

In 2002 brothers Jimmy and Billy Laverick who had both worked at Pelton Fell Colliery were interviewed by Don Whitfield on their experiences down the mine. Billy who was suffering from cancer at the time died shortly after these interviews were given.

Jimmy started work at Pelton Fell In 1949 and worked there till the pit closed in 1965 then he was transferred to Westhoe Colliery.

I did my training for underground at The Morrison Busty Training Centre; we stayed there all the week and came home at weekends. After I did my training I came to Pelton Fell and started work down the pit and I went with a chap called Bobby Young and Bobby showed me how to go on down the pit, that was datal work, setting sets of tubs up and sending them in-bye from the shaft then bringing them out full.

We then had to stow them and wait for the on-setter to come up to our level and draw them. That was my job until I went onto the training face and did about five months training which qualified me to work on the coalfaces. First of all I went filling for a few weeks then there was a job came up when they asked for volunteers to go on the Waffler, it was a cutting machine that had flights on, the coal was cut and fired then the machine went up and ploughed the coal onto the belt. When this was done we had to do what was called flit the machine back to the tail end of the free again, the belts were moved over and we started again, this went on constantly. The coal seam was 2ft 3ins to 2ft 6ins high .The belt ran from the tail-end to the Mothergate and the coal from the belt was loaded into tubs then sent to bank (surface). The conditions were sometimes wet sometimes dry, sometimes we had a fault and that had to be drilled and fired so the machine could get through.

We used to work two shifts, first shift was 6 o'clock in the morning till 2 o'clock then another shift followed us from 2-10 the following week we reversed shifts. We worked continuously, when we reached the end of the coalface the conveyor belts were moved over, the lace was cut and fired and we started again. At Pelton Fell we advanced deeper into the mine but when I went to work at Westhoe they worked what was known as retreating faces, they started from about a thousand yards into the mine then worked their way back out'.

'What were the conditions like at Pelton Fell?'

'They were low, the Hutton Seam was about 4ft high and the men here used to hew the coal, this was the only seam of this height, deeper seams were a lot lower and the coal was machined or hand-filled onto belts. The coal was then transported to the main wagon-way where it was transferred onto another belt then sent to the loader where it was filled into tubs, which

were made into sets of about 40 tubs and these were pulled out-by by the hauler, they were then put into the cage, the cage had two decks and each deck held two tubs, the cage then rose to the surface and another cage descended bringing down four empty tubs, these were pushed out of the cage into an area known as the dish where young lads with ponies would pull them out and make up sets to go back in-bye'.

'How far did you walk to your place of work underground?'

'It depended on which district you worked in but I would say the furthest distance was about a half hours walk and we would meet at the deputies kist where we would wait for the deputy, he would tell us our place of work and would test our safety lamps, he had started work two hours before us and done an examination of the district'

'Did you enjoy your work there?'

'I enjoyed the comradeship and working with the lads but it was heavy work and hard work, we were sweating all the time, sometimes it was wet and we were soaked, we were allowed half an hours riding time to get out of the pit and get our clothes dried then into the baths'.

'Would you say it was a safe colliery?'

'It was pretty safe; there were some deaths and plenty of injuries?'

'You didn't think it was a death trap going down?'

'If you had that fear you wouldn't go down. There was only once when I had an experience, I was working with a lad called Jackie Wild, we were working on this face when the stone came on, there was a fell in the gove, the stone came down with one big bang, a terrific noise, dust and everything and we tried to get off the face, Jackie's trousers came down as we tried to get off, we did get off but was an experience and did put the wind up me'

'Would you say the colliery was exhausted?'

'No I don't think the colliery was exhausted, I don't think it was paying its way but they were getting best coal and this was being mixed with coal from Westhoe Colliery and this helped Westhoe, but there were some bad seams.'

'Did people travel far to Pelton Fell?'

'Some people were transferred to the pit, some came from South Pelaw, some from Usher Moor, a bus was laid on to bring them in, about thirty or forty people were transferred here.'

'When you started in 1949 were there mainly local people employed at the pit?' 'Yes they were all from Pelton Fell, Newfield and Grange Villa and everybody knew each other.'

'Did conditions improve from 1949 until the pit closed?'

'Mine work was always dangerous but if you follow the rules it not too bad, sometimes when you are on piece- work you take risks. When you are on filling you are lying on your shoulder all shift filling onto a belt. On machine faces we sometimes wore protective clothing, oilskins, we would fasten the cuffs with shot- wire but when you are lying in water for about five and a half hours it still gets in.' **'Looking back is it an experience you wouldn't have missed?'**

'I didn't mind it when I got used to it as there was a lot of companionship, I didn't enjoy it, it was a job, I couldn't get a job when I came out of the Air Force'

'Do you think conditions at Pelton Fell were comparable with other pits?'

They were around the area because they were all low seams around the area. When I went to work at Westhoe the lowest seam was about 6ft'.

'When you worked in low seams was it easy to adapt to working in heights of about 2ft?'

'You had to learn to fill from the opposite to your natural side, right handed-left handed, but you became adapted.'

'Was there a lot of absenteeism?'

'Yes there was, mind there were some who were off every Monday.'

"In 1949 were there many people who had never worked in mines applying for work in the pits?'

'No they were nearly all local lads. I think it was only local lads that went down the pit, Pelaw and Chester Moor; they all seemed to be local lads, till later on when pits closed down men were transferred from other areas.'

'Looking back would you do it all again?'

'If I was in the same position again where I couldn't get a job anywhere else, I had several interviews but had no replies and with no money I had to do something'

'Did unions help in mining?'

'Yes, there were times you were on strike three or four days but it was necessary. I have always been a member of a union and am a big believer of unions'. Billy Laverick went through all stages of mining, Datal work, timber leading until he ended up as a lace worker for a few years, then he was elevated to shot-firing and finished his days at Pelton Fell Colliery as a deputy overman in charge of a set of men in a certain district. Mr Laverick has kindly agreed to tell of his working life and conditions at Pelton Fell Colliery.

"I started work at Pelton Fell Colliery in 1950 as a datal lad, I went onto the screens, then did three weeks training at the Morrison Busty and then went underground as a timber-leader and other datal jobs, was face trained then started filling and other kinds of piece-work that were there. I then went on to stone-work permanently, then got my shot-firers and deputies tickets and started shot firing at the colliery and did deputy work at the colliery and until the colliery closed in 1965 I did all kinds of work at the pit, and I think one of the things that all pitmen will tell you is, that the comradeship you get with working with people down the pit serves you in good stead all your working and social life. You depend on people working underground and on the surface so whether you liked or disliked them you had to get on with them.'

'Over the years, you started in 1950; did the conditions improve through nationalisation?'

'My father and other old-time miners I have talked to over the years said that private enterprise got all of the best coal out, the Busty coal, where men could hand hew, and left all the thin seams for us, but when we went down to the coast pits they had 6ft seams down there, I had never worked in a 6ft seam. At Pelton we had a machine called a Waffler and that was getting coals at 7/6d a ton, that was from face to bank. They were hand chosen these people who worked on the Waffler, picked by the management for their workmanship and their attendance records. These people produced coal under very good conditions, but they made the conditions good themselves by the fact that the face advanced so rapidly and I think that's why they introduced power-loading faces, because it did away with the cycle. Previously different operations were carried out in 8hr shifts, stonework, cutting, shot firing and filling and only on the filling shift was coal being produced. When power-loading came they put machines in that could produce coal 24hrs a day and I think that people realised that the fester a face moved forward the better the conditions were for both the workmen and for the pit'.

'Did the men adapt to this sort of mining?'

'Yes, you got men who had worked coal cutters for years and they invariably became

the machine operator on a machine face, men who had been fillers often became timberers because they were very quick and could keep up with the machine putting the timber in and they could keep the timber in line so that when the belts were rolled out the next time there were no alterations to do, they were all very skilled men at their own particular jobs and there was a good happy atmosphere when the colliery was going well When faces and conditions went bad that's when men weren't as happy, because the boss

wasn't getting any coal out, men worked harder under bad conditions and got less money than men working under good conditions who were producing coal and getting all the money'

'So the geographical conditions helped everything out?'

'When you got faults and water and things like that they were all hazards but to go on a face was a new fight every day, there were new conditions every day, the coal would start to rise or the coal would be dipping, men had to alter machines to counteract that. In the high seams at collieries like Westhoe where the coal was 7ft thick they could leave a little bit coal at the bottom of the seam, but if you did that at Pelton Fell it made everybody else's work so hard because it did away with some of the overall working height.'

'When you moved to a supervisory position was it an easy transition?'

'I moved over all right because I had worked with the same men over the years. You got some fellows who didn't like the deputy or overman because somebody at all levels in every walk of life has to be in charge and some men just resist authority but you got other men who knew that authority had to be there and they just got on with it'.

'Did they respect somebody who had worked and come through the ranks and knew what they were talking about?'

'That was not the only reason, I don't think any deputy at Pelton Fell would ask anybody to do anything they couldn't do themselves. You got some deputies that were very, very strict and some that had a little bit leeway.'

'Did men know how they were on with each individual deputy?'

'It doesn't matter whether it's a deputy in the pit, a foreman in a factory or somebody in a shop if people get to know they can get away with a little bit they will try to get away with a little bit'.

'You tried to be fair and didn't interfere with the quality of the work?'

'Yes, you couldn't interfere with the quality of the work. Men used to work hard for themselves'.

'You have been both a workman and a supervisor, which part of the work did you like best?'

'I liked both. When I was shot firing at Pelton Fell I was a member of the N.U.M. but when I went to Marley Hill I didn't have any option, I had to join the deputies union because management there said shot firers and deputies must be in the deputies union. That's when it started to become a little bit more awkward, I was at a different colliery with a different set of men and when I instructed men to do a job a certain way they would say well we have always done it this way, so you had to look at both options and see which way was the best and either persuade the men your way was best or they persuaded you and whichever was best was the way the job was done.'

But we always had to work within the management's rules. The colliery manager set his rules and whether you or the men liked it or not that was the way it had to be'.

'Looking back would you have gone into mining?'

'I am suffering from cancer of the lung. If I had gone into a shoe shop or a grocery shop would this have still happened? I just don't know. But I can honestly say I don't think I would have liked to have missed the years I spent down the pit. It was hard work; it was dirty work, and shift work, when you had to go down the pit at 5o'clock on a Friday night and all the boy's are shouting 'We're finished for the week' it knocked your end in, and when you go to the pit at 1 lo'clock on a Sunday night when everybody's' still out enjoying themselves, but it was part of the job and you just had to get on with it. But it was an experience I would not have liked to be without

Pelton Fell Banner

In Comity Durham each colliery had its own union lodge banner and on Durham Big Meeting Day the miners and their families would proudly parade through the streets of Durham following their own colliery band and banner. At the Big Meeting following the closure of Pelton Fell Colliery, the miners, in anger and frustration at the closure of their pit, flung their banner into the River Wear at Durham. The banner was recovered and Bill Laverick recalled his attempts to have it restored.

'A young councillor with the same name as me was on the phone the other day telling me that they had renovated South Pelaw Banner and they are going to have a dedication and he was asking me if there were any mining officials or union officials from Pelaw still alive and I gave him one name for him to try and trace ready for the unfurling. He said they had made enquiries to try and do the same with Pelton Fell Banner but they found that the banner was tom to pieces and had been sunk in the River Wear at Durham'

'A lot of years ago there was a certain amount of money left in the union funds when the colliery closed and I wanted to renovate the banner and put it into the club so there was something there to remember our heritage, to remember our forefathers and remember all the hard work we have done. Joe Glassey was a very persuasive man and he was treasurer of the union at the time, he said he didn't think that we should spend our money on something that was going to remind us of the horrible, nasty conditions where we had to lie on the Waffler faces or Plough faces with the water running down your neck, he didn't think we should have any positive reminder of that. I still believe the other way, I think it would have been lovely to

have had Pelton Fell Banner in our club now for people to say that's where we worked". There was a vote taken and I was the one saying yes we should spend the money on it and Joe was saying I don't want any reminder of the hardships that I've had, Joe was the most persuasive of the two of us so he got his way'.