

ARIGNA

New Dreams and Old Fears in the Mining Community

FRANKIE WATSON

The bright lights of Arigna homes and of cars and motorbikes converging on Flynn's Pub, beckoned welcomingly as we drove into Arigna Village on a cold November night.

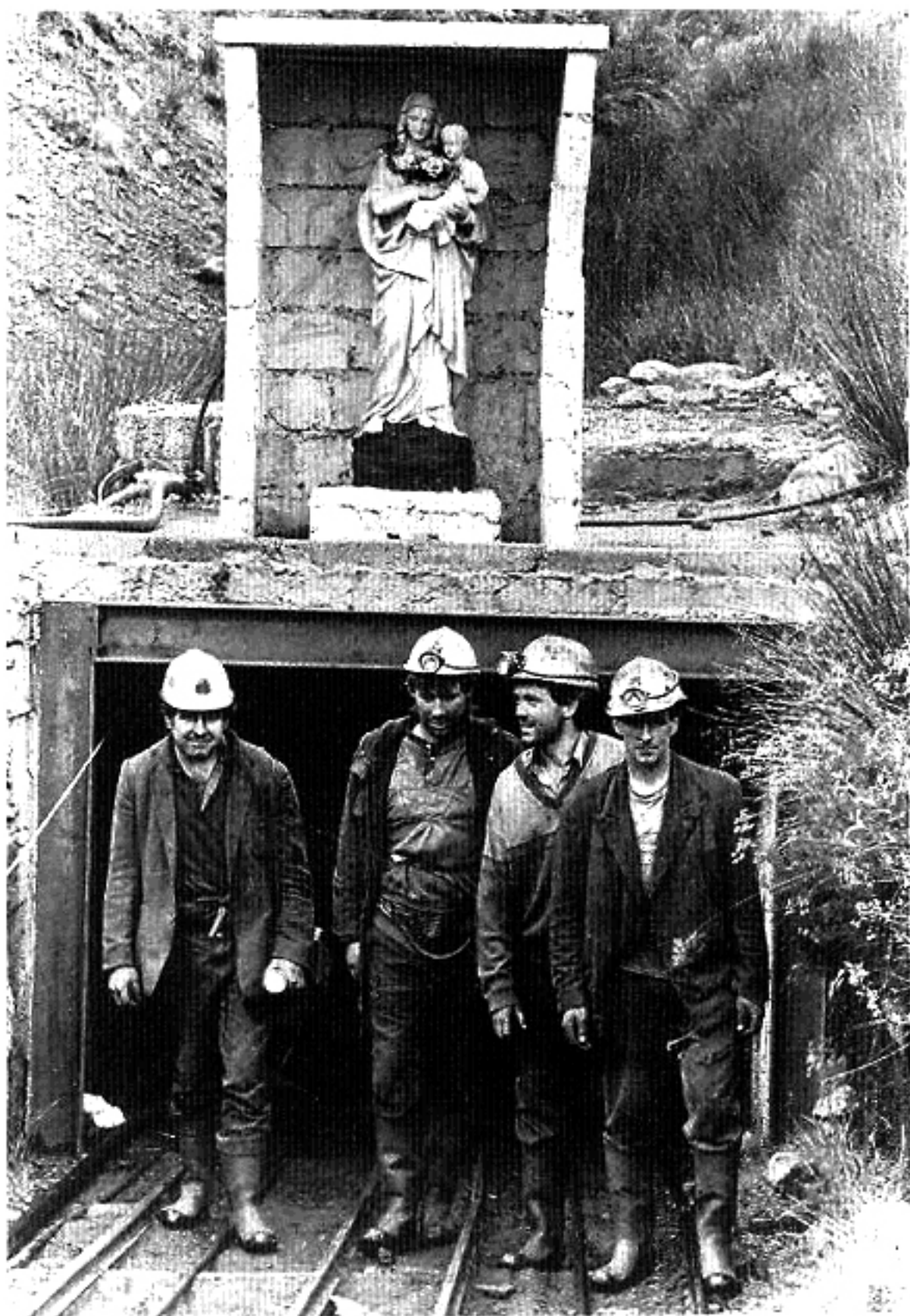
In the relaxed, friendly atmosphere of the pub, quiet men and vivacious girls sat apart.

Clair and Irene Conway talked about how people have changed since the mines were closed down. They are delighted that local women are working so earnestly to try to save the community. The Task Force appointed Ann Flynn as Facilitator/Co-ordinator. Several women are in the Arigna Community Development Company. "It's not only the miners but wives and mothers who are doing the FÁS Course to train people how to establish Worker Co-operatives. It's strange but great to see my mother going around carrying folders and doing surveys and projects," Irene said. "I'm happy to be living at home and to have work in Foley's in Drumshanbo. The cheerful confident girls did not stay long. They left to go to Rockin Robin's Disco in Carrick-on-Shannon.

An old man with a jagged, blue scarred face shook Mary's hand. "I worked with your father Harry Barry for years in the pits." They reminisce. Young men ask me insistently. You tell us what is going to happen in Arigna? Do you think any outside Industry will come here? Do you honestly believe that that wood pulp factory will be set up in Co. Leitrim? We were told there would be forty to fifty jobs in the Briquette Factory. Where are those jobs? What's the use in putting on a course to teach us skills when there are no jobs? We have skills they never had. We're miners. Did you know that we're being "hounded" about the mortgage repayments? What's a house worth now in Arigna? What kind of choice has a man with a wife and children got, if he has to either emigrate or stay here where there is no work? Will Larry Goodman or Gallagher have to pay back the money they owe? An old man urged patience. "Ye'll make the payments. Ye'll manage to pay it back. The young man joined the old to deal and play cards until pub closing time.

A young man sang the line "She can find her own way home" repeatedly to himself. A companion jibed good humouredly, "But you used to love her, You used to lover wanst".

Outdoors in the cold, calm night, posters of Dessie Ellis, Hunger Strike No Extradition, were discernible in the light shining through the Pub windows. Hidden in the darkness were the ruins of iron works, clay works, a railway system and abandoned mines. The industrial projects established by colonisers, landlords and business men in Arigna over the past 400 years are now field studies for industrial archaeologists. I thought . . . The card players and dancers will be part of a new era here or elsewhere.



Devotion to the Blessed Virgin – a central core in the religious beliefs of Arigna miners.

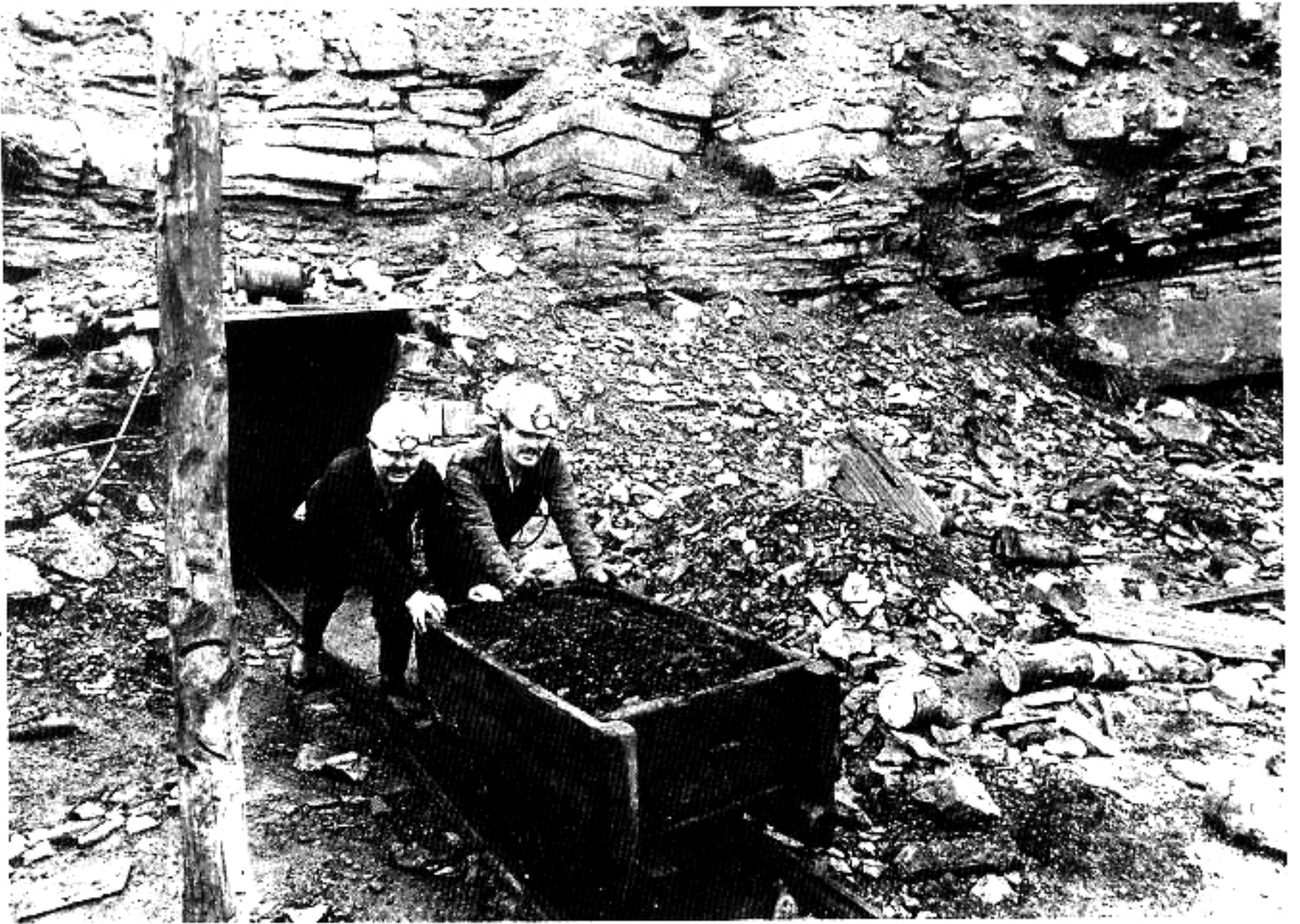
The lights in the mountainside and valley homes are reassuring proof that a remarkable community, has survived dispossession, plantation, evictions and emigration. The dispossessed destroyed Sir Charles Coote's ironworks in 1641. All McManus land was distributed to the Coote Family, yet as the man in the Pub proudly said, "Where are The Cootes? There are more McManuses in Arigna now than ever there were." The descendants of the people who were rackrented tenants on Colonel Tenison's Estate or who worked in his mines at Aughabchy or Tullylions are thriving in their native areas or overseas. Their remarkable history of survival does not quell the fears of local people of the encroaching forestry, plantations. You are told about the "prophesy" that the time will come when there will be nothing only trees on the Arigna Mountains. The white marble and pale grey headstones in the graveyard on the hill are pages of Arigna's History.

The miners who died young of tuberculosis or silicosis or in mining accidents are buried there. There too, are the graves of people who carried iron stones in creels down Sliabh An Iarann, who cut coal in narrow seams with a pick, who pushed heavy hutches, who fought the landwar, the war of independence and a tragic civil war. They left an inheritance of music, song, dance and story. There are reassuring lights in homes where families are already looking forward to the home coming of emigrant sons and daughters for Christmas.

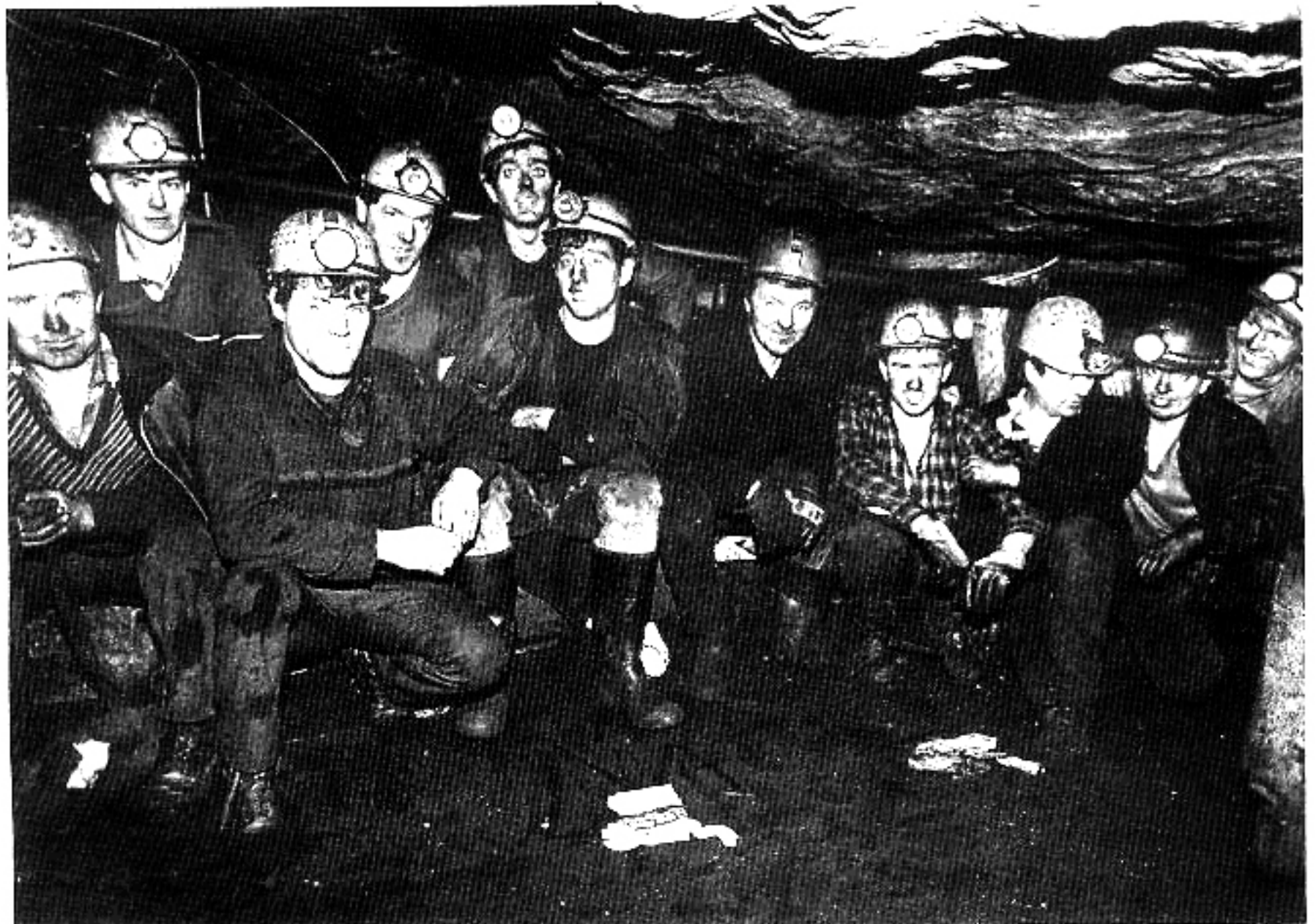
On the way home, I thought about the mothers availing of "second chance" education courses, the miners beginning a retraining skills programme and of the workers' dreams of setting up co-operative enterprises. Could it be possible that the ordinary heroes and heroines of every epoch of Ireland's and Arigna's economic and political history would not be its pawns this time?

The last photographs taken of the Arigna miners

by **DEREK SPEIRS**



Drawers pushed out coal in traditional style wooden hutches at Flynn's mine.



The hazards of working in a mine created close bonds of companionship between men who shared hardship and relaxation.

The last photographs taken of the Arigna miners

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Generation of Arigna miners won coal out of the narrowest coal seams worked in the western world.



Coping with the hutch at Aughacashel mine.