

Not just a pretty façade

The Bluecoat is the oldest building in Liverpool city centre, dating from the early 18th century. Its architectural importance is reflected in its UNESCO world heritage and Grade One listed status. The building reopened in March 2008 after being closed for three years for a programme of conservation, restoration and new build, designed by Rotterdam architects Birk Architecten. Having witnessed nearly 300 years of Liverpool's changing fortunes, the Bluecoat remains at the heart of the city's culture, a reinvigorated arts space for the 21st century. This brochure introduces its fascinating history.

at the Bluecoat.



18th Century

In 1708, Reverend Robert Styth, rector of Liverpool, and master mariner, Bryan Blundell, founded the Liverpool Blue Coat School for poor children, a modest building costing £35, on land belonging to St Peter's Church opposite the present building. Funds were raised for a larger building where the children would live and study, and be instructed "in the principles of the Anglican church". This original intention is inscribed in Latin on the front of the building, below the unusual one-handed clock, together with the date 1717, the year building work started. Construction was completed in 1725, at a cost of £2,300.

The design of the building has caused much speculation, its architect remaining unknown. The candidate most commonly proposed is Thomas Ripley. As well as being a fine example of the Queen Anne style of architecture, distinctive features include the oldest known liver birds in Liverpool over the gate and entrances in the cobbled courtyard, a cupola on the roof of the central building, and charming cherubs' heads.

Much of Liverpool's prosperity at this time was derived from profits of the transatlantic slave trade, and the school was no exception. Many of its trustees, including Blundell and his sons, were deeply involved in the business. It was an age of extraordinary contrasts when brutality and philanthropy often went hand in hand. By the time of Blundell's death in 1756 there were 70 boys and 30 girls at the school, many apprenticed to local trades, especially maritime ones connected to the port. Some 'Old Blues' became mates or masters of their ships, many emigrating to the colonies. After Blundell's death his sons further expanded the building to accommodate 200 pupils, with a new workroom, sick room, chapel and refectory. A reminder of the building's school days is some graffiti dating from the 18th century, carved into cornerstones in a secluded part of the front courtyard.

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1. Recollections of the Blue Coat Hospital, St George's Day 1843
 2. Boys working in the school workshop towards the end of the 19th Century
 3. Bomb damage to the Bluecoat in 1941
 4. Aleks Danko, Rolling Home performance at the Bluecoat, for the Liverpool Biennial International, 2004 (photo by Nicholas Hunt)
 5. Yoko Ono, 1967 performance at the Bluecoat in the Concert Hall, now the Restaurant (photo by Sheridan Davies)
 6. Herbert Tyson Smith and his son Geoffrey in their studio at the Bluecoat
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19th Century

During the 19th Century the school continued to grow with continued support from the citizens of Liverpool, including former pupils who had come to the school as orphans and went on to become wealthy. There were many alterations to the building during this period. At the front, care was taken not to "injure or affect its present appearance and general character". The back of the building, which had originally echoed the front façade with a similar arrangement of windows and decorative features, was changed considerably to a much plainer appearance when the central core was enlarged to meet the school's expansion needs.

The school became well known in the early 19th century for its adoption of Dr Bell's Madras system of education, which was based on the abler pupils being used as 'helpers' to the teacher, passing on the information they had learned to other students. Teachers came from far and wide to study the new methods. The school also consolidated traditions during this period. The St George's Day Parade became a well-known event locally, as did the regular Sunday

Blue Coat Children's Service, which was conducted in the school chapel (the site of the present restaurant and bar). In 1906 the school finally outgrew its building and moved to new premises, its present site in Church Road, Wavertree.



20th Century

It seems strange that the future of a building as beautiful as the Bluecoat could ever have been in question. However, for the first half of the last century it was never entirely free from the threat of demolition or financial insecurity, and its story over much of this period is one of ongoing struggle for survival.

In 1907 a group of artists, the Sandon Studios Society, made homeless by the demolition of their premises near the Anglican Cathedral, rented accommodation in the empty school building. In 1909, the Port Sunlight soap magnate William Lever, later to become the first Lord Leverhulme, rented the building from the school's trustees, and enabled the University of Liverpool's thriving School of Architecture to lease premises in the Bluecoat, which he renamed 'Liberty Building' in celebration of his triumph in a libel action. He purchased the building, intending to develop it into a centre for the arts. When war broke out in 1914, however, plans were shelved and Leverhulme lost interest. When he died in 1925 there was no provision in his will and his executors put the building on the market.

For a while the ground floor space (the old gallery now occupied by the Hub) was let as a car showroom, and then the building was advertised for sale as a building site.

The Sandon Studios Society launched a campaign, driven by the efforts of Fanny Dove Hamel Calder, to save the building. The Liverpool Daily Post was supportive, as was the Lord Mayor who launched a public appeal for the £40,000 purchase price. With just two days to go before the deadline, only £12,000 had been raised, and a last minute appeal was published in the press. Miraculously, an anonymous donation of £18,000 was received, and the rest of the money was borrowed on mortgage to make the purchase possible. Years later the anonymous donor, who, as a "lover of his native city," had also made an initial £1,000 contribution, was revealed as William Ernest Corlett, of local brewers, Higsons. With the building's future secured, a charitable trust, the Bluecoat Society of Arts was established in January 1927 to 'preserve the building for its architectural value, and to establish a centre for the arts'. This, together with the establishment of a bohemian community in the building by the Sandon artists twenty years earlier, makes the Bluecoat the oldest arts centre of its kind in the UK.



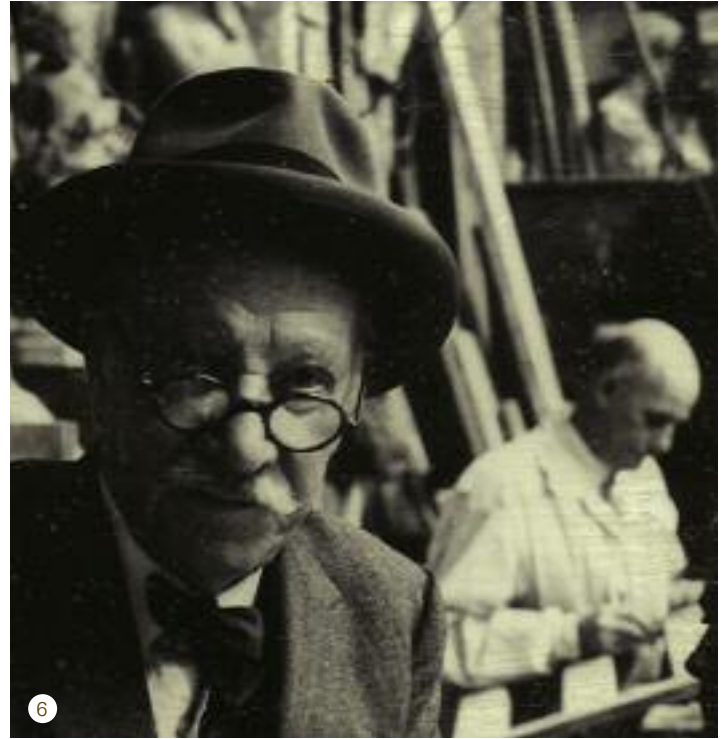
The largely voluntary Bluecoat Society of Arts struggled to maintain the building and in May 1941 disaster struck when Liverpool suffered extensive bomb damage, and fire from a neighbouring building spread, gutting large areas of the Bluecoat including the South East wing (site of the new arts wing). In the late 1940s there were plans,

which thankfully never materialised, to demolish part of the building for an inner ring road. The post war repairs were not completed until 1952, by which time further conservation work was also required to the stonework at the front. Finally in 1958 the building was restored and it was able to once again play a part in Liverpool's cultural life. The Bluecoat Society of Arts continued to run the building, which flourished from the 1960s onwards, with a programme of art exhibitions and performances of music, theatre, dance and other activities in its concert hall. A working community of artists has always been present, and shops, creative businesses, arts organisations and cultural tenants, such as the Merseyside Film Institute, craft specialists the Display Centre and FACT, have added to the mix over the years. The Bluecoat Society of Arts gave way to Bluecoat Arts Centre in the late 1980s, and changed its name simply to the Bluecoat in 2007.



A creative heritage

Throughout its time as an arts venue, the Bluecoat has remained a creative oasis in the city, encouraging a range of art practices, from fine craftsmanship to innovative experimentation. Early Sandon exhibitions, for instance, featured the likes of Monet, Augustus John, Wyndham Lewis and Charles Rennie Mackintosh. And in 1911, following Roger Fry's groundbreaking Post-Impressionist exhibition in London, 46 works by Picasso, Gauguin, Cézanne, Matisse, Van Gogh and others of the French School were brought to the Bluecoat, to be shown alongside Liverpool paintings, with a similar exhibition staged in 1912. In 1931 Jacob Epstein's controversial 'Genesis' attracted nearly 50,000 visitors in four weeks, each paying six pence to be shocked by the sculpture of a pregnant woman. Acclaimed Liverpool sculptor Herbert Tyson Smith had a studio, in the garden courtyard, for many years, as did Liverpool's early modernist painter and critic Roderick Bisson and the surrealist George Jardine.



The building has an equally distinguished history in the performing arts, from visits by Stravinsky, Bartok and Britten, to leading jazz and rock players such as Sun Ra, Captain Beefheart and John Surman, to contemporary composers like Michael Nyman and Gavin Bryars, and the performance art of Yoko Ono, dancer Michael Clark, or live literature from Doris Lessing, the Last Poets and Benjamin Zephania. But the building's creative heritage is not just about major figures. Many artists have presented their work here at an early stage in their career, including several, for instance, who went on to win the Turner Prize, whilst literally hundreds of artists and creative organisations have been supported in different ways at the Bluecoat. Many more individuals have acknowledged a connection to the building, including George Melly, brought as a child to Sandon fancy dress parties, and Simon Rattle who started out attending Saturday morning music sessions at the Bluecoat.

Although there have been internal modifications throughout the past thirty years, the recent capital development has been the first comprehensive renovation and restoration in fifty years. With the new arts wing, reorganisation of interior spaces and access improvements, this represents the most significant change in the Bluecoat's long history. Importantly, alongside the physical changes to the building, the Bluecoat now offers a different experience for people who use and visit the building to engage with art. Creativity, from production to consumption, will be at the heart of everything you experience at the Bluecoat. Support from Arts Council England, the Heritage Lottery Fund, North West Regional Development Agency and the European Regional Development Fund, and from trusts, foundations and donors, has enabled the Bluecoat to transform itself into a building ready to face and survive the next 300 years.

Like its beginnings as a school, the Bluecoat building is still a place for learning, with the emphasis now on participation and opportunities for all to find out about and take part in art. This brochure offers just a snapshot of how the building and its activities developed, its transition from school to contemporary arts venue. We hope that you will want to find out more about this story and how you can be involved in heritage and other activities available in the building. Please visit our website www.thebluecoat.org.uk

The story so far



www.thebluecoat.org.uk

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