

WASHINGTON

COUNTY DURHAM

(A direct link with Washington, D.C., U.S.A.)



LOCAL HISTORY

by

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Looking back in WASHINGTON

Events of the past



(Photograph by G. F. Towns, Newsagent)

PART ONE

WASHINGTON OR WESHINGTON

A WONDERFUL HISTORY OF A SMALL VILLAGE IN COUNTY DURHAM which I hope will be of interest to older and newer residents of Washington New Town. Some might say: "Who is this fellow? He knows knowt"—*he belongs to Weshington*. So much for the prophet who is not known in his own country.

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Our written records date back to early Saxon times, while our Stone Age goes back even further into the dim past of Roman Occupation: relics include stones. A dug-out skiff or canoe (now in Sunderland Museum) was found in the River Wear in 1885, among the muddy banks at Toby's Gill on the boundary of Washington. It is over 4,000 years old, chipped and burned hollow out of a solid oak-tree.

The surrounding countryside was mainly of oak, which includes Bideck Forest on the old maps (Biddick). The Washington hoard of Roman coins was found at Washington Station in 1939; there were 59 coins in all, including one minted during the reign of Emperor Constantine. This should not be confused with Roman coins found elsewhere, as Emperor Hadrian's reign was long before this.

(Hadrian's reign: A.D. 117 to A.D. 138). Constantine died: May 22nd, A.D. 337).

Emperor Hadrian discarded all designs of expansion on coming to the throne of Rome. Britain was then part of the Roman Empire, which Hadrian visited in person at various times. The Roman Wall from the Solway to the Tyne was part of his scheme. The northern screen of forts in the Caledonians was the first check, the Solway to the Tyne Wall being an extended fortress. We cannot but regret the little knowledge we have of this famous character, Hadrian, and the genius of his work in stone. It is not known whether he ever looked down on Washington from the escarpment of Shadon's Hill, your guess would be as good as mine.

Old quarrymen of Eighton Banks told me that Shadon's Hill is a heap of stone rubble left over from quarrying, when stone was taken from the top of such cliffs or escarpments (it would be of easy access with its down gradient). An old quarryman once told me he was employed in the past leading this rubble for road making.

In the Old Hall in Washington this thin-veined sandstone can be seen in the west end of the Old Hall. The Saxon works can also be seen in the west end of the Old Hall (why the keystone was taken out I do not know).

(This sketch shows what it was like during the war, when I made the drawing. The keystone was taken out during the restoration.)

Washington is mentioned in a Saxon Charter dated A.D. 973.

We now move on to a later period of Washington history after the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

William the Conqueror installed Bishop Walchett in Gateshead with over 1,000 retainers in order to control the North. Edgar, of the English, and his two sisters, Princess Margaret and Princess Christina, had already fled north under the protection of King Malcolm. A period of unrest followed, in which Bishop Walchett was murdered. In 1068, William the Conqueror came north himself with a large army to subdue the rebels. Malcolm and Edgar the Atheling sallied forth from Scotland with a small army and those

they could collect in the North. The two armies met on Shadon's Hill on the borders of Washington. It was a hopeless effort and one or two volleys from William's archers were sufficient to win the day. The introduction of a double row of archers with arrows which could kill at 80 yards made hand-to-hand fighting practically negligible, and had the same effect as when the machine-gun ousted the rifle in World War I.

Malcolm fled into Scotland with as many refugees as could get away. There are some highly coloured accounts of this in Scottish history, of huts and hamlets filled with English refugees. Reading of this makes me think that the population of the North were not as warlike towards the people of Scotland as the historians would have us believe.

I read in R. S. Rait's History of Scotland that William the Conqueror's victims were many. Bodies of his victims were found rotting on highways and on their own hearthstones; from the Tyne to South Yorkshire fire and sword, half-policy and half-vengeance, forever stamped the name of William with infamy. The country was thinly populated at the time, and it was 100 years later that any trace was found of people living in Washington again.

It also must be remembered that in those days medical attention would be non-existent, or very sparse, as the word "slain" is very often used. Pestilence, fevers, and plagues would be at many times the order of the day, and later the Washington family would, I suppose, have many troubles in that direction, as whole families were wiped out from time to time.

Hugh Pudsey, a nephew of King Stephen, was elected Bishop of Durham in 1183. He immediately undertook a general survey of Durham (similar to Domesday Book), which was thereafter called the Boldon Buke, a manuscript of 24 pages now in the Cathedral library.

The first Washington to live here was Count de Hertburne, who had acquired it in exchange of the vill of Hartburn near Stockton-on-Tees, who held it for a fee, a rent of £4 per annum. In those days the owners assumed the names of the places where they lived. Washington occurs as Wessington a Weshington. Robert de Stichill's Bishop of Durham account lists the names of the Knights of the Bishopric of Durham between Tyne and Tees who were at the Battle of Lewes in the reign of Henry III. Among the 72 names I find Sir Bernard de Lambton a Lambton and Sir William de Weshington a Weshington; a later list mentions Walter de Weshington a Weshington.

The Blackwood, beside Usworth Aerodrome, can give one as good an idea of what the countryside would be like before any clearance was undertaken as some of the old maps. Bideck Forest, Wessington swamp, between here and Three Horse Shoes was drained in 1820. Biddick Forest grew mainly oak, and for centuries Sunderland port did a considerable trade in hardwood as well as coal.



The water for Washington came down from the Mount to Blue House fields to Washington F Pit and on to the village; this later became known as the Spout. It must have had a considerable flow with no seepage in the mines, as it was used to drive a water-wheel for sinking at Washington F Pit in 1700. Later it was abandoned, due to flooding, and restarted again in approximately 1800.

This stream flowed past the Chemical Works to the staithes. In 1600 a corn grinding mill with an undershot wheel was built at the south end of the Old Hall cottages. Up to 1900 the Old Mill stones used to stand against the Mill, which was pulled down and the two brick houses were built on the site in 1906. This was known locally as the Quaker Mill. The two mill grinding stones are now resting where the mill once stood in the garden behind Orchard House.

In 1800 the water of the Spout was considered unfit to drink. Wells were sunk in the village, some got water, many did not (like the one found in the Council grounds a few years ago).

From the Quaker Mill to New York boundary, stones were put in almost a straight line, from thence they went to Great Usworth; later trees were planted as the stones were easily removed. Some of these still remain today.

The land enclosed was known as Washington Common.

We now move back a little in time to Washington Old Hall, County Durham, which cannot be compared with its bigger brother overseas (Washington White House, D.C., in America), but its history goes much further and is deeply embedded in the centuries.

Situated on the south side of a small knoll, it is not without its attraction, grey stone and greenery. The first recorded occupant (dated 1183), Count de Hertburn, acquired the name of Weshington. This leaves us without any doubt that the Washington family was here and sent its shoots later into Westmorland, Lancashire, and Northamptonshire to Sulgrave Manor.

In another list of 15 in Robert de Stichill's Bishop of Durham account of 1264, Walter de Weshington a Weshington and Gylet Barmston a Barmston are mentioned. There is no note in this list of a Lambton or a Hilton.

I find in John Fordham's Bishop of Durham account of his Privy Council a list of Barons and their retainers: D. N. I. Nevill, the sum of £23 6s. 8d.; Will'i de Weshington, £6 13s. 4d. In the fourth year of Bishop Fordham's reign (A.D. 1385), I also find Thomas Langley, Bishop of Durham, this prelate's time being 1406 to 1437. John Weshington was elected Prior of Durham.

I quote what Bishop Barnes said of his palatinate to the treasurer on being transferred to Durham on 29th May, 1577: "I afine your good Lordship the people of Northumberland are far more pliable to all good order than those stubborn churlish people of the County of Durham."

Decrees of 1281 by Anthony Bek, Bishop of Durham: Privileges among many others named Robert de Hilton and Walter de Weshington "have warren on all their lands or place of execution in sanction thereof goods and chattels of felons." The penalty for coining was dismemberment of hands. The Weshington de Weshington also supplied four hounds for the Bishop's hunt.

Washington Old Hall is a small manor house in County Durham. The original house was built in the 12th century and belonged to the ancestors of George Washington. In 1613 Washington's descendants sold the house. It was largely demolished and the present house was built on the site. This in its turn was about to be pulled down, but was saved from demolition in 1936 and a Preservation Committee was set up in order to restore and furnish it. With the help of the American and British Commonwealth Association, and generous gifts from both sides of the Atlantic, this has been done. During the restoration several parts of the old house (in which the Washingtons lived) embedded in the 17th century structure have come to light.

In 1955 the house was officially opened by the American Ambassador, and two years later it was handed over to THE NATIONAL TRUST who administer it through a local committee, which includes members of the Preservation Committee.



STOCKS—WASHINGTON, 1450

THE HOUSE

Situation.—Washington is an old village situated in the northern industrial and mining area of County Durham. The village and the country surrounding it are very built up and spoilt, but at the centre of Washington there is a wide village green with some of the old houses surrounding it, and just off the square, below the church, which stands on a little hill amid trees, lies Washington Old Hall. The gates are on the main road, but the Hall stands back half-way up the hill to the church.

It is not without its attractiveness, with its greenery and grey stone and, looking south, a fine view of Dame Margaret Hall.

THE LAST OF THE NEVILLES

North Biddick Hall, known in Washington as Cook's Hall, is situated in the south side of Washington Parish. Built by Baron Hilton as a Dower House for his mother, it was modified over the centuries by the various owners. The last tenants were Joseph Cook & Sons Ltd., of the Washington Iron Works, which at one time played a big part in the industrial revolution of the 18th century.

The works sent a goodly amount of picks and shovels, etc., to the 1851 Exhibition at London.

We now go back in time to 1500 onwards.

No known charters of the Hall have been found, but they must have had "bush telegraph" in those days if all tales be true of escapes and felons who hid at Biddick, as it was called in those days. Durham history refers to the fatal rising of the North in November, 1569, when Lord of Raby of Neville fame and Percy of Northumberland were involved. Many lost their heads in this insurrection. Queen Elizabeth I had no mercy. Lord Percy was caught on the borders of Scotland and hanged at York; Neville was never caught, but later it was revealed that he had died in Holland. If you think Neville came this way, your guess will be as good as mine, as Biddick is only a mile by the Burn to the Wear and so on to Sunderland and boats plying to Holland. We still have a few Nevilles living in Birtley, not so far away.

We have evidence of the Earl of Perth fleeing to Biddick after the Battle of Culloden in 1746.

Biddick or Cook's Hall was demolished in 1966 as it was considered unsafe for habitation.

[Mr. Matt Dunn and I made sketches of it before demolition.]

In conclusion, I may well add that the records of Durham City have been very well kept. It was ruled by Prince Bishops with their own army. It was a working army of Barons, Knights, and Squires, of well up to 4,000, which could be mustered within a few days. Durham was a palatine county with its own coinage, with its Castle in a strong position on the Wear.

It was unique in that unlike other Bishoprics it could not be investigated by ruling Kings and Queens for revenue purposes and, with a strong religious background, the Bishops often defied the kingly rule. It also had a back door and escape route by flat boats to the tidal reaches of the Wear at Biddick. It could well be that this was within the knowledge of Neville and gave him courage before the fatal rising against Elizabeth. Hope was also given by the hierarchy: the Lord Bishop in his wisdom could give sanctuary to felons and others in the service of loyalty to the Bishop—hence the Sanctuary Knocker above the North door of the Cathedral. Had that knowledge not been available, the fatal rising in 1569, after which Lord Neville dared not come back to this country, might never have taken place.

According to Moorman in *History of the Church*, a Mass was held in the Cathedral before the fatal rising took place.

Biddick Hall was always noted for its charity in its heyday and the Cook family also kept up this feature.

I met the late Mr. Harold Cook during the last war and he pointed out the track through the wood to me, which was an escape route on many occasions in medieval times, and mentioned previously. From Biddick Hall one travels west to Oxclose Burn; following the stream one turns suddenly left to Fatfield and Biddick. The track through the wood is dark and eerie even on a bright day.

WASHINGTON PITS

No one is likely to know exactly where all the pits were in Washington. They were designated by the letters of the alphabet from A to J. The last shaft to be sunk was Washington J, 80 yards from the Washington F pit shaft, and drew its first coal in 1925. There were others which operated as far back as 1600. Our only information is from the burial registers and old poems. A pitman poet, G. Cook of Byers Green, in one of his books sold in the Royal Arcade, Newcastle, 1851, says that in Washington 69 persons were destroyed, three of them were blown to the Bank, and one of them, a woman, died 57 fathoms deep, on 11th August, 1736.

Dead and buried underground,
Alas, for they were never found;
As sunk the sun to meet the wave
They are gone now
The pit is their grave.

(This would refer to Biddick, as 69 persons were buried underground—72 in all.)

A small mishap, by G. Cook.

17th September, 1847—Washington Pit Heap.

George Reed, Overman, fell asleep,
Alas, he never awakened more,
But to his home his corpse was borne:
He lived happy, thus he died,
T'was God that took him to the skies.

I am inclined to think that very few people would be able to write in those far-off days, and rhyming would be an easy way of remembering. I remember in my schooldays street singers going round after disasters selling song-sheets at 1d. a sheet. These made no note of smaller casualties of ones and twos, such as August 18th, 1656, Chaters Haugh—Fatfield Pit, 4 drowned (Chaters Haugh: wives and sweethearts left to starve).

All by explosions unless otherwise stated—

- 1766—April 16th, South Biddick Pit, 27 lost.
- 1767—May 27th, Fatfield Pit, 39 lost their lives.
- 1773—December 6th, North Biddick, 19 lost in ye pit.
- 1786—February 12th, Washington, 17 lost in ye pit.
- 1794—June 11th, Harraton, 28 lost in ye pit.
- 1805—November 29th, Oxclose, 38 men and boys lost.
- 1812—October 10th, Harraton, Fatfield, 24 lost in ye pit.
- 1813—September 28th, Fatfield Pit, 32 lives lost.
- 1817—June 30th, Harraton, 46 lost.
- 1825—July 8th, Judy Pit, Fatfield, 11 died.
- 1828—November 18th, Washington Pit, 14 killed.
- 1833—May 6th, Springwell Colliery, 47 men and boys lost.
- 1837—Springwell Pit, 14 lives lost.
- 1850—June 5th, Usworth. G. Cook, of Byers Green, says in his poem: "Lo this is the first explosion I have seen—
Lo and behold there was 18."
- 1851—August 31st, Washington, 38 lives lost.
- 1885—March 2nd, Usworth Colliery, 42 lives lost.
- 1908—February 20th, Glebe Pit, Washington, 14 lives lost.



WASHINGTON OLD ROWS—THE BUSKERS, 1900

February 6th, 1778.—Records show us that William Russel and Partners owned the Engine Square Pit, the present Washington F Pit fan shaft, and made the railway past the Glebe Pit to Washington to the staithes. The Rector of Washington did well out of this contract—£40 yearly and 27 tons of coal per year.

The I Pit or Gin Pit lies south 250 yards from here. It was filled in during World War I. It was the last pit in the area to use the horse gin and hemp rope for winding coal at 91 fathoms. William Bush, a one-time tenant of the Half Moon public-house at Oxclose used to tell us that many of the victims of the 1851 explosion were brought up this shaft. The local doctor had gone to the 1851 Exhibition at London and left his apprentice on the job. Many of the victims had died of gas poisoning and looked very lifelike lying out on the grass. The locum tried to revive them by scooping water up in his hands and throwing it on their chests. So much for the serving apprentices in those days.

1850—Oxclose Colliery was 100 fathoms deep and was owned by Messrs. George Elliott and Jonassohn and Partners. Usworth Colliery, sunk by the same firm, drew first coals in 1845.

I have often been asked how victims' wives and children fared in those times, as very often almost half of the male population was wiped out. The miners were a close-knit community in these small pit villages, and it was not uncommon for aunts, uncles, and neighbours to take in whole families who had been left bereaved until the older children were able to start work. Other colliery villages would also help by collecting foodstuffs, etc., until such times as the dependants could look after themselves. There was no social security in those days.

In conclusion, mining started as early as the 13th century in County Durham under the most atrocious conditions. In the 17th and 18th centuries, of which we have more knowledge, mining relied on the employment of women and children of both sexes, as well as men. The Children's Employment Commission reported in 1842 that boys of eight and nine years of age were often employed for 12 and 13 hours a day down the mines. Night work for children of such tender age was not uncommon.

It is well to recall the past when considering present conditions. I quote a mishap at Washington F Pit on Friday, May 31st, 1867—eight men and two boys lost their lives when, due to an overwind, the cage fell to the bottom of the shaft.

I have seen the Fathers sighing,
I have seen the Mothers crying,
I have seen the young and old
Brought to bank both stiff and cold.

G. Cook, Byers Green.

OXCLOSE

There is reference to cock-fighting in very early history in Europe, Greece, and Rome. It was a popular sport with the various rulers and kings in medieval times. Records show us that Oliver Cromwell suppressed it, but at his death in London it was revived again all over the country. The opponents of this sport kept up their objections, but it was not until 1849 that an Act was passed to suppress it. Cock-fighting was still carried on in the mews and the ale-houses under cover in London for about 20 years, until police action became more rigorous. It then moved into the provinces where it had always been a recognised sport; mains were often held quite openly in the North of England in out-of-the-way places. Oxclose, in Washington Parish, was a venue, but is now demolished except for the cubes of the two pit shafts at Oxclose Colliery, which was once owned by George Elliot, the pitboy millionaire. It had a population of over 100 souls, a public house (The Half Moon), and a medical practitioner.

Mains were often held there right up to the 1890s. You may well ask how this was possible. There were just bridle roads to the place, as the patrons strongly resented any interference with their sport. Many landowners and magistrates were involved, but cock-fighting finally died out in 1900.

A tale was told of a bird, Red Robin, which had won many fights for its owner and was killed in the last fight at Oxclose. Its owner died of a broken heart a few days after.



WASHINGTON SWORD DANCERS, 1900

I can well remember when all sorts of activities went on at Oxclose under the name of sport—handball, quoits, sparrow shooting, rabbit coursing, pitch and toss, fisticuffs, etc.

John Wesley preached at Fatfield, but sparred wide of Oxclose. But Peter Mackenzie did not. He was a well-known Durham lay preacher. He would stand no back-chat from anyone. On travelling through Oxclose one day, he challenged a wifebeater to fight. The fight was fought in front of the Half Moon Public House at the weekend in front of a huge crowd. He preached before he started and I think he must have frightened the wifebeater a bit. In conclusion, he said: "God above, give me the strength to bray the fear of the Lord into this man." He won easily. He, Peter, had the reputation of never losing a fight.

Oxclose Colliery had many advantages in those days. It was well ventilated with two shafts, and the winding was steam driven. The shafts were dry; they were clay from the surface to the stone head.

HUGH LEE PATTINSON, F.R.S.I.—1796 to 1858

The founder of Washington Chemical Company was born at Alston in Cumberland. At 20 years of age, and a married man, he came to Newcastle. At 29 he became Assay Master to the Greenwich Hospital Commissioners, Lords of the Manor of Alston. At the age of 37 he patented his famous process of separating silver from lead. In 1840 he was granted a further patent in the manufacture of white lead, and in 1842 another patent for extraction of magnesia from magnesium limestone was granted. About the same time he set up his own works at Washington, a far cry from the small beginning to the large chemical works we see now.

After Pattinson died in 1858 the business was carried on by his four sons-in-law. He was buried south of the Chancel wall at the Parish Church, Washington.

SIR ISAAC LOWTHIAN BELL (Son-in-law of Hugh Lee Pattinson)

An iron-master belonging to Washington. Part of the site of his works is now built over by the chemical factory.

Washington Hall, now called Dame Margaret's Hall, was built by Sir Isaac in 1854. He set up what is believed to have been the first aluminium metal manufacturing plant in the country, then with R. Newall and Bowman, his brothers-in-law, who married daughters of Hugh Lee Pattinson, set up the first wire rope-making machine.

Sir Isaac once rode in his carriage to Newcastle Exchange with an aluminium hat.

For some years he was a Member of Parliament. In 1872 a seven-year-old sweep was suffocated in the Hall chimney. The Shaftesbury Act was passed soon after and Sir Isaac resigned the seat.

A FEW DATES TO REMEMBER

Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy visited the Old Hall, 1931.
Usworth Hall built by Captain Bernard Shaw, 1800.
New Bell Tower dedicated November 18th, 1962, Washington Parish Church.
Washington Colliery Welfare Hall opened July 4th, 1931.
Mill-stones found in the garden in front of Old Hall, July 22nd, 1967.
The Glebe Colliery, the first shaft in Great Britain to be sunk by the Freezing Process, started 1901; drew coal 1905. They froze 10 feet of quicksand by a German firm.
History of the Northern Counties, by Headlam. The first steam engine for drawing coals out of pits was at Oxclose, Washington, 1711; Norwood, 1713; Byker Colliery, 1714.
First safety lamps in collieries, 1815.
Brandy Row School.—On a Sunday afternoon in 1912 the playground, in which the boys lined up before marching into school, subsided owing to a pit shaft falling in.
Washington Juvenile Jazz Band formed in October, 1964; operational, 1965.

LOCAL DIALECT

A donkey means a (cuddy), a crow means a (craa),
When pleading ignorance, they divvent knaa,
The carving knife's a gully, and the spoon's a spown,
To barney's to claim, to dig's to howk,
To huff is to offend, and a poke's a bag,
When anything sticks it's supposed to clagg,
Crack is to talk and "what-ma-cally" lives next door,
An infectious ailment varry smittle,
A boody a piece of broken crockery,
Dunch means collide and daft means silly,
To bounce a ball is to stot,
A decent man's a canny chep,
A bairn's a child, and a lad's a boy,
A gliff's a sudden fright, to stare's to glower,
When asked to stop your nonsense it's give ower,
When a man dies you'll hear the neighbours say
With touching sighs: "Aye he's gotten away,"
And if yor diffent knaa what ettlement means
Y'd better see the plan before yer plant
Yer beans. If yer want some more you'd better petition,
We might get them in the next edition.

Chris.

On one winter night he came out of the Hall to find his coachman frozen stiff on the box-seat of his carriage.

When the Bells left Washington and moved to Yorkshire, the Hall stood empty for a number of years. In 1891 Sir Isaac gave it as a free gift to be a Home for Waifs and Strays and to be known as Dame Margaret's Hall.

*God bless the Squire and his relations for keeping
us in our proper stations.*

The Roman Catholic school recently destroyed by fire was built in 1863 and R.C. church services were held there until the present church at the other side of the road was built in 1878. A fine example of period architecture, combined with older examples of trefoil over the west window, the whole is in keeping with the greenery surrounding.

I have been told that a remarkable amount of voluntary effort went into the building, by miners and other helpers at weekends, in the carting of stone from Springwell. In the days up to 1930 it was known as St. Joseph's. Later sources of information reveal that the Roman Catholic Presbytery and Church of Our Lady Immaculate was consecrated on September 27th, 1933.

Cottage Fire, Washington, at Old Rows, May 13th, 1902. John Baker (father), his wife, and her two sisters and three children—through the upsetting of a paraffin lamp. One was saved out of seven, the baby.

EARLY DAYS IN CONCLUSION

Tales are told of past and gone,
Only a small piece of paper
Tells when you were born;
Just like small creatures in the stream,
They pass away and no more seen.

Storms and tempests may have been
Happy moments in between;
Filled up to the brim
You are old, you can sink or swim,
Cry away such tales are now scorned.

We can learn if we record,
Men's judgements that went wrong.
Some men of times went astray,
Passed now will they never learn, never learn,
Remember Caesar he passed away.

Christopher Bennett.

