

Sunderland ferries

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By 1700, the fords used by medieval and early modern travellers had more or less disappeared from the lower reaches of the Wear. A crossing between Sunderland and Monkwearmouth was not reinstated after being swept away by the sea in 1400,¹ although people who knew the river were able to cross near its mouth at low water until early in the 19th century.² Fords further upstream – one at Pallion noted in the 15th century,³ and that of medieval or earlier date at Hylton⁴ – were eventually replaced by ferries. High tide made these crossings impassable, as did any increase of water in the Wear, so that travellers were sometimes obliged to go to New Bridge, below Lambton castle, the only bridge downstream from Durham and until 1796 the nearest one to Sunderland.⁵ The Sunderland ferry, that closest to the mouth of the river, therefore remained of the utmost importance to the town.

The Sunderland ferry was let by the bishop of Durham to Walter Ettrick from 1661 when rights to the ferry and river passage, along with profits from salt, fruit, roots and victuals sold in the borough, were divided from the main borough lease.⁶ The lease was renewed in 1668, 1688 and 1702, on the latter occasion to Anthony Ettrick, who was granted the ferry and carriage landing on both sides of the river. Throughout this time the Ettricks paid a fine of £20 or 20 guineas and an annual rent of £2 for these privileges.⁷ Their descendants kept the franchise until the property was transferred to the bridge commissioners in 1796. The Williamson family had had confirmed by arbitration in 1710 their own interest in the Sunderland ferry, which they retained until 1846.⁸ Residents of Monkwearmouth and Monkwearmouth Shore were excused the usual halfpenny fare – it was a penny for a horse or cow – instead paying 2s 6d or 5s a year per household, while some dues were settled in wheat, eggs and Yule buns.⁹ The wording of leases of the borough by Bishop Neile in 1622 and Bishop Morton in 1633,¹⁰ and that of the inquiry of 1695 which investigated obstructions of the ferry landings,¹¹ suggests that throughout the 17th century there was only one ferry boat of Sunderland, although at times there were two and even three sets of ferry landings in the harbour area, and more than one boat may have operated. Nor are sources clear on the numbers, sizes and cargos of boats in the 18th century.¹² Matthew Cook, proprietor of the Sunderland ferry, built a new boat in the mid-18th century which had a capacity of four horses and was evidently larger than previous boats.¹³

The medieval ferry connected the foot of Bodlewell Lane, where stairs were still marked as a ferry landing in 1842,¹⁴ with a point directly opposite, near St Peter's in Monkwearmouth. The enquiry of 1695 is explicit that there were two landings near the river's mouth on both north and south banks, though not all of them then in use. On the Monkwearmouth side, these were 'on waste and unbuilt ground', while those in Sunderland were more developed, to the extent that access to the boats was impeded. The low ferry, or coble, boat landing had been filled with ballast and built upon by John Scarborough in about 1680.¹⁵ The alternative high ferry boat landing, called Chapman's or Palmer's stairs after the owner and one-time tenant of neighbouring property, was arguably the King's highway but had nonetheless been subjected to attempts by the Chapman family to build over it since the middle of the 17th century. Chapman's stairs were apparently the same landing as that referred to elsewhere as Bodlewell Lane, and the only viable one on the south side in 1695 after

Scarborough had made the coble boat landing inaccessible, for Walter Ettrick's new quay of c. 1670, some distance to the east of Chapman's stairs at the Custom House quay, proved too dangerous for passenger embarkation.¹⁶

In 1710 the northern landings consisted of a 'waste-shore or landing place' east of Sir William Williamson's North quay, and a similar low-lying area at Sand Point facing the west end of Custom House quay. References to ferry boats' landings in Eden's arbitration confirm that both routes were then in use, and imply that more than one boat could then have been at work on the river.¹⁷ In fact Eden gave Sir William Williamson, landowner on the Monkwearmouth side, and Anthony Ettrick as lessee of the ferry, permission to establish a third landing on the north, called middle landing, opposite and presumably connecting with Ettrick's quay.¹⁸ The high landing on the north side, east of Folly Point, at what was later Folly bank, had moved a short distance to the west, to the later site of Wear Street, by about 1785.¹⁹

On the south side, the low ferry (coble) boat landing, near the custom house at the eastern point of the harbour, was evidently in regular use in 1722.²⁰ Buck's prospect of the town in c. 1723 distinguishes between the high and low landings on the south, though middle landing was unmarked.²¹ Nor did it appear on a plan of the harbour in 1776.²² While the northern landings were rudimentary, berths on the Bishopwearmouth side were improved by the building of new quays from the early 18th century.²³ The Bodlewell Lane (or high) ferry ran from Wylam wharf, while the low ferry used Low or Commissioners' quay, or Thornhill's wharf.²⁴ The middle ferry continued to go from Ettrick's quay, connecting with the ancient Folly Bank landing on the north.²⁵

The Ettrick family, responsible as lessees for repairing and maintaining the ferry - in the late 17th century a rowing boat propelled by two men²⁶ - subcontracted the operation to others.²⁷ It was lucrative and of increasing value, apparently let in 1663 for £23 a year, rising by 1692 to £100 when run by Grace Walker and John Foster.²⁸ In 1722 the value of John Coulson's ferry boats and house made him Sunderland's highest ratepayer.²⁹ Widow Trumble's late husband was said in 1753 to have acquired £3,000 in a few years as master of the ferries.³⁰ William Cook (d. 1796), ferry proprietor during the closing decades of the 18th century, was a shipowner, freemason and prominent citizen.³¹ He was said to have lost income as 'the boatman was not honest'.³² The 1785 Wear Improvement Act ensured that the rights of the owners and proprietors of the valuable Sunderland and Hylton ferry boats were protected.³³

Profits were high because there was little alternative to the ferry, though it was a risky and uncomfortable experience. Garbutt in 1819 noted that the ancient ferry 'almost in the centre of the harbour... was become very insufficient, and unsafe' bringing frequent loss of life, constant delay and disappointment.³⁴ At low tide, c. 1810, a gangway of planks had to be used to access the ferry from the south bank.³⁵ Keels could interrupt the service for hours³⁶ - there are stories of passengers being obliged to leave the boat and walk 50 yards to the shore by stepping from keel to keel,³⁷ bringing to mind the 'bridge of keels' used by Scottish soldiers in 1644³⁸ - while flood waters and wrecked shipping in the harbour might stop it for days. In 1756 a ferry carrying about 20 passengers and a young horse was forced by the current under another ship's rope, leading to capsize and the loss of both ferrymen, the horse and rider, and a child.³⁹ Those lobbying for a bridge in 1791 argued that 'we have long

laboured under many difficulties and inconveniences, and frequently been exposed to great risk and danger of losing our lives by crossing the river in our ferry boats'.⁴⁰ With his Wearmouth bridge under construction in 1796, Rowland Burdon recollected that the ferry boats 'were always attended with inconvenience, and sometimes with danger: 22 persons were drowned in one of them in 1794, and a general officer who commanded the camp near Sunderland was, the following summer, so near being lost with all the officers of his staff, that, the boat sinking, they preserved their lives by plunging on horseback into the river.'⁴¹ The incident he reported as 1794 actually occurred in 1795, on a Sunday evening ebb tide, when the ferry, carrying about 27 people, was obstructed by other shipping and caught on a rope. Scottish Presbyterians returning from church were among those drowned, a tragedy which led to the foundation of a Presbyterian church on the north side of the river.⁴²

Hylton ferry:

Hylton ferry carried horses, cattle and conveyances, connecting the township of Ford on the south bank with that of Hylton, whence a very old road, possibly of Roman origin, led north to Newcastle.⁴³ That the Scottish cavalry forded the Wear at Hylton to reach Sunderland in 1644,⁴⁴ presumably using the medieval causeway described in the 19th century, suggests that the 14th-c. ferry had ceased or was insufficient, while the ford was still serviceable.⁴⁵ In fact Taylor Potts in 1892 recalled as a child having seen cattle and horses and carts ford the river at Hylton at low tide.⁴⁶ A ferry was revived in about 1659 by the manor of Hylton, which paid a tithe to the bishop.⁴⁷ Hylton ferry boat was a recognised placename in 1661, when a son of John Reed of that place was baptised at Bishopwearmouth,⁴⁸ and the 17th-c. ferry appears to have followed the same route as its medieval antecedent.⁴⁹ It was sometimes known, rather confusingly once Sunderland harbour had acquired more than one ferry, as the high ferry boat, distinguishing it from that nearer the mouth of the river,⁵⁰ and perhaps a further indicator that only one ferry then crossed the harbour.

The causeway at Hylton – accounts suggest that it was partly removed to ease the passage of keels in the early 19th century, with further demolition in about 1865 – formed 'a substantial dam' several feet above the river bed, and had perhaps been protected on the lower side by a parapet or rail.⁵¹ The Wear here is tidal, and though relatively narrow is deep and fast-flowing, perils with which the ferry also had to contend. A rope was therefore used to stop the ferry being swept downstream on a falling tide, though it was suggested in the early 18th century that the rope was deliberately used as a kind of toll bar by the Hilton family and their long-term ferry operator, Henry Dobson. Certainly the rope caused danger and inconvenience to river traffic, and it seems that after the legal dispute of 1711-13 it was raised so that it no longer obstructed the river.⁵² Later the ferry, a flat-bottomed boat, was operated by a chain on the river bed and hand-turned windlass, until about 1915 when it appears to have reverted to rowing boats.⁵³

Several roads converged upon Hylton ferry by the 1740s.⁵⁴ With the break up of the Hiltons' estate in 1750 the ferry was sold along with Wood House farm and 'the Ferry-boat farm' in the manor of Ford;⁵⁵ the Hylton ferry was later, in 1799, offered for sale separately.⁵⁶ The Hylton ferry estate, including land on both sides of the river, was sold again in 1816. The ferry then ran from a ship yard on the south bank to a track on the north leading north-eastwards through woods towards the Newcastle road.⁵⁷ Proposals to build a bridge at Hylton in 1817 did not come to fruition,⁵⁸ and

dozens of workmen still depended on the ferry in 1957, when it was suddenly withdrawn from service. Its owner, James Beveridge of Wood House farm, was unable to evict a former boatman from the run-down riverside cottage tied to the job, and the new ferryman could not work enough to support himself while living elsewhere.⁵⁹

Later ferries:

By the time Wearmouth bridge was built in 1795-6 two other ferries ran on the section of the river between Sunderland and Hylton.⁶⁰ The exact dates at which these were established is uncertain. That from Southwick to Deptford was in operation by 1750, when Thomasine Robinson's purchase of the Ayres Quay estate included land on which the glass factory stood, the whole of the wastes between high and low water mark from Pallion Quay to Rector's Glebe, three keel berths, and a half share of the Southwick ferry. The ferry seems then to have been well-established, let for nine years at £10 with the tenant responsible for repairs and for payments towards a replacement boat when needed.⁶¹ By 1770 the annual rent had risen to £30 with an additional £1 charged for use of a boat house.⁶² This service, which carried horses and conveyances, continued until the 20th century, latterly on two routes, the High Southwick ferry running below the Queen Alexandra bridge, and the Low from Southwick pottery to Deptford.⁶³

The Panns ferry, despite claims by its owners of 'ancient' status, may have been the shortest lived of all.⁶⁴ It ran between Beamish drop on the north and the later Fenwick's glass house, formerly Molly Linton's quay, on the south.⁶⁵ Panns Ferry road, leading to the water's edge from Panns bank a short distance downstream of the bridge, survived as a reminder long after the boat itself had disappeared.⁶⁶ This ferry carried horses and cattle, though it was not supposed to,⁶⁷ and the various boats used were too small to take more than one or two quiet horses. Passengers 'were afraid of going in the boat when the horse was unruly'.⁶⁸ Local residents lobbying for a bridge in 1791 did not see it as a total substitute for the ferries. Safety problems could, it was argued, be remedied if a bridge took the heavier traffic. 'When the ferry boats are more properly adapted for the purpose and not incommoded with horses, carriages &c, less inconveniences & risk will attend crossing the river.'⁶⁹ This turned out to be an accurate assessment, for a century later four ferries still operated in the town itself – from Deptford dock to Southwick, from Wylam wharf on the ancient route, from Ettrick's quay and from Commissioners' quay to the undeveloped shore of Monkwearmouth – as well as that at Hylton.⁷⁰ The Panns ferry, though, after enjoying a brief surge of popularity carrying workmen and horses during the building of the Wearmouth bridge, was too close to it to compete after 1796.⁷¹

The Wearmouth Bridge Act of 1792 specified that fair compensation should be paid to ferry owners 'injured by its erection'. The bridge trustees purchased the ancient Sunderland ferry from the bishop of Durham, who received £1,800, while the lessee William Ettrick was awarded £4,500 for his loss.⁷² Settling with the joint owners of the Panns ferry, or Pan boat, Sir Hedworth Williamson, who held rights on the north bank, and General Lambton, lessee from the bishop of rights on the south, was not so straightforward. Various witnesses spoke conflictingly about the Pan boat's role as a horse ferry.⁷³ The case went to arbitration by Messrs Wharton and Errington, with Arthur Mowbray acting as umpire, hearing as witness only the lessee of the boat, Alice Thompson, a niece of William Cook.⁷⁴ She claimed to have received £201 19s

3d in tolls during the year to May 1796, including annual sums from a few frequent users who paid the equivalent of 6d weekly. Thompson estimated the costs at 14s a week for the boatman's wages, £13 annually for taxes, and something over £5 a year to maintain and save to replace the boat. This produced an annual profit of about £144. The arbitrators deducted a fifth of the total receipts, income which came from illicitly carrying horses, but even so, taking account of the rising value and projected profits for 32 years, presumably the time left on the lease, the sum they reached was £7,395. The trustees declared this amount 'enormous' and had the award set aside on a technicality. The case came before the Quarter Sessions in 1799, when Alice Thompson was unable to substantiate her figures – it emerged that passenger receipts were actually about £133 - so the jury worked out a figure based on the boat's annual rent of £80, arriving at a total of £1,600 in compensation. Sir Hedworth and the Lambtons were furious and demanded that the verdict be set aside, but this proved impossible and they were obliged to settle.⁷⁵

Thereafter the remaining harbour ferries were run by the bridge trustees, and were listed as assets during various attempts to re-finance the bridge from about 1809.⁷⁶ They continued well-used, with the tolls let for £610 in 1826.⁷⁷ In the 50 years following the bridge's opening in 1796, harbour ferry tolls raised a total of £30,743, compared with receipts from the bridge of £116,301.⁷⁸ By the time pedestrian tolls were abolished on the bridge, a paddle steamer ferry had come into operation, in 1843.⁷⁹ The first such boat was the *Mab*, supposedly standing for Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses.⁸⁰ A ferry toll office, a 17th-c. house in Low Street which the bridge commissioners had bought in 1841, was still in use in 1867,⁸¹ when improvements to approaches to the Bodlewell Lane and North Quay landings were planned.⁸² By then the harbour ferries were vested in Sunderland corporation.⁸³ The upgrading of these harbour ferries during the 19th century reflects the convenience of the service and vitality of the river. By the 1950s, though, usage had declined, and a further fall was expected as houses around the harbour were cleared. Income had fallen to £600 a year, a tenth of the running costs. The ferry service was closed under the Sunderland Corporation Act of 1957, and the *W.F. Vint*, in service since 1926, made its final four-minute journey across the river in July 1957, the mayor ringing the ferry's bell a final time.⁸⁴

¹ J. Raine, (ed.), *The Inventories and Account Rolls of the Benedictine Houses or Cells of Jarrow and Monkwearmouth in the County of Durham*, (Surtees Soc., xxix, 1854), 248; *VCH Durham*, ii, 176.

² J.T. Middlemiss, 'Sunderland ferry', *Antiquities of Sund.* iii (1902), 3-4; Corder 29, 426-7.

³ A. Piper, *Durham Monks at Wearmouth* (1974), 3.

⁴ See below.

⁵ M.A. Richardson, *Reprints of Rare Tracts* (1847), ii, 7-15; BL Add 31,323 P; Royal Society, Smeaton vi, ff. 71-2. A Hylton bridge mentioned in 1615 crossed a smaller stream north west of Hylton on the Boldon boundary: C. M. Fraser (ed.), *Durham Quarter Session Rolls, 1471-1625* (Surtees Soc., cxcix, 1987-8), 257.

⁶ Durham Chapter Lib., Sharp 2, p. 253. **Add Spearman ref**

⁷ Durham Chapter Lib., Sharp 111, pp. 8, 67, 140.

⁸ H.G. Bowling (ed.) *Some Chapters on the History of Sunderland* (1970), 53; Burnett 1830, 7-8; Garbutt 1819, 126-7; *Gateshead Observer*, 14 Nov. 1846; Middlemiss, 'Sunderland ferry', 7.

⁹ Sunderland City Lib., Award of Sir Robert Eden, L624 W27; Burnett 1830, 10; TNA, E134/7Wm3/East20 (Durham); Middlemiss, 'Sunderland ferry', 7-8.

¹⁰ DULASC, Old University Manuscript E.I.9, ff. 34, 142.

¹¹ TNA, E134/7Wm3/East20 (Durham).

¹² For instance, Corder 33, 404.

¹³ Corder 29, 427.

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- ¹⁴ Hydrographic Office, L3222.
- ¹⁵ TNA, E134/7Wm3/East20 (Durham); Corder 33, 407.
- ¹⁶ TNA, E134/7Wm3/East20 (Durham); E134/7Wm3/Mich42 (Durham); Corder 33, 407.
- ¹⁷ Sunderland City Lib., Award of Sir Robert Eden, L624 W27, 4-5.
- ¹⁸ Sunderland City Lib., Award of Sir Robert Eden, L624 W27, 5-6.
- ¹⁹ Hydrographic Office, E501; Eye Plan.
- ²⁰ Guildhall Lib., Sun MS 11936/19, 33851.
- ²¹ Buck's prospect.
- ²² TWAS, DX882/2.
- ²³ Northumbs. RO, ZMI/B8/VII/9.
- ²⁴ Sunderland Aniq. Soc., Rain's Eye Plan; Wood's survey 1826; OS c. 1855; OS Durh VIII.14, .15 (1897).
- ²⁵ OS Durh VIII.14, .15 (1897).
- ²⁶ TNA, E134/7Wm3/Mich42 (Durham).
- ²⁷ TNA, E134/7Wm3/East20 (Durham).
- ²⁸ Corder 33, 407.
- ²⁹ Garbutt 1819, 44-5.
- ³⁰ Corder 33, 402.
- ³¹ Library and Museum of Freemasonry, Sea Captain's Lodge, 1780; Barfoot and Wilkes 1795-6, 515; Corder 33, 403.
- ³² Corder 29, 427.
- ³³ 25 Geo.III (1785), An Act for the Better Preservation and Improvement of the River Wear, and Port and Haven of Sunderland....
- ³⁴ Garbutt 1819, 303-4.
- ³⁵ Fordyce, ii (1857), 469.
- ³⁶ Corder 29, 428.
- ³⁷ G.S. McIntire, *The Sunderland Ferry* (1957), 7 (copy in Sunderland City Lib., L624 W27).
- ³⁸ A. Baharie, *Tales and Sketches, chiefly of Sunderland and Neighbourhood* (1887), 34; 'The Diary of Mr Robert Douglas when with the Scottish Army in England, 1644', *Historical Fragments Relative to Scottish Affairs from 1635 to 1664* (1833), 55.
- ³⁹ Sykes, *Local Records*, i, 216; Corder 33, 402.
- ⁴⁰ Plymouth & West Devon RO, 105/165.
- ⁴¹ J.G James, *Cast Iron Bridge....* 49 .
- ⁴² Sykes, *Local Records*, i, 374; Middlemiss, 'Sunderland ferry', 9; Corder 33, 404.
- ⁴³ Northumbs. RO, 3410/Wat/3/108/1; 'Hylton Ford', *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Newc*, NS iv (1889-90), 230-1; Surtees, *History of Durham*, ii, 20.
- ⁴⁴ 'Diary of Mr Robert Douglas', 55.
- ⁴⁵ DCM, Misc.Ch. 6223c, [15 Jan.] 1322/3; 'Hylton Ford', *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Newc*, NS iv (1889-90), 230-1; 'Roman Bridge at Hylton', , *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Newc*, NS i (1885), 134-5; **cross ref medieval ferries**.
- ⁴⁶ T. Potts, *Sunderland*, 63-4.
- ⁴⁷ TNA, E134/1Jas2/Mich37 (Durham).
- ⁴⁸ DRO, EP/Biw 2, 3 Mar. 1661.
- ⁴⁹ Surtees, *History of Durham*, ii, 39.
- ⁵⁰ TNA, E178/6216 (Durham, Northumberland & Yorks).
- ⁵¹ 'Roman Bridge at Hylton', , *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Newc*, NS i (1885), 134-5; Hylton Ford', *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Newc*, NS iv (1889-90), 230-1; Potts, *Sunderland*, 63.
- ⁵² S.T. Miller, 'The trouble with ferries', *Dur. Co. LHS Bull.* 19 (1976), 18-27.
- ⁵³ *Sunderland Echo*, 3 Jan. 1957; 25 Nov. 2005.
- ⁵⁴ DRO, Q/R/HD/Q/1.
- ⁵⁵ Surtees i, 242; HER 446; see also DRO, D/St/D6/1/1 for sale particulars?
- ⁵⁶ DRO, D/Br/E 47.
- ⁵⁷ Northumbs RO, 3410/Wat/3/108/1.
- ⁵⁸ Sunderland Lib. index, L624.2.
- ⁵⁹ *Sunderland Echo*, 3 Jan. 1957; HER 446.
- ⁶⁰ **Add ref to Soane letter – see James**
- ⁶¹ Univ. of Hull, DDCB/13/85-6, /58.
- ⁶² Univ. of Hull, DDCB/13/124.
- ⁶³ OS Durham VII SW (1898); Sunderland City Lib., notes on ferries.

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- ⁶⁴ Fordyce, ii (1857), 469.
- ⁶⁵ Middlemiss, 'Sunderland ferry', 1; Eye Plan; Corder 29, 425.
- ⁶⁶ OS Durham VIII.14 (1897)
- ⁶⁷ Bowling (ed.), *Some Chapters*, 53; Northumbs RO, 3410/Bud/14, pp. 246-8.
- ⁶⁸ Corder 29, 426.
- ⁶⁹ Plymouth & West Devon RO, 105/167.
- ⁷⁰ OS Durham VIII.10, .14, .15 (1897).
- ⁷¹ *Gateshead Observer*, 14 Nov. 1846; Corder 29, 428.
- ⁷² Durham Chapter Lib., Sharp 2, facing p. 227.
- ⁷³ Corder 29, 425-8.
- ⁷⁴ Corder 29, 426.
- ⁷⁵ Northumbs RO, 3410/Bud/14, pp. 246-8.
- ⁷⁶ BL, 10351.d.42; Local and Personal Act, 54 George III, c. cxvii, An Act to enable the several Persons therein named to dispose of certain Securities upon the Tolls of the Iron Bridge at Bishop Wearmouth, in the County of Durham, and Ferry Boats attached thereto, by way of Lottery.
- ⁷⁷ SAS, Wearmouth Bridge Box, notice 22 Aug. 1826.
- ⁷⁸ SAS, Wearmouth Bridge Box, bundle of cuttings, Paine v. Burdon, c. 1881.
- ⁷⁹ Sunderland Lib., annotations by Robert Smart (d. 1877), clerk to the bridge commissioners, in his own copy of Garbutt 1819; Corder 33, 403.
- ⁸⁰ McIntire, *Sunderland Ferry*, 7-8.
- ⁸¹ DULASC, Add MS.763 fo. 48r.; Corder 33, 406.
- ⁸² DRO, Q/D/P/289; Local Act, 30 & 31 Victoria I, c. lxxix An Act for empowering the Corporation of Sunderland to improve the Approaches to the Bodlewell Lane Ferry over the River Wear; and for amending the Wearmouth Bridge Act, 1857; and for other Purposes.
- ⁸³ Sunderland City Lib., notes on ferries.
- ⁸⁴ *Sunderland Echo*, 29 July 1957; McIntire, *Sunderland Ferry*, 8; Sunderland Corp Act.