

Geography Group meetings. Raby Castle and Laithkirk Church. May 2022.

Raby Castle 17th May 2022

Eighteen members of the Geography Group were privileged to visit Raby Castle, courtesy of Lord Barnard, to look at some of the maps held in the archives. They met archivist Gabriel Damaszk, who has begun the mammoth task of surveying the vast number of historic documents found stored in wooden boxes and metal trunks. He estimates they would stretch for 600 metres if laid end to end! For our visit he put out a selection of documents, notebooks, maps, and atlases in the magnificent setting of the entrance hall. Gabriel talked about all the maps, and we had the opportunity to examine the ones that interested us in more detail.

Most of the maps showed the Raby estate. In previous centuries there were often disputes between adjacent landowners about boundaries. 'Riding the boundary' on a regular basis was essential to establish and maintain the exact limit of your estate and was publicised in advance using handbills or printed posters. Other maps showed mineral and coal seams on the estate and displayed detailed knowledge of the local geology. Disputes over mining rights were common and maps were used as evidence in court. Some were little more than sketches, but others were accurately surveyed and meticulously drawn. These maps are a valuable store of historical information, preserving the names of local landmarks, places, and people. Some record the owners or tenants of individual fields and the crops growing at the time. Others show the impact of enclosure, following an Act of Parliament or by local agreement. Not all are dated, so other clues must be used such as the parchment or paper used or, as in one case, the style of the military uniform of a soldier depicted at the top of the map which dated it to the 1760s.



There were also detailed maps and plans of the castle grounds. The 18th century saw the restoration of the castle and the landscaping of the grounds. Gabriel explained that sometimes it was difficult to know whether these showed buildings and features that existed at the time or were designs for improvement. One map showed the proposed diversion of a road away from the castle and another from the 1850s showed a line cottages at New Raby, suggesting that their occupants may have been moved from another, less convenient, location.

As the castle dates from the 14th century, it is perhaps surprising that most of the maps date from the 17th century onwards. Earlier maps may have vanished at the time of the northern rebellion, in 1569, when the Nevill family forfeited its ownership of the castle and its lands to the Crown. Some may have been lost at the beginning of the 18th century when a dispute in the Vane family, over inheritance, led to parts of the castle being dismantled.

Many of the maps are currently stored rolled, as they have been for centuries. Most have survived well as parchment is sturdy and the quality of the ink is often better than some supposedly permanent inks produced today. The cool environment of the castle has helped to preserve them. A fire had been lit in the entrance hall on the day of our visit!

As well as maps, there were some amazing atlases. These included a 17th century 'sea atlas', in which California was shown as an island, and an 18th century atlas for pilots and other seafarers, showing aspects essential to navigation along the coastline from Hudson's Bay to the

Amazon. There were also atlases by renowned royal cartographers, and an unusual atlas of fox hunting, showing the areas of different hunts and their meeting places in each English county.

Our visit finished with a visit to the old servant's quarters of the castle, where we had lunch together at the long wooden table. Our thanks go to Lord Barnard and Gabriel Damaszk for allowing and organising this memorable visit.



Laithkirk Church 19th May 2022

On a gloriously sunny afternoon over thirty of the Geography Group, and a few members from the Geology Group, met at Laithkirk Church. The location offers a wonderful vantage point, overlooking the Lune valley to the south and the Tees valley to the north. Working in small groups, members were asked to identify features of human and physical geography that they could see in the landscape around them.



Fortunately, help was on hand as we were joined by Professor Brian Roberts, an expert in historical geography and Professor David Evans, a glacial geomorphologist, at Durham University. They were able to identify and explain features which we had either failed to notice or had misinterpreted. For example, the hummocky ground below the churchyard, which some of us thought were river terraces, turned out the debris from mining and quarrying!

The landscape owes much to the underlying geology and the processes of weathering and erosion. Professor Evans explained that during the last glaciation ice flowed down the Lune and Tees valleys, changing the topography through erosion and deposition, and altering the drainage pattern. Large mounds of glacially moulded material remain in the Tees valley, however there is relatively little drift over the higher ground. (The word 'drumlin' however, was not mentioned!)

As the ice retreated it remained stationery for periods of time, leading to the formation of moraines and drift mounds. Local names – Gueswick, Hayberries and Longton have been given to the main stages of the retreat, when melting exceeded accumulation. The course of the river Lune was altered,

and the original river valley abandoned. That valley is now occupied by small misfit stream, the Eller Beck, which disappears under a kame terrace at Mickleton. Huge volumes of meltwater carved the new steep-sided valley, seen directly below the churchyard today. Meltwater channels were also eroded along the edge of the ice on the northern slopes of the Lune valley. These are now dry valleys. Further meltwater channels can be seen on the horizon at Folly Top, where water escaped over the watershed into Langley Dale.

The physical landscape has influenced the human landscape, impacting on settlement, industry, agriculture, and communications. Professor Roberts explained that the chaotic jumble of sands, gravels and clays left by the ice has influenced the productivity of the land in the Tees valley. Land ownership and land management over the centuries have also had an impact on the scenery seen today. Land at the margins has been taken in or out of use as social and economic factors have changed.



Professor Roberts explained the impact of farming techniques on the field patterns. In medieval times the wooden oxen-drawn ploughs were heavy and unwieldy and once the team was moving forward it made sense to keep ploughing for as long as possible before turning. To accommodate the ploughs fields were usually 220 yards or one furlong in length – a furlong meaning a furrow's length. The land at the end of field was often uneven and used for housing, gardens, or the dung heap. Later ploughs were lighter, and horse drawn. Clearing of the stones from the land prior to ploughing was a herculean task, which often fell to women and children.

Professor Roberts wondered whether there might have been a deserted village near to Laithkirk church. The church, which occupies a large triangular shaped piece of land, is thought to have been a tithe barn.

We all went home looking at the landscape around us in a new light!

Report and photographs by Jane Harrison. Photo of lunch at Raby Castle taken by Peter Harding.

Next meetings:

Thursday 16th June, 2pm. Witham Hall. Professor Michael Alexander will speak on soils and their formation.

Thursday 7th July, 2pm. Witham Main Hall. Professor David Newman OBE, from Ben-Gurion University, Israel, will speak on 'The Changing Geography of the Anglo-Jewish Community in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries'.