

MEET CHESHIRE LIFE'S WOMAN OF THE YEAR

# CHESHIRE LIFE

JUNE 2006

Altrincham • Winsford • Tattenhall

Hyde's  
mural master

Fred Perry's  
Stockport  
roots

West Kirby  
New Brighton

Bob Geldof's  
Boomtown Macc

How we nearly  
spoke Welsh  
in Cheshire

Gander at Goostrey

£3.20

Hunters Close Cottage, Eaton by Tarporley



Hot  
summer  
party  
wear



Heswall's  
top tea  
room  
award




Cheers  
for the  
Cheshire  
Show



ARCHANT LIFE

What's in a name? - **Winsford**



Who put  
the 'wine'  
into Winsford?

Vanessa Greatorex explores the surprising contrasts  
of the multi-faceted mid-Cheshire salt town

Photographs: John Cocks

**B**ENEATH the surface of the Cheshire plain lies a subterranean world of traffic lights and archives, salt and space. You can picture it, but you can barely believe in its existence as you pass through Winsford on the A54. With Victorian redbrick villas on one side and Sixties urban development on the other, the presence of another dimension hundreds of feet below the surface seems the stuff of fairy tales.

The once-upon-a-time of this story was 200 million years ago, when a bed of salt was formed by the evaporation of an inland sea. Hot desert winds blew across the parched terrain,

compacting sand into Keuper Marl clay. Then the area was flooded by another inland sea, too salty (like the first) to support any life. That too evaporated, leaving behind another thick deposit of salt. Separated by the layer of Keuper Marl, the two salt-beds were then covered by aeons of soil.

Yet, despite the antiquity of its geological treasure-chest, compared with most Cheshire settlements Winsford is barely a toddler. While the majority of the county's towns and villages date back to Anglo-Saxon or even Celtic times, it wasn't until the eighteenth century that Winsford became more than a crossing point on

the River Weaver.

The place-name literally means 'Wine's ford', Wine being an Anglo-Saxon man rather than an alcoholic beverage. Perhaps he was associated with the site because he owned the surrounding land or showed people the safest way across the river. By the thirteenth century there were references to a bridge at 'Wynisford', and the name was also linked with a heath (Wynesfordheth) and a street. This would have been the medieval equivalent of the A54, leading to the ford along the Chester-to-Middlewich highway. But although the Winsford crossing was clearly a vital link in the



The impetus for this absorption was the Weaver Navigation Act of 1721. This gave authorisation for the river to be made navigable as far as Winsford Bridge. The result was a cargo-friendly watercourse which stretched from mid-Cheshire to the River Mersey and thence to international markets via the port of Liverpool. Plans to extend the navigation to Nantwich and Middlewich were never implemented, giving the area around Winsford Bridge an unprecedented advantage over the traditional centres of salt production.

This had an enormous impact on the surrounding landscape. When the Act was passed, there were just four salt-pans in the vicinity of Winsford

Bridge, but the accessibility of transport led to the establishment of several boatyards and an explosion in the number of saltworks. The existence of the lower salt-bed was discovered, and the exceptional quality of its salt, coupled with the proximity of the newly navigable river, converted Winsford into Cheshire's most prolific salt producer. Brine was pumped out so remorselessly that there was dramatic subsidence. Two of the resultant flashes are now used for fishing and watersports, but in 1800 they were chiefly valued as reservoirs which helped to drain the valley floor, making it more suitable for habitation. People flocked to the area to work in the salt industry, and by 1810 a weekly

**Left:** Winsford Cross Shopping Centre

**Right:** Sculpture outside the Queen's Arms and Winsford Cross Shopping Centre

**Below:** Jennie Brown and her dog Meg who live at the Dock House by the Bottom Flash



trade route used by Cheshire's salters, there is no evidence of residential or industrial settlement in the vicinity at this time. People were doubtless wary of setting up home on a valley floor prone to flooding.

Local residents had for centuries chosen to live instead on higher land either side of the river at Over ('Hill', from Old English 'ofer') and Wharton (a garbled version of eleventh-century Wanetune, which may mean 'farm at a quaking bog'). Both these villages, which were in existence when The Domesday Book was compiled in 1086, have now been absorbed into Winsford.





food market took place 'at Winsford-bridge, on the Weaver...of late become populous in consequence of the extension of the salt trade in that neighbourhood'.

The downside of this economic boom was that every salt-pan needed its own chimney. The valley's green and pleasant land on Meadow Bank beside the Weaver was swiftly transformed into a smoking inferno. Reputedly possessing more industrial chimneys within a mile than anywhere else on earth, Winsford gained the dubious sobriquet of the 'Dark Town'.

Now, although a seaside tang of brine may sometimes surprise you, the smoke is long gone. A solitary

mine is the only operational remnant of Winsford's salt extraction industry – but its extent is staggering, with over a hundred miles of underground roadways complete with roundabouts and traffic signals. High-tech methods are used to blast out rock salt which is used nationwide for road-gritting in icy weather. The carefully calibrated extraction system leaves behind huge empty rooms supported by gigantic pillars of rock salt. The temperature and humidity of these caverns remain constant year-round, providing ideal storage space for irreplaceable medieval royal charters, business documents and health records.

While this subterranean world is probably the town's most intriguing feature, there are several interesting aspects to Winsford above ground.

The late-Victorian houses in the town centre were built as pairs rather than terraces to minimise the risk of entire streets being damaged if one house succumbed to salt subsidence. Intricate mouldings decorate the brickwork of many buildings in the High Street, while the more modest side streets are reminiscent of railway-workers' homes in Cheshire's other nineteenth-century boomtown, Crewe.

More Runcorn than Crewe, in the middle of this architectural Victoriana stand the shopping precinct and civic edifices of the 1960s. The dislocation between the two building styles is as unobtrusive as a Tardis-shift, but it wouldn't be fair to judge by roadside impressions. The library, grim and utilitarian on the outside, is, for instance, spacious, light, airy, well stocked and helpfully staffed within.

Perhaps more unexpectedly, the heart of the precinct, which once contained a fountain, now provides sanctuary for a commemorative bench and two war memorials. The cenotaphs were moved there from their original site in the High Street at a time when the town's population was growing by 95pc due to its designation as an official overspill town for Manchester and Liverpool. Set amid the bustle of everyday commerce, the memorials somehow possess more poignance than monuments discreetly tucked away in a churchyard or assailed by roadside traffic. Over an eighth of Winsford's



population, 1,100 out of 8,000, served during the First World War alone, during which time nearly 30 medals were awarded, including a Victoria Cross. Although the relocation of the memorials was chiefly motivated by conservation concerns, their new position therefore seems a fitting tribute to local courage, a way of saying: 'These people who died for us are the heart of our community, now and forever.'

West of the Weaver, up the hill in Over, St Chad's parish church still nestles amid green fields, a short drive and yet a world away from the town centre. It was such a trek for most parishioners that they joked

The valley's green and pleasant land on Meadow Bank beside the Weaver was swiftly transformed into a smoking inferno



**Top left:**  
Memorial at  
Winsford Cross  
Shopping Centre

**Above left:**  
Memorial Garden  
at Wyven House  
(council offices)

**Above:** The  
picturesque  
grounds around  
Wyven House

the devil had picked it up and tossed it to the outermost edges of the parish. Aerial photographs clearly show that the churchyard was originally circular, indicating that the first religious building on the site was of early foundation. The existence of a pitch-roofed well suggests the spot may even have been sacred in pagan times, and deliberately detached from habitation to avoid disturbing water-spirits. It is certainly hard to believe that such lush tranquillity was ever marred by the fumes of a smoking salt-town.

A bird theme prevails on one of the nearby housing estates, with street names like Pochard Avenue,

Mallard Walk, and Curlew Close. The inspiration behind them was probably Swanlow Lane. Today it's part of the B5074 between Winsford and Church Minshull. But in the fourteenth century it ran through a hamlet known as Swanlowe. Forget the vision of elegant snow-white waterfowl in a rural idyll. Picture instead a hill with a cluster of lowly dwellings serenaded by the snuffles of rooting pigs. Prosaically, the name is derived from two Old English words, 'hlaw', meaning 'hill', and 'swan', meaning 'swineherd' and, by extension, 'peasant'.

One Winsford resident who should definitely not be described

as a peasant was John Bradbury. Born in 1872, he was chief cashier at the Bank of England when the first ten shilling and one pound notes were issued. They both bore his signature and were consequently nicknamed Bradburys. Despite his high-flying career, he clearly retained fond memories of the unpretentious salt-town where he spent his boyhood, adopting the title of Lord Bradbury of Winsford when raised to the peerage.

River-crossing, boomtown, shopping zone, countryside retreat, and record repository, there's no doubt about it: Winsford really is an extraordinary place. ■