

Byker

The earliest evidence for human activity at Byker is the discovery in 2001 of a native settlement, evidenced by a series of drainage ditches and stakeholes, where the remains of Hadrian's Wall run along the south side of Shields road. Although the location of Hadrian's Wall has long been known, definite evidence for its precise location in relation to the road was finally located in February 2001 on the site of a new public square outside the swimming baths on the south side of Shields Road, where a 29 metre stretch of Wall foundations were revealed. Three rows of defensive pits (cippi) were revealed between the Wall and the ditch. These pits would have originally held entanglements of sharpened branches which would have served the same purpose as barbed wire.

Further west, no traces of the expected turret at the east end of the Shields road bridge have ever been found and the course of the wall and ditch from Stephen St, across the Ouse Burn, to the top of Stepney Bank is unclear. A Roman altar (HER 1414) was, however found in 1884 during the construction of Byker Bridge. The village of Byker (HER 1387) is first referred to in 1198 as the sergeanty of Byker. There were four taxpayers in 1296 and five in 1312. It appears to have been a two-row village with a green and lay at the junction of two roads, the present Headlam Street coming from the north, and Allendale Road / Welbeck Road from the south and east. Major redevelopment in the second half of the 20th century has left it barely recognizable, however. The township was twice reduced in size at its west end. In 1299 its land between Pandon Burn and Swirle was transferred to Newcastle, and in 1549 Newcastle acquired all the ground to the Ouse Burn. The medieval period saw the building of two chapels in Byker, St. Lawrence's and St. Ann's (HER 220 and 1421), the latter replaced by the present church in 1768. Mills and limekilns are also known to have been present in medieval Byker. In the early 17th century the Ballast Hills Graveyard (HER 1597) opened for non-Anglican burials and remained in use until the mid-19th century. A manor house (HER 1385), since demolished, was also built in this period or a little earlier.

Industry became important during the 18th and 19th centuries, with a particular concentration in the lower Ouseburn area. As elsewhere in the North-East, industrial development was based on coal mining which in the Byker area became a major industry at the end of the 18th century (e.g. HER 1591-2, 4188-9 and 4690, etc.). Clay-based industries (e.g. HER 4155 and 4164), notably brick-making (e.g. HER 4156, 4158, 4169 and 4190) and pottery-making (HER 4172 and 4194 are some of the dozens of firms involved) were also very important in the 19th century, with pottery continuing into the mid-20th century at the Maling factory (HER 4344). Glasshouses (HER 1913-1915), chemicals works (e.g. HER 4193), lead works (e.g. HER 4192), bottle works (e.g. HER 4683), roperies (e.g. HER 4163), mills (HER 4165) and an iron foundry (HER 4681) were all present in the industrial period. Shipbuilding was also important on the riverside (e.g. HER 4171 and 4174). The quayside walls and various warehouses, now largely converted to residential and other uses, remain as testament to the former industrial importance of the area, much of which, alongside its social history has recently been recorded by the Ouseburn Heritage Trust. Byker also developed as a residential and recreational centre for workers, associated with roads (e.g. HER 1945), railways and a range of buildings such as schools, churches and residences (e.g. HER 1593), some of which survive and are of local architectural interest. One such structure was the Apollo Cinema (HER 1590) which opened in 1933 as part of the 'Talkies' boom but closed as a cinema in the 1960s but was recently demolished to make way for a supermarket. The Byker Wall replaced much of the earlier terraced housing in the 1970s, and is itself now regarded as a site of architectural merit.