

Just a few of the memories of Tom Ratcliffe, Grandson of Ratcliffe's Quarry owner also called Tom who was killed in 1924 after a explosives accident in the quarry. His father was also named Tom ran away at 16 to join the army lying about his age and saying he was 18. His brother Roland Ratcliffe joined the Welsh Guards and was killed at just 19 during world war 1. When the army found out that his father had lied they contacted his parents who told them to send him home but he refused so the army put him in the Royal Artillery training horses and then he ended up working in a Belgium Quarry.

We lived at 3 Hoyle Street Lee Mill, my grandpa Tom had built all the houses in that area ( so im told ) my Uncles Bob, Fred & Norman all lived in them. We had a air raid shelter built under the garden opposite the front door, and my uncle Norman had one built under the house as you entered the back door. You had to lift a mat, a steel cover and go down the steps.

My early days at Lee Mill Quarries.

Walking with my father we went up the incline to "up top". He used to go early to make sure the fires for the steam cranes were ready when the men arrived to start work. I would light the boiler using paper and kindling wood, anthracite all doused in pink gasoline. Dad would go off to chase the men up. Once the steam was up I would open the door the operator at this time was a Irish man. We used to make breakfast by putting white lard on a shovel, sausages, bacon and egg with hand carved toast 1" thick. One of my favourites was to make soldiers and dunk them in Billy can. Other times I would go off in a lorry, they had a long wooden bench with a cushion to sit on which lifted up and had tools etc inside. You could always see the fly wheel through the floor board. The transmission shaft would bounce up and down and knock holes in the boards. I guess this was due to the roughness of the quarry roads. I think the lorries were Leyland all yellow. On cold morning we used to light a fire under the engine, 1 man would swing the handle and 2 on a rope when it kicked back you knew about it, and then out would belch a big cloud of black smoke. If it snowed hard the siren would sound and then lorries and Irish men would move it off the main road into a lorry and then we would tip it into the river Irwell at the bottom of Blackwood near the conservative club.

As I grew bigger I was allowed to start the con crusher, the stone tipped in the shoot at the top of the cliff it was broken down into different grades then the lorry would drive under the various outlet shoots at the bottom. I learned later that the starter was a star delta starter. You pulled the handle down and the motor started on a 440v power as the speed increased you pushed the handle up and it reverted to 220v but if you did not time it correctly the handle flew back down. So on learning this skill I would arrive home with lumps all over pr-warmed by dad " if you tell your mum what happened, you will not be allowed to work the starter". I used to have a shot with the air drills, making holes for the black powder. The Irish men would sink the hole to start adding longer bits and then I would take over. If the hammer was hitting 300 vibrations /min I was hanging on doing about 220/min. Slowly the hammer would start to turn and take me with it. As I would not let go of the trigger, they would shut of the air and set me up again. I would sit down for lunch of cheese, raw onion and bread sharing it. On cold or wet days they would bring stew or soups, warming it in the stove in the cabin. After the holes had been drilled dad would go round and fill them with black powder and tamp it down then add a length of cordite and the fuse. After all this was set up he would have a glowing thick hemp rope to light the fuses. He would swing this so it glowed as he touched off the fuses. Everybody had to go around the corner out of the way. Then I would count the blasts, the shots were usually fired before a break time because by the time you came back the dust had settled. Most of the lorries in the quarry had busted windows and cabs. My dad would travel to Tipperary to shoot and bring men back to work At weekends

dad would play the organ at Wesley Place and afterwards we would go up to check on any vandalism or we would go off to uncle Norman's. One incident I remember was when two German prisoners of war were loading a horse and cart with stone they put some much in the horse lifted of the ground. This happened just a little further up the street than Dr Brooks surgery which I think was across the road from Jack Spencer's mum and dads drapery shop about 100 yards from Toll Bar.

My pals when I was young were John and Mary Litten ( twins) who's mum had a hairdressers near the Conservative Club. John and Peter Cook, Alan Lord. Donald Fothergill and Terrence Bladzes. We used to go and get the damaged bake goods as they came out of the oven ( it put me of parkin). Derek Grundy who lived in the grocery shop just below the Royal Oak, he used to nick fags from his dads shop, Craven A , Woodbines, Players etc. The gang would go up to his dads greenhouse and light the stove if cold. If he had nicked a twenty pack we would smike them all quite often being sick.

We used to store Canadian timber at the quarry and one day John Cook was sat in a old car jacked up outside the quarry offices. John was in the driving seat and we were pretending to go to Blackpool. John was throwing matches on the roof, and I said do not do that John the roof will catch fire. Which it did. We ran over the Irwell to the houses just down from the chippy and then set off back with water, all the time we could hear the bell of the fire engine approaching. We dropped the water and disappeared fast.