Words Michael Taylor
Photographs Colin McPherson and courtesy Mersey Docks & Harbour Company

This article should be scratch and sniff. You see, the docks at the mouth of the great River Mersey feed the stomachs of the people of the North of England. The smells of edible oils, cocoa, sugar and grain fill the air. And scrap metal too. It's what happens at the Northwest's largest working dock.

A grand tour – or a cook's tour – reveals not just the history of the port of Liverpool, but also the future of a regional asset that is widely misunderstood and widely unappreciated.

To scousers of a certain vintage, the heyday of the docks was at an indeterminate point at the high watermark of the British Empire, when as many as a hundred ships a day came to port. But ships were much smaller then and getting goods on and off them was labour intensive, slow, and wide open to pilfering. Discharging and reloading 5,000 tonnes of cargo could take a hundred men several weeks. Today, massive container ships are emptied of cargo – 10,000 tonnes – stuffed full again and set back to sea, and all within a tide's ebb and flow. That's why those that work there today tell you that the real heyday is now. The port handles more UK, non-EU, container traffic than any of the east coast ports, a total of 32 million tonnes a year. The Mersey Docks and Harbour Company itself employs 800 people. But that's the tip of a large iceberg. Beyond that the whole Northwest maritime sector employs 15,000 people across 900 different businesses with a combined turnover of £3 billion a year. It takes in shipping, repairs, warehousing, trucking, law and education.

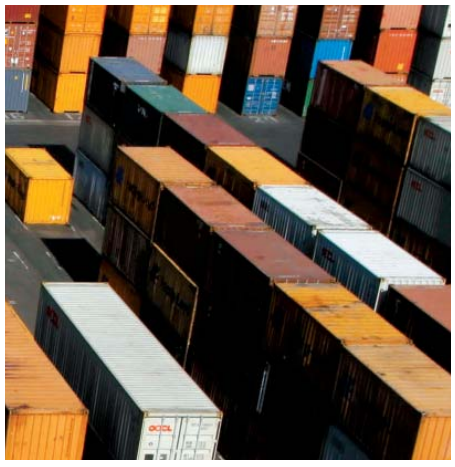
And now that the Port of Liverpool is owned by Peel, the company that bought the Manchester Ship Canal Company in 1972, it has for the first time brought into common ownership both the port that opened a gateway to the world and the canal that was built to say "stick yer tariffs". And a fine chap called Frank Robotham – he's the director of marketing – puts it like this – "what was once there to divide us, now unites us." Peel in fact owns a huge amount of land on both the Liverpool and Wirral sides of the river, including since January the famous Cammell Laird shipyard. Having so many assets in the hands of one company is opening up massive opportunities for regeneration and redevelopment.

So, to understand how the port of Liverpool works our journey has to start at the place it all began – the Port of Liverpool building at the Pier Head, one of the Three Graces. The grandeur of the building represents today what it used to be; an entrance to a major imperial city.

From there I took a trip down the river. I was fortunate to do so on a clear day with just a little wind – not too much – but more of that later. I also got to see the diversity of the modern docks and to take in the profound sense of constant reinvention that you see everywhere. If you took the journey in the

Michael Taylor finds the sweet smell of success at Liverpool's thriving docks.

DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS



Abridged from the upcoming book Mersey: the river that changed the world, to be published in November 2007 by Bluecoat Press.

opposite direction you'd see modern docks at the top and decay through the middle. It isn't like that. But then I had a wonderful guide. A lovely man called Eric Leatherbarrow, who used to report on local news on the radio. He still has a warm broadcaster's voice, even though he's now the head of corporate affairs for the docks.

The docks developed in three directions. North, to the sea. South, down the river. And across to Birkenhead, where the dock goes deep into the Wirral peninsula: Norse Merchant Ferries have two services a day to Belfast and Dublin from Birkenhead, with the services busier than ever.

Heading north, Princes Dock is the first you come to. It's all hotels and office buildings now, a story of waterside regeneration like its nearby cousin the Albert Dock, where Jesse Hartley's famous warehouses are still bringing in the visitors twenty years after their reinvention as a tourist attraction.

Behind a dark red warehouse door are batman costumes and Elvis wigs.

Oh yes, the visitors. There are going to be more of these. The city is paying for a cruise ship landing stage that could enable even the majestic Queen Mary to tie up at the Pier Head. The revenue from cruise ships themselves doesn't amount to much, but those golden oldies in search of a Beatles experience spend a lot. Up to $100 a day. Welcome all.

You don't see many more of the ships that sailed from the sea until you get to Stanley Dock, close to the tobacco warehouses where they used to lay out floors full of leaves. These vast, impressive warehouses are derelict now. The low ceilings make them hard to develop into apartments.

This is also where the Leeds Liverpool Canal meets the Mersey. And here the walls of the old dock look like battlements, as well they should; French prisoners from the Napoleonic wars built them. Now the walls lead up to the sewage works at Sandon Dock, where United Utilities is doing a sterling job of cleaning up the sewage that once upon a time helped make the river the most polluted in Europe.

A mile or so north and it's safer to take in the air again. The aroma is of a kitchen. This is the edible oils terminal. Huge vats of molasses, palm oil and vegetable oil are stored here. This business is run by the American conglomerate Cargills. Their plant processes domestically grown rapeseed oil, one of the fastest growing crops that British agriculture has to offer. They also have a soya crushing plant.

Stacks of beans ordered by Heinz wait to be baked in Wigan for a nation of bean eaters.

Further up is the place where cane sugar once arrived at the Tate and Lyle sugar dock. The European common market put a stop to all that. Canada Dock is now used for animal feed, another scent to fill the air.

Now let's pause a moment in our tour, because you have to understand what's going on here. You have to understand that where once great fortunes were made, new fortunes are being made all over again. You have to get out and see these new mountains of great fortune with your own eyes. They rise like monuments to our culture. They stand as evidence of our desire to renew, recycle and make good from what we discarded. Ladies and gentlemen, this is scrap metal.

There is more scrap metal processed, shipped out and used to make new things from Liverpool than anywhere else in Britain. There are two companies making a lot of money doing it. S. Norton and European Metals Recycling have invested over £25 million in new facilities in recent years. Between them they export shredded metal all over the world.

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The Freeport at Royal Seaforth docks at the mouth of the Mersey isn't much to look at from the ground. It's a secure site that needs certain standards of fencing, security and storage to keep safe the £6 million worth of goods that pass through its gates every week. That standard requires virtually every nook and cranny to be covered by the most extensive CCTV system in the country. It's not only secured by technology, but the port has its own police force, funded by the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company. Businesses can store goods here without having to declare that they've entered the UK's customs regime. If they're subject to trade tariffs then it can be very handy to release goods from storage at Freeport, to get competitive advantage.

There are acres of storage and stacks of stories behind the harsh metal doors of the thousands of containers and warehouses. Take this one for example: Rubie's Masquerade Company, the New York based maker of party costumes, has taken expanded warehouse space of 24,000 square feet to add to what it first established in 1997. Behind a dark red warehouse door are batman costumes and Elvis wigs. They're made in the Far East and stored here to be sent on to those of an adventurous disposition all over Europe.

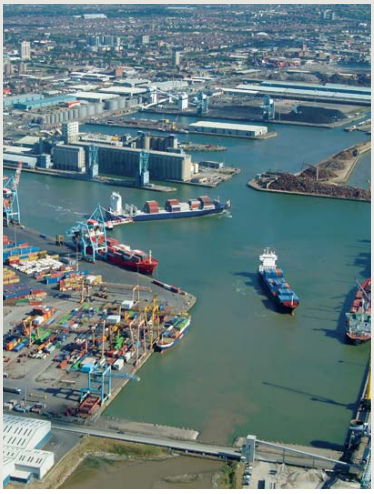
The others contain secrets. That's the nature of container shipping. No-one knows what's inside them.

All this isn't just a quirky coincidence. This is as a result of investment, hard work and a slickness in turnaround that is as good an example of efficiency and progress as you'll ever see. The logistics park for the container terminal hadn't had much spent on it during the 1980s. Now, £23 million of investment in new buildings, machinery and the necessary computer technology to log, scan and track goods means the lorry drivers can be in and out through the busy six lane gate within minutes.

Zipping in and out of the containers around the harbour is a busy fleet of 34 straddle carriers – to load or unload a lorry takes an average of just 45 minutes. "We're the most efficient port in the UK," says Eric Leatherbarrow, with a proud smile. "This is so important, because time is money and some of these truckers could be doing up to four runs a day," he says.

But this isn't just about boats and lorries, there are trains too. The port has five railheads, each dealing with at least three trains a day.

Once the ships come to shore they have to get the stuff off quickly. The longest quay is over a kilometre long but, however many ships are docked there, their cargoes must be brought ashore quickly, or they will miss the outgoing tide. To do this the port has invested £1.5 million in five new



ship-to-shore Noells gantry cranes. That makes all the difference to the captain of an ocean going container ship – twelve hours stuck in dock behind the lock gates is time wasted in the competitive world of modern shipping.

So where does all this stuff come from? Brazil, the Far East, North America, China, the Gulf, South Africa and all over Europe. And where does it all go? It might be easier to ask where it doesn't. Liverpool is the major UK port for trade with North America, with a dozen or more regular weekly sailings. Three new shipping services were added in the first half of 2006; one to Montreal and two to New York. One of these takes Chinook helicopters back for servicing. But you may not be able to know that. It could be classified.

It was a still day when I made my trip – like I said earlier – so standing at the top of the grain store there was no risk of being blown off. From here you can see the range of services sprawling below. The stacks of beans ordered by Heinz, to be baked in Wigan for a nation of bean eaters. Or the special £1.5 million warehouse that provides a temporary home for, amongst other things, cocoa from West Africa bound for Cadbury's chocolate factories in England and Wales.

At the very top of the dock is the future. Plans were approved by the Department of Transport in March to expand the port at Gladstone Dock, at the point where the river has a channel that, at 16 metres, is deep enough to take the vast new container vessels that ply the oceans. These beasts – they call them post-Panamax ships – can carry 15,000 containers. The new port, which will need £80 million of investment, will be able to take two of these behemoths at a time and will have a 17 hectare terminal to cater for the ever increasing traffic in containers.

It's to protect the present and invest in the future – accompanied, no doubt, by a wider, richer mix of smells.

Michael Taylor is the award-winning editor of the Northwest's leading business magazine, North West Business Insider.

To reserve a copy of *Mersey: the river that changed the world*, contact Matthew Sutcliffe on 0161 242 8208 or email m.sutcliffe@merseybasin.org.uk

As a Mersey pilot, Captain Tony Brand has been guiding ships into dock at Liverpool for almost 20 years.

"Our job is to safely bring ships in and out of the port of Liverpool, from the Liverpool Bar into Liverpool Docks or Birkenhead, up to the Manchester Ship Canal and across the river to Garston.

Climbing the ladder and leaping across [onto the ship] is the most hazardous part, especially during the winter. The challenge is getting the ship into the lock safely without damaging it. We pilot container ships that are 292m by 32m, and we're putting them in a hole only 315m by 39m. Your heart's in your mouth as you approach sometimes, but if everything goes well you feel like a million dollars.

My father's family's been at sea since 1636. My maternal grandfather captained the Queen Elizabeth during the war, and I thought I'd go deep sea all my life. But in 1988, after being made redundant, I joined a small coastal company. The first remark made to me was 'I bet you've only joined us so you can become a pilot'. I'd never considered it before, but the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like a good idea. I wrote to several places and was briefly a pilot on the Thames before returning to Liverpool.

Shortly after I started training, I was on a ship out of Birkenhead. It was a clear, windless evening, and, looking across at the Three Graces all lit up, I remember thinking; 'What a magnificent place to go to work.' There's nothing on the Thames to match it."