

Sunder Land: Exploring the changing iconography of River Wear bridges through Sunderland pottery

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Abstract

When opened in 1796, the Wear Bridge in Sunderland was the longest single span iron bridge in the world, measuring 236 feet. Prior to this, a ferry was required to cross the River Wear at this point, hindering the growth of this nascent industrial centre. This impressive feat of engineering, linking Monkwearmouth to the 'sundered land' of the south shore, was widely commemorated through transfer-printed depictions on ceramic jugs, mugs and plaques made as souvenirs by the Sunderland potteries. The bridge was subsequently rebuilt in 1858-59 and later transfers show this new design. The current bridge, opened in 1929, continues to be an iconic structure, appearing on Sunderland Association Football Club's badge. Sunderland pottery has become highly collectable internationally, with Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens (SMWG) holding the most extensive collection.

Today, a new bridge is under construction further upstream between Castletown and Pallion. As Sunderland City Council (2016) points out, at 'Twice the height of Nelson's Column, and bigger than Big Ben, Sunderland's new bridge will be hard to miss'. Like its antecedents, the new Wear crossing is intended to be a catalyst of socio-economic growth and its as yet undecided name will reflect Sunderland's industrial heritage. Designed and built by a British-European consortium, it already appears to have become entangled in complex narratives of regional pride and identity.

Taking the precedent of commemorative Sunderland pottery, the *Sunder Land* project explores, through creative ceramic practice, the ongoing socio-cultural relationship between bridges and the community of Sunderland. It will result in a new body of ceramic artwork, which may become accessioned by SMWG, forming a lasting material testimony to these connections. This paper will reflect upon this process of community engagement, discussing the changing iconography of Sunderland bridges expressed through both historical and contemporary ceramics.

References

Sunderland City Council 2016. 'New Wear Crossing',
<<http://www.sunderland.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=2929>>
[Accessed 26 October 2016]

About the author

Christopher McHugh studied archaeology at Durham University and the University of Cambridge, before becoming an artist specialising in ceramics and print. His AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award project (2010-14) was based jointly at the National Glass Centre, University of Sunderland and the Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens (SMWG). This research explored the reinterpretation of the SMWG's nineteenth century Sunderland pottery collection through creative ceramics and community engagement.

<http://communityinclay.org.uk>



A Scott's helmet jug depicting the 1796 Wear Bridge which was conserved by the author in 2012.



A view of the west side of the bridge, looking eastwards towards the mouth of the Wear.