



GETTING TO THE WIRRAL

The Wirral peninsula lies west of Liverpool and north of Chester, between the River Mersey and Dee Estuary. By car, it can be reached from Liverpool through two tunnels or from the south on the M53, which branches off the M56 near Chester. On public transport, take the train from Liverpool all the way to West Kirby or get on to the Wirral line via Chester. A line from Bidston will take you to Heswall, for Thurstaston, and Neston, for Parkgate.



- 1 A young dunlin pulls a snack from wet sand on a Wirral beach
- 2 At low tide you can walk across the sands to Hilbre Island in the Dee Estuary (see page 24)
- 3 The 12-mile Wirral Way is a peaceful place to stroll or cycle on a warm summer's afternoon
- 4 The fascinating model village at Port Sunlight has an astonishing 900 Grade-II listed buildings

» slice of paradise that you'll have almost to yourself.

Having marched out under huge unfettered skies, I love to secrete myself in the abandoned lifeboat station on the northern tip of Hilbre, which looks out to the cold, grey waves on the Irish Sea. I've always loved the fireplace there, in which Victorian lifeboatmen would have boiled their stew after a daring rescue. It's also a great spot to watch birds, especially in the winter months when the rich feeding grounds of the estuarine mudflats attract huge numbers of waders to feed and roost on the island, many of them visitors from far-flung lands. On crisp, winter days here you'll see great swirling flocks of dunlin (pictured left), knot, redshank and oystercatcher. You might spot a bar-tailed godwit probing the sand with its long, pinkish bill before it migrates to Siberia, or even a curlew. Come spring, terns, gannets and gulls arrive. I've even seen peregrine falcons here, but on June mornings it's the squadrons of brilliant-white and chestnut-brown shelducks, in perfect formation, that capture the imagination.

Walking back along the main path, it's hard not to be drawn to the strange sight of the Heligoland traps – large, wired cages with open-ended funnels at one end – which are used to catch birds for ringing and recording before they're released. Since it began in 1957, the Bird Observatory on Hilbre has helped to

record bird populations, not only of its residents but the amazing journeys of thousands of birds that visit each year, including one intrepid, pale-bellied brent goose that was spotted in Northern Ireland, Iceland and the Canadian Arctic after its short stay on the Dee.

Steam in miniature

Far less arduous is the journey back to the mainland, passing over baize-green, algae-covered sandstone formations and rockpools; and then over two smaller islands, Middle- and Little-Eye, before arriving back in West Kirby. From here it's a short drive along the B5141, through the handsome villages of Caldby and Frankby, where you'll find the entrance to Royden Park. Together with Thurstaston Common, this comprises 250 acres of mature mixed woodland, flower-blanketed meadows, heath and rhododendron-coddled meres. It's an amazing place to escape among the sandy paths before you emerge on to a sandstone ridge with views across the Dee to the Clwydian hills beyond.

Starting from the visitor centre, head south across a walled clearing into the woodland, where you'll spot a miniature railway. On Sundays, proud little steam trains chug up and down the track here, weaving their way through the pine and birch. Follow the woodland round and along a path north-west until you emerge at a meadow. Overlooked by Hillbark Hall, a mock-Tudor residence with wonderful twisting brick chimneys, it's an idyllic spot, especially this month, when flowers »

