

Forum Historical Environment Report: March 2020

We were very fortunate this month to be addressed by author Val Scully who spoke on 'the Courageous Countess' based on the life of Mary Eleanor Bowes (the title a defiant response to an earlier volume 'The Unhappy Countess'). Val spoke with passion, setting the scene by describing the Blakiston family's estate at Gibside and the tale of Elizabeth Blakiston whose marriage to Sir William Bowes of Streatlam Castle united the two families. The early death of Sir William left Elizabeth to show herself as the first of many strong family women as she oversaw the rise of railways and industry in the Derwent Valley. She somehow found time to bring up 10 children, the third of whom, George Bowes, adapted Gibside into the form seen today. His first marriage (to an Eleanor who died at 14!) was followed 19 years later by a second to a Mary. No sooner was a daughter born (the 'Mary Eleanor' of the talk's title) than George died.

The second half of the well-illustrated talk featured the often tragic life of this precocious, but very well educated only child. Early on she was kidnapped by an MP seeking to tap into her vast inherited wealth by marriage. Escaping by the help of servants she moved at age 16 to London where she was courted by the much older Lord Strathmore who again seemed more enamoured of her fortune than her beauty. His early death in 1776 left her at 26 with five children and it was no time before a womanising psychopath Andrew Stoney married her and caused her great physical and emotional damage. Val brought out the desperate situation of 18th century wives quite graphically, but finished on a brighter note with Mary's nine years of peace and tranquillity which followed Stoney getting his well-deserved come-uppance. Throughout, Val wove contemporary society and women's matters into her lively tale and the talk proved a real tour-de-force.

Next month Tim Meacham will talk on 'Edward VIII – Traitor or Victim?' at Enterprise House on Thursday 9th April at 10.00 am. Please email Tim for further details: new members welcome.