

Arbeia Society Notes

No. 2: Log-boats from the River Wear

by A. Croom

Version 1: 2022

Two, or possibly three, log-boats have been recovered from the River Wear, only one of which survives. One was found in 1872, possibly another in 1874 and the third (currently on display in Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens) probably sometime in the 1880s, although the exact date is unclear. In S. McGrail's *Logboats of England and Wales* (1978), the 1872 boat is called Hylton 1 and the surviving boat is Hylton 2; this numbering is retained here.

The boats are similar in size, although the surviving boat (Hylton 2) was probably the most complete.

Table 1: Approximate dimensions of the two boats, not taking into account the intended accuracy of measurement or whether they were measured wet or dry (taken from Shields Daily News, 5 August 1872 and Whitcomb 1968, 299; Sunderland Echo, 13 May 1874).

Dimensions (m)	Hylton 1 (1872)	Hylton 2 (1880s)	Claxheugh (1874)
Length	4.0	3.5	3.5
Width (min)	0.8		0.7
Width (max)	0.9	0.6	0.9
Height	0.4	0.5	0.3

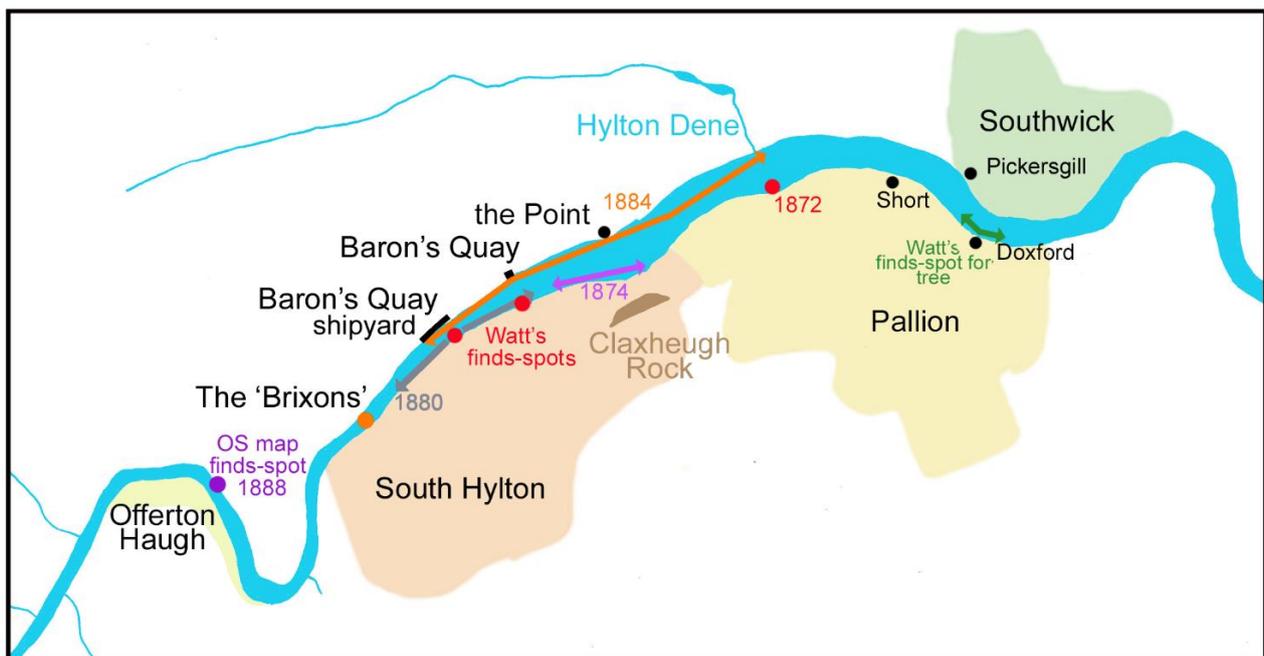


Fig. 1: Locations and dates given for the recovery of the boats, mentioned in the text.

Abbreviations

HER	Historic Environment Records
RWCM	River Wear Commission Minutes books
TWA	Tyne and Wear Archives

Catalogue of the different dates associated with the log-boats

1871

A book recording donations to Sunderland Museum (labelled 'Sunderland Borough Museum Stock Book') has an entry for a donation made in September 1871 of 'A canoe found in the River Wear' by the River Wear Commission 'per H. H. Wake'; a month later the Commission also donated a human skull from the river. Henry Hay Wake was the engineer for the River Wear Commission from 1868 – 1907, in charge of the dredging operations to improve the river for shipping. The entry in the book was not written until at least 1874, as all the entries from 1768 to 1774 on the same page are written by the same hand and in the same shade of ink. The 1871 date must be a mistake for September 1872 (see below).



Fig. 2: A photograph showing log-boat Hylton 1 lying in front of the large tree trunk in the Commissioners' Yard at South Dock (the image has been enhanced). Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens, accession no. TWCMS : N310.

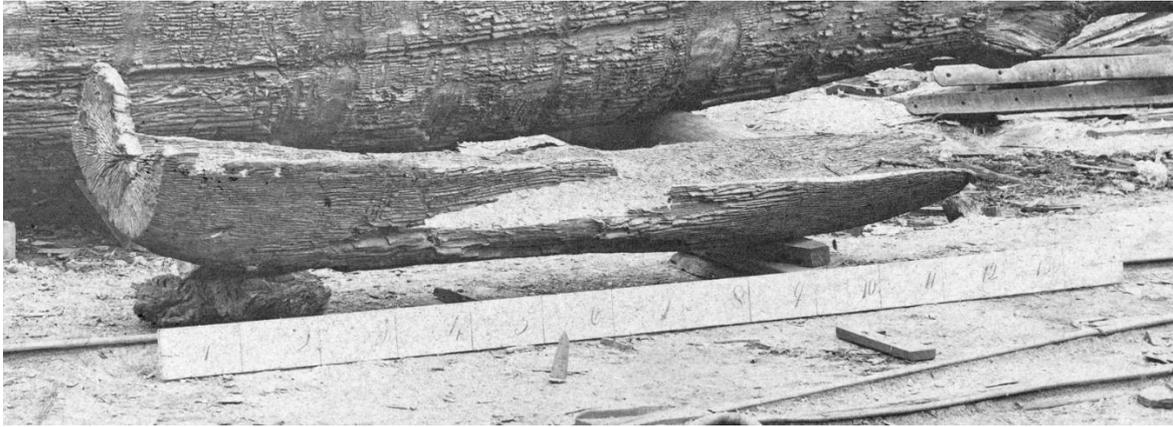


Fig. 3: A detail taken from the above photograph. The scale (in feet) below the boat appears to make the (dried out) boat closer to 12ft than the 13ft recorded in the original newspaper report (the image has been enhanced). Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens, accession no. TWCMS : N310).

August 1872 Hylton 1

HER: 346 (log-boat); 17 (bones)

Other: Ordnance Survey Archaeology card no. NZ35 NE no. 58; McGrail 1978, Hylton 1

Description: (1) 'It is 13ft. long, 2½ft broad, and 17in deep [L:4.0m W:0.8m H:0.4m]. One side is entirely gone, the other nearly so, and there is only a bit of the stern left. The canoe has been made out of a solid British oak of about 3ft [0.9m] ... The wood is still in a good state of preservation' (*Shields Daily News*, 5 August 1872)

(2) at the same place 'a quantity of bones and horns' were also dredged up; only a sample of 25 were kept, but they included two human skulls, plus two dog, one goat, one possible boar, three oxen and four red deer skulls, and a whale vertebra (Embleton 1873, 42-3)

(3) 'some portions of large tree trunks', one of which was 'thirty-six feet [11m] in length ... the diameter at the base ... is five feet and a half [1.7m]. The tree appears to be an oak' (Brady 1873, 43)

Finds-spot: (1) the log-boat was found 'opposite Hylton Dene' (*Shields Daily News*, 5 August 1872)

(2) the bones were found 'from a depth of from fifteen to twenty feet [4.5 – 6m] below the ordinary level of the river bed at the entrance of Hylton Dene' (Embleton 1873, 42)

(3) the trees were 'also been taken from the same position [as the bones] in the bed of the Wear' (Brady 1873, 43)

Found: (1) the log-boat was recovered 'a few days' before 5 August 1872 (*Shields Daily News*, 5 August 1872)

(2) the bones were recovered 'during the last twelve months' (Embleton 1873, 42)

(3) no date is given for the discovery of the trees, but it has to be before 1873, and was presumably at a similar time to the bones (Brady 1873, 43)

Location: (1) the log-boat was 'brought to the Commissioners' yard, South Dock' (*Shields Daily News*, 5 August 1872)

(2) by 1873 the log-boat was on display in the museum: the bones were 'to be deposited in the Sunderland Museum, where is to be seen a canoe, made of the hollowed-out trunk of a tree, also dredged from the bed of the Wear' (Embleton 1873, 42). The boat was no longer in the museum by 1887: 'there used to be in our Museum an ancient canoe, that had been dug from the bed of the river by the dredger' (*Sunderland Echo*, 19 February 1887)

(3) one of the tree trunks 'is now [1873] lying near the South Dock entrance' (Brady 1873, 43)

Discussion: The log-boat, trees and animal bones were all brought up by a dredger deepening the river and removing mud banks. The historian Potts records that the civil engineer William Morgan Wake (died 1881) took a photo of one of the large bog trees found in the river: 'one of these trees was photographed by the late William Morgan Wake where it was landed and then lay – in the yard of the Commissioners, at the South Dock (a copy of the photograph has been kindly presented to the writer by his son, Mr H. H. Wake, engineer to the River Wear Commissioners). The dimensions are as follows: 32 feet [11m] in length, 5 feet [1.5m] in diameter', although he does not mention the canoe (Potts 1892, 62-3). In 1952 the family of Mervyn Hay Wake (William's grandson and the third civil engineer in the family working on the river) donated a number of photographs of the River Wear in the nineteenth century to Sunderland Museum, including one of a tree and boat in South Dock yards (Figs 2-3). The dimensions of the tree are very similar but not exactly the same as those recorded by Embleton in 1873. The description of the boat in the newspaper (see above) matches the boat in the photograph, so this is clearly the boat discovered in 1872. The photograph was presumably taken in 1872-3, before the canoe was put on display in the museum.

References: (1) *Shields Daily News*, 5 August 1872
(2) Embleton, D. 1873 'Note on bones dredged from the bed of the River Wear in 1872', *Natural History Transactions of Northumberland and Durham*, **5 part 1**, 42-3
(3) Brady, G. S., 1873 'Note', *Natural History Transactions of Northumberland and Durham*, **5 part 1**, 43
(4) *Sunderland Echo*, 19 February 1887
(5) Potts, T., 1892 *Sunderland: a History of the Town, Port, Trade and Commerce*, Sunderland
(6) McGrail, S. 1978 *Logboats of England and Wales*, British Archaeological Report, British series **51**

May 1874

Description: 'an ancient canoe, which appears to have been hollowed out of an oak tree ... It is 11ft. 6 in long, 3 ft. beam at the stern, 2 ft. 3 in. at the bow, and 1 ft. deep' [L:3.5m W:0.7-0.9m H:0.3m] (*Sunderland Echo*, 13 May 1874)

Finds-spot: 'at Claxheugh' (*Sunderland Echo*, 13 May 1874)

Found: by May 1874

Location: Unknown

Discussion: This is described as having been found by 'the River Wear Commissioners' divers', and it is known that the Commission's dredgers were working near Claxheugh at certain times between 1873 and 1876 (RWCM meeting of 9 December 1873; *Sunderland Times*, 13 May 1874, 'at Claxheugh reach';

Sunderland Echo, 18 October 1876). The recovery of the log-boat is recorded in a single, brief, newspaper report (*Sunderland Echo*, 13 May; the same text was picked up and used by other newspapers) and nowhere else. It is therefore:

- (a) Hylton 1 found in 1872 at the far end of Claxheugh reach (see Fig. 1), belatedly/mistakenly reported by the newspaper as a new discovery
- (b) Hylton 2, found by the Commission diver Henry Watts, at least ten years before the suggested dates for the discovery of this boat. Some of the suggested finds-spots for Hylton 2 are at Claxheugh (see Fig. 1).
- (c) it is a third boat which perhaps did not survive its recovery and so was forgotten about, unlike the other two which both ended up in the Museum.

Reference: *Sunderland Echo*, 13 May 1874

1880

An old handwritten note on the back of the photograph of Hylton 1 and the tree (Figs 2-3) reads: 'Tree and Dugout Canoe Removed from River Wear 1880. Tree diam [sic] 32'-0 x 5' 0 in diam [9.8m x 1.5m]. English oak; had been felled by burning roots and trunk, dredged at [sic] between Hylton Dene and Southwick. Canoe found in River near Hylton'. The boat in the photo matches the description of Hylton 1, found in 1872, so it is unclear where the date 1880 comes from, nor is it known who wrote the note, or when.

1884

What sounds very much like a copy of the same photograph ('a large tree and ancient canoe') was shown during a meeting of the Sunderland Antiquarian Society on 9 February 1904. The boat was described as having been 'discovered during the dredging operations in the Wear between High Pallion and Hylton in 1884' (*Sunderland Echo*, 10 February 1904). If this is the same photograph then this date must also be wrong. In 1884 the dredgers were doing a lot of work in the stretch of the river near the Doxford, Pickersgill and Shorts Yards (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 4: Hylton 2 at Sunderland Museum, 1910 or later. Photograph from file on the log-boat, Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums.



Fig. 5: The log-boat Hylton 2 displayed on its side in Sunderland Museum. The exact date of the photograph is unknown, but as Mitchell (1919, 14) mentions that the log-boat was 'placed at the top of the glass cases near the [display of the Bronze Age] cists' it was already displayed in this way by 1919 and was still on show above a glass case in 1938 (Sunderland Echo, 16 December 1938). Photograph from file on the log-boat, Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums.

1885

In 1910 Hylton 2 was given to Sunderland Museum and put on display. A note in the 1910 *Sunderland Public Library Circular* said that it had been found 'about 25 years ago'; Mitchell, in his school text-book history of Sunderland, made this approximate date into a specific date (as was his habit), and said it was found in 1885 (Mitchell 1919, 14, 128), which was repeated in later reports (eg *Sunderland Echo*, 16 December 1938). If 'about 25 years ago' in 1910 meant 26 years previously, it would fit with discovery in 1884 (see above); if it meant 22 years previously it would fit with the date given by the Commissioners (see below).

References: Mitchell, W. 1919 *History of Sunderland*, Sunderland

1888

The 6in OS map revised in 1913-4 records that a 'Canoe, Human Remains etc found A.D. 1888' were found at Offerton Heugh (or Haugh), Hylton 2 (see below). The River Wear Commission Minutes Book show that dredging was being carried out at this part of the river in 1888, particularly at Barmston Ford (exact location unclear, although Barmston is even further upriver than Offerton), but that there were also dredgers still at work at Claxheugh (RWCM meetings of 28 April, 12 June, 24 July 1888). It is unclear where the 1888 date and location came from: there is no other reference to either this year or this place. Whitcomb (1968, 297) says this location is confirmed by a note in the River Wear Commission Minutes,

but this is not so: see below). It also does not fit with what Harry Watt, who found the boat, says about where it was found.

References: (1) River Wear Commissioners Minute Book for 1888 (TWA 202.1024)
 (2) Whitcomb, N., 1968 'Two prehistoric dugout canoes from the River Wear at Hylton, near Sunderland, County Durham', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4 ser. **46**, 297-301

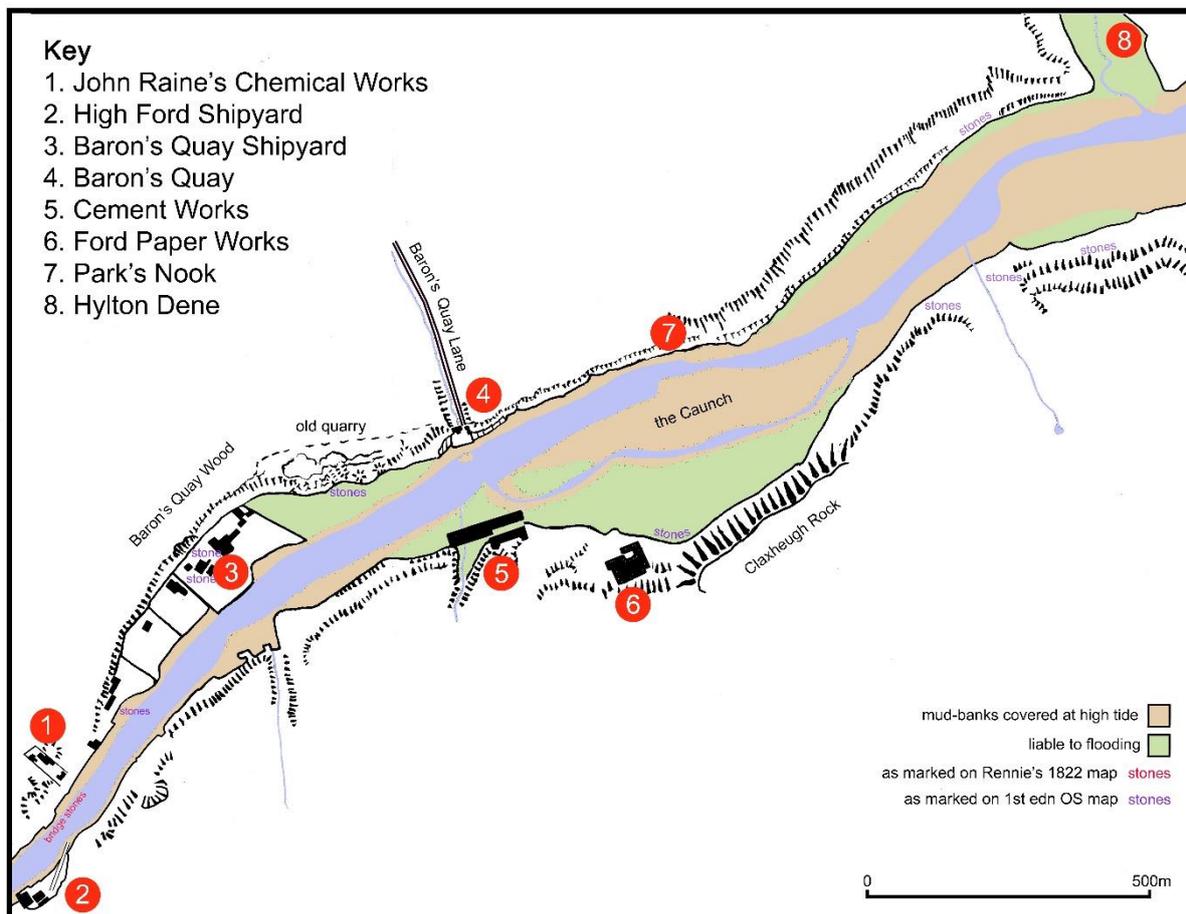


Fig. 6: This map shows details taken from Rennie's 1822 map, the 1st edition OS (surveyed in 1857) and the 2nd edition OS map (surveyed in 1895), so it includes buildings and features that did not all exist at the same time. It shows how extensive mud banks were along the river in the 19th century.

1910 Hylton 2

HER: 340

Other: Ordnance Survey Archaeology cards NZ35 NW no. 2; McGrail 1978, Hylton 2

Description: (1) 'its size is about eleven feet long by two feet broad by one and a half feet deep' [L:3.4m W:0.6m H:0.5m] (*Sunderland Public Library Circular*, 1910, and frontispiece)
 (2) it was found 'with human bones in it' (Donations Book, 2 February 1910); these were 'unfortunately not secured' (*Sunderland Public Library Circular*, 1910); 'there were in it a number of human bones' (*Sunderland Echo*, 2 February 1910)

(3) 'near this spot [the location of the boat] he [Harry Watts] also found stone chisels on the bed of the river, and deers' horns' (Donations Book, February 1910)

(4) 'Years later' after its discovery, Harry Watt 'revealed that at the time it contained bones and some stones shaped like axe-heads which he thought were just rubbish and "hoyed back intiv th' river". Thinking his find was just an old horse-trough, he was actually breaking it up for firewood when, fortunately, he was interrupted by the engineer for the River Wear Commission, who recognized its value as a prehistoric relic. Unluckily, by that time, Watt's hammer had knocked out one side of the canoe' (*Sunderland Echo*, 16 December 1938)

(5) Watts also recorded that in a different part of the river 'near Doxford's Yard, he found a big tree' (Donation Book, 2 February 1910; Fig. 1)

Finds-spot: (1) '7 feet [2.1m] below water, covered with "stuff", opposite Barron's Quay [sic] near Hylton. He [Harry Watts] was then taking away the "Brixons", remains of an old bridge which obstructed the passage of the keels down the river' (Donations Book, 2 February 1910). The Brixons are better known as the Brigg Stones

(2) found when Watts was 'engaged in dredging operations near Hylton' (*Sunderland Echo*, 2 February 1910)

(3) 'at Hylton' (RWCM meeting 22 February 1910); the Minutes record a letter including this phrase from the Museum acknowledging receipt of the boat, but the Minutes themselves do not give a location and had only referred to it as 'a very old Canoe which was dredged up from the River some time ago', with no further details (RWCM 25 January 1910)

Found: (1) Harry Watts recorded that he found it when removing the Brigg Stones, but does not provide a date (Donations Book, 2 February 1910). A large number of stones were removed in 1865, and a channel was cut through the remaining stones by a dredger in 1881 (*Sunderland Echo*, 2 June 1881; RWCM meeting 28 June 1881)

(2) c.1885: 'about 25 years ago' (*Sunderland Public Library Circular*, 1910)

Location: (1) 'For years the find lay neglected in a storehouse of the Commissioners till it was "spotted" on a casual visit by Mr. J. A. Charlton Deas, Curator of the Museum. At his request, the canoe was presented to the Museum in 1910' (*Sunderland Echo*, 16 December 1938)

(2) in 1910 it was presented to Sunderland Museum by the River Wear Commissioners (*Sunderland Public Library Circular*, 1910); the entry in the Accession Book on 31 January 1910 reads simply 'ancient Dug-out canoe found in River Wear' (Accession Register, Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens, original accession no: 2-1910)

(3) Currently on display in Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens (acc. no. TWCMS : F2591)

Discussion: The log-boat was donated to the Museum in January and by February 2 was on public display. The same day Harry Watts visited the museum and provided some additional information about the boat, which was recorded in the Sunderland Museum Donation Book (this is not the same as the accessions register).

Harry Watts was a diver employed by the River Wear Commissioners from 1861 to 1896, who became famous because of the number of people he had saved from drowning. He said (according to the statement in the Donations Book) that he found the boat while removing the Brigg Stones but also that he found it opposite Baron's Quay, even though the Quay is anything from a minimum of 385m and up to 785m distant from the location of the Stones: see Figs 1, 6; Donations Book, 2 February 1910). The problem is compounded by what exactly he meant by Baron's Quay, as there are two possibilities. The original Baron's Quay is shown on J. Rennie's map of 1822 (available at <http://iiif.durham.ac.uk/index.html?manifest=https://iiif.durham.ac.uk/manifests/other/pip/pip-99.json>). The 1st edition OS map (surveyed in 1855) shows 'Baron's Quay Lane' leading down to some buildings by the river, and in 1892 Potts also located the place 'commonly called Baron's Quay' at the same spot, opposite the Cement Works (Potts 1892, 63; see Fig. 6). The lane is labelled on the 2nd edition OS map (revised 1895), but the buildings have gone. The other possible location is the Baron's Quay Shipyard (HER 1731, 13770), some 400m to the west of the Quay, an area still called Baron's Quay today.

The shipyard was closer to the Brigg Stones, but the original Baron's Quay was close to one end of a large island mudbank called Minican's Caunch (Potts 1892, 64) or Miniken's Canch (1st edn OS map, surveyed 1855) that was eventually removed by dredging (Fig. 6). It produced large quantities of preserved trees and branches, human bones, a Roman coin, and deer antlers in about 1860 (Johnson 1860); a Bronze Age rapier was also found in the area (Potts 1892, 62).

If the bones found with the log-boat were definitely human rather than animal then it had been re-used as a coffin.

The 1938 newspaper report provides a lot of detail not recorded elsewhere, although it is unclear where this information, reported so many years after the date (and 25 years after Watt's death), actually came from.

In conclusion, it appears that Hylton 2 was found sometime in the 1880s, possibly in 1881, most likely on the south side of the river somewhere between Hylton and Claxheugh.

- References:
- (1) Johnson, F., 1860 'On ancient remains found in the bed of the River Wear, at Claxheugh, near Sunderland', *Transactions of the Tyneside Naturalists' Field Club* **4**, 117-21
 - (2) River Wear Commission Minute Book for 1888 (TWA 202.1022)
 - (3) Potts, T., 1892 *Sunderland: a History of the Town, Port, Trade and Commerce*, Sunderland
 - (4) Accession Register no. I (1905-1946), Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens
 - (5) River Wear Commission Minute Book for 1910 (TWA 202.1028)
 - (6) *Sunderland Echo*, 2 February 1910, which records that Watts visited the museum on 2 February and saw the boat a few days after it was donated to the museum

- (7) statement made by Harry Watts on 2 February 1910, as recorded in Sunderland Museum Donation Book (labelled 'Sunderland Borough Museum Stock Book)
- (8) *Sunderland Public Library Circular* (1910), **4**, no. **45**, 364-5
- (9) *Sunderland Echo*, 16 December 1938
- (10) McGrail, S. 1978 *Logboats of England and Wales*, British Archaeological Report, British series **51**