

## **Gordon Brooks, freeminer.**

Recorded: 9<sup>th</sup> October 2015

Interviewer and sound engineer: Jason Griffiths

### **Part 1**

- 0:00 Started training at Cannop Colliery, then to Northern. I got given this certificate.
- 1:30 Had to report to the training centre (description). Introduced to Mr Lewis Witts, Percy Miles, Charlie Jenkins. Given kit, then talks, lectures.
- 2:24 Learned 1<sup>st</sup> aid. At Cannop Drift there was coal. We loaded a lorry from Rossiter & James, taking turns on the shovel.
- 3:33 This photo was taken 9am when we went up the drift. Ken Lamb took the photo. L to R: Percy Miles, Sidy Leyton, Gordon Brookes, Ronnie Osborne, Davy Edmunds, Norman Hopkins, and boy from Whitecroft
- 4:45 Born at Mill House Upper Lydbrook. Mining was strong on both sides of the family. I had 6 uncles working at Cannop at the same time. Saw the manager Mr A B Davis at Waterloo and he advised me to go to Northern.
- 6:00 There was factory work, but people didn't travel far in those days. Was interested in stone, my uncle did it, but he told me that was coming to an end.

### **Part 2**

- 6:45 I was more aware of what we were going to do – some of the boys were frightened. You was taught how to put up timber. Was a good rock top in the drift
- We went on pit visit. We went down into Cannop Pit – it was first class, conditions were very good. It was known as “The Happy Pit”. Waterloo was alright. Mr Jenkins said get in the cage and you'll leave your hat behind. Cage went down at 30ft a second. Felt drunk coming off there.
- 9:35 We was there for a look around. Then Princess Royal – we had a look at the big road they was driving through to Mallards Pike.
- Looked around Northern, then Eastern United – that was a drift. We rode down on trollies, then on down – right down into the bottom of the coal basin. There was a locomotive. They'd spent a lot of money there but it was the first to be closed down.
  - I was told some old men wanted to buy Waterloo. It shut in 1959. They offered £8k, but still it was shut.
- 13:00 In training tools was shovel, shaft & blade, axe and hammer. It was a light pick. The men used to lie on their side, cut under the coal 'holing' then drive wedge over the top. You could replace the blade. Elwell was the main maker of tools.
- Your axe you had to buy. Under the dirt you had to cut more timber.
- 14:30 Pit work was different to levels or small mine work. In Northern and other pits you had rock tops. It was all wood. At Cannop it was two sticks and a flat under the rock. Under the dirt you had to scrobble on, tools in front, and make space to get in. After you cleaned up, you'd hole 6ft apart.

Man coming behind would sprag the coal to stop it dropping. He'd knock in props to the cut to hold it up. You'd clean up then the fire man would come. Once you'd trimmed and removed the coal you'd get first stick and flat up. Then you'd trim.

- Under the dirt you could have problems., The dirt shale was 15-20ft up to the rocks. If you had a run you'd have problems. If the wet got up into the clod you'd had it. The wet never got to the front at Northern but in the road. 11 ft road could go down to 4ft. It would 'pick' during the shift – bits dropping down. We come out on the conveyor to get out as it was squeezed so close. Had to make sure we didn't get caught.

20:00 Sometimes it would come down. Sometimes you'd pull out a timber and use it again if you were short of one – as you was paid on yardage. Under the dirt you did less than under the rock.

- If you had a bad day you lost out. Good conditions made a good man. With rock tops you gambled. Best face in Northern was the "Top J" heading out to Eastern. You could have as much yardage as you wanted.
- You'd bring all the cuttings out, all of a sudden the coal would come over.
- We worked in twos on the J Face. Man at top was Mike Burns i.e. Eric Burns from Mitcheldean, me, and Little Bruce Thomkins from Broadwell, Sidy Andrews and Curly Hughes, Fred Nicholls and Harold Stevens.

16:56 Rock never gave no warning. It came down. Right over in big lumps.

17:40 We had coal cutters. Northern was in two parts, H Dipple, and J Dipple – dipples is roads that go down. We'd ride down the J a thousand yards. Down the H you went down 600 yards. A vast area from Northern to Forest Church and back to Cinderford was where the H workings was – and all dirt top.

- The sprags was holding the coal up, you'd hit that out then the coal would drop. You had to get timber in as you went to hold the roof up. Sometimes it would come down. The coal out under there was hard, sharp and shinny. It was 6ft but it had to be blowed.

26:50 Explosives in red packets was used for coal, black for the rock. Polar Ajax was the name for the stone.

27:12 There was a face in Northern went up under Nitrovit – that was the 21. Went up on a steep pitch. Deputy Rat Roberts told me to go up in the top road to give the men a hand as it was steep. I went up there, with Albert Davis, Trev Roberts and Johnny Webb. We was up walking on the top of the steel arches. The roof had gone.

- Steel archways...[looks in book]

PAUSE

29:30 [Reads from book] Pt two together and fix in the top with fishplates. Lagging goes in between to stop them pushing in. Them chaps in some of them rock roads had a lot to do it was a bit of a rush job. They probably didn't even stop for bread.

33:00 My first day at Northern I had to be at top of the pit at 6am. Men started coming up and going down. Harold Rudge deputy told me to go with him. Went down and new face was the B Face. Worked with Chris Hale from Joys Green on a tip end, a loader. Francis Oakley, Roy James and John Hughes. Chris Hale had a shilling a shift to look after me when I started.

- If something had gone wrong, carts come off, you'd sit and wait on the face doing nothing. A lot of chaps got frustrated.
- 35:14 We worked three shifts 6 to 2. Sometimes you'd get a wet note if you worked in the wet. If you could get our early you could catch the earlier bus.
- We worked days and afternoons coaling shifts/filler. Packers worked afternoon and nights. Cutters worked day shift and night shift.
- 37:00 There was showers at Northern. My locker number was 126. Clean area and dirty area. It was hot in there.
- We bored with hand drills with a bit in the end you can change – they was electric. The shot firemen had the powder and explosives. They didn't use it all.

PAUSE

- 39:00 I was working on the H Side and was told to go on the Monday down the J to work with Tom Wills on the E Face – a long face, rock top but very dangerous, very wet. This water was coming out of the bore holes. The air was clear. Water was icy cold. If you stopped you'd be chilled to the bone. Coal up the top was 7ft thick and the face tapered down. At the bottom it was 2ft 8". The manager came up there Rob(?) Butler. Him had been down to Cardiff and he said there's 30yrs work left in the pit. 3 yrs later it was shut.
- They didn't want it. Another foreman come down the face and said it was improving and they wanted men on the J. I was gone. On that face it would sheer off once a week.
  - In that wet the bottom was fireclay. Your timber did disappear. It was a terrible place. Today you wouldn't work in. All that wet was at the front in the coal.
  - Tommy Johnson was working in water. I moved. I had good money on the J but we took risks.
  - Always seemed to be wet where there was a rock top. [Refers to book]
  - Half the men were put off at Easter. Government were bringing out a new scheme 'redundancy'. It was intended for the dockers because of containers. Harold Wilson said the country is changing. Pit was to be kept open until redundancy.
  - They kept Cannon open but pumping costing £200K PA. We had to come up to the G Face as it was dry. Wasn't worth working – coal was 1ft thick.
- 48:00 The Friday we broke up for the holidays, we got our tools, walked to the end of the road. Me, Curley Hughes, Sidy Andrews, Bruce Tompkins, Johnny Webb, Deputy Jack Porter. We walked back up the dipple and went right – never been along there before – took us to bottom of H dipple, long walk all the way up to H parting, carrying our tools.
- Started back there after the holidays. Tom Didcott, Ken Taylor, Curly Hughes, Sidy Andrews and Mike Burns. It was steep.
  - Village mason made some flaps to stop the coal dropping back. I was on the face a fortnight. They talked about knees – bursitis – painful. Because it was steep you used your knee to grip the floor. I was off 6 weeks. When I went back Les Ruck said would I work in pit bottom. Lots didn't want it was you was on diff duff. He asked me to work there on same money, I

was on face rate about £12. I worked on the empty side. Other wise was George Davis and Ivor Roberts.

55:00 At Northern they modified how the carts worked. Northern head frame should have faced Steammills School. At Cannop and Princess Royal it faced the right way.

### Part 3

57:00 Dirt-mounds – most pits had them. At Mireystock was Arthur and Edwards dirt mound. Was said the screens was put up there as that was were they intended to sink the pit. Was another tip up by Serridge Lodge. There was a lot of timber, coal, grease in those tips. If it burned it would never go out. They started the open in the middle and that caught fire. T

- They would burn for years. Northern Tip was on fire and it burned the tress on top. Then they loaded into dumpers and spread it.
- First tip was rented by Mr William Preece of Lydbrook. He had stables opposite The Jovial Colliers [pub]. They were mining family too.
- There was all sorts in these tips, metal and all sorts. He'd get the coal and wood off. After years they'd settle and squash out. No they are lower but bigger in the bottom. The pond at Mireystock is smaller now than it was. Some reckon there was gas in the pond.

- That pond was full of dead oak trees.

1:03:00 The last shift at Northern United I ended up at pit bottom. The face on the left was up under Hawkwell. Top of the J was heading for Brierley. Last day was Thursday afternoon shift – there was officials there from Cardiff to sort things out, they didn't want o be there all day. What was left there was a disgrace – the scrap, coal, the value of it. It was a waste – there's coal cutters, armoured cable.

- The Cable Works [in Lydbrook] had redundancy. Northern may have been the first pit to have redundancy.
- One day one of the cart couplings piled up and went over the side. I knelt down to reach for it. Ivor Roberts shouted something – the cage came down ad knocked my hat off! It caught the peak about a fortnight before the pit shut.
- After Northern...a Cannop man had worked in the pit all his life and he had £400 – that was a lot then. A lot of us had nothing really – few had the top rate. On the last day I went to the canteen and all the wooden stools had gone!
- There was firms coming into the Forest e.g. Reeds and that's where I went to work. Some of us was unsettled. Before Northern shut we were getting letters offering work in Wales. I went down twice, they put buses on. Fist buses went to a pit at Radstock in Bath.
- I went with Siddy Andrews, Dave Oliver, Bruce Thomkins down to Nant Garw. Then there was Bedwas Colliery. There was hundreds of caravans. They'd shut all the pits in Durham and offered jobs in Wales. We then went to Adam Maddock, then Aber Twidr. There was a big pit, The Windsor Colliery.
- Coal there was 8ft thick. It was 600 yards deep, if something happened you didn't stand a chance. The cages was the size of a double decker bus.

1:15:30 In 1960 I went to Newbridge at Aber Carr, Callanan South, I worked there for six months [before Northern closed, then came back to Northern]. The haulage and everything was compressed air. After Northern I worked at Reeds, then Ranks [Xerox] for 17 yrs.

- I did work at Asters Hill [pit] at Whitecroft.

#### Part 4

1:17:35 Uncle was O B Jordan member Freeminers Assoc. He told me to register when Northern was coming to an end. I registered Coleford with Albert Howells. I had a letter from Mr Arnold the manager at Northern to say I'd done my year and a day. Signed by R Tallis the Gaveler.

- O B joined the army at the start. He became a [mines] deputy. Him and his father worked at Drybrook Slope – his father was Deputy known then as an Inspector. He went to Cannop as a Deputy, then Senior Overman, then acting Under-Manager. His father worked in a pit at Brierley. His father had started at Trafalgar. He was also at Waterloo. His father was laid off at 80. Article in The Coal Magazine. His father died about 1957/8.
- O B had discussed with others about setting up Freeminers Assoc as he wanted to look after our rights. He was Chairman for a long time.
- [Described photo] That's my uncle Bert, Ern, Arthur, Henry.
- Years ago the small pits was like a secret society, business – you never told anyone. My uncle Ern helped. Mr [?] the manager at Waterloo said some of the old men saw the Freeminers book as a bible to them - Woods Law.

1:25:34 The secrecy was to do with money.

- A cousin bought a gale and it rue d out the one who sold it hadn't even owned it. That was Strip 'n' At It Number Two
- After redundancy at Ranks several levels [mines] opened up. There as one at Found Out. Some went to Pan Todd – but it didn't last.

1:27:0 In 1984 there was nothing going here jobs-wise. We knew the Warrens up on Quidchurch – down in Ruspidge near Eastern United there's a track-way over in front of the Dilke, dropped down over by a pond. There's a stone chimney from an iron mine done up by Ian Standing. Staple Edge is from Eastern to Mallards Pike. Out along that road was a little level where Ralph Kibble worked out there on his own. Out there and up over Staple Edge.

- Coal up there was like waves at Quidchurch. Beautiful timbering. There was 10ft coal but 1ft in other places – too faulty.
- I was working there with Barry Hawkins. I t was heavy ground, there was a thunder-storm and it came in – hopeless. It had been illegally worked in the past. We had some coal out of there during the miner's strike.
- Under Hawkwell to Brierley, from Jim Hales across to Cinderford. At Northern in the 21 up under Nitrovit it was a syncline. St Eastern it as a monoclyne. There's a lot o coal left out under Ray's gale.
- I worked at Pasters Hill level Whitecroft. They cut the Yorkley seam. There was fall with water. They come back and down over. There's coal out there – rock bottom, coal of 2ft 8" but with dangerous clod on top.

- 1:36:00 A man from price Waterhouse came in to look at it – it was United Mining that had it and they went into liquidation. No prospects there in my opinion. I was told some spent £1m there. Dave Harvey was there.
- I did a few days with Ray and anyone wanted a bit of help.
- 1:38:00 Bert Hinton had Hopewell, and Phoenix. Brian Saunders bought Phoenix. He had to get out then Robin took it over. James Britton has Phoenix – all rock top in there. When Cannop stopped pumping the water came up and Bert lost 400yrs of coal.
- When we left Northern Cannop stopped pumping and water came up J dipple. Cannop was a well laid out pit.
  - Alias Thomas was the deputy

### **Part 5**

- 1:42:00 I was born into a mining family. There's still today a stigma about a miner – looked down upon. Miners used to speak their minds.
- My, Wendy, cousin was over from France. She told me that when she was a girl she did the exams to go to Monmouth School. She got a letter from the school saying, "We don't take on girls whose father's are miners". So instead she went to East Dean Grammar School, then Aberystwyth University. Then she became a teacher in France and never came back. There was a book written by someone from Berry hill who was born in a workhouse.

### **Part 6**

- 1:45:00 Ralph Henry Brookes at 9yrs old went to Monmouth Boys' School. Some of the families around here the kids went away and didn't come back. They didn't want anything to do with miners.
- There's still people here who look down on miners. People see it as part of history. We had students come to Northern once from London.
- 1:47:40 When I grew up at The Mill [Lydbrook] the old pit was our play area as it was lit up at night. We knew what time of day it was by listening to the hooter. For 6 pence you could have two ice creams from the canteen. At nights you could see the men walking up or down. You'd hear a man going by The Mill by their boots. Some walked to Ruardean Woodside, The Pludds, Hawsley, or ride their bikes from Broadwell
- 1:50:00 Freemining – a lot of people don't want work that gets their hands dirty. You got to be interested, but also you got to get to the black stuff, be successful to make some money. Ralph Kibble would leave Ranks [after work] and go to his level to work until 9pm! His wife didn't like it.