

The Jim Hamilton
Heritage Society of Coalburn
Newsletter **78**
Autumn 2025





Chairperson's Remarks

Autumn 2025

We didn't manage a summer newsletter for 2025, so I hope you'll find this one worth waiting for. There's the usual roundup of Heritage Society news, the second instalment of Betty Bell's school memories, news of the Peter McLeish Memorial Prize at Coalburn Primary School, an update on Coalburn routes at the Eco-Museum of Mining Landscapes and information about ongoing efforts to investigate the site of the former curling pond at Stockbriggs.

Unfortunately there is sad news too, with the death of longtime member Helen Walker (née Hamilton) in September at the age of 93. Helen's commitment to and interest in the heritage of her home village remained undimmed throughout her long life. There is a tribute to this remarkable lady in the newsletter.

Helen Brownlie
October 2025

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### *Annual General Meeting*

The last meeting of the 2024-25 session was our 20th AGM, held on April 30th. This provided a good opportunity to take stock. There were no new offers to join committee and so composition remains unchanged:

#### **The Jim Hamilton Heritage Society** **Committee 2025-26**

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Chair: Helen Brownlie **Vice-Chair:** Geoffrey Brown
Secretary: Donald Williams **Treasurer:** Marion McBain
Other Members: Billy Struthers, James McBain

We didn't have a speaker at this meeting, but there was an interesting display of Rechabite memorabilia, kindly donated by Clark Steele and in amazing condition.

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## *Gala Day Exhibition*

Our exhibition at Coalburn Leisure Centre on July 5th attracted over 100 visitors. The display had a focus on mining heritage. Gala Days past featured too and we showed some of Jim Hamilton's films of previous Galas. A large scale map showing Coalburn in the early years of the 20th century was on display and there was the usual book stall, tea and coffee service, and ever popular tombola.



≈ Gala Day Team July 5th, 2025 ≈

**Ian Lundie, James & Marion McBain, Donald Williams, Geoffrey Brown,  
Billy Struthers, Marean Johnstone, Rona Lundie and Helen Brownlie**

*Thanks to Jimmy and Marion's daughter Wendy, who helped out with teas and  
tombola and took the photo*

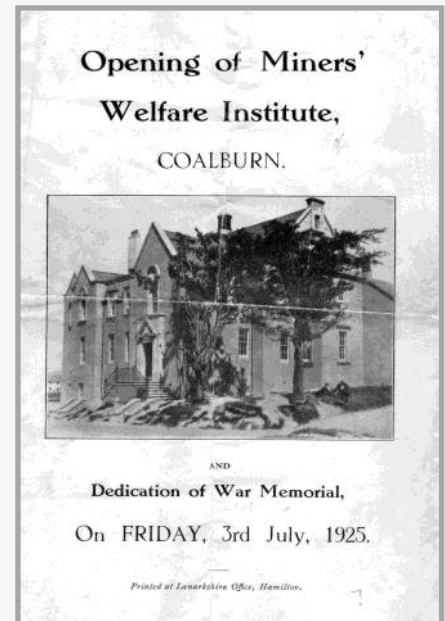
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100th anniversary of Coalburn Miners' Welfare

The Jim Hamilton Heritage Society was pleased to be invited to a **civic reception** held at Hamilton Town Hall on May 15th to mark the 100th anniversary of Coalburn Miners' Welfare, which opened on July 3rd, 1925. James McBain and Billy Struthers were our representatives and thoroughly enjoyed the occasion (*pictures on next page*).

Meanwhile Grace McCall, Christine Hutton and others at '**The Wee Blether**' group had embarked on a mission to create a fitting tribute. Shown on August 21st, the result was wide ranging presentation which covers most aspects of village life over the last 100 years and features many of the local groups that have

used the Miners' Welfare for their activities over the years. We thought that more JHHS members might like to see it and invited Grace and Christine to show their presentation at our first meeting of the 2025-26 season, on the evening of *Wednesday 5th September*. The ladies were congratulated for the extensive research and dedication put into this project.



Continuing the theme, information and photographs about the founding of Coalburn Miners Welfare, how these Institutes came about, and how things have changed over the years was the focus of our next meeting, *September 19th*. Members were able to contribute their own reminiscences and recollections, a welcome addition which meant the time flew. Intended to cover the century, there was time for just the first few decades, taking us up to the late 1950s when the decision was made to change the operating structure to a social club.



**Civic Reception Celebrating 100th Anniversary
of Coalburn Miners' Welfare**

(details on page 13)

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### *The Life of Donald Cameron*

In 1985 Jim Hamilton interviewed Coalburn resident Donald Cameron, then nearing his 89th birthday. Mr Cameron had lived locally for almost seventy years and was village postman for much of his working life.

This informative, funny and very entertaining film was shown at our meeting *on October 1st*. Donald spoke in colourful detail of his early days in Glenborrodale (Ardnamurchan), his family there, his early working life and how he came to live in Coalburn after becoming engaged to local girl Lizzie Strang.

*"My recurring memory of interviews with Donald is of listening to a voluble raconteur who had practised the art of story telling so as to hold the attention of his audience. In print it is impossible to convey his artistry."*

Jim Hamilton, writing on the death of Donald Cameron in January, 1990, aged 93. Jim had nonetheless made an attempt, documenting the interviews in Chronicle 25.



*"Donald Cameron had many endearing attributes and I admired how he supported local events. This photo (above) was taken by me when he was at Coalburn Flower Show in 1984."*

Jim Hamilton

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An informative and very well-presented exposition of *the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC)* was provided by volunteer Fred Ellsworth at our meeting on *October 15th*. Mr Ellsworth was already known to some of us through his guided tours of CWGC memorials at Lesmahagow cemetery. This talk too featured several local stories, some of which had evolved through information provided by the Jim Hamilton Heritage Society. This was a very interesting and professional presentation from a dedicated speaker, generous with his time, happy to prompt discussion and take questions.



Peter McLeish Memorial Prize

2024-25 saw the re-introduction of Heritage Projects for Primary 7 pupils at Coalburn, with the award for best project now being made in memory of Peter McLeish. Peter was dedicated to working with children at the school, and although we miss his guiding hand, were very pleased to be able to present a Heritage Project Award for the first time since 2019.

Pupils were able to choose their preferred topic, with projects emerging on mining, farming, WWII, and the WWII Prisoner of War Camp at Happendon.

Donald Williams was at the school leavers' assembly on June 24th to make the award, presenting the winner with an engraved medal and a certificate. The commemorative shield will be kept on display at the school, with mini-shields engraved with the year and the winning pupil's name. There are a further 13 mini-shields on this trophy, so prize winners can be commemorated through to 2038 – the 100th anniversary of the birth of Peter McLeish.



We hope this will prove a fitting and lasting memorial to Peter, providing some comfort to Peter's family and satisfaction to the many who contributed to the Peter McLeish Memorial Fund, which his daughters Barbara and Fiona set up in his name, knowing that the funds raised would help ensure that Peter's name lives on.

Coalburn School - Primary 7 Heritage Project Peter McLeish Memorial PRIZE WINNER 2025

~ The Prisoner of War Camp at Happendon in WWII ~



The Jim Hamilton
Heritage Society of Coalburn



Betty Bell (née Bryson)

~ memories of ~

COALBURN SCHOOL

PART II

Betty Bryson enrolled at Coalburn school in April 1935 at the age of four. At this time Coalburn was a Junior Secondary, which meant that after completing their seventh year of schooling, pupils could go on to Lesmahagow High (dependent on qualifying) or remain at Coalburn for two years of secondary schooling there. Betty chose the latter course and spent all her schooldays at Coalburn.

It seems that the teaching staff was remarkably stable around this time. Peter McLeish's excellent book, 'A History of Coalburn School', lists teachers in 1945. This shows the same staff teaching the same classes as had taught Betty, who left the year before:

Infants 1	Miss Martha Barr	Primary 4	Miss Mary Harvie
Infants 2	Miss Isa Gilchrist	Primary 5	Miss Marion Jeffrey
Primary 1	Miss Jessie Purdie	Secondary 1	Mr Robert Scott
Primary 2	Miss Agnes Thornton	Secondary 2	Mr Frank Wills
Primary 3	Miss Mamie Craig		

To avoid confusion for readers of today, we'll adhere to modern designations in telling Betty's story i.e. Primary 1 to 7, rather than two Infant years followed by Primary 1 to 5.

The last newsletter (Issue 77, Spring 2025) has Part I of Betty's memoir covering the first six years, up until her time in Miss Harvie's class in 1940-41. (It seems that Betty had mis-remembered Miss Harvie's first name, as she has her as 'Jean' and not 'Mary.') Miss Harvie had arrived in 1919 and the picture here shows her during her earlier days at the school.



And so, on with the rest of Betty's story

Miss Marion Jeffrey, always known as 'Min', taught Primary 7 (the qualifying class as it was known). She was very strict but fair. I was still enjoying my lessons, but not the exams.

Throughout my time at the school there were five of us who had equal ability and we alternated being first in previous exams. The dreaded eleven plus came upon us and after the exam much sharing of what answers we had given to various questions occurred.

The papers were not marked at the school and we had to wait some time before we received the results of the exam. I was second and I think Guy Scott was first, although it could have been either Anne Hislop, Mary Black, Bruce Shaw or Guy Scott.

However, when the results of all the exams throughout the year were added up, I was first by half a point. Before the results were known, **Miss Barr** spoke to my Dad at an orchestra rehearsal in the school and told him the result, but Dad kept it to himself until we were told by Miss Jeffrey.

Miss Jeffrey was not happy however, because out of the first eight in the class only three left Coalburn after Primary 7 and went to Lesmahagow High. My only ambition was to work in an office and therefore I wanted to go to Coatbridge Technical College for a commercial course. I was told that if I decided to go the Lesmahagow High I would be expected to transfer to Larkhall after two years to complete the course. This I did not want to do and my parents agreed I should stay at Coalburn, which was then a junior secondary school.

Miss Jeffrey was tall and very approachable. She taught us country dancing and had great success with her dancing teams.

She and Miss Harvie did not speak to each other.

Rumour had it that Miss Harvie had been friendly with Mr Bob Scott, the Secondary I teacher, but when Miss Jeffrey came to the school he changed his affections. I don't know how much truth there was in that rumour, but Miss Jeffrey and Mr Scott later married, after he became Head Teacher at Stablestone School, Glespin.

Some years later they moved out of the district, but she still kept in touch with the late Jim Hamilton. They corresponded with each other for years and Jim often spoke of her to me. She lived in England after she was widowed, and was 92 years of age when she died.

I cannot remember which class I was in when the evacuees came to Coalburn, after the Clydebank raids. I don't know exactly how many came, but I do know that the school roll was over 500. The only difference they made in the school was that some of the children were Roman Catholic and there was a teacher of that faith appointed to the school. In the morning the Catholic children assembled in the gym hall for prayers, whilst the others had religious practice in their classrooms. Every Friday the priest from St John at Blackwood visited the school and had a service for the Catholic evacuees.

The other thing that affected us because of the war was that we all were given homes to go to when the air raid siren sounded. We practiced this often. The siren from the pit would sound and down went pencils, etc., and off we would run to the allotted house. I went to Mrs. Bernard, who lived straight across from the school. On reflection, I doubt very much if we would have survived if the school had been bombed.



Min Jeffrey in her early days of teaching at Coalburn

Mr Bob Scott was the teacher in **Secondary 1**. He was strict but made us laugh too. We were convinced he had eyes in the back of his head. He would be writing on the blackboard with his back to the class and still could name the person who was talking or misbehaving.

If someone had done something seriously wrong he would ask them to own up. If they did not, the whole class was kept in at playtime or had to do a punishment exercise at the end of which he named the culprit. He coached the football team.

My favourite subjects at school were English, Arithmetic, Reading and History. We did not have a subject called maths in those days. I could do algebra, but did not like it very much. Mr. Scott let me work on the first two subjects without waiting for the rest of the class. I really enjoyed that.

Mr Scott was very kind too. He would ask in a loud, angry sounding voice that a certain person should remain in the class at playtime. We naturally thought they were in trouble. However he would give the person a pair of plimsolls (gutties as they were commonly called) or article of clothing. In those days some of the pupils had no shoes and came to school with bare feet, sometimes even when the snow was on the ground. It is very hard in these days to believe that such a thing happened, but it did.



This picture from 1934 includes several staff whom Betty recalls in her memoir:
Bob Scott, standing 2nd from right; **Agnes Thornton**, seated far left; **Min Jeffrey**, seated far right; and **Hugh Miller**, headteacher during Betty's early years at school, seated.

The teacher of **Secondary 2** was the **Headmaster, Mr Frank Wills**, commonly known as 'Wee Bud' and a complete contrast to the Headmaster when I started School. He was **Mr Miller**, a tall, gray-haired, forbidding looking man, who had a wooden leg. He had lost it be-

cause of being gassed in WWI. Children being children, he was known as 'Polly', but not to his face.

Mr. Wills however knew what *his* nickname was and did not seem to mind. He was small and round. He had been Headmaster in Bellfield School before he came to Coalburn.

Mr. Wills was very jocular and a great Burns' devotee. I seem to remember we spent more time reciting Burns and singing Burns' songs, than anything else. However we must have had the normal academic work as we had the usual exams to sit.

The visiting teachers at the school were Mr McPhail, the gym teacher, Miss Agnes Hutchison, the sewing teacher, Miss Amy Lindsay, the cookery teacher, and a woodwork and technical teacher whose name I can't recall. I did not like gym, I hated sewing, I loved cookery, and had no feelings about woodwork. My likes and dislikes are a reflection of my feelings for the teachers of the subject.



At the end of that school year, those who were 14 or 14 plus years of age would leave school and go out into the world and learn to make a living. I was only 13 years of age and would require to return to the school to continue my education. However, Mr Wills arranged an exemption for me because I would be continuing my education at Coatbridge Technical College.

Altogether, I had a very happy time at Coalburn School, but as is usually the case, the things I remember most are the not so happy times. I recall my time there with a great deal of affection. I will always be grateful to the staff of the school because liked or disliked they took time to teach me and to help make me the person I am today. I can only hope they would have been happy with their former pupil.

Betty Bell (née Bryson)

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### **Mr and Mrs Robert Scott**

At present we don't know exactly when Robert Scott came to teach at Coalburn.



Both he and his future wife, Marion (Min) Jeffrey, are in the 1939 staff picture shown on the previous page. Miss Jeffrey had arrived around 1924. So, when Robert Scott and Marion (Min) Jeffrey married in 1945, they had known each other for some time.

Their marriage took place on 23rd July at Abbeygreen Church, Lesmahagow and both were in their late thirties at this time.

Min Jeffrey, 1939

You may have noticed that all the female teachers of whom Betty speaks were 'Misses'. This was no co-incidence: women were required to resign their teaching posts on marriage.

# Helen Scott Walker

## (née Hamilton)

14th June 1932 – 25th September 2025



It was with great sadness that we learnt that the long life of Helen Walker came to an end on the 25th September, when she passed away peacefully at her home in Hamilton at the age of 93.

A long time member of the JHHS of Coalburn, Helen was from a family with a strong pedigree in heritage matters. She was the sister of our late vice-chairman Jim Hamilton, with whom she shared a sunny nature—and a strong family resemblance. Jim Hamilton, in honour of whom the Heritage Society is named, was their cousin.



But Helen has her own place in keeping Coalburn's rich history alive. Not only was she active in researching her family history, and in supporting the JHHS of Coalburn in earlier days, she had also supported Jim Hamilton in his work. In this respect she was an unsung heroine, as son Allan explains:

*She worked quietly in the background with her cousin Jim Hamilton to flesh out the many stories originally published in his Coalburn Chronicles.*

We were touched also to hear what being a member of the JHHS of Coalburn meant to Helen: *Even after she was no longer able to actively take part in the Society, she continued to enjoy me reading the Newsletters to her. I know her connection to the Society was a source of boundless joy for her.*

Helen Walker was a lady who brought joy to those who knew her, and she will be sadly missed.



*- in deepest sympathy -*  
*Coalburn related deaths*

Rosemary Chalmers (Smith, Birkhill)

Fay Frame

Margaret Aitken (Young)

Bernadette Skey

Jean Johnstone (Sykes)

Ian McLaren

Jimmy McMahon

Brian Petty

Jean Thomson (Smith)

Neil Logan

Jim Forrest

Lynn Stewart

Helen Walker (Hamilton)

Moira Corr (Andrews)

Jim (Peem) Hamilton

Ian Watson

Jim Fitt



# Coalburn Mining Landscape Walks

A second Coalburn Route at the Eco-Museum of Mining Landscapes Project is almost complete and should be ready to view on-line—and undertake in person—within the next few weeks. This walk will take you from the One Stop Shop at the Miners' Welfare to Bankend and back, with information on the various points of interest. There is the option to follow the route as street map or as satellite image.



Meanwhile work has started on Coalburn Route III, which will take in old Coalburn, continuing to Shoulderigg and Auchanbeg then back via Bankend.

Coalburn Route I will remain live on-line at: <https://www.mining-landscapes.org/route/44>.

This is the fascinating result of work by Donald Williams of the Jim Hamilton Heritage Society in conjunction with the University of Stirling Department of Environmental History team. Feedback about the routes is welcome.

Visit <https://www.mining-landscapes.org> for more information.



**SCAN TO LAUNCH WALK**

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the pictures on page 4 show **Civic Reception, Hamilton Town Hall, May 15th**

(1) Deputy Provost presentation to Alan Campbell Graham, representing his uncle Alan Campbell, a member of Coalburn Miners' Welfare social club for over 70 years.

(2) Mr Graham with Miners' Welfare Club chairman Gordon Ritchie

Stockbriggs: Revealing Curling History

Preliminary archaeological investigation at the site of the former Stockbriggs curling pond took place on Sunday June 8th under the auspices of 'Field Archaeology for All' (formerly the Association of Certified Field Archaeologists). There were some



intriguing finds, including evidence of clay that could have been used to line the pond. This was grist to the mill for JHHS member Bruce McCowan's theory that Stockbriggs has a strong claim to be the first artificially created curling pond in Scotland, established in 1817 – fully a decade earlier than the commonly accepted first such

pond. It also appears likely that the person responsible for the work was an ancestor, James McCowan, coalmaster at the nearby Auchanbeg coalworks.

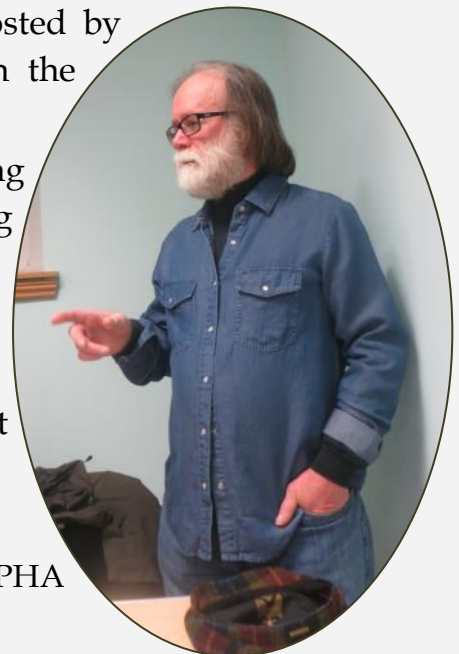
Photographs from June 8th courtesy of Shona MacLean

The investigation happily coincided with a visit to Scotland by Mr McCowan, providing an opportunity for a talk to share his in depth research. This was hosted by Lesmahagow Parish Historical Association (LPHA) on the evening of the following day, June 9th.

Further investigation is proposed, outwith the growing season, and Bruce concluded his talk by highlighting some questions that this might help resolve, including:

- What are the dimensions of the pond bed?
- How deep was the water?
- Does it appear that a special layer of clay was brought in to seal in the water?
- Is there evidence of a curling stone storage shed?

His full presentation is available for download at the LPHA website. Go to: <https://tinyurl.com/ywff5ekv>



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## Dalquandy Community Fund Supports the Jim Hamilton Heritage Society of Coalburn



“Dalquandy decision panel has approved an award of up to £ 4200 for 1 year’s funding for 25/26 toward the Jim Hamilton Heritage Society.

The panel very much appreciate the valuable work of the Society and hard work of all of the volunteers. You have been awarded over the amount asked, to ensure that your work is well supported.”

*Lesmahagow Development Trust, April 9th*

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We are trialling a slightly different format for 2025-26, with Heritage Society matters covered during the first half hour of our afternoon meetings, before going on to the talk or presentation of the day. Evening meetings will be largely devoted to the chosen topic or presentation.

Another change comes thanks to our grant from Dalquandy Community Benefit Fund: we have purchased a zoom pro licence, allowing members from afar to join meetings remotely online.

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### You can contact us by....

email [coalburn.heritage@gmail.com](mailto:coalburn.heritage@gmail.com)

phone 01555 820060 (+ chose option 7)

text & whats app 07905 706622

post on Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/287186251435102>

## *Membership*

£15 for a single adult

£20 for two adults, in the same household

£2 for under 16s

If you’ve not yet paid your membership for 2025-26, here are the details you need:

To pay by on-line transfer, details are: sort code 83-24-38; account number 00205430; account name **Jim Hamilton Heritage Society of Coalburn**. Please provide your name in the box for ‘reference’ so that when our bank statement comes in we can identify whose subscription is being paid.

Payment may also be made by post to our Treasurer, Marion McBain, at 14 Bellfield Road, Coalburn ML11 0LA. Please make cheques payable to: **Jim Hamilton Heritage Society of Coalburn**.

Marion is also the person for new members wishing to join to contact. Please phone 01555 820234 or e-mail [coalburn.heritage@gmail.com](mailto:coalburn.heritage@gmail.com).

*The Jim Hamilton*

## Heritage Society of Coalburn

*Meetings for November to January*

**Wednesday 19th November**

**Coalburn's World War Survivors, including video interviews**

**Coalburn Miners' Welfare Lounge, 1.30 for 2pm**

**Wednesday 3rd December**

**Coalmining at Auchinbeg, Bruce McCowan**

**Coalburn Bowling Club, 7 for 7.15pm**

**Wednesday 7th January**

**Coalburn's Shops, presentation by Donald Williams**

**Coalburn Bowling Club, 7 for 7.15pm**

**Wednesday 21st January**

**The Story of Coalburn Miners' Welfare, 1960 to date**

**Coalburn Miners' Welfare Lounge, 1.30 for 2pm**

## Christmas Dinner 2025

**afternoon of Sunday 14th December**

**at Hollandbush Golf Club**

*Please contact membership secretary Marion*

*McBain if you would like to be there*