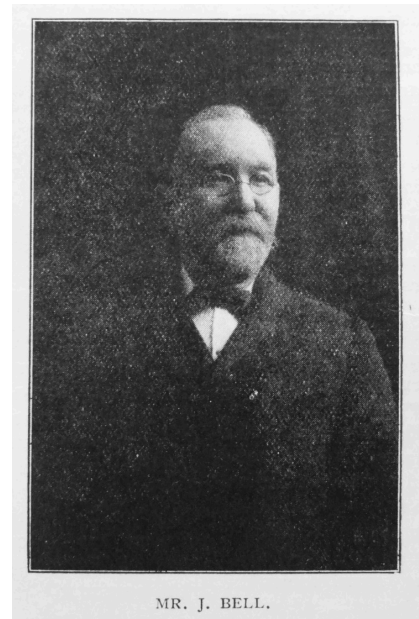


John Bell of Murton Colliery

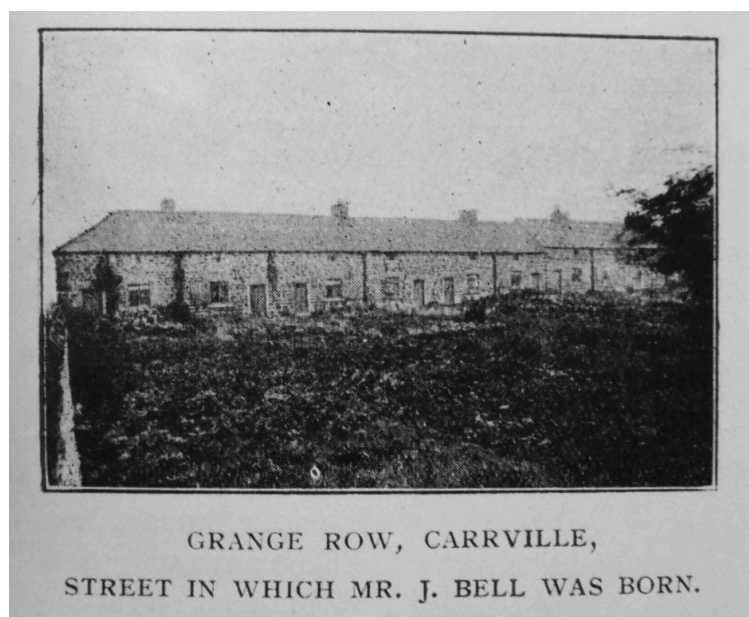
Transcription of article in the series "Some of our Stalwarts" by "A Rambler"

JOHN BELL is one of the pillars of the Primitive Methodist Church in the county of Durham. There is nothing rhetorical about that sentence; it is sober fact, and a crowd of witnesses can easily be found to subscribe to it. "He is only a miner," it is imaginable some superficial soul might say, and the air in which it is said is positively amusing, sometimes irritating. Yes, he is a miner; at any rate, he worked in the mines until he retired, which was as recently as March, 1913, after a servitude of no less than sixty-seven years. And, pray, what would Primitive Methodism have been in the Border counties had it not been for the miners? Eh? The heart of the writer, who, in his rambles, has been in fellowship with thousands of them, glows with a warmth excited by admiration and tender memories when he reviews his years of association with the brave winners of the "black diamonds" and their kindly womenkind.



This John Bell is distinguished from the many John Bells in the county as "John Bell of Murton Colliery." A distinctive character, with a distinctive history, is thus indicated. The designation has come to him in later life, for only about one-third of his days have been spent at Murton. "Flittings" were frequent amongst miners when John was a child and young man, and from the time, in the summer of 1838, he arrived in the cottage of David and Bessie Bell at Carrville until he settled in the colliery appended to his name, something like a dozen different villages claimed him as a resident—quite a moderate experience for pitmen in the early days.

But these wanderings were not all to his disadvantage; certainly they were not to the disadvantage of his Church. They made him a pioneer, a builder in Zion. The grace of God appeared to him in the dawn of life. As early as eight years, of age, in Pitlington Sunday school he was drawn to the Saviour, and joined the society class. (How affectionately he speaks of Willie Winter and Joseph Watson, the class leaders, and of John Turnbull and George Carey, the school superintendents). But it was when he was nineteen that the fuller apprehension of salvation by Jesus Christ entered his soul. He speaks of the occasion until this day. It was a Sunday morning. John Simpson



preached in Carrville Chapel, and when he finished he called upon brethren to pray. Three engaged, and “the power of the Lord was present to heal.” Matthew Buckle struck up “The blast of the trumpet, so loud and so shrill.” Over and over again it was sung, and in that hour John Bell stepped into the conscious liberty of the children of God. Were he telling it in a class meeting or fellowship meeting, he would add: “I have been going on until now; sometimes very low in the valley of fear and tribulation, but, thank God, again and again on the mountain top, rejoicing and singing, ‘Oh, good old way, how sweet thou art!’ ”

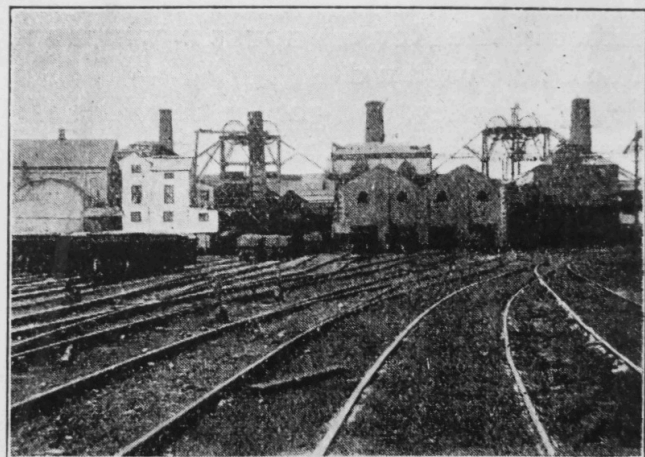


MRS. BELL.

Plain, unvarnished, genuine, is John Bell. Of medium height, a well-knit frame, a sunny face, one can readily believe, in looking into it, of mountain top rejoicing, but not of valley fear and tribulation. Primitive Methodism has had no more loyal son than he. Wherever he has been he has been a Primitive — a characteristic Primitive. He was born again in a truly Durham county Primitive Methodist atmosphere. He has lived in it all his life, and he is in it at this hour. His soul burns with fervour for Zion’s weal; his feet tread her courts with holy joy; his tongue sings the praises of her God; he has found it true that they shall prosper who love her, for he has continually prayed and laboured for her prosperity.

Just a handful of samples of his devotion to “our beloved Church,” as he phrases it, with the old-time unction. After a brief training at Sherburn Hill as chapel steward, assistant leader in William Dobson’s class, and a member of Willie Robson’s famous choir, John went to Oakenshaw. There was no Primitive Methodist society. He and a few others quickly formed a class, and soon they gathered over a score of members. By applying to the colliery owners they got possession of an empty cottage, started a Sunday School, and had services planned. They soon found the place too small, and an adjoining cottage was added; the owners, taking down the partition, erected a pulpit, and fitted up the place in a comfortable manner. That was the start of a society which is now possessed of a suitable village chapel, has sixty-five members, and one hundred and thirty Sunday School scholars.

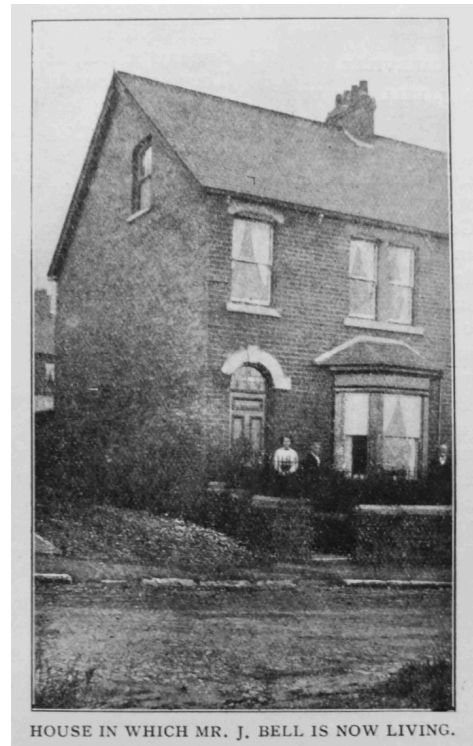
Removing to Billy Hill, near where the Messrs. Pease were sinking a new pit — the Wooley—and where a great number of new houses were being built, a class was at once formed. Billy Row Chapel—Rev. W.A. French knows it well— was a mile away, so the members got a room, and commenced a Sunday School and preaching services. In that humble room worshipped some elect souls, amongst them being a family named Cairns, out of which one member— Edward—went into the ministry, travelled thirty-nine years, and is now



MURTON PIT.

in retirement at Durham. Joseph Jopling and his wife were also members, and their son John is at present the able superintendent of the North Shields Circuit. In three or four years a chapel was built, and subsequently a revival ensued, led by Joseph Jobling, the Frosterley mystic.

It was in 1870 that John arrived at Houghall, near Durham, where, he says, "no one was allowed to be connected with any other church than the New Connexion Methodists." But he was a Primitive, and it was no use telling him to be anything else, so he had "a look around," tramping the while to Durham City on Sundays. Meanwhile, he had the unspeakable joy of becoming associated with John Reavley, father of the Revs. Matthew and Joseph Reavley, and got the permission of the Rev. John Taylor, who was then superintendent of the Durham Circuit, to start a class in his own house, where twenty members were speedily gathered, a Sunday School started in the colliery office, and Sunday evening preaching services also. It was during his stay at Houghall that the remarkable revival at Durham took place, conducted by Miss Hyde, of Ripon. At the same period also the Durham Miners' Union was in course of formation. John was chosen to be secretary of the lodge at his colliery, and forthwith he was dismissed from the pit. "Sacrificed" at Houghall, he made his way to Wheatley Hill, where he found work. Once again he was in a desert land religiously; but Thornley was not a great distance off, and on returning from the Sunday morning worship—he had been preaching, indeed—he met a man who is now known as Alderman John Wilson, M.P., D.C.L., the foremost leader of the Durham miners. The two became fast friends, and the bond has strengthened with the years. The usual happened: a class meeting in a dwelling-house and a Sunday School and preaching services. This time the sanctuary was an old barn, and it became a hallowed place, many souls being brought to the Lord therein. A youth named Henry Errington was amongst the number, and became an efficient minister of Jesus Christ. At this present Wheatley Hill, though only a colliery village, has one of the mightiest societies in its way in our Connexion.



HOUSE IN WHICH MR. J. BELL IS NOW LIVING.

John Bell's experience at Littleburn was much the same as at the foregoing collieries. At Station Town, near Wingate, he and his associates bought a navvy's hut after the N.E.R. Company had finished the branch line from Wellfield to Stockton. The Brothers Glass—William, Thomas and John—were then in the zenith of their fruitfulness at Wingate and district, and other men of power carried on the great work for which the church was instituted—the saving of men. A chapel succeeded the hut, of course, and a substantial society this day witnesses for truth and righteousness at Station Town.

There was no pioneering work to do when John Bell got to Murton in the spring of 1887. He found a strong church, composed of the type of men in whom his soul delighted, men of true Primitive Methodist grip and spirit. Elijah Thompson, Thomas Armstrong, Joseph Hall need but be named as amongst those who have "passed over." But if there was no pioneering work, there was abundance

of evangelistic and pastoral work to do, and he went into it with his accustomed abandon. Class meetings have been his first care, as will have been seen. He is an adept leader, has had an experience as such for over half-a-century, has now forty-five members, and continues to tell of still having “seasons of refreshing coming from the presence of the Lord.” A sight of his expansive smile when he is at a District committee meeting is a benison.

Some might say that John Bell must have had plenty of leisure and few family anxieties. Ponder over these items: At the tender age of seven years and seven months he was sent to be a coal cleaner at the screens, his hours being from four o’clock in the morning until four in the afternoon, and sometimes kept at it until eight or nine o’clock at night. Nine months afterwards he went down the pit to keep a trap-door. On the first morning he, with other boys, was taken to the lamp cabin, where an old man was giving out lamps and candles. The ruler of the lights gave him one small candle—“fifty to the pound”—which was to light him to the trap-door when he got down the shaft in the cage, and back again to the shaft bottom when the day’s work was finished, so that from going in until coming out the child had to sit in the dark all day long. Through all the stages of a pitman’s life he went, at a time when the hours were longer and the conditions not nearly so good as they are now. He married at twenty-two, and when he was thirty-three he was the father of seven children. In all nine daughters and three sons have been born to him; six of the twelve survive and, with one exception, are members of the Church. A quarter of a century ago death robbed him of his first wife. Three years afterwards he found a good mother for his children and a true companion for himself in the present Mrs. Bell.

Without the advantages of a proper school training, and in spite of the long hours and arduous toil of a pitman’s life, especially in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, John Bell applied himself to the cultivation of his mind. He began his career, as has been stated, when seven years and seven months old—think of it! —as a coal cleaner at the screens; he finished assistant manager of Murton Colliery, to which post he had risen step by step, and which he had held for nine years, when he decided in the spring of 1913 to “spend the remainder of his days in retirement,” as it is phrased, in his own Rosemount Cottage, Murton. Sixty-seven-and-a-half years a miner, fifty-two years a class leader, forty-six years a local preacher, and the big and fruitful day’s work still going merrily on so far as his beloved Zion is concerned!

May his afternoon be as shining as his radiant countenance! And around his board may many messengers of grace yet sit, as they have sat from the days of Bastow and Spoor and of John Reavley and John Simpson, itinerant and local, until now.

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1914/130

[Census Returns and Births, Marriages & Deaths Registers](#)