

Note

DUNGEON LANE, MERSEYSIDE: ITS HISTORY, CHANGING BIODIVERSITY AND PAUL MCCARTNEY'S 2026 ALBUM

In this note, a new collection of songs by Paul McCartney, released in May 2026 and titled *The Boys of Dungeon Lane*, is used to examine the changing landscape of a specific part of Merseyside. As far back as 1967, McCartney lyricised memories of his childhood home in Liverpool in the song *Penny Lane*, which has become part of the cultural environment of that city.¹ Here, a location about 6 miles away from Penny Lane, on the north bank of the River Mersey and where McCartney went on birdwatching adventures,² is investigated to highlight a little-studied part of the county and to show how advancing years and increasing urbanization have affected biodiversity. The concept of a 'lost landscape' has been explored effectively by Ian Rotherham, who used remnants of old woodland to identify a hidden past. Mark Cocker used the study of a particular type of bird as a gateway into scrutinizing landscape, and Hayden Lorimer used the novel idea of searching for scarecrows as his entry into investigating agricultural spaces. Some comparable approaches have been conducted for other artistic genres e.g. the regional novel and the topography of certain poets.³ All these methods of reconstructing old rural environments achieve a strong sense of locality and history.

In the mid-nineteenth century the area, about 8 miles from Liverpool city centre, was rural and

noted for its wooded appearance.⁴ There was a small settlement named Old Dungeon, with two windmills and a salt-extraction works situated on the very edge of the River Mersey. Hale Park lay close by to the east and scattered cottages and patches of forestry were to the north and west. Dungeon Lane led down a slope to the river, with woods and heath on either side, and the land was a network of small fields, bounded by tree-filled hedges, and most contained at least one pond (Figure 1). A wooded section within Hale Park named Rabbit Hey, implies a nearby warren. The invocation of the word 'heath' in local names indicates the acidic and sandy nature of the soil and the presence of heather and other ericaceous plants such wild thyme, milkwort and harebell.⁵ These attracted an abundance of insects and, in turn pre-dating birds including swallows, swifts, and warblers. Bird varieties were enhanced by waterfowl such as plover and heron. The name Goldfinch Farm indicates an abundance of seed-bearing vegetation providing sustenance for this species, and farmland provided a suitable environment for grazing birds, including geese, and the marsh was home to waders, including oystercatcher, dunlin and godwit. Overall, the area was a paradise for nature with its varied habitats and opportunities for biodiversity.⁶

As the nineteenth century moved on, detailed Ordnance Survey maps captured the removal of hedgerows, with kinks and bends removed from field boundaries, leaving larger expanses of a more uniform shape, mostly rectangular or near square. The changing field shapes facilitated cultivation by the mechanized equipment that was increasingly used at the end of the nineteenth century, such as the horse-drawn plough, hay rake and cultivator, and generally more intensive methods of agriculture.⁷ While removal of hedges will have had a detrimental effect on many bird types, it will have favoured the skylark, which prefers

¹ R. J. Kruse, 'The Beatles as Place Makers: Narrated Landscapes in Liverpool, England', *Journal of Cultural Geography*, xxii (2005), 87.

² 'Paul McCartney announces new album', <https://www.paulmccartney.com/news/paul-mccartney-announces-new-album> (visited 5 April 2026).

³ Rotherham I, 'Searching for 'Shadows' and 'Ghosts' in the Landscape', *Arbicultural Journal*, xxxix (2017), 31–47; M. Cocker, *Crow Country* (London, 2007); H. Lorimer, 'Scaring Crows', *Geographical Review*, ciii (2013) 177–189; K. D. M. Snell, *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2010); R. Pite, *Hardy's Geography: Wessex and the Regional Novel* (London, 2002); J. Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and a Sense of Place: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge, 1972).

⁴ 'Sketches of Liverpool and the Surrounding Country', *Liverpool Albion*, 20 August 1827, 2.

⁵ M. C. Carey and D. Fitchew, *Wildflowers at a Glance* (Dent & Sons: London, 1949, 1954), 237, 257, 163 174.

⁶ 'Birds in their Setting', in M. Cady and R. Hume (eds.), *The Complete Book of British Birds*, (Basingstoke and Sandy, 1988, 1994), 33–80.

⁷ Stephen Caunce, 'Mechanisation and Society in English Agriculture: The Experience of the North-East, 1850–1914', *Rural History*, xvii (2006), 23–45.

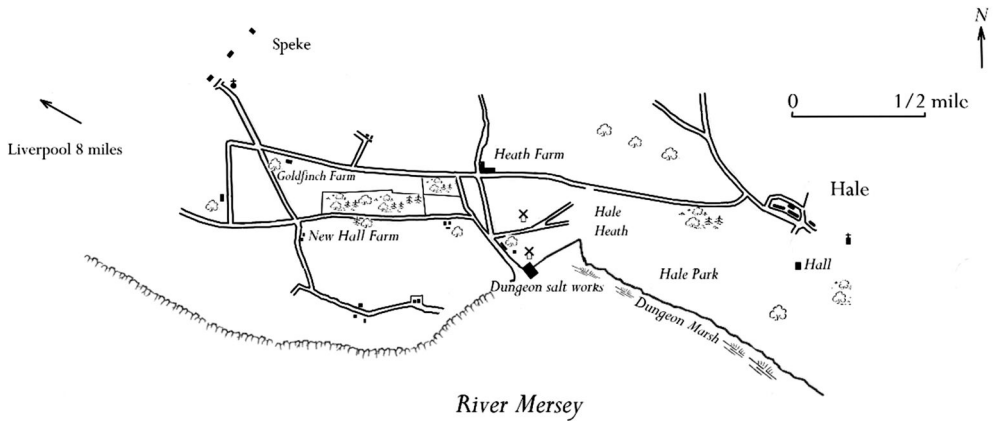


Figure 1. The area around Dungeon Lane, redrawn by the author from the 1849 6-inch Ordnance Survey map.

open farmland and will rarely feed near a hedge.⁸ It is of note that McCartney recalls the skylark in the lyrics of the song *The Days We Left Behind* in the new album. Overall, the landscape around Dungeon Lane remained largely unchanged, with little building work evident. This was to change as the twentieth century progressed and the late 1920s saw the development of an aerodrome west of Tewit Hall, with its associated infrastructure such as new roads and neon beacons.⁹ This was later followed by Liverpool City Council's vast housing and factory developments that began in the 1930s, and grew to cover all the area north of Little Heath Wood, about 350 acres (Figure 2).¹⁰ Nevertheless, greenery remained and reports of isolated fires show that there was plenty of gorse that could ignite on a hot, dry day,¹¹ and a noted local naturalist, Eric Hardy,¹² reported that the area was 'rich in wildlife' including barn owls and plentiful tawney owls, tree creepers and fly catchers. However, he was worried that the new estates would 'blot out so much of the green' but did

concede that the urbanization had introduced some new species. Hardy was also heartened at the thought that 'wherever there is a ditch, even choked with rubbish, the sedge warblers abound'. He evidenced over a thousand hares being shot in a wood that was now part of the aerodrome and despaired at the thought of the ancient habitats of Speke being lost to urban growth.¹³ The development that he feared was rapid during the 1940s, and the 1947 6-inch Ordnance Survey map captures a moment when residential streets had sprung up, and shows new roads and the typical infrastructure of a new town namely factories, schools, fire stations and two police stations, churches, and sports grounds. In 1947, a very young Paul McCartney and his family moved into 72 Western Avenue, about a mile from Dungeon Lane, and were to live there until 1955.¹⁴ McCartney has now lyricised his memories of that time, and from contemporary accounts, we know that he will have seen sycamore, beech and silver birch trees in the woods adjoining the track where Hardy had seen owls,¹⁵ daffodils filling the fields, and spectacular views over the cliffs and across the Mersey.¹⁶ Despite the proximity to the new

⁸ Cady and Hume, *British Birds*, 208.

⁹ 'Aerodrome at Speke', *Liverpool Echo*, 16 October 1929, 12; 25-inch Ordnance Survey map of Speke area (1935).

¹⁰ M. McKenna, 'The development of suburban council housing in Liverpool between the wars' (Liverpool University PhD thesis, 1986), esp. 69, 104 and 143–9.

¹¹ 'Merseyside Gorse Fires', *Liverpool Echo*, 12 August 1933, 5.

¹² 'Eric Hardy Obituary', Knutsford Ornithological Society, <http://www.10x50.com/hardy.htm> (viewed 4 April 2026).

¹³ 'Where City Is Invading Rural Stronghold', *Liverpool Echo*, 15 May 1933, 8.

¹⁴ P. Norman, *Paul McCartney: The Biography* (Wiedenfeld & Nicholson, 2016, 2017), 30 and 44.

¹⁵ 'Jobs in Trees', *Liverpool Echo*, 18 July 1962, 16; 'Speke Wood Damage', *Liverpool Echo*, 13 April 1951, 6.

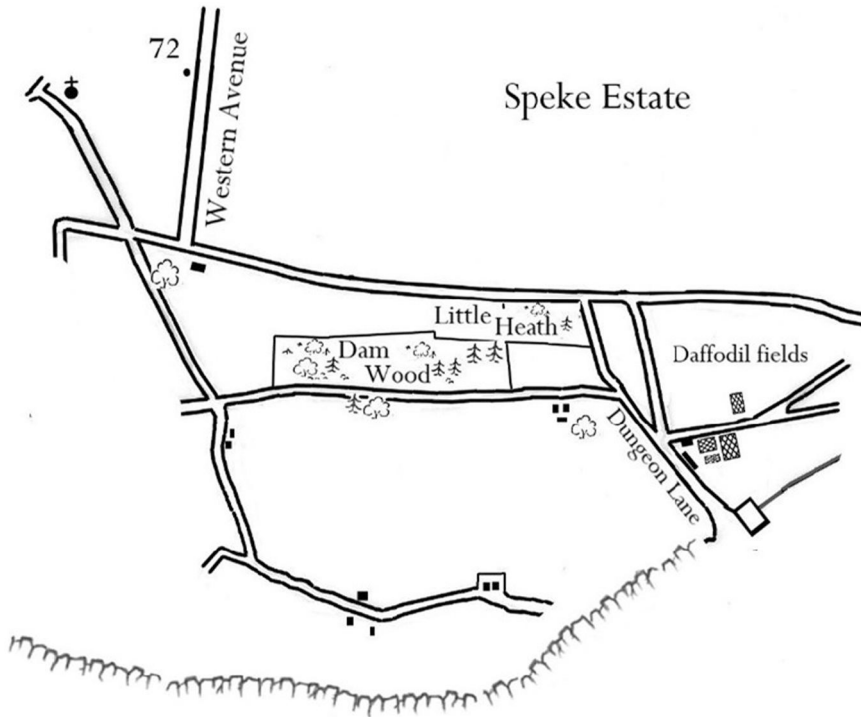


Figure 2. The area in the mid-twentieth century, redrawn by the author from the 1956 1:50,000 Ordnance Survey map.

Speke estate, the area was still very quiet even in the mid-twentieth century, and described as suitable for ‘someone seeking solitude’,¹⁷ with a few farms and cottages, the names of which conjure an image of the natural environment—Pear Tree Cottage, Yew Tree Farm, Briar Patch, Treehaven, and Woodbine Cottage.¹⁸ The route between Western Avenue, where there was a bus terminus, and the Mersey coast was recommended as a day’s outing for ramblers and ornithologists, and a national cross-country running event was held there in 1961, via Yew Tree Farm and Dam Wood.¹⁹

¹⁶ ‘Praise for the Weed’, *Liverpool Daily Post*, 28 March 1949, 2; ‘Speke Wood Damage’, *Liverpool Echo*, 13 April 1941, 6; ‘Along the Mersey Banks to Hale’, *Liverpool Echo*, 28 July 1950, 2.

¹⁷ ‘Along the Cliff Path from Ogle’, *Liverpool Echo*, 25 August 1961, 6.

¹⁸ Register of Electors, Speke Ward, 1962; Ordnance Survey map ref. SJ485W (1956).

In the twenty-first century, little remains of that vision of the past. Little Heath Wood was cleared of trees in the early 1960s when the local Scout Association obtained an 18-year lease on the site to use as an open-air training venue,²⁰ and it is now a scrubby patch. Dam Wood has been levelled and denuded and lies within the precinct of a new airfield which replaced the 1920s aerodrome and was named John Lennon Airport in 2001.²¹ Goldfinch Farm and Heath Farm are gone, along with the opportunities for nesting swallows and owls that the farms’ barns provided, and it is no longer possible to walk the full length of Dungeon Lane down to the water’s edge, because

¹⁹ ‘Cross-Country Gala’, *Liverpool Echo*, 18 March 1960, 26.

²⁰ ‘Scouts Clear Wood for Headquarters’, *Liverpool Echo*, 27 April 1962, 7.

²¹ ‘The New Terminal and Renaming’, <https://www.liverpoolairport.com/about/about-the-airport> (viewed 7 April 2026).

of the airport boundary. The former daffodil fields are now desolate scrub land and nothing remains of the workers' cottages and factory at the foot of the lane. Paul McCartney first used recollections of life experiences to superb effect in lyrics more than 60 years ago. Now, with *The Boys of Dungeon Lane* and via examination of various sources, especially old maps and newspapers to provide context, we can step inside that world and envisage the past alongside him.

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