

Liverpool – A history of a city

12,000 years in 1200 words



Early settlers



Frozen lake and birch forest, a typical landscape in Merseyside 8000 years ago.

12,000 years ago this part of the world was buried under a huge sheet of ice during the last Ice Age.

Once the ice began to melt people who hunted and gathered their food began to move in to and around the area in the Middle and Late Stone Ages about 10,000 years ago. These small groups travelled about regularly and left very little behind them.

About 4000 BC people in this region began to farm for their food, leading to the creation of the first settlements in the area. 4000 years ago those people began to work metal in the Bronze Age, and later, the Iron Age.

About 70 AD the area came under Roman influence for the first time. The nearest large Roman settlement was at Chester and life by the Mersey probably remained reasonably unchanged for most people until Roman soldiers left Britain in 410AD.

In the years that followed the Roman withdrawal from Britain invaders from Germany settled across Britain. The River Mersey formed a border between their Kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria. Viking refugees from Ireland landed in Merseyside in 902 AD after their expulsion from Dublin. They were given land on the Wirral but soon began to settle on both sides of the River Mersey.

Becoming a town



Liverpool in 1680, by an unknown artist. Part of the Merseyside Maritime Museum's collections.



King John
image © National Portrait Gallery.

On 28 August 1207 King John signed the letters patent that created the borough of Liverpool. The letters invited settlers to move to the newly laid out seven streets of the new town. By the 1230s a castle had been built on a rocky outcrop that overlooked the River Mersey and the pool of water that acted as a natural harbour and gave the town its name. The castle and the town were used as a dispatch point for troops leaving England to go and fight in Ireland.

In 1257 a small chapel dedicated to St. Nicholas was built on the banks of the River, Liverpool was not big enough yet to have its own parish church.

Medieval Liverpool was a small and quite insignificant place where most people still farmed and crafted simple goods.

The Medieval town had a market and in peacetime a small coastal trade developed. The population of the small town never stretched above 1000. Almost no trace, other than the street layout of central Liverpool and some small fragments of pottery, survive from the Medieval town.

By the 1500s a period of economic decline had set in, the town's population dwindled to around 600. Epidemics hit the town in the 1540s and 1550s. By 1571 the residents had to beg Elizabeth I to subsidise themselves from a payment, signing the request as, *'her majesty's poor decayed town of Liverpool'*.

During the Civil War the town was attacked numerous times by Royalist and Parliamentary forces. Following the Civil War trade began to be redirected as the Port of Chester began to silt up. In 1648 the first transatlantic shipping arrived (a shipment of tobacco from Virginia) and soon the economic prospects of the still small town began to look more hopeful than they had a century before.

The Great Port



Prospect of Liverpool (cropped), 1725, by an unknown artist. Part of the Merseyside Maritime Museum's collections.



Liverpool's bustling docks in the early 1800s. Part of the Merseyside Maritime Museum's collections.

On 31 August 1715 the world's first commercial enclosed wet dock opened in Liverpool. It was a revolutionary new piece of engineering designed to protect ships visiting the port. Ships could offload and load cargo in record time and before long ships from all around the world brought their goods to Liverpool. More docks were built and within a century the Port of Liverpool was well connected to much of the rapidly industrialising North. Raw materials such as cotton, tobacco, and sugar would come in to the Port, then be transported to factories and mills across the North West. Here they would be made into commercially saleable goods such as cloth, and returned to Liverpool for global export.

Liverpool became heavily involved in the transatlantic slave trade during this period and its ships and merchants dominated the trade in the second half of the 1700s. The town and its inhabitants derived great civic and personal wealth from the trade which laid the foundations for the port's future growth. By the time the trade had been abolished in 1807 Liverpool ships had carried 1.5 million people from Africa into slavery.

By 1850 shipments of cotton made up half of all trade in Liverpool. A Cotton Exchange was built and the city dominated the trade in raw cotton, and led in exporting the cloth globally.

Many of the city's most impressive buildings, such as the Town Hall, St. George's Hall, the Anglican Cathedral were constructed from the wealth created by this huge increase in trading.

Not all Liverpool's residents enjoyed the colossal wealth that the docks were creating. In 1847, 30,000 of Liverpool's residents lived below ground in filthy, stinking cellar dwellings. Liverpool had some of the most overcrowded and poorest slum housing in Europe.

Changing Times



Liverpool in flames during the Second World War, painting by Grainger-Smith. Part of the Merseyside Maritime Museum's collections.



Jigsaw puzzle of The Beatles. Part of the Museum of Liverpool's collections.

By 1939 Liverpool was one of the most important mercantile ports on the planet, home to nearly 900,000 people.

During the Second World War the city became home to the North Atlantic Fleet, who protected the convoys bringing troops, materials, and food in to the UK. Liverpool became a target for bombing raids and during the war the city experienced catastrophic losses leaving 10,000 homes destroyed and 2,500 dead.

Following the war there was extensive rebuilding in the city but this did little to stop an economic decline that would grip the city for decades. Declining industry and staff numbers needed to manage the port meant rising unemployment and a consequent decline in population.

Despite its economic problems the city became a centre for youth culture in the 1960s, producing international artists like The Beatles, Cilla Black, Gerry and the Pacemakers, and the Liverpool Poets.

Economic decline carried on throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. During the worst years of this period around 12,000 were leaving the city per year to find work and the population slumped to nearly half its pre-1939 levels. Dissatisfaction soared and the Toxteth Riots erupted in 1981.

Regeneration of the Albert Dock and the International Garden Festival of 1984 started to bring tourism in to the city. By the mid-1990s the city was experiencing an economic uplift and investment was made in the city's cultural offer. In 2008 Liverpool was the European Capital of Culture with a huge programme of cultural events.

Today Liverpool is a hotspot for tourists who are attracted to the city's unique history, style and culture.