

GIVING KIRKBY A BAD NAME...

JOIN THE COUNCIL, SEE THE WORLD

WINNING a contract in Kirkby could be a costly affair.

This became clear when the sports manager Richard Lane was charged with stealing £2,068 by deception.

He spoke out in court in February 1974 about the 'lavish' entertainment and trips to Europe paid for by contractors.

Of course, there were denials. Strong denials.

What, Kirkby councillors or officials accept hospitality? Never!

Didn't the Town Clerk, Mr Wilfred Byron, spell out the council's views on this subject that very year?

"It had never been the practice of Kirkby Council to accept hospitality from contractors in the past..."

Byron made this crystal clear statement during a very embarrassing period.

He learned - after being away ill - that Norwest Construction Company planned an interesting 'thank you' to Kirkby Council.

They had just finished a £300,000 contract to build the Kirkby Sports Centre. And they arranged an expensive, but private, dinner in the Holiday Inn. Their guests included not only all the councillors... but even Harold Wilson.

When this was made public, Byron

returned to the helm, and cut short Norwest's little 'do'. The council paid instead.

But Lane was correct. Hospitality was taken for granted.

Take for instance the great race for just one contract... the all-weather running track for Kirkby stadium. This wasn't an event for those with faint hearts.

The three competitors at the start were the giant American 3M company with their 'Tartan' track, a Swiss firm with their ICI-made 'Olympene' track, and Lillywhite with their 'Athletan' track.

The 3M company were quick off the mark. On two occasions they dined Kirkby councillors and officials who visited 'Tartan' tracks in the Midlands.

At one of these events in Warley there were a number of notables present... Councillor John King, chairman of planning; Peter Roberts, senior architectural assistant; Lane; and Jennings of E.H. Williams. A fair effort.

But this was easily surpassed by Lillywhite, who were anxious to lose their 'outsider' tag.

Their coup was to fly Chief Architect Stevenson and Lane to Paris and

then Bordeaux... the centre of France's best wine district... for a two-day trip in September 1972.

And what better place for Lillywhite to house their honoured guests than at the famous wine lodge - the St Emillon Chateau.

Quite a heady experience. A pity the 'Athletan' track nearby was so disappointing.

Undisputed winners in this entertaining race were the Swiss-owned firm En-Tout-Cas and ICI. They were really keen to come first. This would be their first all-weather track in this country. And they knew other orders would quickly follow. They have now built six in this country.

Their track was as good as 3M's but their special tender of £61,056 was about £30,000 less.

What's more, they paid for not one, but two trips abroad.

On Friday the thirteenth of October 1972, Richard Lane and Alan Wright (senior architect) were lucky enough to be flown out to a posh hotel in Zurich by En-Tout-Cas and ICI. Here they rested and dined at a cost of about £50 each a day, and saw an 'Olympene' track.

Quite what Alan Wright was doing on the trip, even he couldn't explain.



Kirkby Sports Centre

He admitted to us the track wasn't his responsibility.

Then in March 1973 En-Tout-Cas repeated their Zurich excursion. This time their guests were Stevenson, who had unfortunately missed the first trip because of illness, and Councillor King.

At this time three councillors had complete responsibility for accepting the tender for the track. They were Councillor Tempest, Councillor Bundred... and Councillor King.

Although En-Tout-Cas and ICI shared the whole cost of these trips, Councillor King still received three days' loss-of-earnings money from Kirkby Council.

His explanation for this is interesting. He says he was assured by Stevenson that this was an official trip.

What did Stevenson say to this? - "I think Councillor King got the impression this was an official trip."

He learned afterwards that it wasn't.

There's something even stranger about this trip. Stevenson told us: "It was suggested we went to see the material in actual use."

Maybe. But by the time En-Tout-Cas flew King and Stevenson out to Zurich to examine a track it was a bit late. By then the contract had already been given to the firm. And work had started three months earlier... in December 1972.

For some reason En-Tout-Cas weren't keen to talk about their generosity. When asked about the first trip to Switzerland they flatly denied ever paying for it. They only admitted it later... after we gave them all the details.

All this hospitality... just over one contract.

What was that about "it had never been the practice of Kirkby Council to accept hospitality from contractors"?

PUBLISH— AND DAMN THEM

THE FREE PRESS have spent four months looking into the affairs of Kirkby Council.

It means other articles - probably more useful articles - have not been written.

A "good story" at the end of it is not, on its own, a good enough reason for that.

So why do it?

The story will be taken up by television and probably by the national press. It's unlikely they would have done it alone. National newspapers can't afford a reporter sitting in the Adelphi Hotel for months with nothing to go on but rumours.

More important, why bother? Nothing's to be gained by upsetting the authorities.

Anyway, corruption and odd goings-on in local government are hardly "news" any more. There's so much of it, the press are looking for a new angle.

(There's no need to mention in detail "our" libel laws, the most oppressive in the "free" world.)

WHY, some asked, didn't we go to the police?

The police were in Kirkby a couple of years ago when £6,000 disappeared from the Labour Club. Nothing happened.

A few weeks ago they were called in to investigate the outrageous use of hired vehicles by

Knowsley Architect's Department. But they were not concerned with why the architect had spent £56,000 hiring vans.

Instead, they wanted to find the man who was spotted moving his furniture in one of them. It's just like all those men who've been done for pinching a few bricks or a piece of wood from George Leatherbarrow.

The Free Press is not interested in doing police work. Locking up bent politicians will change very little.

Whether or not our rulers are "good" or "bad" makes very little difference to most of us. They are still there.

GETTING THIS STORY was not easy. Most officials we approached were not very helpful. Two common reactions to our questions are



Tower Hill today.

worth remembering.

The first was: "I find what you're saying distasteful." In other words our questions were distasteful.

The point is this: Many officials in Kirkby must have had an inkling of what was going on. But it was not, apparently, "distasteful" enough for them to say anything.

The second reaction was: "My professional ethics prevent me

from speaking to you and breaking confidences." Just what sort of "ethics" are these?

Some officials did help us. The stupid thing is we can't break their confidence, either. The reason? They would never get another job in local government if we did.

That's the reward for honesty in official life.

BUT THE REAL justification for our story is this: It's true, it happened, it affects the people of Kirkby, and they have a right to know about it.

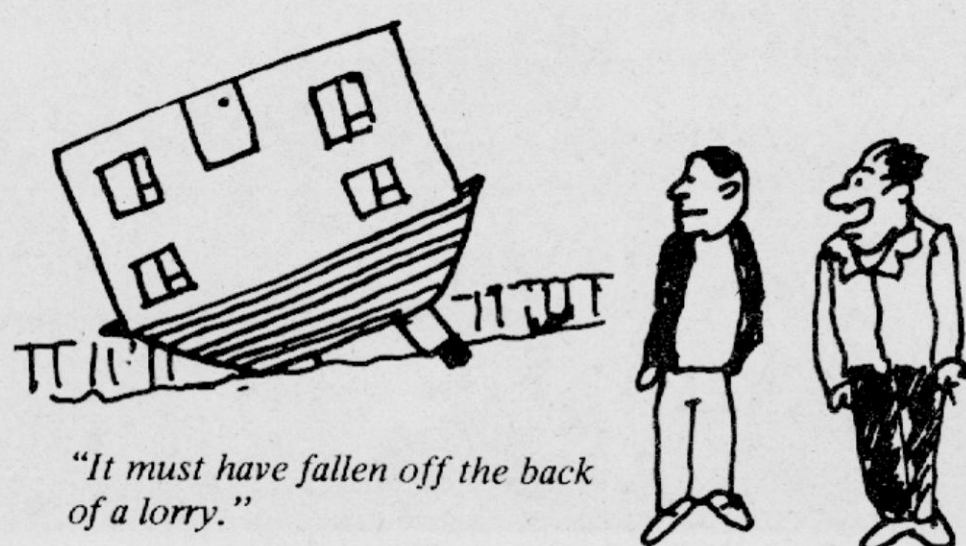
Kirkby people will be paying for Tower Hill, the ski-slope, and all the rest for years.

And our story puts the record straight.

Kirkby has "a bad name". In lots of ways it's a bloody awful place. But that's not the fault of most of the people who live there.

The people to blame are people like those in our story.

The people who built it.



"It must have fallen off the back of a lorry."

Free Press

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