

HIGH SPEN & DISTRICT

by Thomas William Pears

Edited and revised by Brian Pears

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Foreward.

I came across the typescript for this history among my father's papers shortly after he died in 1991. It appears to have been written initially around 1978 and then rewritten and rearranged several times before being abandoned. As a result, I had quite a confusing collection of papers. Some chapters existed in several quite different versions without any indication as to which was the latest one. There were also apparent gaps where a page didn't logically follow from any other extant page or didn't have an obvious successor.

I have attempted to arrange the material in a coherent way and to make good the gaps as best I could to bring the work to a form I think my father would have approved of. I've also updated the material to some extent to reflect some of the changes that have occurred since 1978.

Brian Pears, Low Fell, 2010.

1. Introduction.

I started to write a history of Methodism in Spen, but as this touched on so many other aspects of village life, I decided to make it a more general history of the place. Then it became obvious that it would be difficult not to include Victoria Garesfield too because its mine workings reached under the Spen, and many of the workers at that colliery lived there. Then Barlow Fell seemed to need some attention as the earlier mines were there and it was a centre of sport for the area. And then ... well let's just say that this is a history of High Spen and district.

At first sight the history of Spen seems to be singularly uninteresting - just another 19th century mining village with none of the antiquity of some neighbouring places and no historic events or famous sons to distinguish the place. In the days before the Romans came to Britain, the area was just a forest, probably the home of wild animals including wild cattle not unlike the Chillingham herd. There have been no bronze age finds here such as at Axwell and Blaydon, though the people of that period, the Beaker People, living in those areas might have ranged this far during their hunting. The Romans too were tantalisingly close, with camps at Ebchester and Whickham - not to mention Hadrian's Wall which is only four miles to the north. There are even strong indications, but sadly no proof, that a Roman road passed through Hedley, Coalburns and on to Winlaton, scraping the northern end of Spen en route. Perhaps evidence for this road will emerge some day, but whatever the truth about the road, the Romans were certainly close by, and possibly they too passed this way while exploring or hunting. Even Cromwell passed us by. He and his army were at Whickham, Winlaton and Newburn, but not, as far as we know, at Spen. There is, however, a story, again unconfirmed, that a battle of the Civil War was fought near to where St. Patrick's Church now stands. So maybe we were indirectly touched by Cromwell after all.



One notable who definitely did not pass by the Spen was the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, then the Duke of Windsor. He visited High Spen on 29th January 1929 and had an impromptu cup of tea at 6 Front Street, the home of miner Robert Farrage and his wife, Isabella. Apparently the couple had jokingly offered the Prince a cup of tea as his limousine drove past, and he stopped his car, got out and accepted their offer. Then he entered the house and waved away his security men and others of the entourage who made to follow him in, leaving them anxiously waiting outside the house for 15 minutes.

I hope you will bear with me in this attempt to tell the story of a friendly village with a fine tradition of neighbourliness.

2. Early History.

William the Conqueror's Domesday Book of 1086 completely omitted the counties of Durham and Northumberland. To make good this omission, in 1183 Bishop Hugh Pudsey of Durham commissioned The Boldon Book which surveyed those two counties. Although Spen is not mentioned by name, it was part of the Manor of Winlaton so will probably be included in this entry:

"Winlaton and Barlow are leased out with the lordship farm and the villeins [a servant who held land in exchange for occasional work for the lord of the manor.] and their stock, they return £15, they mow the meadows for two days each with one man and at that time they have subsistence, and they lift and cart the hay for one day. The marsh, meadow and underwood are in the hands of the Bishop."

The earliest reference to Spen which I've found is in an article on "The Manor of Winlaton" by Sir W.W. Gibson in *Archaeologia Aeliana* 4th series volume 23. This says:

"In 1370 Katherine, Widow of Hugh de Fery held 4 messuages [dwellings] and 100 acres in Berley [Barlow] and Spen, of John de Nevill, knt. by 3s rent and suit at the Manor Court of Winlaton."

John de Nevill was the father of Ralph Nevill who became Earl of Westmorland in 1397.

Several people living in Spen are mentioned in Surtees' "History of Durham". William de le Spen died in 1631; William Read of Spen died in 1632 leaving Cuthbert Read (son of Nicholas Read, deceased) his grandson and heir, under age; Peter Hedley of the Spen, Yeoman, daughters Margaret and Dorothie, daughter Anne espoused to Edward Dod, 3rd March 1583; Richard Wild of the Nether Spen to James Wild a daughter Nell to daughters Dorothie and Grace, wife Isabel. Witness Cuthbert Swynburne, Robert Wild, 2nd January 1583.

Bourne in his "History of the Parish of Ryton" states:-

"The Spen is included in the general alienation [transfer of land by sale rather than inheritance] from Nevill in 1569. William Shafto gent. held lands in Spen in 1631; James Wild who lived at the Spen about the same time as Shafto, and married a lady by the name of Barloe, also possessed lands, but afterwards sold them to Thomas Tempest of Thornley."

An indenture of 1632, dividing the Manor of Winlaton - or Winlinton as it was then called - between Sir William Selby, Sir Robert Hodgshon and Robert Anderson, gives the following as living in Spen, Robert Hall, Robert Wild, Robert Allerton, Christopher Lawson and Dorothy Swinburne, Widow, and at Low Spen, William Beason. The Swinburnes seem to have occupied quite a bit of land in the area. At Lintzford there were John and Nicholas, and at Barlow, Elizabeth, Widow.

3. Religion and Education

Methodism began early at Spen. Farmer John Brown, who had been converted by John Wesley at Tanfield Lea, later moved and settled at Low Spen. John Wesley then visited Spen several times as did his brother Charles. The earliest visit was on Thursday 14th

**GRANARY STEPS AT LOW SPEN WHERE
JOHN WESLEY PREACHED IN 1743**



June 1743, where John Wesley recalled:

"I preached at the Lower Spen, 7 or 8 miles from Newcastle. John Brown had been obliged to move hither from Tanfield Leigh, I believe by the providence of God. By his rough and strong, though artless, words, many of his neighbours had been convinced and began to search the Scriptures as they never had before; so that they did not seem at all surprised when I declared 'He that believeth hath everlasting life'".

A Methodist "Society" was established at John Brown's farmhouse and later this was led by Christopher Hopper, one of Wesley's greatest lieutenants.

When the population grew around the colliery at High Spen from the 1840s, Methodism took hold there too. First were the Primitive Methodists who met in a house on the New Row, later known as Jawblades Cottages and finally as the Old Row. They were meeting there by 1861 and probably much earlier.

In 1866 a trust was set up to consider building a chapel. The chairman was Rev. W. Saul, the secretary Joseph Humble the manager of Spen Colliery, the treasurer



Joseph Johnson a farmer from Coalburns, and as vice secretary William Thompson, a miner from Barlow. The foundation stone for this P.M. chapel was laid by William Green, an agent, at 2 o'clock on 22nd September 1866.

This building opened on Good Friday, 19th April 1867 and at first served as both chapel and school.



This arrangement didn't prove satisfactory, so a replacement chapel was built on the other side of the main road at the top of East Street in 1884 at a

cost of £800 to hold 300. The old building continued to be used as a school, the vestry of the new chapel was also used for the senior class.

The Wesleyan Methodist Trust was formed in 1899 and held meetings in the house of butcher William Cooper in Front Street and occasionally at Crawcrook W.M. Chapel. The chapel in Front Street was opened on Friday 13th February 1901 by the chairman of the district, Rev. G. Polkington.

The East Street and Front Street chapels flourished until 1947 when the Front Street Chapel was closed and all services were then held at the East Street Chapel. The Front Street building was used as a hall until 1955, and in 1972 it was sold and later used as a dry cleaning establishment. It has since been knocked down to make way for housing. East Street Chapel struggled on with diminishing congregations, but eventually closed in 2003.



A P.M. chapel was built at Victoria Garesfield in 1885. This was built using bricks given by the Priestman Coal Company and carried by the members, male and female, to the building site. The pews were said to have been carved inside the building. This chapel

was in the main built by voluntary labour - men who worked long hard hours in the pits - and cost only £300. A schoolroom was added in 1904. The last service was held here on 6th October 1963, and now, like much of the village, it has been demolished.

In the 20's and 30's all these Chapels had good congregations, and all had good choirs. They were the social centres for many people in these villages. The choirs travelled the area giving concerts. An example of this is given in the 'Blaydon Courier' of 30th January 1932, which states that the High Spen P.M. choir visited Leadgate P.M. chapel with conductor Joseph Robson, soloists Miss Harrison and John Robson, elocutionist Miss Stinson and pianist Mr. Lowdon A.I.C.M.

There were many well known and well liked personalities in Methodism at that time in Spen. Among the best known were Jack Yule, a local preacher and choir-master, Dickie Smith and Tom Potter two stalwarts of the pulpits, William Cooper, one of the founders of the Front Street Chapel, George Bramley trust secretary and leading tenor at Front Street and the Jessop family, who had many years of yeoman service at East Street.

Methodists in Spen and Victoria Garesfield now have to travel to Chopwell or Rowlands Gill for worship.

Anglicans in the area had no nearby place of worship before 1884 and had to travel to Winlaton, Ryton or Chopwell for their services. In 1884 Arthur Jones, the Rector of Winlaton, rented rooms in High Spen and Victoria Garesfield to act as temporary churches. Services were held at Spen at 6.30 pm on Sundays and at 7.00 pm on Wednesdays, and at Victoria Garesfield on Tuesdays at 7.00 pm. These services were conducted by the curate, Mr. Wykes. Eventually a church, St. Patrick's, was built to serve the two communities. It was dedicated on 17th March 1890 by the Bishop of Newcastle, Edgar Jacob D.D., the Bishop of Durham having died a short time before. This Church cost £1,500 to build and seated 200.

The first chalice at St Patrick's Church was presented to the church by Mrs. Thorp, widow of Archdeacon Charles Thorp of Ryton. Archdeacon Thorp, who owned land in the area, had presented it originally to the Chapel of Ease at Chopwell in 1842 but when this building had fallen into ruin, he'd taken it back. It was an Early Elizabethan Cup inscribed "Chopwell Chapel" and below this "The offering of Charles Thorp D.D. A.D. 1842." The chalice didn't remain at St Patrick's for long - it was returned to Chopwell when present St John's was opened there in 1909.

In the latter stages of World War Two there was a Prisoner of War camp at High Spen which housed low-risk German prisoners who worked on nearby farms. For the benefit of these men, St Patrick's held a weekly service conducted in German and this continued until the camp closed.

Spenn was in the Parish of Ryton until 1832 when the Parish of Winlaton was formed. It remained in Winlaton Parish until 1986 when High Spenn and Rowlands Gill Parish was formed. Most unusually the parish has two parish churches, both of equal status: St Barnabas' at Rowlands Gill and St Patrick's at High Spenn.

The many Catholics in and around Spenn were even less well served - they had to travel to the Sacred Heart at Byermoor. In 1914, however, St Joseph's Church at Highfield was built. Initially this was served by clergy from the Sacred Heart, but in 1929 a presbytery was built, a



priest appointed and St Joseph's became a parish in its own right. The early parish covered a large area including Barlow, Winlaton Mill, Lintzford, Victoria Garesfield, High Spenn, Highfield and Rowlands Gill, but part of the area was transferred to St Anne's Church at Winlaton when it opened in 1962.

Evangelicals had to wait much longer. The Gospel Hall opened on 13th November 1937 in what is now the premises of Abel Building and Roofing Services Ltd on Station Road at Rowlands Gill. This hall had been built around 1928 and was initially used as an Auction Room by Oswald Carter. This church had a large following in its early years, including several from the Spenn area, but like all churches, its congregation declined. In the 1960s the hall was taken over by the Elim Pentecostal Church, but it closed in the 1970s.

At High Spenn Sunday Schools were run by both Chapels and the Anglican Church. I remember the Front Street Sunday School with Harry Bell, the local blacksmith as superintendent, followed in this

post by Jack Yule, a clerk at the colliery. There were field days in the summer, at Ryton or Shotley Spa (now the Shotley cricket field) and we always seemed to get lovely weather. Games and sports, sticky cakes, a bag of sweets and an apple or an orange were the order of the day, and always a sing-song to finish with.

The Sunday School Anniversaries were the highlights of the year in the Chapels. They usually lasted for two Sundays. At Front Street this was Whit Sunday and the following Sunday. Beginning with the whole school going around the streets in the village in the morning singing, sometimes accompanied by a mobile organ or a fiddle. The juniors reciting their poems or pieces of scripture and singing hymns in the afternoon. The evening was taken up by the seniors with their recitations or giving a demonstration, not the modern idea of a demonstration, but poems and hymns with appropriate signs or placards to illustrate their message. Every seat in the chapels was filled for these anniversaries, in fact additional chairs were usually needed.

There were many weekday activities, social evenings, choir concerts, choir practise, Wesley Guilds, Rechabites and the one I remember best, the Boys' Brigade at East Street. We were the 10th Tyne Valley Company, Raymond Robson was the Captain, Lenny Greenhill, Lieutenant, Billy Hedley, Sergeant, and myself, Corporal. It started in July 1933 and lasted about 3 years. There were usually about 30 of us meeting in a small vestry, doing drill, P.T., signalling and playing games. Our favourites were mount-kitty and making human pyramids, There was also a camp in an old quarry near Hedley. There was also a B.B. Company at St. Patrick's Church, this was the 7th Tyne Valley Company, enrolled in November 1934 with John Sanderson as Captain.

Although Spen suffered greatly in the depression of the 1930s, the churches helped to provide some good, in fact memorable, times by providing social as well as spiritual life in the village.

Formal education in Spen started in 1867 when, as mentioned earlier, the first P.M. Chapel and schoolroom was built. The first logbook of this school that I can find is from 1875. At that time the headmaster was Thomas Armstrong and his staff consisted of Anne Armstrong, Lizzie Armstrong, Carrie Armstrong, Annie Bennett, and E. Gair. A report in the log book dated 21st July 1875 reads:- "A man named Jno Parker has been going about from house to house

in the village agitating the people against the school and the teachers because his boy, who is a very dull and careless boy, was not examined by H.M. Inspector."

BOARD SCHOOL 1894



In 1894 a Board School was built on Hugar Road because the P.M. Chapel was deemed too small, in spite of the fact that a plan had been passed through the Blaydon Local Board (later Blaydon Urban District Council) for additional classrooms. When the Board School opened the headmaster

was Thomas Coulson, one of the best known teachers at Spen, he was remembered as a very strict disciplinarian. His original staff was John Carr Gordon, Miss A.M. Rankin, Miss Margaret McDermott, Miss Sarah Jane Fenwick, John Robson, pupil teacher, and Victoria A. Chapman, Monitoress.

When the old chapel/schoolroom ceased to be used as a day school in 1894, it became known as the Assembly Rooms and was used for social functions for many years. Finally it served as council depot before being demolished, probably in the 1950s.

The colliery owners played some part in educating their workers and their families. In 1858 the owners of the colliery at Spen, the Marquis of Bute and the Simpson family of Bradley Hall, erected a reading room and a library of 130 volumes. An account of the annual Tea Party and Public Meeting held 27th October 1860, is reported in the 'Newcastle Daily Chronicle and Northern Counties Advertiser' of Tuesday, 30th October 1860. "A party and public meeting in connection with the Reading-Room and Library at the Spen, took place on Saturday afternoon, in the room which the owners of the colliery have granted for the use of the members."

Adult education at Spen began as early as 1st Oct 1885 when science classes in sound, light, heat, and mathematics were started by the Blaydon District Industrial and Provident Society Ltd. Robert Pears, Principal of Chester House Academy Newcastle-upon-Tyne, gave an introductory lecture. Then on 19th Oct.1885, Mining

classes were started at Spen Colliery, Thomas Nicholson of Spen being the instructor.

Many people living at Spen worked at Victoria Garesfield Colliery. In 1883 the owner of this colliery, Priestman Coal Company, opened a reading room and a school for 200 pupils, boys and girls. This was known as the British School, Victoria Garesfield. The first British School was formed by the followers of Joseph Lancaster, a Quaker, in 1808, and known as the Royal Lancastrian Society. This name was changed to the British and Foreign School Society in 1810. This system allowed for the tuition of masses of children by other partially educated children, with a minimum of paid staff. These schools were competitive; pupils moved forwards and backwards in the rows of desks according to their achievements. By 1851 there were 1,500 British Schools in the country, drawing their main support from non-conformist families.

The school at Victoria Garesfield was taken over by Durham County Council in 1905 in accordance with the 1902 Education Act. It was decided that the Victoria Garesfield premises were unsuitable in some way. Accordingly the school was closed on 17th August 1908, and the pupils and the staff moved to new premises on Highfield Road at Highfield. The staff who moved to the new school were: Adam Smith, headmaster, Mrs. Smith, his wife, Miss Dora Turner, Miss Josephine Bessford, Mrs. E. Matherson, Infants teacher, and a male pupil teacher. The Victoria Garesfield School was converted to dwelling houses and the headmaster's house next to the school to Victoria House. These houses are still standing although much of the village has been pulled down. Almost 100 years after the move to Highfield Road, that school too was closed and the pupils and staff moved to new premises at Pipe Bridge which they share with St Joseph's School.

Education changed at Spen in 1917 when a new two-storey school was built on the site now occupied by the Dovecote Care Home on Hugar Road. This was used for infants and juniors, the seniors were left at the old school. Then in April



TWO-STOREY SCHOOL, HIGH SPEN

1931 Thomas Coulson died, he had been the only headmaster at the school, a reign of 37 years. Although he was very strict, he was greatly respected, his educational achievements were remarkable. Newark Smith was temporary headmaster until the appointment of Wilfrid Davidson in January 1932.

In January 1933 a school attached to St Joseph's Roman Catholic Church at Highfield was opened. Many Roman Catholic children in the area had attended High Spen and Highfield Schools up to that date. These premises closed in 2007 and moved to shared premises at Pipe Bridge as mentioned above.

In the 1950s, the two High Spen schools swapped roles. Infants and Juniors moved to the 1894 single-storey building where they remain to this day, while seniors moved to the 1917 two-storey premises which became High Spen Secondary Modern School.

Then, in September 1965, High Spen Secondary Modern School closed and the pupils and staff moved to the newly-built Rowlands Gill Secondary Modern School near Lilley Terrace. The two-storey premises at High Spen then became "Newcastle House" and served a number of functions before being demolished to make way for the Dovecote Nursing Home.

The more advanced education in the area was at Blaydon Grammar School until 1931 when Hookergate Grammar School was opened at Low Spen. Then, in the early 1970s, Hookergate Grammar School joined with Rowlands Gill Secondary Modern School to form Hookergate School. At first both premises were utilized, but later the school moved entirely to the Hookergate site. That remains the position in 2010, but it seems that Hookergate School is soon to merge with Ryton Comprehensive School with the Hookergate premises closing completely by 2013.

4. Criminals and Crime.

The area had its share of villains, the best known belonged to the Barlow Gang, a set of footpads, pickpockets and shoplifters who associated with other gangs of thieves in the district. A report in the Newcastle Courant of 4th March 1786 refers to two of these.

"Two suspected Persons in the House of Correction.

One Abraham Smith, a tinker, says he was born at Leadgate near Ryton, has lived at Bishop Auckland for about 1½ years, was a soldier in the Fencibles [soldiers enlisted for home defence] in America [this appears to be a contradiction, perhaps their overseas service was an emergency measure during the American war], about 21, 5 foot 5 inches, swarthy complexion, long dark brown hair curled at his ears, black eyes and now wears old sloughed hat, a black neckcloth, an old blue halfwide coat with metal flat buttons, and old red double-breasted waistcoat and trowser.

And one John Cooper, born at Bishop Monkton near Ripon in Yorkshire but brought up at Barnard Castle, he formerly had 2 or 3 voyages at sea, and latterly got his bread by selling books and pamphlets etc., he appears to be about 17 years of age, 5 foot 2 inches and a half high, dark brown hair very thick and rough on top of his head, grey eyes and a fair complexion, he now wears an old coarse slough hat, a sailor's old jacket, an old striped velveret waistcoat and trousers.

The above persons are supposed to be part of a notorious gang of thieves called the Bishop Auckland Gang, otherwise the Barlow Gang, otherwise the Gateshead Fell Gang, so called from some of them residing and others of them occasionally rendezvousing at these places.

Persons able to give any account or information concerning these suspected persons, or either of them, are desired to transmit the same to the Town Clerk, and those who desire to see them are to apply at this office."

Another character in the near vicinity was Robert Thompson. A report in the Newcastle Courant of Saturday 15th, April 1786:

"Escaped from justice, charged with divers felonies, petty larcenies and various other misdemeanours. Robert Thompson, his size 5 feet 10 inches, raw-boned of a sallow complexion, stoops much, and has a shamle or slouch in his gait, with a downcast eye, and is of a most

suspicious appearance, when speaking he turns his head from the person he addresses, conscious of the guilt he in vain endeavours to conceal; he is about 40 years old and lived formerly at Alnwick, as one of the under gardeners to His Grace the Duke of Northumberland, and was lately head gardener at Gibside. Whoever apprehend the offender, so that he may be brought to Justice and convicted of fact or facts in allegation against him, shall be entitled to a reward of 5 guineas by applying to Gibside."

The sequel to this appeared in the same newspaper of Saturday 19th, August 1786, in a report of the Newcastle Assizes.

"Robert Thompson was indicted for 2 burglaries and larcenies, but being acquitted of the capital part of those crimes, he was convicted only of grand larceny within the benefit of the statute and was sentenced to be transported beyond the seas for a term of 7 years."

Like any other area, there were both saints and sinners in the Spen of the 18th and early 19th centuries, but in the main, it seems to have been a fairly law-abiding place - until one dreadful day in 1864 when High Spen became notorious.

The peace and quiet of New Row was shattered by the sound of bitter and violent quarrelling. It came from the house of coal hewer Matthew Atkinson and his wife Eleanor. The date was Saturday 17th December 1864. Matthew, a 43 year old miner and native of Barlow, was said to be of good character and a good workman. His wife, also aged 43, who came from Winlaton, was described as a woman of very dissipated habits. His nephew, Matthew Swinburn, a boy of about 14, lived with him. New Row was a street owned by Garesfield Colliery, Matthew's employers. It was previously called Jawblades Cottages, and was later known as the Old Row. It followed more or less the same track as the modern footpath from Front Street to the park.

On the night in question, Matthew, with Swinburn and another nephew, had been to a pigeon shooting match at the Hobson. They returned home at about 11 o'clock, Matthew had drunk too much, a frequent occurrence at those matches. Swinburn went into the house first, then left a few minutes later. When he returned, his

uncle, his aunt and a man called Leyburn were in the house. A quarrel began and the boy and Leyburn left.

Eleanor ran into the street but her husband dragged her back indoors. Shriill screams came from the house, but at first the neighbours thought that it was just one of their usual fights. However the uproar became worse and there were sounds of metal objects being used. Benjamin Hunter, the next-door neighbour, knocked at the door but got no answer. By this time several people had gathered and some of them tried to open the door. Atkinson called out that he would shoot the first one to enter. This sent them back.

A little while later Atkinson came out of the house and walked around for about a quarter of an hour. Then, saying he was going to finish her off, he went inside again. Moans and groans soon came from the house and the sound of more beatings. Then Atkinson apparently became aware of the seriousness of his actions and he got Benjamin and Jane Hunter and James Hindmarsh to go into the house.

They found Eleanor lying bloody and bruised. On her left temple was a wound 2 inches long and 2 inches wide. The left arm and four fingers on the right hand were broken. The back of the head was badly damaged. The legs were bruised and cut. The neighbours went into the house at 12.15 a.m. A message was immediately sent to Winlton Police Station and P.C. Harrison arrived on the scene at 2.40 a.m. He arrested Atkinson and took him to Blaydon lock-up.

The inquest opened at the Board Inn (now the Bute Arms) at High Spen on Monday 19th December under the deputy Coroner, R. Davis. A report in the Newcastle Courant read:

"The proceedings appeared to excite great interest in the village, the inhabitants of which enjoyed a character of great peacefulness".

The inquest was adjourned until Tuesday 27th December and when it re-opened, Mr. Davis presided, but J.M. Fawcett, the Coroner, was also present.

Evidence was given by Police Sergeant Thomas Wood, stationed at Winlton, that he had known the deceased for four years and she

was a woman of very dissipated habits. Dr. Archibald Meggatt, the pathologist, gave evidence on the nature of the injuries, also that blood found on a poker and a coal rake taken from the scene of the crime matched that of the dead woman. The jury returned a verdict of murder and committed Atkinson for trial. He was remanded to Durham Prison and taken away by Superintendent Jabez Squires.

At this time an article appeared in the Times deploring the inactivity of the neighbours. An extract read:

"We verily believe there is but one place in England where this event could happen and that no other population ... would have allowed a fellow creature to be murdered almost before their eyes."

This was not Atkinson's first encounter with murder. On Tuesday 6th November 1860, John Baty of Cuthbert Street, Blaydon was murdered at Winlaton after a pigeon shooting match at Blaydon Burn. Thomas Smith, a slater and native of Lancashire, was tried, found guilty and hanged for the murder. At the time of the Baty murder, Smith was lodging with Matthew Atkinson and his wife at Cuthbert Street, Blaydon. Smith was also one of three men from the Hobson who suddenly disappeared without collecting their wages after the murder of Dr Stirling at Rowlands Gill in 1855. The Spen murder, the Baty case and the Doctor Stirling murder were all handled by Superintendent Jabez Squires.

The trial of Atkinson began at Durham Spring Assizes on Thursday 2nd March 1865, with Mr. Justice Shaw presiding. He decided that, owing to the serious nature of the crime, he would transfer the case to Mr. Justice Mellor. This trial opened on Friday the 3rd with Mr. Blackwell and Mr. Laycock appearing for the prosecution and Mr. Campbell Forster handling the defence.

The defence attempted to have the charge reduced to manslaughter, bringing evidence of Atkinson's good character and of his wife's poor one. The judge's summing up, however, did nothing to help this. He said he regretted the apathy of the witnesses in allowing the murder to take place. It caused him pain and astonishment at such un-English behaviour. The jury, with John Atkinson of Barnard Castle as foreman, took 44 minutes to reach their verdict - guilty of wilful murder.

Matthew Atkinson was then sentenced to death by the judge. The prisoner, who had shown some anxiety while the names of the jury were being called, listened to his fate without any display of emotion.

The public hanging took place in front of Durham Prison on Thursday 16th March, the "Durham County Advertiser" of 17th March had the headline

"Horrible Scene at the Execution of Matthew Atkinson".

A crowd had gathered near the gallows, all bent on a good day out. At 3 o'clock a shout went up and a figure was seen to approach the gallows; it was the Under Sheriff, Mr. W. Wooler. He was joined by the prison chaplain, the Rev. Bulman, the executioner Thomas Askern, and, of course, the prisoner. The Chaplain read the burial service. The prisoner's hands were clenched and blue, probably tied too tightly.

The Chaplain and Mr. Wooler withdrew and the hangman opened the trap, then the rope broke. The crowd gasped then cheered. There was widespread speculation and uncertainty among the crowd as to exactly what had happened and what would and should happen if the prisoner had survived. The prisoner had fallen 14 or 15 feet, and many of the crowd thought that he may have broken his neck or at least a limb. Was he dead or severely injured? Some regarded the incident as a manifestation of the Divine Will in favour of Atkinson, and thought that if the prisoner was still breathing his life should be spared, indeed some proclaimed that this was what the law mandated and the prisoner had to be released if he survived an attempted execution.

The speculation ended after 20 minutes when a workman turned up and replaced the rope, and shortly afterwards the prisoner was brought back apparently uninjured by his unfortunate fall. Clearly the execution was to proceed.

The crowd booed and jeered at Askern who, apparently upset by what had happened, handled Atkinson very roughly when he placed the hood and the rope on him. This time the rope held but, instead of dislocating the neck, it slowly strangled the struggling victim. This enraged the spectators even more. There was a great outcry in the local newspapers against public hanging.

One interesting fact. The rope which broke was made in the prison itself, the first "hanging rope" to be made there. Was it deliberately made weak?

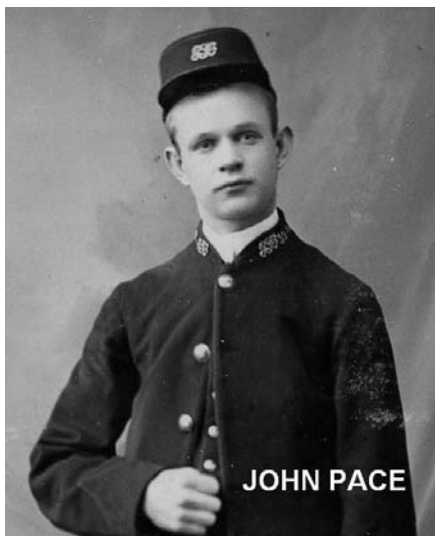
I spotted an interesting possibility while searching for this family in the census records. In 1841 Matthew Atkinson was living at Barlow with his parents and brothers and sisters; by 1851 his wife was there too, and in 1861 we find him heading his own household in Cuthbert Street, Blaydon. The Blaydon entry is as follows:

NAME			AGE	OCCUPATION	WHERE BORN
Matthew	Atkinson	Head	37	Coal Miner	Durham, Winlaton
Elenor	"	Wife	40		"
Matthew	"	Son	10	Coal Miner	"

(TNA Ref: RG9/3808 Folio 120 Page 28 Schedule 238)

There was no mention of this "son" during the murder proceedings, but was he the person referred to as Atkinson's "nephew", Matthew Swinburn? The age and forename are the same, so it is a possibility, but if that is the case, who actually was he?

There seems to have been no major crime at Spen from then until the Great Mail Robbery of 1923. On Monday 19th November 1923, James William Hopewell, a married man with two children, reported to Rowlands Gill Post Office where he was employed as a postman.



At 7.45 he and another postman, John Pace, left together to deliver their mail, but they soon separated to go to their individual areas.

James' route should have included High Spen Post Office, so when he failed to report there, enquiries were made. It was soon established that no mail had been delivered in High Spen that day at all - and Hopewell was carrying a package containing £50 destined for High Spen Post Office. This was approximately equivalent to £2,000 today. The police began a search and his post bag and his

overcoat were found two days later in a hedge between High Spen and Barlow, but there was no sign of James or the £50.

Nothing was heard until the end of December when James Hopewell turned himself in to police at Leicester, and he confessed to giving way to a sudden temptation to take the money. On Friday 11th January 1924 he was committed to the Assizes by Gateshead County Court and was bailed on his own surety of £100. At Durham Assizes on Wednesday 6th March he was sent to prison for four months. That appears to have been the last serious crime in High Spen.

5. Mines and Miners.

There has been mining in the district for hundreds of years, there are reports of mines near Chopwell before the 14th century, leased by the Bishop of Durham. Queen Elizabeth I granted Crown leases during her reign (1558-1603). A pit was worked there for 40 years from 1605 to 1645, at a yearly rent of £5 per year plus £10 for any additional pit. These would almost certainly be Bell Pits which only accessed seams near the surface. A shaft was dug to the seam, then the coal was worked around this, continuing until it became unsafe to do go further, then another shaft was dug. Many of these pits collapsed while they were being worked, and many miners were killed or injured in them. This method of working coal was used until a means of ventilating the pits was found allowing deep workings.

There were pits at Strothers and near Bail Hill (Bone Hill) by 1708 when the Cowclose Stella Waggonway was built to carry the coal from there to the staiths. The first deep pit was the Maria Pit near Greymare Hill opened on 27th June 1756 and this was followed by several others in that locality. Whitefield Colliery near Chopwell was operating in 1767 at a depth of 270 feet producing 31,800 tons per year and another deep pit at Barleyfield (Barlow Fell) produced 13,250 tons.

What were to be the "Garesfield Pits" had their beginnings in 1765 near Ash Tree Farm, then in 1800 the pit near Garesfield Farm at High Thornley, owned by the Marquis of Bute and Miss Simpson of Bradley Hall, was started. The shaft was 150 feet deep and accessed three seams: the Stone Coal, Five Quarter and Brockwell. The

average thickness was 33 inches and it was excellent coking coal. There was a stationary steam engine of 25 H.P. In 1804 there were 24 bonded miners at Garesfield, this excluded offhand men, banksmen and horsekeepers. 5,214 tons of coal from here were shipped to the Thames in 1836 and 5,522 tons in 1837. Also in 1837 the pit at Garesfield Farm was replaced by the Bute Pit at High Spen, and as a reminder of the earlier pit, the Bute Pit and its associated works were dubbed "Garesfield Colliery". Houses built for the workers at the new Garesfield Colliery transformed the tiny settlement of High Spen into a thriving village, and as the colliery grew, so did the village.

The name "Garesfield was later included in several other colliery names - Victoria Garesfield, South Garesfield, Axwell Garesfield etc - as the owners of Garesfield Colliery expanded their business empire. And not only collieries - for many years Derwenthaugh Staiths were known as Garesfield Staiths.



At the Durham Miners' Gala on Saturday 21st June 1873 it was reported that there were 120 men employed at Garesfield and 50 at Chopwell. Later that year Spen had its own Miners' Gala. The Newcastle Daily Chronicle of Monday 25th August 1873 reported:

"On Saturday afternoon the members of the Miners Union at the Spen and their friends held a gala in a field near the colliery, kindly lent for the occasion by Mr Thomas Urwin. It was a beautiful day, the view from the field was pleasing and picturesque, and the large gathering of youths and maidens that were assembled entered heartily into the sports that the committee had provided for their amusement. Tea and spiced bread of excellent quality was supplied in abundance by the ladies of the village, the young men ran races and joined in all manner of games, a good band discoursed sweet music and not a few danced to its strains. After tea a temporary platform was formed in view of the pleasant slopes of

Derwentside and a public meeting composed of the more elderly portion of the gathering took place."

"Mr Joseph Cowen occupied the chair and in a brief address remarked on the altered tone that now pervaded society respecting the operation of trade organisations, to that which prevailed a few years ago. In the district the actions of the Miners' Association had certainly lent harmony and good feeling to the coal trade. They had passed through a period of great industrial excitement without a single difference much less a strike. This is attributed to the offices of the representatives of the miners and the employers' organisations meeting frequently and settling all differences by discussion and reason and not by force. Had the two controlling associations not existed and they had not enjoyed the confidence of the body they represented there would have been continual conflict during the last two years at individual collieries, the miners would have lost their earnings and the employers their profits, much contention would have taken place and not unlikely some of those sectional disputes might have widened into a general strike. (APPLAUSE). To the judicious proceeding of the two unions they were indebted for the peace and prosperity that had reigned, and I hope would long reign, in the mining districts of the north of England."

"Satisfactory, however as the operation of the joint committee had been, he urged them to endeavour to provide against possible disputes in future, first by establishing some central board of arbitration, to which all questions affecting the general trade might be referred and whose decision should be final, and second by starting one or more collieries of their own and learning from them by practical experience the risks and responsibilities, the trials and troubles, the losses and gains of commercial enterprise. (APPLAUSE)"

The Newcastle Daily Chronicle article went on to describe the contributions of William Crawford, Nicholas Wilkinson and John Pritchard to the meeting and concluded:

"Mr Whitfield moved a vote of thanks to the speakers and the chairman, and with the closing of the meeting the sports in the field were renewed."

These speeches seem to have been long before their time. In an era when trade unions were generally disliked by employers and by the press, to talk of workers having their own pits was certainly revolutionary. And I certainly found it surprising that a joint committee of men and their employers existed at such an early date.

Another politician who visited the village was Keir Hardie (James Keir Hardie 1856-1915), the founder of the Independent Labour Party. In 1909 he addressed a meeting in the field beside the Field Club from the back of a rolley - a flat, four-wheeled cart.



PRESERVED COKE OVENS, WHINFIELD

Much of the coal got in this area was coking coal of high quality. To utilise this the Marquis of Bute built 193 Bee-Hive coke ovens at Whinfield near Rowlands Gill. These were the standard pattern used in the North-East and so called because of their shape. The Marquis had obtained the

royalties of Chopwell Colliery about 1800. He built the coke ovens in 1862 and initially supplied them from Chopwell, carrying coal through the wood on a waggonway. Victoria Garesfield Colliery opened in 1870 and from then on was the main supplier of the ovens. The ovens and pit were later sold to Priestman & Peile which eventually became Priestman Collieries Ltd.

Bernard McCall stated in an article on the Whinfield Coke Ovens in Industrial Archaeology that they were built with bricks from the Lily Brickworks at Rowlands Gill. This can't be correct as those brickworks didn't exist until more than 30 years later, and it seems certain



A BRICK FOUND BESIDE THE PRESERVED COKE-OVENS AT WHINFIELD

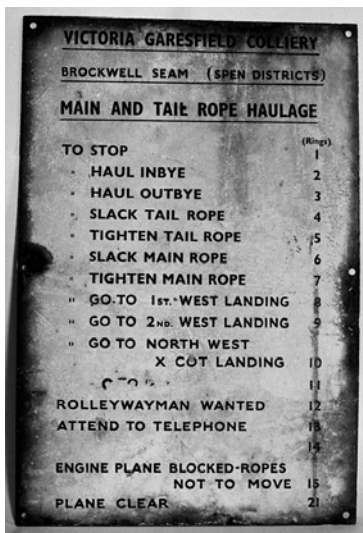
that the source of the bricks was actually Cowen's brickworks at Blaydon.

Coal for coking came from the Victoria and Brockwell seams; it was crushed to a powder, put into hopper, then into tubs each holding 25 cwt, and finally loaded into the top of the ovens. Coke production at Whinfield reached a high of 68,000 tons/year in 1952 and 1953 and fell slightly from then until closure in May 1958. Most of the coke was used in iron foundries. These were the last Bee-Hive ovens to operate anywhere in the world, and for that reason five of them (nos 108, 109, 110, 192 and 193) are preserved on site, the last-remaining link with the early days of coke making in the North-East.

Garesfield Colliery at High Spen and Lily Drift Colliery at Rowlands Gill also had banks of coke ovens in their early days, but these were on a comparatively small scale, and with the establishment of a large cokeworks at the new Chopwell Colliery and the expansion of cokeworks at Blaydon Burn, not to mention the existing large works at Whinfield, their respective owners decided that they weren't needed and both closed in the early years of the 20th century.

Many of the miners employed at the various drifts which made up Victoria Garesfield Colliery lived at Spen. In fact there were many colliery houses belonging to Victoria Garesfield Colliery there. These

were mainly the streets known collectively as "Ramsays" the correct names being the unromantic ones of Short Row West, Short Row East, Long Row West, Long Row East, Queen's Row, King's Row, North Cross Row, South Cross Row, Back Ramsay Street and Front Ramsay Street. These were built by Mrs. Ramsay in 1883 after much delay, and taken over by the colliery in 1912 apparently in a bad state of repair. Questions were asked about their condition at a local authority meeting even at that early date.



All the local pits had their ups and downs - disputes, lay-offs and many

other troubles. The optimism of the speakers at the 1873 Spen Gala seemed misplaced. The range of the pits were extended, new shafts opened, more men employed, but the owners seemed determined to keep wages down and conditions as poor as possible. Matters were brought to a head in 1925 when an attempt was made to lower wages. Chopwell appears to have been chosen as the one to make an example of, and on 22nd June 1925 a strike or lock-out, depending on which side you supported, began. The other pits came out on 1st May 1926, then came the General Strike. This only lasted nine days but the agreement between the Durham Miners Union and the mine owners was not signed until 30th November 1926 and although there was supposed to be no victimisation, Chopwell miners were long afterwards treated with suspicion.

Spen played quite a part in the strike. On the 1st May Robin Page Arnott, an executive member of the Communist Party and a member of their Labour Research Group, addressed an emergency meeting of trade union leaders at the Co-operative Hall at Spen. In answer to Harry Bolton, the chairman of Blaydon Urban District Council, he suggested that Labour controlled councils could effectively block the government's plans by refusing to carry out government instructions.

Another prominent figure during the strike was Will Lawther (later Sir Will, leader of the miners' union) - who was the Labour candidate for Barnard Castle, member of Durham County Council, member of the executive of the Durham Miners' Association and on the National Executive of the Labour Party. He was checkweighman at Victoria Garesfield Colliery. On Sunday 9th May, along with Harry Bolton, he refused to unload food at Winlaton Mill. They were charged at Gateshead court, convicted under the Emergency Regulations and sentenced to a fine of £50 or 2 months in jail, both elected to go to jail. Was this a deliberate attempt to discredit two of the strike leaders?

The Spen and District Trades and Labour Council issued a four page strike bulletin dated Tuesday 4th May 1926 which cost one penny (1d). The secretary of this council was Steve Lawther, a brother of Will. He was a miner but much later became a rent collector for Blaydon Council.

My personal recollection of the strike was confined to seeing a blackleg. I was at my grandparents' home in Watson Street at Spen

when their next door neighbour, the blackleg, was being escorted home from the pit by two, what appeared to me to be, massive policemen. All the street and many other streets were out booing and spitting at him. I believe that many men at Spen never spoke to this man again although he lived until long after the war.

With nationalisation the dream of the early miners seemed to be realised, but as the coal stocks in the area dwindled there was a period of increasing gloom as the pits were closed one by one. Garesfield Colliery at Spen was meant to close on 5th January 1957, on the same day as the Lily Drift at Rowlands Gill, but due to the intervention of Andy Lawther, the area public relations officer of the N.C.B., and others, it was deferred until 29th July 1960. Andy Lawther was another brother of Sir Will, and was checkweighman at Spen from 1937 until nationalisation. Victoria Garesfield was closed on 13th April 1962, and the last part of Chopwell on 25th November 1966. Many miners left the district to work in other coalfields, some found work at nearby pits, others left the industry and found employment elsewhere.

The pit-head buildings and the pitheaps have been levelled. Today's children have never seen a miner coming home from the pit covered in coal dust, often dripping with water, or smelt the characteristic odour of carbide which was used in miners' lamps and frequently discarded by the road-side as miners made their way home. Those were hard times, but happy times and I think that those of us who can remember that era should try to preserve the spirit of comradeship that existed then, and keep Spen as a friendly mining community.

6. Waggonways and Transport.

The early pits in the area were served by waggonways to Stella Staithes. The first was the Brockwell Waggonway. It ran from pits on Barlow Fell opposite Pawston Birks farm to staithes just east of the main Stella Staithes, via Norman's Riding and Brockwell near Blaydon Burn. It opened about 1667 and, as it was omitted from a 1787 map, we can assume that it was closed by that date.

The next to open was the Clavering Stella serving pits in the Chopwell area. This ran from about 1696 until 1897 on a route to Stella via Coalburns, and was latterly known as the Whitefield

Waggonway as it then served Whitefield Colliery, just north of Chopwell.

Then came the local line, the Cowclose Stella Waggonway. This ran from pits on what is now Garesfield Golf Course and at Strothers, it ran from a point south of the golf club house, around Bail or Bone Hill crossing the road near the bottom of Towneley Terrace. Then on past High



Strothers Farm to Greenside and Stella. This line was opened by 1706 and closed before 1787.

There are some remains of these waggonways to be seen. The Clavering remains are near the road from Chopwell to Leadgate (the Bairns), O.S. grid reference NZ115595. The Cowclose is visible near the bottom of Towneley Terrace, reference NZ133599. There is a small cutting at grid reference NZ135607, and to the left of the High Spen to Greenside Road (Rogue's Lane) there are 2 stretches of embankment of the Cowclose line visible, grid reference NZ138613.

The Clavering Stella was of the inclined-plane type. This was a waggonway that ran downhill from the pit using the weight of the truck and its contents to carry it to the staithes. Some of these had an engine at the top to haul the empty trucks back up, others used the weight of the full trucks to pull up the empties, yet others had horses to do the pulling. An advertisement in the 'Newcastle Courant' of 22nd April 1826 stated:

"To sell or let Coalmine at Chopwell upward of 2,200 acres, various seams, waggonway on inclined plane to Stella. Waggonway to Swalwell may be built."

I can find no information on the working of the other two waggonways, but judging by the lie of the land, they would almost certainly be of the inclined plane type too.

When a mine near Garesfield Farm at High Thornley was being considered about 1797, a plan was drawn up giving two alternative

routes for carrying the coals to the river. One went north to join the route of the recently closed Brockwell Waggonway. This route covered a distance of 4,892 yards to Stella. The other route went a short distance downhill to Lockhaugh where it joined an existing waggonway to Derwenthaugh Staithes, a distance of 6,436 yards from the pit to the staithes. This existing line was known as the Main-Way and it ran from pits around Pontop and Tanfield to Derwenthaugh via Burnopfield, Busty Bank, Rowlands Gill, and then along the route of the current A694 road though Lockhaugh and Winlaton Mill. The latter route appeared to have a more regular incline for all of its length and this was the one chosen. The line was built about 1799.

A year or so later, the original waggonway from Pontop closed, so had it not been for the new Thornley-Derwenthaugh waggonway utilising the rails from Lockhaugh to Derwenthaugh Staithes, the entire length of the old Main Way would have fallen into disuse.

These waggonways had wooden rails. Sleepers of oak about 6 foot long and 6 or 7 inches diameter only smoothed where the rails were fitted. The rails were also of oak 4½ inches thick and 5 inches wide, fixed to the sleepers by oak dowels and set at a gauge of 4 foot and 2 to 3 three foot between sleepers. The sleepers were covered with ballast between the rails, There was a foot gang outside the rails for the horse driver to walk. A gutter was often dug outside this.

The trouble with this system was that the rims of the wheels wore away the inside of the rails and when they were replaced the dowels had to be put back into the same holes. These holes soon became too big and the sleepers had to be replaced. The horses' hooves also damaged them, the few inches of ballast was little protection. To overcome this the busier lines, including the Thornley line, added an extra rail of beech, 4 inches thick and 5 inches wide, on top of the oak rail. This could be replaced many times with the dowel holes moved to other positions in the lower rail when necessary. The extra thickness of ballast also helped to protect the sleepers. The waggons would be of the chaldron type, carrying about 53 cwts. of coal. The front wheels were of cast metal and the rear ones of wood. The brake, a simple lever of wood, was applied to the rear wheel to control the speed. These brakes were called tillers or convoys.

When Garesfield Bute Pit was opened at High Spen in 1837 the line was extended from Thornley to there. Some time after 1845 the wooden rails were replaced by metal ones, probably the Wilmington type, designed and made at the Bedlington Iron Works. The gauge used was the standard one of 4 foot 8½ inches and was introduced along with more modern waggons.

The line was worked in four sections. A horse-drawn (later locomotive-drawn) section from the various pits to High Thornley. An inclined plane from High Thornley to Lockhaugh with a stationary steam engine at High Thornley. A second inclined plane from Lockhaugh to Winlaton Mill with a stationary steam engine at Lockhaugh. And finally another horse/ locomotive-drawn section from Winlaton Mill to the Derwenthaugh Staithes near Swalwell.



DRUM HOUSE, HIGH THORNLEY

In 1897 the line was extended to the newly opened Chopwell Colliery. At the same time there was a major re-routing of the line between High Thornley and Winlaton Mill which replaced the two stationary-engine-powered inclined planes with a single gravity-powered plane where

empty trucks were pulled up the slope by the full ones going down. The new drum house at the top of the run was about 200 yards north of the old Thornley stationary engine, and the line crossed the Rowlands Gill to Winlaton Mill road about 200 yards nearer to Winlaton Mill. There was another difference - the old line actually ran over the road surface, whereas the new one crossed on a bridge.

Coal was carried from Chopwell and Spen to Thornley by steam locomotive. Here a siding allowed the locomotive to get to the rear of the train. The trucks were then shunted onto the incline, half to each side of the drum-house. They were run to the upper chocks until a set of 6 was assembled. They were then released to the lower chocks, here they were coupled together and to the rope and allowed to move off towards Winlaton Mill. Each run took 15 to 20 minutes to complete the run of 2,900 yards, dropping 152 yards over inclines of 1 in 14 at the top, 1 in 21 in the centre and 1 in 19

at the bottom. The actual running time was 7 to 8 minutes, a speed of 20 to 25 m.p.h. Locomotives then took the trucks on to Derwenthaugh Staithes.

In the drum house were 2 drums each 15 foot diameter and 6 foot long on a shaft 10 inches diameter, with 2 brakes on each drum. The rope was of crucible steel with six strands. In 1902 there were 4 sets per day, i.e. 24 trucks or 240 tons of coal. This varied at times as the trade fluctuated.

The line was closed in 1961 when the collieries at Spen and Chopwell closed. Now the line is overgrown, bridges down and the buildings levelled.

The line from Victoria Garesfield Colliery and Whinfield Coke Works was built when the colliery opened in 1870, and it joined the N.E.R. Derwent Valley line at Rowlands Gill. This colliery line was closed in 1962 when the colliery shut down. The line is now long gone, but, as with all the other lines, traces remain.

For High Spen residents, public transport arrived as early as 1835 with the opening of Ryton Railway Station, but this generally involved a lengthy walk and wasn't at all convenient. However, when the Derwent Valley Branch Railway and the railway station at Rowlands Gill opened in 1867, it was immediately popular. Brakes (horse buses) ran a regular connection between Spen and the station and motor buses took over in 1918 after the war.

At first the motor buses ran only to the station at Rowlands Gill, but why stop there? Soon they were running to Scotswood where they connected with Newcastle trams, and eventually into Newcastle itself. Bessfords ran buses from High Spen to Newcastle via Rowlands Gill, and Parkers ran from Chopwell to Newcastle using the same route. Robson Brothers started the Yellow Buses which ran from Spen to Newcastle via Blaydon. Then Robinsons ran on the same route, while Hursts ran to Winlaton. Bessfords and Yellow buses subsequently



became part of Venture Transport, and Robinsons part of United Automobiles Services.

Venture established a depot on Strother's Road and also had offices on Ramsey Street, both now closed. Northern General Transport took over Hursts and, in 1970, Venture Transport too. Ultimately United Automobile Services became Arriva and Northern General Transport became Go North-East.

Until recently a vintage Venture bus in its original livery was housed in a garage at Sunnyside and was available for hire. The Venture name and colours are also used by Go North-East as branding for their buses operating in the Consett area.

Early cars also appeared in Spen, one of the first belonging to Jasper Charlton who owned a fish and chip shop on Front Street. His maiden drive drew a crowd and they cheered as he set off from the picture hall on a circular route around Barlow Fell. They cheered as he passed again ... and again - but after a few more circuits the enthusiasm waned. Eventually the car came to a standstill and the reason for the marathon run became known - Jasper had been told how to start the car, but not how to stop it, so he had to keep going until all his fuel was used up!

7. Recreation.

One of the most popular forms of entertainment in the 18th century sees to have been fairs or 'hoppings', the best known of which in this area was held annually on Whit Monday at Swalwell. A notice dated 22nd May 1753 shows the type of events held at these events.

"On this day the annual diversion at Swalwell will take place, which will consist of dancing for ribands, grinning for tobacco, women running for smocks, ass races, foot courses for men, and by an odd whim of a man eating a cock alive, feathers, entrails and all."

It is likely that folks from Spen would have attended these hoppings and ones nearer to home. A similar hoppings was held at Winlaton, but this was only for the employees of Crowley's Iron Works. A later hoppings held at Wylam in 1828 was described by the following notice:

Wylam Hopping, Monday July 28th 1828

- 1/ A Donkey Race for half a guinea.*
 - 2/ A Donkey Race for 5s. The last ass to win, each jockey to ride his neighbours ass.*
 - 3/ A Foot Race for half a sovereign , heats.*
 - 4/ A Foot Race for 5s.*
 - 5/ A Foot Race for 2s6d for boys.*
 - 6/ A Soaped Pig Race.*
 - 7/ To Grin for Tobacco.*
 - 6/ To Smoke for Tobacco.*
 - 9/ To Dive for shillings in a tub of water,*
 - 10/ To Ferret for half-crowns in a meal tub.*
 - 11/ Race in sacks for a crown.*
 - 12/ To eat hot hasty pudding, lifted with the fingers.
2s.6d.*
 - 13/ For the best hornpipe, 5s.*
 - 14/ For the best song, 2s6d.*
 - 15/ For the best whistler, 2s6d.*
 - 16/ A Games Cock to be hunted.*
 - 17/ A pair of gloves to be leapt for.*
 - 18/ For him who can eat 3 penny rolls the soonest,
2s6d.*
- Many other prizes. Sports to begin precisely at 3-o'clock.*

About the same time and until the middle of the 19th century a variety of sports were held on Barlow Fell. These included cockfighting, bull-baiting and horse-racing, the last horse race took place there in 1854. Then, of course, there was the illegal, but very popular, sport of prize-fighting. The best recorded of these was in 1824: from the 'Newcastle Courant' of 30th October of that year:

"On Monday last persons of every description were in motion in the direction of Barlow Fell near Ryton in the County of Durham, to witness one of those disgraceful exhibitions, so frequent in the South of England, but happily of rare occurrence in the north:- Viz:- a Prizefight between two youths of this town. Viz. James Wallace, a bricklayer and Thomas Dunn, a butcher. It was for 20 Sovereigns a side. The ring being formed at half past one. Wallace threw his hat over the ropes, but it was broke

into by the crowd, and he was forced to withdraw, it was reformed and in a few minutes Dunn made his appearance, accompanied by Francis Blackett, a slater, as his second, Wallace immediately followed with James Hutchinson, cooper, as his second.

The annexed 'Official account of the fight' has been published.

Round 1, On shaking of hands, the butcher was expected to go instantly to work, but he was cautious, Wallace let fly upon his face; Dunn returned an Wallace's cheek who changed colour. A rally in which Wallace evidently had the better, Dunn down. Well done Wallace. Even betting.

Round 2, They met with great confidence; both cautious, clever sparring, Dunn piping. Wallace let fly at his opponents eyes with effort. Dunn down.

Round 3, Dunn came up blowing. A close, both down; Dunn underneath.

Round 4, On coming to scratch, it was seen that Dunn's left eye was darkened and the cork drawn. A rally Dunn down.

Round 5, A rally, same heavy blows divan and taken, Dunn down.

Round 6, A rally. Dunn down and Wallace obliged to wipe his hands.

Found 7, Both cautious, Wallace let fly at his darkened peepers; Dunn returned at Wallace's body. A rally, Dunn went down.

Round 8, Dunn came to scratch piping; showed good science, here Wallace proved he could handle his trowel; he put out his punishing right hand, which made his opponents ivories rattle, and he was grassed famously. Cries of " 'Tis all up". Time being called, Wallace was declared the victor.

It is computed that upward of 2,000 persons were present, mostly from this town, and much disappointment was evinced at the apparent easy victory of the Bricklayer over the Butcher."

Magistrates of County Durham decided to take action against the fighters. Wallace, however, had left the country, but Dunn was arrested and tried at Durham Assizes on 1st March 1825. The 'Newcastle Courant' reported on the 12th March 1825:

"At Durham Assizes under Mr Justice Bayley. Thomas Dunn, the pugalist, whom a true bill had been found, for fighting a pitched battle on Barlow Fell with one Wallace, pleaded guilty; and with the consent of the prosecutors, was discharged on his own recognizance to appear when called upon."

This fight, like all between 1741 and 1838 were under the Broughton rules. These were devised by a boxer of that name, who, after killing a man in the ring, decided to try to avoid this happening again. The fights were with bare fists, the rounds lasted until one or both fighters went down. When this happened the seconds had half a minute to get the man back to scratch. This was a square of a yard each side marked in the centre of the ring. Failure to get to scratch in the required time meant defeat. These rules banned hitting a man when he was down.

Another favourite location in the area for prize fights was in the 'Race Field' in the tiny hamlet of Leadgate near Chopwell (not the village of that name near Consett). The field itself was in Northumberland, but Leadgate and the nearby populous areas which provided the audiences for the fights, not to mention the only policemen at that time, were in Co Durham - and at that time police had no authority whatsoever outside their own counties.

On Tuesday 22nd May 1838 a fight took place there between Robert Forbister, a millwright, and John Brown, a whitesmith. Forbister was 10 stone 5 pounds in weight and 5 feet 10½ inches tall; Brown was 9 stone 6 pounds and 5 feet 6 inches tall. During this fight, in spite of Broughton's rules, Brown was knocked out and later died in the Three Horse Shoes at Leadgate. He had the attention of doctors John Calendar of Greenside, Fife of Newcastle and William Henry Scott of Newburn. Forbister was charged with murder and tried at

Durham Assizes. The jury found him guilty of murder but recommended mercy - and the judge agreed, giving him only four months.

In 1858 the colliery owners erected a reading room and library for the miners at the top of New Row. In 1898 this became an Institute which consisted of a billiard room, a reading room and a library. A park was developed on land adjoining the institute with a bowling green, tennis court and bandstand. This proved very popular, especially on hot summer Sundays when High Spen Colliery Band played there.

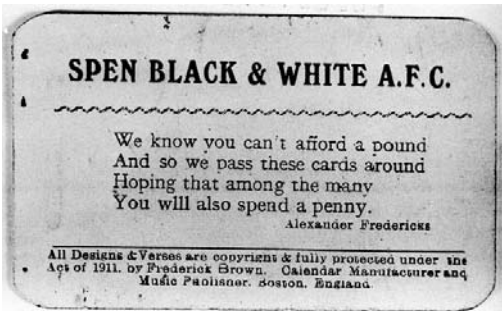
The institute and the park rapidly fell into decay and disuse after the closure of the colliery. The institute was bought privately and converted into a dwelling house. The park was taken under the wing of Blaydon Urban District Council and they, and their successors, Gateshead Council, have ensured that it is maintained in good condition.

The Park Pavillion was rather unkindly dubbed "The White Elephant" as it was so little used in the days when there were many alternative meeting places in the village. It was later known as High Spen Community Centre and provided a home for many community groups and projects until recent years.

Pigeon shooting seems to have been popular in the area; it is mentioned at Blaydon Burn in 1860 and at Hobson in 1864. Perhaps, when this fell out of favour, those supplying the pigeons turned their attention to breeding homing pigeons, a hobby which was immensely popular during the twentieth century.

Richard Browell, who was for many years landlord of the Miners' Arms, and for a while a councillor, got permission from Blaydon Local Board (the forerunner of Blaydon Urban District) to have a music hall at Spen, but I've seen no evidence of one having opened. The Miners' Arms was often referred to as Dick Browell's. In later years The Miners' Arms ran darts teams for men and women, a pigeon club and in 1965 landlord Jack Hailes started a whippet club. Latterly The Miners' Arms changed its image and became "The Tavern" but it was recently closed and demolished and the site used for housing.

The village's only other pub, the Bute Arms, is still thriving. It was originally The Board Inn but was renamed in honour of the Marquis of Bute, the then colliery owner.



Gambling was popular; on 1st August 1889 it was reported at the Local Board meeting that the police were taking action against the gamblers in the recreation ground.

Football was always a great favourite in Spen and the village had two teams - Spen Albion Football Club which was formed by 1895, and before 1905 they were joined by the much more famous Black and Whites. The later school football team was very good too - in the 1932/33 season alone they won seven cups and shields.

The cinema, The Palace, opened in 1911, but unfortunately closed at the end of 1962 after entertaining generations of villagers. The building was then used for the manufacture of garden sheds, but was destroyed by fire on 26th February 1983 and demolished. A house now occupies the site.

**PALACE CINEMA,
HIGH SPEN**



The Co-operative Hall, above the Co-op Grocery Department, was also used as a picture hall on and off from its opening in 1912 until the mid 1920s. It was known as the Picturedrome. From the 1930s the hall was used concerts, film shows, whist drives, domino drives, political meetings and even old revival and faith-healing meetings.

The working-men's clubs too played a huge part in the village life. The Excelsior was founded in 1885 and moved to its present site in 1913. This is commonly known as the Road End Club. The Spen and District Working Men's Club (The Field Club) started in a wooden shed in Ramsay Street in 1903 and the present club



building on Strothers Road was opened in 1908. The Central Club (known as Headsy's) was opened in 1912 but closed in recent years. It stood between Charlton's Fish and Chip Shop and Mrs Mannion's Drapery shop and was rather smaller than the other two.

An Old Soldier's Club also had a brief existence at Spen. It was in Ramsay Street in premises used for many years as a ladies' hairdressers. Apparently there was a lot of gambling on the premises, and lots of fighting after closing time. This club opened after the first world war and only lasted a year or so.

The earliest recreation ground was on the land now occupied by the primary school and Robert Terrace. This was rented by the Local Board for £2 per acre per year from Mr Errington, who was the landlord of the Bute Arms and tenant of the Colliery Farm behind the Bute Arms. When the school was built, the recreation ground moved to the field behind the Field Club, This was rented for £12 per year from the same Mr Errington. Planning permission was granted for a bandstand to be erected on the field, but this was built in the park instead. The field was used until the 1960s for shows, hoppings, and even a circus, and recently, after lying derelict for many years, it became Victoria Gardens as building began on the first of 64 planned houses.

During the depression in the thirties there were carnivals with jazz bands, fancy-dress parades and push-ball competitions organised by a local newspapers.

Then there was quoits. For many years there was a set of clay ends at the side of the Co-op, and there were some marvelous players to use them. Other sporting tastes were catered for by cricket fields near Low Spen and High Strothers Farm, and a 9-hole golf course on the road to Chopwell. This was Garesfield Golf Course which opened in 1923. An enlarged 18-hole course was unveiled in June 1969.

High Spen Colliery Band met in the Miners' Hall, at the rear of the Miners' Arms. As well as giving concerts at High Spen Park and other venues, this band used to lead the miners of Spen on their yearly pilgrimage to the Durham Big Meeting. I can remember them meeting near the Picture Hall, ready to set off for



Durham. They marched from High Spen to Rowlands Gill station then went by train to Durham and marched from the station to the race course.

On 29th December 1917 High Spen Band paraded along with a military band and honour guard at the funeral of Private George Cutter of the Durham Light Infantry at St Patrick's churchyard. Private Cutter had died of wounds at the King George Hospital, Lambeth on the 23rd. The band master of the military band remarked on the fine quality of their playing.

Rapper (sword) dancing was also popular in the village. The first team, The Vernon Troupe, was formed around 1880. They were said to have taken their name from Fred Vernon, the landlord of The Miner's Arms where they practised, though I cannot find any record of such a person. The Vernon Troupe became The Amber



HIGH SPEN BLUE DIAMONDS

Stars in the late 1920s and they regularly performed under this name during the early 1930s, even undertaking a national tour in 1933, but by 1935 they'd stopped performing.

The other team, The High Spen Blue Diamonds, were formed as a children's team in 1926 by Fred Forster. He was

assisted by George Gibbon, one of the Vernon Troupe, and accordion player, Tommy Wilkes. This team were very successful and thrived until the late 1930s when they stopped performing.

In 1954, the same dancers and some former members of the Amber Stars, revived the High Spen Blue Diamonds as an adult team under the leadership of Fred Forster. On 15th October that year they took part in BBC Television's "Top Town" competition as part of Blaydon's entry. Fred Forster handed over the reigns to his son, Fred Forster Junior in 1964, and his son, Ricky Forster, took over in 1986. Under Ricky's leadership, the High Spen Blue Diamonds are still performing to this day.

8. Development and Category 'D'.

I can find no record of buildings in Spen in the Boldon Buke of 1183, but it is possible that the area described as 'Barlow' may have included what became Spen. In 1370 Katherine de Fery held four buildings at Spen; these could have been houses or farm buildings or a mixture of these. She also had 100 acres of land. A map of 1611 shows a large house at Spen, but nothing surviving today matches this, so we must assume it has been pulled down.

A family named Wild lived at Low Spen in 1583: the will of Richard Wild mentions his wife Isabel, daughters Nell, Elizabeth, Dorothie and Grace and son James. The witnesses were Robert Wild and Cuthbert Swynburne. In the same year Peter Hedley, yeoman of Spen, had three daughters, Margaret, Dorothie and Anne who was espoused to Edward Dod. So at that time there were apparently several houses there.

Modern Spen is shown first on the Ordnance Survey map of 1861. This shows Jawblades Cottages (Old Row), Cardiff Square with three sides, High Strothers Farm and the three farms near Bute Arms. A building is shown where the Bute Arms is now located but it is not named so it cannot be stated with certainty that this was the Bute Arms, or rather, The Board Inn as it was then called.

The next 30 years was a period of great development: the 1896 Ordnance Survey maps show much more in the village. All of Ramsays, the original Co-operative Store in what is now Wishart Terrace, Miners Arms, Bute Arms, Collingdon Road, East Street, West Street, Glossop Street, Clayton Terrace, the 1894 school, Field

House, North View (the home of Dr William David Colquhoun, a member of Blaydon Local Board), the Assembly Rooms (old P.M. Chapel), East Street Primitive Methodist (P.M.) Chapel and coke ovens at the colliery - all had been added since the 1861 map was surveyed. Cardiff Square, however, had been reduced to two sides by that time.

By 1919, maps shows more additions: Watson Street, Excelsior Club, W.M. Chapel, Rickless Coal Drift, Hugar Road, Ethel Terrace, South Street, Towneley Terrace, Strothers Terrace, the Co-operative Store buildings, Miners' Institute, Field Club, a brickyard at the colliery (but no cokeworks) and the new school (2 storey). On the 1939 OS map Clayton Terrace and Cardiff Square are missing, but the bungalows behind the old (single-storey) school are shown.



Residents of Spen in the mid twenties might remember a pile of stones lying on the waste ground between the picture hall and Spear's shop (opposite the Excelsior Club) for a long time. These had come from Thornley Hall which was pulled down in 1923. The stones were eventually used to build the houses on the Barlow Road about 200 yards from the Excelsior Club; they were built by Bob Noble, a local builder, who lived in one of them for many years.

Victoria Garesfield developed about the same time as High Spen and for the same reason; miners needed somewhere to live. Some of them were stone-built, others were of wood and were nicknamed the "ducketts" (for the uninitiated ducketts were the sheds used to keep homing pigeons in). Although they might sound uninviting many families were brought up in these ducketts and were very comfortable and happy in them. The school, which was later converted to houses, was built in 1883, and the P.M. Chapel in 1886.

At Hookergate, the Co-operative Store was built in 1896, and in 1899 its owner, the Burnopfield Co-operative Society, built two

streets of houses behind the store, Wood Terrace and Burnop Terrace.

At Spen, the Old Row was the first to be demolished after World War Two, and then Ramsays were levelled in the late 50s leaving a gaping hole in the heart of the village, but the biggest changes came when the pits closed: Spen in 1960 and Victoria Garesfield in 1962. The Spen pit itself and the associated buildings were knocked down and the pit heaps levelled. The Assembly Rooms were flattened, Collingdon Road followed in 1970, then part of Glossop Street. The people from these streets were moved to Highfield and Rowlands Gill, many of them very reluctantly.

The shops which had developed alongside the houses were forced to close for lack of trade though the clubs and pubs fared better.

At Victoria Garesfield the same pattern emerged but the destruction was more complete. All the ducketts and many of the other houses were demolished and the colliery buildings were levelled. Then, in 1963, the P.M. Chapel was added to the list of memories. All that remained of a once thriving community were two streets and a handful of other houses. Hookergate Store was closed in 1967. Part of this building had been taken over by Taylor Industries, a plastics firm, some years earlier, and once the store closed, the firm took over the remainder.

In 1964 Durham County Council Planning Department began to classify the villages, the worst classification was 'D', under this

**PICTURE HALL
BEST'S SWEET SHOP
BUS GARAGE AND OFFICES
FARRAGE'S SWEET SHOP
FISH AND CHIP SHOP
CENTRAL SOCIAL CLUB**



there could be no development at all. No new houses built and as property became vacant it could be demolished. Spen, along with Chopwell, Hamsterley Colliery and several other villages in the county, were placed in this category. The residents of Spen were strongly opposed to this, but there seemed to be little that they could do about it, the

planners had made up their minds.

One of the arguments the planners used was that Spen was an isolated village and another that there was no industry there. Both of these were refuted, the bus service to and from Spen was very good and there was a plastics firm at Hookergate which was expanding. A public meeting was held at Spen to discuss the situation on 21st February 1969, the clerk to Blaydon Urban District Council, Neil Graham, said that the council was behind the residents in their fight. Sidney Henderson, Secretary of the Rowlands Gill and High Spen Ward Labour Party, who helped to organise the meeting, said that the run-down of the village was a social disgrace, and that the local Labour Party would support them. Another meeting was promised with Bob Woof M.P., Neil Graham, Councilor Frank, chairman of BUDC housing committee, and Councilor Elsie Ainsworth present.

Bob Woof raised the matter in the House of Commons in May of that year, attacking the Durham County Planners. High Spen carried on, in spite of the apparent death sentence of the planners. The Tyneside Courier of 28th November 1969, reported that High Spen Women's Institute raised £110 for charity, and on 25th February 1971, that the Excelsior Club had a waiting list of potential members.

In December 1970 the county planners took several villages off the 'D' list, including Chopwell and Hamsterley Colliery, both of which arguably had a less convincing case than that of Spen. Several applications were made by Blaydon Council for permission to build at



Spen, including a request to build houses for aged people, but these were all rejected by the county planners. BUDC hired a solicitor and a barrister to fight the issue at a public meeting with the planners in 1971, but there was no change in the attitude of the county, no matter how good an argument was put forward. It appeared that the Durham County Council was determined to destroy High Spen.

The High Spen Action Committee was set up in 1971 to fight for the removal of the 'D' tag. The chairman was Thomas Ainsworth, husband of Councilor Ainsworth. They published a newspaper, 'High Spen, a Case for Improvement'. This had messages of support from Bob Woof, members of BUDC and many others. Alex Glasgow, the broadcaster and songwriter recorded a song about Category 'D' villages. This shows the wide interest in the county where most of the 'D' villages fought for survival, but I am sure, none harder than Spen.

The situation was not altered as regards the 'D' tag until this local government change in 1974. Spen was then in Gateshead Metropolitan District and Tyne and Wear County. The new councils agreed to reconsider the case of Spen - and they decided to remove the Category D Classification.

High Spen immediately began to develop again. 1976 saw the building of the first brick-built council houses to be erected in Spen since 1938. Since then new private housing estates have appeared in several parts of the village - Woodlands Close on the field north of Hookergate Co-op, Beechwood on the site of Hookergate Farm, Spen Burn and Ashfield Court on land between School Lane and Ashtree Lane, High Spen Court behind the farms at the Ashtree Lane/ Collingdon Road junction, Bute Drive and the Graneries on land west of Glossop Street, Strothers Road on the site of the Miners' Arms, and Victoria Gardens in the old recreation ground behind the Field Club on Strothers Road.

The site of Ramsays became High Spen Industrial Estate and is now the home of several thriving businesses. There's even a reminder of its "Ramsays" days - the road through the estate is "Long Row West", the name of the road which probably lies buried beneath the modern one.

The 'D' tag, unpopular as it was, did much to unite the village as it has not been united for many years. High Spen must be one of the most community conscious villages in the country. The spirit of Spen will, I am sure, go from strength to strength, and will stand the test of time.

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