

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE TYNE BRIDGE

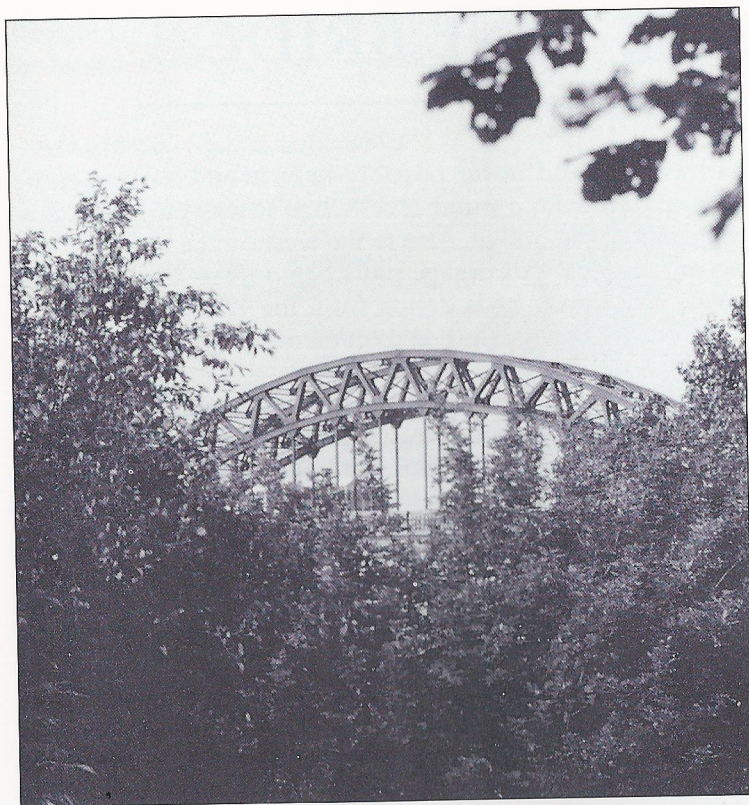
Probably Newcastle's most famous landmark of all, the Tyne Bridge, is nothing more than a traffic bottleneck to the thousands of motorists who cross it every day. Yet as an instantly recognisable symbol of our region and its principal city, it is to Tyneside what the Eiffel Tower is to Paris. This huge structure can hardly be described as being hidden, but like its near neighbour the High Level Bridge, the number of people who actually walk across it or even give it a second glance is tiny in proportion to the number who cross the river on it or pass beneath it on the Quayside each day. And yet a closer look is certainly worthwhile for the curious. A walk across the pathway on the eastern side of the bridge affords excellent birds-eye views of the river and quayside, particularly for spectacular events such as the Tall Ships Race, or firework displays. Very few people are even aware that this pathway is accessible via a public lift from the quayside at the foot of the bridge's tower in Lombard Street. Either from ground level or from the pathway above, the streets at the foot of this tower have a very American look to them. The architectural design of the grey-stone offices with the bridge towering over the canyon-like streets combine to give a suggestion of New York – a look used to great effect by Tyneside-born director Mike Figgis in his 1980s film-noir *Stormy Monday*. The pathway on the west side passes over the roofscape of Victorian Sandhill, providing detail of the ornate and highly decorated eaves and gables normally only seen at such close quarters by pigeons. Detailed carvings such as the coats of arms atop the Royal Insurance Building – only yards from the bridge

pathway – could never possibly have been clearly seen or appreciated from ground level when it was built so many years before the bridge. Also to the west can be glimpsed the 'secret gardens' or burgage plots behind The Close – small lawns and flower beds dating from the 17th century when those buildings were the homes of merchants and Newcastle's hostmen.

The Tyne Bridge itself is certainly worth a closer look, and has a few interesting features of its own. The badges of the Corporations of Newcastle and Gateshead are carved in



An unusual rear view of Bessie Surtees House, Sandhill, a surviving 17th century dwelling.



The Tyne Bridge's familiar shape, seen from Rabbit Banks.

relief above the round-arched doorways of the four stone towers. The original metal lanterns on either side of these doorways are still glazed with the logo of a more recent yet much shorter-lived authority, Tyne and Wear County Council (1974-84), and remain as evidence of an earlier refurbishment. In the middle of the bridge pathways on either side, set into the cast railings, are plaques commemorating the opening of the bridge by King George V in 1928.

Contrary to popular belief, the Tyne Bridge was not a 'trial run' for the much larger Sydney Harbour Bridge in Australia, the plans for which had been drawn up before those of our local landmark. But Newcastle's green leviathan

is nevertheless unique in that it is the only bridge in the world to have had a play written about it. On 9th October 1928, the evening before the bridge was opened by the king, the infant Northern Service of BBC Radio broadcast a short drama with music entitled *The Bridge of Tyne* on the old 5NO Newcastle station. Written by local antiquarian Mr G.R.B. Spain of Jesmond – the father of 1950s author and TV celebrity Nancy Spain – the play was a fantasy featuring characters portraying amongst others the river god of the Tyne, and the spirits of the old Roman bridge and the new one. A world away from the carousing joy of earlier Tyneside wordsmiths celebrating local bridge construction, such as Joe Wilson, this rather high-brow play was set to specially commissioned chamber music, and included a prayer from the Emperor Hadrian, spoken at the dedication ceremony of his new bridge on the Tina (Tyne): "I pray that the future may bring prosperity and trade to this new port ... I name this bridge, and the quay, and the fort ... Pons Aelii!"

Having crossed the bridge from Newcastle to Gateshead, it is worthwhile taking a short detour westward through Gateshead's Half Moon Lane and Wellington Street to the tree-lined slopes of Rabbit Banks. High Level Road runs westward from the southern approach to Stephenson's iron bridge along the ridge of this urban oasis. From here in high summer, the top of the Tyne Bridge's arch can just be seen peeping over the top of the thick tree canopy. Across the river, the city of Newcastle is spread out in all its glory. In 1891, an anonymous writer described this panorama thus: "The view from Hillgate is indeed a moving sight. Pinnacles and towers innumerable rise above one another ... grandest of all is the tower of the Cathedral Church of St Nicholas." It is both pleasing and surprising to note that the same view, which in 1891 would often have been obscured by smogs arising from the heavy industry based around the river, remains largely unchanged to this day.