

Formby Civic News

Formby Civic Society Newsletter

The Green Lane Conservation Area Review



August 2009



The Grapes Hotel, one of the most prominent buildings in the Conservation Area

Are you interested in helping?

Green Lane is one of Sefton's twenty-five conservation areas and the only one in Formby. A conservation area (CA) is a neighbourhood of historical interest deemed worthy of preservation by reason of its distinctive character, arising both from the nature of its public spaces and the character of its buildings and the grounds they occupy.

Development in a CA is subject to special limitations; the aim is not to prevent development, but rather to ensure that

any development is consistent with the character of the area. Special restrictions apply to the demolition of any building or part of a building, the erection of new buildings and to the enlargement of existing buildings; repairs to windows, doors, chimneys, boundary walls, etc. are all subject to special planning requirements aimed at preserving the historical and architectural integrity of the area. The felling of any tree in a CA (not just those protected by a Tree Preservation Order), or even work on such a tree, requires the permission of the Local Planning Authority (LPA). This may sound rather negative and draconian, but, in a recent survey carried out for English

Inside this issue:

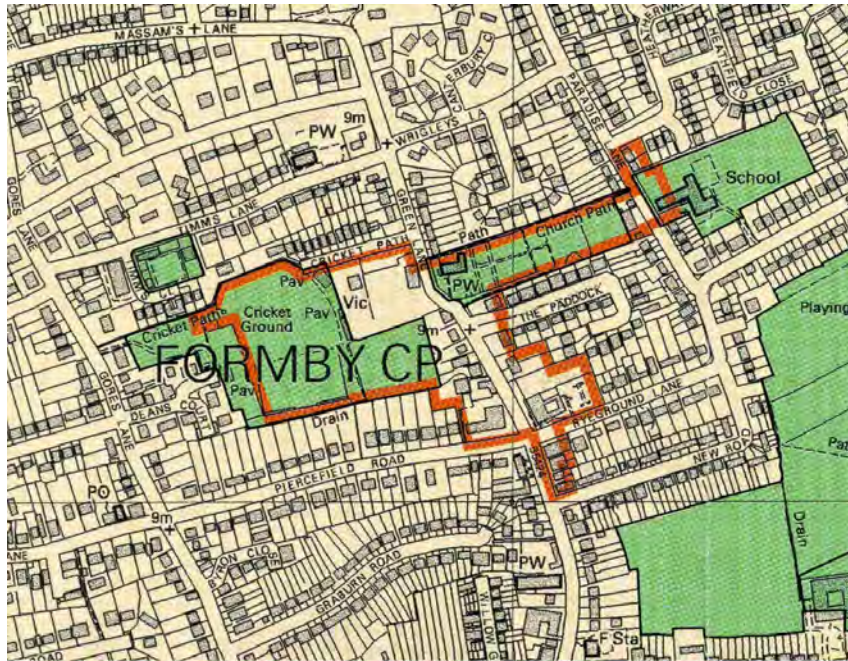
The Green Lane Conservation Area	2
Information Panels	3
Buildings at Risk	3
Planning Matters	5
Ravenmeols Heritage	7
History Group Report	8
Art Group Report	8
The Sands of Time Revisited	9
Wildlife Notes	10

Stop Press

The Civic Trust - see insert.

Continued p. 2.....

The Green Lane Conservation Area review



Map of Formby's only Conservation Area. This is as enclosed by the darker grey line. The paler grey areas indicate urban green space. From the Sefton MBC Unitary Development Plan

Heritage (EH), most residents living in a CA said they chose to live there because of its agreeable ambience, although many did not realize they were living in a CA. EH also found 82% of estate agents nationwide think original features add value to a property and 75% think being in a well-kept conservation area enhances house prices.

The Green Lane CA owes its existence to a proposal of the then Formby Society; its proposal was adopted without amendment by the Council's Planning Committee at its meeting on 14 September, 1983. The report to the Committee, together with the Society's proposal, comprise the foundation documents for the Green Lane CA and remain the only designating documentation for the CA, which is located about the axes of Green Lane, from the Grapes Hotel to St. Peter's Church, and Cricket Path/Church Path, between Gores Lane and Paradise Lane. The CA includes three Grade II listed buildings, viz. St. Peter's Church, which dates from 1746, the cruck-framed house at 15A Green Lane, which is

possibly 17th century, and the thatched house at 21 Green Lane, which is 18th century; the stone sundial at St. Peter's Church, which is a

The main purpose of this article is to ask for volunteers to form a working party for just that purpose.

Grade II listed monument, came from the original St. Luke's church when it was abandoned after being overwhelmed by drifting sand blown by a storm in 1793. The CA is also distinguished by its open spaces, notably the cricket ground and the grounds of St. Peter's Church, including its graveyard and the area of designated urban green space at their eastern end, and its abundance of trees.

Following the recommendation of Government, LPA's are currently engaged in re-appraising their CAs; this is essential work if CAs are to survive. Sefton MBC has only two conservation officers and they have been diligently reappraising the borough's CAs; have a look at the re-

appraisal for the West Birkdale CA (Google "West Birkdale Conservation Area") for an interesting read and to see what is involved. The Green Lane CA has not been reviewed since its original designation, but it is next on the schedule for re-appraisal. EH and the NW Association of Civic Trust Societies (still very active, despite the demise of the Civic Trust itself), in taking the lead to ensure the preservation of CAs, give many examples of how local organizations like ours have been able to assist Council conservation officers make the best use of their very limited resources by doing some of the basic work of data gathering; Sefton's conservation officers have told me they would be very grateful for any help we could give them in re-appraising the Green Lane CA. **The main purpose of this article is to ask for volunteers to form a working party for just that purpose.** The work would be very interesting and would require no specialist expertise; it would entail a review of the historical documents to show how our CA came to be as it is, an analysis of the characteristics of the area and a review of its boundaries, an assessment of how each property relates to its vicinity, and the creation of a photographic record of the area; this work would be done with the guidance of officers who would indicate how it was to be carried out. When the CA has been re-appraised, the work would be not be done, because what is then wanted is a Management Plan to ensure the CA's future integrity, and a periodic review to assess its condition. I hope our current membership will take inspiration from those 1983 stalwarts who brought the Green Lane CA into existence and that it will be possible for us to ensure that their work is continued today. If you wish to volunteer, or would like to know more, please contact me or any Committee member (contact details on the last page of this *Newsletter*).

Desmond Brennan

Village Information Panels Suggested by Reg Yorke

Some time ago, it was suggested that the Society might be able to assist the Formby Parish Council in designing a Heritage Interpretive Panel for Formby Village Centre. We recently went on a 'fact-finding' visit to Frodsham, where they have a range of well conceived panels designed to a professional standard and created and placed there by means of a generous grant from the Heritage Lottery.

We noted that these boards are also significant for the Cheshire 'Sandstone Trail' which starts from Frodsham and runs some 34 miles inland (analogous to our Sefton Coastal Footpath).

We looked carefully at several of the heritage boards and also many of the numerous blue plaques fixed to old or otherwise notable buildings in the town centre. Basically they have two types of panel.

The first type of panel measures about 4' x 3' and contains about 25 images of significant buildings, each accompanied by text describing the

history of the building illustrated. In addition, there is an introductory section describing briefly the history of Frodsham itself. The boards also have a simplified map of the main street showing where most of these buildings are situated. From this it would be easy to identify the position and characteristics of any specific building.

Here in Formby it could be argued that an information board should relate to various local attractions and to locations on the coast

The second type of 'Frodsham' Panel is smaller and has a map of the town area in the centre together with local roads and places of interest with the marshes on one side and hill on the other. A 'frieze' round the map artistically illustrates local wildlife; outside this there is an illustrated band of 25 illustrations of local places of interest, churches, farms, cottages and

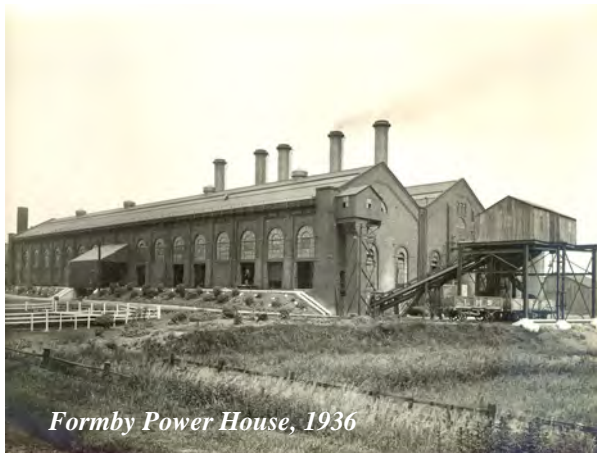
houses. The outermost zone contains some historic dates and other information. A panel at the centre top contains a 'potted history' of Frodsham, celebrating the 800th anniversary of the granting of its Charter in 1209.

Here in Formby it could be argued that an information board should relate to various local attractions and to locations on the coast, or around Formby, like the second type of Frodsham example, rather than focus on our increasingly crowded Village Centre where alas there is now less real historic interest.

We need to think about what illustrative material and text we could include in a similar panel for Formby, but there would certainly be no difficulty in finding illustrations. As well as a heritage interpretation board perhaps we should also be considering a new edition of our 'Discovering Formby' leaflet.

We would be interested to have member's ideas and suggestions!

Victorian or Edwardian Buildings at Risk by Barbara Yorke.



Formby Power House, 1936

The Victorian Society is launching its annual appeal to find the nation's top ten endangered buildings. It is calling on people across the country to nominate Victorian or Edwardian buildings at risk in their local area and we have been invited to consider nominating buildings in our area.

many development plans have stalled, it is now more important than ever to identify buildings at risk. The cost of weather-proofing a building and protecting it from vandals is not huge, but it makes a massive difference. Without it many buildings may be beyond repair by the time the

They do not have to be listed to be nominated, but they should be at risk, perhaps of demolition, from insensitive development or simply neglect. They need to have been built between 1837 and 1914.

As the economic situation has made things harder than ever for the owners of historic buildings and

money starts flowing again.

Buildings that have been nominated in previous years have included pubs, swimming baths, stately homes, former workhouses, many churches and chapels and a large number of threatened Victorian schools. A list of the national top ten threatened buildings will be published in November.

One building we could certainly nominate is Formby's old Power House. Although not generally recognised as notable or historic this splendid building, as we point out on our website, deserves consideration for preservation and it was good to know that local developer Mike McComb has taken the trouble to consult the community on initial designs for its conversion to residential accommodation but nevertheless its future is still uncertain.

.....continued overleaf

Victorian or Edwardian Buildings at Risk

The history of the building was outlined in this Newsletter and on our website in 2006. The Directors of the Liverpool to Southport Railway line, originally opened in 1848, took a forward-looking decision in 1902 for the line to be electrified using a third live rail, one of the first such projects in the country. Because the supply of domestic electric power was at a very early stage of development, this meant that the Company had to supply its own power. The contract was given to Dick Kerr and Co of Preston and the choice of location for the site of the necessary power-station was here at Formby, on the banks of the Alt, which provided the cooling water for the turbines, midway along the line and also some distance from any housing. The building was erected by Thomas Croft and Sons of Preston. It was 280 ft long and divided into two bays, the boiler section 65ft wide and the machinery section also 65ft, traversed by overhead electric cranes. The weight and nature of the engines, turbines, cranes and other machinery was such that the building had to be constructed on a vast concrete platform with 3ft thick brick walls built

in a monumental style. Despite being over a century old (opened in 1904) and carrying many superficial scars, mainly from its later uses the building is basically in sound condition and can now be regarded as an important monument to the industrial revolution's requirement for increasingly reliable transport. Coal was brought from Wigan and delivered by gravity hopper wagons. As no approach road to the power-station existed, access was provided from the railway in the

it makes as great a visual impact as the sight of any other ancient monument.

form of a small platform 'halt' for passengers, (workers) and sidings for rail wagons. One of its early managers was the father of well known Formby resident and Deputy Lieutenant, Mary Creagh, who has kindly provided us with much interesting historical information. Bob Fairburn a long-time member of the FCS and former Treasurer was at one time an engineering apprentice there and has also given us a lot of valuable histori-

cal information.

It ceased producing electricity in 1946, after which time power was obtained from Clarence Dock Power Station. It remained empty until 1955 when it was taken over by Ross Insulation Products who remained until 1978. In the 1980s, it converted to making a variety of moulded plastic products, etc. At this period, it was described as an "active Formby Factory surrounded by fields a mile from the dunes and shore, standing solid and foursquare against the winds of the Irish Sea". In a sense, seen from the distance, it makes as great a visual impact as the sight of any other ancient monument. The famous Liverpool photographer E. Chambre Hardman recognised this and we have some of his remarkable black and white prints of this building seen across the local cornfields then being harvested. This building whilst making no claim to glamour has certainly much character, and a significant history. Neglected it may be but well deserves preservation.



Planning Matters by Desmond Brennan



Removal of a penstock for refurbishment (from the EA's "Alt Newsletter for June, 2009)

Issues relating to the refurbishment of the Altmouth pumping station remain unresolved. For reasons which the Environment Agency (EA) wish to remain confidential, the additional supplementary funds which were approved in response to the first Form G Report have proved to be insufficient. A second Form G Report, seeking additional funding, is in its final stages of preparation and will shortly go to the EA's National Review Group (NRG) to be vetted and hopefully approved. We very much trust that this further Form G Report will be considered by the NRG as a matter of the utmost urgency; the continuing delay (the initial Project Appraisal Report was dated January, 2007) has to be a matter of great concern. We are continuing to engage with the EA, especially on the issues relating to backup, and, because matters are uncomfortably fluid at the moment, I will defer further comment.

However, other aspects of the refurbishment are proceeding satisfactorily. The contract for the enhancement of the network power supply has been awarded to Scottish Power, who have almost finalized the cable route from the Formby substation in Stephenson's Way to the Altmouth pumping station, and the EA have ordered the step down transformer which will be installed at the pumping station. The contract for the refurbishment of the penstocks and the

provision of new stop logs has been awarded and the work is in progress. Also, the contract to refurbish the weedscreen and to double its capacity has been awarded; the contractor has almost completed the design and manufacture phases of the second grab mechanism, and the start of installation is imminent. The original underground diesel storage tanks have now been decommissioned.

A separate but closely related matter concerns Condition 15 attaching to the planning permission for the flood storage area at Lunt Meadows, approved by Planning Committee at its meeting on 23rd August, 2006 and which is soon to expire unless work is commenced before the expiry of the three year period from that date in which it is valid. The condition requires that no substantive work

Before work starts on the scheme proper, more will be known about backup arrangements at Altmouth

should be commenced on the storage area until the first of the new electric pumps has been installed in the Altmouth pumping station and, further, that two of the original diesel storm pumps should be refurbished and retained as backup. Because it will be physically impossible to comply with this condition, given the arrangements now intended for the refurbished station, the condition will have to be renegotiated. With this in mind, the EA submitted in June an application for the variation of Condition 15 to meet the changed circumstances. Unfortunately, their proposed new condition was deficient in two respects; first, the new condition itself

said nothing about backup and second, the supporting narrative contained a number of unwarranted statements concerning the standard of backup which would be provided. Following the Society's intervention with both the EA and the Council's Planning Department, the application was withdrawn. The EA will meet the requirement to start work on the storage area before 23rd August by commencing work on a haul road, which in the completed scheme will become an access road; this work will not be substantive enough to violate Condition 15, but it will suffice to meet the requirement that work commence before the August deadline. Before work starts on the scheme proper, more will be known about backup arrangements at the Altmouth pumping station, giving a sound basis for the renegotiation of the Condition. The project team responsible for the refurbishment of the Altmouth pumping station remain optimistic that the flood storage scheme will soon receive the EA's approval, but we take a more cautious view; we note that even before planning permission was granted, the EA itself had refused funding for the scheme, and, although the scheme has been in the EA system for three years, it has yet to be approved. Further, we are concerned that, although the EA has given repeated assurances that the refurbished Altmouth pumping station will provide the same level of protection as the original station *as a stand alone unit*, managers responsible for the specification repeatedly make statements which indicate that, in assessing the standard of backup required, they make the assumption that the storage area will receive approval in time for it to be completed at the same time as the refurbishment work at the pumping station is completed. We believe that is an unsafe assumption to make and nor does it take into account the role the flood storage area is intended to play in providing the additional protection against the more extreme weather events that are anticipated to accompany climate change. It is not at all clear what

Planning Matters

computer modelling studies have been done on how the flood pool would function in the catchment and in relation to the refurbished pumping station, and we have asked for details now that it is apparent the storage area is likely to have a significant influence on the level of backup that will be provided.

There has been a meeting of the ad hoc working party formed to further the Visitor Centre project at Lifeboat Road; it was chaired by Mr. Dave McAleavy, Head of Coast & Countryside, and included representatives from the Formby Area Committee, the Formby Parish Council and the Society (namely, Reg Yorke and myself). The present adverse economic circumstances made the review of possible sources of funding for the project a depressing exercise and it is clear that the topic will have to be revisited many times in the future before there is any prospect of progress. The Society is anxious to work towards a more integrated management of the Formby Point area which extends from Raven Meols Hills in the south to the Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve in the north. As a first step towards that goal, serious consideration was given to the Society's request that road signage should be put in place which directs visitors to both the Lifeboat Road beach and the Victoria Road National Trust (NT) site. At present, the only road directions are to the NT site and give visitors the impression that Formby Point is just the NT site. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the NT site is currently in some difficulty because of erosion of its beach and the loss of car parking space on account of sand drifting. The considerable overflow of visitors to the NT site is directed to the Lifeboat Road site, which is being designated merely as a supplementary parking area, not as the magnificent beach that it is. The result is that, on bank holidays and at times of good weather, particularly in the school holidays, there is often great congestion on Victoria Road and connecting roads as cars make their way south

through residential areas of Formby to the great inconvenience of the people who live there. The meeting resolved to do what it could to address the road signage issue; there is already some money available which could be used for that purpose, but not sufficient. Mr. McAleavy is to explore the possibility of identifying additional sources of finance. A major current limitation of the Lifeboat Road site is that it lacks toilet facilities, a deficiency which will not be easily remedied, since it is estimated that to do so even in a basic way would cost at least £300,000. We also raised the issue of refurbishing the navigation marker, which is symbolic of Formby (and an icon for this Society!) and there is every prospect that the group will be able to arrange for that work to be carried out. The group will meet again in a few weeks time.

Finally, I will conclude with an update on the two planning cases I featured in the last *Newsletter*. The site visit of Planning Committee to inspect the community green space in Kings Close was a notable event; recall the owner of the adjacent prem-

The Society is anxious to work towards a more integrated management of the Formby Point area

ises has applied for a change of use from *adopted highway* to *residential* so that he would be free to purchase the land from the Council. An upstairs bedroom window in each of the houses in the Close displayed a large well designed poster with the legend *Save our community green space* and a good number of residents and representatives of the Parish Council were out in the road (as was I!) to present an impressive dignified demonstration to the visiting

members of Planning Committee; it was unfortunate that many of the Councillors serving on the Committee missed the site visit. Unhappily and incomprehensibly, Planning Committee voted to approve the application in a politically polarized voted. If the purchase of the land is to proceed, it will be necessary for a stopping up order to be obtained from the Magistrates Court, and I and others will be doing all we can to halt that process – we certainly have not given up yet. The Public Hearing for the other case, viz. the appeal in respect 43-43A Freshfield Road, was quite as enthralling as anticipated. A few days before the Hearing, I had met with the neighbours who intended to come to the Hearing to decide how we would present our case. At the Hearing, the Council's case officer gave a stout defence of the refusal of the application to erect two detached houses on the site currently occupied by a single dwelling with a minor extension; one of the neighbours, who is a professional surveyor, dealt with issues relating to dimensional inconsistencies in the drawings (eventually resolved by measurement on site) and I covered on more general issues. The proceedings were extremely well conducted by the inspector, who allowed us all to have our say, albeit in a very formal procedural context. We have to hope now that the inspector sees it our way rather than that of the appellant – we will know soon.

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



The residents of King's Close protest.

Ravenmeols Heritage by Reg Yorke

According to Domesday Book, before the Conquest “there were in Ravenmeols three manors held by three thanes”. Between 1205 and 1211, Henry de Lea, the lord of Raven Meols, granted a licence to William Blundell of Ince Blundell to erect a mill on the Raven Meols side of the Alt, “with the right to take eels at the sluice”. The mill was subsequently given to the monks of Stanlowe, (later Whalley), who in 1329 paid a rent of a gilt spur, or 4d. The monastery continued to operate the watermill (possibly a tide-mill?) until the dissolution.

A parochial chapel which appears to date from the 13th Century stood on the site of the modern St. Luke's Church, with its ancient burial ground. This was originally within the Ravenmeols boundary but little is known of its early history. Half the manor was already “lost to the sea” by the 13th Century and today Raven Meols only covers about 658 acres (exclusive of foreshore).

From about the beginning of the eighteenth century, blown sand has gradually covered most of it. The Molyneux family of Melling owned the manor in the first part of the seventeenth century, but in 1757 it was purchased by John Formby of Formby. It then continued until the 20th Century to be owned by the Formby's of Formby.

A company was incorporated in 1875 under the title of the Formby Land and Building Co., and purchased 105 acres of Raven Meols, for £12,100 – a roughly rectangular area extending from Andrews Lane to the shore. The Company's objects included *The laying out, forming, and sewerage of streets, roads, parks, gardens, squares, crescents, terraces, boulevards, Promenades and other open spaces. The making of piers, jetties, and landing places in, upon and connected with lands purchased; the laying of tramways, railways, and running carriages thereon, by steam or other motive power, for hire or profit; the forming of waterworks and*

reservoirs, for supplying water for rent or for sale; the erection of gas-works, and the manufacture of gas and the selling of the same; the erection of markets, docks, hotels, laundries, baths, water gardens, aquariums; the manufacture of bricks and tiles, and selling the same.

The first step was to run a narrow-gauge track from the siding at Formby station for the conveyance of building materials, etc. from Andrews Lane to the coast, and here they constructed the first item on their programme, a double-tiered promenade of brick and cement, joining up the westerly ends of the two new roads. Albert Road and Alexandra Road.

The “first sod” was cut in 1876. Behind the promenade, and parallel with it, two other roads were partly made; one was named Lord Street. Houses of the sea-side boarding-house type were erected on the promenade and in Alexandra Rd. and some of the older houses in the area, including those around Elson Road and Carrs Crescent were built by them. In 1878 Mr. Thomas Hawksley, an eminent engineer who was advising the company, thought that Formby would become a potential rival to Southport, but what we see today represents the sum total of the company's actual achievements. In July 1902, it was wound up.

Nevertheless, shortly before World War I, a loop-line to connect with the Liverpool-Southport Line was pegged out for at least a portion of its length in fields belonging to Marsh Farm and Cabin Hill Farm. Application for the necessary authority was made in May 1915, but not until 1918 was this forthcoming. The Board of Trade then made an Order *authorising the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Co. to construct Light Railways at and near Formby.* There was to be one station at, or near Alexandra Rd.

This lack of financial success led however to an interesting use for about half of the houses built. Several were seized on by a number of phil-

anthropic organisations to provide rest and recuperation for children from poor backgrounds in central Liverpool and one by Bootle Corporation.

Seed's Directory entries show:-

1. *Sandon*, 1933-37 ‘Summer Camp for Bootle Children’; (In 1930 Bootle Corporation “Kiddies Kamp” Hon Sec Capt. H. E. Wilson.) Also used for Basque refugee children during Spanish Civil War.

2. *Mount Pleasant*, 1927-39 Convent of Notre Dame (Mount Pleasant, Liverpool)

3. *The Briars*. (‘Chapel of our Lady of Peace’) also used by Notre Dame Convent).

4. *1 Seabank House*. (Father Berry's Homes, 1933-39) Rev Fr. Bennett, Manager.

5. *Stella Maris*. 1927-1939 Stella Maris Association for Poor Children Holiday Home

It will be noticed that this period coincides with the 1930's Depression.

The most interesting of these is Seabank house, as we here have a clear link with the well known mid-Victorian social reformer Father Nugent (who actually died in Formby) and his successor Father Berry. In addition to these Holiday Homes, there was during the summer months a great deal of camping in the area, some organised in camp-sites, but a great deal very informal. This happy philanthropic use for Formby-by-the-Sea property ended suddenly at the beginning of WW2 when virtually all this property and land was requisitioned for military and defence reasons. Afterwards, several of these properties were used to house evacuated families from Bootle.

Now a number of the properties nearest the shore have already disappeared, but their former sites can still be discovered by the keen observer.

History Group Report by Barbara Yorke

Inspecting the 'Cold-War' observation post.



Since the end of our 'Winter Season' of formal meetings, we have been enjoying some outdoor events. These began with an evening 'Asparagus Walk' led by Reg on Wednesday 17th June (just a few days before the end of the 'Asparagus Season'). This was a lovely summer's evening and the stroll started with a perambulation round the former fields of Jimmy Lowe's Pine Tree Farm, first inspecting the old seed-beds and some fields tucked away behind the conifers, where the traditional narrow ridge and furrow of horse-drawn implements can still be seen beneath today's covering of Dewberry, etc. We then inspected a newly planted field on Sandfield Farm and finished by watching the late evening harvesting on the main field of Larkhill Farm,

where we received a cheery wave from one of the busy part-time seasonal asparagus cutters, a ladies hairdresser during the day!

Another interesting walk on Sunday morning 19th July, in rather wet weather, was the Society's contribution to the Festival of British Archaeology. A score of walkers explored the landscape of Formby-by-the-Sea, Ravenmeols, just about the quietest (and one of the most interesting) areas of the Sefton Coast. After meeting at the gate of Firwood, we walked through the earliest dune woodland on the coast, and then by courtesy of the owners looked at Formby's only 'listed' modern residence, Sandhills Cottage, Albert Road.

We then looked at the remains of once vitally important Royal Observer Corps observation posts and explored the remains of some of the intended resort of 'Formby-by-the-Sea', where part of an ambitious

promenade may still be discovered under the dunes. We talked about how the various properties which once stood here had been used in former times, in peace and war. We were accompanied by the Dr Phil Smith who described the unexpected recent finding of the now nationally rare native Black Poplar, some planted as an 'amenity' tree along the disappeared roads of this formerly intended seaside resort.

Our next outing is a day-trip by coach to Sizergh Castle, Cumbria on Thursday August 13th. This fine old building in beautiful gardens is still home to the Strickland family by whom it was built in the Middle Ages. There are still a few places available on this trip. We will enjoy a Guided Tour and then walk round the garden. Lunch and afternoon tea will be available.

We are considering membership of the British Association of Local History Societies which will improve communications with other active Local History Societies and, as long term projects, assisting with the mapping out of a series of Heritage Walks in Ravenmeols and planning how best to celebrate the centenary of the first successful flights on this coast in May of next year.

Art Group Report by Barbara Mossop

The annual Art Exhibition was held on 27 June. There were about 100 paintings including watercolours, gouache, pastels, oils and silk paintings on view. Many shoppers stopped to look at the paintings and some paintings were sold, but this total value was less than those sold last year.

The Committee met at Cafe D'arte one day in July to discuss our future programme. It was decided that

we should record the many changes that have taken place to streets and houses in Formby since Muriel Sibley's well-documented paintings and sketches. Hopefully we will then hold an exhibition of these changes, alongside Muriel Sibley's work. We will meet again to see what progress has been made - same venue, 10 am 26 August - anyone interested, please join us. We also arranged to have a sketching day on Sunday 20 September - details from Art Representa-



Open air Art Exhibitors 2009

The Sands of Time *Revisited*

Exactly ten years after the publication of *The Sands of Time, an introduction to the Sand Dunes of the Sefton Coast*, Dr Phil Smith has presented us with a superb update.

Sands of Time Revisited is based on the original volume, but is completely revised in a new format and with new photographs throughout. The photographs are clearer and the text larger. Most of the text has been updated and there are new sections reflecting Phil's unstinting efforts to catalogue and describe the special wildlife of the Sefton Coast. There is new information on the development of the green beach at Birkdale, now called Smith's slack, on the dragonflies of the coast and on some of the projects on which members of the Civic Society have been involved, including the sand-winning study and the celebration of asparagus farming.

The book begins with a description of the coast and its many land ownerships. The most significant change in the last decade has probably been the purchase of Freshfield Dune Heath by the Lancashire Wildlife Trust and the development of this new nature reserve. The chapter on dune formation and development explains the origins of the dune system and how dunes form at the boundary between land and sea. Phil has studied the history and development of the Birk-

dale green beach in great depth and he explains how this has grown from a few patches in the 1980s to an area of over 60 hectares today. It is important to put the Sefton Coast in perspective and we can take some consolation that the erosion at Formby Point is producing a huge area of new dune growth at Birkdale.

New information is provided on the formation of the 'wet slacks' in the dune valleys and hollows and how these can be affected by drainage and abstraction. Although this is primarily an ecological account of the sand dunes, a chapter on human use sets today's nature in the context of past environments and land use over the centuries from the Mesolithic period, early settlements, and the particular impact of asparagus farming, rabbit warrening and tree planting. New information and quotes are used to add to our knowledge of land use and there is an updated section on sand extraction based on the recent study undertaken with the Formby Civic Society.

The special wildlife of the coast is dealt with in chapters on dune plants and dune animals. New work includes information from Phil's ongoing inventory of plants of the Sefton Coast, trends in the vegetation communities, plants of the green beach,

studies of rare plants, the importance of the Altcar Rifle Ranges for damp grassland and orchids and alien species. In the animals section, new information is provided on the whales which have been stranded on the coast, most recently the Minke Whale washed up at Ravenmeols last year, on the red squirrel, sand lizards, natterjack toads, and invertebrates, including the 20 species of dragonflies and damselflies and the 23 species of butterflies recorded.

The book closes with a chapter on dune management which explains how the various conservation bodies and others are trying to maintain the balance of habitats and the range of micro-habitats which support the incredible biodiversity of the Sefton Coast. Phil remains optimistic about the future of the dune system although he stresses the need to continue to manage the area for all its wildlife.

Even if you already have a copy of the 1999 edition of *Sands of Time*, have a look at the *Sand of Time Revisited* as there is a wealth of new information gleaned from 10 years of scientific study and wider interest in all aspects of the coast.

John Houston



The 'Planes Ltd' biplane at Freshfield 1910

Early Flying at Freshfield 1910

In May of next year, we will be celebrating the 100th anniversary of an extraordinary chapter of our local history. In 1910, five of the UK's fifteen pioneer airmen, were regularly flying here at Freshfield and kept their planes in wooden hangars facing inland behind the dunes. South of the Promenade at Ravenmeols was another hangar used by the 'Formby Flying Club'.

Wildlife Notes by Dr Phil Smith

May 2009

May 2009 will go down in history for the most spectacular insect invasion in living memory. From around the middle of the month, millions of **Painted Lady** butterflies poured across the English Channel into southern England. By about 25th they were arriving in our region. On 29th John Dempsey counted 200 per hour flying along the shore at Southport and there were a dozen or more in just about every Formby garden. As explained in the national press, these fast-flying, hardy butterflies originated in North Africa where high rainfall encouraged rapid breeding. Their caterpillars feed mainly on thistles, so we can expect locally bred butterflies to appear in July and August.

My friend Trevor Davenport has been light-trapping moths in his Freshfield garden and phoned me on 31st, having caught a **Small Elephant Hawkmoth**. I was round there like a shot as, despite being interested in moths for 50 years, I had never seen this species which is a real beauty. According to Graham Jones, the Wildlife Trust's Reserves Officer and an expert in these insects, the Sefton Coast is one of Britain's moth hot-spots. Trevor has had several notable species already, although he only



Small Elephant Hawkmoth.

started trapping last autumn.

The volunteers of the North Merseyside Amphibian & Reptile Group have been studying Sefton's endangered **Sand Lizards** for several years, perfecting techniques for find-

ing them and recognising the unique colour-patterns of different individuals. The good news is that the population is in a far healthier state than was thought a few decades ago, the most recent estimate being 1000-1500 adult lizards. Recently, I had an exciting message to the effect that the group had just found a tiny remnant population on Hightown dunes south of the River Alt, an area with no Sand Lizard records for at least 30 years. There is a plan to introduce, over the next few years, captive-bred youngsters to both Hightown and the Wildlife Trust's Freshfield Dune Heath reserve.

The Cheshire ecologist, Dr Hilary Ash, came to see the Formby **Black Poplars** on 28th. She confirmed that we have at least five different types: three hybrids, the **Native Black Poplar** (*Populus nigra* ssp. *betulifolia*) and what may be a French form of the latter. Further research is underway to finalise identifications of these trees, which are of considerable historic interest.

A guided visit to Altcar Rifle Range on 15th was rewarded with the amazing sight of over 21,000 of the rare and beautiful **Green-winged Orchid** (*Orchis morio*), the largest colony of this plant in the north of England. Two new plants for the ranges were **Spurge Laurel** (*Daphne laureola*) and **Mediterranean Spurge** (*Euphorbia characias*), both being garden-escapes. With friends, I also added five new species to the Birkdale Green Beach plant list, which now stands at 281.

Bird highlights this month included the first **Pallid Swift** for North Merseyside and Lancashire at Seaforth/Crosby, which kept reappearing for several weeks. Also popular were the parties (or "trips") of **Dotterels** which alighted on Plex Moss between 5th and 10th. Unfortunately, these colourful birds were frequently disturbed by crowds of birders, some of whom failed to observe the first rule of mossland bird-watching: "stay in your car!"

June

That hoary old chestnut of the weather often features in these notes but this year's drought has been the most extreme in living memory. Despite frequent deluges further inland the Sefton Coast has had very little rain since January. Most sand-dune wetlands had dried up by the start of the month and even the deeper ponds were struggling by its end. **Natterjacks Toads** had a disastrous breeding season, though I found a few newly metamorphosed toadlets at Birkdale Green Beach on 8th June. However, the news is not all bad. Although some of our grasslands are beginning to look like they did in 1976, several butterflies seem to be recovering from the lows of the last two wet summers. The unprecedented **Painted Lady** invasion continued into early June, stragglers being seen throughout the month. Later there were good numbers of **Common Blue** and **Small Heath**, while **Meadow Browns** were abundant by the end of the month. Drier conditions may help to reverse the trend towards denser vegetation smothering the wealth of small plants that can't cope with competition from tall grasses and scrub. For example, the southern half of the dune-heath triangle at Montagu Road, Freshfield has been invaded by so much scrub in the last few years that that its **Heather** is now struggling to survive.

Each year, we find several new plants to add to the over 1100 species recorded on the sand-dunes in the last 200 years. Few, however, are as spectacular as the **Martagon Lily** (*Lilium martagon*) in full flower near Wicks Lake on the 21st. A few days later, a guided walk on Altcar Rifle Range produced another new species for the coast in the form of a large vetch-like plant that none of us recognised. It turned out to be **Goat's-rue** (*Galega officinalis*), common in the south of England and now spreading north.

Rachael Parks contacted me to recommend the dragonflies at a dune

pond west of Range Lane, Formby. Sure enough, its last few dregs of water had attracted an **Emperor** (*Anax imperator*), a pair of **Broad-bodied Chasers** (*Libellula depressa*) and two pairs of **Black-tailed Skimmers** (*Orthetrum cancellatum*). I managed to photograph the female Broad-bodied Chaser egg-laying on the wing.

Reg Yorke's Ravenmeols Heritage Trail visit for the Sefton Coast Forum on the 28th was fascinating, not only for the many historical features to be seen, but also because I spotted about 60 **Black Poplars** (*Populus nigra*) additional to the 500 or so already recorded at Formby Point. I went back the following day to map their positions. The nearby frontal dunes had lots of **Pyramidal Orchids** – I counted 150 on one north-facing slope – and several **Dark Green Fritillaries**, another butterfly that seems to be benefiting from the warm weather.

Most visits to the dunes are eventful but one to Birkdale on the 16th was really special. Patricia Lockwood and I found several colourful dragonflies on the rapidly drying ponds; about 30 **Bee Orchids** (*Ophrys apifera*) graced adjacent dune slopes, while **Early** and **Southern Marsh-orchids** (*Dactylorhiza incarnata* and *D. praetermissa*) studded the slacks, together with the much rarer **Baltic Rush** (*Juncus balticus*), **Flat-sedge** (*Blysmus compressus*) and **Slender Spike-rush** (*Eleocharis uniglumis*). An extraordinary salmon-pink **Common Toad** (*Bufo bufo*) was spotted in the grass, but the real highlight was four young **Stoats** (*Mustela erminea*) playing together on a footpath a few yards away. We watched them for about ten minutes as they dashed about, leaping and tumbling, sometimes diving in and out of a nearby ditch. Neither of us had seen anything like it before.

July

The weather hit the headlines again this month, which started with a short

heatwave, soon followed by cool, unsettled conditions rather like the last two Julys. Temperatures around 31°C on 2nd prompted an invasion of rare dragonflies from the continent.



Having received a message that two **Lesser Emperors** had been seen at Brockholes Nature Reserve near Preston, I called in the check Sands Lake at Ainsdale and was amazed to find several **Red-veined Darters** zooming about, including a pair egg-laying. This insect was last seen in our region during the warm summer of 2006 when up to eight appeared on the Crosby Marina boating lake. My highest count at Sands Lake was of six males and the pair but one or two males remained until at least 20th July, often sunning themselves on the boardwalk. The lake also held six other species of dragonflies during this period but less desirable were three **Red-eared Terrapins**, no doubt released pets. These can play havoc with our native wildlife, even eating young waterbirds; not good news for the brood of **Tufted Ducks** present at the time. Another unexpected sighting was a **Banded Demoiselle** at Freshfield Dune Heath Nature Reserve on 1st July, only the second record for the Sefton duneland.

I don't usually do much bird-watching in July but Seaforth Nature Reserve was an attraction, with a spectacular flock of up to 1300 **Common Terns**, many said to be failed breeders from the Dee colony at Shotton. From time to time, they were joined by a few **Arctic, Sandwich** and **Little Terns** but, most notably, by up to seven **Roseate Terns**, now a rare bird in Britain. I saw one on a couple of occasions. Also roost-

ing at Seaforth at high-tide were up to 10,000 **Knot**, a summering flock of presumably immature birds which had decided not to make the long flight back to Greenland and Arctic Canada. They made a dramatic grey carpet, sprinkled with a few red highlights, these being individuals that had moulted into their superb summer plumage.

Several days were taken up with a survey of **Tubular Water-dropwort** for the Botanical Society of the British Isles' Threatened Plants Project. This wetland species is rapidly declining nationally but we still have five colonies in dune-slacks, ditches and scrapes. The plant seems mostly dependent on sites where the ground surface has been lowered by digging to create wetter conditions. This study will be written up for eventual publication.

Following their dramatic invasion from North Africa, the **Painted Lady** butterflies have now bred and I saw the first fresh individual during a dragonfly walk at Mere Sands Wood Nature Reserve on 18th. By the last week of the month, they were numerous, especially on the dunes where they could be seen nectaring with **Six-spot Burnet** moths on **Sea Holly** and other favoured flowers.

The month ended with the exciting news of a possibly new plant for South Lancashire found by the National Trust biological survey team. This was **Small Nightshade** (*Solanum triflorum*), a very rare member of the tomato family which is native to western North America. I went to see it on 30th, finding about 15 sprawling plants on the disturbed sand of a rabbit warren. It certainly appears to be correctly identified and I spent some time photographing it and taking detailed notes, before sending a small amount of material to the vice-county recorder to have it confirmed

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A few places are still available for this day visit to Sizergh Castle and Garden, Cumbria by coach, Thursday 13th August. If interested please contact 01704 872187 straight away.

Future Programme

General Meetings Programme 2009

Friday 25th Sept: Professor Allan Hobson (Founder), *The Rwanda Trust.*

Friday 23rd Oct: Gerald Rimmer, (Shrimper), *Shrimping in Southport.*

Friday 27th Nov: Dave McAleavy and Will Moody, *The Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership.*

History Group Programme

Thursday 8th Oct: Mark Adams, *Lost Settlements.*

Thursday 12th Nov: Jack Gore, *Formby in the Cold War.*

Thursday 10th Dec: Reg Yorke, *Formby-by-the-Sea.*

Summer Programme Events

Thursday 13th August: Visit to Sizergh Castle and Garden, Cumbria. NB There are a few places still available on this enjoyable outing. See details above and let us know straight away if you would like to join us!

Wednesday 9th Sept. Visit to St Helen's Glass Museum. This is now cancelled.
