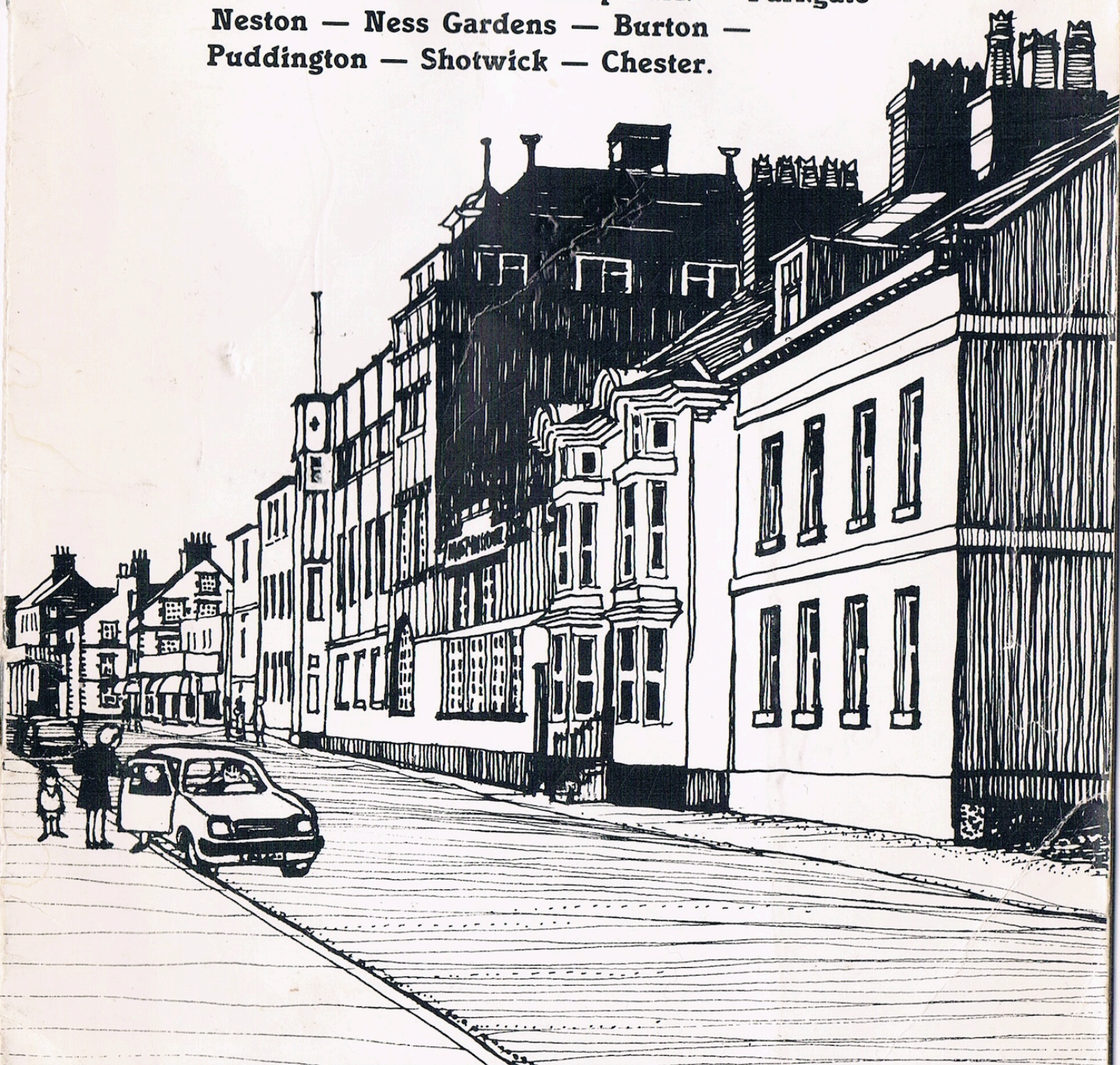


Cheshire Leisure Drive

Chester — Ellesmere Port Boat Museum —
Willaston — Wirral Country Park — Parkgate —
Neston — Ness Gardens — Burton —
Puddington — Shotwick — Chester.



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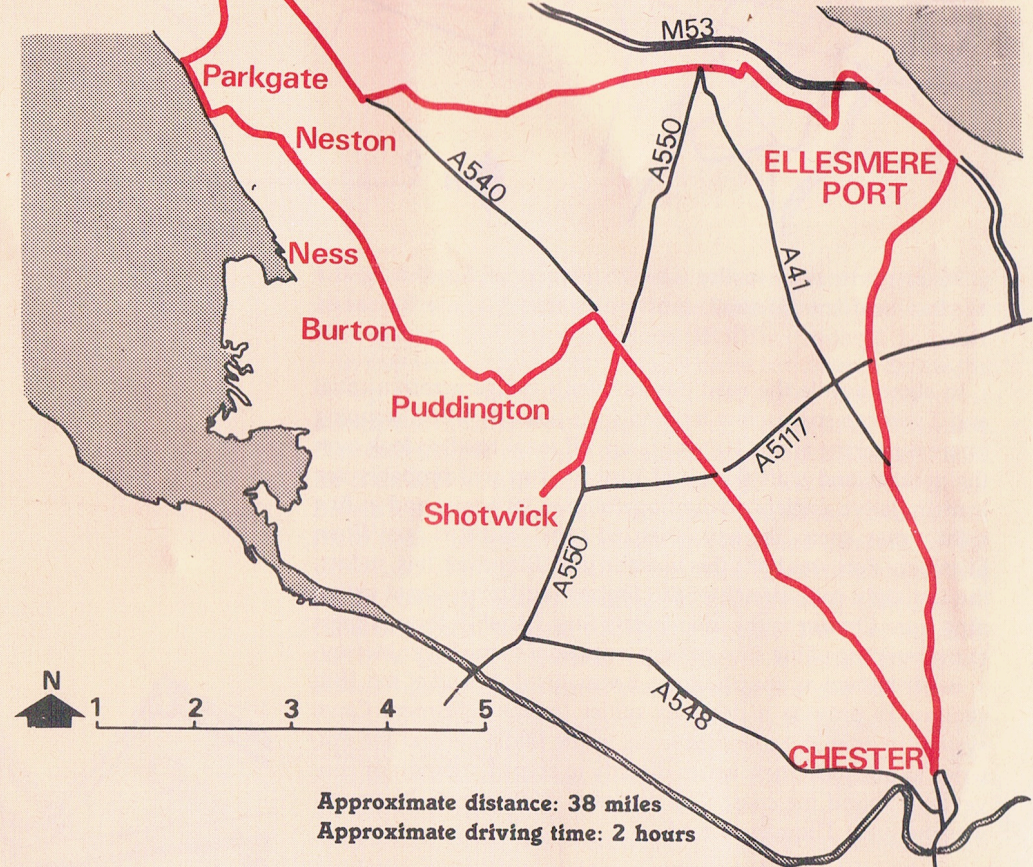


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CHESHIRE LEISURE DRIVE

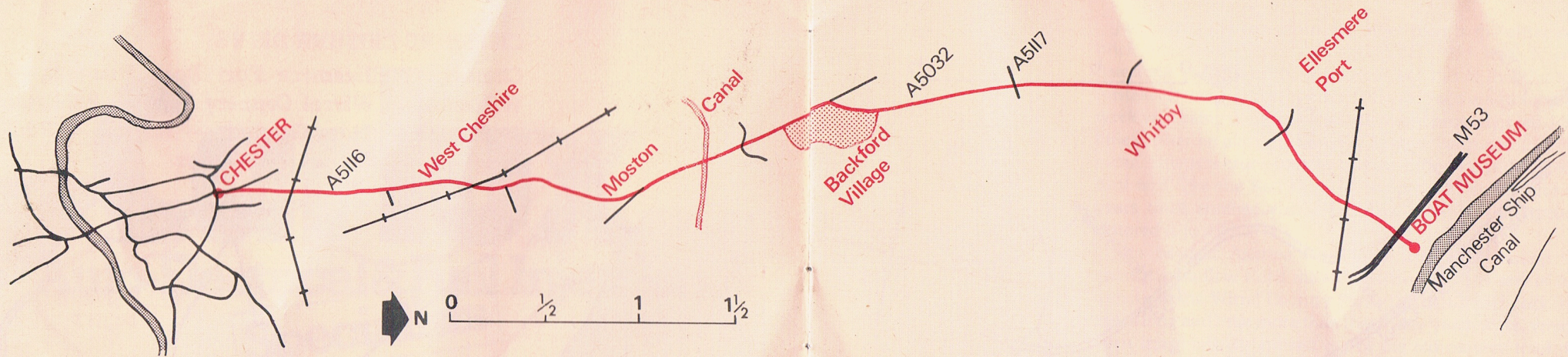
Chester — Ellesmere Port Boat Museum —
Willaston — Wirral Country Park — Parkgate
— Neston — Ness Gardens — Burton — Pud-
dington — Shotwick — Chester.



Approximate distance: 38 miles
Approximate driving time: 2 hours

For centuries the whole of Wirral was in the County of Cheshire but following the deliberations and recommendations of the Local Boundaries Commission in 1974 the peninsula was cut in two with the northern part being allocated to the new County of Merseyside. Happily, the southern portion which remained within the County of Cheshire is an area as diverse in character as you could wish for. It is full of interest and local writer Alan Brack describes a leisurely two-hour drive which will allow you to see most of it. You will pass through unspoilt countryside, see the waters of both the Mersey and the Dee, come across historic villages and have a chance to visit a unique museum at the spot where the town of Ellesmere Port was born.

The route begins in Chester but, of course, can be joined at any point.



Make your way to the A5116 Liverpool Road past the West Cheshire Hospital and join the A41 Birkenhead Road at Moston traffic lights.

In about a mile the road passes over a bridge across a canal and if you can spare a few moments it is possibly worth stopping (there is parking about 100 yards on, off main road) to look over the parapet and sniff the air of history. You will probably see contemplative anglers sitting hopefully on its banks and at first sight it may seem like any other old canal. But it is not. When Ellesmere Port was born this was the umbilical cord. It is, in fact, the last eight-mile stretch of the Shropshire Union Canal extending from Chester to the Manchester Ship Canal — though prior to the building of the ship canal it emptied into the River Mersey.

Better known as 'the Shroppie' it was cut at the end of the 18th century to provide a deep-sea outlet for the Ellesmere Canal system so enabling manufacturers in the Midlands and the Potteries to transport their wares directly to ships for export or conveyance round the coast. The engineer in charge of the project was the great Thomas Telford.

Continuing along the road past the village of Backford, turn right on to the A5032 at the traffic lights and take the A5032 through Whitby to ELLESMERE PORT.

You will pass the splendid Civic Hall, Library and shopping centre. This is the heart of the modern town. Follow the signs for the BOAT MUSEUM and see where it all began.

The canal from Chester would only accept conventional narrowboats and facilities had to be built for the transhipment of goods to sea-going vessels. Telford built a tidal basin which connected the canal to the Mersey by a series of locks. Twenty years later when trade had developed he was recalled to design and build a comprehensive dock estate and a feature of his plans was

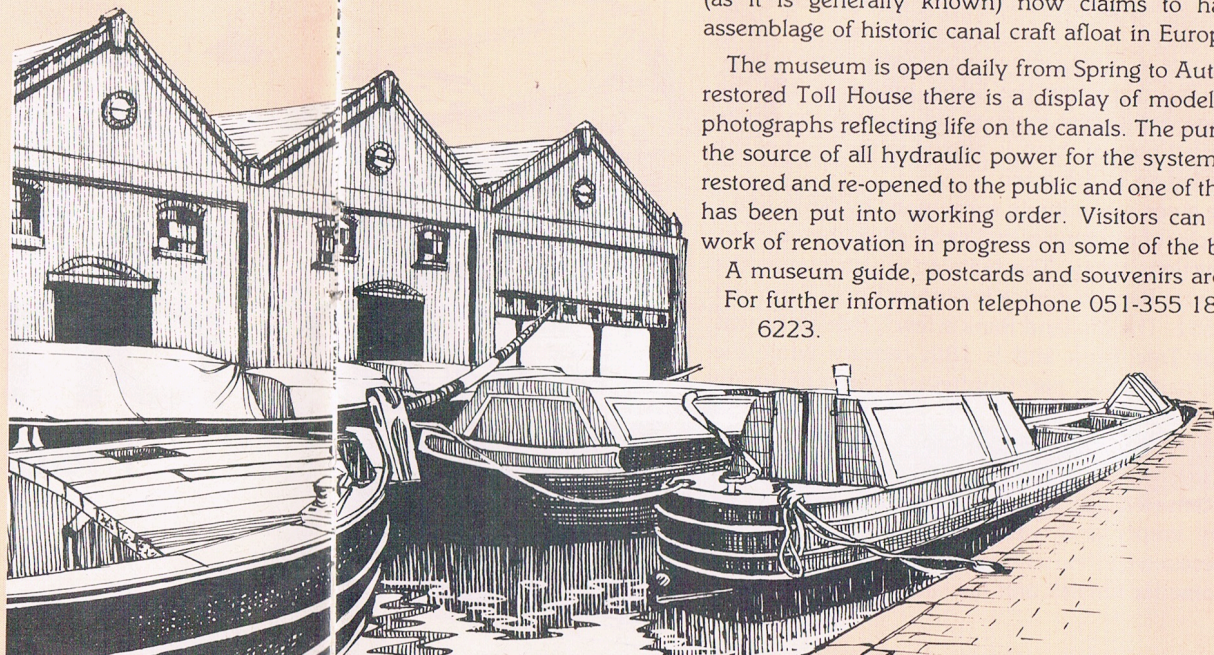
a large warehouse supported on a series of graceful swooping arches. The area became known as 'Little Venice' but, sadly, it was all destroyed in a great fire in 1970.

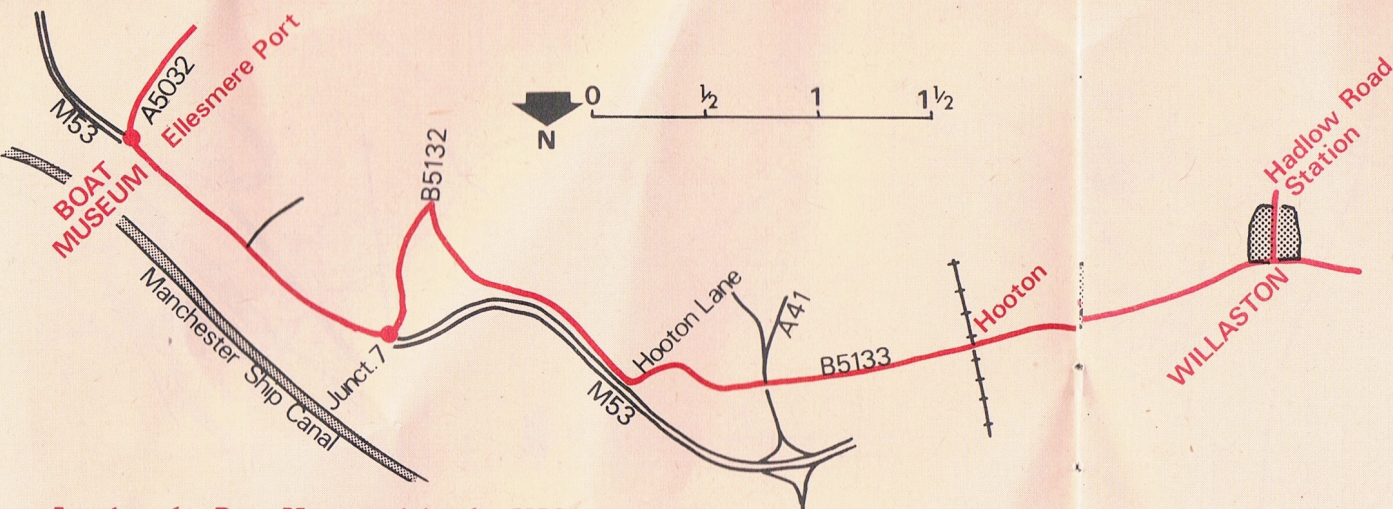
In that same year a small group of canal enthusiasts decided to set up a canal-life museum which they called The Northwest Museum of Inland Navigation and four years later, Ellesmere Port Council offered them the abandoned dock estate as a base for their activities. It was virtually derelict and an eye-sore but Britain's first and foremost canal port could not have been a more fitting location. Volunteers worked hard clearing up the debris and over the years since members have spent many long hours repairing and renovating an ever-growing collection of canal boats of all shapes, sizes and purposes. The Boat Museum (as it is generally known) now claims to have the largest assemblage of historic canal craft afloat in Europe.

The museum is open daily from Spring to Autumn and in the restored Toll House there is a display of models, artefacts and photographs reflecting life on the canals. The pump-house, once the source of all hydraulic power for the system, has also been restored and re-opened to the public and one of the steam pumps has been put into working order. Visitors can also watch the work of renovation in progress on some of the boats.

A museum guide, postcards and souvenirs are on sale.

For further information telephone 051-355 1876 or 061-980 6223.





Leaving the Boat Museum join the M53 motorway (signposted Liverpool) for a short distance leaving at Junction 7 to join the B5132 signposted Overpool. Turn first right still on the B5132 through Rivacre Valley (a parkland area reclaimed from derelict sites) and then alongside the M53 turning left just before a red brick farm building into Hooton Lane. Then take the first road on the right and keep straight on until you reach the traffic lights at the junction with the busy A41 New Chester Road. At the lights continue straight ahead on to the B5133 through Hooton to the village of WILLASTON.

Willaston is one of the oldest villages on the Wirral Peninsula. It boasts a splendid village green enhanced by a magnificent copper beech tree planted in 1935 to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of King George V. If time allows you to stop there is plenty to see and to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of HM the Queen three village walks were mapped out to cover the points of interest. A framed plan of them is affixed to the front of the Memorial Hall facing on to the green.

At one time the green was entirely surrounded by farms and a number of the ancient farm houses still exist, albeit they are serving different functions today. The building which houses the National Westminster Bank was once known as Home Farm and bears the date 1661. The Midland Bank a few yards away was once part of Pear Tree Farm and is 18th century while the building which is part-house, part-hairdresser's was Laburnum Farm of about the same age.

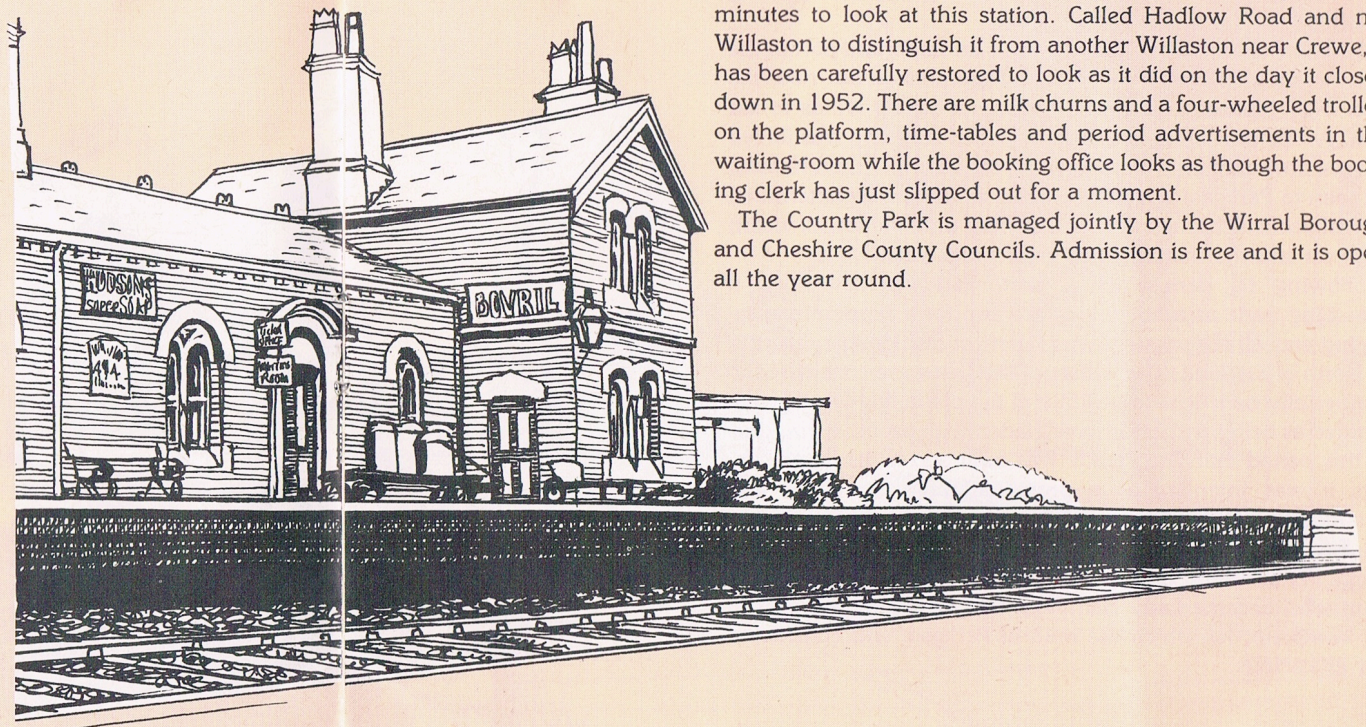
The building which will immediately catch your eye is the old Red Lion Inn. This dates from 1631 (possibly even earlier) and ceased to be a licensed house in 1928. For many, many years until 1972 it lay empty and was on the verge of collapse. Happily, it was rescued and virtually rebuilt by an architect who made it into a home for himself and his family.

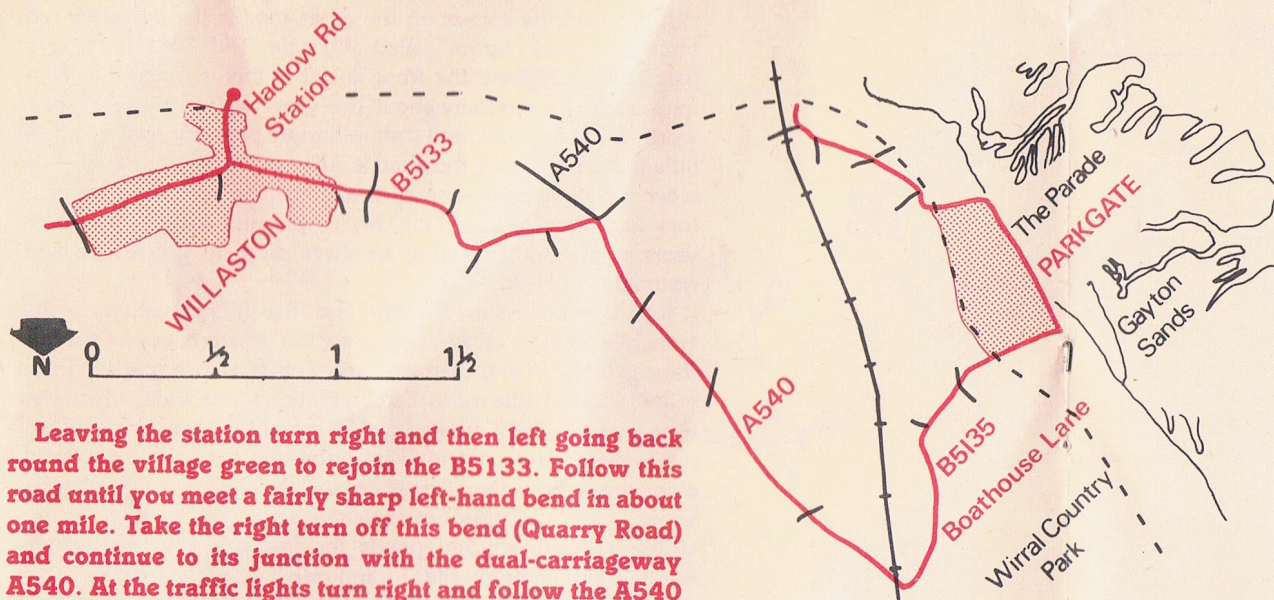
Just round the corner on the other road is the attractive red brick and stone house called Willaston Old Hall. It bears a datestone 1558 over the front door but this is thought to be a mistake. It was put there about 160 years ago when some repair work was being done and it should more properly read 1658. A little further on along this road is Ashtree Farm and that is even older. This is a cruck-framed cottage dating from the 15th century and, like the Red Lion, lay empty and derelict for many years until another young architect came to the rescue and restored it in 1970.

Just beyond Ashtree Farm and the filling station is the erstwhile Hadlow Road railway station which is one of the entrances to the Wirral Country Park. This is a linear park, twelve miles long and little more than that many yards wide, which has been imaginatively created out of the old railway track which ran between Hooton and West Kirby and for much of its way along the sands o' Dee. It provides delightful walks with splendid views, a 'ride' for horses, picknicking areas with rustic seats and tables, specially-stocked ponds for fishing, fully-documented nature trails, camping sites — and much more. Its creators seem not to have missed a trick. Everything is well signposted and where a stile is necessary they have even remembered to make provision for prams. At Thurston (off the A540 going towards West Kirby but not on this tour) is a Visitor Centre where you can see a slide show about the park and obtain full information.

If you are intent on a tour by car, however, time may not allow you to sample the park's many delights but do spare a few minutes to look at this station. Called Hadlow Road and not Willaston to distinguish it from another Willaston near Crewe, it has been carefully restored to look as it did on the day it closed down in 1952. There are milk churns and a four-wheeled trolley on the platform, time-tables and period advertisements in the waiting-room while the booking office looks as though the booking clerk has just slipped out for a moment.

The Country Park is managed jointly by the Wirral Borough and Cheshire County Councils. Admission is free and it is open all the year round.





Leaving the station turn right and then left going back round the village green to rejoin the B5133. Follow this road until you meet a fairly sharp left-hand bend in about one mile. Take the right turn off this bend (Quarry Road) and continue to its junction with the dual-carriageway A540. At the traffic lights turn right and follow the A540 for about two miles turning left on to the B5135 (Boathouse Lane) signposted PARKGATE.

This road winds down to the shores of the River Dee and on the way provides fine views across the water towards the hills of North Wales. When you reach the Boathouse Restaurant the road turns left and becomes the Parade, Parkgate (where parking is free).

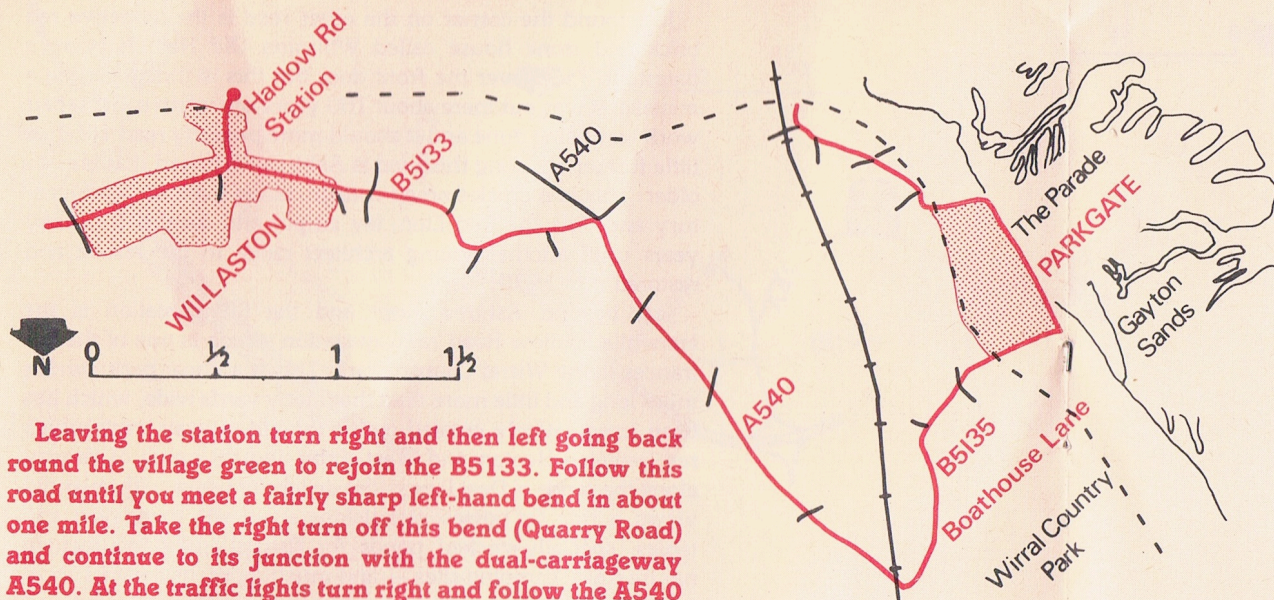
There was a time when Parkgate was an important port in the Irish trade and this was a sea-lapped promenade but now the water only reaches it at Spring tides with strong winds to aid them. As the port of Chester became silted shipping was forced to move downstream — to Shotwick, then Burton, then Neston, and then to Parkgate which flourished as the principal terminal for mail-packets through the 18th century until it, too, fell victim to the silt and the marsh which grew in its wake.

Following its demise as a port, Parkgate developed a flourishing trade as a holiday centre and for a time when sea-dipping was all the vogue it was the most fashionable resort in the North of England. The waters of the Dee were considered to be especially beneficial to health and the prevailing winds were regarded as being particularly well-laden with ozone. It was during this period that The Parade was built and as its name suggests it was intended as a promenade for the smart and fashionable clientele. Among the famous visitors at this time was Mrs. Fitzherbert (the morganatic wife of the Prince of Wales, later George IV) and Mrs. Emma Hart (born in nearby Ness as Emy Lyon) who became Lady Hamilton. She was suffering from a skin complaint for which the mud of Parkgate was considered very efficacious.

When the era as a watering-place ended towards the middle of the 19th century, Parkgate was left to the fishermen and became famous for its shrimps. But along this three-quarter mile of seafront there are several reminders of those times gone by. The little odd-shaped building which juts out into the road and halves its width is the former Watch Tower used by the coastguards. There are several old cottages and the Red Lion pub is of ancient origin. The house with the wrought iron balcony was once the Assembly Rooms where ladies and gentlemen of quality once tripped the light fantastic and right at the end are the black and white buildings of what were once the Mostyn Arms Hotel and the George Hotel. Much altered, they are now Mostyn House School, a preparatory school for boys and girls, which was founded (as a boys only school) in 1865 by the Rev. A. S. Grenfell. Its most notable old pupil was his own son, Wilfred, who was to achieve lasting fame as 'Grenfell of Labrador' and be subsequently knighted. His rescue from a drifting ice-flow off Newfoundland is one of the great survival stories of all time.

Parkgate is still famous for its seafood but now it has acquired a widespread reputation for its home-made ice-cream which people come from afar to enjoy.





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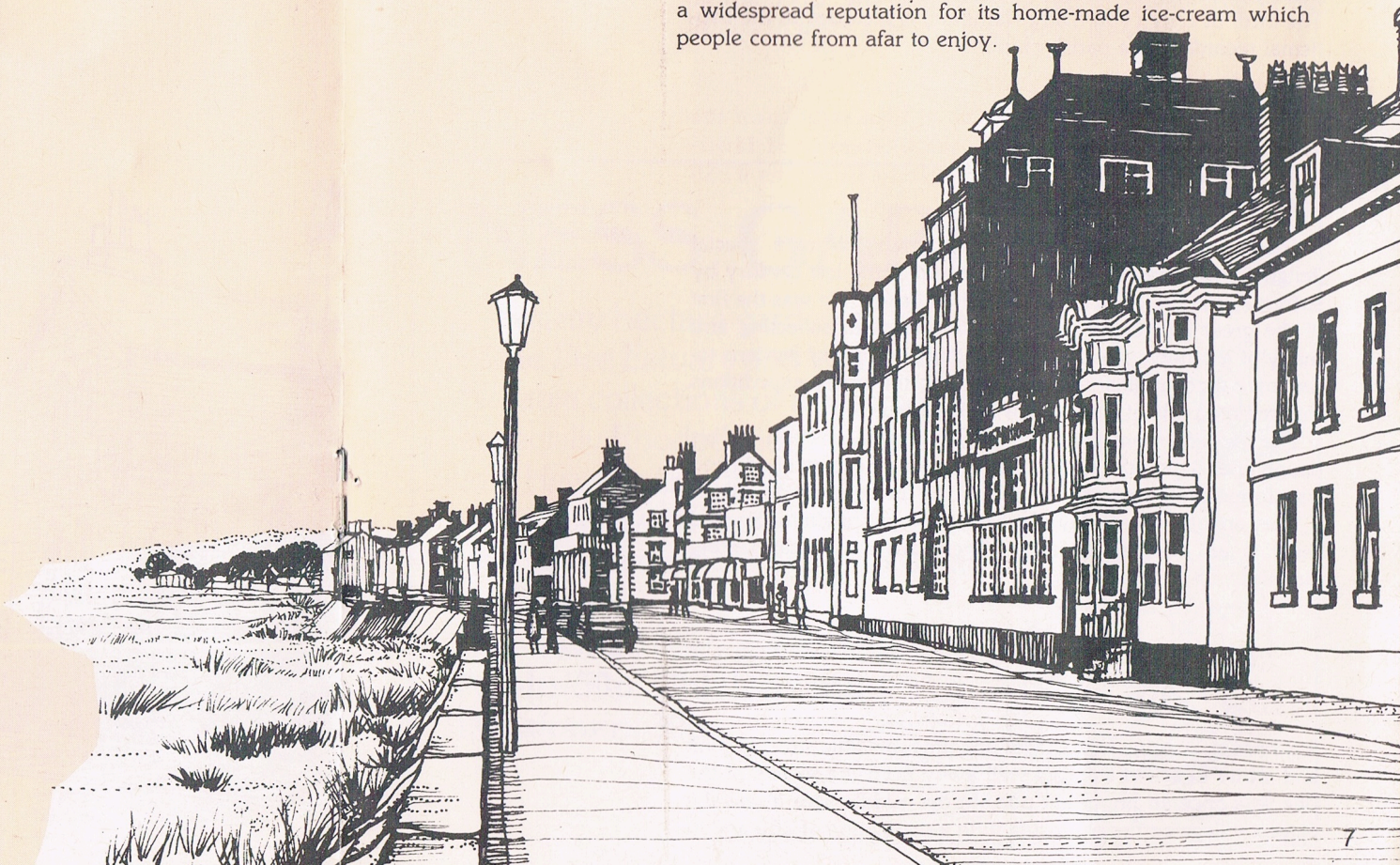
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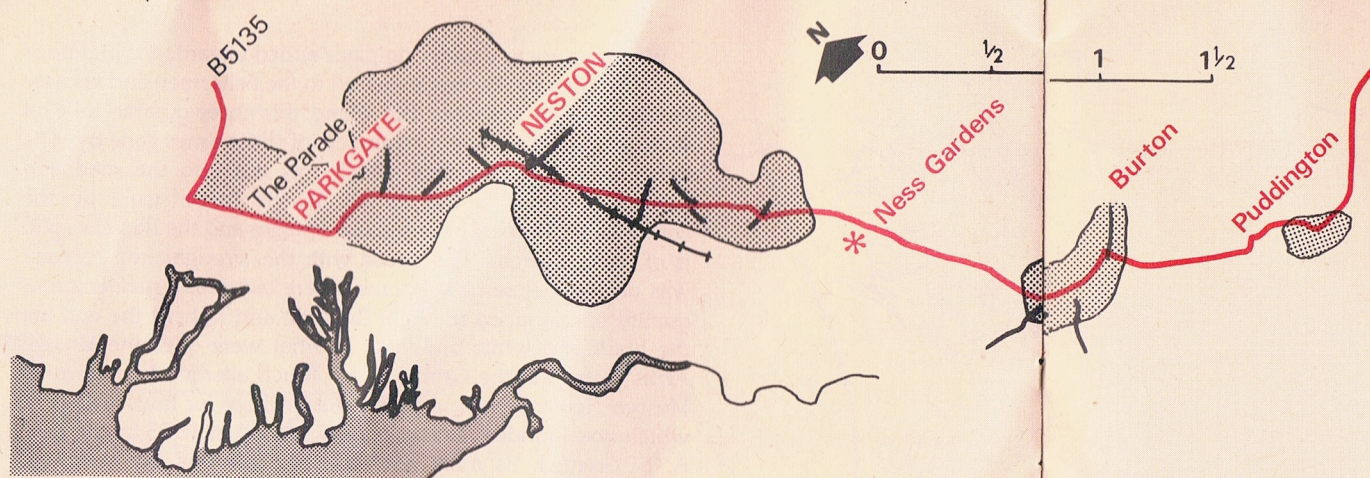
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Leaving Parkgate at the end of The Parade the road turns left and leads into the ancient town of NESTON.

Before the rise of Birkenhead, Neston was the most important place on the Wirral Peninsula and shared Parkgate's prosperity. The birth of Emy Lyon (Lady Hamilton) is recorded in the baptismal records in the parish church.

At the cross-roads (Neston Cross) turn right, past the church, and follow the road to the University of Liverpool's Botanic Gardens, more popularly known as NESS GARDENS.

These beautiful gardens number among Wirral's special delights and were established at the end of the last century by Arthur Kilpin Bulley, a Liverpool cotton broker. He was the first of the great twentieth-century patrons of plant collecting and many of the flowers and shrubs which grow in our gardens today owe their origins in this country to the many expeditions into remote parts of Asia which he financed.

The gardens were given to the University in 1948 by his daughter and over the years since they have been extended and transformed to be numbered among the finest in the country.

They are open every day of the year except Christmas Day and there is an admission charge. There are ample car-parking facilities.

Emerging from the gardens turn right and follow the road for another half-mile to the picturesque village of BURTON.

It is hard to imagine now that at one time this little street of pink and white thatched cottages well away from the waters of the Dee was once an important port. In the middle ages it was the biggest village on the peninsula with a population of 250 and in

the 14th century when silt had closed the port of Chester it became the main port for Ireland. But its maritime era was also ended by the ever-advancing silt and down the years it gradually declined into a little agricultural village.

Burton's church of St. Nicholas dates back to 1721 and on its square tower is a rare one-handed clock. But Burton is known to thousands of people in all parts of the country and abroad as the location of Burton Manor, a very successful and popular residential college for adult education.

Just beyond Burton's tiny Post Office take the first turning on the right (Puddington Lane) and in less than a mile enter the interesting tucked-away hamlet of PUD-DINGTON.

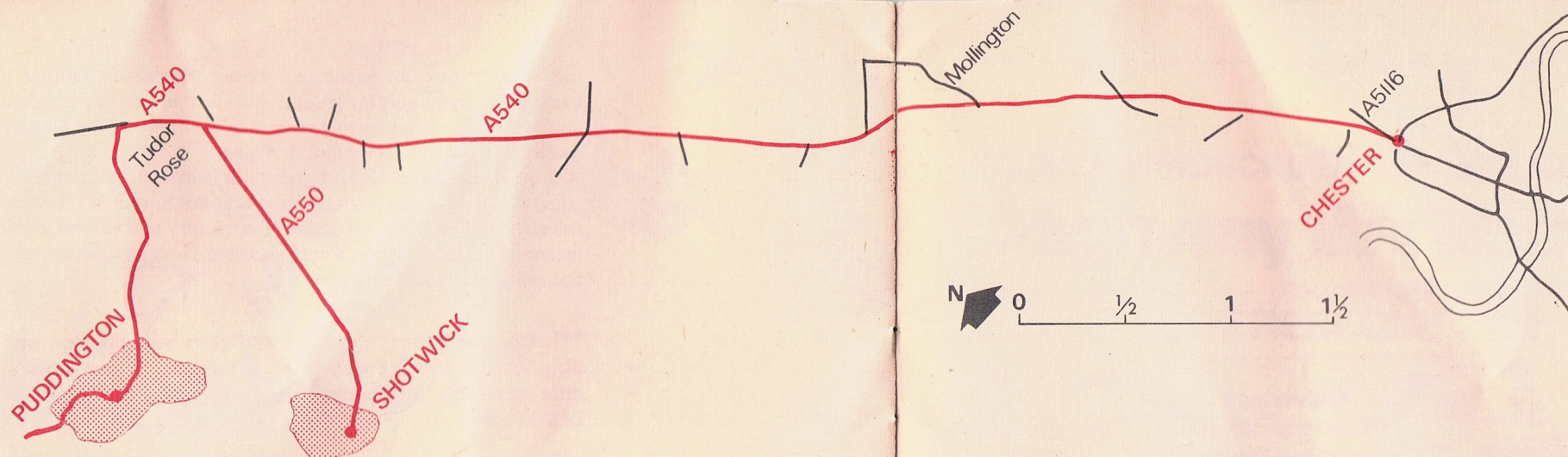
Puddington's little triangular village green has more than once sported a sign proclaiming 'Cheshire's Best Kept Village' but its real claim to fame lies in the activities of the Massey family who occupied the manor for seven centuries until the last of the line died in 1715. The Massey name figured prominently in the fighting in many a famous battle down the years.

NESS GARDENS

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From Puddington continue to follow the road to its junction with the A540. Turn right in the direction of Chester but at the traffic lights just beyond The Tudor Rose Hotel turn right on to the A550 (signposted Queensferry). In just over a mile where the road dips take the road on the right to SHOTWICK.

This is a none-too-wide road but is one which in about half a mile will transport you right back into history. Shotwick is a tiny village with a population of under thirty and it has hardly changed in the last 300 years. It has no shop, no Post Office, no school, no buses and electricity only arrived in the mid-fifties.

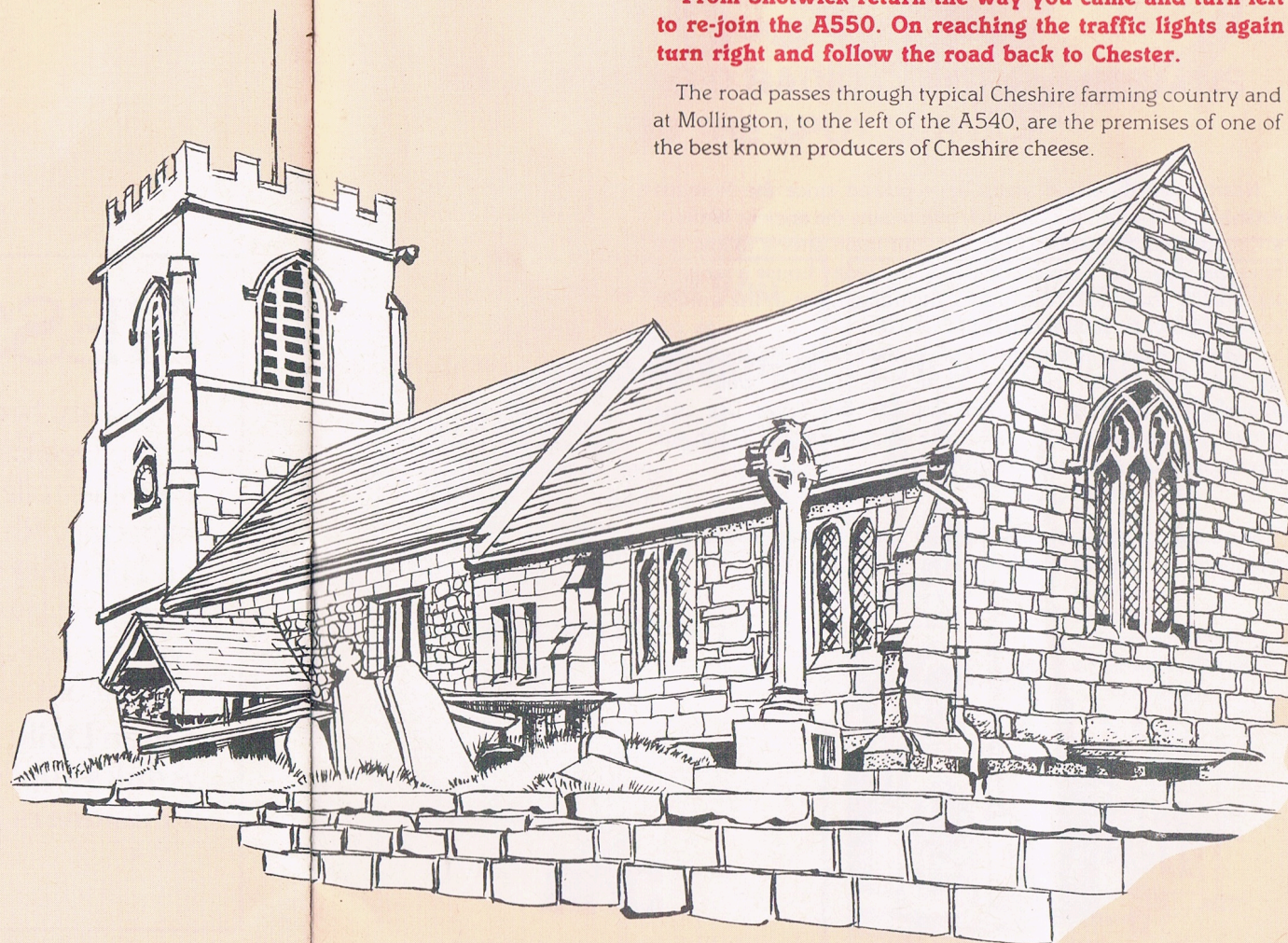
It is hard to believe that, like Burton, this, too, was an ancient port and actually preceded the former. It lasted as such for about a hundred years and it is said that the waters of the Dee once lapped the church walls. But prior to that, and long before the Normans came, the village marked a ford across the Dee which was part of the main trading route from England into North Wales. It was also an important military highway and there was once a Shotwick Castle nearby.

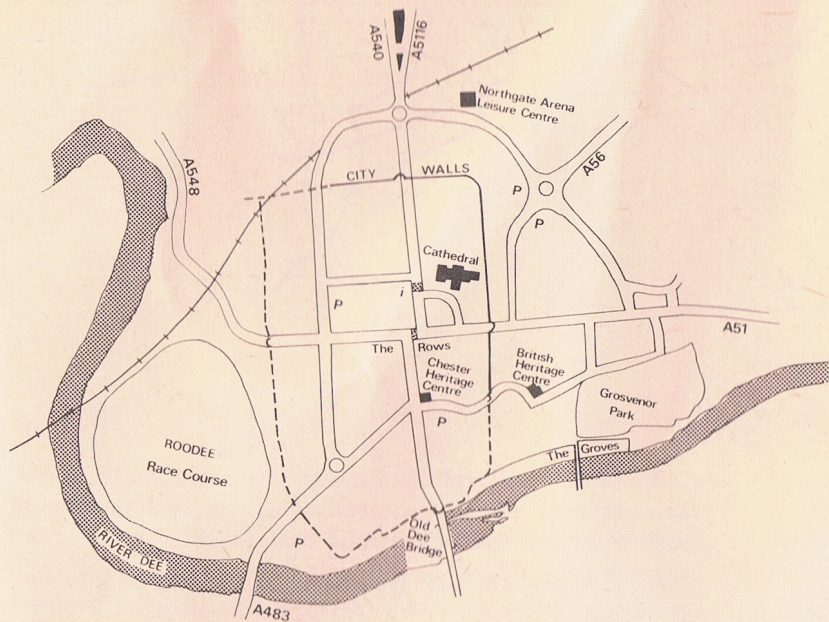
St. Michael's Church is well worth inspecting. The massive tower is probably 16th century but the doorway is pure Norman and in the porch you can see the deep score marks made by archers sharpening their arrows long ago. The rest of the church dates only from 1871 but it is furnished with box pews and a rare three-decker pulpit which came from a church in Chester.

Take a look, too, at Shotwick Hall in the other lane. It is a picturesque red brick, gabled house built in the shape of the letter E in 1662.

From Shotwick return the way you came and turn left to re-join the A550. On reaching the traffic lights again turn right and follow the road back to Chester.

The road passes through typical Cheshire farming country and at Mollington, to the left of the A540, are the premises of one of the best known producers of Cheshire cheese.





Nearly two thousand years have passed since the Romans established Chester, which today still retains the ancient Walls of a City steeped in history. Chester's four main streets follow the lines laid down by Roman engineers, but today house a range of top quality shops and restaurants, including those in the unique covered Rows at first floor level.

Chester's history is brought to life at the Chester Heritage Centre and the British Heritage Exhibition. Guided walks are available, and other attractions include the River Dee, the Groves, Grosvenor Park, the leisure complex at the Northgate Arena, and Chester Zoo at nearby Upton.

More information from Chester City Tourist Office, Town Hall, telephone Chester 40144 (Saturdays — 49026).

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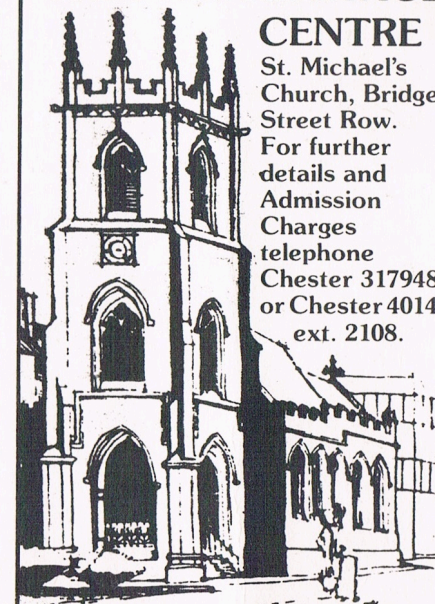


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