

Willie Clarke
Communist Councillor and Trade Unionist
(1935 – 2019)



Figure 1Photo: Scotsman.com

Willie was born into a coal mining family residing at 71 South Glencraig on June 25, 1935. The family, at that time, comprised his grandmother Lizzy; her brother James Lawrie; his uncle William; and his mother Christina.

Grandfather William, who served in the Scots Guards, was killed in November 1914 during the Great War.

Willie's birth was a surprise to the household, as Christina, who worked in service, had concealed her pregnancy from the family. Those were different times.

Willie was raised in a loving family during a period of significant global change, including the rise of fascism in Germany and the defeat of the Spanish Civil War, which served as preludes to World War II.

Locally, Willie Gallagher, a Communist MP representing many mining communities in Fife, was a supporter of the working-class cause, which the Clarke family also supported, along with thousands of others.

The conditions of the 1930s and 1940s profoundly influenced Willie, and the victory over fascism in 1945 strengthened his belief in the socialist movement, particularly the role of the Soviet Union, which would influence him throughout his life.

He first attended Glencraig School (the wee school) in 1940, followed by Lochgelly East from 1947 to 1950.

As was customary, Willie began working at Glencraig Colliery in 1950, initially on the tables before going underground in 1951. Glencraig was known for its militant stance, and Willie became a youth delegate there in 1952. That same year, he joined the Communist Party of

Great Britain (CPGB). Willie was elected to the Glencraig union committee in 1959 and became a workman's inspector, representing the miners in 1963.

The mining industry faced mass closures in the mid-1960s under the Labour government, and Willie moved to Seafield Colliery in September 1966 after Glencraig was closed.

True to his activism, he was elected secretary of the union branch that same year—a position he held until 1978, when he became chairman until 1987. He was active in the 1972 and 1974 miners' strikes, as evidenced in a short interview conducted by the BBC programme "Panorama."

His work on the Scottish Executive of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) began in 1977. During the 1984-85 strike, where he was joint chairman of the East of Fife Strike Committee, he coordinated the work of local strike centres—a struggle Willie compared to the 1926 strike that left miners facing a hostile government. In that role, he visited European nations to garner support and much-needed funds for the strike. Over the years, he represented the Scottish NUM, visiting countries such as the People's Republic of China and the USSR, often with CPGB groups.

Willie was proud of his record of never losing a trade union ballot and represented miners across the Scottish coalfield as acting agent. He also served as the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) representative on Fife Health Board and successfully won settlements in tribunals concerning miners' health and injuries.

Local politics was another pillar of Willie's work. He was elected to Fife County Council in 1973 when the council was based in Cupar. Following local government reorganization, he was elected as a regional councillor in 1975 and later as a Fife Councillor in 1995 for Benarty and Lumphinnans. Despite changing boundaries, he was repeatedly re-elected, often standing as a communist candidate against Labour and Conservative opponents. Willie understood that his electoral support was rooted in his activity, not solely his political allegiance, especially in a country often hostile to Marxist politics.

On Fife Council, he was involved in the Education Committee, served as vice-chair of the Scottish Prison Visiting Committee, and was chair of Glenochil Prison for over 20 years. He humorously noted that he had been inside every prison in Scotland.

Willie also maintained a long association with the Edinburgh School for the Blind, serving on its board for many years.

His social life was intertwined with his work, notably through his involvement with the Glencraig Miners' Welfare Club, which he helped sustain beyond the closure of the pit and the decline of Glencraig village. Despite families leaving Glencraig from the 1950s, the community's sense of identity persisted, with the Miners' Club providing ongoing connection.

Willie believed that progress could be achieved through collective effort. His participation in numerous local groups helped build a community foundation still evident today. He played a key role in preventing the demolition of former primary schools, securing the future of BRAG, and supporting local business, education, and employment initiatives. His pride in representing local people was immense.

He was actively involved in community centers, serving as chairman of BRAG and Lochore Meadows, and participating in Fife Day Care, the Community Council, old folks' welfare, Recycled Teenagers, Kids Come First, Benarty Heritage Preservation Group, and the Benarty Forum. He was especially proud of the volunteers working for the Credit Union, which continues to thrive.

Despite health issues, Willie campaigned vigorously for Scottish independence in 2014 and was involved in efforts to establish the Glencraig boundary. His core belief was in working collaboratively with people, empowering them to challenge the status quo and realize their collective power.

Willie resigned his Lochs Ward seat in 2016 after 43 years of service due to ill health. Fife Council awarded him the Freedom of Fife in recognition of his contributions. In 2018, he officially opened a new centre in Lochore Meadows Country Park named after him, emphasizing that the real importance lies with the people, not officials or politicians.

Willie Clarke passed away on October 30, 2019, following a major operation and battling cancer. Despite his illness, he remained a resilient fighter until the end.

Willie Clarke Jnr