

Notes taken during conversations with John Bellis, lead miner

*Taken at his home: Corwenfa, Main Road, Sychdyn, Mold
on November 11th 1989 and November 20th 1991*

John was born on December 20th 1914. He began working at Halkyn Mines at the age of 16 in January 1931 and his first job was working in a shed at Bagillt manning a telephone linked direct to the men mining at the tunnel face. The phone link to the tunnel face operated by John aged 16 was a flood warning phone. If the tunnel crew struck water, men working downstream could then move to safer ground.

At 16½ he became surveyors assistant. This involved the surveying of old workings to locate the correct position for sinking Powell's shaft down from the old drainage level. This was connected to the compressor chamber on the Rhosesmor branch tunnel. Access to these old workings was via Pen-y-bryn shaft and involved long trips through the old workings. During the trips along the Gt.Halkyn Lode, it was John's job to push the surveyor, resting on a flat top wagon, along the rails. For easier access it was decided in 1931 that Ochr-y-foel shaft, which had been closed in 1920, should be re-opened. This shaft provided the route from surface for the heavy power cables laid down to the compressor chamber. When surveying they used only carbide lamps and candles with a cardboard screen.

In 1931 Halkyn Mines had two battery locos which were employed just on tunnel work. In 1933 the first diesel loco was introduced when lode 656 began production.

Powell's Lode cavern was first entered about 1931-32.

John Bellis began working with the main tunnel crew at 18. He was part of the crew that achieved the European record of 286 feet on each of two consecutive weeks. This was done whilst driving the main heading south between lodes 656 and 641. The tunnelling record was broken as the face approached Olwyn Goch shaft. In the rush to reach Olwyn Goch, the teams worked a seven day week. After reaching the shaft John took a weeks holiday in the Isle of Man.

Walter Blok had claimed that the sump at Olwyn Goch shaft dried up when the Powell's Lode lake was lowered by pumping, John disagreed and stated that this was not the case. Another large chamber (Barclay's) was found just north of Powell's Lode chamber which was 300 feet long and 20 – 30 feet high. There was ore in the roof and clay on the floor. To prevent rails sinking into the clay, they were laid over bundles of brushwood and covered in hardcore.

Pant-y-go and Halkyn lodes were not seen when driving the Milwr Tunnel. The first lode met with south of Pen-y-bryn was 656.

In 1935-36 there was a strike over moving operations from Pen-y-bryn to Olwyn Goch shaft. the manager J.B. Richardson said "Stay out as long as you like; I have bread forever". The men eventually returned to work for a shilling a day less than before the strike.

Men employed varied all the time. In 1932 there were about 650 men and this increased to the maximum of 800 by the end of 1935. After 1935 all but 40 were dismissed. In 1946-48 there were about 60 men. There were 200 in early 1958 but in April all were dismissed except 12 who were kept on for stone quarrying at Olwyn Goch. At the end of 1964 there were about 40 employed. From 1970 to 1978 about 14 men were working. All lead ore had been taken from the mine by 1977.

John worked under six different managers at the mine:

Captain J. L. Francis	until 1934
J.B. Richardson	1934 – 1939
Robert Pettigrew	1939 – 1948
Mr Craddock	1948 – c.1962
Arthur Bowstead	1962 – 1975 (began as underground manager)
Stan Parry	1978 – 1987

After 1938 when most of the workforce were sacked, John was promoted from driller to working foreman. Limestone was first quarried in 1939 from Pen-y-bryn shaft and later from Olwyn Goch. This continued until 1969. High grade stone went to Pilkingtons at St.Helens for glass making; poorer quality went to I.C.I. for agriculture.

Numerous Government chambers were mined throughout the workings. Three were at Pen-y-bryn. Only T.N.T. was stored (no valuables). Chambers with wet roofs were lined with suspended corrugated iron sheets and the boxes of TNT were stored on rows of bricks. One of these chambers lies a few yards north of the Rhosesmor branch tunnel on the east side. This has a shaft in the roof near the entrance. This shaft was a failed trial to find the Halkyn lode above.

Cathole vein was cut in 1957. Immediately before striking the lode, the shot-holes entered clay which oozed from the holes under great pressure.

In 1939 John was sent to mine the Government storage chambers at the old foundry site at Rhydymwyn. The chambers and three entrances were all completed within about two years.

When drifts were driven from the Milwr Tunnel along lodes 611 (Erw Felin) and 647 (Pant-y-mwyn), it was found that the 'old man' had worked down to sea level.

John was involved in much of the work on Lode 561 (South Llyn-y-pandy or Rhyd Alyn). He had a detailed mine section of the lode which showed the cross-cut connecting to the old mans work about 300 feet above the Milwr Tunnel level. This cross-cut is shown as running close to the Nant Alyn cross-course. Lode 561 was worked before the 2nd World war but most work was carried out after the war. In 1964-65, John found a rich stope of lump ore in this lode.

A serious fall occurred in Olwyn Goch shaft in 1975. As a consequence, the ladderway was rebuilt using the best timber. "It must have cost thousands". Aware of the cost and the work involved, John disagreed with the decision to cut the guide wires when the mine closed in 1987.

The underground workshop at Olwyn Goch was formerly a compressor room.

Walter Blok (of Mold) was known as one of the best 'Digger' (Eimco) drivers.

He mentioned the feeder on the west side of Lode 501.

Halkyn Mines was a very happy place in which to work.

When driving the main tunnel south, drifts are driven along all the veins met with. Such drifts are normally halted wherever cross-courses are met with, the company preferring to push the tunnel south. But in the case of Lode 630, John mined through the cross-course to the west and regained the lode after a short cross-cut.

Access to the Flint (Halkyn) Tunnel was via Pen-y-Bryn shaft. The cage was stopped at the Old Drainage level. John knew of no levels off Pen-y-bryn above the level of the Old Drainage.

When asked about the condition of the top 600 feet of this shaft, he stated that it had all been constructed with heavy girders and steel plate and should be in fine condition.

The battery locos used in 1931 were raised to surface at Pen-y-bryn for charging.

Lode 656 was the last lode worked up to 'close down' in 1938.

Electric cap lamps superceded carbide lamps during the war when the T.N.T. storage chambers were mined. Compressed-air lighting was used at the tunnel face from around 1932-33.

The drilling rig used on driving the main tunnel heading used three 'flying pigs' and "not four" (as stated elsewhere).

Rip bits were introduced about 1936. These had screw or taper fittings and were a boon in putting up rises (much lighter).

Ore was smelted at Pen-y-bryn until 1958. It was then treated at Olwyn Goch before being shipped to Avonmouth for smelting.

Schnellmann the geologist was described as "a grand chap".

J.C. Allen was "fair to the men and would stand no messing. You could hear him coming a long way off" (referring to the firm orders he issued), and he always carried a large Cornish pastie in his pocket for lunch.

Toilets were makeshift affairs constructed over any convenient running water. Buckets were used in areas without water such as The Quarry.

Post war, the tunnel face advanced at an average of 7 feet per round of explosives.

Pumping ceased at Powell's lode lake in 1938 at 'close down'.

Average limestone output was 70,000 to 80,000 tons per annum.

John took early retirement at the age of 64 in December 1978 after 48 years. His last job was as underground foreman.

Last chat Summer 1995

- Jerusalem Shaft: Lies beside road to Rhosesmor near sand & gravel quarry. Named after chapel nearby. "A prospecting shaft by their geologist " (G. A. Schnellmann, who supported the 'ponding' theory of ore deposition).
- Gefnffordd Shaft: Named on 25" OS sheets but not known by John Bellis.
- Bryn Awel: "Name of house that housed HDUM offices, in Halkyn village".
- Velocipedes were called 'scooters' and had four wheels. "More effort than they were worth".
- Olwyn Goch Shaft: "Top 70 foot was all steel plates onto RSJ's - very sound".
- Lode 547 steel door & dam: "Put in by the 'old man' on way to Cae Mawr Shaft to prevent flooding. Jack Francis gave the men a bottle of scotch for a successful job".
- Lode 501west: "Big vugh above arch girders".
- Rhyd Alyn Mine: "Water course" shown on plans. "Full of clay and boulders but dry" (after lowered water table).

Notes:

I had known John Bellis for several years and spoke to him about mining on a number of occasions. Although I had spoken to several other Halkyn miners, John's memories seemed the clearest and most accurate. He was always very happy to talk about his life in waders and regarded our modern exploration of the now disused workings with some amusement.

John Bellis died in November 1998 following a short illness.

Cris Ebbs 2002