

U3A Historic Environment Group Report May 2022

The first request I received upon becoming group convenor some six years ago was for a guided walk on Cockfield Fell. In May we actually made it! 14 members met our guides Rob and Elaine at the small car park next to the Fell and set out for what I hope will be the first of two such walks, over what not so long ago was a vast area of industrial endeavour, in stark contrast to the rural solitude enjoyed today. We started on the uneven land opposite the carpark, picking our way carefully through the remains of multiple bell pits on our downward path towards the former Cockfield Fell railway station, where we paused for breath.



While pointing out the remains of the old railway line here (opened in 1861 to take Durham coke to furnaces in Cumberland, while bringing iron ore back to Cleveland) Rob and Elaine passed round photographs taken when the local industry was in full swing. Only the width of the grassy track bed remained to suggest the number of sidings which served the pits and other industry not that long ago (the line closed in 1962 and was removed over the next twelve months or so). Comparison with the old pictures revealed an unbelievable degree of change.

We then made our way down into Butterknowle to walk a section of an even older railway, the Haggerleases branch line of the Stockton & Darlington Railway, opened in 1830 and built to serve the long-disappeared quarries, collieries and other ventures of the industrial revolution. The original terminus can still be seen, although much altered, alongside the erstwhile water mill. A couple of hundred yards along the line we came across the famous skew bridge, one of the first of its kind in the world and now a scheduled monument.



Continuing about half a mile along this line (and passing what seemed a multitude of ruinous coke ovens), we reached the site of the 1861 main line's Lands Viaduct by which it crossed our Haggerleases branch; one gigantic brick pier remains to bear testimony to the awesome technological developments over the 30 years since the skew bridge had been built. From here, having discussed the cautionary tale of the viaduct's builder, Sir Thomas Bouch (whose mighty Tay Bridge collapsed in a storm some 18 years later ruining both the man and his reputation) we climbed up to join the 1861 line's trackbed and completed a triangular journey back to Cockfield Fell station; en route we passed a plethora of old tramway tracks, now providing the most significant evidence of the network of pits that once covered the fell hereabouts.

Today the clear air and an eerie silence make it almost impossible to imagine the claustrophobic hubbub (and noxious atmosphere) which visitors wrote of in the late 19th century. Thanks again to Rob and Elaine for helping us bridge the gaps both structural and temporal; a smashing morning aided too by the bright sunshine!

The June meeting has had to be postponed due to matters beyond our control, so our next visit will be to Wycliffe Church on Thursday 14th July. Further details from Tim Meacham by email at simontimothymeacham@gmail.com.