

# 'There are places I remember'

## (Re)constructions of the Beatles as a Liverpool heritage object

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**Abstract:** This article explores the relationship between music, memory and place, with specific reference to the centrality of the music of the Beatles, collective and individual, to the heritage industry in their birthplace, Liverpool. Since its emergence during the early 1980s, the cultural heritage sector in Liverpool has arguably relied heavily on its claim as the cradle of the genius of the Beatles, and it is thought in some quarters that more could be done to exploit this lucrative link. However, it is suggested here that causal links between the city of Liverpool and the inception and development of the Beatles are limited and tenuous, and, therefore, the (over-)reliance on the band by cultural regeneration professionals is based on a false claim. Further, it is argued that the Beatles story, as told and retold in this urban regeneration context, is a partial one which prioritizes some elements over others, mirroring the broader story of Liverpool as a heritage site.

**Keywords:** popular music culture, music tourism, urban renewal, nostalgia, event-led regeneration, narrative

## Introduction

Since the 2003 announcement that Liverpool had won, against stiff competition, the accolade of European Capital of Culture (ECOC) for 2008 (Boland 2010), the city has been firmly established as a tourist destination. The city's maritime history, waterfront, architecture and cultural and artistic heritage are the key ingredients for a contemporary tourism offer which has been harnessed by business and local government alike to drive urban renewal and regeneration in a city previously ravaged by industrial decline and economic deprivation (Furmedge 2008; Kinsella 2021). Unsurprisingly, the Beatles, arguably the most significant cultural phenomenon of the twentieth century (Du Noyer 2012; Collins 2020), are placed front and centre in these processes: the jewel in Liverpool's cultural crown (McColgan 2015).

The purpose of this article is to explore the use of culture and heritage as drivers for urban regeneration in Liverpool, and the role that the Beatles play in these processes. Specifically, we argue that employment of the Beatles as a heritage object in the Liverpool context is very much partial as, in keeping with what is known about memory and tourism (Bartoletti 2010), the relationship between the group and Liverpool is reduced to a *partial* story. Nora (1989: 15) argues that 'the passage from memory to history has required every social group to redefine its identity through the revitalization of its own history. The task of remembering makes everyone his [*sic*] own historian.' A regularly recurring Liverpool Beatles narrative has been circulating through the city's formal and informal tourism and heritage sites, which emphasizes and prioritizes some elements, and downplays or even excludes others (Polkinghorne 1995; Zeller 1995; Kruse 2005; Erll 2011). Crucially, this dominant narrative is one which best supports the neoliberal, capitalist, urban regeneration goals of the tourism and heritage sector as successively envisioned by the governments of Thatcher, Major and Blair, respectively (cf. Hesmondhalgh et al. 2015; Hewison 2014; Long and Morpeth 2016); versions of the story which emphasize other forms of value are sidelined or even ignored. We articulate this by first establishing the relationship

between music, nostalgia and tourism, and then exploring heritage tourism in Liverpool and where the Beatles sit within it. We consider how the story of the Beatles is regularly constructed and reconstructed according to how it will best support the dominant Liverpool regeneration narrative in a given period, and then close by considering what is lost when sanitized, glossy versions of the past are prized over the challenges of authenticity. As Johnson and Dawson, writing as part of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) Popular Memory Group, suggest, historical memory often conforms to ‘flattened stereotypes of myth’ (Johnson and Dawson 1982: 12).

## **Music tourism and musical nostalgia**

Music and tourism have often been associated, whether through operas attended during the European grand tours of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or the importance of music in the nineteenth-century spa towns, such as Bath in England and Baden-Baden in Germany, where music became an integral part of the experience of a spa therapy (Bradley 2011). In Britain the growth of the railways helped the working classes to travel, particularly to seaside resorts which were closely tied to experiencing musical entertainment (Brennan 2015; Hughes and Benn 1998). Bradshaws, the producer of guidebooks, noted a great deal of tourism in Liverpool and the nearby seaside resort of New Brighton from the 1860s onwards (Bradley 2011), until the mid-twentieth century and the decline of many seaside resorts that was brought about by cheap international flights (Farr 2017). The New Brighton Tower opened in 1897 and attracted millions of visitors each year, providing leisure activities including ballroom dancing, acrobatics and orchestral concerts (Watt 2009). The Beatles played at the Tower Ballroom on twenty-seven occasions between 1961 and 1963 (Murphy 2011). The decline of the seaside resort in Britain is well documented (Farr 2017; Beatty, Fothergill and Gore 2014), and New Brighton was no exception to this, exemplified by photographer Martin Parr’s depictions of the resort in the 1980s, particularly in

*The Last Resort* (Parr 2009). Since the turn of the century, New Brighton has undergone extensive regeneration, often drawing on its Edwardian heritage as well as its Beatles links (Nyland 2019).

As Lashua, Spracklen and Long (2014: 3) contend, ‘music provides an important and emotive narrative for tourists, as an expression of culture, a form of heritage, a signifier of place and a marker of moments’. Brandellero et al. (2014) highlight that for the post-Second World War generation popular music might be a potent symbol of national or local identity and heritage. Nostalgia plays a part in this roster, described by Bartoletti as a ‘typical modern illness’ which manifests itself almost as homesickness for a time rather than a place, which can never really be regained (2010: 24). The value of music nostalgia has taken on increasing prominence, particularly among the post-war generation, in many aspects of life, including music, and Dauncey and Tinker (2014: para. 8) identify how this ‘contributes to the development and status of particular popular music forms and genres’, for instance quoting DeNora (2000: 63) on how music can be used as a process for remembering (or constructing) a person’s identity and as ‘a technology for spinning the apparently continuous tale of who one is’.

In an analysis of the psychology of cultural consumption, Schindler and Holbrook (2003) suggest that people can create nostalgic bonding through an interaction with a product at a crucial age – when the person is around twenty years old – and this can then create a lifelong preference for that object. Bennett (2001) highlights how popular culture’s focus on ‘retro’ enables post-war generations to relive their (nostalgically represented) youth. Resonant in thinking about national identity, Collins (2020) pinpoints a sentimental view of Englishness in the depictions of the music and cultural impact of the Beatles to an idealized image of the sixties. Whether this is a nostalgic trip for those who lived through this period or for those who have come to it later, this sentiment is apparent in a number of phenomena. These include the mod revival of the 1970s, which reflected very closely the fashions, sounds and ideals of the 1960s subculture (Dow 2021); the resurgent career and then murder of John Lennon in 1980; and the Oasis-led Britpop era in the 1990s, which again looked back to an ideal of

1960s England (Kallioniemi 2016). Integral to this perspective is the continued omnipotence of the Beatles worldwide. As Penman (2021) states, the group are ‘as much a part of the public conversation as they ever were’ and Liverpool is the place where fans come to experience *their* Beatles and nostalgia.

## Liverpool’s contemporary heritage industry

Many contemporary cultural events in Liverpool reflect on the city’s history, whether they are derived from its maritime heritage, for example the International Mersey River Festival (McColgan 2015), celebrate its music heritage, for example ‘50 Summers of Love’ (Culture Liverpool 2017), or commemorate a particular anniversary, for example the First World War centenary celebrations (McColgan 2015). The Warwick Commission appears to take issue with such an approach and the role and motives of some of those behind such events:

The role of cultural organisations as strategic partners in the more fundamental place-shaping role, building and moulding local communities and identities, remains underdeveloped. As a result, whilst the accounts of place that civic leaders give are often redolent of local pride and distinctiveness, the economic, cultural and social strategies that are seen to comprise place shaping often lack such distinctiveness, are based on *superficial ‘famous dates and people’* idea [*sic*] of place identity or even disregard local cultural expression entirely. (Warwick Commission 2015: 66, emphasis added)

Reliance on ‘superficial “famous dates and people”’ is very much redolent of the recent approach adopted by Liverpool City Council and its partners (Kinsella 2021); we argue here that Liverpool’s cultural heritage offering would be significantly diminished without recourse to a famous period associated with the city – the 1960s – and to arguably the best-known people associated with that period, the Beatles.

Kinsella has argued elsewhere (2021) that regeneration processes in the Liverpool context can be understood as reflecting two distinct

trajectories, characterized as ‘forward-facing’ and ‘backward-facing’. The ‘forward-facing’ era ranges from the end of the Second World War to the early 1980s, with a focus on the future of Liverpool expressed via modernization and physical expansion. The ‘backward-facing’ era, roughly starting from the 1980s onwards, focuses on Liverpool’s industrial, commercial and cultural past via commemoration, heritagization and prioritization of the city centre.

To expand: the first period, when regeneration focused on the future, was based on the belief that Liverpool would continue to develop and prosper and, consequently, needed to be ‘modernized’ to cope with the demands of an increasing population, a strong workforce and a buoyant, flourishing economy. The second, ‘backward-facing’ era emerged towards the end of the 1970s. A disastrous decade for the city, this era represents an about-face in terms of understandings of where prosperity lay for Liverpool, and a 180-degree change of direction from prosperity based on an insecure, uncertain future, to prosperity based on a celebration of the city’s past – its history, heritage and status as maritime city of empire.

Developing Kinsella’s ideas further, we now examine key urban regeneration pushes in Liverpool from the 1960s, which assume a future characterized by economic boom, and the *volte-face* of the early 1980s towards a future based on the past. Crucially, we map these forward-facing and backward-facing processes against the evolution of the Beatles as a musical and cultural phenomenon, and their role as a source of both pride and angst in connection with the city’s image and reputation.

## Locating the Beatles against Liverpool’s changing fortunes

The Beatles’ story is among the best-known of popular music tales and is emblematic of the optimism and hope of the ‘forward-facing’ era of Liverpool’s historical story. John Lennon and Paul McCartney met in 1957 in the Liverpool suburb of Woolton and along with George Harrison and others began to perform as the Quarrymen.

By 1962 John, Paul, and George were called the Beatles and were managed by local businessman Brian Epstein. They gained a new drummer, Ringo Starr. They released their first single, 'Love Me Do', and in 1963, *Please Please Me* became their first number one record in the U.K. This success was replicated first in the United States and then around the world. Gilmore (1994) articulates that the Beatles were seen as a force of energetic optimism in the U.S.A., where they arrived shortly after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy to a grieving country. As Lemonnier (2016: 46) writes, 'it is impossible to write a cultural and social history of the 1960s without mentioning the Beatles and recalling in passing their worldwide success.' More than just a popular music group, the Beatles were also culturally significant, symbolizing post-war Britain's changes, whether that be the 'invention' of the teenager and their consumerist behaviours (Savage 2010) or the intensification of social mobility in British society (Lawrence 2019), particularly in the North of England.

The initial connection of the orbits of McCartney, Lennon and Harrison in the late 1950s/early 1960s coincided with the first real signs of post-war urban regeneration in Liverpool. Couch (2003) notes that it was around this time that urban planning, or town planning as it was more commonly known in the U.K., came to be seen as a profession and a craft in its own right, alongside the emerging conceptualization of the city as a dynamic living organism. Thus, the town planning of the day was emblematic of a new dawn for urban life – it was planning for a bright, clean future – and very much reflected the economic and social optimism of the 1960s (Balderstone, Milne and Mulhearn 2014). Perhaps the best physical legacy of this futuristic, modernist optimism is St John's Beacon, built in the city centre in 1969 in an innovative space-age style (Muchnick 1970). This 400-foot-high tower, built in conjunction with St John's Precinct (shopping centre), incorporates a panoramic observation area which was originally constructed as a revolving restaurant that closed after just eight years (Kefford 2022). Now home to a radio station, the tower continues to contribute to the distinctive skyline of the city, in sharp contrast to the surrounding 'dingy' Georgian and Victorian cityscape (Tulloch 2011).

The modernist tone of the Liverpool *Interim Planning Policy Statement* (1964) and the *City Centre Plan* (1965) harnessed this optimism and ‘civic confidence’ (Murden 2006: 402) to envision a new city centre which would acknowledge concerns of both practicality and physical beauty (Couch 2003) and reject inner city low-level living in favour of high-rise tower blocks (Aughton 2008; Rogers 2010; Tulloch 2011). The dominant theme of building skywards is, for Tulloch, symbolic of the city’s confidence:

In the 1960s, additions continued to be made to the skyline as the city seemed to build ever upwards in a symbolic demonstration of masculine vigour, proclaiming to the world that Liverpool still had a lot to offer and those who thought the city was dead were in for a shock. (Tulloch 2011: 131)

Thus the future and prosperity of the city seemed assured, with new homes in the sky or in the suburbs fit for a new generation of workers employed in manufacturing at, for example, the newly established Ford Motor Company branch plant in Halewood – allowing for positive comparisons to be drawn between Liverpool and the original ‘motor city’, Detroit (Murden 2006), another hub of innovation and verve in terms of post-war popular music and culture (Posner 2002). For the city to be able to compete as a major player in the modern era, ‘the ambition was to reshape and redevelop what was perceived to be an obsolete and inefficient city centre’ (Couch 2003: 51).

This period of positivity, prosperity and hope in Liverpool coincided with one of the city’s best-known eras, encapsulated in the term ‘Merseybeat’ (Jones 2020). The early 1960s saw a series of pop groups from the Liverpool music scene evoke a new energy in popular culture in the U.K. and find international fame and achieve cultural influence (Millington and Nelson 1986; Aughton 2008), which had the effect of bolstering the confident mood of a ‘new prosperous Liverpool’ (Frost and North 2013: 8). The Beatles were an integral part of the perceived positivity associated with the 1960s, a period of new fashions, art and an increase in economic prosperity. Arguably the creative and commercial success of Liverpool during this time, coupled with the futuristic and



optimistic building programme, against a backdrop of presumed human progress and success epitomized by the excitement of the 'space race' (White 2015: 47), makes this period the zenith of forward-facing Liverpool, with great hopes for the future and where uncertainty was viewed as opportunity.

However, the optimistic hope for a brighter Liverpool life that characterized the climate of the 1960s was ultimately short lived. The early 1970s, whilst proving to be a difficult period for many British communities because of economic recession (Dow 1998), were positively catastrophic for Liverpool (Hayes 1987; Belchem 2006; Roberts 2010; Tulloch 2011; Balderstone, Milne and Mulhearn 2013; Frost and North 2013). The global recession of 1973 coincided with several other phenomena which rained heavy blows on the city. Liverpool's geographical location on the Mersey, once so advantageous to the city's prosperity and growth, was now at the root of its downfall. The continuing decline of the British empire (Belchem 2006), together with the U.K.'s commitment to the European Common Market (Murden 2006; Tulloch 2011), significantly reduced the amount of traffic and commerce through docks on the west of the country and, subsequently, the requirement for bulk processing industry dockside (Taylor 2009). Developments in the handling and transport of cargo, specifically the use of transport containers, rendered the docks to the south of the city obsolete (Belchem 2006; Balderstone, Milne and Mulhearn 2013).

Manufacturing industries in Liverpool have traditionally been characterized by what Heseltine and Leahy (2011: 22) refer to as 'branch plant syndrome', whereby large corporations' commitment to the city tended to comprise a single plant rather than wholesale operations and headquarters, largely because of an accepted view that the Liverpool workforce is both unreliable and 'strike-happy' (Murden 2006: 431). Arguably these ideas about Liverpool and Liverpudlians meant that the city bore the brunt of the economic decline of the 1970s and its impact on business and industry in the U.K., as firm after firm withdrew from their weakest point by closing down branch plants (Grady 2014). Mass unemployment and mass depopulation of Liverpool were the result (Hayes 1987).

Thus, by the 1970s the city had a post-industrial landscape characterized by decay, dereliction and abandonment. A discourse of self-inflicted demise was attributed to the population of Liverpool by critics, deflecting attention away from the many and varied structural causes of decline over which the city's inhabitants had no control (Topping and Smith 1977; Belchem 2006). A significant proportion of young male inhabitants, in a bid to kill time created by unemployment, turned to drugs; cannabis at first, then through lack of availability, heroin (Pearson and Gilman 1994; Thornton 2003). These addictions were fed in many cases through crime (Fazey 1988; Pearson 1991). A further aspect of the multi-faceted 'unique' nature of 'problem Liverpool' arose as a result of Liverpool Football Club's success in European competition, which brought its supporters to continental destinations where they obtained, either by purchasing or through theft, designer sportswear not available in the U.K. (Thornton 2003). This led to a developing close association in the popular imagination between football, crime, violence, gang culture and Liverpool (Lawrence and Pipini 2016).

By the early 1980s the devastation started by the decline in industry dating back to the 1960s was virtually complete, and Liverpool's identity as a post-industrial city became firmly entrenched (Roberts 2010). The inner-city disturbances of the summer of 1981 compounded the near universal view that the city was beyond redemption. This is arguably best encapsulated in this oft-cited opinion piece published in the *Daily Mirror*: 'They should build a fence around [Liverpool] and charge admission. For sadly it has become a "show-case" for everything that has gone wrong in Britain's major cities' (quoted in Coleman 2004: 105). The 'fence' called for by this journalist was never built; however, their suggestion of making a spectacle of the city came to pass in a way, since largely as a result of the intervention of the unofficial 'Minister for Merseyside' Michael Heseltine, and in the aftermath of John Lennon's death, Liverpool's future was identified as its becoming a centre of culture, leisure and tourism (Crick 1997; Robson 1988; Lawless 1989; Couch 2003; Tulloch 2011; Feldman-Barrett 2021).

Early initiatives designed to spark regeneration through culture and heritage included the redevelopment of the central yet long

defunct Albert Dock (a site listed by Historic England as having Grade I status, meaning that it is a structure of exceptional interest), the hosting of the 1984 Tall Ships Race, the opening of the International Garden Festival in 1984 and, crucially, the opening of the Beatle City exhibition in Seel Street in the same year (Couch 2003; Wiener 1986; Robson 1988; Lawless 1989; Tulloch 2011). In the early 1990s, the arrival and ‘kicking in’ period of Objective 1 funding<sup>1</sup> – awarded by the European Union to areas where gross domestic product per head is less than 75% of the European Union average (Jones and Skilton 2014) – coincided with several grassroots developments which had the impact of bringing revenue to, increasing the ‘brand’ of, and, crucially as it turned out, showcasing the *culture* of Liverpool. The first Mathew Street Festival, a loosely Beatles-themed free outdoor music event in the city’s Cavern Quarter, was held during the August bank holiday weekend of 1993, and attracted 20,000 spectators (Wright 2015). Meanwhile, following nascent attempts at establishing music venues such as Quadrant Park and 051, James Barton opened Cream, a night club which sought to reject the seedy, dangerous image of the old ‘clubland’ and fill a void in Liverpool’s music scene with a bespoke site dedicated to dance music. Cream would very quickly establish a reputation for a ‘Scouse house’ scene, which would attract coachloads of revellers from around the country (Du Noyer 2002: 221). Thus, the long-standing local recognition of Liverpool as a ‘party town’ (Murden 2006: 479) began to be disseminated further afield.

Heseltine and Leahy (2011) note that periods of regeneration tend to come in waves. Arguably, events such as the Mathew Street Festival and the birth of the Cream franchise, together with the push and support of European funding, marked the starting point of a wave of rebirth and redevelopment which paved the way for contemporary regenerative processes, cultural revival and event-driven regeneration (Couch 2003; Coleman 2004). ‘Heritage tourism’ (Timothy 2011), which acknowledges and celebrates buildings, artefacts, traditions and ‘famous children’ (Furmedge

1. Merseyside’s initial Objective 1 funding period ran from 1993 to 1999. The area was granted a second period of funding from 2000 to 2006 (Gripaios and Bishop 2006).

2008: 89), was identified by local government as a central and vital feature of the ‘mega regeneration’ (Tallon 2013: 197) that Liverpool needed. The crucial element of heritage tourism in the Liverpool case, the driving force that would set the city apart from other places blighted by post-industrial decline, was identified as ‘culture’ (Coleman 2004; Aughton 2008; Tallon 2013). This was exemplified by the opening of the Museum of Liverpool Life in 1993 (Moore 1997) and also the Rope Walks project which saw the renovation and spotlighting of long, narrow streets in the Bold Street area that were initially constructed to facilitate the making of maritime rope (Bayley 2010). In retail, the development of the Queen Square complex (Boland 1996) was enabled; and in transport, the overhaul of the Gyratory and Paradise Street bus station. Public safety and surveillance were addressed through the wholesale installation of closed circuit television cameras (CCTV) across the city centre in the wake of the abduction and murder of James Bulger (Coleman 2004). What all of these disparate developments shared, though, was a focus on consumption and a commitment to private investment (Couch 2003; Coleman 2004; Tallon 2013).

## Millennial Liverpool

The contemporary Liverpool characterized by its offer of heritage, culture and ostentatious consumption was fully consolidated in June 2003, when the ECOC accolade, by which the European Commission identified Liverpool as a centre of rich cultural heritage, was announced. The people of Liverpool were reported to be intensely proud of this achievement, which would act as a counterbalance to, and a rebuttal of, the persistent negative reputation that the city struggled to shake off, as well as being a useful source of revenue (Allt 2008; Furnedgedge 2008; Boland 2010; Cox and O’Brien 2012). Music tourism, related to the city’s famous past, and in particular the Beatles, was offered as a fundamental cornerstone to this consolidation of cultural regeneration (Cohen 2007). Intrinsic to this is the acknowledgement that, without music, Liverpool would have little to offer as a cultural centre: Mike Wilkinson, when he was head

of Liverpool's tourism, arts and heritage department, emphasized this strategy, stating 'when you ask foreign visitors what they knew about the city before they came here, it boils down to football teams and pop groups' (Wheeller 1996, quoted in Connell and Gibson 2002: 226–227).

Unsurprisingly, the Beatles have been front and centre among the football teams and pop groups (Cohen 2007; Lashua 2011). The first Beatles statue in the city, 'Four Lads Who Shook the World' by Arthur Dooley, was erected in Mathew Street in 1974. It features a Madonna-like figure with outstretched arms holding swaddled infants, representing Liverpool as the mother (city) of the Beatles. The original sculpture depicted John, George and Ringo as the babes-in-arms while Paul was represented as a baby with wings (this element was stolen and then returned years later). The sculpture was altered following John Lennon's death with the words 'Lennon Lives' added (*Liverpool Echo*, 2005).

From this inauspicious beginning there has been a growth in tourist-oriented uses of various Liverpool locations: souvenir shops, the Beatles Story Museum, hotels with Beatles themes and an 'authentic' replica Cavern Club (Connell and Gibson 2002). The Beatles' childhood homes have been protected (some might argue, exploited) via the National Trust, which is a heritage conservation organization. The reconstruction in 1984 of the '1960s Cavern' opposite the original site of the Cavern Club, which had opened in 1957 and closed in 1973 to accommodate a ventilation shaft (Leigh 2015), is also an exercise in heritage revision and protection.

Despite this contemporary focus on the Beatles as being integral to Liverpool's heritage narrative, it is important to remember that the band left the city for London in 1963, and it is arguable that much of their later development both as a musical group and as individuals owes a lot to the capital's 1960s scene rather than their hometown (MacDonald 2007). The group's association with various London locations has also been exploited for Beatles tourist heritage sites, most notably the famous Abbey Road zebra crossing depicted on the iconic 1969 album cover (Jones n.d.), which is now officially designated as a site of particular historic and/or architectural significance.

Returning to Merseyside music tourism, it is interesting to consider that there were originally tensions between those music fans who wanted to preserve the Liverpool legacy of the Beatles, and the city administrators who felt investment should be in the city's future, not its past (Brocken 2016). The influence of the public and public interest groups in establishing the memories and artefacts as part of heritage practices concerning the band was vital to this period of Beatles heritage in Liverpool (Leonard and Strachan 2010). The original drive for representations of the Beatles in Liverpool was predominantly fan-led, because plans for a statue were rejected by the city authorities as being unworthy of a place in the history of Liverpool. At some points in their career, the Beatles were seen to have brought discredit on the city. A *Daily Mail* article in October 1974 reported on a Liverpool City Council meeting where there was a discussion about whether a statue of the Beatles should be erected in the city. The article reads:

The Beatles have been disinherited by heads of the city [...] Councillors in Liverpool branded John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr as a 'discredit' to their birthplace [...] Tory councillor, Tony McVeigh, added, 'The Beatles couldn't sing for toffee. Their behaviour brought tremendous discredit to the city. John Lennon returned his MBE medal to the Queen. It was an absolute insult.' (quoted in Badman 2009: 1977)

As this extract from the popular tabloid press illustrates, the meaning and importance of the Beatles was often in dispute throughout the 1960s and 1970s (MacDonald 2007). Collins (2020) identifies how the Beatles appeared unthreatening in the early 1960s; for example, they appeared before the Queen Mother at *The Royal Variety Show* in 1963 and received honours in the form of MBEs in 1965.<sup>2</sup> However, their association with the social and cultural changes of the era, for example experimentation with drugs and countercultural politics, led to indignation and outrage

2. The awarding of the Member of the Order of the British Empire was not without controversy at the time (Collins 2020). As a protest about the U.K.'s support for the Vietnam war, John Lennon returned his MBE in 1969 (Ingليس 1996).

from politicians and parts of the media. Those once-provocative acts of the Beatles have, over time, somewhat lost their shock value in some quarters as opinions have changed through the years, with these transgressions encompassed by more partial and nostalgic memories of the 1960s. There is a cleaning up of the past in Liverpool's depiction of the Beatles. Post break-up, the group grew in prominence within the city's culture, and a Beatles music tourism industry has been constructed that offers new interpretations of the past and recreates the city of Liverpool as a symbolic place that claims to authentically represent the group. However, the marketing of places involves a manipulation of discourses, where some dominate and others are sidelined (Kruse 2005). Each member of the Beatles was a creative human being with complex personalities and complicated lives; arguably this nuance and intricacy is overlooked in this context.

We would argue that the resulting narrative focus on the Beatles' career in Merseyside is one in which they are carefully (and commercially) remythologized (Kruse 2005). It is largely nostalgic and romantic because the dominant discourse of the band used to represent places in Liverpool emphasizes youth and playfulness – that is, their early 1960s emergence in the city. This privileging of certain discourses is most notable in the reimagining of John Lennon, no doubt influenced by his murder in 1980 (Barnett 2020). Liverpool John Lennon Airport was the first airport in the United Kingdom to be named after an individual, a major acknowledgement of the importance of the tourist market to Liverpool. The iconography, and the tagline 'above us only sky' from the song 'Imagine', represents Lennon as a poet, privileging this particular discourse regarding his reputation while ignoring other, more controversial depictions, including radical politics, drug taking and domestic violence (Barnett 2020; Kruse 2005).

The avoidance or ignorance of particular aspects of the Beatles story raises valid questions about the authenticity of the version of the band presented in heritage discourse to galvanize tourism and the experience economy (Long, Cantillon and Baker 2022). As Kruse (2005: 89) identifies, the narratives that are promoted are 'highly selective, generally accessible and lacking in controversy'.

The commodification of experience and the presentation of artistic and literary places as tourist attractions are often disputed by those who experienced them first hand (Kinsella 2021) and by those who are represented (Badman 2009). As Brocken (2016: 209) argues, such commodifications and presentations are ‘contingent on questions concerning fundamental civil, political, ethical and cultural roles in both popular music and cities in our time’.

### **Nostalgia, the Beatles and the notion of ‘story’**

As Radstone (2010: 188) notes, ‘nostalgia has been associated both with a melancholy and conservative response to modernity’s uncertainties’ and this can be seen in the way the Beatles have been depicted by the tourist industries. Tourists visit Penny Lane simply to have their photograph taken alongside the street sign, as there is nothing else there of note. Strawberry Field, the site of a former children’s home, only opened to the public for the first time in 2019 (Strawberry Field n.d.). Strachan (2010) argues that the Beatles’ nostalgia is suburban, and they themselves are reminiscing about a previous, already diminishing Liverpool, that of the suburban 1950s.<sup>3</sup> As with all memories, the events might arguably never have actually happened and rather are reconstructed and reshaped, and represent an idyll and a desire to return home that can be seen particularly in Beatles songs such as ‘Penny Lane’ and the original lyrics to ‘In My Life’.<sup>4</sup>

3. This is a recurring theme in Peter Jackson’s 2021 documentary series *The Beatles: Get Back*, where the Beatles revisit songs from their early career and experiences in Liverpool.

4. John Lennon’s original lyrics to ‘In My Life’ include mention of a number of Liverpool landmarks seen from the deck of the number 5 bus from his suburban house into the city, including a mention of Penny Lane. Lennon apparently changed the lyrics to be less Liverpool-specific as he said it sounded like a boring bus trip (Brewer 2021). McCartney’s later song ‘Penny Lane’ delivers a suburban trip down memory lane, while ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’, despite being another suburban memory, named after a Liverpool orphanage, is a particularly otherworldly trip.



When Joe Anderson was Liverpool City Mayor between 2012 and 2021, he reportedly believed that Liverpool did not do enough to celebrate its status as the home city of the Beatles and saw this as a potential further historic area to exploit (McColgan 2015). This is, however, part of a wider trend of a ‘memory industry’ (Erl 2011: 3) and, more specifically, ‘memory tourism’ (Bartoletti 2010: 23). Drawing on Pierre Nora’s conceptualization of *lieux de mémoire* as sites of collective memory, Erl recognizes that collective memory is a social construction, in that what we are encouraged to remember is delivered or revealed to us via ‘specialised carriers of tradition’ (Erl 2011: 29) who are authorized to establish ‘official’ memory as opposed to ‘vernacular’ memory. Thus, a process develops whereby what we remember and what we forget becomes politicized, in that what is deemed memory-worthy is dictated by the powerful. Drawing on Derrida’s (1995) concept of ‘archival fever’, Erl identifies ‘a contradictory drive, or desire, to collect and remember and at the same time to repress, destroy and forget’ (2011: 51). It is possible to use Erl’s analysis to explain event-led regeneration in Liverpool: Liverpool City Council and its partners act as ‘specialised carriers of tradition’ (ibid: 29), deciding what to remember and establishing the city’s waterfront, or St George’s Plateau, as the designated site for remembering.

Nostalgia – memories of, and affection for, previous times – is essentially selective and subjective. When something is perceived as deserving of heritage status it is afforded a certain gravitas; a level of dignity, respect and reverence that cannot be attributed in the same way to other phenomena. Because Liverpool as a city has an abundance of history and heritage, feelings of importance, significance and pride facilitate a deep and widely held love for those aspects of the city revered as valuable, distinctive and evidential of a glorious past. Nostalgia about the post-war period acted as a diversion from the social and economic deprivation in the city in the 1970s and 1980s and, from a regeneration perspective, as a way of glossing over it (Mayne 2017).

There is a recognition that narrative and life history are essentially social and cultural constructions (Polkinghorne 1995; Fielding

2006), not least because memory also shares these characteristics (Woodside 2010). Emihovich, for example, states that ‘stories do not pretend to be objective because they deal with emotions, the irrational part of behaviour, they tap into qualities of imagination and fantasy’ (1995: 39). Bowler (2019) argues that whenever a Beatles location in Liverpool is discussed, arguably other, potentially more important histories of the city are going to be overlooked, whether this be its mercantile and nautical heritage, or the legacy of the city’s prosperity built upon the slave trade. The Beatles often cast a shadow over contemporary Liverpool musicians, with many Liverpool bands described as ‘the next Beatles’. Thus, it could be argued that Liverpool’s ‘other’ heritage(s) have been overshadowed by a nostalgic fondness for the group and the excitement and promise of Liverpool of the early 1960s.

## Conclusion

Liverpool’s past is now established, in a variety of ways, as central to both its present and projections of its future identity. Crucially though, only certain versions of, or elements within, the past are validated as ‘culture’ and ‘heritage’ worthy of commemoration and commercialization. The Beatles were a bigger mainstream act and commercial success than other Liverpool bands – either during their years of activity or compared to those who came after (Echo and the Bunnymen, for example) – thus they are worthy of commemoration. The Everyman Theatre was successful, but small and intimate – thus, rather than being conserved it had to be redeveloped for an audience of 400 and its old seats auctioned off as mementos (BBC News 2011). The Pier Head had a night-time ‘scene’ beloved of locals, but it was depriving business of making capital out of the views over the Mersey – thus it had to be remodelled with hotels and restaurants. The past is constructed as vital to Liverpool’s future prosperity, but some elements of the past are deemed either not worthy or not profit making; therefore, they are airbrushed from the version of the past prioritized and co-opted by ‘the regeneration professional’ (Furmedge 2008:

82). The specific emphasis on the Beatles drowns out important alternative scenes in Merseyside, including black and minority ethnic communities (Bowler 2019). It also downplays other cities' significant influence on the development of the group, for example Hamburg. Fremaux and Fremaux (2013: 1) state that Hamburg's role has been overshadowed by 'cultural ownership of the band that was claimed by Liverpool's tourism industry in the 1980s and 1990s'.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, Liverpool's centring of the Beatles as the jewel in its cultural heritage crown is something of a false claim.

The way Beatles tourism manifests itself in Liverpool is simplified and one-dimensional; focus is placed on their early relationships with each other and their initial successes. Other than Lennon, whose murder in 1980 invoked homage to what might be called his 'Imagine' period, little attention is paid to the solo careers of the Beatles, meaning that the greater part of the 1970s is missing from the Liverpool account of Beatles-based nostalgia. This mirrors broader Beatles fandom which associates the 1970s with bad blood between the former group members and the increasingly diminishing likelihood of a reunion (Badman 2009). It also, however, mirrors broader cultural and tourism-driven regeneration narratives in Liverpool, which attempt to draw a veil over the 1970s as a most difficult era for the city, and a 'blip' in terms of culture and the arts, even though other, relatively less commercially successful, scenes flourished in Liverpool during this time. While the deaths of John Lennon and later George Harrison, coupled with much-publicized visits 'home' by Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr, have allowed for more consideration of them as individuals, it is the early 1960s Beatles that are most prevalent in how they are depicted in Liverpool tourism.

Both of the present article's authors re-engaged with the Beatles via various methods in preparation for writing this article. Peters, for example, in watching the eight hours of Peter Jackson's *The Beatles: Get Back*, observed frequent references to their Liverpool pasts scattered throughout. Kinsella, meanwhile,

5. This is true, although in 2009 the city of Hamburg opened the Beatlemania Museum in the Reeperbahn area of the St Pauli district.

gained first-hand experience of Beatles tourism in Liverpool by going on the *Magical Mystery Tour* excursion, which departs from the Albert Dock and ends with free entrance to the Cavern Club. Having been a regular at the club between approximately 1989 and 1993, when the venue had been split into two areas – one featuring music from the 1950s through the 1970s along with contemporary ‘indie’ hits, the other devoted to the emerging dance music scene – she was shocked to discover all evidence of this latter period in the venue’s history obliterated, replaced with various Merseybeat memorabilia. This vignette captures the essence of our argument here. Cultural heritage, when packaged as a singular narrative to support regeneration drives, is essentially selective – plot points, instigating incidents and turns of events are chosen on the basis of *how well they support the chosen version of events*, as opposed to how reflective they are of a messy and contentious reality. Thus, use of the Beatles as a device to drive regeneration is partial – focused on four talented madcap mop-tops and a hint of colourful psychedelia, and ignoring, for example, sexual infidelity, drug use, imprisonment, accusations of blasphemy, Lennon’s ‘lost weekend’, and various other controversies (Everett and Riley 2019). A gesture to a challenging authenticity is sacrificed in favour of saleability.

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