

Guest speaker Richard Blake

"Abolition, Africa and Arctic: - Three Naval Doctors and the Splash They Caused"

THE part played by clergyman and naval doctor James Ramsey in the abolition of the slave trade in the 18th century is not as widely appreciated as it should be, Kyrle Probus members learnt at their recent meeting, in a superb talk by Richard Blake, a retired history teacher and brother of Kyrle Probus member Geoff.

Ramsey, a skilled operator as a naval doctor and surgeon, was serving on board HMS Arundel, under the command of Captain Charles Middleton in the West Indies in 1759, when a slave ship, the Swift, approached seeking help, as it had been struck by dysentery on board.

Ramsey treated the victims, but as he got back on-board Arundel, he slipped and broke his leg. Unable to continue his naval career, he became an Anglican minister and chose to work in the Caribbean island of St Kitts. He welcomed both black and white parishioners and was also appointed surgeon to several sugar plantations.

He strongly criticised the harsh conditions and brutality suffered by the slaves on the plantations and when after 16 years ministering in the West Indies, he returned to Britain, he wrote about and agitated for ending the slave trade. His cause was taken up by a young Yorkshire MP, William Wilberforce and the rest, as they say, is history.

Not only was Ramsey a skilled naval surgeon, he was also a skilled communicator and observed every rank aboard ship, which led him to produce a manual on man management and the duties of officers. He also developed a new language of flag signalling, simplifying what had gone before.

Richard also spoke about two other naval surgeons, who developed interests as explorers and naturalists. William Balfour Baikie led an expedition to navigate the River Niger in Western Africa in the mid-19th century, during which he also observed the cruelty of the slave trade.

The other was Dr John Richardson, who together with John Franklin, carried out three polar expeditions to Canada. Richardson played a big part in keeping up morale on these arduous expeditions and he also brought back a huge number of natural history discoveries. He became a famous naturalist and had Charles Darwin as friend and colleague.

The title of Richard's talk was 'Abolition, Africa, Arctic – Three Naval Doctors and the Splash They Caused' Richard himself certainly caused a splash with his audience and the way he brought the characters involved, to life, was hugely impressive and enjoyable.

Richard lives in Southampton and is an authority on everything to do with the Titanic and when Probus members and wives are on their annual holiday, based in Hayling Island, next month, Richard will take them on a 'Titanic' conducted tour of Southampton, from where the ship sailed on that fateful crossing in April 1912.