

Chapter One

These Boots Were Made for Walking

I was always keen to fit in, even as a green strip of a lad, and I soon realised that my army-surplus boots were a bit out of place in my new surroundings at Bold Colliery in deepest Lancashire. I also noticed that a number of miners wore clogs.

Until then, the only time I'd seen this strange looking footwear was in a film starring Gracie Fields. I forget the name, but I recall it featured smiling mill workers, kindly bosses, Charabancs, Blackpool, terraced houses, wrap-a-round pinnys, flat caps, pulling together and an overwhelming tendency for 'Our Gracie' to burst into song with a voice that could shatter glass.

However, needing to stay abreast of footwear fashion, Lancashire style, and believing that a pair of clogs might make me feel more at home, I asked Charlie, one of our mechanics, where I might get some. This seemed to be a reasonable ploy, as Charlie always wore clogs even when driving his Austin A40 (the car of choice for the discerning mineworker).

"I'll get thee a pair if tha' wants," said Charlie and true to his word, on the following Monday, he duly presented me with a pair of black size tens, neatly tied together with a piece of string. Suddenly, the enormity of the situation started to dawn and, realising that I would be expected to wear them, I undid the string, removed my boots, slid my feet inside, tied the laces and stood up.

It was then that I made a fundamental error of judgement—I tried to walk.

It started off all right; I lifted a leg, pushed it forward, laid it down and tried to follow up with the other leg. Now normally, as you carry out this manoeuvre, you automatically bend the foot which is on the ground. Unfortunately, mine was now encased in a bloody great lump of unyielding wood; the end result was that I was suddenly thrust forward at an angle of about thirty degrees and crashed into Charlie's tool locker. This, for some unaccountable reason, seemed to amuse Charlie.

“I see tha’s never worn clogs before, owd lad.”

I thought, “Well you can’t fault Charlie for perception,” but it still left me in something of a quandary—if I couldn’t walk two steps without destroying a metal cupboard, how the hell was I going to walk two or three miles underground, without doing serious damage to my body, the walls of the tunnel and anyone else in my path?

Charlie, on seeing my stricken look, said, “It’s easy, just remember a clog doesn’t bend. You have to roll the sole forward, that’s why they’re curved underneath. Thar’ll soon git the hang of it.” And, as if to prove the point, he left me hanging onto his cupboard and clattered off up the workshop—the swine.

So, standing as casually as I could and with a marked reluctance to leave the safety of the locker, I realised a number of things: I should give up on my never-ending search for sartorial elegance; clogs were very stiff and very heavy and had been invented by some madman (probably Dutch) and what’s more, had convinced an entire population that they were a good idea. And finally—I realised I would have to learn a whole new way of walking.

Oh, and did I mention that the soles and heels were shod with a curved steel bar running around the perimeter, reminiscent of a designer horse-shoe. Obviously a good idea in order to preserve the life of the wood, but—as I was about to find out—devastating if you stepped onto a metal surface.

So, pretending to be in no hurry, I checked that no one was watching, geared myself up and lurched forward by rolling my feet as instructed and keeping both leg muscles in a state of complete lock-down. Progress can best be described by imagining Boris Karloff, in his favourite role as Frankenstein’s monster, clumping off down the hill in search of a friendly virgin. Only in my case I wasn’t looking for anyone, virginal or otherwise, and the only person being terrorised was me.

Anyway I finally got to the workshop door and set off across the pit yard. Gaining confidence with every stride and trying to ignore the fact that my calf muscles were now in spasm, I went forth.

Until, that is, I stood on a locomotive rail. At this point, the airborne leg began to emulate the adagio stage of one of Dame Margot Fonteyn’s more acrobatic ‘pas de deux’, whilst the other attempted to screw itself into the ground. Sadly, unlike Dame Margot, I didn’t have the benefit of Rudolph Nureyev to catch me, which meant that, having given up being airborne, I landed in a disgusting heap on the ground.

It was quickly becoming obvious that in order to be able to go forwards

and avoid breaking my legs, I had lots of new techniques to master. And all to be achieved if possible, without anyone witnessing the sight of a tall idiot, rolling along at an alarming angle, watching for rails, trying to keep upright and stopping at regular intervals to relieve the onset of cramp in both legs.

There was, however, no option but to persevere. After all when you've spent two pounds sixteen shillings and ninepence on state of the art footwear, you can't just pretend they've been stolen.

Later on, whilst on my usual eagle-eyed stroll around the coal face and just as I thought mastery was in sight, the left clog iron came loose. Sadly, as the iron was now fastened to the underside of the clog by one nail at the front, it tipped forward. I now found that instead of putting my foot safely on the floor, I was suddenly suspended on the twin points of a curved iron, intent on digging itself into the ground.

The end result was that one leg made an inadvertent attempt to pole vault over the iron, while at the same time, the rest of my body took to the air once more and I bloody well fell over again.

To my utter amazement, I learned that some people wore a pair for Sunday best. Apparently they were highly polished with a strap fastener over the instep and were known as 'Dandy Clogs'. The other interesting thing was that some misguided folk used to dance in the damn things—well so did I, but not on purpose.

You can see I'd been thinking a good deal about clogs—generally whilst lying on the ground—and I don't believe people were dancing in the footwear from hell at all—I think they were just making gallant attempts to stay upright.

I finally came to the conclusion that if I was to avoid either breaking my legs, or being renowned throughout the pit for falling over, it was definitely time to visit the Army Surplus Stores again. This time I would buy a nice new pair of second-hand boots, preferably a pair having been worn by a Desert Rat. After all, if they were good enough to beat Rommel—they'd be good enough for me.