

A photograph of a forest floor covered in a dense carpet of bluebells. Several tree trunks are visible, some with moss, and the background is filled with green foliage and more trees.

The Jim Hamilton

Heritage Society of Coalburn

Newsletter *62*

Spring 2021



Chairman's Remarks

Since the last Newsletter I regret to announce the passing of two members, Zena Young and Billy Dempster and further mention of them are elsewhere in this issue, together with Alex McMurdo whose death was announced in the last issue.

We are still in lockdown as far meetings or even opening the Heritage Centre as long as the pandemic is with us which is frustrating for all.

I have had a number of emails lately in which different people have been seeking information regarding relatives who have lived here, I have been able to provide some of them with what they are wanting to know. Others I am still working on thanks to the fact that I have some Chronicles at home which have helped and I have learned a lot as well.

Thanks to Helen we are continuing to produce the Newsletter which is very much in some ways a smaller version of Jim Hamilton's excellent Chronicles.

A special thank you to David Halls for his kind permission to include some of his spring photographs of Coalburn and environs in this issue. Contributions to the newsletter are welcome; never more so than now what with the closure of the Heritage Centre where many items pertaining to Coalburn's history reside. So if you have any photographs that you would like to share, or poetry, or other items that may be of interest, please let me know.

Take care.

Peter McLeish, 13th February 2021

In deepest sympathy - Coalburn related deaths

Johnny Andrew

Billy Dempster

Alex Kerr (in New Zealand)

Freda McAdam (Graham)

Jim Shearer (Bellfield)

Thomasina (Zena) Young (Smith)

Alex Williams



Coalburn: 1924 and 1974 (Part I)

This article was written by Jim Hamilton as 1974 drew to a close. He was looking back to the village as it had been fifty years before and making comparisons with the 'present day'. It's quite a long piece, so this is Part I - more to follow.

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As we approach the end of each year, our thoughts turn nostalgically to days of yore. I began to wonder what Coalburn was like fifty years ago, not long after I was born.

For the first thing, I wanted to compare it for size. When I counted the number of houses, I discovered there was little difference between then and now. In 1924, there were 528 houses whereas today, there are 556. The difference was that then the families were living more in hamlets like Lintfieldbank, Bellfield and Bankend, whereas now the village is more consolidated and less straggley.

What the numbers do not show is the vast improvement in the standard of housing of the villagers. In 1924 most families lived in houses without running water and dry closets were prevalent. Today all families have the desirable 'mod cons' such as piped water, drainage, flush toilets and electricity. There are only four houses inhabited in 1974 which do not have inside toilets.

Gone are the houses built by the coalmasters for the mining community before 1900. The rows at Bankend, Auchenbegg, Middlemuir, and Coalburn have been demolished as have the terraces named Tinto View, Railway, Pretoria and Lintfieldbank. The only link with the past remaining is Glaikhead, now all boarded up except for two houses - and it should disappear in 1975.

It was in 1921 the Lanark County Council started building houses at Dunn Crescent. In April 1924, the council agreed to erect a further 32 houses at a total cost of £10,953 15/-



2d, which by today's standards is merely the cost of putting up a detached villa. The lowest tenders for the houses were submitted by: Wm. B. Fairservice, Lesmahagow (Brickwork), Gilchrist and Gray, Lesmahagow (Joinerwork), Wm. Haggart, Douglas (Plumberwork) and Wm. Dodds Bertram, Lesmahagow (Slaterwork and Plasterwork).

When the last of the local pits closed in 1968, it was feared that Coalburn would become a 'ghost town'. This has not happened as the 'redundant' miners have found jobs in central Lanarkshire in steelworks and factories. Improved roads and better living standards have made it easy for villagers finding congenial employment nearby so the village is likely to continue to thrive.

Transport has brought the biggest changes. During the lifetime of the oldest inhabitants of the village, they have seen the changes which have taken place locally from watching people getting about on foot or horse and carriage to the age of the motor car, the invention of the aeroplane and the ultimate – the day when they watched on television sets the arrival of American astronauts on the moon. My research shows that in 1924 only 5 persons owned motor cars in Coalburn. What a contrast today, with 180 homes having cars and many being two-car families. That, perhaps more than anything else I could write about refrigerators or fitted carpets or coloured television sets in the homes can best show the great improvement in the standard of living in the past fifty years.

In 1924, Coalburn had a busy railway station and well over a thousand men arrived in the village each day to work in the pits. Buses were just beginning a regular service and William Frame jnr., Larkhall had an announcement in the Hamilton Advertiser telling of the service he was starting between Coalburn and Larkhall. In the 1960s the railway line was closed through lack of support and a half hourly bus service is well established, but there have been many complaints throughout 1974 because of its lack of dependability.

Incidentally in 1924, long before the arrival of Lord Beeching as head of the nationalised railways, closure of railways was being discussed as there were reports in the newspapers that the Strathaven – Darvel line might need to close as it was losing £100 per



week. The Avondale farmers held a meeting to protest against such a suggestion.

When I looked up the death register for Coalburn for 1924, I found the names and particulars of persons whose descendants are still in the village. Robert Fotheringham (57 years) and his son Tom (36) died from influenza in the month of April. Marion Finlay, wife of D. K. Finlay, died that year. Her husband was a great supporter of the Rechabite Pipe Band in the village and his family are still playing the bagpipes in far off New Zealand. John Young, the farmer at Aikmanhill, who was described to me by Mary Sykes as "a' screwed up wi' rheumatics" died in 1924 at the age of 74 years. David Bell died that year also; his son, Rab, now in Canada, flies over regularly on visits to his native village. Even that statement about his flying the Atlantic tells of progress in the last fifty years. A very colourful personality, much loved in the village, Jane Morrison, died that year and her daughter and two sons still live in the family home where she died at Avondale. Other deaths registered in 1924 included Graham Munro (69), Sannie McLure (74) and Jane Lawson Wilson (59). The last named died as she lived - working, for she was found dead in the byre at Braehead Farm.

The general practitioners certifying the deaths in 1924 were Drs Smith, Richardson and McFarlane. Two of these doctors lived in the village. Fifty years later the village has no doctor living within its confines and the nearest, in case of emergency, stays in Douglas, over seven miles away. Hardly the progress expected bearing in mind that Britain now has double the doctors it had in 1951.

In 1924 Coalburn had an ambulance based in the village and in the 1940's, it actually had two. These were purchased by the Coalburn Ambulance Fund for the village and the districts surrounding. In 1974 there are no ambulances sited in the village so there again it seems to have lost out in any improvements brought about by the National Health Service.

The coal industry, the main source of employment in the village in 1924, was taking its yearly toll of deaths as this report from the Hamilton Advertiser shows:

On Friday, 18th January 1924, Mr. James Clark, Divity, while at work in Auchlochan Colliery, met with a serious accident when a large stone fell from the roof, pinning him under it. On getting him released, it was found that his injuries were so severe that his removal to the infirmary was thought to be necessary but he expired before reaching there.

Two other villagers killed in the pits that year were Thomas McLean (39) and Andrew Cairney (38). Both have immediate family still in Coalburn.

One noticeable difference, when comparing the registers for 1924 and 1974, is that in the earlier year many children died young, whereas this is rarely the case nowadays. Children who died young in 1924 were born to Robert Sinclair of Crowhill Farm, Mrs Bernard - the (present day) octogenarian of Dryden Cottage, William McGregor of Dunn Crescent and John Dykes of Gladstone Place.

The two years have much in common in many respects. Both were years of tremendous political interest. In 1974 there have been two elections and each time South Lanark

returned the Labour Candidate, Judith Hart. In 1924, the same constituency had its first Labour MP, when the much-loved Tom Dickson was at Westminster. However he lost his seat in October 1924 to the conservative candidate, Mr Stephen Mitchell, the tobacco manufacturer from Glasgow.

It is interesting to conjure up whether South Lanark will be sending an MP to London in fifty years time or whether the member will have the shorter journey to Edinburgh to be in attendance at a Scottish Parliament. The Scottish National Party hit the headlines in 1974 and their candidate for South Lanark was less than 700 votes behind the Labour winner, with the Conservatives in third place. The dream of the Scottish Parliament was also very much alive in 1924, when a Bill to have one elected was not successful when presented to Westminster.

A name in the news in 1924 was Emmanuel Shinwell and he was answering questions in the House of Commons raised by Tom Dickson about the possible flooding of Nos. 9 & 10 pits at Auchlochan with the closure of Bellfield pits Nos. 3 & 4. The very same 'Manny' Shinwell was seen on television in 1974 having a dinner in honour of his ninetieth birthday and all political parties were present.

James C. Welsh, the MP for Douglas Water, and formerly a miner, had published a book that year called, 'The Morlocks', a story of mining life. And, talking of authors, when I was reading through the Hamilton Advertisers researching for this article, I came across a birth notice as follows:

Cronin. At The Glen, Tredegar, Monmouthshire on 24th May, 1924 a son to Dr A. J. Cronin and Mrs Cronin (Dr. A. M. Gibson).

Mrs Cronin was reared in Hamilton and the announcement would be inserted to let her friends know of the birth of the child. A. J. Cronin would no doubt be ingathering material for his books like 'The Citadel' and 'The Stars Look Down'. I doubt whether in his fondest dreams, he would imagine that fifty years later, he would give so much pleasure to so many people with his stories on radio and television called 'Dr. Finlay's Casebook'.

In 1974, Coalburn had one claim to literary fame when John Strang of 92, Coalburn Road, had a book published on 'Antique Silver and Silver Collecting'. His family have been in Coalburn for generations, and being of mining stock and suffering the hard times in 1924, I do not think that anyone of the Strang family in that year, could have foreseen that a descendant would have been so well educated and have such knowledge as to write a book on such an unusual subject and one hobby and interest only followed by the rich.

I was glad to see that in 1974, poems were published in the newspaper written by young persons at the school – Tom Blackwood and Wendy Clelland. This carries on the tradition of fifty years ago when Erchie Hay, Jimmy Logan and Geordie Clark were writing poems which survive to-day.

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Members' Deaths

Zena Young was a founder member of the Jim Hamilton Heritage Society back in 2004, together with her late husband John. Following John's death



Zena continued to be a regular attender at our meetings. When my family came to Coalburn in January 1955 Zena and John were our neighbours in Station Terrace as it was then known - despite being renamed as Coalburn Road several years earlier. Indeed, they spent all their married life in four different addresses in Coalburn Road.

Zena was well known in the village as she was a member of the local WRI and a regular attendee at the church where she was a willing helper when the Pancake Day came round. She also found time to attend the Darby and Joan Club. A very pleasant person who was always smiling. She once told me that when she got married she knew she would never be old as she would be Young for the rest of her life.

Peter McLeish

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**Billy Dempster** I was honoured to be asked to be Billy Dempster's best man at his wedding to Sylvia Rae. Sylvia is an Aberdonian, and they met when a crowd of us from the village were on holiday there in 1957. Billy and I went for a walk in Union Street. When we came to The Scottish Hosiery shop Billy decided to go in and buy a pair of socks. The following evening along with several others we went to a dance hall in Market Street. Shortly afterwards Billy said to me, "The girl who sold me the socks yesterday is here, I know her by her red hair, I'm going to ask her up to dance". That's how it started. At their Golden Wedding he said it was the most expensive socks he had ever bought.



In his youth, like so many others, Billy kept pigeons. He was an engineer with Colvilles in Motherwell. Billy and Sylvia

took up house in Lesmahagow. They later moved to Hartlepool for a short time, then returned to Scotland where Billy worked in a knitwear factory in Alloa before returning to Coalburn to work in Douglas. At this time he took up a new hobby as an angler with his son David as a willing assistant.

Billy was a regular contributor to the Newsletter. In the last year his health was not good and he went into hospital three months ago. We kept in touch on a weekly basis. He was due to go into Lady Home on the day he died. I was shocked when I was told of his death. I lost a very good friend. Billy's widow Sylvia is at present in Lower Johnshill while his son David lives in Dundee.

Peter McLeish

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Alex McMurdo This March would have seen Alex McMurdo's 95th birthday. Sadly it was not to be. Alex died in hospital towards the end of October last year.

Alex was born and brought up in Coalburn. One of a large family, he was predeceased by his siblings including sisters Margaret Dempster who died in 2013 and Ella Finlay, who died in 2017 in her 100th year.

Alex married Elizabeth Hay White Alton, his beloved Betty, whom he got to know when she left home in Glasgow to live with her grandparents Grace Whyte and Robert Alton in Coalburn during WWII.



On return from RAF service in 1947 Alex joined the Glasgow police and in 1977 was the proud recipient of a Queen Elizabeth Silver Jubilee medal. It was just as he was about to retire that the family suffered a huge blow when Betty died very suddenly. This was a difficult time. However Alex and his daughter Jennifer were and remain very close. Alex was a much loved father, father-in-law to Ron and grandfather to Julie and Stephen.

Alex had left Coalburn many years ago, but the village never left him.

I was blessed to have Alex McMurdo for a neighbour. On moving to Croftfoot in 2003 we soon noticed the man in the corner house with the sunny disposition, who seemed to know everybody and always had a smile and a wave. My partner Steven observed that one or two folks like that could bring up a whole neighbourhood. In due course we made his acquaintance and the revelation that he was a Coalburn man and had been at school with my father was a lovely surprise. He is very much missed.

Helen Brownlie

History of Birkwood: Part V

Part IV of our history ended with Birkwood House and Estate passing to Elliot Mackirdy Scott Mackirdy on the death of his father in 1909. Part V covers the new proprietor's earlier life and takes the story of through the first World War.

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***Born in Bothwell in 1881 Elliot Mackirdy Scott was the eldest of five children born to William Augustus Scott and Lucy Bell.*** He had three sisters and a brother, Charles David, the youngest child. The Scott family later moved into Glasgow. In 1894 Elliot's father fell heir to Birkwood on the death of Elliot's great uncle General David Elliot Mackirdy. Elliot - a mere twelve years old - was bequeathed the General's villa in Cannes.

A recurring feature of this history has been the great uncertainty of life in those times, even in the midst of riches. Elliot's grandmother, Susan Mackirdy, had died at 44 leaving his father William Augustus Scott motherless at the age of ten. Now, almost 50 years later, William Augustus lost his wife. The family were in Grantown-on-Spey when Lucy caught influenza. She fell ill on or around Christmas Day 1899 and before the year was out she had died, aged 50. Elliot was 18 and her youngest child, Charles David, only six.

Fifteen months later, the 1901 Census shows 20 year old Elliot at Birkwood - a 'Classical Student' - with his brother, his sister Lucy Augusta, and his aunt Jane Augusta Scott. They were well looked after, with no fewer than 12 staff in residence, of whom only Grace Hamilton, the 16 year old scullery maid, was from the local area. (In part IV we reported on a record to the effect that Birkwood House was empty at this time, however a second Census entry has since come to light.)

Elliot Scott Mackirdy married English aristocrat Eva Mary Pierrepont in London in 1906. Their first child - a son, David - was born the following year. And so it was as a married man with a young son that Elliot inherited Birkwood House and Estate in 1909.

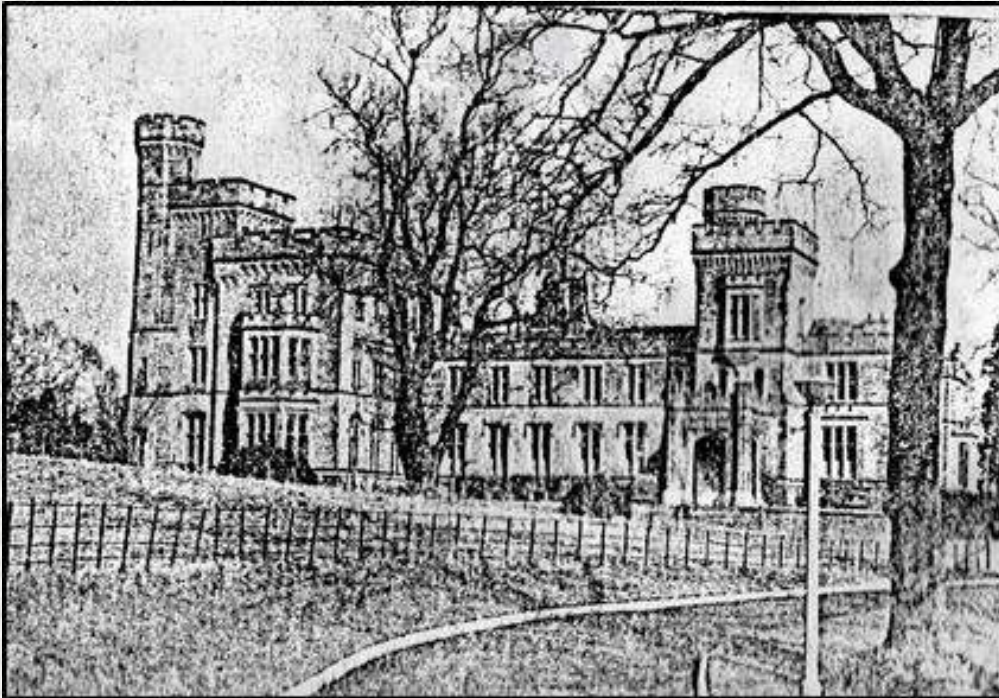
## **Eva Mary Pierrepont**

Eva Mary Pierrepont's grandfather, uncle, and brother held in turn the title of Earl Manvers. As the name suggests, the Pierrepont family of French origin; they had arrived in Britain with William the conqueror. A distant ancestor, Sir Robert de Pierrepont, fought against Bruce at Methven and was one of the chief commanders of the English fighting against the Scots in 1327.

Eva Mary's paternal grandmother Georgine de Franquetot was of more recent French extraction, being daughter of Augustin, Duc de Coigny. Augustin's grandfather Marie François Henri de Franquetot had been 1st equerry to King Louis XVI, the last monarch of France. Forced to emigrate during the revolution, he returned on Napoleon's overthrow in 1815.

She also had a Scottish aristocratic connection through her great grandmother: Georgine's mother, Henrietta Dundas Dalrymple Hamilton, was the only daughter (and heir) of Sir Hew Dalrymple Hamilton of North Berwick and Hon. Jane Duncan, daughter of Adam, the 1st Viscount Duncan.

It would appear that Elliot Scott Mackirdy did not share his predecessors' enthusiasm for Birkwood and the Lesmahagow area. And he had other options. The 1911 Census saw the family at Abbey House, Malmsbury, in the Wiltshire Cotswolds. The record for Birk-



wood advises that Elliot was accustomed to reside in England during the winter months and sees Birkwood occupied by a caretaker, James Cain, wife Elizabeth and son John. This may have been a strange - and possibly cold -

experience for the Cain family as Birkwood House had no fewer than 55 rooms.

Three years later the first World War broke out and the Scott Mackirdy family was not untouched. Elliot's younger brother, Charles David, known as Charlie, was killed in Picardy on March 1918, aged 24. Lieutenant Mackirdy has no known grave. He is commemorated on Pozieres Memorial on the Somme and on a headstone in Lesmahagow Kirkyard.

Elliot Scott Mackirdy does not appear to have seen active service. He joined the Lanarkshire Yeomanry in 1904, and in 1916 is recorded as a Captain in the Royal Horse Guards Reserve. He was also member of the Royal Archers - The King's Body Guard in Scotland.

The records show little to link Elliot Scott Mackirdy with Lanarkshire subsequent to the birth of his son David in Lesmahagow in 1907. His daughter Angela (1912) and son Michael Evelyn (1914) were both born in Kensington. The family were particularly fond of Malsbury. Elliot went on to purchase Abbey House and in 1920 the Mackirdy family moved out of Birkwood completely and settled there permanently. Elliot was a prominent member of the community in Malmsbury and went on to be five times Mayor of the town, where he died in January 1938.

### **Abbey House, Malmsbury**

Abbey House is a substantial dwelling dating from the 16th Century, once part of a Benedictine monastery. Captain Elliot Scott Mackirdy enlisted the eminent architect Sir Harold Brakspear - who had a distinguished record as a restorer of ancient buildings, particularly church buildings, and was architect to the Dean and Canons of Westminster - to enlarge the house, adding a nursery wing and servants' quarters.

The property is set in 4.5 acres of land and was Grade I listed in 1949. The gardens are one of Malsbury's biggest tourist attractions and have been open to the public since 1997.

<http://www.abbeyhousegardens.co.uk>

# *Spring has Sprung . . .*



**Canada Geese Swimming at  
Auchlochan**

**Nether Skellyhill Farm, Waterside**





**Bellfield Road**

**Swan Family, Aucholochan**



*Photographs courtesy of David Halls*

**The Racing Pigeon  
or, "Aloo the doo"**

*Fur years a've been fleein' doos  
An' a've still a lot to learn  
But sae hae Messrs. Black and Stewart  
Frank Hillan and Wull McLaren  
But a think a'll keep on racing doos  
Until a grow a baird,  
By then a'll maybe ken as much  
As Lightbody and Jock Aird  
Ma loft is next tae Hughie Smith's  
He's never struck the mark,  
For his burds come laggin' hame at nicht  
Like the colliers frae their wark.  
Yae dae the race was frae Dumfries  
Wi' a heed win' blawin' strang  
Hugh had twa pigeons in the race  
An' they were battling' hard alang.  
Says yin tae th'ither at Dooglas West,  
"A've ga'ed as faur as a can,  
A think a'll hae a wee bit rest  
Then catch Broonlie's chip van".  
Dan Stewart sent some doos away  
Tae the big race frae Rennes,  
An' the burds that Danny sent that day  
Were a cock an' twa wee hens  
The day went by an' nicht cam' roon  
An' no a sign o' a feather,  
Says Dan "They've maybe settled doon  
It's no whit ye'd ca' nice weather."  
Sittin' at the door on that nicht  
Jist efter the bus went by,  
Says Erchie tae Dan, "See if ye can  
Mak' oot whit it is I spy."*

*They glowered an' peered an' this they heard  
For there wis nae noise nor fuss,  
One doo sayin', "We're hame noo  
It's a handy thing Stokes's bus."  
Twa burds in a race frae Penrith toon  
Were settin' a terrific pace,  
Says yin in a flurry, "Whit's a' the hurry  
Ye'd think we were in a race."  
T' auld burd answered wi' scorn in his vice  
"Man, use some vim and vigour,  
Donald Black closes at 3 o'clock  
An' a'm his wild McGregor."  
Wullie McLaren as far as a learn  
Alang wi' his brither Jock  
Wis shadin' his eyes, searchin' the skies  
Wi' aye a keek at the clock.  
For a while he'd stood, wi' great fortitude,  
An' no a burd on the wing,  
A' at yince, cries he, "A'm sure a see  
Yin fur me ower Bellfield bing."  
He flew fur the loft, Jock cries "Yer' daft  
It's no fur ye at a',  
Ye see fur yersel - it's black as - well,  
It's only a Westoun craw."  
O' the things I cud say o' the doo an' its  
way,  
But I hivna time the noo',  
Tho' it's strange a' the same, hoo these burds  
get hame,  
But jist you aloo the doo.*

**by Jimmy Logan**

**Jimmy Logan** [1896-1962] was born in Coalburn and lived in the village all his life. A coalminer, he wrote many poems. He was a fast rhymester and could produce verse at speed, including at functions he was attending. 'The Racing Pigeon' mentions several prominent names in the Coalburn Homing club in the 1940s.

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Clyde Valley orchards in bloom

These pictures appear to have been taken above Hazelbank, on the road to Aucheneath: likely date early 1960s.

It is estimated that in 1888 the Clyde Valley provided one third of Scotland's orchard lands and, by the 1940s, two thirds of its tomato crop.

Seasonal work fruit picking was popular among local youngsters, while the year round hot house growing was a source of income for many. Glasshouses first appeared in Lanarkshire around the early 1900s. The first glasshouse-grown tomatoes in the valley were produced at Arthur's Crag or Craig, located down the hill near the river.



Four locations where glasshouses once stood were surveyed as part of a *Capturing the Past* project by the Clyde and Avon Valley Landscape Partnership in 2016: Stanhope at Hazelbank Braes; Arthur's Craig, Hazelbank; The Lye, Underbank; and on the riverbank below Underbank, where the new primary school for Crossford now stands.

Read more at: <https://www.communityactionlan.org/horticulture-growing/>

The Jim Hamilton

Heritage Society of Coalburn

www.coalburnheritage.org.uk



Cottages adjacent to the former railway line, near Bellfield Bing

Photograph courtesy of David Halls