

Geography Report – May 2025

Jane Harrison

Our speaker, Richard Witham (no relation to Henry Witham), spoke about his research into Georgian Barnard Castle. His starting point was a town map surveyed by John Wood in 1827. The map is one of the earliest large-scale maps of the town and predates the first Ordnance Survey town plan surveyed in the 1850s. John Wood, who produced over 150 town plans, was educated in North Yorkshire and later lived in Edinburgh. He possibly owned or rented a house just off the road to Bowes, which he called 'Paradise'.

When the map is superimposed a modern satellite image of the town it is remarkably accurate. It shows how crowded the town was in the early 19th century. In 1831, when the population was 4,640, it was confined within a much smaller area than in 2021 when the population was only 1,144 larger. Infant mortality was high in 1827, with children under one accounting for 25% of burials recorded in the parish records of St. Mary's Church. It wasn't surprising that cholera decimated the population in both 1847 and 1849.

The map provides a snapshot of the Georgian town and surrounding area, showing land ownership as well as the location of industries, shops and services. Richard used the map evidence, together with a directory and gazetteer of the time, to tell us more about the town. He introduced some of the inhabitants who included William Prattman, an Independent Methodist minister, whose over-ambitious coal mining ventures made him bankrupt, and Captain Robert Kipling, of the 43rd Regiment of Foot, who fought during the American War of Independence and helped create a rather dubious sounding 'Association for Prosecution of Felons' in Barnard Castle.

A wide range of manufacturers were based in the town. Carpet and leather manufacturers and their associated industries dominated. In 1827 25% of baptisms were into the families of weavers and cordwainers (shoe makers). The list of industries also included straw hat manufacturers, tallow chandlers, rope and twine manufacturers and whitesmiths who worked with non-precious metals such as tin and pewter.

Food shops were predominantly concentrated in the lower part of the town in contrast to those selling household items and services. There were also 24 taverns, public houses or inns. Inns were important for stabling horses. Stagecoaches ran regularly towards Bishop Auckland and Kirby Stephen before being superseded by the train in the 1850s.

Richard hopes the bicentennial anniversary of this special map will be celebrated in 2027.

Next meeting: Thursday 17th July. Meet Jane Harrison in Richmond Market Place at 2pm for a guided walk to explore the town's historical geography.