

Historic Environment Group – May 2025

Report by Rob Pearson

It was another well-attended meeting at Enterprise House to hear Christine Price speaking on “Richard Cobden, Bowes to Westminster: A murder, trial and a radical politician”.

We started with an overview of the Yorkshire Schools, including those at Startforth, Woden Croft, Cotharstone, Lartington and Bowes. They were advertised as providing a “useful” education for young gentlemen, but often ended in neglect, starvation and early death. Naturally, mention was made of William Shaw’s Academy, the likely inspiration for Dickens’s “Nicholas Nickleby”, but the concentration was on George Clarkson’s Academy, in what is now Bowes Hall, which appears to have had higher standards, though still basic by those of today. The spotlight of the day fell upon the 19 year old apprentice teacher, Samuel Wedgwood who was accused of murdering Eleanor Clarkson, the wife of the Principal. It was said that she had been tipsy and with candlestick in hand tried to intervene between Samuel and his employer with the result that Samuel killed her with a blow from the candlestick to her head. Samuel was found not guilty after the surgeon testified that death was due not to a blow from the candlestick, but from a fall or some other object. In the trial, at York Assizes in July 1820, it was claimed as part of the prosecution that Samuel was a Radical who had objected to Mrs. Clarkson complaining about him teaching radical notions. He subsequently moved to Burslem in Staffordshire, where he taught, drank and died in 1863.

This was a time of unrest, with a depression after the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the Corn Laws. Radicals dared to discuss Parliamentary Reform, “universal” suffrage for men, secret ballots and repeal of the Corn Laws.

Richard Cobden, 1804-1865, attended Clarkson’s Academy from 1814 until perhaps 1822, while Samuel Wedgwood was there. He was always studious and suffered terribly from chilblains, which limited his mobility. He wrote many letters home but received few in return. When his father was unable to pay his fees, they were covered by an aunt and uncle. He recognised that a broad education would stand him in good stead, and he certainly received a good grounding.

After leaving Bowes he worked as a commercial traveller for his uncle’s warehouse business and in 1828 had his own calico warehouse, in 1831 going into partnership to print calico in North Lancashire. Between 1833 and 1837 he travelled to France, the United States and the Levant. In 1838 he became an alderman in the growing city of Manchester and with a fellow Radical, John Bright, seeing the hardship suffered by the poor as the result of high flour and bread prices, he led the Anti-Corn Law League until they were finally repealed in 1846. He was Radical MP for Rochdale from 1841-7 and went on a Peace Tour of Europe in 1846-7. He co-founded the then pro-peace “Morning Star” in 1856 and in 1859 was Liberal MP for Rochdale. He packed a lot into his life.

“Cobdenism” was in favour of free trade, international peace and cooperation and his influence lasted until the beginning of the First World War. There are many statues to him, with Napoleon III the major contributor to the one in Manchester and there is a bust in

Westminster Abbey. We will perhaps never know whether he was influenced by Samuel Wedgwood - maybe he was? Christine's excellent talk was much appreciated.

The next meeting is a walk on the original Stockton and Darlington Railway on Thursday, June 12th, leaving Locomotion Museum at 10 a.m.