

Forum Historical Environment Report: February 2022

21 stalwart members turned up for our February meeting at Enterprise House to hear our member Bill Heyes talk about early Lead Mining in Teesdale. We were perhaps expecting a fairly standard run through the history of the London Lead Company, but Bill's presentation barely touched upon their era, showing us that, far from the claim of Rastrick & Jennings' book on the subject written as recently as the mid 1960s which effectively dismissed the years preceding 1753, serious lead mining was going on in Teesdale as early as 1550.

Bill has clearly spent many years researching these unheralded early years. His investigations had started locally visiting record offices in Durham and Newcastle, but as challenges arose he had found himself at the National Archives in London, then followed up links in Hertfordshire before being fortunate enough closer to home to persuade the late Lord Barnard to open up his well-protected Raby Castle archive. The result of all of this has been that Bill has built up a hard-to-equal account of early lead mining in Teesdale. He held us entranced with this for a full hour.

The only pre-1753 lead mine acknowledged by Rastrick & Jennings was Flakebrigg and Bill had found evidence of this site, in the manor of Eggleston, being mined by the Bowes family under lease from Elizabeth I as early as 1571. Yet by 1550 Edward VI had already granted the Bowes family a 21 year lease on 'all his lead mines .. within the Forest of Teesdale' (the neighbouring area to Eggleston manor). Frustratingly, although we hear that by the 1570s, the Teesdale lead mines were already 'well-worked', pre-1550 information has not proved possible to come by. Bill took us through a catalogue of early rivalries and historical fall-outs: in 1557 for example the Earl of Westmoreland was a leading player in the Eggleston Manor mine (Flakebrigg), only to fall foul of the crown in the 1569 uprising. His lease was forfeited allowing the Bowes family to obtain further leases in the manor. In Teesdale Forest too Bill identified a series of leases during the second half of the sixteenth century, although it seems details of production levels, profitability etc. were rarely documented.

Moving into the seventeenth century, we heard more detail of individual mines in both jurisdictions. For example records show that Grasse Groves in Teesdale Forest produced '300 bings' (about 40 tons) of lead between 1662 and 1665. This mine had been worked since before 1595. From 1611 Lady Isabella Bowes was managing these mines and there is mention of ore being carried by horses from Grasse Groves to Hexham. In 1648 ore worth £240 was extracted from Grasse Groves, the records tell us (while Pike Law by contrast was worked without profit). By 1673 Lord Barnard was becoming a potential player. He was keen to take over Langdon Mine when Lord Elgin's lease from the crown ended and, despite this being handed initially to the Earl of Carlisle, by 1683 Lord Barnard had purchased the lease and by 1705 almost all the Teesdale mines had come under his family's control. A map of 1732 still held in the archives at Raby Castle shows that 21 years before the London Lead Company apparently introduced lead mining into Teesdale, the trade was in fact widespread and flourishing. Bill's account was extremely well received and I am sure there will be further talks and visits on the many facets of this subject which he did not have time to cover.

Tim Meacham. 10/2/22.

