

Memories of the Sixties in Heswall

by Roger Lane and Jenny McDonald

We were recently sent a reminiscence written by John Ebbs from Pensby, describing his epic struggle to maintain power supplies to Heswall on a freezing Christmas Day, during the severe winter of 1962/3. John was an engineer employed by MANWEB, Heswall's electricity supply company before nationalisation. He was based in the Queensferry Depot when he retired in 1995. We have since heard the sad news that John died in March after fighting a long illness with great courage. We would like to convey our sympathies to his wife Hilary. We are incorporating John's words in his memory (see separate box). His story has prompted us to recount in this article other significant events which occurred in the sixties in Heswall and surrounds.

The start of the decade saw the replacement in 1960 of the steam locomotives running on the Bidston to Deeside railway. Heswall Hills Station, which was on this line, represented an important commuter route to Liverpool and Chester (the latter serviced by the Northgate Station now long replaced by Northgate Arena). The passengers were reported to be impressed by the comfort and cleanliness of the new diesel locomotives, but had some regrets over the romance of the steam era passing. The other railway in Heswall, the West Kirby to Hooton line, had already been closed to passenger traffic in 1956, but the old Heswall Station in Lower Heswall (now completely redeveloped except for the Old Station Master's House) saw a brief resurgence in activity as the line was used for driver training on the new diesels. The line was finally closed to goods traffic in May 1962 and the track removed in 1964. In March 1969 the Ministry of Housing and Local Government approved a grant of £52,000 to enable Cheshire County Council to purchase 7.5 miles of track between West Kirby and Neston. The Council purchased a further 4.5 miles of track between Neston and Hooton to complete the development of the Wirral Way, Britain's first Country Park, which opened in 1973.



While rail travel along the Dee coast had proved to be uneconomic, in contrast the road crossing at Queensferry connecting Wirral and Flintshire was becoming increasingly congested, especially in summer when holiday traffic dramatically increased the traffic flow. In 1968 the Government proved a grant of 75% of the £140,000 cost of a study to explore a new Dee crossing, with Cheshire County Council, Flintshire County Council and the Dee and Clwyd River Authority funding the remainder. Among the options considered was a bridge at Gayton, with a barrage also under consideration. A local newspaper stated very presciently at the time that if the scheme were to be delayed for another 10 or 20 years the cost, estimated at £10 million, might be doubled. The new Flintshire Bridge, when it opened in 1998 cost £55 million to construct.

The building boom in Heswall, which was boosted in the previous decade by the sale of the remaining 217 acres of the Davenport Estate in 1953, continued unabated. The Rose Farm Estate, the area of land



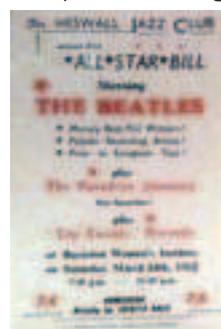
behind the Shell Garage between Gayton Lane and Well Lane where the Annual Horse and Agricultural Show used to be held, was developed, with the houses being advertised in November 1961 in the price range of £5,000 to £6,000. The development of the land on the north side of Seabank Road was permitted after an appeal in February 1960. Davenport Road was built on the only part of the old railway line, which was not able to be purchased for the Wirral Way, forcing users of the Way to divert along the pavement in Davenport Road.

During the sixties, the Roscote, a magnificent mansion with extensive gardens in Wallrake, suffered the same fate as many other overlarge and labour-intensive houses and was demolished, allowing nine new houses to be built on the site. The very old and historic sandstone smithy in Dawstone Road closed after the blacksmith Billy Barlow retired, and the site was redeveloped as Sandstone Walk.

St Peter's School moved into its new buildings in Thurstaston Road in 1961, a welcome move after part of the old school buildings had been destroyed by bombing in 1941 forcing some classes to be held in the Hall of the Mission Church in Telegraph Road. The Mission Church itself was rebuilt as the Church of the Good Shepherd and was dedicated in December. The school population continued to increase, and some classes of the Heswall County Primary School on the Puddydale had to be held in the Temperance Hall on Poll Hill Road from 1967. Gayton Primary School opened at the end of the decade.

Shopping facilities expanded to meet the growing population demands. Lennon's Supermarkets bought the old King's Cinema building in Telegraph Road in 1960 and in the same year Tesco purchased the Irwin's chain of supermarkets, thereby acquiring two branches in Heswall: one in Pensby Road and one in Deva Buildings (near the Catholic Church). Later the Pensby Road branch was redeveloped to become at the time the largest supermarket in Heswall, and the other branch closed. Also, in 1960 Woolworth's Store opened in Telegraph Road in a new building replacing a dairy, only the second store to be opened by the company on the Wirral since the war. This much-missed store is now occupied by Gould's Stationers.

A proposal by the Cheshire Council's Roads Committee to ban all parking on Telegraph Road in July 1960 received short shrift from the Heswall Chamber of Trade, and still has only been partially implemented. An advertisement from 1964 placed by Hall's Garage (now the Lower Village Garage) reminds us how inflation has hit car prices, with a new Triumph 2000 costing just £1,094.



Patrons of the Heswall Jazz Club, which organised live performances in the Barnston Women's Institute Hall would have had a chance to see the Beatles in March, June and September 1962. The band was on the cusp of celebrity, having just appointed Brian Epstein as their new manager. It is claimed that the March performance was the first time that the group wore their iconic collarless mod suits made by Beno Dorm Tailors located in Grange Road, Birkenhead, to replacing their previous leather jacket look.