

# Liverpool, 1886: Selling the ‘City of Ships’

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper examines the efforts of a city to stage an international exhibition and boost its standing, while at the same time paying attention to how these efforts were received in the local, national and the international press.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Drawing on Lindqvist’s schematic picture of the dimensions of exhibitions, the paper looks at the management of the exhibition, its content and responses to the event. Contemporary evidence, particularly newspapers and minutes, is used to gauge the motivations behind the occasion and the extent to which it could be deemed a success.

**Findings** – The paper reveals that this event, the first provincial international exhibition to be held in England, faced particular problems related to the way in which the occasion was conceived and marketed. Despite cross-party and regional support, the exhibition illustrates some of the often overlooked risks inherent in place promotion.

**Research limitation/implications** – Only one, English, exhibition is examined. Further work is needed to see whether other provincial international exhibitions were judged in a similar way.

**Originality/value** – Through an investigation of contemporary opinion about an international exhibition, this paper goes some way to redress the scholarly neglect of provincial international exhibitions and the ways in which efforts at place promotion were received by contemporaries.

**Keywords** – international exhibitions; civic identity; place promotion.

**Paper type** – Research paper

## Introduction: Assessing exhibitions

Commercial exhibitions attempt to deliver ‘experiential and emotional impact in order to stimulate action (buying)’ (Lindqvist, 2009, p. 39). These events have attracted academics interested in contemporary relationships between those who manage and sponsor such occasions and the public (e.g. Cuadrado-Roura and Rubalcaba-Bermajo, 1998; Blythe, 1999; Ladkin and Spiller, 2000; Lindqvist, 2003; Robertson and Frew, 2008). Given the profile of exhibitions on the international stage since the middle of the nineteenth century, along with the numerous traces these events have left in newspapers, official publications, photographs, items and ephemera, it is unsurprising that historians have also taken an interest in these phenomena (Hoffenberg, 2000; Barton, 2000; Purbrick, 2001; Kaiser, 2005; Auerbach and Hoffenberg, 2008; Young, 2009).

Although historians have been aware of the need to ‘sell’ exhibitions to the public during the nineteenth and twentieth century (Auerbach, 1999, p. 3), other concerns, including the ways in which empire was promoted (Porter, 1995, p. 175; MacKenzie, 2001; *ibid.* 2009, p. 222) and their effectiveness as vehicles of middle-class hegemony (Bennett, 1988, p. 94), have tended to dominate the historiography on the topic. Moreover, the Great Exhibition of 1851 has overshadowed historical writing on British exhibitions. In comparison, the ways in which these occasions were marketed and managed during the nineteenth century have been overlooked. Exhibitions outside the capital, such as the one at Liverpool in 1886, have only come under critical examination relatively recently (Pincombe, 2007; Ferry, 2007), and neither study focuses exclusively on the marketing of the event. This is unfortunate because provincial exhibitions presented particular marketing problems which deserve attention. Like events held in capital cities, provincial exhibitions were very often one-off events. Yet those who managed and promoted provincial exhibitions which claimed to be international, such as the one considered here, faced particular challenges because they did not possess as many resources, whether symbolic or structural, as capital cities and may well have been less able to attract visitors, elements identified by Ashworth and Voogd as being central to the city marketing process (1990, p. 29). The success or otherwise of such efforts were dependent upon marketing measures which brought

the product and consumer together. What was more, all stages of the effort, from its inception to its conclusion, were inspected and remarked upon by local and national newspapers, many of which were likely to draw comparisons with previous exhibitions. The event could be brought to the public's attention for the wrong as well as the right reasons.

Existing appraisals of the exhibition which Liverpool staged in 1886 imply that the event, which was opened with great pomp and ceremony by Queen Victoria, was a success, noting that it was an expression of confidence in the city and its leaders (Belchem, 2000, p. 5), attracted some three million visitors (Munck, 2003, p. 42) and occupied a site larger than that which housed the Great Exhibition of 1851 (Burnett, 2004, p. 22). This paper, however, takes a closer, critical look at the exhibition and goes beyond those easily assimilated features which have so far been taken as representative of the occasion. Like all forms of communication, place promotion, 'takes place against other acts that can reinforce, countermand or even neutralise the impact of the specific message' (Gold and Gold 2005, p.12). Any convincing attempt to gauge efforts to promote a place needs to explore more than the message itself. Accordingly, rather than concentrating on the images and material used to market the exhibition this paper uses press reports and the Liverpool Council minutes to identify the reasoning behind and reactions to the 'message'. The study questions the 'liberal narrative' which, echoing the rhetoric of those who organised such events, takes an unduly optimistic view of what exhibitions achieved, sometimes by making much of the challenges which were overcome by those who planned events (Purbrick, 2002, p. 8).

The event signalled the convergence of two imperatives, the 'exhibition fever' that swept through the Western world from mid-century onwards, and the determination of its originator, Liverpool's Mayor David Radcliffe, to use the instrument of a public exhibition to provide a showcase for his city on the world stage during a time of extreme economic adversity (Royal Commission, C.4621, 1886, p. 92). The previous three decades had been good times during which Liverpool had consolidated its status as the second port of empire, handling an increasing volume of incoming raw materials and outgoing manufactures from its hinterland, a transit trade largely controlled by the Mersey Docks and Harbours Board. There followed several lean years during which Liverpool, heavily dependent on trade, suffered an acute loss of business, hitting local employers and leading to mass unemployment of Liverpool's mainly unskilled labour force (Kenny, 2002, p. 12). The port's supremacy was further tested from 1885, when Manchester manufacturers, irked by its high dock duties, overcame the stubborn resistance of the Board and secured passage of legislation enabling the construction of a ship canal that would by-pass Liverpool. Like later instances of place marketing, the event was an attempt to encourage capital investment in a competitive market (Philo and Kearns, 1993, p. 18). The exhibition thus had several purposes: to protect the city's status as a leading world port, to provide a measure of local employment and trade, but above all to 'sell' Liverpool as a major world city on both the national and international scene.

Radcliffe's proposal for an exhibition, publicised in February 1885, received almost unanimous backing from the Council over which he presided, convinced by the argument that it would help local trade and employment. It was strongly supported by Liverpool's daily press, led by the staunchly Tory and pro-Council *Liverpool Courier*, which saw it as a golden opportunity to showcase the city, irrespective of political loyalty. However, this exercise in 'civic boosterism' (Belchem, 2006, p.28) faced severe fiscal restraints that limited the scope of potential municipal entrepreneurship. Local government legislation insisted that expenditure from Council rates could only be used for the direct benefit of ratepayers: this might include cultural activities, such as libraries and art galleries (Ward, 1998, p. 3), but emphatically not commercial initiatives such as exhibitions, which in Britain (in contrast to some on mainland Europe that were supported by government) had always been funded by public subscription/guarantor list. Similarly, local authorities in that period were debarred from spending ratepayers' money to advertise public amenities (Ward, 1998, pp. 37-8). The Liverpool exhibition was thus dependent wholly on the public-spiritedness of the city's men of substance to provide the necessary credit to enable its construction and operation. Radcliffe's enterprise involved a degree of financial risk to guarantors which he believed worth taking to 'sell' the city, especially at a time of economic depression.

Little explanation is needed of his choice of an exhibition to boost Liverpool's fortunes. Spurred on by technological development, increasingly competitive economic conditions and 'the new imperialism', nations, and later, regions and cities, vied with each other to capture the public attention, displaying the latest machines, inventions and manufactured goods. The free trade/internationalist ethos that had characterised the spirit of Crystal Palace (Hobhouse, 1937, p. 8) had withered, though at

exhibitions designated ‘International’, or ‘Universal’, some elements of this survived, with at least a semblance of commercial intellectual exchange. But the tone of the various exhibitions held in locations outside London had become more local, absorbed in the promotion of that particular place as a specialist producer. Liverpool’s exhibition was initially launched within that narrower framework, showcasing its status as a world port, but as this paper shows, became more ambitious in scope, leading to some loss in focus in what it was attempting to ‘sell’. After outlining the organisation and realisation of the exhibition, this paper will turn to the use of concepts of world trade and empire in the projection and transmission of the event. Following this, the reception of the event locally, nationally and, to a lesser extent, internationally will be assessed. This paper is thus organised around three levels of Lindqvist’s schematic picture of the dimensions of exhibitions, namely: management; exhibition; and public. Although this model was designed to facilitate the analysis of national exhibitions, international exhibitions can be assessed on each of these levels too. Lindqvist also identified a fourth dimension, ‘the political’. This level, ‘manifesting national issues, unity, faith etc.’, interpolates the other dimensions considered here (2009, p. 47). For all the routine issues involved in planning and executing exhibitions, the events were frequently assessed on their ability to embody the kinds of conspicuous concepts to be found in ‘the political’ dimension.

### **Conception and delivery**

The successful conception and realisation of a large-scale exhibition demands a considerable amount of co-operation among the host city’s leading figures. In addition, those who manage exhibitions need to attract exhibitors from home and abroad. Both of these requirements present problems which can only be surmounted by marketing the idea of an exhibition to groups who may have divergent interests. In the late nineteenth century, Liverpool was divided into Conservative and Liberal camps, and their political disagreements intersected with disagreements between Protestant and Catholic interests. There were also conflicts of interest between British industry and their competitors, yet both needed to be attracted to an international exhibition if it was going to merit its title. Those who manage exhibitions have to select a suitable site and structure, something which, in the case of Liverpool’s exhibition, proved to be problematic and divisive.

Radcliffe was a self-made brass foundry proprietor who had recently become chairman of the Liverpool United Tramways and Omnibus Company and a director of several railways. Along with Arthur Forwood, long-term chair of the Liverpool council finance and estates committee, he stood for a ‘popular Toryism’ that sought to mobilise the City’s dominant Protestant element. Radcliffe launched proceedings by convening a town meeting of Liverpool’s commercial and professional leaders on 23 February 1885, where his proposal for an exhibition of shipping, plus some associated enterprises, to open in the spring of 1886, was unanimously endorsed (*Liverpool Courier*, 24 February 1885). The mayor referred to the financial success of recent exhibitions in Wolverhampton (1884) and Leeds (1875), and the likelihood that overseas visitors who came to see the Colonial and Indian Exhibition at South Kensington in 1886 would go on to Liverpool, a conjecture which finds some support in the American press (*Salt Lake City Herald*, 6 May 1886). The final resolution was moved by Philip Rathbone, a leading Liberal politician, in a bi-partisan spirit that showed the cause of Liverpool could unite erstwhile foes in a common purpose.

The exhibition’s *Official Catalogue* demonstrated the inclusive nature of its patronage, with a roll of 22 northern mayors, local MPs and peers listed underneath the Queen and other royals. As we have seen, Liverpool’s show was funded entirely by private guarantors. The list in the exhibition catalogue reveals much about the structure of the city’s elite and varying levels of commitment to the project. It is headed by Lord Derby (£2,000) whose family had local connections going back to feudal times. The city’s Tramway and Omnibus Company, chaired by Radcliffe, and six railway companies – all of which stood to derive direct financial benefit from bringing visitors to the Exhibition – were other substantial guarantors. Over two-third of the city’s councillors, including two prominent Irish Home Rulers otherwise opposed to the Tory administration, and R. D. Holt, who had earlier declared the enterprise a waste of money, were listed (*Liverpool Courier*, 10 May 1886). Although they did not stand to gain, as any profits were to go to a proposed technical school for Liverpool, they would be financially liable if the exhibition lost money. The city’s brokers and merchants were prominent guarantors, demonstrating the fact that, notwithstanding their differences and personal views, many of Liverpool’s men of substance supported this exercise of civic salesmanship (*Official Catalogue*, 1886, pp. xvi–xxiv).

To draw in British industry generally, it was decided to have a substantial machinery in motion section. Yet foreign exhibitors were excluded, which showed how far Britain had moved from the free trade internationalist ethos of the Great Exhibition (Hoffenberg, 2001, p. 24). This attempt to segregate foreigners and depict them as mere producers of 'luxury goods' backfired, as the American court displayed two recently patented American products, a cash register that minimised employee theft, and a modern typewriter, as well as a variety of tinned goods (*Official Catalogue*, 1886, pp.154–5); although Springfield's *Globe Republic* thought the display was pitiful given 'the magnificent manufacturing achievements of our country' (10 October 1886).

International precedents influenced decisions concerning the location of the event. An earlier suggestion of using the council-owned St George's Hall, conveniently located opposite Lime Street station in the heart of the city, was abandoned, as Radcliffe, who had visited the Antwerp Exhibition in the summer of 1885, had set his heart on something bigger that would require a new site in the suburbs. And following Antwerp's example, in an ambitious move the Executive Council decided to call it an international exhibition, to be the first held outside London: 'The International Exhibition of Navigation, Travelling, Commerce, and Manufacturing, Liverpool, 1886' – or, as it was popularly called after it was disclosed that model ships would form a major part of the display, the 'Shipperies'. A visit to Osborne House by Liverpool's leading businessmen won an extra dividend, the monarch's patronage for a cause that evidently invoked royal memories of Albert and the Great Exhibition. Meanwhile, the exhibition's international status had been acknowledged by the issue of a Board of Trade certificate on 5 October: this protected the patents of foreign exhibits, and was supplemented later by a customs agreement to allow foreign goods in duty free, provided they were not sold at the exhibition. Radcliffe's efforts won him the unprecedented extension of his mayoralty for a further year so that he could preside over the occasion.

However, this apparently good start masked an initial poor strategic judgment. It was decided to buy and transport to Liverpool a substantial part of the main building that housed the Antwerp Exhibition. Organisers argued that this had the advantage of economy and avoided the risk that a structure started from scratch might not be ready in time. The decision was unpopular with many who felt British industry and labour had been slighted at a time of depression. As Eric Mattie has revealed, the contractors who purchased the structure on behalf of the executive council actually bought third hand materials that had originated at the earlier 1883 Amsterdam Exhibition (1998, p. 61). Moreover, its transportation to Liverpool had to await the autumn closure in Antwerp, leaving only a very limited period to relocate and re-erect the structure. This error of judgment was compounded by delays in preparing the site at Edge Lane, provoking a row that convulsed the Tory-dominated Corporation. At Radcliffe's request, Forwood's finance committee had agreed to allocate the site gratis for the use of the exhibition up to its closure in November 1886. Although extensive enough for the planned building and associated gardens, the site had a major drawback in that it was in poor condition, and had a marked slope that required levelling if a large structure was to be erected. The Corporation Surveyor grossly underestimated the cost of preparing the site at £3,500, to take not more than six weeks. Once started, the sheer size of the task became apparent, with up to 18 foot depth of soil having to be removed. An announcement in late December 1885 that the actual expenditure to date was double the allocated cost with much work still outstanding caused a major rift in the council when Forwood, in his capacity as chair of the finance committee, unilaterally ordered the suspension of work until it was approved by a full Council meeting. It transpired that the initial authorisation had been based on dubious premises legally. Municipal legislation permitted expenditure of council funds only in 'the interests of ratepayers'. Radcliffe and his supporters had argued that earlier plans to turn the site into a park, one for Liverpool citizens, justified the use of ratepayers' monies to make it suitable for this purpose. But the levelling of a site to facilitate the erection of a large building estimated to cover anything up to 17 acres was another matter entirely, and outweighed the mayor's contention that the work had provided gainful employment for destitute labourers. Added to this was the ruling, made rather belatedly by the town clerk that the free grant of council land to private individuals, was not in the interest of ratepayers either, as a rent should have been demanded. Matters came to a head at the full council meeting of 6 January 1886, when Radcliffe lost his temper and created a rupture with Forwood that continued throughout the whole exhibition. In fact, preparations had reached the stage where abandonment of the project could not be entertained; councillors voted overwhelmingly to approve any further expenditure on the site (Liverpool Council minutes, 1885–6; *Liverpool Courier*, 7 January 1886).

Any postponement also would have been unthinkable, irrefutable evidence of Liverpool's inability to stage an international event. A scramble of activity including late night working under newly-installed electric lighting saw completion of the main building in time for the Royal opening, though much else remained incomplete. In the euphoria following the Royal opening on 11 May, these trials and tribulations were soon forgotten. Indeed, these difficulties could be subsumed into the 'liberal narrative' which made much out of how logistical problems had been overcome by those who staged such grand events. The support given to the exhibition from a variety of quarters was indicative of a desire to lay claim to second place in the British imperial hierarchy; the risk taken in emulating the Antwerp Exhibition may well have been worthwhile. If the exhibition could embody this claim, then it was possible that the public perception of the exhibition, and by association Liverpool, would be brought in line with the intentions of its promoters.

### Exhibiting the 'second city of empire'

Unlike the preparatory stages of the exhibition, its content and the ways in which it was perceived could upset any 'liberal narrative'. Given that the Liverpool event was a self-proclaimed international exhibition the stakes were especially high. Although Liverpool could not compete with London, the first city of empire, Queen Victoria's visit presented an opportunity for the port to bolster its claim to be the second city of empire. The exhibition contained exhibits from around the world, including a centrepiece, the Liverpool Trophy, which summed up the port's sense of importance. Shipping was a central part of the port's identity; its docks were the point where many products from around the world arrived and a substantial amount of Britain's manufactured goods left. An Indian village and other features added an exotic flavour to the occasion. A focus on produce from around the world, complemented by imperial themes, was not unproblematic, however. Even if the content was apposite at exhibition level, the attempt to encapsulate the empire and industry threatened to muddy the promotion of Liverpool's primary characteristic as a 'trading centre' (Lane, 1997, p. 5).

During her visit to the port, Queen Victoria was taken out to the Mersey where she espied the docks. The waterborne spectacle was a novel addition to the more commonplace processions through the city. This is not to say that the port stinted on displays on the streets, where giant arches were erected, banners hung and electrical lighting illuminated buildings; Liverpool was, according to the *Daily News*, lit up as never before: 'All the public buildings, offices, clubs, restaurants, and principal business houses will be one blaze of light' (6 May 1886). Yet it was the maritime panorama which served to heighten Liverpool's reputation as an international port. The *London Illustrated News* remarked that the view of trade and activity was distinctive and impressive; London's trade was not so noticeable (15 May 1886). As trade 'was at the theoretical core of exhibitions', Liverpool, with its spectacular waterfront was able to capitalise on this theme (Greenhalgh, 1988, p. 22).

On land, the port's contribution to international trade was represented by the novelty of a city trophy, a feature absent from recent exhibitions at Leeds and Wolverhampton where the focus was on regional produce rather than international commerce. The commanding thirty-foot structure was surmounted by the city's liver bird emblem and the royal crown, uniting feelings of local and national patriotism in an assertion of Liverpool's status as a commercial city of international importance, no mere transit port. In ancient times, trophies had been collections of weapons taken from conquered people and presented as tokens of victory for public admiration. The Liverpool trophy thus celebrated the city's spoils, won this time peacefully by dint of the industry and acumen of its brokers, merchants, ship-owners and traders overseas (Young, 2009, p. 67). Pictures of the lands where many of the imports came from appeared on panels; in between these images there were samples of these goods (*Liverpool Mercury*, 8 May 1886; *Chemist and Druggist*, 28 1886, p. 439). The trophy contained 'growing specimens of corn, cotton, &c', it was not, therefore, a collection of inert materials, it contained life and growth; this was not a trophy of past glories, but a snapshot of present achievements. Press reports stressed how the trophy, 'would attract much interest from the novelty of the structure and the character of its illustration' (*North Wales Chronicle*, 15 May 1886). The port's merchants were asserting their significance and had chosen an especially noticeable form of place promotion. A Glasgow paper's comment that 'the merchants of the city have raised *what is called* the Liverpool Trophy [*italics added*]', without any praise of the piece, may indicate a desire to underplay the significance of a port which shared Glasgow's title 'second city of empire' (*Glasgow Herald*, 28 May 1886; MacKenzie, 1999).

Historians of leisure have seen the 1880s and 1890s as an era when 'much of the guilt was being taken out of fun' (Lowerson and Myerscough, 1977, p. 21). Indeed, many observers had come round to

the view that it was entertainment that enticed people to exhibitions. Recognising this reality, Liverpool's organisers laid on a variety of leisure attractions from around the world: a captive balloon, a Canadian toboggan ride, regarded as the first in England, a replica of the Eddystone Lighthouse, a resident orchestra, and guest appearances from the Hungarian Blue Band, the Belgian Guides (a leading continental brass band) and the Vienna Ladies' Orchestra, with regular military band concerts (*Dart*, 24 September 1886; *New York Times*, 30 August 1886; *Bromborough Parish Magazine*, August 1886). The exhibition grounds were landscaped with gardens and promenades lit at night by thousands of coloured Japanese lanterns, and twice-weekly firework displays.

The imperial and necessarily exotic element expected at Victorian exhibitions, especially from the 1880s onwards, was provided by William Cross, a Liverpool dealer in wild animals with an international reputation. Cross despatched his manager overseas to recruit a company of fifty Indians, some of whom would be craftsmen, dancers and musicians, who featured at many exhibitions. Along with these 'domesticated' Indians, Cross promised the 'real and rare representatives of the various Eastern tribes'. This bevy of assorted humanity was supplemented by a range of 'domesticated' animals, dwarf elephants and zebras reputedly 'broken to harness'. Whereas the Great Exhibition had domesticated the sub continent, Cross now turned it into entertainment with, as a central feature in the village, a circus inside what looked like an Indian palace (Kriegel, 2002, p. 149; *International Exhibition, Liverpool: The Indian Village*, 1886). In his study of menageries, Koenigsberger notes that empire and displays of wild animals alike were forms of 'imperial management' and the Indian village illustrates both (2007, p. 40).

Yet it would be a mistake to see such exhibitions as only being expressions of propaganda. These attractions were integral to the marketing of the event locally. Whereas foreign visitors and exhibitors may have been impressed by the 'city of ships', British visitors would need something less quotidian. Income from British visitors was crucial to the scheme's success or otherwise. It was in this respect that the Indian village and other attractions were important: they offered something which, heretofore, only the metropolis had staged. In exhibiting sights from around the world, the exhibition presented an opportunity for people to sample the exotic. The exhibition included rickshaw rides 'drawn by native men' which was, according to one American visitor, 'a great curiosity to the young people and much used by the ladies for conveyance about the grounds' (Wallace, 1887, p. 15). Incorporating rides and spectacles certainly contributed more to the popularity of the exhibition than stationary exhibits.

K. C. Spier, the exhibition's publicity officer, claimed that visitors to Liverpool would be treated to 'a display more varied, more comprehensive, more opulent, and more wonderful than anything that has been seen in this country since the Exhibition of all Nations in 1851' (Spier 1886, p. 19). Spier's comment points towards one of the problems the Liverpool exhibition experienced. Like many other exhibitions, it sought to apply the template laid down by the Great Exhibition of 1851, while at the same time addressing the twin late nineteenth-century concern with 'familiarizing the public with the overseas empire' and entertaining them (August, 1985, p. 53). In doing so, though, it brought a number of themes to the fore which, although related, did not present a clear impression of Liverpool's importance. Granted, the Liverpool Trophy, Indian village and other assorted amusements respectively underscored Liverpool's role as link across the Atlantic, a commercial hub and gateway to the world. Aurally, international music echoed international products. The only problem was that in creating a gallimaufry of empire and world trade, the port's identity was lost sight of somewhat. For, although imperial trade was conducted through the port, the concept of empire might be thought to reside more readily in the capital. In the same year as Liverpool's international exhibition, London hosted a 'Colonial and Indian exhibition'. Unlike the event in the capital where all but one of the exhibits – an electricity generator – were either raw materials or craftwork, Liverpool's contained many mechanical pieces (Beauchamp, 1997, pp. 144–5). In some ways, the Liverpool exhibition, with its mixture of commercial, industrial and imperial themes, was peculiar in that recent exhibitions in the capital held between 1883 and 1886 focused upon specific kinds of product or trades, such as fisheries or health. On examining the prominent symbols of the exhibition, alongside the exhibits shown there, it would appear that the 'message' of the exhibition was muddled. The extent to which contemporary judgments supported the impression which the event's managers tried to convey, or qualify it, will now be addressed as attention turns to the public level of 'meaning creation individually and in groups' (Lindqvist, 2009, p. 47).

### Viewing the exhibition

In order to brand Liverpool as the second city of empire it was not enough to simply transmit the impression of an 'international exhibition' being held in an international port. It was crucial that this image was received and convinced those from outside Liverpool that the port deserved to be seen as a centre of commerce. Further, it was important that the occasion was free of ineptitude and malpractice. Assessing the impact of such occasions presents some problems— notably, the representativeness of the opinions which have survived – but a survey of the press indicates how the exhibition was seen from a number of perspectives. It is also necessary to look beyond the press by suggesting ways in which those who did not leave a record saw the exhibition. This may be approached by scrutinizing comments about visitors in the press and by estimating how the context, such as weather conditions and the economy, in which the event took place may have influenced perceptions. Not all of these factors were within the control of the marketing strategies of those who promoted the event, but they all contributed to the image of the product.

As Spier indicated, international exhibitions were often measured against the Great Exhibition of 1851. The negative comments about the main structure at Liverpool made by the *Birmingham Daily Post's* own reporter, who remarked that the building 'impresses in its bulk more than design', may have been based on an implicit comparison with the Crystal Palace (10 May 1886). When the 'light, graceful structure' for the Manchester Exhibition of 1887 was planned, it was explicitly contrasted with the 'somewhat repulsive one' of Liverpool (*Manchester Times*, 4 September 1886). There were, however, other more general expectations, which no doubt influenced the ways in which the exhibition was perceived. The expectation that the attractions mentioned in promotional literature would be present at the start was to be disappointed because most were not in place at the opening; in a letter to the *Liverpool Mercury*, 'A Guarantor' described how 'in its present unfinished condition [the exhibition] is sending thousands away disappointed' (27 May 1886). Worse still, the cold and wet spring continued into the early summer, moving the *Liverpool Courier* to remark: 'It would seem as if the elements [have] entered into a conspiracy against the Exhibition' (16 June 1886). Adverse weather also revealed severe leaks in the hastily completed glazing, and several exhibits were damaged. As well as being of little aesthetic merit, the building thus possessed more fundamental flaws. In addition, early visitors claimed that, despite all the information about exhibits being provided in the official catalogue, an absence of clear labelling made it difficult to match this with the items concerned. In sum, both sides of the exhibition, education and entertainment, were not without blemish.

Such organisational drawbacks were compounded by disheartening admission figures, which fell short of expectations: only 314,000 attended in the first month (*Liverpool Courier*, 11 June 1886). Complaints about lack of publicity beyond the city induced Spier to display a 40 foot placard advertising the exhibition in London's Strand, and send mobile displays around Lancashire towns. Attendance improved from August onwards with the belated arrival of summer, culminating with a record 48,000 on 29 October. Excursion parties came from Lancashire towns, the Midlands, Yorkshire, north Wales and further afield and helped to swell attendances. But too much ground had been lost. Some visitors may have reckoned the exhibition too costly. The admission charge of 1s., at a time of economic depression, was one cause. Later, concessions were given via employers to working men, though many refused to be treated as objects of charity; and comparatively late, the charge for everyone was reduced to 6d. Together with this, there were complaints that the railway companies were overcharging excursion parties, as well as individual visitors: the 2s. 6d. return fare from Manchester, only thirty miles away, would have taken up a good part of the average worker's weekly pay packet, often already reduced in the depression. The irregularity of trains between the cities was noted by some observers too (*Manchester Guardian*, 2 June 1886). Sabbatarian legislation, scrupulously observed in Protestant-dominated Liverpool, deprived the executive of one potentially lucrative source of income. The public could enter the exhibition grounds (and many did) but the doors of all paid attractions remained firmly closed on Sundays. The total official figure of 3,132, 515 disguised the inclusion of exhibitors (456,000 admissions, all free). In comparison, the attendance figures for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition and the Edinburgh International Exhibition, also held in 1886, were better (*Liverpool Courier*, 9 November 1886). Attendance figures, announced in the press and on a large blackboard at the entrance to the exhibition, marked and marketed the significance of the event (Heniz, 1886).

Despite these disappointing figures and other misfortunes, the initial response of the press outside Liverpool was largely favourable. While acknowledging the possibility that these correspondents may well have been influenced by a sense of loyalty to the port, the accounts in the Manchester, Leeds and

Birmingham press convey a sense of Liverpool's importance, on a county, regional and national level. Through paying attention to the question of why the Queen deigned to visit the port and descriptions of the docks and history of the port, regional and national newspapers offered a positive picture of Liverpool; though these accounts were still shaped by the specific interests and locations of these papers. It would be ill-advised to assume that these responses to the exhibition were the direct result of attempts to 'promote' the city, but the advertisement of the port's status surely assisted those efforts to promote Liverpool which emanated from the city itself.

It might be expected that the Manchester press, particularly the Liberal *Manchester Guardian* and *Manchester Times*, would not be overly enthusiastic about an exhibition spawned by a Tory mayor in what many perceived to be Manchester's commercial rival (Waller, 1983, p. 87). Still, these papers praised the port, calling it 'the greatest seaport in the world', and outlined how 'an insignificant town' became 'the emporium of the commerce of the world'. In 'an age of exhibitions', the Liverpool event 'is fully deserving of the honour which has been conferred upon it', and although it did not match the Indian and Colonial Exhibition in size, it was as varied and comprehensive, 'the title of International is fully earned' (*Manchester Times*, 15 May 1886). At the same time, there were comments about glitches during the reception of the Queen, including 50,000 schoolchildren's 'lack of discrimination' as they cheered and applauded all who appeared on the streets with equal vigour (*Manchester Guardian*, 12 May 1886; *Manchester Times*, 15 May 1886). Moreover, the Liverpool trophy was judged 'a substantial rather than an artistic piece of work'. Although the way in which the trophy conveys 'our commercial greatness' was praised, it was stressed that these items from around the world are brought 'in return for our manufactured articles', a possible reference to Manchester's contribution to Liverpool's wealth and status (*Manchester Times*, 29 May 1886). These criticisms and qualifications were not, however, as prominent as the praise bestowed on the event. One correspondent cautioned the organisers of the forthcoming Manchester exhibition not to follow the recommendation to restrict entries to a fifty mile radius around the city. They should, he advised, open up the event to the world as Liverpool had, citing the Italian court as an example of how international exhibits can further artistic endeavours (*Manchester Guardian*, 12 July 1886). Some of the rivalry between the towns appears to have been overlooked in the light of a shared Lancastrian identity. The opening of the exhibition demonstrated the affection with which the Queen was held, 'at all events in Lancashire', an allusion to the less enthusiastic attitude to her elsewhere (*Manchester Guardian*, 13 May 1886; Anthony Taylor, 1999, pp. 122–3). Liverpool was, in this instance, a synecdoche for 'Lancashire', although it was not marketing itself as such. There is a sense in which Liverpool could be cast as an example of the provinces being able to host similar events to those held in the metropolis. In reply, London-based humorous journals satirised what they saw as a presumptuous provincial challenge (*Funny Folks*, 8 May 1886; *Moonshine*, 12 June 1886).

The Queen's decision to pay more than a flying visit to Liverpool was explained at some length by the *Leeds Mercury*, a Yorkshire paper which, unlike the Manchester press, would hardly be inclined to boast about the achievements of Lancashire. The paper did, however, convey a sense of regional pride in the event when its own reporter enthused how the exhibition was 'the largest which has been held in the provinces, and is even of greater extent than most of those which have taken place in London'. There was even an attempt to silence critics, when it was observed that 'no exhibition was ever complete at the opening' (*Leeds Mercury*, 10 May 1886). It is likely that the paper was not entirely convinced by the port's unofficial title: it noted that Liverpool '*claims to be* "the second city of empire" [italics added]', but economic circumstances meant that the exhibition assumed a significant role. The 'great enterprise' had the object of 'stimulating ... our sluggish industries and the increase of our lagging commerce, as well as the strengthening of the friendly relations which exist between us and the other nations which are aiding in the work' (*Leeds Mercury*, 11 May 1886). Similar sentiments were expressed by Wirral-born author of adventure stories David Ker, who, before continuing on his journey to central Africa, observed that 'Liverpool's big show' will bring some trade which the port 'so grievously needs at the moment' (*New York Times*, 18 May 1886).

On balance, early impressions of the exhibition appear to have been positive, even though it is important to note those comments which suggest that the promotional image was not taken on board indiscriminately. Together with feeding county and regional pride, the efforts of its organisers chimed with a desire to stimulate trade. These reports confirmed, albeit with some qualifications, the impression of Liverpool as a significant commercial centre. All the same, capturing the imagination was one thing, but demonstrating civic competence was another. Already, there had been problems which were attributed to the weather, pricing and inadequate advertising, and continuous complaints



from Liverpool retailers that, far from helping them, the exhibition had become a 'bazaar', at which foreigners and others who had not paid rates to the Liverpool Council had made money at their expense (*Liverpool Courier*, 30 July 1886). These setbacks were dwarfed by two related scandals which marked the final weeks of the exhibition. The first arose over the question of testimonials for exhibition officials; the second, over the award of medals, the gold category of which was eagerly sought after by exhibitors desperate to use them for advertising their wares and win more customers.

S. Lee Bapty, the exhibition's superintendent, was perceived by many to be the one man, apart from Radcliffe, who had ensured that it had opened in time; Manchester took him on to run their 1887 exhibition, and some time before Liverpool's show closed, he gave notice of his departure. A testimonial was hurriedly organised, and exhibitors approached, apparently unofficially, to contribute. This quickly became enmeshed in problems with the judging of awards. The judging arrangements, by jurors nominated by exhibitors, had manifest shortcomings, causing inevitable delay in setting up juries: Liverpool's jurors only met for the first time in early September. More seriously, it was open to abuse by that phenomenon of the period, the exhibition tout. Liverpool attracted one such, who claimed to be officially appointed by the executive council, had an on-site office and allegedly used official exhibition notepaper. T. Vincent Riordan started out by suggesting the names of potential jurors to exhibitors, and once the juries had been established then issued a circular touting his services which contained the promise: 'if you want the gold medal award you should engage me' (*Liverpool Echo*, 30 October 1886). The corrupt practice inherent in this transaction became enmeshed in a rumour that those who did not contribute to the Bapty testimonial would be ruled out of contention for a medal. Radcliffe promptly denied this, ruled out any further testimonials and disavowed Riordan, but the damage had been done.

After much delay, the medal awards were announced a fortnight late on 15 October. There were the usual complaints from those who had lost out, but allegations of incompetence and malpractice emerged, with a particularly damaging report that found its way to the London *Times*, referring to Riordan's activities. Its editorial went on to cast doubt on the commercial value of exhibitions to manufacturers, who had often spent large sums of money on moving and setting up their displays, if less than 'thoroughly competent persons' were appointed as jurors (28 October; *ibid.* 30 October). This concern was echoed by several successful exhibitors, who publicly refused to accept medals won as they believed any association with a discredited exhibition would be commercially damaging. Shortly beforehand, Bapty had raised the temperature further at the banquet where he was presented with a cheque for 1500 guineas. He revealed that the exhibition was unlikely to cover its costs, adding that 'he could not accept any share of the responsibility in connection with the deficit'. In the final month of the exhibition, further disclosures from a jury chairman revealed that the executive council had set aside many jury recommendations, drawing up often very different lists of medal winners with an increased number now securing the top accolade – accusations of indiscriminate generosity offended the commissioner for Chile in Liverpool (*Liverpool Mercury*, 18 November 1886; *ibid.*, 20 November 1886). Fresh rumours of undue influence or even bribery were seized upon by a growing number of critics. An inquiry held by Clark Aspinall, the Liverpool Coroner and chairman of all the juries, found only one example of corrupt practice (subsequently swept under the carpet by a bankruptcy court), and defended the awards as a whole in a report that the Liberal *Liverpool Daily Post*, now critical of many aspects of the exhibition, judged 'extremely unsatisfactory' (27 November 1886). Whatever the rights and wrongs of these allegations, the jury awards did little credit to Liverpool and apparently confirmed suspicions of pocket-lining and/or incompetence now held even by erstwhile supporters of the exhibition. The actual financial liabilities facing guarantors were revealed in the publication of provisional accounts on 27 November, showing a deficit of just over £15,000, but those who studied the figures more closely noted undisclosed liabilities for restoring the site, and even the amount due to the contractors for the main structure itself, disputed by the Exhibition Executive – a figure of some £39,000 was published in May 1887: a settlement for something substantially less was reached later that year (*Liverpool Courier*, 22 October; *Liverpool Review*, 6 May 1887). It was clear that from these accounts that the exhibition had fallen short of the goal that had been envisioned.

### How well was the city sold?

The exhibition has been interpreted as an expression of the city's confidence, a harbinger of its Edwardian heyday. There is no need to subscribe to the 'liberal narrative' of exhibitions to see that there is some validity in such 'optimistic' assessments, or that substantial obstacles were overcome before the event took place. The port did capture the attention of the press; showcased its waterfront; and hosted the first provincial international exhibition in England. This achievement was the result of energetic municipal entrepreneurship which cut across party lines; the support of northern industrialists; the port's imposing waterfront; and a desire, shared with neighbouring centres, to counteract a downturn in trade. In spite of these advantages, this close examination of the occasion, which took into consideration the details of the exhibition and views from beyond Liverpool, has uncovered a more complicated picture.

Ward has suggested that successful place promotion 'involves the degree to which the place itself is synonymous with a recognized marketable commodity' (1998, p. 237). Unlike its neighbours, Liverpool was not a major manufacturing centre, so the original idea, to focus on nautical transportation would have captured some of the 'city of ships' distinctive character. However, the extension of the exhibition, driven both by a desire to emulate the imperial-spirit of some metropolitan exhibitions and to profit from entertainment, rendered the exhibition less coherent. At a time when Liverpool needed to consolidate its position as a centre of seaborne trade, the attention of the world was drawn to an exhibition in which the nautical component was in fact the smallest of the three sections in the exhibition building, well behind other forms of transport and machinery – though by calling on the produce of its hinterland, the exhibition had put paid to Liverpool's reputation, noted in the 1860s, as a place not readily associated with manufactured goods (Belchem, 2000, p. 5 fn 4). Despite attracting incomers, imperial-themed exhibits and a diverse range of entertainments only made the event appear all the more unfocused. In an attempt to underscore Liverpool's claim to be the second city of empire, capture the inclusive spirit of 1851 and entertain visitors, the exhibition had become something of a melange.

This is not to say that contemporaries were dissatisfied with the event on all counts. Press reports were, the odd allusion aside, generally positive. There was a desire to exhibit items and advertise success. However, the extent to which this was down to what had been an initially lacklustre effort to advertise the event is questionable. The press had long been bitten by exhibition mania. Exhibitions presented an opportunity to boost reputations, either as individuals, counties, regions or nations, as well as garner profits. A large-scale exhibition in the provinces was bound to draw attention. Indeed, it was this positive, expectant attention which probably gave later writers the impression that the exhibition was a success.

For all this, the exhibition was undoubtedly a costly failure, both financially and in terms of the city's reputation. If it were not for those features which visitors had to pay extra, on top of their entry fee, to visit, notably the Indian village, the exhibition would have been even less successful. Various factors may have contributed to this failure, including entry costs, the economic situation, inclement weather and the unavailability of the Sabbath for paid admissions. A substantial number of local retailers remained convinced that the exhibition, run by gentlemen with little business nous, had taken away their trade. Nevertheless, the same organisers staged a further event in the following year to celebrate the Golden Jubilee and to recoup their losses, only for it to be dwarfed by Manchester's exhibition. The jury scandal, which was covered by the regional and national press, cast a shadow on the whole enterprise, generating claims of incompetence and malpractice. The 'City of Ships' was thus sold, and to some extent soiled by shortcomings in its overall management. As a result, this exhibition illustrates the challenges, at the levels of management, content and public perceptions, which faced provincial exhibitions during the late nineteenth century.

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