MERSEYSIDE

FOCUS

A SPECIAL REPORT
By Peter Davenport

Walking tall with success again

The downwards spiral has been halted and again Merseyside is finding new pride and wealth – from industry, the sea, the services sector and tourism

A vibrant new mood is evident on Merseyside. "There is," says Philip Carter, chairman of Merseyside Development Corporation, "an expectation among the people here that they are emerging from a dark period of their history and moving towards the development of real prosperity."

For anyone who has followed the fortunes of Liverpool and its surrounding area over the last decade those words are a welcome confirmation of of the new mood of buoyancy.

At times over the past years, when factory closures, social problems, street riots and bureaucratic confrontation with central government by the then Militant-dominated city council made the daily headlines, it seemed that the nation was witnessing the death throes of a once great city bent on communal suicide.

Even its one constant source of pride, the success of its football teams, was marred by the events at the Heysel stadium involving Liverpool supporters.

Now that downward spiral' has been arrested and turned around. A new pride, increased confidence and a sense of excitement at the potential opportunities have replaced the depression and despair, and Merseyside is again walking tall with its achievements.

Mr Carter, the former chief executive of the Merseyside-based Littlewoods empire, and chairman of that other local institution, Everton Football Club, says: "Socially, politically and economically we have been through difficult times, but now the confidence of the people in their region has changed, and the perception of those outside Merseyside has also improved.

"Wherever I go everybody is bullish about Merseyside. People are starting to lift their heads up and take a pride in the place again."

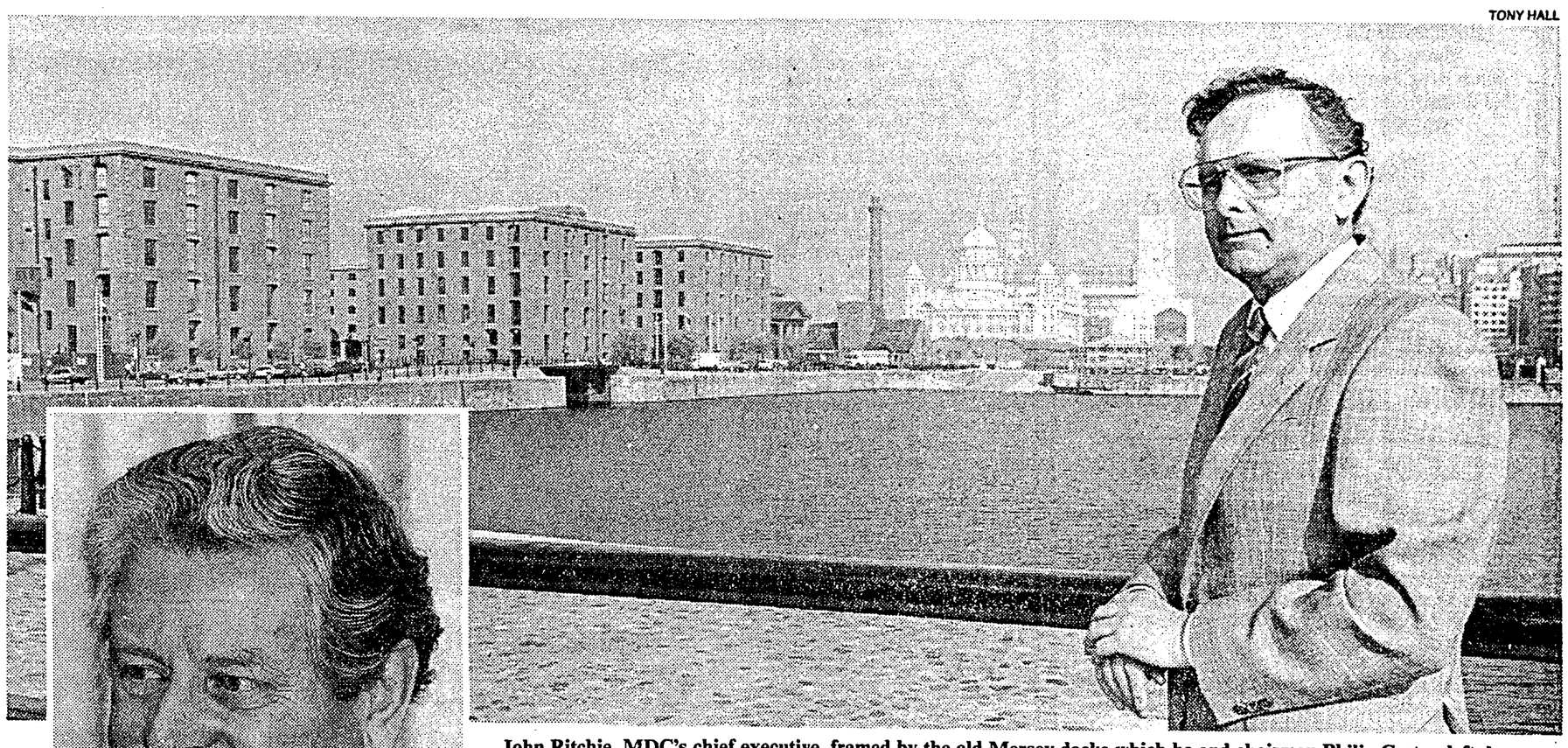
Merseyside still has its problems. Unemployment, although 3 per cent down on last year, is still more than twice the national average of around 17 per cent, with more than 105,000 out of work. Crime, drug abuse, dereliction and areas of poor housing, especially on the satellite estates, remain areas of concern. But there are now success stories to be heard.

Merseyside comprises the districts of Liverpool, St Helens, Knowsley, Sefton and Wirral, and has a population of 1.5 million on both sides of the River Mersey.

The regeneration of the derelict Albert Dock complex by the Merseyside Development Corporation into one of Europe's most impressive maritime schemes symbolizes the new beginning for the area. It has brought new life, jobs and style to the waterfront, and the MDC's commitment, often in the face of enormous difficulties and noisy cynics, is paying off in increased leisure, tourist, commercial and industrial activity.

Most importantly, perhaps, it has emphasized that a big, quality development can be a catalyst to a wholesale change in the fortunes of a region.

TONY HALL



John Ritchie, MDC's chief executive, framed by the old Mersey docks which he and chairman Philip Carter, left, have fought successfully to renovate. "Wherever I go," says Dr Ritchie, "everybody is bullish about Merseyside"

The MDC's area is now to be trebled to take in other large, rundown chunks of land on both sides of the river, and the projected developments over the next seven to 10 years will give Merseyside a fresh face for the 21st century.

Traditionally, industry in Merseyside was linked to the port and related activities which have been in decline locally and internationally for much of this century. However, the local port authority has arrested the decline and is now in profit.

Merseyside is the home of the Littlewoods organization, the UK's largest privately owned company, with more than 36,000 employees nationwide and about 8,000 locally.

Its origins lie in the football pools company created by the then John Moores and two partners in 1923. Today it has diversified into mail order and chain stores which, by 1987, had a turnover in its retail operations of almost £1.5 billion.

The organization has established close links with the community over its 65-year history and is involved in charitable, sporting and cultural activities.

Many famous companies, however, are no longer in the area, their closures adding to the unemployment queues. One of the ironies of Merseyside's predicament, however, was that even when firms invested heavily on re-equipping with modern technology, it often meant fewer jobs as a result.

A table of employment in the region presents some perhaps surprising statistics. The largest number of jobs, more than 100,000, are in professional services, with other main areas being distribution 74,000, government 39,500, food 33,500, construction 30,000, transport 45,600, glass 9,400, vehicle manufacture 15,400, and electrical and mechanical engineering 30,000.

General productivity is higher and days lost through industrial disputes lower than the common perception.

Dennis Morrison, a senior official of the Government-appointed Merseyside Task Force, set up in the wake of the 1981 riots by Michael Heseltine, then Environment Secretary, also reflects the atmosphere of returning confidence in the area.

He says: "At the low points in the last few years, the only interest we got from the outside was from those who thought they could witness the death of a major conurbation. Now the number of inquiries about potential investors setting up on Merseyside is increasing."

The area has excellent communications by road, rail, sea and through two regional airports, Liverpool with a new terminal opened in March 1986, and Manchester, Britain's third largest airport, 45 minutes away by motorway.

Liverpool Freeport, the largest in the UK and the only one adjacent to a major seaport, offers manufacturing and distribution companies financial advantages. Last year it handled cargo worth more than £100 million from more than 80 countries.

Increasingly, too, tourism is stressed as vital to the future prosperty of the region.

David Kern, the chief economist of the National Westminster Bank, told a recent meeting of Merseyside businessmen that economic indicators for the region have never been better.

Tourism, he said, is the fastest-growing industry and it would have a significant effect on the falling unemployment rate. Already 20,000 jobs are thought to depend directly on leisure and tourism, and 20 million visitors a year put around £300 million into the local economy.

Mr Heseltine, who was a key figure in setting up many of the Government-led initiatives, said recently: "Many of those initiatives can be seen to have worked; yesterday's sites have become attractive environments, housing estates have taken on a new life, training centres are seen as the stepping stone to a job.

"The response has come from both individuals and from the business community whose commitment to the rebirth of their city has been impressive.

"There is a generation of work ahead but now at least we know the foundations upon which we can build."

Investment millions produce results

Ford vies with Europe

Some of the core manufacturing firms on Merseyside are at the forefront of their fields – Plessey in communications, Pilkington's in glass and Dista in biotechnology-based pharmaceuticals.

Both Ford and Vauxhall manufacture vehicles locally. Ford productivity at Halewood, once unfavourably compared with sister plants in Belgium and West Germany, is now on a par with the best in Europe and Japan.

Ford is Merseyside's biggest private employer and almost £400 million has been spent in the last few years retooling for future models.

The last six years have also seen substantial investment by many other leading companies. A table drawn up by the organization Business Opportunities on Merseyside (Boom), disclosed the following recent investment statistics:

Pilkington Glass £75 million, Plessey £60 million, Bibby £40 million, Dista Products £20 million, English Estates £17 million, Marconi £13 million, and Lever Brothers £12 million. There have also been substantial investments by Birds Eye, Metal Box and Delco Electronics.

As well as industry, Merseyside has a thriving maritime trading and financial services sector. Ocean Transport and Trading, whose freight forwarding, shipping and distribution services operate worldwide, has its HQ in Liverpool; Royal Insurance, one of the world's leading companies, has its largest concentration of staff in the city.

All the main insurance companies, building societies and joint stock banks are represented on Merseyside.

The National Girobank employs 5,000 at its Bootle computer centre, and Barclaycard provides 800 jobs at its new data-processing centre at Wavertree Technology Park.

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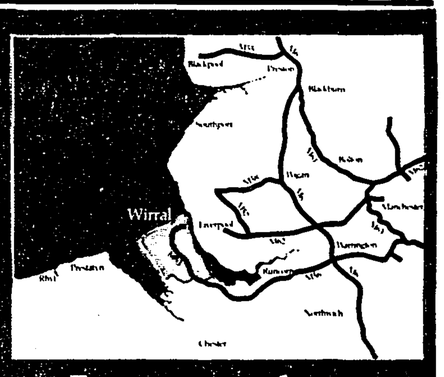

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(And back to Merseyside.)

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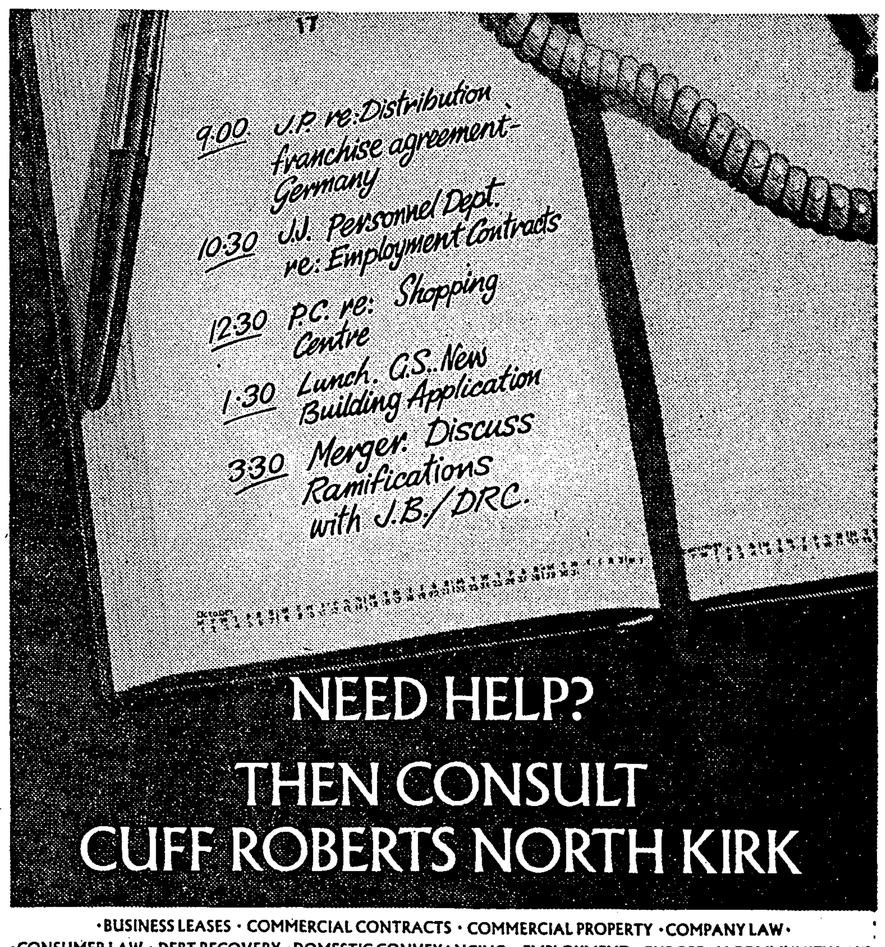

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