Liver bird rises from the ashes

From his fourth-floor office in the Royal Liver Building on Liverpool's historic pierhead, Dr John Ritchie enjoys an enviable panorama. "That", he says, the sweep of his arm taking in an expanse of the Mersey estuary, sparkling below in the brittle sunshine of an autumn afternoon, "is our biggest asset, and it comes free. You simply couldn't create something like that."

Dr Ritchie is the chief executive of the Merseyside Development Corporation, set up by the Government seven years ago to try to create a brighter future for the area by removing some of its ugliest physical eyesores.

Its job was to regenerate 860 acres of some of the worst dereliction in the country, a largely decrepit waterfront that had a workforce of only 1,500, earning their wages in a ramshackle collection of sheds and converted workshops.

Its social facilities comprised one public toilet and two telephone boxes, often vandalized and out of use.

So extensive was the dereliction that of the £120 million of Government money the corporation has used, £80 million was spent on reclamation work beneath the ground, unseen by the public.

For each acre of land bought by the MDC for £6,000, it had to spend £100,000 restoring it to a condition where it was worth £40,000 on the commercial market.

But it was essential work if the objective of giving the waterfront and its collection of Grade I-listed warehouses and dock buildings — the largest in the UK — a fresh future was to be achieved.

This has been achieved. The restored Albert Dock complex, with its high-quality residential, shopping and leisure facilities, the Tate Gallery and the Maritime Museum are a testimony to what can be achieved against the odds in the battle to revive the worst of Britain's inner cities.

The remarkable transformation of the waterfront has provided a new lease of life and is a source of pride to Merseyside. After five difficult years, especially at the height of confrontation between the then Militant-controlled Liverpool City Council and central government, when business, industrial and commercial confidence plummeted, confidence on all fronts is now returning with fresh verve.

The last 12 months, says Dr Ritchie, have shown a tremendous turnaround in the attitude of private investors and, barring current interest rate uncertainty, future investment potential looks good.

Office rentals in the city are rising, providing the incentive for property developers.

The 100,000 sq ft Mercury Court office development by English Estates has provided a significant boost to the market. To achieve its success, the MDC has had to stand some traditional ideas on their heads. Instead of first creating new industry, followed by demand for housing and then leisure facilities for the workers, it provided leisure and tourist attractions first, which in turn led to high-quality, private sector housing, followed by re-furbished industrial premises.

The next phases, says Dr Ritchie, are commercial office development and inward industrial provision.

A revitalized waterfront has attracted other developments. A £26 million scheme is already underway to transform the Wapping area, near the Albert Dock, providing a big indoor events arena with the first facilities in Britain for major international ice-skating, a 70,000 sq ft shopping complex, a multi-screen cinema and hotel, and 1,000 new jobs.

With one success under its belt, the MDC now faces another, bigger challenge which offers it the opportunity of creating the face of Merseyside for the 21st century.

Its area of operations is being extended by 1,600 acres, incorporating further large slices of Liverpool, Birkenhead and New Brighton in a programme of regeneration taking up to 10 years.

About £95 million of new Government funds are expected to attract £180 million of private sector investment, with additional spin-off benefits for nearby areas.

The report by the London accountants Coopers and Lybrand, which formed the advice to the Secretary of State for the Environment on the extension of the MDC area, recommended, among other things, the creation of a direct link between the city centre and the Pier Head, now separated by the busy inner ring road.

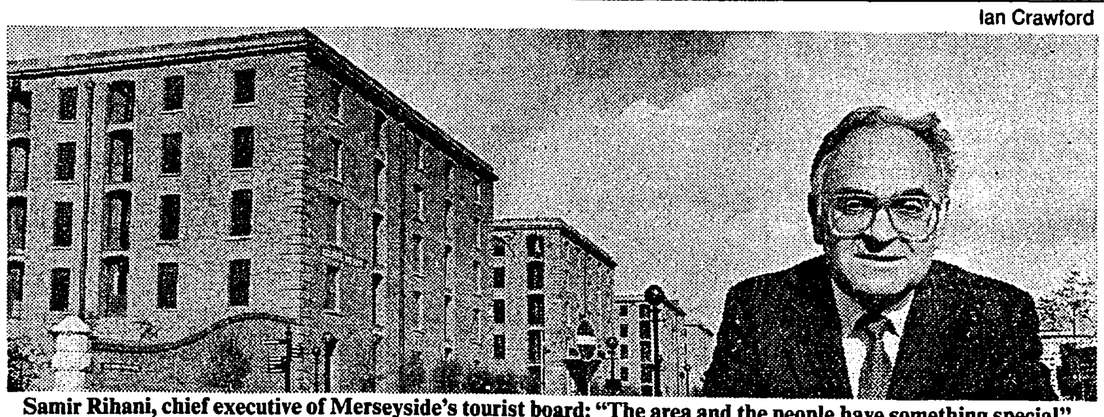
Dr Ritchie says private developers are already expressing interest in the new areas of the MDC's operations, in some cases snapping up investment properties before the corporation can purchase.

The physical appearance of Merseyside will also be drastically affected if the EEC approves the Merseyside Integrated Development Operation (Mido), drawn up by government agencies, local councils and commercial representatives.

The Beatles and the Grand National are playing their part in a regional renaissance

Mersey beat takes off

Ian Crawford



Samir Rihani, chief executive of Merseyside's tourist board: "The area and the people have something special"

Tourism is probably the fastest growing industry on Merseyside, and the eleventh biggest employer. So it is appropriate that the head of its tourism board is living proof of the attractions of the area to the outsider.

Samir Rihani, the board's chief executive, is a Lebanese who came to study at Liverpool University 32 years ago and stayed on. "I guess that is proof enough that the area and the people have something special to offer," he says.

The Merseyside Tourism Board is a non-profit making private company set up in March 1986 after the abolition of the Merseyside County Council. Its aim is not only to attract more visitors to the area, and encourage them to stay longer and spend more money, but to make tourism the means of improving Merseyside's image, assisting inward investment and creating new jobs.

A recent report by the board says: "All indications are that tourism on Merseyside is expanding. Whilst it would be foolish to look upon tourism as the panacea for all Merseyside's problems, it is probably the number one growth industry in the county. It appears to have weathered the recession remarkably well and in line with national trends offers realistic growth prospects for the future."

Liverpool's tourist appeal — first displayed with the International Garden Festival four years ago, which attracted more than three million visitors — is now drawing increasing numbers of people to the area. It pulls in about 20 million visitors a year, who spend some £300 million, and it is thought that perhaps 20,000 jobs depend, directly and indirectly, on the trade.

Hotels that four years ago registered a bed occupancy of only 35 per cent now have the highest figure in the North-West. The aim is to attract the longer-staying visitor and the lucrative conference trade.

The centrepiece of Merseyside's attractions is the splendid Albert Dock complex, the largest area of Grade I buildings anywhere in the UK and renovated to provide shops, restaurants and leisure facilities of a high quality. It is also the home of the Maritime Museum and the Tate in the North, as well as providing residential and office facilities.

Over the next five years, the revived waterfront is expected to attract five million visitors a year and provide 2,000 full-time jobs. An ambitious scheme to build a £500 million barrage across the Mersey is the subject of a detailed feasibility study and the project, should it go ahead, could provide 5,000 jobs and create new potential for tourist developments.

But the area has more than the Albert Dock to offer the visitor; there are the associations with the Beatles which still draw fans from around the world, its football teams, golf courses, Aintree, the home of the Grand National, and some of the most impressive museums and art galleries in the country.

The Walker Art Gallery includes exhibits from the Gothic to Pop Art with works by Rembrandt, Poussin, Stubbs, Turner and Hockney. Even its two famous cathedrals attract more than 350,000 visitors a year.

The main concert hall on Merseyside is the Philharmonic Hall, home of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Empire, Playhouse and Everyman theatres have national reputations. The qualities of its writers, poets, musicians and artists are of the highest standard.

Mr Rihani says: "Tourism can help redress the poor image which the world at large has of Merseyside. Concerted, vigorous and sustained promotion of Merseyside as a tourist destination is more effective, and less costly, than an image-changing public relations campaign.

"If Merseyside is perceived as a tourist destination it will complement efforts to attract industrial and commercial development, including company directors, executives and their families."

To that end, the tourism board offers a service to companies out to attract executives to the area. It will "hand-hold" them and their wives and children on familiarization visits, highlighting the housing and social benefits and even helping them quickly to assimilate into local society when they do move.

Mr Rihani, a trained civil engineer, who formerly worked in local government on Merseyside as a town planner, adds: "One of our biggest problems is that the people who speak about us do not know us. Of course there are problems; what modern city doesn't? But we have a tremendous amount to offer."

"Once we get people here we have won the battle. In a survey, 25 per cent of people who had not visited the area thought it was dirty and violent, yet only 2 per cent of those who actually came thought that way."

Tourism is currently the fastest-growing industry in the area, its eleventh largest employer and, says David Kearns, the chief economist of the National Westminster Bank, the labour- intensive nature of the industry would have a significant effect on employment figures in Merseyside.

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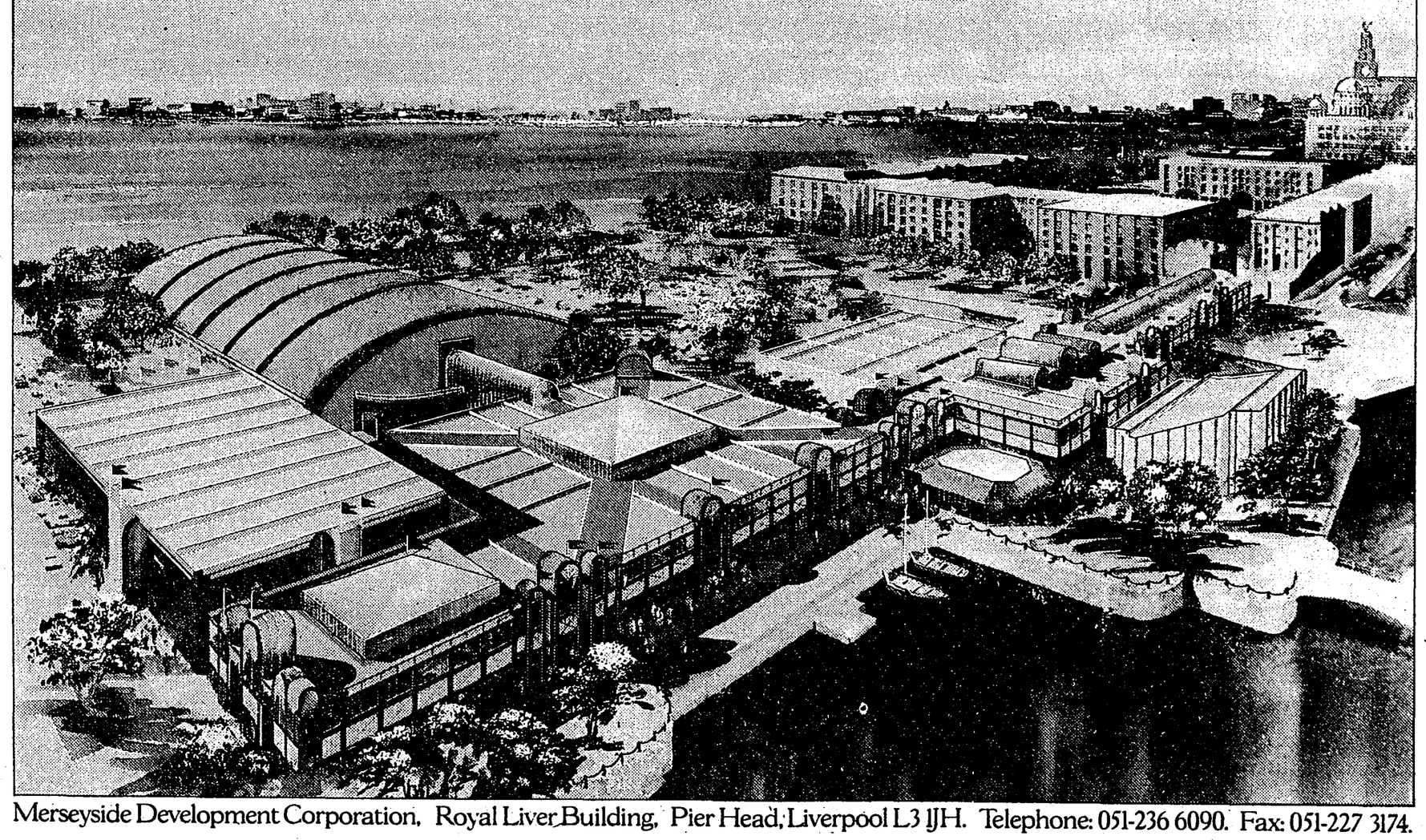

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