Meeting Reports 2019-2020 Programme (No meetings April & May)

March 2020

For this month's meeting our chair Moira welcomed Sir Alan Craft, paediatric oncologist and Emeritus Professor of Child Health at Newcastle University, to speak about the Red Spot Study of 1947 and the man who inspired it, James Calvert Spence.

Born in Amble in 1892, Spence was the first Professor of Child Health in England. After a distinguished career in the army during WW1he spent some time working at Great Ormond Street Hospital in London before returning to take up a post at the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle. Whilst there he joined the medical staff of a day nursery which, in 1925, became the Babies' Hospital and Mothercraft Centre. He was concerned by the amount of poverty, sickness and malnutrition prevalent in the area. In 1936 there were 64baby deaths in every 1000 during the first year of life. So, in 1939 he began to research the causes, finding that most deaths were due to infections. But it was not until after WW2 that the Red Spot Study began at the instigation of Ashington born Dr. Fred Miller who appealed to Spence to undertake a study of the causes of childhood infections in the context of the family. 1142 children from Newcastle were chosen for the study, whereby they were identified by red spots on their GPs' record cards. The study team would therefore be notified whenever a child became unwell. In addition, the team studied the ante-natal charts of each child, along with photographs and health visitor reports. Chest infections were recorded together with reports of poor housing conditions, serious overcrowding and poor sanitation. Home visits to the children's families continued for 7 years, home and school visits for 15 years, and a follow up study was undertaken after 22 years. During this time the 'Red Spot Children' were made to feel very special, as two of their number who were present in the audience testified. In more recent times studies have suggested a link between birth size and adult mortality and health. Professor Craft and his associates decided to test this theory using the 1947 cohort. Of the original 1142 participants they traced 832, 69% of whom responded to a questionnaire and 36% of whom attended for clinical tests. For the men it was found that birth factors were the least likely predictors of adult health, childhood factors came next, but the most likely contributor to health was adult lifestyle and experience. For women it was slightly different, with childhood experience the least likely contributor, then birth factors but again adult lifestyle and experience were the greatest influence. In other words, in answer to the 'Nature or Nurture' question, the resounding answer was 'It's Lifestyle'!

Once again, we were treated to an excellent talk, with more than a little local interest.

February 2020

This month saw the return of the irrepressible Professor John Derry to speak on the subject of "Adolf Hitler: The Bohemian Corporal," a label given to him by Hindenberg as a term of contempt. Born in rural Austria in 1889 Hitler endured a brutal childhood at the hands of his father, who died when Adolf was 14, leaving his family with a substantial pension. Adolf enjoyed four years of comparative comfort, indulging his interests in art and music, but all this changed when the pension stopped on the death of his mother when he was 18 years old.

He was turned down by the Vienna School of Art due to a basic lack of talent and so he became a societal dropout (hence the Bohemian sobriquet). It was at this time that he became interested in what he called the "Jewish problem".

Turning his back on the bourgeois lifestyle of multi-religious Austria, he left Vienna for Munich. There, at the outbreak of World War One, he volunteered for service in the Bavarian Army. Lance-Corporal Hitler was a 'runner', carrying messages to the front line, and was temporarily blinded in a gas attack. After the war he became involved with the left wing National Socialist Party, or Nazis. He attempted to lead a revolution in Munich which failed. Several Nazis died and he was imprisoned for five years. On his release his belief in the superiority ofthe Aryan race began to dominate his thoughts. He discovered a gift for public speaking and was able to persuade many Germans to believe in his cause.

In 1932 he took German nationality to stand against Hindenburg as President of Germany. He failed, but in 1933 Hindenburg made him Chancellor, hoping in this way to gain some control over the Nazi Party. The Reichstag Fire of February 1933 was claimed by Hitler to be a Communist plot. He was given emergency powers, thus paving the way for the rise of his Nazi regime. The rest, as they say, is history. He banned all other political parties and began a charm offensive to win over the German people. He presented himself as a man of peace whilst secretly re-arming Germany in contravention of the Versailles Treaty. With the invasion of Poland and the subsequent outbreak of World War II Hitler found himself fighting a war on two fronts. But his was essentially a racial war, and he became obsessed not just with the extermination of the Jewish people, but also with Communism and the non-Aryan peoples of eastern Europe. When his attempt to invade the Soviet Union resulted in appalling losses on both sides his military competence was called into question and a plot was hatched to kill Hitler in July 1944. Although this failed, the tide of popularity had turned against him and he committed suicide on 30th April 1945.

Once again Professor Derry held his audience spellbound with his astonishing depth of knowledge and insight. Amazing, too, how a young man's lack of artistic ability may have changed the course of history!

January 2020

For the first meeting of the New Year Vice Chairman Barry Jones introduced local speaker Richard Booth to a large audience of members and visitors. Richard referred to himself as a sports diver whose underwater explorations had brought him into direct contact with the remains of several of the German warships which had been scuttled over 100 years ago in Scapa Flow, the largest deep water harbour in the world, used by the Royal Navy as a safe haven since Napoleonic times. In 1918, seventy four ships of the German Fleet were interned in Scapa Flow whilst the terms of the Armistice were agreed. Commander of the fleet, von Reuter, anticipating that the ships would be divided amongst the Allies following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, hatched a plan to scuttle the fleet. This he succeeded in doing on 21st June 1919, much to the dismay of the British, who managed to save only 11 of the 74 German ships. In the 1920s the sunken vessels were sold for scrap. Many of the ships were recovered and by 1939 only 8 were left. Richard then took us on an underwater tour of the remaining wrecks by way of some remarkable photographs taken on his own deep water diving expeditions in the area. These pictures most graphically brought to life the story of this extraordinary incident in British and German history.

December 2019

Chair Moira Kilkenny welcomed back social historian Neil Storey for this the last meeting of 2019. His subject was 'A History of Medicine from Medieval to Victorian Times'. He began gently enough with a discussion of medieval herbal remedies and diagnoses based on star signs, phases of the moon and 'humours'. He explained how 'leaching' did not always imply the use of leeches, but simply meant 'blood- letting' which might be performed (and here it started to get more gruesome) using blades and a bleeding bowl by the local barber. Neil then introduced us to a whole series of objects which looked more like instruments of torture than of medicine. Tooth extraction, for example, was performed by the local blacksmith using a 'tooth key'; minor surgery, such as wart removal or the lancing of boils, using a sharp blade or lancet; all this without any form of sterilisation or use of anaesthetic and obviously with unpredictable success. Once the intricacies of blood circulation were discovered in the C19th tourniquets could be used to help surgeons remove limbs. Sterilisation came later when knives used for amputation were heated, only because soldiers complained about the cold metal next to their skin. AndC19th medicine was not without its quackery, such as the Magneto-Electric Machine, meant to give life force by means of an electric shock. This was altogether a hugely entertaining talk, though not perhaps for the squeamish!

November 2019

For our November meeting our Chair Moira Kilkenny welcomed Elizabeth Finch, volunteer speaker for the National Trust, to talk about 'The Families of Wallington Hall'.

The original Fenwick Hall was built by Sir John Fenwick, a royalist and Master of Horse to King Charles I. His fortunes declined with the accession of William and Mary. Falling into debt he was forced to sell the Hall to Sir William Blackett in 1688 and in 1697 Sir John was executed for treason. Sir William built Wallington Hall on the site as a hunting lodge but continued to live in Newcastle. His second son, also Sir William, took over ownership at the tender age of 16. He seems to have been something of a hedonist. In spite of marrying a wealthy heiress, he left debts of a staggering £70000 when he died aged 29. They had no children, but, perhaps not surprisingly, he did have an illegitimate daughter, Elizabeth. He therefore left Wallington Hall to his cousin, Sir Walter Calverley Blackett, on the proviso he married Elizabeth. Sir Walter made improvements to the Hall, took care of his tenants and Wallington flourished. On his death in 1777 the estate passed to his nephew, Sir John Trevelyan, who chose, however, to live in Devon. So Wallington was somewhat neglected until his death when his son (also Sir John) chose to move to Northumberland. A keen plantsman, he was responsible for improving the gardens. It was when his son, Sir Calverley Trevelyan, inherited Wallington that much of what interests visitors today began to take place. He and his wife, Pauline, were both intellectuals. She added the staircase and also the roof over the central hall, which had previously been open to the elements. She was a writer and an artist and had strong connections with the Pre-Raphaelites, especially John Ruskin. They were all invited to Wallington Hall where they and Pauline herself painted the columns in the central hall. William Bell Scott was also a close friend, and many of his paintings can be seen at Wallington.

Sir Calverley's nephew Sir Charles Edward Trevelyan was the next owner. As a result of his mismanagement of the Irish potato famine the Trevelyan name came to be much hated by the Irish. His son Sir George married Caroline (Carrie) Phillips and her watercolours can be seen on

display at the Hall. Next came Charles Phillips Trevelyan who married Molly Bell, sister of Gertrude Bell. He and his brothers agreed that Wallington should be left to the National Trust and the family supports the Trust to this day.

This whirlwind virtual tour through the history of these local families only served to whet our appetites for a visit in person to a most impressive National Trust property.

October 2019

It seemed appropriate that the first meeting of the new session should be devoted to a talk on the history of our own village by one of its own residents. Our chairman, Moira Kilkenny, introduced Dr Peter Regan to a packed assembly.

Dr Regan began by discussing the history of tourism in Warkworth, which dates back as far as the 1750s and obviously continues unabated to this day.

The artist William Turner visited in 1797 and his painting 'Warkworth Castle, Northumberland – thunderstorm approaching at sunset' depicts the castle from the Hermitage walk. The fishing boats shown in the painting tell us that fishing was an active industry at that time.

Dr Regan then went on to give us a pictorial history of the village, the church of St. Lawrence being the earliest of all the buildings and structures. A Saxon church dating from the C8th originally stood on this site, though the church as we know it today dates from 1130. It was interesting to hear that, being built before the castle itself, the church was constructed with a view to defending itself against invasion, and this can be seen by the height of the windows.

The river Coquet forms a natural defence around the village and the building of the castle in 1139 completed that defence. In 1160 plans were drawn up for 77 houses and plots of land which originally made up the village.

The Hermitage came next in 1330, an amazing structure hewn out of bare rock, and created to house a priest whose task it was to offer up prayers on behalf of the noble residents of the castle. Thomas Percy's poem 'The Hermit of Warkworth,' in which a penitent lover retreats from the world after killing his beloved, is, sad to say, pure fiction!

The old bridge was completed in 1379. The old village as we know it largely dates from the C18th to early C19th. The schoolhouse was built in 1736, the Pont (or water fountain) on Castle Street is late C18th and the Market Cross was erected in 1830. For many years a market was held in Dial Place on St. Lawrence Day.

This extensive collection of old photographs which Dr Regan had sourced from the Woodhorn archives showed us a village which, while very familiar in many respects, also spoke to us of lives and times very different from our own. His fascinating talk provided much food for thought as we viewed local history from a 21st century perspective.