

Teesdale U3A Monthly Meeting – September 2018

Rokeby Hall is a beautiful Georgian building on the outskirts of Barnard Castle. Anthony Wood, one of the volunteer guides spoke to U3A about one of the previous owners, Sir Thomas Robinson. Anthony explained that it is only now that Sir Thomas' involvement in the design of buildings and the architecture of the day was being uncovered and recognised.

Sir Thomas was born in Merton in 1702 into a wealthy family. He bought a commission into the army at aged 18. He then followed the path of many wealthy young people of the day and embarked on the grand European tour. He absorbed the culture and developed an interest in architecture.

Anthony displayed a sketch of Rokeby as it was in 1721. Sir Thomas, now full of admiration for French and Italian architecture decided to demolish the building and replace it with one to his own design and to lay out the park. Work started in 1725. Rokeby is a combination of Palladian style and also classical as described by Pliny. The design was not particularly practical for the British climate, but nevertheless it set the standard for future houses. Sir Thomas meanwhile continued his penchant for getting to know the right people. He was elected to the Royal Society at the age of 25 and then became MP for Morpeth, a rotten borough, having spent £1000 in bribes. He then married Elizabeth Howard, Lady Lechmere, taking a 2-year honeymoon in Europe. Apparently, Lady Lechmere was addicted to gambling and alcohol and Sir Thomas was distraught when she died at the age of 44 in 1739. Meanwhile he continued to worm his way into a variety of influential organisations and generally spending beyond his means.

In 1741 he was appointed Governor of Barbados, a prestigious and influential position and also one which provided considerable financial rewards through the trade in slaves, sugar and rum. After a dispute with the Barbados legislature, the British Government exonerated him. He married the wealthy Sarah Salmon described as a modern lady and the marriage was one of convenience. She stayed in Barbados as the wife of the ex-Governor and he returned to Britain, being provided with an annual allowance from his wife.

Sir Thomas designed many buildings including Belvedere House on the banks of the Thames, later bits of Castle Howard and others. There are several examples of schemes which confirm that he was an excellent structural engineer. By now he knew 'everybody' and was even able to recommend the up and coming e.g. Chippendale, Capability Brown and others. He continued to design other projects including Castle Howard West Wing, the entrance gate to Auckland Palace and the building in the Deer park, several churches and Prospect Place in Chelsea. Locally he designed the Winston Bridge (and possibly another bridge yet to be identified), Dairy Cottage, Rokeby Church, the Rievaulx Temples and Picnic House. He died in Prospect House in 1777, aged 76, and is buried in Merton with his mother and grandmother. There is also a memorial to Sir Thomas and Lady Lechmere in the south transept of Westminster Abbey.

This was an excellent talk, full of fascinating detail about a person who until recently was little known. There is no doubt that he was very influential at a time when the country was just recovering from the privations of the Napoleonic War. The buildings and structures designed by Sir Thomas Robinson will be his memorial.

The vote of thanks was given by Celia Chapple.

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 25th October when Lynda Winstanley will be speaking on the history and restoration of the Darlington Hippodrome.

For more information about U3A contact Ian Reid tel: 01833 631304

Ian Reid