

Monkwearmouth village and cell The Monkwearmouth communities, cell and vill, were physically separate into modern times, though shore and village have throughout their history depended upon each other.

The vill, the agricultural village, developed before the Conquest as a service settlement, supplying produce and agricultural labour to the monks of what was then a large religious house. After the monastery was abandoned in the 9th century, St Peter's continued as parish church, while presumably parts of the monastery estate were tended by lay people from the village. When the cell was restored in the 1070s, it had only two or three monks, but Monkwearmouth village still paid significant tithes to support it, and villagers worked the priory land.ⁱ

The cell's own 120 a. of land was not all cultivated, and from the 14th century pasture began to replace some of the arable. Draught animals, a dozen oxen and four or five horses used to pull ploughs and carts, were gradually replaced by cattle. Part of the estate was rented out, and the monks employed local labour to work the rest. They grew wheat, peas and beans, barley and oats, and kept numerous pigs and piglets. A flock of up to 200 sheep is recalled in the area still called Sheepfolds, on the estate's western side. After 1430 came new grasslands and gardens. The river provided other produce and income, from salmon fisheries, sea fish, small scale salt-making, anchorage fees, a ferry and coal staith and, until about 1387, a watermill. The coney garth, or rabbit warren, on the opposite bank of the Wear, may also have served the ancient monastery with some of its protein. All these activities gave enduring shape to the local landscape.ⁱⁱ

The township of Monkwearmouth Shore took the same boundary as the monastery estate, and long continued to be called the cell of Wearmouth in official documents. Its population was small and scattered. Two substantial buildings, St Peter's church and the adjacent Monkwearmouth hall, converted from part of the monastery, stood in isolation. Elsewhere on the territory of the Shore were only a few workshops and small houses, around the ferry point and along the unstable riverbank and sea shore.ⁱⁱⁱ

By contrast, the village of Monkwearmouth was closely contained. The monastic estate's boundary tightly surrounded the settlement on three sides. On the fourth, northern, edge was a further piece of monastery land, a rectangular plot which also became part of Monkwearmouth Shore township. The eastern boundary of this detached segment, though half a mile from the coast, is still called Shore Street; most of the land is now occupied by a retail park. It had been undeveloped until the 1790s, when intersected by the Newcastle turnpike road to the Wearmouth bridge.^{iv}

At the centre of Monkwearmouth village was an extensive green, with large pond and well, and a pinfold for stray animals.^v The road leading north from the harbour ferry divided as it met the green. The eastern fork approached Fulwell and South Shields, while the other tended westwards via Southwick and Hylton towards Newcastle. The green was first a rectangle, but as the routes established themselves it took the shape of an inverted triangle between road ends. Minor lanes also led away from the green: a track to the church, monastery and north sands; other paths to fields and sheepfolds. The present-day Wheatsheaf inn marks the western end of the green. Its northern perimeter was later Broad Street, now swallowed into Roker Avenue. Thomas Street follows the line of the ancient track which crossed the rectangular green, and leads to

Whitburn Street, medieval route to the ferry. The green's southern and eastern boundaries were less distinct and are now lost.^{vi}

The boundary between vill and cell follows existing lanes and paths, and curves tightly around the settled area. We can guess that a village was already present when these lines were drawn. With houses randomly placed and so close to the settlement's outer limits, any tofts or garths would be small. Documents confirm that the village existed soon after the Conquest, but the size and shape of the green, and haphazard settlement pattern, hint at something older still. Monkwearmouth green, with its water supply and pound, perhaps a smithy, ale house and common oven, and enclosures to protect beasts in troubled times, could well have formed the centre of a pre-Conquest community.

While the overall pattern was irregular, houses resembling a planned row overlooked the green from the north-east. The space behind could have accommodated long gardens, and boundaries there suggest a back lane into communal fields worked in strips. If this group of houses were grafted on an existing village, medieval Monkwearmouth was a hybrid of evolved and planned settlement. The overall randomness anyway suggests that land was held in a range of different ways.^{vii}

The ancient green stamped its shape on every development afterwards. Late medieval Monkwearmouth declined, as the number of tenants fell from the 18 or 20 present in the 14th century. At least one larger freeholding of 96 a. was created before 1430, perhaps a merger of two of the four previous husbandlands (farms of 48a.). Originally there were four cottages, each with about 12 a.; later, from the middle 15th c., six cottages were recorded, and around 1500 two more, perhaps older houses restored and returned to use. The monastery's lands passed into lay ownership after 1536, and by 1600 both shore and village of Monkwearmouth were undergoing significant change, as the estate developed commercially.^{viii}

ⁱ *Origins*, 41, 48-9.

ⁱⁱ Piper, *Durham Monks*, 3-7; Mitchell, *History of Sunderland*, 84.

ⁱⁱⁱ **cross ref *Origins*, MWM Hall; and MWM village plan, fig 000**

^{iv} **MWM village plan, fig 000**; Wood 1826; Burleigh and Thompson 1737.

^v G.B. Gibbs, 'Early history of the water supplies of Sunderland and South Shields', *Antiq. Sund.* xii (1911), 21

^{vi} **MWM village plan, fig 000**

^{vii} Roberts, *Green Villages*, 38, 27-8, esp. fig. 8, Evenwood; R. Daniels, 'Medieval Boroughs of Northern England', in C. Brooks, R. Daniels and A. Harding, *Past, Present and Future: the Archaeology of Northern England* (2002), 186; B.K. Roberts, 'Village Plans in Co. Durham', *Med. Archaeol.*, xvi (1972); L.H. Campey, 'Medieval Village Plans in Co. Durham' *N. Hist.*, xxv (1989), esp. 79; **MWM village plan, fig 000**

^{viii} Piper, *Durham Monks*, 5-6; Lomas and Piper (ed.) 'Durham Cathedral Priory Rentals', 39, 83-4, 150, 204.