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THE PIT PONIES OF KIVETON PARK BARNSELEY SEAM

A personal view by Frank Ward
working with Keith Southwood

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FOREWORD

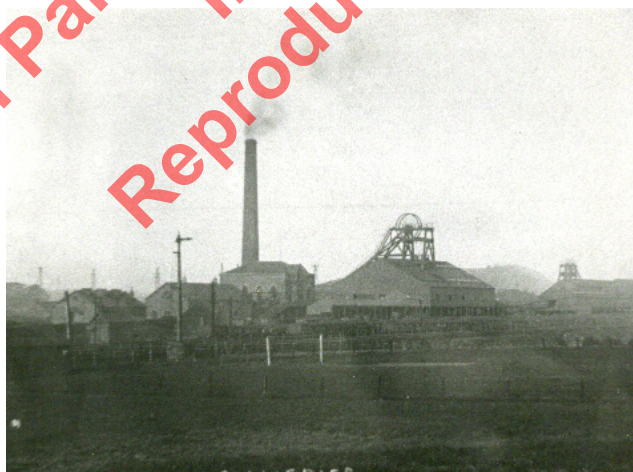
It was 1953 when I first went down the pit. I was 16 years old, and I only went down the pit because my younger brother Richard (Dick) started a few weeks earlier and he was earning more money than me – five pounds a week for five days. I had already done a year in the quarry – at two pounds and eighteen shillings for six days!

Anyway with some apprehension I made the move to the pit. At that time I didn't know anything about horses apart from the ones the farmers used for ploughing, and I'd see them on carts being led through the village of South Anston, sometimes pulling snow ploughs in the winter, usually on the footpaths. These would be shires or some other large breed. They were like tanks on legs so I'd give them a wide berth. Little did I know at the time that the next couple of years would be among the happiest of my working life, working with horses.

My first encounter with pit ponies was when my brother and I were taken down the pit for the first time after finishing our training period at Treeton and Dinnington Tech by the training officer, Enoch King. He was partial to a pinch of snuff, so it was some time before we reached our destination. It was quite a distance, first on the paddy (a man rider pulled by a diesel loco) – about three miles – and then at least another mile walking. Progress was steady. We'd keep stopping for

Enoch to cadge a pinch of snuff and chat with various people. We were eventually introduced to the men who were going to train us, Brian Noble with a pony called Bill, Vin Simons with a pony called Star and Johnny Bingham with Flip, none of whom were eager to take on trainees. The thing was, that they wanted to get on to the coalface, and the sooner they trained somebody the sooner they could move. A case of “You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”, as Enoch was the man who could get them on the face. Anyway, I went with Brian and my brother went with Johnny Bingham.

This is not meant to be the memories of a pit pony driver, rather an insight into how it was – the ponies, their characters and abilities and some of the people involved. I’ll start with the first pony I drove on my own – Little Dan.



LITTLE DAN

Little Dan – so called for obvious reasons. He wasn't even as big as a seaside donkey but he was a good little worker and very placid. Just right for a beginner.

I was driving for two back rippers, Jack Osborne and Frank Whitworth. They maintained the gates (tunnels) leading to the coalface. One of my most vivid memories of that time, which will remain with me forever, was driving between the rip and the gob (that's loading and offloading). Dan stopped dead and refused to move. As I was behind him and the tub with a long check rein, I couldn't get to his head. Well, we looked like being there forever, and Frank would be waiting for the muck. There was no room down either side of the tub or over the top, but with some effort I managed to scramble over the top and past Dan and tried to lure him with a sweet, but he still refused to budge.

Then all of a sudden there was such a crash and the timbers and muck came crashing down around me. One piece of timber hit me and sent me reeling towards Dan where I fell at his feet, whereupon he looked down at me with such a look, as much as to say, "I tried to tell you." While this was happening more muck came crashing down until there was quite a heap. Everything quietened down so I scrambled over the heap to go and fetch Frank and we managed to move enough to get through. But there was still plenty to move,

which took the rest of the shift.

I like to think that Dan knew something I didn't, and had he not then maybe I wouldn't be writing this today. Who knows? Well, my time with Dan was short lived as someone else came to drive Dan. My next pony was Ted.



Pit ponies on display at nearby Waleswood Colliery, c. 1900

TED

Also known as Little Ted, as he wasn't much bigger than Dan. But he was a stallion so he wasn't as placid as Dan. He was also much faster, but he was still a good little worker. I was with Ted for a good while, so there's more to tell about him. We hit it off right from the start and soon became great friends and got to know each other pretty well.

Once again we were with back rippers. This time it was Jim Wainscot and Bob Baer, driving from rip to gob using sling gears. These consisted of a collar, harness, chains to a stretcher behind the horse's rump, then a single chain and a hook on to the tub. Where I was working with Dan it was quite level, and as I said earlier he was steady. But Ted would use his speed to keep the tub rolling. It was also slightly inclined and I couldn't keep up with him, so I'd sit on the tub with a long check rein. This was accepted as normal practice. But we weren't allowed to ride on the ponies!

Anyway part way along our journey between rip and gob there was a fault. That is where the coal seam didn't run true. In this case it ran uphill and then back down again, so we had quite a climb to the top of the fault and then down the other side. Well, Ted's speed wouldn't always take him to the top of the fault and I'd have to locker up somewhere on the hill to hold him. A locker is a wooden peg about two feet long specially made of hard wood, or sometimes they

would be steel pegs. The locker would be pushed between the wheel spokes to hold or slow the tub down, and drivers would become quite expert at “bobbing” – putting the locker in while the tub was moving.

After a rest it would take some extra effort to get going again, so I decided it was better to stop at the bottom, and then get a good run up the hill. Around that time there were some sweets called Spangles – small square fruity tablets in a tube. Most of the pony drivers would carry a packet as a treat for the ponies (and themselves). Well, after a rest at the bottom and with a Spangle he’d go up the hill with a renewed effort, but then I’d have to locker up again at the top to slow him down the other side. This was where bobbing came in handy.

This was the procedure until I discovered he preferred orange peel. So from then on I would gather up orange peel and keep it in a bag over the timber at the bottom of the fault. And he would stop there every run, exactly under the peel. In fact he’d very often stop on the way back with an empty tub – just to get another treat!

Well, both Dan and Ted were from the pit bottom stables, which were some distance from our workplace – 3 or 4 miles. As I said earlier, we weren’t supposed to ride the ponies (it was a sacking offence if you were caught). You don’t need me to tell you that 3 or 4 miles is quite a walk, so we’d ride most of the way where it was high enough. But there were a

few low spots where we'd have to walk.

One occasion springs to mind when one day myself on Ted and a fella called Jack Oldfield on a pony called Mop (I'll tell you about Mop later) were on our way back to the stables. I cockily said, "Let's have a race!" – knowing full well I would win easily. So I set off and left Jack and Mop trailing well behind. Along one particularly long and high part I was at stretch gallop. Little did I know I was heading for a fall. Not literally, but almost. My check rein broke and couldn't hold Ted back, and I knew we were approaching a very low and narrow part. Well, I clung on to Ted's neck for dear life, shouting "Whoa!" I grabbed at his ears still shouting, but to no avail (he could smell the stables). Then we hit the low part, so I dropped on to his side, Apache style. But the side walls were raking my back. I don't know how I managed it but somehow I ended up hanging round Ted's neck with my feet up between his front legs, looking up at him with his hot breath blowing into my face, me still shouting "Whoa!" But he didn't stop till he reached an air door. Now most ponies would open doors with a nudge of their head, but Ted never did. He'd always stop at a door. Thank goodness. Whew! Talk about the ride of my life!

Another scary time, though not quite the same, was when I was on my own with Ted. We were about two thirds of the way to the pit bottom when my cap lamp failed. Actually we'd discussed this possibility some time before and I think it was Jack Oldfield who'd said, "Just hold on to the horse's

tail.” Well, I was riding Ted at the time so I stayed there for a while. It is very disorienting in the dark and I’d keep getting a bump in the low parts and trying to guess where we were. So I stopped Ted and got behind him, holding on to his tail, hoping he wouldn’t lash out behind. But he was very good and we made it OK. It was scary for a while, and I was glad when we eventually came to some lights. Well, they say a man’s best friend is his dog, but I can tell you there was quite a bond between pony and driver.



Dorothy Parker feeding pit pony.
Kiveton Pit is in the background

BILL

Bill was the first pony I ever had anything to do with when I first went down the pit, doing my training with Brian Noble from Harthill. Now he was going to be my pony. He was the fastest horse in the pit, like a racehorse. He was a roan (reddish brown), and what a worker! He'd pull his heart out for you. I've seen him lift his front feet off the ground and leap into the collar to get the tubs moving.

We started work together on the muck loader. This was the belt end bringing muck out of the headings – tunnels heading out to new coalfaces. We'd take full tubs out to the main level and bring empties back, usually four out and six back. If it was really busy we'd take six full ones out. That's when he'd really go for it. But it was no problem to him once they were moving. We go down a slight incline through three air doors. These were big, heavy wooden doors which controlled the flow of air round the pit. I'd have to dash in front of him to make sure the way was clear, as he'd want some stopping once he got going. As we approached the train of tubs, I'd uncouple him while we were still moving, so the tubs would run into the train to be coupled up. Bill would run on, turn round and come back to me to be coupled up to the empties.

This was the usual procedure and it worked well most of the time, but sometimes I'd get hold of Bill's head to slow

him down. It was on one such occasion that Bill stumbled, dropped his head and pulled me down. I tripped and fell. My hand landed on the rail and I lost the end of my thumb, so I was off work for a while.

But then it was back to work as usual. Sometimes there would be supply tubs waiting to come in on the level, so Bill had to come back between the muck tubs and the supply tubs. The space between them was just enough for him to get through, but I'd have to lift his limbers to one side and he'd just squeeze past. Bill being of a very nervous disposition (which is what made him so fast), I had to let him go as it was impossible to lead him through. Anyway on one occasion this was to be his undoing. There were some rings (arched girders) on a tram (an open ended tub) among the supplies, and as he ran by them he caught the sharp end and ripped himself all down his ribs. Well, that meant he'd be laid up for a while. He was stitched up and put in the hospital pen, and I had to use whatever horse was available. But every day I'd call in and see him and take him a few goodies and have a little talk with him.

Then one morning I called in and he wasn't there. He'd had to be put down during the night as he had got very bad colic. Cyril King who was the head ostler had come out in the night to end his suffering. Well of course I was deeply saddened, as I'd been looking forward to us working together again. Sadly, it wasn't to be. And I think about him even to this day, and I'm almost seventy now. I'll never forget him, nor any

of the other ponies either.



Brenda Bradley (nee Cooke) with a Kiveton Pit Pony

DIAMOND

After losing Bill I knew it would be difficult, as Bill would be a hard act to follow. We had become very close. But the job still had to be done, and I was given a horse called Diamond. He was just the opposite of Bill. He was a big, strong horse, quite big for a pit pony. To look at him he was like a miniature shire. He was all muscle. He could move anything just with sheer power.

He had been a pit top pony, but he took to working underground well. I would say he was about the strongest horse in the pit. He was a very good worker and very obedient, a steady old plodder. I never saw him shy from anything. When he pulled, something had to move. But my time with Diamond was short lived as he was needed somewhere else. I was sorry to see him go, as I think we would have made a good team. But it wasn't to be.

ROVER

My next pony at the muck loader was Rover. He was a lovely horse, one of the tallest in the pit. He was light brown with a black mane and a black line all the way down his back to a black tail. And he was slightly bandy legged, but that was no detriment to him. He was a good worker and quite fast. But he wouldn't pull like Bill and Diamond. If he thought it was too much for him he'd just stand and look at you till you gave him a helping hand by encouraging him and pushing with him, or you'd have to lighten his load (he wasn't daft, was he?). But he could do something none of the other horses could. He could push tubs as well as pull.

Around that time they brought in some new limbers which completely encircled the horse. They had to be laid on the floor and the horse would step into them. Then you'd lift them up and fasten them to the harness as usual. These were very good for the horses as it gave them some protection. They were made of tubular steel, and rounded at the front so as to push the horse out if he ran into other tubs. Of course they were ideal for Rover if he had to push empties, which he would do without any encouragement.

When we'd be bringing empties back to the loader, we'd have to go past the loader end, and then reverse the tubs on to a passbye under the loader. But there were three more air doors to go through just beyond the points back

on to the loader and under the loader end. I had to be very quick changing the points, as Rover knew just how far to go through the doors, and he would reverse like lightning. More than once he beat me to it and split the point before I'd closed it, and sometimes there'd already be empties through the door. That's when he'd push them. He could pull six and push six at the same time. If he did come back too soon then the last tub would be pushed off the road. But he'd stop straight away as though he knew what he'd done. I'd get the tub back on the rails and shout "OK!" to him, and back he'd come again.

Where we worked at the loader end was a sort of rallying point at snap time, and there'd be quite a few men sat having their sandwiches. The loader belt would be stopped for twenty minutes and as soon as Rover heard the belt stop, he'd come up to where we were sitting, looking for a treat. But he'd very often have had his nose in the feed trough which was situated just by the loader, as well as the water trough. Well, he'd sometimes have bits of straw or oats stuck round his nose, and this would irritate him, causing him to sneeze just about when he got to where we were all sitting, and he'd spray us, which would cause some men to throw their snap at him. This of course was to his advantage, as he'd get plenty of treats. Then the cry would go out, "Fasten that bloody horse up!" Well, sometimes I'd remember to, but sometimes I'd forget. Of course I and the loader man, Gerald Holden from Thorpe Salvin, knew what to expect and we'd

be ready for him. But occasionally I too would have to make myself scarce or I would get something thrown at me!



TOBY

Toby started out as a bit of a wild one. I think he came to us from another pit, maybe because they couldn't handle him? But we had a secret weapon at Kiveton. A fella called Mick Kelly from Swallownest.

Mick had a way with horses. For a start he was as strong as an ox. But he also had the patience of a saint. There was something else as well – I suppose you might call it an inborn ability, especially with horses. Well, before Toby came to me, Mick had had him and he virtually had to break him in because he was so wild and obstinate. Mick calmed him down and then Toby came to me. The idea was to make sure he was kept busy. Well, he turned out to be one of the best horses I had. I might even say he was my favourite. But that wouldn't be fair to Dan, Ted, Bill and Rover. I had great affection for them all, but there was something a bit special about Toby. Maybe it was because of going from the wild thing he once was to being a pleasure to work with.

Although he could still have his moments, these were usually sorted with a Spangle. He loved them and he'd do anything for a Spangle. At the beginning of the shift I'd go into the stable and he'd be expecting me and start nuzzling round me, looking for his Spangle. One day he was doing his usual snuffling and he'd finished nosing me round the face. I'd say to him, "Give us a kiss then". The next thing I knew, he's got

hold of my helmet peak, took my helmet off and dropped it into his manger. Well, I gave him a Spangle but he still kept nuzzling round me looking for more, so I moved my helmet towards him and said, "Put it back on my head then." It took a while, but he eventually picked it up and turned towards me and I put my head under the helmet. He let go and got another Spangle. Over time this became a regular thing every day.

Then one day, instead of lifting my helmet off he got hold of my cap lamp switch and my lamp went off. This all happened accidentally during our usual procedure, but I wouldn't give him his treat till he'd switched it on again, which he did after a few attempts. So of course this too became part of our daily routine. He could also do it on demand when I wanted to show him off to anyone, and of course whenever he fancied a treat. He'd try it on because he knew I couldn't refuse him. Funny thing was, it was only Spangles which worked!

Well, during the time we spent together we became the best of friends, and developed quite an affinity for each other. I think Toby was the last pony I drove before going on to do my coalface training.

STAR

Star was very aptly named. He was as black as midnight and his coat shone as bright as any star. He was a stallion and very full of himself, and he was a big lad! And you had to let him know who was in charge or he'd lead you in a merry dance.

One of his favourite tricks first thing in the stable, before and during harnessing, was to give you a nip which could be quite painful. Anyone who wasn't aware of this would get quite a shock. I think it was his way of testing you. Most of the drivers knew what to expect, so we'd be ready for him and give him a tap on his nose. Even if you gave him an apple or something he'd still try it on. Actually he was only being playful, but sometimes he'd give you a nasty bruise on the backside, which was usually where he'd aim for. But for all that he was a good worker, but you had to stay in control.

Once he was geared up and ready for work he had to have a muzzle on. In another life he could have been a footballer, as he could kick with his front feet as well as his back. This would usually happen if he was being reversed. He didn't like going backwards. He would grind his teeth together as well. Sometimes he seemed to growl like a dog! All because he didn't like reversing.

Something else he didn't like was rats. He'd chase them and

try to stamp on them. I remember him once pulling tubs off the road after seeing a rat beside the road. Another time I took him into the stables and there was a rat in his manger. He saw it before I did and I got quite a shock when he went for it and it jumped out past me.

I only drove Star on a few occasions. Some of his regular drivers were Jack Osborne Junior – I think Jack had him for about a year – Vin Simons, who I mentioned in the Foreword, and a little fellow, Harry Hewitt. Legend has it that he once grabbed Harry by his jacket shoulder and lifted him clean off the ground. I wasn't there at the time so I can't confirm that, so it will have to remain legend!

Just to cap it off for Star, don't get the wrong idea about him because he wasn't nasty, just playful. Mind you, if you didn't know him you might think differently!



Jack Sampson with Jewel on his retirement
after 25 years in Kiveton Pit

GINGER

Ginger was so called for obvious reasons. He certainly was very ginger coloured. He was a nice looking little pony, about medium size for a pit pony. He wasn't fond of hard work though, and he had a habit of rearing up if things weren't to his liking, and you had to speak to him quietly. If you raised your voice he would rear up. I think maybe he had been mistreated at some time.

Mostly he got on with his job if he was treated right, but you always had to make sure he was fastened up or he would head back to the stables, even when you were uncoupling him from tubs. If you didn't hold on to his head he'd be off and he wouldn't hang about. There'd be no point in running after him or shouting for him to stop. You'd know where to find him, stood at his manger in the stables. The ostler would have a wry smile on his face when you turned up for him, and would comment, "You took your time, didn't you?" or something like that. He'd seen it all before.

I remember a fella called Billy Lawson from Thorpe Salvin had him for the longest time while I was there. I've heard since that he went into the Hazel and was driven by Harry Richardson from Kiveton.

TIM

Tim was a beautiful grey. He and Toby were very similar except that Tim was a bit taller and more slender to look at. He had a lovely temperament and was a good worker. I can't tell you much more about him as I had very little to do with him, although I do know he was quite a fast runner. He'd always be among the lead horses heading back to the stables at the end of the shift.

His regular driver was Jeff Bennett from Harthill who would later go on to be Training and Safety Officer. By this time all the ponies were gone from the pit, which is a good job really I suppose, or he would have had a dilemma of sorts, or maybe a crisis of conscience!

Considering what we got up to in our younger days, the Grand National had nothing on us. As I mentioned earlier, if you were caught riding it was a sackable offence. How we survived those races back to the stables I'll never know. Looking back, it was scary to say the least, but when you're young, fear in such circumstances doesn't enter your head.

I remember on one occasion I was riding double with Jeff on Tim, when Mick Kelly came up beside us on Toby. We were on stretch gallop and Mick forced us over to get past us. Tim lost his footing and down we went. Jeff and me finished up with Tim on top of us wriggling to get up. We could do nothing for laughing, even though we must have

been hurting. Tim got up and away he went off to the stables. We picked ourselves up, still laughing, and walked the last bit back to find Mick Kelly waiting for us at the stables, and a few others, all having a good laugh at our expense.

Don't get the idea that the ponies came to any harm galloping back to the stables. I'm sure they were as keen as we were to get back home! And they enjoyed the freedom to gallop – well, I reckon they did.

As I said before, we weren't supposed to ride and we always had to be on our guard for officials (deputies), although they knew it went on. Most of them had done it themselves in their younger days. However there was one who was the bane of pony drivers. His name was Ernest Flower (Buck). He'd sometimes lay in wait for us. I remember one occasion when I was running a bit late and the rest of the gang had all gone, when I came across this bedraggled figure covered in dust. It was Buck. He'd been waiting to catch us, but he'd been swept aside as they'd galloped past him. Anyway he caught me on my own! Well, I got a good telling off again. It wasn't the first time he'd caught me. It became a sort of cat and mouse situation, Buck trying to catch us and us trying to avoid him. I think it probably worked out about fifty-fifty. But he never reported me or my brother and I don't know of anyone else. His bark was worse than his bite really. He couldn't very well let it go without saying something and he kept us on our toes so to speak. I think deep down he probably enjoyed it as much as we did

FLIP

Flip was a good worker and very fast. It was a toss-up who was the fastest, Flip or Bill. My brother had Flip for a while after Johnny Bingham who trained him. Johnny went on to the coal face and later emigrated to Australia.

Flip was a beautiful looking horse, tallish and slim but not thin, almost like a racehorse, and he had habit of hanging his tongue out of one side of his mouth. Sometimes it made him look quite comical. But he was the kind of horse you couldn't help loving – always obedient and willing.

I remember Johnny Slow having him for some time. I was working with Johnny one time and we'd taken some supplies down No 1, which was about a mile to the face. We were on our way back up, riding in the tub, when the check rein broke. Flip got into stretch gallop and me and Johnny were clinging on for dear life. There was no stopping Flip. We were both scared stiff. Mind you, you wouldn't have known it the way we were laughing. Bravado! We couldn't get out as the tub was only just clearing the roof timbers. We just spragged ourselves in the tub, watching the roof flying past us. The tub was bouncing on the rails and lurching from side to side. I should add that we were using sling gears so there was no way Flip could breech, in fact he'd be as scared as we were as the tub could have caught up with him. Anyway, all was well in the end. We reached the top of the gate and

hit the air doors, derailing the tub and grinding to a halt, a bit bumpy but still intact – just! – and relieved that it was all over.

This was only one of many such occasions when we took our lives in our hands. This applies to most of the pony drivers. At that time most of us were in our teens and full of bravado, without thought or fear. How we made it, the Lord only knows.

Flip seemed to have a habit of getting into scrapes of one kind or another. He'd had a runaway once before to my knowledge with a tram load of rails, and everyone thought he was a gonner that time. He was going so fast when he came to a bend the tram turned over, shedding its load, a couple of rails only just missing him. But luck was with him and he survived.

Unfortunately his luck ran out some time later, long after I'd finished pony driving. I was working in a heading with a fella from Swallownest, Jack Foster, and Flip was bringing some supplies for us. A friend of mine called Derek Shears was driving him. Well, in the heading there was a conveyor belt down one side and rails down the other, so when he'd brought the tubs in, the only way back was on the conveyor belt. This wasn't unusual, but of course the belt must be stood. So the belt was stood and Flip was walking on the belt, when it suddenly started up. Derek came running to me and Jack in the heading and we all hurried back down the

gate. We'd already stopped the belt, but we were too late. Flip was upside down between the belt and the wall, and the bottom return belt had run across his throat. We cut out the belt and split the pans, but our efforts were in vain. I'll never forget the look on his face as he looked up at me just before he gasped his last breath. I'm sure there were tears in his eyes.

I'm not ashamed to say there were tears in my eyes, as I'd known Flip since my very first day down the pit. There was of course an inquiry, but no-one was found to be at fault. It was an accident. Flip's luck had finally run out.

RIP Flip.

MIDGE

Midge was a good old horse, very steady, almost too steady. Not the sort of horse you'd expect a young man to drive. And they didn't very often, as his regular driver was an older man, Sam Short. They were made for each other, as Sam didn't rush about. But between them they got the job done.

Sam was a grand old man. I liked him a lot. I did spend some time working with him and got to know Midge quite well, which stood me in good stead, as later on I would have Midge for a while. Sam had already told me that Midge didn't like water. He wouldn't walk through water. If he couldn't get round it he'd just stop dead, even when pulling tubs. On one occasion I remember him pulling tubs off the rails to get round water between the sleepers, and once while riding him back to the stable I almost went over his head as he stopped dead.

Still, apart from his pace, that was his only fault, as he was a good worker and quite strong. I enjoyed my time with him, although life was never going to be very exciting around Midge.

Sam Short never ever wore a safety helmet in the pit. He always wore a flat cap with a big safety pin in front to hang his lamp on.

SAM

Sam was a grey, quite a dark grey. He was a good worker but rather a handful, although I never had a lot to do with him. My brother had him for a short while, but the fellow who I remember with him for a long time was Brian Smedley from Killamarsh. His Dad was a deputy.

Anyway, as I said, Sam was quite a handful. He didn't like being geared up, and would kick and buck like a bucking bronco at a rodeo, and it usually took two men to put his limbers on.

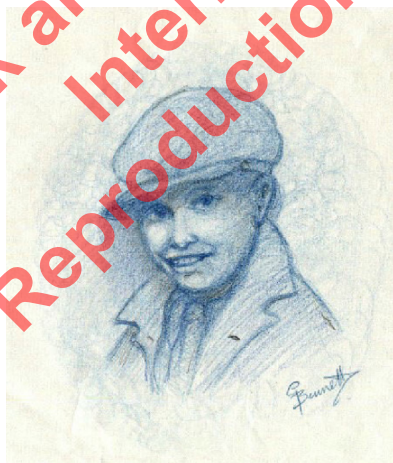
Then one day Mick Kelly came up with a solution. He took his belt off and fastened one of Sam's front legs up so he was stood on three legs, and it worked. He couldn't kick out with his back legs or he would fall down. Anyway he endured this indignity till he was geared up and ready for work. But as soon as the belt was taken off his front leg, everyone had to stand clear as he protested by having a mad few minutes bucking and kicking. He'd then just stand there puffing and panting and shaking his head. Even after that during the day he'd sometimes take fit and if ever he was stood, he'd be pawing the ground with his front feet and doing a bit of snorting.

But for all that, Brian seemed to cope with him quite well, as they were together quite some time.

DEB

Deb was a sort of dark tan colour. I always thought he looked a bit like a cartoon horse as he had a sort of sad yet comical look about his face, and his back was what you might call concave, as though he'd had a heavy load on his back. But for all that he was a good worker and quite placid.

I remember Herbert Hurt from Harthill driving him for a long time, but also Paul Holmes from Kiveton had him for some time. I never had a lot to do with Deb, although on the occasions I did, I found him a pleasure to work with.



‘Pit Lad’, by George Bennet

BLACKIE

Blackie was aptly named because of his colour. He wasn't black and shiny like Star, more like matt black. My one experience with Blackie is best forgotten, as I only walked him about 200 yards into the pit bottom.

He was kept in the pit bottom stables and I never saw him go out to work. There was some talk that he couldn't be driven. He was certainly very wild looking – he was what I'd call “wild eyed.” His eyes were sharp and piercing and he was very scary looking, and biggish but not too big.

One day in my early days I was sent to get a pony from the stables, and they were all out except for Blackie. Well, after all the talk I'd heard about him I was to say the least somewhat apprehensive. I put on his sling gears, no problem so far except for the wild looks he kept giving me. Then I led him from the stables into the pit bottom. Still OK till we got to the rows of tubs lined up to go on the cage and I had to lead Blackie between them. We got so far, and then the stretcher on his gears got wedged between the tubs. Well, I couldn't get behind him to release it, so I was stuck there.

A feller whose name I forget saw me and came over to help. He lifted the stretcher for me to move forward, and as he was doing so asked who I was, as he had not seen me before. He assumed quite rightly that I was relatively new to the job. Then he said, “What horse is this?” I said, “It's Blackie,”

whereupon he let go the stretcher with a startled expression on his face, which made me quite nervous. But I kept hold of Blackie, who had remained remarkably calm.

Anyway, this fellow disappeared, then came back with the under manager, Mr Betteridge, whose first question was, "Who told you to bring him out?" To which I replied, "Nobody. He was the only one left."

"Oh. You mustn't take him."

So he had to go back to the stables. Several men then came from nowhere it seemed, all approaching Blackie very gingerly. We eventually got him turned round after splitting the tubs to get him through. Still, Blackie seemed to take all the excitement in his stride. Mr Betteridge wasn't too pleased, there were men waiting for me and a pony to start work.

Anyway, things were sorted out, and Blackie remained in the stables for a while. The next time I saw him was some time later. He was being handled by Mick Kelly. I never had anything more to do with Blackie. I'm told he turned out to be OK eventually, but he never lost that wild look.

SCOTT

Scott was a dapple grey stallion, but he was not as headstrong as you normally expect of a stallion. In fact he was quite placid and good natured. He was also quite a good worker and got on with the job very well. I remember in the early days he was handled by a good friend of mine, John Rose from North Anston. Scott trod on his foot one day and broke his toe. John left the pit soon after and despite his toe injury went on to be a football referee.

He had a few different drivers after that. I recall John Slow from Kiveton having him for a while. We would all get to handle different horses at times due to absenteeism or sick or lame horses. I drove Scott myself on occasions and found him a pleasure to work with. He was obedient and hard working.

Unfortunately, Scott came to a sad end. Surprisingly not in the pit, but during the pit holidays when they all came out to grass. There was a bit of an altercation between Scott and another horse and Scott got his leg broken and had to be put down, which is ironic really after all his years in the pit, and for that to happen during his couple of weeks of freedom. RIP Scott.

Whilst talking about the pit holidays, I'd like to mention an

incident that took place on one occasion when the ponies were being taken from the pit to the “pony field” as it became known, which is a field just behind my house on Hard Lane. Some of the drivers thought it would be a good idea to bypass the field and have a gallop up to Harthill, bearing in mind this would be the early hours of Saturday morning. I’m told they got to Harthill and back to the field. The village must have been like Dodge City for a short while! Surprisingly there were no complaints. Harthill must have been sleeping well that night.

It’s one of my regrets to this day that I wasn’t involved. It must have been great fun. Unfortunately I was in the pit bottom putting horses on to the cage to come up. This wasn’t as easy as it might have been at times as some of them could be a bit jumpy and nervous. I did hear of one pony who kicked the gates off the cage on his way up and fell to his death.

Some of the “cowboys” who rode to Harthill would have been Paul Holmes, John Slow, Jimmy Hawkins, maybe my brother Richard Ward, and Mick Ramsdon and others. It’s OK to name them now but it was kept very hush-hush at the time, although it did leak out eventually, by which time it didn’t matter anyway.

SCAMP

Scamp was a really big chestnut pony. He was almost a stallion. By that I mean he had only one testicle! I feel I have to mention that or those who knew him would wonder why I didn't. Anyway, disregarding that, as I said he was really huge and strong with it, but he could be a bit awkward at times – I suppose some might say clumsy. But by and large he was a good worker and very placid.

I recall one occasion that sticks in my mind. We were on our way back to the stable, myself and a fella called Jack Oldfield from South Anston. I think I must have been on Ted as I had to dismount to open the air doors. Ted walked through and I kept hold of the door waiting for Scamp to follow with Jack on his back. Well, Scamp came through, but no Jack. I shouted but got no reply. Then I heard, "Help! Get me down!"

I looked back but couldn't see him at first. Then I looked up and there was Jack, hanging from a girder quite high up. What had happened was, as Scamp moved forward, Jack's lamp battery on his belt had caught on the edge of the girder. Talk about a fluke – you couldn't make it up! Of course all I could do was laugh. Jack wasn't too pleased as it was quite a drop.

Well, I tried pulling his legs, still laughing, but Jack cried,

“Stop! Stop! That’ll kill me!” Anyway, after much to-ing and fro-ing and rocking he eventually came down with a crash. I helped him up (still laughing) and we made it back to the stables, Jack hobbling and me – still laughing!



‘Welcome Respite’, by George Bennet

MOP

Mop was about the strangest-looking horse of all. He was a kind of piebald, like an Indian pony. He wasn't very tall but his body was quite big and he had a big head, and his body looked more like a cow, so you see what I mean about strange. But he was a steady old worker, and getting on a bit.

He'd usually be working with the back rippers. I remember Jack Oldfield from South Anston being his driver. He would on occasion go on supplies to the face or the headings, but not too often. As I said he was getting on a bit and was quite slow and steady and could only pull light loads. I drove him on odd occasions, but like Midge life with him didn't get too exciting and he stayed in the pit bottom stables which were three or four miles from the workplace, so you wouldn't get a lot of work done with him. Maybe that was for the best – he'd earned his corn over the years.

CLIPPER

Clipper was a big lad and could have his moments, but by and large he was a good worker, although on occasion he could be a bit awkward and he would sometimes shy off a bit. But usually with a little coaxing he'd do the job. He was very dark in colour. It's hard to describe – he was a sort of off black if that's possible, almost a dark plum colour.

I did take him out now and then, but the fella who springs to mind from the early days is John Shears from South Anston. I don't remember who took him on after John went on the coal face. Hopefully someone reading this book will let me know.

SKIPPER

Skipper was the biggest pit pony I ever saw. He was as big as a racehorse and not suited to pit work at all. He'd been a pit top worker before he came to us and in my opinion that's where he should have stayed.

He could only work on the main level or just off the end of it. He couldn't even have got down most of the gates because of his height. His legs seemed to go on for ever. He was very awkward and nervous and he wasn't all that strong for his size.

Although very gangly, he was quite strong in his neck. If he wanted to he'd pick you up in the air, which he often did till you got him under control.

I remember when he first came down, Derek Shears had him. Well, Derek had only just finished his training at the time and I felt a bit responsible as I had trained him. I remember giving Derek a hand on that first day he had Skipper. Mind you, Derek was a strong young man and between us we managed to settle him to some extent, but as I remember he was eventually taken back out of the pit as it wasn't working out.

ORM AND OMO

I've put these two ponies together as I don't know much about them, although I remember them coming from another pit. They were both quite tall, both chestnuts, one a bit darker than the other as I remember.

I spoke to a friend of mine, Billy Burns from Shireoaks. He'd driven Omo for a while and he told me he was quite a handful, but he stayed on at the pit, unlike Orm, who had a problem.

Orm had had an accident at some time before he came to us and he had a very bad gash at the top of his head, just where his mane began. In fact it was almost as if he'd been scalped. But the wound wouldn't heal. You could actually lift his scalp up. The smell was awful, and for that nobody wanted to work with him. He was also very confused and awkward at times, very timid and sometimes he could be very awkward indeed. Anyway one day he was taken away and put down, so we heard. As far as I know, Omo stayed on. By this time I'd gone on to the coal face, so wasn't in touch with horses any more.

PUNCH

Punch was a small, dark chestnut pony. There's not a lot I can tell you about him as he was always driven by a fella from Killamarsh called Frank Wyatt.

One of the things I recall was that Punch only had one eye, due to an accident earlier on. But this didn't deter him from doing his job, and on the occasions that I had him I found him OK, but he could be a bit awkward at times, though that could apply to most of them. I put it down to Punch not being able to see too well, and so made allowances for that, because he was a nice little pony and quite friendly and I never had a problem with him.

NAT

Last but not least of the ponies I remember is a medium sized chestnut. The fella I remember mostly with Nat was Ivor Maycock. They were well matched – steady, hard working and dependable. I did drive Nat on occasions and found him a pleasure to work with. I can't say much more about him. No exciting or odd events spring to mind, so I'll just have to leave it at that!

CYRIL KING AND THE OSTLERS

It just wouldn't be right to finish without a word of recognition to the men who looked after the ponies' health and welfare.

I'll start with 'Cyril' King, who I had known since I was a child. I often stayed over at his house, which was attached to the Colliery Offices. I visited because my Aunt (Avis Bower) worked at the Offices and for Mrs. King, living in. In those days he was, of course, Mr. King to me. He was a good family friend. Cyril was in overall charge of all the ponies at Kiveton Pit. He also had the unenviable task of having to destroy seriously injured and sick ponies. But the upside of his job was taking ponies to shows up and down the country. On one occasion he met King George VI and Queen Elizabeth (the Queen Mother) at the Royal Show at Lincoln. He presented a horse called Duke, a very popular pit top pony.

I'd also like to mention the Ostlers underground, who we as pony drivers had daily contact with. We had great respect for them. A few spring to mind. I had known Ellis Moody since childhood, when he had a horse-drawn grocery cart, so he was well suited to looking after horses. Then there was Tommy Gollick, also very capable. In his younger days he had spent some time in the cavalry as a riding instructor. Last, but not least, were Len Cottam and Joe Cash, who were

well used to horses as they were from farming communities, helping out at harvest time and such like.

All these men, through their patience and understanding made the pit ponies' lives as bearable as was possible. God bless them all.



Cyril King, Head Horse Keeper at Kiveton Park Colliery and 'Duke' being presented to King George VI and Queen Elizabeth at the Royal Show, Lincoln Race Course

EPILOGUE

In conclusion, I'd like to thank you for taking the time to read my little book. I'd also like to thank the Kiveton Park and Wales History Society for giving me this opportunity, especially Dr John Tanner, the Project Manager, for his support and encouragement, and also Keith Southwood for his patience and computer skills.

For me, it has been what you might call a labour of love, as these were some of the most enjoyable times of my working life. Add to that the camaraderie of the men I worked with, and though my time underground was short lived compared to many (thirteen years from 1953 to 1966), I'm proud to say I was a coal miner.

THE PONIES

Bill
Blackie
Clipper
Deb
Diamond
Flip
Ginger
Little Dan
Midge
Mop
Nat
Omo
Orm
Punch
Rover
Sam
Scamp
Scott
Skipper
Star
Ted
Tim
Toby

THE PONY DRIVERS

Charlie Bashforth
Johnny Bingham
Billy Burns
Brian Glover
Jimmy Hawkins
Paul Holmes
Mick Kelly
Billy Lawson
Ivor Maycock
Brian Noble
Derek Oldfield
Jack Oldfield
Mick Ramsdon
John Rose
Derek Shears
John Shears
Sam Short
Vin Simons
John Slow
Brian Smedley
Denis Turner
Bernard Tyler
Mick Tyler
Frank Ward
Richard Ward
Frank Wyatt