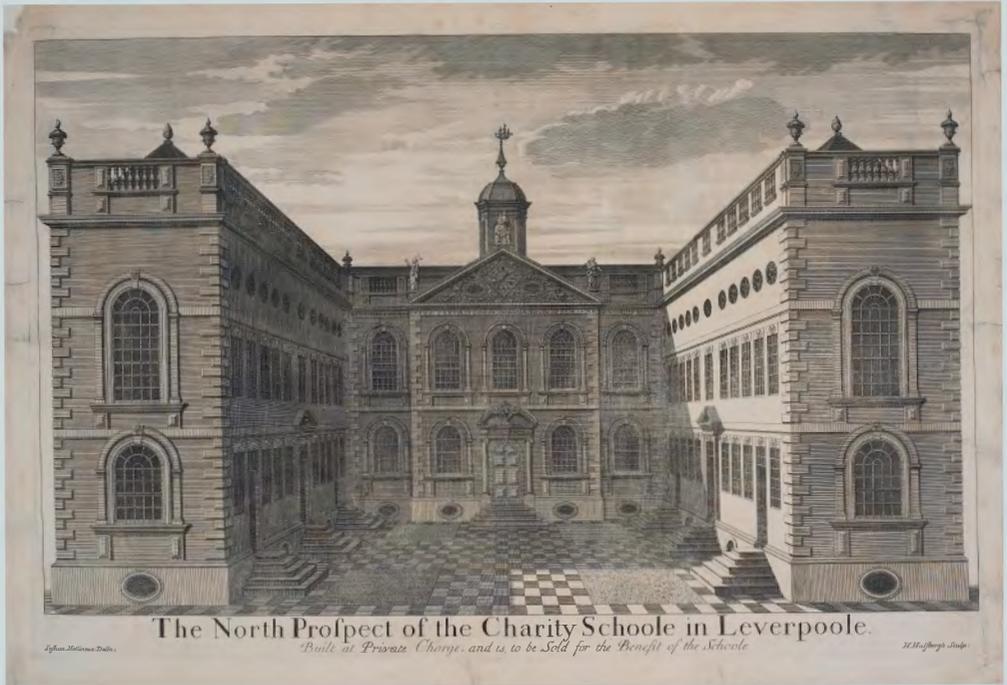


# Subscriptions, Schooling and Slavery: Bluecoat's early years

CHRISTIANA CHARITATIS PROMOTIONE ET IN OMNIBUS AETATIBUS IN ECCLESIA ANGLICANA PRINCIPIS INBUEMUR SACRUM ANNO SALUTIS MDCCLVII



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## Bluecoat will be 300 years old in 2017, but what are the origins of Liverpool city centre's oldest building, now a leading centre for the contemporary arts?

Dating from 1717 and built in the Queen Anne style, it was established as a charity school for poor children and, with strong maritime connections, was witness to the start of Liverpool's growth as an international trading port during the early 18th century. This maritime mercantile connection is recognised by Bluecoat's inclusion in Liverpool's World Heritage Site designation, awarded by UNESCO for "the supreme example of a commercial port at a time of Britain's greatest global influence."

This brochure is based on recent research, carried out by Sophie Jones, into how the school was funded, in particular the people who supported it through regular donations between 1714–1725 and where they derived their income from, including the transatlantic slave trade.

**1 H. Hulsbergh, *Engraving of Blue Coat School* (after Joshua Molineux drawing, 1718). The print was sold to generate income for the school. Licence granted courtesy of The Rt. Hon. The Earl of Derby, 2016.**

## The founding of Bluecoat

The Blue Coat School (the single word 'Bluecoat' was adopted later, while the present school in Wavertree retains the original spelling) was founded in 1708 by Bryan Blundell, master mariner, and Robert Styth, rector of Liverpool. Housed in a modest building costing £35 in the grounds of St. Peter's church (in Church Street, opposite the present Bluecoat) it accommodated 50 pupils and was dedicated to the promotion of Christian charity and the training of children in the principles of the Anglican church. Blundell's role was initially limited due to his being away at sea, but he pledged a portion of his earnings from future voyages to the school.

In 1713, Blundell returned from sea and, learning of Styth's death and observing that the other rector was 'much indisposed of at the time, and not able to undertake such a charge',<sup>1</sup> was concerned about the state of the school. Without Styth's leadership it had become a place where 'the rules were neglected and left to

dwindle',<sup>2</sup> with 'some of the children begging about the streets; their parents being so poor as to not have bread for them'.<sup>3</sup>

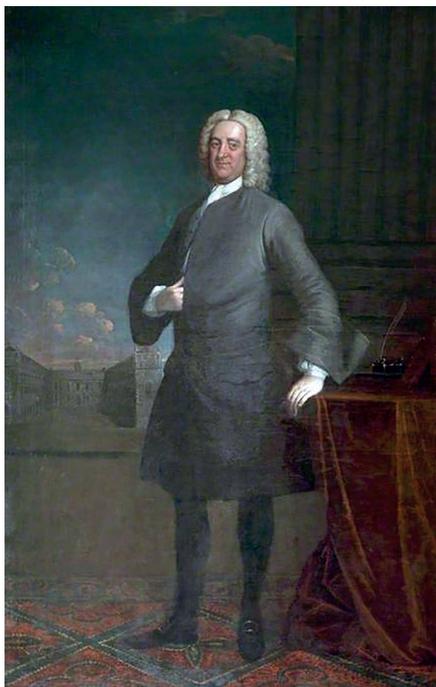
Consequently, Blundell retired from sea to take charge of the school as Treasurer from 1714 and began to plan a new building – the current Bluecoat – that would accommodate larger numbers of children. This new building transformed the school into a residential institution where Blundell could 'take (the children) totally from their parents' and provide them with 'meat, drink and lodging in one entire house'.<sup>4</sup> With money raised predominantly by subscription from Liverpool's 'persons of ability',<sup>5</sup> work began on the construction of a new building in School Lane.

1,3 and 5 *Narrative of the rise and progress of the charity school, or Blue Coat Hospital, made by Mr Bryan Blundell, Treasurer* (Liverpool Record Office)

2 *The Journal of Bryan Blundell, 1687–1754* (Merseyside Maritime Museum)

4 *Subscription Ledger, 1717* (Liverpool Record Office)

**2 Bryan Blundell, master mariner,  
co-founder of Blue Coat School.  
Image courtesy of Blue Coat School**





3

3 James Chadwick, detail from *The Mapp of all the streets, lanes and alleys within the town of Liverpool* (1725), showing the school's proximity to the Old Dock

4 W. H. Watts, *Old Dock, East Side, Showing the Old Custom House* (1799)

Both images courtesy of Liverpool Record Office



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## The port of Liverpool

Construction of the Old Dock was completed in 1715, a year before the foundation stone for the Blue Coat's new premises was laid less than half a mile away. This innovation, the world's first enclosed wet dock, helped establish Liverpool as a globally significant port, and its success during the early 18th century was mirrored by the progress of the charity school.

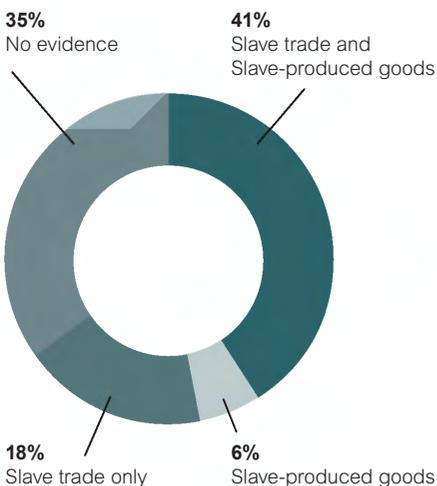
The first ship for Africa sailed from Liverpool in 1699, and heavy involvement in the transatlantic slave trade contributed greatly to the town's commercial success. As part of this 'Triangular Trade', British goods were transported from Liverpool on ships to Africa, which then transported enslaved

African people to the Americas and the Caribbean, before returning to Liverpool with goods from the New World. Consequently, there is speculation over the extent to which many of Liverpool's prominent 18th century buildings and institutions, including Bluecoat, were funded either from proceeds of the slave trade, or from trades reliant on the use of slave labour.

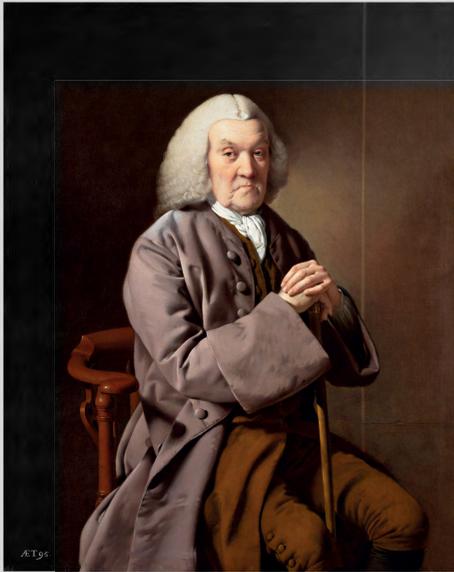
During the latter part of the century and into the early 19th century, it is clear from the Blue Coat's own accounts that the school was intricately bound with the fortunes of Liverpool's maritime trade. A significant proportion of its income came from 'commanders of ships returning from sea', while boys from the school were apprenticed as ships' masters and mates, likely involved in the slave trade themselves.

**5** Participation in the slave trade and the trade in slave-produced commodities between 1700–25 by subscribers to the School.

**6** Albin Roberts Burt, *Captain Hugh Crow*, (1820)  
© Merseyside Maritime Museum, National Museums Liverpool



## How the school was funded



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Who were those individuals who funded the construction of the building during Liverpool's early growth as a port of significance? Between 1714, when Blundell started to raise funds for the construction of the new school, and 1725 when it was fully completed, 17 individuals and families have been identified as its most regular and consistent sponsors. A group of key supporters, they each pledged an annual subscription to the school, which was recorded in the school's ledger by Blundell himself in his role as Treasurer. If one of these subscribers died, another family member such as a widow or son would often take up the subscription on their behalf.

The subscribers were mainly:

- male, although not exclusively
- successful, prominent members of Liverpool's burgeoning wealthy class.
- connected to the new Parish of Liverpool – for instance, they and their families were married, buried or christened at either St. Nicholas' or St. Peter's Church
- merchants, councillors, or a combination of the two. Many served as MPs or Lord Mayors for the town. The one exception to this profile was clergyman Reverend Baldwin.

Notable members of this group included:

- **Sir Thomas Johnson**, a Liverpool MP and Lord Mayor who was knighted for his loyalty to the Crown against a Jacobite invasion. Johnson later became a customs collector in Virginia, America, and gives his name to Sir Thomas Street.
- **Richard Gildart**, a Liverpool MP and Lord Mayor, who went into business with Johnson, his father-in-law, trading tobacco, rock salt, and slaves. His portrait today hangs in the Walker Art Gallery.
- **The Clayton family**, after whom Clayton Square is named. The family included tobacco and sugar merchant William Clayton MP, his widow Elizabeth, and extended family, Eleanor Clayton 'of the West Indies', Margaret and Ann.



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**Cover H. Hulsberg, *Engraving of Blue Coat School* (detail):  
see caption 1 for details**

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