

MARITIME ARCHIVES & LIBRARY

INFORMATION SHEET 35

THE PORT OF LIVERPOOL BUILDING

The Dock Office (or as it has been known since 1972, the Port of Liverpool Building) is the oldest of the three large Pier Head buildings, the Royal Liver Building having been begun in 1908 and the Cunard in 1913. If the Cunard Building is the most elegant, this building is the grandest and most magisterial, with more than a passing resemblance to the Capitol in Washington DC.

The Mersey Docks and Harbour Board was founded by Act of Parliament in 1858 in response to pressure from merchants in Manchester and elsewhere who alleged that the Corporation of Liverpool was administering the docks for its own sole benefit, not to say aggrandisement. The docks had been under the Corporation's administration since the first Dock Act of 1709; from 1793 the Dock Committee kept its own distinct series of minutes, and further stages of the corporate evolution of the Dock Administration were marked by new legislation and extended representation on the Committee in 1811 and 1840. The establishment of the Board in 1858 was the culmination of this process.

The Board continued to use the main offices in the domed Customs House which the Dock Trust, as its predecessor was called, had occupied from 1839 up to 1907 when the Port of Liverpool Building was complete. The Customs House was damaged in the Second World War and regrettably demolished soon after. The very concept of a grand building as the Corporate home of the Board was fiercely contested, particularly the proposal for the erection of a dome. It was contended that it was not part of the Board's duty to beautify the town!

In 1898 the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board agreed with the Liverpool Corporation to close and fill in George's Dock and to sell the site to the Corporation. George's Dock lay to the north of and was connected with Canning Dock; it extended to the bottom end of Water Street.

The Board retained the southerly portion of the George's Dock site for the building of an office and set up a committee under the chairmanship of Robert Gladstone (second cousin of William Ewart Gladstone) to plan a building to accommodate the whole of the Board's staff who were then housed in various offices around the city.

About a dozen Liverpool architects were invited to submit designs for the new office, prizes of £300, £200 and £100 being offered for the best three entries. Alfred Waterhouse RA, the eminent Liverpool born architect (whose buildings include Manchester Town Hall, the Prudential buildings in London and Dale Street, the Victorian buildings of Liverpool University and the former North-Western Hotel in Lime Street) was retained to help draw up the conditions for the competition and to advise on the judging. Seven entries were received and the prize was awarded to Briggs and Wolstenholme, F.B. Hobbs and Arnold Thornely. Even so, the winning architects were asked to prepare a revised design.

In 1903 tenders for building an office to the new design were invited from about 30 builders and a contract was awarded to William Brown & Son, Manchester, in the summer of that year at a contract price of £277,000. The Board's headquarters' staff moved from their offices in the old Customs House in Canning Place into the new building on the 15 July 1907, and various other departments moved in during the course of the year. The eventual total cost of the buildings, including fittings and professional fees, was some £350,000.

The following extracts are taken from a description of the building by the architects in an illustrated brochure published at the time the building was completed:

"The structure was started about five years ago, the first nine months being occupied in putting in the foundations, which start from the solid rock from 30 ft to 40 ft below street level. About 35,000 tons of cement concrete were used for this portion of the work. Owing to the proximity of the River Mersey, and the fact that spring tides reach within 3 ft of the level of the street, great care has been taken to ensure the basement being thoroughly dry. An inch of asphalt was accordingly laid over the whole of the site and carried up inside the balustrade wall to pavement level. The building is of fire-resisting construction throughout, steel columns, girders, etc being encased in concrete

The grand staircase is constructed of grey granite from the quarries belonging to the Dock Board at Creetown, Dumfrieshire, and the balustrade round the site is also built of the same material.

The halls and corridors on the ground floor are lined with white (Calacata) marble to a height of 8 ft 6 ins, the corridors of the upper floors having dadoes of white marble.

Danzig oak is used for the woodwork, except in the Boardroom, which is finished in Spanish mahogany. Bronze has been used throughout for all floor furniture, all fittings being to special designs

The ornamental work is interesting, as illustrating what is being done by the combination of the artists and craftsmen in the North of England. The casements, stained and leaded glass, gates, railings, balustrading, lift enclosures, electric light fittings and door furniture, were executed in the studios and workshops of George Wragge Ltd., Salford.

The designs have been arranged with thought, imbued with the maritime nature of the business for which the building was erected especially noticeable being the bronze terminals on the main entrance gates, representing a globe supported by dolphins, and the outside bronze electric light brackets, with the lamps in the hands of the broadly designed figure of Neptune.

The treatment of leaded and stained glass windows and domes, fulfilling first of all the utilitarian demand, and carrying out a harmonious treatment of colour combined with design, give an added dignified charm to the internal fittings and fitments. (*The stained glass windows show representations of the coats of arms of all the constituent territories of the British Empire at the time.*)

The central hall is surmounted externally by a dome rising to a height of 220 ft above the pavement. The copper roofing of the dome was executed by Ewart & Son of London. This forms the principal feature of the exterior, which is entirely faced with Portland stone from the quarries of F.J. Barnes, Isle of Portland. At each of the four corners of the building is an octagonal tower 140 ft high.

The main entrance, situated in the centre of the river frontage, is flanked by two stone statues representing "Commerce" and "Industry". The extreme dimensions of the building are 264 ft by 216 ft, and from the pavement to main cornice the height is 80 ft".

In the early hours of the 3 May 1941, a heavy bomb exploded in the basement at the eastern side of the building which was very badly damaged. Temporary repairs enabled most of the offices to be re-occupied, apart from those in the eastern wing which had been completely gutted by fire. The building was restored shortly after the War, the cost of re-construction being far more than the original cost.

In 1994 the Port Authority, which had been reconstituted in 1972 as the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, moved totally from the offices it had occupied for 87 years and occupied its new headquarters at the Maritime Centre, near the Seaforth Dock.

The Port of Liverpool Building continues in Dock Company ownership and is let out to a number of tenants. It is possible to visit the former Dock Company's headquarters, which were recently refurbished, if escorted by a Mersey Tourism Guide, normally as part of a Port or Pier Head Tour.

Records

Maritime Archives & Library holds the records of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board. This includes items relating to the Port of Liverpool Building, for example, MDHM/LEG/H95, MDHB and Messrs. W. Brown: Contract for New Dock Office and MDHB/DISC/1-252, Discussions at the Board. For further details see *Guide to the Records of Merseyside Maritime Museum*, Vol. 1, Gordon Read & Michael J. Stammers.

Bibliography

CAVANAGH, T. *Public Sculpture of Liverpool*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997.