The Wirral Society... 60 Years On

1928-1988

The Wirral Society
protecting your heritage

60 years
THE WIRRAL SOCIETY . . .

SIXTY YEARS ON

'... only the constant vigilance of amenity groups and individuals who love and care about the future of their peninsula, can ensure that Wirral will continue to be the attractive and fascinating place which it undoubtedly still is today'.

(Kenneth Burnley, 1987)

Celebrating the Wirral Society’s Diamond Jubilee
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Publications by the Society

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Chapter 1
THE ORIGINS AND WORK OF THE Wirral SOCIETY
Ron Sumner

"Thank Heaven Wirral still retains many of its romantic dales, and has not yielded all its pleasant places to the Jerry builder and speculator. Indeed Wirral may claim to be one of the beauty spots of England ... its quiet English serenity and smiling pastoral it stands unrivalled."
(Charles William Budden, 1921)

All who care for the Wirral countryside lament the changes which are taking place in it. However, few pause to consider what it is in the landscape which they particularly enjoy, what makes it typically English and why changes have rendered it to them less beautiful.

Back in May 1928, at St. Michael's Church Institute in Claughton, a group of people expressed their fears that the rural and coastal beauty of Wirral was being threatened. This was the inaugural meeting of the Wirral Society which came about largely as a result of growing concern that inter-war ribbon development would create whole areas of unplanned conurbation.

The Society was formed with the object of ensuring that Wirral's natural beauty, its architecture and flora and fauna, were preserved and improved for the enjoyment of present and future generations. This 'natural beauty' includes the countryside, open spaces, sea coast and adjoining waters, and the villages. The area it covers is the old 'Hundred of Wirral', bounded by a line roughly between Blacon Point to Stanlow and straddling the boundary between the counties of Merseyside and Cheshire.9

The Society is steered by its Officers and Executive Committee, who consider the many applications for land development in Wirral, and constructively oppose any which will have an adverse effect on the environment. Several committee members are from affiliated bodies (such as the Hoylake Civic Society and the Heswall Society) who, with their local knowledge, can provide valuable advice. The Society also invites information from members of the public regarding any activity in their locality which appears to endanger the environment.

At local and national level many matters of policy, if left unchallenged, would adversely affect the local environment. The Wirral Society must act as a watchdog on these matters too, encroachment into the 'Green Belt' for development, expansion of industry into the countryside, and the development of large retail outlets located in the rural areas are a few of the items which demand attention.

Since its formation in 1928 the Wirral Society has been affiliated to the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE). The Council has a powerful voice at national level and is able to acquaint the government of the day with our views concerning any policy changes which may affect Wirral. The CPRE is doing very valuable work in protecting the English Countryside from over-development and is vigorous in its attempts to protect the 'Green Belt' up and down the country.

One of the original committee members of the Wirral Society was also instrumental in establishing the CPRE. Patrick Abercrombie was a brilliant and influential town planner who was first appointed to the School of Architecture at Liverpool University in 1907. Between 1915 and 1935 he held the Chair of Civic Design, after which time he became Professor of Town Planning at London University.

Abercrombie's article 'The Preservation of Rural England' appeared in the Town Planning Review and led directly to the formation of the CPRE in 1926. Abercrombie came to know and love Birkenhead and Wirral during his time in Liverpool and would have observed the urbanisation of the peninsula and the spread of itinerant building. These were the themes that preoccupied his foreword to the Wirral Society's first 'Cautionary Guide' published in 1933.

*For practical purposes, the Wirral Society normally leaves matters arising south of a line roughly from Shotwick to Stanley to the Chester Committee of the CPRE.
Is it too late to save the remnants of the Wirral? Anyone who knew the delightful peninsula thirty years ago and who suddenly returned to-day to find himself in Kirby or Upton or on Thurston Hill, might well say that its beauty had gone beyond recall. It was so singularly remote: Birkenhead and Wallasey stopped abruptly in all directions — there was much less than the usual struggle even for those days — the growth had jumped across to two or three places on the Dee, Hoylake, West Kirby and Heswall. Footpaths and grassy lanes led in all directions — as indeed many of them do now — but there were no sudden interruptions of the country quiet by groups of houses and wide main roads. That touch of wildness which still survives — pines, heather, gorse and outcropping sandstone, added to the feeling of the remoteness of this tongue of land lying between two great estuaries. How retired a place Burton seemed to be from the fact that about this time a member of a great family, having no longer any connection with Liverpool, selected it as the site for a great country house, as one might to-day choose the Coiswolds or Devonshire. I don’t think anyone would build for that purpose in Wirral to-day: the spacious view over the Dee, it is true, is still unimpaired, but is any view with Wirral land in it, safe from some upstart burst of building?

Extract from Patrick Abercrombie’s foreword to the 1933 ‘Cautious’ Guide.

In its early years, the Society had not only the support of the newly-formed CPRE but the backing of the influential Liverpool and District Regional Survey Association and the long-established Wirral Footpaths and Open Spaces Preservation Society. As a coordinating body, the Wirral Society maintains close cooperation with the Green Belt Council and local amenity groups. In this respect the Society provides an ‘over-view’ not always possible with local conservation groups, and provides the stimulus and experience of what is happening in other parts of the peninsula.

Members of the Society are kept informed about planning applications and government legislation, receiving consideration by means of a regular newsletter. A Summer Meeting is held at a local place of interest; Ness Gardens, Burton Manor, and Thurston Hall among others have provided the venue for an informal gathering. The Annual General Meeting is normally held in October, with an informative talk by a guest speaker after the conclusion of formal business.

When you are next enjoying a stroll along the Wirral Way, or can feel the breeze on your face as you picnic at Thurston Common, it is worth remembering the labours of the Wirral Society and other kindred associations who (with the local authorities) have done so much to preserve and improve your local heritage.

Change is inevitable in the countryside. We really need to combat not change itself but destructive change which destroys forever a rural area or a landscape of outstanding beauty. By acting as a watchdog on these matters, with its members as the ‘eyes and ears’, the Wirral Society can go some way to achieving this.

Wirral’s Beauty Spots.

Preservation Society Formed.

A new society, called the Wirral Society, one of whose main objects will be to organise action to prevent Wirral from disintegration or injury, was formed at a meeting held in St. James’s Church Institute, Chavasse last evening. There was a large attendance, over which Mr. H. Burdett-Jones presided. The society was formed with the object of preserving the Wirral Peninsula for the preservation of local interests, with the support of the Liverpool and District Regional Survey Association, the Wirral Footpaths and Open Spaces Preservation Society, the Ness Gardens Preservation Association, and the Wirral Architectural Society, representatives of which were present.

Ugly Bungalows.

In the draft statement, in which the object of the society was set out, as a附件的sheet; the statement that the character of the Wirral Peninsula is endangered by the bungalows and cottage houses that are building up and will spread further if unchecked. There are already scores of new houses that are being built, with no plan or intention to extend the plan of the village. The rate of building has been greatly increased.

A resolution was carried unanimously, calling for theBrains and a meeting was held at a local place of interest; Ness Gardens, Burton Manor, and Thurston Hall among others have provided the venue for an informal gathering. The Annual General Meeting is normally held in October, with an informative talk by a guest speaker after the conclusion of formal business.

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Liverpool Post and Mercury, Wednesday May 23 1928.
Chapter 2

THE EARLY YEARS

David Randall

'Though a sadly large part of Wirral has already been ruined, there is still time to preserve a great deal of its charm.'

(The Social Survey of Merseyside, 3 vols., 1934)

In the 1920's many conservationists thought that Wirral was becoming 'a bedroom of Liverpool', losing its basic identity amidst the onslaught of housing for an expanding population. There was a real fear that with the decline of rural areas in Wirral — and with the corresponding decline in agriculture — new building developers would squeeze out open land. This theme was picked up in more recent times by W. Victor Smith who wrote, in 1962, that 'in losing its remaining rurality Wirral would lose the very quality which at present makes it so important an asset to its own and the adjoining population'.

Housing requirements changed during the inter-war period. The desire for a town-house was replaced by the desire for a house with a garden and this involved dispersal of population. It coincided with social changes such as a higher standard of living, a greater interest in health, and the smaller family. There was increased mobility provided by the private motor car and the public motor bus.

Population spread became increasingly suburban and this expansion was not always adjacent to the built-up areas (such as in the example of Wallasey and Birkenhead). It also took the form of ribbon development with distinct patterns of houses randomly placed along lines of communication.

Building development in the 1920's and 1930's was haphazard and uncontrolled. There was the frustration that the necessary legal framework was lacking; an official attitude of 'act now, think later' was adopted allowing land to be developed speculatively in lieu of a definitive legal ruling. The local authorities compounded this by providing services such as drainage and sewerage wherever building took place. A new ridge and furrow characterised the local landscape.

*W. Victor Smith is a current Vice-President of the Society, one of its longest-serving members, and author of the 1962 'Cautionary Guide'.

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It must be remembered that in the twenties and thirties there was no officially designated ‘Green Belt’ or protected open land and there was an attendant fear that towns and countryside would merge and become inseparable. The lack of an adequate and effective legal and planning framework encouraged the formation of a watchdog society.

The original Wirral Society committee was a fascinating mixture of businessmen and academics. Maurice Brown recalls that ‘at one time if they had called a committee meeting business in Liverpool would have come to a halt.’

The vice-presidents were Sir Alfred Paton, a Liverpool cotton broker, Sir Percy Bates, a Cunard director, and William Ferguson-Irving, one of the greatest local historians of his day. The first President of the Society, Viscount Leverhulme, was perhaps an obvious choice. It was largely due to his intervention that the central core of Wirral remained agricultural and his estates included the ‘green’ villages of the peninsula — Thornton Hough, Raby and Brimstage.

The first secretary of the Society, Joan Royden, is generally credited as its founder. She was the daughter of Sir Ernest Royden who, in 1928, was responsible for the siting of ‘Hill Bark’ at Frankby.

Illustration by Leonard Barnish, used as an early recruitment poster by the Society.

There were three main groups which the Wirral Society had to bring together: landowners, local authorities, and the general public. The Society also wished to involve interested amenity groups such as the Bromborough Society and the Hewall Society.

The Society’s first ‘Cautionary Guide’ was issued in 1933 and this understandably reflected concern with the effects of indiscriminate building. The early minutes of the pre-1947 committee are sadly missing, but it is possible to piece together some of the issues that must have occupied the meetings in the 1930’s.

The Local Government Acts of 1888 and 1894 provided the basic system of local government that remained until reorganisation in 1974, based on county or county borough councils, urban and rural district councils. In 1922 an advisory committee prepared a regional plan for Wirral and in 1926 their aims were outlined in a Joint Town Planning Commission. However the scheme to restrict building to a few centres and preserve a large amount of agricultural land did not materialise.

In April 1933 there was the alteration of local boundaries and Birkenshead and Wallasey County Borough, together with other authorities like Bebington Urban District, took much of what was previously Wirral Rural District.

**Maurice Brown, a current Vice-President of the Society, is also its longest-serving member.**
As an example of local authority planning, Birketon Urban District embraced much of the ‘pleasant’ rural land in Wirral but the Council’s schemes did not allow for centralisation of shopping and business centres. In 1931 there were plans to reduce the amount of Council-maintained open land by 35%.

There is a good reason for the apparent indifference of local authorities to rural preservation in the 1930s, and indeed later. Agricultural land yields no rates. Neither does council maintained open space. Therefore any authority with a large amount of undeveloped land would actively encourage building developers in order to gain rateable value. There was, then, a conflict between the authorities’ role as planner and that of a rate collector.

In 1934 there was another important development; the Mersey Tunnel opened to road traffic the potential markets and recreation of Wirral. The Port of Liverpool had given rise to a dependent population radiating in a semi-circle from its hinterland. The Tunnel effectively completed this circle and opened up the possibility of easier access, a process started in no small way with the arrival of a regular steam ferry on the Mersey (1827) and the railway under the river (1888).

Once again there was a dichotomy — the need to provide homes for a more mobile population, and the need to provide and preserve recreational facilities for the resident and visitor.

In 1939 War was declared and this put a temporary halt to Wirral Society activities. In 1945 there were to be a completely new set of problems and, in the light of post-war reconstruction, a unique opportunity in planning presented itself.

Although to a casual observer in 1950 the Wirral landscape was not markedly different than that of 1920, there was a greater delineation in the earlier period of both town and countryside. Gradually, however, with the improvements in both public and personal transport building took place along road networks rather than in villages. There was a migration of townfolk to hitherto inaccessible ‘rural’ areas, and the attendant supply of sewerage and water. These basic services were provided by the local councils who — as in the case of Wallasey and Birkenhead — extended their boundaries to include ‘open’ stretches of countryside.

With increased mobility of population came suburbanisation and a gradual decline of the urban centres. In the 1920s, however, and even thirty years later, it was still possible to walk out of Birkenhead across the ‘Flat lanes’ to Arrowe Park. During this period cycling and rambling were popular leisure pursuits in Wirral, reflected in the large number of tea rooms offering refreshment to the traveller at this time.

The rambling guides of Andrew Blair were very popular in the 1920s and his description of walks, in 1922, contrast vividly with what would be found today over the same route. He describes, for example, a walk from Birkenhead to Woodchurch.

‘Starting at Upton Road, we notice, as we proceed, that the country close by is rapidly being given over to the builder. One side of the road, however, retains its wild aspect, and the bramble and fern still find room to live. Soon after passing ‘Rocklands’ (a large red-brick house), we turn down a sandy lane on the left . . . There are some bushes on either side of this pretty byway, and in front we obtain an extensive view of flat country . . .’
Chapter 3
THE POST-WAR YEARS
Rod Tann

"No, all is not yet lost. There have been changes, enormous changes, but Wirral's popularity as a place in which to live is undiminished. It has a character of its own; it has an identity of its own. It remains a place apart."

(Alan Brock, 1980)

The post-war period witnessed the greatest period of growth and redevelopment in Wirral, and was to pose the greatest threat to the identity of the peninsula. There were a large number of new developments and their size usually demanded the use of previously undeveloped open land.

There are many examples that can be used to illustrate this situation. During the period 1945-1974 it is estimated that some 60,000 houses were built in Wirral; substantial housing estates were built at Ford, Leasowe, Overchurch, Woodchurch and Poulton. There was also the expansion of industrial activity, with the establishment of industrial estates on the east side of the peninsula. The construction of major roads such as the Rock Ferry by-pases and, more especially, the M53 motorway, and the introduction of 400 kVA ‘Supergrid’ electricity pylons had a major effect on the Wirral landscape.

The pressure on open land in the post-war years served to highlight the continuing need for improving Town and Country Planning Systems. This need was recognised by successive Governments over the period, and resulted in a series of significant improvements to the system.

The major Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 made nearly all new developments subject to planning permission and established the principle of ‘zoning’ developments. It also incorporated the much-needed ‘listing’ of those buildings of special architectural or historic interest, and identified valuable trees by ‘Tree Preservation Orders’.

There were other important measures such as the introduction in 1955 of the principle of keeping communities separated by a ‘Green Belt’ of open land. In the following decade, the Civic Amenities Act of 1968 incorporated the idea of areas of historic interest known as ‘Conservation Areas’.

These and other measures gave the Local Authorities valuable additional powers to prevent total urbanisation of the peninsula. The Wirral Society, and other amenity groups, became heavily dependent on the planning system and were keen to ensure the responsiveness of the Local Authorities in adopting and correctly interpreting their planning responsibilities.

The recognition of the need to plan both country-wide and locally at the same time, has undoubtedly been to Wirral’s benefit. For example, the Society very much supported the conclusions of Merseyside County Council’s Structure Plan (1981) which recognised that pressures for development in North Wirral were too great. A tightly drawn Green Belt was one result, and development was encouraged on the north side of the Mersey.

Although South Wirral has had a provisional Green Belt since 1961 it has yet to receive formal approval. Although the outline has been broadly adhered to, there have been some efforts by the local council to release open land for industrial development.

Prior to local government re-organisation in 1974, the Society dealt with Cheshire County Council, and its Municipal Borough of Bebington and five Urban District Councils, together with the independent County Boroughs of Birkenhead and Wallasey.
As a predominately rural county, the Cheshire Authority’s attitude was generally in sympathy with much of what the Society was trying to achieve. However, there were exceptions. Shortly before re-organisation in 1974, the Merseyside Area Land Use Transportation Study (MALTS) was set up by Cheshire County Council to examine future development needs in North Wirral. The survey proposed a massive growth in the Greasby/Saughall Massie area which would have changed the area out of all recognition.

The urban-orientated boroughs such as Birkenhead, had been consistent over these years in their lack of concern for environmental matters. It was not surprising, therefore, that its Council refused to designate any of its open land as Green Belt but instead used it for building public and private overspill housing estates.

The 1974 re-organisation introduced a simpler administrative structure with fewer Authorities in Wirral. In North Wirral, the Strategic Planning Authority was the Merseyside County Council with Wirral Borough Council as the District Planning Authority. In South Wirral, Cheshire County Council continued as the Strategic Planning Authority with Ellesmere Port and Neston Borough Council, and Chester, being the District Planning Authorities.

During the post-war years the Society was aided not only by the streamlining of the official planning structure, but by increased public interest in the environment. This was, to some extent, a reaction to the changes within society in the sixties and seventies. For many, the dissolution of old values and standards undermined the one secure thread in their lives — the environmental heritage.

It is unfortunately not possible in a booklet of this size to include a reference to the many issues over which the Society has been active during this period. Some issues stand out, however, either because of their particular importance or their special interest to the Society.
Bidston Village was once a quiet backwater of rural life. It was engulfed by a post-war housing estate (courtesy, Birkenhead Reference Library Collections).

BIDSTON VILLAGE

The Society has had a continuing involvement with this important Wirral village. The loss of the land around the village in the late-1960s changed both its character and its attractiveness to existing residents and prospective purchasers of empty properties.

The designation of Bidston Village as a Conservation Area in 1971 provided some incentive for constructive thought and activity. An Advisory Committee was established with whom the Society has a direct link.
The Lilacs in 1980 prior to auction (courtesy, Birkenhead Reference Library Collection) and after restoration, in 1988.

The problems which affected the 'Lilacs' and the adjoining tithe barn provide a good example of difficulties experienced in the village. Despite being a Grade 2 Listed Building, eight years elapsed between this attractive house being vacated and a new owner being found who was able and willing to restore the building.
"The Old Red Lion", Willaston in the 1920s (courtesy, Birkenhead Reference Library Collection) and in 1988.

THE 'OLD RED LION', WILLASTON

The 'Old Red Lion' public house dates from 1635 and forms an important part of Willaston's historic centre. In 1988 the brewery company which owned the building applied for permission to demolish it and construct a new public house on the site.

The Society argued vigorously that this Listed Buildings Consent should be refused particularly in view of the few examples of timber-framed buildings in Wirral. This was successful and the building, although somewhat altered, still stands.
Throughout the period the Society concerned itself with various aspects of Wirral’s ecology. It attached particular importance to the contribution of trees to the Wirral landscape.

Many fine trees have been lost due to old age, pollution, gales, development, and disease. In the 1990s the Society encouraged surveys by local councils with the aim of seeing the many trees as possible benefit from a Tree Preservation Order. It was also noticed that many trees in Wirral’s lanes were of a great age and no efforts were being made to replant.

An appeal was therefore made to the public, especially landowners, to plant for the future and the Society regularly planted trees at sites such as Mount Road, Claerwenbridge, the Chester High Road, Barrasen Road and the Wirral Way.

Trees in the Landscape

Pine woods at Stretton (above) and Burton Woods, (courtesy, Birkenhead Reference Library Collection).
Proposed crossing over the Dee linking Burton and Flint – alternative suggestions included a crossing between Greenfield, in Flintshire, and Gayton, and one scheme allowing for both crossing routes.
DEE CROSSING

This map shows the proposal in 1972 to construct a combined water storage area and major road crossing across the Dee Estuary. The Society took a leading part in opposing these plans which, if completed, would have produced an eight lane elevated road coming ashore at Burton Point and resulted in two further motorways being built in Wirral's small-scale landscape. The major ecological effect on the Estuary would also have been extremely damaging.

The Wirral Society is represented on the active Dee Estuary Conservation Group which aims to promote and protect the area which has been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

BURTON VILLAGE

The village of Burton and its environs were given much attention by the Society during this period. In 1960, the Society took a leading role in pressing for the removal of numerous overhead lines and cables in the village as it was thought they could be accommodated in the planned new sewerage system. In January 1962, MANWEB and the General Post Office announced they had agreed a scheme and this was carried out the following year.

In 1967 the Cheshire County Council asked the Society for its support in opposing an application to construct 48 Broiler Chicken houses for intensive rearing activity. This had already received an approval from Neston UDC. The proposal could have involved the use of some 600 acres of farmland near Burton Village. The Society suggested that alternative sites further away from residential areas might be more suitable. The application was, however, rejected and not re-submitted.
Stanhope House, Bromborough (courtesy, Birkenhead Reference Library Collection).

Another building of historic importance in Wirral, is Stanhope House. Built in 1693, it was also under threat of demolition in the early 1960's. Much effort was made by the Society to prevent its loss. The generosity of the late Raymond Richards of Gawsworth Hall enabled the necessary restoration work to be carried out. Following the removal of the temporary library building from the grounds, Stanhope House was sold and is now in use as offices.

Willaston Mill.

The mill was built in 1800 and was used until 1885 when a gale blew its sails off. The mill became derelict and was threatened with demolition. The Society — through public subscription — purchased the building in 1938 for £400 and it was subsequently sold to a private buyer for conversion to a dwelling.
LITTER

In 1963 the Society made its first approach to local schools in an effort to make school children more aware of their responsibilities. Further efforts were made to involve the Brownies and Cubs in litter-clearing activity. In 1975, with the assistance of Wirral Borough Council, a major clean-up of several Wirral commons was undertaken which produced some 60 sacks of litter.

More recently, the Society has taken advantage of an excellent scheme being run by Wirral Council for increasing the number of litter bins in the Borough. The Society chose and purchased some six bins which were then ordered and installed by the Council. The locations were chosen by the Society and they are now maintained and serviced by that Council.

The problem of litter is one that can be tackled on one's doorstep, resulting in an immediate improvement to the environment.
KEY: ROUTE OF THE EXISTING WIRRAL WAY \_\_\_\_\_
ROUTE OF THE WIRRAL RING AND URBAN LOOP
PROPOSED BY THE WIRRAL SOCIETY \_\_\_\_\_
ROUTE OF RIVER WALK OF M.I.C. DEVELOPMENT \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

‘The Wirral Ring’ – plan for a leisure trail.
Chapter 4
WIRRAL TODAY AND THE FUTURE

Keith Davidson

"Remoteness, of course, has gone but seemly human use can take its place, a sort of enlightened sophistication. Many of the mistakes are due to ignorance – that lack of knowledge of what is due to the country which... is the legacy of the industrial revolution and the subsequent years of Victorian prosperity."

(Patrick Abercrombie, 1939)

In the past fifteen years Wirral has been subject to an onslaught of speculative building development which has threatened its character to a considerable extent. There is a real possibility that well defined villages will become lost in the general urban sprawl. In this respect the threat to rural Wirral is no less significant than in 1928.

There has been a tendency recently for Councils to seek development of Green Belt land for industrial purposes. In these cases the Council owned the land and therefore the profits to them would be considerable. The Wirral Society accepts, of course, that industry creates jobs but there are excellent sites in the urban and dockland areas of Wirral. This would enable open land to remain open for leisure and recreation purposes.

We all refer to Councils as 'they'. The Public says, 'What are they doing here?' when they see examples of change. We must all remember that the Councils are US. We should be saying, 'What are WE doing here?' It is past the time when the Public can leave the responsibility for the pattern of development in Wirral solely to the Council of elected responsibilities. The Councillors of Wirral work hard but their duties cover a very wide range and there are all types of priorities for them to deal with. The Finance Committees of Councils have a commitment to meet and naturally, if they find that the Council owns potentially valuable land, it is their duty to realise upon it.

If we, the Public of Wirral, wish the Councils to act in a particular way we must become more vociferous to enable them to understand our wishes. The Councils need guidance as they are our representatives. If we are to succeed in protecting the character of Wirral, and we must succeed, it is essential that all the separate areas of Wirral should form groups of interested and forward-looking people to promote and formulate policies which they would wish to become the basis for their own neighbourhood.

There are many amenity groups to the West of Wirral, in the more rural areas, but very few such groups within the urban areas.

Unless Wirral is to be covered in development within the next 20 years, it is most important that the regeneration of the urban areas takes place. Factories and firms are now avidly seeking green-field sites to the detriment of the character of Wirral, yet there are excellent sites within the derelict and tatty urban areas which, if cleared and improved, would be far better, not only from the point of view of the user but for all of us.

The Wirral Society is firmly committed to the policy of Urban Regeneration. In the short term, clearance and improvement will produce employment for the unskilled and semi-skilled. In the long-term, the regeneration of the urban areas will produce an enormous number of jobs in all trades and in all levels of skill. It would become self-funding after a time as the very process of urban regeneration would, of itself, create wealth.

It is not possible for either the Wirral Society or the Town Planners to set a policy, even when it has the full support of Prince Charles, of Urban Regeneration and then to expect the vast majority of those looking for new homes to abide by it and to seek homes in the centre of Birkenhead or other urban centres.
A TYPICAL PLAN OF URBAN TERRACED HOUSES - A HIGH DENSITY AND SOULLESS AREA OF DRAB STREETS FAR FROM NATURE, WHERE THE OWNERS OR TENANTS VALIANTLY ATTEMPT TO CULTIVATE SMALL GARDENS OF ACIDIC SOIL.
Before Urban Regeneration can take place it is necessary for these existing urban centres to become so desirable as dwelling places that they become automatic targets for the seekers of new homes.

The majority of the working population work in centralised areas, whether they be in cities or factories. People are gregarious and also naturally wish their lives to be as simple as possible. Travel distances are very important factors to us all in the choice of our place of dwelling and often they are the most important, whether it be for the priority of proximity to schools, shops, or to places of employment. This was the very reason why urban centres developed when the importance of agricultural work lessened and as industrial and commercial work increased. Such centres gave the maximum amenity related to the greatest proximity.

Essentially, this fact still obtains and will be the commonsense key to ensure that the future of the Wirral Peninsula is guarded and cherished for future generations.

The advent of the motor car enabled people to travel easily to the countryside and for the first time country dwelling and urban working became possible. The urban centres became less desirable in that they were more suitable to those families without car transport and thus decay set in. The trend continued and increased. Property values in these areas of maximum amenity and greatest proximity lowered. The factors of lowered value and restrictive space increased vandalism and the spiral continued.

If this tendency is allowed to continue Wirral will eventually become an urban sprawl. The character of its many villages, already under threat, will become submerged in a flurry of speculative development. The attraction of Wirral will have gone.

How, then, can the trend of opinion be changed? Certainly it is not going to happen within only a year or two as it has taken over 75 years to reach the present state. It will not be changed by any one group, even a group as powerful as the two Councils which preside over Wirral although they will no doubt be in the vanguard of the thrust.

The mind of change must start as a result of a change in the thinking of the Public which will automatically affect the policy of all the Public Bodies.

The most important aspect of such a change will be, firstly, the regeneration of urban and community pride. Such pride, in a corporate sense, is sadly lacking in the urban areas. Some readers will no doubt object to my comment but it is proven by the failure of the majority of the urban areas of Wirral to form Amenity Groups.

The Wirral Society acts throughout Wirral and is pleased to be closely associated with the many Amenity Groups which are affiliated to it. Such groups have been formed largely in the West Wirral or Dee coastal strip. Their policy is mainly of a protectionist nature and it is largely due to their formation and the excellent relationships which they and the Wirral Society enjoy with the Town Planning Departments of the two Wirral Councils, that the rural and coastal areas of Wirral have been able to largely retain their characters against the onslaught of speculative development of both industry and nature.

The Wirral Society is very aware that such groups do not exist in a large number of the urban regions and, in its Diamond Jubilee year and after, intends to actively promote the formation of Amenity Change Groups where they do not exist.

A most important first item in the regeneration of urban pride is litter. The Wirral Society is constantly promoting anti-litter measures and, in addition to the issue of annual prizes for amenity work in two boys schools and two girls schools so far, it has an ongoing policy of the purchase of litter bins in consultation with Wirral Borough Council. The formation of Amenity Change Groups in the urban areas could be of tremendous importance in the Anti-Litter Campaign.

Once the population in the urban areas realise that they are able to be directly involved in the improvement of their neighbourhood then, much as the existing more rural Amenity Groups have experienced, there will be an upward surge of interest. Such interest, however, should be far more dynamic than those Amenity Groups whose main concern is protectionism.

The Amenity Change Groups will be involved in the creation of beauty and interest. They will be involved in the improvement of whole areas of the urban scene and this will involve not the protection of, for example, existing house values but the more exciting increase of them. The motivation, therefore, of the Amenity Change Groups will be far greater and, for those who will take the trouble to be involved, the next ten years will be very exciting with the potential of great achievement.
Typical existing urban Wirral shopping street
where traffic and shoppers have to mix.

Each of Wirral's urban villages should have its own shopping precinct
and square as a meeting place with activities for senior citizens and
youth nearby to promote a spirit of community and identity.
THE PROPOSED WIRRAL RING SHOULD CUT A SWathe OF GREEN THROUGH URBAN WIRRAL.

THE WIRRAL RING SHOULD OPEN DOCKLAND AND RIVER SCENES TO THE PUBLIC OF WIRRAL.
How, then, will the Amenity Change Groups operate? The Wirral Society believes that progress will be made in the early stages as follows:

(a) The creation of greater Public and Council awareness of the problem and the aims.

(b) The formation of a number of Amenity Change Groups within the urban areas to enable the individual character of the different urban areas to be recognised and promoted. The problems, for example, of Claughton are completely different from those of Irby.

(c) The formation by each Amenity Change Group of an early 'Master Plan' for their district in consultation with the Town Planning Department and other Departments of the Council. It is hoped that Councillors will become actively engaged in the group formations.

(d) The promotion of street and district improvement schemes with the owners of houses participating with private and public sector involvement. This would involve, in essence, the improvement of existing housing streets — possibly involving the demolition of some houses to avoid the corridor effect which some streets suffer to enable the formation of planted gardens and play areas. When an area is subject to a potential increase in housing and building value, many changes and improvements become possible.

Some of the methods by which improvement of the urban areas can be achieved are:

(1) The improvement of many of the streets of terraced houses which have a tunnel effect of boredom.

(2) The change of the monotony of paving by the introduction of more varied types, colours and shapes.

(3) The interruption of urban areas by the establishment of copses of trees and planting, in conjunction with small parking areas for local housing.

(4) The establishment of good sheltered housing for the single aged with flexible units of accommodation to release existing housing for young married people and families.

(5) The establishment of local shopping areas instead of existing ribbon shops along a main road to enable them to become areas for social meeting and discourse in addition to shopping. The conversion of existing shops back into homes where suitable.

(6) The improvement and clearance of local 'eyesores' under the threat of Compulsory Purchase Orders.

(7) The establishment of interesting and changeable advertisement sites only near to the shopping areas.

(8) The promotion of linked Nature Trails through the urban areas to link into the existing parks, the new copses, and with other trails to different neighbourhoods, to provide the urban dweller with the ability to enjoy a taste of the countryside.

Urban Wirral has some excellent parks but they are only accessible after a long urban walk or a specified journey with intent. It should be possible for the urban dweller to wander. It must be remembered that such nature trails were hardly possible before the advent of the Clean Air Act but we are now able to achieve a genuine feel of nature within urban areas.

The Wirral Society has been thinking of a linked nature trail for some time, and we have been delighted to notice recently that both the Merseyside Development Corporation and the Leisure Services Department of Wirral Borough Council have been carrying out excellent work in the promotion of a Riverside Walk and Heritage Trail.

(9) The promotion of separate cycle tracks at the side of the nature trails. Such trails would be equipped with specially marked crossings at intersections with roads. Where possible, the minor roads would be cut by the trails.

(10) The nature trails would also link into the Dock areas and the Wirral Way. We have all heard of the Ring of Kerry — we should aim towards a Ring of Wirral but of a pedestrian nature.

(11) The introduction of good English design into all that is done, together with a strong degree of robustness. Design and strong not weak character. Design that is of good taste but not antiseptic. Design that is not produced by the untrained, nor reflective of Accountancy-orientated economy.
If the urban areas are to be regenerated they must become so different from that which they are now. People must be able to walk through the pilot schemes with a feeling of awe that such a dramatic change could be possible. Government will need to help. Local Authority will need to help. The main reason, though, behind the changes will be the potential increase in property value for the individual. Only then will Wirral’s character be saved whereby its existing urban areas are truly urban and thriving and where all the population will be able to enjoy the Green Belt and rural areas for leisure pursuits.

Prominent in the refurbishment of the urban areas must be schemes to look after the aged and infirm and, at the other end of the scale, the Youth — the future citizens to whom our planning will be dedicated. It is not surprising that some of our young people have problems if they are urban and unemployed. They must be absorbed into the schemes as much as possible. Their interest must be caught and held, especially so as the regeneration is likely to take 20 years or more.

Once started, Urban Regeneration will become self-generative. Property values will increase, jobs will be created, more firms will establish themselves and seek employment from the urban population, restaurants and service units will open and the whole cycle of an urban spiral with all its benefits will gather momentum.

*Gateway to the countryside, near Storeton Woods. Wirral still retains areas of country lane and sandstone waling, both making an important contribution to the local scene.*
Dowspool Farm, Thurston. An application to develop unused farm buildings for residential use was refused by Werval Borough Council. The land is both within the Green Belt and subject to Special Planning Control in view of its special landscape value. The Society endeavours to make constructive comments regarding planning applications and is particularly concerned that old buildings find new uses rather than remain redundant. In the case of Dowspool Farm, however, the Society felt that the proposed development would be detrimental to the interests of the farmland.
PUBLICATIONS BY THE WIRRAL SOCIETY

1933  Wirral Countryside — A Cautionary Guide (reprinted, 1936)
1979  Wirral — Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow
Open space, old trees, old buildings — these and other aspects of the local environment can easily be taken for granted. The Wirral Society has been actively involved in the preservation and improvement of our local heritage since the 1930's, providing the necessary forum for debate and the campaigning spirit that has influenced successive local authorities.

This booklet traces the development of one of Wirral’s most respected amenity groups, from its beginnings in 1928 to its work in the 1980’s and beyond.

The first two chapters describe the workings of the Society and the formative years. There is a chapter on the Society in the post-war period while Keith Davidson’s chapter on contemporary Wirral is as incisive and inspiring as Patrick Abercrombie’s polemic in the 1933 ‘Cautionary Guide’.

While the booklet details the 'achievements' of the Society, there is no room for complacency. The threat to Green Belt and open countryside is no less poignant in 1988 than it was in the 1930’s. Although the local planning structure is more able to cope with the machinations of builders and developers, the vacillating policies emanating from central government may still threaten our portion of England’s ‘green and pleasant land’.

This booklet will serve as a timely reminder, both of what has been achieved in Wirral in terms of conservation and what could be secured for Wirral in terms of regeneration, in the future.