

The medieval village of Bishopwearmouth

Modern development conceals, or has destroyed, any archaeological remains, so it is difficult to date or phase the village's evolution. Bishopwearmouth was the only one of Sunderland's medieval villages which had at its heart a parish church. St Michael and All Angels, now Sunderland minster, overlooked the main settlement. This, known to Anglo Saxons as South Wearmouth, stood south of the church, surrounding a rectangular green once as large as that of Monkwearmouth, though later much reduced.ⁱ

Bishopwearmouth, an average-sized community late in the 12th century, had expanded markedly by the 1380s. Perhaps by this time the irregular pre-conquest village had gained a new, more formal element, the shape of which can still be seen along Low Row below the minster. Here two blocks of dwellings overlooked the green from the west, conspicuously different in scale and form from the older settlement. They had narrow tofts behind, to a natural boundary formed by the stream, known variously as Howle-Eile burns, or Wearmouth or Barnes burn. These garths were not so long, nor the properties so large, as the burgage plots created in Sunderland borough c. 1180-3, but may be of similar vintage.ⁱⁱ

From behind the church ran High Street, still the most direct route between Bishopwearmouth and the port of Sunderland. Before the borough was founded, this street probably ran only to Bodlewell Lane, which led into Low Street and to *Ostium Vedrae*, the port. High Street East, the extension of High Street beyond Bodlewell Lane, was presumably formed for the borough in the late 12th century.

The High Street, or King's road, led to the harbour ferry and ford. From Bishopwearmouth village towards Hylton ferry, Tunstall or Ryhope, a traveller would follow tracks across open fields and moors. From the Hind's bridge over the burn, the way passed through the west field to the castle cross, which marked Hylton road. A windmill stood nearby into modern times, the district still known as Millfield.

Roads to the south and west were approached by a bridge at another corner of the green. Some tracks were purely agricultural, leading into the great arable fields and pastureland. Three open fields, east, south and west, encircling the village, were themselves surrounded by moors. The hall moor, reached by a path which is now Borough Road, joined the borough's town moor on the east. South moor occupied much of Hendon, while the north moor incorporated what are now Ayres Quay, Millfield and Deptford. Prest moor came closest to the village, adjacent to the Tunstall lane.ⁱⁱⁱ

The rector of Bishopwearmouth lived in some style, supported by a glebe of about 130a., and by other lands known as the Rectory manor. The rectory house was north of the church in High Street, away from the main area of settlement. Next to it was the tithe barn, and behind a large garden and rectory park, 31a. of land leading towards the river. The remainder of the glebe consisted of a substantial farm south of the lane to Hylton, around the present-day Chester Road and including a portion of what is now Bishopwearmouth cemetery.^{iv}

Rectory manor lands were scattered across the moors and fields of Bishopwearmouth township. Perhaps a dozen tenants occupied these properties, which were mainly modest cottages with one to seven acres, or merely a garden. A small, irregular piece of land between the church and east field was called Hall Garth, and further east was Hall Moor, suggestions that once there was a bishop's hall or manor house, though there is no other evidence of this.^v

The remainder of Bishopwearmouth was divided into numerous copyholdings, land held by custom from the bishop, from which a group of leading tenants had emerged by the 1560s. The open field system survived some time longer. The focus of agricultural and social life was the green, with its communal facilities, perhaps an animal pound, smithy and common oven, and later stocks. Less certain is whether there was a market here, though tradition said so: '[The] square called Wearmouth Green... before the division of the parishes was used as a market place; but the market has since been removed to High Street, Sunderland.' By 1737 the town green had been encroached upon and reduced in size, though its horseshoe shape remained a striking feature until late 20th-century redevelopment replaced it with a car park.^{vi}

Newer properties in place by 1737 on High Street, near the rectory, around what is now the Empire theatre, mark a small expansion north of the church. They signal a shift in Bishopwearmouth's centre of gravity towards the growing port.

ⁱ *Origins*, 44-5; Surtees, *History and Antiquities*, i, 225; Burleigh and Thompson 1737; T&WHER, 163; Roberts, *Landscapes*, 157-72.

ⁱⁱ Roberts, *Green Villages*, 7; *Origins*, 57; Rain's *Eye Plan*, 7; T&WAS, 209/371; G.W. Bain, 'The topography of Bishopwearmouth, I', *Antiq. Sund.*, 8 (1909 for 1907), 53.

ⁱⁱⁱ DULASC, DHC 11/V/16; Rain's *Eye Plan*, 7

^{iv} DULASC, DHC 11/V/16; DDR/EA/GLE 1/11.

^v DULASC, DHC 1/III/7; DHC11/V/12; inf. Linda Drury; Rain's *Eye Plan*, 9, 23; D.A. Kirby, *Parliamentary Surveys of the Bishopric of Durham, II* (Surtees Soc., clxxxv, 1972), 147; C.B. Walker, 'Bishopwearmouth Township', *Antiq. Sund.* xxviii (1983), 44-5

^{vi} Surtees, *History and Antiquities*, i, 225; R.I. Hodgson, 'Coalmining, population and enclosure in the seasale colliery districts of Durham, 1551-1810: a study in historical geography' (unpub. PhD, Durham, 1989), ii, 6.1; Roberts, *Green Villages*, 38; T. Potts, *Sunderland: A History of the Town, Port, Trade and Commerce* (1892), 29-32; E.W. Brayley and J. Britton, *The Beauties of England and Wales*, v, (1803), 136.