Interview with SHONA DONALDSON

Q. Well, Mrs. Donaldson, you were brought up, in which part of the country?

A. Oh, well, originally we came from Campbelltown, and then in 1926, I

was a young woman by then, and my father came to work in Cobbinshaw,

South Cobbinshaw Farm, and there were still some families of the Old

Tarbrax mining area still living there and that is where I met John [my

husband] first.

Q. Now, that is John Lightbody?

A. That's right, and Tarbrax Oil Works, of course, had shut down by then,

and the families moved to West Calder, and much later......in 1940,

I had kept in touch with him off and on, for many years......and we

got married and came to live in West Calder. Well, he was working

at the West......somewhere about......West......no, it wasn't West

Mains......was coal, it was somewhere up there, and then he was

transferred to Burngrange, and it was supposed to be a great pit,

Burngrange, it was the cat's pyjamas you know, as far as safety and

everything else was concerned, and things......well, it was during

the war, and things were going quite well and everybody was quite

happy, and then on the 10th January 1947, there was this big explosion!

Fifteen men entombed there, it was really a terrible disaster for Burn...

for West Calder, and the district, and as I say, well, he went out on

the Friday on the backshift.

Q. What time would that be?

A. Oh, that would be what, maybe I think that they started about three,

and he would leave the house about two o'clock, on a Friday. Friday

night, when the sirens had gone, my children were young, and my oldest

daughter had just started the school, and the other one would be about

three, and I never thought anything about it! You know, I never sort

of thought it was the pit! And, he should have been home about 11

o'clock, and a neighbour and another friend came to the door, to say

that there had been an accident. The whole weekend I just sort of

lived in hope that......my brother-in-law and my father came through,

he was at Stow at that time, he was an old man, he came through and it

was a case of everybody going to the pithead, and there was no news..

and it was the Tuesday morning before they brought them out, and there

was that Rescue Brigade, you know, from Coatbridge, and everybody was

so kind, and so worried. And of course they were all gone at that time, but thankfully, I don't think that they would do much suffering.

Somebody said......well, of course, the death certificate was marked

carbon monoxide poisoning, and somebody said, you see, that they didn't

think that they would really suffer very much. When they did bring

them home, they were unmarked, they were so peaceful looking, and that

was one thing that we felt, well, at least they didn't suffer, you know!

But, there was all the trauma of that and the worry of inquiries and

men coming, there was Mr. Nellies, I think it was, was the Union man,

and Mr. Crichton and everybody......and all the ministers of every

denomination, everybody was so kind, but I think that it took an awful

long time before it just struck home what had really happened, you

know!

Q. And what age was John then?

A. He was forty one, when he died......I mean, we had only been married

six years too, it seemed such an awful tragedy, and yet there were

others...... there was......I don't know many men from Seafield, because

I think that Seafield must have been either shut down, and they

transferred the men, but there was fifteen men in all then, that were killed.

And I think that the Scottish Oils would get such a shock as well,

because it was supposed to be such a safe pit, but whether it was a

build up of gas or not, well......we don't know!

Q. So, there would be a Rescue Squad, go in and bring your husband out?

A. Aye......

Q. Along with the others?

A. Aye, they brought them out, I think that they were nearly all together

but there was one man a good bit away from the rest, and then they took

them over to Westwood, I think, before taking them home. They

weren't brought straight from the pit! They would be taken......aye, they

must have been taken over there and the undertaker sent for there,

because they brought them home after all that had been done.

Q. And what help did you get from the Scottish Oils?

A. Oh, the Scottish Oils were very good! They paid the funeral expenses,

they set up......now, I don't know whether it would be......we got

workmen's compensation, which was administered through the Sheriff Court, it wasn't a great deal of money but I suppose that it would be

all that was given at the time, and then this......

Q. Would you like to say......can you remember how......

A. Well, I got seven hundred pounds, four hundred pounds for myself and

three hundred pounds for the children, and that was administered

through the Sheriff Court, then, and it was well......when I married

again, mine......my......no, would I be right there......no, that would

go on, that would be paid out until the children were sixteen, it was

paid out on a quarterly......

Q. And how many children had you?

A. I had two daughters! One was five and she had just started the school,

and the other one was about three! Well, then the Scottish Oils set

up a fund, and we got about, what, I just don't remember the amount,

it was about thirty shillings a week for the widow and so much for the

children. After I married again, of course, mine was stopped, but the

children's went on, until they were sixteen! But, I suppose at the

time, it was quite a generous settlement, you know.

Q. Yes, so it must have been a real hard time for you after that?

A. Well, it was......you had a bit of a......

Q. Was it a struggle?

A. It was a struggle! You had two children and you were trying to do your

best, and at that time......well, nowadays, women can get children into

the nursery, and go back to work, these things didn't happen the same!

You struggled on, and then of course, I married again, and I had quite

a good marriage and it's not the same, but you had......you made a new

life for yourself and my husband was a widower with one son, and we

each......it was a help for each of us, because it gave my children a

home, and it gave his son a home, you see, and I suppose things turned

out, not so bad, but Burngrange is a thing you never forget! Nor the

10th of January! These things always come up in your mind!

Q. Did you ever feel when John worked down the mine, that it was a dangerous job?

A. Oh, I always felt that! Because, as I say, well, I didn't come from

a mining community, but I suppose that the fear was always there, oh

yes, it was always there! If he was late in coming home, you panicked,

you just thought, oh, I hope nothing has happened......oh, yes, you

lived with that worry at the back of your mind all the time!

Q. Can you remember about the housing where you used to stay? In these days,

what facilities you had?

A. Well, when I set up home first in West Calder, we hadn't very......it

was building......oh, they were good enough houses in a way, but very

little in the way of mod cons, you had......a room, you had a two

apartment, you had the sink in the kitchen, and you had no hot water,

Q. You did have gas?

A. Oh yes, we had gas, coal fires and gas, but you......you, as I say,

you had a geyser, a gas geyser above your sink, and that gave you hot

water, you had outside washing houses, that you had to fill up an old

tub, and oh, yes, the amenities were not just so good then.

Q. Would that be a wooden tub or a metal one?

A. Aye, it was a wooden tub! You had the boiler that you lit the fire

underneath, and then you had the wooden tub, and......

Q. Was it the old range that you had?

A. Aye, it was the old range and a coal fire with an old range......but

somehow in these days, well everybody had that, and you just got on

with it!

Q. Did you find that the neighbours were a big help to you?

A. Oh, yes, very, very good!

Q. Yes!

A. The neighbours were very kind! Oh, no, people were very,

very kind, you've got to go through a thing like that to realise just

how kind people are!

Q. Were you quite religious in these days?

A. Oh yes! I'm still quite religious, I go to church, and we were brought

up like that, and John was......and I always went to church and......

that, I suppose that gives you a......gives you something to hold on

to, I don't say maybe that it is everything but I don't know, it gives

you just that something that helps you to come through things like that!

Q. So, you felt that it was a help?

A. Oh, it was a help definitely!

Q. Now, your social life, when you first got married, what was your.....

your pastimes......?

A. We 11......we went, at that time, there was always whist drives, and..

Q. And who would organise these? Were they run by the church, or were

they......?

A. Well, some of them were run by the church, they were run by the masons

and there was always a sort of village community, you know, it was

nothing hilarious but there were always a few nights out, you got to

these things and......it sort of broke any monotony, but I wouldn't

say, that it was......it was just really a village entertainment.....

which, we all enjoyed it at that time, we were quite happy with it, you

know.

Q. So, these memories, you'll treasure quite a lot?

A. Oh you do, you never forget, there's always something......there always

at the back of your mind and I think as you get older, you think more

about it, you haven't so much......you've maybe more spare time, and

you think more of these things then, you know!

Q. Well, that's very right! Would you like to say anything further about

anything else?

A. No, I think that I have said everything......

Q. Well, thank you very much, you know, that's very good!

***Questions***

1. Where did Shona meet her husband?
2. Explain, in detail, what happened to Shona's husband John.
3. Did Sheena receive any compensation for the death of her husband? How much did she receive?
4. What was Sheena’s house like?
5. What type of social activities did Sheena take part in?
6. As a historian, think of three questions that you could ask Sheena to find out more about her life.
7. Choose five key pieces of information from Sheena’s interview that you think are the most important facts telling us about life for the families of miners.