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An 'appalling eyesore' has become a symbol of hope for industrial regeneration

A parking place for technology

One of the most striking success stories on Merseyside, and a symbol of its determination to move with the industrial times, is the creation of the Wavertree Technology Park.

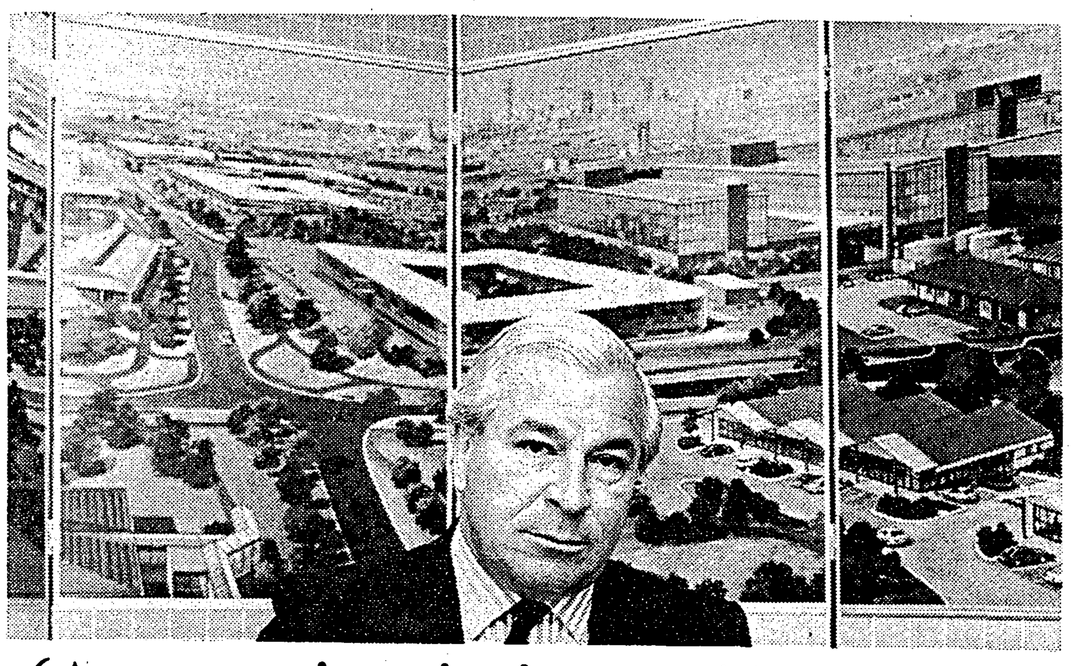
In 1983 it was merely 64 acres of depressing inner-city dereliction; a long-defunct railway yard that somehow seemed to sum-up the malaise of Liverpool.

Michael Heseltine, who as the then Secretary of State for the Environment launched the technology park project, wrote of his first impressions in his book, *Where There's a Will*: "It was an appalling eyesore – mainly railway yards which had hardly been used for a decade; a great sprawl of industrial wasteland. Planners and developers had repeatedly examined the possibility of salvaging the land but had given up in despair.

"It lay within two miles of the city's commercial centre, a silent but eloquent rebuke to a society where it was always someone else's responsibility. Nobody bothered. You drove through Liverpool; you looked at this terrible place and you drove on."

Mr Heseltine created a partnership between the public and private sectors, represented by Plessey, whose plant overlooked the site, English Estates, Liverpool City Council and the then Merseyside County Council.

Sir John Clark, chairman of the Plessey organization, accepted the role as chairman of the Park company and he seconded senior staff to oversee its development. Today's chief executive is Stanton Fuller, a former regional director with the company.



'An exception site in a parkland setting two miles from the commercial centre'

Stanton Fuller, chief executive, Wavertree Technology Park

The picture at Wavertree now is vastly different from the site that proved so sore for Mr Heseltine's eyes; it has been transformed into a landscaped technology park which has succeeded beyond expectations, to such a degree that the city council is now undertaking a £50,000 survey with a view to a expansion.

Mr Fuller says there will be no problem filling an enlarged park.

There are 38 companies now on site and by the time the latest, Barclaycard, is up to strength, there will be about 1500 jobs.

The original plans foresaw the park achieving full occupancy, with 2,000 jobs, by 1995; at the current rate that will be achieved four years ahead of schedule.

Many of the firms occupying the attractive, purpose- built units at Wavertree have established themselves at the head of their particular specialities.

The first to arrive was Plessey Crypto which specializes in the development of secure communications equipment for the military. Last year saw record orders of more than £30 million; recently it won a Nato contract worth £12.5 million and it is also moving into the area of combatting industrial espionage.

The bio-chemical manufacturer Powell and Scholefield is moving into American and European markets with its range of specialized nutritional products. Rytrak Semiconductor is engaged on pioneering work towards enabling the concept of ultra-thin television screens to become reality.

Strong links have also been established with the University of Liverpool and Liverpool Polytechnic to encourage the transfer application of advanced scientific research.

But it is not just the large firms which are making a success of the move to Wavertree.

One of its youngest entrepreneurs is Michael Price. He set up a firm providing computer software for the international construction industry and the Laing group has just acquired a 30 per cent interest with a view to buying the entire business in three years.

It has put the young Mr Price into the Lotus sportscar and luxury waterfront apartment class.

Mr Fuller, the park's chief executive says: "We have the advantages of an exceptional site, a parkland setting – we planted 62,000 trees and 150,000 shrubs – which is one mile from the motorway and two miles from the commercial centre of Liverpool.

"We also offer facilities and services which small firms could not afford on their own – a conference suite for training sessions and seminars as well as business services – plus a recently-installed helicopter pad."

A happier truth emerges from behind the lurid headlines

When Geoffrey Piper moved from the Channel Islands office of the leading accountancy firm, Deloitte, Haskins and Sells to head its operation on Merseyside he found, he now admits, a decidedly depressed mood prevailing.

Many people, he says, believed there was no hope for the area and that they were witnessing an inevitable decline. Mr Piper set about changing that and the result has been the creation of an organization – supported now by the professions and the public and private sector and the area's local authorities – called Business Opportunities on Merseyside, Boom for short.

Its aim has been to encourage and stimulate a new image for Merseyside, the intention being to "lever in" new investment and jobs. It has involved bringing leaders of industry and commerce to the city and showing them the truth behind some of the more lurid headlines.

Boom has also taken its wares to the heart of the City in London with a conference at the Barbican.

A great transformation of mood and image

Boom was established last January but already has had remarkable success. Mr Piper said: "I think we can justly claim to have played a major part in the absolute transformation of the mood in Merseyside and in the image of the area."

It is starting to pay off in practical terms with an increase in potential inward investors and a new sense of optimism among those business leaders already in the area.

Mr Piper identifies several key elements in the future success of Merseyside: the proposals for a £300 million barrage across the Mersey creating up to 5,000 jobs, the prospect of a direct British Rail line from Liverpool to the Eurotunnel, the success of the Liverpool Freeport, which together with the Port of Liverpool returned 80 per cent increased profits last year for the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, and the Wavertree Technology Park. Interest is also being expressed in the creation of a £50 million business park on the site of the former Dunlop plant at Speke by Baltic Developments. In the city itself, a series of restored transit shed and dock warehouses, now known as the Brunswick Business Park, is providing accommodation for small firms.

Geoffrey Piper: Changing the view that there was no hope

Keva Coombes: The days of open warfare are over

How the council changed its tune

The Liverpool City Council under its new non-Militant leadership has a pragmatic approach, and is eager to work with the public sector in the wider interests of the city.

The council's Labour leader, Keva Coombes, said recently: "The days of open warfare between the council and the Government are gone. We will act together for the common good of the city.

"We want to attract as much development as we possibly can."

It is hoped that the Merseyside Integrated Development Operation, backed by local councils, government agencies and the private sector, will lever funds from the European Community towards a massive £300 million plan to create 20,000 jobs in the area over the next five years.

Mr Coombes is confident, since a trip to Brussels, that the Community will provide £165 million towards the total bill for a wideranging programme of works and investment. A delegation from Brussels will visit Merseyside before Christmas and the decision is expected early next year.

Because the whole of Merseyside has Development Area status it qualifies for the highest rates of government grants.

Manufacturing firms in the area have preferential access to long term finance from the European Investment Bank.

Loans of up to 50 per cent of the fixed asset cost of projects may be available on favourable terms from the bank for projects which assist European regional development.

The UK alone is said to account for 43 per cent of all venture capital raised in the Community and among the sources from which it is available on Merseyside is the organization Investors in Industry (3i), whose local director is Robert Toomey.

3i provides finance for projects such as start-ups, management buy-outs and expansion schemes in sums from as small as £50,000 without any upper limit. It also provides access to investment facilities and corporate advice.

It has made a record level of new investments in the region in the last 12 months and reports record levels of profitability among its customers in the unquoted sector.

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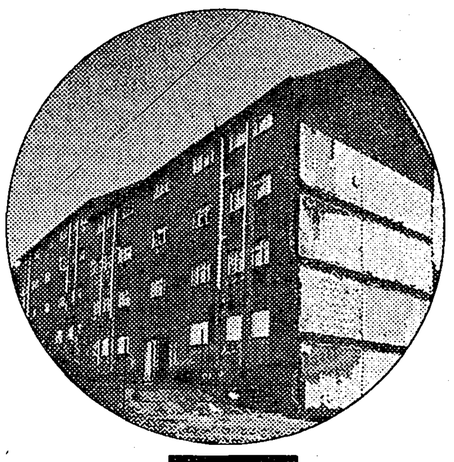

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