**Sisters of Mersey Podcast Transcript**

Dr Sam Caslin: You're listening to Tales from the Square with me Dr Sam Caslin and in this episode, I'll be discussing the Sisters of Mersey. a research project from the University of Liverpool looking at the remarkable women who've helped shape the history, culture and life of the city of Liverpool and beyond.

Sisters Mersey is an app that's been developed by the University of Liverpool and it aims to bring to light the rich, complicated, important history of women's contributions to, and experiences of the Merseyside area. One of the great things about it is that it's free to download. We want this to be an important public engagement project. This is for the community. It's not just academics kind of telling people what's important about women's contribution to the city. We want to hear from people. We want them to get in touch with us and say, what should we be included on this. And there are a number of local historians working outside of the University who are experts in these areas, and we want to bring them in, we want to talk to them or find out more. We want to talk to members of the public schools, as well. We want to get kids engaged with this. And the thing that I really like about Sisters of Mersey as a project is the fact that it is shining light on an area of history that I think in a lot of public conversations and in a lot of public histories is still fairly marginalised.

When we walk around city spaces, there's a lot of subconscious masculinity going on. So a lot of the streets around Liverpool are named after a really important men. And we see statues of really important men all over the place. And I think it kind of sends a message the history is very male field, particularly in terms of importance. You know, when we think about people actually making a difference in the world, I think we're primed to see that it's quite a male endeavour.

And so an app like this really says, actually, it's a lot more complicated than that. And we can't leave women out of the picture. I also think people tend to assume the women just stayed in the home for a long, long time. And that was certainly an ideal, there was the domestic ideal that women were supposed to live up to. But there are a couple of points there that I always like to kind of address. And that is the fact that well, when women were working in the home that was significant in itself, and we need to try and find a way to talk about those domestic histories and talk about where women lived and how they lived.

But also they didn't just stay in the home even while the ideal was there, the domestic goddess, they were still actually participating in the wider social, political, cultural and economic life of a city like Liverpool. And so the app is trying to capture that richness in terms of women's contributions to the city and women's experiences of the city.

In more recent years, what we've seen is a degree of pushback at times where women have been talking about things like feminism, women's rights movement, all of this. And people have said that, you know, this is very challenging and very new. But actually, you know, women have been fighting for these rights for a long time. And so we want to talk about that history. And we want to show that women's lives have been very complicated for a long time because we need to move away from stereotypes about what women have done. It's not a kind of idealistic simple, straightforward celebration, when women were great. We want to tell a complicated history of women as well, because I think it would be doing those historical actors a disservice if all we did was try and tell these kind of positive stories, these inspirational stories, sometimes things can be a bit more complicated and a bit more negative. And I think that's a really interesting thing to do. Because it means that we get a more rounded picture of women's history and what women were actually like.

So we've got women who are out there doing civil rights campaigning on the app, you know, we've got our suffragists, suffragettes on the app. We've got women's welfare workers, but we've also got these more complicated histories around welfare workers who often kind of morally judged a lot of working class women in particular. I think they were doing things for, you know, for good reasons. They thought that, you know, their philanthropy was genuinely helping them. But often they were saying things about other women that could be quite judgmental.

We also delve into the areas of crime as well. So we've got people like the notorious Flanagan sisters on there, who in the Victorian period became notorious for poisoning lodgers who stayed with them and collected insurance money. And so we want to tell all of these types of stories as well. Because when you think about these things, when you think about the fact that, OK, some women were out there committing murder, it's interesting because it flies in the face of that idea that, you know, women don't do things like that, women are supposed to be well behaved, certainly Victorian women. You know, the stereotype is Victorian women just stayed in the house and were well behaved and the husbands told them what to do all the time. And this history is so much more complicated.

So we're here on the corner of Crown Street and West Derby Street. We're not too far from Liverpool City Centre. And there's lots of shiny new buildings here, new buildings in the process of being completed. And this really kind of shows just how much the landscape is changing. And what's really interesting about this particular site is one of our historians from the University of Liverpool. Dr. Cheryl Hudson has actually pinned some information to our app about the civil rights campaigner Ida B Wells. She was actually born into slavery, and in the 1890s, she went on a speaking tour, and she came to Liverpool as part of that speaking tour. And she spoke at a church here, Pembroke Baptist Church, and that was part of her campaign at the time against the lynching of black men in the US for sleeping with white women. She also campaigned for women's suffrage as well. And so Dr. Hudson's kind of brought this history kind of back to the fore here because you would never know. But it was here, the church itself was actually destroyed during the Second World War. So there's nothing we can pin a plaque to say Ida B Wells was here, but for our app brings that to light and, and reminds us of that.

So we’re here outside number 44 Faulkner Street and this is the former site of the Liverpool House of Help. This was a women's refuge that was actually set up in 1890. This part of the street was built in 1829. They’re large houses and most of them now appear to have been converted into flats. And what the House of Help did was basically offer short stay accommodation to women in need. It was a charitable endeavour. And it was constantly in need of money and financial support. And it really reflects the broader social life of Liverpool in many ways. Because this was a city where many women would travel through in search of work or on the way to another location, there was a lot of Irish immigration. So there were a lot of Irish and women coming over to the city. And they often didn't always have a place to stay. So the House of Help’s remit is helping women in that position. There were also women using Lime Street train station to travel around the Northwest and further afield and there’d be missed connections, lost tickets… so it wasn't unusual for women to find themselves stranded in the city and to need somewhere to stay. And in many ways, House of Help therefore was able to step in and offer what was essentially a really vital service. It did come with a dose of moralism though. So the House of Help thought they were vital, not just in terms of the practical support that they were given to women, but they saw themselves as, they saw themselves as maintaining the sort of moral fabric of the city of Liverpool, if you like, because one of the things that they were really concerned about was that these women who became stranded, particularly if they were working class, particularly if they were Irish, they thought that there was a fairly good chance that these women would tend to prostitution that they didn't have the sort of moral strength to avoid that or that they were really naive in some way and will be duped.

So they fed into this kind of narrative of, you know, the fallen woman and the woman who needed to be rescued and protected. And like I say they this was an organisation that lasted up until the end of the 1960s. So when we think about kind of fallen woman / respectable woman, that kind of woman's virtue needing protecting, we.often think of it being a very Victorian idea. But when we look at Liverpool, we can see that it goes right through into the second half of the 20th century. And, and it was still part of the philosophy of the service that was being offered here by the House of Help. But there's no sign for the House of Help was ever based here. It's a significant part of Liverpool's history that's missing. And there's so much history in Faulkner Street anyway. You know, the House of Help wasn't the only important institution here. There was an orphanage, a girls’ orphanage nearby to and also things like that until we're kind of constantly updating the app with regards to Faulkner Street, Faulkner Square and this whole area because there's this rich women's history in this particular locality.

The app is aimed at a really broad range of people, and we're trying to make as accessible as possible as well in lots of other ways. So we've got extra audio on the entries. So we're adding these audio so you can, you don't have to be able to just read the text but actually, you can have it play to you as well. The Sisters of Mersey brings to life the history of a lot of buildings that you might walk past on a daily basis. And you can actually start to think about who lived there, what was the building used for as well get to see your city in a slightly different way. You can get it from the app store, you can get it from Google Play, so it works with Apple and Android devices. And you can also visit our website as well. You can find us through Google. And we have a Twitter page as well at Sisters of Mersey. So you can get in touch with us in lots of different ways. And the main thing to say is that the app is free, so please download it and enjoy it.