

COALBURN **POST OFFICE**

A HISTORY

FROM THIS



TO THIS



TO THIS



By

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COALBURN POST OFFICE – A HISTORY

THE ONE PLACE that everybody who has lived in Coalburn will have visited is surely the Post Office and the following details appear in the census record of 1891, which shows the entry: - 1891 Braehead House.

James Adam aged 42, Grocer and flesher, born Lesmahagow.

Lizzie Adam, Sister aged 22

Marion Moffat, Servant, aged 14

Dr John Dunlop, Boarder, aged 34, Medical practitioner.

The Stothers Directory of 1893 lists James Adam as Postmaster at Coalburn therefore it can safely be assumed that the Post Office as such commenced trading sometime between 1891 and 1893.

The story of the Adam family and their association with Coalburn starts before 1860 as the census entries for 1861 and 1871 reveal. The entry for 1861 shows the Adam family to be staying at “Brick Row” which refers it is thought to Bellfield Rows. In 1861, 13 families lived in Brick Row, 1 family at Stone Row and 5 families with the vague address of Bellfield.

By 1871 the family had moved to Bankend Cottage and Isabella, aged 6, and Elizabeth, aged 2, had been added to the family, both having been born in Lesmahagow parish.

Some research of the *Hamilton Advertiser* from more than a hundred years ago demonstrates that the parents, Mr and Mrs Adam, as would be expected of a mine manager and his wife, were leaders of the social life of the new community at Brockley or Bankend, and earlier at Bellfield.

Ten years on in the extract from the 1901 census yet another place of birth, Johnstonhill, though still within the Parish of Lesmahagow, is shown for James. It may well be the same place of birth and it would also appear from the 1901 census return that he and his sister were sufficiently well off to have a domestic servant.



*The rear garden of Braehead House, date unknown.
On the right is James Adam.*

This would seem to date the arrival of the Adam family to Coalburn just before 1860 if the places of birth are accurate and as direct descendants lived in the village until the 1980's, that covers a period of roughly 125 years.

By 1901 the functions being carried out at the shop had changed as this census entry shows:

1901, Braehead House:

James Adam, Head, aged 52, Postmaster, Carriage Hirer, born at Johnstonhill.

Lizzie Adam, Sister, aged 31, born at Lesmahagow.

It is known that Braehead House was built by James Adam in the 1880's and has been in the ownership of the same family since. First James Adam then his nephew ***James Hamilton***. It must have seemed a palatial home when built in Coalburn. James Adam had been a grocer in

Calderbank for a period and with Coalburn developing he returned to the district and built a grocer's shop, a sort of big shed, opposite Braehead House, possibly in the 1880's, providing a shop service and going out for orders. He never married and his housekeeper was his sister Lizzie. She died in 1911.

A homely evening was spent by Jim Hamilton, author of the Chronicles, and his late father, at the Post Office in November 1972 when Mrs Grace Hamilton, mentally alert and fit, told them of the family background. Mrs Hamilton had often been told by her mother-in-law (Isabella Adam?), that the strong personality in the Adam family was Mrs Adam.

Jimmy Hamilton had withstood the cantankerous nature of his uncle James Adam to become his favourite nephew. Jimmy was born at Douglas and when a butcher, trained in his uncle's business, he then went to work in Tobermory for a short period, staying at the Temperance Hotel. Jimmy, shortly after becoming engaged to Grace Simpson of Lesmahagow, joined along with Loudon Cranston, the army and served in the Tank Corps. He was in the army from 1915 to 1919.

He had been planning to marry in the Spring of 1920 but his uncle James Adam died on 2nd November 1919 at Braehead at the age of 71 years, so the marriage was brought forward to 26th February 1920.



The business was not solely concentrated on the Post Office. As old photographs show, a thriving carriage hiring arm had been built up over the years and this continued for some time with Jimmy Hamilton (photo) himself being involved as a driver along with Bob Boyd who lived at the corner of Coalburn Road and what was Dunn Crescent but was changed to Manse View in the 1950's. Bob's brother Alex was the father of a current successful Coalburn business man, Bert Boyd, whose joinery business is based at Glaikhead. Bob himself was a former "cabbie" and was also very much involved in the haulage side of things at Braehead.

The following poem was written by Bob Mills of whom little is known other than he lived at 15, Dunn Crescent, Coalburn in 1925 and was a brickwork foreman. He was married to a member of the Finlay family.

There's a big hoose that stauns at the tap o' the brae,
Where the letters are got and dispatched every day,
And if ye are wantin' a message sent on,
Gang into the office and get on the phone.

There's Jimmy the postmaster, a very quiet chap,
Wae a wife and twa bairns, they stay at the back,
Noo Jimmy's a man, who always does richt,
And he'll gie ye a hire ony 'oor o' the nicht.

He keeps twa'r three caurs there, ye can hire,
And if ye are stranded – jist send him a wire,
He'll send on Bob Boyd - very careful is he,
And soon he'll hae ye back hame – will he.

Each mornin' at six, Bob tae the shed gangs,
Tae get his big motor tae fetch the milk cans,
And when he comes back – if there's nae hire tae dae,
He jist cleans awa' at his motors a' day.

Noo, Jimmy keeps nearly a' things in his shop,
He'll sell ye some knives, or else a door lock,
He sells papers and books and writing pads tae,
An' a' kinds o' toys for bairnies tae play.

An' servin' the shop there's a lassie as well,
She is liked by a' hauns and her name it is Nell,
There's a telegraph boy beside her there tae,
On his bike he rins roon the country a' day.

There's Jessie the post – she wauners along,
The yin that beats her at waulkin's a don,
Frae eight in the mornin' - the hills she gangs roon,
Tae plan tae get hame jist before noon.

There's Sannie the post – he takes yin o' the rouns,
And goes ower by Bellfield and then tae Westoun,
There's Jimmy his mate – and the low road he'll tak',
That's roon by auld Coalburn before he gets back.

The poem is undated but based on the information it contains it would appear to have been composed sometime around 1924.

Mention has already been made of Bob Boyd. The lass referred to in the poem, was **Nellie Hamilton**, no connection of the postmaster. She later became the wife of John Ross and both became very much involved in village life. They lived latterly in Coalburn Road, facing School Road. By a strange co-incidence there was a previous **Nellie Hamilton** also employed in the shop at an earlier time. She married and her son, Tom Affleck is a well known local historian, particularly in Lesmahagow where he resides. Nellie's mother must have resided in Burnside Cottage, now part of Muirburn Place as Tom told me some time ago that he remembers visiting his grandmother there. From what he said I think it was the house nearest Coalburn Road.

There is no mention of the telegraph boy's name in the rhyme but I recollect **Dan Smart**, my wife's uncle, saying that for a time he acted as such as well as spending a short time in James Adam's butcher shop before he became a miner. The telegraph boy is another of those memories from 50 years ago, it has to be remembered that very few families had or could afford the luxury of a telephone, hence the reason for the telegrams. As many people will recollect usually the sight of the telegraph boy at the door meant a telegram which had a black border round it. This indicated that it was news of a death. Another who was said to be a telegraph boy was **Jimmy Forsyth** from Lesmahagow.

From the poem it would seem that there were three "postmen" to cover Coalburn and the surrounding areas including Lintfieldbank and Birkhill.



This photograph is dated c.1925. It may be Mr and Mrs James Hamilton who are standing at the door.

Mention of the telephone brings to mind also that in those seemingly far off days the telephone system was operated and maintained by the GPO, (General Post Office) during that time and the vans with their dark green livery.

“Jessie the post” was **Jessie Garrett**, she may well have been the first lady post in Coalburn or possibly had taken on the job when the First World War broke out in 1914 as it has been recorded that women helped out with deliveries at that time. Her brother, Willie lived in Dunn Crescent and died in May 1956. Two other brothers, Archie and Charlie, made a name for themselves as footballers. She had another sister, Isabella, whose first husband; William Robertson was killed in Bellfield Pit.

“Sannie the post” was **Sannie Campbell** and to-gether with his wife, Elizabeth Bell; they operated a dressmaking business in Lesmahagow

in a shop in Abbeygreen before moving to another at the top of the Baker's Brae. Among the known Coalburn girls who were employed there were Jean Shaw and Kathleen Purdie. Sannie's son George sadly was killed in a motor cycle accident at the Knocken in Lesmahagow. Sannie later lived in a cottage named "Abbeygreen" at Ruthwell on the Solway coast.

"Jimmy his mate" referred to *Jimmy Duncan*. His son "Dally", is well known locally and resides in Larkhall. His daughter, Mima, lives in Lesmahagow and is a regular visitor to Coalburn.

Another person who has been named as postman in the district was *Willie Pelling*, however nothing can be found about him.

When Jessie Garrett retired from the job, she was replaced by *Donald Cameron*. Donald was a native of Glen Borrodale, Ardnamurchan, where he was born on 1896. It wasn't until he started school that he heard English spoken for the first time as his parents had the Gaelic. When he was eleven he had to travel to Oban to receive his secondary education. On leaving school he joined the Forestry and worked there until he was called up at the commencement of the First World War. His service took him to the fighting in the Middle East, trained as a gunner he had just landed in France and was heading for the Western Front when the war ended in 1918.

He arrived in Coalburn where he lived with an uncle who was shepherd at Stockbriggs and Donald worked for Jock Arneil (as did his son Joe years later), who supplied props for the local collieries. On returning to Glen Borrodale he took over the role of postman starting at 6.30 in the morning. Much of his deliveries were parcels or similar type packages as most of the hamlets to which he delivered had no shops therefore many items were posted to customers.

While in Coalburn Donald had become engaged to a local girl, Lizzie Strang and she wrote to tell him the local "Postie", Jessie Garrett was giving up her job and Donald sought a transfer which was duly granted.



The above photo was taken in the 1960's.

He married Lizzie and three of their four children, Ruby, Joe and Archie, still live in the village. His eldest son, Donald is retired and lives in Fife. Donald Senior served as the village postman until he was pension age in 1961 and he continued to collect the Post Office pension for over 30 years until his death in Douglas Hospital on 2nd January 1990 at the age of 93.

While working his deliveries took him not only throughout the village but to all the neighbouring farms, with the Porterhall and Cumberhead areas the most far flung. Of course in those days it was either "Shank's Pony" or by bike. One of the benefits of visiting the farming community was the "trophies" that he received, a turnip here, a dozen eggs there and so on. Donald was a kenspeckle figure in the village and he was still attending local events into his 90s. One of his favourites was the annual Flower Show. Truly a Coalburn "Worthy". Donald probably was the longest serving of all who have walked the streets of Coalburn delivering the mail.

On Donald's retirement **Billy Davidson** was next to take on the job following his spell in the RAF where he did his National Service. His tenure lasted 13 years and he was well liked and respected. On leaving the service of the Post Office, Billy commenced work at the factory in Lesmahagow and thereafter had several other jobs before taking early retirement and settling down to spend time with his pigeons. Billy lives in the village with his wife Grace who is a member of the Lott family who lived in Dunn Crescent.

During periods when Billy Davidson was on holiday, his replacement was **Nancy Prosser**, who was employed at the Post Office counter. Later to marry Wull Mitchell, Nancy took on the task full time and spent well over two decades as Coalburn's "Postie". Indeed it is not too long ago that she retired from that job. Like Billy above, Nancy has kept herself busy in retirement, in her case keeping her hand in at the "Bools" and helping to keep the Rural going.

Currently the village has another lady "postman", **Isobel McLenaghan**, daughter of Jessie and the late John Newlands or "Brusher" as he was known. Isobel's father was an electrician at No 9. **John Keenan**, who lives in Lanark, covers Bellfield Road and that area by van.

Others who have delivered the mail in all weathers have been **Mary Logan** and **Jimmy Mochrie**. Jimmy, the son of another "Worthy", Jimmy Senior, and Kate Carmichael took on that job after being badly hurt in a colliery accident following which he spent time in Killearn Hospital in Stirlingshire due to a serious head injury. The Porterhall and Cumberhead "run" was taken away from the Coalburn collections and these outlying farms are now serviced from Lesmahagow. To-day of course that area is covered by van as is parts of Coalburn from the Inns Brig and the length of Bellfield Road.



Behind the counter in the shop or Post Office have been two Nellie Hamiltons as already chronicled, **Annie McVey**, **Helen Weir**, who died on February 12th 2007 in Sefton Park Nursing Home in Larkhall, her cousin, **Joan Weir**, **Mary McCaskie**, **Jean Wallace**, **Grace McCall** not to mention two ladies who between them gave over 60 years service to the Post



Office, *Betty McGregor* (photo left) and *Margaret Allan*. Betty commenced working there in 1939 and recalls that it was the junior members who delivered the telegrams in the 1950s. She can still vividly remember names and addresses around Coalburn as though it were yesterday. It will also be recalled by the older generation among us that at one time letters were franked at Coalburn. A letter could be posted in the morning in the village and delivered in the afternoon, particularly if the sender had written

“Local” on the outside of the envelope. Nowadays the mail goes to Lanark for sorting without any input locally. On the right the pigeon holes for the local mail. Other tasks carried out by the counter staff was the task of serving motorists with petrol from the hand operated pump situated next to Roseberry Cottage which is now 15, Bellfield Road. It must be said that at that time there was another pump less than 50 yards away at McGill’s shop at the foot of the “Post Office Brae” at a time when there were many fewer vehicles on the road than now and currently in 2007 we have to travel to either Happendon Service Station or Lesmahagow to “fill up”. In addition to the pumps mentioned there was also another at what is now Bruce Shaw’s workshop at the Glaikhead end of the village which was available in earlier times as well. The ambulance used to be garaged there, that may have been the reason why there was a pump so situated.



James Adam’s nephew Jimmy Hamilton, maintained and improved upon the services provided by his late uncle on taking over the business in 1920 and it may have been under his stewardship that the petrol became available as the motor car became a familiar sight in the district. “Post Office Jimmy” as he was known to distinguish him from several other Jimmy Hamiltons in the village at that time, was a well respected figure and when the Gala Queens were selected in the early years he was one of the select band of prominent local men chosen to be an escort, in his case 1943, to Queen Nellie Scott before it was changed allowing one of the boys to be Lord in Waiting. Both he and his wife were of a quiet demeanour and were highly respected by all. When his health began to fail, one of his sons, also known as Jimmy took over the reins. Jimmy junior,

had his own business prior to that, delivering coal in the district and also continuing the tradition of haulage at Braehaed as he had one of the first motorised floats in the district which could be seen regularly transporting animals to Lanark Market. In addition, like his father and great uncle before him, also provided taxis when needed.



Jimmy junior, (photo) on becoming postmaster he proved to be a worthy successor to his father in every way and the business continued to flourish. Jimmy was involved in many of the social activities prevalent in the village along with his wife Mary who was the girl next door as they had grown up within 20 yards of one another. Mary was a member of the family of Jock and Agnes Nicol and therefore like her husband had a strong pedigree in the history of Coalburn.

In the 1980s there was yet another new postmaster in place following the death of ***Jimmy Hamilton, junior***. His successor being ***Jimmy Porter*** a former electrician who had a shop in Kirkmuirhill, though previously residing in Lesmahagow. Both Jimmys were related as their wives were from Jock Nicol's family. Mr Porter having married Mary Nicol's young sister, Neta, so the Adam/Hamilton connection was continued. Jimmy Porter continued to build on the work of his predecessors and like those before him was also keenly involved in the happenings in the village and he was a member of the Community Council when it was established in Coalburn. A piper in his younger days, Jimmy has always had a keen interest in music and has been a faithful attendee at the Box and Fiddle Club here throughout the years as well as putting in a regular appearance at the many ceilidhs which are held locally.

His time in charge ceased after 5 years and a new face came on the scene. Though now resident in Stonehouse he is a regular visitor to the village.

Steve Leavy, a Canadian who had previously been employed by the Post Office in Edinburgh. With a young family, he had decided to move to a more rural environment. With less than two years occupancy he moved on citing his indifferent health as the reason for leaving.



Yet again Coalburn welcomed another “gaffer” in the Post Office. This also brought a change of gender. **Susan McNeish** came in and took over. Married to a Coalburn laddie, Tom McNeish, his parents being Jock and Jean McNeish who live at Dunn Crescent. Susan’s folks are well known in Lesmahagow, John and

Bobbie (Barbara) Bremner. Tom being in the navy meant that Susan ran the business and she proved to be an innovative and enthusiastic owner. Among the ideas she introduced was the supplying of teas and coffees on the premises to encourage custom. Due to the lack of space this was not too successful. Susan in middle, above, Margaret Allan on the right. On the left is Susan’s sister-in-law, Grace McNeish. Margaret’s parents were Sam and Ann Allan, late of School Road.

It was with regret that the Coalburn public heard that the business was up for sale after a number of years with Susan at the helm as the McNeish family were going to Lesmahagow, a move which necessitated giving up the Postmastership.

At this time **Billy** and **Christine Brown** moved in at Braehead House. It was believed that they had previously been in South Africa before coming to Coalburn. Over the years Post Office services have undergone many changes. Stamps, for example can be purchased in many other outlets, TV licenses are no longer paid there. Though road tax can be offered in some Post Offices, Coalburn does not have that facility despite the number of vehicles now present, some homes having two cars and some even three sitting at the door. Billy and Christine continued to serve the community as their predecessors had done before them with papers, magazines, greetings

cards, sweets as well as grocery items. Several local organisations, including the Gala Day Committee, the Darby and Joan Club and the Mother's and Toddlers, benefited financially from the "Bonus Ball" concept which was operated at that time. Over a period of time it soon became



apparent to all customers who frequented the Post Office on a regular basis that Christine's health was such that she was seen less and less in the shop and **Rae Miller** came in to help out. Rae was a local as well, being the daughter of Jimmy and the late **Annie Cosgrove** (Scanlon), Manse View. Annie too helped in the shop. Another who assisted was **Caroline Smith**. Rae's daughter, **Sarah Miller**, worked at the Post Office end as well. Billy's health too began to falter and the Post Office brought in **Wilma Frew** to run the day to day operation with regard to the Post Office Counters while **Margaret Baillie** stood at the shop side for a spell. Then in August 2006 it was a shock to village to learn that the Post Office was closing, not only the Post Office but the business as a whole.



I am certain that there are other names worthy of inclusion who have served the Coalburn public from the counters of the Post Office; I hope that any one so omitted will not be offended. I have added as many as I know about and any omissions will gladly be dealt with.

With the talk of rural offices throughout the country closing as cut backs were being introduced due to many factors, some of which are mentioned above, there was a fear among the residents that Coalburn would be among

those affected, and therefore the closure could not have come at a worse time. Alternative arrangements were given as travelling to either Douglas or Lesmahagow. With at least Whitelaw providing public transport availability, the majority of users would use the latter as this was the better option for those without transport. That said I would doubt if many even with transport would go to Douglas, as Lesmahagow has always been a more likely shopping venue for the people of Coalburn.

Despite the doom and gloom, the Post Office management indicated that if suitable premises could be made available in the village it would endeavour to have a presence in Coalburn once again. With few options available the Miner's Welfare One Stop Shop was considered and following discussions between the relevant bodies it was decided that if possible the Post Office would be sited there.

Meetings were held and the appropriate paperwork was presented, for example a business plan had to be drawn up to gauge the feasibility of the project. Much to the relief of the villagers the move was given the go ahead.

The hours of opening at the last days of the old Post Office were curtailed somewhat, with no Saturday opening for example and many wondered if that situation would continue. The Management team at the Miner's Welfare took the view that normal hours of working would prevail and that has been put in place. Staff had to be recruited; again talks took place by the Committee members whether to have a full time member of staff or to have a job share situation. The latter proved to be the more favourable as that would assist in covering for holidays and the like.

There was an excellent response to the recruitment campaign and a short list was drawn up and from that two people were chosen. Again the continuity theme came through as Rae Miller was one of the successful candidates, *Jessie Prentice* being the other. Rae's parents have already been mentioned, Jessie's are Ernie, who died recently and Mary Spanton (Brown) who lives in Dunn Crescent.

Training was put in place by the Post Office as new technology has been in use which was not at Bellfield Road and the two members of staff were put through their paces for several days prior to the first day of

trading on Wednesday 7th February 2007. To celebrate the occasion a bouquet of flowers and a bottle of champagne were presented to the first customer. Letty Meikle, Coalburn Road was the recipient and Danny Meikle, her brother-in-law, and our local Councillor did the needful.

The Official Opening took place on Wednesday 21st February 2007 and among those present were David Mundell, MP, Karen Gillon, MSP, Danny Meikle, Councillor, Lindsay Smith Post Office Ltd, George Greenshields, President of the Miner's Welfare and Diane Taylor, Centre Manager of the One Stop Shop. Bill Scott, Headmaster of Coalburn Primary School brought along twelve of his pupils and two of them Patricia and Lewis assisted in cutting the ribbon with the help of the MP and the MSP.

Catering for the occasion was provided up to the usual high standard by the One Stop Shop's resident caterer Cruets. The children and adults alike took full advantage of the chocolate fountain which Cruets also laid on.

Post Office Management have been very encouraged by the numbers using the new facilities especially when the previous premises closed for business six months previously.

Indeed the response from the general public continues to exceed expectations. I have no doubt that the commitment of the two members of staff has contributed greatly to that response as they have continued the tradition in Coalburn Post Office of having staff who are caring and considerate.

Both of them having worked with the public for several years, and are proving most suitable for the role they have undertaken and I am sure that my thoughts are echoed throughout the village.



The above photo shows Patricia and Lewis with MSP Karen Gillon, MP David Mundell, Councillor Danny Meikle, Lindsay Smith from the Post Office and Diane Taylor, Centre Manager of the One Stop Shop.

The facility is certainly very busy and proves the wisdom of reopening here in the village and with the proposed influx of new residents I am sure that it will prove to be just as important to Coalburn in the coming years as it has been in the last 113 or so.

George Greenshields has been President for many years and it was he, principally, along with the support of his committee, who was the driving force in bringing the Post Office to its new base for which the public of Coalburn is grateful as there was a feeling that it would not return to the village following the sudden and rather unexpected closure of the previous premises in August 2006.



MP David Mundell



Councillor Danny Meikle with MSP Karen Gillon



This photo is of the schoolchildren with MSP Karen Gillon. In the background can be seen Rae Miller and Jessie Prentice the two new employees and also, standing on Jessie's left is George Greenshields, President of Coalburn Miner's Welfare.

May 2007



A well known resident, Billy Cook, about to use the premises.

LIST OF POSTMASTERS

James Adam
James Hamilton Snr.
James Hamilton Jnr.
James Porter
Steve Leavy
Susan McNeish
William Brown

OUR NEW POST OFFICE

*Oor Post Office has been re-sited, it's goat a new abode,
It's in the Welfare's Wan Stoap Shoap, at 42, Coalburn Road,
An' there are new assistants, ye get their the best attention,
If it's a furst class stamp ye need, or yer auld age pension.*

*The lassies there will help ye and greet ye wae a smile'
Nae soor faces there at a', that is no' their style,
"Good Morning Sir" they said tae me, a wis wurrit richt away,
Wan said, "I am Jessie", the ither, "My names Rae".*

*They were very nice tae me, "Which service do you require?"
Ah took oot ma plastic caird, a thocht there wis a fire,
Jessie she went quite white, "Are ye lookin' fur some sillar?
Ah juist tak' money in, I'll pass ye tae Mrs Miller".*

*The smiles syne disappeared when they realised whit a wantit,
Grudgingly or so it seemed, ma financial wish wis grantit,
I guess Mrs Miller must be Rae, an' withoot anither sentence,
Ah turned oan ma heel an' walkit oot, an' thocht Jessie must be
apprentice.*

23rd February 2007

Author's Note

Most of the early information was obtained from various copies of Jim Hamilton's excellent and well documented Coalburn Chronicles and all of the photos except for those of the opening of the Post Office in the Miner's Welfare also came from his vast collection. The later photos were produced by me as was the above poem. Where women employee's names are given, it is as they were known while employed.

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