



The Coastal Walk



North Tyneside Council

The Coastal

'Miles of golden curving sand' is how the coastline, immediately to the south of St. Mary's Island, Whitley Bay, was described in the heyday of British seaside resorts. A simple, but honest, marketing description of an area loved by generations of families. However, the sun has now set on those busy, candyfloss days by the sea. The beaches are quieter and the kiss-me-quick hats have disappeared. But the coastline remains as enticing as ever and, whatever the weather, a walk along the coast remains a great way to spend the day. This walk along the coast will give you a flavour of everything you could wish for from a trip to the sea; birds, flowers, history, art, literature, architecture, modern culture and, for those with a yearning for the traditional seaside day out, there may even be some candyfloss along the way.



Walk

1 In 1739, a certain Michael Curry murdered the landlord of the Three Horse Shoes Inn at Hartley, a village to the north of Whitley Bay, and, following his execution at the Westgate in Newcastle upon Tyne, his body was hung from a gibbet on the headland overlooking St. Mary's Island. Since that time the headland has been known as Curry's Point and a blue plaque, attached to a large piece of sandstone, marks the spot and also the start of this linear walk. However, before commencing your journey south, a trip across the short causeway to St. Mary's Island, time and tide allowing, will prove worthwhile. First lit in 1898, the lighthouse, which was so much a part of the local landscape that it was incorporated into the Whitley Bay Coat of Arms in 1954, is now a visitor centre. A 137- step climb to the top of the lighthouse is rewarded by superb views. Again on the headland, and with your back to the island, head along the promenade, looking down to the rocks below; a favourite feeding and resting place for a host of waders, terns and gulls. When the promenade curves to the right, climb to the top of the grass bank and you will be adjacent to the St. Mary's Wetland. This freshwater area attracts a wide variety of birds, some migratory, others who make their home here, so keep your eyes peeled for oystercatchers, kestrels, curlews, green sandpipers, yellow wagtails and more.

2 Once the promenade comes to an end, there are two alternative routes. You can either walk along the sandy beach close to the sea or you can keep to the cliff top, along the edge of the miniature golf course. Both routes converge in a short while at the small hump-back, stone footbridge over the Brierdene Burn. This small coastal dene provides an interesting refuge for plants and wildflowers and is dotted with red admiral, small tortoiseshell and painted lady butterflies during the height of the summer. Cross over the footbridge and follow the path as it cuts left across the bankside to join the beginning of the northern promenade on the other side. After little more than 400 metres, you will pass the much loved Rendezvous Café, for so long a Whitley Bay landmark. The opening lines of Julia Darling's poem, 'Rendezvous Café: Whitley Bay', "I would like us to meet/where the Horlicks is sweet./I could tell you my story/with a knickerbocker glory", perfectly encapsulate the mood of this delightful seaside ice cream parlour.

*Where the Horlicks is sweet
The Rendezvous Cafe*



- 11 The Fish Quay, an area steeped in history, continues to undergo regeneration, and is a place where work and leisure sit comfortably side by side. As you continue along the main road following the river closely, you will pass fish merchants, fish and chip restaurants, pubs, cafes and riverside apartments. The Fisherman`s Mission building is a reminder that this is still very much a working environment despite the overall decline in the fishing industry. There are many historically important buildings within the Fish Quay area, including the `old` and `new` High and Low Lights and the remains of the 1672 Clifford`s Fort. Once past the Fisherman`s Mission you will soon reach the Prince of Wales public house and the buxom `Wooden Dolly`, an artwork made out of oak by Martyn and Jane Grubb in the form of an old ships figurehead. Installed in 1992, the work stands on the spot where a wooden dolly has traditionally stood since the early 1800`s.

- 12 You are now on the final lap of the walk as you continue to follow the road past new riverside apartments and then, to your right, the steep embankments which lead up towards the town centre. When the Porthole public house is reached and you have cut across the bottom of Borough Road, you have arrived at the New Quay, or Market Place, first laid out in 1770. However, before leaving for home look closely at the older part of the imposing building on the north side of the road. Built in 1806 by the Duke of Northumberland, it was for many years the home of the notorious Northumberland Arms Inn, known to sailors far and wide as `the Jungle`. The corner part of the building, adjacent to Borough Road, was once a sailors home, a fact recognised by the blue plaque affixed to the river facing façade of the building.



*A walk for all seasons -
Tynemouth Longsands in Winter*

Devised and Written: Geoff Holland and Jonathan Barrant - 2005
Photographs: Geoff Holland

3 Continue along the promenade, passing first an interesting art décor style drinking fountain, erected in 1937 to commemorate the coronation of King George VI, and then the Panama Swimming Club building, whose hardy members are renowned locally for their traditional New Years` Day "dip in the sea". Where a path branches to the right you will see the four points of the compass set into the paving stones and, heading south, leave the promenade by the facing stairs. At the top you will be on the eastern edge of the large area of open space known as the Links. It is hard to believe that this popular recreation area was, during the early part of the 19th century, strewn with colliery heaps and ironstone workings which had become overgrown with gorse. The work, which ultimately resulted in the current green expanse, was started by the Whitley Bay Golf Club whose members began using the Links in 1890. Walk straight on, turning right at the small facing wall, before reaching the Cenotaph, the site of the towns` Remembrance Day services. Nearby, once stood the King George V Coronation Bandstand, built in 1911 and a popular venue for the brass bands of the day. Although this was demolished many years ago, the adjacent bus stop area is still referred to as the `Bandstand`.

4 Behind the Cenotaph stands the unmistakable dome of the former Empress Ballroom, as much a symbol of Whitley Bay as the lighthouse on St. Mary`s Island. The Grade II Listed building, whose towers are topped with two female figures clad in animal pelts, one carrying a cymbal and the other a tambourine, formed the centrepiece of the Spanish City fairground. Founded in 1908, the fairground was the entertainment complex around which the seaside resort revolved. In 1980 it gained international fame with the release of the Dire Straits song `Tunnel of Love`, which conjured up the nostalgic thrills and spills of a trip to the fairground with lines like, "Girl you look so pretty to me/like you always did/Like the Spanish City to me/when we were kids". The fairground is now closed and this area of the town is on the verge of being redeveloped. Heading straight on and cutting across the short access road to the beach you will see the functional `Sandcastles` artwork in front of you. This wonderfully relevant work doubles as a seating area, giving some protection from the `bracing` sea air.



*'Sandcastles'
Whitley Bay Promenade*

7 Since the middle of the 17th century, coal, salt and fishing have all played an important part in the daily life of the village. Whilst never a tourist destination as such, Cullercoats had, by the late 18th century, become well known as an artists` colony, attracting home-grown artists such as Jobling, Emmerson, Birkett Foster and Horton. In 1881, the arrival of Winslow Homer, the leading American water colourist of his generation, ultimately led to Cullercoats becoming known throughout the art-loving world. During his 20 month stay, Winslow Homer produced nearly 150 watercolours and drawings, many of which now hang on the walls of major art galleries across America. As you reach the corner of John Street and Beverley Terrace you will see the tiny Rocket Garage, once used by the Volunteer Life Brigade for the storage of their carriage and rocket apparatus. The present RNLI lifeboat is housed next to the beach, below you on the seaward side.

8 A short walk along the Victorian-built Beverley Terrace brings you to the gloriously golden Tynemouth Longsands, now one of the country`s leading surfing destinations. In 2004, the town hosted the sports` prestigious and hugely successful `O`Neill British Nationals`. Standing next to the Beaconsfield public open space, to your right, is St. Georges Church, erected in 1884, by the 6th Duke of Northumberland in memory of his father, George Algernon Percy. In his authoritative 1957 work, `The Buildings of England` Nikolaus Pevsner thought that the church was, ".....noble, honest and earnest.....", adding that ".....such a church is in a way a 13th century ideal rarely achieved in the 13th century". Further along the spacious promenade lies Tynemouth Park, first laid out in 1893, and opposite is the large, former public shelter, constructed around the same time, and now home to the local Toy Museum. Just beyond the museum, where the grass bank slips down to the beach, lies the site of the former Plaza. Opened in 1879, and totally dominating the seafront, the winter garden and aquarium, was intended as a major tourist attraction. It proved, however, to be a `white elephant, as did all subsequent schemes for its use, and eventually, perhaps even fortuitously, the decaying building was destroyed by fire in 1996.



*The Big Top on Beaconsfield
and St. Georges Church*

5 Continue along the main promenade with the 1924 -built Lower Central Promenade below you on the seaward side, and the still fine looking Rex Hotel, once the largest hotel in the area, ahead. You are now in the busy nightlife hub of Whitley Bay and it is not without a touch of irony that the artist, who produced some of the most famous Guinness posters, was born in the town in 1898. Working for the Irish drinks company between 1925 and 1960, John Gilroy created two iconic Guinness images; the workman casually carrying a massive girder on his shoulder and the thirsty sea lion making off with the zoo keeper`s pint. Just beyond the hotel, at the bottom of the Esplanade, stands the former Sylvesters night club, which has had, since it was built in 1910, many reincarnations; the Alletsa Ballroom, the Gaumont Cinema and the Empire Theatre. The Esplanade provides a direct link between the town`s railway station and the seafront, a fact which undoubtedly influenced proposals to site a pier from this point, projecting out into the sea. First planned in 1908, the scheme was abandoned because it was felt that the cast iron columns, which were to support the 270 metre platform and concert pavilion, would not withstand the forces of nature. A much grander scheme was drawn up in 1935 but, once again, the proposals failed to get off the ground.

6 As you continue to walk south, the promenade rises slowly to its highest point before descending gently through the Rockcliffe area of the town, where the first promenade in Whitley Bay was built in 1893. Below the prominent headland lie the rocks of Brown`s Bay, the scene of many a shipwreck. Take the path which leads up the one-sided terrace of Southcliffe towards the headland and follow this until you reach the flight of steps straight ahead of you. The headland was once the site of the Cullercoats Radio Station and is called Marconi Point, after the Italian scientist who pioneered the use of wireless telegraphy. The former radio station building has now been converted into a house. Go down the steps, across the short promenade and up the stairs at the other end. At the top you are facing the 1768 - built Cliff House, the oldest building in Cullercoats. Just past the house is the delightful Watch House, a local landmark since 1879, and once the look out post of the Cullercoats Volunteer Life Brigade. Whilst little of the original village still stands, Cullercoats retains much of its charm with its cosy bay and sandy beach.



*North or South?
Cullercoats Watch House*

9 On the promenade, at the most southerly end of the Longsands, stands the stylish Grand Hotel, built in 1872 as a summer residence for the Duke of Northumberland and then converted into an hotel some 5 years later. From here the promenade bends away from the beach, climbing gently towards Tynemouth village. Below, to your left, is the beach of King Edwards Bay, dominated by the high cliffs of Pen Bal Crag, the impressive Tynemouth Castle and the ruins of the 7th century Priory. Built by the monks of Holy Island and sacked by the Danes, the Priory is the burial place of three kings, Oswin King of Deira, Osred King of Northumbria and Malcolm III King of Scotland. The village of Tynemouth, once the home of the 19th century writer Harriet Martineau, has many fine buildings and positively oozes history. It is justifiably a Conservation Area and deserves further exploration. But that is for another day and your route now follows the road which drops down the hill adjacent to the castle towards the tiny cove of Priors Haven, home to the local sailing club. Once over the narrow bridge at the foot of the hill, take the signposted gravel track on your right towards the monumental statue of Admiral Lord Collingwood, Nelson`s second in command at the Battle of Trafalgar. Overlooking the mouth of the River Tyne, the Portland stone statue stands on a John Dobson designed sandstone pedestal and was installed in 1845 to commemorate Newcastle born Cuthbert Collingwood. The four cannon were taken from Collingwood`s ship at Trafalgar, the `Royal Sovereign`. The views from the pedestal, across Tyneside as far as the distant Penshaw Monument in County Durham, are impressive.

10 From the top of the bankside make your way down to the river- hugging promenade, as it heads upstream past the notorious Black Middens rocks, a major hazard to ships entering and leaving the Tyne, and onwards towards the Fish Quay at North Shields. Soon you will reach the `Fish Quay Sands`, a small crescent of sandy beach, and the popular adjacent car park. Halfway along you will notice the yellow and blue `milepost`, one of the many mileposts which mark England`s most popular cross-country cycle route, the Coast to Coast (C2C), which passes along the remaining part of this walk. At the end of the promenade, follow the sign directing cyclists along National Cycle Route 72, passing a curved Fish Processing building on the right before reaching the New Dolphin public house. Outside is the `Dolphin Mooring Post`, an artwork created by Freeform Artists and based on mooring posts which were traditionally used on the Tyne. Sitting on the top is `Colin`, the cormorant, sculpted by Richard Broderick and added to the work sometime after the original installation in 1993.



The Fish Quays Sands `Milepost`