

January 2024

A History of Norham – “The Most Dangerous Place in England”

Speaker: Martha Andrews

This intriguing title attracted a bumper audience!

Our speaker, Martha Andrews, gave an all-encompassing presentation with a superb selection of fine illustrations. In an hour she took us from prehistoric geology to the 21st century, when traditional salmon netting ended in 2009, including a wide range of details history topography, geography, saints and bishops, monarchs, warfare, architecture, treasures, and social history.

The glaciation which carved out the Tweed Valley left in its wake the small rocky hillock on which eventually Norham castle was built. Evidence of a midden with oyster shells suggests the site was used by early Neolithic hunter-gatherers.

Fast forward to the early Anglo-Saxon era, and it is likely that when St Aidan left Iona to found Lindisfarne Abbey he would have travelled via the Clyde to the Tweed valley, with only a small isthmus of land over which to transport his light-weight coracle – used for both transport and for shelter on land.

Cuthbert succeeded St Aidan as abbot, and he was buried at the monastery. When in 875 the monastery was sacked by marauding Vikings, the monks took St Cuthbert's body to the abbey at Norham, where it is likely to have rested for many decades – hence St Cuthbert's church became famed.

This region of Britain was unruly, governed by the Prince Bishops of Durham on behalf of the English monarch. The area is still known as Norham and Islandshire (the Isle of Lindisfarne) today, but interestingly it once included Bedlington.

The castle, built on a strategic defensive site, was frequently under attack from competing Anglo-Scottish forces; it was rebuilt in 1121 by Bishop Flambard to become a massively strong edifice. It was Queen Elizabeth 1 who decided finances were best spent re-fortifying Berwick rather than on the repair and maintenance of Norham Castle.

The church, which has impressive Norman architectural features, was likely to have been built at the same time, again on the site of earlier structures. We were shown images of fine Jacobean church furniture inherited from Durham Cathedral, and heard of tales concerning a past vicar of Norham.

Many famous names are linked with Norham. Here King Edward 1 chose John Balliol to become his “puppet king” of Scotland, not Robert the Bruce. The name of Sir Thomas Marmion, whose story was romanticised by Sir Walter Scott, is given to the iconic arch through which the remains of the castle can be viewed. Sir Thomas Grey, ancestor of the current Lord Howick of Howick Hall, once occupied the castle until a traitor caused it to fall

to the Scots. During the English Civil War, Oliver Cromwell led attacks from his base in Norham. King James IV of Scotland successfully besieged the castle at Norham, using a massive canon, Mons Meg, brought from Flanders. He survived a fall from an unstable wooden bridge and in gratitude he built the indestructible Ladykirk church – a completely stone structure – prior to his death at the Battle of Flodden with which Norham is also linked. To this day the 'Common Riding' from Coldstream includes Norham. Scottish John Knox, while in exile in England, married a woman from Norham.

Norham was given one of the earliest market charters in Northumberland, but the Market Cross was built in 1880 on an earlier foundation. The village retains its medieval street plan, and many houses have long gardens – burgage plots, used to grow food and to keep animals. Many buildings are thought to have been built with stone from the ruinous castle.

Norham village deserves a visit, and further reading, to do justice to its varied and turbulent history!

Rosemary Bell