

lessons from a sorry world heritage saga

Ian Wray looks at the wider lessons that can be drawn from the tussles with UNESCO over Liverpool's World Heritage Site status



Peel Land and Property

The vacant Liverpool Waters site in the North Docks, outline shown in red

Bill Shankly, late and revered manager of Liverpool Football Club, had a saying: 'Football's not a matter of life and death. It's more important than that.' It is a fair assumption that most Liverpoolians would agree with every word. So when they heard that UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – was objecting to the plans of Everton Football Club, one of the city's two top-rated international football clubs, to build a new stadium on Liverpool's waterfront, they must have scratched their heads in disbelief.

Built on derelict land in the abandoned North Docks, next to a sewage treatment facility and across the road from run-down industries, it would bring £500 million of investment and give the city's COVID-19 hit tourist industry a shot in the arm.

£50 million will be spent on restoring heritage features on the site. Everyone was in favour of the stadium, as a letter to *The Times* newspaper attested: those signing included the Chief Executives of both football clubs, a former Chair of English Heritage, Liverpool's new Mayor, the Bishops, the University Vice-Chancellors, Lord Heseltine and Lord Storey, and business leaders. An opinion poll found that 98% of those surveyed supported the development.

What is the problem?

How could anyone possibly object to the new stadium? From the position of UNESCO's expert advisors in the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the problem is very simple. The stadium site, derelict though it is, finds itself

located in (although on the edge of) Liverpool's UNESCO World Heritage Site. While the entire built heritage will be protected and restored, part of the disused Bramley Moore Dock will be infilled, losing the water area. The loss of this water will, according to UNESCO, cause irretrievable damage to the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Site – notwithstanding the wide expanses of River Mersey water just the other side of the dock walls.

UNESCO has had a serious problem with Liverpool for quite a while. It objected to a planning approval for a high-rise development called Liverpool Waters, also in the derelict North Docks, and sees this, together with the more recent stadium proposal (which has nothing to do with the Liverpool Waters approval), as a good reason for deleting Liverpool from its list of World Heritage Sites. Fair enough, you might say – except that the Liverpool Waters scheme has never been built. It was conceived in the optimistic property boom before the 2008 financial crash, pre Brexit and pre Covid. All the proposed tall buildings were in the buffer zone, not in the World Heritage Site. To date, scarcely a brick has been laid, and Liverpool Waters' massive towers are likely to remain forever as artists' impressions.

Let's ask what has actually happened to Liverpool's World Heritage since the site was put on the UNESCO list in 2004. The answer is entirely positive: the complete reconstruction of the city centre pedestrian realm; exciting modern buildings at the Pier Head (to which UNESCO did not object); the award-winning Liverpool One retail scheme; the saving and opening of the underground remains of the world's first enclosed wet dock; the restoration of the historic Stanley Dock; the restoration of the colossal Tobacco Warehouse; and many other schemes which have brought back into use great historic buildings for hotels and housing. The Strand, formerly a six-lane urban-motorway-style road, caused acute severance between the Pier Head and the city centre parts of the World Heritage Site. It is currently being narrowed to a tree-lined boulevard.

Across the city only 2.5% of historic buildings are now in serious disrepair, down from 13% in 2000. More than £700 million has been invested in heritage-related projects, with another £350 million in the pipeline – over £1 billion of investment. It is a triumph of heritage-led city regeneration.¹

The only new tall building constructed on the waterfront since inscription of the World Heritage Site in 2004 is the Lexington Tower on Princes Dock. It was handled as a stand-alone planning application, outside the scope of the outline permission for Liverpool Waters, and sits on the site of a pre-existing expired permission for a tower of similar height. There was no objection from Historic England. The building reads as part of the 1960s and 1970s office expansion zone, which is full of existing tall buildings. Sitting on lower ground, its top storey is significantly lower than the nearby, pre-existing, Beetham Tower.

Arguments such as these, which were essentially the UK Minister's line in her response to UNESCO, were of no avail.² Attitudes had hardened. At its meeting in July 2021 the UNESCO World Heritage Committee decided to remove Liverpool from the list of World Heritage Sites, acting on a report from the World Heritage Centre in Paris. The report stated that:

*'the inevitable process for the implementation of the 'Liverpool Waters' project and other large scale infrastructure projects in the waterfront and northern dock area of the property and its buffer zone have progressively eroded the integrity of the property and continue to do so as the most recent project proposals and approvals indicate. These actions have already resulted in serious deterioration and loss of attributes that convey the [Outstanding Universal Value] of the property to the extent that it has lost characteristics which determined its inclusion.'*³

This somewhat misleading text gave the Committee the impression that irreversible damage had been caused by new developments. In fact, nothing in the Liverpool Waters outline planning permission had been built. The situation on the ground had not changed since the permission was granted almost a decade earlier.

How had this situation developed, and what lessons can be learned from Liverpool's experience? The rest of this article reviews the issues and seeks lessons for the future.

Issues for UNESCO

With the benefit of hindsight, it was probably a mistake to put an entire city centre plus a mile of derelict docks into the buffer zone and boundary of a World Heritage Site. It did not take powers of foresight to realise that Liverpool, still one of the poorest cities in England despite its recent revival, would be looking for major job-creating investment in the derelict docks.

To be fair, when World Heritage Site boundaries were first considered in the late 1990s, Liverpool still looked like a city on the way out and a suitable candidate, in the late Sir Geoffrey Howe's unforgotten terminology, for 'managed decline'.⁴ Low-rise development looked like the future, and big private investment projects were undreamed of. In that event the 'museum-ification' of the city centre might have seemed a feasible, even rational, option. That arch-critic of preservation ideology, Robert Hewison,⁵ sees this veneration of the past as a movement dedicated to turning the British Isles into one vast open-air museum.

How wrong they all were. Post-2000, led by Grosvenor's huge and justly acclaimed Liverpool One leisure, retail and housing project, private investors began to look again at Liverpool, and funds poured into new housing, and into the restoration of formerly

derelict and disused landmark historic buildings, often as hotels. Projects such as Harcourt's Titanic Hotel at Stanley Dock brought back to life buildings which many (including me) had written off to terminal decay.

Having wrapped the entire city centre in a World Heritage Site and buffer zone, how should the new drive for investment have been policed? The possibility of changing the World Heritage Site boundary and buffer zone to remove the derelict docks was ruled out. In UNESCO a preservationist ethos prevailed – which would have been perfectly acceptable for a historic monument, ruin, or even parkland. It was exemplified by the negative response to even the possibility of tall buildings close to those already in place. English Heritage shared this view, objecting to a policy for specific locations for tall buildings. One has to question whether the preservationist ethos was at all appropriate for derelict and disused areas adjacent to a busy, regenerating city centre, with a historic tradition of building big structures.

Trevor Skempton at Merseyside Civic Society has pointed to Liverpool's tradition of building big, and the many historic and current examples of huge structures, including the New Brighton Tower, the Tobacco Warehouse, the 'Dockers Cathedral' grain silo, the Bibby Building, and Clarence Dock power station – not to mention the ocean liners and cruise ships, the Seaforth Dock cranes, and the massive (although not tall) Albert Dock.⁶ The Liver Building itself was built on a disused infilled dock and was the first building in England to be described as a skyscraper. Yet the preservationist view seemed to be that Liverpool's tradition of big and tall structures should be confined to its past, not its future. The

Third UNESCO Mission, visiting in 2015, concluded that:

*'Key attributes of the waterfront and the quays are essentially the large-scale horizontal warehouse buildings and these characteristics should be enhanced.'*⁷

In making this remarkable statement the Mission had apparently closed its eyes to all the 1970s, 1980s and later tall buildings in the 1960s City Centre Plan office expansion zone, adjoining the Pier Head, and indeed to other tall structures higher up the sandstone ridge, not least the St Johns Beacon and the uncompromisingly huge and modern Roman Catholic Cathedral.

Shortly after inscription of the World Heritage Site, the Statement of Outstanding Universal Value was subtly amended, without public consultation, apparently to give better grounds for objecting to development. The initial Statement of Outstanding Universal Value in 2004 had (correctly) laid emphasis on Liverpool's pivotal role in world history, including the abhorrent slave trade, the British Empire, and international emigration to the New World. It did not mention views or townscape, and there was only a passing reference to architectural details, such as original pulleys. The revised statement laid considerable emphasis on dock construction, architecture and structures in its discussion of integrity. This was not present in the initial inscription statement. Parallel changes were made in the section on authenticity.⁸

The preservationist mind turned out to be oddly inconsistent. Liverpool was put on the World Heritage in Danger list on the basis of an outline planning



Liverpool City Council

Liverpool Waterfront, 2021 - the tall buildings to the left of the Royal Liver Building are within the city centre office expansion zone, initiated in the 1960s city centre plan; the Lexington residential tower is behind and to the right of the cruise liner funnel



The Tobacco Warehouse in Stanley Dock, currently being converted for residential use - Liverpool has a long tradition of huge structures on the waterfront, some, like the Tobacco Warehouse, built on former infilled docks

permission which was not actually implemented on the ground (and may never be). The Tower of London World Heritage Site has been surrounded by some of the tallest new buildings in Western Europe, including the Shard, the Gherkin/Swiss Re building, and the so-called 'Walkie Talkie' tower. You may reach your own conclusions on the design quality of these buildings. What is certain is that, unlike Liverpool, St Paul's Cathedral apart, the City of London, which forms the essential context and backdrop for the Tower of London site, had no prior tradition of very tall buildings and massive structures.

Technically, one might explain this anomaly by pointing out that the Tower of London does not have a defined buffer zone (apparently the City of London planning authority insisted on this). But it still has a 'setting' and one which has been hugely impacted by these developments – with more to come. One of my Chinese Masters students offered a convincing explanation, grounded in *realpolitik*: 'Professor, you must understand that London is a rich and powerful capital city, so different standards must apply.'

Another inconsistency has so far escaped consideration. What should be preserved and what should not? In UNESCO's view, the loss of the water



Former Royal Insurance Building, one of many vacant listed buildings in the former World Heritage Site, now converted and refurbished for new use as an Aloft Hotel - the number of listed buildings at risk has fallen sharply

in the dock area infilled for the proposed stadium would amount to irretrievable damage to the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Site. Admittedly, water spaces do offer an amenity value to new developments – and the proposal did conflict with the adopted policy for water spaces in the World Heritage Site. But is the dirty water within the dock really of global significance, something which we ought to venerate?

Before you answer that question it might be as well to consider the issue of historic building interiors. Re-purposing historic buildings, especially large industrial buildings, almost invariably requires the physical removal of historic interiors. Most of the historic interiors of buildings in Liverpool's Georgian Quarter were lost in the 1980s. The planners took the pragmatic view that if the structures were to be saved, the housing associations actively restoring these buildings should be permitted to remove the interiors.

The same is true of the Albert Dock, which is widely recognised as an international exemplar in heritage conservation. The interiors went, as the dock buildings were re-purposed for offices, housing, galleries, and museums. The same is true of Stanley Dock and the huge Tobacco Warehouse, currently



Liverpool One in the heart of the former World Heritage has tied together waterfront and city centre uses and, underground, given public access to the world's first enclosed commercial wet dock

under restoration. The Tobacco Warehouse has impossibly low floor-to-ceiling heights, so realistically much has had to be removed. None of this seems to have impinged on UNESCO and its expert advisors in ICOMOS.

Issues for government

It is a fact less than universally acknowledged that the body responsible for protecting the UK's World Heritage is not the local council, but Her Majesty's Government, referred to by UNESCO as the 'State Party'. Government is signatory to the international convention on protecting World Heritage. The Convention is very clear about the government's responsibilities, setting out the duties of 'State Parties' in identifying potential sites and their role in protecting and preserving them:

*'By signing the Convention, each country pledges to conserve not only the World Heritage sites situated on its territory, but also to protect its national heritage. The State Parties are encouraged to integrate the protection of the cultural and natural heritage into regional planning programmes, set up staff and services at their sites, undertake scientific and technical conservation research and adopt measures which give this heritage a function in the day-to-day life of the community.'*⁹

The two development planning applications to which UNESCO strongly objected were Liverpool Waters and the Everton Stadium. On both occasions the government considered the proposal for 'call in' by the Secretary of State, potentially followed by a public inquiry and a planning inspector's report. On both occasions the government decided not to call in the applications on the basis that they were local matters to be dealt with by the local council, effectively giving these development proposals the green light.

More effective scrutiny, involving a planning inspector and public inquiry, could have considered



Looking across to Everton Stadium, under construction behind the red and white barriers, with the tall Seaforth waterfront cranes and turbines in the background

alternative options. While this might have led to a recommendation for refusal, it could instead have led to a more realistic and sensitive proposal – and one more likely to be implemented. This more robust and open approach might have engendered more support from UNESCO and resulted in compromises that everyone would have been happy with.

In relation to the natural environment in England, government has several protective statutory designations, including National Parks, Areas of Outstanding National Beauty, National Nature Reserves, and Sites of Special Scientific Interest. All these designations have effective management, funded by central government, through bodies such as the National Park Authorities and Natural England. There is absolutely no equivalent designation for areas of great national cultural and historic importance, many of which are in urban areas. Protection comes primarily from the listed building legislation – and from designated Conservation Areas, essentially a local designation of which there are very large numbers. There is no government funding attached to Conservation Areas, nor to World Heritage Sites. Moreover, unlike the environmental designations, World Heritage Sites have no statutory status in the UK planning system.

In its detailed and comprehensive review of World Heritage Sites in 2019¹⁰ (the first ever), World Heritage UK, the voluntary body which represents all the UK sites, described World Heritage Sites as a remarkable opportunity – a sleeping giant of cultural and economic potential. They include the most important heritage assets in the UK, which can help to spell out the island story and capture Britain's greatest global impacts and achievements. It called for a new and more proactive approach, overcoming the very low awareness of and limited management capacity for many World Heritage Sites. Key challenges included:

- capacity, resources, and diversity of skills for site management and promotion;



The financial towers of the City of London looming over the Tower of London World Heritage Site – for London, different standards seemed to apply

- alternative governance and management models, offering greater scope for self-sustaining finances;
- government support from alternative and consistent funding sources; and
- integration with tourism, marketing and site promotion at local and national levels.

The World Heritage UK review called for a national strategy, a UK World Heritage Fund, an independent national body, a campaign to raise awareness about the sites, integration of UK planning policy frameworks, stronger local site management, alternative governance models, and closer links with tourism development. World Heritage UK has also suggested that World Heritage Sites should be considered for statutory status within the current planning reforms. To date, there has been no positive commitment from government to any of these proposals and suggestions – and the huge potential of World Heritage for national status, understanding and ‘soft power’ thus remains unlocked.

Conclusion – lessons from Liverpool

This has been a sorry tale, with questionable judgments on many fronts. What started out positively as a celebration and recognition of Liverpool’s enormous contribution to world history and technology, and its rich cultural inheritance, has ended as an unseemly dispute mainly about projects which, to date, have not been built.

What are the practical lessons for future World Heritage applicants in historic cities, for the UK government as the ‘State Party’, and for UNESCO and its advisors in ICOMOS? There seem to be five:

- **First, draw realistic boundaries:** Think very carefully before including derelict and disused areas where there is known to be an appetite for major investment and change in a World Heritage Site and buffer zone, especially in busy and evolving city centres.
- **Second, be pragmatic in responding to the evolution of cities (including the issue of boundary**

review), and practice conservation, not preservation: At present UNESCO will not consider boundary reviews, even when it is clear that circumstances have greatly changed. The result is that in Liverpool an entire site has been lost in large part by virtue of unimplemented proposals in one derelict part of the area. UNESCO has not set out the balance sheet as whole, focusing entirely on unimplemented or quite minor ‘threats’, rather than wide-ranging tangible achievements.

- **Third, respect and communicate with local communities:** There should have been public consultation on the revised statement of Outstanding Universal Value. UNESCO’s response to Liverpool’s situation was to send in teams of experts for two or three days on three occasions in order to prepare reports; but what was needed was long-term relationship-building, with a permanent embedded presence to build mutual understanding, rather than delivering critical and sometimes misleading reports.
- **Fourth, apply fair and consistent policy:** Make sure that policy concerns are reflected consistently across World Heritage Sites, and do not allow different standards to emerge (as appears to be the case in relation to Liverpool and the Tower of London sites).
- **Fifth, scrutinise development proposals properly:** Make sure that major development proposals affecting sites designated for their international significance – and alternative options – are fully considered. Do not side-step government responsibilities by pretending that they are just a local matter.

Liverpool has been the first major test of the UK’s governance of World Heritage. Others will follow, including the current government proposal to run a new tunnel and approach roads through and under the Stonehenge World Heritage Site. At the time of writing, Ministers had apparently been advised

that Stonehenge will be placed on UNESCO's 'in danger' list – the precursor to it losing World Heritage status – if the scheme goes ahead as planned.¹¹

It is surely time to take our World Heritage responsibilities seriously, as World Heritage UK has argued. But there must be fair behaviour on all sides – otherwise, politicians and the general public alike may conclude that World Heritage policy is unreasonable, inconsistent, and ultimately a nuisance. That would be a serious blow for World Heritage and for the whole conservation movement in the UK.

Liverpool's heritage tussle raises much wider questions for the future of historic cities. How should we rank the 'expert' status of conservation values alongside representative democracy and participatory democracy? Whose views should prevail in complex urban settings – the wealthy developers, the flown-in international experts, the politicians, or the local community? How should we accommodate local political leaders and communities who may be out sympathy with UNESCO's preservationist mind set? Historic cities under pressure to accommodate development are the arenas within which these debates will be settled. Many governments, towns and cities are considering an application for World Heritage status. They should be careful what they wish for – and go into the process with their eyes wide open.

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One final issue remains. The evidence set out in this article demonstrates that the alleged damage to Liverpool's World Heritage Site at the time of its loss was, at most, negligible. In large part the site was in better condition when it was lost than when it was inscribed in the list. It follows that all the heritage assets, of immense national and global value, are still there – cultural, historic, artistic, architectural, archaeological, and technological. How should they best be managed in the future, now that the mantle of UNESCO stewardship has been removed? These are huge issues for Liverpool's Mayor, the Liverpool City Region Mayor and for the UK government. They immediately raise the issue of whether Britain needs a national designation for sites of great cultural and historic importance, properly resourced and properly protected by the statutory planning system, just like

Britain's important environmental assets and landscapes.

In turn this begs a wider question. Currently, the responsibility for World Heritage Sites is effectively split between two different government departments, one responsible for culture, the other for planning. Given the central importance of planning decisions and planning policy to their management, is there a case for moving the sites, along with heritage in general, from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to Michael Gove's newly invigorated Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities?

● **Ian Wray** is the author of *Great British Plans: Who Made Them and How They Worked* (Routledge, 2016) and a Visiting Professor at Liverpool University's Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place. He is Vice-Chair of World Heritage UK and was a Steering Group member for Liverpool World Heritage Site, 2004-2021. This article draws on his personal experience and is an entirely personal view.

Notes

- 1 *Liverpool Should Have Remained a UNESCO World Heritage Site but it Remains a Great World Heritage City!* Report of the Mayoral Task Force on World Heritage, 2021. Available at <https://liverpoolexpress.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Mayors-Task-Force-Response-to-UNESCO-Deletion-180721.docx>
- 2 Personal communication
- 3 UNESCO World Heritage Committee. Extended Forty-fourth Session. Fuzhou, China. Online meeting 16-31 Jul. 2021. <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2021/whc21-44com-7A.Add-en.pdf>
- 4 Geoffrey Howe used these words as Chancellor of the Exchequer in a letter to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In the event Mrs Thatcher backed Michael Heseltine's interventionist agenda for Liverpool, rather than the Treasury line – see 'Toxteth riots: Howe proposed 'managed decline' for city'. *BBC News*, 30 Dec. 2011. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-16355281>
- 5 R Hewison: *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*. Methuen, 1987
- 6 T Skempton: *Waterfront Timeline*. Unpublished Draft Paper. Merseyside Civic Society, 2021
- 7 G Barbato and M Turner: *Report of the Joint World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS Mission to Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City (UK), 24-25 February 2015*. World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS, 2015. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/137607>
- 8 *World Heritage Property Data*. UNESCO, May 2014. <https://whc.unesco.org/document/164467>
The initial (2004) statement can be found in the appendix in P de Figueiredo (Ed.): *Liverpool World Heritage City*. Bluecoat Press, 2014
- 9 *The World Heritage Convention*. UNESCO, 1972. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/convention/>
- 10 *Asset for the Future. A Review of the State of UK World Heritage Sites*. World Heritage UK, 2019. <https://worldheritageuk.org/resources/>
- 11 J Halliday: 'Stonehenge may be next UK site to lose world heritage status'. *The Guardian*, 23 Jul. 2021. www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jul/23/stonehenge-may-be-next-uk-site-to-lose-world-heritage-status