

# Creating New Town Infrastructure

There was a need for massive reconstruction of UK housing stock following the Second World War. Birth rates were rising and many old slums and war damaged areas were considered no longer suitable for modern family living.

To cater for the demand in housing, one solution was to develop a number of “new towns” – entirely new communities on previously undeveloped land. In our region it saw the creation of Newton Aycliffe, Peterlee and Washington in County Durham, and Cramlington and Killingworth in Northumberland.



## Planning New Towns

The immediate years following the Second World War saw a major reconstruction of the UK's housing stock. Along with a sharp rise in population, to meet the imminent demand, a number of “new towns” were proposed. This became legislation in the New Towns Act 1946, updated in 1964, allowing Government to designate areas of proposed land.

Responsibility for delivering New Towns fell to Development Corporations, who employed multi-discipline teams, including highways and transportation professionals, in the design process. More often than not, they started with a “blank sheet of paper”.

The most productive design period was from 1946 to 1950, but then came a long gestation through the planning process and eventual start of construction. The first wave of New Towns completed between 1961 and 1964, with a second trench between 1967 and 1970.





**Newton Aycliffe** was the first New Town in the North East and was designated on 19th April 1947, originally as Aycliffe New Town, 'Newton' being added later as a simple abbreviation of New Town. It has a current population of approximately of 29,000. Within a 10-mile radius are Darlington, Bishop Auckland and Shildon, and just south is the original village of Aycliffe.

There are no “streets” in Newton Aycliffe – the main road running through the centre is called 'Central Avenue', off which there are several Roads, Closes, Crescents and even a Parade. In older parts of the town streets are named after Bishops of Durham and Saints – Van Mildert Road, St. Aidan's Walk, Biscop Crescent; some after prominent local families – Shafto Way, Eden Road, Bowes Road, for example. Others celebrated the ‘movers and shakers’ of the New Town Movement, such as Lord Lewis Silkin (Silkin Way) and Lord Beveridge (Beveridge Way).

A feature of New Towns was the landscaping of industrial areas to look more aesthetically pleasing and not be left as the ‘ugly’ part of town.

Two further phases of development saw the completion of Newton Aycliffe – a residential area named after trees, Beechfield, Oakfield, for example, and Agnew stages 1, 2, and 3, named after the architect.

On the edge of town is the Bishop Auckland to Darlington branch railway line, part of the original 1825 Stockton and Darlington Railway. Newton Aycliffe station is a relative newcomer to the line, being opened in 1978. The Great North Road (A1) also passed through the town until 1969, when it was bypassed with the A1(M).

**Peterlee** was also part of the first wave of New Towns, being designated a new town on 10th March 1948, originally as Easington New Town. Its aim was to provide more modern housing for coal miners and their families and was subsequently named after the celebrated Durham miners' leader Peter Lee. It has a current population of approximately 30,000 and, while the mining industry has all but disappeared, retains strong economic and community ties with Sunderland and Hartlepool.

The town is served by two main roads – the A19 trunk road, to the west, serving Tyne and Wear and Teesside, and the A1086, which runs east of the town to Easington and Hartlepool. The B1320 also provides connections from the town centre, via the above routes to Horden and Shotton Colliery.

Peterlee was served by the railway station at Horden on the Durham Coast Line, until it was closed in 1964.

The old village of **Washington** was designated a New Town on 24th July 1964. It expanded dramatically through the creation of new 'villages' as well as absorbing areas of Chester-le-Street to house overspill population from the adjacent Tyne & Wear conurbation. By 2002 it had a population of approximately 53,000.

Developed through the 'New Towns concept', which aimed to achieve sustainable socio-economic growth, Washington was divided into 15 small, self-sufficient "villages", each simply with a designated number, much to the confusion of visitors to the area. Gradually, these and subsequent districts were given names, which now appear on road signs instead of simply a number.





Washington is located on the mothballed Leamside Line which, until the mid 1960s, carried regular passenger services to Sunderland, Newcastle and beyond. Freight transport continued until 1991, making the town one of the largest in the UK without an operational railway station. However most of the infrastructure remains intact and, in June 2009, the Association of Train Operating Companies called for funding to reopen the station as part of a £500m national scheme to recommence passenger services on 14 lines closed in the 1960s as a result of the Beeching Report.

## New Townships in Northumberland

At the same time as the region's first New Towns were being planned in County Durham, similar proposals were being drawn up in Northumberland. However, by the early 1960s it was clear there would be no government sponsorship was not forthcoming. Northumberland County Council took the bold move to promote two locally financed "townships" – Cramlington and Killingworth.

The development model for Cramlington was radically different to the government sponsored New Town. While the County Council supported the town's infrastructure, the majority of development was planned by two house building companies, William Leech Ltd. and John T Bell Ltd. Killingworth, on the other hand was developed using the more conventional model.

**Cramlington**, situated 9 miles north of Newcastle upon Tyne, was a small mining village until 1964, when it was chosen by Northumberland County Council as the location for a new "township". It was a developer-led project, with house builders William Leech and J T Bell creating a number of large residential estates. However, with little in the way of shops, schools, or community areas, the town effectively became a dormitory of urban Tyneside. Facilities have improved in recent years and the population in 2004 was estimated at 39,000.

In terms of transport, Cramlington is well connected, with a railway station and direct train services to Morpeth, Newcastle and the Metro Centre. The town also has an extensive bus service, including express services to Newcastle. Good road links to the A1, A19 and A189 means Cramlington remains a popular place to live, cheaper than the city but still with easy access to it.

Like many of the New Towns in the rest of the UK, Cramlington has an extensive bicycle network, the majority of which are segregated cycle routes, free of motorised traffic.

**Killingworth** township was built on 760 acres (3.1 km<sup>2</sup>) of former colliery land near old Killingworth Village, the mine having been abandoned since 1884. Started in 1963, it was originally intended to create around 7,000 jobs and house a population of 20,000.

Unlike Cramlington, which had little identity of its own, Killingworth was built with a sizeable commercial centre, with strong bus links to the rest of Tyne and Wear for commuting and leisure purposes. The design was radical, with a large citadel complex, comprising the shops and community buildings. Baileys, or loop roads, ran off each side, where the Garths, or housing would be built. The result was an avant-garde, brutalist style of high-rise buildings, stepping down in scale away from



the centre. It won awards for architecture, dynamic industry and attractive environment. A boating lake was provided close to the centre and nearby housing.

While the township incorporated typical architectural features of the time, there were also were some quirks. One example is the pre-cast concrete houses, which had millions of small shells embedded into their external walls. Offices, industrial units, service buildings, shops and multi-storey car parks were interconnected by ramps and walkways to residential flats, constructed to the Swedish Skarne ‘deck method’. It was very experimental – the five to ten storey flats proved extremely unpopular, leading to that element being demolished in 1987 and redeveloped with more conventional housing.

With construction more or less completed by 1973, Killingworth Development Group produced a Case Study of planning and developing New Towns in the North East, concluding that “...*the key to success of a New Town is the ability to integrate a plan over a large area rather than undertake piecemeal development.*”

*Thanks to J Michael Taylor MBE, CEng, MICE, FICHT, for preparing this article.*

**If you enjoyed this article, try also:**

*Home Zones*

