

NEWSLETTER No 39**29 January 2008****"2008" - Are we all on board?**

The first events of 2008 have gone off well. Congratulations to the Phil, the Cathedrals, the theatres, St George's Hall, the museums and the other organisations which have laid on numerous and excellent events and whose plans for the rest of the year are equally exciting. The refurbished main shopping streets are now looking good. But on the down side, why have virtually none of the city's shops, bars, restaurants and offices put on a festive look, offered a "Welcome" to visitors? (But well done Cains brewery for their "2008" beers.) A sample of two shops, one theatre and one pub suggests that nobody from Liverpool Culture Company or from the Chamber of Commerce has even suggested that they should do something for this Capital year. Quite apart from letting the city down, don't they see that their own businesses stands to gain from looking festive and welcoming visitors? A private initiative is being taken to try to improve the situation but it would be much better of the authorities took the lead. They have the cash, the staff and, one would have thought, the duty to do so. Discussions are in hand with the churches on this theme also.

The importance of the voluntary societies

Liverpool Heritage Forum was set up for networking between cultural societies in and around Liverpool and for liaison with Liverpool Culture Company, particularly during 2007, the Year of Heritage. It has had some success, through this newsletter, the website, public meetings, such as the series of diversity meetings about Liverpool's ethnic components, personal contacts. The website contains a listing of various societies' events. It contains a pen portrait of the city's heritage and culture.

Voluntary societies play an important role in support of the city's culture. Some of them are "Friends" of various institutions, giving support by raising funds, creating interest and acting as volunteers. The Friends of National Museums Liverpool contribute towards buying works of art, the Friends of Liverpool Monuments care for and publicise the city's remarkable collection of statues and street fountains, the Friends of various city parks, the Cathedrals, Sefton Park Palm House, Old Christchurch at Waterloo, the Florence Institute, Flaybrick Cemetery, St James Gardens, the Williamson Tunnels and many other aspects of heritage all support and publicise these valued assets. Brenda Murray, a member of the Forum's steering group, arranged for plaques to be put up in Liverpool's original seven streets.

Other societies are concerned with the performing arts. The Friends of Welsh National Opera spread the word in our region about this excellent company. Other societies organise lectures research on the region's history, such as the Liverpool History Society, the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire and a number of active local groups in suburbs such as Wavertree, West Derby, Knowsley, Litherland and in the north end of the city, the Scottie Press carries the heritage banner. Some of the local societies are members of national organisations such as the Victorian Society, the National Trust and the Civic Trust.

Yet other societies focus on particular people, events or topics such as the Dante Alighieri Society, the Geological and Archaeological Societies, the Liverpool Scottish Museum, the Decorative and Fine Arts Societies. Then there are groups concerned with music such as the Liverpool Italian and Metropolitan Opera companies, the Friends of the Philharmonic and performing groups such as the Travelling People. And there are groups of painters such as the South Liverpool Art Group. Space is too limited to mention all of the excellent work going on. And these activities don't cost the public purse a penny!

It is important that the 100+ staff brought into Liverpool Culture Company and the leadership of the City Council fully understand the work of these volunteers in preserving the vibrant cultural life of the city, in supporting many of the large scale events put on this year and the essential part they will lay in the "legacy", the hoped-for continuation of Liverpool as a cultural mecca in future years.

What makes Liverpool special?

A young man asked the editor why Liverpool was given the award of European Capital of Culture. This wasn't about how the city beat Newcastle et al. The person just didn't know what was special about Liverpool. He would have enjoyed the anecdote told by the Archbishop of Liverpool during the recent visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Metropolitan Cathedral. He recalled correspondence in The Times some years ago about whether Manchester or Birmingham was Britain's second city. Somebody then wrote in to say that it was well known in Liverpool which was the country's second city: "London"!

It seems in the face of the London-centred media we have to keep stating the point. Liverpool's cultural "offer" is superior to that of most European cities apart from national capitals. It is, as the City Council intended prior to the award of European Capital of Culture status, among the top twenty city tourist destinations in Europe, albeit not in the top ten. Our Victorian/Edwardian architecture, our museums and galleries, the Phil, our amateur and professional performing arts and our wealth of voluntary artistic societies is superlative. (Add in our sporting highlights and showbiz greats if you want to broaden the definition of culture).

Even though there are still too many national journalists who ignore or deride anything north of Watford, it is pleasing that the BBC is giving the city a lot of coverage just now. (But we noted that it and the other UK networks missed out by not showing the Liverpool v Havant and Waterlooville match, one of this year's classics. The match was however broadcast on the Shanghai Sports channel in the internet, - with a commentary in Chinese of course! So even they know who we are.

The city's Capital of Culture status has propelled it into an elite list of the top favourite worldwide holiday destinations, behind Argentina, New Zealand, Cape Verde, Abu Dhabi, Alaska, Reykjavik, Berlin and Boston - and ahead of all other British cities! The list was compiled following a survey of more than 14,000 regular travellers who were asked where they would most like to visit this year. So we are special!

Capital of Culture Year is expected to attract an extra 1.7 million visitors to Liverpool, bringing in good money. Critics who say "2008" is not worthwhile please note!

Opera in Liverpool

In one area of culture however, Liverpool does not do too well: opera. But even here, there have been high spots. The European Opera Centre Trust (which is based at Liverpool Hope University's Shaw Street complex) performed "Emilia di Liverpool" in

the superb setting of the Small Concert Room in St George's Hall at the beginning of January. The orchestra was on the stage and the singers, in costume but with virtually no props, in the "well" of the room. There was no scenery, which greatly reduces the cost. If there had been scenery it might have raised a smile because composer Donizetti (or his librettist Checcherini) had Liverpool situated on pine covered hills at the mouth the river! Few cities' names are included in the titles of operas. The production was sponsored by the Culture Company, Royal Bank of Scotland, the European Commission and the Beetham company, to whom thanks are due. Could this pave the way to have an annual opera festival in Liverpool on this pattern of high musical quality but reduced costs.

We have mentioned before that Welsh National Opera has cut back from two visits to Liverpool each year to one - although Llandudno has two. There may be political reasons for this but the rather thin audiences at WNO's last visit cannot have helped. Was the poor attendance because the publicity in the Daily Post and the Echo doesn't reach the potential clientele, because the suburban freebies don't cover Liverpool events very fully?

Another reason may be that people have been put off by certain previous performances. In the commercial world, people selling a product have to offer what customers want to buy. In the state subsidised arts, there is sometimes a tendency to go against what is clearly wanted by the market because something new or shocking "is good for them". Customers complain of opera settings made deliberately ugly or aggressively modernised - which pleases some people and not others. We recall that Verdi, Mozart, Handel and Elgar, to name but a few, tried to supply what their customers wanted and usually succeeded in doing so.

In a related art form, it is sad to see that the Russian State Ballet of Siberia is visiting Manchester, Blackpool, Stoke and eighteen other cities - but not Liverpool.

However, "Blood Brothers" by Knowsley's Willy Russell and as Liverpudlian as you can get, was very good. It was well attended and enthusiastically received on the night your editor went to it.

Faiths

Ω Faiths are part of the culture of Liverpool. Even though only a minority of its people worship regularly, the leaders of the two main branches of Christianity and other faith leaders play a significant part in the life of the city, the people turn to the churches in moments of triumph or grief and the two cathedrals dominate the skyline behind the city centre. Moreover, Liverpool can claim to have more developed relationships between the different Christian churches and between Christianity and other faiths than anywhere else in Britain. It was in character that the national holocaust weekend, a remembrance of genocide in countries from Nazi Germany, to Rwanda to the Balkans should see the Archbishop of Canterbury give a lecture on the Anglican cathedral (after which the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Liverpool said a prayer). The Anglican Archbishop followed with a sermon in the Metropolitan (RC) Cathedral. In between, BBC Radio 4 did two live broadcasts from the Anglican Cathedral. The first was the "Sunday" programme which included references to the sad closure of the Jewish synagogue in Greenbank Road and a debate about Muslim education in Lancashire. Then came the Morning Service conducted by the Deans of both Cathedrals.

Vision

Ω We forbore to refer in the last Newsletter to the very downbeat presentation by Jim Gill of Liverpool Vision to the Merseyside Civic Society. The (city centre) development organisation of which he has been the Chief is to be combined with another public sector development company (serving outer areas of the city) and Business Liverpool, a joint venture of the Chamber of Commerce and the City Council - and someone else was due to get the top job there. However, the someone else turned the job down and Jim Gill got the job.

In his speech to MCS, Jim spoke of how difficult it was to make headway among all the organisations concerned with urban renewal. the Mersey Partnership, English Partnerships, English Heritage (which "lists" heritage buildings), the Housing Market Renewal Initiative (which wants to tear down houses in Edge Lane), the North West Development Agency, BusinessLiverpool and the Government Office North West all help to stir the pot, none of them having a direct democratic mandate and generally headed by "grey" men unknown to the public, leaving the elected City Council rather on the margins. Lovers of heritage have to pick their way through this maze in trying to conserve the landmarks of our culture and heritage.

Now Mr Gill has gone public in saying that there won't be any more tall buildings constructed in Liverpool for many years due to the credit crunch. One can reflect on the opportunities missed to attract high quality architecture to the city because of dithering about the "high rise policy", now officially scrapped but possibly still in place behind the scenes. But does it really help for a top official to say this publicly? Could these remarks actually deter potential quality investors? And if the situation is as bad as that, will we still need Vision - of the quango kind?

Around town

Ω Next time you are quaffing champagne in the first floor bar at the Phil, pause for moment and look at the photos on the pillars. These show people who played, conducted and sang in the building (or in its predecessor before it was burnt down). These include Saint Saëns, Rachmaninoff, Furtwängler, Rubinstein and Galli-Gurci, artists at the very highest level in their time. Liverpool is fortunate in currently having a conductor of the highest quality, Vasily Petrenko. (Has he any ambition to emulate Paderewski, who also performed at the Phil and who went on to become Prime Minister of Poland?)

Ω Peter Elson has published information in the Daily Post about the conversion of the University of Liverpool's Victoria Building (the original "red brick" university building) on Brownlow Hill. The building will become an art gallery, museum and conference venue and will be one of the main projects designed for "2008" which will remain for future years, the all-important legacy.

Ω The campaign continues to save the Roman Catholic Church of St Peter and St Paul which overlooks the mouth of the Mersey from New Brighton. The Bishop is quoted as saying that the decision to close the Church is "not irrevocable".

Ω The people who run St John's Precinct have contacted local societies to obtain views about plans to refurbish it. Your opinion will be welcomed by Four Communications at the Corn Exchange in Fenwick Street, Liverpool L2 7RB

Ω The Wirral Maritime Heritage Trail is a series of 5 plaques situated in New Brighton, Egremont, Seacombe, Woodside and Eastham. The Trail will

commemorate significant areas of Wirral from Eastham Woods, which are mentioned in documents as early as 1347, to Priory Ferry, the oldest known ferry service in Britain, run by Benedictine Monks, founded in Birkenhead around 1150 AD. The priory, still open to the public, is the oldest standing building on Merseyside. Each plaque will offer historical information on the surrounding area. Info: 0151 691 8146

Ω Seven key city centre buildings are being dressed in artwork, including the former White House pub in Duke Street. Controversially, this has covered part of the huge painting of a cat by Banksy, who has turned graffiti (or some of it!) into an art form.

Ω Ron Formby of Scottie Press has asks for help assistance in sourcing photographs relating to the Irish community in the Scotland Road area. Email: ronformby@scottiepress.org Web: <http://www.scottiepress.org/main.htm>

Ω Visitors landing at Liverpool John Lennon Airport are being greeted by a huge multimedia art project costing £1.6 million. This takes visitors on a virtual journey through Merseyside.

Events (see also the website)

Ω The Seaforth Exhibition, organised by South Sefton Local history Forum, will be held in the Church of Our Lady, Star of the Sea, Church Road, Seaforth on Saturday 9 February from 10 am to 4 pm. There will be a Poets' Corner and an Artists' Corner with prizes for children. There will be slide shows and articles about Seaforth. Info: Brenda Murray 0151 924 2541.

Ω There will be another of Liverpool Heritage Forum's "Diversity of Liverpool's Communities" lectures at the Athenaeum in Church Alley (near the Bluecoat School) at 5.30 for 6 pm on Thursday 7 February. The topic this time will be "Liverpool's Jewish and Scottish Communities: how did they come to the city and what have they contributed to it?" Speakers will be Samuel Alistair Munroe (Scottish Community) and Naomi Kingston (Jewish Community).

Ω A fund-raising lunch will be held at the Athenaeum on 3 March, 12 for 12.30, for the Liverpool Working Horses Monument Fund. Older readers may remember the large number of huge horses with feathery feet which drew carts of merchandise around the docks up until the 1950s. The aim is to erect a statue of a horse in a public place in the city centre. Tickets and info: <http://lwahmf.tripod.com/> or PO Box 136, Liverpool L14 5WZ.

Ω The "bombed-out" Church of St Luke's will be opening 7th to 9th February in preparation for Chinese New Year celebrations on 10 February. It will be open daily from May until October 12-4 pm Monday to Friday. It's free! Info: <http://www.myspace.com/lunchatstlukes> or call 0151 709 7562. (Wouldn't it be effective if a light could be installed inside the uppermost windows of the tower, visible from Bold Street, Renshaw Street, Leece Street and Berry Street, at whose junction it stands? Ed.)

Ω The Artfinder gallery (behind Oddbins in Castle Street) has an exhibition by Chris Mills entitled "Imagined Landscapes. Till 4 March.

Publications

Ω The Daily Post has published a glossy "History of Liverpool" (£2.50) containing interesting text and photos.

Ω The prestigious "Architectural Review" devotes its whole January edition to Liverpool with excellent articles and photos on Liverpool's buildings over the years. Brian Hatton of Merseyside Civic Society takes the credit for this important work of intellect and means of persuasion of the merits of the city.

Ω Merseyrail has some interesting information sheets about its history. Britain's first tramway was opened in Wirral by the American George Francis Train, on whom Jules Verne's character of Phileas Fogg in "Around the world in eighty days" was based. The horse-drawn tram ran from Woodside to Birkenhead Park. The first tram in Liverpool came five years later in Castle Street. Electrification of the Liverpool service started in 1897. In a transport strike in 1911, there was a demonstration of 80,000 people on St George's Plateau and soldiers from the 18th Hussars and armoured vans guarded the Tramways HQ in Hatton Garden.

Ω Last year English Heritage published "Jewish Heritage in England: an architectural guide". This includes Deane Road Burial Ground in Liverpool's Kensington district, which is now in a sorry state. A campaign is afoot to refurbish it and will be the subject of a visit by the Victorian Society on 26 June. Info: 0151 334 5933.

Ω An interesting booklet about Shakespeare produced originally in 1998 by Graeme (Paddy) Bryson came into our hands. It puts flesh on the story that Shakespeare worked at Rufford Old Hall. The young Shakespeare became the schoolmaster of the Hoghton family who lived near Preston and kept "players". Shakespeare, according to Bryson, came to Rufford to work for the Hesketh family, friends of the Hoghtons, and then for Lord Strange or Ferdinando Stanley, a son of Lord Derby, one of whose homes was at Lathom, close to Rufford. In due course he moved to the Stanleys' main residence, Knowsley.

Last year an attempt was made (unsuccessful up to now as far we know) to create a Shakespearian theatre at Knowsley in commemoration of his time in the district.

Public affairs

Ω Andy Burnham, born in Liverpool and MP for Leigh has been appointed Culture Secretary in the government. He is providing an additional £500 000 for the new Museum of Liverpool at the Pier Head. A good start!

Ω A "knowledge-transfer" project run by various governmental bodies will promote a new model for impact assessment of culture-led regeneration - The Liverpool Model. This is a reminder that the success of "2008" will bring jobs and revenues to the city. It is not just for our amusement.

Ω Merseyside Archaeological Service is advertising the job of Historic Characterisation Project Officer. The job is to examine the landscape of Merseyside by field visits and using photographic archives. Working with English Heritage and the Historic Environment of Liverpool Project (HELP), the MAS keeps the county's Historic Environment Record (HER) containing records of over 10,000 sites spanning more than 10,000 years from the prehistoric to the present. The pattern of field boundaries preserved though the layout of some of Anfield's later 19th century terraced housing on the same alignment is an example of his work.

Ω MLA (Museums Libraries and Archives) North West are moving to The Brew House, Wilderspool Park, Greenall's Avenue, Warrington WA4 6HL. Not a place for teetotallers, we assume.

Andrew Pearce, Editor.