

## **Bhutan – Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon**

Members of the Denbigh and District Probus Club and their guests enjoyed an excellent Christmas lunch at the Oriol Hotel in St Asaph this month.

New Club President John Barr from St Asaph, who took on the role in November 2022 at the club AGM, following on from Julia Hughes, the 2022 Club President, led the proceedings and welcomed the speaker Zara Fleming who gave a fascinating talk on Bhutan – Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon.

Zara Fleming, who lives in Denbighshire, is an independent art consultant, lecturer, tour guide and exhibition curator with specialist knowledge of Buddhist art; focusing on the art and culture of Tibet and the Himalayas.

Her interest in the country stemmed from when she was aged 7 and the Dalai Lama came out of Tibet and her school raised money. She decided that one day she would go there. Having been left a small legacy for travel by a relative when she was 21, she left and worked in a school in Tibet.

Her lecturing experience includes the Arts Society (formerly NADFAS), the School of African and Oriental Studies, the V & A, Merseyside County Museums, the Oriental Museum in Durham, the Royal Academy, the Brunei Gallery, Asia House and to schools, universities and various study groups. She has also lectured in Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

She was initially based at the Victoria & Albert Museum, with general responsibility for the Tibetan, Himalayan and Burmese Collections (1974-81); Zara was then affiliated with the Central Asian Department at Bonn University cataloguing the Tibetan and Mongolian collections of all UK Museums and private collections, part of a larger cataloguing project throughout Europe (1981-88) and was the Assistant Projects Director in Europe for the Orient Foundation (1984-5).

She has curated several exhibitions including “Man and Environment in Harmony“ for Vistech International, London (1992), “In the Steppes of Genghis Khan” at the October Gallery in London, 2003; “Asia – Body,

Mind, Spirit” for the Wellcome Library and Asia House, 2004 and “The Tiger in Asian Art” at Asia House, 2010. And prepared the educational material for the “Sacred Art of Tibet – Wisdom and Compassion” exhibition at the Royal Academy in London (1992). She is also an art consultant and Curatorial Advisor.

Zara explained that **Bhutan** means at the end of Tibet and that 60 years ago there were no roads, no cars and no currency (textiles used to be used as currency) and that it is a tiny country between Tibet and India about the size of Switzerland but with a population of 800,000 vs 8 million in Switzerland.

There are 23 languages spoken in the country but English is the main medium. The people are collectively known as the dragon people.

Bhutan has always lived in harmony with the environment and it is believed that people must eliminate suffering and get rid of ignorance, greed and anger to gain enlightenment.

There was no art in the country until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century apart from religious art and all paintings and sculptures have to be consecrated. Any paintings have to follow the same format e.g., have only things in them found in Bhutan.

Right around the Buddhist world are Chorten (including Bhutan) Buddhist shrines, typically a saint's tomb or a monument to the Buddha. They represent enlightenment and people need to go around them in a clockwise direction.

There are also many Dzongs which are a bit like a Welsh castle but with a castle, cathedral and county council rolled into one and they are very much in use today, however, because they burn butter lamps on the alter, many have been destroyed by fire.

There is a code of conduct for dress in the country and they wear the Gho the traditional and national dress for men. It is a robe tied with a handwoven belt with different lengths worn depending on status. There is also a ceremonial shawl again linked to status with different colours for different categories of people.

Women wear the Kira which is an ankle-length dress consisting of a rectangular piece of woven fabric. It is wrapped and folded around the body.

Zara also gave a detailed account of the history of the royalty in the country including King Jigme Sinye Wangchuck who took office on July 24, 1972, a few months before the death of his father, who had abdicated and handed power to his son. Jigme Singye Wangchuk was crowned King of Bhutan at age 18, making him the youngest monarch and leader in the world at that time.

He made everyone wear costume, use the same language and had 4 wives and 10 children.

He concentrated on sustainable economic growth and development, good governance, conservation and sustainable environment insisting that 60% of the land must be national forest, no pesticides, no fertilizer and no tobacco. He wanted preservation and promotion of agricultural heritage.

The schools in the country focused on 13 crafts including slate carving, clay sculptures, appliqué banners, weaving and dancing. He reigned until 2006.

The government of Bhutan has been a constitutional monarchy since 2008. The King is the head of state and there is a council of ministers and Prime Minister (who is a doctor at weekends). There is a free health service.

Travellers to the county must be in groups – 2 people minimum. It is really a beautiful and interesting place to visit.

**<https://www.tourism.gov.bt/>**

Denbigh and District Probus Club welcomes new members to join our group for monthly meetings (held at the Oriol Hotel, St Asaph) where we enjoy lunch, friendship and a stimulating guest speaker. The next meeting will be on Monday January 9<sup>th</sup> 2022 when Rod Waterfield will speak about The Woodland Skills Centre, which is in Bodfari. For further information contact Gareth Williams, Membership Officer, [julmwilliams1974@gmail.com](mailto:julmwilliams1974@gmail.com) or call 07881 783735