Margaret Dominiak: 1972 National Coal Queen

‘In 1971 my husband, who, of course, worked in the mines came home from a social event and he just came home and he said, ‘Oh, by the way I’ve just entered you into a competition’, the Yorkshire Coal Queen competition, which I had never heard of before. It was a competition within the mining community which was held annually at a dance hall. This year it was at the Mecca in Wakefield.

It was just a dance at the local Mecca and four girls were picked out of the competition, one of them being me, one of them being my friend Susan and then there was a couple I didn’t know. We were all put forward to the Yorkshire final which was at the miner’s gala in Thornes Park, Wakefield. We didn’t live so far away from Wakefield so we got our glad rags on....

All women think about what they wear, especially if they are going into a competition. I lived very close to a lady who used to have a dress shop and I always remember she was a bubbly lady and I used to talk to her as a teenager. The shop was in the town of Normanton, right in the centre. I remember saying, “Right, I’m going in for this competition. What have you got in that I could make a splash, make myself look really nice?” I went through the rails. In the heat of the moment found my own thing, which was a petticoat type dress with a bib. In those days they were all in, but when it got to the Yorkshire final I had to buy something new. So I went to our neighbour’s dress shop and she fitted me out with turquoise shoes. I bought a big white dress and it was very short because the mini skirt was in and it had big puff sleeves with different colours - turquoise, browns and oranges. It was absolutely fabulous … I loved that dress. Then I looked for earrings, which were a perfect match to the shoes. I gave a bit of thought to the Yorkshire competition!

On the day of the Yorkshire final there was Arthur Scargill in the park, you know, and there was the band playing and crowds sat watching the competition and beauticians there to make you up and judges to judge the competition. They picked three out. My friend Susan came third and I didn’t know who came second, and I came first which meant I would be in the national final! From June 1972, I was Yorkshire Coal Queen and then I entered the national at the end of September so there were three months to get ready for that competition.
What am I going to wear for this? So me being me, I don’t buy the first dress I come to. I want a bargain but it must be of good quality too. So I went to Leeds and there was a big store there, Selfridges, one of the big stores, when Lewis’s was in its heyday. The July sales were on and I went in and saw this white dress gathered at the front with like diamante, long and sleek.

And I saw this dress in the sale and it was something like £40 proper price and I think I got it cheap, cheap. I thought that was ok, white, diamante. I was quite a stunner in them days because I had long hair and I thought if I put my hair up that would be ok. The same with the bathing suit, I found a white one. I don’t know why it was white but I had to find white shoes, so I went to Doncaster thinking at the time there were big, thick heeled shoes that didn’t do anything for your legs. I thought these won’t do and somebody said there was a shop in Doncaster that still sold stiletto heels. The stiletto emphasised the calf of your leg, although this wasn’t just a beauty competition. It was all about the personality of the girl and how she tackled her tasks with the National Coal Board and whether she could be a celebrity and an ambassador for the coal board. So there were a lot of things to take into consideration. Anyway, I found all the gear (on the cheap!) and packed my case and we were off to ‘Skeggy’.

We went on the Coal Queen train to Skegness. There was a parade through the streets, parading the last year’s winner, who was Judith Hargreaves, who I made a very good friend of, and of course she was on the float.

The Saturday night was the competition. We had to be in our places. We had got our numbers and it was a big theatre, with pictures of each girl. They didn’t have video in those days, so they had slides coming up when the girl went on stage and we had three appearances. We had one with the evening dress, one when we were interviewed on stage and then one with the swimsuit. Then all the girls came on together as a finale at the end.

Mick Milligan was the compère of the miners’ camp and he stretched out the announcement of the winner, asking, “So who is going to be the Coal Queen of 1972?” and everybody was waiting, quite a big audience really. There were cameras and news cameras and everybody there waiting. The thing about it was that I forgot to put my number on my arm – I was number 12 – and I thought I haven’t got a cat in
hell’s chance here so I’m sat back in my chair... There was a pretty girl from Wales, I remember her, she was only 18 years old and I thought she’s got a good chance of winning - so when they called me out, I couldn’t believe it!

We had had this interview a few hours before and they were looking for somebody who could talk to people, who could represent the Coal Board, who had a sense of humour, lots of things they were looking for. Derek Ezra, who was in charge of the Coal Board at that time, and his wife were the judges and a couple called Mr and Mrs Crawford were heavily involved in the Coal Board too. There were six judges all together, three men, three women and they were firing certain questions at us and they knew you could cope with the workload. Basically I think I won the competition because I was more mature. I was 24 years old, which meant I was one of the oldest girls in the line up. I think that my maturity and ability to cope with the work fixed it for me.

When I was National Coal Queen I used to try my best to do anything that the Coal Board asked me to do because I enjoyed the work and I enjoyed the people that I was dealing with. I went up and down the country. I went to the Ideal Homes Exhibition at Olympia where I met Her Majesty the Queen.

I never used to know what it was like to go out for dinner, to get dressed up because we couldn’t afford it in those days. Then, of course, they wanted you to be nice and wear nice things and they showed you etiquette and they showed you how to meet people and how to speak to people, so all this experience going up and down the country and being an ambassador for the Coal Board was great.

First of all they gave me a modelling course. Then they took us to Steiner who were the people who made all the wigs. In fact, everywhere they took us educated us in their product, which educated us in our minds as well. They took us out for dinner, took us down to Oxford Street. Three days after we won the competition they took us straight down to London. It was like a big whirlwind and it opened the eyes of a northern girl coming away from the mining area, taking you to London. We were in the best limousines and they took us to British Home Stores because that was the biggest store in those days. British Home Stores! We could choose what we wanted up to a certain price range and we came away with big bags. And we went to dress designer places and it was all set out for us. The lady who looked after us was called
Dorothy Baker and she looked after all the girls. They were actually educating us without us realising what they were doing. We were just enjoying the time we had but they knew what they were doing. Then I had to start work for the Coal Board. The year I was the National Coal Queen I went all over the place, up and down the country.

I remember speaking to Joe Gormley [President of the National Union of Miners in the 1970s] in the pit yard. I went to Acton Hall Colliery to do an underground trip and he was sat at the top in miner’s clothes and I was dressed in a mini skirt before I got changed. I’m just chatting with him, we were having a bit of a laugh and I’m just pointing at him and one of the photographers got a fantastic photograph.

They brought this rose out called ‘The Living Flame’, so I had to go and have some photographs taken and I chose the dress that I won the Yorkshire final in, the little white one with the fancy puff sleeves and it looked fantastic against the colour of the roses. The Living Flame had the orange colour that I had in my sleeves. And of course everything that I did was in the Coal News. Everything was publicised, so I had a fantastic time in all.

There were Coal Queen reunions in later years. Yvette Shilton was the girl who won in 1976. That was the first year it was held in Blackpool at the Imperial Hotel. So it was getting bigger and bigger as the years went on and so I wanted a really nice dress. I put a lot of time in thinking about the colours and whether the dresses suited me.

I bought a blue floral dress for the reunion in 1976. It’s what I used to call a handkerchief dress because it is constructed in layers of fabric like handkerchiefs going into a series of V’s into the centre of the dress, layering down to the floor. It also had turquoise in the floral (turquoise is my favourite colour) and I think that’s what attracted me to it, as it stood out against my strong auburn hair. It was made of light chiffon, I like chiffon and I just thought it was very striking at the time, which was why I bought it.’

Margaret Lister (formally Dominiak), January 2012