An Introduction

Barrow-in-Furness and its surrounding area have a long and rich history. There is much to learn about the first settlers in the area and how its population changed over time. In this study, children will gain an understanding of how Barrow-in-Furness became the place we know and love today.

What you need to know

Barrow-in-Furness has a long and fascinating history that stretches back thousands of years. Evidence from the Mesolithic period (around 10,000–4,000 BC) shows that early people lived in the area as hunter-gatherers. Tools and a pebble mace head found in Croslands Park suggest they moved around to find food. By the Neolithic period (c. 4,000–2,500 BC), people had begun farming and settling in one place. Polished stone axes discovered at the Walney Road Brickworks came from Langdale in the Lake District, showing that trade was already taking place. One of the most exciting discoveries was made at Holbeck Park Avenue, where archaeologists found grains, pottery and traces of milk fats from as early as 3950 BC.

Evidence from the Bronze Age includes the creation of ceremonial sites, such as the Birkrigg Stone Circle, dated to between 2230 and 1710 BC. A large hillfort from the Iron Age (from around 800 BC), located near Barrow, suggests the area remained important in local trade and defence. Later, in the Roman and post-Roman periods, although there was no major Roman settlement in Barrow, finds such as coins and jewellery indicate contact with the wider Roman world. After the Romans left Britain, the area became part of the Celtic kingdom of Rheged, and later fell under Anglo-Saxon control. Viking influence is still visible today, especially in place names like Barrow, Roose and Yarlside. One of the most significant Viking finds is the Furness Hoard, a collection of 92 silver items discovered in 2011.

A major development came in 1127 when the Normans founded Furness Abbey, built using local red sandstone. The abbey quickly became wealthy and influential, though it was attacked several times during the 14th century by Scottish raiders. To protect their supplies, the monks built a fortified storehouse on nearby Piel Island. Furness Abbey's power ended in 1537 during King Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries, but its presence laid the foundations for future settlement in the area.

Barrow remained a small village until the mid-19th century. In 1839, businessman Henry Schneider arrived and recognised the value of the local iron ore. With support from investors including the Dukes of Devonshire and Buccleuch, he helped establish the Furness Railway in 1846 to transport iron ore to the coast. In 1859, Schneider and his partner Robert Hannay opened an ironworks, and in 1865, James Ramsden supported the opening of a steelworks. By 1876, Barrow had what was claimed to be the largest steelworks in the world.

The growth of heavy industry led to Barrow's rise as a shipbuilding centre. The first ship built in Barrow, the Jane Roper, was launched in 1852. The Barrow Iron Ship Building Company, formed in 1871, used local steel to produce warships and passenger liners. In 1896, Vickers & Sons took over the shipyard, which by 1910 employed more than 10,000 people. Barrow's population increased from around 700 in 1851 to over 47,000 by 1881, with workers coming from across Britain and beyond. New housing was built, including the Devonshire Buildings in 1874 and Vickerstown on Walney Island.

Barrow-in-Furness played an essential role during World War 2 (1939–1945). Its shipyards built vital vessels for the Royal Navy, including aircraft carriers such as HMS Illustrious and HMS Indomitable, as well as submarines. This made the town a target for German air raids. In April and May 1941, Barrow suffered heavy bombings, with over 10,000 homes damaged and 83 civilian lives lost. Defences such as barrage balloons, anti-aircraft guns, and smoke screens were used to protect key sites. Despite the dangers, local people worked long hours in the shipyards and factories. Women, older workers, and young people all played their part, whether by building equipment, joining the Land Army, or growing food in the "Dig for Victory" campaign.

Today, Barrow's proud industrial and wartime past can still be seen in its historic buildings. The Town Hall, Devonshire Buildings and shipyard offices are now protected as listed buildings, reminding us of the town's important place in British history.

Resources

Our key enquiry questions, sources, PowerPoints, activities, and other resources will help to build children's understanding of their local area of Barrow-in-Furness and answer the question 'How has Barrow-in-Furness changed over time?'

Get in touch

Is there an area of local history you'd love to see on our Local History Hub? Get in touch to learn how we can work together! Email LocalHistory@tpet.co.uk to find out more.

Teacher's Pet | Historic England

CUMBRIA Barrow-in-Furness

Local History

Historic England and Teacher's Pet have come together to bring you a collection of free resources that you can use in your local history teaching.

Historic England | Teacher's Pet

Who are Teacher's Pet?

Teacher's Pet have been providing downloadable and playable educational content to early years and primary school teachers for over 14 years. We cover all areas of the curriculum and use a team of in-house teachers and designers to create engaging and memorable concepts, that the children will love.

Why local history?

At Teacher's Pet we want to empower primary school teachers by giving them the tools they need to deliver inspiring and thoughtful lessons about the local area and its history. We believe local history teaching has such an important part to play in a child's wellbeing – helping to give children a sense of pride in where they live.

Our Local History project is designed to provide teachers across the UK with everything they need to successfully carry out a full scheme of teaching about their local area, through key enquiry questions and source led activities.

Working with Historic England gives us access to archived maps and photos for resources and information from knowledgeable local historians, as well helping us to provide the content to you free of charge.

For more information about our Local History project or to find out more about Teacher's Pet Classroom Resources, please visit our website.

www.tpet.co.uk