

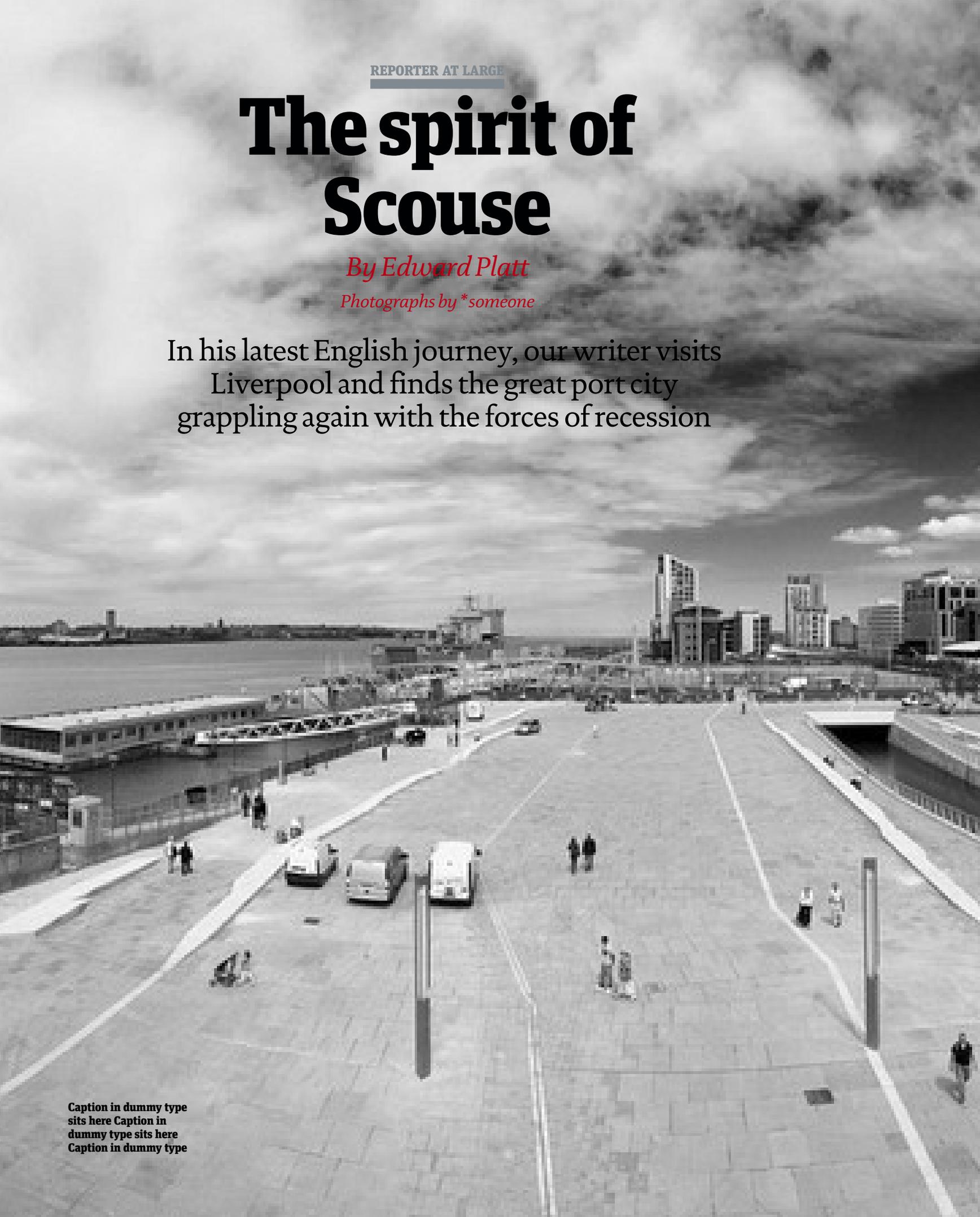
REPORTER AT LARGE

The spirit of Scouse

By Edward Platt

*Photographs by *someone*

In his latest English journey, our writer visits Liverpool and finds the great port city grappling again with the forces of recession



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Merseyside – or the small part of it that I know best – occupies a disproportionately large area in my mental map of England. I lived in many different parts of the country as a child, but my longest single stretch was spent on the Wirral Peninsula, the fat green thumb that protrudes into the Irish Sea between Liverpool and Wales, and is to Liverpool as Cheshire is to Manchester – the favoured suburb of its affluent professionals, its own home county.

We moved to a town in the peninsula's more prosperous western half in 1975 when I was seven years old, and we left in 1983. We had long-standing family connections – my mother's family owned a clock and jewellery business in Liverpool that closed in 1997 – but it was my father's work that took us back. He had been appointed to run the Liverpool office of a company called the International and Commercial Finance Corporation that had been set up by the clearing banks and the Bank of England at the end of the Second World as a kind of national investment fund. It has subsequently changed its name to 3i, dismantled its network of regional offices and mutated into a private equity firm, but in 1975 it was still pursuing its founding remit, and the north-west was in need of the kind of "risk capital" or equity investment – long-term, small-scale funding – that it provided.

If Liverpool is perceived to have suffered more than any other northern city from Britain's post-imperial decline, that is partly because it had so far to fall. "Liverpool, by its imports, supplies the country with food and corn," says one of the panels on the walls of St George's Hall, the grand neo-Grecian building at the heart of the collection of museums and public buildings that make up a kind of "civic forum" near Lime Street Station.

During the 19th century, 40 per cent of all world trade passed through Liverpool's docks, which the American novelist Herman Melville described as one of the man-made wonders of the world. "The extent and solidity of these structures, seemed equal to what I had read of the old Pyramids of Egypt," he wrote in his 1849 novel *Redburn: His First Voyage*. The trade supported a large manual workforce and many associated legal and professional trades, and the notion that Liverpool imported cotton and Manchester made it into cloth inspired the phrase "Manchester men and Liverpool gentlemen". At times, Liverpool's wealth was said to exceed London's, and its Custom House was the largest contributor to the Treasury.

As the port was Britain's gateway to the Atlantic, even those with no connection to the city were drawn to it. Millions of migrants passed through Liverpool on their way from eastern Europe to New York in the late 19th century, and it was the point of embarkation for many destinations in the British empire. When my paternal grandfather left his home town of Hull

and travelled to Brazil to run a factory in 1929, he caught the boat from Liverpool. The port sustained great hotels, such as the now-faded Adelphi, and funded great architecture: of English cities, only Bristol and London have more listed buildings than Liverpool. The trio of waterfront buildings known as the Three Graces – the Liver Building, the Port of Liverpool Building and the former headquarters of the Cunard Line – are particularly renowned.

Liverpool's prosperity was matched by its strategic significance, and during the Second World War it became the headquarters of the campaign known as the Battle of the Atlantic. My mother's father played a minor part in the "longest, largest and most complex naval battle ever fought". He spent three years as a ship's

"We were going through a genteel decline. The Tories turned it into a crash"

doctor on convoy protection in the Atlantic, and in April 1942 he took up a shore posting at the Royal Naval Hospital at Seaforth, north of Bootle. "In this filthy and overcrowded hospital we had a nice mess and I enjoyed a very busy two years," he later wrote. Most people were evacuated from the cities to the countryside, but my mother's family followed him to the second most bombed city in the country, and she was born in Blundellsands, in north Liverpool, in 1943.

The scars of the bombing are still apparent in the car parks that pock the city centre, but the postwar years inflicted longer-lasting damage: Liverpool's location had been the source of its prosperity, but as Europe displaced the Americas as Britain's most important trading partner, it became increasingly isolated. When we arrived on the Wirral in 1975, Liverpool was still engaged in its old role of "breaking bulk" – unloading ships and warehousing and distributing their contents – and it still boasted its own stock exchange, complete with trading floor on the ground floor of the office block where my father worked.

However, the Cunard Line had left its waterfront home in the 1960s and relocated to Southampton, and Canadian Pacific, the last company running transatlantic cruises out of Liverpool, had stopped operating in 1972. In the same year, a container port opened at Seaforth, where my grandfather had served in the war: the modern ships had outgrown the city's 19th-century docks and "containerisation" was making its workers redundant.

The decline of the port was temporarily offset by the arrival of manufacturers such as Ford and British Leyland. Professor Sam Davies of Liverpool John Moores University maintains that the 1950s and 1960s were the most buoyant period in Liverpool's history since the 19th century, yet once manufacturing industry

began to decline in the 1970s, the loss of the city's historical sources of wealth and employment could not be concealed. Professor Davies says that the unemployment rate in Liverpool has always generally been higher than in the rest of the country, partly because of the casual nature of dock work, but while I was growing up in the middle-class fastness of the Wirral Peninsula, it reached levels unmatched since the 1930s. A city that had never been inclined to the ordinary found itself mired in a series of extraordinary crises.

Structural changes to the British economy were largely to blame for Liverpool's plight, but many Liverpoolians criticise Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government for making things worse. Maria Eagle, the shadow secretary of state for transport and MP for the south Liverpool constituency of Garston and Halewood, articulated the widely accepted case against the Tories when I met her at Lime Street Station one evening. "The city was going through a genteel decline, but the Conservatives came in, shut down the little industry there was left, and turned it into a catastrophic crash," she told me.

There has not been a Conservative member of Liverpool City Council since 1998, and the folk memories of the Thatcher years still win votes for politicians such as Eagle. In 2010, she illustrated election leaflets with photographs of Margaret Thatcher and David Cameron beneath the slogan "Don't let the Tories wreck our city again" and was rewarded with a 5.7 per cent swing, reversing the national trend of a 6.2 per cent fall in support for Labour.

Born in 1961, Eagle grew up in Formby, a suburb ten miles north of Liverpool. I told her I found it hard to believe that a national government would seek to "crush" – her word – a city like Liverpool but she insisted that she had seen and felt it. She believed that the motive was a crude kind of political tribalism. "Liverpool represented everything they disliked – a lot of working-class people who looked out for each other, a lot of solidarity, and a great feeling of specialness that led to a pride they didn't understand and didn't believe in."

The rise of the Militant Tendency, the Trotskyist faction of the Labour Party that gained control of Liverpool Council in the early 1980s and refused to cut its spending to meet the target set in the "rate-capping Budget" of 1982, intensified the city's confrontation with the government. "They were crushing the city before Militant took over," Eagle argues. "Militant exploited the sense of hurt and resistance. They took people along with them because they were the only game in town, and there is still a minority who think, 'Well, at least they did something when there was despair around: they didn't just give in.'"

A similar ambivalence prevails towards the riots that broke out in Toxteth – "the Harlem of Europe", as the screenwriter Jimmy McGovern has called it – in 1981. Many of Liverpool's

wealthiest traders used to live in Toxteth's Georgian mansions, but by the end of the 1970s it was one of the most deprived parts of the city. John Wilson, a 50-year-old black man who teaches judo at the Caribbean community centre in Toxteth and works part-time at a hotel in the city centre, told me that most people blamed Kenneth Oxford, chief constable of Merseyside between 1976 and 1989, for inciting the violence. He said that Oxford had policed Toxteth with an "iron fist". "The community felt that the police was doing everything it could in every way to upset them."

Today, Liverpool is one of Britain's least ethnically diverse cities, but it wasn't always this way – the outward-looking nature of the port, and the city's role in the slave trade, ensured that it was home to one of the country's first multicultural and multiracial communities. "All the faces of mankind were there, wonderfully mixed," wrote J B Priestley in *English Journey*, which described his travels round the country in the autumn of 1933. Priestley visited a school in one of "Liverpool's more picturesque and exotic slums, populated by the human flotsam and jetsam of a great old sea-port". He recognised that he had seen "a glimpse of the world" of the future, in which "the various root races... may have largely intermarried and interbred", and he resisted those who argued that those of mixed race were "no good".

John Wilson grew up in a marginally more enlightened age, though he felt that his white foster parents' determination to ignore his ethnicity was not necessarily a good thing. "My

Netherley was a "byword for poverty, crime, drug addiction, squalor"

foster parents used to say to me, 'We just see you as you, John: your colour doesn't matter.' But if you're getting racial abuse, then it does matter." Wilson felt he needed to educate himself about his background and he began a black studies course. On Friday 3 July 1981, he was taking a seminar about the migrants who came to Britain in the 1960s and he went outside at the end of day and found that Toxteth had become "a war zone". A disabled man was killed when he was run over by a police van; another man was severely injured when the police drove a van into the crowd. A policeman was speared in the head with a six-foot iron railing, and CS gas was used on the British mainland for the first time. I remember driving through Toxteth at the age of 13 and seeing rows of boarded-up shops and fire-blackened buildings.

Kevin Sampson, the writer whose argot-thickened novels have become one of my main guides to life on Merseyside, remembers Toxteth as a place that was anything but blighted. He used to visit the area's unlicensed bars and speakeasies. "It was very vibrant – there was



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always a lot of people on the street, a lot of cafés, a lot of street life, a lot of unlicensed premises," he said when I met him at a café in the ferry terminal at Hamilton Square, Birkenhead. Because he was born in Liverpool and grew up on the Wirral, where he still lives, Sampson claims "dual nationality", and it seemed appropriate to meet here on the peninsula, at a spot with a view across the river to the famed skyline on the far side.

When news of the riots began to spread, Sampson went down to Toxteth and got as close as he could to the centre of the trouble. "I make no bones in admitting that I was there as a tourist, but it was incredibly exciting from a voyeuristic point of view. There was girls involved, but it was mainly lads, and not all Afro-Caribbean – there were loads of white lads there as well. It was an amazing opportunity for revenge on the police, for what they had been experiencing for so long."

My father has mixed memories of working in Liverpool: he says that the city had a vibrant business life and a good proportion of the smaller companies that were 3i's stock-in-trade, but thanks to its prosperous past, the region was "overbanked", and so attractive proposals were heavily pursued. More importantly, the changes to the port had stripped Liverpool of an essential catalyst for growth: by the time we left Merseyside in the early 1980s its prospects had not improved. The failure of

the postwar programme of urban renewal was also becoming apparent. Between 1964 and 1979, more than 78,000 buildings in the inner-city area – 36 per cent of the city's total housing stock – were demolished in a grand programme of "slum clearance", and their inhabitants decanted into suburban estates that, ironically, were destined to become slums.

The writer Niall Griffiths was born in Toxteth in 1966, but moved to a new estate called Woodlands in Netherley, in the north-east of Liverpool, when he was three years old: he has written that the high-rise blocks were "declared a mistake even before they were completed" and that "within the space of a decade, four out of five tenants desperately wanted to leave". In the 1980s, Netherley was to become a "byword in the city for poverty, crime, drug addiction and squalor".

Even St George's Hall, the imposing building that Pevsner described as "the freest neo-Grecian building in England and one of the finest in the world", was affected by the city's decline: it had been designed to house both law courts and concert halls from the time of its opening in 1854, but after 1984, when the courts closed, it fell into disrepair. Liverpool Football Club, another of the city's great institutions, whose decade-long dominance of the English and European game had provided it with one of its few successes, was blighted by the tragedies of the Heysel and Hillsborough Stadium disasters of 1985 and 1989. And when, in 1993, a two-year-old child named Jamie Bulger was abducted from a shopping centre in Bootle ►

► and murdered by two boys, both of whom were only ten years old, the ensuing debates seemed to implicate the city of Liverpool itself.

Yet, despite the impression that the city was disintegrating, it had begun to remake itself, partly through the leadership of the only Tory guaranteed a warm welcome in Liverpool, Michael Heseltine. As environment secretary in the years after the Toxteth riots, Heseltine visited Liverpool so often that he became known as the minister for Merseyside. He was granted the freedom of the city in March this year. The recent publication of cabinet papers dating back to 1981 showed how Thatcher's chancellor Geoffrey Howe urged his colleagues to consider the option of allowing Liverpool to lapse into "managed decline", but Heseltine has insisted there was never any prospect of the government abandoning the city. "I simply wouldn't countenance that you could say that one of England's great cities, a world city, was going into managed decline," he has said.

Heseltine is often praised for resisting the free-market dogma that drove the Thatcherite project and arguing for government intervention to revitalise Liverpool, but there remain doubts about the enduring value of some of the projects he oversaw. The riverside site of the International Garden Festival of 1984, which drew millions of tourists to Liverpool, is still derelict 28 years later, though the renovation of the Albert Dock, which had been unused since the container port had opened upriver, has proved more durable.

The idea of demolishing the dock and building a multi-storey car park in its place had been proposed, but the Merseyside Development Corporation, which Heseltine was instrumental in setting up, led the efforts to preserve it. The first phase of its redevelopment was completed in 1984. In 1988, the Tate Gallery opened a branch in one of the dock's warehouses, reviving its benefactor's connection with the city. Henry Tate had begun his working life with a chain of grocery shops in Liverpool, and in 1872 he opened a sugar refinery on Love Lane in Vauxhall, north of the city centre. The closure of the refinery on 22 April 1981 was another point on the city's downward curve. The return of the Tate brand to the city seven years later in the form of a gallery marked Liverpool's transition to a tourist destination trading on its industrial, cultural and maritime history.

The subsequent addition of two further museums devoted to Liverpool's past, one exploiting the global fame of the city's most treasured export, the Beatles, and the other addressing slavery, its most shameful association, confirms Liverpool's profound engagement with its history and identity. "WE'RE NOT ENGLISH WE ARE SCOUSE", proclaims a banner often displayed at Liverpool matches. In keeping with the local maritime traditions, the city looked outwards, towards

Ireland, from where many of its inhabitants came in the 19th century, and America, and disregarded its English hinterland, home of the derided "woollybacks", or "wools".

"Liverpool's a strange place," said a local entrepreneur called Steve Bramwell when I met him at his home in a village in south Wirral, near Port Sunlight. "You don't hear Liverpool accents past Liverpool itself, and people from Liverpool believe that Liverpool is the centre of the universe." Bramwell recognised the value in this independent cast of mind. He began working for Morgan Stanley in 1985, the year before the deregulation of the financial markets known as "Big Bang", and ten years later he set up a business providing outsourced IT services to City banks. He and his business partner told clients that they could run an IT department outside London at a fraction of the cost and

The city's dependence on its past conflicts with its desire to remake itself

assured them that newly trained staff wouldn't decamp to London in search of higher wages. Bramwell was born in Bolton, Lancashire, but he dismissed nearby Manchester because of its "transient" population. Liverpool was the perfect location. "Scousers are very Liverpool-centric, and we knew they wouldn't move away even if we gave them jobs that were very London-centric." When he sold up in 2010, his business had 700 employees dotted across the world in China, the Philippines, Singapore and the US, but its roots were still in the regions of the UK. He felt that only Newcastle matched Liverpool's ability to retain home-town staff.

Yet the city has changed greatly in the 15 years since he arrived. A convention centre and residential developments have been built on the river south of the Albert Dock and areas beyond the waterfront brought back into use. Kevin Sampson used to be manager of a cult Liverpool band, the Farm, and the band's label, Produce Records, was one of the first to rent space in the city-centre area that has become known as RopeWalks. Sampson acknowledged the widespread scepticism that attaches to attempts at "regeneration" but he maintains that RopeWalks was "one of those that worked". The developers' aim of attracting young people and students was helped by the success of the city's "superclub" Cream, which opened in 1992.

In 2004, Unesco designated Liverpool a world heritage site, calling it "the supreme example of a commercial port at the time of Britain's greatest global influence". St George's Hall reopened in 2007 after extensive renovations and in 2008 Liverpool was the European Capital of Culture. Yet the city's dependence on its past has begun to conflict with its desire to remake itself, and the cherished waterfront has become the scene of the fiercest confrontations. Will

Alsop's plan to build a "fourth grace" has been abandoned, but another museum – the Museum of Liverpool – has opened nearby, and the redevelopment of the waterfront is proceeding through the largest planning application in Britain. Liverpool Waters and Wirral Waters – collectively, "Peel Waters" – has been proposed by Peel Holdings, the property developer that owns the Trafford Centre in Manchester and MediaCity in Salford as well as Liverpool's port and airport. The intention is to turn the derelict docks on both banks of the Mersey into a riverine city of steel and glass as imposing as Shanghai or Manhattan. Peel says Liverpool Waters will generate 50,000 permanent jobs and contribute £2bn a year to the local economy, but Unesco has responded by placing the city's world heritage status under review. Critics have told the council that it must change course.

Joe Anderson, who was leader of the City Council before he became Liverpool's first directly elected mayor on 4 May, insists that Peel has done enough to satisfy the heritage lobby. "We're starting to turn the tide," says Anderson, who joined the merchant navy at the age of 17 and began his political career as a convenor in the National Union of Seamen. "We've still got real issues in the outlying areas, but Liverpool is changing, and I believe that its best years lie ahead."

We met in November, on the day that the scheme for Liverpool Waters was approved by the planning committee. Later, after I left his office, I walked down Dale Street and caught a ferry across the Mersey. The passenger deck of a boat that calls itself the most famous in the world and serenades its passengers with piped renditions of Gerry Marsden's song seemed a good place from which to assess the Peel plan. As the boat pulled away, there was an unimpeded view of the area where Peel's greatest ambitions lie.

Anderson claims that the expanse of derelict docks and warehouses stretching between Pier Head and Seaforth has the same potential as Canary Wharf, yet it is hard to see where the shops and businesses to fill the development will come from. It seemed to me that Peel was proposing a boom town without a boom, hoping to inspire economic revival by constructing offices and shops for which there is no demand. Yet it wasn't until I turned away from Liverpool's dramatic skyline, and the dynamic history it encodes, to contemplate the approaching shores of the Wirral that the hollowness of the vision was fully exposed.

From the water, the low mass of buildings on the Wirral is broken only by the ventilation towers for the Mersey tunnels, yet Peel's artists have sketched towers rising from the docks like angled beams of light while yachts and powerboats circle in the water below. Since permission for the scheme was granted, progress has been slow. Peel has converted two grain warehouses – remnants of the day when Merseyside



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was the largest flour milling centre in Europe – into a block of flats called East Float, and begun work on an international trade centre (ITC), designed to give companies from emerging economies access to European markets. The ITC is scheduled to be completed by 2013 and is supposed to generate 2,000 jobs. Phil Davies, the new leader of Wirral Council, concedes that there is “very little rigour” behind the projected figures, but maintains that Peel has a good record of delivering on its schemes.

The Port of Liverpool remains the seventh-busiest in the country and the busiest in the north-west, and its owner, the ubiquitous Peel Holdings, is planning to build a second facility that will almost double its capacity. Yet the container traffic bypasses the city without generating much wealth or employment, and there are concerns about the depth and durability of its recent recovery. Maria Eagle has begun to witness the effects of the recession in her constituency: Garston and Halewood incorporates Woolton, one of Liverpool’s richest suburbs, as well as one of its last remaining industrial concerns in the form of the Jaguar Land Rover car plant at Halewood. However, it is also home to Speke, one of England’s most deprived boroughs, where the consequences of the benefit changes are just being felt.

“People whose heads are only just above water are being pushed underwater,” Eagle says. Speke has a food bank, but not a bank.

Other parts of Liverpool are equally deprived, partly because of the way the city centre has been revitalised. “The centre of town is the

focus for everything and everywhere else has suffered,” says Professor Davies. “Some parts of the north end of Liverpool, around Anfield and Everton, are worse than ever: there’s no work; a lot of housing has been demolished and not replaced . . . There are parts of Liverpool where, if you don’t know the area, you would be foolish to walk into a pub.”

Everyone I spoke to maintains that the city is more self-reliant than it was 30 years ago, yet it remains heavily dependent on a public sector facing severe cuts. Gill Bainbridge, the director of the Merseyside Youth Association, who came here in the 1980s from her home town of Carlisle because she was seduced by Liverpool’s image as a “rebel city”, said that it was being targeted again by a government that was Con-

“I reckon we should do the riots again – so everyone knows we want change”

servative in all but name. She said that the cuts would affect Liverpool disproportionately because the comprehensive spending review of 2010 did not take into account the Indices of Deprivation as it had always done before, and she was concerned that the knock-on effect on the tourist and service industries would send the city into a downward spiral, like the one it had undergone in the 1980s.

The riots that broke out in London on 6 August last year and reached Liverpool three days

later also evoke memories of the most troubled decade in Liverpool’s history. They were of such a limited extent that youth workers were able to go round identifying kids and sending them home, but they showed how alienated many of the city’s young people feel.

“I thought it was good,” said a 19-year-old black man called Caleb, whom I met at the Merseyside Youth Association. He complained of police harassment and of not being able to go to parts of the city without being attacked by members of rival gangs. Caleb was suffering from alopecia, and had a host of other frustrations that he “couldn’t put into words”. The riots were the best way of expressing them. “I know it sounds bad but I reckon we should do it again, so that everyone knows we want change, we want jobs.”

Given the precariousness of its position, many people have questioned the value of Liverpool ONE, the largest open-air shopping centre in the UK, which opened in 2008 on 42 acres of underused land in the city centre. Its role has also been questioned because it constitutes a kind of semi-private realm, owned and managed by the Grosvenor Estate.

To the west, the shopping centre’s unroofed canyons run down to the waterfront and the Albert Dock, and to the north it has absorbed the streets where my mother’s family business made and sold watches for more than 150 years. I walked down Paradise and Church Streets looking for the various premises that Tho^s Russell & Son used to own, but they had changed so much that I couldn’t decide where they had been. The business had left its old home on Church Street in the early 1980s and it closed permanently in 1997, severing my last connection with the city.

Anderson had told me that I was a “plastic Scouser”, which is the term that real Scousers use to describe people from the Wirral. Given that I left when I was 15 and had rarely been back, I’d never even thought of myself as that, but I hadn’t lost my affection for Liverpool. I was encouraged by Maria Eagle’s remark that the city’s sense of exceptionalism was not exclusive: as long as you accepted that it was “brilliant” it will accept you. If that is so, I will always be guaranteed a warm welcome, I thought as I made my way back towards St George’s Hall and Lime Street Station, yet I know that Liverpool needs more than good will or faith in its unique identity if it is to consolidate its recovery, let alone reverse the long-term decline that began before we arrived on the Wirral. ●

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Read more of his English journeys at: newstatesman.com/writers/edward_platt