

FROM LEAD INTO GOLD THE ALCHEMIST'S DREAM

Bert Webster, transcribed by Alan Mutter.

In 1988, the Museum was researching the watery fate of Millclose Mine, preparatory to the publication of a book which commemorated the half-century since the closure of the mine (Willies, Gregory and Parker 1989). Many of those who worked at Millclose told of the fascinating story of their life and labours, not only at the mine, but elsewhere. One such narrator was Bert Webster who worked on the dressing floor and subsequently travelled to distant parts of the world. Truly a case of lead transformed into gold, as you will see when you read on.

During the dark evenings of the winter of 1994 I, Bert Webster, thought that I would try to recollect some of the things that had occurred during my lifetime, and to amuse myself, I thought I would jot them down as follows.

I was born, on the 28th of February 1909, in the small village of Wensley in Derbyshire. I was the third son of a family of five, four boys and one girl. I left school at the early age of 13 years and secured work in Matlock at a newsagent and tobacconist - also hairdresser - called A.S. Dakin, and earned the princely sum of 5/- a week (or, if you wish to translate that into new money, 25p), plus dinner and tea provided. I recall the meals were very good. I started at 8.00 am and finished at 7.30pm when the shop closed and then walked or cycled the three miles back to Wensley

After about two years I left to start work in a butcher's shop as an errand boy for a weekly wage of 10/-(50p). The hours were shorter except that on Thursday afternoons, half day closing, I had to scrub out the shop. Still, at 10/- a week I suppose I improved my lot.

After two years, I heard that there were opportunities at the local lead mine, Millclose, not far from the village of Wensley. So in 1928 I started out on a career which would take me to distant corners of the world, undreamt of by a young Wensley lad.

The starting wage was 3/6d a day (18p) and this was improved to 5/- a day when I was loading lead ore into wagons. Later I was moved to the lead ore jigs on the plant at 8/2 (41p) a day of eight-hour shifts. In those days that was considered to be a good wage.

However, it wasn't all work and no play. I was persuaded to join and play for Brassington football club and it was there that I met my dear wife, Paddy (Frances Dakin) who was born in Brassington. We were married in Brassington Church in the autumn of 1933, still on the wage of 8/2 a day, and took up residence in a cottage in Wensley. An old wedding custom was revived as we started off in the car from the church to the reception. The villagers stretched a rope across the road and we could not pass until we had paid a forfeit. I think that this was the last time that it was done, as I have not heard of it since, and it was considered an honour to be 'roped'

We lived in Wensley for six years and it was from there that I went to West Africa to take up an appointment on a gold mine. What an upheaval, and this is how it happened.

During the the last three years that I had worked on the new plant installed by Consolidated Goldfields at Millclose, I gained much valuable experience in ore dressing. A man who had previously worked on the gold mines in West Africa, Mr. Bruhl, came on the plant as foreman (he eventually went to the Witwatersrand as a

lecturer and he told me of the opportunities and the financial benefits that existed overseas. A ball mill and flotation plant had been assembled for the mine abroad and I was asked if I would like to be an operator on the plant. Eventually I was convinced and, after discussions with my wife, decided to enquire further into the matter. And so to London, to Number 10, Old Jury, for an interview that altered the whole course of my life.

The directors of the West African mine were also the same directors as Millclose, Consolidated Goldfields. During my interview I was questioned about the plant that I worked on at Millclose. It turned out that the director who asked the questions had designed the plant, so I suppose my answers must have satisfied him, for I passed the interview. I also passed the medical examination and returned home to Wensley with some trepidation.

Two days later a letter arrived, offering me a post on their gold mine in West Africa and stating that my wife would be able to join me later. A further two days elapsed before I plucked up courage to sign the contract which offered me a salary of £42-10s a month! After much discussion, Paddy and I decided that I would go for two years and that we would buy a small business, preferably with a sub-post office attached. So much for these speculations - we finally finished up with nearly 25 years working and living in West Africa.

The money was far, far more than I had ever earned, but the parting from my wife was terrible. I would not like to go through that again and neither would Paddy.

In June 1939, I travelled to Liverpool where the company had reserved a room at the Exchange Hotel (400 bedrooms!) and was I scared, up from the country alright! However, at dinner and breakfast, to my relief several more men were going to the same company and we got on well together. Indeed, there were two from my area, Roy Gillet, from Wensley, a good footballer, and Bill Stringer from Darley Dale.

We embarked on the M.V. *Accra*, passenger liner to West Africa, and I still recall leaning over the rails and thinking, as the tugs pulled us clear of the quayside, that I could just about jump the slowly widening gap between ship and shore, until it was too late and I was committed to a land that I had heard about but never seen. These days everyone has been to most places that one can mention, but those early days were different.

The voyage took almost two weeks and although I did suffer from seasickness at first, once I had gained my sea legs I thoroughly enjoyed the voyage and I have since learned how to combat this unwelcome guest.

We called at such ports as Las Palmas, where we stood alongside

the German battleship *Gneisnau* - she looked very powerful! We went ashore and visited the cathedral, going up its rickety lift and viewing the city. All very exciting for a village lad. Then onwards to Madeira where we had a ride round the city on a Ghary cart and horse. Next to Dakar in French territory, and then to Freetown where we saw the liner *Queen Mary* anchored in the harbour, surrounded by 'bum boats' and natives diving for money thrown into the water by the passengers. We went ashore there also.

The last port for many of us was Takoradi in the Gold Coast, although the ship went on further to Accra and Lagos before the return journey to England. Takoradi port was a hive of industry. We disembarked and were soon through customs. The train was in the sidings next to the customs shed and after a short delay we started off, very slowly according to our standards. After innumerable stops we arrived at Dunkwa station where we were met by a lorry and a couple of cars. Dunkwa station I came to know quite well during my journeys to and from Africa.

We alighted in blazing sunshine and were packed into the cars, which, having stood in the heat for some time, were like ovens. We were thankful to set off and to create a slight breeze, even if it was a warm one.

The journey was 63 miles over laterite (red soil) roads apart from about a mile of tarmac road outside Dunkwa. It was soon dark and what a welcome sight to see the lights of Bibiani in the far distance. The liaison officer welcomed us with cool drinks in his bungalow and how grateful we were after a dusty and jading journey when we passed through many African roadside villages where sugarcane, corncocks, paw paw trees, grapefruit, mangoes, plantain, bananas, yam, cassava and many other exotic fruits and crops were pointed out by one of the old hands returning from leave. We were exclaiming at it all as each new item was pointed out. I realise now how lucky I was to be allowed to see all these things, mummies carrying loads of wood that it would take two men to lift on to her head. But I digress. We had a good meal, our bungalows were allocated, cooks and steward boys hired and then to bed. The incessant noise of crickets and other night life kept me awake at first, but finally I got to sleep under the mosquito-proof netting over my bed.

Next morning we saw the manager and the respective heads of departments. After that I went down with the cook and the steward boy to United African Company stores for food and general merchandise, the cook and steward boy carrying the loads back on their heads. UAC was down in the African village, about half a mile away. Then lunch and tea and a walk to the the European club to meet other employees of the mine company, all most friendly. My 'recruiter' Bruhl at Millclose had certainly put me in the picture. Laundry, lighting, water and bungalow were all at the company's expense and were greatly appreciated by the staff, as government officials had to pay for these services themselves. And what an added bonus to wake up to warm sunshine!

Next day I reported for work. The mill was much bigger than where I had worked before, but operated on the same principles, so I soon familiarised myself with the the circuit. Most people went to work at 7am and generally finished at 4.30pm. That applied to the surface workers. Some of the underground staff worked odd hours.

There were plenty of sports; cricket, tennis, golf, a swimming pool and the usual indoor games. These suited me admirably and I enjoyed them and I was fortunate to play in many of the sporting fixtures, thus able to visit many of those places in what was then known as The Gold Coast. Names like Kumasi, Takoradi, Sekondi, Obuasi, Tarkwa, Aboso, Nsuta, Abontiakoon, and Marlu became as familiar to me as Brassington, Winster, Matlock etc. On one occasion, Horace Lindrum, the world champion at billiards came to Bibiani as part of his world tour. I was honoured to be chosen

to play against him. Of course, I did not win, but what a highlight for me, especially when he complimented me on my play.

I was also chosen to play in the colony trials for the 'Possibles' versus 'Probables' but despite a reasonable performance, I did not quite make the colony side, though I played in the Gold Coast Mines team on numerous occasions. Sport was always a good way to make friends and when Paddy joined me - after the war - we moved into married quarters overlooking the golf course, and if we were not playing, we sat on the patio watching the other golfers going round the course. So you see, it wasn't all work and no play being on the gold mine. Indeed, it was idyllic. Happy days which I fear we did not appreciate as much as we should have done. Now they are so far away, they seem so much more desirable!

Back to work! I was due for leave on December 18th. in 1940. The ship was full of Yuletide spirit and I spent Christmas Day on board ship. It was not thought that the war would be of long duration. How wrong we were. I returned to the Gold Coast at the end of my leave and my next tour of duty extended to almost two years, owing to the difficulty of getting a passage homeward bound. At last we left Africa and sailed for America on our own, no escort, just us, going to pick up a convoy bound for England. Able passengers were asked to help stand watch, and I, among others did so. I recall the long cold hours in the darkness, fortified by hot cocoa at intervals.

Eventually we reached Staten Island, New York and there I had my first glimpse of the French ship 'Normandie'. She looked enormous. But that wasn't the end of Staten Island. After a couple of weeks we started off with the convoy, only to break down on one engine after some hours and we returned to Staten Island, once again seeing the Statue of Liberty. Another wait of two weeks and off we went to join another convoy. I understand that the original convoy suffered many losses from attacks by U-boats.

During our enforced stay in Staten Island we were allowed ashore after passing through immigration, interrogation, and having our fingerprints taken. We used to go by ferry to New York frequently and I used to visit familiar places such as 5th Avenue, Times Square, 42nd Street. On one occasion I went up the Empire State Building and bought post cards of views of the city. Along with others I wrote my name and Paddy's in a book in the highest room, since closed as later a man threw himself from the top, all of 1250 feet! We also visited shows whilst waiting for repairs to be carried out to the ship's engines. Sonja Henjje, the famous ice skater, was among the many stars that we saw during our enforced stay.

We left America and joined another convoy, bound for Liverpool by way of Newfoundland, Iceland and Northern Scotland, a journey all told of six weeks and five days in mountainous seas, then ice floes where seals were basking. It was an unforgettable voyage. I had sent Paddy a cablegram from New York, Western Union. However, Paddy had no idea where I was until a taxi from Matlock brought me home and what a welcome I had from Paddy and Mother, they were delighted to see me, as I was to see them.

After meeting relatives and friends it was time to be off again to the Gold Mines of West Africa, departing from King George V dock in Glasgow. I met a fellow employee and we spent the night in the Adelphi Hotel, occupying the Bridal Suite! Fortunately the honeymoon couple were away for a day or two.

We boarded the M.V. *California* next day and sailed down the Clyde out into the Atlantic. Four days out we were spotted by a plane and at 8am on the 11th of July we were bombed by German planes. The ship was sinking so we were ordered to abandon ship. I rushed to the starboard side lifeboat but was ordered away by an armed guard, as the boat was full. I wandered round the deck and with the help of another chap, tried to put a raft overboard, but could not move it as it was too heavy for us.

The guns from the escort ships and the destroyers were all firing at the attacking planes, as they circled round the convoy, but the shells seemed to explode too far below the planes. Amidst the action and the confusion, at last we saw a ladder down the ship's side and decided to go down it and drop into the sea, relying on our lifejackets and hoping that we would be picked up soon.

As we descended, a boat came round the side of the ship and we managed to get into it. What a long way down the side of the ship to the sea! Others joined us in the boat then we pulled away to avoid being sucked down into the vortex as the *California* was going down. I saw a lifeboat being lowered further along the ship's side but sadly one rope stopped and the other carried on. The occupants were tipped into the sea. We were too far away to help.

Whilst all this was happening, another ship was set on fire, then an ammunition ship was blown up, ammunition going up like Bonfire Night, only much worse. A sad sight, such a sad sight. We were thankful to be picked up by the destroyer *Douglas*. We climbed up the 'pig-nets' lowered over the side. I well remember someone pulling me over the side by the scruff of the neck and dumping me on the iron deck along with other survivors..

There we remained until landed at Casablanca four days later.. The destroyer had been at sea for a long time and food stocks were low. We were thankful for what they gave us, my first meal being a ship's biscuit and treacle. Hunger makes you appreciate anything.

Casablanca harbour had its share of sunken ships, with funnels and superstructures showing forlorn in the water of the harbour where we landed, on our way to an American transit camp. There we spent the next two weeks in tents until we were taken aboard the M.V. *Nehellis*, bound for West Africa and elsewhere. Even this voyage was eventful as we were chased by U-boats for part of the time.

Thus we arrived at Takoradi in American uniforms, having been kitted out in Casablanca. Our original clothes and goods were lost during the eventful voyage, but very many people had lost their lives in the enemy attacks. I recall that the English-speaking German based 'Lord Haw Haw' gloated over the disasters on the wireless (as we called the radio in those days). I have travelled back and forth many times, but thankfully never had such momentous occasions as this particular voyage. I often think how lucky I was to survive when so many of my companions perished.

The war finished and after this unplanned delay, Paddy joined me in West Africa, where we had many happy years. It was delightful to show Paddy all the places that I had visited in the previous years, especially Las Palmas, Madeira, Dakar and Freetown. Indeed, at Dakar we were caught in a violent sandstorm and had to take shelter in a nearby building until it was all over. To be in a sand storm is to remember it for ever!

In my early days I was quite athletic and played most of the sports available. In consequence I was chosen for various teams and travelled around the Gold Coast quite a bit. Paddy enjoyed these occasions. During a visit to one of the coastal towns, we saw a prison where the slaves had been kept before being shipped to America.

Mind you, I worked hard, an eight-hour day, often in arduous conditions. I managed to progress in my work and for the last twelve years was in charge of the extractor house and all that was entailed in the process of producing gold bars from the gold concentrates. Gold melts at 1064°C and together with the tropical climate it was somewhat warm!

I was asked to go to Ashanti Gold Mines in Obuasi to learn the system of amalgamation of gold using mercury. The journey there

in my brand new Hillman car - £425 - was not undertaken without incident on account of the 130 mile dog-leg journey through the bush, on a road that produced its fair share of tyre blow-outs. I spent four days there, in the smelting rooms, making copious notes and digesting the advice given to me. Back in Bibiani we tried the new process and sent the results to Obuasi for comparison. Good news - the results were most favourable. We continued with this method with ever more satisfactory results. Even our own assayer made favourable comments!

Leaving work for a moment, it was indeed a pleasure to leave work. Our bungalow was well situated and had a large garden with a grapefruit tree in the centre. We exchanged the fruit for avocado pears from a colleague's garden. There were also cashew nuts, bananas, ground nuts, an abundance of exotic flowers, shrubs and trees, including three orchid trees, two mauve, one white, plus canna lilies, a moon flower bush, hibiscus, a jacaranda, all surrounded by a beautiful bougainvillea hedge.

As always in tropical countries, there were experiences different from home. Paddy was carrying some rose cuttings from one of the outside buildings. The steward shouted to her to drop the cuttings and out popped a poisonous snake which flashed away. We used to have quite a few snakes shedding their skins on the rough bark of the acacia trees.

Near where we lived was a path that led up into the hills to the villages some miles away. Paddy was sitting on the verandah when she saw a group of natives coming down with a body strapped to a long pole. They dropped the pole and the body, had a heated altercation which developed into a fight, then picked up the pole and the body, and departed to the cemetery at the nearby native village. No lack of excitement!

Regarding cemeteries, the 'White Man's Grave' accounted for a number of my friends and colleagues whilst I was out there. My best friend died of typhoid fever. Malaria, blackwater fever and other killer diseases were rife. I myself had malaria twice, but thankfully have not suffered since. Paddy had sandfly fever but recovered after treatment. When the district was ravished by Asian flu, there were so many struck down. All of the ladies assisted in the hospital, Sir Edward Spears, one of the directors of the company, thanked them all for their services. The natives were given tablets to help them get better, but they secreted them and later tried to sell them in the villages - the Artful Dodger had nothing on these boys.

During expansion of the works, we had about a hundred men working there, including office staff, miners, engineers, electricians, mill staff, stores - all white, but only sixteen ladies. There were between four and five hundred Africans working on the property. The ladies were invited to go underground and to mark the occasion, each were given a piece of gold ore, which Paddy still has.

The Bishop of Accra came to Bibiani to open a new church at Linesu, ten miles into the 'bush'. All the ladies were invited and off they went under the leadership of the manager's wife and with an escort. Later we were all invited to a tribal dance in honour of the directors, Sir Edward Spears and Lord Luke and their wives. How we admired the expertise of both the male and female dancers.

Another interesting occasion was the Durbar held on the cricket field. Many high-ranking chiefs were there with their colourful umbrellas held over them. The ladies were asked to assist in making the refreshments, Paddy's quota being 200 scones! More thanks from Sir Edward. By the way, this was the cricket ground where Paddy was enrolled as the scorer. She became really competent and lots of the chaps on both sides could be seen enquiring what their bowling figures were.

In 1956 we had a strike at the mine. Some Labour people came

from Britain and showed the Africans how to organise a union, hence the strike. Everything was at a standstill. Miners went underground to keep the pumps going. Powerhouse men kept the power going for the pumps and lights. The mill staff went into the bush to load timber for use in the powerhouse. What a hot dirty job it was, using muscles we forgot we had.

During that time there was much unrest in Accra. A lot of looting and pilfering took place and we kept as near the mine as possible to avoid antagonising anyone. Much good that would have been if the Africans had decided to attack us. Fortunately they didn't, and after long discussions, they decided to return to work, with a band and plenty of noise. Once again we were all on friendly terms. Whatever they got out of the strike, the company gave us a bonus and I invested in a cine-camera.

The camera came in handy to record the Independence Day celebrations when The Gold Coast became Ghana under President Nkrumah. All kinds of people led by their chiefs and followers marched in procession - teachers of schools and the children, everybody seemed to take part, led by a band and the police. In the evening, the Europeans were invited down to the African club to a dance. We enjoyed this memorable day.

Dances were big social occasions for us. Sometimes after a sporting fixture we would stop on for the dance. However, we had a few problems not usually met with in Europe. After playing at Kumasi, we stayed late, dancing in the European club. On the journey back to Bibiani we encountered a tree across the road. We got out of the car, dead of night in the bush, and cut off as many branches as we could, using a machete, attached a rope to the remains of the tree and pulled it away with the car, sufficient to make room to continue our journey. The ladies in their dance frocks helped. I should think that that was the end of those frocks!

I dare say you've been to the zoo and bought peanuts etc. to feed the animals. Once, on a visit to Kumasi we went to visit a crocodile pit where we were invited to buy live chickens and hens to throw down to the crocodiles. We declined and departed. In the zoo at Kumasi, Paddy allowed a boa-constrictor to be placed round her neck - work for the cine-camera. I suppose the snake had been previously fed, nevertheless, not for me, thank you. Times change and what is acceptable in one era is forbidden in another. Ivory items used to be plentiful out there and we bought many intricately carved specimens which have since become valuable. Some of the ivory craftsmanship was wonderful.

All things come to an end. When we finally retired from Bibiani, we hadn't decided where we would like to live. Las Palmas in the Canary Islands had its attractions but the political situation didn't appear to be all that stable at that time, so we bought a house in Allestree in Derbyshire. We decided on a holiday in Italy and marvelled at the amazing sights in Venice, Florence and Rome, not forgetting Capri (the older readers will recall that Gracie Fields had a bungalow there) Naples, Vesuvius and Pompeii. Such wonderful buildings and art galleries! What a difference from Africa, it was one of the best holidays we ever had.

However, Africa called again. I took up a tour of duty on another mine, Konongo in Ghana. This was my last visit to Africa. The mines were nationalised and I returned to Derbyshire to take up a post in the Technical College in Derby, where I remained until I finally retired.

The wheel had turned full cycle. We bought a house at Wensley, not far from the old Millclose Mine where my career started which had taken me across the world. Millclose was now closed down, some say drowned, but the best of the lead ore had been taken. The lead recovery company, H.J. Enthoven and Sons, Ltd, based in Rotherhithe, London now occupied the Millclose site, continuing the lead tradition which had started in the seventeenth century and was continued, a century later, by the Quakers.

The house in Wensley was encompassed by a three acre field and had a large garden, complete with orchards which supplied us with apples, plums, pears, raspberries, strawberries, gooseberries, currants, and vegetables that I myself set. Rarely did we have to buy anything of that nature. Also there was an abundance of blackberries in the woods nearby.

Bands of deer used to visit us in the winter-time and not always welcome as they would eat anything they saw. I have even seen them standing on their hind legs to reach up for the apples on the lower branches. We liked this lovely home with its views in four different directions, but age demanded that we moved to smaller premises.

Thus we came to a bungalow at Wirksworth, with a small garden, mostly lawn. There was a mining connection, though. The road had taken the name Yokecliff, which was the name of an old lead vein. Near the house was Middleton Mine which I visited with one of my neighbours. It was an education: the stone is very pure limestone and is used in the refining of sugar beet and for other specialised uses. We were told that more stone was extracted over the years than that removed from making the Channel Tunnel.

Our adventures weren't finished though. Paddy and I were coming from the library in Wirksworth to the car park, when a young chap came out of the nearby pub, jumped into his car, reversed furiously and knocked us both down. Both of us were sent flying and when I recovered, I asked him what the H... he was up to. He said he never saw us and the lout went back into the pub without a word of apology. We staggered down to the clinic and were treated by a doctor and nurses for cuts and abrasions. It was a great shock to us and the cuts and bruises took a long time to clear up. The lout was never prosecuted. Well, as usual we survived!

Now I am coming to the last highlight in a village lad's journey through life. In 1993 was the 60th. anniversary of our wedding, our diamond wedding anniversary. We have no family so we arranged to have a dinner at Willersley Castle, at Cromford, the grand house that Arkwright of textile fame built a couple of hundred years ago, but never occupied, now belonging to the Methodist Church. Ten of our oldest friends attended the dinner. It was lovely and everyone said how much they enjoyed it. The presents and bouquets of flowers from our friends and church members overwhelmed us. How does one repay such kindness? The crowning pleasure was a telegram of congratulations from Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth. This telegram is now framed and hangs proudly on our sitting-room wall.

My tale is done and both of us, my wife and I, are very lucky and well blessed. Psalm 67, the text at our wedding.

REFERENCE

Willies, Lynn, Gregory, Keith and Parker, Harry. 1989 *Millclose. The mine that drowned*. Scarthin Books, Cromford Derbyshire, and PDMHS Ltd.

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