

Rowlands Gill

There is no recorded evidence for early human activity at, or in the immediate vicinity of Rowlands Gill earlier than the late Iron Age site of Linzford Wood enclosure, visible as a crop mark on aerial photographs as a sub-rectangular or D-shaped enclosure with a surrounding ditch and possible internal hut circle. However, the paucity of known prehistoric remains in the area is likely to be a factor of lack of fieldwork opportunity rather than the absence of potential. Rowlands Gill is also poorly represented in the county Heritage Environment Record as a location of medieval settlement, largely because it was at the time in a sparsely populated rural area. There is evidence for coal working at an early date, but the first major workings are recorded from around 1800 (HER 3374) and others did not develop until later in the century (HER 3578 and 3577), following the arrival of the railways (e.g. HER 1019). An important related industry in the vicinity was coking, carried out at the Whinfield Coker Ovens, part of the Marquess of Bute's Victoria Garesfield Colliery. At its height there were 193 ovens in use on the site, producing 68,000 tons of coke each year. Before their closure in 1958 they were the last working beehive ovens in the county. To commemorate this, five complete ovens and two partial ovens were preserved by the National Coal Board and, in 1973, these remains were designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument. They have since been restored. The bricks from which the ovens were built were made on site and at nearby Lily (later Lilley) Colliery, while the coal used in the ovens came from the Victoria seam at the Victoria Garesfield Colliery and the Brockwell seam at the Watergate Colliery. From the early 20th century the waste heat from the ovens was used to raise steam for generating electricity, which in turn was used by a cuprous oxide plant, established in 1915. The quarrying of sand, gravel and stone was also carried out in the area in the 19th century (HER 3580 and 3581), but more important than these was brickmaking, which depended on coal for fuel. The Lilley Brickworks (HER 5140) was a major concern locally from the 1880s and at its peak in 1955 produced 150,000 bricks per week for local collieries. Rowlands Gill grew as a nucleated settlement in the industrial period in response to the demand for workers' housing and the associated requirement for public buildings and an infrastructure of roads and services (e.g. HER 1019, 3536 and 3583). However, these developments were relatively modest in scale, enhancing rather than overshadowing the rural character of the village and contributing to the eventual designation of the village as a Conservation Area. Following the closure of the Lilley Brickworks in 1976, Rowlands Gill has served mainly as a residential settlement for Tyneside, although farming and related activities have remained important locally.