

# Liverpool: An Essential Emigration Port

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## Introduction - Context

Between 1830 and 1930 over 40 million people left Europe in search of a new and better life. About 9 million sailed from Liverpool, then the largest emigration port in the world. The majority traveled to North America, Australia and New Zealand - the 'New World'.

Liverpool was at the heart of the emigration process. Liverpool received Irish emigrants from across the Irish sea. Also from across Europe, traveling by ship to Hull, on England's east coast, then by train to Liverpool

As emigration grew, new shipping companies were established and competition increased. The companies advertised their services across Europe. It was often cheaper to travel to Liverpool to emigrate than leave from ports nearer home.

## History of the Port of Liverpool

In 1207 Liverpool was given its borough charter by King John. It grew very slowly. By the 17C it was primarily trading with Ireland, which suffered greatly in mid-century.

In 1666 Liverpool entered oceanic trade with the West Indies, soon after with the American colonies, trading in sugar, tobacco and timber. By 1700 there were approximately 25 ships per year trading with America. Liverpool itself was growing with 100 ships and 1100 seamen. Ships would come into The Pool, a tidal basin, and unload cargoes onto the quayside. Shipbuilding in this period was important, but was competing for space. The last major yard was closed to build the Albert Dock in 1841. By 1900 all ship building activity had moved across the River Mersey to Birkenhead.

The 'Old Dock' was the first commercial wet dock in the world, opening in 1715, and being completed in 1720. This required infilling of The Pool and reclaiming the tidal margins of the River Mersey. Throughout the 18C and 19C the network of docks

continued to expand, with individual docks getting larger to deal with the bigger ships.

During the 18C the slave trade brought great wealth to Liverpool for it is estimated that Liverpool ships carried half of the world trade in slaves from Africa to America and the West Indies. The last legal slave ship sailed in 1807.

By 1800 Liverpool was Britain's second largest port. In 1841 construction of the Albert Dock started with bonded warehouses on the dockside, quickening unloading. 1857 saw the creation of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board eliminating competition between docks and shipyards on both sides of the river. During the 19C, Liverpool was the largest importing market for cotton in the world.

WWI saw major disruption to port operations, and led to a major decrease in shipping activities. In reality it was a continuation of a trend that began before the war, with shipping lines moving to Southampton and London, where bigger ships could more easily dock.

1980 Merseyside Maritime Museum opens. 1990 Beatles story 'museum' opens. 2004 the Docks are designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

## Why did people leave? - Hope

There are three primary reasons for emigrating - poverty, persecution and ambition.

Many fled the hardships of poverty, for example over 1 million left Ireland between 1845 and 1851 to escape the devastating famine. Emigration was a way of escaping political and religious persecution, e.g., many Jews left Eastern Europe.

Many were attracted to the opportunities offered by life in the 'New World', e.g. the Gold Rush years in North America and Australia triggered mass emigration from across Europe.

## Emigrant Liverpool Experience

Upon arrived into Liverpool from the Irish Sea Ferries, or the trains from Hull, the immigrants were often met by the 'runners', who worked for dishonest ticket sellers and lodging house owners. If the 'runners' could get a hold of the luggage, they would take it, with the emigrant following, to a place of accommodation. Getting charged heavily for the service. The accommodation was often squalid, overcrowded, and unsanitary. Some emigrants dying before reaching the ship, while others took diseases onto the ship with them. Even respectable lodging houses offered only boards to sleep on, with no blankets. Some places provided food, all at additional exorbitant costs. The emigrants could often spend days waiting for the departure of a sailing ship. Conditions improved over time so that by the end of the 19C emigrants often stayed in lodging houses owned and supervised by the shipping companies.

When sailing the majority of the emigrants bought the cheapest tickets possible and traveled between decks in 'steerage' accommodation. This area was often dark, poorly ventilated, smelly because of the mass if humanity. Rarely would passengers avoid seasickness, with no good way for cleaning up.

Conditions slowly improved through a series of Passenger Acts between 1842 and 1855. In theory, by 1855, all emigrants were entitled to a cooked meal and larger ships carried a doctor.

For an excellent, compelling description of the emigrant experience during the mid 19C read *Going to America* focusing on the Ireland - Liverpool to North America experience. For more on the Canadian experience in this same time period read about Grosse Isle, the quarantine station in the St. Lawrence seaway, references below and at [www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/qc/grosseile](http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/qc/grosseile).

## The Emigration Depot

The appalling conditions that emigrants experienced was a matter of public concern. An emigration depot was opened in Birkenhead in 1852 for British emigrants going to Australia with passage paid for by the Government. It was not luxurious accommodation, but it did provide meals, warm shelter and safety until it closed in 1868. The

effect was to increase sailing from Liverpool, and increase competition between shipowners for lucrative government contracts. The emigrants under these schemes had to meet minimum provision requirements.

## Effect of Steam

By the 1860s steam ships were having an impact of the emigration process, and by the 1870s most were traveling on steam ships. Steamships made the journey quicker, but also led to more ships sailing on a regular time table.

The collapse of US shipping during the Civil War allowed the British companies to get a better foot hold in the trade. By the second half of the 19C, companies such as Cunard, White Star, Allan, Guion and National were operating regular services out of Liverpool.

Importantly for emigrants, they brought competition. Prices were driven down as shipping companies fought to get business.

## The Great Liners

By the beginning of the 20C emigration had changed drastically. The threat of 'runners' and dishonest ticket sellers had gone. Accommodation was available, often provided by the shipping company and included in the price of the ticket.

Improving technology was producing larger vessels, with better facilities. Good quality meals were being served in regular dining saloons. This is the period when early movies show passengers promenading, reading on ship, writing letters, and enjoying the entertainment.

## Records

The UK outbound passenger lists are available from 1890-1960 on [www.FindMyPast.com](http://www.FindMyPast.com) and [www.Ancestry.com](http://www.Ancestry.com), the inbound passenger lists are available on [www.Ancestry.com](http://www.Ancestry.com). These are for ships, to and from, non-European ports only. So you will find the lists of passengers sailing to Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and almost everywhere else in the world. By this time period do not assume that your emigrant never returned.

The passenger manifests of the individual ships that carried transmigrants to the British ports of arrival have not survived. Some statistical records from official and business records have survived.

You will also need to research the shipping records created in the country of arrival - Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealand. Each are different, especially in terms of starting period and content.

### Research in Liverpool

For research in Liverpool see the Merseyside Maritime Museum website at [www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime-museum](http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime-museum), physically present at the Royal Albert Dock in one of the bonded warehouses. Well worth the visit.

At the archives centre - <https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/archives-centre/about-archive-centre> pay attention to the many information sheets about different aspects of research and the collections. Most subjects are covered.

Also see the guide by Read and Stammers for researching in the collections at the Merseyside Maritime Museum.

### Research in Hull

There is a lot of information online for researching Hull, migrations through Hull, the Jewish community. See the Research Guides at the Hull History Centre at [www.hullhistorycentre.org.uk](http://www.hullhistorycentre.org.uk). The Wilson shipping line almost had a monopoly for emigrants from Scandinavia and eastern Europe, connecting with the North Eastern Railway for onward travel to Liverpool

### Maps

For detailed maps of the Liverpool docks, the River Mersey, Hull, or anywhere else in Great Britain, see the National Library of Scotland Digital Resources at [www.nls.uk](http://www.nls.uk)

### Photographs

Search online for photographic images or paintings of your emigrant ships. Make sure you have the correct version of the ship as many ship names were

reused, often by the same shipping company. Wikipedia can be valuable.

### Literature Search Tool

Search PERSI (Periodical Source index), produced by Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, IN, for articles relating to specific locations and families, available at [www.genealogycenter.info/persi/](http://www.genealogycenter.info/persi/). This indexes article titles in a great collection of British and Canadian genealogical and historical periodicals.

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