

# The Road to Drumleman - a lyrical documentary on brotherhood at Argyll Colliery



Mining communities are today a figment of history, bordering on mythology and who could tell from the landscape of Kintyre that it was once host to such a community 'on the road to Drumleman that winds to the sea'.

Artist, Jan Nimmo, lost both her father Neil and her uncle, his twin brother, Ramsay, in the same year not long ago.

Both of them - as her grandfather before them had done - worked in the Argyll Colliery on the west coast of the Mull of Kintyre, lying between Drumlembie (Drumleman - from the Gaelic *Druim Leamhan*) and Machrihanish and projecting under the waters of the North Channel. Neil was a shot-firer and Ramsay an electrician.

Jan had been brought up in the family home in one of two collections of houses in nearby Campbeltown, built for colliery workers. This was her world too.

When Neil and Ramsay died, Jan Nimmo was moved by a sense of urgency, to regenerate and put a narrative shape on their lives and of the lost colliery by recovering memories and information from the survivors of that time and place.

She has made a beautiful documentary film, calm, lucid, paced and edited with great judgment and a feel for the nature of the material.

Programme makers nervous about the wider worth of their subject tend to make frenetic films, full of business and change.

Jan Nimmo - rightly - has no doubt at all about how valuable this is, so she gives everything its time. People talk unhurriedly, memories triggered by each other, prompting smiles, laughter and tears choked back, as such men do.

The camera pans the landscape, interleaved with archive film of the colliery at work and with still photographs of then and now, all with the haunting melody and lyrics of *The Road To Drumleman* behind them.

Men talk - this was a man's world, one where they depended absolutely on each other for their lives and, equally immediately, for their earnings.

The sense of community and of individual responsibility was strong. Each miner paid a shilling a week from his wages into a fund for the local hospital. They also paid for the annual Miners Gala day. Many paid tribute to just how much the miners did for Campbeltown.

The men went for camping weekends on one of the two glorious beaches near Southend - bringing with them everything eatable and drinkable they could lay their hands on.

They played tricks on each other - like one day when the first shift came on duty. Each miner opened his locker and out of each one flew an alarmed hen. A joker had paid an early visit to a nearby farm.

They took short cuts at work - lying on the coal belt sometimes to get out faster, rather than ring for the bogey to come down for them.

Taking the belt out was a risky business. There was little headroom in some of the sections the belt passed through so they had to lie very flat. And they had to keep an eye out for the places where there were rollers and get their hands out of the way.

They didn't always remember. One man said that you could always tell who'd forgotten, when they emerged. It was all in the way they held their hands - their fingers were, as he said 'all burst'.

They marvelled at the intuitive knowledge of the experienced men - who knew the signs that the roof was coming in - small pieces starting to fall down. They spoke, without drama, of the times when it did, one man telling of the heavy cable that came down on top of his back, taking hours to remove and leaving him still, decades later, with the mark of that cable on his back. They told of a serious fire in the mine and the dead canaries that presaged it.

One man, Willie McKinlay, who seemed always to have his mouthorgan on him, spoke of the end of a day when, in the bogey on the way up out of the mine, he played and they all sang. Eyes warm and lit, he smiled at the joy of that memory.

The next morning, down the pit, someone tapped his shoulder from behind. 'Have you got your mouthorgan again?' 'I have'. 'We can sing again tonight'.

And those were the last words he heard from the speaker. James Woodcock, only 23 and married, was crushed shortly afterwards when a section of the wall of the mine fell and crushed him.

We hear of the golf and the angling the men did - loving the time spent in the fresh air and the open spaces in contrast to the dark enclosure of their working lives in the 'wet mine' that was the Argyll Colliery.

This film simultaneously makes you celebrate and mourn.

You mourn for Cambeltown, then a place of full employment with the colliery, the fishing and farming all thriving. And now?

You mourn for the lost men and you yearn to shelter and protect for ever the ones you see and hear on this film, with their openness and their comradeship that includes the dead with the living, brothers all and brothers still.

Then the film's over and the credits roll. One of the last screens tells you, simply, that three of those interviewed died before the film was finished: Jim Fowler, John Anderson, both fascinating and the utterly magical Willie McKinlay.

And finally you celebrate that thanks to Jan Nimmo you've at least been lucky enough to know of them.

The camera speaks for Jan Nimmo in her film, lingering and loving the place it captures and the people it listens to.

The gene carried to her by her artist father Neil was obviously a strong one.

[The Road to Drumleman is now available here online](#) and we can only say that seeing it has been an enriching experience that puts the world right. People on [The Kintyre Forum](#) obviously feel the same.  
NOTES:

- [Our earlier story of the film and of the Argyll Colliery is here](#)
- A Scotsman article on Jan Nimmo and the making of the Road to Drumleman is here: [Me and Mine](#)
- [Here is Jan Nimmo's Vimeo page](#) - containing other films of hers such as Pura Vida and Bonita (in Ecuador).

*The photograph at the top is of Kilkivan Cemetery Wester Drumlembie by Harold Ralston, reproduced here under the Creative Commons licence.*