



Shincliffe Local History Society

July 2026

Newsletter

Number 18

Next Meetings

**Monday 14th September at 7:00
p.m. (including AGM)**

Steve Bryan and Towan Hancock

The Elusive Tithe Barn – the
hunt for the Chapel of Ease

Before the erection of St. Mary's Church, the Tithe Barn was a place of worship for villagers. Where, exactly, was it and who worshipped in it? Steve and Towan have been researching this exciting topic in detail for the past couple of years. They have uncovered much that will be of interest. *Please note that this meeting begins at 7:00 p.m. to accommodate the AGM.*

**Monday 19th October at 7:30
p.m.**

Geoff Harrison

Civil Servants in Hotpants – The
Story of the Carlisle Experiment

Members may recall the talk Geoff gave to us last year on the letters discovered in Brancepeth Castle from WW2. In a story from WW1 that sounds like an Ealing comedy, what happens when a government seeks to take control of pubs to stop the population drinking and carousing while being responsible for constructing dangerous explosives?

Reflections from the Committee

We are truly fortunate to live in a part of Britain that has contributed so much to the rest of our collective islands. Various civilisations may well have left their mark upon us by force, such as the Romans, the Vikings, and the Normans, but others have contributed via immigration and cultures which have enriched us for millennia.

Consequently, we have an area of England that has proven to be fertile ground for clever, industrious people or those who have sought to leave their stamp upon the world via sporting or artistic talents. So it is that over the course of this academic year we have been treated to tales of mining engineers, mountain climbers, revolutionary inventors, and esoteric world champions in the field of sport.

It says much about the talented people we have still residing in the north-east that we at Shincliffe Local History Society are in such a privileged position to welcome a range of speakers to help shed light on these extraordinary men and women. Thomas Croudace, former resident of Shincliffe Grange, revolutionised coalmining in New South Wales, Australia. Bentley Beetham, schoolteacher and mountaineer extraordinaire, may have been part of the "failed" expedition to Everest in 1924, but he had an enormous impact on generations of schoolboys at Barnard Castle School.

George Stephenson did, indeed, suffer trials and tribulations before his later triumphs. His railways, developed as we all know, in the north-east, revolutionised the nineteenth century and provided the spark for a whole host of jobs and industries.

And, finally, where would we be without the ordinary working men and women who provided their own rich stories and make us gasp in wonder at their courage and fortitude? Thank you for supporting us throughout what has been yet another stimulating year. Have a wonderful summer and we will see you all again in September.

Past speakers

20th April 2026

Chris Lloyd: The Wondrous Whiffy Waters of Croft, Dinsdale and Croft

We were incredibly pleased to welcome Chris Lloyd to our gathering on a fresh spring evening. A stalwart of The Northern Echo (Chris has held the title of Journalist of the Year), he has made the “Memories” section of the paper, published every Saturday, a must-read for keen local historians.

The history of spring waters and bathing in them is a long and illustrious one. The Romans established one of the earliest spa towns in what they knew as Aquae Sulis but which we know as Bath. Nearer home, Harrogate has for a long time been the provider of beneficial waters.

The focus for Chris was on Dinsdale, Croft and Middleton-one-Row, all of which are within a short drive or bike ride from each other and are well worth a visit. It was Croft that grew exponentially as a result of the “whiffy waters” discovered under its grounds. A large hotel (still in existence) was built to cater for tourists, and soon large terrace houses were to spring up as moneyed people sought to take advantage of the health-giving properties of the water. Middleton-One-Row, just up the road, was another place to benefit from the discovery of the aqua vitae under its soil. A whole host of shops and services grew to service the tourists who arrived by train in nearby Middleton-St-George. The Devonport Hotel, still proudly standing above the banks of the Tees, is a lasting remnant of an expansionist era.

Other places in the area to benefit from the public’s desire for “whiffiness” were Gainford and the Red Well near Barnard Castle. A pub of the same name reflects the area’s previous appeal. Members were encouraged to sniff and even drink the waters which still gush from springs. Only one did so and, at the time of writing, we can report that he survived the ordeal.

18th May 2026

Ed Waugh: The Cramlington Train Wreckers

It is not every month that we have the chance to welcome a critically acclaimed and award-winning playwright to our gatherings, but we were truly fortunate to have Ed Waugh present us with his insights into the Cramlington Train Wreckers. The events took place on May 10th, 1926, during the momentous upheaval of the General Strike, viewed as the biggest rupture since the 1640s when civil war raged across the land.

As always, huge historic events need context and Ed made sure that we understood the economic pressures bearing down on the country, notwithstanding the stress placed on it by the Great War. As the 1920s unfolded, the miners found themselves being forced to take a 40% wage deduction. Union membership had risen to 5.5 million, even allowing for the loss of life in the 1914-18 war. A clash seemed inevitable and it duly happened at one minute to midnight on the 3rd of May.

Ed showed us the documentary made about the events in Cramlington as the surviving participants recounted their experiences. It is available on YouTube. In addition, we were pointed to Margaret Hutcherson’s book, *Let No Wheels Turn*. It is available for sale here. Bill Muckle, one of the train wreckers, wrote his own book in 1981 entitled *No Regrets*.

Retribution was visited on the men who took part and were responsible for lifting the rail. They had responded to the rallying cry of union leader Bill Golightly (Robson Green’s grandfather) who had urged them to, “Stop everything on rails!” They received jail sentences ranging from four to eight years. It was by great good fortune that no-one travelling on *The Flying Scotsman* that day ended up being killed.

High Fives

Members and readers of this article will recall that in edition seventeen of the Newsletter we mentioned the research undertaken by Pete Welsh, our guest speaker in March, into the esoteric sports that were popular in the north-east before the growth of football as the central passion of the region. We touched upon the game of “Fives”, a sport that was akin to squash i.e. a small ball was smashed against a wall by one player and the opponent had to hit it back before it bounced twice on the floor and which led to the concession of a point. Pete also tells us that doubles and two v one was played as well as competitors using their “wrong” hand against each other. It was a hugely popular game in the area, particularly amongst miners, and it attracted big crowds. There were assorted reasons for this. Firstly, it gave communities the chance to support their local man. Secondly, it provided opportunities for betting when such a practice was restricted or banned. Lastly, since “Fives” courts or alleys were attached to pubs, it provided the publican with the prospect of earning substantial amounts of money from the sale of alcohol. A Grade-11 listed Fives court exists at the back of the [Langley Moor](#) pub in the village of the same name.

One such venue was our very own Avenue pub in High Shincliffe. A report from The Newcastle Courant on 20/10/1871 featured a game between Thomas Barker of Coxhoe (described as the “champion”), and James Kelly, of Tow Law, (listed as the “ex-champion”). There had been many games played between them across County Durham in the preceding twenty months. They were like the Borg and McEnroe of their era, slugging it out to the delight of towns and villages where they played. So it was that on Saturday, 14th October 1871 (Sunday games would have been very difficult to stage in the face of objections from religious bodies), a crowd of 4,000 packed into the “ball alley” at the rear of the pub to watch the latest instalment of the long-running battle between Barker and Kelly. The Avenue had only opened in 1868 and William Forster, the publican, was the second incumbent. We can only presume that he must have made a big profit on the day. The “ball alley” has long since disappeared, as have the “courts” and walls that were used to play the game. Thanks to the North-East War Memorial Project, we can see how such walls were central to mining communities. The one below was at Ferryhill. Look closely and the Martindales bus (the company was based in Ferryhill) stands proudly in front of the “Fives” wall.



For those desperate to know who won the game, it was Barker who romped home against Kelly and who maintained his superiority.

It was not just in this area of the country that “Fives” was played. Variations of it existed across the country and it was immensely popular in some leading public schools such as Eton. It was still being played in this area in the 1920s and the well-known local author, Harry Pearson, has written about it in an [article](#) for the North-East Heritage Library. The website is also recommended for further research and interest. There was, however, one crucial difference between the game in the south and the north of the country. The effete southern gentlemen endeavoured to protect their hands by using gloves. The Northumberland and Durham miners simply used vinegar to rub on their skin.

Of bricks, boatbuilders and champion rowers

Our presentation in June 2026 focused on the various brickworks that were part of the landscape in Shincliffe in the nineteenth century. The development of the brickworks owed much to the expansion of coalmining in the area. Clay was a byproduct of mining, and this was a key component in making bricks. As well as the two brick and tile businesses (Shincliffe and Sherburn, respectively) that can be identified on the OS Maps of the time, there is evidence from the Durham Chronicle of 18/3/1865 that Shincliffe Colliery had its own brickworks (the current Meldon Way). John Oyston, manager of the works, was assaulted by James Murray who was subsequently fined £1 with nine shillings costs.



Map courtesy
of the
National
Library of
Scotland

The earliest known owner of the Shincliffe brickworks that we have found was one William Barnes. The Durham Chronicle of 4/3/1842 reported that he had gone bankrupt. We believe that the works was then taken up by the local coal owner, Joseph Love, before a trio of local men, Ralph Sanderson, Stephen Oliver (who were brothers-in-law), and Thomas Lowe worked in conjunction with Aaron Liddell, brickmaker, to produce their goods in the 1860s. The partnership descended into acrimony and litigation before Charlton Robson stepped in to take it on in 1874. The next owners that we can trace are Vincent Charles Stuart Wortley Corbett and Charles Rollo Barrett from 1898. Both men had worked for Lord Londonderry and were very well connected. It was under their ownership that a young man, John Henry Ebdy, aged twenty, was working for them. He and his family (his father was a butcher) lived in New Elvet. However, it is his grandfather and great-grandfather who are of great interest.

Charles Ebdy, the great-grandfather, was a well-known boatbuilder in Durham. He was regarded as a real craftsman and his work was in much demand. He was a major player in the nascent Durham Regatta. In addition, he was a frequent rescuer of people who had fallen in the River Wear. He sought no recognition nor reward. The family lived in Paradise House near Elvet Bridge. The site is now occupied by the Boat Club pub.

Henry Ebdy, his son, followed his father into the boatbuilding business and continued to establish a reputation for quality and craftsmanship. Unsurprisingly, he was a keen rower and competed in many regattas, including Durham. One of his main competitors was the famous [Harry Clasper](#) whose reputation has been revived courtesy of Ed Waugh, the playwright, in his thoroughly entertaining production of [Hadaway Harry](#). Despite the intense rivalry between the two men, it was Clasper who would sometimes turn to Ebdy for his boats, such was the skill he brought to the building of them. Sadly, for Ebdy and his young family, he was to die of a fever on 1st January 1859. He was only forty-two. He left behind his wife, Jane, and a four-year-old son, Harry, father of John Henry. In a twist of fate, it was John Hawks Clasper, son of Harry, who took on the running of the boathouse in 1864 following Mr. Ebdy's death.

We are never far from way from a tragedy in Shincliffe in the early part of the twentieth century and the fate of John Henry Ebdy proves what a dangerous place the work environment could be. The Durham County Advertiser of 2/5/1902 reported the shocking fatality of the unfortunate Ebdy. He was oiling machinery and, to improve it further, got inside the guard ropes. As he was cleaning the cogwheels (*presumably while they were still spinning*-Ed), Ebdy's hand was caught and drew him in, crushing his chest for good measure. Despite the frantic efforts of his work colleagues, Ebdy was pulled from the machine but was quite dead. His body was conveyed to his father's house in New Elvet that afternoon. An inquest was held at the Hare and Hounds Hotel, now the site of the University of Durham's Dunelm House.

Four of Ebdy's siblings also worked in brickworks. Frederick worked in the neighbouring Sherburn House and Birtley firm in 1911 while Charles, George and Albert are also listed as labourers in a brickworks in the same census though it does not state which one. Shincliffe's former brickworks is now covered in trees next to the Peterlee Road.

Oil be with you



The location of the Whitwell Acres sump



An old oil meter on the side of a house

A little-known aspect of our history can be spotted on Whitwell Acres and just outside Avenue House (left-hand picture). A large mound of grass seems such a natural part of the topography that most of us drive and walk past it without giving it a second's thought. Trevor Carter, one of our committee members, has alerted us to what used to be a common feature of Shincliffe from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Hidden under the mound is a large oil sump, a remnant of the building developments that took place in the 1960s and 70s. The new houses in both parts of the village needed to be powered and warmed by some method, although gas was the preferred option as the century progressed. We know from Martin Morant's account of his early days in St. Mary's Close that some of those houses were powered by oil as an option. The same architect and builders were involved in Hill Meadows, and oil was also offered as an option for these dwellings and tanks were installed in the gardens. The houses facing on to the green (left-hand picture) near Avenue House would have been fed by natural gravity.

An example of this oil sump system can also be found in Lindisfarne Green in High Shincliffe. Another of our committee members, Towan Hancock, tells us that, *"Just to say that there was/is still a tank under the Lindisfarne Green that supplied all the Heathways estate houses, pre-dating the Whitwell Acres one, I think. The tank below Lindisfarne Green had a square tower containing the pump and a header tank from which the houses were supplied by gravity. A power cut caused problems! The brick pump structure still stands, covered in ivy etc. A supply pipe ran along the back of our houses, and each house had a meter in their garage wall which could be read via a glass window in the side of the garages. The account was with a Shell supplier in Jarrow. Presumably, this applied to all the Hewison houses i.e. down to and including Mitford Close."*

This all changed with the advent of North Sea gas to which the houses were converted in 1985. There had been a major investment in the gas and oil fields in the 1970s. The oil crisis of 1973 had accelerated the need for Britain to have its own reserves. The oil sumps in various gardens in the village were then rendered redundant.

The proposed house developments, both here and at Bowburn, should they go ahead, may well involve the use of solar panels and heat pumps to heat and light these homes. There is a drive to reduce our dependency on gas and oil in the next few years. A careful perusal of the homes in the current Shincliffe will show that some residents have decided to shift to solar panels as a way of riding the new wave of technology.

We would welcome further research and input on this topic: contact@slhs.uk.

School's out for summer

This year marks the 160th anniversary of the rebuilding of Shincliffe School based at Bank Foot. The attempts by the villagers to provide a definitive and large enough school to accommodate a growing population had been underway for some time. So it was that in April 1866 there was much rejoicing to mark the opening of the new school with a huge celebration for a delighted body of pupils.

The architect was Mr. Thomas Charles Ebdy. We cannot be certain that he was related to the Ebdys featured on page 4 (more research is needed) though we feel fairly certain that both branches of the Ebdy name would have been known to each other in such a small place as Durham. Mr Ebdy's father, Charles, was a ropemaker in St. Giles, Durham, and his brother, Barron, two years older, continued in the family firm until the early twentieth century.

The 1860s was a busy decade for T.C. Ebdy. As well as designing Shincliffe School, he was responsible for St. Peter's Church in Sacriston, (1866) now closed for worship, and St. Paul's Church in Ryhope, Sunderland, which began construction in 1868. Perhaps his most famous building in Durham is the Masonic Hall in Old Elvet, the foundation stone also being laid in 1868.



St. Peter's Church, Sacriston



Shincliffe School (1866)



Masonic Hall, Durham

T.C. Ebdy's relationship with William Mason, the vicar of St. Peter's in Sacriston, must have been a fruitful one because he was to marry his daughter, one Fanny Georgina Mason, in Hastings, in July 1869. In 1871, the couple were living at 2 North Bailey in Durham.

Later that afternoon, "the ladies of the village and other friends," according to the Durham County Advertiser, prepared tea and cakes for 166 children who, no doubt, in the time-honoured tradition of such parties, probably gorged themselves on too much sugar and became slightly unruly. We can only hope that some order was restored by the choir of St. Mary's who, in return for their own tea and cakes, led the assembled children in various hymns which "alike bespoke their good taste and careful training."

Their careful training was down to the skill and aptitude of James Lambert who played the organ on this day and was accompanied by his brother and sister in guiding the choir. Each hymn and song concluded with rapturous applause. Mr Lambert was a lay clerk with Durham Cathedral and lived in Old Elvet. A lay clerk is not in holy orders, and s/he provides the foundational vocal parts for daily services, often singing alongside boy or girl choristers. You can read more about [Shincliffe's schools](#) on our website. If you have any more information on either branch of the Ebdys, please let us know on contact@slhs.uk.