

Whither the Albert Dock

In January the Public Inquiry which will decide the future of the Albert Dock opened in Liverpool amid intense local and considerable national interest. In essence Gerald Zisman, a London property developer, wants to turn Albert into a world trade centre and, in doing so, fill in the seven-acre dock basin within. The objectors, co-ordinated by the Merseyside Civic Society and including the AIA, consider Albert without water is unthinkable. Over the whole project the spectre of Merseyside's 17% unemployment hangs like a mushroom cloud. John Crompton, present during most of the proceedings, has written his impressions. Adrian Jarvis's invitation precedes it.

Re-develop the Albert Dock. (A new board game for all the family). The Albert Dock and its warehouses were designed by Jesse Hartley and opened in 1846. Philip Hardwicke designed the impressive Traffic Office alongside and made some stylistic additions to the warehouses. The warehouses and the traffic office are separately listed, both Grade 1, and have been the subject of development proposals for at least fifteen years.

So many plans have come and gone that it seems unfair to deny members their turn, and we are therefore having a competition to produce the "best" plan. The criteria of merit will include damage to listed structures, destruction of the ambience of the area, impracticability, uselessness and expectation of profit for outside parties. Entries exhibiting a high K factor will be heavily penalised. Entries should take the form of a general description of the scheme such as might be used for lobbying local politicians or for a press release, broadly along such lines as these:

Our proposal is to develop Albert and its immediate environs as a Trade Centre, which

will play a significant part in the economic regeneration of Merseyside. We intend to reinstate the warehouses to, so far as possible, their former glories, by glazing in the quayside, constructing links between the blocks and demolishing a few items which we are sure Hartley did not really want anyway, such as the loading yard walls. Of course it will also be necessary to provide service cores in these loading yards and to remove all the hydraulic jigger jibs.

One of the principal difficulties with the site is the large number of totally irrelevant minor buildings, such as the Piermaster's House, the Hydraulic Pumphouse, the cooperage etc., 37 items in all, and we feel that the sweeping away of all this decaying clutter to provide car parking space will greatly enhance the appearance of the whole area. Also, we are intending to remove a totally inadequate and obsolete swing bridge, built as long ago as 1846 to a different site and replace it with an elegant modern embankment, to the great benefit of the local economy. The fine Traffic Office building will, with only an extra



storey added to its portico and a revolving door (We think he might mean revolving - Ed.) make an excellent club which will gain an authentic historical flavour from being called the Victoria and Albert.

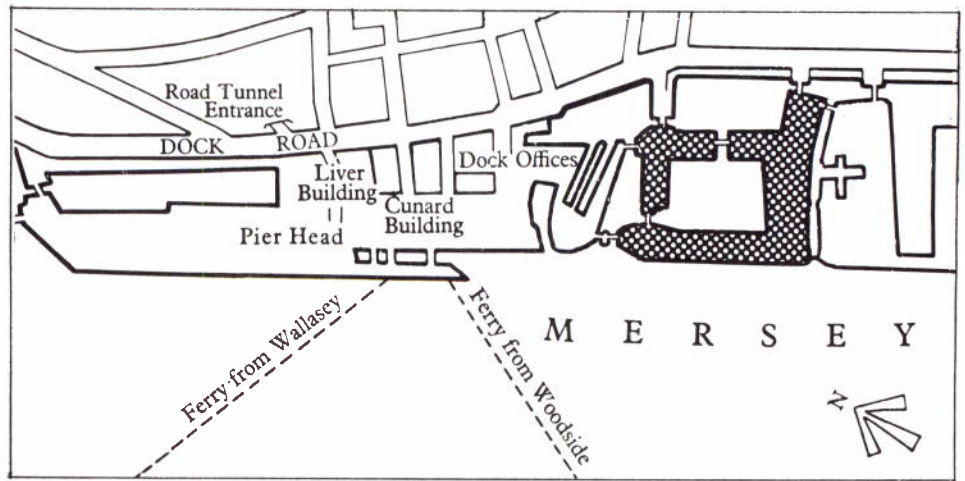
We anticipate that very large amounts of traffic will be generated by the trade centre, and it is for this reason that it will be necessary to dredge and infill Salthouse Dock, for car parking, and Albert Dock itself, having been similarly dredged and infilled will be provided with direct road access for service and exhibitors' vehicles and not overspill car parking at all. And if another person says the piles on which the dock is built might dry out and cause the whole lot to fall down I'll take my money away and spend it somewhere else, so there.

Of course there have been ambitious plans for this area before, and it is necessary in these unfortunate circumstances, for us to point out that this scheme is quite unlike its predecessors in that it is thoroughly practical and more than adequately financed. The estimated cost of the total package is £60M, some of which might be spent with local contractors, all of which is covered by guarantees from our backers, who must, of course remain anonymous, but who have implicit trust in our scheme, knowing as they do of our successful developments at . . . er . . . and . . . um . . . and . . . well everyone knows how good they are, anyway. Our architects have similarly broad experience in the conversion of historic buildings of the highest international importance, and we would like to make it clear that we have every confidence in them.

We are applying for the necessary Listed Building Consent for the scheme, and we would like members of the public, who are rightly concerned for the future of this great monument to feel that they can take part in a process of consultation and negotiation. Unfortunately there are certain groups upon whose motivation we cannot speculate who seem to wish to take us up on this, which is why we do not have a registered office, but any bonafide admirers can rest assured that communications addressed to Scroggins Developments International Associated, c/o Mrs Phelps, 17 Ashtree Grove, Peterborough, will receive our attention.

Members will by now have realised that any resemblance between the foregoing bilge and a plan which went to Local Inquiry on 13th January is more than coincidental. In the unlikely event of your being able to "follow that" by writing a parody of something which is already a self-parody you will richly deserve the valuable prizes the Editor has to offer. NB' It will not be counted to the merits of any scheme to suggest that the scheme might be dropped after listed building consent has been obtained and the site sold at an enhanced value. Such suggestions are considered inconsistent with the high ethical standards of the property development profession, and Scroggins might sue us.

"Filling in Albert". Liverpool's Albert Dock has been in the news again as the subject of a Public Enquiry into an application for Listed Building consent to convert the complex into a "trade, exhibition, and export centre" by Gerald Zisman Associates Ltd. Delegates to the 1980 AIA Conference were able to view the complex from the first stage site of the Merseyside Maritime Museum, and those who gained some



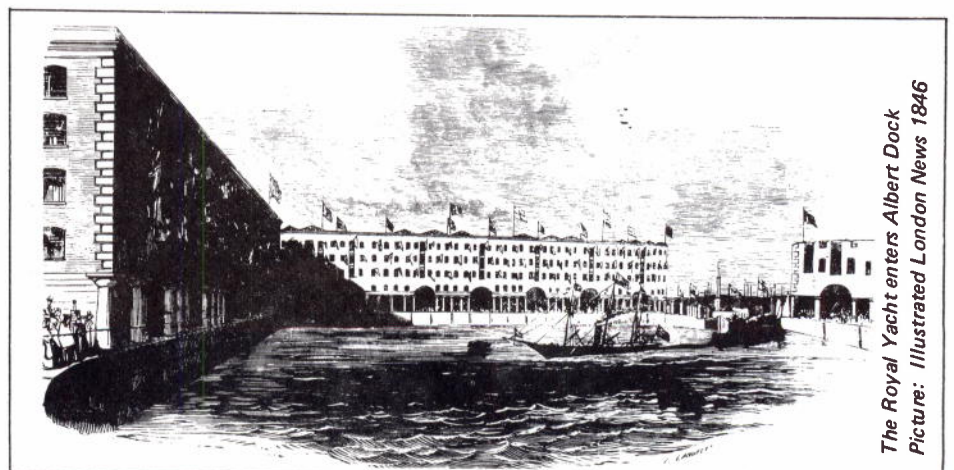
inspiration from the juxtaposition of brick, granite, iron, and water may be at an advantage in the competition announced in this Bulletin. For others, a brief resume of the stature and history of the Albert Dock may prove useful.

Although Liverpool's first charter arose from the potential need to ship troops to Ireland, its rise as an important trading port dates more from the 17th century. Not until the early 18th century was any thought given to providing proper port facilities. Thomas Steers supervised the first "wet" dock which was completed in 1715, and the next hundred years saw an increasing tempo of dock building on both sides (but mainly to the south) of the present Pier Head. Allied with this activity was the building of large numbers of warehouses in the growing town, necessitating the awkward transhipment of goods by cart through the streets, and 'losses' were said to be 20% of some cargoes.

The greatest period of dock expansion began in 1824 with the appointment of Jesse Hartley to the post of Dock Surveyor. During his "thirty-six years guidance with a despotic sway" of the physical development of the port, the water area in the dock system was quadrupled by the building of new docks and the rebuilding of all the existing ones; and the distinctive character of his design and architecture was indelibly stamped on the Liverpool waterfront. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner refers to his "cyclopean" style of granite masonry as being among the finest examples of "architecture parlante" in Europe, "an architecture for giants". Style apart, one of Hartley's most valuable contributions was a security wall between dock estate and the town, pierced by massive gateways whose whimsical gothic watch towers positively reek of a security-conscious Dock Committee.

Hartley's other immense achievement was the Albert Dock.

The idea of dockside warehouses was first put forward in 1803, no doubt following the West India Dock Company's work in London; but vested interests defeated all plans even in the face of a Royal Commission in 1821. Not until 1837 were the first plans for dockside warehouses in Liverpool approved, for a new dock to the west of the existing Salthouse Dock. Construction began in 1842, and Hartley designed the warehouses, in conjunction with Philip Hardwick, in 1843. The Albert Dock was opened by the Prince Consort himself in 1846, though the warehouses were not completed until 1849. The not-quite rectangular basin is surrounded by five blocks of five storey warehouses over brick-vaulted basements. A colonnade surrounds the dock itself, with massive cast iron columns supporting the classically proportioned brick-work above. The rear of the blocks, away from the dock itself, contain open courtyards at intervals, where hoists, staircases, and loading carts were under the eyes of watchmen. The buildings were constructed solely from non-combustible materials; inside, cast iron columns support wrought iron arched beams of inverted "Y" section, with brick vaulting between. The roofs are of wrought iron sheets on light iron trusses. These warehouses fulfilled their intended purpose for 120 years with very little modification; in addition, the Dock Office, with its famous cast iron portico, the Dock-master's house and other related buildings, and most of the original dockside furniture, have also survived. The difficulties of access since the early 1970s have at least curtailed the unofficial rape of "scrap metal" which has gone on apace in the rest of the south dock estate. A most



The Royal Yacht enters Albert Dock
Picture: Illustrated London News 1846

important survival is the great deal of hydraulic machinery - important because the Albert Dock incorporated the first large-scale application (in the world) of hydraulic power to cargo-handling. It is not yet known to what extent the original Armstrong equipment has survived inside and under the warehouses. The central power plant has gone, and the pump house itself (not the original, but a replacement dating from the 1870s) is in structurally poor condition.

Thus the Albert Dock is important for a number of reasons, and its status as Britain's largest Grade 1 listed building is a right and proper reflection of its true merit. Also right and proper is the concern felt locally and nationally at its decaying state, and at the way in which the local Planning Authority has seemed to welcome without discernment every scheme put forward for its development, conversion, demolition, or whatever. It is tempting, in looking at the demise of various schemes for offices, high-rise flats, marinas, and polytechnics, to hold up the Albert Dock as an object lesson on the difficulties of finding new uses for old and historic buildings; but that would be to assume that all the schemes had been sympathetic to the architectural, historical, and archaeological importance of the site, and had merely perished on the rocks of economics. Most previous schemes have been anything but sympathetic, and even the much-welcomed polytechnic conversion would have wrought major changes to the appearance of the warehouses by replacing the roofs with an extra mansard storey. Such treatment would certainly not coincide with the DoEs 1977 statement on the criteria to be applied to the conversion of buildings of outstanding interest. National, as well as local, attitudes have hardened over what may legitimately be done in the name of conservation and re-use. It was inevitable, therefore, that the latest proposals would be treated with deep suspicion, particularly when it was seen that the Planning Authority had given Listed Building Consent at a stage when there was an almost total lack of detail about the modifications intended. Noises were made in all quarters, and there was great relief when the application was "called in" by the Secretary of State for the Environment. The applicant seems to have been surprised by the ardour of the opposition, for at his request the Public Inquiry was postponed from October to January, and the scheme was modified to avoid demolition of some of the ancillary buildings which had been doomed at the stage of local planning approval.

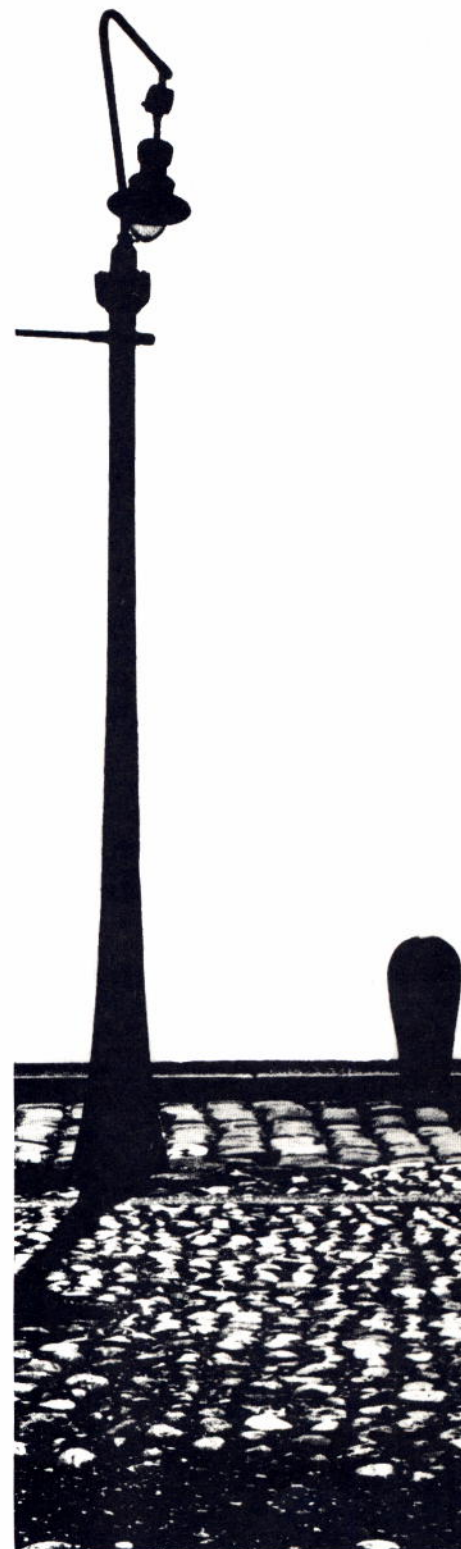
So it was that at 10 am on January 13th, Mr Michael Montague-Smith assumed the Inspector's chair and called to order a crowded committee room. It was an Inquiry destined to last six and a half days, during which the suspicions were heightened rather than reduced. The words may have been fine at times, but each "side" spends its time searching out the motives behind the words, and to some extent, the issues become muddled as they cross the floor. The applicant, of course, has the advantage of being able to construct his case before coming to the Inquiry: the objectors may only do so if the applicant's scheme is clear and detailed.

Counsel for the Applicant, Mr Peter Boydell, QC, was certainly out to impress. He was fully aware of the stature of the Albert Dock; he was sorry at the lamentable state of decay into which it had been allowed to fall; and the present application had been drawn up, therefore, to make "improvements to the Albert Dock" by

the demolition of "a few trivial and ugly excrescences". Mr Zisman was to be seen as a "saviour", providing new life for this now dead site by injecting some £20 million. Mr Boydell outlined the intentions of the scheme, stressing that the filling of the dock itself was essential, particularly for ensuring free pedestrian circulation between the warehouses on all sides. His witnesses, five in number, were then called to testify to the commercial necessity of the dock fill, and the continued safety of the structure with the new groundwater regime. This latter point has been a vexed issue, in that the western buildings are founded on hundreds of beechwood piles driven down through shore deposits to the underlying marls, and they might be in risk of collapse if the piles were allowed to dry out. Two witnesses supported the case that a sand fill would actually raise the water table around the piles; but their admission that the only evidence available on the piles had been obtained five years previously by consultants, who then advised that the only way to ensure continued safety was to maintain a water surface at the former dock level, was not likely to inspire confidence. There seemed to be some variations of opinion, too, on the real intended use for the proposed "piazza", and the possibility of buses and taxis haring around the filled square did not go down well at all. Most interesting of all, as the witnesses and particularly the consultant architects revealed their proofs, there began to appear a list of modifications to the tabled application. It was learned that the hydraulic pumphouse was no longer to be demolished, but now to be taken down carefully, brick by brick, and made available for re-erection elsewhere - perhaps even within a few feet of the existing site. It was learned that the dock was to be filled not to quay level, but to a height of 0.8 m below the quay - and that might yet become even lower! It became apparent that the glass screen formerly to be placed between the cast iron columns surrounding the dock was now to be placed some two feet behind them. It also transpired that the clause concerning the insertion of mezzanine floors cutting the line of the higher elliptical arches was to be removed. It now seemed quite certain that the 1843 cast iron bridge over the north passage need not be moved more than ten to fifteen feet, and perhaps not at all. It seemed to the developer now that perhaps it was more sensible to build a faithful replica of Philip Hardwick's clock tower on its original location, rather than the pseudo-edifice proposed for the other side of the complex. Perhaps there was really no need to demolish all the ancillary buildings at the south east corner of the site . . . and so the concessions crept out. Concessions they may have been, but they did not inspire confidence.

By the middle of Thursday morning it was the turn of the Liverpool City Solicitor to call his two witnesses to support the application. The City Planning Officer outlined his department's discussions with the applicant, and showed quite clearly that the various concessions had come about solely because of the objections raised by the various amenity bodies, and in no way through the concern of the planners for the site. It was very apparent that the sole criterion applied had been the possibility of job creation, an issue echoed with strong emotional overtones by the Chairman of the Planning and Land Committee.

Since the representatives of Merseyside County Council were confining themselves to cross-



examination of the witnesses, and not themselves giving evidence, the Inquiry now switched to the side of the objectors, led by Merseyside Civic Society. The Civic Society has over forty years' record of amenity work for Liverpool, and its representatives were well qualified and able to resist what they saw as an unsympathetic and unpardonable assault on Liverpool's most important building. The list of concessions may well have been calculated to take the wind out of the objectors' sails; but it only succeeded in drawing attention to the lack of detailed plans, and the carelessness of the planners in approving vague and general ideas. The poverty of the applicant's sympathy with the architectural and historical importance of the Albert Dock was heightened by the obvious regard of those who spoke for the qualities of the buildings; Dr