

As with many habitations, geographical location and underlying geology have been critical factors in the establishment and growth of Great Ayton.

Geography

Looking at a map, the village can be seen as one of numerous settlements scattered over the Cleveland Plain, that relatively low-lying, undulating ground between the River Tees to the north and, the steep escarpment of the North Yorkshire Moors to the south, and the sea cliffs to the east. The first bridge over the Tees was at Yarm, further to the west. Downstream from Yarm, the wide, meandering river with marshy banks, followed by a sprawling estuary with many sandbanks, cut Cleveland off from the northern cities and coalfield. The "black moors" to the south formed a different sort of barrier, but every bit as effective in impeding travel and trade. Steep cliffs of what was then the German Ocean hampered the development of ports, so there were few reasons for people and goods to pass through the region and no major coaching routes. Until the nineteenth century, these geographical features tended to isolate Cleveland from its neighbours, and gave the region its distinctive identity and name ("district of cliffs" in the Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names). There were Cleveland long-horn cattle, Cleveland Bay horses, and a Cleveland dialect.

Even in relatively isolated areas, market towns were needed for trade and centres of communication. Although Great Ayton did once have a charter for a market, there were established markets just a few miles away on reasonably good roads. With Guisborough to the east and Stokesley to the west, Ayton's market never really stood a chance. The rural villages of Cleveland looked to Guisborough and Stokesley not only for their markets, but also for the many other facilities of market towns. The numerous public houses acted as commercial centres as much as drinking houses, there were specialist services such as lawyers and printers, and, particularly at Stokesley, an annual fair and the races. The two market towns were not the only features encouraging an east-west axis for the region. The River Leven defied the logic of taking the shortest course from its source to the sea, which lay to the north. Instead, and rather perversely, it chose an east to west direction, flowing inland to eventually join the River Tees near Yarm.

So geography, through the confines of Cleveland and the proximity of the market towns of Guisborough and Stokesley, the growth and prosperity of the parish of Great Ayton was restricted. Its economy was based mainly on agriculture, with almost self-sufficiency in day-to-day requirements, such as mills, blacksmiths, stone masons, etc. But geography did bestow three potential assets on the village. Firstly, the River Leven provided power for three mills, two of which, unusually produced oil by crushing seeds. It also provided the copious supplies of water needed for leather tanning, and the descendants of the seventeenth century Ayton tanners owned one of the largest tanneries in England, at Elswick on the River Tyne.

Although the proximity of the sea was, in many ways, a barrier, the ports of Yarm and later Stockton-on-Tees, gave access to maritime trade. The importance of flax from northern Europe allowed linen weaving to flourish, and access to London was important for the export of butter and cheese. It was not only goods that came and went via these ports. Along with Whitby, they encouraged men from Great Ayton to look to the sea for their livelihood, and possibly fame and fortune, notably the young James Cook.

The third geographical asset was its attractive setting, with the river, two village greens and the backdrop of the hills. This aspect of the village's geography would become more important over the course of the twentieth century, when living in Great Ayton and working on Teesside became an attractive lifestyle for many.

Looking again at the map, the proximity of Great Ayton to Middlesbrough, just ten miles to the north, is obvious. However, until the Industrial Revolution, this aspect of Ayton's location was irrelevant as Middlesbrough consisted of just a few houses. Then rapid growth of Gladstone's "infant Hercules" from the 1830s increasingly exerted its influence over the village. The most obvious effect was the coming of the railway. This heralded a boom in mineral extraction which, in turn, led to a substantial increase in the population when many Cleveland villages were shrinking as men sought employment among the blast furnaces of Middlesbrough. The importance of Middlesbrough peaked in the latter half of the twentieth century, when it probably provided most of the employment for the villagers and was the obvious centre for shopping and entertainment.

A less obvious effect was the Quaker influence. It was primarily Quakers who established Middlesbrough and built the railways, and Great Ayton had a significant number of Quaker residents. This was particularly true after the founding of the Quaker North of England Agricultural School in 1841. Coupled with the rise in non-conformism fostered by the newly-arrived quarrymen and miners, the village found itself with more churches than inns.

Geology

While Great Ayton may not have been blessed by its geography, its underlying geology has yielded a great bounty. Most of the parish lies on a thick layer of clay, which was deposited during the last Ice Age. Cleveland clay is heavy and sticky. Notorious for sticking to boots (John Walker Ord's History of Cleveland has the rhyme "Cleveland in the clay, Bringeth in two soles, and carries one away"), it was good land for raising cattle and for growing wheat. After enclosure of the open fields, local agriculture prospered, initially through the export of butter and cheese to London, and later through the growing of wheat. The Cleveland Bay horse was specially bred to cope with the sticky clay. The clay also provided a ready source of raw material for the manufacture of tiles and bricks, which feature alongside sandstone in local buildings.

Clay usually meant poor drainage, but locally, a short depth beneath it is a bed of well-drained sand and gravel sweeping through the parish from the north-west corner (where there is a gap in Langbaugh Ridge) down to the River Leven at Low Green. It was this feature which attracted the first settlers and provided the site for the birth of the village, around All Saints' Church and Ayton Hall.

Whilst the clay, and some surface glacial sands, had their uses, what lay beneath was of far greater value. Whinstone, ironstone, sandstone, jet and alum-bearing shale all occur within the parish boundaries. Although there is no direct evidence of early iron-making, there are Iron Age sites in the area. Jet, too, had been sought from early times, and the hillsides around the village show collapsed workings and spoil heaps dating from Victorian times. The eighteenth century saw a brief period of alum production, but it was whinstone that began Great Ayton's large-scale extractive industry. Whinstone arrived in the area comparatively recently in geological time, as molten volcanic basalt pushed its way upwards to form the Cleveland Dyke, visible in Langbaugh Ridge and Cliff Rigg. Whinstone is very hard, and ideal for roadstone. Used locally for centuries, it was the coming of the railway that brought extensive quarrying and mining of this rock, when Leeds Corporation paved their streets with whinstone setts from Ayton. The exploitation of ironstone came later, particularly in the first twenty years of the twentieth century, with three mines operating nearby. Vast quantities of ironstone went to Middlesbrough blast furnaces, although its relatively poor quality made the business unpredictable.

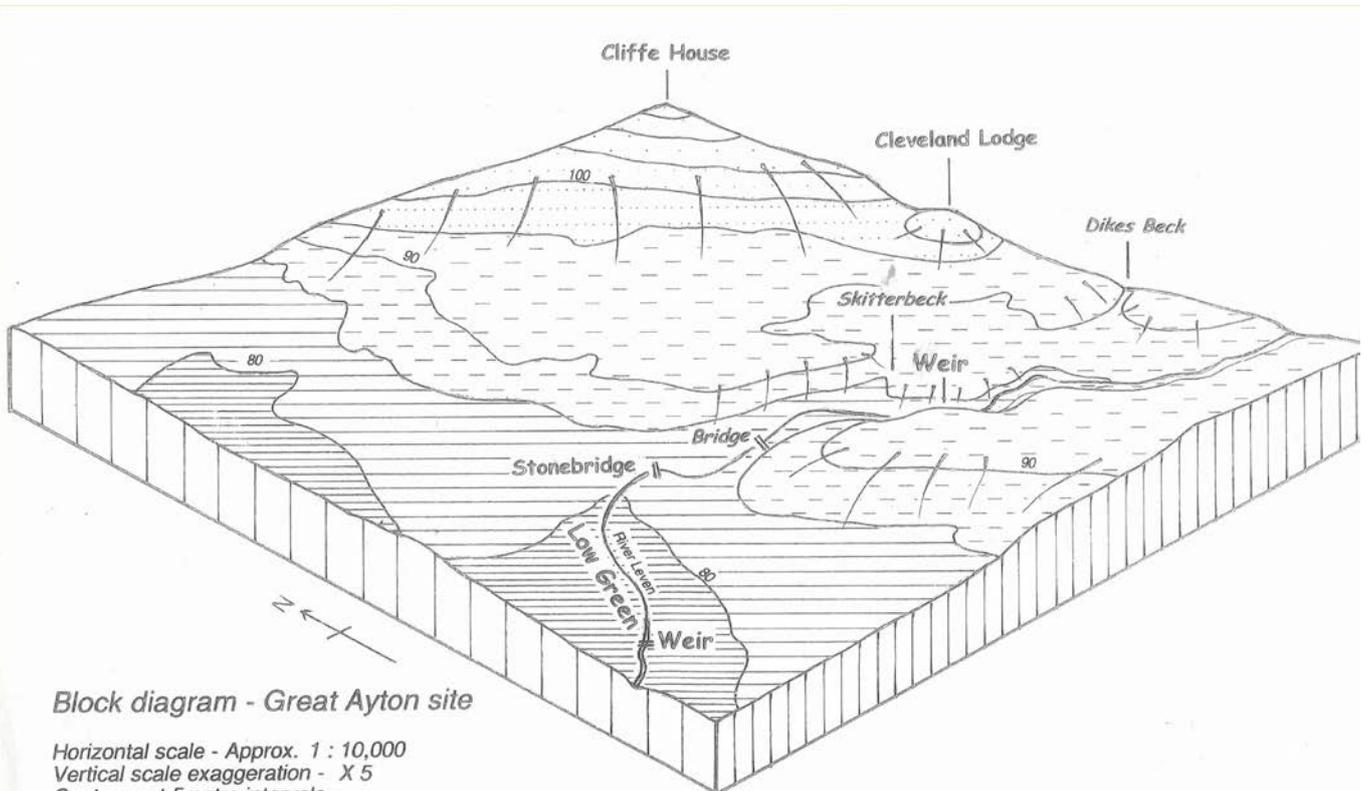
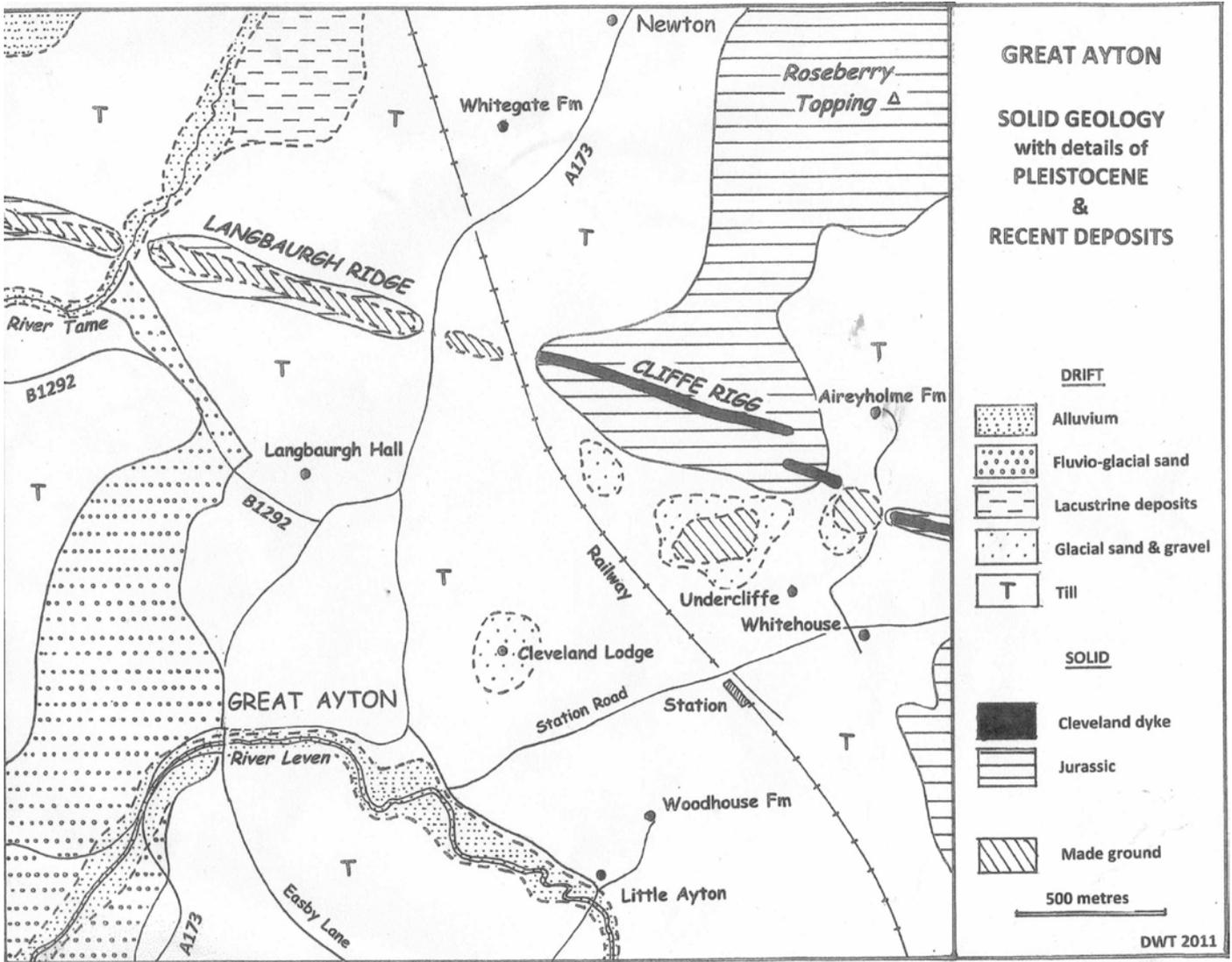
The pull of Teesside

By the end of the 1920s, most mining and quarrying had ceased. The proximity of Great Ayton to industrial Teesside became the major factor in village development. The steel and chemical industries provided ready employment, and Great Ayton became a sought-after home for people moving into the region to work in Teesside's industries, and for residents of Teesside who wanted a place in the country. Outside the onerous planning restrictions of the National Park, yet within easy reach of its magnificent scenery, developers found eager purchasers for their new housing estates. Towards the end of the twentieth century, it became apparent that village size, with a population now approaching 6,000, had reached a limit. At the same time, the loss of industrial jobs in steel making and chemicals on Teesside meant that demand for housing reduced.

Administrative location

Great Ayton has always been in Yorkshire, historically in the North Riding of the County of York, and more recently in North Yorkshire. There was a brief period in the 1960s and early 1970s when it looked as if the village would become part of the newly-created County of Cleveland, but residents fought a successful campaign to remain in Yorkshire.

With the rise of local government from 1900, Stokesley acquired the status of the local administrative centre. The Stokesley Union, originally set up to manage the workhouse, took over the early burdens of local administration, becoming the Stokesley Rural Sanitary Authority and, finally, the Stokesley Rural District Council. With the abolition of the Stokesley RDC, Great Ayton became part of the District of Hambleton, with its headquarters in Northallerton.



Block diagram - Great Ayton site

Horizontal scale - Approx. 1 : 10,000
 Vertical scale exaggeration - X 5
 Contours at 5metre intervals

Relief source - Ordnance Survey 1:10,000 Landplan