



WIRRAL MATTERS

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

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WINTER 1996

67TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

It is never easy choosing just the right date for our Annual General Meeting and when a date is fixed and all arrangements made it is exceedingly cruel of the gods to choose that same night to vent their spleen on the earth below with snow, sleet, biting cold winds and subsequent leg-breaking shish. Not unexpectedly, the Secretary's telephone was glowing red with apology after apology for absence and the attendance was at least halved. Nevertheless, those brave souls who defied the elements and slithered and skidded to Heatherlands in Thurston were rewarded with another fascinating slide-show (no pun intended) from the extremely knowledgeable Joy Hockey. Her subject this time was the old music halls of Birkenhead and Wallasey and the stars who appeared there. How she has amassed such a wonderful collection of slides is her little secret.

We are most grateful to Joy - once again - for such an entertaining evening.

Whilst the slide-show was the highlight of the evening we must not forget that the purpose of the meeting was to hear the Chairman's Report on the Society's work over the past year, check on the financial situation and elect an Executive Committee for the ensuing twelve months.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

(Unavoidably abridged - Ed.)

The Chairman, Keith Davidson, said that whilst the year has been busy there had been no major crisis of planning importance to worry the Executive Committee. Nevertheless, vigil of the environment, like the economy, had to be continuous. Complacency is the friend of poor development until a NIMBY situation arises when there is no structured opposition and panic sets in.

"All too often," the Chairman continued, "we have seen localised opposition groups spring up in Wirral to try and prevent a

development which could threaten their status quo, only to see them disappear into the woodwork when the panic is over despite our pleas to join us after we have issued advice and help to them."

These transitory groups receive dramatic coverage in the press whilst the Wirral Society and CPRE may well have been pursuing a particular matter for some time with our efforts often unused. Fortunately, now that we have a Press and Publicity Officer this is changing.

Upton Meadow

During the year the future of Upton Meadow has been secured after lengthy negotiations between Wirral Council and The Woodland Trust and we await the call from The Friends of Upton Meadow to redeem our pledge of £1,000 towards the purchasing fund.

Our opposition to the development of Upton Meadow goes back at least fifteen years to the time when the Council were trying to market the site for a science park. We are delighted that the Meadow is now secure for the next ninety-nine years.

Haddon Wood

We have long been concerned about the future of Haddon Wood at Ness which is Wirral's largest piece of woodland and were prepared to lead a campaign with The Woodland Trust to save it from being exploited as a site for war games and other commercial activities. After much correspondence with the Trust it seems that opposition to various planning applications and wise decisions made by the Planning Department of Ellesmere Port & Neston Council has made the wood safe. We shall continue to keep a watching brief.

EP & N Local Plan

Last year saw the Executive Committee greatly involved in the intricacies of Wirral Council's Unitary Development Plan. This year it was the turn of Ellesmere Port & Neston Council's Draft Local Plan.

We acknowledge the hard work of the Planning Department in preparing this plan but we are disappointed to note that urban

regeneration was not given the priority treatment we hoped for. We have reported our thoughts to the Council and stressed that the Council should take a more positive role in leading and guiding the urban renewal process.

We urged them to drop the proposal to site many of the 3,000 houses demanded by the Government on 'unallocated' land in the Ledsham area. We have also pointed out that the types of houses to be built in semi-rural areas should not be left to developers who are guided solely by the profit-motive and that incursions into the green areas of the Borough should only be a last resort after all urban regeneration has been completed.

Other Matters

- We were pleased to make contact with The Friends of Bidston Moss who are concerned with the reclamation of the now-closed Bidston Tip as an open greenspace for public use and made a donation of £100 towards their expenses.

- We also made contact with The Friends of Flaybrick whose aim is to preserve and improve the historic Flaybrick Cemetery in keeping with its new name of Flaybrick Memorial Gardens.

The gardens contain some of the oldest and rarest trees in Wirral and the Society was pleased to donate £100 towards the cost of labelling the best of them.

- Following the sad death of Mrs. Joan Collins of West Kirby who was, for many years, the Committee's Minute Secretary the sum of £50 was donated to CPRE, a charity which her husband, Clive, said was especially dear to her heart.

- The Executive Committee was sorry to lose the services of Bryan Heatley following his move from Burton to Ludlow and has been pleased to welcome new members, Mrs. Joy Hockey and Terry Edgar representing the Wallasey Civic Society and Mrs. Lilian Potter as the representative of the Eleanor Road Residents Committee.

- Committee member Nick Lauro earned our admiration for standing up to the barrage from Wirral Council's barrister at the Saughall Massie Road Scheme Inquiry

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and thanks are due to Joy Hockey and Terry Edgar for supporting him at the meeting.

• **Wirral Matters** has been described as 'required reading for all who are interested in the Wirral environment' and we are grateful to Alan Brack for editing it and steering it through the printers. He has also taken over the duties of Minute Secretary.

• Once again we must express our deep gratitude to UML Limited (formerly Unilever Merseyside Limited) for continuing to sponsor **Wirral Matters**. Unfortunately, they will not be able to continue with their support beyond the end of 1997 and we shall have to seek another sponsor.

• We are most grateful to Geoff Loram for continuing to fill the important post of Planning Liaison Officer until we find a volunteer. He is also our representative on the Dee Estuary Conservation Group.

• Eric Sanné, our hard-working Secretary, and Peter Bowler, our equally diligent Treasurer, continue to earn our gratitude and thanks go to all the other members of the Executive Committee for their wise contributions to our monthly meetings.

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTIONS DUE

Unless paid by Standing Order or through CPRE, all annual subscriptions became due for renewal on 1st January.

Cheques or postal orders for £5.00 should be made payable to The Wirral Society and sent to:

Peter Bowler, FCA
Hon. Treasurer
The Wirral Society
c/o Blease, Lloyd & Co.
56 Hamilton Street
Birkenhead L41 5HZ

Joint members of both The Wirral Society and CPRE (annual subscription £17.50) should make their cheques out to CPRE and send them direct to:

CPRE
Membership Department
25 Buckingham Palace Road
London SW1W 0PP

(Those members who joined the Society in the latter part of the year will not be expected to renew their subscriptions until 1st January next year.)

WATERCOURSES OF WIRRAL

In 1993, as part of the Mersey Basin Campaign, a number of River Valley Initiatives (RIV's) were established with the object of cleaning-up and protecting the small rivers, streams and brooks within their field of endeavour. In 1995, following a survey and plan of action by a group from Liverpool University River Valley Action 2005 (RiVa 2005) came into being to concentrate on the watercourses of Wirral.

RiVa 2005 is a working partnership between the public and private sectors, voluntary organisations and community groups with the following objectives:

1. To improve awareness and appreciation of Wirral's rivers and streams.
2. To improve the quality in all Wirral's watercourses to allow them to support fish life.
3. To improve access to Wirral's streams by providing new footpaths and bridleways.
4. To encourage local communities to participate in the protection and improvement of streams in their area.
5. To improve the value of Wirral's streams for nature conservation.
6. To enhance the waterside of Wirral's streams.

Generally, all the water on Wirral runs north and east. All the rivers start in the countryside or in agricultural land and then pass through nature reserves, villages, towns and, in some cases, industrial areas before reaching the Mersey Estuary. Many are polluted; others overgrown.

The Birket rises near West Kirby and flows to Birkenhead; it is joined at Bidston by the River Fender which flows from Pensby alongside the M53. The Dibbin begins in Cheshire and runs north where it joins with streams and brooks from Brimstage and Thornton. It then turns east into Bromborough from where it flows through Port Sunlight into the Mersey.

RiVa 2005 (they hoped to have achieved their objectives by 2005) is based at Ivy Farm, Arrowe Country Park where John Vass-de-Zomba or Clare O'Sullivan will be pleased to answer questions, give further information or advice and receive offers of help. (Telephone 677 2439, fax 604 0081).

(With acknowledgements to RiVa 2005 Report, the group's newsletter).

TRAMS IN HAMILTON SQUARE ?

Time for some horse-sense

The following letter has been sent to Councillor John Cocker, Chairman of the Wirral Council Planning Committee:

Dear Councillor Cocker,

PROPOSED TRAMS IN HAMILTON SQUARE

I write to you with reference to the proposal, made by the Hamilton Quarter, which, we understand, has recently been published, for Hamilton Square to be equipped with electric trams. We wish to oppose this suggestion for the following reasons:

1. The trams will have to be powered by overhead electric lines which will greatly deter from the architectural impact of the Square. It took us a considerable time to remove these very ugly standards, wires, brackets and the whole paraphernalia and it would certainly be a retrograde step if they were to be reinstated.
2. The expense of converting the Hong Kong-built trams to enable them to comply with current regulations is reportedly £250,000 per tram. Whether such expenditure can be met by Lottery funds or not, I suggest that there are a great many projects which would be more sensitive to conservation upon which this money could be spent.
3. If the Hamilton Quarter wish to bring more nostalgia and therefore, more tourism to the Square, I suggest that the era of the development of the Square would be more correctly served by the introduction of horse-trams. These could operate only during the summer months when tourism is at its height and could become a major attraction, similar to those which operate in New York. The Georgian architecture of the Square would be brought to life by the renewed scene and the quite magnificent Town Hall would not be partially obscured by wires. Cyclists and motor-cyclists would not become caught up in the tram lines (I am sure that we all remember this hazard) and the noisy rattle of trams as they negotiate the four curves around the Square would be avoided. It may be that we all forget the noise of trams when negotiating corners and the screeches which accompanied this manoeuvre. How pleasant it would be, in comparison, to hear the gentle 'clip-clop' of the former fiacres, as they were known in France. We applaud the work of the Hamilton Quarter but we do feel that they should reconsider this avowed goal.

Yours sincerely,

Keith Davidson

Keith Davidson
Chairman
The Wirral Society
and the Wirral District Committee of CPRE

THE WOODCHURCH CONTROVERSY

It is fifty years next year since the first residents moved into the Woodchurch Estate. The innovative design of the houses and the layout of the roads was not what is usually associated with council estates and architects and housing experts came from all over Britain to see and admire it. In 1950 the scheme was recognised as one of the best designed in the north-west and won a Ministry of Health Diploma.

Yet, the design of Woodchurch had been a topic of fierce debate and argument at council meetings in Birkenhead Town Hall.

Executive Committee member Lillian Potter has been looking back at the Woodchurch story as part of her PhD thesis.



The building of the Woodchurch Estate began in 1946 and although the fiftieth anniversary of the official opening will not be until 1999, the first residents moved into their new homes in 1947.

The 1,000th house to be completed was handed over as part of the celebrations to mark the Coronation in 1953 at which time the local press dismissed the controversy surrounding the planning with a mere half dozen lines contrasting sharply with many pages when the debate was at its height. Indeed the hostilities in Europe in 1944 were sometimes relegated to second place by local newspapers as the debate acquired national importance and was seen by some as a test case for post-war rehousing plans.

The land involved was purchased from Sir Ernest Royden as long ago as 1926 for £69,000 and Thomas H. Mawson and Sons of Lancaster were instructed to produce a layout. This was approved but development was hindered by local difficulties which were then overtaken by the depression and the War. By 1944, wartime legislation prevented actual house building but site preparation and road construction were permitted. The majority Conservative Party on the Birkenhead Council supported a conventional style of layout drawn up by

the then Borough Engineer, Mr. Bertie Robinson, on Garden Suburb lines. The minority Labour party, however, supported an alternative layout produced by Professor Charles Reilly based on so-called communal living involving the grouping of houses around a series of village greens.

A former Head of Liverpool University School of Architecture, Reilly had been appointed as Planning Consultant in 1944 at the age of seventy, to produce an outline plan for Birkenhead. Even though the housing layout for Woodchurch was not within his brief he went ahead and his idealistic experiment was hailed by supporters as revolutionary and a panacea for social ills.

The ensuing argument with its social and political implications received a degree of exposure unusual for the Borough with coverage in national newspapers as well as an article in *Picture Post*. The vote to approve a layout, perhaps inevitably, followed party lines, resulting in the adoption of the Borough Engineer's scheme though a campaign by Reilly and his faction to reverse the decision was continued for some time.

Herbert J. Rowse (later Sir Herbert), who had been responsible for many and varied projects on Merseyside including India Buildings, the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, the Tunnel Entrances and Heswall Golf Club, was recommended by the RIBA to design the houses within the Borough Engineer's approved plan. But Rowse went further and produced a layout which superseded Robinson's scheme and the early phases

of Woodchurch were built accordingly.

Rowse's skills are evident in a plan which utilised existing contours and incorporated Holy Cross church as the hub of three radial roads. The 'rural' style houses completed to his specifications, characterised by steep pitched roofs, are arranged in terraces of differing numbers reminiscent of those at Port Sunlight. The services are concealed so that the well proportioned lines are uninterrupted and external finishes are varied as is the building line giving gardens of differing sizes and shapes.

Rowse, however, withdrew his services in 1952 and it is thought that this was because he was not prepared to alter his plan to incorporate flats and maisonettes as then required by the Borough. Subsequent planning and design was undertaken by Council employees and it is noticeable that the early phases of the estate have withstood the test of time somewhat better than those completed later. Writing some ten years ago, a local historian pointed out the transition between what is known to be Rowse's work and that of later phases but, sadly, Rowse was not even identified.

The ad hoc 'improvements' made to Rowse's houses more recently by owner-occupiers are aesthetically unappealing but they serve to draw attention to the quality of those that remain unaltered.

An awareness of the importance of the original exterior designs should be fostered to engender a greater respect for what already exists rather than sacrifice it to so called modernisation.

Photo: Eddie Green



Much admired: the Woodchurch Estate

The work of WIRRAL WILDLIFE

Until his retirement last year, Peter Saunders of Hoylake was, for many years the *Daily Post* staff man in Wirral and there is scarcely a square yard of the area with which he is not familiar. As a keen walker he has long been a member of the century-old Wirral Footpaths and Open Spaces Preservation Society and with a lively interest in the flora and fauna of the peninsula he is an enthusiastic member of Wirral Wildlife, the local group of the Cheshire Wildlife Trust. He is their Publicity Officer and Editor of their newsletter. Here he tells us something about the Trust's many activities.



Could otters come back to Wirral? Wirral Wildlife, local group of the Cheshire Wildlife Trust, has a dream that one day these elusive and playful creatures will return to the peninsula's streams and rivers.

John Magee, manager of the trust's six nature reserves in Wirral, is seeking help from fellow volunteers in cleaning up local waterways and restoring habitats in a bid to make them more attractive to these rarely seen animals.

Otters have never been numerous in Britain, but the population declined rapidly after the 1950's, mainly due to increased use of pesticides, water pollution, the contamination of fish – and human disturbance. Mr. Magee said: "I understand the last reported sighting of an otter in North Wirral was at Bidston Moss in the early 1960's, but they are now on the increase again throughout the country and a dead otter was found in Mollington early this year. They are definitely to be found on the banks of the River Dee – so they are not far away."

The county trust is developing an otter recovery programme and has created a demonstration area at its Hockenhull Platts reserve to show what can be done to improve habitats. At another 'secret' site, a Congleton firm, Hays Chemicals Distribution Limited, has sponsored the construction of the first two artificial 'pipe and chamber' otter bolts in Cheshire.

In another new initiative, Mr. Magee's group of Wirral Wildlife Volunteers is taking over the management for nature of an abandoned orchard adjacent to Eastham Woods Country Park. The land formed part of the Carlett Park College site but has been leased to Eastham Lodge Golf Club to allow for an extension to the course.

There has been wholesale destruction of orchards in England in recent decades, so the group is delighted to have the opportunity to look after this habitat. Mr. Magee commented: "It is overgrown with scrub and some of the apple trees are dead but the majority are still producing fruit.

Old orchards are valuable for their own sake, as an attraction for bees in the spring and a place for birds to feed in the autumn.

I hope to obtain a cider press and hold an Apple Day celebration next autumn." Wirral Wildlife is one of nine local groups of the Cheshire Wildlife Trust, which itself is part of a national network of county trusts, all working to conserve English native flora and fauna – and to provide a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves. It has a hard-working committee under the chairmanship of Mr. Frank Cottrell, with Mr. Jim Gilmour as secretary, which organises an annual programme of field trips, indoor meetings and talks, and raises funds for the trust. It also provides opportunities for voluntary woodland management work in its nature reserves.

Wirral Wildlife has played a leading role in the recent establishment of New Ferry Butterfly Park on the site of a derelict railway goods yard. It is available as an open-air classroom for organised visits by schools. More than twenty species of butterflies and over two hundred species of moths have been recorded in the park so far. 1996 was the first full summer of the park and fine weather ensured large numbers of butterflies, especially Painted Ladies and Common Blues.

Further information on Cheshire Wildlife Trust membership and activities can be obtained from the trust headquarters, Cerbe House, Reaseheath, Nantwich, Cheshire CW5 6DA, telephone 01270 610180.

PUTTING WIRRAL ON THE MAP

Members will be interested in a new pictorial and historical map of Wirral which was published just before Christmas. The cartographer is Gerard Swarbrick of Scarisbrick near Ormskirk who has been drawing maps for many years. This is his first excursion 'over the water' but he is no stranger to Wirral. Two of his great aunts were the celebrated Misses Smith who ran the Boathouse Cafe in Parkgate between the wars.

The map has been ten years in the making and is the result of 2,000 hours of painstaking work. It recalls Wirral's history, its ancient families and landowners, its railways and its changing populations. Nothing has been included which has not been fully authenticated with the possible exception of the site of the great Anglo-Saxon Battle of Brunenburgh. Where it actually took place has long been a matter of dispute but having read no less than ten books on the subject Gerard Swarbrick is in no doubt that the battle was fought where Bromborough now stands.

Extravagantly illuminated and wittily embellished in the manner of the missals and gospels of the medieval monks, a full-size (A1) print (23" x 33") is now available in a limited edition at the privilege price of £48.50. Further information from: Gerard Swarbrick, Damwood House, Hall Road, Scarisbrick, Ormskirk L40 9QD.

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TOADS IN A HOLE

The story so far ...

It will be recalled that the colony of Natterjack Toads at Red Rocks, Hoylake, has been close to extinction for several years past due, it is said, to the mysterious absence of males of the species. In an effort to keep the colony in being Cheshire Wildlife decided that two new 'scrapes' were needed in which Natterjack and Natterjill could cultivate a serious relationship. Two years ago The Wirral Society organised (and paid for) the services of a bulldozer to make the scrapes. They duly filled with water but of tadpoles there were none. But someone swore they heard a croak one day and one or two females were actually seen and where there's a croak there's hope.

Cheshire Wildlife decided to seek expert guidance from the herpetologists of English Nature.

Now read on ...

The ultimate decision by the experts was that frogspawn should be translocated (their word) from the thriving colony at Ainsdale. Then came the drought and the frogspawn count was low; too low to allow for any to be removed to Hoylake. But one day in June this year, quite unexpectedly, (reports Jacki Begg, Cheshire Wildlife's Reserves Officer and the toads' Mother Teresa) a telephone call came to say that no time should be wasted in dashing to Ainsdale to collect a portion of spawn. Jacki and a colleague immediately downed tools and sped off and (armed with the necessary licence from English Nature) collected the spawn and made straight for Red Rocks. Alas, when they arrived there, the water in the scrapes had all but disappeared. It was decided that, as an emergency, the spawn should be taken into care and reared in captivity in the shape of a pond in a garden belonging to a staff member of Cheshire Wildlife near their headquarters at Reaseheath.

But, of course, the tadpoles and the resulting toadlets did not all grow at the same pace and it required numerous round trips of ninety-six miles a time taking them in small numbers to Hoylake.

The scrapes have been fenced off to protect them and, said Jacki, the operation has attracted a lot of attention from strollers on the shore, many of whom have stopped to ask questions and all have been most supportive for what they were trying to do.

Since male Natterjacks (*Bufo calamita*) take a year and females take two to three years to grow to maturity it is no short-term project. Over the next four years water levels in the scrapes will be carefully monitored and, all being well, in five years time the summertime air above Red Rocks should resound to a great cacophonous chorus of croaks from contented toads.

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is sponsored by UML Limited as part of their Wirral Community programme.