

A brief history of Gateshead

Gateshead town was a minor settlement of little importance, being overshadowed by its larger neighbour, Newcastle. Roman coins were found in Church Street (in 1790) and Bottle Bank (in 1802) so there may very well have been a small camp at the southern end of the old Roman Tyne Bridge.

The Venerable Bede, in his "History of the English Church and People", mentions 'Adda was brother of Utta, a well-known priest and Abbot of Gateshead'. During the Middle Ages Gateshead is described as a place, rather than a vill (town) or a borough. Real growth began with the establishment of Norman Bishops of Durham from 1072. At this time the area now known as Gateshead was either forest or wasteland with some agricultural land. The forest, which covered much of East Gateshead, was used as a hunting reserve by the bishops of Durham who had a hunting lodge or manor house in the area.

Gateshead was not included in the Domesday Book, but was mentioned in the Boldon Book, of 1183 as having watermills, salmon fisheries on the Tyne and bake-houses. Obviously, the town was not now entirely dependent on agriculture. In the late twelfth century dyeing and shipbuilding are mentioned. The first recorded market was held in 1246, while a bailiff is mentioned in a document dated 1287.

The bishop of Durham owned the southern third of the Tyne Bridge: in 1383, this was taken over by the city of Newcastle and a tower was built on it. In 1416, however, the southern portion was returned to the bishop after appeals to the king. 1454 was an important year in this struggle as Newcastle was granted conservatorship of the Tyne, a privilege held for 400 years. This gave that city a monopoly of trade on the river but the coal mines, the main target, were still controlled from Gateshead. The first record of coal being mined in the Gateshead area was in 1344 and there were staiths at Pipewellgate in 1349.

With the coalmines of Gateshead under the control of Newcastle, the impetus to take over the town was removed and only one other weak attempt was made in 1647. Although Gateshead people had been afraid of control from the north of the river, the town now enjoyed considerable prosperity. In 1574 the population of Gateshead doubled to

approximately 5,500, the abundant coal supplies ended in 1680. Gateshead was now in a state of depression, rents were low and in arrears, the fields were scarred with pit heaps, hindering the cultivation of crops.

The economy of the town was not revived until the growth of the industrial revolution in the mid-eighteenth century. Steam engines were introduced to clear water from the lower coal seams; glassworks and ironworks created more jobs and Gateshead's fortunes began to improve steadily. The 1830s saw the greatest change in administration of Gateshead. Cuthbert Rippon became the Member of Parliament, the first for Gateshead, a Town Council was elected in 1835 and the Poor Law Union was set up in 1836. During the same period the Dispensary opened (1832) the Mechanics Institute (1836) and a newspaper was published for the first time, the *Gateshead Observer* (1837)

Throughout the nineteenth century the population expanded rapidly; between 1801 and 1901 the increase was 101,291. This expansion resulted in the spread southwards of working-class houses. Terrace upon terrace of houses and flats were built over what had been large country estates and the character of the town changed from rural to urban.

In 1889, Gateshead was made a county borough. Up to the Second World War there were repeated newspaper reports of the unemployed sending deputations to ask the council to provide work. The depression years of the 1920s and 30s created even more unemployment and the Team Valley Trading Estate was built in the mid-1930s to alleviate the situation. The borough boundaries were extended in 1951 to provide more building land and slum clearance was started and thousands of council owned dwellings replaced the earlier substandard housing.

In April 1974 Gateshead merged with Felling, Ryton, Blaydon, Whickham, Lamesley and Birtley to form the Gateshead Metropolitan District Area as part of Local Government Reorganisation.

From *A Short History of Gateshead* by I C Carlton