



ME AND THE ELEPHANT IN CHESTER AND THE WIRRAL

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: MIKE TRIPPITT

Mike Trippitt takes his trusty campervan George to visit new places in Cheshire and Merseyside, and finds rivers, beaches, gardens and elephants along the way

The Wirral is a place that up until now has passed me by. I've heard of it, and know roughly where it is, but what is it like? What have I missed? What's to do there? I've decided it's time to put things right, so with my campervan George I'm heading to the Northwest to find out.

ROWS AND A RIVER TRIP IN CHESTER

Before the Wirral we stop first at Chester. It's an attractive spot with a rich and varied past. The city walls cocoon its medieval quarter, whilst the Saxon, Tudor and Victorian periods are manifest in the city's architecture. It is famed for its unique 700-year-old 'Rows' that house cafes and shops on dual levels, creating two shopping streets in one. It's a compact place too, so most attractions including the cathedral, the racecourse, its museums and riverside are within an easy stroll.

After a walk around the city enjoying its buildings and its bustle, I make for the riverside. The sun bursts through the high, fair-weather cloud, right on cue. "Are you having a river trip today, sir?" says Jenny Taylor, crewmember

and trainee skipper of the large pleasure boat—'Lady Diana'—moored at a landing stage. She tells me what a cruise entails and I need no persuasion to go on the three-mile round trip.

Jenny takes the wheel and eases the boat away. We cruise upriver past Chester Meadows to Boughton. It's a splendid way to see parts of the city visible only from the river. The Dee, once famous for salmon fishing, is one of the UK's first rivers to be managed. Chester weir, just one hundred metres from where we set sail, was built to keep a constant head of water in the city, to power local mills and to facilitate drinking water extraction. It's an impressive sight.

THE CITY ZOO

A Cilla Black song springs to mind as we arrive at Chester Zoo the next morning. Once I'm through the gates 'Bembe Kitchen' catches my eye. I'll have lunch there. The anticipation of what I might eat is a welcomed distraction from Cilla's refrain "Me and the elephant, we'll never forget you" that is circulating ad nauseam in my head.

Before visiting the elephants, I'm entertained in the monkey house. Fortunately, modern

The Wirral

A peninsula of 60 square miles between the rivers Dee and Mersey on England's northwest coast. It is bounded in the northwest by the Irish Sea, and in the southeast by the Shropshire Union Canal. It has 50 miles of rural walks. Birkenhead in the northeast is linked to Liverpool by road and rail tunnels.



Jenny Taylor at the wheel of Lady Diana



George at New Brighton with The Mersey and Bootle beyond



Views from Ness



Ness Botanical Gardens



Ness

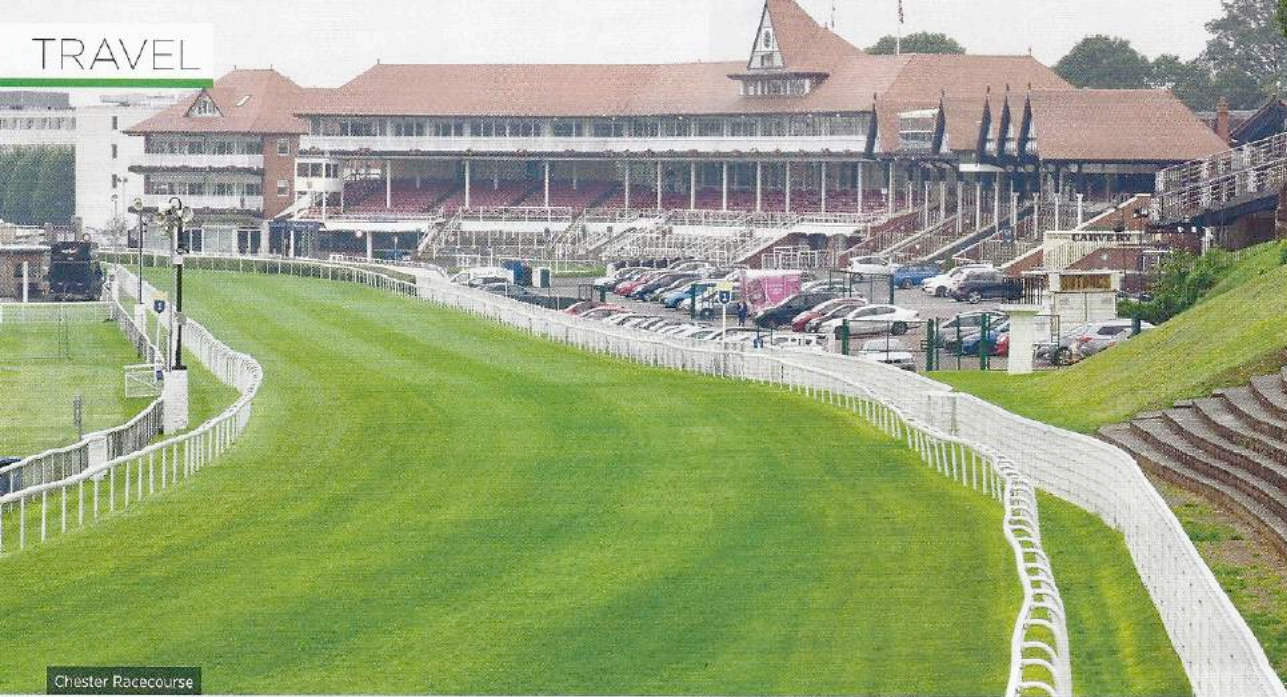
zoos have moved away from dressing chimps in human clothes and coercing them into performing for the amusement of paying guests, but there's no denying that the social interaction of primates is comical. In treetops, adult Columbian Black-faced Spider Monkeys sit in groups grooming one another, whilst youngsters tear around the branches and ropes that hang from the enclosure roof. Old and young venture onto the ground only rarely.

I watch the monkeys feed, then go outside where elephants are busily removing straw from a large basket high above their heads. Their reaching, both physically and mentally, for food is fascinating to watch.

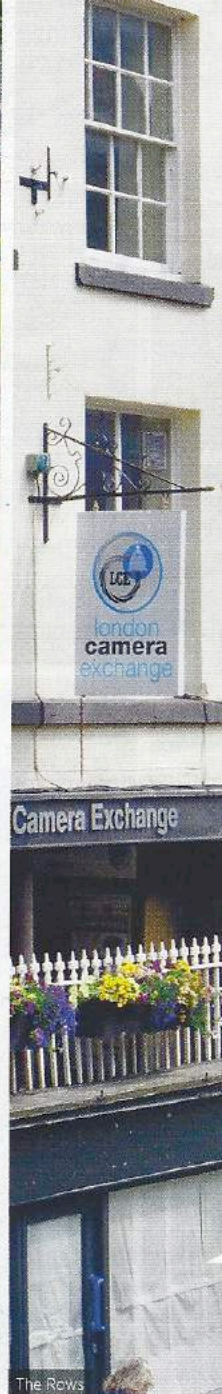
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menageries of Victorian times. Their importance across the world is increasing. “Now we really are a conservation hub,” says Chester’s Head of Field Programmes Scott Wilson. “Zoos are expected not just to do conservation in the zoo, but in the wild as well. We have a role to play in species conservation on the global stage.” Scott says his



Chester Racecourse



The Rows



Mother and Child at Chester Zoo



Sid at New Brighton

“YOU’VE COME ON THE RIGHT DAY. IT’S CHIPPY TUESDAY!”

team always work in partnership with government agencies and non-governmental organisations abroad to carry out conservation work intended to prevent extinctions: “There’s no way we can fix these problems on our own. They are much bigger.” He says that work to prevent species extinction is continuous. “Extinctions are natural, but at the moment they are way above the natural rate. There is no quick way to prevent extinctions because they are so complex and so dynamic. From Chester Zoo’s perspective, we use all our unique and varied skills to work with species both in the zoo and in the wild to mitigate the threats that are facing them.”

I leave Chester Zoo with a greater appreciation of how it, and others, are making a difference preserving our planet. With its vast animal population and the wealth of information on display I need to come again to fully appreciate all that there is here.

COUNTING THE SLEEPS

“You’ve come on the right day,” says Peter, a resident assistant at The Caravan and Motorhome Club site at Wirral Country Park when I arrive later. “It’s Chippy Tuesday!” A mobile fish and chip van is due on site.

Peter and wife Sally have the day off tomorrow and are collecting a new VW campervan conversion. Next morning, after cod and chips the previous night, I find Peter outside reception. “When are you going?” I ask. “Now,” he says, smiling broadly. “I’m so excited. It has been like Christmas: I’ve been counting down the sleeps.” A new van, a new adventure. No wonder Peter and Sally can hardly wait. Today North Cheshire: Tomorrow The Wirral.

Keeping to coastal roads, I spend two days exploring The Wirral, an area dominated by its rivers and the tides of the Irish Sea. We go where the mood takes us and stop where and when we want.

Ness Botanical Gardens had not been on our radar, but a snap decision to call in pays dividends. Created by Arthur Kilpin Bulley, a Cheshire-born

The Facts

During our adventures in Chester and on The Wirral George and I stayed at two sites:

Chester Lakes
Church Road, Doodleston
Chester CH4 9LQ
Tel: 07860 133 133

Wirral Country Park Caravan and Motorhome Club Site
Station Road, Thurston
Merseyside CH61 0HN
Tel: 01516 485228



cotton trader and keen botanist, the gardens were given to Liverpool University by his daughter six years after Bulley's death in 1942.

Ness attracts botanists, horticulturalists and garden enthusiasts from all over the UK, but it's not just for gardeners. It celebrates the outdoors, the splendour of the natural world and the simple countryside. I'm no gardener, but my time in the tranquillity of Ness is delightful. In the warm summer sunshine, the gardens are a peaceful oasis of colour, whilst the views over the Dee estuary are outstanding.

My next destination is as fascinating as it is quirky. Parkgate on The Wirral's western fringe has the hallmarks of a classic 18th century bathing resort, but with one difference. The sea has gone. Parkgate owes both its rise and demise as a port to silting within the River Dee. Its quay was built when ships could no longer sail to Chester, but its fortunes waned when packets plying from Ireland chose to land at Liverpool instead.

The deliberate introduction of a voracious sea grass has created a wetland of marshes and

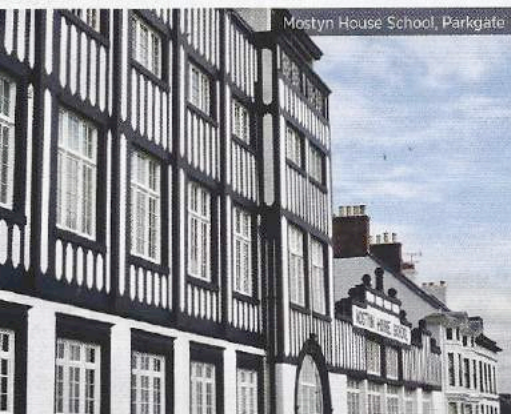
lakes between Parkgate's former waterfront and the tideway. Where the sea once lapped at the quayside, a thick verdant blanket now lays. True, at high water on the highest spring tides water does return briefly to Parkgate, but it's rare, and visitors flock to the shoreline to witness it. I'm told the local ice cream shops do a roaring trade.

A walk along the length of the village leads past the black and white rendered façade of Mostyn House, a former 19th century private school. It stands impressively on The Parade in a line of similar buildings. I'm drawn into a shop more Art Deco than Victorian, attracted by its wares rather than its architecture. In

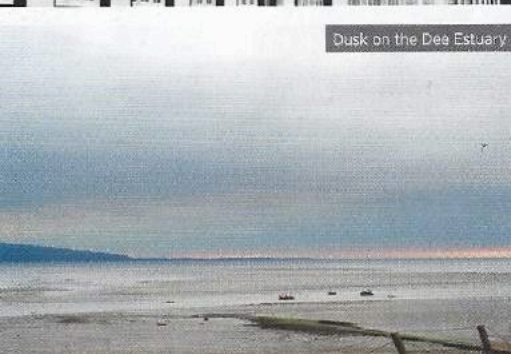
“IN THE WARM SUMMER SUNSHINE, THE GARDENS ARE A PEACEFUL OASIS OF COLOUR, WHILST THE VIEWS OVER THE DEE ESTUARY ARE OUTSTANDING.”



Parkgate sea front



Mostyn House School, Parkgate



Dusk on the Dee Estuary



Nicholls

“WHERE THE SEA ONCE LAPPED AT THE QUAYSIDE, A THICK VERDANT BLANKET NOW LAYS.”

‘Nicholls Famous Ice Cream’ a polite young lady with a cheery disposition serves me. There are worse jobs in life than working here in Parkgate selling delicious ice cream on a warm afternoon, I think.

We end our time on the Wirral at New Brighton, Wallasey’s seafront. Though it fell into decline as a resort after the 1950s it still offers much for the visitor. Ships and pleasure boats pass by, green and red navigation buoys bob in the gentle swell, and red cranes stand to attention over the river at Bootle docks. There’s no empty seascape here.

Ashore, New Brighton is a mix of beach, promenade, retail space, restaurants and a supermarket.

Though its commercial modernity is unlikely to please everyone, the resort is not without history. World War Two tunnels are hidden within an amusement complex, and across the road, Fort Perch Rock, built to protect Liverpool Bay in the Napoleonic wars, marks the mouth of the Mersey. Though finished in 1829, it did not fire its guns in anger until the First World War.

Returning to George, parked up at the Fort, I pass a bronze statue of ‘Sid the Labrador’, sitting alert and facing the sea. It commemorates The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association’s founding here in 1931. Although the association left Wallasey in 1941, founders

Rosamund Bond and local woman Muriel Cooke, together with Flash, Folly, Judy and Met, the first guide dogs to be trained here, have a special place in the town’s history.

I’LL BE BACK

After a week here I head for home content. I’ve learned a good deal and seen most of north Cheshire and The Wirral. But I want to return. There are miles of beaches still to walk, and more to see in Chester. The zoo alone needs another day. Perhaps more than anything though, it is the thought of sitting on Parkgate’s waterfront with an ice cream in my hand and a high spring tide lapping at my feet that will eventually bring me back. ■