

Chapter 03: A Brief History of Stockton Borough

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Stockton-on-Tees lies approximately 40 miles north of York, and 30 miles south of Newcastle, in the former Cleveland County in the North East of England. The Borough is located in the low-lying flood plain of the River Tees Delta, just 5 miles from the North Sea. Originally straddling the great counties of Durham and Yorkshire on the banks of the Tees, Stockton is now a Unitary Authority within the Tees Valley sub-region.

The Borough owes its development to the River Tees upon which it stands, and in particular to the many crossings that have developed. Throughout the ages, the Tees has provided water and power for countless peoples, from the Celts to the tribal Brigantes, Romans to the Nordic invaders, and also the present day industrialists. Each have left their mark on the landscape in one form or another, however the towns and villages across the Borough and the wider Tees valley are the most obvious changes to the once-wild swampy river delta.

Stockton's first entry in the history books was in 1183 when the Bishop of Durham ordered a survey of his land. He found a collection of small farms scattered around the strategic parts of the Borough – Norton on higher ground away from the river Delta and potential flooding, Egglecliffe on the defensible rocky outcrop, and Billingham where a primitive salt production facility was located.

By the 13th Century, Yarm had emerged as a thriving river port, importing wine, sheepskins and flax, while exporting agricultural produce, salt and lead to London and other east coast ports. Around this time, Stockton was growing and was granted a Market Charter by the Bishop of Durham. Stockton was also home to a Castle, or at least a fortified house which is thought to have been the Bishop of Durham's administrative centre for this part of his empire.

Stockton Borough continued a steady growth, based primarily around a farming community, with a self-sufficient range of other industries such as tanneries, breweries and timber production.

In the 1700's, Stockton took over Yarm's role and became the major river port, largely because it was several miles closer to the sea and therefore much more convenient. Coal was carried to the new docks from the Durham coalfield by horse and cart to be shipped to London and overseas. Stockton was also where James Cook served as an apprentice on a number of voyages from Stockton before he moved on and became an explorer. The design of his famous ship "Endeavour" is alleged to be based heavily on the coal barques that frequented the port.

Stockton and Yarm were together a great coal exporting empire, and although rival ports were to be found along the Durham coast, none were as safe or convenient as those on the Tees. This ensured the continuation of the towns

for a very long time, and made Stockton a household name wherever coal was used.

In 1810 and 1830, huge engineering projects were commissioned to straighten out the Tees in order to shorten the journey to the sea. The two vast digs were completed and cut some 2 miles from the total journey, ensuring Stockton's port was kept competitive. The original course is still visible (and in use as a drain) around Teesside Park and Thornaby Golf Course. There was significant controversy at the time, because Stockton Racecourse which previously occupied the site would effectively move from the then Durham County to North Riding of Yorkshire as it changed sides of the river. It was resolved by changing the name to Thornaby Racecourse.

Few events can truly claim to be a revolution, but in 1825 George Stephenson put Stockton at the centre of the world's stage when he piloted Locomotion Number 1 on the first ever passenger railway voyage. His railway brought about massive change throughout the industrial world, and introduced a whole new way of life as people were able to travel quickly across great distances. The Stockton and Darlington railway was quickly expanded and soon brought coal to the port at Stockton, speeding up the delivery and reducing costs of hauling it by cart. The rest, as they say, is history.

In the middle of the 19th Century, iron ore was discovered in the Cleveland Hills, and the Tees Valley was changed forever. The speed of investment in iron and steel manufacture and processing was colossal. With the ready supply of coal and iron ore, together with limestone from Yorkshire, the flat Tees valley was transformed into 'Steel City'. Vast furnaces, factories and warehouses dominated the landscape and changed the picturesque valley into a dirty industrious empire. The population of Stockton, and nearby Middlesbrough swelled dramatically as people flocked to find work in the engineering industries.

The ready supply of steel sprouted a thriving shipbuilding industry on the banks of the Tees, and names such as Robert Ropner became known throughout the world. As a successful shipbuilder, Ropner lived at Preston Hall which is today run as a museum and leisure parkland. As well as building his family home here, Robert Ropner also gifted a parcel of land near Hartburn to the people of Stockton. The land was laid out as a spectacular Victorian public park, with bandstand, fountain and tree-lined avenues. Today Ropner Park remains one of the finest examples of traditional Victorian municipal landscaping in the north-east. Some of the original features have sadly been lost, but a restoration scheme completed in 2006 returned the park to its former glory.

As the iron ore began to run out, cheaper imports of coal, ore and limestone became available, and the effects of the First World War were felt across the global economy, the iron, steel and shipbuilding industries declined. However, this was not the start of a local recession, because a new industry was founded on reclaimed land at Seal Sands. In 1926, ICI began its first

petrochemical works, and the focus shifted away from heavy engineering to more specialised chemical engineering.

The Teesside skyline changed once again as the dust and smoke-laden skies cleared to make way for the steam, and the soot-black smelters and furnaces were demolished and replaced with the stainless steel of intricate pipe work. Another shift also took place, as the thousands of labourers who lived in purpose-built terraced houses were replaced by skilled chemical engineers who demanded more modern housing, and so “New Billingham” was born.

Like most cities in the UK, the Borough was “modernised” throughout the 1950’s, 60’s and 70’s with new roads such as the A19 and its impressive flyover crossing the Tees, new buildings such as Billingham and Thornaby Town Centres and the Castlegate shopping centre in Stockton, and some intensive house building on estates such as Yarm, Norton and north Stockton. Most of the smaller villages such as Hartburn, Norton, Wolviston and Egglecliffe were swallowed up into one conurbation. The WWII airfield at Thornaby was redeveloped with a huge “newtown”, whilst the bomber base at nearby Middleton St. George became Teesside Airport, giving further economic boost to the Tees Valley.

In the 1980’s and 90’s, Stockton lost its status as the main sub-regional town to neighbouring Middlesbrough, and much of the investment of the Teesside Development Corporation went in to sites such as Teesdale Park and Teesside Retail and Leisure Parks. This had a huge positive effect on the Tees Valley’s economy, but at the expense of Stockton, Billingham and Thornaby town centres. Yarm town centre survived better because of the growth of its evening economy.

In 1995, the Tees Barrage was completed which brought about the latest massive change to the Borough. The tidal movements were stopped upstream, and the effluent poured in to the river by the industry was no longer moved upstream by the tide. Over the following years the river ‘cleaned itself’, and is now one of the cleanest rivers in the country with salmon and otters flourishing once again. This has opened many new avenues for the Borough for leisure, and an opportunity to use the river for alternative employment once again, reuniting the people with the asset that originally brought them to settle in the first place. Any remaining heavy industry now sits with the vast petrochemical complexes at the mouth of the Tees at Seal Sands, Redcar and Billingham. This has significantly improved the air quality across the Borough whilst retaining the world-leading companies and maintained a healthy local economy.

More recently, the town of Ingleby Barwick has grown as one of the largest private housing developments in the world, and effectively ‘filling in the gap’ between Thornaby and Yarm. Some other housing development has expanded Billingham, joining it to Wolviston, and a number of regeneration schemes have begun to address problems of low demand housing in Thornaby and Stockton.

The Borough is set to evolve further over the coming years with more brownfield land redevelopment on the banks of the Tees. These mixed use sites will build upon the thriving knowledge-based economy, spearheaded by the presence of Durham University Queens Campus at Teesdale.