



photo: Paul Silverberg

## Bluecoat: an arts centre for Merseyside

In October last year **Christopher Kerr**, former Deputy Director of Merseyside Arts, took over as Director of the Bluecoat Society of Arts, which has the responsibility for administering the Bluecoat Chambers, **Penelope Feeny** asked him what plans he had for its future development.

'Well, the Society is at present just a committee, but if you're going to have an arts centre you've got to have a membership in order to live. There's a working party looking into the question of membership at the moment and we hope to have a system operating by the summer. Bluecoat Chambers has of course existed as a centre for the arts for some years now, putting on concerts and exhibitions and offering studio facilities, but I hope we shall be able to increase both the activities and the amenities available here.

Take music for example: starting this month we're co-ordinating a new series called *Signs of the Times* which will combine baroque and contemporary music and provide the opportunity for people to hear some rarely played works. There will be four concerts, one a month, featuring professional musicians such as Peter O'Hagan and Colin Carr, who should be well-known to Merseyside audiences, as well as the internationally famous Legrand Ensemble. I'm also hoping to initiate a musicians-in-residence scheme whereby we'd have three or four musicians on the premises for three or four days at a time, giving workshops during the day and performances at night: music on tap, if you like, which you can just wander in and listen to, and, again, covering the field from baroque to contemporary. On February 10, by the way, we're mounting a music bazaar at which we shall sell old sheet music to raise money for future promotions – and we'd be very happy to hear from anyone who has any music scores to donate.

There are also plans to have a craftsman in residence. I want to reorganise and improve the crafts workshop that's here already so there will be separately defined spaces and the appropriate facilities for people to carry out various crafts: pottery, weaving, jewellery-making and so on. I'd like to see classes run so that more people can be involved with the work of artists and benefit from participation.

Ideally we would have day as well as evening classes. I'm also, very tentatively, exploring the possibility of an occasional craft market in the front courtyard – which could act as a showpiece and attract people into the building. The back courtyard would continue to be used for summer lunch-time recitals, for suitable exhibitions and, with luck, for a small Handel opera.

Naturally the Bluecoat Gallery itself plays a very important part in all our plans. When funds permit I would very much like to extend it, creating a larger and more flexible space so that we could run concurrent exhibitions for example, enabling us to put on more non-selling shows and still fulfil the responsibility we feel very strongly towards local artists. As a first step we've established a counter in the foyer, by the main entrance, which sells cards, prints, posters and where I hope we'll be able to have a small permanent display of paintings for sale. In the meantime there's an exciting series of exhibitions planned for the year, beginning this month with *Phoenix*, which will show women artists, quite literally, at work, and in February the first sight of Rick Florsheim's photographs of Liverpool commissioned by Merseyside Arts.

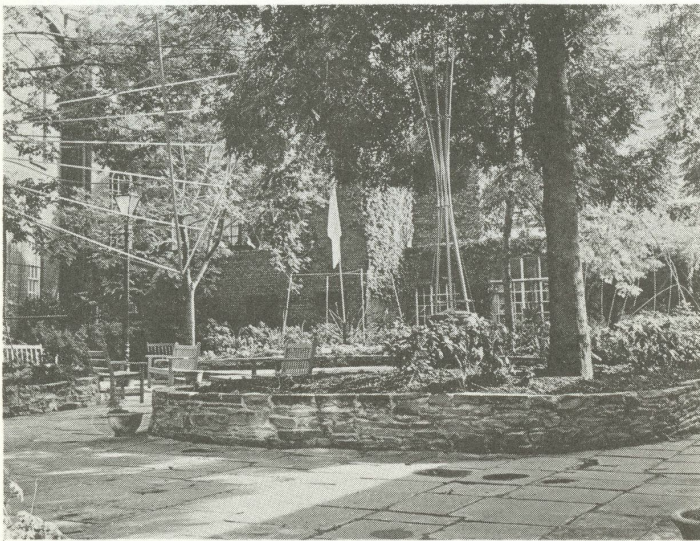


The exhibition *Phoenix* in progress

Another idea I want to develop is that of having a theme around which several events can be co-ordinated – as in the Cocteau festival mounted in autumn 1977. In particular, the exhibitions we're arranging of the work of Claude Rogers and Duncan Grant will be complemented by lectures, films, and perhaps concerts, relating to the life and times of the artists. We shall also be having art films, on tour from the Arts Council which give a good insight into how artists work and how they are influenced.

Visual art and music are probably the two art forms people tend most often to associate with the Bluecoat but I'm also planning to put on regular theatre and poetry events. I would like eventually to adapt the concert hall to a certain extent and give it extra lighting to make it a more flexible performance space. We're going on to the small scale drama regional touring circuit which means we'll be promoting the productions of at least four companies for three days at a time each year – I also want to arrange a good number of events and workshops for children. Following the success of the Dannie Abse poetry reading last year we shall be inviting other poets to hold readings in the Sandon music room which has a more intimate atmosphere than the hall.

It need scarcely be said that we remain in close and friendly contact with the Liverpool Academy in Pilgrim Street who also put on exhibitions, poetry readings and similar events: Gill Clark and I are well aware of the futility of competition. For one thing they'll probably do a lot more dance and performance art (we can't really put on dance because the floor was badly weakened by bomb-damage during the war and can no longer take the strain) and indeed, when it comes to exhibitions I hope we'll collaborate from time to time. An exhibition which demanded a large display space, such as figurative sculpture for example, might even be shared between our two galleries. In any case we shall be planning our programme to avoid any clashes, in fact to complement each other.



An exhibition of sculpture in the back courtyard

I believe there's most definitely an audience for the sort of events we'll be promoting and it's chiefly a question of building up a regular attendance – and this is where our review of membership comes in. We want to have a big membership drive so we can build up an accurate mailing list and we want to be able to offer useful concessions: like discounts on tickets and gallery sales, special events for members, perhaps lower rates for room hire (most of the rooms in the building can be hired out on a sliding scale according to the resources of the organisation and naturally this revenue is very valuable to us). I want to make sure our programme is both varied and well-publicised and I hope to mount elegant new boards on the gates which will show a map of the building and details of what is happening where each week. I think it's important that the Bluecoat is used as much as possible by the people of Merseyside: after all, it's right in the centre of town, it's the oldest building in Liverpool and one of the most beautiful, and there is tremendous potential for all kinds of arts activities. So it's up to us to make the most of it.'