

The Victoria Hall Disaster 1883



The Victoria Hall and Memorial in 1904

The Victoria Hall

The Victoria Hall used to stand at the junction of Toward Road and Laura Street, facing Mowbray Park. It was an imposing, brick building in the gothic style that was so fashionable at the time.

The hall was opened in 1872. Inside, there was seating on the ground floor, as well as in a dress circle on the first floor, and in the gallery above. Due to its size, the hall was a popular venue for public meetings and entertainments.

The disaster

On 16 June 1883, some 2000 children aged mostly between 7 and 11, crowded in to the hall. They had been given tickets to see a show by travelling entertainers, The Fays, from Tynemouth Aquarium. It promised to be “the greatest treat for children ever given” and offered every child the chance to win a prize such as a toy or a book.

As the performance ended, it was announced that prizes would be given to children with certain numbered tickets as they left. At the same time, prizes began to be handed out to those children on the ground floor. Already excited by the afternoon’s entertainment, and not wanting to miss out, many of the 1100 children in the gallery began to stream downstairs to claim their prize.

At the foot of the stairs, the exit door had been opened inwards and bolted so as to create a gap of about 20 inches (50cm) that would allow one child at a time to leave. This was probably done to control the flow of children and make it easier to check their tickets. However, with few adults present and no one organising an orderly queue, the children simply rushed for the door. The gap was not large enough to cope with the flood of children and the narrow stairwell was immediately blocked. As more and more children surged down the stairs, they were pushed forward by those behind, who were unaware of what was happening. The children at the bottom of the stairs were crushed and suffocated by the weight of the crowd above them.

Eventually, those adults in the hall realised that children were trapped and began to pull them one by one through the narrow gap. More adults came to help and within half an hour all the children had been removed from the stairwell.

A total of 183 children died in the tragedy. Some families lost all of their children. The entire Bible Class of 30 children from a local Sunday School perished in the disaster. All died of asphyxia.



The Victoria Hall Disaster Memorial in Mowbray Park today



The bomb damaged Victoria Hall in 1941

After the tragedy

News of the disaster spread throughout the country and national newspapers ran the story. Queen Victoria sent a message of condolence to the families and a donation towards funeral costs, and asked to be kept informed about the recovery of the survivors. The Scottish poet, William McGonagall wrote a poem called "The Sunderland Calamity", which shows the strength of public feeling at the time.

The disaster fund raised £5000, which paid for the funerals of all 183 children. During the funerals, which lasted from the following Tuesday until Friday, all businesses in Sunderland remained closed as a mark of respect. The money that was left over was put towards the cost of a memorial statue of a grieving mother carrying a dead child. The memorial was erected in 1883 under a canopy in Mowbray Park, opposite the scene of the disaster. It was later moved to Bishopwearmouth cemetery, but restored to Mowbray Park in 2000 with a new canopy.

An inquest into the tragedy was held, but it failed to blame anyone. This caused a public outcry and a second enquiry was held, but it too failed to find out who had bolted the door and who was responsible. However, as a direct result of the disaster, Parliament issued laws that required all places of public entertainment to have a sufficient number of exits, and that all exit doors must open outwards and be easy to open.

Despite the horror and shock of the event, the Hall stood for another 58 years. It was finally destroyed by a German bomb, during an air raid in 1941.

Find out more

For more information, visit the Local Studies Centre at Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre, which has contemporary accounts and articles on the disaster, such as:

- "The Victoria Hall Disaster" published by the Sunderland Herald and Daily Post in 1883.
- "Mowbray. The People's Park" by John Ruttley (2002)
- "Sunderland. River, Town and People" by Geoffrey Milburn and Stuart Miller (Eds) (1988)

Some details can also be found on the following web sites: www.north-country.co.uk/victoria.htm
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/1925815.stm>