



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 MATTERS

In our last issue we reported that the Government had issued a Green Paper which proposes drastic changes in the way planning applications are dealt with. In its wake the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) has published a Draft Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) for the North West which incorporates the proposed changes.

We invited a retired planning officer to analyse the proposals and draft a report on its implications for Wirral. This he has kindly done, reducing the original 121 pages of text, 70 policies and 45 pages of appendices to a more manageable 3500 words. His report is of great interest to the Executive Committee but it is not possible to reproduce even his digest in full in a four-page newsletter. So what follows is a digest of a digest.

The main purpose of the RPG is to provide a broad development framework for the Region, called a "spatial strategy" which identifies the scale and distribution of housing development up to the year 2016 and the priorities for the environment, transport, infrastructure, economic development, agriculture, minerals and waste treatment and disposal.

The RPG is not a 'plan' inasmuch as it contains no map showing particular sites for development but it will be a key reference at public inquiries and, in particular, when local development plans are being prepared or reviewed.

Essentially, the Draft RPG continues the present policies of concentrating new development within established built-up areas. This is to be supported by Green Belts and environmental improvements. Policies for conserving the built heritage and countryside are strengthened.

Implications for Wirral

For planning purposes the Draft RPG divides Wirral into two distinct parts lying east and west of the M53. The eastern part (plus Woodchurch, Leasowe, Wallasey and New Brighton) is contained in the North West Metropolitan Area which includes much of Merseyside on the other side of the Mersey and Greater Manchester. Much of this area qualifies for the highest levels of European aid.

As for the western area, the draft comments that 'the environment of the relative prosperity may well generate a demand for housing and other land uses over and above its needs (and) this demand should continue to be resisted.'

Housing land

In line with the need to make maximum use of the land, the Draft RPG requires that in Wirral at least 65% of new housing should be on previously developed land. High priority should be given for making the best use of existing dwellings and reducing the number of vacancies to 3% by 2021. Houses beyond economic repair or unsuitable for modern living should

be demolished to permit comprehensive redevelopment of an area.

The RPG sets an annual average rate of provision of new dwellings for the whole of Wirral as 160, inclusive of conversions by excluding replacement requirements following clearance.

This figure (the lowest of all the Greater Manchester and Mersey Metropolitan Boroughs) is lower than that in the original Draft PRG (187 houses) as the Secretary of State expects a greater decrease in the number of vacant properties. The new figure reflects the anticipated increase in the number of new households, a growth in income and a reduction in unemployment.

Green Belt

The Draft RPG is strongly supportive of Green Belts but considers that a strategic study of Green Belts across Merseyside and Halton is required to determine the need, if any, for changes in their broad extent and location to accommodate likely development requirements to 2021 and beyond.

Waste Disposal and Management

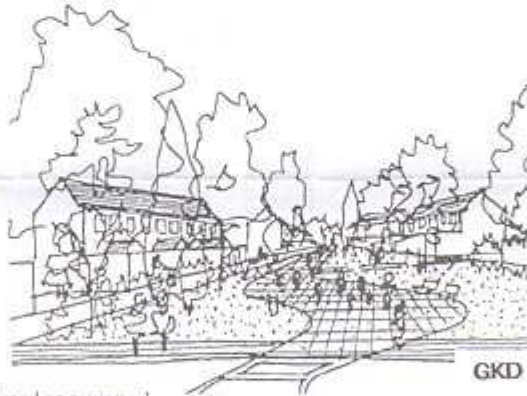
A review of waste matters will take place on publication of the Regional Waste Strategy later this year. The Draft RPG, however, emphasises that the urgency of reducing the amount of waste being produced and that waste materials should be treated according to a hierarchy of re-use, recycling, composting and energy generation. Disposal on landfill sites should be a last resort.

Green Paper

The Government's Green Paper included radical proposals for amending the present planning system which it considers to be too cumbersome, too complicated, expensive and excessively time-consuming. It wants a more simplified system, abolishing Country Structure Plans in favour of more Regional Planning and abolishing Borough Unitary Development Plans (UDP) in favour of Local Development Frameworks (LDF). The latter would comprise a written statement of core policies and a strategy for promoting and controlling development throughout an area. The Government expects LDFs to be prepared in a matter of months rather than years and the core policies to be continually up-dated so that they are consistent with national and regional policies.

Since our last issue the Executive Committee has received visits from Tom Miller, the Chief Planning Officer, Ellesmere Port and Neston Borough Council, and Colin Walker, assistant Director, Planning and Economic Development, Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council, who kindly accepted an invitation to discuss general planning matters.

We are most grateful to both Officers for so willingly giving up their spare time to meet us. The meetings were felt to be a useful and necessary way of building relationships with the two local authority departments which mostly concern us.



Eric Sanné



It is with great sadness that we report the death of our long-serving Secretary Eric Sanné, on 3 August. There was a large congregation at St. Andrew's Church, West Kirby, to take part in, not a funeral service as such but, as his family insisted it should be, A Celebration for his life. It was an understandable attitude to take for Eric had lived a very full and varied life and the many organisations with which he had been associated were well represented.

Rod Tara, our Chairman, paid a handsome tribute to Eric for his work on the Executive Committee of the Society and, latterly, for the Cheshire Branch of CPRE. We can do no better than reproduce Rod's words.

I first met Eric in about 1985 when he joined The Wirral Society as its Honorary Secretary. If I were to single out one particular quality that made Eric important to our organisation - and, I'm sure - to the many other organisations to which he belonged, then I would say it would be his marvellous way with people.

He had a seemingly effortless ability to converse easily and knowledgeably with those he met, making him a valuable asset. Add to this his commitment and enthusiasm for the things he cared about, together with his enjoyment in organising activities, then you see why we shall miss Eric in so many ways.

As well as giving a lot of his time to Wirral Society activities he also represented us on the Bilston Village Conservation Area Advisory Committee and he was an active member of the Meols Drive Residents' Association.

In 1965, Eric willingly took over from me as the Society's representative on the Executive Committee of the Cheshire Branch of the Council for the Protection of Rural England. I remember him telling me how surprised he was - but also very thrilled - to be invited to become the Cheshire Branch Chairman. This was, I'm sure, the greatest challenge of his retirement years and one of to which he rose with much energy and enthusiasm.

If I may quote fellow CPRE officer, Colonel Geoffrey Sparrow, who recalled: "His work was enormously important. He has a complete grasp over our affairs. Quite apart from his ability to chair our meetings - often in difficult circumstances - he will, amongst his colleagues and no doubt, amongst his many friends, be remembered for his tolerance, his determination and above all his courtesy on all occasions."

Eric retired as Chairman last year and, in recognition of his hard work, he and Yvonne had the honour of being introduced to HM The Queen. This was on the occasion of CPRE's 75th Anniversary Celebrations in Windsor Great Park.

It was evident to us that from the amount of time Her Majesty spent talking to him that they were getting on like a house on fire!

It should be said that so much of this activity, especially in recent years, was carried out when he was suffering from serious health problems which would have made most people decide they had had enough and give up everything. We would fully concur with Colonel Sparrow when he remarked how Eric astonished their Committee by rallying and carrying on as if nothing had happened.

A Real Basinful

The Society was represented at the recent 9th Forum of the Mersey Basin Campaign (MBC) by Dr David Britt of Parkgate.

The MBC (he reports) is an important and influential local environment organisation with interests extending from the Wirral Peninsula in the west to Warrington in the east and embracing the entire coastline of Liverpool Bay from north-east Wales to Cumbria and the various river catchment areas within Merseyside.

The campaign has the backing of the Government and enjoys the support of all regional local authorities and a wide range of commercial companies, educational institutions, statutory agencies and the voluntary sector. Much of the practical work is taken forward by 18 River Valley Initiatives (RVI). In Wirral the relative organisation is RiVa 2005 based in Dibbinsdale.

The RVI is responsible to particular local needs but generally they are concerned with clearing waterborne litter, enhancing biodiversity, working effectively with local communities to improve water quality, public access and the amenity value of water courses.

Highlight of the day's programme were papers on two major forthcoming development projects. The first dealt with the plans for a new bridge across the Mersey at Runcorn to relieve the congestion on the present bridge. Planning application will be made in Autumn 2003 and it is intended that the bridge should have style and character which will engender local pride.

If all goes to plan it is hoped work could begin by the end of 2004 and the bridge open to traffic in 2007.

A Merseyside Waterfront Regional Park is also envisaged and Wirral Council is the lead authority for taking the project forward.

The waterfront park is set to capitalise on the natural and existing man-made features of the waterfront and create a focus for increased development of maritime commercial activities, tourism, sport and leisure. A budget of £62 million is proposed for the scheme of which £8.4 million is to be contributed by the North West Development Authority.

The second paper by David Farrow of the Environment Agency dealt with the new European Water Framework Directive which will require the setting up of River Basin Management Plans as the chief system of water resources management throughout the Community. With appropriate strategies already in place - most notably in the form of the Mersey Basin Campaign - the UK is well positioned to give a lead to the rest of Europe.

We are most grateful to David for both his attendance at the Forum and for his excellent report. We are sorry that lack of space allows only for a précis.

ROD TARA (CHAIRMAN)

Keith Davidson Bequest

We are pleased to acknowledge with gratitude a cheque for £500 which has been bequeathed to the Society by our late and much-missed Chairman, Keith Davidson who died two years ago this month.

Keith served the Society well. A much-respected architect with a practice in Liverpool, Keith came to Wirral over 30 years ago and settled in Cadby. He became a Society member shortly after arrival and was soon invited to join the Executive Committee. He became Vice-Chairman and, for the last 17 years before he died, he was Chairman.

As a very busy architect Keith had precious little time to spare but when he was once asked how he managed to find enough time to play an active role in the Society he replied: "If you sincerely believe in what it does - and what needs doing - you'll always find time for it."

He was proud to be Chairman and those who knew him will remember him as a quiet, polite, charming and humorous gentleman who enlivened many a committee meeting with an appropriate quip or bon mot.

In forwarding the cheque, his wife, June, said "The Society was very dear to Keith's heart and it was his wish to make a donation."

BIDSTON HILL

We are pleased to learn that Wirral Council is recruiting a second Ranger for Bidston Hill. The present Ranger is also charged with being the manager of the Tam O'Shanter Urban Farm and that responsibility leaves him very little time to attend to the needs of the hill.

As we have reported in the past, the Society is very concerned at the way this unique and historic hill has been allowed to become so overgrown over the past 25 years or so. The Council seems to have been able to find the resources to undertake a reasonable management programme for its other Commons but, for some reason, not Bidston Hill - and it shows.

Bidston Hill is steeped in history. What other hill - anywhere - can boast of having ancient carvings, a windmill in full sail, a world renowned tidal researched establishment, a lighthouse, a 17th century thatched cottage, now the centre of an urban farm and, on its lower slopes, a 17th century manor house?

That Bidston Hill is still an open space and not covered with houses is due to the drive and benevolence of a group of some sixty distinguished Merseyside businessmen who, in 1894, raised a fund to acquire the hill from the Vyner family to preserve it forever as a public open space. They included Lever and Hudson, the soap manufacturers; Laird, Grayson and Clover, the shipbuilders; Robb, the department store owner; Wilmer of *The Birkenhead Advertiser*; the Lord Mayor of Liverpool and the Mayor of Birkenhead. In their minds, Bidston Hill was important and unique. We shall be forever in their debt.

A plaque on the famous windmill records their hopes that the hill will forever remain a natural open space. Sadly, since it came under the control of Wirral Borough Council that seems to have been construed as an instruction to leave it entirely to nature and Bidston Hill, once a sublime place of heath and heather and woodland is now an unkempt place where gorse and saplings have been allowed to grow rampantly unchecked. Unsightly dead trees have not been removed and the medieval sandstone wall has been allowed to disintegrate. Worse, the famous view has almost been obliterated by trees which have been allowed to grow to full maturity. The result is a thick curtain of foliage which - except for a small gap giving a token view of the Welsh hills - blots out a view of the Dee Estuary and Liverpool Bay beyond. An ironic reminder of what-used-to-be is the pedestal on which there was once a brass directional viewing plate, now almost itself enclosed by tree growth.

It was the view which used to be the main attraction for walking on Bidston Hill. Consult any of the books which have been written about Wirral over the past two hundred years. When writing about Bidston Hill the authors have in invariably enthused about the splendid view. And it was the view which brought about the establishment of the signal stations. They would be impossible today.

Bidston Hill is crying out for urgent action. As listed buildings need constant maintenance, so do preserved open spaces. The trees may carry protection orders but that does not mean they cannot be judiciously pruned to restore the panoramic spectacle that was once enjoyed.

An added concern is the question of what is going to happen to the old Observatory building and Joseph Proudman Oceanographic Laboratory. The laboratory which is part of the National Environment Research Council, is due to move to the University of Liverpool campus in Autumn next year. The Observatory and the Proudman building will be put up for sale within the next few weeks.

The Society's concern over the deterioration of Bidston Hill is shared by the recently revived Friends of Bidston Hill and our Press Officer, Alan Brack, has accepted their invitation to join the Friends' committee. We are eagerly awaiting the arrival of the second Ranger and understand that one of his first tasks will be to draw up a Management Plan.

We hope that will not take too long to prepare. We also hope that 'management' implies restoration and that Wirral Council will find the resources to act upon it. If they feel unable to undertake any major restoration then surely Bidston Hill's unique place in local history would warrant an application for a grant from somewhere. Failure to act could imply a lack of appreciation of Bidston Hill's special character.

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Bidston Hill : 'Steeped in History'

- 1407 : Part-enclosed as a deer park by a wall known as the 'Peany-a-Day Dyke'. Parts still there today.
- 1609 : First reference to a wooden windmill.
- 1763 : Over 100 flagpoles erected by Liverpool merchants. Code signals in flags which could be seen from Liverpool gave early indication of sighting of ships heading for port.
- 1771 : First lighthouse built. Government established chain of semaphore signal stations between Holyhead and Bidston.
- 1791 : Wooden windmill destroyed by fire caused by friction from sails revolving at high speed out of control during gale. Replaced by present brick-built mill.
- 1850 : Landowner Robert Vyner refused offer to develop Bidston Hill as a quarry.
- 1858 : Semaphore stations replaced by electric telegraph.
- 1866 : Liverpool Observatory at Waterloo Dock replaced by Observatory at Bidston where skies were clearer for astronomical observations. One o'clock Gun at Mersey Dock connected by telegraph line to the Observatory.
- 1872 : Original lighthouse replaced by present one.
- 1894 : Hill purchased by public subscription and opened to public.
- 1924 : Liverpool Tidal Institute relocated to Bidston Observatory.
- 1975 : The Joseph Proudman building erected.
- 1950s : Tam O'Shanter thatched cottage destroyed by vandals.
- 1976 : Tam O'Shanter Cottage restored by Birkenhead History Society as a Field Study Centre. Now an Urban Farm.

The Toast is: CPRE Cheshire Branch!

Last October we reported that a panel of Government Inspectors had, after a lengthy public inquiry, recommended that proposals by the North West Development Agency (NWD) that, as part of their 20 year strategy, a great swathe of land in Cheshire, stretching from Chester area to Macclesfield (fancifully termed 'The Mersey Belt Southern Crescent') should be scheduled for 'sunrise and knowledge based' industries.

As we go to press we learn that the inspectors' recommendation has been accepted by the Government. Instead, it is now proposed that economic development in the region must take place first in urban areas or on land previously developed.

The proposals, which would have seen vast areas of Cheshire countryside covered in concrete, were fiercely opposed by CPRE Cheshire Branch who advocated greater use of urban sites.

The Government's announcement represents a great triumph for Cheshire Branch and we heartily congratulate them on the outcome.

Green things on the Ridge

'The tree which moves some to tears of joy is, in the eyes of the others, only a green thing which stands in the way.' So said the poet William Blake. He might have been talking about modern developers who, if they can get away with it, will not hesitate to remove any trees which stand in the way of bricks and mortar. But the average person, whilst not often shedding tears of joy at the sight of trees, would want to save as many as possible. To this end, our Chairman, Rod Tann, was moved to write to the Director Planning and Economic Development about the value of tree cover on the Bidston-Oxton Ridge.

We in the Society (he wrote) have a special interest in seeing that the natural features of the Wirral Peninsula's rather fragile landscape are safeguarded wherever possible.

As you will be aware, one of the predominant and most attractive natural features of the Wirral Peninsula is the almost continuous tree cover that extends along the westerly side of the Ridge. At this time of the year this feature makes an especially important contribution to the landscape in this increasingly urban area. It is our impression that the especial significance of this feature as a whole is undervalued in planning terms and not given the formal recognition it deserves.

It is fortunate (the Chairman continued) that despite much development the visual continuity provided by the trees remains largely intact. However, viewed from a distance, it is apparent that new developments have begun to erode this cover, especially at its lower edge.

In reply, Mr B. Taylor of Wirral Council Planning Department, writes: 'We do share your recognition of the value of tree cover on this ridge. Perhaps as officers who deal with applications site by site, visiting sites individually, we do at times benefit from being reminded of the effect of development on distant views.'

Mr Taylor goes on to point out, however, that some developments will inevitably result in gaps in the tree cover seen from a distance. 'Sometimes the forest trees most valuable for their canopy are least appropriate close to small houses. Not only are houses built but roads are needed, driveways and parking spaces are required and new residents can expect their houses - and area of amenity space - not to be overshadowed.'

He points out that gaps in trees, assisted by new planting (a condition of any planning permission) can usually heal over time.

Whilst it is reassuring to know that Planning Officers share our concern over maintaining 'the green things', we will nevertheless be maintaining a watchful eye.

WIRRAL SOCIETY SCHOOL AWARDS

Trying to find an outright winner for the Society's annual competition to find the Wirral primary school which had demonstrated in a practical way its contribution towards maintaining or improving its local environment yet again proved very difficult.

In practice, this usually entails planning and making, or improving, a school garden with considerable contribution from the children themselves. Six schools were eventually short-listed and all had, in different ways, shown initiative, keenness and positive results.

All six were visited by members of the committee, all with teaching experience, and their reports were discussed at length. But finding an outright winner proved to be impossible. In the end the Committee decided that to mark the Queen's Golden Jubilee Year the prize pool should be increased and each school awarded a framed certificate and a cheque for £100.

The six worthy winners were :-

- Irby Primary School
- Little Sutton C of E Primary School
- Our Lady of Pity RC Primary School, Greasby
- Great Meols Primary School
- Liscard Primary School
- Hillside Junior School, Noctorum

A Walk in the Woods

Two walks, to be precise. The response of members and friends to take part in the Summer Meeting through Storeton Woods was so great that two dates had to be arranged. It seemed that for so many people a walk in these particular woods came under the heading of 'One-of-those-things-I-must-do-some-day'. And there was, of course, the added attraction of seeing for oneself the exact location of Storeton's famous Quarries following the memorable and vividly illustrated, Victor Smith Lecture on the subject by our old friend (and Society member) Gavin Hunter.

On both occasions - the first on a Saturday afternoon, the second on the following Thursday evening - our expert guide was David Casement of Prenton (also now a Society member) and his lucid commentary on the history of the woods, drawing our attention to the still visible relics of the quarrying days was fascinating and very much appreciated.

Fifteen years ago the woods were in a pretty rough state with mountain bikers and scrambling motor-cyclists using them at will to practise their various skills. Happily, a small group of nearby residents decided to do something about it and formed The Friends of Storeton Woods. They started a campaign to save the woods and set up a fund to try and buy them. Their campaign seized the imagination of the Woodland Trust who agreed to help. In 1989 the Trust purchased the woods and now the Trust and the Friends work together to conserve and protect them for future generations to enjoy.

We are most grateful to the Friends and David Casement for providing a memorable occasion and to Dr. Lilian Potter for making all the arrangements.

Membership Drive

Yes, it's still on. Our Membership Drive is aimed to last until the end of this year. As we go to press we have welcomed 75 new members into our ranks and we are most grateful to those existing members who have recruited them.

It's not a bad result - so far. Not every member has felt able to respond but we did hope that just a few more would do so. Our total membership at the moment is 465 and we would very much like to make that 500 by the end of the year. We don't think it's an impossible dream.

It will be recalled that we made the offer of a Beattie's Gift Voucher or a Book Token as a reward to any member recruiting five (or more) new members. We are delighted to say we have a claimant. Mrs Gill McGovern of Newton has enrolled five of her friends and we are most grateful to her.

It is possible that other members have been equally successful but as we carelessly omitted to put a 'Recommended by' space on the application form we don't know whom they might be. If anyone else has qualified we would very much like them to receive their just reward. Please give Mrs Audrey Platt, our Membership Secretary a ring on 0151 332 5523.

• If you have mislaid your recruiting material or need any application forms the Membership Secretary will be pleased to let you have them.

75th ANNIVERSARY

The Anniversary Sub-Committee has now submitted to the Executive Committee proposals for a number of special events to mark the Society's 75th Anniversary next year.

When final decisions have been taken and arrangements made a programme of events will be issued to all members.

One certain event will be a 75th Anniversary Celebration Dinner to be held on Thursday 22 May 2003. We cannot give any more details at the moment but we suggest you make a note of the date now. The chosen date is exactly 75 years to the day since the Wirral Society was inaugurated at a meeting in St. Michael's Church Institute, Cloughton.

For some years we have been under the impression that the date was the 28th May but research into the pages of *The Birkenhead Advertiser* and *The Birkenhead News* for 1928 in the Wirral Archives in The Wirral Museum (the former Birkenhead Town Hall) has established that it came into being on the 22nd May of that year.

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