

Victoria Tunnel Visit



Six members (Ian Macpherson, John Wood, Keith Wilson, Len Small, Martyn Hudson and Mick Garratt) met up at Ouseburn on the north bank of the Tyne in Newcastle on a cold Thursday night. This was for something a little different to our normal activities, but connected by the fact it was associated with industrial archaeology and visits to sites of earlier mining activities feature on several Smelly Helly events. This was a trip to Victoria Tunnel under the city of Newcastle, the visit consisted of a 2 hour guided tour of the site, most of which was spent underground. The tunnel was built between 1839 and 1842 and runs under the city from the Town Moor to the Tyne and was built to transport coal from Leazes Main Colliery to the river. The quality of coal in the seam was poor and the mine unfortunately closed in 1860 rendering the tunnel redundant, however in 1939 it was reopened and converted into an air raid shelter for WW2 and was capable of taking 7,500 people. It was also used as safe underground pedestrian walkway which was warm, dry and safe from bombing raids when walking between the quayside with its pubs and the houses of Byker.

In 2008 the tunnel was reopened to the public and since then with funding from various bodies has been enhanced and is now operated by the Ouseburn Trust.

The original tunnel was approximately 2.5 miles long and ran downhill all the way from the colliery to the Tyne, but now the restored section open to the public is approximately 0.5 miles long. The remaining sections have been deemed unsafe since the building of the central motorway and flats, such as the Byker Wall directly above the tunnel have seriously damaged some sections of the tunnel walls.

With further funding the Trust are hoping to open up more sections of the tunnel, although the north end at the colliery seems to be now lost forever under new buildings. A visit to the tunnel and the Ouseburn area in general is well recommended and is an old part of Newcastle you may not have seen before.

A photograph of the tunnel by courtesy of Mick Garratt is above.

Len