

Forum Report for Historic Environment Group. January 2026. Tim Meacham

Apologies for the lack of a November or December report from the group. We enjoyed Ian Reid's excellent account of John Rae, explorer, in November but had to postpone our December Members' Session until January. It was well worth the wait however, as ten members each delivered their very different but equally fascinating 5-10 minute Historical snippets, while Mandy's mince pies kept up the illusion that the festive season was still in full swing.

Sue gave us a great start with her illustrated account of her home, Balder Grange, enlarged in the 1840s by the Quaker Francis Gibson, and retaining many original features. His wife Elizabeth was from another great Quaker family, the Peases of Darlington. By contrast Alan brought along four card games he had collected dating from the early 20th century, beautifully illustrated and containing contemporary information on the counties of England. Ann then struck a very different note by recalling her great-great-grandparents who were swept away by the Tees in 1896, making orphans of six young children, as the couple unwisely undertook a crossing by the ferry at Whorlton in a fierce spell of weather. Ann read a sad account of the event as reported in the Teesdale Mercury.

Celia had brought along her stamp collection, focusing in particular on one from West Australia featuring a black swan image issued in 1994 to mark the centenary of the state's first postal service. This represented the Swan River and was evidence of Perth's local pride. Liz followed this by showing us several books of carols from the Sheffield area, including one, "A Fantasia on Oughtibridge Carols" whose cover showed an illustration of Liz's great-grandfather! Some of the carols within were local hymns dating from the mid 19th century, but since largely disregarded in favour of the national favourites.

David then produced 3 ancient-looking tools (see photograph) for discussion. It was generally agreed that the top one was a 'proddy mat tool', while there was less certainty about the lower two. A consensus was reached eventually that the uses of these were both linked with saw setting. Further information would be welcome!



Nicky then had a suggestion for a good read. During a recent visit to Mellerstain House near Kelso she had purchased a book "Lady Griselle Baillie, Mistress of Mellerstain" by Lesley Abernethy; this amazing lady had a multiplicity of interests as far apart as gardening and writing Scots songs, all of which she chronicled in her diaries between the 1690s and her death in 1746: not to be missed! We then came more up-to-date as Rob described three bomb craters in the field behind his house. Despite the limits on reporting during WW2, Rob had discovered that about 100 German planes had set out on from Norway on August 15th 1940 to bomb targets in NE England. Luckily a small number of British Spitfires were available to combat these, and one Messerschmitt was shot down over Streatlam. Possibly the bombs responsible for Rob's craters were offloaded by one of these German planes which never reached its target.

Robin followed this with a further local story. He was asked for help by the Vicar of Whorlton who was arranging for attention to be paid to water leaking at his church. Being a retired Archaeologist Robin agreed to report on the digging of trenches through the churchyard for new water pipes in connection with the repair work. This took two days and Robin checked the two trenches to ensure proper respect was shown to those buried there. In fact very little was revealed by the digs apart from some Victorian pottery, possible from the large manor house which once adjoined the churchyard.

We finished with two railway-inspired items. Ian produced a 1975 Railway Timetable which covered the whole country. He lamented the loss of this comprehensive timetable since the break-up of British Rail - "very handy on a rainy day in Banbury after a cancellation" - but said how useful this bulky volume had been in accompanying him on his (successful) mission to travel on all extant railway lines in Britain since the 1970s. He has to remain vigilant however because of the recent revival of services on long-defunct lines. Tim then passed round an LNER corkscrew as used in the 1920s in restaurant cars plying between London and East Anglia. The item contained

advertisements for the celebrated beers produced by the Tollemache Brewery of Ipswich, at its height in the 1920s. A wine list from the mobile restaurant survives for 1926 showing that for wealthy patrons a bottle of that year's Pol Roger Champagne could be ordered for a mere nineteen shillings (just under £100 by modern price comparison).

As has been true every year since we started these sessions, an amazing amount of historical information emerged during our 90-minute meeting! Since thanks to all those who took part.