

Forum Historical Environment Report for February 2025

As this report has to be written before the February meeting, I am focusing on a few of the highlights of our January meeting. This was the annual session where members share a five-minute item of historical interest. Every year this produces a good hour of fun and surprises: 2025 was no exception.

This year we suggested reading a short excerpt of a historical item. One member introduced us to the book 'Cocoa at Midnight' by Kathleen Clifford written with Tom Quinn, an account of Kathleen's life as a housekeeper for wealthy families between and after the wars. This is one of a series of memoirs and candid accounts of 'The Lives of the Servants', and really brings the era to life. By contrast we heard newspaper accounts of seventeenth and eighteenth century feuds (verging on riots) in Teesdale as described in Volume Two of The History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham by William Fordyce in 1867; this made clear that social divisions are not simply a modern manifestation! Another member displayed a lovely map of Hadrian's wall which he had been instrumental in producing, a work of art in itself. Another recommended book was 'The River Wear From Source to Mouth' an enigmatic work at a low price providing a real pot-pourri of fact and fiction.

We were then taken through brief histories of two very different buildings: Sherburn Hospital, opened as a Leper Hospital in 1173 and still operative under a different guise today. More locally we heard of the life of Thorngate Mill under its various guises; it was remarkable how short a time it served as an actual mill! Still in Barney we met the George Browns, father and son, who in different ways contributed much to the life and health of our town. Another member gave details of the life of their indentured great-great-grandfather in Newcastle-on-Tyne, who was expected to survive in 1835 on 7 shillings a year (less 3 shillings deductions)! Throw in a couple of personal reflections on a good range of issues (including a tribute to our late member Roger Redfearn and his contributions to our knowledge of local History) and at least two outlines of what I hope will become full talks in due course, and this made for a great variety of entertainment and education.

Finally In a very different mode we had two real performance highlights: we were shown the Marxophone, a musical instrument of 1912. This included a delightful demonstration of this remarkable invention, a most versatile and rich-sounding instrument. Then a member read us his own thought-provoking poem (also a song) written in response to the British government's 'Protect and Survive' campaign of the 1970s which was intended to allay fears on dealing with the threat of nuclear attack. This cheerily dark poem concludes:

"Protect and Survive,
Prosper and Thrive,
Hold onto your family if the night should turn to day,
Hold on tight or they might just blow away.",

a sobering thought to finish with.

Tim Meacham.