



Opposite The mouth of the Mersey looking east towards Liverpool city centre. Royal Seaforth Dock is left foreground, facing New Brighton on the Wirral peninsula.

I am an estuary into the sea
 I am a wave of the ocean
 I am the sound of the sea
 I am a powerful ox
 I am a hawk on a cliff
 I am a dewdrop in the sun
 I am a plant of beauty
 I am a boar for valour
 I am a salmon in a pool
 I am a lake in a plain
 I am the strength of art

Amhairgain

Celtic Irish poet: possibly 4th century BC

TIME AND THE RIVER

IAN WRAY

It takes skill to moor a Mersey ferry at full tide. The trick is to approach the shore against the current and use the thrust from your engines – rather powerful engines in fact – to hold the ship parallel to the landing stage. Then heavy ropes are thrown, caught, coiled around capstans, and skilfully adjusted until the ship comes alongside the gangway.

This is a fast and powerful flow, and it is not a place for amateur sailors. Look at a map and you can see why. The Mersey is not just a large estuary, but a very unusual one. It is long – something like half of the total length of the river is estuarial, from Crosby through to Warrington – and the shape is odd too. Most estuaries are basically cone or funnel shaped, tapering from a wide mouth to a narrow river channel. The Mersey, unusually, has a very narrow section at its mouth, between Wallasey and Liverpool, where bluffs of harder Triassic rocks come down to the river, opening out to a much larger and wider estuarial basin beyond.

A powerful scouring action is set up in the constricted narrows by the repeated flushing of this huge basin. Silt and mud are constantly swept away, and the Mersey needs little dredging. Chester, once a port, sits at the head of the funnel shaped Dee estuary which has gradually silted up, putting an end to its maritime ambitions.

For obvious reasons the Mersey was no place for early mariners, dependant on paddles, hollowed out logs, or early sailing ships. So, until the late Middle Ages the river was a very powerful barrier to communications, not a conduit (Mersey is Old English for boundary river) and trade focussed on the lost port of Meols in Wirral, as Edwin Colyer recounts.

Before the railway builders bridged the Runcorn Gap in the 19th century, Warrington, at the head of the estuary, was the lowest bridging point. This was where the Roman Road to the north crossed the Mersey, and as John Belchem explains, Warrington's place on the river had some rather surprising and little known intellectual consequences.



From the 18th century onwards, the Mersey, and Liverpool, next to those scoured narrows, became the world's connection to a revolution in trade, industry and society – and shaped the first wave of what is now called globalisation. Manchester was the world's first industrial city and the Mersey its passage to the wider world in general, and the British Empire in particular. That fuse was lit by the construction of the first wet dock in the world in Liverpool in 1709.

Is it absurd to compare the Mersey with the Nile or the Albert Dock with the Pyramids of Giza? Perhaps it is. Yet the Pyramids are the remains of a dead civilisation which became a historical backwater. The industrial civilisation started on the Mersey's banks changed the world – and in China and India still does so today.

There was nothing kind, gentle or sustainable about the Mersey's rise to greatness. On the contrary, events were often driven by the most basic of human motives: conquest, personal gain, and self interest. In water, land and air, the natural environment was exploited and degraded, and is only beginning its long process of recovery.

Yet there are great legacies in the built environment. As Peter de Figueiredo explains, the physical artefacts, in docks, buildings and canals, are still with us. Like Stockport's striking railway viaduct and the Herculean Manchester Ship Canal, most are still everyday use. Liverpool's urban fabric has at last been recognised as a legacy of international significance, by the designation of parts of the city centre and former docks as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. These are some of the most varied and intact Victorian townscapes in the world.

We cannot avoid the truth. The slave trade was at the core of Liverpool's economy until its abolition in the 1807 (slavery was not abolished in the British colonies until 1833). The slavers wanted only personal profit and cared nothing for the black Africans who they forcibly exported to America. Yet unwittingly their cruel actions set in train huge cultural changes – including the emergence of black America with its distinct culture, leadership and music. As Anthony Wilson tells us, black music has shaped and defined popular culture, through the emergence of blues, rock and roll, soul, gospel, rock and jazz – the later arguably the



most important and original 20th century art form. Yet Wilson underplays the Mersey's hand. Rock and roll, created by Elvis Presley in Memphis, Tennessee, fused together the separate traditions of country music and the delta blues. And country music in turn has its origins in the culture of white settlers in the Appalachians, who had migrated to America from Scotland, Ulster and the north of England. They left Britain from the Mersey.

Perhaps the Mersey's days of greatness are over. Industry and empire may no longer be with us, and in some ways that is no bad thing. Nature is reclaiming the Mersey with a little help from the environmentalists, as Chris Baines says. Once abused and exploited, the Mersey is now recognised, especially by the European Union, as a nature conservation asset of international value, and a resource to be protected and nurtured.

The Mersey Basin as a whole is into the third decade of a massive clean up campaign, which, Paul Unger explains, has its origins in the actions of one entrepreneur turned political leader, Michael Heseltine, as well as the turbulent political events of the 1980s. So the salmon are back in the pool: yet the tide of events seems to have receded.

Or is that too easy an assumption? Certainly no one foresaw the cultural and musical flowering of the 1960s. When Daniel Defoe visited in 1708 he wisely avoided making predictions: "Liverpool is one of the wonders of Britain ... it still visibly increases both in wealth, people, business and building: what it may grow to in time I know not".

So often in the past the port connection has been the motor for greatness. Industry and empire always went hand in hand with maritime prosperity. It was the Cunard Yanks (stewards on the Cunard liners) who brought the black American recordings to Liverpool in the 1950s, again during an economic upswing in the port.

After a near eclipse in the 1980s, the port is on the up again, and as Michael Taylor says, handling even more trade than it did in the 1950s.

Opposite The Manchester Ship Canal with Runcorn Bridge in the background.

Above Situated at Salford Quays, on the bank of Manchester Ship Canal, The Imperial War Museum North designed by Daniel Libeskind is a symbol of our world torn apart by conflict.

Opposite One of the finest views of any British city: Liverpool's magnificent Pier Head buildings with, on the left, Albert Dock.

Control has passed to a successful and entrepreneurial company, Peel Holdings (who incidentally recently disposed of a 49% share of the port business to the property investment arm of Deutsche Bank for around £750 million).

As if in harmony, Liverpool's city centre economy has taken off. In the last decade demand for office floor space has increased by over 200% (if present trends continue it could level peg with Manchester by 2011); since 1991 city centre living has increased by 500%; Grosvenor, the Duke of Westminster's property company, is on site with a £900 million project; and cranes festoon the skyline. Writer Simon Jenkins recently commented: "For lasting renewal, for a pattern of old and new responding rather than shouting at each other, for an urban personality in depth, I would look to newly emergent Liverpool".

Where Defoe sidestepped the future, Bill Gates, it could be argued, has devoted his life to anticipating and shaping it. As it happens, Bill has just invested \$50 million in Liverpool – in the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine to be precise – not as an act of charity for Liverpool, but because it is amongst the best in the world.

We are back again to geography and the river. The School of Tropical Medicine is another resonance from the British Empire and those Liverpool merchants. It was established in response to a call in 1898 from Joseph Chamberlain, British Colonial Secretary, for better trained doctors for the British colonies. Actually Chamberlain and his advisors wanted to train these colonial doctors exclusively in London (little changes). After something of a tussle, led by Liverpool merchant Alfred Lewis Jones, head of the Elder Dempster Shipping Line, the civil servants relented and allowed Liverpool to establish its own school as well. The School duly opened six months before its London equivalent.

Bill Gates is not investing for profit, of course, but as an act of philanthropy. His funding, from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation,

will develop safer, more effective and longer lasting insecticides for mosquito control, and improved bed nets, and help to deploy the new insecticides and nets. As Bill points out: "Millions of children have died from malaria because they were not protected ... if we can expand malaria control programs and invest what's needed in research and development we can stop this tragedy". So in a much gentler, kinder and humane way, the Mersey, and some of the people who live by it, may yet again change the world.

