

An Emotional Involvement

Born at the right time

*You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning. And that, I think, was the handle—that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. . . . We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave - Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, 1971*

We were a generation 'born at the right time'. Growing up in the 1950s as Britain emerged from wartime austerity, fortified by state cod-liver oil, school milk and cradle to grave welfare protection, a lucky few passed the 11-plus to get the grammar school education our parents were denied, and even fewer of us (less than 10% of the cohort) were rewarded with a university place. From the early 1960s, not only were Britain's universities expanding, but for the first time they were taking in significant numbers of students from working class backgrounds, often the first in their family to gain the chance of a university education.

Growing up, we had absorbed an intoxicating cocktail of cultural and political influences. Music provided a powerful, electric charge: the raw rebellion of rock n' roll had seeped into our pre-teens consciousness - and then it was the Beatles, defining for our generation the desire to have '*fun/the one thing that money can't buy/something inside that was always denied/ for so many years*'. The music channelled politics and rebellion; we listened to Dylan challenge the 'Masters of War', tell the truth about Hattie Carroll, and warn that 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall'. The news headlines - the civil rights movement, the March on Washington, the war in Vietnam, the Sharpeville massacre - all told that there was a world of injustice out there, and people standing up for their rights who should be afforded solidarity. We were immersed in revolt: against authority, against tradition, against middle-class morality, against everything that belonged to the old - expressed graphically in Jim Morrison's snarled lyric, 'Five to One', released in 1968: *The old get old/And the young get stronger/May take a week/And it may take longer/They got the guns/But we got the numbers/Gonna win, yeah/We're takin' over*.

Those of us at Liverpool and other universities in the mid-1960s were part of big changes taking place in the education system and in wider society. With rising living standards, and changes in the economy affecting employment patterns, it became possible for unprecedentedly large numbers of young people to postpone adult obligations by becoming university students. By 1965, seven new universities had been established, largely a result of the Robbins Report (1963) which recommended a huge expansion of higher education. This expansion of student numbers coincided with social changes that enhanced the status, self-confidence and visibility of young people. The arrival of our generation induced strains within universities which, we were to discover, were still elitist and traditional.

The expansion of the universities created heightened expectations and provided the context for the student movements that emerged very rapidly through 1968-9. Local issues and grievances often provided the spark - lack of student representation, inadequate facilities, outdated curricula, and antiquated rules generated conflicts between students who considered themselves adults and authorities who regarded themselves as acting in loco parentis - but it was international events that inflamed campus protests. The war in Vietnam was a central rallying point. Students from Liverpool University joined both the huge London demonstrations organised by the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign in March and October 1968, and there were local protests in the following year, including a sit-in at the American Consulate. But for many student activists the catalyst was the struggle against racism exemplified in the civil rights movement in the United States and resistance to apartheid in South Africa.

For one brief moment, too, students could perceive of themselves as 'the new revolutionary vanguard'. Fired up by the May events in Paris, that was how the new radical newspaper, *The Black Dwarf*, put it in the summer of 1968: a sentiment that caused apoplexy among old-guard Marxists. Another *Black Dwarf* slogan, 'London, Paris, Rome, Berlin - we shall fight we shall win!' captured the sense of the internationalisation of student grievances across Europe in 1968.

Yet another *Black Dwarf* slogan, splashed across the front page of the issue published in the same week as the October 1968 VSC demonstration in London, was: "Don't Demand - Occupy". This drew attention to the novel tactic now being employed in student protests: the sit-in or occupation. Before the end of 1968, influenced by the occupations of the Sorbonne and Columbia University, New York, students at Hornsey Art College, Hull, Sussex, Essex and the LSE had utilised the same tactic.

Liverpool: Rise like lions after slumber

In October 1968 an opinion piece in *Guild Gazette* stated that the year had seen 'revolutionary goings-on everywhere...except Liverpool'. The writer seemed struck by the impassivity of the place: *A lot has been said about the apathy of Liverpool students, about the fact - even mentioned in Anthony Sampson's Anatomy of Britain - that Liverpool is a 9-5 university. To a great extent this is true. An amazing number of the students here are not interested in the affairs of their own Guild - let alone in what is going on in their external environment.*

On the Liverpool campus, things were quiet. There were no dramatic actions like those at Essex or the LSE, yet beneath the surface things were shifting. But, although the first student protest of any major significance at Liverpool University was not to occur until the joint tenant-student demonstration on the occasion of the formal opening of Senate House by Princess Alexandra in May 1969, there were early signs of the growing radicalisation of sections of the student body, such as the sit-in at the Social Sciences building in solidarity with anti-racist protests at the LSE and the Presidential election campaign fought by Dave Robertson during February and March 1969. Even earlier, in February 1968, a small group of left-wing students had broken away from the Guild Labour Society - until then the focus of much student radical activity - to form Socialist Society. The Labour government's support for the Vietnam War and general disillusionment with the government's failure to implement socialist policies were key factors in the split. From this point on, members of Socialist Society would be at the forefront of radical activity at Liverpool.

What was happening in Liverpool was part of a general pattern. This was a time of intense debate, reorganisation and emergence of new organisations on the radical left - a consequence of disillusionment with the policies of the Labour government of Harold Wilson (1964-70) and influenced, too, by international issues such as the Vietnam War and the events of May 1968 in France. This period saw the emergence of the International Socialists and the International Marxist Group - both Trotskyist factions which would exercise considerable influence in student radical circles. The IMG were influential in the editorial board of *Black Dwarf*, the alternative political and cultural newspaper published between May 1968 and 1972 by a collective of socialists that included Tariq Ali, Adrian Mitchell, Sheila Rowbotham and Fred Halliday. A further example of this ferment was the publication of the *May Day Manifesto* as a Penguin Special in 1968, edited by Raymond Williams and with contributions from the likes of EP Thompson, Stuart Hall, Ken Coates, Terry Eagleton and Michael Barratt Brown.

During three weeks in February and March 1969 a passionate and bitterly-fought Presidential election campaign was waged, with Dave Robertson as the declared candidate of the hard left. The election was fought on overtly political lines, not a feature of previous campaigns. There were huge audiences for candidates' meetings across the campus, reflecting the burgeoning student engagement with issues of student participation in key decisions of the University through representation on bodies such as Senate, and debates over how students should govern themselves.

Dave Robertson's manifesto was unequivocally radical, calling for "abolition of Guild Council and its replacement by mass meetings and democratically elected administrative officers with committees directly answerable to the mass meetings" and "greater support for organisations which attempt to break down the barriers between students and people in Liverpool."

Underlying these demands lay an argument about the role of students and place of the university in society:

Over the past few months many people have noticed a growth in the desire to see the Guild more actively involved in society... The University and Guild must increase its obligations to and involvement

in the problems of the society around us. We must seek to destroy, once and for all, the notion that students are a disinterested, introverted elite. We must press for control over our own environment. We should not rest content merely with increased representation on sterile committees, but should seek to create alternative structures for our education and administration. The pursuit of knowledge must be our aim, not just satisfying the needs of acquisitive society. We must govern and administer our affairs on the basis of mass democracy... We must seek to establish an academic community in which students are regarded as equals, and can contribute to that community in something more than the subservient role of a consumer.

The turn-out in the election was huge, with almost 50 per cent of those on the electoral roll voting. Guild Gazette commented:

The fifty per cent turnout was the highest-ever at Liverpool, and may well be the highest throughout the country in university presidential elections. Continually we are told that students at Liverpool University are apathetic and are incapable of democratic participation in any form. This election proves that when there is something of real importance afoot, people will make their feelings known... almost three hundred attended the Guild Council Meeting last Monday evening to put forward their views on Senate representation.

Exposing the University as a slum landlord

Dave Robertson's manifesto had stated that "over the past few months many people have noticed a growth in the desire to see the Guild more actively involved in society... University and Guild must increase its obligations to and involvement in the problems of the society around us". This was a reference to a campaign triggered by the startling revelation, in a major Gazette investigation two months earlier, that the University owned 130 slum properties adjacent to the campus, in which families experienced appalling housing conditions. The University had bought up streets of dilapidated Victorian terraces in advance of plans to extend the university campus. But it was struggling to rehouse the tenants and the housing association it employed to maintain the properties was failing to carry out repairs. In October 1968, hundreds of tenants, spread across thirty six Abercromby streets, had joined the Abercromby Tenants Association and had begun to withhold all of their rent in protest at their situation. News of the strike reached students at the University, who began to assist the campaign by leafleting and providing a room in the union for meetings.

In December Guild Gazette published a detailed expose by Gerry Cordon of the University's actions in an article which began:

Melville Place is about five minutes walk from the Union, the street of downcast houses, some of them boarded up and rotting, can be seen from the fourth-floor windows of the Social Studies Department. The street looks much like the rest of Liverpool 8, and, like much of the area, houses people living in squalid and insanitary conditions reeking of the Victorian age. But Melville Place is special, for a good number of these houses are owned by the University.

Between 1955 and 1960 the University bought up property in the street as part of its precinct-development plans, bought it apparently without inspecting it, and handed it over to Liverpool Improved Houses Ltd to be managed until demolition in 1970.

Since then, the residents say, no one from the University has been round. They naturally feel bitter: "As far as they're concerned," says Mrs. Singleton, at number fifty, "we're just a nuisance because we're on property they want knocked down." A few weeks ago the patience of the Melville Place residents finally snapped and about twelve of them stopped paying their rents to the University...

Mrs. Singleton and her neighbours complain that for years the University knew nothing of the state of the property. "Nobody's been round here, except the rent collector, because I had to say to her, 'well, I'm sorry, I'm withholding my rent this week.' And she said, 'whatever for?'"

"So I said, we've had a meeting and decided to withhold our rent because we've been told now it'll be 1970 before we go, which we think is fantastic considering the state of the property.

"So she said 'what is it', and I said repairs should be done – there are five of us jammed together in one bedroom. You've never really been in the houses and seen them. It was only then, when she went upstairs and had actually seen it that she realised – and then the University contractors were round here pretty swift. That's how it all started- withholding rent – and mine's still being withheld because I've had no repairs done yet".

The article concluded:

This Christmas the families of Melville Place will, no doubt, still be living in overcrowded, cramped conditions. The roofs will still be leaking, the bedrooms still damp. The cracks in the walls will get larger, and maybe one or two families will have to move down another floor and squeeze up tighter still. Their state is not unusual in Liverpool – and that is the tragedy. There are too many like the inhabitants of Melville Place, and too few homes for them. But they wait and hope, resigned to the fact that it looks like another twilight winter. Maybe their hopes aim too high. "Look," one of the women said to a Doyle child when I called last week, "these students are here to help us – you might have a new house for Christmas."

Do they hope for too much?



In the weeks that followed, while the rent strike continued, there were meetings between student representatives and University officials. But the University's position remained unwavering: it was not directly responsible for the state of the properties - that was the job of the housing association employed by the University – and it had been assured that the City Council anticipated being able to rehouse all the families concerned within twelve months. "It is, of course, very regrettable that people should have to live in these conditions", the University conceded.

When students and tenants learned that the new Senate House, situated a stone's throw from the University-owned slums, was to be officially opened by Princess Alexandra, the reaction was outrage. Resentment among the tenants about Senate House had been growing as they saw the expensive new administrative block being built on their doorstep, complaining that huge amounts of money were being spent on it whilst their homes rotted. Now, to add insult to injury, £5000 was being lavished on preparations for the royal visit.

The tenants, supported by students and ATACC, the city-wide Tenants Coordinating Committee, decided to picket the royal opening. A week before the Princess was due, the editorial in Guild Gazette observed:

The men in Senate have totally failed to recognise the ill-feeling caused by their lack of attention to the needs of its tenants. Now the tenants are to embarrass the University – in front of Princess Alexandra and a whole host of people. Good luck to them...It is time that the men in Senate got to grips with the real issues in and around this University. They seem to act as if the campus were isolated on the Sussex Downs or the Essex fens. This is a city university – with city problems – basic problems for many. It is a question of priority. Which should come first; a castle for the bureaucrats, or homes for the poor? The men in Senate ... build themselves a palace and import a Princess to open it.

On 15 May 1969 over a thousand tenants and students assembled outside Senate House as Princess Alexandra arrived to open the building. Later, the princess chose to visit nearby Vine Street. Across the entrance to the street was a banner with the words, "Come and visit the slums of Vine Street."



The following day, the national press gave extensive coverage to the protest. In response to the embarrassing publicity, the tenants were guaranteed rehousing by the council, and the rent strikers' debt to the University was waived.



The Liverpool Daily Post 16 May 1969

Against racism and apartheid

In February 1969 a small group of students had staged a 24-hour sit-in at the Social Sciences building, the first protest of its kind at Liverpool. It was aimed at supporting students at the London School of Economics, who were engaged in an ongoing dispute following the appointment of Dr Walter Adams as director of the LSE, a man with links to the white supremacist regime in Rhodesia where he had been director of the University College. Opposition to racialism and the apartheid regimes in southern Africa remained at the forefront of radical student activity at Liverpool during the autumn of 1969 and into 1970. In November Peter Hain, organiser of the “Stop the Tour” campaign against the South African rugby team addressed a mass meeting in the Student Union and the following week 25 coaches took more than 1000 students from Liverpool University to the protest in Manchester – the largest of the demonstrations against the Springboks. Guild Gazette reported:

On arrival at about 12.30, the Liverpool contingent fell in behind their scarlet banner, organised by SocSoc, which read, “Liverpool Students against Apartheid”. The march set off through Manchester to the White City playing ground where the match was being held, chanting “Racialists out”, and “Fascists go home... All in all about 100 students were arrested by the police, including 20 from Liverpool but only seven were officially charged.

Jon Snow was one of those from Liverpool who were arrested, an experience he later recounted in his book, *Shooting History*, where he wrote:

Nixon’s Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, had spent the previous months preaching change through ‘economic engagement’ with the South African apartheid regime. Wilson and others had gone soft on economic sanctions, and the apartheid state was consolidating its hold amid calls from Nelson Mandela’s beleaguered African National Congress (ANC) to black South Africans to burn their passbooks. British culpability and collusion with apartheid were clear...The South African Springboks rugby team were already in Britain, while a cricket tour was to take place in the summer. Hain’s ultimately hugely successful campaign recognised that sport was very close to the heart of the apartheid regime. It was the public, competitive and white face of South Africa. We might not be able to spring Mandela from Robben Island, but we could at least stop his jailers from playing sport in our green and pleasant land.

But it was the start of the spring term in January 1970 that marked the beginning of a period of intense political activity among students at the university, as the issues that eventually became the ‘Five Demands’ emerged, leading eventually to the occupation of Senate House in March. Two of those demands concerned Liverpool University’s connections with racialism and apartheid South



Africa. These events took place against the backdrop of the collapse of Guild government and fierce debates about the nature of democracy in the Union.

The campaign for mass democracy

The emergence of the issues that led ultimately to the occupation, and the collapse of Guild government took place against the background of heightened political debate about democracy in the Guild. From the beginning of the autumn term there developed a growing challenge to Guild Council in the form of a campaign, spearheaded by Socialist Society but supported by other radical elements, to increase student participation and power in the Union by replacing Guild Council with Mass Meetings.

We get a sense of the arguments being waged from an exchange at Guild Council reported in Guild Gazette in October 1969. Oliver Swingler alleged that Guild Council spent 80% of its time discussing ‘trivia’ such as the price of chips or the lighting in the hall. *“Representatives, once elected, are there for their own point of view...and do not report back to their societies, so no-one knows what goes on,”* he asserted.

He went on to describe his attempts to bring to general notice the slums owned by the University in Vine Street, on which, he alleged, *“the University spent nothing, but instead built a new Senate building costing over £600,000. Mass meetings were held, and ... expressed approval of action supporting the tenants, but nothing could be done. The Guild Council had met some weeks before and no further meetings were held....We are all equal members and ought to have an equal say in what goes on, but no-one knows what to do to influence policy decisions, even if they know any policy exists.”* Swingler concluded, to roars of agreement from the meeting: *“Are we going to stick to this University or care about things going on in Liverpool itself, such as tenants’ troubles and redundant workers?”*

Sandy Macmillan, President of the Union, rejected the case for mass meetings: *“A mass meeting of 700 people represents only 10% of the student body, but the 70 people on Guild Council represent the opinions of 7000 students, and therefore their decisions must count. How can 7000 people be collected together in a suitable place and controlled?”* he asked. *“Conduct of the meeting would be extremely difficult. Every single committee meeting is open for all to go along.”*

As the mass meeting debate grew, the intensity of political activity and the size of mass meetings in the Union was of a scale never previously matched in the Guild’s history. In November, after weeks of wrangling, a motion calling for a referendum on the introduction of sovereign mass meetings was passed in Guild Council. At the end of the month the referendum was held. The result was an overwhelming defeat for mass meetings.

However, the campaign was far from over. On 27 January 1970 Guild Gazette enabled Sandy Macmillan and Pete Cresswell to debate the issue that had become central to Guild politics: governance by mass meetings or by Guild Council? Pete Cresswell stated:

The system prevents communication, and this in turn prevents any change. We must break this vicious circle of ignorance before we can hope to progress. Last term’s referendum result reflected a collective state of mind resulting from the stultifying influence of the council system and this is the best reason we have for continuing the movement to abolish that system. In no sense can it be acclaimed by right-wingers as a reason for ending the campaign.

Only a genuine system of mass democracy can dispel apathy and ignorance...Unless people know that by attending mass meetings they are actually going to have the power to make decisions they will never participate. Indeed, without power, participation is impossible...We must carry on trying to show this to the students. ..The campaign for involvement and democracy must be stepped up. We must press not only for sovereign mass meetings but for democratic executive elections and the final extinction of the splendid isolation of the student from the rest of the world.

Less than two weeks later Guild government collapsed completely, the President, deputy President and Executive resigning in the fallout from the demonstration that was to mark the start of the road that led to Senate occupation.

The first demand

“That Senate and Court proclaim their opposition to all forms of discrimination on racial grounds and consequently disassociate themselves from the views of the Chancellor, the Marquess of Salisbury, and call for his immediate resignation.”

On 30 January 1970 a mass meeting was convened after it was discovered that the University Chancellor, Lord Salisbury, had been invited to attend Guild Ball and Dinner that evening. The meeting in Mountford Hall, attended by about 250 students, expressed opposition to Lord Salisbury’s racist views as being incompatible with a multiracial university and voted in favour of a sending a delegation to meet Salisbury at his hotel in town to tell him he was not welcome. In the meantime a six hour sit in continued in the Students’ Union, until 8 pm when the dinner in the Sefton Room was picketed. Salisbury did not turn up.



The next day, several national newspapers reported the protest. The Daily Telegraph quoted a spokesman for the protestors as saying: *“We told Salisbury that because of statements he had made and his support for white racist regimes in Southern Africa that he ought not to come to the Guild dinner and ball or continue as Chancellor of the university. We feel that Lord Salisbury’s opinions are an affront to the multiracial nature of our university.”*

The second demand

“That Council and Court order a detailed schedule of all University investments to be published in the Staff Newsletter and in Guild Gazette. And that if these include any in South Africa, they relinquish them immediately.”

A week later a mass meeting in the Student Union voted in favour of a resolution calling for the immediate resignation of Lord Salisbury as Chancellor because of his racist views and demanding that the University should disclose all its investments, and if these include any in South Africa, relinquish them immediately.

A fruitless correspondence with the Vice-Chancellor ensued and a picket of the meeting of the University Council on 19 February was organised by Socialist Society, which rallied support with a leaflet that asked *Why Picket the Council Meeting?* The answer given was:

Because we are concerned with the involvement of this University in racialism. The nature of the involvement is not necessarily personal: it is institutionalised racialism which can manifest itself in many forms. At the London School of Economics, the governors are men who invest in apartheid regimes. At University College London, educational connections with University College Salisbury help legitimise and perpetuate minority rule. At Liverpool the figurehead of the ‘academic community’ is an infamous racist.

But the first dramatic consequence of the action was on the administration of the Guild, not the University. On 9 February 1970 the entire Guild executive, along with the President and Lady President, were forced to resign following a vote of no confidence in them for their action inviting Lord Salisbury to the Guild Dinner and Ball, and not informing the student body of the invitation. The Lady President was condemned for visiting Salisbury in his hotel to present him with a bouquet on behalf of Guild. A resolution to sell £28,000 of Guild investments – because, it was alleged, most of the money was invested in South African shares – was also carried. Once again, this event – and subsequent developments - received national media coverage.

A week later, a mass meeting elected a six-strong caretaker Committee to administer Union affairs. But chaos reigned as the University ruled that the Committee had no legal standing, and that elections for a new president and executive would have to take place.

The third demand

“That the Vice-Chancellor gives satisfactory answers to questions on Chemical and Biological warfare research contracts being undertaken at Liverpool University.”

Sometime in January it came to the notice of members of Socialist Society that at least two members of the University had been, or were still, under contract to the Microbiological Research Establishment at Porton Down. Could it be possible that scientists at Liverpool University were engaged in Chemical and Biological Warfare research? Coming at the same time as the Warwick

protests that put the spotlight on the ‘military-industrial’ complex, and the widespread use of Napalm & Agent Orange in Vietnam and CS gas in Northern Ireland this was, we might say, a toxic issue. The fact that Porton Down was, as it remains, a highly secretive establishment, only added to the potency of the issue.

An Open Letter to the Vice-Chancellor, written by David Jenkins on behalf of Socialist Society was published in Guild Gazette, seeking answers on the issue of University involvement in chemical and biological warfare research:

It has recently come to our notice that, for at least the last 18 months, the University of Liverpool has been engaged in chemical and biological warfare research in connection with the Ministry of Defence institution at Porton Down. This information was originally revealed in the House of Commons in May 1968 and has since been confirmed by people involved in some of the projects. We feel that the full facts of the involvement of this university in this hideous and macabre research should be made available at once. Therefore, we ask from you information concerning: the nature of all Ministry of Defence contracts being undertaken at present in the University; the extent of the research grants donated by the Ministry of Defence to the University; the departments involved in the chemical and biological warfare research; and the programme for future chemical and biological warfare research projects. We feel that insufficient thought has been given to the moral and social issues involved in accepting such research and ask for an assurance that the forgoing points will be answered and future research into chemical and biological warfare will cease forthwith.

The fourth demand

“That an independent public inquiry is held into the methods used at all levels for keeping data and information on staff and students.”

On 11 February, in a protest over local issues, students at Warwick University began an occupation of the Registry. At about 8 o’clock that evening one of the students, in an office next to the Vice-Chancellor’s began thumbing through a file marked ‘Student-University Relations’. The Warwick files contained information that indicated that the administration, in collusion with industrialists, were acting improperly in keeping files on the political activities of academic staff and students in pursuit of their vision of a ‘business university’. There were reports to the vice-chancellor from the managing director of Rootes Motors - a member of the university council - about academic staff and students who had met with Rootes workers; details of an investigation into whether a leftwing US academic could be deported; even a

letter from a university council member wondering whether the unkempt, jeans-wearing students could be made to wear caps and gowns. The discovery of the files persuaded the occupying students to end the occupation and publicise their contents.

Photocopies of the documents were circulated to student unions throughout the country. On 3 March the Liverpool Daily Post reported students at Liverpool University were planning a meeting to decide whether to stage their own sit-in over alleged secret files being kept on students. The paper quoted a Liverpool University spokesman as saying they did not keep such files: *"The University's records consist of the information which is given on the university registration forms by the students themselves and of the academic results which are subsequently added by the University"*.

At a mass meeting later that day, attended by over 500 students, a proposal to occupy Senate House over the issues of secret files, CBW research and Lord Salisbury was rejected in favour of inviting him to speak in the Union the following week. A sense of the heightened political atmosphere that now existed can be gauged from the comments of one of the speakers from the floor at the meeting. He claimed that the administration had:

Ignored a plea to disclose what Chemical and Biological Warfare contracts are undertaken at the university; refused to reconsider the position of Lord Salisbury as our Chancellor, despite petitions, pickets and representations from mass meetings; refused even to dissociate itself – either as a body or as individuals – from Salisbury's views; refused last week, with no reasons given, to reveal where the university's investments lie, thus leading to a sneaking suspicion that they are investing in firms which bolster up Apartheid; and has seriously infringed the autonomy of the Guild in its reaction to last month's officer resignations.

The fifth demand

"That there is no victimisation of any people taking part in the occupation."

On 9 March the occupation of Senate House began shortly after the Vice-Chancellor and the University Treasurer, Mr HB Chrimes, had left a Mass Meeting in Mountford Hall, ended abruptly by the University-imposed chairman. At this point, some 300 students moved across to Senate House and the occupation began.

A week earlier, a mass meeting had rejected the idea of a Senate sit-in proposed by member of Socialist Society, and voted instead to give the Vice-Chancellor, Trevor Thomas, an opportunity to present his views at another mass meeting the following Monday. A SocSoc leaflet circulated before the meeting read:

Cast your mind back over the last term. There have been a number of demands made by the general meeting of Guild to Senate, expressed in polite and respectful terms (letters to the Vice-Chancellor for instance). All have come to nothing. The administration has: ignored a plea to disclose what chemical

*and biological warfare contracts are undertaken at the University; refused to reconsider the position of Lord Salisbury as our Chancellor, despite petitions, pickets and representations from mass meetings; refused even to disassociate itself – either as a body or as individuals – from Salisbury's racist views; refused last week, with no reasons given, to reveal where the University's investments lie (thus leading to the sneaking suspicion that they **are** investing in firms which bolster up apartheid); has seriously infringed the autonomy of Guild in its reaction to last month's officer resignations.*

The Vice-Chancellor agreed to attend a mass meeting, seen as being at the invitation of the student body. However, a Notice issued by the Vice-Chancellor in advance of the meeting presented it as a University meeting, and when the University administrators arrived in the Mountford Hall, they immediately replace the student chairman, John Aspinall, with their own. Things had not got off to a good start.



The Vice-Chancellor devoted a large part of his speech to the constitutional crisis in Guild. He denied that the University had infringed the autonomy of the Guild, but emphasised the unconstitutional nature of the 'Committee of Six'. He dealt more summarily with the four demands made on the University authorities in previous weeks. He said that the issue of political files would be discussed at the next Senate meeting in 10 days time. He said little on the CBW research controversy, and finished his speech by asserting he and the Senate had no intention of considering the position of the Chancellor. "I should have thought that the reason was plain and simple for all to see", he said. "It was in fact set out in the exchange of correspondence on political files between the President of the NUS and the chairman of the Vice-Chancellor's Committee: 'We accept that the political opinions of students and staff are no business of a university'. That is something to which Chancellors, equally with all other members of the University, ought to be entitled."

Mr Chrimes, the University Treasurer, stated that it was impossible for the University to reveal its investments, or whether they supported firms

operating in apartheid South Africa. He said that he considered it fundamentally wrong to “involve the whole University in a personal emotion” as to where investments should lie. More than anything else, this statement inflamed the meeting and contributed to the subsequent calls for Senate House to be occupied. With the vote taken, over 300 students marched from the Student Union to Senate House.

Soon after the occupation began a committee of ten students was elected to coordinate activities and discussions. Their names were listed on a notice pinned to a wall. These ten were the students against whom the University instituted disciplinary proceedings ten days later.



That afternoon a letter was despatched to the Vice-Chancellor stating:

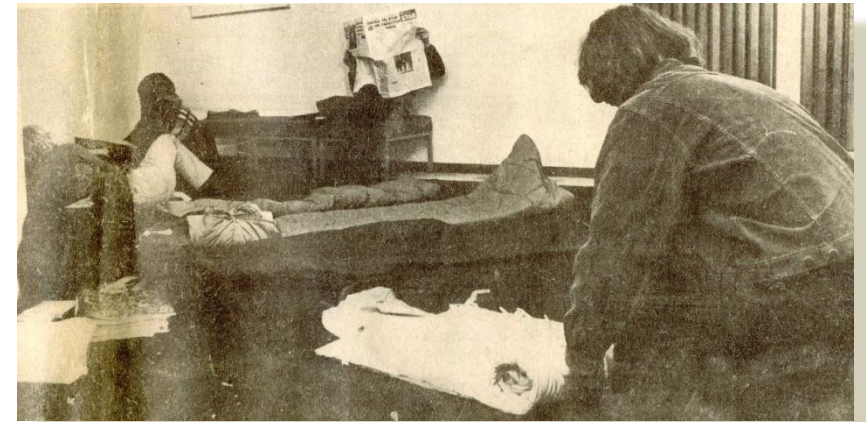
“We wish to emphasise that both the conduct of the meeting on March 9th and the answers received, were so unsatisfactory that we intend to prevent the functioning of the University administration, until such time as the University authorities show a genuine willingness to accede to the demands contained in the attached leaflet...”

The assertion that the occupation would ‘prevent the functioning of the University administration’ was to be highlighted later by the Registrar as evidence for the charge brought against the Ten of ‘conduct detrimental to the discharge of the duties of the University’.

Inside the occupation

Although the sit-in was given extensive attention in the national press, there are very few contemporary accounts of the daily routine during the ten days of occupation. This was a moment when any student protest was subject to widespread, and often hysterical, coverage of ‘militant’ actions. A general election was in the offing, and Conservative politicians had already begun campaigning on a ‘law and order’ platform. As the Liverpool Daily Post put it in an editorial:

So the latest epidemic of student protest finally infects Liverpool University and the outsider may be pardoned his bewilderment at the confusing developments over the past two or three days. What is happening in our academic institutions is part of the same challenge to traditional authority that is taking place over the western world.



The Liverpool Weekly News provided the only balanced account of the sit-in with an extensive front page report, lavishly illustrated with photos:

Reports of office ransacking and general vandalism throughout the £600,000 building were bandied about the city. These we now find to be completely false. The carpeted corridors walked by Princess Alexandra when she opened the Senate House ten months ago are now the sleeping quarters for scores of students. The marble plaque recalling the Princess’s visit is covered with a paper poster commemorating the stand made by 1,500 Liverpool tenants, workers and students. The poster reads: “This building stood as a £0.75 million travesty amongst university-owned slums.” Floors are scrubbed daily. Hygiene, catering and security squads have been formed. Mass meetings are held twice a day. No office doors have been forced. No windows have been smashed. The whole occupation is completely orderly and amazingly controlled. These are the facts that hit the visitor in the face. The Senate Chamber or ‘inner sanctum’, where the University bosses normally hold meetings, is now used as a study room. The massive entrance hall has been turned into a coffee bar and the bare walls decorated with an odd mixture of painted posters. While some students leave the Senate House to attend lectures over the University precinct, others stand guard on all entrances – ready to repel any unwanted intruders.



Mike Smith's article for Guild Gazette (12 May), *Victimising ten will not crush the movement created there*, also provides a sense of those heady days and nights:

The movement on March 9th was not a spontaneous one. It was one that had grown over one or two years. Its origin depends on when you joined it. The sit-in in the Social Studies Building, the Abercromby Tenants Campaign, the Springboks demonstration and the Guild Ball-Lord Salisbury sit-in were all part of the development of a movement which led to the Mountford on March 9th and from there to Senate House.

It was this series of events and others besides which had given many people a sense of commitment and a group loyalty. The issues: Thomas, Chrimes and the others' failure to answer the questions on Lord Salisbury, files, Chemical and Biological Warfare and investments all led to feelings of disgust; but it was the group loyalty and experience of previous action which turned this disgust into a movement to Senate House.

The foundations of a community were laid and over the next ten days they were cemented. While rumours of other offices opened or seen into floated around, the majority of us were restricted to a very limited part of that building: three committee rooms, a roof, and an infinite area of corridors and foyer. Each area had its function, defined not by committee decisions nor even by mass meeting, but rather because we were a community: one committee room for academic work...one for television and all those games of Monopoly, Subbuteo, and Risk (which suddenly appeared), and the third for duplicating and decision-making. It never seemed a question of who took decisions, so long as they were taken in the right place. Within a few days, two other essential rooms were occupied: the kitchen and the Senate Chamber. Organisation was minimal, but jobs got done.

Some people liked to sit by the front door all night and others felt it their duty to go out and get the food, leaflets and posters were produced-not because of any definite decision, but because they were needed.

The University has rejected the declarations of equal responsibility. They claim that we are all free agents. Yet, if they had only been there at the time, they would have understood what equal responsibility was. It was everyone doing what they were best at – and doing it for the sake of the occupation. There can be no doubt that something had been created in that building – and to discipline ten out of the three hundred would in no way crush the movement.

The campaign against victimisation

The authorities made no move to negotiate. Instead, on 19 March the University announced that 'as a first step', ten students were to be charged with "conduct detrimental to the discharge of the duties of the University in that on 9th March, 1970 and succeeding days you occupied the Senate House and excluded the staff of the University with the intention of hampering the discharge of those duties". Pete Cresswell faced the additional charge that "at or about 8. 45 a.m. on 10th March, 1970 you forcibly prevented Mr. HH Burchnall (the Registrar of the University) from ascending the staircase from the ground floor of the Senate House and so reaching his room in order to discharge his duties on behalf of the University".

A statement from the Registrar stated that the occupation constituted a 'serious breach of university discipline' and was a 'contravention of the law of the land'.

In response to the ten being served with charges, 174 occupants signed a 'joint confession', witnessed by the Catholic Chaplain, Fr McGoldrick, admitting equal responsibility:

"I the undersigned hereby declare that I was involved in the occupation, as of Monday 9th March. Furthermore, I declare that I am equally responsible for an action taken in accordance with the wishes of the corporate body of the occupation, which in fact includes all actions taken by the occupants since the occupation began on Monday the 9th."

The hearings were held during the Easter vacation, in the week of April 6 to 10. The University Board of Discipline, comprising seven members of the Senate, heard the prosecution cases presented by a professional barrister, accompanied by a solicitor. The accused students could not afford the £500-

plus, which would have been needed for such services, so they conducted their own defence.

The ten disciplined students, all of whom pleaded not guilty in all cases were charged with “conduct detrimental to the discharge of the University.” As part of their defence they maintained that the duties of a university are to stand committed against racialism, secrecy, germ warfare research and oligarchy. By occupying Senate they were not impeding those duties but attempting to implement them.

None of the students was allowed to call any senior university official, to explain what exactly were the ‘duties’ to which their conduct was alleged to have been detrimental, In one case, the time allowed by the board to the prosecution was five hours, while the defence was eventually allotted one and three-quarter hours. In this instance, the student was several times refused the opportunity of an adjournment to seek legal advice.

The official reason given by the University for charging only ten out of the 350 students who took part in the occupation was that these were the only ones which the authorities could identify. However, the written statements given by certain university employees and used as the basis of the prosecution, contained the names of at least ten students not charged. In addition over 170 individual ‘equal responsibility’ statements had been sent to the Vice-Chancellor.

The hearings concluded on Saturday 11 April and the sentences were announced immediately. All ten students were found guilty. One student was expelled; seven others were suspended for two years; and the other two for one year. Five of the ten students were due to take their finals within six weeks of the hearings. The severity of the sentences stunned the ten and their supporters, and resulted in extensive coverage in the Sunday press.

In the following days discussion focussed on the harshness of the sentences and their wider significance. With one student expelled, seven suspended for two years and two suspended for 12 months, the sentences were unprecedented in their severity.

There was speculation that the Liverpool sentences provided signs of a coordinated strategy against student militancy by university administrators, cheered on by politicians. A general election was approaching, and Conservative politicians had initiated a law and order campaign, targeting militant students and their ‘violent’ tactics. Soon after the Liverpool occupation began there had been a meeting of university vice-chancellors, followed by another meeting between the vice-chancellors and the Prime Minister.

There was evidence of a harsher approach to dissident students being taken on other British campuses. In the month following the Liverpool verdicts, one student at the LSE had been imprisoned, three Essex students had been committed to Borstal, one suspended at Keele, 50 sent down at Edinburgh, one expelled from Oxford, six Swansea students were facing a conspiracy charge related to a Springbok demonstration, and students at Cambridge were facing jail sentences on riot charges

following the Garden House demonstration. Elsewhere, on many campuses, students were being warned that if they caused trouble, they faced discipline.

On 14 May the appeals of nine of the ten disciplined students were heard, but reflected little change to the University’s hard-line position. Sentences were amended in two cases, with a reduction of the period of suspension from two years to one year.

Disquiet was widespread within the University. There was a petition signed by 148 members of the University’s teaching staff, including 13 Professors, another supported by 140 postgraduate students and letters to the Vice-Chancellor from Professors and Deans of Faculties – all expressing concern about the damage to future staff-student relations and appealing for a lightening of the penalties imposed.

Concern about the sentences was also expressed nationally. In the House of Commons, 140 MPs signed a motion put down by Eric Heffer, Labour MP for Walton, which called upon the University authorities to “think again and reconsider the sentences imposed”. In The Times, there was a spirited correspondence instigated by a letter from the Bishop of Whitby defending his son’s actions in the sit-in. Similarly, in the New Statesman, an article by Professor John Griffith, Professor of Law at the London School of Economics, who provided *pro bono* legal support to some of the ten during the trials and appeals, provoked responses over successive issues. Professor Griffith wrote:

A division is now becoming apparent in the attitude of the university authorities to student protest in Britain. One attitude has been recently exemplified at Warwick University, where, even there, the authorities decided not to take disciplinary action against those who participated in the sit-in last term, but instead to concentrate on the continuing development of the university as an academic and social community. This attitude, whatever its motive, recognises that universities today are moving through such a period of fundamental change as happens to all institutions from time to time when they are put under great pressure. The universities as they have existed, some for hundreds, some for scores of years, are disappearing before our eyes as a consequence of great social upheavals in their size and composition. The wiser vice-chancellors and their colleagues do not believe that the future is best safeguarded by strong disciplinary action, by student-bashing. For the inevitable consequence of such action is that the university becomes a place where the attitude of different groups hardens quickly and the restoration of working relationships is postponed for many years.

Aftermath

On May 1st more than 700 students went on strike in support of the ten disciplined students. They joined the thousands of trade unionists who formed the annual May Day march through the city culminating at a meeting at the Pier Head.



However, with the onset of the summer vacation, the campaign petered out. It was left to Dave Robertson, in an article in Sphinx magazine that summer, to capture the heady mood of the occupation:

The Senate House of Liverpool University cost £600,000. It also cost a massive demonstration, months of embarrassment caused by angry tenants, and finally a broken community. It has stood since its chaotic birth as a symbol of all that the university has stood for in this society- an edifice of bureaucratic insensitivity, technocratic isolation, and plain old-fashioned indifference to external problems....

The university authorities have refused to accept joint responsibility. They have said that the occupation was conducted by ringleaders. They do not know. Throughout the occupation most people helped with most things. Nearly everyone took a turn on security; nearly everyone helped clean up; nearly everyone assisted catering. For some people, it is impossible to conceive of a community without hierarchy. During the occupation we came very near to such a community.

But times were changing; the bleak years of the 1970s were soon upon us. On 4 May, at Kent State University in Ohio, the National Guard fired 67 rounds in 13 seconds, killing 4 students and wounding 9. Neil Young was moved to write and quickly release the single 'Ohio'.

In most countries student movements declined or they simply collapsed as the energies of left-wing politics was sucked out of the campuses and into increasingly sectarian – and in some cases, violent -

struggles. In the US, the invasion of Cambodia and the shootings at Kent State seemed to demonstrate the impotence of the movement. Most students returned to their books, while a radicalized minority, as the Weather Underground, resorted to political violence, as did similar fractions in the UK and Germany. By 1971, student movements had burned themselves out almost everywhere.

A conclusion

There was, as Thomas Kelly observes in his official history of the University, a fierce idealism underlying the Liverpool protests, a passionate desire for a more just world order. The degree to which radical students were able to mobilise this idealism through mass campaigns during 1969-70 and achieve, if only for a short period, an unprecedented level of support, is remarkable.

What united the Liverpool actions – from the protest over University-owned slum housing to the issue of the racist views of the Chancellor and the questions about University investments – was a critical questioning of the nature of a university, its relationship and responsibilities to the wider world.

In the long run, did protests like this matter? There is evidence that they did. That the solidarity protests and the boycott movement gave black South Africans a sense of hope that change could occur, was confirmed by Nelson Mandela. He recalled how, in 1981, on Robben Island, isolated from the outside world, he and his fellow-prisoners somehow heard news of the massive and successful protests against the Springboks tour of New Zealand:

“When I heard that news it felt like the sun coming out.”

The Liverpool protests succeeded in asking the big ethical questions about what it is to be human: what kind of lives we want to live, and want others to be able to enjoy in freedom and dignity, and what kind of world we want to pass on to our children.

Gerry Cordon