

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Barbara McElroy, The Story of a Suffolk Bevin Boy

Barbara McElroy gave an excellent talk to the August meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall about her father's experiences working in a coal mine as a Bevin Boy between 1944 and 1948. As a child, Barbara noticed black marks on her father's back caused by coal dust. Over time he has become increasingly willing to talk about the period when he worked in a coal mine. He is now 93.

Les Raymond was born and brought up in a small village near Sudbury which he rarely travelled far from. He left school at 14 with quite a limited education and went to work on a poultry farm. He was a strong, active young man who joined the army cadets. In 1944 he passed his conscription medical and expected to be allocated to an army unit. To his astonishment and dismay, he was sent to work in a coal mine. Early in World War II the government had miscalculated the demand for coal and had allowed coal miners to enlist in the army or undertake other forms of war work. By 1943 there was a shortage of 80,000 miners. The Minister of Labour, Ernest Bevin, was responsible for a scheme to divert conscripts from the armed forces into working as coalminers. There 48,000 'Bevin Boys' between 1943 and 1948. Les Raymond was one of 21,800 young men who were chosen by ballot from the conscripts who came from all social classes. The other Bevin Boys were volunteers, with only 41 being conscientious objectors. Refusal to work in the mines led to indefinite imprisonment.

Les undertook four weeks of training in the technical language, safety and physical fitness, before a further two weeks of training underground. He was sent to work in Glapwell mine in Derbyshire. There was little care taken of Bevin Boys who were leaving home for the first time at the age of 18 but Les was fortunate to given a place at a miners' hostel at Mansfield. Conditions were very basic in the Nissen huts as there was little space for more than a bed and a lack of privacy. They were very cold in winter but there were benefits. The hostel encampment had showers and flushing toilets which were amenities that many of the Bevin Boys were unused to. The food was good, and there was a medical centre. The Bevin Boys had to pay for their lodgings and laundry, and they had to join the miners' union. They were very lowly paid and so had little money left over after these expenses. However, comradeship was strong between the boys. Les was woken up at 4am and caught a bus to work at 5am for the 6am start of an eight hour shift. Conditions in the mine were dirty, hot and dangerous. There was no sanitation, and rats and mice were everywhere. There were constant fears of the roof caving in or explosions caused by gas.

The Bevin Boys had been conscripted to work in the mines but were not recognised as national servicemen. They were paid much less than soldiers and regarded as still being civilians. On the rare occasions that they were given leave to travel home, they were not allowed to use the NAAFI and they were regarded by some people as cowards as they were not in uniform. They were spat at and given white feathers even though they were doing vital war work. This left the Bevin Boys feeling resentful. At the end of the war, Les was not released from the mine. He remained a miner until 1948. By then, the mines had been nationalised and this led to better pay, and greater concern for safety and working conditions. As former miners returned home from military service, the Bevin Boys were slowly released. They were not given a demobilisation payment or any recognition of their valuable service. Unlike soldiers, their former jobs were not held open for them. Les was unemployed when demobilised.

In 1989 the National Bevin Boys Association was founded, initially to organise social reunions, but it became a pressure group which challenged the lack of recognition of the Bevin Boys. In 2007 a badge was given to veterans, but only those still alive. In 2013 a memorial was erected through private subscriptions at the National Arboretum but there were never pensions or support for those injured or killed in the mines.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 25 September when a short AGM will be followed by Brenda Willison with *Tales of a Town Crier*. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

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