



In This Issue

- *Some Notes on Whitehaven*
- Calendar of Events
- Happy Hour

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September 2017

Some Notes on Whitehaven

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Whitehaven, today, is a modest city of about 24,000 people, located on the Cumbrian coast, in England's northwest. It lies an hour's drive (40 miles) west of Carlisle, Cumbria's county seat--and only about 15 miles from the famed (and tourist-swamped) Lake District.

The more prosperous Lake District towns to the east and southeast--places like Keswick, Ambleside and Windermere--glitter with expensive boutiques, espresso cafes, and outdoor-sports shops offering walking sticks, boots, life vests and bicycle tires. There, affluent international visitors jostle each other on the sidewalks--while their automobiles overflow from parking lots to line the roads going out of town, up to a half-mile or more. Among these well-heeled crowds--coming into town, after a day of boating on the water, or hiking in the nearby hills--a visit to the Lake District in August offers a vibe akin to Aspen in ski season.

Yet Whitehaven--only a few miles away--is culturally, a world apart. Back in the age of sailing ships and John Carlyle, Whitehaven was a bustling port and center of commerce; but today, when the automobile and air travel rule, it's

Carlisle that's more strategically located on England's main north-south highway (AKA: "Backbone of Britain"), the M-6. From Whitehaven, via Carlisle then, it's a 2.5-hour drive north to Glasgow--or just a little longer to reach Edinburgh on the opposite coast. (London is a day's drive--340 miles--to the south.)



Present-day harbor of Whitehaven (The town's oldest streets radiate off to the right; the Irish Sea and gateway to the Atlantic lie beyond, to the left.)

While Whitehaven's city planners have sought, over the last decade, to lure some of the Lake District's tourists, a hard-luck history (including serial tragedies at the nearby coal fields, dating to the 1600s) marks

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the faces of Whitehaven and its people. The city was also tagged with unwanted national notoriety, 7 years ago, when a local taxi driver went berserk and shot 23 people--killing 12, before turning the gun on himself.

This is a no-frills, workaday town, cast in whitewash tones. Its busiest shopping street offers fish-and-chips carry-outs, a Boots drugstore and a Pound Shop (the UK's version of our dollar stores). Too many empty storefronts pock the city's oldest streetscapes, mostly located down near the waterfront--where a solitary ice cream truck offers the most visible refreshment. The harbor itself is silent, save for the screeches of scavenging gulls. Speak with a local and you're met with English politeness, but no ready smiles. (*Why is this Yank in Whitehaven?*).

And yet, for someone seeking England's ties to 18th-century Virginia and hoping to lay eyes on sights that would have been known to young John Carlyle, Whitehaven offers an exciting encounter: Many buildings from Carlyle's day still stand—especially on streets fanning out from the harbor, with names familiar in Alexandria like *King*, *Queen* and *Duke*. There're also Scotch and Irish Streets; as well as Roper Street--where rope-makers once congregated to make ships' rigging.

Walking the harbor, the visitor may find

most remarkable its...*coziness*. And in fact, Whitehaven's success as a port was always constrained by its relatively small size; so it was, that in the 19th century, Whitehaven was eclipsed by larger port facilities at Bristol and Liverpool. It's also worth noting, by the way, that John Paul Jones first went to sea out of this same harbor, as a 13-year-old with the British navy; and he later returned in 1778, as an American naval commander during our Revolutionary War--to raid Whitehaven and terrorize its citizenry (who judge him less a naval hero, and more a pirate).

A short walk takes you to the ruins of St. Nicholas Church, to discover a small brass plaque, affixed to a red-brick archway that opens onto the remnants of the church cemetery--grassed over, with most of the headstones long gone. The plaque informs visitors that somewhere on the grounds are buried the remains of Mildred Gale, died age 31, "Grandmother to the first President of the United States, George Washington." (Mildred, a young Virginia widow and mother of three, had remarried to a Scottish merchant in 1700, who brought her to Whitehaven--where she was to die of fever, after another childbirth, a year later.)

For a panoramic view of the harbor and city, follow the one-lane road that winds up a hill to the south of the harbor. At the top of this road is a circular lookout point, whose cobbled



pavement includes a compass rose in rough mosaic: One arrow, pointing south-southwest, is labeled "West Indies - Sugar, Rum"; a second, pointing southwest, is labeled "Virginia - Tobacco." Some 3,500 miles across the choppy Atlantic lies Alexandria – and a new life that young John Carlyle could not have imagined. Ironically, just as Carlyle left for the colonies, Whitehaven's position in the Virginia tobacco trade began to decline--shifting during the next decades to the "Tobacco Lords" of Glasgow, striding with their gold-tipped canes, from out their new stone mansions.



The Old Custom House, on Whitehaven Harbor

For further reading:

Looking at Whitehaven, by J. Brian Crossland --published by the Whitehaven Borough Council; provides a brief history, with particular attention to street layout and architecture (c. 1971; 74 pp in hardcopy).

Whitehaven & District Through Time, by Alan W. Routledge--primarily a series of annotated then-and-now photographs (c. 2011; 96 pp in paperback).