



History of Newcastle upon Tyne


Local Studies Factsheet No. 6

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Many of our large towns and cities are products of the “industrial revolution” of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; but Newcastle upon Tyne has a long and proud history, documented since Roman times.

The Romans realised the military value of the site in its command of the Tyne crossing: they built a bridge guarded by a fort - called “Pons Aelius” - in about 122 A.D. which formed a vital part of the frontier defence system which we know as Hadrian’s Wall.


After the departure of the Romans in the early fifth century, for six centuries there is little record of the story of the town, though archaeological excavation in the area of the Keep provides evidence of continuing occupation by Saxons.


After the Norman Conquest, the strategic importance of Newcastle’s site was again realised, along with its relative proximity to Scotland, its control of the river crossing and its possibilities as a port. All these made fortification imperative and in 1080 Robert, Son of William I, had built a wooden fort - the “New Castle”. The existing Keep dates from 1172-77 and the Black Gate from 1247. The town walls were added the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Behind the protection of these fortifications Newcastle developed as a merchant and trading community; the most significant commodity in the medieval period was wool, but markets in many other types of goods - cloth, fish, hide - also developed. The growth of the town was aided by royal favours and charters: in 1216 the burgesses gained right to have a mayor and in 1400 the town became a county of itself, with its own sheriff. Much care was also taken to suppress the aspirations of other rival communities along the Tyne. Newcastle became one of the great provincial centres of medieval England.

“Coals to Newcastle” - the phrase indicates the dominating importance of the coal trade to the town. By the end of the fourteenth century the “sea cole” trade to London and other ports had been established, although coal mining had begun much earlier. Newcastle's chartered control of the river meant that even coal mined outside the town boundaries was shipped through its port, greatly increasing revenue. Between 1565 and 1625 the coal trade increased twelve fold, a growth which saved Newcastle from the slump which affected other towns as the wool trade declined.

There was a brief halt to the town's continuing rise during the Civil War. Royalist Newcastle was besieged for three months in 1644 and fell to the Earl of Leven’s Scottish army. It was from this defence that Newcastle was said to have been granted its motto by Charles I: “Fortiter Defendit Triumphans” (Triumphing by a bold defence). Critical damage was done to the coal trade during the Civil War, but prosperity was regained remarkably quickly after Restoration. According to Hearth Tax Returns of 1663-65, Newcastle was the fourth largest provincial town in terms of population, after Norwich, York and Bristol.





From the late seventeenth century, other trades and industries joined coal as producers of wealth, whether or not the factories were actually in Newcastle - iron, salt and glass for example. The town became a regional centre: a commercial infrastructure was developed which was not present in other north-east towns: an Assay Office from 1702 and Carr's Bank (probably the first outside London) in 1755.

Only a prosperous town could support many charitable institutions such as the Infirmary (1752): only in a wealthy and confident society could artists and craftsmen flourish, such as - Thomas Bewick the wood engraver, William Beilby the glass engraver, and David Stephenson the architect of All Saints Church. The intellectual and social climate was also propitious: the Assembly Rooms of 1776 and the Literary and Philosophical Society of 1793 are good examples. The Newcastle Gazette (1710) and the Newcastle Courant (1711) were the first newspapers published in the north of England.


There was of course another side to this coin. Much of the older part of the town was squalid and many townspeople did not share in the general prosperity. As early as 1722 Daniel Defoe commented on the "prodigious number" of poor in Newcastle. The town walls had last been used defensively in 1745 and from the 1760's parts were demolished. Wealthier citizens began to desert the centre of town for the cleaner, healthier suburbs: Westgate was the first of these.


The city centre was largely rebuilt from the 1830's led by a partnership of Richard Grainger (developer), John Clayton (Town Clerk) and John Dobson (architect), though other architects such as Thomas Oliver were involved. Many of Newcastle's finest buildings and streets - Grey Street, Grainger Market and the Theatre Royal, date from this period.

In the nineteenth century new industries developed: locomotive building by the Stephensons for example, while other industries such as shipbuilding were greatly expanded. But the most significant enterprise was that begun by W.G. Armstrong at Elswick, building armaments and ships, which became by far the largest employer in the area, with a whole suburb housing the men. Newcastle became the centre of the inventiveness and commercial enterprise towards the end of the century with men such as J. W. Swan (electric light) and Sir C A Parsons (steam turbines, electricity supply).

Industrial growth expanded the city: new suburbs developed, such as Jesmond and Heaton, while urban transport encouraged movement away from the city centre with suburban railways and street tramways. The population of Newcastle increased from 87,784 (1851) to 266,671 (1911) while the land area expanded with the incorporation of Walker, Benwell, Fenham and part of Kenton in 1904.

Growth as a commercial and entertainment centre continued with the opening of large department stores such as Bainbridge's and Fenwick's and theatres such as the Empire. Intellectual developments included - Durham College of Medicine (1832), Mining Institute (1852) and Durham College of Science (1871).







Tyneside as a whole was seriously affected by the inter-war depression as the staple industries on which it depended - coal, chemicals, ship-building and engineering declined. Newcastle perhaps suffered less than most towns because its service industries were more highly developed and its economy more broadly based.

Since the last war there has been further industrial decline, reflected in the city's participation in central government's Inner City Partnership and Enterprise Zone Schemes. Traditional forms of employment have largely been replaced by more retail and service industries. The City's status as a regional centre has been retained.

The City's reputation as a regional shopping centre has been enhanced by the development of shopping precincts such as Eldon Square (opened in 1976), Eldon Gardens (1989), Monument Mall (1992) and pedestrianisation of Northumberland Street, upper Grainger Street, Blakett and Grey Street (1998). In the 1990's and through in to the 21st century Newcastle has been undergoing regeneration to re-establish the city as a vibrant and stylish regional capital and halt the population decline. Selected areas have been the focus of regeneration schemes including the inner city, the West End and East End. Grainger Town has been revitalised as a mixed-use historic urban quarter as part of Newcastle City Council's City Centre Action Plan, a six year regeneration programme from 1996 – 2002. To the west an Arts and Leisure Centre has been created with the Theatre Village and China Town area being redeveloped. Between 1992 and 1997 the West End underwent urban regeneration as part of City Challenge initiative and Ouseburn, in the east was developed as an urban village as part of a five year Single Regeneration Bid programme between 1997 and 2002. Newcastle City Council's 'Going for Growth', a twenty year regeneration programme (2000 – 2020) aims to create jobs and sustainable mixed communities. This includes further development in the East and West End of the city, embracing the key elements of housing, shopping, business, green space and transport. Newcastle Great Park, a residential and business development to the north and Newburn Haugh, a business development along the riverside around Lemington and Newburn are intended to attract business to the area and stimulate economic growth.

The transport infrastructure plays an important role in the City's development and road transport to and from Newcastle has seen major improvements over the last 50 years. John Dobson Street was opened in 1970, the first new major street in the city centre for over 100 years. Since then the Central Motorway East opened in 1973, the Western By-pass in 1990 and St James Boulevard in 1998. The Tyneside Metro, a rapid transport system that connects towns on both sides of the River Tyne with Central Newcastle was opened in 1980. It was extended to Newcastle airport in 1991 and Sunderland in 2002. Newcastle International Airport has also been expanded with an extension to the terminal on the south side, which opened in 2000 and further plans for development over a twelve year period, 2004 – 2016. Continuing improvements to public transport form the basis of 'Towards 2016 Nexus Organisation's transport plan.






This includes all aspects of public transport, rail, bus and river, with greater flexibility to make public transport more accessible. There are plans for further extensions to the Metro system and the introduction of street-running trams as well as expansion of the heavy rail system, refurbishment of Central Station and upgrading of the bus services.


The quaysides on both sides of the river have undergone extensive redevelopment to stimulate economic, recreational and social life with a particular emphasis on culture. The quaysides were at the heart of Millenium celebrations with a huge firework display at New Year 2000. The Gateshead Millenium Bridge was completed in September 2001 and officially opened by HRH Queen Elizabeth II in May 2002. It has received much acclaim both as a feat of engineering, being the world's first tilting bridge, and as an elegant landmark. The area is building a reputation as a cultural centre with the opening of Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in July 2002 in the revamped Rank flour mill and the Sage Music Centre, designed by Norman Foster and partners due to open in the winter of 2004/2005, both on the Gateshead riverside. Both sides of the river are home to a collection of public art and on the Newcastle side buildings have been cleaned and restored revitalising this historic part of the City. The area has become a desirable residence with new apartment blocks built and conversion of some of the existing warehouse buildings in to flats. Links between Newcastle and Gateshead have been strengthened through the joint working of Newcastle Gateshead Partnership, which was behind a bid for Capital of Culture 2008. Although the bid was not successful it provided the impetus for a continuing programme of cultural development.

Other notable improvements in art and cultural facilities over recent years include refurbishment of the Laing Art Gallery incorporating a new glass entrance (1996), installation of the 'Blue Carpet', a square in front of the Laing created by artist Thomas Heatherwick (2001) and interior refurbishment of galleries in 2004 during the gallery's centenary year. A large concert and exhibition venue adjacent to the Redheugh Bridge, the Metro Radio Arena (formerly Telewest Arena) was completed in 1995. The Centre for Life, a unique science village combining educational exhibits and research unit for bioscience, particularly human genetics was opened in 1996 and a four-year redevelopment of the Discovery Museum was finished in 2004. While in sport Newcastle United football club has seen vast expansion and redevelopment at St James Park grounds in the decade 1990 to 2000, making it the second biggest club ground in England.





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