

# Bruised Fruit

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A Twist in the Tale

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Bruised Fruit I worked at Westoe Colliery in South Shields for almost twenty years. I was a fully fledged Powerloader, meaning I was on top earnings when this story happened. By mining standards, Westoe was a wet pit. Lots of water down there. But you didn't really worry about it, because the big Mackley Pumps used to draw water out at one million gallons a day, every day, for years and years. So we felt reasonably safe, except of course for any roof-falls or cave-ins, which could happen at any time, trapping the un-wary. For all that it was wet, it could also be very cold, especially in winter. But it wasn't just the water, it was the cold north wind that used to come in from the sea (Colliery was about 500 yards from South Shields beach). Then it would head down the air intake shaft at a rapid speed. This intake was also where the men travelled down and back up, which was commonly known as the Westoe Shaft. The rushing air went round all the work areas, at least 100 miles through all the roadways and workings, including the miles of abandoned ones. It would then travel back up the return which was called the Crown Shaft, and where the coal and bigger materials would be transported for safety reasons well away from the men. During winter, the Surface Manager would put huge braziers of live coals at the top of the shaft so the air at least felt a little warmer for us, far far away in the deepest part of the mine, but by the time it reached us, it was just as cold. I think now, that it wasn't for us, it was for the men right down in the bottom levels, thirteen hundred feet to be exact, who were working in water up to their waists, pretty much their whole shift. Spring and summer were very different. Hot. It felt like a sauna when it got that hot. But the humidity was the worst, for example, someone could be standing watching a guy shovelling a big mound of spillage onto the conveyor belt, but because the person watching wasn't exerting themselves, therefore not working, they'd have a coat on to keep warm. Whereas the person shovelling, would probably be stripped to the waist or even their underwear to keep cool. Very weird, but again, just something you accepted. Next to the pit there was a greengrocers shop. It was run in those days by a very nice elderly couple. They'd been there forever, it seemed. They also catered to the miners by supplying chewing tobacco or assorted flavours of snuff. To some, these were essential to a good shift. I've witnessed miners turn around and go home, rather than go down the pit without tobacco or snuff. It was that important to them. In the hot summer months, we used to buy fruit from the couple. The juicier the fruit, the better. Sometimes plain water just wasn't enough to slake our thirsts, especially if the General

Manager was pushing production levels up to make quota targets, then we were working flat out. Very thirsty work is mining. So we'd buy from this couple all kinds of tropical fruit; mangoes, watermelons, avocados, honey melon, oranges, strawberries, grapes, grapefruit, and punnets of peaches by the bucket-load. We all loved the peaches the best. Very refreshing. We had a great working relationship with the old couple. They knew we'd be back year after year, so they didn't charge us too much, because we needed it, and we could have bought it elsewhere, so they kept their prices down to keep our custom. This successful partnership went on like this for a long time until finally the couple decided to retire. We were devastated by this news, because we'd depended so much on their generosity and kindness. It was so convenient, because their shop stood just outside the pit grounds. So after a few more weeks, they did retire. We wished them well and even had a whip-round with all the men and got them a card and a little present to show our appreciation, and how much we'd miss their home-spun friendliness. They moved on, the shop closed and was boarded up. The shop stood empty for a long while. But just when we thought we'd never see another shop like it there, another younger couple took it over. The following few weeks of spring was a hive-of-activity, we saw them to-ing and fro-ing with various bits of shelving all bright and new, we all wondered if they'd keep selling the fruit or was this to be yet another all-night-convenience-store, that seemed to be the new way then. Till one bright summer day, the new shop opened. A convenience store that sold everything under the sun from fruit to toilet rolls, bleach and papers ut no Chewing Tobacco or Snuff. A few miners ventured in there, "just to get the-lay-of-the-land-type of thing." The news wasn't good. It seemed they didn't like miners at all. They were stroppy and we were their main source of income. It all came to a head in the mid-summer of 1986. I was on my way in to work for the late shift, this meant down for 2pm and up for 9pm. A very hot shift this was, so we all had extra water and fruit. I went into the shop and got myself a punnet of peaches and made my way in to the pit grounds. Because it was such a hot day, I decided to open the peaches and have one there and then. You can imagine my face when I realised all the fruit were bad underneath. I marched back to the shop and demanded my money back, or an exchange for better fruit. I couldn't believe it when they refused. "No refunds!" We argued for quite a while, by then other miners had turned up and I shouted at them, "The Peaches are rotten!" whereupon every miner that was there inspected the boxes and saw I was telling the truth. The ones who had already bought some demanded a refund and the ones who hadn't bought any, quietly put them back and left the shop. Finally, in disgust, the miners who'd bought fruit, could see plainly they weren't getting a refund at all, so threw their punnets down on the ground, stomping and churning them into the floor, and left the shop muttering and cursing, vowing never to come in again. I was the last customer in the shop now. The couple still refusing point blank, to refund or swap. It was infuriating and unfair. So, because I had to leave straight away - I was becoming late for going down the pit - I picked up a bottle of Domestos bleach. You know the one, "Thick-and-Strong" for going in the toilet? I unscrewed the cap, which as some of you may know, isn't easy, and sprinkled the contents over the peaches displayed in the windows and on the shelves. They of course started to wither with the strength of the bleach. As I was leaving, I turned at the door and shouted, "You wont sell THOSE peaches to anyone else!" Then left. The police were called while

we were all down the pit and when we came up at 9pm, got showered and were walking through the canteen, they were asking about me, because I was seen as the ring-leader. I was well known to people, so someone pointed me out and I was arrested in front of everyone. It felt so embarrassing. I told the police my version of events, but they still arrested me. Do you know what they had the sheer audacity to actually arrest me for? Scroll down and I'll tell you. "Bleach of the Peach!" Heh heh ha ha... Sorry, it was a wind-up! Heh heh (the arrest part anyway).