
Geology in Northumbrian Museums

Steve McLean Hancock Museum, Newcastle upon Tyne

Introduction

The museums listed in this guide are situated within the counties of Northumberland, Durham, Tyne and Wear, and Cleveland north of the River Tees. Local museums with geological collections or displays present an ideal starting point from which to investigate the geology of the immediate area. Such institutions tend to collect locally or regionally and often possess top quality specimens acquired over a long period of time, many from localities which are no longer accessible. This is particularly true considering the extensive mining history of the area and the quantity of specimens which have found their way into museums as a direct result. In addition, extensive U.K. or indeed world collections are not uncommon, usually resulting from the prodigious efforts of 19th century collectors during the 'Golden Age' of geology.

In the area represented by this guide, there are three principal geological collections housed in museums. By far the largest is the collection owned by the Natural History Society of Northumbria at the Hancock Museum in Newcastle (currently managed by Tyne and Wear Museums). The earliest part of this collection dates from the beginning of the 19th century and now contains approximately 50 000 specimens, the largest proportion of which are local Carboniferous and Permian fossils. There are over 8000 mineral specimens, principally from the North Pennine Orefield.

The second largest collection, located at Sunderland Museum, is owned by Tyne and Wear Museums. Although the oldest recorded specimen dates back to 1815, the rest of the collection was begun in 1836 when the Sunderland Natural History and Antiquarian Society was founded. There are approximately 20 000 geological specimens, the largest part consisting of Permian fossils and rocks from the Zechstein strata of northeast England. The mineral collection contains over 4000 specimens collected principally from the North Pennine Orefield.

The third largest collection in the area is owned by Cleveland County Council and is housed at the Southlands Centre in Middlesbrough. The geological collection dates from 1975 and currently numbers 12–15 000 specimens, including minerals from northern England, especially the north Pennines, the Lake District and Caldbeck Fells, and regional Carboniferous, Permian and Jurassic fossils.

D Displays: L = Local; R(#) = Regional (# = C Cleveland, Y Yorkshire, NE Northern England [generally Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, Co. Durham, Cumbria]); G = General Geology. TE Temporary Exhibitions, ask museum for details.

COL Collections: L = Local; R(#) = Regional (# = C,Y,NE as above); N = UK; WW = World Wide; m,r,f = minerals, rocks, fossils (M,R,F = particular strength); P = Photographic records, A = Archive, Li = geological library. Appointments should be made to examine collections, libraries, etc.

CAT Catalogues: Published catalogues of collections, histories of the collections etc., which may be available for purchase.

ENQ Enquiry Service: * = professional geologist on staff.

GACT Geological activities: Ask museum for details.

S Sales: Geological publications for sale.

AC Admission charge.

OPEN general opening hours. It is always best to check before you visit.

Where one or more of the above is not listed it is not relevant to a particular museum.

Museums

2024 note: Web addressed updated in 2024.

1. **Alnwick: Museum of Antiquities, Alnwick Castle**, Alnwick, Northumberland, NE66 1NQ, Tel. (01665) 510 777; <https://bailiffgatemuseum.co.uk/>. COL WW, R, M, Li; AC Yes; OPEN April–Oct daily.
2. **Ashington: Woodhorn Colliery Museum**; Queen Elizabeth II Country Park, Ashington, Northumberland, Tel: (01670) 856968. D (social and industrial history of mining and mining communities in southeast Northumberland, working winding engine); AC No; OPEN Wed.–Sun. all year. <https://museumsnorthumberland.org.uk/woodhorn-museum/>
3. **Barnard Castle: The Bowes Museum**, Barnard Castle, Co. Durham, DL12 8NP. Tel. (01833) 690606; <https://thebowesmuseum.org.uk/>. COL R(NE), N, WW, m, r, f (Carboniferous plants and rocks; minerals and rocks from around the world); AC Yes; OPEN all week, all year.
4. **Beamish: The North of England Open Air Museum**, Beamish, Co. Durham, DH9 0RG, Tel. (0191) 370 4000. D Social history of Coal Mining, reconstructed pre-WW, coal mine; COL P, A, Li (relating to lead, coal and ironstone mining in North East England); CAT access to catalogues of P, A, Li collections by appointment; S mining; AC Yes; OPEN summer all week, winter closed Mon. and Fri; closed over Christmas period. <https://www.beamish.org.uk/>
5. **Berwick: Berwick-upon-Tweed Borough Museum and Art Gallery**, The Clock Block, Berwick Barracks, Ravensdowne, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland, TD15 1DQ, Tel (01289 330044 ext. 269). COL L, N, m, r, f, Li; ENQ; AC Yes; OPEN summer, all week; Winter, Wed.–Sun. <https://museumsnorthumberland.org.uk/berwick-museum-art-gallery/>
6. **Chillingham: Chillingham Castle**, Chillingham, Northumberland, NE66 5NI, Tel. (01668) 215359; <https://chillingham-castle.com/> D L (very small, Carboniferous plants); TE; COL L, f (Carboniferous plants, very small); AC Yes; OPEN Easter–30 Sept., Winter by appointment.
7. **Hartlepool: Museum of Hartlepool**, Jackson Dock, Hartlepool, TS24 0XZ, Tel (01429) 860077. COL R(NE), WW (small), r, f, m, Li; GACT occasional; AC no; OPEN all week, all year. <https://www.culturehartlepool.com/museum-of-hartlepool/>
8. **Middlesbrough: Dorman Museum**, Linthorpe Road, Middlesbrough, Cleveland, Tel. (01642) 813781; <https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/leisure-culture-and-parks/entertainment-and-museums/dorman-museum/>. D L, R(NE), G: TE; COL L, R (C, NE), N, WW, M, r, f.; P, A, Li; CAT unpublished catalogues can be made available for study; ENQ*; GACT; S; AC No; OPEN all year, Tues–Sun. Study and laboratory facilities available.
9. **Morpeth: Wallington Hall (National Trust)**, Cambo, Near Morpeth, Northumberland, Tel. (01670) 773600. D G (curiosity collection of rocks, minerals and fossils); COL L, N (small), m, R, f; CAT available to view in building; AC Yes; OPEN April 1st Oct 31st all week, except Tuesday. <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/north-east/wallington>
10. **Newcastle: Hancock Museum**, Barras Bridge, Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne and Wear, NE2 4PT, Tel. (0191) 222 6765; D L, R(NE), G; TE; COL L, R(NE), N, W'N, M, r, F (see above), P, A, Li; CAT Yes, other collection information can be made available; ENQ*; GACT; S; AC Yes; OPEN all week, all year (except Sunday mornings). <https://greatnorthmuseum.org.uk/>
11. **South Shields: South Shields Museum and Art Gallery**, Ocean Road, South Shields, Tyne and Wear, NE33 2TA, Tel (0191) 456 8740. D L (geology displays within local history context), ENQ: GACT; S; AC No; OPEN all week, all year (except Sunday mornings). <https://southshieldsmuseum.org.uk/>
12. **Sunderland: Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens**, Burdon Road, Sunderland, SR1 1PP, Tel. (0191) 553 2323. D L, R (C,NE); TE; COL L, R (NE), N, WW, M, r, F (see above); P, A, Li CAT No, but collection information available; ENQ*; GACT; S; AC No; OPEN all week, all year (except Sunday mornings). <https://sunderlandculture.org.uk/our-venues/sunderland-museum-winter-gardens/>
13. **Weardale: The Weardale Museum**, Ireshopeburn, Weardale, Co. Durham, Tel. (01388) 537417. D L (minerals and fossils, small); TE; COL L, M, f, P, Li (small); AC Yes; OPEN May–Sept, Wed–Sun; August all week; afternoons only. <https://weardalemuseum.org.uk/>
14. **Weardale: Kilhope, The North of England Lead Mining Museum**, Cowshill, Upper Weardale, Co. Durham, DL13 1AR. Tel. (01388) 537505. D L, R, (North Pennines), restored 19th century lead mining site with water wheel); TE;

COL R (North Pennines, collections relating to the industrial history of lead mining); ENQ: GACT: S (including souvenir specimens); AC Yes; OPEN April 1st–Sept. 30th and weekends in October; any other time by arrangement.
<https://killhope.org.uk/>

Further information

Davis, P. and Brewer, C., 1986 *A Catalogue of Natural Science Collections in North-East England*. North of England Museums Service. Detailed local information regarding geological collections.

Nudds, J. (ed.), 1994 *Directory of British Geological Museums*. Geol. Soc. Misc. Papers, no. 18. Includes information on local museums.

Events in Tyne and Wear Museums are listed in a leaflet *Out and About in Tyne and Wear*.

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