

12th April 2017

Mary Eleanor Bowes

For our last meeting of the season, we were lucky enough to have as speaker Mr Antony Atkinson, a volunteer for the National Trust at Gibside, to talk about Mary Eleanor Bowes, the great, great, great, grandmother of The Queen. His knowledge of this extraordinary woman proved to be profound, and Mr Atkinson was able, with insight and humour, to enlighten us about her life, loves and losses, with his erudite and engaging talk.

He began by giving a preamble about her heritage. Her father, George, (1701–1760) had been known as a rake, yet he was an educated and clever man, and immensely wealthy to boot. He was a 'Coal Czar' in County Durham, and a landowner who inherited 1,500 acres and increased his estate to 43,000 acres before his death. He loved horse-racing and introduced fox-hunting to the North, but found time to be a Whig MP too. It was he who had the famous avenue created at Gibside, half a mile long and culminating with the first Statue of Liberty. The statue was originally covered in gold leaf; however, thieves scaled the column and stole the gold.

When George was 24, he married the 14-year-old Mary Gilbert, thus adding her £20,000 dowry to his considerable wealth. The marriage was short-lived, for only 4 months later she died.

His second wife was Eleanor Verney, who gave him a daughter, Eleanor Mary Bowes, his only child, much indulged and his heiress.

George had her educated with music, Latin and Greek, as well as in the sciences – botany became a passion and she was known as the most intelligent female botanist of the age. She created the orangery in 1772 – originally glassed in. The Gibside Hall was deliberately made derelict to avoid taxes.

She was 11 when her father died, and her mother left her to her own devices until she was taken to London by an aunt and, though of unprepossessing appearance, was soon receiving gentlemen. She married Lord Strathmore of Glamis Castle in a sumptuous ceremony – £20,000 was spent on her wardrobe alone. He added her name to his, thus Bowes Lyon became the family name. Five children were born to the couple before Eleanor took George Gray as her lover and was alleged to have had three abortions before deciding to keep a fourth child since Lord Strathmore had died and she meant to marry Gray.

A scandal ensued when she took a new lover, known as Captain Stoney. Stoney induced her to marry him by staging a mock duel and pretending to be fatally wounded; after a 'surprise' recovery he tried to take possession of her fortune – but Eleanor had pre-empted him by taking out an 'Ante Nuptial Trust' to safeguard her fortune.

A life of domestic abuse began. She was burnt, stabbed in the tongue, locked up, and starved. She was threatened with a mental asylum if she would not relinquish her fortune, and forced to entertain prostitutes. Eventually she escaped with the help of her maid, and succeeded in obtaining an "Article of Peace" to prevent Stoney seeing her. Stoney attempted to abduct her, was prosecuted and jailed. However she suffered from the media's cruel and degrading cartoons until she withdrew to Dorset for the rest of her life. She is buried in Poet's Corner at Westminster.