



Old Haymarket and William Brown Street in 1928.

LIVERPOOL — A Brief History

(by Alan Brack)

Early Days

The title of "City" was first conferred upon Liverpool by Royal Charter, dated 11th May 1880. But as a town it goes back nearly 800 years to — and we can be precise about this — 28th August 1207. Before that it was nothing at all to speak of, just a hamlet on a muddy creek of the Mersey Estuary inhabited by a few hardy fishing folk.

The exact date of its elevation to a place of some importance is known because on that day in the year 1207 King John signed his name to Letters Patent proclaiming Liverpool to be a borough and a port. As inducements to people to come and settle here he offered a two-acre plot of land on which they could build a dwelling and establish a smallholding, together with *'all the liberties and free customs which any free borough upon the sea has within our land.'* But there was method in his apparent generosity. The King needed a port somewhere on the north-west coast where he could establish a base for his expeditions against Ireland. He was Lord of Ireland but the Irish tended not to recognise his authority and he had to keep an army there to exert his will. He had been using the Welsh port of Milford Haven but the Welsh were proving as difficult as the Irish. Chester would have been suitable but that was firmly in the hands of the Earl of Chester who was powerful enough to be virtually independent and would not have welcomed the King's men so the King did the next best thing and established a new port altogether.

Slow Growth

At that time there was an inlet of the Mersey known as 'the Pool' which ran inland for well over half a mile. It afforded a safe harbour for fishing boats and was large enough to accommodate the King's ships.

Those who came and took advantage of the King's offer and settled down did not exactly find it a land of milk and honey. It was totally unprotected from the winds sweeping up the River Mersey, and to the south and east was a heathland pitted with bogs which made communication with places further afield difficult at the best of times and decidedly hazardous in winter.

Although it is recorded that Liverpool had a Mayor as far back as 1351, by the time Queen Elizabeth I came to the throne it still only had a population of five hundred. There was little maritime trade. What ships used the Pool were either those of the Sovereign or of the Molyneux family (later the Earls of Sefton) who were Constables of Liverpool Castle, or the Stanley family (later Earls of Derby) who were Lords of Man.

Liverpool's emergence as a port of some importance really dates from the 16th century. Officially it was still regarded as a creek of the Port of Chester on the Dee and that city continued to claim the right to control the trade even when the Customs dues collected in Liverpool exceeded those of Chester, Conway and Beaumaris put together. Not unnaturally, Liverpool resented this but it was not until 1658 that she was officially recognised as a Customs port in her own right.

The shipping trade began in a small way with the carrying of salt from the mines of Cheshire to the Isle of Man and ports along the north-west coast, followed by trade with Ireland. On the outward voyage across the Irish Sea as well as salt the ships began to carry coal and iron from Lancashire, woollen goods from Yorkshire and an assortment of imported commodities. On their return trips they brought back Irish linens and flax, raw wool and sheepskins, hides, salt fish and salt beef, and not a few Irishmen.

The Development of the Port

As trade grew bigger ships were built to sail into foreign waters and regular trading commenced with France, Portugal and Spain, the Mediterranean countries generally, and with Scandinavia. By the end of the seventeenth century Liverpool ships were trading with America and the West Indies and it became clear that something would have to be done about enlarging the Pool to accommodate the bigger and greater number of vessels.

The first plan put forward was simply to carve a dock basin out of the land big enough to hold a hundred ships but this did not find favour and in 1709 an engineer named Thomas Steers was called in and he came up with the idea of enclosing the whole Pool by putting a gate across its mouth so allowing the vessels to stay afloat at all states of the tide. In effect he designed a dock as we know one today and it was the first commercial wet dock in Britain. It was opened in 1715 and Steers was appointed its manager at an annual salary of £50.



"The Dockers Umbrella" — the overhead railway

It was with the building of this dock that Liverpool's emergence as an important international port and world-wide trading centre began. New streets were laid out, new industries were established and within five years of the dock's opening the population had reached five figures.

In steadily increasing numbers ships voyaged across the Atlantic taking Lancashire textiles out and bringing back sugar and spices from the West Indies and tobacco and raw cotton from North America. The thriving West African slave trade was firmly in the grip of the merchants and shipowners of Bristol and London. In 1709, out of 84 vessels belonging to Liverpool only one was a slave ship. But much of the trade of the other ships was with Spanish contraband traders at Kingston, Jamaica, and when, in 1747, this was outlawed by Parliament some Liverpool merchants also turned instead to the wholly lawful trade in slaves.

This deplorable trade was not carried on by all Liverpool shipowners by any means and many of the leading citizens openly voiced their opposition to it while two in particular — William Roscoe and William Rathbone — were very active supporters of William Wilberforce in his fight for its abolition.

Canals and Coaching Inns

One essential feature of a growing port is that it must have good means of communication with places inland to bring goods for export or to transport goods which have been imported. In those days this could only be achieved by horse-drawn vehicles and, eventually, along the canals by horse-drawn barge. Both methods, of course, were slow and yet in the year 1824 it was reckoned that 1000 tons of goods were passing daily between Liverpool and the fast-growing town of Manchester.

The canal boats were the main carriers since they could carry more and the canal owners were not slow to take advantage of what was virtually a monopoly. Liverpool corn and cotton merchants, and their Manchester counterparts were especially incensed at what they considered were exorbitant charges and, determined to find an alternative, they ultimately decided to build a railway which, as a bonus, would also carry passengers.

The story of how George Stephenson was called in to build the line across the bog of Chat Moss between the two towns, and the subsequent contest at Rainhill to find the most suitable locomotive (won, of course, by Stephenson's own *Rocket*) is well known. When it was opened by the Duke of Wellington on 15 September 1830 it became the world's first regular steam passenger train service.

The coming of the railway ushered in a new era and together with the growth of free trade the town and port of Liverpool grew rapidly. Known as 'The Port of a Thousand Ships' it controlled over 40 per cent of the world's trade with Liverpool ships sailing to all parts of the globe carrying cargoes which varied more and more as manufacturing trades evolved. There were periods of depression from time to time as trade was interrupted by wars but during the nineteenth century Liverpool expanded like a gold-rush town. There was money to be made in Liverpool and from other parts of the country came men who were subsequently to found some of the world's greatest shipping lines. Men like Samuel Cunard, Thomas Ismay (White Star Line), Alfred Holt (Blue Funnel Line), the Bibby brothers, Thomas and John Brocklebank, Booth and Harrison — to name some of them.

The Victorian Era

At the same time the cultural and educational life of the town expanded largely due to the efforts of William Roscoe, one of Liverpool's most remarkable sons. His initiative had founded the Liverpool Academy of Painting and Art which had organised the first provincial art exhibition in Britain, the Lyceum and Athenaeum Clubs, a botanical garden, and the Royal Institution, a pioneer adult education centre which now belongs to Liverpool University. There were many theatres and music and concert halls and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society, now one of the world's oldest musical societies, was established.

The rapid expansion of the town not surprisingly brought its problems. The work which became available — on the docks and on the building of the railway, for example — brought in families from far and wide and especially from Ireland during the so-called 'hungry forties' when that country was hit by famine. In 1847 alone no fewer than 300,000 Irish immigrants landed in Liverpool and though many of them eventually went on to America and the colonies, more than a quarter of them remained in the town living in wretched conditions in cellars and basements and even sleeping rough in the back streets and doorways.

Arising out of these conditions came Britain's first public wash-houses, the first Medical Officer of Health, and the first District Nurses.

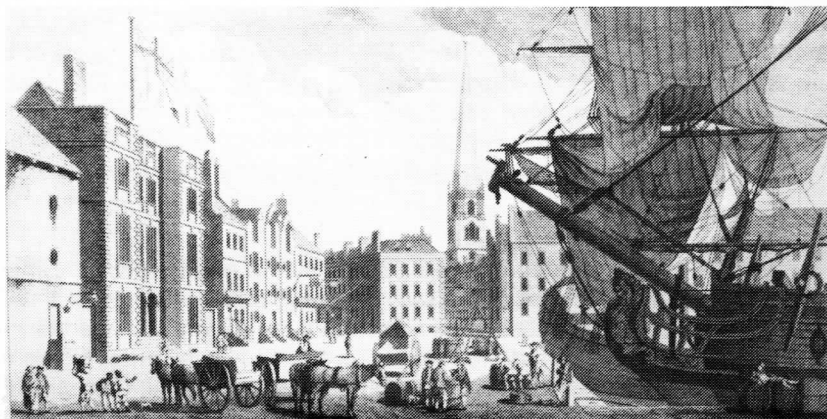
And in pace with Liverpool's growing importance and size went a surge of civic pride which expressed itself in the erection of many of the splendid buildings we have today — like St. George's Hall, the Walker Art Gallery, the Picton Library and the Museum.

In 1880 Liverpool was made a city and the first Bishop was appointed. In 1893 the Mayor became a Lord Mayor.

Turn of the Century

In the years which followed up to the outbreak of the First World War Liverpool's maritime supremacy was in no doubt and a large part of the working population was directly or indirectly involved in the business of ships and shipping. The port facilities had also attracted many other industries, especially those which depended on imported raw materials — like flour milling, sugar refining, tobacco manufacture, match making, oil refining and soap making.

And those three fine buildings at the Pier Head were built — one surmounted by the fabulous Liver Birds — which together make Liverpool's waterfront one of the most famous sights in the world.



The Old Dock and Custom House circa 1750.

In this period, too, the University was founded and a start made on the building of the great Anglican Cathedral.

By this time many Liverpool workers had moved 'over the water' to live on the Wirral Peninsula crossing the River Mersey morning and evening by the steam ferries or The Mersey Railway. Opened in 1884, this was one of the world's first underwater railways. It was electrified in 1903 and, in the course of time, has been extended and linked to other systems to provide Merseyside with the most comprehensive underground railway outside London.

But as the motor vehicle age grew crossing the Mersey brought new problems and in 1934 the first Mersey road tunnel was opened by King George V.

Nerve Centre During War

During the Second World War Liverpool was right in the front line. The Germans knew that if they could close the port Britain's main artery would be severed. It was the gateway to North America and Canada and the main landing-place for much of the nation's imported food and strategic war materials. It was the main base for the North Atlantic convoys and a main port for the embarkation of troops. So the German air force rained bombs on Merseyside on a scale heavier than anywhere outside London.

Altogether, 2,596 people were killed and almost the same number were seriously injured. 11,000 Merseyside houses were totally destroyed and 184,300 were damaged.

In 1942 Liverpool became the main port of entry for the American troops and supplies and right through the war the never-ending all-out Battle of the Atlantic against the German U-boats, was waged from Combined Headquarters, Western Approaches, situated in Derby House on Exchange Flags.

After the war plans were made to rebuild and revitalize the City with a master plan on a grand scale with many ideas new in town planning. Some of them have been carried out but subsequent lack of funds and more pressing problems meant that much of the plan had to be abandoned.

It soon became clear, however, that the increasing road traffic demanded that yet another tunnel be excavated under the Mersey between Liverpool and Wirral. This time it joined up with Wallasey and a new motorway which takes traffic right down the Wirral Peninsula into Cheshire. This new tunnel was opened by the Queen in 1971.

The Post War Days

The post-war era has also seen large housing estates — some, like Kirkby, complete towns in themselves — built both in and beyond the City's boundaries and large industrial estates have also been established. The Ford Motor Company has come to Halewood, and out at Seaforth, the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company has built the Royal Seaforth Dock, the biggest dock project ever built in Britain and which is virtually a self-contained port in itself.

And in 1967 Liverpool became a two-cathedral city when the ultra-modern Roman Catholic Cathedral of Christ the King was consecrated — just four and a half years after work began.

Liverpool is still Britain's most important export port but with the alternative means of travel and transport available today, the docks and shipping are no longer the major source of employment. Liverpool has therefore been forced to change its ways and over the last twenty-five years it has done so dramatically. But she remains one of the world's great cities.

A list of books about Liverpool is available from the City Public Relations Office (address below).

The books themselves are available in the Local History Section of the Liverpool City Libraries, William Brown Street, Liverpool L3 8EW. Tel: (051) 207 2147.

