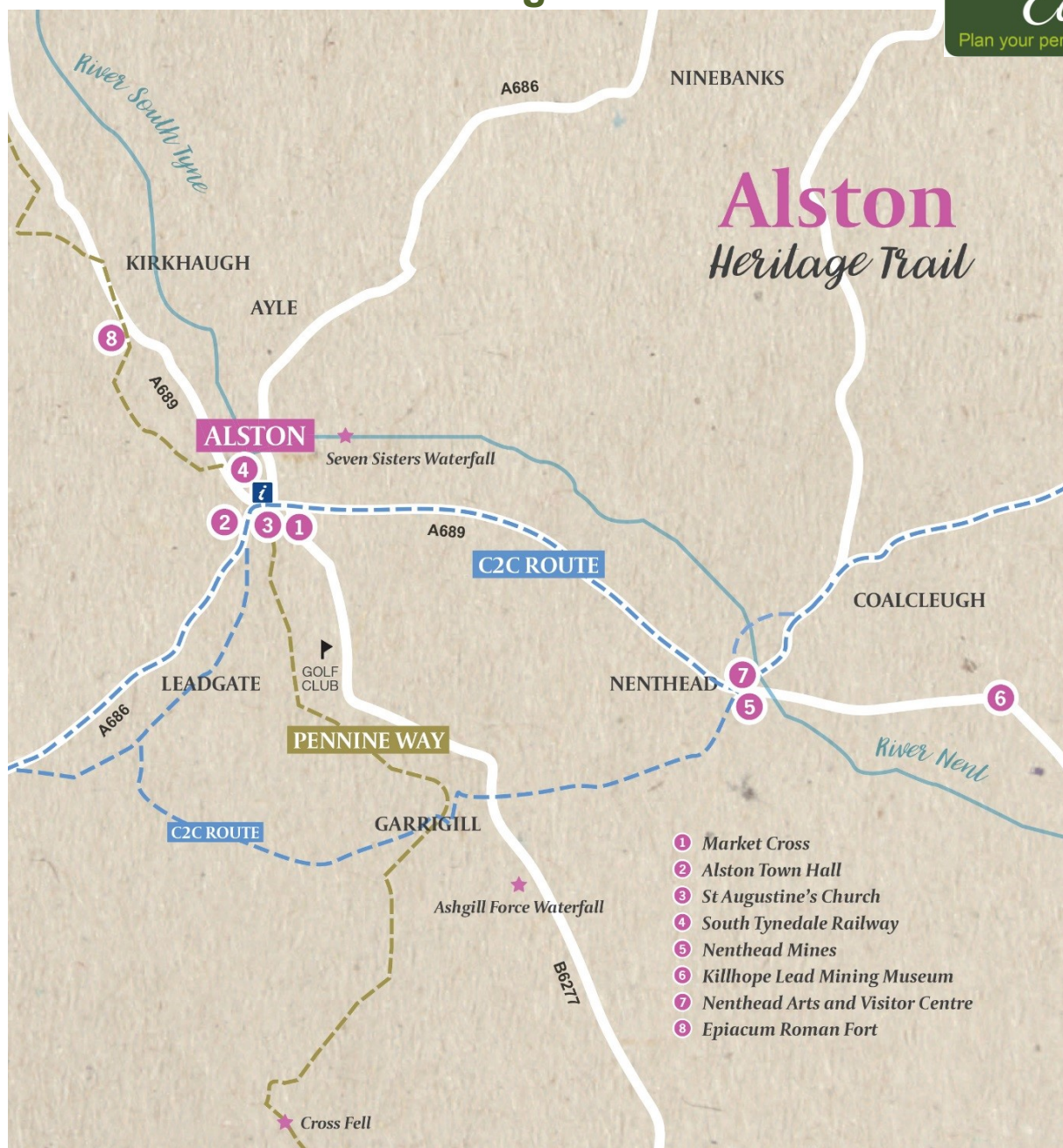


# Alston Heritage Trail



This route is taken from the Alston Heritage Trail leaflet which we produced in partnership and with funding from Historic England.

All the places mentioned here are open to the public, and most are easy to access by car, public transport or on foot. Some sites are free to visit; whilst others have an admission fee.

The map indicates the locations of all the key sites. The wording next to each entry indicates the facilities available. If an asterisk\* is shown after a symbol it means that the facilities could have restrictions, eg limited wheelchair accessibility, parking nearby or dogs only allowed in certain areas. There is no suggested start point or trail to follow; rather the aim is for you to explore Eden's historic attractions at your leisure.

## Explore Alston's Heritage

Sitting on top of the Pennines, Alston is one of the highest market towns in England at 1000 feet above sea level. Its steeply cobbled streets, hidden courtyards and quaint shops invite exploration at every turn. However, most of Alston's history can be traced back to its underground riches!



The cobbled core of Alston is centred on the market cross and shelter from which several roads radiate outwards. A self-guided trail, available at Alston Tourist Information Centre, allows you to explore the town centre in more detail.

Beneath Alston Moor were rich deposits of mineral ores. Although we have yet to discover evidence for Roman mining in the North Pennines, archaeologists think that it must have taken place here. Mines in Alston Moor were controlled by the Crown and were worked for lead and silver from 1154 onwards. At 330 metres above sea level, Epiacum (Whitley Castle) was the highest stone-built Roman fort in Britain. It was linked to other forts at Kirkby Thore and Carvoran by the Maiden Way - a Roman road that is still traceable on the ground.

Reminders of the lead and zinc mining industry are everywhere. Grassed-over spoil heaps, sunken pits, rusting machinery and a myriad of tracks and byways all speak of the riches once gleaned from underground. Today, Nenthead Mine and nearby Killhope Mine are the best-preserved remains of lead mining enterprises.

The hardship of living in such a remote area created independent communities, bonded by the need for self-sufficiency. Farmers supplemented their income with mining to eke out a living from the land, and miners cultivated smallholdings to supplement their diet. Non-Conformist religions struck a chord here and Quaker, Methodist and Congregationalist chapels were attended by local people.



The Quaker-owned London Lead Company began to expand production of the Alston Moor lead mines in 1736, whilst ensuring their workers were well looked after. The company generously supported housing for their workforces and gave some financial support for schools. It provided land for chapels to be built on, mainly by public subscription. Under the London Lead Company, Nenthead became a planned industrial village from the 1820s, with a Reading Room built in 1833. Rebuilt in 1855, it now houses a community shop.

The Alston branch of the Carlisle to Newcastle railway opened in 1852 to carry lead ore, coal and other minerals away from the mines. But, gradually, overseas competition and the falling price of lead set in a permanent decline with many miners seeking a new life in North America, Australia and New Zealand. The majority of lead mines had closed before the turn of the 20th century and the few survivors remained until the Second World War. The legacy of mining life can still be seen at Nenthead Mine and Killhope Mine.



The **North Pennines AONB** is one of the great wilderness areas of England. Purple heather moors, green fields and dales, vibrant hay meadows, silvery rivers and cascading waterfalls combine to create a distinctive landscape that has been protected as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty since 1988.

## Alston Heritage Trail

**1. Market Cross:** The original market cross was built in 1765 by Alston born William Stephenson, who had become Lord Mayor of London the previous year. Having been hit by runaway lorries more than once, the shelter is now protected by a row of stone bollards. Market crosses are found all over the country and are descendants of mediaeval preaching crosses. These were covered in to become known as butter crosses because perishable goods, such as butter, were sold there.

(Refreshments\*, WC\*, dogs on a lead welcome, family friendly)



**2. Alston Town Hall:** The building of the Town Hall started in 1857 with the foundation stone being laid by Hugh Lee Pattinson (the famous industrial chemist who was born in the town). A bottle containing artefacts and details of the committee were alongside the foundation stone. Unfortunately neither have been found and it is believed they remain hidden by new building work. The Town Hall originally housed the Literary and Mechanic's Institute library, a reading room, newsroom and a boardroom for the Poor Law Guardians as well as the Registrars.

(WC, accessible, parking\*)

**3. St. Augustine's Church:** There have been at least three churches on this site. The first church dated from the 12th century but became very dilapidated and was pulled down in 1769 to build a new church (designed by John Smeaton). This, in turn, was demolished 100 years later when the present church was built.

(Accessible, family friendly)

The church is named after **St Augustine**, the first archbishop of Canterbury. According to legend he vanquished the evil spirits inhabiting the Pennines by giving his blessing on the highest fell about 6 miles south of Alston, after which Fiend's Fell became known as Cross Fell.



The 17th century **Derwentwater Clock** arrived by a convoluted route from Dilston Hall, the former home of James Radcliffe (3rd Earl of Derwentwater). He had taken part in the ill-fated Jacobite Rebellion of 1715 and his estates were confiscated and given to Greenwich Hospital in London. The Hospital donated the clock to the church in 1767, but it was damaged in transit. It wasn't until 1977 that the necessary repairs were made. Today, you can set the pendulum swinging by carefully removing one of the wooden blocks from under the weighted end.

**John Smeaton** (1724–1792) is well-known for constructing the Eddystone Lighthouse, but he was also competent at building bridges, harbours and mill works. **High Mill** is one of his water-powered corn mills built c.1767. Its waterwheel is still intact, and was originally fed by a mill race that ran through the centre of Alston. Not currently open.

**4. South Tynedale Railway:** Come and join us at our double award-winning railway. Enjoy a scenic ride through the beautiful South Tyne valley on one of our trains hauled by vintage steam, diesel or electric locos all with their own fascinating history. Walk along the South Tyne Trail and take in the glorious views, visit the Discovery Museum and our engineering workshop viewing gallery and find out all about England's highest narrow-gauge railway.



(WC, parking, dogs on a lead welcome, accessible, refreshments, family friendly)

**5. Nenthead Mines:** A once-thriving lead and zinc mining enterprise that at one time produced up to 60% of the UK zinc ores. Take an underground tour, explore the extensive industrial remains or marvel at the mineral displays on special open days. See website for details.



(WC, parking, dogs on a lead welcome\*, accessible\*, refreshments, family friendly)

Between Nenthead and Alston is an underground canal, engineered by John Smeaton to drain the mines of excess water and reveal new ore veins. Unfortunately, the **Nent Force Level** failed to deliver the riches that were hoped for and became known as 'Smeaton's Folly'. However, it was popular with Victorian tourists whose boatmen would lie on a plank across the bows of the boat, and holding the plank with their hands, would propel the boat with their feet against the tunnel wall. The commemorative stone for the building of the level is on view at the entrance to the town hall.

(Please note: Nent Force Level is inaccessible.)

**6. Killhope Lead Mining Museum:** One of the last-remaining 19th century lead mining complexes on the Pennines. Work as a Victorian washer boy for the day, pan for minerals or marvel at the working machinery including the impressive Killhope Wheel – a large and fully-restored waterwheel used to power the 'jiggers' and 'buddles' that separated the lead ore from the waste. Don a lamp and hard hat and take a tour down the underground mine.



(WC, parking, dogs on a lead welcome\*, accessible\*, refreshments, family friendly)

A common method of prospecting for minerals was by hushing. A dam would be constructed at the head of a valley and once sufficient water had accumulated, the dam was breached to release a torrent of water that would tear down the valley, stripping away the surface soil and exposing mineral veins. A valley could be repeatedly dammed and

hushed, creating an overdeepened notch on the fellside, one of the best known being Dowgang Hush, near Nenthead (easily viewed from the road to Garrigill).

**7. The Hive at Nenthead (formerly Nenthead Arts and Visitor Centre):** Nenthead has a unique heritage; designed by the London Lead Mining Company as a 'model village'. It was the first village in the UK to have a free public lending library. Indeed, it was once known as 'the village without sin' as the lead miners were purportedly more interested in books than alcohol! Nenthead Wesleyan Methodist Chapel's prominent position in the centre of the village reflects its past importance.



The Chapel is now enjoying a new lease of life and helps to convey Nenthead's colourful story. Restored to its former glory, it now offers an exciting arts and exhibition space making it a great base for exploring the area on bike, by foot or in a car.

**8. Epiacum Roman Fort (Whitley Castle):** A dramatically-sited Roman fort perched on the flanks of the Pennines; originally built to control the valuable lead and silver mines of Alston Moor. The impressive multiple ramparts are some of the finest in the whole of the



Roman empire. Epiacum is about halfway along the Maiden Way - a Roman road running between Bravoniacum (Kirkby Thore) and Magna (Carvoran). There are two visitor trails to explore: the Nervian Trail and an interactive family trail across the site. Access is on foot from the small car park alongside the A689.

(Parking nearby, dogs on a lead welcome, accessible\*, family friendly)

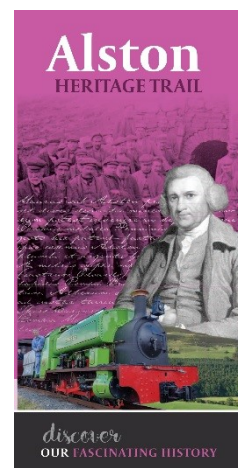
## Further information

Alston Tourist Information Centre (Local Links), Town Hall, Alston

Telephone: 01434 382244

Email: [Alston.LocalLinks@westmorlandandfurness.gov.uk](mailto:Alston.LocalLinks@westmorlandandfurness.gov.uk)

A copy of the Alston Heritage Trail and Heritage Trails for Kirkby Stephen, Appleby and Penrith are available from Eden's Tourist Information Centres.



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