

## **Epidemics and public health**

Asiatic cholera arrived in 1831-2, the first such epidemic in Britain, bringing notoriety to the town. The outbreak killed 215 people locally, triggering a national calamity as it spread during 1832. Sunderland's reputation was damaged above all by attempts to protect the coal trade by denying that disease was rife. So quarantine measures which might have safeguarded public health were blocked. The local epidemic was spent by January 1832, but cholera was then rampaging in Newcastle and beyond. Many of Sunderland's casualties were buried in a special extension to the Bishopwearmouth churchyard, in Hind Street, close to the new infirmary.<sup>i</sup>

Numerous medical investigations followed, based on mistaken beliefs that cholera spread through miasma in the air. In fact responsibility lay with drinking water polluted by sewage, but this understanding came too late to avert national epidemics in every decade until 1866. Each one hit Sunderland. The 1831 outbreak killed one in 200 of the population (one in 109 of the east end's people); in 1848 it accounted for 359, or one in 185 in the municipal borough as a whole. Again the disease clustered in Sunderland parish, where one in 73 died; across all Monkwearmouth the rate was one in 294, and Bishopwearmouth one in 448. The deaths in 1866 were almost exclusively in the town's poorest housing, on the east end burgrave plots; there were none at all in highly-rated areas. And while Sunderland was infamous for its role in the 1832 contagion, a far worse epidemic had swept the town in 1824, when measles claimed the lives of 406 people, one in 86 of the entire population, hitting Bishopwearmouth almost as hard as the east end slums. Infectious disease could not be kept away from the suburbs, though fatalities always concentrated in Sunderland parish and Hendon.<sup>ii</sup>

Like all Britain's mushrooming towns, Sunderland was heavily polluted and lacking basic sanitation. These were disastrous to public health. Death rates were exceptionally high; epidemics rife, of a range of diseases besides cholera; overcrowding the source of concern about morality as well as health. Waste and sewage disposal was unregulated, a healthy water supply not available to many, slaughterhouses uncontrolled, and burial grounds insanitary and over-used. While firm proof was lacking, that overcrowding and bad sanitation brought ill-health and premature death, the links were assumed. Sunderland, in common with other towns, had areas where only the poorest and most desperate would live. The better-off tried to avoid the worst stench and mess, but could not isolate themselves entirely from threats of disease and early death, or even from inconvenience and unpleasantness.

In this spirit was launched a government investigation into the state of large towns, and a visit to Sunderland in 1845 by Dr D.B. Reid. Reid discovered that only 670 of the municipal borough's 6,086 houses had piped water, then available only south of the river. Subscribers were served by a waterworks near Hylton Road which pumped water by steam engine into reservoirs. Monkwearmouth village had only two public wells, and the Shore township just one, Potts pump, for which every family paid a levy to Sir Hedworth Williamson. There were few public baths, and no wash-houses.<sup>iii</sup>

Reid paid most attention to yards off High Street East, in the medieval borough. While the 18<sup>th</sup>-century developments, from Church to Silver Street, were nine to ten metres wide, nearby were lanes and alleys narrower than three metres, and even, in the cases of Bull Lane (5ft 3in) and Moor Lane (6ft 6in), less than two. The inspector was concerned less with new cottages or houses, even where subdivided, than with

the formerly large dwellings, three or more storeys with cellars, now split into six to 12 households. The east end parish had 1,652 houses, in which lived 3,740 families, a population of 17,022 averaging more than 10 per house. Only 223 of the houses had lavatories. The situation was little better in Monkwearmouth and the Shore, and even Bishopwearmouth (which included the Panns) had an average seven people to a house, a third of the houses accommodating more than one family.

The east end, reported Reid, 'is so thickly populated that every room, be it ever so comfortless, has its tenants'. Many of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century mansions had tumbled downmarket, sub-divided into tenements, 'one room generally containing a whole family... of seven or more individuals, and not infrequently pigs are admitted within the house.' With no land undeveloped, refuse was thrown into paved channels. These were supposed to drain into the river or sea, but were never cleaned, so they blocked. Other rubbish choked the town moor ditches. Pigs ran free in lanes and yards, and residents stopped the scavenger taking dung, which once accumulated could be sold to farmers at 1s 6d a load. Thus in Edward Browne's former glory, Fitters Row, was 'a most offensive midden, cleaned out every 8 or 10 weeks but never fully emptied'.

Problems were not confined to the east end. Smoke from glass, iron and lime works 'pervades the whole town', noted Reid. Everywhere were piggeries: 92 in Sunderland parish, 170 in Bishopwearmouth and the Panns, and 150 Monkwearmouth and Shore, all on private property leaving the authorities powerless to remove them. In Bishopwearmouth, where 'very many of the lowest class of houses have no necessities', six men were constantly at work sweeping the streets, dumping refuse a quarter of a mile away in a field. In Monkwearmouth, while 'all new houses have proper necessities and ash-pits', the old ones had 'hardly at all', and the high class residents of Dundas Street had a stagnant ditch behind. 'Manure is deposited on a ballast hill near the town, and is a great nuisance.'<sup>iv</sup>

There was a further horrifying problem. Churchyards were so crowded with corpses that decency was 'outraged by exposure to the public gaze of the mouldering remains of some fellow mortal'. There were 12 burying grounds across the town at the mid century: a Jewish cemetery at Ayres Quay, the remainder Christian. At the centre of the crisis were Anglican churchyards. Holy Trinity had 500 to 700 interments each year through the 1840s, and despite a small extension in 1846 was fast running out of space. St Peter's likewise had 300 to 400 burials annually. St Michael's at Bishopwearmouth was, though, in far the worst state. Its own yard, long overfilled, was closed in 1849 by order of the General Board of Health. Its annexe, the National school cemetery behind Dr Gray's school on Low Row, was dissected by the culverted Howle-Eile burns. In this area prone to flood were buried many of the cholera victims of 1831. Beneath the school in 1851 were '12 large vaults used for sepulture [burial], the entrance to which is covered with stagnated water several inches deep'. From 1849, 500 burials a year took place in another extension, in Rector's Gill.

There was little space for recreation, with the beach area disappearing under docks, remaining parts of the town moor a rubbish dump, and even churchyards no go areas. Building (or Bilton) Hill, while it held a 'depot for manure', was a popular public area, though the hill was 'fast disappearing' as people with no right to it stole the stone. Dr Reid supported the council's purchase of Building Hill from Miss Mowbray,

safeguarding it for public use. Mowbray park opened, amidst much celebration, in 1857, and was subsequently extended towards the town in 1866, with an ornamental lake and other features. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Edward Backhouse's ambitious design for a huge domed crystal palace on top of the quarry never materialised.<sup>v</sup>

The borough council used new powers for this and other public health reforms from 1851. Public baths and wash-houses were provided in Hendon Road in 1851, on Williamson's estate in Monkwearmouth, 1853-4, and also on High Street West, 1858-9, the former site of the Sunderland Union workhouse. Later came swimming baths in High Street in 1890, and the rebuilding of Hendon baths in 1903-6. Municipal cemeteries were built to serve Bishopwearmouth (on Chester Road), Sunderland (Ryhope Road), and Monkwearmouth (Mere Knolls, at Seaburn), during 1856-8, all with entrance lodges and mortuary chapels. The parish churchyards were all then closed. Later came cemeteries for Southwick (1884) and Ryhope (1898).<sup>vi</sup>

William Crozier, first borough surveyor in 1851, mapped the town and planned a drainage scheme. The private Sunderland and South Shields Water Co. retained the best known water engineer in the country, Thomas Hawksley, to advise them on piping water into homes. His solution was to pump from underground aquifers into holding reservoirs, and use gravity to distribute. Hawksley, and later his son, designed 12 pumping stations, from Humbledon in 1846 to Stoneygate in 1905, all substantial brick buildings. Ryhope, now a working museum, is best known. The water company's red sandstone offices opened in John Street in 1907.<sup>vii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> *River, Town and People*, 72-3; DRO, Pamphlets Vol B 5/14; Durham Cathedral Lib., Raine Mss 7; Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland RO, DG24/862/17, DG24/899/8; *Durham Chronicle*, 12 Nov. 1831; 19 Nov. 1831; *Durham Advertiser*, 6 Jan. 1832

<sup>ii</sup> *Darl. & Stockton Times*, 10 Nov. 1855; *Durham Chronicle*, 5 Oct. 1866; *Rep. to Gen. Board of Health on the [sanitary conditions] of Sunderland* (1851), 35-6, 97-8; B.T. Robson, *Urban Analysis: a Study of City Structure with Special Reference to Sunderland* (1969), 118-20.

<sup>iii</sup> *Second Report of the Commissioners for Inquiring into the State of Large Towns* (PP xviii (1845) [602] & app [610], App. Pt II, 112), 190-204; *Rep. to Gen. Board of Health*, 61.

<sup>iv</sup> *State of Large Towns*, 199, 191, 193-4, 200, 204

<sup>v</sup> *State of Large Towns*, 204; *Rep. to Gen. Board of Health*, 1851, 76-9, 80-2; Wood 1826; *River, Town and People*, 76, 123; T&WCMS, C12807; *Sund. Herald*, 22 Oct. 1852; 26 Nov. 1852; 4 Jan. 1856; 20 Jun. 1856; 13 July 1866; 26 July 1867; *Sund. Times*, 11 July 1866.

<sup>vi</sup> *River, Town and People*, 107, 123; *Sund. Herald*, 11 Apr. 1848; 18 Jan. 1850; 11 Apr. 1851; 12 Nov. 1852; 15 Jan. 1858; 25 Jan. 1856; 7 May 1858; *Builder*, 13 (1855), 345; *Sund. Daily Echo*, 10 July 1890; *Building News* (90), 1 June 1906, 790; T&WCMS, B10185.

<sup>vii</sup> *Builder*, 88, 20 May 1905, 548; *Sund. Daily Echo*, 15 May 1905; 8 Aug. 1905; 'Thomas Hawksley' in *Biog. Dict. Civil Eng.* ii, 387-9