

A Brief History of Billingham

Contents

- 1. Around Billingham Green**
- 2. Billingham Town Centre**
- 3. Billingham International Folklore Festival**
- 4. Buildings of Interest around Billingham**
- 5. Ecology in Billingham**
- 6. Industry in Billingham**
- 7. Haverton Hill**
- 8. The Dixon family of Glebe Farm, Billingham**
- 9. Billingham Forum**

These packs are produced by Stockton Reference Library.

To obtain a copy please contact Stockton Reference Library on 01642 528079 or email - reference.library@stockton.gov.uk

Around Billingham Green

Billingham Green acted as the centre of the village of Billingham with most people living in that area. As well as houses around the green there were also five public houses (three of which remain), a National School which was built in 1852 and run by the Church, St. Cuthbert's Church, farms and the village cross.

Most of the public houses were more than just a place to get a pint with the Black Horse Inn acting as a medical centre with a back room sometimes used as a treatment room. From the mid-1850s it was also a fire station with the fire-fighting pump, horses, ladders and long handled rakes kept in the stables which were attached to the inn. The Smiths Arms Inn was also a blacksmiths shop and both the Half-Moon and Salutation were used by travellers from the stage-coaches or railways.



The green itself was split into two by a road with the Parish Green to the left and the Common Green to the right. This Common Green could be used by the villagers for grazing their animals. Cows could be grazed there in the early spring with their manure collected for later use and sheep could be found there in the summer.

Geese and ducks were a common sight in October and November where the women of Billingham would buy their Christmas bird at Stockton's market and would let them out onto the green, only bringing them in to feed them.

One animal that you would not find on the green was the pig which would pull the grass up and leave no feed for the other animals.

The animals on the green would be watched over by a man called a pinder who would put any of the animals that he found wandering off into a pen which was in the centre of the green.



The Village Cross

The village cross was built in 1893 and was the idea of the Reverend Phillip Rudd who was the Vicar of St. Cuthbert's. He thought that every village should have its own ceremonial cross and so he organised a collection amongst the villagers and local gentry to have a cross made. It was designed by Middlesbrough architect, Mr. Bottomley and built out of Shap granite by Bowron's at a cost of £44 12s 0d.



There is a story that the cross was to be unveiled by the Prince of Wales (who became King Edward VII) whilst he was travelling to Wynyard Hall. A large crowd of people gathered to watch the ceremony but the Prince's carriage drove through the village without stopping. It turned out that nobody had remembered to ask him and so the dedication ceremony was later performed by a local squire.

St. Cuthbert's Church

On the green is St. Cuthbert's Church which dates back to the Anglo-Saxon times. It is said that Egred, who was the Bishop of Lindisfarne from 830 to 845 AD, built Billingham and gave a church to the people there that had St. Cuthbert as their patron saint. This church is thought to have been made of wood and destroyed by the Danes and so the church was rebuilt in stone with a tower added in the tenth century to defend against Danish and Scots raiders.

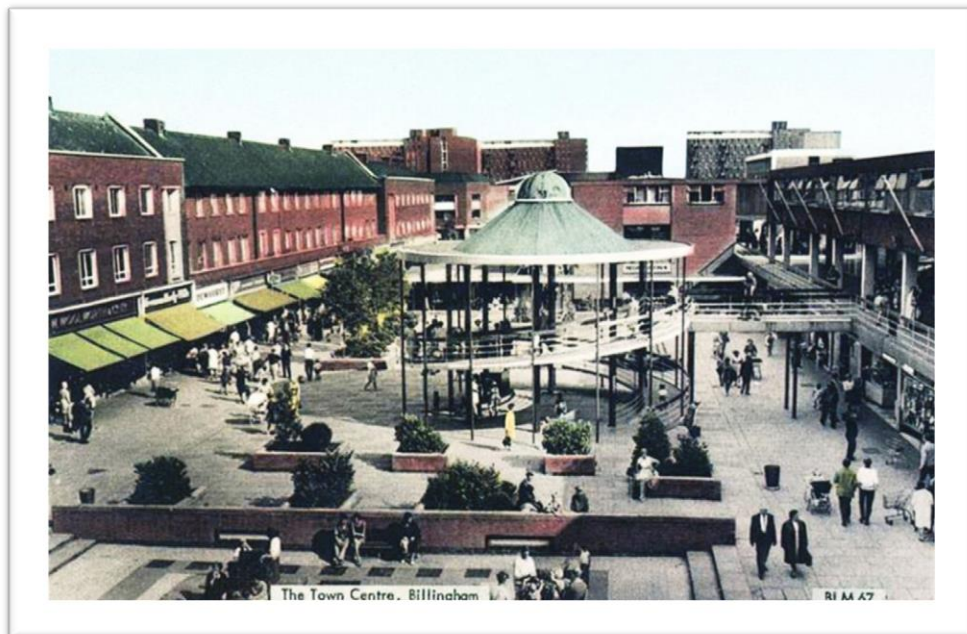


Billingham Town Centre

The new town and the ICI factory grew up together. The first housing was provided by the chemical companies.

The population in 1921 was less than 8000 and in 1970 38,000. Today it is closer to 35,000.

The shopping centre began to take shape in 1953, and attracted the big names of the time, such as Woolworths and Timothy Whites. It offered shopping on 2 levels and free car parking. In 1968 it boasted 1000 parking spaces. The shopping centre was designed not only for the local people but also to compete with nearby Stockton and Middlesbrough with a pub, nightclub and offices. The tram ramp to the upper level was an innovative feature.



On the official opening of the Town Centre The Queen and Duke of Edinburgh arrived by train on a miserable and wet day in October 1967. 7000 children came out to greet them and were later rewarded with a half days holiday for their patience.

The Royal couple spent only 60 minutes in the town. They unveiled 'The Family' sculpture by Bainbridge Copnall, which was intended to depict the unity of the people. It weighed 1.5 tons and was made from fibre-glass and bronze. They also visited the Forum before setting off to Darlington for their next engagement.

In 2014/15 the Town Centre again benefitted from a multi-million pound facelift. Improvements included new paving, new seating, modern lighting and more trees and planting.

Billingham Art Gallery

Billingham Art Gallery was opened on 26 July 1968. It was the first purpose built gallery in the area, with an eye-catching circular glass entrance, enclosing a spiral staircase leading to the gallery above. The building also housed a lounge and workshop with a pottery kiln. It was intended to provide art in all forms and to cater for all tastes. It also had unique opening hours, staying open until 8.00pm Monday to Saturday.



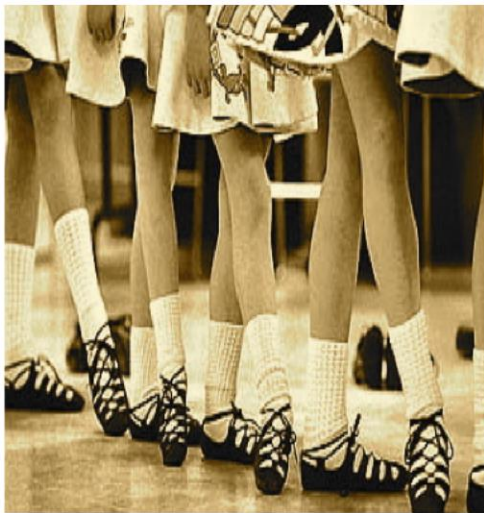
Unfortunately the Art Gallery closed in July 2008 and the site is now occupied by the Billingham Library and Customer Service Centre which was officially opened in 2015.



Billingham Library & Customer Service Centre

Billingham International Folklore Festival

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Billingham Urban District Council had developed a new traffic free shopping centre. Traditionally, Billingham residents travelled to the larger and more established shopping centres in nearby Stockton & Middlesbrough. To attract more shoppers to Billingham, the Council organised entertainment in the town centre, which because it was traffic free, made it ideal for such performances.



On one such Saturday an Irish Dance Troupe, led by a Sunderland head teacher, Phil Conroy, performed in the Town Square and attracted a large and enthusiastic audience. At the end of the show, Mr. Conroy happened to mention that his group had just returned from the continent, where they had performed at a folklore festival. He also remarked that the town centre would be an ideal setting for such a festival. Councillors liked the idea and so the first Billingham International Folklore Festival took

place in 1965. Billingham then became a founder member of C.I.O.F.F., the international organisation of folklore festivals, and Phil Conroy became its General Secretary.

The festival is held over five days every August, and begins with a parade involving hundreds of musicians and dancers. At the first festival, only Austria, Estonia and Hungary were represented. The festival has now been held for over 50 years, and over this time has welcomed over 15,000 performers from more than 90 countries. Each year it hosts 8-10 groups with over 400 artists from around the world, playing to huge audiences. The festival is presented at 2 venues The Forum Theatre and the Festival Outdoor Arena in Billingham Town Centre.





As well as local dance groups and the Billingham Silver Band, musicians and dancers from countries including China, Russia, Thailand, Mexico, Spain, Kenya, Costa Rica and New Zealand, and many, many more, wearing beautiful costumes in vibrant colours, play strange and unusual instruments to entertain their audiences with outstanding and energetic traditional and contemporary routines.



Dance workshops are also held, giving audiences the chance to learn new styles of dancing.

The festival comes to a close with final parade and a fireworks display.

In 1999 the festival became an independent limited company and registered charity. It has also concluded a partnership agreement with Stockton Borough Council which guaranteed its future.

Buildings of Interest around Billingham

Furness Estate Picture House

The estate included a large building called the Hostel, which was originally built to house the immigration workers who mainly came from the Tyne area to work at the new shipyard. Once the estate was completed, the Hostel became redundant. It reopened from time to time, and in 1923 it was used as an isolation area, then during the 2nd World War to house the homeless. In the fifties and sixties lemonade maker Jonco made use of the building.

Later the hostel became a very popular cinema.

The Picture House was a no-frills cinema having only a ground floor with the cheapest wooden seats at the front and the expensive seats towards the back. Before television this was one of the entertainment mainstays of the area, with queues forming regularly on a Friday and Saturday night.

Extract from Hartlepool Mail. 07/11/1932

Plans for a new cinema on the corner of Mill Lane and South View were approved in February 1928. The Billingham Picture House, costing £10,000 and accommodating 700 people, was opened on the 8th October 1928, with opening performances by the Synthetic Male Choir and popular comedy show, "The Kid Brother". The cinema was the highlight of the week for most people, watching all kinds of films from westerns to comedies. Today the building still houses a dance studio and theatre performance group, with the ground floor used as a restaurant.

The annual remembrance service in connexion with Billingham British Legion was held yesterday afternoon, in the Picture House. A procession was formed on the Green, headed by Haverhill Brass Band, who provided the music during the service. First came both sections (men's and women's) of the British Legion, together with a representative attendance of Billingham Urban District Council and of Poppy Day workers. Other organizations or parades were "Toc H", Billingham Social Club, K. G. H., Billingham U.D. detachment, V.A.D., Billingham Co-operative Men's and Women's Guilds, Billingham Boy Scouts, and Synthonia Girl Guides. At the shrine outside the War Memorial hall, wreaths were laid on behalf of the men's and women's sections of the British Legion, Billingham Urban District Council, Co-operative Men's and Women's Guilds, Social Club, and the K.G.H. After the service, conducted by the Rev. F. C. Tymms, a march past took place, the salute being taken by Capt. C. T. Burrell and Coun. A. T. Sealley, J.P. (chairman, Billingham

The Co-operative Wholesale Society



In May 1930 a new co-operative stores building was opened on the site of Town End Farm. It was the thirtieth shop of the Stockton society. It housed eight different shop units, including a butchers, chemist, grocery department, clothing and shoe department, greengrocers, tobacconist, barbers and a branch of Barclays bank. When a customer paid, the money taken was placed into a cylindrical container along with the customers check number. The container top was then attached to an overhead wire. This propelled the container to a central cash point. The cashier then returned the container empty or with change back to the original source.

The large theatre upstairs could seat up to 650 people, and also had a dance floor. It was used for various social occasions including dances, live music and public meetings. Due to the population explosion during the 1930s, the hall doubled as an overflow school for the partially built Billingham South Secondary Modern.



War Memorial

On 11th December 1918 a public meeting was held to discuss creating some kind of war memorial. At the next meeting it was decided that a hut measuring 60 feet by 30 feet should be bought and a tablet listing those that had died should be placed inside. This Victory Hall was built by Messrs. Robinson & Co and was used for many different things such as dances, receptions, billiards, card games, dominoes and even as a changing room for the local football team. The hall remained at South View for nearly fifty years before it was demolished between 1964 to 1968 to make way for a new development. Unfortunately it is not known what happened to the memorial tablet after the hall was demolished.

Ecology in Billingham



With many industries located in Billingham, pollution became a major problem for the area as all the gasses that were released into the atmosphere combined with other substances, such as dust and chalk, to create a white fog on misty and rainy days. In fact all these substances helped to create what became known as the 'Teesside Mists' which could be seen from miles away.

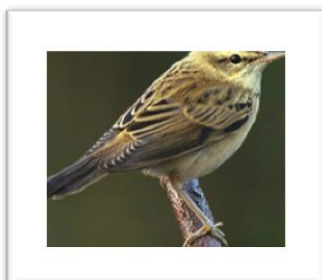
Over the years new green areas have appeared in Billingham providing clean areas that attract flowers, plants and wildlife and which also help to get rid of the pollution.

Billingham Beck Valley Country Park

The Billingham Beck Valley Country Park was created in 1986 and became a Local Nature Reserve in 1992. Before this, the area, known as 'Billingham Bottoms', was a mess, with people using it as a place to dump their rubbish.



Regular flooding in the winter had stopped the area from being developed however this combined with summer hay cutting or grazing has created wetland meadows within the park. Not only do these wetlands make the park a perfect place for a wide variety of plants to grow, such as meadowsweet, flag iris and valerian, but it also attracts a mixture of wildlife, including orange tip and comma butterflies, as well as birds such as snipe, sedge warbler and reed bunting into the park.





Charlton's Pond

This area started out as a site for removing clay which the Cowpen Brickworks Company would then use to make bricks and tiles. This did not last for long however as the works became flooded due to underground springs and a pond was formed.

In 1912 a bank manager called Mr Jack Charlton and his friend, Major Tristram, decided to rent the area for a period of twenty years paying ten shillings (50p) each year. They also put 250 Loch Leven trout into the pond. When houses were being built for the Cowpen estate nearby, the local council asked that the pond have a fence put around it to make sure that no children could fall in. Instead the pond was offered to the council who took it on and decided to develop the area for people to use in their spare time. Eventually the site became Teesside's first nature reserve, with part of the area becoming a bird sanctuary in 1968.



Reed Beds

As a way of trying to clean up some of the area's waterways a new wonder reed was created by ICI whose roots would 'eat' the toxic substances caused by the many industries in Billingham.

This new wonder reed was first researched by German scientists in the 1970s with ICI carrying on this research to create the new wonder reed. The idea was that the roots of these reeds would absorb some of the substances, such as phenol, acetone and methanol, which were still in the water that ICI did not want anymore. In the summer of 1989, seven football field size reed beds were planted by ICI at a cost of £5 million near to another reed bed area close to Haverton Hill. This area had already attracted ducks and moorhens and it was hoped that the same would happen at the site of these new reed beds.



Industry in Billingham



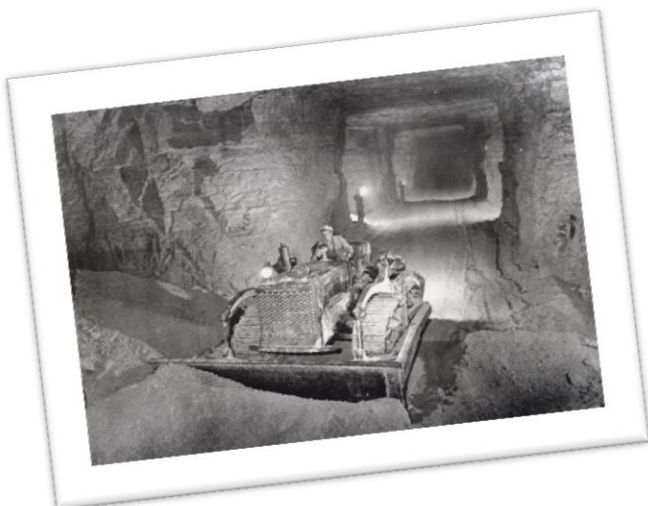
Billingham was a small village in the 19 century and agriculture was the main industry. Farms were leased to farmers from the Dean and Chapter of Durham. They in turn employed men and women to work on the farms. Corn and wheat were grown and exported to London. Cattle, dairy cows, sheep and pigs were kept on the salt marshes as they were excellent grazing grounds.

In the early 1800's a brewery was set up by John Darnell and later it was then sold several times. In 1857 John Heslop bought the brewery for £2,000 and when he died his son John continued brewing.

Billingham Picture House Co. purchased the brewery in 1936, and brewing was then discontinued.

World War 1 brought about the development of the chemical industry in Billingham as there was a huge demand for the production of nitrates, which were needed for the manufacture of explosives. In 1917 Billingham was chosen by the government as the site of a new chemical works. Several hundred acres of flat land at Grange Farm was chosen because it had a good supply of natural resources, namely water, air, cheap coal and labour, as well as good access by rail, road and sea.

Construction of the works was not completed until after the First World War. Brunner Mond Ltd bought the works from the government and began the manufacture of sulphuric acid and ammonium sulphate fertiliser. In 1926 Brunner Mond joined with other chemical companies and I.C.I. was formed.



Anhydrite was an essential raw material which was needed to manufacture fertilisers and I.C.I. mined this on the north shore of the Tees, at Billingham. There were 200 miles of underground roadways and the mine was about 240 metres deep. The tunnels ran beneath parts of Billingham and were able to hold the contents of 4,400 Olympic swimming pools, which is equivalent to 11 million cubic metres. In 1971 the mine was closed and was the shaft was sealed in 1978.



I.C. I. became one of the biggest chemical companies manufacturing fertilisers in Europe. In 1931 “Perspex” was developed at Billingham and in 1940 the development of polythene and nylon. Many of the plastic products were used in the construction of WW2 aircraft cockpits. Another development for the war effort was flight performance aviation fuel.



ICI employed 5,000 people in 1932 in Billingham and by the 1960’s this figure had grown to 20,000. Often three generations of a family were employed at the same time. Social activities, sports and medical facilities and housing were provided for the workers.

By the late 1990’s I.C.I. had sold off all of its chemical plants to other international companies such as BASF, Huntsman, and Terra.

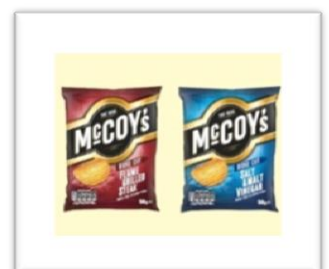


In 1969, on part of the site, KP Snacks built a factory. At that time women were not employed in large numbers in Billingham. It was therefore the beginning of a new era when KP recruited women for 90% of its workforce. KP produce own brand crisps for supermarkets and their own brand crisps “McCoy’s “. At one time over 5,000 people worked for the company but now the workforce is much smaller, although still one of the largest employers in Billingham.

BOC built the UK’s largest hydrogen plant to supply Huntsman at North Tees in 2001.



Specialised chemical and engineering companies are still the main employers in Billingham today.



Haverton Hill

In the early 19th century Haverton Hill was only farmland. It was not until the Clarence Railway line from Stockton to Haverton Hill was constructed that industrial development began.

In 1837, at the north end of the Clarence Railway, a glass works was established by Richard Walton. He provided housing for his workers at Haverton Hill, and later, in 1857, a forge and ironworks was built by Stephen Robinson, and he also built houses for his workers.

The population of Haverton Hill increased more when salt companies began mining after a huge salt bed was discovered 304.8 metres below the ground. These companies, including Salt Union, Tenants, Alhusens and Tees Salt Company, also built houses for the skilled workers that came from Cheshire to work for them. Later these companies were bought by I.C.I.



Casebourne and Co. Ltd established a cement works in 1903 at Haverton Hill, where it was known as the Pioneer Works. In 1928 it was also purchased by ICI.



World War 1 brought a huge need for ships and Furness Shipyard was constructed on marshland in 1918. A million tons of slag and ash were needed on the shore, to increase the level of the land to about 4.3 metres. Lord Furness built a hostel for his workers to live in until he had built houses for them. Each house had its own garden and the estate was named Bellasis Village, but was known as the “garden estate”. There were 531 houses and they were built in 438 days.



The yard was unique in size and spaciousness at that time, and work began on the first ship before the yard was even fully constructed. In 1919 the first ship was launched. A total of 328 ships were built at the yard, including oil tankers, cargo liners, molten sulphur carriers, bulk carriers and floating decks. In 1969 the ship yard was bought by Swan Hunters. However, even though Swan Hunters modernised the yard, the demand for ships declined and other companies in other countries were able to build ships more cheaply and in 1979 the yard closed.

Pollution was a large problem for those living and working in Haverton Hill and in the 1960's and 1970's all the houses were demolished and the people were moved to housing estates in Billingham.

Today Sita UK, an energy recovery company, Falck Safety Services, Marine Fabricates Ltd are among the new companies in Haverton Hill.



The Dixon family of Glebe Farm, Billingham



Tom Dixon and his wife Minnie came to Billingham about 1904. They moved to Glebe Farm, in Chapel Road, and started farming in a small way, with only one cow and a pony- both given as wedding presents.

Minnie would sell milk to the village, and as the herd increased, the churns of milk were delivered around the village by horse and cart. This was the first service of its kind. In the 1930s the Dixons introduced their own glass bottles, and at that time were the only farmers in Billingham to do so.

For three generations the Dixons dominated ploughing competitions. As well as international and world championships, Tom and his father, and both of Tom's sons, won an astonishing 786 championships. It was both a test of practical and traditional skills with the ploughs. Judges scored how straight, tidy and regular the ploughman made his furrows. This needed both muscle power, good eyesight, and of course well trained horses.



Tom began competing in 1895, and by the age of 29 had won over 200 prizes including 100 firsts. It's doubtful if success such as theirs will ever be repeated. Tom was a well-known character whose bowler hatted figure became a familiar sight at competitions.

When Tom retired from farming his son Leslie who was a tractor ploughman, along with his brother John, became the backbone of the ploughing team.

Billingham Forum

Billingham Forum was planned in 1962 and opened its doors to the public in July 1967. It was officially opened by H.M. the Queen, accompanied by the Duke of Edinburgh, on Thursday day 19th October 1967. Commissioned by Billingham Urban District Council, it was intended to be a 'meeting place and centre for community's leisure, recreation and artistic appreciation'.

The building was designed by Elder, Lester and Partners and cost around £1,000,000.

The Forum contained an ice rink, swimming pool, and facilities for all sports including squash, bowls and shooting. There was also a sauna, crèche, restaurant and lounge bar. It was this country's first example of a comprehensive community recreation centre with facilities for arts and sport all under one roof.

Family membership at that time was 5 guineas a year (£5.25)



The theatre had a capacity to hold 637 people and catered for all types of production including plays, operas, pantomime, musicals and hosted some of the great names of British theatre at the time.

The theatre walls and boxes are panelled with wood and the seats are red velvet.

The seats on the two upper levels are in boxes. Shows often came to Billingham before they go to London theatres.



As part of the proposals to regenerate Billingham, a 'Gateway' initiative proposed the construction of a new sports and leisure centre on John Whitehead Park to replace the Forum. This proved highly controversial, particularly as the Forum's would-be-replacement did not contain a theatre. The proposals were abandoned in November 2004, shortly after the Forum Theatre was granted Grade II listed building status.

In 2008 new plans were made to transform the Forum, bringing it into the 21st century. The renovations cost £18.5 million and improved and updated all of the facilities on offer.

The refurbished Forum was opened to the public on 3 June 2011. People queued from 7am to sample the new facilities. 200 people tried out the new ice- skating rink in the first hour. The building was transformed with a new entrance, glass atrium and a new roof.

The official opening took place on 13th November 2012 by the Countess of Wessex, following in the footsteps of her mother-in-law, the Queen. She was also greeted by flag waving schoolchildren.

