Bridging the Divides

On Friday, June 7, a capacity audience in Berwick Parish Centre heard Professor John Barton deliver a fascinating talk on the King James and other translations of The Bible. The talk had been arranged by Berwick Parish Church Trust in conjunction with the Berwick Literary Festival, as a contribution to the programme commemorating the 400th anniversary of Berwick Bridge John Barton, who was Professor of The Interpretation of Holy Scripture at Oxford University, had given his talk a lengthy title - "Authorised and Unauthorised Versions: Bridges or Barriers? The King James Bible and its Modern Successors" - but his relaxed delivery and interesting insights into the translators' art kept his audience enthralled.

James VI of Scotland, who crossed the Tweed to become James I of England, not only ordered the building of Berwick Bridge but commissioned a new translation of The Bible. Professor Barton emphasised that without those who had mastered the biblical languages, most Christians would have had no access to the Old and New Testaments. So successful was the King James version that some have yet to grasp that it is a translation. Professor Barton then skilfully intertwined the rationale of a successful translation with metaphorical bridge-building: James's desire for unity - to unify his kingdoms, the warring factions in the church and the two sides of the river in Berwick.

The attempts of modern translators who ask, 'how may we say that nowadays?' may not, he argued, endure, as such translations can rapidly become dated. The King James version, by translating the biblical text from Hebrew and Greek into English, didn't so much integrate the Bible into an existing way of writing English as modify English to suit the original biblical texts, in the process helping to create a new kind of English. Therein lies the success and longevity of this much-loved version of the world's most widely read book.