

Learning Zone

LESSON PLANS

East End of Sunderland

Discovering the local area: Notes on Edward Brown's Story and Harrison's Buildings

Harrison Buildings.:The Story of a Changing Community

Sunderland Parish was contained within 129 acres (20 the Town Moor)

- 1851 – average
- 11-19 people to each house
- 187 ale houses – 19 slaughter houses -
- 51 brothels
- One of the largest cemeteries in the country

1. The thriving and developing industrialisation of the town had made it an attractive proposition for all classes of people.

The super rich could become wealthier. The new emerging middle classes could become rich over night with the right investment and the working classes could find work, a place to live and settle down while the work was there and communities began to thrive.

2. The story of Harrison's' Buildings encapsulates the story of a town and in particular the development and endurance of the East End of Sunderland.

The history of the site embodies over 200 years of history that draws us into the social conditions that prevailed during that period.

3. To start the story we have to go back in time to 1727.

The site that would become Harrison's Buildings was originally the site of a mansion built in 1727 for the local coal fitter Edwards Browne. Browne like many of the aspiring new rich middle class took advantage of the developing coal trade and as a coal fitter matching up the supply and demand he made a significant amount of money very quickly.

4. However Browne at the time of building the house also commissioned a row of 3 storey houses for ship masters and keelmen, adjoining the house. The cost was approx £5,000. *These Would become known as Fitters Row*

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5. The house must have been outstanding as it was reported:

“The Beauties of Mr Browne’s house and grounds.....with extensive land and sea views were much admired by the inhabitants of the town, by whom Mr Browne was so much importuned for leave to view his house and grounds, that at length he caused a board with the words “Go about thy business” to be fixed at his entrance gate in Silver Street.

Browne did not enjoy his wealth and position or his beautiful new home for too long, he was eventually declared bankrupt and died in poverty in Cork in Ireland in 1730.

6. Ownership of the property was then transferred to Mr Meaburn Smith (son of the coal owner Thomas Smith)Who lived in Morton House

It initially became occupied by the Sunderland Ragged Reformatory and Industrial Schools.(According to Simmers History Of Sunderland Vol I

7. Browne’s house epitomised what was to become of the east end as those middle and upper classes in the area began to move westwards and southwards away from the growing grime and disease and over crowded East End.

8. In 1813 (1837) Browne’s house became the Custom House and the area by this time was deteriorating fast – many merchants and ship owners objected to having to make their way through squalid streets and alleys.

9. A reflection of the state of the area is reflected in an 1842 pamphlet by which time the houses had been turned into tenements. – 32 of the gardens were now timber yards.

10. 1845 Report on sanitary conditions in large towns described the area:

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"In Fitter's Row there is a narrow, confined place called the Hat Case, leading from the street to the Old Customs House, the wall of which blocks up the avenue and intercepts the free current of air. In No 10 there is a yard in which there is a most offensive midden, rented to a man for 9d per week and cleaned out - he says - every 8 or 10 weeks, but to all appearance never entirely emptied, being as we afterwards found out, the chief depository for all the abomination in this neighbourhood and one which is cried out against as a great public nuisance. The privies of the factory houses empty their contents into this dunghill. Stinking stagnant water has no outlet from this row in which human ordure and other disgusting objects are so thickly deposited that one can hardly step clear of them! "

11. East End of Sunderland at this time was a simply dreadful place to live. There had been a huge increase in population from approximately 2,000 in 1630 as the Civil War impacted on the Town and its shipping developments. By 1801 the population was 26,000 but by 1851 it was 64,000, the result of large scale immigration into Sunderland. The east end was the reception area for most of the populated a larger percentage stayed mostly in run down dilapidated housing. . The appalling conditions weren't unique to Sunderland but old towns generally suffered more than new.

1851 - Number 10 was occupied by 14 people in 4 families.

The area had become the home for many migrants, attracted to the area by the promise of work on the developing railways ad docks.

12. The 1851 census shows 4 households there, one headed by a mariner from Kendle (sic), one from Ireland, one from Sussex and only 1 local, from Durham. This pattern was repeated everywhere and showed the widespread immigration, men then typically marrying and having children born in Sunderland. On average a closer look at the census shows there were between 9-11 people per house in Sunderland

13. The area became known as the Hat Case – many of its inhabitants were Irish. However the state of the tenement with no running water or adequate sanitation provision can only be imagined - or not!!!

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14. 1858 directory there is an advert for 2 foundries in Fitter's Row, a cast iron one run by John Dixon selling amongst other things "sham stoves
15. and a brass foundry run by Edward Bailey who also had a shop in High St. This gives some idea of the conditions which must have prevailed in this small cul de sac.
16. A comparison of the OS maps for 1857 – 1897 show some demolition had taken place but it was still densely populated and dilapidated.

“The committee have to state with much regret their firm conviction that the evils which arise out of the crowded state of the dwellings and other causes above mentioned are aggravated to a lamentable extent by the immorality unhappily pervading the lowest classes in this town. ”

17. 1890 – The Housing of the Working Class Act was introduced – this put the local authority under some obligation to inspect areas of older housing and take appropriate action.
They had powers to declare places unfit for habitation. And force those landlords to make it a fit place to live. – Or they could place a compulsory purchase on the property and demolition it.
18. A medical officer Dr Harris on the then Committee of Health would inspect the areas and make recommendations. In July 1892 the Hat Case and Fitters Row area and Flag Lane area were declared unhealthy under the act and cleared.
The plan for the demolition involved 49 houses contained 129 dwellings and 460 people paying an average rent of 1 shilling to 1s6d a week.
19. It was not until 1896 that the Health Committee got to the planning stages for the cleared area.
20. It was resolved that a competition would be held for the plans of laying out of the Streets and buildings and dwellings.

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21. The instructions were that the housing should replace 480 persons displaced at the lowest possible rentals. The buildings were not to exceed three stories and shops and shops may be included.

The prize was 50.00 30.00 20.00. The Judge a Mr J Slater was to receive 100 guineas.

22. By November 1896 – 53 designs had been received – none of these from Sunderland.

Mr Slater had ruled out many of the designs as they contained balconies and walk ways, which from experience were unacceptable.

23. The new proposal was to house 468 people in 42 3 bedroom and 54 two bedroom homes each with a bath.

The competition was won by MB Perry and Robert Angell.

The final plans were accepted – however there was some discontent in the committee. However a meeting in 1897 drastically altered the plans by eliminating baths from the flats.

At the approved amended stage the plans were then to build 3 blocks of flats

The estimated cost was £12,500 – the value of the land £1,202.00

24. By December 1897 the Corporation were shocked by the rejection of their plans from the local Government Board – on the grounds that there was not enough open space at the rear.

The revised plans reduced the accommodation down to 325 people – the estimated costs now rising to £25,652.00

25. Feb 1899 the Board gave the final approval.

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26. The tenders were submitted

5 Sunderland Firms, 2 Newcastle, 1 Leeds ranging from 26,500 – 31,099

These estimates were over the agreed budgets so amendments were made to the agreed specifications.

April 1901 – new tenders requested.

The contract was finally awarded to Mr J. B. Scott of Sunderland for £20,340.00

Surprisingly by May of that year the committee agreed to rising costs of labour – materials sewage works etc.

The corporation applied for an increase in the loan from £25,650.00 to 31,905

27. Constant revision delays poor materials strikes theft and vandalism marred the progress of the building Eventually the first four tenants moved in in Sept 1903.

28. By the map of 1919 the streets are gone - no Hat Case, no Fitter's Row but the big building is still there - an industrial school for boys. The Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1892 compelled local authorities to act, streets were pulled down and the corporation built the first council houses in Sunderland, Harrison's Buildings, named after one of the councillors (Alderman Harrison chair of the Sanitary Committee), Fitter's Row became Rickaby Street. The streets are broadened, board schools appear and ironically another cycle of decline begins. The 2nd half of 19C was the beginning of the transformation, the first half of the 20C saw the removal of the slums and the building of the Garths, the 2nd half of the 20C and the beginning of the 21st saw the Garths themselves.

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