

Memories from Fernhill

by Ray Smith

Ray started working at Fernhill Colliery when he was 15 years old, first as a young collier boy and then as an apprentice fitter in the fitting shop. Here he shares some of his memories of his time at the colliery and the many dangers facing the miners.

This is a story about a colliery in South Wales called Fernhill Colliery, not a large colliery compared to other collieries in the late 1890, but to my opinion this was a special colliery, because this was *my* colliery. I started work in Fernhill colliery in May 1955, leaving Pentre Grammar school to start a career in coal mining. I followed the bus advertisements; “Come into Coal mining, a job for life”. We all smile at the optimism of those adverts, Mrs Thatcher would have a say in this in later years. Looking at the conditions in which the early miner worked, most certainly in the early days, one wonders what on earth begged them to work underground in such conditions. In my time there was very little choice of occupation. The choice for a young man was between mining, railways, shops or very light industry. If you had the brains or your parents could afford it, you could go to university, but those who did, generally returned to the Rhondda, to the mines or as teachers in local schools.



Blacksmiths from Fernhill Colliery c. 1960. From top left: Dai, Mr Oliver, Des Rees and Dai Rees. Bottom left: Stan Fergusson, unknown, Dai, Idwal Llewelyn. Image © Ray Smith

JOINING FERNHILL

I was taken to the colliery office on a Saturday morning in 1955. My father accompanied me and introduced me to Mr Dil Adams, the colliery training officer. Here I was duly signed in and told to report to the training colliery at Wattstown for a provisional 16 week introduction to mining. Here I met about fifty young boys who were sent from the various collieries in both the Rhondda Fawr

and Fach. After training I was sent to Fernhill Colliery to work at the coal face, still as a trainee, I was now 15 and a half.

My first descent was down the No 1 pit at Fernhill, a small cage, slow and positive; I remember looking at the shaft walls of stone, wondering how those masons could work upside down, with such large stones making up the shaft. I was put to work with my father's brother, Tom Smith, who looked after me in those first few weeks. The face was about 1.5 miles - or so it seemed. We walked and walked through the old parts of the pit, asking “when will we get there?” Tom would smile and say “not much further”. I could imagine the early miners toiling in this stall and heading method of mining which was the norm in those early days. The advantage of working in No 1 pit was the man riding haulage engine, which was stationed on the surface and the main & tail haulage method of conveying us out from the face to the pit bottom.

Every person working for the National Coal Board in those days was given the chance of further education to pursue a qualification in Mining, Mechanical, Electrical and Surveying. I took up Mechanical engineering at the Treforest School of Mines, now the University of Glamorgan. When I was 17 years of age I was given an apprenticeship as a fitter and joined the fitting staff at Fernhill Colliery. I was on

cloud 7; I thought I was the luckiest chap at Fernhill Colliery. I can say that all of the people I worked with were so patient and informative to my early raw days. I can remember my senior colleagues changing a winding rope, such a dirty greasy job. They were all issued with oilskin protective clothes and on completion of the job they gave me all their oilskin clothes and I was told to clean them up. I asked them “What will I clean them with?” to which they answered, “Use that drum of Diesel oil”. I placed all the oilskins in a large drum and ruined ten pair of oil skins. I was not so popular that day! The job as a fitter was so interesting, working on steam engines, boiler plant machine shop work and general engineering. It broadened my engineering experience and in 1966 I was transferred to Coventry to work in the NCB Homefire plant. This plant processed coal into a smokeless fuel. I worked at Coventry for nine months and then took a job with the Ford Motor Company at Swansea Plant. I retired from work in 1998 as Engineering Manager for their Treforest Plant

FIRE AT FERNHILL COLLIERY

I was 22 years of age and reporting for duty on the 24th July 1962 when I was told that a fire had started in the tunnel being driven to link up the Tower Colliery. The fire had started after a shot firing exercise had ignited a gas atmosphere. Orders from the colliery manager were to seal off the area on the North Heading, not so far from the pit bottom of the No 3 pit up cast shaft. Together with Thyssen miners, I helped sealing off the tunnel with a block wall in order to contain the fire. This was an extremely dangerous situation and by the



From top: Fernhill Colliery 1964 Exhibition on surface of No 3 Pit. Back from left; Eddie Harris, John Jones, David Kilvington. Front left; Peter Arundell, Tom Davies. Image © Peter Arundell. Middle: Fernhill Colliery visible behind Fernhill Street. Image © W. H. Bundock. Left: Fernhill Colliery site today. Image © Our Valleys Heritage.

25th July orders were given to close the activity of the colliery while the fire was being dealt with. The local mines rescue people were called to Fernhill colliery and they carried out air sampling from the mouth of the heading. Following a mine fire or explosion, mine rescuers would descend into the mine, carrying a canary in a small wooden or metal cage and two or three cages with canaries where used at this occasion. Canaries were a vital part in the life at mines as they are particularly sensitive to toxic gases. When affected by toxic gases, they fall of their perch, but when they are placed in fresh air, they quickly recover.

In spite of sealing off the main tunnel the oxygen levels were still not acceptable. By the 8th August, there was no improvement to the atmosphere within the heading and the decision was made to use nitrogen. A plant was set up on the site of No 5 Pit with the fitters of Fernhill Colliery and British Oxygen at Newport. The existing pipe work from the compressed air system was used to convey the Nitrogen down the shaft and into the heading. There was a fatality involved with this operation when one of the rescue team suffered a heart attack underground and died. By November 1962 air sampling within the fire area was taken and it was deemed safe to remove the walls and enter the fired area. Some 2.4million cubic meters of gaseous Nitrogen had been used by 11th December and the risk of explosion had been satisfactory removed.

SHAFT SINKING AT NO 5 PIT

In about 1962 the colliery management decided to sink the No 5 shaft deeper to connect up with the Tower Colliery. The existing steam winder which had been used to start the sinking was a twin single cylinder steam engine, about 350 horse power. This engine was used during the shaft sinking and operated on a steam pressure of 50 lbs/ in² and proved very reliable during the project. The new headgear and winding house was built at 90 degrees to the old winding house and following the old headgear and steam winding house was removed. It was during this removal that one of the contractors, who were employed to remove the old headgear, fell from the headgear whilst we were working on the new steelwork. He hit his head on our steelwork and unfortunately died on the way to hospital. I would like to give praise to Sister Thomas, our colliery nurse who tried her best to save this man, giving first aid at the pit-top until the ambulance arrived.

When a shaft is deepened as No 5 pit, a wooden platform is used to protect the shaft sinkers as they work at removing the rock from the shaft bottom some 1200 feet down. This platform is about 24 foot in diameter, about two foot less than the main shaft diameter. From this platform a hole is cut about 6 foot in diameter, and it is this hole that the kibble bucket passes through to the shaft sinkers working below the platform. The rise and fall of this platform is controlled from the surface by a capstan electrically driven, just below the old winding house. The actual shaft sinking, though a dangerous operation, was carried out with no

further loss of life. There was one dangerous incident when the spreader gear that holds the kibble steady had jammed on the surface when the kibble was down at the shaft bottom. The rope oscillation caused this heavy gear to free fall down the shaft down onto the shaft sinkers already working under the platform. These men had a lucky escape as the platform did its job and protected them from such an incident.

THE CRASH OF THE AERIAL ROPEWAY

I can remember the day of the crash at Fernhill Colliery of the aerial ropeway. I was sent with an apprentice, Mr Brian Morgan, up the Rhigos mountain tip. Our orders from the group engineer and the unit engineer at the time was to watch the ropes and buckets as they made their way up the mountainside for tipping on this huge tip.

Shale and spoil from the coal washery was collected in a hopper and was controlled in the tipping station via a discharge door into each bucket, which took about one ton of shale. As each bucket came into the station inverted, it was rotated into its upright position and locked into place with a striking handle. The bucket was carried onto a carrying rope and wedges on the bucket gripped a driving rope which took the bucket up the tip. There was a substantial driving mechanism in the station which powered tons of buckets and shale up the incline of the Rhigos tip. In the station was the operator and a fitter, a Dunkirk veteran, called Stan Smith. Being the youngest and possibly the fittest, Brian and I set off to the highest part of the tip to watch progress of the buckets as they made

their way up the tip. The design of operation was to allow the full bucket to return around the top tower, travel 60 yards down the tip to the striker where the handle of the bucket would strike, and the shale would discharge into the tip. It was a terrible day, the wind was howling, as it can up in the Rhigos, it was raining and we were not very comfortable. The driving rope was swinging dangerously in the wind, exaggerated by the sway of the full buckets as they were powered up the tip. As the first bucket made its way around the return tower it sent a signal to the washery station that the first bucket had gone around but this day the operator and Stan Smith thought we had signalled to stop the drive of the buckets. There was a stop of the buckets, the next thing the buckets were in reverse coming back down the tip completely out of control and gaining speed in the descent. The group and unit engineers who were on the lower tip tried gallantly to hold the rope, but were bowled over with the sheer weight of the speeding buckets. My concern at first was to rescue Stan and his colleague in the loading station from the uncontrollable buckets.

We raced down the mountain to witness a complete smash of the control cabin; it was wiped out, with tons of shale and the twisted mass of the buckets in the station. Looking quickly through the tangle of machinery we saw no sign of Stan or his operator. Rushing down the steps we found Stan with a cup of tea steaming in his hands, shaking and in near state of shock, stating that the evacuation at Dunkirk was nothing as bad as this accident. In conclusion, there was nobody injured in this mishap.

The cause of the accident was incorrect loading of the ropeway - the buckets should have gone up empty at first, balancing the weight, and the drive motor brake turned out to be defective, causing the buckets to come out of control. Another day in the life of a colliery fitter!



Young collier at Fernhill collieries, late 19th century. Image © Tony Melville

Blackie and George

by Ray Smith

There was always time for a laugh at Fernhill Colliery and my father, who worked on the steam boiler plant at Fernhill Colliery, told me this story.

The four Lancashire boilers that generated steam for the winding engines burnt a large amount of coal on a daily basis. The coal generated a great deal of ash, which had to be removed to the tip at Blaenrhondda. Firing of the boilers was arranged on the first floor and the ash was put in trams on the ground floor. When the trams were filled, they were pulled out by George Thomas, a little man who controlled a huge, black horse called Blackie.

George and Blackie had a wonderful working arrangement and George would converse with Blackie explaining to the horse to “Back up” and “Steady” and “Ok” and Blackie would duly pull the trams from beneath the boiler house. The conversation was frequently overheard by stokers working on the first floor. One day George had to go to the canteen for sandwiches, so he tied Blackie to a boiler valve for safety while he was gone.

The stokers watched George going off to the canteen and quickly led Blackie into a small pump house nearby and closed the pump house door. George returned and found that Blackie had disappeared. George was frantic and started to

inquire if anyone had seen his horse. Too upset to report Blackie missing to the Gaffer Haulier, Mr Starr, George walked over to the No 1 pit about a half mile away, to look for Blackie, who often worked on that side of the colliery

During George’s search, the stokers duly retrieved Blackie from the pump house and tied the horse up to the existing valve. George returned after 30 minutes and to his amazement he found Blackie where he had left him before heading to the canteen. George was shouting at Blackie. “Where have you been? I have looked everywhere for you!” Blackie gazed at George with a knowing look, and they say he even smiled when George said “And you have even tied yourself up”. Nobody would admit to hiding Blackie.



Another of the colliers, Danny, and his pony at Fernhill Colliery. Image © Marian Smith