

Talks by Richard Knowles and Phil Judkins following Wakefield Historical Society's AGM on 12th March 2025.

'The Surviving Portraits of York Based Printer and Historian Thomas Gent (1693-1778)' by Richard Knowles

Thomas Gent, or “Tommy” was born in Dublin in 1693, apprenticed as a printer in London and then spent much of his life in York. It is the county of Yorkshire that he mainly recorded in his volumes, these are packed with fascinating often obscure facts, hidden biographical snippets and with sometimes crude wood-engravings that have a naive charm of their own, but he is also associated with the printing of chapbooks and a local newspaper.

The talk went on to briefly consider his surviving portraits. These range from a fine life sized oil painting by York based painter, Nathan Drake of 1770 to engraved images from periods of his life. The oil painting was known to many, as he looked down upon the speakers, lectures and members of the YAS, whilst it hung over the fireplace in the lecture room at Clarendon, until the lamented dispersal of the Society's premises a few years ago.

It is a fine characterful portrait, with Thomas holding open a copy of his “History of Rippon” and featuring his other major topographical works. This is a striking image of the irascible Gent in older age. In best television “Fake or Fortune” manner, an investigation of the labels to rear of the picture reveals some of its hidden history.

'The Four Extant Wakefield Burgess Rolls of 1533, 1556, 1559 and 1579' by Richard Knowles.

The Burgess Court was made up of freehold landowners within Wakefield and acted as administrators for the general affairs of the town.

It seems that burgage rights were first adopted from around 1190 and wound up in the Reform Acts of 1832. In Wakefield it appears that only some street frontage properties had burgage rights and burgage plots, these curvilinear plots however, can still be discerned in the street patterns and layout of the town/city.

The surviving rolls in the form of fines or “payns” are replete with the activities and responsibility of the Burgess Court in the Tudor period, for instance the Court had powers to make orders concerning the activities of the Corpus Christi plays, they took on highway responsibilities and in the Rolls you will find mention of the Waites, of a bridge maister, the use of the bakehouse, instruction that butchers must not cast into the street ropes, horns, bags of shepe or other cattel etc etc. Altogether a wonderful picture of the Tudor town life.

It seems that we first hear of the survival of these 16th century Wakefield Burgess Court rolls in November 1901 when found by Battie-Wrightson among his family papers. He loaned them to J.W. Walker. Between 1901 and 1928 Walker made transcripts of them, published by the YAS Records Series. No more is heard of them until John Goodchild rediscovered them among some papers belonging to the Battie-Wrightson family which were stored in premises in the village of Cusworth. John Goodchild purchased them from the trustees of the Old Cusworth Hall Estate. Following John's death in 2017 he gifted his Collection to Wakefield Council. Some concern had been expressed that the Burgess Rolls did not appear amongst the original vast collection now at the WYAS History Centre, that was meticulously box listed by Helen Walker and wondered where these significant documents for the history of Wakefield

might be. These concerns have been dispelled, as they were found at John's former house and they now join the rest of the Collection.

The Construction Contract for Wakefield's First Railway Station at Oakenshaw and for a station at Cudworth and the Admissions book dating from the 1870s for St John's Community Home. Two archival items that Phil Judkins has obtained to donate to the WYAS.

The construction contract for Wakefield's first railway station at Oakenshaw and for a station at Cudworth was purchased at an auction in Penzance. This is a highly detail account indicating the materials used and the wages paid.

Phil indicated Oakenshaw was not Wakefield's first railway, of course. Wakefield's colliery tramways had been around for many years and show us that the first railways were really about freight. After 1835, the faster mainline railways begin to emerge, and it was the North Midland, from Derby to Leeds, which was by a whisker the first in the field.

A review of Britain's railways of the time praised their design but was somewhat 'sniffy' on costs: "We cannot but deplore the growing evil of expending large sums of money on railway appendages. Instead of cottage buildings, which, for the traffic of most of the intermediate stopping places on this line, would have been amply sufficient, we find the railway literally ornamented with so many beautiful villas, any one of which would grace the sloping lawn of some domain by nature highly favoured." Oakenshaw station was just such a "villa" type design. It was quickly superseded by Wakefield Kirkgate, a joint station run by the Lancashire & Yorkshire railway. Closed in 1881 it of course no longer survives; its site is just scrubland with no sign of its previous significance and design. The talk illustrated the importance of archival material very well and the moral is that anything of interest can turn up anywhere.

'Admissions book dating from the 1870s for St John's Community Home'

The other item saved for posterity by Phil and purchased from an auction in Somerset is an Admissions book dating from the 1870s for St John's Community Home which had previously taken girls and women on their discharge from prison, later acting as a training school for domestic service. He outlined the history of the home, the building of which is now demolished. The records listed the young women who resided at the home, their 'crimes' and their impoverished and invariably sad backgrounds. Some were 'unmarried mothers' and were punished and stigmatised, described in their records as 'fallen'. The acquisition of this particular volume now ensures that it joins those already within the Archives and fills the gap left by its absence in the south.

Following the meeting both the Burgess Rolls, the Oakenshaw contract and the Admissions book were on display and the audience studied them eagerly. They will provide a useful source for researchers.

Our thanks to Richard and Phil for a fascinating evening. We would also like to thank Teresa Nixon and the staff of WYAS for both displaying the documents and for the use of their meeting room.