

Teesdale U3A – The Plague Doctor

David Bell, advertised as the Plague Doctor was the speaker at the August u3a meeting in the Witham. David was not in fact a doctor, but a retired civil servant and his talk was about the the Great Plague of the 1600s and the effect on the Derbyshire village of Eyam, where David is currently living.

The diarist Samuel Pepys played a major role in David's story. David was assisted in his demonstrations by a colourful, blow up, life sized Samuel Pepys model, dressed in 17th century clothes. The model had a urinary tract infection, a bladder stone and constipation. With the help of a cucumber, some rusty tools, including a large rusty nail, he demonstrated how a bladder stone might have been removed in the 1600s. To help the healing process apparently, Pepys' surgeon used a broken egg, bird's feathers and finally a hot flat iron to cauterise the wound. This graphic description brought tears to the eyes of many men in the audience.

To treat haemeroids, David employed a bamboo cane, a bunch of red grapes and a plastic leech. There was much shuffling in the audience during this description. Pepys had recalled that his doctor needed to be drunk and that 4 stout assistants were required to hold patients down. David finished with the harrowing story of Matthew Morton and his family who lived on the site in Eyam now occupied by David Bell and his wife. To avoid the spread of the plague, the local vicar, William Mompesson, had advised his parishioners to stay in the village and not to mix or meet in public. Subsequently, Matthew had to cope not only with the death of his 2 children and then his wife but had to bury them himself in the garden. It was later discovered that the vicar had sent his own 2 children to Sheffield before speaking to his parishioners. There were some parallels here with our own situation during the pandemic and we were left feeling grateful for the NHS. The talk also provided some much-needed entertainment after long periods of lockdown.

The vote of thanks was given by Elizabeth Gott.

The next monthly meeting will be on the 23rd September when David Edwards will be speaking on 'Being a Ranger in the Grand Canyon '.

Ian Reid