

Memories of Chislet Colliery - Albert Gee



When I came out of the Royal Air Force, I started looking around for a job in my trade as an electrician. In 1947, I saw a job advertised at a place called Chislet Colliery and I thought at first it was a collar factory! I didn't realise it was a mine. I went along to Chislet for an interview and realised what the place was when I saw the headgear. I had no previous mining experience but I thought I'd have a go. After asking a few questions, they asked me when I would like to start. I said Monday but they said their week started on a Saturday. So I found some digs and turned up at the mine on the Saturday. I had no proper boots and had to use my motorbike boots at first. The colliers took bets on me, saying I wouldn't last six months, but in the event I stayed for 5½ years!

The mine engineer was Tom Mason and we descended in the cage for 1,500ft to the shaft bottom. He showed me around the workings of the Main East District and along the "Air Road" to the South East District. To get into the latter, you had to pass down 'Jacob's Ladder'. This was a drop of 20-30ft, being only 2ft high and nearly vertical. To get down it, you had to slide on your- backside. The mine levels were only 4-6ft high, they were made just big enough to get wagons of coal out and not for our convenience ! There were two types of wagon used to bring out the coal. A "Mine Car" was about 6ft x 3ft x 4ft and a "Tub" was smaller at about 3ft x 3ft x4ft. Just before I left in 1952, they started to drive much bigger levels, up to 16ft high. I didn't know the reason for this at the time but it may have been intended for the later introduction of the electric haulage locomotives.

There were two shafts at Chislet. North Pit was where air was sucked in and this had a double decker cage, for taking mine cars to the Main East District and tubs to the Drift. The latter was a steep incline which followed a fault line, seen at surface at Sturry Hill. South Pit was where air was sucked out and this only had a single decker cage, to take tubs to the South East District. They never seemed to tighten the bolts up on this cage and it was always a case of "shake, rattle & roll"! The area around the shaft bottom was fairly large (10ft high by 20ft wide) and whitewashed, as we often spent time here waiting to go up in a cage. During this time, some wit often threw a stone onto your helmet. You'd always look up since you never knew if the roof was coming down! Once as we waited to go up, we heard a bang and a

swishing sound in the shaft which made us all run for cover. One of the cage guide wires had snapped and it fell down the shaft, coiling up at the bottom. When the cage was going up the shaft one day, there was a big bang and the cable came off the wheel, landing on the axle. The men inside were suspended 20ft from the top and they couldn't use the winding engine. They brought in a steam crane which lifted the cage 5ft at a time, when bars were jammed across the shaft, under the cage, to prevent it dropping back. The cage was jacked up like this until it got to the top.

The face (or lip as it was called by the colliers) in the South East District was only 3ft high. On one side of the face they had fluorescent lamps operated by compressed air and on the other side there were electric lamps. As an experiment, the walls has been whitewashed to reflect the light more efficiently. The colliers at the lip were a strange breed. Before the NCB was formed, colliers used to complain that there was never enough timber at the lip. After nationalisation they used to complain there was too much timber! Despite mechanisation, there was still a lot of manual labour involved in mining. The colliers used 28lb hammers at the lip (elsewhere we only used 7 or 14lb hammers). I've seen one collier lift a 28lb hammer straight up holding onto the end of the shaft - he was incredibly strong! I remember one collier called Old Jock who once opened his snap tin and got out cold kippers which he proceeded to eat with black hands. All the miners, including myself, used to chew tobacco underground. It is a disgusting habit on surface but underground it helped to form saliva and make you breath through your nose. You used to keep it in the top of your sock to keep out coal dust.



At the face, the colliers used a cutter to remove the coal. This was similar to a long chain saw about 20ins high, which was chain driven along the face. The actual cutting head was known as the "banjo" and they used to swing this into the face, undercut the coal and let it fall down onto chain conveyors. These ran the length of the face and carried the coal onto a short chain conveyor (called the "Gate Conveyor") which was positioned at 900 and took the coal to the main conveyor belt. "Pan Turners" came in on the night shift to move the chain conveyors forward and to extend the gate conveyor. The excavated space left behind was called the "Gob" and this was allowed to collapse as the work proceeded forward.

The cutter was electrically operated and, when the cutter was going in a certain direction, the access cover of the control box was right up against the face. I was once called out to repair a

broken down cutter and, sure enough, the access cover was inaccessible. The colliers had to cut a small channel out of the face to let me crawl in to open the cover. As I was lying down repairing the switchgear, the face suddenly collapsed and completely covered me. The colliers quickly removed the coal and pulled me out by the legs. I was so shaken that I had to sit down and have a chew of tobacco before carrying on. The banjo was usually supported by a stout piece of wire and one day the wire broke, causing the banjo to swing out, cutting a chap's leg off at the thigh. He lived but it showed just how dangerous the job was.

Accidents used to happen all the time but sometimes it was the miner's own fault. An electrician called Bobby once burnt his hand quite badly taking a cable out because he tried doing it while it was still live. I was caught my hand trying to save a salvaged ammeter when it fell off the trolley. I was taken to Canterbury Hospital and the nurse said I was the fourth miner in that day. She said that the red glow in a coal fire was the blood of a miner. I don't envy a miner anything he gets as its a hard and dangerous job.

In some places, coal was carried away from the face on conveyor belts. It was illegal to ride on these but the temptation was too great as it saved walking. I once had a narrow escape while riding the belt. I was with the timberman Dave Lech who used to bring timber, chocks, rings, etc to the lip (he also used to train the lads in boxing). He asked me to take out a timber wagon, which was a flat wagon with a piece of galvanised wire and a stick for pulling it along. You used to sit on the conveyor belt and let the thing slip through your hands until enough coal had backed up in front to hold it. You'd then lay back on the belt and could pull the trolley out. At one point there was an inclined drift where you had to stand up as the belt was coming off the rollers. Suddenly my foot went through a tear in the belt and I couldn't get it out. I shouted to Davey to stop the belt using the bell wires. These were two low voltage wires that ran alongside the track and, by bridging them with a hacksaw blade, you could operate the bell and warn the driver of the winding engine. It wouldn't stop at first - I think a bit of stuff had come down from the roof and broken the wires. He ran along the drift and eventually managed to stop the belt. I had to unlace my boot to get my foot out and then pull out the boot.

Along the Main East was the "journey" which was a cable-operated haulage system for pulling out tubs of coal. Manholes were cut into the sides at regular intervals to shelter in while the journey passed by. On the rings there was a thing like two half moons with a line through it. Although it was also illegal, we used to ride on the journey. Attached to the back of the last tub was the "devil" - a long piece of iron with two points like a viper's tongue that trailed along the ground. If the cable broke, the devil would stick into the ground and cause the last tub to ride up and stop the whole thing running backwards. I've seen as many as six people riding the journey. One would jump onto the devil and hold onto the tub, another behind him hanging onto the person in front and so on.

The system of bells we had for haulage were as follows :-

1 = STOP

2 = GO or PULL IN

3 = PULL OUT

4 = PULL IN SLOWLY (2 RINGS WHEN MOVING)
5 = FULL OUT SLOWLY (3 RINGS WHEN MOVING)
6 & 7 = I forget!
8 = MANRIDING.

One of the best sounds you could hear at the end of a shift was 8 and 3 bells. This was the only time when you could legally ride out and you sat in empty coal tubs.

Chislet was always a wet mine and it seemed that they could never get rid of the water fast enough. It was pumped from inbye to the shaft bottom along a water main and thence up to a nearby marsh. A journey once came off the road and smashed into the water main. It caused a lot of flooding but was soon repaired. When the pumps were switched on, however, there was only a trickle of water coming out at the other end. The repaired section was opened up again and it was found that someone had jammed a pit prop in the pipe to slow the original flooding! Once there was a fall on the South East Main and we had to come out of the Air Road, which was looked after by Ted Townley. At one point there was neck deep water for 10-20ft where you had to hang onto the rings. Once we had to cross some deep water in an abandoned working and made a raft out of spare timber.

All pumps and small engines inbye were driven by compressed air, as was a shaker conveyor at one place. There were two types of drill in use. The standard type with a pick head was driven by compressed air and another type like an auger was electrically driven. All the main haulage engines were electrically driven and these were intrinsically safe. Power passed through a wound rotor, stator delta, rotor star to slip rings and thence to a resistance which controlled the speed of winding via a control handle. The engine driver stood on a platform with the tall control handle coming out of the floor and a footbrake beside him. The handle was connected via a system of rods and linkages to three electrodes dipped in a large tank of water. The lower the electrodes went into the water, the faster the speed of the engine. A clutch controlled the direction of winding. The haulage cable passed round a system of pulleys and was almost continuous, one end (the "Main") pulling the journey from the front and the other end (the "Tail") attached to the rear. This prevented the journey "running away" when it was on a slope. The only additional safety measure for manriding was to connect a rope between the front and rear connections of the cable to the journey.

There were stables down the pit for the horses, which were not used for haulage (this was done with engines) but for salvaging. This entailed recovering equipment that had been damaged, etc and much of my time was spent on this. Once we had to salvage some electrical equipment from an engine room, on the inbye side of which there were steps leading up. Me and my mate went in from the outbye side and dismantled the switchgear, which had been damaged by pressure from above on the rings. After we had removed it, there was a sudden bang and down came the roof. My mate rushed outbye and I went inbye down the steps. Of course the steps weren't there since the sides and roof had come in and cracked them away. I fell and broke my ankle!

I used to spend a lot of time on '79 Turn' in the South East District, where there was a telephone in case I was needed. There was an engine driver called Frank and we used to play a lot of cards and draughts here. Our draughts board had been made out of a flat piece of wood with the white squares chalked in and we used nuts and washers as the draughts. On the Turn there was a little wall and on this we placed apple cores, orange & banana peel, crusts, titbits, etc. As the horses came out from inbye they went straight to this wall and ate the food. We had an office and a telephone exchange underground and on the Main East we had an Elsan toilet area, a great big tank with three seats. Often, however, the colliers had to relieve themselves wherever they were but they always made sure it was downwind of where they were working!

Once on a night shift, a chap called Jim Barnes had forgotten to bring down his shot charger and asked me if I could let it off with my mega. I said it couldn't be done as it was intrinsically safe and the spark wasn't hot enough. He said it had been done before so I connected it. I turned the handle, he turned the handle someone else turned the handle but it didn't work! That night they didn't have any firing.

I used to take in a flask of tea, aluminium hot water bottle full of cold water and a snap tin with a jam sandwich and half a dozen pieces of toilet paper. It is illegal to sleep underground but I once sat down having my snap and afterwards turned off my lamp. I sat there with my eyes closed when all of a sudden I felt something move on my chest. I put my hand up and caught hold of a little micky (mouse) where the crumbs had stuck to my chest hairs. I never saw any rats underground but there were plenty of mice, they even ran along the wires. Up on the passbye we once had two birds flying around for a couple of days. They must have been trapped in one of the tubs coming down the shaft.

I was once walking inbye to an abandoned face on the South East when my lamp went. The only way to get out was to crawl on my hands and knees, with my hands following the rails, about 500yds to the end of the passbye, where someone took me out. Sometimes in the distance you could see a light swaying as someone came towards you. You got to know who it was from the way it swayed backwards and forwards.

There were quite a few characters in the mine. Jim Barnes was the deputy who gave the orders on the night shift and a chap called Paddy and his mate were repairers, putting in rings, etc. Paddy had previously spent time in a rest home to "dry out" after a drink problem, One night Jim was telling people what to do and got mad, flinging down his helmet and kicking it. Paddy immediately quipped "Jim if you don't quieten down you'll be going in where I just came out of". Tad Townley was another old miner with whiskers on his face. One day the telephone went and we told Ted to answer it. It had two arms for your ears with the mouthpiece in the centre. He started arguing with the person on the other end and suddenly shouted "If you don't shut up I'll push this banana down your throat", He then proceeded to squash the banana into the mouthpiece!

Of all the things that happened to me when I was down the pit, the one thing that sticks in my mind most of all was coming out of the pit doors after a night shift when it had been snowing. After the black and dirty conditions underground, the whiteness looked really beautiful.