

# The North East Region

## ... A Green History

**T**he green movement in the North East in general and Tyneside in particular scarcely appears in standard histories of the area nor is it any the more visible in feature films and TV programmes set here. Yet it has existed for many years, albeit much weaker than in other parts of the country. Indeed one of the first mass movements with a strong environmental element was the local 'Dicky Bird Society' founded in 1874. Membership reached some 100,000.<sup>1</sup>

Certain individuals from the area had also pre-echoed certain green concerns. For example, the Newcastle-born radical **Thomas Spence** (1750-1814), was a pioneer of the concept of 'human rights'. In 1771, the proposed enclosure of the Town Moor drove him to develop plans for community land ownership as part of his critique of aristocratic privilege and landlordism. He also advocated a kind of socially guaranteed income for the unemployed. So he might be considered a pre-echo of certain green ideas, especially land value tax and the basic income scheme as well as broader notions of 'social justice'.

However the main platform for environmental concern has traditionally been rather 'respectable' organisations. First in the field was the Natural History Society of Northumberland, Durham and Newcastle upon Tyne (now the **Natural History Society of Northumbria**) It began life in 1829 with a membership of 134. Local ornithologist John Hancock (1808-1890) led the campaign to create the Museum of Natural Museum which officially opened in 1884 and for many years bore his name.

Later came the Northumberland and Newcastle Society (founded 1924) and the North of England **Civic Trust** (1965). The **Northumberland Wildlife Trust** was registered as a charity in 1971. The **Campaign to Protect Rural England** (formerly 'Council') has had branches in the region since the 1970s and has campaigned on many local issues, most notably opencast mining and the creation of the strategic green belt.

The good work of such bodies notwithstanding, they might be deemed a 'loyal opposition' in that they posed no wider critique of the society that was causing the very problems about which they were concerned. The same might be said of various educational initiatives such as the Tyne and Wear (now North East) Environmental Education Programme (NEEEF) set up in 1975, the first in England (its leading light was,

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1 <http://www.eh-resources.org/dbs.html>

for many years, David Lovie, a professional town planner). It seems fair to say that until the latter part 20<sup>th</sup> century, environmental concern on Tyneside was small-scale, middle class and focussed largely on what might be called preservationism (historic buildings, favourite scenery etc.)

In more modern times, from the 60s onwards, local awareness of green issues was of course driven to a considerable extent by national and international events. These included a series of high profile oil tanker disasters (*Torrey Canyon* etc) plus some landmark conferences and publications (the 1972 'Only One Earth' gathering in Stockholm and books such as *The Population Bomb*, *Limits to Growth* and the *Blueprint for Survival*, all of which attracted considerable media coverage at the time).

A key issue in the region that helped to stimulate the broad green movement was the construction of the **Cow Green Reservoir** in Upper Teesdale (started 1967). It destroyed about 10% of the rich flora and fauna of the district, especially rare alpine plants like the unique Teesdale violet. Conservationists were able to establish national nature reserve in 1969, the largest in England, with the country's largest juniper wood. The environment's defender included not only local Naturalists Trusts and the CPRE but also cyclists and ramblers' organisations

Yet again the 'jobs first' argument was used to attack conservationists. In reality, the rapid expansion of the chemical industry on Teesside, one that dams like Cow Green (and Kielder, further north) were partly meant to feed, actually went into reverse. Yet again the perspective of predicted shortages, extrapolated from conditions not likely to continue, had been used to justify more supply (instead of seeing the situation as 'longage' of demand, with conservation and efficiency as the primary response).

In a letter to *The Times*, (06/07/66) Peter Scott (as chairman of WWF) and Professor Humphrey Hower (Council for Nature) argued thus: "What [Parliament] must decide is whether, to satisfy the demands of industry for a few years, it is prepared to give such an appalling example to the rest of the world."

## Radical shift

However, the same process that led to the launch of more radical national and international pressure groups such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace caused similar ripples on Tyneside. Bodies such as **Tyneside Environmental Concern** (TEC) and particularly SOCEM (**Save Our City from Environmental Mess**) arose in response to local issues like destructive road developments. At the time, six (sic) motorways were planned which would have almost obliterated the old city centre.

SOCEM was almost entirely the creation of Alan Brown, a Tory supporter, who lived in the area of south Jesmond that was under assault from bulldozers. They had started to carve out what were planned to be new roadways (even removing 1,000 bodies from the local cemetery). The construction of the central motorway not far away also cost much housing (Sandyford Road area) as well as many trees and open space in

Exhibition Park. The traditional Left, however, failed to address the issue of the private motor car, even though it embodies a great class injustice, effectively excluding groups like the poor, the young and the elderly from many activities, while endangering children in particular.

TEC also made the link between social poverty, poor health and unhealthy eating. One action was to open one of the city's first health food stores, not in leafy Jesmond but in the working class suburb of Walker, where lots of shipyard workers lived. The point was that there were more nutritious but also genuinely less expensive alternatives to 'junk food' which was of course, also the produce of an ecologically unsustainable agricultural system. One local activist, Monica Frisch, launched *Earthright Publications* which helped to popularise green ideas.

The radical bookshop *Days of Hope* (c1977-1986, first in the suburbs on Jesmond Road, then Westgate Road in the city centre) had carried a decent environmental section, unlike the older 'Peoples Bookshop' (Communist Party) up the road. This reflected the increasing traction of green ideas in the area. Of course, both bookshops have now disappeared under the tidal wave of chain stores and Internet shopping. The former had been the child of the Tyneside Socialist Centre, one of a series of stalled 'left unity' initiatives. The leading light was Hilary Wainwright who went on to found *Red Pepper* magazine, which continues to feature (somewhat shallow) green material.

## Union currents

There were (very modest) ripples of green concern inside local trade unions too. A very early instance was a meeting in 1973(?) convened by the local trades council in the then quite grand surroundings of the Royal Station Hotel at which Professor Barry Commoner, the American socialist biologist and author of a noted book *The Closing Circle*, and the Australian trade unionist Jack Munday (leader of the 'green bans' movement in Sydney) spoke on environmental issues. It owed much to the enthusiasm of one person, Colin Randall, an organiser from a local Community Development Project. The building workers union, UCATT, also played a part through its representative Davey Ayres.

The main other trade union connection was to be found at C.A. Parsons, a power plant manufacturer. There, members of what was then the draughtsman's union TASS (Terry Rogers, Bob Murdoch, and Harry Blair to the fore) had been arguing the case for combined heat and power plants, instead of conventional coal burning power stations. Also involved were Friends of the Earth via an energy conservation advisor David Green, who particularly stressed energy waste in the home and its link to fuel poverty.

The campaign featured in a BBC 2 'community access' programme at the time (the kind of broadcast that usually goes out when no-one is watching). Dave Elliot and Frankie Ashton from Socialist Environment and Resources Association (SERA) were

centrally involved.

There was also a local branch of SERA in Newcastle. It usually met at the home of a local architect Ted Nicklin. Its main focus was energy conservation. The Labour Party connection was not particularly pronounced at this level, though there was more interest from local Labour Party members than from the 'Hard Left'. The idea of 'alternative plans', following the inspirational lead of Mike Cooley at Lucas Aerospace, had also caught the interest of some trade unionists such as Jim Murray, convenor at the Vickers factory along Scotswood Road.

## Greener transport and energy

There had been concerted resistance to the 'more roads-more cars' mentality'. A strong campaign was waged to re-route lorries from the high streets of Gosforth and Gateshead, for example (**SLOGG**). Its success might illustrate the law of unintended consequences. The new road was, of course, the A1 by-pass which, in turn, facilitated the launch of the giant MetroCentre shopping complex, one of whose side-effects was to decimate local shopping areas.

The main rail unions combined to create a pro-rail pressure group Transport 2000 in 1976, chaired by a local RMT representative. They had correctly seen that the growth of car ownership would result in job losses and the closure of railway lines and depots. That organisation is still continuing as the **Campaign for Better Transport** (<http://www.bettertransport.org.uk>) and the local Transport activist's roundtable (<http://www.ne-ctar.org.uk/>)

There was also activity in the field of alternative energy. Mention must be made of Geoff Watson who played a key role at the New Age Access project eventually based in Hexham. It was succeeded by the **Northumbrian Energy Workshop**, (1978/9-1989), then NE Energy and offshoots. Together, there were home to pioneering work in renewable energy, especially in the field of wind energy. Geoff, who later moved to the Isle of Man, recently died. Ventures like the Centre for Alternative Technology in mid-Wales tend to attract the spotlight but thanks to people such as Geoff, the NE has played its part in opening doors to a more sustainable world.

## No nukes

Later in the 1970s, following the establishment of a national campaign over nuclear energy, one of whose sponsors was miners' leader Arthur Scargill, **Tyneside Anti-Nuclear Campaign** (TANC) was set up. It had half a dozen activists, Future Labour government minister Mo Mowlam, then a local university lecturer, passed through the doors of TANC. It had hoped to replicate the campaign against nuclear weapons. Ironically the rebirth of CND, around the Cruise Missiles controversy, helped to sap its energy. Locally, TANC did manage to organise protests against proposed nuclear

waste dumping in the Cheviots, another proposal for a power station at scenic Druridge Bay and the transport of nuclear waste flasks by train through Tyneside. On that last issue, one meeting organised by TANC packed a church hall in the suburb of Boldon.

The protection of Druridge Bay had mobilised considerable numbers of people. Bridget Gubbins, arguably its leading light, also played a notable role in exposing how the nuclear power industry has been heavily subsidised via public funding of its insurance cover, quite contrary, of course, to what is normal in businesses and households. The public response was such that there was a basis for Greens to contest the Northumbria seat in the 1989 Euroelections (and, sadly, sharing in the 'false dawn' of that success when nationally the Party got 15% of the vote)

**SCRAP** (previously Newcastle Schools and Community Recycling Project) has now been working with schools in Newcastle since 1993. It is based within the Children's Warehouse and strives to raise awareness amongst young people of environmental issues, with a special focus on paper recycling. In the late 90s, **BAN Waste** was to emerge, starting life as Byker Plant Working Group with a vociferous and angry meeting of over 200 people opposed to the Byker incinerator.

## On Your Bike

Many people cycle simply to save money, to improve their fitness or just because they find it fun. Yet cycling does pose an alternative to the unsustainable tyranny of the motor car. So biking groups like **Tyne Bikes** can be counted as part of the progressive history of the area. It might be remembered that, pre-1914, the cycling groups created by the left-wing *Clarion* newspaper, run by Robert Blatchford, combined politics and pleasure. Today there are good initiatives in the form of, for example, Newcastle Cycling Campaign (<http://newcycling.org>)

Mention ought to be made of Newcastle's **People's Theatre** which also started life in 1911 as another *Clarion* spin-off. Of course, biking isn't always benevolent. It can



*Insane road plans like the one above from the 60s and the then Labour council encouraged interest in greener alternatives as did the nuclear power station proposed for Druridge Bay, below.*



threaten pedestrians, for example. In the USA, high-speed mountain biking, is being called 'silent death' due to the risk to ordinary hikers. But, of course, the excesses of the few should not detract from what is a positive alternative, mass cycling. Once again, 'alternative' is not always appropriate.

Many of these organisations have been visible at the Newcastle Green festival, held annually in Leazes Park (itself the site of an important green vicotry when objectors saw off a threat from Newcastle United football club to grab part of the land for new facilities). The Festival did not have sufficient funds for 2015 but hopefully it will be back soon (<http://www.newcastlegreenfestival.org.uk>)

## Ecology turns Green

A local branch of the then Ecology (now Green) Party, had been founded at the end of the 1970s. Its first member was Alec Ponton. It had a fairly fitful existence but began to mount consistent election campaigns, establishing a small but firm foundation on Tyneside. It published a well researched pamphlet called *Don't Catch the A-Train* on nuclear waste transportation. Its circulation was modest, however.

For many years, Ecology/Green Party activity tended to centre on Newcastle. Lately, however branches have emerged in various parts of Tyneside and indeed the whole North East. In Newcastle itself, that first council seat remains elusive. That said, the local elections in May 2015 registered real progress in South Heaton in particular under the candidature of Andrew Gray who has work long and hard in that part of town.

Today, Green Party members are prominently involved in a variety of individual campaigns today, from the anti-cutbacks movement to the battle against the Core Strategy and associated grabs of the Green Belt by developers. In the latter case, it is fair to say that the Green Party Newcastle and Gateshead branches submitted the most comprehensive critique of the plan of any objectors. Greens have been prominent in battles over East Coast rail privatisation and the future of the NHS. Particularly encouraging has the sudden growth of the Young Greens at the two universities in Newcastle.

That said, many local 'Reds' resolutely resisted and continue to resist becoming deeply Green. New challenges have also emerged, notably in the form of Ukip. The 'kippers' have proved quite adept in some areas at exploiting resentments over traffic management schemes, not just the more familiar grievances they exploit.

Recent recruits to the Green Party have included people with no political background as well as switching organisational loyalties. A mix of motives seem to inspire, usually blending 'social justice' with environmental concerns. Perhaps the real lesson from this potted history is that the primary audience for Green ideas is more likely to be amongst that layer of deeply concerned citizens regardless of whatever past political labels they may have worn.

# A Greener side to Tyneside



Above, a domestic PV array in Gosforth, with, right, the community orchard in Jesmond

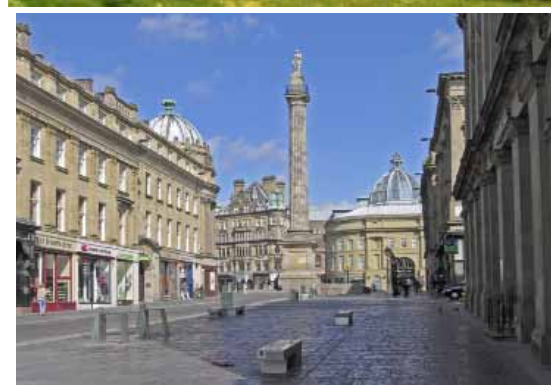


Left, electric buses on the Quayside & below, solar photovoltaic cells integrated into the actual building wall at the city centre campus of Northumbria University



Below, the real ale brewery at Newburn, one of a new generation of local food and drink producers that ought to be supported

Right, a nature park for people & wildlife in Benwell & below right, much needed pedestrianisation at the Monument, with shared traffic space on Blackett Street



Sinclair Meadows in South Shields, right, is the first 'carbon negative' housing community of its kind in the UK (2012).

