

## (Ironstone) Reminiscences By M. C. Fayers

Fortunately I was born in Northamptonshire at the time when steam was king and used exclusively in the ironstone fields. I was also fascinated by the locos and steam Navvies\* & took a great interest in the proceedings from an early age, four years old to be precise.

The interesting article by Mr Tonks mentioned a favourite venue of mine in the 1920s namely the Storefield Quarries. Most people will only remember them under the 'South Durham Co. ownership when they were standard gauge. But in the '20s they were narrow gauge (N.G.) & everything was in a most run-down condition. The wagons were of the side tip variety similar to those at Kettering or Scaldwell, and a loco could only haul 4 of these loaded with calcined ore from the 'Cally bank' opposite the loco shed up the gradient to the sidings. As soon as they had passed over the level crossing the loco would stop & the driver's mate would jump down & put sprags\*\* in the wagon wheels, & then the loco would stand with the blower on to raise enough steam to complete the journey. An interesting thing was the fact that they had a lad as crossing keeper with the usual little hut, in spite of the fact that at the time there was very little traffic on the road. But I have never seen one there since it was made standard gauge, in spite of the great increase of road traffic.

They had also a very mixed selection of steam navies in the pits, amongst them 2 timber framed skip transporters the only ones I have ever seen. Should anyone know of any photos of these or indeed of any of the equipment there in the narrow gauge days, I should be pleased to hear from them. On more than one occasion the Kettering leader & Guardian publicised photos of fossils found in the Newton pit. It was a sad day when this outfit closed down & was dismantled.

Then with the second world war demand for Iron-ore grew & the South Durham Co. relaid the track standard gauge (S.G.), luckily the previous owners had made the bridge wide enough to take the S.G. locos & only the track bed had to be lowered a little.

The S.D. (South Durham) then bought the huge 300ton steam navy from Lchester – the largest steam navy in Europe. This was Ruston No. 1643 built in 1930 & had a 5 Cubic yard bucket, & a 95ft boom and 112ft digging radius, to work on the 'Cally Bank'. This latter machine came from the Desborough Co-Op, whose outfit Cochranes or Cargo fleet had operated some time earlier. Mentioning this I think would be opportune for me to correct a false impression which could have been formed about the Desborough Co-Op's ironstone activities by anyone reading an ill informed article on the subject that which appeared in another Journal. This article stated that the Desborough Co-Op had no mechanical excavators & that all the work was done by hand, this is absolutely incorrect, in the pit which ran roughly parallel to the Harrington-Rothwell road they had what I call the standard arrangement of navvies at the time, namely 2 navvies & a transporter, one navy loading the ore into the rail wagons, & the other feeding the transporter with overburden\*\*\*. I have seen, heard and smelt these machines at work, and photos exist, I just cannot understand anyone saying they 'had no mechanical excavators'. Ruston No. 525 from here wasn't scrapped until about 1964 when they finished at Storefield.

Working conditions in the old days were very tough, I am certain that many younger people can hardly believe just how tough. I have been told in the old N.G. at Storefield one could have been 'set-on' in the morning & sacked in the afternoon!

Mr Tonks, also refers to the 'barrow and plank' method of working, this was hard and dangerous work. Many years ago I remember speaking to a man 'off work' with a strained back. He told me he was working on the 'barrow and plank' method and was just on the plank when a gust of wind caused him to partially lose his balance, and in saving the barrow from crashing down he severely twisted his back. He said had he have let the barrow go and it had got smashed up that would mean the sack.

Although I have taken such an interest in the ironstone trade, I have never worked in it, or even connected with it. I have always been proud of the contribution that the Northamptonshire iron-ore has made to the wealth of the country and to the enormous asset it was to the countries survival in two world wars. For example, the ironstone output reached an all-time record in 1942 with 10 ½ million tons, representing just over a half of the entire British output; this ore yielded 3 ½ million tons of pig iron, about 43 per cent of the national total. The steel output from the basic Bessemer works of Stewarts & Lloyds at Corby was about ½ million tons in the same year.

But now having surmounted the hump of lifes span, it grieves me greatly & in fact I find it almost possible to believe that the iron-ore industry is finished. I only hope that the so called 'experts' who have decided to buy all the ore from abroad know just what they are doing & Haven't made a ghastly mistake.

Marshall C Fayers 24/2/81

\*Navvies – Ruston steam Navvies, a steam driven excavator

\*\*Sprags – A Piece of wood or similar object used as a prop

\*\*\*Overburden - is the material that lies above an area that you are looking to mine, such as rock & top soil etc