

## A new painting of Liverpool: *A Prospect of Liverpool about 1725*

Anthony Tibbles

This previously un-recorded view of Liverpool of about 1725 (Figure 1) has been acquired by National Museums Liverpool for the collections of the Merseyside Maritime Museum.<sup>1</sup> Although almost contemporaneous with the familiar engraving, *The South West Prospect of Liverpoole*, by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck (published in 1728), this view is of particular interest for highlighting, and probably being the earliest representation of, the first dock and the newly-built Custom House.

As a representation of Liverpool at the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century it lies between the so-called Peter's painting of the town of about 1680, also in the Maritime Museum, and the two water-colours by Michael Angelo Rooker, *Liverpool from the Bowling Green* and *The South-east Prospect of Liverpool from Seacombe Boat-house*, both of 1769, in the Walker Art Gallery.<sup>2</sup>

The artist has adopted an elevated view from the Mersey at the southern end of the town looking north towards the mouth of the river. This places the area around the dock in the right foreground and the town is then depicted across the centre of the canvas receding into the distance. To the left the Cheshire coast of the Wirral peninsula with the entrance to Wallasey Pool is just visible. Various vessels are shown on the river, including a group of three in

<sup>1</sup> Accession number MMM.2001.8, purchased from The Boydell Galleries, December 2000.

<sup>2</sup> For the Peter's painting see Anthony Tibbles, *Illustrated catalogue of marine paintings, Merseyside Maritime Museum* (Liverpool, 1999), pp. 196–98. For the Rooker views see *Annual report and bulletin of the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool*, 5 (1974–75), pp. 42–43.

the centre foreground firing a salute. In the left foreground the artist has added a tree at the water's edge. This is clearly an artistic device intended to frame the left-hand side and provide a sense of balance to the composition.

The painting, probably in oil, is on a panel support of four horizontal pine boards of unequal size. It measures 66.5cm high by 147.8cm wide (26.2in x 58.2in).<sup>3</sup> The use of pine rather than oak is unusual at this period though by no means unknown. The choice is perhaps less surprising when one considers Liverpool's role as a port and her already established connections with the Baltic and Northern Europe.

The painting is not signed or marked and identification of the artist has not been established. The composition is relatively sophisticated and suggests that it was executed by someone who was familiar with this type of topographical work. There were a number of mainly itinerant artists in the early eighteenth century producing such views, particularly of country houses. Several of them are known to have been working in the north-west of England at this time. Although the more successful such as Peter Tillmans, who in fact painted two views of Knowsley for the Earl of Derby at some time before 1729, are known, many were of journeyman status and remain elusively unrecorded. Whilst the quality and execution of *A Prospect* makes it unlikely that it was produced by an artist of Tillmans' ability, the probability that one of these journeyman artists was responsible must be quite high.<sup>4</sup>

It has not been possible to trace the history of the painting before it entered the London art market in the late 1970s when it was no longer identified or recognised as a view of Liverpool.<sup>5</sup> It therefore, remains a matter of speculation as to who commissioned it and for what purpose. The rough and unfinished nature of the reverse of the panel has led to the suggestion that this painting was originally

<sup>3</sup> Condition report, undertaken by Nicola Christie of National Museums Liverpool's Conservation Division, prior to acquisition.

<sup>4</sup> For Tillmans and the tradition of country house and estate paintings, see John Harris, *The artist and the country house* (London, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> The re-identification of the painting was made by Paul Breen of The Boydell Galleries. It may possibly have belonged to Liverpool antiquarian and historian Robert Gladstone as there is a tantalising entry in the catalogue of the Liverpool *Shipping Week* in 1931 which reads 'No. 436 Oil Painting of Liverpool c.1720, with ships in foreground. Robert Gladstone Esq.'.

intended as a decorative feature, perhaps set in panelling or over a fireplace. The panels originally had chamfered edges, removed during an earlier restoration, and this would potentially lend support to this idea.<sup>6</sup> One might imagine that it was painted for someone associated with the town, perhaps someone who was no longer actually living there.<sup>7</sup>

The general layout of the town is very similar to the Bucks' engraving, though this latter adopts a different viewpoint, looking directly at the town from the Cheshire side with the river in the foreground. It also corresponds very closely with J. Chadwick's map of Liverpool published in 1725.<sup>8</sup>

The principal feature highlighted in the view is the area situated around the dock. This not only represented a substantial new addition to the town but was the key element in terms of the commercial development and enhancement of the port. It is thus not surprising that the artist should chose to present this area prominently. Building of the dock itself was begun in 1710 and completed in 1716, although the first ships began using it in 1715. The adjoining dry or graving dock was opened in 1718. The layout of the dock as shown here does not entirely conform with the Bucks' engraving or the Chadwick map. They both show the dock as a rectangular space, entered by a short channel from the river with gates at either end, and an entrance basin. Whilst both sets of gates are depicted here, there seem to be ships shown in a recessed area to the right between the two gates. This may partly be as a result of the perspective adopted but it does appear to represent an unexplained inconsistency with other evidence. The graving dock, immediately to the left of the entrance, also appears more substantial than shown by the Bucks and Chadwick, though one suspects it is more accurate. Certainly it is only shown schematically in the Bucks' engraving. The artist also shows the graving dock as tidal. This may not be as inconsistent with its use as would at first appear because it may be that a temporary barrier was built across the entrance. There is some evidence that sections of dock walls were temporarily removed for

<sup>6</sup> Information from Paul Breen.

<sup>7</sup> One possible candidate is Sylvester Moorcroft, a former bailiff, mayor and alderman, who was responsible for building the Custom House. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed survey of Liverpool in the early eighteenth century see Susan Nicholson, ed., *The changing face of Liverpool, 1207–1727* (Liverpool, 1981).

operational purposes at this early period and this practice could have applied to the graving dock.<sup>9</sup>

At the head of the dock, the newly-built Custom House is depicted. The former Custom House had been located at the bottom of Water Street near the centre of the town and its relatively long distance from the new dock had led to some operational problems. A new Custom House adjoining the dock was, therefore, proposed and in 1719 plans were laid before the Commissioners. Building work began in 1721 and was completed the following year. It was a brick building with two wings and an arched entrance arcade in the centre. Its appearance in the painting corresponds with the known details and with a small line drawing, which is included on the Chadwick map.<sup>10</sup>

Other significant features include the wooden jetty which protrudes into the river and the group of buildings at the southern end of the dock entrance. The largest of these buildings appears to be an inn as there is a sign with the image of a ship hanging from the left-hand corner—presumably the Ship Inn. In the distance behind these buildings a trail of smoke probably indicates the glass house opened by Josiah Poole in 1715.<sup>11</sup>

On the other side of the dock area, the main part of the town stretches north. The most prominent feature is the larger than life flag flying over the Town Hall and Exchange, almost in the centre of the canvas. Further north along the waterfront, the large square building is the Tower on the corner of Water Street. This was one of the oldest buildings in the town and certainly one of the most substantial. The view of the waterfront is completed with the parish church of St Nicholas. This had recently been extended with an outer aisle in 1718 but the detail of the building itself cannot be seen here.

One interesting detail is on the area of open ground on the shore just beyond the dry dock, where the stern and hull of a vessel under construction are clearly visible. Similar signs of shipbuilding can be seen at two or three points along the shore in the Bucks' engraving. On the higher ground behind the town, a number of windmills are shown. These were a regular feature of views of Liverpool until the

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of the building of the dock, see Nancy Ritchie-Noakes, *Liverpool's historic waterfront* (London, 1984), pp. 19–22.

<sup>10</sup> E. H. Rideout, *The Custom House, Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1928).

<sup>11</sup> Nicholson, *The changing face of Liverpool*, p. 39.



FIGURE 1. *A Prospect of Liverpool about 1725*  
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early nineteenth century when rapid expansion saw this whole area disappear under housing and other development.

A number of vessels can be seen in the river. Whilst they are all flying colourful flags and pennants, and the group of three in the foreground are firing a salute, it seems unlikely that there is any particular significance to this. It helps to make a more interesting picture but firing salutes was a fairly common occurrence at this period. They are mainly vessels which were typically employed in the deep-sea trades across the Atlantic and also to Ireland and Europe. Two smaller local river craft can be seen close to the waterfront.

A date of about 1725 has been proposed for this view. As has been noted above, the Custom House was not completed until 1722 and the design was not established before 1719. This suggests that the painting was completed after about 1720. Significantly, the artist has not included St George's Church, built on the site of the former Castle a short distance north of the dry dock and a major landmark on the skyline. The church was completed in 1734, though building work had begun in 1726 and the design was sufficiently well-known for the Buck brothers to include it in their engraving, published in 1728. It, therefore, seems likely that the *Prospect* artist was unaware of the plans for the church and suggests that the painting pre-dates 1726. As confirmation it is worth noting that area around the entrance to the dock changed substantial after 1737 when a new Dock Act provided for enlargement of the entrance basin, the building of a permanent pier and a new wet dock.<sup>12</sup> A further general indication is the costume of the people shown on the jetty, which has been broadly dated to the period 1710 to 1740.<sup>13</sup>

Technical examination of the painting also confirms that *A Prospect* could date from the 1720s, though the lack of ageing to the paint layer is unusual and it has been suggested that substantial restoration has taken place on more than one occasion.<sup>14</sup> However, the visual image seems entirely consistent with the suggested date of about 1725. There seems no reason to doubt that *A Prospect of Liverpool* is a significant discovery and an important addition to the small group of pre-nineteenth views of the port and town.

<sup>12</sup> Ritchie-Noakes, *Liverpool's historic waterfront*, pp. 21, 23.

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Anthea Jarvis, Keeper of Costume at Platt Hall, Manchester for this observation.

<sup>14</sup> See Christie, Condition report.

