

## STOKESLEY PROBUS CLUB

### **Speaker Notes – Jack Brunton Room at Stokesley Town Hall Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> May 2026 at 10.00am**

The Chairman was very pleased to introduce Dr Tony Nicholson to deliver his talk, “Ironstone Miners of Cleveland”.

After a career in education, first teaching history, then as a lecturer specialising in museum services at Teesside University, Tony is now retired and undertakes research, presents talks, and has published several books.

With a special interest in Cleveland ironstone mining Tony explained the origins of the industry, its methods, and a very detailed and grim account of life as a miner.

Starting on a small-scale collecting ironstone nuggets from the beach at Skinningrove, the local landowner identified exposed seams in the hillsides and linked up with industrialist John Vaughn and commenced to mine the vast reserves in the local area. The Tees area now had all three ingredients for iron manufacture: coal (from County Durham), limestone (from Teesdale), and ironstone.

The effect on East Cleveland was immediate. Essential infrastructure was developed, numerous mining companies set up, and settlements were built. Tony focussed on Carlin How to explain the hard life of the mostly itinerant workers comprising around 10% skilled tin miners from Cornwall who led and trained the many unskilled labourers flocking to the area for work. And strenuous work it was, toiling 14 hours per day, six days a week. Although gruelling, there was no shortage of labour as the pay was relatively good. Tony described the arduous task of hand drilling into the excavation face, placing explosives, and breaking up and removal of the ironstone often miles from the mineshaft.

Rough and tough, a population of mostly young men, it was like the Wild West – hard work followed by hard play: much drinking, gambling and prostitution. What would become a pivotal incident Tony described a particularly disturbing crime which occurred on Christmas Eve 1873. Following heavy drinking, five miners stripped, beat, raped, and thrashed a vagrant woman who was found dead at the bottom of a mineshaft on Christmas Day. This caused national outrage, and things had to change. Throughout the industrial areas programmes were introduced to improve the lives of workers, and thereby keep them out of trouble - better working conditions, trade unions, working mens' clubs, sports clubs, brass bands, racing pigeons, allotments, Co-operative Club stores, corner shops, etc. This brought civility transforming settlements into communities. Essentially, the birth of the working class.

Having a keen interest in local history, Tony considered old monochrome photographs, whilst fascinating, lacked an emotional connection with the past. Being a keen photographer, and adept at modifying and enhancing images, Tony applied these skills painstakingly to colour old images and enhance them resulting in photographs that appear to have been taken recently. This gives the viewer a wonderful “feel there” glance into the past. Very impressive. Tony has now published two books of his collected modified old images, one featuring Stockton, and one featuring Middlesbrough, which have proven very popular.

Several copies of each were brought to the meeting for purchase.

After several questions and thanks from the Chairman for a fascinating and very engaging presentation, Members expressed their thanks and appreciation to Tony and with a round of applause.

JE 19.5.26