

## MARITIME ARCHIVES & LIBRARY

### INFORMATION SHEET 2

## HISTORY OF THE ALBERT DOCK

The Merseyside Maritime Museum stands on the oldest surviving part of the Liverpool dock system. This is its story.

- Before 1710: There were no docks in Liverpool until the early eighteenth century. Ships anchored in the river or in the 'pool' - a tidal inlet. Cargoes were brought ashore by small boats.
- 1710: The dock engineer, Thomas Steers, began to build an embankment across the south of the pool so making a wet dock. It was the first commercial wet dock in Britain. Generally referred to as the **Old Dock**.
- 1715: The **Old Dock** opened for shipping.
- 1720: An entrance basin and dry dock for repairs were built and up to 100 ships could be accommodated. However, more space was still needed.
- 1753: A second dock was completed, called the **South Dock**, later renamed **Salthouse Dock** because it was near John Blackburne's saltworks.
- 1765: Three graving docks were built. Two now form the **Canning Graving Docks**: the third, the **Canning Half-Tide Basin**. (Graving docks were also called dry docks and were used for cleaning, repairing and painting ships.)
- 1810: The Dock Trustees proposed the construction of warehouses surrounding the docks, instead of the system then used whereby goods were stored in private warehouses some distance from the docks. However, the idea was rejected by Parliament.
- 1820: A Royal Commission visited Liverpool and recommended this system, but it was again rejected. Local warehouse owners objected because they held a monopoly on the storage of goods in their private warehouses and were reluctant to lose this advantage.
- 1826: The **Old Dock**, finally became too small and shallow. It was filled in and the **Customs House** built on the site. This was bombed in September 1940 and **Steers House**, named after Thomas Steers the dock engineer in 1710, now stands on the site.
- 1829: The former entrance basin to the **Old Dock** was converted into a wet dock and in 1832 was renamed **Canning Dock**, after the Liverpool M.P. George Canning.

- 1839: The dock engineer, Jesse Hartley, proposed making an enclosed dock warehouse system similar to St. Katherine's Dock in London. It would allow goods to be unloaded from the ships moored at the quaysides and taken directly into the warehouse. This would shorten the turn around time for ships by as much as two weeks.
- 1841 The Dock Act was passed by Parliament despite opposition and work began. One reason why Hartley's proposals were eventually accepted was that he recommended using non-combustible building materials; fire was a great hazard in dock warehouses and merchants lost large sums of money as a result.
- 1846: In July the Prince Consort, HRH Prince Albert, officially opened **Albert Dock** with great ceremony although the five blocks of warehouses were not finished.
- At the same time the Old Dock entrance channel and a graving dock were excavated to form **Canning Half-Tide Basin**. This basin was separated from the river by two sets of dock gates and Canning Island. The gates were opened two hours before high tide to allow the basin to flood; the gates into the **Albert Dock** were not opened until the **Canning Half-Tide Basin** was full. At this point the ships could enter the dock system to unload and goods were taken directly into the warehouses.
- 1848: The **Albert Dock** was completed and the Dock Traffic Office, designed by Philip Hardwick, was built.
- 1863: The south-east block was converted into a bonded store for tobacco, wines and spirits.
- 1878: The hydraulic pumping station was added to the dock system to provide a power supply (now the Pump House pub).
- 1945: As ships grew larger the **Canning Graving Docks** became less and less useful since their entrances are only 35 feet wide. The first closed in this year, the second in 1965. Little by little all the South Docks became disused.
- 1971: **Albert Dock** was last used at this time. In its last years it was only used by small coastal craft and sailing barges. In 1973 the whole South Dock system was finally abandoned because a collision at the Brunswick entrance prevented the river gates from closing and made the system tidal.
- 1980: The **Merseyside Maritime Museum** opened. In creating a new Museum in Liverpool dockland the Merseyside County Council took a deliberate lead in revitalising the waterfront area.
- 1981: Merseyside Development Corporation was created by the Government to renew all south docks and other areas of dockland.
- 1984: Water returned to the **Albert Dock** and Merseyside hosted the Cutty Sark Tall Ships Race.
- 1986: **Albert Dock**, Block D occupied by the Merseyside Maritime Museum.

- 1988: Refurbishment of **Albert Dock** complete. Re-opening by HRH the Prince of Wales. Tate Gallery of the North opened.
- 1998: Merseyside Development Corporation ceases operations. Gower Street Estates Ltd. takes over administration.

The warehouses, each five storeys high, enclose a water area of seven acres with entrance passages on the east and north-west sides. Vessels berthed alongside the quays and unloaded goods directly into the warehouses by hydraulic cranes and hoists. This was not only timesaving, but prevented undue damage to goods and reduced the opportunities for theft in transit.

The warehouses are surrounded by a roadway, and an enclosing wall on the south and west sides. Access into the warehouses from the roadway was through gateways patrolled by watchmen. A branch line connected the dock railway, running along the length of the docks, with the north east block.

In 1873, JA Picton, the local historian, wrote of the Albert Dock warehouses: 'The works for strength and durability are unsurpassable, but it is to be regretted that no attention whatsoever has been paid to beauty as well as to strength. The enormous pile of warehouses which looms so large upon the river.....is simply a hideous pile of naked brickwork'.

At ground level there is a colonnade of brick-filled cast iron columns, each 4 ft. in diameter at its base. At intervals, the columns are more widely spaced with arches between them so that cranes could swing out over the quay-sides to the vessels being unloaded. The regularly spaced windows have cast-iron frames rather than wood, and shallow arches above. On several outer-facing walls the windows appear to be bricked in. This was done deliberately for security reasons, and the 'blocked in' appearance was an architectural feature to relieve the monotony of large expanses of plain walls. (In D Block these windows are now 'opened-up', as part of the conversion of the building for Museum purposes.)

The warehouses were designed to be fireproof, using methods first used in the construction of textile mills. Only non-combustible building materials were used, including brick, stone and cast iron. The floors were made of either tile or brick, and the curved roof was of galvanised wrought iron. The large rooms were subdivided by brick walls with iron doors to prevent fires from spreading.

Each of the five floors is supported by rows of cast iron columns linked by slightly curved cast iron beams. The beams are shaped like an inverted 'Y' to support curved brick arches, which are further strengthened by iron tie rods across them. On some levels there are mezzanine floors for additional storage space.

During the 1850s, Albert Dock was the base for the East India and China trades. The warehouses, which were more secure and fireproof than any others in Liverpool, were ideal for storing valuable commodities such as tea, and the south east block was a bonded store for tobacco, wines and spirits. A bonded store is where goods such as wines and spirits are stored after being imported and before duty is paid on them. Coopers were based in the warehouses to repair any broken barrels. The bonded store was later extended to other blocks and to vaults in the basement.

The north east block was converted into a cold store, rented by the Riverside Cold Storage and Ice Company Limited. Meat, fish and other perishables were stored here, and ice was

supplied to the fishing fleet's base in Canning Dock. The iron columns in the vaults of this block were surrounded with brick for insulation.

Albert Dock was one of the first places in Britain where hydraulic power was used for cargo-handling machinery. In the 1840s power was obtained from the town's reservoirs nearby, and later a trial pumping station was built to the south of the warehouses. This proved to be inadequate, so in the 1870s the hydraulic pumping station was built at the north east corner of the dock, which still stands today. Water at high pressure was fed through underground pipes to terminals along the quaysides, and was used to power cranes, hoists and lifts. Many of the ornate cast iron wall cranes dated from this time can still be seen on the warehouses.

The Dock Traffic Office at the north east corner of the Albert Dock consists of a large central hall extending to the roof where customs inspections took place, and offices off a balcony on the first floor. Two apartments were later added on the second floor for dock officials. The building has several decorative features including the tall chimney stacks, and a portico at its entrance built in the classical style, consisting of four cast iron columns supporting a cast iron cornice and frieze. The building is presently owned by National Museums Liverpool.

During the 1980s and 1990s the Albert Dock underwent significant redevelopment. It remains, however, the largest collection of Grade One Listed buildings in the U.K.

The Albert Dock presently houses the Merseyside Maritime Museum, The Beatles Story, the Liverpool Tate gallery, two hotels and numerous bars and restaurants.

### **Useful publications**

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