

TEESDALE U3A

One of our own members, Sheila Petersen, was the speaker at the April meeting. Sheila described an exciting expedition she had undertaken in 2007 to look at ancient manuscripts in Mali. The visit was inspired by the work of the historical novelist, Dorothy Dunnett. Sheila co-led a small group of seven women, with a total age of 434 and all enthusiasts for the author's novels.

The group met together for the first time in Charles de Gaulle airport and then flew to Bamako, the capital of Mali, where they met Jacob who was to be their guide for the trip. The Ghanaian, Malian and Songhai Empires of West Africa were important centres of Islamic learning in the Middle Ages when subjects such as astronomy, medicine, physics etc were much more advanced than in most European universities. This knowledge was recorded in manuscripts which proved a valuable trading commodity at that time and some have survived. For centuries the main trade in Mali has been in salt and gold. In the 14th Century King Mansa Musa was reputed to be one of the richest men in the world.

During their expedition, the team visited important sites and cities, including Segou, one of the ancient capitals on the River Niger; Djenné, home of the Songhai people with famous mud mosques including the Great Mosque and then Bamako, the capital of Mali and home of the Bambara tribe.

They travelled to the Bandiagara Escarpment with its ancient rock art. This is a spectacular setting for the villages of the Dogon people who are mainly farmers and blacksmiths. For the last 3 days they hired a pinnace canoe and sailed on the Niger to the outskirts of Timbuktu. There were 11 people in the canoe and the facilities were fairly primitive.

Timbuktu is famous for its mud mosques, including 2 from the 11th Century and for its ancient manuscripts from the 9th Century. The group were allowed to examine some of the manuscripts which were suffering badly from wear and tear. Two US foundations are funding a restoration programme. During the trip, they visited a Water Aid project which was supported by Rotary International and they came across 2 Rotarians from Kirkby Stephen and Appleby, who had decided to have a look at the project. The local people were very proud of this project which had developed into a small soap industry. The group also learned about the importance of the 'plastic kettle', which was used everywhere they went. They spent the last night in tents in the open air, doing their best to avoid the camel spiders.

This was a fascinating journey described in colourful detail and leaving the audience wondering whether they should be more adventurous with their own travel in future.

Ian Reid
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