

GRAINGERTOWN

Though by no means entirely attributable to the early 19th century developer Richard Grainger, the Victorian and Edwardian core of Newcastle city centre has become widely known as 'Graingertown'. His collaborations with, amongst others, the architect John Dobson and the Town Clerk John Clayton saved Newcastle's commercial heart from the worst excesses of Victorian development and created the elegant streets still glorious today. There is much to be sought out and discovered here. Without doubt, the

highest and most impressive panoramic viewing platform for this area is the top of Grey's Monument. Itself a beautiful sight, the monument stands at the top of the hill that rises up from the river. Here is offered an unrivalled view to the south of the street down which the Earl's statue gazes, and which bears his name – once described by Sir John Betjeman as "... one of the best streets in England".

The monument itself is a prominent and well-known feature, though few take advantage of the opportunity to climb the 164 steps to top while it is open to the public between late May and early October. Nor are most people aware of the treasure that lies buried deep beneath its foundations. The first stone was laid by the architects, John and Benjamin Green, in early 1838. Underneath it was interred a large glass vessel containing the original plans for the monument, a list of subscribers who had paid for it to be built, and a collection of gold and silver coins and medals donated by a former Mayor, John Fenwick. The column, which is 133ft. high and 9ft 11ins. in diameter, was completed in August 1838. The statue was hoisted into position, to the sound of the town's church bells, on 24th August. Those enterprising enough to make their way to the top will be able to admire the Earl's statue at close quarters, and may perhaps notice that his head is slightly newer than his body. This is due to the fact that the original head was struck off by lightning in 1941 and had to be replaced. Thus, a somewhat undignified lightning conductor runs down his Lordship's back today to prevent any such repetition.

Julian Brown



Roger Hedley, son of Ralph Hedley, sculpts the replacement head for Lord Grey's Monument in November 1947. The shattered remains of the original head which have been glued together, and the plaster cast created from this, can be seen on the left.



Newcastle's most fashionable shopping street. Grainger Street in 1897. Wenger's building is to the right.

Arrayed below is one of the most fascinating roofscapes to be seen in England, with the domes and minarets of buildings such as the Central Exchange Buildings, and to the rear of the monument, Emerson Chambers stand looking like a giant ormolu clock.

Returning to street level, there is yet much to be admired. A walk along Grainger Street will reveal a plethora of fine decorative detail on the façades above the shop fronts. At the corner with St John's Lane stands the old Wengers building. This magnificently ornate Victorian pile is more reminiscent of a huge French chateau than the office block it once was. Sadly, its elaborate glamour has been fading in recent years as it has stood empty, while huge weeds sprout from the balconies.

A walk back along Grainger Street on the west side heading for the monument again will lead to Nelson Street. What is today a rather unremarkable side street contains two items of interest to us – both relics of visits to the town by world famous figures. The first is a plaque situated at first floor height above what is now a sportswear shop on the corner with Grainger Street. The plaque marks the site of a 19th century bookshop which was renowned as a meeting place for Newcastle's many radicals, intellectuals, and political reformists. It also commemorates a visit to the town by the Italian freedom fighter Guiseppe Garibaldi in April 1854. Garibaldi, who was returning to Italy after a period of exile in America, had arrived at Shields harbour from Baltimore. His visit attracted a great deal of interest and excitement in the town. To observe the occasion, it was decided to present an address of welcome and sympathy, and a public subscription also quickly raised enough to buy a sword and a telescope as gifts for the great man. The telescope was made by Joseph English of Grey Street, and both it and the gold-hilted sword were engraved with the inscription: "Presented to General Garibaldi by the people of Tyneside, friends of European freedom. Newcastle upon Tyne 1854."

The second feature in Nelson Street is the doorway next to the rear entrance to W.H. Smith and the Cordwainer's pub, which has the words "Music Hall" carved in the stonework above it. Among the countless shows and variety performances that took place here last century, perhaps the most worthy of note are the three nights during December 1861 when Charles Dickens came on one of his hugely successful public reading tours. In the 1860s, Dickens was at the very zenith of his fame, with his novels selling worldwide. His series of tours during which he gave public readings from his own works were hugely popular. An advertisement in the *Newcastle Journal* quotes seat ticket prices for the event ranging from one to four shillings – very expensive for the time, though it is known that Dickens allowed "common working folk" to be admitted to the standing gallery for a penny. *The Journal's* reviewer gave an excellent and glowing report of the evening, stating that Newcastle was honoured that such a great person as Dickens should take the trouble to come and visit "a remote northern town"! Dickens himself obviously enjoyed the experience. Writing to his Newcastle-born friend and biographer John Forster of his four visits to Newcastle, Dickens said:

"At Newcastle, against very heavy expenses, I made more than a hundred guineas profit. A finer audience there is not in England, and I suppose them to be a specially earnest people; for while they can laugh till they shake the roof, they have a very unusual sympathy with what is pathetic or passionate."

Sentiments which, I am sure, would be echoed today by visitors to the city such as the Royal Shakespeare Company.