

Ray Miller

taking a sideways look at the past,
present and future

Bert's journey to the past

HISTORIAN Bert Starkey's third book of beautifully illustrated scenes of yesterday is now available – and townspeople will not be disappointed.

Bert prefaces the book, entitled *Runcorn – a Century of Change* and containing more than 200 photographs and illustrations, with an introductory column which does much to remind us of our past and, at the same time, looks at the picture unfolding for the future.

Runcorn ceased to be a canal port when the famous Bridgewater Canal locks were filled in during the 1960s. Since then, great changes have taken place on the waterways.

Old Quay Yard, once a centre of activity where Manchester Ship Canal tugs were serviced and repaired, is being re-developed. The old workshops and store buildings have now been pulled down and the waterfront is assuming a totally different appearance.

Old Quay itself has been cleared to make way for luxury flats.

Runcorn's tannery sites have been developed for light industry and the former ICI office complex at the Heath has expanded to become a technical and business park.

Of the industries of the past there is little evidence and Bert notes it is hard to find any trace



DAY TRIPPERS: Holy Trinity schoolchildren about to set off for Liverpool to visit the Festival of Ships on September 14, 1951.

of the ancient quarries. The centre of the old town has shrunk to half its original size.

Many of the churches and chapels, which 50 years ago had large congregations, have gone and all the old schools have been demolished.

Social conditions have also undergone great changes. The popular annual Runcorn Festival or carnival, the Whit

Monday walking days, village rose fetes and amateur dramatic societies no longer feature in the social life of the community.

'Because so much of our heritage is disappearing,' Bert concludes, 'it is essential that some record be kept of the past.'

He expresses the hope the book will bring back memories and that, at the same time, it

may interest the young and the New Town folk who have settled in the town and wondered about its history.

The book is in ten sections, beginning with the three bridges, maritime Runcorn and the inland waterways and going on to look at the town's industries, its buildings and its churches and chapels.

These are followed by a vari-



BULLDOZED: The ruins of St Edward's RC School being demolished in January 1981.

ety of street scenes, social activities, schooldays and sport and leisure.

The reader will marvel at the number of 'new' photographs. How many, for example, will have seen the efficient mortar mill or concrete mixer at work during the construction of the Manchester Ship Canal?

Or the 250-ton floating crane lifting one of the ship canal's massive lock gates?

Or several excellent shots of the old line of locks?

Churches and chapels include interiors of Halton Road Methodist Church and a picture of the combined Methodist church choirs in the gallery at St Paul's.

There is also a picture of the sundial in All Saints Parish Church – a reminder of the days when it was an essential means of setting the early clocks.

The town's social history is captured in several widely differing guises – from a 1910 wedding to one of the first motor cars to be owned locally, pictured outside Bridgewater House in about 1910.

With more than 200 photographs, the author's third volume on Runcorn is an important record of vanished vista.

■ Priced at £12.99, *Runcorn – A Century of Change* is available from stores including the Curiosity Bookshop on High Street.

Councillors can't fool all of us all the time

ON AVERAGE, Council Tax bills have soared by 120% since the introduction of this form of rating 12 years ago.

But, we are told, Halton has seen one of the smallest increases in the country and, while the national average stands at £1,009, Halton's average is more than £200 less, standing at an average of £804.

Sounds good – but is it? Not really. Add to those figures a sum of £250 to £300 from the water authorities and

even those taxed in the lowest bands are paying a minimum of £1,000 a year – or £20 a week – for their services.

Whatever councillors tell you, people are not hoodwinked by the figures. Council Tax has gone up so much in little more than a decade that, instead of crowing about keeping the bills down, authorities should be looking to reduce the amounts we pay. But we all know there is no chance of that happening.

Carroll's service to HRH

A FORMER Runcorn man, now living near Chester, tells me he recently came across an interesting little tale relating to Charles Lutwidge Dodgson – much better known, of course, as Lewis Carroll.

At the time Charles was born, his father was vicar of Daresbury and continued in that post until his son was 11 years old.

My correspondent tells me when Queen Victoria first read *Alice in Wonderland*, she was so amused by it she invited the author to Buckingham

Palace for a chat. That was in 1865, when the classic was first published.

Before leaving, the Queen asked if she could be the very first person to receive a copy of his next book. Sometime later, she did receive a copy of the author's next offering – but, lo and behold, it was a book about a complicated form of maths!

'I presume,' says the writer, 'this was one occasion when the Queen was not amused.'

Dodgson, incidentally, was actually a university maths lecturer by profession.

Why don't we teach trades at university?

DURING a lifetime in newspaper work, I had the pleasure of visiting a great many factories and workshops engaged in a variety of jobs, demanding and otherwise.

In the 50s, 60s and 70s, it was possible to meet and talk to a variety of craftsmen and manual workers engaged in different trades.

In those days, apprenticeships were available in abundance. Of course, that's no longer the case – and more's the pity.

I mention this because I was delighted to see that the head of a sixth form at a leading independent school, a certain Charles Hardy, had the courage to advocate university degree courses to train plasterers, electricians and plumbers.

Writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, Hardy said: 'If the award of degrees is part of what it will take to preserve these critical skills, let the BAs roll!'

What a splendid idea! What is the point of wasting three years on courses which are virtually worthless?

DESKTOP CALENDAR QUOTE

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