



OUR HISTORY

JOHN CURRY



The old Liverpool Pilots Office



Our History

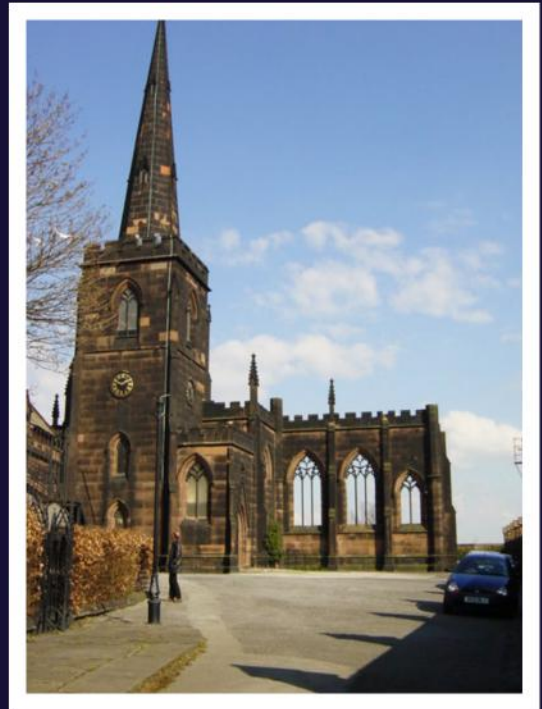
Part One

Liverpool pilots and the Port of Liverpool - early beginnings to the turn of the present century.

*“Centuries long,
The River has flowed
Through an hour glass,
Carrying in suspension
The sands of time
..All our histories...”*

The river referred to in the poem is the River Mersey upon whose eastern shore is the site of one of the greatest seaports of Britain, the Port of Liverpool. On the western shore lies the Port of Birkenhead and the Tranmere Oil terminal, which supplies the huge oil refinery at Stanlow. The distance at the mouth of the river between New Brighton and Gladstone Lock is one mile.

Between the famous ‘Old Pier Head’ from whence the trans-Atlantic Liners sailed to the New World, to Alfred locks is a mere half mile until the river widens to a mile in width and more to the southward of a line from the Dingle to Bromborough river wall, Hence the line in which the poet likens the shape of the river banks to an hourglass through which the river flows. At the narrowest part the flow at half-tide on a spring tide can reach in excess of five to six knots. At this point the bottom is rock and there is poor holding ground. Unlike many of the ports in the United Kingdom Liverpool was not favored by the Romans. In Roman sailing directions however, Liverpool is referred to as ‘a rocky creek in the vicinity of Deva (Chester)’, and the Romans chose to navigate the Dee with their galleys to found and supply their northwest city-stronghold at Chester. The tides, which flow through that ‘rocky creek’, have a range of from around seven metres, neaps, to in excess of ten metres, springs.



Birkenhead Priory



Liver Bird

As vessels drafts increased and the River Dee silted, the main ports on the dee shifted sites northwards, downriver, to various quays and jetties including the Port of Parkgate from where William of Orange set sail for Ireland, and where Lord Nelson's dear Lady Hamilton was born. Liverpool is said to have first been colonised by the Norsemen during the eighth century. The name is possibly from the Norse 'Hilthapollr' meaning 'Pool of the Slopes'. Another possibility is that it is derived from a combination of terms: 'Liver' from the 'Liver Bird', (almost certainly the cormorant) which frequented the 'Pool', which was at the outlet of the stream which flowed (and still seeps into the cellars of the basements of buildings) on the present line of Paradise Street where Maggie May plied her trade with the 'Homeward Bounders'. The 'Liver Bird' has become the emblem of the city and the unique marine pilotage emblem of the Liverpool Pilots.

A third possibility is that the name is derived from the Anglo-Norman French of King John. The City of Liverpool was granted a Royal Charter in the year of 1207 A.D. The charter is written in Latin and is jealously guarded in safe keeping in the vaults of the Liverpool City Libraries. It is not in fact a charter, but rather a 'deed', which is only six lines long. King John and the intelligentsia of the period would have been well schooled in the Latin language, but their everyday tongue was that brought over by William the Conqueror in 1066, Anglo-Norman or: Old French.

The concept of this theory stems from the fact that within the 'deed' the word Liverpool or rather 'Liverpul', is written three times. Following the March equinox, the river can be, for the most part, more docile than it is during the winter months and would have been more easily navigable for the stronger galleys of the Normans.

Translated from the Anglo Norman language we have: 'Li ver pul (vinarium)'. That is 'Li' translates as 'The', 'ver' as 'Springtime', and for 'pul' (vinarium) we have anchorage, the latter taken from the Latin, which gives us: "'The Port of' the Springtime Anchorage." This makes sense in the context of the safety of navigation in calmer conditions, and the shortened Latin word is compatible with the capital of the country: London, once known as Londinium.

We could perhaps take the history of Liverpool as a seaport then, as beginning in 1207 A.D., when the fishing hamlet on the 'Pool' or 'Anchorage', was given this 'charter' from King John, which created the borough and port of 'Liverpul'. King John and his advisors had obviously recognised the potential of a new free borough on the sea. Situated on the west coast of the realm, the position of the

"The river flows through an hourglass..."



port had the advantage of deep water and shelter for vessels from the prevailing westerly winds. Henry III progressed the rise of Liverpool's importance in 1229 with a further charter for the formation of a guild of merchants to trade from the port. On the other bank in 1318, we know that Edward II granted, by Royal Charter, the prior and monks at a site which is now the abandoned Benedictine Birkenhead Priory, the right to build the priory and the right to sell victuals to travelers about to cross over 'this arm of the sea'. A second Royal Charter granted by Edward in 1330 gave the prior and his monks (and their successors forever) the right to ferry men, goods and other things safely over the river. The Royal Crowns still top the gangway posts on both sides of the river to declare this charter. Gerry Marsden's hit of the sixties 'Ferry 'Cross the Mersey' is testament to this even in modern times. It must be said, however, that three tunnels, one rail and two road tunnels which connect the two banks of the river, plus the effect of the Runcorn Bridge, have reduced the ferry service to a major tourist attraction.

There followed some four centuries of slow growth until the late seventeenth century when trade with America intensified and the maritime and commercial possibilities of the port were recognised and capitalised upon. In 1715 Thomas Steers was to utilise the 'Pool' to create the world's first commercial wet dock and the city spread outwards from this centre of trade and on and upwards through what is now the shopping centre to the top of the slope which is at present occupied by the University of Liverpool, Britain's first 'Red Brick' university. The latter term was derived from the fine Victorian building and clock tower built in red brick, so popular in Victorian Times, which was the original university building.

Today the University site stretches out on both sides of 'Hope street' which has at one end the Roman Catholic Cathedral and at the other the Protestant Cathedral.

Liverpool is indeed a city of paradox. Many of the University's faculty buildings such as those in Abercromby square were originally built for the ship owners and traders who operated from and within the port below. These Victorian gentlemen had inherited the prosperity of their predecessors who had profited from the highly successful and lucrative trade in slaves from Africa to the West Indies and the southern States of America. The first Liverpool slaver was a ship of some thirty tons, which sailed from the port on its infamous voyage in 1709. From the records it appears that she was to carry fifteen slaves from Africa to be sold to the plantation owners who had begun to produce valuable crops of sugar and cotton.

The Liverpool slave trade fleet grew rapidly and by the end of the century no less than one hundred and eighty five slave ships were operating out of Liverpool. The



University of Liverpool



port had outstripped its rival west coast port in this trade. Bristol, (together with London) and along with many continental and Scandinavian ports was also heavily involved in, and committed to this nefarious trade. The trade could be described as triangular, for the slave ships carried cargoes of tools and nails to trade with the West Coast slave traders for their captives. The second side of the triangle was the carriage of the slaves themselves, (very few of the slaves were carried on to Europe) and the triangle was completed on the homeward leg with the carriage of sugar, rum and cotton. No visit to the Port of Liverpool in the present day would be complete without a visit to the now obsolete South Docks or Brunswick System. Here, in the Albert Dock, the visitor may view the superb architecture of the turn of this century architect Jessie Hartley.

Apart from shops and restaurants, art lovers may visit the Tate gallery of the Northwest. Marine historians may visit the Maritime Museum, which includes historical vessels, of which the dry-docked 'Edmund Gardener', the ex No 2 pilot vessel, is of particular interest to visiting pilots. The converted warehouse on the north side of the Albert Dock houses many maritime treasures. Here too the visitor may view the superb permanent exhibition, which features the Slave Trade. Liverpool has faced up to its past.

We know that during The Seven Years war, (1756-63) and that during the War of American Independence (1775-82), Liverpool became an important centre for privateering, In 1778 records show that no fewer than one hundred and twenty privateers carrying some two thousand guns and crewed by close on nine thousand men were sailing out of the port. In 1766, following an ever increasing and appalling loss of vessels, their passengers, cargoes, not to mention their crews, on the treacherous sands, which surround the approach to the river, a Pilotage Commission was established to set up a Pilot Service, which would chose and train the specialists who would become Liverpool Pilots. As trade with the Americas grew, so too did Liverpool's importance as Britain's West-Coast Gateway. In particular, copper was being imported from South America, whilst cotton was the main import form North America to feed the demand of the growing importance of the Lancashire cotton mills. William Wilberforce succeeded in abolishing the Slave trade in 1807, but by this time Liverpool was firmly established as one of Britain's major ports.

Macgregor Laird further increased the importance of the River Mersey by establishing what was to become a giant shipbuilding yard with dry dock facilities on the Cheshire bank close south of the present position of the Port of



Royal Albert Dock, Liverpool (Jesse Hartley)



Birkenhead. During the early part of the Nineteenth Century, when the steam engine was being developed and adapted for marine use, Laird's yard was to build many famous vessels including some of the first iron steamships. Together with his brother, this Scottish merchant built the 'Alburkah' which was a 55-ton paddle steamer. Sailing from Liverpool to the Niger River in 1832, she became the first iron ship to complete an ocean voyage. In 1862 Laird's built the American confederate cruise 'Alabama', a three masted schooner with auxiliary steam-power. The 'Alabama' sailed on 'steaming trials' as the 'Eurica' or job 'No 290' with ladies and a party of musicians on board. She thus evaded the officers of a British Government, which had declared its neutrality in the American Civil War. The vessel put in first to Holyhead where she landed the "revelers" before proceeding and successfully evading capture to the Azores. Here she completed her fitting out, which included the armament, which had also been forged for her at Lairds, and proceeded as the 'Alabama' to take up here devastating role as part of the confederate fleet.

Lairds were also to build the world's first submarine, the 'Resurgam' (I will rise again). She was to sink in a gale north of Rhyl, however, and has not risen again to the date of writing. A replica of the vessel has recently been built by apprentices of the present Cammel Laird's ship repairers and may be viewed in the dry dock constructed from an old floating roadway to the north of Woodside Ferry Terminal. Liverpool Pilots pass the replica to and from one of their present launch boarding positions and are only too pleased to know that they shall not be called upon to pilot her. During this century, Lairds continued to build notable ships including the 'Ark Royal' of the song: 'we are sailing' fame, and large tankers up to the size of Shell 'S' class.

The Port of Birkenhead to the north of Lairds was a further development for the importance of the River Mersey and the first enclosed docks. Utilising the mouth of the River Birkett, Birkenhead become operational as a port in 1847.

The Port of Liverpool has been expanding both south and north of that first enclosed dock, and generally speaking as ships increased in size, the need was to build docks ever larger in dimensions to the north of the Pier Head. All these docks were built on the foreshore and there is in truth only one dock (Stanley Dock) in inland Liverpool itself. With the ever-rapid expansion of both Birkenhead and Liverpool, the two great ports rose to become, combined together, one of the largest seaports in the World.



Pilot vessel 'Edmund Gardner'

Part Two

Onwards, towards and into the Millennium.

Throughout the nineteenth century traffic in the River Mersey was increasing, for the Industrial Revolution had brought increased prosperity to the North West.

Railways were rapidly covering the area, and in particular cotton mills were drawing the work force from rural activities to those of urban pursuits. One vital aspect of these developments for the River Mersey and its pilot Service was the completion of yet another Victorian feat of engineering, The Manchester Ship Canal.

With the opening of the canal in 1898, large ocean going vessels could proceed with full cargoes to the heart of the cotton industry in particular, and with other cargoes in general, to this growing centre of commerce after proceeding through the Liverpool Pilotage District. Indeed, initially Liverpool Pilots operated on the canal until the need for two separate services was recognised. At one period during the last century, there were so many pilots in both districts that the two services were remote and their members simply passed-by on the lock gates. Now with greatly reduced numbers on both side of the gates, the two services have come closer together and although separate districts, work in both friendship and harmony with each other for the common good of pilotage. Following the building of the Shell refinery at Stanlow in 1921, and ICI Chemical plants, coupled with the importance of the Runcorn Salt Works in the vicinity of the canal, through trade on the Mersey increased rapidly.

Reports from the early years of the nineteenth century has stressed that the then extant and important Horse and Formby channels to the north of the Rock Channel, were swept by tidal action alone and thus the line of the Liverpool docks, being built ever northwards, was chosen to enhance and strengthen the flow of the tide to assist in the sweeping of the channel approaches. In 1833, HM Denham, Marine Surveyor to the Trustees of the Port, discovered and established a buoyed, mid-bay channel, which forms the present deep-water approach of the Queen's channel. Earlier in the century, Captain Robert Fitzroy of H.M.S 'Beagle' and Darwin fame had been appointed as the first Acting Conservator under the provisions of an Act of Parliament and was one of several hydrographers of the period to be confronted with the mystery of a 'vanishing and reappearing' channel, which has never been fully explained.



The Tall Ships, Liverpool



Denham's survey settled the matter, and a "two course" channel was buoyed and maintained with difficulty. The difficulty arose with the existence of the sand bar, which was, and is formed through the strength of the ebb tide diminishing as it flows from the confines of the river, and which deposits the silt, which forms the bar. It was G.F Lyster, Engineer of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board, who pioneered dredging work on the bar, The work was necessary due to the demands of the ever-increasing size and needs of large trans-Atlantic passenger vessels using the port. The initial success of the dredging of the 27' (at low water springs) channel was short lived as erosion began to take place on the northeast side of the bend at Taylor's bank. The resulting problems of a narrowing and north shifting channel were threatening the advantages achieved by the dredging at the bar.

In 1905, A.G Lyster, son of G.F.Lyster decided to build a revetment wall at Taylor's Bank. Later, during the period, which spans the years from 1914 to as late as 1962, training walls were built on both sides of the approach channels. There are some fifteen miles of wall built of stones from Welsh quarries calculated at the rate of between some eighteen to eighty tons per foot run. Over the last century, many bucket dredgers, including the mighty 10,000 ton "Leviathan" with a crew of forty four, to the present day suction dredgers, have endeavoured to maintain a 6.9 meter channel, which, at the time of writing, is the least water in the working approaches to the port at the low water of a 10 meter tide.

With the establishment of ports at Widnes and Garston on the Lancashire Bank and Bromborough on the Cheshire Bank over the turn of the last century, the Liverpool Pilots were ever in demand, although it must be said that Widnes had its own upriver pilots, the last of which, following the closure of the port, was still believed to be operating on the River Weaver almost up to the close of the twentieth century.

During the First World War, many pilots and apprentices answered 'The Call to Arms' in the service of their country. For those who were left behind, a heavy responsibility rested with the pilots of the port, for, as Liverpool was of great significance in receiving supplies for the war effort from the West, the enemy concentrated on laying mine fields in the Liverpool Bay with devastating effect to shipping in the area. Indeed the No 1 pilot boat S.S. 'Alfred H Read' struck a mine at the Bar Station in late December 1917 and sank within minutes with all hands save two who were rescued.



The Royal Liver Building



it was to be during the Second World War, however, that there was to be a most important moment of unwanted but necessary glory for the Port of Liverpool. As the folksong 'In my Liverpool Home' relates it: "*Hitler threw at us everything that he had*", and, in the true Liverpool sense of humour the following lines relate:

"When the smoke and the bombs had all cleared the air,

Thank god, said the Old Man, the Pier Head's still there"

The reason for this fact is twofold, one: the German bombers quite simply, 'missed it' and two: Western Approaches Command H.Q., operating with few escorts for the trans-Atlantic convoys was based here. On a visit to Liverpool it is essential for those interested in this period to visit the command bunker, which was opened to the public only a few years ago. Here in this bunker, it is as if the young people who played out the lives of others in their daily duties have just left, 'their pencils, pens and rubbers are left behind'. Nicholas Monsarrat vividly further encapsulates the spirit of defiance of those who sailed from Liverpool under the command of men of the calibre of Captain F.J. Walker, in his novel 'The Cruel Sea'.

Many authors and poets apart from Monsarrat have been influenced by their relationship with the Port of Liverpool including the 'Old Conway's' Joseph Conrad and John Masefield. Both men served their time on the famous school ship when she was moored in the River Mersey. Masefield's words from 'The Conway', published in 1933, capture the spirit of Merseyside in the heyday of ocean liners and cargo vessels before the advent of the container vessel, V.L.C.C's and U.L.C.C's:

"...The flower of all England's shipping belonged in Liverpool: the river and docks were always busy with the best ships of the time. The Cunard moorings were just downstream from us; the White Star and Inman moorings beyond them; and the P.S.N and Alfred Holt moorings still further on, but in sight. The Elder Dempster ships were near us in the Sloyne. The steamers of many famous lines were weekly visitors to the river, we knew them all, their funnels, their house flags and their tenders: even the foreign steamers and what they brought were known to us."

Masefield continues to reflect upon the fact that at the time he was a cadet, the bulk of the world's freight was carried in sailing ships, 'which had then reached their last, strange, beautiful perfection'. Liverpool has had the honor of hosting the finish of the Tall Ships race three times in the last twenty years.



The Seven Seas Voyager in Liverpool



The Liverpool Pilot Service had streamlined itself over the course of the century to operate with four pilot cutters with twenty-two in their crews. Half of these men were apprentice pilots. One cutter was stationed at the Bar Light Vessel for her first week of duty, her second week was spent 'on the run'. ferrying inward and outward pilots to and from the Bar and Point Lynas (the western station)stations. The final week of the 'Cruise' was spent at Lynas and the fourth (glorious week for the apprentices) was spent in dock. It must be said that the standard of seamanship achieved by these young 'Boathands' as they were officially called, was considered worldwide to be second to none.

Time and changes in the industry meant a need for change and the reduction in the number of pilots in Liverpool and the reduction in the number of cutters. The change came in the form of a rapid reduction of cutters from four to three to two to none with the establishment of an efficient launch service based at Liverpool and at the Western Station at Point Lynas. Liverpool pilots were instrumental in shaping both their future and the future of the port.

Liverpool, before the container revolution, had peaked with one hundred and eighty five pilots. The Mersey Docks and Harbour Board, as it was then in the late '60's, had fallen short in planning for the future and had failed to anticipate the container revolution and were behind in plans to construct the Seaforth Container base. The Royal Seaforth Dock, eventually constructed, was advertised as an area' which could engulf the Seven Wonders of the World. The area includes berths for container vessels, grain boats, timber carriers and refrigerated cargo vessels. Late into the 'Container Trade', Liverpool had held its own despite the fact that the 'Non-profit' making organisation under the auspices of the 'board' had lost the moment and were in the hands of the receivers.

The Mersey Docks and Harbour Board had fallen and with the fall had withdrawn its (the ship owners) vessels from the Port. The Port suffered immeasurable, but the pilots of the port remained steadfast at the helm and were on watch as the 'Mersey Docks and Harbour Company' superseded the 'Board' and began to make headway against the industrial tide. Seaforth was completed and the large 'box-Boat' conglomerates competed for the advantage of a U.K Port with the facilities of a panamax sized lock and a non tidal berth to work twenty four hours a day. Liverpool is unique in being able to offer this facility, and A.C.L, Atlantic Container Line, has been described as the jewel in Liverpool's (present) crown.

When we look back at Liverpool's history as a port as we have done in these pages, we may see that because of the port's physical and geographical position,



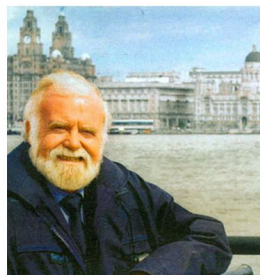
Liverpool during the Second World War



there is likely to always be another crown. The largest U.L.C.C.'s ever built visited the S.B.M at Point Lynas and Liverpool Pilots piloted them and cared for them. At present, the largest vessels afloat, albeit not fully laden (Liverpool is restricted on draft), pass not offshore, but rather through the 'Centre of the City', guided by Liverpool Pilots.

Following in the wake of the transatlantic liners, Liverpool City Council in conjunction with the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, the latter now under the auspices of Peel Holdings, have built a new landing stage in the position of the previous stage, which is now named The Liverpool Cruise Terminal. The first ship to berth at the terminal was 'the Seven Seas Voyager'. which berthed at the terminal on the ninth of September 2007. During the summer season, many of the world's cruise liners visit the terminal along with warships of the world's Navies. The visitors have included both the now retired QEII and the Queen Mary II. This facility has brought new trade and renewed interest in Liverpool and both its present standing and its history.

It is true that there is so much that the narrator has omitted through publishing space available, but it is hoped that an overall literary picture of the history of the Port of Liverpool has been achieved.



John Curry, Liverpool Pilot. (RTD)

John Curry was an Authorised Liverpool Pilot who served the port in the capacity as pilot, for forty-one years, (1968-2009) during which time he piloted somewhere around six thousand ships of all sizes to and from the port.

