



O Come all ye faithful

If you want a microcosm of Blair's Britain look no further than the Merseyside authority of Knowsley. And at its heart in Kirkby, the Labour faithful are losing their religion. BY MARK PIGGOTT

From Liverpool Central the train follows the Mersey between renovated docks, smart new estates and neglected wasteland.

At the end of the Northern Line lies Kirkby: a sprawl of council estates, box-like private homes and grim tower blocks unable to cope with the windy wet climate. Here, far away from New Labour's cappuccino malls and gleaming domes, the people of Blair's Britain have had enough. "They built Kirkby and all these other estates in the Sixties to house the workers from Liverpool's slums," says Mick Dempsey, journalist and editor of scurrilous website *The Kirkby Times*, which provides an irreverent and often

potentially libellous view of local issues. "But they used cheap materials and the wrong building methods, and after a few years many of the houses were boarded up and left to rot."

Mick runs his website from the top floor of one of Kirkby's decaying tower blocks which loom over a muddy patch of grass criss-crossed by skid marks and mottled with brown scars, testament to the twin pastimes of joy riding and arson. The blocks are single-glazed and despite the signs, concierge-less.

"Knowsley Council got 12 million quid from the SRB (Single Regeneration Budget) to do this area up - what did they spend it all on?" he asks. The area is a magnet for drug-dealers, and rumour has it one block has been ear-marked for asylum seekers.

"That could lead to all kinds of trouble 'round here. Kirkby is a very white area, so to suddenly find dozens of asylum seekers moving in could help the BNP. If they start to believe the BNP are the only ones who are listening, that could be dangerous."

Things have progressed since the Seventies, when Knowsley came to represent everything that was awful about 'Old' Labour. Local governance has become a more open and transparent business, and - despite frequent mentions in *Private Eye's Rotten Boroughs* column - the council press office claims Knowsley is no longer one of the "town-hall tyrants" Blair pledged to purge on entering office. On the surface, the indicators are positive: unemployment down, housing improved, jobs created. There may not be a Labour club in town (though there is a Conservative one), but there's a Weatherspoons and a well-stocked library. Maybe Kirkby really is on the up, as the council claims?

So what's the real Knowsley? A shining monument to the New Labour dream or a damning indictment of all New Labour stands for? The answer, it seems, is both. On one hand, thanks partly to businesses like QVC and Littlewoods, unemployment has plunged to just four per cent - in an area where it was once ubiquitous. The authority has been rated as 'good' in the Government's own Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). And in March it was short-listed for LGA's council of the year. On the other hand, according to the Government's Index of Deprivation 2000 this is Britain's sixth most deprived borough, with some of the worst housing and lowest levels of car ownership. Ruffwood secondary school has Britain's worst truancy rates, and crime is way above average. Inside Kirkby Civic Suite, just over the road from local MP George Howarth's office, a mural portrays the Eighties' protests against unemployment. Unfortunately, it seems the artist concerned wasn't a big fan of Howarth, so he went back and drew a small dog with an uncanny resemblance to the Right Honourable Member. It even has a name tag: 'George'.

It's a long way from Kirkby Civic Suite to the canteen inside Westminster but George Howarth seems quite at home - and dogged rather than poodle-like. Despite his frequent run-ins with Knowsley Council's leadership, Howarth is defensive about the area he represents - if not the council which represents them.

Kirkby went through very hard times in Eighties. When local factories such as Hygena and Birdseye went, unemployment was over 20 per cent. But the place is changing. Many people from the area end up buying new properties there, so they must feel an affinity with the place. And it's

not cheap- new houses can go for over £100,000 in Kirkby.

Howarth believes the council is changing for the better under its 'new' leader, Cllr Ronnie Round - and shrugs off rumours that long-time leader, the septuagenarian Jim Keight, may mount yet another comeback campaign. Many in Kirkby still despise Keight, viewing his reign as bullying and autocratic - exactly the kind of town hall tyrant Blair vowed to vanquish. "Local officers describe Knowsley as an abortion," says local JP and former Labour councillor Peter Fisher. "They forced all these towns with nothing in common together, so they all compete for resources. Kirkby usually comes off worst- they've always had it in for the town. Walk round here then walk round Huyton. They've got all the chain stores, the posh shops, and what have we got? Netto."

Grey-haired, wiry and compact, Fisher is a former aide to Robert Kilroy-Silk, then MP for Knowsley North. In the Eighties Fisher helped bring about Derek Hatton and Militant's downfall, bringing Neil Kinnock to Kirkby in 1986 for a showdown with the rebels.

"I've been on the front page of the *Daily Mail*. Alistair Campbell's been in me front room. That Militant showdown was the start of New Labour. I hate to say it, because I come from a solid Labour background, but the Tories did more for this area than Labour ever did.@"

According to Fisher, Knowsley is a guinea pig for the New Labour experiment. "This is Blair's baby borough. Knowsley's his favourite council. Did you know that this is the only council which has a stall at the Labour conference?"

Knowsley Council is proud of its achievements in Kirkby. According to a recent article in the Liverpool Echo the area has had the best record in reducing

unemployment in Britain over the last four years. So why isn't Mick Dempsey doing cartwheels round town?

"For a start, 4,000 of these jobs are in call centres, which have been subsidised as Knowsley has regeneration funds which allow firms to be set up and workers trained. We've had call centre training ongoing here for years, despite warnings that the TUC call these workplaces 'The new Satanic Mills' and many of the firms involved may well choose to outsource these call centre jobs once Knowsley runs out of funds."

Opposite the tight nest of streets called the Crofts and looming over St Kev's Fields, Sonae's huge chimney belches out fumes which locals claim are dangerous.

According to the *Kirkby Times*, the chimney has been airbrushed out of the council website photograph. The factory, which makes chip board, has been fined for polluting the local rivers. George Howarth has received many complaints and has called for independent investigations into potential health hazards from the site.

"In the current economic climate I'd be quite happy if Sonae closed down. It's been a nuisance for years. They sorted out the noise problem, but it still has an odour problem and generates a lot of dust which disperses over a wide area.

Until last year, the Tower Hill Community Centre provided a wide range of facilities for this, one of Kirkby's poorest areas.

Youngsters could learn IT skills, pensioners could play bingo, and there were morris-dancing and line-dancing classes.

When a new medical centre was proposed for the area, Knowsley MBC promised that a brand new community centre would form part of the plans. The plans themselves were put on display in Huyton, six miles away. Asked why the plans couldn't be

seen in Kirkby, locals were allegedly told: "because Kirkby hasn't got a board."

The council promised local residents the old community centre would remain open until it was completed. But last November the community centre was closed and boarded up, leaving locals with nowhere to go.

"We used to do hot scouse for the pensioners for a quid," says longtime Crofts resident Teresa McIloughlan, 55, smartly dressed and determined former chairwoman of a community centre which her three children all attended - and which Knowsley Council shut down. We are in the immaculate dining room of Teresa's well-kept house in the Crofts. Teresa's daughter is busy in the kitchen cooking dozens of sausages.

"Now we have to take them to the English Martyrs (a local Catholic church) but we can't cook there, so we take stuff in. The church is closing in two weeks for renovations. When it reopens they say we can't come back. Where will the pensioners go then?"

Like many Kirkby residents, Teresa believes the council is biased against the town, and Tower Hill in particular. "Since Knowsley came in they've smashed the community 'round here. They've always had it in for this area. When (Jim) Keight was in power he said in a meeting they should put a fence round the whole of Tower Hill to keep us all in."

In the Seventies, Tower Hill was notorious. This was the location of the rent strikes in 1972, when locals protesting against the Housing Finance Act were sacked from the local Birds Eye factory for attending a protest. The families picketed outside the main gates until they were reinstated.

When the area's tower blocks were demolished, a good few other houses were damaged too. The rubble was dumped into

the underground car parks of the flats and turfed over, meaning nothing could be built on the site. Now the grass is scarred every few yards by scorch marks, evidence of cars which have been raced here and torched by bored youths.

The fear of crime is significant. Despite having a population of around 32,000, Kirkby police station is closed at night and I don't see any police. I contacted the police in the hope of finding out if resources were stretched and was told in no uncertain terms that "we don't give out operational details." As for the much vaunted 'community wardens', I don't see any in Kirkby.

Former Labour members, both Teresa and Peter are to stand for the Liberal Democrats in the June local elections. "I voted Labour all my life," says Teresa, Anever again. We need change. We've had enough of Labour. The voters have been browbeaten for years, and there was a lot of apathy. Now that's turning to anger." The Northern Line takes me back into Liverpool, and I feel a guilty sense of relief as the conflicts of Kirkby fade behind me. A return ticket into the city from Kirkby is over £4, which doesn't sound much unless it comes out of your giro or call-centre wage.

The centre of Liverpool is buzzing: Japanese tourists, high-fashion stores, and already looking forward to becoming European Capital of Culture in 2008. According to the government, the country is booming: low unemployment, regeneration, inward investment. But look behind the hype, beneath the press releases and zappy web pages, and there's another Britain.

Blair's New Labour came to power promising a revolution. Seven years on, for many the romance has soured. Labour were meant to be the peoples' party, to

represent the common man and woman. For traditional Labour supporters in Kirkby and hundreds of other communities across Britain, there is a palpable sense of betrayal.

Ends

