

Coach Tour of Historic Liverpool

Friday afternoon 25 July

Joseph Sharples, architectural historian at the University of Liverpool and author of the recent Pevsner architectural guide to Liverpool was our leader for this tour. We set off from St George's Hall, a Greek and Roman revival style building, which Joseph described as the set piece and focus for cultural building in the city centre in the mid-19th century. A museum, art gallery and library were later built, echoing this style and providing an appropriate setting for exterior sculptures. Sadly, these days the Hall's vast interior is underused.

We passed the art deco styled ventilating tower of the Mersey Tunnel, which when built was the longest underwater tunnel in the world. The late 20th century depression and decline of its port saved Liverpool from the extensive rebuilding that many other cities suffered. London Road was the main route into the city and used to have many department stores. Lime Street Station, built 1850, had doubled in size by 1860 to cope with the expansion of the city. Rodney Street, which runs from north to south, was laid out by William Roscoe in 1784, and has the best surviving Georgian houses. Hope Street has recently benefited from a regeneration project. It has some fine houses, and the Philharmonic Hotel, c.1898, was considered by Joseph to be the best of the many richly decorated Victorian pubs in Liverpool.

The Anglican Cathedral, 1904-1978, is an astonishing building, with great towering walls of red sandstone. It marks the climax of private patronage of public architecture in Liverpool. In Princes Road we passed the derelict Welsh Presbyterian Church, a proud and ambitious French gothic design in stone, reflecting the success of Liverpool's 19th century Welsh community, who were very much part of the cosmopolitan character of the city. Reaching Sefton Park, the largest of many in the city, we travelled along the great roads surrounding it, and saw the large houses, many now hotels, built for merchants. Turning west, Joseph pointed out where estate type plots of land, that had belonged to the wealthiest merchants, had once run down to the river, affording views of the Welsh hills.

Liverpool had one dock in the early 18th century; this eventually expanded to seven miles of docks. Only a few of the large old brick quayside warehouses remain and these are being converted for modern commercial use or into apartments. On reaching Pier Head we stopped in front of the three magnificent buildings that dominate the quayside. The former Mersey Docks and Harbour Board Headquarters, built 1903, the Cunard Building, 1916, and towering above them the Royal Liver Building of 1908.

These buildings stood as symbols of their owners' power to the thousands of people alighting from the ships and heading on to road and rail transport. Our most informative and enjoyable tour ended here and we set off to board the Mersey ferry.

Ian Phillips