

*David Taylor*

111 Places  
in Newcastle  
That You  
Shouldn't Miss

111

emons:

# Foreword

Newcastle and Gateshead face each other across the River Tyne. Two separate towns, they are now often joined together for marketing purposes as NewcastleGateshead. Cooperation is a fine thing, but good-natured – and occasionally fractious – competition over the centuries has given both a unique character.

Tyneside has always been a busy and dynamic place. Once it was shipbuilding and coal that drove the local economy. These industries have long gone, but others have since sprung up in their place. Now a typical working day is more likely to involve a PC and an internet connection than heavy machinery. The creative arts have strong roots in both Newcastle and Gateshead too. Newcastle is the home of *Viz* and the birthplace of Sting. Gateshead can boast a world-class live music venue in the Sage, and in the BALTIC, possibly the quirkiest contemporary fine art gallery in the country.

Newcastle has a reputation as a party town. You don't have to walk very far down one of its streets before coming across a pub or a restaurant. At the weekend, there are always crowds of young lads and lasses out in the city having a good time – and in the skimpiest of clothing, even in winter.

Another frequent comment made about Geordies is how warm and friendly they are. If you want to make a new friend just go and stand in a bus queue. Throw in a few pithy comments about how the Toon did that weekend and you'll have a friend for life. Just don't say that they're gannin doon. Unless they look like a Sunderland supporter.

What has been so wonderful about writing this book is that it's helped me see both Newcastle and Gateshead with new eyes. I've also discovered new aspects of both towns that I'd not previously been aware of – how I got this far without visiting the Lit & Phil I'll never know. I hope you have as much fun exploring the places in this book as I had writing about them.



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## 9 Black Gate

*Halt! Who goes there?*

At first glance, Black Gate looks... superfluous. It is a medieval gatehouse to nowhere, with nothing on either side to stop you sneaking around (though be careful not to fall into the deep ditch below the south wall). The clue to its original purpose is the nearby Keep, now separated from Black Gate by the East Coast Main Line. Built between 1247 and 1250, Black Gate was the northern entrance in the walls surrounding the Keep. These walls are largely long gone, with only a few scant remnants surviving. However, one reminder that Black Gate was once next to an enclosed space is Castle Garth, the name of the area south of the gatehouse. This was an area within the castle walls, garth being a medieval word for yard.

Originally, Black Gate would have had a drawbridge and portcullis. It would also have been far less tall than it currently is. Its height was initially increased by Alexander Stephenson, who leased the gatehouse from King James I in 1618. After having had the builders in, Stephenson leased Black Gate to a London merchant named Patrick Black. Further work was carried out by John Pickell, who left his name and the year, 1636, on a stone high up on the south wall.

By the 19th century, the Black Gate area of Newcastle was one of the poorest in the city. Black Gate was used as slum housing with 60 people living there at one point. Ultimately, it was the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne that rescued the building, taking it over in 1883. The society replaced what would have been a flat roof with the jaunty pitched one Black Gate currently sports.

There are several theories as to why the gatehouse is known as Black Gate. The most likely is that it is named after Stephenson's tenant. However, more grisly theories have also been put forward, including one that the colour refers to the blood from those squashed by the portcullis as it was lowered.



**Address** Castle Garth, Newcastle, NE1 1RQ, +44 (0)191 230 6300, [www.newcastlecastle.co.uk](http://www.newcastlecastle.co.uk) | **Getting there** Bus 27 Crusader, 56 Cityrider, 57 Citylink, 58 Citylink and various others to High Level Bridge North End | **Hours** Viewable from the outside only | **Tip** Black Gate is just a 2-minute walk away from El Torero, an authentic Spanish restaurant selling tapas and speciality dishes (Milburn House, Side City Centre, Newcastle, NE1 1PR, [eltorero.co.uk](http://eltorero.co.uk)).

## 63 Ouseburn Street Art

*Stepney Banksies*

The Lower Ouseburn Valley has seen many changes over the centuries. Originally agricultural, this changed once the Industrial Revolution began to heat up on Tyneside. Initially it was glass and pottery manufacturing that took hold in the valley. Over the course of the 19th century, other industries followed, including warehousing and mills, and lead works to produce white paint.

With factories came a need for workers' housing. As a consequence, the valley was one of the first industrial suburbs in Newcastle. The key was the Ouseburn itself, which provided a useful water source, as well as easy access to the River Tyne for the delivery of raw materials and the shipping of finished goods. All this industry in such a relatively small area ultimately had a cost, however. The environment degraded over time with the Ouseburn itself becoming heavily polluted. Housing conditions were squalid too, with families living cheek by jowl in cramped conditions. Change first came in the 1930s with a series of slum clearance programmes. And then, in the 1950s, industry in the valley began a long slow decline.

What could have been terminal proved to be a chance for reinvention, starting with the renovation of The Cluny warehouse in the 1980s (see ch. 20). Since 1995, the Ouseburn Trust has overseen the development of the valley as a creative community and leisure district, with old industrial buildings repurposed and modern housing built. Perhaps the most tangible sign of how the character of the valley has evolved is the dazzling variety of murals and street art painted on buildings and bridges. The art ranges from the pictorial – such as the huge sheep's face on the Ship Inn, painted by Unit 44 and American artist Gaia – to the abstract. The smaller examples of street art come and go, so change is constant – rather fittingly just like the history of the Lower Ouseburn Valley. This all means that there's always something new to see.

**Address** Stepney Bank, Ouseburn, Newcastle, NE1 2PW | **Getting there** Bus 12, 39 or 40 to New Bridge Street–Blackfriars, then a 5-minute walk | **Tip** The Tyne Bar is an independent pub and live music venue. Food is served every day, with a varied menu that caters to all tastes, including options for vegans (1 Maling Street, Newcastle, NE6 1LP, +44 (0) 265 2550, [www.thetyne.com](http://www.thetyne.com)).



## 82 Sparkie Williams

*The talkative budgie who inspired an opera*

In a cabinet in the Living Planet gallery of the Great North Museum: Hancock are the remains of Sparkie Williams, a small yellow and green budgerigar. He may look slightly out of place next to the more exotic animals on display nearby, but Sparkie was no ordinary bird.

Sparkie was hatched in 1954 in an aviary in Houghton-le-Spring. It was there that Mrs Mattie Williams saw and bought him. She called him Sparkie as he was 'a bright little spark'. Mattie first taught him to say 'Pretty Sparkie', before trying other phrases, such as her home address in case Sparkie escaped, as well as nursery rhymes and songs. By the time he was three and a half years old, Sparkie had a 500-word repertoire (spoken with a Geordie accent), and was ready for the big time.

In July 1958, Sparkie was entered into the BBC International Cage Bird Contest. He won so convincingly that Mattie was persuaded not to enter him again. Not that this mattered to Sparkie: he was now a star. He was contracted to Capern's bird seed for two years to head an advertising campaign; he appeared on the BBC's *Tonight* programme; and he was 'interviewed' by Philip Marsden, a renowned budgie expert. (The interview was later released by Parlophone as the B-side of a single, with *Sparkie the Fiddle* – a Raymond Chandler-esque short play – on the A-side.)

Sadly, Sparkie died in 1962. Touchingly, his last words were to tell Mattie that he loved her. Sparkie was preserved and donated to the Hancock, where he has been ever since. However, like any chatterbox, he could not be kept quiet. Inspired by the story, Michael Nyman and Carsten Nicolai created the opera *Sparkie: Cage and Beyond*. On 29 March, 2009, the opera was performed at the Haus der Berliner Festspiele in Berlin, to an enthusiastic audience. If he had been there, it is possible that Sparkie would have talked about nothing else for days afterwards.



**Address** Great North Museum: Hancock, Barras Bridge, Newcastle, NE2 4PT, +44 (0)191 208 6765, [www.greatnorthmuseum.org.uk](http://www.greatnorthmuseum.org.uk) | **Getting there** Metro to Haymarket (Yellow or Green Line), then an 8-minute walk along B1318 | **Hours** Mon–Fri 10am–5pm, Sat 10am–4pm, Sun 11am–4pm | **Tip** An entire gallery of the Great North Museum is devoted to Roman life in northern Britain, including a recreation of the route of Hadrian's Wall that stretches almost the length of the gallery.