

# Town's old mill days recalled

► **TOM Guy, formerly of Settle, who went on to work as head of art at Leeds Girls High School, has penned this article on his childhood days in Christie's Mill, Settle.**

LAST summer my curiosity drew me to a craft centre near the town of Settle: the signpost read 'Watershed Mill' and the site was close to the River Ribble and close also to the village of Langcliffe.

Towering above the building and near to the gate was a square stone mill chimney, so I knew that I had come to the right place.

The goods for sale were the usual bread-boards, 'hand-woven' this and 'wheel-turned' that, and the place was crowded with people from a row of tourist buses in the car park. But the building had shrunk to almost nothing and where was the engine? Where was Bill Pratt's boiler house?

At the age of 15 I had come to work in what was then known locally as 'Christie's College' or, more accurately, as Hector Christie Ltd's Shed Mill.

As I stood in the car park on that summer day a very different scene from some six decades ago rose before my eyes; gone were the tourists and their buses, the bread-boards and the bed-spreads; I saw a large rectangular building with a ridged glass roof, supported by iron pillars, and with a blue-slate floor. Forty-four long doubling frames filled the available space in two rows leaving narrow alleys between the ends of the frames and the walls and a broader aisle down the centre.

Running the length of the shed, which had no windows, only whitewashed walls, was the main drive shaft with 22 five-foot pulley wheels carrying the long belts which powered the frames. These belts were carried horizontally across the centre aisle and over 'gallus' (gallows) pulleys down to the aisle-end of the frame while the opposite row of frames were driven in a similar manner but, since the shaft was closer to that side of the shed, the belts were shorter. Each frame had two 'sides', each side carrying hundreds of bobbins. A good doubler looked after four sides.

The 'shed' was built at a lower level than the road which passed beside it and all that could be seen from the road was what appeared to be a row of cottages. At road level was the 'canteen' and a large wooden landing; from this area a stairway led down to the heavy sliding door by which one entered the doubling room.

Fifty-five years on, I can still remember the roar of the shed when I first heard that door opened. Speech could not be heard or understood and, until one learned to lip-read, one remained incommunicado.

The 'girls', as the operatives were always called, ranged in age from 16 to 60 and dressed in 'pinnies' with usually a strong sacking apron and pouch for waste. To the hem of this apron was pinned a folded 'wiper' (a sort of dishcloth) just over the right knee. Headscarves or turbans sometimes (but not always) were worn to keep dust out of the hair.

The doubler's task was to keep the frame running smoothly with as few 'ends down' as possible. If a thread broke, or a 'cheese' ran out, the loose end on the bobbin picked up oil and 'fat' from the ring and ruined yards of cotton which had to be removed with the razor-sharp knife which we all carried and sharpened on the sand-stone sink.

When the bobbins were judged to be full the frame was stopped and the 'doffing mis-

triss' (Alma Jeffries) and her helpers appeared.

The full bobbins were removed, being carried to the 'skip' in the 'middle alley', piled up in the bent elbow of the left arm to an incredible height, and neatly dropped into the skip in complete rows.

One of my jobs was to lift the skip on to a small heavy wooden trolley by means of a hooked leather strap and wheel it down the shed to the warehouse weighing scale.

On a strict rota, frames had to be cleaned. The sections of plate were lifted off the frame and carried to the sink under the engine-house gantry. Here with almost boiling water and 'soda-ash' the old fat was cleaned off and the plates with their rings dried with wipers.

Once back on the frame, new travellers were fitted, a finger of fat applied to each, a new bobbin placed on the spindle, the thread passed round it in a special loop and, once all the bobbins were in place, the frame started up again.

The bobbins were kept in large wooden boxes or bins at the end of the shed, one for each different size of bobbin. It was the task of Hilda, the eldest of the Jackson sisters, to clean all the bobbins by removing with her knife the strands of cotton still clinging to them when they returned from the 'High Mill'.

For we at the 'Shed' were not a solitary enterprise; about a mile away, further up the Ribble valley was the larger of the two mills. Built in several storeys and carrying out a number of processes, this was a small outpost of industrial Lancashire deep in the West Riding dales.

The two mills were linked by a narrow canal; not for transport but to provide water for a turbine which acted as a standby in case of breakdown. Transport between the mills was by a flat cart pulled by a horse; our skips of bobbins went to the High Mill for the series of stages which culminated in 'beaming' and the empty skips of bobbins returned.

The horse and cart were in the charge of Bob Sourbutts, who in all weathers wore the horse-man's garb of knee breeches, polished boots and leather gaiters, an old trilby hat firmly on his head. He always carried a whip.

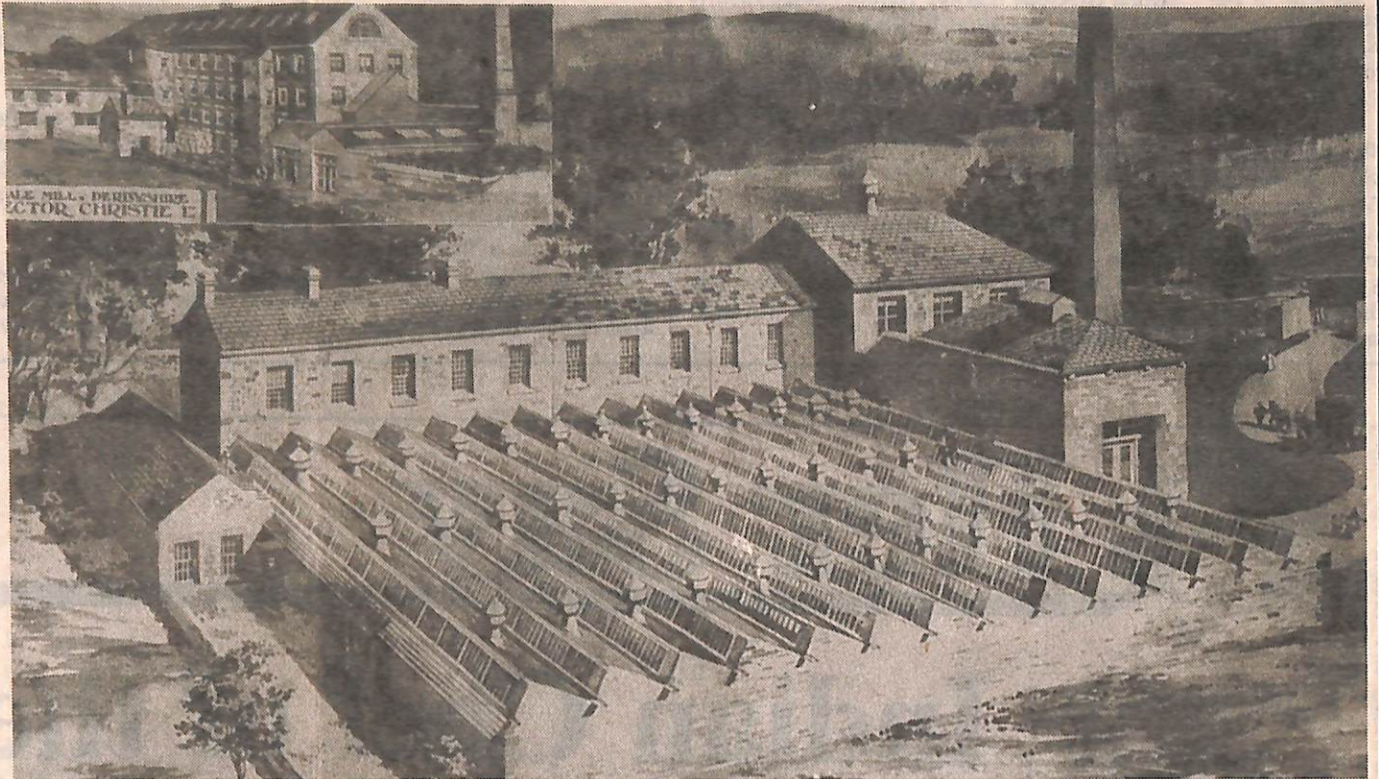
Our transport to and from the real cotton county of Lancashire was by motor lorry. This was in the hands of Tommy Marsden, a cheerful character with more than a touch of the cotton county in his speech.

He was a great cricket follower (the word 'fan' was to come much later, derived from 'film fan') as all the men were.

The men on the staff were vastly outnumbered by the women and girls. The overlookers: small, round Gordon Cardus, thin sad-looking Edgar Herrington, Nobby and Laurence Batten; the engine driver, Jim Bradley; the boiler fireman, Billy Pratt; the manager, Alec Wilcock; together with two or three lads like myself, roller lifters and doffers, were the only males.

My day began when waiting for Dicky Lamb's bus in Knowles's shop doorway at Clapham with my mother at seven in the morning. The bus, driven by Frank Wharton, started from Ingleton and picked up workers all along the route from Ingleton to Settle. Work began at 7.30 and went on until 5.

'Next door' to the Doubling room was the winding room.



Christie's Mill in Settle is pictured above from an old print with the firm's other mill, in Derbyshire, in the top left hand corner. Pictured right is an unknown woman worker from the mill. Does anyone know her identity? Pictures courtesy of Watershed Mill, Settle.

This always seemed to me a much more refined establishment than our more robust, cheerful shed. The machines were much less noisy than the doubling frames and one could actually hear fairly normally pitched speech.

Not that I often visited this more rarefied atmosphere — I had little occasion to do so but when I did I was struck by the decorum of it all. Prim little ladies produced our 'cheeses' while keeping themselves very much to themselves.

The 'cheeses' were wound from paper 'cops' or tubes on to a wooden endless bobbin about the size of a wax candle but hollow down the centre. When full they were large, soft, white objects about 8 inches across and unsupported by ends.

The cheeses were collected in hide-lined trolleys so as not to snag the vulnerable, soft texture of the cheeses; two people were busy all the time distributing them to the correct frames. Lawrence and Mabel piled the cheeses horizontally on the shelf which ran along the top of the frame and which we called the 'creel'. The doubler then used them for replacements as those on the frame ran out.

Occasionally one of the long driving belts would snap and crack like a whiplash across the shed sending cheeses and the

doublers' drinking mugs in all directions.

Dust would fly from where it had been lodged on the pipes of the primitive extraction system and for a few minutes, chaos reigned. The belt had then to be measured by laying it out down the middle alley and any broken pieces arranged at the ends so as to reproduce the original length.

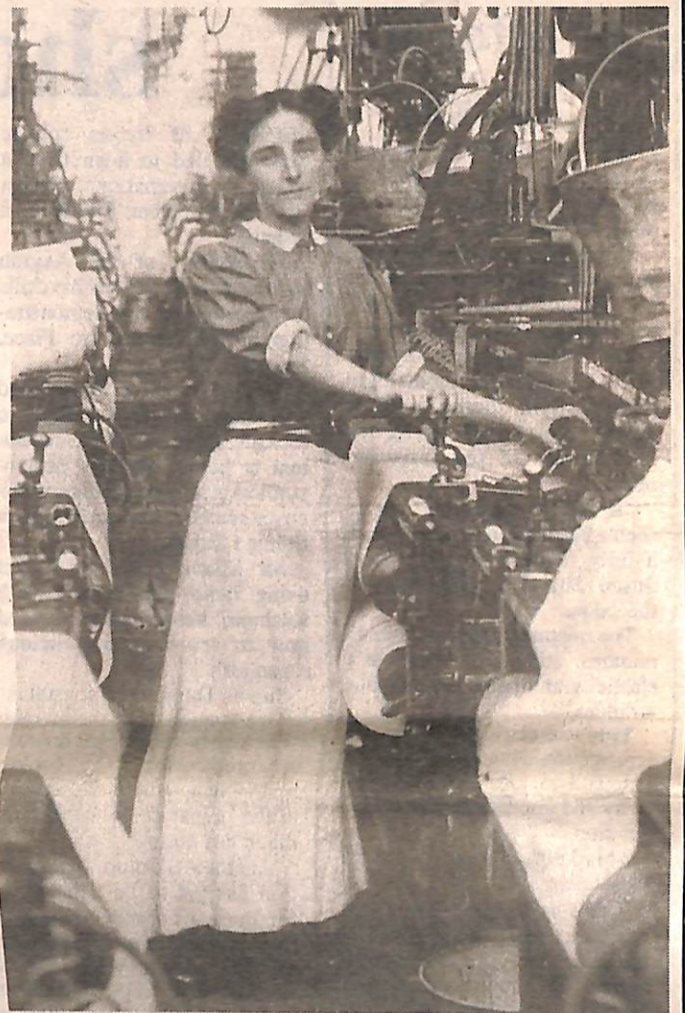
Work in those days began at 7.30 and went on until 5.30pm. We had one hour for dinner time and tea and biscuits half way through each morning and afternoon; this was brought round the mill on a trolley and 10 minutes was the time allowed.

In winter we only saw daylight at dinner time as the roof glass was blacked out for the duration of the war.

In summer the heat was terrific but it was warm all year round because the cotton broke less frequently in warm, damp conditions.

Almost the whole of the complex of buildings has now vanished along with the way of life they supported. Conditions, by today's standards, were primitive, the hours long, the wages derisory. I can honestly say, however, that I enjoyed working at Christie's!

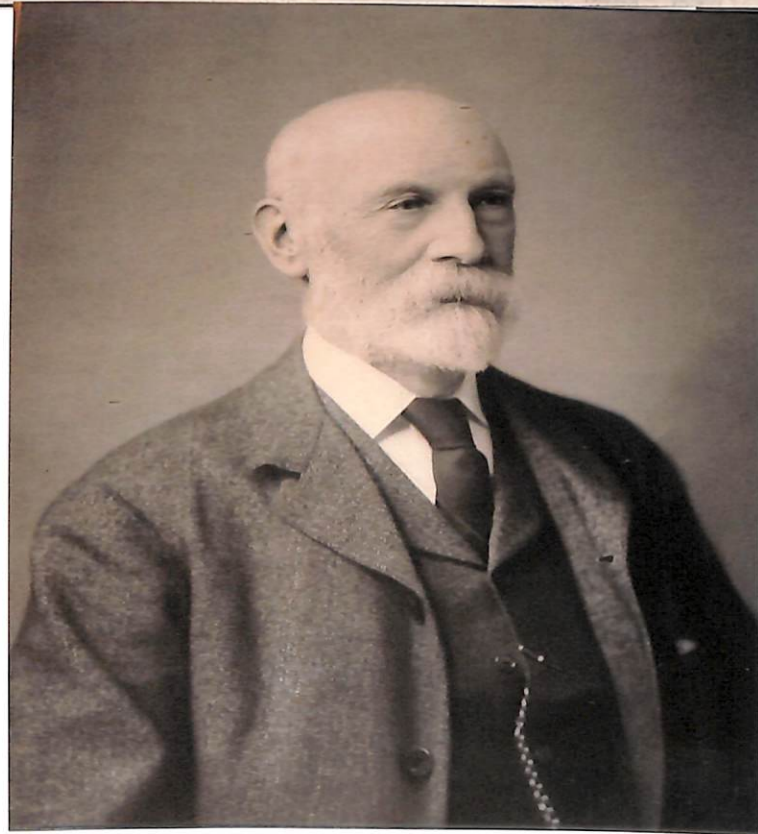
There was a cheerful atmosphere amongst us which it is a pleasure to recall over the years. In my mind's eye I can walk



again down the 'middle alley' and remember which of the 'girls' looked after each of the four sides. Dorothy Hird, Dolly Bulloch, Eileen Marshall, May Jackson, Florrie Maunders,

Sheila Maunders, Doris Moorby, Hilda Brayshaw, Celia Jackson, Mabel Baines and many more.

Where are you now, I wonder?



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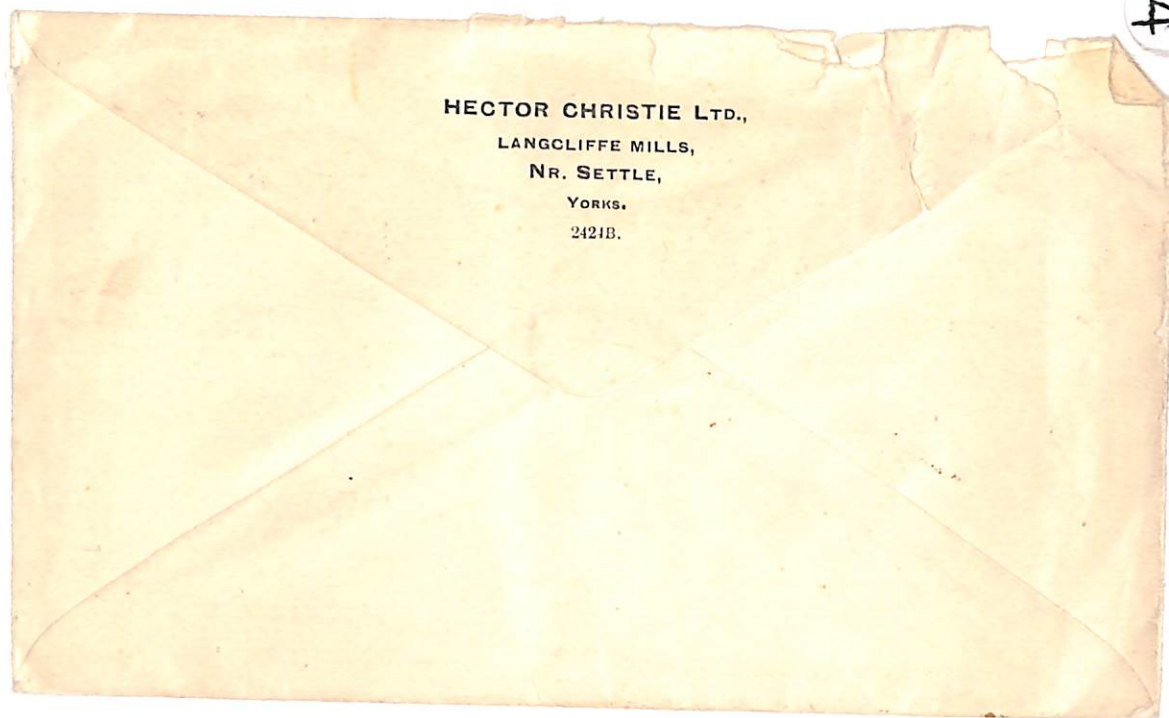
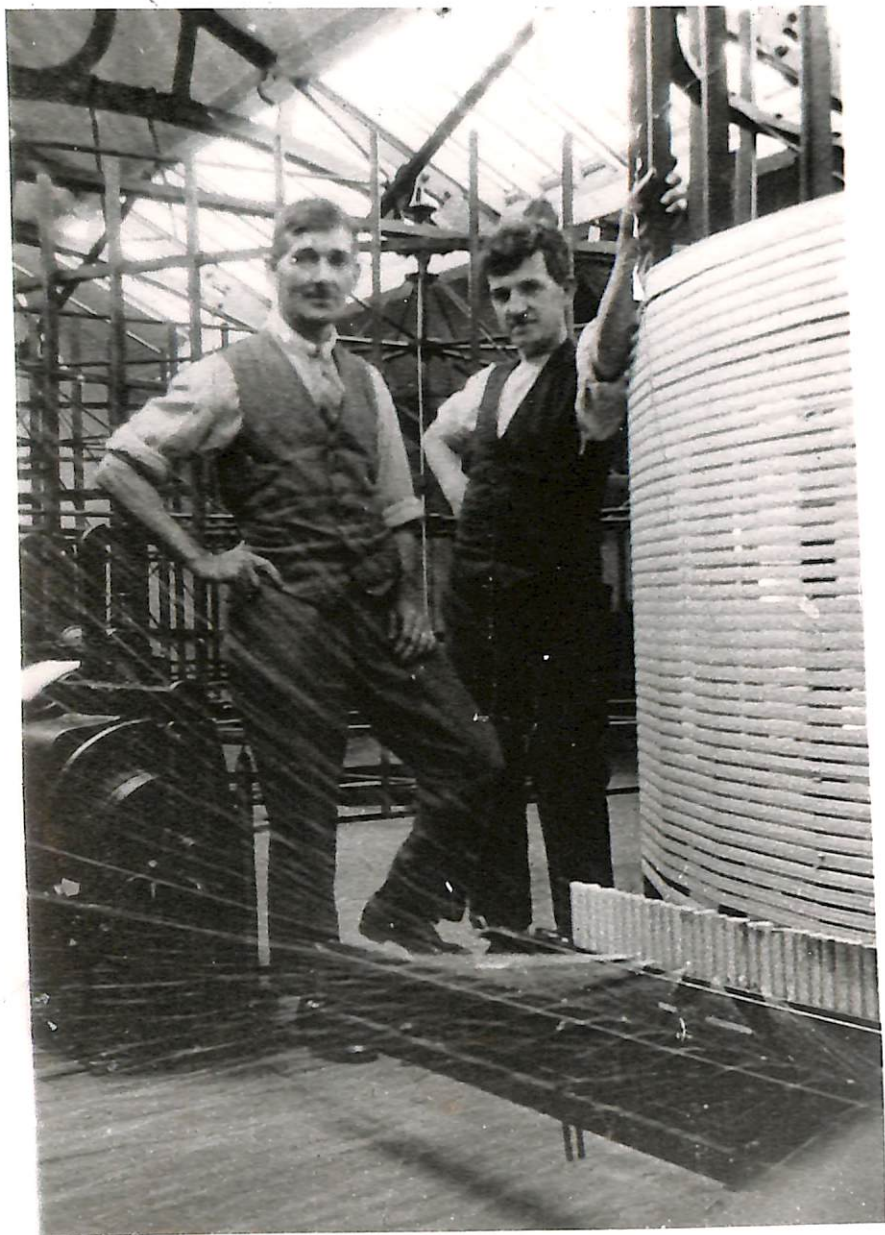
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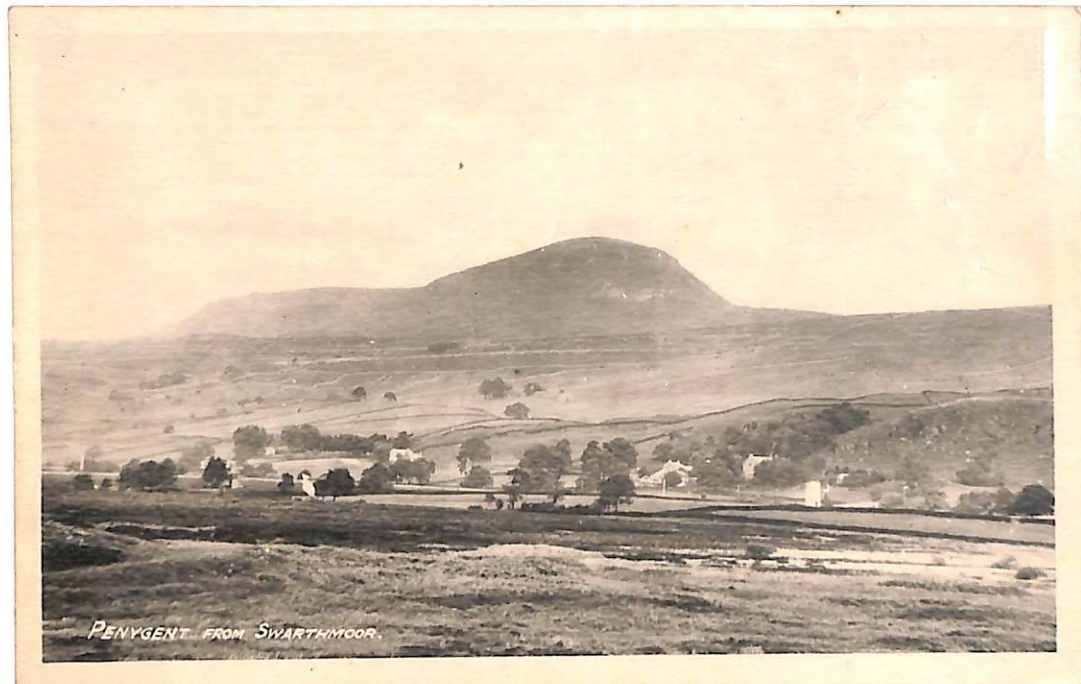
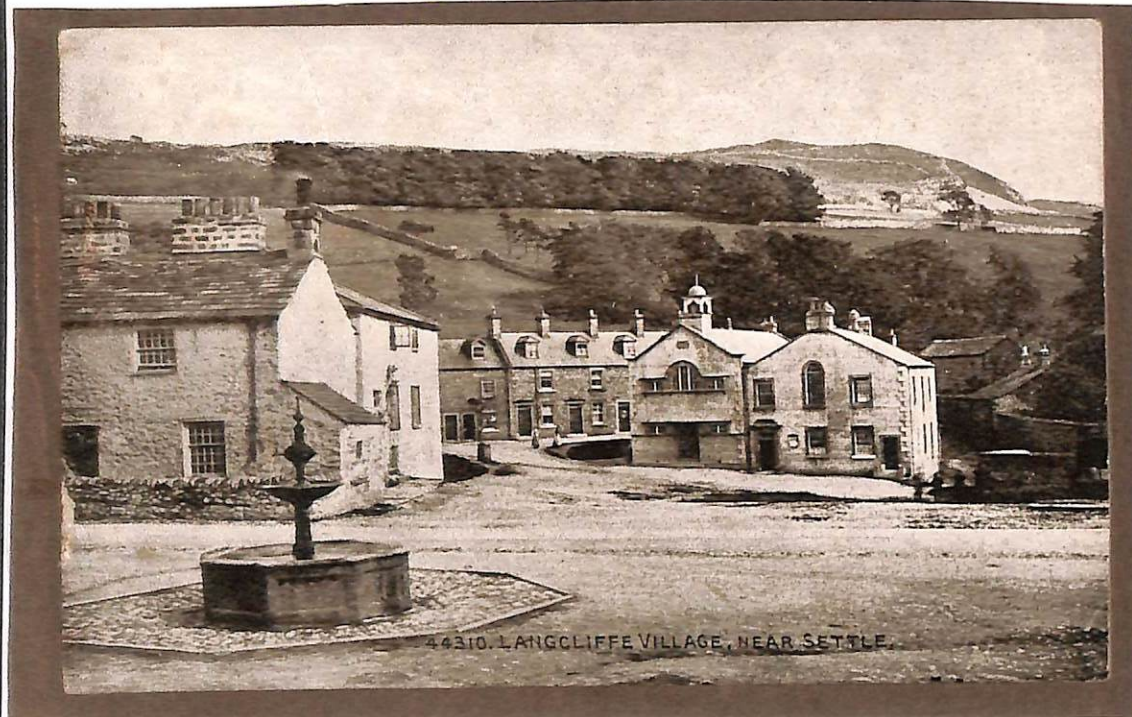
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