

## Beyond Praise: the Story of the Wheatley Hill VC, Thomas Kenny

by Tom Tunney

There are two crucial facts about the Victoria Cross: it is Britain's highest gallantry award and it has been, since its inception in 1857, an award which transcends all boundaries of class and social position. Until the 1993 reforms instigated by Prime Minister John Major, other, lesser, gallantry awards were specifically designated for either officers or other ranks. For example, the Military Cross was mainly for officers, and the Military Medal was exclusively for other ranks. The Victoria Cross recognises no such distinctions. The simple inscription "For Valour" sums up the supremely high standard of courage which the award honours.

In the past, history has invariably been written by those privileged by birth, wealth and education to occupy positions of power in society. Individual working class people were generally ignored, not so much written out of history as never written into it the first place. This is particularly true in military history, where official war diaries, both in WW1 and WW2, always mention officers by name, but only mention other ranks in extreme circumstances. Extreme circumstances such as those which befell Pte Thomas Kenny and Lt Philip Brown of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion Durham Light Infantry, on the Western Front on 4 November 1915.

The new Wheatley Hill History Club film ***Beyond Praise***, (1) which premiered at the Gala Theatre Durham on 8 November 2017 and which is now available to view in full on YouTube, tells the story of Pte Kenny and Lt Brown, the officer he carried on his back for over an hour in "No Man's Land" after the latter was shot through both legs. An action which resulted in the award of the Victoria Cross to Kenny, the first Durham Light Infantry VC of WW1.

The two men were from different worlds: Brown was an Oxford University graduate and a pre-war Tutor in the North East for the Workers' Education Association and Kenny was a Durham miner, already a married man with several children when he enlisted in 1914 from his job at Wingate Colliery. The VC award momentarily put them both in the media spot-light and then they were gradually forgotten, to all but their nearest and dearest. Brown died as the result of his wounds and, after three more years of hard fighting, Kenny, simply went back to his life at the pit. He died in 1948 and was buried in an unmarked grave in Wheatley Hill Cemetery. The film covers all of this in impeccable detail.

However, this isn't just a film about an incredible act of valour. What is fascinating and completely unexpected is its insight into the rigid class system of the era. There's

an amazing symmetry to Thomas Kenny's story which you will have to watch in the film to fully understand. The clue is in the relationship between Kenny and Lt Brown's mother, who turns up unannounced to meet him after the Investiture at Buckingham Palace in 1916 and then proceeds to show him around the posher parts of London. They're at opposite extremes of the same society, but are united for the day. And they also kept in touch subsequently. Mrs Brown reaches out to Kenny; Brown, working as a tutor in the North East prior to his enlistment, was reaching out to help Durham miners better themselves. And, on the battlefield, Kenny literally reaches out to help his wounded officer.

Kenny is buried in the same cemetery at Peter Lee. One of Lee's most quoted speeches, from 1925, runs as follows: *"Those who are inclined to blame us and say we are for class distinction should remember that it has been bred in us, not because our fathers had a desire for it, but because the educated and the rich left us very largely alone in our village life and, to say the least, did not make our houses and streets very beautiful."* The war brutally thrust Kenny out of his pit village life and, momentarily, with the presentation of his VC at Buckingham Palace, into that alien other world of "the educated and the rich". Quoted much less often, is the next paragraph of Lee's speech: *"Durham miners and their wives love justice and fair play and if you watch our work very closely you will find we only seek to obtain a right standard of life, so that we may take our share and enjoy with others the full citizenship of county and country which we love so well."* (2)

Good-natured privileged folk like Brown were doing their best to improve the lot of the Durham miner before WW1. Now most of us watching this film today enjoy that "right standard of life" with more benefits and amenities than Peter Lee could ever have imagined. But, in the grim aftermath of WW1, "a land fit for heroes" meant subsistence wages, the 1926 Lock-Out and terribly overcrowded slum housing for Durham miners like Thomas Kenny.

From opposite ends of the social spectrum, Kenny and Brown were heroically united on the battlefield. And with this fascinating drama-documentary they are now united in the viewer's mind, too. The long-overdue rediscovery of both of them, began, as this film makes clear, with History Club member Fred Bromilow making the astonishing discovery in the early 1990's that Thomas Kenny was lying in an unmarked grave in Wheatley Hill Cemetery.

## CONTACT DETAILS

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**NO MEETINGS UNTIL THE MORNING  
OF WEDNESDAY 31 MARCH 2018  
AT 11.00AM**

A talk by Geoff Wallis on Ludworth Tower

## HISTORY CLUB ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP FEES

are due at the March Meeting.

**£6.00**

## MILITARY ROADSHOW Saturday 11 November 2018

This event was held in conjunction with the North East War Memorials Project as a pilot for an event which could be much bigger, and it was a huge success, prompting the planning of the next road-show at the end of 2018, again, just before the Remembrance, at a venue to be decided some-where in County Durham.

Our invited guests were Alfie Joey from BBC Radio Newcastle and Chris Lloyd from The Northern Echo and we were very grateful to both of them for giving their time up to support us here in Wheatley Hill.

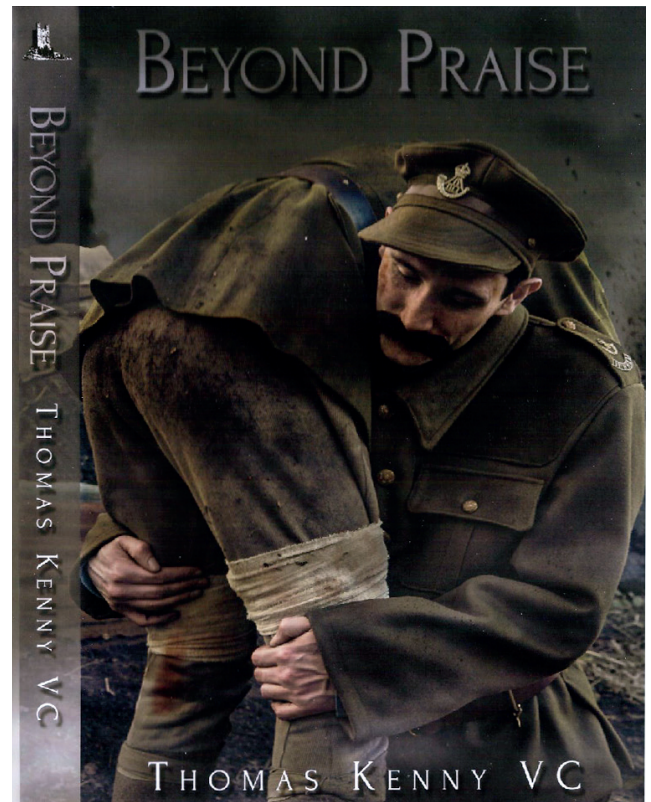
We had the DLI Collection, North East War Memorials Project and Durham County Records Office with displays of their work and a range of military historians offering help with wartime memorabilia.

The Beyond Praise film was running throughout the morning and overall there was a lovely, positive atmosphere.

Refreshments were once again provided by the History Club's catering assistants(!)

The Wheatley Hill Local History Day is firmly on the local history calendar for County Durham and attracts support from a wide area. This is in part due to the excellent publicity we receive from The Northern Echo and also our own social media campaign.

We have been running this event since the year 2000, but will need to have serious discussions about whether it has run its course here in Wheatley Hill. The organising committee are not getting any younger, and it is very demanding to plan and stage a special event such as we have become used to. We changed the venue a couple of years ago as we couldn't cope with the demands of the Working Mens Club, and it may be that we decide to call it a day altogether. If you have any views on the Local History Day, we would welcome your comments.



### Thomas Kenny VC - Beyond Praise

These DVD's are available for £5.00  
at History Club meetings and  
Wheatley Hill Heritage Centre.  
Postage & Packing will be a further £1.50

If you enjoyed reading Tom's article on page 1, you might like to follow up on the full articles he used for some of the content:

- (1) *The film's title is derived from the official citation for Kenny's VC award "Private Kenny's pluck, endurance and devotion to duty were beyond praise", which can be read here:*  
<https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/29394/supplement/12281>
- (2) *Peter Lee, address to Sunderland Rotary Club, Hartlepool Mail, 15/5/25, p5.*



# THE MEMOIRS OF THOMAS RUSSELL

## (1847 - 1928)

*(During the short time he lived in Wheatley Hill)*

### Introduction

Thomas W Russell lived and worked in Wheatley Hill between 1875 and 1881. During his time in the village he kept a journal, mostly written in the pitmatic dialect of the day. As you will see from the entries, Thomas was a member of the Temperance Society, and it is likely that this is where he learned to read and write. I am reproducing entries from the journal over the next few issues of this newsletter. All spelling errors belong to Thomas.

### 8 September 1875, Wheatley Hill Colliery

We had some grate strangers at our house. We had our Ellions mother and grandmother and hir aunt. Thay never ben in our house be fore this time and she was about 86 years of age and she died very son after that at Spennymoor.

### 26 September 1877, Wheatley Hill Colliery

This was the day that explosion of firedamp tooke place at Wheatley Hill Colliery when Gorge Dobeson the back overman was lost and James Attick Kelly, Thomas Quinn and William Edward Jones Abraham. Those was the four lives that was lost at the explosion and it happened in the main coal seam. I was in forst at the time working depety work at the time and our William was working his notice at the time and happened to be his last shift. He was stopping dubel shift on that day. *(Our William is Thomas' elder brother William Russell)*

### 15 February 1877, Wheatley Hill Colliery

On this day I rote my last shift and we ware idel 8 months and that was a sorryful year to me. We lost our daughter Jane Ann, bliss her. She was a fine daughter to us and loving one but we hope to met hir again God bing willing. *(The word rote seems to mean "work")*

### 8 August 1877, Wheatley Hill Colliery

At Wheatley Hill, Easington Union, township of Wingate, Thomas Russell paid Poor Rates in amount of 6 shillings, 1 pence *(There is a receipt for this payment in the journal. The pit had been idle for 27 weeks but the men and their families were allowed to live in the colliery houses which prompted the payment of the poor rate)*

### 27 October 1877, Wheatley Hill Colliery

This book I bought it at John Wilsons. He had to leve his house and take a house at the farm and I hope he will do good in it in spite of his foes. *(This entry refers to miners leader John Wilson, sacked by the coal company for union activity. He set himself up as a stationer in Wheatley Hill Front Street)*

### 30 October 1877, Wheatley Hill Colliery

I had ben to a commete meeting and when I came to my mothers I seed hir face tied up. She had falling down the stairs and cut it verry badly close to the eye and it was very bad. This was at Pymans Street.

### 3 November 1877, Wheatley Hill Colliery

Me and our Robert we have ben to Thornley to see our William but he was at work and we met our Mary at Thornley and we stayed a little and then we came home again. *(These are the siblings of Thomas)*

### 9 November 1877, Wheatley Hill Colliery

We entered Thornley stor and we pade one shillon for enteren and three pence for the Rules.

### 13 November 1877, Wheatley Hill Colliery

Tuesday—this being our night for the committee to meet in conection with the Collry Bisnes. John Wilson segested that we might see some Thornley and Ludworth men to try and arraigne matters for it and another thing that pleased me was that we tried to get Peter Dickson to make the nu tokens for the Colliery.



Thomas & Ellen Russell (nee Hartley) with their children Nicholson & Jane Ann (Jenny) c.1890

Wheatley Hill Community Association T: 01429 820214



### OPENING HOURS

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Available for functions outside of these hours - please ask for details

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**Slimming  
WORLD**

### Mondays

5.30pm & 7.30pm  
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Wheatley Hill

### Wednesdays

5.00pm & 7.00pm  
Wingate Com. Centre

**Contact**  
**07815 776106**  
For more details

Hi my name is Ali and I run your local Slimming World Groups. I will always be a member first and foremost so I know how daunting joining a group can be and I'll be there with you 100% of the way! My life mission is simple: I want to help as many people as possible achieve their weight loss dreams, but it's not just about weight loss, sometimes it can be life saving! Lots of our members are no longer on medication for Type 2 Diabetes and other medical conditions as a DIRECT result of their weight loss efforts.

I would love to welcome everyone new or returning members to one of my fabulous groups. I'm looking forward to welcoming you soon. X

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