

October 2022 Geography Report

October's Geography meeting was a wide-ranging and thought-provoking talk by Professor Grenville Holland, who spoke about "Renewable Energy: Politics, Planning, and Building New Estates". He described his talk as a "bit science, bit politics, some laughs and tears at the end", so we were all intrigued as to what he would say. Professor Holland is a renowned geologist, but this time he was drawing on his experience as a Durham City councillor (and former Mayor) to talk about how planning decisions are (or are not) made.

He began by talking about the UK's energy supply and our over reliance on imported fossil fuels. The UK currently obtains only 17.3% of its energy from renewable sources. This compares with Sweden, who leads Europe on 60% and the world leader, the Democratic Republic of Congo, on 96.24%.

Against this background, Professor Holland stressed the importance of making all new housing self-sufficient in energy. He explained this would be relatively simple and inexpensive to do if installation began prior to house construction and talked about ways this might be achieved. For example, houses could have solar panels and ground source pumps which working in tandem would enable them to produce enough energy to be self-sufficient.

On paper, Sniperley Park on the edge of Durham city looks like a golden opportunity for such innovation, especially given that the Durham County Council development plan now seeks delivery of carbon-neutral developments, through use of renewable energy and sustainable transport connections. The housing developers however wanted to build the houses their way and so were refused planning permission in September 2022. The application failed on thirteen counts, including the need for the development to be comprehensively master planned and sustainable and the need for sustainable house design. It also failed to address the risks caused by the existence of old coal mine workings below the site. There is now going to be a public enquiry in January 2023. A case of watch this space...

Professor Holland was joined by Professor Alan Townsend, formerly a lecturer in town planning at Durham and a local councillor. There was a lively discussion amongst the group at the end.

Report by Jane Harrison

Next meetings:

Thursday 17th November. 2pm at The Witham. Professor Peter Atkins, from Durham University, will speak on the "Historical geography of food with special reference to cheese and the North East of England".

There will be no meeting in December.

Thursday 19th January 2023. Professor Alan Townsend will speak about "The Quaker line: the Darlington to Stockton railway.