

**Memorandum by the Merseyside Civic Society
Submitted to the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee Inquiry**

Protecting, Preserving and Making Accessible Our Nation's Heritage

[This version 31 March 2006]

Introduction

Merseyside Civic Society is grateful for the opportunity to give evidence to the Select Committee, prompted, in part, by the interest shown in the matters raised directly with members of the Committee in the course of their visit to Liverpool on 20 March 2006.

Merseyside Civic Society (MCS) is a charitable body with aims that include the protection and preservation of the architectural and built-form heritage and public amenity features of the Merseyside area, the promotion of high standards of town planning, architecture and design within the area and the safeguarding of areas and structures of historic and/or public interest.

For many years MCS has offered constructive comment and opinion on schemes and policies that have been directly related to, or appear to threaten, the city's enviably large and varied stock of heritage architectural structures and related spaces.

We recognise that the Committee's primary concern is with identifying issues that should be given a degree of priority in the forthcoming Heritage White Paper, together with particular matters to which the terms of reference of the inquiry refer. To this end, this memorandum draws on, or refers to, material assembled for the above 'lobbying' purposes in an attempt to highlight those heritage-related issues that are of more direct general concern to the Committee. Where relevant, active web links are provided in the text to enable access to be gained to the original, more substantial source material, most of which is linked directly to the MCS website [<http://merseysidecivicsociety.org.uk>].

The issues on which we have chosen to focus are grouped under the following headings:

A) Undervalued Heritage

Concerns about the architectural heritage and resident insensitive, cavalier manner in which the local New Heartlands Pathfinder has chosen to pursue many of the otherwise entirely laudable aims of the Housing Market Renewal Initiative.

B) Neglected Heritage

Concerns about the depressingly lengthy list of failures of local authorities on Merseyside to address satisfactorily a wide range of heritage stewardship matters, despite public commitments to protect and enhance the area's heritage assets.

C) Appreciated and Celebrated Heritage

The welcome initiatives to promote appreciation of heritage matters, best exemplified by the efforts of the Civic Trust (now supported by the Liverpool Culture Company) to widen the impact of the Heritage Open Day programme. These we couple here with the commendable initiative of the Liverpool Heritage Forum (led by Andrew Pearce) in seeking to galvanise the efforts of many disparate interest groups engaged in heritage-related activities, ahead of the celebration of Liverpool's 800th birthday in 2007 and the city's status as the European Capital of Culture in 2008.

A) Undervalued Heritage

1. MCS has made representations to voice concerns about the direction taken by government policy and, more especially, the way in which policy is implemented in the name of Housing Market Renewal as a vehicle for addressing significant problems facing the future of the housing stock (see, for example, submissions to: the ODPM Housing, Planning, Local Government and Regions Committee on Empty Homes and Low-demand Pathfinders, January 2005 [<http://www.liv.ac.uk/mcs/lfs/consultations/odpmhmrplet0105.pdf>]; the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, October 2005 [<http://www.liv.ac.uk/mcs/lfs/consultations/paclet1005.pdf>] and the ODPM Select Committee on Affordable Housing, November 2005 [<http://www.liv.ac.uk/mcs/lfs/consultations/odpmaffhlet0511.pdf>] The main lines of argument are featured in an article by Peter Brown that was published in the April 2005 issue of the Civic Trust magazine Focus [<http://www.civictrust.org.uk/news/enews/members/may05/Page%204-5.pdf>].
2. The principal target of our criticism has been the approach adopted by the Pathfinders, as is well exemplified by New Heartlands, in demonstrating a clear presumption in favour of large-scale clearance and new build, rather than viewing demolition as a measure of last resort, only turned to when all other avenues of regenerative refurbishment have been fully explored. This is especially critical in areas of otherwise attractive terraced properties, located in tree-lined streets of considerable character, such as in most parts of Liverpool's Welsh Streets area.
3. Such areas display heritage qualities of streetscape and the specific conditions to support a sought-after 'street-based' lifestyle that are massively undervalued by those bent on sweeping away areas that have functioned so well for generations. Other threatened areas, such as that affected by the Edge Lane West scheme, display a coherent and attractive Victorian townscape, and a setting for several listed buildings, that is to be replaced by bland and nondescript architecture of little local resonance, prompting the local MP and Government Minister, Jane Kennedy, to describe the plans as "social cleansing" and "municipal vandalism".
4. In many such areas, so-called 'market failure' can be seen to be attributable, in no small measure, to the high proportion of long-neglected properties, in the ownership of the local authority and/or registered social landlords, that have been intentionally withheld from the market in anticipation of future receipt of substantial grant aid from the clearance/new build programme – despite clear evidence of a significant revival in the local property market.
5. A not untypical example is that of an owner-occupier on Venmore Street in Anfield who recently agreed to a compulsory purchase sale of his substantially improved 4 bed terraced town-house to the Pathfinder/Council for £87,500, just over two years after buying it, in a derelict condition, for £25,000. No doubt the house would have been worth rather more if the City Council were not committed to demolishing it, and much of the district around it.
6. Particularly frustrating, in these depressing circumstances, is the unenviable position of the owner occupiers located in the areas threatened with clearance. Evident shortcomings in the processes of consultation and community engagement have failed to capitalise on the commitment to the area and abundant goodwill of

those owning a stake in an area's future that should be more effectively tapped in achieving the truly sustainable conditions in which a local community can prosper.

B) Neglected Heritage

7. MCS has long sought to promote the adoption of a more pro-active approach to the stewardship of the area's inherited stock of buildings of high architectural quality and, especially, its unrivalled scale of provision of fine Victorian public parks. We have been disappointed by the poorly developed appreciation of the need for a serious commitment to a heritage strategy for the city of Liverpool. We believe that such a strategy should embrace the protection and enhancement of the qualities of place and space that have made Liverpool so distinctive and historically unique – throughout the city, not just in those areas that enjoy existing statutory protections.
8. This effort is, in part, reflected in the brief and activities of the Society's Parks and Suburban Heritage Committee, a significant product of which was, in February 2005, an 11-page submission, to Chris Blandford Associates, of comments and suggestions in response to a consultation exercise on a proposed 'heritage strategy' for the city [see <http://www.liv.ac.uk/mcs/lfs/consultations/blandfordlet0205.pdf>]. This submission advocated the production of a Historic Environment Masterplan, as a unified spatial heritage development strategy, to be embedded within the Local Development Framework. We believe that this pro-active approach could be usefully pursued more widely, in other towns and cities, where heritage assets are neglected or under-used.
9. The submission identified a number of neglected elements of Liverpool's urban form that, with imagination, could be pressed into making a contribution to the area's regeneration. These included the Great Streets that define the structure of the city, the Great Parks (Botanic Gardens, Princes, Newsham, Stanley and Sefton Parks), many landmark buildings, suburban villas and park estates, plus village centres and their associated churches and other key buildings, the cores of settlements that have been absorbed into greater Liverpool over a long period. What is required, in many of these cases, is not only continuing care and management, but also clear statements of principles (written/visual/statistical) relating to 'making places', i.e. establishing a future for the past, while allowing for change, adaptation and development, for relatively small-scale environments.
10. It is regrettable that the impression has been gained that the above exercise in consultation merely served as a means of prioritising bids for Heritage Lottery Fund allocations, rather than providing a basis for establishing a coherent strategy directed at maximising the benefit to be derived from the nurturing, and positive stewardship, of the area's inheritance of architectural and public space assets.
11. We also note with frustration the inadequacy of the current Spot Listing machinery, now administered by English Heritage, as a measure of last resort in efforts to retain threatened buildings, the contribution of which to the maintenance of an attractive local street-scene or townscape seems to be undervalued in making judgments. We cite, as an example, our efforts to prevent the demolition of the old Post Office building in Kensington where the grounds for rejection of listing were largely based on 'loss of internal structural detail', without adequate attention being given to the enormous value of the presence of the building and its attractive external detailing. It seemed that, in this case, a featureless, 'bitmac-filled gap' between buildings was the preferred fate of this superb example of Victorian architectural endeavour.

12. We are further depressed by the statement by English Heritage's chief executive Simon Thurley to the effect that EH "has now got no problem with housing market renewal" as "almost no buildings of national importance are under threat" (!!).

C) Appreciated and Celebrated Heritage

13. We are pleased to note the existence of commendable initiatives to promote appreciation of heritage matters that have been promoted by the Civic Trust, including the Green Flag Award scheme and the Heritage Open Day programme. We also welcome the way in which the potential of the latter programme has been recognised by those involved in the preparations for celebration of both Liverpool's 800th birthday in 2007 and the city's status as European Capital of Culture in 2008.
14. Beyond that year, incidentally, we note the celebration of the centenaries of the establishment of the University of Liverpool's Department of Civic Design, as the first university department devoted to the study of town and regional planning – the world's first planning school, in 2009, and the following year, the publication of the world's first quality journal to focus on the subject of town planning, *The Town Planning Review*, which continues to be edited in the Department of Civic Design.
15. The Liverpool Culture Company's Heritage and Environment Manager, Eileen Willshaw, has worked closely with Civic Trust staff to initiate plans to widen the impact of the Heritage Open Day programme during the 2007/2008 celebrations, including, eventually, the devotion of a whole month, rather than a week, to Open Day activities and a scheme to encourage earlier interest in heritage issues among school children, through the direct involvement of teachers, during the summer term.
16. We also recognise the enormous value of the of the Liverpool Heritage Forum (led by Andrew Pearce) [see: <http://www.liverpool-heritage.org.uk/>] in seeking to galvanise the efforts of many disparate interest groups engaged in a broad range of cultural and heritage-related activities, ahead of the above celebrations. It must be said that this welcome initiative was prompted, in part, by the failure of the principal organisers of the celebrations to engage with the diverse range of groups that were eager to make a contribution but who were not offered any obvious means of communicating or delivering that desire. The Forum is providing what seems to have proved to be an effective means of channelling and tapping that under-valued reserve of knowledge, expertise and commitment that is essential to the effective passing on, to future generations, of awareness and appreciation of heritage issues.
17. Finally, we are pleased that the unique character of Liverpool's architectural heritage has been recognised through the inscription of the World Heritage Site. However, we are also concerned that there is a danger that the protection that this status affords the site and its buffer zone is interpreted as a block on all future development within its boundaries. There is a critical need to ensure that whatever development is permitted is of sufficient architectural quality and that design details and materials are of an adequately demanding specification to warrant a place in this valued location. We believe that the area must be allowed to evolve and incorporate good examples of architecture, urban design and cityscape that have a place in a dynamic 21st century city. It should not be allowed to become fossilised, as a snapshot of the relics of bygone ages in which the city benefited from the construction of often unplanned assemblages of individually iconic buildings – the fruits of world trading success, entrepreneurial enterprise and magnificent demonstrations of corporate and municipal pride.