



WIRRAL MATTERS

JOURNAL OF THE WIRRAL SOCIETY
The Wirral Committee of C.P.R.E.

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AUTUMN 1996

SAVE 'THE GORSE'

The Wirral Society is giving its whole-hearted support to a campaign which has been launched by local residents to save for public use a small oasis of gorse and grassland among the houses in upper New Brighton.

This one and a quarter-acre greenspace belongs to North West Water and is part of their Gorsehill Reservoir site in Gorsehill Road but is surplus to their requirements. Outline planning consent has been given for housing development of part of the site but local residents feel strongly that it ought to remain an open space. It has always been open to the public, albeit unofficially, and the lower half of the area has been used from time to time as a sportsfield by local schools. It is, moreover, a last palpable reminder of how the road – and reservoir – got its name.

Some consultations have taken place with the water company's Estates Department in an attempt to persuade them of the merits of retaining this natural habitat for wild life and as the last open green space in the locality.

To bolster their case the organisers of the campaign asked Groundwork Wirral to inspect the site and report on its possibilities.

The essence of their report is that this peaceful spot in the heart of a heavily built-up area could be developed into a 'pocket-size' community park.

Funding could be sought from a number of sources such as charitable trusts, government grants, local businesses and the Countryside Commission's 'Millennium Green Initiative' which seeks to establish greenspaces across the country.

The campaign is in its early days and the first step is to secure the agreement of North West Water that the site should remain green. At a recent Executive Committee meeting it was agreed that this is the kind of local initiative which deserves every encouragement and the Society's full support.

BOARDS, BILLS AND BANNERS ARE BANNED – unless approved

Our report in the Summer Issue of WIRRAL MATTERS of the Executive Committee's concern with the apparent proliferation of unauthorised advertising signs and notices brought three quick responses. Two came from officers of Wirral Borough Council whom we accused of not replying to a letter from our Chairman on the subject. The other came from the *Daily Post* who prominently voiced our concern.

From Gerri Smith, a senior planning officer, came word that no trace could be found of the Chairman's letter and an offer to attend the next meeting of the Committee to discuss the matter; an offer which we have gladly accepted.

The other response came in a letter from the Chief Assistant Engineer of the Highway Maintenance Division of the Engineer's Department in Bebington Town Hall. He pointed out that the Borough Solicitor, acting on instructions from the Borough Engineer, has prosecuted a number of persistent offenders and will continue to do so. Recent prosecutions have resulted in fines ranging from £100 to four-figure sums.

The letter stressed that: 'It is an offence under Section 132 of the Highways Act and Section 224 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 as amended and regulations 5 and 27 of the Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) Regulations 1992 to unlawfully advertise and the maximum penalty for this offence is £1,000.'

This legislation covers advertisements of any size, including 'A' boards and flyposting and it would seem that many people are not aware of that. 'A' boards can be seen outside shops throughout Wirral and whilst this might seem like quibbling for quibbling's sake, such boards can be an obstacle and a danger to the blind and short-sighted as well as the disabled in electric chairs and mothers with pushchairs.

In a word, all advertisements on the public highway, whether on pavements, tied on to railings, lamp-posts or other street furniture are, strictly speaking, illegal all first given Council approval.

Members who see any instance of what could be unauthorised advertising should report it to the Borough Engineer's department. Telephone Mr. M. Traynor (if he is unavailable tell one of his colleagues) on 643 7100. A Highways Inspector will be sent out to investigate and at the same time he will inspect the area round about.



When it comes to objectionable and obnoxious 'visual pollution' is anything worse than some of the outrageous advertising on today's buses? When advertisements were confined to the strip along the length of bus between upper and lower decks that was only carrying on a tradition that began with horse trams and was acceptable. But the modern practice of using every square centimetre of a bus bodywork to advertise a single product or service, usually in the most garish colours designers can lay their hands on, turns a mundane double-decker into something from the uttermost depths of Dante's *Inferno*.

PLEASE REFRAIN
FROM DE-FACING
THIS WALL. BY
ORDER OF WIRRAL
METRO





COUNCIL FOR THE PROTECTION OF RURAL ENGLAND

Ever since our formation in 1928 The Wirral Society has also fulfilled the role of the Wirral District Committee of the Cheshire Branch of the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE).

Wirral is not quite as rural now as it was in those days and although we have our environmental problems they do not – at the moment, anyway (fingers crossed) – match in severity some of those facing the CPRE Cheshire Branch. Their autumn newsletter mentions some of them.

Last June, to celebrate CPRE's 70th anniversary, the Macclesfield District Committee organised a picnic at a spot in a beautiful part of the Green Belt at Poynton. It is the first stretch of open land on the south-east side of the Manchester conurbation and its upward slopes provide fine views across the Cheshire Plain.

A splendid place for a picnic, obviously, but that was not why the Macclesfield committee chose it. They wanted to underline what most people see as 'an outrageous proposal to extract coal from the site by open-cast mining.

Extraction would involve blasting through forty-three metres depth of sandstone to reach the coal which is of low-grade quality only economically suitable for power stations.

Two-thirds of the site comprises grades 2 and 3A agricultural land traversed by eight public footpaths and the fact that it lies in the Green Belt is immaterial since open-cast mining is considered to be a temporary activity. After four years (nominally) of extraction and restitution the site would be developed as a golf course. But there is a possibility that the 'hole' made would be used to take the excess spoil from the proposed Stockport Eastern Bypass.

The plan has been rejected once by Cheshire County Council but Coal Contractors Ltd. have appealed against the decision. That appeal was being heard as we went to press.



The Macclesfield Committee is also fighting a proposal for an extension of aggregate quarrying in the Pennine borders of Cheshire and also awaiting the

results of a public inquiry held earlier this year into the roving car-boot sale activities of someone who, they claim, 'manages to despoil the countryside' and who now threatens to extend his activities. However, it seems they can do little about this other than voice their disapproval.



The county of Cheshire also happens to be the country's prime source of supply of silica sand for industrial use and is faced with proposals to extend the areas of extraction over the next few years. And, of course, there is the highly emotive

plans to build a second runway for Manchester Airport. That will swallow up vast areas of countryside, bring about the destruction of many houses and farms and the uprooting of families and cause tremendous upheaval while it is being built.

Press opinion is that the runway will get the go-ahead and the alternative proposal to expand Liverpool Airport will be turned down. And that is why, they claim, British Aerospace has recently put Liverpool Airport up for sale.

All in all, we're not so badly off in Wirral, are we?

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Sixty-Seventh Annual General Meeting of the Wirral Society

will be held on

TUESDAY, 19th NOVEMBER 1996

at

THE HEATHERLANDS RESTAURANT
THURSTASTON

at 7.45 p.m.

Following the business of the meeting a hot supper will be served at a cost of £6.00 per head (inc. coffee)



After supper we shall be entertained by Mrs. JOY HOCKEY of Wallasey who will present another of her fascinating slide-shows which proved so popular last year. This time her subject will be
'UP IN THE GALLERY'

A look back (as far as the 1890's) at the old Music Halls of Wirral and the stars who played there.



The meeting is open to all members, relatives and friends but to help with the catering, please complete the form below (or use plain paper) and send to the Hon. Secretary with your cheque not later than Friday, 15th November.

To: Eric Sanné, Hon. Secretary, The Wirral Society
'Clavis', Meols Drive, West Kirby, Wirral L48 5DB.

Please order _____ suppers for myself and guest(s) for which I enclose
cheque (made payable to the Wirral Society) for £ _____

Tel. No: _____ Signed: _____

ELLESMERE PORT AND NESTON LOCAL PLAN

The Society has received a copy of the Ellesmere Port and Neston Draft Local Plan. This is the equivalent of Wirral Borough Council's Unitary Development Plan (UDP). It is a formidable publication which has been scrutinised on behalf of the Executive Committee by our Chairman, Keith Davidson, and our Planning Liaison Officer, Geoff Loram. In a genuine attempt to make a constructive contribution to the debate Geoff Loram has, on behalf of the Society, conveyed their observations and criticisms to the Planning Services department.

The letter is too long to reproduce in full but the following paraphrase gives the main points.

In general the plan is a workmanlike document which sets out the Borough's planning strategies in a clear manner. However, the Society does have certain significant reservations regarding the housing policy and the provision of development land for housing.

For one thing, the allocation of land for housing alongside the western border of the housing area undoubtedly amounts to 'urban sprawl' and that runs counter to other Council policies. The question from us is whether this is justified and unavoidable.

In its assessment of future housing needs the Government seems to have assumed that the recent rate of increase in households will continue for the foreseeable future. In the context of a stable and falling population that seems to be unlikely and it would not be the first time that planning policies have been based on an uncritical reading of graph trends with unfortunate results.

Housing needs

In the case of the County of Cheshire as a whole, the foreseeable needs for new houses is said to be approaching 15,000 and in the Draft Plan one-fifth of that need is being provided for in the Ellesmere Port and Neston Council area. That seems to be excessive and bears little relation to the Borough's own needs.

In general, the Society feels that the Borough ought to take a more positive role in leading and guiding the urban renewal process which has been highlighted over the past thirty years by various governments as being a major counter to the centrifugal forces causing 'urban sprawl'.

Unallocated land

We are surprised at the description of some areas as, simply, 'unallocated land'. We have suggested that it should be identified

as either suitable for housing or for commerce and industry. Unless this is done it is more difficult to assess the overall picture.

Sort of houses?

We feel more consideration should have been given to the sort of houses which may be built and who will live in them. The house-builders will seize upon these sites with glee and propose to fill them with up-market three and four bedroomed houses as these carry the best profit margins. The people who buy them will be a mixture of incomers from outside the Borough and people from inner suburbs of the town. The latter will, in turn, be replaced by inhabitants of the 'inner core' areas. This will result in a classic case, on a small scale, of the urban sprawl and the hollowing out of inner city cores which successive governments have tried to stop. Urban renewal is the better option.

It should be noted that among the major causes government give for their assumption that the number of households will continue to rise is the increase in the number of one-parent families and also the number of people continuing to live longer in their own houses. Neither of these categories, we have suggested, want three or four bedroomed houses on the out edges of the town.

Business parks

The establishment of business parks looms large in planners' thoughts at the moment and a successful one does add a certain cachet to the town but we question the wisdom of allocating so much land, which is near the successful Cheshire Oaks 'Outlet Village', for this purpose.

The land is described as suitable for a 'flagship' development but the land and infrastructure has been available for the past six years but there have been very few takers. We would suggest that with the Chester Business Park so near (and which has a lot of land still available for development) this surely needs further consideration. The term 'flagship development' sounds very grand but if no one wants to sail the flagship it will rust at its moorings and sink. Some of this considerable area of land is well placed to be used for housing.

Green belt

We have expressed opposition to the expansion of the town westwards which would result in the destruction of good farming land south of Ledsham Road and on the strip north of Berwick Road. The latter

area has already been the subject of considerable local opposition to the idea of housing development and we support the claim that this area should be part of the Borough's Green Belt. The plot of land is dominated by a fine double line of mature trees on which the Council has placed a Tree Preservation Order (TPO). It would seem directly contrary to the Mersey Forest project to rescind that TPO and fell the trees. Equally, the environmental effectiveness would be greatly diminished if the trees were left standing but surrounded by houses.

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It is inevitable in an exercise like this that only those aspects subject to criticism have been highlighted. Many aspects of the Draft Plan which we applaud have received no mention. The Officers of Planning Services are to be congratulated; it has been no mean task.

NEW COMMITTEE MEMBER

The Executive Committee has been delighted to co-opt to its ranks Mrs. Lilian Potter as the representative for the Eleanor Road Residents Association – so doubling the female representation.

Eleanor Road is situated on the western slope of Bidston Hill and was originally part of Vyner Estates. The Residents Association (formerly Committee) has been in existence, in some form, since before the Second World War, and is likely to have served local residents for many years before that. Initially, its purpose was to maintain what until 1982 was a private road which originally had gates at either end. Today with one gate remaining and the primary function lost, the Association liaises with other local groups as well as the local authority in matters relating to the neighbourhood, particularly with the Planning Department and Committee, and is consulted by them in connection with relevant problems and proposed developments.

Membership entails a nominal annual subscription per household and the Annual General Meeting is held each spring. The present Chairman is Professor S. Middlebrook.

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Once again we urge other residents and community associations who are also interested in the environmental welfare of Wirral as a whole (and who isn't?) to send a representative to the monthly meetings of the Executive Committee. The more representative we are the greater our voice. Contact Eric Sanné, the Secretary, on 632 3119.



Action for the Environment

From time to time we have mentioned the involvement of Groundwork Wirral in some project or other, notably the restoration of Bidston Tip, and this has aroused the interest of several members who said they would like to know more about them and what they do.

Groundwork Wirral is an environmental charity that was set up last year and is part of a national network of over forty environmental charitable companies. It is a partnership between Wirral Council, private sector companies who are members of the Wirral Investment Network (WIN), the Groundwork Foundation, and representatives from the local community and the local voluntary sector. Its primary role is to work with the local communities to help realise their environmental aspirations.

The Wirral group consists of a small team of experts who work with communities to explore project possibilities and, where appropriate, develop the plans and seek funding. It does not have funding of its own.

Initially, Groundwork Wirral is concentrating on the so-called M54 Corridor, from Woodchurch and Prenton in the south, to Leasowe in the west and Bidston in the east. They are also involved within the City Lands area, the (so-called) Hamilton Quarter around Hamilton Square and 'Lairdside', the planners' name for the Tranmere and Rock Ferry areas south of Cammell Laird's.

Last spring, with local people, they planted 11,500 trees as the beginning of a woodland environmental improvement to sites adjacent to and either side of the M53 between the Woodchurch estate and Beechwood (the erstwhile Ford) estate.

At Leasowe Station landscaping has been provided at the new Park and Ride facility and, as a result of Groundwork initiative, residents of Beechwood are planning to improve the courtyard in the centre of the estate. There are other activities too numerous to mention.

Whilst Groundwork Wirral receives no funding to pay for such projects they seem to have been amazingly successful in generating generous support from local businesses and industry and are alive to the various grants available. Their motto is: *Action for the environment* and they are certainly living up to it.

TRAMS IN HAMILTON SQUARE?

Shortly after this issue is published the Society's Executive Committee will discuss a proposal from the Executive Policy Group of The Hamilton Quarter that the present 'heritage tramway' (which at present runs for half a mile from Woodside Ferry to Shore Road) should be extended by means of a loop line, so taking it through Price Street or Conway Street, Hamilton Street and Hamilton Square, across the face of Birkenhead Town Hall.

Woodside Ferry to Birkenhead Park Grand Entrance via Conway Street was, of course, the route of Europe's first (horse) tram service and the idea of reviving such an historic passenger transport system can be appreciated.

But, of course, things have changed since the American, George Train, persuaded the Birkenhead Commissioners to step in where London and other capitals of Europe had feared to tread.

A number of route options have been considered and, on the inward journey, Hamilton Street is favoured more than Argyle Street because of congestion but either option would take the trams through the Square. The question immediately arises: would the installation of tram track despoil the Town Hall side of the Square and, much to the point, would not overhead wires and their attendant supporting posts spoil the scene?

The underlying idea is to have a tramway service linking up (we quote) 'the revitalised Woodside waterfront, Conway Park, Twelve Quays and the Birkenhead Shopping Centre. It goes on to claim that 'cumulatively, the proposals would make the Hamilton Quarter the principal focus for Wirral as a whole and offer a unique mix of cultural, commercial, housing and leisure uses.'

One snag to the scheme is that the present (quote again) 'pseudo-heritage vehicles' (that is, the two trams built in Hong Kong) cannot meet new legislation covering light railways brought into force in 1994 and to provide a regular service on the extended route will require two new ones—at a cost of £25,000 each. The full scheme is expected to cost 'under £4 million.'

And where is the money to come from? Hopefully from the National Lottery Millennium Fund. Two outline bids have already been turned down but another was submitted in September. If this is looked upon favourably consultants will be called in to prepare a detailed bid.

But, effectively, the whole scheme hinges on the controversial question of whether the trams—with the tram track and overhead lines—should be allowed to cross the face of the Town Hall and so detract from the overall scene.

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THE PLIGHT OF MAYER HALL

A fight is on to save Bebington's historic Mayer Hall and The Wirral Society is pleased to add its weight to the campaign. The Joseph Mayer Trust has agreed to take over the hall from Wirral Council on a 99-year lease at a peppercorn rent. But the Trust must find £60,000 to refurbish the building which is suffering from serious decay and they are hoping that they can attract National Lottery cash.

The well-known building with the clock tower in Lower Bebington village served as Bebington Library until 1971. The library had been established for the people of Bebington in 1866 by the amazing Joseph Mayer, silversmith, goldsmith, jeweller, bibliophile, antiquarian, horticulturist and a great public benefactor.

As an antiquarian and collector of historical objects he enjoyed a world-wide reputation. His business premises were in Liverpool city centre where he established a remarkable museum which he shared with the public. The year after he established the Free Library in Bebington he presented the entire contents of his museum (valued then at around £80,000 and at present day values we could add two noughts to that) to Liverpool Corporation which had recently opened a museum of its own. The gift immediately made Liverpool Museum one of the most important in the land.

Among his acquisitions was a remarkable collection of antiquities, historical relics, ivory and pottery which included a remarkable collection of Anglo-Saxon relics, including the priceless Kingston Brooch which is currently on exhibition in Newcastle.

The Bebington library was first located in a house built by an eccentric stonemason but such was the demand for books that Mayer soon sought larger premises. Most opportunely, a farmhouse, with a barn attached, together with some five acres of land between his own house and the library became vacant and he lost no time in acquiring it. The farmhouse was converted to provide a bigger library and a reading room; the barn was converted into a public hall and called Free Library Hall and a tower was added into which a clock was installed for the benefit of the public. This subsequently became known as Mayer Hall and the five acres of land was turned into public gardens, known originally as Library Walks but for a long time known as Mayer Park.

The purchase, the alterations and the upkeep of the library, hall and gardens were borne entirely by Mayer.

Joseph Mayer died in 1886 at the age of eighty-three and lies buried in St. Andrew's churchyard and his statue stands in St. George's Hall.

He must never be forgotten. Mayer Hall must be saved.