

Whitehaven - Coal, Rail and Ships

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Once a small fishing village, Whitehaven grew into a major port of industrial innovation with good trade links to the Caribbean and North America.

Harbour development

The first mention of Whitehaven as a harbour comes from 1172, but the foundation for the first quay was laid in 1633 by Christopher Lowther for construction of the Old Quay to export salt and coal.

The Bulwark Quay was completed in 1711 making Whitehaven the third largest trading port in England during the eighteenth century and the most important rum port in the UK.

Construction of The West Pier Lighthouse, West Pier and North Pier surrounding the Outer harbour

began in 1832 and finally the Queen's Dock was built in 1876.

Over 1,000 ships are documented as being built in the port of Whitehaven. The most famous shipyard was that established by Daniel Brocklebank which eventually became part of the Cunard Line.

Of the ships built at Whitehaven very few remain. The largest ship built at Whitehaven was the 'Alice A. Leigh', which had four masts and weighed 2,929 tons.

By the late 19th century, almost all of the harbour had a rail network, even to the tip of the West Pier. The coal chutes or hurries, in the harbour walls can still be seen by the South Harbour.

Since 1990, £20 million of grant funding has been invested in and around the harbor improving public access and enabling the town to host festivals and events to encourage people to enjoy the harbour. The harbour no longer sees the amount of trade vessels it used to; Queen's Dock has become Queen's Marina and the commercial use has shifted to leisure use with sailing boats and yachts on the pontoons. The harbour still has an active fishing industry with vessels bringing in a large variety of fish including sole, skate and prawns.

The sea locks themselves not only let the inner harbour stay water-filled at all times, the massive doors also acts as flood defences. For centuries, the town was flooded by fierce storms, but with the help of the Environment Agency, the sea lock now helps to keep the town dry. It's also the gateway to the Irish Sea, and is manned 24 hours a day, letting boats in and out independently of the tides.

[Click here](#) [6] to view The Whitehaven Marina Website.

[Click here](#) [7] to view the Whitehaven Harbour Commissioners Website

International Trade

Sir John Lowther is credited with developing Whitehaven into one of the key UK trading ports. English sea traders left from Whitehaven to trade in the Caribbean, returning with tobacco, rum, sugar and lime. The Whitehaven trade ships also were used by West African slave traders to ship slaves to the Caribbean.

By the beginning of the 18th century Whitehaven was also importing large quantities of tobacco from Virginia and Maryland in exchange for manufactured goods.

Coal

Coal was a major commodity in West Cumbria and provided significant wealth to Whitehaven. The wealth generated by the coal encouraged innovation and it was the local mining engineer Carlisle Spedding who sank Saltom Pit - the first, and one of the biggest, undersea mines in England.

Mining has had a significant impact on the coastal environment. Whilst several mine shafts were opened under the sea, and not visible from land bar the headgear (still on view at Haig Mining museum above the harbour) and the candlestick which can be seen to the south of the harbour which was the air vent for the pit workings of Wellington Pit. Wellington Pit was the site of the worst Cumbrian mining disaster which killed 136 men and boys.

Environment - Flora and Fauna

Despite an industrial history, the harbour still supports a variety of shellfish. Worms and shellfish such as mussels, cuvin's, whelks, limpets and barnacles are all found in the outer harbour. Grey Mullet are often seen in the harbour.

Colliery and mining waste was deposited along the coast as far as St Bees Head. This now supports an array of flora along coast towards Haig Mining Museum where over 50 flowering plants can be seen including two rarities, grass vetchling and Bee orchid. Other notable flowers are Coltsfoot, first to appear, Tufted vetch with its electric blue, meadow vetchling, bush vetch, kidney vetch, common vetch, hairy tare, red batsia, birds foot trefoil, clovers, cranesbills, black medic, hop trefoil, meadow buttercup, yellow rattle, eyebright, wild carrot, sheep bit scabious and heather.

The Common Blue butterfly has also been spotted on the Whitehaven coast

The coastline from Whitehaven to St Bees is currently under the management of the National Trust and is known as the [Colourful Coast](#) **[8]**

John Paul Jones (1747 - 1792) was a Scottish sailor and a well-known naval fighter in the American Revolutionary War. Although he started his maritime career at the age of 13, sailing out of Whitehaven as an apprentice, his return in 1778 was to lead an attack on the town.

Jones led the assault to set fire to and sink all Whitehaven's ships anchored in the harbour (numbering between 200 to 400 wooden vessels). They spiked the town's defensive guns to prevent them being fired at the American ship, but struggled to light fires as their lanterns ran out of fuel.

Men were sent to a public house on the quayside to get fuel, but were distracted by the alcohol and by the time of their return dawn was approaching. The townsfolk were alerted and large numbers ran to the quay, forcing the Americans to retreat.

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