

COAL INTERVIEW

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

Tuesday 1 - 3 p.m.

TERM III

REGIONAL HISTORY

Transcript of Interview between

L. CUMMINGS (student)

and

MR JOHN AMBLER  
with  
MR JOHN REDDING  
(retired Miners)

on

19 AUGUST, 1988.

Lorri Cummings,  
9 September, 1988

## JACK

The Young Wallsend seam on top of that - you used to go down and get that well that's where they're working now. Anyhow, you go along here, both ways, and another bloke up here, he'd go in here, see, and he'd do the same thing there and he'd come down to meet you - and that's what they call longwall mining, see. Another bloke up here or two men like, they do the same - they'd come along here to meet you - another bloke'd go along here and that's how they got their longwall and they took everything all at once. When you'd both meet up, or something like that, they used to brush this stone down and used to make packs alongside your road - that's your road going in there - you used to make packs each side of your road to hold your thingme, so the wheeler could come in and take the coal away from you, see. It only used to be, not ????, what did they call it Jock? Bloody, no, no, no, the wheels - they didn't have limmers - what were they - tailshanks - the horses used to have little bar across them like this, see, and a tailchain like that. You used to hook on there and they used to hook onto the skip. When you're going there you slew the skip around and the wheeler'd take your skip away like that, see. This hook and there's only a chain, but these places they's only very narrow, I guess - you drove in like and everything and walk up there - but kids of to-day, they'd never go wheeling - they'd never make it - you had to grow up with the bloody thing, like, to be a wheeler at Borehole - they'd never make it, because they'd have one day and that'd be the end - they wouldn't go back.

*QUESTION: So how would you actually be - like you're using your pick on the coalface in 3 foot - how would you actually pick it?*

## JACK

Walking in that low ceiling all the time - they're just three foot six.

*QUESTION: That's what I'm saying - so you'd have to be, oh bent over?*

## JACK

Well - not laid down - when you're filling coal, used to put the pick down and something like that - you'd have little half-ton skips - little wooden half-ton skips.

*QUESTION: On a rail or on .....*

## JACK

Yes, on rail - that's how you used to have to pick the coal - we had blokes out there over six feet - they used to spread their legs right out like that, yeh, and pick the coal - but, when you pick the coal down so much then you had to ????. On these rails coming up here, six foot steel rails, only six foot, you put the ender over the rails, so it would give you a little bit extra

fill over the top. Everything like that. But when I used to fill my coal, I used to fill most my coal on my knees - I put the pick down, kneel on the pick, so the dirt or the coal wouldn't get in your thingme, there, and just shovel it into the thingme, see like that, that's how ..... you're getting me out of breath here talking to you .....

Now what else. I told you like about this, they brushed all that, they used to bore a hole in the stone, two on each side and one in the middle and they used to fire that down and they used to have brushers coming in of afternoon shift and that's what they'd make - they'd make a pack each side of your road - that's to hold your road up like and everything like that as you go forward. But sometimes you'd get a fork, see - it'd be blocked from this bloke to you and you never got much air until you got through again, see, you had to sump in again and go through there, until you meet up to him - and you get the air back - oh, lovely.

*QUESTION: What was it like meeting?*

JACK

You know, blokes used to wear women's big bloomers - you know them big bloomers women used to wear years and years ago.

*QUESTION: Underwear, bloomer underwear?*

JACK

Yes, bloomer pants.

*QUESTION: What was the reason for that?*

JACK

Because it was cooler. Some blokes used to wear nothing - so you wouldn't chafe - see you'd sweat like hell, dirt and everything like that - because when I first started there was no water. Later on in years they got all water pipes into the thingme and every place had a water hose, see - when you got so much coal down, you'd water that before you start shovelling, or anything like that, see - I've seen blokes working there with nothing on. When you'd get these falls like, block you up from that bloke to this bloke or something like that, they'd work with nothing on because it was too hot.

*QUESTION: So, in fact, you'd be locked in?*

JACK

Yes, locked in until you met up with him again, see, and you sumped in again, like I showed you there - you sump in there seven or eight feet and

that's fair dinkum.

*QUESTION: How did you feel Jack, after a shift?*

JACK

Bugged! I'll tell you. I'd just come home - I'd have tea at four o'clock - I'd be asleep at half past four. Yes.

*QUESTION: When did you start the shift?*

JACK

Seven o'clock in the morning. Yes, and it was all contract mining. You had 13 of these half ton skips to fill a day - that was only pick and shovel, see. Years later, they got the power borers in, see. They used to hole over the top over here like that and you'd drill holes in like that - say about five or six of them and you just hole over the top. The afternoon shift Deputy, he used to come in and he'd fire them and we used to leave the clay dollies - we used to leave them for him so he could stem the hole up and he'd fire them - next morning you'd come and you'd have loose coal and that's when you'd water it all down before you'd start filling it, see. That was later times, that's getting in about the '49, '48 or something - that's when that came in. That wasn't too bad then. Then the bord and pillar came in then.

*QUESTION: Could you explain that?*

JACK

Yes. That's your longwall. This is the bord and pillar - I'll just show you a thing me dear. That's your bord and pillar - that's your coal up there - you drive up there, you drive up so far - how far Jock?

JOCK

About 40 metres - all depends.

JACK

About 40 metres. You drive up there, see this is the intake coming down here, say this is the intake - you'd always drive that one first and then when you'd get up there so far, you'd drive a cut-through across over here, see. So this bloke coming up here, see, and you'd break through there and that's how your air would come through all the time like that and you'd do the same up here like this - go like that and like that - you drive over there and back there and that was your return down there. Your air and dust supposed to all go back down this way, see. This is like what they used to call a return and that's how it is. That's the intake air

- always drive that one first - then drove a cut-through across this other bloke here and that air like the air intake up here - push it through there.

(talking about the horses) ..... bridle to his bar so you could drag his head one side and then you sneak up the other side of that road there, see the road I told you there, you could pass him then, and get up alongside of his collar and wack him under the belly and he'd pull six skips - six of them half ton skips - out of the dip and out onto the flat and they used to take them all out with the main and tail chain. I told Jock, the kids to-day couldn't handle it - they wouldn't handle it at all.

JOCK

I wheeled with a horse named Prince - (where's your pen). In the olden days that was your rib, what you call the ribs - you had a skip line there and a skip line here - well your full ones came out here and they went out to serve and these were the empties coming into your miners. I used to have this horse - he'd come up there - you'd put the sprag in and pull the pin - I wheeled with limmers, he wheeled with darstones - I had limmers, what they call limmers, and you'd pull the pin and say 'come here' and he'd come round to his left and come back around, come from there and walk around the front and you'd put the blinkers on and away he'd go - ten times a day he'd do that and if you'd have to wheel eleven set you'd have to have someone in front to stop him going up the pit - oh, they knew. They could count. If I did eleven sets, I'd have to have someone in front of that horse to stop him when I pulled the pin, otherwise he'd walk straight in the pit. But the other ten he'd just wheel around and walk down in front of the empties and away he'd go.

JACK

'Come here' was go to your left and 'gee back' was go to your right - that's how the horses used to know, see. 'Come here' he'd know he'd have to go to his left, see - 'gee back' turn around, or 'back back' .....

*QUESTION: Are you aware of the use of ponies now?*

JACK

No horses at all ... very few - Stocky had the last horses.

JOCK

They used to use them boxcars.

JACK

They should still have horses to drag them big cables they got here now.

JOCK

Mechanisation came in - they done away the old horse, he just, well, he was outdated. He had a good wheeler he'd wheel what, 50 ton a day, wouldn't he - a good wheeler, wheel 50 ton. But you get them on these shuttle cars, they wheel 50 ton before they even turn around. See you got shuttle cars hold twelve ton and they're just backwards and forwards, going all the time and these miners on these continuous miners.

JACK

Especially these little skips I was talking about, they're only half ton skips, that's ten hundred weight.

JOCK

And with the new longwall they don't even have skips at all - they just pour it straight onto the belt - you got not shuttle cars or skips or nothing - they just pour it straight onto the belt and the belt takes it right out.

JACK

In them days I'm telling you about, like in the longwall at Borehole, there was no transport there - you had to walk from the pit bottom right into your work too. And walk out after you'd finished your shift. There was no transport - it's all changed now, all that.

*QUESTION: What colour would you be?*

JACK

Black, you're black.

JOCK

Know Merewether Baths at all? Just stand over the top of Merewether Baths and look due east. Burwood ... you've heard of Burwood Colliery? Well Burwood Colliery sea headings were three miles straight out from the Merewether Baths.

*QUESTION: Under the ocean?*

JOCK

Why they stopped - the floor of the ocean is like that - they come along here - and when you haven't got 150 feet of solid stone between, 200 feet of solid stone, you've got to stop producing. But if you're under a river you've only got to have 150 feet of solid stone. And that's the law. Once they get less than 150 feet of solid stone between the roof of the mine and

the floor of the ocean, you've got to withdraw.

..... they call a splint - you splint that pillar right across it. So then you've got this little bit of a stook - we call it a stook out there - then after we've got through there, then we lift that off - you keep running the miner there and chewing that right off till that comes right out. Then you come back here - you drive another one through there - same thing. Then you come back along here and strip it off there. Once you take that out, that falls in and then you do the same with this one and that falls in and that then becomes your goaf - what we call a goaf. So that's the end of it and as you keep taking your pillars out, you keep retreating right back till you come back to your main road - and you do it again and, as you keep going, these jacks keep moving out and when you get enough air open, it all falls in behind you again - so you got all that falling in behind you as you're extracting it - it keeps coming out.

JACK

It should fall after every luke - after every luke you take off, that thing up there should drop and that's why your big jacks are there to hold the roof up so the .....

JOCK

It falls all the time - continues to roll off - such a big area. Why you have your tailgates, you've got to have a way of getting your coal out, so they've got a belt running along the front of them jacks and they run onto the main belt that runs it out. This is your return - your air comes in over the machine and goes back out when you return there.

JACK

And these belts here, they keep retracting that every time they take a lift off, see. It only takes, oh it wouldn't take an hour like, to move the belts and everything back.

JOCK

You've got to have this here so you can have you're hydraulic system. All these jacks work off an hydraulic system and you've got to have these tankers - 100's of gallons of hydraulic fluid to keep all these jacks - you might have 150 jacks along here and each jack will take 700 ton - so they're a fair lump of a jack. They just started to put this in when I retired - I finished in '82.

*QUESTION: So up until 1982 they'd use the older methods?*

JACK/JOCK

Yes. No. They walls come in a long time in England - but over here in Australia?

JOCK

I'd say the walls came in here in the latter part of the '70s.

JACK

Be the late '70s, too.

JOCK

When I did my Deputy's ticket, I went out to Burwood and they had the shortwall - what they call the shortwall - and the only difference between a longwall and a shortwall is the width between the mothergate and the tailgate. We had what they call a longwall, which was 200 metres between the two gates. But you can have a shortwall - perhaps might only have 50 metres, 80 metres, 100 metres or whatever the physical condition of your mine allows - you might only have to work 80 metres, 100 metres. Well anyway .....

*QUESTION: How about if we go back to the old days - in the '40s say - the difference in mining. When you first went down the mine what was it like?*

JACK

Well, you use to get out of the cage and go for your life - you did, you use to go for your life, because you'd have to get in there and if there was a skip on the flat, the wheeler use to have to come out the flat for - if there was a spare skip there from the night before, you use to grab that and push it in yourself, see, and fill it up before the wheeler come in, see - and have to wait for the tail - yeh! - the main and tail use to take the full ones out and bring the empties in, see. And the wheelers be waiting there - you'd have a skip on anybody else, see - well you'd get out the pit earlier. Cause you'd have your dag filled like, before the other people got theirs. And the wheeler would have to come back and he'd have to stay there and get it because the miner he'd finish - he'd have that one planted somewhere - he'd plant them and everything - oh yes, we was cunning.

I was eighteen I think - no, wait a minute - yes, I eighteen when I went on the coal and I've worked all coal until I left there and went to ..... not Wallarah ..... Waratah Colliery, the Gully Pit they use to call it.

*QUESTION: Where was that Waratah Colliery?*



JACK

Straight up from the Gully Line there - you used to go right up there, right up - used to go underneath Charlestown, right down the bottom of Charlestown, it was.

*QUESTION: Where were you living then, Jack?*

JACK

Wallsend.

*QUESTION: Always lived at Wallsend?*

JACK

Yes ... yes ... yes.

*QUESTION: How did you get to work?*

JACK

When I was out at Borehole, when I first started at Borehole, they used to have old charabanc truck - like a bus sort of thing - a long thin thing it was - seats up each side and one down the middle - that's how we used to go out to Borehole. Then when I went to the Gully, used to catch the tram from here down to the Gully and then catch the old train up there - he'd take us up there and if we'd get out the pit early, the train was down the thing and there was a flat-top there - we use to pinch the bloody thing and sit on the flat-top and just work the brake ourselves and come down the Gully and the train would bring it back up - that's to get away early. Otherwise, you'd have to walk right up this goat track up to Charlestown and get a bus into Broadmeadow, then come home. That was '48 or something I left the Gully - after I left Borehole and went there, I went back to Borehole. That was on the back Saturdays when the war was on - that was the back Saturdays ... '46?

JOCK

War finished in '45.

JACK

Yes, when was the last back shift we worked? I left the Gully on the last back shift on the Saturday. Billy ??? - he got his leg broke. Oh anyhow, either pinched a flat-top from up the pit and ride all the way - all down hill see - all the way down - just work the brake yourself - you had your foot on side of the brake - go right down to the Gully Line.

*QUESTION: How many of you?*

JACK

Oh, how many was there like - was going down - they'd all hop on the flat top and away we'd go.

*QUESTION: What about safety down the mines - ever involved in any cave-ins?*

JACK

No, not actually cave-ins - I haven't been in actual cave-ins. I've been in the cage once when we was coming up, and the engine-driver he thought he had coal on, see. He used to rap three times for men coming up - when men was coming up he'd rap three times - the onsetter used to rap three times - this bloke'd know there was men coming up, see. This day this bloke must have forgot - well he just lifted it straight up like that - this is fair dinkum - right from the Borehole, straight up like that and we only had an iron bar across us at the time - they's going to pull more coal up after it - and we got up passed the Young Wallsend seam - that's about 70 feet up above the Borehole - and just as we hit it we stopped dead like that - he must have realized he had men on, see. Stopped dead like that - the bloke was standing alongside me - the bar flew up, he was hanging onto the bar - over he went - next minute the cage went away again and I was going out and the Deputy pulled me back in - Bobby Campbell - he pulled me back in and I said 'Nippy's gone, Nippy's gone' - he went over the buntings and I heard him squeal once and that was it - he went straight down to the bottom, like that - every bone in his body was broken. I was up the pit top when he - just eased it away then and went straight to the pit top - I couldn't walk - they had to carry me - oh God! - it was the worst experience I've ever had at the pit.

JOCK

Never forget them .....

JACK

No - that's the only one I've had. After that, when the bord and pillar came in, safety, that came in mainly then - didn't it, Jock - and bord and pillar was in then.

JOCK

Yes.

JACK

B.H.P. took over. After that accident, if men was riding, doesn't matter if it was early cage or not, gates had to go on. They had to bring them poor horses up every day too, you know. Yes ..... them horses - as soon as they finished, they knew the work .... - you just take his bar off and the chain and you put it away so you knew where to get it next when you was wheeling - and you could leave them on the flat like that and you'd go out yourself - the horse would follow you - no light or anything - he'd follow you out the pit bottom - he'd get out the pit bottom himself. He was always there. All the men would go up first and then the horses. Every evening they'd go up at the Borehole - at the Gully they used to keep them down there for a week, down the Gully. That's when they got the big rats and everything down the pit. Long they were - they were that bloody long.

*QUESTION: Your lunch wouldn't be very safe, would it?*

JACK

No. That's why you used to have the tucker cans - tin tucker cans. Yes, so they couldn't gnaw it - if you took a plastic one down there, they'd gnaw it and eat it. A horse - I've seen horses go into your can - they get their tongue like that and they lift the lid, like the flap that used to have over to hold your lid down .....

..... I was wheeling at the time - we was out late there the night before, so I planted the bar the the tail chain and I said we'll get down early in the morning and we'll get a ride in, if there's a skip there. We got this skip and the horse took off - this is big Nigger, the one I was telling you about, the one we had to put a rope on him. He started racing see, and the skip was coming up close to his heels and next minute he stumbled - well, we run straight into his backside and arse over head we went and we're all laying there and the horse just staying there and he got up, shook himself, and we're getting out of the way, because we thought he's going to kick and everything like that - he got up - he off for his life down to the flat and we followed him and we went to push the empty skips we were having a ride in with - and he was waiting on the flat for us - he did his job the rest of the day. They were terrific, they were.

JOCK

It was an education to see some of them.

JACK

Oh, yes. We had a little horse - Bonnie we used to call her - she'd back quicker than she'd go forward ... y'ou'd say 'back back' and she'd push the skips back with her bum. Going forward she'd just crawl, crawl, crawl.

JOCK

Ever see a horse riding the rails?

JACK

Yes, Yes.

JOCK

I used to have a horse - I'd take him bread in for lunch time - if you didn't give it to him he used to perform - he'd come over and nudge, nudge, until he got his bit of bread. He'd never work with blinkers on, Jack. When I took him down the pit in the morning, he'd go down with them on and he'd go out with them on, but soon as you got there, used to take them off and hang them on the prop. and away he'd go - never have to talk to him - he could do the work on his own. When I had a promotion, I had the young lad there wheeling - he said 'where will I go' - I said just '????' to his tail and he'll take you - and the horse took him around the place. I think a lot went out of the industry when they went, don't you?

JACK

Yes.

JOCK

Get these mechanical monsters that's around now - it's unreal the size of them. That's where a lot of the trouble - they're making the machines too big and the Government restrictions are making the places too narrow - you've got no room to move.

*QUESTION: So, in fact, it really hasn't improved that much - really - to space?*

JOCK

Well they have got them.

JACK

Not with space - you can't have too much open space because the place would fall in, see.

JOCK

Take the likes of that pillar, that place there - when Jack was talking about in the horse days when we went down there, they'd put a pair of

men in that pillar - you'd forget about them for three to four months - it would take them three to four months to take that out - but the modern miner - you'd put a continuous miner in there this morning, by tomorrow afternoon that pillar is completely out - it's gone - a day and a half - day and a half against four months. But it's a lot of difference - you got a machine doing it .....

*QUESTION: So what companies did you work for.*

JACK

I worked for B.H.P. It was Blacks estate when I first went to Borehole in '41. That's what they used to call it - Blacks Estate. And the B.H.P. took it over '49-'50, I think it's '49 or '50. They took it over and they've been there ever since.

*QUESTION: What were relations like between the workers and the management?*

JACK

Sometimes it was good - sometimes bad.

JOCK

All depends if they wanted coal - if they wanted coal they was good - if they didn't, they'd find something wrong.

JACK

So you'd go on strike, or something like that. It's pretty good now, I think.

*QUESTION: Were there many strikes in those early days?*

JACK

Oh, yes. I went out there ten days at Borehole and came home ten days for nothing.

JOCK

Go weeks with no work.

*QUESTION: So how did you live?*

JACK

We survived. Bring up four kids too - I've got one getting married next month - month after, I should say - October. That's the last one.

JOCK

I've only got one and she's getting married in November .....

..... between men, don't you - I mean you'd have your arguments, but when things are going bad, you realize you've got to have someone there behind you to more or less look after your life for you - to help you - you get in a bad area where they are taking a pillar out and you're starting work and all that, well your mates have got to be there listening for you, same as you. It's something you can't explain, is it? - you get so close to one another - and then you get the funny side of the pit.

JACK

Driver always got an offsider alongside him, looking after the cable, see, and the shuttle car comes in to take the coal away, and he's suppose to be just looking after the cable and watching the roof for the driver, cause he can't hear with the machine going and everything like that - you work together, that's the main thing - you work together, there's no accidents - and that's the main thing about it.

*QUESTION: Yes, the comradeship must be very strong.*

JACK

Yes, yes, you've got to.

JOCK

I had a mate killed alongside of me. I was driving the machine and we both dived out to let go and I got out and he didn't get out. You have a lot of these experiences because you're all the time running out. It's that funny when you get out - everyones out - and, oh yes, great day. But you get one that don't get come out, that's when the fun goes out of it. I went to the funeral and a bloke came up to me and asked how did I feel and I said 'I feel like I'm walking after my own funeral' - that's the way you feel. Even to this day - that's 16 year ago - still vivid in my mind - I can still see the mate getting buried - trying to get him out. He was alive for half an hour under all this stone and coal - still talking to us - just couldn't get him out.

JACK

It all depends on what position you're in like when you get buried.

JOCK

It wasn't the fall that killed him, it was asphyxiation - his lungs got

packed in that tight with the stone and that - like your chest has got to expand to drive the oxygen around your body - well, his couldn't expand - that's what he died of - asphyxiation.

JACK

I was telling you about that time the bloke went out of the cage like - I was going up with him and I nearly went out. I went to the funeral and I went to the compo. doctor a couple of days after - I was still shaking and everything like that - I says 'I want a couple of days off, or a week off work to settle down' - he said 'no chance - you've got to go back tomorrow - if you don't go back tomorrow, you won't go back at all'. So next day I went back to work - soon as I went to get in that cage, like going down, I was as frightened as hell, I'll tell you - bang - I went down after that - after the next day - bang - no trouble at all after that.

*QUESTION: Do you think you would have gone to another job - what would you have done?*

JACK

No. I don't think I could have gone to another job, no. I started at the Abattoir when I was 14 and went to the pit when I was 16 and then went back to the Abattoir in '49, when the pits were only working one, two days a week - that was after the war - coal got slack - I was only there nine months and I went back to the pits and been there ever since.

*QUESTION: What was the tie?*

JACK

Oh, I don't know. You got used to it - you were brought up into it .....

..... We never got much money. My son-in-law, my daughter his wife, he's getting terrific money - I won't say it over that, cause you don't, no - he's electrical engineer out at Gretley - he's getting terrific money out there - she goes on 'oh, Neal's got this and this' - that's when I was working, when he first started out there - and I said 'but he's not in the B.H.P. pit', I said. We was only getting four and five dollars a week bonus. 'Oh, Neal's got all this much', Sharon came home and tell her mum, 'Neal got a big pay this week', she said - 'Look what I've got!', she (mum) said - and that was the difference - different pits had bigger bonuses - the working conditions were better. That didn't worry us, we all survived. I said 'Christ' to Sharon after that 'if you had to survive like we had to mate, you wouldn't live, you'd be dead'.

JOCK

This is where bonus doesn't work out - you're both doing the same work

and one man's getting twice the amount the other bloke's getting. You could be going along this week in good conditions and the bonus just flows off - like, as the coal's pouring out, your bonus is going up and up. Next week you strike a bad area and you're working three times as hard and you get nothing - if the coal's not going out, you don't get your bonus and when it's hard that's when you're really working hard. When things are going along nice and smooth, it's no effort.

JACK

No trouble at all - the machinery is doing all your work.

*QUESTION: Bonus is tied to the output - tied to production?*

JOCK

Once you've produced so many tons, they pay you so much a ton for every ton after.

*QUESTION: Very competitive.*

JOCK

Yeh - but then you get some mines they got different ideas - some sections getting different bonuses to other sections - this is not right - they're all working in the one mine - they've ironed all that out now.

My pit worked on your rate whatever position you had in the pit - it worked out at the mechanical rate, which is the highest rate underground in the mining unions. If you're second class, you might be say five dollars or ten dollars a day less, well your bonus would be say a dollar or so less than that - it went right through to the apprentices - even apprentice lads were getting good bonuses - and this wasn't right, either, because they'd go to Tech. and our boys are getting say one hundred dollars a week more than the boys working in the industry - which is not right again.

JACK

That's when the ???? started to fall out of the bloody coal industry, because some people was getting more than others.

JOCK

They start talking - 'oh, we're getting this sort of bonus out the pit' - 'we're not getting this at our place', say some of these industries - they're not getting nothing at all.

*QUESTION: Did you want to talk about the unions?*



JACK

No! Bugger the unions! What do you want to know about the unions?

JOCK

I've got to make tracks, so .....

JACK

..... Kurri Hospital and Cessnock Hospital - the miners used to put so much out of their pay - threepence or some-bloody-thing - it wasn't much - money wasn't worth that much at that time, as what it is to-day - threepence was worth a lot to-day.

*QUESTION: Did the companies help?*

JOCK

Sometimes they'd subsidise, sometimes they wouldn't - depends on what sort of mood they was in ..... if they wanted coal, if they didn't ..... The Police Boys' Club out at Windale, we put in for that ages - only about 25 cents or something like that.

JACK

The miners would put in for anything - you've only got to go and ask them and bang! But they got that many out at Borehole - they was coming every week, see, different other ????, see - lucky if you'd get home with any money yourself - fair dinkum. It got that bad where we were you couldn't get out. They had to come to the Committee meeting and ask permission to come and speak before anyone give a donation.

JOCK

You couldn't get to the pay windows at the finish in our place - every pay day they was there with a box, underneath your nose, you couldn't ..... Our mining Committee got together and they decided that, righto, any charity that wanted to come used to come and state their case and we'd say 'look we'd like to give \$50 or \$100', righto, there it is, bang, if it was a worthy cause - if it wasn't, 'look we can't allow you to come'. It worked quite good, we finished up, well you wasn't going to the window and those that wanted money, charity, was getting what they wanted.

JACK

Some would put in, some wouldn't. You get some tight ones ... yes ...

JOCK

The bloke would ..... everytime he would come out with the collection, he'd say 'I've only got fourpence or fivepence, that's about all' .....

JACK

If a bloke's off sick or something like that and he was a popular bloke at the pit, he'd get more than the other bloke, see, some other bloke wasn't happy, wasn't well-liked in the pit - people wouldn't give as much to him as the other bloke who was liked good. In the finish they decided, well, if there's anyone off crook, we strike a levy and everyone puts in the same amount - that was the only fairest way there was.

*QUESTION: So you looked after yourself*

JACK

Oh yeh - looked after yourself at each pit. If anyone was off crook or something and they run out of single pay at the finish, well you'd look after them - him and the wife and the kids. If you was well-liked, you had a bigger collection. If you wasn't well-liked, you didn't get as much. So that's why they decided they'd put a levy on and everyone would pay the same amount and that was the best and fairest way.

JOCK

Some would put in a pound and some would put in tuppence, if they could. Then when they made it standard, like if you was off sick, you got the same as what I got. Which is a better idea. Our mob made it a mortality and sick fund and all that, so if you were sick you got so much a week - if you died they'd come and give your wife x amount of money - say it was \$1,000 - they'd come and put it straight down as soon as it happened - you got killed at work or died at home of natural causes. That was better than having a day off work. Years ago, as Jack will tell you, if you got someone killed, like the day his mate got killed, the day my mate got killed, instead of having the day off, we worked that day and we paid the widow the wages - it's better than having the day off in sympathy - if you've got 200 men and they give their day's wages, it's a good gesture - give the wife the day's wage - better than a heap of roses or flowers.

*QUESTION: In those days, were many of the wives working?*

JOCK

Some do, some don't - like all walks of life - some women will work, some won't. My wife worked when we first got married, cause in those days - I got married in '49 - never had two bob to bless yourself with - once we got on our feet, well, there was no need to work .....

*QUESTION: We should say she's still working, though, in the house.*

JACK

Oh yes - worse job there is. My wife reckons 'when am I going to retire?' and I said 'you've retired all your life'.

JOCK

A few say 'how's it like finished working?' - the best job I've ever had, but the worst boss.

*QUESTION: What were your holidays in those days, when you started*

JACK

There were no holidays. Hang on - used to have your holidays, in '41, but there was no pay.

*QUESTION: Never got paid?*

JACK

No, not until I think '48 or '49. ?????? .....

If you worked ten days straight they'd give you an extra day - pay you an extra day. In the pit we'd only get paid once a fortnight - now its once a week - but if the company was going bad or something like that, they'd bung on a blue about the eighth or ninth day, so you'd have the day off so they wouldn't have to pay the extra shift. That's why this all come up in the '49 - the big strike of '49.

*QUESTION: That '49 strike was quite a large strike, wasn't it?*

JACK

Yes ...yes.

*QUESTION: How long was it?*

JACK

Eight or nine weeks. If they'd have gone another week, the Federation would have won.

*QUESTION: What were the issues?*

JACK

We were going for conditions, pensions, compensation ..... different other claims ..... they gaoled the leader, Gallagher I think his name was - they gaoled him because they reckoned he was a Commo - that's when Chifley was in - yes, Chifley was in - he died just after that.

..... '49 - I'm trying to think of '49 ..... another couple of weeks, a week - the A.L.P. had blokes on every corner, speaking 'go back to work' and everything like that - the miners went back to work. Well, they ended up getting something out of it, but not as much as they got if they'd stayed out another fortnight because they'd have beat them - they'd definitely beat them ..... the soldiers in the pits out here in the open-cut out here at Minmi.

But it hasn't been a bad life ..... I don't think I'd have did anything else .....I don't think I could've.

*QUESTION: Was your father a miner?*

JACK

Yes - he started out at a pit called Durham - I think they call in John Darling now - out that way somewhere. Then he went to Borehole and I followed him there and he got dusted, coal dust. They reckon he only had 33.1/3% of dust but he wasn't allowed to go back to the pits anymore or work anywhere near the pits and he got £3 something a week - that's all he got, and he got that till he died like - he died when he was 67, I think it was. He didn't enjoy much out of life afterwards, but me mother's still alive - she's 87 - we've got her up at Nelson Bay Harbourside Village and she loves it up there - she's doing good, she's doing extra well, but she's starting to fail a bit now, but she likes it up there. But he died of dust. Old Simons around here reckons it was an ulcer - and he was getting paid dust money and everything like that until the day he died - and he sure put on the certificate it was dust. Not the same as these bloody things around here - they reckon I've got bloody asthma - don't tell me I was 43.1/2 years in the pit and I haven't got dust on my lungs - ah, no-one will tell me that. Before I go - won't be too long - I'm going to get in touch with the Uni. over there - soon as I die I want my lungs to go the Uni. over there, so they can test them all and see what it is - bloody oath - and if there is dust, the old woman might get a few quid out of it - but she's looked after well, anyhow.

Near the old hospital - we used to live there - and the house is still there - Wirragulla is the name on the nameplate - lived there, and I got married and lived up Wallsend here, Nelson Street up here - and I built the place over there 35-36 years ago, I think it was - and that's where I've been ever since. But she's a big hill - I can't walk up it, mate - not now, anyway - years ago I used to run up the bloody thing.

*QUESTION: Things have changed?*

JACK

Oh yes ... yes .....

..... you have a spotlight on them - some has a spotlight that drives the shuttle cars, or the miner-driver, or the bloke driving the longwall bloody thing, he generally got a spotlight on, see. The others just a round one. When you're in a close area your light used to shine right on everything ..... when you're down the pit you never think it's going to fall in or anything like that - you get used to that. But you know if anything's going to happen - you can hear the timber crack or something like that and you look up and a bit of dust falls down from the roof - well, something's going to happen and you get out of there - that's all you do. You've got to have it bred into you sort of thing. It takes a while to get used to it like, but after you get used to it, you don't even think when you're working down there - you think you're just working inside of a club - you don't - you never think of it.

*QUESTION: I don't think I'd ever get used to it.*

JACK

Haven't you ever been down a pit? Well, that would be your best thing in the world - to go out to one of the pits and go down one - it would, my word. It's an experience.

*QUESTION: So what do you think about the young blokes to-day down the pits - they got it easy?*

JACK

Well, they got it easier than what we got, I can tell you that - with a pick and shovel - they wouldn't do it. These young blokes to-day they wouldn't do it - no way. There's not much manual work down the pit now. Machinery mainly does it all.

**SIDE 2 OF TAPE****JACK**

These walls - what do you call them - the longwall business in the pits - they don't use timber now, they have these roof bolts and everything like that - just this strap or so of metal - not metal, it's like a, oh, what do they call it - no, no - four years and I forget now. Strapping, it's like a strapping - it's flat and it just bolts up with four bolts in between it and that's suppose to hold the roof, see. They are that quick going in and out, the roof hasn't got time to sag, because they're in and out. Years ago, with the bord and pillar, every three feet you used to put a big slab, oh 18 feet slab - and some of the bastards were that big - you had to manhandle them. They were made of timber and you had to put them up on jacks ???? and put them underneath them and the roof bolter would come in behind you and bore two holes up so because if the leg got knocked out they didn't fall down on top of you.

In this time, like in '54, they used to take up a collection like for you, see, and I said 'no, I'm going back' and they give me a job on the screens up there on the pit top and I went back to work and sat on those screens for three months until the Deputy said to me 'Jack, how are you going?' and I said 'good' and he said 'would you like a job down the pit like, trapping' and I said 'yeh' - it'd be better than sitting up here listening to this clank, clank, clank of the bloody coal going over the top and you're picking the stone off with one hand - and that's how I got back on the coal. I went down there at dinner-time - everything used to stop like for half an hour for crib - I used to go into the coal face, see, I'd pick up a pick - I'd use my hand like that - that's all I can open my hand like - couple of weeks after that I said 'bugger this' I said to the under-Manager, 'I want to go back to the coal in the next cable', see - he said 'oh dear' - I said 'yes' - he said 'do you think you'll be able to do it?' - I said 'yes, I'm going to give it a go anyhow' - and that's how I got back down the pits.

*QUESTION: That doesn't effect you?*

JACK

No, No - I can straighten it like that - all the tendons are and that all cut there - see there, I lost that - see your muscles, that's gone - but he saved me life that ???? bloke up here - he went to America and he come back here and he died. He was a good bloke.

SUMMARY

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

Tuesday 1 - 3 p.m.

TERM III

REGIONAL HISTORY

Summary of Interview recorded on 19 August, 1988

between

L. CUMMINGS (student)  
and  
MR JOHN AMBLER  
with  
MR JOHN REDDING  
(retired Miners)

Subject: COAL MINING

Name: LORRI CUMMINGS

Date: 9 September, 1988.



## SUMMARY

1

### PREAMBLE

This interview was recorded on 19 August, 1988, at the Wallsend R.S.L. club, from approximately 10.00 a.m. to 12 noon. The interviewer had not previously met the two retired miners, but was introduced on that day by a mutual friend. The setting was the lounge of the club, where many retired workers spend a few hours in the morning with their mates over a few glasses of beer, hence the background sounds of poker machines, p.a. systems and the morning television programmes, notably 'Coronation Street'.

The tape is approximately 3/4 hour in length, and there are a few inaudible words and phrases, some over-talking and blank tape and, as it has not been edited, a little fragmented.

### SUMMARY

Mr Ambler (Jack) commenced working in the mines in 1941 and retired in 1984. He worked for that time at Stockton Borehole Colliery (now owned by the B.H.P.), with short breaks at the Waratah Colliery (the Gully Pit) and the Abattoirs. Mr Redding (Jock) started in the mines in 1952, became a Deputy, and retired recently: he did not say where he had worked, but some of the time was obviously spent at Burwood Colliery.

The narrative commences with descriptions of the systems of mining, especially the longwall, and as he speaks, Jack is drawing the diagrams. He describes the way in which the coal was put into the skip and taken away by the wheeler, and how you had to grow up with the work - the kids of to-day would never do it. He describes how the very tall miners had to spread their legs out wide to pick the coalface, as in parts it was only three foot six inches. How the two miners were picking toward each other, sometimes not getting much air, but finally meeting and getting the air back. The miners were in fact locked-in until they met up again. He mentions the heat and dirt and how miners would wear women's bloomer underwear or nothing at all, to help stop the chafing: at that time there was no water down the mine.

The day would commence at 7.00 a.m. and Jack would be 'buggered' and 'black' at the end of the shift - he'd have his tea at 4.00 p.m. and be asleep at 4.30 p.m.

Both Jack and Jock talk about the horses down the mines; their fondness for them and how they feel that something has gone now that horses are no longer used. They describe some of the funny instances with the horses, and they also talk of the rats down the mines.

Jock describes the law for heading heights in mines under the ocean or rivers and also the difference between a longwall and a shortwall.

Jack tells of working in the 1940s, how he travelled to work in a charabanc, and working during the war. Both men have been involved in accidents, but no cave-ins. They describe how you must rely on your mate down the mines for your safety and indeed your life. Mateship seems very important to miners because of this reliance.

Although there is no talk about the unions, they did talk about relations between the workers and the management. There is talk about the strikes and Jack relates his thoughts on the 1949 strike and how he feels that with one more week out, the men would have got what they wanted. They talk of the bonus system and how unfair it is, as it is tied to production of coal, not how hard you work: it obviously causes ill-feeling both in and out of the industry and between different companies.

The generosity of miners in helping with donations to community clubs, the building of hospitals, etc, and the difference in some miners when it comes time to pay donations or levies. Also the way in which the miners handled a death among their mates, with the men doing a day's work instead of a day off in sympathy and all the wages going directly to the widow.

Jack tells of his father who was also a miner, but was 'dusted' and had to live on a pension: Jack's mother is now 87, living at Nelson Bay. He says that he feels he has also been 'dusted', but the doctors will not agree and say he has asthma - when he dies he wants his lungs tested to see if he is right. He tells of always living in Wallsend, although the hill his house on is getting a bit too steep for him. He ends with again saying how the young blokes to-day wouldn't do it with a pick and shovel: machinery does it all.

There is also a short piece on side two of the tape, with some more description of mining systems. Also a piece on what happened after Jack had cut his arm badly, thirty years ago, but wanted to go back down the mine, which he did.

OPEN FOUNDATION - AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Tuesday 1 - 3 p.m.

TERM III

REGIONAL HISTORY

Paper: The Coal Miners of Newcastle in the Nineteenth Century.

Name: LORRI CUMMINGS

Date: 8/9/88.

Coal mining and Newcastle have always been synonymous: indeed coal was the initial reason for settlement in the area. Coal has been the industry to which, in the early days, the majority of employment depended: it was what the newly industrialised world of the eighteenth and nineteenth century depended on to run its industry, ships and trains, and to light and fuel its homes. Coal also produced a new breed of people - the miners, who, working in harsh, dangerous conditions, benefited little from the massive profits of the owners of the mines. In Newcastle this was especially hard to take, as the majority of mines were under the direction of masters thousands of miles away in Britain. These absent landlords, together with the Australian owned companies, saw the exploitation of resources in Newcastle as their right, in terms of both the coal and the miners. No concessions were given to the men who daily risked their lives to go down the mines for coal.

The first coal miners of Newcastle were private individuals who dug the exposed coal from the cliffs and beaches for their own profit, and a small party of colliers hewing coal for the Governor. Both these ventures were abandoned. In 1804 Governor King re-established the settlement as a gaol for second offenders, including leaders of the Castle Hill Rebellion of that year. The convicts were used for limeburning, cedar cutting and coal mining and lived in appalling conditions, with little food and clothing. The coal miners were considered lucky, as extra rations were available for those who hewed the coal, although they suffered the occupational hazards of chest complaints and rheumatism, along with venereal disease which was rampant in the penal settlement. For those who tried to escape, punishment was 100 lashes and seven days confinement on bread and water. In spite of these conditions, "up to 1820 they raised 22,000 tons of coal"<sup>1</sup>. In 1830 the Government handed over the mining to the Australian Agricultural Company, who, realizing it was not getting the best production from the convicts, imported Irish, Welsh and English miners, in the hope of getting a "stable, skilled and docile workforce"<sup>2</sup>. This was not to be, as many absconded and the remainder were anything but docile: they were to be the first of many miners to immigrate, bringing with them the hope of a better life.

The second half of the nineteenth century was the time of great expansion and production in the Newcastle coal industry, with strong demand for its coal both in the colony and overseas. It was also the era of the birth of the unions and the push for better pay and conditions. The first strike was in 1851, when A.A. Co. miners struck for increased rates. This strike proved successful, as did many during the early 1850's, when the miners had the bargaining power, due to shortage of labour, as many had left for the goldfields. However in 1855, with firstly the demand for coal falling and the stockpiling of coal, and then a production increase with a coal price decrease, the bargaining power shifted to the employers, who thought nothing of the conditions of their miners. By 1860, miners of the district

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1. R. Gollan, The Coalminers of New South Wales, Melbourne, 1963, p. 8.

2. J.C. Docherty, Newcastle, The Making of an Australian City, Sydney, 1983, p. 14.

were united enough to form a union during a meeting at Groves' paddock at Waratah. This union, with James Fletcher as the Chairman, was the forerunner of the present Federation. Like to-day's Union, that first union was concerned with the wages, conditions and health of coal miners: and like to-day's, there was always constant attack from the mine owners, who prefer no union at all. It was to be the following year that the first general coal strike occurred. This was in retaliation to a proposal by the four main collieries to reduce the hewing rate of coal by 20% and to import 400 more miners from Britain. On 21 August, 1861, during the two month strike, the Miners' Association met at Randell's Camp, two miles from the Waratah Station. Some 650 men, under the leadership of James Fletcher, pledged to resist the reduction and to write letters to England warning of conditions for intending immigrants. A circular from Fletcher was handed out. This circular was printed in the Newcastle Chronicle of 28 August, 1861, headed "To the Coal Miners of England" and pointed out the conditions and cost of living in the mines and accused the owners of false representation.<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that in that same edition of the Chronicle, the A.A. Company has an advertisement placed warning, "Any person found taking COAL, SAND, TIMBER, and other materials from the A.A. Company's premises, will be prosecuted for stealing".<sup>4</sup> This 1861 strike together with the following strike of 1862, which saw the colliery manager of A.A. Co, J.B. Winship, devote himself to the crushing of the union, weakened the union. It was not until 1870 that the Union was re-organised into an effective organisation, fully representative on all issues concerning the miners, economically, socially and politically.

The 1870s and 1880s saw improvements in the life of the coal miner, with the introduction of the ten-hour day in 1874 and the introduction in 1876 of the amended Coal Mines Regulation Act, which superseded the 1862 Act in the areas of ventilation and safety rules. This was a joint representation with the mine owners, one of many in this time of co-operation between the two parties. With the awakening of social conscience in the 1880s, the miners became politically active. Notably, was the first union Chairman, James Fletcher, although by then a powerful capitalist, who was elected to Parliament from 1880 to 1891, becoming Minister for Mines in 1886.

With the economic depression, financial crisis and competition from Japanese mines, the 1900s saw the rise in unemployment in the Newcastle mines. The companies took this opportunity to lower the hewing rate of coal and some miners, for fear of poverty and starvation "were prepared to work for 5s a day!"<sup>5</sup> In 1896 an unsuccessful three month strike further weakened both the miners and the Union - the mine owners had won for the time being. With the close of the nineteenth century, mining was still the major employer, but, with the opening of new mines in the Hunter Valley and the commencement of heavy industry, this was to change in the new century.

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3. *The Newcastle Chronicle*, 28 August, 1861.

4. *Ibid.*

5. R. Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, p.90.

Miners have always been a self-sufficient, co-operative group and this was especially the case in the Newcastle area during the nineteenth century. Because of the coal companies' complete disregard to the needs of the miners and their families, it was up to each individual mining area to provide for the necessary amenities of an isolated society. Many of the social improvements followed the British experience: the Friendly Societies which looked after sickness and funeral benefits, the co-operatives for the purchase of food and clothing and the introduction and support of community needs, such as hospitals, doctors, community halls.

Like the British miners, the majority of Newcastle miners in the nineteenth century lived in houses rented from the coal company. "The homes ... almost entirely destitute of the commonest conveniences of civilized existence ... look black with damp and dirt"<sup>6</sup> The homes were one room and a skillion and were made of either bark or brick: in 1861 the weekly rents were 2s.6d. and 4s. This tying of the worker to the company was effective from the companies' point of view, as was proven at Minmi in 1860 when J. & A. Brown forced striking miners off their property and in 1861 when miners were again evicted. Eviction was tried in the strike of 1896, but without success, as by then many of the miners owned their own homes.

The miners have always had strong allies in their women: mothers, wives, daughters and sisters, who have staunchly supported the men. Unlike the women of Britain, the Newcastle women did not go down the mines, but they were always there during strikes, demonstrations and disasters. In the strike of 1861, the women demonstrated at the Newcastle wharves, against the sailors loading coal and "the poor mariners had to be rescued from miners' furious wives by the police".<sup>7</sup>

To-day, the coal industry in this area is as precarious as it has always been, with mines closing or the uncertainty of continuation. For those men who mine coal, rewards have finally been recognised, although not without continued vigilance on the part of the Union and the rank-and-file. With the problems in the oil industry, coal is, presently, a much sought after commodity for industry and investment. However, after over 150 years, the owners are still multinational consortiums, exporting profit from Newcastle and justifying their existence with highly visible sponsorship of the arts, sport and education: donations which amount to a fraction of their incredible profits.

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6. *The Newcastle Chronicle*, 7 September, 1861.

7. M.H. Ellis, *A Saga of Coal*, Sydney, 1969, p. 79

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UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

1988

JOHN AMBLER  
I, JOHN REDDING ..... give my  
permission to LORRI CUMMINGS .....

to use this interview, or part of this interview, for  
research, publication and/or broadcasting (delete one of  
these if required) and for copies to be lodged in  
the UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE .....

.....  
for the use of other bona fide researchers.

Signed J. Ambler .....

Date 19.8.88 .....

Interviewer [Signature] .....



COAL INTERVIEW

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

Tuesday 1 - 3 p.m.

TERM III

REGIONAL HISTORY

Transcript of Interview between

L. CUMMINGS (student)

and

MR JOHN AMBLER  
with  
MR JOHN REDDING  
(retired Miners)

on

19 AUGUST, 1988.

Lorri Cummings,  
9 September, 1988

JACK

The Young Wallsend seam on top of that - you used to go down and get that well that's where they're working now. Anyhow, you go along here, both ways, and another bloke up here, he'd go in here, see, and he'd do the same thing there and he'd come down to meet you - and that's what they call longwall mining, see. Another bloke up here or two men like, they do the same - they'd come along here to meet you - another bloke'd go along here and that's how they got their longwall and they took everything all at once. When you'd both meet up, or something like that, they used to brush this stone down and used to make packs alongside your road - that's your road going in there - you used to make packs each side of your road to hold your thingme, so the wheeler could come in and take the coal away from you, see. It only used to be, not ????, what did they call it Jock? Bloody, no, no, no, the wheels - they didn't have limmers - what were they - tailshanks - the horses used to have little bar across them like this, see, and a tailchain like that. You used to hook on there and they used to hook onto the skip. When you're going there you slew the skip around and the wheeler'd take your skip away like that, see. This hook and there's only a chain, but these places they's only very narrow, I guess - you drove in like and everything and walk up there - but kids of to-day, they'd never go wheeling - they'd never make it - you had to grow up with the bloody thing, like, to be a wheeler at Borehole - they'd never make it, because they'd have one day and that'd be the end - they wouldn't go back.

*QUESTION: So how would you actually be - like you're using your pick on the coalface in 3 foot - how would you actually pick it?*

JACK

Walking in that low ceiling all the time - they're just three foot six.

*QUESTION: That's what I'm saying - so you'd have to be, oh bent over?*

JACK

Well - not laid down - when you're filling coal, used to put the pick down and something like that - you'd have little half-ton skips - little wooden half-ton skips.

*QUESTION: On a rail or on .....*

JACK

Yes, on rail - that's how you used to have to pick the coal - we had blokes out there over six feet - they used to spread their legs right out like that, yeh, and pick the coal - but, when you pick the coal down so much then you had to ????. On these rails coming up here, six foot steel rails, only six foot, you put the ender over the rails, so it would give you a little bit extra

fill over the top. Everything like that. But when I used to fill my coal, I used to fill most my coal on my knees - I put the pick down, kneel on the pick, so the dirt or the coal wouldn't get in your thingme, there, and just shovel it into the thingme, see like that, that's how ..... you're getting me out of breath here talking to you .....

Now what else. I told you like about this, they brushed all that, they used to bore a hole in the stone, two on each side and one in the middle and they used to fire that down and they used to have brushers coming in of afternoon shift and that's what they'd make - they'd make a pack each side of your road - that's to hold your road up like and everything like that as you go forward. But sometimes you'd get a fork, see - it'd be blocked from this bloke to you and you never got much air until you got through again, see, you had to sump in again and go through there, until you meet up to him - and you get the air back - oh, lovely.

*QUESTION: What was it like meeting?*

JACK

You know, blokes used to wear women's big bloomers - you know them big bloomers women used to wear years and years ago.

*QUESTION: Underwear, bloomer underwear?*

JACK

Yes, bloomer pants.

*QUESTION: What was the reason for that?*

JACK

Because it was cooler. Some blokes used to wear nothing - so you wouldn't chafe - see you'd sweat like hell, dirt and everything like that - because when I first started there was no water. Later on in years they got all water pipes into the thingme and every place had a water hose, see - when you got so much coal down, you'd water that before you start shovelling, or anything like that, see - I've seen blokes working there with nothing on. When you'd get these falls like, block you up from that bloke to this bloke or something like that, they'd work with nothing on because it was too hot.

*QUESTION: So, in fact, you'd be locked in?*

JACK

Yes, locked in until you met up with him again, see, and you sumped in again, like I showed you there - you sump in there seven or eight feet and

that's fair dinkum.

*QUESTION: How did you feel Jack, after a shift?*

JACK

Bugged! I'll tell you. I'd just come home - I'd have tea at four o'clock - I'd be asleep at half past four. Yes.

*QUESTION: When did you start the shift?*

JACK

Seven o'clock in the morning. Yes, and it was all contract mining. You had 13 of these half ton skips to fill a day - that was only pick and shovel, see. Years later, they got the power borers in, see. They used to hole over the top over here like that and you'd drill holes in like that - say about five or six of them and you just hole over the top. The afternoon shift Deputy, he used to come in and he'd fire them and we used to leave the clay dollies - we used to leave them for him so he could stem the hole up and he'd fire them - next morning you'd come and you'd have loose coal and that's when you'd water it all down before you'd start filling it, see. That was later times, that's getting in about the '49, '48 or something - that's when that came in. That wasn't too bad then. Then the bord and pillar came in then.

*QUESTION: Could you explain that?*

JACK

Yes. That's your longwall. This is the bord and pillar - I'll just show you a thing me dear. That's your bord and pillar - that's your coal up there - you drive up there, you drive up so far - how far Jock?

JOCK

About 40 metres - all depends.

JACK

About 40 metres. You drive up there, see this is the intake coming down here, say this is the intake - you'd always drive that one first and then when you'd get up there so far, you'd drive a cut-through across over here, see. So this bloke coming up here, see, and you'd break through there and that's how your air would come through all the time like that and you'd do the same up here like this - go like that and like that - you drive over there and back there and that was your return down there. Your air and dust supposed to all go back down this way, see. This is like what they used to call a return and that's how it is. That's the intake air

- always drive that one first - then drove a cut-through across this other bloke here and that air like the air intake up here - push it through there.

(talking about the horses) ..... bridle to his bar so you could drag his head one side and then you sneak up the other side of that road there, see the road I told you there, you could pass him then, and get up alongside of his collar and wack him under the belly and he'd pull six skips - six of them half ton skips - out of the dip and out onto the flat and they used to take them all out with the main and tail chain. I told Jock, the kids to-day couldn't handle it - they wouldn't handle it at all.

JOCK

I wheeled with a horse named Prince - (where's your pen). In the olden days that was your rib, what you call the ribs - you had a skip line there and a skip line here - well your full ones came out here and they went out to serve and these were the empties coming into your miners. I used to have this horse - he'd come up there - you'd put the sprag in and pull the pin - I wheeled with limmers, he wheeled with darstones - I had limmers, what they call limmers, and you'd pull the pin and say 'come here' and he'd come round to his left and come back around, come from there and walk around the front and you'd put the blinkers on and away he'd go - ten times a day he'd do that and if you'd have to wheel eleven set you'd have to have someone in front to stop him going up the pit - oh, they knew. They could count. If I did eleven sets, I'd have to have someone in front of that horse to stop him when I pulled the pin, otherwise he'd walk straight in the pit. But the other ten he'd just wheel around and walk down in front of the empties and away he'd go.

JACK

'Come here' was go to your left and 'gee back' was go to your right - that's how the horses used to know, see. 'Come here' he'd know he'd have to go to his left, see - 'gee back' turn around, or 'back back' .....

*QUESTION: Are you aware of the use of ponies now?*

JACK

No horses at all ... very few - Stocky had the last horses.

JOCK

They used to use them boxcars.

JACK

They should still have horses to drag them big cables they got here now.

JOCK

Mechanisation came in - they done away the old horse, he just, well, he was outdated. He had a good wheeler he'd wheel what, 50 ton a day, wouldn't he - a good wheeler, wheel 50 ton. But you get them on these shuttle cars, they wheel 50 ton before they even turn around. See you got shuttle cars hold twelve ton and they're just backwards and forwards, going all the time and these miners on these continuous miners.

JACK

Especially these little skips I was talking about, they're only half ton skips, that's ten hundred weight.

JOCK

And with the new longwall they don't even have skips at all - they just pour it straight onto the belt - you got not shuttle cars or skips or nothing - they just pour it straight onto the belt and the belt takes it right out.

JACK

In them days I'm telling you about, like in the longwall at Borehole, there was no transport there - you had to walk from the pit bottom right into your work too. And walk out after you'd finished your shift. There was no transport - it's all changed now, all that.

*QUESTION: What colour would you be?*

JACK

Black, you're black.

JOCK

Know Merewether Baths at all? Just stand over the top of Merewether Baths and look due east. Burwood ... you've heard of Burwood Colliery? Well Burwood Colliery sea headings were three miles straight out from the Merewether Baths.

*QUESTION: Under the ocean?*

JOCK

Why they stopped - the floor of the ocean is like that - they come along here - and when you haven't got 150 feet of solid stone between, 200 feet of solid stone, you've got to stop producing. But if you're under a river you've only got to have 150 feet of solid stone. And that's the law. Once they get less than 150 feet of solid stone between the roof of the mine and

the floor of the ocean, you've got to withdraw.

..... they call a splint - you splint that pillar right across it. So then you've got this little bit of a stook - we call it a stook out there - then after we've got through there, then we lift that off - you keep running the miner there and chewing that right off till that comes right out. Then you come back here - you drive another one through there - same thing. Then you come back along here and strip it off there. Once you take that out, that falls in and then you do the same with this one and that falls in and that then becomes your goaf - what we call a goaf. So that's the end of it and as you keep taking your pillars out, you keep retreating right back till you come back to your main road - and you do it again and, as you keep going, these jacks keep moving out and when you get enough air open, it all falls in behind you again - so you got all that falling in behind you as you're extracting it - it keeps coming out.

JACK

It should fall after every luke - after every luke you take off, that thing up there should drop and that's why your big jacks are there to hold the roof up so the .....

JOCK

It falls all the time - continues to roll off - such a big area. Why you have your tailgates, you've got to have a way of getting your coal out, so they've got a belt running along the front of them jacks and they run onto the main belt that runs it out. This is your return - your air comes in over the machine and goes back out when you return there.

JACK

And these belts here, they keep retracting that every time they take a lift off, see. It only takes, oh it wouldn't take an hour like, to move the belts and everything back.

JOCK

You've got to have this here so you can have you're hydraulic system. All these jacks work off an hydraulic system and you've got to have these tankers - 100's of gallons of hydraulic fluid to keep all these jacks - you might have 150 jacks along here and each jack will take 700 ton - so they're a fair lump of a jack. They just started to put this in when I retired - I finished in '82.

*QUESTION: So up until 1982 they'd use the older methods?*

JACK/JOCK

Yes. No. They walls come in a long time in England - but over here in Australia?

JOCK

I'd say the walls came in here in the latter part of the '70s.

JACK

Be the late '70s, too.

JOCK

When I did my Deputy's ticket, I went out to Burwood and they had the shortwall - what they call the shortwall - and the only difference between a longwall and a shortwall is the width between the mothergate and the tailgate. We had what they call a longwall, which was 200 metres between the two gates. But you can have a shortwall - perhaps might only have 50 metres, 80 metres, 100 metres or whatever the physical condition of your mine allows - you might only have to work 80 metres, 100 metres. Well anyway .....

*QUESTION: How about if we go back to the old days - in the '40s say - the difference in mining. When you first went down the mine what was it like?*

JACK

Well, you use to get out of the cage and go for your life - you did, you use to go for your life, because you'd have to get in there and if there was a skip on the flat, the wheeler use to have to come out the flat for - if there was a spare skip there from the night before, you use to grab that and push it in yourself, see, and fill it up before the wheeler come in, see - and have to wait for the tail - yeh! - the main and tail use to take the full ones out and bring the empties in, see. And the wheelers be waiting there - you'd have a skip on anybody else, see - well you'd get out the pit earlier. Cause you'd have your dag filled like, before the other people got theirs. And the wheeler would have to come back and he'd have to stay there and get it because the miner he'd finish - he'd have that one planted somewhere - he'd plant them and everything - oh yes, we was cunning.

I was eighteen I think - no, wait a minute - yes, I eighteen when I went on the coal and I've worked all coal until I left there and went to ..... not Wallarah ..... Waratah Colliery, the Gully Pit they use to call it.

*QUESTION: Where was that Waratah Colliery?*



JACK

Straight up from the Gully Line there - you used to go right up there, right up - used to go underneath Charlestown, right down the bottom of Charlestown, it was.

*QUESTION: Where were you living then, Jack?*

JACK

Wallsend.

*QUESTION: Always lived at Wallsend?*

JACK

Yes ... yes ... yes.

*QUESTION: How did you get to work?*

JACK

When I was out at Borehole, when I first started at Borehole, they used to have old charabanc truck - like a bus sort of thing - a long thin thing it was - seats up each side and one down the middle - that's how we used to go out to Borehole. Then when I went to the Gully, used to catch the tram from here down to the Gully and then catch the old train up there - he'd take us up there and if we'd get out the pit early, the train was down the thing and there was a flat-top there - we use to pinch the bloody thing and sit on the flat-top and just work the brake ourselves and come down the Gully and the train would bring it back up - that's to get away early. Otherwise, you'd have to walk right up this goat track up to Charlestown and get a bus into Broadmeadow, then come home. That was '48 or something I left the Gully - after I left Borehole and went there, I went back to Borehole. That was on the back Saturdays when the war was on - that was the back Saturdays ... '46?

JOCK

War finished in '45.

JACK

Yes, when was the last back shift we worked? I left the Gully on the last back shift on the Saturday. Billy ??? - he got his leg broke. Oh anyhow, either pinched a flat-top from up the pit and ride all the way - all down hill see - all the way down - just work the brake yourself - you had your foot on side of the brake - go right down to the Gully Line.

*QUESTION: How many of you?*

JACK

Oh, how many was there like - was going down - they'd all hop on the flat top and away we'd go.

*QUESTION: What about safety down the mines - ever involved in any cave-ins?*

JACK

No, not actually cave-ins - I haven't been in actual cave-ins. I've been in the cage once when we was coming up, and the engine-driver he thought he had coal on, see. He used to rap three times for men coming up - when men was coming up he'd rap three times - the onsetter used to rap three times - this bloke'd know there was men coming up, see. This day this bloke must have forgot - well he just lifted it straight up like that - this is fair dinkum - right from the Borehole, straight up like that and we only had an iron bar across us at the time - they's going to pull more coal up after it - and we got up passed the Young Wallsend seam - that's about 70 feet up above the Borehole - and just as we hit it we stopped dead like that - he must have realized he had men on, see. Stopped dead like that - the bloke was standing alongside me - the bar flew up, he was hanging onto the bar - over he went - next minute the cage went away again and I was going out and the Deputy pulled me back in - Bobby Campbell - he pulled me back in and I said 'Nippy's gone, Nippy's gone' - he went over the buntings and I heard him squeal once and that was it - he went straight down to the bottom, like that - every bone in his body was broken. I was up the pit top when he - just eased it away then and went straight to the pit top - I couldn't walk - they had to carry me - oh God! - it was the worst experience I've ever had at the pit.

JOCK

Never forget them .....

JACK

No - that's the only one I've had. After that, when the bord and pillar came in, safety, that came in mainly then - didn't it, Jock - and bord and pillar was in then.

JOCK

Yes.

JACK

B.H.P. took over. After that accident, if men was riding, doesn't matter if it was early cage or not, gates had to go on. They had to bring them poor horses up every day too, you know. Yes ..... them horses - as soon as they finished, they knew the work .... - you just take his bar off and the chain and you put it away so you knew where to get it next when you was wheeling - and you could leave them on the flat like that and you'd go out yourself - the horse would follow you - no light or anything - he'd follow you out the pit bottom - he'd get out the pit bottom himself. He was always there. All the men would go up first and then the horses. Every evening they'd go up at the Borehole - at the Gully they used to keep them down there for a week, down the Gully. That's when they got the big rats and everything down the pit. Long they were - they were that bloody long.

*QUESTION: Your lunch wouldn't be very safe, would it?*

JACK

No. That's why you used to have the tucker cans - tin tucker cans. Yes, so they couldn't gnaw it - if you took a plastic one down there, they'd gnaw it and eat it. A horse - I've seen horses go into your can - they get their tongue like that and they lift the lid, like the flap that used to have over to hold your lid down .....

..... I was wheeling at the time - we was out late there the night before, so I planted the bar the the tail chain and I said we'll get down early in the morning and we'll get a ride in, if there's a skip there. We got this skip and the horse took off - this is big Nigger, the one I was telling you about, the one we had to put a rope on him. He started racing see, and the skip was coming up close to his heels and next minute he stumbled - well, we run straight into his backside and arse over head we went and we're all laying there and the horse just staying there and he got up, shook himself, and we're getting out of the way, because we thought he's going to kick and everything like that - he got up - he off for his life down to the flat and we followed him and we went to push the empty skips we were having a ride in with - and he was waiting on the flat for us - he did his job the rest of the day. They were terrific, they were.

JOCK

It was an education to see some of them.

JACK

Oh, yes. We had a little horse - Bonnie we used to call her - she'd back quicker than she'd go forward ... y'ou'd say 'back back' and she'd push the skips back with her bum. Going forward she'd just crawl, crawl, crawl.

JOCK

Ever see a horse riding the rails?

JACK

Yes, Yes.

JOCK

I used to have a horse - I'd take him bread in for lunch time - if you didn't give it to him he used to perform - he'd come over and nudge, nudge, until he got his bit of bread. He'd never work with blinkers on, Jack. When I took him down the pit in the morning, he'd go down with them on and he'd go out with them on, but soon as you got there, used to take them off and hang them on the prop. and away he'd go - never have to talk to him - he could do the work on his own. When I had a promotion, I had the young lad there wheeling - he said 'where will I go' - I said just '????' to his tail and he'll take you - and the horse took him around the place. I think a lot went out of the industry when they went, don't you?

JACK

Yes.

JOCK

Get these mechanical monsters that's around now - it's unreal the size of them. That's where a lot of the trouble - they're making the machines too big and the Government restrictions are making the places too narrow - you've got no room to move.

*QUESTION: So, in fact, it really hasn't improved that much - really - to space?*

JOCK

Well they have got them.

JACK

Not with space - you can't have too much open space because the place would fall in, see.

JOCK

Take the likes of that pillar, that place there - when Jack was talking about in the horse days when we went down there, they'd put a pair of

men in that pillar - you'd forget about them for three to four months - it would take them three to four months to take that out - but the modern miner - you'd put a continuous miner in there this morning, by tomorrow afternoon that pillar is completely out - it's gone - a day and a half - day and a half against four months. But it's a lot of difference - you got a machine doing it .....

*QUESTION: So what companies did you work for.*

JACK

I worked for B.H.P. It was Blacks estate when I first went to Borehole in '41. That's what they used to call it - Blacks Estate. And the B.H.P. took it over '49-'50, I think it's '49 or '50. They took it over and they've been there ever since.

*QUESTION: What were relations like between the workers and the management?*

JACK

Sometimes it was good - sometimes bad.

JOCK

All depends if they wanted coal - if they wanted coal they was good - if they didn't, they'd find something wrong.

JACK

So you'd go on strike, or something like that. It's pretty good now, I think.

*QUESTION: Were there many strikes in those early days?*

JACK

Oh, yes. I went out there ten days at Borehole and came home ten days for nothing.

JOCK

Go weeks with no work.

*QUESTION: So how did you live?*

JACK

We survived. Bring up four kids too - I've got one getting married next month - month after, I should say - October. That's the last one.

JOCK

I've only got one and she's getting married in November .....

..... between men, don't you - I mean you'd have your arguments, but when things are going bad, you realize you've got to have someone there behind you to more or less look after your life for you - to help you - you get in a bad area where they are taking a pillar out and you're starting work and all that, well your mates have got to be there listening for you, same as you. It's something you can't explain, is it? - you get so close to one another - and then you get the funny side of the pit.

JACK

Driver always got an offsider alongside him, looking after the cable, see, and the shuttle car comes in to take the coal away, and he's suppose to be just looking after the cable and watching the roof for the driver, cause he can't hear with the machine going and everything like that - you work together, that's the main thing - you work together, there's no accidents - and that's the main thing about it.

*QUESTION: Yes, the comradeship must be very strong.*

JACK

Yes, yes, you've got to.

JOCK

I had a mate killed alongside of me. I was driving the machine and we both dived out to let go and I got out and he didn't get out. You have a lot of these experiences because you're all the time running out. It's that funny when you get out - everyones out - and, oh yes, great day. But you get one that don't get come out, that's when the fun goes out of it. I went to the funeral and a bloke came up to me and asked how did I feel and I said 'I feel like I'm walking after my own funeral' - that's the way you feel. Even to this day - that's 16 year ago - still vivid in my mind - I can still see the mate getting buried - trying to get him out. He was alive for half an hour under all this stone and coal - still talking to us - just couldn't get him out.

JACK

It all depends on what position you're in like when you get buried.

JOCK

It wasn't the fall that killed him, it was asphyxiation - his lungs got

packed in that tight with the stone and that - like your chest has got to expand to drive the oxygen around your body - well, his couldn't expand - that's what he died of - asphyxiation.

JACK

I was telling you about that time the bloke went out of the cage like - I was going up with him and I nearly went out. I went to the funeral and I went to the compo. doctor a couple of days after - I was still shaking and everything like that - I says 'I want a couple of days off, or a week off work to settle down' - he said 'no chance - you've got to go back tomorrow - if you don't go back tomorrow, you won't go back at all'. So next day I went back to work - soon as I went to get in that cage, like going down, I was as frightened as hell, I'll tell you - bang - I went down after that - after the next day - bang - no trouble at all after that.

*QUESTION: Do you think you would have gone to another job - what would you have done?*

JACK

No. I don't think I could have gone to another job, no. I started at the Abattoir when I was 14 and went to the pit when I was 16 and then went back to the Abattoir in '49, when the pits were only working one, two days a week - that was after the war - coal got slack - I was only there nine months and I went back to the pits and been there ever since.

*QUESTION: What was the tie?*

JACK

Oh, I don't know. You got used to it - you were brought up into it .....

..... We never got much money. My son-in-law, my daughter his wife, he's getting terrific money - I won't say it over that, cause you don't, no - he's electrical engineer out at Gretley - he's getting terrific money out there - she goes on 'oh, Neal's got this and this' - that's when I was working, when he first started out there - and I said 'but he's not in the B.H.P. pit', I said. We was only getting four and five dollars a week bonus. 'Oh, Neal's got all this much', Sharon came home and tell her mum, 'Neal got a big pay this week', she said - 'Look what I've got!', she (mum) said - and that was the difference - different pits had bigger bonuses - the working conditions were better. That didn't worry us, we all survived. I said 'Christ' to Sharon after that 'if you had to survive like we had to mate, you wouldn't live, you'd be dead'.

JOCK

This is where bonus doesn't work out - you're both doing the same work

and one man's getting twice the amount the other bloke's getting. You could be going along this week in good conditions and the bonus just flows off - like, as the coal's pouring out, your bonus is going up and up. Next week you strike a bad area and you're working three times as hard and you get nothing - if the coal's not going out, you don't get your bonus and when it's hard that's when you're really working hard. When things are going along nice and smooth, it's no effort.

JACK

No trouble at all - the machinery is doing all your work.

*QUESTION: Bonus is tied to the output - tied to production?*

JOCK

Once you've produced so many tons, they pay you so much a ton for every ton after.

*QUESTION: Very competitive.*

JOCK

Yeh - but then you get some mines they got different ideas - some sections getting different bonuses to other sections - this is not right - they're all working in the one mine - they've ironed all that out now.

My pit worked on your rate whatever position you had in the pit - it worked out at the mechanical rate, which is the highest rate underground in the mining unions. If you're second class, you might be say five dollars or ten dollars a day less, well your bonus would be say a dollar or so less than that - it went right through to the apprentices - even apprentice lads were getting good bonuses - and this wasn't right, either, because they'd go to Tech. and our boys are getting say one hundred dollars a week more than the boys working in the industry - which is not right again.

JACK

That's when the ???? started to fall out of the bloody coal industry, because some people was getting more than others.

JOCK

They start talking - 'oh, we're getting this sort of bonus out the pit' - 'we're not getting this at our place', say some of these industries - they're not getting nothing at all.

*QUESTION: Did you want to talk about the unions?*



JACK

No! Bugger the unions! What do you want to know about the unions?

JOCK

I've got to make tracks, so .....

JACK

..... Kurri Hospital and Cessnock Hospital - the miners used to put so much out of their pay - threepence or some-bloody-thing - it wasn't much - money wasn't worth that much at that time, as what it is to-day - threepence was worth a lot to-day.

*QUESTION: Did the companies help?*

JOCK

Sometimes they'd subsidise, sometimes they wouldn't - depends on what sort of mood they was in ..... if they wanted coal, if they didn't ..... The Police Boys' Club out at Windale, we put in for that ages - only about 25 cents or something like that.

JACK

The miners would put in for anything - you've only got to go and ask them and bang! But they got that many out at Borehole - they was coming every week, see, different other ????, see - lucky if you'd get home with any money yourself - fair dinkum. It got that bad where we were you couldn't get out. They had to come to the Committee meeting and ask permission to come and speak before anyone give a donation.

JOCK

You couldn't get to the pay windows at the finish in our place - every pay day they was there with a box, underneath your nose, you couldn't ..... Our mining Committee got together and they decided that, righto, any charity that wanted to come used to come and state their case and we'd say 'look we'd like to give \$50 or \$100', righto, there it is, bang, if it was a worthy cause - if it wasn't, 'look we can't allow you to come'. It worked quite good, we finished up, well you wasn't going to the window and those that wanted money, charity, was getting what they wanted.

JACK

Some would put in, some wouldn't. You get some tight ones ... yes ...

JOCK

The bloke would ..... everytime he would come out with the collection, he'd say 'I've only got fourpence or fivepence, that's about all' .....

JACK

If a bloke's off sick or something like that and he was a popular bloke at the pit, he'd get more than the other bloke, see, some other bloke wasn't happy, wasn't well-liked in the pit - people wouldn't give as much to him as the other bloke who was liked good. In the finish they decided, well, if there's anyone off crook, we strike a levy and everyone puts in the same amount - that was the only fairest way there was.

*QUESTION: So you looked after yourself*

JACK

Oh yeh - looked after yourself at each pit. If anyone was off crook or something and they run out of single pay at the finish, well you'd look after them - him and the wife and the kids. If you was well-liked, you had a bigger collection. If you wasn't well-liked, you didn't get as much. So that's why they decided they'd put a levy on and everyone would pay the same amount and that was the best and fairest way.

JOCK

Some would put in a pound and some would put in tuppence, if they could. Then when they made it standard, like if you was off sick, you got the same as what I got. Which is a better idea. Our mob made it a mortality and sick fund and all that, so if you were sick you got so much a week - if you died they'd come and give your wife x amount of money - say it was \$1,000 - they'd come and put it straight down as soon as it happened - you got killed at work or died at home of natural causes. That was better than having a day off work. Years ago, as Jack will tell you, if you got someone killed, like the day his mate got killed, the day my mate got killed, instead of having the day off, we worked that day and we paid the widow the wages - it's better than having the day off in sympathy - if you've got 200 men and they give their day's wages, it's a good gesture - give the wife the day's wage - better than a heap of roses or flowers.

*QUESTION: In those days, were many of the wives working?*

JOCK

Some do, some don't - like all walks of life - some women will work, some won't. My wife worked when we first got married, cause in those days - I got married in '49 - never had two bob to bless yourself with - once we got on our feet, well, there was no need to work .....

*QUESTION: We should say she's still working, though, in the house.*

JACK

Oh yes - worse job there is. My wife reckons 'when am I going to retire?' and I said 'you've retired all your life'.

JOCK

A few say 'how's it like finished working?' - the best job I've ever had, but the worst boss.

*QUESTION: What were your holidays in those days, when you started*

JACK

There were no holidays. Hang on - used to have your holidays, in '41, but there was no pay.

*QUESTION: Never got paid?*

JACK

No, not until I think '48 or '49. ?????? .....

If you worked ten days straight they'd give you an extra day - pay you an extra day. In the pit we'd only get paid once a fortnight - now its once a week - but if the company was going bad or something like that, they'd bung on a blue about the eighth or ninth day, so you'd have the day off so they wouldn't have to pay the extra shift. That's why this all come up in the '49 - the big strike of '49.

*QUESTION: That '49 strike was quite a large strike, wasn't it?*

JACK

Yes ...yes.

*QUESTION: How long was it?*

JACK

Eight or nine weeks. If they'd have gone another week, the Federation would have won.

*QUESTION: What were the issues?*

JACK

We were going for conditions, pensions, compensation ..... different other claims ..... they gaoled the leader, Gallagher I think his name was - they gaoled him because they reckoned he was a Commo - that's when Chifley was in - yes, Chifley was in - he died just after that.

..... '49 - I'm trying to think of '49 ..... another couple of weeks, a week - the A.L.P. had blokes on every corner, speaking 'go back to work' and everything like that - the miners went back to work. Well, they ended up getting something out of it, but not as much as they got if they'd stayed out another fortnight because they'd have beat them - they'd definitely beat them ..... the soldiers in the pits out here in the open-cut out here at Minmi.

But it hasn't been a bad life ..... I don't think I'd have did anything else .....I don't think I could've.

*QUESTION: Was your father a miner?*

JACK

Yes - he started out at a pit called Durham - I think they call in John Darling now - out that way somewhere. Then he went to Borehole and I followed him there and he got dusted, coal dust. They reckon he only had 33.1/3% of dust but he wasn't allowed to go back to the pits anymore or work anywhere near the pits and he got £3 something a week - that's all he got, and he got that till he died like - he died when he was 67, I think it was. He didn't enjoy much out of life afterwards, but me mother's still alive - she's 87 - we've got her up at Nelson Bay Harbourside Village and she loves it up there - she's doing good, she's doing extra well, but she's starting to fail a bit now, but she likes it up there. But he died of dust. Old Simons around here reckons it was an ulcer - and he was getting paid dust money and everything like that until the day he died - and he sure put on the certificate it was dust. Not the same as these bloody things around here - they reckon I've got bloody asthma - don't tell me I was 43.1/2 years in the pit and I haven't got dust on my lungs - ah, no-one will tell me that. Before I go - won't be too long - I'm going to get in touch with the Uni. over there - soon as I die I want my lungs to go the Uni. over there, so they can test them all and see what it is - bloody oath - and if there is dust, the old woman might get a few quid out of it - but she's looked after well, anyhow.

Near the old hospital - we used to live there - and the house is still there - Wirragulla is the name on the nameplate - lived there, and I got married and lived up Wallsend here, Nelson Street up here - and I built the place over there 35-36 years ago, I think it was - and that's where I've been ever since. But she's a big hill - I can't walk up it, mate - not now, anyway - years ago I used to run up the bloody thing.

*QUESTION: Things have changed?*

JACK

Oh yes ... yes .....

..... you have a spotlight on them - some has a spotlight that drives the shuttle cars, or the miner-driver, or the bloke driving the longwall bloody thing, he generally got a spotlight on, see. The others just a round one. When you're in a close area your light used to shine right on everything ..... when you're down the pit you never think it's going to fall in or anything like that - you get used to that. But you know if anything's going to happen - you can hear the timber crack or something like that and you look up and a bit of dust falls down from the roof - well, something's going to happen and you get out of there - that's all you do. You've got to have it bred into you sort of thing. It takes a while to get used to it like, but after you get used to it, you don't even think when you're working down there - you think you're just working inside of a club - you don't - you never think of it.

*QUESTION: I don't think I'd ever get used to it.*

JACK

Haven't you ever been down a pit? Well, that would be your best thing in the world - to go out to one of the pits and go down one - it would, my word. It's an experience.

*QUESTION: So what do you think about the young blokes to-day down the pits - they got it easy?*

JACK

Well, they got it easier than what we got, I can tell you that - with a pick and shovel - they wouldn't do it. These young blokes to-day they wouldn't do it - no way. There's not much manual work down the pit now. Machinery mainly does it all.

**SIDE 2 OF TAPE****JACK**

These walls - what do you call them - the longwall business in the pits - they don't use timber now, they have these roof bolts and everything like that - just this strap or so of metal - not metal, it's like a, oh, what do they call it - no, no - four years and I forget now. Strapping, it's like a strapping - it's flat and it just bolts up with four bolts in between it and that's suppose to hold the roof, see. They are that quick going in and out, the roof hasn't got time to sag, because they're in and out. Years ago, with the bord and pillar, every three feet you used to put a big slab, oh 18 feet slab - and some of the bastards were that big - you had to manhandle them. They were made of timber and you had to put them up on jacks ???? and put them underneath them and the roof bolter would come in behind you and bore two holes up so because if the leg got knocked out they didn't fall down on top of you.

In this time, like in '54, they used to take up a collection like for you, see, and I said 'no, I'm going back' and they give me a job on the screens up there on the pit top and I went back to work and sat on those screens for three months until the Deputy said to me 'Jack, how are you going?' and I said 'good' and he said 'would you like a job down the pit like, trapping' and I said 'yeh' - it'd be better than sitting up here listening to this clank, clank, clank of the bloody coal going over the top and you're picking the stone off with one hand - and that's how I got back on the coal. I went down there at dinner-time - everything used to stop like for half an hour for crib - I used to go into the coal face, see, I'd pick up a pick - I'd use my hand like that - that's all I can open my hand like - couple of weeks after that I said 'bugger this' I said to the under-Manager, 'I want to go back to the coal in the next cable', see - he said 'oh dear' - I said 'yes' - he said 'do you think you'll be able to do it?' - I said 'yes, I'm going to give it a go anyhow' - and that's how I got back down the pits.

*QUESTION: That doesn't effect you?*

JACK

No, No - I can straighten it like that - all the tendons are and that all cut there - see there, I lost that - see your muscles, that's gone - but he saved me life that ???? bloke up here - he went to America and he come back here and he died. He was a good bloke.

SUMMARY

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

Tuesday 1 - 3 p.m.

TERM III

REGIONAL HISTORY

Summary of Interview recorded on 19 August, 1988

between

L. CUMMINGS (student)  
and  
MR JOHN AMBLER  
with  
MR JOHN REDDING  
(retired Miners)

Subject: COAL MINING

Name: LORRI CUMMINGS

Date: 9 September, 1988.



PREAMBLE

This interview was recorded on 19 August, 1988, at the Wallsend R.S.L. club, from approximately 10.00 a.m. to 12 noon. The interviewer had not previously met the two retired miners, but was introduced on that day by a mutual friend. The setting was the lounge of the club, where many retired workers spend a few hours in the morning with their mates over a few glasses of beer, hence the background sounds of poker machines, p.a. systems and the morning television programmes, notably 'Coronation Street'.

The tape is approximately 3/4 hour in length, and there are a few inaudible words and phrases, some over-talking and blank tape and, as it has not been edited, a little fragmented.

SUMMARY

Mr Ambler (Jack) commenced working in the mines in 1941 and retired in 1984. He worked for that time at Stockton Borehole Colliery (now owned by the B.H.P.), with short breaks at the Waratah Colliery (the Gully Pit) and the Abattoirs. Mr Redding (Jock) started in the mines in 1952, became a Deputy, and retired recently: he did not say where he had worked, but some of the time was obviously spent at Burwood Colliery.

The narrative commences with descriptions of the systems of mining, especially the longwall, and as he speaks, Jack is drawing the diagrams. He describes the way in which the coal was put into the skip and taken away by the wheeler, and how you had to grow up with the work - the kids of to-day would never do it. He describes how the very tall miners had to spread their legs out wide to pick the coalface, as in parts it was only three foot six inches. How the two miners were picking toward each other, sometimes not getting much air, but finally meeting and getting the air back. The miners were in fact locked-in until they met up again. He mentions the heat and dirt and how miners would wear women's bloomer underwear or nothing at all, to help stop the chafing: at that time there was no water down the mine.

The day would commence at 7.00 a.m. and Jack would be 'buggered' and 'black' at the end of the shift - he'd have his tea at 4.00 p.m. and be asleep at 4.30 p.m.

Both Jack and Jock talk about the horses down the mines; their fondness for them and how they feel that something has gone now that horses are no longer used. They describe some of the funny instances with the horses, and they also talk of the rats down the mines.

Jock describes the law for heading heights in mines under the ocean or rivers and also the difference between a longwall and a shortwall.

Jack tells of working in the 1940s, how he travelled to work in a charabanc, and working during the war. Both men have been involved in accidents, but no cave-ins. They describe how you must rely on your mate down the mines for your safety and indeed your life. Mateship seems very important to miners because of this reliance.

Although there is no talk about the unions, they did talk about relations between the workers and the management. There is talk about the strikes and Jack relates his thoughts on the 1949 strike and how he feels that with one more week out, the men would have got what they wanted. They talk of the bonus system and how unfair it is, as it is tied to production of coal, not how hard you work: it obviously causes ill-feeling both in and out of the industry and between different companies.

The generosity of miners in helping with donations to community clubs, the building of hospitals, etc, and the difference in some miners when it comes time to pay donations or levies. Also the way in which the miners handled a death among their mates, with the men doing a day's work instead of a day off in sympathy and all the wages going directly to the widow.

Jack tells of his father who was also a miner, but was 'dusted' and had to live on a pension: Jack's mother is now 87, living at Nelson Bay. He says that he feels he has also been 'dusted', but the doctors will not agree and say he has asthma - when he dies he wants his lungs tested to see if he is right. He tells of always living in Wallsend, although the hill his house on is getting a bit too steep for him. He ends with again saying how the young blokes to-day wouldn't do it with a pick and shovel: machinery does it all.

There is also a short piece on side two of the tape, with some more description of mining systems. Also a piece on what happened after Jack had cut his arm badly, thirty years ago, but wanted to go back down the mine, which he did.

OPEN FOUNDATION - AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Tuesday 1 - 3 p.m.

TERM III

REGIONAL HISTORY

Paper: The Coal Miners of Newcastle in the Nineteenth Century.

Name: LORRI CUMMINGS

Date: 8/9/88.

Coal mining and Newcastle have always been synonymous: indeed coal was the initial reason for settlement in the area. Coal has been the industry to which, in the early days, the majority of employment depended: it was what the newly industrialised world of the eighteenth and nineteenth century depended on to run its industry, ships and trains, and to light and fuel its homes. Coal also produced a new breed of people - the miners, who, working in harsh, dangerous conditions, benefited little from the massive profits of the owners of the mines. In Newcastle this was especially hard to take, as the majority of mines were under the direction of masters thousands of miles away in Britain. These absent landlords, together with the Australian owned companies, saw the exploitation of resources in Newcastle as their right, in terms of both the coal and the miners. No concessions were given to the men who daily risked their lives to go down the mines for coal.

The first coal miners of Newcastle were private individuals who dug the exposed coal from the cliffs and beaches for their own profit, and a small party of colliers hewing coal for the Governor. Both these ventures were abandoned. In 1804 Governor King re-established the settlement as a gaol for second offenders, including leaders of the Castle Hill Rebellion of that year. The convicts were used for limeburning, cedar cutting and coal mining and lived in appalling conditions, with little food and clothing. The coal miners were considered lucky, as extra rations were available for those who hewed the coal, although they suffered the occupational hazards of chest complaints and rheumatism, along with venereal disease which was rampant in the penal settlement. For those who tried to escape, punishment was 100 lashes and seven days confinement on bread and water. In spite of these conditions, "up to 1820 they raised 22,000 tons of coal"<sup>1</sup>. In 1830 the Government handed over the mining to the Australian Agricultural Company, who, realizing it was not getting the best production from the convicts, imported Irish, Welsh and English miners, in the hope of getting a "stable, skilled and docile workforce"<sup>2</sup>. This was not to be, as many absconded and the remainder were anything but docile: they were to be the first of many miners to immigrate, bringing with them the hope of a better life.

The second half of the nineteenth century was the time of great expansion and production in the Newcastle coal industry, with strong demand for its coal both in the colony and overseas. It was also the era of the birth of the unions and the push for better pay and conditions. The first strike was in 1851, when A.A. Co. miners struck for increased rates. This strike proved successful, as did many during the early 1850's, when the miners had the bargaining power, due to shortage of labour, as many had left for the goldfields. However in 1855, with firstly the demand for coal falling and the stockpiling of coal, and then a production increase with a coal price decrease, the bargaining power shifted to the employers, who thought nothing of the conditions of their miners. By 1860, miners of the district

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1. R. Gollan, The Coalminers of New South Wales, Melbourne, 1963, p. 8.

2. J.C. Docherty, Newcastle, The Making of an Australian City, Sydney, 1983, p. 14.

were united enough to form a union during a meeting at Groves' paddock at Waratah. This union, with James Fletcher as the Chairman, was the forerunner of the present Federation. Like to-day's Union, that first union was concerned with the wages, conditions and health of coal miners: and like to-day's, there was always constant attack from the mine owners, who prefer no union at all. It was to be the following year that the first general coal strike occurred. This was in retaliation to a proposal by the four main collieries to reduce the hewing rate of coal by 20% and to import 400 more miners from Britain. On 21 August, 1861, during the two month strike, the Miners' Association met at Randell's Camp, two miles from the Waratah Station. Some 650 men, under the leadership of James Fletcher, pledged to resist the reduction and to write letters to England warning of conditions for intending immigrants. A circular from Fletcher was handed out. This circular was printed in the Newcastle Chronicle of 28 August, 1861, headed "To the Coal Miners of England" and pointed out the conditions and cost of living in the mines and accused the owners of false representation.<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that in that same edition of the Chronicle, the A.A. Company has an advertisement placed warning, "Any person found taking COAL, SAND, TIMBER, and other materials from the A.A. Company's premises, will be prosecuted for stealing".<sup>4</sup> This 1861 strike together with the following strike of 1862, which saw the colliery manager of A.A. Co, J.B. Winship, devote himself to the crushing of the union, weakened the union. It was not until 1870 that the Union was re-organised into an effective organisation, fully representative on all issues concerning the miners, economically, socially and politically.

The 1870s and 1880s saw improvements in the life of the coal miner, with the introduction of the ten-hour day in 1874 and the introduction in 1876 of the amended Coal Mines Regulation Act, which superseded the 1862 Act in the areas of ventilation and safety rules. This was a joint representation with the mine owners, one of many in this time of co-operation between the two parties. With the awakening of social conscience in the 1880s, the miners became politically active. Notably, was the first union Chairman, James Fletcher, although by then a powerful capitalist, who was elected to Parliament from 1880 to 1891, becoming Minister for Mines in 1886.

With the economic depression, financial crisis and competition from Japanese mines, the 1900s saw the rise in unemployment in the Newcastle mines. The companies took this opportunity to lower the hewing rate of coal and some miners, for fear of poverty and starvation "were prepared to work for 5s a day!"<sup>5</sup> In 1896 an unsuccessful three month strike further weakened both the miners and the Union - the mine owners had won for the time being. With the close of the nineteenth century, mining was still the major employer, but, with the opening of new mines in the Hunter Valley and the commencement of heavy industry, this was to change in the new century.

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3. *The Newcastle Chronicle*, 28 August, 1861.

4. *Ibid.*

5. R. Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, p.90.

Miners have always been a self-sufficient, co-operative group and this was especially the case in the Newcastle area during the nineteenth century. Because of the coal companies' complete disregard to the needs of the miners and their families, it was up to each individual mining area to provide for the necessary amenities of an isolated society. Many of the social improvements followed the British experience: the Friendly Societies which looked after sickness and funeral benefits, the co-operatives for the purchase of food and clothing and the introduction and support of community needs, such as hospitals, doctors, community halls.

Like the British miners, the majority of Newcastle miners in the nineteenth century lived in houses rented from the coal company. "The homes ... almost entirely destitute of the commonest conveniences of civilized existence ... look black with damp and dirt"<sup>6</sup> The homes were one room and a skillion and were made of either bark or brick: in 1861 the weekly rents were 2s.6d. and 4s. This tying of the worker to the company was effective from the companies' point of view, as was proven at Minmi in 1860 when J. & A. Brown forced striking miners off their property and in 1861 when miners were again evicted. Eviction was tried in the strike of 1896, but without success, as by then many of the miners owned their own homes.

The miners have always had strong allies in their women: mothers, wives, daughters and sisters, who have staunchly supported the men. Unlike the women of Britain, the Newcastle women did not go down the mines, but they were always there during strikes, demonstrations and disasters. In the strike of 1861, the women demonstrated at the Newcastle wharves, against the sailors loading coal and "the poor mariners had to be rescued from miners' furious wives by the police".<sup>7</sup>

To-day, the coal industry in this area is as precarious as it has always been, with mines closing or the uncertainty of continuation. For those men who mine coal, rewards have finally been recognised, although not without continued vigilance on the part of the Union and the rank-and-file. With the problems in the oil industry, coal is, presently, a much sought after commodity for industry and investment. However, after over 150 years, the owners are still multinational consortiums, exporting profit from Newcastle and justifying their existence with highly visible sponsorship of the arts, sport and education: donations which amount to a fraction of their incredible profits.

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6. *The Newcastle Chronicle*, 7 September, 1861.

7. M.H. Ellis, *A Saga of Coal*, Sydney, 1969, p. 79

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