

Teesdale u3a – Monthly Meeting 25 August 2022

Gibside Hall was built in 1620 by William Blakiston and was acquired by Sir William Bowes of Streatlam Castle in 1693 when he married Elizabeth Blakiston, reputed to be the richest heiress in the country. Sir William's son, George Bowes, inherited the estate in 1722 and created the famous landscape garden, including the wonderful chapel designed by William Paine and the statue to British Liberty, once covered in gold leaf. Built on the profits from coal, the Gibside estate became one of the wealthiest estates in the country. John Bowes, the 10th Earl of Strathmore, inherited the property in 1786 and it was after that date that the house fell slowly into decline, until it was abandoned in 1920. Many items from the Hall were then transferred to Glamis Castle in Scotland. The John Bowes who built the Bowes Museum was the son of the 10th Earl.

Val Scully is leading a voluntary research group into the history of the Hall and particularly into the families of those ordinary folk who have been associated with it over many generations. Helen McFarlane had begun the research using an early census and now Val leads the group. She informed members of Teesdale u3a about some of the findings which the research has revealed. The families identified included the Renwicks, the Cheesemans (3 generations), the McQueens, the Woodmans and many others. Painstaking work had been done tracing family trees and so far, 350 names had been identified and the numbers were still increasing. Photographs, postcards, and letters had been unearthed and Val displayed some of these. The photographs identified many people who have since been traced but also showed useful features of the estate which helped indicate what and where they were. Jack Cowan had been the last gamekeeper and the Butterwells were farmers and ran a sawmill. There was a photograph of the annual pageant with elaborate coach and four. There were several pictures of royalty including a 1936 photo showing the Queen Mother. The Bowes Museum retains the link with the Bowes-Lyon family.

It is sad that such a magnificent estate is a shell of its former self, although now in the trusteeship of the National Trust, it is still well worth visiting. This was a very comprehensive talk, full of fascinating detail. The vote of thanks was given by Ian Reid. The next meeting will be held on Thursday 22nd September when Richard Pears, local northeastern historian, will be speaking on 'Houses of the North'.

Ian Reid