

Bluecoat

The first
300
years



Introduction

Bluecoat is Liverpool city centre's oldest building, dating from the early 18th century. It has a fascinating history; a charity school for nearly 200 years that became the UK's first arts centre.

The building continues as a centre for the contemporary arts to this day. Its architectural importance is reflected in its Grade One listing and inclusion in UNESCO world heritage site, Liverpool Maritime Mercantile City. 2017 marks 300 years since the building was dedicated, as indicated in the Latin inscription above its entrance, 'to the promotion of Christian charity and instilling in needy children the principles of the Anglican Church, in the year 1717.' Its original purpose has changed, but having been in continuous use and witness to Liverpool's fluctuating fortunes over three centuries, it remains an iconic building at the heart of the city's culture. With a modern arts wing completed in 2008 overlooking a popular garden, Bluecoat is a reinvigorated 21st century arts space, whose rich heritage is told here.



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

1717
2017

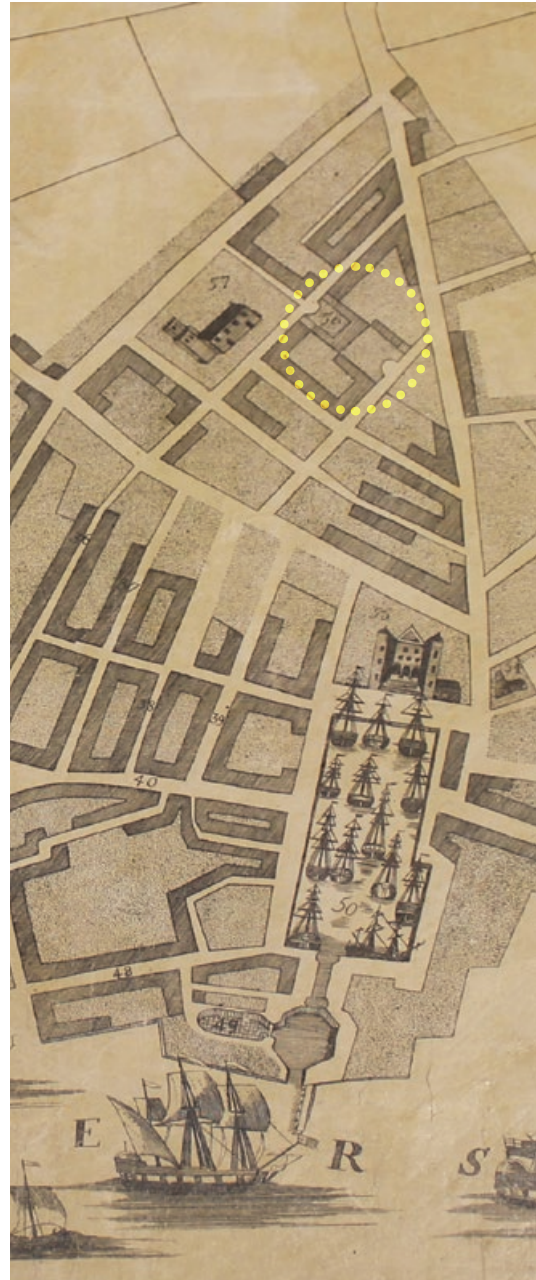
The School

1717 - 1906

In 1708, rector of Liverpool, Reverend Robert Styth, and master mariner Bryan Blundell founded the Liverpool Blue Coat School for orphaned children.

They built a modest building belonging to St Peter's Church opposite the present Bluecoat (originally spelt as two words, after the school moved out the building is referred to as 'Bluecoat'). The coats worn by pupils were blue, denoting charity. Blundell, the school's principal benefactor, raised funds for a larger building where children would live and learn to 'read, write and cast accounts'. A brick kiln was set up on the site in 1715, a foundation stone laid in 1716, and two years later the first 50 boarders moved in, two thirds of their time being taken up in tasks to generate income for the school, a third in lessons. In 1722, alms houses were erected to the rear of the building and construction was completed in 1725 at a cost of just under £2,300.

The architect of the building has caused much speculation. Recent research has confirmed that Liverpool's dock engineer Thomas Steers, together with mason Edward Litherland, were responsible for constructing the building. Both received considerable payments, recorded in the school's meticulous accounts book. They also worked together on other schemes in Liverpool, notably the Old Dock nearby, completed just before the Blue Coat in 1715.



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



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

This connection to the world's first commercial wet dock, which would set the port on its course as a global trading power over the next two centuries, is significant. It positions Bluecoat as central to the birth of modern Liverpool. Many pupils were apprenticed to local employers involved in shipping, some becoming mates or masters of ships, many emigrating to the colonies. Funds to maintain the school came largely from merchants profiting from maritime trade. Many trustees and subscribers were engaged in the transatlantic slave trade and related industries like sugar, tobacco and cotton, in which Liverpool was the most prominent British port by the mid-eighteenth century. These merchants included Blundell's sons. It was an age of extraordinary contrasts when brutality and philanthropy often went hand in hand. In the next century, old boy of the school, Richard Ansdell – a Royal Academician – painted *The Hunted Slaves* (1861), which now hangs in Liverpool's International Slavery Museum. Several artists since the 1980s have interrogated the building's school history and its connections to mercantile trade, including slavery.

A fine example of Queen Anne architecture (though actually built during George I's reign), Bluecoat's distinctive features include Liverpool's oldest surviving liver birds, over the gate and doorways in the cobbled front courtyard. Also of note are a one-handed clock, cherubs' heads over the windows, and oval windows above these. Graffiti from the 18th century, carved into cornerstones in a secluded part of the courtyard, is a reminder of the building's school days. The cupola on the roof once supported a weathervane of a ship, symbolising the importance of maritime trade to the building. This features in a 1718 engraving, produced to raise money for the school, which includes other architectural details that have since disappeared: statues on the pediment denoting faith, hope and charity, balustrades and flambeaux, and checkerboard paving covering the courtyard, though it is doubtful this was ever realised. Apart from these differences, the building's front façade is little changed.

By the time of Blundell's death in 1756 the school housed 70 boys and 30 girls. His sons continued their father's work, further expanding the building to



Girls in the school laundry, late 1800s

accommodate 200 pupils, with a new workroom, sick room, chapel and refectory (the present foyer). During the 19th century the school continued to grow with support from local people, including former pupils who had gone on to become wealthy. There were many alterations to the building during this period, the school expanding up School Lane and along Hanover Street.

Eminent Liverpool historian, abolitionist and writer William Roscoe's 1770 poem *Mount Pleasant*, which refers to Bluecoat, suggests a more liberal approach to the children's education had been adopted by this point, however in 1800 conditions at the school were still harsh. That year, perhaps in protest, 107 of the 320 pupils played truant after attending the Liverpool Fair, some not returning for days. As a consequence, they were not punished, but given concessions instead, including longer playtimes.

In the early 19th century education reformer Dr Andrew Bell's Madras system of education was adopted, with abler pupils passing on their learning to other students. The

St. George's Day Parade, when the school band led a procession through the front gates observed by the Mayor, members of the Corporation and school trustees, became a well-known local event. In 1906 the school finally outgrew its premises and moved to a new building in Church Road, Wavertree, where it remains today.

—
 ‘Yon calm retreat, where
 screened from every ill
 The helpless orphan’s
 throbbing heart lies still;
 And finds delighted,
 in the peaceful dome,
 A better parent,
 and a happier home.’

William Roscoe, *Mount Pleasant*

The Arts Centre

1907 - Present



It seems strange that the future of a building as beautiful as Bluecoat could ever have been in question.

However, for the first half of the 20th century it was never entirely free from the threat of destruction or financial insecurity. Its story over this period is one of struggle for survival. At the same time the arts flourished, with Bluecoat becoming a pioneering creative hub, whose impact was felt by the region's artists and spread far beyond the building.

In 1907 a group of artists, the Sandon Studios Society - disaffected former students who had broken away from the University of Liverpool's School of Applied Art and Design - rented accommodation for art classes and studios in the empty school building. This independent art school marked the beginning of an artistic community at Bluecoat that continues today. Artists involved in the Sandon included Fanny Lister (later Calder) who was instrumental in securing tenure at Bluecoat, one of several women active in the Society and in its transition from artists' group to a larger membership embracing those 'interested in something more than fashion and football and bridge and the share market.' The Sandon wanted to stimulate Liverpool's artistic and intellectual life, enabling 'all the bright, appreciative people to meet the clever and original.'

In 1909, with encouragement from head of the University's School of Architecture, Charles Reilly, the Port Sunlight soap magnate William Lever (later the first Lord Leverhulme) rented the building from the school. Reilly's architecture department leased premises in Bluecoat, which Lever then purchased, renaming it 'Liberty Buildings' in celebration of his triumph in a libel action with a national



Sandon Studios Society fancy dress party, with Charles Reilly seated, centre

newspaper. Ambitions to develop it as a centre for the arts however were stalled when war broke out in 1914 and plans were shelved, and when Leverhulme died in 1925, there was no provision in his will for the building, which was put on the market. The central ground floor space was briefly let as a car showroom and the building advertised as a development opportunity.

The Sandon launched a campaign, led by Fanny Calder, to save the building. With the deadline looming, only £12,000 of the £40,000 purchase price had been raised and a last minute appeal was published in the press. Miraculously, an anonymous donation of £17,000 was received and the rest of the money borrowed on mortgage to make the purchase possible. Years later the donor, a 'lover of his native city', was revealed as local solicitor William Ernest Corlett, who'd written a cheque after a chance encounter on a train with the Liverpool Echo's editor involved in the campaign. With the building's future secured, a charitable trust, Bluecoat Society of Arts, was established in 1927 to 'preserve the building for its architectural value, and to establish a centre for the arts'. This, together with the presence of an artistic community in the building twenty years earlier, makes Bluecoat the oldest arts centre of its kind in the UK, combining visual art, architecture, music, performance, and literature.



Sculptor Herbert Tyson Smith (1883 – 1972) in his studio at Bluecoat, with his son Geoffrey in the background

Bluecoat encourages a range of artistic practices, from fine craftsmanship to risk-taking innovation, supporting local artists and bringing an international outlook. The first exhibition, in 1908, featured work by French Impressionist Claude Monet. In 1911, a version of artist and critic Roger Fry's ground-breaking Post-Impressionist exhibition, previously shown in London and introducing modern art from the Continent to an unsuspecting British public, came to Bluecoat. Works by Picasso, Matisse, Gauguin, Cézanne, Van Gogh and others were shown alongside Sandon artists, the first time these major European artists had exhibited in the company of their English contemporaries. The painter Augustus John was a frequent visitor to the building and many leading early 20th century artists exhibited in Sandon group shows. Over four weeks in 1931 Jacob Epstein's *Genesis* attracted nearly 50,000 visitors, each paying sixpence to see this controversial sculpture of a pregnant woman. The income generated was sorely needed for the upkeep of a building that had become an established fixture and focus for Liverpool's artistic and social life. Its cabarets and parties were

legendary, as witnessed by Liverpool entertainer and writer George Melly who came as a boy dressed as Mickey Mouse to children's fancy dress events.

Herbert Tyson Smith's studio overlooked the garden. From here he embarked on a successful career as Liverpool's foremost public sculptor, his works including the reliefs on the Liverpool Cenotaph at St George's Plateau. Edward Carter Preston was one of the UK's leading medallists and another sculptor of distinction known for his work in the Anglican Cathedral. His daughter, Julia Carter Preston, continued the family tradition, developing a highly individual ceramics style in her Bluecoat studio, which she occupied into the early 21st century. Modernist painter and art critic Roderick Bisson and surrealist George Jardine were amongst a studio community that continued the building's tradition of independent art practice long after the War ended.

Julia Carter Preston (1926-2012) in her Bluecoat studio, 1980s. Photograph by Sean Halligan





For the voluntary Bluecoat Society of Arts, it was a constant struggle to maintain the building. In the late-1940s there were plans, which never materialised, to demolish part of the building for an inner ring road. During World War Two, disaster struck when Liverpool suffered extensive bomb damage during the 1941 May blitz. Fire spread from a neighbouring building, gutting large areas including the South East wing (the current arts wing) and upstairs Concert Hall. Despite this damage, the building hosted a programme of exhibitions during the War, effectively becoming the city art gallery, while the Walker Art Gallery was requisitioned by the Ministry of Food. A mix of important historical and contemporary exhibitions by international and local artists, professional and the amateur, proved popular, continuing beyond the War, when the building also housed a public library.

The membership of the Sandon Studios Society embraced those ‘interested in something more than fashion and football and bridge and the share market.’

Extensive bomb damage from the May 1941 blitz

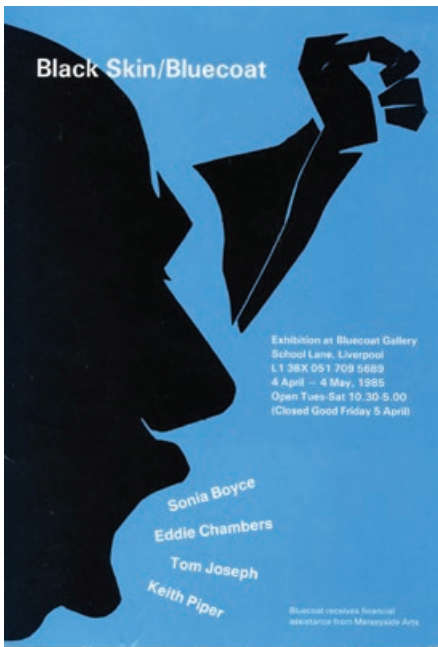


Yoko Ono, performing at Bluecoat in 1967.
Photograph courtesy of Sheridan Davies

Towards the end of the 1960s, an adventurous programme reflected the experimentation of a new generation of British and international artists breaking new ground in poetry, jazz and other music, in performance and visual art. This echoed the Sandon's early radicalism and showed what was still possible in a venue that, after its restoration, had tended to be regarded as artistically conservative.

Performances in 1967 by the likes of Yoko Ono and 'glass composer' Anna Lockwood, mixed media exhibitions and installations from artists including Mark Boyle and John Latham, and experimental film shows, connected Liverpool to a wider avant-garde. At the same time a new generation of local artists was given prominence, especially once the gallery space and exhibition policy were formalised in 1968, following John Willett's study, *Art in a City*, commissioned by Bluecoat. Now regarded as the first sociological investigation into art in a single city, the book made recommendations for how contemporary art could inspire civic confidence, regenerate a place and engage audiences – ideas that fully found expression 40 years later in Liverpool's year as 2008 European Capital of Culture.

From the 1970s onwards, as Bluecoat became one of the Arts Council's major North West revenue clients, and with Liverpool City Council following suit, it consolidated its position as an independent arts centre, providing an alternative to what the city's mainstream galleries and museums, concert halls and theatres could offer: exhibitions by emerging artists from the region, a place for local music groups to rehearse and perform, and a home to cultural organisations, including the popular Merseyside Film Institute, the UK's oldest film society, and - offering the best in contemporary craft - Bluecoat Display Centre, established in 1959 and our oldest tenant.



Black Skin Bluecoat exhibition, 1985

In 1972, cult Californian rock musician Captain Beefheart presented his first painting exhibition at the venue, the first of many cross-overs between art and music in Bluecoat's programming.

The 1980s and 90s witnessed more ambitious gallery programming by Bluecoat – collaborative commissions with UK venues such as London's ICA and the Arnolfini in Bristol, with exhibitions like *Trophies of Empire* (1992); hosting national touring exhibitions like *Women's Images of Men* (1981); initiating its own touring shows; international projects, including an exchange programme with Liverpool's German twin city of Cologne. With the arrival as tenants of Merseyside Moviola (now FACT) and its *Video Positive* festivals, Bluecoat provided a showcase for moving image and new media art. Off-site installations took art out of the building into the city centre, while the venue became home for more experimental 'live art' performance. This period also saw an opening up of the



Janek Schaefer performance, 2009

building, with more public events in the courtyard and 'secret garden', a busy café and retail tenants selling books and art materials. Bluecoat Society of Arts changed its name to Bluecoat Arts Centre in the 1980s, and the organisation – and the building of which it is custodian - is now simply Bluecoat.

For the past thirty years Bluecoat has consistently programmed art to reflect Britain's multicultural landscape, with exhibitions by young artists addressing identity and issues of difference in their work. Here, artists like Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce have maintained a relationship over several decades with the venue, which has also provided a platform for diverse Liverpool multi-media performance groups like Visual Stress and Asian Voices Asian Lives, and became a space for alternative currents in dance, theatre, music and LGBT culture. Its central location and variety of spaces makes Bluecoat an ideal venue for festivals. Over the years it has hosted many, including Asian arts festival MILAP, Liverpool



Women's Images of Men exhibition, 1981

Arab Arts Festival, which Bluecoat set up in 1998 with Liverpool Arabic Centre, and deaf and disability arts festival DaDaFest - the latter two organisations based in the building. Bluecoat has been a partner in the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art since its inception in 1999.

Music has a long and distinguished history at Bluecoat. There were visits to the building by leading composers including Bartok and Holst. Stravinsky was a guest in 1934 when news of Elgar's death arrived, the Russian composer calling on fellow diners to pay a mark of respect for 'England's greatest composer'. In the 1960s the Sandon Music Group presented British composers Peter Maxwell Davies and Elisabeth Lutyens, while the now internationally prominent conductor Simon Rattle attended a music club for young people. Local groups like Liverpool Mozart Orchestra and the Liverpool Lieder Circle maintained a classical music profile in the venue, which later embraced contemporary music with visits by, amongst others, Michael Nyman, Gavin Bryars and Steve Reich, and



Bluecoat remains central to the city's cultural life, a symbol of Liverpool's resilience and historical significance as a global port. It is as relevant now to the regeneration of Liverpool as it was to the town's 18th century aspirations.



Jeremy Deller, *Acid Brass*, a Bluecoat commission staged at LIPA, 1997. MC Tony Wilson, centre



Bloomberg New Contemporaries exhibition 2016

leading US jazz players such as Sun Ra. The building has hosted an eclectic mix of music – folk, rock, reggae, electronica, indie and roots – and is home to instrument makers, music workshops and choirs such as Sense of Sound and The Choir with no Name.

Contemporary dance also has a long tradition at the venue, which is currently home to dance artists Liverpool Improvisation Collective. Literature too is part of the offer, an interest stretching back to the Sandon, whose members included early science fiction writer Olaf Stapledon. Hundreds of artists and creative organisations have been supported and nurtured in different ways at Bluecoat. Many well-known visual artists presented work here early in their career, including future Turner Prize winner Jeremy Deller, commissioned by Bluecoat for *Acid Brass*, in which acid house anthems were re-arranged for the country's leading brass band. This experimental cross-art form working, and giving artists opportunities to try new things, is very much central to Bluecoat's work today.



Liverpool Arab Arts Festival at Bluecoat.
Photograph by Sean Halligan



New arts wing, 2009. Photograph by Jon Barraclough

Bluecoat's capital development, completed in 2008 - designed by Biq Architecten, of Rotterdam - was the first comprehensive renovation and restoration in fifty years. It brought a new arts wing, comprising purpose built galleries and performance space, reorganisation of interior spaces, and access improvements. The project also uncovered and restored historic features long buried behind plasterboard. The ground floor foyer was opened up to reflect its earlier design, revealing cast iron pillars and oak beams from the 19th century. In the gallery, a section of original brickwork has been left visible to reveal evidence of the building's changes.

After three centuries, having resisted threats of demolition and wartime bombing, Bluecoat remains central to the city's cultural life, a symbol of Liverpool's resilience and historical significance as a global port. It is as relevant now to the regeneration of Liverpool as it was to the town's 18th century aspirations. As Liverpool's centre for the contemporary arts, the building continues to welcome more than 700,000 visitors annually. Reflecting its history as an educational resource, its arts programme engages people - children, families and others - in arts activities, from storytelling to printmaking. The pioneering Blue Room programme provides learning disabled people with regular opportunities to discover and create art. This commitment to opening up access to art is at the heart of Bluecoat, and telling the building's heritage story is part of that process.

Thanks to a grant from Heritage Lottery Fund, the *My Bluecoat* project marks the building's 300th birthday. It will digitise archives held at Bluecoat, Liverpool Record Office and the Blue Coat School, and create a website to bring these fascinating records together for the first time, alongside memories from the public.

Further Reading

1708-1995: The Liverpool Blue Coat School Past and Present

1995, published by the school.

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1956, Liverpool University Press.

R.F. Bisson, *The Sandon Studios Society and the Arts*

1965, Parry Books, Liverpool.

Stainton de B. Taylor, 'Music at the Bluecoat', chapter in *Two Centuries of Music in Liverpool*

1973, Rockliffe Bros., Liverpool.

John Willett, *Art in a City*

1967, Methuen, London; reprinted with a new introduction, Liverpool University Press and Bluecoat, 2008.

Eds. Bryan Biggs and Julie Sheldon, *Art in a City Revisited*, 2009, Liverpool University Press and Bluecoat.

Bryan Biggs, 'Liverpool Art City?', chapter in *Liverpool City of Radicals*,

eds. John Belchem and Bryan Biggs, 2011, Liverpool University Press.

Support Bluecoat Tours

Bluecoat is a registered charity that relies on support from our visitors to help us maintain this special building. If you would like to make a contribution, there are donation boxes in the foyer and galleries. To support us in other ways, please speak to one of our front of house team. You can also donate via our website: thebluecoat.org.uk

We provide heritage tours to pre-booked groups of 10 or more, and can arrange refreshments including lunch, afternoon tea or dinner. To find out more about booking a group tour, or to receive this leaflet in alternative formats, ask at Tickets and Information, or contact us via phone or email.

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