

“DOWN THE GRAEG – PART 2.”

Paul Crawley continues his account of a pit visit during his schooldays’, the first section of which appeared in Journal No. 5.



MARINE COLLIERY – CWM.

Some weeks after our first visit I was informed that a trip underground would be possible for our senior technical school group.

Thus, on March 26 1959 - 'Maundy Thursday' we arrived at the colliery and in the canteen met by a young man who shepherded us to the pithead baths to change and put our street clothes into lockers. In the lamp room, I noticed a power driven brush to clean muddy boots as our guide explained no cigarettes or matches were to be taken underground. We were then fitted with miners' battered helmets with lamps clipped in front, their batteries hung from our belts as now happens to Big Pit visitors. At the busy number two pithead clouds of steam rose from the engine houses, winding ropes swayed from side to side as coal 'dram' laden cages rose swiftly. Then chains at the top of each cage fell slack and the ropes swung loosely as the drams were wheeled out to be taken smoothly downhill to the coal washery on an endless chain system.

Soon we were all jammed together in the single-decked cage. The safety gate, which converted a coal carrying cage into a 'bond', for human transport was unclipped and fastened with a catch before the banksman pressed his signal button.

Then it seemed that the ground outside had begun to rise; at first there was little awareness of movement or speed. With the bond running smoothly in its wire-rope guides, the brick shaft lining began to speed past and eventually, with a sensation of pressure in our eardrums, we arrived at pit bottom.

The underground "onsetter" unlatched the bond gate letting us into a brightly lit place nothing like the dark, cramped, coal face we had anticipated. This spacious, brick arched, area had even been whitewashed and seemed like some railway junction. A train of laden tubs soon to enter the cage stood on rails leading into darkness. How empty it all seemed with the only other person present, apart from the onsetter, resembled a sergeant major who turned out to be the pit under manager, or 'deputy', who lined us up against the wall and brusquely demanded to know what we were doing underground? Our guide explained briefly why we were there before the deputy explained the risks ahead. We were to do exactly what our guide told us and, on no account, touch the conveyor belt. I think we were then taken to see an underground stable, most of whose whitewashed stalls looked disused. Mechanization had almost ended the need for pit ponies.

Moving off into the darkness, the light from our cap lamps revealed a tunnel of steel arches backed by wooden boards and a moving conveyor belt bearing a stream of coal towards pit bottom. Everything underfoot was now so wet and slippery that we had to concentrate on where we were going, especially as our tunnel was gradually descending. Water dripped from the roof, perhaps from the river Ebbw far above, or subterranean springs deep beneath the mountain. Some steel arches had distorted out of shape, bent by pressure – this was already proving an adventure.

It was then I walked straight into a lower roof supporting a bad place, hitting this with such force that I thought my neck had been unshipped. As I staggered the guide gripped me by the arm and asked anxiously whether I was all right? Apart from hurt pride, and a slightly stiff neck lasting for a day or so, I was uninjured, but the top of my helmet bore a marked furrow indicating how it had saved me from serious injury.

An increasing newness of the arches signified we were reaching the end of our journey and even the conveyor belt came to an abrupt end. Staring into the blackness we gradually made out a wide low space supported at frequent intervals by hydraulic pit props. The glimmer of a few dimmed cap lamps indicated that we were finally about to meet workers at

the coal face as, bent double we filed into a confined area, where some colliers were taking a break, crouched on their haunches, forearms on knees. In those days one frequently saw old miners perched comfortably in that same fashion on their front doorsteps. As we stared silently one collier commented appropriately: *'Don't you ever come down this place, boys!'*

This was 'where it was all at', where every refinement of technology was employed at the age-old task of extracting earth's minerals. We were far back in geological history. Fossilized ferns and plants from some primeval forest could be discovered in these seams; the disastrous explosion at Senghenydd colliery, near Caerphilly, had taken place in that pit's 'Botanic District.' There were even unlikely stories of prehistoric toads discovered in hollow stones dug out of underground workings, and even briefly restored to life. In front of us was a 'working face', whose black band of coal was relatively thin, four feet at most with a band of loose shale above, and whose wet surface reflected small points of light.

Much colliers' toil of former days had been replaced by a 'Panzer' coal cutter whose compressed air helped ventilate the face and which was moved steadily forward as the face advanced, the men setting up roof-supports in its wake. Dragged slowly forward by cable the 'Panzer' seemed little more than a low oblong box but when started up, its cylindrical cutting disc took huge bites of coal that automatic scrapers pushed away to the conveyor.

This demonstration completed, our guide led us off through the arcade of hydraulic props. The impression of a petrified forest was strengthened by branch-like thick supports above and the girders or wooden supports mounted on top. On one side was the coal face, the other being a forbidden and dangerous 'no-man's land, the 'goat' or 'gob' from which supports had been removed. Occasional rushing noises, shiftings and clattering told that the roof was steadily collapsing behind the advancing panzer. In old days, when primitive methods meant much small coal was left behind, pressure could ignite spontaneous fires that had to be dug out, whatever the risk, and carried to the surface in iron 'baskets'. Nobody in his right mind would ever venture into the gob..

This section did not last long and soon we turned into another 'roadway where its conveyor belt was being extended. Before we fully found our bearings, the guide stopped at a large side door, opening a sliding panel to equalize the pressure before pushing it open. A musty draught of air blew in our faces as we stepped over the sill and into the colliery's past. Here was no modern equipment, just a narrow gauge railway and a standing pit pony harnessed to an empty 'tub', the animal raising his drooping head as we clustered around. When everybody had filed past, this patient beast would be left again in perpetual darkness its haulier from his 'break'.

The whole atmosphere now seemed different. Walking in along the conveyor heading we were fresh cold air from the 'downcast' shaft, but now were in a warm, dusty and stifling 'return' road, where the stale air was on its way to the upcast fan. The steel rings seemed to be in better condition as we tramped along steadily, perspiration trickling through coal dust on every exposed area of skin. My throat grew parched and clogged as we trudged through workings spread with powdered limestone to prevent gas explosion. 'Firedamp' igniting coal dust in the atmosphere, would turn the workings into a gigantic cannon, whose blast shooting up the shaft could devastate even surface workings, as had happened at Senghenydd. As we neared the upcast shaft, I thought we might have crossed into Number One pit, which had suffered a devastating and fatal explosion on March 1st 1927. If some tales were true, people didn't like being there on their own.

Our detour ended at another 'brattice' door, and we were back at the bottom of Number 2 pit. There was little or no conversation as we filed back into the 'bond' and started our ascent. This time it was so leisurely that we could make out every brick in the shaft. We rose ever more slowly and then came to a halt. Somebody said, *'they must be short on steam.'* But we started again and rising slowly from the pit mouth, daylight shone through the headgear's vertical girders and latticed cross-members. One of the boys reacted with alarm, *"We're going up too far!"* to which an adult voice replied in mock anxiety: *"It's an overwind and we'll go crashing back down the shaft!"* But I knew we hadn't even reached the cage platform and we rose gently into sight of the banksman's boots to halt precisely at ground level.

Our return to daylight, after just a couple of hours underground, seemed very strange. Everything stood bathed in sunlight that looked as if filtered through painted glass. This phenomenon lasted for at least a couple of minutes, until our eyes had adjusted to the normal world. As we trudged wearily back to the pithead baths there was a feeling that we had experienced something which set us apart from the rest of our classmates.

I had never showered in public before and even considered putting off washing until getting home. But after just a short time underground we had all begun to look like sweeps. Coal-dust gritted against our sweaty collars and a shower was essential. Standing in a cubicle under the welcome hot water, I was soon clean again. Changing back to everyday clothes, I saw the bath attendant setting out a low wooden stool under one of the showers. One of the disabled miners obviously lacked a leg. It seemed a final reminder that underground work was always dangerous.

On that memorable Holy Thursday I would later attend the familiar Mass of the Last Supper in church that evening. Now I understood, for the very first time, how much “washing the Disciples' feet” had meant in a hot and distant country.

Paul Crawley