



Wheatley Hill History Club

Volume 25 Issue 4

October 2021

FUNDING SUCCESS

COUNTY DURHAM FOUNDATION



The History Club have been awarded a grant from the County Durham Foundation to buy a new lap top. The laptop we use for administration work is also used by speakers to our meetings to project their presentations, is more than five years old, and we found out earlier this year when we wanted to show a film, that it didn't have a graphics card and we were unable to do so. As we are updating our collections to film and associated media, an up-to-date laptop is crucial.

EXCITING NEW PROJECT

It's a very sobering thought to realise that if you're reading this newsletter you are likely to be one of the last generation who remembers our village how it was when the pit was working and even the pit itself! As I have mentioned above, The History Club been updating our electronic holdings to the most up-to-date format and after we showed the updated film of the Wheatley Hill winding engine, one of our members suggested that we might look at the film again and extend it with photographs, different moving images and add explanations of the content provided by people of today describing what they see.

This will generate a film that contains moving images, still images and the voices of local people who were around at the time. There will be no need for the in-depth discussion we have today when we see an old photograph of the village that is not explained. This film will provide accurate and informative detail about a way of life that existed before 1968, through the eyes of people who were there.

Of course, whilst considering this new project, we have taken advice from our friends, Lonely Tower Film & Media who have come up with some great ideas of how to bring it about.

So, in the first place, we are looking for volunteers to take part in providing the explanations of the film and other media. We need both men and women and at the moment all you would need to do is come to a meeting which will take place on **Wednesday 10 November at 2.00pm in Wheatley House** where the film makers will show us the images they intend to use and whilst these are being projected, they will be recording the comments made by the audience and it is hoped that these comments will become 'voice overs' for the new



Marion Swinburne 1928-2021



We were saddened to hear of the death of our ex member Marian Swinburne. Marian and Derrick supported the History Club over many years, even after they were unable to travel to our meetings. They were both very interested in local history, despite Marian being born in Doncaster. She moved to the north east with her family where she met and married Derek. A teacher all of her life, her teaching career started at Wheatley Hill Senior Girls School, leaving to have son Christopher in 1958 (she had a further son, Anthony in 1966). On her return to teaching, Marian worked at Wheatley Hill Infants School, being offered the headship when Miss Greenwell retired. This was a temporary appointment as it was at the time the infant and junior departments were amalgamating. After the amalgamation of the schools at Wheatley Hill Marian moved to Thornley primary school where she stayed until her retirement.

*The following interview is in the archives of the Imperial War Museum
Thank you to History Club member Tom Tunney for bringing it to our attention*

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE DENNIS ELLIOTT OF WHEATLEY HILL BORN 6 SEPTEMBER 1913 AT SUNDERLAND STREET, WHEATLEY HILL AT THE PIT

My first job at Shotton pit was as a switch lad working inbye. Inbye is the nearest to the coal face and outbye is at the shaft bottom. There's places called Main, Tail and Endless and you have two or four tubs taken in at a time – this is called a landing or shaft bottom. From the landing you had different little areas and they were called flats and to go in there you had to keep on the way, the little railway line running down the pit. This is usually a lad's first job to break you in to the work. They would give you a trappers job. That was opening and closing the wooden door to keep the circulation of the area and the safety of the pit. You work by yourself for the whole shift. At Shotton pit we had electric lamps but at Wheatley Hill they were oil lamps.

From trapping, if the wagonwayman thought you were good enough, you could start pony driving and you would work in the flats. On the first day I was pony driving I left the landing and went past a place I thought I saw a ghost. I said to the landing lad that I thought I'd seen a ghost and he said, "Aw lad dinnet be daft", I says I'm sure I did. I went into the flat and took the empty tubs in (the chummins) and when I came out the wagonwayman was waiting for me. He says, "Whereabouts did you see this ghost George?". I says why if you come with me I'll show you. I took him and stopped the pony, and said, just over there. He says, "Alright lad get yourself away inbye and tak the tubs in".

When I came out he changed my places. I asked why have you moved me and he said, ""Where you pointed and said you had seen a ghost was where a pony putter had been killed".

He moved me to the other area where I was driving and on that night a coal hewer was killed at the coal face. Believe it or not but that is the truth. I don't know whether that was a warning but it happened within 24 hours of me seeing a ghost.

Later on when I was pony putting, I worked with an older man called Billy McCree and I learned a lot from him. We were marras. Billy taught me things that you only picked up with experience in the pit, the way the old miners believed you picked the skills of mining up. I could have been involved in many a serious accident if it hadn't been for Billy.

The pony I had the longest was called Charlie. He only had one eye but was a hard worker. I would say howay lad and off we would go. Like all the pony's Charlie had a sixth sense and could feel things that humans weren't aware of. One day I was bringing Charlie out with the chummins and he wouldn't move. I tried everything to get him to go but he wouldn't. Billy came from the engine house to give us a hand and I told him I couldn't rap the set away cos the pony won't move. Not long after the roof fell in just in front of where he was standing. It didn't hit him, it was just in front of him.

Another thing about Charlie was that he didn't like sweets. Most of the pit ponies, if they smelled sweets in your pocket would be trying to get at them. I always carried mints, but Charlie wouldn't have them, but if I took a carrot from me granda's garden he would have me hand off.

After a period of time I left Shotton pit because there was a vacancy at Wheatley Hill. The journey to Shotton at all times of the day or night and in all weathers added on to the 8 hours and 20 minutes of my shift underground and by moving to Wheatley Hill I could avoid it. The pay was the same, 2s a day (10p). I worked sometimes six days a week but we were laid off a lot, it depended on the coal orders, we were only paid by the day and not the week. I gave my wages straight to my mother and she always gave me 6d (2½p) back for pocket money. It was a good amount of money for a lad of my age. While I was working at Shotton the long walk and the long hours meant that by the weekend I often slept from Friday tea time until Sunday dinner time and as this was the only time I had to spend my pocket money, I nearly always gave me mother 3d (1p) back as I didn't have time to spend it and she needed it more than I did.

I used to take my bait down the pit in a tin. I always had margarine and bread. Some of the men took bread and jam or spread sugar on their margarine and bread, but I just liked the marge and bread. There wasn't a set time to eat your bait, you just ate it when you had a break in your work. We took bottles of water down the pit but I gave most of mine away, I wasn't bothered about a drink.

Continued on the next page

CONTACT DETAILS

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MEETINGS IN WHEATLEY HOUSE

All Meetings Start at 11.00am

- 27 Oct George's Local History Quiz
26 Jan Lord Gort (*this will be a ZOOM mtg*)

Once I was 16 and started to pay into an insurance scheme, I saw a big drop in my pay, as the money was taken off my note. I used the Royal Victoria Liverpool company I think and if I was ever off sick I could claim sick pay. The unions insisted that we all pay into such a scheme to protect ourselves. The unions were trying to improve safety in the pit and looked after the welfare of the men and would speak for any man that found himself up in front of the management. Once a man got on either the pit management's black list or the owners black list, he would never work in the Durham pits again, so having the union on your side was a safety net. I was injured down the pit once and was paid some compensation but because I was under 21 it was a very small amount. The compensation payments were graded according to your age.

I realised that some lads who had started the pit after me were pony putting so I went to see the Fore Overman, Mr Chisholm and told him I thought it was unfair. He says "Why you never said you wanted it". When I told him I did he said, "Righto lad you'll be in the next lot". When I got a start, I was making good money.

One Boxing Day I went into the pit. This day was notorious for the men not turning in, but I had to go because we needed the money. When I got in this day, the overman was short of a putter. The wagon-wayman said, "Why don't you send this lad?" and the overman said, "Get away up the endless there's a spare putter going up". I earned more money on that shift than I had for a full week's work because it was dotal work. Dotal meant you got paid a fixed sum for the shift – 3s (15p) and then went inbye with another man, a hewer, and he said, "Look lad, we'll hing up together token for token. Many of the older putters wouldn't do that but we'll work together, should we give it a try?"

The hewers cleared the coal and I kept them going with tubs so I got a good wage for putting, the dotal rate and half of the hewer's money. I wasn't allowed to go to the coal face to hew or shovel coal, if I had I would have been sacked.

THE END

REMEMBERANCE 2021

The Royal British Legion
(Wheatley Hill Branch)
will be laying their wreath on

Armistice Day—Thursday 11 November

at 11.00am

Wheatley Hill Cemetery

(any groups wishing to lay their wreaths at this time are very welcome to do so)

this event will include:

The Exhortation

Last Post

Two Minute Silence,

Reveille

followed by The National Anthem to close

REMEMBERANCE 2021

Service of Remembrance

Sunday 14 November

at 10.45am

All Saints Church

(spaces in the church will be limited to 90 people but the service will be relayed into the church grounds by a PA system, weather permitting

11.20am

**Parade leaves church for
Wheatley Hill Cemetery**

11.40am

**Remembrance Day Ceremony in
The Cemetery
Includes laying of poppy wreaths**

The Exhortation, Last Post

Two Minute Silence, Reveille

followed by The National Anthem to close

**Trimdon Brass Band
will be in attendance
in the church and the cemetery**

The Heritage Centre will be open on both occasions for refreshments

Wheatley Hill Community

**Greenhills
Centre**

For the Community

Association

OPENING HOURS

Mon—Thurs

8.30am—8.45pm

Fri—8.30am-7.45pm

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

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