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Directed to the Mines: The Bevin Boys, 1943 to 1948

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AK

Introduction

Transcription of interviews

conducted between March 2000 and September 2003

by Mary Ann Kneif

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank all the interviewees for their cooperation and help, without which this thesis could not have been written.

Depository and Copyright

The recordings of the interviews on cassette tapes and full transcripts have been deposited at the Imperial War Museum. The author holds the copyrights. Anyone wishing to access the tapes should contact the Imperial War Museum.

Interviews

The majority of interviews were conducted in the interviewees' homes as it was felt they would be more relaxed in familiar surroundings

AK

Alan W.

Transcript of interview with Alan W.,

conducted on 29th March 2000 by Ann Kneif

AW: I was born in North Yorkshire, the North Riding of Yorkshire in those days, in the industrial town of Middlesborough. We were then evacuated to – my father's work closed at the beginning of the war and we moved to North Alliton in the North – still in the North Riding of Yorkshire, but in the countryside. And at that stage I went to the local grammar school and I left there when I was 16. Decided to become an engineer and from there – that was at the age of 16 and at the age of 18 I was called up. The post arrived on the morning of my 18th birthday to report for national service which I did. And having been fit for any sort of national service, in good health, I was directed to serve my country in the coal mines. This ahead of the government – the secretary of state responsible for wartime activities. And directing labour was Ernest Bevin and from then on I think we were termed Bevin Boys. The –

AK: You did not appeal against being a Bevin Boy?

AW: Well I did because at the time I was working with a company in Northumberland at their branch office abstracting open cast coal. That was the work the company was engaged on and I felt that – lets cut that out, no lets cut that out – I don't make particular reference to my appeal but I did appeal on the grounds that I would be responsible for more coal than I would be if I were attempt to get coal from underground, something completely foreign to me. Anyway surprise, surprise my appeal failed. I was directed to go up to a coal mine in Northumberland, which was one of the Crammington Collieries developments, a group of pits. And from there I – for 18 months I worked at the underground but at the shaft bottom, where the empty tubs were left at the shaft bottom and full tubs returned to that point. That was where I was engaged for 18 months.

AK: Were you given any training?

AW: Yes, I had a fortnights training. You will appreciate that being November the only training I had was subject to wintry weather and wintry weather in the North East was pretty horrendous, well it certainly wasn't - . And I was trained firstly one weeks training underground at a training pit, where we were instructed in all – well in coal getting in so far as the – mainly the transport of coal from the coal face to the shaft bottom, using the haulage devises that they had, which included pit ponies. And the using the road track and the – along which the tubs were hauled by means of steel hawser, which were operated by winding engines at each end of the length of the train of tubs as they came out. So that was it. Disconnecting full tubs, pushing them or guiding them into the empty cages at the shaft bottom and sort of locking them in and then taking the empty tubs from the cages alongside the shaft and collecting them up and sending them off in ties, it was called, to the coal face. That is basically what I was engaged on.

AK: You said you had a good experience with the pit ponies.

AW: Oh well yes. That was not at that pit. After 18 months I had difficulty in obtaining suitable accommodation.

AK: What was the accommodation then at the first pit?

AW: First pit. It was a series of – first of all I had been based in Newcastle and this was 6 miles from the pit and meant me cycling 6 miles there, 6 miles back during all weathers for two coal getting shifts, which were from 9 until 5 and from 5 until 5pm that is and – no, I am sorry – and then from 2am through till 9 in the morning. The early shift was called the back shift and the other shift was called the day shift. They were both shifts which were directed to the winning of coal. The intermediate shift was in fact manned by those who were responsible for ensuring that the roof was safe after the coal had been taken out. They were called – they were responsible for cutting down excess stone and making way for opening the faces again for the coal getters to work on coal getting in the two coal getting shifts. They were very experienced men, well they all were. That was that. The equipment we were provided with as a Bevin Boy was a pair of boots, a helmet and that was that. The boots – one pair of boots for the period we were down there were – everybody had clothing coupons. I think the usual allocation was30 a year and boots, if you bought a pair of boots you had to surrender 6 clothing coupons. And believe you me, they took 6 clothing coupons from me for my boots (*laugh*). Just the once because you only bought the one pair. That just a thing. The accommodation that we had up in Northumberland was with local miners and their families. And they were very kind. We were very well treated. None were affluent but they were very good to us. Eventually there was, as it were, no room at the inn and I returned home to North Yorkshire, having left my forwarding address with the Ministry of Labour in Newcastle. So they knew where I was and after a week at home my father instructed me to go to the local Labour Exchange, and who were directing labour in those days. And I was interviewed by the one of the officers concerned, who happened to be a friend of my father. But that is irrelevant and he said – I explained how it was that I was perfectly willing to go back if there was somewhere for me to stay. I said if you find me somewhere to stay I will go back. I said until you do, I said, I am in a difficulty. He said would you mind going to another pit where there was accommodation available. I said yes, I am quite prepared to do that. So I finished up my service in the coal mines my second 18 months at a colliery in South Durham, Dean and Chapter, it was at Ferry Hill in South Durham. But I had to -. I got home at weekends, which was rather nice. And at that pit I went in by and I was responsible for conveying timber, roofing timbers and the props from the trains, And at the end of their run, with the aid of a pony and chain, we dragged, or the pony dragged the timbers into the coal face. And that was that. So I had company, as it were, for the first period there. That was work which kept me occupied and it wasn't unpleasant in that sort of sense. So that was it. There was also pit head baths, which I used. And I was staying at the Bevin Boys hostel in Ferry Hill, so there was also baths and accommodation and food. We had all we needed to live by. That passed away. I did assist the surveyors. There were coal mining surveyors there and it was in my line of work and I quite enjoyed that work as well. It was mainly work during the bank holidays and that's when the surveying work was carried out. That was it. That is what I did and eventually that completed my national service. There was nothing more after that (*laugh*). Perhaps I should say the reason the government needed coal

getting was really that a great number of the coal miners had volunteered or they had been Territorials, which meant that in times of national emergency they would be called up to help defend the country. And in fact a lot of miners were Territorials and others were volunteers for the war time activities and prepared to assist with national values. So the mines were left short of skilled labour. And it was decided that 10% of those that were called up on national service during the war would be directed to go down the coal mines and I was one of those. How they did it. Each month there was some sort of ballot made and a number was drawn out of the hat. And if that number happened to be the last figure of your national service number or whatever, you won that particular lottery and you were directed to the pit. So it was 10% of all those. There was a shortage of coal miners and we were directed down there to something which we knew not much about (*laugh*) or very little.

AK: Were you unhappy about it? Would you have rather have gone into the forces?

AW: I was in fact an army cadet in the Green Howards in the North Riding infantry regiment, based at Catterick, but that didn't wash. That was one of the points I made in my appeal, but it didn't wash. It was something quite strange, something completely foreign. Well any war activity is foreign to folks. And where there is more than one of you involved, when there is a group of you involved, well then you just put up with it. That's what the Brits do I think and moan about it. But there are other things in life you know. You do have a non-working period so take it from that.

AK: What was your relationship with the other miners, that is the genuine miners?

AW: They were alright. They accepted us with a chuckle, with a smile on their face. They were great chaps, they really were and yes, were super. And if our off time there were one or two Bevin Boys there and I think certainly in Northumberland the locals were quite friendly. My age, who were working in the mines, there were not many of them because they had been called up – a lot of them had been called up on national service but they were quite pleasant. We were not taking their jobs you see and there was no animosity at all. They really just raised a smile on their faces. That's what it was. They were great.

AK: Were you accepted by the local community? They didn't have any problems?

AW: No, well in Northumberland we lived among them and they were no problem. The salt of the earth I suppose.

AK: I heard there was absenteeism and desertion by the Bevin Boys. Do you know anything about that?

AW: Yes, one or two were, a few I shall say. If you went home without any leave of absence you were followed eventually by the local police, I think it was were obliged to call round and say well look here you or your boy has absconded and we are here to make sure that he goes back to work. And those who did and were found guilty of this heinous crime, they found themselves in Wormwood Scrubs, I think that was the place it happened in. That was what concerned my father of course. When I arrived home without permission and he said I am not having any of my sons finishing up in prison you see. So go along to the Ministry of Labour and that is it. But I think it's

certainly the coal mining. There are dangers in it but nothing compared with armed service. So I don't know the figures but there were certainly some of the Bevin Boys who were injured or some lost their lives in accidents. But in the main, I suppose, most of us, the majority, came through the war without particular problems. And of course my war time service was only a small part of my national service because I was called up in the November 1944, the month of my birthday, and I served for three years so that will be '47 when I came out. And exactly three calendar years, three times 365 days, whatever that is. A non event, a big non event.

AK: You were one of the last Bevin Boys to be demobbed then?

AW: Oh no, well one of the last. Yes that is right. I think that we stayed there. Each of the services had a different period of service before they were demobbed. I don't know what the others were but I do know that none were longer than three years, so they didn't serve longer than three years.

AK: Were you influenced at all by what you did afterwards – by your experiences?

AW: Well, I think it certainly helped me in my career. I was coal getting on public works. I was with a company who did major civil engineering projects and I was with them on contract. Some of the work they did throughout the war was repairs of runways that broke up due to aeroplanes and airports and the airfields and I did a bit of that work. And I was then prospecting for open cast coal. I was trained as a driller in the prospect for coal. I was then taken away from that and put in the admin office with the engineers in charge and directed to Gosforth, which is part of Newcastle. They were excavating over cast coal just below the surface all over the place in Northumberland, Durham and even parts of North Yorkshire. Ten feet of coal or more just below the surface that could be got to. There was no means of getting to it. Nowadays, of course, they have a terrific sized excavators, draglines and so on and so forth. And they strip the topsoil off and gouge out and convey the coal away. Now that's -?- gas coal. The work and experience that I had and the – I could observe in the pits was of some use to me because the first job I did when I went back to my old firm and the first contract was a tunnelling contract. An aqueduct was being built from the main district down to Manchester. My company were responsible for a tunnel being built under Beaumont Forest in North Lancs. and I was part of that team. But then I went to university and qualified. I had attended night school in this, that and the other, so I had qualified for the entrance to the University of Manchester. And during vacations I used to go back to the old firm again and do a bit. It stood me in good stead. I have no lasting complaint about going down the coal mines. It wasn't very pleasant but there you are.

AK: Why did you join the Bevin Boys Association? I take it you belong.

AW: Well yes, I joined it three years ago. Some of the ex Bevin Boys in various groups around the country, midlands and South Wales, Lancashire and so on, Yorkshire and South Yorkshire, they got themselves into groups and they met up again and they -. About three years ago my brother phoned me. He said have you read this months Saga Magazine. I said Saga, that's for old folks isn't it? And he said I thought you would have one. And I said yes, I have had it. And he said have you looked at this months reviews and advertisements and notices? And I said no. And he

said well there is a Bevin Boys Association. They are having their annual reunion at Canterbury you see. There were some pits in Kent as you know, Bettshanger and Snowdown and that lot and Chislet. We went to Canterbury. Its not as it were a highly technical conference. It's really a getting together of people because you will appreciate that Bevin Boys are a really random lot. That's when I joined. This year we are up in Edinburgh, in Scotland and we go there next weekend, the week after next, 7th, 8th, 9th of April. Last year we went to York and we visited an old coal mine, which is part of a museum, which is in North Yorks. Its Copthorne Colliery. I've got it out there. For anybody, my wife went down there. You have to wear helmets. You surrender cameras and all that sort of thing and then you go through the pit. It is very, very lifelike and it shows you in detail the old last century, century before last conditions down there. There are the stalls. You open a door like that and look in and you saw where the father used to work at the coal face. You saw the rough track, well there was no track in there. And the mother was responsible for hauling the coal from the – whatever it was done with – a sheet or cloth or whatever and dragged it out. And the younger kiddy, one of the younger kiddies, maybe six or seven, sat near this door and when he heard movement on the other side he opened it and then when they got through closed it again. And the conditions were horrendous, really horrendous, it really is. The chappies will take you round. Very knowledgeable because they are ex miners themselves and because when we went there it was something. Well 'won't tell you lot anything' so we were greeted and we pulled his leg now and again so he pulled ours. It was a very, very interesting visit that and of course they had the other displays on the surface. That's Copthorne Colliery. (*left room to get ticket*) Here you are we were all given tabs.

AK: That's interesting.

AW: That is the address. It's worth a visit. It's worth a visit. We are going to see another one near Edinburgh but this one is exceptionally good. And should think you could get up there and visit and come back down on a train. But that's if you -.

AK: So you enjoy speaking with the other Bevin Boys over past times?

AW: Oh yes, we have done. I don't know any of them. The only connection I had was with one and he had been at Dean and Chapter Colliery the same as myself. And I had not met him although he is now living in my home town Northhatlepool. And I was speaking to him and I said I don't remember you and he said I don't remember you, you know. So he said which part were you in you see. So I said I worked from the shaft bottom, adjoining which were the ponies stables. He said oh yes and I told him the tale about this little white pony that I had at that time, a little white Shetland. He used to help me out with the timber you see. I must say he didn't help me, he did it. And how the pony that I had used to jump up on the conveyor belt. They were left running empty, you see, at the end of the shift and we used to lay on there and used to go out instead of walking. And this pony used to jump on in front of me and the roof crunched the belt like that (*made movement with hands*). There was no roof to go under and he used to jump off well before that, so I rolled off at the same time and that was it. I was just saying.

AK: So a relationship with the pony?

AW: Yes, we used to have the same one every day, every shift. And he said you mean Sam don't you? He used the same pony. That's the only connection I had with anybody I have ever been down the pit with. Any Bevin Boys I have ever been down the pit with. The only connection. A shared experience.

AK: You don't feel anything against the government that they didn't recognize the Bevin Boys afterwards, that they -.

AW: When I came away I didn't even clean my helmet because my boots had rotted within the first six months of service, you see. No, well I think – I always took the view that those on active service really did something that – they sacrificed themselves for their country and I suppose, you know, in our service, lost their lives and injured themselves. So I didn't feel we had done very much. I wasn't angry. It was just a toss of the coin in my case, you know. I would have preferred the army. Rather two feet on the ground than under the ground, but no nothing like that. The government now have recognized in terms of the Armistice Day Parade, Remembrance Sunday. The Bevin Boys the last two years have taken part in the parade and have now been represented in the parade. But how long we have to go I don't know. I suppose I am one of the younger ones really. I think there are other things I would have preferred to do but I have no axe to grind. I am very fortunate I suppose.

(END)

Transcript of interview with Peter H.,
conducted at his home on 20th April 2000 by Ann Kneif

PH: My name is Peter Heap. I was born in Hackney in London in 1924. My father, at the time, worked in the insurance business, lost his job in 1929 when the crash came, as a lot of people did in the financial services and from thereon until 1939 we lived on what was virtually the dole. I went to an elementary school because it was no other opportunity for any other kind of education if you lived on the dole and I was just about to leave school when the war broke out in September '39. And because I was the school captain the headmaster asked me to stay on for a bit longer and accompany the school on evacuation. And we went with them to – we were evacuated to Oakeham in Rutland. And I left the following January after settling in – helping to settle the school into its new environment. I had to find a job and I went to work for a shoe retailing company that had a couple of branches in London and I worked for them for three years until, until conscript, until I was conscripted. As you know the Bevin Boy scheme was introduced in 1943 by Ernest Bevin, who was the then Minister of Labour. The coal industry had had a rough time after the 1914-18 war. It had been subsidized but the subsidies were withdrawn by the government afterwards. The coal owners were determined to replace that subsidy by reducing labour costs so they cut wages. That led to the 1921 strike. There were Royal Commissions looked into the state of the coal industry in – that was the Sankey Commission. And by 1926 there was the general strike, which of course as you know originated in the coal industry. That went on for nine months in the coal industry although only nine days generally. And the miners had to go back on the coal owners terms, which created a very depressed, morally as well as financially depressed working employment group in the country. Probably the miners were the most depressed of them all apart from agricultural workers. The inevitable consequences of that of course, was that there was bitterness between both the management and the miners and their leaders and moral was very low in the industry and productivity was at an all time low. Then came the war. A lot of miners took the opportunity to leave the pits, which they had not had before, and join the forces. And they were leaving enormous gaps in the labour force. And output of coal, which was the country's main and almost only source of energy at that time, fell to dangerously low levels because the whole of the output of engineering and mechanical industries was really required for the war efforts and they – one thing they could not afford to do was to stop factories working for lack of electric power. So the situation got critical during 1943 and Ernest Bevin, as Minister of Labour, proposed in the House of Commons that instead of all conscripts for the services going into the services, 10% should be deflected to the mining industry. There were heated debates about this but eventually a bill was passed in the House and one in ten of us young men as we were then – we are now 17 and 18 year olds, who were conscripted. We were deflected, as I said, into the coal industry and as you can imagine going into an industry which could be very enclosed, very self-regenerating as far as labour was concerned – going into an industry without any knowledge of it. Without any experience of heavy manual work was a pretty daunting experience and in fact many politicians had predicted that the whole thing would fail.

Largely on those grounds because you'd got people going in who a) were not suited to manual work because you know you were across the whole spectrum when you were called up and b) that they wouldn't last the course if they did. So anyway, in April – March and April '44, I was called up, went to do my training at Cresswell Colliery in Derbyshire.

AK: Can I just ask a question?

PH: Yes, sure.

AK: What were your personal reactions to being called up into the Bevin Boys rather than perhaps going into the forces?

PH: Mixed. I wasn't keen on the idea of going into the forces because I'd seen a lot of other young men go in with high hopes and they'd had most of those hopes dashed by the drudgery of forces life, which really was a drudgery in those days. There was no glamour to it and so I wasn't particularly keen to join the army. And I had read quite a bit, we all did in those days, people don't anymore but I read quite a bit of politics and political economy and I was quite interested in the political aspects of this. I did read up on quite a bit of it before I went in so I didn't go in entirely cold to it but I was – I was a bit apprehensive, as you can imagine. I didn't know how I'd react to actually physically going down a shaft and working in mining conditions underground. And like anybody else who had never been down a pit you thought you just went down in a cage, got off at the pit bottom, walked across to a pile of coal and started shovelling it into a – and of course its nothing like that at all. But it soon gripped me. Once I'd been underground and we – I think we, we went underground I think on the second or third day of our practical training, which lasted must have been a month. And I began to find it fascinating and it was also very logical. Everything, everything was thought out and I suddenly realized that this wasn't just some crude muscle bound industry that just hacked away and walked away from the job. It was really a well thought out piece of engineering. Mining engineering is a – what it is, a very, very demanding and exacting discipline. So I began to take quite a lot of interest in that.

AK: Can you say something about the life when you were training, accommodation and –

PH: Well I was very lucky when it came to accommodation because we were – we went up to Chesterfield by train in a group. And I suppose groups were converging from all parts of the country to various centres. And I happened to go to this Nottinghamshire/ Derbyshire centre. And I think there must have been about a dozen of us altogether marshalled onto the train and there was a civil servant with us and saw us off at Chesterfield. And we were then allocated to various areas around Chesterfield. Some went into North Derbyshire, some into South Derbyshire, some went to South Notts. And I went to North Notts. And we were then bussed that afternoon to Mansfield, Mansfield Woodhouse actually and we were allocated our billets. Most went into a Bevin Boy hostel, which had been an army camp, which had been converted for us. As it so happened I had left home that morning and forgotten to bring my ration book with me and of course the first thing you had to do when you got to these places was to surrender – was to produce your identity card and surrender your ration book. And I said 'Oh God! I'm sorry; I've left it at home – left the ration

book at home. I'll have to get it sent up'. 'Oh, you'll have to wait over there'. That was the reaction that I got then. So I waited virtually while everybody else was sent off to the various billets, as I said mainly to the Bevin Boy's hostel. And then they came. 'Oh God, yes, you're the chap whose forgotten (*laugh*) his ration book. Oh you'll have to have an emergency ration card'. So there was the billeting officer, who had emergency ration cards. He makes one out for me, says 'well, what are we going to do with him?' Says 'oh well we've got one or two vacant places in houses. There's Mr and Mrs Parks. They said that they could provide a place'. They said 'oh yes, we know Mr and Mrs Parks. Yes, that would be very good'. I was taken off to see Mr and Mrs Parks and it turned out to be a lovely family. He was a quantity surveyor, working at that time on airfields in Lincolnshire and he came home at weekends. And he had a 16-year-old son, who was his apprentice so he went with him. And then there were two other children, a girl of six and a boy of four. They'd had a tragedy in the family only six months previously. The oldest boy was a twin and his twin brother had been gassed in the bath by carbon monoxide. Terrible, terrible tragedy for them. And I suppose to some extent I was filling a bit of gap for the lost son. Anyway these very nice people took me to their hearts and really were wonderful people and I kept in touch with them until they died not many years ago. And I was – I was long and thin. About as thick as a yard of pump water as they used to say. And Mrs Parks said to me 'eh lad' (*dialect*) she said 'you'll never do down pit'. So I said 'why not?' She said 'why there's nowt of ya, see I'll have to feed you up. You need packing under ya ribs' was her favourite phrase; 'packing under ya ribs' and she did too. I don't know how she did it because we didn't have any extra rations - oh yes we did. We had 10ozs of cheese a week instead of the standard 2ozs of cheese a week so that – that was the extent of the additional rations. But somehow or other this marvellous woman managed to cook me meals that (*laugh*) I've never seen the like of before. And she did, she built me up and it stood me in good stead. And so I began to cheer up pretty rapidly you know. Here I was, a nice family, homely, it was just like being at home and the – all the kindness and affection you could ever hope for from people who started out as complete strangers. So that was a good start for me. I think that really that was really what got me off to a flying start.

AK: How did the training progress then? What sort of things did you do?

PH: Well there were two parts to the training you know, theoretical and practical, including physical training. They quite rightly had, the authorities that is, they had quite rightly seen that they were going to get a fairly mixed bunch of lads coming in. After all they were used to getting a mixed bunch of lads in all the services so it was going to be the same sort of thing. And the training centres that they set up at a number of collieries. You would have a training centre at, at say half a dozen collieries or something like that. And they built classrooms at these places and they taught us the theory of mining, which I found quite fascinating. And we spent quite a lot of time underground, actually seeing in practice what we were being taught in theory and learning to do simple jobs underground. And physical training for which they brought in army physical training instructors with the remit to build us up as quickly as they possibly could. They'd got a month in which to build us up. And so we did all kinds of things like humping great telegraph poles around between --?— and that sort of thing. But it did have the desired effect and it did certainly build me up. I was never you know anything but thin, but I wasn't skinny anymore. So I reacted, I think, favourably to that. My health improved. There is I don't think any

doubt about that. But, as I say, I didn't find the underground environment particularly difficult. After we completed the training we then were allocated to individual collieries according to the manpower needs of the colliery. I was extremely lucky again. I seem to have had good luck all the way through this, because I was allocated to Sherwood Colliery, which was about half a mile from where I lived at that time.

AK: So you could stay with the same family?

PH: So I could stay with the same family, which was wonderful and they said 'oh yes that's terrific' you know. Actually I think that Mr Parks pulled a few strings, because he was friends with the local councillor and the local councillor was on the (*wife interrupts and brings a glass of water* I thought you might need this) He was friends with the local councillor and the local councillor was on the billeting committee. And I think somehow a few strings were pulled because they – I think they had taken to me and they liked the idea of my continuing to live there. So I was allocated to Sherwood Colliery and first two weeks at the colliery were always spent on the surface. You had to learn about surface – the work that was done on the surface. The cleaning of the coal and how it brought up the pit, how it was tipped, how it went into the wagons, what all the various workshops were for, the engineering workshop, blacksmith's workshop, electricians workshop. You saw a bit of everything. And then finally the day came when of course you had to go underground, because working on the surface didn't count as national service. Only underground work counted as national service. So we all had to go down and I was put on a job on coal haulage. At that time underground haulage was mainly by continuous rope systems. You had continuous loops of steel rope, which were perhaps half a mile, a mile long driven by enormously powerful 1000 horsepower electric engines, stationary engines and a by drum just turned the wheel and the rope went up to the far end, round tension pulleys, came back, round the wheel again and so forth. And we had double tracks so one side took empty tubs, as we called them, 15cwt steel wagons really, linked together by hook and chain, a dozen at a time. These were taken in towards the coalfaces and the same rope would bring the full ones out again. Mind you I was working on this system, marshalling the tubs into trains, the sets, clipping them onto the leader clip device that fitted, two jaws fitted over the rope itself. The hook onto the front of the run pulled the lever down, that closed the jaws and away the thing would go. I quite enjoyed that. I suppose it was a bit like playing trains, as a kid you know. I quite enjoyed it because it was always something fresh. Always on the move and you moved up and down perhaps two or three miles of roadway march from these things. Whereas if you worked on the coalface, you worked on the coalface and that was it. You did your whole shift there and then you came back again. So they said did I want to go onto coalface work. The pay was better for the coalface workers; naturally enough were paid enhanced rates. But I obviously was earning enough. More than I had ever earned in my life doing this particular job and so I stayed with it. In fact that was virtually the only job I ever did underground. I suppose I missed out on something by not gaining wider experience, but you know I enjoyed it. It wasn't too demanding and being tall I was in roadways that were high enough so I could walk upright the whole time and I didn't fancy crawling through narrow coal faces, because in the seam I was working in the coal seam thickness was just under 4ft. That was on the Dunstall seam and they didn't do as we've done in more recent years, enlarge the whole area of the face. They merely took the coal out of the seam and that was it. So anyone working on the seam worked in whatever height the seam was. I didn't fancy

that too much so I was quite happy to continue to do haulage work for the whole time I was underground.

AK: How did you get on with the miners themselves, because looking at some of the books that I have read people have complained that the miners were not very friendly to them?

PH: Well, I've read those things but that wasn't my experience. My experience was quite the opposite. I found they were kindly, generous and very protective. Many times they were extremely sympathetic. You had to do your job because if you shwim shranked at all then you were beyond the pale, but that was because that was the ethos of the miner. Everyone pulled his weight. Everyone depended on everybody else. And once you understood that, that it was necessary to pull your weight otherwise you'd be a burden on everybody else, once you accepted that, and they saw you accepted that and you were ready to pull your weight, then you were in. You were part of the mining community. And I must say they are the nicest people that, up to that time, that I had ever met in my life. London commercial life was not a bit like that and I never liked it very much but then I moved up into these – into this kind of society and communities of this kind and it was a revelation to me. Here were people who were not thrown together because of wartime contingencies, but because this was their way of life. They lived for each other and each man's safety was the responsibility of himself and every other man. So I never found any hostility. I never found anything but friendliness. And I was never allowed to put myself in jeopardy and I was never allowed to put anyone else in jeopardy. So that was my reaction. I think one of the things that possibly led to my early acceptance was the fact that I was very willing to join the unions straight away. There were a number who came from middle class backgrounds to whom unions were an anathema in their normal family lives and they resisted the idea of unions and refused – first of all refused to join, but, of course, they had to join. That was part of the agreement between the government and the Mineworker's Federation, as it was called in those days, that all Bevin Boys would have to join the union. And as I say some resisted that and were resented for it because, the – 'you toffee nosed buggers, you don't know what you're talking about. You've never worked in this industry. You didn't suffer the privations that we suffered in the thirties'. It was very understandable but I think that did help my acceptance.

AK: And what about your relationship with the other Bevin Boys? Were there other Bevin Boys in the ---

PH: Yes, although oddly enough because we were scattered about in various parts. The pits are very big places underground, as you know. They extend for miles and miles and there are working places all dotted all over doing different kinds of work. And I never actually worked with another Bevin Boy. And this was the case with three or four Bevin Boys that I happened to know at the pit. And you didn't get to see each other because if they worked in a district that was further out they were at the pit later. You were up and off home before they were at the pit, so you didn't see them very much. There was one chap whom I had known before. He lived near me at home. I knew him vaguely and he happened to get sent to Sherwood as well, quite by coincidence at least he was there. But in all the time we were working at the pit I never saw him there. The whole time in four years. So my relationship with them was

desultory relatively. I did have one particular friend, whom I'm glad to say I've still got, what, 55 years later, who lives down in Tewkesbury in Gloucester. But we became good pals and we used to go out together, that sort of thing. He didn't stay in the coal industry as I did. He went back to banking and retired as a bank manager, but I don't hold that against him.

AK: Was there any absenteeism or desertion among the Bevin Boys as I've read that as well?

PH: Yes, I've read that too. If there was I didn't know about it. But as I say –

AK: You didn't do it?

PH: I didn't do it. I was terribly law abiding for some reason or other. I wasn't a rebel in those days, but absenteeism was punishable. If you were a persistent absentee, you went before a tribunal of the Ministry of Labour and you could be fined and if you really persisted you could be put in jail. And they made one mistake. If you were really, really bad they sent you into the forces and of course one or two said 'oh my God, get out of the pit, lets get into the forces this way', but again only by hearsay. I never knew of any of that. And of course another aspect of absenteeism was that if you didn't work you didn't get paid the shift. So if you were off for a day, a couple of days, even if you were off with a doctor's note, you still lost your shifts pay. And on one occasion I was off with 'flu for about a fortnight and fortunately my landlady had nagged me into saying 'cum on lad, put some money by. You never know when you're going to need it. Shove it in the savings bank', and I did and I was very grateful that I had done that because, you know, I thought on my uppers just for being ill with the 'flu you see. And I had an accident about the second year I was there. I got my foot trapped under a heavy wheel, between the rail and the tub. And I nearly got a broken ankle but fortunately they stopped the rope in time. But I was off for six weeks because I had terrible ligament damage. And again, although I got compensation for that, it was only, I think, 30/- a week, which didn't pay for my board even. But fortunately, as I say, I got a few savings. I'm wondering whether I am talking loud enough for this. Can I just stop it for a second? (*Turned off machine to check, during which time PH was asked if there were any anecdotes*) You were asking if anything special happened, whether there were any interesting stories. Something happened almost every day and yet you know they didn't appear to be particularly special. I remember on one occasion that there was a small explosion at a coalface about, about half a mile from where I was working. And I was on the return side of the ventilation. Fresh air goes in one way and comes back the other. I was working on the return side, so the dust from the explosion, of course, is carried on ventilation air. And it was literally everything went black and you – and even though we were working at that time in an area, which had electric lights, it was at a junction of roadways, the lights just disappeared. There was nothing. It was just like being in a muddy pond. And of course the deputy came running down and said 'everyone all right?' you know and 'out, out of the pit'. There had been an explosion. It was only a small one. It didn't cause any damage. No one was hurt but that was a bit terrifying. Then on another occasion they – the monitor had shown that there was a growing increase in fire damp, methane gas, and the law required at that time for everyone to be evacuated from an area when the percentage of methane in the air reached 2½%, because methane becomes explosive when the mixture of air and gas is 5% to 15% of gas.

And that spark in that atmosphere explodes with enormous violence, so we had to be cleared out. Yes, we had a couple of those, that sort of thing. But there were always stories going around, jokes. Can I tell you a joke? It's fairly clean but its good enough.

AK: Yes, yes please.

PH: This is about a Bevin Boy, who was a public school boy, very polite. And he was allocated to an old collier, who had nothing but contempt for the idea of bringing these greenhorns into his pit. And there he was told to take this lad under his wing. Take him it was in a small stall coalface. There was just one man and an assistant. He was taking this lad in as an assistant and he said 'cum on lad, cum 'ere, do this, do that, do the other and by gum they send lads like thee down here, I don't know'. And this lad was so polite and said 'well I am sorry you know and I will do my best'. And he did his best. Anyway, after I think it was about the second day and the old collier, who was beginning to soften towards him a bit, and he said 'eh up lad, what's up?' And he said 'could you tell me where the toilet is?' And he said 'what', he said 'the toilet, I want to go to the toilet'. He said 'we don't have toilets down pit' he said 'you want to go back to the gob'. That's where all the old rubbish and stuff is. 'And you use that down there, go on take your lamp'. So the lad picked up his lamp and started off and he turned back and he said 'I am awfully sorry to trouble you, but you don't happen to have any paper do you?' The old collier said 'paper, we don't have paper down pit'. He said 'ere'. He reached up and there were these wooden props on coalfaces and pulled a strip of bark off this wooden prop. And he said 'ere, use this'. The lad was a bit nonplussed and took this bark and disappeared and came back a few minutes later. And he got on with his work and the old collier was really a kindly fellow really I suppose and was a bit worried he had been a bit rough on this lad. He said 'eh up lad' he said 'did you get on all right. You know ain't got no toilets down here'. 'No, he said. 'Its fine, its fine. Its very kind of you to give me the scraper' And he said 'as a matter of fact I put it back in your jacket pocket'. (*laugh*) So there was a lot of that sort of thing, joking. And of course the people I mixed with most underground were lads and young men and not much older than myself. So they had their own culture, naturally, as they were mining families. They were the sons of mining families and I learnt a lot from them. They were full of jokes and they would pull your leg and if you took it in good part that was OK. If you didn't take it in good part, look out for yourself. But that's true everywhere, isn't it? There is nothing different about that. But I found that they had a great many interests. There was one lad there; he had a great interest in opera. He had two abiding interests, motorcycles and opera. He couldn't use his motorbike very much because of petrol rationing. And when he wasn't stripping his motorbike down and cleaning it and putting it all back together, he would play opera records. And he used to save up money to buy opera records all the time. And he had, he had a voice. It was a strange voice because he – when he was talking to you normally it was just an ordinary sounding voice. But he could pitch this voice up to something near a falsetto. And he often, like me, would be travelling the roads underground with the coal and the tubs and you would walk up there and you would suddenly hear this voice. Seemed to be drifting down on the ventilation, on the ventilation vent. And he would be singing, often in Italian, although he didn't know a word of Italian. He'd just copy. He'd listen to the records. He'd got a collection of records by Caruso. Very old records, which I think he'd picked up from a second hand market stall or something. And he would sing as

Caruso would sing, in Italian, 'O Sole Mio', all kinds of opera songs, operatic type songs and he was not unusual. There was another lad who taught himself political economy and became a Marxist. And he would argue the toss for hours on end. And you'd – we used to travel in to our working places on an underground railway called the paddy. It was just a kind of knife board thingemy and you sat back to back along the sides of this and it would take about – oh 20 men. And he would argue on this journey because it didn't run very fast, but faster than walking pace. He'd start these arguments on the paddy going out of work – going out to work and he would continue it in the pithead baths. Marx always used to say so and so. (*laugh*) And there was a local operatic society – operatic and dramatic society that did all kinds of things like 'Maid of the Mountains' and Gilbert and Sullivan. Several of them belonged to that. In fact they inveigled me into it at one stage. So it was – I found as a society it was close knit but welcoming. It didn't – it wasn't exclusive. It was inclusive and that was part of the reason I think why I was so happy at the end of the time to stay with the industry. Although I came back to London, worked for a short time for the company that I'd worked for before. I found it was so parochial, so narrow-minded and with no breadth of vision in it at all. By that time the Coal Board had been established. The pits had been nationalized in 1946 and their organization was being built up during the course of 1947. So I applied for a job and I got one at the headquarters of the Coal Board. By pure chance I was given a job in the public relations department. Now one thing I didn't mention to you earlier, that I'd always had an interest in journalism, although I'd never had any opportunity to get a job as a journalist. But next door to where I was billeted lived the editor of one of the local newspapers, weekly newspapers, who I got friendly with. And on one occasion he was in desperate straits for, because of wartime restrictions, his staff was tiny. He was desperate for someone to do some football matches for him on Saturdays. Write pieces about local football matches. And he said 'do you think you can manage that?' So I said 'I don't know, I've never tried'. So he said 'help – see if you can – here's a sports page. Have a look at it. See if you can write something about it like that. A dozen paragraphs or something'. And I found I could do it. I used to do these things on Saturday and he used to pay me five bob for every match I attended. Got in free of course and so it supplemented my money. But it gave me an insight into journalism, because I used to go into the paper straight from the match ground. Go into the paper and write out a piece, piece like that and so I saw how papers work and so on. And when I got to the Coal Board I got into the public relations department and into the press office. The press officers, at that time, were all ex Fleet Street journalists and I thought this is the job for me. It's a job that I think I can do. Mainly dealing with incoming calls from the press. That sort of thing. Or arranging press visits, that sort of thing. And so I, in a very junior position, I began to study journalism and took a course at the London School of Journalism, which eventually qualified me to become a press officer, although in the meantime I had worked in other departments as well. I worked in the training department, helping to devise training aids, booklets, films, manuals and that sort of thing, for the colliery training centres. I did that for some time, which I again thoroughly enjoyed. And I also edited a quarterly magazine, which was for, a magazine intended ---
(*end of side 1*)

I edited this quarterly magazine for training officers at the training centre. So I expanded my experience of journalism and expanded my experience of the industry. Because, you know, it was massive industry and you could still learn about it for a

whole lifetime. And then, oh this was in the early 70s, it was about the time of the first miners strike, 1972, the then chief press officer retired and one of the three press officers under him. He had to retire early because of ill health. So the press office were left with a big gap at a crucial time, when they were trying to deal with the press interest in the strike, the six week strike that was going on at that time. And the director of public relations, whom I knew, said you used to work for the press office. I said 'yeah'. 'Would you like to come back as a press officer, you see, and I can arrange an interview with the board and the grade will be so and so and if you could, we would do it all very quickly and we'd like you in the office tomorrow'. That fine, rushed off my feet a bit but I said 'yes, please'. So in 1972 I became a junior press officer. And then I stayed with the press office and became chief press officer in 1980 and finally retired in 1987. So thumbnail sketch but that, you know, covers the important aspects of my career, such as it was. But I'm fortunate. I mean I like the industry very much. I like the people enormously, even --?-- some of the management people were typical managers of the British brand, who are not very sympathetic. But most of the people in management, right up to the very top, had come up the hard way. It wasn't - coal isn't an industry with any kind of elitist recruitment. There were no places for the sons of wealthy directors or anything like that and most of the jobs in management in the industry required technical qualifications. Either mining engineering, electrical engineering, mechanical engineering. There were many of those throughout. There were qualifications for industrial relations officers, qualifications for marketing people and of course we had things like accountants and lawyers and all that sort of thing. So it was a highly professional industry. And you came – you found yourself working with people who had themselves been through what you'd been through, one way or another. We'd had chairmen of the Coal Board, who had worked as pony boys in the pits and that sort of thing and had worked their way up. So it was an industry of merit. It was what you knew, and not whom you knew. And this created a very, very much more human attitude as between the upper echelons and the lower echelons and that made for a very, very happy working relationship all the way round.

AK: How do you feel now about having been a Bevin Boy?

PH: Best thing that ever happened to me.

AK: Some of them have written that they felt very hard done by. They didn't get recognition.

PH: I don't think that matters. At least it didn't matter to me. What mattered to me was that I had a career that I shouldn't have had otherwise. I sometimes wonder what would have happened to me. I would probably have ended up as manager of a shop or something and I would have been very disgruntled with life, I think. No, this gave me a career; it gave me friends, contacts. As chief press officer with the Coal Board, I got to know dozens and dozens of journalists throughout the country and I am still in touch with a lot of them. Many of them, of course, are retired as I am now and we have little get togethers up in town. We go and have lunch together and talk about things which journalists talk about things, which is practically everything. To me it was the best thing that ever happened but I can quite understand that there were people who hated every minute of it. Felt that they were regarded as second-class citizens. Never got a medal, never got any kind of recognition for what they'd done.

And there are a lot of them who bear that resentment to this day. And, of course as you know, the Bevin Boy's Association managed at last, two years ago, to be sufficiently recognized by the British Legion to be included in the Armistice celebrations on November 11th in Whitehall. And they wore their helmets and marched with pride and jolly good luck to them. We never ceased to be civilians you see. That was the point. We were paid good wages for the day. I mean, I think my first wage packet there, down the pit, was £6-15sh a week and the most I'd ever earned before that was £3 a week, so that was more than double. And I wasn't the only one who was in that circumstance. We went home to our beds every night. Once we'd finished our shift we were free to do whatever we wished. We had a normal life. We chased after girls, we went to the pictures, we went to dances. We did all – some of us even studied.

AK: You went on to study then afterwards? Did you go back to study for qualifications?

PH: Not mining qualifications. I studied for journalist qualifications, which I told you about before. One thing about studying for mining qualifications was that you had to be pretty good at maths. I am hopeless at maths. I just cannot do maths under any circumstances. I can just about do arithmetic and that's it. So no, I decided that mining qualifications as such were not for me. I could have done extremely well if I think – if I had gone on to do that kind of qualification, because I could have done extremely well in the mining department or the electrical engineering department or that sort of thing. But I was very happy doing press office work, because you had an overview of the whole industry. You had to know what was going on everywhere in the industry. You got down pits, you went down pits in all parts of the country and you saw all the new developments coming on. We had two research centres. One called the Mining Research Establishment, which was up in Derbyshire and that developed all the new machinery and equipment and we had what was called the Coal Research Establishment in Cheltenham in Gloucester, which looked into the properties of coal and developed ways of using it and so forth. That was extremely interesting. One of the things about nationalising the industry, and I mention it in some detail in that article I have given you, was that for the first time you had a unified management throughout the industry, which enabled new ideas to be disseminated everywhere. In the old days when the mines were owned by companies, and there were sometimes groups of say four, five, six mines owned by one company and there were lots of companies that had only one mine, they would jealously guard any technical developments they made for the usual commercial reason that if it improved their profitability and help them sell their coal, they would sell their coal in preference to someone who hadn't had these advances. All that went out of the window with nationalisation and you had a unified management. And a unified management saw to it that if there was a bright idea developed in a South Wales pit all the pits in the rest of South Wales and the Midlands and the North East and Scotland and even Kent would know about it and have an opportunity to see all these things at work to decide whether this new machinery, this new method of working suited their mining conditions and they were adopted. And one of the outcomes of all this was that from being Europe's most backward coalmining industry in 1946, where the output per man shift which was the aggregate output divided by the total number of miners employed – the output per manshift was just a little over one ton. It didn't mean that the coalface workers only produced a ton. They produced 15, 20 tons but

the aggregate was one ton. And by the time I retired that had gone up from one ton to, I think, 12 tons per man shift so a twelve fold increase. And it was all brought about by adopting up to date – the latest methods, developing the latest methods, developing the latest machines. We produced – we developed a machine in this country called the Shearer. No one had attempted anything like it. It was a machine that had a big drum on it and on the rim of that drum were steel picks at intervals all the way round and the machine electric. Huge electric motors. You'd start this thing up; it would go along the coalface like a bacon slicer really. It sliced along the coalface and it would produce in one day – in one shifts working as much as the whole pit had produced in the same time in a week. That's in one shift. So the development of that sort of thing, which – These machines were manufactured for the Coal Board by engineering companies throughout the country. And, of course, these engineering companies could see the opportunity to sell the same kind of equipment overseas. And so the Germans started to buy it, the Australians started to buy it, the Americans started to buy it. And no end of devises and machines were developed by the Coal Board in their own research establishment and tested and used in British pits. Now operates all over the world. And so world coal production has become extremely efficient. And again, I'm not saying that it was all due to the Coal Board but they got a lead from us and they'd go back and they'd say 'oh, we can do that' or 'we can do better than that.' The Americans were great at that sort of thing. And so the Coal Board, which was much despised by people who were ignorant of it, in fact did an incredible job in the fifty years of its existence.

AK: Going back to your time as a Bevin Boy, did you get to visit your own family at all?

PH: Oh yes, yes. We didn't get leave in the way that the armed forces got leave but there were pit holidays. I mean every colliery had a week's holiday at that time and so you'd have that week off. You could, by talking nicely to a kindly under manager, arrange to have a day or two extra at Christmas or at Easter or August Bank Holiday without getting reported for it. And so I used to get home about three or four times a year, which wasn't much in terms of home visits that men in the forces used to get if they were stationed in this country, but certainly a damn sight better than the poor devils, who were out in India or Burma or in the Western Desert, who didn't get home to see their families for two or three years. So yes, we didn't do badly. And my parents were both alive at that time. Of course, my mother was always on 'please come home as soon as you can'. But I think, if it wasn't for the emotional pressure that was put on me, I don't think I would have left Mansfield when I finished my service. I think I would have stayed up there because I like the people so much. But family pressures being what they are I came home.

AK: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

PH: No, that was the trouble you see. If I'd had brothers and sisters they could have shared such a demand, but no. I was an only child unfortunately and that put the whole onus on me. So I was a bit reluctant really, but there you are. It was just one of those things you know. You have to do what you have to do.

AK: Well I think we have covered everything.

PH: Oh really, that's good.

(END)

Transcript of interview with Tony C.,
conducted at his home on 4th May 2000 by Ann Kneif

A.K. I really hope you are going to talk away and tell me a bit about –

T.C. Oh all right.

A.K. – The sort of things that happened to you. I hope you don't mind if I stop you now and again.

T.C. No, not at all. No.

A.K. All I have got is a rough page of notes of the things I would like to cover.

T.C. Right. Is it the sort of social side or the technical side or both?

A.K. A bit of everything. I mean –

T.C. How I came to be a Bevin Boy?

A.K. Yes, if perhaps to begin with, to set the whole interview into context, a bit about yourself and some of the background information; where you were born, a little bit about your family, growing up, schooling, that sort of thing, very briefly –

T.C. Right, yes.

A.K. – and then how you became a Bevin Boy.

T.C. OK, well yes, that's the social side. I can certainly cover that.

Well, I was born in Finchley, north London, in 1925. In 1936 we moved to Ashford in Surrey and there I went to school at the City of London Freeman's School, which is in Ashford and stayed on there till about 1942, I suppose it was. When I was 17, I think I had just left that school and I then went on to the School of Building in Brixton, on a course to be a quantity surveyor, which I eventually was. But in 1942 when I was 17 I volunteered for Air Corps and at the rather large medical one had, a sort of medical aptitude test, I was failed because I'm colour blind and they didn't want to know that. That put an end to that, which I think rather pleased my mother but it didn't please me. But there you are, that was the times. Then I suppose I went to the School of Building, where I continued studies, waiting for call-up. It was all a bit disjointed then because you never knew what was going to happen. But when I was 18, which was the normal call-up date at that time, I went for another medical for the navy this time. They called me up but they didn't like the fact that I was colour blind either so that came to an end and I think some months later I went for an Army medical. They weren't bothered about colour blind so I passed that and then I was waiting for call-

up. By this time it was 1944 and I was 19 and time went on and then came the ballot and I was balloted as a Bevin Boy. And then I went for another medical with sort of – it wasn't the National Coal Board. Then, of course, it wasn't nationalised. I don't know who it was but anyway I went for another medical for the mines. I went to West Hartlepool, where they gave me digs for a month and I did basic training at Horden Colliery on the north east coast in Durham. After a month I was then allocated a pit, which happened to be Fishburn, which out of interest is just about a couple of miles east of Sedgefield, which is Tony Blair's constituency in Durham, with Trinden, which was the next colliery in the village.

A.K. Can I just interrupt and ask, did you actually appeal against being a Bevin Boy?

T.C. No.

A.K. You didn't – you just accepted it?

T.C. I did. I didn't see any point. I mean I had been turned down for the RAF, which I really wanted and the Navy, which I would have liked, so by then, this was 1944, there didn't seem any point. I did find that most of the Bevin Boys, or a lot of the Bevin Boys were disgruntled. They went in disgruntled. I must admit I was more philosophical about it and no I didn't appeal. I saw no point in that.

A.K. Can you give me some details about the training you did there?

T.C. It was very basic. They took us underground. We had sort of lectures. The idea for the Bevin Boys was that we would become tub pushers and it didn't require a lot of training frankly. I mean it was more to get you used to going underground. I think it was more to get you used to the equipment, to the sort of having your token, which had to be handed in and collected each day and collecting your lamp and putting it on your cap and getting the equipment. There were a few lectures telling you about the various points of mining. A long time ago now. I can't remember an awful lot about it but they would have told us about the noxious gases that there would be and the explosive gases. The men – as I say I was allocated to Fishburn Colliery and they gave us digs. I think there were four of us on that day. One was a local person from Darlington, who knew the area. He was a Durham person and he knew more about it than I did. They'd given us digs at a colliery village some 10 miles away, which didn't seem very good to me. He said we're not having this so we went into Fishburn and we went around from house to house knocking on doors to see if anyone would take us in as lodgers, something I would never have been able to do. This was the difference between a southern reserved person and a sort of Durham open type person and it became so friendly. I mean I called at one house, or we called at one house and she said well I've got three children and it's only a three-bedroom house. I can't manage it but Mrs so-and-so over there might and she called across to Mrs so-and-so and eventually going round the streets we all got digs in Fishburn, which was fine because that meant you were walking to work instead of getting a bus every day. They did lay on buses we found out but they didn't bother telling us this you know. We were very much left on our own.

A.K. What was the family like then?

T.C. The family were lovely. A family called Kirk. There were four actually – I'm forgetting. There were three girls and a boy. The boy was a bit younger than me and he was already working in the colliery. And the three young girls, I think they were all from about 6 to 11, I think and they just – she just took me in. It was kind you know. You just couldn't believe it really. I think the three girls shared one room and I shared another with the son and I stayed there a year I think – with them and by that time – I think I must have been one of the first in. but during that year they built a hostel at Ferry Hill for – specifically for Bevin Boys and after a year in fact I moved in to be with lads my own age and sort of more in keeping. But having said that they were very kind. All the Durham miners were kind. They took us in. As I say quite a number were antagonistic. They didn't want to be in the mines and as you say – you asked whether I appealed, I think a lot of them did unsuccessfully and so they went in with this sort of attitude that they didn't want to be here. But the Durham miners accepted that and it worked out very well. And I spent 2½ years at Fishburn and then by which time my father had retired and moved to Crowborough in Sussex, Jarvis Brook in fact, and I got a transfer down to Snowdown Colliery in Kent so that then, with two or three friends that I'd met – in fact there were four of us and we were very much together. One friend, who now lives down in Plymouth, we got digs together in the colliery village, Aylesford I think it was, near Snowdown and we stayed there another year until I was released in, I think, September 1947. That about covers the social side of things, how I got into the various aspects.

A.K. The work itself?

T.C. The work itself. Well, when I first went to Fishburn, after this first month's training, I don't think they really quite knew what to do with us. It was taking them – As I say I think I must have been one of the first to go in and I think it was taking them some time to know how to absorb us. So first thing they did was to put us on – what were they? – the coal came down an endless belt and we sat by the side of the belt and picked out lumps of stone. Nothing could be more boring than that. After about a month of that, I think it was, you were pleased to get underground and then I moved down to the shaft bottom, I think, and as I say the idea was that we would be tub pushers and release the Durham miners to go onto face work, because they were more experienced anyway and they had much more idea of what it was all about. So I went down to the shaft bottom and pushed tubs all day. They used to come in. I don't – have you learnt much about what went on at that time in the pits?

A.K. Well, I've read a few books on Bevin Boys themselves but not specifically on mining.

T.C. So shall I go into that?

A.K. Yes, you can tell me.

T.C. What happened was that the tubs were made up into little blocks of three tubs, coupled together, and they were pulled by an endless steel rope and at the coalface, where they were loading they had to clip these tubs onto the rope with a clip at the front and a clip at the back. The reason being, at that time, they used to – the main tunnel was bringing the coal out, used to follow the coal seams so it would go up and down with the coal. They didn't drive them straight so the tubs had to be restrained

from running away as much as being pulled forward, so as I say, they had these clips on the front and the back. When they got to the shaft bottom they brought the tubs up a ramp so that when they got to the top of the ramp they would slacken off and at that point you could remove the front clip when it got slack and then before they tightened up you had to get round the back and remove the back clip before it tightened up going down and then you had to uncouple the tubs and push them through to the shaft bottom to get onto the cage going up and in reverse order you had to do the same with the empty tubs going in. this I understood was quite against the safety regulations. It was quite illegal to couple and uncouple tubs in motion. But if they ever stopped the output of the colliery would have dropped by 50% because the whole point was that these tubs kept moving and, you know, one didn't argue about it. That was the way things were done and that was the way you did them. I suppose I was there about probably six months – it's all a bit vague now historically – and then I went into the face, where we did the reverse thing the other way round. We got the tubs in up to the point where coal came off the face and there they still had pit ponies at that time. I never got involved in that. It made me – I didn't like it at all.

A.K. Were they well treated?

T.C. Well it would depend on the handler to a large extent. The one in our particular gate wasn't in my opinion a very kindly person and he had to get his tubs in and out and if of course that meant beating the pony then he would do it. They live it down there of course. They lived all their lives and they had stables down there and they only came up when they were retired. I didn't like that aspect of it at all and of course it did cease fairly soon after that period. I don't quite know when but it didn't go on for long. And I suppose I was there another six months and then they must have read my sort of -- you fill in some sort of form on the application and they must have read that I was a quantity - training to be a quantity surveyor. They didn't know what a quantity surveyor was but they read the word surveyor and thought well we can perhaps use him. So I then became what was called a linesman. The tunnels at that time in most of the collieries worked on what they called a long wall system where you have a hundred yards of coal and a tunnel at either end and a tunnel - 200 yards faces with a tunnel at either end and a tunnel in the middle. The one in the middle was just getting in the air to be circulated round the face and the two at either end were loading coal. But the tunnels had to be kept in a straight line and the linesman's job was to white - every day to go in and whitewash the ceiling with a line and then perhaps once a week or once a fortnight, depending on the speed of progress of the tunnel, the main surveyor would come in with his theodomite and checked that the lines were in fact going straight. And then of course other men were making the tunnels whilst the face workers were getting coal out. And I suppose I did that, with one of the main linesman in the colliery, for about another six months maybe and then they decided to open another seam at Fishburn and that meant it was a completely different system. The way mining was done at that time, because of the amount of capital that was expended, as soon as they got to the shaft bottom and left an area to support the shaft, they started to get coal as soon as they could. I'm going back historically way before that time. So they tended to take the coal and move in, which was very uneconomic because as you take coal out if you're doing 100 per cent extraction, which they were, the stone comes down you can't keep it up with the countless millions of tons. And as the stone came down the actual tunnels were sort of collapsed and they had to go through re-ringing them - redoing them to make up the 4 ft or 5 ft of coal that had

been taken out and so this meant doubling the work on each tunnel and a lot of waste equipment because as the stone came down the steel rings would just be buckled out of shape and would have to be taken out and disposed of and new rings put in. So on this new system - by then I think we had probably been nationalised. When it was nationalisation, ‘45?

A.K. ‘46 I think.

T.C. Soon after the Labour government got in, in ‘45- it was ‘45 wasn't it? Yes. So this must have been ’46 - yes, early ‘46. They opened this new seam, which meant taking a - they didn't do a shaft they did a drift it's called that went down 80 ft or something to this new seam and they decided to do horizon mining. They took out four headings of coal leaving pillars of coal to support the stone till they got to the economic distance and then they would turn round and take the remaining coal coming back, letting the stone down behind them where they didn't have to bother with it. So now they had four tunnels going parallel and they were moving then, instead of the 4 ft 6 a day that they moved on the long wall system, they were moving 7 ft 6 with bigger cutters. These were the new equipment that had been brought in from America. And so the tunnels were moving fairly quickly and so I was given the job of looking after these four headings. That was my job. I went - and not only did I have to put the line on to the roof I had to put two lines on to stop them going too far into the pillar that was being left. So it was quite a lot of work and I used to go in between shifts. They had a morning shift starting from six until two and then an afternoon shift coal getting from two till 10. Well, we will quite a long way from the shaft bottom. The six till 2 used to leave about half past 12 to the shaft bottom and the afternoon shift wouldn’t be in until about 3 o'clock. So I'd got a period of two or three hours when I could get in without getting in anyone's way and put these lines on. And I did that until I left Fishburn about August 1946 I suppose it was and then I went down to Snowdown and then I went back on haulage and getting in tubs of material actually to the face workers. I don't know a few have heard about Snowdown and the Kent collieries.

A.K. All I know is that they have shut now.

T.C. Yes, they're all shut. They were all deep. I think Snowdown was 3000 ft deep and at that depth the temperature is designed by the temperature of the ground, it has no relation to temperature above. And they were hot. Once I used to drive a machine getting these tubs of equipment and I would sit there in just a pair of shorts and all I had to do was sit there and pull a lever on this machine when I was given a bell and I would sweat doing just that. The men on the face were working hard and they were drinking gallons of water a day. And one of our chief jobs was to get in bowsers of water for them and if by goodness we didn't get them in we came under some very severe criticism - unrepeatable. But it was hot down there, hot and dusty in Kent.

A.K. Which one did you prefer, the one in the North or in Kent?

T.C. I honestly didn't really mind. To get to Kent I was able to get home every weekend. They were working - all mines at that time were working an 11-shift fortnight, which meant that you did one week at six to two, where you worked Monday to Saturday and then you did one week 2 to 10 when you worked Monday to

Friday. Well the local lads living in Aylesford and working at Snowdown hated the afternoon shift and they were quite happy to swap and do six mornings and leave us to do five afternoons, so we finished work Friday night at 10 o'clock and my friend who lived in Crowborough - he had by that time acquired a motorbike and so we came home Friday night and had Saturday and Sunday at home and were able to go back Monday morning in time for out afternoon shift Monday. So from the social point of view that was quite an improvement. As far as the work was concerned I wasn't at all interested in staying in the mines. I was just - I mean by this time the war had been over a couple of years and we were just waiting for our demobilization. So the actual aspect of the work wasn't of great interest, but in retrospect I suppose the work I did in Durham was most interesting and I mean there was some technical aspect of it putting these lines on and in fact one or two quite interesting happenings. I don't know if these are of any interest.

A.K. Yes, that's what I'm interested in.

T.C. Right, well they sunk these two drifts to get to the new seam. One of the mine regulations is that in any area where there is no exit they had a limited number of men able to work at any one time and so it was essential that they drive the two drifts and then link them up so that they can get more men in and start the main tunnels. And this was a matter of urgency. At this time they had given me a mining dial. I had never heard of a mining dial. I don't know if you know the difference between a quantity surveyor and a land surveyor. Well, a quantity surveyor measures building work essentially, and although we all take a sort of basic surveying period at the beginning, once I became a quantity surveyor, land survey was of no interest at all. Any way they gave me a mining dial, which is a circular thing, not quiet a theodomite because it only measures horizontal angles and not very accurate. They gave me this and said I was to make sure that when they were at the bottom the two tunnels linked up and came to the right place. So I had to do what they called a choking back survey. I had to take my - and I was doing this all on my own. And they just left me to get on with it. I mean I was 19 years old or 20 years old at this time and no experience. Why they trusted me to do it I don't know, but anyway I was using this to measure the distance between the two drifts. Take my angle to here and this was all in the dark. You have to hang a lamp on the roof somewhere and site through to just pick up the flame of the lamp. There is no electric light or anything. It's completely dark. You've just got your headlamp and a mining lamp, a Davy lamp. So I was doing the angle and the angle down and the angle back, and the angle back to make sure that they were going to the same line. And the Durham miners were thoroughly enjoying this, watching me do this and when I had my angle going back they were in this tunnel working and so you could hear the people in the other tunnel approaching you see. And so my tunnel was like that and the sound of the other people working was over there you see. And these miners said, "You've got something wrong here Tony". And it got me thoroughly worried. I was absolutely worried stiff and I went back and I checked and I rechecked the angles and the distance and every time I was coming up with more or less the same answer and we are not talking about the Channel Tunnel degree of accuracy, we are talking about a foot or two. And each time I was coming to my angle and they said "well, you're doing something wrong. You can hear them they're over there". And this went on, it must have been two or three shifts and I was getting really worried and they weren't worried, they just carried on and said, "Well, we'll just carry on as you tell us. On your head be it" sort of thing and chided me

along like this, I can't remember how long. Long enough to worry me. And then they said, "Well, all right you've suffered enough. Sound doesn't travel in a straight line in stone. It follows any breaks or fissures in the actual stone, so it doesn't mean a thing that it sounds over there". And so I went on and we did marry up within a foot, which was quite enough for them. And later on, on the same thing - I had a survey of it but in our moves I've lost it, which is a shame, because the main surveyor for the area gave me a copy of his because it was quite interesting. These four tunnels were going parallel in and the men were on piecework so they were paid by the amount of coal they were getting out. So although I put my lines here, if they could jib their cutter in a little further to the left and pull round and a little further to the right they would get out more coal from that shift and this is what they were doing and they were getting further and further away from my side lines. And I kept saying to the overman "look that's my line, they are miles away" and of course each time they were moving to the two middle, three middle pillars they were reducing the amount of coal there was to hold up the stone and of course in the end the inevitable would happen. It started to come down. Well now this was interesting too because if I was down on the face as I was because I worked on the face at surveying, if I heard a crack or a noise I got out. The miners were a little more canny than that. There were three different kinds of cracking. There is the coal cracking with the weight of the roof on it. There's the stone cracking up, which is the one to be avoided and there was the floor cracking with the pressure downwards. And they could tell the difference between these three but I couldn't. If I heard cracking, then I got out. But with this particular fault they knew the roof was going to come down. I wouldn't have got anywhere near it but the miners went in to remove all this expensive equipment. They knew it was coming down and they went in and drew it all out, which was very expensive cutters, the conveyor trays, which were expensive and they got it all out and moved it back and then the stone - it did just come down. It closed up completely. They then had to go out right and left past this, back the other side and then start again. But, I had a survey of this which showed how all this had come down because the main - whilst I was putting the lines on, the main colliery surveyor would come in and recorded it for his plans of the colliery and as I say he gave me a copy of this, which I had for a long time. I thought I've still got it but I haven't. That was about all I think.

A.K. Did you experience any accidents in the pit itself?

T.C. Yes, when I was on the long wall faces in Durham there was a miner killed on one of the faces. Usually by a small fall of stone. The way these long wall faces worked. Behind them they prevent fall. The stone's got to come down because taking out all the coal the stones have got to come down. So they put in a line of pit props which caused the breakage and the stone would come down behind and that didn't affect the men working because they had the props to keep it up until they'd taken the coal out. But you did get odd bits, where there was a fault in the stone and a big lump of stone would come down. It was the thing they were worried about and there was a man killed on this face. And the tradition has always been that if anyone is killed in the pit it closes for a day in respect. But I did have to go on that face the day after it opened and it was only about a 2 ft 6 seam. That gave pretty well and I was putting the line on down the face to keep the facing in a straight line. And that wasn't very pleasant. I think there was one tunnel that I was working on where they also had a fall of stone, where a man was pinned underneath it. They did get him out. I think he got a broken leg or something. But I was about at that time because it was one of the faces I

was working on. It tended to happen. I mean you didn't know what to expect and you just sort of accepted it. It wasn't nice. We were young I suppose that the time. You take these things a bit philosophically. There were those two. I had one very bad experience myself - two of us, when we were down in Kent. The tubs when they were on the main run tunnels going in and out with the coal. The rail track was reasonably good and tubs didn't come off line very much, but when you're in between the headings we had just one machine pulling tubs off a sort of side tunnel and these - the track they had put down it had got removed so often, they didn't take a lot of time and trouble. They were for getting it really too good. So tubs tended to come off quite a bit and we were getting in perhaps trains of about a dozen tubs. You had to go up a hill, stop at this return tunnel and get in the props and the water, as I was saying, as material for the men on the face. We had a system because we never knew quite what was happening. There was one, we had a bell on a pulley wire. You could pull it and it would ring a bell in the winderman's or the engineman's place. This is where I was saying I did that for a time too. And it was a colleague who was sitting there on the machine and when we got near to the top, because they didn't stop the machine, the clip holding the tubs on was getting to the turn wheel and caused all sorts of mayhem. So we had to make sure it stopped when it got near the end. So what we used to do was to give the ring of one, which is the stop ring, some time before we got to the end and make sure it was working and then as soon as we saw the rope stop we'd ring twice, to start it up again. And the chap on the - and we were following up behind these, in the tunnel. I don't know if you can imagine, it was no more than six feet high. The tubs were missing the rings by about that much.

A.K. About a foot?

T.C. Yes, about a foot and that was going over and down and we were following behind. We got near the top, two of us and we rang the bell once and it stopped, then it started to - stopped and then we immediately rang twice to move them on again and he threw the machine into full-forward, which in fact snapped the coupling. And this train of tub started to move backwards and, I have forgotten the name now, there were two of us and we were standing like this with our heads over the top and the tubs were coming down between us. If they'd jumped the rails, which was a happening, we'd have been killed. Straightaway we'd have been just chopped off, but they went past us and it was, I can say, it was the nastiest moment in my whole life. And I was very pleased as an agnostic that I didn't pray. But I think that was the worse thing that ever happened. Other than that, you know we just went on day-by-day. Not pleasant but not unpleasant. There were heaps of people suffering more. Amongst them many of my friends.

A.K. Did you actually work together with other Bevin Boys?

T.C. Oh yes, these - I didn't in Durham, when I was doing for surveying, because I was on my own then and I was working with, when he came in, the colliery surveyor, who was a proper collier. But down in Snowdown most of us on haulage there were Bevin Boys, so this chap I was working with was a Bevin Boy. The one on the machine was a Bevin Boy. Another one of our friends had a rather funny incident or situation. As I was saying these tubs followed the coals and tended to go up and down and when they went down, there was always a chance that there they would come off the rails and if they did it would cause mayhem. So somebody had to sit there for a

whole shift in pitch-blackness except for his headlamp, ready to stop the rope if the tubs came off the rails. My friend Dennis, unfortunately he died, he had the job at one time of sitting there. Soon he was bored. I mean are we just had to take books in. That was all you could do and he asked the Colliery over man in charge of this if he could have a book allowance. This didn't go down very well; because of course you weren't supposed to have read in the mind. But I mean what else were we to do, when I was on this machine. The amount of actual work I did was maybe half-an-hour, and now in a whole shift and I got through dozens of books. I mean we were swapping books around. They got very black but we were swapping books around and the Penguin books were being used by us. You know if that was your job, but was all you could do to pack at the time that Dennis didn't get his book amounts. We just had by our own books.

A.K. Didn't the mines have a library?

T.C. Well no, you see once they were down they were so black any way they never came up again. They stayed there until you could no longer read them.

A.K. What did you do with your spare time in Durham then, when you were free, because you presumably didn't get home that often?

T.C. No, we didn't. That caused another little problem. I don't know if that's of any interest. I think it was the first - I was called up in April. We were allowed, I think, one week a year holiday and one or two weekends. Now up north in Durham and in Scotland, Christmas was Christmas Day and New Year's Day. No Boxing Day. So Boxing Day was a working day up there, whereas down south where we came from, most of us, Christmas and Boxing Day were holidays, New Year's Day was a working day. This caused a bit of mayhem because they refuse to let us go home for Christmas. I am afraid a number of us did rebel at that and we did go off home, which caused a bit of mayhem, because about a year later we were summoned for being absent, absenteeism. And the funny thing was that some of them who'd had too much time off - I'd got away with a fine I know, but one chap decided to appeal and cause all sorts of trouble. Eventually he was sent to prison on two or three days before the following Christmas. He spent next Christmas in jail before they allowed him out. We all thought it was rather funny. But spare time, I had done a year of my studying for quantity surveying and I kept my studies going. It was probably a silly thing to do because I could only do it partially and you know you don't learn all that much but I couldn't take the exams for years to come.

A.K. It's getting near the end.

T.C. The first year I elected to go to Durham because I come from a large family and my father had a brother living in Durham City. An uncle and an aunt of mine. And so my father said well, if you can't get locally, at that time we didn't know about Kent, you might as well opt to go to Durham. At least you'll have relatives there. So I did tend to go into a Durham quite often at weekends. I loved Durham as a city. I got to know Durham quite well. It's still one of my favourite places. I met my wife there in fact.

A.K. What, during the war?

T.C. Yes, it must have been ‘40, ‘40- it must have been soon after I got there in fact. She was rather a funny circumstance actually. I used to go at weekends and stay with my uncle and aunt in the weekends in Durham. This time I was on my own because the hostel hadn’t opened and I didn't know any other Bevin Boys. So I used to go in on Saturday afternoon and get the last bus back Sunday evening. But busses and everything was all a bit disturbed during the war and I went down Sunday evening to get one of the last buses and it was all full. I couldn't get on. So I couldn't get back to Fishburn. It was about 10 miles from Durham and so I went back to my uncle's and stayed the night. That night I had terrible toothache so I thought well, if I've missed my shift, I might as well go to the dentist. So they referred me to the dental surgeon, who happened to be the one who was the dental surgeon from the Bishop of Durham. Was it Ramsey at that time? He became Archbishop of Canterbury. And so I went to the dentist who found that my teeth were in a pretty poor state. So I had to have a number of re-appointments and fillings, during which time I got to know the receptionist rather well and she I eventually married. That is how I became engaged and married my wife. But once the hostel opened the social activities were quite different. Quite a number of us enjoyed hiking and we used to go out, go out at weekends up into the Durham - Pennines Weardale and Teesdale and Arkendale in North Yorkshire and spend the weekend hiking and sort of camping in odd - there was a lot of tin - lead mines up in the Pennines and we used to bed down in an old disused mine cottage and spend a weekend there.
(End of side one)

Well, some of the technical things I've rather glossed over but -

A.K. So when you were in Durham you were accepted in the community - there weren't any problems at all?

T.C. Very much, I did say this at the beginning. The Durham miners were really very, very kind much more than we deserved. I was philosophical. I accepted it and I enjoyed their company but they make things very easy for us you know. I think they overcame this antagonism, not shared by me. I was never antagonistic. I was sort of philosophical. It was such an eye opener for me because I came - my father was a bank manager, I came from a middle-class family. I went to a private school; the City of London Freeman's was a private school. I had taken my matric and I went into a working-class area, working-class family. They were - it was a cultural shock to some extent. I am fairly adaptable so don't think I showed it, but it was a cultural shock. But they were so kind. They - I don't think they were even aware that I was in partial shock and they were so kind that it made the transition very easy. But it was a completely different way of life, both socially and workwise. I had no idea of what a mine was. And fortunately I wasn't claustrophobic so it didn't worry me particularly being underground but it was very different, I mean even the dirt aspect. We had, not all of them, but certainly at Fishburn, we had pit-head baths and as you came up from the pit you had a dirty side. You probably learnt all this; you had a dirty side and a clean side. You took the dirty things off and put them in a locker. You went through the showers and washed to the best of your ability and we used to wash each other's backs and then you washed as well as you could and then you went to the clean side. You put on clean clothes. At that time an awful lot of the pits were still without pit-head baths and the miners were going home to, you know, the tin bath in the kitchen,

but in all the pits I was at, well at Fishburn and Snowdown they had these pit-head baths. But we sort of - the trousers that we used - I think we are only took shirt and pants home to be washed. The rest we just used till they fell off. They were inundated with coal dust and as soon as you put them on you were black. There was really no point in getting a clean -

A.K. Did you get extra rations for clothing?

T.C. I don't think we did. We didn't really need it, because you had hardwearing shirts. The shirts went in, the pants must have gone in and my landlady washed them. I forget how they were washed but when we went to the miners' hostel they must have had washing facilities there. I can't remember it; it's so long ago. But no, this was all sort of trousers and if you had a jacket they were never washed. You just put them on dirty and when they sort of fell to bits, you got a new one and so as soon as you put your dirty clothes on you were dirty and you stayed dirty till you took them off again. But, you know, coal dust is coal dust. It's not really dirt dirt.

A.K. Were you aware of the war going on around you, I mean was there any problems in Durham or -?

T.C. Well no, we were very much away from it but the problems of those that our families were not. Before I left, during the Blitz, we lived as I said to, we moved to Ashstead in Surrey and Ashstead was in what was called Bomb Alley. During the night raids the planes used to come in over Dorking. Do you know that area there?

A.K. Not very well.

T.C. The Dorking Gap. You've got Box Hill one side and Leith Hill the other and the river runs from Dorking down and down through to the Thames and so it made it - made a recognisable approach. They used to come in up the valley, get to Leatherhead and turn right and go into London. The barrage was situated roughly at Epsom. The barrage used to open up on the German bombers coning in at that point. An awful lot of them thought this was a bit much and they used to turn turtle, jettison their bombs and get out. Ashstead got more than its share of bombs. The village centre was devastated by a landmine, which landed in there and there were a lot of bombs, so that when I left by this time it wasn't quite - it wasn't the Blitz anymore and then of course they started the doodlebugs and they would come in and I was a bit concerned for my family. Not for myself but for my family. My sister, who was six years the younger than me, so she was in her early teens, she was actually machine-gunned on the way to school and her school - she went one day to school and found it had 5th a - it did have a land mine and had been completely destroyed. And she came home and said there's no school left mum. Well, this was the time when I was up in Durham and it was a bit much for my family going on. But as far as we were concerned the war was just historical. We had the radio, we had the newspapers but we were rather removed from it.

A.K. Did you find that your experiences as a Bevin Boy helped at all with your career after the war?

T.C. Yes and No. I think socially it broadened my outlook. I became a socialist whilst I was in the mines. I was very young. I didn't understand the full meaning of it but I know that when the general election came up in 1945 I was a Labourite. So were all the miners. They wouldn't believe that Labour would win. I took on numerous bets with them. I said that Labour is going to win and they didn't believe it and they were all saying no and I was taking on bets. All of which I won, of course, because there was a landslide. Later on, I think in the Fifties – my wife does come from a mining family so I had my relatives or I did until I retired, I think for a long time it had made me a Labourite if not a socialist and it took a long time for me to realise that socialism is an impossible dream. It would be lovely if it worked but human nature is such it just can't work. It hasn't worked of course. I mean they've proved that in Russia but yes it did affect my political outlook for about 20 years.

A.K. Could you use any of the experience you'd gained when you worked?

T.C. Not really. I was offered, when I was at Snowdown, they did try and enlist me as a mining surveyor and I was quite - or I was thinking seriously about it because at that time I was on piecework. I was earning £8 per week, which in 1947 was quite good. And as a surveyor I would have been increased even on that. And I went back to a trainee quantity surveyor. I earned £80 a year. I was living at home in Jarvis Brook and travelling up to London and my annual season ticket was over £70. I got a government grant at that time but it wasn't enough. My wife by then she moved down with me. We were married in 1947, just before I was demobbed and she was working and virtually keeping me. Of course we were living at my home in Jarvis Brook. She was working in Crowborough and I was working at Snowdown. But it took - oh I would say another five or six years before I even got up to the £8 a week. Not until I moved up to Leeds in - it must have been 1949- no it was another two or three years. So to that extent I might well have stayed. Whether it would have been good for me or not I don't know because in fact with the mines closing the miners have had very, very good redundancy and those who went up to pensionable age - I mean I had a brother-in-law who was an under manager and another brother-in-law who was a winderman, who is still alive, living in Sunderland, and his mining pension has been superb. He bought his own colliery house, which he's transformed. He got an allowance, a free allowance of coal right up until very recently when there wasn't any coal. He still gets a monetary allowance in lieu of that and most of them, my under manager brother-in-law until he died, was on a good pension and his wife also and I had a - my wife had nephew, who was in the mines and he retired at oh about age 50 I think. He is not much more now and he's very well-off. So I don't think they were badly treated.

A.K. How do you feel now about having been a Bevin Boy? Is there any resentment any hard -?

T.C. None whatsoever no. I very much admired them as a people, the Durham miners' and as I said I married into a Durham miner's family. My father-in-law was an overman at Fair Park colliery and as I say I've got my relatives because I married into a mining family. I still very much like my wife's family. They are my family. As a family they've all done extremely well. She's got - it's amazing really how well they've all done. They sort of, all the nephews and nieces have moved way up out of the sort of mining circle and done awfully well. And we see a lot of them.

A.K. So there's no resentment that you weren't recognised having done service?

T.C. That, well as far as I was concerned that never became an issue. I have always been very supportive of the annual memorial service and I think, I've never been to it, but we had one of our - my four, there were four of us who were Bevin Boys, one emigrated in about 1950 to New Zealand and barring Christmas cards we're not very good communicators. We didn't hear from him for nearly 30 years during which time unfortunately he had a divorce and he'd remarried a New Zealand woman and after about 25 years suddenly heard that they were coming back. It was a great reunion. Ron flew into Gatwick. I hadn't seen him, as I say, for over 25 years. We'd arranged a holiday with them but he didn't expect me. I went down to Gatwick and was there when he arrived. It was just as though we'd never said goodbye and since then he and his wife have come - he's a millionaire now he's done ever so well out there but that ruined his marriage, because of course he spent his time working. But they come over every year. They are over again this coming July and we meet every year. I'm losing my point a bit but I think you were talking about -

A.K. You were talking about the memorial service.

T.C. Oh yes, that's right. Well when they came back I had always wanted to visit the war graves - from the First World War, in northern France. And I knew that Margaret, his wife, that's a New Zealander, I knew she'd had an uncle who served in the forces. So I got on to the War Graves Commission and found an Anzac Memorial - sorry - in northern France and we found it. It took some finding because there are literally hundreds of them. I don't know if you've ever been to them. It's so moving. The War Graves Commission did such a wonderful job but there are literally hundreds of little cemeteries with maybe two or 3000 people in each. And of course the Menai Gates have the memorial every day, which I think she's wonderful. But well we went to this Anzac one and Margaret was able, in the book of remembrance, to find her uncle. So we'd always wanted to be involved with this and whilst they were over here - they were over here - it must have been not that year but the following year, they were over in November and went to the memorial service at the Cenotaph, which was very moving. I mean it brings you to tears. But that time there were no Bevin Boys. I must admit it didn't worry me in the least. I always looked upon it that we'd been given a sort of way out in effect. Albeit we hadn't chosen to do it and albeit we didn't particularly want to, but there were dozens of miners' anyway, there were dozens of people doing, sort of, war jobs equally - I mean frankly the fishermen was a far more arduous job and the Merchant Navy, I have always thought as been well under recognised. So no, it didn't worry me though I knew when I heard about the Bevin Boys Association, I knew that they were after the - being recognised and that the last, what two years, they have been - but no, no resentment whatsoever.

A.K. Well that's it, unless you can think of anything else.

T.C. I can't think of anything else except to lifetime friendship with these four of us. We meet up now on a regular basis. I'm seeing Gerald next week in fact. We're both golfers. He lives in Plymouth and we are meeting in Stow-on-the-Wold for a couple of days' golf and then we're going to see a place where all of us are going to stay. It's now - Dennis unfortunately died about three years ago, but Ron and his wife, Mary and me, Gerald never married but my sister, my younger sister who was part of our

group and Dennis's widow. So what's that, six of us are all meeting as we do once a year now and have a get together and will spend four nights at Stow-on-the-Wold. We shall, three of us play golf. The women are going to Stratford to Shakespeare and one evening we are going to Shakespeare and as far as I'm concerned this has been the legacy, which has been a wonderful legacy. They've been lifelong friends and Ron in New Zealand you know we never lost touch and now as I say he comes over, they come over every year. I think his wife would quite like to retire here but they've got family out there, although she's got two sons who are at the University at the moment I think.

A.K. You said that you came from a large family. How many were you?

T.C. Oh no, my father.

A.K. Oh, your father.

T.C. That's why I went to this uncle. My father was the youngest of 12 brothers and his eldest brother had 12 brothers.

A.K. But you've just got a sister?

T.C. I had two sisters. There were three of us. My elder sister died about two years ago. She was seven years older than me and my younger sister is six years younger. I think my parents had a good idea of family planning in that we were nicely separated, which I suppose was a good thing. Pity more people don't do it now. No, it was my father, so I had this uncle in Durham and that time I had uncles all over the place.

(END)

Transcript of interview with Peter F.,
conducted at his home on 6th June 2000 by Ann Kneif

PF: My name is Peter French and I was born in Hackney, London in 1926. And I went to school locally until I was about six or seven when the whole family, including grandparents moved out to Wanstead and Woodford, which was north-east London. And in that way I came again to be at a local school and subsequently I was a late developer And by this time in, 1939, the war was imminent and the school that I was going on to was the South West Essex Technical College. It was a fairly new institution but where I would do the normal curriculum but with an emphasis on art, since I was deemed to be good at art. However, the new term starting in the September of 1939 coincided with the beginning of the war and we were into coaches and evacuated to Kettering in Northamptonshire. Here we shared the grammar school with the Kettering Grammar School pupils, who had the use of the school in the mornings and we had it in the afternoon. And during the course of 1940, which was a wonderful summer, I do recall. When we were not at school doing lessons we were working on a vast allotment. An allotment where we grew vegetables for the war effort, and where I can remember we hoed the onions to death. The better part of that period was where we were, as a whole school, shipped out to the nearby farms to pick peas for tuppence a bag. And also potatoes a little later on for pennies. So we were terribly interested in that. And the farmers very often, they were – all the bags were weighed and very often the bags were tipped out because surreptitiously stones had somehow got into the bags. We were paid for a full weight bag and not more. But in that way the coming of the war affected me. I was twelve, thirteen at that time. But pertinent to what the story that I'm coming to before – in 1939 before the war, the previous school had a summer camp. It would be called nowadays or perhaps even a school journey and our journey on that occasion was to the Lake District. And part of the activities that we enjoyed there was a visit to a coal mine on the coast of the Lake District at Workington. And I can remember that we were specifically told not to answer back or shout or respond to the unemployed miners who were sitting around in - along the kerbs and along the walls. But nevertheless we did go down that pit and we were taken along the – what I now, or later understood to be the long wall faces And here we were in our school raincoats and shorts and socks and bare knees and an oil lamp each. And we were crawling along in the coal dust. I can remember it as an awful experience. Terribly interesting and that you could brag about it afterwards. But at the time I didn't enjoy the fact we were crawling in all this coal, which was just like crawling about in broken glass it seemed. And what it did to our school raincoats, which were terribly precious. And also on that same camp in the Lake District a chosen few were allowed to go down a lead mine, near Ullswater, and that was very interesting. This aspect comes to the fore in my mind because I've always been interested in Geology and Geography. These were my best efforts at school. Always got good marks for Geography. And this was known in the class and I'm sure that's why I was among the chosen few who were allowed to go down the lead mine. But got into the tubs, which had only just been emptied of ore, which was wet and limestone-ish. And so again our raincoats got a thorough soaking with this stuff. We

were not terribly rich back home and the cost of a raincoat was large in my mind. I think that's why I'm emphasising this. Here we are, I'm 74 years old and I still remember these aspects. (*laugh*) The contrast was not lost on me then, that coal was dug out, if you like from a horizontal seam and lead was blown out, drilled out, from a vertical vein. And to see that, almost within the same week, was quite a lesson. So eventually on leaving school, which was in 1942, and I got a job in London as an apprenticed artist, commercial artist, and I learnt to empty the water pots for the artists and mix paint and fetch the Evening Standard at 5.00 o'clock. During the war things like that were very short supply and the minute the man on the corner of Southampton Row and Queen Street, near why I worked, was calling his shout, which was essentially something like 'ster e news standrd', which were the three titles that were on offer, we would run over with our pennies. Several of us perhaps because they soon sold out and one might have to send others to other corners. However, this was Carlton Studios and I stayed there two years, before I was 18 and due to be called up. During that time I learnt how to draw shoes, because despite the fact the war was on, there were still mail order catalogues. Very small and in them were civilian shoes as well as work boots, buckets and pails, kitchen utensils but also in the ladies section corsets, underwear and of course this was all to be purchased with clothing coupons. And there were many of these items to a page. But nevertheless they were still being drawn by the artists who remained in the studio and the job of the average apprentice was to draw the flowers on the corsets, to put the stitching on the shoes, draw in the laces and the lace holes. The artists who were left were all unable to go to the Forces for one reason or another, literally a wooden leg, half an ear. And they were using airbrush and water colour to draw the merchandise, as it was called, and there was a job for us apprentices at the end of the day to take rather large pieces of artwork well wrapped up to the stations like Euston, where they were sent letter rate, parcel rate to places like Manchester Great Universal Stores overnight. So the fact that one cycled to work, as I did through those two years was useful as you could deviate up to Euston and then cycle home. You might be a bit late but nevertheless you were urged to be patriotic. The cycle – the cycling to work was with a gas mask and a tin hat over your saddle, hanging over the back. Before I left school I had joined the air raid precautions locally. The air raid wardens' service and I was a messenger so I had a tin hat with a big M on it. And this was rather like purely a local assistance in times of trouble, bombs etc. and we did have an incident not far – two blocks away from our house, where our post was largely concerned with turning out. The post being about 20 men of various grades of fitness since all the able bodied had long since been called up to the war. But we would turn out in the pitch dark to where ever there was an incident. Cycling to work was a little bit fraught. From north-east London to get to the City you crossed the marshes of the River Lea, which were basically football fields, grassy fields and during the war covered with Ak-Ak guns and rocket launchers and should there be any sort of air raid imminent cycling to work you would cycle through this lot going off. Great guns at the Germans aloft. You never saw the Germans but the shrapnel would make you put your tin hat on and perhaps even shelter under a tree, silly though that may sound. So this was the approach to my 18th birthday, where we are zeroing in on the fact that I was going to be called up. And I thought that I was going into the army since I was A1 medically. But I received a letter to say that I had been redirected to the coalmines. There was a scheme initiated by the then Minister of Labour in the coalition or national government, under Churchill and Ernest Bevin initiated the Bevin Boy scheme, where one in ten of the

call up was directed to the mines and in that way I became a miner from being an apprentice commercial artist.

AK: What were your reactions or feelings to the news of being called up into the mines rather than the army?

PF: (*flustered)* I was – one could – its – it could be so easy to say horrified. Any choice of words like that. I was most unhappy by this. Rightly or wrongly I thought I was going into the tanks. I was going into the army and I hoped I would be in the tanks. What I have since read about being in tanks makes me only too glad that I was called up to be a Bevin Boy. But I had hoped to be in the thick of it in that way. The work we had been doing at the studio also included work for the Ministry of Information and it had been tried by our management that Peter French could perhaps be in some way held back from this ghastly fate since he was so busy, you know doing their work. But this didn't work at all and perhaps it's just as well.

AK: Was this an appeal you made against going in the mines?

PF: Well if – if enough people had felt that I was essential to the Ministry of Information's war work they could have perhaps, I don't know, have pulled strings. But it is significant – and I reach forward here to this little piece of paper issued by the Ministry of Labour and National Service, which says that any person failing to comply with a direction under the regulation – that was a direction to go down the mines – is liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 3 months or to a fine not exceeding £100 or to both such imprisonment and such fine. And that was the general understanding. There had been – there had been mentioned in the press about this call-up, this Bevin Boy call-up and there were letters to 'The Times' saying disgusting, disgusting but nevertheless it was known that you couldn't just duck it and run away. There was no way to run away to in those days. And then this 3 months prison and then we would discuss the situation again. There's a great put off. So duly equipped with a ticket I presented myself at King's Cross on a certain morning. I was 18 on the Sunday and on the Monday morning I was there by half past eight to catch the train and there were groups of similar young men, each with a small brown tatty case with their couple of bits and pieces and your gas mask. And you stood out because everybody else was in military uniform or very obviously left legged civilians. And left-legged civilians you know did look just what I say. They were not sprightly youngsters at all. All those people had gone. And so a group of us got into one carriage and by the time we got to Durham – we were all going to Durham, County Durham, you'd have thought we had made life-long friends. We were all Londoners and we were heading for a training centre at Horden. Horden was a village and large coastal colliery and coke works right on the beach and between that and the next colliery up the coast at Easington in the fields there was a large Nissen hut. Quite well appointed hostel for Bevin Boys, with quite good facilities all round. And so that's where we were billeted and we were able to walk the half mile or so back to Horden on a daily basis for our training. And the training consisted of equipping us with a safety helmet – these were lightweight. You might say for a quick description plastic but there was no plastic then. It was a kind of cardboard made Bakelite, very light weight and that was the standard helmet and it had a lining so you could receive quite a blow to the head and it was not directly on your head. And it would withstand a certain amount of bashing it would in fact break in half. The hat

and the boots – the boots were great big leather black boots with steel toecaps. And other than that we had navy blue overalls. And we had a sort of classroom for the first morning, where it was described how the shifts worked – the shifts of men that went down for seven and a half hours and were replaced by the next shift. How they all went down in the cage, how they all walked or we told that in some cases it was possible to ride on special trains. We never saw that. And roughly what the men were doing at what was called the coal face. And for a lot of townies that would have probably been enough – thank you very much. Except that for most of them – some of them hadn't even ridden in the lift in Selfridges let alone to get in this cage, which was a great big iron thing. You know no seats, no upholstery or anything like that. In fact the cage was either used to ride men and ponies down and up and when it was not doing that it was receiving 2 or 3 tubs full of coal or empty, as the case may be, per level and the cages were in 3 levels. They were great big iron things and you couldn't help but wonder how strong the rope – or was there a rope since you couldn't see how this thing was going to work. And it did appear to drop as if they'd just cut the rope. I can remember it having that effect, except as I have said earlier, I had already experienced going down in the cage in Workington and in fact there was also a small shaft and cage down the lead mine. So I'd got some idea and I was also fortunate – I'd ridden in the lift in Selfridges. So there were experiences which for some were quite new let alone any horror you might have of being underground. But getting out at the bottom there were lights and there was brickwork and roof. It was a little bit like the tube in London – the underground. It also smelt a little bit like the tube. It was sort of slightly stale air. One of the things I think we all found new as a thought about the instructions we had been given was how the air circulated in that there were two shafts and the air was sucked up one so it obviously went down the other. And by virtue of doors and temporary obstructions across the roadways, as they were called, all the tunnels that were underground, the air was contrived to travel round the furthest parts of the mine and anywhere else where the air needed to be kept moving. And so the fan that was sucking up the shaft was a pretty huge thing. In fact it was one of the things we were taken to see. The noise was such that you couldn't hear yourself speak. You would definitely go in with your hands over your ears. We were taken in small groups of five, something like that. Not very far in but far enough for the electric lights to disappear and you were solely able to see and whatever you were doing or where you were going by virtue of the oil lamp that you were issued on the surface before you came down. Again one of the things that had been emphasised in the classroom training was that your lamp was so vital to you, in order to do anything, see anything or even get out – you know. If there was an emergency life sort of began and ended with light and so the oil lamp if knocked over would go out and there was no way of re-lighting it. There were special oil lights for some of the officials. The overmen of the working places in particular. They had self-igniting, they had little devises with a flint which were entirely enclosed and if their light went out they could re-spark it, but ours couldn't. The alternative to that was the electric cap lamp with an accumulator hung on your belt which was very heavy, but that of course would stay alight under all sorts of situations. And if you were using two hands and were moving about all the time the cap lamp was the source of light for that sort of work. And the first things we were taught to do were to couple up tubs. Great big chain, great big hook, quite low down near the wheels – near the buffers. Each tub has its own buffers and if you're doing this all the time and the tubs tend to be on the move coming towards you, buffing up against the one in front whilst you're leaning down between the two coupling up. This is called haulage and there is haulage all over the place

underground. Whatever is being done at some distance, miles perhaps from the bottom of the shaft, it all has to come out to the shaft to then go up the shaft and all that is done with ropes – in some places conveyor belts but that is another story. The tubs would be coupled up into 20s, 30s to make a train, a set and a rope would be attached to the front and one to trail at the back. And the one at the front would haul it to wherever it was going. If it was going 'in by', which was the phrase used in Durham for going into the mine, if the were going 'in by' they would be empties. But perhaps one or two would be special vehicles, which would take timber, logs, flat straps and iron work, even bags of corn for the ponies, even tubs of water for the ponies. This was a tub specially made so it wouldn't spill. Because it's a sort of rollicking ride all these tubs going in, although they were going in on rails. But it wasn't exactly a smooth ride. But these sets would go in. They would go in to signals between somebody who was in a position to say the set is ready the ropes are coupled, everybody is out of the way and they would signal to an engine man who would be controlling the winding in drums with the electric motor. He would be miles away, completely unable to see what was being set in motion. So the signalling was most important and this would be done by not just anybody but even if there was a team of 3 or 4 lads coupling up the set there would be one who would be recognized as the set lad and he would say that it was already to go. He would signal the 1, 2 or 3 with a special signalling button and the signal would be received by the winding man further in. And he would set the hauler going. The ropes would be rolling on rollers between the rails and when it went round bends and corners, the rollers were on the sides. There was a lot of craft to my eye immediately perceptible. There was a lot of hard work, repetitive work and yet there was a drive to do this work. There was no moment when people sort of seemed to slack about, or sit about or take it easy. There was no smoking, there was no drinking, there was no moment to do anything but push the job forward as it were. And so, since it was all so hard, everything that could be done to make it just that little easier was done. All that went on to do with haulage. It was an example of that craft, obviously built up over centuries. Because there was a time hundred years – hundred and fifty years time back when boys and women pushed the tubs to the coal – to the shaft bottom. And since the ventilation was in those days nothing like as good as we found you did this near naked out of normal considerations – I can only put it that way. There are no photographs of this sort of activity. You rely entirely upon people who had seen it and who then made engravings. But I think there is enough written evidence and engraving evidence. It must have happened. The mind absolutely boggles but that's how it went on. They were not producing the thousands of tons that we were producing by these mechanized means.

AK: So this was part of your training then just at the beginning? How long did you train for?

PF: Not at the beginning. We trained for 4 weeks. Trained in inverted commas, at Horden, that was the training colliery, the training centre. But in fact we trained down the pit. The notion that it was a place where we could play learning to coal mine was merely, you know, a figment of imagination. We were taken here and there other than haulage to see what was going on and I should think most people had a natural reaction to what they saw going on as to the fact that this is not for me. And broadly speaking the idea was that if these Bevin Boys untrained as they were, townies if you like, if they would take over the haulage job that by and large the lads were doing – the local lads, the lads would go in and augment the workers on the coal face. And

since there were hundreds and hundreds of collieries in those days the reaction – the use to which the Bevin Boys were put varied enormously. At the time I didn't realize it since there was very little interchange between Bevin Boys as such. After the four weeks of training and living together at the hostel, miners hostel, we were sent to various collieries. Very few received more than two from the same – you know at the same time so any friendships that I mentioned earlier, they evaporated ever so quickly. You found yourself sent some 20 miles in my case from the coast of Durham to a town called Houghton-le-Spring, still in Durham, where I knew nobody and where the local Ministry of Labour found me a billet some 20 minutes walk away from the colliery.

AK: With a family?

PF: With a family. Yes.

AK: Could you describe something of the family and how you lived there.

PF: Yes. I think before I leave Horden there was one aspect of the training in the classroom at the training centre where the – our educators were local miners and it was put ever so nicely to us a) what the facts of life were, since we were all 18 year old lads and we'd all come up from the smoke as they called us and we were all reckoned to be, you know smart lads. And it was put to us very nicely that the local lads would be watching to see if we over stepped the mark viz a viz the local girls. Since we would quite clearly looked upon for a time as you know rather new - something new and if we pushed our luck we'd find there would be opposition. You know it was put ever so nicely but I don't think it was lost on most of us. I can't say it bothered me one bit, but I think it did sort of strike a chord with some of the others. But there I will leave it. You know that was part of the training which I'm sure was not in the manual but was in the good understanding on the part of the miners. The family that I found myself billeted with, I think the word billeting was used. This was a council house, early 30s and despite the fact that the colliery at Houghton-le-Spring had been going something like 200 years, this was a colliery – a house full of colliers with no bath – no bathroom. And it was a council house – early 20s I would say. And this was ever so standard. The previous century and the most earliest back to back pit houses in the town had no bathrooms. But everybody had a fairly substantial range I think it was called, a grate where you could burn coal. On one side was an oven and the other side, if you were lucky was a back boiler. There were some back boilers had been installed. We had such a back boiler but there was the tin bath, hung on a nail outside the kitchen door. And it only had one room and a kitchen. So the dining room was the bathroom, was the everything. Thirty bob a week we were asked to pay by the Ministry of Labour and that included your meals and your washing and all the paraphernalia. And the gentleman of the house was also a miner but at another pit. And he would come home and play the mandolin after he'd got bathed. We'd all have to go into the bedroom or walk round the block. You know you'd have to do something or just carry on listening to the radio or whatever and he would get bathed in front of the fire in this tin bath. The shifts meant that I might be in the early morning shift and I had to get up about half past two, start walking at half past three. And the getting up was the job of the lady of the house – to get the men up. So that's a task for a woman. You know on looking at you. (*laugh*) You had to at least knock on the door and say you know 'Peeter half past 2' and the breakfast on the table,

something like that you know and get back into bed but that spoilt your night hadn't it. And I would be as quiet as I could. There were two children, a boy and a girl, 5 or 6 something like that. It was a youngish family. And I would go off. I would be back round about lunchtime, 12 o'clock. So there would be something for me to eat and then I would go to bed for a bit or if you didn't feel too bad stack a silly afternoon but you'd have to go to bed early if you were going to get up at half past two. The next shift was round about 11 o'clock through to about 6, which was much more like the working day. You know you could get up and like everybody else in the world you'd sort like go to work like everybody else. Night shift was sort of half past four through to about 10 o'clock. And those 3 shifts through the day were the production shifts. Coal was being won W-O-N that is. Won at the face or wherever and fetched out and drawn up the shaft. And this would only stop when men were riding the shifts were coming up and the shifts were going down. Those, - that action always coincided. The men coming off shift and the men going down shifts. So there were black men coming up, black meaning you were dirty and clean men but not white men, clean men riding down. Riding men was done efficiently in that it was not done a moment before the men had come to the bottom of the shaft down below and everybody that was going to work had arrived at the pit head. Because the minute that men were riding it meant that the tub- the cages had to be emptied of full ones and empty ones – tubs and production had come to a halt. And that was, you could say, almost a cardinal sin. So everybody would be watching to see that everybody was present because the worse thing that could happen was that somebody was late, either coming out from the mine or going down. And the notion that you had got to empty the cages of ride one man late or otherwise for whatever excuse was terribly frowned upon. You felt a real sinner. It happened to me a couple of times and the effect was such that you would never do it again. So I have described a small council house, with two miners coming home black. We had no pit head baths. Sorry I haven't actually said that but that was the crux of the matter. There had never been any pit head baths at Houghton colliery and the gentleman where I was billeted, the pit he came from, he worked was very small and didn't have many years life left in it anyway and they had no baths. So the two of us were bringing home our dirty clothes, wet clothes, wet, dirty clothes in many cases, and boots. The standard practice was to literally get undressed on the step outside and drop your clothes there and then. You might keep your pants on. These were in fact what you worked in down below. It was so hot for working in that you took all your clothes off and you just wore your pants. Now normal sort of laundry would not last five minutes. These were canvas, thick canvas pants, which you could buy in the town without coupons. They were specially for miners and they might last a year – it depends. If you were working wet that was very rough on any clothing that you tended to work in, boots, knee pads and these canvas shorts. And so for modesty you might keep those on to step into the house and to step into, with a bit of luck if your wife had been so good as to fill the tin bath with water ready for you to just get on with it. But it meant that you had to wash completely. You had to wash your hair every day. So you can imagine that a very short back and sides was very soon adopted. And I had nice black curly hair I remember. But it had to be a little bit shorter but I could not bring myself to look like these bully headed – nowadays they would call them skinheads. But most men of all ages had this very short hair cut, which was very easy to wash because it had to be washed every day. And I had gone up there to Durham in September and so the first winter of 1944 I remember there was snow and this 20 minute walk to the pit. Well that was one thing dry but coming away in the morning you might have been working wet, so that was a walk in wet clothes,

inclement weather and not too much to look forward to when you got there. You know the water might not be as hot as you would have wished. So that first winter was not a terribly happy time. And I found a kindred spirit down the pit. We were both working on the same haulage.

AK: Also a Bevin Boy?

PF: Yes, another Bevin Boy. He came from south London, Croydon way and he had an even worse billet than mine by the sound of it in again there was the gentleman of the house was a miner and they were a little bit older than my people. They had what I would describe as nubile daughters and more importantly three whippets. And the whippets sat in the armchairs each side of the fireplace, pride of place. And they were not cuffed or in any way discouraged. And my friend, Jim took great exception to this. The fact that little comfort that there was – this was a very old colliery house, the whippets you know enjoyed what comfort there was. And there was a fair amount of sort of sharp talking went on in this household. And he was not best pleased. So we both found there were reasons for looking for something better and we appeared to get on quite well with the local pit men and they would ask us this that and the other and it became clear that we were not enjoying this aspect and they suggested addresses we might go and knock on the door. One in particular. They said go and try there. And this we did. We went one Sunday, when we were not at work, dressed in our best suits and our ties and we knocked on the door and, to cut the story short, what transpired was that this was a council house of 3 bedrooms and a bathroom and you know it was a cut above. And it was quite central to the town, well placed and the man of the house had been a coal cutter on the coal face, which was one of the best jobs, financially and he'd been called up, which was of course the basic problem about the Bevin Boy scheme. There had been so many men had left the industry - called up, volunteered that there was a shortage of manpower. So he was in the army, and would you believe he was in the tanks. And the lady of the house had a large family of sisters, who lived variously around. And she didn't know we were coming. And there we were on the – what turned out to be the back door step. The houses were all arty tarty. Because of the nature of the industry generally speaking your front door was approached by a footpath, brass knocker and all the dirty aspect of life was served by a road. So the coal was delivered, the dustbins were emptied, the milkman came, the men came home in their dirty pit clothes etc., all up the road. But only in your Sunday best or when you went shopping would you go out through the front door. So there we were standing on the back step and sisters were sent for to come and inspect these two Bevin Boys from London. And to coin a phrase you could say they were feeling our collar as to our manners. Eventually we were invited inside and we went into the parlour. And there was no whippet – that was good. And there was a nice fire with a black leaded fender and dogs, tools for servicing a fire. Lots of polish obviously. And we sat around, had tea and eventually they said yes. But clearly you know we were up against the fact that here was the missus of the house. If I may call her Aunt Florrie, that's how it did become. And I suppose Aunt Florrie was somewhere between thirty and forty, I hazarding a guess now but – and all the other sisters were about the same age and all their men folk were either down the mine or had been called up. And there were six at least, sisters came. There were others but they were further afield. Six came and said that this – eventually they said that this was OK and this was quite an important part of the story, even though we're not even down the mine yet.

AK: That doesn't matter. That's fine.

PF: Clearly they were concerned about Aunt Florrie's best interests and welfare. *(End of side 1*)

Friend Jim and I we gave suitable notice in our two billets and we moved into our new billet. And by that time I was interested in what I had been shown going on, on the coal face about it. You had a safety officer would take us round. Take us away for an hour perhaps from the haulage job and show us what was going on round – further in, further inbye. And I then saw teams of men, four or five men, who – shall we say they dug the coal out and they did various things like drilling – drilling the coal, drilling the stone, clearing the coal away, packing the stone into the space where the coal had been to keep the roof up. And where this work was being executed fresh, it was very obvious that the work had got much harder and the stone was fresh and heavier – well not heavier but sharper. Everything – well nothing was smooth and rounded. And it was quite obvious that the main task wasn't so much getting the coal out but keeping the roof up, because all you were doing was to take the support from the roof. From all the stone right up to the surface above. And if you made calculations as to how many tons that was per square inch and you'd start off in your minds eye with say the size of an Oxo cube, an ounce, and how many feet there might be God, streuth you know. How can we possibly hold this up, but the roof was held up. And again the craft was obvious all the way as to how you sawed your timber and put roof supports up, allowed for the roof to come a little. You couldn't hold it absolutely rigid. And you took the coal out and having moved forward a short way you let the roof come down. You couldn't hold the roof up forever. So if you were moving forward towards ultimate boundaries you needed to keep your access roads open. So the stone – there might be a need to shoot the roof stone about four or five feet high and that would come down and would need clearing. And it was cleared into the sides of the roadway in addition to steel props to keep the roof up. Even so the roof was forever gently coming down. Like St. Paul's coming down the hill into the Thames, half an inch a year. The roof was always coming down. And it would show in some places more than others, depending on how broken the roof was above. And I saw for the first time the electric coal – chain coal cutters, which were worked by 2 men, who came in specially to do this. They did nothing else. So it became a 10 o'clock night shift job when there was no production. The 3 day shifts worked through from early morning hours it's true, but that was not the night. The night hours were used to shoot stone because whilst that was going on it generally blocked the access road until it was cleared, the stone was cleared away into the sides. So that was done at a time when it wouldn't interfere with production. And coal cutting meant that all the coal at the previous day had been cleared. So you were back to solid coal, which is very hard and until that is undercut and drilled and exploded with explosives, so that it would drop down into the space that had been undercut, it would not break up evenly. That would be called blasting. And coal cutting was about not blasting it to dust, but breaking it down into relatively small pieces. When I say small pieces you know as big as armchairs but it would fall to pieces once it had been shot with explosives. So night shift was the time when nothing else happened on the coal face other than undercutting by ourselves as coal cutters, followed by drillers who drilled 6 foot – we undercut with this machine. It was rather like a large hedge cutter if you like to use a simple phrase. The machine weighed a ton and a half. So it was not something you could left hand down a bit. It had a mind of its own. You had to

understand exactly what you could do with it. And you could swing this chain cutter under the coal, cutting furiously all the time. Great deal of noise, great deal of dust. And in order to do this you would have to move your machine, which was like the size of a coffin, along side the coal, with all the props taken out on that side so. One end of the machine had the handles for working this and the other end this jib. A chain cutter where your second man would be doing a fair amount of shovelling of what was called the skinch, the dust and the small coal that the picks. There were about 50 to 60 picks on this chain. Some pointing up, some pointing down. So it took a slice about 6 inches deep out. And the length of the jib as it went in under the coal 6 foot and then you pulled it along the length of the face doing that. And what you were effectively doing was to take the support from the roof and the coal for 6 foot in and as long as the face. In our case they were 30 yards long. So there was a fair amount of work for the man at the back working in all this dust and small coal. Putting back the face props and putting other little props under the coal. All the time, because the weight of the roof was such that if you stopped it could pin the jib, even though the picks was still running. So that was a cardinal sin that you very quickly learnt, heard about. You never stopped inching the machine forward. And the machine pulled itself along by a wire rope on its own drum as part of its machinery. And that was mainly what the handles man, the braker – that was his official – well not his official his usual name. One was the braker and the other was the back end man. And the braker would set this whole thing going with controls and levers at his end. But he would also all the time be controlling the rate at which the winch pulled in the rope and by that means we cut say half an inch all the time going ratcheting in for the 30 yards along the face and that might take 2 hours, 3 hours, something like that. There would be no stop for tea, sandwich or anything like that, or any call of nature. It definitely had to start and continue because you were taking out props, you were undercutting the roof, you were sticking the props back in as fast as you could. And when you got to the far end you pulled out from under the pole. And you could the sort of wipe your brow. There were people waiting for you to do this. To crawl over all this skinch, small coals to do their drilling. So that was another filthy job, which a lot of people looked at once and then thought oh no, not for me. You'd got to, on your own, pull a substantial size Black and Decker sort of drill head. I don't know how much they weighed but they were great big aluminium things with an electric motor inside them. The drills were 6 foot long and you renewed the tip. You carried a bag of 5 or 6 freshly sharpened bits and they fitted with a split pin. So you fol - Oh and you had to pull your own electric cable. At least the coal cutters that I became – there would be two of you to share some of the jobs. But the jobs were far more – with a coal cutter you had to take a can of oil, you had to take a bag of fresh picks and carry the blunt ones out at the end of a shift. You had to know where you'd hidden your pick and your shovel and your saw. You couldn't lumber yourself with taking all that home. But if you left it around somebody else would use it. It would never be there next night. So everybody had their special place. Somewhere along the way out, when nobody was looking, you'd reach into the stone packs or move the stone out and put your stuff in there. The one thing you wouldn't store like that was your sandwiches because the rats would have them. Although most people took their sandwiches in a tin, a snap tin as it was called. All these little things have different names in different coal fields I find these days. By these days I mean there is now an association and we're going quite strong right now. But that's another story. The task of coal cutting was not one that many men wanted to do it. It was blinkin hard work but it was also dangerous. There's no doubt about that. You'd not only got to contend with the roof

that everybody had to contend with but you'd got this brute of a machine. And quite clearly to have 50 picks whizzing round at the rate of knots you see danger written large if you were not going to be careful. And there's a law of averages, you know. And so when I showed interest about getting onto the coal cutters the first thing was that I was loaned as it were. I was still getting paid to do haulage which was about £5 a week but I was loaned to two night shift cutters to be a third man. Well they were delighted because I could share all these tasks. I could certainly be shovelling the skinch out all the time. So, but in that way I learnt the things that you had to understand about this game. And in due course, I think it was about – it was over a year I was deemed sufficiently proficient with the handles. And I got a certificate to say I could brake the electric coal cutter.

AK: This meant more money did it?

PF: Oh yes. I stepped up to being face worker piece rates. So we were immediately interested, you could say, in yardage and getting cut out in time. It would be - It was so easy for things to go wrong. If it was only that you could not control the roof. You could only do all that you should do. And if the roof was going to come, the roof was going to come. And you might have to do all manner of things. Drill a large piece of stone that none of you could lift. You would have to drill it and blast it to bits and then shift it, by which time an hour's gone by. Or you've got to go and find a driller, who'll come and do this. And tell the deputy why you stopped the coal cutter and you know how danger is about getting the cutter to start again. Sometimes you were working wet – it was like raining (*laugh*), so the skinch became mud instead of dry coal dust. But, there's no doubt about it, we were earning however hard graft £13, £14 per week as against a £5 to £6 average. And some of those averages were not youngsters. They were older men, in charge of the pumps, in charge of what they called the wagon way. They were responsible for the sets of tubs whizzing about all day without accident and some of them were qualified shot firers and surveyors. But there was nothing to stop them becoming coal cutter men. There was no great urge. Apart from anything else it was all 10 o'clock night shift. Now that does nothing for your love life. It does nothing for your domestic scene and word gets around. And when there were accidents, or so I was told, I never saw anybody terribly injured but I heard about those that could get injured and it was a very real danger. So I became a coal cutter on the face, 10 o'clock night shift. We had no showers but we had a very good bathroom. Down the pit you filled 21 tubs to call it a score of 20 and a lot of things were paid for by the number of tubs. The chaps that filled coal into tubs, fillers, were paid by the tub. So they had a little token on a short string with a loop. And in the bottom of the empty tub there was an iron ring. So before you filled it you reached in and threaded your token string through a simple knot and if there was a pony driver involved in getting the tub from the face to say a haulage wagon way, he would be called a puter. He would put a tub, he would put a tub to use a filler and he would drive it out again. So he got paid so he put his token on as well and then the coal was filled in. So those 2 people would get paid for the numbers of tubs. Everybody else, broadly speaking had to sort of cope with coupling up 21 tubs, you know to call it 20. That was the scheme. And on the strength of that there was free coal, a certain amount. Enough for the hot water for the weeks baths, you know no prob. And here were Jim and I two. It's true we were on different shifts. We needed baths at different times but we never had any shortage of coal. In fact we would sell – not we, the lady

of the house might sell a bucketful to anybody who was needy or even give. I don't think we were too worried. We were still paying 30 bob a week.

AK: And earning £13?

PF: I was slightly – well I say we. Jim was still on haulage and we did talk about this and it was agreed that it would stay at 30 bob a week. Because otherwise there was going to be an embarrassment, an imbalance. So that's the way it was sorted out. I was able to save a little money. I had to save, you know I didn't – there was nothing to blow it on anyway. But we had this very cushy billet. And of course word got round very quickly down below, that Pete and Jim had moved in with Aunt Florrie. They all knew who Aunt Florrie was. The family name was Ebdale, which was a very local name. And everybody knew the Ebdales, you know wonderful girls, wonderful fellows. And they thought ooh, really, you know. And you're on night shift and Jim's on day shift so the bed never gets cold. Well particularly as we slept in the big bed, Jim and I. Aunt Florrie slept in a single bed. So it says here. But I am describing to you a terribly hard life down below and it needed all the humour you could muster. So a little bit of leg pulling on a daily basis you know was all part of the course. I have to put it that way. And I am quite sure I can speak for Jim as well as myself, neither of us had the slightest (*laugh*) interest in matters that were being alluded to. But that was just part of the course. And if you protested that this was not so you know you would have been laughed out of court. They would have thought there was something very strange about it. So you went along with all of this and the fact that whippets were king. And most of the miners seemed to accept us despite the fact that we were serving under a government, headed by Sir Winston Churchill, who had been responsible in their view for locking them out in 1926 and taking a policeman and a soldier in a tin hat with bayonet at the colliery gate. And they never forgot that but here we were in the middle of the war, having to say 3 cheers for Churchill and all that it stood for. And they couldn't be too unkind and they couldn't be too unkind to me because Churchill was my MP (*laugh*), which I didn't tell them. But eventually that became known that he was the MP for Epping, which is further up. The constituency has been changed over the years.

AK: Were you accepted by the miner?

PF: Very much. I would say very much so. And the fact, I think the fact that I went on these coal cutters. Nobody wanted to come and back end for me because I was obviously a new boy, wet behind the ears, Johnny come lately. But nevertheless I did that until I was released. And both Jim and I were invited to come up on Sunday and 'get wer tee' (*dialect*), which was a sign of acceptance you could say. We were invited to go up on the moors behind the town and see the whippets, which meant you put some money on the outcomes. We never actually did that. You know you made your excuses kindly. But we did go and get 'wer tee'. This is Geordie. At the time I very rapidly became a Geordie Wearside speaker like the men. And the language down the pit was all that you might ever hear or hear about. Pretty awful. And I used to get some stick because the best – or the most I would give it would be stone the crows or darn my socks. And the fact that it riled them up a bit I knew and I couldn't see any point in using all these other (*laugh*), all these other words. But we – as I say we got invited here and there and very often you'd find you'd get up there for tea and there'd be nubile daughters and probably that is as much as what it was all about as

not. Burt also the neighbours would see that you were having the Bevin Boys up for tea on Sunday. So we also had in Houghton-le-Spring three cinemas. One of them in fact was just out of the window cross the space. So we were well supplied with, you could say, leisure activities. There were ice-cream parlours, typical of County Durham, run by Italians. Typically across the fascia board there would be Jacanelli, renowned for this that and the other sort ice-cream. They weren't genuine Italians. They'd been there since before the war. And every where you went in County Durham the seemed to be the ice-cream parlour with a name like that. And in fact one of them would become a Bevin Boy. He was one of the Bevin Boys down the pit. He wasn't as young as us but he decided that he'd volunteer for that he wouldn't be called further afield. By that time Italy, I think, had ceased to be an enemy.

AK: That's what I was going to say. I would have thought they would have been interred because they were Italians.

PF: Yes, I think he was not allowed – he had to report to the police station or something. But everybody knew Jacanelli and the ice-cream. You couldn't lock Jacanelli up (*laugh*). So there were ice-cream parlours and of course there were pubs and clubs called 'The Buffs'. That's another thing. The miners would forever be saying, you know, 'come down The Buffs, come down the miner's welfare and get you pint in, get your pint in'. And so long as you went down and bought your round you were OK but anybody who was the slightest bit shy on that score, you got these remarks about these Londoners from the smoke. I mean nothing was smokier than what we were doing as it were but because it – the coal was sent to London to be burnt London was the smoke. Well it was. Pea soup, the buildings covered in soot.

AK: What about pit ponies in the pits where you were working? Could you say something about the ponies?

PF: Yes, I think most pits had pit ponies. I have I think broadly explained how access from the bottom of the shaft to in by, which might be anything up to a mile, would be on haulage rails, sets of tubs hauled by ropes but otherwise everybody walked in and walked out. There was time allowed for that. But where the haulage stopped I was forever getting a longer distance from there to the working face, which was forever working further forward. From time to time the haulage was extended but that was quite a job it meant again night shift work to extend the wire ropes, to extend the rails, extend all these rollers and the great big return wheels that were involved and perhaps even the winding engine that was doing the pulling and I was going to say shoving but there was no shoving. All winding engines have a winding drum and a tail rope, which idles if pulled undone. And when it's got in by the ropes are changed over so that the idle one becomes the pulling one. So that is called main rope and tail rope and it alternates. So broadly speaking the winding engine is two great big drums with the ability to throw the clutch from one to the other and to hold the trailing one from a hand brake. So it was quite a job to extend and that gap from where the wagon way ended and the working face was done with ponies. And if there was plenty of height that would be pony driving. You could walk leading your pony. You might pull 2 or 3 tubs at a time, full or empty. If the rail – if the way as it was called always, not rail – way, if the way was good. But the minute you had to go and do this in the low, that is where there was no more than tub height and the clearance of straps of timber above that, you had to be a bit more experienced. And you sat on the limbers, the limbers

that were iron around the side of the horse, the pony, attached to his harness, finished round the back of the pony with a great big hook which hooked into the – into a special place in the side of the tub, the end of the tub. And the puter would sit on that, immediately behind the pony's tail. He would sit with one arm on that tail for very obvious reasons. And you would – the quality of the way would be in 4 foot lengths, nailed to wooden planks across and it would get a lot of use and it would come undone. It was a Mecano set of sorts. So most people who were involved in what was going on in by knew how to reset the way. And everybody had a measure. Mine was inside the elbow that side and 4 fingers, like that. So you would stick your elbow in there and put your hand like that and pull the rail in till it touched and bang a – or get somebody else to bang a nail in. But that was your met, your measure. And so puters would always have a nail or two in their – they had a little leather bag with bits and pieces which were necessary to your trade. And going round curves, round corners, they were – instead of little rails, they were little plates with a groove in. And unless you put your foot down and pushed against the outside of the curve, your tub would just run straight off at that point. Which if it was –whether it was – if it was empty it would just be annoying because you could bounce it back on again, but if it was full that was murder, because it would probably drop down, tip a lot of coal and you wouldn't be able to lift it – 15 cwt of coal in a full tub. So putting was another one of these quite professional games. Hence the token. You got paid for the number of tubs. That was quite a professional job to do. And you went straight in to wherever the face was and tipped the tub over the end of the rail or the way, otherwise it was so close to the roof that you couldn't shovel anything into it, coal or whatever. So you'd tip it over the end, the filler would fill it and the 2 of you would push it back. You got ever so clever at hanging on. There were two little handles on the ends of the tubs – both ends. You'd get very clever at putting two feet on the buffers and hang onto these handles and just let your weight lean back as far as you could – you were sort of bent double, but that extra weight and somebody the other end, with their back to the tub pulling on the hook and you'd find that 15 cwt was nothing. It was just like pulling a box of sweets back on the rail. But nevertheless I'm making light of (*laugh*) what was horse work going on here, despite the fact that there would be a horse, a little horse to pull it all the way out to the wagon way.

AK: And they were kept down there in the pits all the time.

PF: Yes, there was stables near the shaft bottom. And there were proper stable men. That was a proper job. Looked after –2 or 3, they came in shifts like everybody else. Any job that had to be done was done in shifts if the service was necessary all the way. There were no ponies needed through the night but there was always a pony keeper through the night just looking after the horses. They were never left completely alone. They were in proper little stables with a door and they were properly fed and watered. The – I'm trying to think of his name. I don't think they called him a farrier. The blacksmith I think they called him because he was literally the blacksmith from the blacksmith's works on the surface. He would come down and shoe them. They were all properly shod and trim their toe nails. There were lots of rats down there. I never got involved with the horses very much but those that were drivers and putters would go to the stables and get their pony. They would be given who they were going to get. They were not able to choose. There were too many – they all had names and it was too easy to get to know those ponies that would play you up. There were some that seemed to have a devilish mind of their own (*laugh*). If

they could possibly make the tub come off on those curves they would. And they would get kicked and swore at and you know. Life was very basic in that respect but I never saw any pony or horse you know savagely ill treated. To kick a horse in anger I think I occasionally felt it was probably earned. It did sometimes seem though that if they could possibly do you one in the eye they would.

AK: Are there any anecdotes that you can tell of anything that happened in the mine at all? Any stories?

PF: Well the whole thing, you could say, was a bit of a charade. You know the way I'm telling it I dare say too much humour creeping in. You know rose tinted glasses afterwards. It was real horse work. And I used to mean it when I said I was heart sick. I was heart sick of this whole thing. You got over it in between. In some of the weekends I would in fact get away on a Friday night and I would go youth hostelling. The far west side of Durham builds up into the Pennines so there was lovely moorlands there. There were youth hostels and I discovered what I could do with the bus routes. The buses were excellent once you got to know the routes. So to your question, the job itself was ever such hard work. There had to be humour all the time. You couldn't tell jokes, you couldn't be humorous whilst you were working. But on the way in, walking in, you would meet the shift coming out about half way and there would miraculously always be some timbers, some tree trunks, some timbers lying at the side thereabouts. Sometimes it would in fact be a parting of the waves so there would be what was called a deputy's kist, which was like an iron chest like they keep salt for salting the London roads. And he kept his shot firing and various things which had to be under lock and key there. And very often there would be a deputy's kist where at this half way point. And the outcoming men would sit for a second. It would only be not 5 minutes. But they would sit, they would be asked questions by the deputy as to how it's going, how have they left it, is rather important. Because in that way a man standing at a certain point might be a quarter of a mile, half a mile from the face would have a pretty clear understanding of what the next moves should be. How successful things were going to go or unsuccessful. So he would, if you like, debrief the outcomers. And the incoming team would similarly get briefed as to what they'd got to go and do straight away, pronto. But during that 5 minutes the humour could be fantastic but it would be so rude that I could hardly (*laugh*) offer it to you as an anecdote. But it was regular and I'm not telling you this from the point of view that I'm not going to tell you but it so impressed me that I did start to try and write this down. In fact I know I've got it upstairs but I daren't show anybody. You know its too basically sexy and that sort of stuff. But I think the nearest I come to perhaps reporting one of those, there was a chap from the navy had come home on leave, a son, I don't know. He'd come home on leave and he'd bought a monkey with him and this monkey was on the one hand not house trained and this fellow was on leave for a couple of weeks. So in a pit house like I've described with whippets and nubile daughters and grandma and grandpa and no bathroom, you'd got a monkey. And this monkey would make a mess and it would go and hide because they'd shout at this monkey. They'd throw things at it. It would hide or it would go round the picture rail, disturbing the pictures but being out of reach. I was only told that aspect but I often thought there were never picture rails that high in a pit house. They were all tiny little places but nevertheless thus the story went that this monkey would go round the picture rail. And I think they said they would throw things at him and of course that spoilt the pictures. Eventually it would go and hide under the Chesterfield, which was

like a chaise lounge with short legs and the fellow who was telling this story said 'I fettled the bugger, I cut the legs off the chaise lounge' (*laugh*). You know that's as strong as I dare tell you (*laugh*). Anecdotes, no the anecdotes would be how hard it was and how we'd overcome it for another seven and a half hours. And we were on our way out and had you got owt left. Now the fellows coming in, including myself, had a short length about as long as a pencil of chewing tobacco, which you could buy in the tobacconists everywhere in colliery towns. And you would tuck that down your sock, which were long socks, which came up to the knee. You would tuck that down your sock fresh and it would absorb a little perspiration so it would become soft, otherwise it was tobacco leaf rolled in tar or some such substance and hard. So when you came in you'd got your length and if you'd forgotten or you'd not been able to afford your length you would be asking everybody as they came out if they'd got owt left, which might be half an inch or an inch. It was what they'd got left tucked down their sock. And that was deemed a favour if you asked if you passed over what you'd got left. You made friends that way (*laugh*).

AK: Did you get to visit your own family at all while you were up in Durham?

PF: Well that's an interesting one. We had – we were deemed to be civilians and the coal industry as such, you were not allowed to be absent. You were not allowed to be absent if you were supposed to be there on a shift. What you did in the hours between whether you went to bed or went to Sunderland or over the weekend. So I was able to go hostelling so long as I was back there Sunday night for 10 o'clock night shift to start. And - sorry you're question?

AK: Whether you got to see your family at all?

PF: Family, that's right, that's right absenteeism. I should think 9 out of 10 people working down the pit got back ache. Let's put it – no stronger than back ache. It was probably rheumatism, arthritis goodness knows what. It sometimes when – if you were working wet in particular. It was a matter of getting cold, a chill the minute you stopped working you knew all about the ventilation because there was a draft. So if you had to stop you would reach for clothing. So it was most usual to find yourself going up to the doctor to complain of pains in the back. You couldn't possibly go to work. Sometimes that was very real. You would have to say your piece convincingly but they were as doctors, GPs friendly. But obviously they couldn't be too blatant about it. So one way to get home was to have a pain in the back and you got a sick note. And as long as there was a sick note up at the colliery then that's why you weren't there and you were not contra that and you were off to Durham City and on the train down to King's Cross as quick as light. And in that way I did get home several times. But it was no more than that. It was very lucky to get away Christmas because they – all the doctors were suddenly putting in sick notes for Bevin Boys and all sorts of other people to the point where it would get in the local papers. What an outrage this was, you know what a lot of unpatriotic and what were the police going to do and justice of the peace going to do and so on. Which papers have to do you know. Papers have to feed the conscience, the proper conscience of the world. That's how I got home from time to time. In that way I saw a little bit more of doodlebugs that were just beginning to come when I was called away. And the V2. They were the V1s and the V2 were rockets, which went way up and you heard them not and you didn't see them come down. They came down so quick wroomph. They were big

bangs, but the doodlebugs, you would not know a doodlebug, no. They've got them hanging in the Imperial War Museum among various other aircraft. They've got a doodlebug hanging there. They were quite big things. Not quite as long as this room but they would blast ptchu sideways. So all the tiles off and all the windows. So I did see a little bit of that but otherwise we hardly saw the war up in Durham at all.

AK: Did you have brothers and sisters home or not?

PF: Yes, we were 3 in the family. My sister and – I'm the oldest and my sister 4 years later and I have a brother who was rather a last minute situation in 1939. Now my mother and father had fallen out. I am not sure how that one fitted in. I was only 12 at the time. It was all that was wonderful about home life was not so wonderful about 1939 but for everybody the suddenly there was a war on. We were all sent to various places. The billeting when I was sent to Kettering was superb. It was like a replacement mother and father situation. So for 2 years that was happy. And the 2 years I worked at Carlton, they were happy years, relatively. Things stabilized. You know there was a war on and everybody got on with it. I have to tell you my brother died this morning.

AK: Oh no. I'm sorry.

PF: Not at all, No um-

AK: You should have told me and I could have come another time.

PF: No, not at all, not at all. Life goes on and I wasn't going to tell you but it just leads into it. It's as easy as that and he's 13 years younger than I am and presumably he smoked too much. It's as simple as that and yes I was with his – at his bedside last night. So was Rosalind and the rest of the family and he had been suffering. But my sister married a Baptist minister locally and they are now retired. Live down on the south coast and I'm retired having been released from the Bevin Boy situation in 1947. So I was up there 3 years, 3 months and 7 days I sometimes say. And we were released with a group number just like people who'd gone off into the army. So the early numbers were coming back from the Far East and the Middle East and the Continent. That reminds me of a most important aspect that I skipped. The wonderful billet that Jim and I had - came 1945 and the victory in Europe and Mr Ebdale with his tanks on the River Elb, having met the Russians coming the other way but end of war. And they borrowed some horses and rode along the banks of the River Elb and they stopped and they went swimming and he drowned.

AK: Oh no.

PF: So come 1945, and I was a long way from coming home then and we had the blinds down. And there was a large family. I've already described it to you and so we had a lot of tears and sympathy to extend and you know and cultivate. That was something that was completely new to me. And I am sure it was all very sincere and give it 2 or 3 months and would you believe that down the pit they began to look at Jim and I and would say 'well there's nothing stopping you now, which one of you is going to marry her'. You know the humour. Life goes on. It's 10 o'clock night shift. I've got to get up at half past 2. That's how it was. It's a totally different existence

now. You know people don't understand a lot of what you talk so you probably don't talk about it except that somebody comes along and says well 'please come and talk at me (*laugh*) and I seem to have done it twice in a couple of months. There is perhaps one further thing to say, two things to say. I finished up on these coal cutters. The coal cutters themselves were made for working in low places and they were only 12 inches high. They were in fact nigh on 8 foot long, the jib sticking out or under the coal another 6 foot. But I finished up working in a place called the High Harvey. All the seams in our pit had been shifted by a fault so some were high and some were low. And because of the need for extra coal, our pit had in fact been sunk through some lower seams. All the upper seams, which were high, that is thickness', had been worked out. So they sunk the shaft and we were dealing with the High Harvey and it was only 24 inches high. Now there was room for our machine but there wasn't room to crawl. And 24 inches we were using very thin metal straps with pit props to hold the roof, but you couldn't crawl in that so life became entirely laying on your side working. And it was amazing how you could work. You could saw and you could bang up pit props with a – but it was called the High Harvey and yet it was so low. 24 inches might sound a lot but otherwise I sometimes say to people well come under this table with me and it's an ordinary table we're sitting at. Come under this table and reckon these 4 legs are pit props. But this is where we're going to work with this machine I'm telling you about and it's dark and when it –
(End of side 2)

I am continuing the story. There was a time when working on the coal cutters, three groups were amalgamated together, so there were 6 men, working different shifts in different parts of the pit. But we were flexibly moved about by the management so it seemed a good thing to call us a bargain. We were a bargain of 6. But this produced a separate pay sheet. And the pay sheets were issued on Friday at the colliery offices and everybody collected their pay sheet, whereon it would show how many tubs of coal you'd filled, put, how many yards of coal you'd cut and so on. And the pay sheet would be collected by the men, not by their wives and so the pay sheet time was about 11 o'clock in the morning, when the early morning shift men were coming up and the afternoon shift men were going down. And people like myself, 10 o'clock night shift were deemed to have at least had a bath and a couple of hours nod and they then had to get up and go up and collect the note, as it was called. And in this particular instance, there were 6 of us on the note – I think it was 6 on this particular note, which I am showing you. There is a copy of it. There were the, shall we say intricate interests of 6 men. At least every 2 men was a pair. But even then there were discrepancies. I might be working with a Roman Catholic, who was paying a couple of pennies every week, in case he needed the priest to come down the pit and give him the last rites. Or he might be paying off a shilling a week for a new pair of boots and so on and so on. We might be working all the week dry, but the other 2 might be working wet so they would get so much a shift wet working. All sorts of things. So come Friday one of the six of us would have to go and collect the note. And since I was a single man, there might be 5 other ladies, wives waiting up there for me to come to pick up the note. Pick up £42 does it say, something like that, £42.

AK: £42-9-6

PF: And quickly work out. On the back of it there's probably a lot of working out, pencil doubtless, to who had got to pay income tax, how many children they'd got, no

tax – all those sort of things had to be understood. And the wives preferred me to do it. Shall we say on the basis that I probably understood best how to work this out. But I suspect more because having worked it out they had enough faith in my arithmetic but also I would be handling the cash myself directly out of the pay office. I would sort it out and I would put it into their hands in little paper bags, but I would put it into their hands. Now on that understanding there was no keepy backs. And if their men had gone up and collected it from me they would not necessarily have got the total. When they held their hand out there would be keepy backs. I am quite sure you can understand what keepy backs means (*laugh*). So pay packet on the end of the table was always suspect depending on whose hand had just put it there. How many hands had handled it after the pay office. The pay office was absolutely sacrosanct. The accountants in there, old men, everybody was old men. You never argued with them. It was always you that got it wrong. And if there was anything to describe it would go into the colliery offices and the overman, they were like the seam managers, they were responsible for everything that went on there. And they were overmen and their deputies, deputy overmen. They would be there on the same basis that they been there in the early morning shift. They'd just come up. And they were going to report to the colliery manager, they would go home to lunch, they would come back after lunch. Theirs was a very long day, if you were overmen, but they didn't, they wouldn't be working they would be walking round seeing how it was going. They would know. And they would know how you'd been paid. It was probably them that said well give him another yard or not a yard you know. So it was my job. And I would go up there on Friday morning dressed in my, a fawn coloured trilby and a sports jacket of a sort of bright brown. But there were some rather rare shops called surplus supply and there was a beauty in Sunderland and where these came from I don't know. It wasn't Harris Tweed, but it looked a bit like Harris Tweed. They were sports jackets but hairy. And I even managed to get a yellow canvas shirt from, you might say Hong Kong but it couldn't have been Hong Kong. God knows where that came from but a yellow shirt with this ginger jacket and a trilby. Well I got my leg pulled no end about the funny clothes I wore. Not only had I come from the smoke but where did I get these funny clothes (*laugh*). But the wives loved it. And there was nothing more to it than that. The fact the wives came up waiting for Peter French was just to get the money and they were away. Thank you very much. You were lucky if you were called hinney, which was an endearment or petal. You might be called thank you petal and that would be normal. Just like down here in London people call you deary. So that was the ladies, the pay sheet on Friday, which was quite a palaver because it always meant that I was bleary eyed, having been on night shift and had a couple of hours if I was lucky. And I was expected to go up there and sort this lot out to the satisfaction of these ladies. So we all came home and we were joined by others who had been called away to the forces and one picked up really from school days. The friends who you'd last seen when you all left school, went to work and then got called up, 3 years plus later. Some of them came back and you got to know them again. And this Jimmy, who I lodged with while we were up there he lived in Croydon, he kept in touch. And because I'd done this walking in the Pennines and youth hostelling, I picked up the hostelling again on a bike and we formed here locally, in Woodford, a little group. It was the girl across the road, two fellows I knew from school. And I went back to Carlton, the studios. They said well forget the apprenticeship, just come back now as a very junior artist. And of course the studio was full of grown men. All the famous artists from the 30s as I came back. So I was a long way down the ladder. But

nevertheless there were other young men like me, who'd come back from the forces. So this group grew… *about group, hostelling etc.*

Bevin Boys Assoc etc.

Shows photos of BB Assoc.

Armistice Parade and memorial service

AK: How do you feel now about having been a Bevin Boy?

PF: Well you can hear from my relative exuberance I suppose that I don't feel that it was that bad. It was horse work and I was heart sick many times, but it had to come to an end and I had no intention of staying.

AK: Yes, the Bevin Boys were offered jobs in the mines after the war weren't they?

PF: Yes, they would have been delighted. I did broadly consider it in that I'd done what I wanted to do on the coal face and the next move was to do a bit of studying and become a shot firer, to become a deputy and to become an overman, something like that. That was going to mean study, commitment. I had no steady girlfriends, I had no intention of getting married and living up there. If I say the word Carlton yet again for the third time – does that mean anything to you?

AK: Well it must be some artistic –

PF: Almost every time you switch the television on, these days Carlton Communications is the name of the game. But Carlton has been going since the turn of the century. They started as classified ad agency in the city and moved to the West End and now there in to all that. There is still a studio, an art studio and a photographic studio and printers and publicity ….

You're saying what I think about it looking back. It was probably the best thing for me as against – I could have been knocked off on D-Day, like so many others who thought they were going to join the tanks ? there were so many who didn't come home and all I got was a couple of digs where the coal dust has never quite come out, so I've got some scars, if you know where to look. No, and I enjoy what I've done for you and I did for Conrad from the War Museum. And ever since the Bevin Boys Association activities I've been working on a slide presentation, which I have done veracious things. We have here a local amenity group and I have been taking slides. As long as you carry a camera you get pictures of what goes on around ….

I think that's where we should leave it.

(END)

Transcript of interview with Ken P.,

conducted at his home on 11th July 2000 by Ann Kneif

KP: I moved from Nunhead when I was 4 years of age to a little house in New Cross and I stayed there until I was 11. And Mum didn't pay the rent and we got evicted. And we moved on a wheelbarrow to a flat about three quarters of a mile away, once again in Nunhead. So we went from New Cross to Nunhead and it was a top floor flat, bug ridden top floor flat. It was horrible, it really was. We moved to New Cross. I am not sure whether I was 3 or 4 but we stayed at New Cross until I was eleven and a half. And I went Kendal Street School, which was an ordinary mixed school. And I got a free place at a grammar school in Greenwich, which was probably the best in -or one of the best schools in south London at the time. But it really wasn't the right school for me because my father was pretty poor and they were nearly all pay boys at that school. And they had 2 types of uniform, one for the poor and one for the rich. One was everything was in cotton and the other the badge was in gold wiring and you could tell the difference between them. A scholarship boy and the other boys because we never had cricket bats and things, which the other boys did. I wasn't really a – it was a lovely school. But it wasn't really very happy times for me really because I really felt socially out of my depth and you were made to feel that as well sometimes by the masters. And I stayed there until I was 14 and I don't know if it was fortunate or not but the war came along and the boys went to Wales, evacuated. I didn't go because several reasons. I didn't have the right clothes you know. I had just very basic things, hand-me-downs usually. And I had two sisters as well for mum and Dad to support. And I then went to Colfes Grammar School at Lewisham. And it was about 3 afternoons a week, doing very little. And that was the only education I was getting so I decided to pack that up and I went to work in a engineering Company called, oh I can't think of the name of it now.

AK: It wasn't Elliots was it?

KP: No, no not Elliots. Oh blow. I don't remember the name of the company now but it was only about 3 doors away from where I lived. It was only small and they used to make spindles and washers for mines, you know sea mines. And I then went to work for Shields and Whittaker at Deptford. I was there for a little while. And then I got a job with the Ministry of Aircraft Production in the research and technical publications. Oh, I'd moved from Nunhead when I was about coming up for 13 or just over – coming up for 13 to a flat in Brockley, Brockley Road. That's south-east London again and that was really nice. There were no vermin in that flat, which was one of the finer parts of it and the only other occupant in this bit of this big house was two deaf and dumb people and their little child. That was an experience as well, having 2 deaf and dumb people in the house. But we managed and as I say I went to work for Shield and Whittakers. From there I went to the Ministry of Aircraft Production as I say research and technical publications at Thames House at Millbank. And I was only there 2 weeks and they evacuated. That was in the November – I don't know if it was '40 or '41 when the bombing had been. I think it must have been '40.

War started in ’39. Yes, it must have been ’40, after bombing had started in the September. Actually They’d moved to Harrowgate once but they came back because it was a phoney war. It was all quiet. So I finished up at Harrowgate in Yorkshire with the Ministry of Aircraft production for as I said after a fortnight they evacuated. I was on – I was the only one that hadn’t been evacuated before because I was such a new member. And I think I was the youngest member. I wasn’t 16, I was 15 and a half, which was very young to be in the Civil Service. And we moved to Harrowgate. And I was the only one that hadn’t got a billet because all these guys I went with obviously they knew the drill so they were all fixed up. But I then went from the railway station to - I think it was the – oh I can’t think of the name now, I’ll remember it but it was the hotel in – but basically the Ministry of Aircraft and Accident and M.A.P. and the other part – I can’t remember what they called themselves, but there were 2 divisions of the Air – oh Air Ministry and Ministry of Aircraft and Accident too. And I got a billet in a very nice house in Stargate which is between Harrowgate and Meresborough. It was November and it was a 15 year old kid, never been away from home before with its half a crown, cardboard suitcase. And I went to live in this house and there was a woman who couldn’t really make out what it was but there was a young woman running the house. She had a couple of elderly chaps and a couple of elderly ladies living with them. They worked for the Ministry. And I was there for about 3 weeks. But she asked me to go because I think she tried to seduce me on the doorstep – a 15 year old and next morning she said I’m sorry. I was going out that night and she didn’t want me to – you know by the time you got back from Harrowgate by 11 o’clock – she wanted me in by 10. So she came on the doorstep that night and on the following morning she said I’m sorry she said but you’ll have to go because my husband is coming home. Said she wasn’t married so that wasn’t the truth. Anyway I then went to live with another lady and there were 3 of us. Very close to where this first person was. And we had a boy with us named Tony Clare. I shall never forget the guy. And the landlady gave him a letter to post. Her husband was in the RAF and we were playing cards in the front room. Three of us as she had another lady living there in the front room with a child and we were playing cards the four of us and she called Tony Clare out. And evidently she’d given him a letter to post and he didn’t post it. She saw the envelope on the inside of his pocket. So she tossed him out. And then money started going from pocket to people and they figured it out that it was after – we the young ones weren’t allowed to work after 5 o’clock and they found out that money was going between 5 and 6 and they put it down to one of the 3 young lads. Well this Tony Clare was always borrowing 2 shillings and half crowns off this other lad and myself, Freddy his name was. And when he left us he started to ask us if we wanted to borrow money and seemed very affluent and it turned out that it was him that was stealing the money. And what happened was the camera – it was all to do with photography that we were involved in and a camera lens, expensive camera lens was found to be missing. And it was him evidently he stole it, he couldn’t sell it and he threw it in the river. And his father was an officer in the navy. I can remember him coming up. We never saw him again but he had to go to court. Anyway I finished up there. I was there for about a year and a half I suppose. I was 17 and a bit. I was getting about £2-5s a week, paying – I had to pay my lodging money and buy my bits and pieces. There was very little left. And I only got that £2 something because I used to do a little bit of overtime at weekends because you weren’t allowed to work nights but you could go in on a Sunday. And I was coming home for a weeks’ holiday and all my pals back home had plenty of cash. And I thought to myself; well here I am up in Harrogate, struggling to find picture money

and all these guys down here are earning a nice bit of cash. And one chap said to me oh don't go back, he said. Get yourself a job. Oh, it's a bit dodgy with the old National Service I said, so they said well, why don't you go down to the Paramount Laundry in Ormside Street, they'll take anybody? So on the Monday I went down and I had my best clothes on, such as they were at the time. For the clothes you had coupons for rations. And the chap who owned the place was a little Italian guy named Ambrose, Lenny Ambrose, nice fellow, a nice looking man. A little bit like Douglas Fairbanks Junior. I went for 2 or 3 jobs and he looked at me and I was only about nine and a half stone and he looked at me and he said to me it's tough work. Oh, it doesn't bother me. So he said well, you can start now. I went well, I can't really start in these clothes so he said well come back at 1 o'clock and do half a day. I got home that night – half a day was 1 till 10.30 and from then on I was working in. they tried to get me to go back but I refused and I said what's the point. There are no prospects for me because I'm going to go in the Army anyway. So they swallowed it and I became legally working for the Paramount Laundry. And the chap who was the foreman, he got called up and I went to see some friends in Harrogate on the weekend and instead of coming back on the Monday I didn't come back till Tuesday. When I got back the chap that I was working for, this Len – oh, he said, I was the only full time guy there. All the rest were part time women and special policemen. They were doing their beat and then coming round and working in the laundry. And he said to me; why didn't you let me know you were going to have an extra day. And he offered me the job as foreman – I wasn't even 18. That was running the washhouse, stoking the boiler, mixing the soap and I took this job on as foreman until I finished up going in the coalmines. And I was then only in the bag – it was a bag wash, the old bag wash. I don't suppose you remember the bag wash do you? Well, it was the old bag wash. Well, that was graft that was. But I could eat a mount in those days. I mean Mum used to make me a whole Yorkshire, a whole rice pudding and prunes and I would eat the whole rice pudding. And I'd have half a pound of Kennedy's sausages, 2lb of fried onions, a pound of potatoes, 1lb of Brussels, could eat everything. Couldn't stop eating I was working so hard. And the day was 7 in the morning and they had a double shift, because then I was full-time, I did the double shift. So I just came home for lunch and sometimes I'd go to work at 7 in the morning and wouldn't go home till 6, 7 o'clock the following day. Something would break down and we would have to strip the machine down. And I really, really – it was one of the best times of my life. I really, really did enjoy that. It was hard work but it was so – it was brilliant. I was getting about £8, £9 a week.

A.K. That was a lot of money.

K.P. That was a lot of money. I used to go down New Cross dogs every Saturday and I used to bet. Mind the bookmaker I used to put my bets on with – I was only 17, was Jim Wicks, who was the manager of Henry Cooper, the boxer, and he was the bookmaker. And I never took tickets off of him. If I had like a £, £4 to 1, all my bets were down to the boy. So I didn't have tickets. I used to just go down and he would give me the money, whatever. And then one day I had to go for a medical. Went for a medical for the RAF, aircrew. At the medical at Emline Road at Hither Green, I went from there to, about a fortnight later I went to Charlton, to an eye specialist and I didn't get in aircrew because I had dodgy eyes. Anyway a little later on, soon after, I had to go for an interview for the Royal Navy. Oh no, they gave me the option of the Royal Navy or the Royal Marines, well I was only, like I am now 5ft 7½" and opted

for the navy and I had this test. And I was a bright kid, don't worry about that. When I was younger I was as quick as ? and they used to bring school inspectors round to the junior school. I was in the top junior class for 4 years. I was in the top class when I was 7. And they used to bring these inspectors round and I used to stand up on the chair and they used to fire mental questions, mental arithmetic principally, but I could work the sums out quicker than the teacher could write them. And they gave you these tests and after the test was over I wasn't an officer – petty officer. He came in and he said that's one of the best tests we've ever seen. One of the best results we've ever seen in these tests. He said you are certainly officer material. So I said to him well, how long will it be before I'm in? And he said well, within a fortnight you'll be in. well, I'd already – the first thing we knew about Bevin Boys, was there was a spread in the Daily Mirror, and on the front was a big heading like Bevin Boys, local boys, London boys will soon be going down coalmines under the Bevin Boy scheme. There was a photo of a big collier sitting in a bathtub with his wife with this big apron wrapped round her you know. Well, that's how they used to wear aprons years ago – this big apron wrapped round her, scrubbing his back, getting the coal dust off. And I said to my mother, oh blimey, I said, at least I won't have any of that and she laughed. And a couple of weeks went by, I can't remember, I think that was the – back in 1943, couple of weeks went by and I came home to lunch, Mum used to cook me a dinner every day. I only lived a mile from – I was working down Ormside Street in the Old Kent Road, at the Paramount Laundry. And I came home for my meal and my mother was with a sullen face and I thought oh hello, I've got my call-up papers I see. So she said there's a letter come for you today, she said. I'm not sure you're going to be very pleased about it. So I said well, what's that? So she said well you'd better read it. And it said something like owing to the need of men in the mining industry its been decided to allocate by ballot and your number is one and you'll be duly notified as to where you've got to go. So I said well Mum, if that's it, that's it I said. At least I've got a better chance of coming home I think than I would have if I was going in the Navy. So she said well, I suppose that's one thing about it she said, but don't you mind? Well, of course I mind, you know. So immediately my mind ticked over, how can I get out of this? I didn't really want to go and I think really deep down I would have preferred to have gone in the Services. But anyway, my father, he'd had a hernia and in those days hernia was a thing you was in hospital and you were in 2 or 3 weeks. And I wrote to the – I think it was the Manpower Board, I'm not quite sure, but I wrote to somebody and I said to them that I am quite happy about going down in the coal, you know the coalmines but I said my father's due to go into hospital in a couple of weeks time and my mother is on her own and she's deaf and I said with the blitz and that you know, it's a bit worrying. Anyway they wrote back to me and they gave me a deferment. So I was deferred and Dad went in to have his operation and came back and I got another call-up. And we had a little farewell party on the Friday night and the chap who owned the place came round and actually cried. To my father he said: I've never, ever had anybody work like your son. I could work. He said I've never had anybody work like your son. He said I'm heartbroken that he's going. And on the Friday we had this little farewell in the Rising Sun down the Old Kent Road. And the company had a Russian Jewish secretary, Shaun his name was. And he said - bet my governor, said bet you a tenner I can get him off. So he took this bet. So he said to me; I'll meet you tomorrow here and we'll go up the Manpower Board – oh, I can't remember, some house up in London. And we went to this place and they said well, if he says that he is essential at the firm and all this sort of thing. Well, we can't do anything about it. The best thing to do is send a telegram to where he is supposed

to report, Creswell Colliery training centre. So we sent a telegram and I don't know what was put on the telegram but they sent a telegram back to say everything's OK. So I thought that's fine, you know. I think it was about on the Wednesday or Thursday of that week, the police came down to the firm and said -there's me, my boss, the secretary to come to the National Service Officer down at Deptford Labour Exchange. And we went down and the local police superintendent was there and they gave the boss and the secretary a rollicking and gave me my travel warrant and said if you're not on the train on Monday morning, the 10 o'clock train, we'll be round for you by 12 o'clock and by 1 o'clock you'll be in a prison cell. So I said well, I've tried and I went to a little place called Carvale, which is near Sharbrooke, I think it's in Derbyshire actually and we used to go by bus to Cresswell Colliery. For four weeks we went five days a week, for four weeks training at Cresswell Colliery. And they hadn't got pithead baths. We used to shower at Whitwell. We used to go by bus from Cresswell to Whitwell to shower and then by bus to Carvale where I lived. And I lived with a lady called Mrs Riley and I didn't particularly like her or her husband and she had a Bevin Boy living with her as it was. My pal and I, we'd palled up on the train together, we stuck together, well, my pal and I, on the Saturday, when we checked in for our dinner and it was chips and peas. Well I've never had a meal like that in my life. So I went to the billeting officer and said if you don't move me I'm going home on Monday. And he said oh we've had lots of boys there and I said well, it doesn't suit me. A couple of the people in the village, Mr Mills, that was his name, this Mr Mills took me and a chap named Pete, took the other Bevin Boy and we spent the rest very happy three weeks with them and sat our training out. But our training was a joke really, I mean we'd go down the pit, we'd walk a little way and the chap who trained us was a chap named Siverder, Bob Siverder and he was an ex deputy and he would sit down on a brick or something – a bit of wood and he'd sit there with his deputy stick, chewing tobacco and he would spit. There'd be 10 of us and he'd spit and he'd spit on everybody's foot. He'd go like that and he was a funny bloke and we had fun with him. But we had 4 hours of that then you'd have 4 hours training on the top, which more often than not consisted of a walk round the village. A 3-mile walk in your pit boots. Well used to get to the back of the queue. There was quite a crowd of us. There might be, probably been about 60 or 100 being trained at the same time and we'd all start marching round the street. And, of course, you used to go past the village pub, so you'd just hang at the back and pop in and have a pint and when they came back we weren't on the end of the queue. Oh dear, oh dear. And another time we'd empty railway carriages of coal dust and different things. And we'd have physical training. The physical training bloke used to do wrestling and things like that and I was lucky really. Although I was small I'd been pumping, doing heavy work for a year in that laundry and it was heavy and I was pretty strong. I hadn't an ounce of fat on my body I don't think. Well, I could manage the big guys as well as the small ones, so I was quite popular. And from there I went to Welbeck Colliery and it was completely different to ever what I had possibly imagined. I'd just imagined, you know, soot and grime and filth, like all mining films they'd shown us when we were kids, but it wasn't. It was a little village. I don't think there was more than 300 houses and the pit. That's all there was. And all there was in the village was the miner's welfare, there was the village hall, there was the Co-op, which sold groceries and tobacco and things like that and there was a little PO, and a little general shop that sold cotton and things like that and a telephone box. That was about all there was in this village and the nearest place to that was a little place called Warser?, which was about 2 miles away. And the bus ran every hour but finished at 9 o'clock at night.

And that bus never left anybody. If there was a hundred there, you got on. It was quite amazing. It was unbelievable. I think, one of the newspapers found a ? getting off of the bus one night, single-decker. Can you imagine it? But it was brilliant. I was very fortunate I went to live with a lady called Mrs Shaw. It was a nice sunny day when the first day we got there, although it was April. It was quite a nice day. And what I couldn't believe was there was nothing. It was completely surrounded by fields. There was nothing because we'd come on the bus and we'd seen – it was just like being out in the country. It was a new world. And I went to Mrs Shaws with this other lad called Bunty. And he was a big gentle giant of a boy, must have weighed about 13 stone. But he wasn't gifted with a good brain but he was gifted with kindness. He was a really nice lad but we had a double bed, which we shared in this small room, in this little house. Outside toilet, which I'd got at home anyway. Basically it was like home from home really, except that it was in the country. And I thought to myself what does a young bloke do in a little place like this? Anyway she gave us a bite to eat. And I said to her; what do lads do, you know. So she said well, most of them go up the club. I said where's that? She said just at the top of the road. She said my son-in-law goes up there. He's sure to be there she said. When you go in there she said ask for Frank, Frank Baines. And I went in this club and the guy behind the bar, Bill Woods his name was, he was massive man, massive man and a voice that you could hear a mile away. And he took to me straight away this guy did. I suppose London accent I suppose they couldn't understand us, especially some of the lads couldn't understand but anyway this bunch and I went in there and we made ourselves known to this Frank Baines and immediately he took a shine to me and I took a shine to him. He was a bit older than me, he was about 7 years older than me. And I was living with his mother-in-law. From that day he became like a big brother to me. I didn't have a brother but he was like a big brother. And brilliant, absolutely brilliant. And I couldn't believe my luck because in the club there was 3 dart boards, 2 snooker tables, endless packs of cards, dominoes. Everybody was gambling. And I thought God I've hit the jackpot here. And I fell straight away, never - It was a horrible job but the job never, ever once worried me. I didn't like the first time I went down the pit but once you got used to that cage it was no problem. But I got on well with everybody. I joined in with everything, played football. And we used to go catching rabbits. We had whippets and brilliant. Pulled the crowd up from London. One of the lads, he lived actually with Frank. This Frank lived down the house that faced the 2 gardens backed on so we could walk up and down. He'd come up for me to come up the club and I'd go down with him to football and things like that. We went out every single day together. Football, we played cards at night and didn't worry me too much. So I was happy. I was happy with my situation. Didn't like me job but I was happy with my situation, my living situation and the time I spent there was a happy time. They were brilliant, the time we had was absolutely unbelievable. The job was lousy but the people were absolutely brilliant, absolutely, couldn't have found nicer people. And Bunty, he lasted about 3 months. He had a spell of very bad athlete's foot and they couldn't cure it so he had to come out of the pit. Then I had a young lad come to live there. I didn't know him but he was a Bevin Boy, because the scheme carried on obviously after me. Sydney Goldstein his name was and he was a nice young little Jewish boy, came from East London, Hackney, round that way and a good boxer. Actually he had a fight in the local market place. He got £2-50 for six rounds, which was enough to pay his fare home. Because professional boxers, although he was an amateur, he actually got paid for this fight. Got hurt a little bit but he did it and got the money. He was with me for about six months and he got the money and he went – I don't know how he got away

with it but he went so I was left on my own again. Then they had a class B release, which meant that men came out of the Forces into the coalmines and a chap came, Charlie Travell his name was, from Bermondsey in South London and he was a lot older than me but he stayed until his demob number. They just came until their demob number came up and he went but he was a laugh, he was a funny man. He really was a funny man and we had some good laughs. Good fun together. He didn't like the job but at least he was out of the Forces and he could go home every other weekend to his wife, which he couldn't do when he was in the navy. I had a happy time with Mrs Shaw. And then, one of Frank's Bevin Boys, he left. He came from Wembley this lad. He brought this ruddy greyhound up. Like we used to go to the dogs now and again. He said I could get a dog and we could run it and his mother lived in Wembley and she used to have a lot of the Wembley trainers, you know dog trainers. She had a lodging house. And one of them sent us up a greyhound. We had to go and meet this ruddy train to Mansfield. Got this black greyhound and we entered it for a race at Sharbrooke. It was only a flap and trap. It wasn't a registered track. And this guy whose dog it was called it Black Ace. And the day it was going to be in the race they'd got it on the board Black Ice, because the guy he mistook him. He said like Aace and he thought he said Black Ice. So the chaps went over, we all went over. All our friends, a crowd of us. The blokes from London are here we could hear them saying like about this dog. And the traps went up and our dog came out about third, bit the dog in front and oh God it was such a – and we got warned off. We only had one race. Came back penniless but it was an experience. This boy left, this lad that brought the dog up, he left and I took his place down at Frank's. I was with Frank's mother who was about 70 and she said – I didn't like to leave her to be honest but she said I think you'd be happier down at Franks so I went to live with Frank. And Freddy was a regular in there, Freddy Gould, he came from Woodford in Essex and we became good pals. He was a guy that he had £20 in the drawer that he was saving up for his – he loved this girl in London, a nurse she was, I can't think of her name but he loved this girl in London and wanted to marry her I believe. And he used to save this money. He did marry her in the end. And he wouldn't break into it and he'd borrow 2 shillings off me to go up the club. He was a nice lad and well he stayed there until his release came and obviously I stayed till my release came. I became involved with the families. The landlord, Frank, he had a brother-in-law, which was his wife's brother actually, named Joe and sister-in-law named Ada, Joe and Ada and they lived round the next turning to us and Freddy and I used to go round and play cards a lot with them. We became great friends and Frank and Joe came down to London, spent the week down in London with us and we gave them a good time then. Couldn't get over the underground they couldn't. I think that mesmerised them most of all. But Ada had – when Joe came down, when he went back his wife became pregnant and although they called the son Robert, I'm his godfather, he's about 53 now I think. I'm his godfather. And although his name is Robert he was known as Winkle because this chap had never had winkles before and they reckoned it was the winkles that gave him the power to put his wife in the family way. But we became great friends – still are. We went to their golden wedding anniversary a little while ago. I think we were the only outside family members there. They came to my 70th birthday. In January this year they came down from Nottingham. My godson and his wife came and brought them down. Brilliant. Probably as good friends as we've got they really are. We had a good time. We had a good life. It was just the job. I mean the job was …

A.K. Can you say something about the actual work you did?

K.P. Yes, yes. Well, the first thing that you did when you entered Welbeck Colliery was you worked on the pit bottom and you controlled the tubs going into the cage, the two cages, two tiers in a cage and then three tubs went in the bottom, three tubs went in the top and the thing would go up, the chair would go up and down would come six empties and you would let the three full ones go and knock the three empties out the other side. And you worked on the pit bottom for a fortnight doing this. Well, the chap that controlled the chair going up and down, he used to ring a bell and it would go ding, ding, ding, ding and the bloke up would go ding, ding, ding, ding and up they'd go and it never, ever stopped. You never stopped – it's not like it now though, you never stopped when it was winding coal. So I said to one of the lads I said you listen to this bloke and this chap who was doing this dinging, his name was Baines, Harry Baines, he was my landlord's uncle actually, and he was getting on a bit so they give them the easy job and he got a job in the pit bottom ringing this bloody bell. And I went up to him and I said excuse me, I said, can you ring the bell so that I can go up? So he said eh. So I said I want to go up. So he said you can't bloody do that. So I said I've got to, it's an emergency. So he said, what do you mean an emergency? So I said well, I want to go to the toilet. He went, do what? I said I want to go to the toilet. He said bloody toilet, he said go yonder. So I said I don't just want to have a wee. So he said go yonder, scratch yourself a bloody hole. So I said do what? He said go yonder and scratch yourself a bloody hole. So I said I've got no paper to wipe my backside on. So he said grab a handful of bloody dust, he said. Anyway after I had a fortnight in the pit bottom I got a job – that was day work, I got a job on the night shift. That's what they gave me, a job on the night shift, on the haulage. I was what they call a haulage hand. And that comprised mainly of clearing the roads of any tubs, getting any coal that was in the tubs that was left over as near the pit bottom as you could and making sure that the road that the empty tubs came down on was clear and generally tidying up the road, making sure that there was no problems with the rails or just general haulage hand. After about a week they asked me to get a pit pony and become a pony driver.
(End of side one)

And I'd never handled a pony, oh yes when I was a kid but I went to the stables and the stable bloke, who was the boss at the stables, a chap named Trevor, Trevor Burton, he lived next door actually to where I lived and he gave me this pony. Don it was called and it was the oldest pony that there was in the stable and it could just about walk. It took ages to walk from the pit bottom to where I worked. Normally you get what they called a paddy and you rode half way, but you had to walk when you had a pit pony. You used to walk along and they used to feed these ponies on hay and they never really got anything moist and this old pony used to walk along and he never stopped passing wind and when he'd pass wind he used to puff it out like powder. Honestly I mean it was amazing. We used to put our lights on and you could see the powder coming out of his backside. Every other step he blew off this poor old Don did. He just about had the strength to pull a couple of tubs, poor old lad. But then of course there were others, who really – there was one in particular called Amico, he was veracious and he had something wrong with him that made him go eeh eeh, eeh eeh and when he came charging at you and like caught his eyes his eyes were red. He was a fearsome pug, big he was. Big, bigger than the old milk horses. I couldn't believe it. I thought pit ponies were all little tiny ones. But they had quite a lot and lot of them named after – they had Churchill, Eden, Winston, Nev after Nevil

Chamberlain. Oh all different. And they were all characters. I took out nearly every one of the ponies at one time and I had a job for a little while. They had a gang of guys they called the Drifters and these guys used to - mainly Irish with a local lad and he was the boss man. He was just like Johnny Weismueller. He was big and he never had any fat on him and I used to call him Tiger. Tom, his name was, Tiger, because he was what they called, tunnel Tiger. And I had the job of ferrying the empty tubs into the –they used to make the virgin road. There was only one way in and one way out. If anything dropped behind you, you'd had it. You'd very likely suffocate anyway. And the empties would go in and they'd fill three tubs up and I'd pull three empties out and take another three in. that's how it went on during the night. And they used to blow holes in the wall obviously and make these virgin roads. And I had that job for about three months. I used to make what they call the stemming, that's the stuff, plug, they drill a hole, put they dynamite in and put the plug, the stemming in to stop it. It was coming outward, you know. Deputy would come along, fill the hole up and then you'd get behind the tub and shout out fire and he'd blow these bloomin' holes in the wall and so they fill the tubs up, put the girders up and I was sitting there one day, and this Tom was up on the scaffolding, putting the top holes in and he said to me; come up here you he said. I'll make a bloody tunnel tiger of you. And he got this – the drills were air powered, they weren't electric, they were powered by air. And he said; get you to put a bloody hole in here he said. And he'd given me this drill, which I could hardly lift anyway and he stood behind me and I felt quite, you know, good that I was drilling this hole and he let go. Oh, God almighty, it was probably one of the most frightening, funny experiences. All I had to do was let go but I didn't I'm hanging on, you see. Anyway I got through this hole but I never did anymore. I said to him I'm not having any more of that. But he was a smashing bloke and I used to go up to the Welfare, Miners' Welfare. We got paid on Fridays and the Welfare opened at 10 o'clock on Friday. And we used to go up at 10 o'clock on Friday morning and I used to play snooker and this crowd used to come in and I used to have to get their beer for them, but every time I got their beer I got one as well and that was my reward for the work I did for them during the week. But I also did cable pulling, worked on the coal face, cutting the coal, the coal cutters ready for the colliers to come in and used to cut 4 foot 6 under the coal to give it a gap. Then the following day the guys used to come in on the morning, the colliers used to come in and put sprags up against the coal face, take all the cuttings out from underneath and obviously it would leave a gap. They'd knock the sprags out and the weight would drop it down. Put shots in it and blow it up if they couldn't get it with a pick. I did all sorts of jobs, general jobs down there. I never really did any coal work. It was just getting stuff down to – I think the worst job ever was hauling arch girders down a rubber conveyor belt to the coalface, which was a long way. It was a long way. I think they were going out 800 yards with this particular face. And you couldn't get them down the – they had an intake gate, where the air went in and what you would do, you would take the supply stuff down the intake gate to the end and take it along the coalface on a belt. But you couldn't get down. They were going to take over. The government was going to take the pits over so the private companies weren't doing anything in the way of repairs. Everywhere was buckled and you just couldn't get the stuff down so everything had to go down the loader gate, all the material the men wanted on the coalface. It all had to go down the loader gate and, of course, it all had to be dragged down because they couldn't reverse the belt. It only came one way. Whereas on the coalface it went towards the centre so you could put stuff on and take it along. But I did mainly any jobs, which, you know – tidying up, anything they wanted to do. Some jobs, you wouldn't believe

it but. That lasted as I say until my time came up and I came back to London. But generally speaking, I mean when I first went down they had loads of black beetles and when you went to give the horse – the pony a drink when you came back after the shift, you used to have to scoop these beetles off the water. But then the rats got down there and they cleared all the beetles. And you'd sit there of a night time all quiet, there was nothing working, except you know the tidying up crews and any work that wasn't finished in the afternoon because in those days there were three shifts, coaling, preparing the gates because as they took the coal away they had obviously to make the road. The coal went and they did another bit of the road so. And, of course, there were three roads, intake, gate out take and the loader gate.

A.K. How did you get on with the other miners?

K.P. Brilliant, brilliant, absolutely brilliant, no they were absolutely brilliant to me. It's a question of yourself. I mean you can either – I think I could have walked into any house in that village and got a cup of tea. They used to call me ? because I was always laughing. No, I'm the sort of guy – thing is I can't do anything about it. I just have to make the best of it. I mean my wife's got Parkinson's and you have to make the best of things and I've been like it all my life. If I can't do anything about it well, I've got to put up with it. And I couldn't do anything about that but at least I was very, very fortunate meeting this guy Frank. He was like the Mafia boss of the village. He was a tough nut and he looked after me as though I was his son. He really did. All the family were good to me and still are. Mind you Joe and Ada are the only two left. Everybody else has died, sadly but Ada is 85 and Joe is about 81. I never, ever had a cross word with any of the guys -–never. Down the pit there were some characters, God there were some characters. There were some funny men. There was one old boy, oh I can't think of his ruddy name now. Oh, Daddy Reynolds. They called him Daddy – I don't know why. Daddy or Pop. He was about 75. I mean I'm 75 now and we called him old. But he was just like that Mort Marrot? in the Crazy Gang. He wasn't a member of the Crazy Gang but he did a lot with Will Hay. Just like him. A bit like Steptoe, you know, the old boy. And this Pop Reynolds, he was just like that and he used to operate what they called a bar straightener. It was like a big vice and it had a big handle on it. It must have been about 5 foot, and 2 jaws. And they used to have the metal straps that used to go in between the props and to hold the roof up and they used to get buckled and they used to put these things in to straighten up and this bloke, this old boy, he could chew tobacco, drink a beer and smoke a clay and never spit. He was amazing. He always had a ferret in his pocket. He was always in the same pub – that's all they did was go in the pub, there was nothing else. – I did say we didn't have a pub we just had the miners welfare. No all sorts. Blokes with big noses and oh dear me. It wasn't unhappy. To be honest if there was another war and I was in the same situation they wouldn't have to ask me. I'd volunteer to go down the pits. I wouldn't really want to go in the Forces I don't think.

A.K. Was there a lot of absenteeism in the pits?

K.P. Yes, there was a lot, yes. There was a terrific amount of absenteeism, even amongst the regular colliers. I was prone to having a day off myself. We used to call it – oh what did they used to call it. That was more cause of problems in the pit than anything I think, holiday making. In the end they introduced a scheme where if you worked 5 days you got paid for 6. So you had to work M, T, W, T, F and you got paid

for Saturday without going in, so that you got five days pay. When I left I was on top haulage pay and I was getting 19/7½ a day. I never ever earned a pound a day, never, all the time I was in there. But in those days beer was a shilling a pint up the welfare. If you'd got 5 shillings in your pocket you'd go up the club whereas nowadays £5 and you can't go out. But it was poorly paid really for what they did. And they deserve every bean that they get - –don't worry about that. And there's not too many people I can assure you that would relish the thoughts of going down the pits. It isn't the best of jobs but I suppose there are jobs even worse. But no, it wasn't a very good job. And they did some of them but Joe, I can't remember him taking days off. He was an absolute brilliant worker. They called him the Fuhrer, this pal of mine, Joe and he's not as big as me but he would fight anybody. And he would work against the – not against them, they would work against him. He was the guy that, when managers were being trained, they used to send trainee managers to work with him for the experience because he was so experienced. He was brilliant, an absolute brilliant collier he was and he never, never took days off. Every day that he could work, he worked. And he was like a charge hand. My family love him. All of them do, my children, he's brilliant with them and he's as lovely now, and his wife, as when I first met him, fifty odd years ago. A brilliant man.

A.K. Did you get to visit your own family in London very often?

K.P. Yes, I used to come home Easter, Christmas, summer holiday. I used to come home. It didn't really worry me too much what they did to me to be honest. I never, ever got hauled over the coals for taking days off. An extra day here an extra day there. No, never. I had a couple of minor accidents – you know leg cuts and things, I'd have a bit of time off. But even the people in Carvale, they still used to come over to Welbeck to see me. I remember once I had a big abscess on the side of my face and they took me back with them for a week. And they killed their own pig so I had bacon and I made ham and they were brilliant. They were brilliant. Everybody was. I can't say anything about the people. We've been up there on holiday. They've had my house while I've gone away on holiday. No, still my best friends.

A.K. Were you very aware of the war going on while you were up there?

K.P. Not really, no. Only the papers but no, not really. You were aware that, you know, you cheered when there was a thousand bomber raid, things like that. It wasn't like London. No, London, you were in it all the time, you know, doodlebugs, flying bombs, you know. Coming home that was another experience – that never worried me either. It was just one of those things. What is to be, will be. But no, not at all.

A.K. So you went on until you were demobbed?

K.P. Yes, I went on until I was demobbed. You had to get another job or they could redirect you. It was a Labour thing that was on at the time. I got myself a job and started with a company and retired 40 years later. I stopped 40 years in the same company.

A.K. What was that doing?

K.P. In the docks – and I had 40 years and in 40 years I had 2 weeks off. I was superintendent of the biggest paper wharf on the river, for, I suppose, the last 20 years of my life and I started as a tally clerk and then got on the supervisory staff and when they had that every docker should have a regular job, the old casual system went by the board, I became superintendent and I was superintendent until the day I packed up. Happy life.

A.K. Were you influenced by the job that you then did by your experience as a Bevin Boy – it just happened that way?

K.P. No. I went to the labour exchange and told them that I didn't want a job inside. I wanted one in the open and they said you can try for this one, we don't know whether you'll get it or not. That was this tally clerk, which is checking the cargo out of ships. Actually I'd got a job 4 nights a week to stay me over, working in the washhouse at the laundry where I'd come from. I had to go to Ibbets House?, to register. I had to get a union card because you can't work in the docks without being a member of the union. I went there on the Monday morning, went to the laundry at night, didn't go to bed until the following morning, that was Tuesday, went down the Convoy's to say that I'd got my card and I thought I'd be starting work the following Monday and he said where was you yesterday? So I said I went and got the - you know – and he said why didn't you come straight down here? Yes, we want you immediately, when can you start? I said when you like and he said right, start now. So I didn't sleep Monday or Monday night because I worked down the laundry, I worked for the new governor Tuesday until 6 o'clock, went down to the laundry at 7 o'clock, worked through the night down the laundry, came home, had my breakfast and worked through the Wednesday and then went to bed that night so I got up Monday morning and didn't go to bed. I was working from Monday morning until 6 o'clock on Wednesday night. I worked straight through. I made it. There again that was a job. I enjoyed my life in the docks.

A.K. But you'd belonged to the unions presumably as a Bevin Boy?

K.P. Yes, You had to belong to the miners union but that was a pretty menial thing. Oh we did have a strike when we was at Cresswell – there was a guy there – we were getting £2-10 a week or was it? But I know we all stopped work and they altered it from £2 to £2-10 or £2-10 to £3. I know we got a 10/- a week increase over this day stoppage that we had. He was a Greek lad from East London somewhere. Dad was a café owner so I imagine. But he was a really big lad. No, the unions didn't really mean much to me.

A.K. How do you feel now about having been a Bevin Boy? Resentment or hard done by?

K.P. No, not at all. All the old clap trap about walking in the victory parade and that sort thing – the guy that's organized that, a chap named Warwick Taylor, he's written a book. I think he only spent a few weeks down the coal mines. He's got references from me. I wrote to him not realizing what he was up to and he got these bits and pieces and collated them together and made a book out of it. His story is one that people wouldn't accept and all that sort of thing. To me a load of old rubbish. I don't know. I mean I know a few Bevin Boys. Actually one of the lads, I see him every now

and again, he actually stayed on for a little while. He married one of the girls up there and stayed in the pits.

A.K. This is what I'm finding. I've read Warwick Taylor's book and everything he says, the people I've spoken to have always said well, that's not how they feel.

K.P. Well no I haven't read the book but I slagged him off actually when I found out what he'd done. I said my stories are a completely different one to that. And they were brilliant. Those people to me – and they still are. But it's completely different up there now. The village is no longer the little village. It might not have been the same if I'd have gone up now but at that time it was only a pretty little village. Now it's been extended because what happened was that when the pits closed up north, they extended the village and employed more men and they turned out coal 24 hours a day, whereas they only turned coal one shift.

A.K. Are the pits still open?

K.P. Oh, yes. My pits still open, yes, still going strong. But, of course, it's operated completely differently. Everything is got by mechanical means. No don't ever believe that. I mean if Bevin Boys went to live in a hostel they didn't give themselves a chance did they to know people. If your living in a hostel you go to work, come home and you're in a hostel and you're going to be with your own so you're going to be a little clique, that's probably going to walk around town and get yourself into trouble all the time. But I didn't. I lived in the village itself and I couldn't have stood hostel life. I'd have had to come home.

A.K. Was there a hostel there?

K.P. Yes, Mansfield, yes, about 7 miles away. Used to ferry the boys in of nighttime. Yes, there was a big hostel there and it wasn't just for Welbeck. It was for everybody. All the pits round. My God, the pits that were there. I mean you could walk, you could do a five mile circle and see at least 10 pits, 10 pits, Warship, Warship Main, Mansfield, Mansfield Wooding, Clipstone, Dawlsbury, oh God, every where there were pits in nearly every village. Hundreds of pits, hundreds. But as I say I was lucky. I struck the right people. I lived with the people, which was nice. Very basic, everything was basic, food basic – everything was basic. Shared the same towel, well that's how it was. I mean I had a shower every day at the pit so if you rinsed you face and hands, and it was at the sink where the washing up was done. All the cooking was done on the fire. I mean I could write a book on my experiences. Oh it would be a happy one, there wouldn't be nothing miserable in my book.

A.K. And you're a member of the Bevin Boys' Association?

K.P. Yes. The only reason I joined that really was out of curiosity more than anything. Came home one night and just caught this bit on Charlie Chester Show. He did something about Bevin Boys and I wrote to them and they said the guy you want to contact is Warwick Taylor, who is only speaking for them. Contacted this guy and basically he told me what he did. And he asked for my experiences and I wrote back about 10 pages and the bit that he told me was that people didn't like them and all that crap trap. Well, I said I'm completely different to you. I am proud to have known

those people and I haven't got any regrets. And as I say to you if it was tomorrow, war came and they wanted men in the coalmines, if there was a choice, I'd go to the mines, I'd go back, same place, wouldn't hesitate and I still love the people up there as much as I did when I was there. Even more. As I say I've got a godson up there and wonderful friends they are, absolutely wonderful. Lovely people. I'm proud. I'm proud to have known them and I am sure that they are proud of me. The thing I would have liked was a piece of paper to say I was conscripted into the coal mines and I spent my whole time just the same as the guy in the army, I got discharged just the same as in the army but I served my time in the pits instead of in the Forces. But it wasn't a choice I had to go and end of story. Its very upsetting when – about a year ago, we were having a drink, my wife and I and there were 6 blokes sitting there and Bevin Boys were mentioned funnily enough and one guy said oh they were the blokes that went down the pits to get out of going in the army .. and when I went up to get a drink I just said politely I'd like to put you right. We didn't have a choice but I've got nothing to prove it that's the only thing. And as for Bevin Boy medals and all that old – I don't know – it annoys me. I went to one of the Bevin Boys reunions and Welbeck colliery was the best-represented pit there. The most from any other pit was two. There were six of us from Welbeck. Didn't know they were going to be there but I knew them all, every one of them. Funnily enough they all lived in the village. None of them lived in hostels. All lived in the village. Yes, there was six of us. But it doesn't mean a lot to me. I went there but it's not for me. I like to go and have a beer and socialise my way. I don't like sitting in a hall, listening to clap trap about Lord Plunket, who is now going to give a speech and so and so and so and so is going to give a speech. And Warwick Taylor, who's written a wonderful book – not for me. I went there to see my friends. I just wanted to see the lads. And I've been out and had a beer to men up in different places and a beer and a sandwich and a fish and chips or something but as for a mass reunion. The Surrey rep came over the other day and he wanted to merge with Kent and have a trip to the docks. And that's not for 75 year olds wandering around for four hours. Lots of people can't do it….

But no regrets, honestly no regrets.

(END)

Alan H.

Transcript of interview with Alan H.,

conducted at his home on 17th July 2000 by Ann Kneif

AH: Now I was born in Hillcrest Road, here. I've always lived in Hillcrest Road. I was born in Number 49 and I live in number 44. So that's – I was born in 1926. I went to normal council school. I failed the 11 plus, but I went into another school and I didn't do too bad. And I came out of there – I left school in 1940 and went to Clarke's College for 2 years, a commercial school. And from then on I went to work. And I worked for a company in Stepney, Badgers, a confectioners. I was there for 2 years. And I became 18 in 1944. And I registered as normal. I had joined the air training corps to go in the Airforce, but when it came to it there was no vacancies and I reckoned I'd go and work in the coal mine – a Bevin Boy. So that was the start and from then on I just waited until I was called in November 1944. November 6th we met at King's Cross on the 10.30 train. All went up there. I didn't know what I was going to find. It was quite a new venture, wartime, dark blackout. And we were all sent to Doncaster. Well we were sent – I was put there with a whole group and we stayed in a hostel at a place called Bentley, Queens ? Hostel, which was like Nissan huts made in just a hostel for use of these trained Bevin Boys, trainees. And then we had 2 weeks there. And from there we had 2 weeks - we met on a training course at a nearby colliery Askern, which was now a training centre for Bevin Boys. It was owned by the Coalite Company actually. We used it and after a fortnight there we were transferred to another colliery. They reckoned 2 weeks was the training session. Then I was transferred to South Kirby at South Elmsall, different things, but it was interesting from that point of view. But to us it wasn't really our home. We were only waiting to leave and go home, because the war was on and we didn't know how long we were going to be there. But then the war ended and we were given a demob number and when our number came out of the F services we had a letter from the Ministry of Labour because we were still the civilians you see. ? you can now go home or leave or whatever so I came back in January 1948. And that was it but it was an experience and it was a different way of life. I mean working in an office as I did in London going to work on manual work was not something one didn't expect to do but I enjoyed it. I was on haulage and we used to go about quarter of a mile out the pit bottom but Frickley was a very big pit. It was owned by the Carlton Main Colliery Company till they – they had about 6 pits in Yorkshire and then they sold that to the National Coal Board in 1946 and from then on we just worked for the Coal Board. But it was experience. To say that I enjoyed it would be wrong but I'm glad I did it. There we are.

A.K. Did you actually try and get out of going into the Bevin Boys? Did you appeal against it?

A.H. I didn't, no I didn't because I didn't have any chance. Because if you were – it was a ballot scheme actually. I expect you know how it all happened. And in doing so you were really fighting against the Government. If they say you've got to go, you've

got to go. I had no reason to say no. It was just the fact that we had wanted to go in the airforce and not going in the airforce. Instead of going up I went down.

A.K. So you were disappointed?

A.H. Well in that respect yes. My late father was in the First World War in the Flying Corp and I always wanted to be aircrew and I joined the Air Training Corp for that reason to go and get in the airforce. All young people want to do our bit. But so be it. You can see now it was just chaotic the whole situation. It was all – and the airforce was full up so you were either going in the army or navy. And in their wisdom Ernie Bevin, the Labour Minister thought he'd put men in the mines because they'd lost staff in the first part of the war.

A.K. You said about manual work - you weren't at all used to it?

A.H. No, no. It was really I mean you had to use your hands. We weren't built for it. The people themselves – these chaps who lived in the North – I was a small frame person. The manual work was quite unheard of but we did it. It was not shovelling in so far as hacking coal it was haulage.

A.K. Can you explain what you did with haulage? What it entailed.

A.H. Well in the colliery there was a rope and the empties used to come down on one rope and you'd put the full ones back on the other. It was a machine that kept all the cable going and you had clips. You'd clip it on, it was a bit of a knack to do it but they'd butt on the wire and take the loaded tubs away from the face you see. The empties would come down one way and they'd go back on the other road you see. That's what it was basically speaking. We did shift work. Morning 6-1.30 and 2 till 10 and sometimes I did nights but I didn't do a lot of night work. I'd no need to but it was always alternate weeks, 6 till 1.30 and the 2 o'clock until 10.

A.K. You said that you first went to do some training. Can you explain what training was?

A.H. It was mostly safety. Mostly was safety things you see. The safety down in the mine – not taking contraband - it was all safety things really. It's so dangerous down there for gasses etc. that we had to be sure we knew what we were doing. They took us down. After about four days we went down below and it was just, how can I put it? It was just a new world to us really. Quite dusty and stinking down there too. You haven't been down have you?

A.K. I haven't been down. And you spoke about your accommodation in these Bevin Boy hostels. Can you explain how they functioned and what they were like?

A.H. The government created a company called the National Service Hostels Corporation, and these the Government set up. Built and run by the Government for us miners. They were comfortable in so far as you were 12 in a dormitory, 6 each side. You had all the basics but no finesse. I mean they were charity really. The hot water pipes were at the top so the heat was non-existent. But that's what it was. They were put up quickly. They were Nissen huts like the army would use joined up with a

corridor and just basic sleeping really. We had a cabinet and our bed and the maid, nurse would change the sheets every 2 or 3 days. From that point of view it was comfortable and the food was very good, plenty of food. In industrial we all got extra cheese and all got extra this and that. The food was all right but it was all a bit crudely done.

A.K. And you never went into billets?

A.H. No I didn't go. I chose to keep in a hostel. I could have gone into private but I chose to keep there. I suppose being a bit lazy really but I thought while I'm here with the lads and you all got to be a community. We didn't all work the same colliery. There we are in Castleford. There was a lot of collieries round there and they had buses. We used to go at different times to different collieries you see. So all the people that lived there didn't all work at the same place. I mean our colliery was about seven or eight miles from where we lived so we had a long journey. We used to get up at 4, the bus would go at 5.10 and you'd get to the pit about 5.40 and change and go down for 6 o'clock you see.

A.K. And was the mine work as you expected it to be? Was it as you expected it to be?

A.H. Well, now after having been on training I knew. But it was different when you came up to reality from a training centre. I mean the size of the colliery was huge at Frickley, was a huge colliery and it was quite modern in it's way. In that the people that owned it – it was quite modern but out in the workings it was very dull and dank. At the pit bottom it was rather like an underground station. It was all brick built but when you got out in the workings it got a bit crude then you see.

A.K. And what was your relationship with the other Bevin Boys? Did you get on well with them?

A.H. Yes, we all did. I mean make friends for the time. You all said afterwards would write but didn't no contact but we all went at different times so this was it you see. I'm a member of the Bevin Boy Association. Is Peter a member? [cousin Peter H.] So you know all about it don't you? I've been to one or two functions but I didn't know anybody.

A.K. So you haven't kept in contact with any –

A.H. No only in the Association but not with the people concerned. I mean I've been to one or two functions they've been to and I've been the only one from Frickley. You put stickers on and I was the only one. I did recognise one chap but he was only at the hostel, he wasn't in the same colliery but I got chatting to him but it was 50 years ago.

A.K. What was your relationship with the other miners? The miners that were already there –

A.H. Well they accepted us. They looked on us as Greenhorns, Cockneys and I don't know what. They took to us eventually but they were a bit sceptical. These were hard-bitten men who'd been there all their life. I mean their families, these villages,

colliery village, it was their life. I mean South Elmsall, where we were was a real village community. No one had any car. They had to live and they all went to their own clubs, pubs and they kept much to the community and there was no television then. They didn't know what was happening in the outside world, only with the cinema. But they were hard drinkers they liked their drink.

A.K. And did you join them?

A.H. No, I had a drink but I didn't do what they did you know. Since I've got older I've got worse you see.

A.K. What was the social life then? What sort of things did you do?

A.H. I used to go out a lot. I used to go to the cinema; I used to go to Leeds - shows there. I'm a loner so I never got to know a lot of people really as far as going out anywhere. I knew them in the community but not to go anywhere and I liked to do a lot of walking. I still when I was young – I used to do a lot of walking. When I was on the Saturday and got the all clear or something like that or round these places in Yorkshire, which was limited because of wartime but you could get about if you wanted to. You could go to Scarborough and that you know. But it was just the fact of doing something really but I never got bored. But I say I still read a lot so there you are.

A.K. Was absenteeism and desertion rife?

A.H. Well yes it was, yes.

A.K. Did you do it?

A.H. No, well it was money we couldn't afford to. Absenteeism in that world - manual work there was a lot of absenteeism that's the biggest fault of these things. Men would have 2 or 3 days off at a time, go sick, go down and get the certificate so there was not absenteeism in that respect but it was just a way of life. I suppose all manual people had that. I wasn't use to it in an office you went 9 to 5 Mon to Sat, never went off sick but up there to me when they went off sick - but I didn't do it myself couldn't afford to. If you went off sick you didn't get any pay.

A.K. And you were having to pay your –

A.H. I was having to pay, yes. I must say when I went to Yorkshire I was getting more money than I was in London. A coincidence because miners, their money was better. We were low-grade people but we got - I was doing better financially as far as going up there than I was in an office but that's the way things are. Manual workers and white-collar workers there's a difference in the ? you see but you had to pay your own accommodation at the hostel. I forget what we paid now. What a couple of pounds a week I suppose, might have been that but it was all right in that respect. We used to have meal tickets. You had a ticket for your breakfast and your dinner. You had to pay your own way. We weren't – we had to buy our own clothes as well. Well we had vouchers to buy boots and things. Well we only used boots and a helmet but

they issued you with a helmet. But you had to buy boots. I think they gave us a pair initially. I am sure they did.

A.K. Were there any accidents in the pit where you were?

A.H. There were accidents, yes. I did drop a chain on my toe one time and broke my toe. I did have to come home but this is what you get you see but I have seen some nasty things happen when the roof falls and things like that but it's a hazard of the job I'm afraid and these chaps seem to take it in their – but it's rather sad when these people, you know, get falls of coal as they used to. When the roof was a bit unsure and people would be trapped but luckily, touch wood, I was never happening. Its like any of these jobs there's always a risk factor.

A.K. Were there pit ponies?

A.H. Yes we had pit ponies but they only used only to take materials around they weren't used to bring coal out. They were only used for like the carpenters or the engineers to carry. They were stabled just on the bottom of the pit bottom and these ponies were kept there just to tow these trucks along really. They were not used to carry coal or something but they never saw daylight these ponies. Only about once or twice a year but they were happy in their own way. I don't think there are ponies in pits now. At one time it was all ponies of course.

A.K. Did you work with them?

A.H. I did initially when I worked in the girder shop. I was in the girder shop and I used to go and get a pony out. It was a little job you know – when the girders got bent they had a machine there that would straighten them out. And in doing so they had these tubs and they'd be towed along by a pony. Because this was one of those jobs that had to be done down there rather than be worn out you see. That's what I did when I first went, then you get transferred to the face – well not the face, near the face.

A.K. But you didn't actually work on the face?

A.H. No, I didn't. We weren't allowed to. It was only – we weren't allowed to, well I say we weren't allowed to, I wouldn't have wanted to. I was always a couple of hundred yards away from the actual face. But the coal was brought along on these conveyors and the transferred into the tub you see. Then as the face moved they would move it all forward you see. It was moving all the time.

A.K. And you had to join the Union?

A.H. Yes.

A.K. What was your attitude to that?

A.H. Well I stuck that for a long while but then you see the miner's union in those days was very strong. Arthur Horner was the miner's President and the tail wagged the dog. The miners were a very strong union. There was half a million of them at one

time. They were telling the Government what they wanted more or less so they were strong. They had decided that they wanted us in the union and we had to join or we didn't have to join but otherwise you'd get your name on the risk Board and they wouldn't work with you. It was as simple as that. So for sixpence a week I wasn't going to argue was I.

A.K. Did you get to visit your own family very much during this time?

A.H. I used to come home about once every 6, 8 weeks I mean about every 8 weeks I'd come home or maybe 3 months possibly. I was not happy up there. I was always a bit homesick in the North but you got used to it because the war was on, down here bombing was going on and you were not safe up there but it was safer. But I came home about every three months or so.

A.K. So were you aware of the war going on, I mean only when you came home?

A.H. Only newspapers. I'd phone my Mum up and my Dad up. We were on the phone I'd phone her every now and again, about every week or so just to see how things were. We always used to write as it's all you do to keep in touch. You see there's no – the communications were quite weak really in that respect. There's no televisions, only radio or the newspapers. Everything was censored. And if you'd ring up you'd say 'are you alright?' You'd get to hear a bit about a raid in |London, but you rung up and that was it. They had air raids in the North. They had one in Sheffield and Leeds. When I went up there in 1944 the D-Day had started so the blitz had died off. They were having in London the flying bombs, which you've heard about no doubt. But there was no war as it used to be. Every night they'd come over and bombings so the D-Day had started – the push into Europe had started so consequently it quietened down in England.

A.K. And this area wasn't affected much?

A.H. Yes, yes. We had bombings here. In 1940 when the blitz was quite high we had bombings. There's places where you see where they've all been built up over the years. These gaps. But we were near the docks here; we saw a lot of it. Where the airport is was the docks. They were very badly bombed in 1940. The planes came over here and this all started in September 1940 when the Battle of Britain started. We had bombings round here but not as bad as some parts of London.

A.K. Are there any anecdotes you have to tell about your time in mines? Anything special happened or is it just every day –

A.H. Yes, it's every day the same really. It was a routine job really I mean. Any bad news is good news but I couldn't say anything really happened to me in a bad sort of way. It just the fact that you were there but you was always glad when the time came for you to go home. And that was said when you'd finished and you just put your notice in and that was it. Like a job I suppose but that's all you could do really. Anecdotes – I was with people that I got to know but nothing continuous.

A.K. So your reactions were quite pleased when you heard that you'd been demobbed?

A.H. Oh yes. I mean when I came home – you see when we went up there it was like joining the army. The war was at it's height and no-one knew how long they were going in for and in 1939 you went in the army and if you were in the reserves your ? was called up immediately like all the reserves were. And you didn't know how long, it was open ended. But when we went up there we didn't know how long we were going to be up there more than the army did. It was just that we were civilians in that respect but we were under control. The Ministry of Labour, if you came home, could come and get you and bring you back. In our local paper you would often hear chaps would come home and be brought back. You just couldn't escape it. I mean the fact that if you were told to go, you did it. When the war ended in 1945 everyone wanted to know what was going to happen. We all wanted to go home tomorrow situation like the army did. And then the Ministry wrote to us and said we had to fill in a form and they said we had to go into the Labour Exchange in Castleford and put these forms in. and we were all given a demob number and when the Government announced when the men were going to go home, they were all given a demob number according to their length of service and we were told – I was in a group – I forget what I was in. Anyway I used to enquire when I'd see a soul when I came down I'd say 'what number are you?' because I knew they were coming home to be demobbed. They'd say I'm 65 and I've 15 numbers to come yet so – but when you knew through that really. I mean that is how it was. We did have a demob number and it was our National Service.

A.K. So you weren't demobbed until '48?

A.H. Yes, that's right, Jan '48, I think about the 15th January 1948. But we got nothing. We just came home. We weren't given any clothes or hats or coats. We just came home and that was it. But that's why it's all come up now about what the Bevin Boys are showing signs of what's happening you see. Then they formed a Bevin Boy Association. So this is it. I get a newsletter now and again. If I wanted to I could go and walk in the parade in Whitehall. Whether I will do I don't know.

A.K. And when you were demobbed you had a letter offering you a job in the coalmines?

A.H. Yes.

A.K. You didn't consider that?

A.H. No, I had a job in London you see. I mean Peter [cousin] took a job in London. He was up in Cresswell, Woodhouse I think, well anyway by coincidence he just took a job in London, that's all. I suppose I could have had a job but I didn't pursue it really. I knew I had a job to go back to. You had to have a job offered to you. The Government, whether you wanted to you had a job to go back to. The Government or the soldiers or so on. So I was in the same situation if I want the job and I went back to ? and that was it you see. Peter got in on the ground floor with the Coal Board and he did very well but that's how it is you see. I preferred to keep where I was and I went to be a commercial traveller all my life after that.

A.K. So your life after the war wasn't influenced at all from your experiences as a Bevin Boy?

A.H. No. Now how can I put it? I didn't forget it. Now often they said 'oh you'll come back' – when I said goodbye to the chaps they said 'oh you'll come back' and I said 'oh no.' But curiosity killed the cat. I went back. After about five years I went back on a day trip from King's Cross to Doncaster and I relived what I did before. It was quite interesting because I didn't have to go to work. It was about 8 years after I left, 1956 and in those days you had day excursions so I went up to Doncaster and the same bus was running to Frickley and I went there and I saw people who I recognised and I knew what time the shift would break up and I saw one or two chaps and I was pleased to do it. That was it you see. Then I thought after a time other things take over. Now me and my wife we were going on holiday a couple of years ago up to Scarborough and we went round to Frickley and it's dead. There's nothing there. It's all gone. It's sold. It's finished you see.

A.K. The pit's closed?

A.H. The pit's closed. When they all closed, I mean it's all different. It was about five years ago. The pit had just closed. So it was all more or less a political thing came up, Heseltine etc. And just because we were going up that way, just come off the M1. It was interesting but it didn't seem the same place really. You see more people about. There wasn't many people about in those days. The place was very sparse but now of course it's all grown up and cars and transport etc. so it's all England now where the North and South were more or less divided you know.

A.K. How do you feel now about having been a Bevin Boy? Is there any resentment?

A.H. No, I'm pleased I did it. When you're young you resent that you couldn't do what you want to do but I didn't regret doing it. I mean these people talk about going abroad but what could I do? I was over here and I did the best I could under the circumstances. I knuckled down to it. Peter did as well. He knuckled down to it. That's it, if you're of that disposition – we had chaps with us who went home but they were brought back and it was just the situation where it's a person's make up. If you can do it, do it. And there were some who were very anti and so be it you know. You always get it in all walks of life someone who is anti and they just go home but of course they had to come back eventually and there you are.

A.K. A personal question. Do you consider yourself a Bevin Boy or rather a former Bevin Boy? I've been told to clarify this.

A.H. I'm only a former Bevin Boy. I'm not a Bevin Boy now am I, but if it suits me I'll be one. I'm a member of the Bevin Boys Association. Well you see we all are all older people now.

A.K. Yes, that's why I think the term Bevin Boy sounds funny.

A.H. You see when it all happened we were just boys, youths.

A.K. 18 year olds.

A.H. 18 year olds and this is it. We were just boys, youths. You know hadn't left school very long. 2 or 3 years or 4 years in the case of 14 but about 3 or 4 so consequently we were called boys. It's an easy name to remember – Bevin Boy. Ernie Bevin was the Minister of Labour, as you know and he had this idea. For his sins he did this and you were called boys so you weren't called Bevin Men and its still called Bevin Boy you see.

A.K. So you refer to yourself as a Bevin Boy rather than a former Bevin Boy?

A.H. I am. I did the job and that's it you see. I've still got my old paycheck of Frickley Colliery.

A.K. Oh right. This is the –

A.H. That's my paycheck. That cost me a shilling.

A.K. This is a metal disc with the number 772.

A.H. Yes, that was my number. So whenever I see a 772 guess what I think of?

A.K. Yes, indeed.

A.H. That's been on my key ring for 50 years.

A.K. So you had to use this to get your money?

A.H. Yes, yes. The system at the colliery was, when you went you got a check hole as they call it and you were given a disc and they took it off a board and when you got down the bottom you put in a box at the bottom of the pit and so they would know who was down there. But Fridays was payday. You got two. You got this one which is your pay check and your normal so when you came out of the pit you went to get your check hole, your pay, after you'd had a shower or bath or whatever. So I said I'd lost mine so it cost me a shilling. I knew I hadn't but that was all I could get as a reminder as my days and there it is Frickley Colliery see. You can imagine it's been on there for 50 years. It's quite thick. To me it's a memento.

A.K. So you are interested in that respect, in looking back?

A.H. Well I like looking – nostalgia is a great thing. I've got a great long memories of things and I remember them pretty well. Some things you forget but when you get to that age, that's when you're growing up, at 18. You're growing up and the world is coming and you remember things, I think you remember things as you get older – you wouldn't know this but that happened years ago more than happened a few years ago. It's a fact of life. I remember almost the first day of school. But when things come to you, you can remember things. I keep a diary, I do every day but I always have done. But by doing so you can remember and it all comes back to you when you see the number like 772.

A.K. You can use the number on the lottery.

A.H. No, it hasn't been that much lucky but now you see it's just the way things are but it's no trouble to keep it on there. It's Frickley you see. In those days it was quite – it would still be used but now it's all gone so it must be worth a few bob. But that's how things are you see. I like keeping a memento. They mean something to me. That does. Silly isn't it?

A.K. No, not at all.

A.H. When they wrote to us and said you've got to go – the way they put it was official. You are now going to work in Yorkshire; they gave you a choice of where you could go. And I could have gone to Annfield Plain, which was near Liverpool. I could have gone north to Newcastle or I could have chosen Doncaster. I looked on the map and I thought Doncaster is not so far from London. It's 156 miles but it wasn't so far as going to the North and this is it. I did 'phone up about Kent and they said there are no vacancies in Kent. Well I don't think they wanted men in Kent. They weren't perhaps short of colliers or miners in Kent so this is why I didn't. There might have been some for all I know. I could have gone to South Wales but I had this choice of 4 places and I chose one of them and that's all it was really. It was a real lottery. I mean I could have gone to South Wales; it was a lottery in that respect. Where they wanted men, boys, they gave you that you know. Where you lived meant nothing really. Like the Army. If you lived there they'd just send you where you had to go. I was lucky in so far that – Peter was in Nottinghamshire, I believe, well I was just above him. There was some quite big collieries in Nottinghamshire. Some quite big ones there but I was just above so it wasn't like going to the frozen north.

A.K. Did you meet Peter at all whilst you were a Bevin Boy?

A.H. No, I didn't. when he came home he lived in ? Park and with his parents. If we were home together we'd go and have a drink together, but we didn't really correspond a lot because we're not correspondent people you see and this is all there is to it really. But we knew each other well and that was it you see.

A.K. There were collieries. I think Snowdown and Betteshanger –

A.H. Betteshanger and Tilmanstone.

A.K. They took Bevin Boys. I've met one so far who was in Snowdown.

A.H. Well he may have – was he a local chap? Did he live in Kent did he?

A.K. In Kent, yes.

A.H. Well he was lucky wasn't he? We had people in Frickley who had worked in Kent. When you were just owned by a private company, the chap would move, he'd be transferred or he'd want to move from say somewhere in Kent to Yorkshire or vice versa, you could move around but you couldn't leave the industry I don't think. Kent now there's no collieries. That's Betteshanger and Chislet and Tilmanstone, there's about four but they've been gone years now. There's no collieries at all now. No one wants coal do they? Steam – we don't have coal now so everything is much cleaner

now. I must say it was very filthy in the North. I mean everything was – around Doncaster and Leeds, I mean the pits – but that's how things were. And Sheffield, we've been back there and you can't believe it's the same place but it's all a smokeless zone now you see.

They gave you a choice of where you could go. It was a lottery really.

(END)

George R.

Transcript of interview with George R.,

conducted at his home on 9th May 2001 by Ann Kneif

G.R. Lets see it was late '35 I was apprenticed to a joiner by '39 all we were on were standby really for bomb damage and all we were doing were or into '40 actually it were worse that's when the most damage and all we were doing were felting up and making houses fit to live in as cheap as you could and realising that I wasn't getting anywhere with this really that was a natural thing. Didn't want to be a joiner for that so they decided to put me into Shorts the seaplane works after a lot of negotiating, on the Sunderland and the Stirling bomber. We were making bits. We were getting bombed so much they were putting us round in little workshops you know possibly employing 50 people because it got like that the Medway and it was bombed every day once they got the line on it you know and they realized it wasn't worth running. Anyway, from there on we happened to be this was 1944 I think you've got that in what I sent you. in 1944 It was when they called me to the pits but you have that don't you? Must have been in '43 I volunteered for the Air Force I was fed up with requisition work on a furniture firm they sent us to Slough? to get down onto an aircraft who hadn't a clue between you and me. I think all they done was Littlewoods furniture pre-war and it was a chair that didn't stand up they were hopeless. Littlewoods used to sell them really rubbish.

Well on the aircraft they hadn't a clue they were ? so we were sent up there to get it was a Miles – a Miles Martinets mind you it was a nice little plan 390 horsepower, but it was for target towing they reckoned. But possibly it was something to do with gliders if they ever used them. I was so fed up. Once we got the job going – the jigs working in the end of the shop, where the majority of their workmen worked to have some idea of how we worked because basically we were making almost 100% bonus And they couldn't cut the bonus down because their chaps couldn't make any at all so they put us in these shops so they watched how we're working. But anyway I got so fed up starting a pair of wings every day that's what it amounted to all the ribs and that used to come pre-prepared and we used to make the jigs when they first started making them like but they had a couple of chaps on that in the shop. We made a rig so I volunteered for the Air force and I was accepted. I had me tests up at High Wycome. The next thing I hears – must have been the end of '43 I should think, would I consider going in for coal mining – going working in the coal mines rather than Air force. So I almost scribbled no across it – you know 'get lost' and anyway, I don't know how long after – a month or two they said I'd been picked out the ballot. Anyway we were sent to Newcastle -

A.K. You didn't appeal about going down the mines?

G.R. No, it was no good appealing in the war you was a conscientious objector if you done that. But if I'd known as much as I knew after I'd been in the pits after about 18 months, which I only had to do over 2 year they reckon. The chaps that couldn't stick it they cleared off and eventually put in the Army and that is what I would have gone

for rather than that. It was a living hell that. Going down the pit and there was German prisoners cutting hedges and that out on top. It made you wonder which side you're on. Well anyway regardless of that you ride these things and after you have a months training in a pit where 2 seams which run together which was at Bustfield Morris and Anfield Plain? Where 2 seams run together with a small band of stone in the training pit where we were working were 6 foot high which weren't bad for my height you know. But anyway it was just insight really basically If you wasn't energetic and wanted to do something and get the shift over you learnt nothing at all. But anyway the next pit I sent too the tubs were, which was 3 foot 6 high, coal tubs. They were the crudest thing that run on wheels. Anyone that laid the lines, you know for the run and the wheels were half set, but if they didn't lay the lines right they used to hit a jump and come off and then you had to lift them on and they must have weighed 12 cwt. But being as the wheels was underset you could manage it you weren't jiggered by the time you got 'em on but there was no-one else to give you a hand unless you walked about a quarter of a mile and get some of the coal hauliers like but once they put you in a pit you couldn't change what was it 3 and a half years eventually I was there. They kept putting the demo number back with the Army so instead of doing 2 years I ended up 3 and a half years. But you couldn't change pits until the last year I suppose, perhaps a little more and of course being as you were directed I kept getting night shift and their night shift was 6 o'clock at night till 2 o'clock in the morning. Well I mean a day like yesterday, going to the pit with that sun in the evening when all the chaps were going out for a drink and that. So anyway when they – when I could change me pit I went and found me own job. It was a hell of a job. What they called putting. You went and changed the man? With what they call – they used to mine coal but if there was any property or anything over the top or anywhere where they thought that they'd build on or run roads on it was called boards and walls so you cut I suppose a 6 foot passage to get the tubs in – in places – the lowest place was where there was a hitch? This is where there must have been an earthquake, bit of an earth shake, you know when you have a fault and you took the coal off and then you usually took the bottom cams off which is the stone to work the head in at about 5 foot high. But after you work a head in you prop it with, you used to prop it with wooden props. Two heads were used on top of this wooden prop and then I think it was about 2and a half by 5 wooden plank. Used to strut that up so that when it put weight on, which it did. They reckon the bottom come up but it was the top coming down. I mean they say what they like. You knew what was falling so you – how could it be bottom coming up if the top was falling down but they ere blinding you with science or trying to. But then you run the head in 6 foot in – you take the cams off, what they called the phone? Which …. Getting up sometime and then you went over- you left the cams in on say your left hand side, if that was the side they were working, you went over 6 foot and took the coal out and then you left a pillar of coal in to keep the prop up, further on than that, so you kept driving the head in and of course all the while on a pit that hadn't been worked before, you used to drive this head in and of course it used to be a gas pocket. And I mean you knew it was gas because when you was changing the man you filled his tub. You were running the empty tub in pulling the cam pull it was – pushing the fore and out but if it wasn't quite full and you know you used to lean against the prop and you know within 5 minutes you was asleep if there was ? there – you can understand people and the hewer he was putting off as they called it – he used to say to you cos I suppose some of them thought I was a bit green till I'd been there a bit you know – don't leave us. If you haven't got a tub for us cos sometimes we used to get a breakdown and we used

to have an hours wait for blooming tubs so if you was trying to make money you couldn't cos you lost it then. And incidentally the funny part about mining was you'd think – I think the deepest pit I was in was about 60000 cos the shaft was driven and then you went off like a shelf in different seams and they usually worked from the top and then worked up. But between those seams I don't know how far they were at that part but you could hear sets running above yer. You know where they'd gone in like the shelf to go to the toilet and of course that went up and down so putting sometimes you had to help her up?? so you had to, to get up the ? pushing about 12 cwt of coal which had no bearings as you know of They just run with all the dust collecting up on the wheels – never greased they used to squeak. But if it was wet which a lot of them were – when I was putting you had - they'd bore a hole there, drop a charge in, split below it so that the water drained into that, because at times it was like monsoons coming down. I used to have an old cape. When I used to go through the road where I was working wet because you had about 8 to 10 men to look after all depending on how good the coal was. Say you was putting on an A several of them was dry back? When you went through the A I mean all I had was an old vest – never washed and a pair of shorts, that was all you had on. You'd sweat like a pig and really you used to get drowned and of course cold and they used to give you a shilling a shift for wet money. That was, they used to say if it's one dropper or a thousand and one droppers as they called it, you still got a shilling. You didn't get variations. But by the time you got round 7 men you were just about dried off with the heat from you body and that, you had to go through this wet again. You was, you know really cold. But that's neither here nor there but this is the slavery of the Durham miners. How they were so, well they reckon they are all comedians and I believe it. I don't reckon anyone would go to a job like that unless there was no work about. They were a happy crowd and they were real decent people. But without them the job wouldn't have been – well I wouldn't have stopped. The pit which was just wide of Blatham, a place called Wickham, it was a ??? that went under the bank and we used to go down the pit about a mile away. But you could shout at the down the shaft. It was so near the top and that had been worked centuries ago. It definitely had because there were bits of rail left in Where you were working the coal you'd come across railing and they say that coal is compressed trees and on the top stone there was all fern leaves and that cast in the molten stone as the earth was formed like and you know you could get perfect in the solid stone when you knocked the top down. It was – but of course the other thing about that was you smoke there which was handy 'cos the air ways was good, being as it had been worked before and all. And you used to have a candle. It was like a V closed in and it had a point on that end all made out of little ? they were and you bought them for about a tanner I think. You had to buy them and you had to buy yer own candles and when you was putting they had a wooden bump through the end of the tub so when they were running together that was the bump, you used to stick yer candle in there. You didn't see where you was going, all you saw was where you was running on the track and between the track and of course when they put a shot on anywhere you were in the dark cos it blew yer candle out. And then I mean you get 300 0r 400 yards in and in a dark tunnel you didn't know where you was going you just had to feel right to go out to the flat where you could get a light. It was slavery. Of course they had a few hauling engines where it used to pull them up, the heavy. Once you got it out near the shaft. At Wickham it was – you had to go down to a drift on the ties like at a place called, near Bladen, a place called Twirlwell? And it all used to run out of the side of the hill there. It was like the railway terminal really with these blooming trucks and it was slavery. When you think about it you done a horses work

and it was some of the heaviest work. It must have been 1 in 6 at least what they expected you to push up. So you went like the wind down one side to get up the other. Well of course if it did come off you spent 10 minutes, quarter of an hour, in sweat, tears and blinding to get it on and you were just about jiggered as I said when you got in on, without start pushing again. Of course if you did come off and you was really flying it used to draw the timber and all down – it used to draw the top down sometimes you know it was so. With this ?? we used to run, that timber you put in at first started off at about five foot about varied in places - if a lot of stuff fell, of course you had to start higher but there was always plenty of the hewers there if there was an accident to give you a hand to get the top up again as it was called you know. Within 3 months that place had closed to just enough to clear a tub so a 3 foot 6 tub, as it came down there used to be a deputy. They were good blokes most of them, most of 'em I say, some of them were excellent, buts that's neither here nor there. They used to put the timber in if you told 'em can't get down there. You couldn't get the dump down there and they would knock the timber out and get it up higher. Just enough to clear the tub and of course I suppose the – 3 foot 6 high – what would that be? As high as that fireplace wouldn't it? Well you can just imagine 6 foot tall bloke, pushing like hell I scratches? yer back. I never had me back without scratches on it. You know you used to go down once and you perhaps for a week or two when you were clear and the next week you'd go down you'd catch yer back and of course on top of that and coal dust flying away. It was it was slavery. Politicians ought to go down – you can put that in if you like – and work there. There was nothing else in the district for the locals and there was a real good load of chaps. Where I worked you got 1 or 2 youngsters as wanted a good sorting out. But we won't say anything about that. So after I'd been there, after I'd been to Greenside – night shift again, 6 in the evening till 2 in the morning – that used to wake me up, 2 o'clock in the morning, across the fields, ice on the road every morning, you know winter time. I used to have a pillion passenger and we only came off about twice. He said 'you're mad you'. I said 'well I keep up don't I', because you could feel it sliding and he didn't like that at all It must have been about 9 mile away from where I was lodging. I had a good lodging, excellent people in Gateshead. They couldn't do enough for you. Sometimes when it was really cold, frosty and I came in at 2 o'clock in the morning the landlord would – there would be a bowl of soup on the table. He'd been up till 2 o'clock, possibly half past by the time I got there and there'd be the hot soup on the table. You couldn't use any decent clothes. I had an old overcoat that I used to put on but an overcoat didn't take those northern winds out – not in the winter. As I say they were excellent people.

A.K. Was he a miner?

G.R. No, nothing about that, he came down to London in the depression and he actually came from a place called Alston, the highest market town in England and if anyone's that way you want to go and look at it and 2 or 3 miles from there, there is a pit that was possibly a century before I went there, working again, you know just – I don't suppose they would take the lowest grades. You've got all the screens and that what the women used to do so they left all ??? and if you're near Newcastle there's a mining museum at the end of the town moor or it was. I don't know whether it's still there. I haven't been that way for a few years but its well worth a look at – how they were working. The women used to grab the coal in like toast? Baskets along wooden boards, used to crawl along the pebbles I mean. A pittance for a pittance that's all it amounted to. It was slavery when I was there but – I don't know how they ever stood

it then – God knows. But of course there were so many rich coal owners weren't there. But when the war started of course they had to work everything because they wanted the coal and yet we still didn't have any did we. This was the funny one this. If the pit we were working at – 'cos I used to have to go home black, 'cos no pit I worked at and they used to tell you , well if the pits not going to run 5 years they can't afford to put baths in. They did supply you with extra soap 'cos it was rationed but they didn't supply you with coal, although you worked there. The miners were getting coal. They used to have a load kipped and some of those women they could use the shovel better than I could. They had a little trap about 6 foot up the wall and they used get the lorry up in the gutter and they could shovel. The first landlady we had at a place called Quaken Houses? For a month, 'cos they were always falling down. All the coal had been worked out. The pit was at the bottom of the road and they had so much bother with them, there must have been – I don't know, 150 houses in these terraces and the colliery bought 'em and they used to repair them because it was costing so much to – they employed their own. I never got on – that wasn't pit work that wasn't, but. While I knew it in 3 and a half years the house I lodged in at first – they were called Quaken Houses, South Moor?, near Stanley, County Durham this was. They collapsed twice, they had the builders building one wing or the other. And another funny thing about mining, when I first went up there, you know it was a strange place and I didn't realize but one night there was some bloke hollering about out in the street, and I looked at me watch and I thought '2 o'clock in the morning, what the hell' I went and tell him what to do with himself but of course he possibly couldn't understand me being a Tynesider. I was telling him to get – you know really. When I told the landlady – I got up next morning – this was when we were on day shift. She said you've chocked the knocker up off. I said what do you mean the knocker up, I would have knocked him up if I could have got hold of him. I said I had only just about got to sleep. So she said well he goes round and knocking the miners up to go to the pit. I didn't half – you'd better tell him that I'm sorry but so then I used to stuff cotton wool in my ear so that I could sleep. They were a proper mining family. Really it was – well I didn't realize that there were people that existed like it – I didn't really. But I had that for a month and then they found me another lodge and sent me to Wickham pit. That's another thing, till I got me pushbike up there I had to walk 3 and a half miles to this Bagnall? Shaft before you started. 2'oclock in the morning you had to leave home about 1 and then you had to run like hell to get there. And if you were 10 minutes late they wouldn't let you down. So you got all black up in your black clothes and you had to come back home. It was a pantomime really at times but you took it in good part. Anyway I got me pushbike up there and I realized that I would use all my strength the way I was going. You know what with walking to or even push biking to this pit although I was joinery it wasn't really heavy and I was always pretty fit anyway, which was a good job. I got me motorbike up there and got coal, I got petrol for going to an appropriate pit, so that helped but of course that's how me motorbike got up there. And from then on I had that for about a year. I was – they had the queer shift. That was 2'oclock in the morning till 10. You did 2 till 10 backers in that pit. The men used to go for it, which was their best shift. They were all gamblers up there. That was the first topic. 'What you doing Dave?' they was good tipsters too. The only time I really made betting pay. How people vote for them shifts I don't know. And the of course they sent me to Wickham, to Greenside, Stella Coal Company. Some coal owner had 2 daughters and I think one was called Stella . It was the Stella Coal Company when they originally sunk it centuries ago – so they was telling me. And one of the other pits was called Emma, after the other daughter see.

And of course it was whoever run the pit then, Sirs and that, which I – a genuine Sir yeah but that wouldn't have done me then. Like today it won't. When you work for someone and realize who they are and what they are. With me – I wonder if I was a bit of a rebel. Why they wouldn't put me in the police force, why they wouldn't let me go in the police force. I've often wondered that. But I didn't do too badly in the end. Anyway they put me to Greenside, night shift again, moving the stone, taking the cange? Off. Because you – night shift you used to go in there and at Greenside they had windy picks? And everything, coal cutters, that was a decent pit but it was still slavery. Bit of machinery – I thought to myself I'll be alright on that, being as I've always been machine minded you know and couldn't take it. I couldn't even go in the joiners shop 'cos because there was a joiners shop at the pit because that was on top see. But it had its fruits eventually because when I went to Marley Hill, that was what they called a tatty? Pit. It was so old that they had wooden sleets down the shaft, cut to run round them to keep the cage in. Well the speed they used to travel when they was drawing coal. The coal tubs used to come up, put one in the cage at that one. And when it come up it used to lift almost on the shaft and you could see when it stopped those tubs used to literally jump off the cage. But of course when they had men aboard they used to go slower. But while I was at Marley Hill, changing the subject, they had an accident. Its ripped all these wooden bits off down the shaft see and they said to me 'you were a joiner, wouldn't like to muck in?' They used to let you down on cage and they used to fix them back see. I said 'I'm for mining, not for putting the sleet (skeet?) rails in.' I said 'when I wanted to go into the joiners shop at another pit they wouldn't let me go.' And what happened then that was '47 – everyone went to the pit. I lived right on top of one hill, Lobley Hill it was called, out from the Tyne valley. In '47 I taxed the motorbike in January to March, I used it for a fortnight, then the '47 winter, you looked out of the window of a morning – when you had your shift off weekend like – you looked out and every morning the snow was higher you see. For me, when you come up the pit of a morning and it was – those shifts were – lets think – must have been in the evening, it must have been midnight, yer when we went down, but of course they'd cleared the road all day for the normal traffic and the bus used to come up, you couldn't ride a bike, there was no thing?. I couldn't use the bike, used it for a fortnight. Couldn't use it and I didn't use till after March. Every night it seemed it snowed. So we went up to this pit, that must have been 3 or 4 miles away, yeah, 3 and a half to 4 miles away I suppose. We used to go up on the bus. Busses, I reckon they run in 1940 more. If you fell out of it you broke yer neck all these blooming great old .. but of course dirty pitmen see. We used to get up on the bus. When we come up out of the pit, no bus we had to walk home after a shift work in snow and the funny part about it was a bloke called jack Lamb who one of them always putting off of but in that pit I had a pony. They were marvellous things. Mind their horse keeper, and they used to keep them right, he was a vet really I think. Greenside had a vet to come down to keep 'cos they had quite a few horses there you know. This Jack Lamb I was talking about, I used to put off him in the flat and it was a law that the miners had made amongst themselves. If you got their work out, if you could put them, I think it was 12 of these trucks a shift, when you had 7 or 8 to serve like, if you put 12 of these tubs, they'd fill the 13th for you. You used to put the token on, you used to have token and staple it on so no one could change it you know. They used to fill the 13th for you. Some of them, you know getting on a bit in years, they'd take the 12 and then chuck their hand in 'cos they'd made the money see. But this Jack he'd had a – I didn't realize but he always used to hobble and I didn't realize but when the snow was down he had a wooden leg. Oh and I couldn't help laughing. I've

always been a jovial sort of bloke and he used to walk ¾ mile further than me, after he'd worked the pit like. But in the end I wouldn't walk with him, I'd walk about 6 foot off 'cos if he was going to fall over – which I fell over sometimes trying to walk through the snow. And I said 'blow you Jack' sometimes stronger you know once you put all ? in but he took it all in good part. But then I realized he had a wooden leg but it was through a pit accident you know. There was no end of them. There was in one pit, there was an Overman who was in charge, you know like of that section. He used to work too, if you was wanting too he used to give you a hand. It was only single track into the landing and they used to take the empty ones one side and the full 'uns the other so they could hook them on and pull them out. He caught his finger between the bumpers as he- on some beams you had to twist each tub as it went by and pick them off. I wasn't there at the time but he had a finger off and they told me what had happened. They said he laid his finger on the rails, so one of the blokes who was working with him and he said chop the bloody thing off he said its no good now. But he was one finger short. But that was his – miracles – you know. As I say that was it – that was at Wickham, when I was at Wickham. And there was a character, a deputy used to walk round, keep you right, Greener they called him and his brother was Overman and this John he was a character. When you was fine with running with these tubs, people had to get out of yer way they. In that pit it was a gassy pit we had to ??? and they could see you coming along and there used to have to be holes cut, so if anyone was walking the track you had to jump in there 'cos they knew you'd have bowled them down 'cos what with the noise and that you can't hear anyone you know. And as you went by these he used to switch his light off and as he went by 'be careful' he used to shout out – Geordie you know. Sometimes if you were 3 parts asleep you used to wake up. He was a proper character you know. There were some characters up there, every other chap I reckon. As I say this pit life – but anyway when I went to Marley Hill, on this night shift, the Overman right he said to me when I went for the job 'what can you do?' you know he looked at me. I suppose he thought don't want any more blooming Bevin Boys here. Well I said 'can I make any money?' He said 'well, you get a bit extra for night shift for a start. You only do 5 shifts, 10 shifts per fortnight instead of 11 and' he said 'you've got a pony.' I said 'well I know a bit about horses but I've never worked a pony but I will' ?? when I saw the ponies, they worked in 3foot 6, they were like dogs and one of them was blind. Mike they called him. It was pitiful really but all you used to say to him was, when he could – 'cos the line was laid in and when you was taking yer tubs in – course you couldn't get in front of him – he used to pull the tubs and you only got to say to him – you lead him in one and say 'get in' and he'd walk in you know. And when you said to him 'get in' he must have kicked the rail and realized it was going right or left because they used to work both sides. You didn't have to tell him anymore,. He'd walk in and take them in turn, this was a blind one. But there was some characters there, horses too they used to get a different one. You was tabled to a different place every 3 months. You used to get a different one. And some of them, you couldn't get near them, you know. Eventually I got them tame like but the one I worked at Greenside, Smiler, he used to ?? but I used to split a bit of wood out of the trees going to the pit, when I realized what I wanted and split it down the middle so the white was showing in my belt and if I had that in my belt he wouldn't come for me. But they reckon that they had to get rid of him in the end because he put one of the boys in hospital. But you couldn't work him where there was timber because they had limmers that went round the back like shafts of a cart and it went completely round with a hook in and you used to have to drop that in a hole in the tub and of course that Smiler, every time

you touched that hook to drop it in he'd bring his heels up so you had to get out of the way you know. But I cured him of that. I don't think it was legal but I cured him of it. Then he used to dance, used to stand still. He was like a short carthorse. Poor thing but you couldn't wonder at it with a job like that could you. And then he used to fly and stop everywhere you couldn't get by the props he'd stop then you'd squeeze yourself along the side and dip yer lamp as if you was coming by and then he'd click away as they called it and the side of the tub would put splinters in yer chest and all. Really it was a challenge really. You had the joy of knowing with him there wouldn't be any falls because the top had to be good. Because they worked him in su? And that where there was no timber to draw out….
(End of side 1)

A.K. About your lodgings?

G.R. Oh yeah, about the lodgings – this John Irvine his name was, he said he had a hell of a lot of bad luck. He seemed to invite I think in a - but he was a real decent chap, he was just one of those. So he was off work quite a lot you know. He said to me 'will you take us to pit one night George.? So I said 'yeah I will but I'll have to see if I can take you there' I said 'You don't want to sit on top of the pit all night do yer.' So he said 'oh I'd like to go down' he said 'I never have been down.' So I asked the Overman and then he give me the word he said mind he comes at his own risk and that, didn't have to sign anything then. So anyway he came and I said to him when he went you go – the Overman takes him round see. I said Len – Len Lowyer, he was a bright 'en, you know said you wasn't doing your work and you was working your guts out. He tried to you know but I was working with a good marrower? As they called him and he used to go for him. He said to him once – he was on about – they paid us for some stonework we were clearing up. And the funny part about it I said to me marrer?, who was a regular miner, you know. Yer mate was a marrer, isn't it alright eh, you couldn't, it rubbed off a bit of it. I still say aye like most of them do and I can't get rid of that. But anyway we had worked that evening. I said to me marrer, he was chucking up on the side 'cos some of it was holes and we had to cart it right the way up in this truck thing to empty it. When we got our pay though I think for all the week we had 12 bob extra on, for working our guts out. So me marrer, Billy Loose, he was at Greenside, he said 'whets up with our pay then Len?' they usually give us a quid if you worked, you know. He turned round and said to him 'you didn't do much.' So Billy said 'do what!' Course if you was fighting in the pit, which sometimes it's a wonder how you kept yer hands off some of them, he said '??? Len Lowyer,' he said. 'you were never good then were you?' this was to the Overman, you know. He was a – I couldn't have worked with that bloke. The only trouble was the shifts, 6 o'clock at night there, you know. The landlord went down the pit and I said to him, I eventually got him there, Len said he can come if he wants but its up to him, you know, its down to him. Can't claim if anything happens because there was quite a lot of accidents there, you know. I said to the landlord 'now look, if he says to you wait there, don't you – you go in with him, because' I said ' you'll see real pit work then.' Well of course bah, when he went in with him some place, this was where they was working a long wall face, they had a skip, they used to go and down and it was open one end, like a what 4 foot wide, foot high, 6 foot long and it scooted up and down on boards. So when the coal came over this scoop used to run into the coal and they had 2 levers, with 2 drums. One used to pull it in. it had a return wheel up one end, which had to be moved up everytime they moved up the coal and they put one

clutch in, straight up to a ? wheel as they call it and then they put the other lever on and the other grant pulled it back full of coal. And it was a high cads? There. The skeets were running on top of the stone and this was two way, where the trucks come in empty and went out full on the other line. That was one of the main ways in the pit, you know. And as it pulled over, the back used to open and drop it in the tubs it was a good idea really but noise and dust. You know no water fed cutters or anything then. You know you were like a sweep, really as soon as you got there. And that canging lap? That particular place, there was a hitch, that means there must have been an earthquake and it had crushed the coal and you were cutting the props to keep the top up 15" high and you went in for 100 yards and then we had to cut an escape way in case the top come in and trapped the men. We had to bore holes in the stone, and then the deputy come and we all got out, perhaps 50 yards and he used to shove the powder in and explode it to blow it up and then we had to stow it down this face, where the coal had been taken out. Well when you got in you used to work on a – I think they called it a cracket. It was like a wedged bit of timber. It was an inch batten under there, about 2 foot long, off to nothing, wedged shaped the board – 9" board. And all you could do was lie like that – stupid. After you'd moved – what 6 foot of cange? – got the hole on, moved 6 foot of cange. Time you'd stowed that where the coal had come out you ached. So you had to go out, turn round and come in the other way. We weren't bad because we only had to go down 20 yards but the actual coal cutters – this was a belt. The belt used to run behind where coal was blasted down this face and then the fillers went in all in this 1 foot 5 seam. The coal cutter when they were cutting the coal it was like a ? went in a ? with all teeth round it and it used to cut the – what 6" perhaps 4 somewhere about that, they used to cut a 6 foot trench in the coal. It used to have to be pulled in. it used to pull itself in with ropes, you know with wire hawsers like and then they used to set this coal cutter going and the bloke usually that was ? on the change over of shift. From the time the drawing the belt and that up. It used to run up and while the shifts changed from one shift to the next, the shot firer used to come in. used to put the holes in, fire the coal down and then chaps went in there and shovelled that and they were laying on that thing. Well they had a 100 yards to shovel and on piecework they were making money. I wouldn't mind that job, if I'd been a bit smaller mainly. But of course you didn't get them jobs. That was a regular miner. You were just there for the jobs no one wanted really. Just imagine that 15 inches. You get in 50 yards and you think whorl I've got to go round the other way. You'd shuffle yer way down that 50 yards, mind some of them used to jump on the belt. Deputy saw it I reckon it was a fine you know. I think some of them used to shut their eyes and then turn over and go in the other way. And of course there was scabs about in there. But that was in open country they used to take a long wall off. Well they reckon it never be built on but it was taken off before under houses years ago. They couldn't be bothered to put a stop like you know. Really one of the worst places I've been is Nottinghamshire for houses rolling about. If you ever think of moving up there you be very careful what you buy. Now what else do we want?

A.K. you were telling me about the people you were staying with.

G.R. Well that's all there is to talk about them really. They were really excellent. But how they put up with me, especially at Marley Hill when we was on – we was on windy picks up there at Marley Hill and on the windy picks they was, well must have weighed about 40 pounds I suppose. But like this they dig a road with it and the compressor – they used to have a compressor that supplied the pipe work for you to

plug into. The compressor hadn't been overhauled for so many year, it was blowing as much oil through as wind. When I went to the pit yer face used to be raw, I used to run Vaseline all round me face 'cos within a week or two your face was – and that was just putting, changing. But you know it was one of those things. Just imagine walking into someone who'd never been into the pits, into their house, far blacker than the old sweeps used to be when they used to sweep it with a brush. And the water was usually hot. I had a racket on for coal though. I shouldn't tell you that.

A.K. they fed you well did they?

G.R. Oh crumbs, as well as they could. Oh we used to get double meat rations, that's all our concessions were. But the businessmen, the butchers and that, they were different people, different breed of people. They'd roughed it and that made a vast difference you know. But they were excellent. I remember he bought – I went home to dinner one day – I used to have me meal as soon as I got up like, after I went to bed like – didn't want much sleep then. I still don't want a lot of sleep. But then 3 or 4 hours was all jolly good job I did because it did get me out a bit you know. And I had a look at it and I thought where the hell he's got steak from. So when he went over 'what do you think of that?' I said 'best bit of meat since we started this blooming war' I said to him see. So he said 'you like it?' I said 'yeah, yeah I'll have that anytime.' I said 'you'd better get in with that butcher.' So he said 'well that's horse meat.' That's all right' I said, 'I'll have that every day.' That's right we got 1/8d old money instead of ten pen'nth of meat. But everything else, really, well we survived, I don't really know. I mean what used to grieve me was, when I was going to ? Slough, on that job up there, in summer evenings, you used to see people sitting in the cafes in London, who was getting that above their rations and we were doing a job like that and couldn't get any extra at all. There were rackets, but you was sticking yer neck out. But there was a character at Wickham, must tell you this, he was as big as a house end really, I mean I wasn't small, but I look like his son compared with him you know. Zep they called him. I never knew him as anything else. He was a good tipster, football cards. If he give you a card you had to do it because it would come up. And if you didn't do it he wouldn't give you another one. But he was excellent. The only trouble was he used to work in front of his timber. When you went in to change him you'd say to him 'how about some limber in here then Zep?' it was hand picked … that's alright he used to hit it on the top. Well of course I know why he done it. The coal was loose. When it put the weight on the coal used to come out easy. It was almost sprung see and he used to frighten me, he really did. I used to say to deputy 'for God's sake get in there and tell ? to get some timber on because 10 times to 1 he would turn round and hit yer. I don't think really, well he was brought up rough and he was a rough diamond and he had two sons, not quite as big as he was but they was alright. He used to have a sandbag, you know what used to fill the sand for the bombs. He used to have one of them, used to bring it to the pit always stuffed in his pocket. Every other day he used to get 28 pounds of horsemeat from a horsemeat shop on the way home for 4 of them. That's 7 pound of meat in 2 days. They looked as if they'd been you know really – as I say Zep was alright but when you look 6 foot in front of you, you think hooh … the funniest thing about that was a deputy there and his top set was loose and he used to talk and his teeth nearly come out every time and I couldn't keep a straight face you know. But he knew we was pulling his leg over it but he used to start arguing with Zep and while he was ??? his teeth ??? The landlord was super and the landlady really. Only one trouble I had.

Didn't know what to take for your lunch in the pit. I used to say to her bread and butter will do, if there's any fat left, if not, used to be a pound of jam a month, put a bit of jam on. Sometimes you got a tin of treacle, you know and she give me beet, beet sandwiches. I didn't give it a thought, but of course it was here. Halfway through the shift when I ate it, indigestion, it nigh on killed us. 'Cos I was doubled up see. It didn't go down. I said to 'em I didn't have me bait with me, bait as they called it, I didn't have me bait with me mate or he would have told me not to eat it see. I suppose she thought something off the ration to make something different. They couldn't have done enough for me, they really couldn't.

A.K. Did you keep in touch with them afterwards or ..

G.R. Yeah, the wife used to do the writing really. Went up to see them once or twice and Billy, who I used to work with at Greenside, he had a daughter down at Strood and he used to come down and he used to come up and see us. At Greenside when I got that rough kibble as they called it – two of you were kibbled every 3 months to a head in or something like that. If the last bloke didn't turn up for the pit – we were next to last me and Billy, we had to take his place and that's how we got that 15 inch pos? he used to go and get a sick note. Every time he got a rough kibble it was known he used to go and get a sick note. He had a good doctor I suppose or else I'd have gone to him. But we bunked the rough kibble see. And Furnace they called him. When I saw him at bank I blinded him but he wouldn't buy that. I said you want to get your B self to work. But there was nothing wrong with him I don't reckon. Although most miners had a bit of back trouble you know. I laugh about it now but there was time when I was really annoyed, but there it is. Well I can't tell you much about the .. Oh yes I must tell you this about the landlord. Being a chippie I took some tools up there. I used to do a bit of spare time work. God knows what I didn't make but of course it was a job to get timber. But the funny part about it was I hadn't been in Lobley Hill long when the bloke next door tool advisor in the pit and they used to come out the pit, sit down and have their dinner and then go and get bathed. So the old man said to me 'couldn't make us something like the school form would you George?' after he'd seen I was making a few things there. I said 'yeah, yeah the only trouble is I can't get timber can I' I said 'you want to get a decent bit of hardboard, a decent bit of hardwood,' so 'oh' he said 'that's no problem.' He worked in the Tyne docks and they were getting the ? in there. So all the old timber that was lugged out he could get a lorry load of this old teak and that. I said 'cor! That's alright'. He said 'I can get a bit of timber.' That was the old Burma teak, which was teak. This teak we get now is as soft as muck, no good at all, if you can get it. But anyway he said - the lorry brings it up and I mean there was enough to make 50 forms I reckon. So anyway I made this stool for him, you know this form, splayed it so it couldn't tip over. So he said 'cor that's alright' he said 'yer don't want to make these for a living do yer?' I said 'nah' I said I've got plenty to do if I really want it. So he said 'what do I owe yer?' so I said 'well you can give us a few bits of that teak.' He said 'take the B lot' he said. 'we don't want it. It will only lay about.' So of course I was alright for timber. But they were a decent family. I should think most of the miners, you know, originally like, you know.

A.K. What did you do in your spare time?

G.R. What do you mean …

A.K. Did you go to the pub or ..

G.R. Oh yeah. I used to get into some sad states. But I know one day, the landlord where I was – I must have come off work at 10 o'clock in the morning and I'd made some trays for different people, you know and they put picture box tops, you know chocolate tops in. so I made a fretwork with a scene in a pit and put Wickham colliery ? park as fretwork in it. I'd made 6 for different people of one thing and another and I said 'I want 6 pieces of glass John. Where do I get it?' 'oh' he said 'Sunderland? Road.' Elders and Walkers I think it was called. 'That's a glass factory' he said. 'You'd get in there.' So I said I'd go down in the morning and get some glass. So when I said I was going down in the morning, I come home and bath, had a bit to eat like and I said to the landlady I'll pop down there. I said now 'where is it John? He said 'I'll come down with yer.' We left Lobley Hill, we went in every pub from the bottom of Lobley Hill on the trading estate – the Wagon Train it was called, dismal pub really, every pub on Bengham Bank, right through High Street Gateshead and along Sunderland Road and up. We went in every pub. I thought how the hell am I going to carry 6 sheets of glass. They were only, you know, tea tray size. So I said to the bloke 'wrap them up well mate' and I suppose he could see I looked a bit under the weather so was the landlord. Oh and he had to go to the butchers and he got some sausages. So we ended up in the Wagon Train when we come back. Wagon, yeah, Wagon Wheel. I think it was the Wagon Wheel or Wagon Train, doesn't matter, or the Wagons or something. Well we was drinking in there and they didn't worry about time a lot. And I thought to myself by – come about 3 o'clock I said to John – oh it was just getting really hold of me. I said to John I'll have a wander up John 'oh' he said 'tell Gertie I won't be a minute.' He'd got the sausages for dinner see. So anyway I waited till half past 4 and he didn't come. I said 'arrh I'll go to bed' I used to call her Ma. 'I'll go to bed Ma, get a couple of hours before I go to work, you know.' So she said 'I don't know where John's got too.' I said 'nor do I.' So anyway when I saw him the next day he come in with a black eye. He reckoned he fell over behind a tip. I don't know whether he did or not. But anyway she said 'and no sausages George' she said. 'he reckons he say a kid what wanted them more than we did so – ' we couldn't help laughing he was so – Well most people up there I really got on well with. I should imagine 999%. They were really good. This landlord he broke his foot. He was in a shell factory or something and they were carrying a box of shells and I don't know one of them dropped it, one each end and broke his foot. So when I got in one day he said 'wouldn't like to run me to the hospital would you George?' Had it all in plaster, up to his knee anyway. He had to have his leg straight so he said 'the ambulance was supposed to come for me 2 hours ago. We dropped down the hill to a place called Lanesly, up the other side, and the hospital was on the other side. Well I'd never been through that road and I said 'how are you going to get with that ..' and he said ??? and then of course came across the hairpin bend he didn't tell me about. Took this hairpin bend and he caught his foot on the ground, broke all the bottom of the plaster. He said 'you're a bugger.' 'Well' I said 'you should have told us John' I said. Because if you're driving a motorbike and you're going through fast you've got to lean in. and he came back eventually and the ambulance brought him back and they'd replastered it. Oh he was really a character. Then when I went to see him after the war once he was blind. And someone on the crane had swung something round and it was low – it was one of these overhead efforts, and it had hit him on the back of the head and took his sight. He said 'ain't too bad though George.' He said 'you

ought to be up here now. I've got a French bit of stuff learning me how to Braille.' I said 'yeah John.' He was still the same bloke, apart from being blind like you know. I took the wife with me when I went up then. That's the first time she'd been up and she started to cry, because he was blind like. He was a bloke who could accept it. You do meet blokes like that don't you? Well you've got to like. He said 'oh I'm not getting on with that Braille' he said 'but she's a nice little thing isn't she?' yet he couldn't see her. Really they made the difference between me stopping there and clearing off. And I made some good friends and the countryside, I mean the Lake District was only 60 miles away. In '47 after that snow went we had summer weather, right to the end of the year, even down here. I used to go to the Lake District and put me waterproof in the saddlebag on the back. I spent most weekends over there. I used to have to work 6 shifts one week, and 5 the next. Well the 6 shifts was out, I mean I could go to Hexam and places like that, but it's a nice place Hexam and of course Anwick and all up the Northumberland coast, really lovely, really lovely. I don't know why people go abroad. They don't bother to try. All that Northumberland coast is really worth a visit.

A.K. Do you feel let down that you were made to go and be a Bevin Boy? Looking back now on it do you think it was alright being a Bevin Boy or would you rather have gone in ..

G.R. No, it was slavery. Well there was German prisoners was cutting hedges on top and we were going down for coal. I don't suppose they would have worked if they'd have put them there. But I know one bloke from Wickham, when they told him German prisoners were cutting the hedges along across to Bagnalls like, he was going to do them in. but they had armed guards with them and the bloke said 'now look' the army lad 'if you're going to injure them I'll shoot yer' he said 'that's me orders. Come to' he said. So what they done to him God knows. Perhaps he lost a son or something, you know. I didn't know the bloke who was there. Really it was an eye opener but it was – there was a bloke called Snuffy Bill at Bagnalls. He used to put enough snuff on the back of yer hand. He used to go snnn like that and he used to blink. And I had a hell of a cold once, when I was working wet, and I couldn't shake it off and I was sick, you know, could hardly breathe. He said 'have a bit of this Geordie', he used to call me Geordie, you know 'have a bit of this'. He put a bit on the back of my hand. Couldn't have been a quarter of what he was having. By God, ?? back of my brains out. I said 'oh that's good stuff Bill – don't want anymore of that mind. I mean he got so acclimatised to it. But he was a champion chrysanth grower. He took all the prizes. He was a proper rough diamond like. He looked more like – what was it called – like fair people you know the old ..

A.K. Oh what the gypsies you mean.

G.R. Yeah, gypsies you'd call them. He looked more like – but I thought Billy was all right. Some of them didn't. You could smell him. If he was working in a place and you went in there, if you walked by the end of his tunnel like you could smell the snuff. It used to hang about there. Didn't use to – didn't matter how long after it was. But as I say there was some good people. There was some nice little jobs there too if you could land one. One of the chaps who was in the lodge with me at first, he got on a hauler engine. Well you got like sitting here, working two levers you know.

A.K. Was he a Bevin Boy?

G.R. Yeah, he was Dutch. He came over when the Germans were on the move. He came over then. Harry van de – I don't know – van de Beese or something. Nice chap though. We had another one too. He was a nut case, who was there at one time. He come home from the pit one night on his bike this – Elbert was his name – and he used to smoke a pipe and he hadn't got the strength of a kid, they chucked him out of the pit in the end and sent him somewhere else. But anyway he was riding through Wickham, coat blowing in the wind and he put his pipe in his pocket and it wasn't out and it burnt out his jacket. Laugh, when he comes in I said 'why?' 'Oh the wind must have started it up again' he said. 'I heard people shouting at me'. And he got himself a girlfriend over, I don't know, over the Fells somewhere. I did know at time. And it lasted about a month and he was supposed to meet her family or something. So the landlady looked at him. And she said 'you'd better let me press your suit Elbert' so she pressed his suit and it was a blue serge thing you know. It looked good. So Elbert comes downstairs with his suit on and the landlady put the crease round that way on one of 'em. You know not knowing because there was no creases in 'em. So she said you'd better take the off Elbert and I'll press 'em right. 'Oh it doesn't matter about that' he said. So he went … He came ? One night, I don't know where he'd been, and he said 'I'll have a cup of coffee' he said. It must have been when we went down 10 o'clock at night down one of the pits. And he said 'I'll wake up. No 2 o'clock in the morning, 2 to 10 in the morning, he said don't matter about setting the alarm. So of course the silly perisher drops to sleep. We're all late for the pit. Quarter to 2, blimey. I said 'come on Elbert if you're going to pit'. So I was ready I said 'come on Elbert I'm going'. 'Oh', he said 'I won't bother'. He wasn't half ready. He was one of those. I reckon his old pipe – he used to smoke that Condor stuff, that scented stuff. I think it was getting him down. But anyway they moved him to Ferry Hill and he wasn't there long. He went home and stopped there and ended up in the catering corp or something in the Army. He was a character, Elbert.

A.K. Did you get back to London very often?

G.R. I didn't use to bother a lot. Perhaps once a year. You know used to live in ? street but well it was as good as home really. And the countryside and that's marvellous. You know every county has got its beauty but it's exceptional up there. Really I don't know why I didn't stop there, when I come to think of it you know. At one time we went up there every year but I'd got some good friends. I made some friends at Ashington. One chap who come to training school, he said 'do you know anything about the country round here?' so I said 'well, I've been through it a few times, but can't remember much about it, mostly main roads'. He said 'any idea where Ashington is?' 'yeah' I said its just up the coast here' I said, 'cos the Charlton footballers come from there see. They were boys then but I knew that they had a heading in the news lines they had a test for Newcastle and they didn't want 'em. He said 'I've got an uncle who lives at a place called Shoppington' he said 'that's not far from Ashington.' I said 'I don't know where that is.' I said 'Bevington', no he said 'Shoppington.' He said it's possibly near Bevington, I've heard them talk of it.' That was before I had any transport up there. He said 'you wouldn't like to come up and see if we can find him would yer?' so I said yeah, we was off on that Saturday so we went up and found them and you know I kept in touch with them. I used to go through there about once a month I suppose and stop a weekend. That was a boozy weekend,

really. But more horse racing, they were really … Very nice people, but they've been down here too, two or three times but they're both dead now. He was a miner like. 'cos he tried to get me into Ashington Colliery where he worked. He said you wouldn't like to come to work would you and I said 'well it's pit work again innit so I said 'well, see how it goes you know' but I said 'I'll always come and see yer and I didn't go for a while and I met him in Newcastle one day and I didn't half get a chocking off for not going to see him so after that I used to go and see him once a – made a regular turn out. Got well in with the barman. He had a bit of rough luck. Excellent barman. Much better than any barman I ever come across. He run the pub. Jack Lewisham. He was originally a miner and he had a son who was a chippie at the pit. And they used to cut the trees down for their timber see, you know a sawyer he was. And of course when you're on a saw you have a – specially rough timber like that you have a leather apron on you know like your boots are soled with. And I went up there one weekend - Natty? they called him and Jack said Natty died this week. Well I mean he was like I was, you know. And I said 'why's that.' And he said 'well he was cutting a bit of timber on the saw and it kinched and it come off like a spear and it went straight through the leather apron and through his inside. So he was in the middle of making a greenhouse so Jack said 'you wouldn't like to finish it would you George?' so I built him the greenhouse. But it's just yer luck innit? They took that in their stride, you know. And we had a bookie's runner, Skin they called him, he looked all skin, very thin, you know. He was almost blind and of course he used to get some queer old bets. I couldn't read some of them but he used to give me some and 'what do you make of this?' and I said 'well that's so and so I think.' Got it all spelt wrong and all and he had one there one day. No one could fathom it out. It looked like a lot of Vs. he put his glasses up, like bottle tops they were and he went like this – 'I know what that is' and sure enough. But it didn't look anything like it. And he was so blind they put him on the bottom shaft where it was high because they reckoned when he was in by the pulleys and that what was hanging down the ropeway. He always used to wear a hard hat like and he made me laugh once. There was a manager, this was at ?ham pit, that was one of these that was just about finished I think and he said 'what do you think the ? this week?' and I said 'no telling.' He said the manager rung up and he said to him 'is so and so there?' so Skin said to him - he was to know he was a runner? for a bookie because I mean then it was illegal. So he said 'why do you want to get a bet on?' and the manager took it all in good part 'cos you could hear, when someone wanted to speak on the phone it was so noisy there that they were shouting, so you could hear everything. But I might have done all right with that ? but Skin he was a taffy. We stood in the pub doorway at Bevington, in a club. None of us had coats on one Saturday night like. And it was a wide pavement, about here to the garage. We stood in this doorway, bus was late, bucketing with rain. Skin is not supposed to see but he went down that straight there. Bus stopped so we said 'take yer turn Skin.' He said 'oh you'll all get on.' Well I mean just things that come out, so of course we all had a bloody good laugh so did the queue that was waiting for the bus like ?? There was a row of cottages by where Jake used to live, and they were one of the first they used to get electricity from the colliery and of course at night when it was free electricity all the lights was on. They were talking about that colliery so I … you know Aldy? He said it's at the end of the Mauritania. Well I said 'that's gone down you silly B.' oh he said and he told me the story about when they'd got free lights on, lit up it looked like the Mauritania. But that was straight you know. And they used to have concert parties at the club …..

(END)

Transcript of interview with Gerry G.,
conducted at the Royal Overseas League, Piccadilly,
on 26.3.2002 by Ann Kneif

G.G. I was born in 1927 of I suppose you'd call a lower middle class family. My father was a factory manager. I went to school at Archbishop Tennyson's Grammar School, which is in Kennington. Matter of fact directly opposite the Oval and I reached 18 just as war was ending in 1945. But of course National Service still continued and Bevin Boys were either selected by ballot as you may know or you could volunteer. And believe it or not four of us in the same 6th form at Archbishop Tennyson's decided to volunteer to go down the mines. I suppose the main motive was an odd sort of pacifism and the war being over we didn't particularly want to join up in the Armed Forces. So four of us volunteered to be Bevin Boys in the hope that we'd all stick together. But in fact two of us were sent to mines in Glamorgan and two of us were sent to mines in the Tredegar Valley in Monmouthshire. The colliery where we did our training was called Oakdale, which is in Blackwood in Monmouthshire and after about two or three months training we were posted to a colliery called Pontllanfraith, which was owned by the Tredegar Iron and Coal Company because this was prior to nationalization. I must say that the owners, realizing that nationalization was on the way, allowed a lot of mining equipment on the surface to just go rusty rather than installing it. It was a culture shock of course for us, middle class schoolboys from suburban London to be thrust into a Welsh coalmining community. A culture shock I suspect as much for them as for us. I expected a certain amount of hostility, because believe it or not coalmining is quite a skilled industry. You are not only shovelling coal but you have to be something of a carpenter, something of a builder. All sorts of skills are needed to be a coalminer and we had none of them. Nor of course did we have the muscles. We were really quite weaklings compared with the miners themselves. So I was expecting a somewhat hostile reception, but in fact we were warmly welcomed, the reason being that the Welsh coalminers felt, and I think with reason, that nobody in the outside world really understood them and their problems. Memories go back a long way in the Welsh minefield – coal mines. For instance to a man they hated Churchill because of his actions during the General Strike of '27 and they all believed that he sent in troops. I believe that wasn't quite the case but that was the firm belief among the Welsh miners. And they looked upon us as it were ambassadors, who would go back to the wide world and tell the wide world what coalmining was really like. An interesting point is that to a man every one of them swore that their sons would not follow them into the pits. They said, and with reason that coalmining was not a thing a human being should be doing and they would do anything in their power to make sure that their sons didn't have to follow them in the pits. A few words about the general conditions. I was not terribly impressed with the National Union of Mine Workers. I think our weekly contribution was 3d or 6d a week, or something like that deducted for the NUM. But two things struck me in particular. One was that the pithead baths were not provided by the owners. They had to be paid by the miners themselves and I

think it was something like 3d a week for the pithead baths and it struck me as quite iniquitous that the workers themselves had to pay for cleaning off the coal dust and the filth and the mine owners didn't lift a finger to help. And the other thing was that miners were not paid from the moment they entered the colliery. They were not paid from the time they put on their helmets and their lamps. They were paid from the time they reached the coalface. Now when you bear in mind that the coalface could be one and a half miles, two miles from the pithead bottom and it took you half an hour or more to reach the coalface, all that journey was in your own time and wasn't paid for by the owners. I always thought that was iniquitous and paradoxically it was my General Secretary, the General Secretary of the Union I became General Secretary of, Sir Leslie Williams, who was on a committee to deal with a miner's strike in Ted Heath's time, who finally put an end to the iniquitous practice of miners not being paid until they arrived at the coalface. The strange experience really starts from the moment you enter the pithead cage because it drops perhaps a mile and a half, virtually with the force of gravity. The speed of the descent is quite incredible and as you go down the walls of the shaft are covered in water and then you reach pit bottom and you are in a gallery, which may be as high as 20 feet and then the various mine shafts come off the gallery. One of the sensations I didn't expect was the smell of a coalmine. It's a mixture of coal, which in bulk really has a strong smell, and horses urine, because the pit ponies were kept underground in stables near the bottom of the pit shaft. In fact poor things were only allowed upstairs for one week I think, it may have been two, in the year and they went almost mad as you can imagine, seeing the sunlight. Otherwise for about 50 weeks of the year they were stabled and therein lay a problem because the horse feed that came down brought rats with it. And one of the things I didn't expect one and a half miles below the surface was the enormous number of rats in a coalmine. And the tins that we took our lunch down with us, which you know was sandwiches, had to be specially designed so that rats couldn't open the tins because they would quite easily climb up into your jacket. You took your jacket off of course when you were working - kept your lunch box in your jacket pocket – climb up in your jacket and try and get hold of the sandwiches. But as I say the overwhelming smell was that of horse urine and manure and coal. And of course one of the things that you have to get used to in a mine is that there's no running water, there's no latrines and if you're taken short you just have to go where you stand. It's a messy, dirty, smelly business coalmining. One of the things is, again I didn't expect, was some of the mine shafts the tunnels can be 15 feet high and some of them can be 2 foot 6 high. Actually the miners prefer working in the 2 foot 6 high shafts because there's less chance of fall. If you have a tunnel 15 feet high a small fall of rock could be quite damaging as you can imagine. And in my time I worked – were able to work standing up. Of course every four or five feet or so, as you drove into the coalface, you had to stop and put pit props up to keep the ceiling from falling down. And the number of pit props used in a mine must run into perhaps millions - thousands and thousands of them because they're used every few feet of the way. The coal is shovelled onto trucks and these are either hauled by ponies or by a cable, which is maybe a mile or so long running from the coalface where you're working back to the bottom of the pit shaft, where there is a huge drum machine working, which wound the cable. One of the first things you have to learn is to be very careful of that cable because its lying slack in the middle of the floor and you're half a mile away from the engine, which is turning it. You're not aware when the engine goes on and as the cable tautens it will go up and down perhaps 12 feet and it has been known for a miner to be crossing the cable just as that happened and to be virtually bifurcated

by the cable. Deaths and serious injuries are alarmingly frequent. I think I can safely say that there is literally not a week when on a Friday there wasn't a collection for some miner or other, who'd been seriously injured during that week. I really was quite surprised at the incidence of accidents. I only recall one death. The majority are as I say accidents. I found the most horrifying was the 2 foot 6 tunnel. This is where I developed claustrophobia. It was so narrow that I couldn't lie on my side to shovel coal; I had to lie on my back and shovel the coal across my stomach. That's how narrow it was. One of the myths that again surprised me and disappointed me was, in this particular pit anyway, the miners didn't treat the pit ponies at all well. They bullied them and hit them very sharply on the nose and the pit ponies were snap – well I don't know which came first but the pit ponies were snappy and would kick or bite if they could. So the myth of the miner loving his pit ponies certainly didn't apply in the pit where I was. By a piece of superb irony in 1981 I think it was, I was invited to lunch with Lord – oh God, not Caernarvon – Welsh name but a Lord somebody, whose family owned the Tredegar Iron and Coal Company. I never dreamed at the time I was down the pits that I'd be lunching with the owner of the pit. I went down the mines as a sort of theoretical socialist but came back up as a really true red-blooded socialist having seen what capitalism at its very worst, most blatant could do. As I say there was a real hatred between the miners and the pit owners. The Tredegar Valley was where Aneurin Bevan came from. He taught himself I think a great deal in Tredegar Library. One of the things which impressed me about these mining villages was that the Miner's Institutes weren't only places where you could go and have a drink and play billiards, but were also libraries which were paid for by the miners themselves and there was a great deal of self education going on. Well I'll stop here. Are there other things you want to ask me?

A.K. Can we go back to the beginning again. Can you tell me what your parents thought about you going down the mines? Were they happy with that or not?

G.G. No, well they – my father was a pacifist. In fact he was jailed for 2 years during the war for being a conscientious objector so he was quite happy that I didn't go into the Armed Forces but they were both worried for my safety. But they didn't – well they couldn't stop me but they didn't try to but they weren't easy about it.

A.K. What would you have liked to have done had there not been a war? What career were you looking to?

G.G. I was looking for a career in the Civil Service and when my National Service was eventually over I joined the Civil Service. So the period in the mines didn't upset my career plans because I became a Civil Servant and then in due course having become a voluntary union branch secretary, I eventually got a full time job at the union headquarters.

A.K. Did the Government bombard you with propaganda to go down the mines?

G.G. Oh no, no, not at all. It was – I don't think a lot of people realized you could opt. What most people knew was that Bevin Boys were selected by ballot. At – down in Blackwood my friend and I – my school friend and I, the two of us who were together, we were in a hostel for Bevin Boys. The other two of us, who were posted to a pit in Glamorgan, they were housed with miner's families. I mean they lived with a

miner and his wife. I think they both lived in the same house so they were lodgers as it were, but my friend and I were in this Bevin Boys hostel, which was really like an army barracks you know, with a dormitory and so on.

A.K. What facilities were there available in the hostel?

G.G. Damn all. And we were on an awkward shift, which ran from – what did it run from? – 2pm till 10pm, which meant that we never got to go to the pictures of course and came home after 10pm, had a meal, went to bed in the early hours of the morning and when we woke up in the morning there was nothing, nothing to do except go to the Miner's Institute and play snooker and billiards. That's all there was, there was no recreational facilities at all. Coming from anonymous London suburbia, where we hardly knew our neighbours names, it was quite a culture shock to go to a closely knit, gossipy – and there is nothing like the Welsh for gossiping – a gossipy village, where everybody knew everybody else. And I was told that if a boy went out with a girl more than twice they were engaged … Hope you don't mind this conversation [*as someone enters the room*]. I went out with the same girl twice and in the eyes of the village was engaged. What else?

A.K. Did you feel your job was worthwhile?

G.G. I don't think that question occurred to me. Do you mean worthwhile for me or for the community?

A.K. For you and for the community.

G.G. Well it was an education. It was certainly an education to find out at first hand what coalmining was like. I did my best whenever I came back and when I left the mines to tell people what the conditions were like and how appalling a job coalmining was because when you're down there one and a half miles below the surface the first thing you think to yourself a human being shouldn't be asked to do this sort of thing. So I learnt something from it but was it worthwhile? When everybody was called up for National Service you didn't ask yourself whether it was worthwhile – it was something that happened.

A.K. Can you give me some details about the training that you had? Was it the same as for the professional miners?

G.G. I don't know. We were all in this Bevin Boys hostel and we were all trained as a group of Bevin Boys. I am not sure of the extent to which native Welshmen, as it were, were given training. I really can't answer that question, I'm sorry.

A.K. What was your relationship with the other Bevin Boys? Were there a lot of you there?

G.G. Oh, about 20 or 30 of us. Yes, we got on happily enough. Again an interesting social mixture you know. There were grammar school boys, elementary – well people that left elementary school. The same sort of range I would expect you would find in an army barracks.

A.K. What about the miners - how did they react to the Bevin Boys?

G.G. Well as I explained they, to my surprise they reacted very well because they looked upon us as ambassadors, who would go back to wherever we came from and spread the word because they felt that people didn't understand them and didn't understand what mining was like, which I think was really true. They made us welcome, even though we were not very competent. Certainly in the early days before our muscles got attuned we couldn't produce the output that the miners produced. And putting up pit props, which is after all a very important thing to do, it's quite a skilled job because you had to measure the pit prop and get it right and then you'd stick in a wedge against the ceiling. And you have to do that properly and if you don't somebody's life may be – What I learnt was that when there is a fall, just before a fall you get a slight loss of dust bits of dust start coming down before the roof actually starts collapsing and you learn to watch out for that. Once or twice for interest I switched off my miner's lamp and the blackness is – until you've been there you – I mean it is so black you just can – and if you put your hand in front of your face you wouldn't see a thing. It is so, so black, unbelievably so. I used to enjoy my lunch there because miners were given a special ration of ¾lb of cheese and I think the ordinary ration was about 4oz and I love cheese and for quite a long while I thoroughly enjoyed my cheese sandwiches till I found the reason why miners didn't have cheese because oddly enough it gives you heartburn. So we finished up with jam, jam butties as they were called and water. You had to take down your own water of course because as I say there is no water down there. And as I say going to the lavatory is a pretty primitive business. You behaved like a cat; you tended to cover it over with coal dust.

A.K. Can you say something about absenteeism or desertion - was that rife?

G.G. Amongst Bevin Boys? We weren't aware of ..

A.K. I've heard that there were problems for example at Christmas. The Bevin Boys wanted to take more time off than was allowed because only Christmas Day was a holiday in the mining industry.

G.G. I can't remember about that. I know I went home at Christmas. I don't think I was absent without leave. No, I can neither confirm nor deny – my memory – sorry.

A.K. You were never pulled over the coals …

G.G. Oh no.

A.K. Have you kept in touch with any of the Bevin Boys?

G.G. No.

A.K. Were you aware of the war going on?

G.G. Well it was just ending as I say. We didn't – we came in late so the war was in fact just about over. I think I may have gone down just before the Japanese surrender

– no it was after the Japanese surrender. No, I probably didn't go down until autumn of '45.

A.K. Your experience of nationalization – Vesting Day – can you say something about that?

G.G. It wasn't a big thing it just happened. Everybody was prepared for it. There wasn't bunting in the streets or anything. It was just one of those things.

A.K. There was no difference afterwards?

G.G. No, no. The managers still managed and the workers still grumbled and conditions were still bad.

A.K. Are there any anecdotes you can tell about your time there? Anything that happened that was special or sticks in you mind?

G.G. Can we switch off while I recall? I just have to stop and think.
[*switches off for a moment*]

I remember one Saturday going down to Newport and seeing my first rugby match, which gave me a life long interest in rugby. That was quite interesting. My school colleague and I in the Bevin Boys hostel, we got involved with the local amateur dramatic association and in our off hours we learned our parts and took part in a couple of plays, which were put on in the village. The village, by the way, which Neil Kinnock - was Neil Kinnock's constituency and he had – I don't know whether he still has, he has a house there in Blackwood and when I got to know him he was quite interested in the fact that I had worked in Pontllanfraith Colliery. An interesting point, we – these Welsh mountain – well they're mining villages built on the side of mountains and so on and there're a lot of mountain sheep there. And what a breed they were. They were quite aggressive and they'd nose up to you if you came out of a fish and chip shop and try and pinch your fish and chips believe it or not. You know those cattle grids they have to stop animals crossing? They'd learnt to cross them by – they lay down and rolled over. And the mountain sheep were really - they weren't a bit sheep like. They were aggressive bloody things. It was amazing. But to see them rolling over this cattle grid was quite interesting. Couldn't help feeling sorry for the village occupants. They were in prisons really. And of course South Wales – you've got the coast and then you've got the valleys going up and the valleys are quite separated from each other by mountains so, although there was a valley a mile or two away from you, you had to virtually climb over a mountain to get to it or go right down the valley to Newport and then along and up the valley. So they tended to be isolated little communities and I felt so sorry for the men and women. The women in particular had a very limited life. I'm just trying to think what else.

A.K. Can we go back to the unions? … Were you forced to join?

G.G. It was a closed shop. At least I think it was a closed shop. Being a theoretical socialist at the time, a schoolboy socialist I was quite eager to join. No, I think it was a closed shop. It was an automatic deduction from your pay packet and the union sub. Yep, I'm pretty sure of that.

A.K. Did you have the same benefits and …

G.G. What benefits?

A.K. Pay and benefits or whatever as the ordinary miner?

G.G. Yes, I did. I know I remember us being asked to work on a Saturday, which would have meant overtime. I remember the overtime after tax worked out at 2/6d for a mornings work so we said bugger that. I forget what my rate of pay was. It wasn't very high. I got the miner's rate of pay. Because we weren't skilled we weren't on piecework. The big earners were the ones who were on piecework at the coalfaces where they had machines to do the digging and everything. The worst job I ever had – oh this is something I had forgotten, the worst job I ever had in the pits wasn't underground. When the coal comes up from the pit it's thrown onto a conveyor belt. There's a long conveyor belt and people have to stand there picking out the stone from the coal. Now this conveyor belt was in what looked like a huge barn. That is it had a cover overhead but no walls and if you stand there in January, with the rain and the howling wind and trying to pick up lumps of stone from a moving conveyor belt – that was horrible.

A.K. Were you involved in any strikes then?

G.G. There weren't any strikes during my period there. I can't recall us having a strike. The management was reasonable. In fact one of the managers tried to entice me to become a manager myself and go in for managers. He said he'd arrange for me to be sent to college and everything but I didn't want – didn't fancy a life in South Wales. And as I say I had long since decided I wanted to be a Civil Servant.

A.K. So your work as a Bevin Boy didn't influence you at all?

G.G. Didn't, no, no didn't but it made me even more union conscientious. So I became a union activist when I joined the Civil Service, which I might not have done. As I said leaving school I was a theoretical socialist but I became a red-blooded one after my experiences in the pits.

A.K. So what do you feel now looking back about your time as a Bevin Boy, any resentment or hard done by or ..?

G.G. I feel it's a bit like being run over by a bus. It's not something you want but it's an experience. No. I don't feel resentment because when everybody's called up in National Service, everybody had to do something and I might have been in the army, air force or navy and even though the war was over. I think I'm glad of the experience because it taught me in a very down-to-earth practical manner what the real working class stuff was like for as I say I was a middle class grammar school boy. Theoretical socialist. Taught me what being working class in an area where capitalism reigned supreme – what that was like so that was a very interesting thing. It also taught me a lot about society. A realization that the society of the Welsh mining village was a world apart from the society of a middle class London suburb. I preferred the middle class London suburb, I suppose having been brought up here. I found the gossip and

the intense interest in everybody's doings was a bit stultified. As I say having come from anonymous suburbia.

A.K. Have you thought about what you thought about the coal industry before you went down there and …?

G.G. Well, I doubt whether I thought about the coal industry very much at all. When a 16/17 year old you see coal being delivered to people's homes. Remember in those days you had the horse and cart calling and the coalman with his bags of coal, dumping it down the chutes and that's all you realized about coal. You knew theoretically that there were people who dig it up but you didn't spend a lot of time thinking about that. Not when your hormones are going full pace as they are when you're 16 or 17. I mean you tend not to think about great social issues. So I suppose I hadn't devoted much thought to the coal industry at all and that made the culture shock even greater and more interesting.

A.K. You said that you were working on the coalface, now most of the Bevin Boys I've come into contact with were working on haulage. They said they were put on haulage to …

G.G. No, we weren't put on the really heavy producing coalface because that was piece work and you really had to be – they were the elite and we weren't on that. By the way, I was the only person in the pit with glasses, which was a bit of a nuisance because about once every ten minutes you had to stop and wipe your glasses. I don't know what short-sighted and long-sighted miners did. I suppose they went without but I wore my glasses all the time. But there were about four of us most of the time in a very small coalface. I forget why it was being dug. It wasn't being dug to produce coal, it was being dug because we needed to get somewhere. I can't remember the details. So we had our own little railway and another thing you see, every ten yards – no every ten feet or so, you'd stop digging and have to lay the track for the coal wagon and that's quite a skilled job because if anything goes wrong the coal wagon falls over. So you have to make sure that that's done. So you have to stop and be like a railwayman laying railway tracks. When the wagon jumps off the rails as it often does, lifting it back on was quite a backbreaking job. I learnt how not to get a hernia, how to use your back muscles to lift stuff. So there were three or four of us in this quiet little thing – advance in this pithead, but we weren't on piecework so we weren't paid by the amount of coal we produced. Another thing you don't think about is that when you are underground you are totally but totally unaware of what the weather is like and it's an odd sensation to be eight hours away from daylight and weather conditions and we had no idea if it was raining, snowing, windy, sunny or whatever.

A.K. Was it hot in the pits then?

G.G. Ah, I'm glad you mentioned that. The air circulates through a mine by being drawn down by huge fans at the bottom of the pit shaft. So the air comes down half a mile, a mile, mile and a half depending on the thing and it then circulates through the pit and there are – they were called brad sheets. They're curtains as it were of a leather type substance, which acted as valves and cut off. In the winter the air comes down from the surface and it's freezing cold as you can imagine, but it then circulates through literally miles of shafts and you've got the heat of the earth itself I suppose

and the heat of people and the heat of machinery and by the time it finishes its journey it is a) very hot and b) oxygen starved and I remember twice falling asleep standing up. I lent on my shovel and fell asleep. This of course why they had canaries as you know to – because it's dangerous. So, depending where you are in the pit, you could be in Fahrenheit terms I suppose 35° or 40° Fahrenheit where the pit comes down so you're shivering, but if you were posted to another part of the pit at the end of the air circulation, it might be 70° or 80° and oxygen starved. So you were cold or hot depending on where you were in the pit as it were.

A.K. so did you get to see your family very often when you were there? You said that you got home at Christmas but …

G.G. Yes, I can't – quite honestly I can't remember. I have a feeling that we got about a fortnights holiday a year. I've got a feeling it was a fortnight a year but I honestly – no I've only got a vague recollection of that, so I saw them probably twice a year and kept in touch. I posted my stuff off once a week to be cleaned. What my mother thought of cleaning the filthy stuff .. Oh, by the way, where we were the lamp was in the helmet but it ran off a wet battery not a dry battery and it was a wet battery about that high, which is about 18inches high, which you slung on your belt and it banged your knees and within about three months your trousers had – the acid in the battery had worn holes in your trousers. It was rather unpleasant because the acid stung. Life in a coal pit is one of really unending but varying discomfort. You know you're either freezing cold because the air has just come down or you're boiling hot and sweating and you find it difficult to breath because the air has just finished. The stench, particularly close to the stables, is pretty awful and as I say coal has a strong smell of its own, which I believe until you live among it and there was the constant fear of the roof coming in or the cab … because when the cable – no, not quite as high as this room [*was a high ceiling of about 20 feet*] but when the cable's lying slack and you've got one and a half miles of it and the engine at the other end suddenly starts tightening it up, that cable rises ten feet, just pfwang up there and if you're anywhere close to it you could be hit. There was the fear of that.

A.K. Were you ever hurt?

G.G. Oh no, only a couple of scratches. No, I was never hurt. A friend of mine was. He got a blue scar on his stomach where the pneumatic drill he was using slipped and cut into his stomach but it wasn't a bad cut.

A.K. The coal dust gets in there and it acts like a tattoo doesn't it.

G.G. Yes, that's right, yes.

A.K. Were you upset that you had no recognition after demob, whereas the people in the Forces did?

G.G. No, no. Not particularly. It didn't bother me.

A.K. Because the Bevin Boys Association was campaigning for recognition.

G.G. Yes, I understand that but no I can't say that I lost any sleep over that. Never occurred to me that I'd get recognition. No, no it didn't bother me at all.

(END)

Transcript of interview with Robert K.,

at his home conducted on 28th March 2002 by Ann Kneif

R.K. Right, my name is Robert Edward Kinnear and I was born in South Shields, up in Durham. My mother and father are from London. My father was working on coaster ships, boats so therefore my mother moved up to South Shields with two children. She had me up there and when I was about three years old we moved back down to London and we lived at Forest Hill. From there we moved to Catford and then from there to the Downham Estate. I left school and went to work over at Woolwich. I was working in the boot repair department of the RACS – that's the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society and I then had to register for National Service. I'd asked for the Navy but I was told that as I was a boot repairer I would be put into the Army. Apparently they don't wear boots in the Navy; maybe they've got webbed feet. So then surprise, surprise I then got my papers to tell me that I had been selected for the coalmining industry and would of course then be known as a Bevin Boy. Whilst I was at school of course the war started and my self and my two brothers, my two young brothers, were evacuated to Folkestone. They were re-evacuated to South Wales and I went back home again. So when I got my papers to tell me that I was going into the coalmining industry I chose the South Wales coalfield because I knew the people that my brothers were then lodging with. So – can't remember the date, oh dear, oh dear, oh dear – never mind. I then got my papers to report at a particular little place in South Wales called Newbridge. I went to South Wales and of course I had my travel warrant with me. So having got to a place called Tredegar I then had to get on to Newport – I beg your pardon, Newbridge. We were told various things as to where we would be trained and lodged but as I had already arranged my lodgings I was allowed to make my own way and report at Oakdale training establishment on the Monday. This I did and we went through six weeks of training, which consisted of lectures, visits to what they called the 'house coal' pit and of course various things on top of the pit. So after this six weeks of training I asked if I may stop at Oakdale Colliery and I was allowed to. So I then had to arrange to catch the bus each day to get to the pit and of course one of the local bus companies, Ivor Davies to give him his name, ran a bus – or various buses to Oakdale Colliery. I first started to work with an old collier, who as soon as I started working with him, he retired. But I don't think it had anything to do with me. So I was then put to work with his – what is called his crossing butty, that is the man he crossed shifts with. If one was on the early, the other was late, so therefore they crossed each other. And his name strangely enough was Tom Jones. It was most peculiar because it was no good me telling anybody who asked me who I was working with, that I was working with Tom Jones because they would immediately say 'who is Tom Jones'? But if I gave him his known name then everybody knew. And he was always called Mawr, which in the Welsh language is big, but he wasn't big, but his grandfather was. So therefore his father was called Mawr, he is called it, his brother is called it. So then everybody knew who I was working with. We worked in the Meadow vein, which was sometimes called a murder vein. And we were working two seams of coal. Each of them being about a yard wide, with a about a foot of what was called muck in the middle of it. So the idea was that

you took the top coal down, moved all the muck or the shale and then you cut the bottom coal and we worked on that for quite a long time. And this was called the heading and stall system, whereby a man is on the main road, what is known as the main road, and headings are turned off every so many yards into the coal at an angle and then the roads are turned off there into the coal again. That's on the left hand side of the main. On the right hand side they turn in the same way but they're called deeps or dips. There are a lot of strange words used for various tools and supports for the roof, which are of course different to other parts of the country. We used what they called flats, which were colligated steel plates, 6 foot long and at least an inch thick and it was colligated steel. And these were put up against the top and supported by posts. Now one thing that people do not seem to understand is that the pressure is down and you cannot stop the top from sinking so therefore it has to be cut and when each road is turned off into the coal again the formation over that turning is supported by flats. And after a time the pressure coming down, they have to be taken down and the top cut because in the Welsh coalfields they used full grown Shire horses to take the trams of coal out. Not the pit pony that you normally see but full grown Shires. And of course they hit the top with their haunches and of course they're protected, they have leather protection on their shoulders and their haunches but nevertheless it has to be cut. So sometimes it's blown down, sometimes it's just cut with a pick sufficient for the horse to come through. Tom Jones then decided that he'd had enough of cutting coal and he and I went onto nights permanent for a short time, because a collier had been killed unfortunately. Where he took the flats out from the turning of his road he whole lot unfortunately collapsed on him. So we had to go and make the place safe. And to do that we had to cut timber to the right length – as they call it a pair of timber although there're actually three pieces. So you have two uprights and a collar across the top of it. We worked there for a short time and made the place safe. So then it was decided that they were going to put in conveyors so it meant that the face had to be straightened. Unfortunately there was a very large corner, which had to be taken off. So once again I had to move myself, or rather I was moved to work with somebody else, another collier. And there were four of us, two colliers and two Bevin Boys. And the term for the mate is a helper and that goes down on your pay docket as a collier's helper. So we were working to get this large, large corner off so the face could then be straight to put the conveyors in. one afternoon we were working away and the haulier, who comes in with the horse to take out the full tram said that the rails on which the trams run was dislodged outside and wanted Les, who I was working with and the other collier to come and re-instate it. So I was told to get on with filling the trams. So they went out with the tools to fix this rail. And when you're there by yourself it is very, very eerie. I sounded the top and I thought that sounds good but I still wasn't satisfied, because you hear the top working, it's dribbling all the time, little bits are falling off it. And I noticed a gap, which seemed to be getting wider. However, I tried the top again and by sounding it you hit it with the handle of a pick and it should ring like a bell. But I wasn't happy. I looked at this gap and it was getting wider so I moved all the tools and our coats and I started to walk out, where the others were and I was met by them coming in. And I was greeted by a 'what was I doing out there' and I said 'listen it's up to the daisies', and they listened and suddenly it came. The noise was terrifying and the dust that followed it was even worse. We all turned our backs while the dust passed us by and settled and then we went in very, very gingerly. And the size of the rock that had fallen was unbelievable. It had tipped the empty tram up for starters. So there we were and it was cut off clean with the coalface but as I said it was up to the daisies, which means that you could see

the daisy roots. You could fly a kite up in the hole. So we had to clear it up. So we started off and the first thing of course is to catch the top again. So that's what we had to do, get some pit props, sticks as they're known and catch the top and of course all the time there were bits dribbling off the edge of it. There were very large pieces there and some of them had to be taken down by a controlled explosion of course, which is always done by the fireman and we got back under the top again. But unfortunately, with the pressure still there, pieces got in the way and had to be blown. So we called in a borer, who uses his machine on a tripod with water to lay the dust. Unfortunately the borer, we weren't there at the time but he'd put in a couple of holes, took off his machine, laid it down and was thinking on where to punch in the next hole and he always wore a hard hat. He took it off looking up thinking where am I going to put the next hole and just a small piece, no bigger than his fist, hit him on the head and killed him. Now these are the sort of things that happen every day – almost everyday underground. Everybody leaves the area, whilst an enquiry is held as to why it happened and how it shouldn't happen again. But eventually the face was straightened and the conveyors were put in. now remember I spoke about the main. OK so you've got a conveyor on the main, which is known as the gate conveyor. To the left hand side you've got a belt conveyor and to the right hand side you've got a jigger conveyor. The jigger is the most unusual one because you have cradles with fairly small wheels fitted underneath each of the very long trays. They're six to ten feet long trays and they work on a jigger action. It is taken up under pressure of compressed air and then of course let down again so as it comes down again it shoots the coal along, which polishes the trays so the coal really moves then. So every so often – every day almost, when the colliers have got off their stint and they've made a new run, the turning gangs come in and disconnect or dismantle the conveyor and the jigger conveyor as well and reassemble it in the new run, which makes it a bit awkward because there's not much room to move then. And then the repairing gangs come in after this and they have to fill the space where the conveyors were. And they do this by dry stone walling. They have to have a lot of rough material – rock and small stuff like that so that they build a wall and then all the smaller stuff is put behind the wall in order to support it. It can never take the place of the coal. It can never be as solid as the coal, but I understand that in other parts of the world they actually have machines underground that produce a type of concrete and that goes in where the coal was so that when it hardens it's more support. The modern machines I know very little about. They're very large and they do all the cutting and loading, but they don't necessarily wind coal all the time, whereas under the system that I knew the trams were taken out to the bottom of the pit by large journeys and they were put into the cage or the bon – you see another difference in a name, cages are a usual one but in South Wales it's always called the bon. Sometimes they're just a single and sometimes they're doubles. They're taken to the top of the pit and then of course they're trundled round to the screens, where they are tipped and sorted so of course it's a very dusty job. And the way that the checkers know that that particular journey has been filled by the men on my shift was because we'd all have a mark and as I was then working on what they called a tip end, we were actually filling the trams. The coal would come up onto the gate conveyor and then up over the tip end and we would have a mechanical device, again all machinery underground is driven by compressed air so that we can stop the coal coming over the top although the machines don't really stop. And as the journey is let down gradually by the haulier, which is right along side us so he knows where we are. And there we go, another tram is filled, the next one comes down and so we fill the full journey. And these are then let down to a double parting and that speaks

for itself because normally the track is single track but at a double parting is where you get on one side the full journey, on the other side the empties. So that's the way they get the coal to the bottom of the pit, up the pit and onto the screens. In the pit where I was working we had two winding gears. One is always the open cast and the other is closed. And it's an airlock. Just below the surface on the airlock there's a gigantic fan, which is turning in the opposite usual direction so that it drags all the air down through the open cast, through the workings and then back up to the closed pit, or the up cast shaft. And they use underground - they use doors, wooden doors, quite large ones to divert the flow of air. And where necessary they put up curtaining, what's called brattice sheeting [*tarred hessian*]. Again that is all put onto pairs of timber so that again it diverts the air because if there's a pocket of gas somewhere and this is found by the shot firer whose known as the fireman or any of the other officials, then curtaining has to be put up to divert the flow of air and drive the gas out. What else can I tell you?

A.K. Can you tell me something about the accommodation – people you were staying with?

R.K. Accommodation, yes the accommodation by all means. I was – as I said in the beginning my two brothers were evacuated to Tredegar and I therefore lodged with the daughter of the family that my brothers was with and she was a married woman, with a couple of children. Her husband was a collier and guess what? He'd been called up into the army. So I therefore took his place so to speak. I lodged with Mrs Stokes for the whole time – practically the whole time I was working underground. She lived in a part of Tredegar, which is known as Sirhowy. And during my time there I met a young Welsh girl and I married her and then I moved into – rather we moved into my wife's sisters prefab and it wasn't very long after that I got my release. And this was done in the same way as the army. We were given release numbers and when that number was due for a release I had to go to the local Ministry of Employment and I was given my release papers and I was given also a travel warrant. There that's two I've had. But unfortunately Bevin Boys have had no recognition of what they did for National Service. We had to provide our own tools, our own working clothes, we got no demob suit, we got no gratuities and of course no medals. But there, that's the way things go.

A.K. Did you have to join the union while you were working there?

R.K. Oh yes, yes.

A.K. Can you give me some information about what happened with the unions.

R.K. Very little information regarding unions. I really had to join the miner's union. I didn't have a lot to do with them at all, not really and oh dear, the other thing of course is the fact that in Tredegar, which is the birthplace of Aneurin Bevin, sorry Bevan, was the Medical Aid Society from which he took the blueprint for the National Health Service. It works very well down there and it worked very well in all towns in South Wales. Well the men paid for it out of their wages, it was stopped out of their wages as a stoppage and no one ever – that's everything as well of course, teeth as well, glasses, whatever you needed. I had occasion to use the dental service on one occasion. I had a raging toothache and my – Tom Jones said to me 'go and see

Cliff and he'll give you a chew of tobacco'. Put it into your mouth and put it into the tooth and it'll deaden it. I did this and I don't smoke and never have smoked, never chewed tobacco and immediately my mouth was full of the juice and to this day I don't know whether I spat out the chew and swallowed the juice or spat out the juice and swallowed the chew. But it deadened my tooth, it almost killed me. Having suffered all day long with it, it gave me a terrible stomachache and when we'd finished the shift, then I had my bath 'cos we had pithead baths fortunately and changed my clothes. Up into the bus to Tredegar and I got out in the Circle, which is quite well known in Tredegar. I went to see my fiancée as she was then and she worked in the British Restaurant. I said to her 'shalln't be long' and I went across the Circle into the Medical Aid dental section and I had my tooth out. Didn't pain me after that. What else?

A.K. What was the reaction of your family when they found you were going down the mines rather than into the army?

R.K. Reaction was well, that's your National Service. You've got to get on with it.

A.K. You didn't appeal against going down the mines?

R.K. No, no I did not. I know that some people have and that they tried all sorts to get out of it. I don't know if some did. They probably did. But no, I went down and just had to get on with it.

A.K. What about your relationship with other Bevin Boys or with the other miners?

R.K. The only other Bevin Boy that I can remember was Warwick Taylor, who is our Vice..

A.K. President.

R.K. President at the moment and of course all the work he's done. He's a very good Vice President. I knew him because he worked in Oakdale. I can't remember what part of the pit he worked. Because most pits in South Wales work at least three or four seams and that goes right through the whole of the Southwest coalfield there. Various seams being worked all over the place. As to our – the reactions from the colliers – the Walsh colliers to the Bevin Boys, I think we were just accepted as a necessary evil. Most of us just got on with the job and were working on the coalface. I know there are some who came from very upper class families but they still had to do their job.

A.K. Was absenteeism and desertion rife?

R.K. No, not that I can remember anyway. No I can't say that there was any.

A.K. You didn't ever ..

R.K. No, no I did my full three and a half years.

A.K. What about the social life while you were there?

R.K. I think that the Bevin Boys who stayed in the hostel used to go down into Blackwood and there was quite a social life down there but Tredegar is a good dozen miles away and no, there was enough social life there. There were two cinemas, there were three cinemas over in Ebbw Vale that I'd been to and I went to with my fiancée. There were other town very close like Merthyr Tydfil, which was quite a large town and had quite a lot of social activities going on and of course there quite a number of pubs around, although in those days I was not a drinker. Not that I am now but.

A.K. Were you aware that the war was going on? You were a long way away from it so …

R.K. We were a long way from it, yes, most certainly but we were well aware that it was going on. Of course one of the things was nationalization of the coalmining industry and of course when the end of the war came the Circle was absolutely heaving with people and everybody was singing and dancing and were all very happy.

A.K. Did you get to visit your own family at all while you were there?

R.K. No, only when my wife and I married and we had a week off.

A.K. you were still a Bevin Boy the though?

R.K. Oh yes, still a Bevin Boy. And we actually spent our honeymoon down on a farm in Kent where my sister was a Land girl.

A.K. That's interesting. What do you feel now about having been a Bevin Boy? What are your reactions looking back?

R.K. I was quite happy. It was an experience that I don't think I shall go through again and maybe I missed something by not going into the Forces. I don't know.

A.K. What was your view of the coal industry prior to call up and did it change by ..?

R.K. I knew nothing about it, nothing at all.

A.K. So you went in completely unaware of what was going to happen?

R.K. Well, unaware of what was going to happen most certainly but I knew where coal came from but apart from that I didn't know very much about how it was won.

A.K. Did you get any bombardment of propaganda from the Government about going down the mines – that you were doing a good thing and …?

R.K. No, no, nothing at all.

A.K. You didn't listen to the radio broadcasts by Bevin to schoolchildren?

R.K. No, didn't really know who Bevin was apart from Ernie Bevin was the man who sent us down the coalmine.

(END)

AK

Transcript of Interview with Warwick T.,
at the Imperial War Museum, Lambeth, London,
conducted on 18th April 2002 by Ann Kneif

W.T. I'll look at the reading here *(I gave Mr Taylor a list of points I wanted to cover)*. You've got the call-up. How the ballot was decided upon and organized and the reaction of the Bevin Boys to conscription. I shall go back to the outbreak of the 2nd World War. Massive mobilization – men were called up from all walks of life and from all industries, including coal miners. Many coal miners also left to take up work in other industries such as shipbuilding where rates of pay were a lot higher. Several decisions had to be made by the government. They tried to get men who were called up into the Forces to return to their original work in the mines. Well this is of course not easy. You can't go out to North Africa and say 'here Tommy, put down your rifle, go back to your old job and pick up your pick and shovel'. It just didn't work that way. But they did manage to get 12,000 to return from the Forces back into the coalmines. That was one method. These were called volunteers. They also tried to get the unemployed to take up work in the coal mining industry but the majority were unsuitable. They also tried to get youngsters of school leaving age to take up a career in the industry. Again a serious shortfall in numbers. By 1943 there was a serious shortage of coal in this country. In actual fact there was only three weeks supply left. Something had to be done urgently. 50,000 men were needed in the next 18 months to produce more coal. So Ernest Bevin who was the wartime Minister of Labour and National Service introduced a scheme of balloting young men of call-up age between 18 and 25 to be conscripted to go into the mines. It's a simple method. Ten slips of paper 0 to 9 were placed into his bowler hat and his secretary would draw out a number. These ballots took place on a fortnightly basis. If the number selected coincided with the last digit of your registration number, this determined the fact that you were conscripted into the mines. Now the reaction of Bevin Boys to conscription. Well most of us were devastated by this decision. During the war, including myself, most of us worked – or rather most of us spent our time in a cadet force, such as the Army Cadets, the Navy Cadets or the Air Training Corps. I'd spent already three and a half years in the Air Training Corps, with the whole purpose of going into the RAF when I was due for call-up. It was not to be. You could appeal of course but any appeal just fell on deaf ears. So medical examination – this was a bit of a farce as all of us were A1 fit in those days. It was just a question of breath in, breath out – off, right A1 fit you're in. so about a fortnight later you'd receive the brown envelope, which would contain your direction order and your railway warrant. Now Bevin Boys could be sent to any one of 13 Government training centre collieries in the United Kingdom. One was in Scotland, one in South Wales, where I was sent to and the remaining 11 in England. You would set off. In my case I lived in Harrow in Middlesex – it's now North London. Went up to Paddington Station and caught the train down to South Wales, eventually arriving at the station near to where the mine was that I was sent to. On the station platform you would see a Ministry of Labour official. Now it was his job to meet us, greet us if you like and to find us

accommodation. That was his sole purpose. Now accommodation could be twofold. Some of the collieries had hostels. I was lucky in being sent to South Wales because I was sent to a hostel. Now these hostels were really typical army camps. Purpose built, capable of housing 500 residents. Consisted of a number of Nissan huts, each Nissan hut would house 12 Bevin Boys and a number of brick buildings. The brick buildings would be the ablution blocks, canteen, the sick bay, the recreation centre and so on. The hostels were – there were 44 in the United Kingdom. The hostels were managed by a hostel manager, or warden if you like and he lived on site in a bungalow, which again was purpose built. Now if there was no hostel you would be sent to billets – you would be billeted out and by being billeted out you would normally go to a miner's home. Now the Bevin Boy of course would take the lowest priority in the miner's home. So that would be your accommodation. I should say that the 25shillings a week – one pound 25 pence as it is today, would be deducted from your pay whether you were in a hostel or whether you were in billets. Once we had settled into the hostel or billets we were then instructed or ordered to report to the colliery training centre. Now the first thing that they had to do was to kit us out with equipment. I would mention that the training course there was for a duration of four weeks. In my particular case it lasted a bit longer because when we arrived in South Wales there was a lot of snow on the railway tracks and we were employed in actually clearing snow off the tracks on the surface before having underground training. Kitting out – we were given a helmet, a pair of steel capped boots for which we had to surrender six clothing coupons and you were given a pair of overalls and some PT kit – a vest and some shorts and pumps as they were called in those – plimsolls for PT. Then after having received that you would then be told of what the programme would consist of for four weeks of intensive training. A quarter of the time would be spent in actually doing physical training. Now physical training would be given by ex-army, navy or air force PT instructors. It was very important to get us into a fit condition. One must realize that we'd all come from all walks of life. In my case a typical suburban middle class community. We'd never got our hands dirty in our lives so we had to be licked into some sort of shape. Classroom work- well that would take up a certain amount of the time. Classroom lectures, perhaps slide shows, film shows on all the safety aspects underground and then underground of course – the actual underground. Most of the time would be spent in training underground. So the first day would come to go underground. Now we all looked upon this with trepidation, we didn't quite know what we were in for. This was all very strange and before you actually go underground you have to be issued with a lamp. Now in order to get that lamp you have a check token or tally. All miners are issued with these and you have to surrender one of these in order to get the lamp. You can see the object of course is safety so that they could know exactly who is underground at any one time. Anyone missing at the end of a shift an immediate search would be instigated. Somebody might be injured – I was going to say lost underground but that is probably unlikely. You would then – you're ready to go underground but before you go underground you have to pass a man known as the banksman. The banksman is in charge of men that are entering the cage or even coming out if they are coming up to the surface and it's his job to ensure that you've got no contraband on your possession. No cigarettes, no tobacco, no matches, no lighters, nothing of that nature at all. It's a very serious offence if you're carrying any of those items with you and he can actually – he has the right to physically search you. Into the cage and this is it they called it the initiation drop. First trip underground for Bevin Boys. The regulation speed for lowering men in a cage is 30 feet per second – they let us drop at 70 feet per second. You just go

plummeting straight down. The miner that was with us, he did warn us this is what they do and he said don't worry about it, just bend your legs and it won't feel so bad. But of course it's the pressure on the eardrums as you're going down. It's tremendous and the pit down at Oakdale in South Wales was very deep. It's almost 3000 feet down and this can cause nosebleeds as it did with one or two. You arrive at the bottom – there's another miner in charge at the bottom and he's called the onsetter. Of course the onsetter and the banksman, they're in contact with each other by means of bell code signals for the lowering and raising of the cage and in turn they're in contact with the engine house for the actual winding gear. The onsetter and he's responsible underground. Of course when we first went down it was just really a sort of educational, instructional tour. It looked fairly pleasant. The walls were whitewashed – not one would expect underground, but that didn't last for long for as you walk it's a mass of tunnels underground. It's like a rabbit warren. Tunnels all over the place and as you go deeper and deeper into the mine of course it becomes more and more dismal with lack of lighting. You've got your lamp of course, but of course the object of carrying a miners lamp is not basically to see your way although it does give you some light but it's to detect the presence of any gas. That's the object. Normally a miner's lamp will give you a little flame of half an inch high. It's a nice little yellow flame but if that changes to bright blue you've got firedamp or methane gas and that means it's very dangerous and you have to evacuate immediately. This was one of many trips that we spent underground. So the training starts in earnest. Walking along through the tunnels to the coalface, which in many cases can be quite a distance – a mile, a mile and a half, two miles even to get actually to the coalface to see where the real work is being done. In my particular case I'd completed – well first of all don't forget I'd spent three weeks on the surface shovelling snow and I was in my third week of training underground. Was working in water up to my ankles and I had a very bad cold, almost like the 'flu really and the next day I could just not get up I felt so ill. I think they though I was swinging lead because they said come on get out of bed and I couldn't. So they helped me to the sick bay and I spent five days in the sick bay. They still didn't know what was wrong with me. I felt terrible. I was sick, I couldn't eat. So after five days they said right we're sending you to hospital in Newport, which is about 40 miles away and we're sending you by taxi, not ambulance. I couldn't care less I felt so rotten. Taxi driver came, off we set. It was a January morning of 1945 and the taxi driver said we've got to pick up another patient on the way. So we called into this Welsh village and a lady came out, sat in the back of the taxi with me. She was in the final stages of labour and I was going in and out of consciousness. We finally got to Newport hospital. I don't know what happened to her. I was completely unconscious by the time we arrived there and fortunately the consultant – they knew exactly what was wrong – he said this man has got double pneumonia. Penicillin, one million units every eight hours. Within 24 hours my temperature had come back to normal, I came round and found my mother and father sitting by my bedside. I was also in a ward with five other men all of whom had been seriously injured and been brought back. They were soldiers, brought back from Dunkirk. This made me realize that this could have been an alternative. I thought good I'm out of the coal mine now, that's nice. No, no chance at all. Got a nice bit of sick leave but I had to go back again. Didn't get me out of it. I was still pronounced A1 fit and back I had to go for retraining all over again and I actually remained at that particular colliery. Now normally once you've completed your period of training, you're then sent to another colliery within that area where you were trained. In the case of South Wales it could have been any one of 350 collieries, but I remained actually at Oakdale. The war

finished and I was able to, in actual fact, get transferred to the Royal Air Force, which was what I wanted in the first place. We didn't get much money as a Bevin Boy. Was £3-10sh a week, that's £3-50. Trade Unions – I didn't join one – I don't really know anybody that did. I think at certain parts of the country they did try to persuade Bevin Boys to join a Trade Union because really if you were in the mines as a career it would be compulsory to do so. But a lot of us said no, we're conscripts under National Service, you know we're not interested in joining Trade Unions. As far as I know none of us did. I found personally that down in South Wales, now this doesn't apply to other parts of the country, but down in South Wales there was a resentment from the public at large to the fact that we were down there in the mines. We got a lot of abuse in the streets and it's understandable because the people there thought, the wives thought that we'd come down there to take away the jobs from their own kith and kin, from their husbands, from their brothers, from their sons and so on. So there was a certain amount of resentment. Difficult to know the views of the actual regular miners on how they – I don't know how they must have thought with the invasion of all these young men – as I say never got their hands dirty in their lives, suddenly descending upon them. I think they thought it must have been a bit of a joke. But you get into the way of things of course and eventually they get to accept you. They realize that, well perhaps they are not so bad after all these young lads. And they always liked to play little jokes. Now down in Wales because as I say Bevin Boys really once we started work we were mainly employed on conveyor belts or on haulage. On one particular case I was just shovelling coal that had spilled from the conveyor belt onto the floor. It was my job to shovel it and put it back onto the conveyor belt. Try and keep the gangway as clear as possible. But with haulage there are various types of haulage. This could be done by – I won't go into great details but underground it's rather like a narrow gauge railway with these trucks and they could be hauled by various methods. Sometimes by a steel cable running between the tracks, sometimes a steel cable above in which case it was our job to have to clip on a chain onto the moving cable that was attached to the tubs. Down in South Wales they're called trams. Lots of Bevin Boys had accidents with this question because this steel cable is moving and to try and clip these things on you could easily injure yourself and they actually did injure themselves, especially your thumb – it gets in the way of the chain. But another method of haulage was of course the pit pony. This happened at many collieries and the Welsh miners used to like to – like all miners would like to play a joke upon us and one of the main jokes and this probably took place at many of the Welsh collieries, was to get the Bevin Boys to drive the pony. A pit pony could haul up to two loaded tubs so they'd put us on with the pony to get him to move off. He couldn't. Pony didn't respond. It stood there stubbornly. You'd pull it, you'd push it. No and the miners would be laughing their heads off wouldn't they. The reason is of course the ponies could only understand Welsh. In other collieries they played similar sorts of jokes, like putting a wedge under a tub so you couldn't move it and that sort of thing, you know. But all part of life and you have to accept it and if you accept it you get on with them that's fine but. Another thing really was the fact that it came – we didn't get much in the way of leave. We got a weeks leave a year and you got Christmas Day off but you didn't get Boxing Day. We were liable to be fined £2 for every day of absenteeism. Well that was rather difficult with Christmas time came isn't it. You couldn't get back anyway on Boxing Day if you tried. So most of us got fined or warned about this sort of thing. There was a certain amount of absenteeism this is true. I think the official Government figure said something like 20% that's a fifth absenteeism. The social life down there - well that didn't really consist of very

much particularly down in South Wales. It's these villages are up in the mountainsides and there's not a lot of entertainment. You couldn't go and have a drink, certainly on a Sunday because all the pubs were closed. You'd perhaps go to – a lot of the mining towns had an institute and they had one down where I was called the Oakdale Miners Institute and they'd perhaps have a film show, there might be a dance there. Otherwise your entertainment or social life would really be based around the actual hostel. Games and that sort of thing. Sometimes you'd have some entertainment there actually at the hostel. But don't forget in those days we really didn't have much money to spend anyway. We couldn't really afford – you didn't get much change out of your £3 – 10 shillings a week. By the time they deducted your hostel, income tax, which I think, was six old pence in the pound for that. Not a lot left. We were all youngsters – 18 we all were thinking about getting home as soon as we can because all our interests, social life perhaps girl friends were back home. We didn't have uniforms so there was a lot of – perhaps when you went home you were challenged frequently by the local police for the fact that you were not in uniform. During wartime everybody wore uniform but not us. We were in civilian clothes. This would also prompt members of the general public shouting abuse at you. They thought you were draught dodgers or deserters even and in the case of police you were often challenged because one was warned during wartime about enemy agents. So you'd be questioned by local Bobbies. There were certainly a lot of police about during wartime. Eventually for release. The Government had difficulties in finding some sort of scheme of when we were to be released. They decided that a similar scheme should be brought in as that for the Forces. In other words we were given a release number. A demobilization number. All Bevin Boys were out of the coalmines by 1948. The ballot side of the scheme finished when the war finished in Europe but they carried on. I should also mention – I forgot to mention this – you could actually be an optant. I mentioned earlier that there were volunteers, those from the Forces coming in. I mentioned the ballotees. The optants were the other lucky ones that weren't balloted. In other words they were due to go into the Army, Navy or Air Force but they had the chance of opting to go into the mines if they wanted to do so and there were a number of these because probably some people from mining areas. That they wanted to be near their families and homes and they would be the optants. The target was 50,000 Bevin Boys; at the end of the day there were 47,859 – round it off to 48,000. Many people thought we were conscientious objectors. We were not. Official figures state that there were only 41 conscientious objectors that went into the mines. Recognition – we didn't get any recognition at all. In actual fact we got no demob suit, we didn't get a medal. We all felt that we were entitled to the Defence Medal. We didn't get any letter of thanks for our service in the mines. We could not claim re-instatement to do our civilian jobs. If your ex Army, Navy, Air Force your jobs had to be held open for you. Not if you were a Bevin Boy in the mines. So in my particular case I was lucky I went into the RAF and I did 2 years to complete my National Service. So in actual fact my whole National Service covered a period of four years, two in the mines, two in the RAF. When I was demobbed from the Royal Air Force my record said this man has given excellent service in the Royal Air Force and can be highly recommended to return to his previous job in the coalmines. We always thought that very, very funny. Today after a gap really of 50 years we've tried very hard to get recognition and in my particular role as Vice-President of the Bevin Boys Association. We set up an association in 1989. That's a long time after the war, almost well over 40 years. We set an association up with 32 members. Today we've got 1620 and they're still surfacing. Coming out of the woodwork even today. So and

we first got recognition on the VJ commemorations which took place in 1995 when we were actually specifically mentioned in broadcasts and talks given by Her Majesty the Queen. Betty Boothroyd who was the Speaker of the House of Commons at that time and John Major, who was Prime Minister at that time. All mentioned the Bevin Boys and their role during the war. After that in the year 2000 a plaque was unveiled by Her Majesty the Queen in the old grounds of Coventry Cathedral and this plaque, made of Welsh slate and measured about ten feet in diameter. It's a dedication to all those who served on the Home Front during the Second World War and it's dedicated to the Bevin Boys, the Women's Land Army, munitions workers, timber corp and all those who took an important role during World War 2. I was very proud to be involved with this particular project with the Cabinet Office in London a year before. It was wonderful. So we got some recognition at long last.

(END)

Transcript of interview with Jack M., conducted at the Thistle Hotel, Bloomsbury, London, on 25th May 2002 by Ann Kneif

J.M. Right, when we were talking over dinner you thought it would be a good idea if I told you how I came to be working in the coal mines in the first place. Well this was partly by accident but partly of course because the war was on and they needed people to go into the coalmines. I started off in 1939 in a reserved occupation and so I was not called up at all until 1943. I think it was either the summer or the early autumn and because of the way in which they handled things I had a choice of either going into the army into the Royal Engineers or becoming a Bevin Boy as the term finally emerged. Of course at that stage the need for coal was so great that they were bringing coal miners who'd been called up for the war back to England in order to – or England, Wales and Scotland – in order to produce the production of coal. At the same time they introduced the special employment regulation which enabled the Minister of Labour to direct a proportion of people, who would otherwise be called up for the armed forces, to go into the coalmines instead and running alongside that they were prepared to accept volunteers and I was one of those. A little bit older than most because by then I would have been about the age 28 – that's right. And so off I went to North Staffordshire, near Stoke-on Trent to be precise. To work in the Sneyd Colliery, very close to Burslam, which a few weeks before I started work there had a terrible explosion accident, which led to 57 miners being killed in one fell swoop. So there I was. Off we went and we went on a four-week training course. The training course was a bit of a laugh. They told us a bit about geology. It was all very didactic teaching. No cooperative drawing out of people to find out how little they knew, how much they knew, anyt5hing of that sort but we just had to learn a little bit about strata and the geology sense and at the end of the four weeks – well we had one or two visits to mines but at the end of that time we were allocated to our particular pits and I landed up in Sneyd. I don't regret the experience. It was the hardest work physically I've ever done in my life but that didn't do me any harm I suppose. I had a feeling that I was doing something worthwhile towards the efforts of the miners to produce the necessary coal and had a feeling of satisfaction day by day that it was a worthwhile employment so I didn't resent it but I did resent working for the particular fellow I was working with on the butty system, which meant two people working together, one of whom was in control of the contract with the pit management and the other was the assistant as it were. I very much resented at the end of the week only getting 20 shillings a day for my hard labour, when my fellow worker, if fellow worker is quite the right phrase, he was getting 35 shillings a week [sic] so we had a good old bust up. He put me up from 20 shillings a day to 21 shillings a day and we soon had another bust up and so we parted company and I was made a contract ripper myself, which involved widening the underground roads which had been depressed because of the way in which the floor came to meet the roof of the tunnels and we had to enlarge them once again to be 8 foot high instead of 2 foot 6 high. That was really hard graft. But when I became a contract ripper myself I went 50/50 with one of my colleagues

who'd previously been on the sick list and we worked very well together. I stayed in the coalmines right up until after VE Day and coming up to VJ Day. The General Election was looming and at that stage I got industrial dermatitis, I was on sick leave and I was able in my spare time, while I was on sick leave, to indulge in a bit more political activity than hitherto and helped out in the General Election in 1945 very nearly toppled the Conservative candidate for the division of Stone, which was a very die hard Tory seat. Sir Hugh Frazer managed to scrape in. We gave him quite a shock. And then I returned back to London to pick up the threads again as the job as a telephone engineer, which I'd had before the war. One of the most vivid memories of the conditions that I and other miners had to put up with in those days was the fact that unlike civil servants, local government employees, teachers and other people in white collar jobs, who had permanent jobs more or less for life – well blue collar workers including coal miners also had a job for life but a completely different type of job because they didn't have any provisions for proper sick pay, they didn't have any pension arrangements and if you had an accident in the pit and had to be off work as a result of the accident you still didn't get any pay, which was really pretty rough. And in the case of the Bevin Boys they even stopped the 3/6d rent allowance on the assumption presumably that we'd move out of the accommodation we were using and sleep on the streets and go back again when we were able to work again but it meant of course that we were that much out of pocket. Another particular incident that I recall is that very shortly after starting on the training course it became apparent that we were only going to be given one trip home every month – every three months and this wasn't at all satisfactory, whether one was married or courting or whatever. And so I got all the Bevin Boys in Stoke-on-Trent area together and we agreed to send a joint telegram to Ernest Bevin drawing attention to this hardship. And good for him he very quickly changed the rules so we got a free travel warrant to go home on a monthly basis instead of a three monthly basis. Very chuffed about that. Some people have suggested I understand that some of the Bevin Boys resented being members of the Union but that wasn't my experience. They were all very happy, as I was to join the Union. Not many of them were active but I insisted on going to the meetings. Very badly attended union organisation in North Staffordshire and at that time was very low end and of course each federation in each separate area was an autonomous federation and they collectively formed a national federation of miners. The National Union of Mineworkers' only came into being at the end of the war. During the latter years of the war a lot of people who had socialist ideas in particular, including my good self, campaigned for the nationalization of the coalmines. One of the early acts of the Atlee Government elected in 1945 was in fact to bring them into the public sector, much to the delight of the miners and their community and the Trade Union movement as a whole and the Labour Party of course. And that quite revolutionised the conditions of work for coal miners in the sense that for the first time ever they had a proper pension scheme, a proper sick pay scheme and life was altogether more satisfactory. I recall playing some little part in the campaign for the nationalization of railways – of course they were nationalized shortly after the mines were nationalized. I played my part in the campaign by holding open-air meetings on Saturdays in particular – morning, afternoon and sometimes in the evening and we got tremendous support from the public for our demands for immediate nationalization.

One little memory which I hadn't come back to my mind when we were talking earlier on was that in Stoke-on-Trent, I think it was in Hanley one of six towns – there's not only five towns of course in the Potteries, it's really six towns and the Hanley one of the six had a lovely theatre. Used to have very good plays and I can

well remember one production in particular. Must have been about 1944 I imagine. One of J.B. Priestly's most effective plays. The title I think was 'They Came to a City' and it was really describing what life would be like if at long last instead of living under capitalist conditions the workers in a particular city were able to really be in charge of their own lives. Had quite an impact on me although I already had fairly strong, strongly established socialist ideas even before the outbreak of war. So J.B. Priestly became one of my heroes and of course for probably three or four years during the war Priestly gave weekly pep talks on the radio which were listened to by a very high proportion of the population. Radio was in its fairly early days then but certainly it did quite a bit for the war effort. Would you like me to say a few things about such matters as the standard of living, because of course we were all on rations both during the war and for many years after the war?

A.K. Yes definitely. And accommodation.

J.M. Well some people in certain occupations, certainly including the coal miners were entitled to certain additions to the basic ration. I think we had a slightly higher meat ration per week. We certainly had a higher cheese ration and we made good use of that. I did most of my shopping in the local Co-op and in addition to the official additions to the basic ration once that they got to know that you were a coal miner quite a lot of the shop keepers found extra things under the counter as it were to supplement, which was very nice. I was lucky in the sense that I was able to get accommodation for the first year or so of my stay in the Potteries, which lasted altogether just over two years. The first year I was able to rent the house of a lad who had mining connections and who was in the Air Force. And he agreed that if I paid his rent of 7/6½d a week I could have the full use of his house on the condition that when he came home on leave that he had the use of the main bedroom again. Well he – I used the second bedroom anyway. I had some lovely neighbours there. The people next door used to knock on the wall when it was time for me to wake up for night shift and somebody down the road would come up and put the traditional whitewash on the doorstep, which brightened up the otherwise very drab looking street, which coal mining families lived in, in those days. Those were quite happy memories and I got on very well with this RAF lad. I was also quite active in politics, which led to me helping out at the General Election as I've already mentioned. So those are some of the aspects of the life and trouble I was going to say but it wasn't only troubles really. There was tremendous comradeship and friendship and I got to know quite a lot of the local miners. One thing that did for me was to make me break the habit of being a teetotaller. I was in my late twenties but I followed my father's footsteps and I didn't particularly bother about drinking alcohol but since I could only meet my mates either in the local Working Men's' Club or the local pubs in the evening I was joining them there, I got fed up with drinking ginger beer and progressed via shandys to bitter and so on. But I've always drunk half pints while other people are drinking full one-pint glasses. But we got on exceptionally well and I enjoyed the social life and the great warmth of the people in the Potteries and I even picked up some of their local dialect and some of their local expressions, which were significantly different from those of us who were born and bred down south. But one thing that was often said about the people in the Potteries, which I thoroughly disagree with, was that they were unwilling to accept people into their community until you'd been there for ten, 15 or 20 years. But I found I'd only been there about a few weeks and I'd already made

quite a lot of friends and I found them a thoroughly outgoing, warm-hearted people and I look back with pleasure on those days. Have I forgotten anything?

A.K. What was your relationship with the other Bevin Boys? Did you get on with them as well as the miners?

J.M. Yes, I did. I can't remember how many of them finally joined me in the Sneyd Colliery. There certainly were some others. But the attitude of the management was most unfortunate. They sort of treated us as more of a nuisance than extra manpower. So much so that after the first week or two, being given low grade jobs, which weren't contributing very much to coal production, I went to the manager and asked him for more meaningful type of work and so he sent me on the coal face which was difficult for me not only because of the hard work, which I didn't mind doing but because I always had trouble with my eyesight and had to wear spectacles and even with special splinter proof spectacles it was difficult on the coal face because it was so warm and one would sweat and my glasses would get covered with coal dust and I'd run out of pieces of clean rag to keep my glasses clear and see what I was doing by the first hour in a seven and a half hour shift. So I was then moved onto quite different work. More on the night shift, which involved repairing or restoring some of the underground roads that had been reduced in height from a normal 8 foot to about 2 foot 6 and we had to widen them up again and put in new very heavy roll steeled girders and that was very tough going. Particularly as I worked for one of the most notorious slave drivers in the two man butty system and after that row that I talked about I was glad to be moved on from that and had my own contract in due course on a 50/50 basis with one of my pals. But I never encountered any resistance on the part of the Bevin Boys themselves to being in the union or any feelings of resentment amongst the long-standing miners against the Bevin Boys. We just became part of the work force. Not perhaps doing as good a job as everybody hoped they would do because of the attitude of the management but certainly there was no evidence in North Staffordshire of Bevin Boys getting together to form separate unions or of the union branch trying to obstruct the employment of Bevin Boys.

A.K. There was no pressure from the mine owners to ensure that the new miners were not obliged to join the unions?

J.M. No, no. It just wasn't an issue in our part. I have heard as you told me about the fact that there were these difficulties in other parts of the country but not in North Staffs. It might have been due to the fact that the level of Trade Union activity in North Staffordshire was so much lower than it was in other areas and therefore unionism in any aspect of its operation was hardly atop of people's minds. One thing I did do, partly I suppose because so few of the miners themselves were playing a proper part in branch activity I was able to become a member of the branch committee very quickly and they put me on what was called the pit production committee where elected miners themselves acted as the disciplinary force within the pits in respect of the legal obligation of miners during the war to work every day and not take days off and so on and so forth. Actually any miner who didn't turn up for work was breaking the law and would have been liable to imprisonment, which wouldn't have actually helped the war effort and so they established this quasi legal framework, which meant that the pit production committee on which I served was actually carrying out the legal functions that otherwise would have been exercised by the courts. We could give

exemptions from any legal action as long as we imposed what was thought to be a proper penalty. In our case we very rarely imposed the penalty other than the need to continue to work all shifts available until we eventually invented a penalty, which went along the lines of well if there's no further absences during the next two weeks we'll forget about the fact that you missed a few days in the past. And so it all worked very smoothly. I think that the attendance was improved. Nobody was ever sent to prison and the output of coal continued merrily as a result.

A.K. It must have been quite different from some of the pits where absenteeism was really rife and really upset coal production?

J.M. Potentially that law could have upset coal production if the miners had reacted that way but certainly in my district they didn't and as far as I know they didn't in other districts. And the whole system of these pit production committees was really quite outstanding success in self-discipline and new style management with worker participation.

A.K. So your aim really was to keep coal production up for the war effort?

J.M. Oh absolutely, yes. And I suppose it could whether it played any part in people's thinking but in a number of the nationalized industries in the late 1940s, during the 1950s various industries were nationalized including the steel industry and the railways as well as the mines that they then introduced the concept of worker director. That's where the Trade Unions nominated people to sit alongside the management at board meetings and played quite a full part and many of them were able to make a living by constructive input into the policy of those industries. I had one or two friends who became worker directors and it was quite a success story in its own right.

A.K. Did you keep in touch with any of the people that you met in the mines after the war?

J.M. Unfortunately no for a whole variety of reasons. I think that we were so overjoyed that war was over. We were shortly released thereafter to go back to our ordinary jobs and then in my own particular case it was time to be thinking about starting a family, having been married, for a second time actually, during the Second World War. We didn't think in terms of keeping alive the memories of our two years stint in coal mining. I regret that I didn't do so and I'm quite looking forward to picking up the threads through the context that you've mentioned, which might lead me to becoming a member of the Bevin Boys Association. Whether I'll join them in their yearly march to the Cenotaph is a bit open to question but my poor old hips. Of course a number of miners, Bevin Boys who are still lively enough to do the march is dwindling very rapidly so I suppose that will be a fairly short lived Association. People who are actually Bevin Boys so I'd better get cracking on that while the going's good.

A.K. Is it your impression that the Government had the idea right from the beginning to release miners by using the Bevin Boys, that they wanted to release miners to go on the work face – on the coal face?

J.M. I haven't got any inside knowledge of how the Government finally came around to it. I think it was a fairly obvious case of events themselves deciding what the policy would have to be. I mean there's no doubt at all that improved coal output was absolutely vital to the war effort. That meant more people had got to be working in the mines and even by releasing the coal miners to come back to work in the mines, which was obviously helpful in itself but it wasn't sufficient. I think they needed something nearer ¾ million people in the mines, which was far more than the number that had previously been working there and so they just had to both get miners back in the mines and attract a new labour force and it was just events that drove the Government's policy.

A.K. Do you think that being a Bevin Boy changed your attitude at all after the war or changed the way that your life then developed?

J.M. Well it certainly gave me a new outlook on what working for ones living was. I mean I was very conscious of the fact that one had to work in order to keep oneself and ones family and there wasn't a sort of benefits dependency culture around in those days. The dole was extremely low level anyway and some of the early marches, particularly the Jarrow March and so on were actually sparked by a cut in the pre=war level of unemployment benefit from 15/9d a week to 15/3d a week I seem to remember. So having for those two years during the war worked as a different sort of blue-collar worker, one who was treated almost like animals in the pit in a way and the attitude of the management was so atrocious and the fact that I'd experienced that sort of attitude between management and their employees, which I wouldn't otherwise encountered if I'd remained a telephone engineer for the whole of my early part of my employment, I would have been missing a vital experience, which I'm quite sure played a part in shaping my political outlook on my involvement in the Labour movement of the Trade Unions and at a later stage the Labour Party and so on.

Yes, of course when we first got posted to our destination, we didn't go straight into a particular pit. We went to a miners training centre. I can't remember where that was in North Staffordshire but it was certainly not, as far as I can recall, in a pit itself. It might have been some separate rooms at the pithead but we only made some visits underground in order to be introduced to the methods of work and so on. But most of our training was theoretical, was not down the mine and I can remember feeling that they hadn't really thought through properly the way in which they should train people who'd had no experience whatever, either in the mine or through family connections. I mean it was all so theoretical to the point that it was several weeks after I had finally been allocated to the Sneyd Colliery and started working underground that I realized that I hadn't got the first idea how to use a shovel, which one would have thought anybody who was planning a training course would have put to be high on the agenda. Of course the right way to use a shovel is not to push it with your arms but to do most of the pushing with your legs by putting your knee behind your elbow and adding the full weight of your body in order to get the coal underneath the – to get the shovel – a shovel rather than a spade – to get the shovel underneath the coal or stone, whichever it was that one was loading into the tubs and then you could really make some progress. I don't think that during the course of the recording I've mentioned just how hard the work was in loading the tubs. Tubs were capable of carrying about 15cwt of stone or 15cwt of coal. Of course the coal would take up more room than 15cwt of stone but you couldn't put much more in – you certainly couldn't put more than a ton

in these tubs. And the system was that there was a continuous moving very thick steel rope, which was working on a hydraulic system and we had special clips by which we attached our filled tubs to this moving steel cable As long as you made your connection the said tub found its way to the pit bottom and then went up in the lifts at a great speed of knots and was duly sorted on the conveyor belts and so on and so forth. But if you didn't make the proper connection your tub would jump off the rails and then it would be my job as the other half of the butty system, it was my job not only to fill the tubs but to make sure that the tub was on its way. So if it did jump off the rails it was my job to get it back again and believe it or not one could devise a method of doing a sudden jerking action to get these tubs weighing up to a ton back on the rails. I'm sure it didn't do any great good to my muscle system having to use them that way but it certainly toughened me up no end.

A.K. You spoke earlier about your relationship with the other miners and Bevin Boys but how were you accepted within the community itself?

J.M. Well, I felt actually in spite of the stories that went around about the inapproachability of the Pottery folk and about their unreadiness to accept people into the community I didn't find that at all. I found that if one approached people in a friendly way and open way they'd respond in the same open and friendly fashion. As a result of that I was able to make not only new aquaintships but new friendships very quickly indeed. It might have been helped by the fact that I was working in one of their main industries. The other main industry of course in that area being the potteries, which in the time I was there were the old style kilns and so on. But I found it a very compatible community. One that was easy to get drawn into because I thought the same way as they did, felt the same way as they did, had the same sort of aspirations for the long term objectives as well as the immediate 'win the war. Objective.

A.K. And you were saying that your views now that it wasn't so bad to have been a Bevin Boy?

J.M. It had its plus side – put it that way round. Like most things in life with the topside and the flipside. On the plus side was certainly the friendship and the wealth of experience that I gained that we've just been talking about. But on the other side there was the fact that one recognized that ones body was being almost misused by the demands made upon it and a feeling of even those of us who didn't get caught up with lung diseases we did recognize that our bodies had been assaulted.

A.K. I suppose that most the young men who went in at 18 into the mines as Bevin Boys had never done any manual work before and they were suddenly confronted with quite hard manual work.

J.M. Yes, but you seem to be implying that it might have been harder for them than us but –

A.K. Well, no, no for you as well but I'm comparing you to say the miners' sons, who were expecting to go in the mines ..

J.M. Yes, well I think it was easier for them partly because they were expecting it but more because of their age and youngsters you know from 16, 17 and 18 in particular, they're often anxious to demonstrate to their peer group how tough they can be and in that sense it was a challenge that they were happy to accept from a physical point of view. Whereas from our point of view, where we knew it was going to be physically hard we didn't see that as a plus point. Like the others might have done to us that was the down side point.

(END)

Transcript of interview with John B., conducted at a Bevin Boy reunion, Bournemouth, on 18.9.2002 by Ann Kneif

J.B. My name is John Burgess and I'm now 76 years old and I was born in Winchester and in 1943 was called up to be a Bevin Boy. I was called up to go to Cresswell Colliery Training Centre in Derbyshire, which was quite an experience because in those days, during the war, we hadn't travelled very far and for me to go from Winchester, across London and to catch the steam train from Paddington up to Chesterfield was quite an experience. We then transferred across to the Training Centre at Cresswell, several of us who by the time we got to the station I'd met up with two or three other young men who were carrying their cases and were obviously going to be Bevin Boys and we went across to the Training Centre at Cresswell. We I suppose in those days a good many of us had never seen a colliery, never mind being down one and I suppose being in little teams of a dozen or so we were full of bravado and the actual first day going down the pit was an experience. We all put on a brave face and we didn't show any fright I don't think. We continued doing the training there which was obviously in a training gallery, which was not really much like the real thing but they tried to assimilate it as well as they could and then during the afternoons we had quite strenuous PT exercises in the gymnasium to build up our muscles and make us look a bit more fitter than we obviously were. We were there for a month at Cresswell and then we were asked where we would like to go. Not directed but asked and I wanted to go obviously as near south as I could get and I was directed to Annesley Colliery in Nottinghamshire so after a months training I went down to Annesley and ended up in the miners hostel at Hucknall, near Hucknall Colliery and I stayed in the hostel. We slept in Nissen huts, 12 to a hut. We were on all sorts of shifts, some on day, some on afternoon, some on nights. So it was coming and going all the while. You didn't get a lot of rest but nevertheless we were all boys together and we sort of mucked in and made the most of it. I worked at Annesley Colliery for a while and living in the hostel until eventually I was able to find some lodgings with a landlady down in the town of Hucknall and there I stayed for a good many years. During that time at Annesley I was working mainly on the haulage of course, driving a pony, working on the haulage taking tubs away from the loader end, down to the haulage and away back to the pit bottom. And I suppose during the course of the months got quite adept at it and it became just another job. It was obviously my first time away from home as it was a good many of us so I think in our spare time we did lead the high life a bit. We used to go to all the dances in Hucknall and we were in competition then with some Polish aircrew who had the Polish airfield at Hucknall. So it was quite enjoyable times I suppose. My landlady and landlord had a son, who was a prisoner of war in Japan. They didn't know this but I wrote to several places for them, the POW association, the British Red Cross. We eventually found out where he was and she planned to have a big party on his return. Of course when he came back he wasn't very well, he wasn't very fit at all but nevertheless we had the party and amongst the guests at the party was a young lady from Nottingham, who I befriended

and Joan eventually became my wife. So when it came to demobilisation of the Bevin Boys I was deeply engrossed in courting and also working quite well at the colliery. By that time I became a coalface worker and decided at the end of the day that I was going to stay on. Anyhow we eventually got married in 1948 and I began my studies, first of all at evening school. Then I got part time day release with the National Coal Board and eventually I was offered a chance on their, what they called their DPT scheme, which was Directed Practical Training. The fact that I'd done most of the practical work at the colliery meant that my DPT scheme was reduced to the work in the surveyor's office and the work in area headquarters in various departments, which lasted about 2½ years. And then when I finished that I – during that time I managed to get my colliery manager's certificate, I continued with my studies and became a member of the Institute of Mining Engineers and subsequently a fellow. I started off looking obviously for some sort of promotion and eventually left Annesley. I went back to Annesley after I'd finished my DPT work and I went back to Annesley as an overman and my first staff appointment was under manager at Bentinck Colliery. By this time of course we were married and settled. We lived in a Coal Board house, a big one at Bentinck, a huge house, which was an old Coal Board house. About a quarter of an acre of garden and more bedrooms than we needed. That was our first promotion within the Board and I worked there for five years. Eventually got the deputy manager job at Silver Hill Colliery, which is in Sutton in Ashfield, and then the manager job at Sutton Colliery in Sutton in Ashfield. Again I worked there for five years and in 1974 I was offered the general manager's job at Harworth Colliery in north Nottinghamshire, up near Doncaster. That was quite a challenge. Harworth was very deep, hot and gassy pit, which was difficult to mine at that particular time and proved to be quite a challenge. However, during the 12 years I was there the Board saw fit to invest quite a lot of money in the colliery. I had a very, very interesting 12 years and the results were most gratifying. I was able to retire at the age of 60 in 1986. So the Bevin scheme was rather frightening to start with, having never seen a colliery before. Once I got used to the conditions, if you can get used to working underground that is, I found the study most interesting. I enjoyed my study to become a mining engineer and most gratifying to be able to get a first class certificate of competency and eventually – well for 22 years colliery manager. So as I say whilst becoming a Bevin Boy was something I really didn't want to do, at the end of the day I think I achieved something in life and had something to be grateful for.

A.K. Can you say something about your lodgings? You said that you'd stayed in the same place for several years. You obviously got on very well with them.

J.B. Oh yes.

A.K. They accepted you although you were really an outsider?

J.B. There were two of us. A friend of mine, a Bevin Boy who I befriended in the hostel. His name is Eric Hanks. He lives in Kidington in Oxfordshire. We were friends for a considerable while. We got the lodgings together and I think the fact that they had a son, who was a prisoner of war, they probably spoilt us more than they would have done. They were very good tenants [probably means landlords], as good as anybody got I would think. And Eric, he got married in Hucknall and he stayed in the industry for a long, long while. He didn't become an official but he worked in the industry for a long while.

A.K. Now can you tell me something about the Trade Unions in the mines? Were you forced to join a Trade Union?

J.B. I think in the early days at Annesley everybody joined the Union. It wasn't a forced but –

A.K. Was it a closed shop or not?

J.B. Well it was the NUM of course in those days in Nottinghamshire and the Union secretary at Annesley was the brother of Laud(?) the cricketer, a Nottinghamshire cricketer. And everybody used to respect Mr Laud. He was a Trade Union secretary. We used to call in his office and pay – I don't know 1/3d a week, something like that. But there was never, ever from what I can remember in my early days any strike in the industry. I can remember nationalisation. I can remember going first day, when the notice was up, that this colliery is now owned by the people, for the people and we all thought that was a marvellous day, although it didn't make any difference either to our pay or the fact we were going to work the same day. But I can remember as if it was yesterday going to work and finding the notice up. In Nottinghamshire we never had any really difficult union problems. I think over the years, because of the way I've travelled around, it seems to be that Nottinghamshire miners are a slightly different breed than the others if you like. I think that was a bit borne out with the troubles in 1984 when Scargill refused a ballot and then made the breakaway union. I mean Roy Link, who became the leader of the UDM was my branch secretary when I was the manager at Sutton Colliery so I knew Roy Link very, very well. Roy and I worked, he as union official and me as the manager, we worked very well together. There were times when we didn't agree of course, obviously. We used to fix contracts and rates of pay and with a bit of give and take we always got an amicable solution. So it really wasn't until the 80s when things started to get a bit militant. But there was never ever any – in the old NUM days there was never any animosity because they were all in the NUM. It was only when after the '84 strike, when Notts formed the UDM, that there were one or two of the original colliers refused to join. They stuck with the NUM and that was when the animosities came in. but I always found that Nottinghamshire miners were very easy to deal with. They were decent sort of fellows. You know there was a bit of give and take on both sides.

A.K. Not as militant as the Welsh miners?

J.B. Oh no. Nor the south Yorkshire men. I mean I went to Harworth, which is almost in Yorkshire. In fact during the '84 strike I was a manager there and we had a horrendous time. We worked and we were actually mining Yorkshire coal. I mean the shaft was in Nottinghamshire but coal we were mining was in Yorkshire. We had pickets. We had as many as 6,000 pickets some days. We had police helicopters, mounted police, Black Maria's in the pit yard and stories I mean – police came in armoured vehicles day after day after day. It was horrendous. Even the wife got stopped one day. She was going to Yoga class one afternoon – one evening in her Mini and because she'd got an anorak on and a woolly hat they thought she was a picket going to work so she got stopped on the picket line. That was when the militancy started. And in fact I suppose even today – the pit is still working – ours is

still working. In the village there are still families that are a little bit against one another because some stuck with the NUM and the other joined the union.

A.K. But these problems started only after the Bevin Boys time?

J.B. Yes. All the time that I was a Bevin Boy I mean we joined the Union because everybody joined the Union. It was only a shilling or 9d or something ridiculous like that, although we were only on £3.12s a week.

A.K. Did you ever have cause to use the Unions to fight for anything?

J.B. No, never. I have been involved since in my roles as management on trying to resolve compensation claims and disputes but not as a Bevin Boy, no.

A.K. That's what I was interested in – because you stayed in the mines rather than packing as soon as possible and went back home.

J.B. After the war wages were so poor and because we didn't have much, people didn't expect much in those days. I think it was about 1978 when we had a – I've forgotten the date but it was when Wilberforce came along. Wilberforce came and settled a dispute over us at arbitration. And Wilberforce gave us all something. If we'd been offered what Wilberforce gave us weeks before we'd have settled. And Wilberforce made a big difference to pay in the industry. I mean I was a manager I think in Wilberforce days and I didn't get as much money as the local Woolworth's manager. It was incredible really. He came along and gave everybody a good start in those days. We thought it was lovely, Wilberforce. Although I don't think the Government thought very much of it. But I think during the days when the war was on of course – Bevin Boy days – the war was on, people didn't expect all that much. We used to catch the colliery bus to work. The buses ran on time. Not like today. And at Annesley we didn't have any pit head baths. We used to bath at home. And on a Saturday we used to wait outside the canteen for the buses to come and they were always full of women going shopping and we'd pile onto the bus in our dirty, filthy pit clothes, which was always a bit embarrassing and I'm sure we must have smelt awful coming out of the pit in filthy dirty clothes. The winter of '46, it snowed so heavily, the pit was snowed in for days. We couldn't get wagons to the pit and we couldn't get to the pit because the buses weren't running and they paid us Bevins in those days.

A.K. Bevins?

J.B. Bevins, which was a payment. We had to justify that we'd made an effort. In fact the check weigh man at Annesley lived in Hucknall and he used to stand on the market in the morning and take the names of those that were trying to get to work. And we used to get what they called a Bevin, which was a payment. A day's wage for trying to get to work. So that was quite an experience for young men who was having a day off, paid for nothing. I went home one day. Mother lived in Winchester and I went home one Bank Holiday and overstayed by a day and had to go and see the officer when I got back – like on the film today [BBC film on Bevin Boys] – reminded me of it – I had forgotten about it. The pit only had a week's holiday. Nobody had many holidays.

A.K. You only got one day at Christmas didn't you?

J.B. That's all, yes. I can remember when we were married, we went down to Winchester one Christmas, and I was a deputy then, on the staff and the under manager wouldn't tell me whether I was working on Boxing night or not and I had to ring, can you remember – talking to the wife. She's at the back of me. I had to ring from Winchester on the Boxing Day morning to see if I was at work that night and I had to rush home, do you remember? So things weren't very easy and we only got the one weeks holiday.

A.K. Anything else that you think might be of use.

J.B. My days as a Bevin Boy I think I was very, very fortunate. I think I was fortunate in going to Nottinghamshire because they received us well with no animosity. I mean Bevin Boys who went to Wales for instance were criminalized really. They thought they were taking their boys' jobs but it didn't happen to us. We were made most welcome. I think one of the problems or one of the advantages of it was that in the mining areas, particularly those round Nottinghamshire and south Yorkshire, most of the men who wanted to work in the pit were already down there. Even today I don't find many Bevin Boys living in our area. To find vast numbers of Bevin Boys you have to go to Norwich or like we've done today down here [Bournemouth] or down to Kent or down into South-West because all the men in our locality who worked down the pit they were in reserved occupations so they didn't become Bevin Boys and so there wasn't any animosity. I mean we've made very good friends of local young men who lived in and around the village. Yes. No problem. So I was blessed in that respect. And I think the fact that we tried to make a go of it must have had something to do with it as well. I went back there as a very junior under manager and I was known as Johnny, even today if we're out anywhere and somebody calls me Johnny, Joan will say they're from Annesley because that's the only place where everybody called me Johnny. And I went back there as a junior official from the very first day they called me Mister, because they knew I'd qualified and I thought that was something. I still go to Annesley now and people still talk. That's another thing of course about the industry, you're always a gaffer. You're always known as gaffer. I took some Australians down the pit one day and they couldn't get over this gaffer business so one of them wrote to me and sent me a present and he addressed his letter 'Dear Gaffer'. And yet I thought it would have been a term for the Australians.

A.K. Well thank you very much indeed.

(END)

Transcript of interview with Hubert Shortman, conducted at his home on 26th September 2002 by Ann Kneif

H.S. I was 14 in February, that was just before Easter. Of course we didn't have holidays in those days – not the workers. The school children did you know. But I was down the pit at Easter. Like I say we worked on the coalface, small seams as well and war started. This was in Easter 1938 that I started and not only me but all my friends, all the school mates unless you was a County educated someone you know you didn't have Grammars, you had County Schools, which was like Grammar today. So if you didn't go in them but even if you did you couldn't afford to go anywhere else – you had to go to work. And anyway in '39 war was started and it wasn't until 1940, when things went wrong after Dunkirk. Before that things was tough, really was tough. One of my scars – I was 15 when I got that one. Every time you got a scar, that was coal it left like a tattoo you know. But anyway war broke out and when France fell in 1940 they drew a lot of miners out, because they didn't need the coal. And my brother was older than me; he was one of them drawn out. I was too young to be drawn out because I think I was 16 at the time. And Eddy – that's my brother, he gave up his place for another man because you went in seniority in those days. Everything was seniority. And he gave up his place for the next chap, he was married, only a young chap about 18 I think and he had a child. And it was all piecework in the pits. You got what you earned you know. Anyway France fell, they didn't need the coal so they drew a lot of miners out, not only in Wales but all over the country and they sent them either called them up or they sent them making aerodromes and airports, you know for the fighter planes and the bomber planes and when they'd finished making all these they were called up and my brother he went in the Navy. Then, all of a sudden, things started to go the other way. They needed coal to build up ready for the – first to invade Europe and all that you know. I am not a very good speaker but I'll do my best.

A.K. You're doing it very well. Its very good information.

H.S. Well anyway they needed coal so badly, they introduced a Bevin Boy scheme and they brought the older miners and they had an old face and they'd bring them in to train on this face. Now we used to have to start work at 14 and it was like an apprenticeship. When you was 21 you got your own number so you actually did seven years because before that you worked man and boy. It's your Butty that paid you, you see but you got what we called double yardage or double tonnage. If you had a boy working with you'd get two trams to the other ones only one tram or if you was on a yardage of coal you'd get extra yardage because you was double you see. But anyway it depended a lot on - there was a wage set for different ages you know. My first wages was 18/7 a week for six days and your Butty then, if he had a good week, he'd give you a couple of shillings, which was a lot in those days. Then they wanted – when they finished with these miners they were called up and went into different Forces. My brother went in the Navy. Anyway they needed coal and by this time I was 17 I think. In '42 I volunteered. Anyway – and they started the Bevin Boy

scheme, but they didn't produce anything. They were training. What you've got to understand is it took us seven years to train to be a miner. They were expected to be trained in three months. How can you do that? They were a danger – I think some of them were good, don't get me wrong and they preferred that to going into the Forces. Anyway we all wanted to go into the Forces because we'd gone through this and had such a rough time. Don't forget we were the scum of the earth. I remember on the weekends there was a munitions factory just outside Swansea and they were all women and we used to after a handled depths and powder for blasting our coal out and the rooftop and ? and these women used to come up at the weekends because they used to earn double the money that we did and they used to come into – because all the pubs had singing rooms but you didn't have no drinks. You were lucky if they had a bottle of beer. But these women used to come up and they used to treat us simply because we were miners and they knew because some of their husbands was miners, boyfriends and so forth or gone into the Forces or whatever. But anyway that's how it went. Where do I go from here Mavis?

Wife When you left home and volunteered.

H.S. Oh yes, '42 came, 1942 came and my friend and I Lauder, Harry Lauder his name was but we called him Lauder, he's dead now, we volunteered for the Navy. And we goes down to Swansea and they said oh no you're a miner – oh by this time the Essential Work Order has gone on. They want all the coal they can get hold of and they were bringing in the miners – the Bevin Boys, which didn't help a lot. No disrespect to them, they did whatever they did but they wasn't miners. You've got to understand this, you had miners and you had haulage workers you know and that's all they could do they could work on the face as a boy but by this time they needed skilled miners and mining was beginning to get mechanised. Anyway we went down and volunteered the two of us and they said oh no they said – this is at the YMCA at Swansea, you're a coalminer. We can't have you. Oh the first time he said you're too young as well. Anyway time went on and we tried again. Actually it was three times we tried and in the end they said they couldn't take us. In the end I wrote my notice out to finish in the pits – it was two weeks notice. And the manager – my father was a top man, he was a contractor. Did all what we call the hard heading, that was suicide work and that's why he died of silicosis. And he was respected by the management and it was private enterprise then. Anyway I wrote my notice out and I went up to him and said Mr Jones, John Jones his name was, but you respected them. I said Mr Jones I want to go to the Forces like my brother Eddy. He said you can't, you're in the coalmines and they need miners and you're a good miner and all your family are miners – we need you. I said well it doesn't make any difference, I want to go. I said Eddy's out there, that's my brother. He said no I'm sorry what would your father say if I let you go? Anyway I said – his son had just been killed in the Air force by the way. It was a terrible thing. But anyway he said no. I said in that case Mr Jones here is my 14 days notice. I had it all written out. Well he said I can't refuse this. So anyway he kept on you know hoping I would change my mind. Didn't tell my father anything. So 14 days was up, and in those days you got your cards in your hand. You had your P45 and insurance and your stamps. In those days you used to have to go and buy your stamps at an agent, you know to put in your insurance cards. Anyway got my cards and Lauder got his. So we went down to Swansea and I said to this Petty Officer, I said there you are sir I'm not in the coalmines anymore, here's my cards I've finished. He said where are you working now. I said nowhere. In those days if

you put your cards in the dole office you got what they called a green card. That enabled you to go and get another job. But not in the coalmines. If you was a miner you couldn't. You couldn't get a green card. So I kept my cards in my pocket. He said what are you doing? I said I'm not doing anything sir. I'm waiting to go in the Navy you said you'd take me. And he said to me he said if you'd have come to us when you was 11 years of age, he said, you'd be an officer by now. I was so keen you know. Anyway he gave us both a chance and Lauder he was turned down straight away. Mind you we was volunteers, not called up. He said he had an impediment in his speech and they was tough in those days. If you had flat feet they wouldn't take you. If you was called up it was a different thing you see. Anyway he took me. He said how much do you want to sign for? I said 22 years because I thought it was 22. No he said the maximum was 12 years. You'd do the rest in the colours whatever that meant. So he give me a colour vision test and looked at my teeth. Right he said I want you down here. Give me a travelling voucher and he said they want you down here next – I think it was on a Tuesday. And I went down on the following Tuesday and there was a stopwatch on the table between me and another fella. There was a Petty Officer opposite me and a Marine Sergeant opposite this chappie – he was for the Marines. Because in those days you could go straight into the Marines because they were a naval soldier like you know they wasn't as tough as they are today but all the training wasn't the same. But anyway 60 minutes we had, 60 questions in 60 minutes. He took the paper away and he looked at it and I said I've failed haven't I sir? And he looked and he said – I'd only done about 50, perhaps 52 questions. No he said you've got a good pass. I said I only answered 50 odd questions. He said nobody could answer these in 60 minutes. This was an intelligence test as well. He said you had the intelligence to go from one question to another to answer. Some of the questions are diabolical. You couldn't do it within a minute, you know. Anyway got a good pass. I don't know how this other chap went on but anyway right he said next week I want you to go up to Bristol for an education exam. All this time when I'm not working and I'm hiding it from my father because if he knew what I had done. I had to stay out all day and creep back at night and climb over what we called the coalhouse outside my sisters' bedroom and get in there and go through their bedroom into my bedroom. And we were three boys – there were three brothers. Oh Roy, that's my younger brother was in hospital at that time and so I was on my own. Eddy was in the Navy, Roy was in hospital. He fractured his back in the coalmines and he was 17. He was in hospital for two years on his back and he's still alive but he's never worked. There is plenty of go in him you know. It is his fitness that kept him. Anyway where was I?

A.K. Bristol.

H.S. Oh yes, we had to go to Bristol for this medical. Now all volunteers in those days went to Bristol for their medicals. And when you got there that was the last. If you passed you was in. anyway got my medical, passed out with the doctors and then this Petty Officer comes in. he said now you're in the Navy and a salute and then he gave us a King's shilling and that was that. Anyway I went to the Petty Officer I said look I'm in a bit of a jam. He said what's the trouble? I said actually I'm an ex-miner. I said my father don't know. He said what are you doing now? I said nothing. He said that's good enough. I said but my father doesn't know so I want to get into the Forces as soon as possible. Then he said you'll hear within four weeks. All this time I'm giving my mother my keep like I – because I'd been earning good money. Anyway four weeks came and the letter came on His Majesty's Service. I opened it and I had

to go back to the pits. So anyway I wouldn't go back to the pits. They had a meeting on pithead and the story came out that I'd failed and they'd give me my seniority back because I didn't go to any other work. If I'd gone to another job I'd have lost my seniority. Even if I'd gone to another pit I'd have lost my seniority. Anyway they'd give me my seniority back but I still didn't go back the I went Lauder and myself, he hadn't gone back to work either. His parents was different to mine, they weren't so strict you know. Anyway we decided, first of all, we decided to go and try and smuggle aboard a ship. Well our nearest port was Port Talbot where the steam ships used to come in because Port Talbot was the steel works. And we both got on one of these. And the captain was in London on business I suppose but the First Officer come and caught us and he said sorry lads we can't take you anyway. So anyway from there old Lauder had enough but I hadn't, I was still desperate so I hitchhiked to Cardiff, which was quite a way off in those days. And I got in down Tiger Bay, which was built street in those days and there was all nationalities down there. You had to be very careful how you went down that place because you could have your throat cut but I keeled in amongst all nationalities trying to get able bodied seaman but you had to have a ticket and I couldn't get a ticket. Anyway I'd gone off and my brother now, my younger brother, he like they didn't know where I was 'cos we was on rations and all and he asked Lauder had he any idea where I'd gone you know. And Lauder said I bet he's gone to Bristol to try and smuggle on to one of them ships because that was a big port then you know and he knew we'd been in the pool trying to get tickets for the Navy and all that and my brother gave him some money it's funny he hitch-hiked down. He had a photo of me and he was asking everyone he hitchhiked with have you seen this chap that was me and there were two of us, him and I on the same photo. Anyway he went all the way to Bristol, couldn't find me and a few days later he came back and by this time I'd come back and I went to my Grandmother's and said Gran I can't – can I come down here? Mind you my Grandmother, that one was a lady. And she said well what's happened? And I told her my father turned me out but she had heard it and I told her why. And he turned me out because I wanted to go in the Forces. Anyway my Grandmother said I'll give him big shot you wait until I see him but she never did she kept away because she was the boss. She was a lady but she was a good Grandmother. I stayed there till she died. And during that time I was back in the coalmines and I was a good miner and my brother and my father were in – my younger brother was in the Home Guards. It must have been after that he broke his back. So he was 17 so it would have been after this he broke his back but anyway I got a letter to say I'd got to join the Home Guards and I said no I'm not going to join the Home Guards. I said I want to join the Forces I want to go in the Navy and they said you can't go in the Navy we need you in the coalmines. And I said well you need me in the Forces as well you need service men you know. Because then the optants hadn't started they were desperate for coals and I said well I'm not going in the Home Guards because you won't take me in the Forces. If you won't take me in the regular Forces why should I go in the Home Guards and I said I'll do my work in the pits. And they said but you can go to jail if you don't go. Anyway I said no. Anyway I had to go to court. They had a special court in the school and probably magistrates, I don't know and the policeman was there, Mr Jones, we only had one bobby and got me in front of the magistrates and they said we want you to join the Home Guards like your brother and your father and I said well I'm not going to. They said why? I said I work in the coalmines. That's why. I said I want to go in the Forces. I said my brother's in the Forces, Eddy that's the eldest one. And I said but you're trying to get him back and they said well were trying to get them back in the coalmines but they wouldn't

they were better off in the - . So anyway they said all right in that case if you don't we can send you to jail. I said if you send me to jail you'll lose a miner and you will lose a man from the Forces so how are you going to gain? So they said well we've had enough, we see how you feel but we can't take you out of the coalmines, so it's got to be one thing or the other I say. So they said all right you stay in the coalmines but you're going to become a firewatcher. So they gave me a little card to say you're a firewatcher and you are supposed to – but the whole – I used to have to go up the mountains nearly all night, back down the pit from the mountains and soaking wet. I didn't mind that but I wanted to go to the Forces. I didn't mind coalmines. I was ---- and so forth but that's how it went on. Then they introduced the optants scheme. As you were being called up you had an option of either going in the coalmines or going into the Forces. Because you were called up according to your age groups, except us miners of course. And I had one and he a big fellow and a policeman he was and all. Big, huge fella. Do you know I broke his back in a few weeks. We'd been working in small seams and him being so big you know he couldn't even get onto the courses you know. But anyway that is how it was then. The Essential Works Order came off 1950 because up until '46 it was private enterprise and we was under Amalgamated Anthracite. Matter of fact I've got a little truck with anthracite coal in it and my cousin made that for me. He was a – some years later he was a blacksmith in the pit. They needed blacksmiths as well but they were on the surface of course. In 1952 I was finished. By now I was a skilled miner. I had my own number because – mind you I had my own number when I was 18. But when you've got your own number that means you're a qualified miner and you can have a butty – you can train a butty like. But because I was a good miner and all my family were as well --- they still are or was. But I got a number at 18. But you had a minimum wage from the age of 14 up. As you became 15 your wages went up to 1/6 I think it was and then 16 and 17 and so forth. When you was 18 you had the minimum wage but when you got your own number you earned your own money. You got what we call a stall for 14 yards of coal to get out and you had to blast this as well and then you took the tunnel in as well, the roadway and that was the old fashioned mining because you had horses then. That was before the mechanisation. And going up to London – my wife was there. [wife – '52 we got married] we wanted a house because Mavis become pregnant didn't you. Was it in '52 ['54 I become pregnant]. Anyway we needed a house and there was no chance of getting a house ---- but now they were calling for miners again and offering all kinds of things you know. Anyway I went to the dole office. I was working for steel erectors wasn't I? [That's right, yes]. Oh I had about 18 months of it I suppose didn't I? And I went to the dole and I said I'm an ex-miner. I said I'm prepared to go back to the mines if you give me a house. Because they were offering a house, settling in things and everything you know, move your furniture – we had no furniture anyway your Aunty Daisy's. Well anyway they said oh yes took my particulars and everything like you know and of course they got your records from the pits anyway and they gave us a house didn't they? In North Staffordshire – what's the name where the hostel was? [Newcastle under Lyne?] No just outside there. I was sent to a hostel anyway. But when I was going up there, there was quite a few London lads as well travelling in the same train. But they wasn't skilled miners. They was given boots and everything but I was a skilled miner. And when you got to this hostel you registered in and all the rest of it. All skilled miners had a private room of their own – bedroom – no there was two in a bedroom, you know sharing a bedroom but the non-skilled they were in a dormitory about 20 of them and of course we were the

top notches like. And I went to work in a pit called Silverdale ---------- there from ’54 to ’67.

But as far as the Bevin Boys was concerned, and the optants. There wasn’t many optants what stayed believe me. They thought they were going in there because it was better than going into the front line or whatever. But the civilians were getting bombed just the same, especially in the cities. They were getting as much as they were in the front line. Well you probably know about that anyway. But a lot of these optants, I don’t know any that stayed. They wasn’t there five minutes.

A.K. But the Bevin Boys had to stay.

H.S. Yes, well they did because they – well no they didn’t have to stay. No they didn’t – they had the choice. They wasn’t miners you see. We’re the one that had to stay. This is the unfair part about it. Now I wanted to go into the Navy – you can see my interest in ships look and I used to make some didn’t I? I’ve got one up there you can see but anyway I wanted to go into the Navy and my brother was out in Madagascar at the time. That’s abroad you know in the Navy, that’s a big seaport, a naval seaport and that is why I wanted to get out. On top of the fact that I’d have been better off than being in the coalmines, ending up with God know what, you know. Like I have done. I’ve got silicosis now and I’m invalided because of that.
…
Health problems.
…

A.K. Can you tell me about Trade Unions in the mines/

H.S. Oh yes. One of my uncles he was one of the secretaries to the Miners’ Federation and do you know every Monday in the month – first Monday in the month, when you go up to get your lamp from the lamp room you had checks. You put your check in and you got your lamp out and then they knew if you was still down the pit. If you was injured or buried or anything your lamp wouldn’t be there but your check would and you hadn’t come out of the pit and that’s when they’d send a search party, you know. And every Monday morning of the month they used to have what they call “show cards”. So when you went up to the pigeon hole to get your lamp and put your check in there was a Union man. There was four pigeon holes.. and four the other side to put your lamps in and these Union men would be there to show your card. We used to have to pay – a boy was 3pence halfpenny then and the man was 7d. This was pre-War. And I think it was just the same, no it went up but I think we still had “show cards” during the wartime. But you had to show your card, your Federation card and if you wasn’t paid up you stopped lump.

A.K. So it was a closed shop?

H.S. oh yes. It was a closed shop all right. Well it had to be because they’d walk all over you. Even then we was still, we was the scum of the earth. We were you know. When I was a boy I’d be working in a 2foot seam. That’s just that height and you’re under there and it’s too small to use a shovel. Used to use what we call curling boxes. You used to go up the face with the curling box and your mate, your butty would be calling. You’d be hacking away at the coal. You’d fill a curling box, come down into

the roadway and lift it up. I used to get all scratches down me because I was so little to lift the box up. Mind you I was strong. I used to have to put it on my chest, which was bare to put it in the tram. That's the old system like. Oh it was hard in those days I've seen myself crying in temper, in temper because I couldn't do what I wanted to do because of being little. Well when you're 14 years of age now you think about it now you know.

…

I even got chucked out of my home because I volunteered and gave up the coalmines, because my father was so strict you see. And if it hadn't been for my Grandmother God knows where I'd have been and there were rations – you had to have a ration book wherever you went and things were so tough and yet we're not thought of. I still say we because I still consider myself an ex-miner you know. The Bevin Boys, they wasn't tied to the pits, neither was the optants. The optants were given the chance of either going into the Forces or being trained to work in the coalmines and I don't know anyone that stayed. They found out that they were better off taking a chance out on the front but I wish I'd had that chance. But we had no option.

…

(END)

Transcript of interview with Philip C.,

conducted at his home on 1st October 2002 by Ann Kneif

P.C. I suppose I had a bit of a romantic feeling about it in a way. Firstly because it was a bit unusual and secondly I'd been reading a good deal and was keen on Emlyn Williams and 'How Green was my Valley' and of course I'd read a fair bit of Priestley's book 'Life up in the North'. And this was an area that otherwise I wouldn't have come across. And so I really approached it with a sense of adventure, not knowing exactly what was in store, of course. And I remember meeting at – I think it must have been Paddington Station, I'm pretty sure it was, on an appointed day. As you know numbers were pulled out of the hat and if your number was the number of the month, the flavour of the month, you were sent to the pits. Fortunately I was A1 so I qualified and we met a gang of lads, all about the same ages, of course, at Paddington going assigned to various places for what I learnt later on was a six weeks training session. My training session was funnily enough, I read only last week it was just closed, the Prince of Wales Colliery at Pontefract. And after six weeks there, that wasn't so memorable, I mean the work in the pit was memorable, I'm thinking of the lady in the lodgings. She had a modest miner's house. Her husband was a miner as everybody in those villages was, and she'd given over two rooms to Bevin Boys. There were four of us there, two slept in each room and I can't remember a great deal about her. She was a pleasant little woman but not outstanding in any way. The opening sessions of training were different. Well I hadn't imagined anything, as I had no idea what the inside of a colliery was like but anyway we did our six weeks induction. And it's interesting to bear in mind that all these lads were town lads, that is to say they'd gone to an entirely alien atmosphere, environment. They weren't in any sense local lads. They were London, Birmingham, Leeds I remember. And so to see them, I didn't see myself but I saw them dolling these old clothes and tin hats and things. It was a great novelty for them and I suppose they must have felt a bit adventurous about it. And after the six weeks we were assigned to a mine. My one was Dinnington Main Colliery, southeast Derbyshire. I still remember my tally number, 759. I'm billeted there on a Mrs Davies. I remember the address, of course, it was Swinstons Hill Road, 166 Swinstons Hill Road, top of a steep hill, just outside the village. It was a nice house, especially for those days. There was something a little bit mysterious about this lady's husband. He always seemed to be away. He was a miner, but he was always working when she wasn't. She was living in this little village of Dillington and he was somewhere in Staffordshire. Now it might have been circumstances but there might have been more into it. These things didn't enter my head at the time being a young lad. But she was a very pleasant enough woman, very severe and conscious of her neighbours. I mean it was the great thing. She had a young daughter was at school at the time. I think the daughter's name was Janet. Just she and her in the house plus myself and another Bevin lad. He'd make a separate story, a chap called Roy, a pampered lad from London actually. Parents used to come up every fortnight, bring him food and see how he was getting on. And life there was very interesting. It was hard work, of course. You had to be down at pit bottom by 6o'clock in the morning and the only means of getting there on time was cycling,

down this hill on a winters morning, with the wind cutting in your face, take your bike into the cycle shed, go over to the lockers as it was called, get out of your clothes you were wearing into your pit clothes, which were crumpled and dirty and smelly. And you went over and got your lamp and then you went and got your powder bag. You carried the powder bag, which contained a kind of dynamite for when the holes had to be bored into the coalface; you carried the powder bag, with the official who was responsible for detonating. He was usually called the shot firer. He would drill long holes with a pneumatic drill in the coalface and plug it with these sticks of dynamite and there would be a space of about 12 inches left and he would plug that with clay. Through the clay he would draw two wires, very long wires, which he would lead off down to his little detonator, which he carried and when everybody was safely out of harms way he'd drop the plunger. Of course, the coal would detonate and break up the face so that the men – the colliers could go in and get the coal. Otherwise it was a solid strata between two layers of rock and you couldn't get at it. So you had to blow it up and break it up first to make it manageable. It's interesting to know the difference really. I suppose most people do know, the difference between a miner and a collier. A collier is one who actually works in the coal – on the coalface. A miner can be an electrician, he can be a director, he could be what they call a ripper. If you do any job in the pit you're a miner. But if you worked in the coal only well you're a collier. It was very interesting and dangerous. I remember my first night shift. We were doing what was called back ripping. Back ripping is the process of going down an old disused gallery, from which the coal had all been taken away, and rescuing the timbers that were there to hold up the roof**, because** timber was very valuable. There were timbers and also there could be steel arches holding up the roof. So what you did you started at the bottom end and worked your way back, withdrawing all the timbers and steel rims they called them, which held up the roof, that you could possibly rescue and I don't want to go into too much detail. I may not be able to explain it but anyway in rescuing the timbers you had to be careful that as you pulled them out, that the roof didn't fall in on you. Well on one occasion it did and on my very first night shift I was down at the pit bottom, down at the pit rather, working with a little chap called Clarence Larigo, a cocky little Welshman, had a wonderful voice and we were both pulling out the timbers and my lodging mate, Roy, he and another miner were carting it away with a donkey cart. And we were standing a bit too close to the roof when it fell in and a large, fairly large piece of stone, not bigger than the size of your fist, fell from the roof onto my bare shoulder and burst the blood vessel and the blood spurted all over my chest, I was only wearing a pair of shorts and I must have looked a terrible sight, because the lad working with me, Roy, he collapsed, he fainted. He thought I'd been cut to pieces. It was only a small gash but the blood was spurting. Anyway I had to go out of the pit and I was off work for four weeks until the stitches healed. But Roy, he was off for six weeks. He was, I'm afraid, a little too pampered and perhaps he took advantage of the fact that he was somehow involved in this little incident so he stayed off for six weeks.

There were other times of course in the pit, I remember on one occasion, a rather frightening incident. We were down at coalface and one of the things that we were always warned about was gas. All the officials from deputy upwards – well the almost lowest official was a deputy, the man next to him was the deputy shot firer, which meant he was responsible for going on the rounds and detonating all the holes that the men were drilling to blow the coal up. And after the deputy shot firer the chief man underneath was called an overman. He was second only to the pit manager. There

were several overmen. There was one for each section of a pit. Could be three overmen in the whole colliery and they were the number twos to the pit manager. Well on one night the deputy shot firer had a – the holes had been drilled and he got ready to fire these off. He withdrew the wire, he tested – the thing I wanted to point out is that most of these men carried oil lamps, which they hung up in the air somewhere near the roof. Anywhere on a piece of rock and it depended on the percentage of the flame that turned blue, which determined how much gas there was in the air and if there was too much they would have to brush it away by a series of what they called brattice cloths to let air circulate and then they would go on testing till they were certain there wasn't too much. Something went wrong this morning, on that particular morning and apparently there was more gas than had been bargained for and there was an explosion and a sheet of flame rushed down the coalface, drawn by the current of air that's always passed along the coalface. And there were three men at each end. Three were hiding up one end away from the blast and three had gone down to the other end and it was a matter of luck, which end you'd gone to, because that's where the flame went. And the chaps who'd gone down one end, of course they were facing the flame and it was a bit scary. Fortunately nobody was seriously hurt although there were some burnt, they did suffer some burns. Fortunately I'd gone the other way with two other men and so I was away from the flames but that's a pure chance of life in the pit. You'd never know what's going to happen. In fact there was a kind of folklore that life in the pit was so unpredictable that almost for certain if you had some occasion or event to go to most miners – and this is going for the older men particularly, they almost knew something would happen to them in the pit the night before, or the shift before. So almost as a matter of course they avoided going into work on the day or night before they were due to go say to a wedding or holiday or whatever. It was so unpredictable that you almost had you're fingers crossed the moment that you went down into the pit. And there were quite a number of other occasions in the pit where you saw this unpredictability. And of course the work was extremely hard. I know that the greatest wish of most of the miners was that their children should not go down the mines. I don't know if that's the reason why the mining population has shrunk now to a fraction. When I was in the pit there were something like 200,000 miners and production went into hundreds of million tons a year. It was interesting that Bevin Boys, and I'm sure you'll know the origin of the term. It was because Ernest Bevin was the Minister of Labour at the time and it was he who got the scheme through. But this scheme would not have passed if there hadn't been an agreement with the National Union of Mineworkers. They were keen that these boys coming from towns and cities should not undermine their pay structure and so they insisted that before they would be agreeable to accepting these lads, well thousands of course over the country, tens of thousands perhaps, young lads into their midst, there must be a pay structure agreed for these boys, which would not undermine the pay structure of the existing miners. And so there was - a board was formed called the Porter, led by Lord Porter. And Lord Porter made what he called the Porter Award and he apportioned how much wages the Bevin Boys should get. And I think it was something like – it was quite a handsome sum as far as I was concerned at the time, something like £6 a week. Of course if you were put on piecework, which you sometimes were, not straight away, you could earn more. I mean some boys went on actually to work on the coalface direct and there you got paid for how much coal you dug out. But others, mostly like myself, I did jobs like back ripping and front ripping and things like that. You worked with another miner, who was a contractor, and you'd get a fixed wage from him. You were what they called a dataler. Dataler

was the term in Yorkshire, which meant you worked by the day as opposed to being a contract worker. And so the datlers, they had their jobs. I think one of the strangest sights that you could imagine, reminding me always when I think back of the old slave markets or what later was well known in the docks. Those who were on contract would come down to pit bottom and they would know where they were working. They would carry on where they'd left off on a particular face or a particular gent, they called the lawn galleries gents, and off they would go. But a number of datalers as they were called, with the boys they were responsible for, would simply wait at pit bottom, crouching on your haunches, as most miners do, waiting for the deputy or the overman to tell you what your job was that day. And it was a bit like a slave market. You sat there looking up, wondering if, well there was almost no doubt that you would get a job, because everybody had work to do, but what kind of job? And sometimes you got a reasonable job and sometimes you got a terrible one. A terrible one would be one where you probably had to walk three or four miles from pit bottom until you even got to your place of work, by which time, as you go further and further into the pit, the air becomes more and more foul and rancid, because it circulates and the further it has to go the less oxygen there is in it. And of course at the time I was in the pit there were not only men down the pits but there were ponies. And of course all these animals and people they were all breathing the oxygen before it even got to you. By the time you got it, three or four miles away, it was incredibly hot, you were stripped down just to your shorts and your boots and even then I've seen men, and this is true, empty perspiration from their boots, if they'd been working four or five miles from pit bottom. As I say you were pretty well exhausted before you even started your seven and a half hour shift. You'd walk four miles through all kinds of – from a very ice cold pit bottom, where the fresh air is sucked in and you'd gone through several gates and galleries, miles long, where the air was very rare, hot, rancid and almost free of oxygen, almost all carbon. And then you started to work, whatever it was, digging or ripping or supporting the roof or putting in new props and so on. So the side of the pit bottom where you kept your fingers crossed, hoping two things; that the work wasn't too onerous and that it wasn't too risky, because as I say it was danger almost, almost everywhere in the pit, especially in those days. There were safety precautions, of course, but it was nothing meant to be carried out. As I say there were two incidents in a very short time after I started, one where I had a burst blood vessel on my shoulder, nothing terrible, just needed a few stitches, but actually nevertheless if it had hit me on the head it might have been worse, although I suppose I would have been wearing my hat. It's a very strange atmosphere, very hard to convey the atmosphere in a pit, as most people don't go down there. But there is a tremendous sort of camaraderie down there, no doubt about that and I suppose that's due because, well your life is almost in the hands of your fellow worker.

Your life is in the hands of your friends. Because they can protect you, you must protect them. There was always the unseen danger. I always remember on many of these walks going to your place of work. You'd be walking along and of course there are all kinds of objects strewn over these gateways. There were swept roads with lumps of rock and stone and timber and lumps of metal that had been left over, cable work and so on and you'd walk in line, there was hardly room to walk abreast. Then the man in front you see with his light, carrying either a light in his helmet or one in his hand, a lamp, he'd be the one to keep an eye out. You were also closely behind, then, if he fell over, you all fell over. So you were dependant on him to keep his eyes open and I always remember, especially coming from London, how quickly one

learns the language of the men. And if you saw anything you would say 'oh look out chaps' or 'have a care', you'd say 'ehup' and everybody would pass it down 'ehup', 'ehup', 'ehup', and everybody would miss whatever obstacle was lying in the roadway, otherwise you'd all fall over. So there was this close tie between the men both because they lived and worked together and because you knew how much – this is a fact, your safety relied on how much care they took about you and you took about them. And it was a great eye opener for somebody like me and I always felt, it's most amusing to see, I think one of the most interesting things for me in retrospect was to see the effect of these incoming town boys, comparatively sophisticated, civilised and you had these very isolated village communities of miners, with two different cults almost, coming together. I found that fascinating because what happened was, and this is only fair, a bit of each rubbed off to each other. For instance I noticed that some of the miners started to wear sort of better shirts or maybe even a tie coming out of – off their shift and the boys started to chew tobacco and spit. So you had this wonderful combination of picking up points. There was nothing spoken, it was all done by a kind of bush telegraph that the boys took up some of the habits of the men, and the men – so it was really a very good levelling process.

A.K. So you were accepted by the miners?

P.C. Oh absolutely. Yes, most of the boys were accepted by the men because most of the boys were – they did their best. Some of them, in fact this is a fact, some of the boys actually stayed on after they were demobilised to remain miners. They liked the work, they were capable of it and they liked the life and so some of them stayed on. I know that for a fact. I was rather lucky I suppose, in many ways, I suppose my attitude helped me to – I won't say get through because it sounds – it was a hard life, certainly three or four years. What I think was the icing on the cake for me was that I won a miners scholarship while I was there. It was the Jack Lawson scholarship.

Now Jack Lawson was a miner, who eventually, under the first Labour Government, became Minister of War. And when he heard I'd won his scholarship, which had been awarded in his name by some benefactor, I've forgotten whose name it was contributed the money to the bursary, he asked me to go and see him in Whitehall. I've still got a letter from him, which he wrote asking me to the War Office at Whitehall. And there he was this mild little miner, still with the blue veins and the blue marks on his hands and on his face, which you get in the pits with bits of coal dust flying off in your face and he asked me to go and see him in Whitehall, so I did. And it was quite a thing to see him sitting there. He was obviously an intelligent chap but of course not highly educated. But there he was sitting in his big chair behind his big desk in the War Office and he'd been appointed by Clement Atlee as Minister of War. I suppose the reward for being a very staunch Labour man. I don't think he stayed very long in that post. His scholarship I won, which took me on to Ruskin College, Oxford, which I won the scholarship for and where I won a bursary for two years there and so that led on to other things too.

A.K. Can you tell me about the Unions? Were you forced to join the Unions at all?

P.C. I think we did join the Union. I think the Boys were expected to belong to the Union and I think we did, I think we paid a lesser fee. I can't remember that precisely.

A.K. So you don't know if you actually had any benefits from the Union at all?

P.C. No I don't think quite frankly recalling. Not in my case. I never attended Union meetings. I got involved, as is my wont, I got involved because I was involved in the Union movement before I was called up, so I got involved in running a youth club locally. And it just happened that this is really nothing to do with mining except that it happened at the time that I was in the mines. They'd just lost their own youth leader, who been called away to something, being wartime, and they were looking for a youth leader. And I'd been associated with the youth club and so I was a\pointed youth leader for this club, youth club in Dinnington. And so a lot of my time was spent trying to organise them in different ways. There are a whole lot of stories I could tell you about the youth club but that's perhaps not for this occasion.

A.K. Absenteeism. Did you ever go away for more than you were supposed to?

P.C. No, I suppose I treated it rather seriously. No. No I can't recollect. I think, although I told you about this chap Roy. He hated the work. He hated the job. He stayed away as much as he could. It was rather fun because, if you stayed away of course you didn't get paid and so he had to balance staying away with being able to pay Mrs Davies, the landlady, for the keep. I think we paid about 30/-, about 25/- or 30/- a week for our bed and board. And he had to balance this finely. Now he's a very clever balancer. He managed to stay away quite a lot because he always supplemented his meagre earnings because he was away as much as he could be, he used to play cards with Mrs Davies and he almost invariably won. So he was always making a few shillings out of his game of cards so he could really keep his work down the pit to a minimum. But generally speaking absenteeism was not a problem, not as far as I knew, no.

A.K. Did you get to visit your own family while you were there? Did you travel back down to London or not?

P.C. My mother, who was alive at the time, she came up once or twice to visit me. I can't remember ever going back home during my years in the pit. I can't remember that at all. I don't think there were many holidays. There probably were some few holidays but I probably spent them around going there into Sheffield or going into the Lake District, somewhere nearby for things that I'd not done before. And of course I'd no family at home at the time then because of course my brothers were all in the army. I'd lost my father by that time so there was only my mother left and a married sister so there wouldn't have been anybody to come home to really.

A.K. Did you keep in touch with any of the people that you met in the mines?

P.C. Let me think. No, I suppose I didn't really. I may have seen some of them from time to time because of course straight after the mines I went up to Oxford, having won the scholarship. So I suppose that took me into a completely different environment and people and so I must have lost touch with them, yes.

A.K. Were you a member of the Bevin Boys Association?

P.C. No.

A.K. Did you know about it?

P.C. Frankly I only heard about it from time to time but I've never come across it directly so I never did anything about it. I've got a picture here you might like to see. Social life in a colliery village, especially in wartime, was in one respect it was limited of course by its very nature, but in other respects village life I found was – you could be very active. There were lots going on. Of course everybody knew everybody else. And the village was I suppose a village of about 8,000 to 10,000 people and what is amazing and what always amazed me about my life up in the North – I had to go and live up in the North later on too – my firm sent me up there, was the degree to which social and artistic festivals were organised. Everybody was involved. Now in the village, the mining village, at least in the one I was in, I rather think that it was general, if you wanted to get on you joined in the hobby that the pit manager liked. If the pit manager was a cricketer, you played cricket. If he was a footballer, you played football. My pit manager, I remember his name, John Davies, a little Welshman, broad as he was tall, he loved comic opera and Gilbert and Sullivan. So if you wanted to get anywhere at all you had to join the local Gilbert and Sullivan club, which he was one of the leading lights. He had a good voice. But if you wanted to be anybody in the pit you joined the light opera company that functioned there. And I remember quite clearly, one of the overmen, chap called Webster, he must have been 6foot 6, difficult to work in the pit when you're that height but he was a tall lubricous looking man, gaunt but 6foot 6, great big head, very serious and I always remember him being in the chorus of one of the musicals they did. 'The Belle of New York' I remember and it was the policeman's song and he was there 6foot 6 and little Clarence Larigo, who was my instructor, another little Welshman … he was barely 5feet. These two were the two policemen. You can imagine the sight they presented on stage. They had good voices. One was a big booming voice and Clarence with his sweet little tenor voice. But it was really like a giant and a little dwarf. They were quite comical but nevertheless you withstood all that if you wanted to get on in the pit. You sang or you danced or you joined in if you wanted to catch Mr Davies' eye. I never did join. I was busy with my youth club and my interest was principally was youth club and my individual hobby was acting and I started a little drama group in the youth club. When Mr Davies heard of this he wanted me to join his opera. He thought I'd had a bit of experience in acting and of course I said to him I couldn't. I couldn't join your opera; I've got all my time's taken up with the youth club and with doing the drama class. And Mr Davies didn't like this. Nobody normally stood up to him and I can't swear that this was as a direct result, but within a few days of me telling him I couldn't join, I was moved over from day shift to night shift. Strings got pulled. However, it didn't stop me doing the youth club, because the night shift didn't start till 10 o'clock at night, you had to be a pit bottom at half past nine but that still allowed me two or three hours to go to the youth club, up to about 9 o'clock or so and leave my deputy in charge and then go off on my night shift. Night shift started at 10, you were down the pit by half past nine, started your shift at 10 o'clock, you finished at half past five, the next shift came down at half past five and started at 6 o'clock. The afternoon shift came down at half past one and started at two and they went on till half past nine. At 10 o'clock the night shift started again. There were three shifts in a colliery and that's the times they took place. But the village life, well I look back upon it with some nostalgia now. There were certain country sports I'd never ever done before. For instance a chap, who lived a few doors away, Mr Barlow, Norman Barlow, pleasant

little Yorkshire man, round as a barrel. He was an electrician, working in the pit as an electrician and I got to know him because when my mother came up to see me occasionally, the Barlows used to put her up. And Norman Barlow, got to know him, he used to take me on afternoon trips round the local farm shooting rabbits. The local farmer – the farmer had died and his widow, she had three sons worked the farm and Norman was their friend. So he went around with his gun and I followed him and he'd go round shooting rabbits and when we bagged some we always – this is strange now but considering I was youth leader, we always used to finish up on Wednesday nights playing cards in Mrs – what was her name now? I'm not quite sure if I remember the lady's name, in this farmhouse, we always used to have marvellous suppers, of course there was no shortage of food on the farm, especially the game that we got. Wonderful meat pies and rabbit stews and things like that. And we'd been out and of course got quite hungry, bagging rabbits and then we'd sit down and play cards. And this went on – this must have been I suppose – I don't know if it gone known in the village but I suppose hands would have been raised in the air to find the youth leader sitting up playing cards for money in the farmhouse every Wednesday night. But that's what we did. It was quite harmless and most enjoyable.

A.K. What do you feel know having been a Bevin Boy, looking back?

P.C. Oh I'm very grateful. It was an experience as you hear from what I say. That I can still live with it, that I can think back. I wouldn't have done anything about it obviously otherwise. And so, even after all this time, I can feel quite vividly, think back and muse on it and think of the colour, about the changes in my own life. I suppose it taught me a great deal. Certainly taught one that hard work never killed anybody or at least not many, and the friendship, the comradeship, the warmth. I'm still impressed with the warmth of the northern people. I found them extremely nice. Very friendly, very sociable people to get on with. I can't speak too highly of them. Of course it's a general feeling, that is to say and I was up there for quite a number of years. One rather interesting one in that little story I've written. Well I won't go into it. You'll read it and you'll see. You might be able to draw an anecdote from that. It's not really a story but I still see and wonder, of course the galleries if you could imagine were carved out into the rock to enable the men and supplies to get to the coalface. There were usually three galleries to each coalface. One at each end called the supply gate, that is to say the gallery down which the men travelled and all the tools and all the supplies went down to the coalface. The middle gallery that was the coal gate. That's where the coal was sent up from the coalface on a conveyor belt and sent up. So the supplies went down the supplies gates, coal came up through the coal gate. Now ripping, they called it ripping when you carved the roof, lift the roof. The roof normally very low with all the pressure on and so in order to be able to form men and materials to go you had to rip it, that is to say literally dynamite it to a height so that the men and the materials could go down and that the coal could come up. And when you did rip it of course you ripped it to strict dimensions, laid down to the contractor by the colliery. And the man who did it was the deputy. He told you well you've got to take 18 inches off the walls, that's what they called chinking, and then rip the roof and prop it, prop it up with small props. And the roof was still very low but the thing that always fascinated me, as I said in those days there were ponies in the pits and many of the young lads, especially the local lads, who'd gone down the pits perhaps when they were 14 or 15 in those days, they had bare back racing on the ponies in these gates. The horse barely had room to get under the roof and they were

on top of the horse. They used to slide – no question of saddles or anything, just bare back riding, racing like the wind, down these gates, clinging onto the horses mane, ponies mane, hanging over the side so as not to get knocked by the roof. And they'd have these races almost every day.

A.K. What for betting? They were gambling?

P.C. Oh they might have done or they might have done it out of shear exuberance. And of course the ground was mostly – where it wasn't rocky it was thick with coal dust. You could imagine the dust that the ponies churned up as these raced along. And then of course once a year the ponies were taken up above and allowed to roam in the fields. That's when the pits were closed for holidays.

… myself with miners. I feel for them, I'm aware of them. I'm only saddened now that it's – well saddened perhaps in a way I'm glad that it has shrunk to such a small proportion, which in many ways is a good thing of course. It seems an awful risky business to provide fuel in that way. And at the same time, like a lot of other things there's a great deal of, dare I call it romance or perhaps that's too strong a word, but something of the irony perhaps and the beauty of the environment and the relationship to the created when people go through such a comparatively primitive experience together.

(END)

Transcript of interview with Rev. Ivor H.,

conducted at his home on 2nd October 2002by Ann Kneif

I.H. My name is Ivor Howells, a Londoner, from North London. And when it was announced that one year who were to be called up would be given the choice of going down the pit or joining the armed forces, I decided to opt for the pits, because I thought in that way I'd have time to study for what I wanted to do afterwards. And so that is what I said on the form I had to fill in. And I was given a choice of where I'd like to go and I put down for the Cumberland coalfield, which I thought would be a very pleasant area to go to – is this loud enough? And in the end I finished up coming down to Kent in the opposite direction. But that was all right because it was handy for London, for my home. And on a sunny morning in November 1942 I travelled down with another chap, who I hadn't met before and we got out at Chislet Halt, as it was then and made our way up to the pit offices to be interviewed by the manager. But the manager was down the pit and he stayed down there quite a while so we had to be ushered on to the hostel in Sturry where we were to be put up. This had been the manager's house and there were huts in the grounds to accommodate us all, in number about 80 or 90. Mostly these were miners, whose families had been evacuated from down here and there we were received, very kindly, very warmly and found a place in the hostel and reported for work the following morning. Unlike the Bevin Boys there was nothing prepared for us in the way of clothing or training at all and when we reported at the pit head, again to see the manager but he wasn't available, we were sent down and my first day or two – these days were spent with a fitter and I just accompanied him as he went round the pit down below. Chislet was 1500 feet down and of course it was a new experience for us to travel down in a pit cage but you soon got used to it. And after a time we got the clothing we needed, boots and all the rest of it and the hard hat, although again that was missing for the first month or two and we had to just watch where we went. And eventually after about - oh I suppose a month of this I was sent to work on a parting, which is what we called the roadway, in the south east district, which extended down under the Wingham Preston marshes and there I worked on haulage. The arrangement in Chislet was the miners dug out the coal, put it on a conveyor belt along the face and it then travelled to the parting where at the tip end, as we called it, it dropped into the tubs. And the tubs were made up into journeys of about 30 or 35 tubs in length. Each tub would contain about ¾ton of coal and of course it had to be packed in well so that none of it spilt on the partings that went out to the pit bottom. After about a year or two on that, pushing the tubs, getting the lines assembled, the chap who had been working on the tip end went to work on the face – coalface. And I suppose the one good thing we did down the pit was we relieved a number of men who were real miners to the work of colliers. I worked on the tip end then more or less until I finished down the pit. That was a tricky job for someone who had only worked in an office and I remember days when we were working in thick dust and had to wear masks and other days when there was water everywhere dripping down. Water in our boots and so on but those were things you had and work went on in that way. A thing that, looking back, impresses me is the way we were welcomed and received by the miners. They came from all parts of the

country. They'd come down to Chislet, to Kent in the thirties to get a job. Some of them had been black listed in their home areas for strike action or things like that and they had a bad name. They were often referred to by those who didn't know them as the – not scum but the throw outs of the pits in other parts of the country. As I think I mentioned in my letter I never worked with men for whom I've had a greater respect. They could not have been more helpful. They sympathised with us having to go and work in the pit and they did what they could to make it bearable. So it wasn't a bad experience on the whole.

A.K. Did you spend the whole time in the hostel or were you ever billeted?

I.H. When you went to the hostel you could either stay there as long as you wanted to or look for digs in the village. Some of them went to Herne Bay and got digs there. I was lucky enough to get digs in Sturry. Joan was living in Sturry too. Sturry had suffered from a landmine, which had dropped in the village high street. When we both arrived it was still recovering wasn't it from that. The people I stayed with, Cyril worked in another part of the pit at Chislet. He'd been in hotels and had mostly served as a waiter and doing other jobs as well and he'd married a Swiss wife, who was a genius at unusual cooking. I remember one night when we both arrived back from the afternoon shift she produced this white – well not white but cream looking dish on the table. We didn't think it could be a chicken but it was very tasty and very nicely cooked and it turned out to be a cows udder, which she was quite used to in Switzerland but we weren't in this country. But they were very nice people and gave me room to do a little bit of studying in my spare time. And then Joan and I decided that we would get married - didn't we? Nobody knew when the war was going to end and so we made plans to get married and managed to find a flat in Canterbury, which was very handy and Joan could cycle into Sturry and I could cycle to the pit and back. Before that, when I was in digs and in the hostel especially I had to rely on a local bus service, provided by a man called Banks and this was really a rackety old bus from the early 1930s, which would take us into the pits, you know at odd times you see. We had to be there for the morning shift by about 5.30. That gave us time to have breakfast at the pit canteen and then go and change and go down at about 6.45. and at the end of the morning shift the bus was there to take you back and that's how the system worked. But as I said when we moved to Canterbury it was much easier to rely on the bike. Where from there?

A.K. When you were in the mines did you have to join the union at all? Did you have any dealings with the union?

I.H. Yes, NUM. Again you see that had a reputation of being very communist led, which was true up to a point. The leading officials were communists but it didn't interfere with anything we were doing. There had been a strike in the Kent coalfield, I think about a year or so before I came down this way but on the whole you see you had to have a union behind you because I've never seen so much argument, dispute over money, wages as went on there. When I went to the hostel first of all I found myself there with men who – or even lads like myself who'd worked in offices. One I remember was working for the HSA. My job was with the London County Council in their public assistance department. There was another lad who wanted to become a doctor and I am sure he made it when he left. Another one wanted to be a teacher and we kept in touch because we were both of the same denomination, Congregationalists

and he belonged to a church in London as I did and we kept in touch over the years and he eventually became deputy head of a school in the East End. And there were other lads who'd had manual jobs, all sorts and from all sorts of backgrounds as well. There was one lad who came down with the help of his tutor. He hadn't been to a school at all. He came from a well to do family, Tunbridge Wells I think it was and he was found digs by the tutor and then at the end of the War, when we were all anxious to get away and get back to things, he got away before he should have done and had the misfortune to be brought back and had to start again but that is one of those things that happens. Regarding the union, as I say we needed the union because at the end of the week you got your payslip and from what I can remember there was the basic pay which would be perhaps £2 something but then there were various additions, which had been awarded by this commission and that commission that had sat on miners workings. And then you had a number of deductions. There was one for if you had boots – you had to pay for those. There was a lamp charge, the baths and so on. Sometimes you were overcharged and thought you had a bad deal and you had to bring in the union to come and sort things out for you. But at Chislet we were very fortunate in one regard. There was a lad in the office, who must have made himself very unpopular with the management because he was really on our side and he knew what he was talking about from A to Z. And his father was actually I think the chief engineer but this lad, Graham, was a first rate person to go to if you had any trouble. But he was balanced in the office by the man who ran it, who came from Wales and he was very, very tight. He had to be you know. But the union, when I left in '46 I had a very high regard for the men who served the union in various offices. At Chislet they were all right. Our social life – there wasn't much of that really because we were birds of a passage largely and there was the pub in Hersden and the pubs around. We were always welcome to join the men, the miners in these places. Most of us, optants and Bevin Boys, would go back to London for the weekend or back home somewhere. And then of course there was the Home Guard. We weren't wanted much in the ARP services but we were in the Home Guard and that, looking back, I think was a bit fascicle because I was in the Home Guard for four years, never touched a rifle, never shown how to handle one and the standard of our training was very minimal, bearing in mind that we were down this way where an invasion would have started had there been one. Well you couldn't take it seriously. The nearest I got to handling anything that was lethal – there were three of us deputed to manage what is called a Smith Gun and this resembled two dustbin lids, which were the wheels with a gun barrel in between and when you found a spot that you wanted to fire from you turned the gun onto one of these dustbin lid wheels - it had flanges that was supposed to hold it on the ground – and then you took aim and fired. Well the one we had never worked. And then I served for a time in the Sturry Company of the Home Guard and most of the time there we were messengers, radio messengers and two of us would be sent out into the surrounding countryside, each with a set, one to send messages, one to receive. And the sets we had never worked so we always made sure we took a book with us and stayed out for a couple of hours and that was it. Because by then the worst scares of the war were past and the invasion had sort of faded away and the Home Guard wasn't really necessary anyway.

A.K. Did you come across much absenteeism in the mines? Did you ever go absent or were there people that you worked with that did?

I.H. Oh yes, yes. I know it sounds bad to talk of absenteeism, when you think that men should have been at work but the conditions men were working under down below, I never blamed anybody for missing a day. On the morning shift, day shift we did six shifts a week. Yes, most of them could manage the six but if there was any physical disability or anything like that they needed a day off now and again. I remember often we'd get down in the pit in the morning and find one or two of the colliers missing. That was nothing unusual but again you couldn't blame them entirely. Very hard work, you know. Although the coal we were digging out was mostly fairly soft it still had to be got out and the wages were adjusted accordingly. When I was in the hostel there were one or two men there they were almost habitual absentees, although the woman who ran the hostel, she came from the north-east and she knew what she was about and she used to chivvy men up if she thought they were swinging the lead. But her husband you see had been a collier and he was off because he had silicosis and she knew what the dangers were in that line. She was a good motherly sort. I can't say there was an unjustified amount of absenteeism, although they were often criticised and of course if you stayed away too often you had to go up before the local official from the employment department. He actually had been an NUM official before the war. Ernest Bevin must I think have bought him his chaps a little bit easier but you didn't get away with much in that line.

A.K. What about accidents? Did you – were you involved in any accidents in the pits?

I.H. Not myself fortunately but yes, we did have them while I was down Chislet. The pit bottom was where some happened because they had to work very quickly. They had the cage come down and would have to get two tubs in at a time and get the cage away and make room for the next one you see and they couldn't hang about. Sometimes there was a fall. I remember standing beside a collier on one occasion just out of the pit face, the coalface and a large slab of roof fell down and missed him by two or three inches and that would have been unpleasant. And you were going home from school one day weren't you? [to wife] [*wife speaking* when I met some of them waiting for the bus. They said there had been an accident and I asked if they knew if anybody had been hurt or – one of the boys I knew he didn't know. So I broke all records cycling to Canterbury to find out if he was all right – he was]. Sometimes you couldn't help being absent if your means of transport broke down.

A.K. And then you didn't get paid did you?

I.H. No, no we didn't. No you were paid strictly on what you'd done. Because when we got married we qualified for the allowance of coal, which was pretty good. I think we used to get 16cwt every six weeks at a very reduced rate. The only problem was that it wasn't very good for burning in an ordinary grate. The coal used to bubble up, as there was so much tar in it. [*wife speaking* and it was just dumped on the pavement] outside, yes and you had to shovel it in but there were worse things during the war.

A.K. So what are your feelings now about having been a Bevin Boy? Was it something that you thought was a good thing or not a good thing?

I.H. Having been an optant?

A.K. You were an optant but most of the optants call themselves Bevin Boys.

I.H. Do they now?

A.K. They do. They consider themselves Bevin Boys as much as the ones who were balloted in.

I.H. Yes.

A.K. And so I tend to refer to optants and ballotees as Bevin Boys.

I.H. I think sticklers like myself tend to maintain the difference, because we chose to go down and the Bevin Boys had no choice.

[*wife speaking* and they had training and equipment given to them. You had to buy all yours.]

I.H. Oh yes, yes. There was a black market in things like army trousers. There was somebody working down our way you see who lived in Ramsgate I think and he had contacts with soldiers who were stationed there and every now and again a supply of trousers came along, which were very useful. But looking back I am very thankful indeed that I had the experience. There are things that you learn that way that you wouldn't learn perhaps in any other way or different you know. And as I say the men I worked with one couldn't have wished for better. They weren't angels of course you know. They had their faults but you learn so much. The way they treated us. I mean they could have been very - what's the word? – not hostile but they could have been unfriendly and created difficulties for us but they never did. And I was lucky enough to emerge probably fitter physically than I would have been otherwise and so when I got my discharge in 1946, July '46, I could go more or less to college and so it was a great help.

(END)

Dave W.

Transcript of interview with Dave Williams, conducted at his home on 2nd October 2002, by Ann Kneif

D.W. At 17 ¾ I saw a thing in the paper that said you could volunteer for flying duties in the RAF and so I come to Dover, saw the recruiting chappie, told him about my education, which was only elementary and he said 'never mind, go for it'. And I got the thing to go to Maidstone for my medical. I was very skinny at that time. Well I think we all were but I was skinnier than most. I had the medical and he says I can't find anything wrong with you but you're so skinny that I'm going to send you to the chest – I think you'd call it the TB doctor in them days but we didn't have posh names for people and so I had to go and have an X-ray over at Deal and saw the thingeme and he said to me well why do you want to join the Air force, he said to me you know you'll only get killed. I said well I know all the risks I'm taking but that's what I want to do. And he said well I can't see any reason why you shouldn't join the RAF he said but when I got the reading back I was grade III and therefore not fit for flying duties. I was working on the land and one day when working an old chap come and said to me you David Williams and I said yes. He said you don't want to go in the Army? I didn't know what he was talking about really. He didn't introduce himself or anything and so I said well. He says do you like your job here? I said yes I like it. So he says well alright then you're doing a good job, you can stay. Well I mean, as I'd been disappointed at not joining the Air force I was quite happy to stay where I was. But then now coming up not the end of the war but it was quietening down kind of thing and my parents had moved from Dover to Eastry, which is 10 miles away, a village. And of course they had to come back to Dover and so naturally I wanted to come back to Dover and then you had a card, which as soon as you moved you had to send in to say that you were leaving that job and moving. And that's what happened. And then I heard that I was balloted for the pits.

A.K. So you didn't volunteer.

D.W. No, I do believe that they took people like me and tried it on kind of thing. Because not only was it me that was in the reserved occupation, there were several people at that time from Shorts, you know the aircraft people at Rochester. Well they were all in reserved occupations and Shorts had decided to pack up and go to Ireland. And quite a number of those came to the pits as well. Now I wondered if they thought well they won't argue then, you know. They'd been in a reserved occupation so they're not bothered and the war's coming to an end so that you know that's what I believe. So I went for a medical, you know the army medical again and I was A1 and so then I went to the pits. So I had to go to Chislet Colliery, where they had a Government Training Centre and you had to go there for one month. You had to report in the first stage to the Labour Exchange in Canterbury, where you was issued with a boiler suit, a pair of boots, a helmet, a PT vest and shorts. And the wage was 60/- a week.

A.K. Was that more or less than you had been earning up till then?

D.W. Possibly about the same. Cos of course the wages weren't very high on the land and we was allotted a billet in Hersden, which we had to pay the landlady – I can't quite remember but something like 30/- out of that £3 and then she had to provide a breakfast, some snap as we used to call it to take, sandwiches to take to work but no dinner. You had to pay another 5/-, a shilling a day for your dinner. The shift at Chislet was divided into two. Some went down the pit from 6 till 10 and then came up and had lectures and physical training, where the others went down at 10, came up at 2 doing the same thing. There was a – they had an army – what would you call him – physical training –

A.K. Instructor?

D.W. Yes, employed at the colliery to take you through physical training and trying to get you toughened up. You worked 6 days and then when the Saturday shift was finished you had to then go home. So you had your bus fares to pay. From Hersden to Canterbury, Canterbury to Dover.

A.K. so you saw your family every weekend?

D.W. Yes.

A.K. So when you finished the training what happened then?

D.W. Well, when I finished the training, after a month you had to go in front of two doctors. You were stripped naked and you know they run the stethoscope over you kind of thing and then they sat behind a desk and your standing there naked and in them days very embarrassed. And one of them said 'we can't let him go down the pit'. The other one says 'why not?' 'Well look at the shape of him'. 'Well he'll be fat when he's 40'. And that's how they talked and me standing there and 'oh all right then yes you go down the mines'. And that was that and then they were allocated from there to – some could stay at Chislet, some Betteshanger, some Snowdown and I was sent to Snowdown.

A.K. You didn't have a choice at all?

D.W. I don't believe so – no. You know you make mates. Some went to Betteshanger, some went to Tilmanston. I suppose there were seven or eight of us went to Snowdown.

A.K. So what sort of work did you do then at Snowdown?

D.W. Well at Snowdown the first perhaps six weeks I suppose you just worked on the pit bottom with you know any young lad of 14 stuck in the pit would have to do. And that was as the tubs you know that hold the coal come down the pit you would have to push them from the cage along so they could get picked up on the haulage rope and taken away inside. That was my first job – lasted about a month and after that I was sent inbye and put sending timber, you know pit props and that up to the face.

A.K. And you stayed on that then?

D.W. No, that was - and then when the Bevin Boys were started to be released, someone in their wisdom decided to put all Bevin Boys on nights because he didn't want his day shift coal interfered with so we was shoved on nights and then when we went we wasn't his problem and then I stayed on nights then didn't I for – oh the children were born and the poor old Phil had to look after them on her own. I went from there to belt repairing, which I done for a good number of years and of course you know we wanted more money so I had to work six and seven days a week and sometimes stop on as we termed it to a couple or three hours on the shift to make the money. Then after that I went – I had to go to Betteshanger and do my coalface training, which I done and then I went what was termed as a ripper. That's working in stone as opposed to working on the coalface. I done that – I worked on several jobs and then I was in the main headings. That's the headings that's going away, making the pit longer all the time if you know what I mean. And then I had a – doing that job I had a back injury and then eventually I had to seek light work. Then I went on the dust suppression gang that used to put up what they termed stone dust barriers. If there was an explosion the explosion would blow all this dust up and that would suppress any flame and also you used to have to go round the pit taking samples of how much dust there was and airborne samples how much dust a man breathed in and that was the job I finished up at.

A.K. So you retired from the mines? You didn't then go into any other work?

D.W. No, I was – in the strike I went off sick with me back and of course then they sent every month or so they sent me to Canterbury to what I used to term the malingers board you know. And my doctor said to me you've got to go on the thingemy board. I said yes I've had notification. He said everyone's got to go. You're one of the last. Oh I said I don't mind going. As long as I'm speaking the truth I can out face anybody but it's when I'm telling a lie that I'm disadvantaged. So I went to Canterbury and saw – and this bloke he said to me 'I went down the mines once' and I said to him well so you should. If you're checking on people like me you should go and see what they are working at. And he said oh no I agree with you he says. And then he says 'what did you do down the pit? Was you a deputy or?' No I was just a miner. I wouldn't take over a deputy. And he said well I don't know he said you don't seem to fit in as a miner. Anyway he says I've got to examine you. He examined me and he put his hands on his hips and he looked down at me and he said 'You're not a miner.' I said of course I'm a miner. He said no you're more a bank manager than a miner. I said well I am a miner and I said have I got to see my doctor 'cos you should see your doctor the next day. You should make an appointment to see him the next day in case you've got to go back to work again. And he says oh no, he says don't worry about that I'll write and tell your doctor that your not fit for work. Well in a month or six weeks I had to go again and it was an old doctor that time and he examined me and he says – he was a man of few words. I said to him excuse me have I got to see my doctor tomorrow? He said no, don't bother he says. I'll write and tell him that you're not fit for work. And six weeks again, I had to go again and it was the same doctor and the same procedure and he said the same thing. So when I went back and saw my doctor I said I believe that was old Doctor Hall 'cos he was a doctor in Dover and he said yes, possibly he said. He does do it now he's retired. And then he looked in the folder for the letter and he said oh yes it was Doctor Hall and he was reading blah, blah, blah and in my opinion this man will not work again. So he said

well there you have it. So when the - so I never went back. I never went back to work after that. The strike finished, the redundancies started. I didn't know about the first batch, where I could apply and so I waited the second batch. I went and as I say I went to the pit on the Friday and I draw my wages and I walked away from there and there wasn't even a thing on the wall saying thank you.

A.K. Did you get the back problems as a result of an accident in the pit?

D.W. Yes.

A.K. What happened?

D.W. Well it was – the space where the coal comes out, when you make the roadway and you cut the rock out you have to take the rock and shove it along where the coal came out and I was in there getting this place ready and we had the hydraulic pit props, which we called doughtys and I – you pumped them up and I tried to set it and it was too tall – it wasn't tall enough and so I had to get what we call - termed the chock block and by trying to lift this you know in a crouched position that's when I hurt my back. But the point was that I didn't report it, which you're supposed to do at the end of the shift. It was only when I got home that I found that I couldn't – I could hardly walk. So the next day I had to go to the pit, go down and I told my mate what I was going to do. And I had to go in and then tell the deputy that I'd had the accident to cover myself.

A.K. Why did you decide to stay on in the mines after your stint as a Bevin Boy? Were there no other jobs around at the time?

D.W. The point was I applied to the Labour Exchange to see when my – what do you call it?

A.K. Release number?

D.W. Yes, release number. Well they said it was fifty odd and of course that was a couple of years after I'd been in the mines. It also stated that – then I got a letter stating that I could go but as you – if you give up the job voluntary, which you would be doing, you wouldn't get any money. Possibly it was six weeks, I am not quite sure now but I think it was six weeks. So how can one, who's got a young family, get on for a job for six weeks with no money? And so of course at that time I hang on and the you know we had the one child, my son and you know it was my ambition to get them educated and then we had a daughter and then by then there were really no unskilled jobs going about, not in Dover. But I can go back to after the war and after I'd got established as a Bevin Boy, I did get the offer of a job on the boats and I thought well this is a good opportunity so I went to my doctor and you know me being me I explained everything to him and I said right and I explained about the RAF and I was grade 3 could I have any chance of getting out and he said well really nothing to do with me he said, I'll send you to the chest doctor. And funnily enough it was the same chest doctor who I saw went I wanted to go in the RAF who said why do you want to go to the RAF? And he said well while you're here – I told him, you know explained to him that I was called up for the pits and now I wanted to get out and he examined me and he said 'what's all these scars on your lung?' and I said 'I

don't know'. Well he said 'I can't see any reason why you should get out of the pits' he said. 'You'll have to stay up there' and so that was that episode finished, so I had to stay. And my own doctor used to tell me, he used to say even when you're 40 you try and get out 'cos that's not a job for you. Circumstances deemed otherwise and I never did go.

A.K. Can you tell me something about the unions? Were there unions active in Kent and were you forced to join?

D.W. Oh yes, they were very active and it wasn't a closed shop when I went. It was - but I did join the union and then you used to have to go to the cabin on a Friday and pay your sixpence or whatever it was. And then when I thought well I'm coming to the end of my reign as a Bevin Boy and I'm going, can't be bothered to go and pay me so I let it lapse. Well the man in charge of the union, the secretary of the union, he was an arrogant Scots and he had been an under manager in the pit and he'd fallen out with them and they'd demoted him from that and he'd taken over but he was a very arrogant man. There was another chap at the pit, he was a Bevin Boy and he was a big lad, big, very quiet and a likable lad but he was a big lad and at that time they used to have boxing contests and in charge of the NCB in this area was Admiral Woodhouse, who was based – his offices was at Richborough and he was interested in the boxers and he used to – was a high nob in the arranging these tournaments between different collieries. Well this chap he was more or less like a heavy weight boxer. I remember him saying he used to save all his eggs and before a bout he used to save up and he used to have a dozen raw eggs and he -. Well to get contract work in the pit was the only stipulation, to get contract work you had to belong to the union. Now he wanted a – he was slightly older than me – he wanted to go on contract work and of course he was nicely shaped to do it and they – this union bloke used to come round and said to him – his name was – can't think of his first name but something with Bradley and this Scot would say Bradley you'll join the union. And he used to say I'm not having him telling me what I'm going to do and he used to come up to me and he'd say well I ought to join the union because I want to go on contracts. But he wouldn't give in to the bullying of this bloke. So any rate he went - any rate the under manager called him in and said I don't want you upsetting the union he said so he says you know I'm going sack you. So he went to Woodhouse or Woolhouse or whatever he was as he got to know him you see through the boxing and he told him what had happened and he picked up the phone and rang this under manager and said in no way will you sack this man so he came back and the under manager had him in and said to him if I can't sack you he says I'll pay your wages for you to stay at home. So he stayed, I think, I saw him for about a week after that then he vanished and then this Scot used to come round, because he was on nights as well and he used to come up to me and he'd say that Bradley won't join the union. But little did he know that I wasn't in the union. But no, I've always been a labour supporter but the unions got all communist and no I was never a Scargill man. To me he ruined it. I think the pits closed through him taking on Margaret Thatcher and losing.

A.K. But it became a closed shop later did it?

D.W. Yes, yes it became a closed shop.

A.K. What sort of social life could you have as a miner? I suppose for you it was a bit different to some of them who weren't able to get home at weekends.

D.W. Well, I don't know I suppose money - your social life didn't it. What did we do? Not a lot. What did one do in them days? Go to the pictures weekends. But I was always tired working nights. You know you'd come home on a Saturday morning and as soon as you woke up at nine, ten you'd want to get up. And then of course as I said after I got married more often than not on a Saturday and Sunday night I'd go to work.

A.K. So you got married when you were still a Bevin Boy?

D.W. Yes.

A.K. It must have been quite difficult?

D.W. Well I tell you when I was courting I went to sleep in the pictures and got into serious trouble.

A.K. Who from?

D.W. She said you take me out on a Saturday night and fall asleep. I used to be exhausted.

A.K. How do you feel now about how things happened to you, about being a Bevin Boy – looking back, was it a good thing or a bad thing?

D.W. It's good things in a way but I was a scrawny young man but by doing hard physical work I think it made me a better man. Whether it made me a better person or not I don't know. The miners themselves were – you could split them up. You had what I would term highly intellectual people you know that went because Granddad and Dad they followed them into the pits and you had the scum of the earth. Well really well the dregs. So yes it was an experience and you met people from you know all over the country. Scots, Irish, Welsh, Geordies, Lancs. We had a Zulu.

A.K. A Zulu?

D.W. Yes. A Belgian, a French Canadian called Romeo – no relation to Beckhams [David Beckham's son] and I met some very nice people there, yes and I met some horrible people.

A.K. Did you keep in touch with any of the other Bevin Boys?

D.W. Not the Bevin Boys, no. The ones that – some of the Bevin Boys – one was a – that I stopped with in Hersden – there were three of us – one was an undergraduate and the other was – he was supposed to have been a pilot in the RAF. He looked every bit of it and spoke quite posh. He had a big tash. His story was that he went to Canada and got trained as a pilot and then came over here. I don't know how he got out of the RAF but I always thought that he was a fraud and the way he always used to butter up the landlady she used to – she made for breakfast what you'd term now

chocolate spread. Horrible cocoa she mixed with marg or butter or something. He used to say 'oh delicious Mrs Lavery, delicious'. You know and I used to think Yuk and I wasn't brought up to a great cuisine like. And I said to him one day I said 'have you got a photo then of when you was a pilot?' and he said 'no, I never had one taken'. Now I know that everyone that went in the Forces, and put on a uniform and the first thing they had done was have a photograph taken and he reckoned he'd never had one. Other ones that were at that – one was a schoolteacher, one was a reporter on the Kent Messenger, one worked in the stock exchange.

A.K. A real mixture?

D.W. Yes quite a mixture of people.

A.K. But you all got on well together?

D.W. Yes, its like everywhere else if you go to college or – you start off with a big group of you and then you whittle yourself down to little gangs and then you usually put yourself down to a twosome. Yes I met a very nice bloke, came from Ashford and we tried to – well he wanted to learn to dance and so we went into Canterbury to, I think it was a church, youth thing but they didn't do any dancing so we went over to Margate and we used to go over there to a little dancing school and they tried to teach us to dance which in my case was not very successful. But we promised to write to each other, keep in touch but we never did.

A.K. Well I think I've covered everything. Anything else that you can think of?

D.W. Well I always try to maintain that I would never sink to the dregs that were in the pit. I always thought well I'll keep to myself. Well I can tell you a little story that – when I got this job on the timber you know at the pit bottom, used to see the deputy that used to try your lamp and make sure it - and then send you up and at them times they just got the conveyor belts in and they were a new thing and they employed a couple of chaps to repair the conveyor belts. So they'd gone in early to rebuckle this belt and they told the deputy everyone had to give them help, pull it together. So he said to the colliers like just wait outside and --- which was to their advantage 'cos they would lose money if the parts weren't OK and he also said to me. So I went in there and they all climbed up on the conveyor. I suppose there were about 20 of them. Well you know from experience afterwards that two or three blokes could pull this together and they all got up there you know all big strapping blokes, so all stripped off and I stood there, chained to me skinny little body you know and I thought well I ain't going to be no good. And one of these blokes says 'hey youth' he says 'get yourself up here'. And of course I'm embarrassed now 'cos everyone's looking at me and I said ' haven't you forgot something Alec?' He said 'forgot something, what?' I said 'you didn't say please.' He said 'you don't say f***ing please and thank you in pit' he said. I says 'well you do to me if you want it' and I walked away. And of course you had all these 20 blokes all killing themselves – 'that told thee Alec didn't it?' He said 'that's why they send you down bloody pit now.'

(END)

Transcript of interview with Edward W.,

conducted at his home on 30th October 2002 by Ann Kneif

E.W. My father was a miner at Snowdown Colliery. He'd come into Kent from the Rhonda Valley in South Wales in 1931. Unfortunately he'd had a lung disease and was certified as having pneumoconiosis in 1940 or 1941 and never worked after that time. He died at the age of 49 in 1947. At that time I lived at Aylesham, where I was born and my father worked at Snowdown Colliery and he was a ripper. About 1942 I was with my parents and my younger brother, my other sisters having been evacuated to South Wales, and where they had stayed for the greater part of the war. And my parents, who were good Christian people, were asked if they would take in two Bevin Boys. This would be about 1942 and the young men concerned were called Frederick Cook, who I believe came from the Tonbridge area, and Morris Know, who came from the Medway area. They were very pleasant young men, but I think they had volunteered to go in the mines rather than to go into the Forces and my recollection is that they stayed with us for the best part of three years. Another young man arrived because there was nowhere for him to go and his name was Terence Skipper but he only stayed with us for two or three weeks and subsequently went to live with another family in the village.

A.K. If you can say something about their time here, what they did, your impressions of them.

E.W. Yes, the young men concerned I mean were basically very hard working and I believe that they did in fact work on the haulage at Snowdown Colliery. That is when the coal comes off the coal face it's on a conveyor belt and subsequently goes into what are called trams, which would hold, I suppose, about a ton of coal and they would be responsible for getting the trams to the bottom of the mine shaft and then they would be hauled onto the surface. I'm told that Fred Cook had a teratoma and died at a fairly young age but Morris Know, who came from the Medway area, I understood went to work on the railways but we had very little contact with them after they had left our area. My parents had letters from Fred Cook but I believe that they had a letter from his uncle to say that he had died of this very nasty cancer.

A.K. Can you say something about Norman Harrison? [*writer of a book recommended by Edward W.*]

E.W. Yes, I pointed out to you that there was a man who worked at Snowdown Colliery called Norman Harrison and that he had written a book titled 'Once a Miner'. Norman Harrison had in fact gone into the coalmines but not like most of his equals. He had in fact gone to work on the coalface and his experiences are well recorded in his book. After the war or when his three year stint underground had finished he was the chemist at Snowdown Colliery, dealing with – sort of evaluating the product of the coal, that is he would take coal samples from various parts of the mine and then he

would analyse these in his laboratory on the surface at Snowdown Colliery. And I recall that he stayed for several years after the War.

A.K. And you have some stories, which he tells in his book that supplement things from his book?

E.W. Yes, in his book Norman Harrison talks about the little deputy with the gold tooth. Well his name was Charles Hole, commonly referred to as Charlie Hole, who was quite a character and who lived in the Dover area. But Norman Harrison also refers to his experiences on the coalface and the little Yorkshire or Derbyshire man, his name was Thomas Bossom and the rather larger man who sort of tended to be overpowering, his name was Benson or Belson. Both of these lived in the Woolwich Village area, which is another of those areas or villages near to Snowdown Colliery, which is commonly called White City. I think you'll find the book very interesting because it gives all aspects of mining, that is the haulage, getting the coal and you must remember that the coalfaces are not on an even plane. As you go over the rolling Downs as at Snowdown, Tilmanston and Betteshanger I mean the coalface is much the same that it goes up hill and down dale and in places I mean the coal will be there one day and disappears the next. There is also a lot of water in these mines and every day I mean thousands and thousands gallons of water were pumped out of Snowdown Colliery, which had been mined at two levels, at about 1500 feet and 3000 feet, which is – the latter is about 5/8ths of a mile. I believe that they pump the water up from the lower level to the first level and then from the first level up to the surface.

A.K. You spoke about your father being a miner. Can you explain about the coal rations he was allowed and any other – anything else that he got?

E.W. My father, as a coalminer was entitled to receive 16cwt of coal every 28 days, that is he could have 13 deliveries a year. We had – the cost was 12/5, that is 6/- for the coal and 6/5 for it to be delivered to our home. Needless to say times were very, very hard and my parents, whilst they could have the coal if they wished they simply could not afford to take 16cwt of coal. It would be very difficult to burn that amount of coal. We lived in a very modern house from the time that I was born with basically hot and cold running water. It was generally considered that the miners lived in hovels but this really was not the case. Water was heated through a back boiler and there was a very large hot water cylinder, which supplemented as an airing cupboard.
As far as Fred Cook and Morris Know were concerned, I recall that there were three shifts at Snowdown Colliery. The day shift, which would start at 6am and finish at 2pm, the afternoon shift would start 2pm and finish at 10pm and the night shift would start at 10pm and finish at 6am. It must also be remembered the mine for the day shift was 6 days, that is they worked Monday to Saturday. Afternoon shifts would only work the five afternoons, that is Monday to Friday but the night shift would start at – the six days would start at 10pm on the Sunday and finish at 6am on the Saturday morning. So there was little time for rest. I think it was quite difficult for my parents to look after the young men in that my father was very, very sick due to his pneumoconiosis, but it may well be that Fred Cook would be on the day shift so my mother would have to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning to give him his breakfast and then feed him when he came home at 2.30. If Morris Know was on the afternoon shift, my mother would have to feed him about 12.30 for him to go to work at 1.30 and would have to feed him again when he came home at 10.30 in the evening so she

seemed to be cooking all the time. I think they were fairly quiet young men. I mean obviously in those days there was no television but they had quite a good radio service and they would sit with the rest of the family. They would read and listen to the radio. Fred Cook was very sporty minded and whilst I would be 11 or 12 Fred Cook would have been 19 or 20 and he would come out into the fields behind our home and he would play cricket. I think Morris Know would join in but he was not that sports minded and if we were playing cricket I think he was always the long stop or something similar to that.

A.K. Can you tell me anything about the unions at the pits? Your father was a miner; did he belong to the unions? Did the Bevin Boys that you had belong to the unions?

E.W. Yes, I'm asked questions about the union and when my father came to Kent they had what they called the Butty System, that was one man would be paid to look after a whole face and at the end of the week he would go and draw the money for all the men and he would pay them what he thought was appropriate. I can recall my father coming home almost in tears and giving his pay to my mother having worked jolly hard for five or six nights to be told that his wages were about £3, whereas the man who used to collect all the money, I mean could be off sick and go home with a pocketful of money. This changed when they brought in the unions, which I recall Arthur Horner was the main instigator and then the unions came into the mines and I would have thought that must have been late 30s or early 40s. My father, a good, hard working **man** would be paid 14/3¾ was the basic pay for a shift once the unions had come in. that is the equivalent of about – by present standards about – that's 71p a shift. Provided my father worked all six shifts, then he got a bonus, he got an extra 14/3¾ but you had to work all the six shifts to qualify for that bonus or in the case of the afternoon shift then they had to work all five days to qualify for the bonus.

A.K. Absenteeism. Do you know anything about absenteeism in the pits?

E.W. Yes, absenteeism was rife, especially among some of the younger men and once the old butty system had been replaced a man was then paid for the amount of coal that he produced. If you had a very good collier on the mining face he may say well he would take three yards which he would take nine feet of coal space, which could be at a height of anything from 4´6" to about 5´2", whereas a man who would be not such a good collier would take 6´ of coalface but they were paid accordingly. But I say of the younger men, a lot of them once they'd worked through their four days, they would be absent. Possibly to an excess of alcohol, then they would go to the doctor because they had to get a sick note to prove that they were not capable of going to work. Tax of course was very, very heavy at that time and the young men said it was hardly worth going to work to have to pay. Income tax was, I think, something like 50 pence in the pound, although they did get a tax credit certificate, which was called a post war credit, which was given back to them I believe in the 1950s. But persistent defaulters would have to go to the manager and if they'd been earning very good money on the coalface he would down grade them and put them on the haulage for a few months as a lesson. But I'm not quite sure that would work. As an office boy I recall at the colliery as a 16, 17 year old one of my duties was to get the attendance records for all the defaulters and be at the managers office at about 2 o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon. I recall that he said to a man called Gilley why do you work only

four days a week instead of the six and he said please sir because I can't manage on five. The manager was absolutely infuriated and virtually threw him out of his office.

A.K. You said that Snowdown was 3000 feet. That's incredibly deep. Were there many accidents at the pit?

E.W. I've said that Snowdown was 3000 feet deep at the second working level, which is about 5/8ths of a mile. The pit was very, very hot. You must think that there are two shafts. The air is pressurised down one shaft, it circulates the whole of the pit and then comes up the other shaft, one shaft being called downcast and the other being the upcast and by the time it had been round the pit it really was pretty nasty and I mean the air really would be very foul. There were lots of accidents happened in the pit. I mean I can recall my father, when I was quite young, having a very serious back injury. He was not brought home in an ambulance. He was brought home in what is the equivalent today of an estate car and the driver of the vehicle simply pulled my father onto his back and carried him into the house, which in present times would simply be unheard of. There were horrendous accidents, of course. Lots of men were killed in the pits. When things go wrong or the tubs on a hill start running away, I mean there is only one thing a man can do and that is dive for the floor and hope that they stay on the rails. If he starts to run then he simply cannot run fast enough.

A.K. Do you know anything about the training given to Bevin Boys in the pits in Kent?

E.W. The training scheme for Bevin Boys, when they first came in they were basically learnt how to look after themselves. I would know very little about the training schemes, which were applicable at that particular time, although when I became a clerical type with the Coal Board I was much more familiar with the modern rules but I think this is quite well explained in Norman Harrison's book.

A.K. you said that you had billeted Bevin Boys. They couldn't all be billeted. Were there hostels for the Bevin Boys in Kent?

E.W. No, I can only recall what happened at Snowdown Colliery. There was a large village, which has just grown since the war but the Coal Board had something like 650 houses and people were encouraged to take in the Bevin Boys into their homes. There were no hostels available for them at that time. Again it must have been quite hard say for someone like Fred Cook, who had been brought up in a very good middle class home to have to share a room with Morris Know. That is Morris also came from a nice home but they did have to share a room.

A.K. Well I think that's all. Thank you very much.

E.W. It's a pleasure. If there's anything else I can help you with or if you want to ask me questions about the book I can try to answer them but if I cannot I am sure my brother-in-law could because he subsequently became a training officer or personnel officer at Snowdown – at Chislet Colliery.

(END)

Joseph E.

Transcript of interview with Joseph E., conducted at his home on 5th March 2003 by Ann Kneif

J.E. Well, first and foremost I suppose I knew I was going to be called up for my national service. I got my call-up papers to go to Burton's Buildings, in Chatham; I think it was something about the 7th December or something like that. I put in to go into the Navy, because my brother was already serving in the Navy and he was in the home fleet so he was on the Dover Patrol all the time and he was a very good footballer. He used to play for the fleet team and every time he used to come home all he had with him was his attaché case with his boots in. and I thought to myself well, that's the job for me. If I could get myself – because he could claim then, being in the Navy and I used to do a bit of boxing at the time and I was quite a fit lad. And I thought that would suit me down to the ground if I could get in there I might be able to get myself a job as a PT instructor or something like that. But, as it happened, I had a letter come in January to report at Chislet Colliery as a Bevin Boy and that's how it came about.

A.K. Did you appeal against it?

J.E. No, I don't think there was any conditions with which you could appeal. I don't know but I never enquired. I was called up under the scheme for, you know, going into the Army, enlisted and as far as I was concerned if they said go to A you went and if they said go to B you went. Whether I applied to go into the Navy was beside the point. The fact that they could put me in the Army or the Air Force that was it. But being as they told me that I had to go to the pit I went to the pit. But as it happened I had a fellow who lived two doors away from me named Jackie Cheeseman, who also got his call-up papers to go to Chislet Colliery exactly the same time. We both went there on the same day. And my father's family were miners. Even though my father only worked in Chislet for a short period of time, him and his brother only worked in Chislet for a short period of time, they had been miners in the North. They came down here in about 1923 or something. But it so happened that a lot of the fellows that had worked with my father were still reasonably young chaps. I mean people that my father took with him as labourers and things like that. But they was all qualified men and they was – and because they was in the pit they was exempt from the Army but they was in their years 40s we'll say. And as soon as they knew who I was, I was made sort of thing because 'oh, your Dad done this for me and we'll do this for you'. And you know how they are, there're all close knit and all brother and Bob. So I got to know people reasonably well and I never, ever wanted to go into the Army after – or go into the Navy after being down the pit for a period of years. I got used to it and I stayed in the pit for 27 and a half years. Perhaps that's why Ross [*my contact – A.K.*] didn't know that I was a Bevin Boy.

A.K. So you stayed until the pits closed?

J.E. I came out on the last cage ever to come out of the pit, because before going into the pit I was in the throws of serving my apprenticeship as a bricklayer. My father was a bricklayer after he left the pit. My brother was a bricklayer; my other brother was a plasterer. My family was then in the building trade and as soon as I left school I went straight into the builder's trade. I actually built the retainer wall in the pit bottom, before we brought the last cage out. And I come up in the last cage; there was seven of us on it. I can't tell you who they were now, not all of them but I know a few of them. Laurie Devon, who was an overman, Ted Curtis, who was a shaftsman, a little fellow called Charley Delaney, he was assistant under-manager. My two mates, Gordon Mitchell and Bill Watkins from Ramsgate. Who the other couple were I don't know but we stayed on and we took all the creepers out of the pit bottom and sent them up the pit to go to other pits. But then I got a back problem and I finished, actually, in July because I got this back problem but the actual pit never closed till August. So for the last few weeks in July and a couple of weeks in August I wasn't there because of this back problem, which I had. But by then all the jobs in the other pits, bearing in mind that all the Chislet men was distributed between Betteshanger, Tilmanstone and Snowdown, all what I call the reasonable jobs what paid a bit of money, had all gone. There was hardly any contractor's work left, bearing in mind that I was a contractor in the pit. I didn't fancy going from here to Tilmanstone every day if it was only going to be on what I term a day rate or a reduced contractors rate of about £3 a day or something like that. I was advised by the doctor, bearing in mind that I'd got a 10% disability because of my back, he said if you want an option, there is an option there and you can take a disability pension and forget about it. And so that's what I done and I didn't go into the other pit. The disability pension was exactly the same as the Old Age Pension, which was £1-50 a week. And I didn't go back to the pit again because I had no cause to but I will say this, 27 years in the pit were some of the happiest days of my life. Good friends, everybody worked hard. I was always fortunate because, as I say, I was always on contract, I'd got a family to bring up, you got your allowance in coal and I thought well, if I go outside I've got to go onto the building and the building trade was near enough flat at the time. Thinking about the winters where you couldn't work if there was a frost. You couldn't work if snow was on the ground. I thought no I'll stop in the pit, which I did. But I made a lot of friends and thoroughly enjoyed it. When I first went to the pit you used to – why I don't know – we used to have classes. Fellow called Paul McArthur who was a senior overman in those days, he used to take a little class and the majority taught was about pit.

A.K. This was the training that you had?

J.E. Yes, and we used to do PT, we used to go running round the village and going into the village hall when we come back, we had a bite to eat and that. Alec Hamilton was the PT instructor in those days. I don't know whether Alec's still alive or not. And old Davy Leach used to look after the boys, after the boy's boxing team. Yes, I was a contractor. I always worked either on the coalface or front rip or something like that.

A.K. What as a Bevin Boy as well?

J.E. Well, as a Bevin Boy for the first three months you have to bear in mind that you had a period of training and there was a training face in what we used to call the

Noy's (?) level two 0 Noy's level. And there was a training face in there for about a dozen I would say, old miners that was past contract work if you know what I mean. But they worked on the face all their lives. And that was what they called the training face and they was all – you went with one and another went with another but you was with a qualified ex production man if you like or an ex contractor and he shows you the ropes. It was all the fun of the fair. It wasn't like going to school or anything like that. I mean you was at work and it was a job. But instead of being a teacher there was your mates sort of thing and it was nice. We spent three months on the training face before they let us loose. Some of the lads went rope running and as I say I was Joe Evans and my father had looked after Tommy Shanett (?) and a few others of them that was all working on the face. I fell into a job as a labourer on 28 coalface and I stayed on the coalfaces then for years and years but I could if I went upstairs to my briefcase get you dates of where I worked at different times. But it don't exactly tell you the actual faces and districts. It just says from 19- for the sake of just talking it just says where you worked over the years contracting. When I first went to the pit the actual price for hand got coal was 1/10d a ton and for machine cut coal it was 1/3d a ton. Things over the years altered from derelict shall we say, where they had the old blast conveyors, where there was what they called jigger conveyors. They just shuttled backwards and forwards with blast and then they graduated to what they call scrapper chain and that type of thing. And then of course they graduated to the mechanised faces. We used to have ponies down Chislet. I don't know if anybody's told you.

A.K. Tell me about the ponies.

J.E. I can't think of the old fellow that used to be the ostler. We used to call him the ostler. We used to have stables. We used to have 8 ponies and they was all named A, such as Alec, Abba, Abner, Acorn – for a start off there were 8 and they was all initial A. And a fellow by the name of Ted Whiddet used to work on what we term the roundabout in the pit bottom and that's where the stables were there. And those ponies were looked after better, I would say, than the racehorse and they used to shine. They used to look lovely, beautifully groomed.

A.K. So they were well looked after?

J.E. Oh, they really were, yes. And if you took a pony out of the stable it was your responsibility to make sure he was all right. And the first thing you done was to make sure his feed bag was full up and make sure he had a good drink before the work. But he used to take his feedbag with him. If they were working in an area reasonably regular you didn't have to tell them where to go, they'd go in the pitch black and when you'd finished with them you could send them home and they'd go home as well. Very clever they were but they were never ill-treated.

A.K. Were you able to live at home then? You still lived with your family when you were working in the pit?

J.E. I lived with my parents until I got married, yes. I used to live in Collins (?) Road. There was 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 – there was seven miners lived in Collins Road where I lived and we used to have to walk every morning about 1¼ miles to get the bus. And I have in days gone by, even when there's been a foot of snow on the ground and

there's been no transport, I've actually got up at 3 in the morning and walked to Chislet to work.

A.K. It's a long way.

J.E. Yes, but that's what you done in those days. You couldn't keep a family if you didn't go to work. No good saying you're going to have a day off or anything like that. Some people could, some people couldn't and I was one that couldn't.

A.K. So there wasn't a lot of absenteeism?

J.E. The majority of absenteeism in the pits was on a Monday after a hectic weekend but I wasn't that way inclined. Mondays was a very bad day for attendance. It used to be very difficult when you was on an afternoon shift, when the sun was shining, very difficult to get yourself organised to get off the bath edge steps to go down the pit, go in with the sun and then come home dark at night. In the winter, if you was on night shifts, you didn't really see daylight at all. You went down the pit when it was dark, you came up in the morning when it was dark and then went to bed and when you woke up you did see a bit of daylight but the majority of the time you was either at work or asleep. It was the same for everybody but it didn't make any difference. I made a hell of a lot of friends in the mining industry and thoroughly enjoyed every minute of what I done. And if the pit was still open today I'd still be there.

A.K. Goodness. Did you come across any accidents in the pit? Were there many accidents?

J.E. Yes, there were. I can recall one, well two. Two pretty bad accidents. Bill Stutley, who was a cutter man. His mate was Basher Philpott and the water bag came off the cutter and it was in low ground. I'm talking about low ground about 3 feet high and he had to crawl across the top of the cutter to get the water bag back into the machine and he lost his life.

A.K. What the machine started as he was going over?

J.E. Well, he never shut the machine off. It just ripped him right open, the picks did. Basher Philpott, he never worked again.

A.K. But you didn't have any accidents? You personally?

J.E. Yes, I had two fractured vertebras of the spine. We had a fall of muck – fall of rock when I was working on the lip and I was off work for 11 months I think altogether and then I went back to work six months on the surface. What you call light work. But as soon as I was better I didn't wait for the six months I wanted to get back down the pit and earn some money. But another little episode where a fellow by the name of George Foster, myself and Bill Watkins and Mitchell, Mitchy we used to call him, were coming out on the riding journey. We were working on 8 till 3.30 shift and we were coming out on the riding journey and there was a fellow walking out who was a rope runner. Chap by the name of George Foster and there was, on the road we was coming out, there had been an old electric hauler. Overhead one. And on both

sides of the road there was what we call a pack and he was there and he got up on the pack and the pack gave way and he went under the journey and he lost both his legs.

A.K. So some nasty things happened?

J.E. Yes.

A.K. What about the unions? You had to join a union?

J.E. That was compulsory, yes.

A.K. Also as a Bevin Boy?

J.E. Irrespective of who you was. You couldn't work in the pit unless you was a union man. I couldn't see anything wrong with that. Really it was a good thing. You had somebody to stand up for you. Mind you it was different. I just said you had somebody to stand up for you but you had people that would listen to you. Managers, general managers of collieries was all people that did the work on the face. People who had been brought up in mining areas, knew nothing else and if you'd got a query you could go and talk to them about it. All right you had a union because they would negotiate different things. You'd have prices for contracts and all this type of thing but when you was down the pit if you had an air and you wanted it sorted out before you came up, you went into the union office in the morning, stated your case and the union secretary or representative would go and negotiate with the general manager or the under manager, whoever was concerned and you'd have a result by the time you'd come out of the pit. You just walked in the office – how did you get on Sam or George and yes, got that sorted out – that's all right, yes. Don't worry about that Joe, that's that. And that's what the union was. The union wasn't militant. There were one or two but – McGahey and Scargill, those sort of people they wasn't local.

A.K. So you didn't come across militancy in the Kent pits?

J.E. Not in the Kent pits, no. We had people like Jack Dunn, he was area secretary. Jack Dunn was a gentleman. The secretary of the union at Chislet Colliery. Sam Hayward, he was – they weren't militants at all. They was men that was there and they could negotiate and they went and done the negotiating for you. They never had any militancy. If we did, I don't know what it was. I know we had a couple of little strikes but they weren't anything to do with local. It was to do with national. I suppose we had a lot of people that were conservatives, a lot that were liberals, a lot of people that were labour and we had a few people that was communists. But in general they all got on together. Old Jack Collins used to get off his oils on the odd occasion. Jack Collins was a union man and he was a negotiator but he was also a worker. He worked on the face and on the lips the same as anybody else. He was no different to anybody else. Because he'd got a communist attitude, what difference did that make? Everybody, and you included I suppose, think oh miners, there're all bloody labour or communist or something like that and a lot of people like you do. And it's not like that at all. They was all walks of life and they wanted to do what they wanted to do. If they wanted to support the conservatives they could and if they wanted to support labour they could. You know, there was no restriction, as much as to say well he's gone down pit, he's a bloody militant labour. But in the Kent area

miners were looked down on in those days, they really were. And if you come from Hersden or you come from Chislet or if you come from Snowdown or somewhere like that, you was a creed unto yourself. People used to say oh don't want to have to do with him, he's a bloody miner and you know it was all wrong. And that was the attitude in the Kent area when I was a boy and it grew with these people, you know. Oh, he comes from Hersden. He's a load of rubbish, you know. It was wrong, they was nice people.

A.K. You was in the pits before nationalisation, so you were there during nationalisation. Was there any difference between the two?

J.E. Any difference? I don't really think there was. We just changed over. I think we changed over. Our pit used to belong to Pierce, Dorman and Long or Stephenson and Clarke, one of the two. And when we was nationalised, I think we was nationalised in 1948 but I don't think it made any difference. Things went on just the same as what they were previously.

A.K. The same management in effect?

J.E. Same management, yes. Yes, there was none of this business of sir and all that old rubbish. The general manager was the general manager. I had a fellow work with me, his name was Bill Burnup (?) and he always used to shout when he saw the general manager. He used to shout across the pit, he used to call him Uncle Arthur, 'how are you getting on Uncle Arthur?' And Arthur would say 'oh up Bill, how are you, all right?' Another little fellow, Georgie Green, they used to have greyhounds, Georgie Green and a few others up the village. I've seen Georgie Green go into the general managers office to borrow 2 shillings off him. And Arthur put his hands in his pocket and 'here you are George.' That's the sort of attitude it used to be. And if somebody had a bad accident, which I did, your mates, after you'd been off work about 3 weeks or a month, your mates would be at the pay office. If there was 4 of you in a gang, those other 3 would be at the pay office with the cap and when the men drawed their money they spilt the money in the cap. You never went without. And in those days when you were talking about people earning £19 a week and then somebody coming to your house and giving you £40, what the boys had collected, I mean that was a lot of money. But it used to happen and it was the same for everybody. There was none of this oh you done it for him, you done it for him, you done it for him, you didn't do it for me, you didn't do it for me. No, that was rubbish. It was your mate's job to see that you had got something coming in and that was their duty to make sure that they put delegates there to collect. And they might be collected for one this week, one next week, but there would always be a collection of some sort. And that's how it was. That was life in the pit. You don't get that in other walks of life, not at all.

A.K. Did you keep in contact with any Bevin Boys?

J.E. Only the local ones, Jackie Holman and Jackie Cheeseman.

A.K. And did they stay in the pit?

J.E. No, they didn't. Jackie Holman did, Jackie Cheeseman didn't. Jackie Cheeseman died on the golf course in Herne Bay just a few years ago. Jackie Holman, I don't know whether he's still alive or not. I've not seen him for a long time. But Oddy Cotton, another one, came from Ramsgate. He went to Betteshanger and he lost his arm but of course I know he is still alive. These people now that were in the pit in my time, I would say 75% of them are dead and all the others are in their 60s and 70s. I'm 77 and when young Ross said to me he was 65 you could have knocked me down with a feather because I mean young Ross used to be like his Dad. His Dad was a big man, Ivor. In fact he was the deputy on the face I used to work on, a face called 28 and Ross was a big lad and I'm talking about when Ross was 17, 18 and when he told me he was 65 I thought bloody hell you wouldn't believe it, how fast the time goes. And he said 'I wonder where it's all gone' and so do I, but it has gone.

A.K. The older you get the faster it goes.

J.E. Yes, that's right. I would go back to the pit tomorrow if it opened. If they'd let me. Yes, I would.

A.K. What sort of social life did you have when you were first in the pits?

J.E. Social life?

A.K. Yes, as a Bevin Boy.

J.E. I used to, on the odd occasion, I used to go over on a Saturday evening, go over to the club, over the Welfare. Old George Lock was a very big friend of mine. He used to be the chief pay clerk. He used to run the club in those days. But you'd go up there to see your mates. You used to have a little something to do over there. Whether it was to play Bingo or some of them would get a few beers in them and challenge each other to get up on the stage. All that type of thing. Being as I lived in Canterbury it was it was a little on the difficult side to get to Hersden, bearing in mind I was restricted to buses. I did have a car but I lost the sight of my left eye and I gave up driving so I didn't have transport. But if some of the boys said to me we'll go over the club Saturday night I'd say well, all right and go over and enjoy it. But outside of the pit when it came to social life, nothing, only just the normal walk of life, what every Tom, Dick and Harry does. Other social life I used to have, I used to play golf and we used to go to Derbyshire and Leicester, places like that and play golf. Coal Board set up things. In fact I was the instigator of the Kent coalfield actually forming a golf society. And it was a professional called Ken Redford at Canterbury. I used to have a coal magazine and it had a big picture in it of myself and Ken Redford but I don't know where it is now – when it first started. I didn't take part in many functions that was run by the Coal Board other than the fact that I'd go to the Welfare for a drink or play golf in the society.

A.K. Were you unhappy that you didn't get any recognition, whereas the people that had gone into the Forces got medals and things and Bevin Boys, you didn't get any recognition?

J.E. No, we didn't, no.

A.K. Did that bother you?

J.E. Not at all, no. My only concern was to fill the cup up. I'm a funny bugger but that was – that's what I went to work for. I didn't want medals. I suppose had I done exactly the same thing in the Army I would be drawing a very good pension now. But the Coal Board pension after 30 years I suppose you could say – I'm talking about the older people – that was, I think the difference in – when nationalisation came in – I think there was something in the set-up whereby once you turned 65 you had to retire. Or they brought it out a few years later but once upon a time you worked in the pit till you dropped. Everybody looked after you, everybody looked after. There was always work. The people that worked on the coalface and the people that had accidents in the pit over the years and they were say 60 years old, 65 years old, there was always jobs they could do and they made sure that they got jobs, even if it was only sweeping the yard – and the wind behind you and it was blowing it back at you but it didn't matter. You was still sweeping the yard and you was getting paid. But they always looked after each other. Other walks of life don't. I never found it anyway. But that was an experience. When I packed up, as I say, £1-50 a month pension and for that I paid in 1/6d a week out of my few bob. It's not that now, it's £144 now I think. But a lot of people got big redundancy payouts and things like that. When I say big I think when Chislet packed up they was offering something round about between £2,000 and £4,000. I don't know. But I didn't have any redundancy because I didn't go to another pit. But I suppose really if I'd have wanted to be nasty I could have said I want my redundancy and that's it, I'm going. But I thought the pension, bearing in mind I was hoping I was going to live a long life, the pension might be beneficial.

(END)

Transcript of interview with Fred B.,

conducted at his home on 29th September 2003 by Ann Kneif

F.B. I'm Fred Bainbridge, born in 1925, 6.7.'25. I was initially called up for the armed services when I was 18 but I got one year as exemption due to the fact that I was an apprentice and the firm I was working for had Government contracts. The contracts, the Government contracts ran out when I was about 18½ to 19 and I got called up for military service again and apparently got picked out for the coalmines, which I imagine was one in ten of the people got called up had to go into the coalmines. I had a tribunal, because I objected to the fact that I thought I wouldn't be able to continue my apprenticeship as an electrician in the mines and I thought I would be by far better off if I went in the services. The tribunal, they pooh, phoohed the idea and said you'd have just as much opportunity in coalmining as you would anywhere else, which wasn't true in actual fact but that's what they told me. Anyway this was in 1944, I think it was September '44, I can't really remember but September. And consequently I went down to South Wales for coalmine training and safety precautions and that. I think I did about a months training, basically how to use a shovel and also, of course, safety training. I think that lasted about a month, a month or six weeks now. That was in Blackwood, Monmouthshire. From there I went to a coal mine in Glyncorrwg, which was in Glamorgan and was allocated to a pit. After an interview with the colliery manager, due to the fact that I was an apprentice, he thought I might be more suitable rather than hewing coal to go on the other stationary haulage engine, which was controlled by compressed air. What can I say about that now? I did this for some months and then I - I didn't like the job at all. I didn't like the coalmines or the job. It was completely different to what I had been used to. I then came home over Christmas and I vowed I wasn't going back and some – I'd been home about five or six weeks I think and I had a letter from the Ministry of Defence or military or somewhere and they said that if I didn't return within 14 days or so they would send an armed escort sent to take me back. And my mother was a bit – very concerned and consequently I went back. I suppose after that I got used to it a little bit but being as I'd been a naughty boy and stayed away four or five weeks I think I lost the job on the stationary engine and I then went on hewing coal. I think I spent four or five weeks hewing coal, which was most unpleasant and then I had another two or three weeks at what they call driving a hard heading, which was a rock face, which was basically an airway and there was no coal there, it was all rock and that was very heavy work, extremely heavy work that was. And then they ran short of an engine driver again and I got back on the stationary engine, which was a much more pleasant job and not such hard work.

A.K. Can you say were there pit ponies in the pit?

F.B. Yes, there was ponies in the pit. They called them ponies, at least they do on the television and various places but these were quite large horses – well not large horses but fair size horses really. At one particular time I was helping the haulage man and he was leading the horse and the horse broke away and we both sort of got into an

alcove as you might call it, in the side of the pit and the horse was lashing out and he caught me under the knee and I had about two or three weeks off with an injured knee. But the ponies were very, very sensible really. They knew exactly what they were doing. As soon as the metal pin went into the shaft they were away and you had to be very careful. They knew exactly what they were doing these ponies, you know they weren't fools.

A.K. Were they well looked after?

F.B. I believe they were well looked after, yes. They were very well looked after. Some of them were quite old, I think but I think they were quite well looked after. The hauliers, or the men who drove them, they thought the world of them really. They usually kept to the same horse or pony many years like, you know.

A.K. You said that one of them kicked you on the knee and you were off for a couple of weeks. Were you involved in any other accidents or did you see any other accidents in the pits? Or were you aware of any?

F.B. I was aware of another accident where there was a slight fall and one of the Bevin Boys got injured but personally I wasn't involved in any other accidents.

A.K. Can you say something about your accommodation there, both in the training and when you were actually in the mines?

F.B. Yes. While we were on a months training, of course, it was a state of the art pit that we worked in and worked outside as well and, of course, there were showers and everything was fine like, you know and the accommodation was in huts like. It was quite good really.

A.K. A hostel?

F.B. Hostel, yes, hostel. And the food was quite reasonable really, being as it was wartime anyway. But when you went to the pit you were working in and the accommodation was rather poor really. The particular house that I was in, he had been a miner and he was partially disabled and there was very little money coming in. In fact, the fact that I was a Bevin Boy and a lodger, that helped out with the food and the accommodation. The accommodation was rather poor. At one time there were three other – not Bevin Boys but three other miners. One of them was a Polish lad, who had come over as – not a prisoner of war, what do they call them?

A.K. The freedom fighters?

F.B. Yes, a freedom fighter you could have called him, yes. And as I say that all helped out with the expenses but the accommodation was extremely poor. No pithead bath where I was at all. You bathed in front of the fire. The water was heated on a coal range and at one time as I say there was four of us at one time, all bathing in the kitchen, one after the other. The water got a bit mucky at times.

A.K. It was the same water?

F.B. Yes, you had to top it up like and you know, scoop the top off like because it got a bit mucky. But it depends who got home first.

A.K. So you were always out to get there first?

F.B. You tried to, yes. Obviously the governor who was there, he was partially disabled but he was still working on top of the pit at that time. He suffered with pneumoconiosis, which was the lung complaint and I believe that eventually he died but he didn't die whilst I was there but he died some ten, fifteen years afterwards with this lung complaint. He must have been 65, 70 anyway. But what can I say about that?

A.K. Were the family nice?

F.B. Oh yes, the family were very nice and rather grateful I think in some respects that we were helping out with the finances to a certain extent. But the family were very nice. Quite good to me. As I say I went back some 20 odd years later and the daughter, who had since married a Bevin Boy in actual fact and they recognised me like, you know. They were very good. They even went up the mountain and picked some wimberry and made me some wimberry pie which I was very fond of.

A.K. What are wimberries?

F.B. It's like a small blackcurrant or redcurrant and they grow very close to the ground. There is another name for them but they called them wimberries. There is another name for them I believe. The Americans have got –

A.K. Oh, blueberries?

F.B. They're very similar to a blueberry I believe. I've not seen them anywhere else except in South Wales.

A.K. How about the wages? Did you manage on the wages? I know there were lots of problems with Bevin Boys thinking they didn't earn enough.

F.B. Oh no, I found the wages were – they weren't massive but they were reasonable. I suppose the lodgings weren't very expensive. I didn't pay a lot for lodgings and I didn't have a lot of expenses apart from that there wasn't a lot of amusement you could go to. The village I was in was completely the end of the line as it were, between sort of three mountain peaks and you couldn't go any further out of the village. You had to go back to the next village, which was Maesteg, to get any amusement really and there wasn't much amusement down there. Cymer was the nearest village but there was nothing at all there really. But Maesteg was the weekend visit as it were, where you could dance or roller skate or something or any amusement. In the village itself there was the Miners' Institute, where you could play snooker and there was also a cinema there. It was quite a nice little cinema really.

A.K. Did you go on hikes or anything like that?

F.B. No, I did go up the mountains a couple of times picking these wimberries as I say, There were three daughters where I lived, in the lodging where I lived and the

eldest one, she was at college but the other two were at home and we often – we did go up the mountain when it didn't rain and picked wimberries, which was quite pleasant really.

A.K. How did you get on with the other miners? How did they treat you?

F.B. To a certain extent I think they resented you but I couldn't say that they treated you badly or anything like that. I think they resented the fact that you weren't brought up as a miner, which all the others were. I think there was a certain amount of resentment there.

A.K. And what about the community generally? Did they treat you fairly?

F.B. Oh yes. I couldn't complain about the fact that - they treated you as one of them really, you know.

A.K. Did you have much contact with the other Bevin Boys?

F.B. Yes, there were some – I don't really know how many Bevin Boys there were in the pit that I was in. I would say 12, 14 there wasn't more. I don't think there was more than 20 but I would have said there was a dozen or so of the Bevin Boys. That was about all, you know.

A.K. Do you want to say something about absenteeism?

F.B. Absenteeism, well the only absenteeism that I can recall being personal was the fact that when I went home at this Christmas and didn't want to return and didn't return for four or five weeks like, you know. I would say, generally speaking, that there wasn't any more absenteeism with the Bevin Boys than was with anybody else really. I suppose you couldn't afford to be absent without a good reason because you probably wouldn't have got paid for it, I don't know. Unless you had a doctor's certificate like. That's normal. Occasionally I did do a little bit of overtime occasionally. Worked what they call half a shift to get a bit of extra money. As you probably know you had a similar sort of arrangements with travel passes as the Services did and you also had the demob number the same as the Services. What else can I tell you?

A.K. Can you say something about the unions? Were you forced to become a member of the unions?

F.B. Yes. I think the miners' union you had it stopped out of your wages. If I remember rightly, I'm not quite sure about that. They stopped a few coppers every week out of your wages for the miners' union. That's if I remember rightly. I didn't have any involvement with the union really.

A.K. Any strikes or anything like that?

F.B. No, no we didn't have any strikes as I can recall when I was there. They did close the pit down for I think about two days when they had a very, very bad winter

and the train up to the village couldn't get the coal away so they had to close the pit, which I think was the first time in centuries that they had ever had to close it.

A.K. Were you aware that there was a war going on? You were quite a long way from all the hustle and bustle of war.

F.B. Yes, not really. You weren't really aware that there was the war going on, except that you'd been conscripted into mining, which wasn't very pleasant but you weren't aware, except from the newspapers, that there was a war going on I suppose really. Except for rationing, which was I think possibly – rationing in small villages in South Wales was much harsher than it was in the cities because there was very little shall we say black market, which in the larger cities particularly – I was in Southampton as I say and there was always a little bit of a fiddle going on you could get extra bits and pieces which you couldn't get in the villages and you were really restricted to your bare rations. It was very difficult. There was only one small shop in the village that sold anything and I think food was much shorter there than it was in the larger cities, and towns and that.

A.K. You were there when nationalisation took place in January 1947. Can you remember anything about it?

F.B. Yes, I can really. I was only there to October '47 I think, when I finished there so that although nationalisation had only just about come in, prior to that you did notice that there was a lot more sort of safety precautions going on and they did a lot of improvements, particularly safety improvements, due to nationalisation. I mean when it was under ordinary private ownership there was very little money spent on safety or anything like that. When it was nationalised there was an awful lot of money spent, which didn't last very long because they closed the pits shortly afterwards, you know. Not many years afterwards anyway.

A.K. Did you keep in touch with any of the other Bevin Boys after you left the pit?

F.B. No I didn't keep up with any of the other Bevin Boys. I say the daughter married a Bevin Boy. He came from Exeter I believe. I'd no contact with him after that. The family I lived with as I said just now, the family that I lived with – we went there some 20 years later and they were very receptive and they treated us just like long lost relations really. They were very pleasant. They were a very pleasant family. They were a religious family but that applied to a great deal of these people in the villages.

A.K. Were you unhappy that you didn't get any recognition for having done your service in the mines?

F.B. no, not really I don't think. I don't think I was that perturbed about it. I don't think I expected anything anyway.

A.K. How do you feel now about having been a Bevin Boy? Is there still resentment or do you just accept it?

F.B. Yes, I do feel a bit of resentment in the fact that had I gone in the services, as an apprentice electrician at the time, I think I would have had much more opportunity to

continue my training as an electrician really, which I had no opportunity whatsoever in mining. I think they would have realised that as an apprentice I would, if I had been in the services, I would have enhanced my apprenticeship. It was 3½ years as far as I was concerned, which was lost from my apprenticeship, you know.

A.K. Could you carry on after the war?

F.B. I did, I did. Well I contacted the, actually contacted the union after the war and I did a short training programme to make up for what I'd lost. The union were quite good to me in that respect.

A.K. And you got your old job back? With the same company?

F.B. No, no I didn't get my old job back. In actual fact the firm which I was working for, which was only a small firm, hadn't actually packed up, they were still going but they didn't really want to employ me again. Due to this short training programme I then found another job, which worked out quite well really in the end.

A.K. Are there any anecdotes you can tell me about? Anything that happened in the mines?

F.B. Not really I don't think. I say one of the things that stands out in my mind probably is the fact that if you had any – everybody had a tin box, which they carried their food in, which you had to keep because there were mice in the pit and if you didn't have a tin box the mice would eat it. If you had any fruit like an apple or an orange you had it in your pocket which you hung on the side of the pit the horse would obviously smell it and even eat through the pocket, the apple and everything. Of course the toilet facilities in the pit you've probably heard about.

A.K. Yes, that couldn't have been very nice.

F.B. Which were non-existent, I mean.

A.K. Did you get home to visit your family very often?

F.B. Basically on public holidays you could get home for a few days usually. All public holidays. You had the same holidays as any industrial worker like, you know. And all being well, if you had enough money – because I forget how many warrants you got during the course of the year. I can't remember but I think you probably had enough warrants to get home mostly, even though you had to pay something. You didn't get a complete warrant but sometimes. You managed to get home fairly frequently I would think.

(END)