

WHO SAVED THE MERSEY?

The clean up of the River Mersey is one of Britain's environmental triumphs. How did it happen?



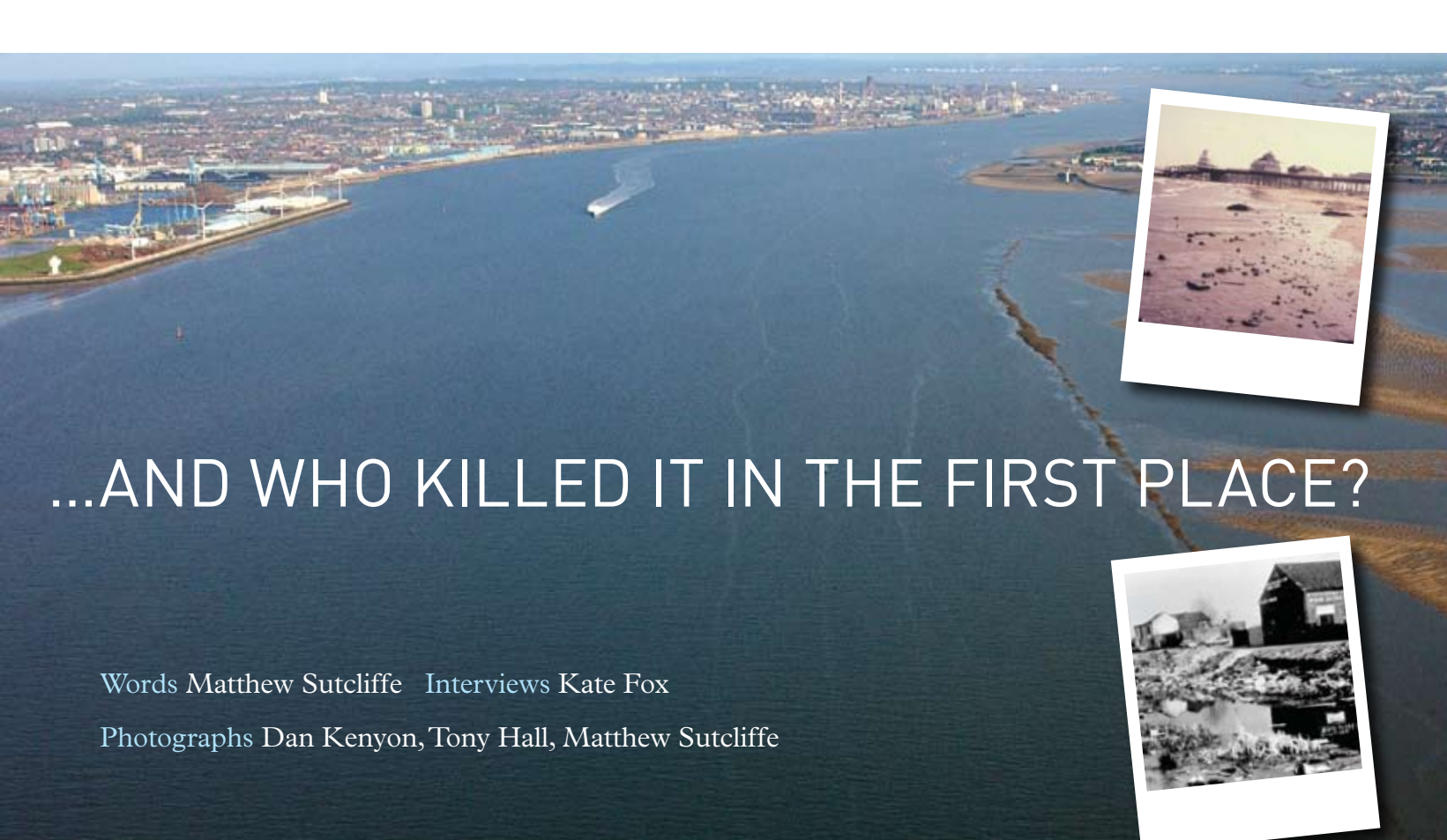
CHRIS CLEAVER, CANOE ENGLAND
"I FIRST CANOED ON THE MERSEY [NEAR STOCKPORT] FIFTEEN YEARS AGO. THE RIVER WAS RUNNING QUITE HIGH, AND THERE WAS LOTS OF DEBRIS FLOATING ALONG. WE WERE ACCOMPANIED FOR PART OF THE TRIP BY A COW'S HEAD, WHICH MUST HAVE BEEN THROWN OVER FROM AN ABATTOIR. I FELL IN, AND WAS SICK THE NEXT DAY."

FACTS AND FOLKLORE

The Mersey drains an area of 4,680 square km, from the Irish Sea to the Pennines, taking in all of Merseyside and Greater Manchester, most of Cheshire and parts of Lancashire and the High Peak District.

FACTS AND FOLKLORE

The Mersey was the ancient boundary between the Saxon kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria – the name Mersey originates from the Old English 'maere', meaning boundary.



...AND WHO KILLED IT IN THE FIRST PLACE?

Words Matthew Sutcliffe Interviews Kate Fox

Photographs Dan Kenyon, Tony Hall, Matthew Sutcliffe

When the idea of cleaning up Britain's filthiest river was first seriously suggested in 1974, the Liverpool Daily Post commented:

"Most dangerous of all the confused thinking is the idea that environmental interests cannot be challenged. It will cost more than £100,000,000 to clean up the Mersey, yet no one dare ask is it worth it.

"The cost will increase before the clean up project starts, if ever; £100,000,000 to bring back salmon to Runcorn Bridge and let a few eccentrics swim in the river...

"Every politician recognises the difficulty of raising the money, but to say it isn't worth it would be political suicide, a latter-day heresy."

Just eight weeks earlier, a young Dr Peter Jones had begun work at North West Water, which was responsible for keeping the region's taps running and toilets flushing. Today, Jones is the world's leading expert on the state of the Mersey. For over three decades he has studied, researched, written about and indeed sailed on the Mersey. Few people have been more amazed by the remarkable story of the river's 25 year clean up.

"When I joined North West Water in 1974 the rivers in the Northwest were gruesome," says Jones. "Whether you looked at the chemistry or the biology, by any indicator the Mersey was as bad as you could get."

The river was awash with a deadly cocktail of raw sewage and toxic chemicals, and people in Liverpool joked that you couldn't drown in the Mersey because you'd die of poisoning first. Virtually lifeless, the Mersey estuary was possibly the most polluted in the whole of Western Europe.

Yet today the Mersey is flourishing. Not only has wildlife returned, but the cleaned up river has also attracted massive waterside development.

It started on the Liverpool waterfront – now a World Heritage Site – with the restoration of the famous Albert Dock in the 1980s. Beside it a new arena and conference centre opened last year and has proved a roaring success. Nearby, a brand new cruise liner terminal allows some of the world's most luxurious ships to dock on the Mersey once again. This year a new £22 million canal link was opened, bringing narrowboats right into the Albert Dock. The canal runs past the site where the £72 million Museum of Liverpool is nearing completion, with vast windows taking in the riverscape – the largest new museum built in Britain in over a century. New apartments, hotels and offices have spread along the waterfront.

At the opposite end of the river, spectacular regeneration has also transformed Salford Quays on the Manchester Ship Canal (part of the Mersey system). Land that was once essentially worthless is now home to the Imperial War Museum North, the Lowry arts centre, apartments, retail outlets and offices. The massive new MediaCity development, including the new headquarters for the BBC in the North, is being built by Peel Holdings and will open in 2011.

So who killed the River Mersey, and who cleaned it up again? Who paid for it, and has it been worth the staggering cost?



DR PETER JONES
"WHETHER YOU LOOKED AT THE CHEMISTRY OR THE BIOLOGY, BY ANY INDICATOR THE MERSEY WAS AS BAD AS YOU COULD GET."

FACTS AND FOLKLORE
The River Mersey is roughly 110 km long (70 miles). The combined length of the Mersey and all its tributaries is around 1,700 km (1,056 miles).

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The 12th century monks who rowed passengers across the broad river near what is now Liverpool must have known a pristine Mersey teeming with life. Over 40 different species of fish thrived in its waters, including sea trout and the mighty Atlantic salmon.

As late as the 1760s the right to fish the abundant river cost as much as £400 per year. Within two decades, however, the industrial revolution had begun its profound reshaping of the Northwest of England. With fast flowing rivers and accessible ports, the Mersey and its tributaries were an ideal setting for the newly mechanised spinning and weaving industries. Manchester became the world's first industrial city,

“You couldn't drown in the Mersey – you'd die of poisoning first.”

Liverpool the great port of the British Empire. From the original cotton mills new industries grew, diversified and prospered. The population exploded as workers flooded in to take up the new jobs.

The rudimentary sanitation of the time was utterly overwhelmed. After cholera broke out in Liverpool in 1848, killing hundreds, the city built a new sewage system – it saved lives, but emptied directly into the River Mersey. Other towns and cities took a similar approach. By the 1960s the raw and partially treated sewage of five million people was being disgorged into the Mersey and its tributaries.

Meanwhile, the Mersey became home to a huge variety of industries – chemicals, abattoirs, tanneries, detergent manufacturing, even food processing – all pouring effluent into the river. Peter Jones explains: “This was the birthplace of the chemical industry worldwide, so we had dangerous chemicals of all kinds – lead, mercury, nickel, cadmium, as well as organic chemicals like solvents. Thirty years ago, if it was a man-made chemical you could pretty much find it in the Mersey.”

By the 1970s the river had probably reached its low point. But it was now that the tide began to turn. In 1973 Britain entered the European Community (EC). For those who wonder what Europe ever did for us, Peter Jones is unequivocal. “The only reason the river got cleaned up was the law. We joined the EC and a whole load of Dangerous Substances Directives came into effect that forced us to clean up the rivers.” Europe has been driving the clean up ever since, setting tougher and tougher standards that culminated in the far reaching Water Framework Directive.

In 1974 the Regional Water Authorities came into being – the first time bodies had even existed with the power to make and implement plans for cleaning the nation's rivers. Nevertheless, neither the Labour nor Conservative governments of the day found the money to fund a comprehensive clean up.

Things began to change when Michael Heseltine arrived in Liverpool in 1981. As Secretary of State for the Environment under Mrs Thatcher, Heseltine headed north in the smouldering aftermath of the Toxteth riots, two weeks of violence, looting and arson that had left one young man dead and many more injured. Heseltine soon homed in on the issue of the Mersey. “Alone, every night, when the meetings were over and the pressure was off, I would stand with a glass of wine, looking out at the magnificent view over the river and ask myself



MICHAEL HESELTINE

“...TODAY THE RIVER IS AN AFFRONT TO THE STANDARDS A CIVILISED SOCIETY SHOULD DEMAND OF ITS ENVIRONMENT.”

PHOTO COLIN MCPHERSON

end of the river because there would still be pollution coming in at the top. Responsibility for the river along its entire 70-mile length lay with myriad different organisations. What was needed was a body that could bring everyone involved together. In 1985 the Mersey Basin Campaign was born with a 25-year lifespan, charged with facilitating the river's clean up and – reflecting Heseltine's original beliefs – with encouraging the waterside investment that would help bring jobs and prosperity.

what had gone wrong for this great English city.”

On one of his regular return visits to Liverpool Heseltine asked how much it would cost to clean the entire river. The answer came back that it would take £2 billion over 25 years. But Heseltine was repeatedly told that he could not simply clean up the Liverpool

MERSEY BASIN CAMPAIGN

In the 1980s, when people first began to look seriously at how the River Mersey could be cleaned up, it soon became evident that the task would require co-ordinated action from many different people and organisations, massive investment and a time scale of around 25 years. The water companies, regulator, industry, local authorities and local people would all need to work together.

In response, the then Environment Secretary Michael Heseltine called a series of meetings out of which was born the Mersey Basin Campaign.

Heseltine's insight was to recognise the relationship between environmental improvement and economic regeneration. The Campaign's role was to improve the quality of the water in the Mersey and encourage the regeneration of derelict land beside the river and its tributaries. (It has since expanded to include the River Ribble in Lancashire). To be effective, it would also need to reach out to local people living near the rivers.

The Campaign broke new ground in British administrative practice with its uniquely collaborative programme. At the time, most partnerships operated just between the public and private sectors. The Mersey Basin Campaign partnership was conceived differently from the start. Although the organisational structure changed over time, the emphasis on partnerships remained central, and today the Campaign is recognised as a pioneer of effective partnership working.

To take action on local stretches of river and to reach out to the people living nearby, the Campaign set up a network of over 20 local action co-ordinators, working closely with volunteers, schools, businesses and politicians on wide range of improvement projects (see pages 16–17).

In 1995 a team from Liverpool University led by Professor Peter Batey (now chair of the Campaign) published the Mersey Estuary Management Plan, the first plan of its kind in the UK. Setting a framework for coordinated action among the local authorities and interest groups on the estuary, the plan uncovered a complex web of issues including shipping, economic regeneration, physical regeneration, recreation, tourism and nature conservation.

More recently the Campaign helped facilitate the unique oxygenation project run by United Utilities that has pumped new life into the Manchester Ship Canal at Salford Quays. It also worked with international partners on projects that created major new nature reserves in Stockport and Liverpool.

In February 1982, Heseltine announced the go-ahead for the costly second part of the Control of Pollution Act 1974, a massive four-year programme set to commence the following summer. A special increase in water rates helped pay for it, as did funding of around £40 million from the European Community. At last the 28 pipes discharging raw domestic sewage from Liverpool into the Mersey could be intercepted by a new pipe and diverted to a huge purpose-built treatment plant at Sandon Dock.

Five years later the £300 million plant came online. United Utilities' operations manager Alex Bolton explains: "Sandon is the second largest treatment works in the Northwest, capable of treating up to 950 million litres of wastewater per day up to the stringent

standards imposed by UK and EU law."

The impact on the river was huge, but it was only the start. In 1989 the water industry was privatised, unlocking new funding from investors, efficiency savings and through increases in water charges. A series of five year programmes have seen around £8 billion spent improving wastewater treatment all over the Northwest, first by Northwest Water and then by its privatised successor, United Utilities. Raw sewage outfalls were intercepted and treatment standards steadily increased in response to tougher regulations. The scale and complexity of the work over 25 years has been vast but, as Peter Jones says: "United Utilities has done a good job...it's been an unqualified success." The next round of investment, covering the five years to 2015, will see millions more spent improving standards.

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FACTS AND FOLKLORE

Today, the Mersey officially starts beneath the Merseyway shopping centre right in the middle of Stockport, where the Rivers Goyt and the Tame meet. But according to folklore it used to start upstream in Marple. At some point a careless mapmaker mislabelled the local rivers, and ever since the Mersey has started in Stockport.



THE START OF THE MERSEY, STOCKPORT



THE ACTUAL BEGINNING IN DERBYSHIRE?



Louise Morrissey
Director of Land and Planning, Peel Holdings

Peel's involvement with the Mersey Basin Campaign has helped us set our own environmental agenda, not because we have to, but because it is the right thing to do. I think when you have a partner like the Campaign banging on the door, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in that private companies like Peel do things better by association.

On the ground, the biggest change I've seen is the fantastic Speke and Garston Coastal Reserve, a project I've been involved

with since the very beginning. I remember going down there in the early days and I must admit that the memory of feeling threatened and in the wrong place at the wrong time will never leave me. Rolling forwards five or six years, I remember the Walk For Health that we did at the opening of the reserve, and it was a tremendous feeling, not least because there were all sorts of people there – families and dog walkers – enjoying the reserve at the same time.

That's testament to the change around that's happened, and stems directly from the energy that the Campaign brought to that piece of land.

FACTS AND FOLKLORE

In 1848, James Newlands, Liverpool Borough Engineer, reported:

"The whole of the sewage is still thrown into the river...and all of it at such points as to act very prejudicially on the health of the town. It becomes therefore a consideration of vital importance how to relieve the river from its pollution."

FACTS AND FOLKLORE

Writing in his *Conditions of the Working-Class in England In 1844*, Friedrich Engels described one of the Mersey's tributaries in Manchester:

"At the bottom flows, or rather stagnates, the Irk, a narrow, coal-black, foul-smelling stream, full of debris and refuse, which it deposits on the shallower right bank. In dry weather, a long string of the most disgusting, blackish-green, slime pools are left standing on this bank, from the depths of which bubbles of miasmatic gas constantly arise and give forth a stench unendurable even on the bridge forty or fifty feet above the surface of the stream."

FACTS AND FOLKLORE

Liverpool-born Dr William Henry Duncan witnessed first hand the link between sanitation and disease. He was appointed the city's Medical Officer of Health in 1847 – the first such appointment in Britain – and went on to become the country's first Chief Medical Officer.

FACTS AND FOLKLORE

Five million people live in the area drained by the Mersey.

United Utilities works towards water quality standards that in this country are enforced by the Environment Agency. Clive Gaskell, regional environmental planning manager for the Environment Agency in the Northwest, says: “We have an excellent working relationship with United Utilities at every level. We share the same environmental goals, even if we have slightly different agendas on how to reach them.

“At the end of the day we both want a good deal for the water charge payer and the environment – it’s important to remember that consumers pay for the improvements through their water bills.”

The Environment Agency also monitors the processes used by industry, the other major source of pollution. “The change in attitude... has been dramatic,” says Clive Gaskell. “No industry can now operate outside the environmental standards, and the standards are so much higher.

“The penalties for non-compliance – and the damage done to a company’s reputation – are potentially severe. It’s a different mindset these days. A breach of a permit is now seen as a major failing.”

So who did clean up the River Mersey? Michael Heseltine, United Utilities, the Environment Agency, industry, the European Union, the Mersey Basin Campaign, scientists like Peter Jones, or the great water bill paying public of the Northwest? Certainly Heseltine’s conviction that a reborn Mersey would help drive the economic revival of Liverpool and indeed the Northwest has been spectacularly borne out. But of course, the answer, as Heseltine recognised over 25 years ago, is that one of the world’s great environmental success stories required a campaign involving all these people and more.



Mark Atherton
Director of Environment and Energy, Northwest Regional Development Agency

I think the Mersey Basin Campaign’s greatest strength has been that it exemplifies something the Northwest is really, really good at – creating partnerships that are cohesive, add value and really work. I’ve worked in other regions where that ethos doesn’t exist, and trying to create it is extremely difficult.

What the Campaign has done throughout

its life is bring together disparate groups from business, the public sector and the voluntary sector, right down to individual members of the public, and made them feel part of something far bigger than they could ever be acting alone.

WHO OWNS THE MERSEY?

The Crown Estate owns the foreshore and bed on the Birkenhead side of the tidal sections of the River Mersey, to the centre point of the river. Much of the Liverpool side of the tidal river is owned by the Duchy of Lancaster, which is the major owner of the foreshore between the centre point of the Mersey and Barrow-in-Furness.



TOM WORKMAN, LIVERPOOL SAILING CLUB:
“WHEN WE STARTED SAILING THE WATER WAS LIKE LIQUID COAL, WITH WHAT WE’D CALL MERSEY TADPOLES IN IT. BIG BALLS OF FAT USED TO COME FROM THE MARGARINE WORKS, IT WAS ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTING. THE DIFFERENCE NOW IS FANTASTIC – WE CAN SEE OUR FEET WHEN WE STAND IN THE WATER!”

FACTS AND FOLKLORE

Over the last 25 years United Utilities and its predecessor North West Water have spent around £8 billion cleaning up the sewage that once polluted the river.



SEWAGE OUTFALL,
GARSTON

FACTS AND FOLKLORE

In 1999 the restoration of the River Mersey won the inaugural World Thiess Riverprize for the best river clean up anywhere in the world.

FACTS AND FOLKLORE

Since the Mersey clean up began the Environment Agency has recorded Minke whales, harbour porpoises and dolphins near the mouth of the river, along with octopus, squid, cuttlefish, crabs, jellyfish and shrimps. Seals have been seen as far upstream as Warrington.

FACTS AND FOLKLORE

The 36-mile long Manchester Ship Canal was opened by Queen Victoria in 1894. Outside Manchester it first merges with, then separates from, the Mersey, before reconnecting to the Mersey Estuary. It took an average of 12,000 navvies seven years to build at a cost of £15 million. Initially it was a financial disaster, failing to recoup the huge costs. But by 1963 Manchester was the UK's third busiest port.

Dr Jeremy Carter
University of Manchester

Who will take responsibility for the Northwest's water environment in the future?

As an idealist, I'd like to think that the public could assume a greater role in this agenda, and people could really take responsibility for their local water environment. In some places this is already happening, which is partly down to the catchment-based approach taken by the Mersey Basin Campaign.

I'd also like to see the natural environment itself playing a bigger part. When you're looking at challenges like flood risk, or water quality, just leaving the natural environment to do what it's there to do –

for example to provide a buffer against flooding, or to absorb pollutants – can be very helpful. If that could be built into the system a bit more, that would be ideal.

In reality, though, I think it comes down to three groups – the local authorities, the water provider, United Utilities, and the Environment Agency. Within that, I think the local authorities have a particular role to play, as they're responsible for land use and development, and many of the problems we see are related to changes in the use of land. Increasing the role and responsibility of local authorities is important, but obviously that does bring resourcing issues of its own.

