Mineworkings: Donald Fulton

Transcription of interview by Nicky Bird on 6 September, 2023

Recorded on location at Barrhill Community Centre, Cumnock, East Ayrshire
Original Transcription by Joan MacKenzie
Length in total: 9 minutes 10 seconds

00:00:00 Nicky Bird: So, Donald, you were saying, when you started at the Barony and, eventually went to Killoch, so that you and the photographer, Milton Rogovin, would have coincided around 1982. How would you describe your job that you were doing?

00:00:12 Donald Fulton: My job at that point was known as ‘power-loading’. It was basically... To be a power-loader, you had to be face-trained, which was different fae being underground-trained, or whatever. No all the miners were face-trained. You got your face-training; that allowed you into the face lines. You were actually going after the coal, whereas the people that weren’t face-trained, they weren’t... their job was normally to supply and tae assist the people that were going after the coal, the power-loaders.

The power-loader could work anywhere fae...one end o’ the face line tae the other. There was people called ‘brushers’ who were making the roadways higher and wider, and putting girders up so that it was safe for everybody.

You had the stablemen. They were there to cut into the coal in advance of the machine so that, when the machine came down, they would swap over the picks that cut the coal and everything, they had room to dae it. So, the stablemen had to be on their best game every day. They had tae be... boring, firing and...digging like hell a day long just to get the coal out, so that when the machine come back, it had room to get changed over and away again without any haudbacks. Cos at the end of the day, the maximum amount of coal was the goal for the day.

There was also the machine men and what they called the chock men. The chock men’s job was tae drop the roof supports and move them in, er, once the machine had passed and what they called snake it in the pans. When the pans... if you consider the pans are sitting in a straight line and the machine comes down by, they’d shove that end in, and as the machine was passing it would snake back in, so that it was constantly moving forward like that.
So your power-loading job covered all these areas.

And then, the rest of the time I was in as a collier, it was private mines, so there was no the same strict rules in the private mines. When you went down a private mine, you were down there to make the maximum amount of money. Get the maximum amount of coal out, so that you were assured that you'd made your wages.

00:02:36 NB: When you were describing your experience of also working in the private mines and then going on to Monktonhall and Castlebridge, you know, some of those differences of your mining experience?

00:02:51 DF: Every National mine and every private mine, they were all there for the same reasons. But a lot of them had all different methods of working. You could pick up, if you left one mine and went to another, you could pick up basically from where you left off. But you would find that you had to do it differently, from the last place, because different people work in different ways.

Some of them, it was a step backwards; some of them, it was a leap forward. They were mair lenient in the private sector than what they were in the Coal Board.

And even the mine itself, the layout of the strata and the coal face and everything, that had a big effect on how you had to work. But if you come up against a fault, or something like that, and you had to try to get round about it, it meant that you'd either a steep decline to get down under the fault or a steep incline to get up over it.

You could get in as a... apprentice engineer, apprentice electrician, but I was demoted to being an apprentice miner... (LAUGHS) ...which I’m quite glad about.

This lamp in particular, this is a miner's lamp. This is a deputy's lamp. The colliers and the workmen, they had a lamp similar to this. But it had to be lighted on the surface before it was taken down the pit. And they had to be careful not to knock the flame out, because that was there to last all day. They couldn'ae relight it if the flame went out.

This here, is a deputy's lamp which has a striker on the side. So, if the deputy's lamp went out, because the deputy needed to relight it straight away because, accumulations of gas or whatever, it had a striker here which, you could relight your lamp. The lamp was used for testing for methane gases, which were lighter than air and usually were found in the higher areas of the roadway or face lines.
The deputy’s job was to find it and disperse it, before it got to any dangerous levels, for the sake of the men. You carried one of these lamps down the pit. Most of the colliers would carry them by the handle. And they would do it as carefully as they could because, if their lamp went out, they were ultimately responsible for the wellbeing of the lamp. So, after the flame had went out, they were basically carrying a fair weight about wi them aa day for no good reason.

I got a reference fae I private company I worked for, and it’s actually quite a glowing reference. I couldnae believe the bit at... I think it’s that bit.

00:05:52 NB: “Donald was a good worker. He was about to be upgraded to deputy when the mines closed. His attendance and timekeeping was good. Donald was amenable and has an even temperament and even gets on with all who work with him. Therefore, I have no hesitation in recommending him for work in any mining environment.”

00:06:11 DF: I think the guy’s lying! (LAUGHS) The best o’ it was, they said there that I was due to get on as deputy. I’d been on as deputy for months, but they hadn’t put it through the books or something. But although I was daeing the job, it wasnae on their books.

These badges were given out to the miners that came out on strike and, stayed out on strike for the year, and showed their allegiance to the National Union of Mineworkers.

My oldest son was... he was 12 days old when the strike started... he was too young, but he knows everything that’s happened through us talking and different things, and explaining things and aa the rest of it. And he’s really very bitter about it, yeah. As we all are, really, especially... Well, I’m talking about my family; we’re aa fairly bitter about it.

A lot of people will say, ‘Oh, it was all these years ago; let it go’. But when somebody does that tae you, you don’t forget easily.

We didnae see it coming. Arthur Scargill seen it coming. He warned us aa aboot it, but we didnae see it coming. And then, when it has, that’s what beat us, eventually, was, they’d been storing coal away for aboot ten years. So when the strike come on, they’d ten years’ worth of coal. You cannae beat against that, cos they can just shut everything doon and say, ‘Well, fair enough. We’ve got the coal to keep the country going, or to keep the gas stations going and all the rest... all the power stations going and everything.
If you look at the miners, it was a great summer that year and the miners are standing there wi flipflop sandals on and shorts on, and T-shirts or vests or whatever. And the police are standing there like Robocop. And then, they bring in the horses, and they charge intae the miners and then say, ‘The miners started it’. Who in their right minds in a set of flipflops is gonnae run up against a polisman on a horse?!

I’d gae through it again.

I think most... most of the guys that stayed out for the year, I think most ae us would.

And, the last time we met and had a conversation, I’d said to you then, that I think most of the guys... if there was a mine opened up tomorrow, most of the guys would gae back in it. They aa said, ‘I’m no fit tae dae the coal work now, but I could dae, ken, everything else’. But they would aa gae back doon.

But, I’ve got to say I’m fiercely proud that I was a miner. I still am. Fiercely proud o being a striking miner. That’ll always be there. And this interview today, I think, is a great thing... It’s a great thing for tae keep mining...history alive because it should never be forgotten.