



WIRRAL MATTERS

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

Editor: Alan Brack, 47 Upton Road, Birkenhead L43 8TQ. Tel / Fax: 0151 652 5530
Hon. Secretary: Eric Sanna, 'Clavis', Meols Drive, West Kirby. Tel / Fax: 0151 632 3119

SUMMER 1998

WE STAND ALONE

The Leas School site saga goes on. On 22 / 23 July a Public Inquiry was held into the planning application made for the erection of 19 detached houses on part of the site - as we reported in our Spring issue.

Wirral Council were 'minded' to grant planning permission for this development but were unable to do so because it contravened the existing Green Belt which is maintained in the Draft UDP. Consequently they referred the application to the Government Office on Merseyside. They passed it to the Secretary of State for the Environment who appointed an inspector to hold a public inquiry.

The brief history is that Outline Planning Consent for a Nursing Home, which importantly showed the position of the buildings in some detail, was granted initially in 1989. It was renewed in 1992 but a further renewal was refused in March 1996. As a result a detailed application was submitted and approved in September of that year, the Planning Officer arguing that he had little option but to grant approval. That consent has to be implemented by September this year or it will lapse. Indeed, by the time you read this it is possible that at least the entrance driveway and perhaps some foundations may have been built just to keep the planning consent alive.

There were several odd aspects of this Inquiry. In the first place, as the Inspector remarked the appellant and the Planning Authority were virtually on the same side with only one objector - **The Wirral Society**.

Any application to build houses in the Green Belt must show that 'very special circumstances' exist to justify the normal prohibition being set aside. Both the developer and the Council were making the same case that the nursing home development, for which detailed consent

was given a mere two years ago, was so damaging to the Green Belt that housing was preferable. This, they declared, constituted 'very special circumstances'.

A further bizarre feature was that all parties happily agreed that even the initial outline consent for the nursing home complex did not accord with the criteria for development in the Green Belt and should not have been granted. That, of course, was not relevant to the Inquiry as once consent has been granted it cannot normally be rescinded.

The main argument put forward for the Inspector to consider was whether the developer's claim that there were three or four organisations who were prepared to invest in the site and build the nursing home complex was credible. The Wirral Council had concluded, reluctantly, that there might be one - but only one - and this caused them to decide to pass the application to higher authority.

The evidence available to the Wirral Society indicated that it was very unlikely that anyone would commit the large amount of capital required to build the complex and we thought that whilst we conceded that the nursing home would cause marginally more damage to the Green Belt than the housing it was more important to defend the integrity of the planning process.

We therefore urged the Inspector to call the developer's bluff and refuse the housing application.

Royal Liverpool Golf Club

Also represented at the Inquiry was the Royal Liverpool Golf Club whose links adjoin the site. The Club would like to acquire the entire 17 acre site. They claim it would protect their 6th

tee (which is renowned in the golfing world) and it would provide much-needed extra space for use on prestigious golfing occasions. (It is lack of space for a tented village and car-parking that has taken the Hoylake course off the Open Championship roster). If they could acquire the site the Golf Club would be prepared to maintain it and allow the girls of West Kirby Grammar School to use it as a playing field.

Residents' Association

The Meols Drive Residents' Association voiced their support for the building plan. We understand that in their opinion houses of a size and type commensurate with the general rub of houses in Meols Drive would be preferable to any other form of development. They had not considered that the site could be used as a sports ground.

The Outcome

The Inspector's recommendation to the Secretary of State for the Environment will, of course, relate solely to the consent given for the housing development. He will not give any opinion on the Society's proposal that the site could be best used by West Kirby Grammar School nor will he specifically deal with the golf club's scheme. If he recommends that the planning consent given for the housing development should be overturned then we shall continue our campaign for the playing field. And we shall press the education Committee to seize a golden opportunity to acquire the land. Failing that the proposal by the Golf Club would seem to be the best option.

The Society's case was put to the Inquiry by our Hon. Planning Liaison Officer, Geoff Loran, to whom we express our deep gratitude for all his hard work.

HIT FOR SIX

It's like King John trying to stem the tide. As a threat to one precious piece of green open spaces recedes another rises. After 20 years campaigning, Upton Meadow was saved. The 'green lung' which separates Upton from Greasby was, we thought, preserved for at least the next 99 years. Then rumour arose of a threat to the green acres of Upton Cricket Club no more than a six-hit away on the opposite side of the roundabout.

Those rumours proved to be true. Along came a London-based developer, Clearwater Estates, with a planning application to develop the cricket ground (owned by Leverhulme Estates) on which Upton Cricket Club has played since 1901.

The developers want to build a 52-room travel lodge, a restaurant covering 5,000 square feet, a so-called 'family fun' pub and a 45,000 square feet health and fitness centre, together with car-parking for 380 cars.

What arguments the developers will put forward in support of their plans are not easy to see. Is there a crying need for a fun pub? With two existing pubs in Upton Village and the Twelfth Man across the way imbibers would seem to be well provided for. Or a large restaurant? Do Upton and Greasby folk feel deprived in this respect? And with The Twelfth Man Lodge already offering overnight accommodation who are going to fill another 52 rooms every night? Pub customers overcome by too much fun, perhaps?

Health and fitness clubs in this car-borne age are, of course, all the rage. But isn't it ironic that one sporting facility should be destroyed for another?

In the Wirral Council Unitary Development Plan (the UDP) the cricket ground is designated for sporting recreational activities and it might be expected that such a proposed change of use would be rejected out of hand on this aspect alone. But there is a loophole. A proposed development of a recreational area can be considered if an alternative site of similar size can be provided. In this case, the Cricket Club has been offered an alternative site at Arrowe Brook Farm in Greasby.

The Society has objected to the scheme on the grounds that a development of this nature and on such a scale is inappropriate to the site. We have pointed out to the Director of Planning that all potential users of the facilities will

travel there by car, as is evident from the large number of car-parking spaces in the plan. The impact of the additional traffic on the local residential area and road system would be seriously detrimental. At peak times the Upton By-Pass is already used to full capacity and even at quiet times of the day Old Greasby Road remains surprisingly busy. We understand that, although it is not specifically spelled out in the UDP, the Council has a general policy, wherever possible, of keeping original settlements from coalescing into amorphous built-up areas so losing their identity in the process. The present use of the site as a cricket ground reinforces the Upton By-Pass and Upton Meadow as a means of separating Upton from Greasby.

We urge the Council to look beyond the detailed provision of the UDP and consider this application in the light of wider considerations.

A development of this magnitude will alter forever this part of Upton. We hope the Council will agree and that the planning consent will be refused.

MISPLACED COMMENTS?

In the last issue of *Wirral Matters* in 'A Site Not to be Missed' we stated our opinion that 'if the Education Authority were to display some initiative (it) would solve the problem: at one stroke! We went on to say 'Not to acquire the (Leas School) site if it becomes available would be very short-sighted.

The comments evoked an indignant response from Councillor Mick Groves, Chair of the Education Committee, who wrote:

"Whilst I welcome the central thrust of the article which concerns the desirability of acquiring the Leas Schools site for the benefit of West Kirby Grammar School, I should have thought that before publication you would have had the courtesy to have contacted me as Chair of the Education Committee to obtain my views. Had you done so you would have discovered that back in September 1997, following consultation with the Governors of the school, the Education Committee agreed in principle to pursue the purchase of at least part of the site for the benefit of the school. The position regarding planning permission is complex and currently rests with the Secretary of State. So far as the land unaffected by the planning issue is concerned we are not in a position to

oblige the receivers to sell the land to the Council, but the Director of Education has written to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment setting out the Council's position and indicating our desire to purchase this land for the benefits of the school if this is possible."

Wirral Society Chairman, Keith Davidson, in a very full reply and reiteration of the history of the site, said:

"I note that late last year your Committee registered an interest with the Receiver for the purchase of the land, about which we knew and were pleased to hear. Unfortunately, this was locking the stable door after the horse had bolted in that, by then and for some years before, a problem existed, which still exists, and even if the Ministry refuse permission for the erection of housing, will still exist in future."

The Chairman went on to point out that the site had been vacant since 1989.

"We believe the Council must have been aware for a time prior to this that the Leas School was considering closure ... knowing the escalating problem faced by the very success of West Kirby Grammar School we are amazed that the Education Committee did not at any time seize the opportunity which this presented to secure the land which would then have been valued by the District Valuer at school value and not at the very increased value of either a nursing home or for housing."

Though we stand by what was reported in Spring issue the Society does not wish to engage in any ding-dong argument with the Education Committee about what was done or not done and when. We are pleased to learn that the Education Committee is alive to the situation and look forward with great interest to see what action they might take - and how speedily - should the Inspector recommend the overturning of the planning consent for housing on part of the site.

If you really believe that
WIRRAL MATTERS
tell your friends about
THE WIRRAL SOCIETY

ST. THOMAS'S CHURCH PARKGATE

Not long ago the news that the disused St. Thomas's Church in Mostyn Square off The Parade in Parkgate was being offered for sale for demolition and development.

One suggestion was that it would be a splendid site for a petrol station! Not unexpectedly it roused the local residents who regard this tiny sandstone building as an integral part of Parkgate's special character.

However, we are pleased to hear that St. Thomas's has been reprieved.

The church closed in 1994 after it was discovered that the walls were beginning to bulge through the pressure of the roof. The building was declared to be unsafe and Neston Parochial Church Council decided that the only course was sell it as a development site. Their decision raised such a howl of protest that it was reversed. Now the Parkgate Preservation Trust in conjunction with the Family and Friends of St. Thomas's is attempting to raise £75,000 for restoration work and a further £250,000 for a new village hall which is attached to the Church.

The proposal is to re-open the church as an active place of worship and community centre - a solution which has rescued many another threatened church.

Application for assistance will be made to such organisations as English Heritage, the Architectural Heritage Fund and, of course, the National Lottery Heritage Fund.



St. Thomas's Church, referred to locally as 'the fisherman's church', is unusual inasmuch as it has served three different denominations. Built in 1843 as a Congregational Church, it was later used by the Presbyterians and, since 1910, by the Church of England.



Parkgate Preservation Trust was founded in 1996 with the laudable aim of rescuing buildings in the area 'whose survival is threatened and for which an economically viable solution is beyond the reach of both the owner and the normal operation of the market'.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Sixty-Ninth Annual General Meeting
of the Wirral Society,

will be held on

TUESDAY 20 OCTOBER 1998

at

**THE HEATHERLANDS COURT RESTAURANT
THURSTASTON ROAD, IRBY
at 7.30pm**

*Following the business of the meeting a hot-pot supper
will be served at a cost of £6.50 per head (inc. Coffee)*

After Supper Mr Angus Tilston of Bebington
will show some rarely seen archive films relating to
Aspects of Merseyside through the Century.

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 it to the Membership Secretary with your cheque not later than
Friday 16 October 1998.

To: Mrs Audrey Platt,
21 Latchford Road, Gayton, Wirral L60 3RN.

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

Tel. No: Signed:

- * I would like a lift, if possible
- * I would be willing to give a lift

**please tick if appropriate*

A SINCERE THANK-YOU

Wirral Matters was first published in Spring 1992. This was made possible through the great generosity of UML Limited, the Unilever services company, who, when approached for support, immediately authorised the printing of the newsletter at their own printing plant in Bromborough. Each quarter they printed 1500 copies for us completely free of charge.

It was a marvellous gesture and *Wirral Matters* soon became required reading for all who are interested in the Wirral environment and it brought the work of the Society to a much wider public.

Three years ago, however, the restructuring of UML saw the printing division sold off but UML continued to allow the production of *Wirral Matters* to continue on the same presses by footing the bill. But all good things come to an end and UML's sponsorship was due to end with last year's Winter issue. However, with typical generosity, they agreed to support its production for a further year to allow us to seek a different sponsor or make other arrangements.

In the event, we chose the latter course. We researched the possibilities of producing the newsletter 'in-house'. The main cost of production lay in the typesetting. The cost of printing was relatively modest. Our Chairman, Keith Davidson, newly-equipped with a highly sophisticated computer, bought a publishing program, scanner and other bits and pieces and set about producing camera-ready copy for the printer. The cost of printing is borne by Society funds. This is the first issue produced under this new arrangement and it affords us an opportunity of expressing our deep gratitude for past favours to Bob Harcourt, the Managing Director of UML, and Brian Kelly and his staff in their printing division (especially Brenda Ashworth who so deftly did the typesetting). *Our thanks to all of them - they did us proud.*

NEW DIRECTOR FOR CPRE

Fiona Reynolds, CPRE'S Director for the past twelve years, has decided to move on. She has taken up a senior post in the Civil Service.

The new Director is Kate Parminter, formerly of the RSPCA. Whilst at the RSPCA she was, among many other things, responsible for that organisation's anti-hunting campaign. Realising that this previous activity might raise concern among CPRE members who hold other views,

Miss Parminter has given an undertaking not to involve herself, privately or directly, in campaigns against hunting by any other organisation.

CPRE is entirely neutral on the question because the matter is not directly relevant to the Council's aims.

Miss Parminter, a one-time local authority councillor, was chosen, CPRE says, because of 'her very broad range of relevant skills and experience'.

SUMMER MEETING

Much to its regret the Executive Committee have been unable to arrange a Summer Meeting for members this year. The simple reason is that we have run out of ideas! Last year, of course, our tour of Bidston Village and some of its fascinating cottages and Bidston Hall was a rip-roaring success with 80 people turning out on a not very clement evening. That, of course, was given added impetus by the BBC TV programme *The House Detectives* a couple of weeks beforehand.

The Committee wracked its collective brain hard to find a venue for a meeting this year but the hard fact is that over five years we have been everywhere we can think of and exhausted all possible venues which fit in with our requirements. An appeal for ideas from members put out in an earlier *Wirral Matters* yielded not a single response but that made us feel we had not inadvertently overlooked anything. Moreover, we don't really feel too concerned about the omission since Summer itself this year was also cancelled.

We do intend to make good this omission, however, by arranging one or two winter general meetings. Ever since the death of Mr. W. Victor Smith, our esteemed Vice-President, former Chairman and long-serving member of the Executive Committee we have been seeking a way to honour his memory. It has been decided to establish an annual Victor Smith Memorial Lecture on a subject of Wirral interest to take place in the early months of each year beginning in 1999. Thought is also being given to at least one other talk. If these ventures are well supported we will consider arranging a regular winter programme.

Further information in our next issue.

Mr. LESLIE BIBBY

After more than a quarter of a century's stalwart service as a member of the Executive Committee Leslie Bibby has decided the time has come to put his feet up.

Leslie can't remember exactly how long he has been a member of the Society. His guess is 'around 40 years' and from 1974-1982 he was the Chairman. When he stepped down from that position he was made a Vice-President, an appointment of which he is very proud and which, of course, he retains. He is also one of the Society's Trustees.

"My leaving the Committee" he said, "does not in any way diminish my interest in the Society's work. I consider it is making a very valuable contribution to protecting Wirral's environment and long may it continue to do so".

And long may he continue to enjoy life. We send him our very best wishes.

CORPORATE BUSINESS MEMBERSHIP

At a recent meeting of the Executive Committee it was decided that membership of The Wirral Society should be extended to Wirral's business houses many of which we know to be environmentally conscious and whom we believe could be glad to support our aims. It is felt that Corporate Business Members would not only increase our standing, our influence and public awareness but also could also proffer expert advice and opinion when it was needed. Their subscriptions would not only contribute to our general activities but would enable us to support some of Wirral's smaller environmental organisations (as we have done in the past with the likes of the Friends of Flaybrick and the Friends of Bidston Moss) in their particular endeavours.

For some time now we have also been endeavouring to bring our work to the notice of the younger generation through projects of an environmental nature in Wirral's schools. We feel that there are firms in Wirral who might wish to be associated with this aspect of the Society's work.

Invitations to become Corporate Business members will be sent out to selected companies shortly.



The Editor wishes to acknowledge the help of Shirley Gloak in the production of this issue.