

Chemical Works in Gateshead

Like many of Gateshead's industries, chemical manufacture began as an isolated historical incident and the chemical trade is a typical example. At the beginning of the eighteenth century a rather mysterious person known as the 'Jew of Oakwellgate' is reputed to have manufactured compound of cyanogen (a highly poisonous gas). Unfortunately, no trace of his activities can be found today.

The chemical works in Gateshead in the nineteenth century were situated to the east of the town, well away from the centre of population - even in those far off days; the environment was a subject of concern to those who lived near chemical works.

The first factory was started in 1827 by Anthony Clapham, who manufactured soaps and soda. His works are best remembered for the very large chimney, which at 263 feet was the largest on Tyneside. Such was the fame of this 'stupendous work of art' that a song was written in commemoration. The firm was taken over in 1858 by the Jarrow Alkali works and again in 1891 by United Alkali.

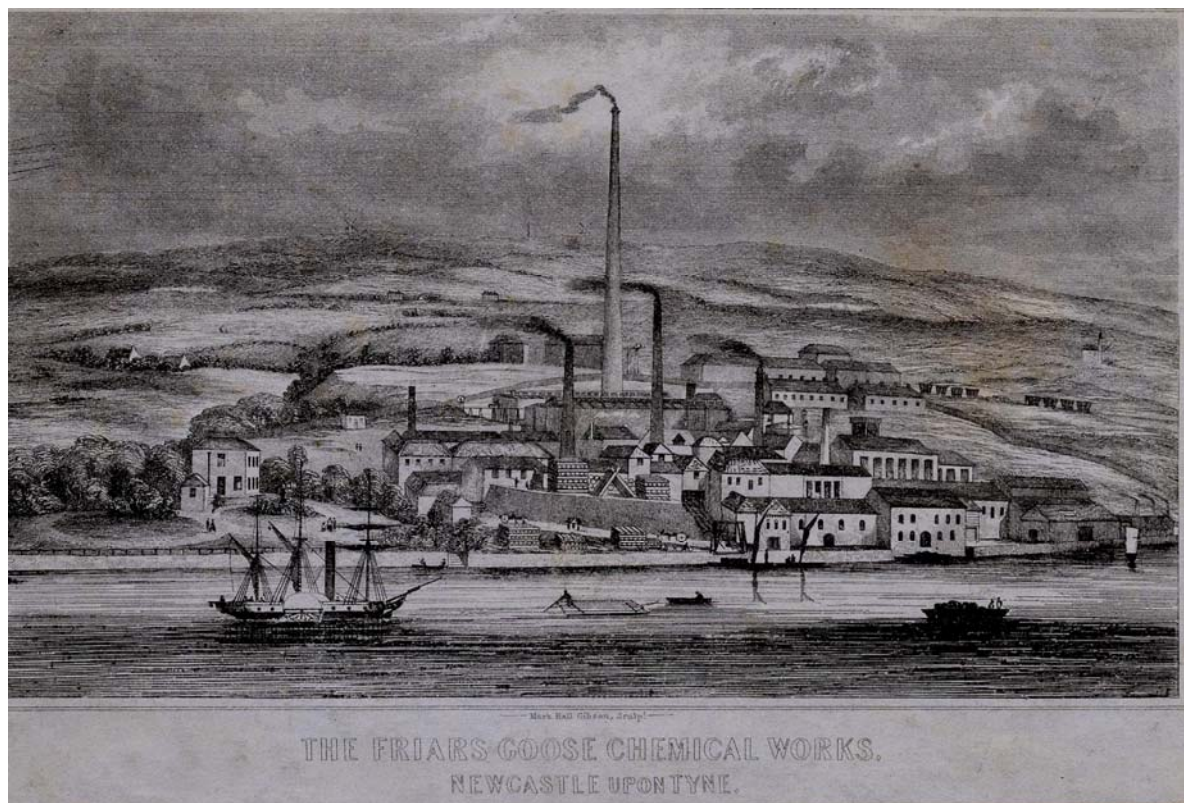
The best known chemical works are remembered as 'Allhusens', developed in the 1830s by Charles Attwood and bought in 1840 by Christian Allhusen who successfully expanded his business until he occupied 197 acres of the South Shore. 'Allhusens' was incorporated as the Newcastle Chemical Works Company in 1872 and this in turn was taken over by United Alkali in 1891 and production concentrated on caustic soda.

In 1889, 1200 men were employed here but from this date there was a gradual run down, which accelerated after the First World War, as the chemical trade was transferred to Teesside. By 1926 the premises were re-let as factories and even poultry houses and in the 1930s the great chimneys were demolished.

One reminder of the past was the spoil heap estimated at 2 million tons which was still smouldering in 1951. Fortunately, a use was found for the lime as agricultural fertiliser, and the removal of 750,000 tons continued from 1953 until the 1960s. The remaining spoil has been incorporated into East Gateshead Riverside Park.

As could be expected, chemical works were unpleasant places in which to work; the heat was considerable and so the men were frequently thirsty. Boys were sent to local pubs for beer and rum while the landlord of the 'New Gateshead' was regularly disturbed by the night shift workers leaving work who hurled 'Irish confetti' (half-bricks) at the door to waken him.

The work was dangerous, and burns were commonplace, although, surprisingly, fatal accidents were not numerous. However, the workers' health was frequently impaired by the heat and corrosive atmosphere. In 1891, the wages for this very unpleasant work varied according to trade, but the highest appears to have been £3 for a 42-hour week by bleach packers.



Engraving of Chemical Works, Friars Goose, 19th century

From A Short History of Gateshead by I C Carlton