

With Liverpool about to take on the mantle of Capital of Culture 2008, a new book and exhibition celebrating one of Europe's great environmental success stories – the clean up of the River Mersey – is about to be launched. Mersey: the river that changed the world tells the river's story as it crosses the Northwest from Stockport and Manchester to Merseyside. We meet some of the people who have contributed their stories to the book.

# RIVER

Photographs Colin McPherson

Interviews Kate Fox

## **SIMON SNODIN** POLICE DIVER

I've been a police diver for seven years. Our main role is search and recovery – we're not a search and rescue unit. We look for bodies, submerged vehicles and missing people.

The Mersey has a great tidal range, which makes diving very difficult. Slack water, between the tide coming in and going out, can be almost non-existent, and the currents make it hard to hold to the smooth hull of a ship, for example, when we search the outside of vessels on behalf of HM Customs and Excise.

The visit of the Royal Yacht Britannia in 1984 was my most memorable moment on the Mersey. I was in the Royal Naval Reserve at the time, as radio operator on HMS Striker. We were deployed as the guard ship, trying to keep pleasure craft away, when we received a message: "Striker, this is Britannia, can you go away, the noise of your engines is disturbing the royal party". So we had to limp away, letting the pleasure boats circle Britannia.

Like many people on Merseyside, my roots go back to Ireland. Ultimately we wouldn't be here if my grandparents hadn't sailed up the Mersey to Liverpool and stayed.



# OFF LIFE

“One of the best moments was when the Mersey won the World River Prize for best clean up, beating the Thames, the Rhine and the Mississippi.”

**TOM & KATH WORKMAN**  
LIVERPOOL SAILING CLUB

Kath's the hardest working crew I've ever had. I never had to tell her what to do – she's always been able to read my mind. We like going upriver where it's quiet, untouched by human hand. The river's got an ever-changing face, with sandy beaches at the top end, and the docks at the bottom. Ten miles down and ten miles up, a vast expanse of water.

The beauty of it is when you're thirteen miles out at the Bar, and you can see the cathedral and the Three Graces. South of the Bar can be a very hostile environment, and it's a wonderful feeling when you see that and know you're home.

**SHANTHI RASARATNAM, MBE**  
UNITED UTILITIES

My involvement with the Mersey began in 1996 when I managed a £200 million United Utilities improvement programme for five wastewater treatment works on the Mersey Estuary.

What was so amazing was that we witnessed signs of new life returning to the estuary before our very eyes; wading birds like curlew, redshank and godwits, fish such as whiting, cod and plaice, sea trout, even octopuses. From time to time we saw seals, and on one occasion a whale decided to swim up the Mersey, and got stranded!

One of the best moments was when the Mersey won the World River Prize for best clean up, beating the Thames, the Rhine and the Mississippi. But the ultimate highlight of my career was being awarded the MBE for services to the water industry. I went to Buckingham Palace and met the Queen, and I was able to explain to her all about the Mersey clean up, and how it's transformed the whole environment here.

**DAVE HALL**  
PUBLICAN, JACKSON'S BOAT, SALE

The name Jackson's Boat comes from Farmer Jackson, who used to ferry people across the river for a penny a time.

The pub used to fall within Manchester's boundaries, and under the old licensing laws it had a half-hour later license than those in Cheshire, so the last half-hour was always very busy. We still have Grandfather Rights to sell alcohol out of the bedroom window during floods.

A lot of our customers who stumble across us think we're on a canal. When you tell them it's the Mersey they say, "it can't be, that's in Liverpool". You have to try and explain that it does go from one place to another.

It's amazing to come down here in the morning with a cup of coffee and watch the wildlife. You wouldn't think you were five minutes from Manchester city centre. This is the real Mersey paradise.

**DIANE WALKER**  
ENVIRONMENT AGENCY, WARRINGTON

I work as a regulator across the whole of the Mersey river basin, concentrating on incidents and emergencies. For many, the river is out of sight, out of mind, so they don't think too carefully about what goes into their drains, and where those drains eventually lead.

As a regulator, you do tend to take ownership of your patch. If an incident like a fish kill happens, you take it very personally. It used to be a condition of working for the National Rivers Authority that you actually lived on your patch, so it's even affected where my children have been brought up.

As a family we enjoy walking along the river, from the source right down to Liverpool. When I took my eldest son on the Mersey ferry for the first time, he thought he was in France!



**BARNEY EASDOWN**  
DECKHAND, MERSEY FERRIES

In the early nineties we used to have football races on the river with three ferries representing Tranmere, Everton and Liverpool. One year my mate and I were preparing the boats the day before, and being fanatical Evertonians, we filled every fresh water tank on the Liverpool boat so that it would be heavier than the others. Lining up at Seacombe, the captain of the Liverpool boat twigged that something was drastically wrong – instead of lying with its bow up, it was lying bow down. I came on duty to sail the Everton boat, and the bosses were chasing me all over saying “it had to be you!” Eventually they pumped the tanks out, and the Everton boat came in last, which I was sick about.



**LOUISE CLARKE**  
ANGLER, SEFTON SEA ANGLERS

I've been going fishing with my dad since I was about three or four. I'm the only girl in our club – I'm the only girl I know that likes fishing. All my mates think it's weird that I like fishing at my age, and they all think it's dirty because you're touching fish. Even my boyfriend doesn't like it.

I just like standing there, watching and waiting for the bite, and then when it comes, reeling it in, and the fight it puts up. When you bring it in and see what you've caught, you feel so proud of yourself. I get a cob on if I don't catch anything. I caught a thornback ray when I was younger, and I tell everyone about that.





**JOHN CURRY**  
MERSEY RIVER PILOT

I came straight from school to serve a seven-year apprenticeship. My father and elder brother were pilots, and my mother's family had their own pilot vessel in the nineteenth century.

You began as the junior lad, serving meals and washing up, and you wondered what this had to do with piloting. You worked your way up to senior lad, learning your trade by living on the river.

The river becomes part of us as pilots. We know it so well in all conditions, different states of tide, different heights of tide, different weather conditions.

The comparison I've always made is to the medical profession. The Master of a vessel is like a GP, while the pilot is the specialist with local knowledge who takes over when the ship arrives at a port.

There are many difficult pilotages in the world, but Liverpool is one of the most difficult, and for me it is *the* pilotage.

**DAVE SANDMAN**  
MERSEY SWIMMER

United Utilities were asking if people fancied the challenge of swimming across the river, and being an idiot, I thought I'd have a go. I went down to Albert Dock, and they basically put a cap on me and said 'jump in'. Boy, was it cold!

People have this perception of the Mersey being dirty and horrible, but it isn't. It's as clean as a river in an industrial town could be. It tends to look dirty because it's turbulent, but that's mainly silt. I see the kind of stuff [the Sandon Dock wastewater treatment plant, where I work] takes out of the effluent, and it's incredible.

I wouldn't have swum in the Mersey 20 years ago, but I'm quite happy swimming in it now. I've swallowed enough of it without any ill effects.



**MARY KENDRICK**  
ACTING CONSERVATOR OF THE MERSEY,  
1988-98

The Mersey Conservancy really began way back in 1626, when Charles the First granted a charter to Liverpool allowing them to levy tolls and look after the navigation of the river. The upper river authorities became rather fed up with paying these dues, so in 1842 the Mersey Conservancy Act vested the interests of the conservancy in three commissioners, who were to appoint the Acting Conservator. I know of no other harbour authority in the country that has a similar post. I suppose it was a good old English compromise at the time.

For me, the Mersey's special because of its geological and geomorphological significance. It's one of the few estuaries I've studied that's shaped as it is, with its very narrow entrance and the fantastic upper estuary that's five times as wide. It's unique and fascinating. The river is never the same for more than a few days together, it's a very dynamic system, always shifting its banks and channels.



**MICHAEL HESELTINE**  
POLITICIAN

I'd been involved with Liverpool for some eighteen months when the riots of 1981 took place, and I felt personally responsible because no-one saw them coming... so I asked Mrs Thatcher if I could take time off from the responsibilities of cabinet to literally walk the streets and talk, listen and investigate.

The Mersey got to me, it was enormously significant to the history of our country, and I felt a debt to that river. For three weeks my hotel room overlooked the Mersey. I saw this huge majestic river flowing through this great British city, and I just felt ashamed. This was the river that had given life to that part of England. Without it there would be no Liverpool, and yet we had treated it with total and utter contempt and disinterest. It was an open sewer, and I felt deeply sad that we hadn't realised what an enormous, valuable resource it was. That's where the idea came from, that we must make good the degradation of centuries.

If you have a stinking sewer running through large urban areas, no-one will take the opportunity to develop alongside it, or create jobs or live close to it, but if you can clean it and give it back its life, it becomes a huge beneficial force for good.

Now, the Mersey is on the mend. It is a generator of wealth, of happiness, of opportunity. It has got a long way to go, but I will always take pride that perhaps I took the initial decision to reverse the downward trend.

“People have this perception of the Mersey being dirty and horrible, but it isn't.”

**Mersey: the river that changed the world is published by Bluecoat Press in November, available at bookshops and online at [www.bluecoatpress.co.uk](http://www.bluecoatpress.co.uk), priced £17.99. To pre-order a copy contact [info@bluecoatpress.co.uk](mailto:info@bluecoatpress.co.uk) or call 0151 707 2390. The project has been made possible thanks to support from United Utilities.**