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'Pigeons not Doves': Liverpool's Contribution to the Festival of Britain, 1951

[GAMES] The 1951, Festival of Britain was celebrated with a series of exhibitions sanctioned by central government. There were permanent exhibits in London, Belfast, Edinburgh and Glasgow, 21 Arts [ARTS] Festivals across the United Kingdom and two touring exhibitions. A Seaborne Exhibition on the Festival Ship Campania, visited ports across Britain and The Land Travelling Exhibition, called at four cities in England. [MAP] The advice from the London Festival Office was that communities large and small should focus their celebrations on national and community pride, endeavouring to promote faith in the future as part of post war optimism.

[EPHEMERA] At the last years conference in Glasgow, I spoke about what happened in York and Leeds, this year, we move west to Liverpool; hoping to redress in a small way, the balance of writings that exist, which at best, focus on what happened in London and at worst, ignore the north and its contribution. The material looked today spans three years, from 1948-51.

[BOMBSITE] In 1940 and 41, the centre of Liverpool had been devastated by bombing raids, post-war, it became the focus of much criticism by its residents and institutions. When Liverpool was chosen by the Arts Council in London, to have Arts Festival status, it gave the corporation a timely platform to foster a renewed, civic pride. Liverpool's contribution to the Festival of Britain was viewed internally and externally as the largest contribution to the Festival outside London. I don't have time to look at all the events and identities privileged, so I'll concentrate instead on whether the charismatic organisers of the Festival were able to silence their critics by restoring and using, previously damaged buildings as a locus for events, while at the same time regenerating not only the actual city centre, but also civic pride? Did the Festival appeal to their wide audience and was it deemed successful?

There is evidence that Liverpool considered it needed a new image, even before they knew of the part they would play in the Festival of Britain celebrations. Deputy Mayor Gregson, spoke to the newly formed 'Liverpool and District Publicity Association in September 48, asking whether Liverpool should employ a full time Public Relations Officer, because, although Liverpool got publicity, it wasn't always the flattering kind, feeling that Liverpool people's energy and enthusiasm 'needed directing.' In many ways, the Festival of Britain, with its London Office aspirations fell straight in to the Corporations lap.

In October 48, The Finance Committee formally accepted the invitation to take part in the Festival. Alderman Shennan, Councillor Braddock, the Town Clerk and City Treasurer formed the first grouping of the Festival Committee, which would later become the Liverpool Festival Society Limited.

Hugh Weldon, an Arts Council representative, who had been privy to their first meeting, cautioned them, 'There is a tremendous amount of publicity going on about affairs in London. Already there is the menace, if

I may spout it, of London drawing too much upon the enthusiasm of the country...The festival is national and by virtue of that Liverpool's place *is* important'.

That evening, the Liverpool Echo speculated about which aspects of the city would be represented. Reporting that the Festival wouldn't be an exclusively Liverpool show', The Mayor said it was 'his desire that all citizens of Merseyside [should] feel they [were] part of the Festival. From the outset, Liverpool agreed that their Festival should have a wide appeal even though it had been given 'Arts Festival status.'

When they held their first full meeting on the 20th December 48, The Liverpool Festival Society Limited had ninety members and shareholders. They made multiple, comprehensive, decisions at this early stage (note, - these were not just suggestions,), which was in contrast to other cities that I've looking at. They set the dates for their Festival, allowing a run of three weeks, from July 22nd until August 11th. The Societies initial estimate for Liverpool's role in the Festival was costed at £50,000, so an appeal for contributions to a guarantee fund was immediately launched, the members agreed that they would match fund up to £25,000.

Alderman Hogan, was the main dissenting voice at the meeting, he queried whether they had taken on too much, 'If we are going to get on with this job there has got to be some driving force, somebody who can get on with it without delay... we must have everything in readiness for launching a great Festival, or, if we do not succeed, [it will be] a great flop'.ⁱ In reply, Shennan announced that they would be seeking a Festival Director, who would be employed for 18 months at a salary of £3,000.

[FRANCIS] Of the 53 all male candidates, eight were shortlisted for interview in February 1950. The applicants were highly experienced. One had worked in the Music Department at the BBC and another as a Music Officer for the British Council in Rome. The Daily Post asked why the Council felt that they needed to look further afield than Liverpool by advertising the Directorship in The Stage, inferring that the person chosen for the role might be less able to anticipate what Liverpool might want, or need for their Festival. Only two of the candidates, currently lived and worked in Liverpool, but The Daily Post needn't have been so pessimistic. In what was termed as a 'wise move' by The Echo, Mr Francis, Managing Director of Edwin Francis in the city, was chosen to fulfil the role of Artistic Festival Director.

Francis was clearly a worthy candidate, who had a great knowledge of, and professional working relationship within the arts and wider social scene in Liverpool. Trained as an accountant, during the war he had composed for the Liverpool Philharmonic, was a proficient local playwright and a writer for radio, becoming in wartime the Western Command, Regional Secretary of the Entertainment National Service Association (E.N.S.A to you and me)! A costume designer and one time Secretary of the Liverpool Ballet Club, he was also a long standing member of Bluecoat Chambers (an arts institute in the city) and in 49 had been the Chairman of the local Caterers Association. For two years prior to his appointment he had managed the Lord

Mayor's Appeal and so would have been known well by the interviewing panel. His wealth of enthusiasm for society membership, understanding of the artistic culture of Liverpool, alongside his financial skills, perhaps go some way to explaining why the Festival of Britain celebrations in Liverpool were so successful.

Francis his photo notwithstanding, was an enthusiastic, charismatic man, repeatedly reported as fireing up his audiences when he spoke. The Wallasey Chronicle described him as a 'driving force', 'fast-talking and enterprising'. The Rotarians, described him as 'inspiring' and the Daily Post gave examples of the 'soup-er-lative' language that he used; 'immense', 'terrific', 'colossal', 'the very blitz sites will become symbols of resurrection'. But that wasn't all. It was noted that he even made a words up; enthusing about the River Spectacle he declared it would be [ZONKING] 'zonking!' (those of you, as geekily interested in etymology, can ask me later what it means now, but also note that the first recorded use of the word zonk, *was* 1950).

[GUTHRIE] Another driving force behind Liverpool's Festival was Tyrone Guthrie. Called a 'star producer', he was employed in May 1950 to direct all outdoor productions, like street processions. Previously working as an administrator at the Old Vic in London, he jumped at the chance to employ his professional experience, 'beyond the scope of [his] ordinary professional practice'. Elaborating on why he had chosen Liverpool over the other 20 arts centres, he said; 'I like Liverpool: I feel grateful for the friendship and support shown to the Old Vic at the Playhouse during the war. I am happy to repay in some small measure what I feel to be a debt'. Guthrie left his post as Master of Ceremonies in Liverpool just weeks before their Festival started, becoming the Director of the Old Vic in London, at the behest of Lady Bonham-Carter and the Arts Council.

[PREVIEW] At the public launch of the plans for the Festival in May 50, Francis gave Liverpool an outline of what they could expect in the way of exhibitions, music, drama and ballet, but it was a 'River Spectacle, billed by The Liverpool Express as the 'largest river event in the country', that was given most prominence. It was emphasised that this event, was not only free, but that it was for the people of Merseyside *and* Cheshire. The theme of Liverpool being re born, was set

[QUOTE] 'The dominant note of our pageantry and ceremonial must be one of resurgence – To-morrow's Tide – a theme to reawaken self confidence, regenerate energy, and so enliven the local scene that our very blitzed sites, become symbols of resurrection. Not for us the casual backward glance, [or the] merely historical pageant'.

It's very clear that the Corporation was using the platform of the Festival launch to re-engineer pride in the city. In doing so, they attempted to answer their critics, encouraging support from them *and* the people of Liverpool. [ASKEY] Francis, *was* ambitious, but not elitist, he explained that 'music hall' entertainment was to be included as a matter of course in the Liverpool celebrations. He pre-empted detractors by stating, 'some people might say that's not the Arts, but for Lancashire it happened to be the Arts, because it was tradition. Music hall had grown up out of Lancashire'.

An unfortunate factor may have encouraged the launch to be more rousing than had been planned. Earlier that day, the Council had found out that they were not one of seven cities who were successful in gaining post-blitz regeneration funding from London, even though they had applied ‘continuously’ for a permit. This must have been a big blow and may have prompted Francis proclamation that the Festival ‘*would be* the ‘*largest outside of the capital*’. Perhaps Liverpool now felt they had a greater incentive to use the Festival to show that they would emerge civically refreshed, with or without the backing of London.

[NEWSPAPER] The criticism of the state of Liverpool’s city centre was levelled from all quarters. Apart from letters to local papers from angry residents, more prominent individuals and institutions also made their feelings known. The Merseyside Civic Society, outlined a number of suggestions that they wrongly believed would cost little to action, such as the restoration of Bluecoat Chambers and the Walker Art Gallery. Lord Woolten, Minister for Food 40-43 and Minister for Reconstruction 43-45, was vociferous in most of Liverpool Corporation’s affairs. He gave a damning speech in Liverpool about the ‘shabby’ impression that the city gave visitors; ‘When I come out of Liverpool Station I find the place so derelict I see danger. In this derelict atmosphere we are bringing up our future citizens. Let us make it a place they are proud to belong to, so that they may say it is not a mean city’.

Mr Stuart, a Director of a ceramic and glass merchants blamed ‘the present unattractive (if not positively repellent) appearance’ of the cities shopping area for Liverpool’s paltry share of the £527,000 that tourists had spent in Britain in 1950.

This ongoing issue was debated in the House of Commons. Aneurin Bevan was discussing a bill that would enable local authorities to clear bomb sites to make way for temporary playgrounds. Liverpool was accused of doing the least of all cities in the country to clear up. Mrs Braddock, a labour member *and* the Liverpool Daily Post’s Political Correspondent, commented that ‘if people wanted to look at something decent during the Festival of Britain, they had better go away from Liverpool as the centre was a disgrace’. Bevan agreed, stating that he hoped that visitors to the future Festival would not leave the country believing that Britain was a ‘bad housewife’

On numerous occasions, the Corporation attempted to paint a more positive story, referring to city centre bomb sites as ‘honourable wounds’ shouldered by Liverpool when it was the only port open during the war. Reminding their critics that they had purchased 46 acres of bomb damaged city centre, but that private owners of other damaged spaces had failed to sell or clear them, even though they could apply for recompense. Mayor Shennan agreed that the city could do with a repaint, and conceded that starting the work would take time. In their defence, he highlighted that redevelopment and deployment of scarce [SPEKE] materials had been transferred into houses and factories on the outskirts of Liverpool, rather than the brightening up of shops or leisure facilities in the centre. He called for Lord Woolten to agree that the

Councils priorities had been the *right* ones for the industrial wealth of the city. This positive spin was echoed by Alderman Cleary who suggested that the blitz sites and grime only threw in to greater relief the cities beautiful buildings. Ronald Bradbury, the City Architect, declared that the blitz had perversely created a chance for a restructuring of the city centre that otherwise could not have been afforded.

[ARCHITECTURE] Luckily for the Corporation, after ten years of occupation by The Ministry of Food at the Art Gallery was vacated, freeing it up for restoration. Mayor Cotton, reiterating the importance of youth and civic pride, thought it lamentable that there was ‘a generation of young Liverpool people, to whom the Walker Art Gallery was merely a place to obtain food tokens’. The Walker was opened by Kenneth Clark, former Director of the National Gallery, a couple of weeks before the Festival in Liverpool began. In the last few months and weeks before the Festival opened, the city centre, underwent a transformation.

The Bluecoat, St Georges Hall and St Nicholas’s church at the pier head had been rebuilt and reopened and decorative improvements to the city centre were implemented or encouraged. Businesses were urged to install, window boxes on their first floors, following a uniform design set out by The Festival Society which they displayed as an example outside of their offices. [DECORATIONS] Street decorations in, gold, blue and red, costing £20,000 were installed. Liverpool really went to town here with flags and banners as large as sails. Their vividness and size were mocked in cartoons in the press, which they deemed cheerful, as long as you didn’t suffer with sea sickness. The city centre was looking refreshed, but without enjoyable or appropriate events with wide appeal, the Festival Society knew that it’s Festival might fail. Francis listened to residents implementing a scheme to encourage participation.

[VOUCHER] In response to criticism that only people who had large incomes would be able to afford to attend multiple theatre, concert or ballet performances, Liverpool launched a voucher scheme, these could be purchased in ten shilling, one and five pound denominations, enabling people to save up for over six months before the box offices opened. The Society even encouraged people to buy loved ones vouchers for Christmas. The scheme was in some ways ‘too successful’. People, who had bought in to the scheme, had the privilege of cashing in their vouchers *before* cash buyers for tickets. [QUEUE] On the first day of opening, due to the high demand extra cashiers were called in and even then, they worked way beyond midnight, turning away hundreds of voucher holders who’d queued for up to ten hours. When queues the next day again stretched for hundreds of yards, the WRVS were called in to hand out tea. Criticism was levelled at the scheme, particularly because people were buying upwards of 35 tickets at a time, although this was usually on behalf of factory social clubs., Francis seemed to be fulfilling what he had set out to do. I e, enthuse and enable a very wide audience across Liverpool to join in the celebrations. However, he knew that Festival Office London had to be won over too.

In the year before the Festival opened, the tension between London and Liverpool was palpable. Escalating in pace, when the full programme of the Liverpool Festival was launched in London early in 51. To place the comments that follow in context, I have to refer to what Francis said a year earlier;

‘One of the most sensible decisions taken recently by a government department...was the plan to decentralise the Festival of Britain, the city (Liverpool) was not dealing with someone else’s “left over’s, we have been given pride of place. For once in our life Liverpool is to be Queen of the May...its time she stopped looking around for someone else’s train to hold. It is *her* day, and the occasion demands a new hairdo, a facial, a festive gown and the air of confidence that these things engender’.

Three months before the Festival opened in Liverpool, Francis spoke at a press conference in London to outline Liverpool’s full programme. Gerald Barry, known as ‘Lord Festival’, was reported as saying that ‘Festival headquarters had not quite foreseen what a forceful and imaginative programme Liverpool would provide’. Barry’s choice of the word ‘forceful’ could be deconstructed in a number of ways. Forceful in that Liverpool had perhaps achieved more than was expected and this was a good thing, or that this level of commitment or showmanship was not appreciated by the London organisers. Perhaps Francis had riled Barry, when he had earlier insinuated that London Festival budget holders and planners had got their sums wrong, overstretching themselves. In contrast, Francis made it clear that he wasn’t worried about overspending, because Liverpool’s planners had budgeted well from the beginning and local people had given their time for free. ‘Some people have read about the millions being spent [in London] and thought that we must be doing it too. But we are not. We are setting the people to work and they are liking it’.

The Daily Telegraph’s London edition noted that Liverpool’s was an ‘ambitious programme’

Hodgkinson, the Regional Director of the Arts Council and a supportive figure of what Liverpool had arranged, spoke directly to the Liverpool Echo. He explained that by securing the Liverpool Philharmonic to play with the Saddlers Wells Ballet (Margot Fonteyn was dancing) that they would be the only place in Britain, outside of London, where a ballet had ever performed with full orchestral support. Hodgkinson lamented that it was ‘insufficiently realised that the Liverpool celebrations were so outstanding, and that while he could see that people in Liverpool were taking their festivities for granted, no other place outside of London measured up to them. He ended by saying ‘This bids fair to competing with London and Edinburgh’. ‘In one bound, [Liverpool] has reached international festival status’.

Liverpool’s Festival opened with a Cathedral service with two and a half thousand people in attendance inside and 1,000 listening outside.

[BROCHURE] The ‘Daylight on Industry Exhibition’ demonstrated manufacturing techniques as well as showcasing, imported materials, such as cotton, rubber and tobacco, Materials manufactured in Liverpool,

were used in the construction of the 71 stands [DIAGRAM]. By the use of coloured awnings and centrally placed, the exhibition was designed to be as ‘bright as a fairground’. Examples of Industrial design were unusually, displayed as sculpture. [BUOY] and visitors were able to see and experience some rather unusual exhibits. Although, not actually descending in to a mine shaft, a simulation of just that was installed, where visitors crouched in a tunnel 5feet tall, to watch coal cutting equipment in action.

[KITE] The ‘centre-piece’ of the tobacco stands was a 34inch ‘skylon cigar’. More importantly, the idea of placing the exhibition on a levelled five acre bombsite between St Georges Hall, the Museum and the Walker Art Gallery, was described by the Festival Director Francis as “brilliantly ingenious”

At St Georges Hall, The Story of Liverpool Exhibition took the spectator from pre-history to the present day. A multi sensory display fanned the scent of the ‘seaside’ at the entrance. Comprising of 34 different sections, the Liverpool Story cleverly ended with a tableau about the cities development plan.

[SPECTACLE] For the free River Spectacle in July and August, people gathered at the pier head four and half hours before it started and queues for ferries to Wallasey were thirty deep across the length of the landing stage. [PLANES]To begin, a flotilla of the Mersey’s small boats and tugs sailed from New Brighton to Liverpool, in addition, on the first of three dates, two squadrons from the Royal Naval Reserve, flew past in 24 ‘Sea Flurries’ and Firebrands’. [CROWDS] Barges launching fireworks, left St George’s stage to go south, and some left the bank opposite New Brighton, culminating in 2,000 rockets being fired from Wallasey Town Hall. Described by the press as a ’liquid fairground’, traffic came to a stand still in the city centre, as people spontaneously got out of their cars to catch a glimpse. To get a sense of the scale, after the first River Spectacle, ferries from Wallasey carried more than 80,000 passengers back to Seacomb.

[MYRTLE] A van with a mobile stage, loud hailers and speakers drove out to housing estates to ‘take the Festival to the doorsteps...of Liverpool’. At Myrtle gardens it was estimated that 5,000 adults and children could watch the entertainment, turning their balconies into theatre ‘circles’.

Three city centre processions took place, Merseyside and the World, ‘Merseyside and Youth’ and on the final day, ‘Merseyside Resurgent’. Guthrie organised the processions, one of which included 6,000 schoolchildren. Eight months before the Festival, he spoke at a Women’s Committee to explain that Liverpool’s processions would *not* be an occasion for loads of children to dress in butter muslin’. He had much grander ideas, calling for 2,000 doves to be released at the closing ceremony. Francis, the overall Director, agreed to pigeons as you had to get a licence for doves.

[YOUTH]So enamoured by the open air events, women were noted by reporters as appearing to turn their backs on the ceremonies, utilising their compact mirrors as periscopes to get better views.

The end of the Festival was signified by a procession through the city centre where 2,000 lit torches were extinguished at St Georges plateau. The closing words were, ‘Let us take with us a renewed sense of pride in our city. Liverpool stands high in the records of our nation, let us keep it there’. An alternative ending that *did not* happen, but *was* outlined in the National, Arts Festival Brochure, was as follows. As the last words are spoken and the torches extinguished, a mechanical digger was set to lift up a bucket of earth, symbolising rebirth, from a still not levelled, bomb site.

[LIGHTS] Was the Festival in Liverpool a success? In the Lord Mayors’ Festival message, printed in the Daily post he emphasised that ‘It [was] not the set pieces, magnificent as they had been, which [had] made the Festival, but the people of Liverpool’ who had emerged ‘refreshed and inspired with a new confidence in themselves and the great city of which they are the citizens.’

[FIREWORKS] The verdict of the Liverpool press was extremely favourable. The Daily Post led a tribute (quite rightly in my view) to the Festival Director, Francis, his staff and Mayors, past and present, praising their ‘infectious enthusiasm’, and commenting that they had been ‘a revelation of inspiring, civic leadership’ The River Spectacle was seen by the press as representing ‘Everyman’s share in the Liverpool Festival’. ‘Everyman might not be at home at the ballet, and may sit out orchestra concerts with clenched fists, but he was well remembered in Liverpool’. Outdoor theatre productions were reported to have whetted the appetite of non theatre goers, to try something new.

The business community were equally pleased by the response elicited by the Daylight on Industries Exhibition. The secretary of the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce and numerous manufacturers recounted that the Festival had been more than worthwhile. Not just because 200,000 attended, but that they had fielded enquiries from ‘South America, the Commonwealth, Africa, India, Pakistan, Canada, America and Germany More importantly they believed that ‘a tremendous amount of goodwill had been built up for the industries of Liverpool’.

Even the usual potential detractors of Liverpool had to concede to the city’s success. The Manchester Guardian wrote; that even though they had questioned ‘such determined celebration on the part of a naturally morose Northern city’, that people venturing to the Liverpool Festival would be ‘agreeably surprised’

[PINEAPPLE] Gerald Barry, ‘Lord Festival’, appeared much more supportive and transparent in his comments after witnessing Liverpool’s achievements first hand, conveying that he was ‘overawed’ by the decorations in the city and considered that ‘Liverpool certainly [had] something that London [did] not’, that their ‘River Spectacle had no parallel anywhere else’ and that the ‘crowds... enthusiasm [was] greater than

London's. And that no other city has shown more true appreciation of the Festival or had made such an imposing contribution in the arts.

Perhaps the most important answer to whether the Liverpool celebrations had triumphed comes from the Corporation itself. Sensing they had answered their critics and improved civic pride just *three days* in to their three week Festival, they announced that they would foot the bill for the whole of any deficit.

ⁱ Anon, 'Merseyside has Vital role in the festival, Daily post, 21st of December 1948