

Reg Ward

Ebullient mastermind of the regeneration of London's East End who oversaw the birth of the Docklands Light Railway and City Airport

DUNCAN BAXTER

Reg Ward was the inaugural chief executive of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) set up in 1980 by Michael Heseltine, then Secretary of State for the Environment, in an attempt to secure the regeneration of 8½ square miles of East London. Ward served in the post from 1981 to 1987, and masterminded such projects as London City Airport, the Docklands Light Railway, Surrey Quays, Canary Wharf and the Royal Docks, where he also helped to create the ExCel exhibition centre.

Ward was widely credited with the success of the LDDC, a powerful but controversial quango established by Margaret Thatcher's Government in response to the economic decline of London's docks. Its remit extended across parts of Southwark, Tower Hamlets and Newham.

Perhaps his greatest accomplishment was to persuade sceptical City businessmen and property investors that such a revival would work. His persistence — and clever marketing (his advertising slogans included "Why move to the middle of nowhere when you can move to the middle of London?") — confounded those who said that it simply could not be done.

Ward's extrovert and entrepreneurial style may have gained him many admirers but he also attracted some influential critics, and after coming under pressure to retire early from those opposed to his rather forthright

'Reg Ward is a man with both feet firmly planted in mid-air'



Ward inspects the construction of the DLR in January 1986; and below, the Canary Wharf development on the Isle of Dogs begins to take shape in April 1989

manner he stepped down from his post at the age of 60, shortly after the master building agreement for Canary Wharf was signed in 1987. More than 90,000 people now work on the site.

Back in the early 1980s, however, attempts by London boroughs and the Greater London Council to revive the area had become moribund. Heseltine gave the new quango both planning control and the resources to “make things happen”. He appointed a leading developer, Nigel Broackes of Trafalgar House, to chair the body; Bob Mellish, the veteran Labour MP for Bermondsey, as its deputy chairman; and Reg Ward as its chief executive.

Ward delighted in his reputation as a risk-taker and a man who spoke the same language as the entrepreneurs he had attracted into the Docklands, and was fond of quoting Broackes’s character assessment of him: “Reg Ward is a man with both feet firmly planted in mid-air.”

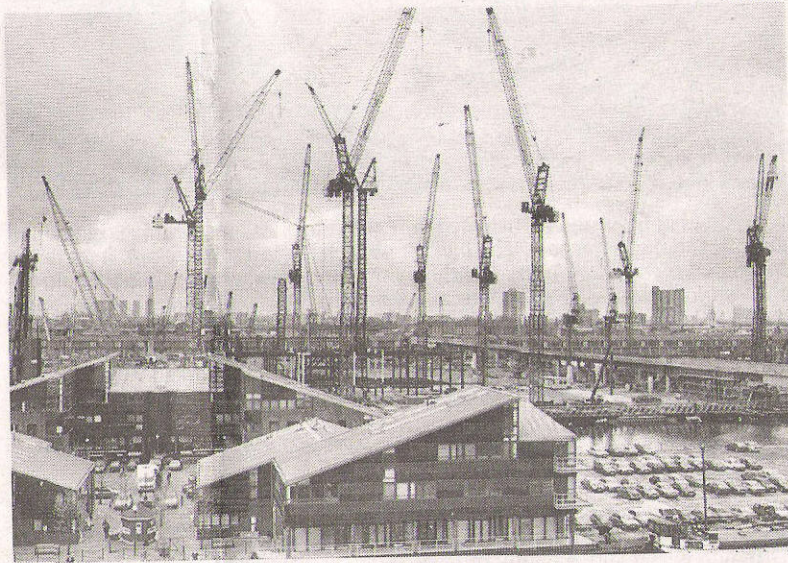
For several months Ward was the LDDC’s sole member of staff. From the start it was apparent that his vision was more ambitious than the original expectation of some decent housing and a handful of small offices. While Ward got on famously well with Broackes, Mellish and Heseltine, his bullish approach did not always sit well with civil servants or the local authorities involved. Ward was unabashed. “I am a man who likes to keep a lot of balls in the air at the same time and perhaps because of their background, a lot of

civil servants find it difficult to understand that approach,” Ward later said, in a newspaper interview in 1987.

The LDDC board also attracted criticism for being unaccountable and for allegedly acting in a high-handed manner — within the Isle of Dogs enterprise zone it had sole authority for planning approval and could largely do whatever it wanted. Moreover, the piecemeal redevelopment of the site led to accusations that it had no architectural coherence, and that local people — and their aspirations — had literally been overlooked.

Nevertheless, thousands of jobs and homes were eventually created, together with massive infrastructure and transport benefits, including the Jubilee Line Extension and Docklands Light Railway. Change did not happen overnight, however. The DLR station at Canary Wharf did not open until late 1991 and the Jubilee Line station not until 1999. In its final annual report in 1998, the LDDC boasted that it had attracted £1.86 billion in public sector investment, £7.7 billion in private sector investment, built 24,046 new homes and 144km (90 miles) of new and improved roads, constructed the DLR, created 25 million square feet of commercial and industrial floorspace, reclaimed 1,884 acres of derelict land, sold 1,066 acres of land for redevelopment and won 94 awards for architecture, conservation and landscaping.

Lord Heseltine said of Ward: “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.”

Albert Joseph Reginald Ward was born in 1927 in the Forest of Dean. He was the son of a miner and was educated at East Dean Grammar School at Cinderford, Gloucestershire. He studied medieval history, then fine art and architecture, at Manchester University. He became a tax inspector with the Inland Revenue and in his mid-30s

worked for the architecture department at Lancashire County Council. He rose through the ranks of local government, becoming chief executive of the London Borough of Hammer-smith and Fulham, and later of Hereford and Worcester County Council. He served as a member of the Duke of Edinburgh’s *Commission into Housing* in 1986–87.

Limehouse Studios, a television studio complex, and Northern & Shell, the publishing group owned by Richard Desmond, were among the first companies of significance to move into

the newly designated Isle of Dogs enterprise zone. Limehouse quickly proved a success and drew various celebrities and senior politicians to its studios in spite of dire transport links and traffic problems. An American banker, Michael von Clemm, who was among those to visit the site, suggested that a new financial centre be created there. Ward seized on the idea and the resulting scheme became the Canary Wharf development. A contract was eventually signed with Paul Reichmann, of the Canadian property developer Olympia & York, in 1987.

After leaving the LDDC that year Ward set up his own consultancy to work on a number of other regeneration projects, including schemes in Barcelona and Sydney. He was later appointed to head the regeneration of St Kitts in the Caribbean as head of Island Development Associates, a group of former LDDC executives who planned to build a new town on 4,000 acres of beaches and sugar cane plantations.

In 2004 he and his wife Betty celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with a lunchtime party at Stow-on-the-Wold attended by many of the LDDC’s original staff. Betty died early in 2010 and he is survived by two children.

Albert Joseph Reginald Ward, chief executive of the London Docklands Development Corporation, 1981–87, was born on October 5, 1927. He died on January 6, 2011, aged 83