



DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS

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Opposite A container ship passes Perch Rock lighthouse on its way to unload at Royal Seaforth Dock.

This chapter should be scratch and sniff. You can tell the story of the ships that come to Liverpool on the tide in pictures. You can tell the story in words. As I will have to do. But even today, the story I have to tell is one that hits all of your senses. You see, the docks at the mouth of the great river Mersey feed the stomachs of the people of the North of England. The thousands of colourful containers stacked up on the dockside may give no aroma at all, they represent the sanitised shrink wrapped, containerised packaging of supermarket produce that the public now needs.

But still, 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. It's how things are, much as it sometimes irks the fine folk of Crosby.

A grand tour – or a cook's tour – is a journey into the history of the port of Liverpool, but also a glimpse of the future of an asset of the Northwest 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 100 ships a day would come to port. But ships were much smaller then and getting goods on and off them was labour intensive, slow, and wide open to pilfering. It would take 20 men two weeks to unload a ship. Today, container ships of twice that size are emptied of cargo – 1800 tonnes an hour – 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 32m tonnes of cargo 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 maritime sector employs 15,000 people across 900 different businesses with a combined turnover of £3bn. 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 brought into common ownership the port that opened a way 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”. He's quoting Martin Luther King, of course, but this is an emotional business. It can still bring a tear to the eye of a tough man.

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

But enough of that. This is not a history book. And neither is this chapter. It is a love story, and a thank you note, to the fine people who have made the docks prosper.

All things considered, I'm glad that I took a trip in the opposite direction. Back into the city, down the river, but not as far down as the grain port of Garston. 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 dock and to take in the profound sense of constant reinvention that you see everywhere. If you took the journey in the 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 with the services busier than ever. Heading north, Princes Dock

is the first you come to. It's all hotels and office buildings now. And like Albert Dock, its use is not maritime any more. Visitors to Liverpool may think that's what used to happen here. But there's a glimpse of a maritime present and a shipping future. One of the shiny new office buildings houses the Bibby Line company, another tenant is Couatts, the Queen's banker – they know where the old money is.

Oh yes, the visitors. There are going to be more of these. A cruise ship landing stage that could enable even the majestic Queen Mary to tie up at Pier Head. The revenue from cruise ships themselves doesn't amount to much, but these golden oldies in search of a Beatles experience spend a lot. Up to \$100 a day. And that's why the city is paying for it. 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 it hard to develop into apartments. And then you see tugs, where a few are docked. These are shallower waters and the needs have changed.

This is also where the Leeds Liverpool canal meets the Mersey. Another waterway that reaches into Lancashire. And here the walls of the old dock look like battlements, as well they should; French prisoners of war from the Napoleonic wars built them. Behind them lay produce worth defending. Now they lead up to sewage works at Sandon Dock. Here United Utilities treat waste that is cleaning up the river.

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. 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.

106 Further up is the place where cane sugar once arrived at the Tate and

Opposite Before containerisation, gangs of dockers would labouriously fill the holds of ship in cramped and often dangerous situations. It would take 20 men up to two weeks to unload a ship. Today, a ship can be emptied and filled again within a tide's ebb and flow.

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.

Stop if you've heard this before. This tale of what once was. Trust me, it gets better, but you have to understand how it all works. 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 £25m in new facilities in recent years. Between them they export shredded metal all over the world.

S Norton's conveyor bridge at South Canada Dock can now move enough metal to load 60,000 tonne deepwater vessels – even the more regular 35,000 tonne ships can be filled to the brim with scrap in a startling 24 hours. Much of the scrap is shredded at a site at Trafford Park and transferred to Liverpool for shipping all over the world. Similarly, at Alexandra Dock, European Metals Recycling takes on tonnes of shredded metal, but mostly through a rail terminal, where 12 trains a week take the equivalent of 300 lorries off the roads.

The renewal of Mersey's dockside sites is a tale of tribute; a fascinating account of how old is replaced with new. The old docks that lie vacant could well be shiny new homes for ferry terminals to take more passengers and commercial traffic to Ireland. There has to be a business case for such a plan, but one barrier to expansion plans of this order is available land. And that's been sorted by Peel securing ownership of land all the way up to the dock road and up to Derby Road, the dual carriageway that links the Freeport at Royal Seaforth docks at the mouth of the Mersey, with the city centre.







The Freeport 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 £6m 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 have taken expanded warehouse space of 24,000 square feet to add

to what they 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 then be sent on to those of an adventurous disposition all over Europe.

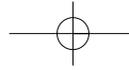
The others contain secrets. That's the nature of container shipping. No-one knows what's inside them.

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

Above There is more scrap metal processed and shipped out from Liverpool than from any other port in Britain.

Opposite Liverpool is the most efficient port in the UK. Lorries are turned around in an average time of 45 minutes. The Port has invested heavily in ship-to-shore gantry cranes to lift containers on and off with impressive efficiency.

Photographs Colin McPherson



Opposite After decades in the doldrums, the river is again a hive of activity with an expected growth in traffic that promises a bright future for the Port.

container terminal hadn't had much spent on it during the 1980s. £23m 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, rather than hours.

Zippering in and out of the containers around the harbour is a busy fleet of 34 straddle carriers. So called because they straddle the lorries, lift a container on or off and carry the containers from dockside to lorry all day long. The rate at which lorries are filled can vary, but the measurement of success is the daily average of a 45 minute turnaround. "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 4 runs a day around the Northwest," he says.

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

Once the ships come to shore they have to get the stuff off quickly. The longest quay is 1,100 metres long but, however many ships there are, they have to get the goods onto shore quickly, or the ship will miss the outgoing tide. The Mersey's tide rises ten metres and 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. To do all of this the port has invested in five new ship-to-shore gantry cranes. They lift containers on and off all day long with impressive efficiency. These Noells cranes cost £300,000 each and are now the main means of moving boxes around.

Where does all this stuff go? Where do all these ships come from? 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, two to New York, one of which goes on to Charleston. One of these takes Chinook helicopters back for servicing. But you may not be

able to know that. It could be classified.

Containers now come in from Brazil, the far east, China, the Gulf, South Africa and all over Europe. A new lorry service cutting out a trudge through Spain and France has been established by Portuguese hauliers.

From the top of the grain store you can see the range of services sprawling below. It was a still day – like I said earlier – so there was no risk of being blown off the top. From here you can see stacks of beans ordered by Heinz, to be baked in Wigan and canned for a nation of bean eaters. The Baco-Liner service to west Africa was restored in 2005, once again opening up the trade in cocoa to Cadbury's chocolate factories in England and Wales. A special £1.5m warehouse built by B&P Commodities provides a temporary home for all of this.

More and more produce now comes in a container. Take the forestry products that have always come down the Mersey. They used to come in ships full of logs and pallets of timber, much of it from Western Canada. Now the likelihood is that the wood will come in containers full of paper, board, plywood and panels. 2,000 cubic metres of plywood from China alone.

At the very top of the dock is the future. Plans are well advanced to build a new dock at Gladstone Dock, at the point where the river has a channel that is deep enough at 16 metres to take the new vast container vessels that sail the oceans. These beasts – they call them post-Panamax ships – can carry 15,000 containers. The proposed port, which will need £80m of investment, filling in an unused triangle at the north end of the present dock will be able to take two of these at a time and have a 17 hectare terminal to move and store the containers. It's to protect the present and invest in the future. Even at the current rate of growth of container traffic – expected to swell from 650,000 to 800,000 units in the future – there's a need to cater for more. This should secure an even brighter future and a wider, richer mix of smells.

