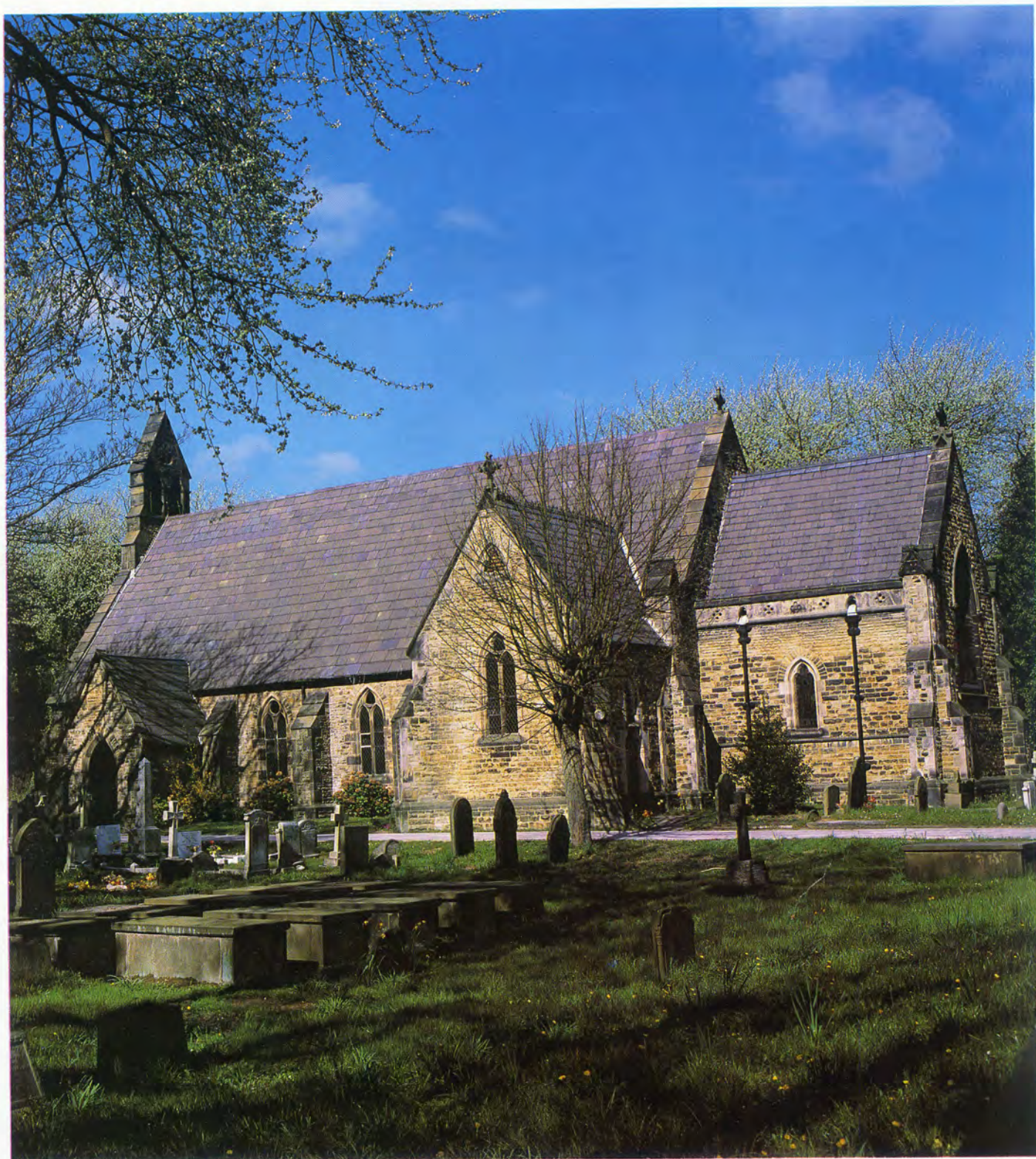


'Betwixt Ribbel and Moerse'

FORMBY & FRESHFIELD

ANGELA BIRCHALL



St. Luke's Parish Church.

NESTLING on the coast between Southport and Liverpool, Formby is a developed into a large town, still clings firmly to its traditional village roots.

And Formby's roots go right back to the time the Vikings landed in the area. Historians declare that the Danish conquerors sailed down the River Alt from the North West Channel and the Isle of Man where they were known to have had settlements since the 8th century.

Even the name Formby has Danish roots although there is some dispute as to how it derived its name. Perhaps the most romantic sounding version proclaims that the Viking chieftan Jarl Forme, son of Orme the Corsair, made his settlement here as Chief Thane of Fornebra.

This name eventually became Formby, but at the time of the Domesday Book, it was known as Fornbebi, almost identical to Fornibi which is the name of the airport at Oslo in Norway.

It was this spelling of the name which gave rise to a similar version of Formby's origins where it was a Scandinavian called Forni who settled here in his 'bi' or village.

Whoever actually founded Formby will always be lost in the mists of time, just as part of Formby itself has been swallowed up by the sands of time. In ancient records, there are references to place names between North Meols (Southport) and Formby of which no trace can be found today.

In Walter Jesson's history book of the region, 'Betwixt Ribbel and Moerse', we find a poignant plea from Sir Henry Halsall, Lord of the Manor of Halsall, Birkdale and Argameols. When sued for the King's rent in 1503, he obviously felt unwilling to pay for land which no longer existed when he said: "Argarmleys and all the lands and tenements in the same area were, at the decease of Hugh Halsall, and long before, within the high sea, and drowned and annihilate, with the sayd see, and out of the lawgh water marke, and also oute of the bodye of the sayd countye."

Various reasons, including tidal wave and earthquake, have been given for the loss of this land which at the time was combined with Formby and Ainsdale in the Chapelry of Formby.

But where the sea didn't swallow up the land, the sand has been silting up the river beds and sandhills encroaching on the area, dramatically changing the look of the coastline over the centuries. The all-enveloping sandhills are even said to have led to the abandonment in the 1730s of the 12th century Formby Chapel, although another source claims this church was swept away in a gale.

Yet the dunes and sandhills are far from being an unwelcome visitor. In fact, they are probably the best leisure and tourist facility in the area.

Sefton Council's Coast Management Scheme has seen coastal rangers and conservation volunteers working tirelessly over the years to restore and enhance the twelve miles of dunes, beaches and pinewoods along the full length of coastline which includes both Formby and Freshfield as well as neighbouring areas of Ainsdale, Birkdale, Southport and Hightown.

Most of this area is of national importance for its wildlife and flora, not

least because it is the main home in this country of the rare Natterjack Toad and sand lizard. At the end of the year, thousands of birds arrive on the mud flats and dunes from the northern countries to spend a peaceful winter here.

Formby is also home to another rare creature which attracts hundreds of tourists every year. This is the red squirrel, a protected species who, along with his more common cousin the grey squirrel, finds an ideal home in the coastal pinewoods at Freshfield.

These pinewoods were planted to act as a shelter and windbreak against the beach sand for the surrounding farmlands, for farming here has always been an important part of the economic life of Formby.

Legend even has it that the first English potatoes were grown in Formby. Two versions of this legend have been handed down through generations of Formby families, with the most popular version being that a Formby man was among Raleigh's crew and, on his return home, he planted the nutritious tubers in his garden.

A second version proposes that the tubers could have been washed ashore from one of the many shipwrecks on this stretch of coastline.

Even if they didn't grow the first potatoes, Formby does have another claim to a national first. In 1776, the Port of Liverpool financed a lifeboat at Formby Point to help any vessels in distress. This allows Formby to declare itself as being Britain's first lifeboat station.

Traditionally, lifeboat crews are the epitome of a close-knit, caring community, and Formby was no exception. It was in those days a small village community whose main economic livelihood came from the soil and the sea.

In many ways very little has changed. For while it has now grown so much in size that Formby has to be called a town, it clings proudly to its village ethos, and a trip to the main shopping centre is still referred to by the locals as 'popping into the village'.

This is not surprising when you discover the number of family businesses still trading today whose parents and grandparents had the same business in the same shop for upwards of a century.

Yet Formby has not stayed buried in its past, for alongside the established family firms are some of the leading names in national chain-stores. Top brands, high-class quality goods, and the latest in modern technology, are available in the shopping centres in both Formby and Freshfield.

Formby's main shopping area centres around Chapel Lane and the side roads branching off it, with broad, tree-lined pavements dotted with flower tubs and baskets to make shopping a real delight for all the family.

Complementing this established shopping and business centre are new arcades of quality shops like The Gallery, situated just past Safeways on the corner of Furness Avenue and Halsall Lane.

Wherever you go, there are fashion shops offering up-to-the-minute styles for ladies, men and children, while to complete the 'look', there are accessories shops and hair and beauty salons.

For the gourmet, there is a world of delights in store for you at both Formby and Freshfield. Inside plush restaurants, cosy traditional Olde English pubs, pleasant cafés and authentic Oriental restaurants, you can choose from a tantalizing range of international cuisine to suit every palate.

As befits Formby's image of a quaint village, there are also a myriad of cake shops and bakeries displaying a mouth-watering array of fresh baked cakes, bread, pies and pastries. Many of these are small family businesses which also offer you that special personal touch that seems to have gone out of fashion in so many of the big impersonal city centre stores.

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and greengrocers in both village centres. In fact, Formby folk are proud of the warmth of their hospitality, so wherever you go in either village you are bound to get a bright cheery greeting from the shopkeepers and their assistants.

Access to this friendly centre is easy too. Take the train using British Rail's Northern Line which has stations at both Formby and Freshfield. Or by car, simply turn off the A565, the main road between Liverpool and Southport.

Both Formby and Freshfield are primarily residential communities, with many of the townsfolk commuting each day into Liverpool or Southport. But there is also a growing number of small factories and light industry appearing.

Industrial estates like the one in Stephenson's Way, are blossoming with a wide cross-section of successful businesses choosing to locate in this purpose-built, conveniently situated area.

The numbers of schools, churches and social clubs show what a caring and active community Formby and Freshfield have, with a range of social activities from amateur dramatics to chess clubs, while the region's top youth choir is based at a Formby high school.

Formby is justly proud of the number of its singers, songwriters, actors and playwrights who have risen to fame over the years.

For those more energetic than artistic, Formby boasts a wide range of sports facilities including the indoor pursuits of table tennis and snooker, both of which have a growing number of players and fans.

Meanwhile, outdoor activities are well catered for, with golf and football probably coming top of the list, closely followed by tennis (played at Duke Street Park) and cricket (centred appropriately at the club in Cricket Path, Freshfield).

The football clubs in Formby have

enthusiastic teams of both adults and juniors, while soccer fans wandering round the village can often meet one of their Liverpool or Everton heroes who have taken up residence in the town.

Formby Golf Club is not only an excellent course of championship standard, but it is also reputed to be the favourite course of the great Henry Cotton.

For the more adventurous, there is the flying club attached to the aerodrome at RAF Woodvale, situated on the border between Freshfield and Ainsdale. This is also the venue for the annual Woodvale Rally with displays of model aircraft and vintage cars that attract thousands of visitors from far and near.

By joining the flying club you can learn to fly off into the wide blue yonder and also get an impressive bird's eye view of the incredible landscape below, where sand dunes form a golden barrier



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between the sea and the towns, fields and forests of pine trees.

Back on 'terra firma' and with all the breath-taking scenery to explore, it is not surprising that there are a number of equestrian centres and riding stables to choose from. One of these ridings stables helps to train the medal-winning equestrian members of the region's Special Olympics team.

Wherever you go in either the shopping and business areas or the residential areas of Formby and Freshfield, it is obvious that a great deal of care and attention has gone into the planning and development. Many of the older buildings are excellent examples of the craftsmanship and skill of Victorian and Edwardian architects, yet there is a good deal of new buildings being erected in all areas.

While this could lead to a conflict in styles, it has clearly been taken into account by the planners and so the new buildings, be they houses, offices or shops, are designed to complement and enhance the existing architectural heritage.

Such work has enabled Formby and Freshfield to retain their village-style charm even though they have outgrown their previous village size. New housing estates are being constructed but in a period style that blends in with the surrounding houses, new shopping arcades maintain the graceful arched elegance of their neighbours, while hotels and pubs in traditional character look as if they have been taken straight off an old-fashioned Christmas card.

This artistic concern is mirrored by the number of shops in the villages catering for the art lover. From galleries selling exclusive works of art to well-equipped shops with a full range of artists' materials.

And there is no shortage of inspiration in this area for the budding Turner or Constable. From landscapes of the quaint centuries-old cottages and churches to the hustle and bustle of life in modern-day Formby. From the windswept beauty of wide open sand dunes and beaches to the shimmering effects of dappled sunlight pouring through the forests of pine trees.

With so much to offer, Formby and Freshfield will paint an unforgettable picture that will linger on in your memory forever. □

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