

Chapter One

LIFE IN THE COFFEE POT

I was born in what was called The House on the front street in the old part of Trimdon Colliery that for some reason was known as Coffee Pot. Behind it, in a split-level situation, was another building linked with a wall and this was The Burton Hotel.

Looking at various documents, I've discovered that my great-grandfather, Thomas Cunliffe, my father's mother's father, came up from Galborne in Lancashire in the mid- or early-1800s with his wife, Alice Travis, who'd been his next door neighbour. They'd married in 1886. They moved to Wingate and then at some point came to Trimdon and took over the lease of The Burton Hotel.

He was still alive when I was born and I have vivid memories of him. Accommodation was in short supply and I can remember people were living in huts, lean-tos and derelict building. In his wisdom, he turned the hotel into a rooming house and let rooms out to young married couples.

I think The House was always part of the hotel and had been where the owner lived. When my father got married, Thomas had said, "You and your wife move into The House and I'll move into one of the rooms down at the bottom", which he did.

My mother and father were second cousins and met at a camp-site at Crimdom Dene in 1945. Her grandmother on her father's side had been Elizabeth Darby and had married a man called Rooks. So on the family tree my mother and father come down on the left and the right-hand sides. They married in 1946 and I came along a year after. The church at Blackhall, where Honor was born in Second Street, had burned down, so they had to get married at Hutton Henry.

I was born on Friday July 4 1947 and my brother Peter was born exactly three years later, on Friday July 7 1950. Many years later, when I was running The Blue Bell, I met a lady who used to deliver our milk with her husband. She told me she'd called at our house for the milk money on the day I was born to be told by whoever answered the door that Honour had had her first son.

She even remembered it was a red hot day and they all thought, "Poor Honor, giving birth in that heat". When my father got to the registry office he'd forgotten the name my mother had given him for me, which was Edward. So he gave me his own name and Ron it was!

I have vague recollections of my brother being born. I seem to see my mother in bed and a lot of activity but I don't get a bad feeling from it as I might have if she'd been ill. Certain smells take me there, I think it's the smell from the nurse. I've got snippets of memories, like sitting on my great-grandfather's knee. He was very typical of the men of that era, when they all had thick moustaches. His had gone grey and he was bald.

I have another recollection of being told he'd died and asked if I'd like to see him. I ran out to tell my Mum they'd put him in a drawer, which was obviously a coffin. When I saw a photograph of him years later it was exactly as I remembered him.

Thomas's son, my father's uncle, Jack Cunliffe, took over the running of the business. He was married to Ada, Aunt Ada we called her, and he was a bit of a tyrant. He was a would-be farmer and had a smallholding. In those days if you worked at the pit you got free coal and sometimes you didn't need it the next time it was delivered so you would sell it to a neighbour and Jack would move it for you and he would transport other things and also people from A to B. Many young couples got married and began their married lives in the rooms. Some of them are still alive and when I go back to Trimdon I see children who were born in the rooms.

I remember Andrew Tempest very well and can recall his funeral in about 1959. He was a prominent figure in my life. During the war Catherine had moved to Darlington to take over a workingmen's club. The men were away at war and women were allowed to take on these jobs with the proviso that when the men returned they got their jobs back. They then moved into a pub called The Golden Lion, in Brunswick Street, which isn't there any more.

My first recollection of that was seeing Andrew Tempest outside the pub on a beer crate. I think his activity in the pub was limited but he was a massive gambler and at one time won a huge amount of money, which he shared with his stepchildren, apart from my father, because when my grandmother moved to Darlington his other three children went with her. But my father stayed in Trimdon, so that when there were any handouts, he was overlooked. The

two daughters, a stepdaughter and a daughter-in-law were all bought fur coats with the proceeds of that win. I'm told my mother's face was a picture on her next visit to Darlington to see her sisters-in-law all wearing these mink coats. From then on, her relationship with her mother-in-law deteriorated.

People in Trimdon called anyone named Andrew, "Andra" and that's what we called him. I remember the day of his funeral. Andra had children from his first marriage and they were all there but I don't think there was any bad feeling among the family.

My grandmother was standing outside the pub in all black and I was left with Aunt Ada while she was doing the catering for the funeral.

In those days tea was made in white enamel buckets for big events. On this occasion I saw Ada having a pee in one of the buckets. I remember saying to Mum when she came back, "Don't have any tea because Ada's had a pee in that bucket!" She was a character!