

THE HIDDEN RIVERSIDE

Once the commercial heart of Newcastle, the city's waterfront fell seriously into decline during the 1950s. Happily the Quayside is now undergoing a massive regeneration programme, but there still remains a warren of old streets, alleys, and chares, full of surprises for the curious explorer. Starting upstream, the section of the waterfront lying between the High Level Bridge and the modern Metro Bridge is called The Close. At its westernmost end, opposite the Copthorne Hotel, is a block of Victorian warehouses. Now redundant and empty, the most interesting features of this block are to be seen behind them in Hanover Street. This usually deserted thoroughfare is lined on its south side with the green-painted doors, trapdoors, and the huge warehouse numbers still fixed to the walls. The cobbled roadway is bisected along its length by the dark twin strips of a granite cart track. If this quiet back lane seems vaguely familiar, that is because it is another example of a Newcastle location much favoured by film directors – in this case notably the TV shows *Byker Grove* and *Spender*.

A walk up Hanover Street will lead to the summit of the 'Hanging Gardens' and the cobbled lanes of Clavering Place. The quickest way back down to The Close, however, is via a dim-looking opening about halfway down the street, sandwiched between the warehouse doors. This is the entrance to Hanover Stairs, a covered flight of steps passing down through the warehouse block like a tunnel, and emerging opposite the Copthorne Hotel once again. A walk downstream towards the High Level Bridge once again passes the 'Hanging Gardens' of Hanover Street, with a section of the old town wall tumbling down towards the river. To the east, the whole scene is dominated by a huge red brick building standing at the top of the bank near the High Level. This magnificent Victorian pile is Friar House. Built as a warehouse

and offices, its proliferation of folly towers, turrets, and minarets give it more the appearance of some Ruritanian schloss clinging to an Alpine mountainside.

The Close continues eastward, passing under the High Level Bridge at the foot of its tall tower supports which gave it the nickname "lang legs" in the 19th century. Here can be found some of the oldest surviving timber-framed houses in Newcastle. Once the residences of 16th century merchants and mayors, one survives as a pub – The Cooperage. Further along The Close becomes Sandhill. Here can be found the plaque on the wall outside Bessie Surtees House, marking the very window through which the 18th century heroine eloped with the local lad who was to become Lord Chancellor of England. A look inside this very quiet house – which is open to the public, and the northern headquarters of English Heritage – reveals a wealth of intricate wood-carved Jacobean decoration.

Across the road from here, right next to the river and the Swing Bridge is the former Fish Market, erected in 1880. Its unusual features include a statue of King Neptune wielding his trident and overlooking the river. A further clue to the original function of this building is given by the larger-than-usual seahorses supporting the shield on the city's Coat of Arms displayed on the side walls. The pavement in front of the Fish Market passes under the Swing Bridge with its commemorative plaques, and emerges on the other side at the Guildhall. Not usually open to the public, the upper storeys of this building contain the old Town Court and the magnificent Mayor's Chamber. The decoration is marvellous, with heraldic devices of the town's guilds, and panelling depicting scenes from Newcastle's history, all covered by a hammer-beam roof.



*The Cooperage on The Close as it used to be, c.1880.
Long Stairs can be seen to the right.*

Passing under the Tyne Bridge, we come to the Quayside proper. Much of the development overlooking the river here is 19th century, apart from the Customs House which dates from 1766. The area behind these magnificent frontages was once a warren of huddled alleys and sprawling

tenements which was largely destroyed by a great fire in 1854. The pattern of many old lanes survives, however, and alleys such as Trinity Chare – sandwiched tightly between high gable ends – meander deep behind into a maze of courtyards.

Hidden away among these back streets is a complex of old almshouses and property belonging to the Brethren of Trinity House. Established by Royal Charter in the early 16th century, this guild of Master Mariners built their meeting place and chapel here, and acquired control over river pilotage for all shipping on the Tyne as well as jurisdiction over all coastal lighthouses between Berwick and Whitby. A walk through Trinity Courtyard reveals a plethora of plaques, sundials, and other monumental masonry on the walls, usually commemorating 18th century brethren. These almshouses are now mostly barristers' chambers.

The ground rises up sharply behind these streets, up Akenside Hill and Dog Bank. Overlooking the whole scene is All Saints Church. Completed in 1796, this elegant neoclassical building is one of only a handful of oval-shaped churches in the country. Unfortunately redundant since 1961, the tall spire is almost totally obscured from the city centre by modern office development surrounding it, but from downhill on the quayside it springs into view in quite the most unexpected places – notably at the end of King Street, from where it appears to stand at the summit of a long flight of steps, very much in the manner of the Spanish Steps in Rome.

To the east of the church, hidden behind the new Law Courts building, there are still quite a few patches of greenery and mature trees scattered about. This area and the land behind rising up towards Manors is known as Pandon. Once a thriving community where some of the earliest shipbuilding on the Tyne took place in the 13th century, the name Pandon now survives only in one or two street names.

In the 18th century, when the Pandon burn had yet to be covered over, Pandon Dene was a pastoral retreat from the hubbub of the town. Contemporary prints portray it as a semi-rustic paradise with the buzzing town and quayside only a few dozen yards away. A poet signing herself

"Rosalinda" was able to write of it in *The Newcastle Magazine* in September 1776:

"When cooling zephyrs wanton play
Then off to Pandon Dene I stray;
When sore depressed with grief and woe;
When from a busy world I go;
My mind is calm, my soul serene,
Beneath the bank in Pandon Dene."

It is pleasing to see that a few of the "towering trees" she later refers to are still standing overlooking what is left of Pandon Dene today. The source of Pandon's name is not certain, but it is thought possibly to be of Roman origin, derived from 'Pandana', the name of one of the gates of ancient Rome itself. This part of the town was later to be the site of the Pandon Gate in the medieval town wall – could it be that the Romans who once occupied Pons Aelii named this place at the very edge of their empire as the very northernmost "gateway" to Rome? It is further said that the ancient kings of Northumbria had a residence here after the Romans departed. Whilst there is no evidence to support this, it would seem certain that this place can claim ancient foundation, as even in the 17th century, William Grey was to write that Pandon was: "... a place of such antiquitie that if a man would express any ancient thing, it is a common proverb to say; 'as old as Pandon'."



*A view of Pandon Dene in 1821, with the New Bridge and All Saints in the background.
This view would have been taken from just north of the present Warners Cinema.*