

Newbiggin By The Sea Heritage Trail

Newbiggin by the Sea is a fascinating place. It may appear at first to be a strange mixture of buildings, but on closer inspection, it is a wonderful reflection of changing lifestyles and industry.

Although coal mining may have been responsible for Newbiggin growing to the size it is today, there were centuries of maritime activity before that. It was also a thriving holiday destination at one time in the days before package holidays to the sun became the norm. This trail will highlight only some of the town's features and history, but perhaps it will help you understand Newbiggin and its people.

1: The Ancient Port

Looking at this quiet bay today with its small fleet of traditional



Northumbrian fishing cobs and occasional sailing boat, it is hard to imagine the busy port it once was: ships loading and unloading their wares, and all of the associated services.

There is evidence of shipping activities dating back to the early fourteenth century. In 1316, Edward II granted the town the authority to collect tolls from any ship using the quay for loading or unloading goods. Twenty years later, and the port must have been important, as an order was issued summoning all Newbiggin ships belonging to the King's service to muster off Suffolk. To assist and protect those ships, there are records of the village having a pier on the north side of the bay at that time. It was in need of repair however, and in 1352, Thomas Hatfield, Bishop of Durham, granted a 40 day indulgence to any person within the diocese who would contribute to the repair, 'for the security of the shipping resorting thereto.'

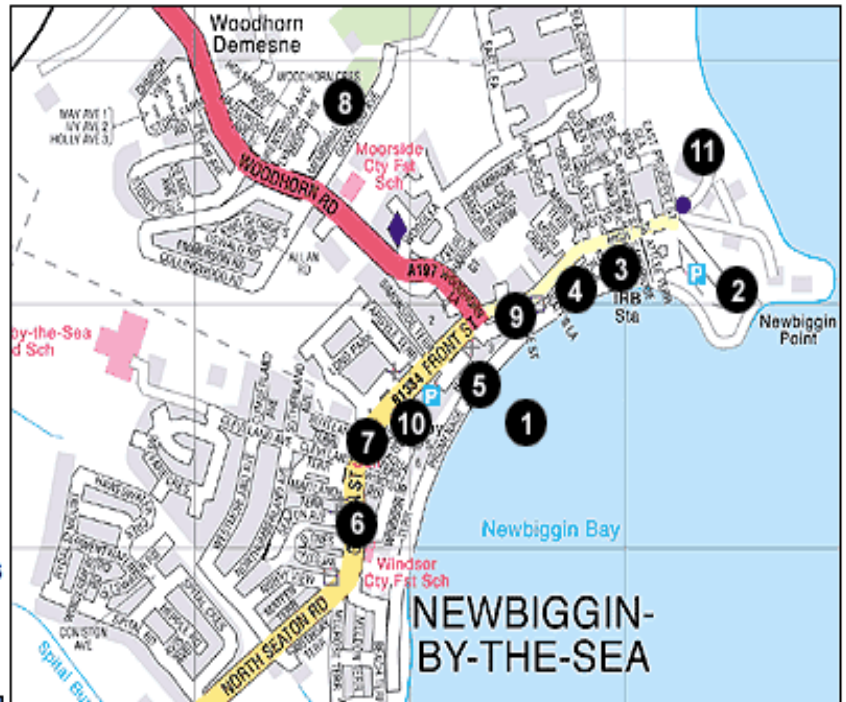
Newbiggin was a major port for the shipping of grain at one time. It is said that it was third only in importance after London and Hull. Occasional reminders of that time can still be found around the village, including grindstones that were used for ballast.

It would seem that Newbiggin by the Sea has always had a fishing industry. The first recorded reference to fishing was in the twelfth century when a home and fishing boat were linked to the monks of Newminster Abbey. This association with the church lasted for hundreds of years and in fact continued in Newbiggin by the Sea for many years after the feudal system disappeared elsewhere.

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2: St Bartholomew's Church (Church Point)

At this point it would be appropriate to draw attention to the fine church which sits on 'The Point' of land at the north end of the bay. St Bartholomew's Church was founded as a chapel of ease to St. Mary's Parish Church at Woodhorn. It is reckoned that a small church occupied this site before 1174, but by the 14th century it had become a larger and more important building. Its development over the centuries has resulted in a fascinating mixture of architectural styles, and it is well worth a visit.



3: The Lifeboat Station

The tragic loss of 10 young fishermen in March 1851 when a storm suddenly arose was the catalyst for the establishment of the Lifeboat Station in Newbiggin by the Sea. Colleagues had risked their own lives to save the crews of four capsized cobsles, but only two men were saved.



The whole village was numb with grief, but determined to be better prepared in future for such an emergency, a Lifeboat Station was established. It was only months after that the Rear Admiral His Grace the Duke of Northumberland accepted the office of President of the RNLi contributing 100 guineas to general funds as well as undertaking to complete the coast of Northumberland with lifeboats, including a boat for Newbiggin, all at his own expense. More than 150 years on and many lives saved, the Station is now the oldest operational boathouse in the country. The same family names as served on the very first lifeboat operate the twelfth boat - an Atlantic 75 class boat named 'CSMA 75th Anniversary' which arrived on 5 August 1998.

Tribute should be paid to the men of the village for their lifesaving service, but also to the women who not only raised funds and supported their menfolk, but who on many occasions hauled the boat in and out of the water. Their role was critical in the rescue of the 'Eminent' on 4 February 1940. Unable to reach the ship from the bay, the lifeboat was landed and relaunched on the other side of the point having been dragged through the wind and snow by 60 helpers. This episode was later to be the inspiration for a rescue in the Jack Higgins novel, "Storm Warning".

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4: The Cable House

Newbiggin by the Sea was at the forefront of early telecommunications when in 1868 the first telegraph cable from Scandanavia came ashore at The Point. Cables were floated by tar barrels, towed ashore by Danish seamen in longboats, then pulled up the beach by horses and placed in trenches cut by local fishermen. They terminated in the 'Cable House'. The Freeholders received rent for wayleave until 1960 when the Great Northern Telegraph Company ceased to operate from Newbiggin.



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5: The Promenade

According to the national press in the early 1930s, Newbiggin by the Sea was fast becoming 'a fashionable watering-place' having undergone something of a transformation. No doubt the new promenade with its three fine bathing shelters and bandstand played a significant part in this positive view.



Work had begun on the promenade in September of 1929, and it was officially opened by Sir Charles Trevelyan on 26 May 1932. Newbiggin had been a popular seaside destination before the new promenade was built, but now visitors flocked to the village by bus and train to enjoy the new facilities, the boat trips around the bay, the Pierot shows and other entertainments, and the wonderful beach.

Sadly, changes in the bay in recent decades, believed to have been largely caused by mining subsidence, have resulted in a shifting of sand away from the centre. The promenade itself has also been altered and reinforced in an effort to protect the seafront properties from the ravages of the North Sea.

There are many attractive properties around the bay. One such house, 'The Haven', was built in 1862 for a member of the Trevelyan family. It was later used as the Newbiggin Colliery manager's home, but is now in private ownership. The present owner has incorporated a piece of local history in the garden. Look out for the wall which features a number of circular grindstones. These were brought to the village in ships collecting grain - they were used as ballast.

There are a number of other large properties on the front from the late 1800s which provided fine homes and summer houses for rich business people and ship owners from Tyneside. Seabank Cottage was home to John Mailing of the famous Tyneside based Mailing pottery company.

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6: Gibson Street

This street was named after a stonemason who came to Newbiggin by the Sea from deep within the Northumberland countryside. William Gibson belonged to a family of stonemasons, and he was responsible for building many of the attractive stone properties on Front Street.



Although not confirmed, it is believed that he also built the large homes on Windsor Terrace. Some of these properties were undoubtedly for rich and well-to-do families; few ordinary folk could afford homes with between eight and fifteen bedrooms!

Gibson must have felt at home in Newbiggin for he married a local lass, Isabella Armstrong who came from a large fishing family, at Woodhorn on 23 May 1846. Their son, Ralph, was born four years later. In 1868, St Mark's Presbyterian Church was built by Gibson, or perhaps it was Gibsons, as his son too became a stonemason.

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7: The Brewery

1, 3 and 5 Front Street are said to be the oldest properties in the town geographically south of the Woodhorn Road junction. Although private homes now, they housed the Johnson and Company brewery in the years prior to 1850. It is difficult to say when this vital production work began in Newbiggin by the Sea, but in St Bartholomew's cemetery, one headstone records the death, in 1812, of a brewer who fell off his horse. Perish the thought that he might have been sampling the product before his fatal accident.



The village is well served with public drinking houses, but this was a major concern of one local presbyterian minister who had strong views on the sale of alcohol. It is said that he "deplored the great amount of public house drinking...especially at weekends." Its effect was marked in the early years of the twentieth century, with one in seven men absenting themselves from the local colliery each Monday. The pubs would have been happy even if the pit owners were not.

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8: Site of Newbiggin Colliery

The building on the right was at one time the offices of Newbiggin Colliery. It later became The Hunter's Lodge Public House and finally burned down in 2005. The Colliery was sunk in 1908, but it is said that many difficulties were experienced by the engineers. The first coal was drawn two years later, but in the early days there were many disputes about the royalties between the Freeholders and Mr Waddilove who owned part of Woodhorn Estates. The Freeholders won the battle in 1913 and so in 1947 when coal mining was nationalised, they received payment.



The first manager was a gentleman from Durham, a Mr R Kellet, and it would seem that quite a number of Durham folk made their home in the town following his arrival. Some of the colliery managers had the good fortune to find that their official residence was 'The Haven' (right), located on the seafront. One manager reputedly communicated his availability by raising a flag on the flag pole. If there was no flag he was not to be disturbed.



The Colliery closed in 1967, but at its peak in the 1920s, almost 1300 men were employed here . Later, Sir John Hall, local businessman and former Chairman of Newcastle United spent some of his early working life in these very offices. Sadly 41 men lost their lives in this pit. The workings of the Colliery have been blamed for the changes which have taken place in the bay in recent decades. The collapse of some of the tunnels would seem to be responsible in part (at least) for the greater quantities of water contained in the bay, and therefore the increased power of the sea. New sea defences have been the only way to protect the heart of the village.

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9: The Mechanics Institute

The building housing the local bookmakers and Newbiggin by the Sea Sailing Club bears little resemblance today to the way it looked when it was first built back in 1891. Originally a small two storey building, it provided reading, smoking and billiard rooms for working class men in the town, not just specifically mechanics. Membership grew quickly, and within 5 years 150 men were listed as members. A local artist Elizabeth Mary Frazer, must have believed the Institute was a worthy cause, because 1000 books were donated upon her death. The building was altered significantly in 1914.

The Sailing Club, which occupies the upper floors of the building today, was founded by local residents in 1961. Social and changing facilities are provided, but the Club has ambitious plans to extend creating even better facilities with improved access.



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10: Newbiggin Library & John Braine

John Gerard Braine was born in Bradford in 1922, but in the early 1950s he found himself working in this building (now sadly demolished, replaced by a small car park) as a librarian. Having left school in 1938 with no clear direction in life, he moved from job to job until 1940 when he became an assistant librarian in Bingley. His

National Service in the Royal Navy was cut short when he developed TB and after his convalescence, he spent a year in London trying to earn a living as a writer. It was then he returned north, to Newbiggin, and here he met his wife.



His first novel, 'Room at the Top' ([click here](#) for Amazon link to buy book) was published in 1957 shortly after he left the village, but it is more than likely that he would have been working on it whilst living in Newbiggin by the Sea. The book was a major success selling 5,000 copies in the first week, and over half a million copies by the end of the 1950s. It reached even greater audiences when it was made into a film starring Laurence Harvey and Simone Signoret ([click here](#) for film info). This was regarded as 'the first British film to take sex seriously and the first to show the industrial north as it really was.' The film won 2 Oscars. John Braine wrote 11 other novels before his death in October 1986 in London.

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11: Newbiggin Golf Course

Golf has been played in Newbiggin by the Sea for well over a century. The game was introduced to the village by a Scot, Mr Laing, who created the first 9 holes. Permission to play golf on the moor was granted in 1884 by the Freeholders for an annual payment of £2.

There were two clubs on the site at one time; the original club for the more well to do folk, and Newbiggin Work-men's Golf Club (Eastcliff) which held its inaugural meeting in January 1885. By 1908 the course with its two clubs had a combined membership of 327. Plans for the first club house were submitted in 1905 with work underway by May of the following year.



Tragedy struck in 1921 however, when the wooden building was completely destroyed by fire. Insurance of £1250 was paid, and a fine new club house was designed by S H Lawson of Newcastle. It opened on 31 March 1923 and its members enjoyed a bar, lounge and games room. Sadly lightning can strike twice, and the building was once again destroyed by fire in December 1977. Members were not to be beaten, and work began on a new club house in 1973.