

## September Geography Report

In September, the Geography Group held a joint meeting with Probus, at the Barnard Castle Cricket Club when Gerald Blake spoke about “the History and Geography of Durham Regatta”. Gerald has had a close connection with the regatta having coached Durham University crews for many years.

Durham regatta will be 191 years old in 2024. Celebrations to commemorate the victory at Waterloo had been held on the river since 1815. Durham University began in 1833 and in 1834 the first regatta was grafted on to the Waterloo festivities. Professional oarsmen competed for cash prizes, while the gentlemen amateurs competed for silver medals (as shown below).

Racing in rowing boats was commonplace for centuries among the professional watermen working on the rivers of England. The watermen sustained the economic life of towns and cities on rivers. By the 17th century there were tens of thousands of them, notably on the Thames and Tyne. Boat-building and oar-making thrived to serve the watermen. Harry Clasper on the Tyne was the most innovative boat builder of his day and he competed frequently at Durham regatta.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century amateur sports of all kinds took off in England and scores of clubhouses, pavilions and boathouses sprang up across the country. Amateur rowing developed rapidly from the late eighteenth century as Oxbridge colleges and Thames side schools took it up. The first Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race was in 1829.

Durham regatta flourished throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with more clubs competing and the railways bringing large crowds of spectators from far and wide. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the regatta continued to increase in popularity although there were no regattas between 1914 and 1918. Gerald told the moving story of the Bede College crew who won the Grand Challenge Cup in 1910, four of whom were on Gravenstafel Ridge on April 25 1915 when the Bede Company of the DLI suffered grievous losses.

The introduction of women’s events in 1946 brought new life to the regatta and a fresh wave of enthusiastic competitors. Today’s regatta is a logistical miracle, with races starting roughly every three minutes, all day long for two days. In 2023 there were 10,000 visitors and 1,400 competitors from 50 clubs, almost half of which are based on the Wear in Durham.

Next meeting: Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> November, at 2.10pm, in the Witham. This will be a “Geography Smorgasbord” of members’ contributions.

