



# THE BEVIN BOYS ASSOCIATION

FOUNDED 1989

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## NEWSLETTER FOR AUTUMN 2021.

### Chairman's Message.

Welcome to your Autumn Newsletter.

Nine of us including three Bevin Boys met for the much delayed AGM and National Reunion in Bedford. We enjoyed meeting up but sadly decided that with dwindling numbers and Health and Safety concerns, this would be the final National reunion.

The good news is that we intend to keep the area reunions going whilst we can and I am determined to keep the newsletters, website and Remembrance books going. We still have a full management committee and next year plan a virtual AGM on Zoom. Please ask friends and family if you are unsure but hopefully lots of you will be able to join us and see everyone even if just on a computer screen. Further details in the next newsletter.

Would you please be sure to advise us of any changes of address. Could you ask wives, partners, sons and daughters to inform us, when you sadly pass please?

I wish you all a Happy, Prosperous and Healthy 2022,

**Anne. (Lane)**

### MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY.

I hope for you life is beginning to get back to some form of normality as the effects of the pandemic begin to recede, and we can enjoy the red and gold colours of the trees that Autumn brings. We continue to have Bevin Boys contact us who have only just discovered the Association, despite our many efforts via radio, TV, newspaper and magazine articles since 1989 to publish our existence. Ray Cowdall from Madeley North Staffs is one such Bevin Boy.

Does the name Gerald Smithson ring a bell?, he was selected for the MCC to play for England in the West Indies in 1948. To travel he had to apply for early release from his service at Askern colliery, his case was discussed in Parliament, before he was given permission. Later he became the cricket professional at Abingdon school; and played two tests for England in 1947 - 48. He died suddenly in Abingdon 6<sup>th</sup> September 1970 aged 43. Does anyone have any memories of that time?

Carole Johnson has opened a coal mining museum at Woodend Road, Reedley Hallows, Burnley, BB12 9DR on land which she and her husband bought. It is open April-October except Mondays. Phone 01282 788290 or 0780927 4910 or [www.woodendminingmuseum.org.uk](http://www.woodendminingmuseum.org.uk) Refreshments from a light bite to a full meal are provided. Note there is a small charge for admission.

Finally there was a new memorial unveiled on 3rd September 2021 by the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester, in the arboretum at Alrewas Staffs. A "Nations tribute for all men, women and children who worked in the coal mining industry and who served or died in the service of their country." A Trip to see this new addition could be a plan for the Spring. Until then make the most of the good things the season can bring. Remember I am always here to listen or help in whatever way I can.

With Every good wish,

## **Treasurer's Report.**

Over the past couple of years, we have planned a small deficit and we are not fundraising now as we have sufficient funds to carry on the work of the Association for the foreseeable future.

We did not have an AGM last year as you know, because of the Covid situation and as this is our major expense, this means the deficit was minimal.

Our falling membership means that our income has declined, but set against this is a fall in expenditure as we do not spend as much on printing, stationery and postage.

We were saddened to hear of the sudden death of our accountant Tony Broster, his widow kindly put us in touch with his colleague who has audited our accounts for the year ending July 31<sup>st</sup> 2021.

Overall the picture is one of sufficient funds to meet our needs.

Barbara McElroy.

## **Archivist's Report.**

Since September 2020 we have had two further lockdowns and my workload has corresponded with those two events very closely. I haven't been out during that time giving Bevin Boy talks (indeed not since March 2020) but have given a few talks through Zoom, which is very odd as you get hardly any feedback.

However, the other side of the coin is that if people aren't going out then they have more time on their hands! I know that others on the Committee have had numerous emails and calls and that is the case with me also. I still haven't produced the promised leaflet but there are many times that I wished I had, as I seem to say for the umpteenth time that most records were destroyed etc. etc. the upside is that in many cases, although we couldn't help with actual details about their relatives, we were able to give callers quite a lot of information about the Bevin Boys. As life has opened up the calls have decreased but hopefully, we will have fed into a few family histories.

I have a large envelope of archives packed up for the Imperial War Museum, but they have been closed for much of the time since March last year and apparently have a backlog of items to deal with, so the curator Tony Richards has asked me to hold on to all the archives I am currently holding and he will let me know when to send them. I have gone through all the many items and made an inventory so I will need to type this up and put it on the website. The current inventory has proved useful to some during lockdown.

We have had one or two requests for images for exhibitions but the museums hold these apart from a few 'snaps' donated.

Generally there is a lack of understanding that photography was banned down the mines. I am always happy to chat about your experiences in the mines and thank you to those who write to me. These memories find their way to the archives.

We continue to spread the story of the Bevin Boys.

Barbara McElroy

## Sales.

**Please note** we have the Lapel badge back in stock. For all Sales, please apply to Mrs A. Lane, Snipelands, Bourton Combe, Flax Bourton, Bristol. BS48 3QL. Tel: 01275 463703. All cheques to be made payable to **THE BEVIN BOYS ASSOCIATION**. **Please add £1 for the lighter items & £2 for the books, as they are expensive to post.**

Blazer Badge	@ £10.00	Digging Up the Past	@ £10.00
Miners Lamp Keyring	@ £6.00	Bevin Boy Lapel Badge	@ £5.00p

Bevin Boy Banner Postcard, 2 Black & White postcards, 2 colour & 2 black & white prints of A4 size from A Bevin Boy Remembers **ALL POSTCARDS & A4 PRINTS @ £0.20 each.**

## Bevin Boys Association Website.

Just to remind you all that we have an **Official** Bevin Boys Association website. This contains information about the Association, pictures of the Bevin Boy's plot at Alrewas, the contact details for all the Committee, and also the Newsletters, Please go to:-

<http://www.bevinboysassociation.co.uk> or to email the committee [bevinboys1943@gmail.com](mailto:bevinboys1943@gmail.com)

Thank you to everyone who has submitted items for the Newsletter.

If you prefer to have access to the Newsletter online or email or have any input or news items for publication please contact me on Tel: 01275 463703 or e-mail: [alananne2749@gmail.com](mailto:alananne2749@gmail.com)

## Apprentice strike against the Bevin Ballot Scheme 1944

One of the consequences of the imposition of the Bevin Ballot Scheme was an upsurge in the organisation of apprentices in engineering. One reaction to the call-up was that in late December 1943 the Tyne Apprentices Guild was formed. It rapidly extended its influence to an estimated at 15,000 members and links were soon formed with other apprentices in Glasgow, Huddersfield, Barry Dock, Merseyside and Sunderland. The dangers that 'Bevin Boys' would confront working in the mines were well known. At this time the coal owners were extracting every last bit of profit from a government desperate to get this energy source to help the war effort. The trades union leaders either complied with the scheme or just called for ex-miners to be rounded up and sent back to the coal face.

The Apprentice Guild supported the fight against Fascism, but felt that workers' rights and conditions didn't need to be eroded to do this. In fact, better conditions would mean more output! Therefore they put forward demands for nationalisation of the mines under workers control. They then set about spreading their message and gathering support. They talked to miners, who didn't want to work with inexperienced men anyway, and other workers. When one of the apprentices, Jones Robert Lowerby, was called to the pits they gave notice of strike action. A delegation lobbied Ernest Bevin (who refused to meet them) and other MPs. On the 7<sup>th</sup> March a final letter of strike notice was sent to Bevin by the Guild. It was reported in Parliament that Bevin was ready for a "show-down"! On the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1944 6,000 apprentices came out on strike in Tyneside, and on Clydeside 7,000 followed suit. Others in Sunderland and Huddersfield struck as well. The strikes lasted for three weeks, but did not achieve their goal. The repercussions, though, were extensive, and this is why we know the details of this strike.

The Tyne Apprentices had asked members of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) for support, and in April four RCP members were arrested, being charged with acts in furtherance of a strike. The lead-up to this had been a vicious campaign by the press. And while they were in prison Ernest Bevin reinforced his already substantial powers to stop strikes by introducing a new act, supported by the TUC. But the response by rank and file workers in solidarity with the gaoled RCP members was huge, and led to them being released on appeal, and for both the 1927 Act and Bevin's new legislation, being withdrawn.

Notes from:

Bill Hunter, *Lifelong Apprenticeship*

Sam Bornstein/Al Richardson, *War and the International*

Richard Croucher, *Engineers at War*

## **A Phil Robinson Account**

Following on from my last article and having read Ian Halliwell's experiences at Old Boston Colliery in Haydock I must tell you of my further recollections.

Old Boston was situated less than a mile from Wood Colliery where I served my last twelve months. I was billeted in the Miner's Hostel in Penny Lane, Haydock. We had no Pit Head Baths at Wood, so quite a few miners bathed at Old Boston.

As I have previously stated I remained in the industry, becoming a qualified Mine Surveyor and in my early years did some underground survey work at Old Boston. We were mining some top quality domestic coal and working to depths of some 1400 feet. The shafts were sunk to a depth of some 1250 feet. After a very serious underground fire Old Boston closed in about 1951.

I wonder if Ian knew of a fellow Bevin Boy called Billy Lowe? I met him in my retirement years in North Wales where he was a neighbour of ours. He had worked at Old Boston too! Old Boston was a happy pit, as collieries go, full of characters some of whom I still remember.

January 2021.

## **Leslie William Bills Bevin Boy 1926 – 2021**

Leslie William Bills was born in Romford Essex in August 1926, his father William Joseph Bills a WW1 veteran of Flanders, serving with the Royal Engineer as a signaller between 1916 and 1918, seeing action at Flanders and Villers Bretonneux. Before the war his father had been a field engineer with the GPO in Ilford, then after WW1 became a Senior Lecturer at the London Post Office School. Leslie's mother Rose Jones worked in a printing firm, dating the famous William Leefe Robinson holder of the Victoria Cross, Robinson famously shot down the L31 Super Zeppelin over Cuffley on 3rd September 1916.

Leslie grew up in a small house built by his father & father-in-law in Chadwell Heath on a plot of land they brought, the family lived in this house during and after WW2, Leslie attended local schools leaving school at age 14. Leslie attended the cubs and scouts locally, and on one occasion was tasked with testing the Home Guards defences pretending to be the Germans, Leslie said they attacked the Police Station with Flour Bombs, outflanking the Home Guard and were arrested by the Police, and then released after a good talking too, much to the amusement of Leslie as he tells this tale. Aged 14 Leslie worked in London, his mother Rose sent him off on the Tram & train with packed lunch and gas mask each morning. Leslie says, "Like father like son", he followed in his father's footsteps and became a Messenger for the GPO, the General Post Office, his training was completed in central London not far from St Paul's Cathedral, Leslie once qualified delivered post across bombed out London during the Blitz years, often clambering over fireman's hoses and bombed out buildings, most messenger work was between London Bridge and the Tower of London. Leslie remembers spending time on the 20th of April 1940 with his father. Leslie says: "I had just returned from Fire Watching Duties with my father and had retired to bed to fall into a deep and exhaustive sleep, a landmine had landed the other side of the railway and exploded!, the blast blew off the back door and living room door, smashing glass everywhere , I was asleep and covered in glass, my mother frantically thinking I was hurt got no response, woke me. I said 'Yes what's the matter?', we spent the next day putting the tiles back on!"

Leslie's father William Bills at night volunteered as a Warden, and Leslie accompanied his father from a young age, during 1944 Leslie himself became a Fire Watch Spotter with the AFS Auxiliary Fire Service, positioned on the buildings at Threadneedle street central London, Leslie witnessed many bombs falling and air combat fights from this central position, Leslie went on to list dates and locations of his duties in a diary he kept, this was the beginning of his book writing skills, going on to publish later 'Fettered Freedom', his experience of working in the coal mines of Northumberland. Aged 16 Leslie completed his training as a Telegraphist and completed duties at Threadneedle Street Post Office and on 23rd August 1944 just four days before his 18th birthday he was served with a notice to Serve as a Bevin Boy by the ministry of Labour for national coal mining duties.

On the 13th November 1944 Leslie was sent to Cramlington Colliery near Newcastle Upon Tyne, Leslie made his way by train from Kings Cross Station, there were eight "Ballotees" for the

training, the billet was at Cowgate, a small suburb in the North of the city, the colliery was 6 miles from the house and 2/6 about 12p was deducted from the weekly pay.

Cramlington was a series of working coal mines operated by experience miners, and according to Leslie RAF trainers were there to get the young men into shape for the arduous task of coal mining. After a months training Leslie was sent to nearby Fenwick Pit, which is nearby East Hollywell near Whitley Bay in Northumberland, & this is where he became officially a Bevin Boy.

Leslie was issued with a helmet, overalls belt, boots, and would collect his lamp from the stores, Leslie explains that before being allowed down he would be searched for cigarettes' and matches he did not smoke, and he said he would descend 900 feet down, once down he would walk to where the work was, I asked him what the layout of the mine shafts was like.

Leslie also described the Pit Ponies saying the following: As part of the curriculum, we were taught that a Galloway was a pit pony, they were usually 4 years old before they "gan doon tha pit", the stables were whitewashed and their food was called 'Choppy' corn or hay, they were known as 'canny aud buggers' by pit men. Leslie said they were not to be messed with, when I asked what he meant he said no riding on their backs, as it could bring the ceiling down, Leslie told me the miners were warned not to jump on the backs of the ponies and ride them for a laugh, I asked him why, he replied the miners heads could knock off the pit props.

On his first pay day after one week the pay Clerk said "Name?" Leslie replied, "Leslie Bills I'm a Bevin Boy", Clerk replied, "You can't help that lad, don't worry about it, here you are bonny lad" and he was handed £1.84 in todays money. In early December 1944 Leslie had completed his training and was posted to Fenwick, Leslie explained that the pit was 900 feet deep, cold but dry, above ground he had to walk to work in snow drifts, over 3 miles walk each way, the mine had hot showers at the pit head baths, Leslie said the showers were full of men all taking a shower at the same time, not for the shy, lots of banter and mickey taking.

On 4th February Lessie says he was asked by the landlady to leave his room and find somewhere else to go, he had expected this as she was renting out the room to tourists, he had nowhere to go so went to the police station, no help offered, went to a local bar and asked for his friend Bobby Nicholson who was a miner at Fenwick, Leslie was invited to his mothers house and offered a hot meal and a room upstairs by the family. Leslie to this day is still friends with the Nicholson family in his 94th year, even though Bobby has long died, the children send Leslie Christmas Cards and phone calls. The village was Seaton Delaval in a brick colliery house with around 45 all bunched together, the roofs were undulating due to subsidence from the mines! The lavatories were outside and frozen during the winter months, the Nicholson dwelling was No 43 Bates Cottages, Leslie was allowed free coal for heat and cooking purposes.

At the pit-head Leslie walked to the Lamp cabin and collected a battery cap-lamp and a leather token, on which was stamped a number, the leather token was handed in at the end of shift, then Leslie would be searched by the Banksman for cigarettes or matches, then enter the cage, and drop down 900 feet to Beaumont Seam, at the bottom the Pit-Boy would be soaked with water from the returning coal buckets, Leslie would walk for up to a mile or so before he was at his work post, his job was to connect and disconnect the carriages or buckets, a full bucket or tub is 12 cwt, Leslie said; "I soon learned the art of swiftly unclipping the heavy steel clip with a flick of the wrist, as the set came into view, and as it passed around the turn quickly lift the clip from the back of the tub and remove the steel pin. Slowly the steel rope would tension the buckets up to Beaumont Bank, I could see the 'Jakey' Engineman with his cap-lamp, he had the handbrake and clutch. Leslie would take his 'Batetime' Lunch break in the dugout recess cut out of the wall, Leslie said if he raised his knees it would generates some heat while he rested.

On the 7th March Leslie heard the alarm called out, and dived into the recess, tubs and steel came racing down the tracks only to crash, the foreman was badly hurt, Leslie assisted, then spent many hours working with another miner to straighten out all the damage.

Leslie outside the pit, socialised by going to dances and playing in a band, Leslie had a guitar and was in much demand. Soon after his friend Bobby was injured "A Prop through out" hit him square in the stomach.

Leslie would go home on leave back to Chadwell Heath and stay with his family, travelling from London each time by train using a train warrant. July 1948 Leslie married Patricia Lamb in

Ilford, Essex whilst on leave. He carried on working at Fenwick Pit until 15th January 1948, when he was released from duty by the Ministry of Labour. Leslie was offered employment at the pit, he declined, Leslie said most did, as they had other work to go back to and the conditions and pay were not good in the pit.

After his service, Leslie returned to his job with the GPO as a Telegraphist. Leslie in 1955 brought a house with Patricia in Billericay, Essex, although the house was not even built at that point, buying a plot on the slopping field, Leslie has lived there ever since. After some time working with the GPO Leslie took an interest in becoming a draftsman in the Engineering field, once qualified he took employment at the Essex River Board in Chelmsford, Essex, this was after the floods of Canvey Island in 1953, whilst undertaking draftsman duties, a flood happened at Chelmsford on the River Chelmer, which gave him an interest in working with flood defences and preventative engineering measures.

From 1965 Leslie Bills by now had been promoted to Assistant Senior Engineer with Benfleet Council in Essex, a stones throw from Canvey Island. Leslie was promoted to Principal Drainage Engineer of Canvey Island and then Senior Engineer of the Island from 1974 to 1989, a total of 15 years on the island, Leslie's team were responsible for upgrading and rebuilding the pumping stations, sea wall repairs, and some interesting additional projects including building a life boat ramp, a sea pool all of which still exist Leslie went on to become a freelance consultant, and having more free time, took an interest in his other passions writing and boat building, from 1992 when he brought out his first book *The Cavernham Bird House*, he published 12 books on handicraft DIY type books. In 1990 Leslie wrote the first Full biography of William Leefe Robinson VC, 'A Medal for Life' who was the first Airman in WW1 to shoot down a Zeppelin over Cuffley Hertfordshire, this book linked in with his mother having dated the airman, the stores over the years and a fascination of the aeronautical made this happen. In 2004 Leslie wrote the book 'Canvey Island, A rising tide', this was connected to his term as Principal Engineer.

And lastly his final book 'A Fettered Freedom' the story and experience of his years as a Bevin boy, this book incidentally is still passed around the small community of Fenwick and its residents. In December 1980 the BBC contacted Leslie with interest in making a documentary about the Bevin boys from WW2, and finally in July of 1983, Leslie was invited along with other miners and Bevin Boys to Morton Colliery in Durham, where a documentary was made and shown, Leslie states that Artur Scargill was there, the documentary he says was shown on ITV after the news at 10, he is still very proud of this, I've not been able to find a copy, Leslie would love to see this once again I'm sure.

In 1988 Christies of London were interested in interviewing his mother Rose Bills, as the medals of William Leefe Robinson were up for auction, Rose was one of only two people alive that had the story to tell, Rose died before the interview could take place. An interesting fact that on the day his mother first met Robinson in Ilford in 1916, the Pilot friend of Robinson was Frederick Sowrey, who ended up shooting down the first \*Super Zeppelin L32, the Zeppelin crashed two miles from where Leslie William Bills lives today.

Leslie went on to write numerous books on carpentry projects, also writing for magazines, and took an avid interest in Boat building, building three motor cruisers, often powering them from Canvey and up the Thames.

In recent years Leslie by now an old gentleman walking with a stick, and often wearing a sports jacket, white hair and beard, in fact I wondered why he would always wear a jumper, and it turns out he never wanted to be cold again, the mining years effected him this way, he would often talk about the pre war years, the mines and his long life in general, one of his prized possessions was a picture of Her Majesty the Queen, he had this portrait hanging up in his corridor, and each morning would say "Mam" as he walked past, I asked him why he did this, he replied "I'm British you see it's what we do", I wrote to the Queen to let her know about his long and interesting life, and we received a reply, Leslie always would say the Queen was 4 months older, and getting the letter made him very happy, not a day later he had had an accident at home and was taken to Hospital where, unfortunately he passed away on 17th June 2021 from a short illness, up until this point living independently into his old age, even making time to vote in person at the last poll, in

fact up until the 8th of June was walking about at a steady pace, his mind and memory as sharp as a chisel, and even refusing domestic help from his family.

One of the qualities which has stood out for me from the war generation is their humour in adverse situations, one funny memory I have that Leslie told me he was shaving in the bathroom, a storm raged outside, then all of a sudden water started to drip on his head making the shaving foam run down, so he put on his trilby hat and carried on, I asked him should we get the roof fixed "Oh no it's only leaking when it rains, and I can tilt my hat forward"

Leslie William Bills, I often said could well have been the last Bevin Boy, and I think you will agree they all served their country so well, every single one of them, and with such determination and sheer tenacity they entered that mysterious and dangerous world beneath to supply the war machine of WW2 and beyond, their families and descendants must be so proud.

An Article by Paul Butterworth of Billericay 2021

### **Bevin Boys Lament 1943**

We are longing to leave New KYO  
And get away from Annfield Plain,  
To say goodbye to the north  
To return home once again.

The careers we wanted are gone:  
And to fight for the glory of England  
Like our fathers did last war on the Somme.

--

We know that coal is essential  
Without it we could not have won,  
We have nothing against Mr Bevin,  
Although to us his Scheme was all wrong.

Some were born to be Miners  
For they are courageous men.  
They did all they could to help us  
But the pits are only for them.

We were never born to be miners  
Surely we've all had a try,  
Our own jobs are on the surface  
That is always our cry.

Down the shaft we plunge  
A way from the light of day  
To do our shift in the darkness,  
With only a lamp to guide the way.

You'd think coal would be treasured,  
If all knew how it was got,  
And the lives never cost in the getting \*  
And the heart breaks by those who have lost.

I hope the time is not far away  
When we leave this place for good,  
But always the memory +  
Of the men ----- by who's side we once stood.

Sidney H Jones & friends.

PS.

\* I interpret the line as the worth of a man's life was never factored into the overall cost of coal extraction.

+ I believe it's memory, which makes the expression rather clunky. But I imagine this group of Bevin Boys were all enjoying a few pints when this was written down!

These explanations were supplied by Sidney's son Buck.

### **Day out to The Shuttleworth Collection.**

At the September BBA Reunion, seven Members enjoyed a visit to The Shuttleworth Collection/Museum. In 1928, a Richard Shuttleworth - himself a pilot - founded an aeronautical and automotive museum which became one of the most prestigious in the world due to the variety of old and well-preserved aircraft (some now over 100 years old).

Among the most notable on view are 5 Edwardian aircraft, one of which is still in flying condition. There was a triple-winged plane which appeared to be constructed of extremely flimsy material, and another where the pilot needed to lie in a prone position in order to fly the craft. Alongside these is the finest collection of genuine WW1 aircraft that all still fly in Europe. There are historic planes from 1909-1950s, the oldest of which is a 1909 BLERIOT.

Others being a British 1912 BLACKBURN MONOPLANE, a 1934 DH88 COMET, a 1936 MEW GALL, a WESTLAND LYSANDER and many more known examples. Also of interest was a 1938 SPECIAL OPS plane which carried female Agents in and out of France during WW2.

There were a large number of Vintage vehicles to be admired, a few dating back to the 1800s. A 1902 Steam Locomobile, early buses, motor cycles (some with sidecars), bicycles (e.g. a penny-farthing and a side-by-side tandem), plus various styles and sizes of horse-drawn carriages. On display were flying uniforms and even a pair of goggles still covered in Flanders mud. All the above housed throughout six hangars, all very clean, well laid out and offering plenty of printed information on each subject.

We ate a snack lunch in the Hub Cafe, by which time the rain was coming down in sheets preventing a walk through the attractive gardens and taking a peek at the Swiss Chalet.

Some time was passed in the Shop looking at memorabilia and souvenirs prior to boarding the people-carrier for the return journey to the Hotel. The countryside was green and pleasant and en route we passed the two massive buildings which had housed Airships in bygone days.

A really great place to visit and one to be recommended.

Mary Fletcher.

**Editors comment.** Please note that we do not edit contributions and as some are based on recollections there may be alternative views and information.

### **PLEASE NOTE!!**

**Please don't forget to send your £5 subscription to continue receiving your twice yearly Newsletter in 2022 to Anne Lane. Cheques payable to The Bevin Boys Association.**