

**14<sup>th</sup> February 2018**

### **The university at Alnwick castle**

As we all know from the *Downton Abbey* series, the grand houses of the aristocracy were left denuded of servants during and after World War 1. At Alnwick Castle, a large block of accommodation and a refectory for the serving staff were left vacant. The late Duke of Northumberland realised that these empty buildings would serve very well for students. After World War 11, the Alnwick Teacher Training College was established there. When teacher training in the UK slowly incorporated into the University-based higher education system in the 1970s, a new educational enterprise moved in from the USA, a branch of the St Cloud State University (SCSU), from Minnesota. So we do have a University in North Northumberland! Some people will surely have come across groups of students taking parts of their university study programme on courses based in Alnwick.

Glendale Local History Society was treated to a lively account of how this came about from Wade Sherman, who administers the programme at Alnwick. SCSU itself was founded long before this venture, in 1869, at St Cloud, a town of around 100,000 people which lies on the Mississippi river, north of the twin-cities of Minneapolis/St Paul. It was created as a State University, which means that it is committed to providing higher education at affordable prices (for the US!) to students from the State, and it is the second largest State University in Minnesota. It also emphasises giving support for students in all kinds of ways. These days it has over 15,000 students, nearly 10% of whom come from outside the US, notably Mexico, Somalia and the Mung communities of South-East Asia. The University has won awards for its provision for students from outside the US, but it remains committed to extending the experience of more local students. Our speaker explained that, for many students, coming to St Cloud itself from deeply rural areas in Minnesota is quite a culture shock. Also, many American families in the Mid-West have little experience of anywhere else, and certainly not another country. So slowly SCSU has built up links with places across the globe which can provide residential study centre facilities where students can widen their horizons and learn something about the world outside their own country. It seems that SCSU was one of the earliest US universities to create a network of such centres for its students. The link with Alnwick came very early and by good chance, as SCSU's first idea was to open a study centre in London; but who could resist the idea of a study centre in an ancient castle?

In the first year, the SCSU students shared the building with the final year of the Teacher Training College. Soon, after some refurbishment, around 100 students were coming to spend a whole year of their studies in Alnwick. Initially, we were told, they had to look after their accommodation themselves, doing all the cooking and cleaning, as this helped to keep costs down. These days, with more concerns about health and safety issues, staff are employed to do this work, creating jobs locally. In recent years, around 63 students have been coming for a slightly shorter programme. They take courses in British History, Contemporary Britain, and British Culture. This last involves visits to various places so that

the students don't imagine that everywhere in our country is like Alnwick. In discussion with our speaker, we reflected on the challenge the students from Minnesota must face in grasping our long history and its active presence in our lives. Staying in a castle is surely a good place to start this experience! Our speaker also explained that students are encouraged to make links with Alnwick people, perhaps meeting with a local family, or participating in events such as the Alnwick Shrove Tuesday Football Match. We heard that groups come to Wooler, as a base for hiking. He also noted that a key task for the local SCSU staff team was to train students about alcohol, available to them in the UK but not until they are 21 in the US. The Alnwick SCSU campus, however, remains an alcohol-free zone.

As in the UK, publically-funded higher education in the US is under pressure to reduce costs, while students have to find the funds to pay for this rich experience. Our speaker explained that changes are in progress which mean that students will come for shorter and more intensive courses. Hopefully, this will not reduce the great value of experiencing another country and realising that there are many different ways to live in this world.