

Admiral Lord Collingwood (1748-1810)

The Battle of Trafalgar, 21st October 1805

"... Only once did the enemy come out in force. Yet the scale was heroic;..."

Piers MacKesy: The war in the Mediterranean 1803-1810

Brave, modest and wise, Collingwood was devoted to King and country. His flagship, the Royal Sovereign fired the Battle of Trafalgar's first shot. During the battle Nelson exclaimed "See how that noble fellow Collingwood takes his ship into action". As his close friend Admiral Lord Nelson lay dying, he took over command of the British fleet during the thunderous battle, seeing it to a victorious conclusion.

With Collingwood's help the British Navy did not lose a single ship at Trafalgar which remains one of the most critical naval battles ever fought in British history. Had the Royal Navy lost the battle, Napoleon could have swept across the channel and invaded England.

About Collingwood

Born in Newcastle in 1748, Cuthbert Collingwood joined the Royal Navy in 1761. On-board the frigate Shannon, commanded by his uncle, Captain (afterwards Admiral) Braithwaite, he learned the rudiments of seamanship. The American War of Independence and then the Napoleonic War pitched him into a number of victorious encounters and he rose swiftly through the naval ranks with his friend Horatio Nelson, whom he had met in Jamaica in 1772 whilst they were both midshipmen.

Though remaining fond of his North East roots, Collingwood never returned to his family in Morpeth after the Battle of Trafalgar. He died at sea near Menorca in 1810 and was later buried in St. Paul's Cathedral beside Nelson.

"See how that noble fellow Collingwood takes his ship into action"

Admiral Lord Nelson during the Battle of Trafalgar

The Monument

Erected by public subscription in 1845, this Grade II* Listed monument was sculpted in marble and sandstone by John Graham Lough and stands on top of a pedestal designed by well-known, local architect John Dobson. The position of the monument marks Collingwood's family connection with North Shields (Members of his family lived close by at Chirton, North Shields.) and allows the statue to be seen from the sea and the river. The four cannons flanking the steps came from the flagship Royal Sovereign and were added in 1848.

Heroes and Shipwrecks

The Black Middens

In late November 1864, during three days of blizzards and storms, the Black Middens claimed five ships and 34 lives. The passenger steamer Stanley and the schooner Friendship were two of these ships and accounted for 32 of the lives lost.

Usually covered at high tide, the Black Middens rocks have been responsible for many shipwrecks and over the years have caused the death of hundreds of mariners within just a few yards of safety.

In response to the tragic events of November 1864 a meeting was held on 5th December 1864, in North Shields Town Hall. The meeting resolved that a body of men be formed, to be trained up ready to assist the Coastguard whenever the need arose in the saving of life from shipwreck. Over 140 men immediately volunteered and the Tynemouth Volunteer Life Brigade was born.

Two Lifeboat Houses

There used to be two lifeboat stations within a few hundred metres of each other. This allowed a lifeboat to be launched in pretty much any weather. Tynemouth No. 1 was sited at Prior's Haven. It was opened in 1862 and closed in 1905. Tynemouth No. 2 was sited just a few metres from the Black Middens. It opened in 1865 and closed in 1905.

Tynemouth Volunteer Life Brigade

On 8th February, 1870, the brigantine Susannah came ashore on the rocks at the Black Middens. Four of the crew of six were saved by the Brigade and this was the first successful rescue effort by the Tynemouth Volunteer Life Brigade (TVLB).

There to assist the Coastguard, the TVLB has evolved into a multi-disciplined search and rescue team. Today, they continue to provide coastal search and rescue on beaches, rocks and cliffs for H.M. Coastguard. The Brigade is on call 24 hours a day, every day of the year, to HM Coastguard and is also available to the North East Ambulance Service, Northumbria Police, Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service, and RAF 202 Squadron to assist in their search and rescue and casualty transfer work.

The Tynemouth Watch House (1886-1887) is Grade II Listed and is now accredited as a national museum. It is home to a range of artefacts, archives and relics from ill-fated ships that have been shipwrecked on the coast.

Tynemouth Pier and Lighthouse

Before the construction of the piers, the mouth of the Tyne was exposed to the full force of the sea with vessels frequently being wrecked.

Designed by James Walker, President of the Institution of Civil Engineers (1835-1845) the foundation stones were laid in 1854 with final completion in 1895. In 1897 the pier was breached and reconstruction completed in 1909. The construction of the pier has been recorded as one of the most difficult undertakings of its kind carried out in this country.

Priors, Kings and Soldiers

A Place Fit for Kings

The strategic and dramatic setting of Tynemouth Priory and Castle provides the backdrop to a long and colourful history. Known by the Saxons as Benebal Crag, the history of Tynemouth and its' Priory is one of constant change. It was sacked by the Danes in 800 and repeatedly during the 9th century. The Priory was finally destroyed in 875 and the Vikings used Tynemouth as their base to sack the surrounding area.

The Earl of Northumberland re-founded the religious house here in 1085 with a colony of Benedictine monks from St Albans Abbey. Building on the great Norman church began in 1090, and the whole monastery was substantially completed by the end of the 13th century.

Having to maintain a priory, providing suitable accommodation and hospitality for many royal parties, was always a costly business but at Tynemouth Priory the priors were also responsible for the upkeep of the castle and the garrison. The wealth they accumulated from their coal industries was much needed.

Known to be one of the largest fortified areas in England, this site was retained by Henry VIII as a royal castle after the dissolution of Tynemouth Priory in 1539.

A lighthouse also stood on this prominent headland before the lighthouse on Tynemouth pier took over the role of protecting ships from the headland and guiding them in to the mouth of the Tyne.

Three Kings

Three kings were buried within Tynemouth Priory:

Oswin, King of Deira was murdered in 651 by the soldiers of King Oswiu of Bernicia. He became St. Oswin and his burial place a shrine visited by pilgrims.

Osred, King of Northumbria from 789 to 790 and then deposed, was murdered in 792.

Malcolm III of Scotland invaded England and was killed by Arkil Morel, nephew of Robert de Mowbray and Steward of Bamburgh Castle, at the Battle of Alnwick after being ambushed by Robert de Mowbray in 1093. His body is since believed to have been moved back to Dunfermline.

Three crowns still adorn the North Tyneside coat of arms.

Coastal Gun Batteries

In 1545, the Spanish Battery was first fortified to protect King Henry VIII's fleet as it assembled before invading Scotland. The name is said to derive from the Spanish mercenaries who were the first to be garrisoned there. By 1905 the majority of guns had been removed. The guns were also used to muster the life brigade with two shots signifying a ship ashore on the north side of the harbour, three, the south side.

Originating in the early 1880s the Tyne Electrical Engineers based at Clifford's Fort, on Fish Quay, were a specialist unit responsible for defending the port with submarine mines and

searchlights. It became a full-fledged unit of the Royal Engineers and in World War One the unit pioneered the use of mobile searchlights. They operated a searchlight battery from Spanish Battery.

Since 1584, artillery has been mounted on the Tynemouth Castle headland, to defend the Tyne against naval attack. During the 18th and early 19th centuries, threats such as Napoleon's navy meant that the walls of Tynemouth Castle were adapted for coastal gun batteries that could better defend the mouth of the Tyne and the North England's main outlet for iron, coal, shipbuilding and the manufacture of armaments.

The Tynemouth batteries were updated and operational during the First and Second World Wars. The army remained in residence at the castle until 1960 at which time much of the modern military evidence was removed. A coastguard station was built in 1980.

In and Around Tynemouth

Tynemouth encapsulates Great Britain's seaside charm, boasting golden sandy beaches as well as a range of cultural attractions for everyone. Tynemouth Longsands is a popular place to enjoy the sun, take a relaxing walk and take part in surfing or other water sports which are increasingly popular activities all year round. Complementing the beach, Tynemouth village has an intriguing mix of shops as well as restaurants, wine bars and superb village pubs and Green Ginger Arcade, set in a converted church, with a range of speciality shops.

Tynemouth Metro Station is an impressive Grade II* Listed building and its restoration was the final project in the Conservation Area. The station hosts weekend markets and is a popular cultural venue. Blue plaques recognise Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Italian patriot who visited Tynemouth in 1854 and the 19th Century writer Harriet Martineau who stayed at 57 Front Street.

Within a short and scenic walk up the seafront along the pedestrian friendly promenade are a number of family attractions. The view from Seabanks looking back towards Tynemouth Priory and Castle with King Edward's Bay nestling below is breathtaking. Look out for ships of all shapes and sizes as they make their approach to or begin their voyage between the piers. The majestic sweep of Tynemouth Longsands soon comes into view with St. George's Church dominating the horizon above the north end of the beach.

Tynemouth Park is a popular place with visitors and is a hive of activity all year round with a boating lake, mini golf course and a café. Opposite the park is Blue Reef Aquarium, home to an amazing and diverse range of sea life with hundreds of exhibits on display including seahorses, sharks, stingrays and otters.

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Parks, Gardens, Lakes and Aquarium

Tynemouth Plaza

Tynemouth Aquarium and Winter Garden or Tynemouth Plaza was built between 1877 and 1878 at a cost of £82,000. It was a dominant feature of the coast and provided over a century of fun and entertainment until it was destroyed by fire on 10th February 1996.

The top floor consisted of a glazed roof with winter gardens. The second floor housed a marine aquarium. The basement gave access to Tynemouth Longsands whilst the towers contained storage space, offices and water to flood the building in case of fire.

One of the many successful events in the life of the Tynemouth Aquarium and Winter Garden was the North East Coast Exhibition of Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering held in September 1882. The exhibition gathered examples of state-of-the-art maritime technologies. The response was so great that every corner of the building, and its skating rink, was filled. Exhibits ranged from a boiler scale and boxes of preserved fish to the coble used by Grace Darling in the rescue of the Forfarshire.

After only a few years of operation the building was repossessed and sold for a fraction of the build cost to a Newcastle-based company who eventually renamed it the Palace Theatre and then the Tynemouth Plaza.

Tynemouth Plaza was home to the Palace Theatre in the 1920s, the Gala Land Ballroom from 1933, the Repertory Theatre and later housed a night club and restaurant. A rollerskating area became a skateboard arena in the 1970s and part of the building was occupied as an amusement arcade.

During the Second World War the open air skating rink at the back was also used for ballroom dancing on summer nights. This was to help to entertain those who had 'holidays at home' - a war time effort to boost morale and keep people occupied. The park tennis courts and Front Street were also used in this way.

Tynemouth Park and Boating Lake

In 1893 Tynemouth Park and Boating Lake was opened on land owned by the Duke of Northumberland and leased by Tynemouth Council. With a large pond, three bowling greens and ornamental gardens with a bandstand, the opening of Tynemouth Park attracted thousands of people including a many model boat enthusiasts.

In the summer of 1893 an exhibition of model yachts was held in the Palace and Winter Garden's aquarium. Tynemouth Model Boat Club was formed, and one of the first buildings planned for Tynemouth Park was their boat house.

Tynemouth Model Boat Club

The Club's boathouse was built at a cost of £102 and 12s. It was doubled to its present size during the 1930s. One of the club's most influential supporters was the Duke of Northumberland. The Duke's agent helped the Club secure longer hours on the pond in 1908, seeing off the threatened dominance of rowing boats.

Model Boats and Regattas

Early model boats were mostly German-built, tinplate boats. British-made boats grew in popularity in the early 20th century. Well known manufacturers included Meccano of Liverpool and Bassett-Lowke of Northampton. They ranged from mini petrol and diesel engines to steam and sail.

Radio control technology transformed the sport in the 1950s and combined with plastic manufacture the sport became affordable and more widely popular. Model boats are raced against each other at regattas. Early competitions involved straight running contests with powered boats set off one by one seeking to accurately reach a target. Modern competitions include navigating around a course set out with a series of hazards.

Standing Tall at the Coast

St. George's Church

The foundation stone for St. George's Church was laid by the 6th Duke of Northumberland in 1882 and construction was completed in December 1884. St George's Church is a spectacular, Grade I Listed, Victorian church designed by renowned architect, John Loughborough Pearson, architect of Truro Cathedral.

St. George's is a perfectly proportioned, French Gothic building and is finished with great attention to detail. The church has some outstanding architectural features including stone vaulted ceilings and stained glass windows by Kempe and Evetts. The tower and spire rise to 180 feet high providing a landmark visual presence on the coast.

Listed Grade I the church is a local and regional icon, a jewel in our heritage and a beacon to local people, seafarers and travellers alike.

Visitors are welcome. The church is normally open during daylight hours.

The Best Church Architect of the Day

John Loughborough Pearson (1817 - 1897), architect of St George's, was highly respected in his field. Pearson's philosophy for all his church architecture was that it should be capable of arousing a sense of awe, of the mystery and majesty of divine worship. On the recommendation of the Council of the Royal Institute of British Architects, Queen Victoria awarded the Royal Gold Medal for outstanding architectural merit, to Pearson, in 1880.

His work reflects the Gothic Revival of the period with vaulted ceilings, magnificent columns and arches featuring in his churches alongside cathedral-like dimensions. Truro Cathedral is considered Pearson's masterpiece. Consecrated in November 1887 the Cathedral was the first British cathedral erected on a new site since the 16th century.

Pearson died on 11th December 1897 and was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey.

Majestic Music

St George's Church organ, by Thomas Christopher Lewis of London, is considered to be one of the best in the country. Lewis was one of the most important organ builders working in the second half of the 19th century. The organ was transported by sea from London and installed in December 1884. It is one of only a few Lewis organs nationally that have not been significantly altered.

Historic Cullercoats

Cullercoats developed after 1539 and until the late 19th Century was a small village with interests in salt making, coal export, fishing and smuggling.

Cullercoats is also known for forming the second Volunteer Life Brigade in the country, in 1865, shortly after Tynemouth. Latterly, Cullercoats has been appreciated as an artist's colony, a fashionable seaside village and is noted for its contributions in the pioneering of science and technology.

Smugglers in Cullercoats

In the early 19th century Cullercoats was known for smuggling due to the myriad of bays and the village's relative isolation. Thomas Armstrong, a Customs Officer who was not above indulging in a little smuggling himself, was granted land in 1768. He is said to have built Cliff House on this land and it is believed that there is a smuggler's tunnel running from it.

Smuggling became less common when the railway reached the coast in the 1840s.

Salt, Coal and Fish

With high demand for the world's most common food preservative, salt, and with a new harbour and pier in place by 1682, Cullercoats flourished. Additional salt pans, used to dry the salt from the sea-water, were erected around the bay. By 1690, with the addition of a waggonway from the coal workings inland to the pier at Cullercoats the salt and coal trade continued to flourish with a resulting increase in population. Cullercoats Bay was a hive of activity and by July 1690 the village had an identity of its own, independent of Tynemouth and North Shields.

For a time, Cullercoats was one of the busiest ports on the North East Coast. However, by 1710 coal pits were in difficulty, the pier had been severely damaged, the waggonway was rotting and by 1726 the remaining salt pans had moved to Blyth.

Fishing became predominant, with Cullercoats described as the best fish market in the North of England. Late in the nineteenth century two piers were built at the entrance to the harbour to provide shelter for over 150 cobs. Two beacons, which are still visible on Beverley Terrace, were used to guide boats in to the bay at night time. When the beacons lined up, it was safe to turn into the harbour.

In 1882 the railway line was rerouted and a new station was opened at its current location on Station Road. At Cullercoats this resulted in a dramatic population growth. It was still predominantly a fishing village but was starting to become a commuter village and tourist attraction with Salt Water Baths and a gorgeous beach.

Life Saving at Cullercoats

Cullercoats Volunteer Life Brigade (VLB) was formed in 1865. It was the second to be formed in the country, following just months after Tynemouth Volunteer Life Brigade (VLB). Like Tynemouth VLB they specialised in ship-to-shore rescue.

The Watch House was their headquarters and the present day Rocket Garage was the Life Saving Apparatus House.

For over 150 years Cullercoats has had a RNLI lifeboat station and the lifeboat crews have been presented with numerous awards for gallantry. The station has also seen tragedy with a number of crew losing their lives saving others at sea. The RNLI continues to operate a lifeboat service from Cullercoats.

Science and Technology Dove Marine Laboratory

A marine laboratory was established in Cullercoats Bay in 1897 when The North Sea Fisheries Committee and Armstrong College, Newcastle, worked together to study the development and improvement of local fishing. The building is still in use to this day for important environmental marine research.

A Dip and a Dive

Table Rocks Bathing Pool, Brown's Bay

Table Rocks was a unique, outdoor, tidal swimming pool created from a natural inlet in the rock formations. The natural pool was formally developed as a bathing pool in 1894 by Mr. W. Scott. In 1896 he extended its length to 70 feet and after Whitley and Monkseaton Urban District Council took over control of the pool it was extended again around 1908.

Formed in 1910, The Whitley and Monkseaton Bathing Club made good use of the pool. They had a winkle motif adorning their official red and black swimming costumes. It is believed that later in the club's history each member was given a gold-plated winkle shell and that the custom of local ladies and gentlemen showing each other their winkles came from this.

At its peak the pool had separate changing facilities installed for the ladies and gents which are believed to have existed until the 1950s. The pool is still visible today at low tide although it is no longer in use.

Other opportunities for outdoor swimming were offered along the coast with the introduction of the Tynemouth Outdoor Swimming Pool in 1925 alongside the Panama Swimming Club who were formed in the early 1900s and are still based at The Links, Whitley Bay.

The 90 Fathom Dyke

The 90 Fathom Dyke is a major crack in the Earth's crust. Geologists don't know how far it goes down but it is a weak point created when 400 million years ago an ancient version of North America hit an ancient version of Europe. The fault appears around here, running through Cullercoats Bay and emerging just south of smuggler's cave at the northern end of Longsands and displaces the coal seams which can be seen in the cliffs.

The Wreck of the Zephyros

On 26th February 1947 the Greek steamship Zephyros ran aground at Brown's Point, between Cullercoats Bay and Brown's Bay, close to Cullercoats Radio Station. There were no fatalities. Parts of the wreck can still be seen at low tide and are often visited by divers alongside the

other two wrecks in the bay, of the Butetown and the Astley. Tynemouth Volunteer Life Brigade seized the opportunity to use the wreck of the Zephyros for realistic training exercises.

Cullercoats Radio Station - Call Sign "GCC" - Wireless Telegraphy Station

Built in 1906, Cullercoats Radio Station at Brown's Point, just south of here, marks the first phase of wireless telegraphy's major contribution towards the twentieth century's scientific technical revolution. Cullercoats served as a maritime radio receiving station listening for maritime distress signals on the 500 kHz Morse Code band. It was closed with other similar stations after the Coastguard Agency no longer required maritime radio services to maintain 500 kHz distress watch.

In and Around Whitley Bay

The seaside resort of Whitley Bay has a history dating back to the 12th Century and has been popular with visitors since Victorian times when the railway opened up the coast to visitors from nearby Newcastle upon Tyne.

Whitley Bay Metro Station, an impressive Grade II Listed building, is a short walk up the Esplanade and Station Road. Located just outside on Station Road is a rare K4 telephone box/post office kiosk. Now Grade II listed, the kiosks were unpopular and withdrawn from service but this one somehow remained. The town centre is nearby and is reached by turning right along Whitley Road at the top of Esplanade.

There are a number of independent shops on Whitley Road and Park View selling fresh local produce, fashion and gifts. You will also find a fine choice of places to enjoy a coffee and a cake or a pub meal. Park View Shopping Centre has many familiar high street names as well as some specialist retailers. The town also has a number of hotels and guest houses.

North of here is Whitley Park which features a play site and water park and is only a two minute walk from the seafront. The nearby Playhouse Whitley Bay is a state-of-the-art 630 seat auditorium which has regular performances from top national and international names in music, comedy, dance and drama. It also hosts local productions as well as children's shows including pantomimes.

The Links is an open green space on the seafront popular for walking, ball games and kite flying. The Grade II Listed Spanish City Dome building is one of the iconic images of Whitley Bay and opened in 1910 as a theatre, restaurant, roof garden and promenade.

Spanish City

A Miniature Earl's Court - Toreadors and Fairgrounds

Charles Elderton, of Hebburn Theatre Royal, first brought his Toreadors concert party to Whitley Bay in 1907. The audience was protected from the elements by awnings painted to look like a Spanish village. Proving extremely popular it returned each summer and Elderton saw that there was demand for more permanent amusements and dance halls. Elderton began Whitley Amusements Ltd and the company steadily built up a fairground inside the painted fences.

The Original Spanish City

The original Spanish City Fairground opened on 30th May 1908. Thousands gathered outside the gates waiting for the fairground to open and to pay their 2d entrance fee. In 1909, the Whitley Pleasure Gardens Company Ltd took over and began work to develop the Spanish City site into large pleasure gardens.

The iconic Dome of the Spanish City, designed by Newcastle architects Cackett & Burns-Dick, measured 73 feet in height with a 52 feet diameter, second only in size to the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral. The complex which included a promenade, the Dome, a 1400-seat theatre, restaurant, cafes, kiosks and a roof garden was opened on 14th May, 1910.

Until 1913 new fairground rides were added and early reports mention 11,000 people passing through in one day.

The Blackpool of the North East

By the 1920s Whitley Bay was frequently advertised as the Blackpool of the North East. The theatre had become the Empress Ballroom with space for 750 dancers. Like Blackpool it was felt that the complex needed a Winter Garden as an extra attraction. The first floor Empress Rotunda was converted in to the Winter Garden and opened in 1935 as a place where good music could be heard uninterrupted by weather conditions.

During the Second World War Spanish City closed down but, as one of the most iconic features on the north east coast, steps were taken to camouflage it from aerial attack. The Rotunda was used to accommodate soldiers whilst The Empress was used as their dining hall.

After the war and into the 1950s dancing continued at The Empress. Their reputation as a dance venue grew, attracting top-line dance bands and orchestras.

The ballroom became a bingo hall in 1961 and is still used for this purpose today. Many changes of use occurred between the 60s and 1999 but all focused on current, popular seaside entertainment. In the 1990s the Rotunda's ground-floor arcade was refurbished and a Lazer Quest facility installed in the first floor nightclub space. A BMX track was installed in the Rotunda.

The Spanish City Amusement Park was immortalised in the 1981 Dire Straits song Tunnel of Love but its demolition was announced in 1999. North Tyneside Council bought the Dome buildings in 2001 and between 2008 and 2010 significant structural and restoration works were carried out to bring the building back to its former glory.

Whitley Bay Links

Originally known as Whitley, meaning white lea or pastureland, by the early 12th century the area was owned by the Prior of Tynemouth.

Following the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the Priory lands and estate were enclosed and divided up, except for the area now known as Whitley Links, which to this day remains as open land. The area is subject to a covenant restricting construction on the land and outlining limits on its use. For a period of time in the 19th century the northern end of The Links was used as a soldier's camp and firing range but by the late 19th and early 20th centuries Whitley Bay had emerged as a bustling seaside holiday resort.

On 10th October 1890 The Links golf course opened. The area of land now known as The Links takes its name from the original 9-hole course which was situated on this narrow strip of land along the coast, with the Clubhouse opposite Spanish City. The course moved on several occasions finding its current venue in 1954.

Whitley Bay's tourist draw was immense through the Spanish City fairground, ballroom dancing, theatre and other amusements, quality and cost-effective accommodation including the Canvas Town tented accommodation, typical seaside shops, excellent transport links, an extremely long and picturesque golden-sandy beach, promenade, beachside cafes such as Panama House and the Rendezvous Cafe, rentable beach huts, regular carnivals along the promenade and The Links, The Flower Show on the links, as well as the picturesque St. Mary's Lighthouse.

Lovely Nelly - 1st January 1861

The brig, Lovely Nelly, still lies three quarters of a mile from the shore off Whitley Sands, opposite Brier Dene, a former toll-bar on the then turnpike road. The ship was laden with coal and driven by a snowstorm in towards the coast. The lifeboat had to be towed three miles along the coast to reach the scene, as the storm prevented it being launched at Cullercoats. One version of the event says that the boat had been hauled by women, but a newspaper report at the time records that it was pulled by horses. All the crew were saved except for the little cabin boy, Tommy, who was too frightened to jump from the rigging.

The Whitley Large Ox

Thomas Bewick, a natural history artist and engraver, is famous for his illustrated History of British Birds and his illustration of Aesop's Fables. He was based in workshops at Amen Corner in Newcastle and worked in partnership with Ralph Beilby.

During the 1780s a massive ox, that grazed around Whitley Bay links, grew to a staggering height of 5ft 9ins at its shoulders and weighed a massive 216 stones. It became famous amongst locals and Thomas Bewick created a copperplate etching and drawings of the large ox. The engraving was published in April, 1789.

Truly a local legend, the Whitley Large Ox was so big and cumbersome that when it was due for slaughter, it created a massive public spectacle. So much so, that it took seven days to walk it the ten miles or so to Newcastle, through sizeable crowds.

Panama Gardens, House and Swimming Club

Panama House operated as a cafe on the promenade from 1895. Built for Stephen Fry it is said that he was a senior diver during the building of the Panama Canal and that this may have been how the cafe got its name. Some believe that The Panama House café was constructed from the deckhouse of the wrecked ship, SS Panama, and hence how it got its name, however there is no evidence of this shipwreck nearby. Regardless, the quirky boat-themed café and its owner, Stephen, were very much part of the tourist scene in the early 1900s. People would flock to Panama House to listen to his tales until he passed away in 1912.

At the beginning of 1933 plans were accepted for laying out Panama Dip between the Panama House and Blyth Road. A bandstand was part of this design and Whitley Bay's orchestra played there in the morning and evening. Panama Dip frequently had entertainment with folk dancers from all over the world. In 1945 the Panama House Café was destroyed by fire. It was never rebuilt. In later years a pool and fountain were built beside Panama Gardens to commemorate the Civil Defence of the Second World War.

For the hardiest of souls the Panama Swimming Club, based on the Whitley Bay promenade and built in the 1950s, provides a unique base for sea-swimming. Members dip in the North Sea on a weekly basis and on New Year's Day they enter the North Sea undeterred by the weather. Panama Swimming Club was formed in the early 1900s.

Smugglers and Shipwrecks

St Mary's Island

The island's history is rich and diverse. The monks of Tynemouth Priory, established in the 7th century, once used the island as a burial ground. After the Norman invasion of 1066, around 1090, the Priory built and maintained a chapel, dedicated to St. Helen. In an additional storey of the tower in the chapel a light was burned to warn sailors of the rocks. These lights were often called St. Mary's Lights, hence possibly the island's name. The island was also previously known as Bates Island after its owner, Thomas Bates, a local mine owner and surveyor of Northumberland for Queen Elizabeth I. Murphy's Column stands on the island and acted as an orientation point as well as a calibration point for the coastal gun batteries down at Tynemouth.

Murder, Disease and Smuggling

In 1722, Anthony Mitchell, a Customs surveyor was found dead near the island. Smugglers who ran brandy using the deep smugglers creek on the north side of the island may have murdered him. It is said they hid their booty in haystacks along the links.

In 1799 a troop of Russian soldiers on their way to fight in the Napoleonic wars contracted cholera and were quarantined on the island. Few survived and those that died were buried alongside the monk's grave stones.

The Square and Compass

George Ewen, a salmon fisherman from Aberdeen, built a small cottage on the island in 1855 to use as a base during the salmon run. In 1860 the salmon fishing laws became more restrictive and Ewen had to supplement his income. By 1862 he had opened an inn called The

Freemasons Arms, known locally as The Square and Compass. Only a few years after opening Ewen fell out with Joseph Patterson a nearby farmer. A feud broke out until Lord Hastings, the owner of the island, stepped in to settle the matter and had Ewen evicted. When they refused to move they had to be forced out by bailiffs. The new tenant, John Crisp, moved in on 10th December 1895 with a licence to run a temperance hotel. The Crisp family has lived there ever since.

Making a Pig's Ear of It

The bailiffs sent to evict Ewen tried to evict a pig from the house but it stubbornly resisted running them amuck for six hours. It took the whole force to get him in a cart and take him to the mainland.

The Last Building

St. Mary's island was a prime point for a lighthouse with over 300 shipwrecks happening between Tynemouth and Blyth over many decades. The light was to replace a 200 year old one at Tynemouth Priory after it was realised that the headland at Tynemouth needed to be used as a gun emplacement to protect the River Tyne. Work began in 1896 and on 31st August 1898 the lighthouse was first lit by Miss Miller, the builder's daughter.

During the Second World War, Mr. Crisp, the tenant of the cottage was employed by the War Office as a coastguard and had to live on the island all year round. The lighthouse was also camouflaged as it was so conspicuous.

The lighthouse became electrified in 1977 and automated in 1982. It was one of the last to be modernised. In 1984 it was decommissioned, no longer being needed due to modern navigational techniques. North Tyneside Council bought the lighthouse on behalf of the local community.