

January Geography Report
Annie Clouston
Professor Alan Townsend: *The Quaker Line*

Alan is a geographer and planner and Vice Chair of the Friends of the Stockton and Darlington Railway. He has undertaken a study of the importance of the Quaker community to the Stockton-Darlington Railway (SDR) and the industries of the surrounding area. The North Pennines was the heartland of early Quaker meeting places.

The protagonist of the talk, Edward Pease (1767-1858), was committed to the Quaker way of life. Non-materialistic and abstinent, early Quakers would not make an oath to the Queen and therefore were precluded from government and the military. This made business “the obvious occupation of the Dissenter”. Their ethical framework contributed to their success in business. Their frugality and sobriety led to isolation from others, cohesion with each other, an insistence on marrying within the faith reinforced this. Capital assets were gathered from fellow congregants – yeomen, small farmers, entrepreneurs. and meetings were occasions where business could be done. They were scrupulous, honest and reliable. There was also an ethos of philanthropy and respect for their workers. One of the Quaker bankers, Jonathan Backhouse, who contributed funds to the SDR summed up their attitude: “the root of evil is not so much the possession of property, as in the undue pursuit of it”.

Edward Pease was a visionary who could see that the transportation of coal and minerals by rail rather than canal was the way of progress. In 1822 he persuaded a reluctant management board to employ George Stephenson as engineer, and the line-laying was begun. Barnard Castle subsequently had four lines coming into it – from Middleton, Penrith, Shildon, and Darlington, with a station in Montalbo Road, and several spectacular viaducts. Money flooded into the industries that used the line and after Edward’s time his son Joseph extended the line into “Port Darlington” (Middlesbrough) thus enabling the development of Teesside.

Alan showed that the evolving nature of Quakerism (i.e. becoming more liberal and less rigid about the accumulation of wealth) was to lead to the downfall of the Pease family as businessmen and their eventual bankruptcy. The next generation of the Pease family watered down Quaker precepts by purchasing grand houses and marrying out-of-faith which led to a ruinous lawsuit – The Portsmouth Affair. A sad end to an enterprise that put our region on the map as a First! SDR celebrates its 200th Anniversary in 2025.