

Oil Street - the end of the road

LIVERPOOL City Council are one of the few local authorities to provide an official caravan site for travellers.

But the way they have gone about it shows how local authorities have used the Caravan Sites Act to deal with the "gypsy problem" - by destroying the travellers' way of life.

Many local authorities have completely ignored the 1970 Act. On Merseyside only St Helens and Liverpool have so far obeyed the law and provided caravan sites.

Liverpool's is in Oil St, between Great Howard St and the docks. A more unappealing site would have been difficult to find. The surrounding factories belch out smoke and fumes and lorries rumble up and down the nearby dock road. A 25 feet wall round the site makes it "worse than Long Kesh" according to one traveller.

The council say it cost £86,000. But most of this went on the land, which had lain idle for years. And since the council still own the land, and the tenants can easily be evicted if it's needed, this is hardly a true method of costing.

The council seem to have picked the site for its isolation. Few people live in the area; the nearest large shops are a mile away; and the laundrette almost as far. There are no milk or bread deliveries.

The council reckons that 14 or 15 different sites were offered to the travellers. The Oil St residents say that was the only one, "take it or leave it".

Each caravan pitch costs £3.50 a week. Most families need two, so they pay £7 a week for two slabs of concrete, a wash basin, a tiny bath, and a large cupboard known as a store room.

The caravans are packed tightly together. But the travellers' complaint about the fire risk has been ignored. The site rules - imposed without any consultation - say the Fire Officer may inspect the premises. But so far he's not been seen.

The travellers have made a number of simple requests to try and improve their living conditions. All have been turned down without discussion.

They asked for a zebra crossing for the children and for a ramp to slow down traffic entering the site. Many visiting cars contain local dignitaries and officials who regularly inspect the site and treat the travellers' home like a zoo.

They asked for a public telephone and were told to use the one in the local pub. Unfortunately the publican shares the prejudice of many and refuses even to let the travellers in.

They have to ask to be allowed to go on holiday. One man wanted to go away for two weeks and was told if he left his caravan unoccupied he would lose his pitch. Imagine the uproar if a council house tenant came back from two weeks in Rhyll to find his home rented to somebody else.

But the major grievance of the Oil St travellers is the site rule forbidding them to store and separate scrap on the site.

Of course, the council would argue the scrap would be unsightly or even dangerous. But this reveals either complete ignorance of the travellers' way of life or a deliberate desire to change it.

Most of them earn a living by dealing in scrap and they need somewhere both to store it and separate the different metals.

The council adamantly refuse to provide a work area even on adjacent waste land owned by the council. The council say the land is needed for "development" - including the bit under an old railway arch.

The alternative to dealing in scrap is destitution or a complete change in the travellers' way of life. This appears to be the authorities' aim.

But Liverpool City Council are using the Oil St site against the travellers in another way. The council now say they have fulfilled their legal obligations to travellers and are applying to the government to make Liverpool "a designated area" under the 1970 Act.

If the council get their way, all travellers not on the official site could be fined £25 for the first day and £5 for each of the following days they are in the area.

A priest who works with the travellers estimates about 500 of them usually spend the winter in Liverpool. The Oil St site has room for 23 families only.

COLIN MCKAY

Birkenhead market: Stranger and stranger

IN THE BLAZE at Birkenhead market traders lost goods worth thousands of pounds. Few were insured, as the building was considered too grave a fire risk by insurance companies.

But there is a danger that the flames which engulfed the market hall will also cloud the serious allegations made about the running of Birkenhead market.

Before the blaze some traders believed their livelihoods were threatened, not by fire hazards, but by mismanagement, graft and corruption.

Here the Free Press looks at why some traders spoke out against the "Birkenhead Backhanders" and examines the strange events which followed...

FORMER Birkenhead Tory Councillor W.R. Baker sublet stalls at Birkenhead market although this was strictly against regulations at the old market.

For about 14 years he rented one of his stalls to a butcher, Mr Joe Rimmer who says he paid "about double" the market rent. He left in 1972 but still has documents to prove he rented the stall.

The former councillor sublet another stall to Mr Jack Fitzsimmons, another butcher, for 15 years.

This is just one example of how market rules were bent, if not broken. There were other examples. A number of stalls mysteriously changed hands overnight without the necessary permission being given from the councillors on the market committee.

Recently, six traders and former traders talked on Granada television about corrupt practices at the market.

One trader said he handed over about £250 over two or three years to the inspector, Mr Alec Marr, to ensure he always had a stall. And another said he had been driven away "because you can only get a stall if you are willing to pay."

This programme resulted in a three man enquiry being set up by Wirral Council and an investigation by the Fraud Squad. Marr, who lives in a luxury bungalow in Ambleside Close, Thingwall, was suspended and two other officials were given paid leave.

Certainly there was plenty for the enquiry team to investigate. Traders who felt their views and grievances had been ignored for years wanted to know, for instance:

- Why some traders, like Wirral Conservative Councillor Mitchell Lowe and his wife, were given three stalls (they have a wine and delicatessen, a cheese stall, and a large cafe)
- This was perfectly legal, but some traders were finding it difficult to get even one stall.
- Why the wife of Mr Alec Marr, the

market inspector, was given a stall. And the traders were worried about the wide powers of the market officials.

The market superintendent, Mr Harry Burgess - one of the officials given paid leave - could put anyone off the market. He chose the short-list of applicants for the inside permanent covered market... which has been worst hit by the fire.

And he and Mr Marr allocated stalls in the outside, three-day a week market. If a stall became vacant here, it normally went to the trader who had attended the market as a casual trader for the longest period of time.

This seems fair... but there was a catch which gave the officials enormous power. "The products to be sold," explained Mr Burgess, "are taken into account. We try to avoid a clash of lines."

These discretionary powers put the top officials in an almost impregnable position. Few traders were willing to complain. And when they did, their views weren't heard.

They could appeal to councillors on the market committee but were rarely allowed to appear themselves. Instead Burgess - often the man whose decision they were disputing - presented their case.

Their powers led to allegations of queue jumping. Over three years, Mr Tony Garvey and his brother worked their way up to first place on the casual list on a Wednesday, and number two on a Saturday.

Then in June a stall became vacant. But it wasn't offered to them. Instead it was given to another casual trader who had 46 fewer attendance marks (casuals get one mark each time they attend).

The lucky trader was a former motor mechanic who Burgess and Marr used to pay to service their cars. Both emphasise this didn't influence their decision.



Tony Garvey (left) and Keith Holt, who raised complaints about the market.

Naturally, many traders were delighted when Tory councillor, Ken Jackson, head of the enquiry team, promised a thorough investigation and a new look at the lettings policy.

"There shall never be a whitewash done on this affair," he proclaimed.

Well, if there wasn't a whitewash, councillor Jackson certainly conducted his enquiry in a most secretive and unorthodox manner.

He never publicly stated that Mr Burgess, the superintendent, had been a close neighbour for over two years. Councillor Jackson lives at 10 Arkwood Close, Spittal. Mr Burgess at number 18.

Councillor Bill Wells, the Labour leader, and also a member of the three man enquiry, understood that Burgess and another official given paid leave would only return when the investigation was over.

But while Mr Wells was away on holiday Mr Burgess went back.

There was only one meeting between the Wirral planning committee (Jackson is chairman) and the 400 traders. None of the traders who complained to Granada was interviewed, nor strangely was any representative of the Birkenhead Market Traders Association.

When two traders made serious allegations about being harassed, after agreeing to appear on television, Jackson ordered an investigation. After interviewing council officials, and only council officials, he said he was "completely satisfied" the traders were mistaken.

And yet there is little doubt some unusual events took place soon after

television cameras were seen at the market.

Mr Burgess took time off to stand and glare at two traders, Tony Garvey and Keith Holt, who agreed to talk about the Birkenhead Backhanders. This ritual happened day after day. Once the superintendent even appeared with a cine-camera and filmed them both.

Mr Garvey was asked to go to Mr Burgess's office, where the door was locked and the superintendent asked if he could tape-record the conversation.

And his mother... who looked after the stall one day... was accused of selling goods Tony Garvey was not registered to sell.

Mr Holt became deeply disturbed by the events which happened to him.

In August, a detective-constable from Birkenhead searched his stall for stolen goods. He found none and was embarrassed when Mr Holt explained he had already made a statement alleging corruption at the market to the Fraud Squad.

The CID officer then admitted, in front of Mr Garvey, that Mr Burgess had called Runcorn CID about the non-existent stolen goods.

Worse was to come. Mr Holt was thrown off the market in the middle of October. He was told he had missed six consecutive days.

But Mr Holt, who had been looking after his parents' business while they were on holiday for two weeks, says he had really only missed four. Since he's been at the market he's only stood on Wednesdays and Fridays... not Saturdays.

Recently, he was told he only had 29 attendance marks. But he's been going regularly since June, 1973, and should have between 100 and 150. What's more, the application form he gave in has been "lost".

Mr Holt has now been reinstated. A new enquiry has been set up and Burgess has once again been given paid leave.

Traders are now hoping this enquiry will be more thorough than the last. It's too late to affect the burnt out market. But it could make the new market a better place for traders.



Councillor Jackson's house (ringed, right) and Mr Burgess's house, (ringed, left) in Arkwood Close, Spittal.

Republican homes raided

TWO Irish Republicans in Liverpool have found many of their personal papers missing.

But Jerry Harte and Kevin Mulcahy won't be turning to the Law for help, as the papers disappeared when armed Special Branch officers raided their homes.

Since then, the police have returned some highly dangerous documents, such as address books, an anti internment poster, a map of Liverpool and a map of London.

But other items, including letters and bank statements are still in the custody of the law.

The Special Branch struck in Liverpool at the deadly hour of 6.05 a.m. on October 25, raided three homes and found nothing. No-one has been charged and no-one is likely to be.

On the same day, at the same time, officers from Britain's political police carried out identical 'dawn swoops' on

homes in Manchester, London, Birmingham, Bristol and Luton.

The result? Just a pile of papers and pieces of wire and tape found at the home of a maintenance engineer.

So either these nationwide, military style operations were a complete flop, or the police, who had warrants to look for explosives, were using recent bombings as a smokescreen. This seems more likely.

Most people raided were members of Clann na hEireann, the official Republican movement in Britain, which is committed to a united socialist Ireland.

The Clann has frequently denounced indiscriminate bombings because they create deeper divisions between the Irish and British working class.

Members of Clann fear these raids were carried out to collect names and addresses of all their members, with the intention of making it an illegal

organisation in this country.

Jerry Harte also said the Clann's campaigns against imprisonment without trial, and the inhuman conditions in the internment camps in Ireland had been gaining more and more support from trade unionists in this country. And he thought the Special Branch wanted to demoralise them, hinder their work, and suggest they are subversives.

Eight plainclothes policemen disturbed Mr Harte's sleep. At least one was armed, and there were two more outside.

"Three officers searched each room, one after the other. They went through books, magazines and papers page by page," said Mr Harte.

At the home of Kevin Mulcahy in Kirkby, the Special Branch took three letters from local MPs giving their views on internment.

So watch out, MPs... you're next!

Granny Blythe

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