

THE WEAR SIDE SHIP BUILDING BUSINESSES **ASSOCIATED WITH THE NAME POTTS**

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Introduction

This paper began out of simple curiosity to see whether there was a connection between two ship building businesses operated under the Potts name in the Sunderland area during the mid-part of the 19th century, one in Low Street, Sunderland, the other at Seaham Harbour. Both had built ships for a firm of ship brokers and owners whom the author is researching. It became apparent that little research had been done on these firms. This paper, then, is a “one name study” of ship building firms in and around Sunderland carrying the Potts name and, as a spin-off, that of the immediate neighbour of the Potts yard in Low Street. Several of these businesses were short lived and some built few ships. However the author believes that it is of historical interest to understand the scope of these firms and the relationships, or lack of such, between the businesses.

The paper therefore covers:-

- **William Potts the elder of Hylton Ferry** and the subsequent businesses of his two sons William the younger and Edward the elder in the same place.
- The Low Street yard in Bishopwearmouth which traded under the name of **William Potts**, then later under his sons as **R H Potts and Brothers**.
- The Low Street yard of **J T Alcock** and his predecessors on that site.
- A yard at North Quay, Monkwearmouth run by **Edward Potts** the younger (son of Edward the elder above)
- The Seaham yard of said **Edward Potts** the younger then of his brother **Robert Potts**.
- A short lived business in Pallion under the name **Bradley and Potts**.
- A business in Monkwearmouth, primarily boat builders, variously named **Cuthbert Potts and Co.**, **Cuthbert Potts and Brothers**, **Potts and Burn** and **M Potts and Son**.
- A short lived business at South Hylton named **McAndrew, Cowan and Potts**.

Insufficient resources are to hand to develop a comprehensive history of each these businesses, but a reasonable picture has emerged of the key people involved, the time frame over which the businesses operated and the scope and nature of the businesses. I’m posting this paper on Peter Searle’s Sunderland website as a resource for others and with an invitation to anyone to comment or contribute.

In preparing this analysis, I have drawn data only from period sources so that all information has a proper “audit trail”. The primary resource has been local newspapers available through the [British Newspaper Archive](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk), but we should note that there are no papers for Sunderland yet available before late 1873 and those for the North East of England in general for the early 19th century are somewhat limited. Indeed, there is a complete gap between 1807 and 1814.

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Reference has also been made to the records held in the [North East Inheritance Database](#) and [Durham Records On-line](#). For brevity, the records have not been reproduced in this document, but are to hand if supporting evidence is needed.

Where I have referred to any recent research for guidance it is clearly stated.

It should be said that the author has not attempted to develop complete detailed lists of ship built by any of these yards. Such information as came to hand has been included only to inform the narrative about the business, but no doubt Peter Searle will, in time, develop fuller information on the ships themselves.

Chapter 1

Potts Family Shipbuilding in Hylton Ferry

Our story begins with William Potts the elder of Hylton Ferry (1736-1798). There is a useful article about the early days of the Potts shipbuilding activities in [Sunderland: A History of The Town, Port, Trade and Commerce by Taylor Potts \(1892\)](#) which I have included in full below. Although written 100 years after the events described, and probably based largely on anecdote, some corroboration can be found for elements of this account which will be explored below. Taylor Potts (TP), who will appear again later in this narrative and who was not related to William of Hylton Ferry, gives some information about William the elder's life, little of which has so far been substantiated but sounds plausible.

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WILLIAM POTTS,

Of South Hylton, built on the yard just below the Ferry-boat Landing; the yard adjoined the landing. He lived in a house going down the bank to the yard and ferry. William Potts the elder died May 2nd, 1798, aged sixty-three years.

He left a will bequeathing the business to his two sons, William and Edward, enjoining them therein to carry on the business in partnership, and not to separate for a certain number of years, so that William and Edward Potts were in business in May, 1798. After the time had elapsed the brothers separated, and Edward laid out the shipbuilding yard below the pottery at the lower part of Hylton. The double two-storied house on the left hand side of the road going down to the ferry was built for Mr. Edward Potts, and was afterwards occupied by Dawson, the potter.

William Potts retained possession of the yard next to the ferry between the years 1807 and 1812; he removed from this yard to the one in the Low Street, which he purchased from the Russell family (it had previously been a raff yard). He also purchased the property opposite the yard in the Low Street, including the large three-storied house in which Colonel John Lilburn was born. There was a pump in the yard at the back of the house. He died on August 18th, 1852, aged seventy-eight years. The late Mr. R. H. Potts was of the third generation of shipbuilders,

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and was the representative of one of the oldest shipbuilding families on the Wear or Port of Sunderland, having been shipbuilders for over a century.

MR. REAY.

Built at North Hylton on the high end of the quay and south-west of the pottery; he lived in the double house just outside the yard, facing south, and which had a garden in front. The house was afterwards occupied by Mr. Austin the potter, and latterly by the late Mr. Ettrick. Mr. Reay married the sister of William Potts the elder; after Mr. Reay's death the widow carried on the business, her brother William, then a young man, acting as foreman and partly manager. When he left to commence business on his own account, at South Hylton, he recommended Neddie Brown, who had been working in the yard as a carpenter, to be the foreman. The late Robert Reay, who was only a young lad when his father died, afterwards carried on the yard with Neddie Brown as foreman, and made a good deal of money. Mr. Reay afterwards bought the estate at Hylton and removed the shipbuilding yard down to the flat below the carriage road to Newcastle, which ran north through the estate; he also built the large house or hall on the estate, known as Hylton Grange, afterwards the property of George Hudson. (Squire Reay was never married.)

Neddie Brown, afterwards known as "Old Neddie," occupied the yard vacated by Robert Reay, and lived in the public house in the road north of the pottery, close to the yard.

Mr. Reay's is the oldest firm of shipbuilders we have been able to trace, and goes far back into the last century.

As we have related, William Potts the elder, who died in 1798, aged sixty-three years, went, when a young man, to be foreman for his sister, the widow of Mr. Reay.

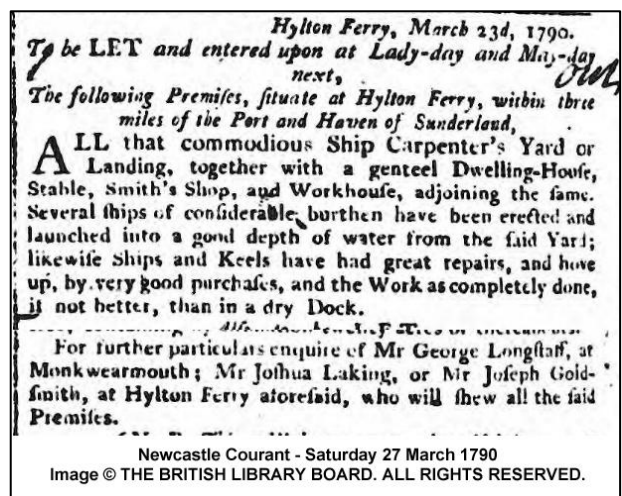
No period resources have come to hand to identify any ships built by William Potts the elder.

In his [will](#), which is to hand but not included here, William the elder identified himself as a grocer, shipbuilder and blacksmith. He had three sons, William the younger, Edward and Robert. On his death in 1798 key bequests, as far as this account is concerned, were as follows:-

- the stock-in trade of his grocery business in Hylton to his wife Ann.
- a house in Hylton Ferry (leased to others) to son Robert.
- a nearly completed coal lighter standing on his landing place at Hylton Ferry to Robert.
- his freehold grocery shop in the High Street of Sunderland to son William (who occupied the shop at that time).
- his tools and stock in trade as a ships carpenter and blacksmiths in equal parts to William and Edward.

Of note is that William was personally charged with making legacy payments for his mother and sisters out of the income from the property in High Street, Sunderland, Edward being specifically exempted.

There is no mention in the will of a requirement for William and Edward to operate the shipbuilding business together for a specific period, so if true this must have been a verbal wish. Nor is there any mention of the shipyard premises in the will. This would have been specifically mentioned if William the elder owned the freehold, so we can conclude that this was rented property and I think it probable that William took the yard in response to the advertisement shown right from 1790. This coincides with the year others believe that William began building in his own right.

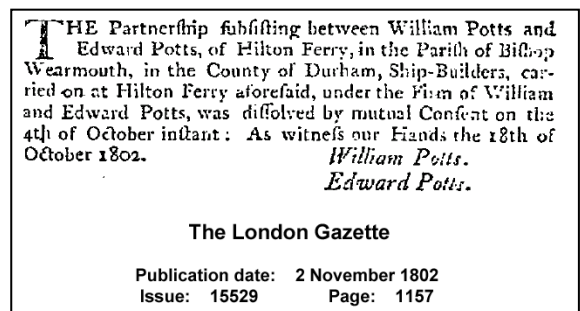


William the younger married in the latter part of 1798 to Margaret Ranson and was at that time described as a grocer. William advertised the grocery business for sale in 1799. (He clearly did not succeed in selling the freehold, as in 1806 William advertised the premises to let, in the occupation of others and still trading as a grocer).

In the record of baptism of their children, William described himself in 1801 as a shipwright and in 1805 as a shipbuilder. All their children were baptised in Bishopwearmouth. Margaret died and William re-married in 1810 to Dorothy Laws. In the marriage register in St. Michael & All Angels, Bishopwearmouth, he is described as "of this Parish." We might conclude that William continued to live in Bishopwearmouth whilst operating the yard in Hylton Ferry.

Edward married in 1800 and was described in the register as a shipbuilder.

Taylor Potts says that William and Edward entered into partnership on their father's death and later split up. This can be confirmed as the London Gazette records the dissolution of their partnership in 1802 (right).

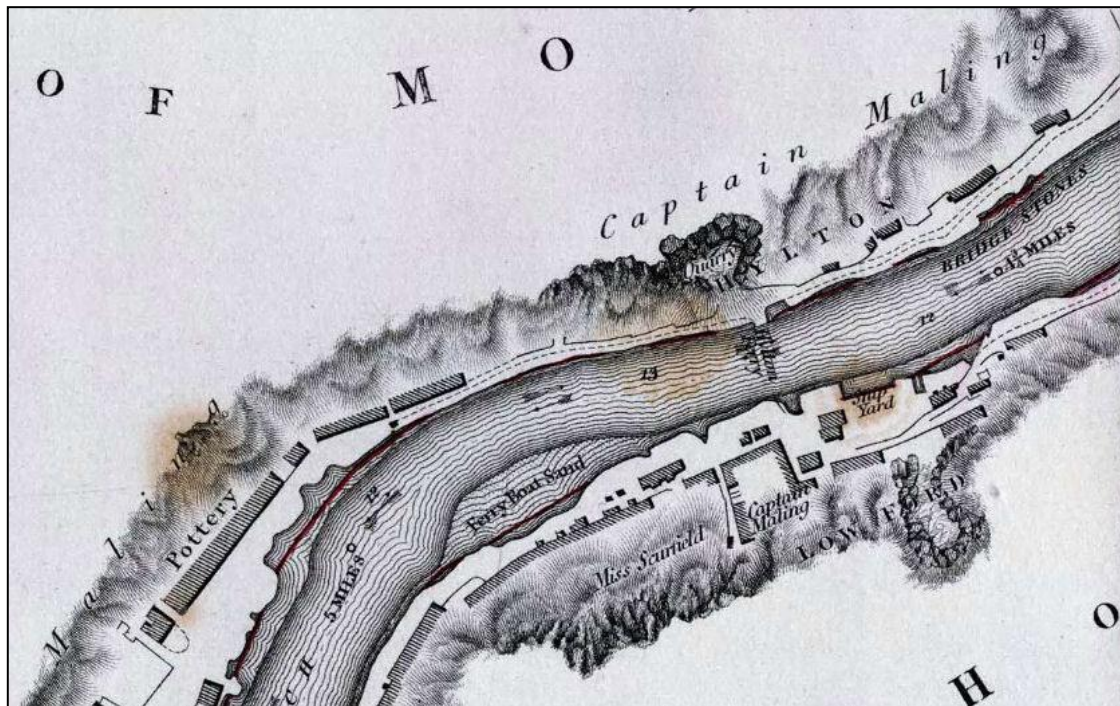


TP states that William continued with the yard at Hylton Ferry bequeathed by his father. I have so far found nothing to support or oppose this. TP suggests that he moved his business to Sunderland in 1812. I've found nothing more in contemporary records about William the younger until 1817, by which time he was operating from Low Street, Bishopwearmouth, Sunderland.

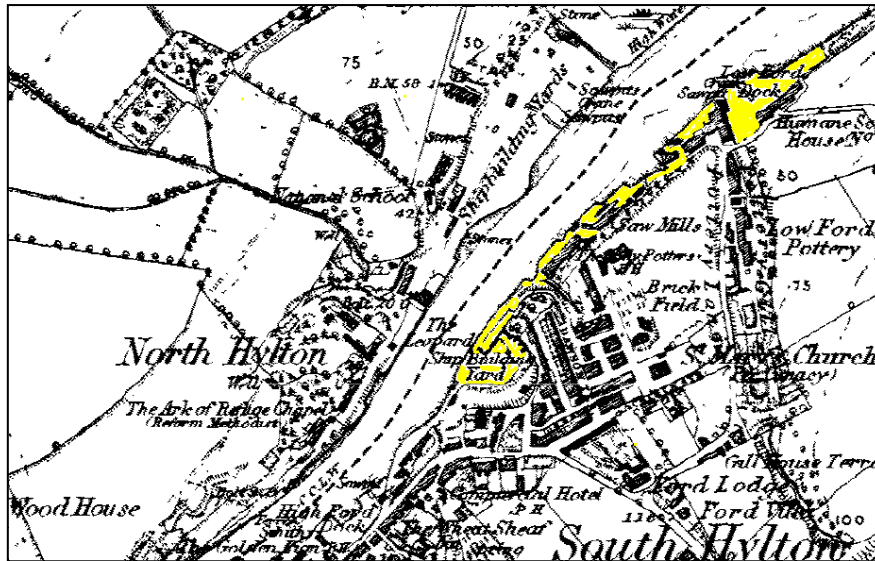
It is recorded that Messrs Potts built the vessel *Sunderland Packet* in 1811. No specific report of the launch has yet been found – so we don't know which of the Potts brothers built her, nor in which yard.

In light of the provisions of their father's will, and the apparent disparity in their trade backgrounds, I speculate that perhaps William the younger was the businessman in this family and, in continuing to run a shipyard after splitting with his brother, employed a foreman shipwright to design the ships and run the yard - possibly his brother Robert? Robert died in May 1812, the burial taking place in Bishopwearmouth, which perhaps suggests that William had moved his business by then. Robert does not appear to have left a will.

The presumed location of William's shipyard in Hylton Ferry (described by TP as "just below the ferry landing) can be seen on the 1826 map below. It is thought that this was later known as Quarry Hole Yard.



TP says that Edward laid out a ship yard "below the pottery in the lower part of Hylton". This implies the pottery on the south bank of the river in the Low Ford area, i.e. Dawson's Low Ford Pottery, which would be consistent with Edward having a house built in Low Ford which was later occupied by Mr Dawson. "Below the pottery" could mean further downstream, or at a lower elevation. I believe that this places his yard somewhere between (and including) the large shipyard by the Leopard Inn and the quayside downstream later referred to as Low Ford Dock i.e. anywhere in the yellow area on the (much later) map below. TP also says that Edward Potts yard was later occupied by William Gales and then by Willy Naisby which I think points towards the yard by the Leopard, but have not been able to confirm this.



On 11 March 1814 it was recorded that Edward Potts had a copper fastened vessel of 210 tons almost complete and was expecting to complete it the following month.

There is a single reference made in a later document saying that ships were built in Hylton by Messrs E and W Potts in 1810. There is no indication that William and Edward were in business together at that time, so it is the author's opinion that this just refers to their two separate businesses, not a partnership.

In June 1816 Edward was declared bankrupt (below left) and his assets were sold at auction. The auction notice (below right) refers to Edward's stock in trade as a ship builder being located at his shipbuilding yard. The management of his bankruptcy continues to be reported into 1817, but there is no record of him being discharged. I cannot at this stage find any indication that Edward subsequently traded in his own right.

WHEREAS a Commission of Bankrupt is awarded and issued forth against EDWARD POTTS, of Hylton Ferry, in the parish of Bishopwearmouth, in the county of Durham, ship-builder; and he being declared a bankrupt, is hereby required to surrender himself to the commissioners in the said commission named, or the major part of them, on the 26th day of June instant, 22d day of July, and 3d day of August next, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon of each of the said days, at the house of Thomas Jowsey, the Bridge Inn, in Bishopwearmouth, in the county of Durham, and make a full discovery and disclosure of his estate and effects; when and where the creditors are to come prepared to prove their debts; and at the second sitting to choose assignees; and at the last sitting the said bankrupt is required to finish his examination, and the creditors are to assent to or dissent from the allowance of his certificate. All persons indebted to the said bankrupt, or that have any of his effects, are not to pay or deliver the same but to whom the commissioners shall appoint, but give notice to Mr Blakiston, solicitor, Symond's Inn, London, or to Mr Thompson, solicitor, Bishopwearmouth.

Bishopwearmouth, June 20, 1816.

Durham County Advertiser - Saturday 06 July 1816
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To be SOLD by Auction,
(By order of the Assignees of Mr Edward Potts, a bankrupt.)
At the dwelling-house of the said Edward Potts, at Hylton Ferry, in the parish of Bishopwearmouth, on Monday the 29th of July instant.

ALL the HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE; and on the following days, on the ship-building yard of the said Edward Potts, at Hylton aforesaid, all the **UTENSILS and STOCK IN TRADE,** of a ship builder.

The sale to begin each day at eleven o'clock.
THOMAS SMITH, Auctioneer.
Bishopwearmouth, July 23, 1816.

Durham County Advertiser - Saturday 27 July 1816
Image © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Chapter 2

Messrs Potts – Shipbuilder of Low Street, Bishopwearmouth

William Potts the younger (1772 – 1852) married three times. It seems that it was only the four sons from his third marriage (to Elizabeth Hutton) who joined him - and later succeeded him - in the shipbuilding business. These sons were Robert Hutton Potts JP (1818-1891), Lipton Hutton Potts (1820-1873), Charles Hutton Potts (1823-1886) and Hutton Potts (1825-1850). So far no notices of partnership changes has been found in the Gazette or local newspapers, which might have helped us to understand better the structure of this business. William Potts and his sons were also ship owners and, whilst this aspect of their business has not been explored, we might note that many of the ships they built were for their own use, particularly those carrying the names of birds.

Whilst we know that Potts yard was in Low Street, the ownership history and topography of this yard and its neighbours is complicated and a little uncertain so that part of the narrative has been kept separate, in Chapter 4.

Taylor Potts states that William Potts moved his business from Hylton Ferry to Low Street Sunderland in 1812. The author has not yet found any contemporary material to confirm this, but as noted, there are no local papers digitised between 1809 and 1814. In 1814, William Potts had laid the keel for a ship of 200t, but the record does not give a location. There is an advert in 1815 for a vessel lying in Potts' dock; it might be implied that this was in Sunderland, but the location is not clear. In 1816 there is reference to a ship having been repaired in Potts floating dry dock. Although the location is not stated, this is the earliest reference to the floating dry dock and places Potts firmly in the Low Street yard. A very much later report said that the floating dock was converted from an old ship, but whether this was true is not known. William Potts' second wife, Dorothy Laws, died at Bishopwearmouth in 1815.

An advertisement dated 21 Jun 1817 offered for sale a vessel "lying .. near Mr Potts shipbuilding yard in Sunderland harbour". In 1819 the snow *Jessie* was offered for sale. Built in 1818, William Potts is given at the point of contact, suggesting that he owned her. Perhaps he built here?

William Potts is listed as a ship builder in Low Street in White's Directory of 1827 and in Pigot's Directories of 1828 and 1834. In 1828 he is also listed as a sail maker.

The 1832 electoral roll shows William Potts as owner of a house in John Street. He lived in John Street until his death. TP stated that William had bought a 3 storey house opposite his yard. This has not been confirmed, but since the Russell Street Gas Works occupied that area from ~1824, his occupancy would have been short lived.

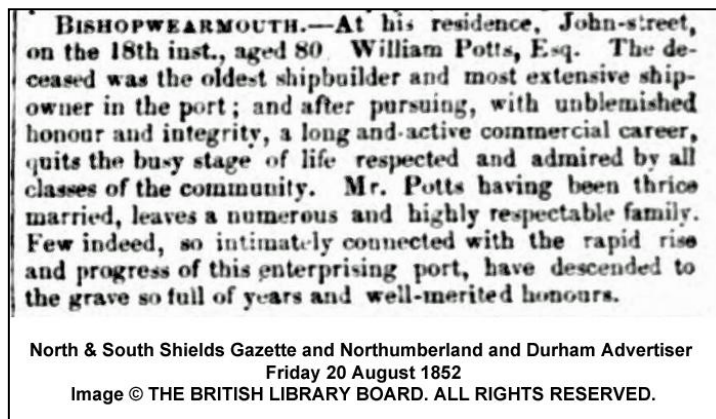
In February 1839 there is a reference to William Potts' Patent Slipway at Low Street, Sunderland. This can be clearly seen on maps in the 1850s and onwards, but no record has yet been found of its installation.

White's Directory of 1847 (March) lists R H Potts and Brothers, shipbuilder of No 4 Low Street. William is still listed in the alphabetic index as a shipbuilder, but this may have been out of date. Three ships have been identified as built by R H Potts and Brothers in 1847 so we can assume that William Potts had withdrawn from active involvement in the ship yard; the 1851 census lists him only as a ship owner. In 1848 Christie's

Maritime Directory described R H Potts & Brothers' facility as a building yard with patent slip and floating dock.

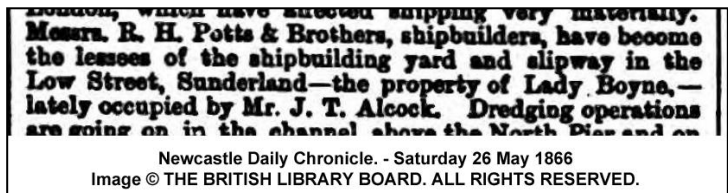
On 25 Apr 1850 Hutton Potts, youngest son of William Potts of Sunderland died at Madeira. His will says he was a ship builder of Sunderland, so we can assume that he worked in the family business.

William Potts the younger died on 18 Aug 1852 (see below). Not seen, but his will is available at Durham University (ref DPRI/1/1852/P20).



There are several newspaper reports which tell us that between before 1854 and after 1876 the Yard Foreman was George Surtees. As we will see later, there is some indication that two of the brothers, Lipton and Charles, were not much involved in the day to day running of the shipyard by the 1860s, as both had moved away from Sunderland to take up the life of country gentlemen, presumably living comfortably on an income derived from the ships they co-owned. It appears that eldest brother Robert H Potts was left to run affairs in Sunderland.

In May 1866 it was reported that Potts had taken over the lease on Alcock's yard next door – presumably adding these premises to their own and creating a very large shipyard with two patent slips, providing substantial ship repair capacity.



The timing is interesting, as 11 May 1866 saw the start of the so called Panic of 1866 when bankers Overend, Gurney & Company collapsed, causing a run on the bank and hardship for many businesses, especially railway companies and their investors. Shipbuilding in the North East was already in depression and wooden shipbuilding in particular was in decline. Indeed the last mention the author has found of Potts building a new vessel is in 1870 and the records show with certainty that they build no new vessels in the years 1874 and onwards. In 1879 only one wooden ship was built on the Wear in the entire year. In 1871, Robert H Potts described himself as a ship owner, rather than a ship builder, which probably just reflects where the focus of his attention then lay.

Mentioned in 1828, but not thereafter, it seems that Potts continued to maintain a sail loft, as in 1867 they advertised for a foreman sail maker.

The author is of the opinion that Potts did not continue with the lease on Alcock's yard for very long into the 1870s (see chapter 4).

Lipton Hutton Potts died on 4 Jul 1873 at his brother's home, Boldon Lodge, leaving effects worth £18,000. The notice below indicates, and the 1871 census confirms, that he had moved to live in Edinburgh. He was obviously a man of some means, as although the 1861 census finds him in Monkwearmouth, he had, by 1858, already acquired [Firby Hall, Bedale, Yorks](#), still his nominal residence when he died. He had been master of the local hunt in Bedale.

DEATH OF A SUNDERLAND SHIP-OWNER.
 Mr Lipton Potts, a partner in the well-known firm of Potts Brothers, shipowners and shipbuilders, Sunderland, died yesterday at Boldon. The deceased gentleman had lately been a resident in Scotland, but the painful malady which has cut him off, recently compelled his return to this neighbourhood. His age would only be a little over 50 years.

Lipton Hutton Potts died 4 Jun 1873

Shields Daily Gazette - Thursday 05 June 1873
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In 1879 it was reported that Potts had two ships in their graving dock for repair. It is assumed that this referred to the floating dock. On 17 Apr 1880 Potts advertised their floating dock for sale – almost certainly the start of the winding up of the business. In April the following year the River Wear Commission reported that they had agreed to buy and remove a floating dock and slipway from R H Potts and Brothers for £350 to allow the removal of the beach where the slipway was located to widen the river.

FLOATING DOCK FOR SALE, in excellent order, takes in vessels above 500 tons register.—Apply to **R. H. Potts and Brothers, Sunderland.**

Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette - Saturday 17 April 1880
 Image © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

On 5 August 1881 Potts' shipyard equipment was sold at auction, as a result of Potts Brothers retiring from the business. The following month the premises formerly occupied by R H Potts and Brothers were offered for sale or let (see Chapter 4).

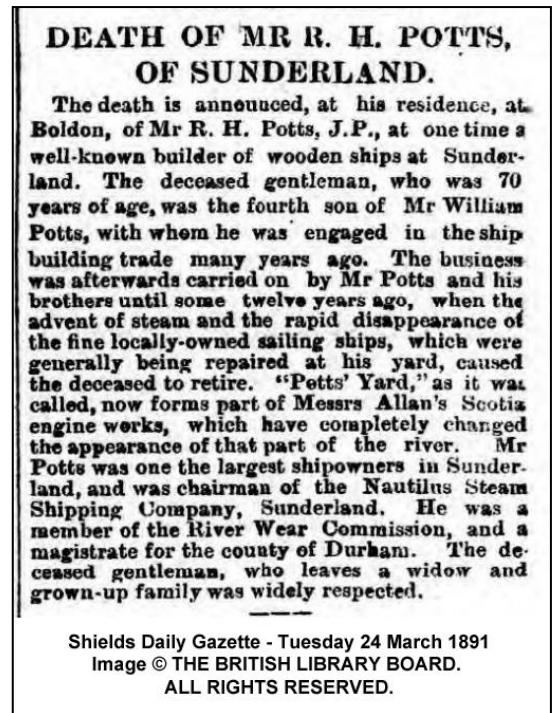
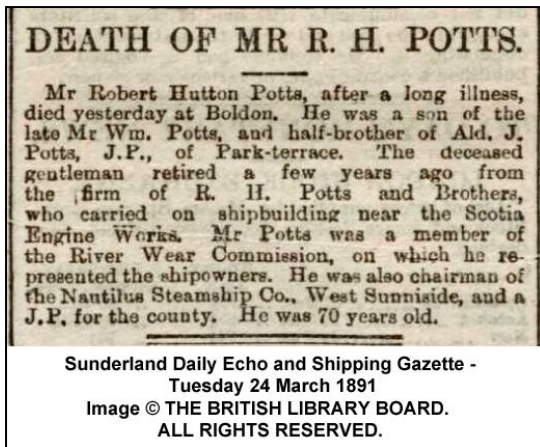
Charles Hutton Potts died on 31 Oct 1886. Like Lipton, he had moved away from the Sunderland area to live in the rather fine Newbus Grange, near Darlington. This house had formerly belonged to a member of the Scurfield family, whom we will refer to later. In 1871 he lived in Somerset and in 1881 in Suffolk.

Robert Hutton Potts died on 23 Mar 1891 at Risely, Bedford, after many years active service on the Bench, as a local councillor and as a River Wear Commissioner.

POTTS' SHIPBUILDING YARD AND SLIPWAY, SUNDERLAND.

MR ARTHUR T. CROW
 Has been honoured with instructions from Messrs Potts Brothers, who are retiring from business, to **SELL BY AUCTION,**
ON FRIDAY, AUGUST 5th, 1881,
AT THE YARD, LOW-STREET, SUNDERLAND,
 The whole of the
SHIPBUILDING PLANT AND MATERIALS,
 Consisting of
 5,000 feet of Balk Timber, Deals, and Planks,
 8,521 15, 18, 21, and 24-inch Treenails,
 10 tons New Round and Flat Iron, 10 tons Scrap Iron and Metal.
Five Powerful JIB CRANES, with Greenheart main pieces, 40-feet Jibs.
 Oak Scantling, Joiners' Benches, Cut Stuff, 2 tons of Pitch
IRON STEAM BOILER, 40 feet by 3 feet by 2 feet 6 inches;
 2 tons hand-picked Oakum, 40 cwt. Hempen Rope, single purchase Winch, powerful Masting Blocks, 3 pair Bellows, 5 tons Blacksmith's Tools, Anvils, Vices, Wedge Blocks, Cramps, Timber Dogs, W J. Nails, Staging Chains, Treenail Mill, Cross-cut Saws, Beam Scales and Weights, Grindstones, Pitch Kettle, 2 Boats, 20 Boats' Oars, Pit and Cross-cut Saws,
 Together with the whole of
THE OFFICE FURNITURE,
 Consisting of
 Two Mahogany Double Desks, with brass rails; Copying Press and Mahogany Frame, Portable Washstand, Book and Paper Racks, Iron Safe, Portable Stove, Maps, Stools, Chairs, &c., &c.
 Sale to commence at Ten for Eleven o'clock to a minute.
Manor House 25th July, 1881.

Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette
 Tuesday 26 July 1881
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Included here for completeness, the notice of the death of John Firth, above, makes reference to him being a partner in the shipbuilding firm of R H Potts and Brothers. Like Robert H Potts, he was a River Wear Commissioner and a local councillor.

Firth never listed himself as a ship builder or shipwright; rather he was a former master mariner, then ship owner. His involvement was probably as an investor, rather than an active participant, but he was certainly a co-owner of several of Potts Brothers' ships, including, in 1858, the *Curlew* and the *Lark*.

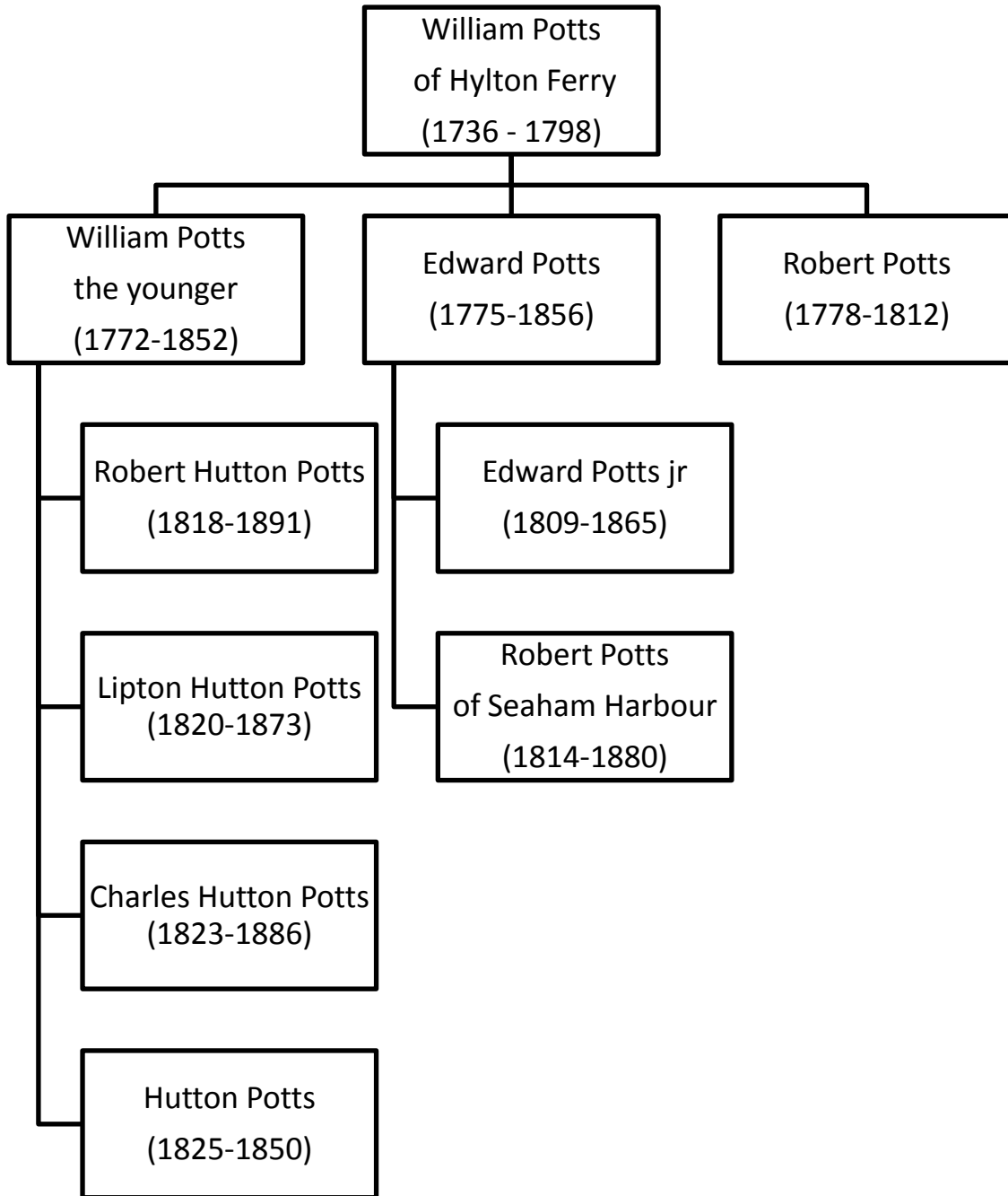
What became of Edward the elder after his bankruptcy in 1816 is not known in any detail. The Electoral Rolls in the 1830s record him living in Low Street, and the owner of freehold property in Low Ford, South Hylton (presumably the house TP refers to as having been built for Edward). This seems to indicate that he survived bankruptcy without having to sell his house and that he was subsequently discharged. From 1840 to 1844 the electoral roll shows him living at Pratt's Building, Bishopwearmouth and the 1841 census as a shipwright living in Sans Street, Bishopwearmouth. By 1847 he is listed as a "gent" (i.e. living on own means) of 17 Upper Sans Street and in the 1851 census as a retired shipwright at the same address. It seems probable that he worked for his brother William and, if he did, retired when William handed the business on to his sons. He died in Seaham on 29 Jan 1856.



Some ships built by Potts of Low Street are listed below, but this is not exhaustive. No doubt Peter Searle will develop a comprehensive list. Where a launch date is given, a contemporary announcement is to hand:-

<u>Launch</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>ON</u>	<u>Builder</u>	<u>Note</u>
6 Aug 1834	Curlew		William Potts	
14 Apr 1835	George William		William Potts	
6 Feb 1844	Gratitude		William Potts	
1847	Mariner		Messrs Potts	Quoted in North of England maritime directory as an 1847 build, but no record of launch yet found; pre-dated March 1847.
14 Jun 1847	Britannia		Messrs Potts	19 Sep 1848 – ran aground on Kentish Knock.
11 Oct 1847	Curlew		Messrs Potts	Wrecked 5 Jan 1857 at Yarmouth.
24 Jan 1849	Vigilant		Messrs Potts	
Jul 1849	Britannia		R H Potts & Bros	
9 Jul 1850	Raven	32922	R H Potts & Bros	
17 Feb 1851	Stamboul	16198	R H Potts & Bros	
6 Apr 1852	Hawk	16049	R H Potts & Bros	
6 Sep 1854	Cumming	16248	R H Potts & Bros	29 Dec 1858 struck on Leman Sands and abandoned.
30 Jul 1855	Penguin	23716	R H Potts & Bros	
1856	No new ships reported in year-end returns			
1857	Athene	18686	R H Potts & Bros	Build year from Christie's 1858. Launch not found, but ran aground (undamaged) in the Wear on maiden voyage in May.
1857	Curlew	19472	R H Potts & Bros	Build year from Christie's 1858. Launch not found. For sale 1863.
1859	Reported in Nov 1858 to be building a brig of 285t for launch in 1859. This vessel has not been identified.			
8 Feb 1860	Heron	28042	Announcement of launch says builder was William Potts, which must surely be an error... Must be R H Potts & Bros.	
w/c 8 Jul 1861	Jane Alice	29868	R H Potts & Bros	
Q2 1862	Mary Ann	44485	R H Potts & Bros	Source Newcastle Chronicle
~ Jun 1863	Jemima	44546	R H Potts & Bros	Almost sank at Hartlepool in Apr 1874 (builder name from that report). Ownership transferred to Dent & Co., then ran ashore and was lost on the coast of Syria in November.
1865	Merlin	51198	R H Potts & Bros	Launch date not found. Reported in year-end returns, the only ship they built in '65.
1866	Thrush		R H Potts & Bros	Listed in LRS as built and owned by Potts. Launch about Jul 1866, but no record found.
Q1 1867	Unsold 360t barque under construction		R H Potts & Bros	Shields Daily Gazette. Name not known.
~ May 1868	Hawk	58139	R H Potts & Bros	Launch date not found. Reported in year-end returns, the only ship they built in '68.
1869	No new ships reported in year-end returns, but in July it was reported that there was a 390t barque on the stocks (framing). The same report was given at the year end.			
Q1 1870	390t barque under construction, sold		R H Potts & Bros	The same report appeared at the end of Q2, but by end Q3 she must have been completed and sold as she is not listed. Name has not been identified.
1874-1880	No new ships reported in year-end returns			

Figure 1 – Simplified Potts Family Tree



[illegible]

Chapter 3

Messrs Alcock - Shipbuilder of Low Street, Bishopwearmouth

This chapter is a brief review of the Alcocks' business in Low Street, intended to provide some context, as the next door neighbour of Messrs Potts, for the real estate matters discussed in Chapter 4. No attempt has been made to develop a list of ships built.

As can be seen from figure 2, Alcocks' yard lay directly to the west of Potts yard, at No 1 Low Street, opposite the foot of Russell Street. Alcocks are not listed as a shipbuilder in Pigot's 1834 Directory and the indications are that they began their business in that year.

Alcocks initially traded at **John Thomas and Charles Alcock** (or **Alcock Brothers**). Charles left the business in 1841 and thereafter it traded as **J T Alcock**. They were the sons of John Alcock, a cabinet maker and upholsterer of Bishopwearmouth.

- **John Thomas Alcock JP, born 1799, died 1884**
- **Charles Alcock, born 1806, died 1881¹**

Some key events and references

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| 4 Oct 1834 | reference to a vessel lying near Mr Alcock's shipyard in Sunderland. |
| 19 Nov 1835 | Launch of the <i>Border Chieftain</i> by Messrs Alcock. This is the first launch I have found in contemporary records, but other researchers refer to the <i>Gosforth</i> built in 1834. |
| 26 May 1837 | reference to a vessel lying near Mr Alcock's building yard, Low Street. |
| 26 Jan 1841 | Launch of the 250t vessel <i>Lucy</i> by J & C Alcock. |
| 1841 Census | John T Alcock resided North Grange, Bishopwearmouth. Shipbuilder
Charles Alcock resided Norfolk Street, Bishopwearmouth. Shipbuilder |
| 23 Nov 1841 | Partnership dissolved (see notice from London Gazette below), the shipyard thereafter trading as John Thomas Alcock . Charles subsequently concentrated his business interests in ship ownership ² and in about 1860 moved to live in Chingford, Essex. |

NOTICE is hereby given, that the Partnership lately subsisting between us the undersigned, John Thomas Alcock and Charles Alcock, as Ship Builders and Ship Owners, at Sunderland near the Sea, in the county of Durham, has been this day mutually dissolved.—Dated this 23d day of November 1841.

J. T. Alcock.
Charles Alcock.

¹ As an unrelated matter of general interest, Charles' second son, Charles W Alcock was the founder and first secretary of the Football Association.

² There was a timber merchant at Ayre's Quay in 1858 under the name of Charles Alcock. They built two ships in 1859. It is probably the same Charles Alcock, but I can't be sure.

- 1848 John Thomas Alcock - Shipbuilders of Low Street (Slater's Directory). The North of England Maritime Directory of the same year says that he had a building yard, patent slip and hard.
- Apr 1848 A dispute with the River Wear Commissioners came to a head. A proposal had been made to dam the River Wear in such a way as to damage the businesses of Messrs Alcock, Potts and Hutchinson, which they strongly opposed. Dredging of the beach off these three shipyards was carried out, but on abandonment of the plan, the beach was restored. The dispute seems to have been about costs and resulted in the River Wear Commissioners appointing bailiffs to enter Alcock's yard and auction some of his stock in trade (although the 3 parties were equally liable). In an extraordinary scene, with bands playing, banners flying, and the protagonists watching from a raised platform, an auctioneer sold timber seized by the bailiffs for the amount due of £74 10s.
- 1851 Census John T Alcock - resided Vine Lodge, Bishopwearmouth. Shipbuilder employing 29 men. A later report, referring back to the 1850s, described Alcock as "... a tall bony man, with a hirsute Russian cast of countenance".
- 27 Jul 1854 Freehold of John Thomas Alcock's yard offered for sale at auction as part of a major sale of local property by the Brancepeth Estate. This is discussed further in Chapter 4, but it is the author's hypothesis that Alcock bought the yard at this time.
- 1858 John Thomas Alcock - Shipbuilders of 1 Low Street (Post Office's Directory).
- 1861 Census J T Alcock resided Grindon Lodge, Silkworth. Shipbuilder employing 60 men and 40 boys.
- 29 May 1865 launch of the *Prudhoe*. This is the only ship they built that year and last ship that the author has found built by Alcock.
- 26 May 1866 As seen in Chapter 2, it was announced that R H Potts and Brothers had taken over the lease of Alcock's yard.
- 1871 census J T Alcock not found, but there is an archived document dated 1870 referring to him as "*late shipbuilder of Sunderland and now of the city of Potsdam in Prussia.*" His daughter Grace von Kunowski lived in Potsdam. By September 1871 he was back in the UK sitting on the Sunderland Bench after a break of 2 years.
- 20 Jul 1878 freehold of shipyard "at foot of Russell Street" offered for sale by J T Alcock. This will be reviewed in Chapter 4.
- 8 Jun 1880 the freehold of the former Alcock's yard was again offered for sale, an advertisement that ran for many months, again see chapter 4.
- 19 Jun 1880 an advertisement appeared (below) for sale of all the component parts of a ship at Messrs Alcock's yard in Low Street, presumably a ship that was being dismantled. This seems to indicate that Alcock had taken back occupation of the yard and was active again in ship repairs, but this might be to misread the situation.

SHIP STORES, &c.

MR. WM. CRATHORNE is instructed to **SELL BY AUCTION**, without reserve, on **Monday, June 21st, 1880**, at **Messrs. Alcock's shipbuilding yard, Low-street, Sunderland**, at **two o'clock** in the afternoon prompt.

THE entire **OUTFIT** of a **BARQUE 400** register tons, comprising superior fly-wheel pumps, large deck-house for crew, new boat, masts and spars, two suits of excellent sails, three bower and three small anchors, cable and hawser chains, patent windlass, standing and running rigging, new towline, 4 good warps, cook's hearth, side-lights, steering wheel, barometer, clock; iron tanks, 4 by 4 and 12 by 4; ballast tubs, &c., &c.

DONKEY BOILER, 8 by 4; **DONKEY PUMP**, 1½ in. ram.

About 30 tons scrap iron, metal, and old lead; large scale beam, equal to 2 tons, &c., &c.

A large quantity of oak, elm, and pine timber; deck deals, 6 by 3 and 6 by 4, and other wood from hull of the vessel, which will be sold by private treaty.

Sale Office, 5, Crowtree-terrace.

Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette
Saturday 19 June 1880
Image © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

1881 Census J T Alcock resided 9 Percy Terrace, Jesmond, Newcastle. Retired shipbuilder

24 May 1884 John Thomas Alcock died at his residence 9 Percy Terrace, Jesmond.

DEATH OF MR J. T. ALCOCK, J.P.—The death is announced of Mr J. T. Alcock, J.P., late of Sunderland, which occurred at his residence, 9, Percy Terrace, Jesmond, Newcastle, on Saturday morning, in his 85th year. The deceased gentleman, who was brother of the late Ald. S. Alcock, and at one time resided at Grindon Hall, near Sunderland, took an active part in the business of the Sunderland Bench some years ago.

Shields Daily Gazette - Tuesday 27 May 1884
Image © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Figure 3 – Low Street/Russell Street Area ~1860

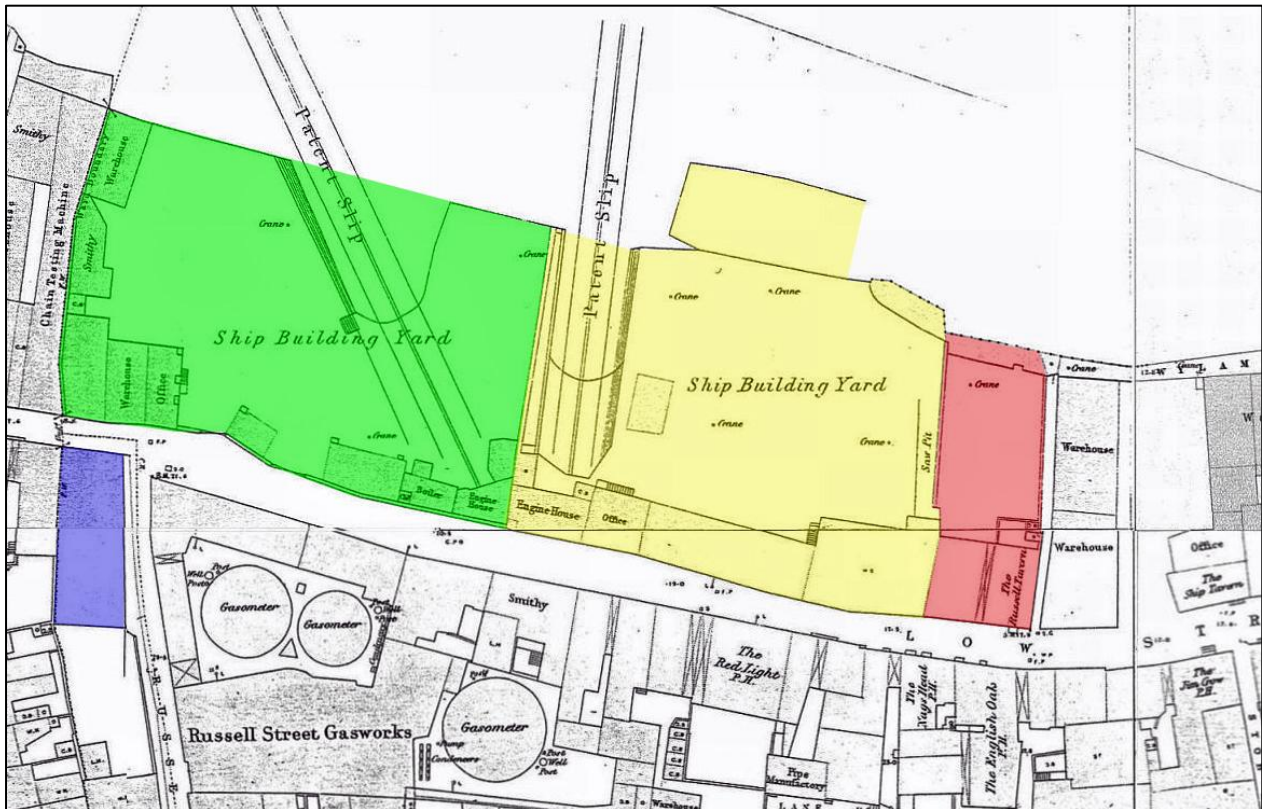
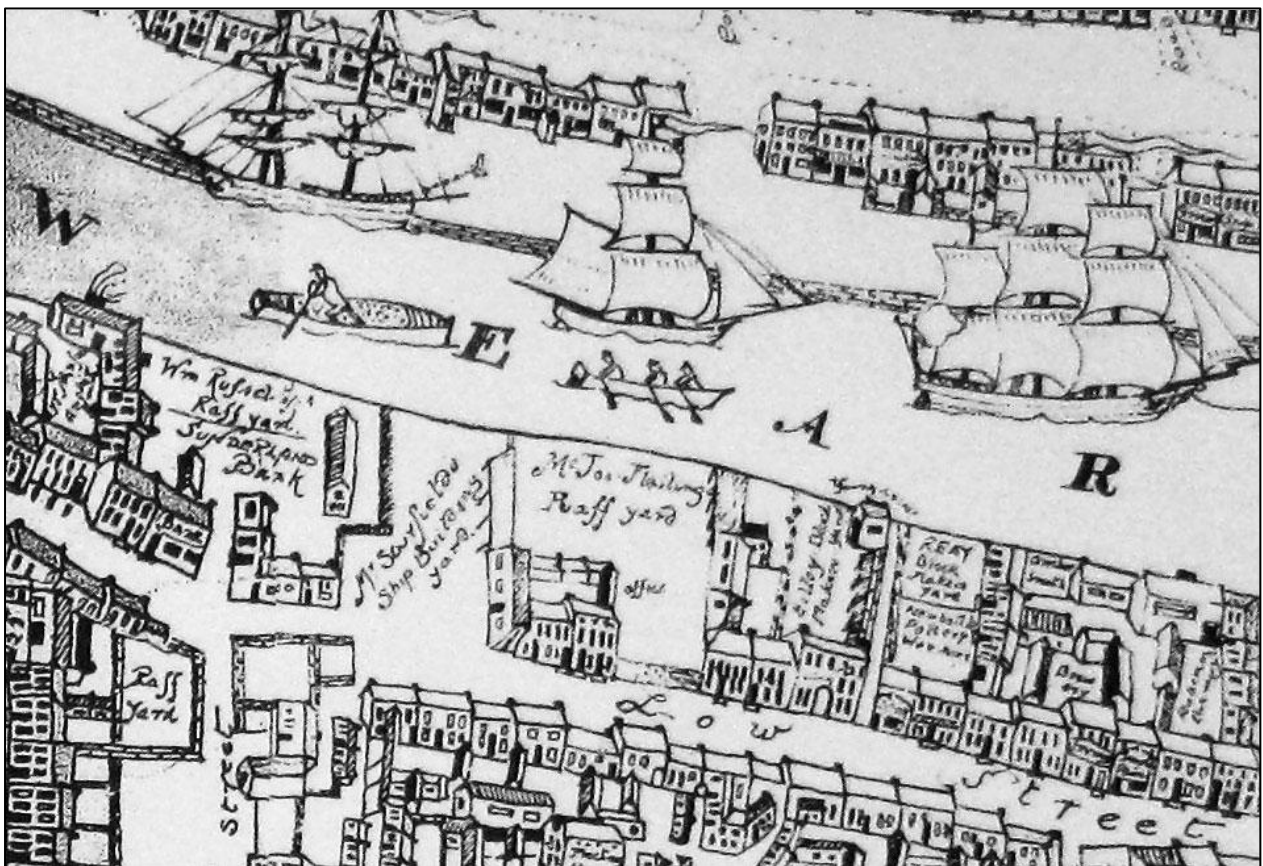


Figure 4 – Low Street/Russell Street Area ~1790



Chapter 4

Ownership of the Shipbuilding Yards in Low Street

Unconventionally, we will begin this story in the middle, by looking at the situation in the mid-late 1850s. The map fig 3 above is dated ~1860, and we have auction notices from 1854 and a directory from 1858 (below).

The four coloured areas in fig 3 represent the property occupied by Messrs Potts and Messrs Alcock. They are located at the western end of Low Street, between the Testing House on Panns Bank and Wylam's Wharf, with a river frontage of 400ft. The continuation of Low Street to the west is Panns Bank on this map and later references, but is also referred to as Low Street Panns or Bishopwearmouth Panns in earlier documents.

In 1854, the Brancepeth Estate offered for sale some premises occupied by Messrs Alcock and Messrs Potts as part of a large sale of property in Sunderland. The advertisement below can be compared with figure 3 and the 1858 Post Office Directory below, which tells us that J T Alcock occupied No 1 Low Street, R H Potts & Bros no 4 and the Russell Tavern No 6.

It can be clearly seen that lot 4 represents the blue area in fig 3 and was occupied by J T Alcock. Lot 14 represents the red area and was occupied by R H Potts and Brothers. Lot 15 represents the green area and was also occupied by J T Alcock. The yellow area on the map was not offered for sale, but must have been occupied by Potts, as we know that in 1816 he had a floating dry dock and from at least 1839 they had a patent slip and this is the only place it can have been. It is my hypothesis that this land was bought by William Potts some time before, but this is not proved.

Lor 4.
All that large and capacious **FREEHOLD TIMBER SHED**, situate at the junction of Russell-street and Low-street aforesaid, now in the occupation of Mr. John Alcock, shipbuilder.
These Premises have a Frontage of 73 feet to Russell-street and 27 feet to Low-street, and are most eligibly situated for any business purpose, being within a few yards of the River Wear.

Lor 14.
All that Large and Valuable **INN**, situate in the Low Street, Sunderland, and known as **THE RUSSELL TAVERN**, now in the occupation of Mr. Elliott, as Tenant. Also all that **DWELLING-HOUSE** adjoining, now in the occupation of Mr. W. Thirlbeck and others. Together with the **SHIPBUILDING YARD** situate behind the above-mentioned Premises, extending and having a frontage of 40 feet to the River Wear and a frontage of 43 feet into Low Street, now in the occupation of Messrs. Potts, Brothers, shipbuilders.

Lor 15.
All that extensive and valuable **SHIP BUILDING YARD**, now in the occupation of Mr John Thomas Alcock, ship-builder, situate in the Low-street aforesaid, with the **DWELLING-HOUSES, OFFICES, WAREHOUSES, SHEDS, and PREMISES** thereunto belonging.
These Premises adjoin the Low Street for 188 feet, and have a Frontage to the river Wear of about 190 feet, where an extensive Business is now being carried on.

Durham County Advertiser - Friday 27 January 1854
Image © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD.
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

We do not, of course know whether the property actually sold at auction and, if so, to whom, but it is the author's view that these lots were all sold around this time, for reasons we will see later.

Low street, from Bishopwearmouth panns to Low quay.
1 Alcock John Thomas, shipbuilder
4 Potts R. H. & Brothers, shipbuilders & shipowners
6 Russell tavern, James Elliott
French Wm, wharfinger (Wylam whf)
Ship, Mrs. Mary Stafford
Harbour Master's Office
Mr. Francis M. Goble, superintendent harbour master
Mr. George Liddel & Mr. Avery Hornsby, deputy harbour mstrs
..... here is Ferry boat landing.....

Ferry boat landing.
Ferry Boat Toll House,
William Jarrott, collector
Pooley George, ship chandler & greengrocer
Commercial inn, Mrs. Margaret Meldrum
Ferry Toll, Jordan Balldridge
7 Fenwick Robert & Co. brewers &

William Russell (1734-1817), a prominent local businessman, began his career as a merchant in Sunderland. In 1770 he acquired Wallsend Colliery and made a spectacular success of this business. He became a banker in Sunderland in partnership with his brothers-in-law John Maling (of the family who owned the pottery in Hylton) and Robert Allen (husbands of his wife's two sisters). He bought property extensively, including Brancepeth Castle in 1796. At the time of his death he was one of the wealthiest commoners in the country.

There are several references to William Russell having humble origins and even working as a rag merchant, but these are not true. Few modern researchers have examined William Russell's heritage, but it is relevant here. He was the second son of Robert Russell of Rowenlands (in Millom, Cumberland). William was sent to Sunderland to pursue a mercantile career in association with his uncle, Matthew Russell, who had established himself as a raff (i.e. timber) merchant in Sunderland. It is stated that Matthew Russell had a raff yard on the site later occupied by Alcock's shipyard and that after Matthew's death in 1760 William inherited £5000 from his uncle and continued the business. William later inherited the Rowenlands estate and a considerable fortune on the death of his elder brother without issue in 1806.

William Russell was succeeded by his son Matthew (1765-1822), who in turn was succeeded by his son William (1798-1850). William the younger did not marry and on his death, in 1850, the estate passed to his sister Emma Maria (1813-1870). Emma Maria was married to Gustavus Frederick Hamilton, who became 7th Viscount Boyne on his father's death; so Emma Maria became Lady Boyne. Viscount Boyne was later elevated to 1st Baron Brancepeth.

The above is well documented and we have already seen that the auction in 1854 represented land owned by the Brancepeth Estate.

In fig 4 we see a map from about 1790 which can be compared with Fig 3. The properties of interest can be identified from left to right as follows:-

- William Russell's Raff Yard and the Sunderland Bank (also note the raff yard opposite at the foot of Russell Street)
- Mr Scurfield's Shipbuilding yard
- John Maling's Raff Yard
- Eilley's block maker yard
- There is then a passageway which can be seen on both maps and is the boundary of the land we are interested in.

These names have been confirmed from the Universal British Directory (Sunderland) 1795 which lists:-

- John Raw and James Craster – Raff Merchants
- Bryan Scurfield – Ship Builder³
- John Maling – Raff Merchant and coal fitter
- Benjamin Eilley – block maker

It is the author's view that:

- the green area in Fig 3, ie Alcock's yard, is represented by William Russell's raff yard and Mr Scurfield's shipbuilding yard in fig 4.
- The yellow area in Fig 3, ie part of Potts Yard, is represented by Maling's raff yard in fig 4.

³ Still a shipbuilder in 1804, but died in 1810 when he was described as a coal fitter.

- The red area in fig 3, ie part of Potts yard plus the Russell Tavern is represented by Eilley's block yard in fig 4.

What follows are a number of accounts taken from 18th and 19th century records relating to William Russell and property on Low Street.

- In ~1773 William Russell's father-in-law Robert Harrison wrote his will, which placed in trust his "messuages, keys and wharfs in Low Street." His executors included William Russell and the residual legatee was his daughter, William Russell's wife, Mary Russell. It is possible therefore that William Russell inherited, rather than bought, his Low Street properties.
- On 1 Mar 1800 William Russell leased to Messrs Raw and Craster, raff merchants, a quay on the north side of Low Street, with a house and offices built on part thereof, and a raff warehouse on the south side of Low Street opposite the quay for 9 years. In Jan 1803 this business was taken over by Masterman and Thompson, continuing to trade as raff merchants (Believed to be William Masterman (d 1808?) and James Thompson). It was still Thompson and Masterman in 1816.
- In 1816 there is a statement that John Hutchinson's shipyard was property owned by William Russell.
- Taylor Potts says that:-

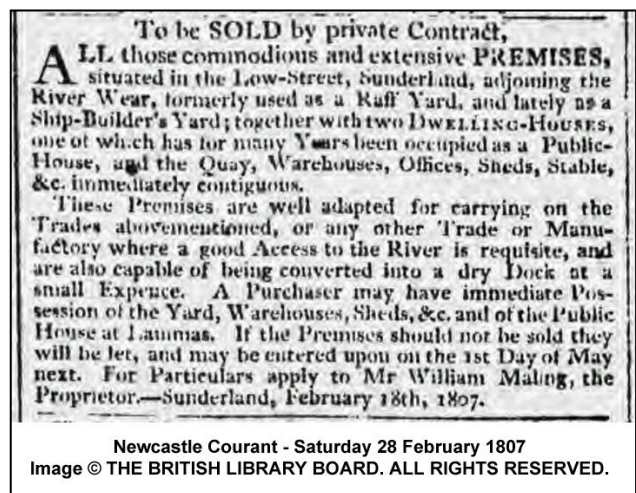
"[William Potts] removed from [Hylton Ferry] yard to the one in the Low Street, which he purchased from the Russell family (it had previously been a raff yard). He also purchased the property opposite the yard in the Low Street, including the large three-storied house .."

- [*Antiquities of Sunderland and its Vicinity*](#) says:-

"William Maling resided at West Hendon House, Bishopwearmouth; he was a ship owner and timber merchant, Low Street, Sunderland. His timber yard was afterwards occupied by Messrs. R. H. Potts and Brothers".

William Maling was the son of John Maling already mentioned,

We can see right that William Maling offered to sell or lease a former Raff Yard (presumably that of his father John Maling above) in 1807 and that it was already in use as a shipbuilding yard. My hypothesis is that this is the piece of land that William Potts bought – whether at this time or later – though it appears to have been Maling land, rather than Russell. It is the yellow section in Fig 3.



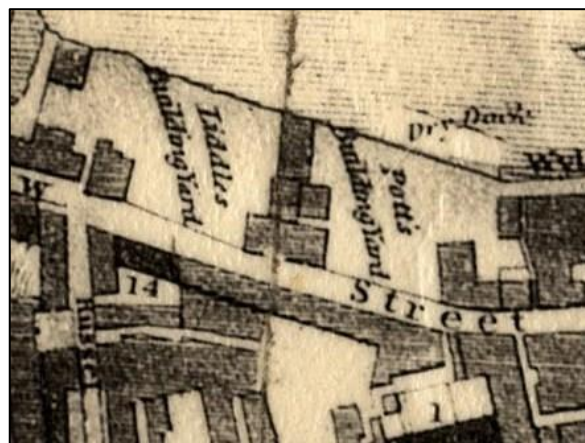
In 1816-17 there is reference to Mrs Ann Burn, ship builder at the "foot of Russell Street" in bankruptcy. She was the widow of Francis Septimus Burn, shipbuilder, who died in 1813. She was declared bankrupt on 7 Oct 1816 and her stock in trade and an almost complete ship hull were sold at auction. It seems likely that Burn occupied the former Scurfield yard.

In ~1820, Pigot's Directory records James Thompson, timber merchant at the foot of Russell Street, William Potts shipbuilder of Low Street and Thomas Laws shipbuilder of Low Street. We might assume that Laws occupied the former Scurfield site after Burns⁴.

The next points of reference we have are Whites Directory of 1827 and a map from about 1826. The directory shows the occupiers of property at the western end of Low Street were as follows (numbers from west to east):-

- | | |
|------|--|
| No 1 | Alexander Reed - Painter and Glazier |
| No 2 | James Thompson – Raff Merchant
James Leithead & Co – ship builder |
| No 3 | The Naval Arms tavern
Robert & George Liddell ⁵ – Ship Builder |
| No 5 | The Ship tavern |
| No 6 | William Potts – ship builder |

The map snippet dated ~1826 is shown right.



Referring back to Fig 4, we can see Potts occupying the former Maling and Eilley yards, whilst Liddells occupied the former Russell and Scurfield yards (though we must assume that James Thompson still had the use of some land on the water front). Leitheads are absent from this map.

The dissolution of Leithead's partnership in 1828 says they were carrying on their business on Monkwearmouth shore so we can assume that they had left Low Street before this time. They are not listed at all in Pigot's 1828 Directory, whilst James Thompson, G & R Liddell and Wm Potts all continue to be listed. Unfortunately the 1828 Directory gives no building numbers. I think we can assume that the publication date of some of these old documents does not necessarily coincide with the date the information was gathered, so although the map appears to predate the directory by a year, the time line must be that around 1826-1827 Leitheads left Low Street and Liddells expanded into their yard space.

There is a reference in 1831 to a ship on Little's [Liddell's] Patent Slip⁶. Pigot's Directory of 1834 lists Robert Liddell and William Potts again in Low Street (with no street numbers), together with James Thompson still at No 2 Low Street. The Russell Tavern was now at No 6.

⁴ Thomas Laws, 1795-1844, son of Michael Laws, solicitor and brother of Michael Laws the younger, solicitor. He may have built only a single ship, the *Camden* in 1821. When his father died in 1826, Thomas was identified as a ship owner, rather than a ship builder and this is confirmed in White's directory 1827. In 1833 he appeared before the Court for Insolvent Debtors, held in debtors' prison. In 1841 he was a ship broker of Blue House, Bishopwearmouth.

⁵ Also often spelt Liddle. I believe that Robert Liddell (1800 – 1856) and George Scurfield Liddell (1798-1833) were brothers, the sons of Robert Liddell and Elizabeth Scurfield. Bryan Scurfield, ship builder above was their great uncle.

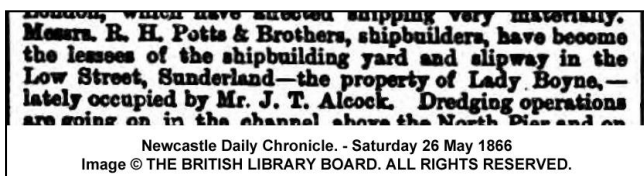
⁶ In April 1832 Thomas Morton reported to an enquiry that two of his patent slips had been installed in Sunderland. John Laing of Southwick had a patent slip erected in 1828. White's Directory of 1828 said that another slip was about to be started in Low Street on the site of "Pan Brewery". This suggests Elstob's Brewery on Bishopwearmouth Panns, which I believe later became S P Austin. However, we know that Liddell had a slip on Low Street in 1831, so either the Panns slip was delayed or Morton was inaccurate in his data.

The last mention of Robert Liddell's yard found by the author is in Feb 1834 and the first mention of Messrs Alcock's business is in October 1834.

Slater's Directory of 1848 lists J T Alcock and R H Potts as the only two ship builders on Low Street with the Russell Tavern still at No 6. James Thompson is not longer listed. Other sources have told us that Alcocks and Potts each had a Patent Slip by the 1840s.

Which brings us back to the 1854 auction which clearly identifies Alcock's yard and the site behind the Russell Tavern as Brancepeth land, but begs the question about Potts larger yard.

As already mentioned, Potts took over the lease of Alcock's yard in May 1866. The newspaper report says that the property was owned by Lady Boyne (ie the Brancepeth Estate), which suggests that lot 15 above was not sold in 1854. However, the author believes that J T Alcock did, at some point buy the yard as, soon afterwards, he advertised the warehouse (blue area) for sale or let, indicating that he at least bought lot 4. I believe that the newspaper report is in error and that J T Alcock was the lessor as will be seen below.



It is probable that Potts did not retain the lease on Alcock's yard for very long as in Jul 1872 there was reference by the Council to a plan to run a water main through Mr Alcock's yard. Furthermore, in 1878 Alcock offered the yard for sale (right).



J T Alcock tried again to sell his yard in 1880 (below left) and it will be seen that the description matches well that for lot 15 above, and convinces me that Alcock bought the yard as well as the warehouse at or soon after the auction.

As already recorded, Potts ran down their business from 1880 and terminated it in 1881. In August 1881 R H Potts' yard was offered for sale (above right). Unfortunately the scope and the vendor is not declared, but this does not look like Brancepeth Estate sale.

The yards were brought together into a single site by Carr and Co. (formerly Carr, Fowles & Co), cleared and redeveloped as a marine engineering business. They sold again in 1887 and it is clear from the advert and map below that the site encompassed the full 400ft of river frontage, ie the green, yellow and red areas of the map in figure 3. The site was bought by William Allen and Co., becoming their Scotia Engine Works, later through mergers becoming Richardson, Westgarth & Co. In 1946 the works was sold to S P Austin & Sons, shipbuilders, and used for outfitting. The works was demolished in 1984 and the site now houses a university hall of residence.

TO BE SOLD BY PRIVATE SALE,
ALL that Valuable Freehold Riverside
PROPERTY, situate at the foot of Russell-street,
 Sunderland.
 The property contains about 2,681 square yards, which
 may be increased by about 890 more, with the Dwelling-
 House, Offices, &c.
 And it has a Riverside frontage of 190 feet.
 This is a Property rarely to be met with, and affords a
 capital opportunity to ship repairers, engineers, warehouse-
 men, bonded store dealers, and others.
 To capitalists this must be a good investment, as River-
 side property is becoming more valuable every day.
 For further particulars apply to
 J. T. ALCOCK, Esq., J.P., Jesmond, Newcastle;
 or to
 Messrs. ALCOCK and ROUTLEDGE,
 Solicitors, Sunderland 1.

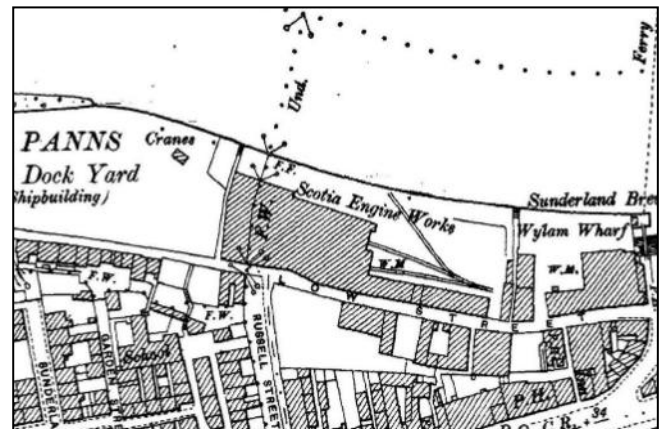
Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette - Saturday 24 July 1880
 Image © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

RIVERSIDE PROPERTY TO BE SOLD OR LET.
THE SHIPBUILDING YARD and PREMISES, for
 many years occupied by R. H. Potts Brothers, near
 the Ferryboat Landing, and in the most central part of the
 town of Sunderland. It has large and substantial buildings
 attached, which could be converted into Warehouses, and
 would make an excellent Wharf, or could be adapted for
 any business where River Frontage is required. Immediate
 possession.
 Apply on the premises,
 Or to HENRY RITSON,
 Solicitor,
 44, West Sunnyside, Sunderland.

Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette - Monday 08 August 1881
 Image © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

CARR AND CO., LIMITED.
TO MARINE ENGINEERS, BOILER BUILDERS,
AND SPECULATORS.
MR GEO. BARNES & MR A. T. CROW
 (who are herein jointly concerned) have received
 instructions to SELL BY AUCTION at the Queen's
 Hotel, Fawcett-street, Sunderland, on Thursday, Novem-
 ber 3rd, 1887, at 5 o'clock p.m. prompt
 (By order of the Mortgagee):—
 The whole of the extensive PREMISES, WORKS,
 PLANT, MACHINERY, FITTINGS, FIXTURES,
 TOOLS, &c., &c., including the whole area of Freehold
 Land connected with the works of Messrs Carr and
 Company, Limited. The premises are most conveniently
 and advantageously situated in the Low-street, Sunder-
 land, having a river frontage of four hundred feet in the
 best and broadest part of the River Wear.
 They are in close proximity to several of the principal
 Shipbuilding Yards, Graving Docks, and other important
 establishments. They have an easy access by land, and a
 perfect and complete approach by water. The situation
 altogether is of an unequalled character, and can scarcely
 be surpassed upon any river. The Machinery and entire
 Works are comparatively new, of modern construction,
 and are in the best possible order and condition. They
 are of considerable magnitude, and well adapted for
 carrying on a large and profitable business.
 The Works and Premises are open daily for survey and
 inspection, and will continue so until the day of sale.
 The Land, Buildings, Premises, Machinery, and Plant
 will be offered as they now stand, as a current-going
 concern.
 Further particulars may be obtained on application to
 the AUCTIONEERS; or to
 MESSRS BOWEY AND BREWIS,
 Solicitors,
 Fawcett-street, Sunderland.

Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette
 Saturday 29 October 1887
 Image © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD
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Chapter 5

Ship Building Business at Seaham Harbour trading as Edward Potts, then Robert Potts

There was a ship building business in Seaham under the name of Edward Potts, then Robert Potts, between the 1850s and 1880s. Seaham was a private harbour owned by the Marquis of Londonderry, Earl Vane.

The shipbuilding yard was in the southwest corner of the harbour and incorporated a patent slip. Prior to Potts occupation, the yard was in the hands of William Henzell (b 1785), who began his shipyard in 1834 and in the 1851 census recorded as employing 3 men and 9 apprentices.

Edward Potts the elder (brother of William the younger) - who we have already discussed above - had two sons, Edward jr and Robert who both became shipwrights.

The 1841 census finds Edward jr and Robert both working as shipwrights and both with family homes in Low Street. We might assume that they worked in William Potts' yard, but cannot be sure. In 1847, Edward jr had a business of his own as shipbuilder on North Quay, Monkwearmouth (though he lived in Bishopwearmouth). It may be no coincidence that around the same time William Potts' business in Low Street passed to his sons and also Edward the elder retired. If Edward jr and Robert did indeed work for their uncle, they may not have felt inclined to stay once the business passed to their cousins. In 1848 it was recorded that Edward Potts had a gridiron at North Quay, Monkwearmouth, which can be clearly seen on contemporary maps opposite the Crown Inn (near the brewery), and in 1851 Robert lived in Monkwearmouth as a shipwright, presumably working with his brother. I have found no records of any ships being launched by Edward Potts from North Quay, but there is suggestion elsewhere that he built some small vessels (less than 100t) between 1847 and 1849.

White's directory of 1856 records Edward Potts, ship builder at 8 North Quay and at Seaham Harbour. The earliest record found of a ship launch at Seaham Harbour under Edward Potts name is 1856, but the 1853 electoral roll shows Edward Potts of Sunderland as occupier of a shipyard in Seaham Harbour. The Post Office Directory of 1858 recorded Edward Potts in business at Seaham Harbour only.

In the 1861 census, Edward jr is shown as a shipbuilder employing 10 men and 10 boys and living in Sans Street, Bishopwearmouth whilst Robert was a foreman shipwright living at Seaham Harbour.

Edward died in 1865 and the business continued in Robert's name. He is shown in the 1871 census as a master shipwright living at Seaham Harbour.

SUDDEN DEATH AT SEAHAM HARBOUR.—Yesterday afternoon Mr Robert Potts, master ship-builder, of Seaham Harbour, whilst giving some instructions to some of his workmen at the Seaham docks in the removal of the ship *Sceptre* from the dry harbour to the slips he instantly fell down dead without any previous complaint or showing any indication of illness. The deceased was a gentleman of robust health, never having previously complained, and only an hour previously left his wife and family evidently in the best of health. Mr Potts was sixty years of age and was generally respected as a thorough straightforward, honourable gentleman, and leaves behind him numerous friends. Dr. Hartley, who examined the deceased body, is of an opinion that he has died from syncope.

Northern Echo - Saturday 27 March 1880
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Robert died on 26 Mar 1880 and the business was offered for sale soon afterwards.

Also see this [link](#) for some further information on Seaham Harbour.

There is a book, *Shipbuilding at Seaham Harbour* by *Fred Cooper*, which I have not seen, but which would, no doubt, provide further information on this Potts business.



Some of the ships built by Potts of Seaham are listed below, but this is probably not exhaustive. Where a launch date is given, a contemporary newspaper announcement is to hand, otherwise the source of builder name is shown.

<u>Launch</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>ON</u>	<u>Builder</u>	<u>Note</u>
1854	William Penn	1815		LRS says built Seaham 1854. No launch record found but as only one shipyard in Seaham, it must have been Potts.
19 Apr 1855	Wynyard	2750	Mr Potts	
28 Feb 1856	Salacia	14571	Edward Potts ⁷	Launch might be 21 Feb. Notice is ambiguous
16 Sep 1856	Lumley	17084	Edward Potts	
1857	No new build ships listed in year-end returns			
28 Jun 1858	John Middleton	21872	Edward Potts	
~ Apr 1860	Jane Duncan	28436	Edward Potts	Source, LRS.
~Apr 1862	Tirzah	44293	Edward Potts	Source, LRS.
Jan 1863	Caspian	44523	Edward Potts	300t. Largest vessel yet built at Seaham
~Jan 1864	Rose	43724	Edward Potts	Source, LRS.
~ Feb 1865	Royal Standard	51172	Edward Potts	Source, LRS. Sunk 31 May 65
18 Oct 1865	<i>Death of Edward Potts.</i>			
17 May 1866	Durham	53467	Robert Potts	310t NM.
1867	Hays	56517	Robert Potts	Launch record not found, but notice of sale 1870 confirms builder.
14 Nov 1868	Sophia Jane	60506	Robert Potts	
1869	No new ships reported in year-end return			
1870	Robert & Mary	62599	Robert Potts	Source, MNL and LRS.
13 Aug 1870	Countess Vane	62606	Robert Potts	Steamer to be used as a tug.

The author has noted that several other researchers have incorrectly attributed ships built by Robert Potts of Seaham to R H Potts and Brothers of Low Street. In creating the above list, clear evidence has been collected to identify the build site for each ship as Seaham, either from notices of the launch in local newspapers, or the place of build from Lloyds Register and the Mercantile Navy List.

⁷ Although the report of her launch just says built in Sunderland by Potts, the return for the year (published in Newcastle Journal 31 Jan 1857) shows her builder as Edward Potts, Christies of 1858 and LRS in later years all give place built as Seaham.

By 1870, there was little or no demand for timber ships and Countess Vane was probably the last wooden ship built at Seaham. Indeed it could have marked the end of shipbuilding entirely at Seaham, but in 1883, Richard Iliff and a Mr Johnson, trading as the Seaham Shipbuilding Company (or Seaham Iron Shipbuilding Company), established a new ship yard for building iron ships on the opposite side of the harbour, below the lighthouse. It was reported that Mr Iliff was the business man and Johnson the shipwright. Major works were required to establish a yard and slip and they started to build one ship, before going into liquidation in May 1884. The ship was completed on site by Mr Edward Towers of Blyth and launched at the *Lindthorpe* on 21 Oct 1884. It was reported that some 15 years had passed since a ship was launched at Seaham, which accords with the data above.

Chapter 6

Bradley & Potts – Shipbuilders of Pallion

The preceding chapters have covered related members of the same Potts family. The remaining two chapters discuss two businesses belonging to unrelated Potts.

There was a short lived shipbuilding business at Pallion under the name Bradley & Potts, which operated between about 1853 and about 1857. The partners were William Orton Bradley (1822-1860) and Taylor Potts (1816-1894). Their primary business was as timber merchants on the North Quay in Monkwearmouth, but for a few years they also operated a shipyard at Pallion. Very little has been found about this yard and only three ship launches are known. The location of the yard and who succeeded B & P there has not been established. A single reference has been found to Bradley & Potts launching a ship at Hylton in 1851. It could be that they started shipbuilding at Hylton then relocated to Pallion, or, perhaps more likely, it is an error in the newspaper. Bradley and Potts were also ship owners on quite a notable scale.

Some key events and references

1847	Bradley & Potts, timber merchants, ship brokers and commission agents – North Quay, Monkwearmouth. (White's Directory)
Mar 1850	Bradley & Potts, timber merchants, advertised a new ship for sale. Did they build it?? (Shields Gazette). The dimensions suggest a ship of some 200t.
1850	There is some unattributed indication that they built 2 small vessels in 1850, the <i>Samson</i> 40t (which they owned themselves in 1858) and the <i>Swan</i> 26t (o/n 2481).
1851	Bradley & Potts, Timber Merchants of North Quay, Monkwearmouth. (Ward's Directory)
Jul 1851	Report of a ship having been launched by Bradley & Potts at Hylton. No name is given, but it is probable that this was the <i>Jubilee</i> , a snow of 323 tons. (Durham Chronicle)
10 May 1853	Launch of a 550t vessel by Bradley, Potts & Co of Pallion Flats. (Durham Chronicle)
13 May 1854	Launched <i>Columbia</i> ⁸ (684t old measure) by Bradley, Potts & Co of Pallion Flats (Newcastle Journal)
1855	Bradley & Potts, ship builder of North Quay, Monkwearmouth (Slater's Directory). There is no indication that they ever built ships at Monkwearmouth.
1856	Timber merchant, North Quay, Monkwearmouth. Not listed as a ship builder. (White's Directory). No new ships from this yard reported in year-end returns.
Sep 1856	Report of a new build ship by B & P being coppered. (Shields Daily Gazette)
5 Aug 1857	Still in business at Pallion (accident report, Shields Gazette)

⁸ The name *Columbia* comes from the notice of her launch. However, it is believed that this is a misprint and she was actually the *Columba*. It is thought that she was lost in October 1856.

1858	Bradley & Potts – timber merchants, ship builders, ship owners and merchants, Bridge Wharf, Monkwearmouth. Also timber merchant at Ayres Quay, Bishopwearmouth. They are not listed as a shipbuilder in Pallion, but actually never were in any directory during the life of the business (Post Office Directory)
Aug 1860	William Bradley died.
Nov 1861	Taylor Potts insolvent (London Gazette).
Aug 1862	Taylor Potts discharged from bankruptcy
Jul 1863	In dispute with Mr Douglass, ship builder over outstanding debts from 1861 when he was building two ships for Taylor Potts. This says that the former had built ships for the latter over many years.

There is suggestion that in 1847 a small vessel, the 32t *Young Bull*, was built on the Wear by a G Potts. No contemporary records have been found by the author, but it seems probably that the G Potts was Taylor Potts' younger brother George (1826-1907), who was a shipwright. This vessel was owned by Bradley and Potts the following year. It is possible that George started in business on his own and was then taken into the ownership of Bradley and Potts, but this is speculation.

The same source suggests that a G Potts built 2 small ships some 20 years earlier, the *Pilot* in 1831 and, as G Potts & Spearman, the *Friends* in 1829. The builder has not been identified, but we might note that Taylor and George Potts' father was Guy Potts, a pilot. There was also another Guy Potts (unrelated?), a harbour master, who died in 1856 owning two vessels called *Pilot*, but not, I think, this one. His were a steam boat and a barque.

Chapter 7

Cuthbert Potts & Co and Successor Companies – Boatbuilders of Monkwearmouth

These firms were, for the most part, boat builders but others suggest that they built some 19 ships between 1838 and 1850. The author has so far been unable to corroborate any of these from any contemporary resources so has not listed them here. Cuthbert and his brothers were also ship owners.

Partners in the firm were brothers

- Cuthbert Potts – b1807 at Whitburn – died 1850
- Andrew Potts – b 1810 at Whitburn – died 1863
- John Potts – b 1816 at Monkwearmouth – died ?1881?

The first reference to Cuthbert Potts in business in his own right as a boat builder is in Pigot's directory of 1834. It is not obvious whether he was in partnership at this time, or a sole trader.

By 1841, when they became insolvent, it is clear that the three brothers were in partnership, trading as Cuthbert Potts & Co. Discharged from bankruptcy in 1845, the business was reconstituted with the same partners as Cuthbert Potts & Brothers. They were bankrupt again in 1849 and Cuthbert died the following year.

The remaining two brother reformed the business as Potts and Burn. The full partners have not yet been identified and may have included one or both of John Potts sons. There is no indication that Potts and Burn ever built a ship. Mr Burn has not been identified – perhaps he only supplied the funds to allow the business to continue trading?

John Potts had two sons, James Smith Potts (1841-1898) and Matthew Potts (1843-1919) who followed him into the boat building business. Their careers have not been analysed, but Matthew continued as a boat builder for many years, trading in the 1890s at M Potts and Son at Folly End.

Some key events and references

Note that in directory entries it is not always possible to distinguish an individual entry at a home address from a business address.

1828	Not listed (Pigot's Directory)
1833	Cuthbert Potts, boat builder (marriage record)
1834	Cuthbert Potts, boat builder of the Strand, Monkwearmouth Shore (Pigot's Directory)
1841 census	Cuthbert Potts, boat builder, home Huddleston Street, Monkwearmouth Andrew Potts, boat builder, home Williamson Terrace John Potts, boat builder, home Huddleston Street, Monkwearmouth

- 6 May 1841 Notice of bankruptcy issued against Cuthbert Potts and Co of Monkwearmouth, boat and ship builder (Co-partners = Cuthbert Potts, Andrew Potts and John Potts). (London Gazette)
- 3 Jun 1845 Final dividend paid.
- 17 Feb 1849 Notice of bankruptcy issued against Cuthbert Potts & Brothers of Monkwearmouth, boat builders, fish curers, ship owners, dealers and chapmen, (Co-partners = Cuthbert Potts, Andrew Potts and John Potts). (London Gazette). On the same day, their stock in trade was auctioned.



- 24 Apr 1850 Cuthbert Potts (boat builder) died.
- 1851 census Andrew Potts of 5 Charles Street, Monkwearmouth Shore, boat builder
 John Potts of 7 Charles Street, master boat builder employing 3 men and 6 boys.
- 1851 Andrew Potts, boat builder of Charles Street (Ward's Directory)
- 1855 Potts and Burn, boat builder of North Dock (Slater's Directory)
 John Potts, boat builder of North Shore (Slater's Directory)
 Andrew Potts, boat builder of North Dock (Slater's Directory)
- 1856 Potts and Burn, boat builder of North Dock (White's Directory). A report has been seen that they built ships' lifeboats for Bartams. Indeed, from a variety of sources it would appear that the bulk of their business was ships' lifeboats. The full partners and identity of Mr Burn have not been found.
- 1858 A Potts, boat builder – North Dock, Monkwearmouth – (Post Office Directory)
 Potts & Burn, boat builder North Dock, Monkwearmouth – (Post Office Directory)
- Feb 1863 Andrew Potts, boat builder of Dock Street, died. Buried 1 Mar 1863. Left no will.

- 8 Jan 1864 A serious fire, started in the joiner's shop above Potts premises, completely destroyed both, including several completed boats and all their tools. There is reference to a herring curing works next door occupied by Mr Laidler, presumably that formally occupied by Potts. (Newcastle Journal).
- 1881 Likely death of John Potts. Left no will.
- 1883 The only member of the family mentioned in business is Matthew Potts, boat builder of Folley End and 30 Thomas Street, Monkwearmouth. (Kelly's Directory)
- 1890 Matthew Potts – boat builder at Folley End, Monkwearmouth. (Kelly's Directory)
- 1898 Trading as M Potts and Son, boat builder at Folly End (Advert for apprentice)
- 1902 Matthew Potts – boat builder at Folley End, Monkwearmouth. (Kelly's Directory)

Chapter 8

McAndrew, Cowan and Potts of South Hylton

A very short-lived venture, started in early 1893 and wound up before Feb 1895. Only two ships are known to have been built.

The managing owner was George Patrick McAndrew of 24 Camden Street, Southwick. The identity of the other partners, Messrs Cowan and Potts, are not known. McAndrew was an experienced iron shipyard manager, having managed two yards owned by others in the past.

Key events and references

14 Apr 1893 – **McAndrew, Cowan and Potts** have taken possession of a shipyard at South Hylton and are preparing the site for building small ships.

20 Dec 1894 – orders received for 2 small vessels

11 Jan 1894 – construction of one vessel started

3 May 1894 – steel steamer *Hawke* launched

5 Jul 1894 – steel steamer *Carew* launched.

28 Feb 1895 – no longer trading.

26 Mar 1895 - George P McAndrew of 19 Rosslyn Terrace, Sunderland, retired iron shipbuilder, died.

The location of this yard has not been determined, but maps for 1895 show only one shipyard in South Hylton, that adjacent to the Leopard public house.

11 Jun 1895 – the yard formerly occupied by McAndrew, Cowan and Potts taken over by the **South Hylton Shipbuilding and Repair Company**.

Oct 1895 – Launch of the *Seaforth*

Jun 1896 – Launch of the *Imatra*⁹

7 Dec 1898 – Assets of the South Hylton Shipbuilding and Repair Company sold at auction.

Another ship built by the latter company in 1895 was the *Wheatflower*, sunk by a u-boat in 1918.

⁹ Name as given in newspaper report. May actually have been *Ematra*.