Tales/Anecdotes/Reminisces

Memories of Robert (Bob) Fletcher – as remembered by his son David and daughter Anne.

Bob often told us about the interview he had for his first job, aged 14, at South Pelaw Colliery.
South Pelaw (or South Peela as Dad pronounced it) was a 'family' pit, so if you were related to someone who already worked there, you had a better chance of a job. The interviewer didn't recognise the Fletcher surname, so he asked Dad about his father and whether any of his uncles or cousins worked at the colliery. Of course none of them did and it was obvious that the interviewer wasn't sure whether or not to take him on. Then Dad told him his grandfather was Doc Kirkup and everything changed. 'Oh, you're a grandson of Doc Kirkup?' Doc was well-known amongst the mining community and although he had never worked at South Pelaw, he and the reputation of his many sons (all miners, but at the Busty Pit, Pelton) was a good enough reference.
On the first day that Dad worked he was on the screens picking stones off the belt when one of the older lads thought he'd have a laugh and threw a stone and hit Dad's hand. It hurt, so Dad was going to have him as soon as the belt stopped. He jumped the belt to get at him. Dad was a big lad for his age and the others were taking bets as to how this would turn out. However, I (Anne) seem to remember that his supervisor took him to one side and explained it was not worth pursuing the matter which could have cost him his job.
When the tubs came up they would have something like a 2'x2' box on the top. One of Dad's first jobs was to count the number of stones he found in the box. If there were too many stones (i.e. over a certain number) then the tub would be put to one side and the person who filled it (they were all tallied) would not be paid for that tub. Dad was so conscientious that far more tubs were put on the side than usual and his supervisor had to let him away early before the men came out or they would have killed him. The men were angry but he stood up for Dad and told them he was only doing his job and that he had been right in what he had done.
When Dad was working at bank he had to move the full tubs and set the empty tubs in their place. He would set the empties off down an incline and they would click into place. As the empty ones went down the full ones would come up. On this occasion Dad had set the empty tub away ready for the next tub arriving but the winder had over wound and so instead of going along the track the empty tub went straight down the shaft and stopped all the work.
When Dad had his accident aged 15 it was discovered that he shouldn't have been doing that particular job until he was 18. He was a big lad and they hadn't realised he was so young.
Once when Dad was on the face he could hear banging and a man came out of a passage and told him not to go down there because he could hear the breaking of the timbers. When Dad was finished he wondered whether to chance it as it was a long walk all the way around (three quarters of a clock) to get to where he wanted to be. He decided to go the long way round and half way back the roof fell in and closed the other passage like a box.

At one point when Dad was on the face he was acting as putter for an old man of 76 (pushing the tubs in). Dad used to help him to fill the tub or the old man would have had very little money.
Because Dad worked the hauler he was one of the few allowed a cap lamp, the rest had carbide lamps.
Dad had a marker on the hauler so that he could stop the tubs at exactly when the high point was reached so that the men inside could get out. At any other point the men would not have been able to get out of the man sets.
Dad's team didn't usually use the pony they were given to help with the work, so he was tied up and usually stayed in the same position the whole of the shift. One day, for some unknown reason the pony stood on the track and was run over and killed when the tubs were brought up.
I remember Dad talking about one particular pony called Curry. The men and boys were not meant to ride the ponies but sometimes they did. If you gave them their head they would go full gallop back to the stables. On one occasion Dad was doing this and hit his head off a girder and carried a blue scar on his ear ever after.
Around the time that Dad was asked to go on the course at Sheffield the managers were starting to mechanise the colliery. They had one side mechanised, the other not. In those days fitters to service the machines only came down to the face to work on a job. What the colliery wanted were trained fitters who would stay on the face and do repairs on the spot.
When Dad returned from Sheffield he often walked with the deputy down the back road ways to do inspections with him and between shifts turned the cutters. Once a cutter broke down and it was considered so important to have the broken component replaced that the Manager asked Dad to stay with the machine so that as soon as the part arrived he could put it straight on. It took so long for the part to come that the Manager had gone home, slept and returned the next day and Dad was still at his post. When the Manager found this out he made the under-manager give dad his bait. In all Dad worked around 36 hours without coming out. When he came to be paid the Office would not believe he had worked that length of time and refused to pay him. Dad had an awful job convincing him even though he told him that the Manager could vouch for him.
On a lighter note – Dad was once eating his bait at the shaft bottom. It's cold there and Dad was wearing long legged, baggy trousers. Suddenly a mouse ran up his trouser leg and he couldn't catch it!
Dad's favourite bait was apple sandwiches. He said the apple tasted different down the pit.
As Dad was about to leave the pit, having taken a post with the Northumberland and Durham County Fire and Rescue Brigade, a man asked him if his father would like a little job in the lamp cabin. Dad never told his father, wanting to shield him as he was already in his early seventies, or his father would have been there like a shot.
Dad spent over 30 years as a Rescue Brigadesman, serving at Crook, Benwell and Ashington Rescue Stations and finished his career as a mining instructor, giving new recruits their basic training before they went down the pit, at Ashington Collieries training centre.

Joe Loughlin's Memories

Joe Loughlin who still lives in South Pelaw has kindly provided us with memories of his time working down South Pelaw pit as a Putter from the early 1950's until its closure in 1964.

Joe was born in 1938 in Birtley and left school at 15 to start work at the Ravensworth Ann Pit in Birtley. His father was no longer working as he was ill with cancer and as his three brothers were all in the armed forces Joe needed to work as his wages were needed to help support himself and his Mam and Dad. His first job on his first day was working on the screens where Joe had to remove stones from the coal which passed along on a conveyor belt. This was hard work and as it was above ground it was really cold during the winter. Joe recalls also working some days at this time in the token cabin where a token system was used both to identify the men who were below ground and also how much coal they had dug out to calculate their wages.

After 12 months on the screens and in preparation for working below ground. Joe then did 12 months training at Greencroft Colliery. He remembers two shafts at Greencroft, one was for the miners and one which led to a worked out seam was used for training. Here Joe learnt how to drill and cut coal and fill tubs etc. When his training was completed he went back to the Ravensworth Ann Colliery. Joe began courting and although he was still only 19 he and his girlfriend were offered a house next door to his girlfriend's Aunts house in Furnace Terrace on Pelton Fell Road, Chester-le-Street. The house was in a row of twelve houses and was a one up one down with one cold water tap. There was a catch though and that was that Joe had to be married before moving in. So he and his girlfriend married and moved in. Joe would walk along to the bottom of Chester to catch the colliery bus to Birtley as he still worked at the Ann Pit. However the bus would frequently not stop and Joe would lose shifts and therefore money through no fault of his own. This was no good to Joe so he arranged a transfer to South Pelaw Colliery and started there in the late fifties as a pony putter. This work involved taking empty tubs which were pulled by ponies to the miners at the coal face and then taking the full tubs to the shaft for transfer to the surface. Joe was a pony putter at South Pelaw until it closed in 1964. Joe was given a fortnights notice and was told he was to be given a job at Waldridge Drift mine. When he turned up at the drift mine he was told there was no job for him. Actually this suited Joe as by now he had set his heart on joining the Derek Crouch Company who had offered him a job, working on a pipe line to be laid from Lamesley to Barley Mow. However before he could start for Derek Crouch he needed his P45 form from the NCB and he was told to go the Bearpark Colliery Offices who would give him the necessary forms. When he got to Bearpark he was surprised to hear they had a job for him and he should have started it 3 weeks ago! Joe refused it and was relieved when some gentleman appeared on the scene and sorted everything out for him, handing over his P45, holiday pay and backdated wages. Joe had never been so rich and with his wife went out and bought a new 3 piece suite. He then started work for Derek Crouch.

Joe recalls it was the seam he worked on was always a wet seam, especially when it rained. He also recalls when there was open cast mining going on at the back of the Plough Inn. He can also remember a lucky escape on one shift when he and his "marras" were underground and he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. He was sure the pit props were moving but thought it was maybe his eyes playing tricks on him in the darkness. He shouted for someone else to come and have a look and

sure enough his eyes weren't deceiving him, the pit props were about to give way. So the shout went up to evacuate and they all ran out. Shortly after this the roof caved in.
Joe remembers losing part of his finger in an accident when a full tub fell on his hand. He was taken by the colliery ambulance to Durham County hospital by Arnold Milner who was called out especially to take him. Joe was off work for 4 weeks.
Joe remembers with fondness the pit ponies who he worked with. Some were good and did their work with the minimum of fuss, but others were bad tempered and would bite the hand that fed them if they could. Joe would take in apples for them and they would be fed corn and maize and get molasses as a treat. They all knew their own stalls and he recalls one actually sucking an orange dry that was in the pocket of a jacket hanging up on the stable wall much to everyone's amusement.

Happy days indeed