



THE CHEETAH MEN

Left to right: Gerald Jackson, who's due to appear in the bankruptcy court at Birkenhead on April 28; George Lowe, former Wonderloaf Salesman of the Year; and Simon Harris, a "slimy little man."



Con-men escape in loans firm crash

THE CHEETAH BUSINESS has collapsed. The con-men behind the dubious loan firms, Ronchil and Austin Lowe Travel — which both use a cheetah as their publicity symbol — are in trouble.

The banks have stopped their cheques. And the Hodge Group have refused to allow them to sell their second mortgages.

This action follows the story in the last edition of the Free Press about the illegal methods used by the companies to win business, and a follow-up programme on BBC Nationwide.

But naturally the people who suffer most are not the directors, SIMON HARRIS of 31 Strathmore Grove, Sherdley Park, St Helens, GERALD JACKSON of Hope Farm Lane, Little Sutton, or GEORGE LOWE of Buttermere Road, Childwall.

After all they have known failure before. Harris saw one of his previous firms go bust owing thousands of pounds. Jackson and Lowe were mixed up in the pyramid company, Golden Chemicals, which also collapsed.

No, it's the unfortunate people who paid the directors between £1,100 and £1,200 to become area managers of the firms, who have really lost out.

At least half of the ten area manag-



The Cheetah — publicity symbol of Ronchil and Austin Lowe Travel Organisation.

ers have tried in vain to get their money back. There's been talk, and plenty of promises. But that's all.

Father of four Bernie Williams from Wallasey was given a post-dated cheque in an attempt to stop him appearing on television. Soon after the programme was shown, this cheque bounced.

What's more, all the area managers had to take out second mortgages from the Hodge Group at an exorbitant interest rate, just to raise the £1,200 to join the cheetah firms.

Now at least five of them may lose their homes. The Hodge Group have sent letters threatening to sue them, as they are unable to keep up the repayments on their loans.

No doubt Harris, Jackson and Lowe don't care a damn about the misery they have caused.

Victims may lose their homes

"QUITE HONESTLY I don't know what I'm going to do. If I can't find some money I'm going to lose my home... and everything."

These are the words of Bob Picton, a victim of the Ronchil con-men. He was fooled into taking out a £1,200 second mortgage he couldn't afford. And then he gave the cash away.

He gave it to the Ronchil men. They smiled, gave him a briefcase, a map, and the title of area manager for their dubious loans firm. Then they drove away with the money in their expensive cars.

The massive Julian Hodge financial empire also benefited. They had another customer paying for a loan at an extortionate 28.5 per cent interest.

Their founder, Julian S. Hodge, who was knighted by socialist Harold Wilson, has grown fat by sucking high interest rates from people in need of cash.

Bob Picton, of Long Lane, Waverley, has now stopped repaying the loan. But that's not the end of his troubles, and he knows it.

Within weeks of stopping the pay-

ments, Picton received letters from Hodge threatening legal action. And he's not the only one. At least four other Ronchil area managers have received similar notices. If they don't pay up, they — and their families — could soon be on the streets.

The Hodge Group run much of their sordid business from Silkhouse Court, in Tithebarn Street, Liverpool.

One of the senior Hodge men in Liverpool told the Free Press that if he could get hold of "slimy little men" like Ronchil's Simon Harris, he would "kick their teeth in."

An admirable statement. But the Hodge empire can't shift all the blame onto the parasitic little companies which spring up around them.

Multi-millionaire Julian Hodge needs companies to flog his loans. Some of them, like Ronchil and the pyramid-style firm Holiday Magic (which recently sold hundreds of Hodge second mortgages to poor black families) use dubious and illegal tricks.

Others have a more respectable image. But they have one thing in

common... they sell Hodge loans.

Certainly the loan business is profitable. One Hodge company has the charming name of Friendship Finance (previously it was just called J.S. Hodge No. 21 Ltd).

In 1973 Friendship made a massive £551,072 before tax, on a turnover of just £1,503,592. A staggering profit of over 33 per cent.

The manager of new business in Liverpool is Mr Dave Thompson. So watch out for him.

Hodge have now stopped doing business with Simon Harris, after the last edition of the Free Press and the follow-up programme on television.

But Harris has been banned before and has slipped through the net.

One way Harris and his kind deal with Hodge is through a mysterious firm called J.P. Richards, based at 23 Greenfield Road, Old Swan. Hodge uses this firm to keep people like Harris at arm's length.

FOOTNOTE: The Hodge Group have recently merged with the Standard and Chartered Banking Group of America. The former Tory chancellor Anthony Barber is chairman.

BIRKENHEAD MARKET

We, as Solicitors for Kenneth Jackson, are writing to you with regard to an article published by your newspaper recently. The heading to the article is "Birkenhead Market: Stranger and Stranger". We consider that the article is not only inaccurate but defamatory.

The inference to be drawn from your article is that because Councillor Jackson and Mr Burgess, the Market Superintendent, are neighbours, the latter enjoyed preferential treatment by Councillor Jackson to a very high degree and that in preferring Mr Burgess, Councillor Jackson behaved in an unorthodox and dishonest way.

Your recounting of events is, to say the least, inaccurate. Firstly, Councillor Jackson is not a member of the three man inquiry team to which you refer. How can he, therefore, have conducted it "in a most secretive and unorthodox manner"? The inquiry is still being conducted and the team may have strong views about how you have reported their conduct in the enquiry. However, this is a matter for them.

The only inquiry made by Councillor Jackson was a personal one. Such inquiry was made sometime prior to the present three man inquiry; a chronological fact about which your article seems to be confused. Having received a letter addressed to him personally making an allegation against Mr Burgess of harassment on a particular day, Councillor Jackson made inquiries of other staff at the market, following which it was obvious that the contents of the letter were untrue.

LETTER TO THE FREE PRESS

There was nothing further to investigate.

We refer to the fact, to which you attach much importance, that Councillor Jackson and Mr Burgess live four houses away from each other. Both our client and Mr Burgess lived in Arkwood Close long before the alterations to Local Authority boundaries. It was only following such reorganisation that Councillor Jackson as Chairman of the Wirral District planning committee took over the responsibility for the market, and discovered who Mr Burgess was. There is no, and there never has been any, contact between them except with regard to the market and at no time has Mr Burgess been accepted into our client's home nor indeed has Councillor Jackson visited Mr Burgess' home.

It would have been a simple matter for you to have established the correct facts by speaking to our client. You chose not to do so and instead published what in our opinion is a libel against Councillor Jackson. In these circumstances, we must ask you to publish a statement withdrawing all your allegations, coupled with an apology. Such statement must be at least as prominent as the original publication complained of. We shall be obliged

if you will advise us in advance of any relevant publication you propose.

Yours faithfully,
PHILIP JONES, HILLYER & JACKSON,
Solicitors and Commissioners for Oaths,
26/28 Mercia Square,
Chester, CH1 3JU.

● THIS LETTER is in part misleading, and one statement is plainly ludicrous.

The letter says: "The only inquiry made by Councillor Jackson was a personal one." Now Jackson is not just any-old-councillor. He is chairman of the Wirral Planning and Development Committee, which has overall charge of Birkenhead Market.

Councillor Jackson was only asked to investigate a trader's complaints of harassment because he was chairman of the committee.

As soon as serious allegations about bribery and mismanagement at the market were made on television an emergency committee was set up. It consisted of the three party leaders... Tory leader Malcolm Thornton, Liberal leader Griff Evans and Labour leader Bill Wells. But this committee relied heavily on Councillor Jackson because of his position.

Jackson saw clearly where his duty lay. On August 22 he said: "There shall never be a whitewash done on this affair. At the same time I will not tolerate a witch-hunt against any of the council staff."

Less than three weeks later he was strongly condemned by Councillor Wells for the "alarming way" in which he had conducted an inquiry, for taking part in a "cover-up", and for exceeding his authority.

Wells was particularly angry about Mr Harry Burgess, the Market Superintend-

ent, and two other officials being allowed to return to work, although they had been put on paid leave by the three-man committee.

Jackson had gained the approval of Thornton and Evans for this move, but he had not consulted Wells, who was on holiday.

These accusations led to the inquiry team being re-formed. And a long and exhaustive investigation started. Jackson was nominated to sit on this inquiry, but Wells refused to sit on the committee if Jackson was also a member.

Recently an interesting event has taken place. This committee has recommended that Burgess and another official should be sacked... the very people Jackson allowed to go back to work.

The Free Press never said Jackson behaved in a "dishonest" way. Secretive and unorthodox, yes. Dishonest, no.

For an example of the unorthodox way Jackson conducted an inquiry, we need look no further than his solicitors' letter.

The wife of a Liverpool councillor wrote to Jackson because he was responsible for the market. She asked him to investigate a trader's complaints that he was being harassed by the officials, who had been allowed back.

The trader was Anton Garvey, who had talked about bribery at the market on television.

The letter says Jackson "made inquiries of other staff at the market, following which it was obvious that the contents of the letter were untrue. There was nothing further to investigate."

But quite clearly there was something to investigate. The inquiry team listened intently to examples of harassment. Because, unlike Jackson, they were anxious to hear the views of traders and their tenants' association — and not just the views of a few corporation officials.

Hefferon puts his foot in it

SLUM LANDLORD and former Liberal councillor Michael Hefferon is likely to be back in the limelight shortly.

The lengthy police inquiries into his affairs have been completed and charges are expected soon.

But the suffering of Hefferon's tenants continues.

Geoff and Imogene Blair live in a basement flat in Princes Avenue, Toxteth. For weeks they had to endure puddles of foul-smelling water on their living room floor.

The water was seeping through the walls from a drain outside.

Attempts by health inspectors to stir Hefferon into action failed, and the Corporation have finally got round to doing the repair themselves.

When they first moved into the flat the Blairs had to repair two broken windows. Hefferon refused to pay because Mr Blair had not got a receipt for the glass.

Now the Blairs are faced with yet another broken window, smashed — this time — by Hefferon himself.

One night when he called for the rent Mr Blair did not immediately rush upstairs to answer the bell.

Hefferon — who expects things to go wrong in his houses — assumed the bell wasn't working. So he banged on the Blairs' window. It broke.

Unfortunately Mr Hefferon banged with his foot, not his fist, and so escaped without cuts.