

The resorts of Roker and Seaburn

Paid holidays and cheap railway excursions widened working-class horizons. Here was another opportunity to be grasped. Sunderland, while not an obvious holiday destination, had some history as a spa. Even in the 1820s, the town moor and Hendon were 'crowded with persons' during the bathing season, come to enjoy hot and cold baths and take bathing machines into the sea.

The attractive coastal area of Roker, immediately beyond the North dock, was ripe for development. Isolated houses, Roker House and Rock Lodge, stood east of Fulwell village, but otherwise the Williamson estate in Roker and Seaburn was open fields. An effort to promote a spa in 1840-1 fell flat, its legacy the classical Roker Terrace with Roker Baths hotel as its centrepiece. Roker Lane, renamed Roker Baths Road, approached the new terrace, with a special coach service running from Monkwearmouth station.ⁱ

Beyond Roker Terrace, a ravine blocked development. Williamson unlocked the potential of Roker and Seaburn by giving Roker Dene to the council for a public park, on condition that they bridged the valley. In 1880 a utilitarian road bridge opened, as did a park with model yacht lake, extending behind Roker Terrace as far south as Roker Baths Road. Monkwearmouth's medieval Broad Street was extended and became Roker Avenue, along which trams brought in the holidaying masses.ⁱⁱ

Off Roker Avenue were constructed acres of working-class streets, while Roker itself became a desirable suburb, thanks in part to the frequent commuter trams. Most of this new middle-class housing was in terraces, around the park in the Rock Lodge Estate of 1884, and c. 1900 near Roker Baths Road, parts of which again changed name, to Park Parade and St George's Terrace. Frank Caws's estate scheme for Seaburn in 1901, although not built as planned, was the basis for later development at the eastern end of Sea Road. On Seaside Lane, early semi-detached houses appeared in 1903.ⁱⁱⁱ

Roker pier, not conceived as a seaside attraction, nonetheless helped adorn this new neighbourhood. The spectacular breakwater, one of two at the Wear's entrance, was designed to make Sunderland 'the finest harbour of refuge on the east coast'. It also provided a barrier between Roker and a congested industrial zone, of saw-mills and shipbuilding, nearer the town. Roker pier was 20 years in the building, 1883-1903, formed from granite and concrete blocks, and 2,800 feet long. The pier head incorporated a lighthouse, and at the shore end were cottages for lighthouse keepers. Its companion, the south pier, meant to be longer still, 2,844 feet, was never fully completed.^{iv}

A promenade and visitor facilities were created under a work scheme for the unemployed, and the sea front further extended in 1907. Seaburn Hall, a concert and dance venue for holidaymakers, was built on the promenade in 1938 and remained popular into the 1960s. At Roker Cliff Park, formerly the Roker battery above Holy Rock, jutting into the sea between Roker and Seaburn beaches, a national memorial to Bede was unveiled in 1904. Underground conveniences and a public shelter were added in 1908. Much later, in 1983, when the south pier was shortened, Thomas Meik's 1856 wrought-iron lighthouse was transferred here from across the river.^v

Roker's triumphant Edwardian decade was capped by perhaps Sunderland's finest building, the nationally important church of St Andrew (1906-7), 'cathedral of the Arts and Crafts Movement'. Sponsored by Sir John Priestman in memory of his mother, it was an appropriate parish church for the rapidly growing, well-to-do suburb. E.S. Prior, the architect, used stone from Marsden quarry, and woodwork from Priestman's shipyard, with wooden pegs and deliberate irregularities. Various leading members of the Arts and Crafts movement contributed fittings: Eric Gill lettering on the dedication panels, Randall Wells the font, and Ernest Gimson an exquisite lectern with mother of pearl and silver inlay. A Burne-Jones tapestry serves as a reredos and a William Morris carpet dyed with vegetable dyes forms the flooring.^{vi}

The other crowning glory on the fringe of the new suburb was the ground of Sunderland Association Football Club, built in 1898 with enough banking for 36,000 spectators. Later confusingly called Roker Park although some distance from its namesake, it was on the route of the Roker tram near the working-class streets of Monkwearmouth. A novel kind of terrace, built on reinforced concrete pillars in 1913, increased capacity to 55,000, and was perhaps designed by the leader in this field, Archibald Leitch, who added grandstands in the 1920s and 30s.^{vii}

ⁱ Parson & White, *Dir.* (1827), 340; T&WAS, 1167/2; 1st ed OS; RTP, 61; *Sund. Herald*, 10 Apr. 1840, 18 June 1841; Northumbs RO, SANT/BEQ/26/1/04/316; **cross ref spa ch 3**

ⁱⁱ *Sund. Daily Echo*, 23-4 June 1880; DRO, Q/D/P/342, /348; 'Roker Park Conservation Area Character Appraisal' (City of Sunderland, 2007)

ⁱⁱⁱ *Sund. Daily Echo*, 23 June 1884; 10 Apr. 1905; 'Roker Park Conservation Area', 5-7; DULASC, CCDCE293220½, 298250, 300894, etc.; *Building News*, 80, 31 Aug. 1901, 749; inf. J. Gould, of G.T. Brown & Son

^{iv} Chrimes et al (ed.), *Biographical Dict. Of Civil Engineers*, ii (2008), 811-13; *Shipping World*, 30 Sept. 1903; 'Roker Park Conservation Area', 22-3; **cross ref. ch. 4 Wake**

^v *Building News*, 59, 3 Oct. 1890, 489; *Sund. Daily Echo*, 9 Jan. 1907; Sinclair, 127; BL, National Memorial to the Venerable Bede at Roker Cliff Park, Monkwearmouth, Sunderland: programme of the unveiling ceremony, 11 Oct. 1904; T&WAS, 209/38

^{vi} *Builder*, 93 (1907), 385-6; *Sund. Daily Echo*, 12 June 1906; 13 June 1906; 18 July 1907; A. Walker, 'The Church of St Andrew', *Northern Architect*, 17 Jan. 1979, 19-24; D. Hawkes, 'St Andrew, Roker', in D Cruickshank (ed.), *Timeless Architecture I* (1985), 8-25; T. Garnham, 'Edward Prior: St Andrew's Church, Roker', in B. Dunlop (ed.), *Arts and Crafts Masterpieces* (1999), unpag.; Pevsner, 469-70

^{vii} *Illustrated Guide to Sund. & District* (1898), 20; N. T. Sinclair, *Sunderland: City and People since 1945* (2004), 25, 126-7; *Building News*, 74, 24 June 1898, 885-6; S. Inglis, *Engineering Archie: Archibald Leitch, football ground designer* (2005), 124-7