

Wakefield Historical Society / Wakefield Civic Society Joint Meeting

Held on Wednesday 14 January 2026 at 7pm at Wakefield Town Hall

“Everyday life in 17th Century Calderdale” by Peter Brears

Peter began his interesting and highly informative talk by stressing the importance of documents in his research – sale catalogues, Poor Law reports and most especially, the Probate records which provide a comprehensive list of everything (and the value of everything) in a person's home at the time of their death. There are literally thousands of such records which provide an enormous amount of information.

A working group is currently in the process of transcribing all the probate inventories in Halifax parish. The parish covers a sizeable area approximately 15 miles by 15 miles and comprises three distinct environments, which was well portrayed in the map of the Calder Valley which Peter showed the audience.

Firstly, a virtually impassable area of bog and woodland, followed at about 1000 to 1200 feet by an area where you could farm, if you had access to water from the natural springs and where sunlight could be accessed.

Finally at 1500 feet there was barren moorland. Peter showed a slide of a packhorse route which illustrated how difficult it was to cross the area.

Things don't change much in the hills. The names of people who lived there can still be found there. Livelihoods were supported by basic farming – it was predominantly cattle country – bulls for beef, cows (usually one per household) for dairy, milk to drink and butter to sell.

Wool from the Calder Valley was not good for making decent cloth, so the flocks of sheep were used for meat – pigs were the most valuable animals.

As regards crops, the fields in the area are so steep, ploughing was difficult, basically only hand ploughing, so only small amounts of oats, barley and wheat could be grown. Only the wealthy could afford to have teams of oxen. In addition, people with ploughs acted as contractors to do the ploughing for those willing or able to pay.

Peter then took us through the process of storing, threshing, winnowing and drying the grain before taking it to the mill to grind. Often an upstairs room in the family home was used to store the oats with bacon, to preserve both. Peter illustrated the range of equipment used in the making of oatcakes, as well as highlighting the great skill which was needed.

But people couldn't live by agriculture alone, so cloth making was also an important element of life in the Calder valley. It was a good area for making cloth – the water was soft and there were no Guild regulations.

The wool would come in from Wakefield and Peter talked us through the process by which the cloth would be spun, weaved, dyed and stretched before being sent to the dressers, which was where the real value was added to the cloth.

The Probate records of various individuals reflected the wealth which was created in each of the different stages of the process – for example, one woman who earned her living by spinning and who possessed only one old cow, had, according to Probate Records a total value of goods of £1 16s at her death, whereas a weaver would often have £60 or £70 worth of goods.

At the other end of the scale, a house near Shibden Hall, the home of a cloth dressing shop owner was home to a family of both parents, two daughters and four sons, plus three beds for six servants. The house was spacious with a hall, parlour, buttery and kitchen downstairs and living accommodation upstairs.

A Probate valuation of £1,500 was approximately a thousand times that of the spinners.

Halifax itself was a bustling town, centred on the medieval settlement round the parish church with its attendant vicarage and alms-houses. It grew in a classical ribbon development, the town expanding on the road into Lancashire. Halifax was a bustling town with every kind of shop and profession represented – apothecaries, drapers, grocers, butchers, bakers, innkeepers, solicitors.

Possessions reflected the wealth of the area – good quality furniture made in Leeds, pottery from local kilns as well as from the rest of the country and further afield, pewter and silver, as well as glassware coming in from London and Venice

Finally, Peter contrasted the Calder Valley's development with Wakefield, which was heavily influenced by geography – with a narrow valley bottom and steep sloping sides, whereas Wakefield had a much wider bottom of the valley and more gentle sloping sides.

After taking several questions from the audience, Peter was thanked for a fascinating and well researched talk about "Everyday Life in 17th century Calderdale"

Steve Hargrave

20 January 2026