Alston – 'the highest market town in England'

Alston is in Cumbria but, in some ways, it looks towards Northumberland and the North East. The river South Tyne flows to the North Sea. The parish of Alston isn't in the Diocese of Carlisle; it's an Ecclesiastical Peculiar of the Diocese of Newcastle. Much of the town is above 1,000 feet [about 333 m]. The main road through the centre rises 198 feet in 800 yards: an average gradient of 1 in 12. Townhead is 1,042 feet above sea level.

Its name was originally Aldeneby; its old Scottish name was Halfden, named after Halfden, a Norse farmer. 'Halfden's Town' later dropped the H and the 'town' became the English 'ton' = Alston.

In about 1164-1171, the Manor of Alston was granted by William, King of **Scotland,** to William de Vipont, a Norman knight. It remained in the Vipont family until 1716 when the Earl of Derwentwater, a Vipont, was beheaded for taking part in the 1715 Jacobite Rebellion. His property was forfeited and, in 1734-35, it was granted to the Royal Greenwich Hospital to provide revenue to support the hospital. The Royal Greenwich Hospital leased land to the Quaker-managed London Lead Company which began the exploitation of profitable lead, silver, zinc, and other mineral mining in the district. The area became the most important centre for lead mining in the world. Following a decline in lead prices – mainly after new supplies from Australia were found – the London Lead Co. left in 1882. Later, the Belgian Vielle Montaigne Zinc Co. of Liege reopened Nenthead mines in the early 1900s but extraction ceased there in 1920. The mines finally closed in 1947. By 1831 Alston's population was 6,858. In 1841 the population of Alston Moor was 6,063. By 1891 it was 3,384; today it's about 2,000. In 1964, after 229 years, the Royal Greenwich Hospital transferred the Alston Estate to the Trustees for Roman Catholic Purposes.

The first impression of Alston is of a cluster of buildings climbing a steep hillside. A closer look reveals a mixture of many buildings, mostly built between the 1730s and the 1880s, in huddled groupings separated by narrow roadways and ginnels – many domestic, others commercial – and, within these, the town's civil and religious buildings. This unique (for England) style of local architecture is called the 'bastle' principle (from 'bastille'). Defensible houses have their living accommodation upstairs, with front doors up external steps. Cattle and animals were kept on the ground floor, providing 'natural' if sometimes smelly underfloor heating. When the population shrank, downstairs became part of the main dwelling and the upper floor, and its front door, was closed off. This style developed probably as a response to 'reiving' – raids and thefts – from across the Border.

Alston still has its railway station. The original line opened in 1852 but, after many protests, the branch line closed in 1976 when a new road was built from Haltwhistle. Now its track bed has been re-laid as the narrow gauge **South Tynedale Railway,** which is reopening the line gradually towards Haltwhistle.

STR trains leave Alston at 10:45, 12:15, 14:15 & 15:45. The trip to Lintley Halt, via Kirkhaugh, takes about 25 minutes each way. Trains depart Lintley Halt at 11:20, 12:50, 14:50 & 16:20 arriving in Alston at 11:50, 13:20 15:20 & 16:50.

The adult fare from Alston to Lintley Halt is £5.00 single & £10.00 return. Children (age 3-15) are £2.00 single & £4.00 return. A family return (2 adults + up to 3 children) is £24.00. Children below 3 years old travel for free. Prices correct at June 2015 – for more details check www.south-tynedale-railway.org.uk *GHH & ATB 2015*