

On Tuesday 11th Sept nearly 40 members of Appleby Archaeology Group welcomed Mr Erik Matthews, Society Fieldwork Officer from the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland, who gave an entertaining and informative talk about recent, and on-going, excavations at a site near Bedale, North Yorkshire.

His talk revealed to the audience an interesting and challenging excavation at the site of a medieval castle, the earliest reference to the castle being in 1175.

Erik first became involved in the project 6 years ago on the site of the medieval chapel and Great Hall. He explained that it was initially intended to be an exploration of post-medieval society from the early 1700's centred around the former Banqueting Hall but, as members heard, events and numerous finds in the castle and grounds conspired to lead to the notion of much earlier occupation of the site. An outline of the castle's history through the centuries revealed tales of eccentric individuals, diplomatic missions, secret passages, Royal visits including one from James I in about 1614, and a fair degree of elite showing-off.

Erik described, and showed pictures of, some of the very many finds (more than 1500 in total) - the earliest one dating from the late 13th century when the castle was in the ownership of Sir Thomas Burgh. The finds range from pottery pieces and bones to gaming pieces, surgical instruments, musical accessories, glassware and roof tiles.

The discovery of substantial cobbled areas, mortar floors, medieval architectural stonework and a high-status conduit-fed timber water pipe of a type normally associated with monasteries has led several academics to suggest that an early building of some importance been found and could be a "plaisance" - an area where important guests were entertained away from the main castle. Erik brought the talk to a close by explaining how the site and its finds are challenging the received wisdom that elite medieval life in Northern England was one lived in fear of the Scots and on the very edge of civilised society in dark and dreary surroundings. Indeed, the lifestyle on offer appears to have been, at this site at least, lavish and very entertaining judging by the 60 wine-jug handles which have been unearthed!

Erik was warmly thanked and enthusiastically applauded then the audience had an opportunity to ask questions and handle several artefacts from the excavations.

The next talk will be on Tuesday Nov 8th at 7.30pm in the Supper Room when Jamie Lund from National Trust NW Region will talk about the Archaeological Landscape Survey of the Sizergh Estate.