



DURHAM
AT **WAR**



ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Elizabeth 'Lizzie' Holmes of Horden

Memoirs of a woman who worked as a labourer
at Horden coke works in the First World War
and played women's football

This is a complete transcript of an oral history interview (ref. ND/Ea Acc: 7911, no. 38) from the People Past and Present Archive in the Easington District Council records held in [Durham County Record Office](#)

There is an accompanying audio file of the interview.



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Mrs Elizabeth Holmes of Horden

Interviewed on 18 August 1976

Mrs. Holmes – My name is Elizabeth Holmes now, single – Elizabeth Wilson. I was born at Hebburn Colliery, County Durham at a place called ‘aback of the blazer’.

Interviewer – ‘Aback of the blazer’?

Mrs. Holmes – ‘Aback of the blazer’. That was in the Hebburn pit yard. Well there was a family of four girls, my mother had a family of four girls. Then we got up (grew up), we were about six, when my father died. Well he worked at Hebburn Colliery but there were no big compensation or nothing like that then, my mother had to go to the ‘white lead’ at Jarrow, to work in the ‘white lead’ at Jarrow to bring our family up.

Interviewer – And what was the ‘white lead’?

Mrs. Holmes – A factory where they made what they called white lead, till we used to get ‘Parish Relief’, may be about 10 shillings a week to keep us on. It had to keep us, see. Well, when we got older, my mother died. Well, we were left, four sisters, four daughters, two went to my grandfathers, my aunt and uncle took the other two. We were alright there. We were going to school, we had to go to school till we were about thirteen, well, the two oldest ones, Margaret Jane and Martha, left school before me, they went to the ropery works at Hebburn Colliery, up against Hebburn Station, railway station, they went to the rope factory, where they made clothes lines out of hemp, so I thought, well, when I leave school, I’ll gan (go) to the hemp factory. So I goes up to the ropery see. Why, rough and ready me, I was a tomboy, and when the boss came out looking to see who wanted a job. He says, “Do you want a job?” I says, “Aye, I have two sisters here,” I says, “so that’s Faith, Hope and if you give me a job, Charity.” Faith, Hope and Charity (laughs). So whatever, he gave me a job, he said, “Oh, if them’s your sisters, and you work as good as your sisters, I’ll give you a job.” Well, I was thirteen, I wasn’t left school. We called the school board man who used to come after us, the ‘kiddy catcher’. So he came after us. I wasn’t thirteen, I couldn’t work at the factory, I had to gan (go) back to school. I kept working at the factory. So there was a lad, biggish lad, he’d be about eighteen, started funny tricks with me and I bashed him, see, why I got the sack.

Interviewer – What do you mean, you bashed him?

Mrs. Holmes – I gave him a good hiding, bashed him, see. So I got the sack. And I gans (goes) to the office, my older sister was in, she’d gettin’ the sack. I said, “What



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have you been doing?" She said, "I've been laughing because the machine blew Mr. Barrass's trilby hat off." Why there wasn't any trilby hats then, they were bowler hats.

Interviewer – He was the manager, Mr. Barrass?

Mrs. Holmes – Aye, he was the manager. So, when we went in to have our interview, you know, to see whether he would keep us on or not, I said, "Oh, you needn't keep me on, I'll get a job next door," that was at the factory next door, but he wouldn't part with Margaret Jane, because she was a good worker. Well I was sick of it, being thirteen, and I was making the clothes lines out in the open air all day, you know, the length of clothes lines, made of hemp, with one hook at this side and we used to have to turn this hemp until it got tight. We used to put them in starch to make them stiff. So anyhow, when I comes out, my sister says, "You'll get wrong when you get yem (home). You'll get a good hiding of me granda." I said, "Me granda will not bray (hit) me."

So when I came away there was a factory next door, and there was a lad there, he had a barrow, one of these hand barrows with handles on. He had planks of wood on the barrow, off rain barrels you know. Well, these barrels used to be full of what you call resin. Your hands got sticky and 'claggy' with the resin and they went black and that. I said, "What do you do with them woods? Where have you getting' (got) them woods from?" He says, "Oh, in there." "How much did you pay for them?" I says, "Oh, you get about fifty for three shilling," he says. I says, "What do you do with them?" "Oh, we saw some up and chop them up and we make firewood bundles with them. Other ones we just sell these as they are and they put them underneath the ovens to heat them." So I says, "Oh, and where do you get the barrow from, then?" "Oh," he says, "they'll lend you the barrow if you promise to fetch it back." So I looked at my money, that I'd got, I had five shilling a week for a start, I only had about three shilling, what I had worked for. I says, "I've got three shilling, do you think I'll get a barrow full of sticks for that?" He says, "Aye." So I gans (goes) and gets a barrow full of sticks. I thought, "Well, I'll try these doors down here, Argyll Street and all them in Hebburn." I knocks at the doors, "Please do you want any wood? Resin oven wood?" "Oh, yes, hinny." Might give you two pence for one, you see, maybe's a penny for a little 'un. You could make about six shilling, gan yem (go home) with six or seven shilling. So I sells the lot ... gans yem, my granda waiting of me. "Aye, ha'way," he says, "what's thee been doing?" I said, "I've been doing nowt (nothing). I've been selling wood, look at the money I've made, I've got a good job." I says, "I'm better off than them in the ropery, I wouldn't work in the ropery with them now, no more." So anyway, I gets that job over. Well, after that, my grandfather and my grandmother died. Now we were branched away to aunts. So I was fetched from Hebburn to Ryhope, I had to stop with my aunt at Ryhope. Well, I was getting up then, in years and be about 16, something like that, when we came to Horden in 1911. Mr. Holmes's people came to Horden. I used to come and stop with them, and



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then gan (go) off to service, to Leeds, to the Jews. When I got tired of that place, I would come back to Horden, to Holmes's. Then I would gan to another place, then I was at a place in Miller's cake shop at Cotsford Lane. I was at Miller's cake shop until I was married, in 1913. My marriage lines are in the drawer, November 13th, 1913. Why after I was married, well, the war broke out, 1914, then Mr. Holmes went to the war, then we were living in a colliery house, rent free. I went and got a job when they started building the coke ovens.

Interviewer – How did you come to start on the coke ovens, Mrs. Holmes?

Mrs. Holmes – Well, these two men came, Bill Pacy and Turner. Mr. Turner said they were going to start some coke ovens. This policeman come up and he says to me and Mrs. Lee sitting on the step in Second Street, "They want some women, we're gonna (going to) build some coke ovens, starting tomorrow. We want about twenty women to start." "Well, what do we have to do?" I said. "Oh, wheel barrows, and stack the bricks, empty the trucks, and get ready for the ovens." So we went along and knocked at this cabin door and said, "Well, are you building some coke ovens, are you starting some women?" He said, "Er, yes." "Well," I said, "me and Mrs. Lee wants a job then." So this big fella is standing, with his hands in his waistcoat you know, and he says, "Oh, why, you come in the morning, you're the first two to set on." When he shut the door, I says to Betsy Lee, "By, he's a big bugger, isn't he? He's German." He opened the door and says, "No, I'm not German."

Well, I came back home and there was Mrs. Timmens, Mrs. Matthews and Mrs. Catlow, also other different ones, they had all been out for a drink, I didn't drink, see. When they came along they said, "Oh, we're going to start the ovens tomorrow." I says, "Aye, none of you gets a job before me, I'm first." (laughs). And we went and started the ovens in 1915, and I was there till 1919, I worked all the time on the ovens, I was the first to start on, I was the last off to finish, because they were leaving because the men were coming home from the war and the ovens were finishing. I finished when Mr. Holmes came home, I wanted to finish before then but no, I had to stop till the ovens were completed.

Interviewer – And what exactly did you do at the ovens, Mrs. Holmes?

Mrs. Holmes – Labouring, wheeling the bricks to the bricklayers. We had a concrete board on the ground, we used to put the gravel and sand down, then, the cement, mix the cement in, shovel it all up and mix it all in, make a big hole in the middle, pour water in and mix it all up. That was the mixing of the concrete for the ovens.

Interviewer – And how did you manage lifting the bags of cement, Mrs. Holmes?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh, we just used to gan (go) in and lift a bag of cement like lifting a loaf of bread, then. We were that big and strong, we could do it then but I cannot do it now.



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Interviewer – They were hundredweight bags of cement?

Mrs. Holmes – Yes, hundredweight bags. They would say, “Send Lizzy up, she’ll carry a bag of cement.” We would carry a bag of cement before the men would carry one.

Interviewer – And how much did you get a day for working there?

Mrs. Holmes – Sixpence, sixpence an hour.

Interviewer – Sixpence an hour? That was like four shilling a day.

Mrs. Holmes – Aye, sixpence an hour we got.

Interviewer – So what were your hours then?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh, eight till four or five. Then we would have to stop over-time to empty the trucks coming in, stack the bricks up for the next morning. Then when the ovens were finished, there was 60 ovens and me and Mrs. Timmins took them on to white wash them out with lime, not white wash, lime. We used to have to put the scaffolding up, right through every oven, then lift it out at the weekend and put it back again on Monday morning for the men working in them. I was there till they were all finished, I was the last one worked there till the ovens finished.

Interviewer – And how did you get on with the men?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh we got on alright with the men, they were alright, they were a happy lot. We used to have six or seven bricklayers coming from Middlesbrough, why they used to gan home on a Friday night for the weekend, and they used to come back on a Monday morning, see. Oh, we got on alright with them. We could work harder than the men, we used to brag about it, and that is what we got, sixpence an hour, aye ... now look at the money they get now, they are rolling over themselves with money, now, the young’uns, aren’t they? They just gan out with a pound note, if you gan in the bingo now, and watch them, one note after the other, they spend it like sawdust.

Interviewer – And what happened when Mr. Holmes came back, what did you do then?

Mrs. Holmes – Well, when Mr Holmes came back from the war, well, he had two diseases of the heart. He was sent home from Russia in hospital blues, to Manchester, the war finished in November, he didn’t know the war was finished till Christmas day. He was sent back to Manchester hospital, then he was discharged see. But when he came home he didn’t work very much after. He put in for a pension, he got a pension, but he was a quiet man and he didn’t like to go in front of people, so when they sent for him to go for a medical, he wouldn’t go, and he lost his



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pension, see. Well we had no family then, I used to just work at different places. I used to go and work for the doctors, I used to go and work anywhere. I could go out washing, anything like that. I used to go and do work. Then Mr. Holmes died, well, I had the four bairns, two boys and two girls, see. Jack was married and our Flo was married when their dad died. Their dad died in the March and our Chrissy got married in the June and our Sidney, didn't get married until he was 31. Sidney, that's the last one, he lives down here.

Interviewer – and when you worked in the coke ovens, Mrs. Holmes, how did you used to work when the scaffolding was up? How did you get your materials up?

Mrs. Holmes – We put the scaffolding up, we used to put them up with a wheel with a rope on to draw the bricks up. Aye, pull them up. And we used to have to put six bricks in a bundle, a rope round them, pull them up before we got the machines. Then we used to have a plank from the ground, a broad plank and we used to have to wheel bricks up that plank up to the ovens. It was just like being up (demonstrates) with a barrow.

Interviewer – Very steep?

Mrs. Holmes – Aye, and then we'd have a like a platform at the top. We were supposed to turn around and wheel that barrow back, but Lizzy used to hoy (throw) it back. I just used to stand at the top and hoy it over the top (laughs).

Interviewer – And after that ... when you worked there, on an evening, did you have to do your own housework?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh yes, yes. We had to do all our own housework. I had a house in Second Street just next door to the ovens, but with living on your own, your house never got much dirty, because you were out all day. My neighbour, Mrs. Lee that started work with me, she only worked one day, she couldn't uphold it, she used to make my dinners. She had a little girl called Meggie and I would say, "Betsy, thou mak (make) the dinner." I used to buy the stuff to make the dinner and Betsy used to make the dinner for me, her and Meggie.

Interviewer – Did you know any women, who worked on the coke ovens who had a family?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh yes. Some of them had families – Jane had a family, Mrs. Frederick, she had a family, also this woman down here, Mrs. Robson, she's in hospital now, she was on the ovens and she had one or two babies you know. What they had, they had their mothers and fathers to look after them while they worked, because we had to work, somebody had to work. And all we got off the government was 12/6 [62p] a week pension. That's all I used to get because when Mr. Holmes



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got leave he would not go back, I used to have to lose my pension. He would not go back, never went back.

Interviewer – That was his war pension, was it?

Mrs. Holmes – Aye, my war pay. Aye, 12/6 a week then. When he got leave I used to say, “I wish they hadn’t given him leave, because he’ll not gan back!” The police used to have to come and take him back. I used to have to say to the police, “Oh, why, wait until it gets dark and we’ll go down to the police station when it gets dark.” But there was once, they came for him and I said, “Why, leave him tonight, he’ll only have to sleep in the cells at the police station, he might as well have his comforts at home and I’ll see he goes at eight o’clock in the morning.” So up to his mother’s I ran, about dinner time the next day and said, “Well, he’s got away, they came for him last night again.” It was pay Friday and she says, “Aye, and do you think he’s getting (gone) away?” I says, “Yes, I’ve made him gan this morning, eight o’clock.” But when I went into the kitchen he was sitting getting his dinner (laughs). So he hadn’t gone. I says, “You’re gannin’ (going) now on the two o’clock train.” But he went. I says, “Why, well we’ll cut through these gardens,” that’s behind the Welfare there, there were no houses or nowt (nothing) then, we could cut through there to get to the station, ah but he wouldn’t. He says, “No, I’m going the right way to the station, not on this path, the right road.” That was to pass the police office facing the Salvation Army hall, so the police could see him through the windows. The policeman said, “Well, there’s Mrs. Holmes taking her man to the station now,” and he did not get away till two o’clock.

Interviewer – Were there long periods of time when you never saw him?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh, yes, never saw him after he got to India for, oh, about three year, turned two year anyway, because when he got to India, he went from there to China, from China to Russia, then they came home from Russia to Beverley at Hull, he was in the Manchester Regiment then, he kept changing his regiment and when he came home everybody was working and all was on the go again then. Well he came back to the pits but he worked off and on with being bad (ill). Mr. Mills next door to me in Warren Street, he had the same disease as Mr. Holmes, it was through the army. But the father wouldn’t go to beg or nowt (nothing) off nobody you know, so he lost his pensions through being stupid. He wouldn’t go if there was any relief to seek, no, I had to do all that. The same when the bairns got up to go to work, he wouldn’t go and get them jobs, I had to go and get them a job – not him, I’ve always seen to them.

Interviewer – So was the men’s attitude different when they came back from the war?



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Mrs. Holmes – Yes, oh, a lot different. They all change in the armies, he did. It was 1918 when the war finished and he didn't get home till Easter 1919, on the Good Friday weekend, gets this letter to say he was in Manchester. So I says, "Oh, he's coming home now." But we had no family then. We had them after.

Interviewer – What did you used to do with your pay when you were working on the coke ovens, how did you spend it? Would you have any sort of leisure yourself?

Mrs. Holmes – We had to feed ourselves with it because we only had 12/6 pension, army pension, that's all we got. We just used to get home, get dressed, went to dances and enjoyed ourselves. Oh I've never stopped in, we used to like a fight now and then (laughs).

Interviewer – So what do you mean a fight?

Mrs. Holmes – Well, we could go to the dance hall and somebody would keep bumping you, well, you would clip them (hit them).

Interviewer – Men or women?

Mrs. Holmes – Women, women, they were the women who clipped you. Now there is one, she lives here now, who I clipped. Our Meg, she met me the next day, she says, "That girl's died." Y'bugger, I nearly died because I thought it was the one I clipped (laughs).

Interviewer – But it wasn't?

Mrs. Holmes – It wasn't ... good luck. Our Meg says, "That lass has died, Liz." I said, "Oh, my God," I said, "who, Scott's lass?" She says, "No Thompson's lass from Ryhope." Well she was very bad, she lived at Twelfth or Thirteenth Street where your mother (to interviewer) lived, you see. I thought I'd killed her, she's still alive – I'll tell you who she was, she was a Scott but she married Brindley. He was one of the under managers, Brindley, well, she married him, well he died. Why she comes to the centre now over there, she's nearly as old as me. We used to all go to the dances at the Miners' hall. Threepenny hops we used to call them.

Interviewer – Were you a good fighter then?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh aye, I always won – I always won. If I didn't win I'd say I won (laughs).

Interviewer – And later, your man came home, you had your family what did you do then?

Mrs. Holmes – Just look after the house and gan from one job to another. I've worked for nearly all the bosses in Horden, and all the doctors in Horden. I was



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married from Miller's cake shop, worked for Mr. and Mrs. Craggs, when they first started their business, and I could go back to them all now.

Interviewer – And what were you doing in the cake shop?

Mrs. Holmes – Just doing the house work for them. Why, it was just like walking into my own house, walking into theirs. Dr. Muir, he was a very big doctor, I used to work for him. They had no family, lots of years I worked for them. Mrs. Martin, she used to go off to France and all those places for her holidays, I used to work for them. I've gone into Mrs. Martin's house at three or four o'clock in the morning when the family's been going to work in first shift, I've gone in to white wash the pantry or do something else before they have got up on a morning. I've always worked, but it's just since I've got older that I don't, it's just now that I cannot get out with my legs because I have got arthritis.

Interviewer – And you used to have bus trips?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh, I had bus trips for years and years.

Interviewer – Can you tell us something about your bus trips – where you used to go and what you used to do?

Mrs. Holmes – After the daughter got married, she went to live at Coventry, there was a lot of people from the collieries went down that way at that time. Well, at the Easter weekend they used to go on a Good Friday, stop till the Easter Sunday, then come back – they all used to go down to Coventry for the weekend, I went there for years and years, with bus loads. I used to have Kelvin's buses, I've had the 'Bee-Line', I've had the buses to London for week's holidays, buses all over. I ran trips for years and years. I stopped them when Jack died, that's about ten years ago.

Interviewer – Had you some good times on those trips? What did you used to do, what did you get up to?

Mrs. Holmes – Well we used to take the people there, then they went off to their friends, but we used to have some happy times, gannin' down and coming back you know. It used to be a cheap bus ride then, but now it's £10 to go down to Coventry in the bus, just one way.

Interviewer – When did you start doing that?

Mrs. Holmes – The buses?

Interviewer – A few years ago?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh, years and years ago, I was running buses when I had no family. And my oldest lad would have been 52 if he'd been alive, Sidney's 50, do you know Sidney?



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Interviewer – Yes.

Mrs. Holmes – Flo's 50, Sidney's after Jack, Sidney's about 49, Flo's between 50 and 51. I had those three sharp then our Chrissy, she's been married 28 years, she'll be about 48.

Interviewer – I noticed you have got some tattoos on your arm, can you tell us about them?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh, I got them on when I was gannin' to school. A shop in Sunderland, three or four lasses, we were all together, says, "Oh, we're gannin' to get tattooed, I'm going to marry Henry Tummelty you see, I'm going to marry somebody else." I said, "I'm gonna marry Jimmy Holmes." Not 14 years old, you know, going to school. Then they were saying, "Well, are we going to get those lads' names on?" "Aye." Well, one was a bit crackers (backward) you know. So I warned the other two not to shout if it hurt. So she had to get done last, because we knew if we shouted, she would have shouted see. So one got done, another got done, then I got done, then it came to her turn. Well, we'd tellin' her what lads names we wanted on, I wanted James Holmes and this girl that was last wanted Henry Tummelty, well, on she got underneath this machine and when it touched on her hand, she started yelling and shouting, we just said to her, "Oh, put it on, put Henry Tummelty on." She was crying and shouting that much when he got finished with her he had Henry Tunnerty on, not Tummelty (laughs).

Interviewer – So she will still have that on?

Mrs. Holmes – She'll still have that on, I expect, because I've tried to get that off many a time, somebody says prick some cream in and you get it off but I cannot. This one up here (shows tattoo on arm) that's my maiden name, Lizzy Wilson. Then I used to kid them up that I had a ship on my belly. I used to say, "I've got a ship on my belly." I'd say when my belly was little, the ship was big, but now my belly is big, the ship is little. It's not there, of course. That was all lasses and boys' tricks we used to do then – we were before 14 when we got them on.

Interviewer – And have they ever caused you any embarrassment at any time?

Mrs. Holmes – No, just when you're at service. You used to have your cuffs on you know, your white cuffs, in those days, you used to have to wear with your white collar and your little white hat, I used to have to shove me bloody cuff up here, (laughs) to hide this you know. But I couldn't get it off, I tried.

Interviewer – And did you get your ears pierced?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh, I got my ears pierced, aye. When we used to have to get our teeth out, well, there were no dentists or nothing in those days. If we had a



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toothache, and we wanted teeth out, dad used to say, "Give me a bobbin of thread, I'll get your teeth out." He used to tie the thread around your teeth, ran out of the door, he would pull the bloody teeth out. And the tooth used to come out. There was once he was drunk, he'd had a drink and he came and had a go at my ear, he pulled at the earring and split my ear down. "Well," he said, "that bugger's come out." He pulled it right out, but I got it bored again. But I've never bothered with them ... not much, just when I'm going out anywhere.

Interviewer – And when you went to Ireland on the trip, regarding your tattoos, what happened that day?

Mrs. Holmes – Well, we went to a hotel, it was my birthday that day and we went out on a boat with Mrs. Brown, and they came shouting ... "Ha'way, ha'way, you're missing the fun," so away we runs to the hotel. When we were in the doors, the band struck up "Happy birthday to you ..." We were all sitting at the front, all the Horden gang was sitting at the front you know. The compere, he got on the stage, he was announcing, "We've got a lady in the hall, will she please come up and show her tattoos." "Oh," I says to the women, "so a tattooed wife is gannin' up here, we'll have a look at her." They were all eager to see the tattooed wife. Nobody was going up, so I says, "Why, where is she, must be shy, she's frightened to go up." Then he shouted again, announced it again, somebody says, "Hey, Liz, it's you, get away up." I says, "I'm not goin' up on the stage, showing my tattoos." Well, anyway I had to go up, and there was ... hundreds there. So I gets up, he announces the tattooed lady ... I shows them my name, takes me frock off, I was standing in my under-skirt you know, shows this name here. Somebody yells out of the audience, "Show your ship." and I says, "Oh, I forgot about my ship." So I was making believe that I was taking my slip off, "Oh," I says, "ladies and gentlemen, you know there's been a war don't you?" "Yes." I had told them all to shout yes. "Yes, well," I says, "you know that man called Hitler?" "Yes." "Well," I says, "he came after my ship and I scuttled it." I got off the bloody stage like a shot of a gun. We laughed about that day.

Interviewer – And have you any other tales of characters who were living in Horden at that time? The best known ones, like when the carnivals were on?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh, the carnivals, poor Mrs. Carr used to run the carnivals, dress her front door all up for the carnivals. She had two daughters, she always had them dressed up. We had a lorry once dressed up for the carnival, I had a photograph of that one, with me and Jane Matthews on, you know, Spencer Matthews, Charlie Matthews, why their mother was on but the photograph has gone.

Interviewer – What were you doing in the carnival? What were you doing on the trolley?



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Mrs. Holmes – Well, the trolley we had used to say, “We take coppers” – Koppers owned the coke ovens, we had a big white sheet tied over the top of the trolley. We used to be regular attenders at the carnivals. The first carnival in Horden was – I was married in 1913, the war broke out in 1914, the first carnival in Horden was 1915. How I remember that one is because Dr. Martin was here then, he was at the carnival, somebody was bad (ill), I was with him. He says, “Oh come on, we’ll have to hurry, I’m on the carnival today.” So that was the first carnival in Horden, 1915. Somebody once came out of the club to ask me when the first carnival was on, because they knew we were here then. But when we came here, we came just after the club was burnt down, 1910.

Interviewer – What was the carnival like in those days?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh, dressed up little Paddy Rafferty, did you know Paddy Rafferty? He used to get dressed up and dance in front of the bands and banners, going around the streets, all the bairns had bicycles made up with paper flowers, the dad used to have the bicycles made up for the bairns, not our bairns, because we had none, he used to do all that for the other bairns. He also used to cobble all the neighbours bairns’ shoes.

Interviewer – Paddy Rafferty, you were saying, Mrs. Holmes, what was he like as a character?

Mrs. Holmes – Well, he was jokey, you know, acted daft, to please the bairns, to make the bairns laugh. Then the bairns used to have the bicycles all decorated up and dressed up as fairies or cowboys or something like that. Then the men and women were dressed up. I was always among the crowd, you know, following along with the people, keeping the bairns in order. I was supposed to keep the order for the bairns, carry the banner and that. They used to have some lovely carnivals but it’s all jazz bands now.

Interviewer – And you played football?

Mrs. Holmes – Yes.

Interviewer – Who did you play for?

Mrs. Holmes – Horden Coke Ovens. That’s the football team you’ve got on the postcard (photograph).

Interviewer – Yes. Tell us about when you played football, how did you come to play?

Mrs. Holmes – Well, when we worked on the ovens, the boss got us together, he said, “Well, we’ll have some sport done on a Saturday afternoon and on a night



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time.” We used to go up training in the field, the same football field is there yet. We used to go there training. Well we got this football team up, for charity matches.

Interviewer – All women?

Mrs. Holmes – All women charity matches, Hartlepool football team used to come and play us, we used to go to Hartlepool to play them, we would go to Wingate to play them, there were football teams all over the place then. We used to go on the train. It was only about sixpence in the train then to Sunderland or Hartlepool. We used to travel round every weekend, to play football. Then we got our new football uniforms. Now, when the war finished and the men came home from the war, Mr. Holmes came home, he wanted to go back to the pit, why the pitmen then wore what they call pit hoppers (briefs), “Well, where am I going to get a pair of pit hoppers now I am gannin’ back to the pit, you want pit stockings to gan back to the pit, you want pit shoes to gan back.” He wanted rigging out for the pit. So he was a cobbler, he could make a pair of shoes, never mind mend a pair. So he put the bars, leather bars across my football shoes, he made them his pit shoes till he got a pay, until he could go and get a pair of pit shoes. He made my football shoes into a pair of pit shoes – he made my football trousers into a pair of hoppers, he had to wear them for hoppers until he got a pay or two, then he got his own pit clothes bought.

Interviewer – You said something about a uniform, Mrs. Holmes – what do you mean? You got your uniform at the colliery?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh, we had a uniform at the ovens. We had a khaki uniform, long trousers, a long coat, with a round hat you know, we got these uniforms supplied at the coke ovens. We gets the uniform, well, we collects our bundle at the office, gans yem (home), tries them on, and me, young and daft, I would go up to show my man’s father. I lived in Second Street, he lived on Eighth Street. So I says, “I have a letter to post.” I was writing to the dad in India, so I had it to post, I went to get a stamp in the post office, when I came to come out I couldn’t get out for all the bairns in Horden, they were all over the post office, they flew all over the streets to see the woman in trousers.

Interviewer – So you were the first woman in Horden with trousers?

Mrs. Holmes – With trousers on, yes, and uniform, when I had to come back from the post office, I couldn’t get out. So when a few bairns got out, instead of me going down to Second Street, I had to double back up to Eighth Street to Mr. Holmes’s father’s. I said, “I cannot get yem (home), our Billy will have to take me down yem.” That’s Mr. Holmes’s brother, I said, “He’ll have to take me down yem – get shot (rid) of all the bairns because they are all after me, because I have trousers on.” But I was the first one to go out in the street with them on. Well, the next morning we got them on, went to work then and we worked in them, you see.



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Interviewer – Did you work as a team ... all you women, did you work as a team when you were on the coke ovens?

Mrs. Holmes – Work as a team, aye, I mixed the concrete on the board, I was the only woman that could fill a barrow left handed. We were on a concrete board, there is right handed side and left handed to mix the concrete also to fill your barrow, I was left handed, because I could fill the barrow left handed. Mrs. Timmins and them couldn't, they were right handed. So I always pushed on the left handed side of the barrow, to fill the concrete. We used to have to wheel those barrows of concrete on a plank, the plank went up the wall like that (demonstrates) up onto the ovens and we still did it, we had to do it.

Interviewer – Did you ever get back strain or any accidents?

Mrs. Holmes – No, no. No accidents, no compensation if you got any accidents, so we had no accidents. No, you never used to get a thing.

Interviewer – How did you enjoy yourself in those days, Mrs. Holmes? Everybody enjoyed themselves?

Mrs. Holmes – Yes, they were happy days them, but they'll never come back, those days, because the young'uns today wouldn't do what we did, they couldn't anyway. They couldn't do it now. I was really a strong woman.

Interviewer – And how did you come to be a strong woman in the first place? Was it doing washing or something? Did you ever do washing?

Mrs. Holmes – Doing everything, because I did everything. I worked all the days of my life from being a bairn. Possing, washing, double possing, poss with a double posser, I had one standing there (facing another few yards apart) ... double posser.

Interviewer – When was this?

Mrs. Holmes – Oh, before we left school. We used to stand on a pit cracket (stool), a little pit cracket to stand on, I would only be the height of the poss tub. I used to poss down when the other one had her poss stick up, she went down and I went up, when she went down I went up. That's the way we used to double poss. That's the way we used to get the shirts clean. Then we used to have to put them on a table, get a big scrubbing brush, scrub our eyes out on them – to get them clean. Now they put them in bloody new fashioned powder and they come clean without any scrubbing. They just use these new fashioned powders they get, it's supposed to soak the dirt out and soak the much out, never used to soak our muck out of our clothes. We used to have all those pit clothes to do on a Friday night. We used to do all them and if it was bad weather we used to have to dry them in the house, a line across the house, to dry the pit clothes for the man going back to work.



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When Mr. Holmes's father and mother died, I had a colliery house, his father had a colliery house. I had one at Second Street, and he has one at Eighth Street. Now, I went to the colliery to see about a big house, because there was our Bill, he wasn't married, our Jack, Bob, Tom, Joby, George, there was my husband, that's five, six, seven ... eight workers. That was eight men and two women, me and our Meg. That was ten. Well, I went to the office, I said I wanted a bigger house. Now the biggest houses then were facing Nimmo's, new Third Street is it, aye, new Third Street. I said, "There's a new house coming empty in new Third Street." I said, "Can I have that house, if I give up my house in Second Street and Mr Holmes gives up his house in Eighth Street?" because he had died. I said we had all that family. So they said, "Yes, you can have that house." You could go up to the colliery in those days, and get a house, they were standing empty looking at you. So we gave those two houses up to get this one house in Third Street. I took the lot - we all went there. Well, our Bill, he was the oldest, he was courting a girl at Houghton, so he went to Houghton and he got married. Then our Meg, she was courting Patsy Robertson's son, Jack Robertson, the preacher now, his brother, his father used to pay the Lloyd George out ... Well, our Meg got married to him, then after she got married, our Bill got married, there was our Tom, Bob and all the rest at home, we still lived in Third Street. Well when our Meg got married I says to her, "You go and get a colliery house of your own, because," I says, "this house now is really too big for me," because I had no family then. Well, I says, "I'll go back to the colliery and I'll get two houses back for this one." So I went back to the colliery and I got a house in First Street, the second door from the bottom beside Paddy's market there, she got a house there for her and her man, I got one in Eighth Street. Our Bob came with me, our Jack, Tom, Toby and our Georgie went with our Meg. They went with their sister, I took the other ones with me, our Bob and a lad called Machinlay that I fetched up out of the Catholic Homes. I says to our Meg, "Now you get shifted," see, they all had gone to work. I said, "You get shifted before the father comes in, because," I says, "when he comes in he'll go mad," because he didn't know that we were shifting, didn't know what I was doing, you know. He wouldn't go and do nothing, so I had to do it. So I says, "You get moved, get away, when he comes in it will be alright." I'd given her all her father's furniture to go into her new house with, I had my own to come back into and when he came down the yard, came in ... "What the world's the matter here!" "Oh," I says, "we're all alone, our Meg's gettin' a colliery house in First Street, and I've gettin' a one in Eighth Street." He said, "I'm going to no Eighth Street." I said, "But we are you know." I said, "You've got no other choice." I said, "If you don't want to go you can go somewhere else. But," I said, "I'm going to Eighth Street, I was married out of Eighth Street and I'm going back to Eighth Street." So I gets myself worked up (angry), he went over to his sister's out of the front door ... what he was going to do at his sister's you know, because she had took a picture or something which she hadn't to have, belonging to his mother, so I says, "I didn't want the picture." "Why, she's not having it," and one thing ... Well, when he went over



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there, their house was all finished, cleaned, all finished, they were sitting down getting a cup of tea, mine was a wreck (laughs). So when he came in, I had his dinner ready, when he came back, he said, "I'm not going to Eighth Street." So I said, "Please yourself whether you go or not." I said, "Our Bob's going with me." There was me, Bob and our Georgie, the youngest one and then I had that lad Mackinlay out of the homes. Why we didn't ... somebody fetched him out and didn't look after him. When we were on the ovens, the boss says, "If you don't take that lad to look after, instead of fetching him food here," he says, "I'm going to sack him." So I took the lad, because he was only a laddie about 14 and I took him, he's living at Houghton, now, I think.

Interviewer – Was there a Catholic home in Horden?

Mrs. Holmes – No, the Catholic home was at Carlisle, but it was a Catholic who took him out of the home, and gave him to a woman called ... she didn't look after him. She wasn't feeding him. The boss of the ovens, Turner, said, "If you don't take him, we're going to sack him," because I was taking him sandwiches to work. So I took him then. Why, when the father came home, with me not being a Catholic, the father (Priest) came after me. He told me I had to send him to Catholic home, he had to go to somebody who was a Catholic. So he says, "When I'm 18 I'm coming back here." Well, during that time Mr. Holmes had come back from the war, well, he didn't know I had taken this lad, he knew through our letters, but anyway he used to come down at night to get a bit supper with the da' and that. Anyway gets up one morning and I says to the da', "Oh, it's Jimmy's birthday today." He says, "Aye, he's supposed to be coming back today isn't he?" I said, "He said he would but I don't think he'll bother." He says, "I don't know about not bothering, he's here." He was in the back yard with his carrier and parcel, no cases then. I opened the door, said, "Oh, where are you going?" He says, "I've come back home." He came back when he was eighteen, well he went in the army then, he got married and he lives at Houghton and he's still alive.

Interviewer – Can you remember when Mrs. Curry had her family?

Mrs. Holmes – Her five bairns – aye.

Interviewer – Could you tell us about them?

Mrs. Holmes – The butcher's wife. Dr. Martin was with her when she had those bairns, because he nearly took a fit when they, you know, one after another, I think he was going to collapse if there had been another one. She had five. Well, Mr. Holmes was in India, then. It was in the papers, somebody had sent the papers out, "Horden butcher's wife gives birth to five children." Well, they used to shout to Mr. Holmes, "Hey, who's had five bairns?" He says, "Oh, I don't know anything about



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her, I've not been in Horden for a long time, you know." It was then I wrote and told them who it was, but they all died.

Interviewer – But were they all alive when they were born?

Mrs. Holmes – No, two alive.

Interviewer – Two alive ... three dead?

Mrs. Holmes – Three born dead, the other two just died after. They all died though. She was only a little, very little, tiny woman, did you know her?

Interviewer – Yes. Was that the first time you ever heard of a woman having five children at once, Mrs. Holmes?

Mrs. Holmes – Aye, they were the first that I can remember, I think I would have bloody well died if it had been me. Mind my mother had three in one birth, and I can remember her having them three bairns when we lived at Ryhope, I can remember she had the triplets and I remember her getting three guineas off the Queen for them. I was only a bairn at the time, but I can remember her putting them in front of the fire in a blanket in a clothes basket.

Interviewer – And did they live?

Mrs. Holmes – No, they died, and my sister has had twice twins, four boys, and they are all six footers, one died, he lived at Birmingham, but the other three live at Hebburn New Town.



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