



Shincliffe Local History Society

April 2026

Newsletter

Number 17

Next Meetings

Monday 20th April at 7:30 p.m.

Chris Lloyd

The Wondrous Whiffy Waters of Croft, Dinsdale and Gainford

Chris Lloyd is the Editor of The Northern Echoes "Memories" section which is published every Saturday and provides the reader with a wide range of fascinating stories from the region. In this talk, Chris looks at the ways in which the Victorians' interest in developing spas had an impact on the north east, in particular around Darlington. Each village is worth a visit in its own right but this talk will provide an extra context for the audience.

Monday 18th May at 7:30 p.m.

Ed Waugh

The Cramlington Train Wreckers

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the General Strike, an event that marked huge discord in the nation. Ed Waugh is a renowned local playwright who has covered this event in dramatic form. Ed's talk will focus on the men who were involved in the planning of the derailment and the consequences for them, their families, and their community. Ed's other plays include "Hadaway Harry" and "Wor Bella".

Reflections from the Committee

We have often remarked that Shincliffe is a little village with a lot of history. The last part of 2025 highlighted this theme even more thanks to the contributions of our members as well as some exploration of historic texts from our redoubtable committee members. There is always a little nugget to be unearthed from the treasure trove that is the past and we have been delighted to highlight some of these examples for you on the website as well as via the pages of the Newsletter.

One such instance was the donation of a diary kept by Roy and Barbara Nuttall who bought Forge Cottage in the 1960s and set about renovating it up to the standard that we see today. We are extremely thankful to friends of the Nuttalls who felt that the diary should be retained by SLHS as there are no living relatives. Roy's careful recording of each stage of the improvements provides us with a real insight into the pleasures and frustrations experienced by anyone who has set off on the path of home improvement. Long-lost former villagers emerge from the mists of time to appear in their working and social contexts as the Nuttalls negotiate with a whole host of builders and workmen.

The diary spurred us on to look at the blacksmiths pictured outside the original forge in around 1914. One of them was Reg Smurthwaite, a young lad whose family lived in Shincliffe Grange. Reg died at a young age in 1927 but not before he had served in WW1 and married a young lady from South Yorkshire.

We also managed to gather a lot of information on one of Reg's predecessors, Charles Pragnell, whose grandsons still live in the village and who furnished us with pictures and details of Charles and his family that enhance our knowledge of the era.

We hope that you will find all these pieces as interesting as we did in compiling them. If you have any information for consideration, please let us know.

Past speakers

19th January 2026

Stephen Livingstone: Bentley Beetham

A swirling mist of an evening greeted a good turnout for the start of the new year as we welcomed back Stephen Livingstone following his presentation to us last January when the topic was, once again, Bentley Beetham. This time, however, the focus was on Beetham's life before and after Everest. Even though being a part of the doomed assault on the mountain in 1924 could be considered his lifetime's outstanding achievement, Stephen painted a portrait of Bentley the man with a clear hinterland beyond it and his work as a teacher.

Pictures of Beetham on the mountains of Borrowdale with some of his pupils from Barnard Castle School would fill our modern health and safety sensibilities with dread. Appropriate clothes and safety helmets would be for a later age as the boys scrambled over vertiginous drops with a rope nonchalantly held by their daredevil teacher.

Beetham's life beyond the confines of the school and his holiday expeditions with his pupils were explored in some detail. As part of a coterie of leading climbers in the 1920s and 30s, he undertook visits to a wide range of countries to fulfil his craving for climbing. One of his closest friends was [Theodore Howard Somervell](#), a member of the family behind the "K-Shoes" brand that was acquired by Clarks in the 1970s. Another was [Lieutenant-Colonel Horace "Rusty" Westmoreland](#), a renowned climber of peaks in the Lakes and an exact contemporary of Beetham.

Stephen is looking for funding to write a book about Beetham which, we are sure, would be of huge interest. Pieces of the jigsaw remain to be completed but the research presented to us shows that this complex and interesting man is worthy of further exploration.

16th February

David Williams

George Stephenson: Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs

Much is known about George Stephenson and his transformative effect on the world following his establishment of the Stockton to Darlington railway line in 1825. He would go on, of course, to even greater heights by winning the Rainhill Trials and creating the first inter-city line between Liverpool and Manchester. His son, Robert, so prominent in British life that he is buried in Westminster Abbey, was the beneficiary, in more ways than one, of his father's difficult early life and eventual national prominence.

David Williams guided us through Stephenson's upbringing in Wylam. What is now a peaceful cottage set in the Northumberland countryside was once home to George and his five siblings. Crammed into one room, the house was shared with two other families who worked in a nearby colliery.

Illiterate until the age of eighteen, Stephenson's life went through twists and turns. One sister emigrated to America (a not inconsiderable feat in those days), another worked as a domestic servant in London, and he lost his wife and daughter following childbirth. Walking to Montrose in Scotland to take on new employment, he left the bereft Robert in the hands of his returning sister from London.

Graft, intuition, sheer bloody-mindedness, and the patronage of wealthy and influential men enabled him to make a mark on not just the north-east but the rest of the world. His legacy is in every aspect of our landscape. Such was his fame and influence, he could count the King of Belgium as one of his friends. [Mr Stephenson's Regret](#) by David Williams is well worth a read.

16th March

Pete Welsh

Working-class sports in the North-east

It was a pleasure once again to welcome Pete Welsh to the Church Hall for a dive into some of the most esoteric sports of the Victorian era and the “champions” that they produced.

Perhaps the most famous one was Stephenson Ridley, the brother of Geordie Ridley, the composer of the “Blaydon Races” song. Such was his prowess as a runner that, for many years, Stephenson Ridley held the record for the mile at 4’ 20”. It was not until the 1950s that Sir Roger Bannister was to run a mile in under four minutes – a feat long held to be beyond the scope of ordinary mortals.

As well as Madame Angelo, a character who saw out her final days in a street near the Durham Viaduct and who probably deserves a whole page to herself, we also encountered the redoubtable Matty Rogerson of Fatfield. Like many of his fellow competitors in the field of potshare bowling, Rogerson was a miner. Games were fiercely contested, in large part because the winner could scoop a lot of money and lift himself and his family out of gruelling hardship.

This now long-forgotten game has been covered in some detail by Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums and is [well worth a read](#). One curiosity of the game is that the players would often “strip off” to play it, even in the depths of winter. Locations varied but a popular spot was the Town Moor in Newcastle. Needless to say, there was much drinking and carousing before, during and after the games and there were opportunities to place bets on the outcome.

We also touched on the game of “Fives”, a hugely popular sport at the time and which was a variation of squash. We’ll be writing more about that in our next edition.

Square pegs and round holes



Albert Glew on the left with his workmate, Alan Caddon, on the right.

Shincliffe’s links with one of Britain’s greatest buildings, Durham Cathedral, have been numerous over the years. Our picture above, Evening Chronicle 21/12/1981, shows under-master mason Albert Glew in his workplace. He lived in Sparks Cottage (before it was knocked down and rebuilt) with his wife, Margaret, and daughter.

Albert was born in 1932 and died in 1997. Margaret died in 2025 and spent her final years in Sherburn House Hospital. The project to restore the cathedral’s stonework had started in 1979 and was estimated to take something like thirty years at least. The southern bay of the eastern part of the building was the first to be renovated. The sandstone came from Dunhouse Quarry in Cleatlam, near Barnard Castle.

Albert and his colleagues had to mimic patterns first carved in the thirteenth century. Although modern tools and machinery were used, such as compressed air chisels, Albert remarked that, “They cut the time down but there is still as much skill involved.” Mr Glew was also employed by the Nuttalls to do some work on their house at [Forge Cottage](#).

Canon Ronald Coppin was involved in the Cathedral project. He told The Chronicle that the total cost of the renovations would be £1 million (circa £5 million at today’s prices) and that, for most of the masons, it would be a lifetime’s work.

The First Medieval Shincliffe Bridge, and Two Deaths on the River

Our recent investigation of the historic river crossing site at Shincliffe has prompted us to research the medieval records of both the Durham Bishopric and Cathedral Priory, looking for early references to what is generally supposed to have been the original 12th or early-13th century bridge. Besides successfully pushing back in time the first known reference to that bridge, it has uncovered details of possibly the two earliest named individual residents of Shincliffe and their involvement in separate incidents connected with the river.

The Bishop of Durham's Assize Court emerged in the 13th century to administer the rights and privileges of the bishop held under the Durham Palatinate. Part of its function was to raise money in fines for infractions by others of those rights, but it also dealt with issues associated with the bishop's responsibilities as the feudal overlord, including the role of what we would now recognise as a coroner's court. The original Latin records of the assize court still exist for a period in the mid-1200s and were transcribed and published by the Surtees Society in the early 20th century. Perhaps curiously, two adjacent records from the year 1242 both refer to Shincliffe.

A body found in the river

'Quidam extraneus inuentus fuit submersus in wera iuxta Pontem de Schinecliue; primus inuentor Radulfus Porcarius: venit et non malecreditur. Iudicium: Infortunium.'

(A stranger was found drowned in the Wear near the bridge of Schinecliue; the first discoverer was Radulf Porcarius: he came [to the court] and is not mistrusted. Judgement: misfortune.)

It would seem reasonable to suppose that Radulf, whose surname suggests he was a swineherd, was a local resident of Shincliffe (Schinecliue). The small farming community was held by the Cathedral Priory, to which its residents were bound by a feudal duty of service. The date of the case, 1242, precedes by 48 years what we had previously thought was the earliest reference to the original medieval bridge at Shincliffe, mentioned in the 1290 will of one John Burgh, a chaplain of Durham. This bridge was later to fall into disrepair in the mid/late-1300s, being rebuilt or replaced around 1400 by the second medieval bridge which survived to the 1820s.

Adam, crushed by his own boat

'Adam de Schinecliffe fecit quendam batellum, et, sicut debuit subleuare batellum, Cecidit super eum ita quod obiit infra tres dies sequentes. [...] Iudicium: infortunium.'

(Adam of Schinecliffe made a boat, and, as he was to lift the boat, it fell upon him so that he died within three days following. [...] Judgement: misfortune.)

The unfortunate Adam appears to have been another 1242 resident of Shincliffe, although the precise location of the accident, involving what must have been a reasonably substantial craft, is not clear from the account. It is reported later in the record that the settlements of Elvet, Old Durham and Sherburn were, with Shincliffe, summonsed by the court. They and their attendant jurors collectively seem to have been found culpable of not properly investigating the event. This wider involvement might point to the accident having occurred downstream of Shincliffe and nearer the city, at a location having more obvious need of a boat or ferry.

Harvey Watt – Postmaster in Shincliffe



We are grateful, once again, to our old friend, Jim Milburn, and his archive bequeathed to us by his widow, Irene. Above is a lovely shot of Harvey Watt, postmaster, on his retirement in September 1981. On the left is Ruth Rayment, teacher at Shincliffe School and on the right is Tony Hickson, publican at The Seven Stars. Jim has not identified the newspaper, but we may presume that it is one of either The Sunderland Echo, The Northern Echo, The Durham Advertiser or The Journal.

Harvey was nearly sixty-seven, having been born in September 1914. He would go on to have a good retirement and died in 2006. His wife, Ethel, had died in June 1981 but he had two sons and a daughter. The shop, for reference, was in Prospect Terrace and can easily be identified as the post box is still there and in use. A listed telephone box stands outside where the post office used to be.

Ethel Watt's parents, Harry and Annie Blackett, had been in the premises since 1928 and it had been converted to a post office in 1941. Mrs Blackett died in 1946 upon which her daughter took on the running of the business. Harvey Watt was working for the Ministry of Agriculture at the time, possibly based at Houghall.

Ruth Rayment, an immediate neighbour of Mr Watt, told the reporter that she was concerned that the closure of the post office and shop would mean up to seventy pensioners in the village having to make alternative arrangements to collect their monies. One of them would involve a trip "up the bank" to High Shincliffe where Mr Norman Wilson was still in business running his post office. This, too, would close in 1998 though Mr Wilson had retired some years before. Mrs Rayment could lay claim to have bought the last stamp from Mr Watt as well as a tin of Heinz baked beans for her daughter.

The nearest post office for Shincliffe's residents is now based at the petrol station in Bowburn.

Down Your Way with Dorothy Brooke and her family



Down Your Way was a local programme produced by BBC Radio Newcastle. The presenter, Paddy McDee, visited the village in 1985 and spoke to a number of key characters, including Harvey Watt featured above, page 5, to gain an understanding of the history and character of Shincliffe. We have a recording of the programme in our archives as well as a transcript of the interviews. Dorothy Brooke is here featured (source unknown), celebrating her 90th birthday in 1985 with her sons and daughters including Dorothy (over her right shoulder) and son-in-law, Norman Wilson (over her left). Below are some extracts from her interview. Dorothy Brooke Sr is represented here as GB, "Granny Brooke," and Dorothy Wilson as DW.

GB I wasn't used to (the) country because I was born in Durham, and I'd lived in Durham all my life. I was born in Crossgate, and we lived there because my father was a printer and worked in Durham. When we came to Shincliffe, you know, I like living in the country. After we'd been there a while smallpox broke out, and so they turned the hospital into a smallpox hospital. (*The Smallpox Hospital was situated on the site of Shincliffe Mill Nursery and is first shown on the 1914/15 revision OS maps published in 1923 -Ed.*) And there were two old people who lived in the house next to us and they moved away. They were terrified. But we said we can't move. If we get it, we'll all get it, but we never took any harm. They came from Sherburn House to vaccinate them. I had to as well, and my dad, we all had to be done. But we didn't take any harm. We used to get a lot of visitors down at the hospital – it was turned properly into a hospital because they got it very bad you know and they went to Brandon in the finish. Anyway, it got so bad.

DW There was an epidemic, a smallpox epidemic. All the visitors used to come on a Sunday afternoon; they were only allowed to come on Sunday afternoon. Because they couldn't go into the hospital, you know, they had to come so far to the gate, and the patients had to step so far that side of the gate and visitors had to stay so far that side and they had to shout backwards and forwards through it.

GB And they used to come down, and I used to make ginger beer, and we used to buy a penny bottle of ginger beer and fetch the sandwiches and had a picnic, and we used to enjoy that you know. But then it got so bad that they had to go to Brandon and it was finished up there.