

From the Middle Ages until the end of the age of sailing ships, late in the 19th century, most vessels brought in sand ballast. Thousands of tons were landed and dumped on the north bank, lower-lying and less developed than other parts of the harbour. St Peter's, the medieval church on a hillock, found itself in a hollow, its churchyard surrounded by piles of sand. This was actually beneficial to Saxon features, for it protected them from the elements until the church's restoration in the 1860s. But elsewhere the ballast caused enormous problems. The workhouse close to St Peter's, in Zetland, now Dame Dorothy, Street, was abandoned and engulfed when sand made it uninhabitable. Engineers building near the Strand slipway, east of the ferry point, had to dig 30 feet through ballast to reach solid rock. And once the river front was completely filled with sand hills, tunnels were excavated to enable sand to be carted under the streets, to be tipped further back.ⁱ

The sand hills were a landmark. On the summit of Meeting Hill, where Church Street joined Dame Dorothy Street, stood a Baptist meeting house. Later the hill was grassed for a picnic site, then removed for building. Lookout Hill, which had swallowed the workhouse and was fitted aloft with public seats, was formed from sand brought via a tunnel below Hedworth Street, dug in about 1827. Cage Hill, west of St Peter's near the river, held the township lock-up and allotments. On Palmer's Hill, surviving until 1973 nearest Wearmouth bridge, was a large house and grounds, and afterwards an engine works and boat-building yard, from which a ship was launched in 1840.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ J.G. Holmes, 'The Ballast Hills of Monkwearmouth' (unpub. typescript, Sunderland Lib., c. 1973, unpag.); *Origins*, 100-1, 103, 106, 138

ⁱⁱ Holmes, 'Ballast Hills'; Wood 1826; OS 2nd ed.; Hydrographic Office, E501