

MCS Account for the MCS website

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[This version dated 13 April 2023]

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1. Introduction

I have been invited to take the opportunity to reflect on my 17-year period as Chair (2000-2016). I succeeded Quentin Hughes who had served as Chair since 1975. (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quentin_Hughes_\(architect\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quentin_Hughes_(architect))). A fuller account of the Society's activities, between its establishment in 1938 and the year 1999 / 2000, can be found in archive material that was lodged in the City of Liverpool Reference Library by the former MCS Hon Secretary, for the latter stages of that period, Paula Ridley, who later became the first Hon President of Civic Voice (see below). Among the more notable achievements during that period were successful efforts to support securing the preservation of Albert Dock and the Lyceum. As Chair, I lodged, in the Reference Library, a corresponding deposit of key documents (Council meeting minutes, correspondence entered into and MCS responses to policy consultations, etc) that I had accumulated during my period in office, shortly before I stepped down.

This account requires an initial statement of what the Society is all about, as set out in the Constitution (the objectives) and, broadly, how efforts have typically been made to pursue those objectives. This will include a description of a typical programme of MCS events that are usually organised to take place in the course of a year. To complement this, a distinctly different account will then be presented of the procedures that are adopted in conducting the business of the Society and, more specifically, in the operation of MCS Council.

An attempt will then be made to identify what may be judged to have been the principal achievements of the Society over the 17-year period for which I acted as Chair.

A starting point for any discussion of the activities of a Society is the Constitution which spells out the objectives of the Society and how the activities that are organised through the operation of the Society's committee (aka here as the 'Council'). Its 'powers' are expected to enable the achievement of those objectives, as well as specifying the extent of the powers of the Council and its officers in discharging their responsibilities. The Society benefits from being a registered charity, with reporting responsibilities as well as the advantages of that status (e.g. from reclaiming Gift Aid on membership subscriptions).

2. The Merseyside Civic Society Constitution

The principal issues identified in the MCS Constitution, that are relevant here, include the fact that the objectives of the Society include a statement to the effect that it is established for the public benefit, for the following purposes:

- a. to protect and preserve and stimulate public interest in Merseyside, an area aka below as 'the area of benefit' which broadly corresponds with what is now described as Liverpool City Region;
- b. to promote high standards of town planning and architecture in the area of benefit; and,
- c. to secure the preservation, conservation, development and improvement of features of general public amenity, or historic, or public interest in the area of benefit.

In furtherance of the said objectives, the Society, through its Council, shall have the following powers:

- a) to educate public opinion and give advice and information;
- b) to promote and assist in promoting activities throughout the area of benefit in furtherance of the cultural and artistic life of the inhabitants thereof;
- c) to co-operate with the local and public authorities relating to the area of benefit and all other voluntary organisations, charities and persons that have aims in keeping with those of the Society; these days this involves working closely with Civic Voice, the successor body to the former Civic Trust, and other voluntary organisations
- d) to promote research and to publish the results of any such research;
- e) to publish papers, reports and other literature; evidence of this can be seen in the publication of green and white papers (see below);
- f) to make surveys and prepare maps and plans and collect information in relation to any place, activity, erection of new buildings or construction works, or, alteration, extension or demolition of a building regarded as a designated or potentially designated heritage asset within the area of benefit; this is reflected in MCS comments on planning applications that are submitted to local planning authorities in the area;
- g) to hold meetings, lectures and exhibitions, exemplified in the MCS monthly programme;
- h) to organise award schemes to promote the objects of the Society, such as the Annual MCS Awards event.

3. A Typical Year of Operation of the Society

Set out below is an outline of a typical year of MCS activities that are individually consistent with the pursuit of, and contribute to the achievement of, the Society's objectives.

This can be described as comprising a programme of monthly events in the form of, either evening presentations or site visits, typically scheduled for the third week of the month, with meetings of the Council now taking place on the first Wednesday of each month (see below). Further events scheduled include the Annual General Meeting (usually in November). For some years, a State of the City Day, was organised by Jean Grant and took place on a Saturday in May/June at the Bluecoat. Beyond that, it was customary for an annual MCS Awards event to take place, typically, in October (usually in combination with a monthly presentation event).

Topical issues are adopted as the focus of discussion at the evening presentation sessions, sometimes featuring the Society's response to a government or local authority consultation

document but, more frequently, featuring an account of how a new development or rehabilitation scheme had come to be pursued. Liverpool's chief planning officer was invited to give an occasional review of planning issues faced by the City Council, sometimes represented by AN Other. While Liverpool One was under construction, we had the benefit of regular updates on progress from Rodney Holmes, who was the Liverpool ONE Project Director on behalf of the Duke of Westminster's Grosvenor Estates development company. Upon his retirement, Rodney Holmes was appointed as an MCS Vice President.

In the early years of my period of office, a welcome social supplement to the above elements of the programme were what we termed regular 'pub nights', which typically took place on the evening of the first Wednesday of every month. The pub nights alternated between drinking establishments that were located in new premises or developments and more traditional pubs, bars and other watering holes of interest. Several members of MCS Council were regular attendees of these events, as was Dean Sullivan who was a familiar figure from his appearances as Jimmy Corkhill in the Channel 4 soap opera Brookside.

4. Operation of MCS Council

There is a need to stress, at an early stage, the role played by key individual characters in shaping the agenda for the MCS Council and the way in which business was conducted. The Council typically consisted of 15-20 planners, architects and academics, some of whom were in retirement.

In that respect, I was fortunate, when I took over as chair, in that the Hon Treasurer, David Stewart, had served in that capacity ever since the Society was founded in 1938. He thus provided a unique perspective on past practice and precedent and continued to do so until the mid-2010s when he stepped down and continued to be an active member of the Heswall Society, where he lived. Shortly after that my colleague from the Department of Civic Design, David Massey, very kindly agreed to take on the role of Hon Treasurer, only a short time after I learned that he had stepped down from serving in a similar capacity on behalf of the International Planning History Society.

Initially, in my experience, the monthly Council meetings seemed to operate according to a culture of personality whereby individual 'spokespersons' were expected to speak on topics and take the lead in responding to events, or in drafting comments on issues or policy matters. This proved difficult to manage on occasions when some individuals tended to dominate the discussion, or a meeting drifted off the key point on which an attempt was being made to focus discussion. A criticism was that it frequently became 'a talking shop'.

Gradually, this shifted towards a variant that was based on the appointment of a number of 'champions' to take the lead on issues. Much later moves were made towards something closer to the operation of topic-based working groups. The expectation was that, if necessary, such groups could meet separately, sometimes drawing into their discussions non-Council members. The working group would then elect or nominate a spokesperson who would be expected to report back to a Council meeting, the outcome of the group's discussion, so that the Council could then vote to accept or reject ideas that were put forward as recommendations by the working groups. The tightening of how discussion was managed eventually resulted in the specification, in the agenda, of intervals of time that were allotted for the discussion of particular topics or group reports.

The Annual General Meeting (typically in November) served as the occasion when the Chair was expected to present a review of the year's activities and the Hon Treasurer a statement of the state of the Society's finances (as set out in audited annual accounts). It was usual for Lord Derby (as MCS President), or a Vice-President, to chair the formal AGM at which nominated MCS members were formally approved to serve as members of the Council. The Council's Officers were also (re-)elected to serve for the following 12-month period (or, since March 2023, whatever period for which a post was typically held). It was also the tradition for a guest speaker to give a presentation to those attending the AGM.

I created the original MCS website on the University of Liverpool system as a vehicle for making notices of meetings more widely available, as well as copies of an occasional newsletter and other information about the Society (the Constitution, Council member contact details, etc). From time to time, efforts were made to improve the format and relevance of the MCS Newsletter in response to comments offered by Council members. A criticism levelled by some was that, because of where it was located, it looked too much like a medium for the sharing of University information. A controversial issue concerned whether the Council meeting minutes should appear on the website as some felt that this restricted their willingness to speak openly at MCS Council meetings. In part in response to this sensitivity, after a particularly controversial scheme came under discussion, the 'minutes' were not made accessible via the website and were re-designated 'notes' and only circulated to MCS Council members.

When I took over as Chair, MCS had published a series of elaborately produced editions of a newsletter, featuring coloured photographs, as a consequence of securing sponsorship from a number of prominent retailers whose advertising material featured in its pages. This tradition ceased and a photocopied paper version of a newsletter appeared for a while. This was distributed by post and eventually, increasingly, via email. Later, when Andrew Pearce was producing and widely distributing monthly editions of his Liverpool Cultural Heritage Forum newsletter, editions of an MCS newsletter became a rarity and were largely replaced by a regular MCS Update feature on the MCS website.

An innovative approach was adopted to the production of responses to policy documents, thanks largely to the efforts of Trevor Skempton. He advocated the making of a distinction between green paper discussion documents, which could be distributed for comment and feedback, and white papers, which would be treated as statements of MCS policy, that were agreed as a consequence of the consultation process.

This was intended to be directly analogous with the government procedure which starts with a green consultation paper on a particular topic. In the light of feedback, a white paper is then typically produced which sets out more specific proposals or 'policies' for formal adoption in a subsequent Act of Parliament.

This approach provided a means of generating agreed statements of MCS policy on specific issues in white paper form – policy that could then be cited in giving evidence, in support of responses to policy consultation documents that were published by other bodies, such as the government or Liverpool City Council. A good example is the white paper that was produced, largely through the efforts of Trevor Skempton, on the virtues of terraced housing and its adaptability to contemporary living space expectations, with the refurbishment of older terraced property viewed as a more sustainable higher density option over many contemporary, typically low density, new-build housing schemes.

The importance of producing regular press releases was stressed to ensure that, issues on which the Society could claim to hold particular views, would receive adequate publicity. This was something that was strongly encouraged by Andrew Pearce, in the light of his experience as a former MEP and from his time in working for an EU Directorate in Brussels.

Communication has been maintained with other local civic and amenity groups across Merseyside, including the encouragement of what has come to be termed 'Community Group' membership, as well as Corporate membership for commercial enterprises, details of which can be found at <https://merseysidecivicsociety/membership>.

The Hon Treasurer has a key role with respect to the collection of annual membership subscriptions and the maintenance of a strategic reserve of funds, as mentioned in the Principal Achievements section below.

Great importance continues to be attached to maintaining a close relationship with Civic Voice, as the successor organisation to the overarching national body representing the interests of local civic and amenity bodies, the Civic Trust, after it was wound down. A direct link was secured with Ian Harvey who took on the role of Civic Voice CEO. He had been a member and regular attendee of MCS Council meetings and events, following my invitation to him to represent student interests on Council when he was a student at LJMU.

5. Principal Achievements of the Society

For some time before I took over the chairmanship, a major MCS campaign had been under way that focused on objections to a proposed Isle of Man ferry terminal car parking scheme. The proposal was of such a scale that it was judged to threaten to take up too much space at the Pier Head, alongside the Liver Building. The scheme was also to involve the filling in of the 'floating roadway' that provided a means of enabling vehicles to get onto and off the Mersey Ferry landing stage. My immediate predecessor Quentin Hughes led the campaign. I gather that both he, and a barrister representing MCS, appeared at a public inquiry to successfully argue the case for rejecting the scheme.

Another MCS activity changed after I took over as chair. In the first year of my resumed membership of the Council, a major joint MCS / Liverpool Architectural Design Trust (LADT) Awards event took place at St George's Hall. This was a very grand occasion, at which, as I recall, Granada TV played an important role, not least in projecting videos of prospective award contending schemes onto a large screen. I believe that Granada also provided a master of ceremonies, in the form of a familiar TV figure who I believe was Dave Guest. Later annual MCS awards events were more modest in scale and were very effectively masterminded initially by David Ainsley (of Ainsley-Gommon, architects) with the assistance of others.

An activity that continued, largely as a consequence of the initiative of Fred O'Brien, was the installation of commemorative bronze plaques, in the name of MCS. The plaques were designed and constructed by Fred to celebrate the importance of particular buildings or in recognition of the outstanding contribution made by specific individuals. An example is a plaque installed on the building in Rodney Street in which the father of Nicholas Monsarrat, the author of 'the Cruel Sea', had practiced as a surgeon.

Members of MCS council and I were regularly involved in the drafting of representations, such as objections to planning applications, that went before meetings of Liverpool City

Council Planning Committee, plus comments on draft planning policy documents relating to Liverpool and the wider Liverpool City Region.

As chair, together with Jonathan Brown, I gave evidence on behalf of MCS at public inquiries, including those associated with the scheme to widen Edge Lane, between the M62 junction at The Rocket, on Queens Drive, and Liverpool City Centre which involved the demolition of a large number of heritage properties on either side of the road to create what we termed a 'free-fire zone'. We also lobbied to protest about features of the government's Housing Market Renewal Initiative (HMRI) scheme, especially proposals to clear properties in the Welsh Streets area. In 2005, I also had occasion to present evidence to the House of Commons: Housing, Planning and Local Government Select Committee enquiry, that focused on The Affordability and Supply of Housing which we believe resulted in a switch in government policy towards favouring the rehabilitation of traditional terraced properties, with clearance and new build treated as a policy of last resort. Subsequently, Trevor Skempton and I registered our concerns with the ICOMOS/UNESCO Committee panel that visited the city in its efforts to seek removal of the city's World Heritage Site status, by objecting to the proposed presence of tall structures on the waterfront. We contended that the area had always been dominated by tall structures, not least moored vessels themselves and cranes. In 2012, as chair, I co-authored an e-book about 30 James Street, the former headquarters of the White Star Line, to coincide with the centenary of the sinking of the Titanic. Photographer Paul McMullin supplied a large number of outstanding photographs and I supplied the text, including details of the building's architect Norman Shaw. The book also contained a brief history of the White Star Line and its competition with Cunard; some details of the design and building of Titanic; plus the sinking disaster itself and its aftermath.

Among the chair's responsibilities, apart from chairing Council meetings and MCS events themselves, was involvement in organising speakers for the monthly MCS programme of presentations and occasional site visits, as well as arrangements for judging for the annual MCS Awards Scheme and associated award events and, what, for a time, was an annual State of the City event that was held at the Bluecoat in May/June, to coincide with Civic Voice's Civic Day, for which Jean Grant took on the primary responsibility. Other notable developments during this period included the introduction of the Rita Cheeseman Heritage Interpretation Awards and, in 2013, the 75th Anniversary Awards to give recognition to wider contributions the achievement of the Society's objectives.

As MCS chair, I also had occasion to be interviewed by Roger Phillips, from time to time, on Radio Merseyside, on topical issues, not least our ultimately unsuccessful efforts to seek the retention of, at least the characterful frontages of, the buildings that bordered the north-eastern side of Lime Street (including the Futurist Cinema) which were threatened with demolition as part of a Skelthorpe Street hotel scheme. MCS has lobbied successfully on a number of issues, including for the retention of the Woodside Ferry Terminal when it was threatened with closure by Merseytravel. MCS also supported the efforts of Graham Handley to lobby for the reopening of the 12 Quays waterfront walk, between Woodside and Seacombe ferry terminals. The walk was finally reopened in September 2012 after a 12-year campaign, with the occasion marked by a ceremony in Birkenhead Town Hall. Another successful campaign focused on efforts to reduce the impact of the proposed redevelopment of the Heap's Rice Mill site on the waterfront. As Chair, I made the successful application to secure listing of the building, which at least enabled its short-term retention.