*A History of the County of Durham, Volume V: Sunderland* (Boydell & Brewer, 2015). Edited by Gillian Cookson. The Victoria History of the Counties of England. 346pp. 304 x 208mm. 53 b/w illus, 29 maps, plans and tables. ISBN 978 1 9043 5644 8. Price £95.00.

The Victoria County History is a great survivor, but only because the current editorial generation works hard to demonstrate its continuing relevance. As well as the medieval settlements, churches, villages and parishes that dominated the output of the VCH in the early twentieth century, recent volumes focus on the large industrial towns of the modern era, and engage with a much wider range of economic, social, political and cultural history questions. VCH Durham’s new volume on Sunderland follows Vol. IV on Darlington, and two paperbacks on aspects of Sunderland’s history published in the interim.

This book pulls together research done over many years by volunteer transcribers, academics and heritage professionals. Despite the centrifugal tendencies of such a process, the result is an impressively coherent and unified text, much of it written by Gillian Cookson and Christine Newman (respectively county editor and assistant county editor), with five other authors sharing chapters. Broadly, the book falls into two parts, beginning with five chronological chapters that trace Sunderland’s development from prehistory to the present. Another five chapters then take a more thematic view of industry, economy, society and culture, mostly structured around key institutions and organisations. Religious establishments, public buildings and spaces, utilities and services are surveyed over time, with a wealth of primary citations that should open up new research. Although by its very nature most likely to be used as a work of reference, the book is written in an accessible and thoughtful style.

There is a good deal here for landscape historians to make use of. The VCH, rooted in the need to explain the ancient and medieval origins of England’s towns and villages, has always provided a careful survey of the landscape and its elements, although early volumes were mostly antiquarian and narrative in approach. Here, there is a more analytical discussion of the gradual evolution of settlement, society, boundaries and jurisdictions. In their very names, the parishes of Monkwearmouth and Bishopwearmouth point to the division of power and territory between the monastic holdings on the north bank of the Wear and the jurisdiction of the ‘Prince Bishops’ to the south. How the fields, estates, townships and moors of this district ultimately became Sunderland and its environs is a key thread of the early chapters of the book, well-illustrated with a series of maps and plans. Competition for space between industrial, transport and residential uses is also a running theme in the later periods.

Several chapters emphasise the complex interactions and uses of coast, river, farmland and coalfield in the Sunderland area, which was in many ways a microcosm of the North East more generally. Sunderland’s economy depended overwhelmingly on the coal trade, directly or indirectly, and there is careful discussion of the changing implications of this over time. Growing as a marketing and transhipment point for coal brought down the River Wear in the seventeenth century, Sunderland then became an important hub in the coal-carrying railway network of the nineteenth century, and a thriving manufacturing centre at the technological cutting-edge in glass-making and shipbuilding. The congested Wear and its shallow mouth had to be extensively engineered with new bridges, quays, piers and docks. The need for proper management of the river and its navigation drove the creation of the River Wear Commissioners, which added a layer of complexity to local administration by exercising its jurisdiction over a riparian space, inevitably in some conflict with established entities that saw the river as a border between them. By the end of the twentieth century, Sunderland had to make another transition to post-industrial regeneration, but still with the river and its banks at the heart of new leisure uses.

In short, this latest VCH volume is a capable survey of Sunderland’s history over a long time-span, supported by an impressive research effort. It is part of a substantial revival of interest in the history of the North East as a whole over the past decade or so, and not least a welcome reminder that there are other perspectives to be had on this part of England, so often dominated historiographically by Newcastle and the Tyne. It is also an important statement of the continuing relevance and value of the Victoria County History.