

Contemporary Descriptions of Gibside

In the 18th century, Gibside was already drawing visitors and travellers from far and wide, and many of their impressions have been recorded and come down to us. One of the most comprehensive accounts is by the famous Durham historian William Hutchinson. You can read excerpts below, and the full text can be read online here: <http://ota.ahds.ac.uk/text/4835.html>

The scene between Whickham village and Gibside:

‘The adjacent country wears an unpleasant aspect to the traveller, cut and harrowed up with loaded carriages, scattered over with mean cottages, from whence swarm forth innumerable inhabitants, maintained by working in the mines; many a sooty face is seen by every hedge-way side. The workmen earn great wages, which recompense every other evil. The meagreness of the track by which you pass to the environs of Gibside renders the scene more striking.

On entering the Gibside estate from what is now the entrance to Whickham Golf Club:

‘It is difficult to convey any adequate idea of the beautiful and magnificent scenery of the place. The visitor enters these enchanting grounds by a serpentine road which for upwards of a mile winds through the bosom of a thick forest, sometimes on the brink of a deep ravine, and at intervals descending on the easy inclination for a hill, but still embowered with venerable oaks. On issuing from this forest road the banqueting house appears, seated upon a noble elevation at the termination of a spacious avenue.’

‘After passing a beautiful piece of water, a delightful landscape bursts upon the view. To the right rises a noble sylvan scene of great extent, hanging on inclining woods from a lofty summit to the very skirts of the vale. Rising over the woods as a terminating object to the grand vista, appears a fine Doric stone pillar, one hundred and fifty feet in height, surmounted by a colossal figure of British Liberty.’

‘It is not easy to convey any adequate idea of the magnificent woodland scenery at Gibside. Woods, venerable in their growth and magnificent in their extent, sweep from the height of the hills to the brink of the Derwent, intersected by deep irregular ravines. The whole landscape, to use a painter’s phrase, is sketched in a broad free style, and the few artificial objects introduced are sufficiently grand and distinct not to disgrace the noble scenery which surrounds them. Across the Derwent a cultivated country sloping gently to the water forms a bright fine contrast to the wooded masses which almost darken the south bank.’

Elizabeth Montague, not a lover of the great outdoors, wasn’t so enamoured of the woods, which she described as ‘oppressively dark and vast; you would expect to be entertained by the howling of wolves.’

To read about the interior of the house, read ‘Whickham Parish, its History, Antiquities and Industries’ by William Bourn. Other useful books are ‘The Old Halls and Manor Houses of Durham’ by Neville Whitaker and ‘Lost Houses of County Durham’ by Meadows and Waterson. All available from Whickham Library and the Lit & Phil.