

Who was the architect of Bluecoat?



Bluecoat is central Liverpool's oldest building, dating from 1717. Also the UK's first arts centre, it began life as a charity school, built in the Queen Anne style. The award-winning refurbishment of this Grade One listed building for Liverpool European Capital of Culture in 2008 was by Rotterdam practice, Bjarke Ingels Group. But who was the architect of the original building? Up until our 300th birthday celebrations in 2017, there were three contenders.

Little is known of local architects at the time, however the design of Bluecoat is so confident architecturally that it is was thought unlikely to have been designed by a local mason-builder, and three names were put forward, each having some claim to the title:

- **Thomas Ripley** (c1683-1758)

The architect most likely to be present in relevant spheres of influence in the second decade of the 18th century, Ripley had connections to Liverpool MP, Sir Thomas Johnson, a Blue Coat school trustee and potentially involved in the procurement of the building. However, despite some stylistic similarities between Liverpool's Customs House, which Ripley designed, and the Bluecoat building, the latter design is more confident and satisfying and was completed before Ripley's documented involvement with Liverpool.

- **Thomas Steers** (c1670-1750)

Steers appears a strong candidate, being in Liverpool at the time working as the city's dock engineer (he designed Old Dock, the world's first commercial wet dock). He'd lived and worked in Holland and London and seen works by baroque architects, including Wren. Commentators have remarked on Bluecoat's 'Wrenish' style. The school's account book shows payments to Steers during the building's construction, though the reference is not specific and could have been for procuring specific construction items (for instance, Steers owned a local foundry).

- **Henry Sephton** (1686-1756)

A regionally significant architect, Sephton's buildings include the house of Ince Blundell (1720), closest in date to Bluecoat (1717) but a more self-conscious and serious architectural study that doesn't employ the latter's round-arched windows, prominent keystones and decoration. Sephton also designed the east wing of Knowsley Hall (1731) however, which has similarities to Bluecoat and, like it, was illustrated in a painting by the artist, J. Mollineux. Sephton was paid £10 for plans for St George's (1720), which, though not used, indicates he was closely involved with early 18th century architectural developments in Liverpool.

Bluecoat's architectural style was somewhat old-fashioned when built, but it was common for charity establishments to be designed in a conservative style. However, the building is also inventive, its design full of life and energy, and could be the work of a young designer not in tune with the latest architectural thinking.

This was the position pre-2017, however research by Gavin Davenport, project manager of our Heritage Lottery Fund-supported *My Bluecoat* project, offers a convincing argument for Thomas Steers, working with local mason James Litherland, following their collaboration on Old Dock, which was completed in 1715, just before work began on Bluecoat. This will be evidenced in a forthcoming book on the Bluecoat story.