

The Sparkling Jewels of Wirral's Waterfronts

Many of the world's greatest and iconic cities were settled on waterfronts that are truly awe-inspiring: such grand and exotic locations as Bilbao, Cape Town, Santiago, Singapore or Vancouver. Indeed, we need merely to glance across the river Mersey at the magnificent vista of Liverpool's memorable Pierhead, now a UNESCO World Heritage site, to grasp the emotional and romantic impact of seaborne rivers and coastal regions. Yet, paradoxically, the only truly panoramic view of that spectacular waterfront is from the Wirral banks of the Mersey.

In so many ways Wirral is closely tied to nearby Chester, with its own ancient history linked to the Romans; or to Manchester where the Industrial Revolution became the catalyst for commercial boom and social change: and perhaps even more so to Liverpool, whose fortunes have regularly waxed and waned, and now wax again in the early part of this 21st century; that great maritime city gearing up to wear proudly the mantle of European Capital of Culture in 2008 and basking in a new found prosperity linked to a positive attitude to the challenges of a new era.

But, although often in the shadows of these clearly more high profile neighbours, Wirral has an individuality and diversity that bestows on it a certain level of enlightenment emboldened by a feisty spirit. It has a clearly focused perspective of its own identity, perhaps forged by an environment of outstanding beauty surrounded by water on three sides: a geographical distinction and advantage that transforms it into a truly dazzling triad of waterfronts. Those very differing coastal and marine references are surely the key to Wirral's idiosyncratic moods and personality.

Flanked by the monochrome reaches of the wide mouth of the river Dee, that springs from the

wild, rocky mountains of north Wales, it is then washed by the turbulent expanse of the Irish Sea, where Hilbre island and other nuggets of scattered outcrops have such ecological importance; and then it juts almost impertinently, even recklessly, into the fast flowing estuary of the river Mersey before sweeping around the inlet and heading upstream.

This remarkably appealing slab of land in the north west of England boasts seemingly endless miles of sandy beaches, lovely countryside, woods and heaths that merge almost seamlessly with expansive – and frequently sumptuous – residential areas that are likened to the Home Counties; or border enchanting villages, a handful of towns and a raft of bustling business parks and industrial sites. Wirral can also lay claim to an intriguing folklore that stretches back to the days of the mighty, all-conquering Roman Empire and to the Vikings, whose adventurous spark encouraged a far roaming spirit and who could recognise a welcoming coastline when they saw one.

These Bluebeards and Bloodaxes were pretty nifty at exploiting opportunities, the pillaging and so on notwithstanding, and their bequest to our age is the long list of Viking inspired place names such as Caldy – meaning *cold islands* – or Thingwall – meaning *assembly field* – amongst many others. Latter day industrial and commercial entrepreneurs, too, have found Wirral a convenient and suitable spot, as the likes of Lord Leverhulme have testified, and we can reflect on the once mighty Cammell Laird shipyard and the contemporary revival of the Birkenhead docklands areas at Twelve Quays by the Port of Liverpool, which is now a part of the Peel Holdings transport and property group, and Norse Merchant Ferries who ply their trade between Ireland and Britain.

Wirral displays that special sense of awareness

that similarly underpins the characteristics of other waterfront conurbations worldwide: its energy and vitality draws people to live, work and visit. However, this book makes no claims to be a concise reference work or a definitive photographic record of Wirral's delights and glories: more, it is a celebration of its outer boundaries as defined by water.

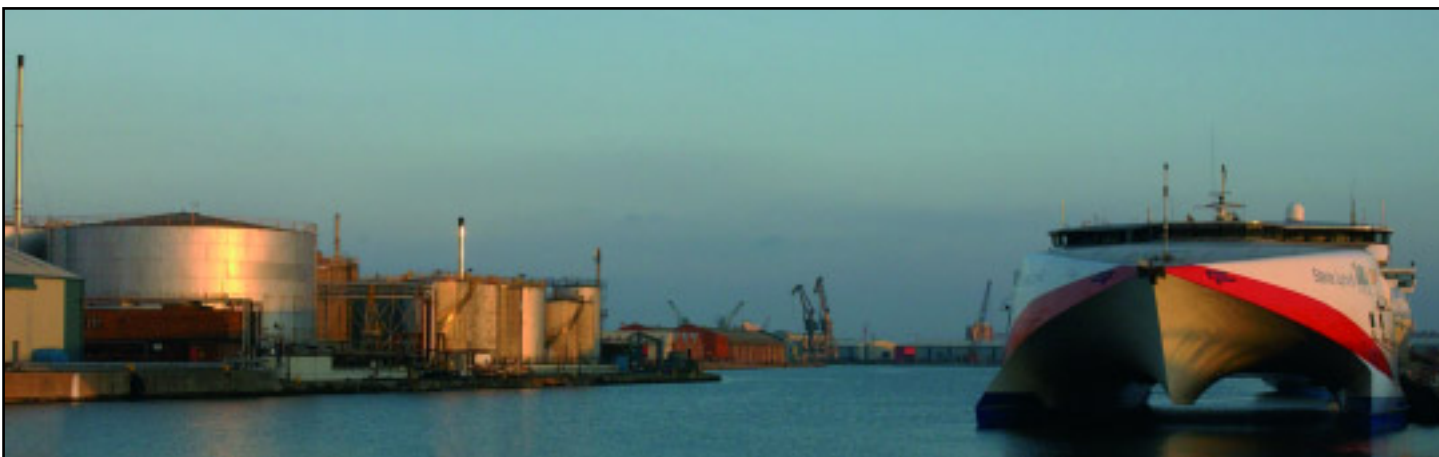
Our visual foray begins, appropriately enough, at Parkgate on the Dee which was once a Roman port of some significance, and that coast and the peninsula in general a Viking haven as explored by Wallasey-born historian Stephen Harding, a professor at Nottingham University, whose informative book *Viking Mersey: Scandinavian Wirral, West Lancashire and Chester* was published in 2004, the 1100th anniversary of the first landing of the Vikings in Wirral.

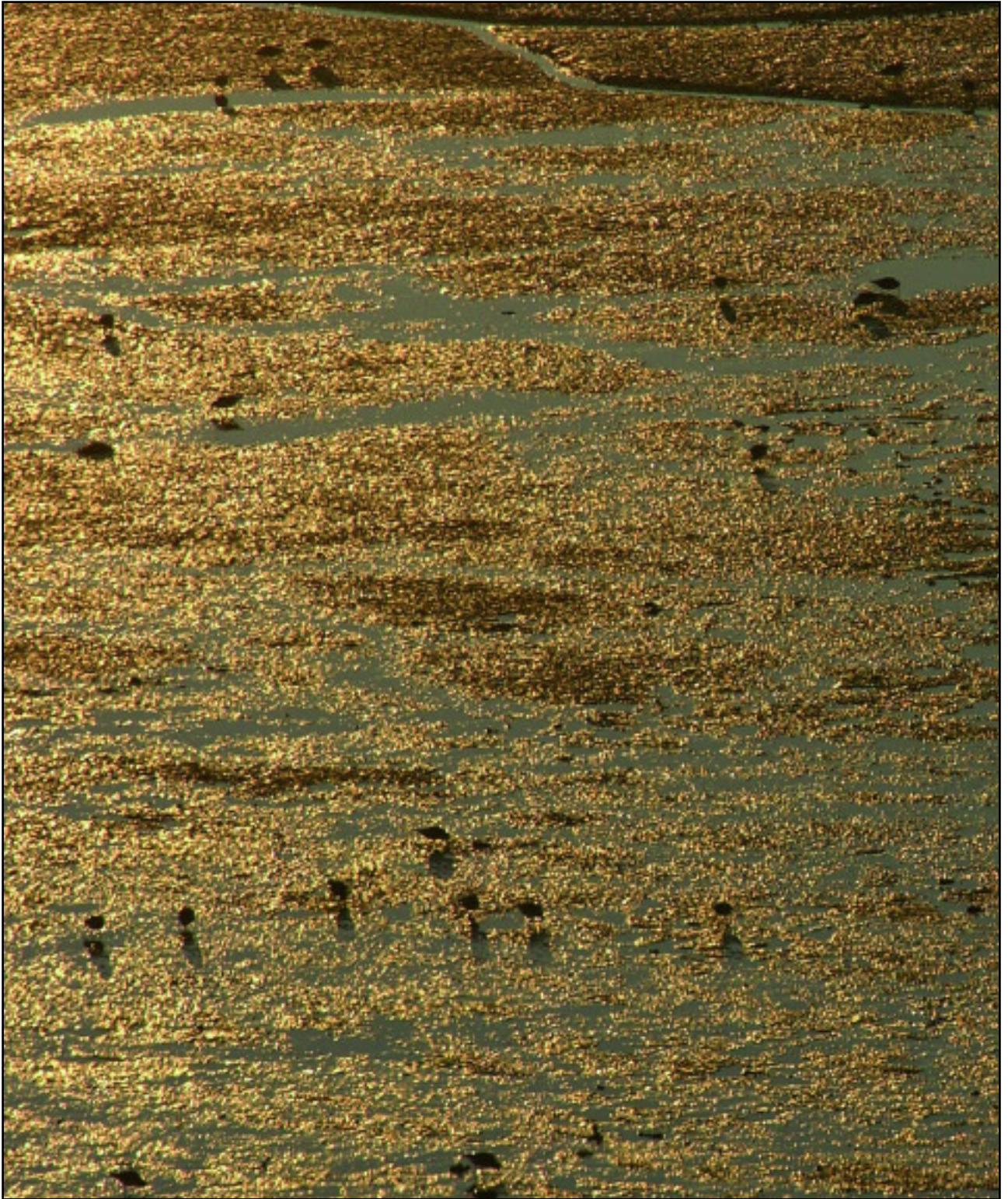
In the pages of *Wirral Waterfront* you can find dramatic reflections of the Wirral banks of the busy river Mersey, through Seacombe and Birkenhead – where the Mersey ferries made globally famous by singer Gerry Marsden, himself a Wirral resident, still plough the waves conveying commuters and tourists alike – and opposite, where huge ocean-going container ships berth in the Port of Liverpool; then switches to the upper stretches of the river to the

economically important oil jetties and terminals towards Ellesmere Port and Stanlow. The images meander over and around Fort Perch Lighthouse – once a warning beacon for ships entering the dangerous Mersey Estuary – along a coastal route that takes in the Edwardian treasure of Egremont Promenade to the elegantly fading Victorian seaside town of New Brighton, once rivalling its southern namesake as a holiday destination, and now gradually shaping up to face this new century. Sweeping around the majestic shoreline it takes in Hoylake, home to the Royal Liverpool Golf Club which has hosted the internationally acclaimed *Open Championship* on its links course, an event that has attracted generations of players and spectators.

In fact, Wirral has no less than 14 golf courses and three driving ranges, but it is the Royal Liverpool that is the diamond in the cluster. It has hosted *The Open* 10 times and the *Amateur Championship* a record 18 times, while the *Walker Cup*, the *Curtis Cup*, the *European Open* and the *Ladies' British Open Amateur Championship* have all been contested on this prestigious and challenging course.

And, of course, we couldn't ignore the exclusive resort of West Kirby, which is cloaked in a gentility that mirrors an earlier, less frenetic, age.





Its popular marine lake and promenade allow strollers and sailors alike to soak in sweeping vistas of the north Wales coast and the distant, misty shadows of the Snowdonia mountain range or the outline of Anglesey. The contrasts in such a relatively confined geographical area are startling, with beautiful countryside and top tourist attractions combining with an industrial and commercial infrastructure that might surprise the occasional visitor; particularly in Ellesmere Port. It is the biggest town in the eastern part of the peninsula, incorporated in the county of Cheshire and with a political frontier that takes in Neston stretching from the Dee across to the Mersey and dissected by the M53 motorway corridor.

The town of Ellesmere Port began to grow properly around the middle of the 19th century when commerce flourished thanks to the success of the Shropshire Union Canal, opened in 1795, and then later augmented by the Manchester Ship Canal, opened by Queen Victoria in 1894: a canal system that was once a key artery to the inland waterways uniting other parts of the UK, and which today still handles eight million tonnes a year carried by some 3,000 ships. In the west of the borough can be found the peaceful rural villages of Willaston, Ness and Burton and, of course, Parkgate which was a hugely popular bathing resort in the 18th century, although these days the tide rarely reaches the promenade and the waters of the Dee are merely far-off sparkles of light soundtracked by the shrieks and screeches of seagulls, terns and other birds – the wildlife acknowledged as another of Wirral’s charms.

Harking back to the work ethic of the Victorians – and frequently their patrician approach to employees – it was Lever Brothers and Cammell Laird that were the instigators of Wirral’s industrial background, and their port and river-related

ventures became essential to the local economy. Today it is stimulated and influenced by the *Wirral Investment Network*, a partnership of 50 of the peninsula’s most powerful private and public sector organisations. Its honorary vice president is Ben Chapman, MP for Wirral South and a former head of the government’s Department of Trade and Industry’s North West of England office. He believes



that the partnership has played a key role in initiating and supporting a wide range of projects that have brought increased prosperity to Wirral. Its *Making A Difference*’ awards were sponsored by Unilever, one of the organisation’s founding members more than a dozen years ago.



There is much about Wirral that might astound those unaware of its legacy. Designed by Joseph Paxton, Birkenhead Park was the first publicly funded park in Britain and is currently Grade 1 listed on the English Heritage Register of Historic Public Parks. Perhaps its real claim to fame, though, is that it was the inspiration for New York's Central Park and London's Victoria Park. For those keen to learn more about the historical background then look no further than the best-selling series of books by local publisher, Ian Boumphrey, who for 25 years has been collecting and recording tales and pictures from Wirral's past; his tally now stands at 47 books with one of his latest *Wirral On The Home Front 1939-1945* putting the focus on those turmoil-filled years of the Second World War.

Wirral is also home to a fair portion of Britain's fabled 'tea industry' with the famous Typhoo brand now located at Moreton while the futuristic Spaceport visitor centre – that cost £8.6 million – close to the Seacombe ferry terminal is already winning an international reputation. From within its portals it is possible to blast off on an unrivalled 'virtual' journey through space: spinning out from Earth to the farthest reaches of the known universe gasping at wormholes, black holes, supernovae and spiral galaxies.

While mentioning Wirral's connections with the USA it is worth noting that it is only the second official American Civil War heritage site outside of America, as recognised by the White House sponsored Civil War Preservation Trust. The other place is Cherbourg. And the Confederate warship *CSS Alabama* – a ship that became infamous for its role as a blockade buster against Union navy forces – was built in No 4 Dry Dock at Cammell Laird in Birkenhead: many Liverpool and Wirral merchants were supporters of the Confederacy, despite the





official British government stance of the time. And the last formal surrender of the American Civil War (1861–1865) took place aboard the *CSS Shenandoah* just off Tranmere, some six months after hostilities ended.

Wirral is also an integral part of the exciting *Mersey Waterfront Regional Park* that takes in more than 70 miles of the area's extensive coastline that incorporates the river Mersey, its estuary and parts of the rivers Dee and Ribble. An 'Action Plan' was drawn up by the Mersey Partnership on behalf of the six local authorities that have responsibility for the region. It encompasses major urban and industrial regeneration projects around the Mersey Estuary that from a Wirral perspective takes in tourism honeypots like West Kirby, New Brighton and large swathes of the Wirral coast, and the Wirral waterfront *per se*, which has a demographic and economic importance all its own.

That is being tackled by a regeneration initiative chaired by Peter Macready – who has contributed one of the forewords for this book – which will span an area from New Brighton to Eastham. He believes that the future success of what is tagged the *Wirral Waterfront Strategic Investment Area* is all about getting the right balance that will not only benefit the business and tourism ventures but the local communities who live close to the waterfront in all its guises. As managing director of the Bromborough-based McTay Engineering firm, part of the Mowlem Group of Companies, Peter Macready is very much aware of the needs of both. He explains that the idea is to change the face of the waterfront to make it a better place for the people of Wirral as well as enticing visitors and investors.

The concept was also the driving force behind a Wirral-based tourism conference – *Both Sides of 2008* – that was the brain-child of Ben Chapman,

a high level gathering that urged the North West of England region as a whole to take advantage of Liverpool's European Capital of Culture crown in 2008. Held at the Thornton Hall Hotel complex, it was attended by Tourism Minister, Richard Caborn, and Loyd Grossman, OBE, chairman of the board of Culture Northwest – the Cultural Consortium for the North West of England – and chairman of National Museums Liverpool. Other distinguished speakers included Jason Harborrow, chief operating officer of the Liverpool Culture Company; James Berresford, director of tourism for the Northwest Regional Development Agency; Martin King, director of tourism for the Mersey Partnership and Jim Wilkie, Wirral Borough Council's deputy chief executive and director of planning and economic development.

It is impossible to list all of Wirral's wonderful attractions and this book can only provide you with a cursory glimpse of what is on offer, and largely from a waterfront view, although we have now and then dipped into the hinterland to show other marvellous aspects of an area that is quite rightly regarded as the 'jewel in the crown of England's North West'. *Wirral Waterfront* is one of a critically acclaimed and growing international series of books published by *cities500* that puts the spotlight on the world's city and regional waterfronts. We hope it will reflect the diverse social and geographical conditions that have made the unusual peninsula of Wirral the lively and varied place it is today: it is a tribute to a vibrant and yet dignified corner of Britain that rarely sounds its own trumpet.

Lew Baxter