Dancing with the Devil

By Duncan Bythell and David Figures

The first thing to say is that it is a privilege to be able to present Duncan's lecture. When it became clear that Duncan would not be well enough to be here today, the first thought was to cancel the event. But it would have been a real shame not to provide this planned showcase for his painstaking work on Keld; and it is a first for Keld to be part of the European wide Heritage Open Days programme. We are extremely grateful to Marina Whitehead for using her good offices to gain access to his fascinating material. She also obtained his consent to use it today.

The village reading rooms and literary institutes of Swaledale are an important part of the dale's fascinating history. They were among the proudest creations of our Victorian forebears. In many villages the building survives, even though its original function has disappeared. Since 2000, when the Muker Silver Band moved into the 'top room' of the Muker Institute, Duncan has been researching that building's history based on the Institute's surviving records. As far as Keld is concerned, he acknowledges the help of Gillian Bobbett, formerly the minister of the United Reformed Churches at Low Row and Keld, in preparing the history of the Institute here, which is the focus of today's Heritage Open Day event. In doing so he has drawn on almost continuous minute books for the institute's General (and other occasional) Meetings from the 1860s to the 1970s, together with a detailed book of accounts for the years 1869 - 1884.

The text has been lightly edited, to make it a better fit for this occasion, and a short introduction has been added, based on material drawn from last year's lecture on James Wilkinson. The ending has been brought up to date. Otherwise the material is Duncan's, used with his permission. I am pleased to be able to bring it to you.

Origins: James Wilkinson

It is impossible to talk about the origins of the Keld Mutual Intellectual Improvement Society, without taking time to understand the Reverend James Wilkinson, minister at Keld from 1838 till his death in 1866. His time as minister here is extraordinary, as it encompasses the rebuilding of the chapel, the establishment of the school, the creation of the Keld Mutual Intellectual Improvement Society, and the erection of the Institute building.

He was born in 1805, a farmer's son in the village of Howgill, then as now a tiny settlement on the western side of the Howgill Fells. The family farm stood on the east bank of the river Lune, which at that time marked the county boundary between Yorkshire and Westmorland. It embraced arable and meadowland on the low ground by the river and extensive sheep pasture.

James was marked out early on as the son who would eventually take over the tenancy of the farm from his father. Consequently, whereas his brothers were given a decent schooling, James was required from a young age to help with farm work, with the result that his formal education was much interrupted. In a letter written shortly before his death in 1866, Wilkinson recalled that 'after I left school, for the space of eight or nine years, I scarcely ever looked at a book or took a pen in hand'. Instead he became accustomed to hard outdoor labour, and went 'many hundreds of times with bundles of hay on his head to feed the sheep in wintry and stormy weather' on the fells. When, some years later, he felt the urge to improve his mind, he had, in his own words, to 'begin anew' his acquaintance with books and letters.

There wasn't much in the way of religious activity in the immediate environment of his home, but a lot was going on in the nearby town of Sedbergh, and James found himself attracted to the newly formed (1828) Congregational Church there. He was quickly involved: he went to a service for the first time in February 1833 , became a Sunday school teacher there in March, led 'public prayer' in May, and was elected a deacon two years later. He delivered his first sermon in January 1836, when the expected preacher failed to turn up, and quickly found himself in demand to lead worship at other chapels and meeting houses in the vicinity.

He had undergone a conversion experience around 1830 after which he was determined to educate himself. In his unheated bedroom, his biographer tells us, 'he read and wrote and studied, after a day's work on the farm, and often after attending religious services also at a considerable distance; and here he would remain until midnight or later, without a fire or any other warmth except from the fire in the room beneath, in order that he might if possible remedy the defects of his early training and improve his mind and heart'.

By the late 1830's Wilkinson was clear about his calling to be a Minister of the Gospel. His observation of the Church of England at the time led to his conviction that he was naturally a dissenter. He was going to be a missionary, working abroad, but in 1838 the opportunity arose much nearer home, in a small, remote Pennine community which he was particularly well-fitted by background and temperament to serve. Acutely aware of his own lack of formal theological training, Wilkinson nonetheless accepted the challenge, and so it was he came to Keld as the minister of this chapel. He was to be here for 28 years.

So it is easy to see from Wilkinson's own story how it was that education was - after the Christian ministry - so important to him. He re-started the day school in 1839, and it moved into its new building in 1843. That building, next door, housed the village school for the next 130 years before finally closing in the early 1970's.

By 1854 Wilkinson was ready for another challenge. He wanted to start an educational programme for adults. In this he was fully in line with the times, as literary institutes, reading rooms and mutual improvement societies were fully the flavour of early Victorian

England. So, his Keld Mutual Intellectual Improvement Society came into existence. It was one of the very first to be started in Swaledale, and it was probably the only one to be associated with a particular church. And it began life a good ten years before its counterpart in Muker.

Wilkinson set out his reasons for starting the Society in a paper which he read at the opening of the new building. 'How can we expect young men to avoid places of evil resort', he asked, 'unless more suitable places be provided for them? Or how can we expect them to improve their leisure time, without suitable employment? … The natural reply was 'What better than a comfortable room, with a good supply of interesting and instructive books, with slates, pencils, pens and ink, and other conveniences?'

His paper also revealed something of the outside support which had helped start the project: the gift of books from friends in Leeds was actually 100 volumes, whilst 'friends at a distance' also funded some of the newspapers taken. The original meeting room was in his house but it soon proved too small. When the rebuilding of the chapel began in 1860 it was too noisy. At first the Society decamped the schoolroom, 'but here we did not find the comfort and convenience we had left'. So the decision was made 'to purchase an old, useless smithy and try to raise a new and more useful and ornamental building'.

Rather than appeal again to those who had just paid for the renovation of the chapel, Wilkinson now sought new backers for the scheme. His biggest benefactor was James Backhouse of York who, 'by the kindness of interested friends', sent £45, whilst Thomas Smith, the absentee Lord of the Manor of Muker, gave a further five guineas.

The best account of how it all came about is in The Richmond and Ripon Chronicle for 21 June 1862. Its report of the formal opening of the Society's new premises.

> The Rev. James Wilkinson, who for nearly a quarter of a century has been the pastor of the Independent Chapel (in Keld), took the initiative, in 1854, in establishing a Mutual Improvement Society. Thirteen young men, chiefly miners and farm labourers of the district, were induced to join. They received a gift of books from some friends connected with the East Parade Chapel, Leeds, and a donation of 2s. 6d. from a friend in their own neighbourhood . . . , Mr Wilkinson allowing them the use of a room attached to his own house as a place of meeting. Since then, they have not only been able to make the Society self-supporting, but they have also increased their library to 400 volumes. Having rebuilt their chapel and improved their schoolhouse in 1860, and introduced an organ (i.e. a harmonium) into the chapel in 1861, they determined to try and provide more suitable accommodation for the Mutual Improvement Society. This they have accomplished by erecting a neat but beautiful little building, containing two rooms, one to be used for a library, reading, and lectures, and the other as a classroom, at a cost of £119, towards which they have already raised £102'.

To have moved from the stage of being a small association of likeminded people to being a thriving society with purpose-built premises in less than eight years is a tribute to the enthusiasm with which James Wilkinson's scheme was taken up.

Had he lived, there is no knowing where his energies might have taken him next. But within five years of the building of the Institute, Wilkinson's health broke down. His devoted flock raised a subscription to send him to Southport, for the benefit of the sea air; but to no avail, and he died there in December 1866.

The Keld Mutual Intellectual Improvement Society.

The Society's title - with its litany of 'mutual', 'intellectual' and 'improvement' - shows how much this was a serious venture in adult education on behalf of a generation whose formal schooling had been limited. Creating a library of good books was clearly the main objective, and at least £5 was spent on buying books in most years during the 1860s. The fact that the downstairs room of the original 1861 building - later used for practices by Keld Band - was designated as a 'classroom' suggests that Wilkinson hoped to run formal evening classes there.

The Society's rules are further proof of serious intent. The members' subscriptions, sixpence per person per month, (it was four pence per month at Muker) were to be used 'only for the purchasing of books newspapers and periodicals, paying postage etc. for the Society, cleaning, heating and lighting the premises'. No purchases were to be made without the consent of the members present at the monthly business meeting.

The rooms were to be open daily (except Sundays) from 2 p.m. to 9.30 p.m., and 'proper order and becoming behaviour' were to be-observed at all times. In particular, 'argument in the room swearing, bad language, evil speaking, smoking tobacco, and the use of intoxicating liquors' were to be 'strictly avoided'. Conversation and reading aloud were only permitted 'when it is agreeable to all who are present' and even then, 'religious controversy and political debate' were forbidden.

With the exception of the dictionary, an encyclopaedia, and 'books used in classes', members could borrow one book at a time from the library for up to three weeks.

Despite these strict rules - and the monetary fines intended to enforce then - Wilkinson's Institute was clearly very successful in its early years. Between 1854 and 1871, over 80 names appear on the only surviving membership register: there may have been a fairly high turn-over from year to year, but even so it seems likely that in the 1860s, the active membership at any one time was over 40.

In fact, by 1867 the members had clearly decided that they had outgrown their original premises, because it was in that year that they built an extension which more than doubled

its size. The extension consisted of a handsome assembly room - intended for social gatherings and lectures - on the first floor, with a stable and gig house (for the use of the minister of Keld chapel) underneath.

There was however one important difference between the Institutes at Keld and at Muker. The Keld Institute was established as an adjunct to the Congregational chapel in a community split between Congregationalists and Methodists and also between drinkers and teetotallers.

By contrast, Muker Institute, as the preamble to its minute book makes clear, was quite deliberately envisaged as being secular and non-sectarian - a 'neutral' space in a village divided between Anglicans and Methodists. Although an elected secretary, treasurer and committee ran the day-today business at Keld, the Congregational minister for the time being was always President. More significant still, under a new Trust Deed of 1869, the various properties that James Wilkinson had built at Keld and Thwaite - including the Literary Institute - became the responsibility of Trustees appointed by Keld and Thwaite chapels. It was this this legal reality that was to trouble them in the early twentieth century, when serious-minded chapel-goers became increasingly concerned about the direction - as they saw it - the Institute was taking.

From the start of the 1870s, then, the Keld Mutual Intellectual Improvement Society was the proud occupier - but never the owner - of a remarkably spacious and attractive new building in the centre of Keld. Unfortunately, there is a twenty-year gap in the minutes at this point. But the account book for the 1870s and 1880s survives and it is possible to deduce from it that the momentum behind this ambitious venture began to to falter during this period. At the heart of the problem was rural depopulation. This led to a dwindling membership and this led to a declining income which limited what the Institute could achieve.

There were over 40 active members in the 1860s, but the numbers had slipped below 30 by 1880 and again to fewer than 20 by the time the minute books resume in 1893. All this spelled financial insecurity.

The Institute therefore was run on a shoe-string. Admittedly the basic running costs were modest: about £2 a year to the caretaker, and a similar amount for a year’s supply of Tan Hill coal, lamp oil, and candles. The outlay on newspapers and periodicals could be - and was - carefully controlled: the Institute took only one daily paper throughout the year (that was the Leeds Mercury: there was an additional title in the winter months) they took a couple of weeklies and four or five monthlies or quarterlies.

Part of this expenditure could be recouped by auctioning off the back-copies of papers and magazines to the members. But the Institute also had to meet the irregular and unpredictable cost of repairs, renovations, and redecoration to a large building.

Consequently, even as early as the 1870s, spending on the library was only possible in years when Institute funds were comfortably in surplus. The library's place at the heart of the Institute steadily eroded. In 1896, it was agreed to call a special meeting 'to consider ways and means for the purchase of a few new books', but it is not obvious that anything happened as a result. Ten years later, it was decided 'that the library be re-catalogued, and that the old books that had got into bad condition be disposed of.'

The gradual decline of the library was not the only factor affecting the Institute at the end of the nineteenth century.

Although the stable and gig house (when not wanted by the minister) produced a small rent income, the extension of 1867 proved to be more of a liability than an asset. The big 'new room' on the first floor was used only a handful of times a year, for the occasional social gathering or lecture. From time to time it could be let to other users - for example, the newly established Keld Band had a tea party there in 1901. In another interesting development in 1898-1900, uncannily foreshadowing the later use of the building, and today's plans, the young Cooperative Holidays Association (known affectionately to later generations of hikers as the C.H.A.) paid 5 shillings a week to use the Institute as a common room when it first began bringing parties of young people and boarding them among Keld's householders during the summer months.

Dancing with the devil

As so often, it all boiled down to money. It was the Institute's need to maximise income whenever possible which set off the train of events that led to the eruption of the dispute in 1913.

In 1907, the chapel held a tea party in the 'big room' after the annual harvest festival service, as no doubt it had done for years. The Institute treasurer asked for the usual half-crown. The Chapel treasurer refused to pay. The Institute claimed - and we can't be quite sure whether they were right or not - that the chapel had always paid to use the room. The Chapel's response was to remind the Institute that it occupied the buildings only by permission of the chapel Trustees. They quoted in support the Trust Deed of 1869, which after forty years most people seemed to have forgotten. Round one to the chapel

Now, the Institute had been holding an annual social in the 'big room' since the late 1860s. This event - early in the New Year - usually took the form of a supper followed by a musical entertainment, and as such provided a useful boost to Institute funds.

But by 1904 the social had come to include what they called 'a romp' (i.e. a dance) in the big room 'from 10 to 12 prompt'; and at some point a whist drive seems also to have been incorporated in the programme.

The flash point came in 1913. The Institute's annual event proved too much for the minister and Trustees (who - you will recall - were responsible for the Institute and school buildings as well as the chapel). In May 1913, a majority of the Trustees signed a requisition invoking their powers under the 1869 Trust Deed. They denounced the Institute committee for having 'persisted in using the said building for Dances protracted into the small hours of the morning and for Whist drives contrary to our clearly expressed protests.'

So the Trustees took a hammer and a nail and fastened a solicitor's letter to the door. They took formal control of the building, and appointed a sub-committee to draw up new rules and regulations. The members of the sub-committee were the minister, the Rev. Joseph Atkinson, James Waggett (gamekeeper) and Simon Fawcett Scott (a farmer).

[Just as an aside, and this is me speaking and not Duncan. In 1911 James Waggett was aged 29 living at Butt House, and presumably was still living there in 1913. Born in Melbecks, he described himself as a gamekeeper and grocer. Simon Scott was 38 in 1911 (and so 40 in 1913). Another local man, he was farming at Thorns. Later information suggests that he moved to Park House and was there in 1930.

Joseph Atkinson was minister from 1912 - 1915: three turbulent years. He was at Oswaldtwistle till 1912, and left for Kirkby Moorside in 1915.

Atkinson's route into the Congregational ministry was increasingly unconventional for his time though not uncommon. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the Congregationalists trying to reconcile their belief in the validity of the call to ministry (which could be heard by anyone) with their desire (at a time when their political and social influence was increasing) to have well-educated ministers. The story of Mansfield College which began in Birmingham in 1838 before moving to Oxford in 1886 illustrates this well. Similarly, the Yorkshire Independent and the Lancashire Independent colleges served northern churches including Keld well over the years.

Atkinson was ordained minister in 1904 at the age of 52. What, you might ask was he doing before then? He was born in Londesborough, a deeply rural village in East Yorkshire, in 1852. His father was an agricultural labourer. In 1871, Joseph Atkinson was in Castleford, an apprentice painter. In 1881 he was 28 married with a three year old daughter, living in Wigton, his wife's home area. Occupation: Missionary. Trace him through the next censuses and you find: 1891: Whitehaven: occupation Town Missionary, 1901 and 1911, Oswaldtwistle: occupation Congregational Minister.

These facts only tell us so much, but it is probably fair to deduce from them that Atkinson's theological position was at the evangelical end of the spectrum. Would it be completely unfair to link his arrival here in 1912 with the bust-up in 1913? And one notes he left not long afterwards. He died in 1920.

Now back to Duncan's script.]

The Institute remained closed, and its members locked out, until the new rules had been framed.

It finally re-opened on 1 October 1913 with new officers and a new committee of management, half of whom were elected by the members of the Institute, and half by the members of the Congregational church. We don't know how many of the members retired in disgust at the Trustees' heavy handed actions, refusing to have anything more to do with the Institute. But there must have been some.

From the perspective of today, a century later, it is not easy to apportion blame in this controversy. On the one hand, the officers and members of the Institute were clearly not behaving in a manner that their founding fathers would have approved of. On the other hand, their unruly conduct was confined to a couple of times a year at most. For 50 years the Institute had enjoyed undisturbed use of the buildings, and had relieved the chapel of the cost of maintaining them during the same period. For the chapel to interfere at this point, and insist on its rights must have been galling to many members of the Institute.

And it was a comparatively trivial affair.

But even apparently trivial matters can take on an enormous symbolic meaning. This was no storm in a teacup, and for a small community like Keld the great dispute of 1913 was a traumatic affair. It involved a serious clash of cultures and of generations. On the chapel side there were those who remembered the Institute's early days and lofty ambitions; the encouragement of respectability, sobriety, thrift, self improvement, and 'rational recreation'. On the other, was a secular-minded generation who had grown up with compulsory schooling and who now looked to the Institute for entertainment rather than for education. They had already, in 1904, acquired a bagatelle board, and it is certain that many of them enjoyed a game of dominoes round the Institute fire after glancing at the newspaper on a winters evening.

But the devil was not in the bagatelle and dominoes. These were not the most potent symbols of conflict. What was causing the problem was the late-night dancing (which might lead to sexual intimacy) and the card-playing (which usually meant gambling). In acting as moral policeman, the Trustees were making a statement about the loose 'modern' habits which had crept into the Institute: and with the weight of the law behind them in the form of the 1869 Trust Deed, they carried the day.

The enforced closure of Keld's Literary Institute by the trustees in 1913 was far and away the most dramatic event in its 110-year history. No comparable crisis disturbed its later years, but the ramifications of the great disruption rumbled on for some time.

The Institute’s members held an annual social and tea party in 1914, 1915 and 1916. However, by 1918 they felt bold enough to propose that the social should comprise 'supper, games, singing, and dancing'. This proposed 'extension of programme' gave rise to a special committee meeting which decided - no doubt after much heart searching - 'to allow dancing at intervals, to be inter-mixed with singing and games'. In other words, dancing was now all right - in moderation. Moderation in Keld meant that it must not be continuous or extend into the small hours. This new arrangement evidently worked out all right, because the committee agreed unanimously to a similar programme for the 1919 social.

Toleration, moderation and competition.

Gradually in the more tolerant social climate of the post-war 1920s, old worries about the Institute's dangerous tendencies subsided. The first clear evidence of change was the introduction of a billiard table in 1923. In order to raise the necessary funds 100 circulars were printed and a sub-committee of young men was appointed to collect locally.

The minister, by then Mr Vasey, then negotiated the purchase of a reconditioned table from Nixons of Leeds. Once acquired, the table was installed in the larger 'second' room, which was thenceforward known as the 'games' room. To make the new facility financially self-supporting, it was decided that members should pay one (old) penny for half-an-hour’s play, and visitors twopence. That marked a shift from education to entertainment which continued during the following years: in 1927, a ping-pong table replaced the old bagatelle board; in 1938 a dart-board was acquired; and in 1944 a new set of dominoes was purchased. There was even a proposal to buy a radio receiver for communal use, but it is not clear whether this was actually carried out.

The building of Keld's spacious public hall as a war memorial in the mid-1920s had major implications for the existing Literary Institute. By including a subscription reading room, the new hall offered an alternative home to those villagers who, for whatever reason, were ill-disposed towards the Congregational church. On the other hand, the hall committee set their faces against having a billiard table!

More importantly, the public hall provided a much superior venue for the Institute's annual social.

Not only was it bigger and better equipped: those who hired it for functions no longer had to abide by the rules laid down by the church trustees. In January 1928, the Institute members celebrated their new-found freedom by hiring the public hall for the social and booking a real dance band, from Brough, to play for them. Simon Scott, the chapel stalwart who had been prominent in the dancing dispute in 1913 and had been a member of the interim committee, prophesied doom and disaster; but his objections were over-ruled.

Throughout the 1930s, the Institute's annual social was held successfully in the public hall. Not only did the event provide useful extra income; it must also have been one of the highlights of Keld's social calendar. The members ‘begged food' from friends and neighbours, and their wives and daughters were recruited to wait at tables. From 1934, the programme was further expanded to include a short concert by 'local talent' and, after some hesitation, a free raffle was also included in the entertainment.

The social survived the Second World War, but it was an occasional, rather than an annual, event; they didn’t hold a social when the Institute’s funds showed a healthy surplus. The final ‘whist drive, supper, and dance' seems to have taken place in February 1968, three years before the Institute finally closed.

So much for special occasions. But what about the Institute’s everyday affairs in these later years?

Given the ever-dwindling membership and modest subscription, it continued to be run on a shoestring. From the re-opening in 1913 down to 1926, the annual accounts usually showed a small deficit, which was sometimes paid for by a whip round among the members at the AGM.

However, when it came to the 1930s and 1940s a credit balance was gradually built-up. This was enough to pay for the installation of electricity in 1953, as well as to meet routine expenditure on repairs and renovations. Ordinary week-by-week expenditure remained minimal. In the early 1930s the caretaker, Fred Metcalfe, received just five shillings a month; only in 1954 did the caretaker's wage reach the princely sum of five shillings a week. Nor was there any extravagance on newspapers: typically, in the 1930s, the Institute took two dailies (the Daily Mirror and the News Chronicle) throughout the year, an extra daily (Northern Echo) in the winter, and two weeklies (the Mid-Cumberland Herald, and the Farmer and Stockbreeder). Papers were auctioned every three months, with the lucky bidder able to take his paper home at the end of the evening (or after three days in the case of the weeklies).

Gradually the number of papers was cut back, and towards the end, before they were discontinued completely at the start of 1968, they were reduced to the News Chronicle (absorbed and replaced by the Daily Mail in 1960) and the Farmers' Weekly. As for the library, the only recorded purchase in the second (1932-71) minute book was in 1938, when 'Mr Waggett produced a few books discarded from a lending library which were offered for two shillings the lot’!
Whether the officers of the Institute managed, like their counterparts at Muker, to keep the members’ subscriptions unchanged throughout the whole period is uncertain - although it is likely that they did. Certainly, they did their best to find other sources of income to help cover costs.

In 1922, the members agreed that the rooms might be let at five shillings a time (heat and light included) for occasional meetings. (Mindful of the events leading up to the 1913 furore, the Congregational church was specifically exempted from this arrangement) On a more regular basis, Keld band began using the basement room as their band room. In 1933 they paid ten shillings a year rent, and an additional two shillings a year for coals. (This went up to four shillings in 1935 after the closure of the Tan Hill colliery. The Institute also made an advantageous arrangement with Barclays Bank, who, from 1935, paid £10 a year to use the reading room for an agency for one hour every Wednesday. A condition of the arrangement was that the Institute would provide 'lavatory accommodation' for the bank official's use. But Keld had no public toilets at that time, and there were no facilities in the Institute itself. Reluctantly, one imagines, the Institute committee agreed to accept the decision of the School managers to charge five shillings a year for the use of the school lavatory.

Another useful bargain was struck with the Richmond postmaster in 1931. It enabled the mail-van driver, whose round ended at Keld, to use the reading room over lunchtime, while he waited for the village postman to deliver the post and collect the outgoing letters on his bicycle. As the mail driver required a fire to be lit before the normal time of 1 p.m. in winter, it was agreed that he should pay a shilling a week extra, on top of his usual subscription. In 1937, when three postmen from Richmond were sharing the van-driving, a members' meeting proposed that, in addition to the individual subscriptions, the postmen should pay two shillings a week to cover the increased cost of coal, and ten shillings a year to the caretaker for additional duties. The Richmond postmaster jibbed at these inflated demands and made an inclusive counter-offer of £4 a year, which the Institute wisely accepted.

Not all the letting arrangements were so satisfactory. In the summers of 1930 and 1931, a visiting troop of Boy Scouts, camping at Keld Lodge by permission of Lord Rochdale, were allowed to use the Institute for an inclusive charge of £2. Unfortunately, on their second visit they caused considerable damage. A special meeting decided to have the walls repaired and coloured, broken articles replaced, and the account sent to the Rev. Canon Stephenson who had presumably been in charge of the boys. A similar problem seems not to have arisen during the Second World War, when the local Home Guard were granted the use of the basement, when on duty, so long as they provided their own coal and light.

The Keld Institute benefitted greatly from the loyalty of long-serving officers. During the 1930s, two familiar names appear and reappear on the list. In 1931, William Alderson -'Bill-up-steps', a noted dalesman and legendary E-flat bass player - first with the Keld and later with Muker Band - was elected secretary. When he left the district to work in Lancashire in 1937, he was succeeded in office by Laurie Rukin. Laurie was also a keen bandsman in his younger days, regularly playing the cornet with Muker in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when the Band was struggling to re-start; but he was even better known as a member of the Keld Singers, who acquired a more-than-local fame in the post-war years for their close harmony singing at village concerts.

Twilight days

By the early 1960s, it was clear that the Keld Institute's days were numbered. A special social was held in 1961 to mark the centenary of the building but the minute book suggests little activity after that. Quite simply, there were very few members, and they were making little use of the facilities. The general meeting in December 1967, faced with a dwindling bank balance, decided to stop the newspapers, and organised what proved to be the final social. It also instructed the secretary 'to approach the bank manager for an increase in their rent .... also the N.F.U. group and others who might wish to hire the room'; but it is not clear that these belated efforts to supplement what must then have been a tiny subscription income proved successful.

Three years later, the general meeting - attended by the Minister, Kenneth Wadsworth, and five members - decided to call a public meeting ‘to enable anyone to voice an opinion on winding up the Institute and so help the committee and members to make a wise decision'. At the ensuing meeting,- in January 1971 - Bill Alderson proposed that the Institute should close, and four of the six members present voted in favour of his motion. They then agreed that the billiard table, furniture, and books be sold; and, appropriately, their final minute recorded that 'thanks be given to the Congregational church for 110 years use of the building.

The building was subsequently adapted to provide simple hostel type accommodation for parties of young people staying at the Keld Centre; and, along with the former schoolroom- and minister’s house, it continued to be used for that purpose till the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001 closed the centre. Many have very fond memories of the time they spent there.

Looked at in one way, the Keld Literary Institute did not always live up to James Wilkinson's great expectations. But on another it did. For more than four generations marked by momentous change in the wider world - including half a century of war and unprecedented peacetime change - it enabled generations of men in one of the most remote corners of England to spend sociable evenings reading the newspaper, playing dominoes, and chatting in front of a warm fire, safe, for the time being at least, from the temptations of the public house. As with all such local voluntary organisations, its history was always determined by the members themselves. No higher authority from outside told them what to do in the face of changing circumstances. They made their own decisions and followed their own collective inclinations.The Dalesmen who founded and sustained their village institute were consciously and proudly making their own history, and creating our heritage. The building still stands at the centre of the village and is now in the hands of a trust determined to continue the tradition of adult self-improvement that was James Wilkinson’s original vision.

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