

Members' evening, March 2024

At the members' evening, Val Glass & Mike Allport each gave talks, & in the interval we enjoyed a wonderful spread of nibbles, cheese, and wine laid on by Rosemary Bell & Muriel Edwin.

Belford's anti-slave trade petition speaker: Val Glass

Val started with the 'Belford Petition' of 1792 in favour of the abolition of the slave trade.

Abraham Dixon had bought the entire Belford estate in about 1746 and built a tannery and woollen mill, rebuilt the Blue Bell, & established a quarry. By 1772 the population of the village was about 700 inhabitants, and despite these enterprises the main employment was in agriculture. When the Belford petition was eventually presented in Parliament by Charles Grey, M.P., some 433 people of Belford had signed it. Val explained that many of the signatories were women, whereas in Scotland women were denied permission to sign petitions. Although other towns and villages such as Rothbury, Alnwick, and Hexham also had petitions presented, that of Belford seems to have been signed by the highest proportion of inhabitants.

Val reminded us of Dr. Trotter of Wooler, who had been ship's surgeon on a slave ship. He was so appalled by the conditions in which slaves were held that he was a key witness to the Report of Thomas Clarkson, which was instrumental in persuading William Wilberforce to embark on his campaign for abolition. The slave trade was abolished in 1807.

She noted the 1772 James Somerset case, decided by Lord Mansfield, which referred to the 'odious practice' and said that there was no case law which justified slavery, so that Somerset, who had been brought to England as a slave, was entitled to apply for habeas corpus and become free.

Val led the audience on to the links between the eminent families of Northumberland and slavery. Although she was at pains to point out that Northumbrian families were not directly involved in the shipping of slaves, many held substantial estates in the Caribbean, acquired through marriage, inheritance, and the payment of debts. The Trevelyan of Wallington Hall had plantations in Grenada and they have recently stated that they will pay reparations. John Graham Clarkson, a businessman from Newcastle, owned estates in Jamaica while the Cadogans of Brinkburn owned estates in Barbados. Val suggested that although the stately homes of such families were not built with the proceeds from slavery, they were often furnished from them. She specifically referred to the Chippendale furniture at Paxton House being so financed.

Val also referred to Ambrose Crowley and his 'cottage' ironworks on Tyneside, where local people manufactured in their own homes items such as candlesticks, pans, and knitting needles which were exported to West Africa along with shackles, leg irons and iron collars which served a much more sinister purpose. Thus, the income from slavery benefitted many social classes, even if the benefits were only indirectly from slavery. Crowley was however noted for his enlightened approach to his workforce, as his company had medical facilities for staff, there was a works committee, and so on.

The development of cameras

speaker: Mike Allport

Mike showed us an antique Magic Lantern which would have been used to show glass slides, then several old photos of Newcastle, Tyneside and Northumberland, some from the collection of the late Jimmy Redpath, a founding member of the local camera club, which Mike had bought from Jimmy's widow Molly.

A selection of original photographs on glass plate were displayed alongside more modern shots from the same viewpoint, showing how things had changed over time – or in some cases, hadn't.

Mike showed us early, pre-first World War cameras and then two photographs taken by 'vest' cameras of American troops in the front line, which dated them to 1917-8. 'Vest' cameras were small, foldable cameras which could be put in one's 'vest' pocket. It was illegal to take photographs in the front line without approval, so the photos which he showed are rare.

Mike demonstrated projectors from the same period and showed how the light was provided by oil lamps, poorly as one would expect, and then latterly by tungsten bulbs.

Peter Davies