# The Miner's Tale Project

**Transcript of Interview with Mel Tuckwell 11th March 2025**
**Interviewer: Roger King (RK)**

RK
*I'm talking to Mel Tuckwell about his life as a person who worked in the mining industry and it's the 11th of March 2025. So, Mel, start whenever you want.*

MT
Okay, well after leaving Leicester City FC aged sixteen. I went for an interview with the Coal Board. At the interview they just wanted to ask me all about the past players I played with! After the interview, the interviewer said, 'You can start at Ellistown Colliery in the rail weighing shop.' It was where coal used to be loaded into the wagons. I used to weigh them and put the ticket on the side of each wagon with its destination and weight.

RK
*You said you was at Ibstock Secondary before leaving for Leicester City.*

MT
The deputy headmaster was David Cross, and he was really annoyed that I didn't stay at school until I completed my O Levels. I wanted five to get to get to Loughborough College because I wanted to be a PE teacher. I was third in the county at 100 yards, under 13 and under 15. I also played for Coalville Area boys and was selected to play for the County but the winter of 63 cancelled all our games. I was also a pretty good rugby player. I left because Leicester City wanted to sign me.

RK
*Did you just sort of drift into the coal industry?*

MT
No, well, my father was a miner. He came up from Pontypool in Wales, to live with relatives in Battram called Watkins. And he came up during the war. He was born in 1901 and at the start of WW1 he tried to get in the navy, but he was only 14 or 15. So instead, they sent him down the mine. When he came over from Wales, aged 40, he met my mother, and they got married. He was 47 when I was born. My grandfather used to give every grandchild a sovereign, but he hadn't got one for me because didn't expect me to be born, my dad being that old.

RK
*And your dad was at Ellistown?*

MT
It was called Nailstone Wood, it's now a big industrial estate.

RK
*Did your dad get you the job?*

MT
No, I put an application in, and I got this interview and that was it. I then started at Ellistown Colliery in the rail office, weighing the wagons and putting them where they were being distributed to, like Cadbury's in Bournville. There must have been 20, 30 wagons at a time that had to go. Either side of the wagon there was a clip where you put the destination and the weight and sent it off. The guys there were working shift time, but you had got to be 18 before you qualified to do them. And the guys said you want to try and get out of doing shifts if I could.

So, I went to college on a day release. I took a couple of 0 levels and ONCs in Business Studies year one and later HNC Business Studies. I was doing cost accountancy then, but I gave that up and swapped line into method study engineering. This is when you went down a mine studying the procedures that they were doing and seeing if you could improve them.

RK
*Was all this studying sponsored through the Coal Board?*

MT
Yes, this was part of the industry. At the time the colliery manager was a very forward-thinking person. He knew everything about the industry. He kept a weekly folder, and it could tell you all sorts of information and data about the mine, also what the output was, the wages paid; everything. He was a mine of information The guy that was filling this booking for him was a was a cost clerk and he couldn't keep up with it. So, I went to help him.

RK
*You supported the cost clerk?*

MT
Yes, but then I get transferred to the Coal Board headquarters at Coloerton. I'd been working with this guy for about two years, and when this cost clerk job came up and I would only be about 18 but I applied for it and got it because the manager knew me, and he knew what I could do. I was the youngest ever cost accountant, and I did that for 10 years.

RK
*What did that actually entail?*

I would get information on the output from the different faces each day where we were probably getting up to two thousand tons a day coming out. Because if you could imagine this wall, it would be a solid coal machine going in with mechanical picks. The machine would take a sheer of coal off, and it would tumble down into a mechanical belt and it would take that out and drop it on a conveyor belt.

Later in my role as Method Study Engineer, I used to go down as the mechanical study engineer, I used to go down and be able to study that and see how many cuts they should do. If they were able to do

one and a half cuts on a shift, I advised them on how to get two per shift. That's when they got the bonus for the improvements.

I got transferred to Coloerton, and for 12 years I went underground as a method study engineer helping improve the efficiency of the mines.

RK
*From that point, you said you did about ten years in that job*.

MT
Yes earlier, before I later joined the Method Studies Department, and I got it. It was in the early 70's but it was when they tried to introduce an incentive scheme for the miners', but they cancelled it. So, the head of department says, "Oh, I'm sorry I said, but I've got you down.

After leaving the colliery, but before joining the Method Study Department, I took up a job at Nuneaton laboratories for two years. It was the Research and Development site for the Coal Board. I was the admin officer there, supporting 50 to 60 scientists. They looked into many different aspects like liquidising coal, but it never came off. They also looked to place a tag on the miners' boots that would send a signal out, which could be tracked if there was a fall. They also looked to develop headgear like space helmets that would protect the miners better from the coal dust.

RK
*You went to Asfordby pit, didn't you?*

MT
Yes, it was when I was at the Method Study Engineering Department. I went down there when they were opening it up. It was 1,500 feet (460 meters) down. It was in the days when they were introducing not just Coal Board people to the pit but other outside miners. And we went down in a kibble it was called. It was like a big bucket, and you could get about 14 people in it. We went down got within about six feet off the floor we saw these guys were working away there and they were starting to drill forward and away from the shaft.

It was about 1 o'clock, and they suggested we go back up for a cup of tea. Can you imagine this area, right? And you're on this this platform and some of the miners have not got their safety harnesses on. Well, if the cable for the kibble snapped, they would have fallen straight to the bottom but if you had the harness on you would just have hung until they pulled you back up. I thought, I'll just keep still, but I knew that any slip and they would be gone. When we got to the top, I went to see the guy who was in charge and I said, 'I am not going down there. You can sack me but I'm not going.' He said it was alright. I never went down there again.

Soon after, the mine was abandoned. It was Mrs Thatcher who wanted to give something to the Leicestershire and South Derbyshire miners because they didn't go on strike. They didn't strike because Arthur Scargill didn't organise a strike ballot which was necessary, being the right thing to do. Had there been a vote they would have come out

RK
*You were not in the NUM union, were you?*

MT
I was in the NUM in my early days, but when I got into the Method Study Department, I became part of management.

RK
*Describe what you might do in that role?*

MT
Well, for example, coal was coming out of the pit to the bottom of the shaft on the belts. At one point it came to a right-hand turn and this meant some of the coal was falling off. I got them to put a big metal plate that dropped down onto the corner and steered the coal around.

RK
*How did they view you as miners? Were you accepted as being one of the team or did they regard you as one of the management?*

MT
It was both. At times they would ask me to come and look at a problem they had and to advise on how it could be improved. You were working for them and the management.

RK
*Were you down the pit with a lot of the lads you played sport with?*

Yes, and when we played in the local area, we bumped into miners that I knew. I remember playing at Ibstock Welfare and I got booked for a late tackle. I said I got there as fast as a I could. And the lad who I tackled he knew me from the pit, and he was sticking up for me.

RK
*So, would you say in terms of a career, it was a very fulfilling role that you had?*

MT
Yes, I enjoyed it but when it was closing down, I had to get out to make a living and I went to Marconi. They set me on, and I was working at a lower rate of pay because I needed to make a living. The manager said that he couldn't believe that I would take the job because I was so well qualified. There were two young guys working with me and they were classed as my superiors. They said, we don't know what we are going to do with you. I said, well just tell me what you want me to do. They couldn't master it - they being in their early twenties, and me in my early forties.

One day I went to give some information to one of the bosses. So anyway, I gave him the information he wanted, and he said, they're not using you right, are they? I said, no. He said well, hang on he says, don't do anything stupid. He said I'll sort something out. About a couple of weeks later they made about 40 or 50 redundant and it was awful because they were accompanying people to their desk to get their things and then escorting them out. They were going to sort something out for me and keep me on, but because of that I applied for job at Butterly Brick, Heather.

RK
*Did you feel did you notice that the differences in the cultures between, you know, being in a mining environment compared to say, Marconi?*

MT
Well, that particular one yes. How they treated those people I was glad to get out. I got this job then got his job at to that was okay, that was fine. But the sales of bricks started to decline at the time, and so I was still looking for other jobs.

**Note**
**Mel went on to describe his career from Butterley Brick to working for Urschel International Ltd. Roger asked the following question based on Mel's work.**

RK
*Obviously, you were building your skills up, but what would you ascribe to your experiences a working in the mining industry that allowed you to do those things? Were the qualities and the skills that you got from being in the mining industry?*

MT
Meeting people and talking to them. Getting information from them and realising something was right or whether it was wrong,

RK
*But there's the technical side and then there's the personal side. You've focused straight away on the personal side. Are you saying that when you were working in the mining industry, you were building up that capacity to communicate well with people in the workplace?*

MT
Yes, you were able to see what people were doing and to advise on how they could improve it.

RK
*But that could be quite threatening for some people, couldn't it?*

MT
You had to do it in a certain way. You couldn't go in and say, 'That's Wrong', you might use a suggestion rather than a direct instruction.

RK
*So, it helped you develop man-management skills? Also process management?*

MT
Yes, for example. I used a piece of string to map out the process by which an individual would undertake a job when moving in his workspace. I would then suggest a slightly different way and measure the difference in distance travelled and time taken. He could see then that there was a more efficient way.

RK
*Final question. The miners I have spoken to have each said they would go back tomorrow to working at the pit, is that what you would say? Was that the best job you ever did?*

MT
Yes, the camaraderie was there, as well as at Urschel. When I first came to Newbold, we experienced this. If you needed a hand, they would help you out.

You had to get on down a pit because the person next to you may well save your life. It was a very dangerous job. I was down there one day leaning against an archway, it was solid. I was watching out for the machine that was cutting the roadway and moving out of the way when it came past. I was talking to the young man in charge and told him I would come back tomorrow. I didn't get there the next day, but I was told that on that shift this young official had asked everyone to move back as he examined this seam and there was a roof fall, and it killed him. I had been standing in that exact same position twelve hours earlier.

You had to get on with people, even if you didn't like them, because they might be saving your life. They relied on each other.