

Becoming a city

A first attempt to gain city status in 1932 was unsuccessful. 'The dignity of a city' was sought again in 1957-8, and once more Sunderland's application rejected. This time the town authorities did not let the matter lie, and embarked on an epic campaign for city status. When the Boundary Commission in 1962 recommended expanding the borough limits, increasing the population from 190,000 to 218,000, the council tried again. In support they listed their housing programme, high spending on education and the arts, a planned new civic centre to be designed by Basil Spence, a civic theatre, redevelopments and – still – the immense national importance of Wearside ship-building and other industries. Not least, this was 'a town of distinctive character and there is no question of it being absorbed into Tyneside or Teesside conurbations'. But again the bid was set back, pending a larger review of local government.ⁱ

When boundaries were extended in 1967, taking the population to 221,000, the town clerk made discreet inquiries about city status for a town 'truly the centre of the area in which it stood'. The Home Office stonewalled. In 1977, when Sunderland expected to be favoured candidate for city designation at the Queen's silver jubilee, it had recently become a part of Tyne and Wear metropolitan county, and consequently lost to Derby. Further efforts, in 1982 and 1984, were similarly unsuccessful.ⁱⁱ

The Queen's 40th jubilee in 1992 was occasion for another competition, Sunderland one of 20 English towns seeking city status. The energetic local response to industrial decline, the efforts made to regenerate the economy, swayed the decision in Sunderland's favour. Becoming a city would inject further momentum to the process of rebuilding. Sunderland, with 296,000 people, was not the largest of the applicants, but 'none of those with a larger population has such a distinctive identity'. With a new coat of arms, and a polytechnic recently reborn as a university, the city brand was quickly unfurled, on road signs and public buildings across the district.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Beckett, *City Status*, 104, 108-9, 111 ; **cross ref above, 1932**

ⁱⁱ Beckett, *City Status*, 111, 122-5

ⁱⁱⁱ Beckett, *City Status*, 129-32; Sinclair, 87;