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INFORMATION SHEET 34

THE PORT OF LIVERPOOL

1207-1700: Coastal Port

Liverpool was given the status of royal borough by King John in 1207, but remained a small coastal port until the middle of the 17th century.

1700-1815: Rising Port

Liverpool's sudden and phenomenal rise to international importance in the 18th century was due, above all, to the growth of her trade with the Americas, which mainly involved sugar from the West Indies and tobacco from Virginia. From about 1740, Liverpool also became heavily involved in the Atlantic Slave Trade, which made an important contribution to her growing prosperity.

Liverpool's first dock, the 'Old Dock', was built between 1710 and 1715 by the engineer, Thomas Steers. This was the earliest commercial wet dock in the world and was an immediate success.

1815-1914: Major World Port

In the 19th century, Liverpool rose to become, after London, the second port of the British Empire and one of the greatest ports in the world. This was primarily due to her role as the main 'western gateway' for the raw materials and finished goods of the industrial revolution, which was then taking place in the mills and factories of Lancashire, Yorkshire and the Midlands. Liverpool's ships, their owners, builders and sailors, became famous throughout the world and played a major part in developing Britain's trading links with North and South America, West Africa, the Middle and Far East and Australia. During this century several million emigrants sailed from Liverpool to the rapidly developing 'New World' countries. Under the management of the Dock Trustees and their successors, the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board, the port's enclosed dock system grew to span more than seven miles of the Liverpool waterfront. At the end of the century the dock labour force alone numbered nearly thirty thousand and throughout most of this period, Liverpool's four great import trades (cotton, sugar, timber and grain) flourished.

1914-the Present: Continuing Growth - Relative Decline

By 1914 Britain was no longer the world's leading industrial power. The growing strength of her foreign competitors had also begun to adversely affect the fortunes of the port of Liverpool, which had long been the country's leading export port. However, Liverpool's vital strategic importance during the First World War (1914-1918) helped considerably to boost her status. Although causing severe losses of men and ships, the War also strengthened the port's trading links. Liverpool played an even more crucial role in the Second World War (1939-1945) as it was from Liverpool that much of the 'Battle of the Atlantic' was fought and won.

Recovering with remarkable speed after the ravages of the War years, Liverpool resumed her position as 'a giant of the age of conventional cargo shipping', a position which the port held until that era ended in the late 1960s. Since this point Liverpool's relative importance among UK ports has significantly declined. Although still the second British port in 1970, by 1984 Liverpool had been overtaken by the south and east coast ports of Dover and Felixstowe and was being closely rivalled by Southampton, Harwich and Immingham. Amongst the reasons for this relative decline were the revolutionary changes in transport and cargo handling technology introduced from the mid-1960s. These changes quickly made a large part of Liverpool's conventional port facilities obsolete. The cost of providing modern port facilities has been much less in the southern and eastern ports, where the tidal range is not so great. Similarly, the large shift of Britain's trade towards continental Europe has also benefited the southern and eastern ports far more than those, such as Liverpool, on the west coast. Subsequently, Liverpool's south dock system was closed to commercial traffic in 1972.

The Port Today and Tomorrow

Although her relative importance amongst UK ports has declined in recent years, Liverpool is still the country's largest west coast port, and still the main gateway for transatlantic trade.

Indeed, from the mid-1980s, Liverpool has experienced a new period of growth across most trades. During 1984 the Liverpool Freeport Zone was opened in the north docks and in 1992 it was extended to cover part of the Birkenhead Dock system. In 1994 the Euro Rail Terminal was established at Seaforth Dock and by 1996, Liverpool was handling more than 30 million tonnes of cargo for the first time in the port's entire history.

Further Developments

During 1999, the Port of Liverpool expanded by 70 acres to accommodate a new logistics centre called the 'Liverpool Intermodal Freeport Terminal' (LIFT) which served to almost double the port's warehouse accommodation. Significant growth has also occurred on the Irish Sea routes, with Liverpool now handling over one third of all freight crossings. In 2002, the Twelve Quays Container Terminal opened in Birkenhead. This 'in river' facility was designed to accommodate future growth in the 'roll on - roll off' sector of the Irish Sea trade.

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