Mineworkings: Iain Chalmers

Transcription of interview by Nicky Bird on 7 September, 2023

Recorded on location at the Willie Clarke Centre, Lochore Meadows Country Park, and Iain’s shed in Fife

Original Transcription by Joan MacKenzie

Length in total: 20 minutes 30 seconds

0.00.00 Iain Chalmers: Once the strike was over, I realised that, in a very short period of time, there would not be a coal industry left in definitely in Scotland. And I wanted to preserve as much, as I could. So, what I did was, I started collecting Strike Centre report books fae some o the various Strike Centres, the Dysart Strike Centre. I myself kept a diary through the strike on a day-to-day basis, and I donated that. And I wanted the stuff to be preserved for future generations, so they could look back at the strike and analyse and study it, for what it was. And it was no just a major industrial event, but the social implications of the strike as well. And I think it’s important that, you know, future generations can look at it and, certainly through various angles, but the angle I wanted them to get was a day-to-day life of a striking miner.

Anyway, it was on the third time, I remember it well, it was on the third time when I went into Kirkcaldy District Museum, which is where I was giving the stuff. A nd wi a load of stuff. Like I say, Minute Books et cetera, et cetera. And the curator, a lovely woman by the name of Andrea Kerr... (CHUCKLES) She says, ‘Iain... will you be making a habit o bringing in these donations?’ And I said as a joke at the time, I says, ‘I’ve every intentions of coming in and making these donations. And if I could get you the Frances pulley wheels, I would’. Anyway, many years later, it turns oot, not only I could, but I did! (CHUCKLING) And that conversation with Andrina springs to mind and made me smile at the time. But the important thing about Andrina was, she says, ‘If you’re gonna collect things, we’re gonna teach you to collect’. And the first thing I thought was, ‘How the hell do you teach somebody to collect?’ It’s just, you know... anyway, herself and Dallas Meechan, who was a deputy curator, says, ‘You got 10, 15 minutes?’ I says, ‘Aye... I have’. So, they took...
me into this side room and the two of them sat me down and taught me how to collect things. And when they taught me how to collect things I seen the value in it. It’s important no just to collect artefact. But the artefact without the history is... to quote Andrina, the curator, “an artefact without the history is classified as bric-a-brac”. Because you could go in there with a miner’s lamp. It’s... OK, it’s a miner’s lamp. Whose was it? Where did they work? What pit? How long? You know? You build up the story, you get the story of the item. So, you’re collecting no just the artefact; you’re collecting the history with the artefact and you’re making it personalised. And they showed me what questions tae ask and how to ask the questions, the main questions that have to be answered.

When I try to explain to people, I always say, ‘Think of Tutankhamun’s mask’. Beautiful. I saw it in Edinburgh close up and it’s absolutely astounding. Amazing. Noo, if that had been found in a sand dune in Egypt, it wouldnae deter fae the fact that it’s a beautiful piece of artwork, and the workmanship is absolutely amazing. The difference is, you know who Tutankhamun was. You knew his background. He was married, he had two children, he had problems wi his feet - and you’ve got the various backgrounds. You’ve got the time period he was in and the battles he was involved in. So, you’ve got this whole story behind the mask.

I say it’s the same with the mining artefacts that I collect. You know, if somebody says, ‘Here’s a pair of knee pads’. ‘Oh, excellent. Great. Whose knee pads were they? What pit did they work in? How long? What was his job? What section was he in? what did he... you know, what did he do?’ ‘Oh, he was a councillor. He was a Labour councillor.’ ‘Oh, aye. So, he was a Labour councillor for such-and-such a place.’ ‘Oh, aye. And he served on the council for blah blah...’ So, it’s no just the knee pads. You’re looking at the knee pads and when you’re reading the history of the knee pads, you understand the man.

Dallas and Andrina made it very clear, and I’ve never ever forgotten their words, that the artefact without the histories is bric-a-brac.

**0.04.44 IC:** The most proud thing I ever did, collecting-wise was the Frances. It was when we realised that the Frances wasnae gonnae be redeveloped. And by this time, I was already in the Frances, cos Seafield had shut. And I started the campaign to save the pulley wheels. We also wanted the winding engine kept in situ, with the winding engine. And we wanted the pithead baths to be kept as a mining heritage centre.
They flattened the baths and knocked doon the winding-engine hoose, but they took the winding engine tae the National Mining Museum, at Newtongrange. And they kept the pithead. So... (SIGHS) ...it wasnae a win, but it wasnae a defeat. I would say it was a draw. The only thing that kinda irks me now is the fact that the Fife Coastal Pathway, which is, gaining in popularity, you know, wi walkers and tourists, actually goes, basically, through the Frances. And, if that mining museum, or mining heritage centre had been established at the baths, that was a golden opportunity on a site that’s now getting worldwide recognition. So that’s kindae a sore point. But, like I say, we got the pulley wheels and it’s better than nothing.

But since then, I mean, I still do collect, but as time goes on, you know, there’s, you know, there’s less and less stuff there. I mean, when I first started collecting, people used to say, ‘Oh, my brother was in the pit’, or ‘my dad was in the pit’. Nooadays, it’s, you won’t hear that. Well, you will from a certain generation, but generally now, it’s, ‘Oh, my di was in the pit’. So, the generation gap’s there. But, it’s been a passion of mine, you know, to get that stuff collected and held in storage. And I was talking to somebody aboot it. They says, you know, ‘It must be great for your grandson to go and...’ I say, ‘Whoa, whoa. Wait a minute.’ I says, ‘Fine. I’m no daein it for my grandson. I’m daein it for my grandson’s grandson and his grandson’s grandson’. I’m daein it for, you know, no ten years fae noo, I’m daein for a hundred years fae noo, for two hundred years fae now. You know, and that’s the way I’m looking at it. Cos a lot of people put things in, and they’ll think in terms ae, ‘Oh, that’s my di’s blah-di-blah put in the museum’ and that’s it. No. I’m thinking long term. So people, you know who, maybe their fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth generation, previous to them worked in the pits. It’s to go and have a look and to understand it. And, you know, that’s been my passion and it still is, and I’ll still collect, and I still do.

I’m also involved in Save the Cage, which is involved in bringing mining... heavy-duty mining museum... from the National Mining Museum, in Newtongrange, into the Meedies, or the Meadows, Country Park. So, that’s going ahead. And I’m also involved in getting a commemorative cairn built for Cowdenbeath Workshops. Again I’m involved, and I’m personally doing it for the long term.

0.08.02 IC: If you think aboot it, you drive into Fife over the Kincardine Bridge. You come through the former mining towns: Valleyfield, Oakley, Blairhall. Green fields. You come into Central Fife: Kelty, Lochgelly, Cowdenbeath, the Benarty area. Green fields. That was a desolate waste land, o pit bings and slag heaps.
And the same if you go into East Fife. Your Buckhaven, Methil – even along the coast at Leven and further along, cos people didnae realise coal mining extended into the East Neuk. They were mining coal at Anstruther and, St Monans and Elie. They even mined coal at St Andrews. But nowadays, it’s just green fields. Nobody knows, or would understand the desolation, that mining caused.

I’ll give you an example. I’m the eldest of three brothers. When I was young, I grew up in Lochgelly and I can remember the pits working. I can remember seeing the men going down to the Nellie and the Jenny Gray, and watch the pulley wheels turnin and the pugs crossin the road at Auchterderran Road.

My younger brother, he cannot remember the pits working, but he can remember the burning bings and the slag heaps, and the desolation. He can remember that. But my younger brother, he can’t, because, by the time his memory was formed, the Meedies Country Park had come into position. He cannae remember the bings, or the slag heaps. All he remembers is the green fields and the scenery that we’ve got today. So, in the life span of three brothers...

You know, you’re goin fae workin collieries tae grassy meadows and, I mean, my opinion is, the pit bings and the slag heaps and that, you know, definitely should be forgotten. No two ways aboot it. But the heritage that made the slag heaps and the burnin bings should not. And the people that toiled in the bowels of the earth, you know, that created these bings and slag heaps, should not be forgotten, and their heritage is important.

And I think it’s really important that it’s bein recorded, and you’re getting people o my generation talkin aboot it because, there’ll come a time as come it will, that the last miner’ll draw his last breath. And then, erm, everything’ll just be what you read or what you hear, and it’s important to get their voices down. That’s what I’m dedicated to.

0.10.35 IC: I’m pleased to say that (CHUCKLES) again, wi a modicum of pride, I collected badges during the strike and after the strike. Miners’ badges fae various branches and that, throughout the coalfield. And it kept me sane during a crazy period of my life. You know, it was just a wee hobby to take the stresses and strains away. I was always asked why there werenae any Scottish badges, so I got the name o a badge company off a mutual friend in England, and started designing badges to raise funds for the Scottish victimised miner. Turns out I think I ended up designing about 35 badges altogether. But I realised, earlier on that
instead o mass producing like, 500, 600 or 1,000 or whatever, it would be to concentrate on limited-edition badges of maybe only 100, or 200.

And I did that. But much to my dismay, and even yet, badge-collecting never took off in Scotland. It didn’t. I’ll gie ye an example. I done a set o Kelty badges. One hundred o each. One was Kelty miners, one was Kelty women. It was a two-badge set. A hundred only sets. Ninety-seven o them went south of the border. None went to Kelty. And it was the same wi the Lochgelly badge. I done 200 Lochgelly badges. I’d say about 194 went south of the border. I would say, in aa the badges that I had done, 98 per cent, 97 to 98 per cent o the badges went south of the border. Nobody was interested, in Scotland. But, as I was raising money for the victimised miners, I really wasnae carin who was buying them, as long as they were buying them.

Strangely enough, in the last couple of years, I know at least two people have started seriously collecting badges... but a lot o the badges I did, you’ll just no get them. Cos, they were, like I said, done in 200 or 100 or whatever. Very collectable.

And then, it was the same with the plates...

I thought to myself, ‘Well, you’ve designed 35 badges. Some of them were smart, some o them OK’. And, you know, but I knew my way rounnd designs. I couldnnae draw tae save myself, but I could take a concept and design. And I started to realise that you could dae every plate wi a picture o a pit, ‘Open blah-di-blah, Shut blah-di-blah, disaster blah-di-blah’. And folk would buy them. But they would all be the same, you know?

That’s when I [started] ‘I’m wantin the plates to talk tae folk’. And the Comrie pit was called ‘The Cat’s Pyjamas’. Cos, like I explained tae ye, it was open plan. And like I say, you could sit and have a picnic there with your back to the winding gear and you’d think you were in a field, cos it had flooer beds and everything. And it also had a fish pond. It was part of the cooling system for the winder. And somebody came up wi the idea, ‘Well, if you’ve got a fountain...’ It still had the fountain. ‘...put a fish in it’. So, Comrie was famous for the fish, fountain. And so, hence, Herbert Morrison, I think. He was the Home Secretary in 1948, ’49... visited Comrie pit and he’s, ‘Oh, this is the cat’s pyjamas!’ which is an expression... that, you know, folk might no be aware o it now, but what it means is, it’s tiptop, it’s top o the tree. So, the cat’s pyjamas, hence the black cat. The fish pond, the two fish. Now folk who worked at Comrie, or done their training there, knew what the
plate was sayin. But other ones were, ‘What the fuck... What the hell you got a cat and a fish on a plate for? On a pit plate?’ And that’s what I wanted.

So also, I discovered you can get the back stamp on. Wi the history of the pit. So, since then, with the Comrie one I also started to realise - cos Comrie was the last one where I had the unions on it - and I started to realise that it’s mining families that’s interested in it, that maybe had nothing to dae wi the union, or the strike, or whatever. But their dad or their brothers an that, that had the connection to the pit. So, I done away wi putting the union, NUM SCEBTA COSA, and just made it generally the pit plate.

The plates went very well. I used to joke when I was sellin the plates, to start wi sayin, ‘Aw, come on, boys. Buy a plate. It’s the antique o the future’. You know, ‘It’ll be on Antiques Roadshow one day’. You know, just a laugh and a gag. Well, the future’s here, noo and that Seafield plate, you’ll get two or three hundred quid for it. You know, so what I said as a joke back then’s...noo provin right, eh?

0.15.33 IC: Well, after I’d finished wi the plates... I’d forgotten all aboot them for, it must ha been about 20 year. And then there was a Facebook thing, and a photy o one o ma plates come up, sayin, ‘Any information on this plate?’ And my sister-in-law had written underneath it, ‘My brother-in-law did this. Iain Chalmers’. So, I went on, sayin, ‘Aye, this is Fife Collieries plate, blah blah blah’. Honestly. Opened the door. I did not realise the interest still in the plates even after all these feckin years. Seriously. I was getting inundated. ‘Oh, did you do the Frances? Can I get one? You’ve done the Michael? Where can I get one? What aboot this?’ Honestly, absolutely inundated. And I thought, ‘Christ, I didnae realise’.

Location change for final section of interview:

0.16.21 IC: OK, I’ve done the badges proud. I’ve done the plates proud. I’ve worked tirelessly to preserve artefacts, documents for public ownership. Proud. I managed to, when I says to the curator o Kirkcaldy Museum, ‘If I could get the Frances pulley wheels, I would’. But like I said, turns oot I could and I did. Proud. Even the monuments that we’ve seen some tae dae, the mining memorials I helped raise money for. Proud.

But there’s one thing supersedes that.

When my daughter was born, we took her to the first Miners’ Gala. And she was literally...months. She was still in nappies. Right? Noo, ma missus, brilliant wife. Absolutely brilliant. One thing she could not do. She could not change a nappy on
her knee. Right? Bearing in mind this is the days before disposable. She could put
the bairn on the table, she had the flair, the couch, whatever – brilliant. Could not
change the bairn on her knee. Right?

So, we’re at the Miners’ Gala in Holyrood. And, we’ve got wee Kerry, in the... I was
goin... aye... What dae they ca it?

Nicky Bird: Pushchair?

IC: The pushchair. We’re gaun aboot and next thing ma missus says, ‘She’s needin
changed’. I was, ‘Oh, aye. Aye, nae bother’. So, I got the bag ae...the nappies and
the... Johnson’s pouder, and the... the things that you put in, nappy liners and the
two pins and everything, eh? So, I’m lookin aboot. ‘Oh, there’s the baby-changing
tent’. Right? So, I goes in. I’d say the tent’s...maybe aboot the size o this gairden,
eh? So, I goes in, and there must ha been aboot...half a dozen, eight women.
Right? And they all look up and they see me. And they’re looking at each other as
if to say, ‘Ho, ho, ho, ho! This is gonna be a giggle, eh?!’

So, I gets the... oot. Gets the bairn oot. Gets the...nappy on. Gets the bairn oot.
Takes the pins oot, pit them in ma mooth, as you do. Right? Gets this oot. Has all
the stuff there. Up wi her bum. Pshhh. Cleans her bum. Johnson’s pouder. There’s
a wee bit ae... I canna mind what the cream was. But you know, you pit the cream
on... this, that and the next thing. And I noticed that there had been a couple o
women had come in, but none o them had went oot. Right? (CHUCKLES) And I’m
sittin there and I’m getting that, and I gets, er... ticklin the bairn, googling away an
that, so it gets up, gets the nappy, gets it folded and... folded in, folded in, tucked
in. Aa the correct folds. Pin oot. (CLICKS TONGUE) In. Pin oot. (CLICKS
TONGUE) Plastic pants on. Gets the wee bootees on. Doo, doo, doo. Thingmied
her up. Gets it aa up. Pits the bairn in the pram. Total silence. Right? So, I gets the
bairn in the pram, thingmies her in. Walks oot. And aa I could see was, oot the side
o my ee, gaun... (MUTTERING) (LAUGHTER) And honestly, I’m not jokin. Ma feet
must ha been...two feet off the gress. Ma chest... Ma chest was like... Yes!
(LAUGHTER)

Oh, honestly! Aye, seriously. The... women came in, but not one went oot. And
some o them were nearly finished, ken, wi the bairns. And I had...I’m playin it in the
audience, and it wis like...Honestly, I could see the heids goin. (LAUGHTER) Yeah.
I would not have been surprised if I’d got a round ae applause. I’m tellin ye! But
honestly, their heids were goin...!
So, I've done aa this for the mining industry. Ma greatest piece o pride is changing a nappy in front o a bunch o women. And getting top marks for it! (LAUGHTER)