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Monkwearmouth Station Museum

NEIL SINCLAIR

Neil Sinclair first joined the GSIA when he was at Cheltenham Museum. He is now Senior Assistant Curator at Sunderland Museums. We welcome this account of the foresight and enterprise, typical of the best exciting Museums of today, in this new use of a railway building in the north.

One of the finest examples of

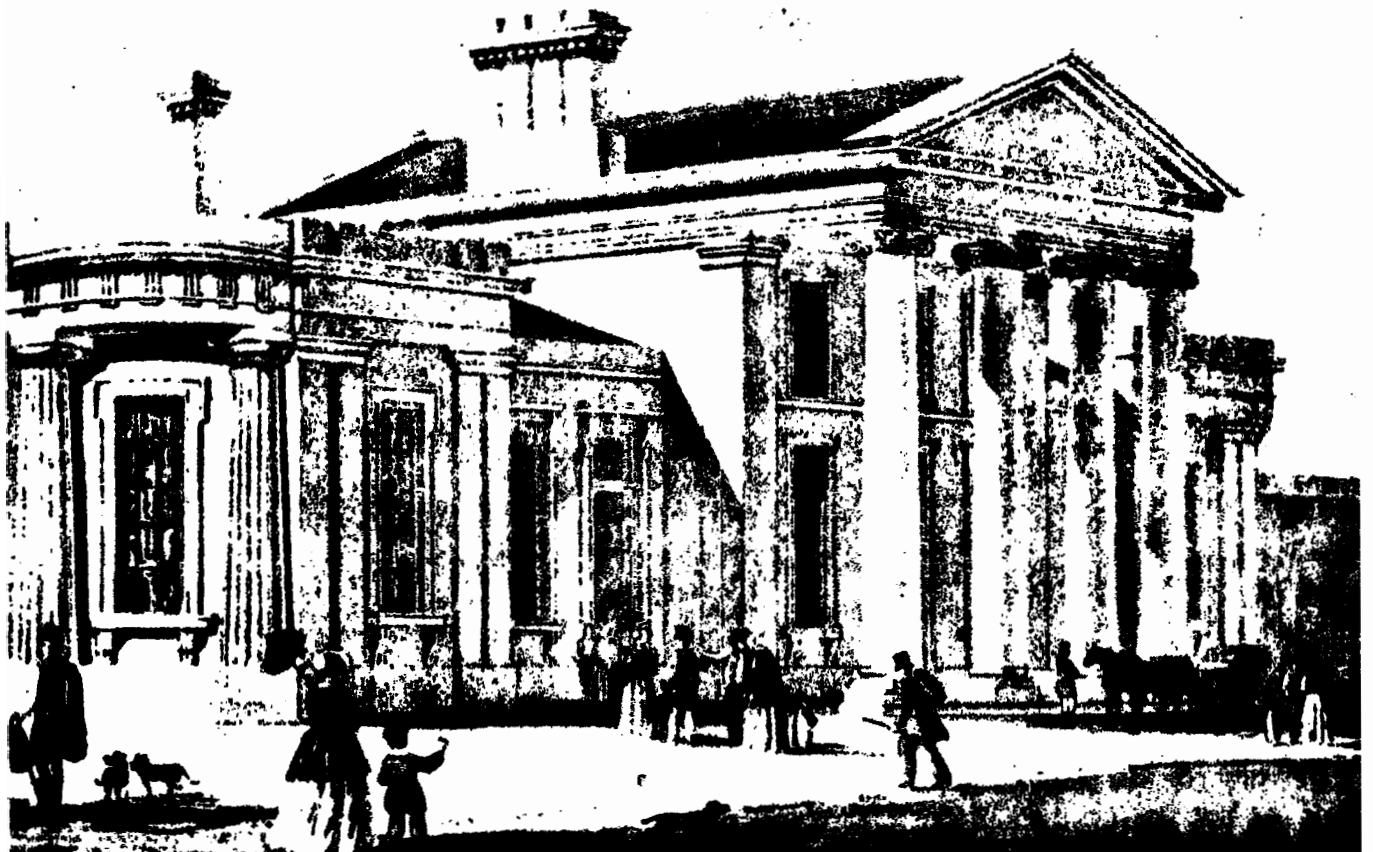
Monkwearmouth Station, closed to passengers in 1967, was reopened as a branch of Sunderland Museum by the Duke of Edinburgh on 31st May 1973. The preservation and restoration of one of Britians finest neo-classical stations has been the main objective of the project. The decision to use the interior as a museum was a logical follow-up to the saving of the station by Sunderland Corporation. The results of the conversion have shown some of the advantages and disadvantages of using historic buildings for museum purposes. A feature of special interest about Monkwearmouth is that the lines that run through the station are still heavily used by trains on the Newcastle-Sunderland line.

HISTORY

Monkwearmouth is the area of Sunderland which lies on the North bank of the Wear. The two banks of the river were linked by an iron road bridge built in 1796 by Rowland Burdon, M.P. The Wear, however, proved a barrier to all the railways which were built in the area during the first half of the century. Brunel produced a remarkable scheme for a two level bridge to take coal from South of the Wear to proposed docks at Monkwearmouth in 1834, but the whole docks project foundered. In 1837 the North Docks were built to a new design of Brunel's, but there was no rail link from the South.

The railway that served the North Docks was the Brandling Junction Railway which was opened in 1839 from Gateshead to Monkwearmouth. The passenger terminus was a rather inadequate structure with "only one waiting room of modest dimensions for all classes of passengers" about a quarter of a mile from the iron road bridge. After eight years it was closed and replaced by the present building which could not have contrasted more strongly with its predecessor.

Victorian railway architecture



The 1848 station was built at the end of an extension which terminated at the Northern end of the roadbridge. Behind the imposing classical building, which contained the offices, waiting rooms and stationmaster's house, was an overall roof which covered the platform and three tracks. The station aroused much admiration. The Sunderland Herald of June 1848 wrote :

"The chaste simplicity and neatness of the whole design, the beautiful contrasts between the Doric and Ionic styles introduced the exquisite proportion and symmetry of all the parts, and the workmanlike finish everywhere apparent combine to render it a great ornament to the town and a credit to all concerned in its erection."

Monkwearmouth Station was built in such an impressive style because the Chairman of the York Newcastle Railway which had absorbed the Brandling Junction in 1844 was George Hudson "The Railway King". Hudson was also an M.P. for Sunderland and the classical facade was built to commemorate his electoral triumph of 1845. The building of Monkwearmouth was only one way in which Sunderland gained from Hudson being M.P. , though the gains were usually at the expense of railway shareholders.

The architect of Monkwearmouth was not John Dobson of Newcastle, to whom the building is often attributed, but Thomas Moore of Sunderland. Little has been known of Moore till recently, but now it emerges that he designed several notable buildings in Sunderland. Like many architects of his day he started his career as a joiner and builder before being described in local directories as an architect. He was later joined in his architectural business by his two sons and the firm designed theatres throughout the North of England.

The year after the opening of the station the High Level Bridge across the Tyne was opened and Monkwearmouth trains were extended from Gateshead to Newcastle. Another thirty years were to elapse before the River Wear was crossed by the railway, but in 1879 Charles Harrison's bridge was opened by the North Eastern Railway. Monkwearmouth ceased to be a terminus and trains now ran through to the new Sunderland Central Station which also served the N.E.R's lines from the South.

After the opening of Sunderland Central, Monkwearmouth lost much of its importance, although it was still used by a considerable number of people travelling to the

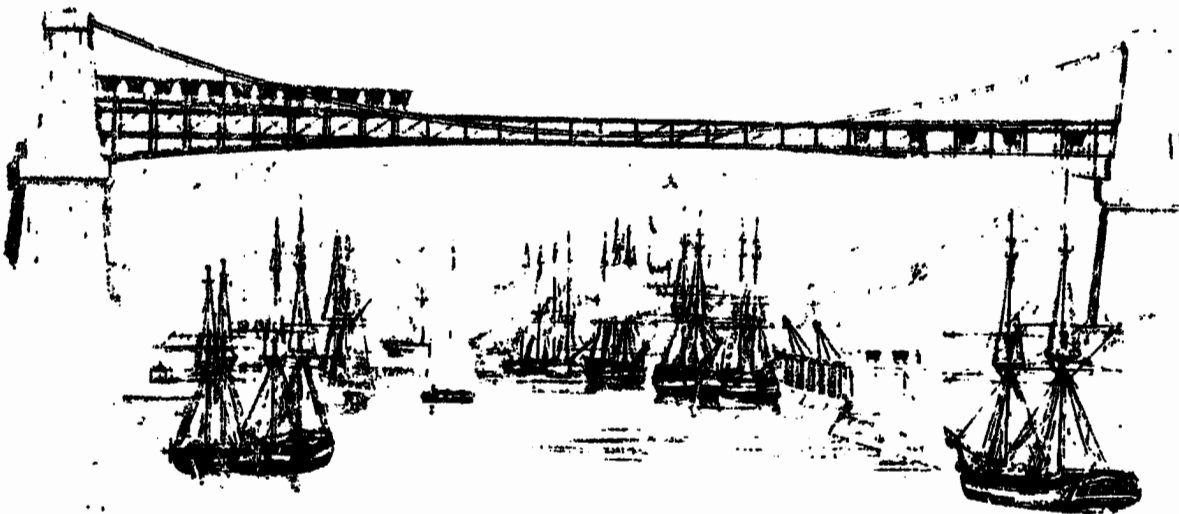
North side of Sunderland especially shipyard workers. Some travelled from outside the town to shipyards in the Monkwearmouth area, while others who lived in Sunderland travelled to the Tyne yards.

One result of the decline in Monkwearmouth's significance was no major alterations were made to the station in the next ninety years, apart from the removal of the overall roof in the 1920s. The station retained its Victorian atmosphere. In a centenary article in the Sunderland Echo 1948 a writer remarked about the booking office that :

"I half expected to find Bob Cratchit there, perched on his high stool, and straining his eyes over his great ledger in the wan light of a gas mantle whose beam was too feeble to pierce all the shadows of the large room.... The ledger was there in the gaslight, real and solid as the big desk on which it lay. The gloom was there too....."

He also noted that many of the rooms were derelict, forlorn and damp.

In 1967 Monkwearmouth station was closed to passengers. For three more years it was still used for parcels traffic and for offices, but then it became completely derelict. To save one of Wearside's finest buildings, Sunderland Corporation purchased the station in December 1971.



*Design for a Railway Bridge over the Wear
at Sunderland*

CONVERSION TO A MUSEUM

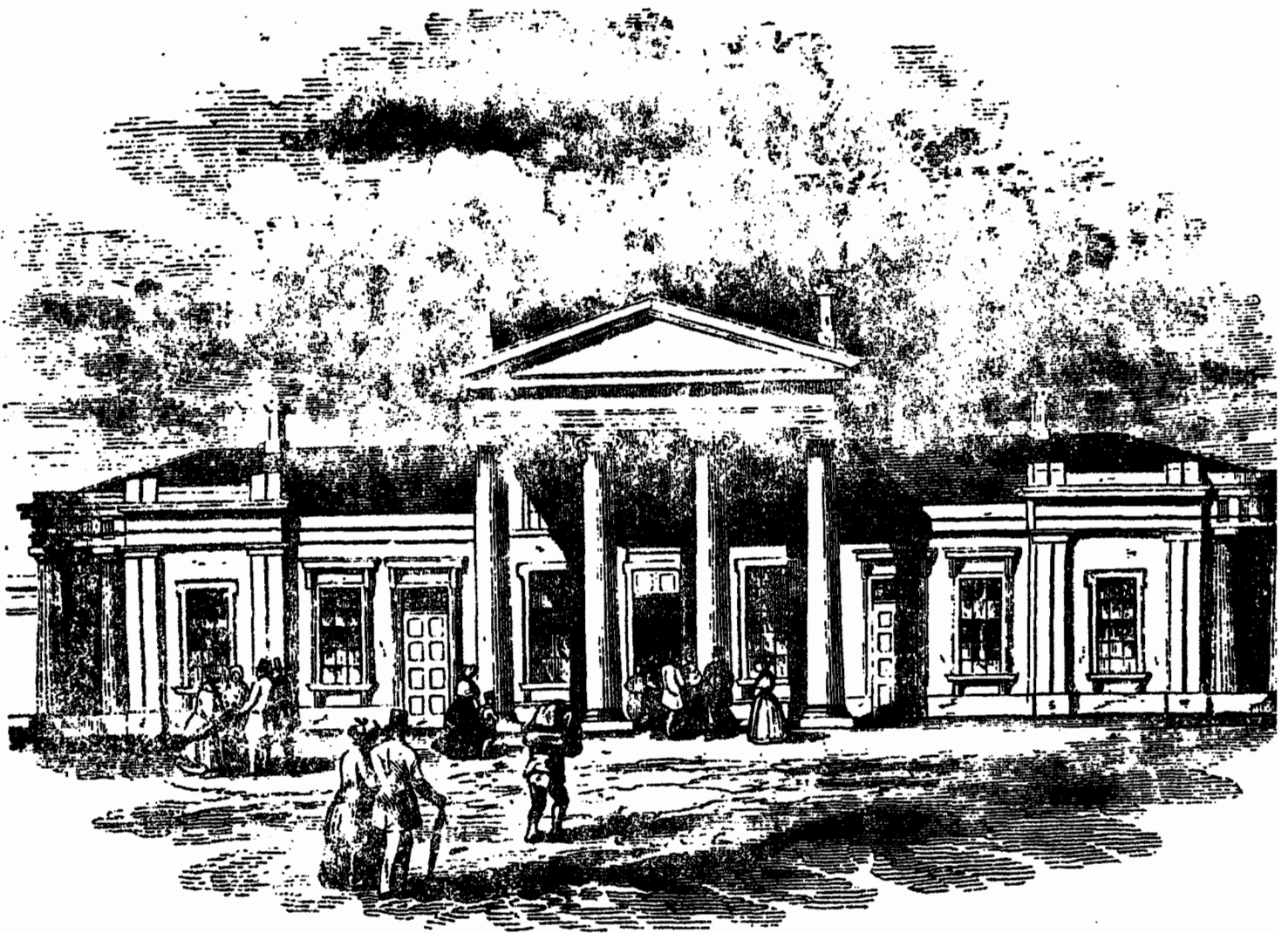
Extensive work was necessary both on the outside and the inside of the building. Externally all the stonework has been cleaned and, where necessary, renewed. This, and the landscaping of the adjoining area has produced a remarkable transformation, which is particularly apparent when the station is floodlit during the hours of darkness. People who previously considered the station an eyesore now speak enthusiastically of it.

The conversion of the interior to a museum posed several problems. On the ground floor there were over a dozen rooms, most of which were not connected, and were sometimes on different levels. Years of neglect had also taken their toll on the inside as well as on the outside of the building. The upper floor of the building, the former stationmaster's house, was still being lived in by a railwayman's widow, but this area was also in a state of bad repair.

It was decided that all the ground floor, except the north wing, should be used for display purposes. The upper floor should be used for a picture lending service and for storage. The project has involved the demolition of several walls, and the insertion of new openings in others to allow visitors to move freely through the exhibition area. The ground floor was previously lit only by gas; a track lighting system has now been installed to allow spotlights to be moved about to suit changing displays.

It has been one of the aims of the conversion to retain as much of the station atmosphere as possible. In particular this has been done by retaining and restoring the booking office. This was installed by the N.E.R. in 1866 and copies of the original plans displayed in the museum show that it has hardly changed since that date. Most of the small fittings - ticket punches, inkwells etc, - had, however, disappeared, but thanks to the cooperation of the local British Railways management these have been replaced by N.E.R. items which still existed in railway offices in the area. The whole booking area has therefore been fairly faithfully restored to its Edwardian condition, complete with 'clerks' and 'passengers'.

The section of platform under the canopy has also been restored, and is once more complete with luggage and porters barrows. The sides of the canopy have been glazed in, so that visitors can see trains on the



THE NEW RAILWAY STATION,

Newcastle-Sunderland line a few feet away. Conversely passengers on the trains can catch a glimpse of a group of Victorian figures which is floodlit at night. It is hoped to start work soon on the repair of the platforms and the 1879 station footbridge, thus ensuring the preservation of the complete station atmosphere.

In the museum an attempt has been made to deal with the history of the station and of people connected with it. The well-known portrait of George Hudson by Sir Francis Grant has been transferred from the River Wear Commissioners' office and is now displayed alongside posters relating to Hudson's career as an M.P.

Most of the display area will be used till July 1974 for an exhibition of the history of the Monkwearmouth area; this is in connection with the Wearmouth 1300 Festival. One section is devoted to Monkwearmouth transport and shows the approach that will be taken when the permanent display of Wearside transport material is mounted after 1974. The approach is to concentrate on

local historical aspects. In this way specific buildings and people can be dealt with.

PUBLIC RESPONSE

The initial response to the project has been extremely encouraging. The restoration of the exterior of the building has been widely approved, as can be seen from the correspondence columns of the local press. The conversion of the interior to a museum has turned out to be more popular than had been envisaged. Over 40,000 people visited the building during the first five months of its new role as a museum. The most popular feature has been the booking office. Visitors have remarked on the atmosphere of the station. It is hoped to make full use of this once local transport displays are arranged; a display about the transport of coal by train will have more impact when coal trains can be seen through the gallery's windows.

As noted above, the restoration and conversion of the station has proved to be a major task. The total cost was over £40,000 and the work proved to be more extensive than had first been envisaged. Public support, has, however, more than justified the expenditure on the scheme and plans are now being formulated for the second phase of the project. This involves the adaptation of the former cattle dock area to house large exhibits such as a Londonderry Collieries chaldron wagon from Seaham harbour.



Monkwearmouth Station Museum is situated in North Bridge Street, Sunderland, and is open: Monday - Friday 9.30 - 5.30 and Saturday 9.30 - 4.0 p.m. (Closed Sundays and Bank Holidays) Admission is free.

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