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THE KELD LITERARY INSTITUTE

A background note to the life of a mining village

W.J. Craig

The first Congregational chapel established at Keld in Upper Swaledale dated from 1789, the period in the Evangelical movement to which the chapels at Reeth (1783) and Leyburn (1795) belong; but progress was uneven and when the Rev. James Wilkinson was nominated Minister in 1838 he found the building in a state of dilapidation and the congregation disunited. Fortunately, he knew the village and the difficulties which his predecessor had encountered and so entered upon what was to be his life's work with his eyes open. Descriptions written thirty years later, say "*he found Keld with a scattered population almost exclusively employed in the lead mines, while a few had small plots of land as grazing farmers. In general the people had very contracted notions, having never been out of these Dales during their whole lives*" and again "*such things as newspapers and magazines never entered the village; there were only a few useful books in the hands of the people or known to them; and the men, young and old, wasted their evenings in the public-house, or in idling away their time, standing about the corners of the streets.*"

Mr Wilkinson's first care was for his chapel and for the Sunday and day-schools in both of which he taught. But by 1854 he had formed a Mutual Improvement Society and within a few years this had achieved a physical centre and became the Keld Literary Institute. One of the writers already quoted continues:-

"Now young men and old spend their time in the Literary Institute, whose reading table is covered with dailies, weeklies, monthlies and quarterlies; and whose library shelves are filled with books on history, science, philosophy and religion, which are extensively used and studied with pleasure and profit." Mr Wilkinson proceeded to do the same for the neighbouring village of Thwaite; other villages followed suit and there were eventually six Literary Institutes in Swaledale.

The Keld Institute building is dated 1861 but the formal opening is thought to have been in June 1862. Mr Wilkinson died four years later and his biographer found amongst his papers the text of what he read on the occasion of the opening and, happily, decided to print it in full. It runs as follows:-
[1]

"It may not be uninteresting to give a brief account of the Keld Mutual Improvement Society, and the circumstances which have led to the building of a Literary Institute. The whole is the result of a thought, which was this, - How can we expect young men to avoid places of evil resort, unless more suitable places be provided for them? or how

can we expect them to improve their leisure time, without suitable employment? Hence the necessity of a comfortable place of resort, with instructive and profitable employment. The natural reply to such a thought 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? Such a room was provided adjoining the chapel, where I met with twelve young men, on the 18th May, 1854, for the purpose of forming this society. All were invited, rules were drawn up, officers appointed, and rates of charges fixed. This being done, the society set out on the principle of self-reliance. Many who did not understand us looked on, wondering what we were about to do; others, more intelligent, were doubtful of the success of the experiment; so that we had not much hope of encouragement from others; but we felt confident if the number of thirteen members could be kept up, or should it ever be raised to the number of twenty members, the society would be sufficiently strong to sustain itself. Since the commencement of the society, the number of those who have become members is 54. The number of members at present is 34. Our library was commenced by a present of 100 volumes of second-hand books from some kind friends in Leeds. Some three or four contributions of the same kind have been made by friends at a distance, which we were thankful to receive, but the largest portion of the library, which now numbers 361 volumes, has been purchased by the society. The library is a loan library to the members. The reading-room has always been well supplied with newspapers, for which, in part, we are indebted to friends at a distance; to all of whom we ever feel greatly obliged. With respect to our financial affairs, we commenced by paying 2s 6d entrance-fee, and 6d per month subscription, to which we have still kept since the commencement. The society has raised by entrance-fees, subscriptions, the sale of old newspapers &c., the sum total of £65 2s 6½d. But the society has not in this been entirely self-relying: We once had a donation of 2s 6d from a friend. The expenses of the society, including the purchase of books and all incidental expenses have been £62 3s 8½d, which leaves at present a balance of £2 18s 10d. The society at one time borrowed £4, which was paid back, with interest, in twelve months; apart from that, every year's accounts give a balance in favour of the society. Acting on the [2] principle of self-reliance, our plan has always been first to get in money, and then spend it to the best advantage. The society worked on very comfortably where it commenced till the year 1860, when its peace was disturbed by the re-building of the chapel and other causes, in fact, the place had become too strait for us. From the room adjoining the chapel, we removed to the school-room, and tried to make a joint concern with the day-school; but here we did not find the comfort and convenience we had left, and there was little hope of either settling down or making any progress there. We therefore met to consult upon what was best to

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be done, when different plans were proposed, but the strongest feeling was in favour of a new building. The result was to try to purchase an old, useless smithy, and try to raise a new and more useful and ornamental building. Having had a reasonable offer made for the old building, we again met to try to fix upon a plan, and make out an estimate of cost, when we came to the conclusion that we could erect a building, with the use of the old chapel roof, for about £70. Then the question came up, How was the money to be raised? We had just finished our chapel, which had cost more than £300, and all the money was not raised, but, we hoped, soon would be; yet we thought it rather soon to make another appeal to our friends. but we resolved to try, thinking we might find some nook or corner where we had not been to beg for the chapel. The first application was made to Mr James Backhouse, of York, and to Thos. Smith Esq., the lord of the manor. From Mr Backhouse I received an answer, the substance of which was: 'My dear Friend., - By the kindness of interested friends, I shall have £40 for thy reading-room,' &c. To this £5 has since been added. From Thomas Smith, Esq., I received a cheque for £5 5s 0d. Thus encouraged, we decided on our plans and commenced action, and built our Literary Institute, which, instead of £70, has, with other expenses connected., cost £118 1s 6d, towards which £101 5s 7d has been subscribed, leaving a balance remaining of £16 15s 11d. We trust that the building will be a lasting benefit to the neighbourhood, as well as an ornament to our village.

"The society has had to carry on its operations in the face of many difficulties, through the continued and increasing poverty of the lead mines; and, as a consequence., many members have had to leave the neighbourhood to seek employment elsewhere, and others have been prevented joining the society from the same cause; yet the society has worked on in unbroken harmony, making gradual progress.

"We find great comfort, as well as convenience, in our new building, and hope, with better times, to make more progress. It will be a great matter to have our Literary Institute free from debt, that [3] we may carry on our operations without encumbrance. We are very grateful to our many kind friends who have aided us in our undertaking, and hope that many more this day have not only come to the opening of our Institute, but to the finishing of the debt."

In the last summer of Mr Wilkinson's Ministry, 1866, Keld and Thwaite were visited by a Delegation from Leeds undertaking a missionary tour which began at Kirkby Stephen and ended a week later at Leyburn. It is to members of the Delegation that we owe the accounts which have been quoted of Mr Wilkinson's work. He was now over 60 and worn out by his 30 years at Keld; he died that autumn.

Evidence of the hardness of life in the Dales at that time is not hard to find; but the account of the Delegation gives a pleasing glimpse of what a townsman could then take in a day's stride ... they had set out for Keld that morning (it was June 21st) on foot from Kirkby Stephen, but had been met by ponies and a dog cart; on reaching Keld they were hospitably entertained by Mr and Mrs Wilkinson: "*Inspected the chapel, the Sunday and day-school rooms and the Literary Institute Saw the wonderful gorge and the cascades in the river and proceeded to Thwaite where a tea meeting and a public meeting for speeches.. were held. The friends began to take tea at three o'clock pm and finished a little after seven. The meeting for speaking came to a close about nine o'clock, and the Deputation departed to seek rest for their weary limbs at Hawes, in Wensleydale, a distance of six miles long metre. In passing, they had a peep, by moonlight, at the Butter Tubs*"

The life of the Rev. James Wilkinson. is to be found in Waddington, Geo. G. *Historical and Biographical Notices*, 1886. The account of the 1866 Delegation and other particulars are taken from:-

Whitehead, Thomas: *History of the Dales Congregational Churches*, 1930.