

Formby Civic News

The Formby Civic Society Newsletter



Re-birth of the Civic Society movement ?

May 2009

The organisation that has attempted to represent more than 250,000 Civic Society Members at National Level, has this last month gone into 'administration' and, during this last week, its two remaining members of staff, both employed in its North West Office, in Liverpool, had their services terminated.

This totally unexpected demise of the Civic Trust has apparently resulted from inadequate funding and, we might suspect, poor management. The Civic Trust was established as a National Organisation in 1957, five years after the birth of this society, and seemed until recently to represent all 700 local Civic Societies well at national level, advancing the views of its members in campaigning

work with Government and policy making organisations.

It provided a central helpdesk for Civic Societies, supporting nine Regional Associations who in turn offered practical support to local Societies, for example, through organising networking events and annual conferences. The Civic Trust recently launched a new website, allowing potential members to find their local Civic society, and to air their views on an online discussion forum.

The website is still accessible but, the organisation behind it has gone. This is a very sad day, but may represent a new opportunity for the evolution of something new relating to the Civic societies and the grassroots more effec-

tively than its predecessor.

Peter Colley, Chairman of the NW Association of Civic Trusts and our Guest of Honour at our Annual Dinner in March, has been closely involved in recent developments. He told us this week that "the situation over the last month has been very confused, but at last there seems to be a consensus." He was optimistic that a successor organisation will be created, but it will be "quite different from the former Civic Trust. Until now Kevin Trickett and some of the former trustees have been working to transfer programmes like Heritage Open Days to other bodies, and I'm glad to say that HODS will now be run by English Heritage for 2009. (Cont'd. p5)

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'Formby-by-the-Sea', (Ravenmeols), one of the least frequented areas of the coast, was intended at one time to become a fully fledged sea-side resort. The reasons why this failed and other little known facts about this unspoilt area will be discussed during a 'Festival of Archaeology' guided walk on July 19th.

Planning Matters by Desmond Brennan

In accordance with the requirements of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, the Council is currently engaged in the onerous and demanding task of creating the completely new set of Development Plan Documents (DPDs) which will constitute its Local Development Framework (LDF). The LDF will in due course replace the Unitary Development Plan (UDP), which was adopted in June 2006, and is at present the basis of all planning decisions made by the Local Planning Authority. It is an irony that the UDP was already obsolete at the time of its adoption, but, like all the other UDPs across the Nation, it was automatically “saved” at the time of its adoption for a period of three years which ends on 28th June; under the authority of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, most of the UDP policies have been further “saved”, this time until they are replaced by the LDF. One of the key DPDs is the Core Strategy on which the Council is currently consulting the community in a two stage process. The first stage is a consultative workshop with representatives of interested local community organizations in each of the seven Sefton Area Committee areas; an Area Committee meets monthly and comprises all the borough Councillors for its area, together with some none voting members such as representatives of the Parish Councils in the Committee’s area. The second consultation will be a more formal process and will take the form of written comments by the public on the draft Core Strategy; the next draft will take account of these comments and will be scrutinized for “soundness” on behalf of the Secretary of State by a planning inspector. So far, most Local Planning Authorities which have managed to reach this stage have had their LDFs found wanting; however, those LDFs that survive the scrutiny must be further amended to incorporate the inspector’s recommendations before finally being adopted. This all sounds very bureaucratic, and it is, but it should be remembered that Sefton’s LDF, when it is eventually adopted by

March 2011, will be a major influence in determining the kind of place Formby evolves into.

The Sefton’s first workshop was for the Formby Area Committee (FAC) area and was held on 21st April in the Gild Hall. It was a very well run and useful event. The proceedings started with a review by a senior Council planner of the process of creating the DPDs and especially the Core Strategy. The participants were divided into four groups and each group considered in turn the following four topics: a) jobs and the economy, b) Village centre, facilities and services; getting around, c) meeting the need for new homes, and d) protecting and enhancing the environment; climate change. Each topic had a convenor, who was a professional planner, but not always a Council employee, and a note taker who was a Council planner; each of the four pairs of facilitators moved from group to group so as to capture the full range of the contributions of the participants. It was an excellent opportunity to give expression to the concerns of the Society and we made the most of it.

We said we would be opposed to development of the Green Belt unless the case for doing so was extremely strong.

We emphasized the importance to Sefton of its coast, both as a recreational area and for its very special flora and fauna (there are several reserves of national and international importance) - usages which sit ill together. Anticipated effects of climate change on the coast have to be planned for on a long-term basis and future needs should not be preempted by short-term development. Of special interest to Formby is the need for integrated management of Formby Point. Of the major land owners in the area, at present the National Trust has the greatest public recognition, but the National Trust site at Victoria Road is by no means the only significant site. We asked for

better road signage indicating to visitors the various sites of interest in the Formby Point area; at present the only road sign is to the National Trust site. We asked that the development of facilities for the public at the various sites (including visitor centres) should be coordinated and complementary and that visitors should be able to move between areas in different ownership without being too conscious of the change.

We said we would be opposed to development in the Green Belt unless the case for doing so was extremely strong. For new housing, we wanted to see development of brown field sites before any consideration was given to development in the Green Belt. At present, we saw no reason to use Green Belt land for the extension of the Altcar Trading Estate. There are several vacant sites currently available on the trading estate. With a few creditable exceptions, the general standard of the environment of the trading estate is very poor indeed. We asked that more should be done through planning development control to improve the quality of the estate so that it might become a place to which better quality businesses would want to come. We specifically criticized the recent decision by the Council that the key site at the entrance to the trading estate opposite the Tesco petrol station was suitable for a builders merchant; in our view the nature of such a business, no matter how well designed and run, makes it unsuitable for this key site. We said that we would be prepared to contemplate an extension of the trading estate into the Green Belt, but within the bounds of the Downholland Brook, if it were for new, well designed buildings suitable for high-tech start-up businesses - at present, a number of such businesses in Formby are run from private residences. Formby has two first class secondary schools, and the case could be made for encouraging quality businesses to come to Formby which could employ well educated local young people; at present, nearly two-thirds of Formby’s resident working

population work outside the FAC area. We asked that planning control should be used to prevent change of use for vacant sites on the trading estate, because employment possibilities in Formby were already limited (but the unemployment level in the FAC area is low, being only 6.7% compared to 16% for the borough).

We asked for a road bridge across the bypass at the entrance to the trading estate to facilitate easy and safe crossing of the bypass for pedestrians and cyclists. At present, it takes several minutes to cross this dangerous junction; tragically, one of our members was killed there last year. This would help to improve the vitality and viability of the trading estate and encourage customers of Tesco's superstore to come on foot or on bicycle and, especially important, facilitate the development of the football ground as a more general sporting facility.

We raised the issue of parking in Formby village. The Council owns the large area of urban green space which was formerly the playground of Holy Trinity School, and which is close to the centre of the village. We said that, as a matter of fact, people expected to use their cars when they shopped and, if they could not, they would go elsewhere and the prosperity of small Village businesses would be damaged, especially when competing against Tesco and Waitrose superstores, both of which have large free car parks. We said whatever uses this green space might be put to, housing development should not be one of them. Provision of additional free car parking is made all the more problematic given that it is government policy to discourage dependence on car use in favour of reliance on walking, cycling and public transport. We also asked that the Council give serious consideration to acquiring the school as a community centre; Formby is very poorly provided for with respect to community meeting facilities. The school is owned by the Church Commissioners and is currently on the market; it is very im-

probable that the Council has the necessary finances, and, if it had, that it would use them in Formby rather than in the more deprived areas of the borough. Still, we urged that the Council should involve the community in developing a policy for the use of this special community asset.

Finally, I will mention two actual cases of the consequences of planning policy. The owner of 2 & 4 Kings Road wishes to acquire the strip of community green space in Kings Close which is adjacent to his premises and which is owned by the Council. As a first step, he has applied for planning permission for a change of use of this land to residential amenity space. There is every indication that the Council is disposed to sell the land; presumably they would be happy to be relieved of the responsibility for its maintenance, which they have neglected to date, and would also be pleased to receive the cash accruing from the sale. However, these are not planning considerations and it would be wrong if they were to have any bearing on the outcome of the case; regrettably, the officer recommendation is for approval of the application. With good reason, the residents of the Close are bitterly opposed to the proposal, which would entail a loss of valuable community amenity space for them. Reg Yorke and I have supported the residents by explaining the relevant planning policy considerations, advising on how to make written representations to the Council and assisting them in every other way we can. As a result of a petition, the application was brought before Planning Committee at its meeting on 6 May, when the Councillors decided they should make a site visit before determining the case at their next meeting, which will be on 24 June. The other case concerns the site at 43-43a Freshfield Road. Initially, there was a proposal for the replacement of the existing large late Victoria dwelling by squeezing in two much narrower buildings having much less impressive facades. We believe that at all major sites on Freshfield Road, of

which this is one, only developments consistent with its *Area of Local Distinctiveness* status should be permitted. We opposed the application on the grounds that neither of the two proposed buildings would satisfy that criterion; the application has been refused on just those grounds. There followed a second application, this time for a semidetached building of a traditional design which would be more in keeping with the street scene. Although none of us cared for the new design, we agreed that it conformed to the characteristics of the *Area of Local Distinctiveness* in which it was to be located and so did not oppose it; the application was approved. However, that has not been the end of the matter; the applicant has appealed the refusal of the first application to The Planning Inspectorate and there is to be a Public Hearing on 24 June. I have met with neighbouring residents, all of whom want the appeal dismissed, and advised them how to make representations to the Inspectorate; we are to have a further meeting nearer the Hearing to decide how best to present our opposition to the Inspector.

For a summary account of the several representations we have made concerning recent planning applications, please see the Society's website.

The Sands of Time, revisited - an introduction to the Sanddunes of the Sefton Coast, by Phil Smith. Price £15.99

On sale soon, this is a celebration of the natural wonders of our sand dunes. Lavishly illustrated with photographs, maps and diagrams, this completely new edition introduces the general reader to the origin and land use history of this coast and shows how sand dunes are formed and develop over time. Also a unique insight into the animals and plants that live on the sand dunes, an area being conserved and managed for the future.

Altmouth Pumping Station by Desmond Brennan

There has been a very significant development concerning the refurbishment of the Altmouth pumping station, but, for reasons of confidentiality imposed by the Environment Agency (EA), I am not at liberty to say what it is. I can say, however, that there is now a real possibility that it will be necessary to reopen the whole debate surrounding the arrangements for backup of both power supplies and pumping capacity. Jack Gore and I learned of the changed situation when we met three senior representatives of the EA on 24 April at a two hour meeting convened by Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas, MP and held at her residence. Fortunately, I can give an account of some other matters which were discussed at the meeting

At the previous meeting, it had been agreed that the EA would seek more information from Scottish Power about the resilience of the substation at Stephenson's Way in the face of flood risks in this vulnerable vicinity; of special concern is the building immediately to the south of the transformer, to which it is connected by low level pipe work and whose function remains unknown. Unfortunately, no new information had been obtained from Scottish Power, but the EA said it would now be pressing Scottish Power for information.

Readers of these notes will recall that, at our previous meeting with EA representatives, we had been promised a copy of Halcrow's quantitative analysis of the relative merits of having on-site one 2 MW diesel-electric generator as compared with two 1 MW generators which we favoured and the EA's assessment of that analysis. It transpires that no such analysis exists; we asked at our latest meeting how that could be and how the decision in favour of a single 2 MW generator had been arrived at. We were told that, regrettably, we had been misinformed earlier and that the decision had been reached informally after telephone enquiries had been made to potential suppliers of

the generators. We pointed out that the lifetime costs depended on the number of hours one, two, three and four pumps could be expected to operate, based on the modelling study, and only a proper computation would suffice for a rational decision to be made. The EA agreed and said that would be the approach in any future evaluation.

We had earlier sought an explanation of the term *the most commonly encountered head* against which the storm pumps would have to operate; this term had been introduced unexpectedly soon after the previous meeting. We were very concerned about the new term and asked about it on several occasions; however, it was not until 19 April that we received a copy of the Halcrow report dated 26 March showing how the head was to be calculated. The methodology it used to calculate a notional operational head was entirely acceptable and, happily, there was no reference to a *most commonly encountered head*. We asked about the absence from the report of a critical piece of information, viz. the coordinates of

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the so-called *duty point* of the modelled pump, only to be told that the information was in the report, but poor English usage had disguised that fact. We said there were other indications in the report that cast doubt on its reliability and we asked for, and were promised, written confirmation that the report really meant what the EA representatives claimed it meant.

We reminded the EA representatives that, at the previous meeting, we had been promised that the tenderers would be asked to quote for the largest standard pumps compatible with the available power supply, in addition to quoting for the EA's preferred option; regrettably, none of the repre-

sentatives was able to say whether the tenderers had quoted for pumps of interest to us, but that a check would be made and any relevant information would be reported to us.

At the last meeting, we were told by the EA that remedial work on the Downholland Brook embankment was in the schedule and they would look into where in the programme of works the item was scheduled and consider if there was a case for bringing it forward. Subsequently, we were told that it had been decided that no work was needed on the embankment and, when we asked for a copy of the report that had led to that decision, we were then told the conclusion by Atkins that the embankment was in poor condition had been based on a high-level assessment and that a proper analysis of the state of the embankment would now be undertaken, with the sum of £25,000 being budgeted for that purpose. Prior to the meeting, I had managed to speak to one of the two authors of the Atkins report. While he could not recall all the detail of their investigations, which were made over three years ago (unfortunately, their report has been archived and there is a recovery fee of £65), he believes there were eight boreholes made along the length of the embankment between Abraham's Bridge and Sutton's Bridge and there were also a series of cone penetration tests to correlate findings from the boreholes. Thus, the Atkins report on the condition of the embankment was based on more than a high level assessment. When we asked the EA representatives why Atkins had not been asked for the details of their investigation into the condition of the embankment before concluding the Atkins assessment was insufficient, we were told that the new consultant would not be making a physical examination of the embankment, but would be reviewing all that was known about the embankment, including the detail of the Atkins investigation.

In arriving at our estimate of 60 cu. metre/sec for the pumping a 1 in 50 years storm event, we had

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Re-birth of the Civic Society movement ? (Continued from p1)

At the moment, the work of coordinating proposals for a new approach is being handled by Tony Burton, Director of Strategy and External Affairs at the National Trust who has been seconded from the Trust with a years funding, to be assisted by Ian Harvey. There is still a long way to go before anything is decided, but it seems likely that local societies and regional associations will have a significant involvement and that their

representatives will drive the activities of the new organisation”.

The attempt to create a successor body to the Civic Trust is being undertaken by an ad-hoc body comprising the National Trust, the Campaign to Protect Rural England, the Royal Institution of British Architects and the North of England Civic Trust, a separate regional organisation that

like our Society predates the Civic Trust. These organisations are to provide finance and co-ordination for an Office and key officers. The aim is that the new body will support local Civic Societies in a more decentralised way than formerly, so that policy creation strongly reflects the views of its membership

Altmouth Pumping Station (Continued from p 4)

asked that this contribution should be made quantitative and the EA had said they would refer the matter to Halcrow. At the last meeting, we expressed our dissatisfaction that the EA's only response had been to send us a selection of extracts about gravity flow from the Halcrow Modelling Report which were already available at the time of the previous meeting and which do not address the issue in the way that is required. The EA again promised to refer the matter to Halcrow, but said that no significant new expenditure would be authorized to obtain the information we had requested.

In December, the EA informed us that a third storm pump was being constructed from the parts of the two retired storm pumps and was due for delivery to the pumping station in March; the cost of installation had yet to be budgeted for. When we enquired at the most recent meeting what the current position was, none of the EA representatives could say if the third storm pump existed, or even if there would be a third pump. We received an apology for the incorrect information we had earlier been given. We were told that a decision whether to proceed with a third pump had to be taken on a 'step by step' basis in the light of progress on other fronts and the risks involved. We said that the risks of having only two reconditioned storm pumps as at present were manifestly unaccepta-

present were manifestly unacceptably high; we argued that their combined pumping capacity of 40 cu. metre/sec when new was well below that required to deliver the agreed standard of protection and, were one of them to fail, the position could be very serious; we further argued that the risks were exacerbated by the great age of the units which meant they would not be delivering to their maximum specification both with respect to their pumping capacity and their reliability. One of the EA representatives then questioned the need for a third pump on the grounds that the maximum in channel flow rate was too low to justify the extra pumping capacity. In response, we read an EA statement, written last September, conceding that their claimed value of 52 cu. metre/sec for the maximum in channel flow rate could not be justified and acknowledging that the best estimate for the flow rate was provided by the Halcrow Modelling Report and that its value lies between 60 cu. metre/sec and 74 cu. metre/sec. We were promised we would now be given reliable information about a third pump after enquiries had been made. The EA representatives confirmed their hope that project for a flood storage area at Lunt Meadows would receive authorization in time for it to be completed by

March 2011, which is also the target date for the completion of the refurbishment of pumping station. However, it had to be remembered that the wash basin would not be immediately available for the storage of flood waters once the excavation works were completed; time will need to pass for the environment to mature and settle before it could be used actively.

Joan Cox

Having been an active member of this Society for some twenty years, (former Committee Member and Secretary from 1994 - 1999) also an active member of Formby Ladies Golf Club, many local people will miss Joan Cox now that she has moved to be nearer her family in Berkshire. Joan has enjoyed an interesting life, brought up abroad, where her father was a headmaster. She then apparently had a government post but came back to England after marrying a RN Officer, a Destroyer Commander, and both travelled a great deal. Joan has a strong streak of 'public service' and was very active in the voluntary welfare work undertaken by SAFA, as its local branch Financial Secretary. She was for many years a magistrate and honoured by being appointed as Deputy Lieutenant. She also received an OBE. Joan has a lighter side, a sense of humour and enjoys painting, particularly flower studies, gardening and golf. We thank her and wish her well. R.A.Y.

Wildlife Notes by Dr Phil Smith



Mediterranean Gulls with Oystercatchers.; Photo Phil Smith.

February

February is the month when the spring movement of birds, especially gulls and waders, back towards their northern breeding haunts, really begins in earnest. Large flocks of **Common Gulls** start to appear on the mossland fields and the shore. In modern times, these have increasingly been accompanied by a few **Mediterranean Gulls** and even the occasional American **Ring-billed Gull**. Last autumn's storms blew lots of the latter across the Atlantic, exceptional numbers appearing in France and Spain. These will tend to fly north at this time of year, so they may turn up in Britain. Indeed, one was photographed at Seaforth Nature Reserve on 23rd.

The formerly rare **Mediterranean Gull**, with its ghostly white wings, jet-black head and large bright-red bill, is now a regular visitor to our shores and started breeding on the Ribble salt-marshes in 2001, five pairs nesting in 2003. I caught up with singles at Seaforth on 13th and 26th and at Birkdale on 10th but Derek Williams reported 5 – 6 birds with **Black-headed Gulls** on the mosses on 14th, while a colour-ringed adult was at Marshside. Finally, on the last day of the month, a search through about 6000 mixed gulls at Birkdale was rewarded with a smart pair of summer-plumaged Mediterranean Gulls. The impressive wader roost here included about 3000 **Oystercatchers** and 16,000 **Knot**; three **Little Egrets** were fishing in the pools on the Green Beach where I also found three **Jack Snipe**. The first **Avocets** were at Martin Mere by

23rd; two were seen flying north at Formby Point on 25th, six being at Marshside the following day.

Several bird-watchers have complained recently about people who allow or even encourage their dogs to chase roosting birds on the beaches. This has long been a problem locally but seems to be getting worse, partly because there are now more dogs around than I ever remember. Our shorebird flocks are internationally important and as they are about to fly thousands of miles back to the Arctic, these birds need to rest at high-water to conserve energy. Being constantly harassed by dogs means they use up precious fat reserves crucial to the success of their migrations.

Wintering birds are still much in evidence in February. The large flocks of **Pink-footed Geese** on the mosses during the first half of the month included several with plastic neck-bands, on which the three-letter combinations can be read with a telescope. One well-travelled individual, ringed in Iceland in July 2000, was seen in March 2001 in south-west Scotland and subsequently in Merseyside, Lancashire, Aberdeenshire and Norfolk. A graceful grey male **Hen Harrier** performed at Crossens Marsh on several occasions, being visible from the coast road with up to two **Short-eared Owls**. An excellent garden "tick" for me was a croaking **Raven** flying over my head on 21st.

The month ended with the first wild flowers of early spring. The tiny **Common Whitlowgrass** (*Erophila verna*) appeared in my garden, while **Hairy Bitter-cress** (*Cardamine hirsuta*) and **Common Field Speedwell**



Purple Willow Catkins; Photo P. Smith

March

One of the harbingers of spring on the sand-dunes is the flowering of willows and poplars which have catkins. Most familiar are the "pussy" willows, both Grey (*Salix cinerea*) and Goat Willow (*S. caprea*) producing very similar furry catkins with golden stamens. However, these trees are unusual in having the sexes separate, so only the male bushes have the pussy catkins, the female flowers being a rather uninspiring greenish-yellow. As I have mentioned before, the Sefton Coast is exceptional in the variety of willows that grow here, some 29 different kinds having been identified. Many of these have distinctive catkins, arguably the most beautiful being those of the male Purple Willow (*S. purpurea*), (see photo above) though those of the non-native Violet Willow (*S. daphnoides*) and Siberian Violet-willow (*S. acutifolia*) are also very attractive and are sometimes grown in gardens. We also have seven different types of poplar, which similarly produce distinctive catkins. Unexpectedly, most of these are of only one sex. Thus, the rather invasive Balsam Poplar (*Populus x jackii*), nowadays known as Balm-of-Gilead, produces only female catkins. This is the tree whose aromatic buds scent the air on calm spring days. In contrast, the equally common Grey Poplar (*Populus x canescens*) is almost always male, while one of its parents, White Poplar (*P. alba*), is mostly female. By the end of the month, the bright red male catkins of Black Poplar were beginning to appear on the 500

trees at Formby Point that were mapped last autumn. Usually, only male BlackPolpars were planted because the copious amounts of white fluffy seed which can be a nuisance.

March is also the month when bird-watchers eagerly await the return of familiar migrants from their southern winter-quarters. **Wheatears** arrived in a rush around the 17th, while the first **Swallow** and **White Wagtail** were seen at Marshside on 15th. **Chiffchaffs** were also singing from mid-month, the first **Willow Warblers** appearing on the last day of March. Probably as a result of climate change, our summer visitors now include that former rarity, the **Avocet**. Birds turned up at Marshside in the second week, reaching 60 by 19th, the influx at Martin Mere being even more impressive, with 70 counted by the end of the month. One of the latter flock had been colour-ringed in Britain in 2006, perhaps indicating a French origin for our Avocets. Less common migrants included **Little Stint** and **Ring Ouzel** at Marshside, Glaucous Gull at Birkdale and a spectacular **Red Kite** reported at Mere Brow on 16th. I was summoned to Seaforth on 21st to see a rare American **Ring-necked Duck** which, annoyingly, was later identified as a hybrid with the Tufted Duck! However, the same place turned up trumps ten days later with **Iceland** and **Ring-billed Gulls**, both from the other side of the Atlantic. An interesting and useful publication is John Dempsey's *Wild Merseyside* which sets out to describe the wealth of wildlife that we have in Merseyside and its surroundings. Beautifully illustrated, it provides very good value for money at £4.99 and is available in local bookshops.

April

Apart from the last few days, April was dominated by prolonged drought. Indeed, as very little rain has fallen locally since January, we have had one of the driest late winter/spring

periods in living memory! This has important consequences for wildlife, especially those species like the **Natterjack Toad** that are dependent on wetlands. Most of the toad's breeding areas in the sand-dunes have dried up already. There was some activity on Birkdale Green Beach but my total spawn count was only 102 strings compared with 172 at the end of April last year.

The dry, sunny conditions did benefit some creatures, however, most notably the **Vernal Mining Bee** (*Colletes cunicularius*) which is a real Sefton Coast speciality. Listed in the *Red Data Books*, this species is confined to sand-dunes in northwest England and a few places in Wales.

About the same size as a Honey Bee,



Vernal Mining Bee, a Sefton coast speciality.

but stockier and dark-brown, it is a "solitary" bee which forms loose colonies, tunnelling into south-facing dune slopes and busily collecting pollen, mainly from willow catkins. I recorded what seem to be two previously overlooked populations, counting 40 colonies at Crosby Marine Park and 68 at Hall Road, Blundell-sands. These are important extensions of the known range of this nationally rare insect.

Even rarer is the spectacular **North-ern Dune Tiger Beetle** (*Cicindela hybrida*), now found in only two places in Britain. We have over 95% of them on the Sefton Coast and I was delighted to count 30 on the Birkdale Green Beach embryo dunes

on 21st April.

Migrant birds always arrive in a rush during April and there is something new to be seen almost every day. On 18th, I went to Seaforth to catch up with my favourite bird, the **Little Gull**. Only twenty were present, but my visit coincided with an **Osprey** soaring low overhead – a magnificent spectacle! Another local rarity is the **Cattle Egret**, two of which turned up at Plex Moss on 22nd. However, in a few years time, these could become as common as the rapidly increasing **Little Egrets** and **Avocets**. Peak counts of the latter reached 70 at Marshside and 88 at Martin Mere. **Northern Wheatears** of the large and colourful Greenland race are a feature of late April. A cloudy night

grounded large numbers on 24/25th, with over 100 reported at Ravenmeols sand-dunes. I counted 77 during a tour of the mosslands near Formby, where there were also 88 **Whimbrel**, that smaller relative of the **Curlew**. Marshside had an excellent assortment of waders from mid-month, including flocks of **Black-tailed Godwits** and **Golden Plovers** coming into gorgeous breeding plumage, together with **Curlew Sandpiper**, **Little**

Stint, **Ruff**, **Snipe**, **Dunlin**, **Avocet**, **Lapwing**, **Oystercatcher** and **Redshank**. Also present for a few days was a superb **Spotted Redshank**, living up to its old name the "Dusky" Redshank.

Has anyone heard a **Cuckoo**? There has been only a handful of reports so far. This formerly common harbinger of spring is approaching extinction in our region, having declined nationally by 59% since 1980. The reasons for this are not fully understood, but seem to be connected with food supply, both here and in its African winter quarters. Cuckoos like large hairy caterpillars and there are fewer of those about nowadays, probably because of intensive agriculture.

Memories of St Joseph's Home, Freshfield in Wartime

by Tony Costello*



Photo: Formby Civic Society

In April 1940 I was 11 and a half years old, my two sisters, Patricia and Norah were 8 and 5 respectively. We lived in Norris Green, Liverpool, which at that time was a new Estate, built to accommodate families who were being re-located from the poor housing situation in the Breck Road, West Derby Road area of the City.

The war was having a destabilising effect on our family life, my mother was extremely ill and my father had been mobilised to work with the Ministry of Aircraft Production. None of our extended family was able to look after us as a trio, and my father had insisted that we stay together. As a result, he approached a children's society run by the Catholic Church.

Some years earlier my sister Pat and I had spent some time in one of their Homes, Knowell [?] Park in Woolton, a suburb of Liverpool. Norah, being too young at the time, was looked after by a long standing family friend. So, one April morning, the three of us were taken by car by the lady from the Society and were driven to Freshfield, and to St. Joseph's Convalescent Home, an isolated building in the pinewoods. We were handed over to a small reception party of Nuns. Pat and Norah were taken to the Girls' side of the house and I was taken in the opposite direction, to the Boys' side.

My first impressions were not good. I had brought with me my treasured football boots; these were taken from me "to be looked after". I was told that I could not see my sisters until breakfast next morning, and that it was not allowed for boys and girls to be together even if they

were siblings. This rule was only relaxed if we had visitors which, because of wartime conditions, was not a frequent occurrence. Occasionally, on the regular Sunday morning walk it was possible for my sisters and I to have a chat if they were at the rear of the

girls column and I was at the front of the boys column. Providing that the nuns who were between the two columns were not too strict, as they sometimes could be, then a blind eye was turned. There were other brothers and sisters who also took advantage of this relaxation. In general, the nuns were very kind and caring. My two sisters made lasting friendships and even visited one of our favourite nuns many years later when she went to live in a retirement home for her Order in Rome.

The building, St. Joe's, as we came to call it, was approached along a very

There was no provision for an Air Raid Shelter. If the sirens sounded we would go into the "house" part of the building and assemble in a sort of corridor

rough and stony road running from Larkhill Lane, through pinewoods. The road ran straight for about half a mile and then turned sharply to the left. It was from here that one first caught sight of the big white gates, almost always kept closed. There was hardly any traffic. An occasional tradesman's vehicle, a visiting doctor, or somebody on official business maybe. On Sundays, the taxi from the Station might be hired by relatives visiting children. The taxi was run by a Mr. Rimmer and the fare was half a crown (2 shillings 6pence) irrespective of the number of passengers. There was a Chapel in the building and a Priest used to come every day to say Mass. The Priest would come from a college in Formby and probably walked or cycled

to the Home. The first sight was of the rear of the building, all drain pipes and a fire escape. At the front, one could see a house of substantial size that had extensions built on to it. To the left was a two storey construction, (hence the fire escape). The top floor was the Chapel and the Nun's quarters. The Nun's (or Sisters) called their rooms "cells". The ground floor was the Boys' dormitory which was partitioned in the middle, each section having 14 or 16 beds. A bathroom and toilets were at the far end of this block and a small private room where one of the Nun's slept.

There was no provision for an Air Raid Shelter. If the sirens sounded we would go into the "house" part of the building and assemble in a sort of corridor. Boys and girls together with the ever present Nuns keeping vigil. The time until the "All Clear" would be passed in saying the Rosary and singing hymns. The windows in the dormitory were permanently "blacked out" with a heavy opaque paper. To let light in during the day, one or two of them would be opened slightly, depending on the weather. As we were not allowed in the dormitory during the day, this did not matter to us. The "Angelus Bell" would be rung at 6pm. and we were all in bed by 7pm., summer or winter. Because of the blacked out windows, we always went to bed in the dark, the lights being switched off by a nun or one of the maids.

During one of the air raids, a bomb landed in the woods quite close to the back of the house. This caused a whole window, frame and everything, to be blown out of its mountings and into the dormitory. It landed across a couple of the beds but luckily there was no-one in them at the time.

I cannot say much about the Girls' side of the building but my sisters tell me that the layout was similar apart from the fact that it was single storey and had a large French window which opened onto a veranda. It was on this veranda where we were all assembled to have our group photograph taken when the Mayor, and Mayoress of Southport visited the Home sometime in 1942.

The population of the Home was greatly increased by having to take an overflow of evacuees. These were mainly children from Catholic schools in the Seaforth and Litherland districts of Liverpool; "Star of the Sea" Seaforth being one of them. This sudden influx played havoc with the education system and for a while the evacuees were taught at the Home by the Sisters. Whilst my sisters and I were not officially evacuees, Norris Green not having come within the boundaries designated as most likely to be bombed, we were nevertheless always treated as though we were evacuees and were taught along with them. There were also some children who were there for genuine convalescence and, where possible, these children also attended the makeshift classrooms.

As the phoney war continued, the 'Powers that Be' ruled that some of the children should attend the Catholic school in Formby, "Our Lady of Lourdes". This idea was abandoned after a short trial period. The long crocodile of pupils had too far to walk and often arrived soaked to the skin and late if the weather was bad. It also stretched the school's capacity to breaking point. However, some of the older boys, were regarded as being fit and able to do the daily journey, and I was one of them. It was not possible to go home at dinner time in the time available and so I had to do without a midday meal or take some bread from the breakfast table to tide me over until I got back to St Joe's in the evening.

I can only remember two teachers, the Headmaster, whose class I was in, and a Miss. Berrill. The Headmaster's name was George Edward Ryan. He was member of the Royal Horticultural Society and so it was natural that, in the farming community in which the school was situated, we did a lot of gardening lessons. I learned how to double-dig and how to "force" rhubarb. His house in Gores Lane was named "Camelot". I have never forgotten having to learn the poem, "On either side the river lie, long fields of barley and of rye," and so on. There was no access to the wireless or newspapers at St Joe's and so it wasn't until I got to school that I learned from the other boys of what was going on in the outside world. Dunkirk, Hess landing in Scotland, The thousand bomber raid on Cologne, the sinking of HMS. Hood, etc. One of the school's old boys had

died in this latter event and was remembered in our prayers at Assembly. Other events which stick in my mind are the funerals of the Polish Airmen in the churchyard of Our Lady's. They had collided in mid air over Woodvale RAF Station. Also, I arrived at school one morning only to be whipped around the legs with bunches of stinging nettles. There was a local custom that one should wear a sprig of oak leaves on Oak Apple Day to commemorate King Charles the Second hiding in the oak tree in 1651. Anyone not doing so was whipped accordingly. I introduced some of the perpetrators to the Liverpool custom of physical retaliation, and was duly given four strokes of the cane by Mr. Ryan. Coming home from school one day, near Brooks's Farm at the top of Wicks Lane, we met an armed soldier escorting what we thought was a German pilot, to Harington Barracks. It turned out to be an RAF pilot who had done a belly flop, crash landing on one of Mr. Brooks's asparagus fields. The plane was a Hawker Hurricane. For a few days, it lay in the field, guarded from souvenir hunters by a small group of soldiers. The children from St. Joes used to chat to them and share their corned beef sandwiches and tea as the field was quite close to the Home.

There was also an occasion, on my

There was a local custom that one should wear a sprig of oak leaves on Oak Apple Day to commemorate King Charles the Second hiding in the oak tree in 1651.

twelfth birthday, November 1940, when a group of the children were taken by two of the nuns to Formby Park where a Messerschmitt 109 was on display. It was in an enclosure surrounded by a hessian screen and it cost sixpence per person to view the German fighter plane, the monies raised going to the Formby "Spitfire" Fund. The Sisters hadn't known about the admission charge, but as they were both Irish and as the soldiers guarding the plane were Inniskilling Fusiliers AND as it was my birthday, some sort of compromise was reached and we were all allowed into the enclosure to see "Gerry". Playing football on the beach one day during the holidays, we saw a plane coming from the direction of Liverpool.

We were all quite good at aircraft recognition by this time in the war and various opinions were given as to what it could be, Blenheim, Beaufighter, and the like. Eventually the Luftwaffe Dornier, another "Gerry" flew over our heads and we saw the plume of black smoke as it crashed up by Birkdale. I can't put a date on this. There was a searchlight emplacement in the sand hills, a sand-bagged enclosure with a solid base of paving stones. The Lister generator was concealed in the woods, as was a galvanised water tank. The tank was replenished daily from a bowser sent from Harington Barracks. Again, the children formed friendships with the soldiers, who would explain to us how the light worked

On one occasion we had a visit from the U.S. Vice Consul's representative in Liverpool. He brought a present for every child in the Home. The Junior Red Cross in the USA were the donors. I got an aeroplane with a wind-up elastic propeller. All the presents were of high quality and we were all in awe at the kindness of these strangers :from America.

I loved the environment of the woods and the dunes. There were lizards, small blue butterflies, rabbits, newts in the ditches around the asparagus field and a colony of natterjack toads in a pond on the far side of the field from the home. We boys were very much left to our own devices, often missing midday meals, but always having to be back in the late afternoon.

In November 1942 I reached my fourteenth birthday. The rules of the Home did not allow boys to remain after this age, but fortunately an aunt and uncle in Liverpool were able to take me in. Their two sons were now serving in HM Forces so there was a room for me at their house.

I finished my schooling at Christmas 1942 and went to stay with them. I never did get my football boots back.

**** The author of this account, Mr Tony Costello, now lives in North Ferriby, East Yorkshire. He came all the way back to Formby to attend a History Group talk on 'The Sefton Coast in Wartime' and while here met some old school friends.***

**The Formby Civic
Society Newsletter**

SOCIETY OFFICERS

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55th Annual Art Exhibition

Our Annual Exhibition takes place in the village on Saturday 27 June. As usual, we would welcome help on the day. The lorry is due to arrive at 8.30 am with the stands and will collect at 4 pm. All those who exhibited last year will be sent an entry form. Anyone else who wishes to enter, please contact me so that form may be delivered to you also.

We hope to have a day sketching in the Tarleton area in July. There are several interesting buildings to paint in this area and also countryside, the boatyard and Bank Hall. Whilst Bank Hall is open one Sunday in the month, we can make arrangements for the grounds to be opened for us, so that we have the place to ourselves. We will settle a date when members are together at the Exhibition. We will also arrange at this time to have a half-day sketching in August. If you are not at the Exhibition but want to join us, please telephone me after this date for details.

Barbara Mossop, Art Group Representative. 01704 873920



Future Programme

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| Wednesday 10th June 7pm | Asparagus Fields Walk (Details Enclosed). |
| Saturday 27th June | Open Air Art Exhibition, Chapel Lane, Formby. |
| Sunday 5th July | The Eden Viaducts, Smardale and Kirkby Stephen (With Merseyside Industrial History Society). £16 pp; |
| Sunday 19th July | Festival of Archaeology Event; A Guided Walk to 'Formby by the Sea'; (see details enclosed) |
| August (date to be arranged) | Day-trip to Sizergh Castle, (Summer Outing); (see details, date. etc on leaflet enclosed) |
| Wednesday 9th Sept | Visit to St Helen's Glass Museum ; (£12.99 pp); (See details enclosed) |
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