

After making documentaries about downtrodden workers all over the world, Jan Nimmo is finally looking back at her own legacy, in the pits of Argyll. **Billy Briggs** meets her

# ME and MINE

**‘Y**OUNG Jimmy Woodcock asked me if I'd be getting get my mouth organ out for a sing song going back up the mine and those were the last words I ever heard from him. About three tons of coal came down and fell on him. I had to carry him up to the mortuary. It was the sorriest time for me at the pit," says Willie McKinlay, speaking on camera. The former Argyll miner is recalling his worst moment as a pit worker at one of Scotland's most remote coalfaces for a new film that tells the story of Kintyre's last mine, the Argyll Colliery.

Today, there are almost no physical traces of the pit and a caravan park stands at the spot close to the spectacular Machrihanish Bay. To many it would be hard to imagine that a mine once thrived there, or that the coal industry flourished far from Scotland's Central Belt on a remote West Coast peninsula facing the Atlantic Ocean. But Jan Nimmo's film, *The Road to Drumleman: Memories of the Argyll Colliery*, pays tribute to the men who laboured invisibly beneath the wild and unspoilt shores of western Kintyre and documents Argyll Colliery's life until it closed in 1967.

The film is a highly personal venture produced by a Glasgow-based visual artist who embarked on the project after her father, former Argyll Colliery shot firer Neil Nimmo, died in January, 2007. It was then she realised that there was an urgent need to gather the stories of the few remaining retired miners. Through their narratives, Nimmo's work provides a historical treasure that offers an insight into their lives, hardships and camaraderie. Through their testimonies, complemented by sepia photographs and old footage, the film portrays the contribution the miners made to their community via art, drama, family life and sport. It also highlights the mine's tragedies such as the death of Jimmy Woodcock and an inferno that raged underground for 61 days back in 1958.

Coal mining in Kintyre can trace its history back to the 13th century when fuel found in

Tirfergus Glen provided heat for King James IV's castles at Kilkerran in Campbeltown and Dunaverty, in Southend. Conditions in the privately owned mines were treacherous. In the 18th century, for example, the forced labour of both men and women was prevalent and these mines, Nimmo notes, were worked by generations of families from South Kintyre such as the Thompsons, the Kerrs, the Gillespies, and also her own family on her father's maternal side, the Browns.

"My Grampa Bob came to Drumlemb from Lanarkshire and found work as a miner at Macrihanish," Nimmo says.

"He met and married my granny, Bella Brown, a local woman whose brothers were miners too. Both my father, Neil Nimmo, and his twin brother, Ramsay, were born in Drumlemb and worked at the Argyll Colliery. Their younger brother, John, worked there briefly too. Ramsay left to work at a mine in England where he married and raised a family."

Workers have been the subject matter of her

ised drama, dances and annual gala days at the beaches for local children. "Many miners were musicians, such as Campbell Maloney and Charlie McMillan of Campbeltown Pipe Band - or were artists - like my Dad, who left school at 12 and was determined that his two girls would get the chance to go to art school. I don't think I can put in words, really, how much the mine meant to the town but there was and still is a real sense of pride that relates back to the colliery.

"When we showed the film at a special premiere night during the summer there was a real sense of community and pride in the legacy of the mine, which I thought might have disappeared. It was very clear that the mine's existence had really marked so many families."

Nimmo is humbled that such a personal project has been met with such enthusiasm as she had been nervous about local reaction.

"It's obviously a personal work and was made for personal reasons but I'm hopeful that the film will stand as a piece which records the human stories behind the colliery's official history. The most enjoyable part of it all was making contact with the men I interviewed as they were all brilliant communicators and contributors."

One aspect that surprised, Nimmo, was that - aside from one former miner - every interviewee, in spite of their hardships, spoke highly of their days at the mine.

"Although they all went on to work in jobs elsewhere after the mine closed, it seemed that mining has a level of camaraderie and solidarity which they didn't later experience and that through the dangers faced daily in the workplace, any problems that they might have had on the surface, were forgotten below ground because they had to look out for one another."

That brotherhood came to the fore again last week, Nimmo adds, when the astonishing rescue of the Chilean miners prompted her to call several of the men whom she had interviewed for the film. "They were gripped by the Chilean mining rescue and were all taking about it, and it seemed to me that there is some strange kind of brotherhood of men who work in mining, which also extends to their families."

Since the summer screening more tales from the pit have come to the fore and Nimmo has been overwhelmed by the response from the community. Her film also prompted the son of James Woodcock, the miner killed in the Machrihanish mining disaster in 1951, to contact Nimmo and thank her personally.

Jim Woodcock, who lives in Australia, never knew his father as his mother, Cathy, was seven months pregnant when her husband died. In an email he wrote: "My Dad was Jim Woodcock who was killed in the Machrihanish mining disaster in 1951. I've always had an interest in finding out more about what actually happened. He was

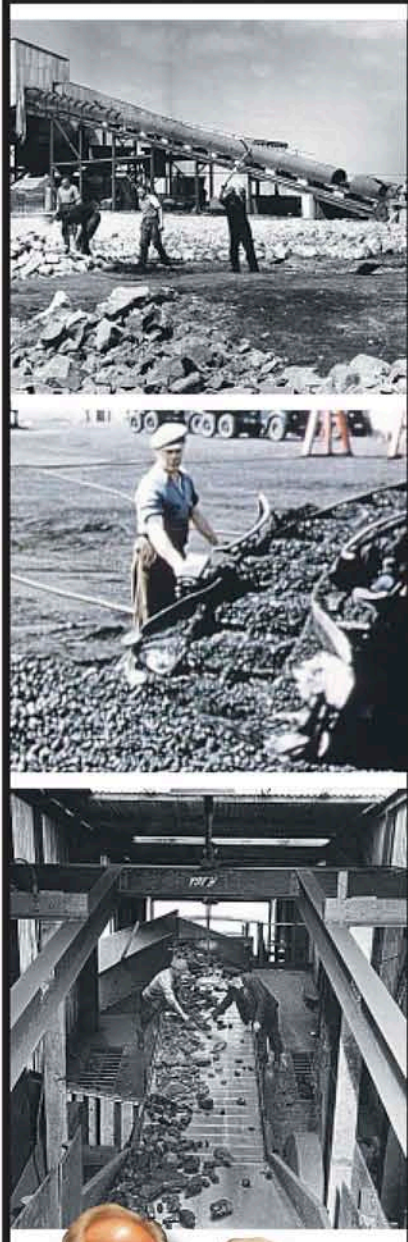
Clockwise from main, the 'brotherhood' at Argyll Colliery; disaster victim Jim Woodcock with wife Cathy; Jan Nimmo and contributors to her film; a picking table at Argyll Colliery; a moment from 1955 film *Kintyre*, which appears in *Road to Drumlemban*; breaking up stone at Argyll; the exterior and its sign, as seen in *Kintyre*

films previously. In 2004 the award-winning documentary *Bonita-Ugly Bananas* exposed the human rights abuses of banana workers in Ecuador while *Pura Vida* in 2005 highlighted the environmental damage caused by intensive banana and pineapple production in Costa Rica. It wasn't until after her father's death, though, that Nimmo decided to focus on an issue closer to home and in the place she grew up.

"I regret very much not starting the project when my father was alive. He was always saying 'what are you doing, going to all those faraway places such as Ecuador and Costa Rica and making films about banana workers? - you should be making one about the mine and about the workers there,'" Nimmo says. Now resident in Glasgow, she left Campbeltown aged 17 to attend art school but she kept in touch with the community and visits regularly.

She has fond memories of the place where she grew up.

Her film depicts the vibrancy of the former pit town, chiming with her childhood memories, and explains how the miners fund-raised for hospitals, started football teams, organ-





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one of the first to be employed at the mine. His mother, my Gran, Isabel Woodcock, lived until the 1990s and as she got older she gave me all the cuttings, death certificate and a few photos.

"After my Dad died, my mother moved back to Paisley to be with her own mother, however we always kept in touch with Campbeltown through Gran. It [the film] brought back some memories from the Campbeltown I remember of the late 1950s/60s. When Willie McKinley started talking about young Jimmy Woodcock, I really sat up and then saw the picture of my parents and my Dad's grave which I've visited several times. My

Mum died at the beginning of 2009, however, I know she would have been happy to think that something had actually been recorded.

"I've already shown the DVD to both my daughters and granddaughters and it's given them some insight into their background. The DVD will become part of the Woodcock ancestry and I am absolutely delighted to think that my heritage has been so well documented."

Sadly, the man who carried James Woodcock to the surface after his fatal accident in 1951, and who spoke candidly of that day in the film, has also died. Willie McKinley passed away before

Nimmo's film was finished, as did two other interviewees, Jim Fowler and John Anderson. Nimmo says she was "gutted" that those three men did not see her finished piece but she has been in touch with their families and hopes that the story of Argyll Colliery will in some small way contribute to the memories of their parents.

● *The Road to Drumleman: Memories of the Argyll Colliery*, will be screened at Document 8 Human Rights Film Festival on 31 October, at CCA, Glasgow, and there will be another community screening at Machrihanish Village Hall on 6 November.

