

GEOGRAPHY GROUP MEETING THURSDAY APRIL 18: JONATHAN MITCHELL ON “UNLOCKING HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY WITH MAPS FROM YOUR PC”

REPORT BY GERALD BLAKE

A full house welcomed Jonathan Mitchell (formerly of the Foreign Office) for the third time in five years, who spoke with enthusiasm about the huge potential of interactive websites and online databases in geographical research and map drawing. To illustrate the powerful tools available Jonathan first outlined his ground breaking research into the Tyne keel boats, and (after the break) his map- led efforts to trace the movements of 183 Field Ambulance RAMC in 1943-44 from Salerno to Casino, a unit in which his father served. Both halves of the afternoon were packed with interest and lavishly illustrated as we ventured into worlds we knew nothing about.

For two centuries the Tyne keels carried coal from numerous mines around the upper Tyne downstream to colliers docked in deeper water near the mouth of the Tyne chiefly for shipment to London. The keels had evolved to navigate shallow river waters, and to pass through the low bridge which spanned the Tyne until its removal in 1868. They were crewed by three men and a boy, who had to load and unload 22 tons of coal. In spite of the famous folk song “Weel may the keel row” oars were rarely used, the chief method of propulsion being the tides. In the early nineteenth century there might have been 800 keels on the Tyne and 2,000 keel men. Sadly no keel boats have survived.

Using tools freely available on the National Library of Scotland website our speaker used large scale maps of the Tyne region to reveal more about how the coal was moved. He retraced the original routes of the wagon ways (in pre-railway days) and drew profiles of their routes from pit head to riverside to show the effectiveness of gravity. He compiled a startlingly complex map of the coal mines, wagon ways, railways and stathes (coal loading and storage places) using NLS resources. We saw his map of the “keel killers” depicting the railways and river improvements which ended the era of the keels from the 1860s.

Jonathan’s painstaking research on 183 Field Ambulance in Italy in 1943 to 1944 is ongoing, but we were given some insights into what can be done using primarily Google Earth. His campaign maps using official war diaries are a revelation of detail. Transferring original map references to modern maps was tricky. Once a location where 183 FA had been stationed was established, it could be related to the landscape today using Google Earth images. We were all captivated by a wonderfully informative talk, but regrettably we ran out of time before questions.

Jonathan Mitchell has kindly provided us with the links to the online resources he used (four interactive websites and three online databases) plus a reading list which has been circulated to members. I hope these will be used by some of us for future adventures!

NEXT MEETING: Thursday 20 June (2.00 pm in the Witham). Professor Peter Redgrave: “Where the crawdads sing: a geographical travelogue of the south east seaboard of the United States”