

Parkgate Society Newsletter Spring 1996

Issue No. 50

DIARY DATES

Monday 5th February 1996

Balcony House - Tom Miller, Head Of Planning Services at the Borough Council, will give the planning background to Balcony House and other Parkgate planning matters.

Monday, 4th March

The Work of the R.S.P.B. - A talk by Colin Wells, our local Royal Society for the Protection of Birds warden, on what's happening 'On the Parkgate Front'.

Monday, 15th April

The work of the Griffin Trust - Christine Thomas talks about Hooton Park and its plans to restore the buildings and surroundings to its former glory.

Sunday, 21st April 10 am

Marsh Clearance - All hands on deck to join the rangers for a Parkgate spring clean. Bring wellies and gloves, and meet at The Old Quay Pub slipway.

Monday, 20th May

The origins of Jazz - Our own Clive Edwards will be telling us how jazz music came about.

SOCIETY INFORMATION

Meetings

Are held at the Parkgate Hotel, commencing at 8pm unless otherwise stated. If you require transport to our meetings, please ring the Society Secretary, Angela Clarke on 336 1069, giving 24 hours notice.

Subscriptions

£4 Family or Single
£2.50 Senior Citizen

Subscription rates have unfortunately been raised for 1996. (See above) Mrs Valerie Place will be pleased to receive your subscriptions at our meetings or at her home (Pendmore, Station Road, Parkgate). We have a full season of events for 1996 and this offers great value for money. Newcomers are always welcome at any of our events free of charge, so get your friends and neighbours to 'give us a try'.

GUIDED WALKS

We will again be running guided walks throughout June as follows:

Wednesday 5th June, THE BOUNDARIES OF NESTON PARK the Medieval deer park which gave Parkgate its name. Meet 7pm at the Old Quay Pub carpark.

Wednesday, 12th June - SHIPS & SMUGGLERS (Chester's New Haven). We will visit the site of Neston 'Key' and return along the edge of the RSPB reserve. Meet 7pm, Old Quay Pub car park.

Wednesday, 19th June - BIRDS, BATHING & RAILWAYS. The north end of the village and back by the Wirral Country Park. Meet 7pm at the Old Baths car park.

All walks will be approximately 2 miles. Geoffrey Place will be our guide. Waterproof footwear recommended. Open to everyone.

NEWS AND VIEWS.....

Plans for Parkgate

A HERITAGE CENTRE

About 10 years ago when it seemed likely that Balcony House might come on the market before long, we convened a meeting to discuss ways of establishing a museum or heritage centre.

The meeting was attended by representatives of the borough council, the county council, the Wirral Country Park, the Civic Trust and the RSPB. It emerged that even if a building and the funds to establish it became available, the subsequent management and running costs were the problem. We could not shoulder these ourselves and nobody would assist us except, tentatively, the RSPB, and they later decided to concentrate on Burton. We also met John Myers, a local architect who de-

signed a heritage centre but lacked a site or sponsor.

The one result of this initiative was that the idea of a heritage centre has been enshrined in the borough council's Local Plan. The idea was revived when the Assembly Room was up for sale but lack of parking and good access, as well as money, put the idea beyond reach.

PARKS FIELD

Brenda Dowding, one of our elected councillors, produced a plan for the landscaping of Parks Field which we endorsed. No money has become available for it, and the funds for such projects were diverted to the children's playground on the Ropewalk, which was a more pressing need.

Here, and on page three, are a few of the Society's proposals, as discussed at meetings in recent years, for the enhancement of the Conservation Area, detailed for us by Geoffrey Place.

LITTER

Our pressure, on the Council and others, on this vexing problem has been unremitting. We have achieved some modest successes and our policy is that continual vigilance is the only feasible response. Since our foundation we have organised annual clean-ups on the marsh as a regular symbol of our concern. This event lapsed for a couple of years when the committee found that only they were present, but with the help of the Ranger service the event has revived. We have paid for several new litter bins of a design approved by us, but more recently have accepted the

Council's choice (the black ones). A problem to the installation of further bins is the narrow width of the pavement. When we have suggested new sites the Council has agreed with us.

Some years ago we asked the Civic Trust for advice on the litter problem. Their response was to reward us with a certificate for our efforts!

After years of discussion we persuaded the Council that the foot of the sea wall lay within their responsibility and we have achieved the best deal for clearance that seems possible under prevailing conditions.

THE ANTI-INVASION FORT

After the Country Park was formed the county council proposed to demolish the fort but, through Peter Moore, we persuaded them that it was part of our history. Recently, the Wirral Country Park management, without warning, sealed all its apertures so that its original appearance was lost. We protested and achieved a compromise: the gun apertures facing the road were opened but the rest left blocked to discourage misuse. In order to give it a practical function we tried to persuade the Bat Group that it would make a winter shelter for bats, but they wanted to hide it under a mound of earth.

Society News

Sadly, Muriel Tinker resigned from the Committee after 13 years of service. Geoffrey described Muriel as 'our eyes & ears' of Parkgate, and she has been responsible for putting together the copies of the Newsletter and getting them to the 'patches', a job not to be taken lightly. Muriel is spending more time in her Craft Guild, and we wish her well.

Two new members have joined the Committee; Anne Williamson, who has lovingly restored the old Backwood Hall Lodge, and Stephen Gordon from rural Wood Lane. We welcome them both.

NEWS AND VIEWS.....CONTINUED

DISCUSSIONS WITH B.C.

Throughout the Society's history we have regularly sought to invite officers of the borough council to meet us to discuss current problems and future plans. The most recent of these have been with:

Mr Tom Miller, Head of Planning, in July 1990 and July 1994.

Mr Gamet, Engineering Services Officer, in January 1990 to discuss street furniture etc.

Norman Stainthorpe, Conservation Officer, in March 1992,

the Borough's Chief Executive, Mr Steven Ewbank, who met us with Mr Phil Bostock, Environmental Officer, and Mr C. Wood (responsible for street cleaning) in November 1991 to discuss the co-ordination and planning operations at Parkgate.

It has been our experience over the years that, if we show a constructive approach, the Borough Council officers are always willing to listen and ready, as funds permit, to help. Their perennial cry is, "If only we had the money".

CAR PARKING AND TRAFFIC

A former borough planning officer, Mr Ward, proposed the creation of two car parks on the marsh at each end of Parkgate. The various (and mostly half-baked) plans for a marina have also tended to suggest car parks on the marsh. Faced with these proposals, we suggested that the least damaging place for a car park was on the derelict land between the Boathouse and the Old Baths site. This land was not originally part of the seashore but was protected by an earth bank, long since washed away. The owner would be prepared to sell it to the council.

At the time our local councillors did not support this idea because, in their view, parking at Parkgate was and is self-limiting: When Parkgate is full of people, cars cannot park and go home. The logic of this becomes apparent when looking at some of the schemes to alter Parkgate radically with a marina etc. Capital outlay could only be justified by greatly increased tourism, hence new car parks, widened approach roads and the destruction of the village we know.

Since then even our own scheme has been ruled out by the Local Plan, which declared the coastal strip to be an Area of Special County Value for Landscape which, together with the Green Belt and the Site of Specific Scientific Interest which covers the marsh, rule out new car parks.

We have suggested that the two car parks belonging to the Wirral Country Park would be used more if they were clearly signposted. The Countryside Manager does not want to do this because the surfaces of his car parks are not firm enough for heavier use and he cannot afford to re-surface them. The Old Baths car park has now, however, been re-surfaced.

When the Old Quay was briefly turned into a motorcyclists' pub we asked the police to check their speeds on Parkgate Road. Unfortunately the police caught, not the sober and respectable bikers, but angry Parkgate residents! This illustrates one of the problems of trying to control our visitors.

Over the years we have made various suggestions for reducing speeds, improving pavements and traffic calming. But where, say the planners, are the accident statistics? It seems that some of our members must die for the cause. But policy may at last be moving our way.

HISTORIC BUILDINGS

We have of course, recently taken the initiative by proposing radical improvements to the listing process. Our Member of Parliament paid a visit to Parkgate, discussed our proposals and is currently keeping us in touch with developments.

PARKGATE IN JULY 1792

from James Plumptre's Britain, The Journal of a Tourist in the 1790s

The following is the Journal of a Tour, through part of North Wales, taken by myself and another Gentleman, in the long vacation of 1792. We were limited in our time of absence from College, and the principal object of our excursion was sea-bathing; for which purpose we fixed upon Parkgate, as near to Wales, and from whence we might, with the greater ease, take a Tour to see a country, of which we had heard much, and had a great desire to travel through: but, as we had not had time to see all we wished, we resolved to make the most of that of which we were masters, and see that part which was most worthy our attention, and at as little expense as possible. As Parkgate, therefore was our head quarters I shall give a short description of that Place, and then proceed to our Welsh Tour.

Parkgate

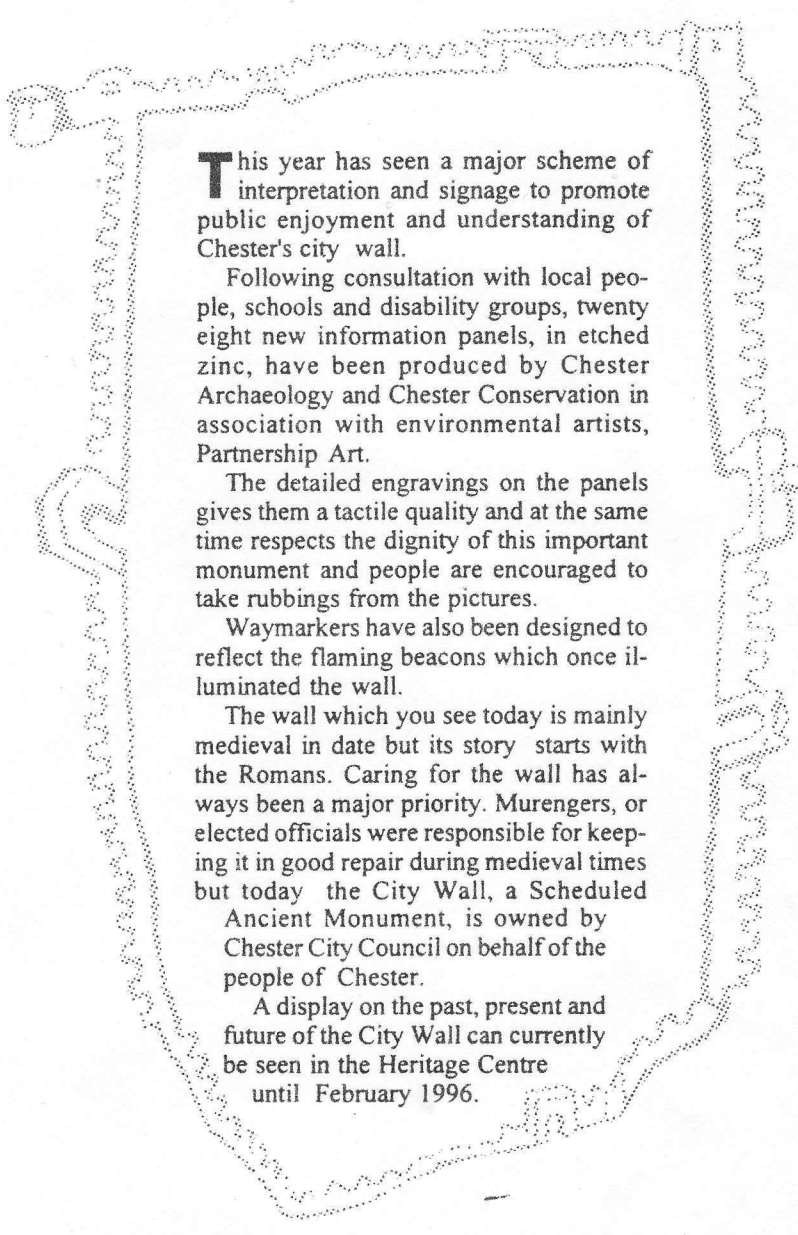
is merely one row of Houses by the seaside, and is only resorted to as a bathing place; for which purpose the accommodations are tolerably convenient, and that is as much that can be said in favour of it. The shore is bad, being stony; and, in many places, there are large beds of mussels and pieces of rock covered with barnacles, which are dangerous; so that it is hardly possible to bathe there, except at high tide, unless you take a boat and go out with one who is acquainted with the shore. Board and Lodging is not unreasonable, 17s.6d a week being the usual charge. The Assembly House is the best and most genteel rendezvous there: we scarce ever sat down to dinner a number less than twenty. They have Card Assembly's once a week, but have neither dances, a Coffee House, nor Circulating Library, places much wanted for the company to resort to in their leisure moments. Neston, which is about a mile off, is the Post town, Parkgate being only a Hamlet to it. The scene here is often enlivened by the Dublin Packets going to and returning from Ireland, which often exhibit scenes the most curious and entertaining; but except at those times, the spot is uncommonly dull; for, unless you have a pleasant party of your own, you have little society; the company who resort to this place being chiefly Chester people, who keep much to themselves, and associate little with strangers. To one fond of Sailing, there are fine opportunities of enjoying that most healthy and pleasant diversion; the boats are good, and the terms reasonable, and the owners themselves civil. The country about Parkgate itself is not pleasant; but the Welsh Hills on the other side of the River Dee give a wonderful richness to the Prospect. On the opposite shore to Parkgate stand the towns of Holywell and Flint, with the noble ruins of Flint Castle; these are crowned by the Welsh Hills which extend as far as the sight each way. The country on the Welsh side is finely cultivated, and bears more the appearance of a Garden beautifully laid out, than anything of the kind I ever saw before. On my first approach to Parkgate, I think I saw this country in the height of perfection. The morning was gay and cheerful; but, on a sudden, the clouds lowered over the Cheshire side, a barren and disagreeable country, and a violent storm of thunder and lightening raged over it, while the sun shone full and splendid upon the beautiful and fertile Hills of Wales, which were separated from us by the Dee at high tide.

Nearer to the sea, about ten miles from Parkgate, stands Hoilick, now only a few Houses; but, by the spirited exertions of Sir J. Stanley, who is building a commodious Hotel for the reception of visitors, is likely to become a favourite bathing place, as the situation is more pleasant, and the shore far preferable for that purpose than Parkgate. We saw this spot in one of our morning walks.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Chester City Wall

Britain's most complete circuit of Roman and Medieval defensive town wall



This year has seen a major scheme of interpretation and signage to promote public enjoyment and understanding of Chester's city wall.

Following consultation with local people, schools and disability groups, twenty eight new information panels, in etched zinc, have been produced by Chester Archaeology and Chester Conservation in association with environmental artists, Partnership Art.

The detailed engravings on the panels gives them a tactile quality and at the same time respects the dignity of this important monument and people are encouraged to take rubbings from the pictures.

Waymarkers have also been designed to reflect the flaming beacons which once illuminated the wall.

The wall which you see today is mainly medieval in date but its story starts with the Romans. Caring for the wall has always been a major priority. Murengers, or elected officials were responsible for keeping it in good repair during medieval times but today the City Wall, a Scheduled Ancient Monument, is owned by Chester City Council on behalf of the people of Chester.

A display on the past, present and future of the City Wall can currently be seen in the Heritage Centre until February 1996.

Pipeline's Great Start

Taking lorries of the road, the 406km North West ethylene pipeline, built by Shell UK, has carried its first million tonnes of ethylene from the Firth of Forth to the Stanlow and Carrington plants.

The pipeline took four years to build, passes beneath 200 roads, 500 waterways, nine motorways, 24 railway lines, a national park and under the fields and woods of 800 different landowners. The ethylene travels along the line at a rate of 1,500 tonnes a day.

Before the pipeline was built, the plants at Stanlow and Carrington had to rely on much of their ethylene supplies via road.

ST. THOMAS' CHURCH

To give a background to the structural problems affecting St. Thomas' Church, Sue Jones, the churchwarden has written details in the church magazine "Catalyst", extracts of which have been used here.

The walls of the church are made up of two sandstone 'skins', or layers, infilled with rubble. The roof is slate supported by narrow wooden trusses. In common with many such buildings from the Mid-Nineteenth Century, there are no solid foundations.

Inherent in this basic design are the problems we are now seeing. The slate roof is extremely heavy and is pushing outwards and downwards onto the side walls, forcing them to bulge and to bow out of alignment. The fact that there are neither external buttresses nor internal lateral ties means that there is nothing to prevent this outward movement of the side walls. Additionally, the rubble infill between the two 'skins' has settled and the two layers, also unsecured, are moving apart. We therefore have a situation in which the walls could move, even slightly, allowing the roof to collapse inwards.

We were first made aware of these problems when, following the widening of some internal/external cracks, we contacted a firm of Structural Engineers for advice. At this time we felt reassured by them that the building was not in anyway unsafe and we duly presented to the congregation the Firm's findings that steel bars should be inserted at intervals across the width of the church (tying both the walls and the separate 'skins' together). Many people felt that this would have a detrimental effect on the building and the atmosphere for worship - "More like a sportshall than a church".

Later an architect drew up a scheme for incorporating the tie bars into an upper storey. This too was felt to be inappropriate, in that it would reduce the feeling of light and space which gave St. Thomas' its unique atmosphere of simplicity and openness.

Neither scheme was pursued with any vigour because we had not been given the idea that there was any real urgency. You will remember that at this time we were involved in the replacement of our other daughter church, St. Michael's and we believed that there were a 'good few years' left in St. Thomas'.

However, in the Spring of 1994 two totally unrelated events forced us to change our thinking. First a succession of windy days caused some slates to move to one side of the roof.... the site is very exposed. Secondly on Easter Sunday I was reliably informed that steam had been observed rising from behind Father Peter during his sermon!!

On investigation it was discovered that a joint in a central heating pipe underneath the pulpit had been leaking - possibly for years - and the steam was caused by the water dripping onto a very hot pipe below. So serious was the problem that the water had caused wet rot in the wooden flooring supporting the pulpit and the

choir seating.

Our friendly local builder advised that we should not use that area at all, nor should we use the dais which was severely infested with woodworm. And then he climbed his ladders to inspect the roof. At this point we were advised to call the structural engineers. That same day Standing Committee met and agreed that the Church must be closed until we held the structural report. Services were immediately transferred to the nearby Parkgate County Primary School. The remedial work to deal with wet rot, dry rot and beetles forms a very minor part of the essential safety work now needed to restore the building for worship.

The Structural Engineer's report made very depressing reading indeed. It said in its conclusions that:-

"The side walls are leaning out well beyond the theoretical safe limits to maintain stability and are thus potentially liable to collapse..." Further investigations revealed the state and composition of the walls, the amount of movement was accurately measured and the foundations tested.

I set about seeing roofers, builders, wood preservers, glaziers, masons and any other experts who would come to look at the building and give us estimates of costs of carrying out these repairs. (Little did I know when I became churchwarden that I would need to be quite so well acquainted with the various creepy-crawlies found in woodwork, or the technicalities of "delaminating sandstone". I asked endless questions, which I must say were very patiently answered e.g.:-

Could the work be spread over a number of years as money came available? - No. Are there grants available - and from whom? How does the listed building status affect what we can do? Can the Diocese help? - English Heritage?, Cheshire County Council? Our insurers? Will the building collapse before we can raise the money? Should we spend that amount of money restoring the church for two hours per week plus choir practice? What happens to the congregation during this time?

The more experts I saw, the more quotations came in, the more questions I asked, the more costly it looked. I had already arrived at a six-figure sum. our Archdeacon and Rural Dean met Father Alastair and me at the Church to discuss the implications of our problems. They suggested that a firm of architects carry out a Quinquennial Survey. (Parish Churches are surveyed every 5 years and a programme of repairs instituted, but daughter churches have been exempt from this process for some years now).

That survey brought out the lack of adequate damp coursing and the need to re-wire, in addition to all the other problems! Using that survey, paid for by the Diocese, we asked a Quantity Surveyor to cost the entire programme. He organised another structural engineer's report (which confirmed the findings of the original one) and arrived at a figure of £100 - 125,000, the figure you may have heard mentioned.

See Update. Page 7

ST. THOMAS' UPDATE

Anyone who has spent any time in the Parish of Neston this last couple of months cannot have escaped the aftermath of the PCC's decision on the future of St. Thomas'. Never has a PCC decision brought forth such headlines!

Sadly however, many people have missed the points we have been trying so hard to make. There are still people who still don't know about the finding of the structural surveys we commissioned and paid for. Surveys which describe the building as "unsafe". There are still people who look at the building and see a solid sandstone structure in no danger of collapse. The walls are not solid and they are being forced apart by the weight of the roof. There are still those who suggest that 'a few thousand pounds could see the church re-opened'. All the experts suggest otherwise - and at present we haven't got even a few thousand. If only it were all so simple.

Most of our regular St. Thomas' congregation have joined us in other services and understand - with great sadness - that the cost of restoring their beloved church is an unacceptable burden on the whole Parish at this time. Raising the amount required would take an enormous amount of effort and organisation. Spending such sums, returning St. Thomas' to what the Chronicle calls 'its former glory,' would not make the building any more practical for worship or for greater community use.

Since my last article on this subject many people have told me that they feel we have spent 'more than enough' time and money on buildings and that now what is needed is effort on people. On bringing more people to God; on working in the community with the sick, the elderly, the families with problems, the bereaved, etc. We have them - they need us desperately. God needs us out there.

If only we could manage all of this and still restore St. Thomas! But the PCC is charged with making realistic and responsible decisions about our priorities. This I feel they did in a very long and well debated meeting on 24th July. It was not a decision taken lightly or easily by anyone. There had been much preparation and thought in the weeks and months prior to the meeting. Expert advice had been sought and possibilities carefully weighed.

The PCC is firmly committed to working with and for the people of Parkgate; but for the foreseeable future that must happen without St. Thomas' building.

As from September 5th, St. Thomas' is regarded by the department of National Heritage as a Grade 2 Listed Building. This means that the application for demolition (which was submitted in August) is now null and void.

There are now other implications. It is virtually impossible to demolish such a building without first exploring "other uses". This means that, if we cannot raise the money to do the repair work, we may be forced to lease or sell the building to someone else who has the money available. This would effectively lose us the site for all time and prevent our ever being able to build a new, more practical building - perhaps with community facilities - on that prime site in the centre of the village.

Various conservation groups have shown interest in saving the building and three members of the Standing Committee met with their representatives last week in the presence of the Archdeacon of Chester. It may well be that, with the help of such groups, some of the costs of repair may be raised. But there is a significant difference between doing the necessary work to safeguard the building - walls, roof, floors, windows - and our being able to use it again for worship. The only reason for pursuing the demolition option - apart from the obvious concerns for safety - was to stem the constant and growing drain on our financial resources by the need to keep the building insured, lit and watertight. These expenses we now have to find.

With demolition came the option - in the future admittedly - to rebuild the church in Parkgate. The money now used on maintenance could be saved and efforts directed towards evangelism. More people equals more cash, equals more likelihood of being able to rebuild at some point. As to concerns about a modern church on the present site, there are modern houses around the square. It is, I am assured, perfectly possible to build without ruining the environment. The important consideration is surely to retain the site and explore the possibilities if money becomes available to us.

We will keep members informed of progress - Ed

CHESHIRE COUNTY STRUCTURE PLAN - NEW THOUGHTS FOR THE NEXT CENTURY- "CHESHIRE 2011"

Heritage - 'sustainability' is the theme for the new plan with regard to conserving and enhancing Cheshire's natural & built heritage.

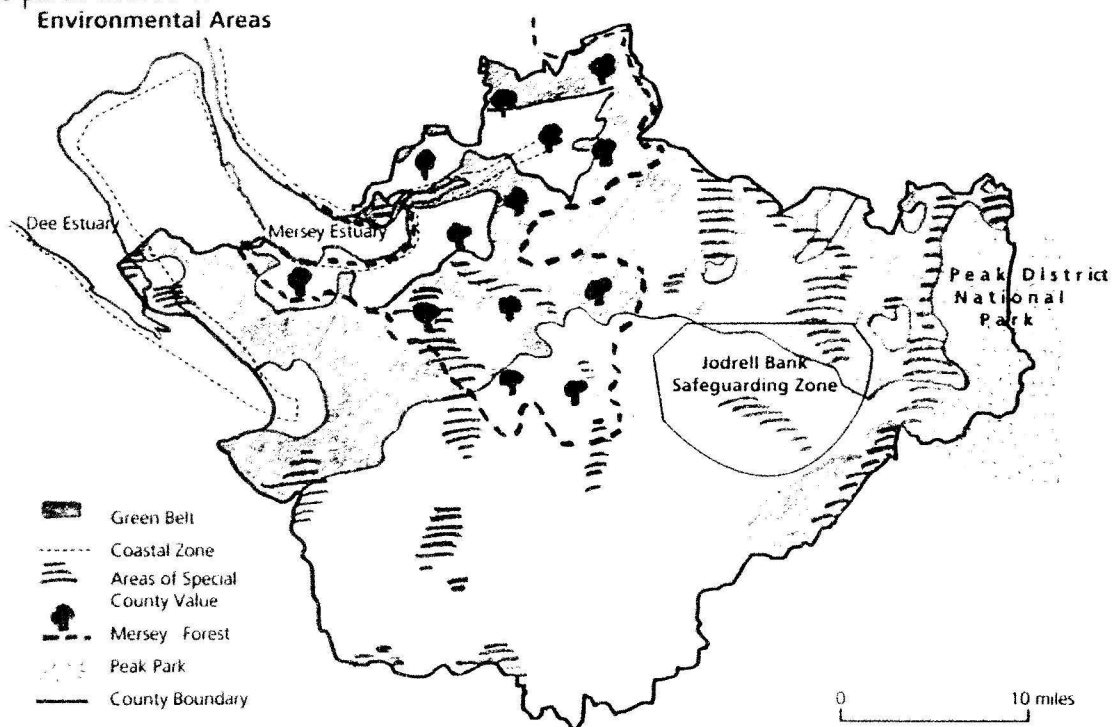
For heritage this means "no net loss" of assets arising from any development. Some features are regarded as irreplaceable and are mainly protected as Sites of Special Scientific Interest or Listed Buildings. For 'Cheshire 2011' other major features so far without protection should be included such as Ancient Woodlands, habitats of nationally rare species & canals.

Other significant assets such as Sites of Biological Importance, historic landscapes, conservation areas, Parks and gardens which are more abundant are considered to be able to be recreated/replaced elsewhere, although they should be conserved where possible.

If exceptional circumstances require development resulting in damage to such sites, then the creation of a replacement asset elsewhere will be required. In the built environment, archaeological features and listed buildings could only be recreated as copies in order to maintain the "no net loss of value". New sites and features should continue to be identified and given protection. Existing features can be enhanced by improved settings, restoration and better access and interpretation.

Areas of Special County Value (ASCV) are protected against any development, chosen for their landscape quality, or their archaeological, historical or nature conservation importance.

The Coast. Development should be restricted to those activities for which a coastal location is essential. Any development on the estuaries should, wherever possible, be located within areas already developed and should provide public access to the shore.



Regional guidance proposes sites in Cheshire for 47,000 extra homes, 1996 - 2011, mostly for Cheshire's smaller households. Half of these are already earmarked in existing local plans. New building for houses and new industrial development has been considered in three alternative proposals by the county council (1) to create a new "market town" in Cheshire with no changes to green belt boundaries, (2) development to be centred on Mid-Cheshire plus changes to green belt boundaries, and (3) widespread changes to green belt boundaries to accommodate growth in nearly all the towns, in the west coast the development being more modest.

None of the plans would affect Parkgate to any major extent. The Council For Protection of Rural England (CPRE) would urge people to reject all three of the options, the county council asking people for their views and suggestions regarding the plan for the next century.

ROUND UP OF AUTUMN MEETINGS

SEPTEMBER

We had an excellent turn out with many old friends attending the charity antiques evening in. Kevin Whay was very entertaining and put on the spot with many members' items to be given valuations. £200.00 was raised for St. John's Hospice, thanks going to the Parkgate Hotel for hosting the occasion.

OCTOBER

At our A.G.M. Geoffrey thanked Muriel Tinker who resigned from the Committee for the thirteen years tireless work. Two new Committee members were appointed, Anne Williamson and Stephen Gordon and the remaining members were re-elected.

St. Thomas' Church was discussed, Geoffrey Place being hopeful that progress can be made with a liaison Committee. Neston Cricket Club's future looked uncertain with discussion that they might sell and move elsewhere. However we believe that since the meeting the members have voted to stay put.

A letter of thanks has gone to Mr. Stephens of the Warren for his generous planting of daffodil bulbs at Parkgate's entry in Boathouse Lane. We look forward to their flowering in the spring.

The future of the Bath House site was raised and Geoffrey pointed out that once a house has been demolished, there is no automatic right to rebuild, particularly as it is a greenbelt land.

Susan Chambers and Edward Hilditch of the Burton and South Wirral History Society then gave an illustrated talk of Neston and Parkgate in World War II. A talk full of memories to those living here at the time. We could really have done with two meetings to cover the wealth of information.

NOVEMBER

Tony Hirst, the director of the Boat Museum, very kindly came at short notice to speak to us in the 200th anniversary year of the opening of the canal to Ellesmere Port.

Despite "Panorama's" interview of Princess Diana on television there was a good turnout! Tony Hirst has been instrumental in having created the Boat Museum as a major attraction with 60,000 visitors per year, a collection of over 100 boats and the restored canal viewing basin. He talked about the sympathetic development taking place around the basin, housing, hotel and restaurants having made an attractive setting from the decay of the run down area of Ellesmere Port docks.

The museum depends heavily upon volunteer helpers who assist in all areas, from dressing in period costume and showing visitors around the cottages with features of 1900 - 1930s, to repairing and painting boats.

There is a large archive section within the museum for people who want to do research.

CAN YOU HELP

Our local ranger, Bernie McLinden, has asked whether any of our members would assist him with the locking & unlocking of the gate to The Old Baths car park. If any member regularly walks their dog early morning / evening and could assist on a rota basis, Bernie would be extremely grateful to hear from you.

Telephone : 327 5145

Many thanks to Debbie Judic for help with the typing of this edition.

Editor: Becky Ford, The Moorings, The Parade, Parkgate, to whom all contributions should be sent. Tel: 336 5088