

History Report for October and November 2022

Having used the November Forum Historic Environment spot to report on our delayed Tees Cottage visit leaves me to update our other activities here on the website.

Our standard October meeting was an absolute treat. Professor Charlotte Roberts from Durham University spoke on 'Skeletons in the Cupboard': focusing on two projects, Charlotte, who trained as a nurse but then moved to do her degree and post-degree work in Archaeological Science, displayed her expertise in understanding History through the study of skeletons. Erosion of sand dunes at Bamburgh revealed a series of skeletons which Charlotte was asked to study. First exposed in the 19th century but reburied only to reappear in 1998, these were dated by Charlotte to the 7-9th centuries, a time when Bamburgh had been a royal seat. Many were buried face down, although others were in a crouch position. There were 78 adults evenly split between male and female. Many had rotten teeth, with considerable plaque – a real boon to archaeologists according to Charlotte. She tested this for Strontium and Oxygen in particular which showed that, while half were local, the others came from further afield. Many were from Cumbria and South Scotland while a few were from abroad. Bede's history suggested foreign invasions at this time, but these findings did not support that. It seemed more likely that these were local workers, although one surprise was the lack of evidence of a seafood diet, given the seaside setting at Bamburgh. Project two was based at Durham; recent excavations on the Castle Hill brought to light 29 individual skeletons, all male and young, not showing trauma and generally fit but with evidence of the effects of many illnesses. Again the plaque was crucial: study here pointed to Scottish origins and the date was clearly mid-1600s. Connection was made with the 1650 Battle of Dunbar and it turned out that these were survivors from the losing Scottish army, force-marched to Durham for imprisonment. Many survived to emigrate to New England (a tale in itself) but these were the unlucky ones. Charlotte's lively presentation made this a meeting to remember.

For November our Deltiologist member Bill Heyes showed us some 65 of his amazing local postcard collection. We were amazed to hear that in the pre WW1 years some six billion of these were posted in the UK. Bill has collected them for years and was able to take us on a tour of our local area adding invaluable detail to the rather dry facts as told in the history books. Following a brief history of the development of postcards (from the initially plain cards of 1870, via the first featuring pictures in 1894 to those in the current format by 1902) , Bill moved to focus on specific occasions and locations. He started with 'Hospital Demonstrations' (early fund-raising fairs in those pre-NHS days, where the whole populations of Middleton and Barney seem to have turned out, most in their 'Sunday best'), spent some time on the coronation of 1911, a blustery day to put it mildly, with bonfires and fancy-dress parades, then turned to the local agricultural shows, still popular to this day. Everywhere there were immense crowds, even at shows such as Hury and Baldersdale, both long abandoned, and everywhere hordes of sheep. Few of us knew that Barney once had an annual horse fair to rival Appleby but there was the evidence; bicycles as well as horses everywhere! Most poignant were the postcards of recruiting stalls among the fair attractions, then a series of views of troop trains at the main railway stations. There were smiling excited faces among those leaving, but expressions of concern from those seeing them off. This made a fitting conclusion to a tremendous hour

of seeing real people in the world they inhabited between 1910 and 1920. As with Charlotte's session the room was packed full of members which both these exceptional talks merited.

Tim Meacham. November 2022.