

Almshouses

The widows and orphans of men lost at sea added to the heavy demands on poor relief and charity. Almshouses, some endowed specifically for seafarers and their families, offered a decent if sometimes crowded living space, and a small income for the needy.

Thus were the almshouses in 1750 at Assembly Garth, on an acre of land facing Holy Trinity church at the junction of Coronation Street. On this site were already a hospital and town hall or assembly room, the last of quite recent build. The almshouses were sponsored by the Seamen's Fund, paid for by merchant seamen's contributions, and administered through the custom house. The beneficiaries were old and disabled sailors, and seafarers' widows and children. The buildings of Assembly Garth were added to or partly converted, to form nine dwelling houses containing '38 rooms for the reception of superannuated sailors or their widows'. There was also a meeting room for the trustees, later called the seamen's hall.

In 1840 the same fund supported the building of Trafalgar Square on the old workhouse garden behind the parish church, a group of plain but substantial brick houses round three sides of a quadrangle.

Almshouses were built in Bishopwearmouth only after the separation of Sunderland parish. A group on the west side of the town green were endowed by John Bowes, the rector, in 1721, and though there was a further legacy, from Thomas Ogle in 1725, the allowance paid to the dozen residents was very small. These tiny cottages were renovated in the 1870s by Canon Cockin, and survived into the 1960s.

Also in the 1720s, 'an hospital, or almshouse, erected and endowed for the maintenance of 12 poor men or women' was built in Church Lane, next to St Michael's, in 1727. The bequest by Jane Gibson was more substantial. The Mowbray family, who administered the fund, replaced the old buildings in the 1860s with the present Gothic structure.

Bishopwearmouth had almshouses, too, for 10 female dependants of seamen. Built in Crowtree Lane in 1820, these survive as shops in Maritime Place.

NOTES:

Pevsner, 455, 459; Parson & White, *Dir. of Durh. & Northumbs* (1827), 336-7; *Post Office Dir. Durh. & Northumbs* (1879), 283; B. Morton, 'Assembly Garth and Trafalgar Square Merchant Seamen's Houses', *Antiq. Sund.*, iv (1903), 92-9; B&T 1737; Brayley and Britton, 136, 146; Durham Chapter Lib., Sharp 94, p. 207; *River T & P*, 7, 77; Surtees, 20-1; A Gibson, 'Bowes Almshouses, the end of an era?', *Sund. Hist.* xxxvii (2003) 84-7; Wood 1826