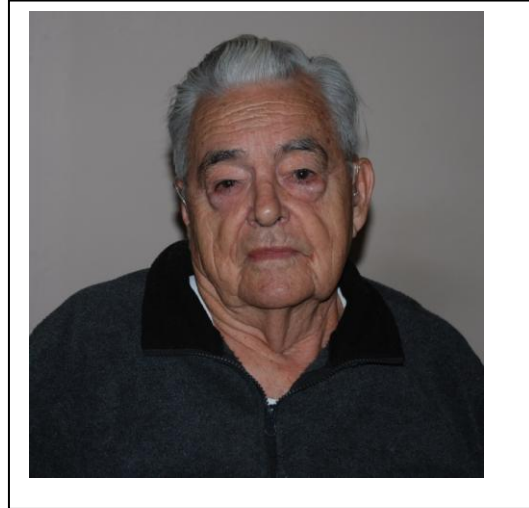


Colin Hughes

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Interviewer: Margaret Cook



My name is Colin Hughes. I started in 1941. I started at what we called Coronation. It was only a small pit and I worked there until it finished. I suppose I had a few years there. When it finished I started at Wattle Glen. I had a few years there. It finished up.

I worked in the Swanbank area and worked there until it finished. I think I went to Sunrise out here at Blackstone on the Redbank Plains Road. I was then called transferred to the Cornwall pit. That was a seam at Bennies. After a couple of years I was offered a job at Dinmore at Westfalen. I worked there until they opened another pit at Collingwood Park. I worked there. Between times we had a strike at Sunrise. I also spent some time at New Hope until I was made redundant there. I got put off there. I was put on afternoon shift at Haigmore over at North Ipswich. I then came back to Sunrise and started day work. Now we are up to date as I worked at Westfalen for a few years and then at Collingwood Park. I worked there until I retired. I was a young fellow when I started.

In 1974, the big flood filled the whole workings at Westfalen. It really filled the place up with water. They were undecided

about what to do with it. They decided to have another go at it, we had to rehabilitate it, clean it all up. We had to divert different belt lines. When the water went down the tunnel they were sandbagging it to about 7 foot high up the tunnel. It collapsed and this seven foot high water tore the concrete off the floor and the belting of the tunnel. It left the main drive there. The belt ended up down the pit somewhere. We never found it. It was all steel arched all the way down and it was all 6 by 1 timber over the top of the arch. There was only one of those arches left. There was timber all around it. When it filled up with water it compressed the air and there must have been a bore hole and when it blew it came out like a big cone. All around the tunnel mouth, when it blew back all the timber was facing up the hill. By the time we got around to the workings, which was about half a mile further on, all the belting down there was just standing there. At Collingwood Park they put down a bore hole and put a submersible pump down it and it was full of water and they shifted all the water in a couple of months. The water wasn't to the surface but a fair way.

I started as only a lad for Binnie's on the surface. At Coronation at Bergin's Hill.

I left school and had 12 months at the Technical College. I was offered a job at the pit and I said I'll take it. I worked there and that was shift day work. It was contract work in those days and that was the best system. When you filled your quota you could go home.

The contracts faded out in about 1960 and they went to mechanisation. They had scraping chains at Dinmore. Noisy sods they were. At Redbank they had a continuous miner and they had one there they called it a Marietta. They paid \$250,000 for it and I think it is still down the pit. It has closed up. They had a blower that blew air in over the top. They had sucker tubes and it was roaring alongside you. The cars used to come in and pick up the coal. It would be right beside you while they filled it with the coal. You would have to secure the roof. They'd bolt the roof up.

Interviewer: Was it noisy?

Oh yeah. The machine itself wasn't but it as the mainly the sucker, it used to roar. The blower wasn't too bad.

They would hook it right up to the machine and suck the dust away. They used a lot of water in the machines to keep the dust down. It used to slop and we had to wear Wellington boots to keep the water out. I probably found out it was my vocation in life. When I was younger my Dad – he put 50 years in at Blackheath pit. That's another I worked in. I worked there for a while. He was there 50 years. When I was on holidays he'd ask me to help because he worked on the surface.

Interviewer: What were you doing at the Technical College?

An industrial course but I wasn't quite up to it.

Interviewer: Where was Wattle Glen?

It was only a small pit, about a dozen miners. A lot of the mining country around here is not suitable for full-scale mechanical mining. Odd ones – Rhondda they had a good patch that had a fairly good roof. They had another seam that did pretty well. It was only about 7feet high. They did pretty well.

Interviewer: In the 1940s what shifts were you working?

They only had the one shift. They didn't have the orders for coal back then. Later on they built Swanbank powerhouse and that took a lot of coal but that wasn't there in my early days.

Interviewer: What were working conditions like?

Some of them were short on air. Some of them were pretty hot. Llewys Thomas' pit out the back of our place here. That finished in about 1900. It only worked for about 10 years. Water beat it they reckon. There is a lot of faulty country around here. That creek that runs down the bottom there down, they worked till there and there is another fault. The seam had a "jump down" (that's what we call it) and it dropped about 500 feet. All over this area there is plenty of coal but it is too hard to get.

The Aberdare seam was worked by Llewys Thomas (he was the original fellow here). They worked the seam down there behind the railway gates down there right up behind Brynhyfryd Castle. It followed the seam and

there was only about 20 feet of coal there. It used to fall in around those houses there. If you go around the loop line there the best seam there was the Aberdare seam – not much stone. Follow that creek around there were lots of little pits there in the early days.

Interviewer: When you say little pits do you mean not many men or not high yield?

Not many men. I am trying to think of the other pit I worked out beyond Swanbank, it was called Ideal. They had some funny names.

I found the contract days were the best days as far as working. You were sort of working for yourself. You got about 6 bob a ton and we used to make good money. That changed in the 1960s.

Interviewer: When did the second, afternoon shift come in?

That came in with mechanisation. Down at Westfalen at Redbank they worked three shifts. They had the dog watch. They started at about 10 and finished at 5 in the morning.

Interviewer: Did you ever do that?

No I did the 4 o'clock to midnight. You would do a fortnight on that and then a fortnight on the day work. 7 to 3 or something like that.

Interviewer: Did you get any formal qualifications?

No I was just a rouseabout miner.

Interviewer: You would have seen some change in that time. Did the size of the workforce increase?

In the days of mechanisation in my time they used to put a lot of men on at Dinmore and Redbank. We used to say at Dinmore that some of the seams were very dirty. We would shake our heads at how they could clean it up because some of it was about 24% ash.

They had a washing plant. Kathages owned it. There were three or four brothers. They designed a lot of their own stuff down there.

You had to work hard to make a dollar on contract.

Interviewer: So you were on the surface?

For 2 or 3 years. I had to load timber to send down. I had to make up belting to send belts down.

Interviewer: Did you like working underground?

It was quite good, some rough patches here and there. You see some decent falls. When you were on contract the inspector would come round and check the timber. When they put machines in the roof was a big as the roof of this house and you could stand. They used to use a lot of roof bolts.

They gave you a false sense of security. It depends what the roof bolts were anchored into. If it was soft they would just come out.

Interviewer: I was told that sometimes people preferred the timber because you could hear what was happening?

They were a good warning. Sometimes a small piece of timber had a fair bit of weight on it. I have never worked outside the district. I never even worked in Rosewood.

I used to say I've been in a lot of rat holes around here.

Interviewer: Did Westfalen re-open after the flood?

Oh yes. We re-timbered all the tunnel and did a lot of diversions and a lot of roof bolting. We cleaned it all up. We had to redirect their main belts. That took a couple of years.

When it blew back it half wrecked their ventilation and fan so they had to get that going. They had a bit of open cut there.

They could produce a little till they got re-established.

Interviewer: How many worked at Westfalen?

They had about 6 jokers in a crew. Three shifts – about 60 or 70 blocks.

Interviewer: Is that a reasonably big mine?

Oh yes. They had a couple of machines there. The machines used to get bogged.

Interviewer: I suppose it was new technology they were getting used to?

For them it was.

Interviewer: Was it interesting to be working with machinery?

It was noisy. They had their times when they had their peak output and times when they didn't. They would shift the belts and move them forward. Underground they had big transformers and we had to shift them all the time because as they advanced we had to move them. They had big heavy cables. Of course a lot of them had big air compressors

- air lines all through the pits. When they were drilling they used compressed air. That was alright too. It wasn't as dangerous.

Interviewer: Why is it less dangerous?

With the air you don't get any sparks. There is a chance with the electrical ones you can. The air was more convenient and you could use it for different things. Every weekend nearly they had to remove stone dust. They had a machine that pumped it out and neutralised the dust. With the gas explosions it would get the dust rolling and then the dust would explode. If they put stone dust around so that it wouldn't explode.

You'd go down and look like Father Christmas.

Interviewer: Was that one of your jobs?

Occasionally. We had these big machines that you tipped the dust into and blow it out behind. They had to do it because of the safety. They went mad after the explosion at Box Flat. They clamped down on it then.

Interviewer: Did you see any accidents?

Not really bad ones. I had close shaves. I heard of some but I have never worked with anyone who was seriously hurt.

You go by what's above you. One bloke said to me when they started to introduce the roof bolts. He was poo hooing the idea. Someone said there are 20,000 miners in America - they can't be wrong.

Interviewer: So had been using for a while in America?

Yes they used them for 6 or 7 feet or more. You had to wear a mask because some of it was a bit dusty.

Interviewer: Was this area quick to introduce the bolts or was it later than other areas?

They started to use them at Redbank. That was the only time I had to do with them. In my days we were mostly contract mining. When we got onto mechanisation it was not as good as the contract mining.

Interviewer: What about the men you worked with? Were there some characters?

Oh characters all right. They played jokes. When you were on contract you carried all your gear with you each day. You got your explosives every day. You worked with a mate and you would be the face man and you would have to knock the coal down and get in and fill it all up.

You worked together. You would bore a few holes and fire it and get the coal down. He'd be shovelling and you'd get your shovel and help him fill it too.

One was called the face man, the other was a wheeler.

I worked with my brother-in-law (Al Warren) or a fair while. Every 3 months when you were on contract and we would have a caval call. You would have a scrutineer going around and inspecting all these places. You would go in a ballot, they'd pull out your name and you would go there for 3 months.

The caval it is like a ballot. With contract you have a string with your number or tally on. You'd put it on the corner of your wagon when you filled it. They'd weigh every wagon when it came up and they would record your tally. And you were paid according to your tally.

Every week or fortnight when you were payed you'd split it up with your mate.

Interviewer: If you did more that was ok. Or when you hit a number you could go home?

They used to try and keep us there but we could say we'd had enough and go home and come back the next day.

Interviewer: Was it just Monday to Friday? Did they bring in Saturday shift?

That was just maintenance. They never used to produce on a Saturday. When the pits gradually closed here a lot of men went up to central Queensland.

Interviewer: When you went off contract you were employed by the mine. Was the wage much the same?

You were paid so much a day. It was good wages and they had bonus schemes. You produced so much and if you did more tonnage you got more.

Interviewer: Did they have overtime?

Oh yes. They'd work 24 hours a day if they could. One bloke used to work a lot of time. He used to say "you do not know how tired I am". This was only maintenance.

Interviewer: Compared to the railways you were quite well paid?

Oh yes they were tied to a wage at the workshops. We were too sort of. But when the bonus came in we did all right out if that. Sometimes we might make an extra \$50 or \$60 a week. Sometimes more. It all depended on the conditions and how easily the coal came out.

Interviewer: What about safety. What did you wear?

In the beginning we had a cloth hat and a carbide light. You carried your tin with your carbide for the day. We used to ride the horse from the stables. One day a bloke got off the horse and he flicked his carbide light on as he put it down and he went bang and the horse bolted. He had no horse and couldn't work.

In the later part we had ear muffs, overalls, Wellington boots. We used to get an issue every 12 months or so. It is 23 or 24 years since I stopped work. At 60, in the mines you have finished. No extensions. You have to go.

Interviewer: What else are you carrying underground?

Before mechanisation you had your electric lamp and your battery on your belt. You had safety equipment in a tin arrangement on your belt. If there was a lack of air you took it off your belt and there was a filter or something in there which gave you so much air.

We carried a billy can of water and a billy can with your tucker. It had to go in cans because of vermin down there – mice and rats. If you had a leather bag the rats would eat a hole in the bag. We had about a quart of water in our billy can. That was all we needed.

I could tell you some funny stories. There used to tell you a yarn about guy and the guys who carried the water used to drink his water. I'll fix them he said and he used to put his false teeth in his billy.

Interviewer: Do you want to talk about any industrial action?

It was mainly over redundancy. They ended up with negotiations. I ended up at Haigmore for a few months on the afternoon shift. I did a bit there. They had other uses like safety.

Interviewer: You did it to improve conditions?

Yes.

Interviewer: Did you get involved with the mines rescue?

No. There was a fellow who worked with me – Randolph – he was out there at Box Flat. He wasn't long in the mines rescue. Fresh crews were coming in to fight the fire down below. He said I haven't seen a fire down below like so he jumped in the rake and went below and then boomb and up she went. A fellow, Williams, worked with me. There is a fellow on the corner, Lenny Tucker, they were working to seal off the tunnel mouth. The smoke started coming back to them and he said I am getting out of here. He was nearly out and it blew. The next thing he remembers was they were picking him up and his mouth was full of coal, dust and he was peppered with coal which had taken pieces out of him. There were others like that. You hear of others that didn't go down on that rake because they had something else to do.

Interviewer: Can you give me an idea of tonnage. What sort of tonnage was coming out?

I suppose they would go 1000 ton a day on the machines when they were all going well.

Interviewer: How did this compare with pre-mechanisation?

No comparison. A man can't keep up with a machine.

Interviewer: When you were on contract what did you produce in a day?

I suppose I would fill about 20 skips or more. Some you could get a ton on them. We used to pack them up. The wagons were 15 hnt weight just level full, but if you picked them up we could get a few hundred on the top.

We got 6 bob a ton. We would fill about 10 wagons – about 20 ton – a day.

I suppose they had about 14 pairs of miners.

The cars we used to call them had about 10 ton on them or more. We would tip it out onto the belt. I said about 1000 ton a day. Sometimes they would do about 25 or 30 cars so that is a lot more than 1000 tons a day.

Interviewer: What are the men underground doing in mechanisation days?

They are following the machines. They have got to keep shifting the sucker tubes and keep the air blowing above the machine. They have to chase around and get the tubes ready to be extending them all the time.

This needed the man driving the machine and his offsider; the man driving the car and 2 or 3 men on maintenance. 6 or 7 in a crew.

Interviewer: Did they have more than one crew going at any one time?

They would have couple of machines going so a couple of crews. There was a crew for the other machine.

Interviewer: Westfalen would have 2 crews going most of the time?

All depends. They never used to produce on the dog watch but they got around to producing on the third shift. They produced some coal there. They had some rough country there. Especially where they started. Where the subsidence is at Collingwood Park, that was bad. We had to work around it there. I feel sorry for them about what happened.

Let me tell you about the miners train. They picked us up at the gates down here. It went for quite a while. Most of the miners used to ride bikes and there are tracks through the bush around here to Rhonda and other parts.

It used to pick us up in the morning and drop us off after work. They had a pilot that did a run first. It was a loop that came right around at Redbank. There were mines and at here at Box Flat and the train turned around at 3 mile 8 and then it went out to Blackheath and a couple of other pits. They called it the loop.

They would take the coal to Brisbane. They would go around and get 2 or 3 wagons at every pit and make up a train at Redbank and take it to Brisbane.