

## Coal to Newcastle

Posted by Peter on 9 June 2010



Coals to Newcastle. A coal train crosses the river Tyne at Newcastle in 1962.

Have you [come across](#) the English expression "carrying coals to Newcastle"? This is what it means. For several hundred years, from the 16th century until about 50 years ago, the North-east of England was a major coal-producing area. There were literally hundreds of small coal mines in the area. Until the railways were built, most of the coal was taken to the city of Newcastle, which is on the river Tyne, close to the sea. From Newcastle, the coal went by ship to London and many other places in Britain and abroad.

Now, imagine that you are a coal [merchant](#) in, say, London. You have some coal to sell. Where might you take the coal to sell it? Where would you not take the coal to sell it? I think that you would not take it to Newcastle, because there is lots of coal there already.

So, if you say that something is like "carrying coals to Newcastle", you mean that it is useless, it has no purpose, it is a complete waste of time and money. I am sure that there are equivalent sayings in other languages - "carrying owls to Athens" is an old Greek saying that means the same. You could even invent some of your own - "taking fridges to the North Pole", for example. Or, "taking wine to Bordeaux".

You may be wondering, why do we talk about "coals to Newcastle" and not "coal to Newcastle"? Surely, "coal" is a collective noun, like "water" or "sugar". Well, in modern English we would indeed say "coal to Newcastle", but the expression dates back to the 16th century, and at that time people talked about "coals" instead of "coal".

And let us have a little pronunciation lesson too. If you want to sound like a native English speaker, you need to know how to pronounce the names of places in England correctly. We do not make this easy for you, and lots of English place names are spelled quite differently from the way they are pronounced. Now, you will hear many English people pronounce the name of the city in the north-east of England "NEWcastle". But the people who live there say NewCASTle. My mother was born and brought up in Newcastle, and she made sure that her children knew how to pronounce the name properly!

I am telling you about "coals to Newcastle" because I read an interesting article in the newspaper this morning.

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As you know, a lot of English people have gone to live in France in the past 20 years or so. They like the climate, they like the wine, they like the food, they like the low prices for houses in rural areas of France. Some of them even learn to speak French! However, the British pound has fallen in value against the Euro, and this has caused problems for many of them. They have found that it is cheaper to buy food and groceries in England than in France. So they order groceries online from one of the big British supermarket companies. The supermarket delivers the groceries to a [specialist](#) delivery company, and five times a week the delivery company sends a van full of [groceries](#) to English people in south-west France. Most of the things they order are awful English foods that no [respectable](#) Frenchman would eat, such as tinned chicken curry. But among the items which they order are French products like wine and [croissants](#). From England to France! Coals to Newcastle!

Finally, I should tell you that someone did once send coals to Newcastle. In the eighteenth century, there was an American businessman called Timothy Dexter. His [competitors](#), who wanted to [ruin](#) him, told him that it would be an excellent idea to send a ship full of coal to Newcastle. So he did. His ship arrived in Newcastle in the middle of a miners' strike. There was a [shortage](#) of coal, and prices were very high, and he sold his coal at a great profit. Sometimes sending coals to Newcastle can be a good idea!

This is the text of the podcast at <http://www.listen-to-english.com/index.php?id=531>.