

Teesdale u3a Monthly Meeting – May 2025

“Turner in The Pennines” was the subject of Dr Patrick Eyres’ talk at the May meeting. Joseph Mallord William Turner was born in 1775 and despite becoming one of the superstars of his day, he was not fully recognised until after his death, and during his life he tried to avoid the trappings of success and fame. He travelled widely throughout Europe, creating sketches and watercolours for subsequent publication. In 1816 he made a four-day visit to Richmondshire, North Yorkshire, which became one of the subjects of his artistic work. The year 1816 was known as ‘the year without a summer’ when, due to volcanic activity, there were extremely harsh weather conditions. Turner usually travelled alone, on horseback, and on the 1816 visit, he was often riding over boggy terrain, covering long distances, resulting in his sketches becoming soaked.

Turner had been commissioned by Dr Thomas Whittaker to create 120 drawings of the area for which he was to be paid £3,000; the drawings were then to appear in a History of Richmondshire. In fact, only 20 of these drawings were used, although the rest were available for subsequent engraving. This reflected Turner’s astute business head. He also planned his trips meticulously, documenting the likely costs of travel, accommodation and other expenses.

Patrick displayed some of Turner’s sketches and paintings of the Teesdale area, including High Force, Cauldron Snout, the Wynch Bridge, the Meeting of the Waters, Brignall Church and others. Turner usually travelled in the summer to make sketches which he then painted in the winter. He was moved by grand mountain scenery, lakes and waterfalls and was known for his expressive use of colour and imaginative landscapes. Local hills and valleys could be depicted as alpine mountains, with raging waterfalls. He always painted “en plein air” which was unusual in Turner’s Day. Also, in many of his paintings, he included small details of working people doing everyday tasks, e.g. a fisherman, a woodman or sometimes an animal. His sketches were passed on to engravers and the popular perception of his work is through his engravings. In 2005, his painting “The Fighting Temeraire” was voted Britain’s greatest painting and the image appears on the back of the current £20 note. Turner left his paintings to the nation on his death and his sketchbooks are kept in Tate Britain. This was an excellent talk delivered with humour and panache.

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 26th June when Dave Palmer will be speaking about the Georgian Theatre, Richmond.

Ian Reid
24/05/2025