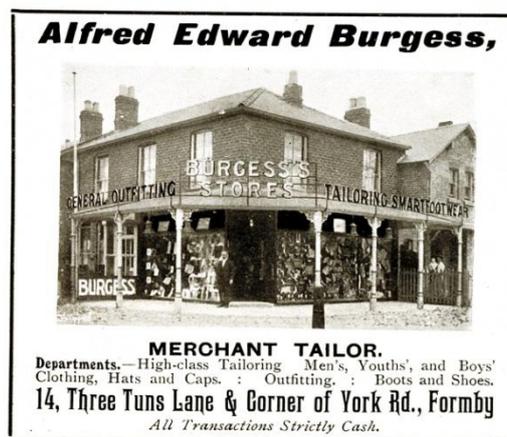
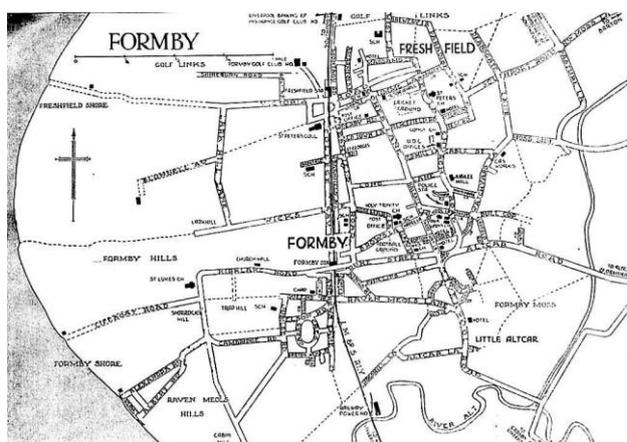


First World War 'Home Front' study in Formby

A number of FCS members worked on this project over a number of years in order to produce a book describing life on the Home Front in Formby during WWI to serve as our contribution to the national programme of remembrance at the centenary of the end of the conflict.

The book was written by John Phillips and Tony Pawson, with Tony Bonney providing the technical and digital support essential to producing the book. The late Reg Yorke provided the chapter on the raising of the civic War Memorial.

Included here is the first chapter of the book, describing Formby before the War began.



'FRESH SEA BREEZES AND HEALTH-GIVING AIR'

FORMBY BEFORE WWI

In the months before the War, life went on. The population in 1911 was just under 6,000, but that represented a large increase for the small, rural community of farmers, fishermen and craftsmen that had grown rapidly since the railway line between Southport and Liverpool had been opened in 1848. About that time, in 1851, the population of both Formby and Ainsdale together had been no more than 1,594.¹ There had been a real effort to try to develop a small resort under the name of

¹ c.f. "Viking Village", Edith Kelly (ed.), Formby, 1982, p. 70

'Formby-by-the-Sea' but this had never come to fruition. In 1875 the Formby Land and Building Company was incorporated and the finance was raised mainly by Southport businessmen. The first sod of earth to create a promenade was cut in 1876 yet, by 1902 the Company was wound up.² This, however, was an idea not necessarily forgotten and tells us that there were people in the district who had ideas and plans for developing Formby; there was a belief amongst many Formby councillors that the village could grow and prosper as the 20th century opened up. The nature of the community had quickly begun to change with the advent of the railway and a great many large new houses were built in easy reach of both Freshfield and Formby Stations to allow the wealthy merchants and business people who lived in them to travel quickly and comfortably to work in Liverpool. "Many of these people had different views and standards from those of the natives of Formby. They were anxious to have the benefits of country life, but not ready to accept the conditions that accompanied it. They were not dependent on the lords of the manor and wished to bring about changes which had previously not been thought of."³ They wanted such amenities as piped water, better drainage and water-closets and sewers instead of the cesspools and the night soil cart (known by many phrases such as the colourful 'marmalade cart'). They wanted street lighting, better roads and a say in their own local government. People travelling by rail in the winter would often still arrive at the station with a lamp and leave it there until their return so that they would have light to see themselves home. It was known for some locals to wait at the station with flame torches or lamps to help train travellers home – and they charged a small fee for doing so.

Change began to come about more quickly once the election had been held in 1894 to decide whether or not to become an Urban District with its own Council within West Lancashire at the time when Parish Councils were created. Once the votes had been counted and resulted in a narrow victory for the 'Urbanites', a campaign having been led by many of the 'newcomers' and promoted in print by the newly-created 'Formby Times' (the first edition of which was 17th November 1894), then Formby was 'on its way' and changes would gradually be made. In 1896 a telephone exchange was opened in the Village. In 1905 an Urban District Council was formed. The first sewers were laid, though the local terrain was so sandy and difficult to lay new pipes in with safety and stability that it became a very long and costly process; many outside privies and cesspits were still around into the 1950s! Horses remained the most regular form of transport, and there were horses pulling traps, carriages and wagonettes for people and carts for deliveries of goods, coal, milk and whatever else; there was still more than one blacksmiths, with one at Smithy Brow, a second in Cable Street, a third in Church Road and another on Liverpool Road. We will read later about such people as Teddy Mawdsley whose carts carried coal and who provided the horses for the Formby Lifeboat. However, other than by the railway, transport remained a barrier to growth and development. There were cobbled roads in the heart of the village and gas lighting from a gasworks on Watchyard Lane. By 1914, cars had begun to appear on the village roads and lanes, with Dr. Arthur Sykes and Reverend J.B. Richardson of Holy Trinity among the first in this community to own motors.⁴

² Ibid, pps. 72-77 (this section was written by FCS member Fred Beardwood)

³ Ibid, p. 79

⁴ The 1982 publication "Viking Village: the Story of Formby", edited by Edith Kelly from contributions by a number of Formby Society (in the present day Formby Civic Society), provides an excellent starting point for further research and understanding of the village's past. It has been out-of-print for some time but can be found online and in local libraries.

Chapel Lane was becoming a key shopping area, just along from Cross Green and with large new retail-related buildings constructed in the late 19th century by the Weld Blundell family among others. It was a popular area for cyclists and motorists despite the poor quality of the sand-ridden lanes, with the relatively new Grapes Hotel a welcoming watering hole for visitors and locals alike. William Marshallsay, who later recorded much of Formby's history, was a young man who described the increasing number of visitors "becoming acquainted with Formby and anxious to enjoy more of its fresh sea-breezes and health-giving air."⁵ On April 29th 1914, an anonymous letter signed 'Annual Tourist' praised the beauty of Freshfield and Formby whilst also making sound suggestions for areas of possible improvement. On the positive side, the letter said, "I know of no other district in Lancashire at the present time where the country looks as beautiful as Freshfield, Formby and the surrounding country. ... a centre of flower gardens, golf courses, and innumerable pleasant walks, electrified railways, and a sea shore within two miles ..."⁶ However, the writer then expressed surprise that with so much for tourists to enjoy in the area, there was so little opportunity to find rooms or apartments available. Then came what 'Annual Visitor' considered a major issue that needed to be resolved by the local authorities: "There is one feature of the place that the Council, or its sanitary authority, requires to look to more rigidly, and that is the more frequent removal of the night soil; and its ashes places ought to be kept more thoroughly cleansed, and at less periods than the removal of these nuisances, once in two months or so."⁷ If the writer had returned to see how matters had changed in Formby in the ensuing years, perhaps they would have found very little change until up to and after the Second World War. The 'marmalade cart' was still a feature for many years yet. Was this the beauty and the bestial? Formby was a village – beautiful, normal and difficult in turn. It was a community that was to be faced with terrible challenges, heartache and yet come through into twenty more years of 'normal everyday life' until dark days returned in 1939.

Is it possible to describe the village in its normality, prior to the Great War? This chapter does not pretend to do so – it merely aims to give a slight flavour of the kind of matters that reached the pages of the local weekly newspaper just three months before war was declared in August 1914. In the first week of May 1914 we can find examples of the everyday activities in a rural British village in the second decade of the 20th century. The annual meeting of the Formby Bowling Club was held at the Blundell Arms Hotel (now the Cross House Inn) in its adjoining Pavilion. A healthy balance sheet of £8 11s and 2d was presented and Councillor Tickle said that this showed that FBC, the oldest in Formby (at a time when bowls was an extremely popular sport, with most public houses having a bowling green) was still "to the fore, and their financial state now augured well for their prosperity during the coming season."⁸ On the previous Friday evening the members of the Girls' Friendly Society (St. Peter's Branch) assembled at the Victoria Hall for a social evening. Also invited were members of the choir, teachers from the day school and Sunday school and members of the Bible classes. There was dancing and refreshments, and the newspaper made particular mention of the M.C. for the evening, Albert Waddington, and pianist Tom Balshaw, a music dealer with a shop he ran with his wife Margaret on Chapel Lane. Both were well-known and popular men in the community and within the St. Peter's congregation. Albert joined the Forces early in the War and

⁵ c.f. Winifred Greenwood, "Sure Foundations: Holy Trinity Church, Formby, 72-77 the first hundred years", Formby, 1989, p.3

⁶ FT 2.5.1914

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

died on the Somme. Thomas was unable to list as he had been blind from birth and he lived on until June 1963 when he died at the age of 83.

At about noon on the same Friday, a Cable Street resident spotted that the roof of a nearby property at 12 Cable Street was on fire. Having given the alarm, the Formby Fire Engine turned out with the 'hose car' and four firemen. The ladder was raised, slates were removed and the fire was extinguished with buckets of water; the damage came to £7 but the house had been insured. The house was owned by William Rimmer of Watchyard Lane, just around the corner, but the occupant was Henry Bannister. What other news was carried in this edition? No local paper would be complete without weddings and deaths and this was no exception. Two well-known Formby names were involved in a wedding at Our Lady's when Mary Mawdsley of Hogg's Hill married William Ackers of Church Road in a service officiated at by Reverend Father Hothersall. As the pair left the church to go out onto School Lane, with the new Mrs. Mary Ackers wearing an amethyst coloured dress with a white hat and ostrich plumes, onlookers showered them with confetti.

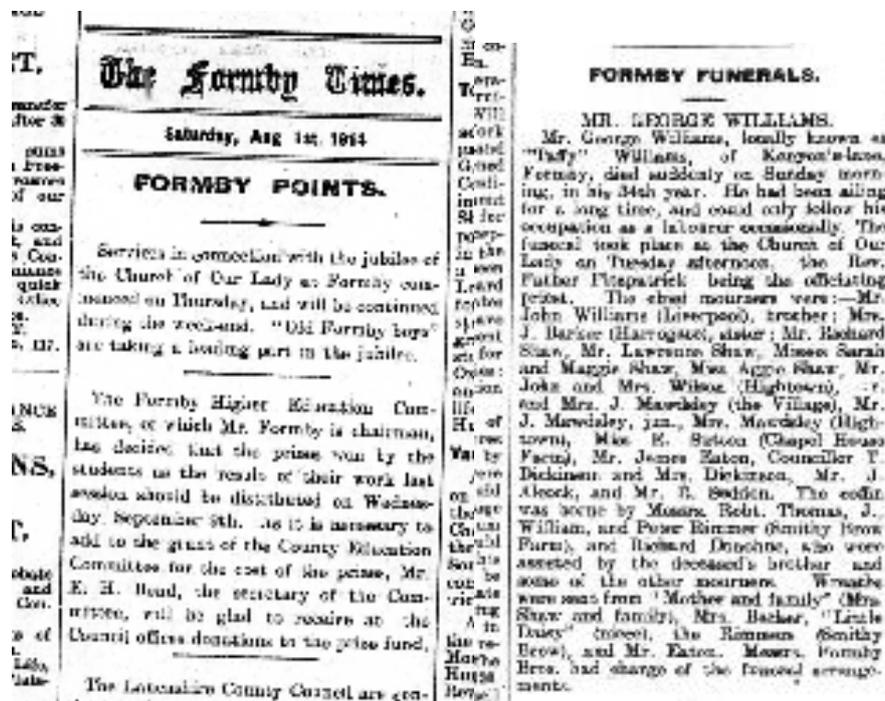
Two deaths were reported. One was of a 49 year-old man who had left the village a quarter of a century earlier to live in Bootle and whose body was returned home for burial. As a young man, Robert Formby had worked at the Formby Lifeboat House, then situated in Birkey Lane (and a private house today). The other burial was that of an even younger man who had been a labourer but had been ill and unable to work for some time. George 'Taffy' Williams of Kenyon's Lane died aged 34 and was interred at Our Lady's, Reverend Father Fitzpatrick taking the service. The deceased's brother from Liverpool and his sister from Harrogate were present, and leading the mourners after them were the members of the Shaw family of the farm close-by where, presumably, he had worked. It is touching to note that the Shaw family sent a wreath from 'Mother and the Family', and one of the youngest of the family was Miss Aggie Shaw who lived at the farm, was a well-known person in Formby and who lived until a very good age.⁹

What we cannot find in cuttings from the local newspaper is any direct and objective description of Formby, though there are plenty of opportunities to make inferences and gather clues. We can, for example, build up a picture of a community which needed road improvements; indeed local people who have lived in Formby for many years will happily recount tales of the cinder paths that were common and the ditches and brooks throughout the area. It is also clear that whilst there was some street lighting by gas, it was limited in coverage and this, combined with the large number of mature trees, made it a very dark place in the evenings. In 'Within These Walls: a Century of Methodism in Formby', Derrick Hanson described some of the problems caused by this darkness. "Travel at night in Formby must have been a hazardous business. In one letter to the Formby Times in the early days of that paper we read, '...it is an encouragement to robbery and immorality ...'." Mr. Hanson then provided more comments from readers on this theme. The first suggested that new gas lamps were not necessary and "Why not leave poor benighted Formby to paddle along in its sweet old-fashioned way ... which at any rate the birds and flowers seem to appreciate." An angry correspondent wrote, "Many ladies going to church are accosted in dark streets. One young servant was accosted no less

⁹ Ibid

than four times between Elson Road and Chapel Lane." Still another wrote, "People are stopped after nightfall and relieved of money."¹⁰

How representative these descriptions might be of a village at the turn of the 20th century when the population was much smaller than today and the police presence probably greater, we cannot say; yet it does remind us that this was a small but developing community which had the same lines of streets and roads that we recognise in the 21st century but with a different atmosphere and aspect, so many large trees, poor roads, street lighting in its infancy, the buildings largely farms and thatched cottages. Formby had become an Urban District Council under the influence of the wealthy new householders and year by year was on its way forward. It was a confident and well-grounded society that came face-to-face with great challenge and tragedy from August 1914. Yet, like other communities, Formby had already faced tragedy. In 1906 a stained glass window was inserted in the nave of Holy Trinity Church in memory of Arthur McConnan, the eldest son of Mr. and Mrs. McConnan of Mayfield on Victoria Road, who would lose another son, George, on the Somme in 1916. In the same year, a brass tablet was placed on the west wall of the church by Mr. and Mrs. Rathbone of Red Gables, Freshfield, in memory of their son Cecil who had died whilst serving in the army in India. The Rathbones would also lose another son, Guy, in 1916.¹¹ What we can say is that whatever the word 'war' meant to people generally in Formby in the early months of 1914, it was nowhere near to what the men and women who would become involved in their various ways would ever have imagined. Nor could those who stayed at home have imagined how radically their lives would be changed. There would have been some folk memory of a small group of Formby men marching together to the railway station, accompanied by the Formby Band, to join their unit and embark for the Boer War in 1901. That experience was not the same as the one that awaited the community on the Home front, in the trenches or in the hospitals of the Great War.



¹⁰ Derrick G. Hanson, 'Within These Walls: a Century of Methodism in Formby', with illustrations by Muriel Sibley, Liverpool, 1974, pps. 23-24

¹¹ Greenwood, op.cit., p.30