

# After the King...

## Fred left his own message

by Jeffrey Pearson



Liverpool Cathedral

It is 76 years next month since Fred Bower, the stonemason poet of the Wirral, died at the age of 70.

He must have been one of the most colourful characters ever to live on the Peninsula. Within months of buying an old 'Black Maria' and settling down to live in it at Heswall, he provoked a national uproar by disclosing that he had concealed a socialist message in the foundations of Liverpool Cathedral. Although the incident had taken place some 20 years previously when he had been employed as a mason on the Cathedral site, he had waited until he was sure that there was so much masonry on top of his message that no attempt could be made to retrieve it.

It was an idea he had conceived when he had heard that King Edward VII was to place a time capsule under the foundation stone. Suspecting that any message left for posterity by members of the establishment would present an unduly cosy picture of the times, Bower decided to redress the balance by burying his own time capsule under the King's.

In a sealed tin he left copies of two Socialist papers, *The Clarion* and *The Labour Leader*, both dated 24 June 1904 and a message which began: "We, the wage slaves employed on the erection of this Cathedral dedicated to the worship of the unemployed Jewish carpenter, hail ye! Within a stone's throw from here human beings are housed in slums not fit for swine ..."

For some days his announcement split the country into those who on the one hand, saw his act as a blow for the underprivileged, and those who, on the other, saw it as the work of a communist fanatic.

While Bower became the target for a considerable amount of abuse, both in the correspondence columns of newspapers and locally, those who knew him personally were proud to call him a friend. A great-hearted man with an intense love for his fellows, he hated only those mean and base acts that are so often prompted by the lust for money.

He cherished a special affection for the young, and many were the stone animals he carved in his spare time to give to the children who stopped to chat to him as he worked around Heswall.

On one occasion when he had completed a flight of ornamental steps in a private garden and the householder's seven-year-old daughter had insisted on being the first to try them, Bower responded with a poem, the last stanza of which reads:

*"Ah proud the craftsman who could see  
His work so sanctified.  
And, pinnacled against the sky,  
Innocence deified.  
Ah! Maiden sweet, whose lissom feet,  
My stony stairs first trod,  
So, may the years throughout your life  
Prove stepping stones to God."*

In 1927 the local authority condemned his unusual home as unfit for human occupation – they said that it was too small and he was obliged to live with relatives in Liverpool for a short time.

Back in Heswall he first took lodgings, and then rented a cottage in Banks Road. In 1936 he published his autobiography, dedicated "To the parents who bred me, The teachers who led me, To study and think for myself, The heroes and sages, Who died in all ages, For Freedom and Man, and not self."

It is a fascinating account of his early life when he had roamed the world plying his craft and seeking adventure. He had travelled in France, Russia, South Africa, the United States and Australia. When he was unable to find work as a mason he became a labourer, sailor, ship's fireman, gold prospector and street corner orator. And always the poems flowed from his pen.