

Arts grant to London group raises more than eyebrows

COMMUNITY ARTS on Merseyside has developed dramatically over the last four years. The Merseyside Arts Association grant has risen accordingly by 80% to £5,500 this year.

But there is still not enough money to go round. Inevitably this leads to squabbles.

The latest example is the dissatisfaction of local community arts groups about a grant of £2,000 to a London-based group, 'Free Form', to work on Merseyside during the summer, for the fourth successive year.

Free Form, whose work includes the use of inflatables, drama, craft workshops, video and films, will perform in the city and in the outlying districts of Knowsley, Halton and Sefton.

One of their venues was to be

with the Merseyside Play Action Council, for which Free Form received a grant of £240.

Unfortunately the Play Action Council's staff knew nothing about this grant. They had in fact taken a policy decision not to pay for groups from outside Liverpool to present activities which they consider local groups are well capable of doing.

In common with Radio Doom and Total Play, the only local community arts groups, the Play Action Council considered the work of Free Form to be in this category.

As a result they have asked that the grant for Free Form to work with them be withdrawn, and their original application for a grant to employ local artists be re-considered.

The merits of Free Form are a debatable point, and not the subject

of this article. Perhaps their work here may initiate the formation of more community arts groups from within the community.

But to justify a grant which amounts to over one-third of the total MAA community arts budget (a grant which might have kept the recently defunct Play on Wheels group in operation), they ought to offer activities not already provided in the city.

Unfortunately, in the distribution of grants, the actual merits of submitted projects are sometimes secondary to the ability to present a 'good case' to the committee. A question of timing, experience in wording applications, and who you happen to know on the old boys network.

These values apply not only to

the art world of course, but wherever public money is to be had.

Community arts, however, does have its own anomalies. If 'arts' is the operative word, then it's perhaps time the inflatables and video syndrome was questioned.

For it's not an uncommon sight at festivals to see a whole barrage of cameras and video tape paraphernalia more akin to Open Day at the BBC than community arts.

What happens to these films? Are they of any value? Or is the Arts Council simply paying for expensive toys?

Perhaps when inflatables were first introduced their design and manufacture could be justified as an experimental art form. But can they now be considered to be anything other than play things?

Certainly inflatables are important to children, if to nobody else. But should they continue to receive Arts Council grants?

Community arts is a relatively new expression and definitions are blurred.

Peter Bevan, director of the MAA, admits that their definition has been too broad in the past and that some groups are more inclined towards play than art or education.

But then where do groups openly promoting play activities get their money from?

This article has not attempted to supply answers to the many questions it has raised. Clearly the answers are not simple. For a future article — suggesting some possibilities — contributions and opinions are welcome.



THE OIL SHEIKHS OF LIVERPOOL

Continuing the story of Liverpool's oil bonanza in the mid-sixties, when petrol stations were valuable properties and fortunes could be made overnight...

THE PEOPLE of Stoneycroft Crescent, off Queens Drive, staged their own fight against the Oil Sheikhs in the 1960s — to stop a petrol station being built right next door to an existing one.

But the Stoneycroft residents were up against one of the most determined men. Councillor Eddie Roderick, now deputy leader of Liverpool Labour Party.

In 1965 Roderick was chairman of the planning sub-committee which dealt with petrol station applications. And Roderick wanted Stoneycroft Crescent to have two petrol stations — whether the residents liked it or not.

On February 11, 1965, Roderick personally moved that permission should be given to Dougherty's Garages to build a second filling station on the site.

For reasons that were not clear, Roderick decided to back Dougherty, despite an array of arguments against building another station:

- The city planning officer warned the committee that another garage would create a serious traffic hazard and advised the committee to reject the application.
- The council had already decided to consider the land for badly-needed shopping facilities.
- A petition signed by 55 residents was sent in protesting that the neighbourhood didn't want another filling station.
- A similar site on the opposite side of Queens Drive had been turned down for a petrol station (and the Minister for Local Government had backed up the council's decision).
- There was already a petrol station on the adjacent site, with no need for additional facilities.



The petrol station site today

Roderick was unimpressed by all these reasons and the wishes of the local people. He remained adamant that Dougherty should get permission, and the planning sub-committee voted their approval.

Significantly, the Planning Department file contains a work-sheet with the now-familiar word "SPECIAL" pencilled in on it.

The profitable planning permission rounded off a neat and devious little business deal by the applicant, Mr J.F. Dougherty, of Dougherty's Garages (then of Pilch Lane).

Dougherty had originally owned the other petrol station on the site

(on the corner of Moscow Drive and Queens Drive). On October 30, 1961 he sold that filling station to Esso, but he retained the other half of the site. And it was on this land that he succeeded in persuading the planning committee to give him the go-ahead for a second station.

Esso later bought this second station and merged it with the first. So today there is once again only one filling station on the site.

The Dougherty affair took place six months before Eddie Roderick was handling another interesting planning application — when the successful applicant sold his house cheaply to Roderick's brother, Billy. (See Free Press no. 25).

And in 1966, in a completely separate case, Roderick was found not guilty of corruptly soliciting £2,000 from John Aspinwall over an application for planning permission to build a filling station in East Prescott Road, Liverpool.

There is still no indication how Roderick will respond to calls from Labour Party members for him to issue a denial or resign as deputy leader of the party in Liverpool.

Health chief in attempt to close clinic

APPARENTLY on the whim of one man, a family planning clinic with a long and distinguished history may have to close to be replaced by an inferior service.

The clinic is in that shambling but noble building, Gambier Terrace. It was the first in Liverpool, one of the first in the country and has been quietly but actively fighting the prejudice and superstition that surrounds sexual matters in our city.

The man is Professor Andrew Semple, area medical officer, whose career is peppered with skirmishes with the Family Planning Association.

Gambier Terrace was run by the FPA until 1974 when it was swallowed by the Area Health Authority. The authority agreed to rent the premises from the FPA for just two years.

During that time, Semple decreed that sessions would be phased out — they would be transferred to District Clinics and to the new Family Health Clinic which had been set up in Rodney Street.

Semple's reason for the move seemed purely expedient — to establish family planning services in premises owned by the Health Service. However, his plans ignored two crucial pieces of advice.

The patients' representatives in the new, organised and democratic health service, the Community Health Council, decided to poke their noses inside Rodney Street. They didn't like what they saw, and Semple's colleagues in the Health Service on the District Management

team agreed: Gambier Terrace may be crummy on the outside, but inside it's a very well organised and busy clinic, while Rodney Street is little more than a posh address and an architect's drawing.

Alterations to Rodney Street have been going on for two years. The accommodation is cramped, with little privacy. Cubicles are at one side of the waiting room. This means the patients have to strip off at one side of the room, don a National Health paper shift, and, dressed like a Dior model on a bad night, squeeze past the waiting queue to the examination room.

The Health Council also had a look round the outside of the building. They were concerned about a ramp up which women had to push prams. Much to their alarm they noticed that behind a low wall lay a drop of fifteen feet. The council asked for the wall to be made safe for children.

The District Management team supported the Health Council's view: Accommodation at Rodney Street was poor, and couldn't cope with family health and contraception services. In principle it was agreed to extend services at Gambier Terrace.

Professor Semple is "consulting" with the District Management team shortly. But his staff could be forgiven for thinking that this is a mere formality. Semple's Chief Officer for family planning services has already told workers at Gambier Terrace Clinic that seven sessions will be transferred to Rodney Street.

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