

Peter Bilbrough

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My name is Peter Bilbrough, and I started in the mining industry in South Wales in 1949. The first colliery where I worked was called Nantgarw, and had been developed in 1911 when two shafts were sunk to a depth of 1000 yards. Unfortunately a bore had not been put down before starting, and the owners assumed the seams they intended to mine would be at a depth of 600 yards, but due to an unknown syncline being present, they had to sink the shafts an extra 400 yards to intersect the seams. The mine became uneconomical, and was closed in 1913. In 1949, the National Coal Board decided to reopen the mine and employ the Horizon Mining System to produce coal. This entailed driving two sets of tunnels through stone, one above the other and driven from the shafts at 280 and 380 yards below the surface. They were driven towards the steeply sloping (35 degree) seams, and when

these were intersected the tunnels were turned at right angles so that they were now mining in coal. A coal face was then driven down the seam from the 280 to the 380 yard depth tunnels. Using a coal plough strips of coal were stripped off the face and deposited onto a retarder conveyor and taken down to the 380 yard level, where it was loaded into 3 ton capacity wagons and taken to pit bottom by diesel loco.

I was at this mine when the stone drives were starting at the shafts, and a bucket similar to the one hanging in Booval shopping centre was used for access to the work being carried out. I didn't think it was dangerous until I got into it and started descending the first time.

Initially I was employed doing a time and motion study in the stone drives – during this period of development the stone drives were being pushed

out as fast as possible to get to the coal, and the latest equipment at that time was being used. An advance of about thirty yards a day (3 shifts) was usually achieved.

About this time, the N.C.B. introduced a system of training for prospective Colliery Managers, and I was able to take advantage of this. It was called Directed Practical Training, and the trainee was supervised by a colliery manager or superintendent, who ensured that the trainee spent adequate time in all sections of work done in a coal mine. One day a week was reserved to attend Treeforest School of Mines. At the end of five years I sat and passed the Home Office Exam for the First Class Managers Certificate. By this time, I had met and married a girl from Australia, and in 1955 we decided to move to Australia. On arrival here I found that my U.K. Mining Certificate was not recognised in Queensland, because the U.K. did not recognise theirs.

BK. Same with N.S.W.

PB. To obtain a Queensland Managers Certificate I would have to appear before a panel of five people from the Mines Department. These included the Chief Inspector of Coal Mines (Mr Platt) and the Senior State Mining Engineer. They asked general questions relating to work in coal mines, and seemed very interested in my experience while working in

stone drives. At the end of the interview they presented me with the required Qld Certificate.

I wanted to work in the Ipswich area, as my wife's family lived fairly close by, so I contacted the Senior Inspector of Coal Mines at Booval Jack Tayler, who introduced me to Percy Adams, the Superintendent at Aberdare Collieries. I was eager to have a period of time working as a miner to begin with, to familiarise me with the conditions, which I knew would be quite different from the U.K. and Mr Adams told me he thought they could use me at Aberdare, and he would arrange for me to meet the Miner's Union Rep. to see if I could join their union for three months. This necessitated a visit to the Union hall near Booval Railway station. Mr Adams accompanied me to the hall where there were a large number of miners at a meeting. We eventually met the Union Rep. Who was quite helpful, and readily gave me permission to join the union for three months. I might add that he did this, despite the fact that the books were closed at the time. Finally I had to be interviewed by the Managing Director of Aberdare Collieries before I started work there, and was surprised and amused that when I arrived at the mine and enquired at the office where I could find him, I was told he was down the mine driving a haulage. I worked at

Aberdare for three months, mainly laying rail track

MC: How did the conditions compare with what you had known in Wales?

P.B: The method of mining in all the Welsh collieries I worked in was long wall, and in Queensland it was pillar and stall, so it is not easy to compare conditions. A longwall coal face could be 100 yards long, with a roadway at each end, one carrying intake air and having a conveyor belt to take coal away. The ventilation flowed along the face, taking away dust and methane into the second roadway. The full length of the face would be undercut to a depth of 5 or 6 feet, and shots fired to bring down the coal. The miners would then return to the face and shovel the coal onto a conveyor which ran along the full length of the face, which in turn fed it onto the belt in the intake roadway. Finally the coal would be filled into wagons and taken up the shaft. As the miners filled the coal they would set timber props to support the newly exposed roof. A second shift of miners would then take over, dismantle the face conveyor and reinstall it closer to the face, and also extend the intake road conveyor. Other miners would be employed building stone walls along side both roadways using material which had fallen from the roof. The roof in the waste area where the coal had been extracted was allowed to fall, the roadways being protected by

the stone walls and the face by a substantial line of props erected after the face conveyor had been moved forward. Supports on the waste side of the substantial line of props would be removed to encourage the roof to fall.

In the pillar and stall method employed in the Ipswich area in 1955 coal was won by driving tunnels in a chequer-board form, the main roof being supported by the pillars and the immediate roof in the roadways by timber supports. A number of faces would be worked, with two miners in each face, boring and firing shots in the coal and then shovelling it into skips- usually having a capacity of about 15cwt. A third member of the team, designated a wheeler would move the skip to and from a double tracked lie, where a number of skips, called a rake, would be delivered to (empty) or taken from (full) by a haulage.

Transport systems underground varied from mine to mine, depending on grades and undulations. Ventilation was guided through the mine using brick stoppings in certain roadways, with brattice cloth used for temporary stoppings and also to direct air into working faces. As can be seen from the two methods described, comparison is not easy, but I think that the dust problem on a long wall face at that time, especially if you were the miner towards the return end of the face,

made that system more unpleasant. Also the seam thickness in Wales (any thick seams had been worked out) was less than in Ipswich, and the miners in the face itself meant that Welsh miners spent much of their working day on their knees. In general, I think Ipswich miners had the best deal. After my three months at Aberdare No.8, where I learned a lot, and found the employees friendly and helpful, I was posted to Aberdare No.9 as manager.

BK: What do you remember about the hand worked pits-Aberdare No8 and No.9?

No 9 was on the northern side of New Chum Road, away in the bush. It was smaller than No.8 but had the same method of work. There were two horses to help with the wheeling underground. Like No.8 it worked a single shift, and the horses seemed to know when the shift had finished. They had plenty of energy left to go quite quickly up the 80yards or so quite steep gradient to the surface. One of them was not able to eat easily, and the blacksmith who worked at the mine, Digger Mehan discovered its gum was growing up towards the top of its teeth. Digger found a piece of flat steel, about an inch wide and a foot long, bent it at right angles half an inch or so at one end and heated that end in the forge. He put a blind fold on the horse, pulled its lower lip down as far as he could and scraped the proud flesh

away from the teeth. I could not stand the hissing and smell and had to walk away, but it seemed to do the trick, and to my amazement the horse did not seem to object too much. It ate much more readily afterwards.

On pay day for the miners, I would go to the main office which was at Whitwood, and get the pay for them- it was all made up and given to me in a small brown attaché case. When I took it back to the mine, I would give it to the surface haulage driver, who would sit on it for a couple of hours until the shift finished. How life has changed.

After several months at No.9, I was moved back to No.8 as Manager. That was a very difficult mine. It had been worked for quite a number of years so it was a long way in and the seam was quite steep. It was poorly laid out and had grown like topsy. The ventilation wasn't good. The method of working in both No8 and No.9 was similar to that described previously for pillar and stall mining.

In 1956, Buller Kerr who was Chairman of Directors at Haighmore and Sandy McPherson came to see me and asked if I would go to N.S.W. to manage their Colliery at Nymboida. It was 30 miles west of Grafton- a fair way to travel each day. In a way, it was because I was so disappointed with No.8 that I decided to accept the offer. I moved

to Grafton and stayed there for fifteen years. It is a beautiful place, and you are far away from the Miners` Union. Most of the workers were country men and they weren`t- what`s the word I`m looking for?

BK: They weren`t unionised to be difficult.

Yes. Unfortunately things did not start well. I travelled to Grafton on the 8th Oct.1956 with Sandy McPherson (he was the Superintendent). He returned to Ipswich next day and on the 10th Oct. I arrived at the mine early in the morning to find there had been a catastrophic explosion a short time earlier. There were two men in the mine, and I knew they would not have had a chance to survive, but I rang the appropriate Rescue Brigade at Cockle Creek in N.S.W, who said they could not possibly get up to Nymboida before Thursday, so I rang the Booval Rescue Brigade, who appeared in about four hours.

It took all day to get down to the two men, and their bodies were brought out about midnight. The cause of the explosion was a pocket of methane being ignited when the inspecting Deputy unscrewed his flame safety light to relight it with a cigarette lighter. In an ensuing supreme court hearing, the barrister for the Deputy`s wife, who was claiming damages from the Company, accused me of blackening a cigarette lighter by holding it over a

candle to make it look as though it had been in an explosion of coal dust, and getting the Booval rescue team to say they had found it in the Deputy`s hand, inferring that he had not been responsible for the explosion. He said I could do that because I had been in the Booval Team for the previous 12 months! The Jury gave a not guilty verdict and the case was dismissed. It took several months to get the colliery re-established and back to normal production, and I remained living in Grafton for the following 15 years.

In 1971 the Directors of Nymboida Collieries - who also owned New Hope Colliery- transferred me to New Hope, as the Manager at that time, Rex Griffiths, was due to retire. He was a bit of a character, and by that time wasn`t really interested in the mine. He was just a figurehead. Merv Harris was the Superintendent and he was the pusher. I was appointed manager early in 1971, and stayed there until 1973

BK: I took over in July 1973.

PB: So I was there for two and a bit years.

MC: How much had the industry changed in your 15 years away?

Considerably. Continuous Miners had been brought in, shuttle cars were used in place of skips, scout

cars to transport supplies, conveyor belts to transport coal, roof bolts in place of timber supports in certain conditions, trickle dusters and other systems to spread stone dust, laser beams to assist in keeping roadways straight, self-rescue units *strapped* to your belt, ready for use in an emergency, and washing plants. These were the main items. 15 years previously, Alfie Fish, employed on pit top at Aberdare No.9 used a long stick to assist him when tipping skips full of coal into a bin from where trucks would cart it away. Quite a change.

Shortly after arriving at New Hope, the Directors decided to install an Automatic Haulage on pit top, intending to dispense with the haulage driver. It was very costly to buy and install but the project was not discussed with the Miners' Union, and when it was ready to use, the Union demanded that a driver be in attendance when it was used. A driver was put on. Sometime later, I was required to increase output by installing another Continuous Miner. After looking at the problem, I decided there was insufficient ventilation to be able to do this satisfactorily, but was instructed to use the ventilation from one of the working miners, treating the return air from it by passing it through a series of brattice cloth apartments with water sprays in them. Again the Union stepped in and refused to work with this set up. About this

time the Qld Mines Department advertised for the position of a Coal Mines Inspector, and I happily applied for it. It was given to me, and I was posted to the Booval Office.

MC: What was your title? Was it Inspector of Mines?

Yes. I was given a number of underground mines and open cuts, and it was my responsibility to ensure that each one complied with the *Qld. Coal Mines Act* and Regulations, and that there were no unsafe conditions on the Leases. After a while I felt it was not really my sort of work, because you didn't do very much. Nothing practical. You just went out and inspected a mine, made a report in their book and then returned to the office.

BK: You didn't achieve anything.

MC: I know you said you weren't doing anything practical, but what did you do?

After being a Colliery Manager where you seem to be constantly making decisions and usually have many problems, the work of an Inspector seems placid. In reality you become an observer, and if you see something wrong during an inspection, you request it be rectified. If it is rectified, you don't see a result. For instance, on one occasion I observed two fitters working on a shuttle car, one corner

of which was held up by an air bag. They had taken one wheel off and were working on their backs underneath the car. I immediately called them out and told them I wanted solid support under the car before they resumed their work, and never again rely only on an airbag after taking a wheel off. They complied- but probably thought I was a silly old fool.

On another occasion, I did see a result- it was at Normanton Colliery Rosewood. That mine had one intake airway having breeze block walls which on each side were only about 2ft. away from the skips and about the same clearance to the roof. The return airway to the surface was a vertical shaft, perhaps 30 feet deep and there was a hand windlass on the surface which could haul out one person at a time. I was walking down the inclined Normanton tunnel from the surface on one inspection and I had a feeling that the tunnel walls were a little warmer than they should have been. I bored a small hole in the wall and pushed a rubber pipe in to take a sample of air. I was unable to get a sample so I pulled the rubber pipe out and to my surprise found the reason I could not get a sample was because the end of the pipe had melted together. It was obvious that there was an active heating there, and that if the rake of skips became derailed –as often happens in small mines- and broke the breeze block wall- the lives of the

30 or so men would be in jeopardy. I went back to the office and wrote in their report book that at the end of the shift no one was to go underground until all signs of the heating had gone. In other words the mine was finished.

It was at the time of the disastrous floods which had closed both Westphalen and Aberdare collieries and coal was running short at Swanbank Power Station. Otto Preuss who was a member of the Qld. Coal Board was in the Normanton office as I was writing my report- he was trying to get the manager to increase his output, and did not act at all favourably to my report. However, he was not able to do a thing about it. The owners decided to open cut the area as the seam was not very deep, and a few weeks later, when the bulldozers exposed the seam, there were large active fires in some of the areas where the mine had been working. It was generally accepted (but not by Otto Preuss) that I had made the correct decision.

A further example of a correct request which was not complied with was at Box Flat. The wooden steps from the lamp room floor down to ground level- only 3 or 4 steps- were rickety. I wrote in the report book that they had to be repaired forthwith. Some weeks later I noticed that a mine electrician had broken his arm. I enquired how it

happened and was told that he had fallen down the lamp room steps. In 1976, the Chief Inspector of Mines, Bill Roach retired and Iain Roberts took his place.

BK: I was told of him before I came here as he was Deputy Manager or Manager at Hepburn No2 in Cessnock. I was Under Manager in charge at one of the other pits. Some of the other Managers let me know what I was in for.

He told me that he wanted me to move to Rockhampton and look after mines in central Qld. This meant my family would be broken up, as my two children were soon to go to Qld. Uni., so I resigned from the Mines Dept, and took a position at Rhondda Colliery.

I started as Undermanager at No.5 which was in the process of driving two tunnels from the surface, starting from a point a few hundred yards east of the Warrego Highway and a similar distance South of Redbank Road. The tunnels were being driven in a seam of coal which was dipping at a moderate grade towards Ipswich, but about 400yards from the entrance a fault was encountered. To get to the seam that we intended to mine necessitated driving through rock at a steep angle for about 80 yards. This was difficult, costly and time consuming, but eventually we encountered the seam we were after, and normal mining began.

BK: It was one of the few pits that worked from there towards town. They were trying to open up what we know as The Grange which is all the coal underneath the southern end of Silkestone.

No.5 mined under Blackstone as far as the Welsh Church. At this point the seam became so steep it was very difficult to mine.

In 1984 Allen Bond owned Rhondda Collieries, and also a colliery called Great Greta, near Singleton in N.S.W. The manager of Great Greta wanted leave for three months, so I was asked to take over from him. The mining system was similar to that in Ipswich, but the coal had a high sulphur content. The water pumped from the mine was also high in sulphur, all water pipes taking water from the mine were plastic and when the water reached the surface it had to be treated before being released into the Hawksbury River. I retired in 1987, but did a further two locums at Greta in the following year