



Shincliffe Local History Society

January 2026

Newsletter

Number 16

Next Meetings

Monday 19th January at 7:30 p.m.

Stephen Livingstone

**The life and times of Bentley
Beetham**

Members will recall that Stephen visited us a year ago to tell us about Beetham's role in the ill-fated 1924 Everest expedition. In this talk, Stephen will illuminate Bentley Beetham's life beyond his famous association with the unfortunate George Mallory and Andrew Irvine. A blue plaque now marks Beetham's house in Cotherstone in Teesdale.

Monday 16th February at 7:30 p.m.

David Williams

**George Stephenson:
Tribulations, Trials & Triumphs**

How fortunate we are that we live in the region that gave birth to the railways and the memories of the 200th anniversary of the Stockton and Darlington Railway will still be fresh in the mind. Stephenson's legacy is across the north-east as well as other parts of the country and the globe. As the title suggests, Stephenson's path to glory was not always a smooth one.

Reflections from the Committee

It is a hearty Happy New Year to you from all of us on the committee at SLHS. We trust that the festive period has been a restful and fruitful one for you. We strive to be, as one of our members put it at the AGM, "a history society for the future." January derives from the Roman god, Janus, who was portrayed with two heads, enabling him to look forwards and backwards. We like to think we take our cue from this mythological creature. We are always striving to preserve elements of our past as well as to establish SLHS on a firm footing for future generations.

It is a constant refrain for us, but members will not be surprised to know that the period since our last Newsletter has been a busy one. A minor addition to the Church Hall has been the document which helps to explain the OS Maps of Shincliffe from the nineteenth century which have been on display since April 2024.

We are actively pursuing the re-siting of the Houghall Boundary Stone outside the college. Although not within the parish of Shincliffe, we feel that our support for this initiative is important. Quite apart from the fact that the stone is a Grade 2 listed building, it is something that would have been a familiar marker to thousands of villagers over the years as they made their way to and from Durham. We are extremely grateful to Durham City Parish Council and Shincliffe Parish Council who have been incredibly supportive in this venture and have committed both time and effort, as well as money, in attempting to bring it to a conclusion. We will keep you posted re: its progress. Once in the ground, we feel it will form a perfect complement to the two hundredth anniversary of the building of the current Shincliffe Bridge.

Our membership continues to grow, and it is testament to you that many speakers comment on the turnout as well as the wonderfully warm atmosphere that is generated. Thank you, as always, for your continued support. We look forward to seeing you between now and June.

Past speakers

15th September 2025

Gary Bankhead and Towan Hancock

Discovering more about river crossings
at Shincliffe

The presentation given to us by Gary and Towan capped off a journey that both had undertaken during the two preceding years. Following funding from the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland (often known as the “Arch and Arch”), the pair outlined the processes that they had undertaken to solve some of the sitings and remnants of bridges that once straddled the Wear at Shincliffe before the current construction, completed by Ignatius Bonomi, was erected in 1826. This year, we celebrate its 200th anniversary.

A crowd of 50+ were left enthralled as they discovered what lay beneath the waters and the evidence the two uncovered, ably assisted by fellow SLHS members, was presented to us in the Church Hall.

There are two further ways for members to access the information presented by Gary and Towan. A [YouTube](#) video exists that covers some of the points raised in the talk and is well worth a watch. Chris Lloyd, a presenter for us later in the year, has also written extensively about the project in his [Memories](#) section of The Northern Echo.

We hope you gain much from the two outlets.

20th October 2025

Margaret Ray

Thomas Croudace (1838-1906):
'Downunder' - From Shincliffe Grange to
New South Wales

Thomas Croudace spent his formative years living at Shincliffe Grange, where his father, Christopher, was the colliery viewer of Shincliffe Pit. He later trained as a mining engineer and, in 1861, set sail for Australia with this new wife, Christina, to take up the post of Manager for the Scottish Australian Mining Company. Starting from scratch, Thomas oversaw the company's development of Lambton Colliery, the name acknowledging former Croudace family associations back in Co. Durham. Even after he became Company General Manager, the colliery remained under Thomas's driving influence, being notable as the most productive pit in the New South Wales coalfield and an exemplar of leading practice in mining techniques and the adoption of new technology. At times a controversial figure – he was a man not afraid to lead by conviction and example - Thomas was nevertheless highly respected in the mining industry and his expertise was widely sought after. He also served as Mayor of the Lambton and New Lambton townships, while his memory lives on in the naming of Croudace Bay on Lake Macquarie, NSW.

Dr Margaret Ray, a former resident of High Shincliffe, taught Australian history at Durham University, where her special research interest was 19th century emigration to Australia. She gave us a splendid and richly illustrated talk on a notable son of Shincliffe which was enjoyed by a large and highly appreciative audience.

17th November 2025

Geoff Harrison

Letters from WW2 in Brancepeth Archive

Geoff kept us warmly entertained on a very chilly evening. He provided a brief historical context to Brancepeth Castle (still such a powerful and imposing building) and how it became a base for the Durham Light Infantry at the start of WW2. It was an ITC (Infantry Training Camp) before the men were assigned to other regiments across the country. Bill Nicholson, the famous manager of Tottenham Hotspur in the 1960s and 70s, was based at Brancepeth for the duration of the war as a PT instructor. The village even gained a pub courtesy of the sergeants' mess.

Renovations i.e. electricity cables, were being installed in one part of the castle and a serendipitous find of a cache of letters and documents were uncovered once some floorboards had been removed. What emerged from these reflects some of the personal and mundane issues faced by soldiers in the war and post-war period, including family and personal relationships, as well as how to deal with mental health (a lesson, perhaps, learned by the British Army from WW1).

The letters also reveal the class divides of the time. One father relayed how he had played host to Lord Baden-Powell for a cocktail party. Another offered to contact his MP should his son not be treated properly while based at Brancepeth. A schoolgirl attending a public school complained to her brother that she had "two massive boils" on her face. We do wonder what happened to them all.

15th December 2025

Richard Barber

The Stockton and Darlington Railway, 1825 - 2025

A wet and dark December evening were no impediments to the hardy souls who braved the elements to listen to Richard's enthusiastic trawl through two hundred years of railway history and celebrations.

It is important to note that the Stockton and Darlington Railway was involved in many firsts, not surprising given that it was the trailblazer for transporting passengers and not just coal. It was the black gold that was the driver for the development of the railways, and we should be inordinately proud that this happened in our region.

So it was that this pride was at the centre of the jubilee celebrations in 1875 and has been reinforced since in the three subsequent events in 1925, 1975, and 2025.

Perhaps the most glamorous of the celebrations, certainly regarding a royal attendance, was the arrival of the Duke and Duchess of York (later King George VI and Queen Elizabeth) in 1925 to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary. William Whitelaw, Chairman of the then North Eastern Railway, and father of the Tory politician, Willie Whitelaw, was also in attendance to help facilitate the day. Sir Nigel Gresley, designer of the iconic Flying Scotsman, was part of the proceedings.

Photographs from 1975 and 2025 showed the importance of the railway to the region. A picture of Locomotion crossing Ignatius Bonomi's Skerne Bridge in September 2025 was one of the highlights. Make sure to visit Hopetown and Shildon Railway Museums in the next year.

Memories of The Avenue

We were contacted by one of our members, Steve Pragnell, who has donated some valuable photographs of The Avenue in the mid-twentieth century and here recalls his memories of the pub.

My parents ran The Avenue Inn as tenants for Vaux - from late 1954 until late 1966 when we moved into a colliery house in Bowburn. Before taking over the tenancy from Robert Turton, my parents had owned their own house at 24 Avenue Street, High Shincliffe (then known as Shincliffe Bank Top) and my father had a smallholding and worked as a miner before moving into The Avenue Inn. Bowburn Colliery (where my dad worked as a miner on the coal face) closed in 1967 and my father worked on salvage work before retiring in the early 1970s. I can remember my parents became very fearful of visits by Vaux's area manager, as the pub's revenue was falling rapidly. Bowburn Colliery's closure and the opening of Crowtrees Working Men's club in Bowburn attracted customers away from The Avenue.

A lady named Ada Hume took over running The Avenue Inn after my parents. She was married to a chap called Seymour Hepple, but I think she was named as landlady.



Back: Joe Emmerson (my brother-in-law), Charlie Pragnell (my dad), Stan Mould (my uncle). Front: Jack Bellis (my uncle), Bett Mould (my aunt), Mary Ann Pragnell (my mother), sitting on the bar – Joan Bellis (my cousin).

The buses stopped where the bus stops are now – across the road from the pub and at the end of Overman Street.

People from Bowburn used to stand at the front door of the pub finishing their last drink whilst looking out for their bus coming around the corner at the top of High Street. When they saw their bus coming, they used to quickly down their drink, leave their glass on the outside window ledge and run like mad to the bus stop. After seeing people fumbling in their pockets whilst running and dropping loose change all over the place, I used to search the grass verge next to the bus stop for coins quite regularly. Tuppences and sixpences were quite common - I hit the jackpot if I found a shilling or a half crown!

The Avenue Inn was, as you described in your talk, (presented to members by Garry Stout on 16/6/2025), 'a drinking den' in those days. It had a much different layout to today. The bar was frequented by men only, the snug by couples and music room by couples. All rooms were normally 'jam packed' on a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights.



Thank you to Steve for also sharing this poster for the Leek Show held in The Avenue in September 1965. Leek shows were extremely popular in Shincliffe's pubs. The Durham County Advertiser from the early 1900s reflects on two such shows at The Oak Tree Inn as well as The Railway Tavern (both now private properties). Expensive prizes were on offer and the competition to achieve a place in the top three must have been terrific. Growing vegetables for working men was a hobby as well as a way of reducing food bills for their families. Steve's memories highlight the huge social developments of the last sixty years. What will the next sixty hold in store for The Avenue?

Quoits – a popular game in Victorian Shincliffe

Quoits, a traditional ring-toss game, enjoyed tremendous popularity in nineteenth-century England, becoming a cherished pastime for people across social classes. Its roots date back centuries, with variations of the game traced to ancient Greece and Rome. By the nineteenth century, quoits had firmly established itself as a cultural phenomenon, blending the simplicity of recreation with the spirit of competition. Its origins intertwined with the industrial revolution's surge, where ironworkers would create metal rings, later used for recreational purposes. As a result, quoits transitioned from an informal diversion to a structured activity with rules.



Quoits was more than a game; it was a social activity that brought communities together. Local competitions and gatherings often revolved around the sport, serving as opportunities for camaraderie and friendly rivalry. Pubs and inns frequently hosted matches, creating a lively atmosphere where participants and spectators mingled. The communal nature of quoits made it a staple in village life, strengthening social bonds and fostering a sense of identity.

There are many references to games of quoits in the local newspapers of the nineteenth century. A tussle between John Clough and Thomas Kelly took place in the grounds of The Avenue, owned at the time by William Forster. The game was reported on 20/4/1870 in *The Sportsman*. Kelly was the brother of James Kelly, from Tow Law, who was a renowned player of the time and who competed in what was, in effect, a championship playoff against Thomas Barker of Coxhoe. This was held at Spennymoor, as reported by the *Durham County Advertiser* on 10th December 1869. Much money changed hands in a flurry of betting. James Kelly won this challenge, as did his brother in the contest held at The Avenue.



The danger of these heavy pieces of iron flying through the air became evident for Mary Bray, wife of Thomas Bray, publican of The Rose Tree Inn. *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle* from 28/10/1871 reported that Mrs Bray had been hit on the head by a man playing quoits in front of the pub. Her skull was fractured, and she was in some danger. It is not known whether she survived.

Quoits competitions were also held at other Shincliffe pubs, especially the Orange Tree Inn, where it was a regular pastime. If you know of any other popular games from this period, please let us know.

Colonel Norman Margrave “Mark” Dillon 1896 – 1997



We think it can be asserted that Colonel Dillon led a varied and interesting life as well as a long one. He received his Military Cross for bravery in a battle that, for most of us, would seem incomprehensible. The MC was conceived in December 1914, just four months after the outbreak of The Great War and stands third in the order of magnitude behind the George Cross, and the Victoria Cross, the highest battle honour that can be bestowed. It should be noted that another MC recipient living in the village (coincidentally, both men lived in St. Mary's Close from the 1960s) was Major Charles Edward Dowse for his bravery in the Korean War.

At the time of his death, Colonel Dillon was the last surviving Tanks Corps officer to have fought in the decisive Battle of Cambrai in 1917, one which saw tanks used for the first time in such large numbers (474) and to such devastating effect. He had joined the British Army in 1914. As well as the MC, he was wounded three times and twice mentioned in despatches. His obituary in the Daily Telegraph, published on 1/1/1998, described in detail the actions undertaken by Dillon to save his men. *He won his MC for diverting a tank attack which he realised was heading for a well dug-in German artillery position. There was no radio communication between the tanks and no transport available to help him to contact the lumbering vehicles (which were already under small arms fire), so he set off on foot, running as fast as he could. He had to zig-zag across the road, as a sniper had picked him out as a target. Somewhat incongruously, he was still carrying his officers' cane "swagger stick" and when a German bullet hit it he was slightly wounded in the hand by the splinters. Undeterred, he pressed on, reached the leading tank, leapt on the back, climbed to the top and banged the metal plate to attract the commander's attention. Miraculously, the commander realised it was a friend and not an enemy, opened up, heard Dillon's frantic message and slewed the vehicle round. No tank was lost.*

Colonel Dillon was educated at Haileybury, a private school in Hertford founded by the East India Company, before becoming a mining engineer in Seaham. Following WW1, Dillon was posted to Bovington in Dorset, now home to a tank museum. One of his pupils was TE Lawrence, otherwise known as Lawrence of Arabia. Mark Dillon married Margaret Munro Ellis in 1935. Following further posts in the Army in WW2, he retired to Wingate in County Durham to run a farm. His move to Shincliffe in the 1950s saw him live in 1 Wood View (a property he rented from Joseph Landt Mawson) before taking up residence in 29 St. Mary's Close.

His 100th birthday celebrations received wide publicity in the region. There is a plaque in St. Mary's Church dedicated to the memory of Colonel Dillon.