

Robert “Hoot” Gibson

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Interviewer: Margaret
Cook

Assisted by Bevan Kathage



My name is Robert Gibson. I started in the coal mines up in the Burrum Field. I started as an underground labourer. The first day I started the manager put me cleaning the tunnel on both sides of the rails. I started from No 7 level. At 3 o'clock in the afternoon I walked out. He said, “you just broke the record; no-one has ever done that in their life”. They might have got two or three, they might have got the fifth, but you came right out of the tunnel; I cleaned both sides of the rails, the middle of the rails and I walked right out of it.

Eventually I worked my way up, and I was called a floater.

Interviewer: What does a floater do?

Anyone who has a hard place, they fired the place, then they wheeled the coal out – well anyone who got a hard place, and it was hard that day, they wouldn't come to work,

they would take a sickie and I would have to fill in. I had to work that day and I had to pay more for explosives, firing the place down, than when I worked for a day's wages, I was called a floater. I had no say, you had to do it, you know, anytime they wanted anyone, for example rope riding.

The one thing I did not like was the horses. They got taken down Monday morning and got taken up Friday afternoon. There were no lights down in the pit. They were down in the complete darkness all the time – different to Rhondda. At Rhondda they brought them up every day. I did, I took them down and brought them up at Rhondda.

I had a great time up in the Burrum Fields at Torbanlea (north of Maryborough). That's where my wife came from.

Interviewer: So how old were you when you started mining?

I'd be about 28, I suppose. I was a grocer. I carried the Olympic torch when I was 32. I'd say I started when I was 28; that would be 1952.

Interviewer: Why did you start in the mines?

The bloke that I worked with, Sutton, I worked with him ever since I was 16, and when I got to 28, he sold out to a bloke called Hervey Smith, but he had no idea of being a grocer. He used to take his groceries out of the store, never pay for them, still take his wages and go fishing every weekend with six or seven hangers-on, put the beer on and all that, I could see him going broke. I had a wife and two kids and we had just built a new home. My father-in-law was head of the union. He lived next door to the manager, Davey Kerr, and I got put on.

My father was a miner. He came from Scotland, and when he came out, he went to the Burrum Field which is nothing like down here. My brother used to work in 3 foot of coal. He used to cut the handle of the shovel off and make it short. He would lay down, pull the stuff out, his mate would fill the wagon; 19 inches of coal, anything. The weight was unbelievable. It was only swamp country; you would put a prop up today and it would break

tomorrow. You could not have machines up there, the country would not stand it.

Interviewer: When did you move to Ipswich?

I moved down here. The coal industry got bad and my brother – he'd been in the mines since he was 14 or 16 – and all the Rosses and all them got put off. I was last on. I got kept on. My father in law said it was not fair, and I said it was not fair either. He said I have to work now, as head of the Union, to get you put off and them put back on, which they did.

He got in touch with Charlie Tucker and Tom, little Tommy, he was the President, Tommy Miller. They got me to have an interview at Rhondda, and so I come down. My brother-in-law lived here, at Stuart Street, just up here. I stayed with him and the next day I got on a push bike and rode out to the Rhondda Mine. Wally Ritchie and Vince Smith were there and they asked me about my experience – they said “hang on a minute”. So Wally Ritchie went round and got a billy can, a sandwich off this bloke, a sandwich off that bloke, a scone, a cake, a biscuit, and I started work straight away - in my good clothes! I came home that afternoon on my pushbike.

This was 1957. I was with a bloke that stuttered – Bill Harkness. He and I used to push four empties in and we would push the four out.

Once, Wally Smith and Vince Ritchie came around to see how the work was going. They asked Bill Harkness how the work was going? He said “we’re going pretty....good.....good....but wh...when you go on top....will.....will y.yy...y.you do me a favour?” Vince Smith said “what would you like me to do?” Bill said “will you send down a bag of chaff, we’re working like bloody horses, we may as well eat like one.”

Anyway, I used to come home and say to Dot, “I’m sick of pushing these wagons, I’d love to get a horse” and eventually they gave me a horse. I took the horse down, every morning, and took them up every afternoon. It was the hardest thing to take the horse up at night, with the rake coming down to pick up the men, last thing, you had to get the horses off the rail. I eventually got to be a roadman there. We laid the rails. It was a terrible mine.

Interviewer: Which mine were you in?

HG: Rhondda, the one with the shaft. Rhondda No 1 – they had a cage going down and a cage going up. They all said, never to worry, if ever you wanted a fast trip, you only

had to give the sign to the engine driver and he would drop you like a stone, and they said to me ‘you don’t ever want to worry about whether the cage would drop, because they will never ever be on the bottom because there is a thing on the side that would grab’. We went to work one Monday morning and both cages were on the bottom! That’s true. I would never forget that.

It was a rock mine. Terrible. You have never seen anything like it. My brother-in-law came down to see me and I took him out to show him what it was like - every night before they went home, they would fire the bord so they had a start the next morning. When I took him down, we went down with the horses, down before the men, he said “have they got to shift all this brushing before they start filling the coal?” I said “that is the coal”. It was a shocking mine – it was about 25% ash. New Hope was about 8%. The difference in the coal was unbelievable.

They never had machines there, at Rhondda, just contract shovelling. Ronnie McKenna asked me would I go to New Hope? “Yes” I said, “I would love to go to New Hope”.

You could only save 5 sickies then, you could have one every 22 days, but you could only save 5 a year, you could keep five if you left.

Wally Ritchie and Vince Smith did not want me to leave, they said no, and I had a good name, so I thought I would get at least one sickie. So I lay on the lounge at home. A knock came at the door and it was Vince Smith and Wally Ritchie, they came to see me to make me change my mind. "We would hate to lose you".

I studied for my Deputy's ticket as soon as I got to New Hope, after I saw what was going on there. I got 99% - top. Tom Featherston was my instructor, and then I sat the exam – I studied everything. I studied shock and everything. They didn't ask me about shock. My brother-in-law was here. He worked in the Commonwealth Bank, the Commercial Bank. I had one son studying for Junior and one son studying for Senior. He was studying. He said we all had to have a separate room to study. He was the first to chuck it in.

So I got my Deputy's ticket. New Hope gave me a job as Deputy straight away. So I had to do five year's permanent night shift, because the men that were there had such a hold on the mine. A few of us that started were outvoted – we tried to get week about, but we had no chance – we were outvoted! So I did five years permanent work at night-time – my wife worked at Londies Fish shop putting our son through Teachers College and I only

saw her on a Sunday. As they started more men, the vote went against the ones that were there and we got week about.

Interviewer: What hours were the shifts?

7am to 3pm and 2.30 to 11 o'clock. Being a Deputy, if a machine broke down, I'd go to work at 2.30 in the afternoon, I would not get home till 7 o'clock the next morning. You had to be there with the fitter or electricians to get the machines fixed.

I had a wonderful crew. I have seen so many Managers come, it's unbelievable. I saw Ronnie McKenna, Rex Griffiths, Eric Cooper, Bevan, Peter Bilbrough, Jim Lawry, Ronnie Barker, Ivan Rasmussen. He was off to Moura. Ivan told me "any time you and your crew want work up at Moura just ask me. You're no. 1 you and your crew as far as I'm concerned".

I never ordered my men to do anything, I asked them. There was a young man who got his Deputy's ticket out there, and the first day he walked in to the Manager's office, he said "I just want to know how I stand when I become a Deputy?" They said "what do you want to know?" He said "I want to know how power I have over the men?" They never put him in charge of anyone. You cannot order men to do it.

Bevan Kathage: The evening shift that Hoot is talking about is what we now call afternoon shift, as opposed to dog watch, hours 12 to 7am.

We had a dog watch shift on too. We had a day shift and afternoon shift then they started a dog shift, that was to get the machines fixed. They put two managers on that, Bob Bitmead and Eric (red-headed South African).

I met them and “Hoot” they said – “you were the only Manager we never saw. You never worked under us” I said “you were the only two who never worked under me” (joking with them).

Interviewer: So you had the same group of men the whole time?

My two miner drivers, Billy Verrell, and Glen Verrell – he was marvellous. My job was extraction. I started at New Hope not down that main tunnel, I took every skerrick of coal out of the Bluff. The Bluff – that was my tunnel, my mine, every skerrick of it. (New Hope No 4.)

I was the shot firer. When we had finished one night and we went back in to see how it was, you could see trees, stars and a plane going over, that’s how close we went to the surface!

We were always frightened. Rex had to fence that in because a cow could

have fallen in. One morning I went down, you only had a spotlight, this thing went straight across in front of me. I got such a scare. It was a big wallaby. It went down the tunnel. When Lenny Hughes and the guys came to work, we went and roped him, and took him back to the surface and let him go. You wouldn’t believe it – he had just kept going down.

I had to do the early morning inspection on the Bluff. I had to start at 4 o’clock every morning. After that finished, I got put in another tunnel, and that was where I got my crew, a mechanised crew. They were such a great lot. I never got a man badly hurt.

I didn’t like when they brought the bonus scheme in, because the bonus scheme was to increase production, but there was more danger. There were more risks taken to produce the coal. The management asked us if we wanted it – it was about the late 1960s.

I did not see it, but one man got killed in a crew. He was up on the miner. It was Eric Cooper’s brother in law. Another young fella started, Williams – he was cleaning the main line and he got killed. He was a rope rider. He and Kenny Cooper were cleaning the side of the track and the skip came down, two skips – they did not stop them in time, they had scraggs in them. On the steel

rails you don't hear it. This bloke panicked and he ran in front of it.

One of the fitters got killed on the dog watch. Whatever they did, I'm not sure, but they wanted to jack the miner up. They put round cut off timber under it and it took off. Things that should never have happened.

Then I got the early morning inspection on the main tunnel. I used to go every morning on my own. I never forget the night that I was lying in bed with my wife and we heard these two bump bump sounds. She said "that's a coal mine blowing up". I did not believe her. We went outside and all you could see what the smoke going up. I went out, but were not allowed to go past. You had to go past Box Flat to get to New Hope. Those men I'm told, were sitting in the rake ready to come up (*at Box Flat*). Another ten minutes and they would have been right.

Morrie Tate and his wife and two kids had been on a picnic and were coming past the Racehorse Hotel where the Mines Rescue was. The light was on. He went in to see what was going on. "Box Flat's on fire" they said and "we have the men out there working to put it out". He took his wife and two kids home and went out and down – dead in half an hour. I worked with his

brother Eddy Tate – he was a Deputy too.

We had wonderful send offs – the Managers used to come. I was practically the only one who had all the Managers come to my send-off. They said "you have so many managers at your send-off Hoot, that it's unbelievable". I said in my reply that the reason they all came was to make sure I retired!

Interviewer: When was your send-off?

In 1984. I stayed at New Hope all that time.

Interviewer: You said that people were loyal to New Hope?

I would never have left New Hope – they were good to me and I was good to them. We were on a marvellous wicket. I paid 60c in the \$ all my life – I still made good money working there.

Eric Cooper, Ronnie Barker and I had a bit of a go in over safety. They wanted me to put one bolt up in the carrier crown. I said "no way in the world". They said "if you don't do it, you will be put out of the crew". I told them to put it in writing and I'll do it. They wouldn't put it in writing – you couldn't blame them – so I got put out of the crew. They brought another bloke in from Howard, Ronnie Larkham, that I knew, and put him in my crew. I

was back in my crew in 24 hours! My men wouldn't work with him because he used to order them.

Interviewer: Why wouldn't you put the bolt in the crown?

A 24 foot tree, a 3 foot bolt – not enough in the roof. When you breakout into a new bord, you knock out the prop. You end up with 4 crowns and no props under the crowns. It's not safe to go in.

Eric Cooper – this was very funny – when he put me out of the crew. He got me to shovel the belt. This was my job from then on. It didn't worry me. The second day I took a complete change of clothing. Down below is a big dam with lots of water. I took a cake of soap and at quarter past two I went and had a bath, and put these clean clothes on. I was first in the rake. When all the others came out, they said, “get a load of Hoot – he had a great day”!

Eric Cooper came out and sat down in the rake about two seats in front. He never took his eyes off me. I was back in the crew next day. Like I said, I'm a con man! I loved my work. I never ever ask a man do anything I wouldn't do myself

On a Saturday, I would work five hours. I'd go out there with my full crew, they'd all come. Some of the other blokes, Deputies, if they had men missing, then would take

blokes off me. Andy Phillips was the Manager – and he took some of my men from me. “My men came out here to work with me”.

One Saturday we went down below to do a 100 yard belt shift, and when we got down there, and it's a long way to go, a mile, we forgot the big six foot spirit level. “Men”, I said, “what are we going to do?” Billy Birrell and Johnny Milford were the two miner drivers – they came up with idea. We found an empty ice cream container, and we filled it with water and down below in the eating room, we found a havaheart stick, and we floated the havaheart stick in the ice cream container water. They put the slab of timber across the structure and put the ice cream container in the middle and that worked perfectly.

TAPE TWO

I was the secretary of the social club, Benny Williams was the President. Every year at Christmas we used to give all the children birthday presents. I'd write all the names on the presents – there was Benny Williams, Tommy Jones, me, Georgie Hughes and Les Richards. Dot would put supper on for them. They always liked coming here – Dot was a marvellous cook.

Every year we would get the hall next to the Booval Railway Station, the National Hall and have the party there. We would have Father Christmas, dancing and games – gee we had a great time. That’s when we met all the wives. We even met another Robert Gibson when I was giving out the prizes.

Interviewer: Was that the main social thing you did, or did you do other things during the year?

I was the captain of the miners’ social golf club – for about 12 years. They would not allow the wives at the breakup for that – we got that changed. New Hope was still sponsoring it. New Hope Day was in honour of a miner, Matt Best, who died from cancer. There would only be a couple of miners in it now.

We had some great times – Wilbur, Tommy Jones, Bill Smith – he worked at Rhonda . Bill had a crook heart. He went to the doctor, the doctor said he was ok. He went off to play golf – he died on the 13th hole.

When you work in the mines, there are never a lot of arguments because you depend on one another for your lives. You would tell each other when there was danger. The break-up every year – the ladies auxiliary would put a day on at the Workers

Club in town, free drinks and a free meal.

Ronnie Crawford and Bennie Williams and Lenny Hughes – we tried to get it going again, but there are not many left. They were a wonderful lot.

Interviewer: I want to ask you a question about annual leave – what holidays did you get?

I reckon every one in Australia owes to the miners for their holidays. I reckon annual leave started in the mines. People went on strike in the mines and they got a week for going on strike. Everyone then got a week. Then everyone went on strike and they got a fortnight, then everyone got a fortnight. I was on one of the biggest strikes ever up in the Howard Field. I kept going. I used to catch the blue mountain parrots, I used to make a snare with the horse tails and catch the parrots (we call them Rainbow Lorikeets down here). I was getting 5 shillings a pair for sending them to Melbourne – that kept us going. We lived right next to the movies – the Federal Theatre. We never paid to go in to it. The only way the theatre could operate was to have the exit in our yard. Mrs King used to let us in for nothing.

Bevan Kathage: There was no retirement age then. In the very early days, some

blokes in their 70s would still be working. There was no pension.

After we went for 3 weeks – we got a little more. Then we went for four weeks and 3 days. We were out for 19 weeks, that's a long time to be out - they called it the cog strike – it was a long time. We had to put up cogs and they wouldn't pay us for it. There were no winners in a strike, only sufferance.

Interviewer: Back to New Hope – what equipment were you using underground?

We had two joy cars, we had continuous miner in every section. The funniest thing, when Roy Scheiffermeine started (he came from Rosewood), he wasn't used to mechanised mines. We had a bloke called Oigle he was on the boot (at the end of the belt). Roy never used to call them crowns (the 18 foot crowns that you put across the top); he used to call them slabs. When we used to put a crown up with six slabs – they would be jutting out for the next one to go under. Roy rang Oigle up and said “how many slabs have you put up?” – up to then we had put up three crowns, that meant 18 slabs. “Holy smoke ! You must have some coal out. How many cars have you got?” Oigle said two – “what do you mean two?” Bobby Vidler drives one and Lenny Hughes drives the other.

Rex was too easy going. He just wanted to let everything flow. We lost a miner – it was buried. We had to work on shifts to get it back. My job was to get the pillars out.

I was issued with a pair of boots every six months. I never wore them once. I wore sandshoes, you could run quicker. I've done some running in my time. I've had my helmet blown off my head, when the roof came in – the compression caused that. I don't think I would go back. I took my two sons down. I showed them what it was like and said this is what would happen if you don't do well at school. They both did well. One got the gold pass from the railway. The other was a senior lecturer at University. One son is up at Burrum Heads now, where we came from.

I remember when that car went down six tunnel. I had just come up and Scotty met me, this was down No 6. Scotty said – you won't believe it, brand new Falcon, nickel bumper bar, spot light on. Here is this bloke in bowls clothes. Scotty panicked. He didn't know if he was dead or an angel. Scotty wasn't a brave man, and here is this man sitting here. He could have blown the pit up. He walked 20 feet and he told everyone. They got the haulage rope on it and dragged it out backwards. He drove from the Gold Coast – and he drove down there to die. He had cancer. I still don't

know how he found it or how he got there. I can't believe it.

Bevan Kathage: The bloke in the car said he was following another one. We were worried there was another car! He died about three weeks later of a brain tumour.

Interviewer: What about some of the other Managers?

Bevan always used to come down and say something. He would say "you never change Hoot".

Jim Buck Lawrie - he came from Tivoli - it got flooded.

Some of the men - they would have their dinner and then not come back. They would make it last to the end of the shift.

We had tradesmen, the electrician and the fitter. Other men used to come to me and asked to go in our crew. Peter Potter said "I want to get a new car Hoot. I can get it in your crew". He said "your crew has such a good name and they seem to get more overtime than anyone else".

He came to my send off at my house. I told the fitter and the electrician. I told them to help us and we will help you. We might want help to lift a prop or something, they were not just the electrician and fitter in my crew. We had one bloke who used to lay

alongside the rib. I kept telling him not to lay there as the rib could come right over and bury him. I want you to give us a hand. He said "I am an electrician, not a miner". I said you remember that now, you are an electrician. OK. We did a car cable. He said "get the miners out to change the cable". I said "we're miners, you're the electrician". We had no more trouble after that. We were a team. We got into the overtime quick.

Bill O'Brien was telling me yesterday that Scotty used to book four hours in and he was gone in no time. How did you know this? He used to tell me. I can't believe it - the Managers knew how much time it took to do things - they are not stupid.

Billy Verrell and Johnny Milford, both were terrific miner drivers, and Ronnie Smith, car driver, Laurie Sparks, Bobby Veidler, he's gone now. He and I used to wok weekends out there. Merv's gone. I don't like going to the funerals of the miners now, it reminds me too much of my wife. I miss her too much - she has been gone 4 years, 5 months and 5 days today. She spoilt me, all my clothes used to be lined up on the bed ready to go on the bus, tea put on my lap, supper put on my lap - she was good to me.

I hated retiring. They said to me "Hoot you can spend the last six

months on the surface”. I was with blue heeler putting down four tunnel. There was a bloke in charge of the crew there. They let me work on the top. My Deputy light is in there. They got it inscribed with Hoot. George Robinson – he was great – he was in charge of the fire extinguishers.

Bevan Kathage: Iain Roberts the Mines Inspector was the only person Hoot did not get on with. Remember the trouble with the River motor. He was too heavy. He used to tell people rather than talk to them – I almost lost my ticket.

What about Buller Kerr from Childers, he was a solicitor in Childers. He used to come down once a month, caught the train. He had a sleeper booked. Big bloke. Come Christmas time and he would always have a special bottle to give out as the Christmas raffle.

Bevan Kathage: Did you start before there were bathrooms at the pits?

I used to have a tub at home. I started at the mine before there was washing at the mine. We went home dirty. After we got bathrooms at the mine, some of them still went home dirty.

Bevan Kathage: When I started, it wasn't unusual to see black coal miners riding home on their bikes.

I built a garage at New Hope for my car. I had a 1962 Holden, beautiful order, then another Holden. We drove our own cars to work. Then New Hope built garages for everyone, around 30 of them. Everything was provided.