

Appleby Archaeology April 2011

Their last talk of the season gave Appleby Archaeology members and visitors the opportunity to hear about the new Archives Centre in Carlisle which will open in June. David Bowcock, Assistant County Archivist at Cumbria Archive Centre, spoke about the need for a new facility and the site, before taking us on a virtual tour of the centre.

The Carlisle records were previously housed in Carlisle Castle but an inspection, in 2002, found that the building no longer met the national standards required for preserving archives and Cumbria County Council were told that if nothing was done the records would have to be removed. The Council acted quickly and decided to build a new centre. The site chosen was in the ground of Petteril Bank House which had been acquired by the County Council in 1951. The house is a Grade II listed building which had been identified as being at risk. Some buildings in the grounds had had to be demolished because of the presence of asbestos and it was then that the Council decided to use the location for the new centre.

The Heritage Lottery fund invested 4.8 million, the largest grant it had ever awarded in Cumbria and the project was given the go ahead in 2006. The work started in January 2009 and the Centre will open on June 1st this year.

English Heritage was closely involved in the design to have a building which strikes a balance between the old and the new and is a landmark for this area of Carlisle.

State of the art storage facilities are housed in a modern building of glass and steel with a new high-tech archive, exhibition and research centre to meet the needs of those who want to search the records. Petteril Bank House itself has been restored and as a result the public will have access to a historic house and the landscaped grounds around it with improved cycle and pedestrian links to the Petteril Valley.

Petteril Bank House was built in 1829 for John Fawcett, an attorney. There is no record of the architect but it is possible that it was the work of Rickman who was working on a number of projects around the city at the time. These included Holy Trinity Church, Christ Church; Scaleby Castle and Rose Castle. In 1909 Lady Mary Gilford, a relative of Sir Alec Douglas Home, became the tenant and lived in the house (still referred to locally as Lady Gilford's house) until her death in 1951 when the house was acquired by the County Council.

David used a power point presentation to take us on a tour of the buildings starting with the loading bay and reception suite. The new glass fronted building houses the main archive area and public study areas. The archives are housed in a temperature and humidity controlled hi-tech vault.. There is nearly 4 miles of shelving to accommodate written records for between 20-25years. Sound and photographic records will be stored in an area for modern media. The work rooms, research, and conservation areas face north to reduce the harmful effects of ultra violet light on the archives. There are two search rooms which can accommodate up to 85people. One is for those consulting maps and records an the other for those searching information in microforms. There is also an education room with personal computers and video conferencing facilities that can be used by 30 plus people. CCTV cameras and digital locks are in place for security.

Petteril Bank House has many of its original features such as the plaster work, stained glass, and impressive staircase and these have been carefully restored. One of the aims of the project is to encourage the public to visit the house and gardens. There are exhibition areas, library links and room in the old kitchen where refreshments can be enjoyed. The billiard room will be available to hire for events such as conferences and weddings.

The evening concluded with an opportunity for to hear about and look at some of the archives from Carlisle which make reference to Appleby. David had brought with him examples of records from the 13th to the 20th century. The earliest was from the Diocese of Carlisle dating back to 1248 and the most recent was a photograph of the Bull Ring in Appleb from the 1960s. Among the other examples was a probate record giving an inventory of the goods and their value left by Thomas Hill of Appleby in 1546 and an 18th century record for the order for the removal of Agnes Maud from Penrith to Bongate in the Parish of St Michael Appleby. A more recent record related to the First World War and was that of a Military Service Appeals tribunal, held at Whithaven in 1917, to hear special cases including those of two Appleby men.

The chairman, Richard Stevens, on behalf of the group, thanked David for a most interesting evening and wished him well for the opening on June 1st.