



# MOUNT WOOD CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

A Report for Metropolitan Borough of Wirral by Donald Insall Associates Ltd

January 2005

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background**

This report has been prepared by Donald Insall Associates Ltd on behalf of Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council. Its purpose is to advise on the creation of a Conservation Area, which would protect and enhance the character of the area around Mount Wood Road. It has been a concern that development pressures are threatening and eroding the aesthetic and historic qualities of the area. The designation of a Conservation Area would provide the Local Planning Authority with additional powers to protect and enhance the areas special characteristics.

The report has been prepared with the help and support of the Mount Wood Residents' Association. Their research document has been a source of both background information and photographic record.

### **1.2 Scope and Structure**

The scope of this Conservation Area Appraisal is based on the guidelines published by English Heritage and represents a factual and objective analysis. In accordance with the guidelines, the following framework has been used as the basis for this analysis:-

- Location and population
- Origins and development of the settlement
- Prevailing or former uses and their influence on plan form or building type
- Archaeological significance
- Architectural and historic qualities of buildings
- Contribution made by key unlisted buildings
- Character and relationship of spaces
- Prevalent and traditional building materials
- Local details
- Contribution made by green spaces, trees, hedges, etc
- Setting of the Conservation Area and its relationship with the surrounding landscape
- Extent of loss, intrusion or damage
- Existence of any neutral areas

The document has been structured to encompass these areas of study and concludes with recommendations for the Conservation Area boundary.

## **2.0 LOCATION**

### **2.1 Location Context (See Plan 01)**

The study area is located between Prenton and Higher Bebington on the outskirts of Birkenhead to the north of the Wirral Peninsula. It is situated on a hill of New Red Sandstone (Keuper strata) which, with Bidston Hill to the north and Storeton Hill to the south, forms the segment of one of a pair of parallel ridges at 80m above sea-level.

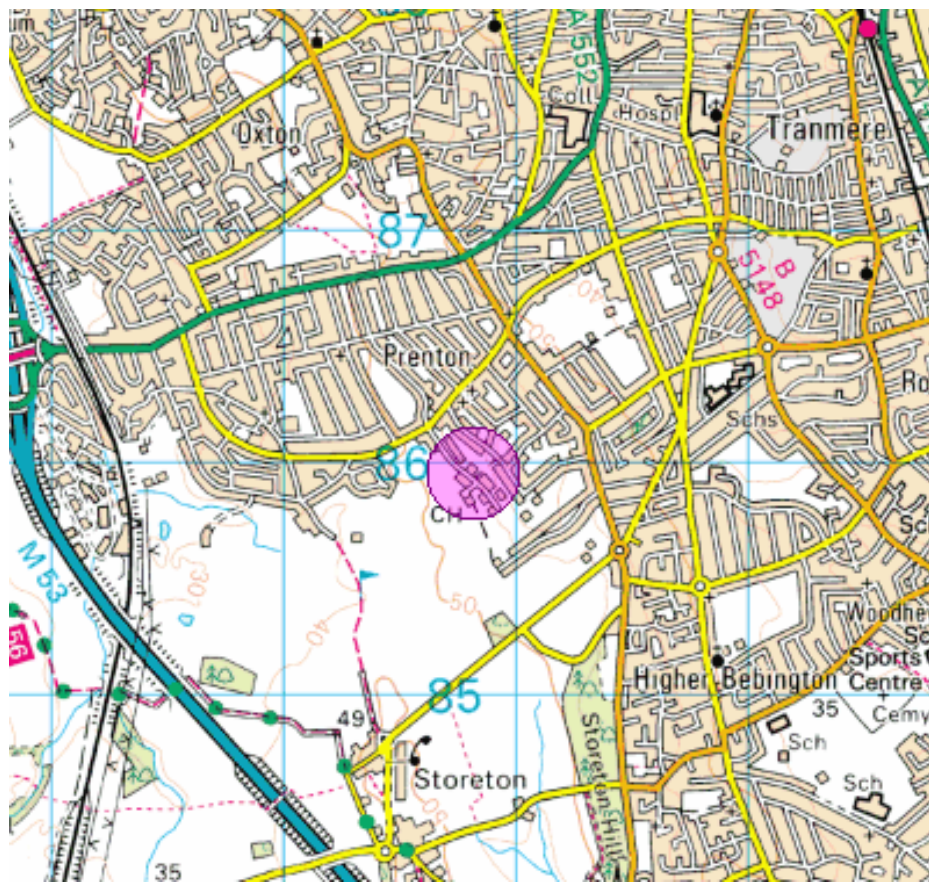
The sandstone was laid down during the Permian and Triassic periods and forms the bedrock of not only the Wirral but also surrounding Cheshire and Merseyside. Its use as a building material is evident throughout the region.

The population of the Mount Wood area is exclusively residential.

### **2.2 Study Area Boundary (See Plan 02)**

The study area is approximately rectangular in shape. It focuses on Prenton Reservoir and those roads which immediately surround it. To the north it is bounded by Prenton Lane which leads from central Birkenhead westwards towards Prenton. Storeton Road forms the eastern boundary. The southern boundary is formed by Stanley Avenue, beyond which is open countryside. To the west, the area is bounded by Golf Links Road and Prenton Golf Course.

It should be noted that the area studied is slightly more extensive than the area recommended for Conservation Area status.



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## MOUNT WOOD CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

### PLAN 01 – SHOWING LOCATION OF MOUNT WOOD

Donald Insall Associates Ltd., January 2005



### **3.0 HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

#### **3.1 Early History and Origins**

Although there is evidence of Roman occupation throughout the Wirral, there would appear to be debate on the extent to which archaeological finds can be interpreted as proof of major settlements.

There is no evidence of any early settlement (either Roman or subsequently) in the location of the study area nor in the immediate vicinity. The 'Roman Road' which lies at the foot of the Mount Wood hill and leads to Storeton, has been shown to be of the mediaeval period.



*'Roman Road' photographed prior to 1909.*

The surrounding place-names of Prenton, Storeton and Bebington are of Anglo-Saxon origin, the *ton* indicating the presence of an enclosed farmstead. However, evidence suggests that much of the Wirral remained as open heath, scrub and some woodland until the Middle Ages.

The Domesday Survey of 1086 indicates settlements at both Prenton and Storeton and it would appear that Prenton was held by Walter de Vernon at that time. Prenton appears to have been one of only three Wirral manors which included woodland and it is possible that Mount Wood was part of that woodland. However, by this time, the Wirral was clearly not heavily wooded.

During the 12th century a large area of the Wirral was re-forested by Ranulf of Meschines (3rd Earl of Chester) and, in 1327, a Royal deer park (Shotwick Park) was created by Edward III within the forest.

#### **3.2 Development (See Plan 03 and Historic Maps)**

Throughout the 15th - 18th centuries those areas not forested were steadily converted for agricultural use.

By 1845 the roads now known as Prenton Lane and Storeton Road, which enclose the study area, had been established. At that time the land was owned

by a group of men - John Winder, Lyon Winder, Edmund Henry Lyon and Uvedale Corbett. However, most appears to have been let for pasture and farmland. By far their largest plot, however, was the Mount Pleasant Wood which they retained un-let, together with the approaching hill roads.

By 1872 a portion of the woodland had been given over to the Reservoir and Reservoir Road was constructed by this time, though it remained undeveloped.

Between 1872 and 1899 both Prospect and Acrefield Roads had been laid out and residential development commenced. A Church (St. Stephens) had been established at the junction of Reservoir Road and Prenton Lane, and the map of 1899 shows an Institute building alongside the Church. In fact this building was a small corrugated iron structure which had been used temporarily as the Church until the present building could be constructed. However, both the Church and the recognised use of the smaller building as an Institute are indicative of the status and wealth of those moving into the area.



*The original St. Stephens Church - licensed for services between 1894 and 1897. It was subsequently used as the church hall and Institute when the present church was constructed.*

By 1910 the area was an established residential suburb and Mount Wood Road, Burrell Road and Pine Walks had all been laid out by this time.



*Mount Wood Road c.1910*



*Burrell Road c.1909*

The development of the Wirral for residential use is closely linked to the improved transport connections and communication with Liverpool. In particular the opening of the Mersey Railway Tunnel in 1886 provided links to one of the countries most important ports and commercial centres, enabling wealthy businessmen to move to the countryside of the Wirral yet remain



close to their work. The map of 1910 shows the Mount Wood area remaining largely surrounded by fields. Areas such as Meols Drive, Bidston and Caldby also became fashionable.

Residential development was further encouraged by the opening of Prenton Golf Club in the 1900's. The game of golf had become extremely popular during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and courses opened across the Wirral to provide rest and relaxation for the many businessmen who chose to live there.

### **3.3 Historic Uses and their Influence**

Little of the former uses of the Mount Wood area are legible in the early 20th century housing development. However, from the historic maps, it can be seen that both Acrefield and Prospect Roads follow the lines of field boundaries.

Mount Wood Road itself and part of Pine Walks appear to follow the lines of forest tracks.

The curve in Burrell Road appears to have been formed to accommodate a former quarry (now the garden of the house known as 'The Quarry').

The areas former use as woodland is evident from the many mature trees which remain, though early photographs show that the woodland was not dense and suggest that the residential development resulted in considerable tree loss.



*Mount Wood - from an original watercolour by J Walton Burnett*

## 4.0 LANDSCAPES AND VISTAS

### 4.1 Setting and relationship with surrounding area

The Mount Wood area straddles the crest of the Storeton / Bidston ridge. It is therefore approached up hill from both the east and west. From a distance the tree tops are visible on the skyline.



*View west up Mount Road - the trees on the horizon are Mount Wood*

From the summit of the ridge there are views across Birkenhead to Liverpool, with both the Anglican and the Metropolitan Cathedrals visible.



*View from Tower Road of Liverpool's Catholic Cathedral*



*View from Storeton Road across Birkenhead towards Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral*

Views to the west are across mostly open / flat countryside. However, views to the west are limited from the public domain, being obscured by houses and mature planting. Prenton Lane offers a westerly view from an elevated position, whilst Stanley Avenue offers a lower perspective.



*View west from the end of Stanley Avenue*

#### **4.2 Character and relationship of spaces**

The area can be defined as linear and sequential, each road leading from another.

A number of the roads are very straight, exposing at a single glance the streetscape. However, the curves in Stanley Avenue, Pine Walks and Golf Links Road provide some concealment allowing the streetscape to unfold more slowly.

Generally the roads are quite wide and, therefore, junctions provide areas of greater spaciousness and opportunities to view a broader picture.

#### **4.3 Green spaces and planting**

Greenery predominates throughout the area and plays an extremely important part in defining its character.

Grass verges line three of the streets and mostly contain mature trees.

Mature trees and planting within front gardens also contribute substantially to the quality of the environment. Plot sizes are large and provide the opportunity for extensive planting to surround and engulf the houses. Although properties are large, they do not dominate their surroundings.

In contrast, the War Memorial on Prenton Lane is a very formal open space. The verticality of the memorial is emphasised by the flatness of the surrounding grassed area.



*War Memorial on Prenton Lane*



*Part of Walker Park as seen from Golf Links Road*

Walker Park accessed from Golf Links Road and Prenton Lane is a much more rough and informal open space. It is clearly an unplanned park and on the map of 1935 appears ripe for development. The line of a footpath across the land was extended northwards as Glenavon Road.



## 5.0 TOWNSCAPE AND FOCAL BUILDINGS

### 5.1 Townscape

The 'townscape' of the area may be defined as large, individual buildings set within spacious grounds. The nature of the development is such that buildings are seldom perceived together and do not form significant groups.

Because properties are set back substantially from the road and shielded by heavy and mature planting, they are seen only fragmentally. However, roofs are often visible against the sky and, in this context, roofscapes assume greater importance.

### 5.2 Focal Buildings

Whilst many of the houses in the Mount Wood area are visually striking, they have been designed to nestle within their landscape. However, properties which are situated at road junctions enjoy greater prominence.

18 Prospect Road is clearly visible on the approach up Burrell Road, whilst 6 Prospect Road (Beech House) terminates the view along Acrefield Road. 18 PineWalks is visible at the end of Burrell Road.



*18 Prospect Road as seen from Burrell Road    Beech House as seen from Acrefield Road*

The most dominant buildings within the area are Prenton Reservoir and St. Stephens Church. The reservoir, which terminates the view up Reservoir Road is, because of its elevated position, visible from Pine Walks. Similarly, St. Stephens Church is located on the brow of the hill in Prenton Lane and also provides a focus.



*St Stephen's Church Prenton Lane*



*Prenton Reservoir from Reservoir Road*

### **5.3 Boundaries and Surfaces**

Because the buildings within the area are mostly set back from the road and shielded by mature planting, the boundaries between properties and street assume a greater significance.

There are a variety of boundary types (see gazetteer) including timber fences, hedges, stone and brick walls and combinations of these.



Surfaces are almost exclusively of tarmac, although granite setts occur at a number of road junctions. Occasionally alternative materials are used for carriage crossings but mostly these are also tarmac,



## 6.0 ARCHITECTURE AND MATERIALS

### 6.1 Prominent styles

The houses found within the Mount Wood area represent an eclectic mix of styles.

The early houses, dating from 1872 – 1899, are fine examples of the period. Large brick and slate, 3-storey buildings (often with red brick details), they are, however, typical of their age and lack any sense of individuality. It is possible that they were constructed speculatively to satisfy the growing demand for suburban residences. These houses are found in Acrefield Road, Storeton Road and Prenton Lane.

The houses which form the core of the Mount Wood area are of a different nature altogether.

Dating primarily from the early 1900's, they are individually designed (often by prominent local architects - see below - for known clients). They may be characterised broadly as 'Arts and Crafts' and display features common to the style, such as steeply pitched roofs with low eaves; small, horizontally grouped windows; tall decorative chimneys; and decorative timberwork. However, each house is distinctive.

Pevsner and Hubbard note that these houses represent some of the best examples on Merseyside of domestic architecture from this period.

Later properties, such as those which date from the 1930's and 1950's (predominantly on Stanley Avenue) display similarities but are often smaller and more modestly finished.

Examples of late 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings are also evident, primarily on Golf Links Road and Stanley Avenue. Whilst most display the individual design approach typical of the area, some are of a much poorer design quality and lack distinctiveness

### 6.2 Leading architects

Many of the houses are by known architects, but Pevsner and Hubbard advise that the best are by Briggs Wolstenholme & Thornley or Sir Arnold Thornley on his own. These include:

<i>The White House</i>		Burrell Road
<i>West Hill</i>	1923	Golf Links Road
<i>The Homestead</i>	c.1909	Mount Wood Road
<i>Pine Grove</i>	c.1910	
<i>Birch Howe</i>	c.1901	Pine Walks
<i>Pine Ridge</i>	1910	
<i>Picardy</i>	1908	Tower Road

The War Memorial on Prenton Lane (1919) was also designed by this practice, although Pevsner and Hubbard consider it "an unfortunate design" !

Briggs Wolstenholme and Thornley practised throughout Merseyside and their non-domestic work includes Wallasey Town Hall, the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board Building on Liverpool's Pier Head and (in collaboration with Herbert Rowse) India Building also in Liverpool

J J Talbot, most notably recognised for his work at Port Sunlight was responsible for the design on Oriel Court on Prenton Lane.

St. Stephens Church on Prenton Lane is the work of, firstly, C E Deacon and subsequently his practice, Deacon & Horsborough. Deacon worked on churches throughout the Wirral, frequently designing interior furnishings (eg St. Andrews, Lower Bebington; St Thomas of Canterbury, Parkgate Road; and St. Columba, Seabank Road, Egremont).

*The Cottage* in Prospect Road and *Greystoke* in Pine Walks are the work of Ashby Tabb, a Liverpool furnisher and decorator. *The Cottage* was built for himself.

### 6.3 Materials

The houses of the Mount Wood area, whilst distinctive and individual in design, draw from a limited palette of materials.

Many are predominantly of brown brick, but with half-timber detailing at first floor. Equally many are exclusively rendered (textured render, such as pebble-dash) and some have now been painted.

Typically, though, houses display a combination of materials (eg brick at ground floor; render above).

The late Victorian properties are mostly roofed in slate, whilst the later Edwardian houses employ clay plain tiles.

### 6.4 Typical features

Given the individuality of the house designs, it is difficult to summarise all of their features. However, the most common are:-

Steeply-pitched roofs :	these often swoop to low eaves. Dormers are also common.
Gables :	these occur frequently on the front elevations
Eaves :	often deep, providing greater modulation of the façade (particularly in strong sunlight)



*Stanley Avenue*



*Mount Wood Road*



*Pine Walks*

Horizontal emphasis : frontages are usually wide and this, together with low ridge and eaves heights

and horizontal window groupings results in horizontal emphasis. (The earlier, late Victorian properties, with vertical sliding sash windows, have a more vertical emphasis).

Chimneys : mostly tall

Brick detailing : used to accentuate particular features, such as porches, chimneys, etc.



*Stanley Avenue*



*Mount Wood Road*

Porches : a number of properties display loggia-style 3-arched (or more) porches.



*Prospect Road*



*Mount Wood Road*



*Mount Wood Road*

## **7.0 CHARACTER ASSESSMENT**

### **7.1 Overview**

The Mount Wood area represents a unique early 20<sup>th</sup> century housing development.

An 'unplanned' development, the road layout nevertheless sits comfortably within the landscape, following elements of topography (Burrell Road curves around a former quarry; Mount Wood Road and Pine Walks follow the line of woodland tracks) and history (Acrefield and Prospect Roads follow the lines of field boundaries).

The houses form an exceptional collection of individualistic substantial houses, designed mostly by known architects of the time. Some of the designers are more renowned for their commercial work (such as Briggs Wolstenholme and Thornley, designers of one of the *Three Graces* which dominate Liverpool's waterfront) and therefore these houses represent a less well-recorded part of their *oeuvre*.

The woodland setting has been maintained by spacious plots which have allowed planting and trees to mature and greenery therefore now dominates the street scene.

The area is located behind frontage properties on the main roads (Storeton Road and Prenton Lane) and, with the exception of the tree-tops, remains to some extent hidden.

## 8.0 NEGATIVE FACTORS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENHANCEMENT

### 8.1 Overview

There are a number of issues which can impact on the character of an area. These fall broadly into the following categories :-

- Quality of later 20<sup>th</sup> century development
- Unsympathetic extensions
- Alterations to historic detailing and materials
- Development pressures and loss

### 8.2 Quality of later 20<sup>th</sup> century development

New residential developments which have been constructed within the study area post the 1960's cannot generally be seen to have preserved or enhanced its historic character. Examples are evident on Acrefield Road, Burrell Road, Prospect Road and Prenton Lane, where blocks of apartments have replaced single houses.

These flat developments have resulted in rooflines which have less interest, greater building volume and mass and the loss of frontage gardens to parking. Furthermore, although brick has been used as the main construction material, this is generally in a colour alien to the area. Such developments erode the character of the area.



More recent developments on Prenton Lane are equally out of character and of a poorer quality than the historic buildings.





At Burrell Close, a cul-de-sac of 21 houses has been introduced on land formerly occupied by *Mount House* and its adjacent historic property. The houses lack the quality of materials, detailing and individuality characteristic of the area and the layout and open plan front gardens produces a significantly different effect to the spacious early 20<sup>th</sup> century form.



### 8.3 Unsympathetic extensions

Unsympathetic extensions to historic properties do not generally stand out as a major issue or threat to the character of the area. The older buildings are of a design, scale and robustness that can absorb minor changes without significant loss of character. Particular exceptions are extensions of two storeys and conservatories which have not been designed in keeping or with reference to the original and are situated on prominent elevations.



### 8.4 Alterations to Historic Detailing and Materials

The majority of properties appear to have been retained largely unaltered externally. Also, because of their distance from the road and the heavy mature planting which shields them from view, minor alterations have little impact on the character of the area at large.

However, the most common alterations appear to be to windows and boundaries.

The diversity of house designs within the area means that windows do not conform to one particular style. However, replacements with uPVC windows

are invariably unable to replicate the precisely the originals. Where differences are subtle (eg width of glazing bars, flatness of profile, etc), replacement windows affect the character of the area most on properties which are not set-back substantially within their plots.



Alterations to boundaries have the greatest impact as these are most visible and contribute greatly to the semi-rural wooded character of the area. Boundary types are varied but simple timber fences and hedges predominate. Where these have been replaced by railings or brick walls, character is eroded. Poor choice of brick is equally deleterious, where original plinth walls have been replaced or extended.



Although there are examples of these types of alterations, they are sufficiently few and, as yet, their impact on the character of the area is not great.

## **8.5 Development Pressures and Loss**

Whilst the Mount Wood area has, to date, managed largely to retain its character, the loss of original buildings and replacement with inappropriate development has been most damaging (see 8.2 above).

Given the large plot sizes within the area, pressure for re-development is immense. This can occur in two ways:

1. demolition of a single property to be replaced by either a cluster of houses or blocks of apartments. Both lead to increased ratio of built form to plot size, loss of spaciousness, loss of mature planting, loss of varied roofscape.
2. subdivision of plots to allow the construction of another detached house. Whilst mature planting may be retained and a varied roofscape introduced, this form of redevelopment still results in the loss of spaciousness and increased ratio of built form to plot size.

Examples of these types of redevelopment are evident within the Mount Wood area but, so far, have not completely eroded its character. However, government Planning Guidance (PPG3) advising Local Authorities to increase residential densities for new development, coupled with dramatic increases in property value has created a situation whereby the value of a single house on a large plot is significantly less than the value of the plot with planning approval for a higher density development. Furthermore, recent Regional Planning Guidance (RPG13) has restricted new development in West Wirral resulting in even greater development pressure in the east.

If demolition and new construction at higher densities continues unchecked, the spacious and green character of the area would be seriously compromised.

## **9.0 RECOMMENDED CONSERVATION AREA BOUNDARY**

### **9.1 Summary Justification**

The Mount Wood area represents a unique early 20<sup>th</sup> century housing development.

A fine collection of individualistic substantial houses (many designed by prominent local architects) in a woodland setting. Spacious plots have allowed planting and trees to mature and dominate the street scene.

Though not a 'planned' development, the road layout responds to the topography and history of the area.

### **9.2 The Proposed Boundary (See Plan 02)**

The proposed boundary line for the Mount Wood Conservation Area is shown on Plan 02.

The core of the area which demonstrates these sylvan characteristics centres on Mount Wood Road, Burrell Road and Pine Walks. However, the properties on Stanley Avenue, whilst of a later period, also continue the themes established by the earlier development. They are detached, in large plots, set back from the road and dominated by greenery. For this reason, the proposed boundary includes Stanley Avenue.

Similarly, the houses on Golf Links Road subscribe to the same basic principles. The houses, however, are mostly more modern and not of the same quality as the Edwardian properties. The character has been further eroded by alterations to the Golf Clubhouse and the construction of the cul-de-sac at Fairways. The proposed boundary, therefore, does not include the west side of Golf Links Road.

To the north, Prenton Lane is a transitional zone. Oriel Court and Haf Ryn, on the north side, are of the same period and characteristics as the Edwardian properties at the heart of the Mount Wood area. However, they have been compromised by the subdivision of their plots and the construction of additional houses. The quality of the road is further eroded by the modern flats at the junction with Reservoir Road North and the wooded characteristic is absent. For this reason, the proposed boundary runs along the centre of Prenton Lane.

The houses at the north end of Prospect Road and Acrefield Road are late Victorian. Whilst large, their plots are not as spacious and their designs lack the strong individualistic quality of the Edwardian houses. Between Acrefield Road and Burrell Road, the houses on the east side of Prospect Road are of a later period and again lack the quality of the properties at the core of the area. For this reason, the proposed boundary runs along the centre of Prospect Road.

However, whilst the properties in the excluded zones (identified on Plan 02) do not conform to the characteristics of the heart of the Mount Wood area, it is recognised that there are difficulties associated with imposing boundaries

which run along the centre of roads. It may, therefore, be considered appropriate to include these areas as buffer zones.