

Charles Pragnell – a blacksmith's tale

Charles Pragnell began his apprenticeship as a blacksmith in his home village of Lanchester, County Durham, in 1881. In 1891 he was a blacksmith in Old Elvet, Durham, possibly working for Harry Peele, a local vet. He was a widower at this time with one child, Andrew. In 1891 Charles married Mary Ellen Pragnell (nee Stout of Houghall) and they went on to have nine children together, four sons and five daughters, Thomas, Elizabeth, James, Alice, William, Mary, Charles, Daisy and Edith.

The picture below is believed to have been taken in 1910 and shows the forge on the left and the blacksmith's cottage on the right. The cottage was demolished to make way for the Church Room (now Church Hall) in 1923. Closer scrutiny of the sign above the door shows that it bears Charles Pragnell's name. We believe that Charles later sold the business to Harry Peele, or that the latter took on the lease and retained it as a forge (see our piece on the website on Reg Smurthwaite). Two grandsons of Charles Pragnell still live in High Shincliffe, and they have identified the people in the photograph below.



*Fig. 1: (l-r) Thomas Pragnell (aged 17): Charles Pragnell Snr (aged 44): James Pragnell (aged 13)
Mary Pragnell (aged 6): Daisy Pragnell (aged 1): Alice Pragnell (aged 10)*

The World War 1 period

Four of Charles Pragnell's offspring served in WW1. Andrew (Durham Light Infantry), James (Labour Corps), Thomas Henry (Durham Light Infantry), and Elizabeth (Women's Army Auxiliary Corps). In 1911 Andrew had been serving as an apprentice horseshoer at the forge with his father. Thomas Henry had been employed as a stable boy at Moor House, near Shincliffe Station, by William Anderson, a farmer, in the same year. Elizabeth was employed as a general domestic at Moor House at the same time. Prior to enlisting, Thomas Henry had been a horseman on a farm at Kirk Merrington. In 1916 he married Blanch Pragnell (nee Welsh, of Spennymoor).



Fig. 2: Andrew Pragnell

Andrew was wounded (reported the Durham Chronicle of 23/6/1916) while fighting with the DLI. His wife, Lily (nee Teasdale), was living at the time with her father in one of the Aged Miners' homes in Shincliffe Colliery.



Fig. 3: James Pragnell (marked with a cross).

James was severely wounded during the war. He had three children (Violet, Thomas, Irene).



Fig. 4 Thomas Henry Pragnell

Thomas Henry was killed in action on the 31st July 1917, near Klein Zillebecke, on the opening day of the Third Battle of Ypres. He had enlisted on the 10th December 1915, was posted to France on May 5th 1916, and promoted to Corporal in October 1916. He served with the 20th Battalion DLI, 'The Wearsiders'.

On the 31st July torrential rain began falling, and the battlefield had been churned up so badly by Allied artillery bombardment that ditches that had acted as a drainage system were destroyed. Soldiers struggled through heavy, sticky mud that reached up to their waists. Men, horses, tanks and other vehicles literally drowned in the mud. It was almost impossible to manoeuvre artillery into new positions, and aerial reconnaissance was grounded by the poor visibility. The battle lasted over 100 days and in that time the Allies advanced about 5 miles for the loss of over 250,000 soldiers killed, wounded or missing. The Third battle of Ypres, also known as Passchendaele, was synonymous with mud, blood and futility.



Fig. 5 A photograph taken 31st July 1917 during the Battle of Pilckem Ridge: IWM Q 2365

His body was never found, and as such, his memory is commemorated on a plaque at the Menin Gate, Ypres, Belgium, and on Ferryhill War Memorial. After the war, Thomas Henry's family received a letter and the memorial plaque (Death Penny) pictured below from the War Office. This plaque was on display in Quarrington Hill Church with many others until the church was demolished, after which it passed to the Pragnell family.



Fig. 6: The "Death Penny" received by Thomas Henry Pragnell's family



Fig. 7: Elizabeth Pragnell in her WAAC uniform

Elizabeth served with the WAAC and, despite being non-combatants, they often worked close to the front lines and faced dangers from enemy air raids and shelling. She served in Le Havre, Etaples, and Boulogne, and was awarded the General Service Medal and the Victory Medal. Prior to discharge in 1919, Elizabeth contracted influenza, which was a pandemic at the time, and it killed more people worldwide than the war.

During WW1 Charles Pragnell, their father, became a blacksmith with Bell Brothers at Bowburn Colliery. He was certainly there in 1915 and living in 16 Stevenson Street, Bowburn, when he is mentioned in James' war records.

Charles Pragnell in the post-WW1 period

The 1921 census (with the family still in the same property) saw the remaining eight of his children, including Elizabeth, now aged twenty-six, living in the house. She married George Newson in 1926 and lived to the age of 101. Elizabeth is buried in St. Mary's churchyard, as is her sister, Alice, who never married and lived to the age of 96. James went on to be a miner at Bowburn. In 1921 he married Edna Annie Hird who, unusually for the time, was listed as a caretaker at Bowburn School in the census of that year. His brother, William, also followed James to Bowburn Colliery, marrying Annie Ellen Marr in 1928. Charles Pragnell Jr. married Mary Ann Bellis in 1935 and he, like his brothers, was a miner at Bowburn Colliery. Mary Pragnell married Reg Gibson in 1924. Daisy Pragnell married Charles "Charlie" Robinson in 1933. For some years, the couple ran a grocery and newsagent's store in High Shincliffe (now Oak Lea, a private house). Both Daisy and Charlie are buried in St. Mary's churchyard. Finally, Edith, the youngest child, married Stanley Nicholson. In 1939 she could be found living in Grange Cottage, in what is now High Shincliffe.

Charles Pragnell Snr. and his wife Mary Ellen returned to live in Shincliffe Colliery (High Shincliffe) in the 1930s. The photograph below shows Charles and Mary seated outside their cottage at No.3 Love Street, which was part of the Aged Miners' Homes (see Fig 9) in Shincliffe Colliery. Charles Snr. passed away in 1939, aged 72, whilst he and Mary Ellen were living in the Aged Miners' Homes. Mary Ellen remained in the Aged Miners' Homes until they were demolished in the 1950s, whereupon she moved to a bungalow at Margaret Court, Bowburn. She passed away in 1966, aged 93. Both Charles and Mary Ellen are buried in St. Mary's churchyard.



Fig. 8: Charles Snr. and Mary Ellen Pragnell outside their home at No.3 Love Street, Shincliffe Colliery

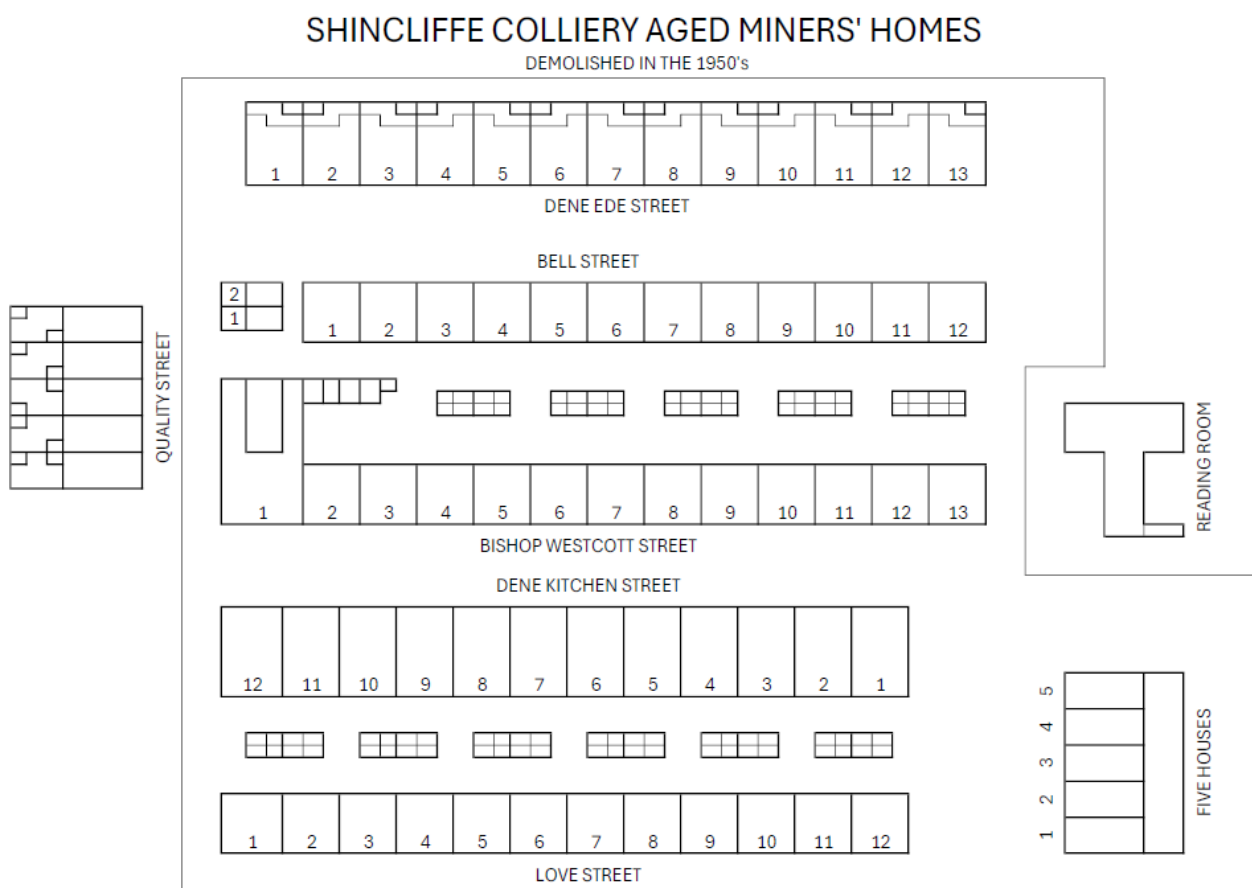


Fig. 9: Shincliffe Colliery Aged Miners' Homes : drawn by SP

John Lightley adequately describes 'The role of Shincliffe in the development of the Aged Miners' Homes' in a Shincliffe Local History Society publication, which was produced in 2016. This publication describes how, when Shincliffe Colliery closed in 1879, the Durham Aged Mineworkers' Homes Association (DAMHA) stepped in and purchased the houses from the successors of Mr. Joseph Love. This acquisition was one of the first such schemes developed by the DAMHA and its importance was recognised by Queen Mary during a visit she made on the 26th November 1913. The Shincliffe Aged Miners' Homes were situated on a rectangle of land south of Quality Street, and east of what is now The Green.

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