



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

MEET THE PRESIDENT

In the 73 years since The Wirral Society was established we have had two Presidents, both of them were Viscount Leverhulme - father and son. The sad death of Philip, the 3rd Viscount, leaving the title extinct, left a void that we thought would be difficult to fill. But, happily, cometh the hour, cometh the man. At the suggestion of our Vice-President, Sir Kenneth Stoddart, we approached Emeritus Professor John Tarn, OBE, DL, FRIBA, FRSA, FRHistS, FSA, not long retired from the University of Liverpool where he was Roscoe Professor and Head of the Liverpool School of Architecture.

His qualifications alone illustrate his vast experience and, even in retirement, he is much in demand as a lecturer and an advisor on architectural matters, and serves numerous committees of organisations both at home and abroad. We feel privileged that such a distinguished figure should so readily agree to become our President. He has already displayed his intention of being more than just a titular head by attending meetings of the Executive Committee.

'My father was a businessman', explained Professor Tarn (speaking to the Editor recently) and he decided it would be better for me if I had qualifications of some sort and a safe career. And since, as a young boy, I had displayed a great interest in history and old buildings - particularly in old churches - he decided that I should be an architect.

And so it came to pass. In due course after leaving Newcastle's Royal Grammar School, and obtaining his Bachelor of Architecture degree (with 1st Class Honours) at Durham University, John was awarded a Research Studentship to Cambridge University where he obtained his PhD with a thesis on Housing in Urban Areas. His first experience as a fully-qualified architect came with a job in a practice in his home city of Newcastle.

In 1963 he swapped his drawing-board for a blackboard and entered the realms of academe, becoming a lecturer in architecture at Sheffield University. At the age of 36 he was appointed Professor of Architecture and Head of Department at Nottingham University. He was the youngest ever to hold the post.

He was very happy in Nottingham but, three years later, an advertisement inviting applications for the forthcoming vacant Roscoe Chair of Architecture at the University of Liverpool proved irresistible.

'Liverpool's School of Architecture had such a great reputation it was an opportunity not to be missed,' he said.

He got the job and became the first non-Liverpool graduate to hold the renowned Roscoe Chair of Architecture, a post he held until he retired in September 1999.

His days in Brownlow Hill were not however, confined to teaching young undergraduates the art and science of building. He played a full part in the life of the university, and in 1987 he became one of the three Pro-Vice-Chancellors and for a period of 15 months he was, Acting Vice-Chancellor.

'I thoroughly enjoyed being involved in the workings of the University both academic and administrative, and it was all very rewarding'.

That wealth of experience is being utilised to the full in his retirement. His list of chairmanships and committee memberships shows that he is involved on countless bodies committed in one way or another, to the care of important buildings. To name but a few (taken at random from his nine page-long CV), he is, a trustee of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside (NMG) and chairman of their Buildings and Design Committee. He is Chairman of the Liverpool Architectural and Design Trust and has

been Chairman of the Liverpool Branch of the Victorian Society. He is also involved with both Liverpool's cathedrals, in each case as a member of the committee charged with the conserving and protecting their structural fabric. Further afield, he is the Chairman of an academic advisory committee for the University of Hong Kong and he has, several times lectured to students at the Chinese School of Architecture in Beijing.

But there are two particular chairmanships which have been very close to his heart. He has, for the last three years, been Chairman of Riverside Housing Association (formerly known as Merseyside Improved Houses). They now own around 25,000 houses', he said proudly.

The other activity which claimed much of his spare time for 24 years was his association with the Peak National Park Planning Board. He was Vice-Chairman of the Board from 1981-86 and from 1979-1997 he was Chairman of the Planning Control Committee. It was the culmination of a love affair he has had with the Peak District since he was a lecturer at Sheffield University in the sixties. He still has a cottage in the little Derbyshire village of Stanton in Peak and is organist in a local village church.

Contrary to what one might expect, he has no thoughts about moving to Derbyshire permanently. 'I have no intention of leaving Wirral', he said. 'I've been here 25 years and I like it here'. He lives in Caldy and likes nothing better than a walk on the shore to see the glorious sunsets. But, like the rest of us, he regrets the onward march of suburbia. 'Nevertheless I think Wirral is underestimated. Some people who don't really know it see it as just a modern housing development but it has character and that character has to be appreciated and conserved.'

The Wirral Society was established in 1928 following the formation of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) two years earlier, CPRE came into being as a result of an article drawing attention to the urgent need for protecting the countryside from indiscriminate development published in the influential *Town Planning Review* and written by another distinguished Liverpool University professor and famous town planner, Patrick Abercrombie.

Sir Patrick Abercrombie (as he became) was a founder-committee member of the Society and Professor Tarn's acceptance of the Presidency is a most appropriate link with the past. We look forward to a long and happy association.

A.B.



NOW MEET THE CHAIRMAN

It was almost inevitable that, one day, Rod Tann of West Kirby, would end up as Chairman of the Wirral Society. Whilst most people become really environmentally aware in their adult years Rod displayed the symptoms in his early twenties. On several occasions he took up the cudgels to tackle threats to local trees, notably a number of mature specimens growing in a field between the Rectory and the Parish Church of St. Bridget's in West Kirby. Not getting very far with the then Urban District Council he went straight to his MP and put the case to him personally. The MP at the time was Mr Selwyn Lloyd and, convinced by Rod's reasoned case, he took the matter straight to the Tree Officer at Cheshire County Council. That the trees are still standing in the field and enjoying life nearly 30 years later show that his protests were heeded.

'But I came to realise', he said, 'that whilst my individual efforts had been successful it would be better not to tackle officialdom all on my own.' Then, one day, he bumped into the legendary W. Victor Smith, the Liverpool solicitor living in Caldy, whose deep love of Wirral and its fauna and flora knew no bounds. At the time Victor was the Society's Vice-Chairman and those who knew him will not be surprised to find that Rod was not only immediately recruited into the Society but found himself on the Executive Committee as Hon. Sec. He was just 24 and can probably claim to have been the Society's youngest Secretary so far.

Rod (short for Roderick) was born in Beverly in the East Riding of Yorkshire and came to Wirral at the age of four when his father, a Squadron Leader in the RAF, took over as Commanding Officer, RAF West Kirby. He went to Calday Grange Grammar School and after a brief flirtation with the Civil Service he moved into local government, first in Birkenhead and later in Liverpool. In 1974 he obtained a post in the Planning Department of the new Merseyside County Council. This, however, suggested that his secretaryship of the Society might sometimes be in conflict with his official duties and he had to give it up though he remained a member of the Committee.

When Mrs Thatcher brought the Metropolitan County Councils to a premature end Rod was forced to move on. He now works for the Merseyside Fire and Defence Authority and is based at Wallasey Town Hall where he is Wirral's Emergency Planning Officer, which has nothing to do with development planning but everything to do with civil emergencies.

Some time after leaving the County Council he was elected Vice-Chairman of the Society and became Chairman last year following the very sad death of Keith Davidson.

Rod has never wavered in his conviction for the need to protect the local environment from indiscriminate development. For many years he represented the Society on the Cheshire Branch committee of CPRE, regularly attending their meetings in Middleswich, and also acted as the Society's representative on the Bidston Village Conservation Area Advisory Committee. He is a Life Member of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, a member of the National Trust and a Friend of the Historic Houses Association.

Rod may have been born by a trick of Fate in Yorkshire but, having lived in Wirral for 50 years or so, he is a Wirralian through and through. He has also been connected with St. Bridget's Parish Church in West Kirby for that length of time. He is an Assistant Church Warden and is the Honorary Curator of The Charles Dawson Brown Museum.

The Museum is one of Wirral's best-kept secrets. It is housed in a small sandstone building in the grounds of St. Bridget's and contains a collection of early Christian, Saxon and medieval relics, including a Saxon stone coffin, most of which was found when the church was being restored in 1869-70s. (Open to interested persons on request, says Rod).

Apart from his wife, Jane, and his two children - Jennie (15) and Christopher (14) - Rod's great love is the Wirral Symphony Orchestra of which he is the Chairman and general organiser and in which he plays a violin. He also plays regularly in a string quartet.

This full-scale 65-strong symphony orchestra gives regular

concerts around Wirral and although Rod is self-deprecating about his own talent he is being modest. It takes considerable talent to play one's part in a performance of Mussorgsky's 'Night on a Bare Mountain' and Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony - as the orchestra did at their last concert in March.

Rod also says he enjoys cycling. Where he gets the time for that is hard to imagine. His duties as Wirral Society Chairman alone takes up a lot of his spare time, as do his duties (and regular weekly rehearsals) with the orchestra.

'If you feel strongly enough about something,' he explained, 'you'll always find time for it. And I like to keep busy.'

A.B.

WIRRAL SOCIETY SCHOOLS AWARD FOR 2001

We are again inviting Primary Schools located in the Wirral Peninsula to enter for the Society's School Award 2001 which is aimed at instilling into young children the need for protecting the environment.

This annual award takes the form of a Certificate and a cheque for £250 to be awarded to the primary school which has, in the opinion of the Society, made an outstanding contribution to improving and protecting the Wirral environment in some way or has displayed a noteworthy awareness of the need for protecting the environment.

This can be interpreted as improving or protecting the Wirral environment generally or locally or within the school itself. The only stipulations are that any project must involve considerable input from the pupils and have been undertaken in the year prior to the closing date for applications which is 30th April.

The award was instituted for the first time last year and the winners were Grove Street Primary School, New Ferry for an imaginative scheme for improving their own school environment. It included a programme of environmental awareness lessons, with children keeping detailed record of the weather, monitoring the school's energy programme, providing a litter watch to attack the problem of litter in and around the school and the building of a garden within the school grounds.

Applications are invited from Primary Schools within the boundaries of the Metropolitan Borough of Wirral and the County Borough of Ellesmere Port and Neston.

For further details please contact Mrs Diana M Lane, 6 Church Meadow Lane, Heswall Ch60 4SB

The Award is being publicised in the local Wirral press but if any member knows a Primary School that has planted trees, created a wildlife area, developed a garden or done something else to protect or improve the environment do please let us know.

FLOOD WARNING

To coin a phrase - it's an ill wind that doesn't do any good.

Wirral, happily, escaped the appalling floods that hit many parts of the country but the heavy and continuous rains of last autumn did put many local fields under water which, even now, have not returned to anything like normal.

While it was a blow to the owners of those fields, whether they be used for farming or grazing, the rain did show up areas that are patently unsuitable for any future development.

One in particular was Fender Farm in Moreton where Redrow has applied more than once for planning permission to build an estate of 119 houses. At a meeting of Wirral Council's Planning Committee the application was again rejected by Councillors on the advice of their officers even though the chairman warned the Committee that if the applicant appealed against the decision and

continued overleaf

was successful the Councillors could be liable for surcharge to cover legal fees that the applicant may incur as a result. We now learn that Redrow have, in fact, lost no time in lodging an appeal. This will be heard in May.

Whilst this makes one wonder how many planning applications in the past, however unwelcome, have been allowed because of this threat, in this case it coincided with a warning issued by the Government to would-be developers and local authorities that new homes should not be built on high-risk flood plains. Lower risk sites must be considered first.

The Society will continue to take a keen interest in the future of this site.

W. VICTOR SMITH LECTURE

Cemeteries and the people buried therein does not immediately catch the imagination as being a riveting topic for a lecture. But John Moffat showed how wrong one can be.

John is the founder and secretary of The Friends of Flaybrick, an organisation of around 40 members eager to see Wirral's first public cemetery restored to its original condition and its heritage preserved and brought to public notice.

Since no new graves are permitted in Flaybrick Cemetery the name was changed in 1994 to Flaybrick Memorial Gardens and his talk told us about some of the more interesting personages who are buried there. They include Alderman Frederick Smith, father of the illustrious F.E. Smith who became Lord Birkenhead and (some say) the greatest of all Lord Chancellors. An obelisk commemorates Charles Thompson whose Mission (still operating in Hemingford Street) helps the poor and underprivileged. A headstone with a Celtic cross marks the grave of James Cochrane whose ironworks built the *Resurgam*, the world's first submarine.

Another grave holds the remains of Dr Arthur Doodson who devised the tide prediction machine (a sort of manual computer) at Bidston Observatory which prepared the tidal charts for the 1944 D-Day landings in Normandy.

John told the story of the hapless Lock Ah Tan, a greatly respected member of the Chinese community in Birkenhead, who, in a fit of rage, killed his wife and two daughters. He was defended by the legendary Marshall Hall who pleaded insanity. It was to no avail and Lok Ah Tan was found guilty and hanged in Walton Gaol. His family is buried in Flaybrick.

John's most intriguing tale was that of Isaac Roberts FRS, a pioneer in celestial photography, who was the first man to photograph anything outside the earth's own galaxy. His striking granite monument, bearing astronomical symbols and designs, is arguably the finest in Flaybrick. But there are many others, all with a tale to tell.

In passing we learned that Flaybrick Cemetery (designed by Edward Kemp who was largely responsible for creating Birkenhead Park), has many fully mature specimen trees, some uncommon if not rare, making it the finest arboretum in Wirral after Ness Gardens.

As we have now come to expect, it was another full house and our thanks go to the speaker for his fascinating presentation, to Wallasey Golf Club for the use of their premises and to Dr Lilian Potter who made all the arrangements.

BLOT ON THE PARKSCAPE ?

There was a time when Park High School for Boys operated happily (as a grammar school) in Park Road North and Park High School for Girls (also a grammar school) were content with their fine building on the opposite side of the Birkenhead Park in Park Road South. Then came the great Comprehensive reshuffle and the two schools were merged. Now, it seems, there are not enough pupils in the Park Road North premises to warrant its continuation so the Education Committee (sorry, the Committee for Education and Lifelong Learning) want to close that school and accommodate all the pupils in the Park Road South building. To do so they want to build an extension and a sports centre on land at presently occupied by two temporary classrooms.

It all sounds eminently sensible. A snag is that the school backs immediately on to Grade 1 Listed Birkenhead Park which is set to undergo a £10.4 million facelift with the aim of restoring it to the original 1847 design of the great Sir Joseph Paxton. So? Well, the school building is a very pleasing piece of 1920s architecture whereas, we understand, the proposed sports centre will be a building loudly proclaiming its 21st century origin with yellow-ish brick and aluminum cladding. Empathetic it ain't. And sited next door to large Victorian villas built when the park was built some might even call it a carbuncle.

We also believe that overtures have been made by Wirral Council to the owners of two neighbouring house asking if they would be prepared to sell them so that they could be demolished to make space for a car-park. Hardly conducive to protecting the environment nor in line with the precepts and principals of a Conservation Area of which the park is one.

Not suprisingly, this has caused great concern to many people, not least The Friends of Birkenhead Park, who claim that the design of the extension is entirely inappropriate and designed without the slightest regard for the character of the area.

The proposed refurbishment of the park also includes plans for an office for the Ranger, a visitor's centre and cafe.

At a recent meeting of the Friends the pertinent question was asked: 'What about security? How will the park be secured against the vandals?' The reply was that with additional buildings there would be more staff about and the public would be attracted in greater numbers. Vandals do not operate where there are people about.

But how about after dark? At the moment the Council Control vans patrol the park by day. But it seems that in the evenings the patrols forsake the park and turn their attention to patrolling the borough's schools - and frequently, we are told, they are used as postmen delivering Council papers to councillors' homes.

We share the concerns of The Friends of Birkenhead Park. It seems to us that if over £10 million is going to spent giving this nationally important park a long overdue makeover Wirral Borough Council must surely give very serious thought to full and proper protection 24 hours a day.

In these undisciplined times it would be reprehensible not to do so. Moreover, it should be done before a single penny is spent. And serious thought, too, must also be given to the impact which the planned school extension will have on the overall look of the park. After all, Birkenhead Park is said to be Paxton's most successful landscaping design.



Opening of Birkenhead Park 1847



Whilst the Society has kept in touch with the Wirral Green Belt Council over the years and conscientiously paid the annual affiliation fee, for some inexplicable reason we have not been sending anyone along to its monthly meetings. This has been rectified and Dr Lillian Potter and Alan Brack now attend as the Society's representatives. We look forward to a close and beneficial association.

The Green Belt Council was set up in 1954 with the then aim of 'setting up in Wirral, a Green Belt of the greatest possible natural and rural amenity and to preserve that Green Belt'.

The Council consists of representatives of some 40 local societies and organisations which share these aims. It is strictly non-political, voluntary, and has charitable status.

The Council monitors all Wirral and receives detailed information concerning Green Belt issues from the planning departments of both Wirral local authorities. On a wider platform it works on regional and national levels of policy-making when appropriate. In the past it has been involved in planning battles over some very special places in Wirral.

It was a member of the Green Belt Council who 'invented' The Wirral Way. In 1965 Graham Walker of Thingwall, the Council's Assistant Secretary at the time, came up with the bright idea of turning the disused West Kirby to Hooton railway line into a linear park - the country's first linear park, in fact. But the realisation of this dream was due in very large measure to a most remarkable man, the late Laurence Beswick.

Beswick was, by profession, an architect and town planner, a land reclamation expert and a surveyor. In the First World War he won the DSM at Gallipoli where, as a marine, he claimed to have been the first man ashore. But it was in the last 20 years of his life that his name became well-known in East Cheshire and Wirral. Wherever a developer dared to tread Laurence Beswick was hot on his heels asking why, and how, and by whose authority. In his capacity as secretary of the (now defunct) Cheshire County Federation of Ratepayers and Kindred Associations he stormed the country in the wake of planning applications. He gave advice to people worried about some environmental threat, addressed public meetings and gave evidence at countless public inquiries, always with vigour and often with hackle-raising bluntness.

The linear park suggestion of Graham Walker's seized his imagination and he set himself the task of bringing it to fruition. With the unstinting help of Seacombe councillor, Miss Eliza Beswick who acted as his chauffeuse and general factotum, he spent three years making a detailed survey of the entire 12 miles of track and the adjoining land, calling on the landowners and local authorities involved, arguing his case and ably dealing with any objections.

He won the day. In 1970 his self-appointed mission triumphed when The Wirral Way project was given a 'Countryside in 1970' award which he personally received from the Duke of Edinburgh.

Laurence Beswick died of cancer in July 1971, aged 74, but he lived long enough to see his plan officially adopted.

A memorial bronze plaque bearing his likeness is sited on the cliffs near the Visitor Centre at Thurston Country Park. It also marks the spot where his ashes were scattered.

CONSERVING HOYLAKE

In April 1999 a concerned group of Hoylake residents, dismayed at the way recent developments were robbing the town of its distinctive character, called a public meeting to see if anything could be done about it.

Arising out of the meeting a dozen or so people formed an *ad hoc* working group to augment activities already being taken by the Hoylake Civic Society and to make a case to the local authority for the establishment of a Conservation Area for Hoylake.

That they were ultimately successful in obtaining Conservation Area status for an area based on King's Gap/Stanley Road is highly

commendable and the Group is to be congratulated.

One of the Group was Elizabeth Davey (who represents the Civic Society on the Wirral Society Committee) and this is her account of how they went about it.

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Conservation Areas were introduced under the Civic Amenities Act of 1967.

By 1972 the Borough's first Conservation Area had been designated in Bidston Village. In the following years the number of conservation areas rose to twenty and included two important areas of public open space, Birkenhead Park and Flaybrick Memorial Gardens.

Though Conservation area status provides a degree of protection from the pressure of development, elsewhere the pace of new development often poses a threat to the character of an area. One such locality was Hoylake.

A key building was the Stanley Hotel. This impressive mid-Victorian building still retained its original character despite changes which had occurred in its paintwork as it became first Flat Foot Sam's and latterly the Orange Grove.

Local residents were shocked when a plan to build a large block of flats was proposed for the site. The Wirral Society, with other local groups, protested against the proposal and suggested modifications to the plans.

Nothing however could save the Stanley, and both Hotel and a large house on the opposite side of the roundabout were demolished. This demolition prompted the holding of a public meeting in April 1999 and the formation of the *ad hoc* committee of local residents, the Hoylake Heritage Working Group.

It was never the intention of the Working Group to form a separate society. Its aims were specific - to prevent further unsuitable development and to work towards the creation of a conservation area.

In order to raise public awareness, members of the group carried out a comprehensive photographic survey of Hoylake. Photographs from the survey then formed the basis of an exhibition on Hoylake's History, which was staged in both Hoylake and West Kirby Libraries and also, for one day, in the newly refurbished Town Hall. The group also produced two Newsletters, which elicited a great deal of local support.

Armed with the results of their survey, members of the group met officers of Wirral's Planning Department on a number of occasions. They were grateful for the interest shown in their work, by the officers, local councillors and by members of the general public. By the spring of 2000, Wirral Conservation Officer, Graham Arnold, had produced a detailed Conservation Area Character Appraisal of King's Gap - Stanley Road Area. The appraisal document was presented to the Planning Committee in April and the Hoylake Conservation Area designated immediately. Hoylake was Wirral's twenty-first conservation area - its designation was result of a great deal of hard work by all the bodies concerned.

Cheque or Credit Card ?

It was reported recently that Wallasey Village has been chosen to launch a pilot scheme aimed at curbing the litter louts. The residents there are appalled at the amount of litter being dropped in the village and have demanded that the Council should do something about it.

The Council has reacted by declaring that anyone dropping so much as a toffee wrapper in Wallasey Village will now be fined £10 on the spot.

No-one will argue that the penalty is warranted but how is it going to be collected? And by whom?

Disfiguring property with graffiti is an offence, so is unauthorised advertising and riding bicycles on the pavement - together with many other antisocial actions that go unchallenged.

Dropping litter in Wallasey Village seems destined to join the list