

Growth of the Town, 1914-45

The period before the First World War witnessed the height of Sunderland's industrial success, and the townscape of 1914 reflected just how far manufacturing and transport overwhelmed local life. Ship-building, and the moving and mining of coal, asserted their dominance upon the riverside, which had covered itself entirely with quays, ship-yards and other industrial installations. Across the central districts, at almost every turn were railways. Some carried passengers, but the majority were goods lines transporting coal, from pithead via branch lines and sidings to docks and riverside staiths, or direct to factories and gasworks. Almost all the lines ran above ground, with bridges taking roads and other railways across them.¹

Passenger lines running south from the Wear railway bridge had been sunk underground in the 1870s, leaving the commercial centre of town unsullied by visible railways. The area around Bishopwearmouth green escaped disturbance too. In Sunderland township the impact of railways was confined to the dock area and the coastal strip heading south through Hendon, although there it was considerable. The old village centre of Monkwearmouth, although not interrupted by rail lines, was closely hemmed in by them. Many converged on Monkwearmouth station and goods yard, others reached into another goods yard on the north side of Roker Avenue, a short stride from the ancient green, while another branch passed across open land between Monkwearmouth and Roker on its way to the North Dock.²

By the time of the First World War, the conurbation had swallowed Roker, Southwick, Deptford, and much of Hendon, with development extending almost uninterrupted towards Grangetown, while Ashbrooke had been built up as far as Thornhill.³ These, then, were the outer suburbs. Beyond were older villages, still quite unaltered and undeveloped, and also small centres of population in the relatively new mining colonies of Ryhope, New Silksworth and Castletown.

The railways had created pockets for new building on the fringes of town. These parcels of land between their many crossing railroads were duly filled with cottages for the working class. The onward march of housing had reached Pallion by 1907-8, when a depression brought a halt to the building and reportedly left streets of houses there empty and boarded up. To the 8,600 houses in the county borough of 1851, there had been added a further 18,100 by 1911, most of these acting to extend the conurbation.⁴

While the county borough's population peaked in 1932, its boundaries continued to spread outwards, more than doubling with extensions in 1928 and 1935, to 6,938 acres, and covering 8,575 acres in 1951.⁵ All the new territory of 1935 and 1951, and some of that added in 1928, was virtually unpopulated, mainly swathes of open farmland two or three miles from the town centre. Upon this new land, much of the interwar and post-World War Two council and private housing was constructed.⁶

Respecting a pattern established in the 19th century, the town spread outwards in a rough semi-circle. Districts generally, but not always, followed a cycle of growth,

stability, and then steep decline. The pattern became more complicated as population increase slowed, and local authorities took the initiative in clearing slums and advancing new housing projects. Change became more intermittent, with lulls in the outward swell during wartime. During 1911-21, the spread of the built-up area largely stalled. What small population increases there were, confined themselves to Pallion and to inner working-class areas. Of these, only Monkwearmouth actually lost numbers. To compensate for the housing shortage and lack of new building, old properties were sub-divided. During the following decade, the 1920s, outer districts such as Fulwell and Southwick grew, and central parts of the town contracted. Yet the fastest increasing places, showing over 10% rise in population, were closer to the centre: Pallion and Thornhill, with the St Michael's district of Hendon not far behind.⁷

During this period there were moves to bring together similar land uses within certain sectors of the town. Planning was evidently becoming a less haphazard and more thoughtful process, strategic beyond the earlier efforts of the River Wear and improvement commissioners. Separating residential areas from industrial zones was one facet of the borough council's drive to improve public health. Slum clearance was undertaken on an enhanced scale, and new suburban estates built by private developers as well as through council initiatives. These various schemes had unanticipated consequences, among which was a loss of public realm. It was not altogether new that communal areas were lost to private activity. From the middle of the nineteenth century, a great part of the town moor, previously jealously guarded as open and accessible land, had been removed for docks and railways. The quayside had also been taken for granted as an unrestricted area, as free and public as any street. William Waples, wandering around the harbour in c. 1930 ahead of the demolition which made way for Corporation Quay, noted the collapse of half a dozen buildings around the Great Eastern hotel, by Long Bank, as he tried to photograph them. Waples was still able to pass freely through a dozen yards and alleys, or follow the waterfront from Commissioners' quay, the most easterly, past the slipway of the coble landing on to Low, Bowes, Ettrick, Custom House, Noble's and Mark quays, this last one close to the bottom of Church Street. Corporation Quay replaced all of this, as well as the ramshackle, sub-divided, crowded, unhygienic homes and shops upon and near the harbour frontage. In doing this, serious health hazards, unpleasant surroundings, and dangers of falling masonry, were eliminated. But at this point, common areas effectively became private property, secured from the public who were excluded from an area which had long been the focus of the town.⁸

The Effects of War

Although vulnerable to bombardment, Sunderland escaped the appalling onslaught unleashed upon Scarborough and Hartlepool in December 1914. Physical damage to the town was limited to that carried out by some of its own inhabitants, when they partially destroyed and permanently closed German pork butchers' premises, the German church and seamen's mission.⁹ While physical damage to the town was slight compared with what might have been, the effects of zeppelin raids were concentrated and deadly. The heaviest, in 1916, demolished several houses, damaged the Wheatsheaf tram depot, killed 22 people and injured 100. Afterwards

an acoustic mirror was installed near Fulwell windmill, an early-warning device made of concrete with a shallow dish 15 feet in diameter, which gave adequate notice of slow-moving enemy zeppelins on bombing missions so that an alarm could be sounded. After war ended, danger did not: floating mines struck the harbour and exploded on the beach early in 1919.¹⁰

With many local men serving in the Royal Navy or as merchant seamen, casualties were high. Almost a tenth of the 25,000 who served were killed, as the war memorial erected in Mowbray Park in 1922 testifies, with many more wounded. The Royal Infirmary received casualties from the front as early as 1914. Later, a military hospital with 500 beds opened in huts built in the Chester Road workhouse grounds, and five VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) hospitals, staffed in part by the Red Cross, were installed in large houses around the town. That at Ashburne House, in Backhouse Park, treated a total of 1,493 men. Hylton Castle had an army encampment in its grounds, and nearby an airfield was established in 1916 to defend a long stretch of coastline against zeppelin raids. This, called Hylton or West Town Moor aerodrome, would later become RAF Usworth.¹¹

Public Works between the Wars

The interwar period proved catastrophic to the local economy. Industrial expansion ceased, and the shipyards and other plants closed. They were mothballed rather than dismantled. Yet the period of depression witnessed some remarkable changes to the local scene. The most notable came about through initiatives that aimed to provide work for the unemployed as well as confront some of the town's pressing social and environmental problems. The borough council's audacious first attempt in 1932 to acquire city status is testament to a local determination to survive and prosper, in the face of overwhelming gloom.¹²

The deep-water Corporation Quay, the flagship of Sunderland's interwar communal projects, delivered radical change to the harbour scene, and had no less impact upon its landward surroundings. With the shift of Wearmouth's urban centre over the course of the nineteenth century towards Fawcett Street and Bishopwearmouth, the name of Sunderland was increasingly applied to places outside the parish of 1719. This marked a further marginalization of the old port area. Although the term 'Town End' has persisted, even into the twenty-first century, Sunderland township and parish had come to be more generally known as the East End. That neighbourhood was deeply and permanently changed during the development of Corporation Quay. Over the course of that scheme, which employed hundreds between 1930 and 1934, the barracks, fish quay, and 155 homes around Low Street, including the 17th-century customs house, were demolished.¹³

The barracks, commissioned in 1795, had occupied a seven-acre site on the northern tip of the coney warren, originally between Black Cat battery and the town end, part of the town moor donated to the government by the town for the purpose. Around an open square, 200 paces' march, wooden buildings sat inside a strong wooden palisade, 'extensive and commodious' barracks accommodating 1,528 infantrymen. In 1803, a hospital for 80 patients was added, protected and also

isolated within an extension to the barracks boundary. The hospital foundations eventually washed away and it was lost to the sea. The barracks should have closed at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, but were reprieved as new regulations were introduced which outlawed the practice of soldiers sharing beds. This produced a general shortage of military accommodation, and reduced its own capacity to 992. In the 1820s there was much rebuilding, including a new deep well, the replacement of soldiers' huts by smaller brick buildings, a new hospital, and the perimeter wall rebuilt in brick. The barracks had been disused for some time before their demolition, and much of their site was lost to engineering works when a new access was made into the Port of Sunderland later in the 20th century.¹⁴

Housing and suburban expansion

A national housing crisis followed the end of war, exacerbating an already acute shortage of decent accommodation in Sunderland. In 1921, so desperate were 38 homeless families that they seized huts at Usworth aerodrome, abandoned at the war's end, and renamed them 'Liberty villas'.¹⁵ In the central districts, where pressure was especially high, it was common for properties to be subdivided. Some were rooming houses for young or temporary residents, others split between several families, generally those of settled manual workers who could not afford a complete house. In the 1890s many of the shared houses were in Monkwearmouth or the port area, or east of Mowbray Park in Bishopwearmouth. After the Second World War, rooming houses concentrated in the town centre and near Roker Park, while Hendon and areas of Roker closest to riverside industry had high proportions of divided properties.¹⁶

In fact many Sunderland dwellings of the interwar period were 'structural slums', never capable of making attractive and healthy homes. This was particularly true of divided houses in the East End.¹⁷ Furthermore, overcrowding was endemic, a state of affairs which can partly be attributed to the ubiquitous Sunderland cottage. For many of the poor, there was no choice but to crowd into any affordable and available space. Sunderland was bottom-heavy in terms of social class, had high levels of poverty, and its typical house was a modest cottage with two bedrooms at a time when large families were the norm. While the Sunderland cottage did not lend itself to being sub-divided, for any average-sized family it could offer only a cramped environment. Unsurprisingly, the town registered high in any index of overcrowding, long before and after the interwar housing crisis. A high proportion lived at more than two to a room in 1891. Over 20% of the population in 1936 lived in overcrowded conditions, compared with a national average of 3.8%, placing Sunderland top among county boroughs. In 1961, Sunderland still had the highest density per room, 0.83, of any English or Welsh town.¹⁸

A co-ordinated annual scheme of slum clearances began in the 1930s, with 709 dwellings demolished in 1931, doubling to 1,455 houses in 1933. Slum dwellers, their possessions disinfested, were moved to estates of new public housing.¹⁹ It is estimated that the council built 4,800 dwellings between 1919 and 1945, of which about five per cent were tenements, small blocks of flats that proved generally

unpopular.²⁰ Sunderland's vast programme of public building delivered perhaps 7,000 new houses by 1939, and almost 20,000 during the 20 years from 1945, its rate of council building the third highest of 157 towns. The North Eastern Housing Association, set up by central government in 1936 to cushion local councils in the most impoverished areas from the expense of house-building, was also very active. In its first two years it started or completed more than 2,000 homes in Sunderland. Most notable were the Garths, virtually the only example of 1930s council building on the site of cleared slums. Housing altogether around 1,000 people, these were quadrangular blocks with long and heavy access balconies, built around a communal square and with air-raid shelters incorporated into the corners of the buildings. Wear Garth and Burleigh Garth obliterated the 18th-century street plan between the eastern end of High Street and the town moor, including Vine, Burleigh and Silver Streets, and Maling's Rigg. Remains of those cobbled streets emerged during a community archaeology dig in 2011. Having become associated with the decline of the East End, the Garths were themselves largely demolished, from 1995.²¹

In spite of these bold re-housing efforts during the 1930s, housing stock was still considered poor. In 1936, the rate of overcrowding was actually higher in Sunderland's council estates than in the private sector. The newly built houses had only three or four rooms. In the case of Marley Pots, the Ministry of Health pressured the council into reducing most of the planned houses to just three rooms, though the ministry's attempt to remove mangle sheds from the scheme was resisted. Without doubt the council estates offered a level of health and cleanliness which was impossible in some central areas of town. The socialist writer Vera Brittan noted after a visit to Monkwearmouth in 1935 the 'terrible slums, and crowded rooms with indescribably filthy bedding', worse than anything she had seen, even in Glasgow. Of 179 tenants relocated to a new estate in 1934, 103 needed bedding and furniture disinfected before the medical officer would allow them to move in. Even after the war, 43% of households in the town either had no piped water or shared their supply, and more than half did not have a bath. While life on the fringes of town in a new house was generally preferred to shared accommodation in the slums, there was a level of dissatisfaction. Some did not enjoy being uprooted from central neighbourhoods, especially as the suburban estates lacked amenities and in some cases were ill-served with public transport. Council rents and heating costs were considerably higher than most former slum-dwellers were accustomed to, a serious consideration for the low-paid with large families. Yet overall, for many there had been decided improvements, an upturn in which local councils and the North Eastern Housing Association had been instrumental.²²

The borough council was not alone in its energetic interwar building programme. In fact the smaller rural district council was proportionally even more active, sponsoring more than 1,100 council houses (48.9 per thousand population) compared with the county borough's 5,500 (33.2 per thousand). The private sector constructed far more houses in the borough than in the surrounding rural area, and with 5,600 new houses in the same period in fact surpassed the borough council's total. In the outer areas, particularly around those settlements closest to the coal mines, in Tunstall, Ryhope, Hylton and Ford, council estates colonised the open land. Sunderland Rural

District Council made an early start as landlords, immediately after the war ended. They challenged profiteering in 1919, when the church authorities tried to sell housing land at double its value. They had to contend with price-fixing when builders formed federations to tender in 1920. While rents in the borough were relatively high, the rural district responded to need during the era of the general strike and depression by carrying huge rent arrears, and reducing rents by a quarter in 1928.²³

The main interwar schemes were situated about two miles from the town centre, where land could be had most cheaply. The centrifugal pattern was re-established, a girdle of new building almost encircling the older town, initially along the lines of the Durham, Hylton and Chester roads. The borough's first big housing scheme was at Plains Farm in the 1920s. Then came Humbledon, Leechmere in Monkwearmouth, and from 1929 an estate centred on the demolished Ford Hall. Marley Pots, on the fringes of Southwick village, started in 1931, had 154, mainly three-roomed, houses. Much of the private building concentrated in Fulwell during the 1930s, St Michael's before and after the Second World War, and Seaburn Dene after 1945.²⁴

The spread of the town into these outer suburbs was facilitated by further schemes to relieve the unemployed. The jobless were found work enhancing and creating facilities across the whole district. Most strikingly, suburban roads on their approach towards the town centre were straightened, widened and resurfaced with tarmac. Some of the main routes were converted into dual carriageways. The resorts of Roker and Seaburn, beneficiaries of a job creation project in 1907, were further developed with promenades, gardens and a fairground. Sunderland's infrastructure underwent substantial modernization during the interwar period, a combination of work schemes and more conventional public and community investment. Parks were laid out and improved, including Backhouse Park, which had been a bequest, completed in 1923, and Thompson Park in 1933. A ring road incorporating the Alexandra Bridge opened in 1925. Street lighting was electrified, trams updated. Monkwearmouth and Southwick hospital, opened in 1932 in Fulwell and replacing that in Monkwearmouth village, was supported by the Government's Commissioner for Special Areas. In 1936, North Eastern Trading Estates Ltd was set up by the Board of Trade to encourage new, lighter industries into the region, and it was they who established Pallion trading estate in 1938.²⁵

Between the wars, too, Sunderland experienced marked developments in its sport and entertainment facilities, including an array of new cinemas, and substantial changes to Roker Park football ground from 1929. The Ashbrooke Club also acquired a new stand in the 1920s.²⁶

The Blitz

Between 1940 and 1943 the town suffered a level of damage which was without precedent. The shipyards attracted 42 air raids, from the middle of 1940 through most of 1941, and resuming in 1943. Sunderland was the most heavily bombed English town north of Hull, and the seventh most bombed in Britain, with 267 civilians killed and 1,000 injured. More than half the casualties came from two raids in May

1943 which destroyed much of the central area. Thompson's shipyard was severely damaged, and Fenwick's brewery in Low Street was struck by a 500kg bomb, but otherwise the port and industry escaped quite lightly. The main casualty was the crowded residential section of Bishopwearmouth situated west of Fawcett Street, where for the previous half century many buildings had been subdivided into rooming houses for the poor and transient. The railway station here, though its grand entrance survived, was severely damaged. It was partially rebuilt, with a new umbrella roof, the following year. St Thomas's (later the site of Jopling's store) and other churches, several cinemas and major shops were left in ruins, as were 534 houses, including many of the splendid homes of St George's Square, off Park Road by the modern Civic Centre, where 15 people were killed. The vicar of St Thomas's died in the street near his church. In earlier raids, 1940-1, there had been lost the Victoria Hall, Empress Hotel and Jacky White's market, Binns' department store and the Winter Gardens, as well as parts of the docks and riverside.²⁷

Thousands of children and other vulnerable people were evacuated early in the war, though many had drifted back before the air raids started. A few Polish refugees arrived, to be taken in by fellow Catholics or Jews. The orphanage on the town moor was commandeered by the East Yorkshire regiment, which guarded docks and port. The Mission to Seamen in Prospect Row became civil defence headquarters for Air Raid Precautions, whose wardens dug trenches across Bishopwearmouth green and on a cleared slum site near St Benet's church in Monkwearmouth.²⁸

Local air raid shelters, though 'very well-constructed', even architect-designed, were not apparently taken as seriously as the authorities wished. 'Many... are being used as wash-houses, for keeping coal, mangles and rabbits. This has to stop.' Later in the war, the probation committee noted 'a number of youths aged 15 to 21 in the borough who are wanderers, sleeping in air raid shelters and hawking and stealing for a living. They are completely out of control.' Yet the shelters saved many lives: a Morrison shelter bolted together from a kit, pictured intact among the rubble remains of a house, saved six people on Seaforth road in 1943. The worst single incident of the war was in a communal shelter in Lodge Terrace, Hendon, which took a direct hit from a 250kg bomb. While 12 people taking refuge there were killed, 28 survived. Meanwhile reconstruction and repair kept busy local builders, not all entirely honest: several were fined for fraudulently overcharging the council in 1945.²⁹

¹ OS 1895 etc

² OS 1895 etc; **cross ref railways**

³ OS 1:10560 1921

⁴ N. Dennis, *People and Planning: the Sociology of Housing in Sunderland* (1970), p. 138.

⁵ **Cross ref intro: popn & boundaries**

⁶ Robson, *Urban Analysis* p. 76-8

⁷ Robson, *Urban Analysis*, 93-5

⁸ W. Waples, *A Revised History of St John's Lodge No 80 A.F. and A.M.* (1965), 36-7; Curtis, 58; Corfe, 76; *Sund. Year Book and Diary* (1946-7), 34; *Origins*, 170

⁹ T&WAS, C.SU68; *Newc. Daily Chronicle*, 7 Aug. 1914; 8 Aug. 1914; *Newc. Evening Chronicle*, 8 Dec. 1914; 9 Dec. 1914; 18 Dec. 1914; *Durham Chronicle*, 25 Dec. 1914; *The Times*, 8 Aug. 1914; **cross ref migration in intro.**

¹⁰ RTP, 188-9; Corfe, *Sunderland: a Short History* (2003), 71; K. Adie, *Corsets to Camouflage: Women and War* (2003), 103, 111; *The Times*, 15 Apr. 1916; 25 Apr. 1915; 31 Jan. 1919; Sund. listed building 920-1/4/298

¹¹ RTP, 189; *The Times*, 21 Nov. 1914; Corfe, *Sunderland: a Short History* (2003), 71; Adie, *Corsets to Camouflage*, 73-4; Brett, *Hylton*, 14-15, 24-5; Brotherton Lib., Univ. of Leeds, MS1311/119/22

¹² J.V. Beckett, *City Status in the British Isles, 1830-2002* (2005), 73-5; **cross ref boundaries**

¹³ BAC, ****; **Cross ref docks and port.**

¹⁴ T&WAS, 202/614/69; BL, Add.54545 f.89; Garbutt, *Historical and Descriptive View*, 235, 326; Wood 1826; NMR, NBR 102346; J.R. Breihan, 'Army Barracks in the North East in the Era of the French Revolution', *Archaeol. Ael.* 5th ser. xviii (1990), 167-75; Port of Sunderland office, Thomas Meik drawing of docks including soldiers parading in barracks yard; **cross ref docks and port.**

¹⁵ Brett, 24;

¹⁶ Robson, *Urban Analysis*, 121-3;

¹⁷ N. Dennis, *People and Planning: the Sociology of Housing in Sunderland* (1970), 167.

¹⁸ Robson, *Urban Analysis*, 86-7; Sinclair, 38; R. Ryder, 'Council house building in Co. Durham, 1900-39: the local implementation of national policy', in M.J. Daunton (ed.), *Councillors and tenants: local authority housing in English cities, 1919-39* (1984), 26, 43, 79.

¹⁹ Dennis, *People and Planning*, 150-2

²⁰ Dennis, *People and Planning*, 215.

²¹ R. Ryder, 'Council house building', 52-3; Pevsner, 454; Corfe, 77; Robson, *Urban Analysis*, 98; Sinclair, 23; North East Archaeological Research Ltd., 'Silver Street Community Archaeology Project, Sunderland' (2011) (copy in Sunderland Lib.); *Sund. Echo*, 23 Jan. 1997.

²² Robson, *Urban Analysis*, 86-7; Ryder, 'Council house building', 48, 75, 79, 50; Adie, *Corsets to Camouflage*, 154; Sinclair, 38-9; RTP, 178-9; Brett, 108-9; RTP, 178-9.

²³ R. Ryder, 'Council house building', 48, 60, 62, 81, 83, 86;

²⁴ R. Ryder, 'Council house building', 70; Robson, *Urban Analysis*, 96-7; Corfe, 77-8; Brett, 108

²⁵ Manchester Univ., Labour Hist. Archives, LP/MP/10/1/28-31; 2/1-23; Robson, *Urban Analysis*, 84-5; Corfe, *Sunderland: a Short History*, 75, 79-80; Sinclair, 118

²⁶ RTP, 173-6; **cross ref Sport**

²⁷ RTP, 183-6; Corfe, *Sunderland: a Short History*, 80-1; Sinclair, 20-1, 48-9; J. Curtis, *Sunderland: a river of life* (2003), 28, 80-5; Sund. Leisure Dept., *Sunderland*

in the Blitz (1990); T&WAS, 209/106-30; DX141; Robson, *Urban Analysis* 121-3; National Railway Museum Lib. & Archives, Misc/04; TNA, RAIL 390/1868/2

²⁸ *Northern Echo*, 4, 8-9, 11-13, 23 Sept. 1939; 3-4 Oct. 1939; Curtis, *Sunderland: a river of life*, 82, 85; RTP, 186-90

²⁹ *Northern Echo*, 4 Oct. 1939; *Newc. Jnl*, 13 June 1940; 10 Mar. 1945; 6 Jan. 1945; 29 May 1945; RTP, 184-6; Curtis, *Sunderland: a river of life*, 82; *Sunderland in the Blitz*; T&WAS, DT.TRM/3/241; 5/31-7; 6/85-136; 6/238