

# WESTGATE AND THE WEST

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From the heart of the city, at the approaches to the High Level Bridge, Westgate Road passes the Central Station and climbs Westgate Hill, reaching out into Northumberland as it becomes the West Road. Alongside this lengthy and ancient thoroughfare are some of the oldest and most curiously concealed parts of Hidden Newcastle. The road itself is so named because it was the road to the west (from the Norse word "geat" meaning street or road) and not, as you might think, after the great West Gate in the town which once stood where there is now the crossroads with Bath Lane and Thornton Street. Here, at the foot of the hill is the Tyne Theatre – a magnificent Victorian opera house with lavish interior decoration, and which still has its original wooden trap and flying machinery beneath the stage. This theatre, where a variety of great entertainers from Charlie Chaplin to Placido Domingo have trod the boards, doubtless has many tales of its own to tell. But no other theatre in the country can claim to have a forgotten cemetery hidden away behind its back stairs!

In the middle of the block in which the theatre stands, flanked by Thornton Street, Peel Street, and Peel Lane on its other three sides, is a square of ground hemmed in by the high walls of the surrounding buildings. It might be expected that this was simply a light well to allow daylight, ventilation, and back window space for the theatre and its neighbours, were it not for the presence of several gravestones. This is, in fact, the remains of a 19th century cemetery with an unfortunate and short-lived history which led to its unusual position today. In 1835, Newcastle's Jewish community purchased a plot of land in what was then an undeveloped area to the north of Thornton Street. Intending to use the vacant plot as a burial ground, they paid £62.10s for just over 250 square yards. Within 30 years, however, this area had become the

scene of much development as the town expanded westward, and the cemetery was earmarked as the site for the new theatre. Despite appeals against the plans, including a plea directly to the Prime Minister Lord Palmerston, the Jewish community lost their battle to save their cemetery. In consolation, they were promised that the 55 square yards which had actually been used would remain untouched, as indeed they have to this day.

Accessible at ground level only via the Newcastle Lighting Centre, the site is rather barren today, with little vegetation surviving due to the lack of direct sunlight. Only five



*The Jewish cemetery behind Westgate Road*



grave stones are left now, and the Hebrew inscriptions on them are badly eroded and are illegible apart from one which commemorates Matilda Gaskell, who died in 1851.

Further up Westgate Road, even older remains are to be found, again in curious and unexpected surroundings.

"Newcastle, they say, is the work of Caesar." So wrote Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini when he visited the town in 1435. Later to become Pope Pius II (1458-64), Piccolomini was travelling in England as Papal mediator between Charles VII of France and Henry VI of England. Indeed, this medieval Italian visitor was quite right in claiming the foundation of Newcastle to be the work of his own countrymen, though today the few remains of Roman settlement are all to be found far to the west of the city centre. Hadrian's Wall, having passed from Wallsend through central Newcastle, headed west along what are now the Westgate and West Roads. It is within the anonymous suburbs alongside these roads that the most ancient ruins in the city lie hidden. In Benwell, on the southern side of the West Road opposite Rutherford School, Broomridge Avenue lies tucked away from the main road. This would be a typical suburban street of semi-detached houses with gardens and lawns, were it not for the presence of an ancient Roman temple in what would be the front garden of number 48. This is the only remaining vestige of the Roman wall fort which was called Condercum – meaning "place for a good look-out". This temple was probably built in the late 2nd century by the Roman Army cohort of the Vangiones, who were the garrison of Condercum. It was dedicated as a shrine to the minor celtic deity called Antenociticus. Replicas of the original altars now flank the apse, in which a life-size statue of the god once stood. The small well-lawned site is well maintained by the Department of Environment. It is a very curious feeling, nevertheless, to stand gazing at the remains of an ancient Roman temple which is immediately overlooked by someone's back kitchen window only yards away.

Further up the West Road near the junction with the Western Bypass in Denton is a substantial portion of Hadrian's Wall itself. Here on a grassy verge by the main road and only a few feet away from the incessant traffic, stand about 50 yards of the wall. Up to two or three feet high in places, this length of wall also includes the remains of a square tower which was excavated in the 1920s. The builders of the nearby housing certainly entered into the spirit of things, as the local street names include Turret Road, West Vallum, Legion Grove, and The Forum. Though quite unremarkable to passers-by, and accepted casually by the local residents, it is a source of constant surprise to many who come across it to find a part of the wall which is not out in the wilds of Northumberland.



*Archaeology in the city: the Roman Wall at Denton looking east.*

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