

The History Of Orbiston

Utopia and Orbiston

Utopia for the People - a perfect society in which everyone works well with each other and is happy.

The 19th century saw a great deal of social reform, with the passing of such milestones as the Education Acts, the Mines Act, the Improvements Act, (which helped to modernise housing) and of course, the great social experiments by David Dale and Robert Owen at New Lanark.

Owen was advocating "co-operative villages or townships", where residents would live and work in harmony. He hoped these new villages would provide havens for the poor, to take them away from the manufacturing towns, which were "the abode of vice, crime and misery, while the proposed villages will ever be the abode of abundance, active intelligence, correct conduct and happiness."

He had formulated his plans whilst manager at New Lanark, where, to support the Cotton Mills, he built a model community with quality housing for his workers, a day nursery for pre-school children, a playground, a school, evening classes for adults and a shop which became the catalyst for the co-operative retail movement.

Owen believed passionately that the effects of the environment a person is brought up in formed their character. He was convinced that people were naturally good but were corrupted by the harsh way they were treated and by their dreadful surroundings. He was convinced he could produce rational, good and humane people if he created the right environment. These "co-operative villages" were such environments.

The Practical Society was a co-operative movement set up in Edinburgh in 1821 by Archibald James Hamilton in partnership with fellow social reformer, Abram Combe.

The Society aimed to improve the lives of members and opened a store for the sale of goods to 500 families. A school was established and members were required to sign a pledge to abstain from drink, tobacco and swearing.

At first successful, the Practical Society foundered within a year when the storekeeper appropriated Society funds. Hamilton and Combe proceeded with plans for a grander, co-operative experiment at Orbiston.

Archibald James Hamilton (1793-1834) was the eldest son of General John Hamilton, 11th of Orbiston and 6th of Dalzell. Archibald was an idealist and social reformer, and was chiefly responsible for the establishment of an experimental socialistic community on Orbiston Estate.

In Scotland, in 1825, a group of Robert Owen's followers set up a community that attained the nickname 'Babylon'. The 290 residents occupied a 291 acre site at Orbiston near Glasgow on which was constructed a 5 storey main communal building, school, apartments and communal dining facilities as well as an iron foundry. The community comprised blacksmiths, wheelwrights, joiners, cabinetmakers, printers, painters, shoemakers, weavers, tailors, seamstresses and harness-makers. 75 acres of their land was cultivated with an orchard and vegetable garden and the waste from the community sewage system was used as manure on the land.

Unfortunately after a very successful two years, the founder of the Orbiston community died and there was no satisfactory mechanism or agreement for passing control onto the community. The site was sold to a local landowner (Mrs Douglas) who ordered all trace of the community to be removed. The housing estate now covers part of the site and the community is remembered in street names such as Babylon Rd, Community Rd, Hamilcombe Rd, & Register Avenue.

Orbiston Colliery

The area around the whole of Lanarkshire has always had a strong mining community, and Orbiston also had it's own mine, as can be seen by the Bing at the side of the Church (Footfield Road side).

The history of coal mining in Scotland can travel back as far as the Roman occupation when they needed the coal to heat their houses and baths. We know that the Romans lived in this part of the country as can be seen with the Roman Bath site found in Strathclyde Park.

However, most of the coalmines were started in the 19th century, it was a hard life for the men, women and children but the miners were a strong community and closely connected to their churches.

22 February 1873

Bellshill - Colliery Explosion - A colliery explosion occurred on Saturday at No 1 Pit, Orbiston Colliery, of the Mossend Iron Company, whereby six persons were seriously burned about the head and body and otherwise injured. The names of the persons injured are Robert Crichton, under manager; James Bisset, fireman; Walter Muir, Andrew Muir, David Muir, miners; and Thomas Miller, drawer. The explosion was owing partly to a feeder of fire damp having been ignited, and some time after the fire was extinguished, the six injured persons went into the workings to ascertain if the place was clear, when another explosion of a serious nature followed, causing the injury to the six workmen. The unfortunate workmen were at once attended to by Dr Sloan of Mossend, who was visiting in the neighbourhood of the colliery. [Hamilton Advertiser 1 March 1873]

11 January 1879

Alarming Colliery Accident – On Saturday an accident of an alarming nature took place in No 1 Pit, Orbiston Colliery, belonging to Messrs Neilson & Co, Mossend. It appears that a number of men had been for some time engaged in making excavations on

the ell seam for the reception of an engine. For the protection of the engine and gearing, an arch of bricks, some 16 feet high by 12 feet wide, had to be erected round the seat. On Saturday, the arch being completed, a number of men gathered in the place to take away the centre, which was no sooner removed than the erection came away with great force, burying a number of men in the debris. When assistance was obtained, one of the men, named John Gillies, residing in Muirmadkin, was found dead, his skull having been fractured. Dr Sloan was immediately sent for, and attended to the others injured. Amongst these are Wm Muir, miner, Orbiston, thigh bone broken and otherwise seriously injured internally; Robert Craig, residing in Mossend, seriously injured; David Brown, bricklayers labourer, residing in Motherwell, arm fractured. Two or three others, named Madden, Grant and Jones are slightly injured. [Hamilton Advertiser January 18 1879]

2 June 1892

Bellshill – Fatal Pit Accident – Between the hours of four and five on Thursday afternoon, in the new Orbiston Pit, a very painful accident occurred in which Archibald Girvan, about 26, residing at Paterson's Land, Bellshill, met his death, and John McCafferty, Napier Square, Holytown, was seriously injured. They were driving a stone mine in No 2 Pit and prepared and fired three shots, two of which took effect. Thinking the third had not been lighted, they went to see, when it exploded. Both men were dreadfully injured. They were attended by Drs M'Gown and Thomson. Girvan lived about an hour; he leaves a wife and two children. McCafferty was taken to the Royal Infirmary. His right arm has been fractured at the elbow, and his head and body are seriously injured. [Hamilton Advertiser 4 June 1892]

27 May 1893

A fire broke out on Saturday morning in the workings of No 2 pit, Orbiston Colliery, Bellshill, belonging to Messrs Addie. Three men, while assisting in extinguishing the fire, were overcome by afterdamp and suffocated. By noon the fire was practically mastered [Times May 29 1893]

Fire In A Bellshill Pit - Three Men Suffocated - A most deplorable occurrence happened at an early hour on Saturday-morning in No

1 Pit, Orbiston Colliery, Bellshill, belonging to Summerlee and Mossend Iron and Steel Company, by which three men lost their lives - one of these in the heroic but vain effort to save that of a fellow-workman.

About twelve o'clock on Friday night fire was discovered in the splint coal seam at a part where a pump was at work. There had been a fall of coal and rubbish from the roof and sides, and the supposition is that the friction that ensued generated heat to the extent of setting fire to the surrounding woodwork and coal.

Upon the discovery of the fire seven men were detailed to take steps to extinguish the burning. In their endeavours they stayed too long, and were overcome by the fumes of white damp. This noxious gas would appear to be somewhat rare in mining experience, as some time ago in a discussion in the Mining Institute of Scotland several leading members confessed to 'never having seen it'.

The suggestion is that it is the products of uncompleted combustion. A number of the workmen were able to find their way outside the deadly atmosphere, and to rescue the others. Several men at once volunteered to take part in the hazardous task of penetrating to where the missing men were. In the attempt one of them, William Maddison, wood-setter, Orbiston New Rows, succumbed.

The others who were lost were Peter M'Allister, bottomer, Orbiston Old Rows and John M'Killop, reddsmen, Larkhall. They are all married men. The fire was got under by the middle of the day on Saturday. [Glasgow Herald 29 May 1893]

Sir Matt Busby

Alexander Matthew (Matt) Busby was born in the mining village of Orbiston, near Bellshill, Scotland, on 26th May 1909. The village included only 32 cottages.

Busby's mother, Nellie, was the daughter of Jimmy Greer, who worked down the pit in Orbiston with Matt's father, Alexander Busby.

Educated at St Brides in Bothwell, he went on to play for Manchester City between 1929 and 1936 and then enjoyed three years with Liverpool before serving in the Second World War.

On his return in 1945, he became manager of Manchester United Football Club, a position he held until 1969. Shortly after his arrival, the team won the FA Cup in 1948 and the League Cup. He seemed likely to win the European Cup for the first time for Great Britain in 1958, but his young side, known as the Busby Babes, was partially wiped out in a tragic air crash at Munich airport.

Although seriously injured himself, Busby rebuilt the side until European success eventually came in 1968. After Man Utd he had a short spell as Scotland manager.

Church & Community

Orbiston is a post war housing estate built to the south of Bellshill. It has a population of over 8,000. Many of its residents have spent much of their lives within the area. In recent years there has been a considerable number of new houses built around the old housing. The area is served by two local primary schools, Scared Heart Primary and Lawmuir Primary.

Orbiston Parish Church was opened in March 1954, and met initially in a wooden hut; the church was built a few years later. The hut was finally demolished in 1995 at the same time as a new wing was erected and the building was developed as Orbiston Parish Church & Neighbourhood Centre.

Since its official opening in August 1995 by the Rt. Rev. James Harkness, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and Rt. Rev. John Burns, Vicar General of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Motherwell, the Orbiston Neighbourhood Centre, then with seven employees who spent their early days telling people where we were and what we were doing, has grown to an organisation of staff now employing 23 members of staff and has over 1000 people using the centre each week.

A further extension developed in 1997, it is a multi purpose resource for the whole community, offering a wide range of services and facilities.

Funding for the Centre has been drawn from a wide range of different sources. Among the major contributors have been the Scottish Executive, North Lanarkshire Council, BBC Children in Need, Lankelly Foundation, Tudor Trust, SIP, Lloyds TSB Foundation, The Robertson Trust & Big Lottery Fund.

The Centre is managed by Utheo Ltd., a charitable company. The Board of Directors are drawn from the local community. Membership of the company is open to all who live within the Orbiston area, or have an interest in its future development.

The people employed within Orbiston Neighbourhood Centre, many of whom live locally, are employed in a range of different activities, including Older Person's Project, Out of School Care, Community Café, IT, Arts, Befriending & Youth Work.

Volunteers are of great importance in the work of the Centre. Over 60 members of the local community are already involved on a regular basis. More volunteers are always required. As the range of activities expands, the need for more people to be involved becomes ever more important.

The Centre seeks to be a meeting place where people from many different backgrounds and age groups can come together, learn from one another, and come to enjoy each other's company. It has arisen out of a desire to give practical expression to God's love for every person in our community – 'a place for people, a centre for all'. All are welcome.