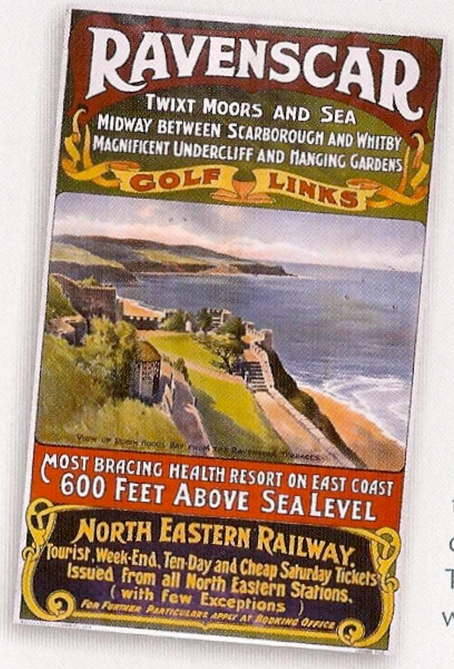
Making bleak Peak chic

The mid 1800s was a boom time for Britain's railway network, new lines began to carry millions more passengers all over the country. This helped spark the birth of the traditional seaside holiday – now everyone could afford a trip to the coast. The Peak Estate Company, who bought Peak Hall Estate in the 1890s (now Raven Hall), hoped to capitalise on this trend. They converted the Hall into a hotel and drew up plans to develop the area into a holiday resort. The town would have shops, tearooms, guesthouses, gardens and many other seaside attractions.



To prepare for the new town, three hundred men made roads, drains, and installed a mains water supply. The land was divided into 1,500 building plots and offered for sale. The map here shows where you can find evidence of this development. Look for the parallel tracks that run across the golf course, these were Saxon, Dane and Briton Roads. On the Southeast side of the town you'll find plenty of old roads and manhole covers that were all part of this grand design. The giveaway kerbstones tell you that these roads were not originally intended as simple farm tracks.

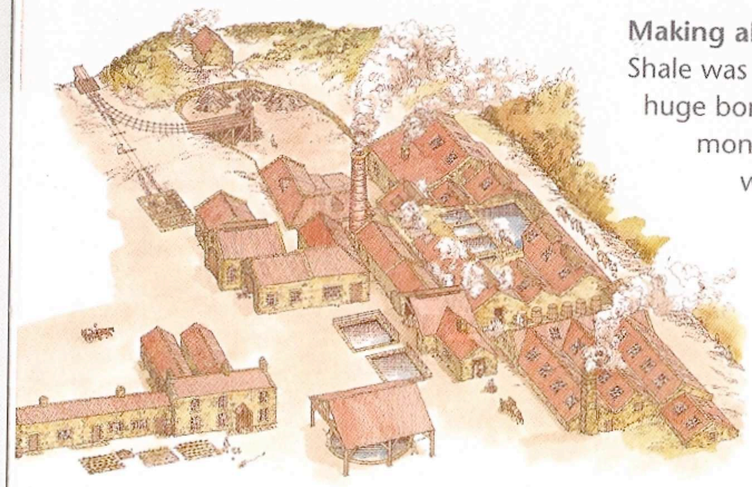
The owners decided Peak wasn't a suitable name for their trendy new resort and renamed it Ravenscar in 1897. This is derived from the raven flag carried by Viking invaders, and 'scar', which means 'cliffs' or 'rocky outcrop' in old Norse. But as you can see, there is no bustling seaside resort at Ravenscar, so where did it all go wrong?

The resort of Ravenscar failed partly because of its location. Ravenscar is perched high up on the cliffs so unlike neighbouring low level resorts it receives no shelter from inclement weather. Also, it's a long way down to the beach and even then it's a rocky shore, not sandy like nearby Scarborough. Prospective buyers were being asked to make a big investment, hope for success on an unprecedented scale, in a location that seemed unsuitable. So it's unsurprising that despite incentives of food, drink and a refunded rail fare upon completing a purchase, only a handful of plots were ever sold. The Peak Estate Company went into liquidation in the early 1900s.

Along the Marine Esplanade you'll find the bases of shelters that were long ago blown away – a lasting legacy of the resort that never was and a reminder of why it failed. Station Square offers a glimpse to those with a good imagination of what Ravenscar could have been like. The platform where visitors would have disembarked is still here, and the building alongside it was to be the Station hotel with a row of fine shops and tearooms below.

From rags to riches

While the textile industry is important today, during the time of Tudors and Stuarts it was absolutely critical to the economies of many countries. A major factor determining the price of cloth was how well it was dyed. A substance called alum was used to make colours stick to wool, without it dyes would simply wash out. Alum was difficult to manufacture and because those that knew how to do it could command great power and wealth, the process was a jealously guarded secret.



Making alum
Shale was mined from the cliffs, piled into huge bonfires that smouldered for nine months and then the burnt alum was steeped in water to produce Alum Liquor. This was delivered to the treatment works where seaweed and (believe it or not!) stale human urine were added and the mixture was repeatedly heated and cooled to make the alum crystals settle out.

During the 1400s the Pope, with alum mined from the Tolfa hills near the Vatican, controlled the alum supply to the whole of Europe. But when Henry VIII broke from Rome and appointed himself as the Supreme Head of the Church of England, alum exportation to England was ended. So England needed another source.

Alum was identified in the cliffs of North Yorkshire in the early 1600s and soon alum works like the one at Ravenscar were springing up all along this coastline. From 1600 to 1870, these cliffs were the main source of alum in Britain. It was Sir Thomas Chaloner who was credited with bringing the secret of alum making to England. How he learned of the process is uncertain, but it is suggested that on a visit to the Vatican's alum works, he smuggled out one or two Italian workers. Their experience of this process may have helped start English production.

What you will see at Ravenscar are the remains of an industry that was the lifeblood of the English economy for about 250 years. Just imagine the scene: hundreds of workers and their families living and working amongst factory buildings and vast quarries. Bonfires and chimneys churning out pungent fumes and great spoil heaps of waste products accumulating as ships came back and forth delivering coal and human urine and collecting this precious cargo.

The Peak works closed in 1862, as new dyes were introduced and cheaper ways of making alum were discovered.