

WHY WAS THE SHEPHERD DELIGHTED?

Talk on weather lore, by Bill Avenell

When a quite large group of U3A members assembled for our usual monthly meeting, on the rather appropriate date of Friday March 13th, we little knew that this was to be our last for some time. We were signed in, rather than all using the same pen to sign ourselves in, George Redgrave mentioned the possibility of future cancellations, and Ann Sole made us laugh with some tongue-in-cheek suggestions for social distancing; I rather favour the giant knitting needles. On the whole, though, it was very much “keep calm and carry on”, and await further developments, so we did.

Most of us remembered Bill from his previous talk (Why is Church Lane so steep), and knew we were in for an entertaining afternoon. He is a retired teacher of geography and I’m sure many of us felt we’d have got better O level grades if we’d had such a lively and enthusiastic teacher. The tone was set by opening with that lovely song by Flanders and Swann: “A song of the weather”, which brought lots of smiles, and the comment from Bill that Britain does not have a climate; only weather.

We were given a roller-coaster ride through air masses, the continental effect, the Coriolis force ... far too much to remember, although it all made perfect sense at the time. One thing which did stick in my memory was the fairly useless, but interesting, fact about the plug hole. This is the well-known fact that water runs down a plug hole clockwise in the Northern hemisphere, counter-clockwise in the Southern hemisphere, and straight down on the Equator (the aforementioned Coriolis effect). Well, actually, no. Most scientists now agree that this is not the case, and has more to do with the way the water is moving when you pull the plug out. A useful fact with which to bore your grandchildren.

As you can tell from the title of the talk, Bill was mostly looking at weather lore: is there any truth in those old sayings? It seems there is, as they are based on the observations of people, like those shepherds, who lived close to nature for hundreds of years. It doesn’t take a scientist to note that “Rainbow in the afternoon, fair weather will be coming soon”, or “When a halo rings the moon or sun rain’s approaching on the run”. We all can generally spot from the clouds when rain is on the way, and, incidentally, the man who was responsible for classifying clouds was Luke Howard (1772-1864). Climate change has made some observations less reliable, as “Oak before ash we shall surely have a splash; Ash before oak we are in for a soak”, meaning that a dry summer follows from the oak tree coming out before the ash. Perhaps we should not rely on that these days.

As always, Bill includes a Sussex slant; I now know that the largest hailstones weighed so far (6.5 ounces) fell in Horsham in September 1958. Altogether a very interesting and amusing talk, which, although we did not know it then, was a good way to enjoy our final meeting for quite a long time.

Jean Austin