



Bletchingley Conservation and Historical Society

Memories of a Bevin Boy

National Service included the possibility of working underground in the mines. Ten per cent of all those that were conscripted were chosen (by ballot or sometimes voluntarily) to work as Bevin Boys.

Ray Eddolls of Bletchingley was one such National Service recruit. His family owned the butchers in Outwood Lane.

He was called up just before Christmas 1943 to serve as a Bevin Boy. It was at this time that the Government became aware that the country had just three weeks supply of readily available coal – it would have been a catastrophe if Britain ran out. Mining was a reserved occupation but many had signed up and the ancillary workforce was running low.

So, fifty thousand 18 year old boys were called up between 1943 and 1948 or as it is said in their letters “You have been selected”. There was no choice – the alternative was prison. It was these lads that became the Bevin Boys – named after Ernest Bevin, the Minister of Labour behind the plan.

Ray remembered the day well in January 1944 when he (and many others) caught the 09.00 train from London to Pontefract; some boys got off at Chesterfield but Ray was heading for the Prince of Wales Colliery in Yorkshire. On arrival at the pit he signed on, was allocated a locker and a helmet, steel toe-capped boots and a pair of plimsolls. First the boys had to get fit – PT with an army instructor and then classes in underground procedures and safety. Dinner in the canteen and then their first experience of going underground with experienced miners. They were paid £2 a week but had to pay £1 5s for lodging and then there were bus fares and food to be bought. As they didn't have enough money they got a small pay rise. Ray was later sent to another colliery which had the highly unusual luxury of showers. Most pits did not even have washrooms let alone showers.

Each working day started at 6am with a change into the clothes for the pit, a fill of the water bottle, a handing over of a metal check to get the vital lamp, a search for matches and other flammable materials and then into the lift cage with 48 other men for the two minute journey down into the mine. At the pit bottom there was a walk of up to a mile to get to the coal face – a seam just 4 feet thick (high), two hundred yards long and 5 feet deep. Each day 1200 ton of coal was cut and which had to be taken to the surface and washed. This was the Bevin Boys job – they rarely undertook the actual mining as that was (and is) a specialised profession.

The coal was taken to the main colliery to be burnt to make coke for creosote, oil, disinfectant and benzole (used as fuel by the RAF). There was nothing but smoke and soot – on a still day it seemed to fall from the sky. Ray fondly remembered the couple he lodged with – Mr and Mrs Beck. He worked for four years at the pits – not enjoyed, but he met the most wonderful people. On his last day, the colliery manager simply said “Thank You” and “sorry to see you go”.

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