JOHN SMITH – SHIPBUILDER OF PALLION

Author - Bill Swift Date – 17 October 2016

John Smith of Monkwearmouth operated a ship building yard at Pallion between 1850 and his death in 1855. He is a fine example of the Victorian self made man.

Taylor Potts, in his book *"Sunderland, a history of the town, port, trade and commerce"* says that John Smith's yard at Pallion was on a site where a vessel called *Black Friar* had been built in 1848. I have been able to confirm that a vessel of this name was built in Sunderland in 1848 (ON 32668 – lost 16 Oct 1870), but unable to identify her builder - can anyone help? Taylor Potts goes on to say that Smith's yard was occupied by several others before becoming a part of Doxford's yard. William Doxford established at Pallion in 1857 to the west of their eventual, much larger site developed in the 1870s (where the lime kilns and quarry once stood).

As we will see, John Smith had no background as a shipwright so we may assume that he took over an existing going concern and that the yard was run by a foreman on his behalf.

John Smith was born in Monkwearmouth in about 1810. The brief obituary below says that he was of humble origins and began work as a blacksmith, before going on to run a public house in Monkwearmouth. There is a record of the sale of the Aberdeen Arms, Wear Street, Monkwearmouth in 1834 in the occupation of John Smith, although Pigot's Directory for that year shows this inn occupied by others, which may guide us on when he left this trade. Apparently he had managed to accumulate a considerable sum of money, allowing him to launch a new business venture in engineering.

John married Elizabeth Storey, daughter of William Storey[1], at St. Michael & All Angels, Bishopwearmouth on 3 Jun 1832. They had two children, Eleanor b 1836 and William b 1838.

The 1841 census records John and his family living in Wear Street, with the occupation of chain maker. White's Directory of 1847 records him living at 12 Norfolk Street (Bishopwearmouth) and in business in partnership with Henry Stevenson of Murton Street, Bishopwearmouth, as **Smith and Stevenson**. They were listed as chain and anchor manufacturer, merchant and many other related trades. The partnership was dissolved soon afterwards, John Smith continuing the business on his own, as shown in the advertisement below. The electoral role of 1849 gives Smith's address as 10 Norfolk Street.

By 1848, John and Elizabeth had moved to Fort House, Broad Street (on the junction with Fulwell Lane), a substantial family home on a site close to the original railway station and now occupied by a Lidl supermarket. A description of the house can be seen in the auction notice below.

Research by other suggests that ships were built at Pallion under John Smith's name from 1850, though the author has not yet seen confirmation of this from period documents. The aforementioned research indicates that Smith's first ship was the 203 ton snow *Violet*, launched in March 1850.

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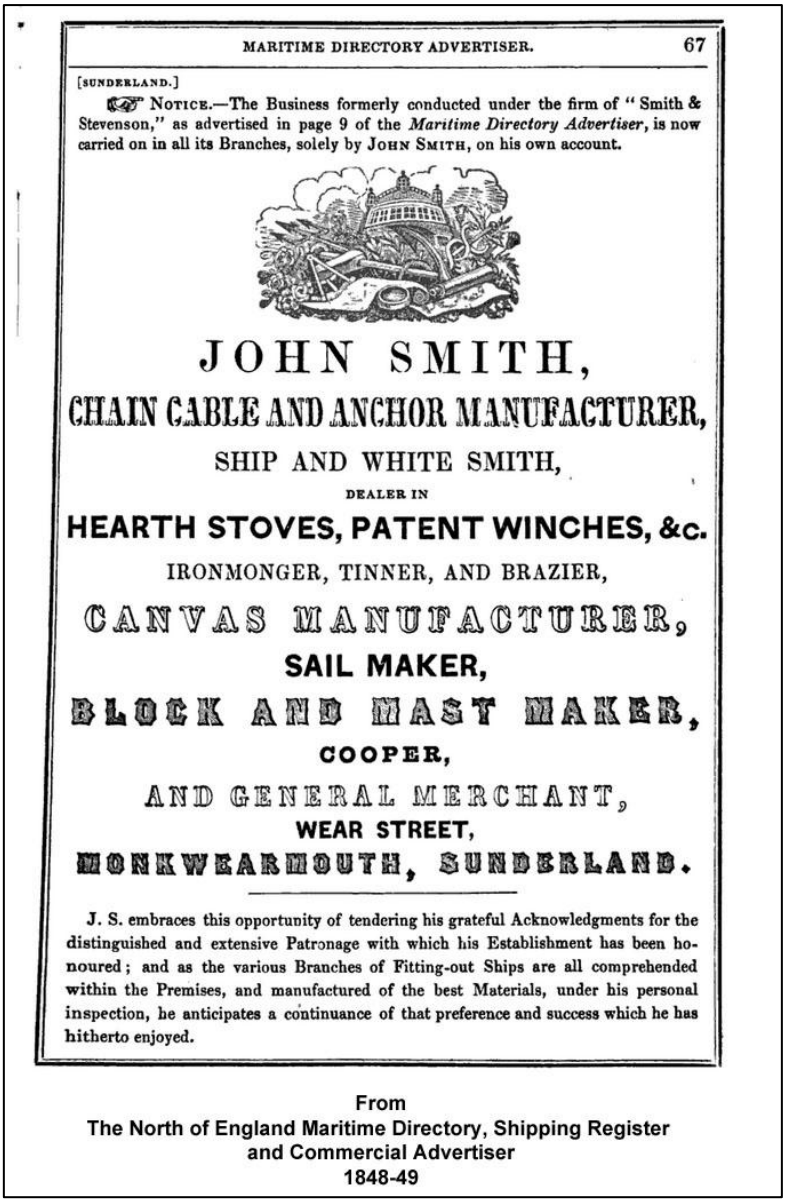
[1] Although a connection has not been demonstrated, there was a John Storey who was a ship builder on North Sand, Monkwearmouth between ~1821 and 1846 when he got into financial difficulties. He also had a rope works near Broad Street, the assets of which were sold in 1847. He died a bankrupt in 1849 aged 62.



MARITIME DIRECTORY ADVERTISER. 67

[SUNDERLAND.]

☞ NOTICE.—The Business formerly conducted under the firm of "Smith & Stevenson," as advertised in page 9 of the *Maritime Directory Advertiser*, is now carried on in all its Branches, solely by JOHN SMITH, on his own account.

JOHN SMITH,

CHAIN CABLE AND ANCHOR MANUFACTURER,

SHIP AND WHITE SMITH,

DEALER IN

HEARTH STOVES, PATENT WINCHES, &c.

IRONMONGER, TINNER, AND BRAZIER,

CANVAS MANUFACTURER,

SAIL MAKER,

BLOCK AND MAST MAKER,

COOPER,

AND GENERAL MERCHANT,

WEAR STREET,

MONKWEARMOUTH, SUNDERLAND.

J. S. embraces this opportunity of tendering his grateful Acknowledgments for the distinguished and extensive Patronage with which his Establishment has been honoured; and as the various Branches of Fitting-out Ships are all comprehended within the Premises, and manufactured of the best Materials, under his personal inspection, he anticipates a continuance of that preference and success which he has hitherto enjoyed.

From
The North of England Maritime Directory, Shipping Register and Commercial Advertiser
1848-49

Ward's Directory of 1851 records John Smith as follows:-

- Shipbuilder, Pallion
- Anchor & Chain Maker Etc, Victoria Iron Works
- Residence Wear Street
- Councillor, Monkwearmouth Ward

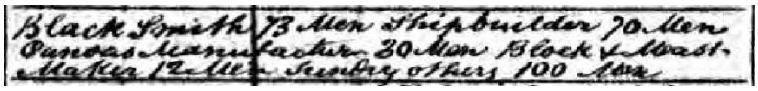
Hagar's Directory of the same year adds more detail:-

- Of Victoria Iron Works, Monkwearmouth Shore, Anchor Maker, Block and Mast Maker, Whitesmith, Chain and Cable Maker, Iron Founder, Iron Monger, Merchant, Mill Wright, Rope and Twine Maker, Sail Maker, Timber Merchant.
- Shipbuilder at Pallion and North Quay, Monkwearmouth Shore[2].

[2] This is the only reference to Smith having a ship building yard at North Quay. I'm a little doubtful about this, but it IS possible that he took over Edward Potts small operation and gridiron at 8 North Quay. The timing is about right.

The 1851 census records that John Smith's employees comprised:-

- Blacksmith - 73men
- Ship Builder - 70 men
- ??? Manufacturer - 30 men
- Block and Mast Maker -12 men
- Sundry others - 100 men



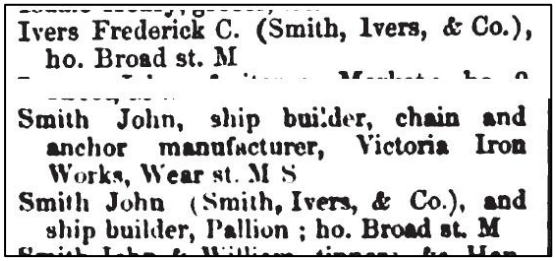
Slater's Directory of 1855 lists Smith's business interests as follows:-

- Rope Maker, Fulwell Road (and 74 Wear Street[3], though the latter was the office address).
- At Wear Street, Chain, Cable and Anchor manufacturer, merchant, nail manufacturer,
- At 74 Wear Street, cooper, iron monger, sail cloth manufacturer/dealer (probably the latter), ship builder (again an office address, there was no shipyard in Wear Street), ship owner, tinman and brazier.

There were two rope works with frontage onto Fulwell Road, but the 1st edition OS map helpfully titles that on the west side of the road (and behind Fort House) as Smith's Ropery (see below). Although the publication of the map post dates Smith's death, it is assumed that this was indeed his works.

Smith continued to build ships at Pallion until his untimely death on 14th May 1855 at the age of 45. However, Whellan's Directory of 1856, though published after Smith's death, add an additional perspective.

It records:-


Ivers Frederick C. (Smith, Ivers, & Co.), ho. Broad st. M

Smith John, ship builder, chain and anchor manufacturer, Victoria Iron Works, Wear st. M S

Smith John (Smith, Ivers, & Co.), and ship builder, Pallion ; ho. Broad st. M

John Smith's daughter Eleanor had married in December 1853, aged 17, to Frederick Charles Christian Ivers of Monkwearmouth. Nothing is known of Ivers' background but he would have been ~20 when he married. The indications are, therefore, that shortly before his death, Smith took Frederick Ivers into partnership in his shipbuilding business in Pallion.

The cuttings below show that Smith actually died at his son-in-law's home in Poplar, London and refer to his having a business in Lavender Dock, Rotherhithe. Little has been found about this business, but Smith was summonsed in March 1855 at Rotherhithe for creating a smoke nuisance from his wood bending and pitch furnaces in Lavender Dock. Historical research by others suggest that during this period shipbuilding activity in Lavender Dock was confined to repairs, but this has not been confirmed.

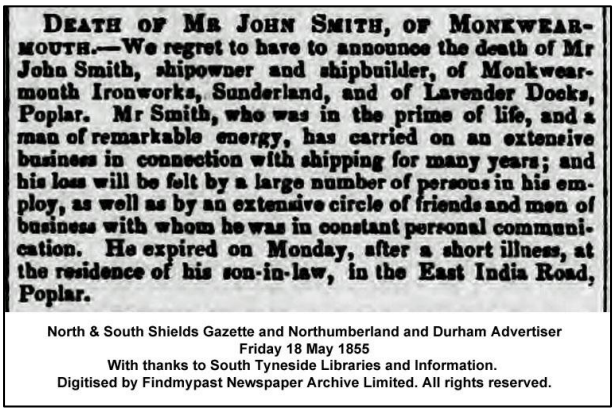
It seems, then, that Ivers was also involved in the Lavender Dock business in partnership with his father-in-law. Again, it seems probable that Smith bought into a going concern, probably operated by shipwright George William Thomas. In April 1856, after Smith's death, it was recorded that there had been a major fire

[3] Reference to the 1858 Post Office Directory tells us that the Aberdeen Arms was at 85 Wear Street and the two corner properties at Huddleston Street were numbers 81 and 80. Counting properties back on the map below, it can be clearly seen that the office marked within the Victoria Iron Works site was number 74.

at the dock and a month later the partnership, by then between Ivers and George William Thomas[4], was dissolved, Thomas continuing the business on his own. Ivers died in 1858 aged only 25, resident at Mornington Road, Deptford, Surrey.

The author has to hand what he believes to be the Will of this John Smith (from the Prerogative Court of Canterbury transcripts) – he is described as a ship owner of Sunderland and the will was prepared by solicitors Linklaters of London . Although very lengthy, it adds little to this narrative. The will was written and proved in London, perhaps when he was taken ill. The will places all his assets into trust for the benefit of his wife Elizabeth. The trustees were his friend Thomas William Panton, Manager of Bishopwearmouth Iron Works, his confidential clerk John Taylor and Alexander Milne, shipbroker of London[5]. The will is signed with a mark, so despite his business success, he had clearly not learned to write.

Of Smith's wife Elizabeth and his son William, I have found no further trace. Daughter Eleanor re-married in Monkwearmouth in 1859 to John Thompson, after which, again, I can find no further information..



DEATH OF MR JOHN SMITH, OF MONKWEARMOUTH.—We regret to have to announce the death of Mr John Smith, shipowner and shipbuilder, of Monkwearmouth Ironworks, Sunderland, and of Lavender Docks, Poplar. Mr Smith, who was in the prime of life, and a man of remarkable energy, has carried on an extensive business in connection with shipping for many years; and his loss will be felt by a large number of persons in his employ, as well as by an extensive circle of friends and men of business with whom he was in constant personal communication. He expired on Monday, after a short illness, at the residence of his son-in-law, in the East India Road, Poplar.

North & South Shields Gazette and Northumberland and Durham Advertiser
Friday 18 May 1855
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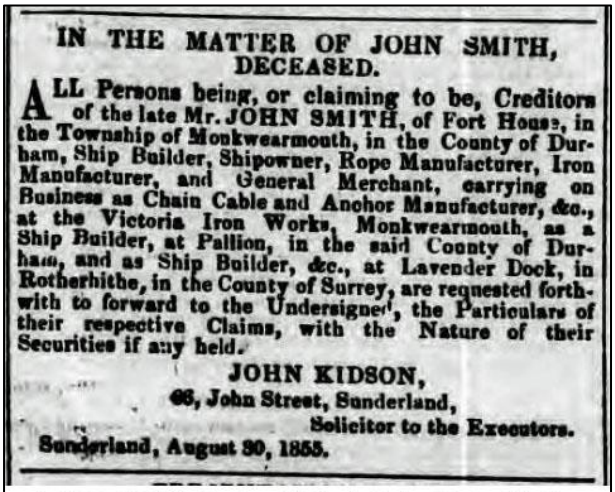

IN THE MATTER OF JOHN SMITH, DECEASED.

ALL Persons being, or claiming to be, Creditors of the late Mr. JOHN SMITH, of Fort House, in the Township of Monkwearmouth, in the County of Durham, Ship Builder, Shipowner, Rope Manufacturer, Iron Manufacturer, and General Merchant, carrying on Business as Chain Cable and Anchor Manufacturer, &c., at the Victoria Iron Works, Monkwearmouth, as a Ship Builder, at Pallion, in the said County of Durham, and as Ship Builder, &c., at Lavender Dock, in Rotherhithe, in the County of Surrey, are requested forthwith to forward to the Undersigned, the Particulars of their respective Claims, with the Nature of their Securities if any held.

JOHN KIDSON,
65, John Street, Sunderland,
Solicitor to the Executors.
Sunderland, August 30, 1855.

North & South Shields Gazette and Northumberland and Durham Advertiser
Thursday 06 September 1855
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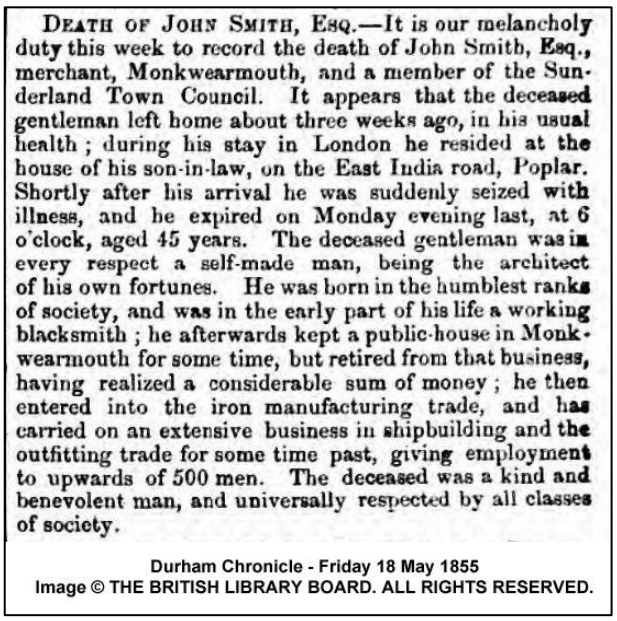

DEATH OF JOHN SMITH, ESQ.—It is our melancholy duty this week to record the death of John Smith, Esq., merchant, Monkwearmouth, and a member of the Sunderland Town Council. It appears that the deceased gentleman left home about three weeks ago, in his usual health ; during his stay in London he resided at the house of his son-in-law, on the East India road, Poplar. Shortly after his arrival he was suddenly seized with illness, and he expired on Monday evening last, at 6 o'clock, aged 45 years. The deceased gentleman was in every respect a self-made man, being the architect of his own fortunes. He was born in the humblest ranks of society, and was in the early part of his life a working blacksmith ; he afterwards kept a public-house in Monkwearmouth for some time, but retired from that business, having realized a considerable sum of money ; he then entered into the iron manufacturing trade, and has carried on an extensive business in shipbuilding and the outfitting trade for some time past, giving employment to upwards of 500 men. The deceased was a kind and benevolent man, and universally respected by all classes of society.

Durham Chronicle - Friday 18 May 1855
Image © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

[4] George William Thomas briefly took into partnership a Samuel Hicks, but this partnership too was dissolved in November 1856. G W Thomas was declared bankrupt in December 1858.

[5] Of Alexander Milne & Co., shipbrokers of 4 Cullum Street, London, originally from Sunderland.

CARRIAGES, CARRIAGE-HORSES, HARNESS, AND SADDLERY, FOR SALE BY AUCTION, AT MONKWEARMOUTH, SUNDERLAND.

MR. GEORGE HARDCASTLE has been Commissioned by the Trustees under the Will of the late JOHN SMITH, Esq. of Monkwearmouth, Sunderland, to SELL BY PUBLIC AUCTION, at Two for Three o'Clock in the Afternoon of Monday the 11th of June Instant, in a Field immediately behind Fort House, Broad Street, Monkwearmouth, the Residence of the deceased Gentleman. Lot 1. A handsome PHAETON (to carry Six,) recently built by "Wilkinson," of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and fitted with Patent Axles, Leather Caleche, and Shafting for One Horse or a Pair. Lot 2. A Strong, Well-built DOG CART, by "Usher," of Sunderland, with Slides, Patent Axles, and capacious Body. Lot 3. Set of Silver-mounted HARNESS, for Phaeton. Lot 4. Set of Silver-mounted HARNESS for Dog Cart. Lot 5. The Noble, Bright Bay CARRIAGE HORSE, "Lightning," 17½ Hands—active, powerful, and gentle—and going well under the Saddle or in any kind of Harness. Lot 6. The Well-bred and universally admired BAY HORSE "Charlie," 17 Hands—a fine Animal of good Temper, free Action, high Speed, great Powers of Endurance, and going well in the Hunting Field, on the Road, and in any Description of Harness. Lot 7. Useful London-made Pigskin SADDLE. Lot 8. Single Snaffle BRIDLE and MARTINGALE. Lot 9. Ditto, Ditto, Ditto. Lot 10. Superb Ivory-handled Silver-mounted GIG-WHIP, by "Ashford." Lot 11. Useful GIG-WHIP, by "Swaine." Lot 12. Set of HORSE SHEETS, &c. Lot 13. Ditto, Ditto, Ditto.

Inspection from 2 to 2·30; the Sale to commence at Three, to a Minute.

N.B. Nothing but the genuine Property of the late Mr. Smith can be included in the Sale.

Sunderland Sale Offices, June 5th, 1855.

Newcastle Journal - Saturday 09 June 1855
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GREAT TIMBER SALE AT SOUTHWICK,
NEAR SUNDERLAND, IN THE COUNTY OF DURHAM,
ON MONDAY, AUGUST 20, 1855.

TWELVE HUNDRED LOADS OF BALTIC, SWEDISH, AND AMERICAN RED AND YELLOW PINE TIMBER, NORWAY SPARS AND RICKERS, AND A QUANTITY OF LIGNUM VITÆ, FOR ABSOLUTE AND UNRESERVED SALE BY AUCTION.

MR GEORGE HARDCASTLE has the honour of announcing to Colliery Owners, Railway Contractors, Timber Merchants, Ship Builders, Block and Mast Makers, Joiners, Cabinet Makers, and House Builders, that he is commissioned by the Trustees under the will of the late JOHN SMITH, Esq., of Monkwearmouth,

TO SELL BY AUCTION,

Absolutely and without Reserve, on MONDAY, August 20, 1855, upon the Beach of the RIVER WEAR, near Southwick, opposite the Pallion Shipbuilding Yards, near Sunderland,

1,200 LOADS OF FINE SQUARED TIMBER, Baltic, Swedish, and American Red and Yellow Pine Timber; Ash, Elm, and Oak; Norway Spars and Rickers; a quantity of Lignum Vitæ, &c., &c., the whole of which will be disposed of in Lots to suit all classes of Timber Buyers.

PAYMENTS:—Under £20, in Cash; above £20, in approved Bills at Four Months, or two per Cent. Discount allowed for Cash.

Sale to commence at Ten for Eleven o'clock.

LUNCHEON at Twelve; Admission, 2s; which will be returned to Purchasers.

CATALOGUES at "The Sunderland Sale Offices" on Monday next, the 13th August instant.

Sunderland Sale Offices, August 9, 1855.

Durham Chronicle - Friday 17 August 1855
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FAMILY MANSION,

Situate on the North side of Broad-street, and West corner of Roker-road, Monkwearmouth, the residence of the late John Smith, Esq., known as

FORT HOUSE, MONKWEARMOUTH,

Comprising, on the Basement Floor, light, well-arranged and ventilated Ale, Wine and Coal Cellars; Dairy and Store Rooms. On the Ground Floor, Entrance Hall, Breakfast, Drawing, and Billiard Rooms, Ante-room, Library, House-keeper's Room, and Kitchen. On the First and Second Floors, spacious Dining Room, Five excellent Bed rooms, and Four Attic Sleeping Rooms, Lumber Attic, Dome and Illuminated Clock. Behind the House, a large Flagged Yard, an excellent Wash-house, and other Outbuildings, a Bath-house, for Hot, Cold, and Shower Baths, a recently built Two-Stall Stable, and Coach-house, and an open Plot of Ground, neatly enclosed in Front of the Mansion.

North & South Shields Gazette and Northumberland and Durham Advertiser
Thursday 31 January 1856
Image © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

NOTICE is hereby given, that the Partnership heretofore subsisting between us the undersigned, George William Thomas and Frederick Charles Christian Ivers, at the Lavender Dock and premises, Rotherhithe-street, Rotherhithe, in the county of Surrey, as Shipbuilders, Shipwrights, Ship Joiners, and Ship Smiths, under the style or firm of Thomas and Ivers, is this day dissolved by mutual consent. All debts due to and owing by the said copartnership will be received and paid by the undersigned George William Thomas, at the office, Lavender Dock aforesaid.—As witness the hands of the said parties this 29th day of May, 1856

George Wm. Thomas.
Fred. C. C. Ivers.

The London Gazette
3 June 1856

The list below shows ships said to have been built by John Smith. The list is constructed from several modern sources, and whilst the existence and launch year of most of them can be confirmed from Lloyds Register and the Mercantile Navy List, this does not record the builder's name. Only those highlighted in green have been confirmed by the author from period documents as having been built by John Smith's yard at Pallion. If readers are able to supply authentication for others, I would be pleased to receive it via Peter Searle.

Name	Launch Date	Tons	O/N	Note
Violet	1850	203	23737	
Janet Willis	1850	666	32728	
Sarah Anne	1850	352	24813	
Shakespeare	1851	810	942	Maiden voyage Apr 1851
Dumfriesshire	~Sept 1851	419	10535	
George Kendall	6 Apr 1852	830	24058	
Brahan Castle	1852	109	17973	
Eleanor	1852	850		No other mention found
Jane Gray	1852	315	8529	
Oak (a lighter)	1852			
Richard Battersby	1852	528	24539	
Sir Walter Raleigh	1852	471	1072	
Sir William Gomm	1853	839		Sailed from Shields with coal 26 Feb 1853. Last in Lloyd Reg 1855.
Walter Duncan	9 Feb 1853	201		
Prima Donna	24 Mar 1853	136	10798	
Uncle Tom	21 Jun 1853	900		Launch date may be a week out. For Kendalls of Liverpool but little else to hand
New E. D.	21 Aug 1853	267		Built for a German client so no UK reg
Lady Elizabeth	5 Oct 1853	496	10756	
African	1853	888	23091	
Catherine Pemberton	1853	313	6098	
Gold Digger	1853	200		2 similar ships listed in the MNL.
Tyne	1853	200		No other mention found
Lady Anne	13 Apr 1854	745		For Sir George E Hodgkinson [6]
Damietta	1854	266	23259	
Joshua & Mary	1854	243	26482	Owned by Dent & Co later in life
Tijarety Misr	1854	311	25984	Wrecked 1859
Alliance	1855	355	5977	
Geelong	1855	455	26949	
Greetings	1855	426		No other mention found
Sir James	18 Jan 1855	645	497	
Sebastian	4 Apr 1855	398		
Stuart Wortley	1855	872	136	For Sir George E Hodgkinson
Hannah Marks	27 Sep 1855			Nothing else found about this vessel...

[6] Taylor Potts, in his book "Sunderland, a history of the town, port, trade and commerce" says that John Smith was negligent in dredging the shore in front of his yard at Pallion. On one occasion, he launched a ship for Sir George Hodgkisson [sic] the stern of which stuck fast in the river bed whilst the stem hung on the quay. She remained there for several tides. Strangely it was not reported in the local newspapers so we don't know which ship this refers to.

Information sources

The primary resource used for this paper has been local newspapers available through the British Newspaper Archive, but we should note that there are no papers specifically for Sunderland yet available before late 1873, so there are some significant gaps in data from this source.

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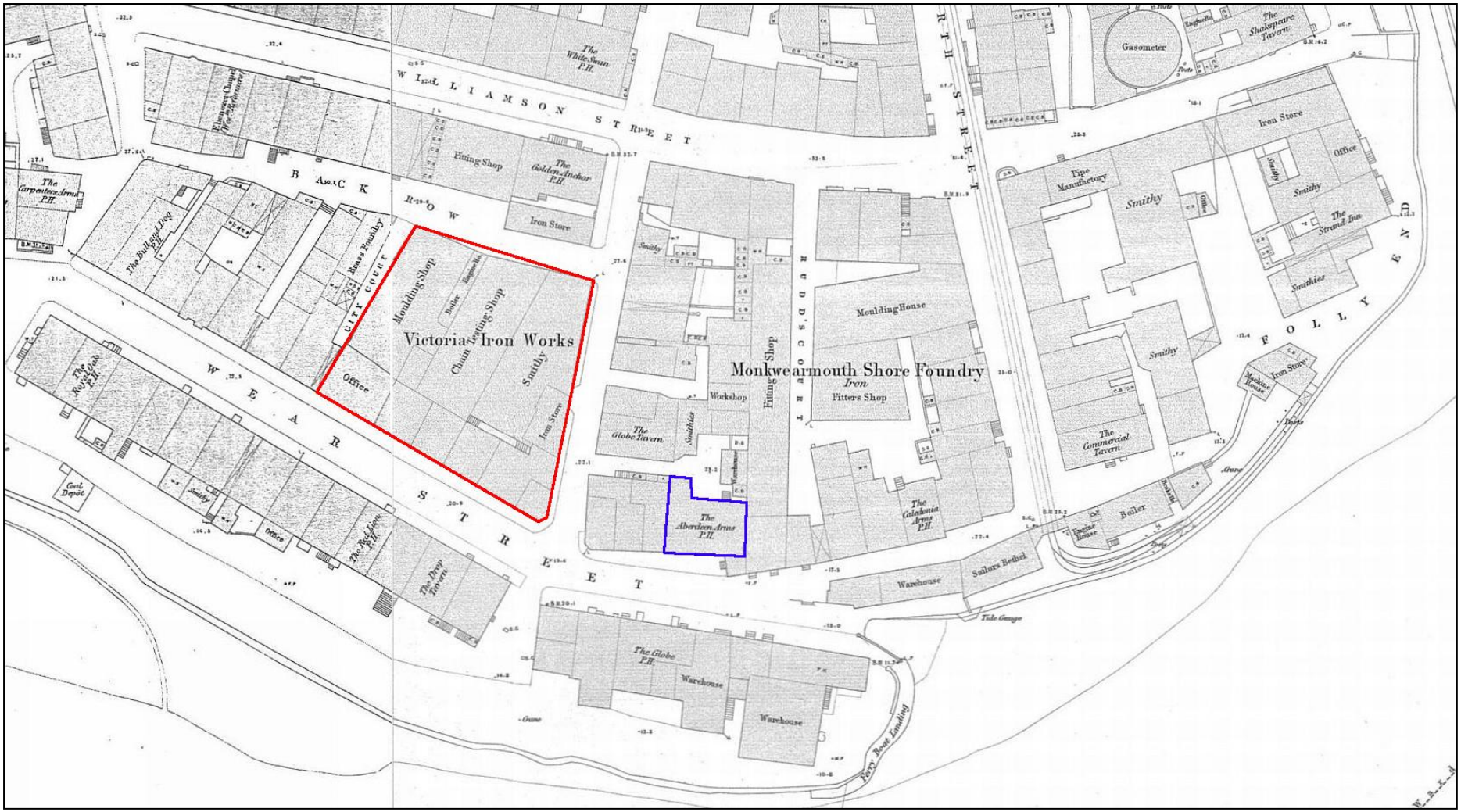
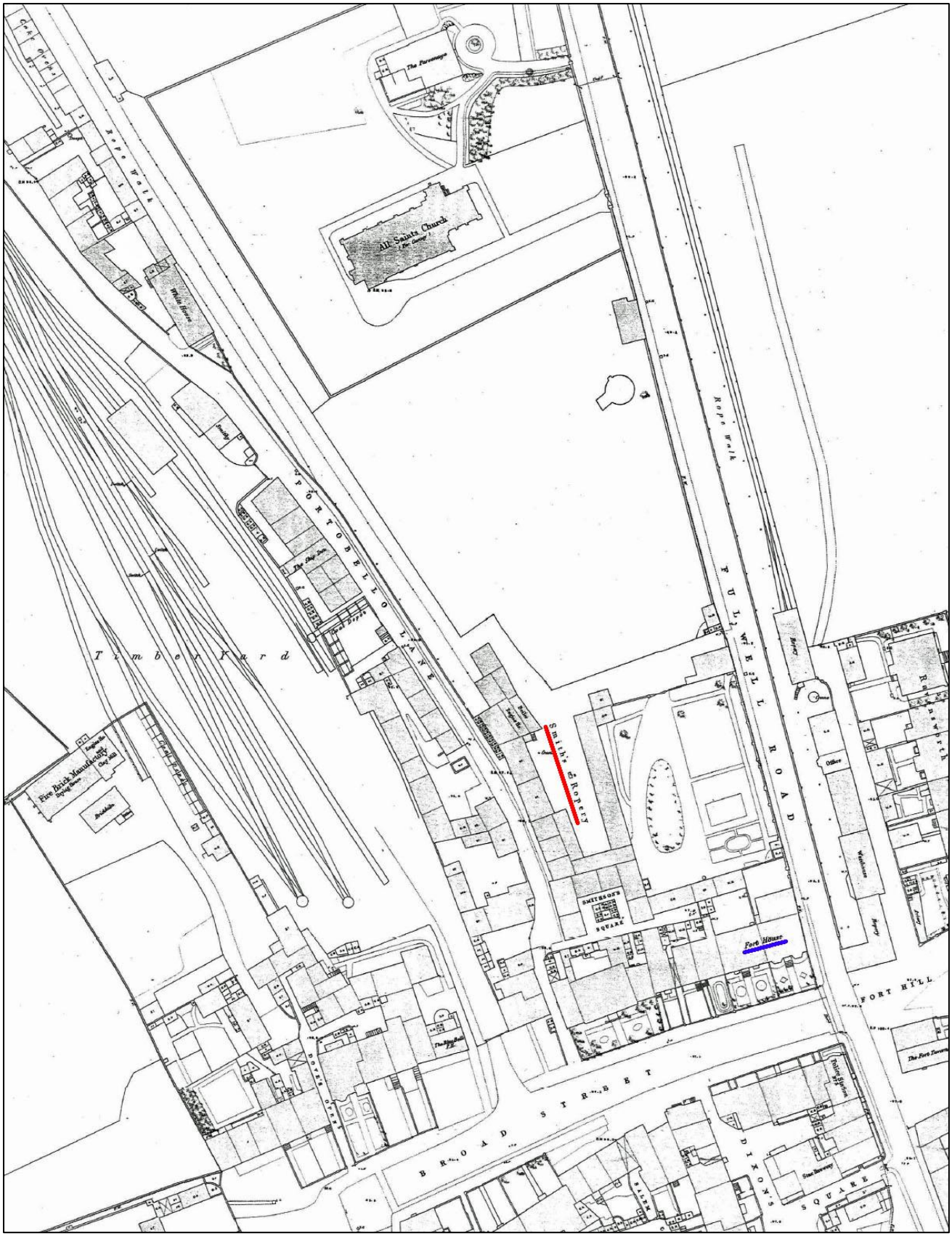
The list of ships above is based on data kindly provided by Peter Searle.

Further information has been sourced from Lloyds Register, the Mercantile Navy List, the London Gazette, a number of open source books and from local trade directories.



Map of Monkwearmouth Shore dated about 1858. Victoria Iron Works shown in red outline, Aberdeen Arms in blue outline



Map of Monkwearmouth dated about 1858 –

Fort House underlined in blue, Smith's Rope Works underlined in red.