

Some Recollections of Life in Edmondsley Co. Durham

My name is John Roddam. I was born in July 1957 at Dryburn Hospital Durham. My parents, Bill and Irene brought me back to live at our two up and two down house in Woodside view Daisy Hill with my big sister Christine. In 1968 we moved to 'The Big Smoke' – Sacriston.

These memories of Edmondsley are what I remember being told by my Dad. There may be inaccuracies, if so, the fault is with my recall. I've tried to keep everything Edmondsley related and have tried hard not to go off at a tangent. The family members mentioned are as follows:-

Old John – Recluse Born 1850?

John William (Wispy) Born approx. 1870. Married to Margaret Turnbull. Died aged 31 of appendicitis.

John (my Grandad) Born 1890. Married Ruth Appleby. Died 1960.

John William (Willie, Billy or Bill) (my Dad) Born 1920. Married Irene Harland. Died 2010.

John – me. Born 1957. Married Hazel White.

The names John and John William alternate down the generations making things a bit confusing but I hope it makes sense.

My Dad, John William Roddam, was 37 when I was born. He was born on June 9th 1920 at No1 Stone Row Edmondsley (where Angel View is now). He used to claim he was 'born in the USA' what he meant was Up Stairs Attic. In later life Dad was known as Bill or Billy but as a child he was usually called Willie. Throughout my childhood, as far back as I can remember, Dad used to tell me stories of his own childhood and youth in Edmondsley and of his time in the RAF during the war. He spent nearly four years in India which left a great impression on him. I don't know why Dad spent so much time telling these stories to me when I was so young, maybe he got the job of doing the goodnight story at bed time and he told me real stuff rather than making up stories, or maybe it was because he was an older Dad and just felt comfortable in doing so. Dad was amazing with names. He knew all the oral history of his extended family, the names and background of everybody in Edmondsley and most of the nearby farms. Sadly I only remember a fraction of what he told me.

Dad (Willie) was the only child of John and Ruth Roddam of 5 Railway Terrace Edmondsley. John (sometimes called Jack) was born in Hunters Terrace Edmondsley and went to work in Edmondsley colliery as a boy, later moving to Craghead colliery. John's own father (John William Roddam – confusing isn't it?) had the nickname Wispy because of his fine fair hair and moustache, sadly he died of a burst appendix aged only 31 when John was only 11 or twelve in 1901. He used to officiate in foot races on the field south of Edmondsley opposite the Fleece. I still have his pocket watch and stopwatch. Consequently John (that's my grandad) spent a lot of his youth with his own grandad who couldn't read or write and young John used to read the paper and any letters to him. There is a family legend here that a letter was received by the grandad (guess what? He was called John Roddam) and read out to him by young John (my Grandad), it was from a firm of lawyers in Canada looking for relatives of someone who had died in Canada leaving a tract of land in the Canadian Rockies. The lawyers were trying to establish relative who might have a claim to the land. The old boy gave young John all the details asked for in the letter and young John wrote a reply on behalf of his grandad. No more was heard... and of course the family tale was that the lawyers had realised the old man was illiterate and had somehow mis- appropriated the inheritance. Another story relating to old John was that he had killed a man in a fair fight at some sort of gathering at Bearpark.

He was never charged but was so badly affected by the death that he never left his house again. I believe that house was in Hunters Terrace too but whether it was the same house that his son Wispy (John William – who died of appendicitis) lived in I'm not sure.

Wispy (John William) married a girl from near Shincliffe called Margaret Turnbull. Margaret had relatives who ran the pub at the bottom of Shincliffe bank – if I remember rightly. They had four children, John (my Grandad – referred to as young John above), Isaac, and two others who died within two weeks of their father. So Margaret buried her husband and two children in a fortnight. A tough lady no doubt, but she had a heart of gold and was a much-loved grandma to my Dad. She lived at no 1 Fleece terrace (next door to The Fleece) and we have a picture of her standing in the front doorway. We have another picture of my Dad (Willie) aged 4 on a little tricycle on the pavement just outside – taken in 1924. My mam and Dad lived-in with Margaret for the first two years of their marriage in 1948 before they could afford their house at Daisy Hill. After Margaret had been widowed she took in washing to help pay the bills and at some stage in later life had a fall and broke her hip. She never had any treatment for it (pre NHS) and it left her with a limp and a great deal of pain for the rest of her life. She is buried in Sacriston cemetery and my Dad's ashes are buried with her. Incidentally, I remember my Dad taking me to the Graveyard of St. Peters church in Sacriston to show me where his Grandad (Wispy, Margaret's husband) was buried. It was a grave right next to the north wall of the church about half way along. Dad said there used to be a glass dome on it with artificial flowers inside but that a slate had come off the church roof and broken it.

So back to young John – my Grandad. Born in about 1900 and lost his Dad aged only 11 or 12. I have only two fleeting memories of him as he died of Parkinsons complications in The County Hospital Durham when I was under four years old. One memory was of him sitting in his pyjamas in a high backed chair in the kitchen of his house in Railway Terrace smiling down at me. The next is of going to see him in The County Hospital with Mam and Dad, approaching his bed halfway along a large old fashioned ward, sitting on his bed and him giving me a drink of Lucozade from a bottle in his bedside locker. Lucozade brings back that memory to this day. I remember he seemed very cheerful.

He started work at Edmondsley pit as a young boy. We have picture of him outside the lamp cabin in a group photo of all the young pit lads with their lamps lit – I still have his. It must have been taken between 1900 and 1910 as he looks to be a teenager. As I've said, he was very attentive to his housebound Grandad (old John). As a kid he used to go to Chester-Le-Street across Waldrige Fell on a pony to collect the village papers. One winter there was deep snow on the fell and at one point the pony refused to budge. It would not be persuaded to go forward so John had to get off and lead it in a roundabout way to get it going again. When the snow melted it was found that there had been a pitfall and a deep hole had opened up which had been covered by the snow and the pony had somehow sensed it.

John and his brother Isaac's wages as young pit lads were no doubt a godsend to his widowed mother Margaret but they must have lived on the very edge of starvation. I think during this time John developed a determination to 'get by' and sense of self dependence that would show up later in life. When the first world war broke out Isaac lied about his age and at just 17 was a Lewis gunner in France. The story told by Dad was that young Isaac was bayoneted in the leg by a German soldier who took pity on his youth and wounded rather than killing him.

John joined the Yorkshire Regiment in 1916. There is something of a mystery here which is yet to be resolved. He never went to France but served in Ireland during the uprising there. I have a leave pass signed by his officer in Dublin, a photograph taken by a photographer in Eniskillen and a couple of anecdotes told to me by my Dad. One story is that although not particularly tall, he was strong as an

ox – through working down the pit no doubt. In their off duty time the soldiers would have piggy back fights where the officers would be carried round on a mans back and try and pull or push each other to the ground. John was never beaten at this so was a big favourite. Another tale was that he wouldn't take orders at face value if he thought they were wrong. He and two mates (The Terrible Three) got into trouble for disobeying an order (I don't know what it was) and were locked up. An officer came to see them and said that as long as they wore the king's uniform they had to follow orders – so they stripped off and sat in their cells in the altogether. I don't know how it was resolved. He told my Dad that fighting the IRA was 'worse than fighting the Germans because at least you knew the Germans were in front of you'. The Terrible Three were Jack Alderson from Horden, Stobert from Gosforth and John. One time all three came to Edmondsley on leave. Stobert had a motorbike and from Edmondsley their next port of call, before going back to their unit, was Stobert's parents who had a shop in Gosforth. There were three of them and only room for two on the bike so they did it by shuttling to and fro all the way. Two would set off on the bike while the other started running. The passenger would get dropped off a few miles up the road and set off running while the bike would go back to find the first runner. He would get on and the two would set off and eventually pass the first passenger running along the road. They would go past him a few miles, drop the passenger off and go back for the runner. And so on all the way from Edmondsley to Gosforth. Unfortunately Grandad couldn't drive the bike so did more than his share of the running. Jack Alderson and grandad kept in touch after their army days. Jumping forward to the second world war...1941 and my Dad was a new recruit in the RAF doing his square bashing in Blackpool which was full of RAF recruits then. He was in a flight of men marching from the football ground at Bloomfield Road, where they had been doing gas mask training with tear gas under the stands, to their headquarters on Lytham Road, when, just as they were marching over the railway bridge a civilian called out to him from the pavement – it was Jack Alderson his Dad's army buddy who was on holiday in Blackpool and had recognised Dad's face among a sea of uniforms. Much to the drill sergeant's annoyance he ran alongside the men and gave Dad his boarding house address. He treated Dad to a slap-up meal that night.

Back to Grandad John: When my parents cleared the house in Railway Terrace we found various bits of ammunition and a Mills Bomb hand grenade which I still have – it is empty and marked on the bottom "DUMMY FOR THROWING PRACTICE" it was my prized possession as a kid. He received a homecoming medal from 'The People of Edmondsley'. The big mystery is that when I went to the Yorkshire Regiment museum in Richmond they said that the Yorkshire Regiment didn't go to Ireland during the first war.

I'd have to check but I think that it was just before he joined the army that he married a girl called Ruth Appleby – (my lovely Nana Roddam). Ruth was from Anfield Plain and was one of thirteen children. One of her brothers was killed on Hill 60 near Arras in the first war. On his return from the army, John went back down the pit either at Edmondsley or Craghead and two years later in 1920 had their only child – my Dad.

John was no stranger to resisting authority and one time he was charged and summonsed to appear at Chester-Le-Street magistrates' court. His crime was one of insolence I suppose. The colliery Manager had been down the pit. The cage was controlled by a cable or wire which ran up and down the shaft from a handle at the bottom to a bell in the winding house. There was a code for instructions to the engine man – a certain number of raps on the bell meant start or hold (hawld!) etc. Use of the bell was obviously strictly controlled and a serious matter. Well John obviously had some grouse with the manager because as the cage with the manager in it was ascending the shaft, John got hold of the handle and rapped hawld! The cage would have come to a screeching stop

leaving the manager trapped in the darkness. Hence the court case and being 'browt up' or brought up before the courts. On the day of the hearing, he was walking to Chester-Le-Street over the fell to appear at the magistrates when the manager's carriage drew up alongside him. The manager was on his way to appear as a witness and actually asked John if he wanted a lift. He declined. I don't know what the fine was but I suspect he was proud to plead guilty.

This was the 1920s and there were years and years of hard times ahead. I needn't go into details here but the early twenties were desperate time for working people in the coalfields of Britain. Honest decent families worked unbelievably hard for six and a half days a week in awful, dangerous conditions only to find themselves penniless and hungry.

John could not tolerate the injustice and in the general strike of 1926 took a leading role in the Edmondsley area. We have a picture of him organising the feeding of Edmondsley children in a 'soup kitchen' somewhere in or near Watson's Buildings in the village.

The strike was broken and the miners went back on worse conditions than before, but not John. Because of his role in the strike he was blacklisted and no colliery would give him work above or below ground. In fact he never had a full time paid job again. He took on all sorts of casual work. Dad remembers taking his bait to him in the fields between Edmondsley and Black House. He had taken a contract to put in electricity poles to supply the new houses at Black House. Being a believer in self improvement he applied for and was given the job as Clerk to Edmondsley Parish Council which he did for many years, I'm not sure of the exact dates. I think he was quite well respected for his principled stance even among the ruling classes which might be why he got the job. He was later 'offered' the option to take over several streets of colliery owned houses in Sacriston (he was dirt poor so couldn't have bought them) but he turned it down because he thought it was somehow corrupt or exploitative. His stance on fairness and justice for the ordinary man had a huge impact on the outlook of his son – my Dad – who spent his life working to improve the lot of others but that's another story.

John I'm sure, despite everything, had an impish and cheeky side to him. He was involved in running pitch and toss schools in secret places on Waldrige Fell and The Five Fields and many a time they had to scatter to avoid police raids. He also ran an illegal 'book' on the horses in Edmondsley with another man. They would take bets on horses in national races and keep a book of who'd bet what. I don't know much about it but apparently if a bookie is looking a bit vulnerable should a certain horse win he 'lays it off' by betting on that horse with another bookie. Well this happened and John sent the other man off to Chester-le-St to lay the bet off. However the other man decided against it and thought they should take the risk. Of course the horse won and they were bust - owing more than they could pay. The other chap made himself scarce but John faced it out and despite having very little income made sure that over time, he paid back every penny owed. At some stage John also took on the job of caretaker of Edmondsley Village Hall – more of that later.

On to John William, Willie, Bill – my Dad. He had a very happy childhood in Edmondsley. Maybe it was because he was an only child but he felt doted upon by his parents and family – especially all the aunts and uncles on his mother Ruth's side! Despite the love of his family, times were very hard and they lived on the bread line. He was fed in the soup kitchen as a six year old but things in the village would only get worse. Dad always had shoes, others from larger families weren't so lucky. Dad went to the school just along the street. It was an old fashioned school with a sloping classroom and tiered desks. There was an iron stove at the front. Discipline was strict and kids including Dad were caned as an everyday occurrence. Though strict, the school taught Dad to read and write (in beautiful copperplate) basic maths and English as well as poetry, history and geography. Not bad for a little

school in a pit village. Now you won't believe this because it's second hand information but Dad told me, and ten years ago before he died he would have told you himself. There were children who walked every day to that school from Black House, a mile away, there and back, bare foot, in winter, IN SNOW. With them those kids would carry a little twist of newspaper prepared by their mothers from what little they had. In the twist of paper would be some cocoa powder and sugar mixed. The idea was that at dinner time they would put the mixture in hot water to make a drink. That was their dinner! No free school meals those days. Of course, well before dinner time the kids would surreptitiously lick their fingers and dip into their mixture so that by dinner time it was gone and they had nothing. Although never in that state Dad once went home to find his mother crying in the house. During the day she had had to spend their last ha'penny and they were literally penniless. I know that incident had a massive impact on him and until the day he died despite being generous to a fault, he was a very cautious man when it came to any hint of financial risk or any risk to the stability or wellbeing of the family.

In happier times Dad played on the fell, down Congburn Woods and in The Mill Wood – where a woman had once been murdered. In the summer men would swim in Littlefair's pond which had once been the water supply for the steam engine at the colliery. Boxing booths would tour the villages and Dad and the other kids would try and sneak in under the canvas of the tents. The trains of cable hauled coal wagons ran up and down from Sacriston and Witton pits – and Edmondsley pit in-between the Fleece and The Colliery inn – up to the Standing Engine on the hill top and then down 'the line' past Ellisons' farm across the fell and on towards the Tyne. No child would leave home without their mother calling "Stay out of the way of the wagons". These railways weren't fenced off and accidents weren't unknown. The coal line from Edmondsley pit ran right behind Railway Terrace (hence the name) and the pit head was very close. I think the pit had ceased production before Dad's time but maybe it was still used to extract coal from other workings because Dad could recall lying in bed hearing the banksman call "bend awaaaay" followed by the bells as the cage was wound up or down. The same banksman suffered a loss when the top of the shaft gave way and tons of earth and timbers fell down the pit. Unfortunately his jacket and waistcoat with his pocket watch inside were hung on a nail on one of those timbers. In a similar vein when coal prices were low, the owners would arbitrarily shut down the colliery to make supply scarce and drive prices back up (of course the miners got no pay during these times and still had families to feed and rent to pay) a man would be sent round the village to let everyone know by giving the dreaded cry "Aaaarl the pit's idle the morn'."

As a very young child Dad was hoisted into the cockpit of a biplane that had force landed on the five fields – a second plane landed upside down in a coal wagon near Witton pit – it (the wagon) was left there for many years afterwards and I remember climbing on it – if it really was the same one. Edmondsley school kids were called out onto the field one memorable day to watch the R100 (or R101) airship pass over. The only motor vehicle in Edmondsley belonged to the doctor although sadly the son of the people who ran the post office was knocked down and killed right outside the shop by a passing car. The doctor Dad remembers most was a Doctor Souter. He was well liked in the village and went on to have a very lucrative practice in Edinburgh. Most people in Edmondsley could never afford to go to a doctor but there were all sorts of local 'Healers' like Wart Charmers, Bone Setters, Mid-Wives, Homeopaths etc. One notable healer in Edmondsley in Dad's time was called Fred Sweeton. Dad's Mam, Ruth, once badly scalded her hand in hot fat. The hand swelled like a boxing glove but old Fred worked his magic and after a time there wasn't even a scar. People talked of being given 'a bottle' when they were poorly, that's to say – some medicine or other.

At 11 Dad left Edmondsley school and went to the big school at Sacriston until he left at 14. He represented both schools at football. I think he had a paper round in Sacriston. He vividly recalled being on the front street at Sacriston early one morning when one-by-one the big shop windows burst and shattered up and down the street. It was caused by a sudden subsidence from Sacriston pit workings. One great bit of excitement in Edmondsley was when the body of a motorcyclist was found on the road just in the dip before Waldrige fell starts. The body was brought back and put in the stable at the side of the Colliery Inn until the coroner could be called next day. Peeping at the dead body proved to be an irresistible attraction for Edmondsley's kids. There was a man in Edmondsley who had a telescope, he would set it up at the crossroads and maintained he could read the time on the church clock at Sherriff Hill. It was also said that you could see the light from St Mary's lighthouse on the coast. The Seamark tree on the corner of Daisy Hill Woods was a well known spot for being able to see the sea but in my experience days when it was visible were very few. Another tale of Edmondsley was that a man built a cart in a hut behind Hunters Terrace but had to demolish the hut to get the finished cart out.

Because everyone in the village underwent the same hardships through the twenties and then the depression of the thirties, there was a tremendous sense of community spirit. If someone made a broth they would send some down the street to another family. People would club together to raise a pig in a back yard and when it was killed it was shared out. Large families were very common, one Edmondsley lady had so many children that at meal times she would put a chalk mark on their back as they were fed so that she knew which ones had eaten. Often one or two children from larger families would be raised by surrogate parents sometimes even taking on the family name.

As a teenager, Dad had privileged access to the billiard table in the village hall because his Dad was caretaker. He developed a good eye for billiards, snooker and later in life pool. His skill once found him playing in a palace, as an invited guest of an Indian Maharaja. Of course, the Maharaja won but that's another story. Dances were held in the village hall and people would come many miles to Edmondsley dances. At one dance Dad's cap went missing from its peg and on going to the gents Dad saw it sticking out of the pocket of a lad standing at the 'trough'. The lad was one of a group from Stanley or South Moor who'd come to the dance and were acting up a bit. Not standing on ceremony Dad thumped the lad and took back his cap. After that a huge fight erupted in the hall, Dad's Dad (John, remember) and some other older chaps took control and one by one the troublemakers were 'dealt with' inside and passed out of the side door and laid along the steep bank by the path until they came to. The only time I can remember being in that hall was for my Grandad's funeral supper - ham and peas pudding of course. Dad and his mates would cycle to either Newcastle or Sunderland (whoever was playing at home) to watch football matches. They would pay a penny to leave their bikes in someone's yard. They would take a pigeon with them and release it with a message to take the half time score back to Edmondsley.

Dad left School at 14 and after a brief spell working in Doggarts in Durham (again, thereby hangs a tale) he was taken on as an apprentice joiner by Bob Bird of Sacriston. He did a seven year apprenticeship during which time he made everything from cartwheels to coffins. Coming out of his time in 1941. When the war started he volunteered as an auxiliary fireman based in the stables at Daisy Hill Co-Op. He was sitting on the toilet there when the Germans dropped an 'Oil Bomb' on the railway viaduct at Chester Moor and the shockwave blew the toilet door frame and all - in on him. While waiting to join up he was employed on bomb repair duty in Sunderland and saw many grim sights. Around this time, late one night he was walking past the crossroads when a man came up to him in the blackout and asked him for directions in a strange accent. Fires and searchlights could be seen in the distance over Newcastle and Sunderland so it must have been quite surreal. Only

afterwards did Dad think it might have been an escaped German prisoner. On another night a German plane dropped a string of parachute flares along the woods between Edmondsley and Witton. The people thought they were German paratroops invading and according to Dad "The women were out in the streets on their knees praying." Being in the fire service Dad was called out to the crash site of a Hurricane fighter at the top of the woods above Holmeside. The plane had gone in under power and there was just a big hole. Dad was given a canvas bucket and told to collect any human remains. All he found that was recognisable was a glove with fingertips still in it and a section of windpipe in a tree. Dad never forgot the pilot's name – If I remember rightly it was Flying Officer Toogood. There were American troops encamped just on the Edmondsley side of the dip before Waldrige Fell – where there was later a small copse of tall trees. One night, Dad and a mate were walking back from Chester-le-St when the mate who was training with the commandos decided to have some fun. He silently crept up and behind the American sentry and vaulted over the barrier. Then he boldly walked out of the camp to join Dad on the road wishing the sentry Goodnight as he went.

Soon Dad was off to join the RAF and to India. He didn't see Edmondsley for four years and had many adventures while away. He and his parents exchanged many lovely letters all through that time. On coming home he met and married Irene Harland from Horden, lived in with Margaret (Wispy's widow) before moving to Daisy Hill and having my big sister Christine then me.

Me and Edmondsley? Well I was never an Edmondsley lad, living as I did in far-away Daisy Hill and going to school in Sacriston.

My nana (Ruth Roddam) still lived there. I can still remember her house at 5 Railway Terrace, her neighbours Uncle Bob and Aunty Sue Hancock on one side and Mr and Mrs Graham on the other. Uncle Bob had been hit by a stray bullet in the first war and had a damaged upper lip which affected his speech and I'm sad to say I was a bit afraid of that even though he was a lovely kind man. Aunty Sue was like another Grandma. Mr and Mrs Grahams son Billy went on to be a very well known active local politician and county councillor. The Grahams moved with my nana into the new bungalows in Rosedale gardens.

As a young child I'd tag along with my big sister and we'd catch bumblebees, in a jar with a bit of sugar in the bottom, on the waste ground to the south of Railway Terrace. We'd play on the rec of course next to the village hall and we'd also play at the west end of Railway Terrace in a little gutter with running water which was the overflow from Littlefairs pond. Apparently my Dad used to do exactly the same thing. I was always interested to go and peer through the windows of Edmondsley school. The windows were low down as I remember, and part of the classroom was below pavement level. There were rows of old fashioned desks in tiers sloping down to the teacher's desk and blackboard at the front. All my Edmondsley playmates went there. There was a little sweet shop in a house half way along Tyzack Street which was handy as it was almost right opposite nana's new bungalow.

I used to attend Sunday school at Edmondsley Methodist chapel in my little Sunday suit with short trousers and a false hanky on a bit of cardboard in the top pocket. The organ in the chapel was powered by a hand pump and a strong lad had to stand at the side and pump a long wooden handle for all he was worth during hymns. I was once walking back home over the hill to Daisy hill when I met my Dads workmate and pal old Billy Maffin. He'd been to The Crown and was a bit tight. He asked me if I was Billy Roddam's lad and when I said yes he shoved a handful of coins into my top jacket pocket then went on his way home down the hill. I think he lived on Braeside with his brother. I can remember not being able to get my hand in my top pocket – it was too narrow, so there at the

top of the hill I took off my jacket and held it upside down to shake out the loot. I was about six. On another occasion I was at the crossroads just opposite the old brick battlemented toilets when a Diamond bus was coming down the hill driven by Dickie the famous driver. A Morris Minor with four old folks in it came right across the crossroads without stopping. Dickie slammed on the brakes and locked up all the bus wheels and the bus went into a straight line skid right next to me. The front of the bus just clipped the back wing of the Moggy which went up onto two wheels before coming back down and coming to rest opposite the Fleece. I had something to tell my Mam that day!

After nana died in about 1966, my own connections with Edmondsley came to an end. As Dad got older he became what he would have called 'an owld standard' and he remained an Edmondsley lad until his dying day in May 2010 just two weeks short of his 90th birthday.

John Roddam 2020