

St James' Heritage & Environment Group

Benwell's Big Houses

A Heritage Walk

On the trail of the big houses and mansions of Benwell

This circular walk starts and ends at St James' Church. It takes you along Benwell Lane and around old Benwell, following clues to where the former big houses stood and who lived in them.

This heritage walk was devised by St James' Heritage & Environment Group in partnership with the Benwell Big Houses Group who helped to research the history of the big houses for the book **Benwell's Big Houses**.

To contact us or to obtain a copy of the book:

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NE4 7TU
Email: judith.green@unn.ac.uk
Or visit St James' any Tuesday
11.00am - 3.30pm

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The national charity works to create safe, attractive, enjoyable streets where people want to walk.

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1 St James' Church

Inside this 170 year old church are memorials to some of the wealthy people connected with Benwell, such as coal owner and engineer John Buddle, Benjamin Browne head of shipbuilders and engineers Hawthorn Leslie, and Walter Scott a successful businessman who built London's first underground electric railway.

Among those buried in the churchyard are the builder and developer Richard Grainger, coal owner William Cochran Carr, lead manufacturer William Isaac Cookson, glass manufacturer John Sowerby, and Arthur Thomas Lloyd the third Bishop of Newcastle.

2 Condercum

Condercum Road (formerly called Charlotte Pit Lane) is named after Condercum fort - a large cavalry fort on the Roman Wall, built at the highest point with good views of the surrounding countryside.

Several 19th mansions here were called Condercum, including Lower Condercum, home to William Cochran Carr, a local coal owner who also owned South Benwell brickworks. Where the Springbank Club now stands, there was a big house called Spring Bank Villa, once home to the Brims family who were engineering and building contractors.

3 Benwell Grange

Benwell Grange was built in the 1860's. Notable residents included George Angus, son of the founder of the Newcastle rubber and leather company that later merged with Dunlop to become a major multinational. A later resident was the wine and spirit merchant John McPherson, best known for his Cluny brand of whisky.

In 1920 the house was bought by the Royal Victoria School for the Blind which ran a hostel and training centre for blind young women here until 1954. It was demolished in 1968.

7 Benwell Towers

The first owner of Benwell Towers was Thomas Crawhall, whose business interests included rope-making, lead mining and coal mining. In 1881 it became the residence of the Bishops of Newcastle. From 1943-76 it was a base and training centre for the mines fire and rescue services. After this it became in turn the Silver Lady night club, the Mitre pub, and then the location for the Byker Grove television series until 2006. There has been a big house on this site since the 12th century.

8 Benwell Cottage

Benwell Cottage, to the west of Benwell Towers, was actually a large house standing in extensive grounds. Its most famous resident was the railway engineer and steam engine builder, William Hawthorn, who, along with his brother Robert, was one of Tyneside's most illustrious industrial pioneers.

In the 1920's, Royal Victoria School for the Blind bought the house and grounds to create a training centre for blind young men. This was closed in the 1950s, and the house stood empty until it was demolished in 1972.

9 Benwell Hall

Benwell Hall dated from the 18th century. Standing in its own wooded and landscaped grounds, it was home to several important industrialists including William Cuthbert, owner of Montagu Colliery.

The last residents were the Bramble family who moved there in the 1920s. William Bramble, the "Dick Whittington of Newcastle", is said to have arrived with his possessions in a bundle on his back to seek his fortune. He became Lord Mayor, after achieving wealth from retailing and property development. The house was demolished in the 1980's.

4 Benwell House

Benwell House was built in the 1820's. Its first resident was the coal owner, John Walker.

Reached by a long drive leading from Benwell Lane, it was a stone-built mansion situated in extensive grounds, including fountains and a walled garden, and surrounded by woodlands. The estate extended south to the river at Paradise.

In 1902 the house and grounds were converted into the Benwell House Hotel. This closed in 1969 and the building was demolished four years later.

5 Benwell Dene House

Benwell Dene was built in 1866, designed by the architect Alfred Waterhouse who also designed London's Natural History Museum and Manchester Town Hall. It was the home of Thomas Hodgkin, a partner in the Newcastle bank of Hodgkin, Barnett, Pease and Spence which later became Lloyd's Bank. Hodgkin was also a respected historian.

In 1893 Hodgkin sold Benwell Dene to the Royal Victoria School for the Blind, which relocated to Benwell from its previous city centre premises. It remained there until it closed in 1985.

6 Hodgkin Park

When the banker Thomas Hodgkin left Benwell to live in Bamburgh Castle, he gave almost six acres of land from his estate to the council to be developed as a public park. Hodgkin Park was opened in 1899 by Mrs Hodgkin, and later extended by the addition of a further 12.5 acres south of Armstrong Road.

10 Benwell Old House

Benwell Old House was a large house with gardens and orchards in the centre of Benwell village which dated from the 17th or 18th century. It was demolished in the 1950's.

Its most high profile resident was Joseph Straker who lived there for several years in the 19th century. Son of a ship owner from Walker, Straker was himself a timber merchant, ship repairer, and owner of the Brancepeth, Brandon and Willington collieries in County Durham.

11 Benwell Village

By the mid-19th century almost 200 people lived in Benwell Village, a small settlement of cottages, farms, a blacksmith, a school, a church and two pubs. Most families relied on jobs servicing the big houses nearby.

Originally the Green Tree and Hawthorn pubs were next to each other on the north side of the road, but later the Hawthorn moved to the opposite side where new houses now stand. St John's Church (the oldest church in Benwell) was rebuilt on its present site in 1950.

12 Pendower Hall

Pendower Hall was built in the 1860's for John William Pease, a banker and director of the North Eastern Railway Company. In 1919 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 was converted to an "open air" school for children with physical health problems. In the 1950's the school moved to new premises nearby, and the Hall became an education centre until its closure in 2002.

Early 19th century Benwell was home to some of the most wealthy and powerful people on Tyneside. It was a peaceful rural area but still conveniently near to the facilities and social life of Newcastle. By the start of the 20th century, despite the rapid growth of heavy industries and extensive coal workings, most of the area was still occupied by large detached houses set in their own grounds, protected from the sight of industry and coal mines by trees and other landscaping. Today only a few of Benwell's big houses remain standing, and none are now in use as private homes. But traces survive, such as gateposts, boundary walls, and street names.

Walk to School

The National Walk to School Campaign

Our Walk to School campaign encourages parents, children and teachers to think about their journey to and from school, and consider the benefits of walking.

Walking Work

We help workplaces promote walking, so that employees are happier and healthier.

Fitter for Walking

Fitter for Walking works with local residents to improve the local environment and encourage people to walk more.

Map

Walk directions

Start at St James' church. 1 Leaving the church, walk a few yards east to the crossroads at the top of Atkinson Road. At the beginning of the 20th century, the trams stopped here. Adelaide Terrace was a busy shopping street but Benwell Lane was still a country lane overhung with big trees. Condercum Road running north up the hill owes its name to the area's Roman history. 2 Return to the church entrance and continue to walk west along Benwell Lane. Note the former vicarage on your left behind the stone boundary wall of the church. This was designed by John Dobson who also designed the church. After crossing Bishops Road, you will pass Benwell Grange on your left. 3 Now a housing association estate, this was formerly the site of one of Benwell's big houses. Continue west and cross Hodgkin Park Road. Note the Co-operative Funeral Service premises on your left as you continue west. This site was formerly occupied by Benwell House. 4

Continue until you reach, on your left, Benwell Dene House. 5 This is no longer a private residence. It can be viewed from the courtyard entrance. 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. 6 Cross Benwell Lane here and continue to walk in a westerly direction. As you pass the end of Pendower Estate on your right, a high stone wall begins. This is the boundary wall of Benwell Towers. A few yards further along, carvings set into the wall mark the position of an old well. The spring supplying this well now flows underground. Continuing west, you come to the gatehouse of Benwell Towers. One of the few big houses to have survived in Benwell. The gateposts still stand at the start of a narrow lane leading to the house. Sadly it is not now possible to enter the grounds to view it properly. 7 A short distance further along you will come to a bus stop and a small triangular parking bay. Turn right here and pass between bollards to walk up a narrow lane. This takes you to Fergusons Lane. As you come out onto

Fergusons Lane you can stand and look to the west or walk a few yards further along. On the south side of the lane, about where Shafto Court stands now, is the site of Benwell Cottage. 8 On the north side is the site of Benwell Hall. The house is gone but the gateposts and stone boundary wall remain. There are still many beautiful mature trees dating from the old Hall. 9 Return to the point where the narrow lane leading from Benwell Lane joins Fergusons Lane. Continue to walk in an easterly direction past some new houses. On your right, will be a short road, leading to stone gateposts with two bollards between them. Beyond them is a grassed area. On the left side of this short road you will notice an old stone wall, with evidence of a bricked-up door. This marks the boundary of Benwell Old House. 10 Continue along the main road. You are now in the heart of old Benwell Village, of which little remains. 11 As you walk, you pass the police station and entrance to St Cuthbert's School on your left. On your right, you can see Benwell Towers behind a small estate of new houses called Benwell Village Mews. These houses were

built on the site where Pendower Schools used to be. You may want to cross the road to get a better view of the Towers. Turn right, walk down the west side of Pendower Way through Pendower Estate. As you walk, you can catch glimpses of Benwell Towers in the gaps between the houses on your right. You will be able to see less during the summer, when the leaves are on the trees. Pendower was one of Britain's first council estates, built as part of the drive to provide "homes for heroes" after the First World War. It was named after another of Benwell's big houses (which can be seen from the West Road). 12 When you reach Jenison Avenue on the left hand side of Pendower Way, cross the road and walk along Jenison Avenue to the end. You will see a grassy area facing you on Sunnybank Avenue. The stone wall behind here marks the boundary of the Pease Estate where Pendower Hall was situated. Beyond here was the Charlotte Pit, known locally as the "Charley". This was the last pit to operate in Benwell, finally closing in the 1930s. Turn right and walk down Sunnybank Avenue to rejoin Benwell Lane. Turn left here and return to St James' Church.

Did you know...



Walking is a simple, free and green way to increase your fitness levels. Research shows that walking one mile in 15 minutes burns about the same number of calories as running a mile in 8½ minutes. Regular physical activity improves mood, helps relieve depression, and increases feelings of well-being. Walking for just 30 minutes a day during the working week means reaching the Government's recommended level of daily activity needed to transform your health. Simple things can make a big difference to how we use our streets. If you would like to make your area Fitter for Walking contact Charlotte O'Keefe on 0191 2457361 or charlotte.okeefe@livingstreets.org.uk

Living Streets is the national charity working to create safe, attractive, enjoyable streets where people want to walk. With our supporters we influence decision makers nationally and locally, run successful projects to encourage people to walk, and provide specialist consultancy services to help reduce congestion and carbon emissions, improve health, and make sure every community can enjoy vibrant streets and public spaces. If you would like to find out more about our work, please take a look at our website or register for our e-newsletter at www.livingstreets.org.uk

