



WIRRAL MATTERS

JOURNAL OF THE WIRRAL SOCIETY
The Wirral Committee of CPRE

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SUMMER 1999

BRIEF ENCOUNTER

The Society in Action

For those who do not know it, Eleanor Road runs due North along the side of Bidston Hill from the Upton Road to Bidston Village. Above it, on the East side, rise the woods that clad the hill and provide not only a pleasant place of recreation for the inhabitants of Birkenhead, but also a valuable landscape feature seen from afar that is designated as a Site of Special Landscape Value in Wirral Borough Council's Unitary Development Plan. The West side of the road consists in the main of large elegant Edwardian houses set in generous, well wooded gardens and there is a further well wooded area - not open to the public - below those houses. This area is an essential element of the attractive appearance of the Bidston ridge referred to in the UDP.

Earlier this year it became apparent that consent was being given to planning applications for development on sites adjacent to Eleanor Road which could, if relocated along the road, entirely change the character of the area and seriously damage the appearance of the Bidston ridge.

The basic problem was that the remaining houses in Eleanor Road were too large for modern requirements. Two had been used unsuccessfully as nursing homes and one of these and another large house had been vandalised when empty and subsequently demolished. So the question to be asked was whether Eleanor Road could remain viable as a high class housing area. The Society thought it probably could be with the right development, a view shared by the planning officer concerned.

I have to hold up my hand and say *mea culpa* because the Society did not appreciate at the time the significance of the two applications for outline planning consent that had been submitted for development in the area. However, when the detailed application came in for the more recent of these two outlines, which is for 13 dwellings, I was alerted to the serious danger that a piecemeal approach to planning strategy for the area could result in over development that would be disastrous. The trouble would be that unless the developers were, which the UDP policies cannot be detailed enough to achieve, they would be likely to want to denude the area below Eleanor Road of the generous tree cover that it presently enjoys and is a major part of the attractive appearance of the Bidston ridge.

Development Brief

It therefore seemed that what was needed was a detailed local policy known as a Development Brief. This is a document that a Planning Authority can issue covering a specific area and which sets out the criteria to which planning applications must conform to be acceptable.

The important criteria are: the density and type of housing, tree preservation and what the planners call 'elevation treatment'. I consulted my planning oracle who confirmed that the Society would be perfectly in order in calling for the Borough Council to consider drawing one up for the Eleanor Road area. We did just that and asked also for an immediate tree preservation order to be placed on all the trees in the area. To its great credit the Planning Officers responded very rapidly. They drafted a Development Brief which they sent to us for comments which were returned equally rapidly and accepted. The final result has been approved by the Planning Committee and now controls all development in the area between Eleanor Road and the housing developments at the foot of the ridge.

Main Provisions

The main provisions of the Brief are that on a strip of land, containing the existing large houses, development will be limited to 4 houses per acre (9 per hectare) and that density may be further reduced by the restriction that is placed on the removal of mature trees. Below the houses fronting Eleanor Road is another, longer, strip on which detached houses may be built at 9 per acre (22 to the hectare) but also liable to further restriction to preserve trees. The third area lies largely on the flatter ground between the two existing house estates - which will not be allowed to coalesce - where a similar density to those estates will be allowed. Considerable powers are encapsulated in the brief for the Council to insist on the preservation of trees and restrict building to do so. The other provision is for the appearance of any buildings to be governed by a series of detailed architectural requirements intended to make them conform to the general character of the existing houses.

Incident

There was an illuminating incident during the course of all this. It looks as if the imminent threat of an all-embracing tree preservation order had leaked out and the owner of the site where the house had been demolished sent in as contractor with chainsaws and bulldozers early on a Saturday morning to fell a number of large trees on the site. However, the developers had reckoned without the Eleanor Road Residents Association who had already joined with the Wirral Society in calling for a Development Brief. They sprang into action and went straight to the top in the form of the Director of Planning and Economic Development himself. To his great credit he immediately contacted the Borough Solicitor & Secretary and came up to the site armed with a hastily drawn-up tree preservation order. The contractor was halted in his tracks but, unavoidably, only after he had felled several large trees. Not the best way of getting the planners on your side when you submit a planning application for development!

The Eleanor Road story illustrates one of the ways in which the Society can achieve its aims of looking after Wirral's heritage and environments and we take a modest pride in the outcome so far. If the area is now developed as one of high class housing with the woodland setting preserved, we shall be well content.

R. G. Loom
Planning Liaison Officer

PROTECTING THE PIER HEAD

In our last issue we mentioned that the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company wished to develop a site straddling the old Floating Roadway as a car-park for cars going to Ireland and the Isle of Man. The proposal was challenged in the courts by the Millennium Walks Committee, a small group of people who were fighting for the right of Liverpool citizens to walk along the Liverpool waterfront, without let or hindrance, even on land belonging to MDHC.

Members will have read how the judge overturned the permission to close parts of the public right of way which had been given by the Merseyside Development Corporation. This scuppered MDHC's plans and, predictably, they reacted by deploing the decision which, they claimed, would lead to the loss of both ferries with a huge consequential loss of jobs.

The temporary marshalling yard at the Princes Dock, it was claimed, could well be developed as a permanent terminal with all the facilities modern-day travellers expect. But the Dock Company (in the guise of the Princes Dock Development Company which they own in equal partnership with a firm of developers) have earmarked this site for the erection of a money-spinning prestigious office block. The big question is: should they be allowed to take over public land so that they can profit?

MDHC's proposals were also opposed by the Merseyside Civic Society whose Chairman, Professor Quentin Hughes OBE, pertinently observed: "MDHC was formed to look after maritime trade but now they seem to spend most of their time on building developments. The Pier Head is part of the proposed site for world heritage status. The buildings are vital to this bid and would be spoiled by putting a car-park in front of them. A jewel is cheapened by a bad setting."

At a meeting with MDHC officers earlier this year we suggested that consideration be given to building the terminal on the Wirral side of the Mersey where a Ro-Ro terminal is to be built on the Twelve Quays site. We came away from the meeting feeling that this possibility had not been seriously explored. As we pointed out, in Dublin, the passengers are landed two miles from the city centre while the other terminal at Dunlaoghaire is six miles away.

As we go to press, it is reported that MDHC are said to be "tight-lipped" about what they will do next. The Irish shipping company, Sea Containers, have apparently - and most imaginatively - suggested that the former Floating Roadway could be used to create a tunnel which would lead to a car-park *underneath* the Pier Head. If that is not feasible then they suggest the Landing Stage should be extended so that the vessels would be removed altogether from the Pier Head. And, of course, Princes Landing Stage is where the big passenger liners used to berth before the post-war, shortened, replacement stage made this no longer possible.



Pier Head - Nowhere quite like it.

SUMMER MEETING

Our Summer Meeting took place on a new aspect this year. It was the first time we had ventured beyond the Wirral boundaries and our first-ever coach trip.

Following the second Victor Smith Lecture given by Grant Luscombe, Chief Executive of Landlife, who told us about the National Wildflower Centre which is being established at Court Hey in Knowsley, we went to see it for ourselves.

The arrangements made by Dr. Lillian Potter and Audrey Platt were impeccable. Nothing was left to chance and all went very smoothly. The weather was reasonably kind with just the odd short shower to contend with and Grant Luscombe, whose clear voice was easily heard out in the growing fields, was an excellent guide.

The Centre rents around 100 acres of land in the Knowsley and South Liverpool areas on which they grow wild flowers for their seed. The seed is harvested by their own combine harvester and taken to the Centre where it is sorted and packaged for sale to provide funds. The main sales outlet is through Sainsbury's Homebase DIY stores and they operate a flourishing mail order business which supplies seed to local authorities and highway agencies who plant them to bring colour to our roadsides.

There was a little disappointment in that we tended to see flowers gone to seed rather than in bloom, especially to those members armed with cameras. But it was a highly interesting trip and out thanks go to Lillian and Audrey for all their hard work.

Watch Out for Triffids!

By coincidence, newspapers reported next day that another charity, Plantlife, was very concerned that pollution from the pollen of genetically modified crops could corrupt Britain's declining wildflowers. They added their voice to the many who have expressed fears about the consequences of interfering with nature in this way.

In their report Plantlife warned that pollen from chemically-resistant GM-crops would produce chemically-resistant superweeds that could spread, Triffid-like, across the countryside suffocating other forms of plant life.

That could result in an intensive use of weed and pest killer and, additionally, new uncontrollable viruses could spread between plant species.

The charity has been working with the Government in an effort to bring certain species back from the brink of extinction and fear that the introduction of GM organisms could undermine all their good work.

YOU GOTTA HAVE FRIENDS

Mention to anyone that you are one of the Friends of Flaybrick (Cemetery) and it invariably brings a flippant response, something on the lines of "That's a grave responsibility" or "You're dead lucky". Even from the politest people it brings a surprised raised eyebrow. Yet, why should such an interest be any more curious than being, say, a Friend of the Gunsite ("How's Captain Mainwaring, then?") or a friend of Leasowe Lighthouse ("Are you the leading light?")

This was the essence of a conversation I had in Birkenhead Town Hall recently with several people who had travelled there from distant parts for the Annual General Meeting of the National Federation of Cemetery Friends. They had all suffered similar reactions.

Oh yes, there are Friends of cemeteries nationwide. The 60 people who assembles in the flower-bedecked Town Hall represented an interest in cemeteries ranging from Edinburgh down to the famous Kensal Green and Brookwood cemeteries in the south.

BLOW HOT, BLOW COLD

The occasion began with a guided tour of Flaybrick (now Flaybrick Memorial Gardens, of course) to which delegates were taken in a beautifully-restored 1952 red London bus. After lunch David Hillhouse, Wirral Council's Principal Museums Officer, gave an illustrated talk on old Birkenhead and, in particular, on Birkenhead Priory. A visit to the Priory followed (again in the splendid red bus) and the day finished with the annual general meeting.

A number of Friends groups took the opportunity of mounting displays illustrating their particular cemetery and their particular aspects, activities and achievements.

The activities of some of these organisations are quite remarkable. Some had produced handsome booklets about their particular cemetery with photographs of some of the splendid statuary and memorials there and telling the stories about the people they commemorate. Others had devised cemetery trails (and that includes Flaybrick), genealogical guides for family history researchers and Brookwood, Britain's largest burial ground, issues a twice-yearly, widely-read magazine. Many Friends' groups also organise lectures, bird-watching sessions and some have educational facilities for schoolchildren intent on knowing something of their local history.

The two London cemeteries, of course, offer tremendous scope. Both can support teams of guides and Kensal Green has a programme of poetry readings (of works by some of the famous poets buried there), an exhibition of funerary monuments, regular art exhibitions and an "Ivy League." The latter is a "hands-on" group of enthusiasts which turns up at appointed time with suitable gardening tools, old clothes and a stout pair of gloves (hard hats are issued on arrival) to remove years of unwanted ivy growth from the mausoleums, monuments, tombstones and chapels.

Brookwood Cemetery is actually 25 miles from the centre of London in Surrey. In 1862 The London Necropolis & National Mausoleum Company was formed to establish a great metropolitan cemetery out in the countryside and large enough to contain London's dead for an indefinite period. It occupies 450 acres (about the size of Arrowe Park) and had its own railway line to take coffins and mourners straight into the cemetery. It had two stations - one to serve the Anglicans and the other for Dissenters. They are still there but out of use for some time.

The scope for guided tours (famous writers, famous artists, eminent engineers and scientist, actors and actresses, musicians and composers) is inexhaustible.

The only sad note of the day was the tale told by visitors from Newcastle-under-Lyme. The Friends' organisation there was rapidly established earlier this year in the wake of an horrendous act of "municipal vandalism" (their words). Residents of that Staffordshire town woke up one morning last year to find that hundreds of gravestones in the municipal cemetery had been flattened. The local council had decided that they constituted a dangerous hazard and had called in a contractor to make them safe. Even foot-high kerbstones were put on their sides.

A campaign of demonstrations and protest meetings was rapidly mounted and a petition bearing 18,000 signatures was handed to the Prime Minister at No.10. The Government has recently ordered the council to reinstate the gravestones as they were. At the time of the AGM it had taken no action and the fight goes on.

Who says cemeteries are dull?

Last March *The Wirral News* was suddenly seized with a crusading zeal to protect the Wirral Peninsula from further development which, they felt, had already gone too far. In a SPECIAL ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE it trumpeted: "Everyone must unite in a concerted campaign to make Wirral a green and pleasant land that our children will be proud to inherit."

So concerned were they that they wrote straight to the Prime Minister to acquaint him with the problems Wirral is (allegedly) facing and urging him to encourage the Borough Council to adopt a more sympathetic stance over planning issues.

The News then went on to make some most alarming statements:

- ◆ *Hundreds of concerned residents have asked us to "stop the destruction of Wirral."*
- ◆ *Wirral's disappearing Green Belt is becoming an increasing cause for concern among readers.*
- ◆ *Planning issues have dominated the headlines all year as more and more of Wirral's heritage falls victim to the march of the bulldozers.*
- ◆ *It seems that nowhere is safe from the relentless race of development which, if allowed to proceed unchecked, will change the face of Wirral forever.*

The News campaign seems to have been sparked off by a planning application from Wimpey North West to demolish a large Victorian house in Holm Lane, Oxton, and erect a four-storey block of flats on the site where (claimed *The News*) "hundreds of protected trees will be chopped down if the development is allowed to go through". (There are some trees on the site but "hundreds" is a gross exaggeration). "If the Council gives this latest plan the go-ahead (they went on) "it will scar the landscape well into the new Millennium."

Stirring stuff.

In the event, the Society agreed, for a number of reasons, that this planning proposal was quite unsuitable for the site which faced St Saviour's Primary School and we had already lodged our objections to it. Subsequently, the Council's planning sub-committee also thought so and the application was rejected. However the developer has appealed against the decision and a Public Inquiry has been fixed for 2nd November. The News also voiced its deep concern about the proposal by Mulberry Properties (for which outline planning permission has been granted) to build 250 homes on former playing fields in Noctorum which, they seem to believe, was an infringement of the Green Belt.

This particular site is *not* Green Belt but is part of what is known as "the M53 Corridor." Before land can be designated as Green Belt it has to be of certain environmental quality. A Government Inspector reported that the "M53 Corridor" did not meet this criterion and should be made available for residential development.

The ground is the site of the former Old Birkenheadians' rugby field and belongs to Birkenhead School which is disposing of it to provide funds for scholarships for boys whose parents wish them to be educated there but who cannot afford the fees. This action has been prompted by the Government's withdrawal of grants to independent schools.

The News failed to mention that Wirral Council has been charged by the Government with finding sites for the building of 9500 houses by the year 2001. Many of these have already been built and mostly on "brownfield" sites, not in the Green Belt which the Council rightly regards as sacrosanct.

Nor did *The News* mention the existence of the Council's Unitary Plan (UDP) which was widely publicised and explained at

public meetings when it was drawn up. This lays down where development may take place and where it may not.

And, in this respect, we feel that the criticisms levelled at the planners is most unfair. It is the Society's experience that Planning Officers in both Wirral Council and Ellesmere Port and Neston Council are most co-operative and very protective of their environment within the limits permitted by Government rules and regulations.

However, the factual errors and sweeping misstatements made by The Wirral News suggested to the Executive Committee that we should offer our help. After all, the Wirral Society has been doing its bit to protect the Wirral environment for the past 72 years. We felt this long experience of dealing with local authority and planning departments might prove useful.

To this end, our Chairman wrote to Mr Leigh Marles, Editor of The Wirral News group, and invited him to attend one of our Committee meetings when matters of mutual interest could be discussed. That was on the 2nd April 1999.

He is still waiting for a reply.

WASTE WASTED ?

I despair as I watch the contempt for the environment. Litter, graffiti and waste characterise our urban lives. The countryside is defaced by thoughtless fly-tipping. Recycling may have caught the imagination of some but how much fossil fuel has been used making special journeys to take small quantities of bottles, cans and newspapers to recycling facilities?

How much energy and how many chemicals are then used to do the recycling? Our understanding of sustainability is still very limited. It is the new buzzword often twisted to suit the arguments of whoever is using it at the time.

Our world has to work out how to meet present human needs and improve the quality of life without diminishing the Earth's capacity to provide for the needs of future generations.

Peter Luff MP

(in a House of Commons debate).

COMING SHORTLY!

For one Night Only!

Don't Miss It!

The Wirral Society

A.G.M.

19th October 1999

7.30pm

The Heatherlands Court

Irby

KEEPING QUIET

The Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) never rests in its ceaseless crusade to protect Britain's green and pleasant land from the equally ceaseless onslaught of developers and highway engineers. Their latest battle-cry is: Safer Country Lanes for All.

Last year, in a White Paper, the Government recognised the problems of intimidation from traffic and the need to protect the countryside from ever-rising traffic levels.

Country lanes, says CPRE, are as much a part of the fabric of the countryside as the hedges, fields and trees which they pass. But country lanes are under siege from the increasing number of cars and lorries, speeding traffic and transport "improvements."

Last August CPRE issued its *Charter for Country Lanes* in which they called upon national and local governments to:

- Ensure low speeds on country lanes and reduce the speed limit of 60 mph to a maximum of 40 mph, with 20 mph limits in villages.
- Introduce a new category of country lane where walkers, cyclists and ramblers would have priority over motorists.
- Stop the speed of new developers which encourage traffic growth; provide real transport choice in the countryside through better public transport and local services and by providing a safe environment for cycling, walking and riding.

There is much that can be done, they add, to safeguard country lanes for the future, to reduce distress and danger caused by speeding traffic and to protect part of the historic fabric that makes the countryside what it is and what we value.

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"Happily, this is not yet a real problem in Wirral," commented Eric Sanné, Chairman of the CPRE Cheshire Branch, "but we need to be ever alert. Members will recall that the Council's highway engineers planned to straighten out the winding country road which leads from Saughall Massie village to Black Horse Hill in West Kirby and turn it into a main thoroughfare simply to relieve congestion at Moreton Cross in the peak hours. The Government has not seen fit to fund this plan so far and if CPRE's Charter for Country Lanes is acted upon in may never happen."



"There's a quiet lane just - there!"