

### **A new Exhibition commemorates the BELLINGHAM FLOOD OF 1911**

One hundred years ago, on the afternoon of Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> May 1911, there was a violent thunderstorm and subsequent cloudburst over Hareshaw near the village of Bellingham, Northumberland. When the storm hit, it struck first with hailstones and then rain in prodigious quantities. During the next three hours the Hareshaw Burn rose 10 feet (3.048 metres) and up to 15 feet (4.572 metres) in places. It destroyed buildings and footbridges, washed gardens away, flooded homes and riverside pastures and made roads impassable. Two grocery shops lost all their goods. A new temporary exhibition at the Heritage Centre at Bellingham commemorates this terrible event. The exhibition, which has been curated by AC (Freddie) Everatt, is open from Friday 5<sup>th</sup> August to Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> September. The Heritage Centre gratefully acknowledges a donation from Northumberland National Park Authority towards the cost of the exhibition.

The Hareshaw burn flows through Bellingham and into the river North Tyne and the flood was confined to it. The burn rise at a spring at Nine Well Eyes near Hareshaw Head, runs through upland pasture and old common land, spills over a waterfall into a wooded glade known as Hareshaw Linn, flows along the margins now of the golf course, past foundry farm and under the police station bridge, and thence into the North Tyne.

The cloudburst was preceded by lightning which struck Reedsmouth and Woodburn railway stations and set all the telephones in Bellingham ringing simultaneously. The torrential rain fell only on Hareshaw and Bellingham and did not affect the levels of the Tyne or Rede rivers.

At first, people came out of their houses to watch the spectacle but curiosity quickly gave way to alarm. Soon, in the pouring rain, people started moving their possessions to higher ground with many using the Town Hall as emergency storage. The speed with which the torrent built was frightening: Mr Burn, the blacksmith, was standing on the Police Station bridge when Hareshaw Burn was a mere trickle but by the time he went to check his own property a short distance away the water was already so high he was unable to enter it. The force of the water was such as to hold back the flow of the North Tyne at its confluence with Hareshaw Burn below the village.

Eye-witnesses reported that homes were damaged in two ways: first, the sheer force of the water undermined the foundations of the buildings; second, water filled the houses making the outer wall bulge, crack and crash down. Sewage pipes were also damaged leading to fears about infection.

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Ironically, 1911 was a year notorious for its summer drought which caused crop failures in many areas. Weather stations in the area recorded very low rainfall for the month of May with Cockle Park reporting 0.82 inches (2.1 cm) and High Green 1.72 inches (4.4 cm).

Villagers were thankful that the calamity happened during daylight. Had they been asleep when the floodwaters came, it is very likely that there would have been fatalities. On a lighter note, while the Burn was in flood, otters were seen frolicking among bundles of hay floating downstream.

Freddie Everatt had this to say about the exhibition: “The exhibition includes a collection of photographs taken during the Flood and its aftermath by Roddy Thompson. Roddy was nineteen years old at the time and thanks to him and his box camera we have an exceptional archive of images of the flood and the damage it inflicted. Thanks are due to Frank Mattinson, Willy and Daphne Reid, Will Burn, Dorothy and Jim Bell, Ian Roberts, Ken Haynes, Ken Gaskin, Seán Mac Nialluis, Steve Richardson, Bob and Jim Thompson; and very especially to Catherine Watson. David Archer’s book ‘Land of Singing Waters: Rivers and Great Floods of Northumbria’ has been invaluable. Brian Tilley’s vivid article in the *Hexham Courant* on 27 May 2011, ‘The day the rains came down’, is an excellent account of the drama of the flood. We gladly thank Northumberland National Park for their continued support of the Heritage Centre.”

**NOTES TO EDITORS / PICTURE EDITORS**

**1) Pictures from the Heritage Centre collection:**



**Bridge End Cottage**



**Burnside**



**Burnside Dwellings**

**2) Additional Documentation attached:**

- (a) Hareshaw Burn;
- (b) The Flood Damage;
- (c) A background note on the North Tyne.

**Further information:**

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**ENDS**

## Hareshaw Burn

Visitors to Bellingham are often recommended to have a walk up the Linn. And it is well worth doing. Strictly speaking, "Linn" is a waterfall; it is at the farthest point of Hareshaw Dene, a densely wooded glade full of wildlife. Hareshaw burn rises a few miles farther North (about half the way to Otterburn) at a spring called Nine Well Eyes – a spring of very fine water which, until recently, supplied the needs of a handful of dwellings and a dozen cattle troughs. It appears to be a very modest burn unlikely to have played the role of raging torrent which it did a hundred years ago.

This year then is the centenary year of Bellingham's flood, and the Heritage Centre is marking the occasion with this small exhibition which includes a collection of photographs taken by Roddy Thompson. Roddy was nineteen years old at the time and thanks to him and his box camera we have an exceptional archive of images of the flood and the damage it inflicted. Roddy is seen here with his wife Eunice, both as a youngish man, and older (with the box camera!) and also at the wheel of an x registration motor car, the first generation of motor cars in Northumberland.

From the spring the burn flows through fells and upland pastures past what remains of old coal pits (Hareshaw Head Colliery) and an earth works known as the High dam which held back water to be used in a controlled way in an ironworks. The water was released in 1870 by Lord Armstrong who had acquired the mineral rights from the Duke of Northumberland but came to realize its shortcomings as an industrial unit. The burn continues to the waterfall where it falls 30 feet into a ravine, and thence through Hareshaw Dene. The burn passes the margin of what is now the golf course and also the Low dam which was originally part of the iron making process. This was constructed in 1838 and abandoned in 1848 when the Union Banking Corporation which had taken over the ironworks ceased making and trading in iron. It was a very solid structure; left unmaintained, it survived the 1911 flood, but collapsed in 1968.

The burn continues below the dene through the Foundry Yard – the cottages there housed the offices of the Iron Works – and underneath the main road bridge through the village next to the Police Station, then passing through a part of the village which had many more buildings and houses a hundred years ago than it has now. The Free Churches for instance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were less than 50 yards apart. However the Presbyterians moved to Otterburn Road in 1888 leaving the chapel and manse as dwellings; the Methodists moved to Fountain Terrace in 1897, leaving their old building, which became a pop factory, and was later demolished. Both former chapels were flooded. The burn makes its way past what are now less crowded and better protected buildings and joins North Tyne river just south of the village.

Thanks are due to Frank Mattinson, David Archer, Willy and Daphne Reid, Will Burn, Dorothy and Jim Bell, Ian Roberts, Ken Haynes, Ken Gaskin, Seán Mac Nialluis, Steve Richardson, Bob and Jim Thompson; and very specially to Catherine Watson. Brian Tilley's vivid article in the Hexham Courant of May 27<sup>th</sup> 2011, "The day the rains came down" is an excellent account of the drama of the flood.

## The Flood Damage

Bridge-End Cottage. Bridge-End Cottage was exposed to the full force of the flood. Fears were entertained that the Police Station bridge with its one rather low arch might not withstand the torrent but, remarkably, it did. The wall of part of Bridge-End Cottage collapsed. Many helpers gathered to save as much as possible from the disaster. In those days the dentist used to visit Bellingham – he used the premises of Bridge-End Cottage as his surgery.

The monster lump of coal. The flood brought to the surface considerable quantities of coal. This piece measured 18 inches square, 2½ feet long, and weighed between 2 and 3 hundred weights.

Gasometer. The flood took its toll of gas pipes and fittings. The village was lit and warmed by gas. People say there was a rather pervasive smell of gas in the village. Certainly gas pipes were very extensive; they have been found as far as Hesleyside two miles to the west and at Low Leam four miles to the east. The system was managed by the Armstrong family who lived in Gasworks Cottage, and lasted till 1938. Metal was greatly in demand at the beginning of World War Two, and no traces of it now remain.

Smithy. The smithy was especially vulnerable situated by the burnside at the lowest point of the village. The blacksmith was a key craftsman in the village and much of his equipment was washed away. The wooden footbridge was destroyed and the ford became impassable. Dairy cows were driven across each day from their pastures to be milked and this became impossible. It was resolved in Council soon after to replace the footbridge with a cartbridge.

Brookside Place. Eye witnesses said that the flood attacked the dwellings on the burnside in two ways: first, the sheer force of the water undermined the foundations of the buildings; second, the water filled the dwellings making the outer wall bulge. When the bulge could get no bigger, there was a loud crack and the wall crashed down.

All the houses in Brookside Place were flooded, No 4 (seen here) was wrecked as well. Sewage pipes were damaged along the burnside, leading to fears about infection.

Whirlpool. Furniture, bedding, carpets, books were found in different places along the River Tyne – one place being near where the Hareshaw burn enters the Tyne (seen here), and in other places as far down the river as Bridgeford. Two grocery firms, Mr Young's and Mr Allen's, lost all their goods. Insurance was not a widespread practice at the time. On a lighter note: while the burn was in flood, otters were seen frolicking among bundles of hay floating downstream.

A view from the burn. The reflective mood of this image is unlike the others. A familiar stream that flows through the village is a threat, the sides of the burn must be strengthened. The work of the River Authority has thankfully done this. And in more recent times, managed releases from Kielder Reservoir have lessened the likelihood of flash floods.

Fallow Green Cottage. A rather large corner of Fallow Green Cottage was knocked down and the Maughan family were in a state of shock. It was fortunate that the flood took place when it did; if it had happened at night or in winter, the harm done, especially to children, would have been immense. Luckily there were no fatalities. It is clear that the whole village pulled together to help those affected, until normal life could be resumed.

## A word or two about the area for visitors

The North Tyne has an interesting history, being a beheaded river. Its head waters used to be those of the Wansbeck, but due to an earth crustal movement, the water course was diverted and it now joins the Tyne near Warden. The original Tyne above Warden is now called the South Tyne and the new addition the North Tyne. The same earth movement has also left us with the peculiar switchback terrain over which the A68 road lies in our region. But that's why the North Tyne is as it is.

Bellingham is *where* it is, also for an interesting reason. When human beings first settled here, they followed the river valleys. The practice was to have settlements not too populous that they threatened starvation, nor too small that they encouraged in-breeding. A settlement with a radius of about three miles seemed to be optimal; everything they had to live on came from their location – fruit, berries, bark from trees etc as well as grazing for their livestock. So, when a new settlement was to be formed, they could move about six miles up the river valley and form it there: Hexham to where Humshaugh used to be – about six miles; Humshaugh to Wark – six miles; Wark to Bellingham, Bellingham to Falstone about six miles; that's why Bellingham is where it is. Or so the story goes.

Coming into recorded history, Tynedale, Redesdale and Coquetdale were held by 'the Scottish king of the English king' in feudal times. The Bellingham family was prominent at the time as they were Foresters to the Scottish king by 'Grand Serjeanty'. Their coat of arms was the familiar three foresters' horns. Unfortunately when Edward I invaded Scotland (a war known this side of the Border as the conquest of Imperial Britain and on the other side as the War of Independence) the Bellinghams found themselves on the wrong side, and had to leave. Their insignia, however, remained; it now appears in all sorts of places as a kind of badge for Bellingham. That invasion began what Honeyman has called "the three hundred years war", aspects of which are features in the Heritage Centre.

More pertinent to the flooding a hundred years ago were the years in the nineteenth century when Bellingham experienced a period of industrialization - coal mined locally, converted to coke, ironworks established; the population, increased hugely. Industry however did not flourish. (The story of Bellingham's industrial period is also on display in the Heritage Centre.) It has been claimed that the industrial remains up at Hareshaw facilitated the flow of water towards Bellingham, but this is difficult to prove. The high dam at Hareshaw had been destroyed about 40 years before the flood and the low dam may even have been a minor obstacle.