

'Father of Docklands' dies aged 83

21 January 2011 | By David Donoghue

Obituary Reg Ward

Reg Ward, chief executive of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) from 1981 to 1987, died on 6 January, aged 83

The powerful but controversial quango was set up by Michael Heseltine during Margaret Thatcher's government in 1981, in response to the drastic economic decline of London's docks.

Its remit extended 6 miles down river from Tower Bridge over parts of Southwark, Newham and Tower Hamlets.

At the time, unemployment stood at 17.8%, 10,000 jobs had been lost in just three years and 60% of the area was derelict.

Attempts by local authorities to revive the area were totally moribund. Heseltine gave the new body both planning control and the resources to make things happen.

He appointed leading developer Nigel Broackes to chair the body, Bob Mellish, a veteran local Labour MP, as deputy chairman, and Ward as chief executive.

For nine months Ward was the only member of staff, but it was clear that his vision was far more ambitious than the original expectations of some decent houses and small work premises.

Although he got on famously well with Broackes, Mellish and Heseltine, his vision and persistence did not sit well with civil servants or the local authorities.

However, he is now credited as the main driver behind the extraordinary change and development in London Docklands.

In 1982 I stood alone with Ward on an empty Canary Wharf at what is now the base of Canary Wharf tower - One Canada Square. We were the only people to be seen for miles around. It was eerily quiet. Today there are more than 120,000 people working there.

We were there discussing the launch of Limehouse Television studios. Limehouse and Richard Desmond's Northern & Shell were the first significant companies to move into the newly designated Isle of Dogs Enterprise Zone. Despite the appalling transport and traffic problems, Limehouse was an instant success and attracted VIPs, celebrities and leading politicians.

They included a US banker, Michael von Clemm, who suggested a new financial centre should be created there. Ward jumped on this and a contract was signed with Paul Reichmann of Canadian property developer Olympia & York in 1987.

Unremitting persistence

Ward’s greatest achievement was to persuade hard-nosed City and property investors that a Docklands revival was going to work.

Initially the media, property industry and even the LDDC board were cynical, but Ward’s unremitting persistence – and brilliant marketing – won the day.

Since then thousands of jobs and homes have been created, as well as massive infrastructure and transport improvements that include the Jubilee Line and the Riverbus. His admirers claim that London would never have won the bid for the 2012 Olympic Games had Ward not battled vigorously for better transport links in the East End.

Lord Heseltine says: “He was an outstanding success and it led to one of the world’s outstanding regeneration projects. His energy was proverbial; his imagination huge. I greatly enjoyed working with him. Reg made a great contribution to the redevelopment of the East End. We owe him a great debt.”

The son of a miner, Albert Joseph Reginald Ward was born on 5 October 1927 in the Forest of Dean. He was educated at East Dean Grammar School at Cinderford, Gloucestershire, and studied medieval history, then fine art and architecture, at Manchester University.

He became a tax inspector and in his mid-thirties worked for Lancashire County Council. He rose through the ranks of local government, becoming chief executive of the Hammersmith and Fulham Council, and later of Hereford and Worcester County Council, before joining the LDDC.

Ward stepped down from the job of chief executive in September 1987, having also served as a member of the Duke of Edinburgh’s Commission into Housing 1986/87 and as a Fellow of the University of London and the Royal Society for the Arts.

He set up his own consultancy firm to work on several regeneration projects around the world, including the Olympic cities of Barcelona and Sydney, before being appointed to head the regeneration of St Kitts in the Caribbean.

Throughout this time he continued to be a regular contributor to debates on urban regeneration and the future of the Thames Gateway.

During his career he also devised and saw through plans for the Docklands Light Railway, London City airport, the Royal Docks, Surrey Quays and the Excel Centre.

In his last years Ward took life a little easier at his home at Broadwell Manor in Gloucestershire.

In April 2004 Ward and his wife Betty celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with a lunchtime party at Stow-on-the-Wold, which was attended by many of the LDDC’s original staff. Betty died in early 2010. Ward leaves two children, John and Sarah.

By David Donoghue, former director of communications for the London Docklands Development Corporation

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