

Deserted medieval villages

Our speaker, Allan Colman, explained that the mediaeval period is now considered to stretch from as early as the 6th century to the end of the fifteenth century, including the Anglo Saxon and Viking settlements of Britain, as well as the Norman era and the later Middle Ages up to 1485.

Allan started with a general overview of life during those Middle Ages relating to details of housing, religion, animal husbandry, food, socio-economics, clothing, education, and more. The most powerful local men and their families, who under the Normans were 'lords' who held one or more 'manors', had often substantial houses, comprising a great hall with high narrow windows, for which glazing was an expensive luxury few could afford, and a gallery at first floor level. Decorative tapestries, also acting as insulation, might adorn the walls. The ground floor of stone was strewn with rush matting. The peasantry survived in very basic, unhealthy, damp and smoky huts, and later in cottages. Most buildings had roofs of local thatch, very prone to destruction by fire. (Indeed, in far more recent times, many of Northumberland's smaller market towns, including Wooler, suffered severe destructive fires spread by heather thatching.)

The church had great influence both socially and economically, its religious traditions having a huge impact on life: for example, it was forbidden to eat meat on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, and no eggs could be consumed in Lent. Most households kept a pig, much smaller than current breeds. Sheep provided meat and clothing, while laying hens did not provide sufficient flesh to be worth slaughtering for food.

The wealthier classes got their income from the land, the law, the church, trade and warfare. The Norman Domesday book didn't cover Northumberland, but it shows that the proportion of freemen and the unfree peasants, including villeins, bordars and cottars, varied in different areas of the rest of the country. There were many highly skilled trades, and we can still admire the work of, among others, medieval metalworkers, embroiderers and stonemasons. The villeins, bordars and cottars were obligated to work for the lord of the manor and scraped by, cultivating their small share of strips in the 'open field' system and using the common for grazing any livestock. The right to gather firewood for fuel was also granted by the Lord of the Manor. Dress was highly regulated and very much denoted status.

We heard that following a warm climatic period in the 11th and 12th centuries when vineyards thrived in Britain, and Greenland was colonised, the weather began to cool in the 1300s in what we now call the Little Ice Age; life would have become even more of a struggle, sometimes leading to famine.

In Glendale, many once thriving, more populated villages (owned by known baronries) have been largely deserted over time; we now know them as hamlets. They include: Humbleton,

Akeld (where a bastle house may still be found), Ancroft (with Saxon origins), Doddington (with its later, 16th century bastle ruins), Ewart, Lanton, North Middleton, Pawston, Old Yeavinger, Weetwood, and Duddo (with remains of a tower or pele).

The early settlement of Ad Gefrin at Yeavinger, which later moved to the more fertile Milfield basin, is now represented at Maelmin where interpretation boards describe life in the Anglo-Saxon period.

The causes of depopulation include changes in the climate limiting food production on marginal land, and particularly the Great Plague or Black Death which swept through the country killing almost a third of the people.

Glendale Local History Society's members will enjoy a tour of several of these deserted sites in the often-warmer weather of late March.