

# JESMOND AND GOSFORTH

---

Jesmond Dene, the lush Victorian park which borders the east of the suburb from which it takes its name, is worth a book in its own right to describe the hidden delights and beautiful, unexpected vistas to be discovered within it. Ruins such as Lord Armstrong's Banqueting Hall or unusual features such as the Pets' Cemetery are familiar to the thousands of visitors who walk its leafy pathways each year. Armstrong Bridge – a unique masterpiece in its own way – forms an excellent viewing platform for the whole scene, and from here the far away campanile (tower is far too English a word for it) of St George's church in Jesmond itself can be seen rising above the tree canopy, almost as if it were in some valley in Tuscany.

But a little way off this particular beaten track, at the foot of Reid Park Road where it meets Jesmond Dene Road, lies a ruin of pure antique charm, made even more delightful by its concealed position amid the edges of suburbia. St Mary's Chapel stands behind wooden railings in a leafy glade overlooking the dene, its high roofless stone walls still bearing much evidence of the mason's craft. The remains of the Norman nave and chancel date from the 12th century, with the later addition of the sacristy probably from the 14th.

One of the earliest mentions of the chapel in writing is in the register of Bishop Hatfield of Durham, who on 12th June 1351 instituted William de Heighington into the chaplaincy of "the free chapel of Jesmuth within the parish of Newcastle." Sadly, what must once have been a beautifully situated rural church did not stand the test of time as a functioning place of worship. By 1548, an account of the chapel read that the Incumbent: "... is not resident there, nor no divine service used ... plate none, goodes none."

In 1549 King Edward VI granted the chapel and its land to the Corporation, who soon passed it on into private hands.

By the 18th century its use had descended to that of a barn. The chapel and the nearby St Mary's Well have been places of pilgrimage for centuries due to the miracles and cures which are said to have taken place – especially due to the water from



*The chancel of St Mary's Chapel, 1903*





*Lily Avenue c.1910, at the time of John Alexander Dickman's residence there.*

the holy well. The name of Pilgrim Street in central Newcastle is possibly derived from it being the route taken by pilgrims approaching the shrine from the south. Indeed there is much evidence to suggest that they did come from far and wide: William Ecopp, rector of a Yorkshire parish, made it a condition of his will in 1472 that after his burial pilgrims should be despatched to various shrines to offer a groat on behalf of his soul, the shrines to include "... that of the Blessed Mary of Jesmownt."

The variable spelling of Jesmond's name in ancient documents such as this has given rise to a popular myth that the name is derived from the words "Jesus Mount". It is much more likely that the name comes from "Jesemuthe" which pre-dates the chapel, and refers to the upper dean being the "mouth" of the Ouseburn.

Elsewhere in Jesmond are scattered antiquities of more recent vintage, but of no less interest to connoisseurs of the unusual. To the south of Jesmond road as it approaches the

city is Jesmond Cemetery. Laid out in 1836 for the Newcastle General Cemetery Company, the sombre gateway and its lodge were designed by John Dobson. Within the high stone walls stands a fascinating collection of Victorian monumental masonry, running the whole gamut from the magnificently vulgar via the downright ugly to the simply elegant.

In those days there were few restrictions upon the dimensions or design of memorial sculpture, and the earthly wealth of the dead and their families are often brashly proclaimed in the form of weeping archangels, obelisks, cherub-infested sarcophagi, and 12ft high celtic crosses that would not look out of place in the market square of a county town. Parts of the cemetery are long overgrown with moss, weeds, and climbing plants, bestowing a rather gothic atmosphere upon the place. The often quite detailed inscriptions on many of the stones bear witness to the lives and history of the people who lie buried here, including many of the great and the good (Dobson himself is buried here) as well as shopkeepers, tradesmen, and the professional classes.

One of the simplest monuments is a white stone cross in the north west section which marks the last resting place of John Nisbet of Heaton Park Road. Nisbet, a colliery wages clerk, was the victim of a sensational murder and robbery committed on a train between Newcastle and Alnmouth in 1910. The arrest of the culprit and his subsequent trial at the Moot Hall were the talk of the north for the rest of the year, even banishing Dr Crippen from the front pages of the regional press. John Alexander Dickman of Lily Avenue, Jesmond became the last man to be hanged in Newcastle as a result, and the 300 gold sovereigns which he took from his victim were never recovered.

Further inside suburban Jesmond itself is a rare Victorian monument of a different kind. The Post Office pillar box standing in Osborne Avenue is one of a handful of surviving examples of the hexagonal 'Penfold' type. Introduced in 1866, these boxes were named after their designer, and this particular box has been serving the local residents since the 1870s.



To the west of Jesmond lies the Great North Road, running from the city centre towards Gosforth. Running along its side in this area are several ornamental horse-troughs and drinking fountains or 'pants'. Now all redundant and quite dry, these relics of Victorian munificence were usually erected as roadside memorials to local worthies, as can be read on the inscriptions which they bear.

Further along the road to the north of the city, and separated from it by the Town Moor, stands the suburb of Gosforth. Once a town of Northumberland in its own right, Gosforth was absorbed into the city only in 1974. Some evidence of the old separation remains in the form of one or two 19th century boundary stones around the edge of the Town Moor.

Going up the Great North Road we come to Gosforth itself and the High Street. Next to the Brandling Arms pub stands a row of red brick shops and offices which includes a branch of the Halifax Building Society. Set into the wall above this shopfront is a stone inscribed with the words "Bulman Village". The name refers to a family of local landowners who lived at Coxlodge Hall. The Bulmans became infamous for gerrymandering during the notorious Parliamentary election of 1826 by building a group of houses in the area in order to create vote-carrying freeholds. That episode led to this part of Gosforth becoming known as "Bulman's Village" as the story passed into legend, though the nearby County Hotel is probably being unkind in describing the family as "mobsters" in a potted history displayed on its wall.

As the High Street progresses north, it becomes the Great North Road once again and the shops give way to pre-war suburban housing. Anonymous as these estates may seem, they hide some interesting surprises. On a small grassy verge outside the gable end of No. 1 Aidan walk stands a 4ft high round-topped stone bearing a fading inscription. The words "Main Dike" remain fairly clear, but the rest which reads "distance from Pit 349 yards, Cut 3 June 1828" is barely legible. This stone commemorates the conquest by Gosforth mining engineers of the Main or 90 Fathom Dike, a geological

fault which caused huge problems in the subterranean strata and which was the blight of the early 19th century coal industry in the area. A clue to the line followed by the fault underground is given on the surface by the presence of another such stone within the grounds of St Nicholas church on Church Road. This event was such a cause for celebration that when the pit shaft and tunnel were completed and fully dug out in 1829 the owners held a party there hundreds of feet underground at which guests were invited to hew their own lumps of coal as souvenirs.

Even further to the north is Melton Park, an estate of mature avenues and crescents. Lying in the middle of tree-shaded Chapel Green at the foot of Kingsley Avenue are the remains of North Gosforth Chapel – a Norman ruin dating back to at least 1296. The stonework stands one or two courses high and clearly shows the layout of the chapel, with its rectangular wall, doorways, and what might have been an altar stone standing at the western end. Several ancient grave-stones lie flat on the ground outside the east end, some of which still have barely discernible coats of arms upon them, and two of which are dated 1691 and 1695. Of more recent vintage is the Northumberland County Record Office close by which, apart from the obvious interest offered by its archives, is made even more of an attraction by the fact that it is sited in a concrete former wartime bunker.

