

Tour 4

THE WONDERS OF THE WIRRAL



Port Sunlight



I doubt The Wirral would be top of many people's list for a day out, however as I found this peninsular trapped between the Rivers Dee and Mersey has a number of very special buildings hidden amongst its industry. One of Britain's largest Georgian squares, its finest Arts and Crafts village and the best place to see old colourful narrowboats are just some of the reasons to explore.

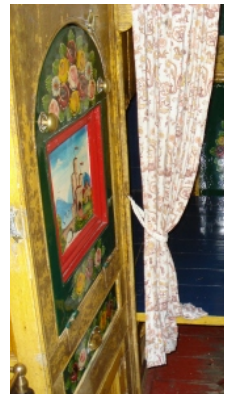


I love unexpected places like The Wirral. There is a strange contrast between heavy industry and rural villages with the M53 seemingly keeping the two apart. These two aspects come together at Port Sunlight where industry drove the building of a housing estate in which leading Arts and Crafts architects created a rural idyll. At Ellesmere Port the waterways museum explains the transformation from industrial highways to tranquil backwater of Britain's canals. Most surprising though is Hamilton Square where you can find an astonishing station tower, a pioneering submarine and a graceful Georgian square all within a few yards of each other.

To find the sites with your sat nav or on Google Maps/ Street View just enter the postcodes listed under each title. Most houses are private so please remember to respect owners privacy.

NATIONAL WATERWAYS MUSEUM, SOUTH PIER ROAD, ELLESMERE PORT, CH65 4FW

Although we associate narrowboats with peaceful rural holidays they were of course once the backbone of industry so it is only appropriate that the largest collection of these colourful craft should be set in this once hectic port. The museum displays many aspects of how they were built, painted and operated. However the most memorable part for me was stepping inside the cabin of a working boat and thinking how on earth did a family live in this tiny space only ten foot long and half as wide!



PORT SUNLIGHT VILLAGE, CH62 5DX

The Victorians preached self help and the authorities made little effort to aid those who struggled to find good housing. It was generally left to a few rich philanthropists to raise the standard of housing for the working classes by building model villages. These pioneered new designs of homes and demonstrated the value of improved housing on the health and efficiency of staff and helped lay the foundations for the garden cities and council estates of the early 20th century. Occasionally though these businessmen went further and made more of an artistic statement with carefully landscaped gardens and spaciouly set romantic cottages. Nowhere is this passion to create an Arts and Crafts style village better displayed than here at Port Sunlight.



Port Sunlight village was the brainchild of William Hesketh Lever who designed it to house his soap factory workers (Lever Brothers, now part of Unilever) with most houses built from the late 1880s up until the outbreak of the First World War. He employed nearly 30 different architects hence the wide variety of shapes, styles and materials on display. It is almost like walking through a huge exhibition of the finest Arts and Crafts style housing.

The houses range from cottage styles with local red Cheshire brick and black and white timber framing to humble Classically inspired forms. Not only is there beauty in the way they have been set within the artificial landscape but also from close at hand with highly decorative details which is so characteristic of the Victorians and Edwardians. The houses are carefully arranged into courtyards with the busy facades facing out and a more utilitarian look to the inner walls. This is not at first clear as the lines of houses are full of interest and movement so you don't notice the formal planning. Where Port Sunlight is of special note is that so little has changed over the past hundred years so the houses have not become enclosed behind walls and hedges as happens at many other similar estates. If you plan to visit then take some time to visit Lady Lever Art Gallery on Lower Rd, CH62 5EQ and Port Sunlight Museum on King Georges Drive CH62 5DX.





HAMILTON SQUARE, BIRKENHEAD, CH41 5AT

It is easy to pass through or under Birkenhead via tunnel to Liverpool, however this once important shipbuilding town is well worth a diversion. Its most notable architectural feature is a real surprise. Surrounded by industrial buildings is a huge and graceful Georgian square (top left). Despite all the later activity around it Hamilton Square's elegant facades which face upon the park in the centre are remarkably intact and make it one of the largest of its kind in the country. If you head out of the eastern corner there is another surprise, a huge ornate red brick tower. This is Hamilton Square Station (bottom left) but as the tracks are far below ground on their way under the Mersey to Liverpool, it has to be accessed by lift. The tower was not created just for Victorian bricklayers to demonstrate their skills but to house the hydraulic system to carry passengers up and down from the railway. If you head east around the roundabout you come to Woodside Ferry where there is the U Boat Story and excellent views across the Mersey to Liverpool.

Many important naval craft were created here, including a pioneering submarine designed by the clergyman Reverend George Garrett which was launched in 1879. Called Resurgam II it was powered by a steam engine but was lost at sea when its crew forgot to fasten down the hatch during a storm and it sank. The wreck was rediscovered in 1995 and an exact replica built outside the U Boat Story on Woodside Ferry, CH41 6DU.





If you would like to discover more about Railway Stations, Victorian and Georgian houses or canal narrowboats then take a look at the following books. They are all packed with photos and drawings explaining in an easy to understand way how they were built, what the different styles were and where you can find some outstanding examples. They are available from Amazon, my publisher's website www.countrysidebooks.co.uk and your local bookshop. Go to my website www.trevoryorke.co.uk for more details and to take a look inside each book.

