



Rugley Railway Bridge

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## For your diary:

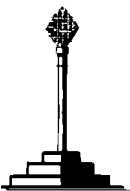
**19<sup>th</sup> February:** Online talk by Dr Philip Carstairs on the little-known history of Alnwick's soup kitchens. Dr Carstairs has traced the development of Alnwick's soup kitchens during the nineteenth century along with others in Northumberland and the rest of England. Were soup kitchens a crucial form of welfare, on which the poor depended to survive? Or did they help to create the problems they sought to alleviate? Online: 7:30 p.m.  
eMail [contact@alnwickcivicsociety.org.uk](mailto:contact@alnwickcivicsociety.org.uk) to request your joining instructions.

**28<sup>th</sup> Feb - 2<sup>nd</sup> March:** Alnwick Story Fest

**12<sup>th</sup> March:** Annual General Meeting. We have invited Bailiffgate Museum and Gallery to give members an update on their plans for the future. St James Church, Pottergate, 7:30 pm.

**29<sup>th</sup> March:** Target date for opening of Borderline Greenway from Alnwick to Rugley Wood

**1<sup>st</sup> April – 11<sup>th</sup> May:** Alnwick through the lens exhibition, Bailiffgate Museum



# Solar panels on listed buildings

*In 2024 Historic England published a new Advice Note on Energy Efficiency and Retrofit in Historic Buildings. It covers broad ground. Here we extract some of the advice it provides on Solar Panels, Photovoltaic Cells and Solar Tiles. PhotoVoltaic Panels currently produce around 3% of UK electricity, of which around a third is generated by domestic installations.*

It is not easy to reduce carbon emissions and improve the energy efficiency of an historic building while conserving its significance and ensuring that it remains a viable place to live. Photovoltaic and solar panels on a listed building can look incongruous and can harm a building's architectural qualities. Listed building consent is always needed, and care is required. Especially when it comes to the impact on significant views of the building. On the other hand, installation can often be designed to avoid harm.

PhotoVoltaic installations fixed directly to a historic building, or within the setting of a heritage asset will need to be properly assessed and the impact on historic significance will need to be evaluated before applying for permission. There will be many listed buildings where solar panels can be fitted, but some heritage assets will not be suitable. If the installation will harm significance, alternative options may need to be considered.

Factors that need to be taken into account include the physical impact that the installation could have on the building and whether it can be easily removed at the end of its operational life. The lifespan of a Photovoltaic array and its associated equipment is much shorter than the roof covering, so a roof could have several installations over its life. PhotoVoltaic Cells degrade throughout their operational life. The amount of electricity generated will decrease slightly each year. It is important to understand the expected lifespan and how the energy yield will decline. And to minimise damage to the roof covering by carefully planning how the panels will be installed, maintained, and removed at the end of their useful life.

Fixings, wiring and pipework will rarely preclude installation, provided care is taken not to harm special interest. However, some buildings will need installation of safe working systems, to enable panels to be maintained. Consideration needs to be given to the additional weight of the panels, weather-tightness and risks of fire.

Deciding where to install the panels and managing their visual impact are important parts of the design process. Photovoltaic cells produce the most electricity when they face the sun. Tracking systems can keep the panels facing the sun, but they are expensive. So most installations use fixed panels that face south at a suitable angle.

Installation of solar panels will generally be acceptable if they are hidden from view - for example in locations such as valley roofs, or behind parapets on flat or low-pitched roofs. Installation of panels will generally not be acceptable on principal roof slopes, if they would be visible and would detract from the building's special interest. The front elevations of buildings are generally the most important and the most prominent. They will usually be the most sensitive place to site PhotoVoltaic and solar thermal panels.

Installation of panels on less prominent roof slopes will generally be acceptable, even if they will be visible. Roof slopes to subordinate parts of a complex building (for example, lower wings or rear ranges) may provide the most appropriate place for such installations. By respecting the hierarchy of the building, any harm to special interest will be reduced. Steps to reduce visual impact can include use of black frames, avoiding silvered or reflective panels and avoiding irregular or stepped panel layouts.

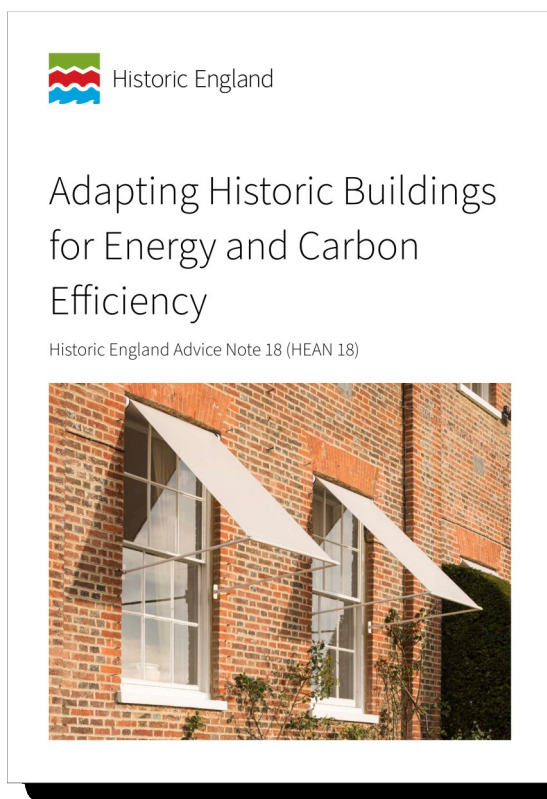
The significance of some highly graded listed buildings is such that installation of panels on less prominent slopes may still not be appropriate. Mounting panels on

outbuildings or land associated with a listed building will generally be preferable to installation on the main building. Consideration will still need to be given to the effect of an installation on the setting, but installation can often be done without any direct harm to the building's special interest and it may be possible to reduce the visual impact of ground mounted panels - for example by using hedges. Other considerations include flood risk, shading caused by nearby vegetation, the possibility of buried archaeology, routes of underground services such as gas, water, electricity, and telephone cables, and risk of vandalism or theft.

Solar slates provide an alternative to photovoltaic and solar panels. They replace existing roof coverings and have the potential to offer a reduced visual impact, but do not convincingly replicate the look of traditional slates. So they are not considered suitable for prominent roof slopes where panels would also be unacceptable.

Solar slates also have a considerably shorter life than traditional roofing materials. So sound or repairable roof coverings should not be removed to accommodate them. They are also more difficult to maintain and replace than standard PhotoVoltaic panels. However, they might be considered for use on roof slopes of low significance and visibility during a roof repair project. Listed building consent is always required for their installation.

See <https://tinyurl.com/4u8yu3u3>





# Alnwick Stone by D. E. Jackson

Between September 1997 and January 1998 Doctor Dennis Jackson contributed a series of articles to the Civic Society Newsletter about the use of stone in Alnwick. This extract considers the Percy Tenantry Column. So far, we have not managed to contact Dr. Jackson. If any member can help, or has a copy of his article on the Pottergate Pant we would be most grateful.

Alnwick has a long history of stone building stretching back to the fourteenth century, prior to which all buildings used timber. The initial demand for stone was for military defence works, then came the demand for churches in the Middle Ages, then during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries there was a resurgence in the use of stone for commercial buildings, houses, bridges, and monuments.

It is well known that the oldest buildings used local stone, indeed old quarries can often be found adjacent to churches, great houses and farms because landowners gave "quarry awards" to the local community to win stone for their use.

Old Alnwick is predominantly a sandstone town with a unity of scale and building stone, such that a cursory glance at, say, Bondgate Within gives the impression that it is all built of the same stone. On careful inspection, however, you can see subtle variations in colour, from light grey (Barclays Bank) through light brown (Lloyds Bank) to ochre (Hansel House). Furthermore, the internal structure of these sandstones varies from

fine- to course-grained, and from massive without bedding planes, as for example Lloyds Bank, to strongly cross-bedded as in the Northumberland Hall. Clearly, provenance involves more than a single quarry, and tracking down the source of various stones has involved some geological detective work.

A cemetery is always a good place to start. Here we find headstones which are dated and tell us the nature of the local stone used on old graves, as well as the imported varieties - especially those that take a polish. Monumental masons call these simply "granite" or "marble". In the Alnwick cemeteries, sandstones have been used for hundreds of years, but few earlier than 1700 can be dated because of their susceptibility to weathering. Slate headstones appear in 1821, marble in 1846, Bath Oolite/Caen Limestone in 1852, Grey Granite (*senso stricto*) in 1861, and Red Granite in 1881.

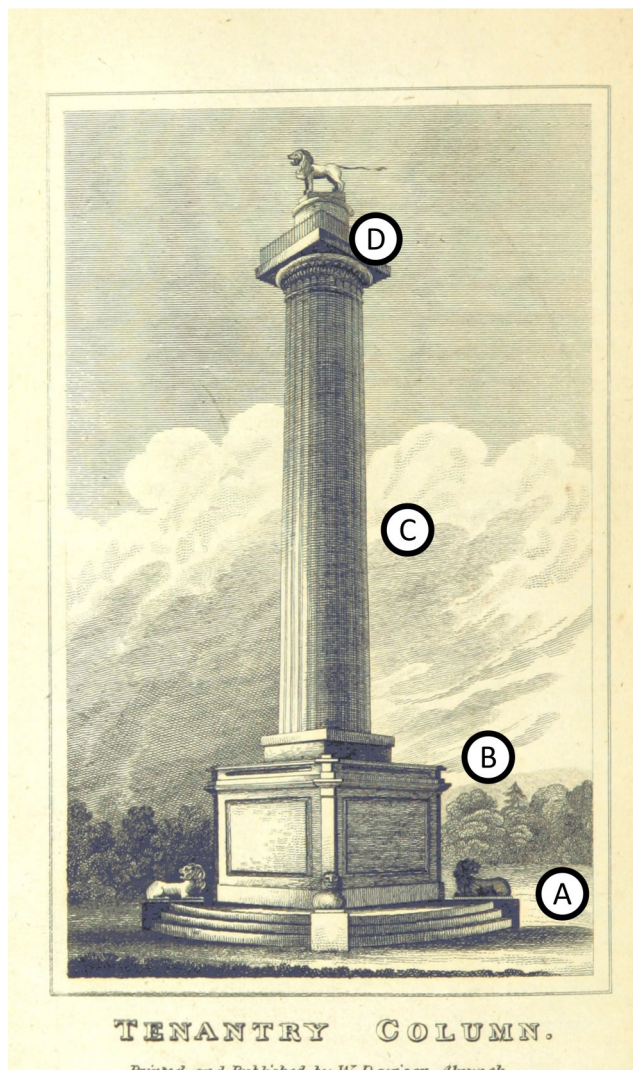
Today, "granite" remains extremely fashionable and is imported from as far away as South Africa. Nearly all the British granite quarries have closed. The ingress of foreign materials was facilitated firstly by sea trade in the 1700s, initially bringing slate and marble, and secondly by the railways after 1850, bringing granite.

We start with Alnwick's tallest monument, the Tenantry Column, designed by D Stephenson of Newcastle and built in 1816. The structure was described by W

Davidson (*Descriptive and Historical Views of Alnwick*, 1822) as follows: "The column stands on a base upwards of 90 feet in circumference built of a species of rose-coloured granite. On this are placed colossal lions raised on bases of polished black marble. ... The stone came from a neighbouring quarry on the estate of the family..."

Davidson's description is not entirely accurate. More correctly, the base (Item A) comprises a reddened cross-bedded sandstone best compared with the Longhoughton Grits seen in Alnmouth buildings. The stone was probably obtained from the seashore between Longhoughton Steel and Seaton Point. The four lions rest on "distressed" slabs (Item B) of grey coral-rich Limestone. These corals should not be touched - if you want to collect some go down to the shore at Foxton. The coral is called Lithostrotian and is about 350 million years old.

The box-like base and the column of the monument (Item C) are of Denwick Sandstone, but the top of the column just below the lion (Item D) was reconstructed around 1960 using Springwell Sandstone (*vide* Ian August, Alnwick Castle Estate) from the Gateshead area.



Hansel House Gift Shop  
Now EB Bridal at 5-7 Bondgate Within



# Assembly Rooms

*This year sees the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Jane Austen. Her fans will be well acquainted with the role of Assembly Rooms, as the hub of Regency society.*

Assembly Rooms are large halls, used for concerts, meetings and dancing. They evolved in the early 18th century and became popular in Regency times, by providing a socially acceptable public place where respectable men and women could meet socially. Or, according to Chamber's Cyclopaedia (1728): "A stated and general meeting of the polite persons of both sexes for the sake of conversation, gallantry, news, and play".

Assembly Rooms varied in size, and funding. In a fashionable town like Bath they would be a prestigious building in a prominent location, and offer several different rooms. One of the early examples is York Assembly Rooms, by Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington. It opened in 1732 with a large room for dancing, another for cards and play, a room to make tea and basement rooms for footmen. On the other hand, in a small town the Assembly Room might be no more than the entertainment room of an inn. The Assembly Rooms in Berwick are part of the Town Hall (1754-1760). The Newcastle Assembly Rooms (1776) were designed by a renowned local architect, William Newton, and paid for by public subscription. Compared to these, the Assembly Rooms in Alnwick are relatively late. They were built for the Third Duke of Northumberland in 1826 and replaced an earlier single storey Market House, in Gothick Style which had been constructed by the first Duke, around 1765 (image: above, right).

George Tate describes Alnwick's Assembly Hall in the 1860s: "Within an arcade on the north and south sides are ranges of butchers shops and above is a room 94 feet long 30 feet wide and 24 feet high which is used once a year for the Sessions Ball and sometimes, but rarely, for other balls. Attached is a smaller apartment called a News Room for the use of a select body. At the east of the Assembly Rooms another portion of the Market Place was built upon by the Duke of Northumberland in 1830. The lower area is now the Fish Market and is open at the sides but covered above by a room supported on pillars which is used for meetings of the Poor Law Guardians, of the Board of Health and of the Burial Board and for which a yearly rent of £20 is paid to the Duke of Northumberland".

The architect for the Assembly Rooms was William Barnfather. He was born in 1789, in Northamptonshire, and came to Alnwick around 1825 as architect to the Duke of Northumberland. This was his first major build, but he would go on to design St.



Michael's Parsonage (1835), Barndale House (around 1852), Barnyards, and various cottages.

There is a second floor, above the main hall, that has been used for storage but was originally designed for use by the public. The Fish Market was added in 1830. A similar extension had been added to Newcastle Guildhall by John Dobson in 1823. The chandeliers were installed in 1860, and were originally lit by gas. They are still the property of the Duke of Northumberland.

Initially, his new Assembly Rooms must have given the Duke a powerful voice on Alnwick's social calendar. They were used for balls and dances, often associated with an event such as the Duchess's birthday, a national or a local event such as a country fair. But within thirty years of opening, Tate hints that they were not heavily used. By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century polite society had a greater choice of social activity. Larger cities had started to provide dedicated concert halls. Theatres and Music halls were becoming popular. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the formalities associated with the Assembly Rooms had fallen out of fashion, and their role was being taken over by other venues: dance halls, hotel ballrooms, nightclubs. More elaborate entertainment complexes were opening. Some combined dancing with other activities. In seaside towns such as Southend-on-Sea, Brighton and Blackpool a ballroom might be combined with an aquarium, menagerie, restaurant, winter garden or circus.

In Alnwick, during the first World War the Assembly Rooms were used by convalescing soldiers as a reading room. Then in 1919 the building was presented by the Duke of Northumberland to Alnwick Urban District Council, and it became known as Northumberland Hall.

The building was Grade-1 listed in 1952, but never seems to have been greatly admired. It has been tactfully described as "impressive". George Tate wrote that it "casts a dark shadow over the marketplace". Others have described it as "heavy and clunky", "lacking architectural refinement" "plain to a degree" and having a "heavy depressive effect" and "entirely devoid of taste"

Northumberland Hall was restored by Reavill and Cahill in 1983 and again in 1991 to improve access and install a lift. The building was re-roofed in 2005. Northumberland County Council took over responsibility on the abolition of Alnwick District Council in 2009. The sash windows were replaced in 2016, new lighting, curtains and decoration in 2020 cost £328,000. Some of the decorations in the main hall are original, others date from these later changes.

See <https://www.regencydances.org> for more on dances of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries including music, steps, costume and ballroom etiquette.

# Why are they making our town centre more attractive?

*Work on Narrowgate is under way. Plans for the Cobbles are progressing. There is talk of improving the Bus Station. Perhaps this is the time to discuss why the authorities are trying to make our town centre more accessible and more attractive. Do they just want people to spend more money? Or could there be a more ambitious agenda?*

Two recent reports raise some interesting questions and provide useful pointers. The charity **Living Streets** has updated their research into the benefits that flow from investment in the public realm, and the **Built Environment Committee of the House of Lords** has published the findings of their inquiry into the future of high streets.

For centuries high streets have been places where we shop, socialise and work. They have provided spaces for us to meet and trade. But the pandemic and cost of living crisis drove shopping online and reduced the number of visits to the high street. The result was a record number of retail failures. In 2023 there were over 10,000 store closures in the UK. Retail footfall has fallen by 7% in the last twelve months. Nevertheless, both of these reports find that high streets could flourish in future. They can maintain a special place in our lives, but only if they adapt to changes in what people want.

Both reports judge that retail will continue to be a component of the future high street, but see its dominant position as a



thing of the past. The high street has always evolved as businesses respond to changing preferences. Recently there has been rapid growth of hospitality and service businesses. Town centres now provide a range of services, and entertainment. They are thoroughfares and meeting places. This diversity is something to encourage because it makes the high street more resilient.

High streets will only thrive if people can get to them easily and safely. People value spaces where they can spend time without spending money. So we can expect green space and other improvements to the public realm to increase the number of people who want to access the high street. Hopefully, filling the high street with people should bring economic benefits: increased spending, fewer vacancies, higher property values (and rental yields), additional investment, more business start-ups, better business survival rates, lower unemployment, better jobs and more wealth retained in the community.

But there are risks associated with economic success:

- Regeneration leading to gentrification can displace those on lower incomes.
- Better commercial returns might mean that some business owners are unable to afford increased rents.
- Attracting external investment can mean that important decisions about our town are taken elsewhere.

- Growing numbers of visitors can displace services that address the needs of local people.

Town centres are not just about retail and hospitality. In Alnwick 40% of high street addresses are already residential and the trend is for town centre living to increase. Nationally the proportion of residential addresses on the high street has reached 60%. A high street that adapts to these changes will need to look beyond retail and hospitality and consider other ways that it can contribute.

If we believe that High Streets are at their most vibrant when they are used by the whole community then we will want to

- ✓ Locate public services, entertainment, events and leisure facilities in the town centre
- ✓ Draw people in by encouraging pride in place and celebrating heritage
- ✓ Create attractive spaces for sitting and socialising
- ✓ Resist any developments that reduce the appeal or discourage footfall.

Appealing to a broad cross-section of the community will mean that the high street needs to

- ✓ Provide access regardless of disability, age or income
- ✓ Ensure that everyone feels safe and welcome
- ✓ Provide appropriate facilities such as good public toilets (particularly for the elderly and families with young children)
- ✓ Provide places where different groups can mingle (particularly young people)
- ✓ Provide safe and easy access for all, including those on foot and public transport.

A town centre that can bounce back from future challenges and navigate ongoing uncertainty will need to build resilience

- ✓ With an adaptable mix of units and a diverse mix of owners
- ✓ Avoiding over-reliance on national brands and decisions that are taken elsewhere
- ✓ Encouraging new ideas and innovative business models
- ✓ Supporting experimentation.

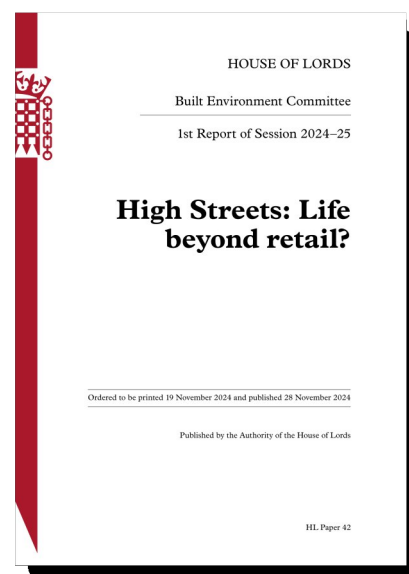
But why stop there? Is the high street economy the limit of ambition for Alnwick town centre? Why can't the centre also benefit from investment in policy areas such as

- ✓ Public health
- ✓ Climate action
- ✓ Isolation and loneliness
- ✓ Antisocial behaviour
- ✓ Inequalities, and more?

In the long-term, will current investments be seen as a doomed attempt to shore up a model of the high street whose time had passed? Or an initiative that shaped a high street that met the needs of Alnwick people at the time? Or as a step towards a town centre that continued to flourish. Not just by attracting visitors from elsewhere, but also because it contributed to a happy, healthy, safe and sustainable community?

For the Living Streets report see: <https://tinyurl.com/wurzb9cn>

For the House of Lords report see: <https://tinyurl.com/2f7h6sd5>





# Consultation on the Neighbourhood Plan

*There will shortly be another public consultation on the refresh of the Neighbourhood Plan. What should we expect, and how can we help?*

Neighbourhood Plans have given us an opportunity to develop a vision for Alnwick and the right to help shape development. When they were introduced Alnwick received special support from the government for a pilot. Other communities in Northumberland have now completed their own plans, and the plan for Alnwick and Denwick is being refreshed. If the community decides (in a referendum) that this refresh should be adopted then it will become a policy document with legal status. But first, the local planning authority (Northumberland County Council) has to be satisfied that it meets basic conditions and passes various legal tests. For advice, they will rely on a review by an independent examiner. This consultation will be our last opportunity to comment before that independent review. At the time of writing we do not know exactly when the consultation will take place, but it can't be far away.

Members will already have given some thought to what they hope to see in the refresh of the Neighbourhood Plan. Naturally, we all hope it will reflect our own priorities. But an effective plan needs to consider views across the Alnwick community. This is an important consultation. So there are some questions that members may want to ask.

Has it reached the right conclusions?

The Neighbourhood Plan covers a wide range of issues and touches on many different aspects of life in Alnwick. It has to address some complex problems. Some have no straightforward solution. Has the review helped us to understand the issues, and options? What were the different opinions and values that have been considered?

Does it reflect the views of those who will live with the consequences?

Planning will always involve some difficult and controversial decisions. It's time-consuming to air the issues, rather than hiding them. It's easier to leave complex matters to specialists. But proposals that only consider one part of the picture are unlikely to work in practice. It's better to spot and rectify any mistakes at an early stage. Where the community has been involved, the conclusions are more likely to be robust, and less likely to be influenced by powerful interests.

Has it built understanding and earned support?

A plan that has involved the community is more likely to earn support from the community. When we are presented with a range of different options we gain insight into the issues that the town faces, and an appreciation of where change is needed. Greater understanding and realism about what can be achieved encourages cooperation and long term thinking.

How can we help?

We cannot force anyone to participate, but we can help to spread the word, and hope that others will respond positively. That's more likely if people believe that the issues are relevant to their lives, that the process is transparent and worthy of their trust, and that the results will be taken seriously.

There are always going to be different perspectives on where priorities should lie. A plan that works for the whole community needs to reflect the views of the whole community, including groups with different priorities to ours.

As a Civic Society we are in a privileged position. We have experience of dealing with planning matters and we have a platform for engaging with decision takers. We are not alone in this, but there are other groups in Alnwick which are less privileged. Their voice also needs to be heard. It is important that the review makes an effort to reach across the community.

Some members of the Society are well-placed to help groups that can be hard for others to reach. We hope they will.

What comes next?

If the revised Neighbourhood Plan is approved it will influence developments in Alnwick for years to come. The policies will be applied to every future planning application. Alongside the policies there will be a set of Community Actions, which members of the Civic Society will no doubt be asked to help deliver.

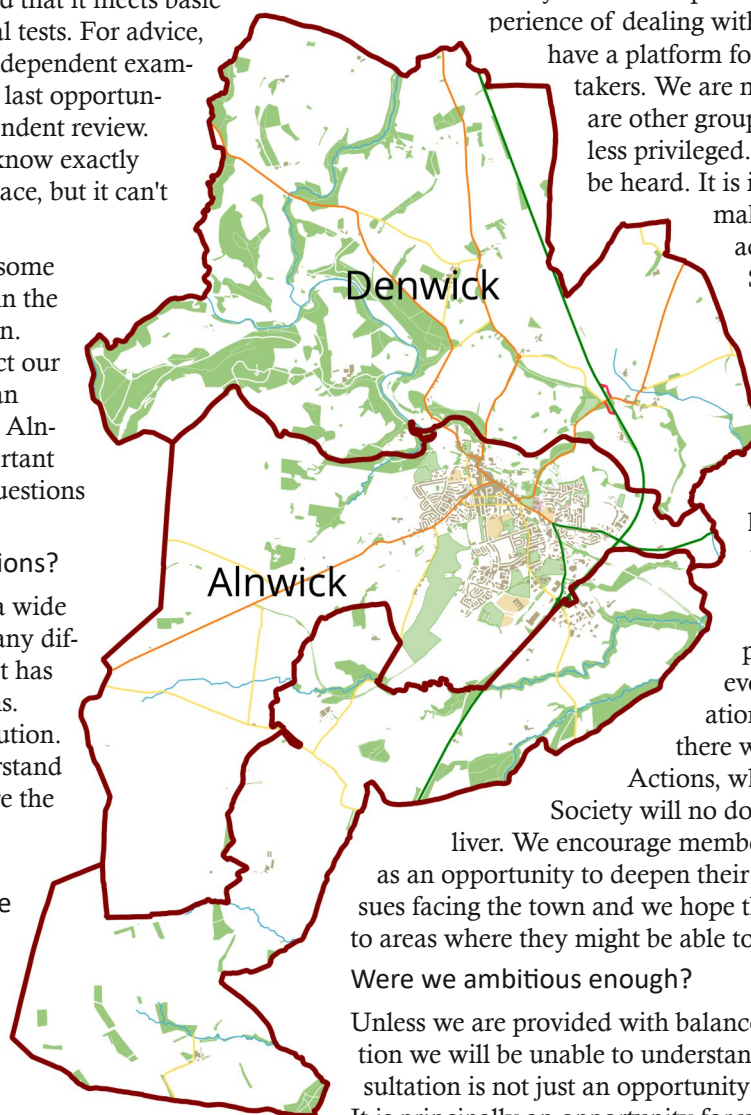
We encourage members to see this consultation as an opportunity to deepen their understanding of the issues facing the town and we hope they will give some thought to areas where they might be able to make a difference.

Were we ambitious enough?

Unless we are provided with balanced and objective information we will be unable to understand the issues. But a consultation is not just an opportunity to exchange information. It is principally an opportunity for us all to express our views on how we would like our town to develop.

Everyone involved in the refresh of the Neighbourhood Plan has ambitions for Alnwick. If we get everything we ask for then we may end up wondering whether we should have been more ambitious. On the other hand, if we push the boundaries of what seems possible then we are likely to be disappointed. Either way, we should expect the authorities to listen carefully to views that are considered and well-presented. And we should expect feedback on how the views of the community have influenced the outcome.

In brief: this is an important consultation. We hope members will hold it to a high standard. But not one that is unreasonable.



## News in Brief

ARCHI is an online interactive system that combines data on Historic and Cultural Sites, Old Maps, Terrain Maps, and Aerial Photographs. Even without a subscription, their search can find Archaeological sites, and early maps and plot the terrain around Alnwick. More features are available to subscribers.

See <https://www.archiuk.com/>



Edinburgh is expected to introduce a Visitor Levy or "Tourist Tax" in 2026. Visitors will pay a daily 5% surcharge on beds in Hotels, Bed and Breakfasts, Self-catering, and Rooms to let like AirBnB. Campsites, the Disabled, the Homeless, Refugees and Traveller sites will be exempt. The charge will be capped at seven consecutive nights. The levy could raise up to £50m a year, of which about 50% will be spent on housing, 35% on festivals and cultural venues, and 15% on tourism.

A survey more than twelve months ago found 97% of residents and 87% of visitors were already aware of the proposal. Most supported the idea, including the majority of visitors. Residents tended to feel that imposing a levy as a percentage of the room bill was fairer, while visitors preferred the simplicity of a flat rate. 35% of all respondents thought the levy should be set at 5% of the bill. A small proportion did not want to deter visitors so opted for 1%. Different reasons were given by those who opted for a higher levy: more funding available to invest, deterring visitors or matching the levy applied by other European cities.

Most residents felt the levy should apply all year round, while visitors were divided on whether or not it should be higher in peak seasons.

Almost all respondents ranked Edinburgh infrastructure in their top three priorities for investing the proceeds, followed closely by local services then culture, heritage and festivals.

### Edlingham Burglary: February 7, 1879



A reminder that the Police urge us to report incidents. See the Northumbria Police website: <https://tinyurl.com/y9hsz53s>.

Crime related intelligence can be reported anonymously via

Crimestoppers at <https://crimestoppers-uk.org/> or 0800 555 111.

Each month we review planning applications across Alnwick and Denwick. In 2024 we considered 40% more applications in Alnwick than we did in 2023, but saw little change in Denwick. By contrast, it looks as though the volume of applications across Northumberland fell by around 6%. This is broadly in line with reports from the Planning Portal, which has early access to national data. They report a decrease of 6% across England and Wales, with a larger fall in some regions, including the North-East. But they also report increases in specific areas such as advertisement consent, conversion of agricultural buildings, and conversion of commercial, business, or service premises to dwellings. See <https://blog.planningportal.co.uk/>



Government sees the performance of local planning authorities as crucial in achieving their plans for house building and economic growth. In 2024 there has been an improvement in the speed at which planning decisions are taken in Northumberland. Both major and non-major applications are determined well above the standard where government would invoke special measures. Few decisions are overturned on appeal, which suggests that quality of decision-taking has not been sacrificed for speed. However, comparisons with other authorities show there is still room for improvement

and enforcement continues to present a challenge. Some enforcement actions can be lengthy, so the standard is for 85% of cases to have an agreed course of action within 13 weeks. That test is still being missed as often as it is met. See <https://performance.northumberland.gov.uk>

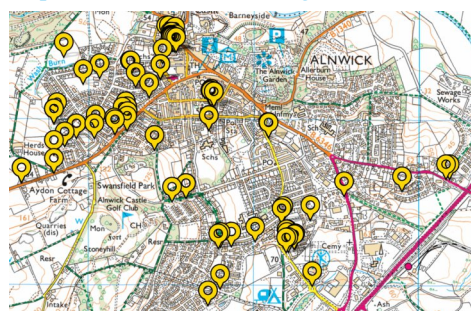


At the time of writing, on FixMyStreet there have been 1,566 reports of Dog Fouling across Northumberland. If the scale of the problem was in proportion to the size of the (human) population we should expect to find just over 40 reports in Alnwick. The actual figure is 32. Which raises an interesting question. Are the good people of Alnwick better than others at picking up after their dog, or less diligent in reporting incidents?

Again, based on population size the total number of FixMyStreet reports from Alnwick (2,222) has been higher than you would expect (1,998). The number of reports of Fly-tipping (145) is lower than you would expect (161). The number of reports of potholes in Alnwick (376) is about what you would expect (370). For Grass Cutting, on the other hand, the number of reports in Alnwick (85) has been higher than you would expect (34).

This map shows the locations where issues with Grass Cutting were reported.

<https://fix.northumberland.gov.uk/>



Like a number of other Civic Societies we have recently joined Bluesky, a social media platform that is similar in style to the site formerly known as Twitter, but with a very different culture. Bluesky launched in early 2024 and grew rapidly towards the end of the year. It aims to give users more control over what they see, rather than relying on algorithms. If you are interested in seeing whether this will turn out to be an effective way for Civic Societies and the wider Civic Movement to interact then find us at [@alnwickcivicsoc.bsky.social](https://alnwickcivicsoc.bsky.social).



# The Alnwick and Cornhill Line

*Our readers may already be enjoying the new Borderline Greenway along the former trackbed of the Cornhill Branch Line between Alnwick and Rugby. This article (below, right) was published in the Newcastle Courant on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1887. It captures something of the mood just before passenger services began.*

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century various railway schemes were proposed to link Central Northumberland, the North British Railway in Scotland, and industrial Tyneside. Few of the proposals were built, but the threat of competitors opening an alternative route to Scotland spurred the North Eastern Railway to propose their own: linking their Kelso line, the rural communities of north Northumberland, and Alnwick. They had the support of Alnwick traders, who feared a loss of business if the farmers of north Northumberland had direct access to rival markets. Authorised in 1882, construction of the line began in 1884. The section between Cornhill and Wooperton opened for freight in May 1887, then the whole line opened for both freight and passengers in September 1887. It had cost £272,266 15s 3<sup>d</sup> to build.

The quality of station buildings and structures was remarkable. *"Probably the best ever built by the North Eastern Railway"*. The company had a reputation as one of the most professionally managed of the Victorian railway companies with financial controls far ahead of its time. So we can only assume that they chose splendid facilities on a relatively minor line in order to demonstrate commitment and deter competitors.

It was difficult to attract passengers because many stations were some distance from the communities they served. Competition from road traffic in the 1920s led to regular passenger trains being withdrawn in 1930, leaving only occasional specials for holidaymakers and troop trains when the RAF operated Milfield airfield near Akeld. The goods and parcel services continued to run, but there was little reduction in

overheads. When a storm washed away a bridge north of Ilderton station in 1948 the cost of replacing it could not be justified. So the line was split into two: Alnwick to Ilderton, and Coldstream to Wooler. The decline continued. The section from Alnwick to Ilderton closed in 1953, and the connection to Wooler in 1965.

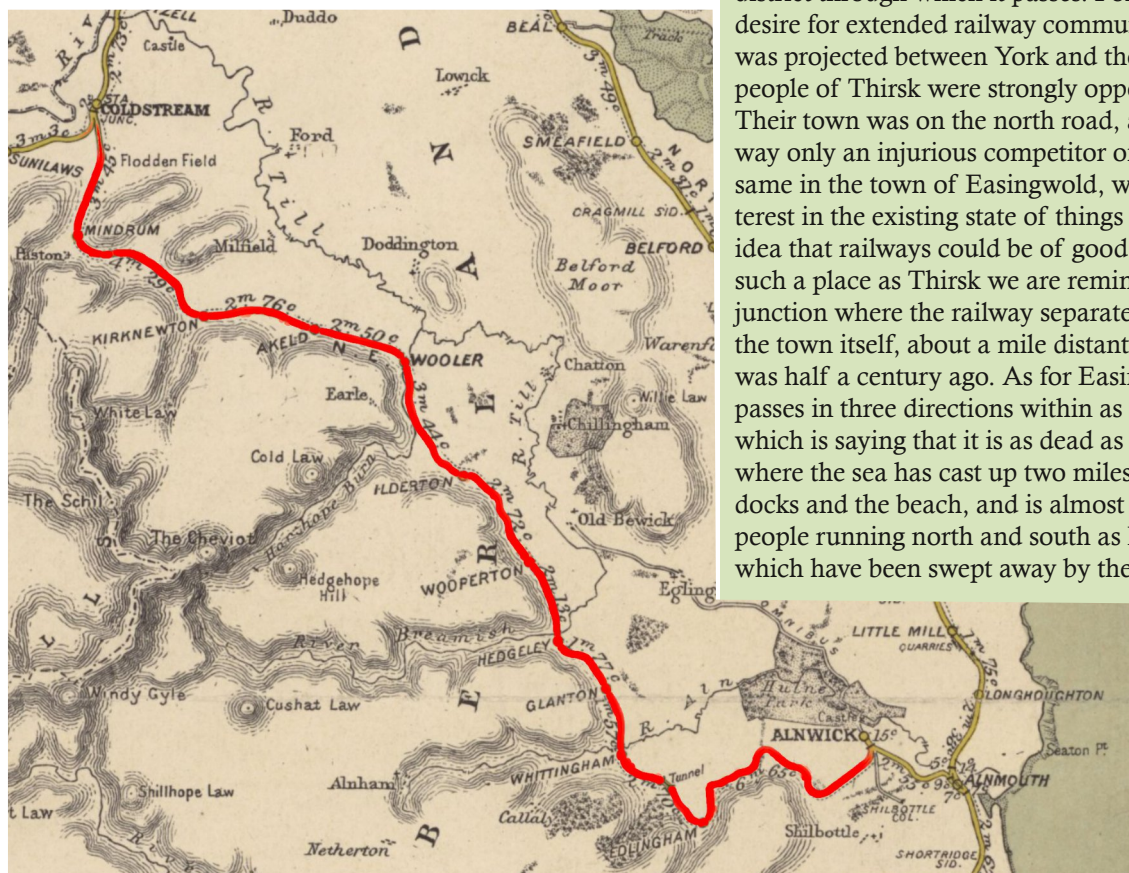
## Newcastle Courant, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1887

The opening of a new railway in the North of England, or in any other part of the country, possesses now almost the charm of novelty. Our railway builders have been so active, and the public requirements have been so fully discounted, that it may be said railways have long been in existence where they were considered likely to pay, or where it was believed they were absolutely needed. It is not the fault of the people in North Northumberland that the more central part of the county was not sooner brought into railway communication with the north and south. The people of Wooler and the district, for example, unlike some residents in provincial towns, were eager years ago to have a railway brought to their doors, and a considerable amount of money was paid upon shares then taken up with the object of carrying a scheme of the kind into execution. They had seen what had resulted from railway construction in other places, and they had everything to gain and not much to lose by being brought into quicker communication with other parts of the kingdom. They have, however, had to wait a long time for the realisation of their desires. The line between Alnwick and Cornhill has been completed some time for goods traffic, and after much delay from various unavoidable causes the route will be opened next week for passengers. Thus a long felt want has been supplied, and it will be interesting to watch the effect of the completion of the undertaking on the district through which it passes. For there was not always this desire for extended railway communication. When the line was projected between York and the North some of the people of Thirsk were strongly opposed to its construction. Their town was on the north road, and they saw in the railway only an injurious competitor of stage coaches. It was the same in the town of Easingwold, where those having an interest in the existing state of things at that time ridiculed the idea that railways could be of good to anybody. That there is such a place as Thirsk we are reminded in the name of the junction where the railway separates for Leeds and York; but the town itself, about a mile distant, is little larger than at was half a century ago. As for Easingwold, the railway passes in three directions within as many miles of the town, which is saying that it is as dead as Hedon on the Humber, where the sea has cast up two miles of land between its docks and the beach, and is almost as apocryphal to most people running north and south as Ravenspur and Outhorne, which have been swept away by the advancing tide at the

south-eastern corner of the Yorkshire coast.

The town of Stokesley has paid a like penalty, half-an-hour's walk to a railway station being too far for manufactur-

Continued opposite...





## Heritage at risk (spoiler alert: it's not getting worse)

*Historic England use their Heritage at Risk Register to understand the overall state of England's historic sites. Since 1998 they have been identifying sites that are most at risk of being lost as a result of neglect, decay or inappropriate development.*

The list covers Grade I and Grade II\* assets, Grade II places of worship and Grade II assets in London. It was last updated in November 2024 and there are currently 4,891 entries.

In Alnwick neither of the two entries has changed this year. General Lambert's House is assessed as being in poor condition, and assigned priority D (Slow decay; solution agreed but not yet implemented). Bondgate Tower is assessed as very bad condition, and assigned priority A (Immediate risk of further rapid deterioration or loss of fabric; no solution agreed).

Outside Alnwick the condition of Heiferlaw defended settlement is generally unsatisfactory with major localised problems (mainly from forestry). The condition of Ellsnook round barrow in Rennington is considered satisfactory but with significant localised problems (mainly from forestry). Various Romano-British settlements and field system around Hedgeley have problems with bracken. Across Northumberland no new entries have been added and three have been removed. These are Hexham Conservation Area (with the help of grants from Historic England) and two archaeological sites where site management has improved: Glead's Cleugh Iron Age promontory fort, at Akeld, near Wooler and three Roman native settlements and a later droveway at Kirknewton.

See: <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/heritage-at-risk/>

## Northumberland Museum Service

*Last year Northumberland County Council decided to move to a shared services arrangement for delivery of museum services. Their partner will be North East Museums (formerly Tyne & Wear Museums and Archives).*

This change will affect Woodhorn Museum, Morpeth Chantry Bagpipe Museum, Hexham Old Gaol, Moot Hall and the House of Correction. It won't directly affect either Alnwick's Bailiffgate Museum and Gallery, or the Northumberland Fusiliers Museum (both are independent). North East Museums will run the Berwick Museum, but not the Living Barracks project, which is run with English Heritage, the King's Own Scottish Borderers, and the Berwick Maltings.

North East Museums is a joint service of four local authorities: Newcastle (which acts as the lead), South Tyneside, North Tyneside and Gateshead. It already has agreements with Sunderland City Council to manage its archives and with Newcastle University to manage the Great North Museum: Hancock. They are funded by partners and by Arts Council England. As a National Portfolio Organisation they already play a regional role, with a variety of projects and schemes, some of which have been based at Woodhorn.

North East Museums will take over responsibility for running the museums from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2025, but ownership of the collections and property will remain with NCC. A programme board is overseeing the transition. Northumberland Archives will remain the responsibility of NCC.

Local Government is an important source of funding for museums, but since 2010 their contribution has fallen by 16% (36% when adjusted for inflation). The reason is largely attributed to financial pressures on statutory Local Government services (particularly adult social care). So the efficiency savings and economies of scale that are expected from this partnership are an important consideration. But cost savings are not the only financial benefit. There are other potential gains in terms of trading, other income streams and access to grants.

Looking forward, let's hope that this new partnership will help our museums to navigate a fragmented funding landscape, and make it less likely that an individual authority will need to make further cuts. And on a more positive note, that our museums can draw on the experience of North East Museums, benefit from a larger partnership and a stronger regional voice: without weakening their distinct local identity.

## The Alnwick and Cornhill Line (continued)

ing and business purposes in a decaying district. The fortune of battle, it has been said, once decided whether London or Bamburgh, was to be the capital of the country, and a railway even today has an important determining influence on the future of a district. At the same time, we do not suppose that the Cornhill and Alnwick branch of the North-Eastern system will revolutionise the appearance of the country through which it passes, for if a railway brings people into a district it also takes people out. This being the case, it is hoped that one immediate effect of the opening of the new line will be to develop the resources of the district and to increase and extend local industries. The very inaccessibility of a locality is one of its attractions to some people, and this attraction, whatever it may be worth to hotel-keepers and to the owners of fishing and sporting rights and properties, will now disappear. Wooler, Cornhill, and other places may be expected to grow in the modern fashion, which it need hardly be said is not always the most

pleasing fashion, yet it is better that they should do this than become more deserted. The line is intended to open up that portion of the Border land rather than form a link of communication between the Border and South Northumberland. To learn the difference between railways constructed with such different objects in view, we need only contrast, say the Carlisle and Settle link on the Midland with others passing through districts with a large resident population. It is hoped, therefore, that while the new line will be found of the utmost value to farmers and enable them to send their produce to market at a lower rate, and to receive on easier terms manures, seeds, and implements, it will also tend to keep the population on the land. It is true that the line forms another highway from the Border into England, but in these hard times we ought to remember that it leads also into Scotland, and may thus contribute to the material prosperity of the population on both sides of the Border.



# Planning Matters

At 17-19b Clayport (next to the laundrette) there is an appeal under way against the rejection of the first retrospective application for the new shop-front. There is also a new retrospective application which is essentially a re-submission of the previous one with an updated heritage statement that attempts to justify the works. We saw no reason to amend our earlier objection for the appeal and repeated our response for the new application as it has the same issues. The new application has since been rejected. We await the results of the appeal.

St Paul's Church is proposing to remove some pews and install a kitchen. The Catholic Church is exempt from certain provisions of the planning acts, including the need to apply for listed building consent. Instead they operate a parallel system which provides the same standards of protection as the local planning authority. It was interesting to follow a process that falls outside our usual experience, but we felt the application was well thought through, and well presented, so saw no need to comment.

At the former Methodist Church in Chapel Lane there is an application for change of use to a dwelling with internal alterations to form living accommodation. We felt that it is crucial that the future of this important building is secured, that the external appearance is protected, and that internal features are conserved as far as possible. We welcome efforts to that end. However, there are particular pressures on street parking in Chapel Lane that require careful consideration. Now the building is no longer in use as a church some might expect the demand for parking to reduce. However, when the building was in use as a church the congregation were sensitive to the issue, and took care over their use of street parking. We suggested that future demand for street parking should be assessed on its own merits, not on assumptions about the previous level of demand.

Alnwick Playhouse is seeking advertisement consent for replacement of static advertising displays with digital signs. Although it is not listed, Alnwick Playhouse is both an important community asset and a prominent feature in the conservation area. Highways do not believe that such digital signage will have a material impact on highway safety. The Theatres Trust was established to provide statutory

planning advice on theatre buildings, and they support the granting of advertisement consent. In our view the proposed illuminated digital sign on the south (front) elevation is not sympathetic to the conservation area, but recognise that such harm has to be weighed against other public benefit. We suggested that if permission was granted the reasons be clearly stated so that this does not encourage further harm of a similar nature to this part of the conservation area. Permission has since been granted.

At 33-35 Market Street (formerly Turnbull's) there is an application to convert the building to five holiday apartments and a cafe. We did not feel a response from the society was necessary: the works appear to be sympathetic to the character of the building and there are benefits in bringing a prominent historic building back into use, with major repairs and removal of some inappropriate alterations.

At Park Cottage in Hulne Park, permission has already been granted to restore the house and demolish the outbuilding. Now a Variation of Condition application has been submitted to demolish the cottage on the basis that this will be more environmentally sustainable. The building is a significant non-designated heritage asset so demolition may be contrary to Policies ENV1, ENV7 and QOP 1 of the Local Plan. Historic England has provided evidence to parliament that retaining and reusing buildings rather than demolishing and rebuilding is necessary for a low-carbon future. We believe this decision needs to be based on a sound understanding and open discussion of the significance of this asset and the Carbon Impact of demolition. It is inappropriate to treat such a fundamental change as a Variation of Condition. The Gardens Trust were surprised not to have been consulted but had no objection. The Georgian Group also registered concerns.

On the site of the former Duke's School revised applications have been submitted for demolition and redevelopment of the modern extensions and outbuildings, conversion of the former school building to thirteen residential apartments and construction of forty-six dwellings in the grounds. We have objected. The harm caused to the heritage asset and its setting outweigh public benefit. Harm to the setting includes development on the former playing fields, and loss of mature trees.

Harm to the building includes window replacement, subdivision of the Examination Hall and loss of internal views of the Kempe window. Materials proposed for new build are not in keeping with the listed school building, or buildings on surrounding streets. In terms of public benefit, the proposed housing mix is poorly aligned with local need, and there is loss of green space.

Access via The Avenue raises significant highway safety concerns that are not addressed by introducing a turning head. In order to alleviate traffic impact we would have liked to see some consideration given in the transport plan to the impact of additional movements on the road network beyond the immediate vicinity, particularly the effect on the busy traffic corridors along Wagonway Road and Prudhoe Street / Lisburn Street. This should include an assessment of the potential to mitigate this impact by providing improved connections to Alnwick's cycling network. We also consider the amount of retained open space to be insufficient. It is regrettable that the proposal involves loss of mature trees and the opportunity has not been taken to integrate this site with Swansfield Park to establish a unified open space. Any adjustment to the proposed site layout should continue to respect the character of the listed building and its setting.





## Quiz: One hundred and eighty!

Our readers, without exception, are conscientious, considerate and law-abiding.

So those who drive in Alnwick will be familiar with the 20 mph restrictions that are now in place and they will have no difficulty identifying the location of each of these signs. Will they?

Check your answers on the back page and award yourself 20 points for each correct answer.





## Diary dates

**19<sup>th</sup> Feb:** Online talk by Dr Philip Carstairs on the little-known history of Alnwick's soup kitchens. Dr Carstairs has traced the development of Alnwick's soup kitchens during the nineteenth century along with others in Northumberland and the rest of England. Were soup kitchens a crucial form of welfare, on which the poor depended to survive? Or did they help to create the problems they sought to alleviate? Online: 7:30 p.m.  
eMail [contact@alnwickcivicsociety.org.uk](mailto:contact@alnwickcivicsociety.org.uk) for joining instructions.

**12<sup>th</sup> March:** Annual General Meeting. We have invited Bailiffgate Museum and Gallery to give members an update on their plans for the future. St James Church, Pottergate, 7:30 pm.

**1<sup>st</sup> April – 11<sup>th</sup> May:** Alnwick through the lens exhibition, Bailiffgate Museum and Gallery.

**14<sup>th</sup> May:** Panel discussion: Protecting our heritage, or a spanner in the works?

**14<sup>th</sup> June:** Summer outing to Felton. Including visit to Felton Park.  
And more...

**11<sup>th</sup> Feb onwards:** Howick Hall Snowdrops. Daily 10:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

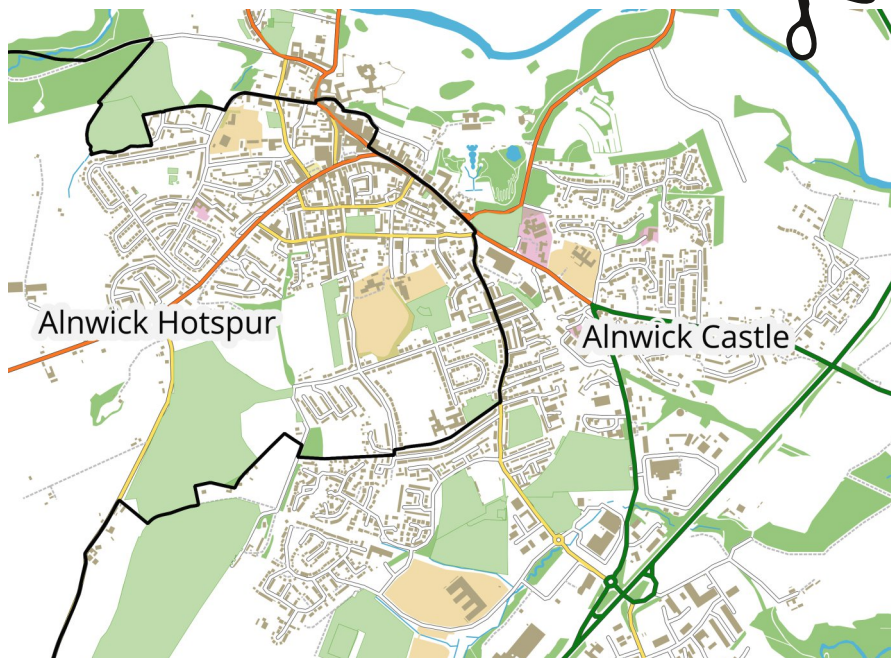
**12<sup>th</sup> Feb:** Berwick Civic Society. "Health of the Town Centre" and "The Neighbourhood Plan" by Mark Dodds, 7:30, Berwick Parish Centre.

**28<sup>th</sup> Feb - 2<sup>nd</sup> March:** Alnwick Story Fest invites us to have fun, find new friends, learn new skills and mingle and meet with inspiring writers, authors, poets and artists.

**29<sup>th</sup> March:** Target date for opening of Borderline Greenway from Alnwick to Rugley Wood

**1<sup>st</sup> May:** Northumberland County Council election. This will be the first under Alnwick's new ward boundaries.

## Alnwick's new electoral map



In 2023 the Local Government Boundary Commission changed the electoral map of Alnwick. In the past, wherever we live in Alnwick, we have been represented by the same two County Councillors. In future Alnwick will still have two County Councillors, but each ward will elect a different one. This will be the basis on which we will vote in the elections to be held on 1st May. Do we all know which ward we live in?

## Quiz Answers

- (F) Clayport Bank
- (G) Bondgate Without (& Playhouse)
- (H) Taylor Dr (& Duchess's Community High School)
- (I) Column Cottage (Prudhoe St & Wagonway Rd)

## About Alnwick Civic Society

Alnwick Civic Society was formed in 1974, following the defeat of proposals to re-develop the town centre with a modern shopping area and amid growing concerns about the future of our town. Since then we have sought to influence developments, especially in the town centre and conservation area, to ensure that proposals protect and enhance our heritage.

The Society pursues its objectives through a variety of activities. We provide a voice for members through dialogue with planning and conservation professionals and like-minded organisations. We offer advice, scrutinise and comment on development proposals; recognise excellence; and organise public meetings. Members were heavily involved in development of the Alnwick and Denwick Neighbourhood Plan, and we work with local partners to influence policy at a county level. We seek to influence national policy by co-operating with other bodies in the civic movement, and the Society was a founding member of Civic Voice.

All who share our aims can support the work of the society: by joining as an individual, family, student, or business member; by participating in activities, sharing ideas, raising areas of concern and pointing out examples of good practice. Or simply by demonstrating pride in our town, and spreading the word about the value of our work.



## Who's Who?

**President:** Peter Ennor

**Trustees:** Chair: Peter Reed; Membership: Gill Parker; Honorary Secretary: Sue Smith; Treasurer: Tim Smith.

**Web:** [www.alnwickcivicsociety.org.uk](http://www.alnwickcivicsociety.org.uk)

**Email:** [contact@alnwickcivicsociety.org.uk](mailto:contact@alnwickcivicsociety.org.uk)

**Bluesky:** [@alnwickcivicsoc.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/alnwickcivicsoc.bsky.social)

**Twitter:** [@AlnwickCivicSoc](https://twitter.com/AlnwickCivicSoc)

**Facebook:** [AlnwickCivicSociety](https://www.facebook.com/AlnwickCivicSociety)

**Instagram:** [alnwickcivicsociety](https://www.instagram.com/alnwickcivicsociety)

**Substack:** [alnwickcivicsociety.substack.com](https://alnmickcivicsociety.substack.com)

**Charity registration number:** 1197235

**Heritage at risk:** report your concerns here:

<https://alnwickcivicsociety.org.uk/heritage-at-risk/>

- (A) Willowburn Ave (& Greensfield Court)
- (B) Wagonway Rd (& Barter Books)
- (C) Bailiffgate, (& Narrowgate)
- (D) Dispensary St (& Maltings)
- (E) Willowburn Ave (& Sports Centre)