

The Victoria Hall Disaster!

One of the country's worst tragedies in Hendon



Mowbray Park and Winter Gardens

Sunderland Male Voice Choir evolved from the former Shiney Row Male Voice Choir in July 2022.

The Choir has recorded and performed some great material over the years. Recently, it has embarked on a programme of creating new musical material. Some of this material incorporates new arrangements of traditional numbers.

An exciting new initiative is the creation of brand-new songs based upon the region's rich local heritage and its people.

The Choir has been working with Sunderland City Council and members of the community to expand their outreach in Hendon, Sunderland.

One of the oldest parts of the City of Sunderland is steeped in a rich heritage which is being captured by the Choir in song.

This information sheet looks at one of the worst tragedies in the country which took place in Hendon – 'The Victoria Hall Disaster'.

The Hendon Music Project

Sunderland Male Voice Choir is creating a series about the rich heritage of the Hendon Ward of the City of Sunderland and its people.

The Victoria Hall in Sunderland

The Victoria Hall originally stood at the junction of Toward Road and Laura Street in Sunderland, facing Mowbray Park.

The building was an imposing, gothic style brick building, which was opened in 1872. There was seating on the ground floor, dress circle on the first floor and the gallery above. The hall was a popular venue for public meetings and entertainment.

'The Greatest Treat for Children Ever Given'

On the 16th June 1883, 2000 children, aged between 7 and 11, crowded in to the Victoria Hall.

They had been given tickets to see a show by travelling entertainers, The Fays from Tynemouth Aquarium, and it was advertised as 'the greatest treat for children ever given'. Every child was to be given the chance to win a prize such as a toy or a book.

The National Disaster that shocked the World

At the end of the show, an announcement was made that children with certain tickets would receive a prize on exit. At the same time, entertainers started to distribute gifts from the stage to children in the stalls.

Not wanting to miss out on treats, many of the 1,100 children in the gallery began to rush downstairs to claim their prize.

The exit door at the foot of the stairs, which opened inwards, was bolted only to allow one child through. The opening was not large enough to deal with the numbers.

With few accompanying adults, the result was children being trapped and crushed to death as they continued to come down the stairs.

Sunderland Male Voice Choir

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Mowbray Park overlooks former Victoria Hall

The Tragedy of Victoria Hall

Within half an hour of the initial disaster, the adults in the hall, supported by others, had removed all the children trapped in the stairwell.

The shocking outcome was 183 children died in the tragedy. Some families lost all their children. The entire Bible class from a local Sunday school died in the disaster.

All the children died of asphyxia. No one was prosecuted for the Disaster!

The Disaster will be remembered!

Country-wide donations contributed to the children's funerals and a memorial in Mowbray Park.

The Victoria Hall Disaster Memorial, a grieving mother holding a dead child, was later moved to Bishopwearmouth Cemetery, where it fell into disrepair and was vandalised.

In 2002, the marble statute was restored and moved back to Mowbray Park in a protective canopy.

National outrage and the inquiry led to legislation that public entertainment venues be fitted with outward opening emergency exits and 'push bars' were invented.

Victoria Hall was destroyed by a World War !! parachute bomb.

Remembering our past heritage through words and music!

Comments from the Tragedy

'Keep back, keep back! There's someone down'.

'Don't let go my hand, as someone is standing upon my face.'

'When I got to the door, I found it was fast. I took my little brother in my arms and went upstairs again as fast as I could. I set my brother on a windowsill and so saved our lives. I stopped there a long time, but then I had to step over dead bodies to get downstairs.'

'Good God! All my family gone!'

'Ah! They will never need air more.'

The Sunderland Calamity

'The Sunderland Calamity' is a poem which was written by William McGonagall about the tragic 'Victoria Hall Disaster' in 1883 and showed the strength of public feeling at the time.

The Male Voice Choir Song

It is hoped that the new song created by Sunderland Male Voice Choir will provide a lasting musical memorial of an important national disaster which took place in the heart of Sunderland – 'The Victoria Hall Disaster' in Hendon.



Victoria Hall Disaster Memorial

Sunderland Male Voice Choir Information Sheets

Sunderland Male Voice Choir is producing a range of information sheets on its new music creation and project work. These sheets will be published within the 'Project' page of the Choir website.