



Live Well  
with Cancer

# Step into Shields



A walking  
guide!



**North Shields' history dates from the 13th century, when Prior Germanus of Tynemouth Priory constructed a quay to facilitate the landing of fish for the monastery.** Fishermen settled nearby in temporary huts known as "shiels", giving the town its name.

By the late 1200s, around 200 of these shiels housed nearly 1,000 people, with fishing fleets venturing as far as Iceland. Supporting trades—such as bakers and brewers—soon followed.

However, the town's growing prosperity drew hostility from Newcastle's powerful Hostmen, who in 1290 secured royal backing to control all trade on the Tyne.

They destroyed much of Shields' infrastructure, forbidding ships from trading there. Despite this, the town slowly rebuilt, becoming known for salt and fish exports, although coal still had to be shipped via Newcastle.

The tide turned in the 19th century. In 1838, North Shields became an independent port, and by 1850, the River Tyne Improvement Commission ended Newcastle's monopoly, allowing North Shields to trade directly.

The town's population has steadily grown—fuelled by a strong community spirit that remains vibrant and continues to thrive today.



North Shields Fish Quay 1890  
Image source: localhistoryvideos.com



North Shields Fish Quay 1965  
Image source: Flickr

# The walk

The walk will take you to several key stops in North Shields, providing a glimpse into the town's history and introducing you to just a few of the special individuals who have contributed to its legacy.

Follow the maps to take you to the next point and try to solve the questions as you go.

The walk should take between 1.5 and 2 hours; however, there are plenty of fantastic cafés and eateries if you wish to extend it, and there are also lots of other areas to explore.

**For your first stop, please head to North Shields Transport Hub.**

## Safety notice

This self-guided walk includes road crossings and uneven pavements. Please take care, look both ways, and support anyone who may need extra help. Participants under 18 must be accompanied by an adult. You are responsible for your own safety and for staying on the designated route without trespassing. The characters featured are real, but the words we share have been used for entertainment purposes only.

**Duration  
1.5-2hrs**

## North Shields Transport Hub



**Next stop**



North Shields Metro Station, 1912

Image source: co-curate.ncl.ac.uk

## Tommy Brown North Shields Transport Hub

Hi, I'm Tommy Brown. I was born in North Shields in 1926, and this square is named after me. In 1942, I boarded a sinking German submarine to retrieve important documents. What I found helped crack the Enigma code – the system used by the Nazis to send secret messages. Only after I returned did people discover I was too young to be at sea in the first place. I was just 16.

When I lived here, the Metro station was a busy railway stop. Way back in 1839, the Newcastle & North Shields Railway opened a station here,



Thomas Brown Memorial

Image source: Live Well with Cancer charity

making North Shields the terminus for what's now considered the world's oldest purpose-built suburban railway. The line extended to Tynemouth by 1847.

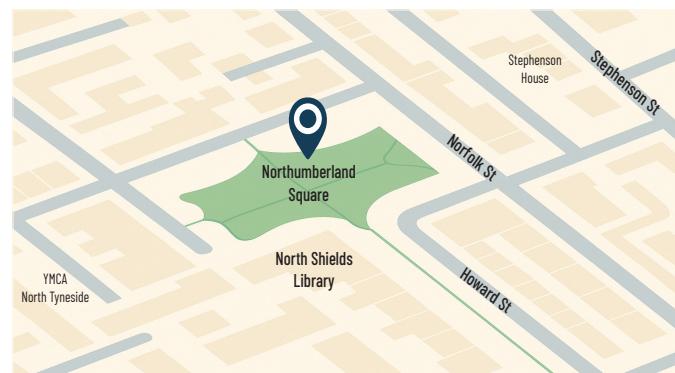
In 1904, it was electrified under the "Tyneside Electrics" programme – a major innovation at the time, and a step towards what we now know as the Metro. In 1982, it reopened as part of the Tyne & Wear Metro network. You're standing next to the Hub – North Tyneside's first net-zero carbon building.

## Quiz time ?

Can you see the shield on the wall?  
That's the North Tyneside Coat of Arms. Which of these does not appear on the North Tyneside coat of arms?

Hint: 5 errors

## Northumberland Square



# Ellen Lee

## Northumberland Square

Hello, I'm Ellen Lee. I was a local air raid warden and lived right here in North Shields. People used to say I had a heart of gold – that I'd "do anything for anyone."

On the night of 3rd May 1941, the town was bombed. Over 190 people were sheltering with me when a blast hit. Despite being injured, I helped clear rubble to make a way out, guiding people to safety. Then I headed to a local meeting place to care for the injured – even though I was badly hurt myself. My injuries were so severe that, later, my husband barely recognised me.

Northumberland Square looks different now, but it's always been at the heart of the town.



Northumberland Square - Now  
Image source: Live Well with Cancer charity



Northumberland Square- 1930-1950s  
Image source: Chronicle Live



It was designed by landowner John Wright as part of a grand new development in the early 1800s.

The north side was finished by 1810, and the east and west sides were completed by 1880, making it the most complete Georgian square on Tyneside.

At first, the square was private – residents had keys to the gated garden. But by 1959, it had become a public space.

## Quiz time ?

Can you spot the differences between how the park looked then compared to now?

Hint: 5 differences

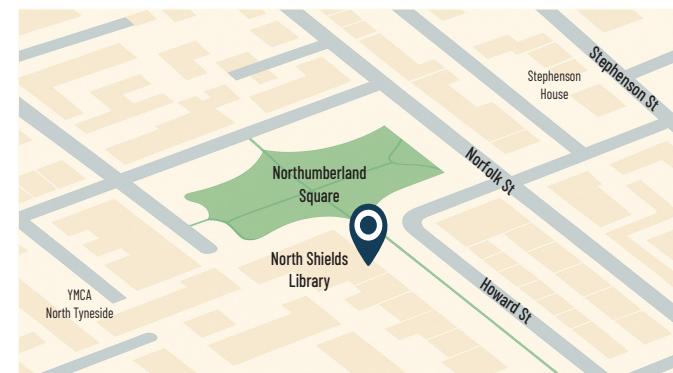


Past



Present

## North Shields Library



Next stop

# The Wooden Dolly

## North Shields Library

Did you know there's been a Wooden Dolly like me in North Shields for over 200 years? The first three were old ship's figureheads. Then, in 1920, a new Dolly was carved – a fisherwoman with her basket – and that's the style you see today.

Fishing has always been at the heart of this town, and fishermen were a deeply superstitious lot. They'd slice a sliver of wood from the Dolly for good luck.

Wives wouldn't wash clothes on the day the boats left. They'd never whistle on board – it was said to whistle up a storm. Some even had it written into their contracts that they wouldn't sail after seeing a bad omen.



### Importance to Shields

The Wooden Dolly is more than just a statue – it's a symbol of the maritime and fishing culture of North Shields, acknowledging both the coal-shipping trade and the female fishwives of the area.



Wooden Dolly in Northumberland square  
Image source: Wikimedia Commons



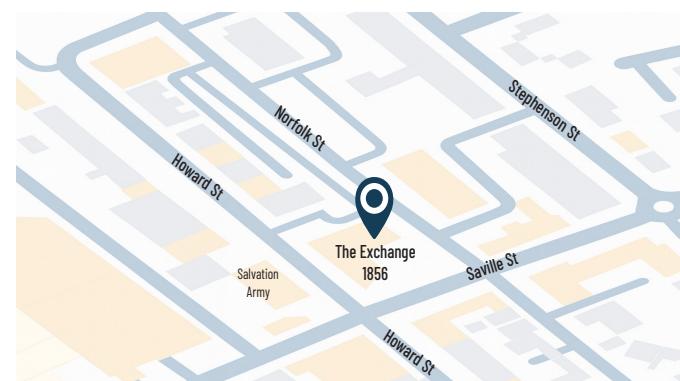
1905 Wooden Dolly, North Shields  
Image source: Newcastle Libraries (Flickr)

## Quiz time ?

The fish quay still runs 24/7, and later on you'll get a closer look – maybe even spot another Dolly. I'm the youngest of the bunch. I was carved from a single piece of mahogany by Robert Thompson, known as "The Mouseman." He liked to hide a little animal on everything he made. Can you spot where it is on the dolly?



### Howard Street



Next stop

# John Dobson

## Howard Street

Good day, I'm John Dobson. Born in North Shields, I'm most famous for being a distinguished architect. I had a very long and successful career, spanning more than 50 years. I've been involved in over 400 works and projects covering every type of building, including grand homes, churches, railway stations, shopping arcades, and more.

I was the main architect involved in Richard Grainger's redevelopment of Newcastle and also designed several projects in North Shields, particularly on and around Howard Street.

Howard Street was designed as the main street within the Georgian-era New Town development. Named after the land-owning Howard family from Carlisle, the street was laid out in the early 19th century and featured grand civic buildings, as well as large shops, offices and homes.

Let's look at a few buildings designed by me!



## The Salvation Army

The Salvation Army at 28 Howard Street was originally known as the 'Scots Church'. Before the church was built, the congregation would meet in several parts of the town. The building housed a school and was used for wartime recruiting in 1915.

Salvation Army - present  
Image source: Live Well with Cancer charity



Former Scottish Presbyterian Church  
Image source: Rememberingthepast.co

Howard Street as North Shields' centre of Commercial Life

Image source: BBC



The Exchange 1856

Image source: Live Well with Cancer charity

## The Exchange 1856 (Howard Street)

If you look over the door, you will see a sign "Borough of Treasurer's Office." This denotes the old town hall building. Facilities inside included a courtroom, a police station, and cells for five prisoners. Today, the building is an extraordinary venue, with live music, events, food and drinks.

Check out the courtyard for a hidden memorial stained glass to Tommy Brown!

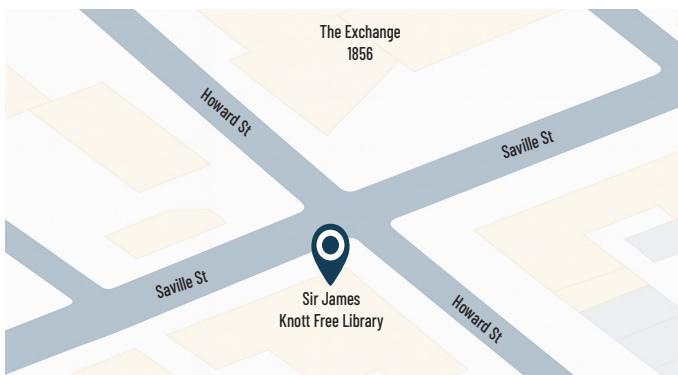


# Quiz time ?

Which one of these buildings was not designed by John Dobson ?

- Grainger Market
- Newcastle's Central Station
- Beaufort Castle
- St James' Park
- Morpeth Gaol and Courthouse
- Doxford Hall
- Jesmond Dene Banqueting Hall
- St Thomas the Martyr

## Sir James Knott Free Library



Next stop

# Sir James Knott

Free Library and follow on pages for North Shields Registry Office

I'm Sir James Knott – a shipping magnate and Conservative politician from Howdon, educated at the Scotch School in North Shields. I began work at 14 in a Newcastle shipbroker's office but soon set out to build my own fleet. I went on to create The Prince Line, which, alongside The Stag Line, became one of North Shields' major internationally recognised shipping companies. Known for my belief in "action, not words," I donated generously to local causes. Knotts Flats, built to give safe, modern homes to North

Shields seafaring families, still stand as part of my legacy.

Let me introduce two key buildings on this street. On the corner of Saville Street stands the North Shields Mechanics Institute, built in 1857-58 by architect John Johnstone. In 1870 it became Tyneside's first free library, drawing on collections from the Institute and the Tynemouth Literary & Philosophical Society. During World War II, its first floor was reinforced with steel supports to better withstand air raids...

## North Shields Registry Office



# The North Shields Registry Office

If you walk further down the bank, you'll come to the North Shields Registry Office.

This is a Grade II building and was originally the Maritime Chambers. It was built in 1806-07 as the North of England's first subscription library for the Tynemouth Literary and Philosophical Society.

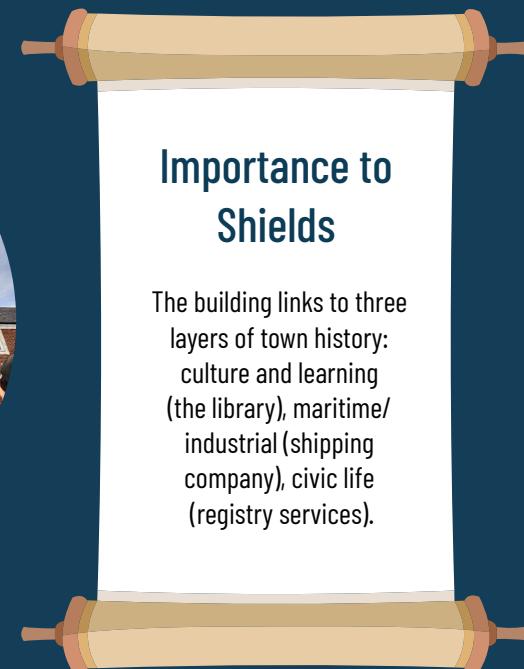


North Shields Registry Office  
Image source: Live Well with Cancer charity

Honorary members included Admiral Lord Collingwood and his wife, Lady Collingwood. Between 1895 and 1980, the building was used by Stag Line Ltd, one of Tyneside's oldest family-owned shipping companies. In 1998, it opened as a registry office and has two rooms which can be used for ceremonies.

## Importance to Shields

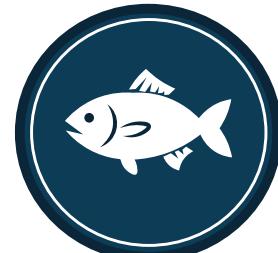
The building links to three layers of town history: culture and learning (the library), maritime/industrial (shipping company), civic life (registry services).



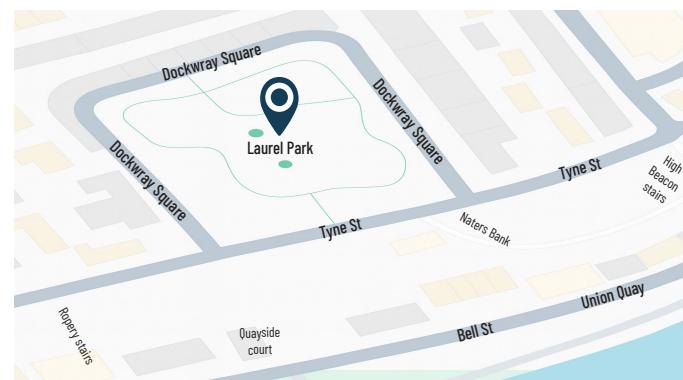
## Quiz time ?

You can still see an emblem on the side of the building, linking to the building's past.

Which of the images below features on the emblem?



## Laurel Park



Next stop

# Stan Laurel

## Dockwray Square

Hi, I'm Stan Laurel. I wasn't born in North Shields, but I lived here for years, first at Dockwray Square and then at Ayres Terrace. My dad, Arthur Jefferson, was the manager of the Theatre Royal on Prudhoe Street and was a showman in his own right. To drum up business, he once paraded a lion through the streets of North Shields—in a cage, of course. But to really grab attention, he placed a dummy stuffed with meat inside the cage, making it look like the lion was savaging a man.

There were virtually no buildings on the top of the bank until Dockwray Square was laid out in 1763. Despite the attractive setting, the houses lacked basic amenities such as running water and drainage.



### Did you know?

Laurel and Hardy had a famous pose? Hardy would scratch Laurel's head, as Laurel smiled below. Why not recreate this photo with your group and share on social media with #StepIntoShields

Over time, wealthier residents moved to more modern parts of town, such as The Square.

By the time my family moved here in 1897, the housing was very run-down. By the mid-1950s, the site was demolished before being remade.



# Laurel Park

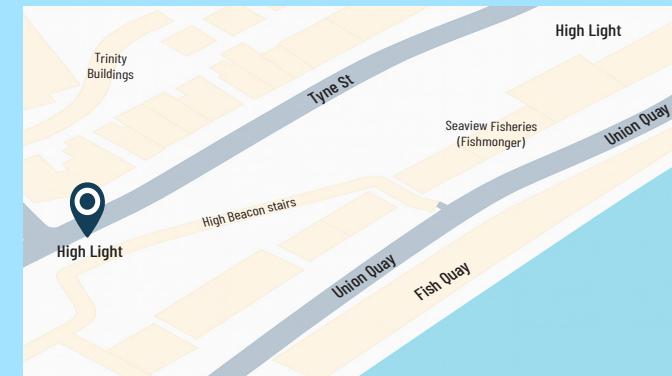
If you head down the steep steps towards the Quayside, you may well be struck by creative inspiration, in a similar way, people say I was. There is an infamous piano scene in The Music Box, where Hardy and I struggle (and fail, repeatedly) to deliver a piano to the top of a very steep staircase.

Oscar-winning comedy, born from a local climb.

"Humour is the truth; wit is an exaggeration of the truth."



# High Light



Next stop

# High Lights and Low Lights

I'm Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood.

I was born in Newcastle in 1748 and joined the Royal Navy at the age of 13. Most of my life was spent at sea.

During the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, I took command of the British fleet after the death of my friend, Admiral Nelson. We achieved a decisive victory that day. Some say my calm leadership under fire and strategic skill earned me the deep respect of my peers and the nation. There's even a towering monument dedicated to me here in Tynemouth – I'm rather pleased to be keeping watch over the mouth of the River Tyne, guarding the seas I knew so well.

Sailing, especially near the coast, is a dangerous business.

The seabanks off North Shields have claimed many ships over the centuries.

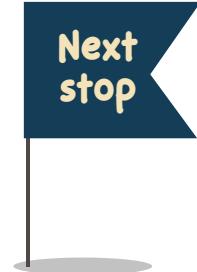
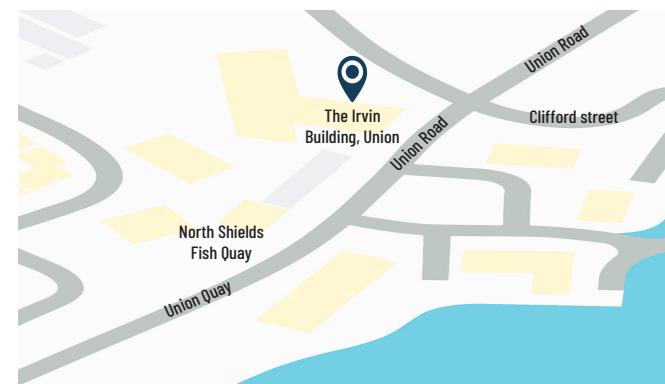
To help guide vessels safely into the Tyne, a pair of navigation towers known as the High and Low Lights were first built in the 16th century. These "leading lights" worked together – when a ship's captain saw them aligned one above the other, they knew they were on a safe course into the river.

The towers were rebuilt in the 18th and 19th centuries to reflect changes in the landscape and shipping needs. The one you see now is the "new" High Light, completed in 1807 – just two years after Trafalgar. Though eventually made obsolete by modern navigation systems like radar and GPS, these towers remain standing.

Today, they're protected as listed buildings, proud symbols of North Shields' rich maritime heritage.



## The Irvin Building



As you walk down towards the Fish Quay, you are now entering what was once known as the Low Town. Before the 18th Century, dozens of stairs lined the steep banks to connect the Low Town with the High Town.

Why not pop into the Old Low Light Heritage Centre & Café at Clifford's Fort—explore their exhibition, have a cuppa and check out their shop!



High Beacon Stairs  
Image source: co.curate.ncl.ac.uk



Low town, North Shields  
Image source: nsgallery.co

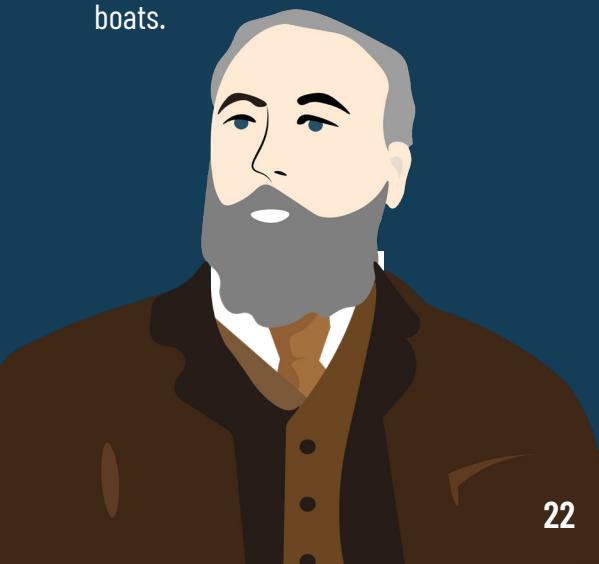


These stairs provided entry to the hundreds of packed tenement buildings constructed along the banksides. There was a high concentration of taverns and alehouses. In the early 20th Century, many of the buildings and tenements were demolished.

# The Irvin Building, Union Road

Good day! I'm Richard Irvin. I'm a North Shields lad, born and bred – and one of the great entrepreneurs to come out of this town. I grew up in the Low Town, where life wasn't easy. I saw real poverty, but also plenty of hard work and a strong sense of community. It's amazing to think the North Shields Fish Quay has been in operation since the 13th Century.

Over time, I built up my business and ended up employing hundreds of local people. I established an ice company, opened a cannery – known as Tyne Brand – and even owned a fleet of over 30 fishing boats.



R Irvin & Sons Building

Image source: Live Well with Cancer charity

# Art Murals

Just over there, on the corner, is a Grade II listed building that bears my name. It was built in 1913, and I always thought of it as a special place. Some say that very corner is where North Shields truly began.

Union Road is steeped in history. Down this bank once flowed the Pow Burn, and the original quay – the first working wharf – was located nearby. Just up the slope behind us stood the original “shiel”, simple fishermen’s huts from which North Shields gets its name. That first community began here more than 800 years ago.

## What is NS800?

“NS800” refers to the 800-year anniversary celebration of North Shields. It is a year-long (or extended) programme of events, heritage, art and community initiatives marking the town’s founding in around 1225.

The programme includes murals, community events, heritage trails, etc.



If you look behind, you might see some new art which connects the past to the present. The piece was created by artist Prefab 77 and is part of the NS800 trail.

Why not explore the rest of the murals in your free time?



## Low Light, Fish Quay, Clifford's Fort & Fiddler's Green



## Fiddler's Green

We end our tour on Fiddler's Green, next to Ray Lonsdale's statue of a Fisherman which commemorates all the lives lost at sea.

Behind him is what's left of Clifford's Fort - a defensive gun battery built to defend the Tyne during the Anglo-Dutch Wars. A stone fort was constructed in 1672, equipped with 40 guns by 1677.



## Clifford's Fort

From its beginnings, Clifford's Fort was associated with the long-established nearby defences of Tynemouth Castle. The fort continued in use as a gun battery until the second half of the 19th century, when in 1888 the fort became the headquarters of the newly-established Tyne Division Royal Engineers (Volunteers) Submarine Miners.



## Old Low Lights

There's also the Old Low Lights. An earlier lighthouse was built on the site in 1539, but the current Old Low Light building, completed around 1727, was part of a pair of leading lights to navigate the Tyne estuary. It is the oldest surviving occupied building on North Shields Fish Quay.

It has had numerous uses, including serving as an Alms House, which provided support for poor and sick mariners, before becoming a training base for the Deep-Sea Fisheries Association and later the Maritime Volunteer Service. The heritage centre opened in 2015, its development driven by local enthusiasts and has become a vibrant cultural and educational hub.



Images source from this page: Live Well with Cancer charity



### Did you know?

The name 'Fiddler's Green' comes from sailor mythology. In old maritime folklore, it's a place where seafarers go when they die – "where the girls are kind and the rum is free."

### Keep exploring

- The Herring Girl
- Mary Ann Macham
  - The Jungle
- NS800 Heritage Trail
- Tynemouth Priory Castle

# Step Into Shields

Step into Shields, and what do you see,  
A proud town, with eight hundred years of history.

Built for a purpose, a God-given goal,  
The Priory surveyed as the fishermen left shore.  
Brewers and bakers, soon would reside,  
In the town growing stronger, on the bank of the Tyne.

Our neighbours stood watch, fought to hold us down,  
Guarding their wealth, defending the crown.

With each tide that ebbed, we found new ways  
To shape our future and improve our days.

Pride hard won. Hope, our guide.  
Our spirit to serve, forever tied.

Then came shipmakers, and Herring Girls, too,  
Wor Dolly, a good luck charm, to me, and to you  
Bombs shook the square, buildings came down,  
But heroes are sewn into the heart of our town,

Lee stood fearless, as Brown acted bravely,  
Dobson rebuilt. Have you admired the town lately?  
Cuddy, our hero, forever protecting.  
Guarding the home, we're still busy perfecting.

Step into Shields, and what do you see,  
Over the next eight hundred years of history?

Revitalised and focused, communities that thrive?  
Only unified will our town survive.  
Step into Shields, and what do you see?  
Tell me.



# Quiz answers

Quiz 1 - North Tyneside Coat of Arms -  
Spot the errors

Correct:

1. Three England flags on ship
2. Three golden crowns for Tynemouth Abbey
3. Lighthouse on right shield
4. Bottom white wave on armour
5. Chain for unity

Quiz 2 - Northumberland Square -

Spot the difference between past and present

Correct: *Plinth on the Dolly, Car, Clothing, Bench, Ball*

Quiz 3 - Robert Thompson 'Mouseman' -

Find the hidden animal on the Dolly

*Up her sleeve*

Quiz 4 - John Dobson - Which building isn't  
designed by John Dobson?

*St James' Park*

Quiz 5 - North Shields Registry Office - What is  
on the emblem on the side of the building?

*Stag*



## Thank you for taking part in Step into Shields.

As a local charity, we are immensely proud of our town, and we hope you've enjoyed discovering some of its many highlights along your route.

If you would prefer to avoid the walk up the bank, a bus shelter is available at Fiddler's Green, with regular services to the North Shields Transport Hub. Public toilets can be found close by, along with a wonderful selection of cafés, restaurants, and places to relax and refuel.

Finally, if you have been affected by cancer, please know we are here for you. We are here to offer support, understanding or a friendly face whenever you need it. Our Live Well Hub on Nile Street provides a welcoming space with free workshops, events, and support groups for anyone living with or beyond a cancer diagnosis, as well as for their families, friends, and carers.

## Special thanks to

VODA, NS800, The National Lottery Heritage Fund  
and Live Well with Cancer

**Maureen Elliott**

CEO, Live Well with Cancer

# Capture the spirit and history of North Shields in every step.

Discover the hidden stories and scenic paths of North Shields with this engaging walking guide! Perfect for explorers of all ages, this booklet leads you through historic streets, buildings and monuments rich in maritime heritage along with local legends that shaped the town's character.

With interactive quizzes, illustrated maps, and fun facts, each walk becomes a journey through time – inviting you to learn, explore, and connect with North Shields like never before. Whether you're a curious local or a first-time visitor, this guide is your perfect companion to step into the past while enjoying the present.



Share your walk with us:  
**#StepIntoShields**

Or tag us at  
**@LiveWellwithCancer**



Written by Ashley Elliott from Newcastle City Guides. Illustrations by Jervie Ellamil (@jedesigns.studio) and features photographs from trusted online resources. Live Well with Cancer produced this guide in partnership with VODA, NS800 and The National Lottery Heritage Fund.