

Condercum - From the Romans to the bankers

This Heritage Trail takes you around some of the historic sites of Condercum, an area of West Newcastle which was the site of a Roman fort and associated civilian settlement for 300 years from the second century AD. More than 1,500 years later, during the Victorian era, it became one of the most popular residential areas for Tyneside's business elite - a place of large houses and mansions in landscaped grounds.

The circular walk starts and ends at St James' Church, following the trail of the Roman remains and the sites of the former big houses.

Search

Search is a community-based voluntary project working in the inner west of Newcastle with and for older people. It has shop-front premises which provide a drop-in advice and information service for people of pensionable age and it runs a variety of groups and activities for over-fifties in community venues across the area.

In 2013 Search ran a programme of guided tours to explore the fascinating and varied history of the west end of Newcastle, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund's "All Our Stories" programme. This is the first of a series of Heritage Trails based on these tours.

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Acknowledgements:

Trail created by Pat Lowery and Judith Green, with help from Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums' WallQuest Community Archaeology Project, and Elsie Scott. Images courtesy of Newcastle City Library, West Newcastle Picture History Collection, and Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums.

Much of this Trail is based on the work of the "Benwell Big Houses Group" who researched the history of the big houses and mansions that used to dominate the area. For more information, read "Benwell's Big Houses: A Social History", 2011, by Mike Greatbatch.

The design and production of this trail were funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund through Search's Exploring Our West End project and TWAM's WallQuest project.

Condercum

From the Romans to the bankers



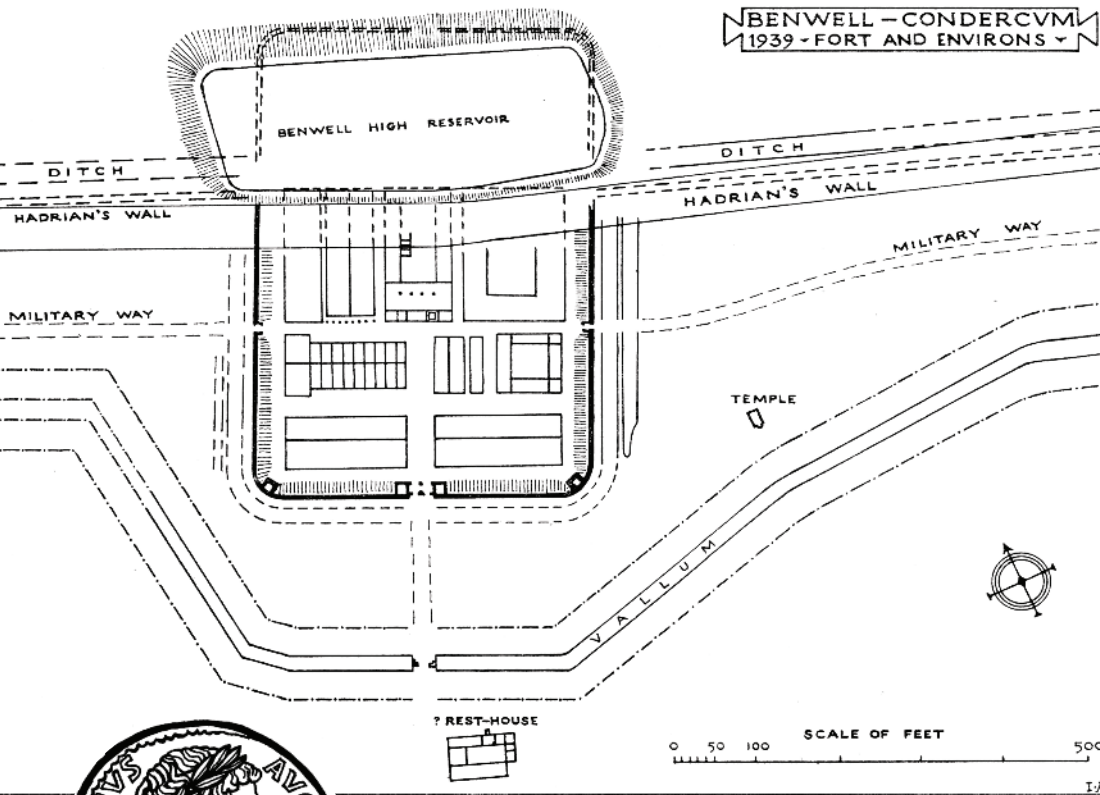
A heritage trail

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The Romans

In AD 122 Hadrian began building a Wall to cross northern Britain from coast to coast. Benwell was chosen as the site of one of the 15 major forts spaced along its 80-mile length. The Romans named this site 'Condercum', meaning "place with a fine view". The fort was occupied for around 300 years until Roman rule in Britain ended shortly after AD 410. For most that time the soldiers stationed at Benwell were cavalrymen in a 500-strong mounted unit of Asturians, originally from northern Spain. South of the fort there was also a civilian town on the slope running down towards Benwell Lane, occupied by craftsmen, traders, merchants, slaves, and the wives and children of the soldiers. The fort baths were found here in 1751, but the exact location of this is unknown.



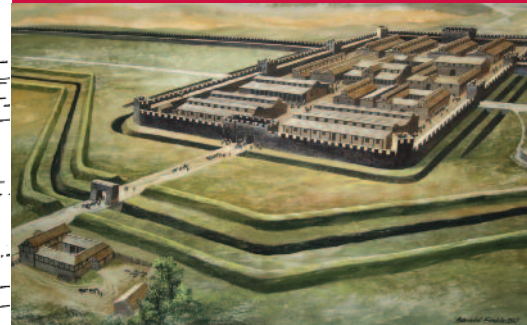
Most of Roman Benwell was covered by housing in the 1920s and '30s. Part of the layout of the fort is known from rescue excavations hurriedly carried out in 1937. Buried archaeological remains of the Roman presence survive under present-day Benwell.

WallQuest is a community archaeology project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, which offers local people the opportunity to get involved in finding out more about this important but neglected Roman site.

For more information visit: Hadrianswallquest.co.uk.

① Roman Fort

The Roman fort at Benwell occupied the hilltop. It straddled Hadrian's Wall which is now under the West Road. The fort was rectangular, protected by a stone wall and ditches, and contained a headquarters building, grain store-houses, commanding officer's house and barracks for 500 horsemen. An inscription found in 1937 tells us that the *classis Britannica* – the Roman fleet in Britain – helped with the original building of the fort.



③ Temple

The foundations of a little Roman temple were discovered in Benwell in 1862. The temple lay outside the fort. It was dedicated to the god Antenociticus, who is not heard of anywhere else. The head of his cult



statue, showing a youth with flowing locks of hair, can be seen in the Great North Museum (formerly the Hancock). The small building accommodated a select congregation of high-ranking officers. One was the cavalry commander, Tineius Longus, who boasts on one of the inscribed altars found in the temple that he had become a Roman senator.

② Vallum crossing

The Vallum was a great flat-bottomed ditch that ran along the south side of the Wall to separate the Roman military zone from the civilian area to the south. A causeway carrying a road running from the south gate of the fort across the Vallum was found in 1933.

It can still be seen today at the south end of Denhill Park. An arched gate stood on the causeway. The road running onto the causeway from the north shows three resurfacings and was obviously used for a long period of time.



④ Roman civilian settlement

WallQuest project archaeology digs in 2013 found much Roman pottery on a large grassy area in the middle of Pendower Estate south of Bertram Crescent. This sloping site was previously covered by houses which were demolished in the 1990s. The road running south from the fort and Vallum crossing ran through this area, and the south facing slope was probably covered with buildings and fields belonging to the 'vicus', or civilian settlement, attached to the Roman fort on the hilltop.



St James' Church

St James' Church was built in the 1830s. Before then, local residents had to travel up to three miles to attend their parish church, St John's in Grainger Street. The early congregation included some of the richest and most influential families of Victorian Tyneside, as semi-rural Benwell was then a highly desirable place to live.

The church was designed by John Dobson, the most eminent architect in the north east. Its special features include stained glass windows by William Wailes,

woodcarving by Ralph Hedley, and a sculpted memorial by Eric Gill.



Benwell Dene House

Benwell Dene House was built in 1866 for Thomas Hodgkin, a partner in the Newcastle bank of Hodgkin, Barnett, Pease and Spence which later became Lloyd's Bank. In 1893 Hodgkin moved to Bamburgh Castle. He sold Benwell Dene to the Royal Victoria School for the Blind, which remained there until it closed in 1985, and gave almost six acres of land from his estate to the council to be developed as a public park, still there called Hodgkin Park today.



Pendower Hall

Pendower Hall was built in the 1860s for John William Pease, a banker and a director of the North Eastern Railway Company. The family lived there until



1919 when the house and grounds were sold to Newcastle Council. The land was used to build some of the first council houses in the city, whilst the house itself was converted to a "open air" school for children with physical health problems. In the 1950s the school moved to new premises nearby. The Hall was used as an education centre until 2002.

Westacres

Westacres House was built in the 1860s on Benwell Park, adjacent to Benwell Bank Top Quarry, and was originally called Benwell West Park. The name was changed to Westacres when Benjamin Chapman Browne moved here in the 1880s.

Browne was an important figure in Tyneside industry, holding the role of chairman of shipbuilders Hawthorn Leslie and Co and setting up the Engineering Employers Federation. He was also politically active, serving as an Alderman and Mayor of Newcastle, a Justice of the Peace, and Deputy Lieutenant of Northumberland.



⑦ Springbank

Springbank Villa was a large private house with its own grounds near the top of the west side of Condercum Road, probably dating from the 1870s. One notable resident was building contractor David Brims who was one of the first in the country to use ferro-concrete. His



projects included the Co-operative Wholesale Society's warehouse on Newcastle Quayside, which is now the Malmaison Hotel.

Later the house became the Benwell and District Social Club, known locally as the Springbank Club, which still exists today although little of the original building remains.

⑧ Condercum Villa and Lower Condercum

Condercum Villa was originally home to Thomas Emerson Crawhall, a member of the influential Crawhall family who were major players in the development of Benwell after acquiring extensive land holdings in the 1830s. Later occupants included bank manager Arthur Ridout, and Colonel William Mathwin Angus, head of the leather and rubber manufacturing firm of George Angus and grandson of the company's founder. The house was demolished in the 1930s.

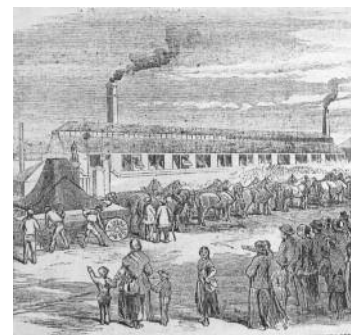
Around this time, Lower Condercum, the big house immediately to the south, was bought by Newcastle Council to turn into a school.



⑪ Condercum House

Condercum House was built in 1869-70 just to the west of Condercum Villa. Its first resident was George Rendel, a director of W G Armstrong & Co, which would soon grow into one of Tyneside's largest and most successful industrial enterprises. In the 1900s the house was bought by John

Frederick Weidner, a businessman with interests in shipbuilding and retailing and an active local politician, becoming both Sheriff and Lord Mayor of Newcastle. Condercum Park Estate was built on the site in the 1930s.



⑫ Oakfield

Oakfield was a big house standing in its own landscaped grounds immediately north of Charlotte Pit. The house itself probably dates from the 1860s, when its first resident was John Christian Reid, owner of the Reid family firm of goldsmiths, silversmiths, watchmakers and jewellers. Oakfield was demolished in the 1930s, and streets of new private housing were developed where the house and grounds had once stood. The entrance lodge still stands today at the start of what is now Oakfield Gardens.



Start at St James' Church

If the gates are open, it is worth taking a look around the historic graveyard. This contains the graves of some of the most significant figures in the economic and social life of Victorian Tyneside, including Richard Grainger, John Buddle and John Sowerby. **Leaving the church**, walk west along Benwell Lane keeping to the south side of the road. As late as the 1920s, this was still a country lane, overhung with trees and bordered by the landscaped grounds belonging to the big houses of Benwell's wealthier residents. The stone walls you pass along the road are the remains of the boundary walls of some of these former mansions. **Stop to look at Benwell Dene House** which is one of the few former big houses which is still standing, although it is no longer a private home. The house can be viewed from the courtyard entrance. It was designed by the architect Alfred Waterhouse who also designed the Natural History Museum in London. **A little further along you will pass the gates of Hodgkin Park**, a fine Victorian park which was once part of the grounds of Benwell Dene House.

From the gates of the park, look north-westwards to a stone wall behind which a large turreted house stands mainly hidden by trees. This is Benwell Towers, at different times home to the bishops of Newcastle and to rich families such as the Shaftoes, the Crawhalls and the Sowerbys, and most recently the place where Byker Grove was filmed.

Cross the road and walk up Rushie Avenue. You are passing through Pendower Estate, one of Britain's first council estates built just after the First World War to provide homes "fit for heroes to live in". Cross Pendower Way and continue up Rushie Avenue. **Turn right at the top along Bertram Crescent.** You will pass the entrance to Hadrian School. Excavations carried out around here in 2013 as part of the WallQuest project found pottery indicating Roman civilian activity. **Re-trace your steps** along Bertram Crescent and then walk up Adair Avenue to the top where it meets the West Road.

Turn right and walk along the West Road until you reach Pendower Hall, which is currently empty. To get an idea of the scale of the Hall's grounds, note that they extended as far as Benwell Lane to the south. Part of the wall that surrounded the grounds can be seen today behind the new bungalows on Sunnysbank Avenue on the eastern edge of the Pendower Estate.

Continue along the West Road. Note that you are now following the route of Hadrian's Wall. Running parallel to this to the south, along the back of the Wall, was a supply road for the Roman fort known as the Military Way. The WallQuest project uncovered this in 2013 during a dig next to Pendower Hall. A short distance beyond Pendower Hall you will come to a **right turn into Denhill Park**. You are now standing near the centre of the Roman fort. **Walk down here until you reach the vallum** crossing at the bottom in the middle of the houses. You may be able to gain access to the site if you follow the instructions on the sign.

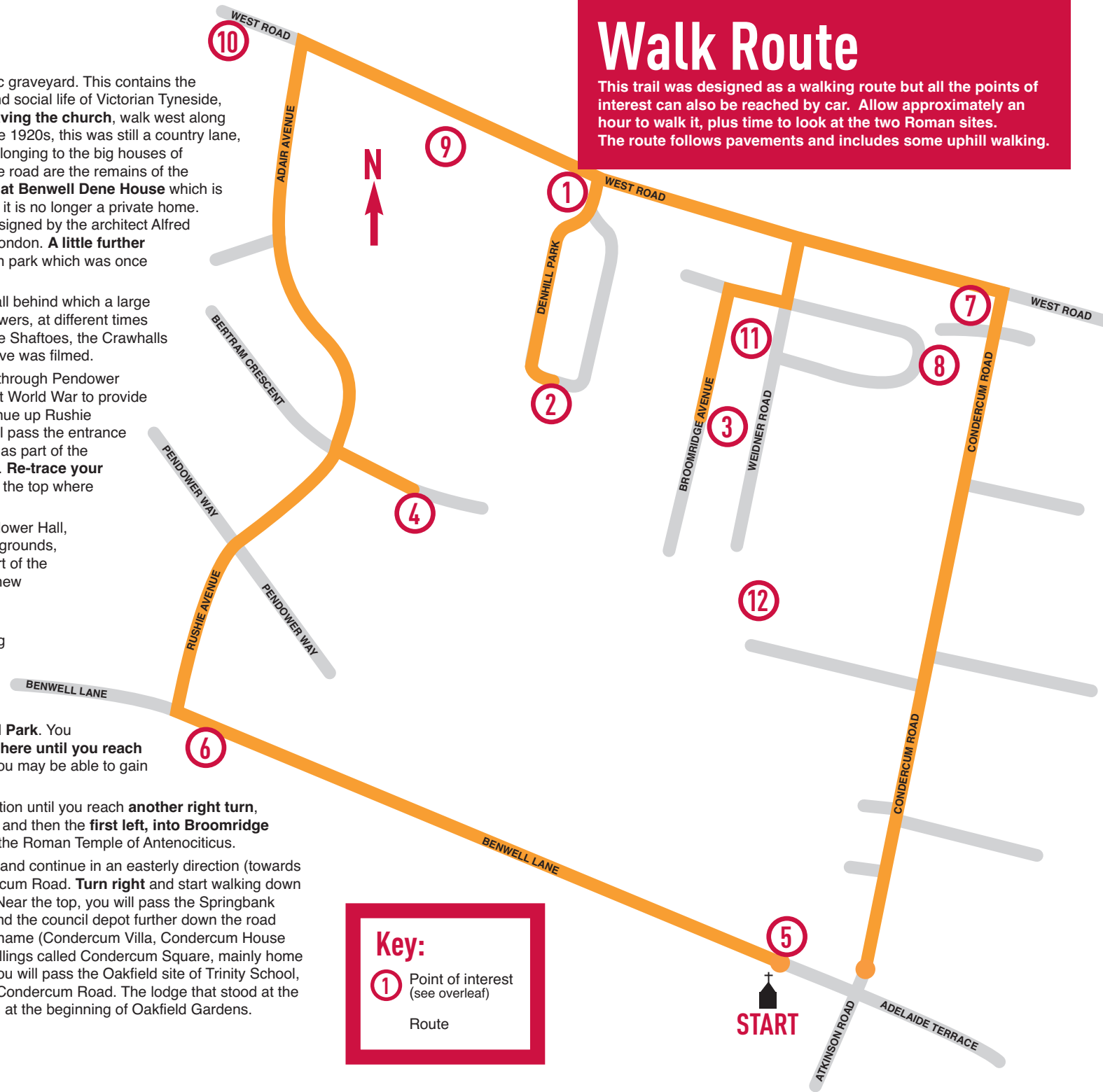
Go back up to the West Road and continue in an easterly direction until you reach **another right turn**, into Weidner Road. **Take the first turn right off Weidner Road**, and then the **first left, into Broomridge Avenue**. A few yards down here you will come to the remains of the Roman Temple of Antenociticus.

After leaving the Temple, **retrace your steps to the West Road** and continue in an easterly direction (towards the centre of Newcastle) until you reach the junction with Condercum Road. **Turn right** and start walking down Condercum Road, **keeping to the right-hand side** of the road. Near the top, you will pass the Springbank Club, formerly site of Springbank Villa. The area between here and the council depot further down the road was formerly occupied by three big houses with the Condercum name (Condercum Villa, Condercum House and Lower Condercum) as well as a small cluster of cottage dwellings called Condercum Square, mainly home to coal mining families. As you **walk down Condercum Road**, you will pass the Oakfield site of Trinity School, recalling the big house called Oakfield which used to be west of Condercum Road. The lodge that stood at the entrance still remains: it is now a private house, and can be seen at the beginning of Oakfield Gardens.

Continue down to return to your starting point.

Walk Route

This trail was designed as a walking route but all the points of interest can also be reached by car. Allow approximately an hour to walk it, plus time to look at the two Roman sites. The route follows pavements and includes some uphill walking.



Key:

- ① Point of interest (see overleaf)
- Route