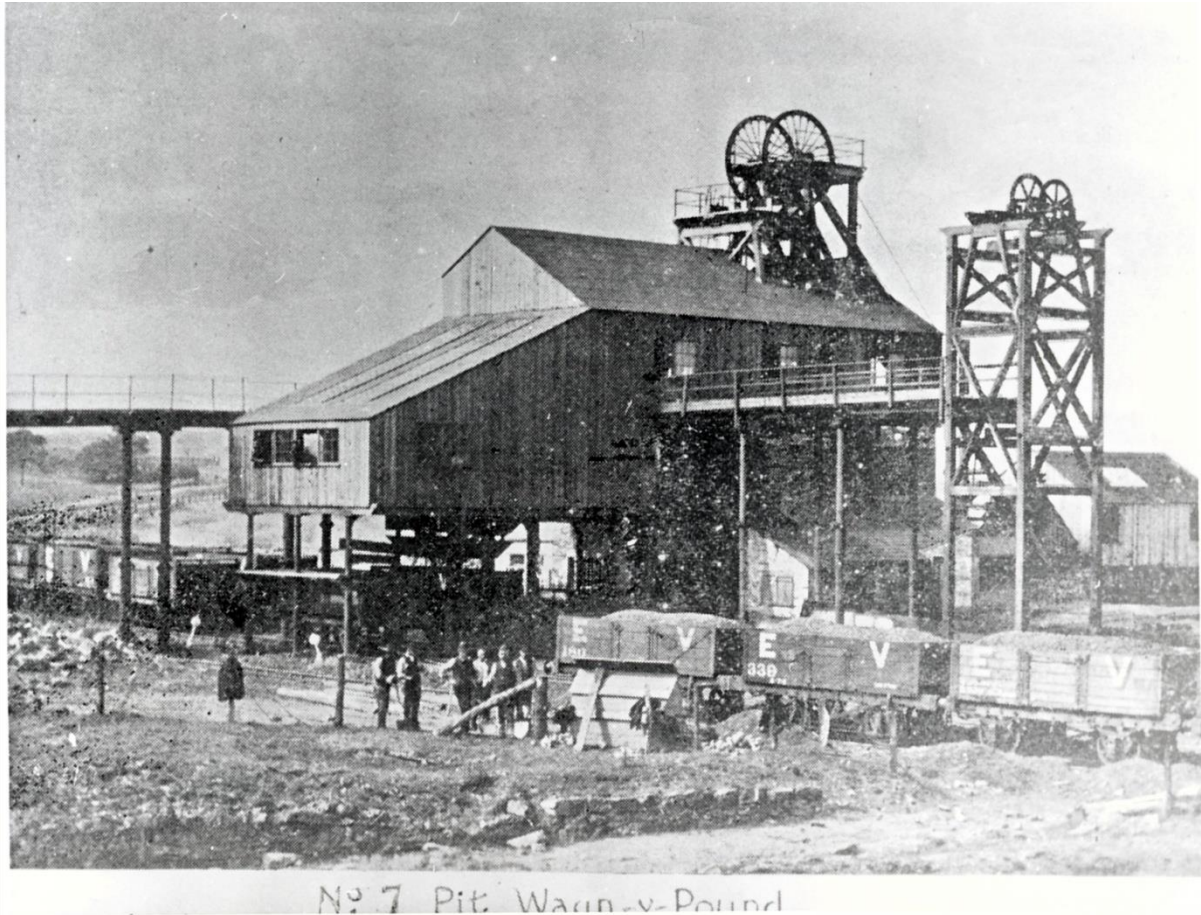


“LITTLE JOHNNY”

The book “Little Johnny”, from which the following extracts are taken, was published privately at Cardiff in 1910 by its author John Prothero. In what is clearly an autobiography, the writer used this title when describing his seven years spent working underground as a child, and not for his later life spent firstly as blacksmith, then railway porter and signaller. Becoming deeply religious, Prothero would eventually serve as a Methodist missionary preaching throughout Wales.



Little Johnny was born at Llanddew, near Brecon, in 1858, but would later attend school at Bronllys near Talgarth, the village to which his family moved the following year. In 1865 they moved again to Rassau, the young child having to walk all the way driving the family's one black pig. That same year, aged seven and a half, Little Johnny started work at Ebbw Vale's Gantra iron-stone pit under John Jones, his master who was known as "Cardu". He remembered his father and mother telling him that first morning as he left home *"to mind and be obedient and a good boy"* His first task each morning would be to find clay for the miners to fix their work-place candles. As they neared the pit he heard the loud 'knocks' that were pit signals to the banksman (winder).

"The carriage was ready and about seven men went into the bond with Johnny in their midst. Down the pit they went into the blackness. When they got to the bottom a match was struck and each man lit his candle. Johnny had no candle of his own – Mr. Jones had agreed to find him light at his own expense...Johnny kept close to his master and shared his light...he saw a number of rats...they came to a parting where a number of men were sat down smoking...it was the custom to take what they called 'a general whiff' before starting work." They then went to their stall in the 'Red Vein' seam under whose low roof the boy stripped ready for work "there were many strange things for Little Johnny to learn, the names of

dagger, drill, wedge, handle, charger and squib etc...".(On one occasion) "Mr Jones and Johnny were boring a hole when a little stone fell on Johnny's back...looking up he saw the roof was cracking and said to Mr. Jones 'that stone will fall' His master did not listen but soon the stone fell on Mr. Jones's thigh crushing it severely. Running for help, a tram was brought, Mr. Jones put inside, but the ride was so painful he asked Johnny to sit in the crushed leg to ease it. On top of the pit Mr. Jones was put in a cart for the journey back to Rassau ... there was much weeping and great sorrow in the house that day. Mr. Jones was put on the table and a doctor arrived who did all that could be done. There were many sympathetic hearts and ready hands to do any kind act to comfort those who were sorrowful."

Some days later Johnny was sent into the pit to put Mr. Jones's tools in a safe place. Hurrying back he clung onto the bond as it was rising, only managing to climb inside before a narrow shaft section that would have crushed him.

In 1868 when working at No 7 Pit Sirhowy, (See Photo) 10-year-old Johnny was working not far from his 12 yr-old brother, both their masters being absent. Estimating time by the number of candles burned, eventually they arrived back at pit bottom only to discover the banksman winder had left. In an attempt to get out of the pit, and with no food or light, they walked along the heading finding their way by sliding their feet along the tram plates. Suddenly, in the blackness they heard a roof-fall ahead of them but, somehow squeezing through the debris, they reached the first of several ladders leading up to the Gantra winches. Reaching the surface "they sat on the top of the winch and had a look at the light of the flames as they came from Ebbw Vale Works. Then they started over the mountain for Sirhowy. It was about midnight - they had to go by the top of the pit which they should have gone up and hence by the lane to the top of the pitch on Waun-y-pound." Lights were seen coming down the hill towards them – their parents had come to seek them.

At No. 7 Pit Sirhowy:

"Mr Henry Baker of Sirhowy was an Englishman of the right sort. He worked in No. 7 Pit Sirhowy for a number of years and was an old man. He used to walk with a stick. Little Johnny worked with him for about two years in the 'red-vein' and the 'littlepins'. (The boy much respected his master, even attending St. George's Church with him, but that did not prevent him being punished on two occasions underground.) "Johnny answered his master sharply like some disobedient boys do, but Mr. Baker used his 'good old stick' on the boy's back. It was rather hard for Johnny to bear and he complained to his father who replied 'Serve you right! If a boy is disobedient to his master he should be rebuked for the same and save him from growing in disobedience!' The storm was soon over – it was a good thing the boy got the stick on his back – he was a far better boy than ever."

Billy One-Eye:

Billy was an orphan boy, blind in one eye, who lived at Beaufort and used to walk from there to the Globe Pit at Tredegar. Little Johnny used to meet him almost every morning and have chats on the hillside. Many boys used to make fun of Billy and call him 'Billy One-Eye'. Johnny and B were good friends and so Johnny went to work alongside him at Tredegar. One day Billy had been working very hard and was coming out of the pit, and he had been in much powder-smoke just before he left the stall and it had made him a little bilious. Johnny was walking with him and when they got to pit-bottom they entered the carriage together but when it came near the top of the pit it slackened speed and came almost to a standstill. Billy thought it had landed and, it being very dark, stepped out and fell to the bottom. He was found in the sump at the bottom of the pit and his head was swollen very

large and he was in great pain, but he was not dead when he was brought to the top of the pit. The doctor was in immediate attendance but it was too late. He died within two hours as he was taken on his way home to Beaufort.”

Rats:

“Rats were numerous underground and of various hues of colour, some black, grey, slate-colour and white. When you saw a white rat you could be sure there was an army of them nearby...plates, not rails, were used in those days and the rats used to run along them at great speed. (It seems Johnny had fed them some of his food.) One day when Johnny went for his dinner he found it had been taken down from the post on which it was hung ...after searching for some time he found the bag torn all to bits and his dinner taken away... he had been kind to the thief for such a long time, and to be served like that was rather out of place, even for a rat!!”

At No. 8 Pit, Sirhowy - Through the Flames: (Several local pits were hot-air ventilated)

“The pit called No. 8 at Sirhowy, had two flues in it, one in the middle and the other at the bottom of the pit. These were purposed to draw fresh air through the workings, one for the up and the other for the downcast....a man had to keep the fire continually burning, and a wonderful fire it was. Its flames went into the pit with wild force and was often found to interfere with workmen as they ascended and descended the pit.

The first time Little Johnny went down No. 8 pit he was frightened very much as he felt the hot sulphur coming up to meet him and filling his nose and mouth...When he came almost opposite the flue the flames came out so strong and singed his little hands and face. It was not so bad when he went down the second time but the sulphur was almost unbearable! After a time Johnny became so accustomed to the unpleasant experience and did not mind it so much at first until one day he discovered that the workmen carried a quantity of gun-powder in linen bags under their coats down the pit past the flames. Johnny arrived at the pit one morning and soon after there came a man with a bag of powder in his hand. Johnny began to think he would not go down the pit in the same bond so he began to move away from the pit but the banksman shouted to him ‘Johnny, if you want to go down you had better go now for I shall be winding coal in a few minutes and you will not be able to go down for a long time!’ As they went past the first flue J asked God to protect him from harm and after they had passed safely he thanked God and asked Him to protect them from the awful flames of the lower flue. The prayer was answered and all was safe. Every now and again, Johnny’s mind became troubled by the flues and their flames and when he went out that night he put his coat over his head to protect it from the flames. He got out safely.

One pay-Monday morning Johnny arrived early at the pit before anyone had time to open it. When the banksman arrived he began to set the pit (winding gear) in motion according to the regulation that the bond had to operate empty before men were allowed in it. In the turning of that first bond the carriage going down caught against a rock by the middle flue and tore it out of the side of the pit. There was such a crash in the pit – the guides were shaking to and fro and the chain swinging until it almost came off the wheel. The banksman received a severe shock as he held firm at the brake...Johnny ran some little distance away and expected to see both carriages fall to the bottom. After a while a number of examiners went down by a temporary rope and chain to see what had taken place...it was discovered that about 30 tons of coal and rubbish had fallen from the side of the pit and a large volume of water had burst from an old water-course, the force of which prevented them descending

further. If Johnny had gone down on that bond, or if the fall took place during the second descent, he would have lost his life.

It had been a common sight to see stones of various sizes fall from the pit sides as men went up and down. The pit was picked once a month or oftener – all the loose stones were picked out. Shortly after that large fall of stuff orders were given to stop all men going down the pit as it was unsafe and condemned as such. The men had to go down No 7 Pit.

At No. 2 Pit, Sirhowy - Covered in a Fall of Coal:

“In the year 1869 Johnny was working in No 2 Pit Sirhowy in the seven-foot coal. He worked with a Mr. Lewis – the work was called ‘longwork’ The face of the workings were all open – one stall to another, the coal easy to work but the clod (rubbish) in the middle of it was very dangerous. The top was very brittle and it was with great difficulty the men had to prop it up safely. One night as Johnny was filling a tram the collar (transverse beam) fell on his head and knocking him down – he became covered by a large quantity of coal and rubbish – he was completely covered. His master heard the fall and hastened back to look for Johnny but could not find him anywhere. He shouted out ‘Where are you Johnny’ but there was no answer. Suddenly his master saw the boy’s hand projecting through the rubbish and he caught the hand and began to pull him out but by that time Johnny was recovering consciousness and he cried out ‘Don’t pull my arm out of joint!’ They got the stone and coal off the boy and got him out from under the fall. The blood was streaming down his face from the head and Mr. Lewis soon discovered a number of deep wounds upon which he placed some wet tobacco which immediately stopped the bleeding. It was discovered there were no bones broken but he complained of a severe pain in the head. Two men walked with him to the bottom of the pit. There was a flue at the bottom of the pit ...the old gentleman at the flue was blind, but he was a good-hearted man – Mr. Myrtle. He had one wooden leg... The banksman had gone home so Johnny waited with the old man all night until the banksman returned to his duty. At six o’clock he came to the pit and J proceeded towards his home. He was living at the Step Row, Sirhowy, at the time...a doctor was sent for ...in a short time he was able to go back to work again. J’s parents were very much against it but he liked the work and he went to work with Mr. Lewis again...”

At No. 4 Pit, Sirhowy:

“No 4 Pit Sirhowy had different ranges in it and an engine at the bottom of the pit to wind up the trams from the different ranges. Johnny worked in the pit for some time, during which two men were killed. There was a horse-way or level out from No 4 without going up the pit and it was said that a ghost was seen at its entrance.”

At Briggs’ Balance Pit:

“Briggs’ Pit was situated on the tramway side on the way from Tredegar to Nantybwch. It was a balance pit, balanced by water in large iron buckets, one on each carriage. Little Johnny commenced working in this pit with Mr. Hughes of Sirhowy, they were driving a heading across the measures from the red vein to the soap vein. Mr. Hughes was a hard-working man and the lad had to do his share with his master – all for the boy’s good and he paid him well. One night he had a strange experience with a donkey. He was proceeding in a carting lorry (tram) to the bottom of the pit when at the top of an incline Mr. Hughes failed to sprag the wheel and the donkey ran away down the run with J in the lorry. When they got half way down the heading the chain got fast in the axle and the donkey was drawn back on the top of Johnny in the tram. There was a strange sight to see – the tram,

the boy and the donkey in it...all the while the donkey was making his usual unpleasant noise!”

Little Johnny changed his master from Mr Hughes to a man known as Big Ben. Big Ben was a fine workman and a good-hearted fellow but he was a drunkard and fond of fighting. After working all week he would go to the public house on a Saturday night and spend about half of his money which was so hardly-earned during the week. Little Johnny was living at Sirhowy at the time and whenever he wanted his pay he was obliged to seek the same from Big Ben at some public house in Tredegar. He used to go to the door and listen for the voice of his master – he had a strong voice and could oftentimes be heard from without. Sometimes Johnny had to visit about six public houses before finding his master. When he found him he would be in a quarrel with someone and sometimes he would be fighting. It would be a pity to see Big Ben as he foamed at the mouth with rage. He was a strong man and would soon rough a few men over and leave them for the worse. As soon as Big Ben saw Johnny he would take him into the public house and compel him to drink from his pint of beer. Nearly every pay-Monday Ben used to get a spree for a day or two. Johnny told him he would not lose any more time for him and if he did not turn up he would go into work alone. Soon after Johnny arrived at the pit on Monday morning someone told him Big Ben was drunk at the Globe Inn and won't be at work today. Johnny went down the pit but arriving at a parting saw a notice which gave warning of 'FIRE! FIRE! He looked at the notice but all seemed clear so he went on, every so often testing for gas..suddenly the gas exploded and he was knocked down on the rails and was much frightened. He saw the flames running along the top of the stall to where he was on the road...after a short time he took off his little coat and began to fight the enemy...he had seen one of his masters do this and succeeded in beating the fire out of the stall so he could start work. He filled two trams and then left for home.”

At No. 4 Pit, Sirhowy - The manhole on the drift:

“There was a long drift in No 4 Pit Sirhowy from the bottom of the pit to the lower range. There was an engine at the bottom of the pit with a big drum and a rope to work the trams up and down the drift. The workmen had to pass up and down over the drift to get to their stalls and headings. It was very dangerous for the workmen were often met by the trams on the drift and the rope often broke and the trams were left to run wild and were dashed to pieces against the sides of the drift. The man-holes were little recesses in the side of the drift for the workmen to run into for safety. Little Johnny was going out from his work one evening when the journey of trams came down wild over the drift to meet him. He could hear a dreadful noise before him and suddenly he saw a blaze of fire flashing on the drift. He ran for his life to get into a man-hole which was just ahead of him. He got into it just in time to save his life.”

The 1870 Strike:

“It lasted for 13 weeks. Little Johnny was working at the Little Forge Pit, Ebbw Vale previous and up to the commencement of the strike. He spent most of the time riding the horses that were idle during that time. There was great distress among the poor people at the end of the strike. Johnny has said many times since that there should be some other way of settling matters besides striking over it – strikes are a disgrace to humanity – the master should pay that which is due to the workmen and the workmen should do that which is right to their masters.”

Shortly after the strike ended Johnny left the area to work underground at Hirwaun. He had been attending the Primitive Methodist Chapel at Sirhowy.

At Hirwaun:

“Johnny went to work in the ‘Twr-y-graig’ level Hirwaun with his brother Tom. They found they had to turn a new stall from a heading and were obliged to work nights...they filled three trams of coal at 4s 1d a ton (20P), each tram weighing about 25 cwts. (In spite of having been promised no timber had been provided when they began work the next night.) They started work and filled two trams..as they were getting coal to fill the third, a very large stone fell from the top and nearly caught Johnny...it blew his light out and his brother Tom shouted ‘Where are you?’ The top was cracking loudly ...they went down the stall some little distance and, being very tired at midnight, both fell asleep and after a time were aroused by a fearful noise in the heading above them. Their lights had gone out but they had some matches and struck a light and were soon at the spot where they heard the noise..the top began to give way all over the place. The timber cracked like matchwood and the gobs began to crumble to dust. They tried to get some of the tools out of the way and made their escape for their lives. As they went down the wind-way, the gobs were falling-in as they passed. The whole place fell in and they had only got away in time to save their lives. There was no other person in the level that night. There was a man at the pumping-engine at the mouth of the level but he was sleeping and they failed to wake him.....”

Transcribed P.M.J. from a copy of the original book provided by Philip Prosser.

