

The Smurthwaites – forged in Shincliffe

The picture below (Fig. 1) of Reginald “Reg” Smurthwaite has led us to an exploration of his family, his work colleague, his connections to Shincliffe Grange as well as his grandparents’ role in providing goods and services in the village.

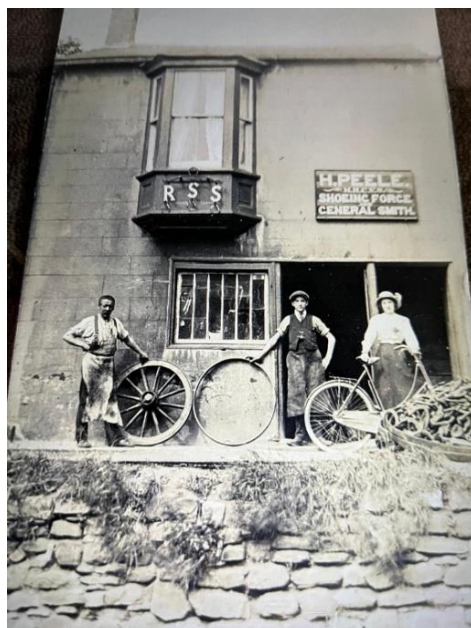


Fig. 1 Reg Smurthwaite is in the middle of the picture, taken somewhere between 1910-15.

Reg’s Shincliffe life

Reg began his working life as a blacksmith at the village forge. The forge itself has been replaced by Forge Cottage and the Church Hall (or Church Room as it was known when it was first built in 1923) stands next to it. Over Reg’s left-hand shoulder is the sign indicating the owner of the forge. It was Harry Peele, a well-known vet in the area whose own father and brother were also vets. Mr Peele lived for a while in Shincliffe Hall in the 1900s. Thanks to the work of Roy Nuttall, and his wife, Margaret, we know a bit more about the forge at this time. Roy was an architect with Durham County Council and bought Forge Cottage in 1966. He and Margaret set about renovating it, keeping a full account of the costs of each item as well as detailing each step undertaken. Below is an extract taken from Roy’s diary.

The ground floor external walls of the cottage are between 18” and 24” thick, whilst the first-floor walls are only 12” thick. Sometime between 1894 and before 1913 the first floor was added, and a separate doorway made to a flat.

We also know from Roy’s meticulous research that “RSS” stood for Registered Shoeing Smith.

We believe the man to Reg’s right is Charles Wesley Featherstone and the young lady is his daughter, Lily Featherstone. The 1921 census shows Charles Featherstone living as a blacksmith in Hallgarth Street, Durham. Reg served in WW1 in the Signal Section of the Royal Engineers. One of his cousins, John Smurthwaite, who lived in Overman Street, was with the 46th Royal Fusiliers.

Reg's post-war life

The 1921 census shows us that Reg was still working as a blacksmith although this time with Thomas Coates, a builder based in Hallgarth Street in Durham. It was a business that originally was located in Claypath and had been around for at least forty years. He had had to seek alternative employment since the Shincliffe forge had been closed by the Church Commissioners in 1920 in order to facilitate the building of the Church Room (now Hall). One of his fellow employees was Charles Featherstone.

Reg lived in Shincliffe Grange with his parents and two siblings, Irene, and Royston, at this time. His father was a railway signalman, presumably at Shincliffe, with the North-Eastern Railway. Gladys, his other sister, had married and was living with her husband in her grandfather's shop in Shincliffe (see below). The family had been living in the Grange for at least forty years. The 1881 census shows us that his grandfather, John Smurthwaite, was living there with his wife, Elizabeth, and ten children. This included John, Reg's father, who would eventually take over the running of the property. In 1871, the family had been living on a farm in Cowpen Bewley, near Hartlepool. John Smurthwaite Sr. was a farm bailiff. A farm bailiff is a person who manages a farm for an owner, overseeing daily operations, supervising workers, and ensuring that the farm is well-maintained. Historically, this role also included responsibilities like collecting rent and taxes from tenant farmers and enforcing the estate owner's rules. In 1923, Reg married Lily Hollingworth who had been born in Goldthorpe, Rotherham. Her father was a miner. Unfortunately for the couple, Reg was to die in 1927. The cause of his death is not known. His wife never remarried, and she died in 1995, aged ninety-five.

Reg's family background

Reg's parents, John and Elizabeth (nee Carss), had married in St. Mary's Church, Shincliffe, on 7th October 1891. Their silver wedding celebrations were announced in The Durham Chronicle on 13th October 1916. Elizabeth Ward Carss had been born in Houghton-le-Spring and in 1871 she was living in Newbottle, County Durham, where her father was an engineer in a steam laundry. 1881 sees the family in Shincliffe, living in Bank Top. The photograph below (Fig 2) shows the probable location of the shop although we have no indication of the people in the picture. Nor is there any clarity to conclude that the shop belonged to Carss at the time the picture was taken.



Fig. 2 The location of John Carss' shop in Bank Top. The Oak Tree pub is on the right. Note the chimney in the background that was part of the Shincliffe Colliery infrastructure.

John Carss – Reg’s maternal grandfather

By 1911, Mr Carss had moved to Prospect Terrace in Shincliffe and opened a shop there. His commitment to his role and serving the community was evident from the 1921 census. He was still working as a shopkeeper at the age of eighty-two. Living with him was his grand-daughter, Gladys, and her husband, Nelson Clark, a miner at Bowburn Colliery.

Mr Carss must have been seen as a respected figure in the village. The Durham Chronicle of 5th May 1916 reported that he had been made foreman of the jury in a distressing case involving the daughter of John and Margaret Hewitt, tenants of The Railway Tavern in Shincliffe. Christopherina Hewitt, just seventeen and a half, had given birth to a baby boy, described as “illegitimate,” in the pub in the previous month. Within ten minutes of the baby’s birth (who had arrived while Nurse Coote had departed to retrieve her instruments and who had insisted on a doctor being called), he was dead. The conclusion reached by the jury – the inquest was held in the Wesleyan Chapel in Shincliffe – was that the premature nature of the baby’s birth had been a factor in the inquest’s decision to return a verdict of death by natural causes.

John Carss died on 2nd May 1924. He left £574 to his daughter, Elizabeth, and this may have been a factor in the Smurthwaite’s’ decision to move to “Nancy Ville” in Shincliffe. With them was their daughter, Irene, who never married.

World War Two

The 1939 Register, taken instead of the 1941 census, shows us that Gladys and Nelson were living in “Moodie’s Cottages” (sic) which is virtually opposite Nancy Ville. Royston, his wife, Elizabeth, and their son, John, were living in Pity Me at this time and Royston served as an Air Raid Warden. Royston was a builder’s joiner (he had also been employed by Thomas Coates in 1921).

We would be interested to know of any descendants of the Smurthwaites. If you have any information, please do not hesitate to contact us at contact@slhs.uk.