

## HERITAGE OF ST HELENS

In medieval times there was a small hamlet close to the chapel (St Elyn's) from which the town derives its name but St Helens is essentially a product of the Industrial Revolution and its proud heritage includes England's first canal and a significant section of the world's first passenger railway. Indeed, in 1829, the epoch-making locomotive trials, won by Robert Stephenson's Rocket, were held at Rainhill in the southern part of the modern borough.

The basis for St Helens' development was coal. The first pits were perhaps dug in late medieval times, and a significant stimulus to growth was the extension of the Liverpool turnpike road in the mid-eighteenth century, so that coal could be more easily carried from St Helens. Transportation was further improved when the first English canal, the Sankey Navigation, was constructed between the town and the River Mersey.

From this point, the town's development accelerated as entrepreneurs such as Michael Hughes, the Greenalls, and the Pilkingtons established other key industries such as copper refining, foundries, chemicals, glass, and brewing. By the mid-twentieth century, St Helens had 30,000 glass workers and 20,000 miners, as well as many thousands more in other industries. Newton-le-Willows was another significant industrial centre, concentrating on railway engineering, sugar, and printing.

Despite the town's growth over the past 200 years, St Helens does contain several buildings from the pre-industrial age, most notably the fifteenth-century Windleshaw Chantry in the borough cemetery (Grade II\* listed) and the sixteenth-century Friends' Meeting House on Church Street, as well as even older fragmented structures in Newton-le-Willows, Rainhill, and Rainford.

Though not renowned for its architecture, St Helens does contain other buildings of real merit, and makes a significant contribution to Heritage Open Days held in September each year. The borough is home to the world's first railway viaduct built in 1829 to carry Stephenson's Liverpool-Manchester

Railway over the canal at Newton. There are several notable churches, not just the Parish Church and St Mary's Lowe House, but other places of worship in the suburbs such as St Aidan's, Billinge, St Peter's, Parr, and St Bartholomew in Rainhill.

The town centre has a number of interesting public buildings including the Town Hall and the Gamble Institute, as well as long-established entertainment venues like the Theatre Royal and the Citadel. The former Beecham's Factory, now part of St Helens College, was a building admired by Sir Nicholas Pevsner, the critic and writer responsible for the County Architectural Guides. Rainhill's Briar Hey, and Mansion House in Cowley Hill are amongst the best of many surviving large houses from the High Victorian period. Several unsung local architects such as George Harris and Frank Biram made major contributions to the built environment of the borough and it is encouraging that their work is now being re-assessed and celebrated. A modern iconic structure in St Helens is the 20 metre high *Dream* on the site of Sutton Manor Colliery, symbolic of post-industrial regeneration and the focus of inspiration for present and future generations.

To many, St Helens is synonymous with rugby league, and Saint's sporting heritage is now particularly relevant, the club having just moved from their long-established home to a state-of-the-art stadium. Though there are many other historic sports grounds across the borough, Haydock Park racecourse also stands out as a nationally renowned venue.

There are a number of heritage centres of which the best-known is the World of Glass which celebrates St Helens' industrial and local heritage as well as the manufacture of glass, and which also includes the borough's museum and art collections. Also notable is the St Helens Local History and Archives Library which contains two million archival items relating to the history and development of the borough, for which an online catalogue can now be consulted by the public.

We must not forget the outstanding individuals from St Helens who have made significant contributions on the national or international arenas. People

such as Richard Seddon, the early twentieth-century Prime Minister of New Zealand, orchestra conductor Sir Thomas Beecham, statesman Sir Hartley Shawcross, world champion motor cyclist Geoff Duke, and Oscar-winners George Groves and Colin Welland.

St Helens and its surrounding area have a proud and impressive history that has made an impact in the UK and across the world. Local heritage contributes to the distinctive identity of the modern borough of St Helens and by conserving important local buildings and structures, artefacts and documents, parks and open spaces, as well as the collective memory and culture of its citizens, this heritage will be passed on to future generations.

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