

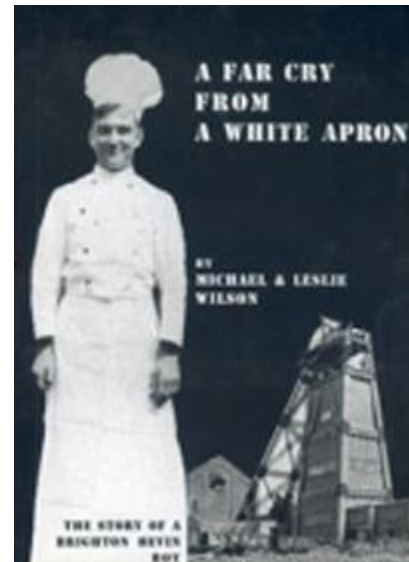
# 20th Century Sparks!

## World War Two

### Who were the Bevin Boys?

Men and women were conscripted to help support the War effort. Men were generally sent into the army as soldiers, while women were put to work in the vacant male jobs, such as welding and agriculture.

On this page extracts from Michael and Leslie Wilson's memoir 'A Far Cry from a White Apron- The Story of a Brighton Bevin Boy' tells the story of how conscription took them from a life of working in Sainsbury's in Brighton, into helping the war effort, not as soldiers overseas, but as a boy miners down the coal pits up in Coventry.



### The call-up

The day arrived when I received my call-up papers to join the armed forces. I had a medical in August or September of 1943. It was held in the Odd Fellows Hall in Queens Road, a building that has since been demolished to make way for the Eagle Star building. I passed the medical as did many other people, which is surprising when you think that we were brought up in the days of the depression during the 1920s and 30s, as food was scarce and jobs were almost impossible to come by. People just did not have any money.

There were nearly three million people on the dole in those days and there was not the amount of people as are in the country today.

### Conscription lottery

Then, at the beginning of December 1943, the government had a tombola to decide which of those people who had been called up for military service were to go down the mines instead.

The reason for this new ruling was that Ernest Bevin had allowed many coal miners to leave the pits to go into the armed forces, even though coal was the main source of power in the country. The government had been so keen to build up the fighting services that they had not spared a thought about its effects on the coal mines, and so now there was a shortage of men working down the pits and consequently a shortage of coal.



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### **Who were the Bevin Boys? - continued**

Everyone who was called up had been given a card with a number on it: this was your call-up number. They put the numbers from 0 to 9 in a hat and decided to draw out two numbers at random. The two numbers drawn were by coincidence, 0 and 9, and anyone whose number ended with these was conscripted into the mines. My number ended in 9 and so I was being sent down the mines. I had no other option than to go to prison. You either went down the mines or went to prison: it was as simple as that. That was what it meant to be a Bevin Boy.

After that first month where two numbers were drawn, only one number was picked out for most of each month's successive call up. Over 20,000 people were drafted into the mines like that. The aim was to ensure a fair system of selection whereby anybody could be enlisted and sent down the mines: rich or poor, lord or peasant.

Looking back, and now having a greater knowledge of how things work and what things were like in England, I have my doubts as to whether all those who were called and fit enough to do this work, did actually go down the mines.

### **Arriving in Coventry**

I duly arrived at the Labour Exchange in Coventry . It was in the main road of the town and near the station so it was not too difficult to find. I arrived there at the stated time and quite suddenly there were about one hundred of us Bevin Boys gathered outside the building. The press was there in full and started to question us, for there had been considerable coverage about our arrival and a lot of hoo-ha about the scheme in general. The government had no idea at the time of the trouble it was going to cause. It was a difficult situation that nearly brought the scheme to a halt. Many people did not think it was right that we should be sent coal mining, which was an industry completely different to anything we had ever known. It was not like going into the army, navy or the air force.

I had worked in Sainsbury's most of my life and all of my working clothes were white shirts with stiff collars, so when I arrived at Coventry I was dressed as I would have been when going to work in the usual way. I was now committed to a completely alien job. I felt sure that I would be kitted out with protective clothing sometime in the near future, ready for the task that lay ahead. After all, all the other services are fully kitted out and distinguishable from the general public.

### **Sainsbury's pays off**

It was wartime and times were hard, you could not get anything very easily. Things were difficult for us all, but I had learnt something while I was in the Air Training Corps in 1941, which was to come in very handy now.



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### **Who were the Bevin Boys? - continued**

We had gone to camp in Arundel and went to Ford Aerodrome, which at the time was flying Bostons and a few fighters. Now all of these kids, (I was fifteen at the time) descended upon the aerodrome canteen, where we had our meals. So of course you can imagine, the canteen staff complained. The sergeant in charge shouted for volunteers, 'you, you and you!' I was one of the 'yous'. The sergeant asked, 'Well, what can you do?' I replied, 'Well I can cut that bacon up and I'll cut your bread up.' The sergeant looked at me as though I was boasting. 'Do you know how?' he asked. 'I should do, this is the work I do at Sainsbury's.' 'Are you sure?' He still sounded dubious but led me to a large side of bacon and while he watched, I cut as I had been taught. I fitted the bacon machine up and started to slice the bacon into rashers. 'Well you certainly know what you're about.' He left me to cut the bacon and then the bread. You did not have cut bread in those days. When he returned he said I was very handy, 'We could do with you in here every day.' I could tell that I was on to a good thing so I let him know that this suited me. As he started to leave he said, 'Remember, you don't eat with the rest, you eat with us, here, out the back.' I found out very early in life that the place to be if you want plenty to eat, is where the food is.

### **Comradeship**

The locals around Coventry treated us very well. I suppose we were celebrities to them. They were aware that we did not have a great deal of money, and were always prepared to buy us a beer when they found out that we were Bevin Boys. They knew we had little idea what life down the mine could be like. The men in the car industry and other big companies were earning good money compared to us and they were never tight. People generally did try to help each other whenever it was possible. This wartime comradeship was mainly due to us all fighting a common cause and it was nationwide. The battle lines were clearly drawn. At one time the Mayoress of Coventry came to the doss-house with a few entertainers, and Doug and I did some entertaining ourselves. We sang, 'If I had my way,' and for this we were given the princely reward of some bacon and eggs, which to us was as good as a gold mine.

### **New Experiences, New People**

Meeting new people and learning all about the different trades proved very bewildering at first. There are two main types of people in the mine, haulage and colliers, the colliers being the more experienced. Mr Lewis was a collier. There were also electricians, railmen, ropemen and many others. They all had their own place to make the mine run smoothly. Some worked above ground, others below, and of course there was the office staff. Unlike most offices some of these were located at the bottom of the shaft. Maybe with my white shirts I would secure an office job, but no such luck came my way.

Being from the south and the first Bevin Boy they ever had, I was to be shown around the mine and got to see areas out of bounds to many. They were proud of their place of work and of being a miner. 'We go down at 8 o'clock ,' Mr. Garston informed me, and a strange feeling rippled through my body as I had learnt that the shaft was about half-a-mile deep. News travels fast around the grapevine of the mine.



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### **Who were the Bevin Boys? - continued**

Most of the face workers had started their shift and when we arrived at the pithead ready for the descent into the bowels of the earth, Mr. Garston and I were the only two going down. Many others were ready to go but were holding back. In no way were they going down with us. I wondered why as I heard them saying, 'We are not going down with him, for all the tea in China .' The fear within me increased. They all knew what I was in for.

#### **Safety and solidarity down the mines**

I cannot recall how long this took, but by now the mine was in full swing. They had started to wind coal. This would mean that the cage was going at full speed. The mine once achieved seventy-six windings an hour, so you can guess how fast the cage was going up and down the shaft. I had noticed a draught on my back and queried this with Mr. Garston. He seemed pleased with a question like this. 'You can always tell which way the exit is by that draught,' he said seriously. The need to find the way out in the event of the light failing was always on people's minds and this was the sort of information everyone needed to know. 'The reason is,' he continued, 'that there are two shafts, one the air goes down, and one the air comes up. The latter one has a series of doors to prevent a back flow, so the air only goes one way round the pit. Always face the draught to find the exit, son.' Fear rippled through me at the thought of being trapped down there and this piece of information remained with me always. Solidarity was important in all things especially where safety was concerned and the need to escape presented itself.

#### **Learning the ropes**

The different trades in the mine never ceased to amaze me. With the massive reduction in coal mines, I now wonder where all of these skills have vanished to. It was one man's job to check the ropes which lowered the cage that transported the men up and down. He would stand above the winding gear with a hand around the rope. The cage would be lowered slowly for him to assess the wear and tear on this important piece of equipment. When this was done the cage would come up and another checked. This sort of job was done at night.

When a new rope was needed to go round the pit (bearing in mind that it was a colossal length), it would be brought down and laid around the pit ready for the splicers to come in and complete the work. It meant that all the trucks had to be moved so that they could carry this out. Furthermore the working of the mine was not to be disrupted if at all possible.

The air flow down the mine was also constantly checked because if the fans stopped completely you had about twenty minutes to get out. The particular man who did this job had an instrument with a small fan in it. As this rotated it gave him a reading. He knew the safety levels very well and since he was already down the pit he would also be in trouble, as well as the other miners.