THE WHEATLEYS OF HOUGHTON-LE-SPRING
THE SWEET SUCCESS OF A FAMILY
BY PAUL LANAGAN
THE SWEET SUCCESS OF A FAMILY

MUCH OF THE RESEARCH for this article on the Wheatley family was done while consuming a bag of sweets and at the same time watching old black and white flicks. The sweets were of course black bullets and helped to invoke the history of the Wheatleys’ confectionery factories in Houghton-le-Spring; the movies were The Lady Vanishes (1938) and The Stars Look Down (1940), both starring Linden Travers, great-granddaughter of the confection founder, George Wheatley.

A visit to Beamish Museum was also called for and afforded the opportunity of seeing the traditional method of making sweets and candy rock. I was disheartened, however, to see that the modern recreation involved the use of protective gloves, unlike in the days gone by (see photo page 7) where the factory workers’ fingerprints made the sweets truly unique!

It is hard to study any area of Houghton’s history without it being punctuated by a Wheatley. They were a large family and it is not surprising that their history is as equally fascinating as the flavours of the sweets in their numerous shops.

Linden Travers is often described by movie aficionados as being out of synch with the industry, that she was before her time and should have been a bigger star, but it is comforting to know that a light still shines on her name in Houghton-le-Spring for there are two large sumptuously framed photographs of Ms Travers in the new Wetherspoon’s Wild Boar public house.

Paul Lanagan
PAUL LANAGAN
HOUGHTON-LE-SPRING
HERITAGE SOCIETY, 2011
b. 04/03/1862, Montrose
d. 19/10/1863, Montrose

7. Fanny WHEATLEY
b. 23/03/1858, Montrose
m. Peter McCORMACK 01/06/1875.
d. 16/06/1916, Dundee
b. Den Mains Caystlem Dundee

b. 06/01/1869, Dundee
Illegitimate
m. Henry BARTLET in 1889
d. 05/01/1938

11. Sophia WHEATLEY
b. 07/05/1876, Spennymoor
m. John ALCOCK
d. 04/08/1954

b. 09/07/1893, Spennymoor
Lived at 35 Ironside Street with her mother after her father died

b. 09/07/1878, H-L-S or Spennymoor [aged 2 on 1881 census]
b. 14/11/1883, Houghton
d. ??/09/1963, Durham

16. John WHEATLEY
b. circa 1887 [aged 4 on 1891 census]
b. 23/03/1858, Montrose
m. Peter McCORMACK 01/06/1875.
d. 16/06/1916, Dundee
b. Den Mains Caystlem Dundee

b. 04/03/1867, Dundee
d. 23/06/1876, Dundee
Her mother, Jane, died 19 days after her birth!
DECEMBER 11TH 2006 WAS the 100th anniversary of the death of George Wheatley, founder of the Wheatley’s confectionery business in Houghton-le-Spring. George was a Crimean War veteran having fought at the battle of the Alma at the siege of Sevastopol (a port and naval base in the S. Ukraine, in the Crimea, on the Black Sea) for which he had received two medals with clasps. It was here, while aboard the Agamemnon, that his right leg was blown off by a cannon ball – he was only nineteen years old. Sevastopol was captured and destroyed by British, French and Turkish forces during the War, but George was discharged from the Navy, lucky to be alive after his injury.

George established a successful confectionery business in Spennymoor, Durham, but soon relocated to Houghton-le-Spring where he founded the Mill House sweet factory in Houghton’s Market Place. He did not allow his disability to hinder him and his confectionery business prospered. He became known as ‘Sticky’ and there are tales of him using his wooden leg to stir the hot toffee mixture! Another tale states that George would stand in the same spot in his factory, watching over the workers, resting his wooden leg in a worn hole in the floor! The leg can be seen on the right with George’s descendant and fellow confectioner, David Wheatley.

One tale, which is fact, saw George before South Shields Police Court in September 1879; he was fined for selling sweets which had inadvertently been made with yellow leaded paint. An employee had mistakenly added paint which had been intended for painting a cart barrow into the ingredients of a batch of sweets, several of which were purchased by Mr J. J. Hindmarch, sanitary inspector for the borough.

George was married twice and had many children, some of which died in infancy, as was common in families of the Victorian era. His first wife Jane passed away nineteen days after giving birth to their daughter Fanny in August 1867. Six sons and seven daughters survived him.
IT IS WITH REGRET that we have to announce the death of Mr George Wheatley of Houghton-le-Spring at the advanced age of 78 years. The deceased was a man-o’-warsman aboard the Agamemnon. He was a Crimean veteran having fought at the battle of the Alma at the siege of Sebastopol for which he had received two medals with clasps. At the storming of Sebastopol one of his legs [the right] was blown off by a cannon ball, this misfortune occurring at the early age of nineteen. On several occasions he was commanded to appear before the late Queen at Buckingham Palace. After he lost his leg he was discharged from the Navy with a pension. He then tried his fortune in Dundee where he entered the spirit trade, undertaking the management of four public-houses in which he was very successful.

About thirty years ago he crossed the Borders into England, first settling at Spennymoor where he built a large factory and commenced in the confectionery trade. His principal business was by vans which covered a great part of North Durham. As however Spennymoor was not well situated for reaching the larger towns on the Wear and Tyne he removed to Houghton-le-Spring, first taking a wooden building which has been gradually converted into a first-rate factory and is now occupied by his son Robert.

George Wheatley soon began to cultivate a trade in count goods amongst the merchants along the Tyne and Wear and this so increased that he gave up his vans altogether and passed them on to his sons. He regularly visited Newcastle on Tuesdays where up to a few years ago he was a well-known figure on market days. The deceased was twice married and leaves a widow and grown up family of six sons and seven daughters to mourn his loss.

He was buried at the cemetery of Houghton-le-Spring and the funeral was attended by a large following which stretched for about 300 yards. The confectionery trade was represented among others by Mr Sam Adams, Durham, Mr Henry Pringle, Chester-le-Street, and Mr GW Smith, Spennymoor. Mr Wheatley was a quaint character and had a personality all his own and if space permitted many racy anecdotes could be told about him.

One incident of rather a dramatic kind took place in Durham County Court, the writer being a witness on behalf of Mr Wheatley. A well-known doctor in Houghton-le-Spring sued Mr Wheatley for a sum of money owing which was disputed and the case was tried before Judge Maynell in the Durham County Court. After the proceedings had gone so far the doctor’s solicitors retired from the case. The doctor then took upon himself to conduct his own case and was several times pulled up by the Judge for asking offensive questions. At last he told Mr Wheatley that what he was saying was nothing but lies. George at once rose up to his full height in the witness box and throwing open his overcoat displayed to the Court his medals saying in dramatic style whilst pointing to his breast, “Your Honour, would a man who had received these medals be guilty of telling untruths?” Judge Maynell, with a kindly smile he so often wore, replied, “Well, I have no doubt the medals are a good evidence of the parlour you have displayed but I should hardly like to go so far as to say that uncorroborated they are in an evidence of a man’s truthfulness.”
GEORGE WHEATLEY'S CHILDREN ESTABLISHED a host of businesses in Houghton-le-Spring:

:: John Wheatley was licensee of the Jolly Farmers Inn opposite the Mill House sweet factory, which was managed by his younger half-brother, Robert, following George's death in 1906. It appears to have still been a family concern, despite John and Robert being half-siblings, as Robert provided employment to John's sons, Albert and John, at the factory. Between 1913 and 1915 Robert sold the factory to Joe Gibson, former head of Houghton Tramways.

:: John Wheatley had a confectionery shop at 51 Newbottle Street in 1914 and it was owned by the family until 1998. At the time of the shop's closure, it was manned by eighty-four year old widow, Elizabeth Wheatley, who retired in April 1998 after 45 years in the confectionery trade. The premises were empty for many years until it was occupied by LD Bridal and most recently Subway. John also had a confectionery shop at the south-east end of Newbottle Street, in one of the arched shops which backed onto Cox's indoor market.

:: Robert Wheatley Junior had a fruit, vegetable and confectionery shop on the corner of Mautland Street at 41 Newbottle Street between circa 1938 and the 1970s. In later years, the premises were occupied by Grayson & Son, butchers, who had moved out of the indoor market. The shop is now a Peters bakery and cafe.

:: After the 1914-1918 War, George's son William 'Tushy' Wheatley set up a sweet factory in an old Salvation Army Citadel in Pottery Yard. Tushy was joined by his son Alfred in 1922. The firm outgrew the premises and moved to the larger Hawdonside Works, on Sunderland Street at the top of Houghton Cut, in 1947. The firm continued to prosper and Alfred's son, Keith Harvey, joined the ranks in 1958. The business produced over one-hundred lines, including boiled sweets, lollipops, Easter eggs, and large batches of seaside rock for resorts such as Blackpool, Edinburgh and even nearby Seaham! Many photographs exist showing the workers rolling long sticks of mint rock by hand. As always, the firm was a family concern and also provided employment for: Alfred's wife, Maud, in the office; Alfred's cousin, George Wheatley, as manager and chief sugar boiler, and his wife, Vera, who had worked at the factory since leaving school; along with Alice Surtees, a long serving member of staff who was trusted enough to be the sole preparer of fudge using the original Wheatley recipe. The premises were compulsory purchased and demolished when the A690 dual-carriageway was put through the middle of Houghton in 1968.

:: Following the demise of the Hawdonside Works, George's grandsons, Keith Harvey Wheatley and David Ian Wheatley, formed a company called Harvian Foods (based on their middle names) and sold sweets from a property in Pottery Yard. Around 1972, the brothers purchased the Mill House factory back from the Gibson family and were based there until 1987. Before the firm closed, a range of their sweets were photographed by Beamish Museum and included: Tyne mints; sarsaparilla tablets; and black bullets.
1913 – LINDEN TRAVERS WAS BORN Florence Lindon-Travers on May 27th 1913 in Houghton-le-Spring, Co Durham. Her parents were: Florence Wheatley, granddaughter of confectioner George Wheatley; and William Halton Lindon-Travers, a manager of theatres in Tyneside. Linden attended the La Sagesse Convent School, Jesmond, Newcastle upon Tyne.

1933 – Linden made her first stage appearance at Newcastle Playhouse (now known as Northern Stage) at the age of 20. Her paternal grandmother, Alice Travers, passed away in February 1933 and was buried at Jesmond Old Cemetery.

1934 – Linden played the lead in ‘Murder in Mayfair’ at the Glove Theatre in London’s West End. She met a gentleman called Guy Leon, whose sister was in the cast. Linden later married Guy.

1935 – Linden starred in her first movie, ‘Children of the Fog’. Around this time, Linden was the centre of attraction at the Houghton Film Society, which met in a building on Robinson Street, when she made a visit home.

1937 – Linden’s maternal grandfather, Robert Wheatley, passed away in April 1937.

1939 – Linden’s first child, Jennifer Susan Leon, was born in Chelsea in February 1939.

1948 – Linden married James Holman.

1949 – Linden’s second child, Sally Linden Holman, was born. She played the part of Beatriz de Peraza in her last film, ‘Christopher Columbus’, which was released in October 1949. She continued to appear in television plays.

???? – Linden lived at a house called Lorraine, St Ives, Cornwall, where she spent her time as an artist.

1969 – Linden and her sisters, Alice Wilton and Pearl Morant, opened the Travers Gallery in Kensington, London. It was open until 1972.

1974 – Linden’s husband, James Holman, passed away. Linden spent the years afterwards travelling around Asia and Africa.

1980s – Linden studied psychotherapy in the early 1980s and qualified as a hypnotherapist.

1999 – Linden made her last television appearance in a BBC tribute to Alfred Hitchcock, celebrating the centenary of his birth.

2001 – Linden Travers passed away on October 23rd 2001 in Cornwall at the age of 88 years old. Her funeral service took place at St Ives Parish Church.
FILMOGRAPHY & STAGE ROLES

1933  Cynara (stage role, Newcastle upon Tyne)
1934  Murder in Mayfair (stage role)
1935  Children of the Fog
1935/6  Repertory theatre in Birmingham
1936  Wednesday's Luck
1937  Against the Tide
1937  Brief Ecstasy
1937  Double Alibi [short]
1937  London Melody
1937  The Last Adventurers
1938  Almost a Honeymoon
1938  Bank Holiday
1938  The Lady Vanishes [Dir: Alfred Hitchcock]
1938  The Terror
1938  Three on a Week-End
1939  Inspector Hornleigh on Holiday
1940  The Stars Look Down
1941  South American George [with George Formby]
1941  The Ghost Train
1941  The Seventh Survivor
1942  No Orchids for Miss Blandish (stage role, Richmond)
1942  The Missing Million
1943  Ten Little N*ggers (stage role, London), [Writ: Agatha Christie]
1945  Quality Street (stage role
1946  Beware of Pity
1946  Dear Murderer (stage role, tour)
1947  Jassy
1947  Master of Bankdam
1947  My Friend Lester (stage role)
1948  No Orchids for Miss Blandish
1948  Quartet
1948  The Bad Lord Byron
1949  Don't Ever Leave Me
1949  Christopher Columbus
1955  The Big Show (TV)
1955  The Vise (TV series)
1960  Sea Hunt (TV series)
1988  Game, Set and Match (TV)
1999  Reputations (Alfred Hitchcock tribute)
**THE WHEATLEYS OF HOUGHTON-LE-SPRING**

**THIS PAGE IS UNDER CONSTRUCTION**

- **George WHEATLEY**
  - Born: c1850 - c1852, Scotland/Houghton le Spring
  - Died: 15/12/1915, Hillside Cemetery
  - Buried: 19/12/1915
  - Address: 45 Ironside Street

- **Benjamin Arthur WHEATLEY**
  - Married: 26/04/1869
  - Born: c1828, Poole, Dorset
  - Son of William WHEATLEY and Charlotte BARLOW.
  - Died: 15/12/1906, Hillside Cemetery

- **Isaac Alfred WHEATLEY**
  - Married: 26/04/1869
  - Born: c1830 - 1852, Scotland/Houghton le Spring
  - Died: 11/12/1906, Hillside Cemetery

- **Josephine LOWSON**
  - Married: 19/12/1915
  - Born: c1850 - 1852, Scotland/Houghton le Spring
  - Address: 45 Ironside Street

- **Lillian Rose LANE**
  - Married: 19/12/1915
  - Born: c1878 - 1881
  - Died: 11/12/1906, Hillside Cemetery

- **George WHEATLEY**
  - Married: 19/12/1915
  - Born: c1830 - 1852, Scotland/Houghton le Spring
  - Address: 45 Ironside Street

- **Robert WHEATLEY**
  - Married: 10/04/1873
  - Born: 08/04/1873, Dundee
  - Died: 16/04/1937, Hillside Cemetery
  - Took over the Mill House factory, Hillside, when his father died

- **Vera ROBBINS**
  - Married: 1936
  - Born: 1871
  - Died: 11/12/1906, Hillside Cemetery

- **Etta WHEATLEY**
  - Married: 1909
  - Born: 1871
  - See siblings on L. Travers Tree

- **Jane Ann SWALES**
  - Married: 1894
  - Born: 1871
  - 1881 - living at 53 Newbottle St

- **Maud**
  - Married: 1901
  - Born: 1871
  - 1881 – living at 53 Newbottle St

- **Keith Harvey WHEATLEY**
  - Married: 1936
  - Born: 1909
  - See siblings on L. Travers Tree

- **David Ian WHEATLEY**
  - Married: 1936
  - Born: 1909
  - See siblings on L. Travers Tree

- **Sarah Jane WHEATLEY**
  - Married: 1936
  - Born: 1871
  - See siblings on L. Travers Tree

- **Emma WHEATLEY**
  - Married: 1936
  - Born: 1871
  - See siblings on L. Travers Tree

- **Simon Richard WHEATLEY**
  - Married: 1936
  - Born: 1871
  - See siblings on L. Travers Tree

- **HAWDONSIDE WORKS**

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The main Wheatley Family Tree was produced in early 2006 and updated in 2012. The Linden Travers extension was created in 2012 using information from the BMD records, IMDB and various obituaries online, including the Guardian.co.uk and Scotsman.com. The Hawdonside Works extension was created in 2006 with information from confectioner David Wheatley.

Thanks are extended to the following for their contributions:

- The late Keith Wheatley, for meeting with me in the summer of 2005, and his brother David Wheatley, both descendants of George Wheatley’s son, Tushy Wheatley;
- Dr Jack Morley for sharing his memory of meeting Linden Travers in the 1930s at Houghton Film Society, for perusing the censuses for the Wheatleys, and also for clarifying the history of his Uncle Joe Gibson whom purchased the Wheatley’s Mill House factory;
- Barry Wheatley and his father Sydney Wheatley in Australia, descendants of John Wheatley;
- Tia McCombes in Australia, descendant of Josephine Lowson Mackay (nee Wheatley);
- Dot Fenwick, descendant of Mary Jane McCormack (nee Wheatley);
- Bill Graney for memories of rolling the gooey material into hard sticks of Blackpool and Seaham rock;
- Mary Irwin for memories of J.J. Gibson Limited;
- Ray Hayes and the Friends of Jesmond Old Cemetery for information on the Lindon-Travers family grave;
- Linden Travers entry on Wikipedia.org accessed on 01/01/12;
- The Turner Classic Movies Movie Database accessed on 01/01/12;
- Linden Travers entry on IMDB accessed on 01/01/12;
- Linden Travers’ stage roles from the George Formby Society;
- B/W image of Linden Travers and image of Penelope Wilton from Wikipedia.org;
- Image of Bill Travers from www.fatheroflions.org;
- B/W toffee works image from the People’s Collection, Beamish Museum;
- All other images from the Paul Lanagan Collection.

Further information about the burial place of George Wheatley (1833-1906), Crimean War Veteran, can be found on the Houghton Heritage website in the Hillside Cemetery section (quick link: www.houghtonhillsidecemetery.co.uk).
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