

Regarding Liverpool, all must commence with the Mersey. On the primary of the river, all are agreed. So Henry James' *English House* began in a smoky dawn at the end of the pier, looking out to sea in the form of a Liverpool. In 1907, Walter Dixon Scott's summary of the city is its confident peak, *Liverpool*, opened with 'The River': '... not merely because Liverpool owes her actual existence to the River, but also because the whole quality, the "virtus" of that existence has been determined by the completeness of the dependency.'<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Quentin Hughes in 1964 opened *Savage* – still the best introduction to Liverpool's architecture – with 'The River and the Docks.'<sup>2</sup> And Tony Lane began his 1997 social history, *Liverpool City (By The Sea)*: 'In Liverpool the sea cannot be avoided. All roads converge at the Pier Head. The main streets collect the prevailing westerlies. Standing outside the Town Hall and looking down Water Street at high tide, inward and outward bound ships move across the frame made by the Canard and Liver Buildings.'<sup>3</sup>

The Mersey launched the port and its shipping; as topography it is ubiquitous and transcendent. In great width, huge skies, and broad slopes all invite to architectural gesture on a grand scale. Colin Rowe, who studied and taught there, echoed Dixon Scott in remarking their spur to Liverpool's self-imagining: 'Liverpool is, or used to be, grim but grand. It was dour, squally, improbably Prussian and, characteristically, was equipped with an apparently endless series of smoky stratified tunnels – which served, occasionally, to contribute to a highly poignant magnificence. Also, it was never a completely provincial or pragmatic city and, from the late 18thC origins of its prosperity, it had typically indulged itself in fantasies which were likely to involve an unmistakably local (and Enlightenment) combination of elegance, information, and megalomania.'<sup>4</sup>

That provocative and 'fierce beauty', as Dixon Scott called the river's influence, has exceeded its utility to the port. It is now attractor to those converters of warehouse lofts to 'city-dwelling' who may make shopping rather than shipping the key to the city's future. Visitors will notice the towers rising north of the Pier Head, each angled westward to the view across the river, the Welsh mountains and the Irish Sea. They are the crest of a regeneration that began, very slowly, in 1987, by turning the Albert Dock to the Maritime Museum, Tate Gallery North, tourism, and apartments. Removal of the port downriver, rebuilding the Pier Head for cruiseliners, and the new King's Dock Arena, on the waterfront next to the Albert Dock, should now connect city and river in a way that was never possible when eight miles of docks monopolized the Mersey. Across the old dock road from the Arena is now the city's biggest building site: 42 acres, with streets for 40 individually designed buildings, on a masterplan worked out between the city and developer Grosvenor Estates. Opening during Liverpool's year as EU Capital of Culture, and named 'Liverpool 1', this doubling of the city's retail centre is the largest of over a hundred projects which only now, 35 years after the closure of the south docks, are beginning to transform the city. It is ironic yet characteristic that 'Liverpool 1' is now rising on the site of the first of those docks, originally the very 'poor' itself of Liverpool.

#### The 'navel' of Liverpool

From its incorporation in 1207 to 1700, Liverpool scarcely grew beyond a grid of six streets, a castle, and church.<sup>5</sup> Exposed to wind and surging tides, the Mersey was a dangerous channel, and the only haven for ships lay in the muddy creek that was the pool of Liverpool. The port of today is an entirely artificial creation that began only with the replacement of that creek, in 1715, by the world's first wet sea-dock, into which ships could sail at high water, and remain through all tides. Over the next two centuries, 30 more such basins would follow, enclosing 500 acres of water by 80 miles of quays along the Pier Head. Liverpool built ships out into the river, which became flanked by continuous granite walls from Dingle down to Seafarths at the mouth; but in the nineteenth century, docks were opened on the opposite side of the Mersey, along the great 'Flot', which ran inland from the locks at Birkenhead. Initially owned by the Corporation, and from 1857, a Trust, the administration of this vast estate on both sides of the Mersey became in effect, a city within a

city, planned and designed with a regulation unknown in English towns.<sup>6</sup> This was a factor in Liverpool's peculiarly digressive, even paternalist, Tory politics (which counted the city up to 1956) but also in the formal rationalism that would recur in Liverpool architecture.<sup>7</sup>

An example of this was the 1827 conversion of the first dock into Canning Place. Dominated by John Foster's massive Custom House, whose dome and Ionic west portico surveyed the docks, Canning Place became, until the Edwardian monumentalisation of the Pier Head, the civic focus of the port, whose brokers' axis ran from the Exchange behind John Wood's Town Hall, along Castle Street past Cockerell's Bank of England, and culminated in the shadow of the Custom House's north portico and mercantile pastiche. Its looming bulk, bigger than St George's Hall reflected its national importance; for with the port's ascendancy, Liverpool Custom House became the Eschequer's biggest single source of revenue, leading Liverpool, uniquely, to be accorded its own Whitehall office.<sup>8</sup>

#### Schinkel in Liverpool

That Foster succeeded his father as Corporation Surveyor (also Dock Engineer from 1799 to 1825) aroused comment. The elder Foster owned a doubling of the docks and the building of fireproof warehouses such as the Grove arcades. In 1810, the younger Foster joined Cockerell in gaining the Aegina marbles, and on his return transfused Grecian style to Liverpool, where it persisted, as in Glasgow, over a century. Most of Foster's austere works are now gone; but one remains. Pevsner called it 'a stroke of genius': the romantic quarry of St James' Graveyard, now in the gothic shade of St George's Anglican Cathedral, into which Foster led down, from his Doric Oratory and Gambier Terrace, a Prussian descent of ramps and tunnels to his domed Huskisson Mausoleum.<sup>9</sup>

It was understandable, therefore, that when, in 1826, Friedrich Schinkel visited Liverpool on his research tour of Britain, he sought out Foster at his house in Mt Pleasant, opposite Edmund Aiken's Wellington Rooms, whose Grecian refinement he noted in his journal.<sup>10</sup> But Foster was already at his office, and when Schinkel caught up with him, had little time to talk with his distinguished Prussian visitor, who noted Foster's income from the booming port around him. If Schinkel hoped to discuss the culture of the city, he would have done better at the Athenaeum club with its illustrious founder William Roscoe, self-taught biographer of Lorenzo di Medici, founder of Liverpool's art collections, and campaigner, as local MP, against slavery.<sup>11</sup> Schinkel, like many nineteenth-century visitors, experienced in Liverpool a mix of exhilaration and alarm, finding efficient models to imitate, but social disorders to avoid. Many in the city felt the same. For instance, James Nevlans pioneered a sewer system long before Bazalgette in London. Such reformers promoted the 1846 Liverpool Sanitary Act and appointed the country's first Medical Officer of Health, the celebrated Dr Duncan, for whom, like Roscoe, two Liverpool pools are still named.<sup>12</sup>

#### Visitors and visions

Liverpool's fame grew with its trade. In 1824, Donizetti made it the setting of a fanciful opera: *Emilia di Liverpool*. It also featured in journals, such as those of de Tocqueville and Emerson. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a journal of his years there as US consul, and Herman Melville set his 1849 novel *Mohawk* in the 'grand caravansary' of Princes Dock, after his stay there while visiting Hawthorne. Most decisive was Frederick Law Olmsted's discovery, on his arrival, of Paxton's new Birkenhead Park, where he found the picturesque landscape design which he had come to see, but adapted for the first time from aristocratic estate to a democratic park. Back in New York, Olmsted would translate Birkenhead, upcaled and Columbus-rudder, to Central Park.<sup>13</sup>

In 1842, a German visitor, J. G. Kohl, recorded the city in meticulous and admiring detail, noting that since 1800, its population had rebelled to 300,000, while the port received annually 16,000 ships, with 10,000 owned there.<sup>14</sup> By 1900, a million people lived on Merseyside, and with growing steamship size, one seventh of the world's tonnage was owned there. This



01 Original coastline of the Pool overlaid with the plan under Steers' 1718 dock, which filled the mouth of the 'pool' but subsequent docks were extended into the river. In 1815, Steers' docks were filled to become Canning Place with Foster's Custom House at its centre. 02 Modern Liverpool gained by Walter Richards, 1867. 03 The working part of its history. 04 Benson's map of 1860-65. Overhead Railway and Liver Building of 1915. 05 Mersey Docks in 1972 with (on map) proposed port-Panamax size, expected to receive the world's biggest ships by 2012. 06 View of the Mersey from above Seafarths Dock. 07 Robinson Greenwich view of the Dock Road, 1832. 08 Map of Canning Place and Custom House, 1926, built on site of the original Old Dock. 09 Liverpool 1. Grosvenor Estates Paradise Street project on the site of Canning Place. 10 St Nicholas (the Seaman's Church, c.1835). 11 The Custom House from Seafarths Dock. 12 View of South Castle Street looking north to the Custom House, 1924. 13 North Castle Street looking north to the Town Hall. Photograph by Paul Monfils.

