

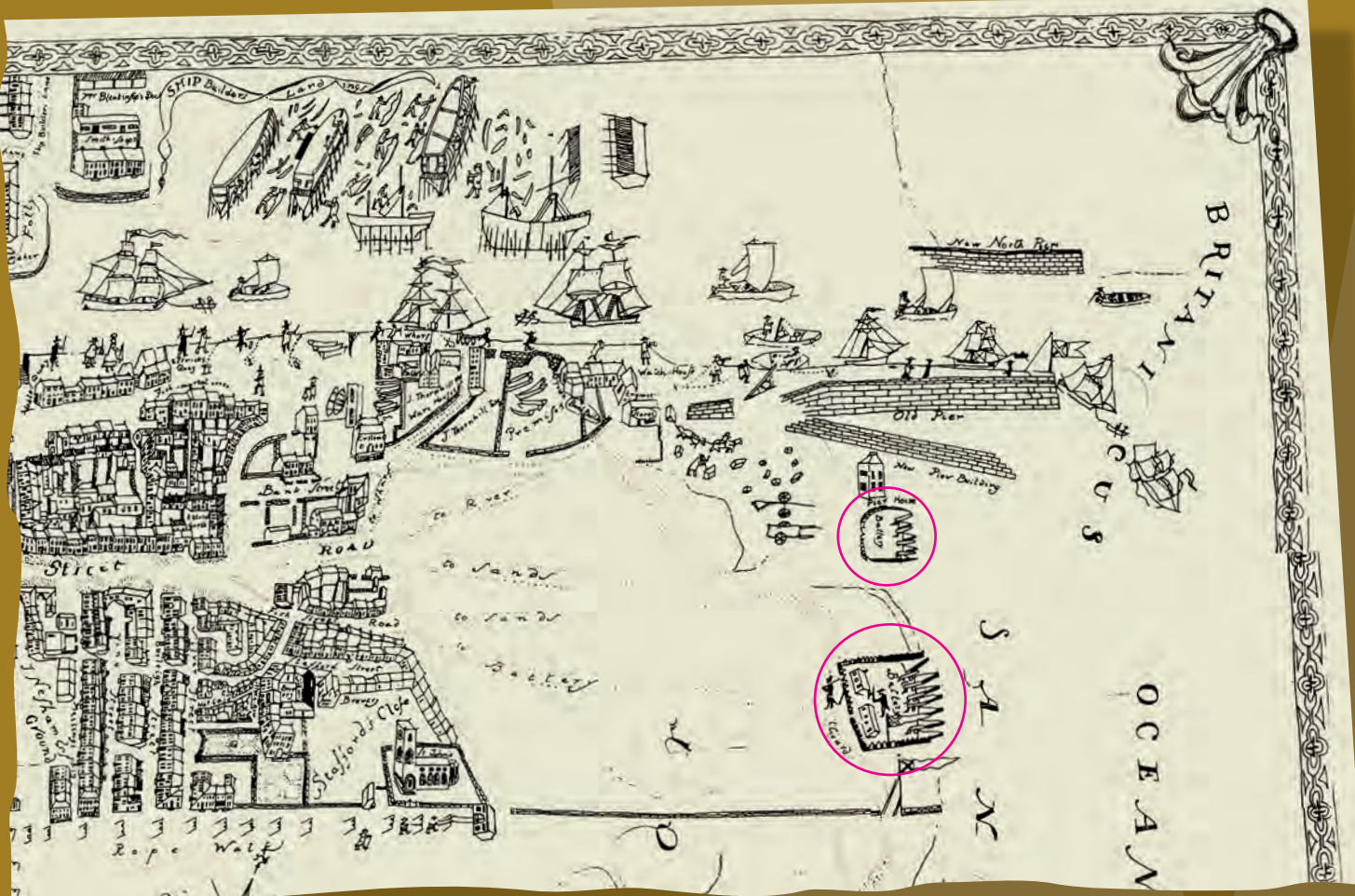
Sunderland under attack

With its long history of shipbuilding and as a major port, it’s not surprising that Sunderland has been a key target for countries at war with Britain. From feared Spanish and then French attacks in the 18th century to the devastating aerial bombardment in World War II, local defensive operations have had to develop and adapt to new challenges.



From an ear to a privateer

The first permanent gun installations at Sunderland were to defend against possible attack by Spanish ships during the War of Jenkins’ Ear (1739–48). A battery of four cannons was built at Coney Garth, overlooking the main channel of the River Wear. Defences were upgraded and added to during the Seven Years’ War (1756–63), this time with well-founded fears of a French attack in mind. These new defences included a battery on top of the cliffs at Roker, the first of various gun emplacements at Roker for the next 200 years. A third round of improvements to the coastal defences followed during the American War of Independence (1775–83). One of the main threats at this time was from the notorious privateer John Paul Jones, who as an officer of the Continental Navy of the American Revolution was raiding the east coast and attacking British boats with a squadron of warships.



Courtesy of Sunderland Antiquarian Society www.sunderland-antiquarians.org/

Black cat early defences

The batteries and barracks of Town Moor are shown in this 18th century plan of Sunderland. From 1805 this battery was known as Black Cat Battery after a drunken volunteer mistook a large cat for the devil and fled the barracks, much to the amusement of locals.

Ruthless buccaneer or American hero?

John Paul Jones (1747–1792) was a complex character. Born in south west Scotland, he went from a blossoming career in the British Merchant Navy to settling in North America after killing one of his crew in a dispute about pay. From then on he effectively swapped sides, fighting for the American rebel forces in the War of Independence.



First World War: Zeppelins and U-Boats

Sunderland played a crucial role in Britain’s war effort in the First World War. Not only was the town a significant producer and exporter of materials and ships, but thousands of Sunderland men volunteered to fight. Of the 18,000 local men who served in the armed forces around 6,000 lost their lives or were wounded. After war was declared in 1914, Sunderland took swift action to defend itself against coastal bombardment and aerial attack by building gun emplacements at Roker and placing block ships and torpedo nets in the harbour. Anti-aircraft guns and a new airfield were built and troops patrolled the town and coastline. Shipbuilding was stepped up and by the end of the war in 1918 the shipyards had built an incredible 360 ships for the war effort. Women replaced men in many industries and in 1915 ten women were employed as tram conductresses for the first time. The first to be taken on, Sally Ann Holmes, was injured in a German zeppelin attack on 1st April 1916. During this raid, 22 people died and many more were injured. The guns at Roker hit the zeppelin but it escaped serious damage and went on to drop more bombs on Middlesbrough.



Sally Ann Holmes and the remains of her bombed out tram.
Images courtesy of Ian Alderson

Forewarned is forearmed

This unusual structure is an example of an ‘acoustic mirror’, a novel type of early-warning device. It was installed towards the end of World War I and can be found near Fulwell windmill.



Second World War: the battle for the skies

With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Sunderland was once again a prime target for attack. This time it was the German Luftwaffe that wreaked death and destruction. The most intense bombing was during air raids between 1940 and 1943. The raid of 16th May 1943 was one of the worst and was described by the Sunderland Echo: ‘Showers of incendiary bombs as well as high explosives were dropped and these caused several fires, some of which burned furiously for a considerable time.’ During these devastating attacks 267 people lost their lives and 4,000 homes were destroyed or damaged. The shipyards and other industrial areas were also hit. In 1940 Sunderland’s Central Station was badly damaged. In response to these attacks, anti-aircraft guns and searchlights were hastily put up around the town.



Courtesy of the Sunderland Echo

Severe damage was inflicted during bombing raids by the German Luftwaffe. Central station (above) was hit in 1940. In this case thankfully no one was even injured.



Courtesy of the Sunderland Echo

The women’s branch of the army was called the Auxiliary Territorial Service, or ATS. The photo shows an ‘Ack-Ack’ Sergeant explaining a spotting instrument to ATS recruits. Women would track aircraft with radar, operate the searchlights and aim the guns, but only the men were allowed to fire them.