

Meeting Reports 2021-2022 Programme

May 2022

Following a brief AGM in which Moira Kilkenny updated members on the latest developments, and Anne Cashmore presented the accounts, this month's speaker, Tom Allan, gave a fascinating talk about the history of the now defunct Alnwick Branch Line and the more recent work on the Aln Valley Railway.

He began at the very beginning with the invention in 1790 of the first stationary steam engine by James Watt. In 1804 Richard Trevithick invented the first steam locomotive, and in 1812 the Salamanca was the first steam engine used to transport goods at a sedate 5mph. When the Stockton to Darlington Railway opened in 1825 passengers were allowed to travel for the first time at a heady speed of 15mph, and by the time the Manchester to Liverpool line opened in 1829 the aptly named 'Rocket' was able to carry them at an astounding 30mph!

The 1840s saw a massive growth in railways throughout Britain and in 1845 the Alnwick to Alnmouth branch line linked up to the main London to Berwick line, with stations at Lesbury, Bilton and Hipsburn.

In 1885 there was pressure to improve Alnwick Station and the Duke of Northumberland, who owned the land, eventually gave permission for a 36mile single track railway to be built from Alnwick to Coldstream. Opened in 1887, the number of passengers using the line peaked in 1890 and it was eventually discontinued in 1930. Tom was able to show us a large number of photographs of the various stations in use at that time. It was evident that both the design and construction of these buildings was of the highest quality, and many are still in use to this day as private homes.

The Alnwick to Alnmouth branch line eventually closed in 1968. In 1995 the Aln Valley Railway Society was formed. The original station at Alnwick had already been taken over by Barter Books in 1991, so a plan was formed to build a station at Lionheart. Finance was secured and construction started in 2012. In 2018 an EU grant allowed for the construction of a second station at Greenrigg Halt and by 2020 a track had been laid joining the two stations, with a 'greenway' alongside it for cyclists and walkers. The line is now operational and several locomotives, both steam and diesel, are in use.

Tom then called upon Ken Middlemist, the driver of the last train to travel from Alnmouth to Alnwick in June 1966, to talk a little about his life. He was also a founder member of the Aln Valley Railway Society in 1995.

Janet Jackson gave a vote of thanks for an enlightening and thoroughly enjoyable journey back in time courtesy of our local railway line and two of its most knowledgeable enthusiasts.

March 2022

This month saw the return of a well-loved speaker, Professor John Derry, who was warmly welcomed by Moira Kilkenny. His topic on this occasion was Earl Grey, the Man on the Monument. To historians he was Charles Grey, former British Prime Minister from 1830-1834 and member of the Whig Party. But to many Newcastle residents he is widely known because of his statue which takes pride of place in Monument Square. And in Northumberland he is famously linked with Howick Hall and its close association with Earl Grey tea.

But it was of Grey the politician that Professor Derry wished to speak. Born in 1764 he entered Parliament in 1785 as a member of Charles Fox's Whig Party, which was then in opposition to the Tories under William Pitt. Educated at Eton, he is primarily associated with the Reform Act of 1832.

When the Whig Party followed Edmund Burke in being strongly opposed to the French Revolution of 1789-1799, Grey wanted reconciliation between Britain and France. This led to a split in the Whig Party with Grey finding himself very much isolated.

Grey was asked to form a government in 1830 when there had been a crisis in Parliament over the right of Catholics to sit in the Houses of Commons and of Lords. He believed in a balance between reform and continuity. As Prime Minister he presided over the Reform of Parliament Bill, but faced defeat over this so that it had to be carried to the House of Lords. In the end the Reform Act was limited in its extension of voting rights in that voters had to be house holders. Women's franchise did not, of course, come into effect until much later. Its main effect was the redistribution of parliamentary seats and the reform of local government.

Grey was also famously involved in the Abolition of Slavery Act of 1833 by which slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire.

Professor Derry concluded by reminding us of the inscription on Grey's Monument, describing him as an 'Aristocratic, Conservative Reformer.' Not a radical Whig then, but one whose more moderate reforming zeal led to changes which affect us to this day.

Marion Jones gave a vote of thanks for another interesting and erudite talk.

February 2022

Moira Kilkenny introduced this month's speaker, Professor Brian Wood of Northumbria University, for his talk on "Abolitionism, the American Civil War and the North-East". Brian set the scene by recalling the 9 hours that the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. spent in Newcastle in November 1967; Brian went on to outline the key role of non-conformists and particularly that of women (such as Harriet Martineau) in the campaign for the abolition of slavery and for human rights.

A number of ex-slaves visited Britain and gave talks to sympathetic audiences, starting with Olaudah Equiano in the 18th century and then others in the following century including William Wells Brown (the first African American to have a novel published) and Henry "Box" Brown, who had escaped slavery by having himself posted to freedom in a box, a feat which he often repeated at the start of his public lectures. The most famous ex-slave and campaigner of his day, Frederick Douglass, toured Britain 3 times giving talks and was full of praise for the enthusiasm for the cause in the north-east of England; there is now a blue plaque at 5 Summerhill Grove, Newcastle, to mark where Frederick Douglass stayed with the family of Anna Richardson, who was instrumental in raising £150 to buy his freedom, so that he could continue his campaigning unhindered in the USA without fear of re-capture.

Today we can also visit the grave of William Hall (12th Illinois Cavalry) in South Shields cemetery; he was one of many local men who volunteered for the Union and he was even one of those who carried Lincoln's body from Ford's Theatre in Washington after his assassination there after the end of the war. We also learned the remarkable story of Mary Ann Macham, who

escaped slavery at the age of 28, arrived in Hull and, with the assistance of the Quakers, settled in North Shields, where she married a local man; on his death he was given a typically grand Victorian headstone, whereas Mary's grave remained un-marked until a successful campaign finally put an end to this example of racial inequality as recently as 2020.

There are of course other negative aspects in the story of the abolitionist cause: in October 1862 (at the height of the Civil War) William Gladstone, Chancellor of the Exchequer, future Liberal Prime Minister and himself an owner of sugar plantations, addressed a meeting in Newcastle and spoke fervently in favour of the rights of the South to determine their own future and to leave the Union.

Elizabeth Bethune gave a heartfelt vote of thanks, and that the next meeting will be on Monday 4th April when Professor John Derry will give his talk on 'The Man on the Monument – Earl Grey'.

January 2022

Unfortunately, this meeting had to be cancelled due to the increase in covid infections.

December 2021

For the final meeting of 2021 author and social historian Neil Storey returned to speak to us about Notorious Victorian Murders.

It seems that the Victorians were fascinated by the workings of the criminal mind, as many people still are today. He began by introducing us to the Black Museum, now located at New Scotland Yard, where souvenirs of famous crimes are to be found, including 'death masks' or in some cases replicas of the heads of some of the most notorious murderers. It was thought at the time that the shape of the skull (its 'bumps') could hold the key to whether a man, or woman, was likely to become involved in criminal activity.

Public hanging was commonplace up until 1868, and many Victorians enjoyed nothing better than a day out with the family to witness the final moments of the latest victim. One murderer who escaped hanging however was John 'Babbacombe' Lee. In 1885 Lee was sentenced to death by hanging, but when the day for his execution arrived the trap door malfunctioned. This happened on two further occasions. Finally his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and he was known thenceforth as 'the man they could not hang'!

This all seems a little barbaric to us today. However, we were more than happy to be entertained by Mr Storey's catalogue of bloodthirsty tales, culminating in the most notorious of all murderers, Jack the Ripper.

Unlike today, knife murders were unusual at that time, which was what made police investigators suspect that these crimes had been committed by the same person. There was a point of local interest when a similar murder was committed in Durham. But this turned out to be a 'copycat' murder, and the perpetrator, William Waddell, whilst confessing to the Durham murder, could not have been the infamous Jack, as another 'Ripper' murder took place in London whilst Waddell was in prison. Of course, to this day, the identity of Jack the Ripper remains a mystery.

Once again Neil Storey had his audience spellbound and horrified in equal measures. I'm sure I wasn't the only one to be glancing over my shoulder as I walked home that night in the dark

November 2021

This month's talk was by historian Dr Liz O'Donnell and centred on the religious group, the Society of Friends, known as Quakers. We learned that they were particularly active in the North East and their beliefs were based on peace and equality. They became politically active in areas such as the anti-slavery movement, prison reform, education, social work and international relief work. They also became involved in business and were extremely successful. Businesses they founded in the North East included Rowntree's and Fry's chocolate, Clark's shoes and Barclay's bank. They used the profits from these enterprises to fund their charitable causes.

The Richardsons of Newcastle were one of the most influential families at this time and Dr O'Donnell spoke of the extensive humanitarian activities of Henry and Anna Richardson, Anna's sister-in-law Ellen, who helped set up the Ragged and Industrial Schools for vagrant children, and Anna Deborah Richardson who was involved in the first ladies college at Cambridge. Her brother-in-law, Robert Watson, was also prominent in setting up what was to become the University of Newcastle.

Another area of interest was helping victims of war. During the Napoleonic Wars they worked with civilians who had been affected by war and in 1870 they set up the Friends War Victims Relief Committee to help towns and villages devastated by the Franco-Prussian War.

In the present day the Quaker movement is still based on its six main Testimonies which are to Integrity, Simplicity, Peace, Stewardship of the Earth, Equality and Community. Their philanthropic work continues in areas which are very much relevant today, for example climate change, conservation and support for refugees.

Dr O'Donnell was given a warm and heartfelt vote of thanks for an enlightening and fascinating talk.

October 2021

After an absence of almost two years it was wonderful to see so many people back in the Memorial Hall for the first meeting of the 2021 – 22 session. Our chairman, Moira Kilkenny, welcomed Max Adams, renowned author, archaeologist and broadcaster, to speak on the subject of 'King Aelfred and St Cuthbert, an Unlikely Alliance.'

Unlikely indeed, since King Alfred the Great (as most of us know him) was born in 849AD and died in 899, whilst St Cuthbert was born over two hundred years earlier in 634 and had been dead since 687! How could this 'alliance' have come about then? Mr. Adams lost no time in enlightening us.

King Alfred was the one who burnt the cakes whilst hiding in an old peasant woman's cottage from the invading Vikings. This is how most of us remember him from primary school history lessons. However Mr Adams told us of a different story, which also took place whilst the King was in hiding in the village of Athelney in Somerset. According to this account, a vision appeared to Alfred as a stranger in a dream. In this dream Alfred kindly feeds the stranger, who later appears as a vision of none other than St Cuthbert. In this vision, St Cuthbert blesses Alfred and as a result, Alfred was able to beat the Danes at the Battle of Edington, after which peace was declared. So here we find the 'unlikely alliance.'

Our speaker then continued to explain about the political importance of St Cuthbert during his lifetime. It was through him that the Church legitimised the chosen heirs to the thrones of the various kingdoms of Britain to ensure smooth succession. After his death his spirit continued to be regarded as of political importance. Eleven years after his death his body was disinterred and miraculously found to be intact. This was then placed in a coffin where it remained until 1827. From 698 to 705, the coffin was taken on a tour of the Roman forts of the North by the Viking kings, ending in Chester-le Street. What came to be known as the Cuthbert Community used the promise of spiritual protection to persuade communities to hand over land and treasure to the Viking kings. Consequently the Cuthbert Community held on to all this land and the power associated with it for thousands of years.

The remains of the original 7th century wooden coffin which held St. Cuthbert's body can be viewed today at Durham Cathedral, along with his gold and garnet pectoral cross, the portable altar and ivory comb that were placed in his coffin when he was buried, and embroidered Anglo-Saxon vestments gifted to his Shrine in return for spiritual protection.

Altogether this was a most informative talk which took us on a tour (along with the coffin) of one of the most fascinating periods of English history. I'm sure that many of those present will be making a visit to Durham Cathedral to see for themselves the relics associated with this important Christian saint and political influencer, St Cuthbert.