

# SUBTERRANEAN NEWCASTLE

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The most well and truly hidden parts of Newcastle are those which are underground. Beneath our feet in the city centre, the ground is riddled with tunnels, cellars, old mineworkings, and culverted streams. In fact, because of the streams that run beneath the modern city, many of the roads and pavements we walk over every day are actually bridges. The many streams that flow into the Tyne at Newcastle include the Ouseburn, the Lort or Lork Burn, and the Erick, the Skinner, and the Pandon Burns. Of these, only the Ouseburn is allowed to meander its way through the city mostly in the open air – but more of the Ouseburn elsewhere (see *The Eastern Suburbs* and *Jesmond and Gosforth*). One could easily be forgiven for being totally unaware of the other burns, as they are all totally enclosed. The only surviving clues to their existence are in the old names of a few streets and alleys such as Erick Street, The Swirle, and Painter Heugh. But this was not always the case. Up until they were covered during various programmes of development in the 18th and 19th centuries, the streams flowed openly through the old town's crowded streets, little more than filthy open sewers.

The Lort Burn, which approaches the Tyne beneath what is now Grey Street and Dean street, was covered in 1784 – prior to which it had been described as “a vast nauseous hollow ... a place of filth and dirt.” Three side streets at right-angles to its course still have names which hint at its presence, however – High Bridge, Low Bridge, and Painter Heugh. The name Painter Heugh is said to derive from that lane, at the foot of Dean Street, having been the highest upstream point at which small boats could be tethered with mooring ropes (painters) when the river was at high tide. Obviously, before the burn was culverted, the steep-sided banks of the Lort must have been some yards below today's street level, and

the foot of Painter Heugh would have descended much lower than it does now. It is said that at one time the Lort had been navigable far enough upstream for boats to pass under Low Bridge (about half way up Dean Street). This would seem difficult to believe today, but the tale is borne out by a legend that King Charles I escaped by boat from where he was imprisoned in Newe House (where Lloyd's Bank now stands at the top of Grey Street) but was recaptured before reaching the river at Sandhill.



*The remains of the old High Bridge beneath Grey Street.*

City Repro



Further up the hill in the Cloth Market, some of the older buildings that back onto Grey Street have cellars containing the tops of old bricked-up door frames which now stand only two or three feet high above the floor. These old doors – which now look more the size of fireplaces – are the only visible evidence that these rooms once had much lower floor levels at the back which opened out onto the burn's bank before Grey Street was developed on the west side between them and the burn.

The development of Grey Street and the enclosure of the burn afforded an opportunity for underground development as well as that which took place on the surface. Beneath the modern street lie many quite substantial and commodious cellars which were originally constructed for use by such establishments as the old Turks Head Hotel, which once occupied a site facing out onto the street.

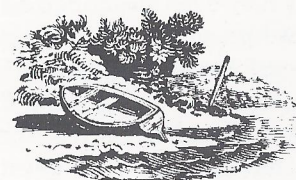
The greatest feat of underground engineering in the city is of course the Metro system, but a much earlier tunnel dug out for purposes of transportation deserves a mention here. The Victoria Tunnel, also known as the Spital Tongues Tunnel, runs diagonally beneath the city centre from the north-west to the south-east. Constructed between 1839 and 1842, the purpose of the tunnel was to provide an underground railway for the transportation of coal from the Leazes Main Colliery at Spital Tongues near the Town Moor down to the Quayside. The colliery owners, Messrs Porter and Latimer, commissioned the building of a two mile tunnel, 7ft. 3ins. high, 6ft. 3ins. wide, and lined with brick and masonry. Starting on the surface at the colliery, the tunnel ran beneath the Moor and approached the town centre under St Thomas' church at Barras Bridge, emerging at the Quayside near Glasshouse Bridge at the mouth of the Ouseburn. From the higher ground at the Moor, the tunnel followed a steady gentle slope down to the Quayside, a total descent of 222ft., with its greatest depth below ground in the town centre being 85ft.

The full coal wagons ran down the gradient by gravity, and once emptied at the quayside, were hauled back up to Leazes Main with a cable drawn by a stationary winding

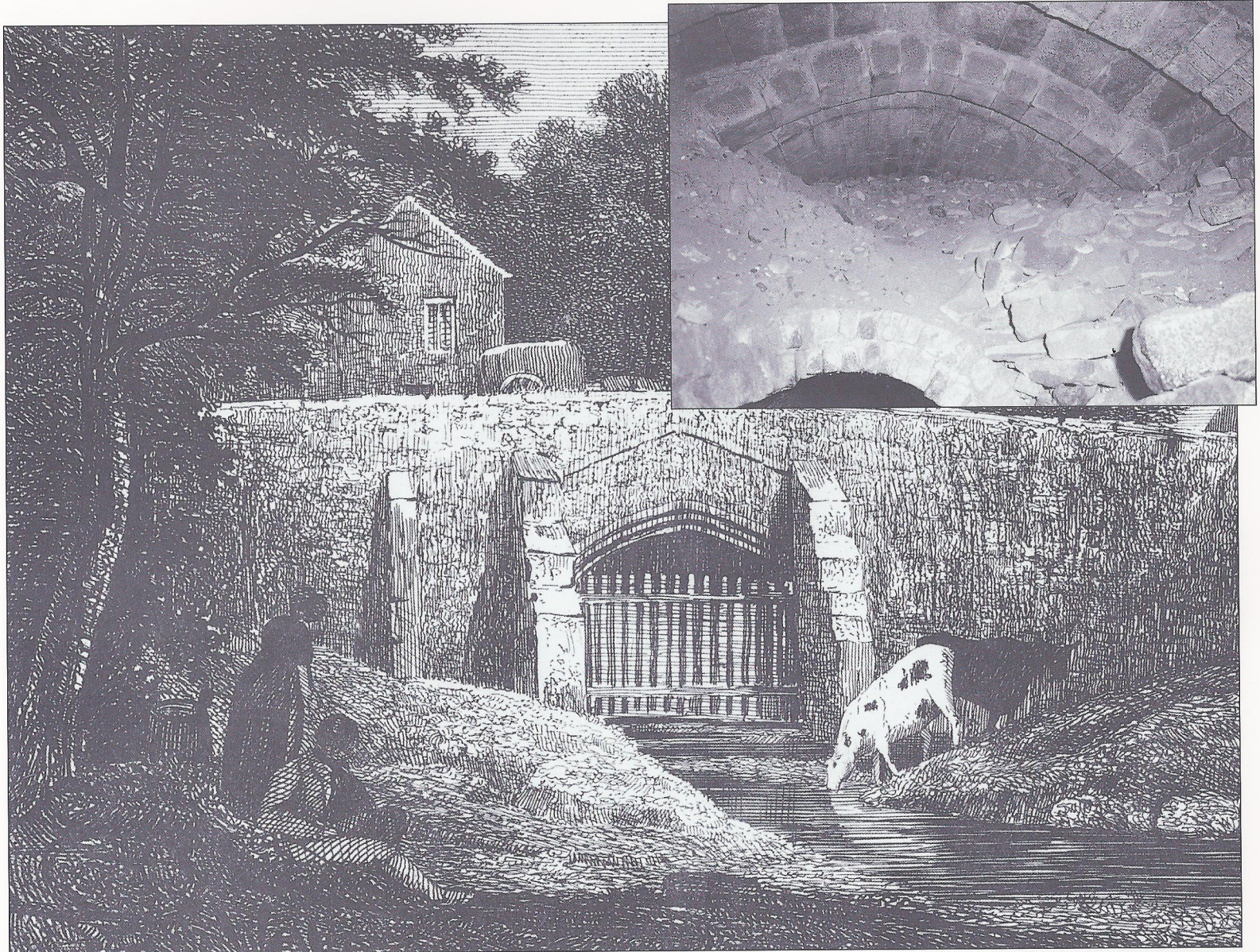
engine at the colliery. This adventurous undertaking could not, of course, have taken place without it being immortalised in a surprisingly informative song by a local poet – in this case Robert Nunn – which included the verse:

"This tunnel's two miles, and it's strange for to tell  
That twenty full wagons will travel on't well;  
With men for to brake them, they run doon se clivvor,  
And in less than six minutes they're doon to the river."

The tunnel did not remain in use as a wagonway for very long, however, and was closed within ten years, by which time the colliery had ceased to be commercially viable. But this was not the end of the tunnel's useful life. During the Second World War it was converted for use as an air raid shelter, and fitted out with bunk beds. During the 1970s it was once even considered for use as a mushroom farm, but that idea never came to fruition. Today a section of the tunnel forms part of the city's sewage system and much of it remains in good structural repair. The iron blast-proof doors of a wartime entrance can still be seen today behind a grassy verge in Ouse Street, not far from Byker Bank.







*Barras Bridge, as it used to be and its underground remains, photographed during repairs to the sewer beneath present day Barras Bridge.*