

2: Neston: Stone Age to Steam Age. Edited by
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by Peter Carrington‡

This is the fourth substantial publication by the Burton and Neston Historical Society since its foundation in 1971, two of the others being again devoted to Neston and one to Burton. It has been compiled by members of the society, especially Susan Chambers, who has also edited the work for publication, the late Geoffrey Place and Anthony Annakin-Smith. The book treats the history of Neston parish from prehistoric times to the middle of the nineteenth century and is explicitly the ‘prequel’ to *Neston 1840–1940*. Eight of the twelve chapters are devoted to post-medieval times (of which two are on the coal industry) and one to the other townships of the parish – Leighton and Thornton Hough, Little Neston, Ness, Raby and Willaston.

The book is a solid piece of research, well referenced and, despite the multiple authorship, well organised and very readable. It treats all aspects of life, not just the port and the coal industry but land ownership, agriculture, a variety of manufactures and trades, religion, education, law and order, and leisure activities; also the impact of forest law, outbreaks of plague and the Civil War. As is reflected in the references to numerous unpublished documents in the Cheshire Record Office, the approach is historical rather than archaeological. Consequently the roles of individuals and families figure largely in the story and help us to understand how Neston developed as a community. By contrast, although there are plentiful illustrations and some maps, they are not as useful as one might wish in helping the reader unfamiliar with the town to visualise how it developed as a place. (For a more spatially orientated approach, see Cheshire County Council 2003. *Neston archaeological assessment*. (Cheshire Historic Towns Survey. http://www.cheshirearchaeology.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/HTS_Arch_Assess_Neston-Parkgate.pdf. Accessed 17-02-2016). Unease with earlier periods is clear in chapter two, which runs from prehistoric times to 1066: the treatment of archaeological data is a little ‘uncomfortable’, and the conjectures regarding Saxon estates and townships could have been explained more clearly.

It is impossible here to summarise the wealth of subjects treated, and the focus of this review is on the traditional subjects of shipping and mining as representing the major threads in the story of these communities.

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Neston was for long the largest settlement in Wirral, which at the time of the Domesday survey was the most densely populated part of Cheshire. The existence of a church and the survival of five fragments of Viking-era crosses (redisplayed by the Neston Civic Society in the 1980s) attest its importance before the Norman Conquest, while the recovery of a contemporary silver ingot from Ness may reflect the use of Denhall as a landing place by this time. However, by the nineteenth century the situation had reversed, with Wirral having only one-third the population density of the rest of the county and Neston being overtaken in size by Birkenhead.

In the twelfth century the Earl of Chester imposed ‘forest law’ on the whole of Wirral, as well as on the Macclesfield area and Mara-Mondrum. As is attested by prosecutions, the consequent restrictions on exploitation of the land bore heavily on the population, rich and poor alike, until they were finally abolished in 1384. About 1250 the then lord of Great Neston, Roger de Moltalt, created a deer park to the north-west of the town, which ultimately gave its name to the riverside settlement of Parkgate.

By the start of the fourteenth century a number of anchorages, from Blacon to Hilbre, were in use to avoid the difficulties of navigating all the way up the shallow Dee estuary with its shifting sands to Chester. Indeed, the existence of two anchorages at Denhall and Burton Point led to Burton being granted the privileges of a town in 1299, with a weekly market and annual fair, although it soon lost this status. However, the small bays tended to silt up, and in 1541 the Chester Assembly decided to build a stone quay (the ‘New Haven’) by the mouth of the Neston brook. In 1595 it achieved national prominence when the English government, fearing a Spanish invasion of Ireland, began shipping troops from the Dee. However, the quay was always difficult to maintain and finally went out of use as a result of the canalisation of the Dee in the 1730s, when it became known as the Old Quay as opposed to the newly constructed Connah’s Quay on the Welsh shore.

The Neston deer park survived for hunting until the end of the sixteenth century. A few years later we first hear of ‘Parkgate’ as an anchorage, although the nearest deep-water anchorage was Beerhouse Hole a little to the north in Leighton township. Houses began to be built along the waterfront to the south from at least the 1650s. Despite the depredations of the Civil War and an outbreak of plague in the mid-1660s, Neston was prospering enough for Sir Thomas Mostyn, by now lord of the manor, to petition the king for a market and fair, although this was opposed by the Chester Assembly and was only granted in 1728. Thanks in good measure to official traffic with Dublin, by the 1680s Parkgate had become the favoured port for Ireland – a position it would hold for another century – and the village grew up around it.

The eighteenth century was Neston and Parkgate’s heyday. Even after the construction of the New Cut, which released water on the Welsh side of the Dee estuary, the river continued to run across to Parkgate, where it resumed its old course; it was not until further works in 1815 forced the river to remain on the Welsh side that Parkgate was starved of water. The principal exports from Parkgate at this time were cheese, which came down from Chester, and lead, which was boated across from the Welsh shore. Not surprisingly shipbuilding became established at Parkgate and allied trades throughout the parish. Commercial devel-

opment at Neston is represented by the construction of new windmills, breweries and a tannery, and the establishment of a market, fair and races. Owners of these enterprises also had shares in ships and occasionally invested in slave-trading through Liverpool. From 1760 onwards Parkgate also offered the chance to take part in the new craze of sea-bathing, an activity which resulted in a visit by Emma, the future Lady Hamilton. As might be expected, from the 1720s onwards prosperity meant that old thatched cottages began to be replaced by grander brick houses and inns; only towards the end of the century did overcrowded terraced houses appear. Another result of the growth of the population was the insertion of galleries into the parish church. Unfortunately this involved the removal of some of the pillars, and in 1874 the medieval church was declared beyond repair and rebuilt. A social consequence of Parkgate's rise as a port was an increase in the number of Irish vagrants – seasonal labourers and the families of men recruited into the army – who were housed in the Old Quay House before they could be put on board ship for their homeland.

Coal had been mined within sight of Neston on the Flintshire coast since the fourteenth century, but it was not until about 1760 that Sir John Stanley Massey, lord of the manor of Ness, established the Denhall Colliery, possibly drawing on family experience of mining in Flintshire and Lancashire. Exploitation of coal at Neston faced a number of difficulties. Ownership of adjacent land by the Earls of Shrewsbury and the local Cottingham family, and competition with the latter, led to bitter disputes and sabotage. Moreover, the main channel of the Dee had already left this part of the Wirral coast, hampering export by sea, although the shallow 'Colliery Gutter' survived. Finally, the local market was small and served only by poor roads. Thus by the start of the nineteenth century the Stanley Masseys were seeking to lease their workings. The Ness collieries finally closed in 1855 but then reopened when the construction of the railway line between Parkgate and Hooton improved overland transport. Nevertheless, the early years were clearly successful. Newcomen steam engines were used to drain the workings, which ran out under the estuary, and underground canals linked the coalfaces to the shafts. Two quays were built to allow the coal to be loaded for shipment to Chester, North Wales and especially Ireland. By 1765 13.5% of males recorded in the parish registers had their occupation recorded as collier.

The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of decline for Neston. The introduction of steam ferries across the Mersey from Liverpool in 1819 led to the meteoric rise of Birkenhead, which soon overtook Neston in size. Regular services between Parkgate and Dublin had ceased in 1815, and the introduction of a steam-driven ferry service between Liverpool and Dublin ended any chance of the Dee reviving its Irish connections. Reliance on sea-bathing was also doomed when James Atherton devised the custom-built resort of New Brighton in 1830. Finally, in 1849 the Mostyn family sold all their Cheshire lands to develop a new seaside resort at Llandudno. With the closure of the collieries Neston and Parkgate reverted to sleepy villages relying on agriculture and fishing until the coming of the railway in 1866.

