

Lecture 26th March

James Hutton of Slighouses: Father of Modern Geology

Speaker: Mike Chandler

Last Wednesday evening at another well supported meeting members of Dunse History Society, enjoyed a well presented and researched talk given by Mike Candlish on **“James Hutton: Father of Modern Geology”**.

After taking a sounding from members of their knowledge of Hutton and of his contemporaries the speaker gave a resume of various books and biographies and an outline of the life of this most amazing Enlightenment polymath major.

Members were probably surprised to learn of the extent of Hutton's interests. Born in Edinburgh in 1726 he was educated at the High School where his interests were in mathematics and chemistry before going on to the University to study “humanity”, then being apprenticed as a lawyer. This however was obviously not his first preference as he attended lectures in medicine and become a physician's assistant. With even further ambition he went on to university in Paris and from there to Leiden in Holland obtaining a doctorate in medicine in 1749.

Back in Edinburgh Hutton became involved with James Davie in a factory producing sal ammoniac from soot which proved very successful.

He also became very much involved in agriculture having inherited the farm of Slighouses only a few miles from Duns. He moved there in the early 1750s and set about making all sorts of improvements almost certainly including working with James Small on the introduction of the modern plough which revolutionised farming practice.

His interests showed no limits extending to geology. He embarked on a geological tour and put forward a revolutionary theory regarding the formation of rocks and the age of the world – as was said ‘bursting through the boundaries of time’. The age of the earth was then commonly believed to be about 6000 years but following Napier's discoveries and theory had now to be calculated in millions of years.

Much of the theory arose from observations he made at Siccar Point on the Berwickshire coast and the speaker explained how age could be worked out by observing rock formation – stressing though the dangers of access at Siccar Point.

The speaker went on to look at Hutton's contemporaries and whom he would have met, - many famous names suggesting among others, Robert Burns who must have had Hutton's findings very much in his mind when in ‘My Love is Like a Red Red Rose’ he wrote “Till all the seas gang dry and the rocks melt wi' the sun”.

Hutton a quite amazing man.