

Article in the latest edition of Who Do You Think You Are Magazine

YOUR PROJECTS

WHEATLEY WONDER

Rosemary Collins finds out how a history club in a deprived County Durham village is building community pride

Wheatley Hill in County Durham is a village that was centred on its coal mine, which opened in 1869 and closed in 1968. Despite this proud industrial history the village is struggling today, with high rates of poor health, crime and unemployment. Indeed, it was ranked as more deprived than 63 per cent of neighbourhoods in the Government's English Indices of Deprivation 2025. However, the Wheatley Hill History Club is determined to be a bright spot for the village's community and heritage.

"It's a village with major social problems," says Margaret Hedley, the club's chair. "It's the typical story of villages in east Durham – it's just a bit of a left-behind area in terms of facilities and infrastructure – and yet our club keeps growing. We started in 1995. There was only me and the vicar at the first meeting, and then we've grown from there. Now we have 60 members."

The club holds a monthly talk at Wheatley House, Woodlands Avenue, which is open to non-members. Recent speakers have included David Williams on the early years of pioneering engineer George Stephenson (1781–1848) and Paul Chrystal on John Scott 'Jack' Youll (1897–1918), a local man who despite his young age earned the Victoria Cross before being killed in the First World War.

Margaret says that the meetings provide a valuable social outlet: "Over the past few months people have been coming earlier to strike up conversations with friends and those they've just met."

The club's website at wheatley-hill.org.uk holds historic photographs, oral history recordings, and heritage trails around the village. Also at the end of 2023 the club was awarded a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant of £17,890 for a project raising awareness of Peter Lee (1864–1935), a trade unionist and chair of Durham County Council as well as the namesake of Peterlee new town.

"The project was designed specifically for primary schools, and delivered through the medium of drama," Margaret says. "Year 5 pupils from six primary schools across the area took part in an immersive learning experience, working in their own schools with a professional actor from the Mad



Members work on the club's contribution to a Durham County Council art project

Alice Theatre Company, alongside a scriptwriter. Together, they explored and retold the story of Peterlee in their own words. The work culminated in a full production staged at The Lubetkin Theatre in Peterlee, attended by every child who participated."

Five club members have also become published authors in recent years. Margaret has written a trilogy about women in the Durham coalfield, while Paul Chrystal has published a book about Jack Youll and Frances Wilson is the author of *Our Seaside* (2025), a book about seaside resorts in County Durham such as Crimdon.

"In the 1940s and 1950s, when there was no money to go anywhere else, people would go to Crimdon," Margaret says. "It had a huge caravan park, and lots of people went holidaying in the static caravans there. The memories that Frances

dug up when she was doing her book were remarkable."

Margaret reveals that a lot of the club's

Our club proves that creativity and community spirit can flourish anywhere

membership is elderly, and getting younger people involved is a challenge: "We used to meet at 7pm, but found that our numbers were dwindling because we do attract an elderly demographic and they didn't want to come out at that time. Since we've started to open at 11am our membership has increased, but just with retired people or those not in work. It doesn't seem as if we can attract younger people. But on social media they all seem to have a look at what we've posted, share comments and like our content."

Nevertheless, Margaret says that overall Wheatley Hill History Club is "a source of inspiration and pride, proving that creativity and community spirit can flourish anywhere".

TELL YOUR STORY

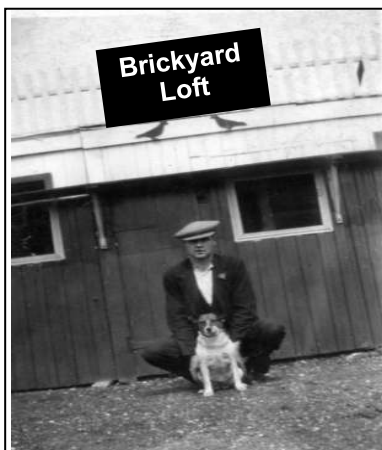
Share your local history project with us and you could appear in the magazine!

Please write to us at the address on page 6 or email rosemary.collins@ourmedia.co.uk

DISCOVER MORE

Wheatley Hill History Club
[w wheatley-hill.org.uk](http://wheatley-hill.org.uk)

The club also runs a YouTube channel at [tinyurl.com/yt-wheatley-hill-hist-club](https://www.youtube.com/yt-wheatley-hill-hist-club). If you would like to become a member, please email history.club2@btinternet.com.



A Champion in the Pigeon Fancying World James (Jimmy) Kelly

Many of you will remember Wheatley Hill as a place where hard work, community spirit and a good bit of friendly rivalry went hand in hand. One such familiar name was Jimmy Kelly, who worked at Wheatley Hill Pit and was a man of quiet determination both below ground and above it.

Jimmy worked at Wheatley Hill pit all of his life. His father was killed during the first world war and his brother drowned in an accident at Thornley pit.



Wheatley Hill pit

Away from his demanding work in the pits, Mr Kelly built a remarkable reputation within pigeon racing circles. Renowned for his dedication and expertise, he consistently demonstrated exceptional skill, earning top positions in the prestigious Up North Combines in 1933, 1936, and 1938. Such repeated success was no small feat and firmly established him as a respected and admired figure among fellow fanciers.

One of his most notable achievements came in 1938, when he triumphed in the Yearling Nomination Arras Cup. This victory was particularly significant given the highly competitive nature of yearling races. Competing with birds just one year old, these events highlighted the future potential of any loft, making success at this level a true mark of quality breeding and careful training. The flying distance from Arras to Wheatley Hill is 430 miles.

Arras, located in northern France, has long been an important race point for British pigeon enthusiasts. Serving as a popular starting or mid-distance release location, it has tested the endurance and navigation skills of countless birds over the years. Mr Kelly's accomplishments in races from this historic location further highlighted his standing as a leading name in the sport.

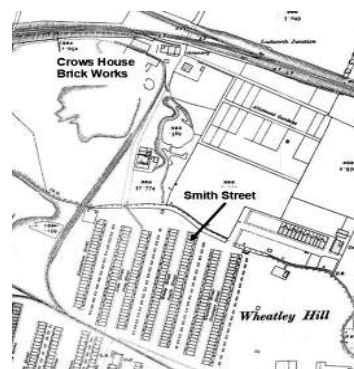
In 1941, Jimmy married Gladys Brain, and together they made their home in one of the village's most familiar areas. Their address in Smith Street placed them close to the Low Crows district of Wheatley Hill—an ideal spot for Jimmy's pigeons. It was here that his pigeon loft, proudly known as the "Brick Yard Loft," became a local landmark, its name reflecting both its location near Burns brick yard and Jimmy's strong connection to the area.



*Jimmy Kelly
and his pigeon racing medals*



Image showing the location of Smith Street, Wheatley Hill



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26 August	The Man They Named A Town After	M Hedley
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28 Oct	The Hoppers of Iveston - a Quaker Family	C Meade

CONTACT DETAILS

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The Way We Were A Story of Growing up in Wheatley Hill, County Durham

By Edith Foster (nee Poulson) written when she was 92

Part 5



Hannah Foster,
Nee Smith

Thomas Foster was born in 1920 at 15 First Street, Wheatley Hill to parents, overman Thomas Foster and his wife Hannah, nee Smith. He was the second youngest of their six children and brother to Margaret Hannah, Elizabeth, George, Mary and Doreen and we married in 1946.



First Street, Wheatley Hill



Thornley Colliery

Tom was a joiner at Thornley Colliery and in 1948 the first of our three children was born, Marjorie Edith followed by Richard Thomas and then June.

Tom built a bungalow for us and he also started a woodwork business and built a workshop. He supplied many stores with garden sheds, green-houses and garages. He also did lots of fencing work for the Peterlee Development Corporation and sold his timber.



Tom Foster in his woodworking business
Tom in his woodworking business

I was involved in the business and did the paperwork – wages, VAT, delivery notes, you name it, I did it. Our family were growing up and our son Richard started working in the timber business and our daughters used to help in various ways too.



Tom & Edith
with Marjorie and Richard

Now my family are married and sadly my husband has died and is missed by us all. I am now a grandmother and great grandmother. Tom would have been so proud.

This really is the final part of Mrs Foster's memoirs and we hope you have enjoyed reading them. Publication was made possible as her daughter June passed them to The History Club, along with family photographs.

The History Club have edited and illustrated the work with relevant local images and we are grateful to the family for sharing.

Wheatley House Moving Forward

Wheatley House was formerly the men's hostel within the aged miners homes complex, opened in 1924. It is now a community hall managed by a committee to provide a gathering place for the people of Wheatley Hill and surrounding area to hold a range of functions

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