



West Cumbria Around Whitehaven

In the 17th century, Whitehaven was the first post-medieval town to be built in England. Today it remains **one of the most complete Georgian towns in the country**, with particularly notable examples of the period style to be found in and around around **Scotch Street, Irish Street and Queen Street**. When viewed within the historic development and spread of the town out from this core, and over the surrounding hills that made it a good location for a port, it offers an excellent example of how the small and contained situation of Whitehaven helped to preserve this urban core in something very close to its original form.

This, perhaps, has much to do with the fact that in its original design and layout – dating from the 1640s and employing an orthogonal or ‘modern’ grid – was really intended, like most urban grid systems in history, to be

expanded outwards from its core. It just so happens that in the case of Whitehaven, the outward expansion came much later and, as such, betrays the traces of later eras, particularly the 19th and 20th centuries, which are evident in different styles.

Heading west along Queen Street at the corner of Roper Street (*pictured above*) and the narrow road turns on to a view ahead of 20th century houses on the hills beyond, which the **Cumbrian poet Norman Nicholson** described as almost rising up in the early mornings like waking beasts hoisting their backbones. On the left-hand side of the street behind the row of trees and parked cars is a **mural at the gable end of Coates Lane celebrating Jonathon Swift's connection to the town**, with his fictional Gulliver being pinned to the ground at Whitehaven by a team of

Lilliputians (reputedly inspired by his view from a cliff-top down to the harbour below).

The flat land upon which the town rose up was ideal for the kind of gridded design that had begun to be laid out in port cities elsewhere in Europe in the 1600s (particularly in the Netherlands). As the first modern town to be built in England it might have been expected to grow much more than it did, but its prospects for greater urban expansion were – in truth – also limited by the peculiarities of its location. Distant from the main urban centres of England at the dawn of the railway age, and with ports unable to expand to match the capacity of the larger cities on the west coast of the country – Bristol, Liverpool and Glasgow – Whitehaven, like West Cumbria more generally, became isolated and peripheral.



Top: A view from the 'Colourful Coast' Heritage landscape overlooking the harbour with the Isle of Man on the horizon. **Bottom:** a view along Lowther Street in the town centre



Around the Harbour

Another interesting view of Whitehaven is to be found high on the cliffs south of the harbour. Behind the 'Steep Slope' pictured here the remains of [Haig Colliery](#), the town's last coal mine, have been preserved. The pump house briefly housed a museum devoted to the town's mining past, but now lies empty. Also located here is a stone monument marking the place where [King Pit, at one time the deepest shaft in the world, was first sunk in 1760](#). Walking towards the harbour the distinctive [castellated remains](#) of the former Wellington Pit – including the white Wellington Lodge, and the chimney stack known as [the 'Candlestick'](#) – come into view. At the foot of the steps that drop down to the harbour is [The Beacon](#), a gallery space that holds local heritage materials and temporary exhibitions, which

resembles a round tower, and is much in keeping with the maritime atmosphere.

And the atmosphere today is much changed from that recounted in the early 1980s by Paul Theroux in his tour around Britain's coastal towns, *The Kingdom by the Sea*, when to approach along this route was to be overwhelmed by the "smell of the coal and potash" as the harbour and townscape came into view. The busy marina is located between quays that seem to have been named for some poetic or exotic purpose – [Sugar Tongue, Lime Tongue](#) (nearby is Tangier Street, giving a further clue to Whitehaven's former trading history) – and the sense of leisured calm today is a marked departure from the kind of activity that once characterised this waterfront.

Whitehaven Harbour, of course, is also famous as the site of [the last](#)

[military invasion of Britain](#), which was carried out by an expedition of the American Continental Navy in April 1778 during the American War of Independence. This was led by [John Paul Jones](#), now known as the "Father of the American Navy", a Scot who had learned his trade on the ships of Whitehaven, sailing to the Caribbean and the American colonies as a young man. Jones brought his men ashore here with the intention of burning every ship in the harbour after an aborted mission to take prisoners for exchange with captured Americans sailors. Today around the harbour there are a number of figures on the quayside commemorating that brief skirmish.

This maritime history is also celebrated at [The Rum Story](#), a permanent exhibition on Lowther Street. But before you get that far a refreshment at the quayside pub, [The Vagabond](#), may be in order.