

Whickham and District Past n Present Group (History)

On Thursday 12th June 2025 nine members of the Past n Present group travelled across to Seaham on the coast where the day started with a 'coffee stop' that quickly morphed into an early lunch. Thus fortified, Malcolm Wilkinson, Chair of Seaham and District u3a, our guide for the day, led us to the nearby church of St Mary the Virgin. My knees can question the term 'nearby' - about a mile in all, down and up a ravine with the reverse to get us back to the cars!!

Malcolm had co-opted the help of Alice, one of the church wardens, to tell us about the church which is one of the twenty oldest churches in England dating back to the late 7th or very early 8th century. The first recorded mention of Seaham being in a grant by King Athelstan of the parish to the monks of St Cuthbert in 934AD, but the church long pre-dates that.



I particularly liked the lancet windows of the eastern end of the church and also the height of the three Anglo Saxon windows in the western end of the nave that had been revealed by repair work in 1912. All contributed to the knowledge and atmosphere that we were in a very old stone church. Our attention was also drawn to the windows on the south side of the nave which are attributed to the firm of Kempe with the firm's logo of a black castle on a wheatsheaf in the bottom left hand corner. The box pews are of note also, being Georgian, dating back to 1811. Some of them still have their original brass plates to say whose pews they were.

After our interesting visit to the church, we walked along the seafront of Seaham with Malcolm pointing out the influence of Lord Londonderry on the building of some of the housing and in particular on the harbour. We learned that Lord Londonderry had married a wealthy heiress and had invested his fortune in the development of Seaham. We also heard about the lifeboat disaster in 1962 which took place just outside the harbour involving the lifeboat called George Elmo which was assisting the coble 'Economy', which was in distress. All five of the lifeboat crew and four from the coble were lost.

We admired Ray Lonsdale's statue of 'Tommy' sitting in its seafront position and also his most recent work of the miner's head which has been installed opposite the road down to the harbour.

Our day ended in the Masonic Hall where Malcolm showed us into the grand meeting room with its large wooden plaques on the walls denoting its history. This was also an opportunity for us to sit down and rest our weary legs after a long, but enriching, day spent in Seaham.



Script by Shirley Fall. Photos by Cecilia Coulson