

Gilbert Crow – interviewed in 2012 by Martin Vye

I'm talking today to Gilbert Crow at his home in Union Road and it's the 19th of November 2012.

Gilbert, tell me were you born locally?

Womenswold.

At that time, was your father a miner?

No.

So when did he come into mining?

During the war he was a wood man, cutting down trees. That all came under the agricultural thing so he didn't have to go in the army. Agricultural workers and miners were exempt weren't they?

Did he get into mining later on?

He did after the war. He worked for this firm and the sons had come out of the army and it was a bit too regimental for them and he worked on the surface. I don't know how long, quite a few years.

So he didn't go down into the mine at all?

No

But I gather you followed him; did you go down the mine yourself?

Yes.

That was quite an experience I should think. How old were you when you went down for the first time?

I don't know how old you had to be – seventeen or eighteen.

Tell me about your first experience of the mine. How did you feel? What was it like?

I don't know really. I can't even remember the first day.

Not the first day necessarily, but you went down with a crowd of men? Were there quite a lot of youngsters, young men like you?

Yes.

Had they told you a bit about what it was going to be like or was it a bit of a shock?

You didn't have to go down a mine, you could go down in an underground cave it wasn't any difference.

So what would happen in the cave? That was where the coal was mined was it? Did you have special clothing? Did you have overalls or anything like that?

No.

Or headgear?

Yes. Headgear and safety boots – steel toecaps.

And a pickaxe, something like that?

Did have, yes.

So it was very physical work?

Yes, to start with. In those days you had a pick and a shovel and a long what you'd call a jemmy I suppose.

Where you pushed it into the coal seams?

Yes.

After the coal was got at did you have to load it on to a truck?

No, on to a conveyor belt, endless.

It was going round. Then that was taken on to a truck?

Eventually. It went so far by conveyor belt then it went into tubs as they're called then to the pit bottom and then up.

Right up to the surface and then it would go by train down to Dover or something?

Yes. It was all cleaned first to separate the coal and the stone.

I gather it was a very deep mine wasn't it? One of the deepest in Britain?

Something like that. The second deepest.

So it took a long time to get down?

Not really.

In the lift. Was that a bit scary?

Not really. I suppose it was to start with. You used to do three thousand feet in three minutes with men. With coal or material it was only a minute.

That was quite something. Tell me, being very deep what was it like down there? Was it very hot, very humid?

Yes, not half!

I heard that some times you completely stripped off because it was so hot.

Oh yes.

You had to drink lots of water did you?

We used to take eight pints of water and halfway through the shift you'd refill that from a well and so you'd drink up to sixteen pints of water.

Because it was so hot and humid I think it was called Dante's Inferno, had you heard that? I think it was in the little miners' handbook. Did you move around the mine at all? While you were there did you move along a seam or did you change areas a lot.

Yes. Different districts. You had north, north west, south east

A lot of different shafts and things.

Yes. To get to some places you had to travel for an hour and a half to get there.

So it must have spread miles underground. So was it one of the larger collieries in Kent or in Britain maybe?

Yes.

I'd no idea it was as vast as that. So you were saying you grew up in Womenswold, so all the time you were in the mines you lived in Womenswold?

No, I lived at Barham, then here.

I wondered if you'd lived in one of the many new houses that were built in Aylesham I think. I read that six hundred and fifty mining families were given housing. A lot of the miners lived in those specially built houses in Aylesham I guess.

Yes, most of the men were miners anyway.

Yes but a lot of the miners had come from other areas I think.

Oh yes, you got all sorts.

Where were they from?

Scotland, Ireland, all different counties of England, Cornwall, Lancashire, Yorkshire, Northumberland all that.

So quite a mixed bunch. Was the camaraderie good? You made good friends with the other men?

Not always.

I gather it's the centenary of Snowdown Colliery and there's been an exhibition on in Aylesham Community Centre. I went down to see it and there did seem to be a lot of photographs there going right back to when the mine was first opened in 1912. Seeing those photographs did that bring back any special memories for you?

Well not really because there was only about half a dozen photographs wasn't there?

There were big sheets or posters on both sides of the rack. You could go down one side and up the other. To me there seemed quite a number of photographs.

I didn't think there was. I went with John and he was as disappointed as I was. They called it a mining exhibition but it wasn't because there was very little about mining. It was all about the building of Aylesham and the railway station, the shirt factory that was there and the school and fire service.

Yes. I did think the photographs that were there gave you a great feel of being down in the mines and how hard it was.

The only underground photos were the train. You used to ride paddy cars as they called them. There was a photo of them and there was a photo of a man pumping up a power support and that was about it. You never saw any coal face or anything like that.

No, there were photographs of men along the seams with helmets on and it looked a very tough sort of job to be doing. I suppose because it was almost a town really, I think there were about two thousand houses, lots of other things were going on revolving round the mine, there seemed to be a big community spirit. Did you get involved in that? I saw quite a few pictures of fairs and beauty queens and that sort of thing.

Yes that was later on wasn't it, fifties or sixties.

So would you have said there was a community spirit when you were living in Womenswold?

Yes. They had their own band and choir and football team. In those days they had what they called the Kent League. The collieries had their own teams and each town – Dover and Canterbury had their own teams, Kent police and that.

So it was quite competitive amongst all the teams.

Yes. I don't know if you saw at the exhibition if you looked out of the window did you see the bowling alley and rugby pitch?

So the social side the centre itself was a big asset.

Three social clubs and a pub.

So quite a lively social life as well. You played a lot of football did you?

Not me no. I used to go and watch.

You were talking about the band. The Male Voice Choir is very popular, they are still a very strong choir and I know they sing in a lot of competitions and concerts.

Yes. It all used to be miners but I doubt if they're miners that's in it now.

There may be a few but I expect they get other people in from other villages around.

How long were you working in the mines Gilbert? Can you remember?

I went there about 1946 or '47 to 1972, about twenty five years.

A lot of years working down the mine. And then did you retire? What did you do after that?

Even in those days there was always the threat of pit closures and I got to the age of forty and in those days once you got to forty firms didn't want to know you. So I thought well I'm not going to get another job. If they close the pit I'll be out of a job.

So Chartham Paper Mill had built an extension and they wanted workers so I applied for that and went there for twenty three years.

So you had a second career. I thought I was just coming to talk about mining, perhaps we can talk about Chartham Paper Mill as well. You were at the paper mill for a very long time, was that any easier than working down the mine?

Yes, not so hot.

I've just had a visit to Chartham Paper Mill it's enormous isn't it?

Now there are only about fifty workers I think. In those days there were about three hundred and fifty.

A lot's been taken over by machinery I suppose.

I've never been back there, I don't know what it's like now. They had three machines I think they've only got one now.

What was your machine doing?

It was an electric one. When they did the extension they put this new machine in so they had three machines instead of two which was all a lot more modern than the old ones.

You were talking about the heat. One particular place we went to, one particular piece of machinery, cotton was being boiled up and pulped down before it became sheets and that was terribly hot and steamy.

I was in the conversion department – the finished product.

More on the packaging side. It was a very specialised tracing paper wasn't it, very high quality? I think one of the only mills that was producing that particular kind of paper. Was the packaging mechanised or did you have physically do it?

To start with and then as time went by it became more mechanical and automatic. But they had that many owners.

The competition must be so great from China and Japan. But because it's so specialised maybe, hopefully it will continue.

The invention of computers and that paper wasn't needed so much. The orders used to fall off because there was no demand. Once upon a time the Japanese used to take tons of the stuff because they couldn't make it themselves. The Japanese were good copiers weren't they? They still are but they couldn't do that. A lot of the output went to Japan.

I think a lot of the tracing paper was used by architects for their designs and things.

It was yes.

I understand from the manager there it's used in advertising for the special glossy magazines and so on.

Thank you Gilbert. Do you have any other thoughts that you'd like to talk about, about mining days or do you think we've covered everything now?

I don't know, there's so much really.

Going back, you were talking about pit closures. I think because the miners had wanted an increase in wages which they got, later on in the twenties the

Government reduced their wages and I gather there was a strike then and because of that the pit closed for a couple of years and then it reopened. Were you involved in the later strike in Mrs Thatcher's time?

No that was in the eighties I think and I finished in '72.

Well you've told us a great deal about the mines and life and how hard it was down there.

When I started getting coal it was all pick and shovel then when I left it was all mechanised. How they got the coal, they had what they called a plough like a plough going through the ground it turns the soil over. It was the same as that. This plough cutting the bottom of the seam. It was like a brick wall. If you take the bottom layer of bricks out it collapses. That's what happened that's how they got it.

So they moved along the seam gradually taking away the bottom layer. So then would it collapse and that made the coal accessible.

It used to fall onto a conveyor, there was no shovel work or anything like that. Except in what they called the headings where you had to have an end or two ends so you could go forward all the time.

So this came after the pick and shovel.

Then they had another method they called pulse infusion where you bored holes into the coal then put the explosives in and put a rod in with a bush on the end. That squeezed together and that made it sort of watertight so when a thing explodes it goes to its weakest point, so it had to be tied in that way so it would explode into the coal. That's pulse infusion. When I left they were just introducing big drums going round and round. That would be cutting into it all the time.

A bit like the machinery for the Channel Tunnel. So the methods of mining certainly changed while you were there.

Yes. They had wooden supports at one time but then they became automatic with power supports.

Describe them for me, would that be a complete roof as well or just the sides?

Power supports. On the floor and they would go under the roof.

About three feet high?

It all depends it might be eighteen inches it might be six foot. Then when the coal goes these rams used to push everything over about two foot at a time.

So when it was very low did you have to get own and crawl on all fours.

Yes, lots of the time you had to cut through the roof because the plough was about eighteen inches high and sometimes it wouldn't go through because the coal was wavy. That was rare really I suppose.

It must have been hard when it was as low as that.

I used to get weight problems. That was the trouble with Snowdown when you had weight problems. At the beginning of the shift you might had five foot of height and at the end you'd have three foot and the floor used to come up.

In the early days when they provided large baths for the miners so they could get clean and go home looking respectable because the original houses didn't have bathrooms. What did you do? Did you go home in a clean state?

They had showers there, though they didn't at one time.

That was introduced was it?

Particularly after the war when it was nationalised and the National Coal Board took over, they spent a lot of money on things like that and the welfare.

I think you deserved it.

There were about three hundred naked bodies roaming around at one time.

That must have been quite something! I think we'd better leave it there Gilbert. Thank you very much for your memories.