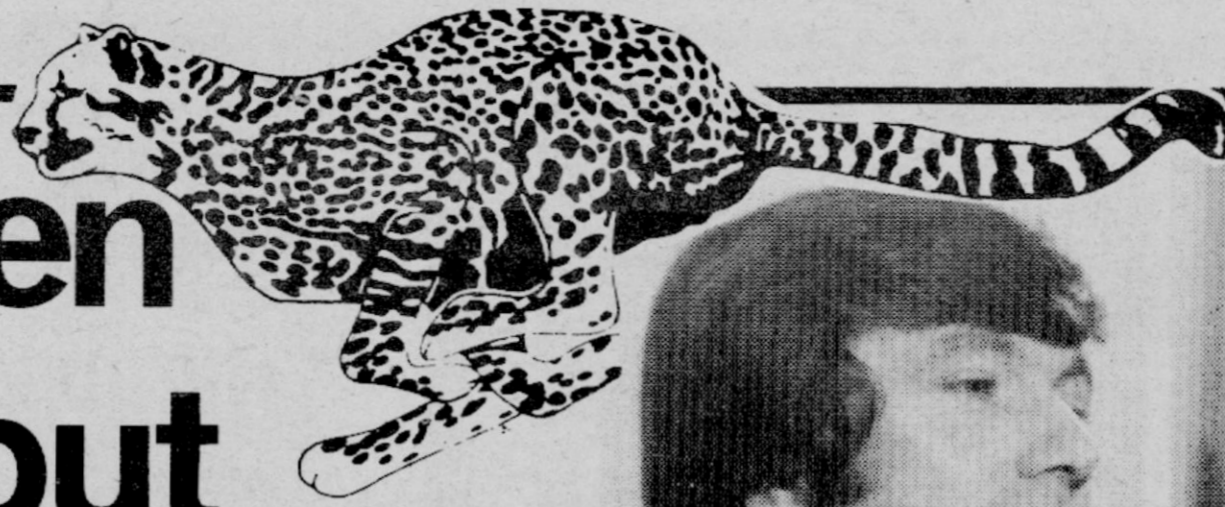


Con-men jailed—but Hodge free



The Cheetah men. Left to right: George Lowe, Gerald Jackson, Simon Harris.

FOUR CON-MEN were jailed last month at the end of Liverpool's longest criminal trial.

The four were known as "the Cheetah men" — for the drawing of a cheetah they used as a publicity symbol, and for the way they cheated their victims.

Their racket was first exposed by the Free Press, in November 1974.

Simon Harris, Gerald Jackson and former Wonderloaf Salesman of the Year George Lowe set up a

business flogging second mortgages for the Julian Hodge organisation.

To recruit helpers they put adverts in the Liverpool Echo offering £2,000 a year for part-time work. (The adverts were illegal under the 1973 Fair Trading Act.)

Applicants were invited to part with £1,200 in exchange for a map, a briefcase and the title "Area Manager". They were promised jet-set trips to Monte Carlo, but these never materialised.

Applicants who hadn't £1,200 to spare were persuaded to take out Hodge loans (at 28.5% interest).

One victim was Bernie Williams, who became area manager for Wallasey. In his first two months he sold two loans, earning him £50 commission. But in the same period he had to pay £58 on his own loan, plus his phone, petrol and insurance stamps.

An ingenious trick of the Cheetah men was to put phoney adverts in the "Cars for Sale" section of the Echo. They didn't own the cars and were not interested in selling them. The cars were simply a ruse to interest people in their loans.

Lowe was jailed for 18 months, Harris for 15, and Jackson for 12. Tom Proctor (who mistakenly used

to describe himself as an accountant) got a nine-month suspended sentence.

But the real villain is still at large, Julian S. Hodge. Knighted by Harold Wilson, and a close friend of James Callaghan.

Hodge founded a financial empire whose success depended on the trickery of agents like the Cheetah men.



Letters to the Free Press posted after the end of April should be sent c/o 100 Whitechapel, Liverpool 1.

Alternative school

ARE THERE any parents in Liverpool who are unhappy about sending their children to a conventional school, and who are interested in an 'alternative' or 'free' education for them?

We have two young children (2½ and 4) and would be pleased to meet others who feel unwilling to force their children to attend institutions that, however conscientiously and

efficiently organised, are manipulative, unimaginative and boring.

We would like to talk to anyone who like us is interested in:

1. Child-regulated rather than teacher-regulated learning (i.e. choice of interests and activities, and approach to learning basic skills).

2. Emphasis on the validity of free play experience.

3. Participation of parents and any other adults with interesting skills to offer children.

4. A democratic and non-authoritarian system of organisation.

Should there be enough support from others to start something on a small scale, we feel that it would be possible to make something relevant to our children's lives and very enjoyable as well.

We do not know much about education and are looking for ideas and discussion from anyone willing to be involved. —COLETTE and BOB MILLS, 101 Smithdown Road, Liverpool 7 (or phone 733 3774 after April 17).

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Why the loop line ties up the ends

BEFORE mentioning the positive aspects of the new Loop and Link lines, which in the opinion of many are the only signs of imagination displayed by the MPTE since its inauguration, I would like to refute the assertions made in the last issue, assertions more the result of prejudice than evidence.

Firstly, the blame for the worsening bus service is laid at the door of the railway system, and then it is declared that we know "without a study" that 80 is the right unit size for transport in Liverpool. I suggest a study be made of that assumption on the main bus routes at peak hour as 80-seater double decker buses sail full, past shivering, soaked bus queues.

As a consequence of this, the article goes on to imply that trains will provide a less frequent service than buses. On the new link line, however, the service specification is for a train every ten minutes from Southport, Kirkby and Ormskirk. Similar frequencies are planned on other routes and, unlike buses, trains are not held up by traffic or weather. Remember the snow storm in January? It was business as usual on the railways while buses were stranded for hours in the town centre.

Once again the article appears to tend towards inaccuracy — for it refers to buses awaiting trains at Interchange stations. The present on-time rate on the Mersey Railway is no less than 95%, and usually far more. You can use your imagination for the figures for one-man buses, but I think you will agree that it is trains that will be waiting for buses, not the neat inversion of the case by Mr Easton.

On the question of equivalent times on journeys by train and bus, I suspect that they have been taken from some Hornby-Dublo timetable, for they certainly bear no relation to the real ones. The time from Garston to the centre is not 19 minutes as quoted. It is, in fact, 9 minutes, while not mentioned at all was the timing by rail from Kirkby — a mere 16 minutes as opposed to 55 on the bus!

Similarly it is stated that "all buses will turn back" at the stations on the outskirts, a statement that cannot be proved on the basis of any published plans. Certainly the railway unions have not been informed of it, and most railwaymen, living as they do inside the city, would object for the same reason as everyone else — how would they get to work?

There are many reasons to be wary of the MPTE's planning, but suspicions are not the same as evidence. The plans published are for some buses on dense commuter

IN OUR last issue George Easton, a transport enthusiast, criticised plans for Merseyside's Outer Loop railway line and argued this would have a detrimental effect on the bus service. He suggested special 'busways' as an alternative. Here IAN WILLIAMS, a former busman, now a railway worker, replies...

routes to be diverted to interchanges, others will continue their journey, and it is up to all of us to ensure that any buses released in this way are used to augment the service elsewhere.

ROAD TO RUIN

The article goes on to look to the future — in a crystal ball provided by the motor manufacturers. Mr Easton proposes that the railway be concreted over and used as a roadway for buses, which he alleges is "literally maintenance-free", a statement that can be refuted by anyone who looks at the holes in an average Liverpool road.

Do the signals repair themselves? Do streetlights generate their own power (even glow-worms have to be fed)? And, more morbidly, do the bodies of traffic victims remove themselves? On the Mersey Railway, not one passenger has been lost since 1886. How many pedestrians have been killed on Liverpool's roads since then?

As a matter of harsh statistics, apart from the human toll, Merseyside's current road plans are costed at £360 million, while the cost of the whole railway scheme, including rolling stock, is only £200 million (75% government funded).

On the technicalities of the plan to use 80-seater buses — in half an hour at peak hour this would involve no less than 65 full buses arriving at James Street alone — one bus every 25 seconds on one route! Chaos would be the mildest description of the city centre. All these buses would, of course, be burning irreplaceable polluting fuel oil as opposed to the electricity which, far from being the "fuel of the future" is the one the railways are actually using now.

Bad as the MPTE may be, we can be thankful that they have not retained Mr Easton as a consultant!

THE LOOP AND LINK

Really, all that is happening now is a tidying up of the anarchic planning of the railways when they were privately built and owned.

The 20th century saw Liverpool with no less than four main routes, all separate and unco-ordinated, not to mention the unique overhead railway (now, alas, gone to the big siding in the sky — even further overhead).

The aim of the project which is opening shortly is to connect all of these routes so that by the time electrification is completed it will

be possible to travel anywhere on Merseyside by train with a maximum of one change. The Loop line is the old Mersey Railway continued round, as its name would suggest, in a loop from James Street to Moorfields, Lime Street, Central, and back. The line from Kirkby, Southport and Ormskirk is extended in the Link Line to the old Central Station line to Garston and Widnes.

Finance permitting, it is hoped, using old goods tunnels, to run a line from Central to Edge Hill, leaving the current Lime Street Station to deal with Inter-City trains, but this seems to be suffering from the cuts in government spending.

THE FUTURE

Apart from the environmental grounds for public transport, Merseyside has one of the smallest proportions of car owning households in the country. No less than 58% of families are totally reliant on public transport, and most of the others use it often.

It is long overdue for public transport to take priority — especially if the long suffering city centre is to be revitalised along with the inner city areas. In any such plans for a county the size of Merseyside, railways, with their speed and efficiency, must play an important part, just as the buses must, and it is obvious that rather than competing the two modes should complement each other.

This is the policy of the NUR, and even of the TUC: An integrated transport system — and it should indeed be the policy of all who are concerned with more than their sectional interests.

Both rail and bus workers should not be attempting to throw the blame and the brunt of the cuts on to each other, but should be fighting, in common with the passengers, not just against cuts, but for an expansion of public transport.

It was with this in mind that my NUR branch passed a resolution last year calling for support for the busmen in the campaign against the cuts, and also calling upon the Trades Council to set up a transport committee to co-ordinate the fight. Unfortunately the Transport Committee has not exactly been overwhelmed with support or interest. We can only hope that more is shown in the near future, otherwise the wishes and interests of the workers of Merseyside, and the passengers, will continue unrepresented, as busmen blame railwaymen and vice versa.