

Memories of Calverton & Moor Green Collieries

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Introduction

While I was still at school, my brother Derek, my father Charles and my then brother-in-law Paul all worked at Calverton Colliery in Nottinghamshire. From the age of 12, I often used to go with my dad, brother and a close friend around the woodlands and farmland surrounding Calverton Colliery. We usually took our whippets and ferrets and we had permission from the NCB and other landowners to use the land to hunt rabbits and keep them down to a minimum.

It was at this age that I first had the feeling that one day I would work underground at Calverton colliery but, being so young at the time, dismissed it as a boyish dream. From the age of 13, they used to take me underground and I learned a lot about mining even before I left school. I was such a regular visitor that I was even given my own lockers in the pit head baths!

On my first trip underground my dad and a colliery deputy took me to have a look at a coalface. At that time, Calverton was working two seams, the Low Bright and Brinsley Seams. In the High Main workings (the old side of the mine) two drifts had just been driven towards these but there was only one coalface in this side of the mine. Much of it was still being developed and at the time it appeared chaotic with lots of clutter and development drifts all over the place.

This coalface was said to be a state of the art development for Calverton at that time and was supposed to help the colliery to produce 3 million tons of coal a year. Sadly they got it wrong, as this coalface suffered all sorts of geological problems and actually produced more water than coal. Three years later, when I started working at Calverton after my training, they were still struggling with this coalface and had another open called c2s. This turned out to be another nightmare but it did produce quality coal.

What really sticks in my memory from that time was the work being carried out by the development crew at the top of the return drift. This is where the manriding station was for the return endless haulage but the work being carried out here was unlike any other I ever saw to this day. It was a feat of engineering, a real wonder. At the very top of the return drift, the steel supports rose into what was rightly called the cathedral, with the supports rising to at least 40ft in the air, and it resembled the look of a real cathedral. I have seen many visitors just stand in wonder and the questions were always the same - how the hell did they build it!

In 1974, when I was 16 and about to leave school, I had not really made up my mind to work at the pit and I was still unsure as to what I should do. My father often used to ask me what was I intended doing and jokingly I answered him by

saying that I might just go on the dole and hang out at the seaside while I was making up my mind. On the Friday before I left school, my father just demanded that I go with him and said very little else. We soon arrived at Calverton Colliery and sat in front of the training officer, Jack Twynam. He was a tyrant of a man with very little conversation, all he said was "Good morning, sign this, you will be starting training Monday the 12th of August at 9.00am sharp, be there". He then asked me to leave.

Moor Green Colliery

Sure enough Monday came and I started work at Moor Green Colliery where I was to spend the next six months, mostly underground but mixed with classroom work. I was excited but a still little hurt that my father had done all this behind my back. However, as the years rolled on, I think it was for the best as I have a special passion for mining, just being underground and for the people of mining, damn great people to be around. My first day underground at Moor Green was great and the sheer adventure of it still makes me excited. We went training in old workings of the mine or the training gallery as it was known. I can still smell the old workings and see how dark it was with very little lighting except your cap lamp.

It was a very old colliery and one that caught my interest from day one because I had already experienced going underground at Calverton. I was hungry to find out how things were done at Moorgreen and most days we were taken on coalface trips to meet the cutter drivers and coal face men. It was not so much a feeling of being in a job, it became more of an obsession with me to want to learn as much as possible as soon as I could. In the early days I showed lots of willingness but it is easy to lose track of what you should be learning and I got lots of things wrong. The experienced colliers have lots of ways to make you get it right, however, and I was soon put in my place!

In my early days at both Moorgreen and Calverton collieries, we were trained to move materials using a little truck called a danny. This was used in coal face installations and development areas because the endless haulage cannot go right up to the face, which was always moving forward anyway. All main intake roads at Moorgreen and Calverton had conveyors carrying coal out of the pit. Moorgreen had its belt system running right up to the surface but at Calverton the conveyors ran to the main bunker at the bottom of the No.2 Shaft, where the coal was lifted out by cage.

Once out of initial training, the main job young trainees did in those days was conveyor driving. This was mainly just watching the drives where coal is transferred from one belt to another, the guys watching and stopping/starting the conveyors being known as Connie Drivers. You also had to watch out for large stones or lumps of coal getting stuck in the chutes or the coal would spill over onto the roads. Eventually driving the conveyors was all done centrally from

surface but there was still the danger of blockages so, as a result, Belt Patrol was brought in. For this, guys wandered up and down sections of conveyor allocated to them and cleared up spillages of coal or blockages as they occurred. The first job of new trainees was then to accompany one of the belt patrolmen to learn the job for 30 days. They got paid much less than the colliers but it was them who had to clean up all the spillage under the belts. Management had their conveyors kept free of spillage and the guys they were sent with had 30 days with no shovel in their hands!

Calverton Colliery

The surface and buildings of Calverton Colliery were spread over quite a big area, split by the main Calverton bypass. The winding house contained an electric winder but you could rarely get to see it as the engine drivers were a law to themselves. It was a wonderful building and everything in it was kept very clean and polished by the winder drivers. This was because the drivers worked much longer hours than the colliers and to them it was like a second home. All the machinery in the winding house was constantly looked after by a team of fitters and was kept in good repair. The headgear was also well looked after and it was painted on a regular basis.

Directly behind the main No.1 Shaft were the fitters' workshops and stores. The workshops were a constant hive of activity in those early days, as Calverton had a lot of active coalfaces underground so a lot of machinery was needed. This had to be kept in good repair for immediate despatch underground either to replace breakdowns or for new installations. On the other side of No.1 Shaft was the main yard, where all materials were stored. All empty mine cars coming out of the shaft went here and were re-filled with materials.

Also in the yard were some more buildings and workshops. One of these workshops was where all of the chocks (hydraulic coalface supports) were maintained. Chocks recovered from a finished coalface were fixed here and either stored for the next face to be driven or sent to another colliery for use. Another building was for the mines rescue crew - a bunch of people you couldn't help but admire. Coal was wound up from No.2 Shaft (also called the return shaft) and near here were all the main offices. These housed all of the administration staff and they were really people that we colliers never had many dealings with.

After my 6 months at Moor Green, I was transferred back to Calverton Colliery and my underground training really started. I spent the next eighteen months under close personal supervision, working closely with colliers of some rank and learning the basics. It was mostly Belt Patrol at first but, towards middle of my last year of this initial training, I was placed with a team of gangers (or material men) in the headings. This was great work as the heading teams were all on

contract, so if we kept up with them we got bonuses in our hands at the end of the week.

The only items provided to us in the early days were a helmet, gloves, belt, boots and knee pads. We had to provide all of our other clothes so I mainly just used jeans, old shirts, jumpers and a warm jacket, as some parts of the mine outbye were really cold. I think it was when I was 18 or 19 that the NCB started to issue us with overalls. We all wore orange work gear and we felt like someone had taken our identities away as we looked like clones! I used to take sandwiches and a flask of coffee underground, all carried in the front of my overalls even when crawling up and down the coal face.

The helmets provided were made of plastic, coloured yellow if you were a trainee. No ear or eye protection items were given to us in the early days but this did come in time. We had a choice of gloves, rubber when working in water or otherwise leather or fabric gloves with rubber criss-cross on them, the latter being the ones I favour as you could get a good grip with them. We were also given one pair of leather boots a year and wellies if we were working in wet conditions.

We always used Oldhams electric caplamps and these didn't really change much over the years. When moving around, most miners have the habit of having the caplamp hanging from their neck rather than on the helmet. This means that they can hold the lamp itself and shine it to see what they need to look at right away and not continually have to move the head around in circles. When actually working, however, it would be firmly on the helmet. The general lighting at Calverton got better over the years as new workings were opened, with strip lighting installed on all belt roads and the main intake and return drifts.

Like any other miner, we soon learned that to get back out the pit in a hurry the best way was to jump on the belts. It was quicker but the early belts were quite unstable, with lots of slipping in the drives so they were prone to stopping and so on. I had quite a nasty accident at the age of 17 when the belt I was riding out to pit bottom stopped. The rules were quite clear - wait a suitable time just in case it started again and, if not, get off and walk. There were no pre-start alarms then so I waited for what seemed a lifetime, judged it to be safe and decided it was time to get off. That was a bad mistake as the belt started up again, resulting in me being tossed in the air and landing on the bottom belt, which was going the other way. It rammed my knee into the belt structure, causing torn ligaments, cuts, bruises, etc. Luckily, some of the blokes I was working with covered it up and reported the accident as happening near one of the coal face installations I was working at transporting material. I was off work for 6 weeks on sick pay, that was in 1975 and the money I got was loose change compared to today.

Shortly after my return to work I stopped doing belt patrol and moved on to being a ganger. This is an old mining term used in most pits I have been to and it

simply refers to outbye men who bring materials in to headings or coal face operations. I liked my time as a ganger as we went all over the pit, meeting up with the colliers and playing tricks on them.

I remember giving some coal face men on c9s coal face a real hard time and, because I believed at that time that these men just were making my life more difficult, I started giving them a lot of lip. When snap time came, the only 20 minute break in the shift, I had only just sat down to eat a sandwich when a few of the coal face men (including my brother) grabbed me and tied me to the cable carrier on the panels. They then got out the high pressure hose and let fly with what seemed like a million gallons of freezing cold water! I did start to cool down in nature from that time.

I was lucky enough up until I was 18 to have been trained as a utility man for future use. I was trained on belt patrol, belt maintenance, road repairs, Eimco driving, road repairs, material handling for all coal face installations, mainly using endless rope haulages. On the drifts main intake I used a direct haulage winch and I was also trained in the use of drilling gear, mainly for blowing sump holes, making manholes, and such. I used to take home £16.50 for a week's work at 16, rising to £20.00 at 17 and eventually when I first was coal face trained it went up to a massive £60.00 per week.

The day I turned 18 it all started to happen. On the Friday before my 18th birthday, Jack Twynam the dreaded training officer sent for me when I came off day shift. All he had to say was "Right Archibald, you are 18 on Monday?", to which I replied "Yes

that's right, have you got a birthday present for me?". The reply that I got was not what I expected, he only said "I have been waiting for your 18th birthday to come, you are now allowed to go on nights and, by the way, you start coal face training on Monday as well. Six months hard labour" he said, "Never did like you Archibald, now I am sending you with the big boys, they will sort you out and you will soon leave". It was a real shame, for some years later he sent for me again to praise me for all the good I had done for the pit, the respect I had gained and also I was a senior charginer at that point.

When I was Charginer of c12s in the Brinsley Seam, we hit what every coal miner never wants to see - a white wall. That means that you have gone as far as you can and the coal finally disappears. The next 12 months were the hardest work I ever came across. A coal face is not normally worked to the very end because of the geological problems but the management in their wisdom decided that somewhere on the other side of the white wall there was more coal. So we carried out long hole drilling to find it in front of us and we kept pushing the face forward with horrific results. It took 12 months and there were many accidents, with men losing fingers and I even got buried twice. It was 12 months of hell but we finally found coal at a lower depth, and good coal at that. I can still remember

the day we found coal again, it was very moving for all 75 of us. But after all of the sweat and tears to find it, they closed the coal face and left all the equipment including the latest eimcos behind! I had the feeling that all 75 of us were just guinea pigs.

Calverton colliery was know for producing a lot of gas (Methane mainly) and, to keep this down, they set up a methane drainage station at the bottom of the return drift going into the Brinsley seam. Basically what happens is that all coal face installations and headings in this side of the mine had pipes running from just behind the face or head end all the way out-by to the methane drainage station, at the head end or just behind the coal face. In the case of a coal face, it would be the return airway only. Holes were drilled in the roof using a special drilling rig and in most cases they were up to 25 meters deep. Pipes were inserted into the holes and sealed, then they would coupled to the main pipes running out-by. The out-by station could then monitor the amount of methane present and draw off dangerous levels, about 70% effective in my books. When drawn off, this methane was put through a diffuser at the pumping station and expelled into the general body of airflow at the bottom of the return drift, as the airflow here was like a gale blowing and it was very near the upcast shaft.

I always argued that this was another mistake of Calverton as there was enough gas produced to heat and run the whole of the surface buildings and heat the water in the baths but my ravings were ignored. A few years before I left Calverton, they adopted a similar drainage system at Hucknall Colliery and ran all the heating for the offices and pit head baths. The workshops also used the gas. I did receive a brief apology from management at Calverton with a rubbish excuse.

There was always a 3 shift system running at Calverton with Days, Nights and Afternoons, all 7 1/2 hours long. The shift started when you got out of the cage at pit bottom. You would go into the pit bottom office to the relevant board where you were working and a deputy would book your time in. There was totally no difference in working conditions on any shift unless you were a spare man or market man as the term is. If you were on the market then you could be doing a different job every shift.

There were so many jobs I have done that it would need hours to go through them. The main ones would be Trainee, Connie Driver, Belt Patrol, Ganger or Material Man, Rope Man, Trainee Coal Face Operator (once trained this became Power Loader Operator) This also was my time as a Tailgate Ripper where the real work is handled. I went on to become a Chargeman Ripper and had one of the best teams Calverton ever had, we never stopped the machine from cutting on the coal face. I eventually moved on the coal face full time and became a Chargeman and Senior Chargeman Shearer Driver, then a Coal Cutter Driver. I was the first driver in that seam to cut 1,200 yards of coal in a 6 foot seam in one shift. We were all knackered afterwards and I never hit 1,200 again!

The methods of haulage I have used is direct haulage more so on the intake drift of Calverton, return haulage, or endless, in Calverton we had really big locos for the main road's and man riding also small locos for the tighter conditions.

Sometimes there were problems at Calverton or Annesley-Bentinck with fires or heatings but the mines rescue usually dealt with those. However, sometimes we would stop off old roads where they didn't want any air getting in or just wanted it sealed. Close to the end of whichever road was going to be done, a section of cover would be exposed between the arches or rings set all the way round. Once a couple of rings had been exposed and the rock ragged down we would then set about building a wall with a gap in the middle, like building two walls at the same time so you create a cavity. The wall would be built with bags of hardstop, the material inside looked like pink cement and when mixed with water would go rock hard in no time. So we would bring in hardstop pumps, build the walls up with unopened bags right into the rings. As soon as the wall was half way up, we would start filling the cavity, which was created by mixing the hardstop in the pump system. Once you got to the top it all went hard so created a good air seal.

I have never experienced an explosion underground but have been underground when we had a belt drive catch fire. We got to the fresh air base in time but as soon as we could smell smoke we got real panicky.

I worked at Calverton pit for a total of 13 years and it was not a bad run. At the beginning I had told my dad that I would only do it part time then I would be off!