

## Sunderland town moor

In spite of the pressure surrounding it, much of the town moor remained, and parts remain still, open ground. Its seaward side was transformed and protected, and lost territory reclaimed, by the building of South Dock, and other docks and railways, from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Before that, the coast was under constant attack from ‘old Neptune’. Erosion quickened after the south pier was built in the 1720s, for the rocks disappeared under sand and tide, and the sea launched a direct assault on the low cliff.

Grassmen working for the new parish took charge of the moor from 1718. A fence dividing the coney warren from the moor was replaced by a wall, while a ‘stunted thorn hedge’ enclosed the intake. There were ponds on all three parts of the commons, and the moor itself drained into three ditches, crossed by small bridges. The grassmen also maintained Spaw or Spa well, a spring approached by half a dozen stone steps, protected by a brick arch open to the east. Repaired in 1718, it was presumably older still. In its heyday, the spa attracted ‘a goodly number of visitors... during the bathing season’, including the Countess of Darlington, who stayed in the town ‘to enjoy the salubrious sea-borne breezes’ and take the healing chalybeate (iron-tasting) waters. Spaw well and the neighbouring Lowther’s hall, along with one of the ponds, and the herdsman’s house near what became Barrack Street, were washed away by the sea before 1817, and the battery near the harbour entrance required frequent rebuilding.<sup>i</sup>

Several public buildings trespassed on the edges of the commons: the church in 1719, the school, a workhouse *c.* 1740, and soon after that the battery. A roper’s house on the boundary of the moor and warren was threatened with demolition in 1750, presumably because it was unauthorised. Plenty of open ground remained, though, for traditional activities: horse-racing, bowling and many other sports; religious and political meetings; fairs, for which booths were set up; and the more mundane drying of nets and clothes, and informal social gatherings.<sup>ii</sup>

The Sunderland Dock Co. started building the South Dock in 1847. A coal-shipping dock for up to 350 vessels covered 18½ a., and had at its north end a tidal harbour and half-tide basin each of 2½ a. The works swallowed shoreline and a large part of the town moor. Other sections of the moor were lost to railways approaching from the south. The remaining town moor was finally surrendered by the freemen and stallingers in 1853, for which they received enough money to endow an Orphan Asylum, built 1856-61 on the moor itself. The asylum, now derelict, trained boys for a career at sea.<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> *Origins*, 177-8; T&WCMS, B8176; B8181; G. McCombie, ‘Notes on Sunderland Town Moor’, 6-8; Corder 36, p. 26; Potts, *Sunderland*, 234-53; Garbutt, *Historical and Descriptive View*, 42; Barnes, *People’s History*, 6-7; Mitchell, *History of Sunderland*, 86-7; Summers, *Sunderland*, 74-5, 269; DCL, Sharp 94, p. 207; **Cross ref defending port panel**

<sup>ii</sup> T&WCMS, B8176; B818; Corder 36, p. 26; Mitchell, *History of Sunderland*, app. 52-3; Garbutt, *Historical and Descriptive View*, 42; Potts, *Sunderland*, 238-43.

<sup>iii</sup> ‘John Murray’ in *Biog. Dict. Civil Eng.* ii, 560-2; *River, Town and People*, 17-18; Lambton Estate Office, bundle of reports and accounts of Sund. Dock Co., 1846-58; bundle relating to building of Sund. Dock; *Building News*, 4, 26 Nov. 1858, 1184; *Sund. Herald*, 14 Dec. 1860; Pevsner, 455.