

# The Donnison School

## Heritage and Education Centre



### SPECIAL EDITION MAY 2020



#### **WELCOME** to The Friends of Donnison School

latest updates and newsletter. We hope this edition finds you safe and well under these unprecedented times. Well, it's very strange not having our usual routine at The Donnison School, meeting our friends, volunteers and of course our visitors. However, in these unusual times it is important for us to keep in touch and we are doing this at The Donnison through Zoom meetings, Facebook messenger and regular telephone phone calls to members who are not on line and as always emails. These have been invaluable tools to help us keep in contact with each other and to check how our shielded and more vulnerable volunteers are doing and that they have all they need. We can

only hope that we will be back soon, but encourage you all to be safe and we will see you soon. As many of you are already aware we have had to cancel many of our organised events and activities and like many others we are uncertain when these will resume. This is a blow to a small charity and organisation as many of you know we rely on the fundraising to help keep us going. If you are able to pledge or donate or renew your membership please pop onto the website and show your support for this beautiful building.

A big thank you to all our friends, volunteers and visitors and we will be looking forward to your continued support once this pandemic has passed and we can celebrate together!



<http://www.donnisonschoolheritagecentre.com/membership>



## VE Day Remembered

The Donnison School had been planning to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of VE Day with some special events for all the family. However we didn't want to let this occasion pass without giving a voice to those volunteers and the memories of those who remembered those moments and give us hope for all our futures.

*"I remember VE Day. I was about three years old, living in 66 Hood Street and can vividly remember attending the Street Party to celebrate the end of the war. I wore my favourite dress, sitting on a long wooden form with huge wooden tables in front of us and had my arms wrapped around the lamp post, which was opposite our house. I had never seen so much food in my life as everything had been rationed! I can still remember the warm and friendly atmosphere, we all shared that day. This has always been my first childhood memory and has stayed with me all my life.*



Plymouth Square, Plains Farm Sunderland.

(Audrey Faul)



***"I left school at Christmas 1944 and started work at Doxfords shipyard on the first working day of 1945. My title was 'Shop boy' in the paint shop, where I spent 48 hours a week being told, what to do and when to do it, running errands sweeping up, making 46 cans of tea three time a day, and***



*a million and one other things and this was my lead up to VE Day.*

*I remember it was a Tuesday so I stayed off work and helped to carry tables and trestles from the chapel, to the Barracks ready for the women to set out a feast, of cakes and sandwiches all washed down with pop and other liquids. Flags and bunting were hung around the place, everyone was in high spirits, and so we sang and danced the day away.*

*The rest of the day is a blur through the passage of time, however the feeling of relief and happiness was quite tangible, everyone was laughing and singing, even though we were still on rations, but the blackout was gone, the street lights were on. Our war was over. Hip-hip hooray.”(Jack Curtis.)*

## Women at War.

**Joyce Hopper** one of our members kindly shared this information so we could share it with you as part of our commemoration for VE Day

*“Irene Hopper was a French Polisher for Ditchburns and Jays Furniture Stores until she was ‘directed to do’ “Work of National Importance.” Following time at the Governments Training Centre at Wallsend, she qualified as a Welder.*

*She then worked as a Welder in Sunderland Shipyards and capable of doing both Flat and overhead welding. She was just 5’2” tall and of a slim build, because of her high and weight, she was small enough to be hoisted up into the Hawse hole (the hole where the anchors chain comes through) to weld around it.*

*After the War she returned to French Polishing at Ditchburns until starting a family. She was very proud of her wartime Welding work. In later years she joked to us, her children, saying, “That’s probably why we lost as many ships!”*





# EUROPE REMEMBERS

Connects people, places, and events to mark Europe's liberation from occupation, and reflect on WWII.

**VE Day commemorations** this year will still be celebrated.

Reflecting and remembering can be done in different ways so we've moved our commemorations online.

From 4 – 9 May, **Europe Remembers** will provide opportunities for people, especially younger people, to speak with someone who experienced WWII first-hand.



We'd really like to include people who were in or around England's north east during WWII.

Maybe they were children at the time and remember what their life was like, or perhaps they worked in places like the Sunderland/Wear River shipbuilding yards.

We want to hear their stories because these experiences are sometimes overlooked. Do you know someone who remembers WWII?

Would they be interested in speaking about their memories with young people online?

Contact Dawn O'Connor

at Liberation Route Europe [d.oconnor@liberationroute.com](mailto:d.oconnor@liberationroute.com).

*The Donnison school were contacted by Europe Remembers and have shared information and are hoping that Jack Curtis will be able to take part in the video call. Check out the website: <https://europe remembers.com/>*

If you would like to share any family stories or histories and photographs, we would love to see them and share them with our members. Send them to [info@lhne.co.uk](mailto:info@lhne.co.uk)





# Focus in the times of a Pandemic.

By Pauline Hilton

**I suspect** we have all had more spare time than we ever craved to ponder on this unfolding Pandemic. I certainly have found my mind revisiting the memories of days gone by. From an early age my mother told me stories she had heard from her great grandmother, grandmother and parents. Little did she realise that she was an oral historian, paving the way for her family's history to be retold when she was sadly no longer here. She also left a legacy in the form of her hand written memoirs, which I begged her to write after my fathers' death. I have been meaning to type them up and have them printed for years, so perhaps now is the time. However, for the purpose of this short article, I want to focus on some of the traumas that beset my grandparents and parents in their lives in contrast to the threat we have hanging over us today.



Stanley Herring

My father's parents married in 1913 and were to have 2 daughters and a son. My grandmother saw the loss of her brother Richard in the first battles of WW1 in France and Flanders, reported as missing in action presumed dead on December 19<sup>th</sup> 1914. She saw her husband serve with the Merchant navy during the war years. My father was born in 1917 and Grandma also looked after her eldest daughter and her aged widowed father. The sense of loss and fear of more loss must have been great through those years. She was a proud woman and in post war times refused to accept vouchers for free boots, instead Grandad made rope sandals for his children.

My mother's parents were also enduring the same hardships of war. Henry, my grandfather, enlisted without discussing it with his wife Beatrice and, as my Mam often recounted, he went off to war



Agnes Kaigg Herring

leaving her with two young daughters. He could have stayed home longer as he worked at Hendon Docks, but felt he wanted to 'do his duty'. Grandma Smith was left with the worry of making 'ends meet' as money was short, mam told me that her sister Beatrice was given cheese by Soldiers billeted in the school grounds. How stressful to be constantly wondering whether her husband of 7 years would come home again. Grandad sustained shrapnel wounds, some of the shrapnel remaining in his body for the rest of his life, and was sent home to recover, before eventually returning to France. My mother was born in 1917 and was always thought of as a weak child. Food was short in wartime, anaemia and rickets were fairly rife conditions, but somehow families found a way through. Mam lived until she was 90 years old, the last of her family generation.

Both sets of grandparents would be, towards the end of war, faced with another threat in the guise of 'Spanish Flu'. The timing of this outbreak was cruel,



Beatrice Berry Smith

coming at a time of already great sorrow and hardship. Only now have I begun to realise the stress they must have been under, with this second unseen enemy killing off so many people already weakened by war and rationing. They had no Medical protection or hopes of any cure, instead they just sat it out until the danger passed. It began in January 1918, and by the end of summer 1919, when the pandemic had subsided, a quarter of the British population had been affected and 228,000 people in Britain had died, with a 3<sup>rd</sup> wave to come. It is a miracle my grandparents and parents made it through those years.

When growing up I suppose I took my grandparents for granted, they gave you hugs and cuddles and nice cakes for tea, but never in their lifetime did I realise how much they had



Henry Wittenburg Smith

endured. They never spoke of it and lived their lives taking pleasure in their families and the simple things in life. Stories of their generation deserve to be heard and recorded for posterity, and I hope we can learn something from them which helps us to cope through our own turbulent times.

# Times' is Hard!

By Steve Donkin

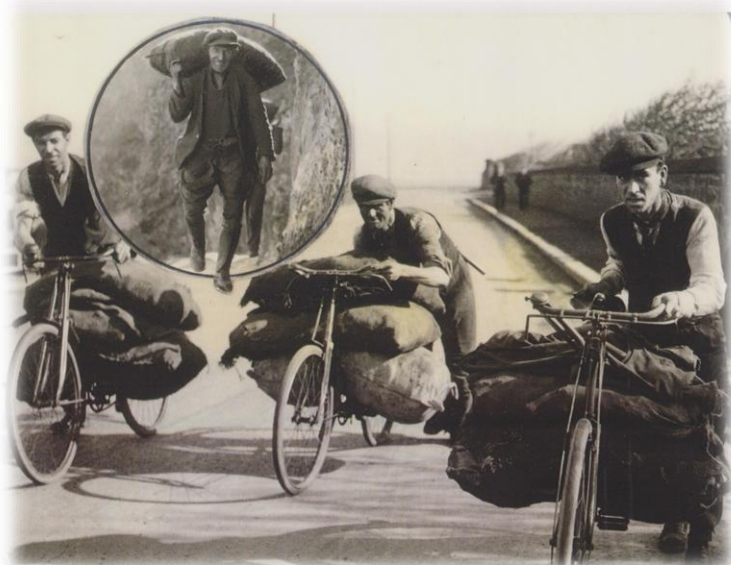
Time's is hard, of that there can be little doubt. With an almost mesmerised and morbid fascination we watch TV each night and await for a further count of those that have succumbed to Covid-19. They could be people we know, acquaintances, friends, family, loved ones.....ourselves? Yes, ***times' is hard!***



But times have been harder, much harder. Adding insult to self inflicted injury, in 1918/19 Spanish Flu became the first pandemic of modern times. The pandemic of 1918/19, over 50 million people died worldwide and a quarter of the British population were affected. The death toll was

228,000 in Britain alone! Global mortality rate is not known, but is estimated to have been between 10% - 20% of those who were infected. Grim! Eleven years after the pandemic, in 1929, a stock market crash in the USA threw the world into a depression; 2.7 million people became unemployed and the North East was hit hard. No work, no insurance, no NHS, no job seekers allowance but means testing. Times was hard.

So, let me introduce you to John Robinson Farrow Donkin, that's him on the right.



Born in 1904 he was the 9th generation of men who could trace, had they had the time, inclination and a lap top, to trace their ancestry back to a Michael Donkin (1675 to 1755) who lived in Houghton le Spring. At the time of the recession he was married to Margaret, nee Avery, Donkin. Two sons Jack, who carried the JRF into a third generation as first born, and Bill. A third son, Robert, died in infancy. Another son Ronald, of who I am particularly fond, came along on the 30th March 1931 and then a daughter Margaret, the last to survive the tight knit Hendon based family.

With a growing family to feed John Robertson Farrow Donkin, like thousands upon thousands of others, needed to graft and graft he did. Despite having only one functioning lung

JRF Donkin, my

Grandfather, along with his brother and another extended family member Bill Golightly, I believe would take their bikes and empty sacks to Hendon beach and collect sea coal. The coal would be bagged and pushed up the hill and back up to



Hendon where it would be sold and the money shared to allow the three men to buy food for their families with perhaps just a little being used for a libation, thirsty work after all.

John was a hard worker; he built his own tool box and worked as a handyman as well doing jobs for a local landlord. The box with all of its tools is still in the family and is used, box tools and all, by one of his great grandsons to this very day.

His lung prevented him doing active service in WW2 but he rose to the rank of Sergeant as a trainer. My Grandfather lived the latter years of his life in Pennywell on Padgate Road in a house with an enormous garden that was just about big enough for another generation of Donkin's to play in. He died in 1975.



# Upcoming Events:

## The Donnison School Heritage and Education Centre

**Bernadette Gibson: Events manager**

**Events Update:** As you know we have had to cancel a number of events due to the current situation. Our programme is still in place and we are waiting like others to see how the lockdown will be lifted and when. We can only hope that we will be able to enjoy our programme of planned events and activities.

**18<sup>th</sup> May 1.30pm - 3.00pm**

**Sunderland Shipbuilders: A walk through Doxford's Shipyard**  
by local historian Jack Curtis



**29<sup>th</sup> June 1.30pm - 3.00pm**

**The Girl with the wind blown hair**

The story of Grace Darling

by local historian Stuart Miller



**27<sup>th</sup> July 1.30pm - 3.00pm**

**Working Women: North East Fishwives**

by Margaret Atkinson



We are keeping up to date with our partners about our scheduled Donnison trips, which I know are very popular and we are hoping to resume as soon as is possible. We are scheduled to visit **The Yorkshire Lavender Farm** in late June, but we will keep you posted as we get the information.

Please keep checking the website

<http://www.donnisonschoolheritagecentre.com/>

Or look on the facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/donnison.school> for current updates.

Please let Alan Cummings know if you would like to be added to our mailing list for mailchimp newsletters. Send to [donnisonschool@gmail.com](mailto:donnisonschool@gmail.com) or give us a ring on 0191 5654835 or 07443653838 to request a newsletter by mail.

## The Donnison School Heritage and Education Centre Today

The Donnison School is, today, a very active heritage and education centre with a full range of annual events and activities that appeal to a wide spectrum of ages, interests and backgrounds. Each year we undertake a variety of projects to bring into focus some aspect of the heritage of Sunderland, it's industry and it's people.

Please support your local heritage and help us to keep this unique heritage centre for future generations.



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