

## Forum Historical Environment Report: January 2020

We finished the year 2019 in December with a new venture (unashamedly stolen from the Geography group). Members were invited to bring in one item of historical interest and talk about it for 4 minutes. Nineteen members turned up and most brought an item. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the items had a personal as well as historical connection and the session turned out to be quite moving as well as instructive. After considerable thought I have not named any names below, but those present may find this a useful summary to recall a very interesting and evocative session.

We heard about (and passed round) the first bearing cast at NSK Holdings of Peterlee, followed by a coin cast to celebrate the cutting of the first sod for the Weardale Extension Railway in 1893, then a late 19th century handmade amber brown jug with black etched illustrations of drawings from W. Outram Tristram's book which takes a nostalgic look at travel in pre-railway days, *Coaching Days and Coaching Ways* (1888); we continued with a replica large Sanctos Cage doll from Venice (although found throughout the catholic world), too big to pass round, but leading to wide discussion; then it was a set of naturalisation documents with a most moving story attached involving incredible suffering and equal fortitude; by contrast there followed a chafing dish, relatively modern but of a type dating from Roman times (described by Cicero as 'a kind of two-piece saucepan' with examples found across many ancient and medieval civilisations; our first military item was a fuse from a smoke shell picked up on the battle site at Ypres, at the very spot where the member's grandfather died on 7<sup>th</sup> June 1917. This was very poignant.

A silver matchbox was next, given to a fiancé as a good luck charm in WW1. Unfortunately the soldier died, but his fiancée married another more fortunate soldier who returned and the matchbox survives as a family heirloom; a well-worn jacket paid tribute to the expertise of a Sheffield metal specialist, responsible for assessing the quality of steel in his factory; a set of 19<sup>th</sup> century indentures came next, notable for their exquisite handwriting as well as for providing evidence about the running of a contemporary local hardware shop; back in the military world, we handled fragments of a Chinook helicopter from the Falklands campaign; following a reading from a member's mother's diary for the day of his birth in 1957 we were passed a letter composed by the same member as a young boy to his poorly father, complete with Toy Post postage stamp; then came a commemorative mug from Limavady in Northern Ireland celebrating the tercentenary of the Battle of the Boyne (the turning point in

the Williamite War) which took place in Drogheda, Ireland in 1690 between William III and the deposed James II. We also heard about the member's family connections to Limavady.

We were then shown a photograph from June 1917 sent by a member's grandmother to her husband who was serving on the Western Front at Ypres. It was a photo of herself holding her first-born; happily the soldier later returned, bringing back the photo. Ironically the member's other grandfather, a Quaker and conscientious objector was not so lucky, being killed evacuating the wounded in Northern France; last but not least we were treated to examples of 17<sup>th</sup> century-style farming implements, including a clamp for working with leather and a quite fearsome metal branding iron for use on cattle horns.

All in all, a fascinating 90 minutes – so interesting in fact that the planned quiz had to be held over to a later date. Thanks to all the members who took part, particularly those who described some very emotional family situations.

Details of our full 2020 programme will follow shortly. There will not be a January meeting but the group will resume its activities on Thursday February 13<sup>th</sup> at Enterprise House when Phil Johnson will talk on the history of his house in Galgate. As ever, new members will be most welcome; contact Tim Meacham for further details.