

Liverpool a potted history

The modern city of Liverpool has many strings to its bow: it has been a European Capital of Culture, it has a diverse and loyal population and there are famous sports teams and sports personalities, all set against a backdrop of active politics and economic highs and lows. Liverpool as an historic city can help to explain a lot of the modern city's success. As a port, it has been a point of arrival and departure for centuries, providing the city with a rich and diverse history. However, it did not have the same status as some of the other towns and cities in the region, such as Chester, until the seventeenth century, when it began to be a port for voyages to the Americas. Once it did start to develop and grow, it surpassed many of its neighbours and became the key port out to the Atlantic from mainland Britain. It was at this point that Liverpool became a crucial part of the triangle that was the transatlantic slave trade. By the end of the eighteenth century, 80% of Britain's trade within the transatlantic slave trade passed through Liverpool, making the city and its investors hugely wealthy. The first commercial wet dock was built in Liverpool, making it pivotal for many aspects of foreign trade and helping to ensure that its significance continued after the abolition of the slave trade.

As the trade expanded, so did the city, with huge urban and industrial expansion. Liverpool became a key city in the cotton trade and a port for departures for and arrivals from India. In the nineteenth century, famine in Ireland led to large numbers of Irish arrivals; these were followed by Welsh communities, with the first Welsh language journal *Yr Amserau* established there by William Rees. During the American Civil War, the city became a popular spot for Confederate leaders to plan and purchase for their efforts against the Northern States.

“Britain’s trade within the transatlantic slave trade passed through Liverpool, making the city and its investors hugely wealthy.”

Grand buildings were constructed, displaying the wealth of the merchants and of the town that they had created. In 1880, Liverpool officially became a city, and in 1881 the university opened, confirming Liverpool's new cultural and intellectual status, as well as financial.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new migrants arrived in the port, with some heading on to the United States but others staying in Liverpool, leading to a growth in the city's Jewish community and other European communities. The regular arrival of sailors added to the increasing diversity of a city that was comparable only to London in the UK in terms of the range of nationalities and cultures that had made their home there.

The economic slump of the 1920s struck Liverpool, leading to high unemployment, but the city hit back with building programmes and social improvements. During the Second World War, the city was crucial for supplies arriving into Britain and troops and weaponry leaving the country. Many members of the Merchant Navy worked through Liverpool, as well as military activities taking place there. The control centre for the Battle of the Atlantic was housed under a commercial building close to the city centre, but hidden away from public scrutiny.

In the immediate post-war period, Chinese labourers and seamen were brought to the city; despite some marrying local women, they were nearly all returned to China forcibly.





From the 1960s onwards, the city's economic output began to falter. Factories started to close and shipping of the sort used for centuries was phased out in favour of container ships.

At the same time, the city gained a reputation for cultural creativity, with a vibrant music scene and writers who depicted and celebrated working-class life. Writing about the local and all levels of society has always been an important element for Liverpool's own storytellers. That cultural output continued even as the city went further into decline. By the 1980s, Liverpool, along with industrial cities in the north-east of England, was a centre point for mass unemployment and rising poverty in a post-industrial society: 20% of the city's working-age inhabitants were registered unemployed in 1985. Race riots in Toxteth in 1981 had underlined some of the socio-economic tension points of a city that was diverse but not necessarily equal. Sport, especially football, seemed to be the main success of an increasingly boarded-up city.

However, by the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s, Liverpool began a process of regeneration. The dockside was remodelled. New museums were created and civic buildings and institutions were given facelifts. The city continued to celebrate its cultural legacy and its new innovations. The riots of the 1980s had led to some introspection, and Liverpool

“During the Second World War, the city was crucial for supplies arriving into Britain and troops and weaponry leaving the country.”

made steps to explore its diversity and to examine its history: in 2007 it opened its Slavery Museum, and in 2008 it was a European Capital of Culture.

Despite the regeneration and, in some areas, gentrification of the city, Liverpool has not lost its distinct identity. To be a Scouser is a source of pride: to know your Scouse history, whether it goes back generations or starts in the present, is equally important to many resident in the city – which is possibly why there are a number of leading museums, art galleries and archives all located centrally.

Liverpool is a fascinating city and we have a number of resources that can help you to learn more about it. Existing resources to learn more about Liverpool can be found on the HA website and accessed through your membership. If you are planning on attending HA Conference, then it is well worth making a weekend of it, with lots to see and enjoy.

To find out more information about historic Liverpool take a look at the following articles:

Liverpool's revolutionary Old Dock
<https://shorturl.at/m2KUr>

The commercial architecture of Victorian Liverpool
<https://shorturl.at/3m3Qt>

Attitudes to liberty and enslavement: the career of James Irving, a Liverpool slave ship surgeon and captain
<https://shorturl.at/qa2pA>

Real lives: Maria Rye's emigration home for destitute little girls
<https://shorturl.at/Py8xd>

Real lives: Jessie Reid Crosbie
<https://shorturl.at/xrBA0>

If you are coming to HA Conference, you can see much of the city centre on our tours and during our visits. Then, for those of you who might want to stay longer, here are a few places to visit that will help you to explore the history outside of the city centre.

- **Sudley House**
- **National Museums Liverpool**
- **Port Sunlight Village**