

Not All is Lost on Liverpool Maritime Mercantile City WHS Yet

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The expected World Heritage Committee meeting¹ in 2020 suffered the same delays as most other programmed events and meetings since the Covid-pandemic erupted in the world. This meant that in Liverpool we continued to hope that our city will not be deleted from the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. To a civil society organisation such as Engage it is obvious that the global pandemic has dramatically affected one of the most important areas of our economy – tourism and the visitor economy. It has virtually ceased, and it looks very much like nothing will be restored for many months and possibly even years. And add to that the unknown impact of Brexit upon tourists from Europe and the city is facing a serious and potentially devastating crisis.

Losing such a prestigious status as a UNESCO WHS at this time would be a disaster – a real loss for the city but also a loss for humanity were that to happen. Our status sets us apart from almost every other city in the UK and places us alongside some of the most significant and most visited sites in the whole world. And the world gains an insight into a unique moment in global history at the height of the British Empire, in the design and build of an exceptional dock system that was a world-first which led to extraordinary prosperity for the citizens of Liverpool. The problem now is that our Outstanding Universal Value is under threat from development proposals, specifically the Everton FC stadium plans within the Bramley Moore Dock in Liverpool’s waterfront World Heritage Site.

At the time of writing this piece for the World Heritage Watch Report 2021 the planning application for the stadium has yet to be presented to the Liverpool City Council Planning Committee and so to some extent we are all awaiting the decision of the Planning Department on whether they will recommend the application for approval. However, it has to be said that no one expects anything other than a positive recommendation to be presented to the elected representatives. And no one expects them to do anything other than approve it. The nature of politics in the city has for some time been determined by the impact on the city council of the elected Mayor Joe Anderson, whose influence is widely felt across the city on many levels. However, in December 2020 he was arrested² by the police for questioning in connection with offences concerning bribery and witness intimidation as part of an ongoing investigation into building and development contracts.

His arrest followed a year of extraordinary turmoil³ within the City Council and in particular in the Regeneration Department which includes Planning. In December 2019 the Mayor’s appointed Director of Regeneration Nick Kavanagh was arrested⁴ by police and questioned over conspiracy to defraud and misconduct in a public office along with a developer from the city. He was re-arrested⁵ in September on suspicion of conspiracy to commit bribery along with a number of other individuals. It is hard to know what if any impact this will have on the World Heritage Site and specifically on the Bramley Moore Dock proposals. By the end of the

¹ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/sessions/44COM>

² BBC News 04.12.20 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-55192375>

³ Liverpool Echo: 12.12.20 <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/seven-days-rocked-liverpool-core-19432035>

⁴ Liverpool Echo: 19.12.19 <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/city-property-developer-council-regeneration-17445045>; 10.01.20 <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/arrested-council-chief-not-work-17540517>

⁵ Place North West 03.09.20 <https://www.placenorthwest.co.uk/news/kavanagh-among-five-arrested-by-merseyside-police/>

year the UK Government⁶ had decided to send in inspectors to review the city and its governance arrangements⁷.

During this year with the health crisis and significant local political turmoil the City Council found time to publish the long-awaited North Shore Vision, that had been taken to Paris for a preview with UNESCO officials at the start of 2020, and whose virtual launch in September was attended on-line by Isabelle Anatole-Gabriel (Chief of the North America and Europe Unit at the World Heritage Centre in Paris) and other heritage officials from ICOMOS and Historic England. As we described in our report last year there is much to be admired in this Vision and it is a really welcome addition to the city's attempt to belatedly recognise the value of its UNESCO designation. It received very positive reports in the local and national media⁸.

The crux of the argument now with UNESCO is really about the decision to start a process that has deliberately led us to a place where the city, Everton FC and the landowner Peel are in the strongest position having invested millions in the project and brought most of the city on board with the public consultation processes. It needs to be said that during these consultations it was never explained that building inside the largest dock structure in the WHS Stanley Dock group of docks was not possible within the mutually approved guidelines and agreement signed by the government and UNESCO. So, it is not about whether or not we like the design of the proposed stadium or the concept of it being on the waterfront, but it is the very idea of it being compatible with the nature of the WHS and the decision everyone made to protect its OUV (Outstanding Universal Value).

And the answer was known to all those who started this process, which does include Mayor Anderson (who is a strong supporter of the team), the landowner as well as the football club. There are no innocents here and during the years when this process was allowed to run unchecked the prevailing narrative coming from the Town Hall was that progress and development trumped everything and that UNESCO must not be allowed to stand in the way of this project. It is only at the last minute that some have begun to realise that there is after all some value in the designation that we are threatened with losing. And the North Shore Vision is part of that new effort to try and bring UNESCO and other heritage bodies to allow this development because everything else we will do in the future will be compatible with our being a World Heritage Site.

It is also a sad reality to note that most people think that if the proposed stadium doesn't go ahead the dock will remain abandoned and desolate for ever – which of course isn't true. It will take some time for land values to rise and the setting itself improve (it has a rather unsightly northern border with a working dock) in order to bring forward proposals acceptable to the landowner and also economically feasible for any potential developer. But it will be developed in due course. However, the city is now in a position where it has already prepared people for the loss of our status and the Mayor's supporters are in the press regularly making the case for the stadium and against the 'heritage lobby'⁹, so should that happen the blue half of the city (Everton FC's colours are blue and Liverpool FC's red) will jubilantly welcome the stadium and most people will agree that development is what is

⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/945913/Letter_to_Tony_Reeves_171220.pdf

⁷ Liverpool Echo: 17.12.20 <https://www.liverpooecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/government-investigation-launched-liverpool-council-19478159>

⁸ Insider Media 10.09.20 <https://www.insidermedia.com/news/north-west/heritage-led-plans-launched-for-liverpool-docklands-future>; Local Gov 11.09.20 <https://www.localgov.co.uk/Liverpool-launches-UKs-first-heritage-led-development-plan/51067>; Environment Analyst 14.09.20 <https://environment-analyst.com/uk/105938/liverpool-publish-plan-to-keep-un-world-heritage-status>

⁹ LBN Daily 09.09.20 <https://lbdaily.co.uk/heritage-lobby-scupper-evertons-stadium/>

needed right now. Few sadly will mourn the loss. The UNESCO narrative that values our being part of a global humanity by making a unique contribution to it no longer plays well in a society driven by nationalist populism.

Engage is not the first or the only civil society actor to point out that had the city and landowner wanted to invite Everton to build a new stadium on the waterfront they actually had land available that would not have caused any fuss at all with the WHS status. But they chose to offer the football club the water-filled largest dock in the complex which in itself would have no monetary value for the landowner should it remain an open-water dock space. And the city's Mayor loved to point out the truth that historically Liverpool always infilled its redundant docks and built upon them (the famous Three Graces at the Pier Head being a case in point).

Having personally attended the World Heritage Committee meetings in Krakow (41st session 2017) and Bahrain (42nd session 2018) I have seen for myself the political nature of the Committee meetings and noticed how blocks will form to support certain countries no matter what they have done to damage the OUV of their World Heritage Sites. I suspect Liverpool will become a victim of any geo-political anti-UK or anti-western feelings that might be around when our case is brought to a vote. We should think about what I also picked up at the sessions, that the west is held to standards that other countries are not expected to follow. The decision on Liverpool might now be made at the postponed 44th session which should take place in June/July 2021 in Fuzhou, Fujian province, China.

Engage would understand a negative decision from the World Heritage Committee, but we kindly request the World Heritage Committee not to delete Liverpool from the World Heritage List on its 44th Session but rather postpone such a decision to a later point in time after the decision-making process in the UK has been finalized. There is a strong possibility now that should the Planning Department recommend approval to the Planning Committee, the UK Government will be asked to call it in¹⁰ for a full report from an inspector before they make a decision. It is one of those things that the body that has the final say in our planning process isn't Liverpool City Council but HM Government in Westminster.

Everton FC have now submitted their final plans¹¹ to the City's planning department and the revised drawings show some changes¹², notably the removal of a car park from the eastern edge of the site facing the River Mersey (figure 1) and its replacement with a much better stepped piazza overlooking the river which will be both a fitting start and end of an extensive walkway along the full length of the river¹³; this has meant that fans will now have a covered entrance to the turn-styles along the river entrance to the ground (figure 2); and the height of the roof has been reduced¹⁴ and the area around the ground has been decluttered with energy-efficient power sources being moved to the roof of the stadium (figure 3). And Mayor

¹⁰ Liverpool Echo: 28.02.20 <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/decision-day-edges-closer-evertons-17828508> (the Echo says that is unlikely but we are sure it will happen as the DSOCR states quite clearly that: "Where necessary the State Party will call in development proposals for determination at the national level rather than by LCC.")

¹¹ Infrastructure Intelligence 15.09.20 <http://www.infrastructure-intelligence.com/article/sep-2020/everton-fc-amend-new-stadium-design>

¹² Liverpool Echo 26.11.20 <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/everton-new-stadium-designs-improved-19346486>

¹³ Pitchcare.com 16.09.20 <https://www.pitchcare.com/news-media/everton-submit-new-plans.html>

¹⁴ New Civil Engineer 13.09.20 <https://www.newcivilengineer.com/latest/everton-reduces-stadium-height-to-appease-historic-england-concerns-13-09-2020/>

Anderson has announced that he will withdraw¹⁵ from the forthcoming postponed elections in May. That might make a difference too! Engage seriously hopes that both the Government of the UK and UNESCO ambassadors will consider the ordinary citizens of Liverpool who desperately want to hold onto our status and who have always valued the decision made to inscribe our city as a World Heritage Site in 2004. The people remain but the politicians and developers move on.



Figure 1: View of the central west stand. Source: <https://www.business-live.co.uk/economic-development/top-everton-official-speaks-out-18918733>

¹⁵ The Guardian 01.01.21 https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jan/01/liverpool-mayor-joe-anderson-withdraws-from-elections?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other



Fig. 2: A view from the southwest. *Source:* <https://royalbluemersey.sbnation.com/2020/8/26/21402765/everton-new-stadium-delay-latest-bramley-moore-designs-planning-application-unesco-world-heritage>



Fig. 3: A drone view of the planned Everton Stadium from the south. *Source:* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-53999295>