



Whitby

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<https://www.thewhitbyguide.co.uk/whitby-harbour/>

Whitby harbour is located on the east coast of North Yorkshire at the mouth of the River Esk and is currently owned and maintained by Scarborough Borough Council. The harbour contains a number of historic vessels listed on the National Register of Historic Vessels , as well as various maritime skills providers and seafood retailers working on the harbourside.

The harbour will be the beneficiary of the £37.3m Levelling Up funding awarded to Scarborough Borough Council in 2022, with funding allocated to pedestrianize the swing bridge and harbourside and develop a Maritime Training Hub. There has recently been much effort to revive the harbour's function as a regional and national tourist attraction following the COVID lockdowns, particularly in the organising of public food and music events and sailing regattas in Summer 2022. The Whitby Lifeboat Museum closed in September 2021 but has recently received funding for the regeneration of its museum, and the conservation of the registered historic lifeboat [*Robert and Ellen Robson*](#). There is a high degree of civic and heritage involvement in the harbour's historic character, with local interests keen to be involved in the future Levelling Up regeneration projects. The primary threat to the historic harbour appears to be over-development and infrastructure regeneration which are insensitive to the historic environment

Brief history of Whitby harbour

Whitby harbour is located on the east coast of North Yorkshire at the mouth of the River Esk and is currently owned and maintained by Scarborough Borough Council. The harbour today is used by commercial, fishing



and pleasure craft, including a number of local vessels licensed for small-scale inshore and offshore fishing. Following its decline in the early 20th century due to limits on admitted vessel sizes at a time of their rapid expansion, the harbour was revitalized during the Hull Docks strike in 1955, eventually admitting 291 vessels by 1972 and subsequently seeing development of a marina (1979), pontoons (1991-95) and the Whitby Marina Facilities Centre (2010).¹ It also has a significant harbourside economy making use of local fish and seafood supplies and the historic town's tourist attraction, including food outlets, fish markets and distributors and gift shops.

A monastery was founded at Streatonæsheal, later known as *Hwitebi* ('white village' in Old Norse), in 657 AD, later rebuilt as a Benedictine monastery in the 11th century by Norman baron William de Percy. The town was chartered during the 12th century and appeared to have acquired a sizeable harbour by the late medieval period, being called by the crown to furnish a vessel for use against the Scots in 1301, and capturing Jean d'Orléans, French dignitaries and his nine ships in 1451, during the Hundred Years War (1337-1453).² The harbour substantially expanded in the 18th century, with its sail-making industry beginning in 1756 and lasting until its replacement by local factories in 1807, while the *Diligence* coach began its twice-weekly service from the 'Turk's Head' and 'White Horse and Griffin' to York in 1788, later extending to Scarborough in 1793. While Whitby was handling vessels of 30-50 tons burden as early as 1544, it was handling up to 11,754 tons of shipping in 1790-91, as the third most important shipbuilder after London and Newcastle.³ The harbour first acquired a lifeboat in 1802, eventually building a lifeboat house in 1895 which stayed in service until 1957. The waters around Whitby to Robin Hood Bay to the south contain a number of First World War wrecks, including the SS *Rohilia* (1914) in Saltwick Bay, and German submarines UC-70 and UB-30 (1918), while the town was shelled by German battlecruisers in December 1914.⁴

Whitby was an exceptionally busy whale-fishing port in the 18th and early 19th centuries, with the first whaling ships *Henry and Mary* and *Sea Nymph* leaving for Greenland in 1753.⁵ The town was also the home of Captain James Cook (1728-79) and William Scoresby (1789-1857), both of whom were closely involved with global navigation and exploration. Scoresby, who is memorialised on the Scoresby family grave in St Mary's Church, was elected to the Wernerian Society of natural history in Edinburgh (1809), later the Royal Society of Edinburgh (1819) for his contributions to polar meteorology and natural history, and territorial magnetism. His fifteenth whaling voyage from Whitby (1816), ultimately turning back due to ice damage, was in search of the Northwest Passage, while his 1822 voyage surveyed and chartered the flora and fauna of East Greenland.⁶ Cook was apprenticed in Whitby aged 17 on East Coast colliers, later serving on trading ships in the Baltic Sea before entering the Navy during the Seven Years' War (1756-63). After surveying the entrance of the St Lawrence River in Canada during service, he was subsequently commissioned on three Pacific voyages between 1768 and 1779, becoming the first crew to venture south of the Antarctic Circle in 1773 and achieving the first recorded European contact with the Hawaiian Islands. Four of Cook's ships were converted Whitby coal colliers: Langbourne Yard's HMS *Discovery* (1774), and Fishburn Yard's HMS *Endeavour*, HMS *Adventure*, and HMS *Resolution*, the latter of which Cook acclaimed "*the ship of my choice*" and "*the fittest for service of any I have seen*".⁷

¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20120328014937/http://www.whitbysights.co.uk/whitby-history/whitbyport.html> (Accessed 09/08/22)

² <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/yorks/north/vol2/pp506-528> (Accessed 09/08/22)

³ Andrew White, *A History of Whitby* (1993), 69.

⁴ http://www.eskside.co.uk/dive_whitby/the_wrecks.htm (Accessed 09/08/22)

⁵ <http://www.whitby-yorkshire.co.uk/whaling/whaling.htm> (Accessed 09/08/22)

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Scoresby> (Accessed 09/08/22)

⁷ <https://www.captaincooksociety.com/home/detail/resolution> (Accessed 09/08/22)



Associations and interested parties

Governmental and sub-governmental: Whitby has, partly owing to its remarkably well-preserved historic townhouses and working harbourside economy, several parties and initiatives interested in the protection of its heritage and settings from degradation, over-development and erosion. Natural England has designated the Whitby-Saltwick coastline a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) protecting the coastal waters from over-development and pollution on account of its exceptional paleontological and palaeobotanical finds, a number of which are housed in the Whitby Museum, while Beast Cliff-Whitby just south of the town has been designated a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) on account of its complex vegetated sea cliffs and geology.⁸ Whitby is bounded inland by the North York Moors National Park, and incorporated within the North Yorkshire and Cleveland Heritage Coast, in particular for its exceptional palaeolithic specimens as 'Dinosaur Coast'.⁹ Historic England (HE) created the North East Rapid Coastal Zone Assessment (NERCZA) in 2008, which included Whitby harbour and coastline, seeking to

"... assess the threat posed to heritage assets in the North East by rising sea level and consequential coastal erosion... [and] has established that many heritage assets in the coastal zone are under threat from rising sea level and/or the mitigation strategies proposed."¹⁰

In particular, the report noted that a number of categories of asset are "as yet poorly understood" including a number which are closely relevant both to Whitby town and harbour:

"In carrying out the assessment, it has been noted that a number of categories of asset are as yet poorly understood... Examples include the archaeology of pre-industrial shipbuilding, the development of small harbours, the fishing and whaling industries, early land reclamation and the recreational use of the 'sea side.'"¹¹

Scarborough Borough Council have themselves designated the Whitby Conservation Area (1973), which includes the historic harbour and approaches. They have noted in particular that:

"The built form of the town illustrates the impact of changing economic and social conditions from medieval times to the present day. The mouth of the River Esk forms a natural sheltered harbour in a long stretch of forbidding coast on a busy sea route."¹²

Local interest groups: A number of local interest groups are active in Whitby harbour. The Bristol Civic Society has a particularly wide remit, including organising lectures on local heritage, administration of blue plaques, and assessment of local planning applications alongside Scarborough Borough Council. The group have also organised seasonal newsletters, heritage open days and guided walks of Georgian Whitby and local war memorials.¹³ As well as the Abbey, maintained by English Heritage, the town also houses a significant number of museums such as: Whitby Museum; Captain Cook Memorial Museum; RNLI Whitby Museum and Robin Hood's Bay Museum. The North East Maritime Trust and Whitby Historic Lifeboat Trust are active in the town, as are a number of local groups making use of the historic waterfront and waterways. These include the Whitby Yacht Club and Whitby Fisherman's Amateur Rowing Club, as well as the Whitby Regatta committee.

⁸ <https://ukfossils.files.wordpress.com/2007/03/whitby.pdf>; <https://sac.jncc.gov.uk/site/UK0030086> (Accessed 09/08/22)

⁹ <https://www.visitwhitby.com/tourist-information/people-places/heritage-coast-villages> (Accessed 09/08/22)

¹⁰ Archaeological Research Services, 'North East Rapid Coastal Zone Assessment (NERCZA)' (2008), xv.

¹¹ 'NERCZA', xvi.

¹² Scarborough Borough Council, 'Whitby Conservation Area – Character Appraisal and Management Plan' (2013), 10.

¹³ <https://www.whitbycivicsociety.org.uk/projects/whitbys-war-memorials/> (Accessed 08/08/22)



Maritime infrastructure and business: Whitby has a base of maritime businesses centred on its small-scale commercial fisheries. Its quayside fish-market and seafood provisors are supplied with cod and haddock caught within 12 miles of the coast, licensed open-boat salmon fishers at the harbour entrance, and inshore crustaceans and line-fishing. The port and marina are maintained by Whitby Harbour Port Services on behalf of Scarborough Borough Council and include a number of permanent and visiting vessel berths, along with 5000m² of open quay storage available on Endeavour Wharf. The town also has a base of maritime skills and service providers which could provide for visiting historic vessels.

- Sandgate Seafoods
- Sail Jolly Swagman
- The Whitby Crab Company Ltd.
- The Whitby Catch
- Coates Marine Ltd.
- Cook S.G. Boat Builder
- Crooks D. Wholesale Fish Merchant
- Johnson Angling and Boat Charter
- Lockers Trawlers Ltd
- Northern Spars and Rigging Services
- Whitby Fish Selling Co Ltd
- Whitby Fisherman's Ice Society Ltd.
- Whitby Fisherman's Society
- Whitby Harbour Port Services and Shipping Agents
- Whitby Sea Fish
- Whitby Seafoods Ltd.
- Whitby Shipping Services
- Whitby United Fish Selling Co.¹⁴

There appears to be some interest by Scarborough Borough Council to maintain, if not to invest in and expand, historic harbourside services and infrastructure. In 2013, the 'Whitby Conservation Area Character Appraisal' (CAA) noted that:

"Historically, [Spital Bridge and Whitehall] was an area of intense industrial activity around the ship wrighting trades... There is still some evidence of these activities some of which make a contribution to the character of the area."¹⁵

Condition of heritage assets

Existing protections: Whitby has 474 listed buildings, including 9 Grade I listings and 2 Scheduled Monuments. Many of these sites are concentrated on the harbourside, including the East and West piers and lighthouses, Customs House and Harbour Office and a number of public establishments on the waterfront including the Star Inn, Pier Hotel and The Ship public house, all of which are Grade II listed. Other listed buildings relating to Whitby's maritime history include Grade I listed Captain Cook's House, currently housing the Captain Cook Memorial Museum, and St Mary's Church, including a number of sailors' gravestones and a memorial to Peregrine Lascelles who served in a number of 18th century naval engagements during the War of Spanish Succession (1701-14), as well as 'Dracula's Grave'. The Missions to Seaman and St Ninian's Church, both Grade II* listed, also have connections to the historic harbour, with the latter containing the grave of arctic explorer

¹⁴ <https://www.whitbyonline.co.uk/whitby/whitby-marine/> (Accessed 08/08/22)

¹⁵ 'Whitby Conservation Area', 59.



William Scoresby and was owned at various times by shipwrights Thomas Fishburn and Thomas Milner, both of whom were involved with the construction and ownership of Captain Cook's ships.¹⁶ There are also a small number of historic sailing vessels at Whitby registered on the National Register of Historic Vessels, all of which are historic lifeboats.

Registered historic vessels currently at Whitby:¹⁷

Registered vessel	Details
<p><i>William Riley of Birmingham</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/2174/william-riley-birmingham</p>	<p>33ft Dungeness Class lifeboat built in 1909 by Thames Ironworks and Shipbuilding Company of Blackwall. Transferred from Uppang to Whitby in 1919, remaining in service until 1931. Employed as cabin cruiser on canals around Stowbridge. Purchased and donated to Whitby Historic Lifeboat Trust for restoration with Heritage Lottery Fund grant.</p>
<p><i>Robert and Ellen Robson</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/2204/robert-and-ellen-robson</p>	<p>33ft Dungeness Class lifeboat built in 1918 by Thames Ironworks and Shipbuilding Company of Blackwall. Based at Tramore and Aberdeen until transference to Whitby from 1946 to 1957. Put on display at Whitby from 2001.</p>
<p><i>Parachinar</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/2405/parachinar</p>	<p>47ft Watson class lifeboat built in 1961 by Groves and Gutteridge Ltd of Cowes. Based at Courtmacsherry until 1987 until retirement at Drake's Pool near Crosshaven. Transferred to Whitby in 2008 for extensive restoration.</p>

Successful restorations: Whitby harbourfront contains a significant number of surviving heritage assets and has seen a number of successful restoration initiatives in recent year. The 'Friends of Pannett Park' successfully lobbied in 2005 for a Heritage Lottery Fund grant to restore Pannett Park, located inland from the harbour with views of the Abbey headland. The West Pier lighthouse has also undergone an £86,000 restoration project in 2016, funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) Coastal Revival Fund and Harbour authorities.¹⁸ The Whitby Lifeboat Museum closed in September 2021, but has recently received funding for the regeneration of its museum, and the restoration of the *Robert and Ellen Robson*.¹⁹ Scarborough

¹⁶ <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2021/15-october/news/uk/whitby-civic-society-launches-campaign-to-save-listed-church-in-captain-cook-s-home-town> (Accessed 08/08/22)

¹⁷ https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/the-registers/find-a-vessel?search_api_fulltext=whitby (Accessed 08/08/22)

¹⁸ <https://www.scarborough.gov.uk/latest-news/whitby-lighthouse-restoration-complete> (Accessed 08/08/22)

¹⁹ <https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/people/new-look-rnli-museum-and-historic-lifeboat-in-whitby-revealed-after-long-restoration-project-3770602> (Accessed 08/08/22)



Borough Council has been awarded £37.3m from the Levelling Up fund in 2022, which has been allocated to develop a Maritime Training Hub, and to pedestrianize the swing bridge and harbourside.²⁰

Under threat or unknown: Whitby has one structure on HE's Heritage at Risk register, 15 and 16 St Hilda's Terrace, which are situated on a primary approach to the harbour and described as being in "very bad" condition with "immediate risk of further rapid deterioration or loss of fabric".²¹ A significant amount of local concern has been voiced relating to the allocation of the Levelling Up fund, the potential diversion of tourism from existing harbourside businesses to new retail and hospitality venues on the West Pier, and the risks of over-development impacting local character. Scarborough Borough Council noted in the CAA (2013) that the 'Commercial centre of the town and the west side of the harbour' character area:

*"...has been subject to the greatest pressure for change over the last forty years in response to changing town centre commercial demands... There is a large number of Listed Buildings in this character area [and] in addition to these... a number of buildings have been recognised as making a substantial contribution to the character area of the area either because of their architectural interest or their interest or both."*²²

Aside from local businesses, over-development could also damage potential submerged and terrestrial archaeological assets. The 'North East Rapid Coastal Zone Assessment' (NERCZA), drafted on behalf of English Heritage, recorded a number of "potentially interesting and unusual find[s]" in Whitby, dating to Early Prehistoric and Mesolithic eras, as well as the remains of a mid-18th century stone built dry dock with two collier wrecks discovered underneath a carpark in Church Street in 1998.²³ The NERCZA also expressed concern that coastal erosion and inundation through sea-level rise represented a "significant threat" to heritage assets.²⁴ Historic England have noted that the presumed location of the Dictium Roman signal station, upon Whitby's East Cliff as part of an extensive northern coastal defensive system dating to the late 4th century AD, has been lost due to exceptional geologically determined erosion rates.²⁵ Wire mesh erosion defences have been installed under St Mary's Church, after landslip debris has damaged properties beneath, including the Grade II listed Fortune's Kippers smoking shack.²⁶ Further development and continually rising sea levels will only worsen coastal erosion around Whitby harbour, and exacerbate the threat to heritage assets.

Threats and opportunities

The harbour's main issue appears to be development pressures and over-commercialisation which has become more prominent with the Levelling Up funding release in 2022. As the harbour sees substantial development and regeneration, it will inevitably face pressures for larger scale tourist facilities, including car parking and larger food outlets, with its demands far exceeding the capacities of local fisheries and service. But there is significant interest in Whitby's historical assets and associations both from local groups such as the Whitby Civic Group and the locally run Captain Cook Memorial Museum, and from national organisations such as English Heritage, through their maintenance of Whitby Abbey, as well as Historic England. The harbour also possesses an exceptional base of maritime infrastructure and skills providers, and a number of community groups using the town's coastline and waterfront for yachting and sailing regattas. There appears to be a high degree of civic cohesion and communal identity invested in the historic harbour, and particularly in its

²⁰ <https://www.thisisthecoast.co.uk/news/local-news/scarborough-and-whitbys-37m-to-arrive-next-month/> (Accessed 08/08/22)

²¹ <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/heritage-at-risk/search-register/list-entry/219114> (Accessed 08/08/22)

²² 'Conservation Area Appraisal', 33.

²³ NERCZA', 81; 102-9.

²⁴ 'NERCZA', 78.

²⁵ <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/support-and-collaboration/research-and-english-heritage-trust/whitby-abbey> (Accessed 08/08/22)

²⁶ <https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/work-will-slow-erosion-near-famous-whitby-church-1867984> (Accessed 08/08/22)



associations with the RNLI and historic lifeboats. Local concerns for the use of the Levelling Up Fund appear to centre primarily on the desire for a higher degree of civic involvement with the development project, both to preserve historic character and assets, and to protect the interests of local businesses.

Redevelopment should be sensitive to the demands of the local economy, whilst also being sensitive to the conservation and amplification of the town's significant historical associations and regional distinction. For instance, the town's associations with figures such as Captain Cook and William Scoresby could be related to wider national stories of the Age of Exploration in the 17th and 18th centuries, as well as with the later Age of Polar Exploration of the mid-19th to early 20th centuries, especially given the revival of interest in the latter with the relatively recent discoveries of the *Erebus* (2014) and *Terror* (2016) commanded by Scoresby's contemporary Sir John Franklin in 1845, and Ernest Shackleton's *Endurance* in March 2022. Moreover, the town's connections to the naval warfare could further publicise the town's remarkable rate of warship production during the 18th century and its maritime figures such as naval commander Peregrine Lascelles and civil engineer William Chapman, and the largely unknown history of naval warfare and defence on the north-eastern coast dating back to the Roman era and extending to the British and German wrecks of the First World War along its coastline.

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