

Shipbuilding on the Wear: Part 1



William Pile's yard, North Sands, c. 1850

Sunderland shipbuilding: a brief history

Sunderland has been building ships since at least 1346, when Thomas Menvill had a yard at Hendon. Little is known of the industry until the 18th century when improvements to the port meant that larger ships could use the Wear and more coal, salt and glass could be exported. The export trade played a central role in the development of shipbuilding.

In March 1814 there were 23 yards at Sunderland, with 31 ships under construction. By 1815, it was the leading shipbuilding port for wooden trading vessels. That year, 31 yards built around 600 ships.

By 1840 there were 76 yards. In 1850 Sunderland built five times more ships than in 1820. The ships

were almost twice as big and yards had increased production from two to five vessels per year. The *Sunderland Herald* proclaimed the town to be "the greatest shipbuilding port in the world" and during 1846-54 Wearside produced almost one-third of all ships built in the UK.

By this time, ships were being built in iron as well as wood and steam power was replacing sail. Marine engineering grew rapidly from the 1820s and most yards had an engine works. In Sunderland, most ships continued to be built in wood until 1868, when production of composite (iron frame, wood hull) and iron hulled ships finally overtook construction in wood. The last wooden ship was built in 1880, and the last sailing ship in 1893. In the 1880s, steel replaced iron and cargo ships and tankers were the main type of vessel built in Sunderland. Many of these cargo ships and tankers were produced for overseas customers and during 1888-1913 around 22% of the ships built on the Wear each year were made for export.

The 20th century saw many changes to shipbuilding on the Wear. During the two World Wars, Sunderland's main work was in the production of cargo ships to keep supply lines open and replace those ships lost at sea, although it also undertook a great deal of naval construction and repair work. Demand was so great that women were employed in the yards for the first time. In 1914-18 there were just 16 shipyards on the Wear: a result of the change to iron and then steel construction. In 1939 there were only 8 yards, although wartime needs led to the opening of a ninth yard at Southwick, on the site of the disused Swan, Hunter and Wigham Richardson yard.

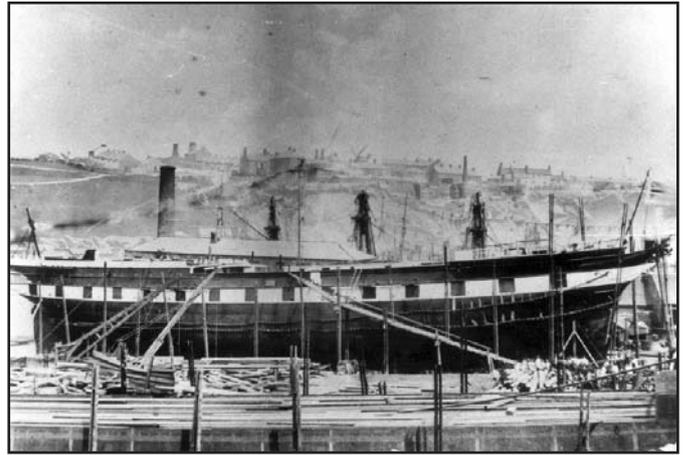
After the war, Sunderland continued to lead the way in shipbuilding however production increased worldwide and it became more difficult for British yards to compete. Throughout the 1950s and 60s more yards closed or merged. In 1977, the shipbuilding industry was nationalised and substantial job losses followed. In 1978, 7535 people worked in the yards: by 1984 this was reduced to 4337. The two remaining shipyard groups merged in 1980 but, despite strong opposition, Sunderland's last remaining yards were closed on 7 December 1988.

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Pay and conditions

Life in the shipyards was tough. Death and injury were commonplace, but compensation payments were not regulated until the late 19th century. The loss of a man's wages could devastate a family. In the early 20th century there were vast improvements, but accidents were still a daily occurrence. After World War II, medical officers were appointed at yards and safety equipment and clothing started to be used. By the end of the 1960s safety committees existed in most yards and, with the introduction of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, accident rates were greatly reduced.



The "Paramatta" being built at Laing's in 1866

The work itself was very physical and the hours were long, but it was not as well paid as other trades. In the 19th century, a builder earned almost three times as much as a shipwright. With the introduction of iron and steel construction, there was a new group of workers, the boilermakers, or "the black squad". They were paid for "piecework": the amount of work they produced, whereas the shipwrights were paid for "timework": the amount of hours they worked. This meant that the boilermakers could earn a lot more money than the shipwrights.

Workers had to arrive at the yard no later than 6am. Anyone who was late was locked out and lost one quarter of a days pay. If work stopped for any reason, such as bad weather before the days of indoor workshops, workers would also take home less pay.

Hard times: depressions and disputes

The shipbuilding industry suffered regular fluctuations in demand for new ships or repairs. There were many periods of low demand, or "depressions", which normally followed periods of high demand. There were three Great Depressions and during each there was a scarcity of work, wage cuts and mass unemployment. The first occurred from 1884-7 and when wages were reduced, those on piecework suffered the most. The second occurred in 1908-10, after a national fall in ship production. It was the worst depression known until the 1930s, when there was a huge fall in demand after the boom of World War I and the post war years. In 1921 there were 15 yards, but by 1937 there were only 6. Those yards that survived went for 4 or 5 years without launching one ship. This time the depression had a deeper impact as fewer men wanted to join the industry and many left to join other professions. In later years, this meant that there were fewer skilled workers and managers in the UK industry.

Strikes were another regular event in shipyards. As the workforce grew to meet new technologies, more trade unions and more disputes developed. Many were about pay or actual work, which varied between trades. Others concerned conditions, such as shorter working days and overtime regulations. The Sunderland Engineers strike of 1883-5 was one of the longest on the Wear, although more working days were lost to strikes in the period after World War II.

Find out more

For more information, see "Shipbuilding on the Wear: Part 2" and visit the Local Studies Centre at Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre, which has many images and books on maritime heritage, including:

- "Sunderland Shipyards" by Andrew Clark (1998)
- "Building Ships on the North East Coast" Parts 1 and 2 by Joe Clarke (1997)

The 'Launched in Wearside' exhibition in Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens also provides an insight into Sunderland's shipyards and proud shipbuilding heritage.