Sunderland under attack

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

First World War: Zeppelins and U-Boats

Sunderland played a crucial role in Britain’s war effort in the First World War. Not only was the town a significant producer and exporter of materials and ships, but thousands of Sunderland men volunteered to fight. Of the 18,000 local men who served in the armed forces around 6,000 lost their lives or were wounded.

After war was declared in 1914, Sunderland took swift action to defend itself against possible attack by Spanish ships during the War of Jenkins’ Ear (1739–48). A battery of four cannons was built at Coney Garth, overlooking the main channel of the River Wear. Defences were upgraded and added to during the Seven Years’ War (1756–63), this time with well-founded fears of a French attack in mind. These new defences included a battery on top of the cliffs at Roker, the first of various gun emplacements at Roker for the next 200 years.

A third round of improvements to the coastal defences followed during the American War of Independence (1775–83). One of the main threats at this time was from the notorious privateer John Paul Jones, who as an officer of the Continental Navy of the American Revolution was raiding the vast coast and attacking British boats with a squadron of warships.

Second World War: the battle for the skies

With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Sunderland was once again a prime target for attack. This time it was the German Luftwaffe that wreaked destruction. The most intense bombing was during air raids between 1940 and 1943. The raid of 16th May 1943 was one of the worst and was described by the Sunderland Echo: ‘Showers of incendiary bombs as well as high explosives were dropped and these caused several fires, some of which burned furiously for a considerable time.’

During these devastating attacks 267 people lost their lives and 4,000 homes were destroyed or damaged. The shipyards and other industrial areas were also hit. In 1940 Sunderland’s Central Station was badly damaged. In response to these attacks, anti-aircraft guns and searchlights were hastily put up around the town.

Black cat early defences

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

From an ear to a privateer

The first permanent gun installations at Sunderland were to defend against possible attack by Spanish ships during the War of Jenkins’ Ear (1739–48). A battery of four cannons was built at Coney Garth, overlooking the main channel of the River Wear. Defences were upgraded and added to during the Seven Years’ War (1756–63), this time with well-founded fears of a French attack in mind. These new defences included a battery on top of the cliffs at Roker, the first of various gun emplacements at Roker for the next 200 years.

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Ruthless buccaneer or American hero?

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