

GIVING KIRKBY A BAD NAME...

Mr. Fixit

KIRKBY grew rapidly between 1958 and 1974. Kirkby Urban District Council grew with it.

So did Kirkby Labour Party, which ruled the council for all but one of those years.

And so did the power of one man in particular.

DAVE TEMPEST.

Councillor Dave Tempest OBE, JP. Until his defeat at the polls this month, the leader of the new Knowsley Council.

Politically, Kirkby WAS Tempest. He not only dominated the local Labour Party — he had the ear of Harold Wilson.

Harold Wilson, who until February last year, was the Member of Parliament for Kirkby. Harold Wilson, who in 1969, gave Tempest his OBE.

This relationship gave Tempest power. So when the BBC recently offended him by filming the ridiculous Kirkby ski slope, Tempest was quickly on the phone. Not to the BBC, but to the Prime Minister's office. The BBC hastily apologised.

Tempest was Mr Fixit. If you wanted to be a magistrate or a school governor, you spoke to Dave.

How did he do it? By hard work, skilful manipu-

lation... and an unusual method of selecting the Labour candidates for the council.

The Kirkby system was probably unique. The night a ward was selecting its candidate the entire executive committee would swamp the meeting. The 'right' candidate was usually chosen.

Tempest dominated both the local Labour Party and Kirkby Council.

His employers, Yorkshire Imperial Metals, allowed him an amazing amount of time off for his council business. He served on almost every committee and on many outside bodies.

Year after year he was chairman of the powerful General Purposes committee. Some years he was chairman of the Finance and Public Works Committees as well.

He had the power to award hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of contracts personally.

And when, one year, the voters stupidly failed to elect him, Tempest was able to get round it. He was brought onto the council as its chairman.

Something very similar is happening after his latest defeat, which means Tempest will probably still



Tempest: Dominated the council.

serve on committees.

There is one final element in this picture of politics in Kirkby. It is usually referred to as "apathy".

But the truth is that the people of Kirkby (like elsewhere) can see that the present system gives them no real control over their own lives.

This article is about the kind of people who control their lives for them...

GEORGE, ERIC & CO

THE NAME George Leatherbarrow will long be linked with Kirkby.

In the last ten years his building firm has been awarded around £10 million worth of business by the local council.

Council contracts changed George Leatherbarrow (Builders) Ltd from a modest family concern into an outfit capable of winning business away from construction giants like Wimpey and Cubitts.

It all began in the mid-sixties with the start on the massive Tower Hill estate in Kirkby. Early on, the Unit Construction Company did most of the work. Leatherbarrows had a £390,000 contract for 120 houses.

But the big prize was still to come: the £4½ million contract for 1,100 homes forming Tower Hill Phase 2B. With it went a follow-up contract on the final phase, 2C, worth a further £2½ millions.

Front-runner for the contract was the Reema Construction Company, well-known for their work in Skelmersdale. Chasing Reema were Unit Construction and George Wimpey.

None of them got it. At a special housing committee on March 11, 1968, the Phase 2B contract went to George Leatherbarrow.

At the following council meeting the five Liberal members walked out in protest. Why, they wanted to know, were houses in Kirkby costing far more to build than elsewhere? The chairman of the Finance Committee, Councillor Dave Tempest, explained. Kirkby was getting better houses, he said.

They needed to be. The final bill is not yet settled. But that £4½ million contract is now estimated to be over-spent by no less than £1 million.

It's the same story with Leatherbarrow's two other big jobs in Kirkby. Tower Hill Phase 2C, completed last year. Contract: £2,300,000. Overspent: £135,000. Kirkby Park estate improvements. Contract: £670,000. Overspent: £267,000.

Council tenants in Kirkby will be paying for the houses George Leatherbarrow built for a very long time.

GEORGE'S BEST MAN

THERE ARE, of course, good reasons for some of the overspending. The collapse of the Roman Point flats in London, for instance, caused long delays on similarly designed blocks at Tower Hill.

But local councils are supposed to keep a careful check on the quality of work done for them; and also on costs. In Kirkby, the council department



Harold Wilson and Eric Spencer Stevenson at a recent dinner in Kirkby. (Wilson's words are from a speech he made in the North-East in 1973.)

responsible for those checks was the Architect's Department.

On Phase 2B, for example, Senior Architectural Assistant Peter Roberts would spend half of each day at Tower Hill. (Roberts is now in business with a man he used to see there — Mr Fred Dunbavin, Chief Surveyor for Unit Camus, the main sub-contractors on the site.)

But in overall control was Kirkby Council's Architect, Mr Eric Spencer Stevenson. He is now the Borough Architect for Knowsley Council. He is the man who authorised payment to Leatherbarrow; the man who reported to councillors on Leatherbarrow's work.

Stevenson is the man who helped negotiate the £2½ million Phase 2C contract with George Leatherbarrow.

And Stevenson is the man who, when he was negotiating that contract, became the proud owner of an expensive Alfa Romeo car.

A maroon Alfa Romeo 1750, registration number EGC 114J.

A car bought for around £2,000 in the autumn of 1970. A car paid for in used fivers.

A CAR PAID FOR BY GEORGE LEATHERBARROW.

But Eric Spencer Stevenson is the name which appeared in the car's log book.

Stevenson, the man who told us he had "definitely not bought the car from George Leatherbarrow."

And Eric Spencer Stevenson is the man who, in 1973, was Best Man at George Leatherbarrow's second wedding.

The wedding breakfast was at Stevenson's home in Gayton Lane, Heswall, on the Wirral. So the Free Press asked Stevenson just how close he was to George Leatherbarrow. "I have known him for a number of years," he said. A close friend? — "A friendly associate."

His best friend? "I shouldn't think so. But you were his Best Man? "This is totally irrelevant. It is no concern of yours."

SPECIAL DELIVERIES

OF COURSE, none of this can be directly connected with the work George Leatherbarrow was doing for Kirkby Council. But there is a connection. A concrete connection...

BUILDING MATERIALS. Building materials delivered to Tower Hill to build council houses. Building materials which later disappeared. Which were loaded onto Leatherbarrow lorries. And which fell off those lorries at a number of private houses.

- Private houses like:
- "Sherwood", Gayton Lane, Heswall, home of Architect Eric Spencer Stevenson.
- Number 7 Deerbolt Crescent, Kirkby, home of Councillor Dave Tempest.
- Number 24 School Lane, Rainhill,

home of Senior Architectural Assistant Alan Wright.

● "The Roundhouse", Ince Blundell, home of Mr Eric Hufton, a director of George Leatherbarrow (Builders) Ltd.

The work renovating Hufton's house and extending Tempest's and Stevenson's was carried out by Leatherbarrow.

We asked Alan Wright about the mixed concrete, soil and timber he had from Tower Hill. "I deny that completely," he said. "Rubbish, bloody rubbish."

Wright, the council's man in charge of Tower Hill Phase 2C, was lying. A lot of his answers were lies.

We asked Stevenson about the building blocks, stone, bricks, timber, sand and cement delivered to his home. He said he paid Leatherbarrow for them.

We asked him whether a set of Lovelady kitchen units, delivered to Tower Hill as a sample, were taken to his home.

"Not that I'm aware of," he replied. To have building materials carted all the way from Kirkby to Heswall must be expensive. But the way Stevenson had a Leatherbarrow lorry make individual trips with a young tree and a concrete block to moor a boat was real extravagance.

We asked Tempest about the materials for the extension Leatherbarrow built on his house. Tempest refused to say who the builder was. And he hadn't a clue where the bricks, timber, flagstones etc came from.

"I wouldn't know anything about it," he said. "I've paid for my extension quite legitimately."

If he paid the full price it was a lot of money. There were difficulties with the foundations; special facing bricks were brought from St Helens; then Tempest changed his mind about a window at the front; and then a door at the back.

The garage door was too narrow for his car and the bricks had to be shaved back. It was an expensive job alright.

ALL ABOVE BOARD?

WELL, were all these extensions perfectly legitimate and above board?

Leatherbarrows were working on multi-million pound public contracts. They did not do minor extensions to private houses. So why did they work on these?

And there's another strange thing. A lorry driver who delivered some of

(Continued overleaf)