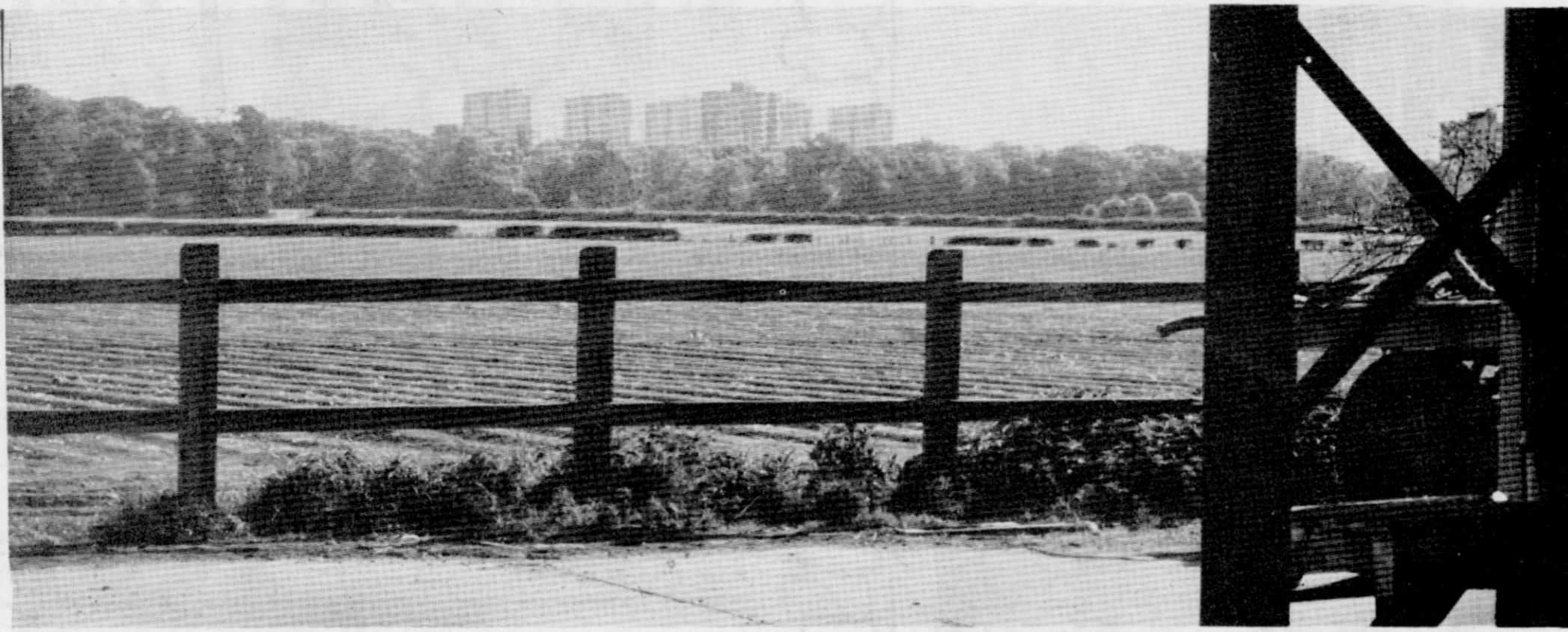


THE FIGHT TO SAVE CROXTETH ESTATE



Above: View from Stand Farm, one of the areas to be built on. Right: The old coach wash. This is likely to be preserved.

WHEN the seventh - and last - Earl of Sefton died two years ago, his vast 1,037-acre estate at Croxteth passed to his American-born wife, Josephine.

Lady Sefton gave half the estate to the city as a park, and sold the other half to a private developer to build luxury houses.

The developers are Wigshaw Properties, an obscure offshoot of one of Britain's biggest insurance companies Guardian Royal Exchange.

Building has not yet started and there is now growing pressure to change the development proposals.

Liverpool Trades Council are afraid that if building goes ahead, what is left will develop into just another park.

The complete estate is at present much more than that, they argue... it is something unique, with great educational value.

Apart from Croxteth Hall and its grounds, the estate has two farms, woods, pools and streams.

The development plan involves building mainly on the open fields, preserving the hall and as much as possible of the parkland and woods though some of the woods will be kept private).

The Trades Council point out that many animals, such as the hare, which sleep and breed in the woods, depend upon the farmland for most of their food. To destroy so much of the farmland would reduce the number of such creatures in the woods.

Others, such as the lark, live and feed almost entirely on the open land. These would disappear once the land was built on.

Drainage needed for the building land would affect the pools and streams in the areas which would not be built on.

The Trades Council are also concerned at the future of the two farms. One farm has already been sold for building. The other would probably not be able to function because there

FOR CENTURIES Croxteth Park was the private estate of the Earls of Sefton. Now, half of it has been given to the people of Merseyside. The other half has been sold to a property developer.

The estate is the only area of real countryside left in Liverpool. It is rich in wild life and contains some of the finest landscape in south-west Lancashire... all within a 20-minute journey from the city centre.

Its size is enormous. The whole city centre - from Exchange Station at one end to the Anglican Cathedral at the other - would fit comfortably inside it.

Despite the estate's size and importance, its future has been left mainly in the hands of councillors and officials. Until recently there had been little public discussion about what to do with the land given to Merseyside, and even less about the land sold to build luxury houses...

would be too little farmland left and some of the farm buildings are likely to be used for other purposes.

They believe there is a need for a working farm within easy reach of the city, which could be used for educational visits.

The main difficulty is getting the building stopped, or at least reduced. Planning permission has already been given, and to change this legally other building land would have to be found and given to the developer in compensation.

Merseyside Civic Society have produced a plan which could provide the answer. Their plan would reduce the amount of building on the estate and also provide a working farm.

They feel that the eastern boundary of the estate, which is actually a small brook, has been treated as if it were a 50-foot cliff. There is a broad strip of open land between the brook and the outer ring road. Some of this could be given to the developer in exchange for some of the more spectacular landscape inside the estate.

More of the strip could be combined

with land in the south-east corner of the estate to produce a working farm.

The Civic Society were involved in discussions before planning permission was given. Liverpool's Planning Officer, "Radical Jim" Amos asked them not to call for a public inquiry and assured them there would be "opportunity for manoeuvre" after permission had been given.

"I think we were naive to believe that," Paula Ridley, the society's secretary said recently. Amos has now left and responsibility for the estate has passed from the City Council to Merseyside County Council.

The society are annoyed by a report just published by the county council, which has not taken the society's previous comments into account. The report seems to have ignored any possibility of changing the areas to be built on.

The Trades Council, however, are more optimistic. They're hoping to meet the county planning officer, Miss Audrey Lees, shortly.

Simon Fraser, secretary of the Trades Council told the Free Press: "The planning people's views are now

substantially what we have been saying... that is, that if the houses encroach too fairly near the 500-acre park, then it must damage the fauna and flora and the educational value of the whole thing. This is not what they were saying a couple of months ago.

"I think we're winning the first round, for people to get down seriously to have a look at the whole question afresh.

"The Countryside Commission have now reached the stage where if the County Council can get a lot of the land back that was scheduled for housing, then they'll be very interested in helping to finance it as a country park."

Whether the Trades Council are too optimistic or the Civic Society too pessimistic remains to be seen. There are large areas of agreement between both groups, and they are the only local organisations trying to make the council change the plan.

The eventual result will affect - directly or indirectly - thousands of people on Merseyside. Both groups have plenty of ideas of their own, but would probably welcome additional suggestions from others interested in the future of the estate.

(Trades Council secretary - Simon Fraser: 236 1778. Civic Society secretary - Paula Ridley: 427 1630).

IRO men's victory

THE LONGEST strike in Britain's history has ended in victory for the strikers.

In February 1971 the sixteen electricians at the Inland Revenue Office building site in Bootle went on strike for more pay.

But what began as a simple pay demand soon developed into a confrontation with the Joint Industry Board (JIB) which fixes pay and conditions for the whole for an extra 25p an hour soon developed into a confrontation with the Joint Industry Board (JIB) which fixes pay and conditions for the whole electrical contracting industry.

The electricians' pay had fallen behind that of other workers on the site who had made local agreements with their employer. The JIB prohibits local negotiations and penalises both employees and employers who disobey its rules.

A solution to the problem was found some time ago but could not be put into effect until after the Pay Board and Phase Three were abolished.

The solution has been to boot both the electrical sub-contractors off the site. The men are now employed direct by the main contractor, McAlpines, who are not in the JIB scheme.

McAlpines have agreed:

1. To pay 35p an hour above the civil engineering rate (which itself is roughly the same as the JIB rate).
2. To provide insurance and other benefits previously provided by the JIB.
3. To bring the men's National Insurance cards up to date - or pay the cash equivalent.
4. To guarantee the men at least 12 months' employment.

As a result of this settlement the JIB will almost certainly come under enormous pressure to allow site agreements.

The settlement also shows that long disputes need not always end, as many of them have done, with the employers winning.

How the deal was done

ONE OF the quickest and easiest ways to make money if you own land is to get planning permission. A simple council decision can raise values astronomically almost overnight.

When Lord Sefton died, his land at Croxteth was valued at just under £2m. Two years later, with planning permission it was worth £20m or more.

The affair raises some disturbing questions about the way planning permission was given - and the way it could be given to other developers in future.

Lady Sefton wanted to sell half the estate to a private developer and asked the council for planning permission. At the same time she offered the council a gift... the remaining half of the estate, including Croxteth Hall, for use as a park.

The development might have been expected to meet fierce opposition.

Nationally, the Labour party were making ferocious noises against land hoarders and speculators - and in Liverpool Labour were in power. Wouldn't they be up in arms about a plan to build 2000-3000 private luxury houses when there was a desperate shortage of houses for the less well-off?

But Croxteth Estate never became a major issue, and within a year of the first announcement the plan had gone through, approved in secret by the Policy and Finance Committee and rubber-stamped by the full council.

How did this happen?

A key role was played by Labour leader Bill Sefton (no relation to Her Ladyship), who set about pushing it through as fast as possible in his usual "dynamic city-boss" style.

The first his own Labour colleagues heard about it was at a Labour group

meeting in August 1972. The meeting was an important one, and a furious battle was expected over the new Fair Rents Act.

As the meeting started, Bill Sefton announced that he had some very good news. He explained the deal, carefully emphasising the generosity of Lady Sefton's gift to the city.

"I take it nobody will oppose that," he said. Nobody did. For Sefton's timing had more perfect. His colleagues had more urgent problems on their minds.

On such an enormous scheme careful thought and public discussion were more important than speed, but Alderman Sefton wanted it sorted out before the new local government system came into force.

This urgency meant the planning department had less time to investigate alternatives to Lady Sefton's proposal. They had tried to persuade the government sponsored Countryside Commission to buy some of the land earmarked for building. The commission were prepared to spend some money - not enough, the corporation thought. And there the discussion ended.

Despite the vast scale of the development, the corporation took no special steps to consult people.

Several official bodies objected to the plan: Lancashire County Council, Kirkby Council and the Ministry of Agriculture. But Kirkby and the ministry later withdrew and a minor alteration satisfied the county council.

About 1,000 West Derby residents signed a petition after Liberal councillors in the area publicised the plan. They objected to building on some of the open space near their homes. The plan was

hastily changed.

The residents got what they wanted, but the corporation's motive seems to have been to speed up the planning application and quieten opposition rather than to do what people wanted.

Merseyside Civic Society have criticised the way the change was made before other views had been heard. It involved preserving what the society describe as 'inferior landscape' and sacrificing more interesting parts of the estate.

Some councillors were willing to give planning permission because of the cost of accepting Lady Sefton's gift. (Patrolling and maintaining the estate is costing £150,000 this year.) They argued that the rates from the new houses would help pay for the park.

And other councillors who particularly wanted to park were afraid that if planning permission was refused, Lady Sefton might withdraw her offer of the gift.

In fact some corporation officials believed the council were in no position to refuse planning permission even if they wanted to.

A rumour circulated that Lady Sefton was determined to sell the estate - without planning permission if necessary. This could mean the estate falling into the hands of several developers rather than one. And the corporation had visions of a long series of legal battles, public inquiries, appeals to the Minister and so on.

It would be a lot cheaper and easier to deal with one developer and settle things quickly and quietly with Lady Sefton.

In this way the corporation talked themselves into a defensive position where they were terrified of upsetting Lady Sefton or pushing their demands too far.

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September 15 in London

Train chartered by Merseyside Committee for Solidarity with Chile

Fare: £2.20 (same day return)

TICKETS from the committee at 33 Hatton Garden. Tel: 236 1778

AMENDMENT TO POINTS SYSTEM.

New Policy - As defined by the Housing Committee Chairman using his interregnum powers.

"All housing applicants who are unauthorised lodgers in Corporation property will be awarded "nominal" points only."

(This means - one point for each member of the applicant's family, points for sub-tenancy and overcrowding, will not be awarded.)

LATEST EVIDENCE of housing chairman Bill Smyth's erratic behaviour has been his use of emergency powers to authorise a change in housing policy, only later to protest that the letter (above) sent to all housing managers and clearly headed "Amendment to points system" was misinterpreted and was really only a request for a survey.

Smyth had assured the council that as there was no council meeting in August he would notify councillors if a major issue cropped up.

The change in policy would affect the

prospects of better housing for young married couples living with parents in corporation property.

Smyth's previous flight of fancy was his threat - published in the Daily Post and Echo - to release a blacklist of corporation tenants with more than £100 rent arrears. Faced with an irate council he claimed to have been 'misquoted'. When it was suggested to Smyth that if this was true he should demand an apology from the Press, Smyth did not reply.