

NORTH TYNESIDE COUNCIL

ROBERT ATKINSON WESTALL

The acclaimed children's author was
born here on 7th October 1929.
He wrote over 40 books and received
a number of literary awards.
Some of his books used a local
setting including
'The Machine Gunners'.
He died at Northwich, Cheshire
on 15th April 1993.

The Robert Westall Walk



North Tyneside Council

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Reading the books of local born writer Robert Westall is like taking a virtual journey through the streets, sights, smells and sounds of North Shields and Tynemouth as they were more than half a century ago. Born in North Shields in 1929, Robert Westall found fame as a writer of books such as, The Machine Gunners, Fathom Five, The Promise, The Kingdom by the Sea and Falling Into Glory. Whilst primarily written for children, Robert Westall's books also reached out to an adult audience. Much has changed in North Shields since Robert Westall's formative years, but the essence of the area remains. This walk takes you on a journey to many of the places which inspired Robert Westall and, as you step out along the streets which follow the river down to the sea at Tynemouth, you will feel the spirits of his characters tugging at your sleeve. Fiction will merge with fact.

Essential Robert Westall Reading

Novels Published:

The Machine Gunners : 1975 - Carnegie Medal The Watch House : 1977 - Fathom Five : 1979

The Scarecrows : 1981 - Carnegie Medal Blitzcat : 1989 - Smarties Prize The Promise : 1990

The Kingdom by the Sea : 1990 - The Guardian Award Falling Into Glory : 1993 - A Time of Fire : 1994

The Night Mare : 1995 - Collections Antique Dust: Ghost Stories : 1976

The Haunting of Chas. McGill and Other Stories : 1983 - Echoes of War : 1989 - The Call and Other Stories : 1989

Non-Fiction Children of The Blitz: Memories from Wartime Childhood : 1985

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Children's author was
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He wrote many books and received
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The Machine Gunners:
The Berwick Arms, Cheshire
in April 1993.

- 1 Not much more than a stone's throw from North Shields Metro Station Vicarage Street points downhill towards the River Tyne. You can almost feel its closeness. It was here, at number 7, an unpretentious Tyneside terraced flat, that Robert Westall lived for the first 5 years of his life, before moving little more than a mile away to 18 Balkwell Green. The blue plaque attached to the house marks the start of this walk. The son of Robert Atkinson Westall and his wife Maggie, Robert used his parents as the models for the McGills in *The Machine Gunners* and *Fathom Five*, dedicating the original hardback version of *The Machine Gunners* to "my mother and father who were the mother and father of the book". At the bottom of the street, head left along the opposite side of Waterville Road before crossing into Trinity Terrace and down past the Berwick Arms public house. Writing in the *Shields Weekly News* in 1964, Robert Westall, a firm admirer of the building's unusual tile work, called for the preservation of the public house. As you turn into Addison Street note the old brick building on the opposite corner which was once the canteen for the nearby Smith's Dock. In *Fathom Five*, Chas. McGill is threatened with a life clerking for Smith's Dock if he gets a girl "into trouble" and misses going to college as a consequence.

- 7 Continue to the end of the promenade and follow the tarmac footpath uphill, turning left at the top to reach the white, yellow and blue wooden building. Built in 1887, this is the headquarters and museum of the Tynemouth Volunteer Life Brigade and a faithful description of the museum is set out in *The Watch House*. The old Coastguard Station, home of Sonny's grandparents in *A Time of Fire*, is located at this place and much of the book's action revolves around the building. Rejoin the tarmac path and continue downhill to the bridge over the old pier railway line. It was here, in *The Watch House*, that Timmo and Annie hid from Scobie Hague and the police in their attempt to bury Hague's skull. On your left is the small cove of Prior's Haven where, in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, Harry Baguley discovers the abandoned dog Don and then lives under an upturned boat before heading north to Lindisfarne. In *A Time of Fire*, Sonny describes a lone boy and dog departing from the beach; a reference to Harry and Don embarking on their journey north. To the left of the cove is Tynemouth Pier, or the north pier, and in *The Promise* Bob takes Valerie along this pier on her last walk. In *The Kingdom by the Sea*, Harry hides from an air raid in the arches part way along the pier, whilst Annie Melton is haunted there in *The Watch House*.
- 8 On Pen Bal Crag, high above the pier, stands Tynemouth Castle and Priory. A stone in the Priory graveyard marks the resting place of Alexander Rollo, holder of the lamp at Sir John Moore's funeral in the Peninsula Wars and in *The Watch House*, Annie is fascinated by this grave. Along with Timmo Jones, she tries to bury Scobie Hague's skull there. In *A Time of Fire*, Granda points out the grave to Sonny and muses over Rollo's long life. The Lady Chapel in the Priory grounds is where Bob Bickerstaffe hides from Councillor Hilda Burridge, a result of which Valerie extracts "the Promise" from him. Follow the road up past the Castle and on reaching the top you will be facing the Gibraltar Rock public house, which is mentioned in *Falling Into Glory*. The Clock Tower and Fountain on the edge of the pavement was presented to Tynemouth Village in 1861 and is referred to in *The Watch House* and *The Kingdom by the Sea*. Turn left into Front Street and within 50 metres you will see the set-back church of Our Lady and St. Oswin, the junior priest of which, Father da Souza, plays a crucial role at the climax of *The Watch House*. On the other side of the street Timothy Duff Court stands on the site of the old Carlton Cinema. The cinema appeared in a number of Robert Westall's books, most notably *Falling Into Glory* when Robbie takes Joyce Adamson there. Just beyond the Timothy Duff Court is Marshall's Fish & Chip Shop and as far as Harry Baguley was concerned in *The Kingdom by the Sea* it had "always" been there. Here, half way down Front Street, your journey comes to an end. Perhaps there is just a little time to drop into Tynemouth Branch Library and a chance to renew your acquaintance with the characters of Robert Westall's fascinating books.



Has this "alwys" been there?

Original Robert Westall Trail: Eric Hollerton - 1996

Revisited and Revised: Geoff Holland - 2005

Photographs: Geoff Holland

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2 Immediately after the old canteen building turn right through the small passageway into Tennyson Terrace, an address (together with its variant Tennyson Street) utilised by Robert Westall in a number of his books. In *Falling Into Glory* it was the home of Emma Harris whilst in *The Night Mare* the Leggetts lived at Back Tennyson Street. In actual fact, Robert's grandfather, Robert Dodds Westall, lived in Tennyson Terrace in the early years of the 20th century and he is a major character of the short story *The Making of Me* in the collection *Echoes of War*. Proceed straight ahead and once halfway along Tennyson Terrace, now an area of new housing, make a slight diversion to your right for a view down to the river. The adjacent steps, which you should take as far as the viewing balcony, ultimately lead to the site of the former Dukes Street, part of the "Low Street" referred to in *Fathom Five* and other books. Back in Tennyson Terrace, continue as far as the path between numbers 16 and 18 and head across the footbridge which spans the deep cutting of Borough Road as it tumbles towards the New Quay and the river. In *The Promise* Bob Bickerstaffe has to help Valerie Monkton across this bridge after one of their walks. To the left towards the bottom of the hill are the scant remains of St. Peter's Church, known locally as the Sailor's Church, which moved many years ago to Balkwell Green near to Robert Westall's home. It was, in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, that Harry Baguley claimed allegiance to St. Peter's, Balkwell.

3 Over the bridge and again on terra firma pause by the wall at the corner of Waldo Street and Yeoman Street. From here, it is just possible to catch sight of the New Quay where, since the 14th century, ferries have made the short journey to South Shields on the opposite bank of the River Tyne. The "fat old ferry" which was machine-gunned in *The Promise* was the old horse and cart ferry "Northumbrian", long since taken out of service. The ground floor of the old Sailor's Home, on the corner of Borough Road, appears in *Fathom Five* in the guise of the "Ministry of Ag & Fish". The building has now been tastefully converted into flats. Directly below the wall is Clive Street, the narrow main road of 18th century North Shields and also part of Robert Westall's fictitious "Low Street". When Robert was growing up in North Shields this was a disreputable area and in his 1964 *Shields Weekly News* article he noted that "... nearly every male member of my family have come near drowning here". In *The Promise*, Bob brings Valerie on this high walk on one of their secret trips, commenting that it is safer than taking her through the "Low Street". He noted that you could see everything that went on below "as though from the gallery of a theatre". Many years ago Clive Street was home to a number of Greek shipping chandlers, similar to Xenophon Kallonas, the alleged spy in *Fathom Five*.



The "Low Street" and "The Ministry of Ag . and Fish"

4 Walk along Yeoman Street, passing on the corner of Lower Rudyerd Street, the old Town Mission, and continue into Little Bedford Street, ignoring the first flight of stairs on your right. Descend the next flight, Tiger Stairs, named after the Tiger Inn which once stood at the foot of the stairs, crossing the steep gradient of Bedford Street into Union Street. Continue up the slope of Union Street with the Magnesia Bank public house to your left. Nearby, the Howard Hall cinema once stood, an establishment referred to in *The Night Mare* as a "fleapit" and the only picture house in town. On reaching Howard Street turn right and head for the railings high above the river. From here, next to Maritime Chambers once the home of the Stag Line and before that the Tynemouth Literary and Philosophical Society's library, there are extensive views of the river. Below, slightly to the right and now surrounded by new housing, is the Haddock Shop Dock where trawlers and lightships were serviced. This was mentioned in *The Promise*. To the left, on Custom House Quay, is the Prince of Wales public house where a number of "wooden dolly" figureheads have stood since the early part of the 19th century. The people of the "Low Street" were attached to these figureheads despite their habit of cutting off pieces for luck, a practice which was noted in *Fathom Five*. Leaving Maritime Chambers behind, walk along the pavement adjacent to the grass bank which falls away to your right and eventually to the "Low Street". The ice factory that delighted Valerie in *The Promise* stood to the right of the tall blue building on Western Quay, the current ice making plant.

5 To your left is Linskill Street, the address of Robert Westall's grandfather at the time of his marriage in 1897, although the original properties have long since been demolished. It is interesting to note that in the same year a 7 year old Arthur Stanley Jefferson, better known as Stan Laurel, was just beginning his four North Shields years in the very next street, Dockwray Square. In *The Machine Gunners* fabric from the barrage balloon which was tethered in the south west corner of the square was used as roofing material for the camp. Opposite the square stands the High Light, a stunning white tower, and it was here, in *The Promise*, that Bob Bickerstaffe brought Valerie for her very last walk. Slightly further along, on the other side of the road, stands the old High Light, built by Trinity House in 1727, and marking the start of the elegant terrace known as Trinity Buildings. From here there are splendid views of the Fish Quay which is featured in *Fathom Five*, *The Promise* and *The Watch House*. Continue as far as the small car park attached to the Wooden Doll public house, behind which lies the area known as Pow Dene, first developed as a tannery in 1766. Nearby stood the North Shields Fish Oil & Guano Works, whose choking smell plagued the town well into the 1960's, and which was used by Robbie and Emma, in *Falling Into Glory*, as their trysting place until they were surprised by William Wilson.

The Fish Quay from Trinity Buildings



5 Head forwards along Tynemouth Road for half a mile until you reach the first set of traffic lights. Turn left into Upper Norfolk Street and on reaching Northumberland Square cut diagonally across the central park area towards the large 1960's Central Library building. Once at the corner of the building you will be standing next to the Wooden Dolly statue which faces down Howard Street towards the River Tyne. This 1958 life size sculpting of a fisherwoman carrying a basket and wearing traditional shawl and full skirts is carved from wood and is painted brown. It stands as a tribute to the part women played in the economic life of the area. Within the square itself there are some fine Georgian houses, now all converted to offices. Follow Howard Street until you reach the small square in front of the beautiful Maritime Chambers (10) with superb views over the River Tyne. Completed in 1807, this building originally housed the Tynemouth Literary and Philosophical Society's library before becoming the headquarters of the family run Stag Line shipping company. The company's stag emblem adorns the gable wall of the building, overlooking the river, and when erected replaced the town's official clock. Within the square there is a fine memorial, made from an old ship's anchor, to all those lost at sea. With your back to Maritime Chambers walk along the pavement adjacent to the top of the grass bank which falls away steeply to your right. Before long you will reach the modern buildings of Dockwray Square set around a laid out park area in the centre of which sits Robert Olley's wonderful sculpting of Stan Laurel, one of North Shields' famous sons. Born Arthur Stanley Jefferson in Ulverston in 1890, Stan moved to North Shields in 1897 when his father came to manage the Theatre Royal in Prudhoe Street. He continued to live in 8 Dockwray Square until 1901 when he moved to Bishop Auckland and later, in 1906, to Glasgow. The original house has long since been demolished and the blue plaque (11) is affixed between the current numbers 6 and 7 Dockwray Square.

6 Take the stairs, known as Union Quay Stairs, adjacent to the Wooden Doll public house down to the Fish Quay, turning left when you reach the bottom. At the New Dolphin public house and the fine art work, "Dolphin Mooring Post", turn right alongside the fish merchants units towards the river. Once on the riverside look to your right and you will see the wooden remains of the walkway to the former Lloyds Hailing Station over which the Dornier Flying Pencil flew in *A Time of Fire*. Continue to your left along the edge of the Fish Quay "sands", "a little crescent of beach where you could always find something smelly and interesting washed up". It was here that Chas McGill, Cem Jones and Sheila Smythson built their raft in *Fathom Five* before sailing out on the dangerous river. Follow the pedestrianised promenade beside the river eventually passing beneath the monumental statue of Lord Collingwood, Nelson's second in command at the Battle of Trafalgar. The monument is a regular feature of Robert Westall's books and from this vantage point Chas McGill watches the tug Hendon in her battles with the Kriegsmarine. In *The Promise* Bob and Valerie visit the monument on one of their walks and in *A Time of Fire*, Thomas Prudhoe vents his grief and frustration by shooting at seagulls and the monument. Later, in August 1940, Sonny Prudhoe sits on the monument's plinth reading his dad's letter and looking over to South Shields. It ought to be remembered that when Robert was growing up in North Shields there was no promenade here and the area around the monument came to an abrupt end at steep cliffs falling down to the notorious Black Midden rocks below. Much of the action in *The Watch House* took place on those cliffs and on the rocks below. Not only did the Old Feller witness the murder of Scobie Hague whilst hiding in the rocks but also the body of the Galloway was buried in the cliffs.

"... a little crescent of beach ... something interesting washed up"

