

## April Geography Report

Gerald Blake has a great interest in Africa having lived and travelled there, so his talk on “The Geography of pre-Colonial Africa” was a fascinating one in which he drew on his personal experiences and observations. He began with some facts about Africa which brought home its sheer size. The Mercator map projection, found in most atlases, distorts the true size and shape of the continent which is as wide as it is long and accounts for 20% of the earth’s land surface. The UK would fit into Madagascar. Africa extends from north of the Tropic of Cancer to south of the Tropic of Capricorn, giving rise to huge differences in climate and vegetation.

Exploration began with the Romans along the Mediterranean fringes and later Arab merchants sailed down the east coast to trade. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Portuguese began the mapping the west coast but very little was known about the interior. Rivers were often difficult to navigate upstream because of swamps, cataracts and waterfalls, and diseases spread by the mosquito and the Tsetse fly threatened health and hindered progress. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century explorers had started to map areas further inland and often renamed geographical features in the process.

Africa was plundered for labour from Roman times. During the 400 years of the Atlantic slave trade, 11-12 million young and able-bodied people were taken to the plantations of the Americas. This decimated communities, affected agricultural production, and created political instability. A lesser-known fact is that Arab and Indian traders also took slaves and an estimated 17 million were taken from East Africa and the Sahel over a thousand-year period.

The political map of Africa today largely still reflects the carve up of the continent at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Germany, Britain, France, and Belgium led the scramble for a share of its land and resources – a process that largely ignored existing boundaries and ethnic groups. It was often forgotten that Africa was populated long before its ‘discovery’ by Europeans. African kingdoms had risen and declined over the centuries, and many had had highly effective governments, extraordinary cultures, and extensive trade routes over land and sea. The Kingdom of Zimbabwe, the Mali Empire of West Africa, and the Kanem-Bornu Empire are examples.

Following this excellent introduction, the Geography Group will continue the African theme in July.

Report by Jane Harrison

### **Next meetings:**

Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> May 2023. 2.10pm in the Witham. Professor Frederick Smith “Managing the Oceans”

Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> June 2023. 2.10pm in the Witham. Dr Frederick Smith “Lithium: what’s it all about?”