

The Telegraph

Reg Ward

Reg Ward, who died on January 6 aged 83, was the first chief executive of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC), the body granted executive powers by the Thatcher government to develop the depressed Docklands area of east London.



Reg Ward Photo: PHOTOSHOT

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As such, he was the irrepressible mastermind behind such projects as the Docklands Light Railway, London City Airport, the Royal Docks, Surrey Quays and Canary Wharf.

Appointed in 1980 by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine, Ward put Docklands on the map with a cheeky advertising campaign — “Why move to the middle of nowhere when you can move to the middle of London?”— and a rumbustious approach to getting things done that brooked little role for Left-wing neighbouring boroughs, or indeed for Whitehall protocol.

Within five years Ward and his equally ebullient chairman, Sir Nigel Broackes, had confounded LDDC’s critics by achieving a remarkable transformation of one of the most run-down areas in Britain, turning 8.5 square miles of dereliction into a place where people wanted to live and work. His admirers have even claimed that London would never have won the bid for the 2012 Olympic Games had not Ward battled vigorously for better transport links in the East End.

Ward's greatest achievement was to persuade hard-nosed City and property investors that Docklands revival was going to work. By 1986, the LDDC had spent around £300m of public money, but had succeeded in attracting £1.4 billion in private investment.

His approach was to seize opportunities whenever and wherever they arose. When the American banker Michael von Clemm visited West India Docks looking for a factory site, he became interested instead in the idea of building offices. Ward jumped on this and the resulting scheme became the Canary Wharf development. After several hiccups a contract was eventually signed with Paul Reichman, of the Canadian property developers Olympia and York, in 1987. "You could say that Docklands is a 'happening', a happy coincidence of opportunity and accident," Ward explained. "There have been no master plans or detailed development frameworks."

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But Ward's style was controversial. The Greater London Council under Ken Livingstone refused to acknowledge the LDDC's existence and the affected boroughs were furious at having an unelected body within their midst that had sole authority for planning approval. Within the Isle of Dogs Enterprise Zone the LDDC could do virtually whatever it wanted — including offering generous tax breaks to developers. Ward also encountered criticism that instead of creating an aesthetically pleasing and coherent new urban environment, he had presided over American-style suburban sprawl — a fragmented collection of clustered housing developments, offices and industrial parks loosely linked by the river and a light rail system. Moreover, the LDDC faced growing criticism that local people had not benefited from the new development. Unemployment in the area remained above the national average, and beyond the shiny new office blocks, deprivation and grim housing continued to be the norm. Local residents led rallies in protest at the noise, pollution and lack of job opportunities.

Ward remained unrepentant, protesting that if there had been some grand plan, "we would still be debating and nothing would have got built. Instead, we have gone for an organic, market-driven

approach, responding pragmatically to each situation." A sense of local identity, he argued, could only emerge once the buildings were up.

Ward stepped down from the job of chief executive in September 1987, shortly after signing the contract for the development of Canary Wharf. Though he was held in great regard by those who worked for him, one commentator observed, "the corns he has stepped on would fill more shoes than even Imelda Marcos possessed".

On at least one occasion, for example, Ward dodged phone calls from a Secretary of State for several days knowing that if he did not, one of his road schemes would be blocked. While Michael Heseltine was a great admirer of his gung-ho approach (as, apparently, was the Duke of Edinburgh), Nicholas Ridley, who became Environment Secretary in 1986, was less enthusiastic.

The son of a miner, Albert Joseph Ward was born on October 5 1927 in the Forest of Dean and educated at East Dean Grammar School at Cinderford, Gloucestershire. He became the first member of his family to attend university, studying Medieval History, then Fine Art and Architecture, at Manchester University. Rejecting the option of becoming an academic, he joined the Inland Revenue as a tax inspector.

He left the Revenue in his mid-30s for a job as administrator of the architecture department at Lancashire County Council, then rose through the ranks of local government, becoming chief executive of the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, and later of Hereford and Worcester County Council. He joined the LDDC in its "shadow" period in 1980, a year before it was granted executive powers.

After leaving the LDDC Ward set up his own consultancy and used the experience he had gained in Docklands to work on a number of major regeneration projects around the world. He worked in Barcelona and Sydney before being appointed to head the regeneration of St Kitts in the Caribbean.

In 2004 Ward and his wife Betty celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with a lunchtime party at their home in Stow-on-the-Wold attended by many of the LDDC's original staff. She died last year. He is survived by their son and daughter.

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