

Liverpool University

Sustainable Heritage Management MA

LIVERPOOL ANGLICAN CATHEDRAL

Reflective Report

Department of Social Impact
Research: Insights **2025**

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Sustainable Heritage Management MA

ARCH740 Professional Placement

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Liverpool Anglican Cathedral

Department of Social Impact Research: Insights

Reflective Report

Insight Lead: Dr. Ann Casson

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Katie Dyer

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Christopher Deacon

All the friendly team of Volunteers

The cover illustration was done by the author in March 2025 and observed from the Metropolitan Cathedral.

Liverpool Anglican Cathedral

Reflective Report

Department of Social Impact Research: Insights

Overview

During six weeks of professional placement, I worked alongside Dr. Ann Casson, the Insights Project Lead at the Cathedral Research Department. My role involved assisting researchers and volunteers in understanding how people with diverse motivations interact with the Cathedral. Through the prism of my professional experience and current academic heritage studies, I have been exploring how the presence of the Cathedral, as both heritage and religious space, contributes to Liverpool's socio-cultural life. Additionally, I have been reflecting on how the ever-changing social dynamics are shaping the perception of the Cathedral itself.

My task was to identify tangible and intangible heritage aspects of the Cathedral, that volunteers and visitors value to support the Insights Project's aims in understanding the heritage aspects of the Cathedral better, engage new audiences, and support the delivery of its vision. Additionally, identifying the Cathedral's heritage values and stakeholders to help facilitate funding opportunities. My research methodology was structured around two key axes. The first approach was field observations (two to three sessions per week), which involved individual interviews with volunteers and selected members of different departments of the Cathedral. The second component involved secondary research on the significance of Liverpool Cathedral's heritage and its social impact on individuals and communities.

During my work experience, my primary challenge was immersing myself in and understanding a culture and society different from what I was accustomed to. Additionally, the Cathedral serves two functions: one sacred and the other secular, which I believe, sometimes conflicted and intensified the challenges I faced.

Religious structures, geography, and city skyline

Ballard, in 2016, argues that the city centre is usually a place where domestic life, the state, and the church come together to shape the image of a European city. That could be applied to any urban settlement where the city centre is marked with a main dominant religious structure, be it a temple, church, or mosque. In other words, religion has a direct impact on shaping the spaces of the city. "Religion leaves an imprint on landscape, through culture and lifestyle. Religious structures such as places of worship, and other sacred sites dominate many landscapes" (Park, 2004). He explains that the presence of a religious structure impacts the spatial movement and behaviour of city users.

In the situation of Liverpool, the brick and red sandstone Cathedral is situated upon a raised plateau that reaches almost 150 meters above sea level. The Cathedral is not merely a massive religious structure, it is a significant landmark observable from all over the city. I remember arriving in Liverpool for the first time with no spatial notion of the city; the visual presence of the Cathedral has helped me in orienting and navigating the city. My perception of Liverpool would have been entirely different without such a structure. That reminds me of my second hometown, Marseille. The skyline of Marseille is marked by La Basilique Notre-Dame de la Garde or La Bonne Mère (The Good Mother). As a believer, the presence of Le Bonne Mère provides me with a feeling of protection, security, and safety. In Liverpool, I experienced the same feeling with the Cathedral. Knowing it stands there acts as a compass that helps not only in the geographical orientation but also the emotional and spiritual stability.



Figure 01: La basilique Notre-Dame de la Garde (Gohar, Marseille 2025)

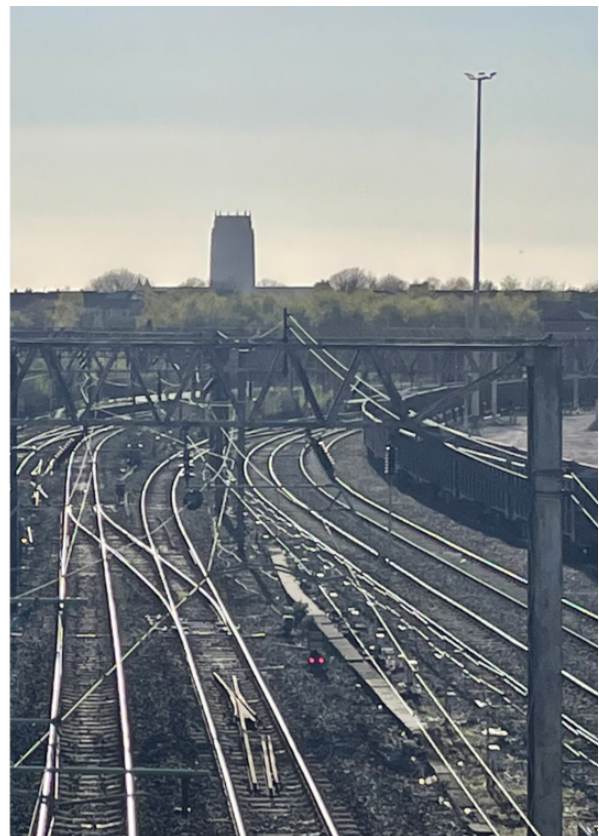


Figure 02: Anglican Cathedral (Gohar, Liverpool 2024)

Notes on the social perception of the Cathedral's tangible heritage

“It was a hot day in August. We were making our way to the Anglican Cathedral. We were only a short walk away from the Cathedral, and already you could see it overshadowing the city. We didn’t realise it was on such a steep hill. When we all got to the top of the never-ending hill, ..., we stood in front of the entrance of the gigantic building. As we looked up, it appeared as if it was going to fall because of how tall it was. A huge shadow hovered over us. As we walked into the building, an instant cool breeze hit us.” (RIBA North exhibition, 2017). Since the beginning of its construction, the Cathedral has been facing criticism. In the 1960s, the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner noted that architecture should be humanised to fit the English character. He criticised the cathedral’s large symmetrical spaces as outdated. In my opinion, one could agree with Pevsner if it was designed in the 1960s. To counter his criticism, I would make a little comparison. In 1882, Antoni Gaudí designed and initiated the construction of the Basilica de la Sagrada Familia in the Gothic style, adding his personal Catalan influences. 22 years later, in 1904, Gilbert Scott started the construction of the Liverpool Cathedral in Gothic revival style using masses as a new form of expression within the rigid Gothic style. Hence, we could argue that the Gothic style was the most appreciated expression of Christian faith at that time. While La Sagrada Familia was never finished and kept growing as a new structure, the Liverpool Cathedral was completed in 1978. During the construction years, the Cathedral has witnessed a development in craftsmanship and building technology, adding value to its architectural heritage significance.



Figure 03: La Sagrada Familia, 1966

Identity conflict

According to the census of 2021, the proportion of residents in Liverpool who have Christian beliefs has dropped from 71% in 2011 to 57.3%, while the number of the population who have no religion increased from 18% to 29.4%. However, Liverpool is not a unique case, the 2021 census noted that less than half (46.2%, 27.5 million people) of the population in England and Wales described themselves as “Christian”. A situation could alter the UK's religious identity, creating pressure on religious institutions to defend their longstanding Christian heritage. The Liverpool Cathedral could be an example of a religious institution facing an identity conflict. On the one hand, the Cathedral is trying to secure a sustainable financial and economic model by emphasising its significance as Britain's largest Cathedral. On the other hand, it modestly advocates for its religious identity. In an increasingly secular society, finding a balance between the Cathedral as a sacred place and as a monumental tourist attraction could be challenging.

A living religious structure, a sacred space or a heritage asset?

To address this debate, I will be trying to analyse how diverse groups and individuals in the society interact with the cathedral, what their motivations are for visiting, and in what different ways they engage with the physical space. To measure the social impact of the Cathedral's cultural heritage, primary data will be collected through observation building and the engagement in conversation with the volunteers.

Understanding the periphery of the Cathedral

A heritage asset's settings and spatial context strongly influence its significance (Historic England, 2017). The wider surrounding landscape can positively or negatively impact the perception of the heritage asset, corresponding to the overall cultural heritage. These surroundings comprise the immediate landscape, buffer zones, and the surrounding built environment that contribute to the site's context and character. In the case of the Cathedral, I have observed that the surroundings of the main entrance are not very welcoming. Approaching the Cathedral via Upper Duke Street, visitors enter through a triangular plaza. This stepped landscape offers no shade or shelter from the wind and leads to metal fences and gates that, in my opinion, convey a message of exclusivity. The gates left me confused about which one leads

to the Cathedral. Additionally, the very small entrance to St. James Mount and the gardens on the Cathedral's eastern side can easily be overlooked.

Despite not being part of the Cathedral's property, this garden contributes significantly to its visual identity and experience of the sacred heritage site. My observations indicate that the garden attracts a diverse group of locals, who are not necessarily the same visitors coming to the Cathedral. The garden's softscape of greenery and trees complements the Cathedral's hardscape and its gothic architecture, giving a different perspective of the structure both visually and spiritually. The garden's visitors throughout the day are primarily young to middle-aged adults who come to escape the city, enjoy the quiet atmosphere, relax, read, or walk their dogs. I noticed groups of individuals from less affluent backgrounds who I hadn't seen inside the Cathedral. However, the garden provided them with a neutral space to experience the heritage and sanctity of the site. I believe the garden serves as an outdoor and inclusive community hub. ***“If we think of the Cathedral as Liverpool's living room, then the garden can be seen as its terrace”.***



Figure 04: Aerial view of the Cathedral, webbaviation.co.uk, visited 16 March 2025

Democratic space against elitism

The broader observation of the Cathedral as a sacred complex of solids (built structures) and voids (landscape) can expand the experience of interacting with the heritage asset. During my conversations with volunteers at the Cathedral, I learned that some believe the Anglican Cathedral may cater to an elitist crowd, attracting specific groups of regular visitors. While I can partially agree with this perspective, I have also observed that the Cathedral's outdoor spaces offer a more democratic and inclusive environment for public expression.

The case of St. James Gardens serves as an excellent example. I have also observed several choir girls in school uniforms playing football in the backyard of the Cathedral, in front of the Lady Chapel. Sitting in the uncovered plaza in front of the Cathedral, I have had the opportunity to watch people who visit the heritage site simply enjoy the outdoor space or the site's voids without entering the Cathedral itself. I noticed that many individuals pay significant attention to gravestones. I have spent hours examining and reading the inscriptions, which has allowed me to dive into the history of Liverpool. This experience opened my eyes to the strong presence of the Freemasons and their influence throughout the city. These examples demonstrate how the poorly addressed voids of the Cathedral complex can add significant dimension and value to the overall experience of the heritage asset. In other words, it helps to better understand different portions of the cathedral's stakeholders.



Figure 05: A gravestone (Gohar, 2025)

Tourism, culture, and leisure

The monumentality of Cathedrals allows them to engage with broader communities more effectively than regular churches. La Sagrada Família and Notre Dame de la Garde are examples of how a cathedral can be the icon of its respective city. In my opinion, the Anglican Cathedral is the most prominent icon of Liverpool.

I first visited the Cathedral as a tourist, I was attracted by its massive size and unique architecture. Visiting the cathedral has increasingly become a regular activity for me over time. It is not only a place where I feel God's presence, but it also embodies human creativity and technology in the praise of God (maybe in an arrogant Renaissance way of expression). It has an earthy quality that attracts spiritually and physically. It is a place that reminds me of my first days in the city. A mixing pot where I could hear several languages and varieties of English dialects. For me, such places have always been a source of inspiration as they provide space for dialogue and diverse perspectives. According to a report by ECORYS to the Association of English Cathedrals, it is estimated that cathedrals attracted over 9.5 million tourists or leisure visitors in 2019. In the "Heritage and Renewal, The Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Cathedrals" in 1994, the importance of tourism was boldly highlighted. The commission argued for the adoption of tourism for the generated economic benefit that is needed for maintaining such massive structures and for its soft power to spread the faith (Kirby et al., 2023).

However, I believe that the "Shop-windows of the Church of England", a term introduced by the commission, is self-critical and humbly applied in the case of Liverpool Cathedral. Based on my observation, on a regular day (no special event), a visitor/tourist who comes to the Cathedral for sightseeing typically stays no more than 15 to 20 minutes, unless they are architects like myself. That can be considered a very short visit in relation to the size of the Cathedral.

To break down the possible reasons for such a short visit, we need to think in a special way considering the visitor's psychology. As an architect, I see that the front desk is poorly designed. It feels like a security check, acting more as a barrier rather than a welcoming point. It is small in size with low-cost materials and an unstudied signage system. I remember the first time I visited the Cathedral. After managing to find the entrance, I was confused about whether I entered through the main entrance or a secondary one. The richness of the architecture and the massivity of the space needed to be reflected in its furniture and fixtures, especially in the main

entrance. Additionally, after passing the front desk, the visitor finds him/her/their self lost and unable to find a path. The main hall is wide enough to dwarf you, which encourages the feeling of insecurity. I observed that the majority of first-time visitors prefer to walk very close to the sides and avoid the central space. The lack of a visually demonstrated curation plan resulted in the absence of clear paths. I also observed that during the services, when the chairs are installed, visitors navigate the Cathedral more confidently as the chairs help define the path and act as viewfinders. The original design of the Cathedral was to be furnished with chairs and seats for the worshipers, which is an essential element of the interior experience. Once the Cathedral has shifted towards a touristic approach, the Cathedral needs a different spatial design that corresponds to its newly adapted use. Dividing the space into smaller zones can create a more intimate place and provide diverse visual experiences that, as a result, can prolong the visiting time and increase the touristic quality.

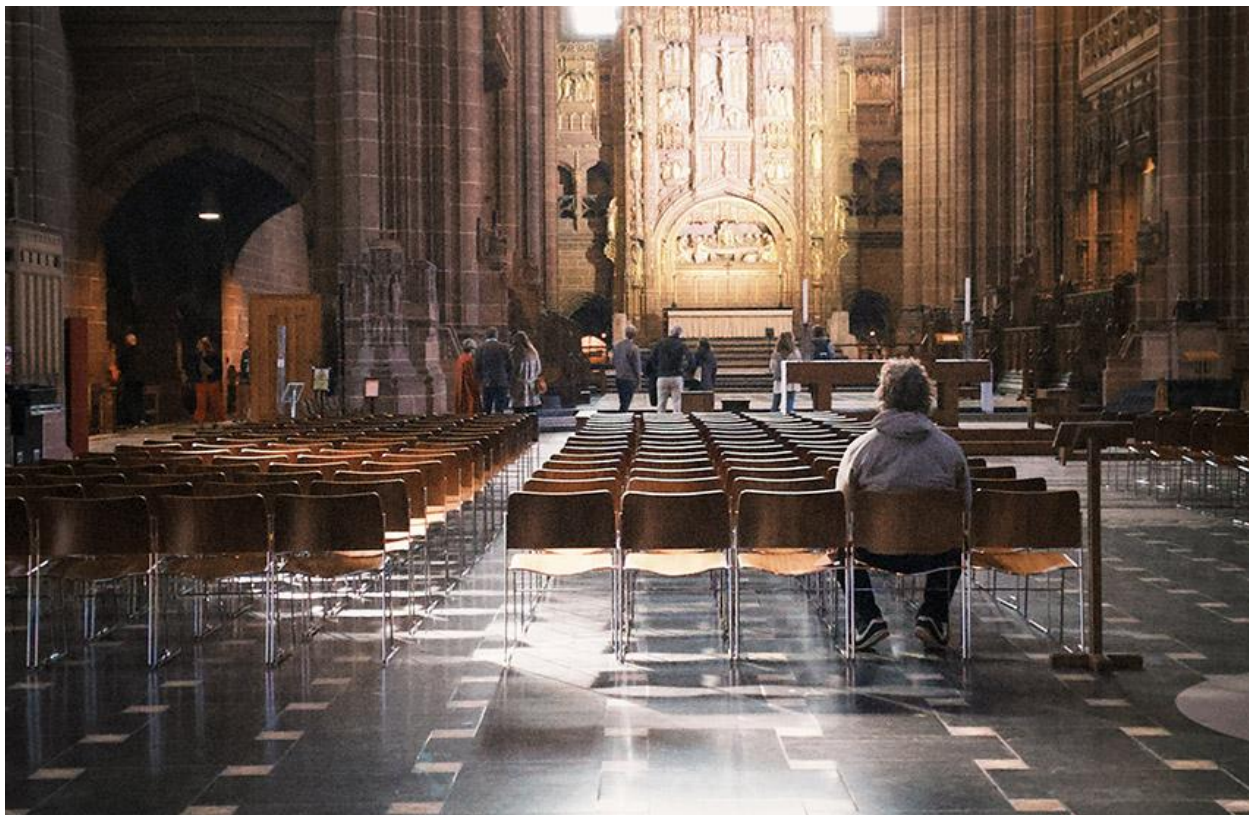


Figure 06: The Cathedral following a service (Gohar, 2025)

Contested cultural heritage, cultural memory, and ownership

“This Cathedral was built by the people and for the people of Liverpool”, a volunteer explains to me in front of the Laymen’s window; a stained glass panel by Carl Edwards celebrates the individuals and groups who contributed to the construction of the cathedral, including tradesmen, architects, and committee members. I disagree with the volunteer’s statement as it would be inaccurate when measured by our present standards. According to Historic England, in 2018, some buildings and monuments might refer to painful parts of British history. The historical links between the Cathedral and the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans position it among buildings that carry painful histories for some societal groups. This painful history is part of the past for some groups in Liverpool and remains a present struggle for their descendants, who may find it difficult to reconcile with the cathedral, Jennie Taylor (racial justice officer at Diocese of Liverpool) explains. This complex is known as contested heritage or difficult heritage, which refers to all heritage that holds different values to different people (IHBC, 2018).

The memorialisation represented in that window might be connected to people and events of racism and slavery. A reminder that the cathedral was not always a welcoming place for all. It took the cathedral quite a long time to shape that contested collective memory that became rooted in the intangible cultural heritage of some groups of society. Intangible cultural heritage refers to the practices, expressions, and experiences associated with objects and spaces that communities, groups, and sometimes individuals recognise as part of their cultural identity. This cultural identity is transmitted through generations over time (UNESCO Convention, 2003). While the meanings and values we ascribe to heritage are not fixed and are always changing (Church of England, 2021), addressing issues of contested cultural heritage needs time for reinterpretation and appropriation. Taylor observes that people of colour knew it was not meant for them, which is rooted in the profound inherited pain they feel.

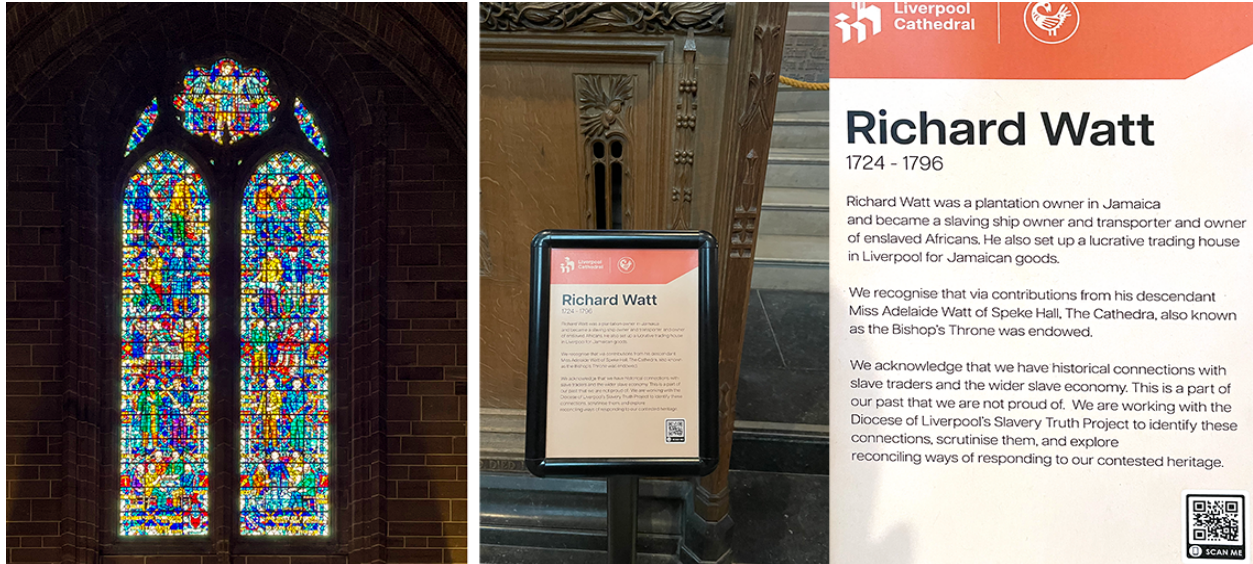


Figure 07: The weight of symbolism. Laymen's window to the left, A printout of the cathedral acknowledgement (Gohar, 2025)

Creating a memory requires both a space and an event that transforms that space into a place. For some, this place may be filled with good memories, while for others, it may evoke negative feelings. These spaces often contain physical elements that serve as reminders of specific memories. In situations where memories are contested, removing some of these physical elements can help address the underlying issues. However, when it comes to heritage assets, altering or removing physical elements would compromise the significance of the place, both on tangible and intangible levels. Additionally, while removing or replacing physical objects may change the political dimension of a historical event, it often does not have the same effect on the social dimension.

A notable observation I made in Alexandria involves a major road in the city centre known as Fouad Avenue. This name is recognised both locally and nationally in social and official contexts. Fouad was the last monarch of Egypt, forced to abdicate in 1952 when the country transitioned to a republic. To distance the nation from its monarchical past, a widespread campaign of street renaming occurred. As a result, Fouad Avenue was renamed to honour the Leader Gamal Abul-Nasser, and this is the official name displayed on all signs to this day. However, I was surprised to discover that very few residents, including those living along the road, are aware that it is officially no longer called Fouad Avenue. People kept the name that represents the memory they would like to keep.

According to Historic England, in 2018, one effective approach to dealing with contested heritage sites is to offer a thoughtful, lasting, and impactful reinterpretation. This approach involves maintaining the structure's physical context while introducing new layers of meaning, ultimately facilitating a more profound understanding of our complex history. The aim is to build a new sense of belonging and ownership of the space. The challenge lies in achieving that goal within the limited possibilities of physical interventions in a heritage asset. In 2017, Ciolfi and McLoughlin noted that cultural heritage institutions would greatly benefit from adopting interactive technologies at heritage sites. These technological installations are known as Human-computer interaction (HCI). Installations such as virtual reality, mobile, context-aware applications, touch-based interaction, and auditory interfaces could engage users to explore a modified or invented virtual heritage environment. These installations in contested heritage sites could help visitors interpret what they encounter in specific settings in ways that are engaging and sensitive to their circumstances (Ciolfi and McLoughlin, 2017).

From my observation, the cathedral is taking progressive actions to give new meaning and enhance its inclusivity as a place for all societal groups. While wandering around the cathedral's outdoor spaces during the graduation ceremonies on March 27th, I noticed a vibrant mix of people from diverse backgrounds, colours, and age groups. Many were taking photographs of themselves and their friends or families with the cathedral in the background. Those photos are pieces of evidence of new collective memories linking good events with the space. In my opinion, the cathedral became a place that holds a significant memory for a small portion of society. By adopting various approaches and incorporating new technologies into both its internal and external spaces, the cathedral could evolve into a site for creating contemporary and meaningful memories that would balance its contested history.

Architecture, heritage, and culture

As an architect, even if I sometimes forget, I am, at all times, unconsciously architecturing. Architecture is a lifestyle, not only for those who make it but for every single individual who actively or passively uses it. I believe that architecture is a hybrid form of cultural expression created by both architects and society. It is in a constant process of being shaped and reshaped over time, and there is no final result. Architecture is an honest book of the city's history. In the "Arcades Project", Walter Benjamin observes architecture "as the most important witness of the

latent 'mythology.'" It is a physical witness of events and political powers, technological innovation, and cultural and societal norms (Jones, 2020). For me, the Cathedral of Liverpool is, metaphorically, one of the city's major history books. It is a book that is written in the universal language of architecture. During the Sir Giles Gilbert Scott: A Liverpool Legacy event on November 5, 2024, Ataa Alsalloum notes that the Cathedral is a container of Liverpool's living memories. She observes that its architectural features are linked to the city's intangible heritage.

The Cathedral, during its relatively long history of contraction, has witnessed people come and go. Being built on a hill makes it an observatory over the port, seeing who's coming in and who's leaving. It has witnessed peace and war times. To my surprise, the demonstration of some events is observed within its stones. The decorative wall surfaces and sculptures at the beginning and end of the arches that support the stained-glass windows on the left side of the Rankin porch demonstrate how the architect, as a member of the community, has incorporated the events of his time into the building's design. One of the sculptures depicts a soldier wearing a gas mask, while the other features a soldier donning military goggles and a helmet. These physical elements convey a profound story and reflect a collective memory of society. In my opinion, they symbolise inclusivity during a time when people set aside their divisions and unite. However, these details can easily be overlooked by an untrained eye or a casual visitor. While the Cathedral is primarily a religious structure, these elements can be utilised to add another layer of significance to its architecture. If they are included in what I might call the "Architectural Itinerary of the Cathedral," they could attract different types of visitors.

In 2007, the Alexandria and Mediterranean Research Centre of Bibliotheca Alexandrina (ALEXMED) published the "Cultural Routes of Alexandria". A box of several maps that tells the story of Alexandria's significant heritage and history through tailored and separated layers of itineraries. Each map aids the visitor in uncovering one single layer of the Alexandrian heritage. The Cathedral could benefit from such an idea. I would recommend a "Cathedral Itinary Box (CIB)", for instance, that contains maps of paths through the buildings. These paths could be designed to tell a cohesive story, focusing on themes such as religion, history, politics, art, society, music, and architecture. This box will help organise visits to the cathedral and enhance the visitor experience by allowing individuals to choose their preferred theme. This box can improve the cathedral's visual identity and serve as a potential economic investment. Furthermore, the process of researching and designing will involve the community, fostering a stronger sense of ownership and belonging to the cathedral.



Figure 08: Sculpture of the gas mask to the left, sculpture of the helmet (Gohar, 2025)

Reflecting on the concept of the Architect and Society, Lord Norman Foster notes in his 2022 book "On Cities" that "Architecture is too important to be left to architects alone." While architects play a significant role in construction, building involves much more than just bricks and walls. It encompasses the meanings and functions of the spaces that are used by society. The architectural historian Joseph Sharples argued that aspects of the Cathedral's design by Gilbert Scott are open to questions. He pointed out that Scott aimed to generate emotions in everyone who entered the building by committing to absolute symmetry. This design approach resulted in the exact mirroring of the Welsford and Rankin porches located on opposite sides. Consequently, the Welsford porch has been rendered functionally useless as it overlooks the cliff of the former quarry (Giles Gilbert Scott: A Liverpool Legacy, 2024).

"It is either an engine of emotion or it is nothing", this 19th-century comment by the architect and critic HS Goodhart-Rendel on the Cathedral can be applied to the contemporary context. If we accept that heritage is not static, we might have the opportunity to reinterpret the design, redefine, and perhaps generate new emotions. We can revisit the functionality issue of the Welsford Porch facing St. James Gardens. By involving architects, neighbourhood residents, and other concerned stakeholders in brainstorming sessions for a design process, we may arrive at a relevant contemporary solution that revitalises Welsford Porch as one of the main entrances to the Cathedral. This can create a connection between the garden and the Cathedral's structural body and perhaps integrate it into one of the visitor itineraries.

For instance, envisioning the use of new and modern technology, such as 3D printing, we could create a bridge linking Hope Street to the Cathedral, providing direct access. This bridge would enhance the user experience, give the porch a new function, and potentially attract new visitors who would feel welcome to approach the Cathedral from that softened side (due to the existence of natural elements). In this scenario, the Bistro could serve as the first point of contact, which might lead to a new economic model. Additionally, this bridge could be considered a reversible intervention in the heritage site, ensuring that it does not negatively impact the Cathedral's significance from a heritage protection perspective.



Figure 09: Intervention diagram (Gohar, 2025, based on Apple Maps)

Conclusion

During my professional placement at the Anglican Cathedral of Liverpool, I had the opportunity to engage with a diverse team of academics, clergy, professionals, and volunteers. This experience allowed me to apply my academic knowledge while drawing from my professional background to closely examine the Cathedral. I was able to investigate and reflect on the Cathedral as both a sacred space and a heritage asset. I had the freedom to explore various aspects to understand the dual nature of the Cathedral.

Throughout my research, I made an effort to incorporate relevant literature to ensure that my reflections remained unbiased by my personal background. Examining the historical, cultural, and social dimensions of the Cathedral has proved that it has an impactful role in Liverpool. This impact is demonstrated through various, and sometimes overlapping, levels. However, in my opinion, this complexity can lead to confusion and a lack of clarity in how individuals perceive the Cathedral.

The Cathedral is carrying a heavy burden of the past in addition to the dynamic and contemporary needs of the present. A challenge that creates difficulties for the decision-makers within the Cathedral. I believe that deconstructing and deciphering these challenges and separating them into layers can lead to a deeper understanding of their nature. This professional placement has introduced a new dimension of insights into the Cathedral as a heritage asset and led to more professional collaboration with the University of Liverpool.

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