



Heritage 100 Stories

Shotton, Haswell and South Hetton



Shotton Colliery, Haswell and South Hetton

When you start at Shotton Colliery, imagine the greatest pit heap in the country. Once it dominated the village from the north east, glowing from the spontaneous combustion of unextracted coal and flammable gases, sulphurous and smoking like a volcano. Imagine shrieking children tobogganing down the slippery coaldust on its lower slopes, deaf to their parents' warnings of the fiery fissures that might open and plunge them to their deaths. Imagine poisonous, heavy gases rolling down the sides of the tip beside them to collect in their homes at its base.

The writer JB Priestly came reluctantly to see it in 1933. "There must have been a lot of labour put into the ground and a lot of wealth taken out of it before that 'tip' began to darken the sky and poison the air. I stared at the monster, my head tilted back, and thought of all the fine things that had been conjured out of it in its time, the country houses and town houses, the drawing-rooms and dining-rooms, the carriages and pairs, the trips to Paris, the silks and the jewels, the peaches and iced puddings, the cigars and old brandies; I thought I saw them all tumbling and streaming out, hurrying away from Shotton — oh, a long way from Shotton— as fast as they could go." The bulk and reek of the tip was so unsettling Priestly wished he had never seen it.

But it has gone now. The vast smoking mound has been expunged, its clinker spread across the country, used to make the foundations for roads. Gorgeously, where the tip once reared, there is now Shotton Airfield, a skydiving centre; and, most days, you can see parachutists tumble and whirr out of the clouds and hear the snap of canopies and yelps of joy as they swing down. If there is a more uplifting symbol of the spirit of Durham than the site of the tip at Shotton Colliery and its transformation – from coaldust sledge-run to a skydiving pathway through the bright, clean air of its ghostly presence – I do not know what it might be.



Shotton Colliery was sunk exactly a hundred years before Priestly came. The original village and its country-house hall, which still lie a mile to the to the east, have since been swallowed up into the new town of Peterlee. Unlike the west of the County, where the coal outcropped, and its seams could be chased down into the sides of hills, the coal measures in the east were overlaid by the dolomite rock of the high hills of the east Durham escarpment. This is the same slab of rock that makes the famous cliffs of the Durham Heritage Coast, and it was once a daunting physical barrier to the discovery of coal in these parts. It was at Hetton, a little north of the furthest extent of this walk, where, in 1822, the breakthrough was made and the coal measures were first reached. At Shotton, it took eight years and tens of thousands of pounds before the seam was found, and this was an investment that broke some. The last hereditary owner of Shotton Hall lost his country house, its drawing-room and dining room, to speculation on finding coal and had to sell up to a mining company. The Hall and some of the rump of its parkland have sunk by ten to twenty feet as a result.

If you take the walk clockwise, Haswell is the second village you come to, and you reach it by walking along the route of one of the first railways in Durham: the Hartlepool Dock and Railway Company. Coming north through Shotton, the dock company wanted to attract the coal from these new deep pits to its new port at Hartlepool.

At the same time, their rival Sunderland competed for the port fees by running a line in from the west. The two lines converged at Haswell at almost the same time but at right angles to each other, eventually leaving the village with two stations and a daily trapse of passengers who had to walk from one to the other to buy separate tickets to cross the County. The first shipment was won by the Sunderland line, and it was from that port that the first Haswell coals were shipped to London “amidst the loud huzzas of the spectators, the firing of guns and a numerous display of flags hoisted on many conspicuous places.”

Haswell was also the location of one of the innovations that allowed these new deep mines to be profitable. Here engineers developed a cage on a steel cable that could be reliably raised and lowered by steam power to carry four tubs of coal, two on each deck of the cage. This innovation more than doubled the output of coal, which, with the additional pitmen and boys, went from 350 tons to 850 tons per 12-hour shift. The old Haswell pit head, which has the look of an abandoned chantry chapel, is a quarter mile to the west of the walk, and it stands now as a memorial, not to the steel cable and its cage, but to the risks those pitmen and boys were subject to during the industrial age. In 1844,

150 fathoms below the surface, far beneath the dolomite slab, a broken Davy lamp ignited the “damp”, the flammable gasses of the mine, and an explosion and the resulting lack of oxygen killed everyone in the workings but for the four men at the bottom of the shaft. Ninety-five men and boys died, their number including a father and his ten-year-old son, the boy brought to the pit for the first time “to put his mind at ease” as he was starting work in the morning. The damaged Davy lamp was found at the point of ignition, but it was inexperience that was blamed for the disaster, inexperience caused by a new workforce employed after a strike protesting the so-called bond. This bond was an annual contract which prevented the pitmen changing employers for a year and so had the effect of both suppressing wages and allowing owners to remove any “troublemakers” agitating for better conditions.



South Hetton is the furthest village north on the walk. Conditions and support for miners gradually improved through the nineteenth century. By 1900, boys under 13 were no longer allowed to work in the pits. But the danger never ended. A resident of South Hetton recalls the choice his father made at the time of the Great War, leaving the pit for the trenches after an accident underground that drowned his work mate. “It broke our hearts, his wife and five little kids,” the son wrote. “I was the oldest, ten, when he went away. He came home on leave and then he went back and was killed at the second battle of the Somme. My mother never got married again.”

In South Hetton, a hundred yards up the A182 from the route of the walk, there is a sculpture by Ray Lonsdale, “And the Village Remains: The Last Tub”, which portrays the resolute dignity of a pitman pushing his last tub of coal from the mine, which closed in 1983. It is worth the detour to see. Lonsdale’s workshop is nearby and his most famous work locally is Seaham Tommy, an out-sized statue of a soldier which became famous during the centenary of the end of the Great War. Funded by local subscription, the name of the South Hetton sculpture refers in part to the determination of the residents to resist the closure of their village. Labelled by the County Council as “Category D” – not worthy of future investment – the villagers of South Hetton were being encouraged to migrate to the new town of Peterlee. But, led by Jack Rackstraw, they fought back, barricading the main road and declaring “Peterlee is a nightmare not a dream.” And the village still remains.

At the northern extent of the walk and of the village there is the eery climax of an encounter with a Super Grid substation. Reached via the black-dust moonscape of South Hetton's former tip, the atmosphere here is heavy with the scent of ozone from the converging of the high-voltage lines. A remanent of the old national-grid infrastructure connecting coal-fired power stations, this substation is nominated to become a new power-link in the transmission of green energy from North Sea wind farms. Around and about here are sculptures and signage from "Turning the Tide, a project to restore the Durham Coast". Metal ribbons with existential questions loop around the entrance board to the area, while the gas vents that emerge from the spoil are topped with plaques stamped with poetry. Plants which once turned air into wood were turned in their time to coal and then burned for power; and now the wind itself is turned into power and the damp to rhyme.

As you move back south, high now on the flattened tip heap above the dolomite plateau, you can see below the green of "the park" or the welfare area that developed in the twentieth century near every pit, a place where pitmen and their families could relax and play. Some had open-air swimming pools heated from the mineworking. And as you cross the A182 for a second time, you are passing beneath the ghost of Pesspool Bridge, which once carried the railway over the road. It was here that a pitman on early shift found Angus Sibbet shot to death in his car.

The murder became known as the one-armed-bandit murder as Sibbet was collecting cash from slot machines, and his death became the origin of a book called "Get Carter" and then a film that was to define the North East of the 1960s.

On a clear day, you could once have seen from here six pitheads across the landscape. For though the shafts were vertical, here on the escarpment the connections were horizontal: the sight lines, the sounds of the pit buzzers which called men to work or warned them of an accident or rang in the new year. The railway lines too joined the pits together, and the seams of coal themselves were worked from mine to mine, sometimes breaking into each other. The breaching of a coal wall between two pits could be tragic, if water had built up behind the wall. Men would have to swim for their lives in the flood, propelled by a surge of water than could move heavy machinery, terrified not only of drowning but of becoming tangled or electrocuted by the cables and lights above their heads. But sometimes such a breakthrough would create playfulness or joy. Men who broke into the end of abandoned workings might be mistaken for ghosts as they foraged for equipment that had been left behind, and in the winter of 1947, when the snow above lay to the height of a first-floor window and the roads were impassable, a wedding cake, bouquets and the bridegroom himself made their way underground from an outlying mine for a wedding at Shotton's St Saviour's Church.

The bride had her own tunnel as her neighbours and friends dug a pathway through the snow to clear her procession to the church. All those underground galleries are flooded or abandoned now, but the green tunnels of the old railway lines still connect, and the villages remain.

Priestly wrote of the tip, "I hope it will always be there, not as a smoking 'tip,' but as a monument to remind happier and healthier men of England's old industrial greatness and the brave days of Queen Victoria."



Photos : People past and present, Durham County Council