THE BEVIN BOYS ASSOCIATION

FOUNDED 1989

CHAIRMAN Anne.E.Lane. Tel: 01275 463703.

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NEWSLETTER FOR SPRING 2023.

Chairman's Message.

Welcome to Spring 2023. We used Zoom for our AGM last year, which was quite successful and certainly a lot easier. Would any of you like to have a social get together on Zoom? Perhaps in May or July? Can you ask your family if they can help you with this? If yes, email me with your email address and I will send you the log in details nearer the time.

I wish you all a Happy and Healthy 2023,

Anne. (Lane)

MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY.

Another year when we welcome the Spring sunshine and welcome snowdrops and daffodils.

I attended a very interesting talk on Neston collieries recently. They are situated on the left hand side of the Wirral peninsula overlooking the Dee river estuary and north Wales. At the base of the peninsula lies Chester. They were remarkable collieries existing from1759 --1950 owned by the Stanley and Cottingham families. The underground workings were one mile out under the estuary up to Point of Aire, because of water leakage from the river, canals were used to transport the coal with men,' legging' against the roof. An unusual aspect of the collieries was implemented in 1755 when the collieries paid two guineas per annum to Chester Infirmary for treatment for one inpatient or two out patients, The names of some of the men who received treatment are still to be found in the records. Coal was sent as far as Barbados as well as locally. More can be read on the website 'nestoncollieries.org' or by reading the book with the same title by Antony Annakin Smith.

I hope you found this of interest and that the year ahead is a good one. With best wishes,

Elizabeth Todd (Liz)

MESSAGE from the TREASURER.

I am pleased to report that our finances are very healthy. We do not in truth have a great deal of movement on our funds and the balance has stayed much the same since my last report. We are continuing to support local reunions as of course we no longer have National reunions, which were costly, and will of course do so as long as Bevin Boys wish to meet up.

Barbara McElroy.

ARCHIVIST

Life has opened up and consequently not so many people are researching their family history. I have had just three enquiries since the last newsletter but in each case I have been unable to give any specific information as the Bevin Boys in question hadn't joined our Association. As you all know most of the records were destroyed after Nationalisation and even those left really don't say much.

The Association has taken many of your stories and these have been lodged in the Imperial War Museum and I know many of you have contributed to the newsletters with your recollections. I am always happy to talk to people and make notes if you still have something to contribute. I know some families have the newsletter so any family anecdotes are always welcome as well.

Best Wishes, Barbara McElroy.

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY'S REPORT.

Sadly we now have 1874 names in the Book of Remembrance.

It is lovely to receive so many letters of support for the Association and saying how much you all look forward to reading the Newsletters. With, of course, your subscription of £5 to continue receiving the twice yearly Newsletter! I would also like to thank so many of you who have also enclosed a little extra for the general funds! If any Bevin Boys widows, partners or any relatives or friends would like to receive the Newsletters do let me know. Please would you write, telephone or e-mail me, to notify me of Change of Address and/or Telephone numbers and if you hear of any Bevin Boys, members or not, who have sadly passed away. See above for my address and Telephone number.

Anne Lane.

Sales.

For all Sales, please apply to Mrs Anne Lane, Snipelands, Bourton Combe, Flax Bourton, Bristol. BS48 3QL. Tel: 01275 463703. for details of how to pay. We are thinking of changing our Bank, because of charges being made by HSBC.

Please add £1 for the lighter items & £2 for the book, as it is expensive to post.

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

Bevin Boy Banner Postcard, 1 Black & White postcard & 2 colour & 1 black & white prints of A4 size all from A Bevin Boy Remembers. **ALL POSTCARDS & A4 PRINTS @ £0.20 each.**

Many Thanks to all our 'customers', as always!

Anne Lane.

AGM 2023

Will be held on Zoom again in October. Would you please email me if you wish to be included. I will then send you the information in October.

AREA REUNION's for 2023.

I would like to thank the Area Reps, for all their hard work in arranging lunches etc.

Cheshire, Lancs & North Wales. Ring **Liz Todd 0151 342 3703** for details and if you would like to join us, all are welcome. Liz will contact recent attendees.

SOUTH WEST. - Maybe we can meet in May and/or October. Please ring **Anne Lane** on 01275 463703 if you would like to join us. We usually meet at 12 noon.

ESSEX & NE LONDON : Barbara McElroy will contact those who have attended recent area reunions if it goes ahead.

Bevin Boys Association Website.

Just to remind you all that we have an **Official** Bevin Boys Association website.

Please go to:- http://www.bevinboysassociation.co.uk or to email bevinboys1943@gmail.com
Thank you to everyone who has submitted items for the Newsletter.
Any other memories and experiences of your time as Bevin Boys I am happy to print.

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

Anne.

Eric Dowden.

Eric's thoughts on his years as a Bevin Boy, February 1944-November 1947, at Bedford Colliery, Leigh, Lancashire. Written almost 60 years since his direction to report for work in the Mining Industry. At the time, Eric was a telegram messenger with the Post Office in Bournemouth, Dorset, delivering telegrams by bicycle.

The first month of his service was spent at a Training Colliery. The group he was with had to report to Wheatsheaf Pit at Pendlebury, near Manchester, (could have been on the moon as far as he knew). He had classroom instructions and surface and underground training and did P.T. With Army P.T.I's. At the end of the month he was sent to his designated pit.

His first job was on the surface, working on the waste tip of the Mine. The miners called them 'Dirt Rucks'; huge piles of rock and other material that extended some distance away from the shaft. This waste was carried in railway wagons and the lines ran along the top edge of the 'Ruck'. Along with other surface workers, his job was to empty these wagons. He used to shovel it out and down the side of the heap through a side door of the wagon, so extending the the side of the heap. After a while the line was moved nearer the edge again, thus widening the surface area. As the railway lines were not on permanent beds, they were moved by a team of men with long crowbars.

If the lines needed bending, a piece of equipment called a 'Crow" was used.This was an elongated "U" shaped item, the ends of the "U" arms hooked onto the rail. Across the arms ran another bar with a thread on it, this went into the rail. The other end of the thread had a square boss, so by turning this with a long lever the rail was bent to get the correct curve. Fortunately the weather at this time was not too bad and Dad quite enjoyed this part of his term in the mines.

The Bevin Boys were regarded as a different species to the miners, we spoke quite differently to them and this was a cause of much amusement and misunderstanding. As he had worked for the Post Office as a telegram messenger, the blokes wanted to know if he spent his time 'licking stamps'. Some of the miners had been to Bournemouth, to the miners hostel in Southcliffe Road on the West Cliff.

His next job was underground, at the rear of the shaft, known to the miners as "Back O' Pit". At the rear of the shaft bottom was an area of steel plates on the floor. As the cage came down loaded with empty tubs, the chap at the front side of the shaft, who was in charge of loading the full tubs, which were on an incline towards the shaft, would take out the "SCOTCHES". These were lengths of steel bar that went into the wheels of the tubs as they came down the incline. These "SCOTCHES" were pieces of round bar about eighteen inches long overall and about 1 1/4" thick with a loop about two thirds along its length to stop the operator getting his fingers chopped off between the scotch and the bottom of the tub, as these scotches were literally throw into the wheels as the tubs go by. It wasn't easy in the beginning, Dad did the job for a while. The main idea was to stop them short of the cage. A bit hazardous at times. He mentions this because it directly concerned the job at the rear of the shaft. As the cage stopped at the pit bottom, the chap in charge of loading would take out the scotches (I think he also had a good operating lever that hooked up under the axle of the front tub as they came into position) and let three tubs down the incline and into the cage, thus forcing the three empties out the other side with considerable force, where another chap and Dad would be waiting. (He was another Bevin Boy but he disappeared after about a week and Dad never saw or heard of him again). His job was to grab them, spin them round on the steel plates and onto the rails at the side of the shaft ad so back into

the pit to be refilled.

The cages at Bedford were “triple deckers” that held 42 men at a time, 14 to a deck or three tubs per deck, and there were two cages, so we at the “Back O’ Pit did not have time to hang about during “Winding”.

The area at the back of the shaft was always wet with water dripping down, this made the plates very slippery, coupled with the fact that the loading and unloading was done as fast as possible to get maximum production, did make some exciting times now and then. In the winter the water in the shaft would freeze, forming huge icicles, which would break free now and then. We could hear them coming. These icicles could be several feet long and inches thick. Now was the time to clear the area, ‘FAST’.

The bottom of the shaft is not as you may imagine, it is not a small dark hole but rather like a tube station with two sets of rails to accommodate outgoing full tubs and one set for the empties going back into the pit. This area could be compared to a railway marshalling yard, only on a smaller scale. It is lit by electric light and is quite bright. No need for your cap lamp. It is probably several metres high and several wide and could have been about 50 or 60 metres long. It was all bricked up like a railway tunnel. Maybe the floor was bricked as well. Afraid I can’t remember, it was a long time ago.

My next job was on the ‘Haulage’ a system of transportation of the tubs in and out of the mine. The method at Bedford consisted of an endless cable that ran over the top of the tubs, these were connected in gangs of about three or four by means of a coupling at front and rear of the tubs, similar to train couplings really. The next bit was to get them moving. A length of chain with a hook was used for this, one of the hooks was attached to the eye on the front tub, the other end of the chain was twisted round the cable a certain number of times so that it gripped the cable, thus pulling the gang along. The same method was used at the rear of the gang to stop them over running, thus the gang was secured fore and aft. This at first may seem a bit complicated, but after a while the chain could be swung so that it wrapped itself round the cable the correct number of times and the chain slipped into the hook all in one movement. At the same time, by placing your ‘gloved’ hand on the chain wrapping, the links would release their grip on the cable which would allow you control over the movement of the tubs. The cables were driven by engines within the pit and controlled by a driver who operated them on the command of a system of bell signals. This method allowed the tubs to be controlled throughout the pit.

His next job was nearer the “face”, short for “coal face” where the actual coal production was done. He worked on the “Loader.” This was the output end of an endless belt that brought the coal from the face to the haulage system. This ended about six or seven feet above floor level to allow men and tubs to work beneath it. Coal from the face travelled along the belt to the loader where the worker positioned a tub to allow the coal to drop off the end and into the tub. During the night shift, the coal cutting machine had been at work making an undercut along the whole face. This was to help the colliers, the actual “coal getters” to get the coal down. The seam was about 3 feet high and after being under so much pressure for so long it was mighty hard. This action of the cutter produced an enormous amount of coal dust which was the first product off the face every morning. So imagine, for about the first half hour or so a continuous stream of coal dust about two feet wide and several inches deep poured from above your head into the tubs that you had “hopefully” put in the right place. He says hopefully, because it was practically impossible to see what you were doing, even with your helmet lamp on. The coal dust or whatever that missed the tubs went into a sump between the rails that the tubs ran on. So, you had to keep the belt running, shovel up the lot that missed the tubs, all in a fog of coal dust (I don’t remember goggles or mask) that was for a time nearly impenetrable. Stopping the loader was not popular with the colliers on the face, as stoppages cost them money. You also had to fill the tubs with the right amount, because a “tally” was tied to the tub to indicate the face number it came from, ours was known as 160, this was used to indicate the amount of coal produced in each shift, they were weighed when they reached the surface. The blokes on Dad’s face were pretty tolerant of him, they thought he

was doing a job he didn't want but could hopefully, only get better.

His next job took him onto the face. I should mention at this point that the closer you got to the face, the lower and narrower the 'roadways' got. Still room to work upright and wide enough for two sets of tubs to pass, with working room between. The haulage finishes at the loader. The roof was kept up with large wooden props with steel girders across or arched girders that joined at the top of the arch with steel plates.

The job on the face was on the "PANS". These were a system of shallow trays, with sloping sides in which ran an endless chain with steel vanes attached, all driven by a motor at the end of the face. The colliers shovel the coal onto the Pans and it is taken down the length of the face and onto the previously mentioned belt and so, in due course, to the haulage and so to the surface. Dad's job was to keep the pans clear of obstructions and stop them in the case of any stoppages out on the belt or loader or any other emergency. Noisy, hot and dusty. There was another system known as "The Shaker", which by means of a piston method that shakes the pans backwards and forwards and so propels the coal down the face to the outgoing belt.

Dad did have a job on the belt for a while, repair and maintenance, that was a cushy number but too good to last so on to the next job which came along by chance, he was working on the belts one day and the district fireman (foreman) came along saying that the driller had reported in sick, could Dad have a go at it. Not realising what he had let himself in for, Dad agreed to do it. NEVER VOLUNTEER! The driller's job is to drill holes in the coal face at the direction of the colliers, to enable the shot firer (more of him later) to blow the face to their advantage. This was the hardest job he ever had in the mines, the equipment consisted of a compressed air drill, two drilling rods, one about two feet long and one about four feet long and enough airline to complete the length of the face, probably about 50 yards, maybe longer.

The height of the face at this time was about three feet. The entrance to the face was about a third of the way along its length, so you did the short length first, starting at the bottom and working your way up. up because the face was not level but on quite a steep incline. So you dragged all the gear down to the bottom and started drilling, that was when Dad got the hang of it and stopped it charging about all over the face. The trick was to borrow the colliers pick and make a small hole in the face, then start drilling. (First obstacle overcome). This was not too bad but nobody told him about taking all the slack of the airline with him because the shotfirer working a safe distance below would start firing his charges he had placed in the holes you had drilled. This was carried out under strict safety regulations. But that did not stop Dad getting the 'wind up' at times. Getting back to the reason for taking all your airline slack with you, as the "Shottie" fired, he brought that part of the face down all over the airline thus preventing you going any farther until you had scrambled back down the face, dug it out and got back up to the face again. This took time and a hell of a lot of sweat, not to mention a certain amount of chastisement from the men on the face. All in all they put up with his attempts pretty well. As far as Dad knows, he was the only Bevin Boy in the pit and was very lucky at not having to live in a Hostel. He lived in "Digs" all the time he was in the mines.

I have mentioned Dad's Fireman George Bond. He was the man in charge of our District. His job, amongst others, was the safety and maintenance of the area. He was also one of the men that carried a Safety lamp, which was used for the detection of gas. This lamp was also used for keeping the roadways on the correct alignment. This was done by hanging the lamp on a peg previously driven into the centre line of the roof. With another chap with a lamp (this man's lamp would not be fitted with the means of reigniting as the Fireman's, again for safety reasons), the Fireman would take a sighting along them from an earlier peg, take a chalked string line and mark the roof so continuing the centre line, then bangs in another peg. (This may not be the exact description but gives some idea). George had two brothers in the pit, Jackie and Billy, both Firemen in different districts.

I have not explained how the face and the roadways gradually extended. As coal was removed from the face it left a space and spaces that far underground tend to start to fill up again fairly quickly. Our face was about three feet high. The roadway side might have been between five or

six feet height, this overhang was drilled each day by a chap on a later shift (about 2 o'clock, but was fired by the same shotfirer that had done the coal face). As this was rock, it took a lot more drilling and more explosives to get it down. If I remember rightly, the colliers came off the face during this firing. It didn't half go off with a bang. There could have been six or eight charges in that overhang because the rubble had to be moved by hand and used to help fill the gap where the face had been a couple of days ago, so the face and the roadways advanced the same amount.

I have not told of the journey from the pit bottom to the face. Most of it was on return airways, these are quite low so you have to stoop most of the time which is not very comfortable and all the time looking to see where you are going. You develop a sort of crouching, one sided shamble. Dad's face at the time, was perhaps, a mile from the pit bottom. After walking some distance, we came to the "Man train". This was a system of transport for the miners on the way into and out of the mine. This was composed of a number of of wooden half sized tubs that four men could sit in. I don't know how long the journey was, or how long it took, several minutes I should think, and most welcome, it went at quite a speed too. It was driven by the usual endless cable method, only this time the cable was secured under the tubs. We then had a further walk to the face.

To give you some idea of how the distance to the face increases, consider the following. Allowing that the face moves forward about four feet a day, five working days a week, (allow 48 weeks per year to take in Annual Holidays and Bank Holidays), that gives roughly 20 feet a week. 48 working weeks each year, gives you 960 feet or 320 yards. So during Dad's three and a half years there, the face would have moved forward almost 1,000 yards.

The men on the face recovered as many of the props and overhead bars as they could that had been in their working areas a couple of days before and then the rest of that space gradually filled in under natural pressure. The men secured their own "Stint" every day and as their own lives and that of their mates depend on it, you can bet on it that it is down with that in mind.

We used mainly steel props with a built in wedge, with wooden blocks called "Chocks and Bunnocks" that were placed separately at the top and bottom of the prop to stop them slipping under pressure.

I should have mentioned it by now, but for some time, I had "Gone Native", I wore clogs (very comfortable when you got used to them), carried a 6 pint water can and a "Snap" tin (food tin) and spoke the 'Lingo'.

Dad's last move was on a return airway, used as supply road for the face, as the air circulation had by now gone all the way round the pit. It had got very hot and somewhat smelly, lots of sweaty bodies, dust and fumes from shot firing and of course there are no toilets down a pit. An older chap and I used to collect props and bars and all the things required to keep the face running smoothly from the main haulage and push it along to the face. Quite a long haul and each day it got longer, as these roads advanced as well as the main intake roads.

We also collected bags of what was called "Stonedust" to spread about to lessen the risk of a explosion. This was also a hard job, as long as the face was kept running, all was well. The Fireman used to come round a couple of times during the shift, to ensure all was ok and that was that. Dad thought he only got the job because it is not safe for one man to work alone. Dad finished his working days in the pit on this particular job. Dad's release number came up in November 1947 about three and a half years since his call up. We had the same "Demob" numbers as the Forces.

For those of you who are not sure what Bevin Boys were, I will try to explain briefly. Us 18 year old boys, had had our medical prior to being called up for the Armed Forces (we thought). Instead we were told to report to the nearest Labour Exchange to receive directions and report for work in the Mining Industry. This came about when the then Minister of Labour, Ernest Bevin, decided that men should be directed to work in the coal mining industry as an alternative to the Forces. We were "NOT" volunteers nor Conscientious Objectors, we were selected by Ballot and had no recourse to appeal. There is a book written by Warwick Taylor (Ex Bevin Boy) called The

Forgotten Conscript. That tells the story.
When Dad was demobbed, as others, in 1947, we just left the mines and returned home. Some, like myself were lucky, I had a job to go back to. I returned to the G.P.O. We received no Gratuity or Demob suit, nor any leave. (I believe we got a railway warrant). You might say, we got paid for what we did and I agree, but I also say that we worked bloody hard for it. I have since talked to Ex servicemen and have not found any that would have changed places. I retain fond memories of the two families that I was fortunate enough to have lived with at that time. They treated me as one of the family, not as a stranger. Both families lived quite a way from the mining district, a good half hour on the bus. I used to fall asleep regularly on the way 'home' at the end of a shift, luckily the conductors got to know me and gave me a shout at my stop. I was fairly clean at this time as Bedford had a good pit head baths and canteen.

I shall never forget the friends I made, young and old, during those three and a half years, they were the friendliest and most outgoing people I had ever met. You could hear someone's life story whilst waiting for a bus. I joined the local youth club and had many a great weekend hiking and Youth Hosteling in the Peak District.

And so, last but my no means least, the men I worked with, hard men but very friendly and helpful when you got to know them. All work underground is hard, heavy and dangerous, none more so than the work on the coal face. Unless you have worked in this environment, you cannot imagine what it is like, the constricted working space (about three feet high), the noise, the dust, the noise from the machinery and the ever present danger all round. Yet these men did it daily as if it was the most natural thing in the world. I take my hat (or helmet) off to them and consider it a privilege to have been accepted by them.

Most of the coal mining industry is now gone and apart from the unemployment caused, I expect a lot of men are glad, but then a lot of the men I knew at that time are probably no longer about. Those men gave me an insight into a working life that was completely alien to a Southerner and it would have remained so but for the War and a man named Ernest Bevin.

STILL A FEW MORE THOUGHTS

I did mention the pit head baths, which were in fact showers. The baths were divided into three sections, all heated. The first room was full of lockers, one for each man, for your clean outdoor clothing, shoes etc, soap and towel. You left the clean gear, took your soap and towel, walked through the shower area and into the "Dirty"locker room, this was where the working clothes were kept in your other locker, so, put your "dirty" gear on, boots, (clogs) and helmet, take your water can and leave your soap and towel, ready for your return at the end of the shift.
The next stop was the "Lamp Room", you took your lamp from the charging frame, (these were battery operated lamps) and replaced it with your numbered "Tally" (metal disc). I have it still, the number is 391. From there you went across the yard and up the gantry and waited for the "Banksman" who, after checking you for illegal matches or cigarettes or anything else that could endanger the safety of the mine, would signal the man in the Engine house, by means of electric bell signals that men would be travelling in the cages, not coal. They did not wind men as fast as coal but it was fast enough, believe me. These cages were designed for carrying coal, so each deck was only high enough to take the height of a coal tub, so you had to squat down during winding. The Banksman was in charge of the cages and responsible for the safety of the loading and unloading of coal and empties as well as men, at the top of the shaft. Quite a responsible job. At the end of the shift you returned your lamp to the lamp room and the charging frame, and took your tally. By this method it could be checked as to whether any man was in the mine or out at any given time, especially in an emergency. From the lamp room, back to the "Dirty" lockers, hang your clothes inside, collect your soap and towel and get a shower, then on to your clean locker.

Oh, in case you wondered, each man washed his neighbour's back.

A 'Bevin Boy'

I had to go and register in Nineteen Forty-Three.
To see what service I'd go in, if they wanted me.
To the local hall I go, to see the big man there,
He said "Sit down, what will you join?" I said "I don't care."

Later on I had to go for a medical exam.
So off to Norwich I go, to see the doctor man.
He tested this, and tested that, and tested you know what.
He measured my height and weighed me and then said "That's the lot."

I had to wait awhile as forms he had to fill.
After testing this and that he made me feel quite ill.
He said "You'll be hearing soon, I've passed you A1 fit."
Then what did they go and do? They sent me down a pit!

I had to be a 'Bevin Boy' amongst the dust and grime,
Every day, every week, seven and a half hours at a time.
I had to be a supply lad, to the men who hewed the coal
Not the best of jobs down that long black hole.

Someone had to do it, and it happened to be me.
Then after almost four long years, time to set me free!
I came back to Norfolk, to my friends and pals;
And the best thing in my life I did, was marry a Norfolk gal!

Written by Russell Craske.

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