



Heritage 100 Stories Newton Hall



Newton Hall

The revelation of the Cathedral from Frankland Lane is one of Durham's great moments. As you pass down between the woods and hedges of the track from Frankland Farm and emerge onto the flood plain, the vista that opens up before you changes the spirit.

This is a walk through two parks – a medieval hunting-ground and the surroundings of an eighteenth-century country house – but the whole walk retells the history of the County. It begins dramatically, with access between a prison and a remand centre. They call the prison Monster Mansion for the infamy of some of its prisoners, but even the presence of jails around Durham is a legacy of the king-like power of the medieval Prince Bishops and of their right to dispense justice. The access road is itself also a relic, of the route of the early nineteenth-century wagon way – a cart-horse track – which brought coal from Framwellgate Moor Colliery to the nearest railway; and the post-marker at the beginning of the walk is on that disused railway.

To experience the revelation, you have to walk this route clockwise, and the first thing you will see on your left as you enter the green peace of Frankland Lane are the almost indiscernible remnants of a brickworks and a hamlet of the industrial age. Almost hidden in the woods are the remains of the original Brasside village: the brickwork manager's house and a miners' clubhouse.

But it is the sudden joy of the vista that will stay in the memory. This is a medieval landscape. The Cathedral and its promise of redemption is dominant, while the river plain before it is a former deer park of the Bishops of Durham. And while the rich alluvial soil may have been parcelled up and farmed for centuries, the scope of the deer park remains, taking the countryside to the centre of the City, telling of the power of the Prince Bishops to command the landscape.

As you climb out of the valley up the spur to the west, you can look down to your left at Hopper's Wood, one of Durham's wooded gorges. First cut by ice-age streams through the sand, gravel and boulder clay, you look out over an ancient woodland of oaks, rowan, beech and sycamore, and can hear the tumble of its water. The spur brings you to a footbridge over the east coast mainline and this takes you into the second curated landscape: the parkland of a Georgian country house called Newton Hall, which gave its name to the modern housing estate that took its place. Modern Newton Hall was built in phases, with first the Rural District Council, then the County Council, then three private developers building thousands of homes during the second half of the twentieth century. The walk takes you backwards in time through these phases: 1980s at the bottom of the hill; 1970s on the slope; until you turn along the estate's main road, Carr House Drive, which is bordered on its north side by homes that were built in the 1960s. At the time of writing, many of these homes still house the residents who moved into them when they were young and the houses new.

So as you pass through the alleys, the paths, the cul-de-sacs and unexpected glades, past the intimacies of back gardens and the public displays of the frontages, you are moving through the first democratic community to own and enjoy this former parkland. The original country house was built by Lord Ravensworth, one of the 'grand allies' of coalmine owners. His architect and landscape gardener used every technique to capture and enhance the views to and from the Hall, with modern sash windows, embanked gardens and an avenue cut through the hill to frame the house in the landscape. But, in time, the picturesque mists in the deer park below greyed over. The scale of the industrialisation, first kept at a distance by the curve of the railway line, soon overwhelmed the park; and the valley and the views became filled with smoke, soot and dust from all the coking, the quarrying for ganister sandstone and building stone, the clay pits, the limestone, fireclay and ironstone pits, the slag heaps and mine-stone waste, the steam trains and tankies that surrounded it. The tenements spread, and the river and the stream of its tributary gorge grew more polluted, and the descendants of Lord Ravensworth found themselves as asthmatic, caked and rheumy eyed as their workers. Fogged up and choked out of their home, they sold the Hall and it became, in turn, a rental, the County Lunatic Asylum, a First World War barracks and the local headquarters of the Boy Scouts.

The Hall was demolished in 1926. A 14-year-old boy called John Arnison, who was three days out of school and cleaning the bricks, was killed by a joist thrown down by one of the workmen. The people of Durham still know the name, because, when they built one of the final phases of the Newton Hall complex – a retail development on its northern edge – they called it the Arnison Centre after him.

You can still feel the Hall's presence among the modern homes. If, as you climb, you turn around on Canterbury Road and look south, you will see the view of the Cathedral that the Hall enjoyed from its embanked lower garden. And as you cross Wolsingham Road and look west, you can still see the dip where the avenue had been cut through the hill to frame the Hall and its views. The tree-lined path on the south side of Carr House Drive was once its main carriageway, while the hollow behind the goal of the football pitch across the road is the drained fishpond. The bank of trees you then pass through was once the woodland backdrop framing the Hall, while, just before you regain the railway line, you find yourself (at the end of Eggleston Close) on the exact spot of the gazebo and its east-facing views. What was once a home for a single family and its household of servants is now where hundreds of families live. What was once a curated vista for the Lord, his family and his guests has become a kaleidoscope of views for thousands.

With the Hall gone, the line of the railway which curved around the estate could be drawn even closer, and, back on the other side, you can still trace the tight curve of the mainline in the ponds that were left behind when the line was straightened in 1969 to allow faster trains to pass. The gap between the lines is now a nature reserve, and the old railway is an Eden of pond-skaters, whirligig beetles, tadpoles, sticklebacks, damsel flies and ramshorn snails.





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