

*The Jim Hamilton*  
**Heritage Society of Coalburn**  
**Newsletter 57**  
**Winter 2019**



Wallace's Cave with Tinto Hill in Snow

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES HAMILTON

1988



## Chairman's Remarks

**First of all I must apologise for an error in the last Newsletter, in the list of deaths the name of Andy Banks was given when in fact it should have been his brother Archie.**

As will be seen in the current list a former member, Dr John Scott, has died. In 2006 Dr Scott did a series of articles which were very much appreciated, regarding the time he spent working at Number 9 Pit. This being a period when he was studying medicine. He later was employed as a principal consultant at Perth Infirmary.

We have recently received a number of emails from America and Canada from folk seeking information about family members. One of the enquirers was a name well known to many, Joe McGill, who is currently in Victoria, British Columbia.

Our annual visit to Hollandbush is just round the corner (Friday 20th December) and I am sure it will be a good evening yet again.

Thanks to all who helped in any way throughout the year to ensure the continued success of the society.

In closing may I wish all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Peter McLeish

November 2019

*In deepest sympathy - Coalburn related deaths*

Eddie Anderson

Peggy Burns

John Clark [Canada]

Jean Dyet (McRae)

Fred Kirk

Tom McLean

Jessie Newlands

Dr John Clelland Scott



# COALBURN DRAMA GROUP



## **Part 2: *The First Concert***

Having come together in the autumn of 1938, within a few months members of the Coalburn Drama Group were ready to stage their first public performance. This took place on Tuesday, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1939 and consisted of three one act plays plus variety entertainment - all carried out by members of the group.

The Hamilton Advertiser reported in glowing terms:

**Amateur Theatricals** -*The public debut of Coalburn Drama Group was an immediate success. The players were on their mettle and their acting and technique was a revelation to the audience. Three one-act plays were performed; "The Darkness", a tragedy by Joe Corrie, "Martha", a drama by Joe Corrie and "The Wee Comic" by John Donald Kelly. It is pleasing to think that all the arduous rehearsals bore fruit in the end, not forgetting the work behind the scenes.*

A total of 238 tickets had been sold and James Smith, John Hamilton and John Sorbie were reimbursed of the 4/- (20p) each had earlier loaned to the club.

Four months later, in April 1939, the Drama Group were ready with their next production. Once again locals turned out in good numbers with over 300 attending to see a 4-Act comedy "Kye Amang the Corn", again by **Joe Corrie**. As there was a gun used in the play - presumably aimed at the errant kye (cattle) - the local police constable had had to be informed.

That November it was decided to put on a range of 1-Act plays: a drama, a comedy, a tragedy and - probably the most difficult to stage - a farce. This came about in March 1940 with almost 350 tickets being sold and the Coalburn Amateur Orchestra providing music to entertain the audience between plays.

During this period, while the Second World War raged, the group were appearing in Lintfieldbank and Douglas for the respective Women's Rural Institutes.

At the end of 1941 John Sorbie proposed that the group should be properly constituted. He acted as Chairman for an evening of decision making on the running of the group:

**NAME OF GROUP** : Coalburn Drama Group (moved by George Clark & seconded by Helen McClement)

**CONTRIBUTIONS** : In January of 1941 the membership levy had been reduced to 2d; it was decided to increase this back to the original 3d per week

**REHEARSALS** : Tuesday of each week at 7.45pm prompt

Roles and responsibilities were also formalised:

**PRODUCER** - responsible for staging, selecting and casting of plays:  
Mr. John Sorbie

**STAGE MANAGER** - co-operates with Producer: Mr James Findlay

**EFFECTS etc.** : Mr James Cullen

**SECRETARY & TREASURER** : Mr James Hamilton

**CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE** : Mrs Lily Steele, Messr George Clark, Messr William Brodie

### **Who was Joe Corrie?.....**

Performances of Joe Corrie's work were popular among the Coalburn Drama Group.

Born in 1894, Joe Corrie began work in the Fife coalfields as a youngster in 1908. Shortly after World War I he began writing and his articles, sketches, short stories and poems were published in prominent socialist newspapers and journals. T. S. Eliot described him as *"the greatest Scots poet since Burns"*.

Joe Corrie turned to writing plays during the 1926 General Strike. Like other native playwrights who wished to present authentic representations of Scottish life, his plays originally came to general attention through amateur productions. His work was first performed by the Bowhill Players, a company of miners who performed to raise money for local soup kitchens.



## *Did you know?...* Mining Heritage



This photograph shows **Coalburn Road** on the way into the village from Lesmahagow - with the entrance to **Shoulderigg Road** on the right, just past where people are sitting against the wall.

The **National Coal Board** office, known locally as '**The Big Oaffice**' is on the left. Two miners would appear to be collecting their wages at the small window. **Pretoria Terrace** or '**The Bloaks**' is in the centre of the photo. Named after the location of a 1900 British victory in the Boer War, the property was built of Ayrshire brick. There was a **railway crossing** around this point with the line running from Auchlochan Number 9 to Number 6. The photograph is undated, however there are no road markings, telegraph or street lighting poles to be seen.

The 1960s saw major changes in this vicinity. The railway crossing was removed in 1963, Number 6 Pit having closed in 1961, and by February 1964 there was just one house occupied in all of Pretoria Terrace. 'The Bloaks' were demolished that October, to be replaced by the 'electric flats' that presently occupy that site. The Coal Board Office lasted a few years longer - it was demolished in April 1968.



The frosty photograph above is from the 1980s, on what was then the **pedestrian route to Shoulderigg**, looking back towards Coalburn with the **Miners' Welfare Building** prominent in the background.

The **steps** (top left) were built to provide safe passage over another of the many railway tracks associated with the mining industry in the village in former times. Wagons hauled coal from Auchlochan Number 6 to Dempster's mine. Connected by heavy rope, the weight of the loaded wagons coming down hauled the empty ones back: no manpower was required. So a protected means of crossing the line was imperative for pedestrian safety. Once the rail track was no longer in use the stairway was used

for a shelter by locals wishing to partake of an alcoholic beverage or two out of doors and became known as 'Steps Hotel'.

Following the start of open cast mineworks in the late 1980s this landscape has changed greatly.

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Left: A rare photo of the former **Washer at the 'Doosie' Pit** at Dalquhandy, Bankend.





# Birkhill Sabbath School

It is well known that over the years there have been Sunday Schools in the various hamlets which came to form the village of Coalburn as we know it today - such as Braehead, Coalburn, Bankend and Bellfield.

However I recently came across this reference to the founding of another Sabbath School - at Birkhill, in early 1922:

***“Birkhill Sabbath School*** —Through the kindness of Mrs. Smith, the barn at Birkhill has been placed at the disposal of the Kirk Session for an auxiliary Sabbath School. The School was opened on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> January, and will meet every Sunday at 4. Mrs Smith has agreed to act as Superintendent, and she has with her four other ladies as Sabbath School teachers.” [Lesmahagow Old Parish Church magazine Feb 1922]

The Birkhill Sabbath School was soon thriving:

***“Birkhill Sunday School Picnic*** - On Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> September the children of Birkhill Sunday School were entertained by Mrs. Smith. This School, which started in January last, has gathered in about seventy scholars, and Mrs Smith who superintends the School, has secured the help of five ladies as teachers. At the first picnic seventy-nine children met in the Birkhill Barn and marched to the adjoining field, where the afternoon was spent. The day was excellent, and all the bairns had a most happy time.” [October 1922] Peter McLeish



Birkhill House, around 1950



### **Mrs Margaret Mary Ann Smith**

Born in 1870, Margaret Mary Ann was the eldest child of David Stewart, proprietor of the Black Bull Inn in Wellgate, Lanark, and his wife Elizabeth. This was no shabby drinking den, as the Lanarkshire OS Name Book from 1858-61 attests: *A superior old established Inn. 2 storeys, slated and in good repair, it has good stalling accommodation & outhouses attached.*

Her marriage to 59 year old widower Andrew Smith took place in Lanark in February 1900. Margaret Mary Ann was single, aged 30 and living at Westport, Lanark - her mother Elizabeth having taken over the running of the Black Bull Inn following her husband David's death.

Andrew Smith's first marriage had been at the age of 47, in 1888, to Janet Lyon, aged 44. He was a solicitor and writer, living at Broompark House on Hope Street, Lanark, a substantial property with stables. As the eldest son in the Smith family Andrew had inherited Birkhill on his father John's death in 1894. His wife Janet had died the following year.

Following his second marriage in 1900, Andrew Smith continued to live at Broompark with his new wife. Their son John was born the following year but sadly the marriage was to be a short one as Andrew died in May 1903, one month before the birth of their second son, Andrew jnr. Mrs Margaret Mary Ann Smith thus found herself a relatively young widow with two very young children. At first she continued to live at Broompark, however by 1920 she was resident at Birkhill and within a year or so was devoting her energies to the Sabbath School there.

Margaret Mary Ann Smith died at Birkhill in August 1940, aged 70.



## Poetry Corner

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### THE SHAPE THAT I'M IN

There's nothing wrong with me,  
as anyone can see,  
Except for the arthritis in my knees,  
and when I talk, I speak with a wheeze,  
My pulse is weak,  
my blood is thin,  
but I'm awfully well for the shape that I'm in.

Arch supports I have for my feet,  
or I wouldn't be able to walk down the street,  
Sleep is denied me, night after night,  
but, every morning, I find I'm alright,  
My memories fading,  
my head's in a spin,  
but I'm awfully well for the shape that I'm in.

Old age is golden, I've heard it said,  
but sometimes I wonder, as I get out of bed,  
With my ears in a drawer,  
and my teeth in a cup,  
my eyes on the table, until I get up,  
I look in the mirror,  
am I really that thin,  
but I feel awfully well for the shape that I'm in.

I get up in the morning and dust up my wits,  
pick up the paper and read the obits,  
if my name missing, I know I'm not dead.  
so I have a good breakfast and go back to bed.  
It's better to say, "Oh I'm fine" with a grin,  
than let people know the shape that I'm in.

*Anonymous*

# Coalburn in Winter: December 1942

In these days, when the roads into the village were blocked by snow locals



were encouraged to help shovel them clear with the inducement of payment at the rate of 1/- an hour. The person in charge of organising this was none other than Mr John Sorbie, of drama group fame, in liaison with the local council.

On this occasion, following the digging operation two intrepid youngsters - Robert (Bob) Hamilton and Alex McMurdo - had set out to explore the local landscape.

Alex was 16 at the time and the vehicle belonged to his father - John McMurdo (Johnny), who was then a manger in the local co-operative: snow chains can be seen

on the tyres. Since leaving school Alex had been working in William Harvey's butcher shop in Lesmahagow, however until the roads were cleared these wintry conditions had made getting to work impossible, even on foot.

Bob, son of the local postmaster James Hamilton, was aged 14 and a pupil at Hamilton Academy.

He is pictured by the car on the way back into Coalburn from Lintfieldbank. And above, in a bolt hole dug at the side of the road by the road clearance team. From the size of it competition for shelter would have been stiff in the event of a storm blowing up.





# *The Jim Hamilton*

## Heritage Society of Coalburn Syllabus January - April 2020

January 8 <sup>th</sup>	Slideshow	
January 22 <sup>nd</sup>	Amanda Davies	Coalburn One Stop Shop
February 5 <sup>th</sup>	Donald Williams	I.O.R. Pipe & Drum Band
February 19 <sup>th</sup>	Ed Archer	Topic to be confirmed
March 4 <sup>th</sup>	Bill Love	Agatha Christie
March 18 <sup>th</sup>	Alan Court	Coalburn Silver Band
April 1 <sup>st</sup>	Ethyl Smith	Covenanters
April 15 <sup>th</sup> (AGM)	John Fleming	Old St Brydes Church, Douglas

Heritage Society Meetings are held in Coalburn Bowling Club on the 1st and 3rd Wednesdays of the month, from September to April, starting at 7.30 pm

[www.coalburnheritage.org.uk](http://www.coalburnheritage.org.uk)

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Water Meetings in Winter

The junction of the Nethan and Logan waters, by the entrance to Stockbriggs.