

Can Liverpool’s once glorious  
Garden Festival site emerge from  
beneath the weeds with the help  
of new plans for long term maintenance?

Words Ben Willis  
Photographs courtesy of  
Mersey Waterfront, Halton BC,  
Land Restoration Trust,  
Haycock Associates

# KEEPING UP APPEARANCES



In the summer of 1984 over three million people flocked to Liverpool to witness the city in full bloom. This wasn’t the kind of attention it was used to. Only three years earlier it had achieved international notoriety as one of a number of UK cities hit by racial rioting. But, largely in response to the 1981 riots, the then environment secretary Michael Heseltine had chosen Liverpool to host the UK’s first garden festival, and the crowds came in their droves.

Now, just over 20 years on, the once glorious site lies almost in ruins. The only things that grow in the main pavilion are weeds and piles of rubbish. Apart from a few surviving features, much of the rest of the once manicured landscape is now heavily degraded. A crude perimeter fence ensures most people stay away, but it is not enough to keep out the fly-tippers and motorcyclists.

So what went wrong? “The garden festival was a phenomenal effort and attracted a lot of people, but the next bit was a disaster,” says Walter Menzies, chief executive of the Mersey Basin Campaign. “No-one had really worked through a convincing post-festival plan for the site, so it’s been festering ever since.”

This autumn a masterplan for an urban village on the site was unveiled by its new owner, Langtree McClean, and despite a catalogue of false starts over the years

there is at last real optimism that the development will proceed. The news is rekindling the memory of the garden festival, but 20 years of decline will not easily be forgotten.

Although the Merseyside Development Corporation put around £40 million into the garden festival, in the process transforming over 100 acres of landfill and derelict land, what came next was less successful. At the time the long term plan for the site had been to use part of it for leisure and recreational purposes and the other part for housing. The housing element did eventually materialise in 1986 when 600 homes were built on a portion of the site, but other ventures hit the rocks.

In the early 1990s, one company tried to turn part of the site into a theme park, but this fell flat after failing to make any money. Then in 1998 Wiggins, a development consortium, bought the site but gave it up last year following a string of unsuccessful planning applications.

Liverpool’s garden festival site, it seems, fell victim to the same affliction that has affected numerous other regeneration schemes around the Northwest and, indeed, the country.

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PICTURES:  
THE GARDEN FESTIVAL  
SITE TODAY



PHOTOGRAPH BELOW:  
SITE OF SPEKE GARSTON COASTAL RESERVE

It goes something like this: thousands, more often millions of pounds of public money are poured into the capital costs of a regeneration project – land reclamation work, building, landscaping. But inadequate planning and limited sources of finance for long term management conspire to undermine those early good intentions, and decline once again sets in.

“It’s easy to get hold of capital, but revenue funding is much harder to secure,” says Alexandra Rook, a principal consultant for the Civic Trust. This is partly because local authority budgets are so stretched that they are often unable to take on the long term running of sites, Rook explains. “Parks and open spaces are seen as local authority responsibilities, but they’re not a statutory service so their budgets get pushed into high cost areas like social services and education.”

Another factor, says Mersey Waterfront director Louise Hopkins, is that public funding bodies have traditionally underplayed the proportion of their regeneration grants that goes towards the revenue costs of a scheme – the expenses incurred through long term management and maintenance. This is in spite of some funding sources, particularly Europe’s Objective One pot, coming only on condition that schemes they finance are maintained to the same standard achieved upon completion for at least ten years.

“Roughly ten per cent of the capital costs of a scheme can be set aside for maintenance,” Hopkins says. “But if your project is worth say one million, that means only £100,000 can go towards maintenance, which over ten years is not a lot.”

Mersey Waterfront is a co-funder of Halton Borough Council’s waterfront estate team (see box). Through this pilot project, Hopkins says, the partners are trying to show how a well-managed public area can have beneficial impacts on anything from crime to health.

“Funding bodies need to recognise that more of their grants should be going towards revenue costs,” she says. “But the benefits of long term maintenance are hard to measure, and therein lies the problem because it means there’s a reluctance to put in the extra resource. What we’re hoping to demonstrate

through the Halton pilot is that good management is about more than just making a place pretty; it can have a fundamental impact on people’s lives.”

In attempting to find new ways of funding and organising long term maintenance of public open space, the Halton pilot is not alone. Across the Northwest a number of new mechanisms are emerging that offer possible solutions to the management challenge.

Happily, given its recent past, one such initiative is being developed to rescue – hopefully once and for all – Liverpool’s garden festival site. Last year, after the Wiggins consortium pulled out, developer Langtree and house builder David McLean formed a partnership to buy the site.

To protect the site’s large swathe of open space for the future, Langree McClean have engaged the services of the Land Restoration Trust (LRT), a partnership of government agencies set up two years ago to reclaim and

manage derelict land. Under a deal struck with the trust, the developers will undertake the restoration of the site’s open space and also crucially pay the trust a lump sum, or dowry, to fund its long term management. The trust will invest this money and use the interest generated to provide a sustainable source of revenue funding for the site.

“Money spent on this site in the past had a short term benefit but nothing has been carried forward,” says Euan Hall, the trust’s chief executive. “The advantage of the dowry is that it will provide secure money to manage the site. We invest capital from the private sector and hive off the interest, so unlike with the public sector where budget priorities move from thing to thing, this cash is guaranteed for the site.”

“The festival was a phenomenal effort and attracted



## Case study: Mersey Waterfront Estate Team, Halton

The Mersey Waterfront regional park is an ambitious project to revitalise 135 km of coastline stretching from the Wirral to Southport by creating a chain of open spaces and nature reserves along the Mersey, Dee and Ribble rivers.

Apart from improving the general quality of life for people living in the area, another of the scheme’s priorities is to create a visitor and tourist attraction that will contribute to Merseyside’s overall economic

prosperity. One of the main concerns is therefore how the regional park will be maintained.

“When Mersey Waterfront came about, we realised that if we were serious about this, we would need to present a first class, quality product,” says Ian Lifford, head of landscape services at Halton Borough Council, one of the authorities involved in creating the park. “It was clear that on a lot of the sites there was a great deal of room for improvement.”

In partnership with Mersey Waterfront, Halton Council has been instrumental in setting up a pilot project known as the Waterfront Estate Team, a group of individuals

dedicated to managing and maintaining the five main waterside sites in the authority’s area.

Martin Grimes is the team’s leader. A typical week for the team, he says, involves regular site visits and routine maintenance work, such as fencing, mowing and cleaning up any litter or graffiti.

“Basically, we’re trying to raise standards so people will immediately see a good quality site that is clean, safe and well maintained,” Grimes says. “We visit sites daily so we fix anything needing it straight away.

The trust is just one method by which a long-term source of revenue funding can be generated. Another concept that is rapidly gaining currency is that of a management company.

This model is being put to good use on the Speke and Garston Coastal Reserve, a formerly derelict site currently undergoing transformation into a nature reserve. To ensure this transformation is sustained, says Louise Morrissey, head of land and planning at the reserve’s landowner Peel Holdings, a management company is being created that will lease the site from Peel and assume responsibility for its maintenance and further development. The company will be formed of two main partners – Peel and the Mersey Basin

“It’s a win-win situation, because we’re a vehicle they could use to meet their corporate green targets. We hope this formula will be a success and therefore a benefit to others over time.”

Elsewhere, other methods are being employed that attempt to tackle the maintenance issue by minimising the overall need for it. Sinderland Brook is a stretch of river running through the National Trust’s Dunham Massey estate in Cheshire that has recently been restored to complement a new housing development on an adjacent site.

Rather than try to artificially steer the course of the river away from the housing development or create large man-made flood defences, the restoration deliberately sought to create a wide flood plain that would allow the river to meander naturally and follow its own course. The advantage of this approach, says Nick Haycock, director of the environmental

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Campaign – who will pay an annual sum into a central maintenance pot.

“The principle is shared care,” says Morrissey. “We will spend a certain amount of the maintenance fund each year, but the idea is that there will always be some left in case of emergencies.”

The company is also hoping to raise further funds by attracting sponsorship from the numerous companies based in the Speke and Garston area. “Companies would pay a certain amount into the pot in exchange for a certain amount of profile for being involved and being our sponsor,” says Morrissey.

consultancy Haycock Associates that worked on the scheme, is that it minimised the need for extensive engineering work to ‘lock in’ the course of the river, all of which carries considerable costs both in the short and long term.

“When you rely heavily on engineering, you end up with a lot of capital assets in place, in the form of expensive geo-technological measures to keep the river bank in place,” he explains. “These can degrade within 15 to 20 years with catastrophic effects. By allowing the river to erode and move naturally at Sinderland, and not relying on a lot of subtle engineering techniques, we have probably halved the costs of long term maintenance.”

PHOTOGRAPH BELOW:  
THE MERSEY WATERFRONT ESTATE TEAM, HALTON

As public funding sources continue to be squeezed, the likelihood is that long term management and maintenance will increasingly come to rely on innovative techniques such as those being tried in Sinderland Brook, Halton and elsewhere.

“These kind of things will be key in the future,” believes the LRT’s Euan Hall. “As long as they can change their budgets annually, local authorities will always be looking to find money from somewhere. And unfortunately one of the first things that gets targeted is open space and parks budgets.”

**MORE INFORMATION**  
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### 60-second expert

- To get started, a regeneration scheme needs capital funding to pay for things such as land remediation and building work, but equally important is revenue funding to maintain the project over the long term.
- Sometimes as little as ten per cent of a scheme’s budget will be spent on revenue funding, leading quickly to neglect and decay.
- The problem is compounded when inadequate plans are made for a project’s legacy, such as in the case of Liverpool’s garden festival site, which has lain derelict for 20 years.
- Limited sources of public revenue funding have prompted the advent of innovative techniques to pay for long term management, such as dowries and management companies.

