



Holy Trinity – the Parish Church of Sunderland Parish

While the architectural qualities of Holy Trinity are of considerable interest and warrant it being regarded as one of the architectural gems of the City it must also be viewed in the context of the social and economic context of the area which it served.

Holy Trinity was a new creation. Consecrated in 1719 it was one of very few new churches built in the late 17th Century – early Hanoverian period. Indeed the Parish of Sunderland was a new creation, carved from the much larger parish of Bishopwearmouth. The former has an extent of 220 acres while the latter was 9,500 acres. However the establishment of the new parish was recognition of the great significance of this small patch of Sunderland and the businessmen who orchestrated this.

The key was the coal export trade which had developed rapidly throughout the 18th Century in response especially to the needs of the growing smoky metropolis of London. The coal export trade of Sunderland dates mainly from the early 17th Century but lingered very much behind that of Newcastle until the outbreak of the English Civil War or War of Three Kingdoms which triggered off a period of turmoil and uncertainty until the Restoration of 1660. Throughout the period Newcastle was handicapped by its support for the King while Sunderland, dominated by the Lilburne clan, was parliamentarian. The result was that the coal trade grew with leaps and bounds.

To such an extent was the export growth that the physical nature of the harbour of Sunderland became a serious restriction and led the local business community to agitate for the creation of a river improvement body. The first attempt to obtain legislation in 1705/6 failed. The second attempt though, in 1717, against the background of the growing tide of speculation which would culminate in the frenzy of the South Sea Bubble, was successful. The result was the River Wear Commissioners. The leading gentlemen of the future parish of Sunderland were key drivers in obtaining the legislation and members of the RWC. Simultaneously the same group of businessmen must have been engaged in seeking legislative approval for the creation of the new parish of Sunderland. This process was completed with the building of the new church in 1719 – and the first Rector, Daniel Newcombe, was also a member of the RWC.

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The result of all of this activity was that within a few years the locus of social and economic power in Sunderland-on-the-sea (as it was described in the 1717 RWC legislation) had moved to the new parish in the heart of the developing port.

The role of the new church was very much as that of a Civic Centre today. Here, the gentlemen of the parish would carry out the key functions of the managing of their parish. The parish rate would be determined and collected and deposited (the large safe in the Vestry Room is a witness to this although it dates from the mid-nineteenth century) and would be allocated to the purposes for which it was used. Of course this would have included the maintenance of the church itself but extended into paying for necessary works for the maintenance and improvement of the highways and by-ways of the parish. The main expenditure, and a significant form of social control and status, was on the poor rate. The centre of this was the Church Vestry Room where the applicants for relief would have been interrogated by a committee of gentlemen who would then decide how much, if any, and in what form relief should be given. What records survive, mainly for the later 18th Century and early 19th Century, suggest that this was done with a degree of sensitivity to the individual circumstances of applicants.

Amongst other activities the Church would also be witness to the controversy over the cholera outbreak in 1831-32. The problem was that the outbreak resulted in a naval quarantine and the closure of the coal export trade at a critical point in the year when the price of coal was at its highest. The situation was confused by the fact that cholera was a new disease and the medical gentlemen were divided over its causes and treatment. Hence Holy Trinity was the centre for frequent meetings of gentlemen and medical personnel seeking to make arrangements for the diagnosis and treatment of victims and also the wider debate about the relevance of a quarantine.

So when you visit Holy Trinity remember that this was not only a vital and packed place of worship but also the administrative and political centre of a vibrant society and economy.