

Monthly Meeting – 27 January 2021

In the absence of face-to-face monthly meetings Teesdale U3A has decided to hold meetings via Zoom for the time being. The first meeting was held on the 27th of January when almost 100 members joined local historian Chris Lloyd. Chris's topic was 'Pits, Pockmarks and Haggerleases: The Story of Cockfield Fell'. Did you know that Cockfield Fell is England's largest scheduled ancient monument? Chris began with an aerial view of the fell and identified several features. These included Iron Age farmsteads (500 BC), a Romano British settlement (500 AD), a Roman centurion's grave, a mound which could have been a Roman rabbit hill, depressions of former bell pits and various old railway tracks. Coal mining was an important industry in Cockfield for many centuries. In the 1700s, coal was transported to Egglestone where it was used in the process to smelt lead. Ponies with panniers would have been used initially to carry the coal and then in 1800s coal wagons would have been pulled by ponies using rails.

In 1776, George Dixon was investigating the possibility of building a canal from Winston to Copley through Cockfield to carry coal to other areas. There was a shortage of money to finance the project, but a start was made and even a barge was built. The scheme was not completed but this was one of the precursors to the building of the Stockton to Darlington railway. You might still hear the expression 'send to the Cockerton docks', which of course were nonexistent. George is credited as being the discoverer of coal gas which he used for domestic lighting in Gordon House (later to be part of the Gordon House colliery) with explosive results.

In 1821, John Dixon surveyed a possible steam railway line across the fell. This was opposed by the Duke of Cleveland although the railway did open in 1825. The Brusselton Incline was a major stumbling block on the line to Shildon where ponies were originally used to pull the wagons up the hill. The ponies were then put into 'Dandy Wagons' and given a free ride back down. This system was replaced by a steam powered engine at the top of the hill designed by George Stephenson. At the bottom of the hill Locomotion No 1 was waiting to take the goods to Shildon. This system was replaced when a tunnel was built under the hill in 1842.

Chris referred to reports written in 1854 by a Mr. B who was a reporter visiting the area, describing the life and work of a miner. He even travelled on a Dandy Wagon. Mr. B refers to the growth of intellectual labourers, smoking pipes and reading after their daily bath. 'They enjoy the best of health and are free of accidents. This was not true of course. Chris thought Mr B was a snob.

The North Eastern Railway opened the Bishop Auckland to Barnard Castle line in 1863 which featured 2 magnificent viaducts, the Langleydale and the Lands. The architect was Sir Thomas Bouch who also designed the famous Tay Bridge. The line was closed in 1962 and the Lands viaduct was blown up. The Gordon House Colliery replaced the bell pits in 1893 and was closed in 1962.

This was a fascinating and revealing talk about an area which has seen enormous changes over the centuries and was at the forefront of the industrial revolution where the scale, ambition and engineering skill were awe inspiring. Chris peppered his talk with amusing anecdotes, some of

which might even have been true. Chairman Mike Sweeting thanked the speaker and also Bob Tuddenham who had hosted the event. The next zoom meeting will be held on Thursday 25th February at 10.30 am when Richard Witham will be speaking about the life of Henry Witham. For more information about U3A, look at the website www.teesdaleu3a.org.uk

Ian Reid