

Goree Piazza (now Beetham Plaza) Fountain

Architect: Richard Huws

Commissioned by Merseyside Civic Society

Constructed: Cammell Laird, 1967



*That's a fountain ?
Why buckets?
They don't look like buckets.
We love the peaceful sound.
Have you tried detergent?
It splashes.
I don't get wet?
How did it get here?
Who did it?
WHY?*

The Historic Name

The sculpture is located in Liverpool's World Heritage Site, on Beetham Plaza, formerly the site of the Goree Piazza warehouses. Named after the former slave trading island off the coast of Senegal, West Africa, the warehouses were built 11 years after the courts ruled that every slave became free as soon as their feet touched English soil. The Warehouses were demolished following bomb damage during the Second World War.



Goree warehouses in 1850 - https://localwiki.org/liverpool/Liverpool%27s_destroyed_landmarks



Goree warehouses and Overhead Railway, 1947 - <http://streetsofliverpool.co.uk/tag/goree/>

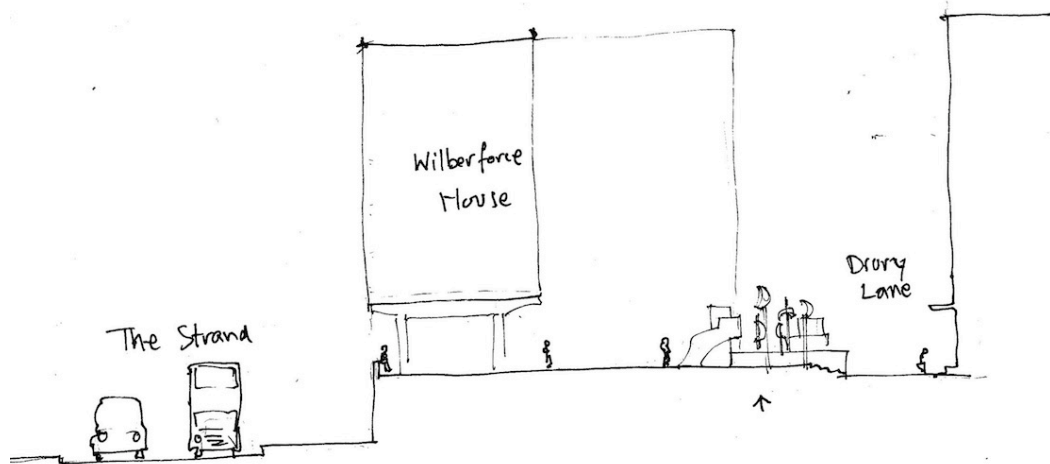


The House of Slaves, Goree Island, Senegal - <https://images.app.goo.gl/a2QZgEpDi6BsRdWa7>;
<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/26>

The beautiful tiny island of Goree, which is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was built as an estate for the auction and dispatch around the world of enslaved Africans and was a key part of the Transatlantic slave trade, within which Liverpool played a prominent part. To impress the mainly European traders, Goree islanders built a series of European style mud buildings for the imprisonment and auction of slaves. The human goods were then taken through the door at the back of the building to ships bound for the Americas.

The Site

This magnificent Liverpool city centre space is hidden from The Strand by a façade of smooth black glass by architects Brock Carmichael, which quietly adds a different surface to the earlier, varied identities of the Pier Head architecture and the buildings on the Plaza side of The Strand. The 2010 Mann Island building mirrors its black surface. The buildings on the Strand are very varied in style and yet have similar heights.



Beetham Plaza and fountain with Wilberforce House, The Strand. Dai Gwynne, 2019

Sheltered from traffic and wind, The Plaza has only a small stair access from The Strand to a balcony entrance looking over The Strand. Despite the elderly surfaces, the minimalist enclosure is one of completeness and peace. The fountain is designed to be acoustically and visually reflected in the surrounding glazed building.

Liverpool City Council owns the land freehold. Overlooking the Goree Piazza, Wilberforce House (1965-67 by Gotch & Partners) was named after the abolitionist William Wilberforce MP. From the 1960s to the mid/late 1990s, Liverpool City Council's Planning offices were in Wilberforce House. It was later bought by Stephen Beetham and renamed Beetham Plaza. Beetham Plaza leasehold is currently owned by the Elliot group, as Beetham Plaza Ltd.

Residents, visiting families and guests from the hotels are very enthusiastic about the fountain. Gushing water energises everyone and the viewing platforms give unique, exciting views of the 'buckets', which are designed to randomly fill and empty with different sounds according to their random shape and emptying and filling sequences.

The Sculpture

Merseyside Civic Society commissioned Richard Huws to produce a fountain for the centre of Liverpool in 1967.



The fountain on the opening day

Richard Huws was a Welshman with a unique CV as an artist. After working as an apprentice at Cammell Laird ship yard he qualified as a naval architect, then 'drew cartoons' at Liverpool School of Art before moving to Vienna to work at the Applied Arts Centre there with several ex-Bauhaus staff.

Huws, by now a lecturer at Liverpool School of Architecture, submitted a design to Merseyside Civic Society (MCS) for a kinetic fountain. After the experience building a similar fountain for the Festival of Britain in 1951, he proposed a design using creative engineering and an improvisation with the elements for the proposed Liverpool sculpture. The Civic Society chose his design on the condition that he worked in close cooperation with the site architect.

It had been suggested that the fountain would be seen by more people if located in the city centre, but Huws refused a more prestigious site: it was better here and made better sounds. Of its construction, he said, "I spent a week on the aesthetics and several years on the engineering" (from *The Observer Weekend Review*, at the opening).

The 1960s was a time of creative experimentation, of *musique concrète*, Pop Art and pop music, of happenings and interaction between art forms, as cultural and political ideas collided, such as in John and Yoko's bed-in for peace. Huws sits firmly in the middle of that creative period and was part of a move towards greater public engagement in art and saw the fountain sculpture as an expression of the new interactivity, occasionally adding colour or detergent to the water and creating fun himself.

Huws, together with the Plaza architects, knew how the plaza building could make the fountain sing with the skills of medieval builders creating, instead of whispering galleries, an endlessly changing sea using buckets. The *Observer Weekend Review* at the time of the fountain's opening commented, "He has in many ways made a work that creates more movement in space and time than he would have imagined".



The Sculpture Today

The Plaza is today a living space in both senses of the word. The viewing platforms are necessary to this experience. The buckets need to be examined in detail as they empty and drip before the great heave to be filled - it's similar to watching a musician's fingers. The time of silence and rest, the last drip and trickle, before the swoosh and effort to be upright; and then the water can rush in again. The fountain magically influences the space, it never seems the same.

Approaching the site, water can be heard crashing before the structure comes into view. Constant random sound and visual variety is present as the sun appears from the East and sets in the West, dappling the viewing platforms and sparkling the water in unexpected ways, reflecting the light and sounds in the buildings' glass facades. The fountain provides a multi-sensory experience akin to a jazz improvisation, but the improviser, Huws, has left his elemental instrument to play.

Children and adults love this fountain. Local residents, visiting families and guests from the hotels are very enthusiastic about it. Gushing water energises everyone, and the viewing platforms give unique, exciting views of the 'buckets', which are designed to randomly fill and empty with different sounds according to their random shape and emptying and filling sequences.

Wider Significance

Beetham Plaza and the fountain are included in important inventories of places of architectural merit: the National Heritage List for England (NHLE) and Pevsner's *Architectural Guides* (Liverpool Guide, 2004, p.163). Importantly, the plaza is also within the UNESCO World Heritage Site and Castle Street Conservation Area. This area was considered "outstanding" in the national context by the Historic Building Council of the then Department of the Environment.

As the last remaining public fountain sculpture by Huws in existence, the Liverpool piece is of national significance as an iconic public art work. Equally, as an expression of the city's bold and ambitious public art heritage, and as a popular and much-loved symbol of Liverpool's architectural and public realm in the 1960s, it has historical importance. The piazza is also the first, and probably only, purpose-built new open square to have survived

from Shankland's 1965 Liverpool City Centre Plan.

But there is another reason why the piece holds significance.

Water is the lifeblood of Liverpool. Huws was proud of the fact that he used 20% less water than a traditional cascade fountain. And there is perhaps another context in which to consider why the buckets had to be here, and why the Plaza 'sings of the ocean'. Separated by six lanes of traffic from what was then Goree Piazza are the River Mersey and Liverpool Bay. Standing on the Goree balcony overlooking The Strand, the site of arrival and embarkation, we are reminded of our maritime global connections by the engineers at Cammell Laird who built huge ships for all over the world, and also this fountain.

On completion of the fountain in 1967, Huws reported to Merseyside Civic Society that "the engineers of Cammell Laird had created a beautiful bronze African shield. This commemorates the history of the original Goree Piazza".



The fountain showing the bronze plaque donated by Cammell Laird, and a detail of the plaque

The text reads:

Originally two arcaded warehouses in the middle of the old dock road were named after the island 'Goree' off the west coast of Africa. On the 14th September 1822, the Piazza was gutted by a spectacular fire, described by Thomas De Quincy. In 1817 Washington Irving worked at the American Consul in Liverpool, had his office at Washington House – Goree. The old Piazza was severely bombed in the air raids of 1941 and finally demolished between 1948 and 1950. In 1967, to mark the completion of the new Piazza this plaque was kindly presented by Cammell Laird and Co., builders of the fountain.

Bearing in mind Huws' ongoing close connection with Cammell Laird as an apprentice and later engineer, the company's ship building connections with Goree, and also with the making of this sculpture, as well as the siting of the African shield-shaped brass plaque on one of the spiral stairwells (which is remarkably reminiscent of the House of Slaves in Senegal), emphasise the importance to Cammell Laird workers that the island of Goree is remembered as essential to the sculpture.

The sun's trajectory across the fountain's structure can symbolise the journey across the globe, from the House of Slaves and the spiral staircases around the Door of No Return in Goree. Standing on a viewing platform surrounded by the restless gushing of filling and

spilling cascades of water, we can imagine travelers arriving from across the sea, from a place to which, as slaves, they could not return.



The Door of No Return, the point of embarkation on Goree Island -
UNESCO <https://wayback.archiveit.org/10611/20170127194638/http://webworld.unesco.org/goree/en/screens/20.shtml>

Credits

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