

Meeting Reports 2017- 2018 Programme

MAY 2018

This month was the Annual General Meeting of the Society, and Chair Moira Kilkenny gave her annual report which included a thanks to all those who have helped making the past year a success. Membership has increased to 67 and average meeting attendance of 45. Treasurer Anne Cashmore reported that the Society finances remain in good order and provided a copy of the accounts for review. The following officers were re-elected – Chair Moira Kilkenny, Treasurer Anne Cashmore: the following committee members were also re-elected, Richard Jackson, Barry Jones, Kathryn McLachlan, Les Purvis, and Jill Wharton. Christine Doe was elected to join the committee. The programme for 2018-19 was distributed, with details as follows:

1st October 2018 – The Slavery Business & the North East – Dr John Charlton

5th November 2018 – “Hens that want to Crow” Women’s Battle for the Vote – Dr Liz O’Donnell

3rd December 2018 Northumberland in the Great War – Neil Storey

7th January 2019 – The History of Beekeeping – John Hobrough

4th February 2019 – Historical Oddities – those curious places around the County – Ian Hall

4th March 2019 – Wellington, the Iron Duke - Prof. John Derry

1st April 2019 – Ada Lovelace – Anthony Atkinson

13th May 2019 – AGM followed by Martin Luther King in Newcastle – Prof. Brian Ward

Following the AGM Chair Moira welcomed Ian East to give a talk on The Northumberland Elections 1826. Prior to this date Northumberland had traditionally returned one Tory and one Whig to the two parliamentary seats. The 1826 election was a four way bitter affair involving principal Northumberland families, with no love lost between any of them (a duel being fought on Bamburgh beach at one stage). Candidates spent huge amounts of money on promoting themselves and denigrating opponents, using posters, handbills cartoons etc. and giving mugs and jugs to supporters so that they could drink free ale when they arrived at the hustings. All voting took place at Alnwick over 15 days with the count announced daily. Candidates even provided steam ships and horse drawn carriages to transport their supporters to vote. The Tories Matthew Bell and Henry Liddell took both seats with an estimated cost to each of £30,000.

Ian was thanked for his detailed and interesting talk.

APRIL 2018

Michael Thomson has become a regular and very popular speaker at the Warkworth History Society. This was his first visit to our new venue, however, and he began his talk on Bede by commenting on the appropriateness of the historic church of St Lawrence to his subject.

Northumberland, or Northumbria, was very much at the heart of this month’s talk. Bede was a Northumbrian monk living his whole life in the area between 672 and 735 AD, a period usually referred to as the Dark Ages, with associated images of wild, uncivilised heathen tribes. Not so in Northumbria, however! It was going

through its very own Golden Age, both culturally and religiously, and it was in this context that Bede was born, educated and eventually able to make his own considerable mark.

One of his many ambitions was to make the Bible accessible to the common people, and he began a translation of St. John's Gospel from the Latin into Old English which he is reputed to have completed on his deathbed. He also made such a detailed study of the sun, stars, planets, moon and tides that he was able to work out how these all fitted together, how our tides work, and even came to the astounding conclusion that the earth was round and not a flat disc as was universally believed at that time.

It seems that Bede's dedication to learning also landed him in hot water, however. Through his minute and scrupulous study of the Bible, he re-calculated the time of the Creation, and therefore the age of the earth. This did not go down well with the authorities of the time and he was accused of heresy!

His greatest achievement is considered to be his 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People' which he completed in 731 and dedicated to Ceolwulf, King of Northumbria. For this he travelled widely within the British Isles and used his knowledge to explain where and how the different English tribes originated. His intention was to influence the way in which people viewed England, and his strongest desire was to draw together all the feuding Anglo-Saxon tribes under one kingdom with one king – that being, of course, the King of Northumbria!

Sadly, shortly after Bede's death, the Vikings arrived and brought an end to Northumbria's Golden Age. They continued to wreak havoc until they were finally beaten by Alfred the Great, who successfully took up Bede's ideas and put them into practice by bringing together the various tribes of England under one law, Danelaw, and one kingdom.

We were left wondering how different our political map might look today had the North East succeeded in becoming the beating heart of our nation! Another thought provoking talk for which Michael Thomson was roundly applauded.

MARCH 2018

The snow fortunately cleared sufficiently to enable 55 hearty souls to attend the meeting to hear Chair Moira welcome one of the Societies favourite speakers Professor John Derry, who without the use of visual aids and notes took us through the life of Joseph Stalin.

Joseph Vissarionovich Dzhugashvilli was born 18 December 1879 in Gori, Georgia (he changed his name to Stalin, meaning man of steel, in 1913). He grew up in poverty, his mother a washerwoman and father a cobbler. Throughout his life Stalin retained his Georgian accent and pronounced some Russian words badly: which anyone in his presence took care to also mispronounce in order to avoid the anger of the great leader!

Aged 16 Stalin was sent to study at the Russian Orthodox Church in Tiflis, the Georgian capital. However he lost interest in his studies when he joined the revolutionary movement and in 1899 was expelled after failing to turn up for his exams. His time was then spent raising money for the Bolshevik movement by any means, including bank robberies, murder, and abduction. He was described as a revolutionary without scruples.

Professor Derry took us through Stalin meeting Lenin, their involvement in the Russian Revolution, the toppling of the Tsar, then Lenin taking power and appointing Stalin as General Secretary of the Communist Party. After Lenin's death in 1924 Stalin became leader having first arranged to have Trotsky exiled.

Stalin instigated various 5 year plans to modernise the country in order to compete economically and militarily with the Western powers. Individual farms were grouped together under State control in an attempt to improve output. This was initially resisted by the peasant farmers, resulting many being killed or deported.

Over the years Stalin became increasingly more paranoid and purged the Communist party and the army of anyone who might oppose him. Millions were sent to labour camps, with hundreds of thousands summarily killed. The lack of experienced army generals was to cause great difficulties during WW2.

Professor Derry described the non-aggression pact with Germany and how this was ignored by Hitler, the Battle of Stalingrad, the subsequent part Stalin played in defeating Germany, followed by the aftermath which Churchill described as "an iron curtain falling over Europe". Stalin's death 5 March 1953 was mourned by some in the Soviet Union but was cheered by the millions affected by his reign of terror.

Professor Derry's talk was informative, expertly presented and thoroughly well received. We look forward to his talk on the Iron Duke next March.

February 2018

Our speaker this month was George Nairn who gave a talk on the history of picture postcards. George's interest in postcards began over 40 years ago. He is now a full time dealer and collector and has written/contributed to over 30 local history books. The first picture postcard was sent in September 1894 and until 1902 it was illegal to include anything but the recipients address on the back. A card with writing around the picture on the front usually dates it to this period. In 1902 the back of the card was divided to provide space for a message and the address. Cards were made from many materials including tin, leather and even peat! Many messages were written in code or shorthand to keep them private, the angle of the stamp could also convey a message i.e. upside down meant "I love you" Postcards were 1 penny to buy and ½ penny to send up to 1918 when the cost of postage was increased. Some of the best quality early cards were printed in Germany, as at the time they were leaders in the lithographic printing process.

The golden area of postcards was from 1900 - 1920. Each town or village had a photographer and images would be taken using a plate camera to record all aspects of life in the area. George showed many slides of early postcards depicting not only scenic views but of church/chapel/school/WI events and outings, collieries/pitmen and poignant ones from WW1. If a disaster occurred the local photographer would be soon on the scene to record the event and postcards produced for sale the next day. One commemorating the West Stanley pit disaster included Keven Keegan's grandfather.

Before the days of the telephone, postcards were often used as a means of communication. There were up to 3 post deliveries a day and a card could be sent in

the morning asking someone to meet that same evening. Many cards were posted on Christmas Eve for delivery the next day!

One of George's favourite card producers was Mr Johnson of Gateshead who produced around 16,000 cards between 1900 and the 1940s. The Abraham Brothers were famous for their photographs of the Lake District, and their former shop in Keswick is now the premises of George Fisher.

Georges entertaining and illuminating talk clearly illustrated how picture postcards and the story behind their messages provides a social history record of the time, unlike the text/Instagram/e mail methods of communication used today which are usually deleted or forgotten.

January 2018

At the first meeting of 2018 Chair Moira welcomed Jessica Turner from Northumberland Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership to give a talk on The Bamburgh Ossuary and the Anglo Saxon Context.

Jessica began by explaining that an ossuary is a box, building or site used as the final resting place for human skeletal remains used particularly where burial space is limited.

She then described that the first edition ordnance survey map of Bamburgh had included reference to a Danish burial site in the dunes south of the castle, which was generally thought to relate to Viking invasions of the area. However archaeological excavations of the site between 1998 and 2007 revealed this not to be the case. The graves found contained skeletons aligned east to west suggesting a Christian burial. In addition no Viking artefacts were found during the dig.

Jessica then outlined how Bamburgh got its name: how its importance grew when Oswald brought the two Northumbrian Kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira together under a single ruler and how Aiden arrived from Iona to spread Christianity.

Over 110 individual skeletons were excavated in the 1998-2007 dig and years of research by Bamburgh Research Project and Durham University generated a wealth of information about the people living in Bamburgh 1400 years ago. Analysis showed the cemetery was in use between 650– 700 AD, the individuals were well nourished and came from a wide area including Italy, Ireland, Scandinavia and Southern Spain. They were some of the earliest Christian converts and indicated how important Bamburgh must have been for them to have made the journey.

A final resting place was needed for the skeletons and the long unused second crypt of St Aidens Church in the village was considered to be appropriate particularly as some of them may have actually heard St Aiden preach. Each skeleton was encased in an individual zinc charnel box and at a committal ceremony on the 24th June 2016, they were finally laid to rest in the small crypt, secured behind a grill designed and made by local blacksmith and artist Stephen Lunn. Funding is now in place to enable the hugely important story of Bamburgh to be told through interactive technology and projection and make the important data recovered from the Anglo Saxon cemetery available to the public.

Jessica's extremely informative and enthusiastically presented talk was thoroughly enjoyed by all.

December 2017

At our final meeting of the year we welcomed Dr Paul Morrison Head Warden at RSPB reserve on Coquet Island to give a talk on The Secrets of Coquet Island. The earliest documentary reference is in AD684 when St Cuthbert met Elflaed the Abbess of Whitby met on the Island, although it is presumed there was already a monastic establishment on the site when the meeting took place. Further monastic buildings were constructed in the 15th Century and ruins of these were adapted and the foundations used by Trinity House, when the lighthouse and keepers cottages were built in 1841. From the outside the remains of the monastic buildings are clearly visible as they are unpainted whereas the newer additions are painted white. Paul showed a number of photographs showing how the Trinity House buildings had been incorporated, including the crypt with its 1 metre thick walls and a number of sealed up arched doorways.

One of the first lighthouse keepers was Grace Darling's brother William. Keepers and their families living on the Island were mostly self-sufficient growing their own vegetables and using kelp as a natural fertiliser. Families had to leave in 1926 when the lighthouse was re designated. Three Keepers were employed on the Island, working 1 month on and 1 month off, with always someone on duty. In 1990 however, the lighthouse was automated and the last keeper left the Island on the 19th December that year. It was then converted to solar power in 2007.

The Island is owned by the Duke of Northumberland, being bought by his family in 1753. The Dukes family were the instigators of a Napoleonic gun battery, stones from which are still visible. The castellated appearance of the lighthouse mimics that of a castle: and the Dukes home in London, Syon House, is built from Coquet Island sandstone.

Paul ended his talk describing the RSPB work he and his team of volunteers do on the Island, including monitoring, research, the provision of a suitable breeding habitat and ensuring the safety of visiting birds.

Pauls talk on both the history of the Island and on the current work carried out by him and the team of volunteers was both informative and entertaining and was thoroughly enjoyed by all.

November 2017

Vice Chair Barry welcomed Rt. Hon. Baroness Joyce Quin to the November meeting to give a talk on "Walking Newcastle".

Baroness Quin is Vice President of Newcastle Association of City Guides of which she has been a member for many years. This Association was started in the early 1960s by Counsellor FH Bell and now has approx. 50 active volunteer guides with a further 20 either retired and/or on the reserve list. Volunteers undergo an intensive 2 year training period which includes learning, shadowing trained guides and undertaking dummy tours before they are allowed to take a formal tour. Originally there were 4 tours available to the public but over the years the programme which runs from Easter to October, has been extended to include Gateshead and now also includes other areas within Tyne & Wear.

Baroness Quin advised that when walking around any City you should take note of street names as these provide an insight into the past history of the area, New Bridge Street for instance originally lead to a new bridge over the Ouseburn. City Guides are always keen to stress that Newcastle has been a major City during

Roman and Norman times, the Middle Ages, when it was the fourth largest town in England: and the industrial revolution.

Baroness Quin then took us on a virtual walking tour of Newcastle starting at Greys Monument then down Grey Street, planned in the 19th Century; and said by Prime Minister William Gladstone to be “our best modern street”. Then to Mosley Street, the first street to be lit by gas in 1818 and also the first to be lit by electricity in 1880, Dean Street then The Side and the Quayside to the Castle Keep and Black Gate. Along the way Baroness Quinn told interesting stories of the people and buildings, including Earl Grey, Richard Grainger, John Dobson, Thomas Oliver, The Castle, Black Gate and the seven bridges crossing the Tyne.

Baroness Quin ended her talk with a number of anecdotes about Newcastle some true, some not true and some she originally thought were true but now has doubts as she has heard the same tale told on tours she has been on in other Cities.

Baroness Quin’s talk gave an insight into the City Guides approach to their role, followed by a very entertaining and informative virtual tour: all of which was thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated.

October 2017

Fifty members/visitors attended the first meeting of the 2017-18 programme where Chair Moira welcomed Anthony Atkinson to give a talk on Abraham Lincoln “The Great Emancipator”

Anthony took us through Abraham Lincoln’s early life, born in a one room log cabin at Sinking Spring Farm near Hodgenville Kentucky on February 12th 1809. Young Lincoln was an avid reader and mostly self-educated having only 1 year of formal schooling.

His first brush with politics came in 1832 when he failed to win a seat in the Illinois General Assembly, however he stood again two years later and at the age of 24 became the second youngest to be elected. He then began studying law using borrowed books and received his licence to practice in 1836. He was admitted to the Illinois Bar a year later and became a successful lawyer.

He had strong views on slavery but was not an Abolitionist as he knew it would make him unelectable. Lincoln entered the House of Representatives in 1846 and in November 1860 was elected 16th President of the United States, receiving very little support from the slaveholding States in the South. Prior to his inaugural address in March 1861 seven States had seceded from the Union and Lincoln had received 130 assassination threats from 15 States.

Anthony then described the Civil War in which there were 625,000 deaths, more than all the other wars America has been involved in to date, including Iraq. In January 1863 as the war progressed, his moves to ending slavery included the Emancipation Proclamation. Later that year the battle at Gettysburg resulted in more than 51,000 casualties. It was decided to create a national soldiers cemetery on the site and Edward Everett was requested to deliver the main address with Lincoln asked to “give a few appropriate remarks”. His 280 words spoken at Gettysburg turned out to be one of the great speeches. Lincoln was re-elected as President in November 1864, with the end of the war following five months later. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated at the Ford Theatre by John Wilkes Booth a Southern sympathiser, on April 15th 1865.

Anthony's much enjoyed talk, supplemented by slides, video and audio provided a clear description of how a man from humble origins who suffered many tragedies in his life, has come to be regarded as one of the great US Presidents. Many of the passages from his inspirational speeches are still relevant and often quoted today.