

Teesdale u3a

Over 100 u3a members turned up to the October meeting to hear a talk by Professor Andrew Beeby on mediaeval manuscripts. About 12 years ago, Andy was asked to undertake research into the pigments found in mediaeval illuminated manuscripts. Being a chemist who had always been interested in ancient documents, he readily agreed and is now a key member of a specialised team named 'team pigment' which examines the documents, usually where they are held. These handwritten documents are mainly from the 6th to the 16th centuries and include the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Book of Kells, the Durham manuscript and many others.

Prior to the use of modern methods, the identification of pigments was often down to educated guesses which were often subsequently found to be incorrect. Now, various kinds of spectroscopy are used to identify the material in the pigments. In this process, light (radiation) is split into different constituents, specific to individual pigments. Andy displayed the results of such analyses, identifying red lead, lapis lazuli, indigo, red ochre and many others. From these results it is also possible to determine when the ink or the artist had been changed, where alterations had been made and whether the paints had been mixed. The parchments themselves were made from animal skins which had been treated, scraped and stretched into double pages. Four sheets made a quire and the quires were then sewn together to produce the books. In the earliest documents, black iron gall ink was used, made from oak tree galls. The text was usually written first, leaving spaces for initials or illuminations, which were then filled in later by an artist. Andy displayed an extract from the Lindisfarne Gospels, showing the original black ink. Adjacent on the page was a translation into old English written by the monk Aldred in 970 AD in Chester le Street. Andy then showed a Latin text from the Durham Collector, also written by Aldred, using a red oxide pigment.

Andy and his colleagues have built up a unique specialist team which is mobile, is able to use multiple methods and which can use equipment made in house.

This was an exceptional presentation of a difficult technical subject, delivered with humour and made accessible to a general audience, which was much appreciated.

The next meeting is on Thursday 28th November when Connor Emerson is speaking on 'Remaking Beamish, the 1950s Town'.

Ian Reid
25/10/2024