asked his mate, who thought it was so-and-so, but wasn't sure. Every miner and his butty that could be reached were asked. Failing all these, the haulier would keep the question going, asking the roadman and repairers on the way out. Next to be asked might be the shunters out on the parting, or the rider coming in from the Deep. Often it got as far as the fireman's cabin, but the answer always came back. Often, when the haulier has brought in the answer with a journey of empty trams, I have heard a cheeky lad boasting, waggishly, "Dammo! I knew that all the time, mun, but I just wanted to find out if anybody else knew", which caused him to duck a shower of small coal and a broken sleeper. (Later, in the car factory, the question travelled up

and down the lines until the problem, invariably, was satisfactorily solved). A sort of workers' "Enquire Within".

Actually, I heard telepathy explained so that even I began to understand what it meant. I was a busy "butty" to two colliers: Joe Coles and Dai "Cymfa". Joe was a Band of Hope man but Dai liked a pint of Hancock's ale on Friday (payday) evening. Occasionally, Dai would consume "one over the eight" and not turn up on Saturday morning. Joe said: "Now listen, Dai, our following shift must have the next tram number, so we chalk it on a shovel, see that's passing a message on. After your booze-up Friday night, you decide to stop home Saturday, so you pass me a message, right?"

I laid my shovel down and wiped the sweat off my brow with my shirtsleeve. Dai's candle was flickering. He lit a fresh one and stuck it in his spike. "How, mun?" Dai was polite. He respected Joe. Joe was "a good scholar". He wasn't the only one who was confused. So was I, and production suffered a hiccup, for the three of us had laid down our tools. Joe continued, speaking slowly. "My mind is the shovel ad your mind is the piece of chalk, so—" "Good God!" said Dai. "Oh, Ay", I mumbled, "whatever next, Joe?" Joe explained, deliberately, patiently, as if he was telling the story of "Joseph and his coat of many colours" to his Sunday school class.

"You THINK - hard. Joe, Joe, Joe, this is Dai, your mate. I am not coming to work tomorrow. You repeat the message over and over again and, this is telepathy, the message will come into my mind and I know Stan and I will be on our own on Saturday morning. There was a pause. I could hear the three of us breathing. Three candles flickered, casting shadows on the coal-face and ribs. Then, two mandrills and one shovel got back to doing what they were paid for. But at least two people, Dai and I, had something fresh to THINK about.

One of the jobs I enjoyed, because it took place within a space of two or three yards and therefore involved less scrambling and crawling up and down and down and up, was "shifting up". Inevitable, unprofitable in the short term, it "paid in the long run". We had ordered in advance, through the fireman, the necessary sleepers; rails and road nails and these had been delivered by the haulier and placed handy for use near the face. The new sheave-post was firmly fixed as near to the coal-face as practicable.

If the height from top to bottom was ample - 3 feet or more in this instance - the little rails could be measured-up and laid right away. But if, as now, there is not enough room for our carts to move, we must "cut bottom". My mate and I take careful measurements: the right distance between the two sets of rails clearance for the wings of the carts on right and left sides ("ribs") the depth of "cut" needed in the bottom to achieve enough height for the carts to travel freely.

Our aim is to make a minimum of spoil "muck" - for "muck" doesn't mean money in a colliery. Using mandrills fitted with blunted blades, we carefully follow our marks and get to work, testing as necessary. Sometimes, the bottom is as hard as the rock top this time we are lucky, for digging is reasonably good. If we can, we lose the spoil whenever it is possible, in the ribs and between the sleepers, but

when this can't be done, we have to fill it into carts, send it below to the filling-shaft, into a tram and up and away.

When enough space is cut and cleared, we lay our sleepers, and fix the new length of light railway with road-nails. The carts (empty of course) will have one end off-railed and anchored against the old sleepers. The sheave is transferred from the old to the new sheave-post and secured. The overlap of chain, resting in the bed of one of the carts is unravelled, taken up and passed through the sheave. The cart is on-railed, pushed up to the end of the new length of railway, chained on with any overlap in the bed - and we have "shifted up".

We'd not be black-dirty, but grey-dirty. Most likely, in that particular stall, my mate was Bill, who would say "Time for a whiff", and he'd light a Woodbine from his candle. Don't ask me how many times this process was repeated to fill 'x' many trams of coal!

Mention "Cwm Rhondda" and the whole wide world knows what you mean. Mention the Rhondda Valley and everybody knows it once meant coal with a capital 'C'. My only recollection of being in the Rhondda is of, being in my "try-anything-once mood, I joined a team of "salesmen" in one of my "off-work" periods. We were driven into the Valley in an ancient bus, dumped somewhere in the middle, each with a small "Park Drive" coupons case stuffed with small packets of "chimney-cleaning" powder and told to get on with selling them door-to-door.

We were to tell the miners' wives that, here in a tiny packet, for three copper coins, was a miracle of science. "Place it on the fire, Madam, and - hey presto! - In a matter of minutes, the soot up the chimney will dissolve and vanish into thin air". None of us had any experience of salesmanship. I was given a long, long terrace of miners' cottages climbing up the steep hillside.

My knock at the door was gentle and tentative. Time after time, at door after door, I was told "Not today, thank you". While the door was slammed in my face by many a Mrs Miner. Those were the polite ones. At door after door, I was told where to go and what to do with my magic chimney-cleaner, in language which I never dreamed was known by ladies (?). It took only a few hours for the penny to drop (and not in my pocket). With one or two fellow "salesmen", I found a cheap place to eat. By the time the dilapidated chariot picked us up, I sold (almost given away more like!) just three packets. As we were on commission only, I was actually out of pocket. On the credit side, I'd had a free ride, and I'd visited "The Rhondda".

Persuaded, much against my better judgement, next day I tried Cadoxton, near Barry. Few colliers living here. Mostly dockers and such like. But some of their womenfolk knew harsher language than the Rhondda miners' wives. Around midday, proud and independent, I emptied my "Park Drive" coupon case into the Supervisor's van, adding the advice I'd learned at one of the doorsteps. Then I trudged, weary and hungry, back to Cardiff - which was a long way.

Next, crazy for punishment, I tried to flog toothpaste to the miners and their surprised families in Ogmore Vale. Again, a DEAD LOSS. Still with a lot to learn, I

tried to sell vacuum cleaners. Before I went for a demonstration lesson, like many other people, I didn't even know what a vacuum cleaner was! But one remark our instructor made still sticks in my mind: "Never tell the good lady of the house to push it backwards and forwards over the carpet. The word we use is G-L-I-D-E". I drew another blank.

Later, during another slack period, I told myself this would definitely be the last. Cardiff it was. Ninian Park Road to be exact. In my faithful little case, a collection of ornamental geisha girls and lucky elephants - cheap and nasty stuff really. I'd managed to sell almost enough to pay for my stock and I was, for this once, an optimistic salesman. I sauntered up the long, tiled path to the front door of this BIG house and knocked loudly. Nothing happened for a while, so again I knocked, less confidently this time. After what seemed an age, but wasn't really, I heard a "shuffle, shuffle" come slowly down what must have been a long passage. Slowly, the door opened - and a dear old lady smiled at me. I opened my case and showed her my lucky elephants and geisha girls. With another smile, "Just a minute", she said, and shuffled off down the passage.

While I waited on the doorstep, I wondered how many she would buy. Another shuffle, shuffle, and she was back - with money in her hand! Again that beaming smile. "I don't want any lucky elephants or - er - other things", she said, "but here's threepence for you". With a scarlet face, I slunk back down the long, tiled path. "Bloody hell!" I told myself, "Never again!" I felt like a tramp, a flipping beggar, and I longed to get back down the pit, where I could be myself again.

But rumours were rife all through the Welsh coalfield. Bad blood was rising, tempers flared, and I felt that soon the battle would commence - between THEM and US.