

Keld before and during the war

This is a revised version of the talk given in Keld Chapel for the Research Centre weekend. It was less structured than it should have been as a result of a confusion in my own mind about its theme. Originally part of my Family Mosaic I had agreed with Glenda to speak on 'My Keld Years' and only later found that David Figures had announced that it was to be about the War Years. Then, on my own, I concluded after reading a BBC script from 1939 that I had lived here through a pivotal time, knowing people from a very different world before some twentieth century changes had come. As a child and later I had observed this remarkable and dearly loved place as it caught up with the modern world, and now I foolishly attempted to make that the thread of my talk. I should have omitted the opening entirely.

Mining for lead had been a major occupation in this part of the Pennines since Roman times and by the Middle Ages coal was being supplied to Richmond Castle from here, but by the end of the 19th century mining was in decline and by 1935, when we came to Keld, farming had completely taken over as the principle way of life. I took the Rukin family as my starting point (I had photographs of three generations) and started with old James, known as Grandpa, Rukin who was in his 90s when we first knew him. That surname has been in Upper Swaledale since at least the sixteenth century, as have most of the local surnames there - Alderson, Calvert, Metcalfe, Scott, Thornborough, Clarkson, Hunter and others. I quoted his recollections, made in a BBC broadcast in 1939, of when at 10 years old he worked in the William Gill pit at Tan Hill, walking there every morning and back in the evening, over four miles each way, then milking the cows and tending the sheep when he got home. The mine was 30 fathoms, or 200 feet deep. I remember looking at him when I was a little girl and thinking: 'You must have been alive when the Crimean War was happening!'

Another old miner remembered that at least there was steady pay then, and his father coming home one month with £40 in his pocket. 'Every miner had a field with a cow and a pig'. There were other memories of the days before proper roads and then the coming of better roads and of improved transport including motor cycles. Ready made clothes could be bought, there were dances to enjoy, markets were more accessible and life was opening up. Other old people remembered quite clearly the great flood in the early years of the 20th century which had carried away, among many other buildings, the old Hoggarths Farmhouse and the stone top of the bridge below Keld, replaced in wood over the stone pillars and still essential for access to East Stonesdale, Crackpot Hall and Swinnergill. Freakish and dangerous weather is by no means a new phenomenon.

I explained how my father came to be minister of the three dales churches, Keld, Thwaite and Reeth. An ordained minister who had already been in charge of two churches he was also an academic who had been persuaded to become Tutor in Hebrew at the Yorkshire Independent College, a profession which he had reluctantly to give up because his poor eyesight deteriorated further until such work became impossible. He actively chose to serve in the Dales and the influence of Salem, his home church in Leeds, may well have helped him to find such a beautiful and absolutely suitable place in which to settle. *(There was no need to talk about the interesting history of Keld Chapel as David Figures had already covered that earlier in the day.)*

Even in those days between the Wars this village was well loved and cherished and there were already a number of appreciative books and articles in circulation. Enthusiastic walkers and campers even then came up regularly and so did fishermen, writers, broadcasters artists and professional families looking for holidays and recreation. They would generally stay at the Cathole Inn, sometimes at Butt House, then also the village shop and Post Office, or at Park Lodge farm where Mrs. Rukin presided as well as at other farms. One or two people had bought a holiday or a retirement home, and these included the Redmans from Rochester and two ladies who had been missionaries and called their new home 'Patna'. There was also talk of a famous actress who had a cottage at Thorns. Could it have been Marie Tempest? (A young man approached me later: he has a cottage there himself and had heard something which was an echo of this, but he knew even less!) One of these appreciative visitors was Richard (Dick) Sharp, a BBC correspondent who worked with Northern Radio. He often stayed with us at the Manse and in 1939 involved my mother and other local people in some broadcasts about living in and around Keld in the then past and present times.

One powerful influence upon us all was Keld School, the building which stands at right angles to the Manse and was part of the Congregational complex, and its formidable headmistress Miss Marshall who reigned with a strong personality, a small cane and firm discipline. This was an Elementary School where all ages were then taught together in the same room, the older children at one end and the younger at the other. There was a piano, and we all sang hymns and the full range of songs from the National Song Book. There was a big basket where materials and tools for needlework were kept, and a huge Tortoise stove with a big iron-railed guard around it. In winter the children who came down from the farms walked in with wet gloves and socks as well as coats and scarves and these were all hung over the iron fire guard so that the smell of drying wool hung around all day mixed with that of the coke fired stove. Clogs were left in the cloakroom and exchanged for plimsolls. There are, of course, no games fields at Keld and no playground. Our PT took place on the road leading into the village, seldom disturbed by any traffic.

Miss Marshall's gift for imposing discipline was observed by my father as he looked out from his desk in the study one morning after a fall of snow. Playtime arrived, so all the children came tumbling out to play in the snow. Almost at once one of the boys, who was a very good shot, took aim at the bell within its small turret and hit it, which was quite a feat. Out came Miss Marshall: "As the school bell has been rung playtime is over. Into your lines!" And they all marched meekly inside. I know nothing of her background or how such a cultivated lady came to her isolated place in Keld but she was well liked and respected and always commanded obedience. I wonder now if she may have been one more of the generation of young women cheated of marriage and a happy home life by a loss in the Great War and sought solace in a remote and beautiful place.

This was Keld when the war began, the people and the ways of life. I have some recollection of a few national events before that happened. Of wondering why there was a shortage of oranges and being told that there was a Civil War in Spain, and of the abdication of Edward VIII, an event kept hidden from the nation by strict self-censorship of the press, but Coronation mugs were issued. Another was of my father handing out another set of Coronation mugs to all school children in 1937 from the steps of the Institute. A symptom of the unpleasant changes to come was when the Redmans brought a friend to stay at their cottage opposite the Manse. He had a German name, Herr Roman (or Romanes), and he was almost certainly a Jewish refugee, but nothing was known then of the persecutions and the local people were hostile and suspicious. In a place where hospitality had always been generous this was a new and unpleasant state of mind. Later, when my father was seen to be giving a lift to a stranger further down the Dale it was reported that Mr. Mee had a German spy in his car.....

Keld, like the rest of the upper dale, was edging into the twentieth century while in many ways still not long out of the nineteenth.

Then came September 3rd 1939. My chief memory is of my father carrying our very heavy wireless set from his study in the Manse through the door (now closed) connecting it to the Chapel and placing it with the volume turned up to maximum so that the congregation could hear Mr. Chamberlain's announcement of the Declaration of War. This took place in a deep silence and most eyes must have looked at the tablet on the wall commemorating the four lives lost so recently in the Great War, names also carried on the War Memorial on Butt Rigg and all of well remembered local men.

My father was appointed as Air Raid Warden for Upper Swaledale and the Dale Head, which must have been one of the largest areas coming under one man's responsibility in the entire kingdom. He was also appointed Billeting Officer for when the evacuees arrived. The first of these was an intermittent duty: the Germans were unlikely to bomb Upper Swaledale. When a warning was deemed necessary someone down the dale (where?) would telephone a message to the Post Office on Keld 1, Chrissie would come down to The Manse with the message, Arnold would mount his dimly lit bicycle and alert anyone he considered should be told. By the time he got home there would be another message to tell him that the Alert was over - and then he would repeat his round. As the original warning probably came from Darlington, forty miles away and in a much more dangerous location, it was all a bit of a farce, but we took these things seriously. There were, of course, no sirens near us. Enemy aircraft were the business of the Home Guard.

The evacuees were a different matter. The north-eastern cities with their docks and industries were in danger and were indeed to be bombed extensively. Our particular duty was to take in children from

Tyneside and my father had to find new homes for them, even billeting them where they were not much wanted if necessary. An immediate solution when homes were not immediately available for some of them was to place the overflow in Keld Lodge, Lord Rochdale's hunting lodge beside the road above the village. (This later became a Youth Hostel and is now an Hotel and good restaurant - it was never the Cathole Inn, as stated in at least one recent book!) Most of the farms were willing to take these unfamiliar children but not all wished to keep them once they had arrived. Our farmers' wives take immense pride in their impeccably clean homes, their children then as now have been taught good manners and they could not easily accept the very different ways and behaviour of strange children from city slums. And by no means were all of the Tyneside children happy when they realised how remote this area is. In an earlier attempt to evacuate similar children many of them had refused to leave the coach which had brought them to this wild place where the nearest cinema is twenty three miles away and the nearest fish and chip shop was in Wensleydale and over the Buttertubs. The prospect of empty moors stretching for miles with only sheep upon them filled many of these children and any mothers who had accompanied them with horror. Familiar streets were what they wanted and they preferred the risk of German bombs to this terrifying wilderness. Others among them were at first excited by the prospect of going to live in splendour at dwellings with names such as 'Starling Castle' and 'Crackpot Hall' but coped with disillusion when they got there and found that they weren't grand at all.

Most stayed and learned to love this place and the people who had taken them into their homes and there were at least a couple of boys who wanted to stay when the war ended and to go on working in the farms. My new 'best friend' Cicely was a Gateshead girl, billeted at the Post Office with the Waggetts, and we became a pair, helping with the hens, roaming the woods and the hills together and sharing secrets. One odd result of the evacuation was the development of a new dialect when 'Geordie' children acquired an overlay of 'Swardle' and created an interesting hybrid accent and language.

In addition to the Tyneside contingent from Gateshead and Sunderland there were a few private evacuees whose parents had made their own arrangements for their endangered children. Two of these, brothers Keith and Gordon Wilson, were the sons of a doctor in Lancashire who had come to Keld regularly every summer for family holidays with Mrs. Rukin at Park Lodge Farm and now were to stay for the duration of the war. Another was Mary Redman whose parents owned the cottage opposite the Manse and had decided that she would be safer with us than in Maidstone or Rochester, so she stayed for a while. There was another temporary evacuee who came to the Manse: a small white and spoiled Sealyham terrier. His owner, a lady of nervous disposition who lived in Bradford, feared for his safety if the town were bombed and begged for a refuge for him with us. Laurie Rukin, his working collie Gyp with him, took one look at this creature and exclaimed scornfully: "Tha wants to put yon on wheels!" Sunny had the usual terrier nature - chirpy, yappy and not at all biddable, and he wore out his welcome just in time for his mistress to decide that she could no longer bear life without him, and he returned to the perils of Bradford.

The sudden and sizeable influx of children changed the school but at least one new professional teacher came with the evacuees. At different times Miss Robinson, Miss Audus and Miss Penny stayed with us at the Manse and each of them attempted to enlarge my education although none of them got very far with giving me an interest in knitting. There was an immediate need for extra space in which to teach the enlarged school, now probably doubled in size and so the Public Hall came into daytime use for education, so Miss Marshall found herself in charge of two buildings with extra teachers and some very different children. I think that this may also have been when a local assistant teacher was appointed, Miss Pedley. She later married a local farmer and went to live at up on the fells at Harker House. Somehow it was all made to work and I recognise now just how very good the quality of teaching and expectation must have been in that remote village and under such difficulties. So good, in fact, that when I went away to my next school, far away in the south, I was well able to keep up with my much more sophisticated contemporaries.

We were fitted for gas masks while at school in the Public Hall, uncomfortable things with porcine snouts and a rubbery smell; each came with its own cardboard box and was supposed to be carried everywhere one went, carefully named with name, address and identity number, and the were worn with a leather strap across the chest. There were also special 'gas cradles' for babies, horrid things looking rather like mummy cases with a transparent (?celluloid) mask inserted. Another very obvious memory is of the black-out: not a chink of light must be allowed once darkness fell, so thick black inner curtains must be made and hung inside every window - though there would never be much illegal light to attract the enemy from candles and oil lamps even if there were a slit in the curtains. Large windows in public buildings such as schools had brown paper strips gummed across them, criss-crossing in diamond patterns in case of bomb blast and to

prevent injury from flying glass. Cars had their headlights masked so that only a narrow slit or a tiny cross in the middle would let the light through, which can only have been to inform other drivers of your presence. It certainly did not illuminate the road. Then there were Ration Books with their coupons for meagre allowances of food such as sugar and meat, then clothes coupons and Identity Cards. Those who had taken in evacuees had extra rations, of course, and I believe that there were extra allowances for other visitors, so that when my father met Mrs. Rukin carrying a huge bag of provisions down from the store at the Post Office he ruefully contemplated his own small basket load. Not a lot there! But like many country people across the land it was possible to add to the rationed allowances with what could be grown in gardens and the eggs from the chickens, not to mention the rabbits waiting to be shot and the butter and cheese from the dairies.

When it came to the War Effort I don't think that our contributions were of much value although we rallied to the call. The iron railings at the front of both Miss Marshall's house and of the Manse were never removed for scrap iron, and the collection of aluminium saucepans and other metal household goods remained for many years where they had been patriotically deposited in a space in the angle of the lane above Starling Castle, gradually disappearing beneath the weeds until long after the war was over.

Farming was a reserved occupation and as the family farms had always managed with the bare minimum of workers almost no-one could be spared to go to war, although there were some volunteers from further down the Dale. Nevertheless the men of Keld in common with the rest of the country wished to serve in this, the Darkest Hour, and joined the local Defence Volunteers, later named the Home Guard by Winston Churchill, and Keld had its own platoon. It wasn't entirely Dad's Army because some of them were comparatively young men who were eager to join and spend their nights on guard duty watching the skies and looking out for possible enemy planes and paratroopers. Initially without guns, except for the gamekeepers, they brought what weapons they could including pitchforks, but once officially armed they got in some good practice shooting grouse with ammunition also provided by the gamekeepers, and they met in the gamekeepers' lodge by the track up Kisdon. I am not sure how many men belonged to the Keld Home Guard and I do not know much of what they did, and least of all just how they planned to hold back Hitler's troops if they ever made it up Swaledale, but their shooting was good enough to win the Buchanan Cup in a competition with other units at Catterick. It may have helped that two of these men had served in the First War. It is only recently that I have learned that it was particularly necessary to watch for and report the flight path of the Luftwaffe's bombers: German pilots were known to follow the east-west path of the Swale as it gleamed on moonlit nights and used it to direct them towards the west coast ports such as Liverpool and even Belfast.

The Public Hall is a solid and remarkably useful building, perhaps unusual in so small and remote a place. It has its own history and the names of some of the local benefactors who contributed to its building are carved into the stonework on the front. As a centre of village and dale life it could not have been better and during the war it was indispensable. It was, as I said, pressed into use as an extra school room by day but in the evenings all kinds of activities went on there. I remember visiting drama groups, but more often there were dances, very popular, with music provided by a local farmer with his own accordion or occasionally by a small visiting band. It was my mother, though, who got a small concert party together to present concerts in the Hall. This party was formed from a collection of local girls and farmers' wives and they called themselves the Blackout Belles. They rehearsed their songs and routines in the Manse with my father playing the piano accompaniment to songs such as *There'll always be an England* 'Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye', *There's something about a soldier*, or even *The Quartermaster's Stores* and various other popular pieces of the time. My mother sang solos such as *The little brown bird singing* and *Little old lady* and my father contributed *Passing By* and *Jeannie with the light brown hair*, and there were duets as well. Occasionally Laurie Rukin might be prevailed to join in and there were short comedy sketches too. There are still friends who recall their times with the Blackout Belles and reminisce with me, for they had a high old time together and the concerts were always a great success.

The Chapel, always at the centre of Keld life, now had an enlarged congregation and Sunday School, and the evacuees were to join in the annual Sunday School Anniversary when special Services of Song were presented and the girls all dressed in their best frocks and new bonnets and the boys, in suits and caps, looked unusually clean and tidy.

(Two photographs here.)

Farming was the main occupation but one man who managed to do two jobs was Jack Rukin, son of old James 'Grandpa' Rukin whom I mentioned earlier. Jack not only ran the farm at Park Lodge but was also the local postman and he made daily deliveries on foot or by bicycle to Tan Hill, the highest inn in England, a distance of four and a half miles - rather as his father had done in his boyhood mining days.

This was my cue for a second photograph: Jack Rukin with his dog and a lamb.

The Swaledale farming families, living in the villages or scattered up and down the dale or in lonely farmsteads on fell and moorside had lived there for many generations and spoke a dialect which still used some of the vocabulary left behind by their Viking ancestors. These were the people, tough minded, courageous, hardy and close bonded in their remote area to whom Arnold and Jeannie were to commit themselves with heart and soul for the next seven years.

Earlier this week (in July 2014) I had visited the graves at the lowest part of the graveyard where the flowers remained on Lizzie Calvert's last resting place and realised that I knew just about every person there named on a stone. (This led me to stray into going round the village and putting old friends into their houses.)

Life in Keld in those between-war years when there was no electricity was hard for everyone. The old wash-kitchen at the back of the Manse has vanished in the recent, and splendid, redevelopment of the house, but then it had within it a huge stone construction containing a big copper bowl under which a fire was lit to boil the water inside. A big 'dolly tub' would be rolled in through the outer door from a shed outside, filled with warm water for the washing which was transferred to the boiler before rinsing with 'blue' and put through the rubber rollers of the hand-wringer. Most of the farmers' wives still used wooden rollers. Eventually the linens would be carried down the garden and hung out to dry on the patch of ground now designated as the 'Well Being Garden'. Later, the ironing was carried out dangerously on the kitchen table with the sort of iron, heated in the fire, which now turns up in museums. All the cooking and baking was done on the big kitchen range which also provided all the hot water for household use. Not only did it have to be fed regularly with coal but it had to be black-leaded every day, an awful chore. Living rooms were heated by coal fires, and a small pleasure when ill was to have a comforting fire in the bedroom grate - these upstairs fireplaces have all been removed now. Lighting was provided by oil or paraffin lamps, candles and battery torches. Mr. Waggett at Butt house had installed a private generator to provide his home with electricity and at Hoggarths old Kit Calvert had created his own by using a waterfall and the high tarn above to drive it. Our radio sets were powered by battery and accumulator, and these last had to be taken up to Mr. Waggett to be recharged. Huge amounts of coal were delivered before the winter set in, and large quantities of provisions such as flour were bought and stored against the snow and bad weather which would make them difficult to obtain.

Visitors, however, may have regarded all these difficulties as part of the charm of Keld and upper Swaledale, an enchanting alternative to city life. Recently I was privileged to read through a holiday diary kept by two young women from Leeds who came to stay with the Waggetts at Butt House for a fortnight in the summer of 1937 in which they recorded notes about long walks and notes about the people they met here. My father was one of them, described as 'one of our boys' because he came from Leeds, and they went to the Chapel on both Sundays. Laurie Rukin, son of Jack and grandson of 'Grandpa' Rukin, was the organist and they seem to have developed a crush on him, for he was indeed a charmer and handsome with it. He also had a fine singing voice which they much admired. They met him one Sunday after the morning service and seized the opportunity to talk to him when "Arnold came out and asked him about the music for the evening service. We could have biffed him!" Laurie turned up several times in their diary and they may have attempted an inept and minor flirtation with him, but they were probably wary of his remarkable mother!

Photographs of Laurie, one with his dog and my mother and me, another in the garden on a Sunday afternoon - in his suit; and a note of regret that I have none of Mrs. Rukin herself.

When my parents discovered that the care of their health was likely to depend upon Dr. Spears twelve miles away in Reeth who prided himself on using his father's medical instruments, which surely went back to the previous century, they switched to young Doctor Cox in Hawes. The Buttertubs lay between but at least he was up-to-date. I understand that now the District Nurse comes up from Reeth but in many ways my mother took many such duties on herself, sitting with Mrs. Metcalfe at Crackpot Hall during a difficult labour or nursing the Aldersons at Skeugh Head when they were all laid low with measles.

Farming being a reserved occupation there was a good mixed community right through those difficult years, and many of the young men who were not called up found their relaxation and pleasure in music when not on Home Guard duty. I still don't know whether there is a special gift for singing bestowed upon those who live in the hills - the Welsh seem to think that they have a very particular and exclusive gift - but if there is it certainly flourished in Keld then. Perhaps shouting across the fells as well as whistling to their sheep dogs trained a powerful voice. Brass and Silver Bands were as popular in the Dales as in the industrial towns and there was always a group available to play at the War Memorial every Armistice Day and at other special occasions, but the male voice quartet known as the Keld Singers was admired far outside upper Swaledale and a cause of immense pride within. These too were part of the gallant spirit which prevailed during those years.

Occasionally the war beyond our sheltered world broke in. One event happened when an RAF plane crashed on a remote part of the fells and the surviving crew were brought down to the village where accommodation was found for them. (I say surviving, but I don't know about the condition of any others.) I have no idea of how long these men stayed among us, billeted around just like the evacuees, but although it seemed a long while at the time they must have rejoined their units as soon as possible. This would have been in 1940 or 1941, and quite possibly it was the weather which brought their plane down and kept them here for these were two of the unusually bad winters which afflicted us during those years. These young men certainly enlivened life in Keld while they were with us, and there were sing-songs around the harmonium in Park Lodge and new partners for the girls in the village dances. There were other crashes on the moors, one near Skeugh Head where two Dutch airmen were found dead after their parachutes failed to open in time.

We eventually and very sorrowfully left Keld in August 1942. My mother's health was poor and she had suffered from the bad winters of those years. I was due to go away to a boarding school which had itself been evacuated to Lynton in North Devon and for these and other reasons my father had agreed to become minister of a church in Burwell near Cambridge, a place which I never really lived in and could never bring myself to like. Although it was difficult to make the journey we returned to Keld whenever we could during holiday times and as chance - or Providence - arranged we were there on VJ day in August 1945 when the Second World War reached its final conclusion. Cicely had not yet gone back to Gateshead and the two of us were even allowed to attend the victory dance in the Public Hall that night before the huge bonfire built in anticipation at the bottom of the village was lit, the bright flames soaring skywards in a joyful celebration of peace, a glorious contrast to the hateful fires of the Blitz and the detested blackout. By another coincidence my father had been booked to take the service in Keld Chapel that Sunday, and so by God's grace where he had so sadly marked the beginning of the war on 3rd September 1939 he was able to lead the congregation in thanksgiving at its end.

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