KELD POST OFFICE MOVES FROM GROCERY SHOP TO YOUTH HOSTEL

After 58 Years in One Family: Y.H.A. Warden-cum-Postmaster

KELD, Swaledale's western outpost, a cluster of stone-built houses nestling among the dale's mighty fells and far-flung moors was the scene of unusual activity this week.

Telegraph linesmen were busy installing the telephone and other paraphernalia into Keld youth hostel which has now become the village post office, replacing that held by the Wagget family for 58 years.

Mr. R. W. Reynolds, the new postmaster, will, of course, continue with his duties as Y.H.A. warden, a position he has held for three and a half years. A Keighley man, he was formerly a commercial traveller and during the war served in the Middle East with the R.A.F. but a deep interest in the youth hostel movement culminated in his taking over the Keld hostel wardenship.

The hostel accommodates 56, and last Saturday 38 young people stayed there overnight. Mr. Reynolds has found that an increasing number of organised school parties and Boy Scouts are using the hostel and he anticipates a busy season until the end of September. But in addition to looking after his young guests he will fulfil all the requirements of a village postmaster, selling stamps, issuing postal and money orders and transacting savings bank business.

Three Generations

It will be long before Keld people accustom themselves to the new post office, for since 1897 they have gone to Wagget's grocery shop, a few yards across the way from the youth hostel, for their postal and savings bank needs. But on Saturday, Miss Christiana Wagget, representative of the third generation of the family to have the post office, retired from that position in order to concentrate on the grocery business.

She succeeded her father, 73-year-old Mr. James Wagget, on his retirement three years ago and her last duty has been to initiate Mr. Reynolds into the complexities of G.P.O. organisation. Mrs. Reynolds's acceptance of the postmastership has, incidentally solved a difficulty as no one had applied for the vacant position, and for a time it was feared that Keld would be deprived of its post office.

Keld's first postmaster was Miss Wagget's grandfather, Mr. James Wagget, who was appointed in 1897. After his death in 1903 his widow took over the duties. She died in 1912 and her daughter, Miss Dorothy Wagget became postmistress. Resigning in 1939 owing to illness, she was succeeded by her brother, Mr. James Wagget who conducted the office until 1952. A widower since April, 1951, Mr. Wagget feels that the grocery business is a big enough responsibility for his daughter and himself and for that reason has decided to abandon the post office.

Born at Gunnerside, Mr. Wagget came to Keld at the age of five and was educated at the village school under the late Mr. George Fawcett and his first job was as a postman.

Coming of the Telephone

Mr. Wagget told the "Darlington and Stockton Times" that when his father became postmaster in 1897, business was very limited, only stamps and a few postal orders being supplied. In 1901 the money order and savings bank departments were opened, this being a great benefit to the Keld inhabitants as the nearest savings bank was at Hawes, eight miles away. In the same year the telephone service was extended to Keld and telegrams were received and forwarded from the office for the first time. Previously Hawes was the nearest telegraph office and the fee for delivery to Keld was 8s.

For many years, continued Mr. Wagget the postman walked from Keld to Gunnerside to meet the horse-drawn vehicle which brought the mail from Richmond. In 1924, however, a motor-van brought the mail from Richmond to Keld, arriving at 9.30 a.m. every weekday.

Mr. Wagget added that it was not until 1898 that the farms, remote hamlets and Tan Hill, the highest public house in England, had a postal delivery.

He went on to recall an incident during the severe winter of 1947 when heavy snow isolated Tan Hill for three weeks. Fears for the safety of the landlord and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Lew Hamilton, were felt on all sides and Mrs. Hamilton's mother, who lived at Darlington, was particularly anxious. Eventually the Keld postman, Mr. Walter Metcalfe, who in normal circumstances delivered mail to the inn, and Mr. John Herbert Clarkson, the West Stonesdale farmer, volunteered to brave the elements in order to bring relief to the Hamiltons who they imagined to be on the brink of starvation.

After an arduous journey the pair reached Tan Hill only to find Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton fit and well, adequately stocked with food and fuel, but minus artificial lighting. The journey was, however, worth while in that Mr. Clarkson and Postman Metcalfe were able to return with reassuring news about the beleaguered innkeeper and his wife.

Mr. Wagget commented on the big increase in postal business in recent years but steeadfastly refused to reveal the extent to which football pools had contributed to that increase, despite Keld's Nonconformist reputation. Incidentally the village has a Congregational chapel, with a resident minister, and a Methodist chapel. A good average congregation at each place is 25. Anglicans, however, have to go three miles to the nearest church, which is at Muker.



Mr. R. W. Reynolds, warden of Keld youth hostel and Keld's new postmaster.

Church Trustee

Mr. Wagget was for many years treasurer of the Congregational Church and is the sole survivor of the 17 trustees appointed in 1912. He is a teetotaler but he regrets the closure of a few months ago of Keld's only inn, the Catbole, which the brothers James and Albert Alderson, who farm at Stonehouse, Keld, bought for conversion into a private residence.

"I have lived here 50 years," he said, "and have never heard any disturbance or rowdyism in the village. The Catbole was under good management and visitors were always assured of a meal and a bed. It was a great pity it had to be closed."



Mr. James Wagget and his daughter, Miss Christiana Wagget, who have just given up Keld Post Office after it had been in the family for 58 years.