

Seizing the Moment

Discussion Paper No 2 in the
'Future of our World Heritage' Series

Issued by Merseyside Civic Society, August 2022

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This is the second Discussion Paper prepared by members of Merseyside Civic Society (MCS) as contributions to the policy debate about the future of the former Liverpool Maritime Mercantile World Heritage Site following its deletion from the World Heritage List in a secret ballot at the 44th meeting of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee in China on 21 July 2021. Like many others in the city region, the Society was disappointed with the decision. Notwithstanding some real threats to our heritage, however, we acknowledged the improvements to Liverpool's heritage assets through conservation and regeneration since inscription and argued that the "value of Liverpool as a world heritage city goes far beyond the narrow encapsulation of the original citation" (Davenport, 2021).
 - 1.2 MCS regrets UNESCO's decision to delete Liverpool from the World Heritage List, but also recognises that the challenges remain the same: 'reconciling the need for development with the aim to protect and enhance our heritage'. We are now at a turning point which allows us to reflect on some fundamental aspects of the future of our world heritage. What do we want to keep, drop or enhance from the policies protecting Liverpool's WHS? Now is the time to seize the moment and move beyond regret and drift.
 - 1.3 Discussion Paper No.1: 'The Future of Our World Heritage' (MCS, 2021.a) was issued in connection with the open meeting convened to discuss the topic after our November 2021 Annual Meeting and is available online at the Society's website and should be read in parallel with this second paper to which it relates closely. It includes more extended coverage of sections on: 'What WHS was all about and how we lost it'; 'the need to properly protect our listed buildings and conservation areas'; 'recognising the economic value of heritage and design'; and, introductions to the three workshop themes.
 - 1.4 After a general introduction to the leading issues for the future of the city centre's World Heritage, the November 2021 meeting divided into three workshops led by members of the MCS Council. Workshop A led by Gavin Davenport and Jean Grant explored the theme of 'Liverpool Maritime and Mercantile City'. Workshop B led by Trevor Skempton took up the theme of 'The River Runs through the city'. Workshop C led by Sebastian Dembski, with Peter Elson as note taker, considered the case that what the area now needed was 'iconic buildings, not compromises'.
 - 1.5 Discussion Paper 2 Seizing the Moment reports on the proceedings of the three Workshops together with subsequent comments and suggestions. Following this introduction, Section 2 presents the Society's key conclusions and actions on the core heritage policy principles of (a) the need to properly protect listed buildings and conservation areas, and (b) the need to recognise the economic value of heritage and design in policy decisions. Sections 3, 4 and 5 report on the outcomes of the three Workshop discussions, including their principal conclusions and issues for further consultation. In conclusion, Section 6 'Looking Forward' recommends two imaginative and challenging next steps.
 - 1.6 The first recommendation, for national government, is the establishment of a new statutory designation of 'National Heritage Area'. The second recommendation is for the Metro Mayor and Combined Authority to identify the former WHS, together with extensions to appropriate areas in Birkenhead and Liverpool's Georgian Quarter, as a pilot 'National Heritage Area' in the emerging City Region Spatial Development Strategy. In suggesting this wider viewpoint, MCS is cautiously encouraged by emerging local proposals for future WHS designations for Birkenhead Park (Wirral Council, 2020) and for Port Sunlight (Port Sunlight Village Trust, 2022) in Wirral, and for the Sankey Viaduct (St Helens Star, 2022) in St Helens.
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2.0 The Next Steps: Two Key Requirements

2.1 While Liverpool has lost its World Heritage status, it still has world class heritage which needs protection. But the deletion from the List also forms an important turning point to reflect on the meaning of our heritage and its future. As a contribution to the wider discussion MCS invited its membership to formulate our ambition for protecting and enhancing our world heritage. MCS proposes the following key requirements for further discussion:

Key requirement 1: Properly protecting our listed buildings and conservation areas

2.2 Liverpool City Council's emerging policy on Heritage is short in detailed guidance compared with the Unitary Development Plan dated November 2002 (originally adopted for Development Control purposes in 1996). However, the emerging heritage policy is supported by the National Planning Policy Framework (MHCLG, 2021), but it cannot include or repeat Government guidance verbatim. As a result of this the Society considers that additional support/guidance should be provided to owners/occupiers of recognised heritage assets. To that end the Society has issued two Green Papers for consultation on Listed Buildings (MCS, 2021, b) and Conservation Areas and the Protection of Built Heritage (MCS, 2021.c) prior to their adoption as White Papers (MCS policies). We hope these will support owners'/occupiers' and ward councillors' understanding that the historic environment is important and that its protection in terms of its embedded carbon footprint helps maintain the character appearance of an area.

Key requirement 2: Recognising the economic value of heritage and urban design

2.3 Historic places and buildings are key to attracting tourists and visitors, supporting a range of local businesses. Tourism is a significant part of the local economy in much of the City Region, including the City Centre. Historic buildings can provide flexible and affordable floor space, essential for supporting enterprise. The catalyst in such areas is low rental levels and flexible floorspace, which are essential to support micro and small businesses, start-ups, creative enterprises and knowledge-based employment. Examples are the regeneration of Ropewalks, the Baltic Triangle and the Fabric District. Historic environments can help to project a positive image and distinctive environment to attract investment, jobs, population and visitors to the area's various centres.

3.0 Workshop A: Liverpool Maritime and Mercantile City

- 3.1 MCS proposes that the physical be taken in the context of the intangible and that the material be representative of the human, where the historic built landscape follows the function of serving the population of the city and its hinterland. Lost sites and structures should be signposted and celebrated through partnership with private landowners and the civic bodies. Inaccessible hard-hat heritage should be opened up through imaginative reuse and high-quality design and interpretation. Intangible narratives, whether historical or contemporary, can add to the case for preservation of under-appreciated but significant structures and zones, and suggest a blueprint for meaningful and high-quality adaptation and redevelopment that should serve the needs of the city's people first.
- 3.2 Our discussion began from the questions: "What is it that constitutes our World Heritage, and, what needs protection?" Themes identified at the outset were: (a) Maritime innovation and rivalries (Liverpool vs. London/Chester etc.); (b) Leave taking and migration; (c) 'World' city; (d) The trade in enslaved peoples: colonies and empire; (e) Cultural currencies and cultural exchange.
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- 3.3 The discussion ranged widely, but there was broad agreement that the identified themes were significant. Although each might have some space within a museum, it was broadly felt that relatively little attention to these was given to them in the public realm of the city. Many people raised the need for greater evidencing and interpretation of heritage in place to provide not only context and information but to avoid misconceptions. Participants felt that Liverpool's heritage was underplayed, and that there was more to be celebrated than the twin engines of The Beatles and Football.
- 3.4.1 Liverpool possesses a wonderful public realm in which to tell stories and it should be the forefront of interpretation, engagement and discussion. Significantly, the following themes were identified as requiring further public signposting and exposition outside of museums (whose contribution was readily acknowledged):
- 3.4.2 Ellis Island in reverse. The significance of Liverpool's waterfront is celebrated in thousands of songs and is recognised as part of the story of millions of settlers from across Europe finding a home in the Americas and beyond, but very little exists 'in place' around the Pier Head or Landing Stage to reflect this immensely significant part of the city's history. It was as one discussion member remarked "Ellis Island in reverse".
- 3.4.3 Enriching the idea of immigration. There exists an opportunity to celebrate immigration in Liverpool that is unique. As a hub of world trade from the early 1700s, home to one of Europe's oldest Chinese communities and having welcomed refugee communities since the 17th century, there is an opportunity for a city-wide celebration of the positive story of immigration from the Huguenots to Windrush and through to the present day. Is any other city doing this?
- 3.4.4 The hidden 'pool'. While the new Liverpool ONE Heritage Trail is welcomed, Grosvenor's presentation of the Old Dock was felt to be inadequate. Moreover, the City itself was doing little to make people aware of the world-changing nature of the engineering innovation represented by Liverpool's pioneering dry docks. Signifying man's first significant technological control of the tide, the symbiosis with the river and laying the foundation for Liverpool's rise as a world port, this area and story is shamefully neglected.
- 3.4.5 Exceptional Places of Worship. Little is made by 'the city' of the wealth of architectural and cultural treasures in places of worship beyond the two cathedrals, yet there is an opportunity for city-wide recognition of a whole spectrum of extraordinary places of worship – the Princes Drive synagogue, the Abdullah Quilliam mosque, the Nordic Church and more could be collectively celebrated in a way that would reflect heritage, the city population, architecture and communities.
- 3.4.6 Representation of all communities. Liverpool's Black, Jewish, Chinese, Muslim and other ethnic and faith communities are under-represented in the public realm. How can this be engaged with in a full-spectrum manner which does not pay lip service to communities and instead celebrates the 'big' community of the historic city?
- 3.5 Across all the identified themes, it was commonly felt that occasional attempts to achieve these ends were disjointed and unconnected (plaques from a range of schemes, no real 'trails' for tourists). Blue Badge guides remarked that American Jewish tourists were looking for a city 'offer' that didn't yet exist, and this may be common to other groups. A unified strategy for the heritage public realm, linked trails across a range of themes and infrastructure to support tourist access to these should be developed and not left entirely to the private sector or individual opportunism.
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3.6 The principal questions for further discussion and consultation on the heritage public realm which emerged from Workshop A's consideration are: 'where corporate interests (e.g. Grosvenor, Peel) exist, how can they be drawn into the conversation about quality first, heritage interpretation and visibility? And, 'what leadership and coordination can the City Council, the Combined Authority, the Local Enterprise Partnership and National Museums Liverpool provide to enable the development of a unified strategy and action plan to express these themes and ideas?'

4.0 Workshop B: The river runs through the city

4.1 The Port of Liverpool comprises the tidal estuary of the River Mersey and the docks in Bootle, Birkenhead, and Liverpool itself. 'Liverpool Bay' extends to a line between Point Lynas (Anglesey) and Formby Point. At the heart of the port is the historic 'Maritime Mercantile City'. Some have talked of 'the ocean flowing through Liverpool'. A phrase that we have used is 'The river runs through the city, not past one side of it'. With this in mind, perhaps we should be considering the pros and cons of putting a greater focus on the river itself and extending the definition of the 'Maritime Mercantile City' to include parts of Birkenhead and Liverpool's residential Georgian Quarter (Fig. 1).

4.2 The MCS argued, in its White Paper on the World Heritage Site (MCS, 2018, para. 3.6), that both sides of the river are of vital importance. The ferry crossing from Birkenhead to the pool of Liverpool was inaugurated by the monks of Birkenhead Priory in 1150 AD and Liverpool was given a Royal Charter by King John in 1207. Victorian Birkenhead was laid out as a new town, to relieve overcrowding in the fast-growing city, but the grand vision [glimpsed in the Park and Hamilton Square] was left unfulfilled. However, the best views of Liverpool are from Birkenhead, and one of the finest riverside landmarks is Herbert Rowse's Queensway Tunnel Ventilation Tower.

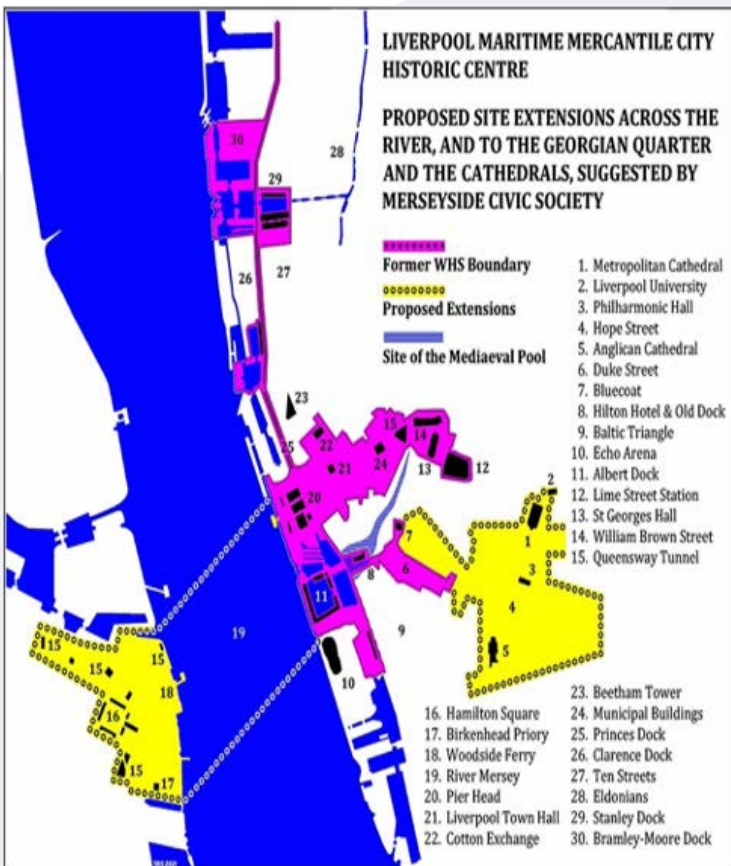


Fig. 1 Proposed boundaries of Liverpool Maritime and Mercantile City (Map: Trevor Skempton)

- 4.3 In the course of discussion Group B considered the following main topics: (a) The 'pros and cons' of forming (or supporting) a successor organisation; (b) Some specific or detailed proposals: (c) Who do we need to 'get on board'?
- 4.4.1 There was support for the cross-river approach (Fig.1). In response to the presentation of the theme one view expressed on a post-it note asked "Are we best defining our heritage assets by sharp geographical boundaries? Does the area need to be contiguous [including the river of course]? Maybe we should identify a cluster of attractions and the story that links them – which could be on a much bigger scale."
- 4.4.2 Specific ideas included a 'Future Zone', an enhanced ferry service ('water-buses'), and a cross-river barrage producing sustainable energy. A sketch map on a post-it note suggested a River Authority, supporting a 'National Maritime Park', and showed 'views', a barrage, shipping, water sports, a 'floating city', seals, wading birds.... A second sketch map showed the 'Mercantile Maritime City' embracing wider 'world-beating infrastructure': Tide Tables (Bidston Observatory?), Docks, Tunnels, Railways, Ship Canal, Glass, Chemicals.... Potential further extensions to the designated World Heritage Site included: the area of the Birkenhead Park WHS bid, Port Sunlight and Fort Perch Rock (which 'protects the river').
- 4.4.3 It was pointed that we now have a cross-river Combined Authority, in the form of the Liverpool City Region, headed by its Mayor, Steve Rotherham. He has shown interest in the Mersey Barrage project, and the City Region Combined Authority would surely be the appropriate authority to oversee a new formulation for an expanded World Heritage Site?
- 4.5 The principal questions for further discussion and consultation which emerged from Workshop B's consideration are: 'what approach would we support', and 'are we in a position to persuade the Metro Mayor to be proactive on heritage matters?'

5.0 Workshop C: Iconic buildings, not compromises

- 5.1 Liverpool has seen excellent examples of heritage-led development throughout the years, the regeneration of the Albert Dock in the 1980s, the Bluecoat, St George's Plateau with St Georges Hall, the World Museum and the Central Library. Liverpool One helped to retain the old street pattern and brought a derelict site in the heart of the city centre back in use. The Titanic Hotel in Stanley Dock and currently the Tobacco Warehouse shows that it is possible to retain some of our finest buildings. All these developments have given new meaning to old buildings.
- 5.2 The quality of new developments on the waterfront, however, has been mixed and a frequent bone of contention, not only with UNESCO. Many prize-winning architects have left their marks in Liverpool, but perhaps not their best buildings. The architecture of the office blocks in Princes Dock, for instance, can be found everywhere. The mediocre quality of new developments also applies to Liverpool's 'other' waterfront on the Wirral.
- 5.3 In the course of discussion Group C addressed the central issue of how we wish to address future development in the former World Heritage Site and the waterfront more broadly. What kind of qualities do we envisage for our waterfront(s) and what mechanisms do we need to secure this? Do we need a stronger vision for the waterfront? Do we need to be more demanding in terms of design quality, through stricter peer review or the use of competitions? Do we want a clear rule set (including a tall buildings policy) that may result in architecture which succumbs to the rules, or do we need iconic buildings that shape the heritage of the future?

- 5.4.1 There was quite some debate about what constitutes an iconic building. People know them when they see them. Liverpool's waterfront and the wider heritage is already characterised by iconic buildings, such as the 'Three Graces', the two cathedrals and St George's Hall.
- 5.4.2 A shared view emerged that bad planning decisions were made from the 1960s onwards and that the South Docks such as Herculaneum were not appreciated as a heritage asset. The design quality of some of the recent developments was rather mediocre. In the post-WHS era, should its replacement conservation template be extended to Garston in the south and the active docks in the north? Should it also be extended across the river to include Wirral up to New Brighton?
- 5.4.3 One participant remarked that we need to move forward and embrace the 21st century. This was not contradicted, but there was also agreement that history must be respected and that replacements need to be respectful. The group seemed to share the view that the waterfront is a dynamic part of Liverpool and many of the iconic buildings were in fact comparatively young. It was widely agreed that it is not iconic buildings as such, but activities and the spaces between the buildings that matter most. It's often small things that people can relate to. We need a people-centred strategy.
- 5.5 The principal question for further discussion and consultation which emerged from Workshop C's consideration is Liverpool's need for a new people-centred Waterfront Vision/Strategy. We have the aspiration to be world class and a Master Plan is needed to represent that character. It was acknowledged that there is an enormous responsibility for Peel Holdings' Mersey Waters projects and that extended discussions with them are needed.

6.0 Looking Forward

- 6.1 Since the adoption of UNESCO World Heritage Status, MCS has been a key part of the discussion around World Heritage as part of the formal Steering Group, convened via the City Council. Although this body is no more, we remain part of the conversation. We endeavour to represent the views of our membership and to act in the best interests of our wider civic society. The discussions of our members help us to further push the agenda with stakeholders.
- 6.2 Although Liverpool has lost its UNESCO World Heritage Site 'badge', the assets remain. The memories, history, collections, documentation and world history which formed the essential basis of the initial statement of Outstanding Universal Value are largely intangible – and thus unchanged. Virtually all of the physical and architectural assets remain and in large part they are in better condition now than when the WHS was designated. It is simply one of the most beautiful and environmentally significant urban areas in the UK.
- 6.3 This remarkable cultural inheritance should be recognised nationally and managed carefully and sensitively to protect the unique assets for future generations and to underpin Liverpool's tourist sector, retail and leisure sector, the city centre residential market and many other segments of Liverpool's economy, its society – and its very image and local identity.
- 6.4 More than that, because of its pivotal role in world history, including the development of railways, port technology, international trade, international migration, imperialism and the cruel and abolished trade, this unique inheritance, both tangible and intangible, is part of our national story and, for good or ill, part of our national inheritance and psyche.

- 6.5 Drawing together the outcomes from the three Workshops, we therefore recommend that the commitments to beauty, environment and neighbourhood established by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities should be taken forward with the establishment of a new statutory designation of 'National Heritage Areas', similar to those designated in the United States (NPS, no date).
- 6.6 As with National Parks, Areas of Outstanding National Beauty and National Nature Reserves, such National Heritage Areas would enjoy enhanced statutory protection, their own national planning policy, within a revised National Planning Policy Framework, and, like those rural national environmental designations, a specific management budget from central government for enhancement, management and interpretation.
- 6.7 We further recommend that the Metro Mayor and Combined Authority identify the former WHS as a pilot 'National Heritage Area' in the emerging City Region Spatial Development Strategy, together with appropriate areas in Birkenhead and Liverpool's Georgian Quarter (Fig. 1). With the close involvement of local neighbourhoods and local people, a suite of suitable policies should be developed to be reflected in Local Plans. In Liverpool the former WHS Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) should be developed and extended as a National Heritage Area SPD, with an equivalent document to be prepared for Birkenhead. The continuing management of the National Heritage Area should be advised by a local body, able to comment on policies, their implementation and major development proposals.



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