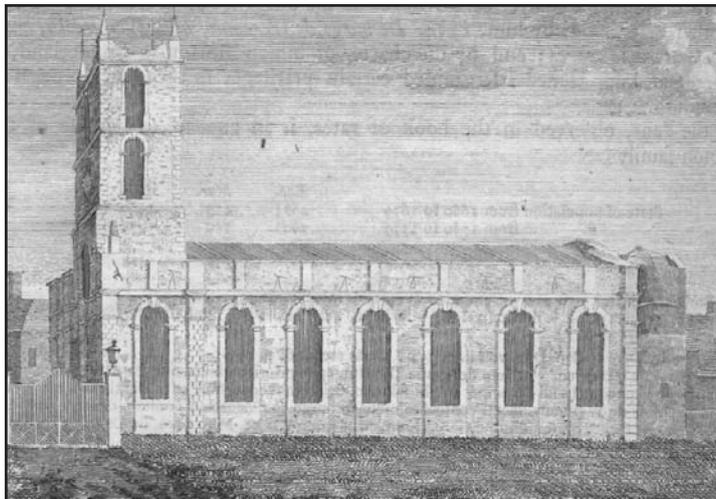


Old Sunderland Parish Church



Holy Trinity Church in 1782
(from Hutchinson, William. 1787. The History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham. Vol.II)

A brief history of Holy Trinity Church

Holy Trinity Church is the original parish church of the township of Sunderland. It was opened in 1719 to provide a place of worship for the people who lived in Sunderland. Until then, the nearest church had been St Michael's in the neighbouring village of Bishopwearmouth.

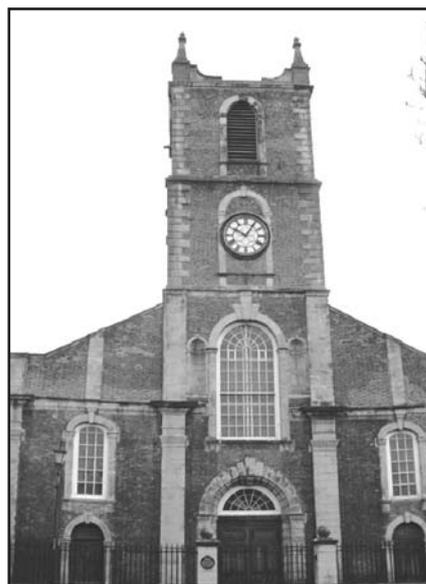
In the early 18th century, Sunderland was a busy, riverside port with a population of about 6,000 people, mainly merchants, craftsmen, sailors and their families. Sunderland was within the parish of Bishopwearmouth, but its population had increased so much that there was not enough room for everyone to worship in St Michael's church.

In 1712, some of the local merchants launched an appeal for a church and parish of their own. Funds were raised and it was decided to build the new church near the local burial ground on the Town Moor. Holy Trinity was consecrated on 5th September 1719. The new parish of Sunderland village covered the area of the modern city known as the East End.

Outside Holy Trinity

Nobody is sure who designed Holy Trinity, but Daniel Newcome and William Ety are known to have been involved. Newcome was the first rector of the church and Ety was a skilled wood carver and worked on and designed buildings elsewhere in the North.

The church itself was built in brick in the "baroque" style, fashionable at the time. It has a square tower, with a clock face on three of its sides. At the front are the three original oak doors. The church had been square-ended, but in 1735 Newcome added a semi-circular chancel (the part where the altar is and where the priests and the choir sit). Then in 1803, the roof was raised by about 10 feet (3 metres) in order to build a gallery inside. The church has seven windows along each side, but it is not clear whether these are original or added in 1803 when the roof was raised.



View of main entrance and tower

Inside the Church

Visitors enter the church through a porch – the left of the smaller front doors. This porch has a plaque on the wall from the house that Jack Crawford, the Hero of Camperdown, was born in.

The next room is the vestibule, which links all the other rooms in the church. In the centre of the vestibule there is a marble font, which has an elaborate wooden cover carved with cherubs' heads and a dove. When the font cover is raised it fits into an alcove in the ceiling above, which is also painted with cherubs. At one end of the room is a rack of ceremonial churchwardens' staves from the Victorian period and two collecting boxes dating from 1721.

The central porch at the base of the tower has a memorial to Revd. Robert Gray, who was rector of Sunderland from 1819-1838. Gray was well respected for his work with the poor. He died from typhus, which he caught from visiting the sick. Next to this porch is the vestry – the right hand of the smaller front doors. The vestry is normally the room in which priests change into their robes, and so it is usually next to the chancel. However, here it is at the other end of the church and has an outside door. We know that the Act of Parliament of 1719, that gave permission to build the church, states that “the gentlemen of the vestry” were in charge of the new parish. These men needed somewhere to meet and deal with local matters, and the vestry is where they did this, until 1835 when Sunderland became a borough. The original oak table that they sat at is still in place in the vestry.



A view of the inside c.1900, showing the two side galleries and box pews

would once have been box pews that were owned by local families, unlike the free seats in the galleries. The communion rail, with its semi-circular gate, is original and it is likely that the eagle-shaped lectern is too. The organ was built in 1936. Though much has changed over the centuries, the church is an impressive and beautiful reminder of the old township of Sunderland.

The present day

The church closed in 1988 due to low congregation numbers. It is owned by the Churches Conservation Trust, which regularly allows the church to be opened for special occasions. Its historical importance is recognised by listed building status and it is one of only two Grade I listed buildings in Sunderland.



Holy Trinity Church today

Find out more

For more information visit the Local Studies Centre at Sunderland City Library and Arts Centre, which has books such as *Holy Trinity Church, Sunderland Tyne and Wear* by Geoffrey Milburn (2003). Details of events at the church and contacts for the support group, the Friends of Old Sunderland Parish Church, are also available at the Library.

An explanation of listed building status and the listed building entry for Holy Trinity are available at www.sunderland.gov.uk/pages/ListedBuildings/lbdescription.asp.