

*The Jim Hamilton*  
Heritage Society of Coalburn  
**Newsletter 67**  
Summer 2022







## Editor's Remarks

Sadly, there is more bad news to report at this time with the death of founding member Gilbert Dobbie on 9th May. Gilbert was until recently vice chair of The Jim Hamilton Heritage Society. There is a tribute to Gilbert and his work for the Heritage Society in this newsletter. We also have a tribute to our former secretary Betty Bell, following her death in March. Just as we were about to go to press, we learned of the death of former vice chair and founding member Jim Hamilton. Gilbert, Betty and Jim were all very highly regarded in Coalburn. We will have a tribute to Jim Hamilton in our next issue.

On a much happier note, this summer sees the return of Gala Day celebrations on the traditional first Saturday in July, which in 2022 falls on July 2nd. There will be a Heritage Society display in the leisure centre that afternoon, the first time we have been able to mount an exhibition since 2019.

As part of preparations for the exhibition we started looking into anniversaries that fall this year and at how the village looked in these years. Some of the results are featured in this newsletter, with items on plans to introduce pumped water to the village getting underway 125 years ago in 1897 and on the closure of Bellfield and Auchenbegg collieries in 1922.

The other item concerns Mima Watson and her experience following her emigration to California in 1950. It occurs to me that we haven't previously published much on how people from Coalburn fared on leaving the village to settle elsewhere and this could be an interesting line to follow for future articles. Mima was very active in the Brownies and Guides while still in Coalburn, which ties in with the anniversary theme as it was in 1922 that the Coalburn Guides were founded - more on that in the next issue.

The cover picture was taken on Gala Day 1937 and shows Queen Grace Wilson with Maid of Honour Barbara Knox en route to the crowning ceremony.

The car belonged to Joseph McGill and the driver is Murdo Naismith.

Helen Brownlie  
June 2022

# *In deepest sympathy - Coalburn related deaths*

Robert Adams

Jean Allan

Robert Boyd

Gilbert Dobbie

Sammy Donaghue

Jim Hamilton



*125 Years Ago*

**1897**

## Water Supply Proposed

In 1897 Coalburn Special Water Supply Board proposed a gravitation water supply for the village, providing water via water pumps. By 1923 there were nine such pumps throughout the village.

Prior to this water had to be obtained from wells.

What was life like for a young girl in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, having to obtain water from a well for drinking and cooking? Jim Hamilton reported his grandmother's experience....

My grandmother, Agnes Millar, as a girl in the 1870s, resided at Coalburn Rows. Each morning she had to go for water. The nearest source to her home was Nellie's Well, called after Nellie Cranstoun and situated on the Bellfield side of the Coal (Black) burn on the banking near to Coalburn Inn. The present brig over the burn had not been built at that time so my gran had to cross at the ford where the brig now stands.

If the burn was in spate and she could not cross, it meant an extra half-mile walk up the road to Bankend to another well. This second well was opposite the entrance to Gunsgreen on the side of the bank above the Coalburn and it was called the Herd's Well as a shepherd lived at Gunsgreen.

After collecting water for drinking and cooking purposes gran then had to walk the two miles to school which was in one of the houses at Bankend Rows.

Coalburn Chronicles 48, page 2228

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Piped supplies also began in the 1920s, however it was rare to have water piped *into* the home at this time. Pictures from Lime Row in the 1930s show another form of early water supply, the Kennedy Well. These were



a type of permanent standpipe made by the firm of Glenfield and Kennedy. A ribbed knob operated an internal valve controlling the flow of water from an underground pipe. In 1923 there were around two hundred Kennedy Wells serving Lesmahagow, Douglas and Coalburn.

Also shown in the picture are barrels to collect rainwater for washing.

The people in the photograph are Mrs Lockhart, standing beside Mrs Duffy who is holding her son Tom, with Mrs Wallace just visible in the doorway on the right.

When Adam Brown was born in 1913 the family lived at Auchenbegg Rows with relatively primitive conditions - typical of the time - including dry closets.

Adam recalled that in his childhood his grandfather's family home - Stonehill, reached from Ardoch road-end, Lesmahagow - was the only house he had ever heard of that in had its own supply, which **seemed to come from a spring. The water was led by a pipe to a stone trough** at floor level in the kitchen and there was another pipe to take away the overflow.

Adam and his parents left Auchenbegg and moved to a new home in the two storey tenement in Garden Street. Interviewed in 1986, Adam still recalled the excitement of having running water and flush toilets, and the satisfying feeling of hearing running water gurgling along pipes.

Coalburn Chronicles 32, pages 984 & 986

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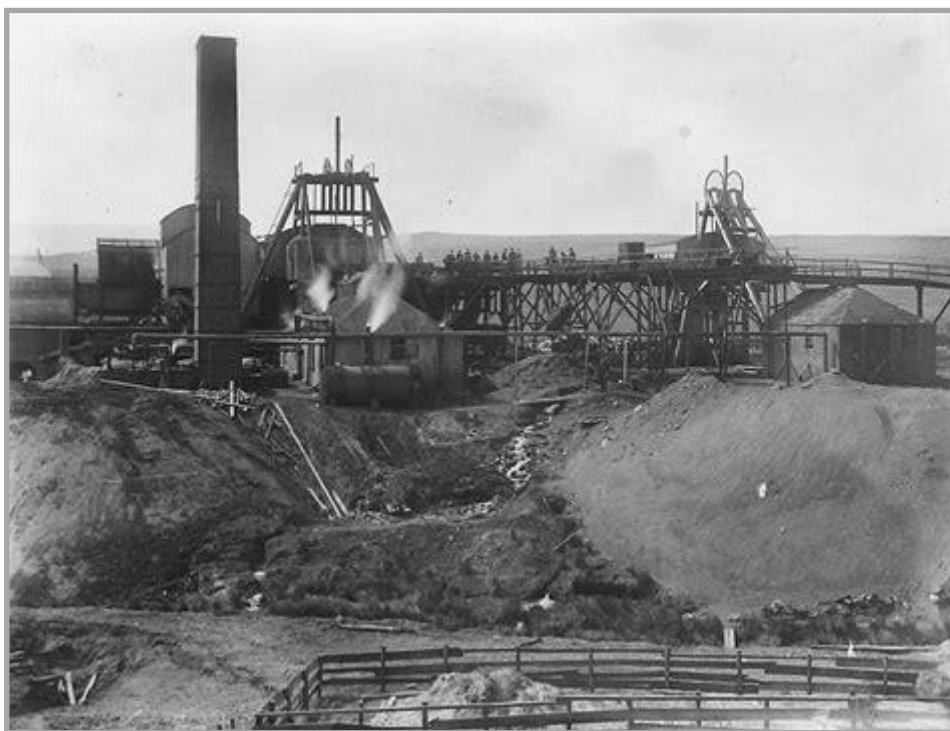
*100 Years Ago*

**1922**

## Auchenbegg and Bellfield Collieries Closed

1921 and 1922 brought strikes by the miners seeking improvements to their wages and also to the conditions under which they had to work. This action indirectly brought about the demise of both Auchenbegg and Bellfield Collieries as no maintenance work was carried out during the period of the strikes.

**Auchenbegg** was possibly the oldest colliery in Coalburn, being mentioned in the Traders' Directory of 1837 (although coal was being worked at Birkhill, Bankend and Auchlochan as early as 1791). Auchenbegg was located on the Road between Shoulderrigg and the Nethan, shortly after the sharp bend to the right on the old road at Shoulderrigg. Unfortunately no pictures exist of the houses at Auchenbegg, though there are pictures of the colliery.





**Bellfield** colliery was owned by William Barr and sons and was a major employer, possibly having commenced production about 1893. The lack of maintenance during strike action in 1922 led to a fire. Originally there were four Bellfield collieries - this was the last one to operate. The picture above shows this colliery and was taken around 1900. The Bellfield pit bings in later years can be seen in the picture below.



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# Elizabeth Todd Bryson

## (Betty Bell)



**Betty Bell** was born **Elizabeth Todd Bryson** on 22nd August 1930, to Agnes Bryson (née Odger) and James Bryson, a coal miner. Betty was a remarkable woman - smart, travelled, clever and kind.

The young Betty had a happy childhood at Glaikhead. Her paternal grandparents lived next door and in this small community of 12 terraced houses everyone looked out for each other. There was no electricity and an outside toilet; in later years Betty was one of the liaison group which petitioned Lord Dunglass to have electricity installed there.

Betty enjoyed her school days. She worked hard, received good reports and went on to study at Coatbridge Technical College, having obtained an exemption to go there straight from Coalburn School without having to go to Lesmahagow or Larkhall first.

In 1946, aged 16, Betty started work as Secretary to Department Manager of The Royal Insurance Company in Glasgow. Over the next few years she worked in secretarial positions with different firms.

Betty married Tom Bell in 1951 and they moved to Australia the following year, where Betty worked in various secretarial positions until finding employment with Bristol Aeroplane company, weapons division. Here she worked for the manager and had to sign the Official Secrets Act as much of the work was of a highly sensitive nature. She loved this job and travelled a lot during her seven years there. However big changes were about to occur in Betty's life.

After Betty's daughter Fiona was born in early 1961, she and Tom had scarcely time to settle into parenthood when they learned that back in Coalburn her father's health had deteriorated. Betty wanted home. Together with baby Fiona she arrived back in April and was able to spend quality time with her parents before her dad died in July. This was a very hard time for Betty as Tom was unable to get home to be with them until September.

That same year, 1961, Betty took on the job as agent for the local councillor and eventually she became Chairman of the Coalburn branch of the Labour



Party. In 1972 Betty was appointed a Justice of the Peace. She was then nominated by Lord Clydesdale to the position of Magistrate in Lanark District Court and worked in this capacity for 25 years. Betty took some pride in the fact that she was the only female magistrate in the Clydesdale area.

In 1964, when Fiona was three, Betty secured the job as Secretary at Coalburn Primary School, linked with Blackwood Primary. Betty was held in high regard by all who worked with her in both schools.

In 1980 Betty took up the challenge when the open cast mining project came to Coalburn. With a hard working committee they toiled tirelessly to look after the interests of the villagers. Betty became Chairman of the Action Group and in one eight week period she attended no less than 74 meetings.

When Tom died very suddenly in 1994 Betty was bereft, but decided the best way for her was to return to work as soon as she could. She retired the following year, 1995, after 31 years service.

Betty's legacy will be found in the communal values of the village of Coalburn which she helped to retain and improve through her work in the school. Although not actively promoting the feminist cause Betty demonstrated an independence of mind and spirit that is to be applauded. She was indeed a woman with drive, determination and self-belief, all qualities which she used not only in her personal life but in the public arena in her home village.

When the Jim Hamilton Heritage Society of Coalburn was formed Betty was among the first to offer assistance. Working unstintingly and such an able communicator she was always very welcoming to all who met there. Betty was Secretary for ten years and she was invited to and attended the Queen's Garden party at Holyrood in 2010.

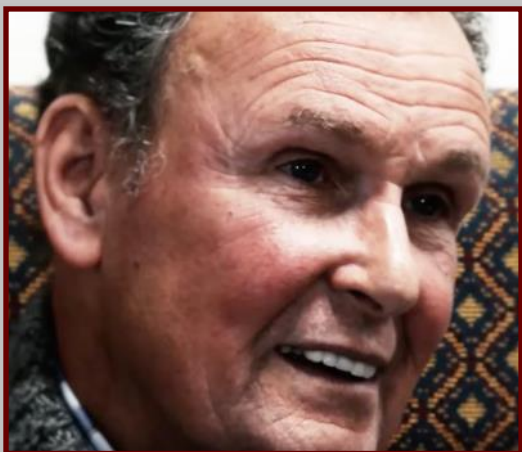
Betty Bell died on 23rd March 2022, aged 91. She will be sadly missed.

Marion McBain



Betty at the Governor's Ball, Adelaide, 1955

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## Gilbert Dobbie

**Gilbert Dobbie**, known to friends as 'Gib' or 'Gibbie', was born at Tinto View Terrace on 28th June, 1946. A former miner, Gilbert Dobbie was remarkable for his dedication to village heritage and his devotion to family and friends.

Yet there were many aspects to Gilbert. A former classmate recalls the poetry he wrote while at school. And it was with a letter that he won the heart of his lifelong love, his wife Margaret. In contrast, when a boxing club was formed in Coalburn, Gilbert was among the young lads who joined: we have a report from the Hamilton Advertiser on the outcome of several contests staged by the club, including a bout between Gilbert and a Lesmahagow boy, which Gilbert had won. Gilbert was also a talented footballer.

When Gilbert was ten the Dobbie family - Gilbert and his parents, Gilbert and Mabel, and sisters, Jane and Margaret - moved from Tinto View Terrace to a new house at Manse View.

On leaving school Gilbert went to work as a miner. He worked at Auchlochan No. 9 then, following his marriage in 1972, moved to Mansfield in Nottinghamshire where he worked for six years. Gilbert then moved back to Coalburn with his wife and son and, with the last of the local pits closed, travelled to work at Bedlay Colliery in the Monklands coalfield.

On retirement from work as a miner Gilbert became a driving instructor. He taught many young people in Coalburn to drive - they all thought he was a great instructor.

Gilbert later worked as janitor at Coalburn Primary School, where he was well liked by the pupils. He retired in 2012, just as Coalburn School closed for the last time, and that spring entertained the Heritage Society with a talk looking back on his work at the school.

Back in 2004, when a public meeting was held with a view to forming a Heritage Society for Coalburn, Gilbert was there. He remained a member of



the Jim Hamilton Heritage Society throughout and on retirement in 2012 became more actively involved. He volunteered weekly at the Heritage Centre and also made trips to other organisations, such as Blackwood and Coalburn Darby and Joan Clubs and Douglas Church Guild, to give talks. In 2016 Gilbert stepped up to the plate as vice chair and ably supported chair Peter McLeish in that capacity. He also assisted with outreach to Coalburn School - spring 2019 saw Gilbert involved in hosting a school group who visited the Heritage Centre to find out more about the Second World War and how it had affected the village.

Gilbert's most powerful legacy in heritage matters is his contribution to the '*Pits, Ponies, People and Stories*' Project, which aimed to build an understanding and awareness among schoolchildren of their communities' mining heritage. Gilbert played an important role in the development of the book put together to reflect the impact on primary seven pupils from across Lanarkshire and he helped judge the children's artwork for book. In the course of the Project, Gilbert had visited schools to talk to pupils about mining and answer their questions. He was a great presenter, as the video record testifies. This video presentation, titled '*Pits, Ponies, People and Stories*', together with '*The Light at the End of the Tunnel*' - where Gilbert eloquently describes his working life as a miner and that of his father before him - can be accessed on You Tube from the Project's page at the Heritage Society website:

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

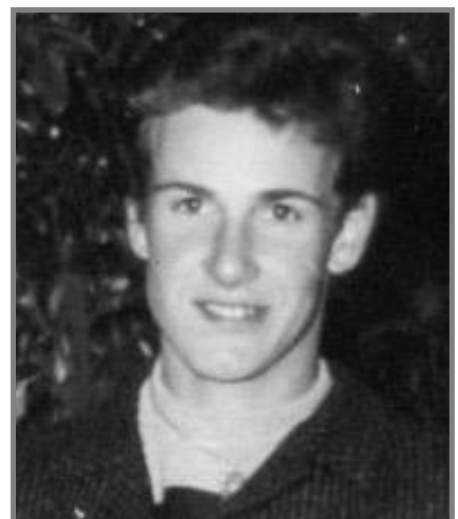
At time of writing, '*The Light at the End of the Tunnel*' has been viewed over six thousand times.

Gilbert had suffered poor health over the last few years but his condition was not thought to be life threatening and when he was admitted to hospital in late April it was expected that this would be a temporary stay. Sadly that was not to be and Gilbert passed away on 9th May, aged 75.

We extend our heartfelt condolences to Gilbert's widow Margaret and family, his sisters Margaret and Jane and their families, and to all those who were near and dear to Gilbert.

Helen Brownlie and The Jim Hamilton Heritage Society

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# Caretaker at Asistencia has many Duties

## *FEW WOMEN HAVE JOBS LIKE THIS*

This article is from The San Bernadino County Sun, 7th December 1968. It concerns the remarkable Mima Watson, who had emigrated to California in 1950 together with her brother Dan, sister Bella and baby niece Jennifer. Two other brothers, Tom and Bill, together with sisters Nessie and Jenny, were already in the states at that time.

Their parents were James Watson and Agnes Smart, who began married life at New Trows Road. The family moved to Pretoria Terrace, Coalburn, and latterly lived at 16 Dunn Crescent. Mima was very active in the Coalburn Brownies and Guides.

Following their move to the USA the Watsons kept close ties with friends and family in Coalburn, including the Smarts. The father of Jean Smart (Mrs Peter McLeish) was a first cousin of the Watson siblings.

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Being the caretaker of a combination mission-museum is not the job most women would apply for.

Yet when Miss Jemima Watson, a native of Scotland decided to go to work in America, the first application she filled out was for caretaker at the San Bernadino Asistencia.

She was hired and for the past eight years, the historical landmark has been her home.

The Asistencia was once the headquarters of the branch of Mission San Gabriel in San Bernadino and was originally intended to form a unit in an inland



chain of missions. It now serves as a public museum displaying items pertaining to the Indian Mission san Gabriel and the American pioneer period of the county. It also maintains its mission atmosphere, including a small, quiet, almost hallowed chapel.

Here at Asistencia, Miss Watson arranges an average of 60 to 70 weddings per year in the chapel.

Here she serves as tour director for 1,000 children and adults who visit the mission-museum compound each month.

Here she sweeps, dusts, polishes and cleans the museum rooms and chapel and keeps the lawns and flowers green.

Here, also Miss Watson even substitutes for the usual church sexton in ringing the large mission bells for weddings and other special occasions.

“Few single women have jobs like this,” says Miss Watson (she doesn’t know any other at all). It’s mostly couples who work in similar jobs, she explains.

In addition to her duties as caretaker, Miss Watson finds time to cook, bake, sew knit, read and visit, and is learning to drive a car.

Most important, she has been a mother, adviser and family to her neice, Jennifer, who resides with her. The latter, a 1966 graduate of Redlands High School is now employed by riverside travel service.

A brother, Daniel, who formerly resided with them was killed in 1964 when struck by a car in front of the Asistencia.



When she first came to America in 1950, Jemima joined several brothers and sisters who were already settled in Redlands and started keeping house for the family.

During World War II, while still in Scotland, she was first-aid

ambulance assistant and ran a youth club. Prior to that, she was a leader of the Girl Guides. At one training school in Clitheroe, England, she became acquainted with both Lord and Lady Baden-Powell, founders of the Boy Scout and Girl Guide movements.

After the war when rationing continued in Coalburn and there seemed no relief in sight, Miss Watson decided to come to America. She was accompanied by her brother, a sister and Jennifer, then 15 months old.



Mima Watson with brother Dan and niece Jennifer

Since the Asistencia is county-owned (it is perhaps the only one of its kind that is not directly affiliated with a church) Miss Watson receives her monthly salary from the board of supervisors to which she is responsible as an employee. She works six days a week (Monday is her day off) and is on duty all holidays unless she pays someone else to work for her.

Officially, Miss Watson's day at the Asistencia begins at 8.30 a.m. The place is open to the public from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily except Monday. But in reality, she is on duty 24 hours a day. People who wish to be married in the chapel don't always check to see what hours the chapel is open. "Once we had a couple come at midnight because they couldn't make up their minds exactly what day they wanted to be married."

Miss Watson always tries to oblige any couple who comes to the



chapel. She telephones a minister and arranges other details for the ceremony.

For scheduled weddings at the chapel, Miss Watson will make the punch and coffee and cut the cake for the reception if requested to do so. Of course, it is her duty to see that everything, including the candelabra and flower baskets, is ready at all times for the ceremonies.

In conducting the many museum tours, Miss Watson tried to impress on the children the value of the country's history. "It is their heritage." She tries to make her talks interesting to the children. "They are the next generation. The world is in such a mess. We need to let them know that some things have lasted for years. It gives them a sense of security."

She and Jennifer, who is her girl 'Friday' when she isn't working at her regular job, went back to Scotland in 1966. The latter wanted to go again next year to spend a little more time in the country of her birth. But neither of them wants to go back to live.

And Jemima, a member of the Daughters of the British Empire, Mentone Congregational Church and San Bernadino County Museum Association, expects to continue arranging weddings, guiding tours, baking, sewing, knitting, reading and making new friends.

She likes being a caretaker, especially at a place like the Asistencia.

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**Mima Watson, Coalburn 1949**  
**Miller Brownlie holding baby Jennifer**

*The Jim Hamilton*

## Heritage Society of Coalburn Forthcoming Events

Coalburn Gala Day **Saturday 2nd July 2022**

**Coalburn Heritage Exhibition, Coalburn Leisure Centre, School  
Road, 12 noon - 3 pm**

Talk by Ethyl Smith **Saturday 27th August**

**'The Battle of Bothwell Bridge'**

**Coalburn Miners' Welfare Lounge, 42 Coalburn Road, 1.30 for 2pm  
(Car Park Garden Street)**

*Light Refreshments Served*

2022-23 season begins **27th Wednesday 7th September**

**Annual General Meeting and slide show by Geoff Brown following  
his recent stay in the historic town of York**

**Coalburn Bowling Club, 7 for 7.15pm**

