

Forum Historical Environment Report March 2025

30 keen members attended the March meeting at Enterprise House to hear Geoff Lowson's talk "From Spennymoor to Cape Town" which took us through the lives and works of Robert and Sophie Gray. There is a local link to this story: a plaque in Whorlton Church commemorates the church's consecration by this very Robert Gray in May 1853. Born into a wealthy family, the son of another Robert Gray who was Bishop of Wells, our Robert perhaps predictably entered the Church, serving at Whitworth, County Durham, before becoming vicar of Stockton in 1845. By this time, he had married Sophy, daughter of another local well-to-do family, the Myddletons, and they could have settled into a comfortable if predictable life of ease. However, both were made of sterner stuff and in 1847 Robert accepted the position of Bishop of Cape Town. Geoff took us through the challenges faced by the couple. Initially it was necessary to fund their mission and the couple raised an enormous sum which allowed them to travel to South Africa in 1848 and set themselves up in their huge but undefined diocese. Trips followed though little-explored territory to meet the tribal chiefs and make plans to develop the diocese. Sophy was fully involved and even designed and project-managed a number of churches (some 40 or so).

Following a visit home in 1853 (hence presumably the Whorlton visit above), the pair returned to continue the good work in South Africa. They set up a school, St Georges, in Cape Town aimed primarily at the education of the sons of the local chiefs. Geoff had put considerable research into the dramatic effect this school had on the future development of South African life and politics right through to the present time. It was not all plain sailing (The Xhosa Cattle-Killing Massacre caused mass starvation in 1856 and 1857 for example) but thanks to the unstinting efforts of Robert and Sophy the diocese prospered and the seeds were planted for the South Africa of the late 19th and 20th century. Robert died in 1870, followed by Sophie less than a year later at the early age of 57, but together they had influenced history more than they perhaps realised. This was a splendid talk in every way, full of detail and nuanced understanding of the pros and cons of the English church's aims in trying to bring 'civilisation' to this far-away part of Africa. Whatever one's views on these aims, Geoff's description ensured that the diligence and commitment of this extraordinary couple shone through.

in April Ian Royston will talk about a very different but equally fascinating subject, 'Reservoir Mania'. This meeting, on Thursday 10th April at Enterprise House, is now fully booked.

Tim Meacham