

Alderman William (Billy) Kelly (1878-1949)

“Go and see Old Kelly about it.” Such was the advice given in the mid-20th century to Bowburn miners with a problem. That “Old” was pronounced “Ahd”, which was not unlike “Ald” (as in Alderman), was no doubt coincidental. But Ald. Billy Kelly (BK), checkweighman and miners’ lodge secretary, was the archetypical local democratic leader, a Street Corner Society godfather, the Mr. Fix-it of his age. “You would go to him with your complaints”, according to one former Bowburn miner. “He would look at you as if to say, ‘What are you doing here?’ But he would always get things done – even though he probably looked after himself first...”

Ironically, Billy Kelly’s grandfather was brought to Durham from Ireland by that arch-enemy of mining unions, Lord Londonderry. Matthew Kelly (abt 1819-1874) lived on Londonderry’s estate at Mount Stewart, Co. Down, before he arrived in England in about 1846¹ – two years after the first ever universal miners’ strike, throughout Durham and Northumberland, aimed at getting a new bond². Londonderry evicted miners in his Durham colliery villages and imported strike-breakers from his estates in Ireland to replace them; the strike failed. However, although later employed as a miner, Matthew Kelly may have first come as Londonderry’s gamekeeper, which he is believed to have been in Ireland³. BK’s father, also William Kelly (1847-1916), was almost certainly born at Wynyard, Lord Londonerry’s estate in Durham: he was baptised at Wolviston⁴ – when Matthew was described as Labourer.

The family appears to have been Anglican: William snr’s baptism was in St. Peter’s, the parish church at Wolviston, and Alderman Kelly himself was baptised at the parish church at Monkwearmouth (also St. Peter’s). BK twice⁵ married “according to the rites and ceremonies of the Established Church” and was an Anglican all his life. However his brother Matthew married in a Catholic church and his children were baptised Catholics⁶. And his youngest brother, George (who died young), was baptised a Catholic. Family anecdote says they had a cousin, on their mother’s side, who was an active member of the IRA who was killed by the Black and Tans.

William Kelly junior, later Alderman Billy Kelly, was born, on 11th August 1878, in Back Dundas Street, Monkwearmouth, the son of William Kelly and Mary Ann (née Carney, or Kearney). By 1881 he was living with his parents at Kelloe Winning; two years later they were at Swalwell and by 1886 at Felling. They were at Seaham in about 1890 and in 1891 at Oakenshaw. (This information is deduced from the birthplaces of their children, as given in successive censuses.) In short, Billy’s parental family moved frequently when he was young.

As a young adult, Kelly continued this trek. In April 1901, he was boarding with his cousin Mathew, at Lower Beechburn, but he soon moved to South Shields, where he married his

¹ This date is derived from later census entries, which say that Matthew Kelly’s three eldest children were born in Ireland, the third in about 1845, while fourth child, William, was born in Durham in 1847. However MK could, of course, have come earlier, followed by his wife and children later.

² The bond was the annual master-servant contract between coalowners and miners. Lord Londonderry evicted miners in his Durham colliery villages and imported strike-breakers from his estates in Ireland to replace them. The strike failed.

³ Source: Family anecdote.

⁴ His birthplace was given in successive censuses as Wolsington, Wolverston and Wynyard (and once as Scotland!)

⁵ At St. Stephen’s Church, South Shields, on 15th September 1901, and at St. John’s, Brandon, on 14th April 1934.

⁶ At at Our Lady of Victories & St. Thomas R.C. Church, in Easington

first wife, Mary Habbershaw, in 1901⁷. From there they went to Walker and three years later were at Wallsend. In 1906, they lived at Easington Lane and then by 1910 had moved to Shotton Colliery. He was there at the time of the 1911 Census, described as Coal Miner, Stoneman. By 1920, however, he and his family had settled at Sherburn, where he first became established as a union leader and local politician.

In 1929, he was living at 1, Harley Terrace, Sherburn Colliery, when he wrote to the London banner makers, Tutill's, on behalf of the Sherburn House Lodge, D.M.A., to say that they were "quite satisfied" with their new banner⁸. The banner was unfurled on May Day that year by William Whitely (Labour MP for Blaydon from 1922-1931 and 1935-1955). It carried a portrait of William Kelly, Sherburn House's lodge secretary and checkweighman, on one side, and the "Emancipation of Labour" on the other⁹.

Then, in 1932, Kelly became checkweighman at Bowburn Colliery¹⁰ and the following year bought and moved into "Greystones"¹¹, Durham Road West, Bowburn, where he lived till his death in 1949.

His first wife had died in 1932¹² and he re-married in 1934¹³, to Mary Parnaby (née Olley), of Browney Colliery. She was a widow, with five of her eight children still aged less than 20. He had also had eight children, the youngest of whom was still aged 14.

Kelly first became a member of Durham Rural District Council in 1925. He followed this, on 6th March 1928, by being spectacularly elected to Durham County Council, when he displaced the long-standing Moderate Party member, farmer Abraham Wearmouth (who was also a fellow Rural District Councillor) – and "thus deprived the Council of the services of a useful agriculturist", according to that week's Durham Chronicle¹⁴. At that time, while Kelly was Rural District Councillor for the Sherburn Ward, he was representing the much larger Sherburn Division on the County Council. That then included Cassop-cum-Quarrington Parish, which contained the new colliery village of Bowburn. (The colliery houses there began to be built in 1906, the year the new shaft began to be sunk.¹⁵ The first two tubs of coals were drawn on 7th June 1908.)

When he moved to live in Bowburn, Billy Kelly continued to serve as its County Councillor, being re-elected to represent the Sherburn Division on 6th March 1934. His opponent this time was his by now great rival, the under-manager of Bowburn Colliery, John Gladstone Ramsay (Moderate Party – i.e. Conservative), whom he defeated by 1,942 votes to 1,582.¹⁶

⁷ 15th September 1901, at St. Stephen's Church, South Shields, Durham.

⁸ Tutill's catalogue (on National Museum of Labour History's website, p.56.

⁹ N. Emery (1998), p.216, drawing on the Durham Chronicle, 10 May 1929

¹⁰ Durham County Advertiser 4th Nov 1949 p.4 + 11th Nov 1949 + 30th Dec 1932

¹¹ "Greystones" had been built seven years earlier. Kelly bought it on 30th June 1933. (Source: Abstract of Title of "Greystones", 23, Durham Road West, Bowburn. It was so called because it was built of grey stone. However it was clad in red brick in the 1950s, by its next occupants but at the expense of the National Coal Board, because of damage caused by mining subsidence.

¹² 12th January 1932, at Sherburn, Durham.

¹³ On 14th April 1934, at the Parish Church, Brandon, Durham.

¹⁴ Durham Chronicle, 9th Mar 1928

¹⁵ The first sod was cut ceremonially by the writer, explorer and Islamicist, Gertrude Bell, as daughter of the Chairman of Bell Brothers Ltd, Lowtian Bell, on 23rd July 1906.

¹⁶ Durham County Advertiser & Durham Chronicle, 9th March 1934.

Only two weeks later, however, he failed to gain a seat on the Rural District Council in his new ward. At the district election on 27th March 1934, the sitting councillors were both returned. These were his fellow Labour candidate, William H. Luke, of Cassop, who topped the poll with 464 votes, and his rival, J. G. Ramsay (Moderate), who got 413. Kelly came third, with 368. (His eldest son, William Kelly, now aged 33, also failed to capture the Moderate's seat for Labour in the neighbouring Coxhoe Ward, though the other two Labour candidates, in a three-seat ward, retained their seats.)¹⁷

In March 1937, he retained his County Council seat – still in the Sherburn Division and once again against Mr. Wearmouth (by 1,685 votes against 1,305¹⁸) – and, after the boundaries were re-drawn to put Cassop-cum-Quarrington in the Coxhoe Division in 1939, he won that seat and held it till his death in 1949. In the same year, BK also captured Jack Ramsay's seat on the District Council; he held that, too, till he died.

During his time on the County and Rural District Councils, Billy Kelly served as Chairman of Durham Rural District Council; Chairman of the Durham Area Guardians' Committee (in 1932, for instance); Chairman of the County Council's Works Committee (for many years), and Alderman. At the time of his death, he was Chairman of the County Planning Committee and a member of the Rural Food Control Committee.¹⁹

More locally, Kelly had joined Cassop-cum-Quarrington Parish Council in 1934 and two years later he became its Chairman, deposing J. G. Ramsay, who had been a Parish Councillor for over 20 years and Chairman since the first World War. But this rivalry was not confined to local politics.

Kelly moved to Bowburn after he was elected by Bowburn Miners' Lodge²⁰, on 9th September 1932, to be checkweighman at the colliery. He had led in the first three ballot rounds, which reduced the candidates from 18 to two. Then the final choice was between him and John Witham, of Bowburn. Three months later, he was elected Lodge Secretary²¹, in what was evidently a heated contest. For Cuthbert Morley, who had been Lodge President for over a decade, was first re-elected but then stepped down after Kelly's election, giving way to the presidential runner-up, William Allison. The defeated Secretary, Robert Willey junior, had only been in post for six months, having been Assistant Secretary and succeeded his father when he died in mid-year. Both Morley and Willey snr had been among the original miners working at Bowburn Colliery; both were original residents of the new colliery rows, and both Parish Councillors for 20 years or more. (Morley had been Vice-chairman.) It is fair to assume that they were of the "old school".

But Bowburn was changing. The company that sunk the colliery, Bell Bros Ltd, had been absorbed into Dorman Long & Co. Ltd in 1923. Its Tursdale Colliery ceased drawing coal and merged with the now larger Bowburn Colliery in 1931. From employing 397 miners (including surface workers) at the start of World War I, the colliery employed 2,176 in 1935

¹⁷ Durham County Advertiser & Durham Chronicle, 30th March 1934. Cassop-cum-Quarrington Ward at that time returned two councillors; Coxhoe was a three-seat ward.

¹⁸ Durham County Advertiser 12th March 1937

¹⁹ Durham County Advertiser 4th & 11th November 1949.

²⁰ Durham County Advertiser 2nd & 9th September 1932.

²¹ Durham County Advertiser 30th December 1932.

and this was to rise to at least 2,432 by 1958²², by which time six seams of coal were being worked – the largest inland pit in the Durham coalfield.

More and more of this growing workforce were traveling miners, coming from Durham, Gilesgate, Spennymoor, Browney and elsewhere. In 1937, Durham RDC was urged to build more houses, because about 1,000 workers, all householders, were traveling 2 to 8 miles to work; many of these were to Bowburn Colliery²³. Many walked – from Hett, Cornforth, Coxhoe and Shincliffe, for instance. Some used a burgeoning local bus transport system. Many came by bicycle, leaving their machines in the yards of Bowburn residents or at a cycle shed²⁴ near the man-riding (upcast) shaft behind Burn Street. The pressure for more housing at Bowburn was inevitably strong.

Durham Rural District Council's first 36 houses for Bowburn and Tursdale miners were built in 1931 – at Park Hill, on land bought from farmer John Oxley (the son-in-law of one-time Tursdale Colliery manager John Ramsay). A further 59 houses and eight bungalows were built there before World War II intervened, as well as 16 houses at nearby Heugh Hall Row, Old Quarrington, in 1938. The Park Hill estate grew to around 200 houses after the War. By then further council housing was also beginning to be built north of the colliery, on the new "North Bowburn" estate, which was to grow to some 950 council houses by the 1960s.

By 1932, when William Kelly was elected checkweighman, Bowburn's miners were no longer the small community that had been formed round the original colliery, many coming from other Bell Brothers' pits and many knowing each other and related to each other before they arrived. Moreover the miners' lodge was by now undoubtedly more radical than it had been in its early days. The famous Edith Cavell lodge banner, commissioned in 1920 to portray the World War I nurse hero, on one side, and the Liberal MP, miners' agent John Wilson, on the other, survived till 1939. But in that year it was replaced by one with images symbolising "The Brotherhood of Man", on one side, and "The Emancipation of Labour" – with the motto, "Workers of all lands unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains. You have a world to win"²⁵ – on the other. The latter side, it will be noted, was the same as BK had commissioned for Sherburn House Lodge in 1929.

By 1949, when Bill Kelly died, the village itself was being transformed. It was growing to one that had many more council houses, mostly semi-detached, with modern plumbing and gardens, than the original rows of tied colliery houses built in the early 1900s. And its electorate had converted the ward to a Labour stronghold.

Billy Kelly was not solely responsible for this, of course. But he was a key figure in its development and somehow personified the change. By all accounts, he was the

²² Employment figures are from the Durham Mining Museum (www.dmm.org.uk), which draws mostly on the annual Guides to the Coalfields published by the Colliery Guardian. That gives a highest figure on 2,432 in 1957, compared with 2,382 in 1958. Production peaked in 1957, with a record-breaking week's output of 16,387.8 tons in w/e 13/4/57 (Durham County Advertiser 19th September 1958). One ex-Bowburn miner, a normally reliable source, told me that the maximum number of employees was "nearly 3,000", in 1958. While the Colliery Guardian probably did not give maximum numbers, it seems likely that the number of employees peaked at nearer 2,500.

²³ Durham County Advertiser, 5th March 1937.

²⁴ This was owned by the landlord of the Hare & Greyhound, who charged 4d (later 6d) a week. He also did repairs if required. (Source, ex-miner, who traveled from Browney before getting a house in Bowburn.)

²⁵ Emery (1998), "Banners of the Durham Coalfield" says that the motto on this side was just "You have nothing to lose but your chains", referring to Durham County Record Office's D/X411/97. Available photographs are unclear; however it looks as if the motto was the same as the one on a slightly later Tutill pattern-book banner produced for Ramshaw Lodge, which I have quoted above. The motto on the "Brotherhood of Man" side, according to Emery, was "United to obtain the just reward of our labour".

archetypical mining union man. He was highly intelligent, self-taught and very knowledgeable. His parents (and, indeed, at least one of his siblings) only ever signed their names with a cross. With moving around so often as a child, moreover, it is fair to assume that he did not get the best benefit of a formal education, and that this says much about his personal determination. “My father used to speak about him as being a very fair man”, said the son of a fellow lodge official. “He was a respected man by the workers. But he was a really bad tempered man. You didn’t have to cross him, or you were finished.” He was not only strong-willed; he was very effective. “He used to have the under-managers shaking”, one former Bowburn miner told me – and that will presumably have included John Gladstone Ramsay.

Kelly made it his job to know absolutely everything there was to know about Bowburn Colliery. According to the same account, he spent some time as checkweighman, watching the belts, but would spend more time in the union hut – “with his cronies” – and would gather information from every possible source. “For instance, you could say to him that there were 9 inches of rubble in the seam in East Hetton [District] and he would say, ‘No there isn’t. It’s 8 inches’, or whatever.”

He was also secretary of Crowtrees Working Men’s Club, at Bowburn. There he would talk to the men, get information from them and know what their feelings were on various issues. Lodge business and Council business inevitably went hand-in-hand. One of Kelly’s stepsons told me that, every Sunday, Kelly would tell him to “Fetch the dog”, and they would set out to walk, for instance, to Heugh Hall Row (half a mile away, mostly occupied by Bowburn Colliery miners). There they’d walk around, talking to people and collecting complaints which he’d write down in his notebook. “He would then go and sort them out in the Council offices during the following week. The next Sunday, we would do the same, walking to TurSDale [a mile in the other direction], for instance.”²⁶

As lodge secretary, Kelly was remarkably effective. “When they broke through in the Sheeptrack [District]”, I was told, “the management said the rate of pay would only be 11d, instead of 1s 3d. So the men complained to Old Kelly.” He went and saw the manager. He came back and told them they would have to work on the “mini” [i.e. the minimum rate] for five weeks and then it would be reviewed. So they worked slow. There was coal piling up down there which they didn’t lead out. Then, at the end of the five weeks, the rate was reviewed. Kelly went to see the manager again. When he came back, he said they would now be paid the 1s 3d rate... But he told them they’d all have to pay a £2 fine, as well, for going slow. “And that was a lot of money, then!”²⁷

Another time, he discovered that Bowburn Colliery’s Third East Busty Seam had previously belonged to TurSDale Colliery. So yard work prices for cutters, on longwall faces on that seam, should have been governed by a TurSDale agreement made in 1927. However his men were getting Bowburn prices: they were getting 1s 2.5d (6.25p – about £2.16 in today’s money) per ton, instead of 1s. 8d (8.33p). The seam was now being worked by machines, not hewers, so the union accepted a 2d per ton increase (i.e. to 6.875p per ton). And it was back-paid for six weeks. On 9th December 1938²⁸, about 270 Bowburn miners shared a £2,500 back-pay award [about £93,000 in today’s money] – and Kelly was a hero.

²⁶ Source: verbal account, not strictly verbatim.

²⁷ Source: verbal account by former Bowburn miner, not strictly verbatim.

²⁸ Sources: Durham County Advertiser, 2nd December 1938 p.4; DMA record of Urgency Committee meetings 1937–39 [case no. 16]; Copy of Agreement [source unknown]; www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency.

As Councillor, he was equally effective, acting on the smallest detail. When the former miner referred to above was de-mobbed after the War, his parents' home was overcrowded. So he went to see "Old Kelly", who listened to the problem and at the end said, "Come and see me tomorrow and I'll have the keys for a house for you". And sure enough he did: the son went to the Union hut and the keys to his parents' new council house were waiting for him on the table.

He was clearly a man of principle: he was not just looking to win votes. In 1932, for instance, as Chairman of the Durham Area Guardians' Committee, "he gave a strong warning to any who were in receipt of Poor Law relief but did not disclose other income, for instance from the British Legion or from sweepstake winnings. Stringent action would be taken against them, he said. Two offenders, both from Kelloe, were appearing before the Guardians. 'I am hoping to put up for that part of the County for the next County Council election', said Cllr. Kelly, who was currently member for Sherburn. 'But I am told Councillor Kelly is to get no more votes because he stopped the two men getting the money. If I have to get votes by encouraging actions like that I do not want to occupy the seat. So long as I am a member of the County Council, I am prepared to do my duty by everyone concerned.' After a lengthy debate by the Guardians, it was decided not to take legal proceedings."²⁹

Sometimes beggars came to his door. Kelly would tell his [step]children that their mother should offer them a cup of tea, which they would drink in the outhouse, and send them away with a sandwich. "But, if the man was clean in himself, no matter how he was dressed, however ragged, then we should ask him in and offer him to sit down in the kitchen and have something to eat." On one occasion, Kelly had been in Shire Hall, Old Elvet, Durham, for meetings. Afterwards a couple approached him about a man, whom he then brought home; gave him a change of clothes and a meal, and sent him on his way, in the Council's chauffeur-driven car, to Durham railway station.³⁰

But that did not mean that he was above guarding his own interests, too. For example, five acres of land on Park Hill Farm were compulsorily purchased by Durham RDC in 1939, to establish a cemetery. Alderman Kelly objected to this, as it was behind his house, and the plan was dropped. (At first, it was going to become a sports field, instead, which was Kelly's aim. But this did not materialise and part of the land was sold to some one who kept pigs on it – much to the delight of the person who told me this story – and the rest became a Council garage site.³¹

By whatever means, Kelly became quite wealthy, by local standards. He owned three or four houses in Sherburn and left a sizable estate (£5,535 6s 3d [about £130,000 in today's money], according to the National Probate Calendar) when he died. (This compares with the £3,052 11s 4d left by John Gladstone Ramsay, the under-manager.) In 1949, he had two mild heart attacks, which were sufficiently worrying for him to go down to Harley Street, in London, for possible treatment. He was told there was nothing they could do that could not be done in Durham.

Soon afterwards, on 3rd November 1949, Ald. Billy Kelly died at home, "Greystones", from a third attack, aged 71. He left a widow (who lived to 102, only dying in 1992), fourteen surviving children and stepchildren, and several grandchildren.

²⁹ Durham County Advertiser, 18 March 1932.

³⁰ Source: stepson; the story was told to him by his mother.

³¹ Source: verbal account by local resident.

The Durham Advertiser, which had hardly been an ally in the past, commented: “In public life as well as in his position of checkweighman at Bowburn Colliery, he was held in high regard. He was, in the words of one of his friends, ‘a born fighter for the men he represented’.”³²

³² Durham County Advertiser, 18 March 1932.