

# THE PICK OF THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

## Pick Volume 2:5

### Living on the Great North Road at Sawyer's Gully

Harriet Carter

#### Introduction

By Dawn Edwards

The Great North Road was built c.1829 at Sawyer's Gully and the road is still used today for travel between Maitland and Cessnock. Cobb and Co serviced the area with a Half-way House located at The Black Waterholes, providing a change of horses and overnight stay. Early references to the area include 'near' Black Creek, The Wilderness and Black Waterholes - before Sawyer's Gully was mentioned in records in the early 1860s. Timber was the main reason for development (hence Sawyer's Gully), with sawpits and steam mills transporting logs by bullock wagon to Morpeth 'for loading onto sailing ships'. The Great Northern Railway (1860) provided closer transportation. A drive wheel from an early steam mill still exists and has been dated as 'pre 1860 and locally built'. Sawyer's Gully was originally located in the Parish of Allandale, but now incorporates both Allandale and Heddon Parishes.

With the clearing of the land, cultivation began. Some of the Hunter Valley's earliest vineyards were planted and thrived. Gold was once mined in this area. Subdivision of the large acreages included the 1860s and the early 1900s. Sir Edgeworth David travelled part of this historic Great North Road to confirm the Greta Coal Seam (1886) in nearby Deep Creek, Abermain. Mining this 'richest coal deposit in the Southern Hemisphere' commenced in earnest in the early years of the 1900s, with some miners settling on land at Sawyer's Gully. Sawyer's Gully serviced the rapidly growing mines and mining communities providing timber, dairy, meat, fruit, vegetables and wine. Sawyer's Gully is now part of Werakata National Park (Gov. Gazette 18 Jan 2002), with some fifth generation residents still living on the same portion of land. Below is the story of the Findley family and their life in Sawyer's Gully on the Great North Road at the tum of the Century and during the early years of the 1900s.

It is told by Harriet Carter (nee Findley) born 22 August 1898, and this was written when she was



96 years old. It is presented just as Harriet recalled her life. It was given to the Abermain Heritage Preservation Society by Harriet's daughter, Joan Russell of Abermain.

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I will tell you about where we lived in Mitchell Street, Merewether, ten minutes walk to Merewether Beach. My mother Elizabeth, and father William, had ten children when we left for our property in Sawyer's Gully, about thirty miles further up north and ten miles out of Maitland.

This is Sawyer's Gully when we first saw it. It was situated on the Deviation Road, seven miles from Cessnock and ten miles from Maitland. Then it was the only road to Sydney.

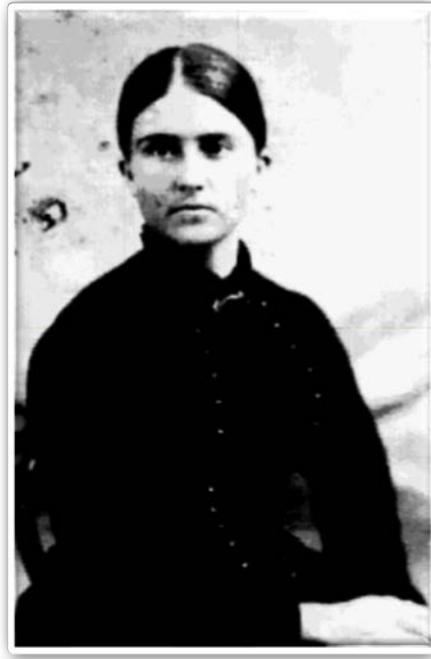
The convicts built this road of blue metal and shale. Sometimes when on our way to Sunday School we would run up the side of the road onto a property to see two convict graves, it made us sad as the convicts had a bad time.

Why we shifted was because my brother Jim wasn't real strong, so the doctor said to shift up to the country. When he grew up he was quite strong and he died aged ninety-three. Dad had to clear the bush away so he could build a kitchen, where they lived and slept. Dad, Mum, Jim and my baby brother lived there until Dad got a big weatherboard house nearly built, to be liveable and almost finished, so we could come up to our new home. Dad lined it out, a room at a time, he was a very good builder. When we lived at Merewether Dad had big horses and drays and was a coal carter and other things.

When we came to Sawyer's Gully he got work at Pelaw Main Pit, my two older brothers got work there also. Dad started in his spare time to cultivate the land, we soon had a grape vineyard, an orchard, cows, horses, pigs and fowls. It all took hard work and sometimes some drought periods. Then there were dams to build, Dad then had the underground tank to dig and with the help of the two elder brothers to give a hand, they had it finished in a year.

Dad lined it with bricks and then cemented it out with a round bowl in the middle, so any bit of dust would fall in at the middle, and once a year he would put the pump in the middle and pump it out, then put a little lime in to purify the water. We had a nice board top put on it. The water is the most important thing you want, as we had to depend on the tank, it was beautiful and cool to drink out of the well. Before we had the tank we had to carry water from an old well on an empty property three quarters of a mile away. The older ones took buckets and we kiddies took billycans or whatever we could carry, that was only for drinking and cooking. The clothes and family were bathed in the dam water, but once our tank got full we had enough water to give to those neighbours who had no water. Dad said they could have enough water for drinking and cooking, so they would bring their buckets and fill them every morning. Our tank had never gone dry all the years we lived at the Gully.





*Elizabeth Findlay*

When we came from the town we thought the bush was lovely, there was all sorts of bush flowers wattle, wild may, bottle brush, blue bells, maiden hair fern and flowering trees. But we didn't like snakes and there were goannas up trees, some were five to six feet long. When the drought was on the birds would fall out of the bushes and trees dead, but when it was over we would hear the beautiful birds singing once again. My brother Will brought the last of our belongings up to Sawyer's Gully from Merewether; he was a bit of a doer. Our neighbour, M. Crawley was following Will with another load of furniture, he said Will was sitting on top of the load going through Maitland playing his old accordion and singing, and our old cocky was perched on top of the load in his cage, calling out, 'a load of coal for Mrs Maloney', like he called out to Mum. It took some dray loads to bring up all our belongings to our new home. I was up with Mum and Dad and brother for a while in our big one roomed kitchen. The kitchen was made of weatherboards and the big old chimney was made of slabs and lined with bricks as far as the chimney turned off.

There were big mattresses on the floor and the baby's cradle. One night Mum was singing the baby to sleep, the men had all gone off to dogwatch to work, Jim was asleep on one of the mattresses, Mum saw two big eyes looking at her through the cracks of the chimney, she woke Jim. When the men came home next morning Mum told Dad she thought it may have been one of the men from the tents, who Dad had clearing the timber for him. Dad said he didn't think it was one of them, they all seemed to be good men, so they left it at that. Later on two big eyes looked through the cracks of the fireplace again, but they found out it was a big wallaby. They were six foot tall and when I was old enough to go to school with my brothers Jack and Ellis, and sisters Stella and Maggie, through our one mile property we would see no less than four big wallabies.

Three years after in our new home, Mum had a little baby girl, Doris, and three years after that she had a little baby boy, George. That made Dad and Mum a family of six boys and six girls, twelve in



all, but our little brother George died when he was a year old, we loved him very much. Mum was a very small woman, just four foot ten inches tall, Dad was six feet tall. Dad was born in Newcastle-on-Tyne England, Mum was born in Newcastle on the Hunter, in Australia. Her family also came from England in a sailing ship, it took months to reach Australia. Mum's older sister, Emily, was born on the ship so the family had to stay on the ship in Sydney Harbour for five days, till my Grandma was well enough to move. My Auntie Emily used to say 'I wasn't born in any country I was born at sea.' People said that was why she was a good speaker. She married an Englishman, Andrew Curry, they had ten children and when their youngest was three years old, Uncle Andrew and Auntie Emily were made Mayor and Mayoress of Merewether, and they were in office for four years.

All my aunties and uncles on Mum's side lived in Merewether. Dad's people lived in Woollongong, except Dad's brother Uncle Tom and Auntie Ada, whose family also came to Sawyers Gully. They had a wine cellar and vineyard. All the people who left Merewether came to live at Sawyer's Gully, except Mr and Mrs Edwards who came from Sydney. They came soon after all of us, they were much better off than us, but they had to work hard to get their big vineyards and wine cellars. They had six boys, the youngest was a lovely piano player.

When it was time for grape picking we all worked for Mr Edwards picking the grapes, we got one penny a bucket, Dad was always tallyman. Mr and Mrs Farrell also came from Merewether. They built a big weatherboard house on Deviation Road, right in the middle of Sawyer's Gully. It had a real long veranda right along the front and there were rails for men to tie their horses to. There were three rooms along the front, first there was the wine bar, the second was a billiard room and the third room had tables and chairs where travellers could get a meal, then there was the little Post Office. In the afternoon at about half past two you would see the man with the afternoon post, driving four horses, in a dray from Maitland, then he had to go to Cessnock and Wollombi. They had to change horses at each post office, then he would go to Singleton.

When I grew up Mum told me that when I was a little girl they wanted to adopt me, and also when Uncle Tom and Auntie Ada's family all got married they wanted Mum and Dad to let them have me, but Mum said 'Even if I did have twelve children there was none to give away'.

Now a few things I can remember when I lived in Merewether, I was only three and a half when we came to Sawyer's Gully. I remember Mr and Mrs Lord who helped my eldest sister Mabel look after the rest of us, while Mum, Dad, Jim and the baby were building the house ready for us. I remember only vaguely when we all had the measles when I just turned three. I can see my sister's embroidery on her nightdress as she was lying next to me in our big four poster bed. She was very good and stayed in bed, but Mum said I used to get out of bed. There were children dying with measles in those days and we were supposed to keep warm. I don't remember this part, the doctor said to Mum, 'if you don't want her to die make her cry.' He said 'Pick her up and smack her on the bottom.' So Mum did, I cried myself to sleep, Mum said, and the measles came out all over me and I was red as a lobster. Just one thing more I can remember was part of the hallway and I see Dad coming in with two dolls with shoes and nighties on. Stella and I had fair hair and our dolls had fair hair too.

Some people say I must have a good memory for a little over three and a half years old, I can

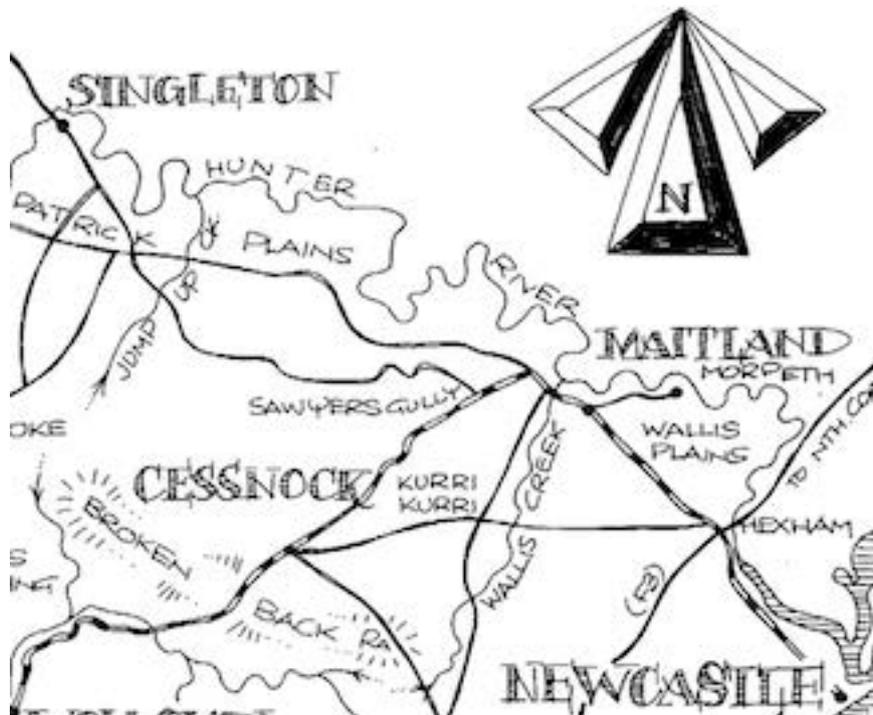


remember the stables and the big horses. Before we had our tank, as I said before we had to carry water from an old underground well from this vacant property, about three quarters of a mile at the top of our property. There were fruit trees at this old well, with violets growing all around. My brother Jack and his friend Morris Crowley, they were twelve, and my sister Lily, who was ten, my sister Lily picked a bunch of violets. She leaned over the old slab top to put them in water to freshen them up as it was a very hot day, and she overbalanced and fell in. Jack couldn't reach her, he said, 'Sit on my legs to stop me from falling in'. Jack could just reach her long hair and pulled her out by the hair. One of us ran home and told Mum and another neighbour, Mrs Way, that Lily had fallen into the well. Mrs Way came carrying a ladder three quarter of a mile through the bush, her little boy was drowned, coming home from Sunday School, in Merewether Beach.



*William Findlay*

All the men were at work, but coming around the bend in the track were the two boys carrying Lily. Mum was very upset, but she soon had a big tub of warm water near the old fireplace, all was well. It was Christmas Eve and all Lily could say 'if I had drowned I wouldn't have had my Christmas Dinner, would I mum.'



About our childhood days, we were a very close family and we had one hundred and sixty acres of land to play in. Our brother Jack would make us a billy cart out of a box and he cut the wheels out of sapling. He was cutting them off with an old cross saw, he said to me, 'Art you hold the sapling', but I said I didn't want my fingers cut off. I was seven years old but our Maggie who was not quite five said she would hold the sapling for Jack, and the old cross saw slid and cut off the tops of Maggie's fingers. Sister Stella ran over to our neighbour's place and got Mr Way who was a first aid man and he stopped the bleeding and bandaged her hand.

We had a lot of neighbours to play with. We would all meet at school and at Sunday School Picnics. We would visit each other and would go to each other's place for Sunday tea. We sisters played in our 'cubby house' under a big wattle tree. We would rake all the leaves from underneath and tie the branches back for our doorway. Mum would give us a pair of lace curtains that were beginning to crack and were too old any more, and we would hang them up at the 'doorway'. We would go down into the shed and get a nice new empty kerosene tin (as we used kerosene lamps) to use as our table and 'piano' and get an old jam jar and put in something to eat, whatever was in season.

We would dig up a potato plant or some carrots, other times we would have fruit. There were certain trees we were allowed to pick from in the orchard. Then there was our 'babies'. There was blonde, some pretty red and yellow, we picked the ones we liked best and we would run down home and ask Mum for some scraps of material she had left from her sewing and would make dresses for our 'babies'. Then my sister Maggie who was just six would say to me to go and get my little blue mug, she would say 'How would you like a drink of milk'. Our old cows Butter and Beauty were behind the shed and Maggie would say 'leg back butter cup' and she would milk me a jug full and I would drink it straight from the cow, Maggie nor Stella never drank milk.

We would go cray fishing in our big dam, Mum would not let us go without our big brothers, and



the dam was very deep. We had some string and a bent pin and a piece of material, when we caught one we learnt how to take it off the line, some were six to eight inches long. They were a pretty blue with bright pink claws. Then we went home, we would cook them and get some bread, butter, pepper and vinegar and sit under the old peppercorn tree and eat them, and they were sweeter than lobster.

When Mum and Dad bought our organ it was sent from Newcastle in a big board box. My brother got the empty box and made it into a billy cart. He got two big cast iron wheels and an axle. One day he came home from work at about quarter past three, there was a big bush fire up in the top paddock between our house and the school. Mum said to Will to get our old 'pie bald' horse who was called 'Doctor' into the shafts of the billy cart and go and get us all from school. Will would stand in the front driving the horse and all us kids would climb in and hang onto each other as we were racing around the bends in the bush track, with burning trees failing around us.

Will would fit as many children as he could into the cart, there were seven of us. If there was a big storm brewing Mum would send Will to do the same to get us home safely. Old Doctor was a tough old horse and Will could do anything with him.

When my older brothers and sisters came to Sawyer's Gully there was no school building, the government rented a room in Mr and Mrs Millard's slab hut. Later a schoolhouse and residence was built. The house is still there, we the younger children went to the new school, and we only had one teacher to teach all the classes - what a wealth of knowledge this man could share with us. We only had slates and pencils when we attained a higher class. As you can imagine with our large family to provide for we had to wait months until it was our turn to get a penny pencil ( 1 cent) which was cut in halves for us to share.

We children from the eldest to the youngest had to walk two miles through the bush track leading to our school. It was nothing to see kangaroos and wallabies feeding by the wayside. Mr Pont our teacher followed strictly to the '3 Rs'. We loved to go on native study walks, everyone joined in gathering the wild flowers and specimens, we all knew each plant and flower by name. We would bring them home and 'press' them in our books. One day stands out clearly in my mind. Our teacher stood with his head to one side as if listening for something then without any fuss he said, 'Children close your books, stand up and march single file up to the school gate'. As we lined the fence, coming down the road at twelve miles an hour was our first sight of a motor car. The man was dressed in a dustcoat and hat with driving goggles on and the lady had on a big hat tied on with a big veil - what a day that was for us.

When I went to school the new school was built. There were four of us going, we had to pay two pence a week each, that was a shilling, it doesn't sound much but the men worked long hours, they didn't knock off until Saturday morning at dinner time and they didn't get big wages, Dad also worked on the land. Later when our vineyard and orchard grew we had lots of fruit and vegetables, also pigs, cows, ducks and chooks. Brother Jim helped Dad on the land, he pruned all the grapevines and fruit trees. We had everything we wanted in the way of food, Mum also kept the big



flour bin filled with 50lbs and 201bs bags of flour.

The closest bakehouse was at Maitland ten miles away. Our brother Will, when he came home from work at four o'clock would take the horse and cart to Maitland and get our bread. On Saturday if our neighbours

wanted bread he would bring some out for the weekend. Mum would give him two white sheets, one for the bottom of the cart and one to cover over the bread. Sometimes he would have over a hundred hot loaves, just out of the oven, it was ten miles there and ten miles back. If he was a bit late, Mum would make two big oven shelves of scones, we would have butter, cheese, golden syrup, honey and jam on the hot scones. Mum was a good cook, they were lovely, especially when it was getting near lunchtime. Later Mr Farrell built a bakehouse, his sons delivered the bread by horse and cart. Mum always got twelve loaves on day shift and eight loaves on afternoon shift. Two of us would walk a mile to the bakehouse to get four hot loaves for the men's crib and our school lunches. That was two miles before school and another mile to school, we didn't mind. When we saw our first picture show, we said it was just like Sawyer's Gully when we were kids. There was no Kurri Kurri, Weston Neath or Abermain, there was only the little township of Pelaw Main. It had our first coal mine. Dad and our two older brothers and all the men from Sawyer's Gully worked in the mine. Talk about a 'western film'.

Every man went to work on horseback, when they all got to our place there were seven horsemen, when our three joined them there were ten horsemen leaving our place for work. They had to go in single file as there was only a track wide enough for a horse to get through. When the men came home in the morning after night shift my sisters and I would run to meet them to get a ride up the paddock. I would always go to my father's horse as I was always frightened of horses, I felt safe on his horse.

Dad was in everything, when there was anything special on at the school they would invite Mr Chariton, our Member of Parliament from Newcastle. Dad was about to speak also, they were very much alike only Mr Chariton had blue eyes and Dad had brown. Dad had to go to Minmi once and when Dad walked into the hotel bar he said everyone stopped talking as they thought he was Mr Chariton.

Dad was in the Progress Committee from Cessnock to Bishops Bridge. When he went to a meeting at Bishops Bridge on his blood mare Violet. He brought her from Mr Kelly at Raymond Terrace. Dad would take his revolver Bull Dog on the five-mile ride. It was a bit of a wild place as there were always tramps along the way and hawkers in hooded carts, not that Dad really needed the revolver he had a pretty good 'left hander'. Before the Homestead Bridge was built he was coming back from Weston Station after taking one of our relatives to catch the eight o'clock train, when coming home through the bush track at the Homestead a man rushed out of the bush and grabbed the horse's head. Noble was a quiet horse, Dad said Steady Noble and walked along part of the shaft and jumped down and gave the man a good left hander, Mum said 'What did you do then?' Dad said 'I just left him out to it.'





*William and Elizabeth Findlay*



*Elizabeth Findlay by the well*

When my sister Mabel's husband Fred was afternoon shift at the mine I would stay with her for company at Native Dog Hill where Mabel lived. Down over the road I had two little mates Eve and Henry Donnan to go to school with, it was one and a half miles around the Deviation. One day we slept in and I missed them and had to go to school alone.

All the cattle were driven from Maitland saleyard by road to Cessnock slaughter yards, mostly big Hereford cattle. There would be three horsemen driving them with big stock whips. This morning I was all alone and coming around the bend there were thirty or more big white faced Herefords coming right towards me. One of the men said, 'Sis run off the road and get under the fence and run for your life, there are some pretty wild ones. I will keep them off with my horse and stockwhip till you get under the fence.' I was terrified; I'm nearly 95 now and shudder when I think of that morning. I can still see that man holding the cattle back with his horse and stock whip. I had nearly a mile to run across the paddock to school and I was trembling when I got there.

We were brought up on a property, there were cows and horses and I am still frightened of them. My sister could ride horses and milk the cows, I just fed the little calves and pigs in their sties. My Dad never asked me to milk cows as he knew how frightened I was, those days the milk was put into big flat dishes on the dairy shelf. I always skimmed the cream off the milk into big white china

bowls, we would make our own butter, and it was lovely.

When I think how our Mother and Father brought up twelve children it wasn't any easy task. Dad had to plough the ground and set fruit trees and grape cutting and go to the market (union). We girls didn't have to work on the land, some of my sisters and brothers milked the cows and when the grapes were ready to pick for the market we would go every Monday and Thursday and pick twenty one cases for Tuesday and twenty one cases for Friday. Dad wouldn't let us do anything other than that. We were not allowed to touch the bloom on the vine.

I forgot about our church. Our Dad drew up the plans and the rest of the men in Sawyer's Gully helped build it. In those days people didn't have much money, like they have today, so we had to pay the church off. Every month on Saturday night we would have a social, our mothers would bring the refreshments, we would play games such as the 'Grand Old Duke of York he had ten thousand men, he marched them up the top of the hill and marched them down again' and there was Drop the Hanky, Three and Fours and Postman's Knock.

We all enjoyed ourselves very much in those days, every social and dance night, we closed down before twelve. Then it was time to go home, some in sulkies, some on horseback or bikes, but most of us young ones walked the three miles home. Then other nights we had Pie Suppers all homemade, they all had big families. The men would make an oven with bricks and iron bars for shelves to heat the pies and cook the peas, our mothers would set jellies and dip them in coconut for desert.

We had three miles to walk to Sunday school every Sunday afternoon at two o'clock and three o'clock was church. Mum and Dad and all the other mums and dads, sisters and brothers would come to church, some in sulkies, on horseback, by bike and the young ones walked. We had a good choir of thirty or more, our young neighbour Mr Bob Hanley was our choirmaster. He had many medals and cups he had won in Eisteddfods.

When Mr Hanley was on afternoon shift Dad would take the choir practice at our place. Dad was a good organist, before he came to Sawyer's Gully he was the organist at the Merewether Methodist Church. He also had a good voice as also did Mum, we all had pretty good voices, sister Mabel and brother Will would sing duets in the evenings. My sister Lily was organist at our church for four years, our neighbour's daughter Amy Hart was organist before Lily, but sadly Amy died in childbirth and also her baby. We were shocked when she died. Our first organist at our church was Uncle Tom and Aunty Ada's daughter Martha Findley, our cousin.

In the evenings when we were all together Dad and my sister Lily would play the organ, we would all get around and have a singsong. Nearly all the neighbours had an organ or piano.

In later years nearly every one of the old people had died and us young ones had married and moved away, so there was not enough people to keep the church going, so it was dismantled and shifted to the Weston circuit. It made a nice room for meetings and fetes, it is all body carpeted now and the kitchen is a nice room for cooking etc.



Our minister came from Cessnock and if he had a visitor from Sydney he would bring him in the horse and sulky to our place and he would say he had never seen a much better place than ours. The vineyards and the

orchards and vegetables, the wheat and sorghum and com, it was a picturesque place. The minister and his guest would get to our place for lunch, we always had plenty of food, home grown vegetables and fruit from the orchard. Dad always killed his own pigs, we always had pork and home cured bacon, also plenty of poultry and ducks. Sawyer's Gully was a very healthy place to live, there was a lot to do besides the men going to the mines to work. My eldest sister had a lot of washing and ironing and cooking to do for fourteen of us. Mum had lots of sewing and looking after the baby and us younger ones. Dad had the ploughing and setting the seeds and the boys had horses to feed and look after and Jim always pruned the fruit trees and grapevines.

*Below: Murray's Wine Shop, situated on the Great North Road /Cessnock City Library*



When the First World War broke out in 1914 most of the boys from the mines enlisted. My brother Jim went to enlist but he was turned down, but Jack was accepted and he spent four years away at war. He was gassed with mustard gas and he was very badly injured in his leg, he had a steel plate put into his leg and from that day on he was never able to bend his leg and always wore a boot.

Dad had worked on the land for over eleven years, he said to Mum, 'I must do my part towards the war'. So he went back to the Abermain coal mine at sixty-one years old. He was on the coal, he and his mate got the highest pay for a fortnight. Mum said, 'You shouldn't do it.' He would come home shaking like a leaf; Mum would give him a glass of red wine before dinner.

They lived a good life, Dad was seventy-three when he died and mum was eighty-six. My eldest



brother Bob was killed on a motor bike when he was sixty-three. My sisters, Mabel died at ninety, Stella was sixty nine, Lily at ninety one, my brother Will was ninety eight, Jim at eighty nine, Jack was eighty eight and Ellis at seventy six. We all lived to a good age, there is still three of us alive, Maggie is ninety four, Dods is eighty nine and I am ninety six.

*Images in this story are from the Abermain Heritage Preservation Society Collection.*

