

## **Ifton Colliery**

**Location** - 1 mile north-west of St Martins (SJ321375)

**Minerals** - Coal

**Working Life** - Known working life : 19th century-1968

### **Memories of Ifton Colliery - Harry Richards (SCMC Journal No.4)**

The site of Ifton Colliery is in Shropshire but geologically it is on the southern edge of the North Wales Coalfield. Due to the dip of the strata, most of the haulage roads and all of the coal faces were inclined by as much as 1 in 3. This made it very difficult to work and the miners often said that if you could work at Ifton then you could work at any pit in the country or, in a lighter vein, that to have one leg longer than the other was a definite advantage! Imagine working on a coalface where your tools, props, etc were continually moving downhill, making the job twice as hard. It would have been nice to have the luxury of working on the flat but this never happened.

Although the colliery is generally called Ifton nowadays, it was originally known as the Gertrude Mine, named after a female member of the Craig family who founded it. As officials, we always used the name Gertrude on our daily reports.

I left elementary school at 14 and, since my father and brothers were already miners, it seemed the natural thing to follow them into the pit. I well remember meeting my father as he came up the shaft and then going with him to see the manager in his office. He immediately told us that I could start work underground on the very next day. Jobs were easy to get in those days providing your father was reasonably respected as a workman by the management. Up to then, I had been working part-time for a bread delivery firm after school hours so was used to the idea of working. The thought of finishing work early in the afternoon at 2.30-3.00pm was great but little did I realise that I would have to start at some unearthly hour in the morning!

Going down the shaft on my first day was a frightening experience. Between 12-14 men were cramped together in the cage, either standing, crouched or sitting since there was no room for movement. As the cage gathered speed on its descent into the depths, I remember experiencing a terrible feeling that the bottom of the cage was falling out, leaving me stranded in mid air. This feeling stayed with me for quite a few descents until it eventually became normal procedure. The exception was when a certain winding engine driver called Jim Evans was on duty. After a particularly rough ride, you would always hear the older miners say "Mad Jim's on today". After a week or two, I was able to buy a new pair of moleskin trousers which were the normal things worn. An old miner

remarked "He's signed on for life" and my subsequent 41 years proved him nearly right.

In the pit, wooden doors were fitted on the roadways to control the direction of the air flow. My first job was to open and shut one of these to allow ponies to pass through with a train (or journey) of tubs. My next job was to couple together journeys of tubs for the ponies, the tubs being pushed manually to the shunt by men called hutchers. The tubs were coupled together loosely by links and, as each link tightened as the pony began to move, the pony could tell how many tubs were in its journey. If any attempt was made to increase the allotted number of tubs in the journey, the pony would refuse to advance until the extra tubs had been uncoupled. The only names I can remember for the ponies were Prince, Bob, Dobbin and Ned.



At that time, roof supports in the roadways consisted of horizontal wooden bars across the roof with vertical wooden supports. On one occasion in a roadway, the roof had lowered due to weight on the supports and the floor had risen due to heaving so the pony was catching as it passed by. The drivers were very attached to their ponies and this particular driver (not very bright) refused to take his pony under the roof support and sent for the deputy fireman. On arrival, the deputy grabbed a pick and proceeded to make a temporary job since the accent was on output and the roof supports would be changed on the repairing shift. As the deputy was making a hole in the floor to increase the height, the pony driver was heard to say "his head's catching not his feet"!

I can remember listening to a debate on TV on how the well-off members of the community enjoyed riding with the hounds. Someone said that he knew some miners who went horse riding and Arthur Scargill immediately answered "So do I, pit ponies"! The ponies at Ifton between 1928-30 were reasonably well treated but theirs was a hard life, only being brought to surface during holiday breaks. They were housed in comfortable stables underground and were well fed and

watered by an ostler. At the end of their shift they would run out to the stable at a considerable rate, taking everything before them. Some drivers would indulge in the dangerous practice of riding on them, giving conviction to Scargill's remarks.

Later on I became an engine driver, which was an important job with the emphasis on production. Tubs of coal from faces below the main level were winched up an incline, whereas those from faces above were lowered down by a method called jiggling. In this, there was a full tub at the top of the incline connected to a cable which passed around a horizontal sheave wheel. The cable then passed to the bottom of the incline where it was connected to an empty tub. By using a brake on the sheave wheel, the full tub was lowered down and, in doing so, lifted the empty tub up to the top. These crude methods were phased out in 1930, soon after I started work - mechanisation was coming to Ifton.

The worst thing that could happen was to make an error and stop the flow of coal out of the mine. These were stationary winding engines without any method of gauging position and I tell people today that they were harder to drive than an aeroplane.

I then became a face worker and quickly found that it was a very hard, tedious operation. There were usually teams (sets) of three men working a section of the coal face, two colliers (coal hewers) and one filler, who was quite often a son or other relative of one of the colliers. The method used was a procedure called "bottom holing". Lying in a cramped position for hours at a time, the colliers would cut a section out of the bottom of the face using a hand pick. This was called "holing out". Wedge-shaped wooden sections were then placed into the gap at intervals and the face was ready for shotfiring.

Shotholes were bored by hand using a long cumbersome screw drill, which was secured with wooden props to keep it parallel to the face. This was a very skilled job since the shotholes had to be positioned just right to safely bring down the maximum amount of coal when the shots were fired. The filler's job was to load the loose coal into tubs and to push these along the roadway to the shaft. If a tub was thought to contain any substance other than coal, eg rock, dirt, etc, it was rejected and turned out at surface for everybody to see. The filler had all the blame for that too - "Poor filler, what a baptism"!

Each set filled and sent to surface over 20 tubs each shift, the tubs containing 7-10 cwt each. To identify the tubs, each set would have its own numbered tallies, made of leather and attached to the tubs with strong string threaded through two holes. At surface, the mine owner had a weighman who weighed each tub as it came out of the cage. He would record the weight of the tub and the set it came from, thus ensuring that each set received payment for their recorded tonnage. The miners also clubbed together to pay the wages of a checkweighman, who checked that the tubs were correctly weighed and allocated to the proper set.

The colliers provided their own tools and, at the end of each shift, would bring out their picks and drill bits to be sharpened on the surface ready for collection the following day. The colliers looked after their other tools themselves and I can remember turning the grindle stone while my father sharpened his pit axe.

Each set was only paid for the amount of coal it sent out of the mine and there was no minimum wage in those days. This piece rate method of working suited the mine owner because it encouraged the men to send out as much coal as possible. Where coal was easy to cut, it was possible to make good money but there were times when geological problems interfered with the cutting and there was less coal sent out as a result. These lean times made the men frustrated and short tempered and even my father, normally a pleasant, placid person, was subject to these moods at times. I did most jobs at Ifton during my employment but I am convinced that my father in his time worked much harder.

After hand cutting was phased out, coal was produced from 4 or 5 longwall faces, approximately 100-120 yards long. The coal was cut by machine in the middle of the seam to a depth of about 3-3ft. Holes were then bored into the top half of the face and the coal was brought down and broken up by shotfiring. It was then loaded or "handfilled" onto the Shaker Pan conveyor. After this, the bottom section was removed in a similar way. The seams worked at Ifton were 5ft, 6ft and 7ft, we never worked in small seams as were common in other mines. In fact, some of our seams were too big for comfort and almost unmanageable. When our faces became fully mechanised, Ifton produced a lot of coal due to the size of the seams. It does not take much imagination to realise that a "strip", a complete cycle up and down a face, produces much more coal on a 6ft seam than a 2ft one.

In the mechanised cutting process, the shearer disc cut and turned the coal on to the moving chain. Stable holes were prepared by hand using shotfiring methods, while the shearer moved upwards, ready for its advancement on its return. The machine cut on its upward journey and ploughed downhill. Advancement, or "pushing over", was done by automatic rams attached to the conveyor chain. Before this was done, however, the machine was advanced into the prepared stable in the roadway.

Another innovation was the introduction of storage bunkers. When a stoppage occurred to the flow of coal out of the mine, it could be directed into the bunkers so production could continue at the face. When the coal began to move again, the bunkers could be emptied. Stoppages were frequent due to haulage mishaps on the inclines. In later years, conveyor belts replaced rope haulage and most of Ifton's production was conveyed by belts to a loading point less than 100 yards from the winding shaft.

I was eventually made a Deputy and placed in charge of a section of the mine called a working district. I was responsible for the health and safety of the men

and answerable to the manager for the working of that district. He was required to make statutory reports daily, which were signed by over-officials and kept securely on the surface. In the old days, the Deputy was called the Fireman and fired all the shots. In later years, second grade Deputies were introduced to fire most of the shots and they were called Shottfirsers. This allowed the Deputy more time for his other duties such as supervising work, safety and of course production, which was always the dominating factor. To become a Deputy, I had to pass an exam for (air measurement) gas detecting, etc. This detecting was always done by reading the down turned flame on the safety lamp which Deputies always carried.

In the old days before mechanised mining, the Deputy measured the work done by each set of road rippers, etc and recorded any allowances due to them for other work. Unlike the colliers, these sets were engaged on non-productive but essential work, such as driving roadways, and they were paid per foot of passage driven. The Deputy would mark the side of the passage at the extent of their work and measure the distance back to the mark made the previous week. The difference would be the distance on which their pay was calculated.

The Deputy's lot was not an easy one. The responsibilities were massive and, with the manager on one side and the men you had grown up with on the other side, it was very difficult (if not impossible) to find a happy medium. Looking back over the 20 plus years that I was a Deputy, however, I pride (or console!) myself that I came through reasonably well and that I can look both the men and the manager in the eye when we meet today.

One thing that I remember well were the mice that lived underground. They had presumably first come down in the ponies' food but, when ponies were phased out in the 1930s, they had to look elsewhere and preyed on our food. We had a constant battle with them over our "snapping", which we used to hang from the roof. For some reason, they could negotiate string but not wire. If you did not have a tin container and had wrapped your food in paper hung up by a string, you could guarantee that the mice would get to it before you! I remember once coming off the face at snap time to where we had hung up our food. One miner was in time to see the mice scampering away, with large holes where they had burrowed through the paper into his butties. Nonplussed he reached for his snapping and one of his mates was shocked that he was going to eat it. He replied, "If its good enough for them its good enough for me". One of the roadways was nicknamed "Mouse's Alley" - it was so low that even the mice caught their backs on the roof! All of the roadways had names such as Lloyd's Dip, Hatton's Level and Rodway's Crut.

Around 1930, a terrible disaster happened at Gresford Colliery, about 10-12 miles from Ifton. I didn't know a lot about practical mining at that time but I remember my father telling me that bad mining practices had played a part in that terrible happening. Repair of airways had been neglected since this was

regarded as dead work, ie non-productive. On that memorable Sunday afternoon, an enterprising bus contractor organised a conveyance to Gresford. There were hundreds of sightseers at the pithead and I regret to say that I was in the crowd. It struck me at the time how helpless everyone was and from that time I decided that, if my future was to be in mining, I would make every endeavour to be of some use. I decided then to become trained in the Rescue Brigade.

You couldn't just become a Rescueman and it was some time before I was even given the chance to attend a selection course. This involved daily attendance over a period of two weeks for extensive training. We had to spend 2 hour sessions in a prepared gas-filled chamber erecting sandbag stoppings, etc. This was very strenuous work and it succeeded in its objective of "separating the men from the boys". I am pleased to say that I came through successfully and I stayed in the service for over 15 years, only leaving because of the age limit.

After qualifying, rescue practices consisted of four visits per year to the Rescue Station at Wrexham or at one of the neighbouring pits. Rescuemen always visited other pits in their area to become familiar with them in case of emergencies. At the station each man assembled his own apparatus, which was checked by the Captain before we entered the gas-filled chamber for a gruelling 2 hour session in a red hot atmosphere. The cumbersome apparatus consisted of a heavy canister containing a supply of over 2 hours of oxygen, which was breathed through the mouth and controlled by valves. There was a clip over the nose and, of course, no talking. After donning the apparatus, everything was done by a code of signals sounded on a small hooter attached to the apparatus. The Captain gave the signal for each operation and was required to make a detailed report after each session.

Rescue teams were a vital part of mining and every colliery had to have by law a percentage of trained rescue men. Ifton had two teams of 5-6 men. It was a voluntary service for which we received no extra pay, until later years when a small retaining fee was paid. The job was very strenuous and demanding but the worthwhile feeling of being prepared and involved gave us all a great deal of satisfaction. I became Captain for a number of years and received the three medals awarded for 5 years (Bronze), 10 years (Silver) and 15 years (Gold) long service. We attended most pits in the area during that time, mostly for underground fires, etc but were fortunate that no lives were involved. Underground fires were quite common and I remember one time where our team was on duty waiting to go down. The manager came over and remarked "We can't sell our coal as people say it won't burn - they should see it down there!".

I well remember the first callout that came soon after I joined the Rescue Brigade, to a fire down a small old pit called Llay Hall near Wrexham. I was the youngest member on the team and the hundreds of villagers sightseeing at the pithead did not help my composure as it brought back memories of Gresford. The fire was situated at the bottom end of a face where the coal cutting machine

turned round. That machine cut a long wall face (a method not used at Ifton) as it went up and down, cutting in both directions. Again, bad practice had prevailed with the stable (turning point) not being packed off securely. There was water available so we proceeded to put the fire out with hoses. We did a two hour stint that night before being relieved by another team and found that the fire had been extinguished when we returned the following day.

During the years, I saw some phenomenal changes in the pit. Ifton changed over to longwall faces, a new steel headgear, electric winding engine and a modern washery and screens at surface. One of the most welcome changes in later years was the pithead baths - Ifton was then really "on the map". The changes underground were intended to make it safer for working but they were not always welcomed by the older miners who were set in their ways. Wooden roof supports were replaced with steel props on faces and steel arches on roadways. Coal dust in the air could be a danger as it sometimes exploded, so dust suppression was introduced on faces and at loading points. Better lighting and first aid appeared, together with compulsory steel helmets and safety boots for the miners. As trained first aid personnel we had access to morphia, which we were able to administer when necessary because it took so long to get a doctor to the scene.

Despite rigid safety measures, accidents occurred at regular intervals and some of these were fatal. It was noticeable that there was a spate of bad accidents when long wall faces came into vogue. I will give two examples of bad accidents to demonstrate how dangerous the job was.

In the first example, a friend of mine in my early days was waiting to unhook a journey proceeding up dip. An overhead girder snapped and fell, striking him on the head and killing him instantly. The girder was a used tram line, a cheap form of roof support that had found its way into mining. Following the accident, this type of girder was condemned since it was realised that they had lost structural strength and could snap like a carrot at any time.

In the second example, I had a rare week off work and my workmate was allowed to change shifts from nights to days. During that week he was crushed between tubs and a steel girder which crossed the roadway to carry a motor and gearing to drive a small conveyor at a loading point. Again, this method of operation was condemned after the accident and a new construction was erected on future loading points.

We took these occurrences in our stride at the time but they gave cause for much reflection in later years. One old miner often said that there was no such thing as an accident, the fault could always be directed at somebody. I also remember the first overman in charge I worked for, who often spoke in similes. He would say "Its surprising what a lot of difference a bit of difference makes". He would use these words when a lift or some help was required because many jobs were much easier when done by two persons.

During my time, Ifton had always been connected to Chirk Green pit, the latter acting as the upcast shaft. After Black Park Colliery closed, I recall a connection being driven to join up with that as well. As a safety measure, officials had to regularly travel these roadways to check on their condition. They went one way underground and returned on the surface. It was necessary to be familiar with these ways out in case of emergency where we couldn't use the main shafts.

As the colliery began to expand, the National Coal Board built a number of new houses to accommodate the influx of workers from other areas, whom we in the village regarded as foreigners. One such family came from the Midlands and was obviously used to different ways from us. Their father sadly died quite young and the 17 year old son Frank, who was working with us, was asked by the deputy in charge when his father's funeral was to be held. He replied "I don't know yet but I hope its not on Saturday as the Wolves are at home"!

Closure of Ifton was due to several reasons, the chief one being the underground fires which we referred to as "heating". We encountered a lot of trouble over the years with heating at our colliery and I firmly believe that bad mining practices were the main reason for their occurrence. Old workings and roadways were often not packed with waste or sealed off securely and this allowed oxygen to circulate. Even where packing was done, this sometimes included combustible material such as coal which would readily ignite.

There was only one sure way of dealing with breakouts of fire and that is by erecting a complete wall ("stopping") of sandbags on the intake side. This sealed off the workings and prevented any further oxygen getting in. The problem with this, however, was that it meant the loss of a working face and complete stopping was only done at Ifton as a last resort. The alternative usually employed was to dig the burning coal out of the sides of roadways and to replace it with sandbag stoppings. In later years, a quick setting cement mixture was pumped into the cavities instead.

We once had a rather long fight against a fire at our colliery over several days. Our team went on duty on the afternoon shift to do our allotted two hours stint and we were met by the Overman. He informed us that good progress was being made due to the help of the rescue team preceding us, who had organised the filling of sandbags and thus released men for other jobs. Such work was outside the required duties of the rescue team, which was supposed to only be on standby with apparatus fitted ready for emergency.

A member of our team appointed himself as our spokesman and bluntly informed the overman that we intended to comply with the regulations. The manager was informed and he came down to speak to us. He hadn't been at the colliery long and he was a real down to earth product of South Wales. I well remember his words "What's going on here lads! When I went home last night my daughter said 'Who's this strange man'. It was that long since she had seen me. We all want to

get home so let's get this job done. It's our pit". Needless to say we all got stuck in!

The bottling up procedure for fires went on for some years and, with constant observation of danger spots, proved quite successful. In the last few years, however, breakouts became more frequent and too close to the main shaft for comfort. I was at Ifton until the end and have a photograph of a small consignment going down on the last shift, taken by a local paper.

### **Memories of Ifton Colliery - Graham Lloyd**

I left school in 1936 when I was aged 15, together with four of my friends. I didn't have any relatives working down Ifton Colliery but I did have a friend who already worked there. He told all five of us that we could get much more money working down the pit than anywhere else (I was working for a butcher at the time) so we applied for jobs and I spent the next 3 years there.

On my first day I started on the Day Shift (6.00am until 2.00pm) and went straight underground with no training. There were 3 shifts and on each shift there were 200-250 men working underground and on surface. I had mixed feelings when I first got into the cage and I stood by myself as all the other miners stood back from me. I later found out that most new people were sick when the cage lifted up about a foot then started down at great speed. I wasn't sick myself but that is why they gave me a wide berth! The cage had four decks with about 10 men to a deck. My first job underground was at the shaft bottom, uncoupling tubs of coal and hutching (pushing) them to the cage. This took eight tubs (two to a deck) up the shaft at a time, a similar cage coming down at the same time. The tubs weighed 5cwt and were not too hard to hutch but it was a bit harder to lift when they came off the rails. We had to lift the middle and swing our bum over but even the smallest could do this. When I came up I had to bike 6 miles home to Oswestry. There were no pit head baths at that time but I was lucky because we were one of the few families who had a bath at home.

At some mines the miners gave their tallies to the onsetter before getting into the cage but we didn't do it that way. We took our tallies home with us and handed them in at the lamproom to get our lamp. This also acted as a clocking in mechanism. We never actually had much contact with the lampman because everything was done through an open window. When the shift was over we took our lamp back and was handed our tally. The tally number was on our lamp and that way they knew we had come up. If there were any lamps missing they went to look for them. The first men out of the cage on descending were the firemen and shotlighters. The fireman went through our pockets to search for contraband such as matches or cigarettes. Most miners hid theirs in a tin under their bike seat for when they finished shift and in those days nobody would touch them.

It was not a wet pit, some parts of it were quite cool, but the deeper we went the hotter it got. Lloyds Haulage was hot and, as we went down, one of the reasons for the manholes in the side walls was to store our clothes. We would maybe place our jacket in one and shirt in another and so on. We had to walk to work from the shaft bottom but we were never allowed to walk in the haulage way when it was running. Down below there were lots of sacks of limestone dust in the form of a fine white powder. One of our jobs was to chuck this about on the roadways as we went to our shift. This was heavier than coal dust and stopped it getting in the air as we walked to work. We had our breaks where we worked but I only remember having half an hour. This depended on the colliers as they got paid for what coal they sent out from their seam. We took food in snap tins and water in tin bottles. My favourite was jam and cheese butties. We did get mice down the pit and they did like our snap if they could get at it! I quickly learned and put mine in a tin but we did leave bits of bread for them to eat. They did use ponies at one time but not when I was down there. The stables were still there but the firemen and shotlighters used them as offices. The lamp relighter was also in the stables.

Although I went to night school after a while, most of what I learned was down the pit itself. I particularly wanted to know more about the engines. The clothes we wore were our own as there was nothing provided. On my first payday I bought a pair of moleskin trousers which seemed to be the favourite item worn by miners. We were always given our pay in our own pay tin which had our tally number on. This was 5 inches high and 3 inches across with the top half open - our money was stuffed inside it. We would take out the money and hand it back in for the following week. I can't quite remember what we got paid but I think it was about 36 shillings. My old job was working 11 hours a day for 5 shillings a week so you can see why we went down the mine. It was very poor pay working for a butcher.

We had no helmet and our only lamp was a very large and heavy electric one, 9 inches high by 4 inches around the base. The light was on the top and we turned the base clockwise to switch it on. When I started driving engines I also had an oil lamp. We used our oil lamps to test for gas and were told to place the lamp near to the engines. We tested all around it and if the flame turned blue we waited for the walking fireman to check it and give the go ahead to work. If they went out, the lamps could be relit down below by the shot lighter or a fireman. The lamps were made by E Thomas & Williams Ltd of Aberdare. We went down like a Christmas tree with two lamps, oil can, bottle of water and a snap tin - all hanging on our belt except for the big lamp. I used to work only the morning and night shifts as the afternoon shifts were only for ripping.

I was eventually moved to a very deep coal seam which we called Lloyds Haulage (also known as Lloyds Dip). This haulage way was very steep, the first stage was at least three quarters of a mile long (at an angle of 1 in 3) and then it levelled off for about half a mile. There were what was known as "Throw Ons" (or

as one bright spark called them Throw Me Ons), the purpose of which was to put tubs that came off the rails back on again. They consisted of a piece of hard wood placed at the side of the rail track and a 4 foot length of rail nailed down at an angle, 18 inches wide at the end. There was one each side of the track at intervals. The tubs had to be unclipped and hatched on the level sections. They were then clipped to the rope again on an endless haulageway. The remainder of the journey went on down for maybe a mile to the coal seam, where I worked on the Pan Shaker. The only way I can describe the Pan Shaker is to imagine a 44 gallon oil drum slit from top to bottom lengthways (a bit like a kid's slide). These were much thicker, however, and about 10 feet long, all joined together in a line. A compressed air motor operated an arm which pulled the pans backwards and forwards. The colliers loaded coal onto them and it shook the coal along to the tub loaders (there were no belts in those days). Once the tubs were loaded, they were turned and sent back up the haulage way.

They used compressed air drills to drill the coal face so that the shotlighter could put in the powder and detonator to crack the seam. They then used their picks (with a short blade about 14 inches long) to pull the coal down so it could be loaded on to the pans to shake down to the tub loaders. They did have a coal cutter but all it did was cut a 3 inch strip of dirt 4 feet up the seam - it looked like a chain saw on a very large scale

Then I was moved to the "500ft Down" haulageway to where men were opening up a new seam. This consisted of a static engine operating a single rope. It was hard work since two empty tubs were pushed to the top of a dip and lowered down to where to men worked. When they reached the working face, the colliers pulled on a signal wire once to let me know to stop the engine. When the tubs were loaded, the colliers pulled on the wire twice and I pulled them up and let two more empty tubs down. I was not allowed to ride down in the empty tubs but once two big miners made me! One night the same miners rang the bell to pull them up in the tubs and I pulled them up too fast. One didn't like it at all so he got me by the neck and told me he had buried better \*\*\*\*\* than me down there! I never did find out where this roadway went as it was a long way down to where the two men worked but it carried on down with no rails. I asked one of the colliers where it went to and he did say about another 400ft but never try to go down there. I wondered if it was an escape road as I did read that they made a steep road to Black Park Pit.

The top of this incline joined the main two line roadway to the shaft bottom which was operated by an endless rope. This rope was not so thick, it pulled about 16 tubs (called a "journey") and I had to stop this rope to put my two tubs on the back of the journey. When the two tubs had been hauled up the incline, I used locking pins that were 1 inch thick and 18 inches long placed in the spokes of the wheels to stop the tubs moving. There was a chain about 5ft long with a hook at each end, one hook went in the tow bar of the first truck and the other on the rope. After the locking pins were taken out of the wheels and the haulage

restarted you took the last 18 inches of the chain and, as the tubs moved off, you wound the chain around the rope then the chain was slipped in the hook. We then had to hold the chain so it slipped along the rope, it could not be too tight and it had to be done this way because the 5 tubs closed up. This is when fingers could be lost as it had to be held until the slack was taken up.

It was not long before I moved back to Lloyds to a side working where I worked on a Main & Tail engine, which pulled out about 16 tubs on a flat roadway. It had a rope attached to the front tub and one to the rear, the front pulled the tubs from the working and the rear rope pulled the empties back to the working. The haulage signals were 1 bell to Stop, 2 bells to Start and 3 bells to go home. On an endless rope you knew when you had a problem such as a "thitener". This was when two tubs came off the rails and wedged up against the wall side. You then got out of the way fast as the rope whipped like a snake. We had man holes cut in the side of the roadway so we could shelter from this. Operating an engine could be a lonely job as we were on our own most of the time. However, I remember once when I worked on the Pan Shaker that we were having our snap and there was little chap bragging that he could hurt anyone who put their finger in his mouth, even though he had no teeth. One of the colliers got a rail spike and put it in this chap's mouth. He thought it was a finger in the semi dark and he was biting like hell with the water running from the side of his mouth! One sad memory was when a collier tried to hold up a roof with his back. They left his cap where he died and it was still there when I left the pit.

When the coal tubs came up to surface they were tipped into a washer which took out the rock and dirt. The coal was then loaded into railway trucks and in those days the company had their own name on the trucks (W Y Craig and Son ). The only time I saw any coal dumped on the surface was when we over-produced. The colliery was linked to the main Paddington-Liverpool railway line at Gobowen. The pit had two shunting engines. The waste was taken up to the tip (or slag heap as we called it) by tubs running on railway lines pulled by a rope engine. There used to be a very large tip but it has since been bulldozed and landscaped. There were the offices, lamproom and blacksmiths shop where they sharpened the colliers' picks. Winston Churchill once visited the pit and mark the occasion a one yard square of coal was cut out, placed on a flat bogey and sent to where he lived.

Most miners came from St Martins but others were from Whittington, Gobowen, Chirk and Weston Rhyn. The Chirk miners came when Black Park Pit closed. Myself and my pals did not take part in the life of Ifton village as we lived at Oswestry and it was a 12 mile round trip. There was a miners welfare there, I believe it was built some time in the 1930s, but I only used it once. The only holiday I can remember having was once when we over-produced and were put on a 3 day week. The company got the dole people down to sign us on for 4 days dole. When we were laid off, the younger ones were taken by bus each day for 3 days to the Derbyshire Miners Research Centre near Buxton. We were taken into

different buildings, one with miners' tools which were explained to us then to a room with safety things in it. On the third day we were taken in to a narrow passage with a mockup of a mining roadway with coal tubs, pit props and a half ring that held up the roof, as well as lots of coal dust. We were taken through this roadway and out of the other end and then taken to sit on the hill side and told to wait. They told us to cover our ears and then all hell broke loose with a mine explosion. Everything came flying out - tubs, pit props, rings and rock - with a hell of a bang and flames.

I left the mine when the war started and five of us who had started in the pit together from school were all called up into the army. They asked us if we wanted to go back down the pit but we all said that we didn't as we thought the war would last so long. I am sorry to say that only three of us came back. When the war was over I got married and went to live in Lincolnshire. Ten years ago I went back to the old pit but only the offices, lamproom and blacksmiths were still there.

### **The Shaft Sinking Saga at Ifton Colliery 1912-44 (SCMC Journal No.3)**

Ifton Colliery is situated in the northern part of the spur of the Denbighshire Coalfield, which passes into North Shropshire. This area was already being mined in the early 19th century and the Ifton Colliery is referred to in the Mines Inspector's list for 1860. The mine workings in Wales, however, completely overshadowed the Shropshire operations. By 1912, the company that operated Brynkinalt Shaft in Wales (W Y Craig & Son) were working towards Ifton and decided to develop it further. The Ifton Rhyn Company already had a 135yds deep shaft at Ifton, about 1 1/2 miles South East of Brynkinalt Shaft, and it was decided to take this over and deepen it. The workings in Wales and England would then be connected.

In March 1912, a German company was employed to start sinking and by 1914 they were 415yds down. Due to the war, the Government stepped in and stopped the sinking but the colliery company formed an inset at this level and got the coal by driving two tunnels, one north and the other south (Fig.4). The tunnels reached coal in 1921 and 1923 respectively and, during the years of development, Brynkinalt Colliery continued to produce coal. The old workings and new shaft were connected in 1921 and for some years both Brynkinalt and Ifton produced coal until Brynkinalt was closed for coaling in 1928. It then became the upcast and emergency shaft for Ifton Colliery, which was a single shaft site.

At this time, production was about 1,000 tons per day with 1,357 men, the largest mine Shropshire was ever to have. In 1940, it was decided to deepen the shaft by a further 75yds to cut out the two sloping tunnels put in temporarily in 1914 when sinking had previously been stopped. The principal problem was that the Ifton shaft was an all-purpose shaft and could not be used for the deepening

activities themselves. The solution was to drive a tunnel back from the workings in the lower seams under the present shaft and then to "sink" upwards to the shaft bottom.

A borehole, commencing at 18" diameter, was put down from the base of the existing shaft to the full depth of 75yds without interfering with production but there was no guarantee that it was truly vertical. The borers gave a guarantee, however, that it would be less than 2ft out and later it was found to be less than 1ft 10ins. To do the boring, it was necessary to make a small engine house in the shaft side. Work was done on night shift and at a rate of 4-6ft per shift, the hole being completed in 2 months. The deep level tunnel reached the position beneath the existing shaft and located the borehole in May 1942. The cavity for the new pit bottom was then formed and bricked 2ft thick, 16ft high and 15ft wide to accommodate the new 15ft shaft. It was then necessary to sink downwards from the new pit bottom for 20yds using conventional methods to form the new sump. After the sump was completed, shaft "raising" commenced. The company used its own employees, partly as they felt the work needed careful treatment since they would be driving upwards to connect with their working shaft.

The shaft raising method used was fairly conventional and it is described in "Iron & Coal Trades Review" for September 14th 1951. The drawings accompanying that article show the method clearly. The work of raising continued without affecting the shaft operations above until a point had been reached where only 10yds remained solid. From here, all work was carried out at night when the shaft winding operations above were at a standstill. The shaft was completed in August 1944 and the total cost of the new shaft, which was done entirely by one chargeman and two men including the borehole, worked out at £47-4s-0d per yard. A shaft about half this diameter 80 years before on the Titterstone Clee Hill cost this much. Before full depth winding could commence, a larger winding drum had to be fitted to take the extended rope. Ifton Shaft was now 482yds deep.

In 1947, the colliery was nationalised along with its neighbour in Wales, Black Park Colliery only 1.75 miles away. At that time Ifton Colliery, then still known as Brynkinalt although this was now only a ventilation shaft, had seen its number of employees fall to 974, while Black Park had 402 employees. In 1949, it was decided to close Black Park and to work the remaining coal from Ifton. For this, a 910yds long tunnel had to be driven at over 1 in 5 gradient to connect the underground workings. Black Park Colliery was at least 117 years old (as shown on old mine plans) and was close to the western outcrops of the coal seams. Its main shaft, however, was only 272yds deep.

By 1960, the modernised Ifton Colliery had a manpower of 1,250 and a daily output of 1,750 tons. The colliery eventually closed in 1968.

### **Surface Remains**

The site is now used by other firms but a number of old colliery buildings still remain, including the pithead baths and office block. A small coal tub mounted on rails has been preserved as a memorial to the mine and the miners welfare building still survives in the village. If you feel active, the line of the old mineral railway can be followed to its junction with the main line at Preesgweene.