



# WIRRAL MATTERS

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The Wirral Committee of C.P.R.E.

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## 'THE DESPOILER'S CHARTER'

**UNLESS YOU ARE A PLANNING OFFICER**, an architect or property developer you are unlikely to have heard about Circular 22/80 and PPG 1. Both documents were issued by the Department of the Environment and they have a great deal to answer for.

Circular No. 28 of 1980 warned local authorities in effect that when considering planning applications for new buildings and houses design issues were none of their business and this dictum was later reinforced by Planning Policy Guide note No. 1 (PPG 1).

Now CPRE, in a recent publication entitled *'Local attraction'*, points the finger at these two documents and blames them entirely for the way many country villages throughout Britain have all but lost their individual character. The villages have been deliberately expanded by the building of suburban-style housing estates without the slightest regard for the nature and style of the houses already there. But faced with these two directives from the DoE local councils were unable to object. There are examples of this in Wirral.

In the wake of the two circulars - described by the authors of *'Local attraction'* as 'the despoiler's charter' - developers have had a free hand all over the country - including Wirral - we have seen badly-designed, badly-proportioned houses built where lack of design quality became submerged in a welter of stick-on features ... plastic porticos, false half-timbering, lead-light bay windows, plastic-frame "picture" windows, and other pretensions.

The original character of villages, say the authors of the report (Caroline McGhie and Richard Girling), was governed by the materials of which they were made; materials which sprang straight from the local landscape. It gave us the cob and thatched cottages of Devon, the granite and slate of Cornwall, the timber-framed houses of Essex. They could also have instanced the sandstone cottages and houses of old Wirral villages.

Later period, brick-built houses also had a particular local character governed by the varieties of locally-made brick. Today? As with supermarkets and chain stores, houses are being built willy-nilly to a number of standard designs with factory-made housing products without any regard or feeling for their situation and, in the main, without the services of an architect. All over Britain you can see housing estates which are clones of housing estates elsewhere. Local authorities have had no say in their appearance - all because of 'the despoiler's charter'.

### Shotgun planning

Another result - doubtless unforeseen when Circ 22/80 and PPG 1 were dreamed up - was that local planning authorities ceased to search for architecturally-trained planning assistants and so never even attempted to control the aesthetics of the built environment. This has been the case since the Eighties and, with a few exceptions in England, the buildings and houses which we all have to look at and live in have been largely 'designed' by, and have been given planning approval by, persons who have not been architecturally trained.

In the words of the authors 'the Eighties was a decade of shotgun planning in which design standards were the principal victim'.

Local authorities were not actually prohibited from turning down planning applications on aesthetic grounds but were told

in no uncertain terms that design and style were really not their business and refusal of an application on that score would likely be challenged by the applicant who would assuredly win and also be awarded costs. And, of course, no local authority could risk that.

There have been other factors which have contributed to this lamentable trend. With the abolition of the rating system which tended to restrict the size of houses to sensible proportions we now see the erection of houses which are plainly too large for their sites. But as the building/plot ratio is very closely linked to design, chief planning officers have had no say.

Similarly, planning officers have been unable to prevent the desecration of well-designed older terraced houses by accretions and alterations by the owners intent on 'individualising' their properties. By facing their houses with 'stick-on' stone, or falling prey to the roofing cowboys and replacing their high-quality Welsh slate roofs



Neighbourhood Botch

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with red roman pantries of coloured concrete or installing modern windows which are completely at odds with their neighbours' they are letting the world know: "We don't treat this house - we own it!"

Their attitude is very understandable and they should not be criticised too harshly for what they have done. The pity is that the planning officers were unable to point out the error of their ways and suggest more sympathetic treatment.

### Design guidance

Some county and rural district councils, however, have refused to concede defeat and have sought ways of getting round the edict. They have simply issued a design guide for the attention of would-be developers. It does not lay down specific designs for builders to follow but illustrates local vernacular styles with examples of detailing and materials to help architects and builders appreciate local traditions and produce designs which are compatible.

Whilst the report is essentially concerned with the building of houses in rural areas and rural villages it is not entirely irrelevant to urban and suburban building developments. In that way it is a stable companion to CPRE's earlier publication 'Urban Footprints' which was outlined in our last issue. In the words of the famous architect, Norman Foster: "The protection of our precious countryside cannot be separated from the ways in which we regenerate our cities, towns and villages. In all cases, there is a pressing need for innovative architectural solutions which combine tradition and modernity harmoniously. It is not necessary to sprawl or consume our vital green space because there is no shortage of urban sites and decaying buildings long overdue for renewal."

### What's to be done?

Any study and report, however, must suggest possible solutions. The authors of 'Local attraction' propose *inter alia* that:

- The Government should give local planning authorities not only the right but the duty to involve themselves in questions of aesthetics and architectural design.
- The Department of National Heritage should take a stronger lead in promoting improvements in the design of new developments in the countryside.
- The Department of the Environment should revise its key statement of national planning policy design (i.e. PPG 1). The new guidance should make it clear that the design of buildings is a 'material planning consideration' and that even where the principle of new development is acceptable in planning terms, poor design and inappropriate materials can justify refusal of planning permission.
- National planning policies should establish broad design standards for the scale

and density of new developments, the choice of materials, the setting and relationship with the local landscape and built environment.

- The Government should review the impact on building design of its own developments.
- Volume housebuilders should use architects who understand the local environment rather than rely on standard computer-generated solutions.
- The Royal Institute of British Architects should raise the profile of domestic architecture within the architectural profession (and) architects and planners should be more responsive to public opinion.

The sad fact about all this is that there's no putting the clock back. What's done is done and even if the Government, the local authorities and all those who might be given the power to bring about change in the near future act at once it will not repair the damage already done. Not within the lifetime of anyone alive today, anyway.

## SUMMER MEETING



This year we are privileged to be able to invite members to inspect the progress being made in the restoration and refurbishment of

**BIKENHEAD TOWN HALL**  
in Hamilton Square on  
**THURSDAY, 20th JULY 1995**  
**AT 7.00 P.M.**

our Host for the evening is  
**DAVID HILLHOUSE**

the Curator of the New Museum of Wirral Life which is now being created in the Town Hall. We shall also be shown a fascinating selection of old film clips shot in and around Birkenhead, notably in Cammell Laird's Shipyards.

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*Refreshments will be provided and all members and friends are cordially invited*

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N.B. David Hillhouse is the designer of the splendid stained-glass window recently unveiled in Birkenhead Central Library, Borough Road, in memory of the great First World War poet, Wilfred Owen, who was a pupil at Birkenhead Institute. The window is in the foyer over the main entrance and is well worth a special visit to see it.

## MATTERS OF MOMENT

### MORE CLOUTI

The Wirral Society Executive Committee consists of officers and members elected at the annual general meeting plus co-opted members who are representatives of other organisations concerned with the protection of the Wirral environment. In the main these are residents' associations and civic societies and 'Friends' of various treasured Wirral amenities. Sadly, however, the number of co-opted members has fallen away in recent years and we would very much like to revive their interest and make our combined voices heard that much louder in places where it matters.

The Wirral Society (founded 1928) revised its Constitution last year so that its field of interest now encompasses both the urban and rural areas of the Wirral Peninsula.

With this in mind it is hoped that when an environmental problem or issue arises in a particular area we can call a meeting in that area, in conjunction with the local residents association where one exists, to see if we can be of assistance. Two heads, they say, are better than one.

Such meetings would, of course, be open to everyone interested.

In the meantime, there is an open invitation to all societies and organisations who are in any way interested in the Wirral environment to send along a delegate to the monthly meetings of our Executive Committee to ensure that we are a truly representative Wirral Society.

Executive Committee meetings are held once a month on the second Wednesday of the month in St. John's Church Centre, Meols, starting at 6.00 p.m. and finishing at 8.00 p.m. Just let out Hon. Secretary, Eric Sanné, know beforehand (on 632 3119) that someone can be expected.

### OUR MAN IN SAUGHALL MASSIE

We have been pleased to welcome Nick Lauro of Saughall Massie on to the Executive Committee as a co-opted member. Nick has been trying, albeit without success so far, to form a Saughall Massie Residents Association to represent the interest of people living in and around the village. He -

and other residents who, sadly, seem backward in coming forward – are not happy with Wirral Council's planned roadscheme for the area, some aspects of which are giving cause for real concern.

Planning permission for the scheme has already been given and the Council has issued compulsory purchase orders for land and premises which they will need to acquire for the scheme to go ahead. The scheme, however, will first be the subject of a public inquiry on a date not announced at the time of going to press.

Anyone living in Saughall Massie who might read this and who is at all concerned about the plans for the area is invited to get in touch with Nick on 606 9068 or with the Society Hon. Secretary, Eric Sanné, on 632 3119.

### PEGASUS FLIES IN

We reported in our last issue that Pegasus Retirement Homes plc had now stepped in (after Merseyside Improved Houses had stepped out) and agreed to build the projected sheltered housing complex in Port Sunlight. The warden-controlled apartments will be the first new buildings erected within the village boundaries for sixty years. There was some initial misgivings – and even outright opposition – when the proposals were first announced but Pegasus Design Director, Gerry Ratcliffe, told *Wirral Matters*: "We will be building to plans drawn up by UML Limited which echo the styles of architecture surrounding the site."

This is the sort of development which would gladden the hearts of the authors of *Local Attraction* (see front page) but, of course, one would expect nothing less in this gem of a place.

To achieve affinity with the rest of the village great attention will be paid to ornamentation and detail and, added Mr. Ratcliffe, "It will look superb when it is finished."

The high standard of building and the attention to detail will, however, be reflected in the charges which might possibly seem on the high side by villagers hopeful of moving in. And Port Sunlight has twice the national average of people over the age of sixty-five.

Building will start next year with completion in 1997.

### CPRE CHESHIRE BRANCH

Ever since its formation The Wirral Society has also been (to be precise!) 'The Hundred of Wirral Committee of the Cheshire Branch of the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE)'. Our representative on the Cheshire Branch Committee is

now our Hon. Secretary, Eric Sanné. He replaces Rod Tann who has been our representative for the past nine years. Since CPRE's meetings are now held in the afternoon Rod has been unable to attend. Our thanks are due to him for so willingly making the lengthy journey every other month to the Cheshire branch offices in Middlewich and for looking after our interests so well.

Another Society Executive Committee member, Bryan Heatley of Burton, has also been elected to the CPRE committee in his own right. Bryan is Chairman of their recently-formed Transport Campaign Group.

### BE A CABLE WATCHER!

Whilst it is just conceivable that there are some people about who are eagerly awaiting the arrival of cable television so they can have an even bigger choice of chat shows, game shows, sitcoms and similar intellectual delights its coming represents yet another threat to the environment, both natural and man-made.

Parliament has authorised the establishment of a national fibre optic cable communications network so that every house and business can tap into it to obtain a high quality television service and telephone lines at less cost with, they say, all local calls free. And once the system is in place who knows what future technology might bring to add to its usefulness?

In the Wirral Peninsula the laying of the cable has been entrusted to the firm of NYNEX CableComms (*sic*) and the work has been under way for some time in parts of Birkenhead, Wallasey, Ellesmere Port and New Brighton. In the next two to three years the Wirral network should be completed and every house (except those in private roads) will have a small connection point in the pavement outside the front door or front gate. If you then opt for cable service at any time it will be connected at this point – though it could mean a small

trench would have to be dug through your front drive or front garden.

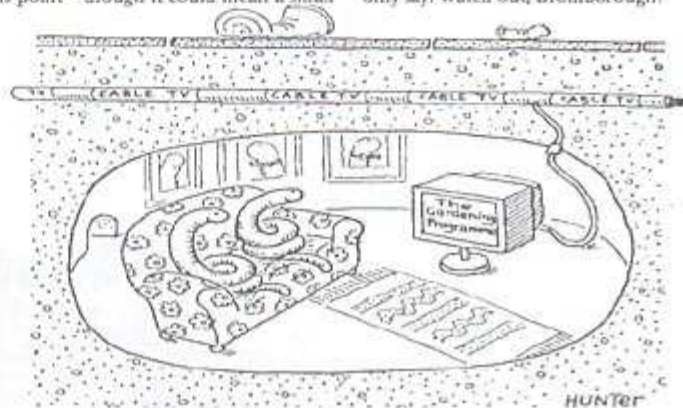
Whilst those who do avail themselves of the services will have to pay for them, of course, we shall all have to pay a price in the shape of disturbance whilst installation of the cable takes place and possible damage to the environment. Not only will pavements and grass verges be disturbed but Wirral's wealth of trees is at risk. Many of the trees which line our roads are decades old and in many cases it will be impossible to dig trenches without disturbing the root systems, no matter how careful the contractors might be.

The contractors are working to a strict code of practice and their workmanship is being closely monitored by both Wirral and Ellesmere Port and Neston Councils. But they can't examine the work every inch of the way and we can help them. We can all become cable watchers. When the cable-layers arrive in your road keep an eye on the way the trees are dealt with and how the pavements and grass verges are being reinstated. If you think there is cause for complaint pick up your old-fashioned telephone and tell the appropriate council. They will appreciate your call. For Wirral Borough Council the telephone number to ring is 643 9000 and for Ellesmere Port and Neston it is 356 6789. In each case ask for the Highway Engineer's Department.

### LOTTA LITTER

Our Vice-Chairman, Rod Tann, has been pursuing with the appropriate Wirral Council officer the problem of blown rubbish from the Bidston Tip which is such an eyesore for motorists driving along the northerly section of the M53.

When a strong wind blows it is difficult to prevent some rubbish being whisked off the tip but, we're told, the problem will be solved when the tip is closed down in the near future and tipping is transferred to Bromborough. When that happens we can only say: Watch out, Bromborough!



# SHIP AHOY!

Members who wish to mark a birthday or an anniversary in a special way could find a Dee Wildlife Cruise the answer. They were started by Wirral Council's Countryside Rangers seven years ago and have proved extremely popular, introducing Wirral's marine wildlife to visitors from outside the area as well as locals.

We enjoyed an exhilarating seven hours afloat on a wet and somewhat windy day in September. We had looked at the weather forecast with some foreboding, but our skipper Hughie was made of sterner stuff and we were soon slipping on our lifejackets and climbing aboard the Sula – a scientific name for the gannet – on the moorings at Thurston.

Sula is a 31 ft. fishing boat, with room for twelve passengers, fully equipped with UHF radio, radar, navigators, fish-finder, depth sounder and life-rafts. There was even the luxury of a loo, and tea and coffee-making facilities in the forward cabin where we could shelter for while from the elements.

Our guide was Martyn Jamieson, Senior Ranger at the Wirral Country Park, and a mine of information on the birds, seals and fish of the Dee estuary. We also learned about the local fishing industry, the channels, wrecks and history of the Dee from Hughie, our genial skipper – who invited my wife to take the helm for a while.

Our fellow-passengers included three people from Manchester, one of whom came equipped with a large black umbrella, earning several comments from Hughie. They said they had only recently 'discovered' Wirral but were delighted with it and had already visited Hilbre several times.

We'd had a brilliant summer in Wirral, with day after day of sunshine and blue skies, but for our trip we'd unfortunately picked a wrong 'un for our cruise. It was grey and cloudy, with heavy showers, and the wind was too strong to permit a landing on Hilbre Island due to the hazardous rocks. We did land on the vast West Hoyle sandbank at the mouth of the Dee, however, and walked right across it, the wind blowing squalls of rain into our faces.

The seals must have thought we were mad. We passed close to where they 'haul out' on to the bank. (They always haul out at exactly the same spot on the bank – it must surely be connected with shelter and food.) There were about 60 of them (Grey Atlantic Seals) on the bank, and many others in the water around us. They obviously recognise and trust Sula, and do not associate

it with danger. Two particularly playful seals came within ten yards of our boat and gave a marvellous display of their swimming ability.

They were definitely showing off because they came close to the boat on subsequent occasions, leaping around and nuzzling each other. Numbers of seals on the West Hoyle have climbed to 400-plus (virtually all are Greys, but the Common Seal is sometimes seen). They breed elsewhere, mainly on Ramsey Island off the Welsh coast. We also saw common and sandwich terns, skuas 'bombing' other seabirds to make them drop their food, migrating swallows, cormorants, great crested grebes and herons.

Local fisherman Andy Armitage came alongside and passed over a box containing several different species of fish – too small to be worth cooking, alas – which gave us an idea of the contents of his nets. They included the deadly weever fish, with its black dorsal fin and powerful spine on each gill cover containing venomous gland tissue which can cause extremely painful wounds. The venom attacks the blood corpuscles. Mr. Armitage is just one of the local fishermen who have suffered from their 'caress'.

As we returned to our mooring and later relaxed in a hot bath, discarded clothes steaming on the radiator, we reflected on a day which had given us a marvellous insight into another aspect of Wirral's varied wildlife.

PETER SAUNDERS

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The seven hour Dee Estuary Wildlife Cruises continue this year until Friday, 22nd September. The last four hour River Dee Cruise is on Sunday, 24th September. During August and September there are also a number of Birdwatching Specials.

The cost of the seven hour cruise is £13.50 midweek and £14.50 weekends and Bank Holidays. Birdwatch Specials £15.00. There are no reductions for children.

For booking forms and further information contact the Wirral Country Park Visitors' Centre, Thurston. Telephone 0151 648 4371/3884.

