



WIRRAL MATTERS

NEWS FROM THE WIRRAL SOCIETY • FOUNDED 1928
THE WIRRAL COMMITTEE OF THE CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT RURAL ENGLAND (CPRE)

President - Professor John Tarn OBE DL

Saving the Trees

Over the years the Wirral Society has consistently raised objections to any development plans within Wirral which would incur the loss of mature trees. Our cries have not always been heard - or, possibly, heard and ignored for some reason - but we press on.

The Wirral Peninsula is not over-endowed with trees. Before our Victorian predecessors came from 'over the water' to enjoy the fresh air and open spaces of the peninsula, Wirral, for the most part, was fairly treeless. The so-called Forest of Wirral created by Randal de Meschines, the fourth Earl of Chester did not mean that he ordered the planting of trees on a vast scale. In fact, he probably never planted so much as a single sapling. By designating the peninsula a 'forest', it enabled him to invoke the Forest Laws which simply meant that he and subsequent overlords had the right to go wherever they liked. All creatures, great and small, thereby belonged to him and the peasants had to remember that right and not interfere. This situation lasted for over 200 years until a dis-afforesting order was obtained by The Black Prince, eldest son of Edward III, in 1398.

Wirral Peninsula up to 200 years ago was a pretty wild and uncultivated place, by all accounts. There were several pockets of woodland here and there but most of the majestic trees we enjoy today across the western ridge were planted not much more than a century ago by those Victorian in-comers. Large houses with large gardens for large families was the norm. They landscaped their gardens and planted trees and we are fortunate to see them in all their majesty.

This situation applies to many other parts of the country, of course, and we are not alone in wanting to keep what trees we have, even though developers might boast of making good on a several-for-one scale for any which need to be felled. But now The Woodland Trust (which owns Storeton Woods and Upton Meadow) has launched a national campaign to protect ancient trees in the same way notable houses and other buildings are protected - by having them 'listed'.

Local councils have the authority to issue Tree Preservation Orders where they think fit and many of Wirral's trees are protected in this way. But TPOs do not have the permanency of 'listings'. Local authorities can revoke them as easily as they can issue them if a real need to do so arises.

The only tree we know of in Wirral which would be likely to qualify for listing is the famous Eastham Yew. Standing in the churchyard near the church door, its trunk is eroded and blackened as though it were on the point of extinction, yet the leaves are green and bountiful enough to give promise of many more years to come.

A plaque attached to its protective ring of railings records a visit made by The Royal Archaeological Society in 1898. Their conclusion then was that the tree was planted in Saxon times. That makes it at least 1500 years old.

For all that, there must be trees in Wirral which deserve protection beyond the limits of a Trees Preservation Order. Trees in places like Ness Gardens and Flaybrick Memorial Gardens are safe, of course, but one never knows when others may be jeopardised by applications for re-development or allegations of ill-health. Jill Butler of The Woodland

Trust commented: 'It is very easy for people without experience to say there is a bit of fungi on the trunk - it will have to go.' She might have mentioned, too, that one of the biggest hazards faced by trees is the ever-present threat of road-widening and highway engineering projects. That is where TPOs are no more protective than a paper hat in a thunderstorm.

Nevertheless, there may be trees in places like Eastham Country Park and Dibbinsdale which can boast of a long life and we feel there is no need to worry about their future at the moment. But, as far as we know, there is no tree other than Eastham's yew which would qualify as ancient and notable enough for listing.

But we stand to be corrected. If any member knows of any other particularly venerable tree in Wirral we would be pleased to hear of it.

Similarly, we would be pleased to hear about any tree which a member feels needs some protection.

Our Tree

Members will be pleased to hear that the tree we call our own in Flaybrick Memorial Gardens is doing very nicely. The Hop-Hornbeam which was planted to mark our 75th anniversary has adapted well to its new surroundings and is currently looking very healthy indeed, as our picture shows.



- and the plaque

Several members who kindly telephoned the Editor to express their approval of the introduction of full colour into our last issue with photographs of the Anniversary Tree planting also commented that the commemorative plaque was covered and wanted to know what the hidden message was.

The plaque was not being hidden from view for any reason. Nic Harding, the Flaybrick Ranger, who took the photograph, was intent on recording the planting and his camera clicked just a split second before Professor Tarn unveiled the plaque. To put matters right, our conscientious Secretary immediately grabbed his camera, rushed to Flaybrick, and, now, all is revealed, as shown below.



Photographs by David Casement

Historic Towns Forum

Most people, if asked, would not think of including the City of Liverpool, in a list of historic towns. Yet in three years' time Liverpool will be celebrating the 800th anniversary of the grant of its charter by King John in 1207, making it a borough and a port.

It is not surprising, then, that the city was recently chosen by the English Historic Towns Forum for a conference.

Three Society committee members, together with a representative from the Hoylake Civic Society, attended the meeting held in Liverpool Anglican Cathedral. The occasion gave delegates a splendid opportunity to exchange ideas, to hear talks on urban design and to see at first hand some of the imaginative regeneration taking place in the Liverpool Ropewalks area.

Parts of east Wirral, with its numerous vacant and unused buildings, have a similar need for regeneration. Interesting but decaying properties, some of real architectural or historic merit, could be converted into homes and areas made safer and more attractive to encourage people to live there.

The new Regional Policy Guidance for the North West emphasises the need for 'the effective use of existing buildings and infrastructure within urban areas, including the re-use or conversion of empty buildings if they are sound and worthy of re-use or are of architectural or historical importance. The Ropewalks Project goes a long way towards showing how this can be done.

This all-day event attracted architects, planners and others from all over the north-west and as far afield as Scotland, the Isle of Man and Hull.

Representatives from the Metropolitan Borough of Wirral and Ellesmere Port and Neston were conspicuous by their absence.

Our President Honoured



We were delighted to learn that the Society's President, Professor John Tam OBE DL, has received further laurels to add to his illustrious collection.

Recently, he flew to Hong Kong to receive an Honorary Fellowship of the Chinese University of Hong Kong for his

part in establishing their Department of Architecture. Professor Tam was Chairman of the University's Academic Advisory Committee from 1988 - 2002.

Our President is also a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architecture (FRIBA) a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA), a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (FRHistS) and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries (FSA)

CPRE Matters



■ With 13,000 new telecommunications masts expected to be installed over the next three years, CPRE is preparing a revised campaign briefing to help people campaign against inappropriately sited masts that harm the beauty of the landscape.

■ The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill has completed its passage through Parliament. Royal Assent is expected immediately and the Act will come into force in July. Eighteen months of lobbying by CPRE has helped to improve the Act in many important ways. For example, Regional Planning bodies must now publish a statement of how they will involve the community in their planning functions.

■ Central to the Government's main policy guidance *Policy Planning Statement 1* is also being revised and CPRE has highlighted the importance of seeing planning as being more than just delivering sustainable communities. The planning system should conserve and enhance landscapes, maintain communities and demand good design.

■ Planning appeals should become fairer as a result of CPRE Warwickshire's lobbying of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. New rules are coming in that will give third parties more time to comment on the statements that developers and planning authorities make as part of the appeal process.

■ *The Way to Go* campaign, a CPRE-led national campaign supported by over 25 major environmental and social justice organisations that is working to influence Government spending on transport, has secured the support of over 80 MPs.

Matters of Moment

The new-fangled advertising boards continue to sprout on the wayside verges and roundabouts of Wirral. As members know, the Society has long been critical of the amount of illegal advertising which is apparent in many places in Wirral. All those 'A' boards outside shops, garden centres and other business premises are, in fact, illegal without local authority permission. And, of course, the worst culprits are night clubs and other pop music organisations who paste their ads on roadside control boxes, building site hoardings, telegraph poles and lamp posts. The Society took action in two particularly appalling cases and the culprits were taken to court by Wirral Council and fined.

It can be understood, therefore, that we were disappointed to find that these new wayside advertisement boards bear the insignia of Wirral Council itself. Moreover, we consider that some of them could feasibly be a hazard to motorists. The only way drivers can read these ads is by taking their eyes off the road and, to that extent, we consider them dangerous.

Our opinion is shared by RoSPA (the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents). The AA and the RAC have informed us that they have not yet formed a view on them and the Merseyside Police have told us that they are not concerned until it can be proved that one has been the cause of a collision.

But it seems Wirral Council is delighted with them or, to be exact, delighted with the extra revenue they bring in. Our views that they could be a hazard have been dismissed and we are now informed that consideration is being given to other ways in which the scheme could be extended.

The unusual TETRA mast which suddenly appeared at Three Lane Ends Farm, Saughall Massie, some months ago was, it seems, erected without permission. Wirral Council has informed the Society that the mast is part of the police national emergency network and the contractors installing the masts have been unable to find a suitable permanent site. We have been told that they intend to apply for temporary permission to retain the mast in its present location for the time being.

The proposed development at Port Sunlight which, as reported in the local press, has aroused great hostility among the village residents, has also been of great concern to the Society Executive Committee. We agree wholeheartedly with the Residents' Association that the planned buildings would not only be quite out of character with the Grade 1 Listed village but would be a case of over-development of the site. We have voiced our objections to the Council.

Harrison Park, Wallasey, has recently been renovated. Great care has been taken to restore the park to its former standard and, believing that credit should be given where credit is due, the Executive Committee has written to the Director of Parks and Open Spaces expressing its appreciation of a job well done.

Far-reaching plans have been announced for the regeneration of Hoylake and West Kirby - obviously sparked off by thoughts of the Open Golf Championship in two years' time.

The wide-ranging plans put forward by Manchester consultants, Building Design Partnership, include the creation of a 'quality town centre plaza' at West Kirby Concourse, a similar 'plaza environment' in front of Hoylake Station, an 80-150 bed hotel and restaurant on the site of Dee Lane Car Park and a 'De Vere' type hotel and leisure complex adjacent

to the existing Hoylake Municipal Golf Course. Other proposals include a large food retail outlet in Hoylake on site of the Row, the upgrading of facilities in West Kirby's Coronation Gardens and the creation of 'The Necklace' - a chain of soft lighting to showcase (as they say) the Marine Lake, in West Kirby.

For many people, however, the most welcome aspect will surely be the recognition of the need for public toilets accessible from South Parade.

The Council will say this grand design has been the subject of public consultation and the residents were given the opportunity to comment. Well, were they?

The plans were revealed at two open meetings, one in Hoylake the other in West Kirby and it was announced that they would be put on display in the libraries. They failed to materialise but on 19 May they suddenly appeared in West Kirby Concourse - just three days before the closing date for comments.

It is doubtful whether a trained planner could absorb the details of such radical proposals in that time, let alone Joe Public.

Street name-plates in Wirral have been engaging the Executive Committee's attention. We notice that the Council has of late been renewing those on the borough's major routes and very well they look, too. To that extent, we commend the Highways and Engineering Department. But there are scores of old cast iron plates which have not been maintained so that many have badly rusted and, in some cases, are now almost indecipherable, particularly to motorists searching for an address.

We have spoken to the Director of Highways and Engineering Services about this and we would be pleased to hear of any particularly bad cases which members feel require urgent attention.

We have pointed out, too, that some of Wirral's old cast-iron milestone posts are similarly in need of a re-paint and we have been assured that they, too, will receive early attention.

The Rt.Hon Frank Field MP, who has long taken a keen interest in the efforts of the Bidston Preservation Trust to save Bidston Observatory has tabled an Early Day Motion in the House of Commons to mark this month's 60th anniversary of the D-Day landings. Bidston Observatory played an important part in those landings, providing General Eisenhower with vital tidal information.

Mr Field's motion: *That this house, mindful of the successful D-Day Landings 60 years ago, which resulted in freeing Western Europe from Nazi tyranny, congratulates the Bidston Observatory on their landing tide predictions and the Bidston Preservation Trust for its attempts to preserve the Observatory site as a crucial part of our heritage.*

At the time of going to press, the motion had been signed by 27 Members of Parliament - including all Wirral MPs.

Meols Drive, Hoylake has seen considerable pressure from developers around the Royal Liverpool Golf Club area. A large development was allowed on the site of the former Lees School and landmark buildings, like The Priory - once a highly desirable residence but debased to a Job Centre - have been demolished.

Following pressure from local residents and the Hoylake Civic Society, Wirral Borough Council appointed consultants to appraise the area. Their findings were accepted and the Meols Drive area has become the borough's 22nd Conservation Area.

Wirral Council boasts one Conservation Officer to oversee these 22 areas - which include Bidston Village, Hamilton Square and Birkenhead Park. The City of Hull, with a smaller population than Wirral, has 23 conservation areas and to look after them it employs two full-time conservation officers and two planning officers specialising in urban design matters.

Uphill Tasks

*Oh! dream of joy! Is this indeed
The lighthouse top I see?
Is this the hill? Is this the mill?
Is this mine own countree?*

Coleridge's Ancient Mariner did not quite say that but had he chanced upon Bidston Hill he might well have done so. Bidston Hill today, of course, is 'mine own countree' more than it ever was 200 years ago in Coleridge's day when it would have been in private hands. Then it would have been a hill of heath and heather, a little gorse here and there, a wooden mill, a lighthouse, but no observatory. It presents a different picture today. More gorse, less heather and more trees, especially silver birch, sycamore and oak - and rhododendron bushes. And probably more people about.

Bidston Hill, as we have said before, has been grossly neglected over the past quarter century but, oh dream of joy, that is slowly being put to rights. Following the detailed survey made by Dr Hilary Ash for Cheshire Ecological Trust and the Management Plan she produced a five-year action plan and Nic Harding, the hill's Ranger, the Friends of Bidston Hill and parties of volunteers have been working hard to put it in good order. And, recently they came to the rescue of some giraffes.

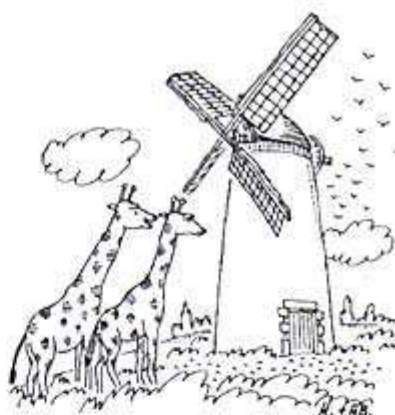
Giraffes! On Bidston Hill! Well, no - not exactly. The giraffes were in Chester Zoo - but they were a little famished and it seems that one item of food they apparently stick out their necks for is lush silver birch.

Now, silver birch is something the hill has in over-abundance. For many years self-sown saplings were left untouched and have become fully mature trees and something of a birch forest was developing. Following the recommendations of the Management Plan, the Ranger and parties of volunteers have removed a large number of these trees. And nothing was wasted. Some of the wood went to local schools for sculptural activities (a nice change from how the birch was used in Victorian times) while the branches and twigs were collected by Chester Zoo.

At Chester they were crushed and turned into giraffe food (or 'browse' as it's called) and, apparently, the giraffes found it lip-smacking good. Now, an area of birch on the hill will be coppiced and the Zoo will cut and collect it at intervals.



Cunningham's White - bred in 1830 - flourishes in Park Wood
Photo: Morna Knottenbelt



*"The food's great and
they've even built
us a house"*

Various grants have been applied for, Nic Harding reports, and the money will go towards replacing pathways, planting some 600 new trees, repairing historic features and producing publicity material to promote the hill with its trees, and exceptional collection of rhododendrons.

Morna Knottenbelt, Chairman of The Friends of Bidston Hill and a rhododendron expert (a member of the RHS North West Rhododendron Committee), has recently completed a 15 months-survey of those on Bidston Hill. She photographed them, measured the size of the flowers and leaves, wrote careful descriptions of them and, with the aid of the RHS library and other sources has identified 32 different specimens - of which only three are available from specialist nurseries today.

People who were acquainted with Bidston Hill some years ago will remember that one of its great attractions were the extensive views which could be had of the Welsh hills, Liverpool waterfront, and Liverpool Bay. With the absence of any tree management those views gradually disappeared. But, happily, some vistas have now been opened up. One, by the Observatory, gives a good view of Liverpool and the waterfront and, in the opposite direction, a view of the Welsh Hills. From the footbridge there is now a view across the mouth of the Dee Estuary towards the Point of Air.

Grants have also been received to pay for a new noticeboard in the car park, new picnic tables and some strimmers.

'All this will have a massive impact on the hill,' said Nic, adding 'and we shall be having our periodic walks to see the bats, our fungal forays and, during the summer, our popular guided walks.'

Sadly, the Open Days at the windmill have been suspended. A survey has concluded that, until some restoration is done, it is not wholly safe for the public to enter.

The Society Executive Committee received news of these developments with great pleasure and, by way of congratulating the Ranger, the volunteers and The Friends of Bidston Hill, they have agreed to sponsor The Friends' website which is now in the course of preparation.

Editor: Alan Brack 47 Upton Road, Claughton. Tel/Fax: 0151 652 5530
Hon. Secretary: David Casement 5 Cornwall Drive, Prenton Tel/Fax: 0151 608 3039
www.wirralsociety.f9.co.uk

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e-mail: hil-y-gem.diamond@virgin.net
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