

November Geography Report

By Jane Harrison

Our speaker for November had to postpone, so Annie, Gerald and Jane stepped into the breach.

Annie has been a keen wild water swimmer for many years, and we discovered that she had swum in lakes, rivers, and seas all over the world. As a geography group we enjoyed trying to guess the locations of her slides. Most were beautiful places, such as Lake Bohinj, in Slovenia, but others had less to recommend them, such as Odense harbour, in Denmark, which was full of jellyfish! Wild water swimming is not without its hazards. Once a dog ran off with her underwear and an over-enthusiastic Labrador dive-bombed her from a pier!

Jane talked about the fascinating Dutch system of water defence lines, which she discovered by chance in an historical geography atlas about Utrecht. Since the 16th century the Dutch have used geography and their hydraulic engineering expertise to their advantage and deliberately flooded low-lying land to hinder the advance of invading armies. Carefully regulated water levels deterred foot soldiers whilst at the same time prevented the use of boats. The 96 forts of the New Dutch Waterline and the Defence Line of Amsterdam, together with the system of dikes, sluices, pumping stations, canals, and inundation polders, became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2021.

Gerald spoke about the complicated political geography of the Gaza Strip. This tiny, narrow territory is about the size of the Isle of Wight and was once economically influential on ancient trade routes. Today it has an agreed international border with Egypt and a 60-kilometre armistice line with Israel. It is a low-lying, semi-arid coastal area, which relies heavily on groundwater, desalination, and piped water from Israel. Hamas has taken advantage of the underlying sandstones to construct its extensive tunnel systems.

Gerald outlined the political background leading to Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip in 1967, and its eventual military withdrawal and the dismantling of its settlements, following the rise of Hamas in 2005. A temporary blockade became permanent in 2007 and crossing points and buffer zones were created along the border. This has impacted on Gaza's fragile economy, as well as restricting the movement of people. Israel also controls maritime resources including recent gas fields discovered offshore. Population densities are high and increasing, particularly in the refugee camps.

We all came away understanding more about this complex region.

Next meeting: Thursday 15th February, 2pm in the Witham. Andrew Griffiths founder and director of local company Droneflight Ltd. "Drones – aerial-borne cameras and other sensors in the examination of landscapes and structures"