

With the prospect of great national rejoicing and thanksgiving to come in the weeks ahead it seems almost lese-majeste to mention anything that might put even the tiniest damper on things. But this year also marks the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of an event which is regarded by some folk, even today, as an irremovable stain on the good name of Birkenhead.

In the Spring of 1861 the American states erupted into a ferocious war. The American Civil War, as it is known in the history books, was a fiercely-fought conflict between the northern American states (the so-called Yankees) and those in the south (the Confederate States) which raged for four years until 1865.

The first blow was struck by the Confederates who, on 12th April 1861 at half-past four in the morning, launched a fierce attack on the northern states harbour of Charleston in Carolina. This was in the early years of Abraham Lincoln's presidency and he had often voiced his total opposition to slavery and the Confederates feared their livelihood was in jeopardy.

And their livelihood was growing cotton, an industry which relied heavily on the use of slave labour.

The world's main cotton port was, of course, Liverpool and this led to Birkenhead's involvement. The Confederates set about building up a fleet of fighting ships and Liverpool, in fact, was as much involved as Birkenhead.

A man from South Carolina – Charles Prioleau – was the Senior Partner in a Rumford Street firm which acted as financial agents for the Confederates. In fact, Prioleau settled in the city, marrying a young lady known as 'The Belle of Sefton Park' and they lived in a house in Abercromby Square.

It was to Prioleau's office that Captain James D. Bulloch, the Confederates' naval representative in Europe, made his way with orders to purchase or have specially built six steam-driven ships able to be converted into fighting ships to combat the Yankee vessels which were blockading the southern ports.

The two men went to Laird's shipyard (though by that time John Laird had retired and the yard was in the hands of his three sons). Bulloch placed an order for a 'screw despatch' vessel which the Confederates planned to turn into a gunboat somewhere beyond UK waters. After the vessel's launch – known to Laird's only as 'Hull Number 290' – it was sailed to the Azores with some Merseyside men among the crew. There it was renamed CSS Alabama and was fully armed and loaded with ammunition.

Its role was to seek out and destroy Yankee trading vessels and in this it was notoriously successful. Over two years the Alabama destroyed over 60 enemy ships but as none of them was armed it was hardly a glorious naval feat.

The Alabama's career, however, was brought to an inglorious end in June 1864 when it was sunk off Cherbourg in a fierce battle with the USS Kearsage which had spent a year searching the seas for it.

A few years ago a charitable trust was set up in Wirral and with the Council's approval tried to raise funds to build a full-scale replica of the based on the original plans in Laird's archives. This, it was hoped, would be a great tourist attraction. The cost was estimated to be £3.5 million but despite enthusiastic backing from some very important people nothing like that sum was raised and the project was eventually abandoned.

Whilst scrapping the idea was a great disappointment to many people one wonders how a replica of a ship that was built to ensure the continuance of slave labour might be regarded today? If, of course, it had remained afloat and had not suffered a replica fate of the original and sent to bottom of the Mersey.

*With thanks to Joy Hockey for her research material*

### EMAIL ADDRESSES WANTED

*The recently published Accounts show that the costs of printing, stationery and postage continue to escalate. To reduce our spending on these items we would ask you to let us have your current email address - if you have one.*

*Just sending a message, including your name, to Wirral Society will ensure that your email address is recorded accurately. and will enable us to send you information regarding forthcoming events as quickly as possible - as well as reducing postage, printing costs etc. and saving the rain forests!*

*We assure Members that personal information will not be passed to anyone else and if you are unable to make use of the internet all information will continue to be sent by post.*

***We urgently request your cooperation in this matter so that the Society's funds can be used more effectively.***

From 1st March 2012 our new email address is [wrlsoc@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:wrlsoc@yahoo.co.uk)

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### HELP SUPPORT OUR WORK

*send your name and address and tel.number to Avril with a cheque for £7 (£10 for a society) for one year's membership (Jan to Dec)*

*Newsletter printed by D.B. Print, Hoylake.*

*1500 copies go to members, libraries, community centres and all Wirral Peninsula councillors and MPs*

*All images by Judith Railton except if otherwise named.*

*Additional material from Diane Lane and Lilian Potter*



1980s plan to install The Alabama at Woodside, Birkenhead  
Image provided by Joy Hockey

# WIRRAL MATTERS

NEWS and VIEWS from THE WIRRAL SOCIETY - FOUNDED 1928  
THE WIRRAL COMMITTEE OF THE CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT RURAL ENGLAND (CPRE)

President: Professor John Tarn OBE DL FRIBA FRSA FRHistS FSA

## BUILDINGS UNDER THREAT

### Vineyard Farm - is this the oldest, continuously lived in home in Wirral?



During damp-proof work at Vineyard Farm, Bebington, rendering was stripped off and a mediaeval timber-framed building was revealed, of a similar age to the listed cruck barn a few feet away. Discussions between the owners - Persimmon Homes, Matthew Crook - Senior Conservation officer for Wirral Borough Council and the Wirral Society are aiming to retain and repair the building with the sensitivity needed because of its importance. English Nature can give grants for this sort of work.

There are very few ordinary buildings of this age on Wirral. It is exciting to see the different wall panels, centuries old – some of rush and laths, some wattle (woven hazel branches) and daub (a mix of clay, animal dung, straw and horsehair). From the 17th century, failing panels were removed and replaced with, by now, very old bricks.

*These days wattle and daub is being used once more for low impact sustainable housing projects*



**Pennant House, The Clock Tower and Mayer Hall in Bebington are badly in need of proper repair and maintenance. Once the home and museum of Victorian businessman, historian, collector and philanthropist – Joseph Mayer** these buildings are an important part of the village scene. Recent information from the Council suggests that public opinion has swayed the decision to put money into restoration so that these buildings can thrive.

Enquiries, contacts, up to date news and views – see our website by Nick Lauro [www.wirralsociety.net](http://www.wirralsociety.net)

## SUMMER MEETING - 14th July - meet at the gates of the cemetery at 2 pm.

Friends of Rake Lane Cemetery, Rake Lane, Wallasey will give us a guided tour of the cemetery and the Russian Orthodox St. Elisabeth's Chapel. The Chapel has been beautifully restored and received the Wirral Society Civic Award in 2011. Come along and learn all about St. Elisabeth and the stories behind people, some famous, buried in the cemetery. Refreshments will be available.

## **Green Belt Matters - March 2012**

The “proposed” National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) remains the biggest threat to the Green Belt and Green Field, nationally, with the “presumption for development”.

Whilst not on Green Belt, Redrow are planning a major development off Ledsham Road on a “Green Field” site, in the CW&C Council area, perhaps an example of developments we can expect from the NPPF?

Wirral Council have invited us to comment on the eight Settlement Areas they have defined. We have responded that the Council must be more positive in their commitment to retaining the Green Belt “as is”.

The current Green Belt issue with Wirral Council is the proposal for “Affordable Homes” off Carr Lane in Hoylake, complicated with its impact on the possible development of the “Golf Resort”.

At Hooton, in the CW&C Council area, the application to build homes on the RoFTen site is still pending.

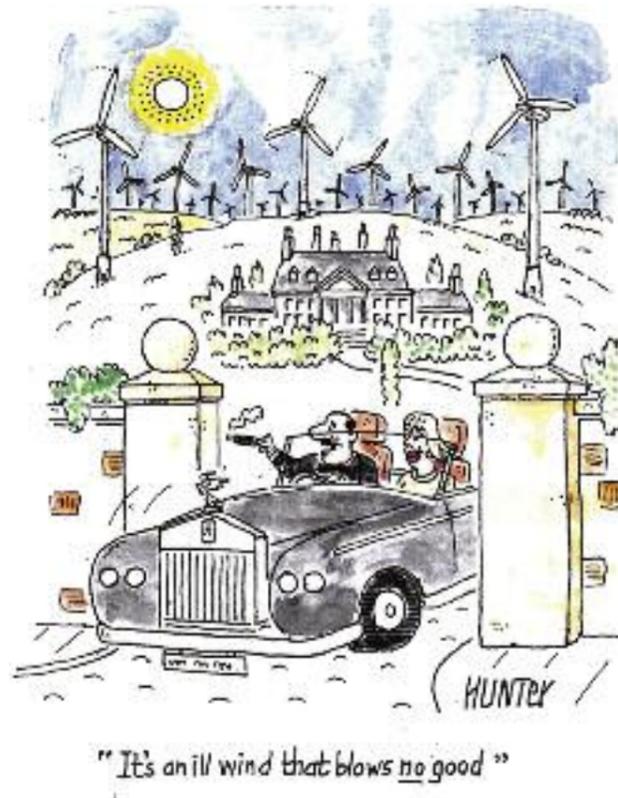
Any further information on the Green Belt in the Wirral please email:-  
[neil.parry@lineone.net](mailto:neil.parry@lineone.net)

## **W Victor Smith Lectures**

### **The Herdmans of Liverpool**

Colin Simpson of Wirral Museums and Art Galleries told us of the prolific Herdman family who worked during the 1800s, visiting and documenting buildings, scenes and events throughout Liverpool and Wirral. One of their patrons was Joseph Mayer who lived in Bebington (see front page of WM). Their Wirral works include views of Tranmere, New Ferry, Bebington, Egremont, Eastham, Bidston Hill and Birkenhead Priory.

*Egremont Ferry, pictured here, courtesy of Williamson Art Gallery which has Herdman prints of Liverpool on display.*



### **Wirral's Diverse Archaeological Past –**

Heather Butler gave us an illustrated survey of Wirral from prehistoric to mediaeval times, referring to artefacts and documents found - from the Stone Age to Norman occupation; from cereal pollen, to red deer antlers; from pottery shards to a spindle whorl.

Thanks to St. Nicholas Church with All Saints who hosted our meeting in its impressive Storeton sandstone church – funded by one of the Harrison shipping line brothers in 1910.

## **During 2012 the Wirral Society are highlighting trees and coastlines**



*Memorial trees at Ingleborough Road fields.*

80 trees were planted to commemorate ex Birkenhead Institute boys killed in World War 1.

Hotly contested plans by Tranmere Rovers Football Club (see their stands beyond the railings) to sell the land for housing have been withdrawn.

**RMS Titanic and Other Voyages  
The Marine Art of Edward D.Walker  
Williamson Art Gallery  
24th March to 20th May**

*Dee Estuary - Burton Mere  
Wetlands – RSPB Reserve*



*Sculpture by Paul Bearman*

Every spring we enjoy the tree planting schemes included in social housing estates of the 1950s.

This blossom tree is one of many in Prenton



## **A Comment from the Chairman**

In recent editions of Wirral Matters, you may recall my drawing your attention to two new important pieces of legislation the Coalition Government was introducing aimed at ‘streamlining’ the planning process. These were known as the ‘Localism’ Bill, and the Draft ‘National Planning Policy Framework’ (NPPF). As I write, both the ‘Localism’ Bill and the revised NPPF have now received Parliamentary approval.

You will probably remember the uproar that the 1st Draft of the NPPF caused last Autumn, which generated no fewer than 13,700 submissions to the Department for Communities, by the time the Consultation period closed in October. Apart from the welcome publicity generated by the Daily Telegraph, especial credit must go to the National Trust and to our colleagues at the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), for leading the opposition to the ill-conceived provisions contained in that Draft. The Society contributed by providing information to CPRE and lobbied the 5 MP’s who represent us in the Peninsula.

It’s reassuring then, to learn that the main concerns arising from that Draft have been accepted by Government, and that the Trust / CPRE have welcomed the improvements now contained in the final document. We did ask that in view of the major failings of the 1st draft, that a further round of public consultation be made available, but this seems unlikely to happen. The future still remains uncertain, as the Trust / CPRE are still concerned the balance may still be tipped in the developer’s favour, and they consider environmental protection is now less strong than it was under the old legislation.

The Society is currently taking advantage of advice being provided through CPRE to learn how we can take maximum advantage of the new powers which have been vested in local communities under these two new sets of legislation.

## **Some current Society Casework –**

**Mayer Hall & associated buildings, Bebington:** We have concerns at the future of this group of buildings in terms of their under-use, condition and vulnerability, given their proximity to open space at the rear. **St Margaret’s Convent, Rock Ferry:** We have been concerned over the condition of this building for some time now, so we recently noted with pleasure, that plans to convert this major building into apartments have been approved.

**Western HVDC Link - Cable laying in Wirral:** We are continuing to take an interest in the plans for the major excavations that are needed to bury this electricity cable down through the Peninsula.

**Proposal for 2 Windmills on Holywell shore:** We have objected on the grounds that if approved, the machines would be a major visual intrusion into the Dee Estuary, and create an undesirable precedent for the future. A decision on the Planning Application is awaited.

**Unauthorised Advertising – South Wirral:** In answer to our enquiry, we are pleased to learn that that Cheshire West Council acknowledge they are having difficulties in dealing with this problem and they are acting by drafting a revised strategy for dealing with the issue. This will be put before the Council in the coming months.

**Former Elf Garage – A540 at Dunstan Lane, Burton:** We are still trying to find out who owns this derelict building, so to establish what is proposed to be done with it.