Atgofion Aberllefeni. 1980 – ’81.

I worked at Aberllefeni 1980 and ’81 as a second rockman, mostly with the late Will Davies (1918 – 1987 **?**) down the “Drift” – the only place that still had an underground “caban”. I was the only second rockman employed at that time. Most of the Lower Corris and Aberllefeni residents will remember me for my black & gold Triumph 750^{cc} motorcycle.

Only two chambers were being worked at this time, the other being “MVC“ (*Middle Voel Chamber*) where I worked for a month with the late “Jock” Lewis. Walter (“Wally” or “Wal”) Simmons was the mine manager with the late Dai “Eye” Jones as underground manager. The mountain in which these workings were conducted is properly the Foel, but this became anglecised to Voel. “Wally” had succeeded his father as manager and was one of the best men that I have ever worked for. Had the wages had been better I would have been tempted to have stayed longer, if I lived closer it would not have necessitated a 6:30 start and home at 5:30, some of the lads thought that I ought to buy a house nearer the mine, maybe I ought have. At the time I left, the “IVC“ (*Inner Voel Chamber*), near the very end of the adit, was being pumped out with a view to reworking it. The power supply to “MVC” was not good, there was a three phase supply but there appeared to be a severe voltage drop and the air pipes were prone to freezing. To have extended this system for another 200 yards was stretching the system to its limits. Apparently, the slate in “IVC” was not of A1 quality, but was fit for purpose. It was over a mile to the portal of the adit and very wet compared to the drift – the cost of extracting the slate must have been absolutely phenomenal.

At this time, “MVC” was about 100’ deep and the water could be pumped up to the adit in a single lift. The other thing that I remember about “MVC” was that it had abominable accoustics and it was quite difficult to communicate with the winch-man. The time honoured method was to shout “*stop*”, “*wind up*” or “*lower*”, each of which has a totally different sound. I suggested that whistles might have been better but could find no enthusiasm and was very aware that I was the new boy.

I was therefore particularly pleased when a young collier named Glyn, from Neath, was later recruited as our labourer, down the drift, as it saved me having to climb up to the winch chamber, land the load and “ hoof it “ the 100 yards down to the foot of the incline, it also promoted me to being “Will’s partner”. I also looked after the 100 yards of track between our bargain and the foot of the incline and managed to greatly reduce the number of derailments. Sleepers and dogs were replaced, particularly on the curves, and it seems that the mechanic did not think that this fell into his domain. Both the waggons and cars had loose, double flanged, wheels and I was not convinced that they would not have been better using fixed, single flanged, wheels but this was the way that it had always be done here.

There was a story still being told about two labourers having a crafty smoke in a caban in the 1940s, when they were spotted by one of the underground foremen – “ *Evan Jones, if the good Lord had intended you to smoke you would have been born with a chimney on your head*” in answer to which someone muttered “ *Aye, and I*

*suppose that if the good Lord intended me to pull waggons, I'd have been born with a hook sticking out of my a*** !"*

Those people that I remember from 1980 – '81 were John Lloyd – managing director, Wally Simmons – general manager, Dai "Eye" Jones* – underground manager, Ellis – clerk, Malcom Holt* – mechanic, Phil – smith/fitter, Glyn – fork lift driver, Dai "Swiss" – electrician, Les – millman / ocasional rockman, "Jock" Hefin Lewis* – rockman, Will Davies* – rockman, Iori – loco driver/winchman, Glyn "fach" – labourer. Plus another four or five people who only worked in the mill.

* Now deceased.

In the early 1970s, a new adit had been driven some 200 yards into the hillside, West of the Aberllefenni bottom adit, behind Blue Terrace, by a Wolverhampton firm. This was on a parallel vein to the main Aberllefenni – Ratgoed vein, it had been worked a little on the opposite side of the valley. Will's great criticism of this work was that the contractors didn't know what they were doing and used so much high explosive that they had shivered the rock. Dai "Eye" told me the same story but I never got to inspect the place. Apparently, no one was prepared to use black powder for tunelling into the vein and gelignite was far too strong. I never managed to find out if this work was salvageable.

In 1984 the drift was abandoned, the machinery moved, and the pumps switched off. I recovered the horizontal 6 & 4 x 8" "Evans's" Cornish steam pump that had preceeded the electric pump, at the foot of the incline, and delivered it to the Llywernog Museum. It was in working condition when it taken there, but it has not been run for 20 years and I fear that the complex valve-gear may have siezed by now.

A little after this, the electric pump was installed in the lowest adit on the opposite side of the valley by Malcom Holt. The incline at the far end of this level was then drained so as to allow the next level, about 120' down, to be inspected but the slate was of an inferior grade and the project was soon abandoned. Originally, this part of the mine had been kept dry with a vertical "Evans's" Cornish pump of about 6" & 4" x 8". This was salvaged by Trevor Jones of Newtown and has now been restored to working condition.

Also, in the mid 1980s, at the time that "IVC" was being resuscitated, and after I had left, some work was done on the other side of the valley, near the top of the hill. A new road was driven and an old adit was opened out but the vein was narrow and poor. The machinery was all second hand, rather aged and I was not at all suprised when it was closed. Dai " Eye " had died by this time, Phil was in charge on the surface with Les as the rockman.

I left soon after the revival of "IVC" had been proposed. Dai had rigged up some kind of raft to examine the chamber wall. I offered to accompany him, as I had a wetsuit, buoyancy aids, and held swimming awards but he was determined to do it his way. I believe that the final outcome was that the Mines Inspector insisted that a walkway be built to enable the regular inspection of the point to which the "Blondin" was fixed. This system also used a "Dusterloh" winch for lifting but I do not remember how traversing was achieved, a small "Pickrose" possibly. The driver's cabin was a particularly wet place as I recall and water always ran down the iron ladder into the

level, making it thoroughly unpleasant to climb. The engineering for the new walkway was done by Bob Gunn of Dolgellau.

There were numerous stories told about “Darkie” (I never knew his proper name) who had worked there for many years but had retired before I started there, he frequently called at mid-day to have his lunch with the boys, he and Will had both gone to the quarry in the 1930s. He was famed for raiding other people’s lunch boxes for chocolate so the men lightly concealed some “Ex Lax” but he found it and ate quite a quantity before embarrassing himself. “Darkie” died whilst I was still working there, Will and I cut his gravestone, but even the best of what we were able to extract was felt to be of inferior quality. Will told me that when he and “Darkie” started there, that this slate would only have been considered fit to make a toilet seat ! Most of the “Darkie” stories that I heard were hilarious but totally unfit for publication.

As you head northeast into the mountain (Y Foel) from the portal, the first chamber on the right was known as “Belsen” and most of the men I knew were glad when it was abandoned. I had to go into this place regularly as the first of the underground air receivers, about 8’ x 12’, was located there, on the edge of a flooded chamber. It was in a poor location and no-one, apart from myself, was prepared to squeeze past the zinc sheets to drain off the liquor which badly affected the air supply to the drift. The first time that I tried this bit of routine maintainance, I was drenched by several hundred gallons of creamy emulsion / condensate. When I entered the blacksmith’s shop all the men fell about laughing and knew exactly what had happened and some old hands gave me sage advice on how to drain the receiver, and then how to hit the drain cock with a spanner to get it to seat properly. There was an electric locomotive in this flooded chamber, driven in there by a careless driver, but it was deep and the walls were scaling so badly that it must have soon been buried. Salvage was not a commercial proposition.

The next working after this was an incline on the left with an old ship’s winch at its head. Will told me that this was sunk in the late 1940s when there were still a couple of hundred men employed there. This was known as the drift and apart from the inclined railway line it housed a flight of steep stone steps alongside, it led to a level about 100’ below the adit from where there was a 100 yards of level leading to a 100’ chain ladder into the next chamber east of “Twll golau” – the open chamber. Winding was done here by a “Blondin” with a 2 tonne “Dusterloh” air winch doing the lifting and a ½ tonne “Pickrose” winch to traverse the carriage. Cuts were made into the floor of the chamber using a “Dusterloh” stone saw on a prefabricated railway track – this was a fearsome beast being a 50 HP air motor driving an 8’ chainsaw fitted with carbide tipped teeth. The air comsumption was phoenomenal and used most of what could be supplied by both compressors, about 700 CFM. I was told that it cost £ 100 per day to run this machine which was, at that time, a particularly good week’s wages with bonuses.

Malcom Holt looked after the compressors, both by “Broomwade”, one a triple cylinder machine producing 450 CFM, the other a twin cylinder machine producing 300 CFM. Both were driven with multiple “Vee” belts from two electric motors. The outlet pipes were 4” diameter both of which carried air at 80^{PSI} to the large receiver alongside the road from where a 6” pipe carried it into the mine. The cooling water was warmed quickly and ran out into a galvanised iron tank between the compressor

house and the road, this warm water was used to wash off our hands at the end of the day.

Our water was pumped from the sump in our bargain about 100' up to the level with a "Holman" sludge pump and from there ran to a substancial sump at the foot of the incline from where it was pumped up into the adit by a newish electric pump. I don't think that either the drift or "MVC" ever made more than 100 gallons per hour – both were very dry places to work.

Great care had to be excercised that nothing sent to the mill was bigger than 6' x 4' x 18" and then positioned very carefully on the car – the tightest part of the adit lay about 100 metres inside the portal and large loads were prone to jamming between the walls. Similar caution had to be excercised when loading waste waggons, pieces of slate would be laid on edge, so as to protrude above the waggon body and the capacity could nearly be doubled. In metal mines, "greedy boards" are often fitted into waggons to increase their capacity.

We also had to be careful about sending large loads up the incline as the sleepers had gone a bit soggy, headroom was restricted and the rails were prone to spreading. Any derailment on the incline was an absolute nightmare as this was the only exit, I usually thought of the Hester Pit disaster when working here, and was soothed by the fact that it was not a coal mine. I don't think that there had ever been an accident on this incline, and only once did I have to pass a load that had become jammed when a car had up-ended. The official engine driver was generally useless and this never happened when anyone else ran the winch.

It was expressly forbidden to stray into old workings. I sometimes used to ask Will "*what's up there ?*" and he'd usually reply that his father or grandfather had worked there before the Great War. Will still had many of his grandfather's tools and always complained that you could not get tools of that quality. If we ever needed a wedge, Will would go to the smithy and make it himself whilst muttering a string of expletives about the capabillities of the present staff.

My first month at the quarry were spent with Hefin "Jock" Lewis in "MVC", about a mile into the hillside and about a quarter of a mile from the end where there was a rise into Ratgoed so that we could escape should the main level ever become blocked. Sawing was done by a "Dusterloh" chainsaw driven by a large three phase motor with an air motor being used to move the blade. Drilling was done with an aged "Holman" machine that I knew probably dated from the 1950s but was still highly effective. Pumping was performed entirely by a "Holman" sludge pump in a single lift of about 100' up to the level. The most remarkable piece of machinery was the crane used to lift the slabs and put them onto the car. Virtually identical with one that still survives on the surface at Ratgoed, it was constructed entirely of rivetted trellis work and powered by an aged "Holman" air winch that drove the gearing with a 4" balata belt. Whilst it looked very "Heath Robinson", it was particularly sound and solid. To get onto the floor of the bargain, at that time, we had to climb down one short ladder and four longer ones, a total of about 100 feet. "Jock" had two hobbies – drinking in Machynlleth and fishing. He rarely talked about much else. After a month, for some reason, it was decided to move me on to a different chamber.

On my first day with Will, down the drift, some time was spent clearing rubbish into a waggon before drilling a 4' pillar hole that was then largely filled with powder and rammed tight with a 1" brass bar and 7 pound sledgehammer, I felt certain that I would soon be telling the Coroner that "wreckless abandon" had taken place. As he was finishing off the job I started clearing the tools away when he lit the fuze, shouted "*fire*" and asked for two shovels. I was by now getting a bit nervous, so I quickly passed him two shovels whereupon he hands one of them back to me, telling me to use it to "*cover your face*". We then stood for a very long minute, nose to nose, around the corner, about 5' from the hole with shovels shielding our faces. The flash and bang are still vividly burned into my memory. He knew exactly what he was doing – he'd done the job for fifty odd years and had forgetten more than I'd ever know about the working of slate. Hardly a day went past when he didn't threaten to leave and he always maintained that the place would close without him. We worked very well together and ran a very productive chamber. He had spent some time in Canada as a young man and had a far greater diversity of conversation. Sharing the caban with him made it a joy to go to work and improved my Welsh no end. I was very sad to hear that he had suffered a stroke in his bargain and was brought out in a waggon, but died shortly thereafter.

Even 25 years after leaving, I still bump into people who's family originally hailed from Aberllefenni and they always ask me about with whom I worked and in which bargain. It is almost as if a " who's who" of their backgrounds are lodged deep in their memories and I have even met a few people who have almost turned me into a family member by virtue of their having worked with Will in the 1950s when there were still dozens employed.

I went back to the mine maybe a dozen times between 1985 and 1995 but was finding it increasingly upsetting to see the place ailing so badly, and it was just not the same without Will being there.

Simon Hughes. 26th July 2007.

2942 Words.

Corrected - 1st October 2008
2965 Words.