

Parkgate Society

Newsletter 44

Spring 1993

President	JR Cochrane CBE	Secretary	AM Clarke
Chairman	GW Place	Treasurer	SC Edwards
Vice-chairman	MS Potts		

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

(8 pm - Parkgate Hotel unless otherwise stated)

Monday, 8th February
An Introduction to Pub Signs
A talk by Paul Stoner.

Monday, 15th March
Cheshire Countryside Rangers
A tour around the Cheshire countryside with our local ranger, Bernie McLinden.

Saturday, 17th April
Join the countryside rangers with their **Marsh Clearance** at the Old Quay Public House from 9.30 am onwards.

Monday, 19th April
Travel on **Ellan Vannin, Isle of Man** - Glyn Parry looks at forms of transportation on the island.

Monday, 24th May
Cycling from Victoria Station, London to Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe
An illustrated talk by a local lad, Chris Lee and his wife, Gilly on their fascinating journey.

If you need transport to reach our meetings, ring Mrs.A.M. Clarke (336 1069).

Guided Walks (approx. 2 miles) - Led by Geoffrey Place - open to everyone. Waterproof footwear recommended. (The Society's contribution to the 1993 Cheshire Year of Culture).

Wednesday, 16th June, 7 pm - meet at car park, Old Quay Public House.
Boundaries of Neston Park.

Wednesday, 23rd June, 7 pm - meet at car park, Old Quay Public House. **Chester's New Haven** - visit site of Neston Quay and return along edge of bird reserve.

Wednesday, 30th June, 7 pm - meet at Old Baths car park. **Bathers, birds and trains.** Follow Wirral Country Park to site of old Parkgate station and return through village.

Membership: The subscription remains at:

£3 Single or family
£1.50 Senior Citizen

Mrs. Valerie Place will be pleased to receive your subscriptions at our meetings or at her home (Pendmore, Station Road, Parkgate). This represents excellent value for money. Please spread the word to friends and neighbours and encourage them to attend our interesting and varied meetings.

THE PARKGATE BATHING CHARITY (by Geoffrey Place)

You may remember that this charity was set up in 1790 for the benefit of invalids who would benefit from the sea air at Parkgate but could not afford to stay here. Summer visitors who paid their subscription at the Assembly Room were invited to pay a further shilling towards the charity. By 1835 the trustees were running short of money and approached the Chester Royal Infirmary, who began paying a subscription so that their own patients could convalesce in Parkgate.

In 1881 the capital of the charity was merged with funds found by the hospital to buy a house in Parkgate and use it as a convalescent home. The house, on the site now occupied by Deeside Court on the Parade, was used as a Red Cross hospital during the First World War, and you may remember that recently a commemorative brooch, probably given to the nurses at that hospital, was recently described in this Newsletter.

In 1923 the house was sold, and by agreement with the Charity Commissioners the proceeds were then used to support patients of the Chester Royal Infirmary in their convalescence, though no longer at Parkgate. The news that the Chester Royal Infirmary is due to close next year has prompted us to enquire what would happen to the Parkgate Fund. Here is the answer.

After schemes agreed by the Charity Commissioners in 1927 and 1938, part of the funds were vested in the Health Authority when the National Health Service was established in 1948. This money is now a part of the charitable funds administered by Chester and Halton Community NHS Trust.

Part of the Parkgate Fund remains an independent charity with trustees drawn from Chester and the nearby local authorities. In 1956 the Charity Commission decreed that the fund should be used for the benefit of convalescent patients who have been discharged from Chester hospitals. Powers have been agreed that the funds may be transferred to the Chester Health Authority, and therefore the closure of the Chester Royal Infirmary will not materially affect the present use of Parkgate's ancient Sea Bathing Charity.

PARKGATE BATHS (by Anne Williamson)

Rows and rows of little black Austins, Fords and Morrises crowded into the fields around the Bath House. Sixty years ago the people thronged to the Parkgate Baths. What better thing to do on a summer's day but sunbathe by the pool side, take a salt water dip, then warm up with a hot cup of Bath House tea. So popular was Grenfell's large, open-air swimming pool that several years on, a second pool was constructed alongside the first. The two pools flourished for a decade longer before the ceaseless siltation of the estuary gradually choked the supply of water. By 1942 the Baths had died.

Then followed a period of fascination with the decaying relics. The two pools lay there derelict, still and semi-filled with a green soupy slurry of stagnant water. Children fashioned rafts from planks torn down from the changing rooms. It became a somewhat

hideous and dangerous adventure playground. My early memories of the Baths in their 1950s dereliction was sharpened by the excitement of the place through a child's eyes.

When was it eventually filled in and made safe? That I do not know, but I can remember sneering at the proposal to re-sculpture and plant the area as a park. How boring our whole family thought! Who will want to sit among flower beds in this windswept isolated spot? But the late sixties brought this park to fruition. Not a "flower bed park" but the linear 12 mile Wirral Country Park, the first of many country parks recognised by the Countryside Commission for England and Wales.

The retaining walls of the baths remain to this day to provide some shelter from the estuary winds. Now the car park is used as a base for walkers, picnickers and nature lovers. What is there hereabouts for walkers to admire? Sometimes peace and tranquility, sometimes wild flowers and butterflies, sometimes a clear sky and expansive views and always countryside, birds and the uninterrupted marsh.

A short walk up to the Wirral Way leads to Backwood Hall Bridge on which the tiny fern, wall-rue grows. From the bridge you can see the early lodge to Backwood Hall and in the distance the beautiful Hall itself, the central portion of which dates back to Charles II. The original house of reddish 17th Century brick was owned by the famous Glegg family, but major extensions to provide the East and West wings were carried out in the mid-19th Century by another famous owner, Sir William Rathbone, a Lord Mayor of Liverpool. In the 1920s (the early years of the Baths) the Parrington family from Yorkshire bought the Hall and over the years became wellknown as breeders of pedigree Dairy Shorthorn cattle. Their herd carried off most of the major trophies and Ronald Parrington became a respected judge of show cattle. The Shorthorns and the Parringtons left the Hall in the 1970s.

Not far along the Wirral Way there are rare flowers to look out for, including wild fennel (do not pick it). Common wild flowers, beautiful in summer, include the blue harebells, speedwells and forget-me-nots, the yellows of ragwort and trefoils and the purples of rose-bay willow-herb and hemp agrimony. There are masses of blackberries, raspberries and scented honeysuckles. But I have strayed too far from Parkgate Baths.

Walking back down the slope from Backwood Hall Bridge the marsh stretches away before you, on autumnal days tinged purple with the flowers of sea aster. Acres and acres of marsh (5040 acres of which form the RSPB's Gayton Sands Nature Reserve), a feeding table of worms and shells, rodents and seeds. The magnificent herons, the plovers, the waders such as oystercatchers, curlew and redshank, and the ducks such as pintail, shelduck, teal and mallard, all come to the marsh and muddy channels to feed.

Once more back at the Baths car park where rows and rows of brightly coloured Volvos, Peugeotts and Hondas, etc. crowd into every space available. People wait for the high tide that flushes out the rodents and the birds, the high tide that fills the Baths not with water, but with bird-watchers hoping for a glimpse of a huge short-eared owl, a merlin, a hen harrier or a secretive water rail. Come to think of it, what better thing to do on an autumnal day in the 1990s but wrap up warm, take out the bird book and warm up with a nice flask of hot tea in Parkgate Baths!

PUBLICATIONS

An interesting series of colourful information leaflets has been produced by the borough council which includes walks around Parkgate, Rivacre Valley, Neston, The Boat Museum canal walk and Whitby Park in Ellesmere Port. They are free from libraries and tourist centres.

"The Funny Side of Wirral" by Bill Stott, is a book of cartoons like the example included in this newsletter. The original drawings are selling at £10 each, the proceeds going to the Children in Need Appeal - tel. 608 3812.

Our own publication "This is Parkgate" is now in its second print bearing on its cover a beautiful scene of Parkgate especially commissioned from David Scott. Priced at £1.65 it is compulsive reading for any Parkgate resident and ideal as a present for friends and relatives. Available at our meetings and local shops this book is a mine of information. Mr. Scott has a limited edition of framed prints for sale.

ROUND-UP OF RECENT MEETINGS

Our *Charity Antiques evening* held in September was an excellent event. Kevin Whay proved to be a thoroughly entertaining speaker and a number of items of china and jewellery were brought in for public valuation. We are very grateful to the Parkgate Hotel for their generous provision of the room and refreshments. A cheque for £300, proceeds of the special charge made for this meeting, has been sent to St. John's Hospice. The photographic quiz provided by Mr. Boston and items from our historical display were on view in Neston library during October.

We had a good turn out for our *tour of Ince, Thornton-le-Moors and Stoak* led by Pat O'Brien in October. He provided an insight into the old Manor House at

Ince and it was distressing to see the present state of the buildings. It was ironical to see a plaque bearing the inscription 'European Architectural Year 1975' attached to the crumbling Manor. Thornton-le-Moors church contained a number of hatchments of local well-to-do families, a lovely church contrasting starkly with the neighbouring massive chemical complex.

Our final stop was the church at Stoak, where Nelson Burt, one time resident of Parkgate (cf. "This is Parkgate") is buried.

Although a cold day, Mr. O'Brien kept us entertained every step of the way. He has an infinite number of stories to tell - of which we hope to hear more on a future occasion.

At the October **AGM** our treasurer, summarised the Society's financial affairs. Our current balance is a healthy £4,794. Any suggestions as to how this money might be used to good effect, should be made known to any of the Committee. The entire Committee were re-elected. Geoffrey Place spoke on matters of current concern to the Society, including the future of Balcony House which has recently come up for sale. The Society have contacted The Landmark Trust and Chester Historic Buildings Trust to seek ways to restore the building, but with no joy. (See Geoffrey's article "Balcony House").

After the AGM, Dr. John Cox spoke about *Leahurst*, the University of Liverpool Veterinary Field Station on Chester High Road. The talk opened our eyes to the pioneering work going on, on our doorstep, in the training of veterinarians. We were shown the intricacies of operating on horses and cattle, and told something of the history of veterinary science.

Frank Latham spoke at the November meeting about his experience of **publishing village local histories**.

BALCONY HOUSE (by Geoffrey Place)

This building has been so neglected over the past thirty years that it seems unlikely that it can be saved. If it has to be demolished, the Borough Council will insist that any new building will look substantially the same, on the Parade elevation, as the present house.

We do not know exactly when Balcony House was built. The Assembly Room at the back was first mentioned, as a Billiard House, in 1782, although it had probably been there for some years before that and there is some evidence that it may have been built between 1763 and 1772.

The Billiard House was very successful, judging by its rent which was raised from 5/6 a year in 1782, in stages to £25 a year in 1804. The master of the billiard room in 1801 was George Harrison, who married Widow Grimes, the head bathing woman. He was described as "a most lively and eccentric character" when he died in 1814.

The Billiard House was also known as the Assembly Room from at least 1808. In that year a public ball was held there in aid of British prisoners of war held by the French. The only mention of regular assemblies so far traced is in 1817, when it was advertised that "Parkgate Card and Dance Assemblies will commence on Thursday, 13th July, and will continue once a fortnight". At one time there was a library in one of the halves of Balcony House and the other half was a lodging house.

In 1846, three years before he sold the whole village, Edward Lloyd Mostyn "placed a splendid billiard table in the old Assembly Room". The room was occasionally recorded as being used for public occasions; in 1856 Mr. Macauley of Chester booked it for a series of scientific lectures.

Although we do not know when the house was built, we do know when its famous balcony was fitted. The Local Board passed the plans for the balcony in May 1868, and the plans were signed by a Birkenhead architect, William Lowesborough. The balcony is the one part of the present house which is likely to be retained.

The owners would like to sell the site with planning permission to rebuild the house as six flats.

PLANNING APPLICATIONS - Recent plans looked at include:

Mostyn House School, new classroom and covered play area - decision pending.

Land adjacent to **Brockleigh**, renewal of permission for detached house - approved.

Spring Cottage, extension to rear - decision pending.

Temporary catering outlet at **Old Baths** site - plans withdrawn.

Old Quay, play area and bin store screen - refused.

"A MISSIONARY ZEAL FOR RAG RUGS AND RUSKIN" (by Shirley Britt)

As a crafts enthusiast, the words "rag rugs" caught my attention as the somewhat unexpected heading of an obituary which appeared in a national newspaper*. Rhoda Dawson, the rugmaker, had died in March, 1992 at the age of 94. Coincidentally, 1992 marked the centenary of the arrival of Parkgate's most famous son, Sir Wilfred Grenfell, in Labrador where, as a newly qualified doctor, he had been sent by the National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen to report on the social, economic and medical conditions.

Rhoda Dawson was born in Chiswick five years after Grenfell founded his Labrador Mission. Her parents were both distinguished "Arts-and-Crafts" artists and devotees of the social, egalitarian and moral theories of Ruskin and Morris. Having been "brought up to paint from the cradle" it was a natural progression that she should devote her life to art, studying at Hammersmith College of Art and the Royal College of Art before working in interior decoration and then at the Mansard Gallery at Heal's. However, in 1930, after the death of her mother and her father's remarriage, she quite literally re-routed the course of her life, sailing from Tilbury to Newfoundland to work at the Grenfell Mission - and transforming what was to become the legacy of her creative output in the process.

Appalling weather and terrible poverty made life in Newfoundland harsh; survival meant dependence on fishing in summer and hunting in winter. The only contact with the outside world was a fortnightly mailboat.

The Grenfell Mission had established a network of hospitals and nursing stations, as well as schools, orphanages, and various workshop schemes to improve the local economy - very much in the Ruskin tradition. Rhoda's Village Industry department harnessed local skills in the production of handcraft items for which eager buyers waited in America, Canada and England. Rag rugs were an especially successful product. Rhoda's job was to make up rag rug kits for the outworkers, marking out designs in purple pencil on hessian. The figurative designs of schooners, sleighs and hunting scenes and the patterns derived from patchwork quilts were commercially successful but not to Rhoda's liking. She preferred the true primitive varieties which she came across as she travelled in the area. These she added to her personal collection along with those of her own sophisticated designs - equally unacceptable in the market. Her abstract patterns and subdued colours were too refined for popular taste. It was a hard lesson for the artist to accept - sales mattered more than aesthetics. Nevertheless, she remained in Newfoundland for five years finding outlets for her creative gifts in the design and construction of rag rugs and, more conventionally, in watercolour paintings of the country and its people.

Wilfred Grenfell contributed to the rug manufacture. During his travels he collected discarded silk or artificial-silk stockings which, when cut, dyed in bright colours and hooked through the hessian, produced beautiful furnishings. A popular slogan of the time was "When your stocking runs let it run to Labrador".

*The Guardian, Tuesday, 31 March, 1992.

NEWS AND VIEWS

The restaurant, formerly **Chompers**, has caused a stir by changing its colour as part of its refurbishment. The council has asked the proprietor to change the colour but they have refused. The council have no powers to enforce a change of colour. This does seem to make a mockery of the idea of a conservation area, bright yellow and dark green not being the predominant colouration of the village.

The glass from the **bus shelter** was removed by the council in order to discourage groups of local youths from congregating and causing a nuisance. The seat and litter bin have been replaced outside the shelter.

"Spring Cottage" in School Lane is undergoing refurbishment, the side wall having been replaced in order to strengthen the structure.

The Countryside Rangers have done a fine job in refurbishing the Wirral Way signposts and conservation area signs at the entry to Parkgate.

The site surrounding the Bath House continues to look an eyesore with rubbish piling up. The site is awaiting redevelopment.

A pay telescope has been installed at the Boathouse and one is to be placed on the Donkey Stand by a private company.

The Chairman has congratulated the borough council on its very thorough and professional work in compiling the **Local Plan**. It was felt that the Inspector had dealt fairly with all items and that the Green Belt was correctly drawn and so planning proposals for land in Boathouse Lane have been refused.

A number of meetings have been held

during the past year with various members of the council resulting in improvements such as the more frequent emptying of litter bins. The Conservation Officer is preparing an overall plan for the future of The Parade. Items such as shabby pavements, street furniture, traffic calming and general improvements will all be incorporated - in readiness for such time as funds become available for implementing the improvements.

Other matters - The Tandoori restaurant received renovations, the Wirral Way footbridge in Brookland Road was demolished due to its dangerous state and will be replaced when finance is available. A letter of thanks was sent to the council for their show of spring flowers on the Donkey Stand. Unfortunately, later plantings were vandalized. Thanks were also sent to Mrs. Diane Konechi for her lovely show of flowers alongside the Wirral Way at the top of Brookland Road. Local public houses were asked in the summer to take responsibility in collecting any glasses left on the sea wall. A welcome planting of trees was made by the play area in the Ropewalk. The WCs have been repainted and the pill box windows re-opened. A pledge of £50 was made towards the publication of an edition of the Victoria County History of Cheshire.

Snippets

Dog fouling - Dog owners allowing their animals to foul in public places are now to be more severely dealt with by the introduction by the local authority of new bye-laws affecting most public open spaces and all footpaths. Dog owners will have to clear away dog dirt or face prosecution.

Did you know? that it is cheaper not to fix the lights that stay on all day along The

Parade. It appears that the electronic eyes are broken and the electricity charge is the same should they stay on or go off at night. Come the new financial year they might be fixed!

Have you noticed? the new panorama from Parkgate front minus the cooling towers of Connahs Quay power station. This accounts for the bangs around 9.30 a.m. on Sunday, 29th November when the lucky winner of a raffle pressed the button to end the life of this familiar feature.

WHAT'S ON

Burton & S.Wirral Local History Society meets regularly at Gladstone Village Hall, Burton, next meeting 11th Feb. 1993 - 8 pm 'Great Exhibition 1851'.

Local highwater **Bird Watches** take place at the **Old Baths car park:**

Jan.	Mon. 11th	11	- 1.30 pm
Feb.	Mon. 8th	10	- 12 noon
	Tues. 9th	11	- 1 pm
	Wed. 10th	11.30	- 1.30 pm

RAIN..... RAIN..... RAIN

The Ness Gardens weather station has recorded rainfall of about one-third higher than average from July - November, 1992, 15.39" compared with an average of 11.7". However, the year overall is below average due to the dry Spring. 1989-91 were three very dry years.



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Newsletter Editor
Secretary

The Parkgate Society, Spring 1993
Becky Ford - any items for inclusion in the Autumn Newsletter should be passed to a Committee member by 1st June.
Mrs. AM Clarke, Sea View, The Parade, Parkgate.