

This self-guided walk takes you through Abercromby Square – a Georgian (1714-1830) residential development. You will learn about the history of the square and some of the people who lived there.

1. Based on a plan designed by John Foster Senior, construction began on Abercromby Square during the 1810s. It was completed by the 1830s and named in honour of Sir Ralph Abercromby (1734-1801)

2. Abercromby Square is home to the School of Histories, Languages and Cultures, the Garstang Museum, the Institute of Irish Studies and the School of the Arts

3. Circular domed building, originally built to store gardening tools.



You may have noticed that the University is uphill from the city centre – this is not an accident. The higher air was thought to be cleaner and healthier for residents. The communal garden in which you are standing offered residents even more access to clean open spaces. Note the wide raised pavements – these allowed wealthy residents to walk (or ‘promenade’) away from the dirt of the streets. The streets would have been unpaved, with horses drawing carriages and wagons. Pavements are also lit by streetlamps – this was a relatively new innovation, and was introduced to reduce crime and create a feeling of safety. In the 1830s, the residents of Abercromby Square were served by St Catherine’s Church, (now the site of the Abercromby Wing of the Sydney Jones Library), although this was destroyed during WW2.



At first glance, the houses are uniform: all are constructed of brick, and have three storeys plus basements. They have sash windows, and the centre house in each block has a Greek-style Doric porch (a decorative feature, designed to resemble a column or pillar). The remaining houses have Doric pilasters. These neo-classical architectural features were incredibly fashionable during the eighteenth century, and demonstrated Abercromby Square’s status as respectable, genteel housing. However, if you look closer, you can see that the houses are not quite replicas of each other. Although the houses were laid out according to a general plan, individual builders had flexibility, so you may spot some differences between them, such as their height or window size. As you can imagine, individual budgets impacted the level of intricacy of the decoration of each house.

Begin by turning left out of the Management School and onto Chatham Street. Directly in front of you will be the Cypress Building, and to your right you will be able to see the Sydney Jones Library. Head in the direction of the Sydney Jones Library, and stop when you reach the Red Post Box on the corner. Here, you will find Abercromby Square.

Leave the communal garden to your right, and cross Oxford Street. Number 19 (the entrance for the School of the Arts) has an interesting history. The plaque outside the building commemorates Noel Chavasse – son of the Bishop Chavasse – as this was formerly the Palace of the Bishop of Liverpool. However, this building was originally constructed for Charles K. Prioleau – a cotton merchant from South Carolina. Step into the entrance vestibule and look up towards the ceiling.



1. Based on a plan designed by John Foster Senior, construction began on Abercromby Square during the 1810s. It was completed by the 1830s and named in honour of Sir Ralph Abercromby (1734-1801) – the Scottish Commander of the British Army in Egypt, who died of his wounds following the Battle of Alexandria. This patriotic reference to Britain’s military (and its Empire) gives us some clues about what was important to the people who lived and built Abercromby Square.



2. Abercromby Square is home to the School of Histories, Languages and Cultures (to your left) – including the Garstang Museum on the left corner; the Institute of Irish Studies (straight ahead of you); and the School of the Arts (to your right, across the garden).

3. In the centre of the housing is a communal garden. Make your way to the centre of the garden, where you will find a circular domed building. This was originally built to store gardening tools. From here, let’s briefly consider the architectural features of the buildings and what they can tell us about eighteenth-century Liverpool.

Abercromby Square was constructed in response to changing social conditions in Liverpool: the city centre was overcrowded, dirty, and unhealthy. Liverpool’s wealthier residents (including merchants and politicians) wanted to live away from the dirt and noise of the city, but still close enough to access the Docks and their businesses. From the 1750s onwards, housing began to be constructed away from the city centre (such as along Rodney Street, Falkner Square and Mount Pleasant, where you will see other surviving Georgian housing).



Here, you will see a palmetto tree – a symbol of South Carolina. If you have time, step into the reception area and look towards the ceiling to see the grandeur of the building. A plaque inside the entrance to No.19 tells you more about the building’s history. Prioleau’s Liverpool-based firm helped to finance the Confederacy (made up of the southern states, in which slavery was legal) during the American Civil War, and his home was referred to as ‘the Confederate Embassy in England’. Liverpool was a major importer of US-grown cotton, which was cultivated by the forced labour of enslaved persons.

Consequently, upon the outbreak of the American Civil War (and the potential end to slavery), many in Liverpool were supporters of the Confederate cause. Confederate ships were constructed across the Mersey at Cammell Laird’s, while fundraisers for the widows and orphans of Confederate soldiers were held at St George’s Hall.

To return to the Management School, you may cross Oxford Street and return the way you came via the communal garden. Alternatively, you may wish to follow the path around the Square, taking in the different features of the buildings as you go, including the University’s war memorial.

