Early Days of Jim Hale

A dictation given by Roderick James (Jim) Hale, 5th April 1992

I was born at Oak View, Nailbridge, Drybrook, in the house that belonged to my grandfather. We all lived together, that is my grandfather, my father and mother, Chris—my half brother, my own brother Harold and my sister Daphne.

Grandfather was the village blacksmith and my father had a sawmill and builder's merchants business. The business was at the rear of the blacksmiths shop having been built around a pair of disused colliery buildings. The sawmills were driven by a portable steam engine which was later superseded by a single cylinder Lister petrol engine. The earliest memory I have is the phut-phut-phut of the petrol engine running. Its exhaust pipe was outside the sawmills.

In 1925 Dad bought a pony and trap. He also had a flat trolley and a smaller pole wagon which was used for deliveries. Later he bought a car—a Ford Model T, which was also used for deliveries.

In 1926 my Dad bought a triangular plot of ground at Dunkley's Corner which was surrounded by three roads. Nearest the Crossroads Dad built two shops and three petrol pumps and started a filling station. In 1932 he built a bungalow near the filling station and Mum, Dad, Harold, Chris and Daphne went there to live. I stayed at Oak View to keep Grandfather company at nights. I suppose I did not mind because Grandfather was not too strict and let me go out to play (I was eight at the time).

One day I came home from school and changed into my old clothes which I always did and ran along the road to help Ray in the yard. This particular day Ray said—"when you go home, ask Granch if he wants any little jobs done"—and I said "why is that Ray?" and he said "because Grandfather has bought you a beautiful new bike from Tommy Mormans at Drybrook". Tommy was the local grocer but he also did a bit of dealing on the side. Grandfather had spotted this bike whilst collecting his groceries. The bike was such a treasured possession that I used to clean it everyday and kept it in the hall at Oak View.

In 1930 Dad bought a Morris Oxford Car which I well remember. Dad made trestles to fit back and front so that timber could be carried on top of the roof. The seats were taken out and cement put inside. On weekends it was cleaned out and used for the occasional family trip out.

At a very early age we were taken to chapel and we attended

Sunday School twice every Sunday. The highlight of the Sunday School days was the annual treat and also the book prizes for good attendance. I still have some of these today.

All we children attended Steam Mills school which was only just down the road. My headmaster for the duration of my school days there was Willo George. I started school in the infants under Madam Lloyd—a very severe woman. The teacher under her was Miss Yeman who was very kind. We then moved into the big school under Mr. George and another nice man under him was Reg Morgan. We took bowlers to school and had many happy hours playing whip and top, cat and stick, jacks and marbles. We eventually arrived at standard five and our classroom was a corrugated building at the rear of the school. This was the scholarship class for the Grammar School. Our teacher was Miss. Smith who must have been at the school for forty years. I passed the exam to the grammar school and left to attend school in Cinderford.

The headmaster at this grammar school was Mr. Sanders who had the nickname of Tim. He was a fearsome and very strict headmaster and after two years my enthusiasm for school ran out and my one aim in life was to leave school and work for my father.

Whilst still at school all my spare time was spent at the sawmills. Dad's right hand man was Ray Edwards and I thought the world of Ray. Dad's business prospered and when he was able to, he got rids of the car and bought a little Ford V8 lorry (22hp) that was a real step forward and we spent many happy hours going out into the forest for Cord Wood (branches cut up) and timber which we cut up in the winter into blocks. We also cut up timber for mining props.

Dad by this time was selling all types of building material and had switched from home grown timber to imported softwoods. This imported softwood in the early days came by rail from Sharpness Docks. The railway ran at the back of our yard en-route to Drybrook—and just past the tunnel under the Drybrook road was a set of points. The trucks were backed into a siding here called Speedwell sidings. The timber was unloaded there onto a pole wagon which our pony Kit pulled back down into the yard where it was unloaded into the old shed.

In 1939 War was declared and imported timber was put on strict licence. As this was 75% of our business, Dad was forced to lay Ray off—but fortunately Ray obtained immediate employment at Cannop Colliery. We all missed Ray very much, but he used to call in from time to time to have a chat and also to cut Grandfathers hair.

I eventually left school when I was sixteen years old and started full time work for Dad. My first wage was five shillings per week plus my keep. Working at the yard then was Dad, myself and Grandfather lending a hand now and again. Trading was very difficult and goods were hard to come by.

In 1942 my papers came to have a medical—ready to be called up for the armed forces. I passed my medical A1. and awaited my calling up papers—then out of the blue I had an official letter asking me if I would consider working in the mines as coal was in short supply and the armament factories needed to be kept running.

Everyone who lived near a coalfield had this request and after a discussion with my father, I decided to accept employment in the mines and replied accordingly.

In due course I received notification to present myself at Northern United Colliery for employment. Having lived in a mining area all my life I was not a stranger to this work. I started work on the screens on top for an initial six weeks to get accustomed—but the foreman kept me on for twelve weeks because I had made myself very adaptable. Eventually I went underground. I knew plenty of the men and was able to fit in well with their company and also my mothers three brothers who worked there—uncles Ron, Ivor and Chris Brain—wonderful men.

At Northern we descended the shaft in a metal cage that held ten men. Then we walked along what was known as the main and tail road—then we came to the top of the dipple (this was a very steep gradient). There was a big electric haulage engine here to lower us down another steep gradient. These trolleys were lowered down three to four times to get all the colliers to their place of work.

My first journey down on the trolleys I knelt down beside my uncle Ivor and I remember his words to this day—and he said, "well Jim, welcome to the W. W. B. Pitt", and I said "what does that stand for Uncle Ivor?" and he said the Water, wire and bradice pit" (pronounced bradish) which indicated that the pit was a little Heath Robinson, but I gradually got used to this.

My first job was transporting pit props on a flat trolley from the main road into the wind road to the top end of the coal face. A journey of some hundred yards. I was all on my own and a little bit frightened especially when they let a shot off to blow the coal down and the concussion blew my carbide lamp out.

On the reflector of this carbide lamp was a flint wheel and by holding your hand over the reflector to let the gas build up you then struck the flint to ignite the gas—which made a pop. But unfortunately on this first occasion my hands being covered in wet clay gobbed up the flint wheel, so that was the end of that! I then continued pushing the trolley in the dark. I was even too frightened to curse and have never been so relieved to see a small light in the distance. After that experience, if this happened again I wiped my hand down my mole skin breech before striking the flint! (that is what is known as finding out the hard way.) After a few weeks I settled down to mining without any further problems.

My next job was driving a pit pony which I called Darky. But

with this job came the strenuous task of walking the dipple behind the pony. There were in fact two ponies working at the same time. Being willing and the youngest I took to walking the dipple with both the ponies.

After descending the shaft and all the men had been let down the pit and gone off to their place of work—I stayed behind and waited for my two ponies to come down. After they were taken off the cage, (they were well trained and knew exactly which way to go) I walked behind them along the main and tail road and opened two sets of doors which controlled the air and then finally arriving at the top of the dipple, I walked with them down the dipple to the Y parting. One pony stayed here to work and the other I then took on down to No 3 dipple to the number eleven face road. My job here was to hook the pony onto five empty pit carts and take them to the face.

The five loaded carts were then sent out onto the dipple and then when two lots were sent out, they were sent up the number three dipple and then across the Y parting by the other pony then up the H dipple.

At the end of every shift it was my job to take the two ponies up the dipple and hence into the pit bottom. I had the privilege of walking the dipple before the colliers commenced their journey on the trolleys up the dipple. When I arrive at the top of the dipple the man called the "lander" would tug on the knocker line to signal to the rope rider at the bottom of the dipple that it was all clear to ascend and he would do this by giving the engine driver up at the depot three knocks of the knocker line.

I should mention that whilst walking up the dipple I grabbed my pony's tail which was a great assistance as this dipple was very steep. When this number eleven road had advanced sufficiently the pony was dispensed with and a little haulage introduced. The manufacturers of these little haulages was a firm called Beckett and Anderson and the nickname of these haulages was Bekander. My job then was to ride on the front with my feet on the rope taking ten empties in and running ten full ones out. Onto the number three dipple. Where there were usually ten empties waiting. I transferred the rope from the full ones onto the empties giving the engine driver three knocks on the knocker line and then jumping on the rope in a squatting position and hooking my arm into the empty cart, shining my light along the track. I then commenced the journey back to the face. At this stage I must relate a sad story.

It was in December 1945 and approaching Christmas that I took my ten full carts to the dipple there were no empties waiting for me and the man in charge of the number three dipple was no where to be seen. After a short while I walked up the dipple to see if the carts were off the road and to see if Tom Cinderey wanted any assistance. Eventually I arrived at haulage where two or three men were standing in silence. I said "what's the matter?" and they replied "Charlie Mason and Tim Brain have been fell on". (they had been working in the

road above our face) Charlie Mason was dead and his mate Tim Brain had a broken leg. It was a very sad accident. Normally all the men would leave the pit as a mark of respect, but as coal was in desperate short supply the pit returned to normal working.

In the winter when the weather was cold and wet I found working below no problem. But in the summer time when I was on afternoon shifts and descending at 2 o'clock, I found it heartbreaking to leave the lovely sunshine. I ought to mention something that sticks in my mind. The first time that I went underground the favourite song of the day was the Ink Spots singing "Why do we whisper green grass?" I thought how typical!

Periodically we went into work on a Sunday Morning to move the haulage as the heading had advanced and here I must relate a bit of forest humour. A young lad was assisting us and he was pulling on a chain on the front of the haulage and one of the colliers shouted "bist thou a pululling ow butty?" "No" im said, "I be a Clutterbuck". (Pullen was a forest surname)

All the time I spent at Northern Untied Colliery, I continued helping my father with his business—and when I was on an afternoon shift, I would work the morning from 8-1 o'clock with my father. When I was on a day shift I was usually up and out of the pit by ten past two. A quick cycle home—which was half a mile away, a hasty wash, some lunch and then out to the yard to help Dad.

Work continued without any major upsets and In January 1947 we had tremendous snow storms. I struggled to pit through drifts of five to six feet and for a week there was only a handful of men able to get through. We were sent underground to do emergency repairs and to keep the pumps running.

In the July of that year I received my papers for leaving the industry if I wanted to and as Dad had his own business I left to work with him. I enjoyed my time in the pit and if father had not had his own business I would have made mining my career.

In December 1946 Dad purchased a new Bedford two-three ton drop side lorry—no tipper—and then we had the deep snow fall of '47 as mentioned before and we couldn't use it for weeks on end and I was so desperate to drive this new lorry. It replaced a Ford V8 truck—loaded capacity 30 cwt. The registration number of this was BDG 185. Tew new lorry registration number was EFH 629. This new lorry was my pride and joy. I did all my own servicing etc. We kept this lorry for many years.

Whilst working in the colliery, me and one of my butty's—Joe Warren happened to mention a girls name whom I had known at the grammar school—Dorrie Preddy—and I said "Do you know her Joe to talk to?" and he said "yes" and I said "do you reckon you could fix a date for me?" She lived at Collafield. Two or three days later he told me that he had seen her and fixed up a date. It was in the summer time, I dressed up fairly

smart and walked up through Haywood to Collafield. And there she was by the back gate. We went for a walk in the wood and had a long chat and decided to meet again. I was twenty at the time.

This was the start of a long and happy relationship and eventually marriage. I was working in the mines and used to go and see her two or three times a week when I was on the day shift, and when I was on the afternoon shift I did not see her at all for a week—then it was always nice to see her on a Saturday night.

At this time Dorrie's sister Ruby had a sweetheart who she had known before the war—Fred was called up for the army and captured in north Africa by the Germans. He remained a prisoner of war for five years. When the war ended he was released and returned home in 1945. He married Ruby as soon as possible and spent a few more weeks in the army before being de-mobilized. He then took up his old occupation as a grocer with Mr Jones on the triangle in Cinderford. Fred and I remained firm friends for the rest of his life.

Business began to improve at the yard after five long years of war. Houses were desperately needed but materials were very scarce. Timber which had represented 75% of our business was still strictly licensed. We struggled on cutting home grown timber and the odd load of imported softwood whenever we could obtain it. This timber was hauled from the docks at Gloucester by a firm called Price-Walker. It was my job to haul it in.

Cement, plasterboard and plaster were also in short supply and it was exciting to get loads of this scarce material.

I continued courting Dorie and eventually I had the chance to move into rooms at our old homestead at Oak View. I must mention at this stage when Grandfather died in 1941 I went to live with Dad and Mum and my sister Daphne and brother Harold at Claremont. Housing was so short after the war that to have the chance of rooms at Oak View was very exciting. Dad still owned Oak View which was let to two families, one of whom moved out of the district. With the chance of these rooms we decided to get married. The ceremony took place on September 11th 1948 at the Baptist Chapel, Cinderford (do not know if this is true, always thought it was at Holy Trinity, Drybrook) During our courtship Dorie and I attended the little Baptist Chapel at Green Bottom. Both Dorie and all her family were members of this little chapel and the parent chapel was in Cinderford.

The people at Oak View that we shared the house with were Fred and Peggy Diamond—who had two little boys John and Peter. We all got on well together. In the little red brick house attached to Oak View lived a lovely old gentleman—Mr. George Rudge. He kept a wonderful garden and fowls.

During the early part of our marriage we built a pigs cot and

kept pigs to supplement the food ration. In July 1949 Roger was born in the Dilke hospital. I remember quite vividly when Dorie said one evening that she thought she was nearly due. I went and alerted Mrs. Diamond who had previously offered to come with us and as we had no other means of transport I took Dorie with Mrs. Diamond to the hospital in the Bedford lorry. After the usual stay in hospital I got Mr. Bill Brown who had a taxi service to fetch Dorie and the baby home. Her mother came from Collafield to help and life went on quietly after this. Our second son Leslie was born later in 1952.

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