

John Hall

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Interviewer: Margaret Cook



My name is John Hall. I was born on 26 September 1941 in Mt Morgan. I got a job through my father, who worked at Rhondda Collieries, in 1957. I worked at the pit bottom. Rhondda Collieries had a shaft. Wagons were pulled and my job was pushing up empty wagons and letting full wagons down towards the shaft, so the person there could put the full wagons on the cage and take the empties off the other side.

I had that job for probably 12 months, and I always wanted to get further into the mine, to do horse-wheeling or rope riding, learn a bit more about the mining part of it, rather than just that, but I think I was still too young. I was only 16, so they didn't want me to go under any further.

So I left, and I thought I could do something different. That didn't work out, so because my father still worked there, he got me a job back there in the same mine, and I went straight on

horse-wheeling then – which was what I wanted, anyway. That was sometime in 1959.

We used to bring the horses up every night, and the horse-wheelers would start half an hour earlier, on overtime to take the horses down and have them ready for work.

I just carried on that job for quite a while, learning a few different skills along the way with road-laying, how to lay rails and points and things like that. I also did rope riding.

We had a file for rope riding that you used to make contact between the two plain fencing wires going down, and that was the signal up to the motor driver to either stop the rake – which could have been, like, 10 or 12 wagons – lower it, or go. That rang a bell, and he could read those signals.

I eventually wanted to get a Deputy's ticket, but I didn't have the necessary

experience with blasting or shot-firing which you had to have. So at Rhondda they started a waterworks system where we had to fire the face down and the idea was to flush it out with high pressure water hoses and wash the coal down where it would go over vibrating screens, water would drop out into a bin, and the coal would go onto a conveyor belt and into wagons. Wal Ritchie brought that idea to us. He was the Superintendent, and he went over to Russia to find out all about it.

We persevered with that, and I did get a lot of valuable experience with all that, with blasting and things, but it didn't work because the Rhondda coal seams were too dirty and the coal would get washed down properly, but the stone would stay behind.

I eventually got my Deputy's ticket, which was a bit of a problem because that was the first time that Deputies had to do a written examination. Before that it was just an oral, and a bit of a practical demonstration with the Mines Inspectors, and they would see whether you were competent; but when they had a written exam, no-one knew what to expect, and it was a very worrying time.

I eventually got through that, got my ticket.

Interviewer: Did you study in your own time?

Yes. There were no special schools or classes that you could go to. It was just

if you knew a manager or somebody who was doing managing work, they would help you. You could get a book on gases – you had to learn the gases and the relative humidity, the weight of the gases, whether they were poisonous or what.

Interviewer: Is that when you learnt to read the safety lamp?

Yes, you had to learn to read the safety lamp. That's part of getting a Deputy's ticket. You had to pass that test. I got the ticket, but I didn't really want to use the ticket at that stage. I just thought it was something that would secure a bit of a future.

Soon after that, they started doing some small mechanisation of the Rhondda Collieries. It was a coal-cutter, which cut an arc in the coal seam in the face, about the centre of the seam, and then the drillers would drill the top and the bottom in a pattern, so that the shot-firers then could come in, charge the holes up with gelignite and electric detonators. All the electric detonators were timed. They were different delays, so that you would have the ones down near where the coal cutter had cut, that would go first, and that would allow the coal free fall. The bottom ones would blow up and the top ones would blow down, and the top corners would be the last ones to go off. You would fire a whole lot together, maybe 20 or 30 shots all at once, but all delayed. Then you would be left with a whole heap of blown coal ready to be loaded out.

Then the loader would come in. At one stage they loaded with just a little loader compared with what they do these days. It was a small loader with arms. You'd pick up the coal and push it onto a conveyor on the loader, which then dropped it on pans which we had.

Then after that, they eventually got a shuttle car, and the loader then, instead of just dropping it onto the pans, we would load it into a shuttle car and the shuttle car would then drive that to the conveyor belt and unload that load on the conveyor belt. That would eventually go all the way to the surface.

Interviewer: Which was a long way?

Yes. In our particular case we were working the Strip of Bacon seam, and the coal had to go actually down to a Rob Roy seam, which was below it, so it had to go down a shaft which we had built, and that shaft acted as a bin to store the coal, and underneath that was the conveyor belt that went up the Roy Roy seam to the surface.

Mechanisation just got bigger and bigger. We eventually got a continuous miner, and I was one of the drivers of the continuous miner. There were three of us, and we'd drive in two hour shifts, one before breakfast, one before lunch and one after lunch, so we wouldn't get bored with it or whatever.

The first continuous miner used to dump the coal on the ground behind it, and we had a loader behind us picking

up the coal and putting it into the shuttle car.

As miners got bigger we'd just cut the coal straight out of the face and load it into shuttle cars. We probably had two shuttle cars by that stage, one getting loaded and one unloading, and they would pass each other at a passing point. That was a bit more up to date.

There was a crew of six or seven men. That was pretty much it. On overtime we'd do conveyor belt extensions. You had to keep extending the conveyor belt as you advanced forward. We also had to build stoppings to keep the air flowing in the right direction so it wouldn't short-circuit.

Interviewer: And when's that done? Is that on a dog watch shift?

When you're working around the clock it is done on a dog watch shift. In the early days we only worked day shift, and then we went to day and afternoon, and then we went to three shifts.

In the early days we used to do it all on overtime. We worked a lot of weekends doing maintenance on machinery and things like that. This was in the late '60s, early '70s.

I actually left the underground, it was about '74, it was after the Box Flat explosion, and I'd had a few close calls at Rhondda with falls. There was one, I was driving a continuous miner, and we were pulling out pillars. The pillars

were the square pieces that's left there to hold the roof up, and then after you've gone as far as you want to go, you come back and pull the pillars out, and the roof falls. So I was driving the continuous miner. We had no warning and all the timber around me started to crack and break, and next thing the whole lot fell in.

I just dived back behind me. There was a loader behind me at the time, and I just dived down beside the loader, thinking that if it's going to fall I might get a bit of protection from the loader, and it stopped at my feet! But there was a fitter chap who was with me. He was watching the machine to see that there was no problem, and he got caught in it. We could see his hand above the rubble, so he was still alive – we had to go and dig him out, which we did. His name was Ron North, and he was the son of the Manager at the time.

He had some injuries. He was lucky. So that was one fright I got.

There were a few more falls that I missed out on, different times where we buried machines and then we'd have to go and dig them out.

Then with the Box Flat explosion in 1972 and by 1974 I didn't want to work underground any more.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about your Mines Rescue work?

I think I left the Mines Rescue in 1974 when I actually went to the opencut. So it must have been about '67 I started in the Mines Rescue.

I got a lot more experience there. We used to have competitions. We formed teams of about five or six men, and each team had a captain and a vice captain. The captain always walked in front and the vice captain was the last person, and you had hooters for signals, like beep-beep, beep-beep-beep, little squeeze things. That was our signals, because usually you had a mouthpiece and you couldn't talk, and you daren't pull that out if you were in a hostile atmosphere.

You learnt a lot, because with these competitions you were given a lot of data about mines and gases and fires and you had to learn it all. I eventually became the captain of a team. We won a couple of competitions. The one that stands out to me the most was we actually didn't win the local competition – we came second, and the winning team went down south to compete for the inter-district competition, and the second team went to Central Queensland to compete for the intra-district competition.

So that was our team. We went up to Collinsville that year. In the local competition, although we didn't win it, I had got the highest marks for the written and practical.

I got 98%. At the competition dinner it was announced that I'd won that. When we got to Collinsville, we won the competition, and I was the captain, and I also won the Chief Inspector of Mines trophy, which was introduced that year for the best performer, the highest written and practical, first aid and things like that.

Interviewer: So you got a trophy?

Yes, I got a trophy for that. We actually won the big trophy, which was the E K Healy Cup, and there was another perpetual trophy that I had won, the Chief Inspector of Mines Trophy. I kept that for 12 months. I got a gold pewter mug as well.

Interviewer: Who was E K Healy?

He was the Under-Secretary of Mines. Ron Camm was the Minister for Mines, and E K Healy, Kev Healy, was the Under-Secretary. Now, when these competitions were on, you always had the dignitaries there, like, we had Lew Edwards there at different times. E K Healy, Kev Healy, always came. He was a big supporter. I think he through the Government may have even supplied the trophy, so that's why it was called that. I think it's still around.

Interviewer: Maybe they still compete for it?

I think they might, too.

Interviewer: So you competed in Collinsville and elsewhere?

Yes. Over the years I went to Newcastle and Wollongong to compete. We did all right, but we didn't win any of the Southern competitions, but we were there with them.

Interviewer: I believe you set up a football team?

I first met Paul Pissasale (Ipswich Mayor)— he used to come to the mines and take samples. He was an industrial chemist, and he used to take samples from our washing plant. That's where I first met him. I was playing touch football at the time with the Firemen's Team and there were a lot of coal miners who wanted to play touch football. It was a big sport in those days. It was just starting out, and we used to have a ton of fun doing that.

Because there were a lot of miners who wanted to play touch football and they couldn't all play in the teams that were there, I always had the idea that we could form a team out at Rhondda Collieries. So I got a few people together and we broke away from the Firemen and formed our own team. It was called the Rhondda Collieries Touch Football Team, and I was the President of the club because it was my idea. I didn't particularly want that position, but it was thrust upon me. They made me Coach and Captain of the team as well, so I started that.

Paul Pissasale ended up playing in our team, so that's how I got to know Paul. I eventually stopped playing touch

football to play squash. I used to play a bit in my spare time, but I couldn't do everything. There was always training for touch football, and then there was training for squash, and occasionally I liked to play a bit of tennis as well – and so did my wife.

So I eventually gave away touch football and concentrated on squash, and I enjoyed that. But the touch football team went on for many, many years.

Interviewer: Your family has got a long history of association with mines. You mentioned your father.

My dad worked at the Mt Morgan mine. That's where I was born, Mt Morgan. He worked there for quite some time. Eventually we moved from there to Bluff in Central Queensland, near Blackwater, and Dad worked in the Excel Colliery at Bluff, and my older brother Jim, he worked there as well. He was a rope-rider at Excel Colliery. I had left school by then. I left school at 14, and I had a job in the bakehouse at Bluff, baking bread.

The mines at Bluff started closing down, they weren't profitable any more. They were very steep seams, and one of the managers from Bluff had earlier moved to Ipswich, and he was a good friend of Dad's, so when the mines looked like closing in Bluff he wrote to this manager who was Peter Grabby, and his father was superintendent of Rhondda Collieries.

His name was Peter Grabby, and the other was Peter Grabby Jnr.

So that's how I came to Ipswich. Dad got the job through Peter Grabby at Rhondda Collieries, and he didn't go underground any more. The job for him was as a pit carpenter. Now, he wasn't a carpenter, but he was a handyman. There were three of them there that were pit carpenters.

Interviewer: And then your brother ended up working at Rhondda as well?

Yes, my older brother came down, and he worked at Rhondda, before me. I'd never worked in the coal mines. Then I found it hard to get a job. I was looking for a job in a bakehouse. So, anyway, I ended up getting a job at Rhondda Colliery with my older brother and my Dad, and after a few years my younger brother came on, got a job in the mines as well. He eventually had to leave because they were putting a lot of men off when the mechanisation started in the mines. A lot of the men in the mines had to go. It was last on/first to go, so my brother Ron, got a job in the Fire Brigade, and he stayed there until he retired.

Interviewer: How did mechanisation change production?

I think with mechanisation you had to push ahead and get big productions. Like when we did conveyor belt shift there were only a couple of us who more or less took charge of that and

could direct people as to what should be done, and I think the management saw this, and they made me Deputy of one shift, and they made my mate Ron Hodson Deputy of another shift. That was a sad day, because we liked working together, but then we ended up doing day and night shift.

Interviewer: And did the older Deputies retire, or were they re-employed?

No, they were put on belt duties looking after conveyor belts or maybe clean a few rollers here and there and just patrol them.

Interviewer: It was quite a lot of change in a very short time. I mean, you were talking about the cutters were changing quite quickly, so you were probably running to keep up a bit.

Yes. It was always a competition, I think, before I became a Deputy, but when we were driving the continuous miners. I would drive one day, and another bloke the next and we would go our hardest to see if I could beat the chap the day before.

Of course we started getting bonuses as well, and that was a big thing. Then we'd always try to break the record. The record was maybe 100 shuttle cars a day so the next day we'd try to break that. There were bonuses with that.

Interviewer: So were you on wages, or on contract?

Wages. We even used to get an incentive allowance in those days. In the early days if you went to work for a full two weeks, you got an extra day's pay every second week. That was called "attendance allowance.

Tape Two

All the miners got that, at all the pits.

Interviewer: And was Rhondda pretty good to work for?

Yes. Well, I think they always had a bright future, because they always had a lot of big leases. There were some big strikes. Miners always had strikes, and even though you might not have agreed with all of them. You were part of the workforce.

Interviewer: Were you very involved in the union?

No. I was a member only.

Interviewer: Was it well paid generally? Did each mine get paid as much as another mine?-

The base rates were the same, but as I said earlier about Rhondda's dirty coal, it cut down their profits a lot, because we had to produce more to get the same amount of coal. That was always their excuse, that they couldn't pay big bonuses like other mines. Southern Cross had clean coal and they had really good, big thick seams, good production, and they could pay in those

days, I don't know, it might have been 20 or 30 pounds a week bonus.

We might have got 10 or 12 or 15, something like that, but we stayed there. We used to get a fair bit of overtime, and it wasn't bad money.

You wanted to know about the miners' lamps? Well, I think all Deputies know the basis of a flame safety lamp. Now, that's all they relied on, or any miner relied on in the early days for detecting gas, the miners' safety lamp. We never had canaries. I think canaries might have been in England a lot, but I don't think too many people in Australia ever used canaries underground. I think canaries were only good for carbon monoxide. It affects the breathing, and canaries breathe faster, and that's how you can tell if there's a pollution gas like carbon monoxide, because the bird breathes I think 15 times faster than us, so they inhale quicker, and because they're chirpy.

Interviewer: Yes, they react quickly?

Yes, they react quickly, so if the bird's not reacting – that was the idea of the bird. The idea of the flame safety lamp is it's got a gauze, sometimes two gauzes, and the idea of the gauze is that if you hold a match under a gauze the flame won't go through the gauze. It'll flatten out, it might heat the gauze up, but the flame won't go through and that was the idea, that you could light the lamp, and it would be sealed except for air getting into it.

Now, as long as the air was just normal air, it would burn at a nice yellow flame. One of the main gases you would test for underground was methane, CH₄, and it was a light gas, so you'd always find it up at the roof of the seam. So when you were checking for gas – which you had to do pretty regularly, just to make sure everything was all right – you would lower your flame down and slowly put your light up to the roof, and just keep your eye on the flame. If it got a blue haze on it, that would mean there was gas there, and the more gas, the higher the blue flame got. You never wanted the light to explode in the lamp, because then it might go out.

In those early days before the Garforth lamp, which you could re-light underground, you had to go back up to the surface if your light went out. That wasn't easy, so you always took great care, tried to keep your flame alight all the time.

Interviewer: And there was another gas you were looking for?

CO₂ gas which was heavy, and that's not a poisonous gas, but it replaces the oxygen, and if you've got too much CO₂ you start to feel sleepy and you might just doze off and never wake up. So that was a low gas, and if your flame went out for no reason or the flame died for no reason, you had to consider that there was CO₂ around.

Interviewer: And get out?

Yes; or maybe it was just a matter of re-routing the air to blow it out. It's the same with methane gas. If you've got just a small pocket of gas up in the roof, you had brattice directing your air to the face. Now, you might have to re-route the brattice to push the gas away.

Interviewer: Just get the flows better?

Yes, it was just like ventilation.

Interviewer: What about the water gauge. You said every morning as a Deputy you had to check that.

You had to check the water gauge before you went underground. There was a U-shaped glass tube on the side of the fan house. The fan is an exhaust fan. So one side of this tube was in the normal atmosphere, and it had a rubber hose poked through into the ventilating part of it where the fan was, and that gave you ventilating pressure. The tube was half filled with water, and as the difference in pressures between the ventilating pressure and the atmospheric pressure, it varied so the water in the tube would vary a couple of inches.

It would probably stay the same every day. You'd read that water gauge. You'd have to write it in your report that the water gauge was two inches or one and a half inches, or something, and if that water gauge had altered significantly you would know before

you even went underground there possibly was a fall or some obstruction.

Interviewer: So it was pretty reliable, then?

Yes, for a simple thing. The first thing you'd do, you'd go to the Deputy's cabin, you'd get your safety lamp. You had to pull it to pieces, make sure the washers were right, no chips in the glass, fill it up with the fuel, put it all back together, blow around it to make sure that there was no air getting in where it shouldn't get in. So if it was getting in somewhere else, that means the flame could get out.

You had to keep check of the asbestos washers. You'd put your safety lamp together ready for the day. You would fill out a report book. You would fill out that you got there at a certain time, you were leaving at a certain time, you'd write down the water gauge. Then, in our case, we'd go underground then. We had to walk down, and we'd have a hammer. You'd bang the roof with a hammer, to see whether it was a solid or a drummy sound, keep your eye out for different other things. You'd carry a safety lamp, keep an eye on the flame, so that there were no problems.

When you got underground, you'd go right up to the coal face where the men were going to work, see that the roof was all right, if it needed extra timber or support. Then you'd ring through the report and the Manager on the surface would take your call, and he

would fill out the rest of the report that you had started to write.

Interviewer: And only then the men would come down?

Yes. If the Deputy never rang the report through, the men wouldn't go down, couldn't go down, they weren't allowed to go down.

Interviewer: It's a great responsibility.

Yes. There was one time I found a fair bit of gas underground, so I rung through that there was gas. The Manager and another Deputy came down and we had to try to clear the area.

There was nobody allowed underground until we fixed this problem, with extra ventilation. And then the Mines Inspector had to be notified of this as well. They would come out and check it as well.

Tape 3

Interviewer: So if we can talk about Box Flat?

I got the call-out late on Sunday night. I had a good friend in the Mines Rescue, Ron Hodson. We used to go to the Mines Rescue practices once every week, and we'd go together. I'd pick him up because he was on the way.

When I got the call-out, I assumed that he would get it, too, so I called in to

pick him up – and he hadn't got a call. He always says I saved his life, because if he'd been called later he'd have been down there.

We went down underground, saw the fire. There were a couple of Box Flat men working there, hosing, and they had quite a few hoses, just hosing the fire. They didn't seem to be making much headway with it. So it was decided by people above me to go to the surface and get the foam machine – we had a foam generating machine – and the idea was to fill up the whole area with foam to put the fire out.

Interviewer: It gets rid of the oxygen, I suppose?

Yes, smothers it, as well as cools it. We took it down and it just didn't work – I don't know why at this stage. We couldn't get it right to the spot where we wanted it, so that failed. After a lot of to-ing and fro-ing I went back up to the surface again.

Then it was decided to go down a different seam. It was one below, they had a stone cut through that led to where the fire was, so we went down there and tried to block things there to stop the air. There were four men who were picked to go in and pick up this foam machine from where we'd left it earlier. They went in through very thick smoke, which was backing up, and they had face masks and oxygen on, which we all did. They brought this machine

back out to a point and just left it where there was still clear air.

So after that, we decided that things weren't working, so we went back up to the surface, and that was the third time I'd been down. We didn't achieve much, so we just sat around, and then they decided they had plans to block some airways. I'm not quite sure now what it was – but there were fresh recruits that came in. They were getting ready to go down, and the men who'd been down were standing around, and Reg Hardy (who was the Mines Inspector) said, "Well, we want another one." I said, "I'll go down." He said, "No, you've been down" – so I didn't go. That was----

Interviewer: That was the shift not to be on.

Yes. They went down, and we all sat around then in the Deputy's cabin – well, not everyone; there were others, I think, just walking around. Some of the Box Flat men were starting to build a brick stopping, in one of the tunnels to block that off. We were just sitting around talking. I know Alex Lawrie, the Manager, got a phone call from John Roach, who was underground. He was the Under-Manager at Box Flat, but he was with the Rescue Brigade, and he rang Alec Lawrie up, and from what I could understand of the phone call it was pretty much, 'It's out of control. We're coming up.'

It was soon, then, that all hell broke loose and there were – I don't know

how many blasts, but there were more than one – maybe two or three explosions, and I was just sitting on the floor, with my hat and light on.

Next thing there was this terrible explosion. I went something like that, I think----

Interviewer: Covered your face?

Yes. I had my hat on, so I was making sure my hat stayed on, because that protects you. I'm feeling all the stuff coming on me. It broke my arm, right across there. A beam landed across my shoulders and my back, and it pushed me onto the ground, spread my legs out like I was doing the splits, and I got sore legs from it, but there was nothing broken. It was just ligaments stretched. I was pretty strong but I could not lift that beam.

Interviewer: So they got you out?

Yes, and eventually I yelled out, and Clarrie Wolski was right next to me, and he said, "Oh, my back!" He said, "My back's broken."

Tape 4

After being trapped there – and I couldn't shift this beam off me, no matter how hard I tried – poor Clarrie was next to me. I was yelling out, "Help! Get me out of here." I thought everyone had gone. I was waiting for another explosion to come up right underneath me. That's what I was

waiting for. So I was probably screaming out, “Help! Help!”

Then Lance Waldon, I remember Lance and Wally Butterfield were the two blokes who lifted it. Well, Lance was a very strong man. Lance lifted this up and he said to Wally Butterfield, “I’ll lift it, and you pull him out” – which they did. Then I went off in the ambulance.

It was pretty much a harrowing experience. After it I found that my whole body was just one big bruise. It was blue/brown. We had burns on our face, like as if you’d been sunburnt, and your lips were all burnt and stinging. Your face was burnt. You could feel the burn. So that was the after-effects.

Interviewer: And you didn’t go back to work?

Yes, I went back. With my injuries I had two weeks off. I got compensation for that. I did get back to work, but I found I wasn’t the same underground. There were things I didn’t want to do, or places I didn’t want to go, so after that I eventually left the Mines Rescue Brigade as well, and then I got a job in the Opencuts.

Interviewer: Well, you were a very brave man.

I wasn’t then.

Interviewer: You didn’t have to go to Court?

No. So that’s about it.

Interviewer: And you retired when the mine closed. When did Rhondda close?

Yes, Rhondda Collieries closed down in 1996. It was running out of coal, out of the easy coal, anyway, so it was decided by the Board to close. I was only 54 years old at that time, and I thought, “Well, that’ll do me.” At one stage I was going to go with Leo and Green down South – they’d offered me a job – but then our company wanted me to stay there for another few weeks, which made me miss that job down south.

Anyway, later on they called me up and wanted me to go down south, by that time I’d already retired, and I said, “No, that’ll do.” I thought, “I’m going to retire and enjoy myself” – which I did, and I still am. I travel a lot.

Interviewer: So did you have to retire at 55 or 60?

You always had to retire at 60, and I think even when I left you could have stayed until 65 if you wanted to. I would never have done that. My plan was always to retire round about 57, but when the mine closed – ah! I’d never taken much long service leave.

Interviewer: In 38 years? You would have had a bit owing!

Yes. I had taken a few weeks here and there, but not a lot, so I had a lot of long service owing to me. I had a lot of sickies, which they used to pay out, so there was sickies, long service leave,

and I got a bit of severance allowance,
and I said, "That'll do." I left it at that.

It was a long career working for the
one company.