

Shipbuilding on the Wear: Part 2



Thompson's yard c. 1956

A brief history of Sunderland's Shipyards

Throughout its history, Sunderland has had over 400 registered shipyards. These are some of the key yards in the development of the shipbuilding industry.

Philip Laing started in 1818 at Deptford. In 1898 the company was renamed Sir James Laing and Sons. Laing's merged with Thompson's and Sunderland Forge in 1954.

S.P. Austin and Sons began in 1826. Austin's was famous for its pontoon, which opened in 1904. The pontoon was a platform that could be sunk below a ship, then re-floated to raise the ship out of the water. Austin's merged with Pickersgill's in 1954. Its yard closed in 1964.

George Bartram opened his yard at Hylton in 1837. The business moved to South Dock in 1871, and was the only firm to launch ships directly into the North Sea. The company was taken over by Austin & Pickersgill in 1967. The yard closed in 1978.

William Pickersgill started building ships in 1838 with Messrs Miller, Rawson and Watson. The firm split in 1845 and Pickersgill opened a yard at Southwick. During World War II, Pickersgill's took over the neighbouring Priestman yard. The company merged with Austin's in 1954 and the Southwick yard was redeveloped at a cost of £3 million. The yard closed in 1988.

William Doxford and Sons began in 1840 at Cox Green and moved to Pallion in 1857. In 1904 the East Yard was built, and the 3 extra berths helped Doxford's to win the blue riband in 1904 and 1907 for the highest production rate in the world. The East Yard was rebuilt as a state of the art covered shipyard, which opened in 1976. Doxford's joined Thompson's, Laings and Greenwell's in 1961 to form the Doxford and Sunderland Shipbuilding and Engineering Group. The Group was taken over in 1973 and re-named Sunderland Shipbuilders Ltd. It merged with Austin and Pickersgill's in 1986, and closed in 1988.

William Pile worked in many yards before starting his own company in 1846. He then took over the family yard in 1848. He built more than 100 ships in wood and almost as many in iron, and was renowned for his tea clippers. A talented draughtsman, he was described as the greatest ship designer of his age. His yard closed after his death in 1873 and was sold to pay his creditors.



Austin's Pontoon in 1962

Robert Thompson opened his North Sands yard in 1846. His son, Robert, opened a yard at Southwick in 1854, while another son, Joseph Lowes, took over the yard at North Sands in 1860 and changed the company name to J L Thompson. Robert Thompson Jnr's yard closed in 1933. J L Thompson's yard was closed in 1979, although the fitting out quay was used by Doxford's and Laing's. St Peter's Campus of Sunderland University now stands on the site.

George Short started in 1850, and moved to Pallion in 1869. Short's built more ships for local owners than any other yard. It closed in 1964 when the firm was unwilling to redevelop and build bigger ships. The yard was demolished, although Bartram's took over the fitting out quay, which was still in use in the 1980s.

John Priestman was chief draughtsman at Pickersgill's before starting his own yard at Southwick in 1882. The yard remained under sole ownership until it closed in the post-war depression of the 1930s. Priestman made his fortune trading in South African diamonds and was a generous local benefactor, funding many charities and public buildings in Sunderland.

Sunderland's Ships

Although it was often very traditional in its approach to shipbuilding, Sunderland has produced some world famous ships and designs. These are a few of them.

When steam power was overtaking sail, Sunderland produced some of the finest sailing ships ever built. The "City of Adelaide", launched in 1864 by William Pile, Hay and Co., was one of the fastest ocean going clippers of her time. Her record to Adelaide in Australia was broken by another Sunderland ship, the "Torrens", which was launched by Laings in 1875. The "Torrens" was the last fully rigged (all sail), composite (iron frame, wood hull) passenger clipper ever built and sailed between England and Australia in just 64 days.



The Torrens, taken in 1892

In 1892, Doxfords brought out a new hull design, which became a popular design for cargo vessels. The "turret" ship had a smaller deck size, which meant that it cost less to tax.

Just before World War II, Thompsons designed a standard steam ship that was easy to build and to operate. The design was taken to America where several thousand were produced. The purpose of these emergency type cargo ships was to maintain the supply of food and munitions to Britain and they therefore became known as the "Liberty" ships.

After the war, Austin and Pickersgill developed the SD14 to replace the aging "Liberty" ships. The first SD14, the "Nicola", was launched in 1967 from the Southwick yard. It was one of the most successful designs of its day and was used worldwide.

Find out more

For more information, see "Shipbuilding on the Wear: Part 1" and visit the Local Studies Centre at Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre, which has many images and books on maritime heritage, including:

- Lloyds register of shipping
- "Sunderland. A River of Life" by Jack Curtis (2003)

Visit the "Built on Wearside" exhibition at Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens, and one of the open days at Sunderland Maritime Heritage (www.sunderlandmaritimeheritage.com) to see more about the City's proud shipbuilding heritage.