

My Early Life by Martin Lewins

My father had also been through the First World War. In 1914 he was 24 years old and worked as a time served stonemason and bricklayer, His older brother-in-law who was a deputy at Houghton Colliery and my father both volunteered for the King's Shilling, signing on at Houghton Hall which in 1912 became the new Workingmen's Club. Both joined the R.A.M.C. and went down to Eastbourne for their training. After six months of the luxury of the "Grand Hotel" they were sent over to France to spend half of their time in bell tents. There was 33 in the unit and they were sent up to the trenches. Captain Gibson, a doctor from Glasgow was in charge. Of the 33 who went to France only 22 came home – not a hero's welcome. His brother-in-law got his old job back but my father had to start work on the belts at Houghton pit. My father began to suffer from a problem picked up in France, he was suffering from shell shock and this made him terribly sick. Harry Gibbon, another brother-in-law worked at Eppleton, down the pit as a bricklayer and with his help and management my father came to Hetton in 1922, to work alongside his relative. It was not until 1934 that he fully recovered from his ordeal.

My father taught me to take notice of what was new and modern and also, how people lived their lives. About 1933 he came out of the pit and worked from the Hetton Lime Depot under Mr. J Coxon, master mason. Repairs to miners' cottages, farms and line work etc.

One dirty job he endured, happened nearly always on Monday mornings with a 7 a.m. start. He was told by the foreman to go down to the engine sheds and for example number 39 engine needed a new fire box. This job would take until eight thirty to renew the box. He would then go back home, change his sooty clothes and return to normal work. The renewal of a cottage fireplace was also dirty but not as bad as an engine. The boilers at Copt Hill and Warden Law were also the same. Two boilers were found at each place, one would stand idle until the other in use, needed repair. My friend Alan Best in the early 1940s was knocked out when working inside a boiler, one of the liners dropped on his head. My job involved replacing lath and plaster. Thistle boards were a replacement and in 1938 8' x 4' plaster boards came into use. One thing we all tend to do is take for granted new inventions and discoveries, even the gaslight.

We were modern at number 15 since gaslight was installed in 1932 and to celebrate it we had a party. My brother was 10 months old and I had just started school. The infants school gates I could just see over the railway line. My first teacher was Miss Hind who came from Shiney Row, the second year was Miss Horne from Houghton, her father had a tailor's shop. Miss Hind's family were builders. The lady who was the Head Teacher, Miss Eggleston had a small car and came from Durham City.

I was always reminded of my older sister whom I never knew. She died when I was only 10 months old. My mother told me about the big funerals of June 1928 when 14 ladies and one man were killed in a train crash at Darlington. Mrs Smith had travelled from Eppleton Hall to her daughter's house in Barnes Street belonging to Lamb's Brewery, they then walked through the passage to Hetton station. Both did not return.

When in Miss Hind's class my mother, with my brother in the pram, collected me at 3.30.p.m to take me home. She started to cry and over a cup of tea she told me she had witnessed an accident. About 2 p.m. that afternoon she took my brother in his pram up Caroline Street to go to the Co-op. Walking along Market Street, a butcher seated on his cart came galloping with his horse along Downs Lane. A spinster of Regent Street decided to cross the road . Mr. William DGLISH, a relative and my mother shouted for Miss Rebecca Elliott aged 61 not to cross, but she took no notice. She tried to beat the galloping horse and was hit by the shaft and bowled under the cart. The wheel ran over her. Plenty of people came to her aid, and carried her into the doctor's surgery nearby, but unfortunately the poor woman was dead. This incident occurred in May 1932.

On the 27th November 1933 Mr. Robert Stokoe, Manager of Eppleton Colliery was killed in a shunting accident, outside his colliery office. Mr Stokoe was passing through an opening between the empty wagons and was crushed about the shoulders and chest.

Martin Lewins. 2011.