

John Walker

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Interviewer: Margaret
Cook



I started in the industry in 1954. But to go back a bit it was a family company. The Walkers owned a number of mines. I went to the Grammar School in 1953 and 1954 and did Junior. As soon as I had finished I went to work as I wanted to earn some money straight away. So in December 1954 I started.

I started on the surface at New Whitwood Shaft No 3. It was a hot December and my job was to empty the stone wagons that were coming up from a fault they were driving through. I thought it was a fairly tough introduction to the mining industry. I never thought I would get it easy. I think some people thought here's a young Walker coming through they'll make it easy for him. I think it was just the opposite. It was a good introduction anyway.

Interviewer: Was it the family philosophy that you had to start from the ground up?

For me it was anyway! There seemed to be a lot of Walkers walking around doing nothing but certainly I wasn't one of them. I started there in December 1954. In 1955 I was doing a cadets surveyors job and started studying for Mine Surveying, through the Technical College in Ipswich. At the end of 1955 I went to Haigmoor Colliery at Tivoli. Dad thought it might be better if I went to another mine. It was a Walker that owned that mine – Viv Walker. He was a cousin of my father (Jack Walker), but it was not our family company.

So I went to Haigmoor in 1956. I went there as a Mine Manager cadet and I was studying mine management at the College. I was there for 6 years. I got my 2nd class Mine Manager's certificate. Then 1st class. Also I finished up with my Mine Surveyors certificate. So I got the three certificates while I was there but I couldn't get a job with them. So I went back to work for the family and for a couple of years. I worked as Assistant Mine Surveyor.

There was no position available, either there or at other Viv Walker mines. I also wanted to get experience as an Assistant Surveyor or as a Surveyor. I did a couple of years as Assistant Mine Surveyor at a number of the Walker family mines and then went to Aberdare No. 8. I got a job as an Assistant Underground Manager on the night shift – the dogwatch. That was in 1965. That was at Aberdare No 8 at Bundamba. If you go along Mining Street at Bundamba you come to Elm Street to the left and the mine was right there. Today there is a block of units there. That is where the mine was when I first went to work there.

For the next few years I had various experiences at a number of their mines – Whitwood Tunnel, Bluff tunnel. I was changing between Mine Managing, mine surveying and going wherever I was asked to go.

Interviewer: Great experience?

Looking back on it, it was. At the time I was probably more anxious to become a Mine Manager but this was all good stuff leading up. I went back to Aberdare No. 8 in 1969 as the Mine Manager. Then a couple of things happened. Wally Walker retired and two years after Frank Walker died. They were the generation above me. Frank was my uncle and Wally was Dad's cousin.

Pat Farrell came in as the General Manager in about 1972. I went down to Whitwood to manage a mine. This went on for a couple of years. The mine got into trouble. The mine went into receivership. Pat left to become a Mines Inspector and I took over from him. We got out of receivership. In 1978 people by the name of Crusader Oil – a publicly listed company – they bought us out. The story with them was that Graham Tucker

was the appointed Receiver when we were in receivership. He was a senior partner at Hungerfords. In 1978 I stayed on as General Manager. In 1980 Crusader did a bit of a change and sold 60% of their company to Allied Queensland Coal Fields and retained 40%. Allied Queensland Coal Fields went on to the stock market a public company. Tucker was still the Chairman of the Directors so it was much the same setup only this time we were a publicly listed company. They brought an Englishman out to become CEO of that. I stayed on at the mine as Mine Manager.

I did that for a number of years. Allied Queensland Coal were looking around for other things. They were looking at starting a mine at Ebenezer which they started in about 1987. I was still at Aberdare Collieries at New Whitwood Open Cut Mine at New Chum.

I should go back to 1974. We were operating only one underground mine in January 1974 and it got flooded out. So from 1974 onwards we were only open cut mining.

It was too massive a job to recover the mine. It was covered.

It was the Australia Day floods and the water came in through Bundamba Creek. It came through some old mine workings that were on the right hand side of Bergins Hill as you go south and it flooded Aberdare No. 8 which was on the other side of the road.

Interviewer: Was there much open cut mining before then?

We had already started open cutting. The open cut mining started by Rhondda in about 1965 at Belmont. That was very close to where we were mining when all

the coal reserves were exhausted in 1993. We started some small open cut in the late 1960s to augment the underground. But after the floods we expanded the open cut. That open cut went to 1993 but we ran out of coal. We exhausted all the coal in the Dinmore/New Chum area so that is when the company closed its operation.

Interviewer: Was open cut more productive? Was it more capital intensive?

It was more productive but it was not capital intensive for us because we did it all by contractor. It was more capital intensive for the contractor but not so for us. It was a good way to go for us. We had over 100 people working for us as contractors and with the coal washing plant we had another 50 people working on the plant. When we were producing that amount of coal we employed 150 people.

In 1986/7 we started to buy a lot of properties in New Chum. New Chum was almost a suburb within a suburb. I don't know if you know the history. It was always called New Chum, Dinmore. It was where Clay Pave is now – in that area. New Chum at that time was like a little settlement.

Interviewer: All mining people?

I think originally they were but by the 1970s and 1980s that had changed. There was actually a pie shop in New Chum where Burnells made pies. In about 1986 we started to buy all the houses in New Chum because they were sitting on really good quality coal. I went to the head office in Brisbane in 1987/8 for 18 months to buy the properties and get them sorted out. I was involved in getting all the leases at Ebenezer which Allied Queensland Coal Fields started in about 1988.

Then I went back to the mine and I stayed there till it ended. I knew there was only going to be 3 or 4 years when I went back. The last year I was working for Aberdare but New Hope was working the mine. We had pulled down our washing plant. All our people had gone. I stayed there and looked after the mine restoration. Then the whole operation stopped when New Hope took out the last of the coal.

There is deep coal there but not particularly good quality.

After that I did consulting. I did some work from Rhondda and others. I got into quality assurance with Sharon Carvolth's company Audit Services International. She went into safety management and I did some courses with her and worked with safety management until last year. Then I decided that was enough. I did a couple of jobs this year but basically I have retired. From 1993 I worked as a consultant.

Interviewer: Going back now, was Pat Farrell the first non-Walker to be in management?

No he wasn't. Regarding the Walkers, four Walker brothers started Aberdare Collieries in 1901 and one brother-in-law, William Miller. So there were 4 Walker families and the Miller family. The second generation was there when I started - my father's generation. He had three brothers and their cousins. The five families all had the same number of shares. Each family had a director. It was quite funny as they never got on very well and it was always one lining up with another two. And then something else would happen and a couple would line up against the others. It was always happening. Then the second generation started retiring in the 1960s or dying.

I was the last of the third generation. It was the third generation of Aberdare

Collieries but the fourth for mining in Ipswich because my Great Grandfather started a mine at Chuwar in the 1880s.

Because they couldn't really get on they did have some Superintendents which were outside the family. They were there in the 1930s and 1940s. When I started there was Albert Winstanley who was a Superintendent outside the family.

I think it was a good idea but they were lobbied from every side.

So Pat Farrell wasn't the first. Frank Walker was in charge before him and Wally Walker before him again. There had been some Walkers there for a while.

Interviewer: Was there any suggestion that you could have done something else?

I didn't want to. Mining has been good to me. I wouldn't have minded being a school teacher when I was at school. I couldn't really say it was expected of me to go into the industry but it was the way.

Interviewer: Were there differences between the mines?

Yes when I moved from Whitwood shaft to Haigmoor, Whitwood was a vertical shaft and it wasn't a particularly big producing mine. It was still pick and shovel and blasting. I then went to Haigmoor which was an incline tunnel. It was a much better setup, much higher producing mine, with a bigger workforce. When I first went there they had a very big winding engine to haul the coal up and down and they changed that not long after I got there to an endless rope system. You kept clipping the full wagons and the empty wagons on.

Someone up the top is taking them off and clipping them back on. Whitwood

had one too but only on the surface from the top of the shaft to the picking belt which was only a kilometre away. Not underground.

Interviewer: Was this early mechanization?

If we are talking underground, right back at the turn of the century Rhondda had some coal cutting machines. No mechanical loading machines but the cutter. Endlesses had been around quite a long time as I understand it. Haigmoor worked over a much bigger area and had a lot less geological problems than the Whitwood Shaft.

Interviewer: How many men would have been employed?

At Haigmoor, there were the men who we referred to as "on the coal" who were the contract miners and day men who were the people who supported them. When I went to Haigmoor there were 50 men on the coal and about 50 supporting them. So there were probably about 100 employed. There was some very high quantity of coal producing miners amongst them. They would work in pairs. Some would load about 50 wagons a day and that is about 50 tons. That's a lot of coal.

There were about 50 of those. They worked in pairs – one was the miner and one was the wheeler. The miner would drill the holes (or they would do this together) and the miner would do the charging and the blasting. The wheeler would fill the wagon and wheel it out and bring in an empty one. They helped each other.

They were contractors. The support people – those who brought the timber down from the surface for the miners to prop up the roof, or kept the rails up so

they could wheel their wagons to the coal face, they were called day men.

They were on wages. I went out to Haigmoor as a cadet Mine Manager and we always worked Saturday mornings. That was our overtime and invariably one of the things we would do would be to clean the coal pillage off the floor of the tunnels. For two reasons. One was to recover the coal. The second was to prevent the wagons coming off the rail. The day people would get overtime which would make their salary pretty reasonable.

Haigmoor was part of a group so there was a Superintendent based there. There was a mine manager. When I first went there the mine manager was Charlie McPherson.

He'd been in Australia about 30 years but he was as broad as the day he came out. I could hardly understand him. He was a tough guy. There were some funny stories. There were 2 Under Managers and an Over Man who was someone who looked after one section. There were 4 or 5 staff. There was a Mine Surveyor and an offsider and an Engineer. He looked after the workshop and a Mine Electrician looked after the electricians. There were various staff on the surface looking after the lamps and odds and ends.

Also at Haigmoor there were coke ovens. They tell me they are still there and apparently in good condition. There was always a couple of blokes working on them.

Interviewer: How did Haigmoor compare with other mines in the area in terms of size?

It was pretty big in terms of scale for pick and shovel mines. That was in 1956 and things were starting to move from the old hand work days to mechanization. Other

mines were bringing in the conventional unit – a loader and coal cutter. The coal cutter cut the coal which was blasted and the loader came in and loaded into onto shuttle cars on a conveyor belt. I can't recall having conventional units at Haigmoor, but my recollection is that they went straight to the continuous miner, which did not require coal cutting and blasting. I think it was about 1958/9 when they brought in the continuous miner and the shuttle cars.

Interviewer: So you were not the first but you are up there?

We weren't the first but they were up there. I think Rhondda was earlier in the piece. That revolutionized the process. It made some people redundant as they didn't need as many miners.

It increased productivity. From there on as far as the underground working in Ipswich goes it was just better, higher capacity machines. The system didn't change.

Interviewer: It was just technical improvements?

Bigger miners and bigger shuttle cars and that sort of thing. That started in the 1950s.

Interviewer: Did this coincide with a boom in the industry?

It probably did. In the 1960s Central Queensland opened up. Most of the coal down here was going to the power stations. Haigmoor's was going to Tennyson by way of barges on the Bremer River and to Abermain which was right next door. If you go over the Warrego Highway on Mt Crosby Road just before you go over on the right hand side as you go out the power station was there. There

is a trucking business in there now. Haigmoor was right next door.

Interviewer: So you had no transport problems?

No. The mines around Bundamba were later sending coal to Swanbank (when it opened in the late 1960s). It was probably going to the railways or Brisbane before then.

Interviewer: So Central Queensland did not affect the Ipswich industry?

No it didn't. It was basically export coal and Ipswich didn't get into export coal until the 1980s. The market was basically the railways and the power stations. It was more railway than power stations until the rail became diesel. Then Swanbank was built and extended and took coal from Bundamba but also later on from Ebenezer. That was where the markets were. The expansion took place in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Interviewer: Did you see changes in your role as a Mine Manager?

My role was different as until the 1970s I was underground and then after that open cut. My role didn't change all that much. Part of the job was planning and managing staff and that was always the same. We always had problems. I reported to the Board. I reported monthly but in our case it was family and they were always around anyway. You could never get away with anything. Surveying changed a bit with the instrumentation but I didn't keep up with that after we became open cut as we had another full-time surveyor and I concentrated on mine managing.

Interviewer: What staff are involved with open cut?

We had the Manager. In my case I was Manager of the open cut and the washing plant. Under me, at times, was an Assistant Manager. Some years we didn't. It depended on who we could get. We supplied the open cut examiners. They were the equivalent of Mine Deputies – they were the safety officers. They did the pre-work inspection. That was basically all we supplied for the cut itself. We had three open cut examiners. They worked two shifts so we had a spare. They rotated around. We did the pumping and any other jobs needed. The examiners and their offsidiers did that.

On the machinery side of it that was all done by contractors. Where blasting was needed – and it wasn't always – we did that.

Interviewer: Can you explain the washing plant process?

Ipswich coal typically needs to be enhanced to get to the market because it has a lot of impurities in it. In our case we would mine the coal and it would have a lot of shale in it. The job of the coal proportion plant was to take the shale and all the stone out of the coal to make it a more marketable product. It was done through a whole series of conveyor belts into jigs and sluices and what have you and worked on the specific gravities of coal. The heavier stone dropped to the bottom and the lighter coal floated to the top and was separated and dried with centrifuges and the coal went to the market and the stone was rejected.

Most of Ipswich coal was quite dirty. If you had a good seam you would throw out about 30% of it.

We had some bad seams that we threw away about 60% but basically about 50% was kept. Washing plants started off in the

mid 1950s. In the 1950s the people who controlled the mining industry in Queensland was the Coal Board. They were also a source of borrowing money and a lot of mines borrowed money to build washing plants. The Coal Board would organize the loans. It revolutionized the industry too. It was happening at the same time as mechanization so the greater quantity of coal being mined was then being able to being treated.

Prior to that it was over picking belts. Workers on the surface picked out the stone. It went from being a hand operation to mechanization.

Interviewer: Did you wash other people's coal or just your own?

Before the flood we were working 3 or 4 underground and one or two open cut. After the flood it was 2 open cut so we were mixing coal from the various mines of the one company. It was a 24 hour operation.

Interviewer: How big is this plant?

It was pretty big. In Ipswich they weren't massive. They can be ten storey building high. Ours was quite big, but only about four storeys.

It was cut it up and sold it off when we ran out of coal and the only bit left was under the washing plant and New Hope mined that. They washed that coal at New Hope.

The other mines had them – all the big mines. They are a whole industry on their own. They were needed in the Ipswich area because of the quality of the coal.

It was railed to the markets and we were paid by weight. You were also paid on the

quality so there were penalties if the coal was dirty, particularly if it was going to Swanbank. If there was too much ash there were penalties. They didn't want to pay for dirt.

Interviewer: Was managing the slag heaps a problem?

JW: Yes because some of them caught on fire. That is where chitter comes from. Stability was not a problem. A bushfire would come through and they would catch fire. That is what the white stuff is called, chitter. A lot of spontaneous combustion would happen when they got hot because there would be bits of coal stuck to the rock.

Every coal mine filled in gullies to the top and with the open cut there was a lot of spoil.

It was controlled by the Mines Inspectors. You couldn't do it willy nilly. There was a lot of flexibility in the early days. It wasn't until the 1980s that they started to get a bit tougher. Then rehabilitating mines came too.

No one paid too much attention to it until it became a big thing and it should have been something we were doing all along.

Interviewer: Did you have to get environmental people involved?

Yes we had an environmentalist working at Allied Queensland Coal Fields at one stage. We had this big heap near the Cunningham Highway and we planted all sorts of grasses on it. Keith Teske was a Mines Inspector and he said I have this plant at home and it grows everywhere. We planted it and it went everywhere. It was Singapore Daisy. Kratzmann was an environmentalist with the Department and he came up to inspect and he asked

for a list of things before he came. I didn't know what this plant was so I named it Pashaflorateske, common name Randy Creeper. He asked for the list and said he didn't know that one. It was a good plant.

The Department got more serious about the environment and so did we. We planted thousands and thousands of trees. In the 1980s and 1990s we had Lloyd Bird working for us. He is a local self-taught botanist who wasn't formally educated very much but very knowledgeable on flora. We planted a great number of trees. We had our own nursery and Lloyd gathered and propagated seed from trees on our own property. We became more aware of what had to be done. In the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s nothing much happened.

It became important in the 1990s. I spent a year working on the restoration when New Hope was working on the washing plant.

Interviewer: Do you want to comment on safety in mines?

I am not up on safety. When we stopped in 1993 it was not anything like as intensive in the things we did as are done now. I know this from my work with safety management systems now. We didn't have a safety management system in 1993. It has happened since then.

We always had safety officers – the Deputies in the underground and the examiners in the open cut. Their job was to make sure no-one was doing things they shouldn't be doing. But we didn't have rules like today. With contractors we found that there was always a little bit of conflict between our guys and the contractors to do things that were safe. In 1983 a young contractor was driving too fast and he went over an embankment.

That wakes you up and that was our first fatality.

Back then we paid nowhere near the same attention to safety.

Then we had the quality assurance issues that were all the go for a few years. That was a precursor to safety management. They were the big changes.

In Ipswich, the system of mining was basically board and pillar. There was some long wall mining in Rosewood but in Ipswich it was basically board and pillar. You take out 50% of the coal and then leave the rest to support the roof. The difference in Central Queensland and the Bowen Basin is that the system is long wall mining and they take out 100%. The roof falls behind them. That system is much more efficient as you take all of the coal. A lot of the local mines came back and took out the pillars but we could never do that because of the proximity of houses where we were working at Bundamba.

Interviewer: So underground there are still pillars?

Yes still a lot. But it is under houses which has sterilized a lot of coal.

Interviewer: Can I ask about the personalities.

Starting with Charlie McPherson I was a mine cadet at the time he was at Haigmoor. He was always fighting with the committee of the union. They hated him. He was such a hard man. Haigmoor's Union had a bad reputation of going on strike at any time. Just before I got there they ran a bus from town to Haigmoor and it used to be full. One day one of the regulars didn't get a seat so they went on strike.

Anyway when I was there they had meetings and as soon as they had a meeting they didn't ask if they could have (which was most of the time) Charlie McPherson would go and blow the whistle for knock-off time. The boys would say "right that's it we'll have 2 days off". Charlie ended up winning. He got the better of them on that one.

Charlie was a strong Manager and was able to stand up to a strong union. Jim Clark was the Chairman of the branch of the union. Jim liked to use big words. If he could use a big word instead of a small one he would. One day he was reading the paper and there was a symposium going on. That afternoon Jim said "I'm going to see the Manager and I'm going to take a symposium of men". Of course everyone had read it in the paper and all laughed. He liked to use the big words.

Haigmoor mine had a lot of characters. Sam Woodwood was a miner and a very funny man. Laughter, humour, was a great thing in the underground mine. It helped comradeship but I think it also helped in what was a dangerous job. They made light of that with their humour and there were very funny men. Sam Woodwood was one of them. But at every mine there was always a character.

Interviewer: Did they have their own mining slang?

There probably is. Knock off is finishing time but everyone uses that. We had pit time. When I started at New Woodward Shaft we started at 7am but we put our clocks on at 8am. The award then stated the times were 8 to 4, but you got around that by changing your watch. At Haigmoor pit time was only about 10 minutes ahead. I think that worked in because of the train. People would get the bus out but they would get the train to

town. One guy came from Enogerra every day in the train. We had pit time that was unique.

Interviewer: What about management?

There were good Managers and bad ones of course. Invariably none of the men liked the Managers. Ivor Rasmussen was Under Manager at Haigmoor. He was a young man, a smart guy. A mate of Beris Evans. He became a member of the Coal Board but died pretty young. They called Ivor "the boy wonder" because they didn't like him.

Talking about characters there was a guy on the surface at Whitwood in the 1960s whose name was George Redfes Kitchen. He played soccer for Australia. All the Kitchens played soccer. He was a funny man. He didn't like work. One of his jobs at the end of the shift on Friday night was to clean the tail end of the belt at the bottom of the main drive. George was on one Friday night and he came back on Monday and abused the guy who didn't clean the belt. It turned out to be him.

I think later on when we went to open cut mining we never got the same characters or camaraderie. We didn't quite get that underground camaraderie.

I think it was the conditions. It wasn't as dangerous. It wasn't hot and dusty, as the operators sat in air-conditioned cabins.

We had a manager under me called Lloyd Stitz. He always prided himself on getting names right. If he met you he would repeat your name several times to remember it. We had a guy called Murray Graham. One day he met him on the street and said "Hello Graham and how are you Mrs Murray?" He mixed it around. Lloyd was on staff and while he was liked by the blokes, he sometimes frustrated

them. Most management weren't liked by the men.

Interviewer: Strikes were all over industry issues?

They were and they were really bad in the 1950s and 1960s. Actually in the 1980s when I came back from working in Brisbane I employed a couple of guys who turned out to be trouble. I put them on because they were sons of people I knew.

We had some bad times with industrial disputes. We were a public company then – Allied Queensland Coal - and invariably we would capitulate. They would ring head office and say we shouldn't be doing this and they would give in to them. One of our men always said, (incorrectly), capiculate, so some of us would get in the habit of saying capiculate. This same man also said effelant instead of effluent.

In the 1950s I was in Haigmoor and strikes were really bad. They had a meeting one day about a cricket match. The Central Hotel or someone had written to them about a social game of cricket so they had a meeting about it. Charlie blew the whistle so they had a 2 day strike. That was the sort of thing that went on.

The miners at that mine were producing a lot of coal and they were well paid. They could afford a day or 2 off work. But the day men couldn't. It hurt them. Once you got over a certain limit the tax was pretty high so the miners didn't mind too much.

We had some good patches of industrial relations. When we finished in 1993 Allied Coal Fields opened a mine outside Dalby at Kogan Creek. Work culture was different up there. Strikes weren't thought about. Things were changing in the industry. Every action has an opposite reaction. Strikes in the 1950s and 1960s

had a reaction from management in the 1980s and with work choices. Power went away from the union. They didn't exercise their power with a great deal of caution.

On the Darling Downs there were West Moreton companies up there at the early part of the century. The Wrights had a mine there. Viv Walker owned Acland which is now opened up as an open cut. Allied Coal Fields have Kogan Creek and also have coal at Cape Creek. They opened Wilkie Creek up, outside Dalby. Really nice coal. They have now sold Wilkie Creek and Kogan Creek. We knew from our exploration in the 1990s that Kogan Creek was a really good prospect.

Interviewer: People have suggested that Premier Job Bjelke-Petersen's policy was to wind back Ipswich coal in favour of Central Queensland. Do you want to comment?

The only way he could have done that was through the prices he charged us for the transportation of coal. What I didn't mention was that in 1980 we started to export coal because the power station was cutting back on purchasing our coal. The first export was from Pinkenba wharf at the sugar facility. Rylance did that. We sent some there while they were in the process of building Fishermen's Island. This opened in 1983.

The railway had opened a loop line near Box Flat and a big loading facility and that is what we started to use. The rail tariff was very high and we had a continuing battle to reduce transport costs. Bjelke-Petersen was in charge at that stage and they weren't going to move in any way, shape or form. Our CEO, a bombastic Englishman, said "we won't pay it". This lasted for six months until Bjelke-Petersen wrote him a letter to tell him to pay up or no coal would be moved. He paid it. The only way Bjelke-Petersen could do that

was through rail tariff. I can't see how he could have done it any other way. We didn't have a huge quantity of coal anyway.

The only other way is if the coal stations stopped taking coal but the power station technology was starting to get old anyway. Certainly the freight was a problem.

Interviewer: Who was buying the coal?

It was mostly Japan. We had discussions with Korea but that didn't happen. New Hope sent export coal to a number of South East Asian countries.

Interviewer: What percentage was exported?

For us, after 1980, it was 100%. Everything was going. We lost our contract with the power station and got straight into export coal. Central Queensland was a different kettle of fish. They had much bigger mines, better coal, more and massive machinery.

The rail killed it. We went to see him on a number of occasions, but no change. In the 1970s there was a great kafuffle at the little mines. They were cutting back the supply to Swanbank from some of the little mines.

We started exporting through Fishermen's Wharf in 1983. We had no mechanical facility here so trains were loaded with front end loaders. We could get big ships into Fishermen's Island - maybe 90,000 tons. That was an outlet for our coal, otherwise we wouldn't have had it. We also exported from Wilkie Creek. The price was better than the local price.

We had lots of changes – mechanization, environmental, safety, quality assurance, new markets. When I left the whole

industry had changed – thank goodness. Hopefully it will be much safer now.