

NEWSLETTER

Colwall Village Society

JULY 2014

Revealing Our Heritage

Article from the Malvern Gazette & Ledbury Reporter, August 30, 1979

Tunnelling through the Malvern Hills for 10 bob a shift

The experiences of a Malvern man more than 50 years ago during the construction of the present railway tunnel through the Hills have opened up a new occupation. About six months ago, Mr Joe Loader, of Crown Lea Court, Malvern, talked to a Women's Institute meeting when the scheduled speaker was unable to come. He described life as a young man in Colwall, working on the railway tunnel first as a crane fireman and later underground as a pump minder. He so enthralled his audience that he has been in great demand as a speaker ever since.



Mr Loader was born in Castlemorton but his family soon moved to Upper Colwall. Mr Loader went to the Lower Wyche School where he recalls receiving a "good and firm" education. At the age of 14, he went to work at the mineral water factory in West Malvern Road, for the princely wage of £1.04 a week. Later, he left to work on the poultry farm of a Manchester iron and steel tycoon. By 1922 work had begun on the tunnel, designed to replace the original one, now showing serious distortion of the brickwork. Mr Loader and a friend, both 17, persuaded the foreman they met the minimum age limit of 18 and both started work on the tunnel site. "The fireman said I could start by firing the steam crane. I started at six in the morning and worked a 12 hour shift." The crane was used to lift men, materials and spoil up a shaft sunk on the Colwall side of the tunnel. A similar shaft was sunk at the Malvern Wells end and the workings gradually inched towards one another.

The Malvern Gazette of July 9, 1926, looking back on the construction of the tunnel, published an extract from the Great Western Railway Magazine, which thus explained the need for the new tunnel. "For some years past, the train service and other railway developments had rendered inadequate the accommodation in the old tunnel, owing to the small size of the structure both in width and height coupled with the steep gradient of 1 in 80; considerable inconvenience was caused to enginemen and others by the atmospheric conditions in the tunnel. "This was accentuated by the fact that the structure being used for both up and down trains. Exhaustive tests were carried out on various tunnels on the company's system with the idea of ascertaining the best means of combatting the atmospheric nuisance. The unsatisfactory ventilation was however, only one, and indeed not the chief consideration, which gave rise to the question of the reconstruction of the tunnel or alternatively the building of a new one. "There was the equally important fact that expenditure on repairs owing to the indifferent construction would have to be incurred sooner or later." The old tunnel did not lend itself to enlargement so engineers decided on a new one 1,589½ yards long, parallel to the original one and about 44ft away with a less steep gradient of 1 in 90.

Mr Loader can remember a number of funny incidents during his time on the steam crane, like his first experience of cooking eggs and bacon for breakfast on the shovel in the firebox. Once the up draught caught the shovel and the breakfast went up the chimney! On another occasion, a back draught sent flames shooting back into the cramped cabin. He reeled back, caught his head a hard knock . . . and woke up in Malvern Hospital. Mr Loader was fascinated by the grey slate-like stone brought to the surface by the tunnellers working below. "It was very soft, it crumbled in your hand, he recalled. According to the Great Western Railway Magazine, 64,140 cubic yards of rock and spoil were excavated, a combination of igneous and sedimentary rock. The magazine suggests the 'soft' rock Mr Loader found so remarkable was Wenlock Shale, an ancient marine bed extending almost 700 yards into the Colwall face.

When Mr Loader went down into the tunnel itself to work for 10s a shift minding the sump that kept the tunnel water-free, he saw the outlines of many ancient sea creatures fossilised in the sedimentary rock. During weekends, archaeologists went into the shaft to examine the fossils. But they could not be brought to the surface because the shale crumbled to dust when it reached the surface. "I was a bit frightened going underground at first," said Mr Loader, "I had that feeling of being shut in, and it was very damp." He remembers candles being used for lighting perfectly safely because there was no gas likely to cause an explosion. The candles were secured to the tunnel wall with clay. At peak times, as many as 500 men were working on the project and the numbers employed over the 30-month construction period never dropped below 200.

Most of the men who did the hard excavation work were itinerant Irish "navvies." Hard workers, but "rough diamonds," they dwell as large as life in Mr Loader's memory. For the hardest rock, they used compressed air drills and blasted their way through with gelignite. During meal breaks or "snap" as a break was called, crown and anchor was a popular pastime. "On pay day, there would be two queues, Mr Loader recalled, "The men would collect the pay and their women would be lined up to take it off them. They knew that if they didn't get it then, they would never get it." Mr Loader can remember no serious accidents during the project, and his memory is confirmed by the Great Western magazine. During "snap" workers drank their tea from jam jars, and then trudged back through the tunnel, some-times up to their ankles in water.

Mr Loader remembers being intrigued by the skill of the brick laying contractors, Wilson Lovett of Wolverhampton. They constructed a lining of three to six rings of bricks, including a facing of blue bricks. The work went on under the careful scrutiny of the railways inspector Mr Waghorn. If he did not think the lining was up to standard, he would order the structure to be torn down and a new start made, Mr Loader said. He remembers that the mortar used on the lining was ground clinkers, ground on a machine like cider press. There was no celebration when the two headings met, but Mr Loader can vividly recall the rush of fresh air as the wall of rock between them was blasted down. "The first person through was the foreman's son a lad of about 10 who darted through before anyone else had a chance." he remembered. Soon after this, Mr Loader left and entered the motor trade. His industrious life took him to R.S.R.E. after the war. But he said he has never forgotten nor regretted his working days in the Colwall Tunnel, officially opened late in 1926.

Colwall War Memorial By Nicholas Neve

As the anniversary of the start of World War I approaches, our thoughts naturally turn towards those who lost their lives in the conflict and in particular those commemorated on our village war memorial. 61 names are inscribed there, but these are not just names inscribed on stone, they were men with characters and families who went from Colwall and gave their lives for their country. Another 10 names, found on a handwritten list in the St James the Great vestry, were left off the memorial and two more soldiers lie buried in the churchyard in official war graves with Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstones.



Jenny Harrison and Nick Neve will tell some of the stories that lie behind those names; stories of bravery and hardship and also how a familiar hymn tune helped to fund the memorial.

Do you have any ancestors who are commemorated here in Colwall; do you have any stories handed down, any medals or documents, letters of condolence or memorabilia tucked away in a drawer? If so do bring them with you to the Village Society meeting on Monday 15th September. You may learn more about your ancestor and also fill in some of the gaps in our research.



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

To the 17th Annual General Meeting of the Colwall Village Society - 28th April 2014.

Once again, I am pleased to report on another successful year for the Society.

Following last year's AGM we held three public meetings -

1. 22nd April 2013

Dr Janet Cooper took us through the painstaking business of producing a village history - in this case Eastnor. We were intrigued to learn that Colwall will be the subject of the next VCH investigations.

2. 16th September 2013

Amanda Simons spoke enthusiastically about the mysteries surrounding the British Camp using information from her recently published book on the subject.

3. 27th January 2014

Gordon Wood, another local author, gave us a fascinating historical trip along the Worcester to Hereford Railway line.

Amongst other activities were an exhibition including photographs and maps of Colwall past and present set up for the Annual Horticultural Show in August; the presentation of a life membership to Barbara Eagles; and the continuation of putting our archive material on a database. Our newsletters continue to be successful and all credit to Derek Rees, the editor.

For the future, another plaque perhaps, another booklet - this time on Colwall past and present, and a further series of interesting talks.

My grateful thanks go to committee members - John, Margaret, Derek, Marion, Rebecca and Barbara for all their hard work, to Penny the teapot, and to you the members for supporting us.

Michael Milne

The Society's Archives – An appeal from your Chairman

As you are all aware the Society has a large collection of archive material which is constantly being added to - we would welcome help in collating and organising this, prior to its copying to electronic media where possible. No technical knowledge is necessary – only patience and enthusiasm.

Please email cvsnewsletter@colwall.info or contact any committee member.

Rope Making in Colwall by David Hodgson

Rope makers have resided in Colwall for at least 140 years.

In 1871 we find Thomas Collis from Leicester listed as a rope manufacturer employing 2 men and a boy. Thomas lived at the Pink. The Pink was an ancient cottage, which housed 4 families but was demolished in the 1950's. The Cottage was situated just below the lane which runs behind New Court in Old Church Road, Colwall. Thomas Collis resided at the Pink for around 10 years. On the O.S Map of 1904 there appears to be outbuildings, which could have been used for Rope Making. In 1881 we find Daniel Murphy living at 4, The Pink, and George Smith living at 3, The Pink, both of whom were Rope Makers.



The Pink

By 1881 Thomas Collis was residing at Aston Cottage which is the Cottage north of Colwall Library, however by 1891 he had moved down the road to the Royal Oak Public House in Colwall, which is situated next to the Butchers Shop. At the Oak he is listed as a Publican and Rope Maker. Both of these properties show out buildings on the O.S. map of 1904, which may also have been used for rope making.

In 1841 Hannah Nash is listed as a Glove Maker and in 1842 marries James Mason. Around 1860 the couple have a son, Allen who becomes an apprentice rope maker and is significant later.

In 1861 Henry Horton is a Manufacturer in Worcester of Ropes, Marquees, Tents and Rick Sheets etc. In 1871 we find that he has moved from Worcester to Fields End, Colwall, the property now known as Rope Walk.

To Be Continued...

Future Talk

5th September 2014

'Colwall War Memorial'

By Jenny Harrison and Nicholas Neve

26th January 2015

'Stone Buildings and Structures in Colwall'

By Kate Andrew

20th April 2015 AGM

followed by

'Natural History in Colwall'

By Tim Dixon

14th September 2015

'Folklore of Herefordshire'

By Roy Palmer

From the Editor

Any article on Colwall related subjects (however tenuous!) are always welcome.

If you are prepared to receive your newsletters by electronic means, please register with the email address below.

Corrections and additions to the information in newsletters are always welcome, as are **CONTRIBUTIONS!**

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