

Speaker: Chris Hunwick

As one becomes a 'certain age', we know that doctors and police constables seem to get younger and so it was with the Archivist of the Duke of Northumberland's estate, Chris Hunwick, who gave the Society an entertaining lecture on what the archives contain and their relevance to the operations of the Duke's business. Chris trained at Oxford University before working at Manchester Cathedral and gaining his archivist qualifications at Liverpool.

The Percy family originally had estates in Yorkshire and the first Baron Percy bought the barony of Alnwick from the Bishop of Durham in 1309; the charter of which sale still exists. The archives include the documents and seals from centuries ago including one of Robert Bruce. The oldest document found so far dates from the 1120s.

The timing of the lecture was fortuitous as it was the 620th Anniversary to the day of the Battle of Homildon {sic} [now Humbleton, of course] in which Harry Hotspur and the Earl of Dunbar defeated the Earl of Douglas a mile or so from Wooler; a battle to which Shakespeare refers at the beginning of *Henry IV Part 1*. Hotspur was later to die at the Battle of Shrewsbury when fighting with Douglas against Henry's armies after Henry refused to allow him to retain the ransoms which he was due for the prisoners captured at Homildon. Chris referred to a piece dated September 1768 by Thomas Percy, a Chaplain to the Duke, which referred to 'Red Riggs', so named after the rivulets of blood which ran for three days after the battle. Chris referred to the work undertaken by the Battlefield Trust on this and other battles using information from the Archives.

Chris began by discussing the location of the records which are largely kept in a tower in the south-east corner of the castle and its physical history after various re-building through the centuries. Lesser archives are now housed in a converted farm building and the main archives are being digitalised as vellum and old paper archives in ancient cardboard boxes deteriorate over the years.

The Percy's were involved throughout the War of the Roses and the third earl was killed at Towton in the Lancastrian cause and another Percy was killed in 1464 at the Battle of Hedgeley Moor [north of Powburn on the A697]. The Percy's were sufficiently ensconced with the Yorkist Richard III {who as Duke of Gloucester had captured Berwick on behalf of his brother Edward IV in 1482} for the latter to expect them to side with him against Henry Tudor at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 but Percy kept out the battle and therefore aided Henry to win and be crowned Henry VII, thus keeping his estates in the process.

The tenth Earl, Algernon, fought against King Charles in the Civil War but did not participate in the execution of the King so also retained his estates.

Chris explained that although there is a direct Percy blood line back to the Norman invasion, it has occasionally been passed through the female line via the junior title 'Earl of Northumberland'. The male line of the Percy-Louvain house ended with the eleventh Earl, and his heiress married the Duke of Somerset with her granddaughter marrying a Yorkshire knight, Sir Hugh Smithson, who changed his name to Percy and was created the first Duke of Northumberland and Earl Percy in 1766. It is their descendants who now represent the famous old house.

The website for Alnwick Castle indicates that the archives are maintained without cost to the taxpayer. The Duke's estates include land of 100,000 acres and 100 tenanted farms, and Chris disclosed that the role of the archive is to 'support the business' so supplying proof of the Duke's interests in properties throughout Britain and elsewhere. Thus, the archives are not only a historical resource to us all, they are also an essential commercial resource for the Duke.