

# The Port of Blyth

The Port of Blyth is located at the mouth of the River Blyth in Northumberland. It was a key port for the coal trade, which reached its peak in the early 1960s, but within another ten years, was declining quickly.

Like many others, it could simply have ceased trading and become a derelict of the industrial past. But the port reinvented itself, attracting other cargo, improving, modernising its facilities and diversifying to continued success. Now it looks to be at the forefront of the renewables industry, using its strategic location to service the development of offshore wind power generation in the North Sea.





The Port of Blyth and its facilities lie on both banks of the River Blyth estuary, seven miles north of Tynemouth, on the Northumberland coast. It is a tidal deep water port, accessible in nearly all weather conditions and provides modern cargo handling facilities.

## History

While recorded use of the site as a port dates back to the 12th century, it was not until 1788 that the first elevated staithe was constructed, along with the ‘High Light’ lighthouse which remained in service until 1984 when it gave way to more modern navigation aids.

The Blyth Harbour and Docks Board was formed in 1853 and with the Harbour Act of 1858, dredging began at the harbour to allow larger access for ships. In 1882 an independent Statutory Trust was formed to manage the port, an arrangement that continues to this day. Because of this, all surpluses are reinvested to improve facilities at the port for the benefit of stakeholders and the region.

Historically, the port’s trade was dominated by coal exports from the numerous local mines. This was enhanced with a railway link to a staithe south of the river 1849. Coal shipments increased rapidly to 200,000 tonnes per year, reaching 5.5 million tonnes per year in the 1930s and making it the largest coal exporting port in Europe. It peaked at 7.0 million tonnes in 1969.

Shipbuilding also had an important role to play in the port, and this element grew throughout the 19th and early 20th Century, particularly during the two World Wars.

By the late 1960s the coal trade was declining. Local mines closed one-by-one and the port suffered accordingly. The same was true for the shipbuilding industry, with the last yard closing at the port in 1966.

## Reinvention

By the early 1970s the port's future looked extremely bleak. However a reversal of fortune came when a major aluminium smelter was established five miles north at Lynemouth. With it came an import terminal, built at the port to handle the large volumes of raw materials.

The 1970s also saw expansion of the paper import trade from Finland, and by 1998, Port of Blyth was a major paper import terminal, handling 0.5 million tonnes that year.





Commercially, the import trade was aggressive, and the loss of paper import contracts in 2000 was a major blow to the port. Once again though, reinvention was the key to survival, and the port diversified into container handling, plywood, project cargo for offshore and renewal energy sectors, bulk commodities such as cement, stone, grain, fertiliser and animal feed and, perhaps ironically, coal imports. A new bulk terminal at Battleship Wharf was built in 2006, including a rail link, to handle the throughput of goods.

In recent years the port has invested heavily in the renewable energy sector with several major projects. The first came in 1992 when Blyth Harbour Wind Farm was constructed on the East Pier. It was followed in 2000 by the first pilot offshore wind farm in the UK, about a kilometre out to sea.

In 2002, the New and Renewable Energy Centre was established at the port to develop and test new energy technologies and equipment. This became the National Renewable Energy Centre (NAREC) which has invested over £160m in new test facilities and an offshore demonstrator site, due to commence operations this year (2012).

## The Port Today

The harbour facilities offered by the Port today consist of five sites, on both sides of the river estuary, as shown on the plan. Each site offers different facilities, with three also having rail links.

**South Harbour** provides two deep water berths, a Roll-on/Roll-off (RoRo) pontoon and over 35,000m<sup>2</sup> of warehousing. It is a “clean terminal” for paper products, containers, plywood and pulp, as well as project cargo including wind turbines.

**Wimbourne Quay** has a single berth with a RoRo pontoon, limited Lift-on/Lift-off (LoLo) options and 27,000m<sup>2</sup> of warehousing. It handles log exports and general warehousing.

**Bates Bulk Terminal** is a large site of 9.5 hectares with a rail link, open storage and loading conveyors. It is a potential site for port expansion or redevelopment.

**Battleship Wharf** was redeveloped in 2006 at a cost of £10m to provide a 15 hectare bulk terminal with an extended 4 berths quay up to 9m draft, 10,500m<sup>2</sup> of bulk warehousing, open storage and a rail link. It handles all bulk cargo (coal, aggregate, agribulks, bagged cargo etc).





**Alcan Bulk Terminal** is a deep water (10.4m) import terminal which handled 0.5 million tonnes per year of Alcan raw materials, until the aluminium smelter closed in 2012. It has a rail link and storage silos.

Today the Port handles about 1.5 million tonnes of cargo each year.

## The Future

In early 2012 it was announced the Alcan aluminium smelter was to close, a fresh blow to the local economy, and the port which had handled the bulk import of raw materials for the smelter.

Nevertheless, as before, the port continues to diversify, by maximising its other cargo handling trade, and promoting its strategic location in relation to offshore wind power generation in the North Sea.

In a partnership arrangement with Northumberland County Council, the port has established the Blyth Estuary Renewable Energy Zone. The initiative offers development opportunity sites both in and adjacent to the port, to attract manufacturing and provide harbour facilities for the developing offshore renewable energy industry in the North Sea.

The port is also looking to provide facilities to handle biomass material for a proposed new power station on the site previously used to generate power for the Alcan smelter. If constructed, it would burn around 0.5m tonnes of biomass per year.

More information on the Port of Blyth can be found at [www.portofblyth.co.uk](http://www.portofblyth.co.uk).

*Thanks to Malcolm Smith of CIHT North Eastern Branch, for preparing this article.*

*Additional thanks to Alan Dodd, Port Director, for useful comments and supply of photographs.*

