



WIRRAL MATTERS

NEWS FROM THE WIRRAL SOCIETY • FOUNDED 1928
THE WIRRAL COMMITTEE OF THE COUNCIL FOR THE PROTECTION OF RURAL ENGLAND (CPRE)

President : Professor John Tarn OBE DL

PLANNING A PLANNING SHAKE-UP

In the last issue of *Wirral Matters* we put the question: The Planning Process - Is it Fair? We can't claim that our voice was heard in Whitehall but, by coincidence, the Government has recently issued a Green Paper giving their ideas for reforming the way in which planning applications are dealt with at the moment. The current regulations, they point out, have been in existence, almost unchanged, for the last 50 years and it is time for a change.

Says Stephen Byers in the Forward: 'What was once an innovative emphasis on consultation has now become a set of inflexible, legalistic and bureaucratic procedures. A system that was intended to promote development now blocks it.'

The Green Paper is actually a three-volume work and that on planning runs to 68 pages. In essence, it removes many of the present powers of local authorities and puts them in the hands of regional authorities and, in the case of 'major infrastructure features', into the hands of Parliament itself. Out would go structure plans, local and plans and unitary development plans to be replaced by new 'Local Development Frameworks.'

The Local Development Frameworks would consist of:

- a statement of core policies setting out the local authority's vision and strategy to be applied in promoting and controlling development throughout the area.
- more detailed action plans for smaller areas of change, such as urban extensions, town centre and neighbourhoods undergoing renewal; and
- a map showing the areas of change for which action plans are to be prepared and existing designations, such as conservation areas.

Plans produced on these lines, it is claimed, would take less time to prepare and keep us to date. They would provide business with greater certainty and prove communities with a clear means of getting involved. The statement of core policies would be a short, focussed and strategic document.

But who will be the controlling authority? The elected regional government, that's who.

No, you're right, we haven't got such a body - yet. But in a forthcoming White Paper the Government will set out in detail its proposals for regionally-elected assemblies, including the specific functions of such bodies if and when they come into being. Regional planning will be one of them.

That the present planning system is slow and cumbersome there is no doubt. Do the Government's proposals make things any easier and speed things up?

Yes, they should do - but there's a price to pay. Democracy will suffer.

Said Henry Oliver, CPRE's Head of Planning: 'The regions are unaccountable, people don't identify with them, and they're just too big to cope with the detail.'

If a major infrastructure proposal is made (a new runway for Liverpool Airport, or a Ro-Ro terminal, say) Parliament will decide whether or not such schemes should go ahead. There would be a public inquiry but only minor details of design and conditions would be discussed.

'This is a bare-faced attempt to deprive people of their right to question the principle of development in precisely those cases where the environmental impact will be greatest,' declared Mr Oliver.

But there are a number of changes proposed which will be welcomed. For one thing, it is proposed that a curb be put on repeated applications which some developers are prone to do following a refusal. In particular, it is intended to put a stop to identical 'twin-tracked' applications submitted by developers who negotiate on one proposal and appeal on another. (On another page we report how Mr Frank Field MP is trying to curb the repeated demands of the mobile telephone companies).

The necessity of consulting the public, however, is emphasised, and it is proposed that members of the public should be allowed to speak at local authority planning committee meetings. And Councils would have to give reasons for approving planning applications, as well as refusing them.

However, there is no provision for giving local people the right to challenge development decisions which may conflict with publicly agreed plans.

Although the Green Paper includes a Response Form asking for 'Yes/No' answers to a number of questions it is altogether a rather lengthy and too complicated a document for the layman or woman to read and absorb, let alone make a judgement. CPRE Cheshire Branch called on the services of Mr John Wesenraft, a planning consultant from West Kirby to consider the proposals and report. He produced such an excellent, considered, professional view which we could not fault. So, with his kind permission, the Society Executive Committee decided that it could do no better than align its self fully with the response to be made by CPRE Cheshire Branch based on his report.

The Numbers Game

How goes the Membership Drive? The answer is : It's going very well.

We would like to thank all those of you who have answered our plea and recruited new members. At the time of going to press the total membership has reached 400 - and rising. But, of course, the drive goes on - unabated, we hope - and if any member would like more application forms and/or leaflets (plenty available) please get in touch with Audrey Platt, our Membership Secretary; she will be delighted to let you have them. (See her own report below).

In the excitement of getting the drive underway we slipped up! The special Membership Form did not give space to say who recommended whom. So, we don't know the names of those splendid members who have recruited five or more new members and whom we are anxious to reward with a £15 Book Token or token for Beattie's. It was a lapse for which we apologise and we would ask all who have a claim not to be shy but let Audrey Platt, our Membership Secretary (or any member of the Committee) know, quoting, of course, the names of the five (or more) nominees.

As our Chairman, Rod Tann, pointed out in his letter to you, it is our total number we are anxious to increase, we are not trying to boost our finances. That is why we are intent on keeping our subscription to a nominal £5 a year. With a total population of nearly half a million on the Wirral Peninsula we believe there are many more people out there who would only be too keen to join The Wirral Society if they only knew about us and what are aims are. So, please, keep on keeping on mentioning us to your friends and neighbours.

A word from the Membership Secretary

May I thank all those who have paid their subscription for this year and, at the same time, issue a gentle reminder to those who haven't yet got a "Round to it" that they become due for renewal in January.

It seems that some members are perhaps not aware that when you join the CPRE it automatically makes you a member of the local district group. On the Wirral Peninsula, the Wirral Society is also the Wirral District Committee of CPRE and no extra subscription is needed (although I know that some CPRE members do intentionally pay a subscription to the Wirral Society as well). When the CPRE member does inadvertently send a Wirral Society subscription I try to let them know but don't always have the time. This year, particularly of course I'm being kept pretty busy with the new memberships.

Since Brian Brack, the Editor, has let me loose in Wirral Matters I might just slip in one more item. Standing Order Forms are available for those who wish to pay their subscriptions through a bank. It is very convenient and saves you having to remember when, where and how much to pay each year. You have complete control and the amount paid will not change unless you say so.

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The Wirral Horn

One of the deep regrets of local historians and present and past curators of The Williamson Art Gallery is that the legendary Wirral Horn is not on display there. Used as a badge or logo by Wirral schools and organisations this token of authority of the ancient office of Chief Forester of Wirral is now nearly 900 years old and still exists - in Somerset. It is in the possession of the Earl of Cromer (who also bears the famous name of Evelyn Baring).

The latest voice to ask why this most historic relic of Wirral's heritage is not kept in Wirral comes from Pete Millar, the Ranger at Dibbinsdale Nature Reserve. The proper place for the horn, he says, is The Williamson Art Gallery - if only on loan and not many Wirralians would argue with that.

The Wirral Horn is to Wirral as the Liver Bird is to Liverpool. When the third Earl of Chester designated Wirral as a forest in 1120 AD he made Alan Sylvester of Storeton Hall his Chief Forester and gave him the horn as a badge of office. The Forest of Wirral was not a tree-filled area in the modern sense of the word; it meant that, like the New Forest and the Forest of Dean, the area became a hunting ground and subject to forest laws. In effect, the laws were designed to preserve the game for the earl and his friends to hunt and the Chief Forester was responsible for seeing the laws were kept. In return he was granted the manors of Hooton, Storeton and Puddington and one of his duties was to blow the horn at the Gloverstone in Chester on the morning of every Fair Day. This was to remind the citizens that the tolls on all goods bought and sold within the sound of the horn belonged to the Earl. A sort of 12th century VAT.

The horn stayed with the Sylvesters until it was inherited by the female line of the family when passed on marriage into the Stanley family of Hooton Hall. However, in 1876, Ethel, daughter of the then Earl of Stanley, married the first Earl of Cromer and took the Wirral Horn with her.

Pete Millar's cry has not gone unheard. He has the Society's support. Approaches are being made to the Earl of Cromer asking whether he would help us mark the Society's 75th anniversary next year by allowing the horn to be displayed on loan for a period in The Williamson.

Planting a Tree for Keith

It was one of January's wettest days. As members of Keith Davidson's family, our President, Professor John Tann, Chairman, Rod Tann, and members of the Executive Committee assembled in the Memorial Garden in Royden Park, Frankby, to plant a tree in his memory the rain bucketed down. 'We could not have chosen a worse day', said Rod.

The chosen tree was a substantial, healthy-looking sapling *Cedrus atlantica*, better known as the Blue Cedar. It was the Blue Cedar in his front garden which gave Keith so much pleasure during his final days. The activities of the birds among its branches outside his window were highly diverting and Keith's wife, June, did not hesitate when asked to choose which type of tree should be planted.

Despite the torrential downpour, the short ceremony went as planned. Adrian Oldfield, the Royden Park Ranger, read a moving poem and spoke about the characteristics of the tree and about the plan for creating the Memorial Garden in which Keith's Blue Cedar was one of the first to be planted.

It's only ten feet tall now but in the years to come it will soar over Royden Park to at least 80 feet and possibly higher. A record of the planting and its association with Keith will be contained in the Memorial Book at Royden Park.



A prestigious English Heritage blue plaque has recently been placed on a house in Village Road, Oxton, where the renowned architect, Sir Patrick Abercrombie, lived for twenty years while he held the Lever Chair of Civic Engineering at the University of Liverpool. And during that time Professor Abercrombie became a founder-member of The Wirral Society and served on its Executive Committee. In fact, it could be said that he was indirectly responsible for its formation.

The Wirral Society was founded in 1928 by Miss Joan Royden, of Hill Bark, Bidston, following the formation of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) two years earlier. CPRE came into being following the appearance of an article in the *Town Planning Review* by Professor Patrick Abercrombie. He was not only a pioneer of town planning but was also the first person to advocate the designation of Green Belts round Britain's towns and cities.

We are delighted that Sir Patrick's work has been remembered in this way and we are proud that his successor, Professor Myles Wright, was also associated with the Society and that another distinguished Liverpool University professor, Professor John Tarn, former holder of the Roscoe Chair of Architecture, is our current president.

(The Society's officers elected at that first meeting included one Viscount, two Knights of the Realm, three university professors, two doctors, a future Member of Parliament, a well-known historian, a ship's captain and several prominent Liverpool businessmen. -Ed.)

Missing Records

Next year, as we have mentioned before, is the 75th Anniversary of the formation of The Wirral Society and over the past couple of years we have been trying to locate the Society's first Minute Book and early records but all to no avail.

What records exist are in the safe hands of the Wirral Archives in the Wirral Museum in Birkenhead's former town hall. We have been in touch with both the Cheshire County and Liverpool City archives in the faint hope that they might have them. We have failed to find anything before the year 1950 and our one remaining hope is that one of our members may have some idea or suggestion to make as to their whereabouts.

It has been suggested that an erstwhile secretary or other committee member might have taken the Minute Book home for safekeeping during the last war.

Has any member got anything up in the attic which once belonged to a relative who may well have served on the Committee? A large book, maybe, or a parcel which has never been opened but which, from its shape, looks as though it might contain a book of some sort? Its a very long shot but we are keeping our fingers crossed.

We would also like to get our hands on the Society's first *Cautionary Guide*, a booklet which was published in 1933. Another was published in 1962 but we would very much like to track down a copy of the first edition. Any offers?

W. Victor Smith Memorial Lectures

The total success of the series of lectures held in memory of the 50-plus years' unstinting service to the Wirral Society by the late W. Victor Smith of West Kirby would have delighted Victor himself, not for any personal reasons but for the knowledge that his beloved Society is very much alive and flourishing. If anyone ever cared for Wirral, he did.

This year's lectures, in January and February, both brought the packed house we have now come to expect and both speakers told us about aspects of Wirral most of us knew little about.

Martyn Jamieson, Wirral's Head Ranger, took us on an exploration of the Dee from source to mouth, telling us how and why, from an environmental standpoint, it has one of the most important estuaries, not only in Britain, but in Europe. He also told us about the activities of the Rangers in their never-ending quest to let Wirral folk know and appreciate just how important and wonderful it is. The musical reprise with which he ended his talk was a delight.

Such is the popularity of Gavin Hunter he seems destined to be called upon at least once every season, not least because he is always coming up with something new (about something old) and because of his clever use of modern technology, turning a slide-show into something akin to a TV documentary.

This time Gavin chose to tell the fascinating story of the quarries of Storeton and Higher Bebington which, in their day, were enormous undertakings, two hundred feet deep, which supplied the white-ish Storeton stone to buildings all over the world. It was even used to clad the Empire State Building in New York.

We are most grateful to our speakers for providing such enjoyable evening and we are not unmindful of the hours and effort needed to put a talk and slides together. We must also, yet again, express our gratitude to Dr Lillian Potter who made all the arrangements and to the Captain and committee of Wallasey Golf Club for so generously allowing us to use their magnificently-refurbished premises.

Prior to the last W. Victor Smith lecture our organiser received a letter of apology for not being able to attend from Mr George Harris of Gayton because of advancing years. Mr Harris is 82. He has kindly allowed us to mention this because we cannot but wonder whether he is our most senior member. Can any other member boast having had more birthdays than Mr Harris?

Summer Meetings

By coincidence rather than by design our summer meetings (note the plural) will be a nice follow-up to Gavin Hunter's lecture on the quarries of Storeton and Higher Bebington. They will take the form of a guided tour of Storeton Woods which, in part, covers the site of two of the quarries.

So many of us have passed along Mount Road many times and promised ourselves that, one fine day, we shall stop and have a walk in these woods which were saved for posterity by the laudable initiative displayed by the very enthusiastic Friends of Storeton Woods. The woods are now safely in the hands of the Woodland Trust.

Because we expect an enthusiastic response there will be two separate guided tours (each with a maximum of 25 people), one in an afternoon, the other in the evening - on different days in June. A letter giving precise details is enclosed with this issue. But, please note, it will be a case of first come, first served.

March of the Masts

One of the more familiar items of reportage in newspapers these days - apart, this is, from the NHS, the state of the railways, the BBC, the state of roads, education, drugs, violent crime and hunting with dogs - concerns attempts by mobile telephone companies to erect their masts on every available high point and action by local residents to prevent them doing so. We have reported on the several (so far, successful) Battles of Flaybrick water tower and have condemned the manner in which Gorsehill water tower has become festooned with antennae. And no weekly planning list seems to go by without another application to erect a mast of some sort on a lofty perch of some sort somewhere in Wirral.

One person, in particular, thinks the time has come to put a curb on them. Mr Frank Field MP, no less, has launched a bill in Parliament - The Telecommunications Transmitters (Restrictions on Planning Applications) Bill, to be precise - following complaints by constituents about the way telephone companies will not take 'no' for an answer and, following a refusal, almost immediately try again with slightly amended plan.

'Mobile phone companies', said Mr Field, 'have a huge amount of money, whereas local authorities have very little cash. Fighting a planning application can be time-consuming and while they (the local councils) have to keep winning a mobile phone company has only to be successful once to get the site.'

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One of the more valiant fights is being waged by the good people of Greasby who, faced with the erection of a mast on green belt farmland site by One2One, immediately formed GAMMA (Greasby Against Mast Menace Association) and vigorously campaigned against it.

The Council Planning Committee duly rejected the application but, sadly, the notice to that effect did not reach the applicants by the statutory deadline date. It was just a day late. But this, claimed One2One, gave them planning permission *by default*. And without more ado they brought in the bulldozers and began to build.

Outraged, GAMMA demanded that the Council should take the rare, but risky, step of asking the Secretary of State to issue a Discontinuance Order telling the firm to stop work immediately.

The suggestion was turned down by Wirral Council's cabinet committee on the grounds that One2One might sue for heavy compensation. But when the matter was considered by the full Council they, to their great credit, boldly grasped the nettle and agreed to seek a Discontinuance Order. Said Councillor Steve Foulkes, leader of the Council: 'We have accepted that the deadline for rejection was missed but, as the law stands, it was not possible to apply for a Discontinuance Order to stop the building until some building had taken place.'

The residents of Greasby have mounted a very successful campaign against the mast and we hope that their campaign may actively help towards getting a discontinuance order.'

Herpetological Matters

It's hard to believe that six years have passed since we answered a plea from Wirral Wildlife to help them conserve the small colony of rare Natterjack Toads at Red Rocks, Hoylake. We played our part by hiring a bulldozer to make two 'scrapes' in the sand at the edge of the sand dunes to provide a suitable 'courting' area for the toads. It's some time since we reported on the toads' progress but thanks to Wirral Wildlife's newsletter we can bring you up to date.

The natterjacks have been subject to a careful watch by WW members and the Wirral Ranger and last year they were able to report that some 5000 tadpoles had been seen. But how many of them turned into toads? Not at all.

A recent study of the natterjack elsewhere shows that of eggs laid no more than one or two per cent can be expected to mature. Which is why they remain rare.

About three years ago tadpoles by the bucketful from the thriving colony at Ainsdale were introduced into the Red Rocks pools with only moderate success. The fully-mature male natterjack has a honking mating call that can be heard for over a mile and, judging by their concerted voices it is estimated that Red Rocks sustains a population of between 12 and 20.

Considering the natterjacks' paltry birthrate this is considered a success since it takes two to three years for toads to reach sexual maturity.

Detailed monitoring, it seems, involves counting individuals in the pools at night and, with the aid of a torch, measuring and sexing them. So, if you see mysterious lights around Red Rocks one evening don't call out the Coastguard or the Police.



Natterjack Toad
Illustration by Roger Stevens
Courtesy Cheshire Wildlife Trust