



**Figure 4.10** Pierhead,  
Liverpool

ridge, sit the two cathedrals; both of which have highly distinctive silhouettes.

One of the most important decorative functions of the skyline is to facilitate orientation within a city. Tall structures of unique profile that stand out from the rest of the skyline function as landmarks. As Lynch (1960) defines them, landmarks need not be high-rise but those that do stand out on the skyline derive additional significance for the viewer. This form of city decoration can be regarded as simply utilitarian, an aid in orientation. As Attoe (1981) states, the skyline 'provides various kinds of information and in particular it provides information that aids in orientation . . . This is the "landmark" meaning of a skyline, when it offers conspicuous objects that mark and identify localities within the city.' The Duomo and its campanile in Florence are an example of decorative skyline functioning as landmark: 'visible from near and far, by day or night; unmistakably dominant by size and contours; closely related to the city's traditions, coincident with the religious and transit centre; paired with its campanile in such a way that the direction of view

can be gauged from a distance' (Lynch, 1960). However, with the increase in the vertical scale of cities in the modern period, the legibility function of skyline decoration has become less straightforward. Thus there have been efforts to control the city skyline, to retain the historic skyline of cities by imposing a height limit on all but a few important buildings, or by protecting certain 'view corridors' from particular points within a city towards important buildings and skyline landmarks.

### **SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXT**

The skyline is the crown of the city. The form and shape of that crown, its overall meaning and the symbolic power of its parts develops over the centuries. Urban form, and the skyline, can be considered the physical manifestation of man's culture. That is, the form of the city is a result of the way in which society, at any given moment, organizes itself in a particular location. Culture in the modern world, that is the social, economic and political structures of a community, the way it organizes and administers itself, the technology it employs and the values it holds, is not static. Urban form, together with its skyline, is forever adapting to these changes. Understanding the present decorative impact of the skyline, or more importantly, assessing the potential for its further development, are both dependent upon a knowledge of the history of cultural development. Historical insight and sensitivity towards the process of skyline development are important prerequisites for successful changes to city profile. Until recently in European cities religious buildings dominated the skyline. In the USA and increasingly in European cities, it is the commercial buildings which now dominate and define the skyline.

#### **THE TRADITIONAL CITY**

The skyscraper is the symbol of the new urban scale of the twentieth century. It was the result of

developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prior to the nineteenth century, the size and scale of cities were constrained by the limitations imposed by both construction methods and available building materials. There were limits to the loads placed on traditional walls of stone and brick, limits to the spans of floors and roofs in timber. In addition the height and spread of development was limited by the restrictions of pedestrian and animal transportation.

Only in exceptional circumstances were buildings taller than the distance people would reasonably walk upstairs on a regular basis. Similarly the distance between workplace and home was only the distance that could be reasonably commuted on foot or on horseback. Tall buildings appeared in cities prior to the modern period, for example the Mesopotamian ziggurat was a great mound of development and the multiple towers of medieval Italian towns, such as San Gimignano, presage the romantic skyline of New York. There was also an increase in the vertical scale of urban development from medieval and early Renaissance cities to those of the Baroque. Morris (1972) notes that: 'In the old medieval scheme, the city grew horizontally; fortifications were vertical. In the Baroque order, the city confined by its fortifications, could only grow upward in tall tenements, after filling in its rear gardens.' Nevertheless, people did not commonly live or work at heights above four or five storeys. Tall buildings, apart from watchtowers, were used only for ceremonial and symbolic purposes. The result was a city skyline decorated with domes, spires, towers and minarets. To build high in the traditional city was a great undertaking, few buildings had patrons of sufficient social, political, religious or cultural status. Consequently, where such buildings occurred they represented and expressed the prevailing social and political order of that city. The skyline of the city is therefore the physical manifestation of how the city operated, which forces dominated there and what the residents valued.

The decoration of the skyline can be read as an index of cultural process and as the resolution, however temporary, of competing powers within society. Integrated to this dynamic balance are hierarchies of value expressed in the different modes of decoration and ornament. In Britain, in particular, city and state halls were domed to distinguish them from the rest of the city roofscape, while the many church spires indicated the special place of spiritual life in the community. Thus the traditional city celebrated institutional landmarks, buildings of communal importance having their *raison d'être* in religious and political power. As Kostof (1991) observes 'The source of wealth, of economic power, was itself sometimes institutionalised in representational buildings like cloth halls, with their stately towers proudly rising within the storied shape of the urban centre.' Siena displays a classic skyline confrontation between civic and religious powers. While the Cathedral with its command of fine decorative detailing assumes command of the dominant hill, the Palazzo Comunale below attempts to overcome the disadvantage with its soaring tower. Despite the aggressive skyline competition of the traditional city, the boundaries of that competition were limited by construction techniques. The height of both ordinary and exceptional buildings was strictly limited. The manifestation of the competition in terms of the skyline was further restricted by the limited numbers of institutions able to enter that competition. The taller buildings, being relatively few in number, act as a vital counterpoint to the texture of the general urban fabric which was usually characterized by a greater degree of uniformity in the consistent use of similar materials and construction techniques. This is particularly true of the roofs which would in general terms be of the same roofing material, a similar pitch of roof with similar eaves, ridge and verge details.

#### MODERN CITIES

In the nineteenth century and more extensively in the twentieth century, the scale of urban