MY LIFE AS A HEWER OF COAL! 1944–1948

An account, written in 2012by the late Alan Dell , of life as a Bevin Boy in WW2. Alan was one of the founding members of our U3A

It is now 65 years ago that I joined a group of young men in their late teens at Paddington Station en route to a new life within the coalfields of South Wales. I, along with 48,000 others between 1943 and 1948, had been chosen by ballot to become one of the lost generation known as Bevin Boys, for it has only been in the last 10 years or so that their very existence has been acknowledged and partially appreciated.

Although the end of the 2nd World War in Europe was then only six months away, the shortage of manpower in the pits had been a growing worry to the authorities. Many younger coal miners had taken the opportunity of joining the forces or seeking better-paid war work elsewhere. Indeed some had been called up themselves before the consequences of this major mistake by the Government had been appreciated.

Teenagers, as we now call them, had been “encouraged” to join a cadet force of one kind or another. I had been a Boy Scout and this was also considered to be a worthwhile movement prior to joining the forces but now after almost four years of war, the call up of youth had been brought to a fine art. At seventeen and thirty nine weeks, registration took place, which was coupled with a medical. If passed fit, all was ready for a call up exactly on attaining eighteen years of age. All I recall of the medical was a puzzling commotion with a bulky boy shouting that he wanted some privacy and wasn’t going to undress along with all the others; he was swiftly hustled away into a back room. For many years I wondered why he was making such a fuss but now think perhaps he was trying to hide the fact that he was missing a vital piece of evidence, so to speak. I never did to this day know why men were told to cough during a particular part of a medical; I had led a very sheltered life up to then, as subsequent events were to prove.

At the interview, before a portly red-faced army officer, he asked what were my hobbies “Walking and hiking”, I replied. What a brilliant answer! I cowered at the gleam in his eye, as he no doubt thought, “the Infantry for him!” I was just another

number and that, in retrospect, was my downfall, so to speak, for the ballot was said to have taken place each month by the simple method of the extraction of two numbers, one to ten, from a bowler hat at the Ministry of Labour. If either of those two digits coincided with the last number given at registration, compulsory direction into the mining industry followed.

The journey from Paddington to South Wales seemed unending. After changing trains at Newport, the journey to Oakdale, the Training Colliery for South Wales, continued via the famous now demolished Crumlin viaduct. The four weeks instruction was divided between lectures, physical training, surface work and visits underground; accommodation was in a hostel. Many of the lectures concentrated on how coal was formed in the year dot but little on how it was extracted – surely the whole point of the exercise. The so-called surface work consisted of shovelling one pile of slack coal to an adjacent one. At least we had the opportunity of getting to know one end of a shovel from the other. About week four came the dreaded first descent "down the 'ole" as the song the lads sang had it and the full extend of what was to come was revealed.
I never became reconciled to that first plunge downward and I have never recited the Lord's Prayer to myself so many times as in the three or so years, and well over five, and nearer six, hundred days I worked below. The cage was usually packed with many dozens of men and fell like a proverbial stone into the void. It was little consolation to be told that the descent and ascent was slowed down when the workers were involved compared with the speed with which coal was raised.

At the end of the training period, a choice of a pit within the area was offered and I opted for one with a pithead bath. This was Markham in the Sirhowy Valley, about five miles south of Tredegar at the head of the valley, which is not to be confused with Margam, a steel town near Port Talbot Neath.

To those who do not know the area, the valleys in South Wales run like the inverted fingers of a hand, the high Brecon Beacons to the north down to the plain on which the two cities of Newport and Cardiff stand on the mouth of the river Severn. Communication both by road, and at that time by rail, ran north to south down the valleys but there was very little movement possible across to the next valley, east and west, other than by walking; the roads were, with some exceptions, very little more than mountain tracks. This led to a certain amount of isolation within communities and the Welsh language was not universally spoken in this part of what was then Monmouthshire (now Gwent), as it was in other valleys of South Wales.

There were strangely English sounding names as well, which appeared to be somewhat incongruous to the newcomer, amongst which were Blackwood, Oakdale, Charlestown, Crosskeys, Newbridge, Hollybush, and Rock. We could cope with Bryn and Mawr but fooled when it came to Ynysddu lower down the

Sirhowy Valley.

Figure 1: Bevin Boys Medal first issued in 2008

Bevin Boys Monument National Memorial Atboretum