



# WILLASTON WAKES UP!

ALAN BRACK

adds a postscript to his recent feature  
on this Wirral village



**Above left** Siri Taylor, the seventeen-year-old, who really put a cat among the pigeons with her "Worst Kept Village" sign.

**Left** The petition was strong stuff—"deliberately so" said Mrs. Adams, "to sting them into action".

**Below Left** The police inspect the "Worst Kept Village" sign in the middle of the green. "It brought yet more adverse publicity, pricked a lot of consciences, and roused a sense of shame."

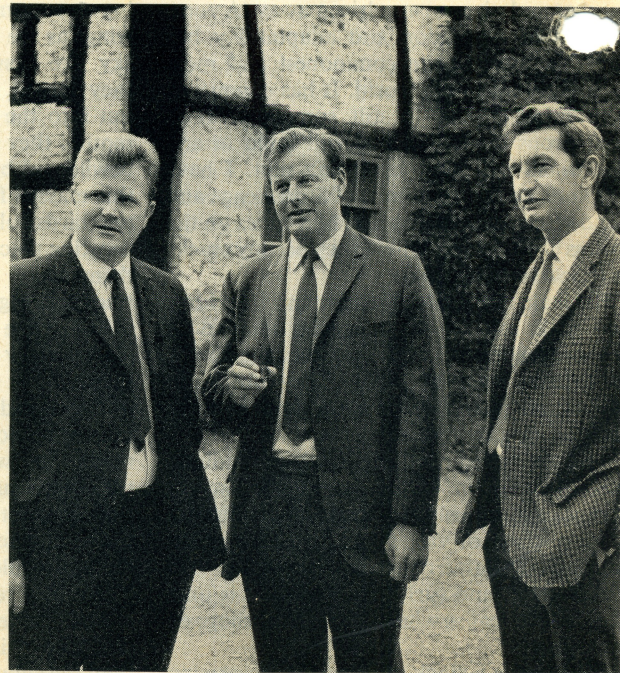
**Below right** Three upset Councillors — David Francis, Timothy Prior and Peter Jones.

*"Since you started all this I feel you ought to be present at the meeting."* So ran an invitation from Willaston, the village in Wirral which was featured in the June issue of *Cheshire Life*.

And what did we start? Well, when we expressed our disappointment at the way the village was deteriorating and when we wagged a finger at Willastonians for doing nothing about it, it seems we lit a fuse that exploded into a fair old rumpus that attracted space in the national press, on television and on the radio, and kept Willaston in the headlines of the Merseyside and Deeside papers almost every other day throughout July and August and well into September.

When we cried, "Wake Up, Willaston!" we did not, I must confess, ever expect our criticisms and exhortations to be taken so to heart and so quickly and it is as gratifying as it is flattering that they were.

Few people can easily accept criticism however well meant and there were people in Willaston who complained that we dwelt unduly and unfairly on the uglier aspects. On the other hand there were many who agreed with all we said. People like





the members of the Hadlow Green Women's Institute. For some time they had been quietly working away through their own Conservation Group to achieve minor improvements here and there and when they saw *Cheshire Life* and realised how their village looked to an outsider they decided to do something positive about it. In the event, they enlisted the help of their menfolk, organised a Ploughman's Supper to raise funds and set up a working party to effect some tidying up.

They wasted no time. Within a week or two they had received permission from the owners to remove a completely derelict and collapsed corrugated-iron Dutch barn which had lain rusty and twisted for years in a field within a hundred yards of the village green. They set out to discover who owned other properties which had become eyesores and were making plans for further tasks when (as they say) events took a dramatic turn.

At the end of July nearby Puddington was named for the second year running as Cheshire's Best Kept Village. A couple of days later Willaston folk on their way to work were startled to see a large sign erected on their village green for all the world to see proclaiming Willaston as WORST KEPT VILLAGE 1970! It had mysteriously appeared overnight and a notice on the back of the sign said it had been erected by the Young Willastonians Action Group. No-one knew who they were but its appearance brought the Young Willastonians hoped for, even, probably, beyond their aims. It brought yet more adverse publicity, pricked a lot of egos, and roused a sense of shame.

In particular, it roused into action Mrs. Joan Adams, a resident for forty years and a former president of Willaston Women's Institute who promptly set about organising a petition. It read: "We, the ratepayers and members

*Bill Hardman, secretary of the Wirral Society, outside Ashtree Farm, a fifteenth-century "preserved" house which he and his wife Diana are restoring for their own use, with four WASPS (Wirral Associated Schools Project) who are busy re-cobbling the ground in front of the building.*



of Willaston, resent the horror of our village and wonder what the Council members are doing and, if they are doing nothing and have no time to do anything, they should give way to someone who will." It was strong stuff – "deliberately so," said Mrs. Adams, "to sting them into action!" Naturally, the three Councillors who represent Willaston on Neston U.D.C. were upset. All their spare time, they rejoined, and much of what should be their working day (with consequent financial loss) was spent in looking after the affairs of the village at local authority level. What is more, it was their combined efforts which had brought about improvements in the engineering company's premises and the old Green Lantern Café right in the village centre. It was not their fault if Willastonians took no interest in what they were doing; it was not their fault if their efforts received scant notice in the local press. They had once tried to promote a meeting of the village to which they could report but not a soul turned up. They were available on the telephone and could be reached by post, but nobody wrote and nobody phoned.

Feelings began to run high and eventually Mrs. Adams called an open meeting of the village for the 4th September. Once again not mincing her words, the notice was headed: FIRST AID FOR OUR AWFUL VILLAGE; ALL WHO WOULD LIKE TO SEE WILLASTON AS THE BEST KEPT VILLAGE WELCOME.

On the night, the Church Hall was packed as it has never been packed before with over three hundred residents crammed in. The neutral Chairman was Mr. L. Beswick, Secretary of The Wirral Green Belt Council, and the stated purpose of the meeting was to sound out opinion as to the setting up of an organisation "to safeguard the full interests of the residents, make recommendations to the authorities and work in as close a degree of collaboration with such authorities as circumstances may permit."

The impressive turn-out of the residents was matched by the impressive array on the platform. There was the Chairman and Mrs. Adams; two young ladies taking the minutes; Colonel Charles Overton, County Councillor for the area and Vice-Chairman of Cheshire County Council; Mr. Houldsworth, Assistant Clerk to the County Council; Mr. Williams, Assistant Planning Officer to the County Council; the three local Councillors; Mr. Keith Priestman, head of the Conservation Department at Liverpool Museum, and Major Frank White, dressed, as he put it, in his "official rig" of green suit, green shirt and brown tie in his capacity as Cheshire Ranger in charge of the county's first linear park which runs along the old railway line from West Kirby to Chester via Willaston.

There was also an empty chair. This was reserved for the person who erected that sign – the leader of the, so far, anonymous Young Willastonians Action Group. At Mrs. Adams' invitation attractive seventeen-years-old Siri Taylor mounted the platform and was received with loud applause. Erecting signs in total darkness at two o'clock in the morning must be fraught with difficulties and the efforts of Siri and her four chums were obviously appreciated and their motives understood!

The Chairman opened the meeting by telling of the success of the Wirral Green Belt Council in pursuing its proposal for the linear park as an example of what could be achieved by a determined voluntary body and declared that "the future of Willaston rests entirely with the united efforts of the residents of Willaston". Mr. Priestman spoke briefly about conservation and said: "We have a duty to preserve our heritage" and Colonel Overton said: "There is a limit to what can be done by local councillors at urban district level". Mr. Williams spoke about the Willaston Village Plan and reiterated what many people fail to appreciate that the plan is simply "a control scheme for future development which could only be implemented piece by piece as planning applications were made". And Mr. Houldsworth said: "The County Council is on your side – within the limits of its financial resources – and some positive action on the old Red Lion pub can be expected within the next six months."

The Chairman of the moribund Willaston Countryside Society offered his organisation, its records and remaining funds lock, stock and barrel to the audience as an easy way of promoting a residents' association but, logical though the proposal seemed, it was rejected out of hand.

The meeting ended with a resolution to call another meeting within a fortnight to elect a steering committee for the new society. The Vicar rose and formally thanked the Chairman, Mrs. Adams rose and formally thanked everyone else. Nobody thanked Mrs. Adams.

Nevertheless, neither she nor young Siri Taylor could have been anything but immensely satisfied at the way things turned out.

And that goes, too, for *Cheshire Life*. We wish Willaston well.