Voices and echoes: The story of regeneration in the North West

Doom and gloom... and then a 'BOOM'

Learning from the past – a study of the BOOM initiative, 1987-1993, and its role in promoting the Liverpool city region’s economic recovery

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Preface

In February 2017, I was invited to address the members of Professional Liverpool on the Business Opportunities On Merseyside (BOOM) initiative which I had the privilege of chairing from 1987 until it became part of The Mersey Partnership in 1993. After all this time I was surprised to find that the event attracted a capacity lunch-time audience at Tilney’s offices in the iconic Royal Liver Building.

Why so much interest three decades later? Perhaps one reason was the lecture’s focus on the leading role which Liverpool’s professional firms, particularly the Chartered Accountants, had themselves played in establishing and supporting BOOM’s high profile programme. But many of those enrolling for the 2017 event must still have wondered what the BOOM initiative was all about. Hadn’t the 1980s been a grim period for Liverpool – an era of industrial strife, civil unrest and political confrontation - and therefore best forgotten? Besides, what part could accountants, lawyers and other such professionals have contributed to addressing the region’s problems?

The seeds of Merseyside’s economic regeneration had started to be sown in the 1980s, principally through government-sponsored measures and projects introduced by Michael Heseltine as Environment Secretary following the Toxteth riots of July 1981. The establishment of the Merseyside Development Corporation (MDC) led to the Albert Dock restoration, the International Garden Festival and a variety of other major regeneration projects. But these projects were all driven, and funded, by the public sector. What part had Liverpool’s private sector, and in particular its professional community, played in addressing Merseyside’s challenges? This was the subject on which I was invited to speak, and which had aroused such interest after all these years.

Since giving my presentation I have been encouraged to set down the story of this early example of private-public sector partnership in economic regeneration, so that the experience of thirty years ago might be preserved for future reference. In doing so, I have referred not only to BOOM’s own archives (with considerable assistance from former BOOM employee Angela Roberts), but also to contemporary press reports and writings such as Michael Parkinson’s “Liverpool on the Brink”, (1985), Lord Heseltine’s “Where There’s a Will”, (1987), and the joint memoir of bishops David Sheppard and Derek Worlock (“Better Together”, 1988). These provide stark reminders of the grim realities which faced Merseyside in the 1980s and help to explain why Liverpool’s professional community, and in due course the private sector as a whole, felt the need to assert itself in such a proactive manner.

I hope this report will demonstrate how the BOOM initiative set about stimulating much-needed business investment during this extremely challenging period, whilst promoting a more positive image and contributing to a level of consensus and trust on Merseyside which many had previously thought impossible. I hope also that it may serve as an example, and an encouragement, to future generations to do all they can to actively support and promote the social, economic and cultural well-being of their local community. The firms of Chartered Accountants who helped to kick start BOOM, the individuals who kindly spared valuable time to serve on its board, and the many other businesses which supported the BOOM initiative thirty years or so ago, certainly all did so.

Geoffrey Piper, June 2018
Chapter 1
“Doom and Gloom” - Liverpool in the Eighties

Then and now

1.1 To fully appreciate the significance of the BOOM initiative it may help to contrast the fortunes of the city of Liverpool today with the plight in which it found itself in the 1980s. Liverpool in 2018 is an admired and much-loved city with a very promising future. Its population is growing year by year. Its national and international visitor numbers are soaring. Its economy is soundly-based on a healthy mix of high technology, science-based industries with a thriving, research-led higher education sector and a resurgent manufacturing base. It has a new deep-water port terminal opening up a faster supply chain transit for most of the UK container market; it has a flourishing financial and professional services sector; and it is renowned for its world-class sporting, cultural and entertainment attractions. It offers a unique blend of awe-inspiring architecture, from its Georgian and neo-classical buildings to its distinctive, modern Mersey waterfront. It is proud, it is confident and it is moving with the times.

1.2 Yet it could scarcely have been more different three decades ago, when the outlook for Liverpool was so poor that ever-increasing numbers of its residents were choosing to leave the area and make a new life elsewhere. Many of its traditional industries (including, most serious of all, the docks) were seemingly in terminal decline and by the mid-1980s, when unemployment had reached 20%, the city’s population had dropped from over 700,000 in the 1950s to below 450,000. At one point in the early 1980s an average of 12,000 people were leaving Liverpool annually. Meanwhile both the city, and the wider Merseyside region, had become increasingly dependent on support from national Government, prompting the leading economist Professor Patrick Minford, then the head of the University of Liverpool’s macro-economic research group and joint editor of the Merseyside Economic Prospect, to open his September 1986 editorial with the following bleak assessment: -

“Merseyside is in a mess – and it is going to get worse. As for Liverpool, the same is true, only more so. We should not delude ourselves about this. There is no gleam on the horizon. There is no Seventh Cavalry waiting beyond the Canyon. It is most unlikely that any political party would make more funds available: already the staggering sum of £1.5 billion per year is poured by central government into Merseyside in grants, loans and benefits. But even if this sum was increased, it would not dent the basic problem of high manual unemployment and low or negative output growth. The subsidies required to offset high labour costs and rates are too high to be realistically on the agenda.”

1.3 Such was the economic plight to which Liverpool had fallen by 1986. In the same piece (which carried the title “Where is Merseyside going and can we do anything about it?”) Minford went on to consider what actions could be taken locally to help turn the area’s fortunes round. These, he argued, included the need to spread understanding among the people of Merseyside of the “fundamentals creating the problem”. He pointed to the “forces driving up manual wages and business rates when there is a vast excess supply of labour and a vast need to attract business capital” – concluding that “only the business community, with its natural understanding and grass roots knowledge of the facts, could help greatly in this public education process”.

The local and national political backcloth at this time was, as many will still recall, one of stubborn confrontation between a left-wing “militant” labour administration at Liverpool Town Hall and the right-wing conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher. Liverpool’s local politicians saw a bigger, national agenda – they were more concerned with trying to derail central government than with seeking workable solutions to their own economic crisis. Minford was unforgiving, finishing this particular piece as follows:–

“Talk is one thing, action is another. We hope that thoughtful businessmen, who reflect on these arguments and on the facts of Merseyside... will provide the leadership that the local politicians have so clearly failed to give.”

Patrick Minford’s analysis naturally reflected his own political philosophy, but the grim reality of Liverpool’s plight in the mid-1980s was undeniable. Another eminent commentator with a more sympathetic viewpoint on Liverpool’s crisis was Professor Michael Parkinson. In 1985, as director of the University of Liverpool’s Centre for Urban Studies, Parkinson painted a vivid picture of the city’s troubles in “Liverpool on the Brink” (Policy Journals, October 1985). Sub-titled “One city’s struggle against Government cuts”, this contemporary analysis described graphically how, over many years, a gradual decline in Liverpool’s industrial fortunes had turned into the total collapse of the local economy, threatening to make it Britain’s “first ever deindustrialised city”. Liverpool had become “economically marooned” for, as Parkinson identified, it was “in the wrong place, based on the wrong kind of economic activity, with an outdated infrastructure and an underqualified labour force.” It was increasingly a branch plant economy and peripheral to the mainstream international capitalist economy. It was the perfect recipe for political strife and not at all conducive to attracting business investment.

Deprivation and civil disturbances

Liverpool as a city had become more and more dependent upon the UK public purse for grant support, social security and welfare benefits. The cost to the national exchequer had mounted year after year without appearing to solve the fundamental problems. Whether or not Professor Minford was right about no Government being willing to make further cash available, there clearly was a need - throughout the 1980s - for something more than the ever-increasing public funding. Economic failure had left parts of Liverpool with some appalling living conditions, giving rise to a range of social problems in the city as intense and intractable as any in Western Europe. Meanwhile fewer and fewer people with the means to drive business growth - and to create jobs and wealth - considered Merseyside a viable place to do so.

The frustration felt by those living their daily lives in increasingly impoverished conditions had given rise in 1981 to civil disturbance on an unprecedented scale. In July of that year, tear gas had to be used by police to quell a large-scale revolt in one of Liverpool’s most marginalised, disadvantaged, inner city communities. Over several nights the Toxteth area exploded into riots with large buildings being burnt to the ground, shops looted and lines of police attacked with bricks, petrol bombs and iron railings. By 1.00 am on the second night of rioting, after three hours of unrelenting ferocious attack by the rioters, Merseyside’s chief constable ordered the use of CS gas - the first time this had ever been used on the mainland of Britain. There were further outbreaks of gang violence over the following few years, most notably in 1985.

The origins, causes and effects of the Toxteth riots have been documented extensively elsewhere. One of the most thoughtful analyses can be found in “Better Together” (Hodder & Stoughton, 1988) - the joint work of Bishop David Sheppard and Archbishop Derek Worlock, the senior Anglican and Catholic clerics who held office in Liverpool on behalf of their respective churches for
much of the seventies and eighties. Universally respected and admired across Merseyside, Sheppard and Worlock were two of the very few establishment figures who were trusted both locally and nationally at the time of the disturbances, and they clearly played a key role in persuading the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, of the need for a sympathetic and constructive response. In “Better Together” they told of their discussions with Mrs Thatcher and the decisions that followed in the wake of Toxteth:–

> “Soon after the outbreak of rioting in July 1981, the city received a visit from the then Home Secretary, Mr William Whitelaw. Both to him and some days later to the prime minister, when she herself came to Liverpool, we tried to give some picture of the degree of alienation felt in Toxteth and other deprived parts of the city. We explained the feeling that London did not know, let alone understand, some of the social problems facing Liverpool. We asked that a minister of Cabinet rank be appointed, who would be seen regularly in the area and through whom local people might have confidence that their true needs were being brought to the attention of the Government. It was difficult to make headway in trying to deal with all the various government departments which might be involved in such a complex situation. We asked for a minister with special responsibility for Merseyside, someone who would come and listen to a not always coherent voice, but who would be seen to share the people’s concern. Mrs Thatcher gave us the assurance for which we had asked and soon afterwards Michael Heseltine, as Secretary of State for the Environment, was given this special responsibility as Minister for Merseyside. He immediately spent fourteen days in the area, listening and seeing for himself. His genuine personal shock at seeing some of the worst examples of urban dereliction led him to ask the Cabinet for a major expansion of public expenditure.”


Michael Heseltine’s impact

1.9 The arrival of Michael Heseltine to take up his role as “Minister for Merseyside” soon gave the city and its inhabitants some much-needed encouragement. His willingness to stay for some while in Liverpool, as opposed to merely paying the city a series of day visits (as many might have expected), was a clear signal that he was committing himself wholeheartedly to the challenge. The inevitable early suspicions that this was “another Tory politician on the make” soon gave way to renewed civic pride as the flamboyant but sympathetic, energetic and visionary Mr Heseltine captured the hearts of more and more local people with projects like the creation of the International Garden Festival and the restoration of the Albert Dock. These were to be funded by the Government through the Merseyside Development Corporation (MDC) - one of the UK’s first two urban development corporations empowered by Act of Parliament in 1981 with a mission “to secure, in partnership with others, advances towards self-sustaining regeneration”. The new body was granted the land, the funding and the planning powers necessary to thoroughly regenerate several strategically important but derelict sites. The whole operation would be overseen by the Government’s specially-created Merseyside Task Force.

1.10 The benefits of establishing and empowering the MDC soon became apparent (particularly the transformation of Albert Dock into a stunning and highly marketable business, tourism and leisure location) and undoubtedly helped to act as a catalyst, prompting and inspiring further visionary thinking. For the time being the costs to the public purse prohibited more widespread application of the urban development corporation model, but its successes in Liverpool (and in the London Docklands) were apparent and eventually another eleven urban development corporations were created in strategically significant locations around the UK.
1.11 In Liverpool the concentration of such resources and powers into a small number of high profile flagship projects inevitably alienated some inhabitants of the most disadvantaged areas of the city, who understandably felt that their needs were being pushed to the back of the queue. This response proved challenging for Mr Heseltine and his team as they toured vast areas of depressed and disadvantaged communities with their derelict houses, shops and factories. For much of the time it was an uphill journey that Mr Heseltine and his team were endeavouring to make. Day after day they met people who told only of the problems facing them, their colleagues, their families, their communities and their city. There were always plenty of problems but, as Lord Heseltine was to discover, nobody seemed willing or able to offer any solutions – apart, of course, from pleading for multiplication of the vast sums of taxpayers’ money already being spent on Merseyside. Everything was wrong but nobody suggested how it could be put right. And it was always someone else’s fault. Hopelessness and helplessness had become inevitable bedfellows.

Effect on business confidence

1.12 For those few who came to live and work in Merseyside in the mid-eighties, this presented a serious challenge. Too many people seemed resigned to a feeling of doom. The pessimism affected not only those from the marginalised and disadvantaged communities – it also plagued, to some extent, the whole population of Merseyside from the politicians (of all parties) to the business community, from the academics to the journalists and broadcasters. Even the comedians, for whom Liverpool has always been deservedly renowned, seemed to be getting most of their laughs from jokes about the area’s dereliction and high crime rate. The only hope for the future, it appeared, was continued ever-increasing Government support, in one form or other. And as the 1980s continued to take their toll, relieved only by a succession of expensive Government funded initiatives, any hope of Merseyside ever again becoming self-supporting seemed to outside observers to be rapidly disappearing. It was hardly likely to attract much in the way of new business or industry, and people were continuing to leave the area in droves.

1.13 By 1986, despite all the various Government interventions, the economic outlook for Merseyside, and particularly for Liverpool itself, remained as bleak as ever. Economists and politicians differed in their suggested responses but it was difficult to argue with the bald facts as set out by Patrick Minford and Michael Parkinson. The whole “city region”, as we now refer to it, had become increasingly dependent on the public purse for its survival. Fortunately, thanks to the imaginative recommendations of a sympathetic and determined “Minister for Merseyside”, the list of Government-led (or joint Government and European funded) initiatives continued to grow, and one in particular - the 25-year Mersey Basin Campaign – was especially significant, in that its purpose was to address the shameful state of the river which had made, and was at the very heart of, the city of Liverpool.

Graces and disgraces

1.14 Mr Heseltine demanded that the Mersey be given priority attention, describing it at this time as “an affront to the standards a civilised society should demand of its environment, with untreated sewage and noxious discharges contributing to water conditions and environmental standards that are perhaps the single most deplorable feature of this critical part of England”. Just as the famous Three Graces – the Royal Liver, Cunard and Port of Liverpool buildings - had celebrated the pinnacle to which the city’s fame and fortunes had risen a few decades earlier, the condition of the river upon which they looked out was now symbolic of the many disgraces which had resulted from the years of neglect and mismanagement.

1.15 The massive Mersey Basin Campaign was launched in 1985 with the daunting task, and highly commendable target, of cleaning up one of Europe’s most polluted rivers to the satisfaction of the EU’s demanding environmental standards. Significantly, it was to succeed not only in meeting these
standards, but also those of the native breeding salmon and various other species of fish which had
long deserted their natural home but by 2010 were choosing to return. Nor was this simply a
desirable social and environmental programme: aside from all its environmental benefits, the
project was destined over the next quarter of a century to deliver many thousands of hectares of
attractive development sites. To what extent this was an intended priority for the Mersey Basin
Campaign is somewhat unclear for, as Walter Menzies - for many years the campaign’s dedicated
and inspirational executive director – so eloquently put it, “no instruction book came with it”. (The
same could perhaps be said of the BOOM initiative, which in those challenging mid-1980s was still
merely a pipe-dream in the mind of its founder. Like its environmental big brother, BOOM also had
to “write its own instructions and develop its own strategy”, adapting it as required to turn around
the proverbial tanker that had been heading in precisely the wrong direction.)

1.16 Meanwhile the various public funding programmes continued to be rolled out. Year after year
there were new Government initiatives without which the condition of Liverpool and much of
Merseyside would have become, or remained, utterly intolerable. There is little doubt that over the next
few years the combination of well-directed programmes and initiatives such as City Challenge, the Speke
Garston Development Company, the MDC, and most of all the EU structural funds, were to save
Merseyside from a permanent, irreversible decline. For a while, however, the processes involved in
lobbying for Government support and demonstrating that Merseyside was one of Europe’s most
economically disadvantaged regions in order to qualify for the multi-billion “Objective One” structural
funds, brought the extent of Merseyside’s difficulties to additional public attention. This added further
fuel to those sections of the national media which had for some while portrayed Liverpool as harbouring
something of a “begging-bowl” culture.

Vicious circle

1.17 Inevitably the negative messages were heard by the business world as much as they were by the
European Commission or the British Government and for the time being this did little to attract the
private sector investment necessary for real, self-sustaining recovery. The decades of decline in the
Merseyside economy had year by year created a self-fulfilling downward spiral. Increased
unemployment had led to poor living standards, which in turn prompted crime and civil unrest, resulting
inevitably in still more negative perceptions of the area and fewer and fewer employers wishing to
conduct their business in or near Liverpool. Each year this vicious circle of decline grew in its disastrous,
damaging impact, while those carrying civic and other leadership responsibilities in the area seemed
powerless to reverse the trend. Individually and collectively, they were inevitably caught up in constant
“fire-fighting” and civic crisis management – and, of course, in playing the blame game.

1.18 Fortunately, amongst the many publicly funded or part-funded Government initiatives, there
were a few for which results came quickly. These at least would soon have a beneficial effect on
Liverpool’s reputation. Two particular examples (both resulting from the intervention and active support
of Michael Heseltine) were the creation of the Wavertree Technology Park in partnership with the
electronics giant Plessey, and the work of the Stockbridge Village Trust in Knowsley. These two projects
had little in common - one was a science-based business development, the other the redevelopment of
a seriously neglected and deprived housing estate – but they shared the essential ingredient of strong
and committed leadership and partnership. Wavertree benefited particularly from the determined
support of Sir John Clark, Plessey’s chairman, who responded enthusiastically to a challenge described
later by Heseltine in “Where there’s a Will”:–

“The challenge was the 65-acre site of what is now the Wavertree Technology Park, a
steadily expanding centre of high-technology industry and one of Liverpool’s most
visible beacons of returning confidence. Five years ago it was an appalling eyesore,
mainly railway yards which had hardly been used for a decade, a great sprawl of
industrial wasteland… It lay within two miles of the city’s commercial centre, a silent but eloquent rebuke to a society where it was always someone else’s responsibility. Nobody bothered. You drove through Liverpool, you looked at this terrible place, and you drove on. I was certain that because of its prominence the site must make the same daily impact on every other visitor to Liverpool that it made on me. It was as if a vast poster had been displayed with the message “This place is on its way down. If you are thinking of investing you had better try the suburbs – or the South-east.” (“Where there’s a Will”, 1987).

1.19 The new Park Company at Wavertree was formed in July 1983 with £10 million of public money - the cost of reclaiming and landscaping the derelict land and putting in roads, water and other services, the absence of which had previously been a barrier to planners and developers who had considered salvaging the land and finding a new use for it. The four shareholders - Plessey, English Estates, Merseyside County Council and Liverpool City Council - each put up £300,000 to acquire the site and market and administer it. The first phase of the highly successful Wavertree Technology Park opened in 1985. From then on it grew incrementally and, in the process, with its proximity to Liverpool’s academic and scientific research excellence, demonstrated its suitability as a location, not simply for start-ups but generally for science-based companies to grow and expand.

Lesson learned

1.20 Perhaps even more important for Liverpool, and Merseyside as a whole, Wavertree had addressed the issue of advertising the success or otherwise of Liverpool to anyone who passed the site. So, in a different way, did the Stockbridge Development Trust, which subsequently served as a model for other private development housing trusts elsewhere in the UK such as East London. The key lesson being learned, mostly somewhat slowly for a while, was that solutions can be found even for the most challenging problems if there is sufficient determination and committed leadership.

1.21 But the transformational projects of MDC on the waterfront, the Wavertree Technology Park and the Stockbridge Development Trust, still represented only a tiny proportion of the colossal regeneration required all over Merseyside. A few pieces of the jigsaw had begun to take shape, but to many it still appeared that the more that was regenerated, the more still needed to be tackled. The media, meanwhile, continued to focus most of its attention on the derelict and it was no help that perceptions of a begging-bowl mentality still prevailed in many quarters. Above all, as Heseltine put it himself in “Where there’s a Will”, if you go on reminding people of your failure, it is no good hoping to attract investment. Perhaps, now that there were some examples of meaningful regeneration, the time had come for somebody to start talking about those rays of sunshine, as opposed to merely the dark and gloomy clouds.
Chapter 2

“BOOM” - the Antidote to Gloom?

Negative perceptions not the reality

2.1 Despite the vast quantity of regeneration which had been achieved from 1981 onwards, negative perceptions of Merseyside still continued to beset the area and, by the mid-1980s, it was increasingly the perceptions, not the reality, which were the principal obstacle to attracting business investment or recruiting key personnel. The continuing much-publicised political confrontation between a left-wing Liverpool City Council and a right-wing Conservative Government had attracted the constant attention of the British media for much of the 1980s. The impression which this gave in the national media inevitably wrought huge damage upon the image of Merseyside and seriously threatened the stability of existing local businesses, making life very difficult for those responsible for the management of branch operations or subsidiary companies in Liverpool. It also made life especially challenging for organisations seeking to recruit suitable candidates for positions of responsibility in the local offices of professional firms, or academic institutions, banks and other such organisations – and even more so for the apparently unfortunate individuals who were selected to fill these “unwanted” roles.

2.2 Such was the dilemma facing a handful of ambitious individuals who found themselves being offered senior appointments in Liverpool in 1986. These included Professors Graeme Davies and Peter Toyne, the respective newly-appointed Vice-Chancellors at Liverpool University and the Liverpool Polytechnic (now Liverpool John Moores University); Robert Toomey of the venture capital group Investors in Industry (3i); Brian Thaxter, the new regional director for Barclays Bank; and accountants Tim Johnston (KPMG) and Geoffrey Piper (Deloitte Haskins & Sells). Subsequently dubbed “The Class of ’86” by the Financial Times in a feature article on the impact of these “leading immigrants” (FT, 19 October 1989), they became well-known to one another soon after their arrival in the area. By this time they had, for the most part, discovered that the reality for much of Liverpool was a great deal more acceptable than had been portrayed in the media and were sharing their views on how, for them, living and working in Merseyside bore little resemblance to the negative perceptions they had when first invited to take up their posts.

Need to talk the area up

2.3 Not surprisingly, the consensus amongst this small band of “immigrants” was that there was a need – perhaps even a responsibility - for them as newcomers to convey a more positive picture and to talk the area up when the opportunity presented itself. Their opinion might be considered more objective and convincing than that of those who had lived on Merseyside all or most of their lives. It certainly seemed clear that something really positive needed to be done to promote a more upbeat assessment of the area, both as a place to live or visit and as a location for business and industry - if only to counteract the grossly misleading impression given by much of the media that Liverpool remained a “basket case” and was inevitably doomed to permanent decline. Even before making his move, and having pondered long and hard with his family on the wisdom of doing so, Geoffrey Piper had envisaged the need for some fresh marketing material to promote specific “Business Opportunities In Liverpool”. (Happily he had soon spotted that “Business Opportunities On Merseyside” would make for a more appropriate acronym!). In the meantime he had also met with Dr John Ritchie, the chief executive of MDC, and a number of other key figures in the Liverpool economy and been encouraged to speak out along these lines in his new role.

2.4 By the autumn of 1986 Piper’s marketing material idea had evolved into a plea for a concentrated campaign of promotional activity for Merseyside as a whole, which he felt should first be discussed with the main committee of the Liverpool Society of Chartered Accountants (LSCA). He and his
colleagues were anxious that the campaign should be seen from the outset as a collective effort on the part of the profession rather than one which could be interpreted as an attempt to gain competitive advantage for any particular firm. At that time LSCA was still a very traditional district society, perhaps more so than most other branches of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW). It was the oldest such society, having been founded in 1870, and from its earliest days had played a leading role in the development of the ICAEW nationally, with the city of Liverpool enjoying for almost a century an extremely prominent place as one of the UK’s (and indeed the world’s) leading cities, ports and trading hubs. So there could hardly have been much need to promote the prosperity of Liverpool during this long and illustrious history and the idea that LSCA should now embark upon such a high profile initiative did not sit easily with some of its senior committee members who still preferred to maintain a more low-key approach.

Role of the Chartered Accountants

2.5 However, by the end of 1986, with negative headlines about Liverpool continuing to appear regularly in the national and international media, LSCA agreed to take the lead in promoting a marketing campaign to convey the more positive aspects of Merseyside as a place in which to do business. Its standing in the local community, as a revered and respected professional association, made LSCA an appropriate parent body for the fledgling initiative. Moreover, by a happy coincidence Mr Arthur Green, one of its most distinguished members and a former district society President, had recently been elected President of ICAEW – the first Liverpool accountant to hold such office for very many years. So the LSCA had strong grounds to expect some national support and soon found Mr Green’s influence a major boost to the credibility of the proposed campaign.

2.6 The title Business Opportunities on Merseyside (BOOM) was duly adopted. Meanwhile, throughout the first half of 1987 and against the background of a General Election campaign, the constant flow of adverse comment about Liverpool continued to provide further evidence of the need for such an initiative. LSCA therefore lost no time in establishing a small BOOM “working group”, which Geoffrey Piper was invited to chair, reporting regularly to a wider “steering group” chaired by the President of the LSCA, Nigel Packer, and open to other professional firms and representatives of the business community. The working group held its first meeting in the LSCA offices at 5 Fenwick Street on 6 February 1987 and began to produce specific proposals for the campaign. It also drafted a statement of BOOM’s aims, which was duly approved by the steering group and was to remain unchanged throughout the lifetime of the initiative. This read as follows:-

“To interest executives and advisers of national and international corporations in the business opportunities available on Merseyside; to project the professional, commercial and industrial facilities and the social, recreational and cultural amenities of the area; and generally to promote Merseyside in a manner conducive to attracting long term capital investment so as to enhance the economic and employment prospects of the area.”

Strategy

2.7 BOOM’s strategy for achieving the above aims was equally straightforward. First and foremost it was to be business-led, focusing on the business advantages of locating in the area (e.g. lower overheads and the good transport links); second, everything which BOOM was asked to do, or which it felt was worth arranging, would be referred to the appropriate Merseyside agency or agencies for its consideration and, wherever possible, delivered with the involvement of the local community; and third, the aim throughout was to persuade as many potential decision-makers and opinion-formers as possible to come to Liverpool themselves and see the area at first-hand, so that they could base their opinions on what they had actually seen, heard and experienced for themselves.
2.8 The simplicity of the strategy was undoubtedly one of the key reasons for BOOM’s success. Everybody involved in the initiative understood and knew what they were doing. The business community, many of whom recognised the need for the private sector to make more of a contribution to the well-being of the region, saw it as an opportunity to be part of something constructive which was aimed at attracting business. BOOM signposted all enquiries to the appropriate agency or authority, rather than duplicating or cutting across the work of Merseyside’s various public bodies. So the visiting prospective investors would always be looked after by the relevant host organisation, whether it be the appropriate local authority, the development corporation, the tourism bureau, cultural institution or some other body. There was always an agency that was best placed to land the relevant project. BOOM’s own role was to organise the best possible programme of activities, circulate attractive and informative literature on the region’s business advantages, and introduce or entice targeted companies to take part in the tours of Merseyside. All BOOM’s members and supporters were expected to play their role by banging the drum for a new, upbeat Merseyside.

Initial funding

2.9 As we have seen, the initiative was led from the outset by the Liverpool Society of Chartered Accountants, but invitations to the inaugural working group meeting were also extended to representatives of the Merseyside Task Force and the Liverpool Daily Post and Echo. A grant of £20,000 from the Merseyside Task Force, which had warmly welcomed the idea of the BOOM initiative, helped to provide some essential initial funding and enabled the working group to publicise its proposals more widely, whilst collaboration with the area’s principal printed media was of course considered crucial to the success of the campaign. The part which both organisations played throughout the life of BOOM was immense.

2.10 As far as additional funding was concerned, this was greatly assisted by contributions from the various accounting firms represented in the Liverpool area, thirty-three of whom became members in the first year of BOOM’s existence, and from the many other professional firms and business enterprises that signed up in any of three categories of corporate membership, which ranged from £2,000 down to £100 per year. Until the summer of 1988 the initiative employed no paid staff, all its administration being carried out “pro bono” by the offices of the Chairman or by the LSCA itself. So the majority of its modest budget was allocated towards the net costs (after sponsorship, in cash or in kind) of its meetings, promotional publications and events such as the conference at London’s Barbican Centre and the visitor tours of Merseyside. Total expenditure in the first year of operations was a little over £80,000.

Steering Group

2.11 By April 1987 the list of interested supporters was growing rapidly and the first of the regular steering group meetings had taken place. Those present included Arthur Green (as the national President of ICAEW and Grant Thornton’s senior partner); CBI regional director Andrew Toop; the director of the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce, Keith Robinson; Phil Redmond, founder of Mersey Television; Professor Michael Parkinson; Peter Rathe of the Midland Bank; Michael Potts of Coopers & Lybrand and several other senior chartered accountants, in addition to Nigel Packer and Geoffrey Piper. Over the coming years the steering group was to grow in size month by month and play a key role in developing a strong sense of partnership and inclusivity, with regular representation of the local authorities, local communities, the TUC, the arts, the educational sector and many other interest groups, all of whom were just as anxious to see a recovery in Merseyside’s economic and social well-being as the accountants and business people who were leading the campaign.

2.12 Also in attendance, both at that first steering group meeting and on many subsequent occasions, was George Pragnell, regional director of Business in the Community (BitC), the corporate
community engagement organisation which had been founded several years earlier and was enthusiastically presided over by HRH The Prince of Wales. The active involvement of BitC, and the close interest in BOOM’s activities which both His Royal Highness and his representatives took over a number of years, was to prove a key factor in the success of the initiative from its earliest days.

Good news stories

2.13 The relationship with the Daily Post and Echo was crucial from the outset. It was suggested at one of BOOM’s first meetings that an approach should be made to the editor of the Daily Post to ask whether his paper might set an example by carrying more “good news” stories and fewer of the “doom and gloom” variety which for years had dominated its pages. Even the local newspapers had fallen into the widespread national media habit of printing negative copy on Merseyside but it was readily recognised by the Post and Echo that this was not helpful to the area’s chances of ever recovering from the difficulties it was going through. An offer was made by the BOOM steering group to help by encouraging its own members to provide copy on business success stories of which they were aware. The outcome was that the Daily Post agreed to run a weekly “Good News” section for a while, with a series of articles on “Who Speaks Up for Merseyside?” Before long the success stories, and the whole idea of promoting a more positive image of the area, had started to filter through to the national media. Hence the Guardian piece entitled “BOOM – the crusade aiming to create a Merseyside miracle” which occupied a full page in its business section, welcoming the BOOM campaign and its determination to “proclaim the good news”. Other leading national papers soon picked up the baton and ran features on the bold new approach being taken by BOOM.

2.14 With such strong support, both morally and financially, the working group was now able to start planning its programme of events aimed at attracting positive media coverage for Merseyside, while at the same time starting to monitor a number of specific companies which were thought to be potential future investors in the Liverpool area.

2.15 From this point on, BOOM began to be recognised by many in the business community as the unofficial marketing or promotional agency for Merseyside. It had, from the outset, shared its proposed campaign with representatives of the local authorities whilst declaring itself committed to an apolitical stance as an organisation. It believed strongly in the need to speak out about the case for business investment and, following the abolition of the Merseyside County Council (MCC) in 1984, there was now an absence of any other such body in a position to speak for the entire region. The former chief economic advisor to MCC, Jack Stopforth, had however agreed to join the BOOM board, thus strengthening the close working relationship it enjoyed with each of the five local authorities of Liverpool, Knowsley, St Helens, Sefton and Wirral, as well as the Merseyside Development Corporation and, of course, its co-founder the Merseyside Task Force. So the board was now well versed in the political and economic, as well as the professional and industrial circumstances facing the region.

First major event

2.16 By the autumn of 1987 BOOM was ready to organise its first major promotional event for the region. This was duly held at the Barbican Centre in London in November 1987 - an ambitious one- day conference addressed by Michael Heseltine, as well as a number of other eminent speakers including Arthur Green (as President of the ICAEW), Professor Graeme Davies (Vice-Chancellor of the University of Liverpool), Sir Antony Pilkington (Chairman of Pilkington plc) and a cross-section of national and local politicians. The event attracted a high quality London audience, including over 200 senior decision-makers, and prompted the idea that those who had shown sufficient interest to attend the conference might also be invited to pay a visit to Merseyside and see for themselves just how much the area was improving. As we will shortly see, a significant number were to do just that the following June and this was to set the pattern for BOOM’s future campaigning.
Royal endorsement

2.17 In December 1987, just four weeks after the Barbican conference, the Prince of Wales brought a group of senior industrialists to Liverpool as part of a Business in the Community fact-finding programme, during which he took a leading part in an hour-long planning meeting with BOOM’s board, hosted by Geoffrey Piper at his firm’s offices and attended by an impressive array of senior directors of London financial institutions along with other significant opinion-formers. This official royal endorsement of BOOM added further to the initiative’s reputation and word soon started to spread around the City of London that Merseyside could now be worth taking a look at. Arrangements were promptly made to press ahead with the first of what, over the next few years, were to become regular BOOM “fact-finding” tours of Liverpool and Merseyside. This was to take place in June 1988, attracting over a hundred prospective investors, advisers and other interested business delegates, and, as we will discover later, was to prove a landmark event in terms of BOOM’s impact both nationally and locally.
Chapter 3
“Seeing is Believing” - BOOM’s Tours of Merseyside

The first BOOM tour

3.1 The call for delegates at the Barbican conference to be invited to Merseyside the following spring did not go unheeded. Despite the undeniable success of the Barbican event, and the rapid growth of support which BOOM was receiving from both the private and public sectors on Merseyside – and a noticeably more confident mood within the local business community - there was still relatively little investor interest from elsewhere around the UK. The only answer was to try and convert some of the doubters by making this first BOOM tour of Merseyside – in June 1988 - as informative and eyebrow-raising as possible.

3.2 At the BOOM planning meeting he attended shortly after the Barbican event, the Prince of Wales had emphasised the value he found in persuading people to actually visit the place which one was asking them to consider supporting. As the President of Business in the Community, he was to put this mantra into practice on numerous occasions, up and down the country, as the leader of BitC’s “Seeing is Believing” visits. BitC was keen to encourage a similar approach with BOOM and the proposal to stage a two-day tour of Merseyside was in his view an excellent opportunity.

3.3 BOOM’s board readily recognised that the tour would need to prove itself time well spent, in terms of its value to the busy executives taking part. In this respect it helped that, through the initiative of the Wallasey MP, Lynda Chalker, a specially sponsored executive British Rail Inter-City express train was laid on for the delegates to travel together from Euston to Liverpool early one Thursday morning. So they were able to pass valuable time with one another on the journey, as well as seeing some particularly good examples of regeneration once they arrived. It also helped that the Daily Telegraph published a four-page report three weeks ahead of the tour under the umbrella title “Business Opportunities on Merseyside” which featured articles on the formal opening of the Albert Dock complex by the Prince of Wales, some early signs of recovery for the Port of Liverpool, the developing role of the Merseyside Development Corporation, Plessey’s leading role in the creation of Wavertree Technology Park and other examples of the kind of forward-looking Merseyside enterprises which BOOM was seeking to promote. The tour duly visited these and a number of other forward-thinking businesses and the result was two busy days of constructive dialogue between a large party of London business people and some of Merseyside’s most enterprising executives.

Building bridges

3.4 BOOM’s board also recognised from the outset – and certainly in time to dispel the fears of the business leaders from London – the key role it needed to play in helping to build bridges across the political divide (or the political “chasm” as some observers had described it). This was still the biggest obstacle to attracting business. The adverse publicity which Liverpool had received from the city council’s confrontation with the Thatcher government was still acting as a powerful deterrent to serious private sector investment in the Liverpool area. But by the spring of 1988 there were clear signs that the more moderate regime which now held office at Liverpool Town Hall was endeavouring to rebuild relations, not only with government but also with the business world. So BOOM’s approach to Liverpool City Council, seeking permission to hold its tour’s closing dinner in the Town Hall for all the visiting business delegates was received a great deal more cordially than could ever have been expected a year or two earlier. The outcome was a magnificent civic dinner for the 150 delegates and their tour hosts with warm, welcoming speeches from business and civic leaders alike. This left those present, and particularly the visiting delegates, in no doubt that a corner had been turned. The years of Liverpool being notoriously divided by extreme politics were surely now coming to an end – the task from this
point onwards was to keep spreading that message and demonstrating its truth to all who were willing
to listen, or, better still, willing to come and see.

3.5 The undoubted success of this first major tour, the way in which all the various Merseyside
hosts played their part generously and positively, and the credibility which Merseyside had earned for
itself by publicly hosting so many significant opinion-formers and enabling them to see the area for
themselves, greatly encouraged the many new supporters whom BOOM was now attracting. The long
list of paid-up members, ranging from major corporates down to sole traders, and representing many
different industry sectors as well as public authorities and voluntary organisations, also gave BOOM
itself a new level of credibility and authority to speak for the area (see Appendix 2 for a list of members).
By now it had been formally incorporated as a company limited by guarantee and one of its board’s
earliest decisions was to employ its first (and for a further two years, its only) member of staff – Angela
Roberts, who joined as a general administrator and was destined to become in due course the highly-
respected Director of Communications for The Mersey Partnership, the joint public-private body into
which BOOM was eventually to be subsumed.

Promotional brochure and publicity

3.6 By the spring of 1988 BOOM’s growing budget had also enabled BOOM’s board of directors to
push ahead with the production, and distribution, of a promotional brochure to complement the
success of the Barbican event and provide an introduction to the June 1988 tour of Merseyside. This was
to be the first of five annual “glossy” BOOM brochures (in those pre-internet days, the “glossy” was
generally reckoned to be the most effective form of marketing material). Scripted by Jack Stopforth and
designed by David Jones, with a generous Foreword by Michael Heseltine and numerous attractive
photographs supplied by John Mills and Carl Fox, it was distributed to a long list of carefully selected
national and international business contacts. The language in that first edition was decidedly upbeat (as
it continued to be in subsequent editions). Contributors, including some of the most recent newcomers
to Merseyside, wrote enthusiastically about the quality of life in the area and there were persuasive
articles about property investment opportunities, the strength of Liverpool’s higher education
institutions, the productivity of its workforce, the quality of its arts and sporting institutions and many
other assets and attractions. Michael Heseltine’s Foreword praised “all sections of the local community
and their willingness to work together” and welcomed the whole “Business Opportunities On
Merseyside project” which he was certain would “make a significant contribution to Merseyside’s
growing confidence and prosperity” (see Appendix 1). Mr Heseltine had of course himself already made
a massive contribution towards the area’s future prosperity.

3.7 Prior to the 1988 tour the Daily Telegraph had published a four-page survey entitled “Business
Opportunities on Merseyside” which carried articles entitled “The viable new quality of Mersey”, “A safe
Port after years of storm” and “Developing into something special”, each of which provided living proof
that the national media was starting to give credit, and credibility, to the new Merseyside. “After years
of decline, to which the area’s negative image undoubtedly contributed, business leaders feel
sufficiently confident about the future to mount a major initiative aimed at wooing both investors and
tourists to the region. After only twelve months the Business Opportunities on Merseyside campaign, a
strategy devised by the accountancy profession, is already altering people’s perceptions” wrote Trevor
Bates.

Further tours of Merseyside

3.8 BOOM’s organisers certainly felt more confident about the future after they had delivered that
first tour for the targeted investors. There was growing confidence that BOOM’s lively programme of
promotional events could indeed provide the long-awaited answer for dispelling the doom and gloom of
the past decade. It did not take the board long to start planning further tours, two of which were to take
place in 1989. Major London-based corporates were again the principal target audience for these
events. The first of these, in April, was centred around some substantial business investments which had now been made in Liverpool, for which Glaxo, Charterhouse Tilney, Royal Insurance and Barclaycard all gladly opened their premises and provided generous hospitality whilst sharing the thinking behind their substantial recent investments. BOOM endeared itself to many of its distinguished guests by concluding this tour with a sporting Saturday – a visit to Liverpool John Moores University’s ground-breaking sports science department, followed by a lunchtime home match for Liverpool football club and, later that same afternoon, the world-famous Grand National steeplechase at Aintree.

3.9 The second of 1989’s two tours focused on the property sector, with Charles Hubbard, the senior partner of Edmund Kirby and chairman of the RICS Merseyside branch, leading a team of local commercial property advisers with support from the Merseyside Development Corporation and the Liverpool and Sefton councils. As The Times newspaper reported, they “played host to 65 key executives from City property institutions, chauffeuring them around Merseyside and pointing out the achievements and commercial opportunities yet to be seized”. This no doubt attracted the attention of other City executives down south as they commuted into their increasingly expensive capital.

Excellent partnership

3.10 The teamwork and goodwill provided by the whole Merseyside business community had become a key feature of BOOM’s tours and undoubtedly contributed to the success of these ambitious events and the positive mood which they engendered. Company executives were only too pleased to provide a warm welcome and generous hospitality to the visiting delegates. In the same way, Merseyside’s local authorities were always willing to provide advice and complimentary transport around their respective areas in a friendly and welcoming atmosphere. Without such excellent partnership, and particularly the way in which hosts gave so generously of their time, the tours could never have been as successful as they were.

3.11 BOOM’s impact in 1989 on prospective national and international investors was considerably enhanced by a variety of further high profile, prestigious events. A notable example was the special BOOM reception at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, hosted by Lynda Chalker as Minister of State. There was also the annual conference of the national Institute of Journalists, a European Commission trade briefing and other such opportunities to reach relevant influencers and opinion-formers. From each of these events, BOOM’s representatives invariably came away with new enquiries and contacts for Merseyside’s local authorities and other relevant agencies to follow up.

North West context

3.12 By this time Geoffrey Piper, as the chairman of BOOM, had been co-opted onto the board of Inward, which was the public-private inward investment agency for the North West as a whole. This included Greater Manchester, Cheshire, Lancashire and Cumbria as well as Merseyside itself. He was thus able to witness at first-hand the difficulties facing a pan-regional body charged with simultaneously marketing potential investment locations from across forty or fifty local authority areas. By the spring of 1990, in addition to chairing BOOM, Piper would also be running the newly-formed North West Business Leadership Team which, like Inward, covered the whole North West region from Cheshire to Cumbria. So it soon became clear to him just how fierce the competition was between the rival local areas. Merseyside’s offer was by now starting to provide more serious competition for other attractive sites in Cheshire, Lancashire and Greater Manchester, but it was essential for Merseyside’s representatives to be at the table when bodies such as Inward and, in due course, the North West’s regional development agency, were dealing with potential inward investment projects. There was no point in Merseyside acting in isolation from the rest of the North West given the volume of attractive sites becoming available across the wider region at that time.
3.13 BOOM’s strategy was to focus on identifying and inviting key decision-makers from outside the region, showing them the best of what Merseyside had to offer, giving them the facts and appropriate introductions, and then letting them form their own opinions on potentially interesting sites. It was still early days from the point of view of landing large numbers of projects, but most of the targeted investors at least went away with a considerably enhanced opinion of Merseyside’s investment potential, if not a specific proposition, and amongst an increasing number of business visitors the outdated and inaccurate images of the area were finally being dispelled.

Community engagement

3.14 Another principle of BOOM’s was to ensure that, wherever possible, the local population of Merseyside had the opportunity to engage with BOOM’s work. One high profile community organisation, the Eldonian Community Trust, which represented the severely disadvantaged community around Eldon Street in the Vauxhall ward of North Liverpool, was an outstanding example of community-led regeneration in the face of adversity, and a visit to this and other successful community initiatives was included wherever possible in the programme for BOOM’s fact-finding tours. The Eldonians initiative, led by Tony McGann, was to some outsiders something of an eye-opener as the local community demonstrated how, largely through their own ideas and efforts, they had achieved a transformation in their living standards, housing and employment opportunities. An area which had been devastated by the decline, and eventual closure in 1981, of a huge Tate & Lyle sugar refinery and factory, was eventually able to show some highly influential figures, such as HRH The Prince of Wales and prime minister Margaret Thatcher, just what could be achieved through positive, determined leadership allied to a clear vision of what was attainable. BOOM was honoured to play a small part in the Eldonians’ unique model of regeneration.

3.15 Young people were also invited to share in some of BOOM’s initiatives. With the opening of the new Tate Liverpool contemporary art gallery there were opportunities not only to include the Tate on some of BOOM’s tours but also to encourage visits by local families who might not otherwise have considered visiting the Tate. A highlight was the Children’s Painting Competition, organised and sponsored by BOOM in conjunction with the Liverpool Echo, SkyTours and the Tate. This attracted over a thousand entries from local children and some truly inspiring works from talented young artists, most of whom could never before have enjoyed such recognition. A large number of the children, their teachers and their families attended the prize-giving ceremony in the Tate, with the popular Liverpool comedian and impressionist Faith Brown presenting the awards. Whilst being clearly focused on the business opportunities for which it was established, BOOM’s strategy was always to recognise the importance of its message reaching as many people as possible across the whole community of Merseyside.

3.16 By the end of the 1980s, there was clear evidence of an overall improvement in perceptions of Merseyside as a business location and some transformational projects were under way or in the pipeline. A report in the Times dated 26 October 1989 featured a number of articles on visionary new proposals including a new, much longer runway at Liverpool Airport and a massive expansion of the Port of Liverpool so as to serve as America’s gateway to Europe. We were still a long way from delivering even an approximation of these visions as they were set out in that report, but if nothing else, at least people were once again beginning to think ambitious thoughts about Merseyside. Further strengthening of the hitherto relatively informal BOOM partnership was, from 1990 onwards, to add still further to the content and impact of its subsequent investment tours, as we shall see later.
Chapter 4
Pulling Together - A New Kind of Partnership

Key partners

4.1 As stated earlier, BOOM was not one of those initiatives which began with a book of instructions. However, given that its agreed aims clearly could not be met without re-establishing confidence in Merseyside as a location for investment and doing business, it had obviously been necessary first and foremost to set about cultivating a more positive media image of the area. This process needed to begin at home, so one of the first steps for BOOM’s founders at the Liverpool Society of Chartered Accountants to take had been to approach the Liverpool Daily Post and Echo, the region’s principal local newspaper group. It was also essential for them to discuss their proposals at the earliest opportunity with official government representatives - both central and local. So approaches were made at an early stage to the key appropriate bodies, particularly the Merseyside Task Force and the local authorities.

4.2 As we saw in Chapter 2, it did not take long for a close working relationship to develop with the Post and Echo. Once BOOM’s purpose was explained to the business editor and the purpose of the campaign explained, the paper was the first to agree that a responsible collaborative relationship was essential for the future prosperity of the marketplace in which they were operating. The Merseyside Task Force was similarly supportive, even to the extent of providing BOOM with its initial funding of £20,000, and each of Merseyside’s five local authorities were soon also signed up and became paid-up members of BOOM. Thus was already taking shape one of the first examples of private-public partnership in UK urban regeneration, and one of the very first to have been led and driven by the private sector – in this respect BOOM had borrowed something of the US ethos which had for many years seen utility companies, banks and other locally-run businesses driving the economic development of their area, with willing support from their elected local politicians.

Politically neutral

4.3 In the process of attracting its cross-party political support, whilst also recruiting and retaining a wide range of business members, BOOM was however undoubtedly breaking new ground. There was no doubting the desire of organisations, from across the political divide and from all industry sectors, to be part of the campaign. It was in everybody’s interest for it to succeed. Crucially the maintenance of this independent but balanced representation – with the lead coming from a trusted professional body - was fundamental to its continued success. Throughout its existence BOOM was to maintain a strictly neutral or apolitical stance, without which it would never have been possible to earn and retain the respect and support of all its public sector partners - an essential pre-requisite for a body determined to present a united, confident face in promoting the area to the outside world.

4.4 Indeed, throughout the mid-1980s, with the UK having one of its most right-wing governments and Liverpool City Council one of its most left-wing administrations, public opinion had become so polarised that any other approach would have been unthinkable. Nevertheless, in BOOM’s early days, it frequently found itself up against journalists and broadcasters who seemed determined to convey to nationwide audiences a belief that most of Merseyside was a no-go area. Nor did they miss an opportunity, if the national story was about strikes, or crime, or business failure, to pick on an example from Merseyside to illustrate their report. It did sometimes help that BOOM’s chairman had himself lived and worked in London and the south, and was able to remind reporters that such problems occurred all over the UK and not just in the Liverpool area. It certainly helped that, within the cross-party and cross-sectoral membership of BOOM’s board and steering committee, there was generally someone who was well placed to respond - if any response was merited – on particular issues affecting Merseyside.
Involvement of Merseyside MPs

4.5 Over time BOOM found itself enjoying ever-improving relations with the national media, and, from the moment BOOM took the initiative and established its own regular Parliamentary Advisory Committee - comprising local MPs from each of the largest three Parliamentary parties - it found itself increasingly well-respected as spokespeople for the Merseyside community. David Alton, Lynda Chalker and Robert Wareing joined BOOM’s chairman and two of its other directors who had policy or PR backgrounds, for regular quarterly meetings of this “BOOM Parliamentary Advisory Committee” during a key period in the initiative’s evolution between 1989 and 1992. The occasional working lunch at London’s Royal Horseguards Hotel provided members of BOOM’s board with an opportunity to discuss its progress and plans with the full range of Merseyside’s MPs, as it was already doing on a regular basis in Liverpool with representatives of the local authorities, educational institutions and TUC North West, as well as the local business community itself.

4.6 The views and ideas which this cross-party partnership brought to the table lent BOOM further credibility and authority as the initiative gathered momentum. Whilst its founders from the accountancy profession were naturally respected for their financial and professional judgment, and still well represented on BOOM’s board, the steering committee by now included a much wider range of private, public and voluntary sector interests – from the bosses of major companies to the regional TUC representative, from the chartered surveyor to the local politician. All were now participating actively at the meetings and providing a balanced and highly credible body of opinion on the state of Merseyside as a place to invest or in which to expand. The steering committee met every few weeks (47 meetings were held during BOOM’s six-year existence) so there was a consistency of strategy, adapted over time to take account of events and new circumstances, and regularly fuelled by fresh ideas from new members - particularly those who spoke for a sector new to the group. The format of the meetings, held throughout the life of BOOM at the LSCA’s offices with the members arranged in one large circle, helped to facilitate creative but realistic thinking as well as building a powerful consensus on the best way forward for the campaign.

4.7 Meanwhile the opportunity for regular networking, in a forward-thinking environment, encouraged a consistently good attendance at the meetings. Little wonder that its members happily paid their annual subscriptions. Merseyside had not exactly been known for consensus building in recent times, but at least BOOM’s cross-sectoral composition now provided a forum for collective, constructive thinking. And as the initiative gathered pace, and recruited new members from across the political divide, its profile grew rapidly – both locally and nationally.

Future ambitions

4.8 From its position of relative strength, in terms of business experience as well as political balance, BOOM was able to move ahead with further high profile events both on Merseyside and in London. Following the positive feedback on the industrial and property tours of 1989, plans were put in place for a one-day conference on “Merseyside in the 90s” at London’s Barbican centre and, in the summer and autumn of 1990, two further investor tours of Merseyside covering respectively the role of Liverpool’s universities in the development of the Merseyside economy and the unique strengths of its cultural and leisure industries.

4.9 The “Merseyside in the 90s” event, held in March 1990, was an exceptional occasion which showed just how far the area had come since the dark days of the mid-1980s. It began with an afternoon conference in the Barbican Centre which was chaired by Sir Philip Carter, the chairman of Merseyside Development Corporation, and addressed by Geoffrey Piper as chairman of BOOM, followed by Councillor Keva Coombes as leader of Liverpool City Council, Professor John Tarn of the University of Liverpool, Sir Michael Angus as chairman of Unilever, John Last as chairman of the Royal Liverpool
Philharmonic Society (RLPO) and the Rt Hon David Hunt, Cabinet Minister and a Wirral MP. This panel of speakers not only demonstrated once again the all-embracing nature of BOOM’s support but also reminded those present of the breadth of Merseyside’s strengths and expertise – its industrial, academic and cultural excellence – alongside its renewed political balance, its quality of life and its commitment to investing in the future.

Celebration

4.10 The conference delegates were then treated in the evening to the RLPO’s 150th anniversary celebration concert in the magnificent Barbican Hall, with the orchestra under its world-renowned principal conductor Libor Pesek providing a further example of Liverpool’s exceptional cultural excellence. The organisers of this day of celebration left that night with an immense sense of pride at having hosted, in London, such an impressive overall demonstration of Merseyside’s many strengths and its renewed confidence. Incredibly, BOOM at this stage was still operating with just one paid member of staff, Angela Roberts, and although it was soon to recruit one further part-time employee – Margaret Bowker, who joined from May 1990 - much of the work surrounding these major events was still being supported by the directors or steering group members on a pro bono basis.

Further tours of Merseyside

4.11 No sooner had the dust settled on this Barbican event than BOOM was busy arranging two further tours of Merseyside for prospective investors. The first of these was to take place over three days in July 1990, centred on the University of Liverpool. The focus of this event, the brainchild of Professor Sir Graeme Davies, was upon distinguished alumni of the University, who were invited back to their alma mater to witness not only the many new additions to the University of Liverpool but also a host of regenerated sites around the city, ranging from Albert Dock and Wavertree Technology Park, to Paul McCartney’s visionary restoration of his own old school, the Liverpool Institute, as the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts (LIPA). Only a few weeks earlier, McCartney – accompanied by his wife Linda – had given a memorable open air concert on Liverpool’s south docks in support of the LIPA project, prompting the thought amongst some of BOOM’s supporters that this unique waterfront location could one day provide the perfect, permanent venue for such concerts, as well as for conferences and exhibitions and other major events. It was to take another two decades, but it was a prescient thought.

4.12 The final BOOM event of 1990 focused on Merseyside’s increasingly successful cultural and leisure industries. In addition to visits to the renowned Walker Gallery and the still relatively new Tate Liverpool, the entire party of visitors was treated to the Royal Shakespeare Company and Opera North’s touring production of “Showboat” at Liverpool’s Empire Theatre. This tour emphasised the significance of the region’s ever-expanding cultural and recreational attractions, in the context of relocation strategy. Quality of life was increasingly being recognised as a major factor and BOOM was alive to the importance of encouraging, amongst its visitors, an appreciation not only of the commercial and industrial opportunities offered by the area, but also the outstanding cultural, recreational and social amenities. These were to play a key role in the revival of the Merseyside economy over the next two decades, as Liverpool earned itself the accolade of European Capital of Culture in 2008 – an honour which was not only richly-deserved but also highly catalytic in paving the way for the city to establish itself as one of the UK’s top international visitor markets.

4.13 The year 1990 had also seen BOOM commissioning a comprehensive, independent review of its structure, its impact to date and its optimum future role. This is covered in detail in the following chapter but suffice it to say that, for the time being, BOOM was to continue in much the same vein, staging partnership and confidence-building events and sectorally-themed promotional tours of Merseyside for potential investors and opinion-formers, for a further three years.
Burying the past

4.14 One particular event, branded “Open for Business” and held during the week of the 1991 Open Golf Championship at Royal Birkdale, attracted a particularly strong delegation. Its opening conference session in Liverpool’s Adelphi Hotel featured a memorable speech by Councillor Harry Rimmer, the new-style moderate labour leader of Liverpool City Council. The panel of speakers at this BOOM event included the Inner Cities Minister, Michael Portillo, who had that day announced the award to Liverpool of substantial “City Challenge” funding. This was a competitive and very effective form of selective UK government funding for urban regeneration. In expressing his pleasure at Liverpool receiving the award, Rimmer took the opportunity to outline his determination to finally bury the past years of mismanagement and what he described as the “decay in the city”. Speaking passionately to a captivated audience, he continued:

“What was needed was a fundamental shift. We had the worst services anywhere in the UK. It was the most costly but in terms of what people got its performance was abysmal. We were grossly overstuffed in some departments because of the thinking that had been developed over previous years. It has been difficult to change a culture and convince people that council services aren’t there to provide the maximum number of jobs for the most people, but Liverpool needs to rise to its challenge and become more efficient, and come to terms with the realities of the modern world and modern life.”

4.15 Rimmer’s speech was greeted with tumultuous applause, led by Portillo. The advent of the moderate regime may have been long overdue, and there were times when some feared this day would never arrive. But, as the courageous new leader of the city was finding, there was now a huge sense of relief across Merseyside’s whole business community that the city had finally returned to the “realities of the modern world”. There was a genuine feeling that a new dawn had broken.
Chapter 5
Passing on the Baton - towards a new “City Region”

Numerous public bodies

5.1 The 1990s had started well for Merseyside, and particularly for the city of Liverpool, with widespread acceptance of the moderate regime at the Town Hall. It had also started well for BOOM, which continued to enjoy ever-increasing support from across the whole region. Its 140 paid-up members included businesses of all sizes from one-man bands to multi-nationals, as well as a host of public bodies including all Merseyside’s local authorities, the Merseyside Task Force, MDC, the Merseyside Tourism and Convention Bureau, the University of Liverpool, the Liverpool Polytechnic (soon to become Liverpool John Moores University) and many other private, public and third sector partners. Its conferences, tours, dinners and other such events continued to attract large audiences and frequent media coverage. More importantly, there was now ample evidence that Merseyside’s economy had finally started to recover from the dreadful state in which it had been for much of the seventies and eighties.

5.2 However there still remained a need for proactive marketing of Merseyside for business investment and, as the spectre of extremist politics was being swept away, there was a greater than ever opportunity to promote the opportunities presented by the new, business-friendly regime. Nevertheless, despite its ever-increasing list of supporters, there were inevitable limitations on the capacity of BOOM to continue playing such a leading role for Merseyside. There also had eventually to be some questions over its suitability as a small, private sector-led initiative to carry indefinitely the responsibility for marketing the area as a place to invest, live or visit. Through the dark days of the 1980s, when the local authorities had neither the funds nor the credibility to undertake place marketing, BOOM had been a convenient vehicle through which some active promotion of the area could be conducted. But by the early 1990s it was becoming apparent that there was a need to look at some form of partnership approach which recognised more clearly the responsibility of the public authorities for marketing their respective areas, whilst retaining the advantages of engaging leading business voices on an ongoing basis.

Secondment

5.3 In the early spring of 1990 the Chairman of Shell UK, Sir Bob Reid, approached BOOM’s chairman Geoffrey Piper offering the secondment of one of Shell’s high-flying young graduates, Nadine Stubbs, who was to work with BOOM for three months entirely at Shell’s expense. The oil giant had previously incurred the wrath of many for its serious pollution of the River Mersey and, although it was also facing a £1 million fine for this massive environmental damage, it recognised that it still owed society as a whole, and Merseyside in particular, more than a few favours.

5.4 The secondment of Ms Stubbs was a popular move – she had arrived strongly recommended by Sir Bob and she threw herself into the challenge of independently assessing the work of BOOM, consulting as widely as possible with key figures across the public, private and third sectors on its most appropriate role in the future; and putting forward recommendations which recognised the opportunities and changing circumstances now pertaining in the region.

Key findings

5.5 At the conclusion of her secondment, Nadine Stubbs’ presented her key findings, which stated that BOOM had proved successful in:
• Bringing together key members of the Merseyside community from sectors which have traditionally polarised, i.e. private and public. It has contributed to the achievement of a level of consensus and trust which many thought impossible five years ago. It has done this by bringing people together in an unthreatening forum to talk about the positive sides of the region in which they operate. It has also encouraged joint lobbying and programmes to show a united face to the outside world.

• Boosting the morale of Merseysiders by highlighting the positive and unique attributes of their region, thereby encouraging their sense of well-being.

• Producing the highest quality promotional material and events for external potential investors. This has appeared to enhance the Merseyside image for some investors and has probably contributed to some new investment.

• Providing a focal point for the media to obtain reports from Merseyside.

5.6 To help identify BOOM’s appropriate role into the 1990s, Ms Stubbs’ report went on to say:

“Boom began as a small initiative and developed very quickly into a highly professional, enthusiastic and efficient organisation. It is recognised as having played a considerable role in boosting the self-confidence of those working and living on Merseyside. Its events and activities are consistently high quality. However it is in danger of becoming a victim of its own success, for it has been called upon to diversify its activities and act as a co-ordinator for a wide variety of initiatives on Merseyside. It does not have the resources to promote the image of Merseyside on all fronts.

Its key challenge is to build on its strengths and clarify its position and services in relation to other agencies on Merseyside. There is definitely a role for BOOM and it should continue to develop as the representative of the business community on Merseyside, ensuring that any opportunity to reach its target audience (the UK business community) is not missed and providing an excellent proactive and reactive response to the UK and international media for the Merseyside members of BOOM. The media should be harnessed and cultivated as allies. It should continue to provide a focal point for developing high quality promotional literature about Merseyside specifically for its target audience.”

Maintaining the momentum

5.7 Extensive discussions and consultations ensued following receipt of Nadine Stubbs’ report and the conclusion of her secondment. For the time being BOOM maintained the momentum of marketing Merseyside with its ongoing programme of high profile events for prospective business investors and the production of its high quality brochures which were distributed to intermediaries, opinion-formers and potential future investors. BOOM’s fourth annual brochure, entitled “Merseyside in the 90s”, was issued in the summer of 1990. It raised the prospect of a major revival of the Port of Liverpool as “America’s Gateway to Europe” and emphasised the rapid progress being made by the high technology and tourism sectors, as well as the excellent quality of life offered by the area’s sporting and cultural amenities. With a foreword by the ever-supportive Prince of Wales and company profiles on twelve major recent investors, including Ford, Glaxo, Premier Brands and Unilever, it demonstrated renewed pride in the city region and growing confidence that “those who invest in Merseyside in the 1990s will in a very short time be glad to have done so”.

5.8 BOOM’s ever closer working relationship with the region’s local authorities and economic development agencies enabled its promotional events to be enhanced and diversified over the next few years, with tours promoting advanced technology and an increasing range of cultural and leisure attractions which did much to sow the seeds for future growth in the visitor economy. In 1992 BOOM’s
staff were heavily involved in Merseyside’s week-long programme of high profile events celebrating the Columbus Quincentennial “Tall Ships” race, which attracted huge numbers of first-time visitors to Merseyside including the King and Queen of Spain, with television audiences around the world being introduced to the spectacle of Liverpool’s magnificent waterfront. This event, which had been foreseen in the Guardian article back in July 1987 as a potential culmination of BOOM’s work, was to provide a fitting climax to five highly successful years of ambitious and dedicated campaigning.

5.9 Meanwhile, behind the scenes, BOOM’s board had started to host periodic private dinners with influential guests such as the cabinet secretary, Sir Robin Butler, and the chief executives of major businesses such as Morgan Grenfell, Royal Insurance and News International. Senior executives of successful Merseyside companies, accompanied by a new breed of entrepreneurial local authority chief executives, were able at these dinners to impress upon national opinion-formers the suitability of the area as a location for their operations, in a more intimate environment than had been possible at BOOM’s larger events. Ever closer working relationships between the region’s town halls and board rooms were now reaping increasingly significant rewards and it was clear that Merseyside was ready to move on towards the 21st century with a fully-fledged public-private partnership representing all sectors of the city region’s economic development.

Unification

5.10 It was now clear to BOOM’s board that, with Merseyside’s local authorities attaching much greater importance to economic development, and committed to working closer than ever with the private sector, the time had come to pass on the baton to the new joint partnership now taking shape. Following a due process of detailed consultation led by the Merseyside Task Force, and some well-attended meetings of BOOM’s own members and directors, a unified model of public-private partnership was agreed upon and duly incorporated in the name “The Mersey Partnership” (TMP). By the spring of 1993 TMP had appointed its first chief executive, Christopher Gibaud; put together a fully representative board which included seats for each of Merseyside’s local authorities as well as key private sector employers, the universities and other representatives of the community as a whole; and recruited its initial management team which included both of BOOM’s former employees, Angela Roberts and Margaret Bowker. The new, more formal partnership was ready to embrace the challenges of the millennium years on behalf of a Merseyside now well set on the road to recovery.
Why did BOOM cease operating?

6.1 A quarter of a century has now elapsed since BOOM closed its Royal Liver Building doors and bequeathed its long list of members, its healthy bank balance and its excellent staff team to The Mersey Partnership. Some said that it had stopped too soon, that it was the perfect model of how to promote a city region for business investment and that it should have continued for as long as its growing membership numbers continued to pay their subscriptions and voice their approval. Others had felt, for some while before the closure, that BOOM had served its purpose - it had stepped into the role of speaking up for Merseyside at a time when others were failing to do so, but was right to pass on the baton once the public authorities were showing themselves equipped and minded to resume the responsibility.

6.2 As one who was closely involved throughout the initiative and for much of the life of its successor body, I have no regrets. I believe we had been right to step forward and speak for the city in its hour of need. It was of course important, indeed essential, for us to do so in close collaboration with the elected leaders and senior officials of the region’s public authorities, and to invite them to be represented on BOOM’s board. This we had done, and although occasionally there were one or two “territorial disputes” we enjoyed throughout BOOM’s life the many mutual benefits of exchanging our different points of view in a constructive manner and on a regular basis. We readily recognized from the outset that it was unusual, perhaps unique at this time in the UK, for the marketing and promotion of an administrative area to be undertaken primarily by a private sector-led partnership. But soon there was a growing acceptance across Merseyside’s public sector that the region’s leading businesses and their representatives had to play a leading role in enhancing the image and reputation of the area, especially in such challenging times. After all, these were the very people to whom the community were looking to create the prosperity and employment opportunities which were so desperately needed.

6.3 As the results showed, the combination of BOOM’s private sector leadership, with its marketing skills, professional judgment and business acumen, working alongside the democratically-elected representatives of the whole local community, for the most part worked extremely well. But private sector leadership was still not the norm, at least not in the UK. Perhaps inevitably, therefore, once all Merseyside’s local authorities were ready to resume their marketing role, it was considered more appropriate and democratically accountable for a more orthodox municipal partnership model to be adopted. Hence the creation of The Mersey Partnership (TMP), which was carefully constructed under the supervision of the Merseyside Task Force and, from April 1993, was given responsibility for the marketing of Merseyside, and in due course the Liverpool City Region (LCR). It was to continue in this role until the formation of the Local Enterprise Partnership almost two decades later. With the combined resources of the local authorities, the MDC and the Merseyside Tourism and Convention Bureau, and the healthy business membership which it inherited from BOOM, TMP had the necessary stability, expertise and accountability to meet the challenge of building confidence in Merseyside as a location for successful business investment. It was well equipped to build upon BOOM’s own work.

What can we learn from BOOM?

6.4 The experience of BOOM’s six years of leading the promotion of Merseyside could perhaps merit further study in the context of today’s constantly changing, and sometimes confusing, economic development structures. As stated earlier, private sector leadership of city regions has not traditionally been a concept readily recognized in Britain, though it is interesting to trace the growth in recent years of successful business leaders being appointed as chairs of public bodies. Moreover, private sector-led
partnerships are the norm in many places around the world, most notably in the US where city partnerships are often driven and funded by local private sector employers – typically a consortium of utility companies, local banks, property investors and other major commercial entities which have long-term commitments to the relevant region. Whilst BOOM could never be said to have been based consciously upon the US model, it was nevertheless motivated by similar needs – to achieve and sustain a more prosperous, optimistic and harmonious community. As we saw earlier in this report, BOOM’s origins owed as much to desperation as to inspiration, and those “new kids on the block” who arrived on Merseyside back in 1986 (the FT’s “Class of ’86”) soon found that some things simply weren’t happening unless you did them yourself. For them, as for the many others who were suffering the consequences of uncertain municipal leadership, necessity had been the mother of invention.

Where are we now?

6.5 Thanks to the efforts of so many dedicated Merseyside people throughout the past quarter of a century, and to the relative stability achieved by politicians of all parties, both locally and nationally during that period, the Liverpool city region has progressed beyond many people’s expectations. Indeed over the past twenty years, as recent figures reported by the Centre for Cities (May 2018) have shown, the size of the Liverpool economy has doubled and, amongst England’s major cities, it has been second only to London in its overall rate of growth.

6.6 Nevertheless, despite all the progress that has been made, there is still a feeling of unfinished business – one of shame at the numbers of long-term unemployed; at the inequalities so evident across the vastly different wards that make up each of the districts of Merseyside; at the frequency with which once-great businesses, as well as enterprising new ventures, are reported to be facing closure. But the region is on a journey, and on the whole the direction of travel is positive. The city region, and particularly the city of Liverpool itself, is immeasurably better off than it was three decades ago. BOOM helped to turn the proverbial tanker round and point it in the right direction. The Mersey Partnership built upon BOOM’s initiative and set the region on the path to increasingly rapid growth. And now the Liverpool City Region’s local enterprise partnership, working with the region’s combined authority and supported by Liverpool Vision, Invest Liverpool and other such dedicated groups, has the opportunity to set it once more on a truly global journey. With the lessons of the past still very much alive in many citizens’ memories, it is to be hoped that it will continue to do so collaboratively, imaginatively and inclusively and above all – in the words of BOOM’s own mission statement – “in a manner conducive to attracting long term capital investment so as to enhance the economic and employment prospects of the area”. We have a long way still to travel.
Appendices

1. How the national and regional media saw it – some examples of contemporary press coverage
   - ‘BOOM – the crusade aiming to create a Merseyside miracle’ (The Guardian, 14 July 1987)
   - ‘The viable new quality of Mersey’ (The Daily Telegraph, 24 May 1988)
   - ‘Boom from Gloom – how Merseyside turned optimism to realism and won the confidence of industry and new investment’ (The Times, 22 May 1989)
   - ‘No more begging-bowls’ (The Times, 22 May 1989)
   - ‘Task ahead is not easy but is essential’ (Daily Post, 5 July 1989)
   - ‘The Class of ’86 settles down’ (Financial Times, 19 October 1989)
   - ‘Confidence is up in a region on the mend’ (Daily Post, 21 March 1990)
   - ‘University courts alumni with a degree of success’ (The Independent, 9 July 1990)

2. Forewords to the BOOM brochures
   - Rt Hon Michael Heseltine, 1988
   - Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, 1989
   - HRH The Prince of Wales, 1990

3. Members of BOOM

4. Directors of BOOM

5. Photographs
BOOM - the crusade aiming to create a Merseyside miracle

SENior company executives and politicians will gather in Liverpool tonight to hear about the beginnings of an industrial revival. It has all the classic indicators including multimillion-pound investment schemes and a quickening commercial property market. For some in the audience it might prove a revelation. It is happening in a place called Merseyside.

Tonight's meeting, in the restored splendours of the Albert Dock, is to launch a national crusade. Its purpose is to proclaim the good news about a region long-established as the epitome of recession, and to increase the flow of essential inward investment. A £25m budget has been collected, 15,000 booklets are being prepared and Michael Heseltine will be among the region's champions addressing the city in November, possibly with the Prince of Wales. The code-word is "boom."

Geoffrey Piper, senior partner in the Liverpool office of accountants Deloitte Haskins and Sells, was inspired by the acronym for "Business Opportunities on Merseyside" while shaving. He came to Liverpool after 12 years in Jersey: "From Bergerac to Brookside." Public perceptions of the two areas could not be more different. When first offered the move to Liverpool, he changed his normal 48 hours consideration period into a fortnight.

Twelve months after his arrival, he proclaims the supremacy of Merseyside with the zeal of profound conversion. Ask him why anyone should want to invest in the region and you receive a eulogy about motorway communications, the character and industry of the country's finest labour force, ease of commuting, range of culture and the chance to make as much money as in the south without the attendant "hassle." There is only one problem: the rest of the world is not hearing about it.

"If people in Liverpool don't speak for the area, who the hell will?" demands Geoffrey Piper. Boom emerged out of his frustration. It has drawn together representatives of the regional chamber of commerce, CBI, the task force set up by the Government after the 1981 riots and other investment bodies, professional organisations and major companies. The unions are, as yet, unlisted.

A core group of four or five plans the campaign and a steering group of 18 fill in the detail. A £1,000-plus donation enables larger companies to have a steering group representative.

The task force is now considering "a very substantial contribution" one of the five district councils has already paid up and another has a contribution under consideration. Boom has also acquired a roving evangelist, Arthur Green, senior partner of Grant Thornton and the first Liverpool-based president of the Institute of Chartered Accountants for more than 80 years. His speeches, the length and breadth of England and Wales, offer golden opportunities.

It says much for Geoffrey Piper's insistent diplomacy to have inspired such a coalition in a city where neutrality has fallen out of most dictionaries. "We see it as a catalyst to all the organisations: as being complementary, not supplanting them," he said. "We see ourselves very much as an action group." Behind such statements might lurk implicit criticism of the various bodies established already on Merseyside to promote the region and demolish myths. Geoffrey Piper prefers to look ahead activating one of the three 'unwritten rules' to a region where the romantic past has sometimes become a comfortable bolt-hole for the traumas of the present. Boom's other aims are simply: "We must be positive and we must do things, not just talk."

On November 10, at the Barbican Centre, the city will have its first taste of the new Mersey challenge when Michael Heseltine, the former "Minister for Merseyside," as he is still remembered, will outline the region's regeneration. The "different shade" of Labour council is one essential political plank. The other, for an apolitical organisation, is central government's newly-discovered enthusiasm for inner-city regeneration. "The lady's not for turning, but she is for veering," said Geoffrey Piper.

Boom does not minimise the difficulties, whether perceptual or as actual as the lingering dole queues which high technology investment can sometimes lengthen. Its founders envisage at least a three-year programme: more likely extending to 1992 and the Tall Ships race spectacle.

The alternative is stark: the fulfilment of a death wish Geoffrey Piper senses when Liverpudlian pessimism overflows. No one else will shout on the region's behalf. "We've got to keep selling the area: otherwise, fundamentally, the decline will continue."

Martyn Halsall on the Bergerac to Brookside mission of Geoffrey Piper

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The viable new quality of Mersey

A safe port after years of storm

Containerisation and the switch to freepost status have helped transform Mersey Docks, as John Petty reports.
Boom from gloom

How Merseyside turned optimism to realism and won the confidence of industry and new investment

It is entirely appropriate that the initial letters of the organization formed to stimulate increased commercial and industrial activity in Liverpool and Merseyside, should form the word so beloved by headline writers in tabloid newspapers to describe periods of economic growth.

Business Opportunities On Merseyside (BOOM), is a joint initiative by the Liverpool Society of Chartered Accountants and the government’s Merseyside Task Force, formed with the aim of encouraging a wider appreciation of all that the city and region had to offer to assist in its regeneration.

It is now supported by more than 120 organizations in the public and private sectors and is acknowledged to have played a valuable role in creating a new air of business and commercial confidence in the area.

The driving force behind the organization is Geoffrey Piper, the chairman of its board, and the head of the Liverpool office of the accountancy firm, Deloitte, Haskins and Sells.

“When we started it was one per cent perspiration, one per cent inspiration and 98 per cent desperation,” he says. “Then, after a year, other people began to share our optimism. Now it is no longer optimism but realism. The future looks so much brighter than in did only a year ago.”

Piper says that the organization set out with a three-phased programme. The first two, to stem the tide of companies moving out of Liverpool and Merseyside and the re-building of business confidence in those remaining, have been achieved.

The third is to attract substantial inward investment and that is now beginning to happen. The property scene, both residentially and commercially, is proving attractive to developers anxious to find a stake in the city and there is, he says, massive investment by companies.

“We are now seeing the concrete results of the increased confidence we have been striving for. We are seeing massive increased investments by companies which until now just didn’t have the confidence in the future of the area. There are concrete examples of people putting their money where their mouth is.”

As part of the drive to sell the attractions of Liverpool and Merseyside, BOOM has taken leaders of industry and commerce to the city to show them the truth behind some of the more lurid headlines. It has also taken its wares to the heart of the City in London with a presentation and conference in the Barbican.

Piper remains a realist though. He says there is still much work to be done and it is essential that the new more moderate regime in the city council maintains the new era of confidence it has created.
Among those who believe that Liverpool is in for better times is Keva Coombe, the leader of the Labour-controlled city council. "The worst is undoubtedly over. We can still be blown off course by national events of course but I am convinced that we have more reason to be optimistic now than for many years," he says.

"The days when the council was seen as an obstacle by the private sector have gone and, although it took some time and a lot of hard work to convince people of that, they are convinced now."

Coombe said that there was also now a more pragmatic approach to working together between the council and central government agencies. There were hopes of persuading some major government departments to relocate to the city. "We would like to see a government department set up in the city but the days are gone when we adopted a begging bowl attitude, saying that we deserved it."

"Now it's more a case of what we can do for them; its not so much Liverpool needing civil servants, but the Civil Service needing Liverpool."
Task ahead is not easy but it's essential

by Geoffrey Piper, chairman of BOOM

MANY of Merseyside's economic and social problems can be attributed directly or indirectly to the comparative lack of private sector investment in the area in recent years. The position has improved to some extent since 1987 but Merseyside still fares relatively poorly in comparison with other regions of the UK.

The principal obstacles to investment in this area are its image, infrastructural deficiencies, and negative perceptions about the quality of the workforce. All these areas have to be addressed urgently if Merseyside is to attract its share of the huge potential of inward investment currently being attracted to the regions.

Images cannot be changed overnight and there will be a time lag between change taking place and that change being recognised elsewhere. Moreover, it takes much longer to build a good reputation than to lose one.

Merseyside's only answer to this problem is consistent sound management (both in the public and private sectors) over a substantial period of years, combined with a policy designed to promote the area; i.e. to talk it up whenever the opportunities present themselves. This is what the BOOM initiative is dedicated to achieving, but we recognise we have a long way still to go.

Merseyside's infrastructure suffers many of the disadvantages common to areas which developed principally in the 19th century. In recent years there has been very substantial investment in services such as water and power, but there remain very urgent needs in respect of the modernisation of the electricity supply and waste disposal if industry is to operate efficiently in the area.

Possibly the most serious problem of all remains the widely-held perception that the typical workforce in Merseyside is unco-operative and unproductive.

This largely misleading image costs Merseyside millions of pounds of investment, and thousands of jobs, every year. The truth is that net output per head is consistently higher on Merseyside than the national average, and that industrial relations are on the whole excellent - a recent survey showed that 93pc of the companies operating in the area have never experienced a strike.

But if we are to improve our image, and attract all those additional jobs, we must all unite together

Geoffrey Piper

English Estates' city flats
IN 1986 Mr. Geoffrey Piper, who had spent 13 years building the operations of Deloitte, Haskins & Sells, the accountants, in Jersey, the largest Channel Islands offshore financial centre, was waiting for promotion.
When the offer came, he went home to tell Sue, his wife. He recalls: "It's in Liverpool," I said. I shall never forget the look on her face. But we needed a change. Her attitude was, 'Well, I think we ought to at least have a look.'
They took three or four months to make up their minds. "My impression was that this was a city going through an awful time but that other British cities had gone through bad times but they solved their own problems," Mr. Piper says. "After all, this was not Beirut."
There was no problem for the Pipers' three teenage daughters. Offshore financial centres are desert islands in terms of entertainment for teenagers. They saw nothing but good from the move.

Not that this cut much ice with those not involved. "When I said we were moving to Liverpool, friends in Jersey and London said that we must be mad," Mr. Piper says.

There were several other outsiders in the same category whom he calls "the class of '86". They include Mr. Robert Toomey, a Welsh-born venture capitalist with Investors in Industry (36), who moved from the Manchester office to take charge in Liverpool.

Another one was Mr. Brian Thaxter, the incoming regional director of Barlays, the biggest bank in Merseyside, who shook up the organisation and increased its thrust and impact on local affairs dramatically.

Professor Graeme Davies did a similar thing at Liverpool University, making an impact from the moment he arrived as vice-chancellor.

Like the Pipers, they all arrived uncluttered by local history, ready to evaluate Liverpool not for its naval-continental uniqueness, but against other cities, such as Nottingham, where Mr. Toomey had begun his career with Boots before moving to 36, or Sheffield, where Professor Davies, a New Zealander, had seen another major city in decline and undergoing change.

Though born locally, Mr. Tim Johnson, a partner with Peat Marwick McLintock, the accountants, looked set for a City career in the mid-1980s.

He had done a high profile secondment to the St. Helens Trust to introduce the enterprise agency's ground-breaking business expansion syndicate. He then moved to London to write a report for the Government on the future of the Business Expansion Scheme generally.

"People in London thought I was mad to come back here," he says. "It was around the time of the Heysel Stadium disaster, in 1985, when Liverpool's image was mud all over the world. But the quality of life here is good. I live in a nice area but I'm only 20 minutes from the office."

Mr. Piper says: "We didn't have a culture shock, but a culture surprise. In Jersey the theatre was amateur dramatics because you had to make your own entertainment. We kept sane by always having trips off the island written into our diaries. "To come to a place with a world-class orchestra, four splendid theatres, and half a dozen national museums and art galleries was wonderful."

Ironically, the Pipers and Toomeys clashed accidentally, double-gazumping each other to buy the house in Parkgate. Wirral, of Mr. Nicholas Barber, chief executive of the Ocean Group, who was moving to London. The Toomeys won. The Pipers consoldied themselves by buying well in Willaston nearby. 'Not all was sweetness and enlightenment. 'The first stumbling block I came across was trying to persuade other senior managers to move here, too,' Mr. Piper says.

Deloittes is auditor to the Royal, Littlwoodes, Plessey, Mersey Docks, Royal Liver, Charterhouse Tilney and Alsops. It employs 200 people, of whom 100 are auditors. Retirement meant there were senior jobs going.

"I was trailing jobs around our London office. I was saying that I had come up here and bought a house twice as big as theirs for half the price they paid for theirs in the south. It didn't make much impression. It was quite clear we had an image problem," Mr. Piper recalls.

He met Mr. George Pragnell, head of Business in the Community's operation in the north-west, and officers of the Government's Merseyside Task Force. He decided to start his own bridge and image building by creating a promotional body called Boom - Business.
Merseyside booms as sparkle replaces tarnished image

Confidence is up in a region on the mend

by Stephen Suckley

MERSEYSIDE'S image - tarnished by strikes, militant politics and the inability of its people to shoot themselves in the foot - is on the mend again.

No longer are investors, customers, tourists or outsiders in general able to shun the place out of hand, as somewhere put to be seen, or to be doing business with.

A recent steady and progressive track record has made the rest of the country sit up and take notice. Liverpool and Merseyside are getting the message across and it's no longer falling on deaf ears.

And, while the image has seen some vigorous polishing, it has been sided by a number of other positive factors, which, when combined, are putting the region back on the map again.

Co-operation

An important factor is the strength of the local economy, which continues to perform well in the face of high interest rates and general economic uncertainty.

Investment on a local level is continuing and is being welcomed by the community, but growing locally from outside. Growth in the attraction of investment has been close co-operation between the private and public sectors. A formula that has worked well elsewhere has been called for in Merseyside, perhaps a little late in the day, but better late than never.

Many observers feel the strong will to get the region's act together could not have come at a better time.

Firms in the South and South East and London in particular are leaving at an alarming rate, pushed out by an oversaturated economy, high rates and roads congestion.

They have to relocate somewhere, and Merseyside feels more capable now of attracting its fair share. More and more firms are realising the benefits of locating in an area where rates are lower - and with the United Business Rate Bill.

BUSINESS Opportunities On Merseyside is a private sector initiative, started nearly four years ago by the Institute of Merseyside and Liverpool Merseyside.

It has also Government backing through involvement of the Department of Trade and Industry.

Its brief is to promote Merseyside to the rest of the country and beyond and show the region in the best light possible.

Despite criticism since its inception, it can show a great deal of intangible success and some tangible success. It has:

- Brought the awareness of Merseyside and helped to dispel many of the myths held by those down south.

- Helped bring health-care company St Michael's Hospital to the region.

- Contributed to the introduction of American company South Eastern Bell for work with Otayson Cables in Merseyside and Lancashire.

- Persuaded Leading London-based Business Expansion schemes promoters Johnstone Fry to feature the Mersey waterfront in its latest investment scheme.

Prospects 'looking good

OPINION makers on Merseyside are confident the mood in the region has changed for the better and that prospects have never looked so good.

This is the general consensus of a number of businessmen on Merseyside who have their finger on the area's pulse.

They say there are more positive factors combining which will put Merseyside in a very favourable position, regarding future investment and recession.

Surveys by the Daily Post and the Chamber of Commerce showed the region moving into the new decade in a mood of confidence. The feeling is in the region is holding on despite rising interest rates.

Today, Business Opportunities On Merseyside, takes its roadshow to the capital. It returns to the Baltic centre secure in the knowledge that the region's image and act has been polished up since its first mission down south in 1987.

ROO chairman Geoffrey Piper said: "Interest in the business opportunities on Merseyside is greater than it has been for years. Liverpool council leader Ken Coombes, addressing a Merseyside into the 80s symposium at the Albert Dock, earlier this month said opportunities had been missed and hopes on Merseyside and Merseyside were 'piling up to sell itself in future'.

Chamber of Commerce chairman George Aitchison said: 'Merseyside's image is getting better all the time. There is a positive will from all sides including the unions to ensure the region is able to take up the opportunities presented.'

Challenge

Academic leader Graeme Davies, vic-chancellor of Liverpool University adds his weight. "The 1990s will be a decade of challenge and I am confident that Merseyside is well placed to exploit the very foundation of economic prospects established in recent years."

He said the university was committed to the regeneration of Merseyside.
University courts alumni with a degree of success

PETER BYROM, a Devon textile consultant, was puzzled by his invitation to Liverpool University’s new alumni initiative. He confessed he had not even graduated, dropping out some 40 years ago to join the family business. How had they tracked him down?

Professor Graeme Davies, the university vice-chancellor, revealed the secret — a copy of Who’s Who and the services of two younger graduates. In this new campaign, the brainchild of the university and Merseyside’s business sector, Mr Byrom’s career success is far more important than the passing of an exam.

Last week, Mr Byrom and 20 other prominent alumni — including company chairmen, academics and diplomats — returned to Liverpool for a free three-day tour of the university and the city. Some had not visited Liverpool for decades. They had missed the Twelfth riots and the subsequent changes instigated by Michael Heseltine to bring investment into an area left depressed by the death of its traditional industries.

The hope was that these successful former students would be so impressed by what they saw that they would lend their support to their Alma Mater and to Business Opportunities on Merseyside (BOOM), in its efforts to regenerate the area.

For decades, American colleges have tapped former graduates for influence and cash. With the financial squeeze on universities, the practice is now gaining ground in Britain. The Liverpool initiative is novel in encouraging graduates to reach beyond the campus to the city, reflecting Professor Davies’ belief that the university’s future is inextricably linked with that of Liverpool.

American businessmen compete to out-donate each other at their alumni reunions, but Liverpool adopted a softer sell. A four-course dinner, some time to reminisce, then Professor Davies announced it was the university’s and BOOM’s hope that the graduates — most of whom now work in the prosperous South — would become unpaid ambassadors, helping the city overcome a major hurdle, its tarnished public image.

Professor Davies said: “We want these people to get a feel for the place again. Then they can go back to Birmingham, London and the South-east and say that Liverpool is a place where things are happening.”

In the absence of an Oxbridge-style old boys’ network, the university is working hard to re-establish links with former students.

“The business of rebuilding links is long-term. The worst thing you could do with people who haven’t been close for many years is ask them to open their cheque books. We have to court them and then target specific graduates for specific projects," Professor Davies said.

City tours, including visits to Albert Dock, Liverpool’s urban redevelopment showcase, and the highly successful Wavertree Technology Park, did impress many of the returners.

Stan Crosbie, a 1968 graduate who is now managing director of the Royal Exchange Trust Company in London, said the city was less depressed than he remembered. Setting up in the North-west would make commercial sense for many companies because of low costs.

Alan Kelly, a retired Buckinghamshire teacher and Liverpool graduate who was born on Merseyside, believes the city is on the up. “I was very sad about the way Liverpool declined in the bad years, but it’s a great pleasure to see it look so well. There is a wealth of talent, space and trained labour. It could relieve many companies’ problems.”

Others were less convinced. Mr Byrom felt there was too much concentration on image and not enough on workforce training, while a company director from Bristol said he could not, in conscience, spend Liverpool when there were many more attractive places to site a business.

Liverpool University is inviting former students to play a bigger role in its future. Mary Braid reports
FOREWORD

I have many memories of Liverpool and my time with responsibility for Merseyside, but most of all I will remember Merseyside for its people. Throughout all sections of the community, often just beneath the surface, there was and is a willingness to work together.

And work together they have. The problems any large city faces are formidable. That was certainly true of Liverpool when I first went there as a Government Minister. But the people have great spirit and great determination, and there was a ready response to the early government initiatives. Many of those initiatives can be seen to have worked: yesterday’s sites have become attractive environments, housing estates have taken on a new life, training centres are seen as a stepping-stone to a job. The response has come both from individuals and from the business community whose commitment to the rebirth of their city has been impressive. There’s a generation of work ahead but now at least we know the foundations upon which we can build.

This booklet and the whole “Business Opportunities On Merseyside” project will, I am certain, make a significant contribution to Merseyside’s growing confidence and prosperity. I wish all concerned every success.

The Rt. Hon. Michael Heseltine, M.P.
FOREWORD

I was delighted to be asked to write this foreword to the 1989 edition of the Business Opportunities on Merseyside ("BOOM") brochure. BOOM is an excellent example of the private sector assisting in the vital process of urban regeneration. For years lack of confidence in Merseyside was a serious obstacle to investment, but by harnessing the resources of commerce and industry, and through the good offices of the accountancy profession in particular, BOOM has been able to publicise to the business world the tremendous strides which have been made in Merseyside over these past seven years.

It is particularly heartening to see that the run-down industrial and commercial scene of 1981 has now become a thriving business community consistently building on its own successes. There are real commercial opportunities on Merseyside now. Companies are producing at record output levels with excellent profits, showing just what can be done by hard work and enterprise. Quite apart from the good economic arguments in favour of industrial investment in Merseyside, it is once again a good place to live and work. This renaissance is due to a concerted and sustained effort by everyone concerned with regeneration on Merseyside, not least the very active and committed local business community.

BOOM is now ensuring that the national and international community is made aware of this ‘new’ Merseyside. Its success can be measured by the increased co-operation between the private and public sectors and by the ever-growing investment from outside the region. There is still much work to be done but I am confident that firm foundations have now been laid for a recovery which will continue into the 1990’s.

BOOM’s efforts can only accelerate this progress and I wish the initiative every continued success.

Margaret Thatcher

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA
FOREWORD

As President of Business in the Community, I was delighted to be involved in the early planning of the Business Opportunities on Merseyside (BOOM) initiative, which has since done so much to assist in the regeneration of Merseyside. BOOM has played a vital part in re-establishing confidence in the area and I know, continue to do so.

When I visit Merseyside I am constantly struck by the wonderful character of the people and the vitality of the local community. It is an area rich in its cultural heritage and history, and, through its great maritime traditions, has strong links with many parts of the world. The combination of the old and the new, reflected so graphically along the Mersey waterfront, creates a unique working environment as well as a fascinating centre for the international visitor. Many parts of the area have been restored or redeveloped. But there are large areas which have not shared in this new investment. I believe that many of these areas offer opportunity for the business community.

Since my initial involvement I have followed the progress of BOOM with great interest. It is a splendid example of leadership from business and the professions. I am delighted that Merseyside is setting such a marvellous example in this respect.

[Signature]

KENSINGTON PALACE

BOOM
CONTRIBUTORS TO BOOM

Business Opportunities on Merseyside gratefully acknowledge the support of:

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World Trade Centre - Liverpool

(Appendix 3 - Members of BOOM)

(Members as at 1st October 1992)
Appendix 4 - Directors of BOOM

The following served as directors of BOOM during its active lifetime:

- Geoffrey Piper (Deloitte Haskins & Sells/NWBLT) (Chairman)
- Alex Anderson (Merseyside Development Corporation)
- Anthony Brown (Bailey Page & Roper)
- John Deakin (Royal Insurance UK)
- Ian Evans (Weightmans)
- Stanton Fuller (Wavertree Technology Park)
- Councillor James Keight (Knowsley Borough Council)
- John Last (The Littlewoods Organisation)
- John Milbourn (Liverpool Society of Chartered Accountants)
- Nigel Packer (Liverpool Society of Chartered Accountants)
- Professor Michael Parkinson (University of Liverpool)
- Dr John Ritchie (Merseyside Development Corporation)
- Jack Stopforth (Stopforth Bright Anderson)
- Harry Thomas (Littlewoods/Merseyside Task Force)
- David Weir (Ernst & Young, Treasurer)
BOOM Conference
Barbican Centre, London
November 1987

Left to right: Nigel Packer (President, Liverpool Society of Chartered Accountants), Sir Antony Pilkington (Chair, Pilkington PLC), Sir Graeme Davies (Vice-Chancellor, University of Liverpool), Geoffrey Piper (Chair, Business Opportunities On Merseyside), Rt Hon Michael Heseltine (Secretary of State for the Environment), Arthur Green (President, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales).

BOOM Conference
Barbican Centre, London
November 1987

George Pragnell (Regional Director, Business in the Community) meeting Rt Hon Michael Heseltine with BOOM Chair Geoffrey Piper.
A selection of photographs from BOOM planning meeting, 10 December 1987 in the presence of HRH The Prince of Wales
The Rt Hon Lynda Chalker MP (Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and MP for Wallasey) joins BOOM board members Nigel Packer, Geoffrey Piper and Harry Thomas.