

GOING ASHORE:

# TOURING THE BEATLES' LIVERPOOL

by

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Liverpool's four most famous sons are without question, The Beatles - - John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr. Their music, much of which was created nearly a half century ago, speaks to millions. Thus, a port call in Liverpool demands a pilgrimage to the places where The Beatles got their start. This is so not just for their fans but also for people who are interested in modern history because The Beatles' influence went beyond popular music to impact social mores and attitudes.

The tour that I went on began with The Beatles Story - - a series of exhibits housed in a revitalized warehouse along the river Mersey. The majority of the exhibits consist of giant photographs and panels with written material. There are also examples of musical instruments, electronic equipment and artifacts that are similar to the ones actually used by the Beatles. In addition, there are some high tech exhibits using three-D animation, a children's discovery centre, a Starbucks and a store which sells everything Beatles. Included in the entrance price is an audio device which you can listen to

at designated points in the exhibition.

A mountain of information is presented in an easily digested manner. It is particularly good for people who may only know the broad outlines of the Beatles' history. While the experience would be enhanced if there were more actual artifacts from the band, such items would undoubtedly be difficult and expensive to come by. Furthermore, I doubt that, at least in the early days, even the Beatles realized the need to preserve their possessions because of their historical value.

Although The Beatles Story is located in Liverpool, the exhibits extend beyond the group's Liverpool days, beyond the break-up of the band and into their subsequent careers. There is also an exhibit about Elvis Presley, who influenced The Beatles when they were growing up.

One of the most striking things I noticed at The Beatles Story was not in the exhibits but rather was about the people who came to see the exhibits. The Beatles were the sound of the 1960s and in many ways

shaped that time. But the majority of the people visiting the exhibition were born after that period, well after the group split up. This really brought home the fact that The Beatles' music and their personalities have transcended their time. Furthermore, the international composition of the visitors underscored that they have also transcended their roots in the English-speaking world.

After spending time at the Beatles Story, we drove through the city and out to the suburbs. The scenery shifted from an urban landscape to broad tree-lined streets occasionally interrupted by commercial areas.

Our first destination was Mendips, John Lennon's boyhood home in Woolton. Lennon came here at the age of five. His mother and father had separated and he was sent to live with his Aunt Mimi and Uncle George. He lived there until he was 23.

Mendips is a semi-detached house built in 1933. It is a neat, comfortable middle-class house typical of that period. Architecturally, there is nothing outstanding about the building. Rather, it is of interest because of who lived there.

While he was living there, Lennon developed his musical talents. Despite his aunt's warnings that he would never make a living playing the guitar, he devoted much of his time to playing that instrument and rehearsing with the various bands that he formed. Several of The Beatles' early hits were written at Mendips. Indeed, their first number one hit, "Please Please Me" was written in Aunt Mimi's bedroom.

In view of the importance of Mendips in her husband's life, Yoko Ono, purchased Mendips and donated it to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It has now been restored to the way it would have looked in the 1950s and early 1960s when Lennon was living there. This includes period furniture as well as some original furniture.

This is not a grand stately home and it would be overwhelmed if the large numbers of people who come by were allowed to tour the interior. Therefore, the National Trust limits access to the interior to those on its own mini-bus tour.

Not too far a drive is 20 Forthlin Drive, the seventh and final house where Paul McCartney lived while in Liverpool. It is not as nice a house as Mendips but it is still comfortable. Built in 1952, it is a typical example of post-war terraced council housing. There is a small garden in front of each of the attached houses along the street.

The McCartneys moved to Forthlin Drive in 1955. For most of the nine years that he resided there, Paul lived with his father and brother, his mother having



*A guitar lies just beyond the gates of Liverpool's Strawberry Field.*

passed away in 1956. The National Trust, which has restored the interior, says: "The McCartney men weren't as houseproud as Aunt Mimi so expect to see mismatched wallpaper, clutter and threadbare sofas." There are also black and white family photos taken by Michael McCartney, Paul's brother. As with Mendips, the interior is only open to those on the Trust's tour.

The early Beatles used to meet here to rehearse and compose. "I Saw Her Standing There" and "Love Me Do" were written at 20 Forthlin Road

Visitors to the two homes have included celebrities as well as the general public. According to newspaper reports, Bob Dylan boarded a tour bus unrecognized and visited the two homes.

Along the same lines, our guide told us that a local entrepreneur approached a man he saw in the neighborhood and offered to show him where Paul McCartney grew up in exchange for 10 pounds. The entrepreneur's Beatles expertise was apparently not very extensive as the person he approached was Sir Paul who happened to be visiting his old hometown.

Near the two boyhood homes are two places that have been immortalized in song. After the group achieved success, all of the Beatles moved to London. However, a single issued in early 1967 demonstrated that they had not forgotten where they grew up.

McCartney's "Penny Lane" presents a montage of summer time memories from a suburban street near where he lived. Tour buses stop along a park-like stretch of Penny Lane to allow the passengers to take pictures of, and pose by, a street sign without disrupting the flow of traffic. However, further along the road in a busier, more developed section you come to an intersection. There, you find the barber shop, the bank, and the bus shelter mentioned in the song.

Strawberry Field was a Salvation Army children's home. In its grounds were green areas where local children used to play. John Lennon was particularly fond of the annual garden party held there each summer, which he attended with his aunt. Recalling that island of happiness, he added an "s" to the name and chanted "Strawberry Fields forever" in the refrain of his brooding yet poignant song about confusion and loneliness.

The old house that was the children's home was torn down in the 1970s and the facility closed altogether in 2005. Not long after, the Victorian cast iron gates were removed and replaced by replicas.

Today, the Strawberry Field site is along a wood-ed stretch of road. The gates stand in isolation with the stone pillars that support the gates marred by graffiti. It is a lonely spot. When I was there, someone had placed an old acoustic guitar on the path leading through the woods beyond the gate - - heartbreakingly sad.

Our tour did not take us to the childhood homes of George Harrison or Ringo Starr. The guide told us that both Harrison and Starr had grown up in more inner city/ working class parts of Liverpool. Harrison's birthplace (the family moved several times) is still a private home, not open to the public. Ringo's house on Madryn Street has been slated for demolition as part of an urban renewal project.

We drove back into the city to visit the Cavern Club, the place where the Beatles first achieved real popularity. The first time the group appeared there was on 9 February 1961 and it went on to perform there 292 times.

Hearing of a band that was causing a sensation amongst Liverpool's young people, local record store owner Brian Epstein went to the Cavern to see The Beatles in November 1961. Impressed by the potential what he saw, Epstein offered to become the group's manager. He re-cast the group's image from that of leather-clad rockers to a more polished look that would become world famous. More importantly, he was able to secure the band a recording contract.

With the outbreak of Beatlemania, the Cavern Club had an international reputation. This was buoyed by a string of other British Invasion stars who also received their start at the Cavern.

The original Cavern Club was in the cellar of an old warehouse building on Mathew Street. In the early 1970s, the warehouse was demolished in order to build a ventilation shaft for an underground railroad system. The cellar where The Beatles had performed was filled in with rubble. The Cavern Club re-opened at a location across the street but the venture was financially unsuccessful.

In the 1980s, plans were formed to excavate the original Cavern Club cellar and re-open the club at its original location. However, it was found that the cellar was no longer structurally sound. So, bricks from the original cellar were used to re-create as closely as possible the Cavern Club next to its original location. Unfortunately, this venture was also financially unsuccessful.

The Cavern Club re-opened under new management in 1991, combining Beatles era tributes with performances by contemporary groups. Subsequently, a number of major stars have performed there including Paul McCartney.

Mathew Street has changed since The Beatles performed at the Cavern. It is now pedestrians only and it is clearly aware of its status as a tourist attraction. Opposite the entrance to the Cavern Club is the Cavern Wall of Fame with the name of a band that played at the Cavern engraved on each brick. A banner flying over the street proclaimed that it is the birthplace of The Beatles.

To get to the Cavern Club, you have to descend a long flight of stairs from the street level entrance. At the bottom, the room is dominated by brick arches. At one end of the "Front Room" is a small bandstand, which looks like the one in the photos of the Beatles playing at the original club. On the opposite side is a bar and in between are small tables and chairs.

It is not a large room and it would not take many people to fill it. However, there must have been a tremendous amount of energy created when The Beatles and other legendary bands played to a house packed shoulder-to-shoulder.

The Cavern offers live music every day from mid-afternoon until late evening. There is no admission charge in the afternoons but there is a charge for certain evening performances.

During the course of the tour, our guide pointed out numerous other places with a connection to one or more of the Beatles - - schools they attended, the bus line that Paul McCartney and George Harrison

used to take, the cathedral that rejected Paul's application to join the choir etc. These things helped to color in the picture.

But in the end, I was impressed most by how such ordinary beginnings led to such extraordinary lives. There were no grand houses, exceptional institutions, advanced schools or ground-breaking technology on this tour. Nor was there extreme poverty to be seen. Instead, the things we saw were very average, not unlike those experienced by thousands if not millions of others. Yet, with talent and hard work, these four individuals went from Liverpool on an amazing journey that took them all over the world and brought riches, fame, influence, love and sadly, in some instances, tragedy.