



Newsletter Autumn 2025



Note from the Vice-Chair

The last time I was asked to write a welcoming introduction the Whitby Civic Society newsletter as Vice-Chair, I was bemoaning our failure to organise Heritage Open Days events in Whitby since before Covid.

This time I am very pleased to be able to congratulate the Executive Committee (but mostly Kat Norrby, our hard-working Secretary and Betty Bayliss, our President) for pulling together a very respectable programme of events for Saturday 20th September 2025.

I am also very grateful to the property owners of the Victoria Spa Well, Pannett House, the Masonic Hall, Union Place, Abbeville and the Port Hole and Ripley's Yard, for agreeing to throw open their doors to the public this year. I hope you will enjoy exploring Whitby Heritage buildings which you have probably passed by many times and wondered what its like inside!

Ok, some might say, not such a big event as 2019 when we arranged to open 14 heritage properties in Whitby, but its a new start – a relaunch, as they call it in business terms. If we attract more members and volunteers, next year, we can be more ambitious.

The ongoing challenge for Whitby Civic Society organising anything is the shortage of active members who are prepared to offer their time and organising skills. We could do a lot more. Please let our Secretary, Kat, know if you would like to be more involved in the work of the Society. You will be made very welcome!

Best wishes

Neil Swannick
Vice-Chair, Whitby Civic Society.

Welcome from our President

I was honoured to be asked earlier this year to be President of The Whitby Civic Society. I was previously a member of the Executive Society and was very involved with the last Heritage Open Days. Its lovely to be involved with this one.

Thank you for your love, support and friendship

Mrs Betty Bayliss

Heritage Open Day on Saturday 20th September 2025

Heritage Open Days is England's largest festival of history and culture; every year, thousands of volunteers and supporters organise events that allow us to discover hidden places and try out new experiences. Brought to you by the National Trust, supported by players of People's Postcode Lottery and run by thousands of local organisations and volunteers, Heritage Open Days gives everyone free access to experiences and events across England, including access to many sites that usually charge for admission. For details and opening times, visit www.heritageopendays.org.uk

Whitby has many treasures and this year Whitby Civic Society open the doors to 6 of its most precious giving you the opportunity to explore the history and architecture of unique buildings such as The Victoria Spa Well House and Union Place Georgian Townhouse with her stunning Bottle window, 2 of the old cottages that Whitby is famous for and two further Victorian buildings on the same street but very different to each other; Pannett House and the Masonic hall with her bespoke stone frontage. All for free.

This years Heritage Open Day is on Saturday 20th September 2025. All events are free to attend and no pre-booking is required.

- Victoria Spa Well Building, REAR of Broomfield Terrace. 10am to 2pm
- Pannett House, Normanby Terrace. 10.30am to 2pm
- Masonic Hall, John Street. 10Am to 2pm
- Union Place, Uppang Lane. 10.45am to 15.45pm
- Abbeville "The Little Yellow Cottage", Church Street. 10am to 4pm
- The Port Hole and Ripleys Yard, Baxtergate, 10am to 4pm

In addition 6 associated attractions are also open. These are also free to visit and will open on the day and include the churches St Mary's, St John's, St Hilda's West Cliff, St Hilda's Catholic, St Ninian's and also Whitby Mission and Seafarers Centre whose cafe is open.

The Port Hole and Ripleys Yard will also act as an information point for Whitby Civic Society with information and directions for the other 5 open buildings, publications and to let you know what Whitby Civic Society does.

Further information can be found at whitbycivicsociety.org.uk, on Facebook at "Whitby Civic Society" or emailing whitby_civic_society@yahoo.co.uk or from www.heritageopendays.org.uk



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Saturday 20th September 2025

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For Further Details:
www.whitbycivicsociety.org.uk
Whitby Civic Society on Facebook
whitby_civic_society@yahoo.co.uk

Find out more:
www.heritageopendays.org.uk
@heritageopendays
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Churches are Open
Saturday 20th September 2025

Some of our most wonderful architectural buildings in Whitby are our churches and they will be open as associated attractions and free to enter.

In addition Whitby Mission and Seafarers Centre cafe will be open for refreshments 10am to 2pm

St Hilda's Catholic Church, Brunswick St: open 11am to 4pm
St John's, Brunswick Street: open 10am to 12pm and 2pm to 4pm
St Mary's, Abbey Plain: open 11.15am to 3pm
St Hilda's, West Cliff: open 12pm to 4pm
St Ninian's, Baxtergate: open 11am to 3pm
Whitby Mission and Seafarers Centre, Haggarsgate: 10am to 2pm

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RNLI's Bicentenary - 200 years of Lifesaving

2024 marked the bicentenary of the RNLI. To help celebrate this occasion I thought it would be good to give a small history of the founding of this great organisation, as well as a little bit of its history involving Whitby and its lifeboats.

Sir William Hillary is credited with founding the National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck, later renamed the Royal National Lifeboat Institution in 1854. After witnessing the destruction of dozens of ships from his home in the Isle of Man, and being involved in rescue attempts himself, Hillary appealed to the Navy, the government and other 'eminent characters' for help in forming 'a national institution for the preservation of lives and property from shipwreck'. With support of London MP Thomas Wilson and West India Merchants Chairman George Hibbert, the Institution was founded as a charity in a London Coffee House on 4th March 1824.

National Rescues - a national service

The RNLI's lifeboat crews, lifeguards and flood rescue teams have saved more than 141,000 lives since the charity's foundation in 1824. The biggest single rescue was in 1907, when lifeboats from Cadgwith, Coverack, the Lizard and Porthleven rescued 456 people from the liner Suevic.

The RNLI and Whitby - the Rohilla disaster

Locally Whitby has had a lifeboat from 1802 when the Whitby Lifeboat Association was formed when a Henry Greathead lifeboat was stationed at Whitby funded by local subscription and the help of Lloyds of London. The RNLI took over the running of lifeboats at Whitby after the 1861 Lifeboat disaster in which twelve of the thirteen lifeboat crew perished, the only survivor being Henry Freeman. He went on to become Coxswain of Whitby Lifeboat, assisting in saving 152 lives and was awarded the RNLI's Silver Medal for Gallantry twice.

The RNLI were involved in the greatest wartime navel disaster rescue when the hospital ship HMHS

Rohilla ran aground at Saltwick in the early hours of 30th October 1914. Sailing under wartime conditions, HMHS Rohilla was enroute from Leith in Scotland to Dunkirk to evacuate wounded First World War soldiers. With 228 people on board, including the ship's crew, medical and support staff including five nurses, the vessel ran on to Saltwick Nab and almost immediately broke into three pieces.

Over three days six lifeboats from five lifeboat stations— Scarborough, Teesmouth, Tynemouth, Upgang and Whitby (No 1 & No 2 Lifeboats) - were involved with the attempts to rescue those on board. Whitby's No 2 Lifeboat John Fielden rescued 35 people in two trips before she was wrecked and a further 50 were rescued by the motor lifeboat Henry Vernon from Tynemouth. Others made their own way ashore after jumping into the raging sea, being assisted by Whitby townsfolk. Prominent amongst these local people was Mr. George Peart who rushed into the surf at great personal risk to drag individuals out of the sea. Sadly 83 people from the Rohilla lost their lives.



John Fielden with survivors

RNLI Gold medals were awarded to Coxswain Thomas Langlands, Coxswain of Whitby Lifeboat, Coxswain Robert Smith and Captain Burton of Tynemouth lifeboat and Silver Medals to Whitby's Second Coxswain Richard Eglon and Mr. George Peart.

Neil Williamson
Hon Curator
Whitby RNLI Museum

Sending a Letter in Georgian Whitby

First you would need a pen, goose feathers from the edge of the bird's wing were considered the best, having the required ten inches in length and the flexibility to create a stylish hand. A sharp knife was used to scrape away the membrane at the end of the quill and then to cut the end to a sharp angle. The quick inside the nib was scraped out and then a slit was cut from the centre, and finally the end was made pointed for the more usual cursive style or cut blunt for an italic style (as favoured by Captain Cook in his log). By now the end of the quill would look like the metal nib that some of us remember on our dip pens that we used at school! Properly maintained, such a quill pen would last some time, for the writing of many letters.

Ink could be made at home but in a town like Whitby ink would probably be bought ready made. Created from ferrous sulfate, tannin extracted from oak gall and mixed with gum arabic to bind it together, giving the soft brown colour we usually see in eighteenth century letters and documents, Sometimes soot was mixed in as well to create a dark almost black ink. Should the weather be cold, then a couple of drops of brandy could be added to stop the ink from freezing.

Paper was bought in small sheets, made in a laborious process of soaking rags, beating them to a pulp, laying this pulp on wire racks, pressing out the liquid and then drying out the sheets of paper. All this made paper an expensive product, so if you were on a budget your writing had to be small with the lines close together.

At last you were ready to dip your pen in the ink and start your letter. If you were unsure of what to say, then you could consult one of several books published on the art of letter writing, offering sample letters for business purposes, condolences, love letters and so on. Formal phrases such as "your humble servant" proliferated. Letters to lovers or family could be finished with a row of x's, which at this time represented the sending of blessings rather than kisses.

If you were in a hurry, you could dry your ink quickly by sprinkling your letter with pounce, a sandy substance made from powdered cuttlefish bone.

Envelopes were not invented until well into the nineteenth century so letters had to be folded and sealed. This could be done cheaply by using special little wafers glued down with a mixture of flour and

water, Much more secure was red sealing wax, melted, dropped onto the edge of the folded letter and stamped with your own initialled seal or a bought ready made seal.

Now the letter was ready to start its journey to its recipient, local letters were delivered on foot, sometimes arriving only minutes later. There were always willing lads eager to earn a penny to deliver a letter within the town. Otherwise, letters went to the postmaster, for most of the eighteenth century this role was passed down through the Dickinson family until 1812, when Richard Rodgers became postmaster. Stamps were not yet invented so the responsibility for payment usually lay with the recipient who sometimes refused the letter. About 10,000 letters were sent every year with less than 200 returned. Up to the middle of the 1700's there were no roads out of Whitby, only trods or bridle paths, the width of a single flagstone. Post boys rode along these with bags of letters making a slow progress until in 1759 when the first turnpike road was constructed from Whitby across the moors to Saltersgate. However increased speed along roads led to increased dangers and for the next fifty years there were several robberies. In 1774 the Whitby mail was robbed by a "lusty man in a light coloured great-coat, with a crepe veil", who took the mail bags for Whitby, Kirby, Pickering and Thornton. In 1775 John Williamson was hanged at York for robbing the Whitby mail of £66 at Thornton Gate.

Prior to 1784, the home of the Postmaster was also the Post Office but from 1784 there was a Post Office in its own independent building in the Old Market Place, with post coming into Whitby three times a week. Shortly after this the first coach started a regular service to York. As business grew (particularly the whaling) and the population of Whitby rapidly expanded, so did the demand for regular coach travel and with it the transportation of mail. By the end of the eighteenth century, travel to Scarborough linking to the Hull coach, Ormesby, Sunderland and Leeds was well established, running several days a week, with post boys on horseback taking the post on the in between days. This led to a surprisingly speedy service, a letter to someone in York could be delivered that same day and a reply could come the next day on the return post. Letters for more distant destinations could be sent by sea to London or Edinburgh.

All in all it led to a pretty efficient service of communication.

Jenny Burns

Custard Winds, High tides and Climate Change.

This year the “custard winds” seem to have been more persistent and annoying than I can ever remember previously. The term applies to the winds that hit the north-east coast in early spring, bringing rain, low cloud and “sea-frets” though it seems to have fallen out of use lately. I last noticed its use in the local writer Brenda H English’s novel “Except Ye Repent” which was set in the 1830s. I used to hang on to the vain hope that climate change would bring a beneficial effect to this phenomenon, but the reverse seems to be happening, with “coastward” (sic) winds having lasted for most of the winter, spring and early summer. Each year we seem to go from cold to suddenly hot (inland at least) with no gradual warming-up in what used to be springtime, to acclimatise us from one extreme to the other. A dose of so-called global warming is quite an attractive concept to north-east coast dwellers!



Sleeper slots Port Mulgrave (JE)

Onshore winds, along with rising sea levels, have the ability to be quite damaging for our coast; for as long as I can remember I have been interested in the effects of the tide, and have bought the annual booklet listing tide times and heights for each year. This is very useful for an industrial historian, as it is fascinating to be able to walk out onto the furthest extent of seashore during the lowest spring tides to discover where our ancestors blasted out rock to make harbours, shellfish tanks, rutways for guiding horse-drawn carts, postholes for long-gone jetties, jet diggings, mine adits, shipwrecks and even – incredibly – the sleeper slots of a railway between Staithes and Port Mulgrave which was submerged at high tide. Getting way out onto the shore during a low spring tide also gives you the opportunity to study cliff geology with its bands of ironstone, pit props and sometimes even iron rails protruding from the cliff face, proving that some of our local cliffs are honeycombed with old mines.



Robin Hoods Bay rutway (JE)

Taking note of the actual height of the highest tides is interesting, but also worrying. When I was young, a 6-metre tide was notable, but over the decades maximum heights have gradually increased; 6.1 metres....6.2 metres.....and this year (2024) for the first time (in my lifetime at least) we have no fewer than ten tides topping 6.2 metres with **four** tides exceeding 6.3 metres. Whitby has had its harbourside walls raised along Church Street, but the Station Square area where the Endeavour replica is moored has often been affected by flooding, with The Angel Hotel’s cellars needing to be pumped out several times in recent years.



Staithes rutway (JE)

As children we would play amongst the sturdy timber groynes on the beach between Sandsend and Whitby, and it never occurred to us to question why they had been put there – they just were, and surely always would be, presumably to stabilise the beach, but now most of them have disappeared without trace and I can recall that as they were gradually disintegrating in the 1960 and 70s, some serious cliff stabilisation needed to be undertaken, with huge amounts of rock armour being delivered by ships

from Scandinavia, towing barges laden with the huge boulders.



Raithwaite jetty revealed Dec 2013 (JE)

No-one seems to give a thought to the need for these breakwaters these days, let alone replacing them (at vast expense). With all such factors to be considered, should we be worried about the resultant effects on Whitby, and all the other coastal communities?

The highest tide of 2024 was forecast for 5.54am on September 20th at 6.39 metres. As calm conditions prevailed on the day, this went largely unnoticed, although if climate change had caused our custard winds to be blowing onshore with some strength at the time – as actually happened exactly one week later - , perhaps even coinciding with a tidal surge, the effects could have been serious or even devastating.

Jane Ellis

Publications

Whitby Civic Society has produced a range of publications that help to raise awareness of the conservation area and that promote good practice in design and development. A number of town trails have been devised to help locals and visitors to discover local history and heritage, for example the Blue Plaques trail and White Rabbit trail. They are priced from just 50p to £3 and are available at all Whitby Civic Society events, the monthly lectures and at the Tourist Information Centre in the town. Thank you for your support in purchasing one of our booklets.



Membership

Whitby Civic Society is always delighted to welcome new members. The Society is its members, it is only through a strong membership that we can hope to protect and promote everything that is wonderful about Whitby.

Please join us to help make Whitby an even better place to live, work and visit.

Membership costs just £10 per year. If you would like more information please contact:

whitby_civic_society@yahoo.co.uk

You can download the application form from the website and complete it online, no printer required.

Whitby Civic Society Executive Committee 2025

Whitby Civic Society does not employ any staff and is run by an Executive Committee of volunteer trustees. The Executive Committee is elected at the society's Annual General Meeting. Any member of the society may volunteer for election and we are always looking for new members, Executive Committee members and for members to get involved in subgroups especially our planning group. At the AGM February 2025 the committee was elected as follows:

President: Mrs Betty Bayliss
Chair: Vacant position
Vice Chair: Neil Swannick
Secretary: Kat Norrby
Membership Secretary: Chris Whitlam
Treasure: Janet Kukk
Minutes Secretary: Vacant position
Events Secretary: Vacant position
Committee Members: Laura Meszaros, Kerry Boardman
Newsletter Co-ordinators: Chris Whitlam/Kat Norrby



We are always looking for members, new and old, to get involved

Could you spare some time regularly or on one off occasion?

Do you want to help keep Whitby special and promote our wonderful town?

The charity supporters include residents, those with Whitby connections and visitors alike, all of which love our town.

Could you help with ...

- publishing a regular newsletter
- providing content, articles and inspiration for our website, social media and news roundup
- completing surveys within the town
- progressing targeted projects
- helping restart our popular heritage open days and tours
- sourcing or suggesting speakers for our lecture programme
- distributing publications and generating new guides and trails
- joining our sub groups such as the planning group
- becoming a member of our committee

GET INVOLVED !
- JOIN WHITBY CIVIC SOCIETY

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