



GREEN BELT BLUES

It will not have escaped your notice that there has been a great deal of controversy surrounding the preparation of Wirral's Local Plan and the implications for Wirral's green belt. This new Local Plan will replace the current Unitary Development Plan (UDP) and covers the period up to 2035. It has been in preparation for over 10 years!!

Because of this prolonged time period the Government threatened the Council with the removal of their plan-making powers. As a result, the Council agreed to a new timetable and embarked on a wide-ranging consultation process which required comments by October 26th 2018.

The controversy revolves around how much land is needed to satisfy the Government's house building target for Wirral for the next fifteen years. They have set this at 800 dwellings per annum. As the Council has been unable to find sufficient brownfield sites, empty homes, etc to meet the target they have had to identify large areas of green belt land to accommodate the required houses. This 800 dwelling target is based upon the Government's 2014 national population and household projection figures together with a standard method for calculating how many houses are needed in the Wirral between now and 2035.

However, using the same formulae the Government's latest 2016 national population and household projection figures produced a lower target of 500 dwellings per annum - compared to the previous 800. This significant reduction could mean a much-reduced need for green belt release or no need at all.



Prospect of Wirral - overlooking the Dee Marshes

However the Government, not satisfied with this result, has produced a 'clarification' paper which serves only to deepen still further the fog surrounding the calculations with the Government now saying that despite the new figures they do not intend to change their original higher target! In other words Wirral's Green Belt, its history and its heritage remains under threat.

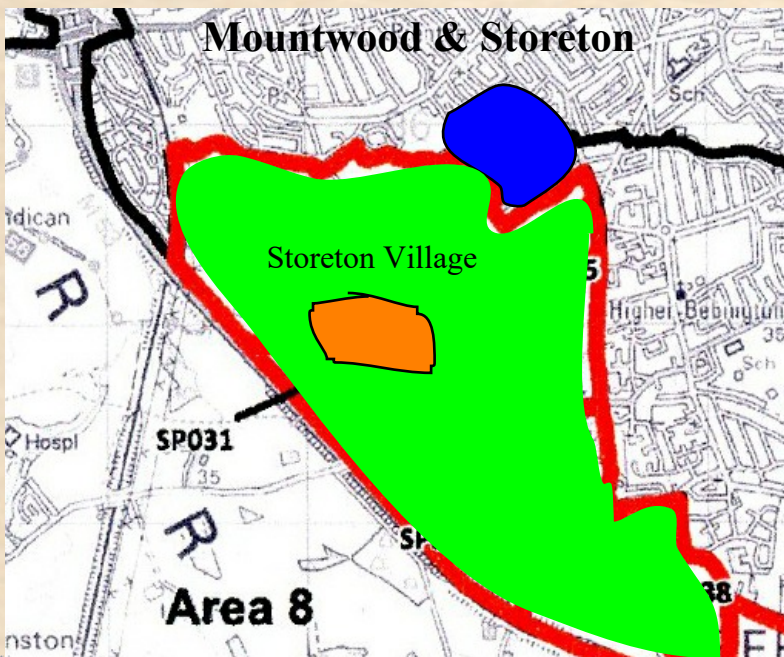
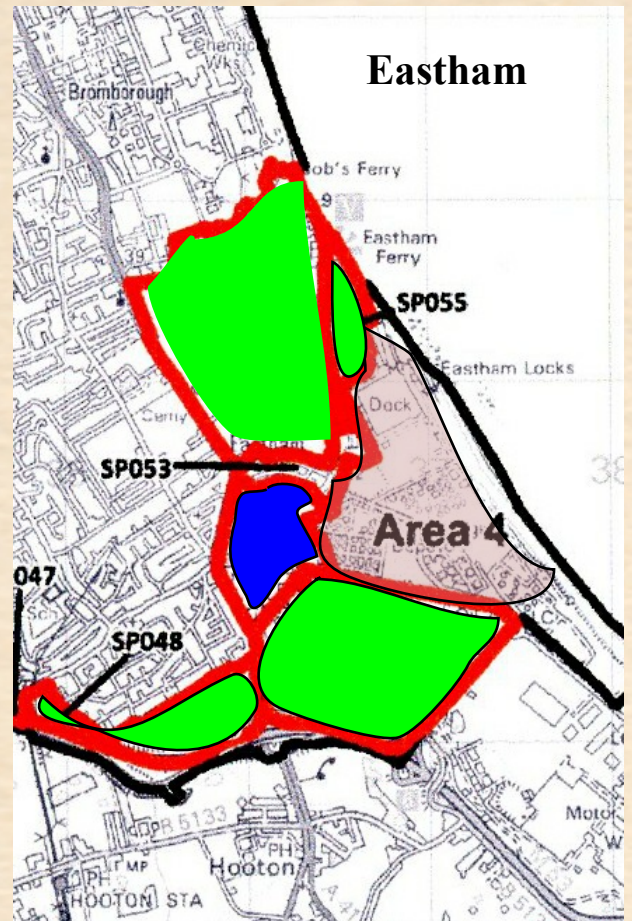
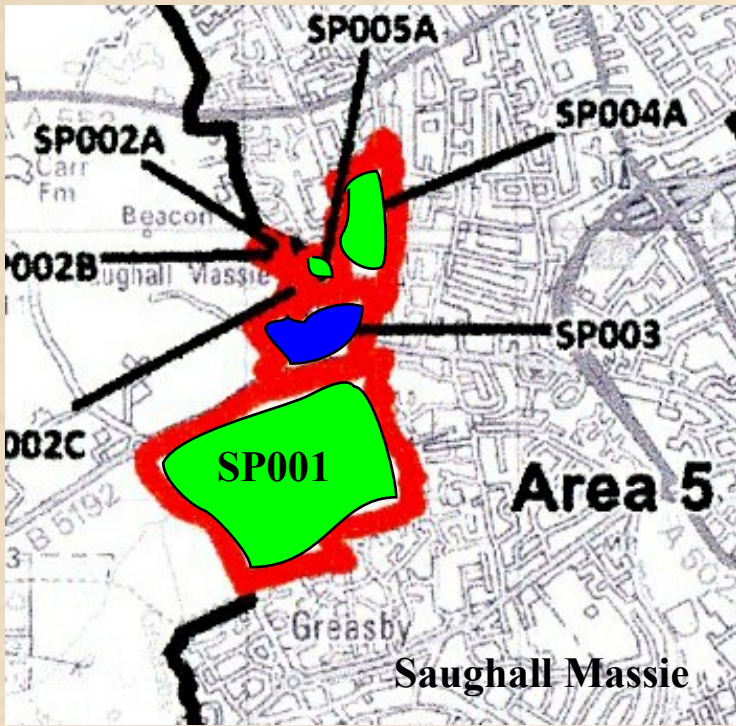
This arbitrary decision has led to a great swathe of opposition from many areas of Wirral and the formation of an alliance to oppose the release of green belt land. Much of the debate has been around the validity of the 800 dwellings target and the latest Government announcement has reinforced this scepticism.

Conservation Areas Wirral's primary concern is how this impacts upon Wirral's conservation areas, especially those likely to be most seriously affected such as Eastham and Saughall Massie, and to a lesser extent Mountwood. CAW has submitted detailed reports rebutting the need, and desirability, of releasing green belt sites on the land surrounding the Eastham and Saughall Massie Conservation Areas. All the Conservation Areas under threat have submitted their own detailed opposition

to the threats to green belt land in their area.

Conservation Areas Wirral also recognises the wider implications for the local environment if there was to be a large-scale release of Wirral's precious green belt. It has therefore joined with its partners, under the leadership of The Wirral Society, to be part of the new 'Wirral Green Space Alliance' which is dedicated to opposing the proposals in their current form.

So what happens next? The Council's 'cabinet' will consider a report from the council's officers at their meeting on the 17th December. This report will take account of the numerous representations that have been made. At this meeting they will take a final decision on the fate of Wirral's Green Belt. However that decision will need to go to a Public Inquiry probably some time in the summer of 2019. This will be held in front of an independent inspector where the council, and indeed all parties, will have to justify their arguments with sound evidence. The Inspector will then make a final decision.



Legend

- Green = current green belt but identified for housing/industry
- Blue = Conservation Areas (Eastham, Mountwood and Saughall Massie)
- Orange = Potential Conservation Area of Storeton.

The threat to the existence of three of our Conservation Areas is vividly illustrated in these plans.

Eastham - Wirral's oldest village will be swamped by housing and the industry that it has fought for over 50 years to keep at bay. A thousand years of history consigned to the scrap heap.

The delightful tree-lined area of Mountwood, a site of ancient woodland will be hemmed in by housing and the potential Conservation Area of Storeton with its 13th century hall a scheduled ancient monument will be obliterated.

Saughall Massie, one the borough's smaller Conservation Areas, will virtually cease to exist surrounded on all sides by housing, its identity engulfed.

Ivy Cottage - Saughall Massie



Clifton Park - A Good News Story

Clifton Park was once one of Wirral's long neglected and forgotten Conservation Areas – but not any more. It lies in the area between Whetstone Lane and Borough Road in Birkenhead and was once the preserve of wealthy Liverpool merchants. Created a Conservation Area in 2004 it boasts some 22 listed buildings. It was home to one of the great British Chancellors of the Exchequer – F.E. Smith, a close friend and confidant of Winston Churchill. 'FE' as he was known was later to become Lord Birkenhead. The founder of the Scout Movement Lord Baden-Powell lived there during the famous Arrowe Park International Jamboree in 1929.

It is not only a Conservation Area that is plainly 'at risk' but it is also in danger of disappearing altogether. Following an intervention by Conservation Areas Wirral in the shape of Gillian and Peter Bolt the existing resident's committee were persuaded to take on the additional role of the Area's Advisory Committee. They have taken full advantage of this new responsibility and have opened up links to the Council.

Their efforts were crowned on the 9th September when more than 150 people turned up at their Heritage Open Day event held at the Masonic temple in Clifton Road.

Pupils from the Woodlands Primary School had done some digging into the history of the Park – one of the first grand Villa developments in Birkenhead, laid out in 1840. Among other things they found out where people had come from to live and work in the Park – and these included such exotic places as Finland, Cuba, Portugal and North America! They also looked at the 1851 Census records and found out the type of jobs that people did in those days. Years 3 & 4 went one step further and built a Victorian house, complete with individual blocks of "stone" and sash windows. They then dressed up in Victorian clothes and made a video – acting out life in a typical household of the time.

The displays and the video (which is also on YouTube) fascinated many of the residents who visited the Masonic Hall as many of them had no idea about the history of their own houses. Musical entertainment was provided by members of the Birkenhead Operatic

Society Trust who came dressed in Victorian clothes and sang numbers from their recent shows.

Members of the Masonic Lodge were also on hand to talk to visitors about the charity work carried out by the Lodges and to show people around the lovely rooms in the Temple.

A visit by the Mayor, Cllr Geoffrey Watt, completed a very successful day. The Clifton Park history display then went to Birkenhead Central Library for the remainder of Heritage Week. CAW are currently working with the Council on installing Conservation Area signage at the three entry points and also producing interpretation boards to tell visitors about the area and its fascinating history. A walk through the Park also forms part of CAW's Conservation Area Heritage Trail which can be downloaded from the website.

We like to think that Clifton Park has turned the corner and will become not only an asset to the cause of Conservation but also an area that people will want to visit.



Top & Centre - two of Clifton Parks iconic properties.
Lower - CAW secretary Gillian Bolt with the Mayor and the president of the Masonic Lodge.

Tourism - A Major Role for Conservation

Visitors are curious about Wirral, this little peninsula hemmed in by the rivers Mersey and Dee, washed by the Irish Sea to the west, with the Roman city of Chester to the south and the great port of Liverpool to the north. What does Wirral have to offer? How did it evolve? Who lives there? What can we see? What is its coastline like? What wild life is there?

Conservation Areas can answer many of these questions. They are a gateway to the past, offering a tangible glimpse of the world our predecessors occupied. Should we not be exploiting this inquisitiveness, this natural curiosity to present our Conservation Areas as the assets we know them to be?

It would undoubtedly be helpful to the cause of trying to preserve and conserve Wirral's heritage if that 'heritage' could be shown to be contributing to the local economy - and contribute it does. One only has to look at the popularity of Port Sunlight with thousands of visitors every year who flock to see this picture-perfect 'worker's village' with its museum, its art gallery and its magnificent gardens.

Visitors flocking to Port Sunlight and spending money!



The old smithy and village green - Thornton Hough

But Port Sunlight is just one of Wirral's twenty-six Conservation Areas. The others too have plenty to offer. Should we not be looking for the Unique Selling Point (USP) for each area and asking how can it be sensitively exploited

"Wirral Peninsula's tourism sector is currently worth over £402 million, employs over 5,150 full-time equivalent jobs, and attracts over 8.5 million day and short break visitors each year. It has increased by over 39% since 2011, and employment within the sector has increased by 22%, and over 25% more visitors came to Wirral during the same period."

Wirral Chamber of Commerce Press Release

without damaging that which we are trying to preserve?

There can be little doubt that our Conservation Areas are under threat.

Recent examples include uncontrolled tree felling in West Kirby and Mountwood, incremental erosion of character in Oxton, the appalling treatment of Hamilton Square, the neglect of Clifton Park, the damage to

Eastham and Saughall Massie by the Green Belt proposals, the dreadful state of the esplanade at Rock Park, the dish aerials all over the lovely buildings in Bromborough Pool – we could go on. But if these areas can be shown to be making a net contribution to the economic activity of the area they may, just may, be treated with more sympathy by

the Council.

The Council themselves have perhaps pointed the way. In their evolving core strategy proposals which will lead to a new Local Plan (and away from the Green Belt issues) their proposed policy CS7 states that the Council will :-

"Preserve and enhance the character and appearance of the Conservation Areas at Port Sunlight, Bromborough Pool, Bromborough Village and Eastham Village and the setting of other designated and un-designated heritage assets, including the need to safeguard against the gradual erosion of the outstanding quality of the character and setting of Port Sunlight Conservation Area."

This proposal not only recognises the potential of the named villages but it also clearly includes "the setting of other designated and un-designated heritage assets". In other words all of Wirral's

Conservation Areas are included in this proposal as well as “*undesigned heritage assets*”. In this latter category can be included Storeton and Brimstage.

To build on this proposal we are currently exploring how to give ‘added value’ to the lead provided by Port Sunlight. Can visitors who may have been impressed by Leverhulme’s village be encouraged to visit other and similar areas such as Bromborough Pool, Lower Bebington (Mayer Hall) and Thornton Hough? All these areas owe their existence to some extent to the philosophy of their industrial founders, who, recognising the value of their employees to the success of their businesses, made it a part of their vision to provide high quality living accommodation and facilities.

Some perceive Wirral’s Conservation Areas to be an irritant serving only to frustrate their vision of a soulless Wirral with a pastiche of look-a-like houses and ‘horizontal tower blocks’ with their ‘cut and paste’ plastic trees on expensive architect’s drawings. But Conservation Areas aren’t boring ‘blobs’ of leftover buildings from a previous century - a barrier to be removed. – they are a dynamic window into our past showing the building blocks of what Wirral has become today. They have a part to play and an increasingly important one as more and more visitors want to know about them!

We all know what makes our own Conservation Area attractive but how do we communicate that vision to all those visitors that come to Wirral for its culture and heritage?



The sandstone Church of St Andrew - West Kirby.

Why Visitors come to Wirral

91% associated Wirral with Coast & Countryside
90% highlighted the peninsula as a great base between Liverpool & Chester
85% liked Wirral for its Culture & Heritage
82% highlighted the borough’s Quality Food & Drink
Local Enterprise Partnership Survey
commissioned by Wirral Council

One way has been the very successful Wirral Heritage Trail that CAW has already produced. This links all 26 Conservation areas with an interactive on-line map suggesting how visitors can make their way round Wirral understanding and enjoying its history

and heritage. To see this just follow the link below.

<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/planning-and-building/built-conservation/wirral-conservation-area-and-heritage-trail>

Wirral’s culture, history and heritage is embodied in the old villages, the ancient buildings and the historic transport of our unique peninsula. All of this complemented by Wirral’s landscapes, seascapes and wildlife. There surely is a story here that we can tell. From the Bronze age settlements at Irby and Greasby, the defeat of the Vikings and the establishment of the English nation at the Battle of Brunanburh in 937AD, the Romans at Meols, the involvement in the American Civil War, the hovercraft terminal at Moreton to the industrial village of Port Sunlight.

What a golden opportunity this presents using our Conservation Areas to promote Wirral’s history to those inquisitive visitors that we mentioned in the opening line!



The Clock Tower at Thurstaston

Wirral's Sandstone Walls

Wirral is built on sandstone; it is the natural native building material of the area. It ranges from the lovely warm grey material produced by the Storeton quarries that clads Liverpool's Liver Building to the reddish brown stone from which so many of our old churches are constructed. A much more commonplace use that is so characteristic of Wirral are the sandstone walls that feature throughout the peninsula. So common are they that we scarcely give them any thought and yet they define our countryside, our villages and even our towns. Without them we would be much the poorer. Sadly we are losing them. They are today expensive to build and not easy to maintain, however there is protection available.

Alan Chape explains

Existing formal protection for Wirral's sandstone walls

As things stand, sandstone walls only have limited formal protection. In a Conservation Area permission is required before a wall can be demolished. It is also required to demolish a gate, fence, wall or railing over one metre high next to a highway (including a public footpath or bridleway) or public open space; or over 2 metres high elsewhere.

The Oxton Management Plan, for example, says that the Council will:

"Take enforcement action where the majority of a wall has been removed unlawfully in excess of that allowed under permitted development rights." However, the definition of "demolition" is when more than 50% of a wall is to be demolished – so quite a substantial part of a wall can be lost without permission.



How not to point a sandstone wall in a Conservation Area!



The delightful 'sandstone' village of Caldy built of Wirral's native rock

In some cases Planning Permission is needed before you can erect or alter a gate, fence or wall. This mainly applies to increasing their height. The same rules apply whether or not you live in a Conservation Area. Any queries on whether you need planning permission should be directed to Wirral Council's Conservation Team – 0151 691 8183.

Improving the protection for sandstone walls

We believe that walls need more protection. The Council could consider introducing a new rule for walls. This is called an Article 4 Direction, which would mean that all proposed work on walls would require permission in advance. (there would be no fee for such applications).

Technically, this involves the removal of householders' permitted development rights, ie development that can take place

without permission. The Council is concerned about the extra work that this might involve. We believe that the number of instances per year involving permission to alter or demolish walls would be small and the benefits from increased protection would easily outweigh the extra staff time that would be needed.

Maintaining sandstone walls

When walls need repairing it's important to respect the traditional building methods. The type of mortar, the form of pointing that is used and the pattern of stonework can help to preserve the area's character. Lime mortar, available from most builders' merchants is the best material to use. It weathers to a pleasant shade of grey, is cheaper than sand and cement, and gives a softer finish that will not damage the stone.

Ordinary Portland cement mortar is much harder than the sandstone and will damage the stone when freezing takes place. Pointing should be finished flush with the surface of the stone, or slightly recessed. The new mortar should be rubbed down with a damp brush or hessian sacking a day later in order to bring out the aggregate and to soften its appearance. It should not be trowelled smooth. Strap pointing, which protrudes forward of the face of the stone, will eventually damage the stonework. It should not be used. More advice on pointing is available from the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings' site at <http://www.spab.org.uk/bookshop/TP5.html>.

Green Conservation Area Signs



A few issues back we raised the issue of the road signs that identify our Conservation Areas. We suggested that the sort of sign that says "Welcome to Frankby Village" followed by the imperative. "Please Drive Carefully" not only has the opposite effect, but doesn't even identify the Conservation Area!

Following a discussion document presented to the CAW committee which concluded that Wirral should 'invent' its own signs for Conservation Areas as

there is no national standard.

It was decided to pursue this idea with the Council and was raised as an agenda item at one of our regular meetings with Council officers.

It was agreed in principle and there followed a series of meetings with Wirral Council's senior traffic man, Ian White. The discussions have been very positive and Ian most helpful. We are now in position to trial the new sign in Clifton Park. In the final version the

green will be a little darker and the letters will be pure white.

We would hope that these new signs will not only identify a Conservation Area for passing motorists but will also remind residents that they are living in one!

If the trial is successful we shall press for other Wirral Conservation Areas to have their own sign - to replace the 'Welcome to ??' Sign mentioned earlier.

Comings & Goings

Sadly we have lost three of our committee members who have had to retire for various reasons. They include :-

Audrey Platt who was the Wirral Society rep on the committee and is moving out of the area.

Chris Moore has a full year ahead of him with other commitments

Alan Thomson has had to leave us to attend to personal matters.

We thank them all on your behalf for their enthusiastic service and dedication to the cause of conserving Wirral's special places.

To replace them we are pleased to welcome two very experienced new members. **John Cocker** a former chairman of Wirral's Planning Committee and **Graham Arnold** for ten years one of Wirral's senior planning officers and its Conservation officer.



Graham Arnold Retired: former Town Planner and Conservation Officer for Wirral Council -1999-2009.

Is involved in practical landscape maintenance in Birkenhead Park. Former Chair and Secretary of the North West Branch of the Institute of Historic Building and Conservation.

Interests: rail travel, exploring historic cities visiting art galleries and museums, reading history, gardening, film, astronomy and swimming



John Cocker Retired - a member of Bidston Village Conservation Area Advisory Committee and a Trustee of Port Sunlight Village Trust. Former Town Planner including 20 years as Urban Designer with Liverpool County Council. John was Mayor of Wirral in 2001/02 and for ten years was Chair of Wirral's Planning Committee. John's interests include the arts, architecture and Rock & Roll.

Discover Wirral's Conservation Areas & Heritage Sites



www.wirral.gov.uk/heritage

