

Slum clearance

The old Improvement Commission had made a tentative start at clearing ‘some of the worst houses in the town’ when the Half Moon estate was demolished to make way for the Exchange building in 1810. Likewise the Commission’s covered market, on a burgage plot parallel with Church Street, swept slums from that area as well as removing vile and unhealthy wooden sheds used as butchers’ shambles, and other unsightly stalls, from the High Street.ⁱ

Fifty years later, the borough council’s powers to replace slums with model dwellings were at first used sparingly. Union Lane and its surroundings, some of the worst housing on the old burgage plots around the covered market, were demolished and replaced by James Williams Street in 1872. Just 14 two-storey houses were built, most of the street being given to a board school, three chapels and a dispensary. The overcrowding problem was not helped, for dispossessed tenants were obliged to find room elsewhere.

Edward Bowmaker, a local doctor interested in model housing, found Sunderland in 1895 to be the third most overcrowded town in the U.K., 32% of its population living more than two to a room, a figure which had not improved in 1911. Local churches carried out their own investigations, finding ‘the congested tenement type’ of housing typical of the east end. Within the 1719 parish boundary of Sunderland, infant mortality was 239 per thousand births, compared with 171 across the municipal borough as a whole, and 150 in the large towns of England. Many east enders were in a ‘chronic state of poverty’, victims of misfortune, ‘ill-housed, ill-fed, ill-clad, void of any purpose reaching beyond the present moment’. The churches attempted to alleviate some of this, and supported moves to improve matters, for instance the demolition of the notorious Hat Case.ⁱⁱ

Other slum clearance was a by-product of industrial advance. On the north bank, the ‘Gateshead of Sunderland’, Monkwearmouth Shore’s waterside, was demolished so that Sir Hedworth Williamson could sell the site for shipyards. The Williamson estate office on the front street of the Shore was itself a victim, moving to Bridge Street, near the railway station. Many ancient properties, shops and inns as well as houses, were swept away, collateral damage in the Shore’s renaissance. ‘Alas! In Monkwearmouth as elsewhere “Monuments themselves memorials need”’.ⁱⁱⁱ

This reincarnation was matched at Bishopwearmouth Panns. The tiny, 6-a. township, home in the 18th century of some of the town’s finest, degenerated into a slum district in the shadow of the Wearmouth Bridge. In 1801, 564 people lived here. At the mid-century there were around 300. In 1901, all but five residents had been displaced by shipbuilding and the bottleworks.^{iv}

ⁱ Garbutt, *Historical and Descriptive View*, 327-30; Summers, *Sunderland*, 365-6 fn.; Sykes, *Local Records*, ii, 250, 280; *Sund. Herald*, 27 Sept. 1834; *Sund. Daily Echo*, 4 Nov. 1880.

ⁱⁱ T&WAS, SDB/A9/1/1-13; *Sund. Times*, 9 Jul. 1870; 7 Feb. 1871; E. Bowmaker, *The Housing of the Working Classes* (1895), 11-12, 14, 159; M.J. Daunt (ed.), *Councillors and Tenants: Local Authority Housing in English Cities, 1919-39* (1984), 26; Sinclair, *City and People*, 43; *Report of the East End Commission to the Ruridecanal Conference* (1896) (Sund. Lib., L301.36); *St John’s Parish: its Work and its Limitations* (1896) (Sund. Lib., 274.281).

ⁱⁱⁱ DCL, Longstaffe 41, news cutting, 29 Mar. 1875.

^{iv} *VCH Durham*, ii, 269.