

Arsenic's Toxic Legacy

Wickhambrook Local History Society welcomed Neil Dickinson to the May meeting for what sounded like a very serious subject, but before too long we were in fits of laughter as Neil's dry wit made it come to life.



When he was a child in Sheffield, Neil would visit the Peak District where he collected minerals from the hills and this led to a lifelong interest, a university degree and a career as an industrial chemist.

His subject was arsenic, a chemical element from an ore which was a by-product of Cornish tin and copper mining and since Victorian times has been used in many different ways.

Fowler's Solution was marketed as a tonic and aphrodisiac, good for the complexion too as it caused cheeks to be rosy.

Arsenic was used in chicken feed to grow bigger hens until fairly recently and was widely used as a spray to kill Colorado Beetle and Boll Weevil in the USA and was sprayed on fruit trees.

As we know, it is also a poison and half a teaspoonful ingested can kill a human.

Neil told us of poisonings and possible murders. In 1857, Madeleine Smith gave her fiancé cocoa laced with arsenic but murder was 'not proven' in the Scottish Court. Mary Anne Cotton, 1832-1873, poisoned 21 members of her family with it to claim insurance. Marcus Marymont, an American serviceman, used it to poison his wife in 1958 and this was the first case where hair samples were analysed to prove slow poisoning over a length of time.

In 1858, a Yorkshire confectioner mistakenly added arsenic to peppermint lozenges and more than 20 people died. In the Manchester Beer Epidemic, when cheap beer was contaminated by arsenic, 6,000 people were poisoned and 70 died.

There were accidental poisonings too as a green dye used in clothing and wallpaper contained arsenic until it was banned in 1856

This was such a fascinating talk, so much to learn and think about, and the chemists and farmers in our society had many questions for Neil at the end of the evening.