

MAY 2003



# 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 Tann OBE DL

*1928 • Celebrating our 75th Anniversary • 2003*

## **The Chairman reflects . .**

As you will know by now, the Society is marking its 75 years of existence. Inevitably, celebrating any form of anniversary leads one to reflect on the past, consider the present and look ahead to the future.

In the course of such a reflection over the Society's 75 years a number of questions come to one's mind; the central one being to ask how have things changed in that time.

The statement put out by the newly formed Society on 22nd May 1928, tells us that the main concern of those founding members was not just the significant increase in building in various part of the peninsula. It was as much the unsympathetic design and location of those buildings. This seemed to be a direct result of the lack of interest in what was happening by both the public and their representatives at local and national government levels; the latter being demonstrated both by the largely ineffective planning controls and the will to strengthen them.

This advancing tide of bricks and mortar appeared to increase significantly as the 1930's progressed. This took the form of an increased level of 'volume' building away from the established centres of population, together with especial concern directed towards the so-called ribbon development alongside main roads.

Again, even during this time of high building activity, contemporary records appear to show the Society trying to take a balanced approach. The need for more houses seemed to be accepted (albeit reluctantly, we are sure) but its main objections were directed more towards the poor quality, siting and density of what was being constructed.

It is probably fair to say that over all this time those who espoused the cause of conservation were considered by the public and officialdom alike to be interfering eccentrics, whose views were to be tolerated or ideally ignored.

This view of our predecessors in the conservation movement continued over a period of some 30 years following the Second World War. During this time, however, the dispiriting pre-war situation changed for the better in some respects. Perhaps the most significant improvement was that our national elected representatives had seen the light and introduced extensive new powers in the form of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. Further powers introducing the concept of Green Belts, Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas followed during this period and these controls began to play an effective part in bringing some order out of the virtual free-for-all that had existed to date. At last, it seemed that our voices were being heard; township boundaries began to be respected and the value of historic buildings and localities were positively recognised. Sadly though, the volume builders were still much in evidence and the collective demands of us all, as road users, resulted in the construction of the M53 motorway which cut a significant swathe up the peninsula.

These last few decades have seen a welcome recognition by those at all levels in Government that we conservationists were right after all! Our relationship with the decision-makers has now very largely moved from being adversarial to one of partnership, so we now find that so many of our views happily coincide with those in Government. Long may this positive situation continue!

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As we go to press, we understand that the new Government housing targets for Wirral are set at their lowest level, so hopefully we may see the last of the volume-builders in the not too distant future. Most of Wirral has a very tight Green Belt; thanks to Cheshire County Council and the former Merseyside County Council. This valuable asset is being admirably maintained by our Councils. This restriction, taken along with new Government Guidance, is now generating increased pressure to intensify and re-develop within our townships. In some cases, this is an opportunity to replace indifferent buildings of the past, but in others it is resulting in the negative effect of over-development in some areas.

**Rod Tann**

### 75th Anniversary Dinner

The Executive Committee is highly delighted with the response to this important event which will be held in the Westwood Suite of The Grange Country Club, Thornton Hough, on Thursday 22 May.

All the arrangements have now been finalised and we look forward to a memorable evening. However, some tickets are still available price £20 each and may be had from :

David Casement  
5 Cornwall Drive  
Prenton  
Wirral CH43 0RW



### Wirral Society meets the Arts

Spring has sprung and that means the annual Wirral Spring Art and Photographic Exhibition is underway at the Williamson Art Gallery in Birkenhead. As part of our programme to mark the Society's 75th birthday we joined in this year's exhibition by sponsoring two special prizes. Selection was made from those paintings already 'hung' by our Chairman, Rod Tann and Vice-Chairman, Terry Edgar (a former art teacher). It was, they report, no easy task. The Spring Exhibition is extremely popular among Wirral's artistic community. No less than 447 items were submitted and 292 were ultimately accepted for exhibition.

The winner of the Wirral Society award of £50 was John Fairbairn of Greasby for his delicate and traditional water-colour interpretation of a familiar place with his 'Picnic on Red Rocks'. The runner-up, who received a cheque for £25 was Paul Lewis of Bebington for an altogether more-freely painted rendering of an equally familiar Wirral location, 'Rest Hill', Storeton.

Rod Tann, in handing over the cheques at the preview on 11 April, spoke of the Society's past - and continuing - role in protecting the Wirral environment and expressed the hope that the prizes, although given to mark a significant milestone in the long life of the Society, might also herald a wider involvement in the arts in the future.

'The Exhibition is put on every year,' said Karl Heatlie, the Gallery's Senior Keeper, 'expressly to encourage all aspects of artistic endeavour in Wirral and we're delighted not only by the number of entries we've had but by the high standards reached.'

The Exhibition, covering five galleries includes not only paintings, drawings and photographs but also sculpture, ceramics, wood carvings and bronzes. It is well worth a visit and the Wirral Society award-winners are clearly labelled.

The Williamson Art Gallery, at the corner of Slately Road/Balls Road, Oxtou, is open Tuesday-Sunday 10am - 5pm. The Exhibition is open until 1 June.

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### SUMMER MEETING

For our 75th Anniversary Summer Meeting we are privileged to be able to invite members and friends to a guided tour of the animal care facilities at

**The UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL  
VETERINARY FIELD STATION  
LEAHURST, Willaston  
On the Chester High Road (A540),  
On Saturday 19 July at 2.30pm**

*Going south along the A540 Leahurst is on the dual carriageway almost immediately after The Hinderton Arms.*  
**Please note. This will be the only intimation. No reminders will be sent out so please make a note of the date and time NOW.**



### Tree Planting

In our programme of 75th Anniversary Events we have announced our intention to establish a permanent reminder of the occasion by planting a tree or trees somewhere in Wirral which would bear a suitable plaque. Alas, though we have searched diligently we have yet to find a suitable site. Public parks and gardens, including Ness Gardens, are happy to accept trees but none is willing to allow it to be graced with a plaque. The reason is understandable; they don't want to set a precedent and end up in years to come overlaid with plaques which would despoil the character of the place.

If any member has any bright ideas on the subject we would be glad to hear them.

### Guided Walks and Open Days

Learn more about the fascinating history of Bidston Hill from the Norse Irish in 1000AD to the present day by joining one of the Friends of Bidston Hill guided walks:

They are gentle walks for all ages during which you see and hear the story of the famous windmill, the Observatory and the Lighthouse, view the ancient stone carvings, the local flora and fauna.

No need to book. Just turn up at Tam O'Shanter Urban Farm in Boundary Road, Bidston on any of the following dates: Wednesday 18 June, Tuesday 25 August, Thursday 23 October, Tuesday 16 December. Walks start at 10am and finish around 12.30pm Refreshments may be had at the farm cafe.

A great opportunity for a family outing that is different is offered by the Bidston Windmill Open Days from 2-4pm on 6 July, 3 August, 7 September, 5 October, 2 November, 7 December. Again, no booking required. Just turn up.

## Save the Observatory

As the Bidston Preservation Trust deliberates on how to ensure the future of the Bidston Observatory as a museum and visitor centre after it is vacated by the Tidal Institute in August it seems that the current owners, The National Environment Research Council (NERC) and the University of Liverpool, are bent on selling it and the adjacent Proudman Oceanographic Laboratory building for residential purposes.

Many folk are under the illusion that Bidston Hill is sacrosanct and that such a thing could never happen. That's a delusion. None of the buildings are covered by the same protection the hill itself enjoys.

Bidston Preservation Trust has been inundated with letters from many influential people expressing support for their aims to ensure that the history of the Observatory and the work of international importance which has gone on there over the decades should be properly acknowledged and remembered by converting this unique building into a museum. But lip service is not enough.

Interest in the Trusts' proposals has been expressed by both the Architectural Heritage Lottery Fund and English Heritage but what is needed is to make these organisations take any positive steps is the enthusiastic support of the Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council.

Peter Crawford, the founder and chairman of the Bidston Preservation Trust, has, from the outset, proposed that the windmill, the Observatory and lighthouse and the hill itself, together with Flaybrick Memorial Gardens, Tam O'Shanter Farm and the lesser known Bidston Court Gardens would in all, make a visitor attraction in the same way that the hugely successful Birkenhead Heritage Trail has been devised. The star attraction, of course, would be an Observatory Museum and Visitor Centre with a cafe, toilets and all facilities. Only Wirral Council could achieve that. It has the experience and the clout. We realise only too well that it could not find the necessary funding to hand from its own coffers but money can be made available. The Architectural Heritage Lottery Fund has shown encouraging interest and we understand such a scheme would be available for financial help from the Wirral Coastal Park Scheme.

To allow this historic building to be turned into apartments or put to any other mundane use would be a great opportunity thrown away.

The Council has made a good job of making Birkenhead Priory, Woodside Ferry terminal, the Grasshopper pump and the trams into an exciting visitor attraction. Bidston Hill, Tam O'Shanter Farm and Flaybrick Memorial Gardens offer a similar opportunity.

The old Observatory building is at risk and we do not apologise for making known our fears for its future.



## "Walking in the park one day, In the merry, merry month of May"

How many of us do that these days? Last year the Government acknowledged that the nation's parks and open spaces were not fulfilling their objectives. Fewer and fewer people were using them - for all the well-known reasons. Concern about personal safety, particularly in relation to children, litter, graffiti and vandalism; inadequate facilities - and general neglect. All over the country urban parks, in particular, have come very low on the agenda of local authority budget provisions but now, with a promise of extra funding, some remedial steps are being taken.

At a weekend Forum of Friends of Wirral's parks and gardens, at which the Society was represented, was held at the beginning of the year in Vale Park, New Brighton, Dave Cowling, Head of Parks and Open Spaces for Wirral Council, explained the changes which are proposed for our open spaces.

The chief proposals are that the Parks and Open Spaces Services will be restructured and the work of parks staff will be solely to care for the parks. Outside work (the care of roadside verges and weed-spraying, for example) will be transferred to the Highways Department. Parks Service will continue, however, to provide a maintenance service for school playing fields.

Parks Superintendents would be given more responsibility for managing parks and the role of the Rangers will be more clearly defined.

Among the priorities recognised were more and better toilets, more litter bins, more rangers or park police, more seating, facilities for teenagers, better play areas and provision of tea rooms and even shops.

There is no denying that these objectives are what Joe Public has been long crying out for but the number of parks, county parks, open spaces, nature reserves and playing fields for which the Department is responsible suggests that these improvements will not be achieved overnight.

In Wirral, there are 2,976 acres of parks and open spaces on 280 sites. This includes two major parks (Birkenhead and Wallasey Central), six country parks, 50 local parks, 7 local nature reserves, 5 public gardens and 112 sports pitches of one sort or another. Additionally, there are 81 children's play areas, 11 cemeteries and 44 allotment sites. There are also 25 miles of coastline and 4 municipal golf courses to be maintained. Oh, yes - and 120 incidental open spaces.

It is a formidable list. We must be patient.

*If you think that Wirral matters  
tell your friends about  
The Wirral Society*

## ILLEGAL...

### ...Advertising

In the last issue of *Wirral Matters* we reported that we had brought to the notice of the Wirral Borough Solicitor two cases of widespread - and illegal - flyposting throughout the borough and that the Council intended to prosecute the perpetrator. The advertisements had been attached to lamp-posts, guard rails, traffic lights and pasted on vacant buildings. The case was proved and the nightclub licensee responsible was fined £500 plus £100 costs and ordered to pay Wirral Council £500 in compensation.

Said Steve Maddox, Wirral Council Chief Executive: "Flyposting is having a detrimental effect on the area and the Council is anxious to tackle the problem. This prosecution serves as a warning that this Council will not hesitate to take legal action against flyposting offenders.

### ...Littering

The Society recently complained to Network Rail about the disgusting amount of litter which has been allowed to accumulate along Merseyrail embankments of the Wirral Line. It is particularly bad on the stretch between Station and Station. The culprits are, of course, from that section of the public which has no sense of pride or shame and unless they are caught in the act little can be done to frighten them off. Nevertheless, a responsibility rests upon those who own or who are in charge of an area where dumping takes place to remove it. It is not a legal obligation but civic duty and one which to which a public utility should react quicker than most. Sadly, there is probably no one on the staff whose job description includes the removal of dumped rubbish.

At the time of going to press no reply to our complaint has yet been received.

We have also drawn the attention of Wirral Council to the amount of blown litter strewn along Bidston-Hoylake road between the Tesco roundabout and Reeds Lane. The Council's reply pointed out that a sub-contractor is charged with keeping the road tidy and removing litter once a month and our concern will be brought to their notice. Obviously, once a month is not often enough.

Earlier in the year Wirral Council announced the launch of a clampdown on litter and the introduction of litter wardens charged with issuing on-the-spot fines to offenders. We wish them luck. It will be very interesting to see how they get on.

#### Rosemary Smith

As we go to press. We were saddened to hear of the death of Rosemary Smith, the widow of our former Vice-President W. Victor Smith in whose memory our lectures are held each year.

Rosemary was a great supporter of the Society and, like Victor, was a Wirraian through and through. She will be sadly missed by her many friends and by her family to whom we offer our sincere condolences.

## The Ever-expanding Airports

The management of Liverpool John Lennon Airport has announced an investment of £130,000 in a new system designed to enable aircraft to remain at higher altitudes before landing. This, they claim, will reduce aircraft noise for people living under the airport flight path from the west. That will give a little solace to the residents of Bebington, Bromborough, Eastham and Caldy. But not all that much. The number of passengers using Liverpool Airport is on the rise - from 3 million this year to an expected 4.5 million by 2006.

The problem of the rapid rise in air passengers has brought about some alarming forecasts by Government statisticians which suggest that the number of aircraft in the skies in the years to come will blot out the sun.

The current 180 million air passengers a year today, flying in and out of British airports, will soar to 500 million by the year 2030. That's nearly twice the population of the United States. To meet this demand would need the equivalent of five more Heathrows.

However, Governments seldom dispute their own civil servants' computed findings and the forecasts were quickly followed by proposals to expand Britain's existing airports in all directions to cater for these hypothetical air travellers. Proposals have been mooted to concrete over vast areas of Green Belt countryside for new runways and airport terminals and even new airports.

CPRE have reacted by mounting a vigorous campaign to fight the plans. They not only point to the devastating effects on rural Britain but also on the state of the air above. Think of it. On a return flight from London to New York an aircraft produces about 800 (yes, eight hundred) tonnes of carbon dioxide, the gas which is causing global warming and other climate changes.

It would take an average family car 200 years at 12,000 miles per annum, to produce the same amount.

Nor is it just the climate. People near airports are directly affected by pollution on the ground from aircraft and traffic. Nitrogen oxide emission are higher and that aggravates asthma, reduces lung function and causes lung disease.

Nor is it just the airports. Bigger airports call for bigger roads with all the problems that entails. Special wildlife and heritage sites, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, parks and gardens and hundreds of listed buildings would all be at risk.

Larger airports also call for hotels, extra parking, additional housing (for example 83,000 extra houses at Stanstead alone), miles of new motorway and widening of existing roads. It doesn't bear thinking about....

CPRE say that their campaign would benefit hugely from support in the form of writing a letter to a key opinion former (your MP, a Government Department or member of the House of Lords) and they invite you to do so.

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