Regarding Liverpool, all must commence with the Mersey. On the promontory of the river, all are agreed. So Henry James' English Hours began in a smoky dawn of arrival at the Mersey bar, and so do all the best books on Liverpool. In 1867, Walter Dixon Scott’s summary of the city at its roccobello peak, Liverpool, opened with ‘The River…’ not merely because Liverpool owes her actual existence to the River, but also because the whole quality of the “vitality of that existence has been determined by the completeness of the dependency’. Likewise, Quentin Hughes in 1964 opened Sayler – still the best introduction to Liverpool’s architecture – with ‘The River and the Docks’. And Tony Lane began his 1997 social history, Liverpool City of Our Time. In the Mersey the sea cannot be avoided. All roads converge at the Pier Head. The main streets collect the prevailing westwinds. Standing outside the Town Hall and looking down Water Street at high tide, sourad and outward bound vessels move across the frame made by the Cunard and Liver Buildings.1

The Mersey launched the port and its shipping: as topography it is unpretentious and transected. Its great width, huge tides, and broad stages all attune to architectural gesture on a grand scale. Colin Rowe, who studied and taught there, echoed Dixon Scott in remaking their space to Liverpool’s self-imagining. Liverpool is, or need be, to grim but grand. It was, is, stateful, indeed and necessarily, was equipped with an apparently endless series of sumptuously restored streets – which served, eventually, as vast stage, to contribute to a high-pitched magnificence. Also, it was never a continuously provincial or pragmatic city and, from the late 18thC origins of its prosperity, it had typically indulged itself in banalities which were likely to last a surprisingly local (and Enlightenment) combination of elegance, information, and megascope.2

That provocative and ‘force beauty’, as Dixon Scott called the river’s influence, has succeeded in its utility to the port. It is now attractor to three converters of warehouse lots to ‘city- dwelling’ who may make shopping rather than shipping the key to the city’s future. Visitors will notice the towers rising north of the Pier Head, such aegded seaward to the view across the river, the Welsh mountains and the Irish Sea. They are the sum of a regeneration that began, very doily, in 1887, by turning the Albert Dock to the Maritime Museum, Tate Gallery, North, sweeton, and apartments. Removal of the post dockways, erecting the Pier Head for cruiseships, and the new King’s Dock Arena, on the waterfront rear to the Albert Dock, should now complete the position in a way that was never possible when eight miles of docks monopolised the Mersey. Across the old dock road from the Arena is now the city’s biggest building site: 42 acres, with towers on five electronically designed buildings on a masterplan worked out between the city and developer Governor Estates. Opening during Liverpool’s year as EU Capital of Culture, and named ‘Liverpool 1’, this modelling of the city’s hand cannot be the largest of even a hundred projects which only now, 35 years after the closure of the south docks, are beginning to transform the city. It is ironic yet characteristic that ‘Liverpool 1’ is now rising on the site of the first of those docks, originally the very pool itself of Liverpool.

The ‘nucleus’ of Liverpool

From its incorporation in 1207 to 1700, Liverpool scarcely grew beyond a grid of six streets, a castle, and church. Exposed to wind and surging tides, the Mersey was a dangerous channel, and the only lanes for ships lie in the muddy creek that was the pool of Liverpool. The port of today is an entirely artificial creation that began only with the replacement of that creek, in 1713, by the world’s first iron-built dock, through which ships could sail at high water, and remain through all tides. Over the next two centuries, 50 more such basins would follow, encompassing 500 acres of water by 80 miles of quayside. Most were built along the Liverpool shore into the river, which became flanked by continuous granite walls from Dingle down to Seaburn at the mouth; but in the nineteenth century, docks were opened on the opposite side of the Mersey, along the great Albert, which ran inland from the docks. Initially served by the Corporation, and from 1857, a Trust, the administration of this vast estate on both sides of the Mersey became its own, a city within a city, planned and designed with a regularity unknown in English towns. This was a factor in Liverpool’s productivity, diverse, patterned, and relatively free of the restrictive police polity policies (which controlled the city up to 1958) but also in the formal rationalism that would recur in Liverpool architecture.

An example of this was the 1872 invention of the first dock into Canning Place. Dominated by John Foster’s massive Cunard House, whose dome and Ionic were purposely surmounted the docks. Canning Place became, until the Elizabethan monumentalisation of the Pier Head, the civic focus of the port, whose busiest corner ran from the Exchange behind John Wood’s Town Hall, along Castle Street past Cockrell’s Bank of England, and culminated in the medieval north and mercantile pastellia. Its sloping bulk bigger than St. George’s Hall reflected its national importance, for with the port’s ascendancy, Liverpool Cunard House became the Corporation house, its single source of revenue, leading Liverpool, uniquely, to be succeeded by its own Whitehall.

Schenkel in Liverpool

That Foster succeeded his father as Corporation Surveyor (also Dock Engineer from 1794 to 1805) accorded commonwealth. The elder Foster overseen a doubling of the docks and the building of fireproof warehouses such as the Gorwe arcades. In 1810, the younger Foster joined Cockrell in gaining the dock masters, and on his return travelled German cities to Liverpool, where, it is said, in 200 years, most of Foster’s auteur works are now gone; but one remains. Peveror calls it ‘a stroke of genius’ the romantic quay of St. James’ Greyfriars, now in the Gothic style of Scott’s Anglican Cathedral, into which Foster led down, from his Doric Odeon and Garden Terrace, a Peiorean descent of ramps and turrets to his own dusky Hosiery warehouses.

It was understandable, therefore, that when, in 1826, Friedrich Schinkel visited Liverpool on his research tour of Britain, he sought out Foster at his house in Mt Pleasant, opposite Edmond Allsop or now Regent Street, where his Regent House, whose Greek refinement he noted in his journal. But Foster was already at his office, and when Schinkel caught up with him, had little time to talk with his distinguished Prussian visitor, who noted Foster’s income from the becoming port around him. If Schinkel hoped to discuss the culture of the city, he would have done better at the Athenaeum Club with its illustrious founder William Roscoe, with the taught biographer of Lorenzo di Medici, founder of Liverpool’s art collections, and campaigner, as local MP, against slavery. Schinkel, like many nineteen-century visitors, was interested in Liverpool as a model of civic edification and alarm, finding efficient models to imitate, but social disorder to avoid. Many in the city felt the same. For instance, James Newlands pioneered a sewer system long before Ransome in London. Such reformers promised the 1846 Liverpool Sanitary Act and appointed the country’s first Medical Office of Health, the celebrated Dr Duncan, for whom, like Roscoe, two Liverpool parks are still named.

Visitors and visions

Liverpool’s fame grew with its trade. In 1824, D’Alberti made it the setting of a fantastic opera, Farnia di Liverpool. It also featured in journals, such as those of de Tocqueville and Emerson. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a journal of his years there as US consul, and Herman Melville set his 1849 novel Moby Dick at the Grand Stand of Princes Dock, after his stay there while visiting Hawesone. Most decisive was Frederick Law Olmsted’s discovery, on his arrival of Pennsylvania’s new Buckingham Park, where he found the Picturesque designs which he had come to see, but adapted for the first time from arithmetical design to a democratic park. Back in New York, Olmsted would translate Buckingham, upscaled and Columbia-instigated, to Central Park.

In 1847, a German visitor, J. G. Kahl, recorded the city in meticulous and admiring detail, noting that since 1800, its population had trebled to 300,000, while the port received annually 10,000 ships, with 10,000,000 tons there. By 1900, a million people lived on Merseyside, and with growing steamship size, one seventh of the world’s tonnage was owned there. This