

**Just keep breathing**

**Memories of Hamsterley  
Colliery, 1904-1930**

**Joseph Graham**

## **Introduction by Janet Graham**

Dad had always been a good story-teller, and I encouraged him to write this book after we had read a fascinating and amusing memoir written by a friend who had grown up in Bristol. Having convinced Dad that he could write something like that about his own early days, I tried to encourage him by writing a small book of my own about life at Medomsley Edge in the early 1950s. (I have a typed copy of this if anyone is interested!) His memory jogged further by the Arthur Clewes incident he mentions in his Prologue, he set to work keeping notes and putting them together into a text. My parents lived at Delves Lane at the time and I lived at St. Albans in Hertfordshire, so he would post me a few pages at a time to be typed out on my little portable typewriter. The last few pages, as well as the Prologue and Preface, were typed by my sister Margaret, who bought an electric typewriter a year or two later and took over as secretarial assistant, as she lived much nearer Dad. It was only recently that I started feeling it was time I put it all on computer, with the object of making it available for people who might find it of interest.

Dad's book, written in the late 1980s and early 1990s, is about the way of life in a colliery village in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and he does not give much information about himself or his family. I have decided, therefore, to add here a few extracts from my own book to fill in the family background. All the information was collected during conversations with Dad himself during my visits to Delves Lane, and he checked my type-script for accuracy shortly afterwards.

### **Family Background**

Dad was born in 1899 in the part of Gateshead known as The Felling. His father was at that time a deputy at a Gateshead pit, though he had started his career as a clerk at Leadgate Station. After marrying, he moved to Boldon Colliery Station as head clerk, but wages were so poor that clerical workers with families to support were being forced to leave their offices and seek work in coal mines.

My grandfather found a post as acting station master, his wife having to help him by operating the crossing gate. All went well until a family who lived in a cottage near the railway line held a wedding celebration at home. My grandfather accepted an invitation to toast the happy couple and, in his absence, some of the young guests helped themselves to detonators from the station and put them on the line. The inevitable result was that the afternoon trains set off the detonators and were forced to stop for no other reason than the amusement of a few irresponsible young men. My grandfather was reported for neglect of duty and summoned to an enquiry at York. Knowing that he would be dismissed, he resigned before the enquiry was due to take place and went to work at the pit.

Dad's mother, born Frances Worthy, was the eldest child of a boot and shoe maker in North Road, Durham. As the eldest, she was compelled to help in the shop instead of going to school, and she never learnt to read or write. One of her duties was to wax the threads used for hand-stitching the leather, and both her thumbs became swollen and deformed through the continuous rubbing action which this task required. Though illiterate, she had a good head for figures, however, and managed the shop's accounts very efficiently.

Dad's parents were married at St. Margaret's Church,<sup>1</sup> Durham, in 1885. They had eight children, of whom Dad (Joseph Elsdon) was the seventh. The eldest, Ethel, was brought up by her Aunt Annie, who kept a milliner's shop in Durham. At home, as the younger children increased in number and size, conditions became cramped and the family took a grocery shop, mainly for the house that went with it. My grandfather was still working at the pit and the shop was looked after by my grandmother and some of the older children.

One morning Dad, who had recently started school, went downstairs to find all the furniture gone and no-one there but his mother and younger brother, John. The rest of the family and the furniture had already gone to a new life in the Derwent Valley. Dad describes his journey there, by train and on foot, in detail.

The family had originally intended moving to Chopwell, a large village on the hillside about a mile north of the river. When the older brothers arrived there, however, they were greeted by the sight of a funeral procession and, considering it a bad omen, refused to live there. Instead, they found a house at Hamsterley Colliery which, though somewhat spartan, would serve them until a better one became available. Later, the family moved to School Row.

At the local school Dad won prizes for essay-writing but, in spite of his obvious intelligence, left at the age of fourteen with no opportunities for further study. His first job was at Timothy White's butcher's shop in Blackhill. In those days, butchers slaughtered the animals themselves in their back yards, and Dad soon found himself unable to bear the cruelty involved. The terrified bulls had their heads forced down and were felled across the neck with a pole-axe; the sheep were carried into the yard struggling and bleating, knowing that a sharp knife awaited them; the pigs' throats were slit, their blood being caught in a basin and used for making black pudding.

After leaving the butcher's shop as soon as he could, Dad found work at Hamsterley Colliery, picking stones out of the coal as it went along the belt. During his time working there he was moved to various other jobs in different areas of the pit where men, boys and ponies toiled together in the dark and unhealthy passages.

When the First World War broke out Dad passed the medical examination necessary for joining the army, but was exempted from military service because he was needed at the pit. Three of his brothers, alas, were less fortunate.

Bob, the eldest, joined the West Yorkshire Regiment with his brother Frank. He was sent to the Dardanelles and spent some time in a Turkish hospital after being shot through the jaw. He returned home to convalesce at Whitley Bay Hospital, but was sent to rejoin his regiment in France and was soon reported "missing, assumed dead."

Frank was badly gassed in the trenches. After being discharged from the army he went back to work at the pit for a year, but the irreparable damage to his lungs during the War led to his death in Sunderland Hospital in 1920. He was given a military funeral at Hamsterley, and our family treasures include a paper-knife, napkin ring and cravat pin made in the trenches out of shell cases.

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<sup>1</sup>In his book Dad says their wedding was at St. Nicholas's Church, but I am inclined to believe that St. Margaret's is more likely as it is nearer North Road.

Andrew joined the Territorial Army before the War, and was sent to Ireland in 1916 during the Republican Rising. He joined the Durham Light Infantry and was sent to France, where he was killed at the age of eighteen or nineteen.

At the pit, Dad started suffering from chest trouble and was advised to find a job away from the coal dust. He was given a post in the time office, where everything went smoothly until the manager, a former officer in the Guards, gave one of his old fellow-officers a job there as a favour. The new man was arrogant and incompetent, and Dad was continually having to cover up his blunders and do the work of two. Added to the unhappiness caused by the uncomfortable atmosphere in the office was an accident which happened when Dad was inspecting part of the mine.

Dick, one of the ponies, slipped as he started off with a load and his head was trapped under the tail-rope, which unfortunately was being tightened at that very moment. Dad quickly signalled for the tightening operation to stop and struggled to lift Dick's head, but it was impossible to free him from beneath the heavy steel rope, three-quarters of an inch thick and some three miles long. The poor animal kicked desperately for several minutes before finally drowning in the few inches of water at the bottom of the channel, his head still in Dad's arms.

Although obviously not his fault, the accident upset Dad so much that he left the Colliery immediately, and its memory haunted him for many years before he could even begin to get it out of his mind. He had worked at the pit for about fifteen years in all and it was by now 1929. He bought a small wooden general store in Chopwell and also started selling drapery with his brother Tom at Tow Law, a small mining town over the moors to the south of Consett. He became friendly with a man who used to come into the shop every Friday evening to buy cigarettes and chocolate. The man's father was managing director of Allen's, a drapery and tailoring business in Newcastle, and through this connection Dad was offered a job. He gave up his shop, which had never really interested him, and became a travelling salesman, earning thirty shillings<sup>2</sup> a week plus commission. Out of this he had to pay all his own expenses, including those occasioned by his extensive travelling. His area was large and, when Allen's was taken over by Bryson's, became larger still.

By this time my parents had been married for several years<sup>3</sup> and my sister Margaret was born. Dad worked such long hours that he rarely saw her, so he decided to buy an insurance business book advertised for sale by the Liverpool Victoria Friendly Society. The book cost £500, which he paid by means of a £35 bond followed by regular installments. This meant that the book was barely paid off when he retired thirty years later in 1964, selling it for only £200 more than its original cost. By then, new ways of selling insurance had started taking over, and an agent walking from house to house carrying an enormous book was becoming rare.

The previous agent had allowed the business to run down and Dad had to work hard to build it up. His income was no better than it had been when he had worked for

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<sup>2</sup>One pound and fifty pence in today's money.

<sup>3</sup>My mother is not mentioned in Dad's book, as it covers only the years up to about 1930. He did not marry until (I think) 1932. My mother, Christina Kilpatrick, was from Iveston. She met Dad when she was working on her aunt's farm at Blackhall Mill.

Bryson's, and travelling was no easier, but at least he could spend a little more time at home.

My parents and Margaret lived at Beech Grove, Blackhall Mill. It was very near the river, and Dr. Hepburn<sup>4</sup> advised Mam to move away from the damp atmosphere for the sake of her health. This was why they moved up the hill to Medomsley Edge when Margaret was about four. The rent was twelve shillings and sixpence<sup>5</sup> a week, a shilling<sup>6</sup> more than they had paid at Beech Grove.

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<sup>4</sup>The local family doctor, whose surgery was at Low Westwood and who some years later presided at my birth.

<sup>5</sup>Sixty-two and a half pence in today's money

<sup>6</sup>Five pence in today's money.

## **Just keep breathing<sup>7</sup> by Joseph Graham**

### **Prologue**

I began this as a family album until, one day when touring around Yorkshire with my daughter and her husband, we pulled into a car park to look round an ancient abbey which they wanted to see. Feeling slightly tired, I decided to stay in the car. When you are approaching ninety years you cannot just jump up and run around!

There were two or three cars and a minibus there, and they seemed to be having a car-park picnic. I was reading a newspaper and, looking up while turning a page, I noticed a chap had left the group at the minibus and was sauntering towards me, a cup of coffee in his hand. He stopped beside our car and, seeing he wanted to talk to me, I opened the window. We had just exchanged pleasantries when Janet and Philip, my daughter and her husband, returned.

In the conversation that followed, Consett was mentioned. The man seemed to have been there, and began asking me if I knew one or two people whose names he mentioned. I answered accordingly, but one name seemed to open the flood-gates of memory: Arthur Clewes. Janet and Philip had already got into the car and we were ready to leave, so waving our goodbyes we set off for home. The incident referring to Arthur Clewes probably happened before the chap enquiring about him was born. However, it sparked off so many memories that I decided to write about the village, from my going to live there in 1904 until 1930.

It is all from memory only, so if I seem to have got the cart before the horse in some place, or have offended anyone, please accept my apologies. Some of it may be assumption, as seventy years is a long way to go back when trying to piece things together.

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<sup>7</sup> Dad remained active and generally healthy until the last couple of years of his life. When asked, as he often was, what was his secret he would say, "There's no secret. Just keep breathing!"

## **Preface**

In 1904 Andrew and I were shown around the village of Hamsterley Colliery, where we had come to live from The Felling. I was turned five years old and Andrew would be getting on to eight. George, who had been told by his mother to show us round, completed his task at Gibson's, the newsagents which was on the corner of a cross-road at the end of the village. We were walking east to west, and the road crossing ours went south to north. The south road went up to High Westwood and the north road went down a steep hill to the river and Milkwell Burn. Across the road was Low Westwood, with the Co-op right opposite the newsagent's shop, with the road running down to Milkwell Burn between them.

The irony of the whole thing is that at five years of age I was standing looking across the road at Low Westwood Co-op, and eighty-six years later I am writing this book from the third floor of a room in the same Co-op building, now the Derwent Valley Residential Home for the Elderly, where I am now a resident. Looking out of my window I feel that I have the same problems that I had all those years ago: having to make new friends, and the same feeling of trepidation<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup>After my Mother died in 1990, Dad found it impossible to live on his own. He had glaucoma and his eyesight was failing, and he was also becoming physically more frail, though he was as mentally-alert as ever. At the time I was working full-time and living in Hertfordshire and, had he come to live with Philip and me, which we offered, it is possible that he might have felt lonely when uprooted from the rest of the family and the part of the country where he had lived all his life. In spite of his initial fears he soon settled in at the Derwent Valley Residential Home and lived there until he died in 1993.

### **Early Days in The Felling**

I was born on May the 15<sup>th</sup>, 1899 at 24 Fellow Park Road<sup>9</sup>, The Felling, Gateshead, the seventh child of a family of two sisters and six brothers. Counting Father and Mother, that made ten of us.

We lived in a double-fronted shop next to the Shakespeare Hotel, which was separated from us by a side road leading up to the back street. I learned much later in life that it wasn't Father's intention to go into business and that he took the grocery shop because he had to leave the house he occupied previously at Boldon Colliery, where he was employed as head clerk at the railway station. He was in fact acting station-master at the time, as the station-master had left for a more lucrative job. Railway wages were very low indeed, and Father was fed-up with applying to York for recognition, promotion and an increase in salary. However, an incident one Saturday brought things to a head, resulting in the termination of his employment with the North Eastern Railway.

It so happened that one of the young chaps who worked on the railway was getting married. The bride's father also worked on the railway, and lived in a cottage near the station. The reception at the cottage got a bit out of hand when one of the guests put some detonators on the line. (They are used as a warning signal, for example during fog. When the engine runs over them they go off with a bang.) Father went down to the cottage to sort it out, and of course he had to accept a drink, but unfortunately was seen leaving the party by someone who must have reported the matter to York. A few days later he received a letter from the superintendent requesting him to appear at York.

Now all this I learned many, many years later, long after we left The Felling to live at Hamsterley Colliery. I didn't want to move, as I was just beginning to go around with other youngsters (some much older than me), but a five-year-old didn't have any say in the matter.

How long Father and Mother lived at Boldon I do not know. They were married at St. Nicholas's Church<sup>10</sup>, Durham City, on September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1885, Father being 24 and Mother 25. Mother was the eldest of three sisters and one brother and from an early age helped her father, who was a boot and shoe maker in Durham City. At the time of their marriage, Father was a clerk at Leadgate Railway Station, where he had worked since leaving school. Fourteen years passed before I appeared, and I do not know how much of this time was spent at Boldon before they moved to Felling, but I assume that Father must have worked at Heworth Colliery for at least five years to have gained his deputy's certificate.

Father did not go to York. Instead, he sent in his notice to the North East Railway and went to work at Heworth Colliery. How he got the shop in The Felling I know not, but I suspect that some Durham influence may have been used there. My brothers Bob and Frank began work at the pit while Mother and my sister Lizzie worked in the shop.

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<sup>9</sup>I have recently been told by a Felling resident that this is in fact Falla Park Road. As Dad left Felling as a young child, it is possible that his version of the road's name dates back to a time before he could read.

<sup>10</sup>On another occasion Dad told me his parents were married at St. Margaret's. I have not checked this, but St. Margaret's seems more likely, as my grandmother probably lived in the parish.

All this I learned over the years, listening to their conversation at different periods while sitting reading my "Comic Cuts" or "Chips", both comic papers at that time. I was a bit of a prattler at three or four, and was often told that "little boys should be seen and not heard" and that I should either be quiet or go out to play. This, of course, made me a listener instead.

Now that I had started school properly and advanced from the sand-box to the slate and pencil, and going around with other boys, I was being a bit adventurous. I once wandered alone (this before I began school) down a road called Holly Hill, and the chap who brought our milk in the mornings picked me up and took me home in the milk float, telling Mother "I foond him reet doon Holly Hill."

Sometimes after coming out of school we would go down to the Low Road where the trams were, and Felling Station. There were more people there, and it was more exciting for us. Everybody seemed in a hurry. Across the road were shops; one in particular must have been a cafe or restaurant. Just to stand in the door one got a hot wave of air which smelled of hot gravy. One or two lads went in to get a halfpenny<sup>11</sup> dip, which was a half bun which an assistant put on the end of a long fork and dipped in a tank of hot gravy, then put it on a square of paper and handed it to the lad. A penny dip was a whole bun.

On the corner of the street leading down to Felling Station was a wooden box, like a sentry box. It had a shelf so far up, on which were piled newspapers, and a chap in the box sold the papers. Older lads would buy copies of the sporting paper at three for a penny, and would jump on tram cars shouting "All the winners", particularly on Saturdays or holidays. They would then sell them to passengers for a halfpenny each, making a small profit. Any papers left lying on the seats were added to the one or two under their arms, with the result that, even after selling a few, they often came out with more papers than they went in with. I would enjoy watching these goings-on until my brother Andrew came looking for me, to take me home to another scolding for not going straight back.

I liked a Sunday morning when, weather permitting, we used to go along to the Blue Bell to hear the band practising in the pub yard. They had wooden music ledges arranged in a square, with the bandmaster in the centre and the bandsmen sitting on upended beer boxes.

Groups of youths used to gather outside our shop, as a meeting place I suppose, and they would swap yarns without noticing a five-year-old listening. One yarn I remember them laughing and talking about went something like this. There was a chap who used to run some gentlemen down to Felling Station with his pony and tub-trap. In the evening he used to call at the Blue Bell for refreshment. He was a quarrelsome sort of chap and was also in dispute with some lads for failing to tip them for looking after his pony. One evening he was turned out of the pub the worse for drink and temper. He got into his trap, grabbed the reins and found himself face to face with his pony. Someone had taken the pony out of the shafts and put it in face-first.

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<sup>11</sup>Before decimalisation was introduced in 1971 there were twelve pence in a shilling, which was equal to five pence in today's money.

Another character was Big Meg, who worked at Heworth Colliery on the "screens", picking stones out of the coal. Women worked at the pits in those days on the surface. I only saw her once. It was on a Saturday afternoon and she must have come straight from work. She wore a cap, with her hair in a bun at the nape of her neck. She wore a shawl crossed over her chest, a coarse apron over her skirt, and strong boots. A well-built young woman, she would stand no nonsense from the young men. In fact it was said she threw one young chap out of the pub. The Salvation Army band at times played in front of the Blue Bell and Meg would join them. When they finished she would take the drum and play it as they marched back to their chapel. I think thumping it would be a better description!

I was three years old when my brother John was born, on August the 28<sup>th</sup>, 1902. This gave me more freedom, and I took advantage of it. I was often told that Old Helen would get me if I went up the back lane and, a few years later, after we had left The Felling, I heard talk of Old Helen of The Felling catching cats, skinning them and selling them as rabbits. I wondered if this was the same Old Helen. Another scare was telling me that Kruger would catch me. I learned later that Kruger was a Boer leader during the Boer War.

It wasn't my intention to write so much about my tender years, but to describe the country village which was to become my home for a great part of my life. I had no idea we were moving until the actual day we did move. I was woken up by Mother and taken out of the bed-room, while Tom and a man began taking the bed to pieces. Everything else had been taken out of the room, and the rest of the house was bare of furniture too. I was dressed and taken to our neighbour Mrs. Denny's, where John was already having his breakfast and where I was given mine. Everything was so much rush and bustle and I was so bemused that I hadn't got round to questioning the whys and wherefores. I asked Mrs. Denny what was happening, where was all the furniture, and where were the rest of my brothers and sisters. She explained by telling me about the place we were going to live, and said she wished she was going too. That was when the tears started to flow. I didn't want to go into the country; I didn't want to move.

### **The Train to Lintz Green**

After breakfast I was told not to go out, but to stay and look after John until Mother came for us, as she had to go out to see to certain things, and then we would go to catch a train. That brightened me up a bit, the thought of going in a train.

The family had dropped in number by one. My Aunt Annie, who had a ladies' outfitters and millinery shop in Claypath, Durham City, took my eldest sister Ethel at an early age, to bring her up in Durham. Aunt Annie was a spinster who shared a rather large house with a bachelor brother, Uncle Harry. It was quite a big shop, with two long counters upon which stood racks of ribbons and long hat pins stuck into cushions at each end of the counters. The windows displayed ladies' dresses and hats. Aunt Annie employed two or three assistants.

She was the younger of Mother's two sisters, who both received a good education. My Mother had no schooling at all, having to work from an early age helping her father. I was always amazed at the difference in shape between Mother's thumbs and mine. With constantly rubbing the wax down long threads for the stitching, her thumbs had

broadened out like miniature table-tennis bats. Another surprising thing was her ability to keep accounts wherever money was involved. She could mark figures down and add them up, yet could neither read nor write. I dare say in the 1860s when Mother was born, nobody bothered if a child did not go to school.

My sister Ethel lived with Aunt Annie until she got married. Mother's other sister, Aunt Sarah, had a grocery business on the opposite side of Claypath. I can remember her sitting at the side of the fire-place (a gas fire). On the hearth were two glass basins filled with water, to take away the gas fumes I suppose. On the shop front was painted "Walton's Stores". The house was above the shop, but Aunt Sarah had a room at the back fitted for her to save climbing the stairs, as she suffered from asthma. I got the impression that the staff were a bit scared of her. I know I was, whenever we paid her a visit.

They had three sons: Walter, Harold and Sydney. Walter served in the 1914-18 War and came back a complete wreck, his nerves shattered. He died shortly after the end of the War. Harold served his time with Grays<sup>12</sup>, the firm of robe-makers to the universities, in Saddler Street, Durham, and he eventually rose to become a director of the firm. Sydney, the youngest, began his career as a pharmacist, setting up in Tyne Dock after he got married. He then went to Edinburgh University to study to be an optician, while his wife looked after the shop. Later, he became a consultant at the Royal Victoria Infirmary, Newcastle, after selling the business at Tyne Dock and moving to Cleadon.

When Mother came back after leaving John and me at Mrs. Denny's, we went to say our goodbyes to the neighbours. After the goodbyes we walked down to Felling Station and got the train to Newcastle, where we changed to another train leaving from Platform 10. I remember that because I heard Mother ask a porter where Platform 10 was. They seemed to know each other, because they were talking about people they both knew. The train was already in, so we got into a compartment all to ourselves. When Mother got the tickets I heard her ask for Lintz Green Station.

After leaving Newcastle Station and passing factories and works, we stopped at a small station (Benwell, I think it was called), then Scotswood, after which we crossed the River Tyne and on to Swalwell Station, where we first saw the country, the beginning of the Derwent Valley.

There were fields, and big trees and hedges. To us, leaving streets and shops, it was a little frightening but so exciting. John and I ran from one window to the other, looking up at the hills on each side as we got further into the valley. After going through a wood we burst into open country shortly before going into Rowlands Gill, and saw a great tall monument and a huge building, which Mother said was Gibside Hall. After leaving Rowlands Gill, we seemed to be climbing higher and higher and leaving the River Derwent away on our right. We were going through a forest, which darkened the compartment a bit. We eventually arrived at our destination, Lintz Green Station.

## **The Walk through the Woods**

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<sup>12</sup>Dad's sister Ethel married a baker called Alf Rickerby. One of their two sons, and later their grandson, became shop manager of Gray's in Saddler Street. Gray and Son's shop is now in Neville Street.

Very few people got out, only about half a dozen. There seemed to be just one house and a waiting room, and what could be a ticket office and porter's room. About five or six years later, the station-master was shot by a man he tried to prevent robbing the office. It's a very remote place and there were no houses near the station.

After leaving the platform by a small gate which led into the station yard, it was like coming to a clearance in the middle of a forest. Two horse-drawn traps were waiting to pick up three or four passengers who got off the train. They passed us on the road leading away from the station, which was about fifty yards from the main road. We seemed to be in the middle of a forest, and the trees were very high. When we were about half-way, John let out a yell, "Oh, a little pussy cat!" and was about to run towards it, but Mother caught hold of him and told us it wasn't a pussy cat but a squirrel. It was red and small, with a bushy tail over its back. When we approached, it turned and ran up a tree.

We came out of Station Road onto the main road, which seemed to be on a hill. On the left it climbed, it seemed to nowhere. There wasn't a house to be seen. On the right, where we had a three-mile trek in front of us, the road went down-hill. We were still in the wood and, looking down, there seemed no end to it.

It was a great experience to us and we were enjoying it. The weather was fine for walking. It must have been in the early spring, just before my sixth birthday. John would be getting on for three. There were no buses in those days, and no tram-cars. Everywhere there were trees and bushes in the hedgerows, with banks at either side of the road. It was like a long garden, not as man made it but as nature intended it to be. Birds of all sorts were flitting here and there.

It was cooler than The Felling when we got out of the train, but after walking so far it was becoming much warmer. Down the hill we went, meeting no-one and seeing no-one. On the right we saw a viaduct through the trees, and Mother told us that the train would go over it. The hill levelled out and we seemed to have reached the bottom. On our left the trees gave way to an open field with a trimmed hedge, which in turn gave way to wrought iron railings which bore round to the left and became attached to enormous ornamental gates. Beyond the gates, the railings swept round to the right to rejoin the hedge, forming a sort of forecourt. Inside the gates on the right was a lodge cottage. A chap was doing something to a small gate which led to the cottage. We walked up to the gates to have a closer look, and Mother got talking to him and was told it was Hamsterley Hall.

Directly opposite, across the road, was a five-barred gate painted white which opened onto a road running away through the wood and going under the viaduct. I was to learn later that it connected with the Newcastle to Shotley Bridge road, and many's the time I have walked through when out with other chaps for a walk. Of course John and I had crossed the road and were looking over the gate, standing on one of the bars and hoping that a train would cross the viaduct, but Mother joined us and we continued our walk. The man at the gate had told her that the next station was about six miles further up the line at a place called Ebchester. If we had stayed on the train and got out at Ebchester we would have had further to walk back to the village we were going to. A station was built in between about nine years later at High Westwood.

The road was quite level now and more open on the left, although the wood on our right hid the viaduct until we came to a bend in the road, from which we could see it again. The railway continued across a bridge we passed under. Mother suddenly stopped and said, "Listen! There's something coming down the line." So we stopped and stood looking at the bridge. The rumble we heard grew louder and the engine came into view, followed by big trucks which Mother told us were coal trucks. A man was leaning on a small door of the engine and gave us a wave, which we returned. We stopped for for a while to eat some cake and biscuits, much of which we fed to the birds.

We started going downhill again and through the wood once more. It was a very steep hill, at the bottom of which was a bridge. Leaning over the wall of the bridge, we saw a stream of yellow-coloured water. On our right were two houses and what appeared to be a blacksmith's shop. The blacksmith was shoeing a horse, a big horse. In front of it, and holding its head, was a chap who probably owned the horse. We sat on the wall, which was very low, and ate some oranges Mother had brought with us. A lady came out of one of the houses and emptied a bucket of water into the stream. When she turned she saw us and gave us a wave, to which we responded.

We left the bridge and continued on our way, climbing a steep hill and still going through the wood. At the top of the hill the road levelled out and swept around to the right. On the left, the trees receded to make a clearance running along the side of the road for about twenty yards. A road from the left joined ours. There was a white cottage on the right, flush with the road and with the door facing us. Across the road from the side of the cottage was a white beam which latched onto a white post. The door of the cottage was convenient for just turning the corner to open the gate to traffic. This was a toll-gate, and anyone needing to pass through with horse and carriage or cart must pay. There was just enough room between the gate and house for pedestrians or cycles.

Sitting by the side of the road leading up the hill and on through the wood were Tom and Andrew, who had come to meet us. We all sat there and rested for a while. It was so peaceful. Never once did anything pass through the gate. In fact, since leaving Lintz Green Station we had hardly met a soul. It seemed as though very few people lived in the country.

We got up to continue our journey, with Andrew taking John on his back. John had been wonderful; only once did he whine a bit and want to go home. I think the tramping through the wood all the time and meeting no people got him scared a bit, and I had carried him on my back for a little way. Tom, who was much bigger than Andrew, picked me up but I protested so loudly that he put me down after a short distance. We had another mile to go.

We had gone about a hundred yards when the wood gave way to open countryside and we joined the Newcastle - Shotley Bridge road. The wood went on up the hill to our left, but in front and on our right were fields bordered with hedges and trees, and farms and, as we proceeded, a cottage here and there. One strange cottage had an open porch with seats facing each-other, giving room for four people, two on each side. I understand that this was for anyone needing shelter during the night, drovers particularly, who drove cattle long distances from the marts. This we knew afterwards as the Second Lodge. A road ran away from it down the hill to a biggish-sized house. Opposite, across the road, was another cottage with a wicket gate.

It was a good distance along the road before we reached the next cottage, although there was a farm across the field on our right. Everything on the right went downwards and everything on the left went upwards, as if we were walking on a ledge. Now this cottage was known as the First Lodge. It stood at the head of an open road which went down through an avenue of trees to a large house, which much later became the Vicarage.

### **First Sight of the Village**

Continuing our walk past the cottage, we noticed on our right a field sloping down to a wood and on our left a field going up to a wood, and above the trees was a big heap which Tom said was a pit heap. We could also see houses, and when we rounded a bend to the left we could see the village. Tom said that was Hamsterley Colliery, and I didn't like it at all. I put my hand into Tom's. He stooped down so I could get on his back, and I did not object this time. And so we reached a small bridge over a stream that ran under the road and down the front of a street of houses, with gardens reaching down to the stream.

Crossing the bridge, we came to the first of the houses. It was a long street whose garden gates opened onto the footpath on which we were walking. Along the street there was a road which led to the back of the houses, and then another street of houses, and then a long corrugated building which we learned later was called the Tin Chapel. Tom had put me down at the bridge, but I was still holding his hand.

The streets of houses we had passed were long and the gardens well-attended. Across the road from the houses were fields with a wood at the top, and over the top of the trees was the pit heap. These houses were known as the Cement Houses, and made up quite a village in themselves.

We hadn't far to go now before we came to the village proper and, to us, what a sight it was! The path we were on stopped at the top of a steep road going down to our right. Down the hill it turned to the left, and over the tops of the trees we could see a bridge where the road crossed the river. Across the bridge the road divided, one part swinging to the left along the river bank, with a village on its right. The main road continued past some shops and houses up a steep hill, becoming lost to sight by the trees. The village was called Blackhall Mill, so Tom told us, and the road continuing up the hill went on to Chopwell, part of which we could see above the trees. It was a beautiful sight looking at miles of woods and fields across the river, but to children who had never seen anything like it before it was a bit frightening. John began to cry and said he wanted to go home. I just stood clutching Tom's hand as he explained things to Mother. So we crossed the top of the road leading down to the river, which Tom said was the Derwent. We could see it flowing away through fields and past a farm before turning right into some trees, where it disappeared from view. It seemed as though we were on a ledge looking over the valley.

We continued on our way, past gardens sloping downwards to the houses on our right and upwards to those across the road. We crossed the road and walked along a back street between the village school and the gardens of a row of houses. A further back

street behind these houses led us to Cronniwell<sup>13</sup> Row, the end of our long walk of about three and a half miles.

### **Our New Home**

We walked up a cement path which ran along the front of the houses, and Tom stopped at No. 10. We arrived at our destination to be greeted by Lizzie and the rest of the family, who had all been busy fixing the furniture and the beds. A welcome meal was waiting for us. John still wanted to go home and, without voicing it, so did I.

The door from the cement path opened into the living room, with the stairs running straight up to the bedrooms. It was a very big room with a cement floor. There was a window with four panes at the front. A door on the other side of the room led to the back kitchen, which was also quite big with a walk-in pantry on the left. This room also had a cement floor. The only tap was beside the back door, with the water pipe running about a yard up the wall and the tap at the top. There was no sink, not even a hole in the floor, so a bucket had to be placed under the tap. There was a window opposite the back kitchen door similar to the one in the living room.

Opening the back door and stepping out onto another cement footpath, we found a mud-hardened back street and some outhouses. Behind the outhouses was the pit yard, which made us practically living in the pit yard. We were told this was a temporary house until an expected vacancy came up at the front of the village, with a garden.

Upstairs were two big rooms, two beds in each. In the back room, Lizzie and John were to occupy one and Andrew and I the other. In the front room Frank and Tom would share one bed while Bob occupied the other. The reason for them using the front bedroom was because they would need all the sleep they could get, and some of their shifts would mean sleeping through the day. Father and Mother would sleep in the bed in the recess under the stairs in the living room. A curtain drawn across hid the bed.

In the living room was a big open fire-place, about sixteen inches wide, with three or four iron bars across the front. The back was built up to the level of the top bar, forming a shelf which went well back, allowing a couple of buckets of coal to be thrown on, to be pulled down when needed with the coal-rake. Fixed onto the top bar was a bright black enamelled and brass shelf. Below this and on the hearth was a tidy, also black enamelled, with a brass strip along the top and two brass knobs on the front, to stop the ashes falling onto the hearth. A bright well-polished fender surrounded the hearth, and implements needed for the fire were displayed: a steel poker, a coal-rake and steel tongs. There was a large oven to the right of the fire with a brightly-polished steel door, which opened onto a polished shelf. On the left of the fire was a set-pot for hot water, with a hinged lid.

There was no gas or electricity. For illumination we had two paraffin lamps. A table lamp was on the sideboard and a hanging lamp was fixed in the middle of the ceiling. Two pear-shaped weights kept it up, working on pulleys. When the lamp needed attention, it was pulled down to the height required. Oilcloth covered the cement floor

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<sup>13</sup>Dad spelt this "Croniwell."

and over this, in front of the fire, was a clippy<sup>14</sup> mat. With curtains up at the windows and doors everything looked more cosy, but it wasn't done in one day.

### **Exploring**

John had been put to bed, as he was tired, and Andrew and I were being bumped around a bit. It seemed as if we were in the way, so we decided to go and explore. With calls from the elders telling us not to go too far, and don't do this, don't do that, we went out the back door.

As at the front, one stepped out onto a cement path which ran the length of the street. In front of the houses were what looked like miniature semi-detached bungalows. A step up and, on opening the door and entering, one was confronted with what looked like a big cement box from wall to wall. It had a wood surround about five inches wide, and a lid with large door hinges. In the middle of the lid was an egg-shaped hole for the use of the call of nature. This box was also the ash pit. Whoever attended to the fire on a morning would move the fender, then the tidy, fill a bucket with the ashes and take it to the ash pit, lifting the lid and disposing of the ashes there. One wouldn't have to leave the lid open, particularly at night, in case someone needed to use it in a hurry, and disastrous results are known to have happened sometimes. From time to time a cart-man would clean out the contents by lifting a steel lid at the back and shovelling the ashes, etc. into his cart and taking them to the ash heap.

On the outsides of the pairs of ash pits were built small coal-houses like lean-tos, with an opening at the top about eighteen inches square for shovelling the coal in, and one at the bottom for when wanting to use it.

There were no back yards. Every street, with the exception of Victoria Terrace, where the officials were housed, had its row of semi-detached houses at the back. Sometimes one would refer to going to "my little house in the country", or a snappy answer to being asked where you were off to was "A'm gannin' t' the netty." The snooty people called it the closet. I remember reading in a book called "The Consett Story"<sup>15</sup> of a preacher who travelled around the valley telling people, "If you want to pray, gan into the closet." I wondered if he meant the netty.

During the 1930s, council house estates began sprouting up where before there had been nothing but fields and woods. People living in condemned houses were moved into new houses with bathrooms and flush toilets, and hot and cold water, luxuries far beyond their expectations, and many stories were told after the change from the little "hoose across the street" to all the inside conveniences. One woman sent in a complaint that she wasn't getting hot water. This was because it was a warm summer day and she wasn't lighting the fire.

Another complaint was of a hole appearing in the bath. When the plumber called to inspect the hole, he asked the woman "Whativvor on earth were ye deein', Missus?"

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<sup>14</sup>Rugs made by families from recycled clothes or blankets cut into strips and then hooked or prodded through hessian stretched across a frame.

<sup>15</sup>I gave Dad a copy of this local history book for Christmas in 1964.

Clog-dancin' in the bath wi' hob-nailed butes?" The woman replied "No, a hev'n't, and a just possed<sup>16</sup> in it twice."

A young chap was asked by his work-mates how he liked his new posh house with flush toilet, and said "It's ahl reet, but a like usin' paper the best."

After one council estate had been up a few years and got settled down, a chap was moving there from a condemned property. He was a bit of a rough card. As he was walking alongside the horse-drawn lorry loaded with his furniture he met a work-mate, who asked him "Are ye shiftin', Bill?"

"Aye, Jack, I am."

"A've hord that the hooses doon there are full o' fleas," said Jack.

"That doesn't worry me, Jack. A've got a load on there that'll scare them to death!"

Getting back to Andrew and me having a look round the village, we walked up the street. We were at Number 10, more than half-way up quite a steep hill. The village was built on a hill and streets running north to south were steep, while those running east to west were level. Running across the top of the street was South Row, with the usual cement footpath past their front doors. Of course they had the usual little "country hooses" at the back, behind which was a steep hill with trees and bushes.

Continuing our walk along the top of Cronniwell Row and looking down the front of the houses, we noticed that between our street and the street opposite was quite a space, and it was all grass, on which several youngsters were playing. Andrew got into conversation with a lad of about his own age. We learned that there were sixteen streets all with the same number of houses, sixteen; also a farm with two or three cottages, a shop on the main road, the church, and of course the tin chapel we saw on entering the village. We didn't get much further because Tom came looking for us, and the three of us walked down the back of Stone Row, which was the street opposite Cronniwell Row. So we went back home.

### **Sunday Morning**

The next morning, Sunday, we were awoken by the most unearthly noise coming from the pit yard. Jumping out of bed and looking out of the window, we could see over the top of the "wee hooses" into the pit yard. Two pipes stuck out, low down, from a stone building and ran up to the top of the building. The tops of the pipes were shaped outwards like a bugle, and one after the other they squirted steam and hot water. At breakfast we asked what it was, and Father said he thought it could be the fan chamber being cleaned out and that we probably wouldn't hear it again until the next Sunday. The fan ventilated the pit workings.

After breakfast the older ones went out to get familiar with the village. Tom had vanished. He would! A proper loner was Tom. That left Andrew and me and, of course John, whom Lizzie was dressing. The three of us went out the back door and could see people going about their business of morning chores. As we set off down the street, a woman two doors down, who had been filling a bucket with coal, put the bucket down as

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<sup>16</sup>At that time washing clothes involved pummelling them vigorously with a poss-stick in a poss-tub. There were stories that women found their new baths useful for this!

we were about to pass. "Hello," she said. "You'll be the new people in Number 10, eh?" Andrew answered "Yes". She was more friendly than nosy, got to know where we were from, then asked if we were looking the village over. She then shouted "George" and a boy of about Andrew's age came out of the house. "These are our new neighbours," she told George. "Have a walk with them and show them round."

While we were standing there a man came out of the house next door on his way to the netty, his boot laces unfastened and trailing, and his braces dangling. "Mornin' Flo," he said. "Mornin' Jim," she answered, just as if they were passing each other in the park.

We met several people when we walked through the village, and one thing I noticed was that, whereas in the town everybody seemed in a hurry, here the people we met seemed to be in no hurry at all, and quite willing to stop and have a bit of a natter.

Further down the street two houses, Numbers 4 and 5, had the bottom half of their windows curtained off. "That's the pub," George told us. George said hello to two or three people who passed us, and he told us they would be going to church. He said he would be going to Sunday School in the afternoon and, if we liked, he would give us a call.

And that is where I shall leave George and tell you about the village and its characters, which was my intention in the first place. So while my memory holds good at the age of 89 (and that is all I have to rely on, memories), I will try to the best of my ability to describe life in a colliery village where I spent a good part of my life.

### **Some Village Characters**

We will start at the point of entering the village at the Cement Houses and go round the back. The street was shaped like a large L. The foot went well down, and finished just above the bend of the road leading down to Blackhall Mill. Looking down from the first house was a pit shaft just inside the railings at the bend of the road. Up the inside of the shaft was a huge iron pipe from which a continuous flow of water was pumped up from the bottom of the shaft. Of course the streets had their usual semi-detached conveniences opposite the houses.

Occupying the first house were some people called Johnson. Now Jack was having a bit of a lean time. He had been "on the minnie" for the last two quarters. To be on the minnie is being paid the rock-bottom wage, about six and eightpence<sup>17</sup> a day. To get above the minnie he would have to produce more, and some places in the pit were known as "minnie places." In the days before electric coal-cutters, all a coal hewer had to work with was a pick and shovel, and very hard work it was. Every quarter, what was called a cavil or draw was held. If a pit worked a two-shift system, for example six- to-two and two-to-ten, their names would go in a basin in pairs, and in another basin would go the pit places. For instance, out of the names basin the drawer could call Jones and Webb and out of the places basin he could call Top Busty, and so it would go on until all the places had been taken. This meant that their earnings depended on the draw.

Jack had six of a family. One would be starting work next year when he would be fourteen. Finding it difficult to keep them well-shod, and being no laggard, he would go

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<sup>17</sup>One-third of £1.

up to the ash-heap looking for shoes and boots that people had thrown away, and he would repair them or use them to repair what he had. Of course he wasn't the only one who did that sort of thing. It's surprising what some people will throw away! However, the cavils had gone in and Jack had drawn a good place and received his first pay of the new cavil, which was well above the minnie. He was sitting on the door-step taking his pit boots off (no pit baths in those days) when the Co-op butcher came from his horse-drawn van bearing a sheep's head.

"What ha' ye got there, lad?" Jack asked the butcher.

"It's a sheep's head. Mrs. Johnson gets one every week," he answered.

"Well noo," said Jack, "I'll tell ye what t' dee wi' that. Tak it back and bring it in arse first!"

There was no beating about the bush with Jack!

A door or two up lived the Soulbys, Jack and Jim, both very popular in the village. Jim and my brother Andrew, who were friends, joined the Chopwell Territorials and hadn't been in very long when they were drafted out to Ireland in 1916, two years after the start of the First World War. They were then drafted to France as members of the 6<sup>th</sup> Durham Light Infantry, and there they both died at the age of eighteen. Jack was a rolley-way man<sup>18</sup> at the Colliery and, like me when my call came up, would be exempt from military service.

Another door or so up lived the Piggs. (You will notice that I don't mention the parents. Everybody knew everybody in the village, so I will mention only those who had some distinguishing feature.) There were three lads: Tom, Billy and Charlie. I think there was a sister too, but I'm not sure. Now Tom, the eldest, was very popular at school. He often checked bullies tormenting younger scholars. My brother Tom was about the same age, and the pair of them were often fighting each-other. Now Billy was a rougher type, a year or two younger than Tom, and the hero of those who liked sport. He was centre-half of the school football team and, after leaving school and playing in the Junior League, he went on to play for Carlisle United, who were in the Third Division at that time.

He was very out-spoken. He would be about thirteen years old when the class he was in got a new teacher, a southerner, who set the class to write "How I spent my Easter weekend." Everyone was busy concentrating until Billy broke the silence in a stage whisper, asking someone next to him "Is pig fart one word or two?" There was a wood which was known to the locals as Pig Fart Wood, but I don't think it would be called that on the map!

Walking up to the top of the street behind the row of out-houses, and looking down the valley, was a very beautiful picture of the river and the whole of the village of Blackhall Mill, and the woods and fields beyond.

Now in the street that ran parallel to the main Newcastle - Shotley Bridge road lived the Browns. Old Tom Brown was known as the Bee Keeper, and was once sent for by the school head master. A swarm of bees had settled on the school wall. A ladder had to be sent for and Tom, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and veil and carrying a blow-lamp,

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<sup>18</sup>Rolley-ways were the roads in the mine used by the horses pulling wagons (or rolleys) of coal, and were kept in repair by the rolley-way man.

mounted the ladder. What happened then I don't know, as the teachers cleared us out of the yard, but we saw Old Tom going away carrying a box which somebody said contained the queen bee and swarm. Quite exciting to us at the time.

Further along the street were the Whitfields. There were two girls, one of whom became a teacher at the local school, and a very good and popular teacher too, known as Miss Mabel and liked by everybody. I was in her class, standard three I think it was, and in the same class was a boy called Jack Bott, who was a nephew of Miss Mabel and a very nice lad of very respectable parents. His father tried to run an ice cream business, but without much success. I don't know what became of them, but I believe they moved to Chopwell.

An incident took place that left a sort of catch-phrase which was carried on for weeks by class-mates who wanted to rub Jack. It happened on the Friday afternoon we broke up for the summer holidays. As we were filing out, the teacher called Jack to one side. After a short conversation Jack turned away to join the file when she called him back, and he kissed his Aunt Mabel. Some wise scholar claimed to have heard her say, "Oh, kiss me Bott before you go" and, as I say, it became a sort of catch-phrase.

A little further along the street were the Walkers, a very respected and popular family, especially the father. Now Bob was reckoned to have the loudest voice in the village, so he was appointed "crake man." If there was a special union meeting for the miners, Bob would go around the village whirling a crake to draw attention, then yell out "A union meeting will be held in the Church Hall at..." such-and-such a time.

Now just before the First War in 1914 a picture hall called the Palace was built at Blackhall Mill, and Bob got the job of going around the streets with his crake to announce the programmes. As the films shown in the early days of the cinema were in parts, and each part was separate, there was some delay at times before the operator got the next part fixed. Bob would come into the street whirling his crake, then yell "Tonight at the Palace the programme will be the news followed by the big picture (name of picture), which is in five parts," plus the time of opening and any extras that might be on. There was a yarn about a picture he announced one day, "The woman who fell in five parts." He had something to do with the local football team, and one could hear Bob's voice above the rest of the spectators.

One Saturday night at the Palace, at second house after the Pathé - Gazette news, the lights came on and the stage lit up for a "turn," which turned out to be a boy scouts' camp scene. A scout master and half a dozen scouts were busy settling in. It was in the early part of the War. After a while they got around the camp fire and began singing popular songs, the audience joining in. Then the scout master sang his party piece and the boy scouts sang it after him. Then he wanted the audience to sing it with him, while he called out the words. It began like this: "Sitting round the camp fire, in the ruddy glow." A howl of laughter came from those of the audience sitting close to the familiar loud voice which sang "in the bloody glow." No prizes for guessing who! Unperturbed, the singer tried again, but there seemed to be more singers who obviously preferred Bob's version.

In that street was also Charlie Axford, who was the colliery and union ambulance man; also Sam Barlow, who was superintendent at the Methodist chapel at the other end of the village. A great man to have on committees and at meetings, he would have his say

no matter what. One Saturday night there was a special service, a rally or some anniversary for which there was a special speaker. The circuit minister was chairman and, at the appropriate part of the agenda, announced the special speaker, who began his speech with a warning to the congregation that he got carried away sometimes and that his wife said he was "long-winded." He said, however, that if it happened that he was going over what the chairman considered was a reasonable time, he should just give his coat tail a pull and he would bring his speech to a close. He then went into his speech, which was proving his wife right in saying he was long-winded. The packed congregation gave him patient attention as the drone of his voice went on and on until everyone was startled by Sam, who had a voice nearly as loud as Bob Walker's. "Pull his tail, Mr. Chairman," he called out. Complete silence for a moment, then somebody laughed and everyone joined in.

### **Local Accidents**

Before leaving the Cement Houses we come to the last house, wherein lived the Cousins family. There were three sons. I don't know about girls; I don't think there were any. Matthew, or Matt as he was known, was a blacksmith at the Colliery. More like a farrier really, he had to shoe the pit ponies, which meant going into the pit to shoe horses that never saw daylight until a long weekend like a bank holiday. However, he left the village and went to Australia, which left Billy and Theodore. Now when Billy was eleven years old he had a very serious accident. He and some youngsters were playing up in the High Wood. At the end of the wood, higher up, was the pit heap, where stones that were taken out of the coal were tipped. The heap was a great height, overlooking the wood and fields and giving an enormous view of the valley. However, it wasn't a pleasant climb to get to the top because of loose stones. The boys had been to the top, where they had been larking about chasing one another. As it was a Sunday the pit wasn't working, or they would have been chased off.

Billy, with one or two more, started to go down towards the wood. So far down, the boys coming behind set some loose stones rolling down, which caught Billy behind his legs and caused him to fall and roll down with the avalanche of loose stones. Of course they had to clear the stones which were pinning him down. One of them ran to where some older chaps were walking through the wood, and fortunately one was an ambulance man. Billy's leg was broken below the knee and was amputated in Newcastle's Royal Victoria Infirmary.

He was always a lively lad and was a keen footballer. After a while on crutches, he was fitted with a stump. He never let it get him down, and when he got used to the stump he carried on from where he had left off in play and sport. He never got a false foot; he was content with the stump. Like other lads of the village about Billy's age, when playing football with him on the opposite side, I felt the difference between a football boot and Billy's stump on my shins! He met a girl from Burnopfield who was born with a disability which caused her to wear a big boot. They were married and joined the Methodist church; two people both with a disability, but that did not stop them living an ordinary life. Billy worked at the Colliery on a hauler engine which pulled the sets of tubs in the Towneley drift.

Billy and his brother Theodore were keen motor cyclists. Theodore was a joiner at the Colliery, and one day while working on a job up at the screens he put his gear on a full tub of coal and then jumped on to have a ride up the hill. The tubs were attached to an endless rope by a grip. The empties came down and the full tubs went up. Now so far up they passed under a small bridge used by people crossing the line. It was a very steep incline, which caused the space between the coal tub and the bridge to get less. Theodore was crushed between the bottom of the foot-bridge and the tub of coal he was riding on, and died instantly. Very sad, a very popular lad not long out of his apprentice years.

### **The Tanner Hop**

Leaving the Cement Houses, a footpath ran behind the building known as the Tin Chapel, Church Hall or Tanner Hop, depending on whom you were talking to. Anyway, it was the community hall of the village, where miners' union meetings were held as well as marriage receptions, boy scouts, girl guides, ambulance classes and concerts, and a dance very Saturday night which was named "The Tanner Hop."<sup>19</sup> The building was entered by the main door in the centre, opening onto a small entrance hall. A door to the left led to the part used for general purposes and one on the right to the dance hall.

Proceeding on to the village centre, one must pass the top of the hill leading down to Blackhall Mill. There was many a pile-up at the bend of the road half-way down, with horses unable to hold the cart or van and crashing through the railings into the field. Once a van delivering sweets and confectionery packs crashed through. Broken bottles and boxes of sweets were scattered all over the place, rich pickings for the youngsters. Often a lorry-load of furniture got stuck on the bank and the driver sought the help of the colliery cart-men, who took one of the big horses with tracing chains and pulled them up. And of course in winter time it was great sledging and helping to push carts and loaded flats<sup>20</sup> up the hill; for, despite the horses being shod with "sharps", it was still difficult for them to keep their feet.

Opposite the top of the bank were the gardens of Prospect Terrace, which ran parallel with the main Newcastle - Shotley Bridge road. On the other side of the road, at the top of the hill, was a detached red-brick house with a small front garden but a bigger garden at the back. The Turners lived there. Jack Turner, the father of quite a large family, was back over-man at the Colliery, and people said the house was built for him because no-one would live next door to him. I don't believe that, but it's true that he was a bit of a bully. The young driver lads were scared to death of him.

### **The Ladies from the Hunt**

Often the hunt met at the Bank Top, as it was known, and one morning one of the lady riders asked Jack if she could use his toilet. Of course others followed. A path ran round from the front garden to the larger garden at the back where the coal-house and ash-pit-cum-closet were. After the riders had gone, with the ladies in their long skirts and spurred boots mounted side-saddle, (ladies rode side-saddle in those days), and probably

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<sup>19</sup>A tanner was a sixpenny piece, the equivalent of two and a half pence in today's money.

<sup>20</sup>Flat carts, without raised sides or ends.

with one or two polite goodbyes and a bit of forelock-touching, Jack went round to the back garden to continue what he was doing before the hunt interrupted him. People across the road reckoned they would hear his bellowing across the valley. No longer ladies, but "dirty bitches," "lazy hussies" and other none too complimentary names. His own description was "You would think somebody had thrown buckets of water in. It was running down the step out into the garden."

The garden was fenced in by the military fence of a path which ran down from the main road, between the garden and the garden of the end house of School Row, to the back street. As I have mentioned, Hamsterley Colliery was built on a hill rising south, making each street a little above the other, so that Prospect Terrace overlooked School Row. The paths to their front doors went up, whereas the paths to the front doors of School Row went down the garden.

In the early earl days J. Cawthorne lived in the first house of Prospect Terrace, overlooking the Bank Top. A side road led to the back streets and the streets behind. Now Joe was on the big haulage engine that hauled the sets of tubs from outside the drift (it was a drift mine) to whatever underground landing the set was made for, which could be half a mile or more underground. About thirty yards in was the bell cabin, where the chap changed the points and the off-takes of the ropes to which-ever way the set was needed. The landing chap could be the rolley-way man, whose job was to make the full set and change the ropes from the empty set to the full set, then ring three to the bell cabin. The chap at the bell cabin would ring three to Joe, who would start that huge mass of steam machinery, with its two great piston rods driving two huge drums, one in front of the other. The main one pulled the set, winding the rope on, whilst the tail drum was unwinding and acting as brake. Joe was well-respected by the landing chap, as he was always spot-on in landing the set. Once he got the three rings of the bell he was off, no dilly-dallying.

### **Sweets, Marches and Bacon Boxes**

Over the years there were many changes in the streets, but I remember the Rooneys, the Phillips and the Sullivans. Big Jim Sullivan was grave-digger at the Catholic church, and was popular with the young lads of the village for his interest and support in football. And of course the Keenleysides, who at one time had a small house-shop near the end of Prospect Terrace, with just a side-road leading up to the back streets dividing it from the school.

Robert Rowe, who sold confectionery wholesale, used to deliver boxes of sweets. He used to leave the horse and trap on the main road, and had to carry what he was delivering up the garden path. One late afternoon near the end of the year, when it was becoming quite darkish, a few lads tied a length of strong rope between a spoke of one of the wheels and the garden gate-post. When Mr. Rowe got in the trap and picked up the reins, there was a great clattering of horses' shoes. The gang scattered when Mr. Rowe jumped down with the whip in his hand. One of the gang was Eddie Keenleyside, who was about my age, a grand playmate and game for anything. He lost his life in the 1914-18 War.

Also in the street were the Clarks. Mr. Clark was union chairman. I can only remember the one son, Peter, and one daughter. Peter came back from the War minus a

leg and got a job at the Colliery in the joiners' department, as tub repair man. Next door to them were the Slavins, with one son, James, who in time married his next-door neighbour's daughter, Elizabeth Clark. (I think it was Elizabeth.)

As time went on, and after the end of the War, a house two or three from the end of the street was occupied by the Dixons. Bob, the elder son, came back from the War minus a leg. The father was a keen bandsman. He had a gramophone with a huge horn which needed a brass rod to hold it. On a Sunday afternoon, having been to the club, he would fix it up and open the front door, and the village and valley would get the full blare of the "Belfagor" March and other marches; all marches.

Going past their row of semi-detached out-houses was another row of semi-detached out-houses, being the back street of Jubilee Terrace. There were two Jubilee Terraces, their fronts facing each other with grass growing between the two streets. The second street was known as Bacon Box Terrace. There was always a vacant house or two before the 1914-18 War, and it often happened that a couple seeking work wouldn't have a stick of furniture. Quite a few were from Ireland. After a chat with their future neighbours, away they would go along to the Co-op and buy, for a few coppers, a couple of bacon boxes, which were about four feet square and made of good solid wood, and with neighbourly help they would make makeshift furniture, and some of them became pretty good at it. They would also buy a plank from the local joiner to make a long form for sitting up to the table. Nearly every miner's house in the village possessed a form, which was pushed in under the table when not in use. It was very useful when making a clippy mat.

### **The Jubilee Terrace Ghost**

Further along the street lived the Latimers. I do not know how many there were in the family, but I remember one son and one daughter at least. The father must have been attached to a theatre or a circus at one time. I would say a circus, because whatever entertainment went on he supplied the costumes. I believe he got others interested in a comic play which was performed at the local Palace at Blackhall Mill. A comic band was also formed. A chap called Lumsden, who had played the cornet in some band, got a few more instrumentalists together. The others played musical "submarines"<sup>21</sup>, through which one hummed whatever tune the band was playing. They dressed up in whatever they liked, Latimer providing the costumes. There were Laurel and Hardy and different characters of the film and circus, with pompoms and tassels, and of course Charlie Chaplin. Tot Hall played Chaplin, and very good he was too. The group was a great success on the Saturday of the Durham Big Meeting, when they marched out of Durham Railway Station behind Westwood Colliery Band, down the crowd-packed North Road, over Framwellgate Bridge and up Silver Street, entertaining the crowd on the way. Tot was in his element and the crowd just loved it.

The band was a great comfort and help during the strikes of 1921 and 1926, playing around the villages of the valley and collecting what they could for the soup kitchen, which was in an empty house in Bacon Box Terrace.

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<sup>21</sup>I wonder if these were kazoos.

Before leaving the Latimers, one incident occurred which deserves mention. There wasn't much street lighting and, at one time, during the back end of the year, people were a bit nervous about going out, as rumour was that a ghost had appeared around the Jubilee Terrace area. So some of the lads got together and patrolled the streets, and one night two or three of them were taking a short cut through the school yard and were just climbing a wall at the end of Jubilee Terrace when they saw an apparition like a tall skeleton with green glaring eyes. The lads just froze until John Jones put a marble into his catapult and aimed it at this thing coming along the back street. It suddenly dropped in size and got a bit tangled up with its equipment. Of course it was young Billy Latimer dressed up and on stilts, having a bit of fun as he put it.

One did not need to be present at any event that happened in the village. A visit to the local Institute, or the "Tute" as it was called, was enough. Go into the billiard room and meet the lads, and everything that happened at any time was sure to be discussed in the Tute. Just like the story of a kiddy called Clewes, and what happened to him some time about the 1920s.

### **The Kidnapping of Arthur Clewes**

This boy, Arthur Clewes (I think it was Arthur), was above average intelligence. He could recite the alphabet backwards, tell you his name and address and his father and mother's names, and answer numerous questions, and he was just four years old. One day, apparently, he went on an errand for his mother to the local grocer's shop. A flat horse-drawn cart pulled up as he was about to cross the road from the side-street he'd come down. There was no-one about and, as he told it later, the conversation must have gone like this:

"Hello, sonny. Where are you going?"

"I'm going to the shop for my Mammy."

"And where's the shop?"

"Along there," pointing along the road.

"Would you like a ride? We are going along there."

Being friendly with everybody, Arthur got up onto the flat and away they went. A woman and another man were sitting on a seat with a back-rest, and they moved along so that he was sitting between them. He couldn't remember passing the shop, because the woman put a shawl over his head, covering his eyes. After they had galloped along for a while they stopped at a place where there were trees on both sides of the road, which must have been a short distance before entering Ebchester. Arthur began screaming for his Mammy. The flat must have had a back and sides which came so far up, and Arthur said there was a canvas covering some boxes. Under this canvas they pushed him, telling him to be quiet or they would do something to stop him. They galloped along for quite some time, then steadied to a walking pace. Arthur heard voices. He started screaming and shouting "I'm Arthur Clewes. I live at Jubilee Terrace, Hamsterley Colliery."

In the next village to Hamsterley Colliery lived a chap called Frank McLean, who had taken up boxing and was doing quite well at middle weight: so well, in fact, that he was meeting fights leading up to championship standard and was booked to meet a chap from Middlesbrough. Frank fought under the name of Wharton, I think. He was in training, and was jogging along through Shotley Bridge when he heard Arthur's voice. I

don't really know what happened here, but the story goes that Frank ran and grabbed the horse's reins and pulled the chap holding them nearly from the flat. He had jumped to his feet with a whip, and the other man jumped down too, and was making for Frank wielding a stick. Evidently he came off worse, because he was soon lying in the gutter while Frank was on the flat taking Arthur from under the tarpaulin. So it was just a matter now of getting Arthur back two and a half miles to his home.

Of course there would be a lot more to the story, and reading this you will wonder what happened at St. James Boxing Hall at Newcastle on the night of the fight between Frank Wharton and his opponent. Well, as I've said, nothing happened in and around the village but what you got to know about. Frank was courting a very lovely young lady whose views on boxing were very different from Frank's, and the result was "either give up boxing, or else!" Being a wise man, Frank knew which of the alternatives to choose and his career as a boxer was abandoned.

### **Edward Row**

The next street above Jubilee Terrace was Edward Row. There was a huge space between the out-houses of Jubilee Terrace and the gardens of Edward Row, and it looked as if they had intended to build another terrace there. I did mention that Victoria Terrace was the only one with back yards, but I forgot Edward Row. It was understood by people of the village that Edward Row was built to house deputies of the Colliery but, although they were grand houses, nobody fancied living in the west end of the street because of the ash heap and pit heap, with the ash carts having to pass the end of the street after cleaning out people's ash pits. The east end was different, with fields and the wood, and of course the football field known as "Mud Park." This field sloped up to the wood at the bottom of the pit heap, and when it rained the water drained down to it.

I had occasion to be walking along that part of the row one day when Jack Allan, cart-man at that time, was sitting on the front of the cart, his feet on the shaft, smoking his pipe and with the horse just ambling along. Two women standing talking at a gate said something to Jack and one of them, Dolly Street, said to me, "Joe, doesn't it say in the Bible that you must be born again? Well, if I have a choice in the matter, I would like to be Jack Allan's horse."

Later, Jack became head horse-keeper. His waist-coat must have had fire-proof pockets. He had a short-shanked clay pipe, which disappeared into his waist-coat pocket if anybody was approaching. After they had gone, out came the pipe, and it was still burning.

When a couple got married, often as not they were given the key to one of the houses at the west end of the street. John and Julia Wilson had been living in Number 2 over a year when their baby was born. One day, Julia had been out shopping and had just beaten the rain. Normally she would have left the pram outside, but as the rain was turning into a heavy storm she decided to take it indoors. Then she went out to get the bucket of coal standing just outside the door and saw, to her horror, that there was no back yard but a gaping hole caused by pit subsidence. She had to warn the neighbours, then report it, but found that her next-door neighbour from the end house was already on her way to the colliery office. Both houses were demolished, the tenants being rehoused by the Colliery.

### **The Famous Footballers, and the Foxes who got away**

Before we leave the area there is one family we must mention: the Grahams, footballer sons of Ned Graham. Of course there were girls too, but it was the boys who put Hamsterley Colliery on the map internationally, particularly Tom. Jack was the eldest, but he was more interested in pigeons than football. His father flew the birds in competitions and Jack helped him. He played for local football teams when they dragged him from his pigeons. Now Matt was a year or so younger, and had trials with professional clubs but lacked the inches and weight needed. However, he played for Consett Celtic when they were in the North-Eastern League and was a great favourite with the crowd. The Consett team had players good enough for any professional club, but they had good jobs at the steel works.

Next was Michael who, during the 1926 miners' strike, along with about half a dozen other young chaps (my brother John being among them), walked to Newcastle, a ten-mile walk, and joined the navy. Wherever his ship visited a foreign country and a football match was arranged, Micky was on the team.

Tommy Graham, as he was known throughout the country, was the youngest of the four. He went to Nottingham Forest and played for England. He stayed with Nottingham Forest and married the boss's daughter. When he decided to hang up his football boots, through injury I believe, he filled in as their coach for a while and then finished up as physiotherapist, a great credit to Hamsterley Colliery indeed.

South Row ran along the top of Stone Row and Cronniwell Row. Bob Williams lived in the first house. Bob was a pianist who played with a small orchestra at the Tanner Hop on Saturday nights, and of course wedding receptions, before he eventually became pianist at Blackhall Mill Workmen's Club.

At the other end of the street lived Jim Robb, whose back got broken in an accident at the pit. A long full-length basket bed on four wheels was obtained, with a small pit pony, to take him around. This had been used previously by a man called Bobby Charlton, who had also had an accident at the pit. Of course this could not have been possible with the traffic of today<sup>22</sup>.

In Stone Row lived Paddy Fox, a real Irishman with Irish humour. He had two daughters, and on Sunday mornings Paddy and his daughters would go along to the Roman Catholic church about a quarter of a mile away, at Low Westwood. One Sunday, coming back from church, they were passed by the fox-hounds, a big pack with two horsemen in charge. They pulled up at the Workmen's Club, which had been moved from Cronniwell Row. The two horsemen, still mounted, were having a drink which had been handed up to them. When Paddy and his daughters caught up to them, they heard someone say "Good morning, Paddy" as they were walking through the pack of dogs.

Paddy looked up to one of the horsemen and said "Good morning, Sir. A fine pack of dogs you have."

"Yes," replied the horseman. "They are just a young pack I'm breaking in."

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<sup>22</sup>Dad told me he remembered having seen 2 penny-farthing bicycles at Hamsterley, which shows the extent to which traffic developed during the course of his lifetime.

"Ah," said Paddy, "that explains it, Sir, for you just passed three Foxes along the road." Paddy and his two girls walked away with great laughter from the locals.

"Didn't he say we passed three foxes?" asked one of the riders. "Whereabouts would they be along there?"

"Oh, they are not there now," laughed one of the locals. "They have just passed us."

They all had a good laugh when it was explained to them.

One evening I was taking a short cut through the wood from Blackhall Mill when I met Paddy leading a couple of goats which had been tethered at the bottom of the wood. He had a great coil of rope over his shoulder.

"Hello," he said. "Do you know, a goat is never satisfied with the length of rope you give it. If you gave it a mile there would be something a yard or two further it would want to reach."

Across the back street at the bottom of Stone Row was the back of Middle Street, which ran along the bottom of Stone Row and Cronniwell Row. The front gardens of these two streets ran down to the main Shotley Bridge - Newcastle road, with a side road separating them from the school yard. Past the bottom of Cronniwell Row and the out-houses was a gateway into the pit yard, where there were three big steam boilers. Two were always in use. In winter it was a grand place to be, helping the fireman, because it was always warm.

Further up the street was a foot-bridge crossing two small-gauge lines on which ran the tubs carrying the coal up to the screens, the full tubs on the right and the empties coming down on the left. An inch-thick endless steel rope was used, and a grip with jaws that gripped the rope and tightened when the steel handle was pressed down carried the tubs along.

Over on the other side of the bridge and running up the hill was Park Row. When we first moved to the village, there was the Colliery Farm at the bottom of Park Row, with a footpath leading up through the fields to High Westwood. The farm was later demolished, and new colliery offices were built there. The old office down the main road was taken over by the workmen for a workman's club and institute.

Park Row was on a very steep hill and the back street was very wide. There was quite a distance between the houses and the out-houses, and an open channel ran down to a sink at the bottom of the street, with a grate set at an angle. This was for drainage of the road and the wood at the top of the street. The hill got steeper, passing the Towneley Drift on the left. About fifty feet further up were the screens, where coal was loaded into trucks. The trucks were shunted by two big horses. Later a steam engine, which we called a tanky, took the place of the horses. Bob Errington was the driver, with Jim Allan as fireman and shunter.

Back to the top house of Park Row, in which lived the Woods. Fred, the elder of the two sons, was an athlete. With Bill Lynn, who worked in the office, and one or two others, he used to enter competitions held around the valley. Fred came back from the 1914-18 War minus a leg, one of the village heroes. Alf, his brother, was a fireman at the big main boilers. Alf appeared to be stone-deaf, yet amongst the hissing of steam pipes and with the noise of activity all around, where one had to raise the voice in any case, he could hear every word and one could have a good conversation with him. Away from the

noise and activities of the boilers, he needed an ear trumpet. There were no hearing aids in those days. He got keen on motor cycles when they started appearing on the road, and got himself a combination. Of course it could not have happened today, where one must take a test. All one had to do to get a driving license was to go to Durham and fill in a form. Alf was a nice chap to know.

### **Tot Hall's Cooking**

A little further down the street were the Halls. Everybody knew Tot Hall; a real character was Tot! I have already mentioned him being a member of the comic band, impersonating Charlie Chaplin. He had a large young family of girls, and only one boy as far as I know; but how many were in the family all together even Tot said he didn't know, although people who knew him took what he said with a pinch of salt. When Mrs. Hall went into hospital and he was left to fend for himself, he said he believed his children were bringing others in off the street at meal-times. This was the first time he had been left to look after himself and the bairns, and he was fortunate that the schools were on holiday. On the first day he gave them toast and jam for breakfast but as he was tidying up, making beds and doing the necessary chores with the help of the eldest girl, he wondered what he could give them for dinner. Looking round the pantry, he found a brown stone jar with a lid on the top shelf. He saw that it was half-full of fat, so he thought he would fry some bacon and make chips. At dinner time, he did just that. Everything was going fine. The chips were lovely and brown and the bacon done to a T, so they all scrambled round the table. Tot had warmed up a pie, too, as a quick dinner for himself.

"Ugh, I don't like these," said one of the children, tasting a chip. The others began complaining too.

"It's just because I've done them," said Tot. "Now get them eaten. There's nowt else, and they look lovely to me. If your Mam had done them you'd be eating them with no complaints. And hurry up, because I want to go and see your Mam."

After giving them strict instructions for the afternoon, he got himself dressed and caught the 12.45 bus to Newcastle. When he got to the ward, his wife was anxious to know how they were faring at home.

"Great, lass," Tot told her. "Divven't worry about us. We're ahl reet."

"How are the bairns?" She asked. "What had ye for dinner?"

"I made them chips and fried some bacon," said Tot.

"Where did you get the fat to make the chips, Tot?"

"That stone jar on the top shelf in the pantry," explained Tot.

"That isn't fat! That's tallow, ye greet fond lump!"

After he had got back home and seen that things were organised by a neighbour and his eldest daughter, who would be leaving school shortly, and after answering all the children's questions about their Mam, he had his tea then thought he would have a look in at the club. This was the building that had been the colliery offices before the new offices had been built on the site of the demolished farm buildings. The two houses in Cronniwell Row, where the old club had been, were renovated, and the new place became the Workmen's Club and Institute.

Tot met his workmates. As it was a Saturday night it was very busy. He gave his mates a full account of the way things were with him, and one of them told him that his eldest daughter was nearly sixteen and could cook, and if Tot liked he would send her round. It would help out until Mrs. Hall was well again. Tot didn't want his girl to lose any schooling, so he accepted the offer with thanks. The following week passed not so badly. Tot was getting home just after 2 o'clock to find everything in order, and a meal ready to be put on the table and plenty of hot water for a scrub in the zinc bath in front of the fire.

People baked bread, tea-cakes, scones, etc. at that time, and when walking along a street one could get that smell of fresh bread being baked. The lass who was doing for him had baked a loaf or two, and two stotty cakes "like motor-car wheels," Tot said. He was not impressed with all her baking, though. On the Saturday morning, which he had taken off work to go into Newcastle, he said to one of his daughters, "Here, lass, go along to the shop and get a white loaf. If they haven't any, go along to the Co-op."

"What about this yeasty cake I've made, Mr. Hall?" asked Tot's temporary housekeeper.

"Black-lead it," said Tot. "It'll do to hold the door back."

At that time, door stoppers were the thing, and were quite decorative. They were usually either well-polished black-leaded harvest sheaves, about nine inches high, or "Rabbie Burns and plough," which was very popular. Ours was a Rabbie Burns and plough.

Tot was also spare-time clock and watch repair man, and if ever one had need to ask him the time two days running, it would likely be seen that it was a different watch on the second day from the one Tot had used that day before. One day, a young chap changing a full tub for an empty one in the pit asked Tot the time.

"Me watch is in me waist-coat pocket," said Tot. "It's hanging up over there. Just take the watch out and look at it."

"Hey, this is my watch!" yelled the young man, having found it in Tot's pocket.

"Is it, noo?" said Tot. "A'll sell ye it." Of course it would be settled up along at the Tute.

### **Bill's Unlucky Day**

At the bottom of the street, in the end house, lived the Hendersons, a couple just past middle age. They had a son not long married living a door or two further up. Now Bill Henderson had an agency with the Northern Echo, and had a good many customers in the village. On a Saturday he would go around collecting his money. Now on a Friday, house-proud miners' wives would polish and clean the brasses. Everything on the mantel-piece and hearth would be polished and the fire-place would be whitened, all tidied up for the weekend. One day, Mrs. Henderson was baking and stood on a chair to reach her scales, which were on the top of a kitchen cabinet. On stepping down from the chair she missed her footing and the chair toppled over, sending her sprawling across the floor. Her arm was broken, so on the Friday the son's wife did all the necessary chores, and early on the Saturday morning put everything in its place and then left to attend to her own affairs. Bill saw to the needs and comforts of his wife, who was sitting with her arm in splints giving him orders.

"You had better build the fire up before you go out," she said. Bill, eager to get out, was getting a bit flustered, but he obeyed orders, filling the coal scuttle and throwing its contents on the back of the fire.

"Oh, and you had better put some water in the set-pot."

Bill got the pail and filled it at the tap. He was nearly running now. In he rushed with the pail full of water and threw it on the fire instead of pouring it into the set-pot. What a mess! Coal dust and black water were pouring out of the fire-place, and smoke and soot were filling the room. Mrs. Henderson screamed and ran out of the house to fetch her son and his wife. They all came back to find Bill mopping up. The windows had to be opened, the clippy mat lifted and thrown outside, fender and tidy also put outside, and then the mopping up began. In his anxiety to help put things right, with his mind still on getting out to do his round, Bill was getting in the way. In any case, the others seemed to be managing to get things cleaned up, so at the first opportunity he slipped out. He crossed the road and bridge into Cronniwell Row, carrying a bundle of papers under his arm to deliver as he collected his money.

It wasn't Bill's day at all! A west wind had got up, but as he was in the shelter of the houses it wasn't so bad. Having finished Cronniwell Row and Stone Row, he made his way down to the main road with the intention of rounding the school yard into Prospect Terrace. A woman across the road shouted "Mr. Henderson" and, seeing it was one of his customers, he went across to her. The wind was much stronger here and he had to hold on to his cap.

"There won't be anybody in, so I'd better pay you now," said the woman. She handed Bill a ten-shilling note<sup>23</sup>, which he put in his mouth, and he put the bundle of papers between his knees while he got some change out of his trouser pocket. The woman kept up a one-sided conversation about the weather, then mentioned that he was later than usual. Bill turned his head, face full to the wind, mumbling something in reply, when away went the ten-shilling note. He made a grab at it, and away went the papers from between his knees. The ten-bob note stuck on a gate post, but as Bill got up to it a gust of wind carried it on over the bank top which leads down to Blackhall Mill and along the road past the tin chapel, until it finally got stuck on the hedge of one of the Cement Houses. In the meantime, the customer he had left so abruptly, awaiting her change, was gathering some of the scattered pages of the Northern Echo papers which had blown into the gardens on both sides of the road. Bill was on his way back minus his cap, but two lads coming up the bank from Blackhall Mill had retrieved it. They also helped to gather what they could of the Northern Echo. People that week would have to excuse him being short of a page or two, if they got a paper at all. What a day!

### **Local Talents**

I have just remembered another chap who put Hamsterley Colliery on the map, at least to the listening public at that time. He was Fred Street, a young chap who lived at the top of Cronniwell Row. He had a rich baritone voice and often sang on the radio, besides working in the pit. Those were the early days of radio, when a radio set meant a pair of ear-phones and a cat's whisker, and the radio station was Newcastle 5NO.

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<sup>23</sup>Fifty pence in today's money.

There was quite a lot of talent in the village, people who today might have been successful performers on radio and television. One young chap who comes to mind was Joe Armstrong, who could imitate any bird. It was a delight to hear him whistling some song whilst driving his pony along in the dark passages of the pit. He later married one of Paddy Fox's daughters.

Back to the bottom of Park Row, where new offices had been built on the site of the demolished farm buildings. One or two cottages had been built with stone from the farm, but the offices were red brick, as were also the stables at the bottom of the yard. Down at the far side were loose horse-boxes used by the big cart horses. The pit ponies' stables ran along the bottom of the yard, their backs going along the top of Dean Row.

Opposite the offices were three or four cottages. Bullerwell lived in the top one. It was said that he had big shares in the Colliery, and it was possible. His garden at the back was actually in the pit yard, and he spent hours in the evenings standing in the corner watching the surface workers, and the full tubs of coal running past on their way up to the screens. He was head blacksmith. His wife made ginger beer and herb beer. It was a regular run on a Sunday morning, particularly in the spring or summer-time, for youngsters from all round the village, carrying empty pop bottles on their way to Bullerwell's house, and with full ones with the corks tied tightly down on their way back. One just had to cut the string and the corks shot out with a loud pop. The price? Tuppence a bottle!

### **An Uninvited Visitor**

There was one incident which caused a laugh but alarmed the young woman who occupied one of the cottages. One morning in summer, towards dinner time, she had popped round to one of the neighbours leaving her door open. It was turning into another hot day. When she returned, there was a young man lying fast asleep on the couch. Just below Office Block, as the cottages were called, was the colliery time office and, knowing the time-keeper, she ran down and asked him if he would come up to her house, which he did. He recognised the young man as the doctor covering for Dr. Marshall while he was on holiday. He looked so comfortable it seemed a shame to waken him; however, waken him they did, by just calling "Doctor," with immediate response from the sleeper. He sat up, looked around him and apologised.

He explained that he had been called out at four o'clock in the morning to attend a birth, and that he had felt a bit tired walking round on his calls. On his way back to the Post Office to see if there were any more calls, he glanced in through the open door and the sight of the easy chairs made him more conscious of his need to sit down. He knocked at the door to ask if they would mind him resting for a few minutes but, getting no answer and thinking they must be upstairs, he knocked more loudly then went in and sat down on the couch, and that was the last thing he could remember. Of course the woman didn't mind. The doctor had his sit down (and a cup of tea as well) and resumed his round with renewed energy.

### **Union Pressure**

There was one time when the miners had a dispute with the management about the household coal being delivered to them. There had been a change of manager. Mr.

Cummings retired and a Mr. Longstaff had been appointed as his replacement. Changes had been made, hence the new offices and stables, and now the household coal. This coal was from a seam that hadn't been worked for years, I believe because it was unsaleable. It was certainly unburnable unless mixed with a better class of coal. It was soft, more like black soil than coal. However, it had to be worked to see how things went. The result was that it had to be used by the firemen at the big boilers, who complained about not being able to keep up the pressure of steam, and also as house coal.

People began to complain. Men who had wet places in the pit were having to put damp clothing on, as it was impossible to maintain a heat sufficient to dry them properly, and washing days were becoming a nightmare. The unions had complained to the management without success. One day, a very cold back-end-of-the-year day, with frost in the air, there was a board meeting at the offices. Owen Jones worked as check weigh-man up on the screens, where the loaded tubs of coal were weighed, and his job was to check the weights. He was employed by the union. He had only one leg, having lost the other in an accident and, being a good union man, he was appointed check weigh-man.

He was a forthright fellow who would go where angels fear to tread. On this particular day, as he was coming down Park Row, he saw a couple of loads of coal which had been tipped at the coal-houses of two of the workers, waiting to be shovelled in. He asked the woman of one of the houses if she would lend him a bucket, which she did. Owen half-filled it with coal. When he got to the offices he went in, walked up the stairs to the room where the board meeting was in progress, and knocked at the door. Without waiting for an answer, he opened the door and went straight in. He crossed the room to the fire-place, where a good bright fire was burning, and threw the half-bucket of coal onto the fire. Of course there had been plenty of shouts of "Here, you, what do you want?" and "How dare you?"

Owen turned round to face the angry looks of the manager and members of the board, and told them to look at the result of putting the workers' household coal on their fire. He'd put the fire out. After explaining who he was and telling the members of the board about the dispute between the union and the manager, he left.

After a week or so, much better coal was delivered to the houses and the firemen.

### **Progress**

An electric power house was built to serve the coal-cutting machines and haulage, and then the colliery houses were wired for electric lighting, but only downstairs. Previously, I believe Consett Iron Company had supplied the current as well as street lighting before the council took over. Every colliery house now had electric lighting, and sixpence a week as added as "off-take" on every man's pay-note. Coming straight from the power house, it was direct current, and when the big steam haulage engine was bringing a set of full tubs of coal to the surface it wasn't so bad on level-going, but when the set came to the steep climb to the surface (about 1 in 6), the house lights would dim and all reading, sewing, cooking or anything being done that needed electricity just had to stop until the set crawled over the top onto the level and Alf Wood shovelled coal into the big boiler fires to keep a pressure of steam.

### **A Cycling Accident**

Dean Row was at the west side of the Colliery, behind the pit ponies' stables, with a road leading to the back street between them. The Kyles lived in the top house. Mr. Kyle was on one of the coal-cutting machines, with Paddy Fox as his partner. I believe there were three sons, Jack being the eldest. He got married just before the 1914-18 War, which had been going a year or so when he joined the army. In the course of training and service he was promoted to the rank of sergeant.

He came back on embarkation leave, and the day before he was due back he decided he would go over to Leadgate to visit friends. So he borrowed a bike and, in the afternoon straight after dinner, away he went. Now to get to Leadgate by bike one would have to walk, pushing the bike about half the distance. He could go past the offices up the fields by the path leading to High Westwood Railway Station, which had been built about two or three years before the War, then up through the villages of High Westwood, Allendale Cottages, Medomsley and on to the Hat and Feather pub, or he could cycle a mile or so to Ebchester along the Shotley Bridge road, and turn left up Ebchester Bank. This involved a steep climb for about a mile and a half to the Hat and Feather before the bike could be used for the last mile or so into Leadgate.

Now the way he went is immaterial: it's the way he came back that nearly cost him his life. Corbridge Road runs straight from the bottom of Ebchester Bank through Leadgate to Durham City, and Jack had come back that way because he could cycle all the way. Good brakes were necessary on Ebchester Bank, though, as it is very steep indeed.

His family got concerned when he didn't come home that night nor the next morning, when he should have been going back to his unit, so they reported the matter to the police. Somebody had gone to Leadgate and found out that Jack had left just after ten o'clock on the previous night.

Opposite the bottom of Ebchester Bank was a wall about four feet high running along the foot-path, with a considerable drop at the other side into a garden. There was a shop and two or three cottages further along, and somebody going into the shop happened to look over the wall and saw a man lying in the garden. Jack's brakes had not been able to hold as he came amain down the hill, and he had sped across the road, hitting the wall with such force that both he and the bike had gone over. He was in civvies and had been taken to hospital by the time his family got to know what had happened. Incidentally, two red caps (army police) came that day to arrest him. He had been taken to the Royal Victoria Infirmary at Newcastle, a very lucky man. I don't think there were any bones broken, but he was concussed. Of course, after a week or two he was transferred to a military hospital and eventually joined his unit somewhere in France.

### **An Emergency Drive**

A few doors further down the street lived Sam Morpeth, whose wife was expecting a baby. It was two days before Christmas and he had to get her to the Murray Hospital at Blackhill as soon as possible. I had gone to work as time-keeper at ten o'clock at night and, getting towards midnight, I was in the ambulance house when Arthur Errington came in to see if I would go with him to take Mrs. Morpeth to the hospital. He had tried to get the ambulance man, but he had the 'flu, so Arthur thought of me. He had to get

somebody to help, as there was snow on the ground and it was snowing now. The union had got an ambulance and had appointed Arthur as driver when needed.

We first had to get the ambulance out of the garage, a converted loose horse-box, and it was snowing heavily. So, having left a note on the desk in the time office to explain where I had gone, we got the van out and went to pick up Sam and his wife. We got them both settled inside the ambulance and set off, the snow getting worse. However, we got to Shotley Bridge all right, and around onto the Snows Green road after a bit of skidding, and then a little slide panel behind our heads opened and Sam told us we would have to hurry. We could hear his wife's voice calling "Hurry up."

We got round onto the Briary Bank (there were no houses there then) and eventually reached the street leading to the hospital about a hundred yards further on. The snow was getting pretty deep. The van skidded a bit when we turned into the street, and then we received a shock! Two concrete posts confronted us, preventing us from continuing up the street. We learned later that the occupants of the street were in dispute regarding the road repair. A young chap passing by told us we would have to go a round-about way and gave us directions. So, after a few more skids, we reversed and set away along Benfieldside. We came to a bottle-neck at the end of the road, with a pub on one side and a shop and houses on the other. There was just enough room for single traffic, and as Arthur took the bend on to Durham Road he skidded into the gutter. I got out to give a push. The snow here was quite deep and the wheels couldn't get a grip. I was getting concerned. Sam had left the slide panel open and I could hear Mrs. Morpeth moaning and telling us to hurry.

A chap came along and went into one of the houses, where a Christmas party was going on. Out came about half a dozen young chaps, who practically lifted us around onto the bank, where we soon started making progress. I sighed with relief, as I had visions of the baby being born in the ambulance. The patient was almost screaming now. However, we got to the hospital, where it became all bustle, and were told that we had got her there just in time. We wished everyone a Merry Christmas and set off back to Hamsterley, arriving without any trouble well into Christmas Eve. Arthur did extremely well to keep the ambulance on the road in such severe weather conditions.

### **A Nasty Accident.**

At the bottom of Dean row was the sub post office. A red brick lean-to had been built on the gable end of the first house, occupied by the Browns, with the door opening onto the Shotley - Newcastle road. Messages were left here if any villager needed the doctor to call. With the exception of the officials' row, the Browns' house was the first one came to when approaching the village from the west.

Next door to the Browns lived the Barrows, who had one son, Tom, and one daughter, Doris. It was the last day of the term before the summer holidays at Consett Grammar School, and was also prize day, when scholars were given awards according to their educational progress. Afterwards there was the usual rush for the Venture bus, which started from Victoria Road opposite Sandler's drapery shop. (Consett had no bus station at that time.) The Waters and their friends got into the back seat of the bus. Doris Barrow was in the back corner seat next to the window, with Minnie Waters in front of her. They were all showing their prizes to each-other, and Doris had her arm along the

window ledge as she leant over the back of Minnie's seat to look at one of the books she had received.

By then, the bus was proceeding along Benfieldside Road. Now from the top of Benfieldside Bank, which leads down to the church and school, was a five-foot stone wall, flush to the road and winding down to the Briary on the left. It was at this point that the bus, approaching the bend in the road, got too close to the wall when it swerved to avoid another bus coming up the hill. The back of the bus scraped the wall breaking the window, which crashed down onto Doris's arm. She was taken straight to hospital, but her arm had to be amputated: a very sad end of term. Like me, Doris is getting on in years, but I sometimes still meet her shopping in Consett. She lives at Shotley Bridge. One thing noticeable from the beginning was her attitude to being without her left arm. She never let it get her down. She married and brought up a family.

### **The Whistler.**

Across the road from the bottom of Dean Row was the colliery manager's garden and house. The garden wall went along as far as the top of Allans Bank and down as far as the bottom of the bank, everything hidden by a thick high hedge. Across the top of Allans Bank was North Row, whose gardens opened onto the Newcastle - Shotley Bridge road. On the opposite side were the gardens of Middle Row. The first house of North Row was occupied by the local policeman.

There were the usual semi-detached out-houses, and across the road running along behind the out-houses, and overlooking the wood and river, were crees: hen crees, pigeon crees and pig crees. When we moved from Cronniwell Row to School Row I would be seven years old, and the first lad of about my age I met out the back was George Keenlyside, who lived in North Row. He was a big lad, a full head taller than me. What I remember most about him was the way he responded to his father's whistle. It didn't matter where we were, or what we were playing, when he heard that whistle (made by putting your fingers in your mouth and blowing) he would drop whatever he was holding, be it cricket bat or ball or rounders bat, and he would run as though the Devil was after him.

I had heard the whistle; everybody in and around the valley would have heard it; but I thought it was the pigeon men until one day when a few of us were playing in the back street bowling at the wicket, a wood panel held in position by a stick at the back, and using a home-made bat. It was Geordie's turn to bat. John Jones was bowling, and was just shaping up when the whistle sounded and Geordie dropped the bat and ran.

"Hey, what's the matter with him?" I asked.

"That's his father whistling," said John Jones. Anybody would have thought he was scared of his father, but when you got to know them they were very nice people. It was just that whenever he wanted Geordie and he wasn't within call, he whistled.

### **Sticker Robson and the Dobsons**

Further along the street lived Geordie Robson, better known throughout the valley as Sticker Robson. Quite a good many people in the district kept a pig or two, and when the time came to have a pig killed and cut up it was Geordie who did the slaughtering and

butchering. It could be morning or afternoon, depending on what shift he was on. It was quite a gory experience watching the slaughter of a pig in those days.

Across the road leading to the back streets was School Row. Number 1 was occupied by the Dobsons. Tucker Dobson was a few years older than our playing group. Alice, his sister, was a year or so younger, then came Ethel and finally Joe. When one is below ten years of age, friends are usually of the same age or from the same class at school, running into one-another's houses and playing together in the back streets. The years roll on until, reaching teen-age, they begin to stretch out a bit, meeting and making friends with people from neighbouring villages, which brings me to an incident regarding my brother John and the Dobson girls. John and Joe Dobson were staunch friends, right up to joining the navy in 1926. Alice Dobson had married a chap called Dent who lived at Allendale cottages, a mile further up the hill and after a year or two of married life they decided they would go to Canada. A year later, after they had got settled down, Ethel went out to join them. This was about the time when John joined the navy.

After a while, John was posted to a cruiser called the Cairo, which was going on a two-year cruise including America and Canada. He was on shore-leave in one of the Canadian ports with a few ship-mates when one of them noticed a fish and chip restaurant. They went in and sat round one of the tables. John started looking round, and his eyes rested on a waitress who was serving a family at a near-by table. He seemed to recognise her, but couldn't be sure while she had her back to him. At last she finished serving the plates of food and turned round. John gave a yell. "Ethel," he shouted. It was Ethel Dobson. Alice and her husband owned the business. You would be right in saying that John and his friends were well looked after while in port there!

Now Tucker Dobson caused a bit of a disturbance one night at the picture hall at Blackhall Mill, before "talkies" came onto screens. There was a five-part film being shown, and the fourth part was nearing its end. It showed a young woman in a house noticing a man lurking in the garden and making up her mind to ring the police. What she didn't know was that his accomplice was already in the house, and was hiding behind the curtains she would have to pass to get to the telephone. He was slowly opening the curtains.

It was Saturday night, and Tucker had been best man at a friend's wedding earlier in the day. He had over-indulged in the celebrations, but had nevertheless staggered down to the picture hall with one or two friends to see the follow-up of the film. He got so worked up that he started shouting "Look out, hinny. He's a-back of the curtains." He started taking his jacket off and staggered down towards the screen, shouting what he intended doing to the "dirty bugger". His friends ran after him and restrained him, but not without a struggle. He knew nothing about it the next day, so I was told.

### **A Local Affray**

In Number 3 lived the Jones family: Lizzie, Phoebe, Bill, Maud and John. Mrs. Jones, a widow, had a lodger and was caretaker of the school just across the road. Looking back over the years, there were always people moving out, but houses were never empty very long. When Number 8 became vacant, an Irish family called Kelly moved in. They were a widow with two grown-up sons and a teen-age daughter. They turned out to be a very fractious lot, and at weekends were nearly always drunk.

One Saturday night, at about midnight, there was shouting and arguing just outside the Jones' garden. Bill Jones was just going to bed when he heard a police whistle. He rushed to the window and saw two men struggling on the ground, with a third man kicking at one of them. Bill ran down the stairs, unlocked the door and ran up the garden path. He found that one of the men on the ground was the policeman and that the other two were the Kelly brothers. Bill just waded in, and must have knocked one of them out to defend himself. He found that the other brother was handcuffed to the policeman, who seemed to be unconscious. By then the lodger appeared and helped them to get up, at which stage the policeman was coming round. Others appeared too, and they helped to get the policeman and the handcuffed brother along to the police house, where they rang Consett Police Station. The other Kelly had sneaked away, but was arrested the next day. They were both put away for a few months. Of course they lost their jobs and had to leave the house. They left without anyone noticing, although they didn't seem to have had much furniture. This happened some time before the 1914-18 War.

### **The School Row Murder**

During the War, a man lodging at Number 10 School Row might have been hanged for murder if one of the daughters of the house hadn't witnessed what happened. One Saturday night, a number of youngsters were playing in the back street when there was shouting as if two men were arguing. The Strakers lived there, and Jack Straker was drunk and was arguing with the new lodger, who hadn't been there very long. Evidently he did not drink, and had been to the pictures at Blackhall Mill. Mrs. Straker had been to the picture hall too, with a woman friend. On a Saturday night there were two "houses," one from 6 till 8 o'clock and the second house from 8.30 till about 10.30. It wasn't too dark a night, but dark enough to need the light on in the house, so the blackout blinds had to be drawn. These were black roller-blinds made of paper.

The lodger entered the house by the front door and walked through the sitting room into the kitchen, where he found Jack Straker slouched in a chair in front of the fire. The fire needed some coal pulling down from the back, and the lodger reached in front of Straker for the coal rake. Straker shouted something like "Watch where the hell you're going" and flung his arm out, knocking the coal rake out of the lodger's hand and giving him a blow in the chest. This, of course, started the argument. The lodger picked up the coal rake again, and was about to attend to the fire when Straker came at him aiming a blow. The lodger put out his hand and pushed him back. Straker stumbled and went crashing down, upsetting the chair.

At this point, Mrs. Straker came through the door shouting "Whatever in the world is going on?" She could see the lodger with the coal rake in his hand, and when she stooped down to look at her husband she found that his head was covered in blood. "You've killed him," she screamed, rushing to the back door. She shouted for her son Alec, about ten years old, who was among the group playing in the back street. "Hurry along and seek the policeman," she said. "Tell him your father's been murdered." Within a very short time the policeman arrived.

Outside the house, the youngsters had gathered at the window, which was blacked out by the paper roller-blind, worked by a cord at the side. If not pulled right down, the blind sometimes curled up a little, leaving a small gap at the bottom, and all the time that

the argument and "murder" had been going on, Jessie Straker, the elder of the two daughters, had been peeping through and giving her friends a running commentary of what was happening. And this is what she told them:

"Da is sitting in the rocker with his feet on the fender, and Tom (the lodger) seems to be asking him something. Tom is reaching down for something. Now me Da is shouting at him, and he's swung his arm out and knocked Tom across the fire-place. It was the coal rake that Tom had reached for. Now they are arguing again. Da has got up and tried to hit Tom, but Tom has jumped aside and Da has stumbled. He's still trying to hit Tom though, and Tom is pushing Da back with his hand on Da's chest. Now Da's stumbled again. He's fallen down into the fire-place. Now me Ma's come in from the front door. Tom still has the coal rake in his right hand. Now Ma's screaming at Tom. Get back! She's coming to the back door."

Jessie's friends scattered as the back door opened and Mrs. Straker appeared, screaming for Alec and telling everyone that the lodger had killed Jack with the coal rake. One of the neighbours, a woman, followed the policeman into the house and shut the door. The youngsters gathered together outside and began to discuss what had happened.

"Jessie," said one of them, "did you see him hit your father with the coal rake? I thought you said he pushed him back and he fell.

"No, he didn't hit him with the coal rake. He pushed him back with his hand on Da's chest," said Jessie.

"Then you'd better go in and tell the policeman, because if you don't he'll arrest Tom for murder and he'll hang."

"I can't," said Jessie, bursting into tears. She was about fourteen years old and was a very intelligent girl.

"Why not?" asked the other girl.

"Because I'm afraid," said Jessie.

"I'll go in with you," said the other girl, who I think was Lizzie Turner, and that was what happened. The policeman had sent for the doctor and taken statements.

The argument had started when Straker had asked the lodger if he had been to the pictures. He said he had, then Straker asked him where his wife was.

"How do I know?" asked the lodger.

"You should know! You went there with her" said Straker.

The lodger denied this and the whole thing blew up from there. Straker told him to get his things and clear out, but the lodger told him he would wait until Mrs. Straker came in. That was when Straker got up, saying that he would "see about that" and aimed a blow which resulted in him losing his own life.

The result of the court hearing was accidental death and proves that a little peeping and eavesdropping isn't always a bad thing. It gave the village enough gossip for a week or so, with information gleaned from the youngsters who had been in the back street at the time and, of course, from the lodger himself. No-one tells a secret in a close-knit colliery village but that, after a while, everybody knows it word for word. The lodger got fresh digs, but left the village shortly afterwards.

## **Bidders and Gatherers**

Behind the out-houses of the back street of School Row was what was called the "Battery," a wooded steep hill that ran two or three hundred feet down to a field, beyond which the River Derwent flowed between it and Blackhall Mill. At the top of the hill people had built pigeon crees, pig crees, goat sheds and hen crees, with wired-in pens that went so far down into the wood for the hens to scratch around in. Some crees had steps cut into the hill, where a clearance made it possible to level the ground out a bit. Such were the crees of the MacPhersons, who lived two or three doors further along from us. They were very popular in the village. David (Big Dave) was well-known by the local football fans as the village team's right back or, as some called him, "The Tank", but the whole village knew him as "The Bidder."

When there was a funeral, it was the practice of the village for the family of the deceased to appoint two men as bidders and two women as gatherers. The men would dress up on the morning of the funeral in a dark suit, usually navy blue, a black bow tie, black kid gloves and a bowler hat. A close friend of Dave was Jonathan Holden, who lived in the end house and was the other bidder. They would go round the village knocking at doors to tell people they were "bid" to attend the funeral of Mr. or Mrs. So-and-so of Such-and-such Street. After the service the two bidders would stand outside the church, one at each side of the door, to "bid" the mourners to refreshments held at the house of the family of the deceased.

The two women, for their part, would have a large washing basket and would go around the village gathering whatever the people would like to give towards the funeral. It could be a packet of tea, a pound of sugar, or some would contribute a plate-tart, or a cake or sandwiches. You could always be sure of having a hefty basket to take to the house of the chief mourners.

In the early days, everybody attending a funeral walked behind the coffin, which was carried on the shoulders of four or six men the half mile to the church. Sometimes a hearse was used, a glass coach with part of the floor built up. It was all painted white, and brass rods ran along each side of the raised part of the floor, onto which the coffin was slid from the back of the coach. Wreaths and sprays of flowers were placed inside the brass rails round the coffin, and then two glass doors were closed. If there were a lot of floral tributes, they were spread on top of the coach, which had an ornamental rail about six inches high to stop them falling off. The coachman would be wearing a black frock coat, black gloves and a high black hat, which we called a "shiner", with a black plume up the side. The horse would have suitable harness, and head-gear with a large black plume. The under-bearers would walk at each side of the hearse, the mourners following behind two by two. If the deceased was a miner killed in an accident, there would be a band leading the cortège, playing the Dead March.

There was quite a large family of the MacPhersons and one of the two daughters, Marny, was engaged to Jonathan Holden, but he was one of the many who lost their lives in the 1914-18 War. One day, a hard frosty day at the back end of the year, Mrs. MacPherson slipped on the steps of the hen-pen as she went to feed the hens. She lay unable to move for quite a while before Aggie, the other daughter, found her. She had broken her thigh and was ill for a long time. She was getting on in years; however she fully recovered, to the relief of the villagers, who knew her as "Grandma Mac."

### **A Tragic Accident**

The Holden family at the end of the street consisted of the parents and three sons. The eldest must have married before we moved into School Row, as I only knew Jonathan and Anti, the youngest one, who was a joiner at the Colliery, probably an apprentice at that time.

In the years leading up to the First World War, more cars were appearing and motor buses were becoming an important feature as public transport to Consett and Newcastle. There were no official bus stops, although the top of the bank leading down to Blackhall Mill became a regular stopping place. The bus from Newcastle to Consett would stop right opposite the Holden' garden gate. The bus from Chopwell to Newcastle would climb the bank and turn left at the top, stopping to pick up passengers for Newcastle and letting off those who wanted the Consett bus. They would have to cross the bank top, then cross the main road to where the Consett bus stopped.

Mr. Holden soon became aware of the danger and, whenever possible, spent a lot of time warning people to be careful as they crossed the roads. This went on for quite a long time, well into the war years, with more and more buses and cars on the road. One day he was a passenger on the Newcastle to Consett bus and, alighting just opposite his garden, came out around the back of the bus to cross the main road and was knocked down by a car and killed. A great tragedy for so careful a man. Two more accidents happened later, in one of which a woman was killed, and official bus stops were made, away from the bank top.

### **The Handicap Race**

Around the valley, particularly when one of the colliery villages or towns held a fair, there would be a hundred-yard handicap race, and runners from all over the valley would gather there to compete. A hundred-yard cinder track would be rolled and marked. Just outside Hamsterley Colliery, on the Newcastle side of the village, was a cinder footpath which went a considerable distance down the road, and young chaps used it when training. One young chap was Bobby Abbott, who was a regular competitor around the circuit and had actually won at one of the villages. His trainer was Jack Batey from Chopwell, who was himself a professional runner at the White City in London.

Now John Jamieson, who lived in School Row, started training, and this became the joke of the villages amongst the young chaps. As one of them said, "He cannot walk, nivvor mind run!" Rowlands Gill, three miles from Hamsterley Colliery, was holding a fair and one of the attractions was a hundred-yard handicap race in which John was taking part. On the Saturday of the race, every young chap that had a bike was on the road to the Gill, and many were walking. When his heat was due to start and he was lined up with five other new-comers to the circuit, it seemed as though John had the support of the whole track. The six runners were off at the crack of the starter's gun, with the crowd yelling John on, and he seemed to be holding his own for the first half of the race, and then it was all over.

We gathered around where John had stripped (there were no pavilions or changing rooms in those early days). Fellows were asking John how he had finished (as if they didn't know!) and this is what he said:

"I got off to a good start and was doing fine. In fact I was fleeing, really fleeing."

"What happened?" asked one of the chaps. "What stopped you winning?"

"About the last ten yards, the others flew past me," replied John. End of career! John was the type of chap who rushes in where angels fear to tread.

At the other end of the village, the west end, was Victoria Terrace. One had to walk along the path in front of the walled-in garden of the colliery manager, at the end of which was the road leading to the back of the street. When we first came to the village, Cuthbert (or Cuddy) Green's shop was at the end of the street. If you wanted anything, Cuddy would have it: ironmongery, paraffin oil, pit lamps, candles or groceries.

There were small gardens to the houses at the front. Opposite, across the Shotley Bridge road, were the officials' allotments. At the back, the first two or three houses had yards. The first house past Cuddy Green's was that of the colliery engineer, Bob Gardiner; the next was occupied by the fore over-man, then an over-man, an electrician and so on, down the line. The back street overlooked Allens Field, which is now Derwentside park, and also the river and the west end of Blackhall Mill.

At the end of the street was the Club and Institute across the road leading out onto the main road. The Club and Institute were the colliery offices at the time when the Methodist Chapel was built next to them. About a hundred yards along the road was Gibson's newsagent's shop, which was at the cross-roads. Straight on was Low Westwood, to the right down a steep hill was Milkwell Burn, and to the left was a toll-gate, the road leading up to High Westwood Colliery and village, and later High Westwood Railway Station.

### **Milkwell Burn**

Across the road was the Low Westwood Co-op, a big stone building with the tailor's and ladies' department and grocery department on top of the bank and the butcher's department extending down the steep Milkwell Burn bank. The grocery department had the usual loading bay that every Co-op had, where both horse and lorry were backed right into the store to be loaded for outdoor delivery amid the smell of horse urine and droppings, which today would have condemned the building. You never knew of anybody being affected by it, or even complaining.

Milkwell Burn was built by the Consett Iron Company for miners employed by them to work at the Whittonstall Drift, about a mile up on the north side of the river and part of Chopwell Colliery. The village consisted of two or three streets of houses built on the south side of the river, and had a population of under a hundred people. The front street was right on the bank of the river, with the Institute at the end, the Methodist Chapel next and then the houses, whose fronts faced the river. In the early days, people had to cross the river by stepping stones. There was a ford for horse-drawn traffic. Later, when schools were built across the river at Blackhall Mill, a foot-bridge was built about two hundred yards down the river, and later still a steel-rope swing-bridge was built to the delight of the youngsters, who would swing the bridge, particularly when women were crossing<sup>24</sup>. The ford was still used by horse-drawn carts and lorries. The bridge

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<sup>24</sup>Dad must have taken part in this prank, as I remember him scaring me years later by making the bridge swing as we were crossing!

was built mostly for the miners who, after crossing, had to walk about a mile through the wood to work.

The people of The Burn were very closely-knit: kick one and you kicked all, sort of "united we stand." When it was decided to put electric lights in the houses, overhead wires were run through the wood from Chopwell, but the current kept cutting off until an electrician eventually found the cause. The cross-bar on the top of the poles holding up the wires was too short, and crows (particularly in the spring) would alight on the wires, one on each, and would start what bird-fanciers call "nebbing", rubbing their beaks together. The result would be a "short", and another two dead crows. Of course everything went all right when the wires were fixed wider apart.

I nearly forgot the shop, which supplied everything needed by the customers. It was a large wooden lock-up affair owned by the Forsters, who lived just opposite in one of the miners' terraced cottages. It became a family business and, through their own efforts, grew into a firm of butchers second to none anywhere, with branches around the district. Also, in Victoria Road, Consett, they have a radio and television shop next to the butcher's, with a china and glass department upstairs. From humble beginnings, etc!

There are quite a number of yarns to be told of The Burn. One is of a young couple who hadn't been long married. She wasn't a Burn lass. When chaps were going to work on the first shift, for four o'clock in the morning, they would knock and call out as they were passing the young couple's house at about half past three. If the husband had already gone, the wife would call out from the comfort of her bed, "He's just gone." One day, on coming back from working an eight-hour shift, he found the door locked. Thinking his wife was probably along at the shop, he used his own key. The opening of the door must have woken her and she called out, "He's just gone."

Another tale was of a chap who worked the shift from ten o'clock at night till six in the morning. Walking home through the wood on a cold, hard frosty morning he could see the smoke rising from the house chimneys and could almost feel the warmth already as he crossed the swing bridge. Alas, when he reached his own home he had to let himself into a cold house, as his wife was still in bed. So he went upstairs, opened the bedroom window and started shouting, "Fire, fire!"

The doors of neighbours' houses soon opened, and people appeared in the street shouting up at him, "Where? Where?"

"In everybody's hoose but wors," he shouted back.

### **Pit Closures**

Long before the Derwent Reservoir was made, when there were thunder storms up Blanchland way the river would come down the valley like a big wall of water, flooding the banks and overflowing into some of the villages. Milkwell Burn, like many of the colliery villages around, is now no more. Consett Steel Works had eight collieries around this part of the county. Most of the villages have been demolished: Milkwell Burn, Westwood, Allendale Cottages and Derwent Cottages. Medomsley was left standing, but the pits (the Hunter, the Derwent and the Busty) were closed.

Hamsterley Colliery was a private pit started, I believe, by a Dr. Watson round about the year 1866. It was first named Colt Park, then Cronniwell and finally Hamsterley Colliery, probably from Hamsterley Hall, belonging to the Gorts, who were

directors of the Colliery<sup>25</sup>. Alas, it also has gone, being closed in the late 1960s and the village demolished. Only the school, which was bought and made into a filling station and garage, the Institute and Club, and the Methodist Chapel are left.

### **Entertainment**

As kids we played the usual games in the spring, the girls skipping and chalking out bays on the paths or in the school yard, and playing tiggy<sup>26</sup> and ball games. The boys played marbles, making a chalk ring on the road or in the school yard. Each player put a number of marbles in the ring, and each in turn had to shoot the marbles out of the ring by fore-finger and thumb. Rounders was a game played by both boys and girls which the Americans pinched and made their national game called baseball.

Long before the first World War, before 1910, missionary meetings would be held, sometimes in a hut behind the Wesleyan chapel at Blackhall Mill, and slides would be shown by paraffin light and projector. Later this was replaced by showing films with what looked like a camera, behind which were two reels, one above the other. The operator turned a handle winding the film from one reel to the other, but still with oil lighting, giving us moving pictures. Such progress! We would go there with great excitement, clutching our coppers. It was one penny for admission, later increasing to twopence.

As the years passed, great things were happening. Motor cars were appearing and buses were running passengers to Newcastle and Consett. Parkers from Chopwell began to run a bus to Newcastle. Harper and Lockey started running a bus from Consett to Newcastle which was later taken over by Richardson and Harrison of Low Westwood and later became the Venture Bus Company.

Blackhall Mill picture house was built, "The Palace." Mr. Watson, who was a director on the board of Hamsterley Colliery, began giving talks to the young men working at the Colliery just before the 1914-18 War. He then had them formed into proper military positions. They used the tin dance hall for muster and drill, having obtained carbines for the purpose, with a shooting range down by the river-side. Mr. Watson had been an officer in the army, a captain, I believe. He always wore a patch over one eye, having lost an eye in some action, probably during the Boer War. When war was declared in 1914, he took this small army he had formed into his old regiment, the West Yorkshires: one hundred of the youth of the village and the Colliery. Two of my elder brothers were in his squad, eventually being sent out against the Turks at Suvla Bay, Dardanelles, where there was a great loss of life. One of the "bloomers" of the war.

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<sup>25</sup>Years later, in the 1950s, I was asked by our head master at Medomsley Church of England School to write to (the then) Lord Gort on behalf of the school to thank him for the Christmas tree he had sent us. I believe he sent us a tree every year.

<sup>26</sup>i.e. tag, a children's chasing game.

Picture halls were built, or halls taken over and used as cinemas. One such was the band room at High Westwood. A sea captain from Whitley Bay bought it. It was a large wooden building, and he had side exit doors put in to meet safety regulations and the floor altered so that it sloped up to the back seats, which were long wooden forms fastened to the floor. It had probably been the village community hall. It had a stage and room at the front for the projector. We kids used to climb the half mile up the hill come hail, rain or snow to stand outside, some of us with a penny or two, waiting for the start of the show. At the last minute before it was due to start, the Captain would turn to us and say, "Right, how much have you got?" We pooled our coppers into his hand. "Right, in you go to the front, and be quiet."

The Bell family of Allendale Cottages ran the show. Mr. Bell was the operator and one of his teenage daughters played the piano. His other daughter sang to such films as "The Rosary", "Ave Maria" and others that had a song in the story.

### **New Technology**

Things were happening to change the life of the valley. One day, a lad who had been to Shotley Bridge on a visit to a relative came into the Tute with such a story about a new gadget that had been installed in the grocery department of the Shotley Bridge Co-op.

"The grocer puts a roll of bacon on the machine and just turns a handle and cuts the bacon into slices." So we all walked the two and a half miles to see a bacon slicer.

Buses were now running a regular service. A railway station was built at High Westwood. A station master had been shot at Lintz Green Station. A terrible disaster occurred on Medomsley Bank. A charabanc taking a choir to a music festival at Prudhoe got out of control, its brakes failing, and crashed into a tree at the bottom. Ten were killed and many injured.

People seemed to be in such a hurry, and motor cars and buses were taking possession of the road where until now we had played marbles, skipped and chalked bays with just the odd horse and cart to put up with. A great joy to see was the wood-waggon with its load of trees, drawn by four horses.

### **Country Pleasures**

Before all this change in our lives, we looked forward to the Agriculture Show in the autumn. There was dyke-laying<sup>27</sup>. A hawthorn hedge would be allowed to grow rough and then, on the day of the show, lengths would be marked off. Men would team up in twos and, having drawn lots for their sections, would strip to the waist and then, on the starter's whistle, would start the enormous task of hedge-laying.

There was also tree-felling. Trees would be marked to be cut down on the edge of Chopwell Wood, and pegs would be put in place to show where each tree must fall. Again, the men would team up in pairs. There was pigeon-shooting too, using live birds, and greyhound and whippet racing with live hares. The hand-ball competition was a great game, and the whole show was good sport (with the exception of the live pigeons and hares.)

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<sup>27</sup>Dad often referred to hedges as dykes.

Motor cycles were appearing on the roads, particularly on Sundays, when motor cycle trials were held. They would start from Newcastle to Shotley Bridge, going up Benfieldside Church Bank, along Benfieldside Road and back through Shotley Bridge.

Horse-drawn brakes full of people were running from Newcastle to Shotley Spa on a Sunday and a Wednesday afternoon. Some had two horses and some four. There would be a chap sitting up beside the driver playing a melodeon, and the passengers would bellow out "Nellie Dean", "Sweet Adeline" or some other music-hall popular song of the day. The peace and tranquillity had been disturbed. The first ten years of the 1900s were the best years of the century, but now the undisturbed peace and quiet enjoyed in that period were gone for ever.

We youngsters enjoyed the freedom of the roads. We ran for miles with our steel hoops ("gorths," we called them) and went wading (or "plodging") in the river catching tiddlers. It was water that flowed in those days, not the industrial filth that sometimes flows nowadays. We also walked the mile and a half along to Ebchester boat-house, especially when, on some weekends, there were water sports: swimming and boat-racing. There is a dam built across the river which makes the water deep enough for diving, swimming and boating. Even without the sports it was an attractive spot, particularly when a band was there. People could sit around or walk along the river bank through the trees.

At the corner of the dam is a sluice-gate which was used to add water to a brook that worked the water-wheel of the Poss Stick Mill, about two hundred yards along a lane leading to the river. After leaving the dam, the river flowed under the bridge which took traffic into Northumberland, then turned right towards the Poss Stick Mill. It was one of the most pleasant places in the whole of its course. People picnicked on the river-side. There was a ford, and stepping stones into Northumberland and to Broad Oak Farm.

There is a yarn, how true I know not, about a young man, probably a farm worker, on his way to work. Approaching the stepping stones he found a young woman standing there, gazing across the river. Assuming she wanted to cross, and going over himself, he picked her up and carried her across, taking no notice of her screaming and cries of "Put me down!" On gaining the opposite side he placed her onto her feet and, for his good turn, received a right old wallop on his left ear, and was just in time to prevent the right having the same treatment. So he picked her up again, took her back to the other side and left her there.

### **Washing Day**

Poss-sticks were used by the majority of women on a washing day, on Monday or Tuesday mornings. On a washing day, the clippy mats which covered the cement floor of the kitchen would be taken up and the huge mangle with its big wooden rollers would be brought out of its corner. The poss-tub would be brought into the middle of the room and filled with hot water from the set-pot of the kitchen range and pans that were boiling over a built-up fire. A bar of soap would be grated (no soap powders in those days) and the clothes would be put into the poss-tub. Then the poss-stick, made at Ebchester, would be produced.

This was made from one piece of well-seasoned wood, worked and shaped on the lathes and drilling machines which were worked by the big water-wheel outside. When

finished, it was like a small table leg, with a dowelled handle at the top. The bottom, being about six inches in diameter, tapered up in the shape of a bell and was cross-cut so far up the bell to form four sections which, when shaped, were like a cow's cloven hoof. With this the washer-person would beat the clothes in the tub.

The mangle would be wheeled forward until the rollers were over the poss-tub, which would catch the water when the clothes were put through the rollers. These were worked by a big iron wheel at the side, with a handle attached which sometimes needed two hands to turn it. No spin dryers or washing machines in those days!

### **A Search at the Poss Stick Mill**

Ebchester in my kiddy days always gave me the impression of being one big farm-yard, before the modern Post Office and Co-op were built. There was Simpson's the Saddlers beside the Temperance Hotel, a few cottages at the top of the Chare Bank, with Chat's shop and cottage, and the Post Office across the Shotley Bridge road, with the Chelmsford Hotel behind. These buildings, with the exception of the hotels, have mostly been demolished. Two young chaps staying at the Temperance Hotel were school teachers at Hamsterley Colliery school, to which they walked every day, there and back. They were Mr. Little and Mr. Smith.

I had been to Ebchester once or twice with friends, running our hoops, but had never been down the Chare Bank to the river until one day after school, when we were meeting for our weekly Boy Scouts' practice and the scout master, Oliver Brown, who was head electrician at the Colliery, told us a boy had been missing at Ebchester since the previous day and that we were marching there to help in the search.

We halted at the top of Chare Bank, a very steep hill with a fall-away on the left past the cottages to a brook, and on the right a high bank of trees overhanging the hill and making it look more like a pit shaft. The scout master had been in conversation with some people outside the cottages. He then joined us and gave the order to march down this forbidding-looking road which, near the bottom, suddenly opened out into a breathtaking scene, like coming out of a dark room into a beautiful, brilliantly-lit hall. Right in front of us was the river and the dam, the river flowing under a hump-backed bridge bearing the road up to Whittonstall. Over on the other side of the river were fields and woodlands.

The road we were on swung to the right and we could see sluice gates at the corner of the dam which, when opened, would let water through into a brook that ran under the road into a stream. There were some cottages beside the stream, in the V of the cross-roads. Bob English, our patrol leader, took us along the road following the stream. Two of us got through the hedge and followed the stream, which flowed past more cottages and farm buildings towards its end, where it ran through stone-built sides under a huge water wheel. A door of the building being open, we went up the steps to look in, but did not get far. A loud shout of a man's voice from the farm behind us told us to get out of there. "There's nowt in there for ye." So we scurried back down the steps and across a small bridge onto the road leading down to the river. The building we had looked inside proved to be the Poss Stick Mill, and we noticed that all the works inside - cogs, lathes, wheels, etc. - seemed to be made of red wood.

The road led down to a ford, and a little way up the river were stepping stones. It was a lovely place for picnics and walks through the woods and fields, crossing the river into Northumberland.

After searching the banks and bushes on both sides of the river, we were called in and walked back to the dam, where we formed rank and marched home. It wasn't until we got back that we were told that nothing had been found. We had looked where we had been told to look, and we decided that we would go back the next day and search where we wanted to search. However, that was the end of my part in the search. After a restless night and a high temperature, the doctor who had been called for said I had influenza and must stay in bed. It was weeks before I could start going out again and I never really go to know what happened, though I have an idea that the boy's body was found near the dam, where he had probably been playing.

It was a good while later that I was down there again. The two teachers staying at the Temperance Hotel must have met up with the Bewley family from the Chelmsford, who were apparently river people taking part in boat races around the North. Above the bar in the Chelmsford Hotel were two crossed sculls which had been won by one of the family. The result of this get-together was a day of sport on the River Derwent. There was a boat-house I hadn't noticed before. Boating contests were held: skiff rowing and other sporting events. Westwood Colliery Band entertained the people, and a good day it turned out to be. In the summer, on Saturday and Sunday evenings, there would be a band playing at Ebchester boat-house while people picnicked on the river banks or walked the lovely paths to be found there.

### **Blackhall Mill: Moving Pictures, Transport and Turns**

Things were moving fast in the early years of the Twentieth Century, with the introduction of the motor cars and bus services. Also, cinemas were being built in the cities, towns and even the villages, with the coming of the "moving pictures" - silent, of course. A picture house was built at Blackhall Mill, and quite posh it was. Chopwell had two, so we were well-served.

So, by the beginning of the 1914-18 War, we were travelling by bus to Newcastle and Consett. We also had the choice of going by train, as a railway station was built at High Westwood and, instead of having to walk three and a half miles to Lintz Green Station to get a train to Newcastle or two and a half miles to Ebchester Station to get a train to Consett, we now only need walk through a couple of fields.

The shops opposite the new picture hall at Blackhall Mill were doing their windows up, showing what they were selling. Figolini, who had an ice cream saloon at Chopwell, opened one at The Mill. Jackie Windle and his wife Frances opened a tobacco and confectionery shop for Frances to look after while Jackie ran a hair-cutting and shaving business in another part of the shop. It was a double-windowed shop with one door in the middle serving both sides. Above the door was a bell which went off with a loud clang when the shop door opened. Jackie was a talker: he never stopped, no matter what he was doing – shaving or cutting hair, short back and sides. When the shop door opened, accompanied by the clang of the bell, and he saw that the customer wasn't for his department, he would yell out "Shop, Frances" and carry on with the conversation where he had left off.

A big wooden fruit shop was built on the corner opposite The Palace, which was quite posh inside. It had tip-up plush seats, a fabulous stage with a piano and an orchestra pit, and at the back were two family boxes. A programme would begin with a small comic film, then the big picture. Later came the news films, the Pathe Gazette, which at times during the War became almost the main film with its war scenes. They then began what we called a "turn." The lights would come on, and onto the stage would come a singer or a comedian, or sometimes a musical "turn." The entertainment would last between half an hour and an hour, depending on the length of the big picture.

One of the comedians told a yarn about a smartly-dressed young lady boarding the train at Rowlands Gill; what we called the paper train, which arrived at High Westwood at 5.45 pm. She got into a compartment occupied mostly by men, with room for one. The old compartments in those days consisted of two seats facing each-other, running the full width of the coach from window to window, with very little space between, and with a parcel rack over the heads of the passengers. After entering the coach, the young lady passed between several pairs of men's knees and, on reaching the only available seat, turned round to put the attaché case she was carrying on the rack. Nowadays, a similar position would have been a sight to the young chap sitting opposite if she had been wearing a mini skirt, which is the style at the moment. On sitting down, the young lady would probably notice the young man's interest and, sitting almost knee to knee, it would be impossible to miss.

When the train reached High Westwood she stood up and turned around to get her case off the rack. The young chap opposite offered to help her, but was told not to bother as she could manage. One or two others were getting out and, as the young lady turned to follow, she gave the young chap a right good wallop across his face as she passed him. By the time the chap had pulled himself together, wondering who she was and threatening to report her, the train was on the move. A chap sitting in the corner opposite said he knew who she was, and the only other lady in the compartment said she knew too, and began to laugh. This angered the young chap.

"It's no laughing matter. Who is she?" he said.

"She's the mind-reader performing at The Palace," said the man opposite, "and she is pretty good, too!"

"He knows how good she is," said the lady, who was still laughing.

Another "turn" was a chap from Newcastle called Tom Payne, who used to play a one-string fiddle with a horn attached while he wise-cracked. But what made him so popular was that he was also champion walking racer of the North, if not of the country, and he used to give a challenge. On Saturday mornings young chaps would be lined up and they would set off across the bridge and up the bank onto the Newcastle - Shotley Bridge road, through Hamsterley and up through the fields past High Westwood Station to Cuddy Throat Lonnen<sup>28</sup>, then down Medomsley Bank and back to Blackhall Mill. Tom never set off until they were going through Hamsterley, but he always came in first. He also became involved in setting up and starting the first radio station and also the first radio shop, where we went when in Newcastle to buy the necessary parts to make a radio set: the crystal and wire for the cat's whisker, and the ear-phones. He started the radio

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<sup>28</sup>Cut-throat Lonnen. I've also heard it called "Cutty Throat Lonnen."

station, 5NO, on a lorry in Stowell Street, Newcastle, and played his one-string fiddle, and it grew from there. It certainly provided a new interest to chaps making crystal sets which, as time went on, became a one-valve set with an accumulator. The Sunday papers began printing diagrams on making a set. Then came the electric transformer and firms producing cabinet sets, which put the home-made sets on the scrap-heap. However, it was great fun while it lasted.

Further round the corner into the Front Street of Blackhall Mill was the Ship Inn. When I was a kid of about seven and just moving into School Row, the back of which looked down onto Blackhall Mill, the Ship Inn was a very old building, not as big as the present pub, and it had a hand-ball alley. This was played something like squash, except that the players hit the ball with the palm of the hand instead of a racket. Chaps used to strip down to the waist when playing.

On the corner of the street was Aynsley's shop, beyond which a huge square opened out into what we called the Show Ground. About twice a year the square would be filled with coconut shies, hoop-la stalls, roundabouts, horses and motor cars, with great big steam engines and, of course, show organs. I used to stand listening to the music of the organs, then go home and play the tunes on my mouth organ. I dare say I could still do so at ninety. It was with excitement we used to watch the great engines towing two or three waggons along to the show-ground. We would stand in the back street of School Row looking down across the river from an elevation of about fifty feet. The most exciting time was night, when people filled the ground after finishing work and everything was lit up with paraffin torches. The smell of oil, the flickering of the lamps, the music of the organs, the shouts of the stall holders and the shrieking of girls on the roundabouts was all fascinating indeed.

Sometimes the show needed the service of Bob Potts, the local blacksmith, whose forge and shop were at the bottom of Hamsterley Bank. He made our "gorths" (steel hoops) and the "hook" to run it. The blacksmith's shop was one of our main interests, watching the smith at the fire working a handle up and down, which worked the air-pump to brighten the fire. In his left hand he had long tongs holding a length of iron in the fire. When it was white-hot, he pulled it out and put it on the anvil and beat it into shape either as a horse-shoe or an angle bracket. He was very strong and very clever.

### **The Scars of War**

The years before the 1914-18 War were the most peaceful and happy of the century. People could walk the full length and breadth of the country without being molested; in fact, it never entered one's head to be afraid to walk anywhere. Even the first year of the War seemed peaceful, but then the grim realities of war arrived through the post. On the top of the brown envelope was printed "On His Majesty's Service." The brief letter inside began "We regret to inform you..." No street in the village would be missed. The youth of the village was marched away, with Captain Watson leading them to West Yorkshire. In case we forget, there is Remembrance Day on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November every year in the Albert Hall, and in the short service of prayers an ex-serviceman reads "They shall not grow old, as we who are left grow old."<sup>29</sup> Many of

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<sup>29</sup> From the poem "For the Fallen" by Laurence Binyon.

those who left the village didn't even reach manhood; they were just boys.<sup>30</sup>

It was difficult trying to meet the ones that returned at the end of the War on the same terms as before. They had gone through so much, a life-time in two or three years, and seemed to have aged far beyond their years. Tom McClusky, for instance, a young chap who would be the life of a party and join in any game. I remember an instance just before his call-up, when the village was forming a football team to play a friendly match with a team from Allendale Cottages. One of the organisers shouted across to Tom.

"Hey, Mac, can I put your name down?"

"Who are playing," asked Tom.

"Allendale Cottages" (who, by the way, could always put out a formidable team.)

"Where will I be playing?" asked Tom.

"Right back," he was told.

"Right back, eh? Make it as far back as you can, then," said Tom.

And now he was back minus a leg. Peter Clark, son of the union chairman, also returned minus a leg, and others came back with scars seen and scars unseen. They seemed to me the most difficult to converse with. You met one in the street and greeted him in the usual before-the-war style:

"Hello, Bill. Nice to see you back. How are you?"

"Oh, aye, nice to be back."

Full stop, like a couple of strangers passing by. Of course that was the odd one or two. You might also meet the likes of Tom McClusky, whose Irish blarney couldn't be stopped by a war and the loss of a leg.

"It could 'a' been worse," he would say. "I could 'ave lost both."

They got jobs at the Colliery according to their capabilities, Tom at an in-by hauling engine and Peter on the surface as a tub repair man.

However, time is a great healer, so they say, and, as things got sorted out and everything fell into place, we started meeting again at the old places and heard little bits about the War from those who had experienced it. Of course there were many questions asked, of the Dodds twins for example. Now one of the twins had no chin. From the bottom lip, the skin went straight back to the throat. The other twin seemed normal until seen from behind. There was a very prominent lump on the back of his head.

One day, a young chap asked the chinless twin, "Did you get that done in the War, Mr. Dodds?"

"Well, it happened like this," he explained. "We were both in the trench on the firing step when a shell landed just in front of us, and a lump of shrapnel hit me on the chin, slicing it off, and it landed right on the back of Harry's head."

It didn't pay to ask any of them questions about the War!

## **General Strike**

Things eventually got settled down, but were far from being the same as before the War. The peace we had enjoyed had gone. There was disturbance even in the Colliery, about

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<sup>30</sup>Three of Dad's brothers died during, or as a consequence of, the First World War. Andrew and Robert were both killed in action in 1916 and 1917, respectively. Frank died in 1920 as a result of gas poisoning. His funeral was at Hamsterley and he was buried in the churchyard.

conditions and wages. There were more union meetings, which went on until 1921, when the Miners' Union decided on a strike. This lasted a week or two, after which the men went back a copper or two per shift worse-off than before.

And so it went on: grumbles and union meetings. In one of the speeches, Albert Thomas said, "And are we to sit here and stand that?" In spite of his unfortunate choice of words, however, he was appointed to lead the next delegation to meet the "boss", which got nowhere. So it went on until 1926 when, with the support of the Transport Union and the Iron and Steel unions, a general strike was called. It lasted six months and ended through lack of support from other unions, who had decided to go back to work. The miners went back with no change having been made at all.

One incident that happened during the Strike I must mention. One of the partners of the Venture Bus Company, Mr. Richardson (who, I believe, lived in Hexham) decided to run a bus to Newcastle despite a warning not to, his drivers supporting the general call-out. He decided to drive it himself. Pickets were stationed at road ends and he was stopped at the junction of the toll-gate road and the Newcastle road running past what is now Hamsterley Mill Estate. He was told to turn back but refused, almost knocking a couple of pickets down. At that time there were no houses before coming to the lodge cottage at the top of Lintzford Bank, where a private road went through the wood to Hamsterley Hall. It was all wood, right back as far as the toll-gate road junction, and flush with the road.

The pickets reported the matter to the union headquarters, who sent about half a dozen men along carrying a cross-cut saw, a couple of axes and a coil of rope. Other users of the road were not interfered with so long as they were not carrying passengers. A tree was chosen just before the top of Lintzford Bank, where the road curves slightly. A lookout was positioned to give warning of the approach of the bus. The gang had cut the tree, which was now held by the rope. A drop of the axe was all that was needed to send the tree across the road. It was timed to perfection. The lookout gave a wave and the chap at the rope lifted his axe and waited for the signal. The bus appeared, coming at a steady speed which seemed to increase when the driver saw the gang. It seemed as though he was going to make it when, at the signal, the rope was cut and the tree crashed onto the road. The driver did not have time to brake and the bus crashed into the tree, giving the few passengers a bit of a shaking, though nobody was hurt.

### **John joins the Navy**

As the strike went into the third month young chaps, not having anything to do and getting tired of just hanging around or playing football or cricket, started taking longer walks. Half a dozen of them, including my brother John, walked the ten and a half miles to Newcastle one day. When passing the bottom of a street one of them said, "This is Rye Hill, where you join the navy."

Nobody replied. They were getting a bit tired and were looking for somewhere to sit when they saw a fish and chip shop. Harry Moffitt, who seemed the leader of the bunch (or at least had made himself leader) said, "Who has any money? Turn out your pockets and see what we can pool."

John reckoned it came to less than five bob<sup>31</sup>. They entered the restaurant and Harry told the others to find a table while he went up to the counter.

"What's on, like? What do we get to eat?" one of them asked Harry when he joined them at the table.

"I don't know," said Harry. "I told them where we came from, and that we were fed up with the strike, and that we were going to Rye Hill to join the navy but were hungry. I put the money on the counter and told the lass there were six of us, and to give us whatever that would pay for. She counted it and went through a door, and after a few minutes she came back and told me to join you lot."

"But we're not going to join the navy." They all seemed to want to speak at the same time.

"Shut up," said Harry. "We'll discuss that later. Here comes the lass with a tray, so it looks as if we're going to get something to eat."

The "something" was six plates of fish and chips and the good wishes of the kitchen. When they had finished the meal they thanked the waitress, who wished them good luck. Outside, they swarmed around Harry for an explanation.

"When we were passing the bottom of Rye Hill and one of you said that's where you join the navy, I thought about it and decided that's what I'm going to do," said Harry. "Now you fellows can please yourselves." And he walked on towards Rye Hill.

"Hold on, Harry," one of them called.

Looking back, Harry saw them bunched together in discussion, then they joined him. My brother John said, "Come on then. One goes, we all go!" And that is how the Royal Navy got five stalwart young fellows signing on to give twelve years of their lives. One of the six changed his mind at the last minute and refused to join.

### **Change and Development**

Just after the end of the War, things began moving fast. More cars and lorries and motor cycles were appearing on the roads. The Ford cars (Tin Lizzies) were available to those who could afford them: £105, a lot of money in those days. There was some yarn about a chap in Low Westwood buying one. To start the car there was a steel handle which was kept on the floor of the car when not in use. At the end of the rod attached to the handle was a small round piece on each side of the rod, which the driver connected to a socket under the bonnet of the car. He then gave it a sharp turn or two, starting the engine, and took the handle out, replacing it under the seat of the car. The story goes that this chap decided to run up to Consett and pick his wife's mother up so that they could go for a drive after tea. After showing off his new car to his mother-in-law, he took the starting handle out from under the seat.

"What's that for?" asked his mother-in-law.

"It's to start the car," he replied.

When he got home his wife asked her mother, "How do you like his new toy?"

"Ee, it's marvellous, lass," she said. "All that way from Consett to here and just with one wind."

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<sup>31</sup> Five shillings, i.e. twenty-five pence in today's money.

We missed the horse-drawn coaches that had run from Newcastle and Gateshead to Shotley Bridge. Times had changed indeed. Everything changed. One had to stop at the kerb and look both ways before crossing the road. Council estates were being built all over the north, as they would be all over the country. As the pits were closed the villages were demolished, the occupants being moved to council houses. When later, around the 1950s, salesmen from Pakistan started travelling round the villages selling draperies door-to-door and, of course, allowing credit, they often had difficulty in following customers who were moving into council houses in different parts of the district.

The Coal Board was moving workers to other parts of the country: to Yorkshire and Lancashire, for instance; so much so that houses became empty in High Westwood and Allendale Cottages. So the council took them over and used them as transit houses, as they were stout and stone-built and all had gardens. When sons and daughters got married there was only one place they could go: they moved in with their parents, which, when the babies came, caused over-crowding and a head-ache for the council. The houses were given only as temporary accommodation: they had no hot water, and to have a bath one had to heat the water on the fire and get the old tin bath out. Eventually, they were all rehoused around the district as council houses became available. All mod-con, with hot water and central heating, gardens back and front, and inside toilets and bathrooms; a big change from the tin bath in front of the kitchen fire.

### **Paddy Murphy**

Thus ends the memories of the lives and characters of a pit village, written down just as they came to mind without notes or references. There are, however, one or two other characters I should mention, like Paddy Murphy, who came down from Burnopfield seeking work as a cart-man. He most likely had a tip-off that a cart-man was needed, and made himself known to the village by his antics one day when the regular coal leader was off work and Paddy took his place. He was on his way back after delivering a load to Victoria Terrace. To leave this back street he would have to pass between it and the Workmen's Club and Institute.

He had just come out onto the main road when about half a dozen young chaps came out of the Institute. With much laughing and shouting "Hould on, Jim", they caught up the cart and climbed on, making their way to the front, still thinking it was the regular driver sitting ahead of them. Paddy never once turned round. He reached down and pulled the cotter-pin out (this holds the cart down), then he stood up to help tip the cart up, depositing the youths in the middle of the road, much to the amusement of passers-by. Paddy must have had an idea that this could happen: he had known that the check-board, which holds the contents of the cart when fitted in its place, was fastened up at the front. As the youths were sorting themselves out, Paddy had time to right the cart and continue on his leisurely way.

When a stranger comes to reside in a village, with the exception of near neighbours it can be weeks before he or she is noticed, but if they do something that becomes the talk of the whole village, then people want to know more about them. This is what was told about Paddy by folk who had relatives in Burnopfield. Apparently he had been lodging with some people for fourteen years and they had a daughter a year or

two younger, whom her parents thought he would have wed. However, evidently Paddy had other ideas, so the story goes. When the question of marriage was brought up he expressed himself thus (and I quote):

"Oi'm marrying no man's dowter to keep her for the rest of her loife," and left them.

Another incident regarding Paddy was when he was carting the slag or ballast from the fire-hole, the big boiler. After the fireman had stoked the fires he would have a heap of slag or ballast, which he would barrow onto a heap for the cart-man to lead away after filling his cart. Paddy was the cart-man on this particular day. After loading his cart he drove it across the main road to the back of School Row, where it was to be tipped. There was a wood on a steep hill about one hundred feet high leading down to a field between the wood and the river. Trees had been cut down, leaving a clearing and a sort of ledge about thirty feet down. This was where the ballast was to be tipped. On top of the hill a railway sleeper was placed, which the cart-man backed the cart onto before tipping his load, the sleeper preventing the cart from going over the top.

When the load was tipped and the cart pulled away, a lot of ballast was left on top of the sleeper and had to be shovelled away and levelled off, and the sleeper moved up, which resulted in another incident to move Paddy a bit further up the list of notable characters of the village. Thinking he might save having to shovel if he moved the railway sleeper nearer the edge of the tip, he moved it to the very edge with the result that when he backed the cart onto the sleeper he knocked it over the top, followed by the cart and the horse with Paddy still holding the reins. Fortunately the wheels sank into the soft ballast, acting as a brake, down to the shelf about thirty feet below.

Not a soul was to be seen until, hearing voices, Paddy looked up to see he had spectators – two or three women and a chap who shouted down to ask if he was all right. Getting no answer, he slid down and helped, looking over the horse's legs. Paddy tipped the load and then asked the way out, and was told to follow the ledge, which would bring him out behind North Road. He got the chap to help him lift the railway sleeper into the cart and then made his way out.

Paddy didn't drop out of the notice of the village chin-waggers if the following incident is altogether true. Apparently he had been taken off carting and was attached as labourer to a chap called Mulholland, whose job it was to attend to the clock of the pump which fed the boilers from the river. He also had to see that nothing fouled the pipe which entered the river. The "clock," as I understand, was a small steel door that fitted inside the pipe, taking the water from the river. It was on a hinge and opened as the pump drew the water, then closed to prevent the water going back into the river. This had to be examined occasionally to see that nothing clogged it, so a small brick "house" was built on the river bank, about a yard square and two or three bricks high, with a lid on the top.

When there were storms and heavy rain up at Edmundbyers, before the reservoir was built, the river would rise quickly, with the result of washing away the bank-sides, and it was decided to concrete the surrounds of the pipe-housing and also fence it in. Fencing posts and gear were delivered, and Paddy and Mulholland began the job of fencing. Three sides of fencing posts were driven in satisfactorily, with just the side next to the river to do. Paddy stood on top of the pipe-housing with the mallet while

Mulholland took the post and set it into the hole they had dug for it. In order to hold the post in position for Paddy to knock in with the mallet, Mulholland had to stand on the very edge of the river bank. What happened next is anybody's guess, but Mulholland went into the river. Fortunately it was near the bank and he was able to scramble out, with more injury to pride than body. He probably over-balanced and slipped, but various tales were told as to what happened, including one by Mulholland himself. He claimed to have been leaning on the post to keep his balance.

" I told Paddy, 'Now when I nod my head, hit it,' and he did!"

### **The Ship Inn**

Another character was Ivy. Whether Joe Ivy or not, he was just known as Ivy, and he would often sing the song "Just like the ivy on the old garden wall," especially on a Saturday night after a pint or two at the Ship Inn at Blackhall Mill. One Saturday night, after there had been thunder storms, particularly up towards the west, the river had risen enormously, washing over the banks in many places.

Just before reaching the bridge across the river from Hamsterley, on the right side of the road, there is a footpath that runs a considerable distance, parallel with the river, which at this point swings to the right then to the left, washing away the river banks and also part of the footpath where the body of poor old Ivy was found, caught by the branches of a tree, leaning over and partly in the river. As the river was in spate, it is not known whether he had walked along the path and slipped into it at this point, or had got in somehow at the bridge and been washed away to where he was found. It could easily have happened to a man the worse for drink, on leaving the Ship Inn at Blackhall Mill. (The old Ship Inn has been demolished and replaced by the present one, being much bigger.) There were some white railings from the bridge running so far along the river bank, but nothing after that to prevent anyone from walking straight in.

I remember one Saturday evening when, just before the 1914-18 War, the Annual Agricultural Show was held which, as I've already mentioned, consisted of tree felling, hedge trimming, pigeon shooting (live birds), whippet and greyhound coursing (live animals, hare or rabbit). Whatever caused the carry-on nobody seemed to know, but men were coming out of the pub fighting with others taking part in the Show. They were fighting on the road and eventually in the river, which fortunately was low at the time. It seemed as though anybody who wanted a fight could join in. A horse-drawn tub-trap from Chopwell arrived on the scene, containing a sergeant of police and two or three policemen, who soon put a stop to it all. As soon as the fighters saw the Law was taking part they broke off and made themselves scarce, the ones in the river wading across to the other side. It soon cleared up, the Police taking one or two of the fighters into the pub, but it was exciting while it lasted.

I cannot remember ever seeing the Annual Show there again. It's quite possible that it was held in different parts of the District Council, in which case only those interested would know, for across the river was Blaydon District Council whereas we were in Consett District Council. Of course hand-ball and quoits could be seen every weekend. Before the new Ship Inn was built they used to play hand-ball, probably with the same rules as present-day squash, the only difference being that new rackets are used now, whereas with hand-ball bare hands were used to hit the ball against a wall. We kids

followed the crowd from one event to another. There was also quoits. To see the contestants in shirt sleeves doubled up to the elbows throwing those heavy rings of steel was something to see. Also the young men playing hand-ball stripped to the waist, and walloping that hard ball against the wall with their bare hands was indeed something to see. We didn't even have the wireless or cinema in those days, but we enjoyed ourselves. We were more content than the youth of today often appear to be.

### **The Hen-run**

On looking back over the years at some of the little incidents that occurred in the village, which at the time one took very little notice of, sometimes later in life something jolts the memory, and one sees the humour or sadness. I remember one day playing in the back street, about noon. One of the lads had been called in to get his dinner, but he kept on with the game until his mother came to the door and shouted, "Thomas, come in at once. Your dinner's poured out!"

Another time, in another part of the village I remember hearing a loud yell, "Gearge, come in t'house and play t'organ", real Yorkshire. George was taking music lessons and his mother was evidently seeing that he did some practice.

Sunday evenings were looked forward to by the teenagers and the youth of the district. From all parts they came to walk what was known as the "Hen-run". On a Saturday night young people would go to the first house at the Palace (picture hall) and then finish the night at the Tanner Hop held in the Church Hall, what used to be the Tin Chapel, where they would meet other young people, and arrangements would be made to meet on the Hen-run the following night.

This must have started during the War years, because it was unheard of previously. People of all ages used to walk down the road on a Sunday afternoon and evening, weather permitting, until the nights got dark and cold. There may have been the odd couple previously, but never the numbers that paraded up and down from Hamsterley down the Shotley Bridge - Newcastle road to where it forked. The road to the right went through the wood to the toll-gate at the bottom of Medomsley Bank, and that to the left continued with the wood on the on the right and fields and farms on the left as far as the Lodge on top of Lintzford Bank. There was a number of lovely walks leading off from both sides of the Hamsterley to Lintzford road. On the right, or south side, were paths up through the wood across the railway and through to Cuddy-throat Lonnen. On the north side paths led down to the river. A popular place in the summer was the dam head, where the river had been dammed up and stepping stones placed across, making it possible to cross over to the other side. It also made a large bathing pool.

Getting back to the "Hen-run", this continued throughout the war years until the street lights came on again and there was more traffic on the roads. However, it was interesting walking down the road in the black-out amongst people wearing luminous brooches and buttons, some as big as an overcoat button. On being approached by somebody wearing one on each coat lapel, it looked like miniature headlights coming at you!

### **The Tute**

Sometimes, when out walking recently, something would bring to mind a happening in the village and I would dot it down in a small scrap-book which I carried in my pocket. I had intended to end here but, on finding two or three scraps of paper in my desk which I had overlooked, I decided to end this book of memories with them.

I've mentioned the Institute, or "Tute", which had been the colliery office. It was a big double-fronted house with the entrance door in the middle and a big bay window at either side. Alterations had been made to the building, and a billiard room had been built on at the back, with three billiard tables and a small table in one corner for playing dominoes. The steward and family lived upstairs.

Shortly after the 1914-18 War Bill Adams, who until then had been the local Miners' Union Secretary, moved into the Tute as steward. It was a big stride and change of life from wielding a pick and shovel on the coal face. What qualifications were needed when applying for the job at that time, goodness knows! Of course he would have to appear before a committee, who would be chosen from fellow workers of the pit. One chap, on being asked that question, said "Oh, I diven't knaw really. I dare say as long as he can pull a decent pint, keep his nose clean and his fingers out of the till, he should dee."

Bill seemed to have got settled in and was proving satisfactory at his new job. One day, during a slack period, with only about half a dozen members in the bar, he made an announcement.

"Well chaps, I wish ye to know the dowter's getting married at the end of the month, so I'm losing me dowter but gaining a son. So let's drink to their happiness. The drinks are on the house. Shut that door, Tom."

Larry Grayson, a television star<sup>32</sup>, may think he made that catch phrase, but he would be wrong. When anybody made an entrance anywhere about the Tute, there would be a yell, "Shut that door!" Larry Grayson would probably just be toddling at that time.

One Saturday morning a boy of about ten years old was standing at the front entrance. A chap going in said "Hello Sonny, were you wanting something?"

"Yes, I want me Da!" the boy answered.

"You want your Da? What's your name?" the chap asked.

"Jim Mac," the boy replied.

"All right, Jim Mac, just wait there."

The man went along the passage and through a door which, when opened, let out a loud hum of voices. After a while, he came back accompanied by a smaller man.

"Is this your Da?" he asked Jim.

"Ay", answered Jim, and then addressing his Da he said "Ma says you are to hurry home. John wants to go to Mass and it's his turn for the trousers."

## **The Race**

It is remarkable how something attracting one's attention jerks the memory back over the years. For instance, a pony drawing a flat cart with the driver sitting on the front with his

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<sup>32</sup> Larry Grayson, born in 1923, was a comedian and television presenter popular round about the 1970s and 80s.

legs dangling over the side, a rare sight these days, reminded me of little Geordie Deacon. He had some deformity with his legs and I don't remember him going to school. Knowing there was only work in the pits and that Geordie would never be able to work there, his family got him a pony and flat cart and left it to himself to use them to his advantage in any way he could. It was about the early 1920s, when things were beginning to settle down from the effects of the War.

I had purchased a James motor cycle combination, and one Saturday morning my brother John and John Scott were talking about getting the bus to Rowlands Gill to see the local school football team playing in a cup-tie match. As I had just fixed a new brake lead and sparking plug and was about to try out the brakes, I said I would run them there, intending to come straight back. However, finding a convenient place in the corner of the field, I decided to stay and see the match, which ended in a draw. John Scott, I believe, had a relation playing for the opposite team, which was why he wanted to see the match. (Incidentally, a few years later John signed on for Gateshead, who played in the Third League.)

On the way back, about half-way between Rowlands Gill and Lintzford, I was about to overtake a horse and flat when Scotty, who was riding pillion, called out "It's Geordie Deacon. Hello, Geordie. Been for a ride out?"

I didn't hear Geordie's reply, as I had to pull in behind because a car was coming towards us. After the car passed I pulled up alongside again, and was about to ask him how he was getting on when he called down to me, "What's the matter, Joe? Am I gannin' ower fast for ye? De ye want a lift?"

"No thanks, Geordie," I replied. "If I cannot make it up the Lintz Bank I'll accept your offer, if you get that far!"

He was sitting on an orange box, and had a young lad sitting on the other side of the flat with his legs dangling over the side. Geordie had a number of smaller boxes on the cart, and it looked to me as if he was going into the fruit business. He was keeping up a steady trot when we left him. We had just reached Lintzford when the engine suddenly cut out, bringing us to a stop. It didn't take long to see what was wrong. The sparking plug screw-cap had come off, allowing the lead to the engine to come adrift. It was either my own carelessness or it had been tampered with in the football field. In the saddle bag was a tin box which had come with the bike, and amongst a variety of nuts and screws was a sparking plug and screw cap, so it was soon fixed. The delay had allowed Geordie to trot past us, and he shouted out, "Get a bike, Joe! De ye want a lift?"

The two Johns had gone over the hedge to relieve themselves and were coming back as Geordie passed, and of course heard Geordie's remarks. We soon got going and saw Geordie ahead, crossing over the bridge. We caught up and overtook him on the rise of the bank, the horse climbing at a walk. On passing, Scotty called out "Get a horse, Geordie! De ye want a tow?"

We got home O.K. and it was after dinner that I heard the sad news. John had gone out, intending to go to the Tute, but got no further than the end of the street where one of his pals, Joe Dobson, lived, and he heard what had happened. Apparently Geordie Deacon had turned the school corner into the side street leading up to Stone Row, when his horse collapsed and died. I explained earlier that all streets going south were a bit of

a climb. Poor horse, and poor Geordie! When buying a horse, just as when buying a car, one should take along someone who understands about such matters.

### **A Woman's Week**

On the whole, Hamsterley Colliery was a happy village, close-knit and friendly. Of course there were comings and goings of people who would find it difficult to settle anywhere, but I can never remember hearing anyone say they were bored, even before the moving pictures put in an appearance.

At fourteen years of age the lads went into the pits after leaving school. Lasses went to serve as kitchen maids, unless they were clever enough to win a scholarship and got into college. Or they stayed at home to help their parents, which was very much needed if they had brothers working in the pit.

As there were no pit baths, bathing had to be done in front of the kitchen fire, so there had to be plenty of hot water. Pit clothes, if dry, had to be taken outside and beaten against the wall of the "little hoose" over the back street. If wet, they had to be cleaned, often washed, and dried. Pit boots also had to be cleaned. There was plenty to do keeping the house clean and tidy and preparing meals, which the mother attended to. If there were two or three workers on different shifts and the father also on shift work from ten o'clock at night until five or six in the morning, a mother who wished to see each one of the workers out and in got very little rest indeed, and did that without complaint. She also had to attend to school children, if any, going out for nine o'clock school and coming back for dinner at twelve o'clock – no school dinners in those days. It was almost a 24 hours a day job.

On a Monday or Tuesday it was washing day and, if it was a dry sunny day, the clothes were hung on a line in the back street, then taken in when dry and ironed. The fire had been built up to heat the irons. A flat-iron was heated by standing it up on the steel plate fixed on the top bar of the fire-place, with the base of the flat-iron facing the fire. A box-iron was much bigger, with a half-moon-shaped handle fixed on top of the steel lid, which opened by releasing the catch and bending the handle over to disclose a solid iron bar, about half an inch thick, shaped to fit inside the box. This was lifted out and put in the fire by placing the pointed end of the poker in one of the holes at each end of the bar. When it got red-hot it was lifted out of the fire by the same method, using the poker as before, and placed in the box-iron. Then the lid was closed, making sure the catch held it securely. Then it was ready to use, the handle being attached to the lid. No electric irons in those days!

If it was a wet day the clothes were hung on a huge clothes-horse, which was placed in front of the fire, or there would be a drying-frame<sup>33</sup>, which was pulled up to the ceiling when not in use. This consisted of six lengths of wood about six and a half feet long by two inches wide and a quarter of an inch thick, attached at each end to a crescent-moon shaped frame on which cords were attached and put over a couple of pulley wheels

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<sup>33</sup>When describing what is now often known as the "Edwardian clothes airer" in such detail, Dad would not have known that it was again becoming popular, sometimes for hanging up pans, etc. in "country kitchens."

fastened onto the ceiling just above the fire-place, so that the frame could be lowered to put the clothes on, then pulled up to dry, and later to air off after ironing.

Much of Tuesday would be spent tidying up after washing and ironing. Wednesday was when the beds were changed and the house tidied up generally. Thursday was baking day, when loaves of bread and tea-cakes and scones would be made. On a Monday or a Tuesday the Co-op man would call for the order, which would be delivered on a Thursday by the Co-op waggon. Flour was ordered by the stone and butter and bacon by the pound. There were no supermarkets in those days, just the village shop.

Friday was brasses and steel polishing day. Brass candle-sticks were very popular, standing on the mantle-piece, probably three or four on either side of a clock. A small one, then one a bit bigger, the largest one being at the end. These would be taken down and polished along with the fender, the steel tongs, the coal-rake and the poker. The tidy would be lifted out and all would be polished. Underneath the fire, the hearth would be white-washed. The kitchen concrete floor would be washed and scrubbed and everything spick and span for the weekend.

Friday and Saturday were the tradesmen's days. The butcher called, and the baker with fancy cakes on a Friday. There were the hawkers with fruit carts, and the hardware vans with oil and household necessities used for cleanliness such as Condy's fluid, a disinfectant used in those days. One woman, when asking for it, called it "Conshy's flunge!" There were door-to-door tradespeople showing their goods on the door-step. It was possible for Sunday to be the only day a family sat around the table together to eat their mid-day dinner. A miner's wife had to be as tough as the menfolk in those early days.

The Colliery itself was known as a safe pit. Of course there were accidents, but mostly minor injuries like broken limbs or back injuries. Up to the time of leaving the village in the early 1930s I can remember only two fatal accidents. If it so happened there was a fatal accident, the steam buzzer (hooter) would blow for a full minute, all operations would cease and the pit would be closed for the rest of the day.

## **In Conclusion**

We had our grumbles, but on the whole we were a happy lot. Hamsterley Colliery no longer exists. Around about the 1960s the pit closed and the village that I knew was demolished. The pit heaps were landscaped and the people rehoused by the council. Milkwell Burn was also demolished and the swing bridge taken down. What was Allen's Field, our recreation ground and often used as a short-cut by people coming to Hamsterley from The Burn, is now part of Derwentside Park<sup>34</sup>. Where there were houses now stand factories, and the village has become partly an industrial site. High Westwood was also demolished, as were Allendale Cottages, Derwent Cottages and the Co-op at Medomsley. Where there were pits and pit heaps are now green fields and council houses.

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<sup>34</sup>Dad was probably referring to the Derwent Walk Country Park, which follows the course of the old Derwent valley railway between Swalwell on Tyne and Consett.

Women no longer put a shawl around their shoulders and pop along to the corner shop or the Co-op, sometimes as much for a friendly chat as to do their shopping. They now get the car out, or travel by bus to the supermarket, where they get a trolley and push it around, loading it with their purchases, avoiding people doing exactly the same and being bumped from behind by others. After finishing their shopping they make their way to the check-out and stand in a queue behind their trolleys waiting to pay for their goods. Not a friendly "Good morning, Mrs. Brown. What can I do for you today?" It's all routine now. Such is progress.

The End