Well, my name's Ernest Jeffrey. I'm better known as Jeff and I was born in Front Street, Leadgate actually. And I worked there for 50 year in Leadgate. That's funny enough as well, lived all my life in Leadgate apart from a little stint in Templetown. Just a normal childhood, like anybody else.

Oh well, my Mam died when I was 11 year old and she suffered with diabetes. And so I was sort of brought up with my Grandmother. Or my Granny as we called them in them days. And then my father remarried and brought us back together again because my brother was getting brought up with my Auntie and all his life he worked at the steelworks doing something. And an uncle. Most people around here worked there anywhere. Or the pits.

We just call them blast furnace men, you know, like they had the big wheel like iron barrows. Huge wheels and very heavy before they put the iron ore in to take up to the furnaces. How they lifted them I don't know. That's maybe why they were heavily built. And they worked out all the weather's, you know, there were, it was an open air job.

I got a job at 14, shoe repairing. Apprentice shoe repairer in Stanley. Started work at 14.

You didn't get any holidays in them days. You just, as soon as it was your birthday, if you got a job you just went to work. I can always remember having to start at half past seven in the morning and having to go to Stanley. And I've always been a bad getter upper. I always missed the bus!

And you work till about half five. That was about, and six days a week.

I can always remember I had to be best man for my next door neighbour. He was getting married and I only got a half a days off work for to go there. I can always remember my first wage, which was 16 and eight pence. I remember that and I got half a crown pocket money. I thought I was quids in!

Then your eighteenth birthday, you got national service in them days. And I was all over and ended up in Palestine for a while. And I was in the Airborne. Paras. But I was in the Remy at first, Royal Electrical Mechanical. I don't think they knew what to do with us when I was a shoe repairer.

And I was what they called a coach trimmer. We used to make the, the canvas things what you see on all the trucks and whatever and things like that.

Then I was up in Glasgow, a place called Bishopbriggs, terrible place. The barracks was anyway. Then they came and wanted volunteers for, to go into the Parachute Regiment. So the whole hut volunteered to get out of that place. Bishopbriggs anyway. But it was only about three of us that got through.

When I come out the army and I'd done my national service and so me and a friend of mine, we started up together in Leadgate in 1949, like I've said before. I think it was November the sixth. November anyway. And would just carried on from there. Then we built a business up.

Then my friend, my parter, he went away and started in Consett and then he moved and whatever. And I just stopped in Leadgate all my life. Cause I was born on Front Street, I worked on Front Street and I'm forgetting about that, I was born on Front Street as well. So I've got big ties with Leadgate.

Oh aye, and I'm a member of Leadgate Club. I've been a member since, I was the oldest serving member in Leadgate, I've been told anyway. I don't know, but that's what I've been told. Not the oldest member, the oldest serving member, about 50, 50 odd year. I'm not a boozer, but I like a pint and a bit, and a bit craic!

My brother got a job. And he was an apprentice draftsman at Templetown and then they moved over to the, to the main works later on. But the day of the accident was, well obviously it was a Saturday night and we got to know, I don't really exactly know how we got to know.

It was all going round to the district at the time, there was a big accident, a big disaster going on at the Company. And my father was on ten till six at the time. There was the three shifts, ten till six, six till two,

then whatever. And with him going at ten till six, my brother was working at the Company at the time. And he he says, I'd better go up lad and see what's happening.

I says, you know more about the Company than what I do because I'd never worked there. And so I don't know how he got there, whether he cycled or what, but I stopped with my sister and my mother, my stepmother and like sort of comforted her, cause she was crying.

My sister was only seven year old at the time. And we just waited till we got word and then my brother come home and told us. I don't think he knew that my Dad had died at the time, but he met an uncle of mine up there, my Uncle Joe, and he was walking about getting air cause he'd been gassed at that particular time. And he says, I think you'd better go home lad, to my brother. You know, the way they talked, he says, you better go home Ted he says and we'll see things what's happening in the morning lad, he says, but it doesn't look too good.

So my brother came home then and told us all about it, which I didn't really understand. Nobody understood at the time what was happening, but it was a big thing. Everybody the next day was talking in like hushed tones and you know, did you know this one kid being killed or that one had been killed or that one being the relations of this one. Because it was two people from, maybe two or three people from Castleside and Blackhill. It seemed to be all around the Company, but everybody knew somebody who'd, who had died in it.

And it went like wildfire round the district. But everybody knew somebody who had been killed in the disaster or a near miss or whatever.

Well, I would say maybe six, seven o'clock or something like that before they confirmed, who had...

Well, I think it was like a cabin type place. Something like that where the gas had escaped. I don't exactly know exactly. But was a, it was odourless gas, it was a thing nobody could tell so I know that my Dad had went in once and pulled somebody out. My Dad was very strong, muscular. He was 46 at the time and he'd be...

Nevermind. As far as I can gather anyway, he pulled, he dragged one out and he went back in for another one. Then I think he went back in for the third one, but never came back out again. The gas was, well you didn't know it was there. I didn't, I didn't know that he could've got out if he, if he hadn't gone back in again. And you just got to know where that like on the grapevine later on and that, you know.

But always remember going to the mortuary. That was a thing that sticks in my mind forever that like. It was at Shotley Bridge and I had distant relation, a relative went with me just to give us a bit support and I had to identify my Dad and things like that, but I can always remember the mortuary. It was all the bodies was there and they were like a tinged with green, with the gas, I suppose it was.

But apart from the 11 men that had been killed and things like that, there was all the other bodies from the hospital. So you can imagine what it was like, just walking into that and all the, the sheets. I'll never forget that as long as I live.

We never got to know really what happened, but they must have given him the certificate for something which, which come out later, which we didn't know about.

This is a plaque from the Carnegie Foundation or whatever it was and it's a bravery award, which I'm quite proud of. And I'm pleased it's getting recognised. Somebody, maybe it was done through the unions or something later on, you know, cause the union men were pretty good at the time. They were sort of helping you and trying to get compensation, which didn't happen really and we're just quite proud of him really.

But it's, it's sad as well at the time. But, but when I think back like, he must've been pretty brave to have done it, if that's the right word, I don't know. But if he was here now he would probably not like that

word. But you just help your fellow man, don't you? But when you think back at 11 year old, when youvre lost your first Mam, then apart from that I lost my first child when she was three months old as well so I'm quite used to losing people. But you know, you just don't talk about things like that. You just, that's life.

I just love family life. Like Christmases and birthdays I get spoiled. And I had a good wife, I was married for 62 year. I've got two letters from the Queen, so that speaks for itself!

Then I've got a good family and just, I think that's what it is. If you've got good family life, everything's, everything's okay. If you, if you treat them right, they treat you right. That's, that's what happened when you were young, you know. When my, when my Mam died and I thought I was brought up with my Granny, as we called her in them days. And my brother was brought up with an Aunt. And my Dad was having to go to work on shifts and things like that. And, and when he got married he brought us back together again, as a family.

My brother and me were very close. And then my sister, we're still close you know. We never fall out or anything like that.

I didn't really retire. I just knew a friend in Consett who was starting up. I helped them to start off actually. I helped them to pick the threads up cause he lost his job at the Company when the Company closed and he came to me and asked if he could pick the threads up and I helped him. He was a competitor too but I helped him anyway. Nevermind, when I retired I just went up there just for the talk and then you get involved, don't you? I just, I just love what I do.

It's never mentioned when, when dates comes up and things like that. You get mentions about disasters at the pits and in places like this and but it's very rarely that I've seen anything mentioned about the 11 men that were killed at Consett, that died at Consett and, and it's, it's, it's not right. To my mind it's not right anyway. There should be some memory of some sort, you know, and I'm pleased this is happening.