

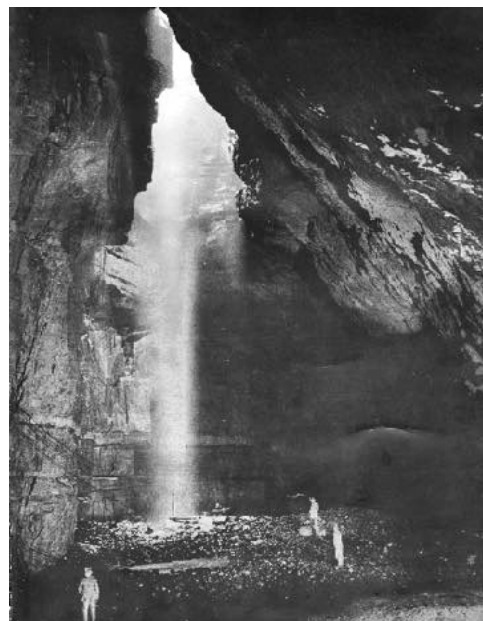
Eli Simpson, one of a kind

Without doubt, **Eli Simpson** is one of our graveyard's most notable burials, and what a character he was. A charismatic genius with vision and drive, but, unfortunately lacking the awareness and communication skills to completely fulfil his dreams, even destroying some of his best work. However, Wikipedia summarised that Eli was '*an influential and controversial British caver and speleologist, and a founding member and Recorder of the British Speleological Association.*' It could be argued that he did more to advance the study of caving in the UK than anyone else in history. Speleology is the study or exploration of caves. The internet provides numerous sources to demonstrate his achievements and career. Caving websites record his nickname as 'Cymmie' but surely this is a simplified version of Simpson so Bill Mitchell's preference of 'Simmy' makes more sense? To avoid confusion, we'll just call him Eli! Eli demonstrated many characteristics which are now commonly associated with autism, in particular Asperger Syndrome, often found in eccentric geniuses.



Cymmie (1884—1962)

Eli [ph1] was born in Ossett, between Dewsbury and Wakefield, in 1884. The son of a successful woollen merchant, Eli began his working life as an electrical engineer's clerk, later working as a clerk for his father in the mill, in Hunslet, Leeds. His interest in exploratory caving had begun as a 17 year old, in the Yorkshire Dales by 1901. To accompany his explorations Eli's life long passion was to accurately map and photograph his findings, and the discoveries of others. He became the greatest collector of cave information and award winning photos in England, especially relating to Gaping Gill [ph5]. He had meticulous standards and, unfortunately, this caused numerous problems and made him quite unpopular with fellow cavers.



Eli caved with *Craven Pothole Club* and the *Yorkshire Ramblers' Club* but disagreed with the YRC's passion for caving as a 'sport' rather than an opportunity for speleological science. So, in 1906 Eli created the *Yorkshire Speleological Association* which was the first British club to do just that. Interest in the group soon waned and, with the war adding further difficulties, the group was finally wrapped up in 1915. Eli's interest in caving paused in 1912 when he married **Lily Ellison**, a millwright's daughter from Hunslet. Eli was enlisted to serve in the war in the Ordnance Corps and spent time in Mesopotamia. He suffered with malaria and post-traumatic stress for the rest of his life. After the war Eli and Lily moved to Mickley, Ripon where they farmed and took part in local community events at the village hall, including playing in the dance band. This is where another of Eli's traits became apparent — he had an affair with the banjo player, **Mrs Ellis**. In 1928 he left Mickley and his wife and was thought to have spent time in Scarborough, with or without his banjo player. Poor Lily found employment as a housekeeper for a vicar in Leeds.

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By 1931 Eli was back in Leeds and was a member of *Leeds Caving Club*. Aged 47 he was a respected, experienced member and was elected president of the club. However, in a pattern to be repeated numerous times, he fell out with the club photographer who then refused to give him photos for his record books. Eli didn't think the club was taking his recording work seriously enough so he became disillusioned and left just a year later. He moved to live in South View Cottage in Austwick [ph6], devoting his time to drawing maps and making records of the caves. It's not clear how he lived without an income.



In November 1934, following a long rescue from Gingling Pot on Fountains Fell, the *Cave Rescue Organisation* (initially the *Central Rescue Organisation*) was formed by Settle's **Norman Thornber** and **Reg Hainsworth** of Ingleton. The BSA was later admitted as an operational member, but Eli was adamant in his opinion that almost any underground accident could be dealt with by BSA members themselves, aside from the CRO. This startling idea was highlighted by the fatal trip of Sgt Harold Sargent in Grange Rigg Pot on Ingleborough in 1946. Both Eli and **Tot Lord** thought the matter could have been handled solely by BSA cavers, as was brought out in the subsequent inquest. Some newspaper records suggest that Eli insisted of being informed of all the local rescues for his records.

European countries including France, Italy and Austria had national caving societies. Eli was inspired and in 1935, with a few others, founded the *British Speleology Association* (BSA), running their first conference in Buxton in 1936. He worked with a respected caver, **Leo Palmer** from Bristol, who was a professor at Hull University at the time, and spinster **Adeline Elizabeth Montagu** and others. Eli was the honorary recorder, his plum job. The group issued a glossy quarterly magazine, '*Caves and Caving*' and organised several meets a year which made great progress in the exploration of the Gaping Gill system.

The group established their HQ on the first floor at the rear of Cragdale in Settle [ph1] providing a venue for the growing BSA records and a makeshift museum. Electoral records show Eli lived at Cragdale from 1938 and he assiduously collected manuscripts, plans and publications from all over the place, in an attempt to create a central research resource for cavers. Simpson was an obsessive collector. To achieve this, Eli and the BSA received substantial financial support from the rich spinster, Miss Montagu. Adeline Elizabeth Montagu lived at Queen's Rock House in Giggleswick in the early 1930s. She was born in London but her father, **James Montagu** was a magistrate of the West Riding and lived at the family's ancestral estate at Melton Hall, just west of Doncaster [ph2]. His '*brother, Mr Andrew Montagu, was one of the richest commoners of England*'[1].

and lately by Dr. Jessop, of Leeds. He was brother to Mr. Andrew Montagu, one of the richest commoners of England. The deceased gentleman was a magistrate of the West Riding.



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Settle's **Christine Margaret Rawdin** [ph1], twenty years Eli's junior, lived and worked at Cragdale as Eli's secretary, housekeeper and girlfriend. She was the daughter of a solicitor's clerk and had worked as a photographer's assistant for **Anthony Horner**.



The outbreak of WW2 hindered the practicalities of caving exploration, with lack of transport being a significant issue. Push bikes brought helpers from miles away! Eli continued to use BSA members to explore the old lead mines of Ingleborough and Stump Cross — these were women and men who were unable to serve for whatever reason. In 1939 Eli directed his wartime members to an open fissure in Kingsdale and the final exploration occurred in 1940. It became known as *Simpson Pot*, allegedly because the cave was 'tortuous and annoying' — like its namesake!

The BSA ran beyond its means from the start despite Miss Montague's support. Financial problems became more apparent. Publishing five issues of *Caves and Caving* finally drove the last nail into the coffin, and with a startling dip in subscriptions due to the war, the whole lot was moved to 5 Commercial Yard with the '*potholers room*' at the top of the steps. Eli was photographed there in 1937 next to one of his large photos [ph6]. Commercial Yard provided very basic (but cheap) facilities and was essentially a hoard of records and papers and included stuffed animals (including a huge turtle shell) and other oddities! The property was rented from Eddie Percy for whom Christine worked when the Horner business was bought out.



Members were getting fed up with Eli's '*Yorkshire hands on approach*', otherwise described as '*blunt rudeness and discourtesy, controversial, manipulative and forceful*' and he had frequent arguments with academics. However, Eli had help and support from Giggleswick engineer **Bob Leakey** [ph4], '*one of the finest cave explorers in Britain.*' Bob was equally fit and adventurous and ready to explore '*with a ferret and the women*' including Grassington Moor lead mines, trying to find the '*Lost Cavern of Grassington*'. In 1947 newspapers reported that Bob and a team of five others managed to achieve what was thought to be impossible, to find the bottom of the pothole after '*climbing top ladders down three 100ft waterfalls, 1130 ft of a virgin cave system and a crawl of 500ft in a water channel no more than 3ft high*' [2]. Bob had to dive

Deepest Pothole is 'Bottomed'

"BOB LEAKEY'S done it again."
To those who do their mountaineering in reverse—the potholers—that means Leakey has added another page to potholing history.
They know that this young Giggleswick engineer is one of the finest cave explorers in Britain, with an already long list of discoveries to his name.

During a meet of the British Speleological Association they descended 520ft. and travelled 3,989ft., climbing rope ladders down three 100ft. waterfalls to cover 1,130ft. of virgin cave system, with a last crawl of 500ft. in a water channel no more than 3ft. high, and, in many places, down to 2ft., to reach the sump where the cave ends.



down under a screen of rock, absolutely blind to hope to find air on the other side. Newspapers also said that In 1908 Eli had discovered Meregill, known as a 'blacklist pothole' as it was so dangerous. However, there are no records linking Eli to this cave and cavers today suggest the journalist got a bit carried away with exaggerating the drama of the expedition!

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Back with the BSA, things came to a head following the discovery of a 100 foot shaft called Lancaster Hole on Casterton Fell in 1946. This still forms part of the longest cave system in the UK – nearing 100 kms now. Eli realised the potential of this find and wanted the influence and control of who went down, deciding who was good enough to bring back accurate findings to safeguard its future. Eli went into overdrive to conserve the cave. With his usual dictatorial, un-collaborative approach he refused requests to let other groups go down and put locks on the entrance. Friction became so bad that other groups used explosives to blow the lids off! At a winch meet at Gaping Gill, also in 1946, exasperated members resigned from the BSA and reignited the fortunes of the *Northern Pennine Club* and the *Red Rose Cave and Pothole Club*. These were primarily concerned with exploring and caving rather than record keeping, much to Eli's chagrin. Some of the more academically inclined members, either fed up with Simpson's shenanigans or having been thrown out of the BSA by him, founded a rival *Cave Research Group*, a national organisation which held no caving tackle, and co-existed until 1973 when the two bodies merged. In the end, a few years later, even Bob Leakey left the BSA too.

Eli devoted his passion to completing his records, compiling 100 large record books covering the the years between 1920 and the 1960s. Each book contained maps, surveys, photographs, exploration accounts, newspaper cuttings and published articles. They included the discovery and exploration of many of the major cave systems in all UK caving areas and mountains of admin, correspondence and miscellany. Fortunately, most of these have been preserved by caving authorities.

In 1952 Adeline Elizabeth Montagu, (remember her?) died at the age of 78 in Windermere, leaving an estate of nearly £41,000 of which £5,000 was left to Eli *'for such purposes as he may, in his discretion, consider will carry out my wishes in connection with the work in which he is most actively engaged.'* In typical Eli style he said, *'what the money is used for is my business and no-one else's...That work is work which she and I were engaged upon long before the BSA was formed in 1936, and had she lived another 12 months it would have been completed. You might say it is my life's work... It will definitely not be used to popularise potholing, which is just an adventurous sport, as distinct from speleology, which is a definite science with a purpose.'* [3]

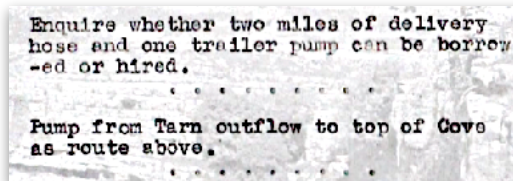
**£5,000 legacy
to "carry
on the work"**
"WHAT the money is to be used for is my business, and nobody else's," a "Yorkshire Observer" reporter was told last night by Mr. Eli Simpson, of Settle.

This life's work could have been his collation of material but it's probably no coincidence that just a year later Eli led the making of a 16mm film, with help from Settle's **Eddie Percy** and filmed by Keighley's **John Tobin**. The film was brought back to life in 2012 by **Sid Perou** and information is available online at www.cavinglibrary.org.uk. Eli, some caving friends and *'a mystery woman'* (who



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bears a remarkable resemblance to Christine Rawdin) made an appearance with some colour sections as well as black and white. It detailed experiments in photography, often at Hull Pot and Hunt Pot, intended to be preparatory work for making a film about limestone caves in the Yorkshire Dales called *'The Birth of a Yorkshire River'*. Ambitiously, it aimed to resurrect the waterfall at Malham Cove using pumps and hoses down, and powering large underground lights with a generator at the cave entrances. But as the technical and cost constraints became apparent, the project was abandoned. Little did they know that in the floods following Storm Desmond in December 2015 the Malham Cove waterfall briefly appeared again, photos of which can be seen on the website *Malhamdale.com*.



Enquire whether two miles of delivery hose and one trailer pump can be borrowed or hired.
.....
Pump from Tarn outflow to top of Cove as route above.
.....

Eli died at Raikeswood Hospital Skipton on 1 February 1962, aged 77, still living at Commercial Yard. He left his moderate estate of £676 to faithful Christine Rawdin. Eli was buried at Settle Parish Church and a memorial stone was later erected by members of the British Speleological Association that he founded. Although newspaper obituaries are not forthcoming, Eli is since remembered as a pivotal character who brought order and an international outlook into the exploration of caves and potholes with accurate surveying and award winning photos. Someone said that despite his flaws Eli was the inventor of the word 'speleology' in the UK.

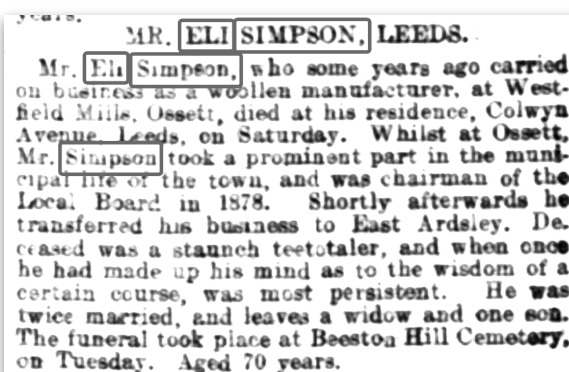


In Remembrance Eli Simpson 1884-1962 Founder and Recorder British Speleological Asscn. 1935- 1962

What about Christine? Locals remember that Christine had to sell some of Eli's collection in order to balance the books. Although finding their way to various corners of the planet, much of this has been returned to UK caving authorities. In 1965 Christine married **Wesley Oakes**, one of the original exploration party that found Lancaster Hole, and went on to join the Red Rose Cave & Pothole Club. They moved to Lancaster and Christine lived to a ripe old age of 86. Some sources suggest that, after her death, her husband disposed of the rest of Eli's records that Christine had retained.

What do we know about Eli's background? Eli was the only son of **John William Simpson** of Ossett, a successful woollen manufacturer, and his wife **Elizabeth Rhodes**, a farmer's daughter. Eli was known to use headed paper from his father's business to make notes and records at Cragdale and Commercial Yard. Eli's sister **Edith Alice Simpson** married **Sidney Firth Townend**, a marine engineer. John William Simpson was the only child of **Eli Simpson (Snr)** and his wife **Elizabeth Burdekin** who died when John William was just two. John William was brought up by his dad and his Simpson grandparents who were weavers.

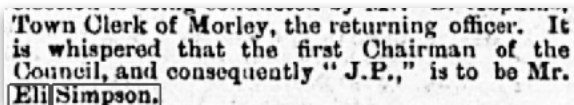
Eli Simpson (Jnr) definitely inherited his drive from his grandfather. Eli Simpson (Snr) was another successful woollen manufacturer, employing 73 men and 57 women at the time of the 1881 census. He took *'a prominent part in the municipal life of the town and was chairman of the Local Board in*



MR. ELI SIMPSON, LEEDS.
Mr. Eli Simpson, who some years ago carried on business as a woollen manufacturer, at Westfield Mills, Ossett, died at his residence, Colwyn Avenue, Leeds, on Saturday. Whilst at Ossett, Mr. Simpson took a prominent part in the municipal life of the town, and was chairman of the Local Board in 1878. Shortly afterwards he transferred his business to East Ardsley. He ceased was a staunch teetotaler, and when once he had made up his mind as to the wisdom of a certain course, was most persistent. He was twice married, and leaves a widow and one son. The funeral took place at Beeston Hill Cemetery, on Tuesday. Aged 70 years.

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1878.'[4] During the 1880s Eli (Snr) and John William moved a few miles north east to East Ardsley where, in 1895, 'it is whispered that the first Chairman of the (East Ardsley) Council, and consequently 'JP' is to be Mr Eli Simpson'[5]. Eli was a 'staunch teetotaller and when he had made up his mind as to the wisdom of a certain course, was most persistent' — that sounds familiar! He retired to Leeds with his second wife Sarah, although they don't appear to have actually married. Son John William worked as the foreman in Eli's mill and took it over when he retired.



Town Clerk of Morley, the returning officer. It is whispered that the first Chairman of the Council, and consequently "J.P.," is to be Mr. Eli Simpson.



This account has been compiled by Sarah Lister as part of the Settle Graveyard Project which has recorded gravestone inscriptions, updated church records and researched the lives of those buried. It has been written in good faith with no offence intended. If I have inadvertently included errors or breached any copyright I apologise and would welcome corrections.

The life stories of people with italicised names have been researched as part of the graveyard project and can be found on [dalescommunityarchives.org.uk/settle graveyard project](http://dalescommunityarchives.org.uk/settle-graveyard-project). The 'Old Settle' family tree on Ancestry.co.uk includes the families buried in the graveyard. The project is ongoing and welcomes queries and information on settleresearch@gmail.com. Latest news and events are on the Facebook page 'Settle Graveyard Project'.

This article has been compiled with the help of Alan Jeffreys, life long caver, expert and presenter of talks on, amongst other things, Eli Simpson.

Internet sources include the Sid Perou Youtube channel, www.archives.bcra.org.uk, Wikipedia, www.darknessbelow.co.uk, www.cavinglibrary.org.uk

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