

# *A Potted History*



People and Places of the West End

## Published by St James' Heritage & Environment Group

St James' Heritage & Environment Group is an independent volunteer-run organisation based in West Newcastle. The Group provides activities and resources for people of all ages to explore and celebrate the history of the west end. Its local history books, heritage guides and films are available free of charge on the website <https://stjamesheritage.com>. For more information email [stjamesbenwell@gmail.com](mailto:stjamesbenwell@gmail.com).

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Marge Craig	Sarah Hunter	Jamie Nicol	Linda Sutton	

In addition there were 119 participants whose names are not listed individually, including 55 pupils from Bridgewater School, 28 from St Joseph's School, 20 from Excelsior Academy, and 10 members of Pendower Good Neighbour Project Young People's Group.



# *Introduction*

This book offers a series of snapshots of the history of the west end of Newcastle, illustrated by unique clay models made as part of the Potted History of the West End project. More than 200 people of all ages and backgrounds took part in this project during 2019–2020, working in groups at local schools, sheltered housing, churches, youth projects, community organisations, libraries and other local venues.

Participants began by learning about the history of the area and sharing their own memories in informal sessions. They

chose scenes and stories which they wanted to depict, and then worked with a potter to create clay models of people and places to illustrate these. As well as engaging people in exploring their history, the project aimed to use the pottery models to share this history with a wider audience. A rolling programme of small displays in different local venues was followed, after a gap of two years due to the pandemic, by a major exhibition at the City Library and the Discovery Museum in the summer of 2022. This book marks the final phase of the Potted History of the West End.



# *The Romans were here*

Hadrian's Wall runs through the west end. The Romans occupied the area for about 300 years from the second century. They built a large fort called Condercum at the highest point of the Wall. A troop of 500 cavalrymen was stationed here.



Antenociticus was the Roman God of Benwell. The remains of his temple still stand today in the middle of a housing estate just south of the West Road.



# Scot's Wood

In 1367 local landowner Richard Scot obtained permission to enclose a 200 acre wood to make a deerpark. This was how Scotswood got its name.



Richard Scot came from a rich and powerful family of Newcastle merchants.



Scot's park was full of deer, wild boar and other animals and birds. His neighbours kept breaking in and helping themselves to these as they were not at all happy about the enclosure of the wood.

# *Old Benwell*

Before the middle of the 19th century Benwell was mainly rural. Some of the richest and most influential people on Tyneside lived here in grand houses set in landscaped grounds.



Anne Sowerby lived in Benwell Towers in the 19th century with her husband John, owner of the huge Ellison Glassworks in Gateshead.

Mrs Hodgkin lived in a large house called Benwell Dene. Her husband was a wealthy banker. Their extensive gardens later became Hodgkin Park.



# *The Brambles of Benwell Hall*

Benwell Hall was a large 18th century house standing in its own wooded and landscaped grounds. The last residents were the Bramble family who moved there in the 1920s.



William Bramble was known as the Dick Whittington of Newcastle. The story was that he arrived in the city to seek his fortune with his possessions in a bundle on his back.



Three of Bramble's daughters became teachers at local schools.

# *Benwell Towers*

Benwell Towers still stands today to the north of Benwell Lane. There has been a great house on this site since the 12th century or earlier. It has been rebuilt at least three times, and the present mansion dates from 1831. Many famous names have been associated with Benwell Towers during its long history.



Benwell Towers has long been rumoured to be haunted by a ghost known as the Grey Lady.





During the 15th and 16th centuries Benwell Towers was owned by the Priors of Tynemouth who used it as a summer residence.



Benwell Towers was the official residence of the Bishops of Newcastle for more than sixty years until the end of the Second World War.

# *People of Benwell Towers*

Among the earliest owners of Benwell Towers were the Shafto family, relatives of the real Bobby Shafto celebrated in the well-known song.



The house's most notorious owner was Andrew Robinson "Stoney" Bowes, a high society villain who is alleged to have bought it in the 18th century as a base for his smuggling racket.

In the 1970s Benwell Towers became a pub called The Mitre. This was a cosy place with coal fires and original features such as stained glass windows and wood carvings.



Later the BBC used the building as a recording studio. Benwell Towers became the setting for Byker Grove, the TV programme which made Ant and Dec famous.

## *New Benwell*

In the second half of the 19th century thousands of new homes were built across Benwell, and the population grew rapidly.



By 1900 Adelaide Terrace had become a busy shopping centre. Shops used to stay open until late into the evening for people to come after work.



William Bramble of Benwell Hall owned shops on Adelaide Terrace.

There were several baker's shops on Adelaide Terrace making fresh bread and cakes. The bakers had to get up very early in the morning to heat up the ovens and prepare the dough.



Fishmongers sold fresh fish on the Terrace.

There were several farms in this area until well into the 20th century. The Ferguson family ran a dairy at Benwell West Farm, giving Fergusons Lane its name.



Before motorised vehicles were in general use, horses were used for transport and for working on farms and in industry. It was a common sight to see blacksmiths at work in Benwell.



Reay's ice cream parlour at the bottom of Condercum Road was a popular place for young people to meet in the 1950s and 1960s.

Benwell Library opened in 1909 on Atkinson Road. It was known as the Carnegie Library after the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie who paid for it. Carnegie was a successful industrialist, said to be the second richest man in history.



This was the first library in Newcastle to allow people to choose books from open shelves.



The library is typical of a Carnegie Library – an imposing building with a lamp at the entrance to symbolise enlightenment, and steps up to the doorway showing that people were elevating themselves by visiting the library.

St James' Church in Benwell Lane was the area's first parish church. Opened in 1833, it served a large area stretching from the city boundary to Denton Dene.



The church and its graveyard were built on land donated by the coal owner and mining engineer John Buddle, known in his time as 'King of the Coal Trade'.



As the population grew rapidly over the next century, more churches appeared across the area. St Margaret's Church in Scotswood was built during the First World War.



Almost 13,000 local residents, young and old, rich and poor, are buried in the graveyard of St James' Church.



The Grainger family lived in Elswick Hall. The builder and developer Richard Grainger is best known for transforming the medieval townscape of Newcastle into one of Britain's finest town centres.



Jack Palmer, a former coal miner from Benwell, was a world-class boxer. He was heavy-weight champion of Britain from 1903 to 1906.



Elswick resident Walter Scott was one of Britain's first self-made millionaires. Among his many enterprises, he built London's first underground electric railway.



Cricketer and businessman John Atkinson Pendlington invented the method of scoring used in all first class cricket matches for over 50 years.

St Joseph's RC Church opened in 1931 on Armstrong Road.  
Its distinctive dome can be seen from across the Tyne.



Next to this wedding party stands Father Milroy,  
the parish priest who served St Joseph's Church  
for 36 years from 1924.

# *Industries of the west end*

The west end has a long history of manufacturing. It was home to a number of important industries. One of the oldest factories along the riverside was the Elswick Leadworks with its iconic shot tower.



Joseph Swan, the inventor of the light bulb, set up the world's first electric light bulb factory in South Benwell in 1881.



There used to be a windmill in Elswick at the top of a road still known today as Mill Lane.



Adamsez factory in Scotswood was famous for its bathroom ware, especially the toilets.

# *Arming the world*

In 1846 William Armstrong set up an engineering factory on the riverside at Elswick. By the end of the 19th century Armstrong's works occupied most of the riverside land from Elswick to Scotswood. Here the company made tanks, guns, warships and many other types of armaments, as well as trains, tractors, cars and other engineering products.



The Swing Bridge was manufactured at Armstrong's Elswick works in 1876.

These powerful locomotives, made in the 1920s, helped to modernise the Australian railway system.



The company used to be one of the world's major armaments manufacturers.



Armstrong's, later called Vickers, used to be the largest employer on Tyneside.

# *West End at War*

During the two World Wars many west end residents joined the armed forces. Some women chose to join the Land Army working on agricultural production in the Second World War.



Vickers-Armstrong increased production at its West Newcastle factories, and also opened up new facilities. The Town Moor was one of the locations for secret wartime factories making planes and munitions during the Second World War.



Ruth Dodds was one of hundreds of women working in Armstrong's munitions factory in Lemington during the First World War. This was known locally as Canary Island because the chemicals used in the process turned the workers' skin yellow.

Women's football teams became a national phenomenon during the First World War. Because so many of the players worked in munitions factories, they were known as the 'munitionettes'. Armstrong's Newcastle factories had nine different women's football teams.



# Coalmining

Coal was mined in the west end from Roman times until the 20th century. At first the coal was dug out of shallow mines close to the surface. Later, as mining technology improved, deep pits were sunk where miners worked at the coalface in tunnels far underground.



Mining was a dangerous occupation and accidents were common. Miners carried lamps underground to detect poisonous gases.





In 1925 38 men and boys died in a terrible accident at the Montagu Pit in Scotswood. Thousands of mourners lined the route of the funeral.



Ponies were used in the coal mines. They worked long hours underground hauling heavy loads along the dark passages.



The last pit to close in Benwell was the Charlotte Pit on Condercum Road. There were stables there where the ponies were kept when they were not working.





This book celebrates the fascinating history of Newcastle's west end as well as the creativity of its community. Illustrations from a unique collection of pottery models of people and places bring to life almost 2000 years of the area's history.

