

LOOKING UP NEWCASTLE

The founder of the Boy Scouts, Lord Baden-Powell, always maintained that the best place to hide from a pursuer was as high above ground level as possible because, he said, "People don't look up." This statement is borne out by the fact that thousands of Newcastle residents who shop in the city centre each day remain oblivious of the rich cornucopia of statues, busts, carvings, friezes, and decorations which adorn the architecture around them just a few yards above street level. The grandest – and incredibly widely unnoticed – phenomenon of this type is the quartet of statues set into the wall half way down the west side of Northumberland Street. Above what is now a shoe-shop standing opposite Saville Row, this building was constructed earlier this century as a branch of Boots the Chemist. At that time the company had a policy of commissioning elegantly designed shop fronts for its new branches, incorporating statues representing local historical figures. Those chosen for Newcastle are Thomas Bewick, Harry Hotspur, Sir John Marley, and Roger Thornton.

Whilst it must have been a difficult task to distil the long and chequered history of the town into a handful of characters, these do seem a somewhat random and not very well-balanced foursome, with the engraver Bewick standing uneasily amidst three representatives of civil and military power in the region. Of the other three, Hotspur is perhaps a surprising choice. Powerful though the Percy family

may have been in medieval Northumberland, Harry Hotspur is more remembered for his part in the political intrigues and armed struggles for the crown than for any direct connection with Newcastle. His inclusion can possibly be attributed to his being the only Northumbrian to be immortalised in the works of Shakespeare.



Christopher Goulding

Roger Thornton gazes down.

The lives of Sir John Marley and Roger Thornton, however, are inexorably linked to the history of the town. Marley is principally remembered for having been mayor during the Civil War when Newcastle was besieged, and is credited with having saved the spire of St Nicholas from destruction (see that section). Of much greater vintage is Roger Thornton, mayor in 1400 and also MP from 1399 to 1417. Newcastle's answer to Dick Whittington, Thornton is traditionally said to have arrived at the town's West Gate a penurious footsore traveller who settled down here to become the town's wealthiest citizen. His tale is told in the sub-plot of an obscure and long-forgotten early 17th century play which was possibly performed in Newcastle upon the occasion of the visit of James I to the town in 1617. In *The Lovesick King* by Anthony Brewer, young Thornton's arrival is described: "Here did Thornton enter in with hope, a halfpenny, and a lambskin." Incidentally, this same play contains what is almost certainly the earliest reference to the game of football in a work of drama in the form of a conversation between two local characters, Goodgift the merchant and

Grim the collier:

"Goodgift: How now – what mean these shouts?

Grim: I think there's some match at foot-ball towards, the colliers against the whole town, cut ang long tail!"

Proof, if proof were needed, of Newcastle's long standing pre-eminence in our popular national game.

Around the corner at the top of Northumberland Street is Northumberland Road. Over the road from the City Hall stands Burt Hall – named after Thomas Burt (1837-1922) who was MP for Morpeth for over 40 years, and was the first working miner to be elected to Parliament. This building was until recently the headquarters of the Northumberland Branch of the NUM. Atop the gable end of the building is a statue of a walking pitman with his pick over his shoulder. This monument is based on the younger of the two figures in Ralph Hedley's painting *Going Home* (1888) which portrays a father and son on their way home from the colliery. This picture was enormously popular at the time, and prints of it decorated the walls of many a humble home.

To the south, Northumberland Street becomes Pilgrim Street, where at the corner with Worswick Street we find another set of curios perched above eye level. On this corner stands Worswick Chambers, a turn of the century brick and stone office building.



Christopher Goulding

The pitman on the top of Burt Hall.

Here, the parapet between the the ground floor and the first floor is decorated with over two dozen carved stone faces and head-and-shoulder busts of various characters. There is no obvious theme to link these figures, some of which resemble figures from the world of literature and drama, others of which might have been contemporary celebrities, but the detail of the workmanship makes them a fascinating subject for conjecture. Overlooking Worswick Street are a handlebar-moustached and bemedalled army officer, a nurse, a man who might be Shylock, a Sphinx-like Egyptian head, and a stout faced Elizabethan gentleman who gazes the Theatre Royal and who has the look of Falstaff about him. The possibility of a Shakespearian theme is dispelled, however, on the Pilgrim Street side around the corner, which includes a Chinaman wearing a coolie hat and sporting a droopy 'Fu Manchu' moustache. Also on this side is a face which bears an alarming resemblance to Charlton Heston! For many years the ground floor of the building was occupied by a pub called the Black House, which may explain these curious figures as decorations to entertain the Edwardian revellers who frequented the establishment.

Over in the Haymarket, on the west side, is a large grey stone building, now occupied by Thorne's Bookshop. The façade above, however,



The Grand Hotel, Percy Street, opened in 1890, with shops on the ground floor. This photograph dates from c.1907.

shows that the entire block was once the Grand Hotel, the name of which is carved into the stonework.

To the south in Percy Street, where it converges at a sharp angle with Leazes Park Road, is a wedge-shaped building of dark red brick which bears the legend: "T. Howe

Carriage Proprietor". Now a draper's shop at street level with offices above, the first floor of this building was once the Newcastle headquarters of the British Socialist Party. In 1911 it became the birthplace of the People's Theatre – then called the Clarion Dramatic Society – who performed plays here

until moving to the Royal Arcade in 1915. It was here that the People's presented plays that were often being seen for the first time in the north of England, and included at least one national premiere – Bernard Shaw's *The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet*, which had been banned from public performance by the Lord Chamberlain. Among the players who founded and performed with the People's in those days was Colin Veitch, who captained Newcastle United throughout their Edwardian heyday during which they were league champions three times and won the FA cup in 1910.

Further along Percy Street, where it meets Gallowgate, stands St Andrew's House. The façade of this office block bears interesting decorations high above the street consisting of a series of cream-coloured square plaques, each bearing a terracotta figure of a male nude in various action poses, the style being very reminiscent of the artist Edvard Munch.

Another building with unusual wall decorations is Sunlight Chambers on the corner of High Bridge and the Bigg Market, opposite the beautiful glazed-tile frontage of the Beehive pub. Originally built for the soap manufacturer Lever Bros, Sunlight Chambers has set into its walls above the ground floor a frieze consisting of a mosaic of white medieval figures representing various trades and occupations against a pale blue background. Many of the other buildings in the Bigg Market have very ornate façades with decorative stone and ironwork, topped by towers or minarets, and often featuring motifs reflecting the building's name. One such example is Half Moon Chambers, which has iron-railed balconies, each featuring a crescent moon motif.

The names of some Victorian and Edwardian buildings are a story in themselves. Opposite the portico of the Central Station in Neville Street at the foot of Pink Lane stands Pape Buildings. The name 'PAPE' is carved in relief at the top of the gable end overlooking the station. The Papes were a well-known family of gunsmiths who had premises in Pink Lane for many years before the First World War. It was a member of the Pape family who organised the world's first ever dog show, which took place in June 1859 at Newcastle Town Hall.

The next street to branch off Neville Street is Bewick Street, which is the site of the Port of Tyne Authority building, constructed in 1885. High up on the topmost parapet are carved numerous heraldic badges and devices, including that of the Authority itself, a shield portraying lifeboatmen rowing out to a rescue, and one bearing the motto "Always Ready".

At the other end of Neville Street, on either side of the Literary and Philosophical Society, stand Bolbec Hall and Neville Hall with their beautifully decorated and detailed stone facades. The roof of the latter is rendered particularly noteworthy for an unusual weathervane. In deference to the Institute of Mining Engineers who had offices here, the weathervane depicts a pit pony, rather improbably climbing vertically upwards, and thereby giving the casual observer the impression that they are witnessing the exploits of a particularly adventurous cat!

Finally, just across the road in Collingwood Street, is the Sun Life Building. Constructed in 1904, the main doorway has a magnificent stone portal with huge caryatids supporting the lintel. High above is a magnificent golden Sun-god motif which faces up Neville Street and which catches the rays of the evening sun beautifully as it sets over Westgate Hill.

