Wirral in Medieval Times

BY

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WAS there a particular social behaviour and manner of life of Wirral folk, that distinguished them clearly from the people north of the Mersey or east of the Gowy? The habits and speech of the dweller in the heart of Cheshire soon make themselves plain; the Welshman, the Yorkshireman, and the Cornishman leave no one in doubt as to their place of origin. Was the same true of the Wirral man?

Regions, like people, have a personality, that sum total of qualities which makes them a type, and sets them apart. Just as an individual's personality is the outcome of his heredity, his contacts, his social conditions, and his upbringing, so is that of a region the result of its physical nature, its nearness to or remoteness from civilisation, its accessibility, the nature of its soil and its type of climate.

Thus there must have been a Wirral type, for Wirral is a region unique in many ways, both geographically and historically. And yet the typical Wirral man is hard to discover, on account of the rapid and recent industrial development of the area round Merseyside with the consequent influx of outsiders, for whom Wirral is merely a dormitory. The newcomers had their roots elsewhere and are alien to Wirral soil, but they have been transplanted in such numbers that they tend to oust the native and supplant him.

The characteristics of the true native of Wirral have been submerged in the ever-growing tide of this residential invasion. Wallasey and Birkenhead of 100 years ago must have been very like Bromborough of 50 years ago, or Burton or Ince of to-day, and even the last two are already yielding to the allurements of the speculative builder.

Let us see, therefore, what factors have gone to mould Wirral and let us attempt to make a few deductions as to their effect on the lives and habits of the people.

1. Its Orientation.

The first factor of importance in the moulding of Wirral is its position relative to the lands and seas about it. Naturally this is a changeable factor, and particularly with a peninsula like Wirral. Its sea coast often protected its inhabitants, but occasionally gave access to the invader, as it did in Prehistoric and Scandinavian times. Generally speaking though its situation was one of remoteness from civilisation and of inaccessibility. The marshes of the Gowy and the Broxton Valley proved difficult barriers to cross and the inhospitability of the Mersey Estuary was a deterrent to settlement. Wirral was thus an isolated backwater,

rarely disturbed by the successive tides of culture that washed the south and east of England.

Thus in Prehistoric times, Wirral was little influenced by the invasions of the Megalithic folk except on the coastal fringe. At Dove Point, near Meols, on Hilbre, and at the Red Noses, there were evidently habitation sites, but they only served as links between much more populous areas in the Bronze Age. Wirral was a sort of half-way house between Anglesey and Derbyshire; and between Antrim and the Yorkshire Wolds. The Megalithic Builders, the Axe Men, and the Urn-Burial Folk influenced merely the edge of the Peninsula, the marshy hinterland and the heavily wooded districts on the boulder clay being too inhospitable for habitation.

But it was into these desolate and isolated areas that the Celts were driven by the incoming waves of Roman civilisation. From the Celtic place-names in Wirral, one realises how the Celts took refuge in its remote fastnesses. To mention only one, Ince, is to obtain a graphic description of that settlement site — an island in a wilderness of marsh.

So though the Roman military station of Chester was so near to Wirral, the Peninsula's inaccessibility was such that it did not attract the Roman gentleman, and in consequence the culture of the Roman villa passed Wirral by. In spite of this there must have been some sort of a road leading to the Meols neighbourhood, where so many Roman finds have been made. It probably followed roughly the line of the present Parkgate Road, perhaps much nearer the coast in the upper portion of the Dee Estuary than now, with a branch via Willaston (Street Hey) to the Storeton Quarries. This western route into the Peninsula by land and water was to play an important part in the development of Wirral.

After the departure of the Romans, the remaining British were left in undisputed possession of the district until in the early part of the seventh century, when as a result of the victory of Ethelfrith of Northumbria at Chester over the Britons, the Celts of Wales were separated from their kinsmen of the North, and by the time of Edwin's expedition to the Isle of Man, Wirral must have become Saxon, with the exception of those uninviting "islands" Wallasey and Ince.

Some 200 years later the Scandinavians from Ireland and the Isle of Man invaded Wirral, their settlements taking place on the north coast and the neighbourhood of Deeside. The many place-names terminating in "by" representing a farmstead or dwelling, and in "ea" or "ey" denoting an island, e.g. Wallasey "the island of the Welsh," give clues to this. If, as some authorities assert the battle of Brunanburh in 937 A.D. was fought at Bromborough, then very bad news was quickly conveyed to the Norse Assembly at Thingwall.

Thus by the time of Edward the Confessor, the dweller in Wirral ought to have been possessed of the hardihood of the Celt, the agrarian and economic ideas of the Saxon, and the sea-roving instincts of the Norseman, though little of the constructive ability of the Megalithic or the Roman people.

II. The Sovereignty of the Earls of Chester.

By 1070 The Norman Conquest was complete as far as Wirral was concerned and the great shadow of the first Norman Earl of Chester, Hugh Lupus, the Conqueror's nephew, fell over the land. For some 200 years it was to shut out the light of peace and freedom from Wirral.

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that the great Earl's position was exceptional; his powers were immense; he was virtually a king in his own right, and therefore his territory was not subject to the Conqueror's law and government. Of this earldom, the chroniclers later wrote, "The King left Chester and returned to England." So, though physically a portion of England, the earldom of Chester was a separate political unit, and of this unit Wirral was the outlying portion. It certainly was not to bask in the suns rays of a beneficient king, but had to be content with the fitful moonlight of the Earl.

And why? Well, though the Earl was nominally subject to his over-lord, William the Conqueror, and though the Domesday Commissioners had surveyed Wirral and found its assessable value to William, the Earldom was a buffer state to secure the peace of England by preventing the predatory raids of the Welsh. It was to provide the troops to attack the Welsh or to receive the shock when they attacked. To lead these commandos was the Earl's task and because of its dangerous nature, he was given plenary powers and the right to add to his possessions by the sword as much land as he liked, provided it did not affect the holdings of the king.

Now Wirral was the part of the Earldom closest to Wales and would therefore be compelled to play a prominent part in these incursions into Wales and the inevitable counter thrusts. What an unhappy prospect for the Saxon in Wirral who had begun to appreciate the agricultural pursuits of peace.

As he made his way, say, up Townfield Lane, Lower Bebington, to cultivate his strip of land in the townfield and guide the eight-oxen plough, or tend his cattle on the common meadow, or his pigs on the wasteland, he could not have been at ease in his mind. "Why bother?" he would say, "to sow what others will most likely reap? I may have to go to war or my land may be harried by the Welshman." However, the body had to be nourished, the soldier fed, and in consequence, the main purpose in life was military. He owed service to his lord for the tenure of his land and this meant service in the Earl's army. His was Hobson's choice—work to supply the commisariat or active service. Yes,

the Earl meant business; he was building castles at Chester and Shotwick, as a de Lancelyn was soon to do at Poulton. The safety of the river Dee and the creeks of Shotwick and Bromborough Pool was essential.

When the Earl and his successors died, the last of whom, John Scot, left no male heir, the Earldom escheated to the Crown, and the King or the King's eldest son took the title and the lands. The County Palatine was clearly a valuable prize, and so it remained until 1536 when for the purpose of government it was merged into England and sent M.P.'s to Westminster.

III. The Power of The Lords Ecclesiastic.

As a result of the Conquest, the dweller in Wirral was soon to feel the authority of the ecclesiastic, the lord abbot or prior, as well as that of the lay lord. To secure the blessing of Holy Church on their adventures and to ease those twinges of conscience, the result of past misdeeds, the Norman Barons founded monasteries.

In 1093 Hugh Lupus ejected the secular canons of the church of SS. Peter and Paul in Chester and founded the Benedictine Abbey of St. Werburgh. In 1150 this act was imitated by Hamo de Masci of Puddington and Dunham with the establishment of Birkenhead Priory while a Cistercian brotherhood was founded in 1178 at Stanlow by John de Lacy, Baron of Halton and Constable of Chester.

The death of the lord of the manor, with no living male issue, frequently brought relief to his oppressed subjects for the property was transferred by marriage to another; sometimes it it was split into portions and parts of it were sold to the tenants. My lord abbot on the other hand was like the king; he never died. His was a corporation and the land, in consequence, never changed hands through death. The monastic possessions grew and grew. By the fourteenth century, the Earl of Chester held only the manor of Shotwick in Wirral, the bulk of the rest of the Hundred being under the jurisdiction of the Abbot of St. Werburgh's. In fact, Woodchurch and Heswall were the only two churches the advowsons of which were not in monastic hands.

In addition, these lords ecclesiastic obtained special liberties in the Forest of Wirral and market rights, and in this way their pride became inordinate and their power immense. The inhospitabilty of the Mersey discomfited the monks of Stanlow and and its inundation of their buildings finally drove them to Whalley in Lancashire in 1294, but the monks of Birkenhead and Chester remained for nearly another two and half centuries. Yes it needed Anne Boleyn to dislodge them !

IV. Military Service.

That the men of Wirral took part in the Welsh, French, Irish and Scotch campaigns is clear from the records, for where their

lords went their fighting men had to accompany them. Robert de Rodelent (Rhuddlan) was killed fighting against the Welsh in 1088, and there were several Wirral men in the "miracle" of the Constable Sands. A Massey was present at Crecy and Poictiers, and because of his prowess in the latter engagement, he was pardoned by the Black Prince for certain misdeeds. Soldiers of value to the Prince were frequently forgiven trespasses in the forest or even murders.

Sir John Massey and other Wirral Knights were in the rebel hosts of Percy at the battle of Shrewsbury in 1403, the former losing his life there. Another Massey distinguished himself at Agincourt. The Pooles and the Stanleys were equally gallant and brought trophies from Flodden Field. Sir John Troutbeck died at Bloreheath in 1459 losing his life in the Lancastrian cause: Thomas Clegg of Gayton and Henry de Bromborough espoused the Yorkist cause and conspired to seize 20,400 marks on their way to Henry VI, but were imprisoned in Chester Castle for the attempt.

Kings too, featured in the events in Wirral. King John set sail from Shotwick in 1210 on his Irish expedition; Edward I went via Wirral on some of his Welsh campaigns; and in 1399 Richard II accompanied by a body of 2,000 Cheshire Archers, to whom he paid the comparatively high wage of 6d. per day, and among whom were many Wirral men, embarked from Burton Point for Ireland, as William III was to do later from King's Gap, Hoylake.

The average Wirral man must have had a rather hopeless outlook when all he had to look forward to was to die in the campaigns of his lord or be maimed permanently in his service. Economically he was badly off, socially, he was a nonentity; only in the military sphere was he of consequence. And why was it that between the campaigning he was of no importance? He lived in a forest and that was no enviable habitation.

V. The Forest of Wirral.

The obstinacy of his character and his love of the freedom he had gained during Saxon times made him resent the oppression of his Norman overlords, but he had displayed his opposition to the new regime very strongly, and Randle, the fourth Earl, found it so vexatious that he declared Wirral to be a forest and therefore subject to forest laws. It was a sort of transformation from civil to military law that we can appreciate in these days.

It meant that the bulk of Wirral was a chase for the pleasure of the Earl and his favourites. The native lived there on sufferance; his economic prosperity was of no consequence. Many farmsteads were obliterated to improve the chase, and so Wirral became a sea of wooded and open heath country with villages dotted in it like islands. Village life still continued but

with the difference that agricultural development was restricted and personal liberty limited.

To those employed in and for the chase, the change must have been welcomed. Alan Sylvestre, appointed chief forester, was given the manors of Puddington and Storeton and a horn to blow, or cause to be blown at the Gloverstone in Chester in the early morning of every fair day. His under-foresters and others who went on the "regard" of the forest besides their fees, received many perquisites in kind, as did those later on in connection with the Cheshire Hunt. Indeed the Hunting Squire and Parson were the direct descendants of the forest lords lay and ecclesiastic, of the 12th and 13th centuries. The master forestership later passed to the Stanley family by marriage in 1280. Is it any wonder that the Grand National is run near Knowsley Hall and that the most important flat race is called "the Derby"? It was a member of the Stanley family who interested himself in the races at Leasowe in 1683 in which the ill-fated Duke of Monmouth was a jockey. Truly custom dies hard.

It would be the natural desire of the farmer to extend his arable land to provide additional food for the needs of his family, but if he "assarted" land, that is, enroached on the forest, he had to pay a fine for it. To keep out the deer or other straying animals of the chase he erected a pailing or dug a dry ditch. but were the paling too high or the ditch too wide for the running deer to negotiate without danger to itself, more fines followed.

If the cold days of winter tempted him to trespass in the forest for fallen branches or turves, it was a dear and hazardous undertaking. An empty larder and hungry children must often have proved too great an incentive for him to let discretion warn him. He poached game, even the buck itself. We can picture the trepidation into which the family would be thrown on the appearance of an under-forester several days or so after the foraging expedition. Discovery meant a heavy fine or serious bodily mutilation or even death.

And should it be found out that the trespasser possessed a greyhound or other coursing dog, he was severely punished. Other breeds of dog he was allowed to keep, provided that they had been "lawed," that is three claws removed from each forefoot. This rendered the dog lawful, but useless to a poacher.

Great and small were compelled to respect these forest laws or pay the forfeit. Records show that the great abbot himself had to toe the line, but the great ones had a much more favourable chance of obtaining the liberty of the forest and exemption from the irksome restrictions and abuses of the chase, particularly the dreaded right of "putura"—a custom of feudal foresters to take food from the inhabitants within the perambulation of the forest. When he or his underlings were on their itineraries

through the forest, they could call upon the villagers for refreshment and accommodation for themselves and their horses. Bromborough and Eastham apparently were freed from this burden and other forest dues by a licence granted to the Abbot of St. Werburgh's for his manor of Eastham, and this privilege was certainly instrumental in promoting the development of these places.

VI. The Black Death.

Thus the people of Wirral had to bear like many other people in Cheshire grievous burdens additional to those which were general throughout the land, because of the forest. But they were now to be visited by that dreadful scourge, the bubonic plague, known as the Black Death, round about the middle of the 14th century. It was no respecter of persons; the only cure was apparently the "Quick, Far and Late" one. Whenever it occurred it was case of start quick, go far, and come back late. Naturally most were in a position that they could not try this cure. The Abbot of Chester, William de Bebington and the priests of Backford, Stoke and Woodchurch succumbed to the plague as did many others too unimportant to be mentioned in the records. Most likely Wirral suffered as did the rest of the country by losing a half or one third of its population. The remnant used their scarcity value to obtain alleviation from their lot by demanding an increase in wages and a decrease in irksome restrictions.

To the lords of the manor their demands appeared absurd, for they declared:

> "The world goeth fast from bad to worse when shepherd and cowherd demand more for their labour than their master bailiff was wont to take. Labourers of old were not wont to eat of wheaten bread; their meat was of beans or coarser corn and their drink of water alone. Cheese and milk were a feast to them; their dress was of hodden grey; then was the world ordered aright for folk of this sort. Ha ! age of ours, whither turnest thou ?

Nevertheless, the threats of the residue in Wirral were evidently no idle ones, for by the end of the 14th century the men of Cheshire were very lawless and out of hand.

VII. The Lawlessness of Wirral.

The monastic chroniclers refer to them as ruffians, turbulent, cut-throats, thieves, vagabonds, etc., and no wonder when they waylaid the Abbot of Combermere and played football with the head of a Vale Royal monk. Cheshire may have been "the seed plot of gentilitie" but it was no nursery bed of gentleness. The Wirralite would be no less a thug than the other gangsters of the county, for he must have had much tainted blood in him. The forest was not only the home of the lord's game; it harboured

felons and fugitives from the king's justice, and the offspring of such ruffians were not nurtured in the refinements of civilisation.

There is much recorded evidence of the brutality and savageness of the Wirral man and of his violence and indiscipline. Brimstage Tower was built in the latter half of the 14th century and was fortified by loopholes and machicolations. At the manor house at Ince is ocular evidence of the crenellation of that building, its strengthening by intermural passages, the outer wall of which was loopholed. This was at the end of the same century, in 1399.

This was the fateful year of Richard II, who was served so faithfully by his bodyguard of Cheshire archers. Adam Usk, an eye-witness of events at that time wrote, "in all places they oppressed his subjects unpunished, and beat and robbed them. These men whithersoever the king went, night and day, as if at war, kept watch in arms around him, everywhere committing adulteries, murders, and other evils without end. And to such a pass did the king cherish them that he would not deign to listen to anyone who had complaint against them; nay, rather he would disdain him as an enemy."

In the previous year a licence had been obtained by the Hulses to erect an oratory at Brimstage. This privilege would be craved because of the difficulty of travelling to Bromborough Church in bad weather over ill-conditioned ways, and because of the gangs of marauders about. The Hulses would not have been the first lords of the manor to have been molested on their way to mass.

Grievous though the legitimate forest taxes were, they became intolerable when an earl arose who regarded Wirral merely as a recruiting ground for his armed forces and a never-failing treasury for his wilful extravagances, as did the Black Prince. The peasant was prepared to pay the usual charge for the rights of pannage, i.e. when he turned his pigs into the forest in the Autumn to forage for acorns and beachmast; the customary charge was 1d. per pig up to 6, from 7 to 10, one pig, from 11 to 16 one pig and one penny, and from 17 to 20, two pigs.

This was no inconsiderable toll to pay for a pig to be turned out to fatten itself in the Autumn. Most peasants earned a penny a day so for half a dozen pigs it meant the forfeit of a week's wage. No modern farm labourer would enjoy giving up £5 15s. for a similar privilege now. And can't we easily imagine what a riot would be caused nowadays if this excessive charge were increased in order that the lord of the manor might have more income to spend on riotous living.

So the Wirral man's lawlessness in an acknowledged age of brutality was conspicuous. His military adventures and the condition under which he lived at home encouraged this hooliganism as did the lack of respect he was beginning to have for the lord ecclesiastic and the removal of the restraining influence of the

priests owing to so many of them dying during the plague: but the prime cause was the forest.

VIII. Church Building.

Roving bands of thugs preyed on the convoys of food to the army and on its pay wagons, as well as goods from the Deeside ports in transit to Chester. It does not therefore come as a surprise to us that the citizens of Chester petitioned the Black Prince to disafforest Wirral towards the end of the 14th century, and of their joy at the granting of their petition by the Prince's father, Edward III, though Richard II, the Prince's son, a few years afterwards, fined Wirral 600 marks for the concession.

Probably this is an exaggerated picture of the banditry of Wirral, for records speak more of the wrongdoer than the law-abiding. There must have been some godfearing people in the Hundred, for if not, it is difficult to account for the church building and extensions that went on in the 14th century, not only at the abbeys of Vale Royal and St. Werburgh, but in the village churches. Gangs of masons were evidently available as they finished their assignments at the abbeys, but was the money? Yes, it was, but it did not come from the monks, who had appropriated so many of the Wirral churches. They were only responsible for the upkeep of the chancel, the rest of the fabric was the concern of the parishioners, and in particular the lay lords of the manor.

Building went on at Backford, Woodchurch, West Kirby, Shotwick, Thornton-le-Moors, Bebington and Eastham; the famous broach spires of the last two were built then. These churches could not compare in magnificence with those building at other places in the County of Cheshire, at Astbury, Audlem, Bunbury, Middlewich, Nantwich, Malpas, Tarvin, and Witton, nor with the "Wool" churches of East Anglia upon which so much labour and money were being lavished.

IX. Wirral and the Wool Trade.

Wirral like the rest of Cheshire did not benefit from the wool trade with Flanders. The City of Chester had applied to be given a licence creating it a staple port, but in vain. So Wirral bales had to be shipped to London for transit to the Flemings or had to be taken overland to the East Anglian ports. Thus the Hundred could not compete in this lucrative trade. Records show that the Abbey of Stanlow kept very few sheep and when we learn that only 200 bales of wool were collected in Cheshire by the Commissioners of Edward III against 1,500 bales from Shropshire, and at one mark less per bale than the Salop variety, we realise that the rest of Cheshire must have been similar to Stanlow. In other words, Wirral was not to grow fat on sheep, and this disability was seen in the inferiority of its church architecture. However, despite this, it is perfectly clear that Wirral was beginning to

engage in trade seeing that there was money available for church embellishment. Nantwich and other Cheshire towns got it from salt, but Wirral depended on its sea trade. Chester itself became more and more blocked with silt, and ports lower down the river engaged increasingly in wine from Gascony, slates, lead and mill-stones from North Wales, corn and cattle from Ireland, and timber and fish from Wirral. The port of Liverpool too was no longer an infant; it was some 150-200 years old, and the Mersey side of Wirral was benefiting from this, and particularly Bebington, Bromborough and Eastham; Burton was similarly benefiting from Deeside traffic.

X. Growth of Towns, Markets and Fairs.

It is only natural that men should try to free themselves as soon as possible from the service they had to give to their lord, or commute it for a money payment. Trade and land utilisation brought this money and so Chester was the first to purchase freedom from this bond service, and the right of regulating its own trade, of establishing gilds to control both crafts and craftsmen, and of holding a weekly market, but not of controlling the three days' fair. This was the privilege of the abbots and the citizens' own business had to be suspended on those days and no ship was to be unloaded at the quay. All trade had to be done only at the stalls erected in front of the Abbey Gateway and the tolls for such concession went to the abbey exchequer — a great source of grievance to the Chester merchants and of profit to the Convent.

However, the citizens agitated for the transfer of the fair rights to the town and petitioned Edward I to bring this about. They obtained only a partial redress of their grievance. In 1288 the King granted them the right to erect stalls also and hire them to traders, provided they were set up some distance from the Abbey Square. This concession adversely affected the Convent's source of income, and as it must have been foreseen that the citizens' agitation for a partial transfer of fair rights would be successful one day; so the monastery chapter must have begun to look elsewhere for fair and market rights to make up the probable resultant deficiency in income. And where was so suitable as their manor of Eastham? Reports from Bromborough Court House clearly showed that trade up the Pool was flourishing and the abbey might just as well share in the profit.

Bromborough and Eastham's relief much earlier surely influenced their development and made them attractive places in Wirral. In the average manor there cannot have been much of what we know as trade, for it did not produce much more than its own requirements, and the inhabitants could secure their needs by barter. But as land was reclaimed and agriculture developed, there would arise a surplus and this could not be wasted. Hence a rudimentary but unlicenced market must have been held at

irregular intervals and these "Black" markets must have been reported to the Abbot.

What was easier then, when Edward I was several times in Wirral on account of the Welsh Wars and the building of the abbey of Vale Royal, for the abbot of Chester, who attended him when he stayed at the Court House and the abbot's manor house at Ince in 1277 to crave these market boons. Something like this must have occurred for the very next year the king, while at Dover, granted the request and handed to a monk of Chester a charter licensing a weekly market on Mondays and an annual three days' fair, and witnessed by the Bishop of Bath and Wells and the Earl of Lincoln.

Thus began in the long days of June, the Bromborough Fair of Barnaby Bright, held on St. Barnabas's Day, the day before and the day after — three days that must have passed very quickly with all the excitement and bustle that took place round the market cross. No wonder Johnnie was so long at the fair, with the other yokels and lasses seeking new employment. The sale of cattle was interesting enough, and the busy-ness of the shops of the cobbler, the shoemaker, the saddler, the blacksmith, the wheelwright, etc. was something to wonder at, but most excitement of all was caused by the presence of strange traders, whose wares were as attractive as their tales. A year's thrill in three days with feasting and drinking at the inn. As late as 1561 there was only one inn in Bromborough and two in Eastham. Was the Bromborough one on the site of the present "Royal Oak" though it cannot have been called by that name in the 15th and 16th centuries? Was it the "Cross Keys" or "The Mitre" to please my lord abbot, or "The White Hart" for Richard II? It is very doubtful that it would be "The Red Lion" of John of Gaunt or "The Swan" of Henry IV, particularly in Wirral. This matter is worth some research. We cannot but doubt that one of the Eastham inns was then "The Stanley Arms."

Twenty years later in 1298, the same king granted similar concessions to William de Langton, Bishop of Lichfield to hold a weekly market on Thursdays and a three days' fair at the feast of St. James in Burton. This is an index of the importance of Burton in the 13th and 14th centuries then the chief port of Wirral possessing five inns. Yes, Burton and Bromborough were the busy B's of Wirral. How long these markets and fairs were held is not known, but they must have been allowed to lapse with the improvement of communications to Chester and Liverpool, and the development of Neston in the 16th century.

XI. Land Reclamation and Utilisation.

I mentioned previously that the surplus products for the markets came from increased sea trade and land utilisation. Land reclamation particularly after the disafforestation of Wirral, went ahead. After defeating the enemies of the realm and the forest

oppressions, the inhabitants began to attack nature herself. After uprooting trees, cutting down bushes, burning heather and bracken, and breaking up the ground with turf spades, it was ploughed by oxen. Its fertility was improved by spreading marl on the sandy soils; there was not sufficient farm yard manure available owing to the killing off of cattle before winter, so marling was resorted to, to stiffen the sandy soil. Marl pits abound in Wirral and were the scene of activity for hundreds of years, for when the abbot of Chester in 1296 was attacked by the Wirral foresters for digging marl pits without permission his answer was that his predecessors had had the right from time immemorial.

Draining work too was done by the abbots of Chester and Stanlow to reclaim the flooded land in the neighbourhood of the present Ellesmere Port. Thus more and more land was brought under the plough, the farmers' lands getting more and more farther from their farm houses. This accounts for the interesting feature of the Wirral farmhouses, being so frequently right in the villages and not in the middle of their acreage. An Inquisition Post Mortem of 1614 shows that John Poole, at his death was seized of several mills, both water and wind, 2,000 acres of land, 5,000 of meadow, 2,000 of pasture, 600 of wood, 1,000 of marsh and 1,000 of furze and heath on his manors in Wirral, and this is typical, though this is only one example of what was accomplished. The development of the land was general: the smallholder and the great landlord both did their share, in this land reclamation.

XII. Characteristics of Late Mediaeval Wirralites.

His long and arduous fight with nature shows that Wirral man of the late Middle Ages was a sturdy and hard-working fellow; one not easily beaten by obstacles. Stubbornness was evidently one of his characteristics, and he could not be turned from his purpose easily. He was very jealous of his rights so dearly bought and perilously gained. His house was his castle and he was only too ready to fight for its security. A noteworthy example of this trait was seen in the affray that occurred at the manor house of Ince, after the Cottons had been granted the property at the Dissolution, and had sold it to the Cholmondeleys who had also received the spoils of Vale Royal. Sir Hugh Cholmondeley gave the tenant, Lady Maud Grosvenor, notice to quit, but she refused to do so. Though 60 men marched against the manor house in 1550 it was valiantly defended for four hours and the attackers withdrew leaving one of their party fatally wounded. The law stepped in and the Grosvenor party was tried for murder. Hans, the Gunner, a Dutch tinker, was hanged, but the Lady Maud was acquitted. Such was the ancestress of the Dukes of Westminster; she remained at Ince until her death in 1582.