

We Are the Champions

LIVERPOOL VS THE 1980s

Tony Lane

Liverpool is never out of the news. Be it Liverpool FC, *Letter to Brezhnev*, John Lennon, financial crisis or Militant. Liverpool is a city with a difference . . .

AN ARCHITECTURAL CRITIC sent on a tour of British provincial cities wrote of Liverpool that it was one of the few places outside London worth a second visit.

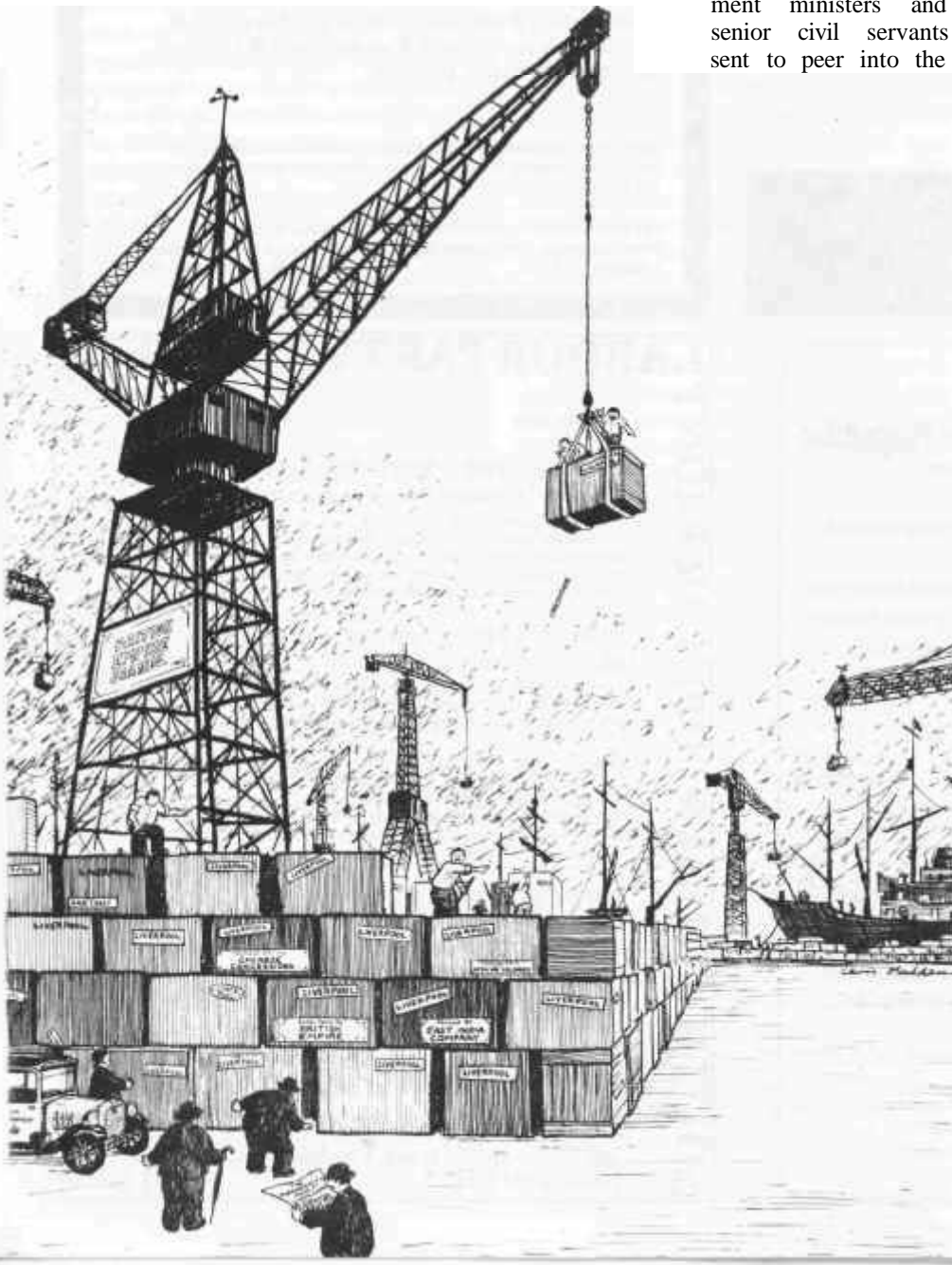
Michael Parkinson, recent author of an excellently-told account of Liverpool's economic and political crisis, reports a rather more ambivalent attitude to the city in general from government ministers and senior civil servants sent to peer into the

entrails of this remarkable place. Yet it seems that even they with their metropolitan jaundices get caught in the fascination that overtakes nearly everyone who stops and lingers in what was once the second city of the empire.¹

Liverpool is never long out of the national news. Nor, for that matter, long out of the international news of the countries of Northern Europe. The city has a powerful attraction for journalists and analysts, radio producers and television directors. They find it 'different' in ways they cannot quite describe and even when it is trouble they have come to report, they are plainly pleased to be back. They wonder what it is about this place that can produce such modern Shakespearian drama as Alan Bleasdale's, *Boys From the Blackstuff* or the contradictorily tough-minded innocence of the film *Letter to Brezhnev* now running to packed houses - and simultaneously elect a city council which appears to be in the dictatorial grip of 'hard-faced political militants'.

It is obvious to most Liverpoolians and perhaps even more so to those who have lived in the city for many years without being born in it, that the conventional account of the constituent 'nations' of the United Kingdom is foreshortened and inaccurate. Additional to England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales there are also London and Liverpool. London can be taken for granted. Like most other capital cities its function as a focal point of national institutions gives it a special quality and status. But *Liverpool?*

It was the shipowning aristocracy of Liverpool who used to say that the city had turned its back on Lancashire (and by implication the rest of Britain) and looked outwards across the Atlantic. In truth it did but it also looked further - to the coasts of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, to the China Sea and the peninsulas and archipelagoes of South East Asia. The point to seize upon about Liverpool is that its vitality and exuberance, its solidarities and assertiveness are all a product of a cosmopolitan city that has only very, very recently lost its role as *the* great city-port of Britain's formal and informal empire. Only follow through the crocheted web of



consequences of this simple fact and a great deal begins to fall into place.

A port with a difference

There are other port cities in Britain but none of the scale of Liverpool. In Glasgow the social and political economy of ship-building and engineering dwarfed the role of the port. In some respects most similar to Liverpool, Hull was much smaller in scale, catered mainly for the short-sea trades to the Baltic and European mainland and the culture of the fishing industry was dominant. Cardiff developed later and collapsed earlier than Liverpool. The port rose and fell with the coal export trade and by the late 1950s was already a ghost-port. Despite the ethnically mixed quarter known as 'Tiger Bay', Cardiff's trade was far too restricted to give the city any substantial cosmopolitan character. Southampton only handled the big passenger ships and cross-Channel ferries, developed late in the 19th century and was little more than a bus station for ships.

The Port of London certainly handled greater volumes of cargo than Liverpool but London's port was never so critical to the life of the city. The docklands and their people had the same purposes as their Liverpool counterparts but their living and working pursuits did not permeate every capillary of London life. The boroughs of Poplar and Bermondsey had a social economy separate and distinct from other parts of London whereas the equivalent districts of Liverpool were completely woven into the fabric of the life of the city.

At the turn of the century almost half of measurable world trade and nearly all trade between countries of the empire was carried in British-owned merchant ships. This overwhelming dominance of British shipping was eroded but still in the mid-50s the red ensign was the commonest flag to be seen in the world's ports. Even in the early 60s the British merchant fleet was the largest trading at sea - and a very substantial proportion of it was either owned or operated from Liverpool offices.

Staple employment

In the mid-60s the seven-mile-long enclosed dock system of Liverpool was plugged tight with ships, the dock road throttled with trucks and wagons queuing for hours to get onto congested wharves. When all those red-ensigned ships came home to discharge their cargoes, nowhere more than in Liverpool was it still possible to believe that here was the centre of a great trading nation with a far-flung empire. Here at these quaysides were the same

sights, sounds and smells of a half-century earlier. Wool and frozen meat from Australia; grain from Canada; latex and valuable hardwoods from Borneo and Malaysia; sugar from Guyana and rum from Barbados; palm kernels from Nigeria; copra from the South Pacific Islands.

The constant movement of ships and their cargoes meant employment for tens of thousands more than the locally resident seafarers: dockers and warehousemen, railwaymen and road haulage workers, ship repairers and ship chandlers, riggers and ropemakers, the clerks in the offices of the shipping companies, shipbrokers and freight forwarders, the labourers and process workers in the grain silos, sugar, rice, flour and seedcake mills, in the match and tobacco factories. And when the ships had been emptied and then loaded again there

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were those who opened and shut, repaired and built the lockgates and swing-bridges, the boatmen who ran the ships' lines, the tugmen whose craft nudged and pulled the unwieldy laden ships.

This cataloging of the port and related employments is critical to getting a mental grasp of Liverpool for these were the *staple* employments. On the understanding that the social character of a town or city is largely given by the social relations found in the dominant labour markets, it is easy to see how much Liverpool has been shaped by ships and the commodities of empire and then Commonwealth.

Casualism and its effects

The abiding feature of port labour markets is casualism: labour is hired for as long as it is needed and then discharged. In this system there is no social bonding for neither employer nor employee have any obligation to each other beyond the period of hire. It is a system plainly advantageous to employers when labour is abundant and to workers when labour is scarce. It is also a system which produces distinctive forms of labour movement organisation.

Liverpool, in the 1930s, was seen by the Communist party as an organiser's graveyard. There were the impermeable autocracies of the local trade union and Labour party organisations but far worse was the proneness of rank and file oppositions to be led by erratic characters with

the habits allegedly found among prima donnas. These were especially prominent features of labour in Liverpool and were the product of casualism. In the depression of the interwar years autocracy was an organisational necessity given the extreme infancy of trade unionism and the widespread inexperience and ignorance of what was involved in democratic routine and practice.² And then in a casual labour market labour's strength lay in seizing temporary advantage which, in turn, required quick-witted and flamboyant personalities who could express and march at the head of a common impulse.

The twin impulse toward autocracy and flamboyant individualism is neatly illustrated in the contrast between the organisation of the National Union of Seamen and the public character of the seaman. Not until the 1970s was bossdom and petty corruption largely eliminated from the union and yet for the previous 50 years seafarers preserved intact their view of themselves as free-wheeling, independent-minded men beholden to none but themselves and their shipmates. The possibility of reproducing this self-image was guaranteed by the conditions of the postwar boom where seafarers were always in short supply.

Seafarers were hired by the voyage and would very rarely commit themselves to one shipowner; they picked their ships and chose what voyage they would embark upon. Tired, perhaps, of shuttling across the grey and bumpy North Atlantic between Liverpool, New York and Boston, they could always sign on for a three-month trip to Rio or for four months to Hong Kong, Yokohama and back.

Seafarers have played a very special part in the development of the social character of Liverpool. Even in the 19th century the turnover within the seafaring population was extremely high and that meant that a city which already provided a high proportion of *all* British merchant seamen was found to contain huge numbers of men who had at some time been away to sea. Even now, in the mid-80s and at a time when the foreign-going merchant fleet has been all but wiped out, the typical Liverpool family will be able to find at least one member who has been to sea.

The Liverpool man

These simple facts of numbers, weights

¹ Michael Parkinson *Liverpool on the Brink* Policy Journals 1985.

² In the Liverpool dockland wards and constituencies before the first world war only approx 43% of adult males were enfranchised.

and proportions of seamen are pregnant with all manner of consequences, some of which are glancingly uncovered in Matt Simpson's elegiac poem, *Booth Streets*:

'Salt winds keep these ocean-minded streets voyaging. There are men here who, landlubbered (wedded, winded, ulcered out), still walk as if steel decks were rolling underfoot: riggers and donkey men, dockhands and chandlers, shipwrights and scalers, who service ships with something of love's habits, insisting on manhood and sweet memories.'

In a city saturated with port activity it is not so surprising that the idealised seafarer should come to be regarded as the ultimate expression of what it meant to be a man . . . Home from a voyage and temporarily flush there was the conspicuous spending, drinks on the house and presents for Mum and Dad, young brothers and sisters; the flash new gear for the first night out; the embellished tales of heroic drinking in Havana (before the Revolution!) and sexual exploits in Rio. Here was the freeborn, free-spoken, foot-loose male who respected those who earned it and was unswervingly loyal to his equals.

The plays of Alan Bleasdale and Willy Russell teem with people touched by these conceptions of being a proper man. And long before them, Joseph Conrad had obliquely noticed these matters when he said of some sailingship men: 'That crew of Liverpool hard cases had in them the right stuff. It's my experience they always have.'

There is a raw egalitarianism at the core of the cultural currency of working class Liverpool and this has long been seen in shipboard relations.

The rise of the working class

After the second world war the city was finally deserted by its old ruling class of shipowners and merchants. The process had begun much earlier as family firms and partnerships were absorbed or translated into public companies; as deaths divided family fortunes into more and more fragments with each passing generation. The local class of patricians became increasingly dilute and ceased to play any obvious part in local affairs and politics.

The patricians of Liverpool had not been merely big fish in a provincial pond. They were wealthy by any metropolitan standards and in the milieu of shipping, commerce, banking and insurance were powerful national and international figures. The scale of their wealth and the style of living that this permitted gave them an enormous *presence*. Expressively these people *were* Liverpool and their power and influence in most aspects of local politics and policies ensured an un-

questionable dominance. Their subsequent and unannounced abdication passed relatively unnoticed for as long as their monuments and benefactions remained and there was still a high level of port activity. Their passing did, nevertheless, leave a vacuum. Without them and their prominence in those mysterious circles of power and prestige there was no obvious way in which Liverpool could be seen as separate and distinct.

As private wealth more generally retired from public life the economic and political conditions of the postwar boom allowed the relatively new organisations of labour to assume a prominence in national life never known before. Indeed, the terms and conditions of the 'postwar settlement' plainly required the active participation of labour's institutions. In this environment

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the condition, manners and morals of working class people could acquire some legitimacy and even begin to be celebrated.

Where once the working class had been picked over by investigators, domestic anthropologists, evangelists and other crusaders it now began to hold up a mirror to itself. Middle class critics, decreasingly able to find themselves and their values reliably reflected, feverishly denounced the new 'kitchen sink' drama, the 'jungle music' of rock and roll. Repertory theatres scandalised their petit bourgeois audiences with such plays as Arnold Wesker's *Chips With Everything*; Alan Sillitoe, David Storey and Stan Barstow had their novels transformed into films with mass followings. With the arrival of the assertively anarchistic Beatles and Rolling Stones the world was finally turned upside down.

Liverpool centre-stage

At a time when popular idioms were being nationally adopted and transmitted, a city which had for a long time applauded in everyday life an assertive, blunt individualism, released an avalanche of talent perfectly fitted for the times. Almost in tandem with the rebellious rhythms, chords and lyrics of the Beatles were the 'Mersey Poets' who, with a nationwide following, got into school syllabuses with a

speed that TS Eliot could only have envied. As if to crown all else, as if to doubly underline the superiority of the city and ensure a continuing presence in the national consciousness, Liverpool FC returned to the First Division and began an astonishing and still uncompleted career of repeatedly winning everything in sight.

In the 1960s Liverpool became the working class capital of the UK. No city could have been better equipped to express the brash self-confidence of young working people; the anarchic solidarism of the seafarer was just perfect for the temper of the times. This was also the decade of shopfloor liberation. The yoke of the old autocracy in the trade union movement was being lifted and a belief in the virtues of local self-government and direct action rippled out into the sleepest quarters of the labour markets. Here, too, Liverpudlians could appear to be taking a lead, not least in the newly-arrived car industry.

Quickly discovering that the car firms were trying to impose financial conditions inferior to the established plants in the Midlands and infuriated by the colonial mentality of southern managers and foremen, this new generation of factory workers was soon organised and expressing itself in the colourful way *de rigueur* for Liverpudlians. Often led by young men in their 20s, this was a generation that could draw strength and support from the wider cultural milieu; they could also regularly see themselves and their unhealed historical wounds in the television plays brilliantly written, produced and directed by Jim Allen, Tony Garnett and Ken Loach.

And then decline...

Just as Liverpool's working class culture was assuming a local hegemony and a national prominence, the material conditions that had enabled these developments were disappearing. The statistics of trade and population gave the objective measure of Liverpool's economic and financial plight - and the evidence until the late 1960s was of a process of trickling attrition. Not until the mid 70s did the figures start to have a major impact on popular consciousness. It took a continuing stream of redundancies in the port and a termination of growth in the newly-arrived manufacturing sector to reveal the scale of the collapse of the port economy. A subsequent spate of factory closures in the late 70s and early 80s dragged the local economy down even further.

There have been the inevitable attempts to blame the decline of the port on malingering and bloody-minded dockers. Emo-

tive moralising, easier to grasp than the complexities of the real historical shifts and transitions, the rhetoric of 'blaming the victim' quickly took root among the more purblind sections of the middle class who then obligingly transmitted it elsewhere until it became part of the national conventional wisdom concerning Liverpool and Merseyside.

In reality, the port economy was undermined by a range of economic tendencies wholly outside any local control. The demise of empire and the expansion of North European trade left Liverpool stranded on the wrong side of the country; continuing trade with the Commonwealth was increasingly being carried in Nigerian, Indian, Pakistani-flag ships as these and other countries sought savings on foreign currency; containerisation drastically reduced the numbers of ships and seafarers and the numbers of men needed to service ships when in port; air travel killed off the passenger ships and road haulage badly damaged the coastal shipping trade. The contraction of the shipping companies and the absorption of the residues into firms based in the metropolis had their multiplier effects on the need for locally-based shipping services. Once the ships started to go, so, in short, did everything else

associated with them. Compensating growth in manufacturing was still there in the 1960s but from the mid 70s unemployment was increasing at a rate three times the national average.

And so the crisis...

Industrial decline meant a reduction in rate revenue for the city council; a falling population had the same effect. The city council having failed several times in the postwar years to extend its boundaries, many re-housed Liverpoolians were obliged to leave the city; Liverpool's population declined from nearly 900,000 in 1951 to a little less than 500,000 in 1981. Needless to say, the reduction in population was not accompanied by a *pro rata* reduction in the cost of services and so the gap between costs and rate revenue grew steadily wider. Unemployment compounded these problems. A reduction in aggregate demand contributed to a decaying fabric of empty and unsaleable property that an impoverished local authority was powerless to contend with. Taking everything together and whatever else might be said about the District Labour party and its handling of the crisis, the financial crisis itself was not of its making.

It should by now be obvious that the style of management of the crisis owed far more to Liverpool's culture than to the 'revolutionary programme' of the Militant Tendency. For all of its grosser posturings, the belligerent fighting stance of Labour councillors touched a popular nerve. There is no doubt whatever that the politics of the financial crisis electrified the people and alerted them to its problems in a way that was simply never there before. *Everyone* knew about it and *everyone* had an opinion. There was, too, a deeper well of sympathy for what the councillors were hoping to achieve than was often recognised. Among Liverpoolians there is *still* that proud, 'nationalistic' assertiveness and that was a powerful stream for the city council to draw upon. Looking ahead, however, it is hard to see how Liverpool can sustain its gritty, stylish integrity without replenishing those 'ocean-minded' streets with new generations of seafarers. In the meantime the legacy of past and existing generations is potent enough to guarantee that this will continue to be a city to watch. D

³ Matt Simpson *Making Arrangements* Newcastle-on-Tyne 1982 p21.

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