

the life of the Dunston Staiths



foreword

Dunston Staiths, built over 100 years ago, are all that remains of a very different way of life on the south banks of the River Tyne. The massive wooden structure which is the Dunston Staiths stands largely intact and serves as a monument to the industrial heritage of the area.

The decline of Tyneside’s heavy engineering and mining economy signified by the closure of the Staiths and shipyards along the River Tyne left the area with a huge need for regeneration. Tyneside became a post industrial wasteland, Gateshead was at one point ranked as the 35th most deprived area in Britain; it desperately needed a new profile and major investment.

From the National Garden Festival in 1990 and throughout the nineties, a massive transformation took place and is continuing now. The surge of creative enterprise that lay behind NewcastleGateshead’s joint bid to become European Capital of Culture 2008 resulted in an upheaval on Tyneside and a cultural renaissance on an unprecedented scale. Tyneside’s heritage runs much deeper than the spate of millennial projects, however. The region is as rich in writers and artists as it once was in coal. Nevertheless, the icons which allow the region to boast four world class status symbols: the “winking-eye” Millennium Bridge; the stunning Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art;

Norman Foster’s £70m music centre The Sage Gateshead and Anthony Gormley’s Angel of the North, erected in 1998, all herald a new era and assure the long term survival of the region and its heritage.

Although there are no steamers waiting for loading, no jobs on the Staiths and no coal, there is still a thriving community. The unique concept in housing design which resulted in George Wimpey’s Staiths South Bank development of over 700 homes shows that all along the Tyne decision makers were choosing to think creatively and responsibly. In all areas of the regeneration programme from cultural assets to housing, there was an opportunity to put the region on the map by establishing benchmarks for a new way of thinking and to improve the quality of life for the region’s population.

The Dunston Staiths have an important story to tell and reveal a lot about a time gone by. The Staiths are Grade II listed and a Scheduled Ancient Monument but professional bodies should not be the only ones to recognise their historical, social and architectural importance, it is hoped this book will help you to appreciate that too.

chronology

- 1850**

Tyne Improvement Commission established to carry out major dredging and to improve facilities for loading coal.
- 1890**

North Eastern Railway commissioned works. Construction of Dunston Staiths began.
- 1893**

The North Staith (with three berths and gravity loading chutes) of Dunston Staiths opened on 16 October.
- 1903**

The South Staith was completed and opened. To service this new Staith a basin was dug out from the riverbank.
- 1925**

The Dunston Staiths had three electric conveyors and twelve gravity spouts.
- 1938**

A record of four million tons of coal was exported.
- 1971**

Get Carter, a ground breaking film noir crime thriller starring Michael Caine, is set and shot entirely on Tyneside.
- 1975-6**

The South Staith was taken down to pile top level.
- 1980**

The final shipment of coal was loaded and Dunston Staiths were closed and partially dismantled.
- 1983**

The Dunston Staiths became a Grade II listed building.
- 1984**

The National Garden Festival was awarded to Gateshead.
- 1985**

The South Staith was demolished.
- 1985**

The saltmarsh was designated as a Site of Nature Conservation Importance.
- 1986**

The Dunston Staiths were scheduled as an Ancient Monument.
- 1987/8**

The North Staith was restored for the 1990 National Garden Festival.
- 1989**

The Riverside Garden Festival site was acquired by Sir Robert McAlpine.
- 1990**

The National Garden Festival took place from May to October.
- 1991**

The Tyne’s mudflats were designated as a Site of Nature Conservation Importance.
- 1997**

The Dunston Staiths became the responsibility of the Tyne and Wear Building Preservation Trust.
- 1998**

Anthony Gormley’s Angel of the North was erected.
- 2000**

Wayne Hemingway criticised the “Wimpeyfication” of Britain in The Independent and was invited to work with George Wimpey.

- 2001**

Gateshead Millennium Bridge opened to the public on 17 September.
- 2002**

The Riverside site was acquired by George Wimpey Limited.
- 2002**

The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art opened.
- 2002**

Outline Planning Approval for the whole site was achieved along with detailed approval for Phase One of Staiths South Bank.
- 2003**

Early in the year building began on site.
- 2003**

The first homes went on sale on 5 November.
- 2003**

In the early hours of the 20 November, a fire broke out which resulted in around 40m of the Staiths structure being destroyed or damaged.
- 2003**

Detailed Planning Approval was achieved for Phase Two of Staiths South Bank.
- 2004**

Detailed Planning Approval was achieved for Phase Three of Staiths South Bank.
- 2005**

The Sage Gateshead music centre opened.
- 2005**

George Wimpey won Best Large House builder for Staiths South Bank at the ODPM Housing Design Awards.
- 2005**

Staiths South Bank was a Silver Award Winner at the ODPM Building for Life Awards.
- 2005**

Staiths South Bank won the best housing led regeneration award at Building Magazine’s Regeneration Awards.
- 2005**

Staiths South Bank reached the final of the Local Authority Building Control National Built in Quality Awards and The Journal’s Landmark Awards.
- 2006**

Staiths South Bank came first in the Residential Awards category at the RICS North East Renaissance Awards.
- 2006**

The partnership behind Staiths South Bank, George Wimpey North East, Gateshead Council, architects id partnership and designers Wayne and Gerardine Hemingway won the Best Partnership Project at The Journal/Evening Gazette 21st Century Living Awards.
- 2006**

Staiths South Bank was also crowned overall winner at The Journal/Evening Gazette 21st Century Living Awards.
- 2006**

Donald Insall Associates Conservation Plan deems the Staiths structure “exceptionally worthy of conservation as a historic structure”.

staiths early history



Kings Meadows Dunston was a large island that lay in the middle of the Tyne and stretched from Redheugh to Dunston. It prevented large boats from sailing up the river any further than Newcastle.

The Kings Meadows vanished during the dredging of the river in the late 1800s.

The Dunston Staiths are reputedly the largest wooden structure in Europe and were the last working staiths (loading stage) on the Tyne. Almost every aspect of industrialisation relied on coal and during the Industrial Revolution, the Tyne was the most important coal port in the North East and the staiths at Dunston, Derwenthaugh, Wallsend, Jarrow, Tyne Dock and Blyth played an important part in this. The Staiths early history tells of an environment which contrasts massively with what we see today, it reveals more about an industry and lives which no longer exist.

Dunston Staiths were constructed in 1890 by the North Eastern Railway Company in two stages. The first staith with three berths was opened in 1893. A second similar staith was opened in 1903 immediately to the south and a basin was dug out of the riverbank to service it. This set was taken down to the piles tops in the 1970s and further dismantled in the 1980s. However the majority of the North Staith structure survives intact and has been restored.

The whole structure is around 526 metres/1725 feet long and stands approximately 20 metres/66 feet above the mean water line. For the purpose of loading north Durham coal into ships, the Staiths protrude into the River Tyne for 521 metres/1709 feet and run parallel to the river bank forming a large tidal basin in which ships once moored. Several railway lines ran along the top of the Staiths from the river bank and rose at a gradient of 1 in 96 from the western to the eastern end. This enabled locomotives to shunt coal wagons to an appropriate height for loading ships anchored alongside the Staiths.



Dunston Staiths c.1920



Aerial view of the Dunston Staiths, 1925

by 1911, more than 20 million tons
of coal and coke were exported
from the River Tyne

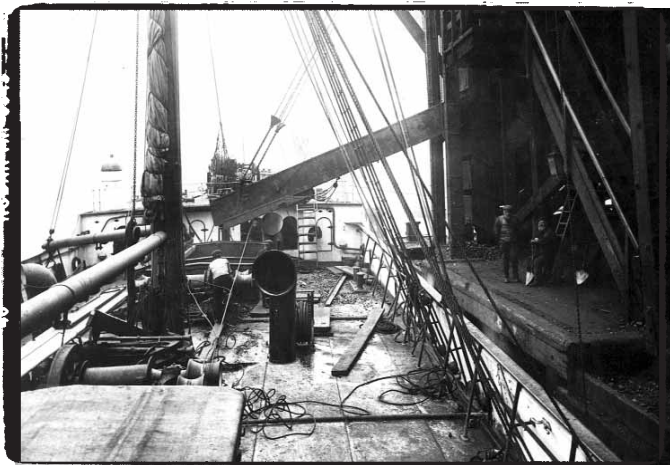


Coal wagon, coal drops and ships at the Dunston Staiths, date unknown

According to Dick Keys and Ken Smith (2000) by 1850, coal exports from the River Tyne had grown to about five and a quarter million tons a year and by 1911, more than 20 million tons of coal and coke were exported from the River Tyne to ports throughout Britain and the world.

The enormous growth in exports and booming seaborne trade needed the assistance of the Tyne Improvement Commission, established in 1850. This group made the river one of the best ports on the east coast. Beginning in the 1860s, the Commission carried out major dredging operations which deepened the Tyne and enabled it to take larger ships. They also improved facilities for the loading of coal so that steamers could take their cargoes quickly and efficiently. Dick Keys and Ken Smith continue:

"The Tyne gained a well deserved reputation as a port of bunkering. Ships seeking to refuel their engines could speedily and cheaply replenish their bunkers at Staiths not far from the river mouth and so achieve quick turnaround time..."



Loading coal at a Tyne staith in 1897



Dunston Flour Mill, c.1910

gangs of men called trimmers
were set to work to level out
the coal in the
ships for stability



Colliers at Dunston Staiths, early 1900s

Coal wagons fitted with trapdoors were shunted along the Staiths and lined up with hoppers in the Staiths' floor. The technical operation of loading the coal was carried out by gangs of men called teemers, four to a chute, who would then release these trapdoors and "teem" or direct the coal into the hoppers. The hoppers in the Staiths were linked to coal chutes called spouts and the teemers had the task of adjusting these spouts according to the height of the ships they were loading and state of the tide. The spouts were adjusted by means of a hand windlass and these can still be seen on the Staiths. When the ships were too high for the spouts to reach, conveyor belts would be used. Teeming was not an easy task as often the coal would jam or freeze in the wagon or hopper so that men would have to jump in to free the coal and run the risk of falling through.

Once coal or coke had been loaded from the chute into the holds of the ships, gangs of men called trimmers were set to work to level out the coal in the ships for stability.

It is hard to imagine the busy, dirty, noisy coal shipping environment around the Staiths today or the comings and goings of steamers, coal and workers throughout the day. The Staiths not only worked physically but socially too and the presence of "comfort girls" for waiting seamen was well known.



Above: A ship is loaded at the Dunston Staiths around 1920

Right: Dunston Coal Trimmers, late 1920s

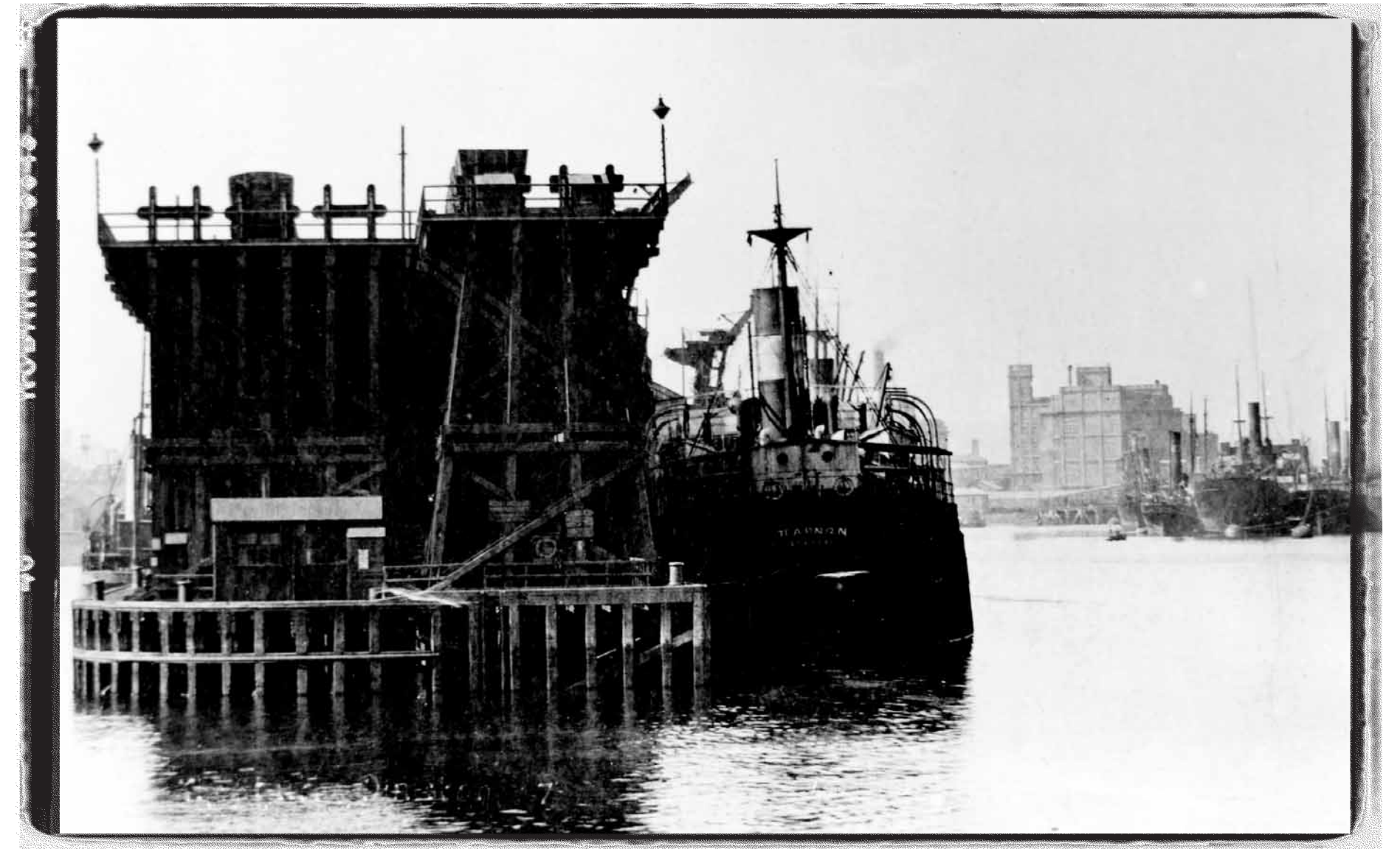


in the 1920s the Dunston Staiths
were shipping an average
of 140,000 tons
of coal per week

At the peak of its career in the 1920s the Dunston Staiths were shipping an average of 140,000 tons of coal per week on vessels bound for both London and the continent but the trade blockade after the Second World War forced countries to find alternative supplies and the quantities of coal shipped began to decline. By the 1970s the figure had fallen to 3,000 tons of coal a week. On 4 March 1980, the North Staiths loaded their final shipment and were finally closed. They remain today as a listed building and scheduled ancient monument, a testament to the once busy days. Keys and Smith report more fully on this stage of the Staiths' history in their book *Steamers and the Staiths* published by Tyne Bridge Publishing.



The Dunston Staiths and Flour Mill, c.1918



The Dunston Staiths and Flour Mill, date unknown



Class photograph -
St Philip Neri School, Dunston, c 1910



Street party, Chapel Street, Gateshead, 1935

the life of the Staiths turned in a new direction as part of the National Garden Festival site and the face of Dunston began to change once again



The Dunston Staiths provide a spectacular backdrop to the National Garden Festival's Riverside Site

With the closure of the Staiths and decline of industrial activity in the area, including the closure of the Redheugh Gas Works, the site and riverbanks became an area of dereliction and contamination. The concept of the Garden Festival seemed just the remedy and in 1984 Gateshead was chosen out of 27 other local authorities and awarded the Festival for 1990. The life of the Staiths turned in a new direction as part of the National Garden Festival site and the face of Dunston began to change once again.

National Garden Festivals were introduced in the 1980s and were part of the cultural regeneration of large areas of derelict land in Britain's industrial cities. Five were held in total - one every two years, each in a different city - after the idea was pushed by environment secretary at the time, Michael Heseltine in 1980. They were based on the German post-war Bundesgartenschau concept for reclaiming large areas of derelict land in cities, and cost from £25 million to £70 million each. They reclaimed the contaminated ex-sites of large industrial areas such as steelworks. They took place in Liverpool, 1984; Stoke on Trent, 1986; Glasgow, 1988; Gateshead, 1990; and Ebbw Vale in 1992.



Above: HRH The Princess Royal at the National Garden Festival, 1990

Right: Caterpillar Monorail, the National Garden Festival, 1990



there were 25,000 hours of events
including dance, theatre, sport and music



The narrow gauge steam engine which ran between Dunston and Redheugh

When Gateshead took its place in the history of Garden Festivals it aimed to secure beneficial reclamation, development and long term use of the sites and around £37 million was spent on reclaiming, altering and beautifying the 200 acres of land. The Staiths were to provide a unique backdrop to the Festival although restoration was a formidable task. Donald Insall Associates Conservation Plan (2006) reveals that their restoration took place over two years and involved the stripping of all rotten, damaged and decayed timbers, repairs and fitting of two new steel staircases and fencing for access and safety. They were also re-equipped with a wet riser fire main, mooring bollards, fenders and lighting columns.

The National Garden Festival in Gateshead was Europe's biggest horticultural, leisure and tourist attraction that year. It ran from May to October, was open for 157 days and attracted more than three million visitors. The visitors were able to move around the site using a road train which ran the full length of the site, a monorail system between Norwood and Eslington, a narrow gauge steam railway between Dunston and Redheugh and a river ferry from the east of the Dunston Staiths down to Newcastle Quayside. The Festival also included a huge variety of weird and wonderful public art: over 70 art and craft installations, with around 50 of them specially commissioned. There were 25,000 hours of events including dance, theatre, sport and music. It showcased 100 gardens from around the world and included 25 national horticultural shows, two million trees and shrubs and planting of around one million bulbs.



Above: Bright floral displays like these typified the National Garden Festival

Right: The National Garden Festival's iconic ferris wheel



after the Garden Festival...



Residents at Staiths South Bank enjoy their garden
www.stevemayesphotography.co.uk

In 2002 George Wimpey acquired the old Riverside site and worked with Gateshead Council on planning permission for a unique development which was granted later in 2002. Staiths South Bank was designed by George Wimpey in partnership with architects, Ian Darby Partnership and designers Wayne and Gerardine Hemingway. The unusual partnership between two successful fashion designers and one of the UK's biggest house builders began in 2000 when Wayne Hemingway set the challenge for the industry to think harder about design. He criticised the "Wimpeyfication" of Britain in the media and his challenge was taken up by George Wimpey. This collaboration has resulted in Staiths South Bank.

The development is an innovative solution to community living with homes that enhance quality of life. The Staiths South Bank project has caused a stir in property circles since day one. It offers the design conscious majority a new choice in housing - choice of elevation, layout, mix of house types and the way in which people live their lives.

As a result, the site incorporates a wide variety of homes including townhouses, small family homes and apartments. A range of well thought out and complimentary materials including coloured render, brick, tiles and sustainably sourced timber cladding give a sense of individuality to each home. Because of attention to detail and the principles of good design and affordability which underpin the development, Staiths South Bank has become a desirable place to live.

Right: Town houses use a wide variety of materials and give a sense of individuality to each home.



an urban community that combines
forward thinking design with a
people friendly environment



Children playing in one of the pocket parks

Some of the key features of the development are a far cry from what would usually be associated with a volume house builder. Staiths South Bank provides public, private and semi-private spaces which complement the transport and circulation infrastructures rather than conflicting with them. It is also unique as Britain's largest Home Zone, where the impact of vehicles is reduced and priority is given to pedestrians. It encourages an environment which is safe for playing children and neighbours to meet rather than prioritising a solution to get cars from A to B.

Staiths South Bank is ideally placed for access to the extensive regional cycling networks and has communal pocket parks, barbeques, giant games, sand pits, play areas and an outdoor table tennis table. These facilities within the streetscape allow residents to meet and congregate. Reclaimed timber has been used to produce outdoor seating, play equipment and gateways and the site also includes landscaped and concealed communal bin stores installed by local craftsmen. These stores are made of willow and are within easy reach of every home. This makes for efficient recycling and is easier on the environment (and the eye) than bins outside every front door. These bins have four times the capacity of a standard wheelie bin and so reduce the activity of refuse collectors.

Right: Staiths South Bank residents and their dog in a courtyard
www.stevemayesphotography.co.uk



the collection of industry awards won
by Staiths South Bank chart milestones
in its success story



Above and right: Homes at Staiths South Bank

The success of the development at Staiths South Bank has been recognised with several awards which are listed in the chronology. Most recently, George Wimpey North East announced that Staiths South Bank had won the Overall Award and Best Partnership Award at The Journal/ Evening Gazette 21st Century Living Awards. This announcement was the latest milestone in the Staiths South Bank success story. It came alongside another scoop for Staiths, the top prize in the residential category at the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) North East Renaissance awards, the property world's equivalent to The Oscars which were announced on the same night in May 2006.

Not long after the first homes had gone on sale, on 20 November 2003, the Staiths structure suffered a major fire, believed to have been maliciously started, requiring over 70 firemen before it was brought under control. A substantial portion of the middle section (around 40 metres) collapsed. This destruction later prompted the commissioning of a conservation plan and feasibility study for the protection of the Dunston Staiths and surrounding environment.



what next?

In 2006 the Conservation Plan and Feasibility Study by consultants Donald Insall Associates assessed the national and regional significance of the Dunston Staiths and surrounding environment. They suggested possible options for their preservation/restoration and also highlighted issues and vulnerabilities such as ownership, access and planning which need to be considered.

The Staiths have significance historically as the site of coal shipping for over 350 years, as part of a dwindling stock of industrial heritage structures in the North East and as the last remaining significant structure of the National Garden Festival. Alongside this, the Staiths have structural significance as the last timber staith in the UK, one of the largest timber structures in Europe and architectural significance as an example of the visual, sculptural and emotional effects that can be achieved with an engineering structure. The Staiths also have functional, ecological, visual and potentially educational and social significance too.



Above and right: The Dunston Staiths before the fire, 2003





The full length view of the Dunston Staiths, 2003

the future

Whatever the future holds, the values of the site should be conserved and any development approached sensitively to enrich and support the local and regional communities.

Among key recommendations is the repair of the Staiths including rebuilding the missing section, the opening up of access to the structure and the construction of a community focused centre with ancillary facilities. Because the Staiths structure presents very evocative links to the history of the area, they could well form the basis of education services about the industrial revolution, transport, the coal industry and related social themes. Development of the Staiths site is likely to provide a catalyst for bringing established and new communities together. Providing intellectual and physical access can be achieved and managed successfully, their unique historic, cultural and natural heritage will be preserved.

The Dunston Staiths’ role will continue into the future. They were once part of the Industrial Revolution and have provided a consistent backdrop to an area which has undergone radical change. They are now part of a different kind of revolution, one centred on design and cultural transformation. Staiths South Bank has moved the boundaries of what can be expected from one of the UK’s largest house builders George Wimpey and ensures that the Dunston Staiths and the land behind them will attract deserved attention for years to come.

thanks to

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Gateshead MBC Library and Newcastle City Council Education and Libraries Directorate

Unused Staiths early 2003 before the fire: Mike Mills Photography

Staiths South Bank homes: Critical Tortoise Photography and Tim Crocker

Residents at Staiths South Bank and view from north banks: Steve Mayes Photography
19 October Courtyard, Staiths South Bank, Gateshead, NE8 2BQ
www.stevemayesphotography.co.uk



“It’s hard not to enjoy this scheme. Everyone talks about serendipity; only Staiths South Bank has it.”

The National Housing Awards 2005