

July 4th 2019

College Valley Memorial Event

Glendale Local History Society had the pleasure of joining with the Rothbury and the Aln & Breamish societies at an all-day event at the College Valley Cheviot Memorial, which commemorates those who lost their lives in air crashes during WWII, together with the shepherds and a sheep dog who rescued survivors.

On a fine summer's day, members were welcomed with coffee and cakes to nearby Cuddystone Hall. Air Vice Marshall Sandy Hunter OBE presided over the day's events and introduced three excellent speakers.

Group Captain Tim Willbond DL gave a fine, illustrated talk, explaining that in 19 crashes involving 16 different aircraft, 58 airmen from 7 allied nations died and only 16 survived. All the crash sites are clustered around high ground: the Cheviot, Hedgehope and Alnham Moor hills. Tim gave a superb description of the conditions for the crews in World War II aircraft, telling just how uncomfortable and noisy the planes were – and without heating (or toilet facilities) for long hours. The pilots and crew had rudimentary navigational equipment and received only basic training. Tim also explained why the large US Boeing B-17 bomber aircraft had come to grief on Cheviot's summit.

There were no formal search and rescue teams, instead responsibility fell on the local hill community to be vigilant and to alert the authorities of unexpected events; however communication was difficult, usually entailing a bicycle ride to the nearest public telephone. Many shepherds were involved in rescuing airmen, including Archibold Guthrie, John Goodfellow, Joe Douglas, Arch Bertram, and John Dagg and Frank Moscrop who, searching in appalling winter blizzard conditions, managed to rescue men from the B17 bomber. The two shepherds received BEM awards, and John Dagg's collie dog Sheila, who found the survivors, was later awarded the first civilian Dickin Medal for animal heroism.

Group Captain Tim Willbond explained that the original memorial had been built by a group of choir boys on top of Cheviot in 1968 to mark the spot where the B17 bomber had crashed. In 1995 a memorial was erected on the current site then, owing to weathering, it was refurbished in 2018.

The second speaker was GLHS member Squadron Leader Chrys Murphy MBE, who spoke about the crash sites and the walking trails which have been devised in conjunction with Northumberland National Park. The trails can be viewed and self-guided via a smart-phone app, View Ranger, which gives detailed historical and route information.

Meanwhile, Chrys has been taking young people from schools, scouts, cubs and Duke of Edinburgh Award candidates on the hill trails, giving exercise, information and thought-provoking questions whilst simultaneously enjoying the beautiful hill scenery.

At noon, a piper led us all to the memorial and a short service, led by Canon Reverend Jeffry Smith, remembering those who lost their lives "for our tomorrow". After a picnic lunch, 26 people enjoyed the guided walk which Chrys Murphy led to

one of the crash sites and the rest of us were entertained by an enlightening and humorous talk by Charles Baker-Cresswell. He focused on the College Valley itself, mentioning its pre-history, its ownership and its management – past, present and future – aiming to preserve this special, precious, peaceful landscape as a peaceful retreat for people and wildlife. His foresight, wisdom, advice and management, while chairman of the trust for College Valley Estates was very much ahead of its time, since it is currently anticipated that (? post Brexit) landowners will be rewarded for environmental protection and public benefit.

This summary is but a brief account of a moving and enjoyable day with the memorial as a focus of hope for lasting peace.