Author Interview: Andrew Beardmore

History, Heritage, and Epic Fantasy: From the Unusual & Quirky Series to the World of Thera

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Interviewee: Andrew Beardmore — Author, Local Historian, and Musician
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Editorial Note: This transcript has been lightly cleaned from a verbatim recording for readability. The series title 'The Nessemiah' has been standardised throughout; the character name 'Davy Sheeran' and place name 'Cabrennar' are as stated by the author. Natural speech patterns, including hesitations and self-corrections, have been retained to preserve the authentic voice of the conversation.

PART ONE — WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Fiza Pathan: Thank you. So, welcome again to Fiza Pathan's Teaching Portfolio for PGCITE. Today, we are talking about history — which is actually my subject, my postgraduate and graduating subject, and my favourite subject of all time. And I thought, why not have one of the best and most talked-about indie authors here on this platform, talking about his non-fiction historical writings? We have with us today Andrew Beardmore, a great friend of mine and a wonderful — not only non-fiction historical writer, but an amazing fantasy fiction writer. I would even term his fiction as fantasy literary fiction. So, all of you — my students especially — I know you are all out there watching this. Those of you into fantasy, this is the guy you should be looking up: Andrew Beardmore. And please, I hope you will all learn a great deal about the importance of history and his ideas about history. He has a background in IT, which is totally different from history, and yet he feels subjects like history and geography are very important in any educational curriculum. Over to you now, dear Andrew Beardmore. Yeah, let us go for it.

Andrew Beardmore: Thank you so much, Fiza. That is an amazing introduction. And thank you for having me on your teaching portfolio website. It is a real honour to be here. And I also thank you so much for the reviews that you have given of my fiction as

well. As you know, there is nothing more encouraging than having another author support you.

Fiza Pathan: Well deserved, well deserved. And this is an author to be watched out for. But I think even his non-fiction works should be looked into. Continue, continue.

PART TWO — BACKGROUND: IT, HISTORY, AND A FIRST-CLASS HONOURS DEGREE

Andrew Beardmore: Okay. I thought it would be important to explain who I am — you have already done a really good job of that. So: I do feel a little bit of a fraud when people introduce me as a historian. I feel a bit uneasy. It is sort of odd, because I have worked for nearly forty years in the IT industry, for four huge companies: Rolls-Royce, Boots, IBM, and Computer Centre. The latter two both have a significant presence in India, incidentally. And I have had associations with India throughout my IT career. But my two biggest loves throughout all of my life have been history and geography — which aligns with yourself perfectly. If I go back to my childhood, for example, I remember being aged seven or eight. I knew every single capital city in the world. And I could have been presented with the shape of any country — without naming it — and I would have known which one it was. I am probably about eighty per cent as good as that now. There are a lot more countries, of course. But yes — that was about age seven or eight. By the time I took my A levels at eighteen, my main love was history. I got an A at history A level. I was all set to read history at university. But unfortunately, we had some troubling family circumstances which meant I had to get a job and earn some money.

Andrew Beardmore: My first job was at the tax office, where I worked for four and a half years — hence the photograph of the Houses of Parliament. Obviously it is a government department. But whilst I was at the tax office, I studied GCSE Computer Studies at night class. That then enabled me to get my first IT role at Rolls-Royce, which was way back in 1987 — hence nearly forty years. Rolls-Royce then sponsored me to do a Computer Science degree with day release. That took four years. And I eventually graduated with a first-class honours degree. But more importantly, I actually won the top prize for the Faculty of Mathematics and Computing that year, which was known as the Junaid Ghari Memorial Award.

Fiza Pathan: Can I just ask you a question? At which time was this? The 1990s or the 1980s?

Andrew Beardmore: Both — it was 1988 to 1994, and I took two years off in the middle when I got married. So it took four years in total, but six years of elapsed time.

Fiza Pathan: I want to point out something here. This is so important for my students especially. He worked while he was studying. He was working. This is something totally novel to most people here in this part of the world. Gen Z and Gen Alpha do not always like to earn while learning — and you can see here, it may not be happening in England, but it is certainly happening over here, which is very concerning. So I hope you can see in Andrew a beautiful inspiration. And another thing: the Junaid Ghari Award — and the first thing he thinks about is not how he can get more money or keep on progressing, but why did I get this award? He is thinking about this. This is a totally different, unique

way of thinking about one's own achievement — a humble and beautiful, reflective way. Continue Andrew, beautiful.

Andrew Beardmore: Thank you. But it is tough. And I did it in my mid to late twenties as well — which is probably a time when you should be out enjoying yourself. There are two ways of looking at this really. But it certainly laid the foundations for my career. From this point onwards, everything really took off. All the hard work was worthwhile. I realised that I could write, and that I was pretty good at writing. So I thought, well, I need to do something with this. Not necessarily make a living out of it, but at least get some recognition for it.

PART THREE — FIRST PUBLICATIONS: SHORT STORIES AND LOCAL COMPETITIONS

Andrew Beardmore: Moving on to my first publications. I decided to write, and the very first competition I entered — in 1996 — was the annual BBC Radio Derby Short Story Competition.

Fiza Pathan: The biggest one, the most important one — he enters. Amazing. Go ahead.

Andrew Beardmore: There were, I think, somewhere between a thousand and two thousand entries. There were only five winners, and they were read out on the radio Monday through Friday. Now, I was not in the top five. But this competition was run by Derby City Council's literature development department. And what they did was pick five additional people whom they thought showed promise as writers — and I was one of those five. It literally changed my life at that point. Because I do not know whether I would have carried on — certainly I would not have been as prolific — without that encouragement from Derby Literature Development.

Andrew Beardmore: I then became a prolific contributor to the Derby Telegraph, which had the biggest circulation in our particular area — back in those days, something like fifty to a hundred thousand readers. Incredible exposure. I wrote many short stories for them, and then I got published in other newspapers, magazines, periodicals, and the small presses. I then started winning competitions — mainly local ones, but some national. And then we come to the second pivotal moment in my writing journey: the Trowel and District Writers competition of 2008. Trowel is a village-come-town in Nottinghamshire, my neighbouring county.

Fiza Pathan: A big thing. Nottinghamshire's Trowel and District Writers — you were really catching on. I want to know more of those short stories. I hope you are planning on making a collection of them to share with us — your readers. Please do.

Andrew Beardmore: It is just time, Fiza, you know. I really would love to release an anthology of all of my early short stories — particularly the ones that appeared in the Derby Telegraph.

Fiza Pathan: Please do. And then send them to me, and I will review them — and my students will also review them for you. Please do.

Andrew Beardmore: Oh, that would be wonderful. Okay, so back to the second pivotal moment at Trowel and District Writers. It is pivotal because it is the first time I had

written anything relating to local history. And it was not a short story, not an article — it was a poem. But a poem with a difference. These poems later manifested as something I called a shire-ode, which became the pivotal central part of all of my Unusual and Quirky books over the next fifteen years.

Andrew Beardmore: What is a shire-ode? It is a poem told in rhyming verse about imaginary inhabitants of the county in question, with place names woven into the flow of the poem. The particular piece that won the Trowel and District Writers 2008 competition was called Arnold's Daughter — because Arnold is a town in Nottinghamshire, and the daughter in question is Kimberley, which is also a town in Nottinghamshire. So it starts something like: 'She was born the youngest of Arnold's three — there was Elton, and Trent, and then sweet Kimberley.'

Fiza Pathan: Trent! All of them! I love Trent. I hope one day I get to go there. Continue.

Andrew Beardmore: They obviously thought this was worthy of winning the competition. And by virtue of winning it, I again took a step back and thought: well, I might be on to something here. I wonder if I can put this at the centre of a local history book, and maybe get published by a mainstream publisher — for the first time. So that is exactly what I did. But I did not want to write about Nottinghamshire first. I wanted to write about my own county, Derbyshire. So I created a new shire-ode called Brad and Mel, which starts: 'They were born in the Forties — Mel born in Cromford and Brad born in Lea. Brad was the kinder; there was great hope for Mel, who excelled in the kitchen and sure could Bakewell.' Bakewell being a place name in Derbyshire, of course.

Fiza Pathan: That was so smart! Bakewell.

PART FOUR — MAINSTREAM PUBLISHING: THE UNUSUAL AND QUIRKY SERIES

Andrew Beardmore: My first publication is Derbyshire Unusual and Quirky. Picked up by Halsgrove Publishing in 2012 — they offered me a contract in 2013, and it was published in 2014. And you have got that shire-ode, Brad and Mel, sitting at the heart of this book. Each of the Unusual and Quirky volumes is divided into two halves. The first half is called Conventional Derbyshire, and the second half is called Quirky Derbyshire — driven by the shire-ode, which has seventy-seven place names woven into its flow. In the second half, I visit each of those seventy-seven places as a kind of random almanac, and I delve into the history of each one. Every place has got a church, usually a pub, and certainly got history — and that was just such fun. I would drive all over the county to these places, taking all the photographs myself. Each of these books has around four to five hundred photographs in them.

Fiza Pathan: Four to five hundred! Whoa. Students, we can really get a lot from these books. Even for history and literature students, especially the style in which he has incorporated all these regions, all the counties and areas, into a form of poem. I think you all should look into this — especially for your poetry writing, and for the questions you face in IBDP and AS and A Level. Continue. I am especially looking at Nottinghamshire, I am seeing Staffordshire, a favourite place which I love — and oh, Shropshire. I have not seen this in the Indian market. You must make it available for all of us over here.

Andrew Beardmore: Well, it should be available. Shropshire came out in 2023. It is an absolutely beautiful county — actually my favourite after Derbyshire. Very sparsely populated, which makes it lovely to drive around. Warwickshire is another one I love deeply. So: Derbyshire Unusual and Quirky was published in October 2014. These are hardbacks, by the way — quite substantial, coffee-table style, around one hundred and sixty pages, but with lots of photographs and an enormous amount of information. The first half covers the county from prehistoric times all the way through to the twenty-first century. Derbyshire did better than the publisher was expecting, and within a month I received a contract to write Nottinghamshire, and then Leicestershire and Rutland. They were successful, and I ended up with a rolling contract giving Halsgrove first refusal on my next piece of work. We are now at eight books, with Worcestershire three-quarters finished as book nine.

Fiza Pathan: Amazing, amazing.

Andrew Beardmore: Halsgrove have also published some football literature for me — historically orientated, of course. Barmy Derby is a history of Derby County Football Club from its founding in the early 1880s all the way through to today. I thoroughly enjoyed writing that. And then, as you have also mentioned, I have more recently branched out into fiction — not any old fiction; I have gone for epic fantasy. And my grounding as a local historian has proven very helpful in writing an authentic world called Thera in the epic fantasy series, The Nessemiah. The strapline is 'Poldark meets Gladiator on another world,' and it is extremely helpful having the background and love for history that I do. That brings us round full circle to the first question: would it be history and geography that I loved as a child, or IT which I deliberately moved into in the 1980s because it was clearly a growing profession? The answer is: I have ended up doing all three. I am still working in IT now, albeit as a copywriter for the last eight years — using very much the same process: pulling information from many disparate sources, analysing it, discarding what is not relevant, focusing on the key message, and summarising it into something succinct. It has been the same process for my degree course, for Unusual and Quirky, and for my IT copywriting career.

PART FIVE — THE QUIRKY HISTORY OF DERBYSHIRE: LOCAL HISTORY TALKS

Fiza Pathan: Is this something you have photographed — the graves or these stones here at the bottom? Where is this from?

Andrew Beardmore: This is Stanton Moor in Derbyshire — a very windswept, flat plateau at about one and a half to two thousand feet. And in the middle of this plateau, surrounded by trees, is one of the most serene places I have ever been. It is a Neolithic stone circle known as the Nine Ladies. There are nine stones there. And the legend is that these were nine ladies who were turned to stone for dancing on a Sunday. I tell this story in my local history talks, and I have also written a song to accompany it, because I am a musician. The song appears on my YouTube channel, The Quirky Beardie. There is a big crossover between Unusual and Quirky and the channel, because a number of the songs there also appear as tales I tell in Derbyshire Unusual and Quirky.

Fiza Pathan: May I ask you a question at this point? If you were not obliged to earn a living — is your heart truly only in history? More than IT, more than copywriting?

Andrew Beardmore: Oh, if I could have been a writer for a living — that would have been absolute perfection. Or a historian, that would have been wonderful. But there are limited jobs in this country, and unless you... At school, I always told everyone I was going to be an archaeologist or a geologist. I would have loved to have done either of those things. But as you saw, I ended up working in local government at the tax office, and then I thought, quite sensibly at the time, that IT was the profession to get into. But I have to say it has been a tough profession. There have been times when I was on call every other week for forty different customers, being called out every night to fix problems — and I swear that has knocked ten years off my life. That was when I was working for IBM.

Fiza Pathan: So I hope everyone is hearing this. All those who want to become data scientists and data analysts — see what Andrew had to go through, and yet that love for history and geography did not die in him. And if you heard carefully: because of financial conditions at home, he made the right decision, and yet he kept his hobbies alive. Keep that in mind.

Andrew Beardmore: Never give up.

PART SIX — STORIES FROM THE QUIRKY HISTORY TALKS

Fiza Pathan: Please tell us the story of the Nine Ladies. Even if you cannot sing for us, please share the story. I think they are singing to my soul.

Andrew Beardmore: I am sorry to disappoint you, but it is only a legend. A very short and succinct legend: it was simply nine ladies who used to go out on the Sabbath to dance. And they were punished for that — alleged to have been turned to stone. So you have these nine stones in this beautiful stone circle. And about forty yards away to the west, there is a single stone known as the King Stone — also known as the Ladies' Fiddler. He was the man who played the fiddle while they all danced.

Fiza Pathan: This is getting into my head as a nice story. I think you should develop on this further.

Andrew Beardmore: Well, I have done something with it in the song. It is very atmospheric — I have got a flute in there as well, which makes it sound very ethereal. And that is what this place is. This whole area of Stanton Moor, with its many stone circles, is actually a hotbed for druids — British druids.

Fiza Pathan: I was just about to ask you about any druidic legend or history here. Can you tell us about druid culture? Most Gen Z students hardly know anything about the druidic culture of the UK.

Andrew Beardmore: I cannot profess to be an expert. But I know that the druidic culture goes back at least two thousand years — it was present when the Romans invaded Britain, when the Anglo-Saxons invaded, and when the Vikings came. They worship Mother Earth, I believe. And — you may have noticed — in my fiction, The Strains of Malice and The Nessemiah, it is heavily orientated around a druidic culture. I

have read about it in novels rather than non-fiction, so I do not know all the details. But what I can tell you is that in the trees around this stone circle, they tie bells and ribbons. The wind is always blowing here. When you stand there, you hear the wind through the trees — and you also hear these tinkling bells.

Fiza Pathan: Like wind chimes — but something even better. Something...

Andrew Beardmore: Exactly. It is just a magical place. And there are quite a few of these in Derbyshire. I am afraid that is the best I can do from a druidic perspective.

Andrew Beardmore: Now, moving on to the Crooked Spire — one of the most, and certainly probably the most famous landmark in Derbyshire. This is St Mary and All Saints Church in Chesterfield. Nationally famous as well. Chesterfield Football Club are nicknamed the Spireites. And I kick off this part of the presentation by saying that we Derbyshire people are a bit lackadaisical about what a wonderful edifice we have here — we just take it for granted. The Crooked Spire has a twist of forty-five degrees. It sounds infeasible, but it twists. And the most astonishing fact is that it has a lean of nine and a half feet. The lean is measured from the centre point of any of the four sides of the tower to the outermost point of the spire — and it is nine feet six inches out to the left. In my talks, I pick on someone who is about six feet tall and say: if you lay down on the floor now, that is your body length and a half. That is how far that spire leans.

Fiza Pathan: Is there a story behind it? Was it naturally created by...

Andrew Beardmore: Yes, it is coming shortly. The main reason attributed to the spire being twisted and crooked is the Black Death. The Black Death swept through England in 1349, taking roughly a third of the population. At that time the population of England was six million — it was taken down in twelve months to four million. An astonishing figure. If you extrapolate that to today, with England at seventy or eighty million, and India at over a billion — the numbers are just horrific. What the plague did was wipe out an enormous number of skilled craftspeople in the mid-fourteenth century. And that was precisely the point at which the Church of St Mary and All Saints in Chesterfield was being built. They ended up with an inexperienced team. Two fundamental mistakes were made: they used unseasoned, green timber in the frame, and they did not put cross-bracing inside to strengthen the structure.

Andrew Beardmore: What is really interesting is that it is almost certain the spire remained upright — not twisted — for several centuries. We know this because two very significant commentators of the late seventeenth century, Celia Fiennes and Daniel Defoe — of Robinson Crusoe fame, though he was also a journalist who travelled and wrote about the places he visited, rather like I am doing now — both visited Chesterfield, and neither reported a crooked spire. There is no way they would have failed to mention it if it had been crooked. So the theory is: in the early 1700s, the original oak tiles had worn out and were replaced with thirty-two tons of lead tiling. Remember — they had still not fixed the unseasoned wood and the lack of cross-bracing. The sun beats down on the southern face, the lead tiles expand and contract at a different rate to those on the north face, and over the years the structure warped, twisted, and leant.

Andrew Beardmore: Now, because this is called A Quirky History of Derbyshire, there is obviously a legend associated with the spire. One very dull legend says it was struck by lightning — clearly not true. Another states that a Bolsover blacksmith was conned by a

Chesterfield magician into shoeing the Devil — putting a horseshoe on his hoof. He was so frightened that he missed and hammered the nail through the Devil's foot. The Devil took off in pure rage, swiping at buildings as he went — and one of the things he swiped was the Chesterfield spire. But my favourite legend is that in the late Middle Ages, a virgin got married in Chesterfield church. And the spire was so astonished to see such an unlikely event that it twisted round to have a better look. The legend also states that in the unlikely event that another virgin should marry in the church, the spire will come back up straight again.

Fiza Pathan: Oh my gosh — and I think that is even a deeper level of analysis, because we were just talking about virginity being something more than the physical. The spire was perhaps seeing in that virgin a kind of absolute purity — a purity that has nothing to do with the physical aspect of the word in the canonical sense. And now only if it sees that kind of purity again will it turn back and become straight. This is something we can really talk about.

Andrew Beardmore: I think it is fair to say it is absolute nonsense in this case! But every county has these legends, and multiple legends at that. I am happy to talk about some of the others if you like.

PART SEVEN — DALE ABBEY, THE HERMIT'S CAVE, AND THE REFORMATION

Andrew Beardmore: There is a massive focus on ecclesiastical institutions in my Unusual and Quirky books, because they are so built into the history of every county. Every single place I visit, I always go into the church, I always leave some money in the collection box. And most of them have little booklets you can take away giving the history of the church — you are getting information from the horse's mouth, and you know it will not be inaccurate.

Andrew Beardmore: I am going to move to another ecclesiastical establishment now. This is a place called Dale Abbey in Derbyshire — in the south-east, which is mainly industrial, but there is this beautiful valley in the middle called Dale Abbey. And that is the only surviving arch from a thirteenth-century Premonstratensian Abbey — also known as the White Canons, courtesy of their white habit.

Fiza Pathan: Of course. A very old order. These strict cloistered nuns — or monks, if I can remember correctly.

Andrew Beardmore: These were monks, yes — this was a monastery. And it was known as Dale Abbey; the place was called Deepdale before the monastery was built. Now, the Reformation is something I write about in every book. It is one of the biggest tragedies of all time, what happened in the 1530s — and it features heavily in the history of all the Unusual and Quirky books. Because every single county I visit, there are these kinds of ruins. Some have nothing left at all. They were either sold off to the noblemen of the time, who converted them into country houses, or the stone was simply stolen for other buildings.

Andrew Beardmore: What is interesting is how Halsgrove have placed the photograph of the Dale Abbey arch next to the photograph of the Hermit's Cave — also in Dale

Abbey. There is a beautiful valley running across the back of where the Abbey was, and halfway down is this cave. There is a legend associated with it, but it is almost certainly founded on truth. The legend states that between 1130 and 1140, a Derby-based baker had a visitation from God and was told to go and live out the rest of his days as a hermit in this place called Deepdale. He went and carved out his home from the sandstone cliffs — six yards by three yards, two rooms: a living quarters and an oratory. He lived there for about ten years.

Fiza Pathan: My Lord. Six yards by three — that is it?

Andrew Beardmore: That is it. The story does have a happy ending, though. The Norman nobleman who owned these lands came across him, took pity on him, and granted him the land on which the hermitage was located. He also granted him a tithe from one of his mills — ten per cent of the takings per year — which enabled him, so the legend says, to create a grander home for himself, a grander oratory, a grander living quarters. And this connects to All Saints Church at Dale Abbey, which is one of the quirkiest buildings you will ever see. It is a church on the left-hand side and a private home on the right-hand side — it is the only one in England, possibly the whole UK, that shares a roof with another dwelling. That dwelling has been a farm, an infirmary for the abbey, and also a pub — the Bluebell Inn. The rumour is that the clergy used to change into their vestments in the pub, and then go through an internal doorway into the church. So it is highly likely they might already have been a little bit tipsy before they even reached the communion wine.

Fiza Pathan: The best kind of priests, the best kind of priests! And I am sure the best kind of theologians also. In my own life I have noticed that when they are a little merry, they give the best expositions on the Bible. Sometimes I think I should have a bit of rum cake before I interpret the Bible — then I see more layers. Anyway — and what about that Ferris-wheel-looking thing below the hermitage?

Andrew Beardmore: Ah yes. And this is something that should connect with you, Fiza, because when you reviewed my fiction book The Strains of Malice, you talked about the miners a great deal and mentioned your affinity with mining communities. Well — that is a mining memorial. A coal mining memorial. All coal mines, from certainly the nineteenth century through to the twentieth, had this enormous structure with a big wheel at the top — they were called headstocks. On the outskirts of the wheel there is an enormous groove, and inside that groove would have been an incredibly thick iron cable, which lowered and raised the miners to the various galleries. It took about forty miners at a time. There are memorials like this in dozens of villages in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, because this is coal mining country. They are memorials not just to those who lost their lives, but to all people who mined in these counties.

Fiza Pathan: Totally what The Strains of Malice was all about. That whole middle portion was focused on exactly this kind of thing.

Andrew Beardmore: Let me say that every single Unusual and Quirky book has got some kind of industrial disaster from the Industrial Revolution — and a lot of them are terrible coal mining disasters. And the one that happens in The Strains of Malice is based on a disaster in Wales. The place is called Cabrennar in the novel, which is an anagram of Aberfan, where that disaster occurred. And my character Davy Sheeran —

who is the hero of that sequence — is an anagram of one of the men who rescued the most people, which is exactly what Davy does in the book.

Fiza Pathan: Oh my gosh. So please, everyone — when we are analysing the historical context in not only fantasy books but also when we pick up Derbyshire Unusual and Quirky by Andrew Beardmore, we have everything: the Reformation, the medieval era, and now even an Industrial Revolution element. This is something we should definitely look into. And let us not forget the parallels in The Nessemiah series — The Strains of Malice and Cold Sanctuary, both of which I have already reviewed on Goodreads and Amazon. I am just sitting here waiting and waiting for the other two books in the series. I am at the mercy of Andrew.

PART EIGHT — THE NESSEMIAH SERIES: PUBLICATION UPDATE

Andrew Beardmore: Well — this is my publisher, I am afraid. Ironically, the reason Books Three and Four have not been released yet is that I actually wrote them two years ago. We wanted to release at the back end of last year, but our printers are in India. And there is an issue: the costs keep going up, and the ships cannot go through the Red Sea any more because of the Somali pirates and what is happening now in the Persian Gulf. They have to go all the way round the Cape of Good Hope. They do not even know exactly where the ship is at the moment. That container has to arrive at Felixstowe in the UK, then be shipped cross-country to Somerset, and then the books will be released. But I have agreed with the publishers to release the eBooks several weeks earlier.

Fiza Pathan: Yes! Yes! We want eBooks — anything, anything will do. Anything at all.

Andrew Beardmore: I might even be able to get that sorted in a month or so.

Fiza Pathan: We want eBooks — anything at all. Thank you, Andrew. Thank you. Goodbye.

— End of Transcript —

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