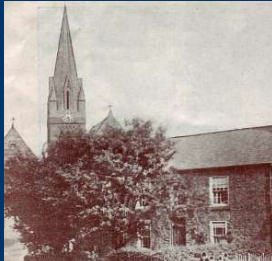


West End Stories



Stories from the History of West Newcastle

St James' Heritage & Environment Group
Local History Series



West End Stories

Stories from the History of West Newcastle

Contents

The Islands in the Tyne	Page 1
The Shilling House	Pages 2-3
How Scotswood got its Name	Page 4
How the Big Lamp got its Name	Page 5
The Bandaged Shot Tower	Pages 6-7
Richard Grainger and Elswick	Pages 8-9
The Old Field Names of Benwell	Pages 10-11
The Benwell Intrigue	Pages 12-13
The Great Flood of 1771	Pages 14-15
The Disappearing Street Names	Page 16
How Skinnerburn Road got its Name	Page 17
The Tunnel beneath Newcastle	Pages 18-19
The Benwell Spy	Page 20
Children and Epidemics in the Past	Page 21

Acknowledgements

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We need to thank in particular West Newcastle Picture History Collection without whose generous help in supplying photographs and information from their amazing collection of more than 20,000 images of the west end we could not do what we do. WNPHC are about to launch a new website *newcastlephotoarchive* showing images from their collection. Other images in this booklet are courtesy of Newcastle City Libraries and Information Service and www.old-maps.co.uk.

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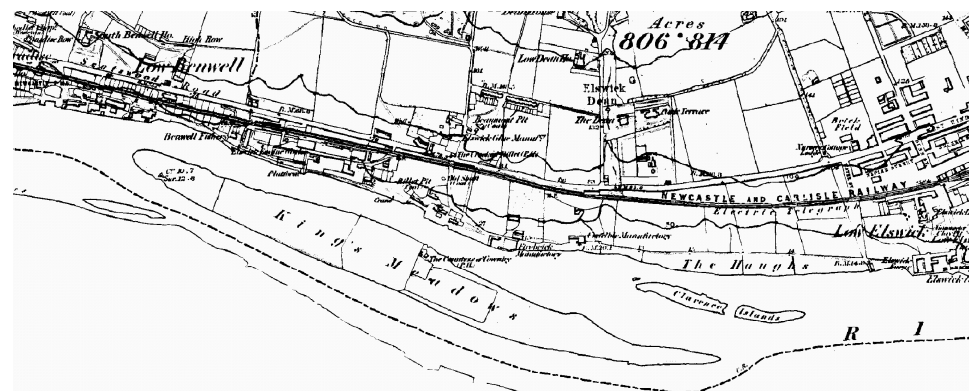


The Islands in the Tyne

There were once three islands in the River Tyne at Elswick.

The largest, at approximately 34 acres, was called Kings Meadow. As this extract from the 1857 Ordnance Survey map shows, it stretched from Elswick as far as Benwell. The island was let as farmland. The farmhouse also served as a pub called the Countess of Coventry.

Its much smaller neighbours were called the Clarence Islands. Unlike Kings Meadow, they probably did not remain above the waterline at High Tide.

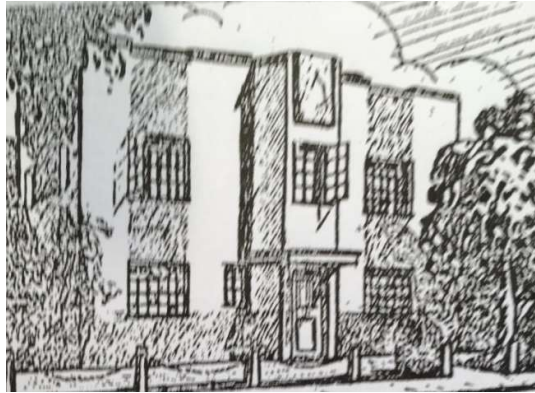


In the 1880s Kings Meadow was dredged out of existence to allow warships, which were then being built at the Armstrong Whitworth shipyard at Elswick, to travel downstream.



This photograph shows Kings Meadow being dredged, c1885.

The Shilling House



In 1925 a major mining disaster at the Low Montagu Pit in Scotswood resulted in the death of 38 men and boys. Some were drowned, others were poisoned by black damp gas, when water from the abandoned workings of the nearby Paradise Pit flooded in without warning. Most of the victims are buried at Elswick Cemetery. The funeral procession made its way there from the pithead through streets packed with mourners.



Various schemes were launched to provide financial assistance to the families of the victims. Perhaps the most imaginative fundraising idea was the Shilling House.



The Shilling House got its name because it was the first prize in a competition which cost one shilling to enter. The winner had to estimate the number of people using the Newcastle Tramways on 30th May 1925. The new house was donated by the proprietors of the Newcastle Daily Chronicle. It was valued at £1,500 which was a large sum at that time.



The Shilling House still stands today. It is on the north side of the West Road between Grange Road and Benwell High Reservoir.

Pictured here c1939, it was built as a demonstration house to illustrate the latest techniques in building with reinforced concrete. It is of considerable architectural interest, believed to be the only house built in a modernist style by Michael Bunney and Clifford Makins who also designed several homes in Hampstead Garden Suburb in the early 20th century.

HOW SCOTSWOOD GOT ITS NAME



To find the origin of the name Scotswood, you have to go back as far as 1367. That was when Richard Scot obtained a licence to enclose a 200 acre wood called the West Wood to make a deerpark. Scot's Wood!

The park was bounded on its west side by Denton Dene, on the south by the Tyne, and on the south east by a dyke. This enclosure annoyed his neighbours and there is a history of disputes. People broke into the park to cut down trees, dig coal, carry off cattle and deer, pinch corn and hay, and take herons from their nests.

There were several court cases – all of which Scot won. This was not surprising as the Scots were a rich and powerful family of Newcastle merchants. Richard's grandfather Henry Scot had been the biggest taxpayer in this part of the west end. They were also influential. Peter Scot, Richard's great-grandfather, had been mayor of Newcastle in 1251, for example.

Richard Scot was not a good neighbour. He owned coal mines in the area, but stopped other local mine owners from transporting coal across his land when they went to court to claim the right to do this.

The family name died out within a generation, as Richard's son – also called Richard – had no children.

This map of the deerpark comes from a manuscript probably dating from the 15th century. It is not a map as we know it, as it does not show the exact locations of places. Newcastle town walls and the castle are depicted in order to show that the park was near to Newcastle.

How the Big Lamp got its name

The area at the junction of Westgate Hill, Elswick Road and Buckingham Street is known as the Big Lamp but there is no sign today of such a lamp.

This photograph dating from 1900 shows there was once a big lamp here. Constructed in the 1870s, this was one of first electric street lamps in Newcastle. It was powered by the tram system whose tracks can be seen in the photograph.

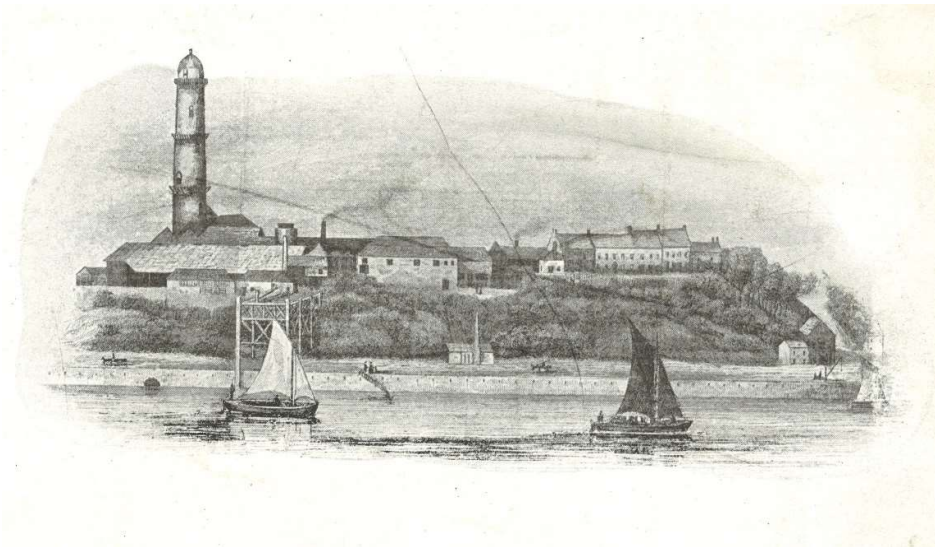


For over a hundred years prior to the construction of the Big Lamp a residential property called Quarry House had stood in this area. By 1833 it had become a pub "known by the sign of the Bay Horse". It catered for the needs of travellers using the new turnpike road built in the 1750s. This was known as the Military Road or West Turnpike which became the West Road. A successor Bay Horse pub (shown here) stood at the top of Buckingham Street within living memory.



The Bandaged Shot Tower of **ELSWICK LEADWORKS**

Elswick Lead Works was probably the longest-surviving industrial concern on the West Newcastle riverside. It was established in 1778 on two acres of what had been meadows, just upstream from the present-day Redheugh Bridge. This is what the site looked like in 1790. At this time the leadworks was the only significant industry in this area, and there were open fields around it.



By the end of the 19th century, the leadworks had grown to cover 13 acres, and it was surrounded by other industries, notably a gasworks to the west and the Forth Banks Goods Yard to the north. There were also small areas of housing where people lived in the midst of all this industrial activity.

Prominent among the many buildings constructed on the site was the big 18th century Shot Tower. This was built of bricks and stood 174 feet high. Workers would climb up the inside of the Tower to drop molten lead into a water-filled trough at the bottom to make lead shot.

Soon after completion the Tower was found to be "alarmingly out of perpendicular" as the ground on one side began to subside. To correct this problem before it caused a collapse, ground was dug away on the opposite side to restore "perpendicularity".

The Shot Tower continued in use until 1951. In 1969 the decision was taken to demolish it. During the demolition process it partially collapsed. The Fire Brigade were called in to "bandage" the tower with cables which allowed the contractors to carry out a safe demolition.

The leadworks closed and the site was cleared in the early 2000s. There is still a road called Shot Factory Lane leading from the Arena down to Skinnerburn Road.



The Shot Tower can be seen in the centre of this photograph dating from 1956.

Richard Grainger

The Man with a Plan for Elswick



Richard Grainger, 19th century builder and developer, is credited with transforming the centre of Newcastle from a warren of medieval lanes and old buildings into one of the finest town centres in Europe. In less than seven years during the 1830s, Grainger built many of the most important streets and buildings of present-day Newcastle, including Grey Street, Grainger Street, the Theatre Royal and the Grainger Market.

The centre of Newcastle has been renamed Grainger Town in recognition of Grainger's achievements. Less well known are Grainger's connections with the west end of the city. After bringing about these dramatic changes in the centre of Newcastle, he turned his attention westwards to Elswick. It is no exaggeration to say that the scale of his ambitions to transform this area matched that of his vision for the town centre.

Elswick at that time was a largely agricultural area with a handful of coalmines and small-scale industries scattered along the riverbanks. This

image dating from 1829 shows the view upriver from Newcastle to Elswick.

Grainger realised the area was ripe for development as Newcastle's population was growing rapidly.



In 1839 Grainger bought the large Elswick Estate on the west of the city, and moved with his family to live in Elswick Hall, declaring that "Elswick Hall will one day be the centre of Newcastle". He devised a master plan for the area that included housing, factories, roads, railways, churches and even a zoo.

This time he overreached himself, however, and the grand scheme was halted almost before it began. Grainger fled the city to escape being jailed for bankruptcy, but traces of his legacy remain in the area. There is a row of houses known as Graingerville South next to the bowling alley on Westgate Road, which were among the few houses built by Grainger in the area. Grainger Park Estate, built between the wars on a site north of Elswick Road, was built long after Grainger's death on land that was part of the Elswick Estate, adjacent to one of the quarries he owned.

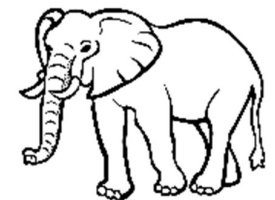


The grand mansion of Elswick Hall stood on the site where the swimming pool is today in Elswick Park. Grainger had to leave here when his business collapsed, and spent the rest of his life in a house in Clayton

Street West – you can see a plaque marking the house. He is buried in St James' Churchyard, Benwell.

The Elswick Elephant?

One of the casualties of the collapse of Grainger's grand scheme was the plan to create a zoological and botanical gardens on the slopes above the river at Elswick. This would be "unsurpassed in the kingdom". The plans had progressed quite far, including the acquisition of the first animals and birds.



The Old Field Names of Benwell

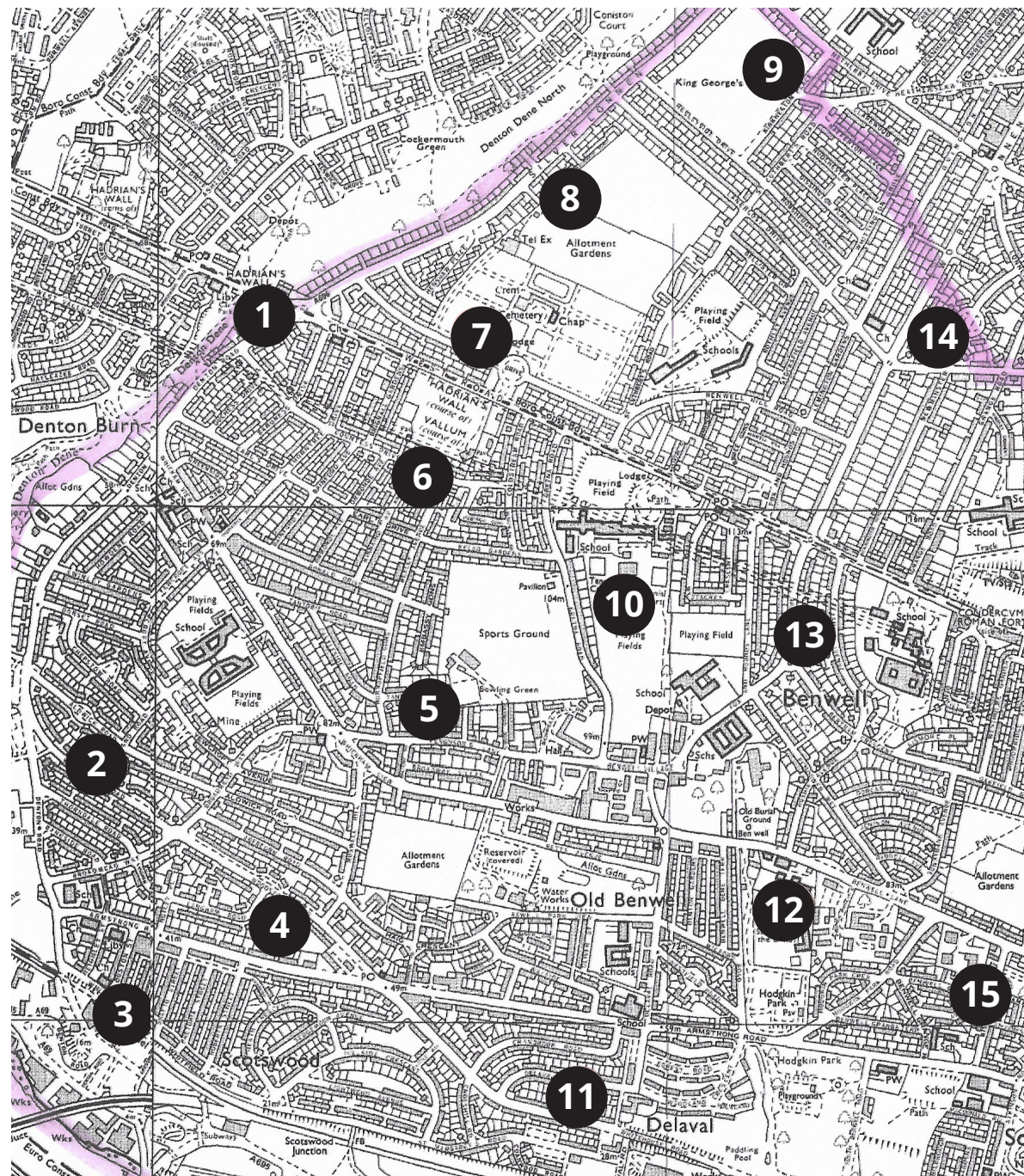
Before the second half of the 19th century, most of Benwell was farmland. The field pattern probably dated from the early 1700s and all the fields had names. There were 157 different fields in the 1,346 acres of the Benwell Estate. Some of the names speak for themselves, such as Pond Field, Pit Field, Turnpike Field, Mill Field and Windysides. However we can only guess at the origin of High Fishers Trod, Hobson Hole and Thistley Sheath.

Benwell no longer has any farm fields but in many places they have shaped the landscape we know today. For example, the reason there is a wiggle at the top of Strathmore Crescent is that the field boundaries took that route. The grounds of the former Rutherford School (later Westgate Community College) largely mirrored the shape of Turnip Field. Nuns Moor Crescent has a curved shape because that was the shape of South Coach Mare Field and Little Field on which it was built.

Here you can see the approximate locations of 15 of some of the most interestingly named old fields, superimposed on the 1989 OS map of Benwell, Scotswood and part of Fenham.

Key

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Goose Green | 9. Bounder Lands |
| 2. Hare Snipes | 10. Middle Kings Chamber |
| 3. Bull Meadow | 11. Green Delaval |
| 4. Under Land Down | 12. High Fishers Trod |
| 5. South Windy Side | 13. Chair Gap |
| 6. Thistley Sheath | 14. Cottage Field |
| 7. The Goodings | 15. Swans' Well Field |
| 8. Cream of Kent | |



The Benwell Intrigue

The Parish Church of St James' in Benwell opened in 1833. At that time this area had a reputation as a desirable place to live. It was near enough to Newcastle to be convenient for work and leisure purposes, but at a safe distance from the dirt, smells, noise and disease of the town. It was home to some of the richest and most powerful families on Tyneside. The church was surrounded by green fields and opulent mansions set in their own grounds.

This sketch dating from the 1880s shows the church in its original rustic setting, with its flat tower rather than the present day spire.



The story of its origins was less tranquil, however. The church that we know today as St James' was originally an outreach chapel run by St John's Church in the town. The project was marred by accusations of corruption. The "Benwell Intrigue" was the name given to the very public and unpleasant controversy by the satirical magazine *Northern John Bull* - the *Private Eye* of its time. Two eminent architects competed for the job of designing the new church. John Dobson (pictured here) was already celebrated for his work including the new Royal Arcade in Newcastle. His competitor for the job of designing the chapel in Benwell was John Green, another of the north east's foremost architects, whose works to date included the Chain Bridge at Scotswood and the Lit and Phil building in Newcastle.



Dobson won by seven votes to six at a meeting of a specially convened committee formed by the vicar of St John's. The vicar was accused of packing the meeting with supporters of Dobson and bending the rules to benefit him, and Dobson himself was accused of copying some of Green's plans. One of the fiercest opponents described the vicar's actions as "a most contemptible and shabby subterfuge" which would do "incalculable harm to the new church at Benwell". Despite efforts to challenge the decision, Dobson retained the contract and his reputation appears to have survived intact.

Another actor in the saga of the Benwell Intrigue was John Buddle (pictured here). He was the owner of Benwell Colliery and a major landowner in the area. Buddle was one of the new additions to the committee and helped to swing the vote in Dobson's favour. He went on to donate the land for the new church and was later buried there.



This photograph shows St John's Church in Grainger Street in the 1880s. By this time St James' had become a parish church in its own right. The parish of Benwell, established in 1843, covered a huge area stretching from the city centre out west to include Scotswood, and from the river in the south to the Town Moor in the north.

So great was the growth of the population in this area over the following decades, however, that by the 1880s the parish had been divided once again and several new churches were built or planned in the west end.

THE GREAT FLOOD OF 1771

In 1771 a terrible flood brought devastation to several communities along the banks of the Tyne. The most dramatic incident was the destruction of the old Tyne Bridge, as illustrated in this painting. Six people died as the flood carried away most of the houses and shops on the bridge.



According to a contemporary news report from the *Newcastle Courant*:

“Newcastle, this Sunday morning, the 17th of November, about two o'clock, with the wind at East, the inhabitants of Newcastle upon Tyne were alarmed with the most dreadful inundation that ever befel that part of the country; the water in the Tyne rising six feet higher than a remarkable fresh in the year 1763; occasioned, as may be presumed, by an incessant fall of rain from Saturday morning to Sunday.

The first dawn of day discovered a scene of horror and devastation, too dreadful for words to express, or humanity to behold, without shuddering: all the cellars, warehouses, shops, and lower apartments of the dwelling-houses, from the West end of the Close to near Ouse-burn, were totally under water.”

Communities further upriver were badly affected also. Homes and livelihoods were damaged, but fortunately no lives were lost.

At that time many of the inhabitants of places such as Scotswood and Newburn lived in cottages close to the riverside. The flood hit during the night, and water rushed in while families were asleep in bed. Many people were rescued by boats after climbing out of roofs and windows. They were lucky to escape with their lives but lost their possessions.

One Joseph Thompson of Scotswood is reported to have lost six barrels of ale from his cellars, together with household furniture, clothes and provisions.

Further upriver at Wylam, the colliery sustained considerable damage during the flood. The flood reached one of the shafts and the whole of the extensive mine workings filled with water, said to be equivalent to 1,728,000 hogsheads. The cost of draining the flood water and the damages incurred underground were estimated at around £800 – a large sum at that time.

Riverside Cottages

The term “cottages” conjures up images of pleasant rustic dwellings with roses around the door, but the reality of the living conditions in these 18th century riverside cottages will have been far less salubrious.

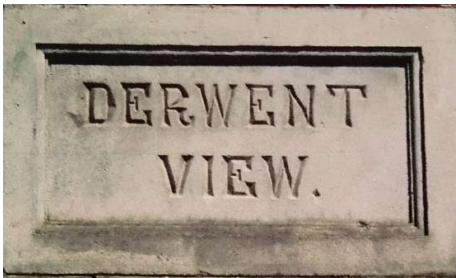
This photograph of riverside cottages at Paradise dates from 1936. Many of these substandard dwellings survived well into the 20th century because of the acute housing shortage in the area.



The Disappearing Street Names

In 1904 Benwell and Scotswood were incorporated into the city of Newcastle. Elswick had already been part of Newcastle since 1835.

One of the issues the City Council had to resolve was what to do about duplicate street names. These could lead to confusion in the days when there were no postcodes. A list of proposals to change street names included twelve streets in Benwell, Delaval and Scotswood. One of these was Derwent View, which became Delaval Road. This stone plaque remained on the front wall of the top house until demolition in the 2000s.



Tyne Street in Delaval became Oliver Street.

In Benwell four streets were renamed:
Edward Street became Green Street
Neville Street became Nichol Street
Norfolk Street became Norwich Street
Oak Street became Larch Street (pictured right in 1950s)



Six streets in Scotswood were given new names:

Station Road became Fowberry Road
Victoria Terrace became Axwell Terrace
William Street became Danskin Place
Ord Street became Perkins Street
Railway Street became Whitfield Road
Grace Street became Gregson Street (pictured here in 1908)



In some cases, the names of streets in other parts of the city were altered instead. For example, Bond Street in Walker became Benson Street to avoid confusion with Benwell's Bond Street.

How Skinnerburn Road got its name

Skinnerburn Road is a narrow road running parallel to the Tyne from Forth Banks to the Newcastle Business Park. South of Forth Banks there is an outlet in the river wall where an underground burn flows into the Tyne.

This is the Skinner Burn. It flowed from just south of Corporation Street, passing west of Clayton Street West and down the east end of Forth Banks. This used to mark the boundary between Newcastle and the township of Elswick to the west. The burn was covered over between 1840 and 1859.

The Skinner Burn was one of several streams that used to cross Newcastle to run down into the river. There are still reminders in the names of streets such as Barras Bridge and High Bridge. As the town expanded the streams were filled in, and now flow in culverts deep below the surface.

The Lort Burn rose between Barrack Road and Richardson Road, flowing down the north side of St Thomas Street, then south to pass under Grey Street, Dean Street and The Side. The Pandon Burn flowed through a wide and deep ravine, passing by where the Civic Centre is now, and continuing through the east side of the town to the river. The original Barras Bridge was a bridge across the Pandon Dene.

But why Skinner?

It may be that there was a link with the leather industry for which Tyneside was famous from as early as the 13th century. There used to be several tanneries in the area around Low Friar Street and Blackfriars. One of the important Guilds in Newcastle was called the Guild of Skinners – a skinner being someone who makes a living by working with animal skins.



This 1898 photograph shows leatherworkers at Richardson's Leatherworks on the riverside at Elswick, not far from the outlet of the Skinner Burn.

THE TUNNEL BENEATH THE STREETS OF NEWCASTLE

Many people will have walked the streets of Newcastle unaware of the marvel of early Victorian engineering beneath their feet. The Victoria Tunnel runs for two and a half miles from Spital Tongues to the River Tyne.

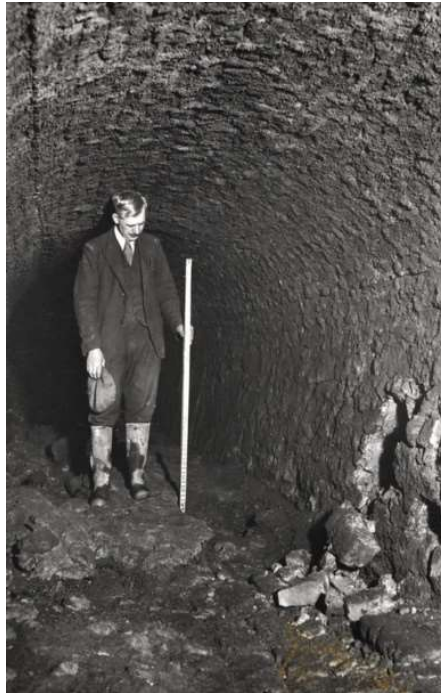
The tunnel was built in 1842 to carry coal from Leazes Main Colliery to the coal staithes at Ouseburn. Here it was loaded onto collier brigs bound for London and beyond. The city of Newcastle lay between the colliery and the river which meant that it was not possible to use a wagonway to transport its coal. The ingenious solution was an underground railway. The colliery had a short working life and closed in 1858. Afterwards the tunnel lay almost undisturbed for nearly 80 years.

In 1939 Britain was preparing for war. Bombing raids were expected to be a major threat to the civilian population. In Newcastle many people did not have room for individual shelters at or near their homes, so Newcastle



Corporation needed to create several large municipal air raid shelters. These photographs show preparations underway in 1939 to convert the Victoria Tunnel into an air raid shelter.

Seven entrances were dug out across the city to allow for quick and easy access in the event of an air raid.



The Victoria Tunnel was converted into a shelter to accommodate up to 9,000 people. The old tunnel was cleaned and white-washed. A few basic facilities such as benches and chemical toilets were installed to try and make life as comfortable as possible for the thousands of Geordies who regularly spent seven or eight hours there.



This photograph shows the entrance to the tunnel in the grounds of St Thomas's Church, Haymarket, during World War Two

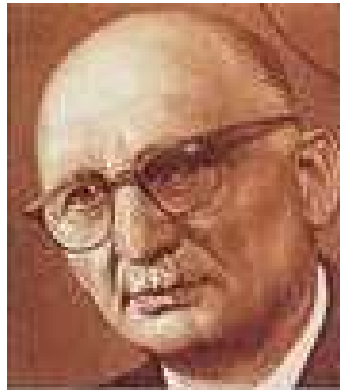
Would you like to visit the Tunnel?

After the war, all but two of the entrances were sealed and the tunnel lay silent and almost forgotten until the early 2000s. However in 2009 a section of the tunnel was opened up to visitors after being brought up to modern health and safety standards. Since then more than a thousand people a month have visited this unique piece of Tyneside heritage. The tunnel is managed by the Ouseburn Trust. To find out more, visit their website: www.ouseburntrust.org.uk.

What “*Bridge of Spies*” didn’t tell you

If you watched the 2015 film *Bridge of Spies*, you will be familiar with Rudolf Abel, the high ranking Soviet spy played in the film by Mark Rylance.

What the film didn’t tell you is that Rudolf Abel was born in Benwell. Son of a Russian émigré, he was known then as Willie Fisher. He lived with his family at 140 Clara Street, Benwell, in the early 20th century. After leaving school he became an apprentice draughtsman at Swan Hunter in Wallsend, and also attended evening classes at Rutherford College.



Abel was captured while working in the USA and convicted of passing military secrets to the Russians. He was later exchanged for the American spy pilot Gary Powers and lived in the Soviet Union until his death in 1971. He was buried in Moscow as a hero. This image of him featured on a 1990 USSR commemorative stamp.



Clara Street was one of the long rows of terraced homes running down the banks between Adelaide Terrace and Scotswood Road. Most of these were demolished in the 1970s, and only the top part of Clara Street remains today.

CHILDREN AND EPIDEMICS IN THE PAST

These boys are the sons of the headmaster of Newcastle’s Royal Grammar School.

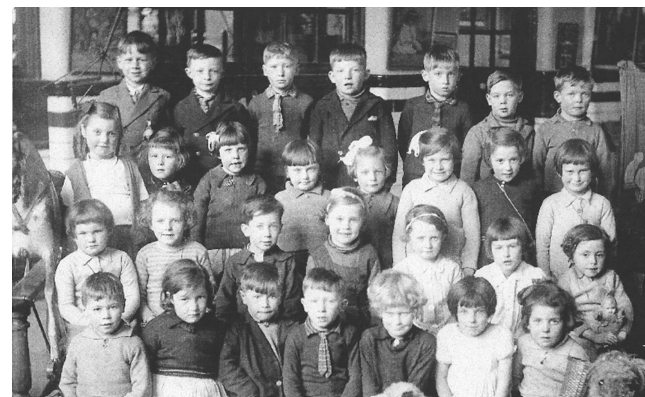
The two oldest boys, Claude and Denton Christopherson, died in 1879 at the ages of five and four soon after this photograph was taken. They were victims of an outbreak of scarlet fever. The boys are buried in St James’ Graveyard in Benwell.



The coronavirus pandemic does not affect children as seriously as adults.

Although children are as likely to become infected, the effects are usually mild. This was not the case a hundred years ago. The burial records from St James’ reveal some stark statistics. More than a third of all burials were of children under the age of ten. The worst decade was that between 1900-1909, when 51% of total burials were of children aged five or under.

Epidemics of infectious diseases were a major cause of illness and death in children in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Killer diseases included cholera, measles, diphtheria and tuberculosis.



It was not unusual for schools to be closed because of life-threatening epidemics. At the end of the First World War a major influenza epidemic caused Atkinson Road School to be closed for over seven months.

West End Stories

The West End of Newcastle has a long and fascinating history full of events of national and even global significance. The area was the site of one of the major forts on the Wall which marked the edge of the mighty Roman empire. It was the location of one of the most decisive battles in the English Civil War. It was home to one of the world's most important armaments manufacturers and the first ever underground passenger railway.

There are also many smaller stories to tell about local people, places and events which together make up the patchwork of the detailed local history of the west end. This booklet has its origins in the "Did you know?" features we started to send out in digital and printed versions at the beginning of the lockdown in March 2020. These contained bite-size stories from the local history of West Newcastle, illustrated with archive photographs. This booklet collects some of these features together, along with some new material.

St James' Heritage & Environment Group

St James' Heritage & Environment Group is an independent volunteer-run organisation and registered charity providing activities and resources for people of all ages to explore and celebrate the history of the west end of Newcastle. The Group also maintains the historic graveyard of St James' in Benwell, last resting place of some of the most influential people on Tyneside at the height of its industrial and commercial power.

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