

Robert Stephenson Trust



History of Robert Stephenson & Co in Newcastle

George Stephenson's first locomotives were built at Long Benton Colliery Forge but the idea of a new site to build further locomotives was a very attractive one as a proper works would enable it to achieve a higher standard of workmanship. On 23 June 1823 the first factory in the world specifically to build steam locomotives was founded in Newcastle upon Tyne. The firm, known as Robert Stephenson & Co had an initial capital of £4,000 divided into 10 shares. Edward Pease had four shares, two of which were paid for by Pease's cousin, Thomas Richardson. Michael Longridge, George and Robert Stephenson had two shares each, although Robert had to borrow £500 from Edward Pease to pay for his stake. His valuable input to the later Killingworth locomotives was acknowledged by him being made Managing Partner at the age of 19.

The new company a sub lease on land owned by the Hospital of St Mary the Virgin. The Hospital had been founded in medieval times across the road from St John's Church in Westgate Road and over the centuries had been endowed with many parcels of land. By the Nineteenth Century these lands were already occupied by a wide range of industries and had extended from Westgate Road, down to Hanover Street near the riverside, and from the bottom of Forth Banks on the west to the foot of the Tuthill Stairs on the east. Throughout his life Edward Pease referred to the factory as the Forth Street Works. The land leased by the new company on 1st August 1823 lay between South Street and Orchard Street and extended from Burrell's foundry to the north, to as far south as Hanover Street.

A small, one up, one down cottage on the site served as the offices of the Company. With its distinctive oriel window on the first floor, this building survived into the 1930s before being badly damaged by fire. A further building on site was adapted to house the stationary engine designed by Robert and assembled on site. The chimney for the engine's boiler can be seen in the only known elevational drawing of this 1823 site.

After the success of *Rocket* in October 1829 the company soon needed to extend and by 1830 extended its foothold to the west of South Street to form what was effectively a new factory which rapidly grew on both sides of Sussex Street and eventually had its own engine to supply power. From contemporary plans, maps and letters it can be surmised that a new Smiths' shop was situated directly opposite the Company's first office. By 1847 a long thin boiler plate shed was also constructed to the west with access from Sussex Street. This may have been considered a temporary site until final formal legal arrangements became possible when the building developed eastwards to South Street, becoming part of 18 and 20 South Street.

These permanent structures were probably constructed during Robert Stephenson's frequent visits to Newcastle when he was Engineer in Chief the Newcastle and Berwick Railway from 1845. This project included the High Level Bridge and Central Station completed in 1850

On the first Ordnance Map Surveyed in 1859 the boiler/plate shop and offices are marked but the workshop which became 18 South Street did not extend to South Street until 1867 with the demolition of Forster's Court. The new eastern façade was constructed to match the adjoining offices.

From 1860 Robert George, Robert's cousin, who had become Managing Partner after Robert's death in 1859, started a major building construction, extending the factory northwards on both sides of South Street and replaced an assortment of buildings with a large erecting shop on the ground floor and over it a fitting shop. This listed building still exists immediately to the south of 20 South Street.

In 1883, the date of the last lease, Robert Stephenson & Company had reached Forth Street and almost completely encompassed Sussex Street and South Street. For the next 30 years the factory helped to supply the demands of world-wide railway networks but as the size of locomotives increased the South Street Works became too small and outdated and as the long term leases expired they were not renewed. During the 1890s a decision was made to

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move to Darlington and this took place in stages, the last locomotive being built at South Street in 1904.

