Westoe Road Historical Walk

A non chronological walk around South Shields town centre, pointing to places of interest to people connected with WRBC, covering the period 647AD to 2018.

Taking in such sites as the Salt Pans, Collieries and places of Baptist worship.

Further information from:-
A Church in our town by B. Robson
The Baptists of North East England by D. F. Neil
History of Baptist churches in the North of England by D. Douglas

There has been a Christian presence in South Shields since at least 647AD, when St Aidan gave land to build a Chapel at the site now occupied by St Hilda’s Church. Non Conformists, such as Baptists, did not surface till the mid 1600’s, in 1669 there were 52 Anabaptists in the area of South Shields. As there was no place for them to worship they travelled to the Meeting Room at Tuthill Stairs in Newcastle [just above the Swing Bridge]. In 1798 a Baptist Church was opened in North Shields which greatly assisted the cause in South Shields.

Our walk is not chronological but will take us to major sites connected with Westoe Road Baptist Church (WRBC).

South Shields Beginnings

Historically South Shields was part of an Anglo-Saxon district called Wirralshire – the name of the coastal land between the Tyne and Wear. South Shields has an Anglo-Saxon or medieval name referring to ‘Scheles’ – temporary fisherman’s huts, sheds or shelters on the south side of the Tyne. It is not known when South Shields acquired the name.

Anciently, South Shields was the site of a Roman fort and a Saxo monastery but the name South Shields is not recorded until 1228 when the place is called ‘the Sheales upon the South’. It is then recorded as ‘Shelis’ in 1296, and ‘Suthshelis’ in 1313 and as ‘Le Shels’ in 1365. For most of its history South Shields was a fishing village belonging to the Priors of Durham Cathedral monastery.

South Shields, a port in Roman times, was a suitable site for a medieval port but Newcastle legally claimed control of trade on the Tyne and was protective of its status as Tyneside’s dominant port. Newcastle merchants resisted attempts to develop rival ports and were determined the ‘Sheales’ on both sides of the Tyne should remain nothing more than huts.

1. Our meeting point is to the rear of the building in Romilly Street, this site was purchased in 1876 and building started in 1880. as you look towards the Town Hall built in 1910 we could imagine WRBC could have stood there! Let us walk away down Romilly Street and pause after we turn right towards Westoe Road.

2. We now stand and looking away from the town there is a right fork in the road, this is Imeary Street, named after Alderman Imeary the son of Robert who was Minister at North Shields BC in 1798(D 1814) and served at times in South Shields. The Emmanuel Chapel stood in this street built in 1895-1953 when some of the remaining congregation rejoined WRBC.
Westoe Lane, as it was known was the main through route from Westoe Hall 1864 to the ground belonging to the Dean and Chapter of Durham stretching to what became King Street and Mile End Road it was in existence well before and appeared on Fryer’s map of 1772 which shows the first Ballast Hills and also the road hugging the Tyne with houses either side and St Hilda’s Ground.

The Emmanuel Chapel was constructed in 1895 because of a dispute in WRBC about ‘Membership’ the Minister Rev. Ernest Mason in 1891 sought to have membership open to all believers. He resigned and took a substantial minority who sympathised and formed a new church in The skating rink in Ocean road and raising almost £1400 they built the new church to seat 400 people In Imeary street, they applied to join the NBA in 1896 and were referred to as the South Shields Free Baptist Church, the two churches worked happily together in many joint projects including hosting the NBA assembly in 1898. Emmanuel church prospered reaching a membership Of almost 200 By 1910 the Ministers opposition to state support for denominational schools was sufficient to see him imprisoned as a passive resister to the 1902 Education Act. When the minister left the church declined Closning in 1953 and the few remaining members were welcome back to WRBC.

Cross the road and follow the footpath—as you go along what was a mineral railway line from Westoe Colliery almost all the area in front of you was taken up with Salt Pans from 1489 to supply many world capitals. Icelandic and Greenland fishing fleets came to load up with salt at Shields. In 1539 there were 9 salt pans, in 1635 Sir William Brereton describes South Shields as having "more salt works and more salt pans made than in any part of England". By 1693 there were 143 pans, 7 near Mill Dam. In 1725 Lord Harley visited South Shields and described it as "the chief place for making salt. The houses there are poor little hovels and are in a perpetual thick nasty smoke. It has in all 200 salt pans, each employs three men... and each consumes 14 cauldrons(35,000 Kg) of coal in 7 days". Thomas Kitchen's Map of County Durham, c.1750, which incorporates an embellishment showing a salt pan and the inscription “South Shields, the station of the sea coal fleets, is a very large village eminent for its salt works, here being upward of 200 pans for boiling the sea water into salt. Tis said that 100,000 cauldrons (1.5 Million Kg) of coal are yearly consumed in these works”. The decline of salt making was rapid however in 1820 Surtees recorded only 5 saltpans remaining at South Shields.

Most of the coal required for the salt pans were shipped in by Wooden Wagonways, then steel railway until in 1805 Templeton and 1810 Saint Hilda’s Colliery [formerly known as Manor Wallsend in Mr A. Oyston’s field] were Sunk, followed by Harton 1840, Whitburn 1879 and Westoe in 1909. The population of south shields grew From 12,000 in 1801 to 75,000 by the 1860’s {still just short of 76,000 today}. Of course the Romans were here in AD 120, Arbeia, meaning “place of the Arabs” as one of the garrisons being the Tigris Boatsmen from modern day Iraq.[they left in the 5th century] other history 865 AD Vikings came and established Danelaw, destroying St Hilda’s Nunnery, 1100 the Normans arrived and rebuilt it and brought yet more change, 1644 the Civil war was upon us and the Royalists were retreating to the south and routed at the battle of Boldon Hill. 1730 Much new industry including Glass works introduced by Isaac Cookson, by 1807 there were 8 more in the town. In 1850 Cookson had been awarded the contract to make half the glass for the Crystal Palace in London but it failed in 1891. By 1900 all but one of the town’s glass works were closed. 1832 The Reform Act was established bringing democracy to our doorstep.
Station Road is nowhere near the present station you tell me, but in 1843 the Stanhope and Tyne Railway came and built a station just at the top of Mill Dam, probably Opposite where the Law courts are now. In 1839 the Brandling Junction Railway built a station where Nile street is now. Here at Mill Dam we had a large population of Yemeni sailors since the 1890’s yet in 1919 and 1930 there were Riots in this vicinity over Jobs, the locals thought the ‘foreign’ workers were stealing the jobs.

All along the riverside in the 19th Century there were many industries. An Oil depot near Harbour View, which then expanded to include Velva Liquids in the 20th Century. Two Iron works in Wapping Street, Four Brick works [one at the top of Mile End Road the others in Oyston’s Field, to the rear of Wick’s and Laygate]. Two Breweries either end of Wapping Street One in Mill Dam, a Boiler works at Middle Dock and Three Glass works in Mill Dam and backing onto Oyston Street. There were other trades to supply the shipping industry including Rope Manufacturing to the south of Ocean Road and Caesar’s Walk. The River had become filled with Trade Ships, a turn around from the time when the Newcastle Burgeses had Disputes between them and South Shields over trading rights and despite an order being made between the town of Newcastle and the Prior and Convent at Durham in the 13th century that South Shields should have no quays and no ships berthing there, by the 15th century there were numerous fish-houses and staithes constructed.

At one time 50 ships could easily lie at anchor in the river between Jarrow and Mill Dam. Mill Dam, as its name suggests had not one but Two mills one was waterpowered by the incoming and outgoing tide into the Lake which formed stretching almost as far as Fowler street with an inlet going out to sea along Ocean Road. A Viking boat was discovered at what is now Denmark Centre 5 metres below ground level. And another Wind powered, both used to mill locally grown corn from the fields at the Roman Fort site and also what is now Westoe. This area also became one of the dumping grounds for Ballast from ships entering the river to load in Newcastle from as early as the mid 1750’s, and so there were many Ballast Hills in the area some standing many metres high all along the river bank and also on sites near Arbaia and the Bents. After the Napoleonic Wars 1815 returning soldiers and prisoners were put to work on the Ballast Hills and filled in most of the lake to the north and also many other infill projects.

5. At the Ferry Landing you could take a DETOUR, boarding the Ferry to North Shields and Tynemouth and maybe search out the origins of North Shields BC 1798, with Robert Imeary as Minister, at Walker Place to its present home in Howard Street.

Restricting trade at the mouth of the Tyne was a big concern for Newcastle and in 1259 Newcastle made an order to the Priors of Durham that the people in South Shields could only bake or brew for themselves and not for visiting strangers.

Trading of course continued on both sides of the Tyne and intimidation was one means by which Newcastle dealt with the problem. In 1267 a mob of Newcastle merchants attacked the inhabitants over at North Shields and seized one of their ships.

Another form of redress employed by Newcastle was petitioning the king to restrict trade at North and South Shields. This was put to the test in 1279 by which time the Prior of Tynemouth had developed a well-established small town at North Shields and the Prior of Durham a similar town at South Shields “where no town should stand”.

That year the King’s Justiciar Itinerant came out in favour of Newcastle. The holding of fairs, markets or selling of meat and drink was banned at both Shields. In 1303 King Edward III also supported Newcastle banning the loading and unloading of ships by the Priors of Durham at South Shields. It would not end there and the battle against Newcastle’s supremacy on the Tyne continued well into the 1500s and beyond.

For centuries the whole tidal stretch of the Tyne was regarded as the port of Newcastle and it was not until 1848 that North and South Shields came to be officially recognised as separate ports. Customs houses were established at both places but the customs house at South Shields was subordinate to that at North Shields though its jurisdiction extended south to Souter Point which formed the border with that of Sunderland.
6. Turn away from the river passing the new Library and Old Town Hall built in 1768 by John Wooler.

In 1768 during the reign of George III South Shields, with its small chapel dedicated to St Hilda, was still little more than a long narrow street or track running alongside the Tyne. The street was adjoined by a collection of lanes and side roads and was bordered by hills of ballast created by the offloading of visiting ships.

South Shields was in need of major changes to cope with its continuous industrial growth and trade. In 1768 the Reverend Samuel Dennis and the Dean and Chapter of Durham (successors of the earlier Priors of Durham) obtained an Act of Parliament allowing them to undertake the development of eight acres of church land. Onto this land were moved the fairs and markets of South Shields. An extensive market place was built along with several new streets laid out in a grid pattern.

At the centre of the market place a small square-shaped town hall was built (1768) by the architect John Wooler. Now the ‘Old Town Hall’, it can still be seen opposite St Hilda’s church. The new streets built in this vicinity included a new principal thoroughfare called King Street which was completed by 1826 during the reign of George IV.

In the 1850s the Town Hall and markets were purchased by the South Shields Corporation from the Durham Dean and Chapter. In the early 1900s a new town hall was built further to the south but King Street is still South Shields’ main commercial street, although it was rebuilt in the late 19th and early 20th century.

In May 1915 there were 7-10,000 people gathered in the marketplace to demonstrate and riot against local German born naturalised British Butchers F Seltz over the sinking of the Lusitania by a U Boat. The market place was established by the Prior and Convent of Durham in 1767, to replace a street market that had been held in the town for many years. The Old Town Hall was constructed by Durham at this time to provide a market hall, manorial court and offices but incorporates an earlier market cross. A Monastery and later Nunnery were established at St Hilda’s.

 Traverse the Market to cross Church street next to St Hilda’s church. Founded in 647 by St Aidan, Bishop of Lindisfarne on 15 acres of land endowed by King Oswin, with Hild, now a nun, in charge of the work, (if you have time go in and see the Wouldhave boat hanging from the ceiling, he was accredited as the ‘inventor of the lifeboat’. The first lifeboat, called the ‘Original’, of 1789, was built in South Shields by the boatbuilder Henry Greathead.) turn left into Barrington street and stop at the end next to the red brick building. This area was very densely populated in the 1800’s.

7. As you pause, the building you are standing next to is on the site of Barrington Street Chapel 1821-81. looking towards King Street right in front of you, to the left near East Street was the Chapter Row Methodist Chapel 1809—through the gap in the shops can be seen Queen Street where the Salem Chapel once stood, on the Left corner used by Particular Baptists in 1824-40 housing some of our ancestors. South Shields became very densely populated, up to 75,000 people in 1886, with a new Police and later Fire headquarters [in the bottom right of picture] and large Railway station [top middle]

The area around Queen Street was redeveloped many times, before the war there was a very large Theatre on the site of the former Chapel that seated about 1,400 people. There was an Ice Rink in Ocean Road Originally built as a Congregational/Baptist Church, it later became the People’s Palace Art Gallery and was also used as a Drill hall. On 21st April 1880 it opened as a skating rink. It was also used as a shooting gallery. It screened its first films on 7th January 1907 when Downey’s Living Photographs were screened and variety acts were on the stage. It was closed on 9th November 1907, and re-opened as the Cosy Cinema on 24th December 1910, around 1930 it was re-named Picture House. It was taken over by the Newcastle based Essoldo chain in 1947. The Picture House was closed on 27th February 1960 with Frankie Vaughan in “The Lady is a Square”. It was demolished in November 1962.
The main Marine College was situated on the other side of Baring Street as was the Boy’s Grammar School. The bombing of south shields flattened many structures such as the Queen Street Theatre which was replaced by a concrete Multi story car park, now also demolished. This whole area around us was obviously open fields, then came many industries including Brick making, using the local boulder clay, Glass making and Gas making in the late 1890’s.

9. Turn right crossing the road into Waterloo Vale and then on to Garden Lane, before the Railway bridge, with Next behind you, look to the right—this is Oyston Street [named after the landowner] which used to go as far as Station Road and was a main thoroughfare and having a wooden bridge over the river Branan, along here stood Oyston Street Chapel 1818 probably just before the main Asda store, an area known as ‘paradise’ because of the Gas works of 1824, go under the bridge and turn right into Crossgate, first left into Claypath Lane and first right into Percy Street.

On the right is St Bede’s, until 1849 Catholics in South Shields had to travel across the river to North Shields to attend St Cuthbert’s Church. However, in 1849 they bought a chapel in Cuthbert Street [now Western Approach] from the Bristol Brethren and formed the Parish of St Bede, The church, however, was too small, so on 27 May 1874 the foundation stone was laid for a new church in Westoe Road. St Bede’s Church opened on 22 August 1876, unfortunately they could not build a high tower as Quicksand was found in this vicinity. As you look across at the red brick building, now the CO-OP Funeral Service you look upon the possible site of Percy Street Mission, one of a number formed in 1868 and was used as part of Westoe Road Baptist Church, in the days when formality was key and it would not do to be improperly dressed or inebriated coming to church, those types and the poor were redirected from WRBC to Percy Street and probably given lessons by their ‘betters’.

Percy Street went all the way down to Western Approach but most of the possible sites are at the Westoe Road end

Turn left into Westoe Road (Lane) and pause by the crossing point to look over to the church building, a place of Baptist witness since 1881. In 1874 the area between Beach Road and Westoe Lane was a proposed site but the Town Council got in first and so the site where the church now stands was purchased in 1876.

HISTORIC TIMELINE OF WRBC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1650</td>
<td>Tuthill Stairs Chapel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1798</td>
<td>Robert Imeary minister in North Shields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1818</td>
<td>Oyston Street Chapel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1821</td>
<td>Barrington Street Chapel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1868</td>
<td>Mission stations formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>Foundation stone laid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>Westoe Road Baptist Church Opens, Organ from Barrington Street installed, Ladies &amp; Gentlemen had separate entrances to Baptistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>School rooms completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Emmanuel Street Chapel built</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>Open Communion established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>Electric lighting and individual communion cups first used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>Founding of the Fraternity and Sisterhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>First Lady Deacon elected. The Organ from Queen street Methodist church installed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Emmanuel closed and members readmitted to WRBC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>