

The Wirral way

With the eyes of the sporting world on Wirral for July's Open Golf, **Barry McLoughlin** finds this windswept headland boasts an unlikely array of attractions

The revolutionary German torpedo that may explain the mystery behind the submarine's sinking. It's now a tourist attraction for the Wirral

SURREAL IS a word that's been devalued by over-use, often wheeled out to describe anything vaguely unusual. This, though, was truly surreal...

I was standing on the promenade in what seemed a quintessential seaside resort, with a beach, funfair, amusement arcades and an early-19th century fort guarding the estuary.

Across the river, however, were the cranes of a busy container port, and three miles away to the south I could see the skyline of Liverpool with its two famous cathedrals and 'Three Graces' waterfront.

The scene was in New Brighton, a once-faded resort on the tip of the Wirral peninsula – the edge of England – that is now beginning to blossom again as a tourist attraction. In its heyday New Brighton had a tower taller than Blackpool's, a pier and a massive open-air swimming pool.

I was last there nearly 50 years ago when it was still just about clinging to its 'seaside' status before it became something of a sad anachronism. But a £60m investment – including a new leisure and retail development – has led to it being rebranded 'Brand New Brighton'.

Indeed, this sort of tourism regeneration is taking place across the Wirral, a peninsula that's a potpourri of just about every aspect of modern British life. There's 25 miles of coastline, nature sites,



Brooding Fort Perch Rock and, in the distance, the derricks of Liverpool's dockland

walking and cycle routes, countryside with leafy lanes, heritage and cultural attractions, 14 golf courses, stockbroker-belt mansions, suburbs and even some traditional heavy industry.

Wedge between Liverpool and North Wales, between the Mersey and Dee estuaries, Wirral is an oblong of land containing some startling contrasts – a 12th century priory next to the renowned Cammell Laird shipbuilding yard, for example.

Tourism is on the rise, with Wirral's visitor economy now valued at more than £310m a year. The tourism sector provides more than 4400 full-time jobs and attracts almost seven million people annually.

In 2011/12, the visitor economy grew by four per cent, jobs in tourism increased five per cent and short breaks by 13 per cent.

This summer it will receive another huge boost when the Open Championship is staged at the Royal Liverpool golf course at Hoylake.

Wirral's always had a symbiotic relationship with its big neighbour across the river, so it was fitting we started our tour with a trip on the famous Mersey ferry, said to be the oldest ferry service in Europe.

To the plaintive strains of Gerry Marsden's *Ferry 'Cross the Mersey*, we took a 50-minute triangular tour between Liverpool Pier Head and the two Wirral terminals at Woodside and Seacombe. (When I used to visit New Brighton as a child in the Sixties, there was also a direct ferry there, but it stopped running in 1971.)

The voyage is a must – if only for the stunning views of Liverpool's World Heritage Site waterfront.

Wirral Waters

A £4.5bn redevelopment has been proposed for Wirral by the Peel Group as part of two complementary waterside projects either side of the Mersey. Described as the "largest and most visionary regeneration project in the UK", Wirral Waters seeks to create more than 20,000 jobs by transforming the derelict docks in Birkenhead into a world-class waterfront.

It involves construction of millions of square feet of office space alongside bars, restaurants and as many as 15,000 flats. It could take 30 years to complete.



Forbidding Fort Perch Rock and New Brighton Lighthouse



The Mersey ferry with Liverpool's unmistakable Liver Building in the background

£60m New Brighton rebirth

The idiosyncratic coastal town of New Brighton once had grand hopes of supplanting rival Blackpool as the playground for industrial workers in the North.

Even its somewhat grandiloquent name seemed to hint at ambitions that, ultimately, were largely unfulfilled.

In the second half of the 19th century it developed as a popular resort for Liverpool and industrial Lancashire, with a pier, promenade and a competition-standard open-air bathing pool.

New Brighton Tower, at 567ft, was the tallest building in Britain when it opened in 1898-90, designed by the firm behind Blackpool Tower, Maxwell and Tuke. It was almost 50ft higher than Blackpool's.

After neglect during the Great War, however, the tower was dismantled and sold for scrap but the ballroom at its base continued in use until damaged by fire in 1969. The Beatles played there no fewer than 27 times.

The resort suffered a swift decline after the Second World War, although it

"I was last there nearly 50 years ago when it was still just about clinging to its 'seaside' status, but £60m investment has led to it being rebranded 'Brand New Brighton'"

remained a popular day-trip destination for Merseysiders.

Standing on the edge of Liverpool Bay, New Brighton also had strategic importance. The forbidding landmark of Ford Perch Rock, a Grade 2* listed coastal defence battery, has dominated the estuary since it was built in 1829. Open throughout the year, it features an aviation archaeology museum and permanent exhibitions about the ill-fated submarine *HMS Thetis* – on which 99 men died during sea trials in Liverpool Bay in 1939 – and air raids over Merseyside during the war. There's an 'Elvis meets the Beatles' display and tearoom, and it also hosts concerts.

Next to it is the New Brighton Lighthouse, originally the Perch Rock Lighthouse, which is now family-maintained.

New Brighton's fortunes have received a massive fillip with the £60m Marine Point development, including a casino,

hotel, restaurant, superstore and digital cinema. The historic Floral Pavilion Theatre is now a popular conference and performance venue.

■ **New Brighton Heritage and Information Centre, tel: 0151 639 3555**

■ **Fort Perch Rock, tel: 07976 282120.**

The U-Boat Story

At the delightfully restored Woodside terminal of the Mersey ferries in Birkenhead, there's a compelling but more sinister maritime attraction. One of the last surviving German U-Boats from the Second World War, U-534, has been cut into four sections with glass viewing partitions to give an intriguing insight into life on board these deadly vessels that sunk millions of tons of Allied shipping the North Atlantic.

The massive submarine was recovered from the sea bed off Scandinavia in 1993,

and is accompanied by some remarkably well-preserved artefacts in the adjoining museum, including a German Enigma coding machine.

Our enthusiastic tour guide Chris Ince explained how Merseytravel, which runs the ferries, had used the U-boat display to help revitalise the area. He outlined the often grim conditions in which the crew lived and worked and the mystery over why it refused to surrender before being sunk by an RAF bomber with the war in Europe virtually over. German high command had ordered all U-boats to surrender but for some unknown reason U-534, heading north towards Norway, didn't. Amazingly, all but three of the 52 crew survived.

Some have speculated it contained Nazi gold or war criminals escaping to South America. The more probable explanation is that it contained a hugely expensive new torpedo that was being shipped to Japan to continue the war. This 21ft-long torpedo is now on display.

■ U-Boat Story, tel: 0151 330 1000, website: (www.u-boatstory.co.uk).

Birkenhead Priory

From the tower of the former church at 12th century Birkenhead Priory, you can look straight into the busy shipyard of Cammell Laird, on whose prosperity the town was founded.

It's an extraordinary juxtaposition to look down on these two sites separated by so many centuries. Indeed, one young



The U-Boat Story at Birkenhead



Left: Depth-charge damage that sunk German submarine U-534. Right: This is a full-size reconstruction of one of the first submarines ever built. Designed by Birkenhead curate the Rev George Garrett, the iron and wood vessel was built in 1879 and was the first to be successfully propelled mechanically underwater. Manned by a crew of three, and named *Resurgam* - Latin for 'I shall rise again' - it sank in a storm off North Wales in 1880

child was head to remark to its mother: "Mummy, why did they build a church next to an industrial estate?"

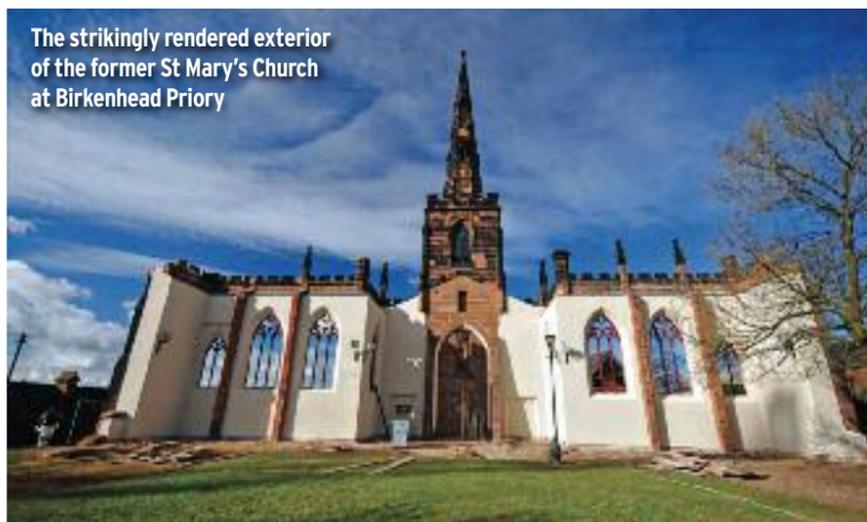
Founded around 1150, the priory is the oldest building on Merseyside. One of

only four surviving Benedictine sites in the North West, it is a Scheduled Ancient Monument and includes a range of Grade 1 listed structures. The monks looked after travellers for 400 years and supervised the first ferry in 1330.

Ironically, the ancient priory has outlived the 19th century church that was built alongside it, though St Mary's tower still stands and provides unrivalled views of the Liverpool waterfront.

Knowledgeable museum assistant Philip Ballinger told us how the site has an 'ethereal feel' on autumn evenings as the sun goes down and reflects on the newly restored buildings.

The former chapter house of the priory is now the chapel and remains largely unaltered from its original Norman design. In the museum in the former undercroft, there's a huge variety of exhibits, including a genuine set of fossilised dinosaur footprints. The priory is



The strikingly rendered exterior of the former St Mary's Church at Birkenhead Priory

being transformed into a multi-million community space thanks to a Heritage Lottery Fund grant of nearly £400,000. Led by Wirral Council, the project will conserve the buildings to remove them from the At Risk register and improve visitor facilities.

■ Birkenhead Priory, tel: 0151 652 4177.

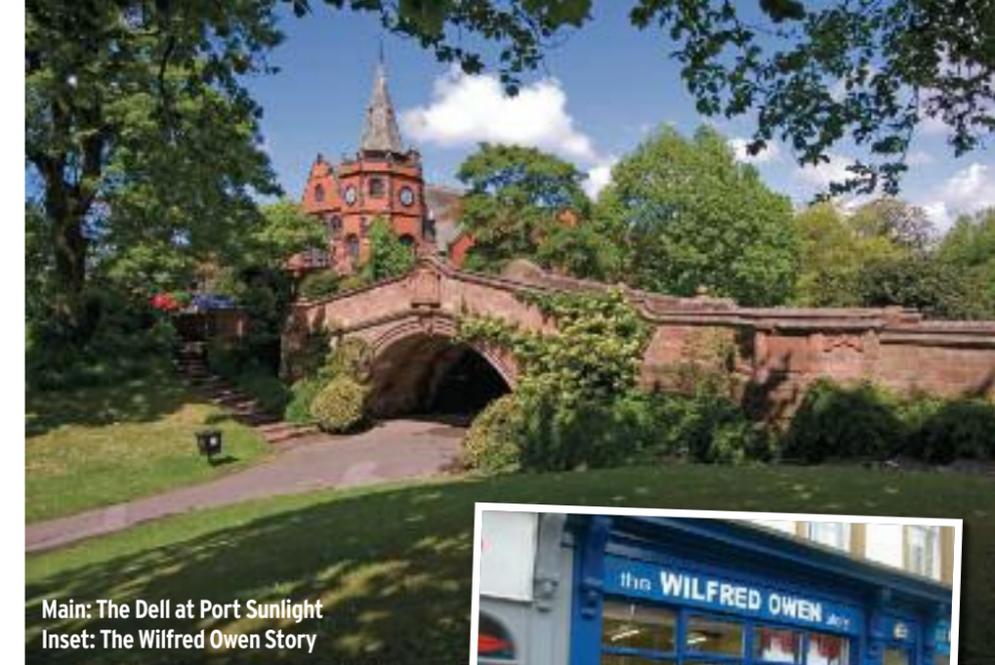
Port Sunlight

Like the priory, Port Sunlight is an enchanting oasis amid the industrial landscape of riverside Birkenhead. Soap pioneer William Hesketh Lever, later Lord Leverhulme, built this garden village of arts-and-crafts style houses for his workforce, complete with school, library, church, village hall and pub in 1888.

The pub was originally temperance but the enlightened Lord Leverhulme, a teetotaler, put it to a ballot of both his male and female workers – and they voted for an alcohol licence.

The village covers more than 130 acres. Designed by more than 30 architects, every house is different, and there are no fewer than 800 listed buildings – some of which can be hired for holidays. The leafy roads and open spaces were designed to provide a breathing space for Leverhulme's employees at a time when many workers elsewhere were crammed into unsanitary slums.

In the heritage centre there's also an informative exhibition and film, and a great café serving afternoon teas on three-decker stands. Dominating the village is the



Main: The Dell at Port Sunlight
Inset: The Wilfred Owen Story



Lady Lever Art Gallery, which the philanthropist opened in 1922 in memory of his wife, Elizabeth Ellen. The gallery has an outstanding collection of art and crafts, including pre-Raphaelite classics and a fine display of Wedgwood pottery.

■ Port Sunlight Museum and Garden Village, tel: 0151 644 6466, website: (www.portsunlightvillage.com). Lady Lever Art Gallery, tel: 0151 478 4136/4178, website: (www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ladylever/).

The Wilfred Owen Story

It's easy to miss this small but moving museum in a former high street shop. Birkenhead doesn't make a great show of

one of its most famous sons, the Great War poet Wilfred Owen (though this may change with this year's centenary commemorations).

The museum was set up by local singer-songwriter Dean Johnson who, like Owen, was educated at Birkenhead Institute. The poet lived in Wirral for ten years as a child.

"Our aim is to help people find their own voice and use it to the same cathartic



The imposing frontage of the Williamson Art Gallery and Museum

The Williamson Art Gallery and Museum

Housed in an imposing Twenties building in Birkenhead, the Williamson has one of the North West's finest art collections, featuring paintings – both historical and contemporary – porcelain, and an eye-catching collection of model ships connected to Cammell Laird's.

British watercolours and work by local artists join highlights of the decorative arts collections, such as Liverpool Porcelain and Della Robbia pottery, and staff are friendly and eager to help.

■ Williamson Art Gallery, tel: 0151 652 4177.

effect as Owen did," he said. It's packed with mementoes of Owen and the Great War, from letters and a shaving kit to an officer's uniform and an entrenching tool. It's the first designated cultural memorial to a poet anywhere in the North West. Admission is free.

■ **The Wilfred Owen Story and Gallery**, 34 Argyle Street, Birkenhead CH41 6AE, tel: 07539 371925, website: (www.wilfredowenstory.com).

Birkenhead Park

The Heritage Lottery Fund has invested £11.6m in projects across Birkenhead – more than £7m on restoring Grade 1 listed Birkenhead Park.

Officially opened in 1847, it was the first publicly funded park in the world. The 'Park for the People' was designed by Sir Joseph Paxton, of Crystal Palace fame, and US architect Frederick Law Olmsted later incorporated many of the features for his design of New York's Central Park

■ **Birkenhead Park visitor centre and Cappuccinos in the Park café**, tel: 0151 652 5197, website: (www.birkenheadpark.co.uk).

Wirral Transport Museum

Birkenhead played a pivotal part in Britain's public transport history. It was the site of the country's first street tramway, an idea imported from the United States in 1860. The man behind the American tramways, George Francis Train, had applied without success to run street railways in London and Liverpool.

The service from Woodside ferry to Birkenhead Park continued until 1937 and then was partially revived in 1995. When open, the museum runs a variety of vintage and modern vehicles linking it to the ferry terminal. Vehicles on display include trams, buses, cars, motorbikes and bicycles. It also features a 26ft-long model railway layout and a reconstructed Thirties garage scene, together with views of projects in the museum's workshops, such as the restoration of a Liverpool 'Green Goddess' tram.

■ **Wirral Tramway and Transport Museum**, Taylor Street, Birkenhead, tel: 0151 647 2128, website: (www.wirral.gov.uk).

Spaceport

Spaceport at Seacombe ferry terminal



Cammell Laird's from the top of St Mary's tower

is a £10m space-themed attraction containing a variety of hands-on exhibits and audio-visual experiences. Ideal for children, it takes visitors on a fascinating journey through space, with several themed galleries

■ **Spaceport**, tel: 0151 330 1566, website: (www.spaceport.org.uk).

Water sports

With sea and river on three sides, Wirral is

an important venue for water sports, and has hosted the world kite buggie endurance record event, the European Sand Yachting Championships and powerboat races. Wirral's six sailing clubs stage regular race meetings and regattas; Royal Mersey Yacht Club is the second oldest sailing club in the country.

■ **For more information on water sports**, contact Wirral Council's Coastal Rangers, tel: 0151 648 4371.

Passport to the Wirral

Getting there

■ **By car:** The M53 which runs through the peninsula connects to the M56 and M6. Two Mersey tunnels link Wirral to Liverpool

■ **By rail:** The local Merseyrail system connects Wirral to the national network via Liverpool Lime Street station. Contact National Rail Enquiries, tel: 08457 484950, website: (www.nationalrail.co.uk)

■ **By bus:** Wirral is well served by bus and coach. For public transport information, contact Traveline Merseytravel, tel: 0871 200 2233, website: (www.merseytravel.gov.uk)

■ **By ferry:** The Mersey ferry operates daily from Liverpool Pier Head to Woodside and Seacombe. Mersey Ferries, tel: 0151 330 1000, website: (www.merseyferries.co.uk).

Where to stay

■ We stayed at the multi award-winning

Peel Hey Country Guest House, Frankby CH48 1PP, a friendly and extremely comfortable boutique-style B&B, built in 1885, with great breakfasts and a relaxing rural atmosphere, tel: 0151 677 9077, website: (www.peelhey.co.uk).

Where to eat

■ We ate at the Riverhill Restaurant, Talbot Road, Oxtton CH43 2HJ, home to Claire Lara, winner of the BBC's *Masterchef: The Professionals* 2010, tel: 0151 653 3773, website: (www.theriverhill.co.uk); and at Marco's New York Italian, The King's Gap, Hoylake CH47 1HE, tel: 0151 632 2073, website: (www.marcoshoylake.co.uk). Both are recommended.

Find out more

■ Tourist information, tel: 0151 666 3188, website: (www.visitwirral.com).