Gateshead’s commemorative plaques

Your guide to a historical journey through Gateshead’s amazing past
Gateshead’s people, places, events

When it comes to history and heritage, Gateshead has a lot to be proud of.

From the invention of electric lighting to famous disasters that changed the life of miners for ever, Gateshead has an amazing history.

Famous authors, inventors, artists and musicians have all made their mark on the borough and there are a host of special buildings and places of interest. They have shaped the Gateshead we have today and are a huge source of pride for local people.

Gateshead Council has erected commemorative plaques to some of the most significant people, buildings and locations from Gateshead’s history. This leaflet is a guide to those plaques, to make them easy to find and to give a little more historical information.

Why not take a tour of Gateshead’s commemorative plaques? You could try to visit all of the plaques celebrating our industrial past or perhaps pay homage to some of the borough’s most famous musicians and song writers. Whatever your interest, this leaflet has handy maps to help you plan your route to the plaques.

Included in this leaflet are several new plaques, unveiled in 2012. Be sure to find out more about the Felling Pit disaster, Sir Vincent Raven and the celebrations to mark the 150th anniversary of the Blaydon Races.

We’re always keen to hear about the people, places or buildings that you think should be nominated to receive a commemorative plaque too. So if you’ve got an idea, please contact our historic environment team on 0191 433 3510.
People

1. **Daniel Defoe (1660–1731)**  
   *On south side of Hillgate, adjacent to footpath to St Mary’s Square.*  
   Well-known writer, journalist and pamphleteer Defoe spent some time lodging in Gateshead. He was one of the founders of English novel writing and wrote the world-famous Robinson Crusoe. It is believed that he lived near Hillgate in the early 18th century.

2. **George “Geordie” Ridley (1835–1864)**  
   *On side wall of William IV public house, High Street.*  
   Writer of what has been referred to as the “unofficial anthem of Tyneside”, The Blaydon Races, Geordie was a music hall singer and composer. This plaque marks the site of a previous building where he lived.

3. **Sir Vincent Raven**  
   *On former Greenesfield Works office building, Fletcher Road*  
   Sir Vincent Litchfield Raven was the last Chief Mechanical Engineer of the North Eastern Railway. He was responsible for some of the most successful and longest lived steam locomotives ever built. He was also a pioneer of electric locomotives. He oversaw the construction of a prototype high speed electric locomotive in 1922 as part of a plan for electric trains from York to Newcastle, over 65 years before they became reality.
Dr Alfred Cox
On West View House, Bensham Road
founded the Gateshead Medical Association and later went on to be both Deputy Medical Secretary and Medical Secretary of the British Medical Association. Dr Cox was also a well published medical writer.

Sister Winifred Laver
On Gateshead Evangelical Church, Derwentwater Road.
Pastor of Vine Street Mission, Sister Winifred Laver devoted her life to her religion and to helping others. Famed for organising Christmas lunch for up to 1,200 people and taking large numbers of children to the seaside for trips, she has been referred to as ‘the first Angel of the North’.

William Henry Brockett
On King James Street, Just off Old Durham Road, Gateshead.
A 19th Century liberal reformer, Brockett had a prominent career as a commission merchant and ship broker. He is best remembered for lobbying to ensure parliamentary representation for Gateshead, helping to establish the Gateshead Dispensary and for founding Gateshead’s first newspaper – The Gateshead Observer.

Places

Brandling Station
On north wall, Mulberry Street, Felling.
The Brandling Junction Railway was a pioneering railway. This station, one of the oldest surviving passenger stations in the world, was built in 1842. This plaque celebrates the restoration of the building in 1978.

The Gateshead Dispensary
On south front of the Dispensary, Nelson Street.
Founded in 1832 after the outbreak of cholera in 1831, the dispensary helped to improve public health and made medicine available to the poor. It was also used to treat patients injured in the 1854 fire – one of whom received treatment for “bruised toes”! The plaque commemorates the site occupied by the dispensary between 1855 – 1946.
River Police Station
On east wall of Tyne River Police Station (former La Riviera Restaurant), adjacent to the Swing Bridge.
The Admiralty formed the first River Police on 4th August 1845, with 21 men and six rowing boats. This station was built for them in 1910.

Tyne Bridge 75th Anniversary (Bridge opened 1928)
On west side of south tower of Tyne Bridge, Hillgate.
A famous symbol of Tyneside, the Tyne Bridge was designed by Mott, Hay and Anderson and built by Dorman Long and Co. of Middlesbrough. It was officially opened by King George V in 1928 and celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2003, when this plaque was unveiled.
Events

The 1854 Fire
On east side of south tower of Tyne Bridge, Hillgate.
This plaque marks the site of Wilson’s worsted factory where the Great Fire of 6th October 1854 started. It later spread right across both sides of the Quayside and resulted in an explosion which was heard as far away as Hexham, Alnwick and 20 nautical miles out to sea.

High Level Bridge
East side of central pier.
The iconic High Level Bridge was designed by Robert Stephenson, son of railway engineer George. It was officially opened by Queen Victoria in 1849 after being open to rail traffic for almost a month.

High Level Bridge Lamps
West side of central pier.
The original cast iron lighting columns on the High Level Bridge were brought back into use in 2008 as part of a major restoration of the bridge, this plaque celebrates that work. Network Rail carried out the work in partnership with Gateshead Council and Newcastle City Council, English Heritage and the Railway Heritage Trust. Further plaques marking the presentation of the prestigious Europe Nostra Grand Conservation Award to the restoration team in 2009 can be found on the central pier.
Felling Colliery explosion

On Mulberry Street, near to former entrance to colliery. The 1812 explosion at the John Pit of Felling Colliery killed 92 men and boys. The disaster led to great advances in mine safety including the introduction of the safety lamp. The plaque was unveiled in May 2012 as part of the commemorations of the 200th anniversary of the disaster.

Felling Colliery explosion memorial

In St Mary’s Churchyard, Heworth. The memorial commemorates all 92 killed in the 1812 explosion at Felling Colliery. The youngest killed was just seven years old, the oldest 65. Reverend John Hodgson was so incensed by the loss of life that he founded the first group to press for improvements in industrial safety, the Sunderland Society for the Prevention of Accidents in Coal Mines. The group was instrumental in the creation of the first miners safety lamps.
Town Centre Map
Plaques 1-6 and 8-13

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Plaques 7 and 14

Plaque 15

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Bensham and Saltwell

People

16 Emily Davies (1830-1921)
On wall on east side of Bensham Road, near junction of Rectory Road.
Feminist, leading suffragist, founder of Girton College and long-time campaigner for women’s rights, Emily spent most of her youth in Gateshead. As a child she used to visit the Gateshead slums and apparently nothing was to shock her more in her life than what she saw there. Her father was the Rector of Gateshead and she lived her early life in the rectory that once stood on the site of this plaque.

17 Robert Spence Watson (1837-1911)
On south wall, Bensham Grove, Bensham Road.
An active participant in Liberal Party Politics in the local area, Robert Spence Watson was also an educational reformer. He founded the Girls’ Public Day School in Gateshead and was actively involved in the education of those attending ragged and industrial schools. He was also instrumental in the founding of the Durham College of Science, now Newcastle University.

18 William Wailes (1808-1881)
Adjacent to main entrance to Saltwell Towers, Saltwell Park.
William Wailes was one of the most noted stained glass manufacturers in Great Britain during Victorian times. In the 1850s he bought the Saltwellside Estate and designed Saltwell Towers, where this plaque is located. He lived there until he died but sold the estate to the Gateshead Corporation in 1876. Saltwell Park (voted Britain’s best Park in 2005), has been enjoyed by residents ever since.

19 William (1829-1912) and Catherine Booth (1829-1890)
On front wall, 15 Woodbine Terrace.
William had a reputation for being a fiery preacher. Together with his wife Catherine, he increased the congregation at the Bethesda Chapel in Gateshead from around 30 to 2,000. Catherine took on more of a preaching role, and because a woman preacher was such a novelty, requests for her to speak poured in from around the region. The Booths later moved to the East End of London where they founded The Salvation Army.
Bensham and Saltwell Map
Plaques 16-19

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Low Fell

Places

Carter’s Well
On wall on west side of Durham Road, adjacent to Carter’s Lodge.
This plaque marks the site of the ancient well which was the main water supply for Low Fell until the late 19th century. Carter’s Well was restored by Gateshead Council in 1994.

Hope, Ruth and Sylvia Dodds
On front boundary wall to Home House, Kells Lane, Low Fell.
These three daughters of bookbinder and amateur historian Edwin Dodds were very well known in Gateshead in the 20th century. Hope was educated at Cambridge before women were even awarded degrees, while Ruth became a prominent Labour Gateshead councillor in the 1930s. The sisters are best remembered for founding the Little Theatre in Gateshead, which was the only one in the country to open during the Second World War and still entertains audiences today.

Sir Joseph Swan (1828-1914)
On west wall of Underhill Residential Home, Kells Lane, Low Fell
Sir Joseph Swan was born in Sunderland and came to Gateshead as a young man to work as a chemist. He lived at Underhill and his experiments here led to him inventing the first incandescent electric light bulb. He was knighted in 1904.

Alex Glasgow (1935-2001)
On front wall of 59 Church Road, Low Fell.
Traditional working class singer-songwriter Alex Glasgow was born in Low Fell, and developed his own style of political folk music with a Geordie slant. A miner’s son and ardent socialist, many of his songs were trades-union focused but he also wrote music for TV, including “The Tyne Slides By”. He is perhaps best known for singing “When The Boat Comes In” for the BBC show of the same name.

People

William Clarke (1831-1890)
On wall, adjacent to High Fell Social Club, Old Durham Road.
William Clarke was a very successful industrialist and co-founder of Clarke Chapman, one of the largest employers on Tyneside. William was a councillor for some years as well as an organiser for the local Volunteer Corps, treasurer of the Children’s Hospital and a supporter of the Northern Counties Institute for the Deaf. It was said of William that he seldom “strayed from the banks of the Tyne”. This plaque marks the site of ‘The Hermitage’, his large mansion.
**Katherine (Githa) Sowerby (1876-1970)**

On boundary wall adjacent to the entrance of The Drive, Durham Road, Low Fell.

Playwright, poet and children’s author Katherine was a member of the noted Sowerby family and heir to the huge Ellison glassworks opened by her grandfather in 1851. Githa’s first play, “Rutherford & Son”, was the first serious play by a female playwright to become a West End success and took London by storm in 1912. This plaque was erected in 2009, the same year her play was brought back to life by Northern Stage.

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**Arthur Holmes (1890-1965)**

On front wall of 19 Primrose Hill, Low Fell.

A pioneer in his field, Holmes was a much-published geo-scientist who was very famous in the early 20th century. He was once described as the “Father of English geology” and has a crater on Mars named after him!
Places

27 Summerhouse, Former Stella Hall Estate
Tower, Summerhouse Hill, Stella (currently missing).
This plaque marked the spot of the summerhouse which is believed to have been built in 1840 on the site of the Stella Hall Estate, home of Joseph Cowen. Stella Hall - now demolished - was traditionally used as a convent and dated back to the 12th century. The estate was home to the army during the battle of Newburn Ford and Oliver Cromwell stayed here in 1651. There are plans to repair the summerhouse and replace the plaque.

28 Ryton Pinfold
Junction of Barmoor Lane and River Lane, Ryton.
This plaque marks the spot where an enclosure for stray animals existed from the 12th century. Pinfolds were used in Medieval Britain when animals grazing on common ground were not properly supervised by their owners. The Ryton Heritage Group restored the Ryton Pinfold in 1974 and this plaque was erected three years later.

29 Crawcrook Pinfold
In seating area adjacent junction of Main Street and Greenside Road, Crawcrook.
Another home for stray animals in the west, Crawcrook Pinfold was restored in the mid-1980s. The idea for restoration came after children from Kepier Chare Primary School took part in the BBC’s Domesday Project to celebrate the 900th anniversary of the Domesday Book.

30 Lilley Brickworks
On rear wall, former offices (now private house) adjacent A694, Rowlands Gill.
The Lilley Brickworks was operated by the Priestman Colliery Co. The firm owned a number of collieries in the area and converted redundant coke ovens to produce bricks. At first the bricks were just used for the company’s own purposes but from 1890 bricks were produced for common use. The works closed in 1976.
People

John Brown (Jackey Broon)
Left of entrance arch at west end of Blaydon Shopping Centre.
This plaque marks the site of the home of John Brown, the bell-ringer made famous by Geordie Ridley’s The Blaydon Races.

William Shield (1748-1829)
On sandstone block set in grassed area, Hood Street, Swalwell.
One time Master of the King’s Music, Shield was born in Swalwell. He was an accomplished violinist, violist and composer of operas. He incorporated the tune we now know as “Auld Lang Syne” into his opera “Rosina”.

Events

“Blaydon Races” On wall on north east side of Stella Road (B6319)
Originally a horse race that first took place on Blaydon Island in 1861 and later immortalised in George Ridley’s famous song of the same name and has led to the modern Blaydon Race, now a road run.

Blaydon Races 150th Anniversary
At the corner of Church Terrace and Shibdon Road, Blaydon.

Old Hollinside
On south east wall above door opening to Old Hollinside, Derwent Country Park, Whickham.
Old Hollinside is a 13th century medieval manor which was owned by the Harding family for 200 years. It became part of the Gibside Estate in 1732. One of 16 scheduled ancient monuments in Gateshead, it was granted Grade I listed building status in 1950. The manor was repaired in 2009 with funding from English Heritage and SITA UK.

Ebenezer Chapel
On north side of Market Lane, Swalwell.
A commemorative plaque marks the former site of the Presbyterian Ebenezer Chapel. The chapel was built in 1750 and demolished in 1976.
We hope you’ve enjoyed reading about the people, places and events that characterise Gateshead’s history.

If you’d like to find out more about our borough’s intriguing past, then pay a visit to St Mary’s Heritage Centre. This Grade I listed former church opposite The Sage Gateshead, is now home to historical records, photographs, maps and lots of fascinating heritage information. There is also an education space for learners of all ages, and a wide range of family and cultural activities take place throughout the year. Even more historical material is held in the Local Studies section of Gateshead Central Library on Prince Consort Road.

For more information on Gateshead’s local history contact
St Mary’s Heritage Centre, Oakwellgate, NE8 2AU,
0191 433 4699 or visit www.gateshead.gov.uk

For public transport information that could help you plan your route around the commemorative plaque sites call Traveline on 0871 200 2233.