

Robin Riley: A Great Man to Know*

By Richard Scott

(Constructed from personal sources, memories and notes and tributes collected by David Massey, Peter Brown, and their conversations)

Introduced by Tony Siebenthaler, I first met Robin Riley at the Liverpool Architecture and Design Trust. Robin was very supportive of the Trust's high aspirations for an urban design guide for the city and was working there to pass on the skills of sculpture conservation to new apprentices. The next time I met him shortly afterwards was in St. James' Garden: seeing a branch off an overhanging tree. Always with the practical and activity in mind, for Robin it was the happening which was important: making things, bringing people to the stage, raising funds.

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Robin Riley, who died in September 2023, was an artist, a teacher, craftsman, sculptor, polymath and life-long socialist. A well-known figure on Catherine Street L8, where he lived for many years at No.45, and the Canning Street area (now known as the Georgian Quarter), he was a strong advocate for the community and locality, for which he tried, with other residents, to establish a Neighbourhood Plan. Robin was also passionate about parks and open spaces and the public realm, working with good friends Professor Tony Bradshaw FRS and Dr. Emlyn Williams to establish the Friends of St James' Garden to rescue, manage and to restore the cemetery area beneath the Anglican Cathedral. In the Radio 4 programme below, Robin concluded: "We are very proud of this place, because we all know we have made a great difference to it, and we built a place which people love." And this group of friends lifted the heart. The Garden has become known as a gem and oasis in the city. In the Radio 4 programme, Robin stands back from the interviews and lets the people and place shine, which shows his love and understanding for the combination.

Robin lived, as I am sure he would have said, through some 'interesting times', and the people he knew and characters he came across and lived close by were equally interesting. Allan Ginsberg described Liverpool as the Center of the Cultural Universe, and Robin certainly knew this era in the city and appreciated its universe; his life was touched by this philosophy. As always, I wished I had asked more questions about those times and his catalogue of knowledge. Bryan Biggs (Director of Cultural Legacies, The Bluecoat) has said of Robin that "I liked him very much and he was always generous with his time. I learnt so much from him about the postwar art scene in Liverpool and we had many stimulating conversations – and much laughter."

As Bryan has indicated, Robin had a strong attraction to interesting people, doing interesting things. He was indeed an inviting and conversational man; his network of contacts and friends was extraordinary. Robin knew Adrien Henri, who lived in Falkner Square (and later in Mount Street), as a fellow artist and teacher, and others such as the sculptor Arthur Dooley, Beryl Bainbridge, Felicity Wren, art teacher and independent gallery owner, and, Paddy Byrne at the Everyman Bistro. I am also sure he knew the photographer E. Chambre Hardman. Robin had strong connections at The Blackie (now Black-E) and with Ambrose Reynolds at St Luke's, the Bombed out Church. Each of these social magnets were important links that flowed to the city's vital cultural community.

There are not many people who could say they've had chat over a pint with Bob Dylan. Robin could, and told me how he turned to see a familiar magazine cover face standing next to him at the bar, and a chat ensued. This would have been in the midst of Dylan's iconic 1966 tour, the same day he was pictured with a group of local children on the otherwise deserted streets, near

the Stanley Dock (it was FA Cup Final day for Everton). According to friend Keith Hamlett Robin's meeting with Dylan was almost certainly at either the 'Crack' or 'Peter Kavanagh's'.

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Robin's many cultural works were insightful and memorable. Notable among these was sculpture, both contemporary and historic. A controversial sculptural installation he produced for Bold Street as a young man in the 1960s, is worth noting as expressing Robin's thinking. "I was primarily concerned in making a figure as a piece of sculpture", Robin was quoted as saying, "It was sculpturally unnecessary for it to have arms. I wanted to create the impression of power in human beings, in humanity and in life itself" (Willett, p. 119). In the event, records Willett, the statue was taken away and given asylum in a Liverpool private garden. As the statue was lowered from its Bold Street site, the Liverpool Daily Post reported that a man with a beard said: 'Dreary old Liverpool strikes again'" (Willett, 120).

Robin was commissioned in the early 1960s to produce a long, horizontal, abstract relief for the outside wall of a Catholic school in Kirkby. This work is a typical post-cubist relief that uses geometrical shapes, shallow linear contours and intervals to produce a forceful rhythmic interplay of successive elements" (Davies, p.75). With reference to St Kevin's School, Kirkby. Peter Davies wrote that "the responsibility for decorating modern buildings had assuredly passed into the hand of a younger generation, with craftsmen artists like Robin Riley ...taking over.'

Davies also recalls Robin being among the helpers of the Hungarian émigré, George Meyer-Martin, when he started teaching the age-old techniques of mosaic decoration (Davies, p.91). Robin recounted to me his meeting as a child, the German artist Kurt Schwitters, when he was creating his Mertz Barn in Cumbria in the late 1940s. This is now displayed in Newcastle Art Gallery. In 1989 it was Robin who had the skill, patience and graft to undertake the painstaking job of removing the large mosaic of Pentecost (1957) from the wall of the Church of the Holy Ghost at Netherton, Bootle, which was due for demolition. The impressive mosaic was transferred in May 1989 to the Roman Catholic Cathedral where, along with John Piper's stained glass patterns, it introduces a high note of modernism into a religious setting." (Davis, p.,91). Kitty Wilkinson's grave is in St. James Garden, and Robin was certainly proud to be involved in getting Kitty a place on the plinth in St. Georges Hall, the only woman statue present (more spaces remain) along with proud author Mike Kelly who wrote so passionately about her (Mike also sadly passed away in 2023)

I remember Robin recounting his remarkable journey with his friend, the Foundry owner and Bronze caster, Chris Butler, to see the Liverpool cast sculptures in The Forest of Dennis, in Warwickshire (the largest private arboretum), now part of the Heart of England Forest. Felix Dennis, was a noted publisher and poet (One of the Oz Trial defendants in the 1960s), who knew Robin's poet friend Eddy. Felix filled his Forest with statues of his heroes, which had been cast by Chris in Liverpool. I was sorry to miss that trip. If Robin invited you on a trip, it was worth going on; we had a wonderful outing to Criccieth to help with a community nature garden with his friends and fellow artists: Keith, a sculpture friend and colleague in Manchester, and his wife Lynda Hamlett. I travelled together with Robin and Linda, who shared many wonderful architectural and cultural travels with Robin in his later years.

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Keith first remembered his impatience as a young art student "I was so belligerently obstreperous" and recalled a fearful argument with Robin. Eventually Robin calmly looked at his watch and declared, 'I'm off for my lunch now. You will be back here at two o'clock to resume.' And off he went. Subsequently Keith spent several weekends in Liverpool with Robin, Wendy his wife and

their two young children. Robin had a wonderful collection of art books which he was able to endlessly enjoy. Kieth recounted "There was one of particular amusement to me; He had a book about Rodin, a large book, full of magnificent photographs. Simon, the younger son, had written '*rodin Riley*' on the inside cover, and I certainly felt then that I was in the house of a master. Robin taught me oxyacetylene welding and after I had practised for several hours by seam-welding one of his sculptures he invited me to work with him on a large stained glass window for a church in St. Helens. One hundred and twelve panels; the French glass set in cement within mild steel angle iron frames. By the time we had completed the one hundred and twelve frames I was an accomplished welder. Our friendship, artistically, philosophically and socially flourished."

Robin was also noted for his outstanding efforts in producing so many well-illustrated documents, which provided a valuable record of the origin and intended function of countless, often neglected and little-known pieces of sculpture and other artefacts found at different locations across the city. These included the Chalybeate spring in St James' Garden. Characteristically going beyond the immediate task to make something happen, Robin's work included the restoration and celebration of the city's collection of drinking water fountains installed between 1854 and 1889 and commonly known as the 'Melly' drinking fountains, named after the prominent Liverpool Melly family, initially responsible for their installation. Working with founder Patrick Neill as Chairman, Robin was an active member of The Friends of Liverpool Monuments to promote and encourage the appreciation of the city's extensive holdings. The walks Robin gave in association with monuments and public sculpture were inspirational and memorable to those who attended; he also gave talks on the subject to many different groups.

Memorably, Robin also produced beautifully illustrated guides to sculpture trails for each of the six districts in the former World Heritage Site for wide-scale distribution to residents and visitors alike. He also advised the City Council, including commissioning new work to fill some of the vacant niche spaces in the internal walls of St George's Hall. For many years he was a member of the Council of Merseyside Civic Society, serving a term as Vice-Chair and keeping its members in contact with issues relating to parks, monuments and public sculpture.

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Robin was a great community champion and respected by so many people young and old. Laurence Westgaph, the Liverpool Black History historian, when he heard Robin had died just said he was "a lovely, lovely man" and remembered affectionately their conversations. Robin was a very practical man and appreciated practical people who were doing things, his conversation was rich and diverse, and it was always good to talk on the telephone. And it was always a pleasure to visit his lovely flat on Catherine Street, which was obviously full of happy memories and beautiful art, and share a meal or bowl of warm, home-cooked mushroom soup.

Robin loved the links to Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts and the work of artist in residence Jayne Seddon. The Oratory Building and St. James provided an important link to education and arts linked activity. Jayne said "I'm privileged to have spent time with Robin; he was a great mentor, and friend. His knowledge and love for the natural world, and all art forms inspired my work with the children at LIPA Primary and High, and will continue to do so." Events in St.James' many quite spontaneous in the past, have included Shakespeare Plays and Toxteth Day of the Dead with the KLF, who even brought their famous Ice Cream Van into the Gardens.

The Friends of St James' Garden was a remarkable gang, which I promised Robin I would not let fade away and which a group is working to revive in the coming months. A diverse group of like-minded individuals, who took on what in some ways what had become a piece of no man's land between the Cathedral and the City Council, sparked new life into this space. Attracting a wonderful eclectic group of individuals including the great friends Robin and the late Tony Bradshaw, to be part of this group was wonderful. The camaraderie was infectious and lovely to stumble across on a Saturday morning and the conversations were always far-reaching and satisfying. He was great supporter of Landlife and the National Wildflower Centre's work, and the wild themes in St. James' Gardens, The snowdrops planting that we put in place in memory of

Tony Bradshaw in 2008, was organised with Robin and David Garner. The St. James' achievement is something we must continue as a tribute to Robin, and we will soon I am sure discuss a fitting way to mark his wider influence in the city, and hopefully revive interest in forgotten projects – the drinking fountains for example, and it is certainly worth a visit to see the transplanted Pentecost mosaic in the Roman Catholic Metropolitan Cathedral.

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Robin Riley was a great contributor to Liverpool's civic life, widely respected and just kept doing things. He was a craftsman, who many of us are proud to have known. Very typically, Robin did not want a funeral, but just wished his ashes to be scattered privately on St. James Mount -- the very first public garden in the city.

Also see:

[The Hod Carrier, Building Industry Memorial \(1\) \(liverpoolmonuments.co.uk\)](http://liverpoolmonuments.co.uk)

And

[Liverpool - The City of Sculpture | Great British Life](http://GreatBritishLife.com)

And a BBC programme about St James' Gardens

[BBC Radio 4 - Lives in a Landscape, Series 14, St James' Gardens in Liverpool](http://bbc.com)

And (last para. but 1 in)

[The Dean's Weekly Message - 15th October 2023 - Liverpool Metropolitan \(liverpoolmetrocathedral.org.uk\)](http://liverpoolmetrocathedral.org.uk)

Bryan Biggs, 'Where the Village Hall Meets the Avant-garde', in, Bryan Biggs and John Belchem (eds), *Bluecoat, Liverpool: The UK's first arts centre*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2020, pp.105-43.

Peter Davies, *Liverpool Seen: Post-war artists on Merseyside*, Bristol: Redcliffe Press, 1992.

Mike Kelly. *The Life and Times of Kitty Wilkinson*.

John Willett, *Art in a City*, London, Methuen for the Bluecoat Society of Arts, 1967.

Keith Hamlett- 'Sculpting Aloud' Autobiography, soon to be published 2023.