

Howdon and Willington

There is no recorded evidence for early human activity in, or in the immediate vicinity of Howden, although this is likely to be the result of lack of fieldwork opportunity in the area, rather than the absence of potential. From Willington an antler mattock of likely early prehistoric date was reported in 1934 (HER 776), and a Romano-British quern in 1842 (HER 778). Willington is first mentioned in 1072 when it formed part of Bishop Walcher's gift to the priory of Durham. A mill is recorded there in 1299, and a windmill is specifically mentioned in documents of 1438-9 and 1464. In 1536-7 there was a waste water mill and a salt pan. In 1539 there were eight tenants each paying rent of 33s 4d each, and 3s 4d for the salt pan. Eight farms are also mentioned in 1585, but by 1839 there were six farms of very unequal size, three of them outside the village. Originally Willington was a 2-row village of oval outline, with the green located around the present cul-de-sac, Engine Inn Road. The later history of both Willington and neighbouring Howdon are dominated by heavy industry, the diverse variety of which is as great as anywhere on Tyneside. As elsewhere, the industrial development of these two centres was based on the coal trade which developed rather later in the lower course of the Tyne where the seams were lower. A large number of sites associated with mining are recorded in this area, including Flatworth Pit (HER 1174) at Howdon and the older Howdon Old Pit (HER 1178). The pits were linked to staithe on the river by wagonways and railways, such as the Blythe and Tyne Railway (HER 1055; see also HER 2031, 2032 and 2036-43). Closer to the riverside the exploitation of coal and its transport intensified (e.g. HER 1163-73). The original Willington Wagonway from Bigges Main to Willington Square was opened in 1785 by Gibson, Bell and Brown and closed around 1800. Part of this wagonway (HER 1130) later seems to have served Bewick, George and Christo Pits (HER 1161, 1125, 1126). Bewick Pit was also associated with wagonways (HER 1083 and 1162). Another wagonway, Willington Wagonway (HER 1167) started near Old Engine Pit (HER 1166) and served Edward Pit, Bigge Pit, Willington Colliery Low Pit (HER 1165, 1163, 1189), crossing Willington Dean by a Viaduct (HER 1185). This followed at least part of the course of the Grand Allies' Willington New Line, from Battle Hill to Low Pit, opened in 1820. Coal-dependent industries in and around Willington and Howdon included salt pans (HER 5258), brick and tile works (HER 1176, 2105, 2185 and 2188), aluminium works (HER 5019), lead and other smelting works (HER 2035, 2101 and 2106), and, somewhat earlier than most of the other heavy industrial concerns in the area, the Howden glassworks, which was built in the 17th century (HER 5078) and operated for around a century until destroyed by fire. The Willington Quay ballast hill (HER 2107) was a related product of the coal trade. Other important industries included roperies (HER 1174, 1179 and 2028), corn mills (HER 1177 and 2044), and shipbuilding (HER 2197, 2210, 2211, 2104 and 5017). Extensive housing estates, their associated public buildings and an infrastructure of roads and services were built in response to housing demands of an increasing population in the industrial period. The transport infrastructure was also developed and improved for both industrial and passenger use – notably the Newcastle to North Shields road, the Tyne Road and pedestrian tunnels (HER 1798 and 1799), and the North Eastern Railway, Tynemouth branch (HER 1186), now part of the Tyne and Wear Metro line. Modern sites of importance to the local cultural heritage include military sites such as an anti-aircraft battery (HER 5501) and pillboxes (HER 5432).