

DUNSTON STAITHES TO THE OUSEBURN

Standing next to the River Tyne, one of the most destructive events, but less well known, effecting the river was the Great Flood of 1771. Its cause was a sudden thaw of the ice in upper Teesdale, a cloud burst over the Pennines and a continuous period of rain. Of the fifteen bridges crossing the North and South Tyne and the main river itself, only the bridge at Corbridge remained standing. There were also losses, less significant, on the Wear, Tees and Eden.



The Old Tyne Bridge

To the right of us is the Saltmarsh Garden, which gets its name from the tiny fragment of saltmarsh habitat that was found growing here at the time of the Garden Festival in 1990. The Saltmarsh Garden contains the main area of this type of habitat remaining in Gateshead and is situated on the lowest section of the River Team where it flows out into the Tyne. Over 12 miles from the sea, the existence of a sea-salty saltmarsh habitat here is remarkable and indicates the power and extent of tides on the River Tyne. The site has been designated as a Local Wildlife Site and the habitat is representative of 'upper' saltmarsh habitat. Species of note include sea aster and sea clubrush, which is a scarce plant in the old County Durham area. The woodland trees and plants you see growing here were all planted at the time of the Garden Festival. The reedbed was also planted then now has to be controlled to stop it taking over the rare saltmarsh habitat.

Our walk continues along part of Keelman's Way, reaching Dunston Staithes. It's believed to be the largest timber structure in Europe. It was opened in 1893 by the North East Railway Company, allowing a huge quantity of coal from the north Durham coalfield (about 5.5 million tonnes annually) and coke from Norwood Cokeworks to be loaded directly on to colliers for shipping to London and markets abroad. As the market for coal fell, the need for Dunston Staithes also declined, and fell into disuse in the 1970's. Although restoration was carried out in time for the 1990 Gateshead Garden Festival, subsequent years saw attacks by vandals and arsonists in 2003, 2010, 2019 and 2020.

Continuing our walk down the south bank of the river, the Redheugh Bridge as we see it now is actually the third bridge at this location. The first was opened in 1871, and was partly financed by the Newcastle and Gateshead Water Company and the Newcastle and Gateshead Gas Company to allow their supplies to be routed across the Tyne when the old Tyne bridge was being demolished and replaced by the Swing Bridge. The bridge was designed by Thomas Bouch (who also designed the ill-fated Tay Bridge!). Structural failures began to show as early as 1885, and subsequent investigation indicated repairs would cost more than a new bridge, so a new bridge was built and opened in 1901. Design flaws became evident in the 1960's, and weight and speed restrictions imposed. Work on the current bridge started in 1980, and opened in 1983 by HRH Diana, Princess of Wales. The south abutments are visible, but what little remains of the north abutments are disguised by bushes.

The second Redheugh Bridge



Only a few more yards further along our route, is the King Edward VII bridge, described by some as “Britain’s last great railway bridge”. Designed by North Eastern Railway and built by Cleveland Bridge and Engineering, it opened in 1906, and by providing four more tracks, allowed trains to travel in both directions as against having to reverse over the High Level to complete their manoeuvring past Newcastle.

The theme of railways crossing the Tyne is repeated at the next bridge, the Queen Elizabeth II, completed for the Tyne and Wear Metro, and also built by Cleveland Bridge and Engineering. The bridge was officially opened by HM The Queen a few days before the Metro system’s regular services began in 1981.

Next on the list is the High Level road and rail bridge designed by George Stephenson. His design became the one we know today, but there had been other suggestions regarding a crossing at Redheugh, and an easier to build one at Bill Quay. It has to be remembered there wasn’t an all-encompassing railway authority, and railway companies were obviously looking after their own interests! Before the bridge was built, passengers and goods were unloaded from the trains and transported across the river by road to the station on the other side to continue the journey. It was opened by Queen Victoria in 1849, and, although still in use, there are weight restrictions on the vehicles using the road deck.

Between the High Level and what was the “new” old Tyne Bridge was the site of the Great Fire of Newcastle and Gateshead in 1854. The fire started in the mill of a worsted wool manufacturers. Quantities of oil used in the process ignited and quickly spread. Almost next door was a bond warehouse, which although constructed to the then fire regulations, caught fire. It was used to store thousands of tons of sulphur, nitrate of soda, and other combustibles. Several explosions took place, 53 people lost their lives and hundreds were injured. Burning debris and rubble were blown up to three quarters of a mile and spread to Newcastle on the other side of the river. Unfortunately, due to a dual service agreement, a substantial number of Newcastle Fire Brigade personnel were already on the Gateshead side assisting the North British Fire Brigade in the attempts to extinguish the Gateshead fire.

On the other side of the river, we can see refurbished, repurposed and new buildings now used as hotels, restaurants and pubs.

A few steps further along we cross over the Swing Bridge, which replaced an older bridge over the Tyne, and was paid for by the industrialist William Armstrong to allow ships to reach his works at Elswick. The previous bridge was demolished in 1868, but the Swing bridge didn't open until 1876! At its peak in 1924, the bridge opened over 6,000 times: now it's only for the occasional small craft and once per month as a maintenance exercise. Originally powered by a hydraulic accumulator 18 metres under the bridge, the hydraulics are now electrically operated, but the mechanicals are Armstrong's originals.

The "new" old Tyne Bridge, High Level Bridge in the background



Stretching over us as we continue our walk is the most iconic of all of the bridges across the river: the Tyne Bridge. From Roman times there have been bridges crossing the river, and it's not really known how many! Built of wood, stone, or a combination of both, they have been lost to storm, fire or flood. The one illustrated at the beginning of our walk was the one destroyed in the Great Flood of 1771, replaced by the one shown above, then that replaced by Armstrong's Swing Bridge. The bridge as we know it now was designed by the engineering firm Mott, Hay and Anderson (who also designed the Sydney Harbour Bridge and are both similar to the Hell Gate Bridge in New York), and built by Dorman Long. It was opened by King George V and Queen Mary in 1928. In 2024, work starts to refurbish the bridge to be completed for its 100th anniversary in 2028. In 2018, the bridge was rated Grade II* for architectural and historical interest.

The Grade one listed Guildhall and Merchants Court was built in 1655 replacing an earlier building that was demolished in 1639 following extensive fire damage. Old shipping company offices and warehouses are amongst more repurposed buildings. One of the new buildings is the Newcastle Law Courts, a Crown Court and Magistrates Court venue that replaced the Moot Hall in Castle Garth. The Magistrates Court used to be in the Pilgrim Street Police Station and Fire Station complex

Next, we arrive at the baby of them all: Gateshead Millennium Bridge. Thought to be the world's first "blinking eye" tilting bridge, it was opened to pedestrians and cyclists in 2001. Newcastle Council objected to the original choice of name "Baltic Millennium Bridge" so Gateshead council chose the current name causing a bit of a feud with its neighbour!

We are following the northern side of the Tyne to the Ouseburn. At one time there was an extension of the Roman Wall from Pons Aelius (Newcastle) to Segedunum (Wallsend), but none of this is now visible. The

area was heavily industrialised, with sluice gates installed to establish permanent water in the Ouseburn. The walk was suspended at this point because the call of food and drink overwhelmed the will to continue, so after refreshment at the Tyne Bar, we continued. With the demise of the industrial base there is now something of an arts centre (with the Cluny) and Seven Stories (the National Centre for Children's Books) and not quite city centre flats. At the top of the valley there is the Ouseburn City Farm, and the Ouseburn Valley Brewery. From there the group dispersed back along the river bank for onward journeys, city centre shopping and other tasks.

