



Friends of Darfield Churchyard

Newsletter: Summer 2009

Our current project

The Restoration of the Houghton Main Disaster Memorial (£4,200 needs to be raised for this restoration)

As I was finishing the compilation of our Spring 2009 newsletter Glenice rang to ask whether we could possibly fit in a small note about the Houghton Main memorial. We had just been turned down for funding from yet another source and she wondered whether it would be worth putting in a request to the general public for donations. At first I said that there was no room, but she was gently persuasive (would not take 'no' for an answer), so I cropped a couple of photos, narrowed the margins and managed to squeeze in a few lines. What a result we had!



Almost immediately we had a response from our good friend and supporter, Martyn Johnson, who met with us to discuss possible means of funding. It was not long before he told us of a really exciting opportunity. None other than Catherine Bailey herself (author of 'Black Diamonds') had offered to come to Darfield as our guest speaker. What a coup for FODCY!



Martyn and Catherine (centre) with Kay Valentine and John Kendall from FODCY.

If you have read the book, you will not need to be told what a page-turner it is - and if you have not read it you are missing a treat. Essentially, 'Black Diamonds' tells the story of the Fitzwilliams of Wentworth in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and of the mining communities in the area. It is a very revealing insight.

This was a wonderful opportunity to launch the Houghton Main Memorial appeal. Plans were made and the date was set for Thursday 13th August in All Saints

Church at Darfield. We were overwhelmed by the response on the night. Even before the doors opened at 6pm people were waiting to get into church and well before 7pm the church was full. What an evening followed! Martyn introduced Catherine who then told us how she became interested in the story of Wentworth and the Fitzwilliams, and how, just as she was about to abandon her quest for information, she met Martyn. He was the catalyst, putting her in touch with everyone she needed to contact. There were stories and revelations before an opportunity for visitors to ask their own questions.

At the close, Catherine was presented with a genuine miner's safety lamp, thought to originate from Houghton Main Colliery. Martyn received a handmade pen, made by one of the FODCY members, Trevor Baxter, from part of the old church organ. Then refreshments were served in the church hall and people queued to have their copies of 'Black Diamonds' signed by Catherine.



We are truly grateful to both Catherine and Martyn for giving their time freely and getting our appeal off to this wonderful start. The magnificent sum raised at the event was £1,100! Thanks must go to all who helped us in any way - we could not have done it without you.



Spotlight on ... The Houghton Main Cage Disaster of 30 December 1886

1886, the middle of winter and only two days before the new year of 1887 was about to begin. Ice and snow were on the ground. It was the end of the afternoon shift and ten men were coming up out of the pit at Houghton Main ready to head for home and a good meal, perhaps a pint, and then bed. They were being drawn up the pit shaft in a three deck cage, using just the top deck of it. The journey up the shaft took about three or four minutes.

Allen Berresford was the engine winder, an experienced worker who had been at the pit since it started - about eight years earlier. Houghton Main was still quite a new pit with a fairly good safety record. It had only five fatalities recorded so far, and it was a large colliery, employing about 690 men and boys.

The engine winder was sitting in his chair. It was all routine, nothing out of the ordinary. Another shift ended and men on their way home. Then suddenly there was a loud cracking noise and Allen Berresford was hit on the head by a piece of falling wood and knocked unconscious for a short time. He therefore had no idea what disaster was unfolding around him.

The cage was overwound and smashed into the headgear and roof of the engine house. The rope then snapped and the cage hurtled back down the shaft - a distance of 535 yards - at tremendous speed. Inside it were ten terrified occupants. One estimate was that, if the cage weighed between four and five tons, the descent would have taken no more than twelve seconds and would have reached over 200mph when it hit the bottom. What went through the minds of those ten men during that twelve seconds? Or had some of them, as was thought, already died of shock when the cage crashed through the headgear?

When it hit the bottom, the iron cage smashed through the wooden beams over the sump like matchwood. The resulting destruction of the bodies of the ten men is too horrendous to imagine.

How did it happen? It should never have happened. A 'butterfly' over-winding device was fitted. The rope was supposed to detach from the cage into a catchplate and this would enable the cage to be suspended in mid-air. But the speed of the cage on its way up had been so great that it had smashed the device to pieces. The rope was made of best steel and was over five inches in diameter. It had a working strain of 110 tons. But it snapped!

The pit manager, pit officials, and even two senior police officers were all quickly on the scene. Imagine the distraught state of Allen Berresford, the engine winder, when he realised the full extent of the disaster. Things rapidly went from bad to worse for him as he was arrested and charged with manslaughter. An investigation of the winding engine had shown that the drum had made seven revolutions more than had been needed to take the cage to the pit bank.

The bodies of the ten men were then recovered. Some were recognisable, such as Joseph Walker and his two sons, Samuel and Charles. Others were 'in fragments' and totally unrecognisable. All were placed in coffins and brought out to the distraught widows, relatives and friends.

The inquest was held in the Cross Keys Inn at Darfield, close by the church yard where the bodies would be laid to rest. It ended with the verdict that 'the men had been killed by falling down the shaft when they had been over wound by Berresford'.

The burial of the ten men took place, together, in Darfield church yard on 4th January 1887. A service was conducted by Rev H P Cooke, Rector of Darfield, and Rev F Sleep, Vicar, for the Church of England. A further service was also conducted by Rev H J Smith of Elsecar for the one Roman Catholic involved, W Mannion.

The trial of Allen Berresford took place at Leeds Assizes. The question was raised of whether he was totally sober at the time of the incident (as he had been in three public houses in Wombwell earlier in the day). However it was eventually accepted that he had only had two glasses of beer, and several men testified to his sobriety as well as to his good character. Allen Berresford's defence rested in the fact that he had been hit on the head by the piece of wood and therefore totally incapable of doing anything to prevent the disaster from unfolding, such as turning off the steam which powered the cage or reversing the levers. The jury found him 'not guilty'.

A granite monument was erected on the grave site of the ten men and unveiled in a ceremony 12th November 1887 by the Houghton Main manager, J S Elliott. The tragedy was made even sadder by the fact that seven of the ten men came from just three families. The men were -

Joseph Walker, 48, collier
Samuel Walker, 20, trammer
Charles Walker, 19, trammer
James Hardcastle, 49, collier
Alvin Hardcastle, 18, trammer

Joseph Pearson, 47, collier
Joseph Pearson Jnr, 20, trammer
Edward Baxter, 29, collier
William Mannion, 42, trammer
William Barton, 17, pony driver

Future Events

- **Saturday/Sunday September 12 and 13th** - Heritage weekend, when the church and churchyard will be open for guided tours and plans of the churchyard will be on display
- **Friday October 16th** - An evening with Ian McMillan
- **Wednesday November 4th** - FODCY meeting in Tower room at church 7.30pm.
- **In early 2010** FODCY will be displaying photographs of the various aspects of the church yard in the café at the Maurice Dobson Museum in Darfield. Further details about the exact dates later



Over the weekend 29 and 30 August FODCY had a stand at the annual Darfield Area Amenity Society Exhibition. Our focus was on the Houghton Main disaster and memorial appeal. Here Glenice shows the details to a visitor. Our collecting box raised £26.01 towards the appeal.

We have also received several cheques through the post from people who had heard of the appeal (usually through the Catherine Bailey talk noted above) and wanted to give something even though they could not attend. Most notably we felt very honoured to receive a contribution from Her Grace the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire, who had heard of our appeal through Catherine Bailey and Martyn Johnson. This is really amazing as she had no connection with Darfield and knew nothing of us until they told her of our appeal. Many of the people who give us donations are saying that they are doing this to keep alive the memory of our coal mining heritage. If you would like to donate to this appeal please make cheques payable to Friends of Darfield Church Yard and send them to 8 Meadow Drive, Darfield, Barnsley, South Yorkshire, S73 9HL

From our postbag -

We never stop being overwhelmed by the support and interest received by our group. Here are just a few extracts from recent letters -



- ❖ "My father has been wanting to 'discover' your church for 30 years. We were excited to see your recent letter. It was very thoughtful of you to send the information. We plan to return next year." (From Edwin V Hargate of Cleveland, Ohio, whose ancestor was the Poor Law Officer for Darfield in the early 19th Century)
- ❖ "We visited your lovely church and the fascinating churchyard in May. Were we nearby, you could count on us 'Yanks' to be part of your renovation work, to be sure! It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance and to be so warmly welcomed to the church and its grounds where my long ago relations were once active members." (From Claudia and Mike Salewske of California)
- ❖ "My niece visited Darfield recently and told me of your efforts to clear the churchyard. As my father is buried there I am enclosing a cheque towards your funds" (From Barbara Sanders, nee Camplejohn, of Cambridgeshire)
- ❖ "Thank you for the newsletter which I enjoyed reading. I now have your website on my favourites list so I can keep an eye on your progress. I was very impressed with the work you have done to date when I visited the churchyard recently. As a youth club member in the sixties I was involved in at least two abortive attempts to make a start on clearing the undergrowth so I know how hard you must have worked. I enclose a cheque from the family to put towards the (Houghton Main memorial) restoration fund. Dad died in December last year but had he still been alive I know he and mam would have been very pleased to help". (From Roy Williamson of Essex)
- ❖ "For years I had to fight my way through waist and shoulder high vegetation, and though the grave is approx 6ft high black marble, it was often obliterated from sight. I promised my father that, for as long as I lived, I would continue my visits. You can imagine how stunned ('gobsmacked' is a better description) I was when I turned the corner on Christmas day. I just stood, amazed, full of joy, looking at a tarmac path, our grave, visible and a continuing distant view which I have not seen for many a year. Nobody could have had a more wonderful Christmas gift. I only wish that my dear father had been alive to witness it. Many many thanks to you all". (From S Hayward of Worsbrough).



Here is a photograph of our visitors from Alaska and British Columbia. From the left - Our own John Kendall, Steven Carson (Alaska), his mother Leila Carson (British Columbia), Alan Robinson (Northampton)

They came to see the grave of Frank and Kate Robinson, the grandparents of Leila and Alan. When Steve first contacted us (via Barnsley Family History Society) last year the grave was still hidden in the thickest part of the 'jungle' undergrowth. John, Mike and Trevor immediately set to and uncovered it in readiness for the visit. Steve sent this email thank you following the visit -

- ❖ "Alan knew at one point where the grave was but had not been able to find it last time he visited the graveyard several years ago. No one had been able to visit the grave in recent years due to the dense undergrowth. Many thanks to you and the Friends of Darfield Churchyard for making our gathering at the grave site possible. We were very grateful that John was able to meet us at the church. He was very kind to do this."

Our newsletters (including back copies) are now also available to view on the FODCY pages on Darfield All Saints Church Web Site - www.darfieldallsaintschurch.org.uk

This newsletter was written, and photographs(except I McMillan) were taken, by Glenice Smith, Sheila McMillan and Kay Valentine

