



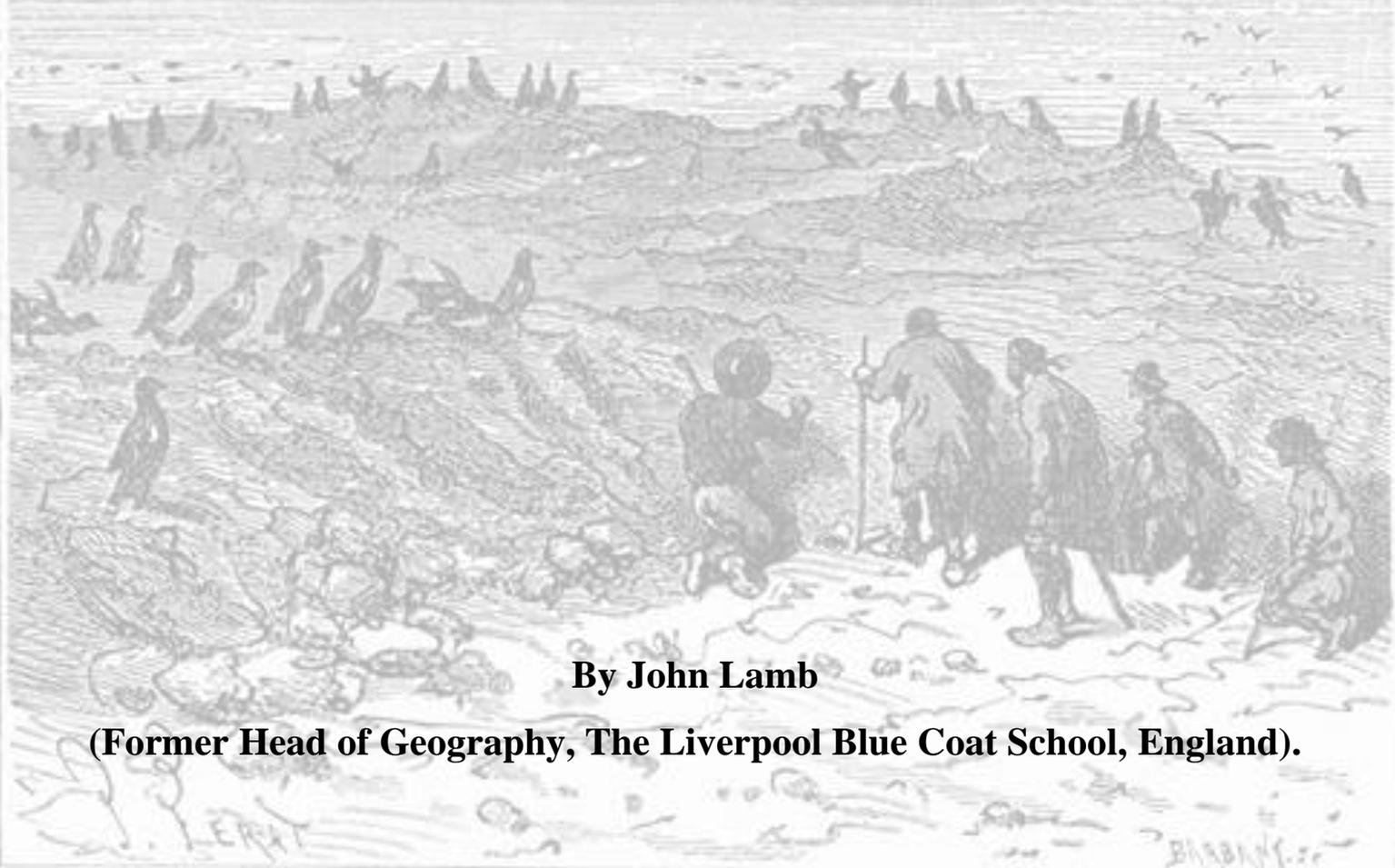
Jules Verne and the Heroes of Birkenhead.

Part 10.

The Seal Hunt on Hilbre Island.

By John Lamb

(Former Head of Geography, The Liverpool Blue Coat School, England).

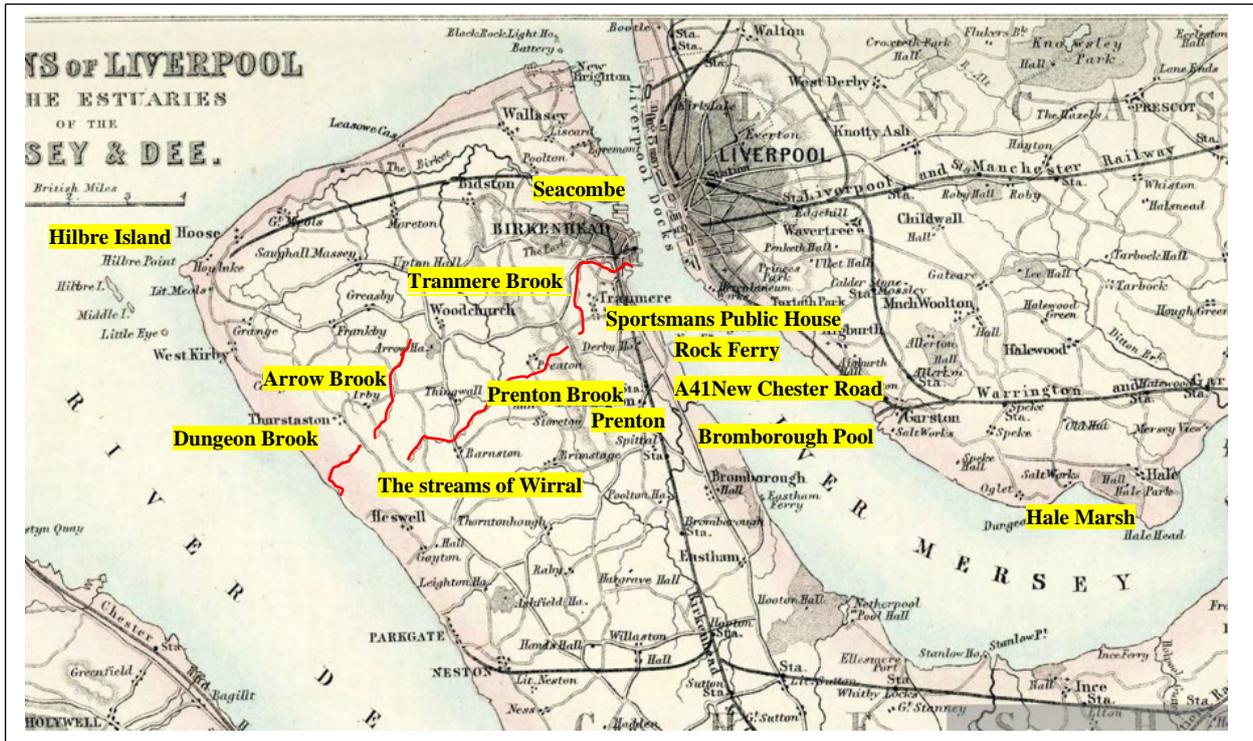


Jules Verne and the Heroes of Birkenhead.

Part 10 - The Seal Hunt on Hilbre Island.

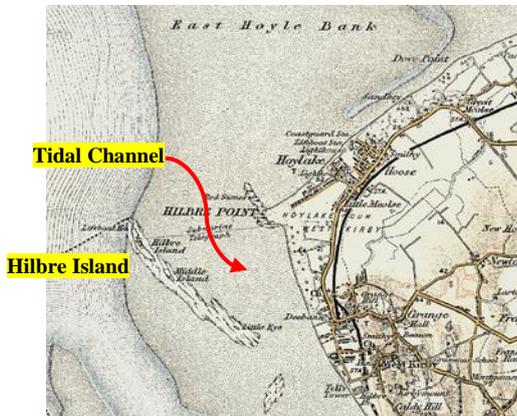
- THE SEAL HUNT ON HILBRE ISLAND -
- MAKING POTTERY AT SEACOMBE -
- CROSSING THE FROZEN RIVER MERSEY - A VISIT TO HALE MARSH -
- SIR JOHN BIRKENHEAD - THE PRENTON WATER TOWER -
- THE SPORTSMAN'S PUBLIC HOUSE AT TRANMERE -
- CAPTAIN NEMO'S SEA CHEST AT ROCK FERRY -
- A MAP OF JULES VERNE'S MYSTERIOUS ISLAND -
- THE ROCK FERRY WHALE - THE STREAMS OF WIRRAL -
- THE REMAINDER OF THE BALLOON AT BROMBOROUGH POOL -
- BUILDING THE A41 NEW CHESTER ROAD -

The Wirral Locations Used by Jules Verne in Part 10.



A Seal Hunt on Hilbre Island.

Cyrus Harding proposes to set up an iron furnace on *Lincoln Island* using the deposits of iron and coal found around the vicinity of Lake Grant (Wallasey Pool / Birkenhead Docks).



An iron furnace will need a set of airtight bellows and Cyrus Harding proposes to use seal skins for this purpose.

The colonists gather on the banks of the swift tidal channel that flows between the mainland and the Islet (Hilbre Island).

They will now cross to Hilbre Island using the route of the submarine telegraph cable (see left).

Hilbre Island c1900.

Soon Cyrus Harding, Herbert, Gideon Spilett, Neb, and the sailor had gathered on the shore at the point where the channel allowed a fordable passage at low tide. The sea was then at low tide, and the hunters could cross the channel without wetting themselves above the knees.

The route to Hilbre Island.



Cyrus Harding set foot on the islet for the first time and his companions for the second time since it was there that the balloon had first thrown them.



It was important not to frighten the amphibians who were lying on the sand several cable lengths away.

Seal Colony on the West Hoyle sandbank, Hilbre Island.

Today, up to 500 Atlantic Grey seals can be seen hauled out upon the West Hoyle sandbank, one mile (several cable lengths) to the west of Hilbre Island, their numbers have increased greatly in the last 30 years. Occasionally the seals also haul out on to the rocky north end of Hilbre Island, and it is these seals that will be of interest to the colonists.



The colonists advanced carefully toward the north point. Near the extremity of the islet appeared large black specks floating on the water. They resembled the top of a reef in motion.

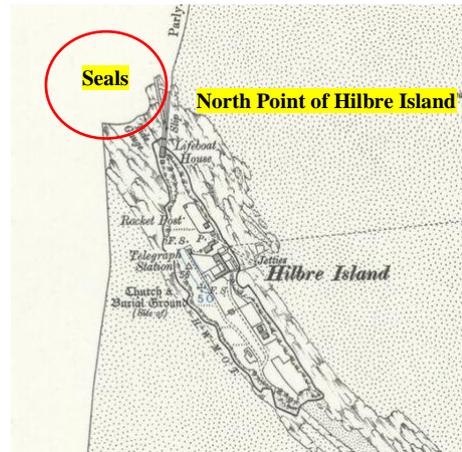
Atlantic grey seal off the north point of Hilbre Island.

The water off the north point of Hilbre Island is the best location in the north west of England to observe Atlantic grey seals at close quarters.

At high tide up to twenty seals may congregate in the water just thirty yards from the old lifeboat station.

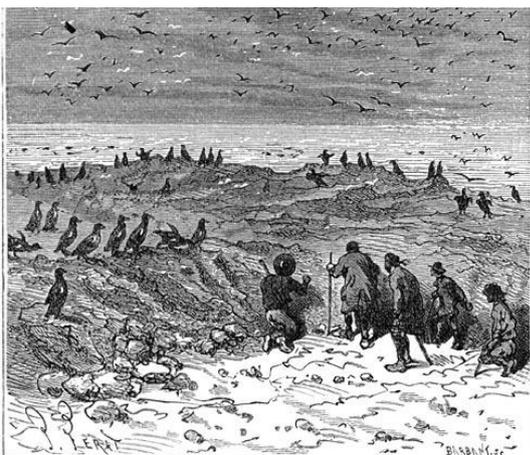
It is the seals of Hilbre Island that first identified the Wirral as Jules Verne's Mysterious Island.

The North Point of Hilbre Island and its seals.



Pencroft knew the habits of these amphibians, and he advised waiting until they had stretched out on the sand under the rays of the sun which would put them to sleep. They would then maneuver to cut off their retreat and dispatch them with a blow on the muzzle.

The hunters concealed themselves on the rocks on the shore and they waited silently.



The colonists walked carefully through the nests.

The artist Jules Ferat replicates the rock contours at the north end of Hilbre Island but removes the old Hilbre lifeboat station as Mysterious Island is supposed to be uninhabited.

An hour passed before the seals came to frolic on the sand. They could count half a dozen. Pencroft and Herbert then went around the point of the islet in order to take them from the rear and cut off their retreat. During this time, Cyrus Harding, Gideon Spilett, and Neb, crawling along the rocks, glided toward the future theatre of combat.

Suddenly the sailor emerged. Pencroft shouted. The engineer and his two companions quickly threw themselves between the sea and the seals. Two of these animals, struck vigorously, remained dead on the sand, but the others were able to regain and retreat to the open sea.

The animals were struck vigorously.



“Here are the seals asked for, Mr Cyrus,” said the sailor, advancing toward the engineer.

“Good,” replied Cyrus Harding. “We’ll make forge bellows of them.”

“Forge bellows!” cried Pencroft. “Well, these are lucky seals.”

It was in fact a blowing machine, necessary for the treatment of the mineral, that the engineer counted on making with the skin of these amphibians. They were of an average size at a length of no more than six feet. Their heads resembled dogs.

Since it was pointless to burden themselves with the considerable weight of these two animals, Neb and Pencroft resolved to skin them on the spot while Cyrus Harding and the reporter explored the islet.



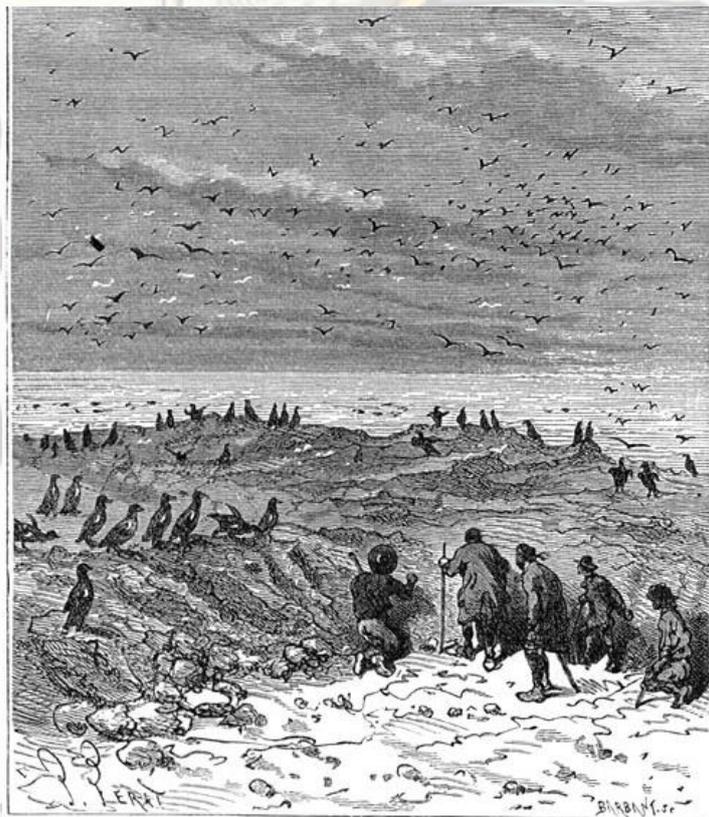
The sailor and the Negro did their work skillfully and, three hours later, Cyrus Harding had two seal skins which he planned on using in this state without subjecting them to any tanning.

The colonists had to wait for low tide. Crossing the channel, they returned to the Chimneys.

The operation proved difficult.

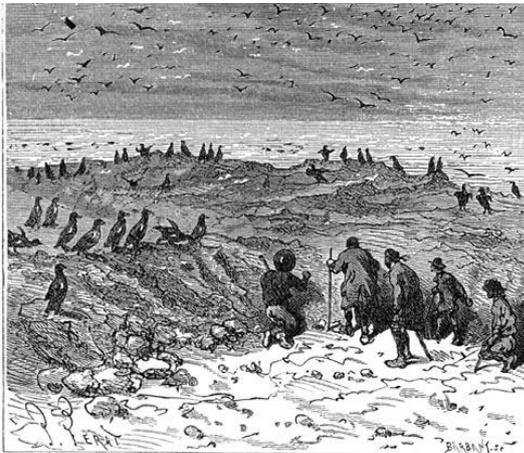
INTERLUDE

**Did Jules Verne and Others Alter the Physical Landscape
of the Wirral?**



UBI FIDES IBI LUX ET ROBUR

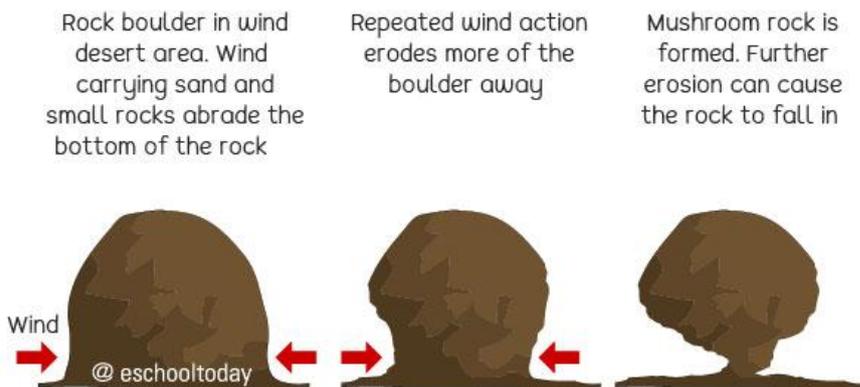
The Mysterious Boulder on the North End of Hilbre Island.



The Rock contours on Jules Ferat's illustration are almost an exact match for the rock contours at the north end of Hilbre Island – with one exception.

On Hilbre Island, there is, what at first glance seems a 'mushroom rock' with a pedestal wider than its base (see circled above). This is not included in Jules Ferat's sketch suggesting that it may have been placed there at a later date.

Mushroom rocks are usually only found in desert climates due to their being worn away by windblown sand transported close to the ground, hence there is much more erosion around the base of the rock compared to those parts higher up.



Hilbre Island is a coastal rather than desert environment – so what is this feature?

The Formation of a Mushroom Rock.

Closer inspection of the 'mushroom rock' on Hilbre Island, reveals it to be reinforced with sandstone blocks around the base. But who would go to all this trouble to just stop a natural rock feature toppling over?



A reinforced 'mushroom rock'?



One of the sandstone 'supporting blocks' is missing and a visual inspection of the inside reveals it to be completely hollow - there is no 'stem' to the mushroom.

It is in fact a stone cairn with a massive boulder placed upon a 'ring' of sandstone blocks.

The Hilbre Island stone cairn looking out to sea (left) and inland (below).

The overhang on the seaward side means that any 'stem' would have been far too thin and fragile to have ever supported the weight of the rock above.



The reality – a man-made stone cairn.



There can only be one conclusion - the rock feature is not a mushroom rock at all but a man-made stone cairn with a five-tonne boulder placed on top of a circular stone base.

If this is a cairn then it must have taken considerable planning and a large amount of labour and lifting machinery to place it in position. There is a metal ring on the top and that may point to a chain and winch having originally been used to lower it into position.

Apart from the visual clue in Jules Ferat's illustration, there may also be evidence from Jules Verne's novel *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (1864) – an adventure which of course starts in Birkenhead but is set in the High Arctic.

To quote Jules Verne in the novel *The adventures of Captain Hatteras* (1864);

But before leaving this rock forever, the doctor, following Hatteras's intentions, put up a cairn at the place where the captain reached the island; this cairn was built of large rocks laid on one another, so as to form a perfectly visible landmark...

The Adventures of Captain Hatteras (1864).

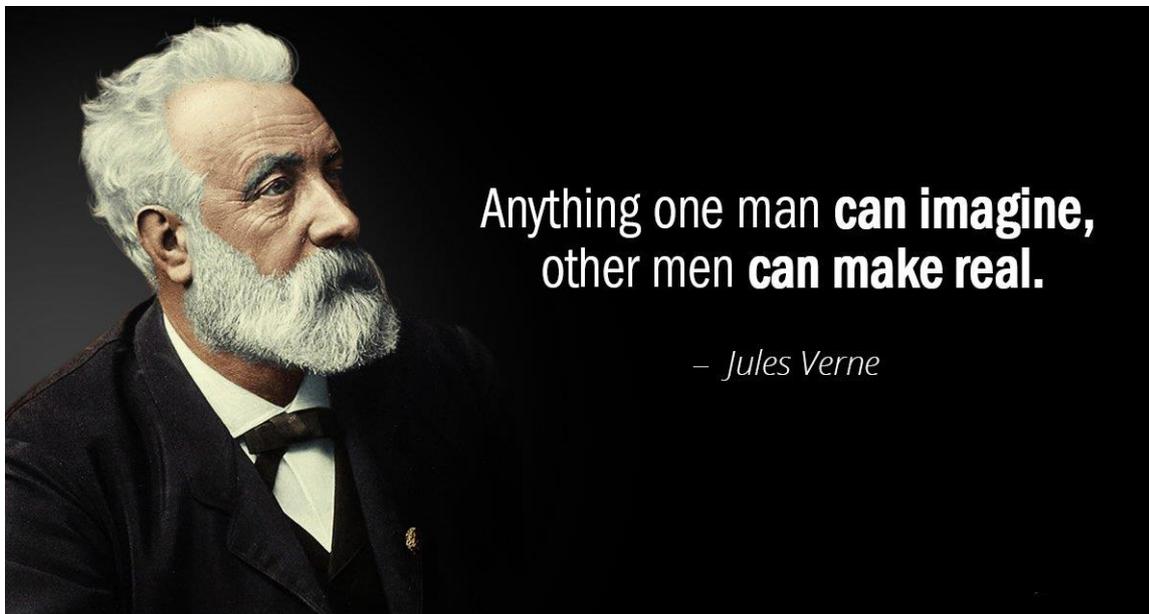


When Hatteras knew this result, he asked that it should be stated in two documents, one to be placed in a cairn on the shore.

Excavation is dangerous, as removal of the base supporting blocks will result in the collapse of the main block on to the archaeologist – it is a booby trap in the best adventure tradition.

Perhaps more symbolically for Jules Verne, the cairn is sited at the very spot on Hilbre Island where the castaway's balloon first reached land on his '*Mysterious Island*'.

In isolation this may be seen as conjecture and yet there will be other examples of Verne apparently 'changing the landscape' of the Wirral and retrospectively adding features.



The interpretation of our fourth novel will hinge on accepting that Jules Verne or 'other men' added a feature to Bidston Hill a full two years after Verne's novel was printed.

Meanwhile back on Jules Verne's Mysterious Island....

Making Pottery at Seacombe.

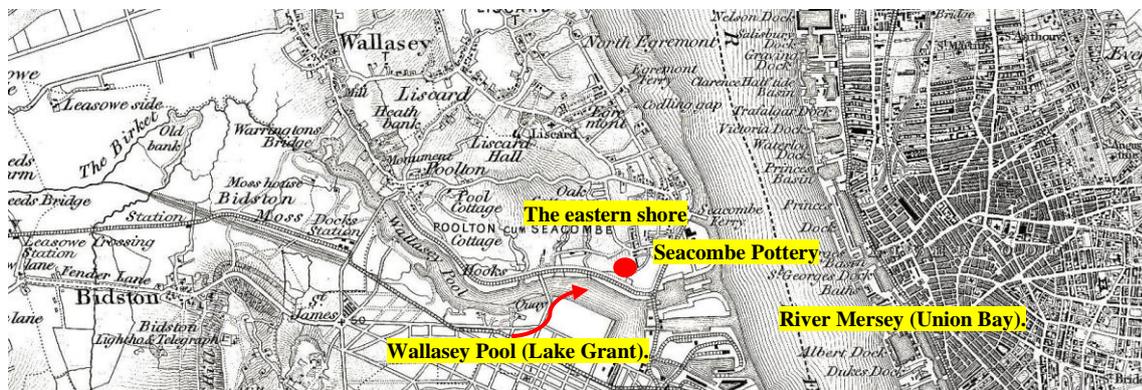
The castaways decide to set up a pottery on the eastern shore of Lake Grant, and as usual Cyrus Harding takes the lead in its design. The Pottery is based on the Seacombe Pottery (1852-70) on the eastern side of Wallasey Pool.

“In order to avoid transportation problems, we’ll establish our workshop at the very place of production.”

It was Cyrus Harding’s intention to return to the eastern shore of the lake. On the previous day, he had noticed clay soil, and taken a sample. They walked along the bank of the Mercy, crossed Grand View Plateau and, after a walk of five miles, they arrived at a clearing situated 200 feet from Lake Grant.



The East Float at Wallasey Pool with the Seacombe Pottery in the background.



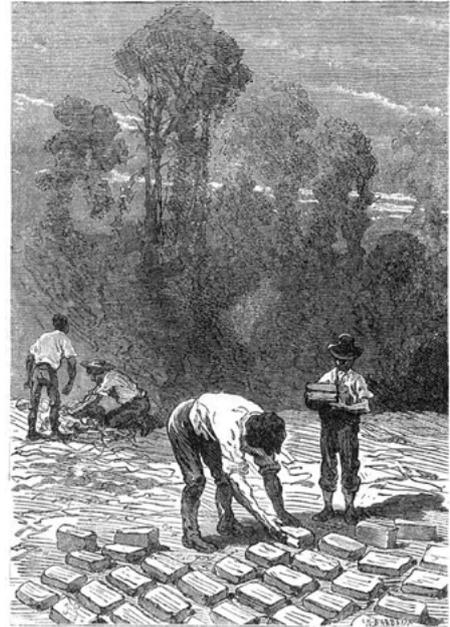
Seacombe Pottery (1852-70) occupied the eastern shore of Wallasey Pool.

The colonists arrived on terrain that they recognised from the previous day. It was composed of this figuline clay which can be used to make bricks and tiles. It sufficed to thin this clay with some sand, mould the bricks, and bake them in the heat of a wood fire.

The result of these various tasks was that, on April 9th, the engineer had at his disposal a certain quantity of fully prepared lime and several thousand bricks.

Without losing an instant, they began the construction of a kiln which would bake the various pottery indispensable for domestic use. They succeeded without too much difficulty. Five days later, the kiln was charged with coal which the engineer had discovered in an open bed near the mouth of Red Creek.

Three thousand bricks were laid out.



The first smoke escaped from a chimney about twelve feet high. The clearing was transformed into a factory and Pencroft was not far from believing that this kiln would issue all the products of modern industry.

These tasks lasted until April 15th, and this time was well spent. The colonists became potters and did no other thing except pottery.



The colonists became potters...



Seacombe Pottery – 200 feet from Wallasey Pool

Seacombe pottery consisted of six bottle kilns and outbuildings. Bidston Windmill can be seen across Wallasey Pool.



Plates from Seacombe Pottery c1855.



In 1870 a large consignment of cargo bound for America was shipwrecked in a violent storm, the Seacombe pottery did not recover from this loss and subsequently closed in the same year.

Crossing the Frozen River Mercy.

This is one of the hardest and potentially most confusing tasks in interpreting Jules Verne as there are two possibilities and he may eventually use both.

Toward the end of the month of June, after endless rains, the weather definitely began to turn cold and, on the 29th, a Fahrenheit thermometer would have registered only 20 degrees above zero.

Ice flows piled up at the mouth of the Mercy, and the lake froze completely over. The colonists, dressed as well as possible, decided to devote a day to the exploration of the south east of the island between the Mercy and Cape claw. It was a vast marshy terrain which would make for good hunting because of the many aquatic birds there.

They took the shortest route crossing the Mercy over the ice floes then blocking it.



Are we crossing Jules Verne's Mercy
– otherwise known as Tranmere Pool?



...or we crossing real River Mersey
over to Liverpool?

Is Verne going to describe the crossing of the Tranmere Brook or the actual River Mersey? It seems the latter is the case and the castaways are going to have a day out in Liverpool by walking across the frozen River Mersey.

They took the shortest route crossing the Mercy over the ice floes then blocking it.

A brilliant sun with no appreciable heat then rose from the ocean, its enormous disk floating on the horizon. The surface of the sea was calm and as blue as a Mediterranean gulf when the sky is clear.

Here Verne is emphasizing the clear blue waters of the Mercy, in direct contrast to Harriet Beecher Stowe, who complained how muddy the Mersey was. Beecher-Stowe wrote;

This Mersey River would be a very beautiful one, if it were not so dingy and muddy. As we are sailing up in the tender towards Liverpool, I deplore the circumstance feelingly. "What does make this river so muddy?"

"O," says a bystander, "don't you know that 'The quality of mercy is not strained'?"

Harriet Beecher Stowe – Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands (1854).



It was the first time the colonists had set foot on the right bank of the Mercy, and they walked among tall, superb conifers which were then covered with snow.

The shortest was to cross the Mercy.

If the castaways are crossing the frozen River Mersey from Birkenhead to Liverpool, then they would indeed have been greeted by *tall, superb conifers*.



Liverpool Docks c1860 – The *tall superb conifers* viewed from Birkenhead.

Jules Verne's *tall superb conifers* are a metaphor for the masts of ships in the docks of Liverpool. Verne is again following in the literary footsteps of Harriet Beecher Stowe.

We are in a forest of ships of all nations; their masts bristling like the tall pines in Maine; their many colored flags streaming like the forest leaves in autumn.

Harriet Beecher Stowe –*Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands – Liverpool (1854).*

Verne will later emphasise this point by crafting a whole page on Liverpool Docks in a stunning metaphor on his *Mysterious Island*.

Cape claw, curved in the shape of a yataghan, was clearly visible about four miles to the south east.



A yataghan is a long-curved sword. Hale Point in South Liverpool makes the shape of the handle of the yataghan and can therefore be interpreted as Cape Claw.

Hale Point will also feature in another novel by Jules Verne.

Union Bay and Cape Claw.

The Yataghan shape of the South Liverpool coast seems to confirm that the colonists are now on the stretch of coast between the 'abolitionists enclave' of Dingle Point in the west and Hale Point in the east.

The exploration was continued and the colonists arrived at the marshy region. It was a true marsh whose area, up to the rounded shore, which marked the south east of the island, measured twenty square miles. Above the aquatic grass, on the surface of the stagnant waters, fluttered a world of birds. Marsh hunters and professional poachers would not have lost a single shot. Wild duck, pintail, teal and snipe lived there in flocks and these fearless birds could easily be approached.

The upper Mersey marsh is one of Britain's most important habitats for wading birds. In the 1980's and 90's it was Britain's most important estuary for Pintail with up to 20,000 birds counted, along with 35,000 teal and up to 1,000 snipe.

A gunshot would certainly hit several dozens of the birds, so tight were their ranks.

The hunters were content, for the time being with a dozen duck who had white bodies and cinnamon waists, green heads, black, white and reddish wings and flattened beaks that Herbert recognised as "Tadorns." Top skillfully helped capture these birds whose name was given to this marshy part of the island. Thus, the colonists had an abundant reserve of water fowl.



Hale Lighthouse and Marsh.



When the time came, they would exploit this, and it was likely that several of these species could become, if not domesticated, at least acclimatised to the neighbourhood of the lake, which would put them within the immediate reach of the consumers.

Hale Duck Decoy, built c1633.

The hunting of wild duck at Hale Point is a tradition going back to at least the 17th century and possibly earlier. The Hale Duck Decoy was constructed as early as 1633 as an artificial lake with five tapered covered channels designed to entice and entrap wildfowl.



The Hale Duck Decoy in the 1890's.

In the mid nineteenth century, catches were reported at between 750 and 1,500 ducks per season for *consumers*.

The saltmarsh of the Mersey around Hale Point and the duck decoy are most likely the inspiration for the vastness of Tadorn marsh. Jules Verne may have included the village of Hale as he had already used the settlement briefly in a previous novel.

Around five o'clock in the evening, Cyrus Harding and his companions took the road back to their dwelling, crossing Tadorn's Marsh and passing over the Mercy on the bridge of ice. At eight o'clock in the evening they were back at Granite House

Sir John Birkenhead

Winter has well and truly set in and the colonists are feeling the cold in Granite House.

Jules Verne will proceed to give his most indirect clue to the fact that we are really in Birkenhead. It is just one sentence, but it suggests so much about the depth of Verne's research.

Pencroft laments the absence of bears from Lincoln Island and the warmth that their skins would provide.



This intense cold lasted until August 15th and the temperature stayed very low. When the weather was calm, this low temperature was easily tolerated, but when the cold wind blew, it was hard on those insufficiently dressed men.

Pencroft regretted that Lincoln Island had not given sanctuary to several families of bears instead of foxes or seals, whose fur left much to be desired.

“Bears,” he said, “are generally well dressed, and I’d ask nothing more of them than to borrow for the winter the warm cloaks on their bodies.”

From the Heights of Granite House.

“But replied Neb laughing, “perhaps these bears won’t consent to give you their cloaks. These animals are not St Martins!”

These animals are not St Martins is a strange phrase which does not seem to have a definable meaning.

St Martins in the Fields is one of Britain's most famous churches, dominating as it does the north-eastern corner of Trafalgar Square in London. It is named after St Martin of Tours (316-397), who was the Patron Saint of France during the Third Republic (1870-1940). The choice of St Martins would therefore satisfy Verne on two counts, firstly for his patriotism and secondly for the fact that St Martins in the Fields Church is the burial place of Sir John Birkenhead.

St Martins in the Fields Church, Trafalgar Square.



Sir John Birkenhead (c.1617 – 4 December 1679) was a British political writer and journalist, imprisoned several times during the Commonwealth for unstinting support for the monarchy.

Upon the restoration of Charles II to the throne, Birkenhead began producing England's first official news-book *Mercurius Aulicus*, he was a founding member of the Royal Society and was knighted in 1642.



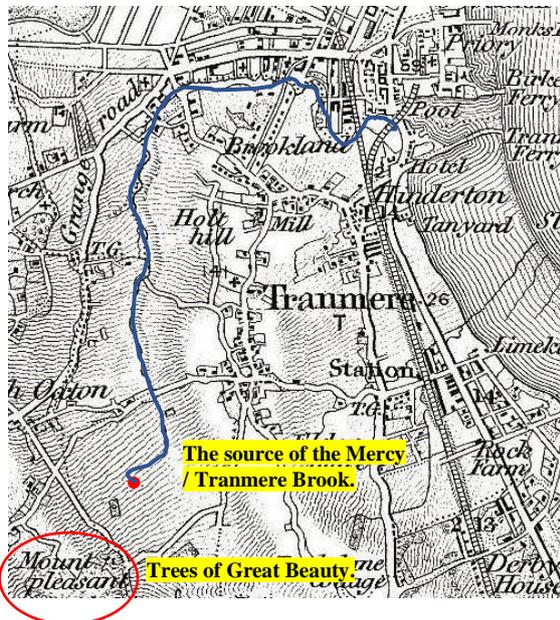
Sir John Birkenhead in the stocks (c1645)

Birkenhead is buried in an unmarked grave near the school door at St Martin-in-the-fields church, Westminster, London.

Climbing Prenton Water Tower

Gideon Spillet and Herbert decide to climb to the highest point in Birkenhead.

On the day when the two hunters were chatting in this manner, they found themselves in a part of the forest near the Mercy, noted for its trees of great beauty.



Mount Pleasant Wood c1900

Now known as the 'Mountwood' Mount Pleasant is still noted for its trees of great beauty. The wood will be referred to in more than one novel.

Mount Pleasant or the Mountwood, is the highest point in Birkenhead, it is topped by the Prenton reservoir (c1850) with its observation tower rising high above the tree canopy.

Among others, rising to a height of almost 200 feet above the ground, were several of these superb conifers which the natives of New Zealand call "Kauris."

"Here's an idea, Mr Spilett," said Herbert. "If I climb to the top of one of these Kauris, perhaps I'll be able to see the countryside over a large area."

The agile and skillful lad darted up to the first branches whose arrangement made them easy to climb....

Prenton Water tower



Jules Verne is alluding to the Prenton water tower situated above the soft greenery of the Mount Wood. The Prenton water tower's spiral staircase is represented by *branches whose arrangement made them easy to climb.*

... and in several minutes he arrived at its summit which emerged above this immense expanse of verdure created by the forests foliage.

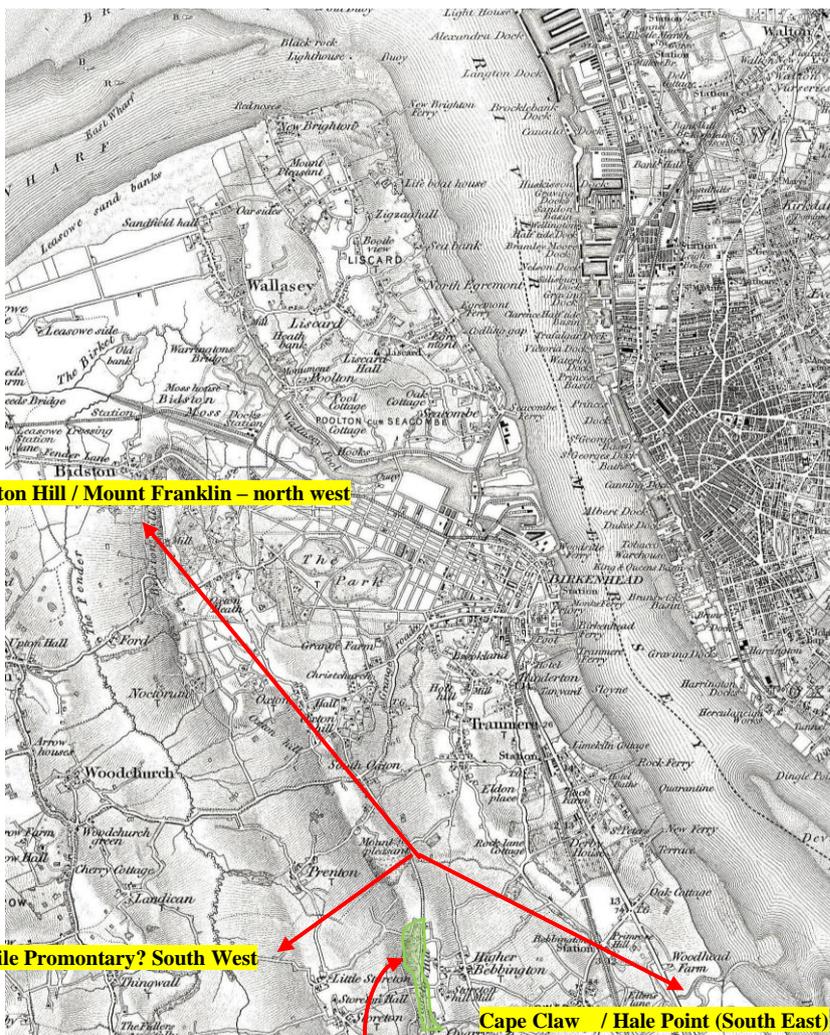
From this high point, the view extended over the entire southern portion of the island, from **Cape Claw in the south east to Reptile Promontary in the south west**. In the north west, **Mount Franklin** rose, blocking out a good quarter of the horizon.

But Herbert, from the height of his observatory, could easily see all of this still unknown portion of the island which could give or had given refuge to the strangers.

The lad looked carefully. First, on the open sea, there was nothing in sight.

There was also nothing amid the forests of the Far West. The forest formed an impenetrable dome measuring several square miles, without a clearing or an opening for light. It was even impossible to follow the course of the Mercy or to recognize the point of the mountain from which it took its source. Perhaps other creeks flowed to the west, but that could not be determined.

From the observation tower on the Prenton Reservoir can be seen all the landmarks alluded to in Jules Verne’s Mysterious island.

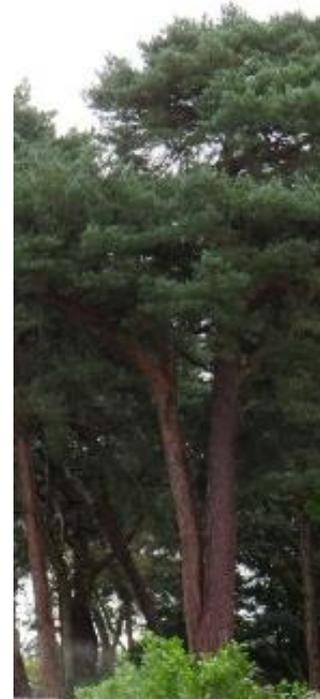


Bidston Hill / Mount Franklin – north west

Reptile Promontary? South West

Cape Claw / Hale Point (South East)

Storeton Woods / Forest of the Far West



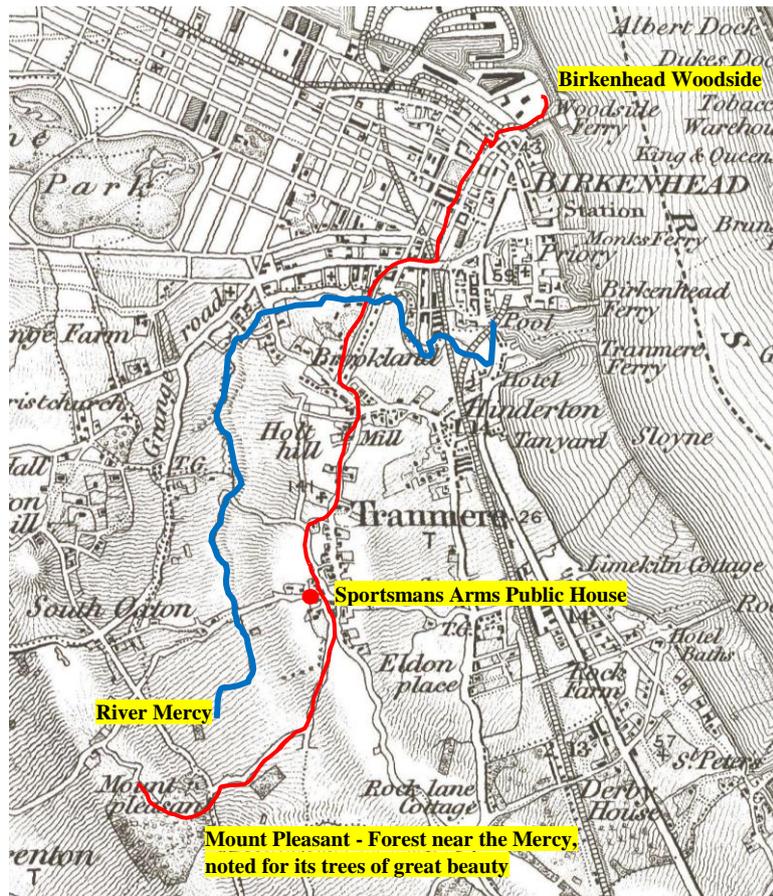
The present-day superb conifers of the Mountwood.

The Sportsman's Public House at Tranmere.

The Kingston translation states that.

Herbert descended to the foot of the kauri and the two Sportsmen returned to Granite House.

If Herbert and Pencroft take the most direct road back from Mount Pleasant (the site of the Kauri) to Birkenhead Woodside (the site of Granite House) they will immediately come to the landmark whitewashed inn of the Sportsman's Arms Public House, high up on the ridge of Tranmere Village and overlooking the Tranmere Brook (Verne's Mercy River).



Yet again, it seems that Jules Verne is mimicking Nathaniel Hawthorne's English Notebooks.

Hawthorne writes;

Reaching Tranmere, I went into an alehouse, nearly opposite the Hall, and called for a glass of ale.

**Nathaniel Hawthorne
English Notebooks (1853 -
published 1870).**

Two other Wirral public houses will appear in our adventure.

**The location of the
Sportsman's Arms.**

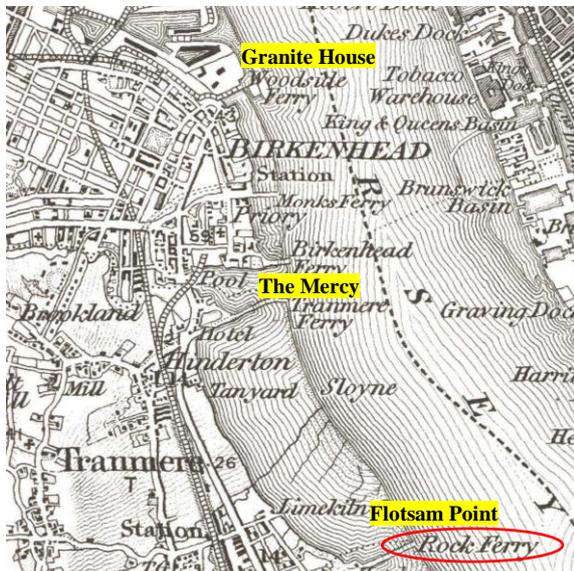


The original Sportsman's Arms was a seventeenth century single story public house with a thatched roof. It was replaced by a modern building in the 1930's.

**The Sportsman's Arms,
Tranmere Village in c1860 and
present day (insert).**

Captain Nemo's Sea Chest at Rock Ferry

Herbert and Neb find a turtle *among the rocks* two miles from Granite House. This is at Rock Ferry, Birkenhead and it will later be renamed 'Flotsam Point' by Jules Verne.



Two days later, on October 28th, another incident took place whose explanation also left something to be desired.

While roaming about the beach two miles from Granite House, Herbert and Neb were happy to capture a magnificent specimen of the order of Chelonia. It was a turtle of the genus mydas, whose shell had a green lustre. Herbert saw this turtle crawling among the rocks, trying to reach the sea.

Rock Ferry

The sandstone and granite slipway at Rock Ferry is a 'listed' structure and according to the 'Historic England' website;

Daniel Defoe is thought to have travelled on this ferry in 1725 during his researches for his book "A Tour Though the Whole Island of Great Britain."

Rock Ferry Slipway and the anchorage of the 'Tranmere Sloyne' c1865



Herbert and Neb decide the creature will furnish the dinner table at Granite House, but how do they get it back home?

"Help, Neb, over here!" he shouted.

Neb Rushed up.

"What a beautiful animal! Said Neb, "but how will we get hold of it?"

"Nothing is easier, Neb, replied Herbert. "We'll turn this turtle over on its back and it won't be able to escape. Take your spear and do as I do.

*The reptile sensing danger, withdrew into its shell and breastplate. Its head and feet were no longer visible, and it became **as still as a rock.***

Herbert and Neb placed their sticks under the breast-bone of the animal and, working together, they succeeded in turning it over onto its back. This turtle measured three feet in length, must have weighed at least 400 pounds.



The turtle lying as *still as a rock* and the large rock in the background may be Verne giving us both written and visual clues as to where we really are – Rock Ferry.

“This will delight our friend Pencroft!”

“Good!” shouted Neb, “this will surely delight our friend Pencroft!”

Indeed, friend Pencroft could not help but be delighted because the flesh of these turtles, which feed on seaweed, is extremely tasty.

“And now, what will we do with our game?” asked Neb. We can’t drag it to Granite House.”

“Let’s leave it here, since it can’t turn over,” replied Herbert” and we’ll take it with the cart.”

“Agreed!”

Nevertheless, as an added precaution which Neb considered superfluous, Herbert took care to wedge in the animal with large stones. After that the two hunters returned to Granite House following the beach at low tide, by then uncovered. Herbert, wanting to surprise Pencroft, did not tell him anything about the “superb specimen of the chelonia order,” which they had turned over on the sand; but two hours later, Neb and he came back with the cart to the spot where they had left it. The “superb specimen of the chelonia order” was no longer there.

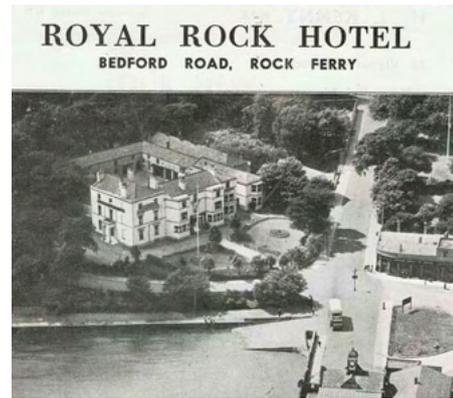
Neb and Herbert first looked at each other, then they looked around. It was, indeed, the exact spot where they left the turtle. The lad even found the stones which he had used and was therefore certain that he was not mistaken. “So,” said Neb, “these animals can turn themselves over.”

“So it seems,” replied Herbert, who could not understand it. He looked at the stones scattered on the sand.

The overturning of the turtle is one of over a dozen unexplained events befalling the castaways in *Mysterious Island*. All these are eventually listed and explained by Jules Verne as being down to the benign interference of Captain Nemo who, as an admirer of their inventiveness and fraternity, has been secretly helping them without making himself known.

All of Captain Nemo's interventions help the castaways ... apart from this one. The turning of the turtle is not mentioned again in *Mysterious Island* and the assumption here is that Nemo's interference is purely to prevent unnecessary suffering to an animal – even if it deprives the castaways of their dinner!

Rock Ferry, masquerading as Jules Verne's Flotsam Point, will now furnish the settlers with many of their needs.



The Royal Rock Hotel at Rock Ferry – the 'Marine Station' of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club c1930.

The light canoe was carried to the shore in front of Granite House, and the rising tide lifted it up. Pencroft joined in, began to scull, and declared that it was very suitable for whatever use they wanted to make of it.

It was agreed they would try out the canoe on this very day by following the shoreline up to the very first point where the rocks in the south came to an end.



It was a pile of granite blocks randomly distributed, of an extremely savage aspect and very different from the façade that formed Grand view plateau. One would have said that an enormous cartload of rocks had been emptied here.

There was no vegetation on this very sharp jutting point which extended two miles in front of the forest, and it very much resembled the arm of a giant emerging from a sleeve of foliage.

The sharp jutting point c1950

However after a navigation of three quarters of an hour, the canoe arrived at the end of the promontory. Pencroft prepared to go round it when Herbert, getting up, pointed to a black spot and said:

“What do I see there on the beach?”

Everyone looked towards the indicated point.

In a few strokes of the oar, the canoe landed in a small cove and the passengers leaped ashore.



The small cove at Rock Ferry slipway / Flotsam Point.

Two barrels were there, half buried in the sand but securely attached to a large chest which, held up by the water, had floated this way until it had become stranded on the beach.

The canoe would not be able to hold the objects which were probably enclosed in the chest. They had to be heavy since it was necessary to keep it afloat by means of two empty barrels. It would be better to tow it as is to the beach in front of Granite House.

Where did this wreckage come from? This was the important question. They carefully looked around and scoured the shore for a distance of several hundred feet. No other debris appeared.



“But what is in it?”

The sea was scrutinised. Herbert and Neb climbed to a high rock but the horizon was deserted. Nothing was in sight, neither a disabled ship nor a vessel under sail.

Pencroft and Neb dug into the sand with their oars in order to facilitate the movement of the chest. Soon the boat, towing the chest, began to round the point which was given the name Flotsam Point.

The ‘high rock’ may again be a clue, given by Verne to the Rock Ferry location – in this light the rock will play a further role in the story of *Mysterious Island*.



The chest is a gift from the Captain Nemo – the hidden presence on the island.

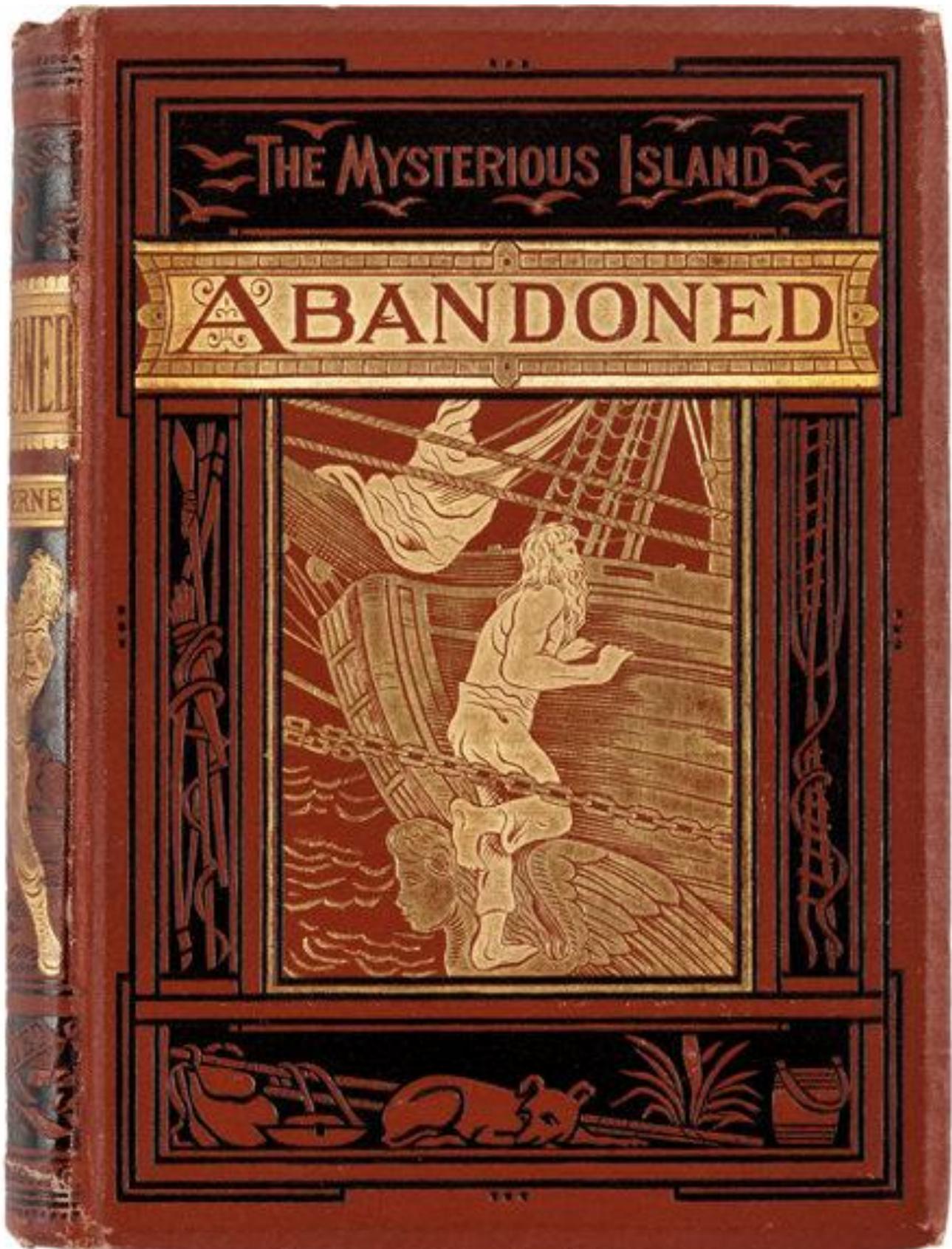
It contains a myriad of tools and utensils including hunting guns, knives, axes, chisels, gunpowder, binoculars, a telescope, a sextant, photographic apparatus, clothing, pots, pans ... and a bible, where the following phrase is marked with a red cross – “*he that seeketh findeth*”.

The colonists were delighted.

The Mysterious Island

Part Two

Abandoned.



The Rock Ferry Whale.

The American author Nathaniel Hawthorne, who, while serving as the American Consul to Liverpool from 1852-55, lived just yards away from the Rock Ferry slipway in Rock Park.

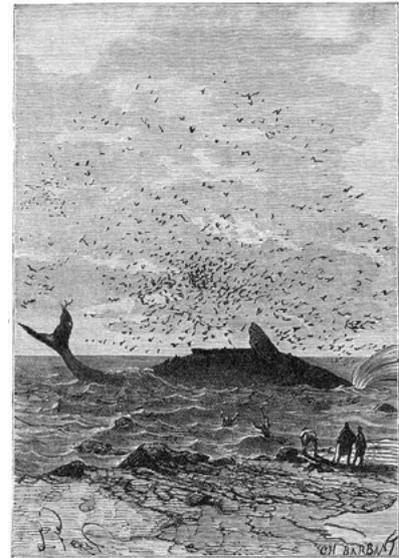
Just two years prior to taking up residence at Rock Ferry, Birkenhead, Nathaniel Hawthorne's friend had dedicated a novel to Hawthorne's 'genius' – the friend was Herman Melville and the novel was *Moby Dick*.

For several days, they had observed an enormous animal swimming in the waters of Lincoln Island, two or three miles out to sea. It was a whale of the largest size, belonging to a southern species called "Cape Whale."

"How lucky it would be if we could get hold of it," exclaimed the sailor. "Ah! If we had a suitable boat and a working harpoon, I would say: 'Let's chase the beast! It's well worth the trouble!'"

"I am astonished," said the reporter, "to see a whale in this relatively high latitude,"

"What a monster!" exclaimed Neb.



The whale seemed to have no wish to leave the waters of the island.

But what the colonists could not do, chance did for them. On May 3rd, Neb's shouts from his kitchen window announced that the whale was stranded on the shore. The stranding occurred at Flotsam Point, three miles from Granite House, at high tide.

Hawthorne would have had a rather surreal neighbour at Rock Ferry during his residency - an 800-ton Chinese Junk named the *Keying* berthed at Rock Ferry slipway. Rumoured to be over one hundred years old and once a pirate ship, she had previously caused a sensation as the first Chinese ship ever to visit New York City.



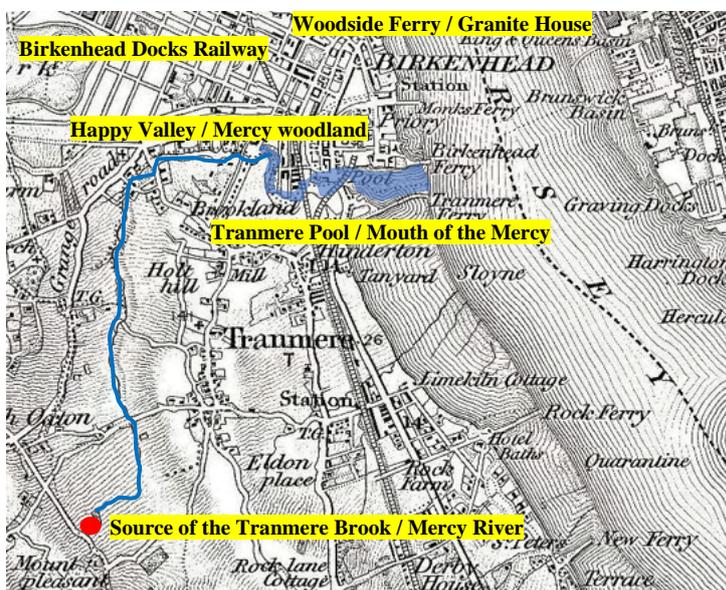
When the *Keying* berthed at London docks, commemorative medals were struck, and she was billed as 'Europe's top attraction'. Thousands of spectators later watched Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's procession as they visited the ship at East India Docks in 1848.

The *Keying* complete with the eye of a whale.

The Streams of the Wirral.

As we have already seen, Jules Verne's Mercy River is based on the Tranmere Brook, which had its source near Mount Pleasant, the highest point in Birkenhead. From Mount Pleasant the brook flowed northwards for a mile and a half, before turning eastwards towards Tranmere Pool – this stretch of the river originally contained a beautiful woodland known as the Happy Valley. In the 1860's the brook was diverted into a culvert and 'Happy Valley' Road built on top. The road is now known as Borough Road, Birkenhead.

The following evidence may seem conjectural; however, Jules Verne will later confirm that the Tranmere Brook is the 'Mercy' by relating its location in the most bizarre way possible to both Wallasey Pool and the cutting of the Birkenhead Docks railway (see the map below). The Tranmere Brook will also appear again in a second novel and this time, Mount Pleasant will be alluded to by name.



As Hilda Gamlin in her 1890 *Memories of Birkenhead* stated;

The most rural spot in the locality was known as the Happy Valley in Tranmere Vale. The name meant all it suggests, a lovely vale, with primroses covering the banks, the wild violets and woodbine so profuse.

The Tranmere Brook.

It was agreed that they would ascend the Mercy as far as the river's current would take them.

At six o'clock in the morning, the canoe was pushed in the water. Everyone got aboard, including Top, and they steered towards the mouth of the Mercy.



The Tranmere Brook was tidal as far as Birkenhead Central Railway Station (see above and the map) – beyond this lay the beautiful woodland of the Happy Valley – Jules Verne will push the tidal current much further upstream than this.

In a few minutes, the explorers arrived at the bend in the Mercy, at the same point where Pencroft had made his first raft of wood seven months earlier.

After this rather sharp angle, the river widened out and flowed towards the southwest beneath the shade of evergreen conifers.



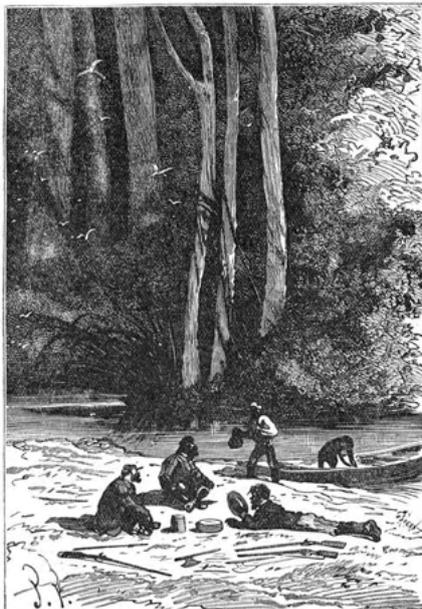
The scenery along the banks of the Mercy was magnificent. Cyrus Harding and his companions could only admire, without reservations the beautiful effects so easily produced by Nature with some water and trees. As they advanced, the forest's flora began to change. On the right bank of the river, there rose magnificent specimens of the ulmaceous species, these precious French elms so sought after by builders which bear up well in water.

This view to the rear of Birkenhead Central Station shows the flooded concrete base of the old Birkenhead Gasworks. The illusion is one of a tidal creek.

Then there were numerous groups belonging to the same family, nettle trees among other, whose almond produces a very useful oil. Further on, Herbert noted some lardizbacaceae whose flexible boughs, soaked in water, make excellent ropes, and two or three trunks of ebony trees, of a beautiful black color, containing irregular veins.



The modern-day site of the Happy Valley woodland – Borough Road, Birkenhead and the Pyramids Shopping Centre.



By consulting his pocket compass, the engineer knew that the direction of the river from the first bend was essentially southwest to northeast, and that it was nearly straight for a length of about three miles.

It was ten o'clock in the morning when the canoe reached a second bend in the Mercy, about five miles from the mouth. Here they halted to eat lunch and, sheltered by large beautiful trees, remained for half an hour.

Here they halted for lunch.

The boat was therefore relentlessly pushed through the forest, which was becoming thicker, and which also seemed inhabited. If the sailor's eyes did not deceive him he thought he saw bands of monkeys running under the brushwood.

About four o'clock, the navigation of the Mercy became difficult because its course was obstructed by aquatic plants and rocks. The banks rose little by little, and already the bed of the river was hollowed out between the first foothills of Mount Franklin. Its source could not be far away since it was fed by all these waters from the southern slopes of the mountain.

The monkeys studied the colonists.



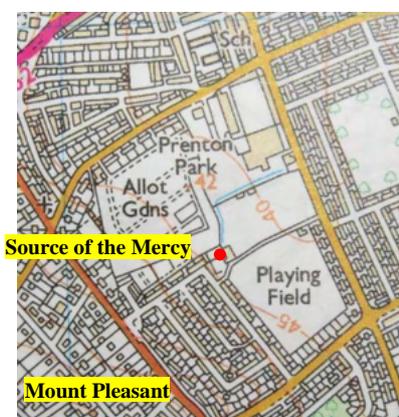
But soon the canoe scraped the stony bottom of the river whose width at that point did not exceed twenty feet.

They also heard the rather distinct noise of a waterfall which indicated the presence of a natural barrier several hundred feet upstream.

At a last detour of the river, a cascade indeed appeared through the trees. The canoe hit rock bottom, and a few minutes later it was moored to a trunk near the right bank.

They camped in this very place which was charming. *The colonists landed, and a fire was lit under a group of large nettle trees among whose branches Cyrus Harding and his companions could find refuge for the night if the need arose.*

The castaways have followed the Mercy River / Borough Road as far as Tranmere Rovers Football ground at Prenton Park, here the Tranmere Brook took takes a sudden turn westward towards Mount Pleasant (a spur of Bidston Hill). Today the remaining short stretch of stream still has its source to the rear of Tranmere Rovers Football ground.



The source of Jules Verne's 'Mercy River' (the Tranmere Brook) in 1860 and in the present day.

A short stretch of the Tranmere Brook still survives today at Shaftesbury Youth Club playing field, this is indeed the real source of Jules Verne's Mercy River.

The *group of large nettle trees* may refer to Birkenhead's 'Mountwood', then known as 'Mount Pleasant' and hence generating the phrase *They camped in this very place which was charming*.



The source of the Tranmere Brook at Shaftesbury Youth Club, Birkenhead and the group of large nettle trees at Birkenhead's Mount Pleasant (The Mountwood).

It was six o'clock in the morning when the colonists, after an early meal, continued their journey with the intention of reaching, by the shortest way possible, the western coast of the island.

The exact position of the encampment was calculated by the location of Mount Franklin and, since the volcano rose in the north at a distance of at least three miles, they had to take a straight route to the southwest to reach the western shore.

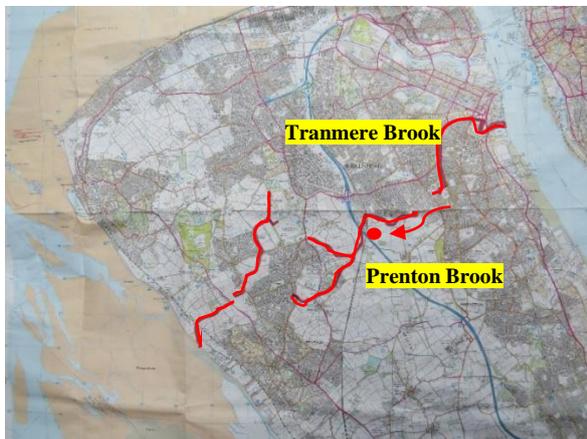
The colonists are heading for the west coast of Mysterious Island / the Wirral and the only way that Jules Verne can do this is to 'river hop' *by the shortest way possible* from one river watercourse to the other. Jules Verne will use parts of three more small rivers and will collectively call them 'The Falls River'.



The summit of Bidston Hill is three miles to the north of the Mountwood in Prenton, this confirms that the canoe is being left at Mount Pleasant.

The colonists will now ‘hop’ from the Tranmere Brook to the Prenton Brook, then on to the Arrowe Brook and finally the Dungeon Brook before arriving at the west coast.

The first blows of the axe were made against the brushwood, among the mastic tree bushes, a little above the waterfall. With compass in hand, Cyrus Harding indicated the direction to follow.



From Tranmere Brooke to Prenton Brooke



The Prenton Brook

The forest was composed of trees already recognised in the neighbourhood of the lake and Grand View Plateau. They were deodars, douglas firs, casurinas, gum trees, eucalyptus, dragon trees, hibiscus, cedars and other species.

During the first hours of the journey, they again saw monkeys who seemed to show astonishment at the sight of men.

They also saw several wild boar, agoutis, kangeroos, and other rodents as well as two or three koalas whom Pencroft would have willingly greeted with gunshots.



From Prenton Brook to Arrowe Brook

Jules Verne has followed the Prenton Brook westwards and will now divert up to the waterfalls of the Arrowe Brook before finally transferring to the Dungeon waterfall at Thurstaston and the open sea. The prevalence of waterfalls on these streams will lead Verne to christen this amalgamated watercourse ‘The Falls River’.

The Arrowe Brook runs through the grounds of Arrowe Hall, built in 1835, and landscaped with many exotic tree species.

John Cunningham (1799-1873) a Scottish architect lived at Arrowe Hall.

Arrowe Hall Birkenhead.



At nine thirty in the morning, the road, which headed directly to the southwest, was suddenly barred by an unknown watercourse thirty to forty feet wide whose swift current, propelled by its steep incline and broken numerous rocks, rushed down with a roar.



The Arrowe Brook possesses many small cascades including a natural waterfall (above left) and an artificial waterfall over *broken numerous rocks* (above right).

In 1838 John Cunningham brought the discovery of the ‘Birkenhead dinosaurs’ to the attention of the world. The dinosaur footprints will play a further part in our story – but the novel will not be Mysterious Island.

The ‘Birkenhead Dinosaur’ Footprints in the Main Foyer of the Natural History Museum in London.





John Cunningham also designed the Liverpool Sailors' Home. It was to this building that the crew of the CSS *Shenandoah* were brought after the final surrender of the American Civil War at Tranmere, Birkenhead on 6th November 1865.

The Liverpool Sailors' Home (1850-1974)

There will be one final tribute paid to Arrowe Park, Birkenhead, but it will not be found in the novel *Mysterious Island*.

Jules Verne will now travel back down the Arrowe Brook and lead us on to our final watercourse – the Dungeon Brook – with its attractive waterfall and cave.

The Dungeon Brook will finally take us to the west coast of *Mysterious Island* and the sea. However, Jules Verne will not be unable to resist using the Dungeon's cave in our story.



From Arrowe Brook to Dungeon Brook.



Dungeon Brook Waterfall.

The first blows of the axe were made against the brushwood, among the mastic tree bushes, a little above the waterfall. With compass in hand, Cyrus Harding indicated the direction to follow.

At ten thirty, to the great surprise of Cyrus Harding, Herbert, who was a little ahead, suddenly stopped and shouted:

“The sea!”



“The sea!”

And several moments later, stopping at the edge of the forest, the colonists saw the western shore of the island emerge before their eyes.

But, curiously, the water instead of reaching the sea by a gentle slope, fell from a height of more than forty feet, which explained why, at the time of high tide, it was not felt upstream.

They therefore agreed to give this watercourse the name of the “Falls River”.

Around seven o’clock in the evening, the colonists weary with fatigue, arrived at Reptile Promontory, a sort of volute strangely cut out of the sea.

Herbert and the sailor did not look long for a favourable place to pass the night. The high rocks on the shore – very broken up because they were violently battered by the sea under the influence of the winds from the southwest – contained hollows which would permit them to sleep.

The Dungeon Cave.



But, at the moment they were about to enter one of these excavations, a frightful roar stopped them.

“Get back!” cried Pencroft.



And the sailor, seizing Herbert by the arms, dragged him to the shelter of the rocks just as the magnificent animal showed itself at the entrance to the cavern.

It was a jaguar of a size at least as equal to its Asian cousins, measuring more than five feet from the extremity of its head to the beginning of its tail.

The jaguar gathered himself together and then pounced – but, at that very moment, a bullet struck him between the eyes, and he fell dead.

A bullet struck him between the eyes.

“And now,” said Gideon Spilett, “since the jaguar has left his den, my friends, I don’t see why we shouldn’t occupy it for the night”

“But others may return!” said Pencroft.

“It will suffice to light a fire at the entrance to the cavern,” said the reporter, “and they won’t venture across the threshold.”

“To the jaguar’s house then!” replied the sailor, dragging the animal’s body behind him.

That done, they installed themselves in the grotto whose sandy floor was strewn with bones; the guns were armed for any emergency, especially in the case of a sudden attack; they had supper and then, when it came to go to sleep, they set fire to the wood piled up at the entrance to the cavern.

Immediately, a crackling noise began to burst out. It was the bamboo, now aflame, which detonated like firecrackers. This noise alone would suffice to frighten away the most audacious beasts.

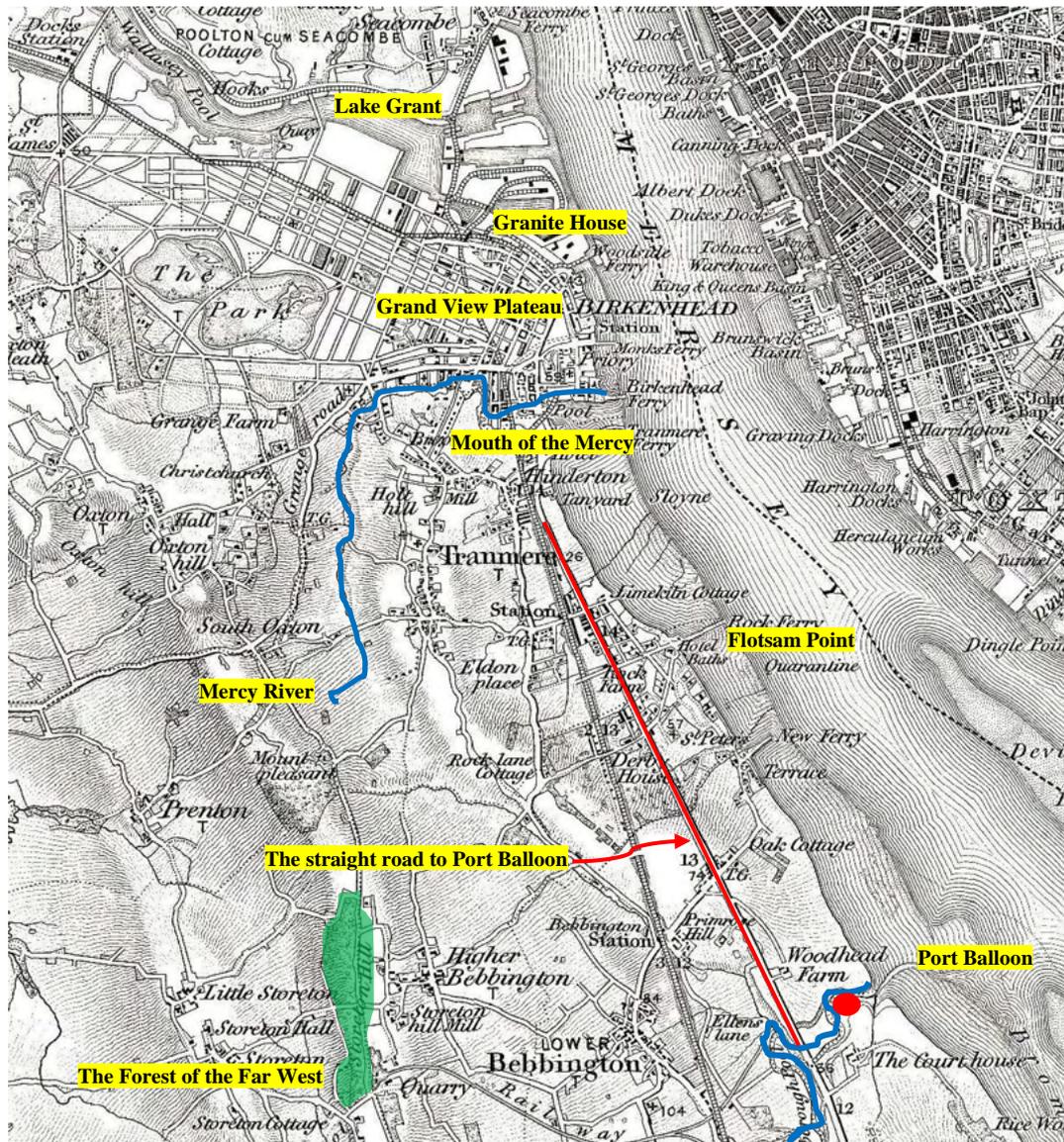
And this means of producing loud detonations was not the engineer’s invention. According to Marco Polo, the Tartars, for many centuries had used it with great success to drive away from their campsites the fearsome beasts of central Asia!

There is one set of initials carved into the rock of the Dungeon cave and their style suggests that this may be another example of Jules Verne altering the landscape of the Wirral. There will be far more obvious signs to come.

The Remains of the Balloon at Bromborough Pool.

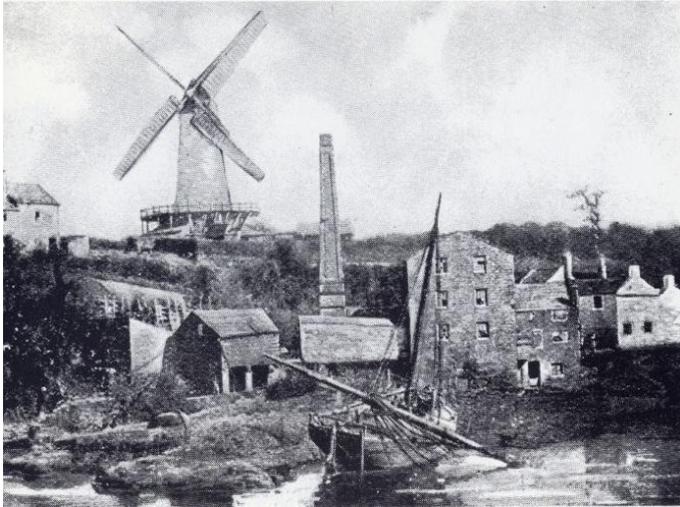
The colonists discover a new tidal creek – a perfect anchorage for a boat.

About three o'clock, Cyrus Harding and his companions arrived at a narrow well enclosed inlet which did not contain a watercourse. It formed a real small natural port, invisible from the sea, which could be reached by a narrow passage between cliffs.



This plateau was situated less than ten miles from Cape Claw and consequently four miles in a straight line from Grand View Plateau.

Bromborough Pool is situated *four miles in a straight line* from Birkenhead, the straight line is important as it represents the A41 New Chester Road, built in 1831 by Birkenhead's Thomas Brassey.



In the 1870's Bromborough Pool was a picturesque tree line tidal creek winding through a deeply incised valley – it would have presented an irresistibly romantic aspect to inspire the story lines of Jules Verne.

Bromborough Pool c1870

A few minutes later, the colonists were seated at the foot of a magnificent cluster of maritime pines, devouring the food Neb had taken from his knapsack.

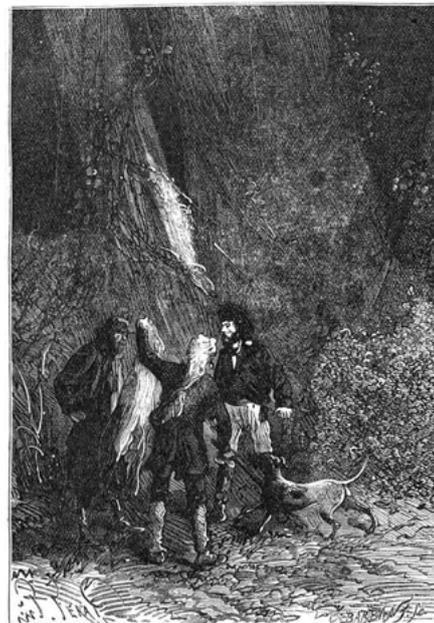
The spot was fifty or sixty feet above sea level. Their view was now considerably broadened, passing above the last rocks of the cape and stretching as far as Union Bay.

After the castaways had landed on Hilbre Island, the envelope of the balloon took to the air once again, never to be seen until now.

Top came out of the woods barking loudly and holding in his mouth a scrap of cloth soiled with mud.

Neb tore this scrap from the dog's mouth. It was a piece of heavy cloth.

Top continue to bark and, by his coming and going, he seemed to be inviting his master to follow him into the forest.



It was a piece of heavy cloth.

Everyone followed the dog among the large pines which formed the leading edge of the forest. Cyrus Harding and his companions loaded their guns for any eventuality.

After seven or eight minutes, Top stopped. The colonists arrived at a sort of clearing bordered by large trees. They looked around but saw nothing either under the brushwood or among the tree trunks.

“But what is it, Top?” asked Cyrus Harding.

Top barked louder, jumping at the foot of a gigantic tree. Suddenly Pencroft shouted:

“Ah! Fine! Perfect!”

“What is it?” asked Gideon Spilett.

“We’ve been looking for a wreck on sea or on land!”

“Well?”

“Well, it’s in the sky!”

And the sailor pointed to a huge mass of whitish cloth hanging from the top of the pine. Top had brought them a piece that had fallen to the ground.

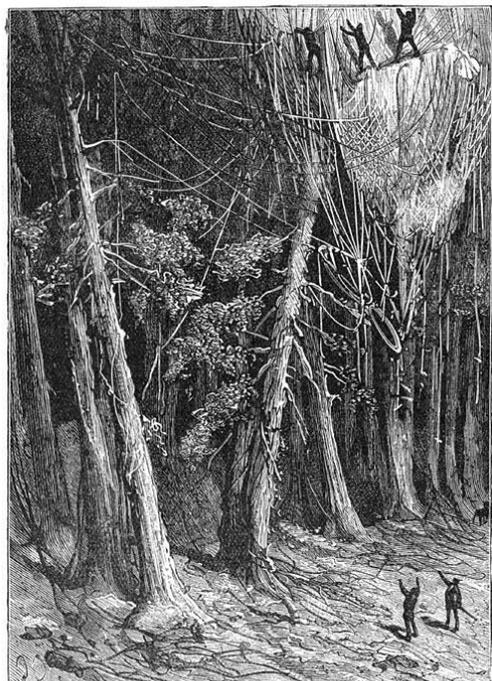
“It’s all that remains of our flying boat, or our balloon, which beached itself up there at the top of this tree.”

Pencroft was not mistaken, and he let out a magnificent hurrah and added:

“There is good cloth! It will furnish us with linen for years. With this we can make handkerchiefs and shirts! Mr. Spilett, what do you think of an island where shirts grow on trees?”

It was truly a fortunate circumstance for the colonists of Lincoln Island that the balloon, after having made its last leap into the sky, fell back again on the island, and that they had this luck to find it.

But it was necessary to remove this envelope from the tree where it hung and put it in a secure place, and this was no small job. Neb, Herbert, and the sailor, climbed to the top of the tree and used all their dexterity to disengage the enormous deflated balloon.

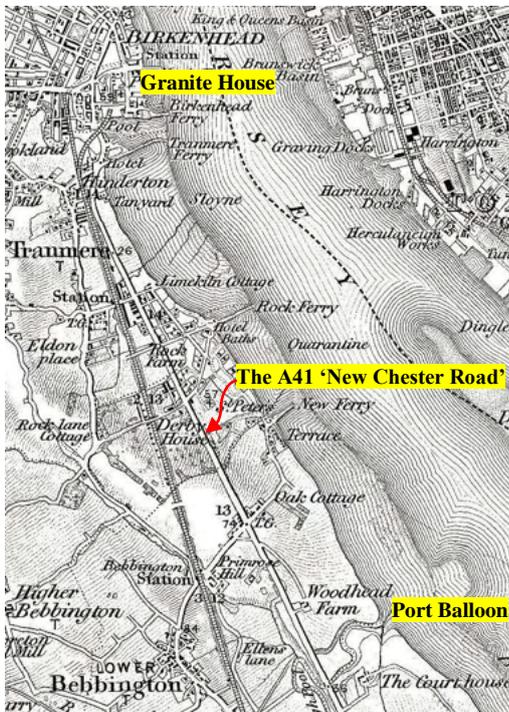


The operation lasted nearly two hours.

The colonists, uniting their efforts, succeeded in dragging everything to the shore where they discovered a rather large rocky cavern which was situated so that neither wind nor rain nor the sea could get to it.

By six o'clock in the evening, everything was stored away. After giving the well-justified name of "Port Balloon" to this small indentation which formed the cove, they started out again to Cape Claw.

In 'our world' Bromborough Pool deserves inclusion in Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island* for its beauty and romance alone. Jules Verne was also well aware that since 1853 this tidal creek had also been the home to the Price's Candle Factory and its fiercely abolitionist owner William Wilson – a leading figure in the first International Slavery Convention in London in 1840. The inclusion of Bromborough Pool therefore connects the pure romance of the Victorian novel to the very real story of abolitionism and the 'slave narrative'.



The colonists would eventually build their own bridge over the *Mercy* and their own *Road to Port Balloon* and thus pay a further tribute to the engineering genius of Thomas Brassey.

In 1831 Brassey had built a bridge over the Tranmere Pool and the A41 'New Chester Road' to Bromborough Pool (which he also bridged) as Pencroft would later say;

"Bah! It's not more than three miles from Granite House, and we have a fine straight road to take us there."

The A41

Thomas Brassey was awarded the Legion d'Honneur by Napoleon III for his help in coming to the aid of French forces in the Crimean War. He also built over three quarters of France's railways.

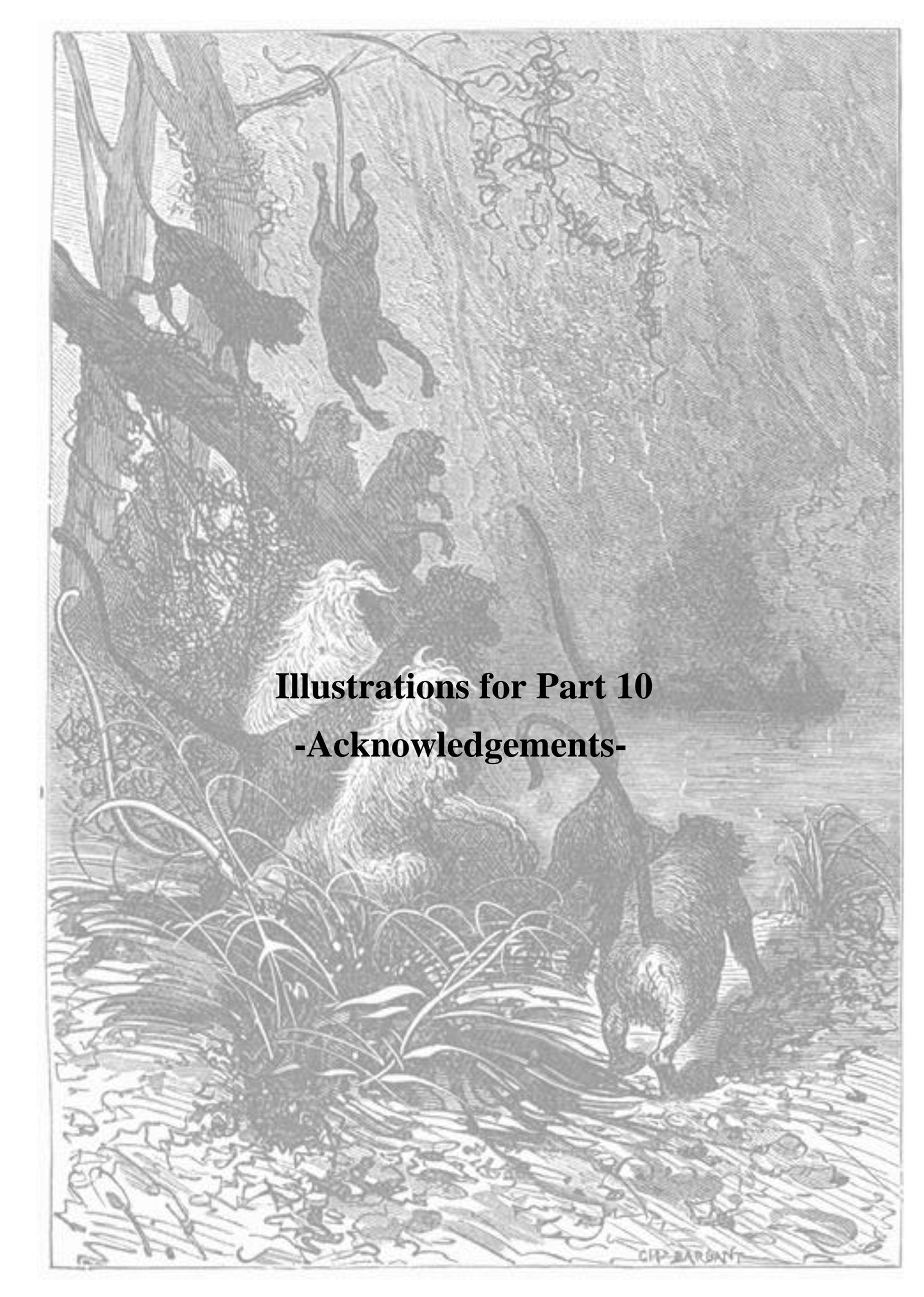
It will become clear that Jules Verne will want to pay his own tribute to the great Birkenhead engineer and will thus give him a major role in his novel *The Mysterious Island*.

Thomas Brassey (1805-1870)



Next on Jules Verne and the Heroes of Birkenhead.

11. The Orangutan Attack on Birkenhead.



Illustrations for Part 10
-Acknowledgements-

Page	Photograph Acknowledgement	Page	Photograph Acknowledgement
1a	TRIXES Large French Flag	22a	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey
1b	Pending	22b	Pending
1c	Talbot Flags	23a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
1d	Heraldry-wiki.com	24a	Pinterest.co.uk
1e	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre	24b	Yoliverpool.com
2a	gettyimages	24c	Liverpoolecho.co.uk
3a	Francis Frith	25a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
3b	John Lamb	25b	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
3c	Friends of Hilbre	26a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
4a	John Lamb	27a	Heritage Auctions
4b	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre	28a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
4c	John Lamb	28b	wikipedia.org
4d	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre	29a	gutenberg
5a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre	29b	Collections.rmgco.uk
6a	Heraldry-wiki.com	29c	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey
6b	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre	30a	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey
7a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre	30b	John Lamb
7b	John Lamb	30c	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey
7c	eschooltoday	31a	John Lamb
8a	John Lamb	31b	Pending
8b	John Lamb	31c	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
8c	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre	32a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
9a	AZquotes	32b	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey
10a	Historic Liverpool	32c	Ordnance Survey
10b	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey	33a	John Lamb
11a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre	33b	John Lamb
11b	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre	34a	Ordnance Survey
11c	Pinterest.com	34b	Ordnance Survey
12a	Naparstek.com.pl	34c	Ordnance Survey
12b	Musedelhistoire.com	34d	John Lamb
13a	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey	35a	Picclick.co.uk
13b	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey	35b	John Lamb
14a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre	35c	John Lamb
14b	Liverpoolmuseums.org.uk	35d	Natural History Museum
15a	historic-liverpool.co.uk	36a	Wikipedia.org
15b	Pending	36b	Ordnance Survey
15c	Halevillageonline.co.uk	36c	John Lamb
16a	bbc.com	37a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
16b	bbc.com	37b	John Lamb
17a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre	38a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
17b	Britishheritage.com	39a	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey
18a	Britishmuseum.org	40a	Oldwirral.net
19a	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey	40b	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
19b	Wirral.gov.uk	41a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
19c	John Lamb	42a	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey
20a	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey	42b	Wirralglobe.co.uk
20b	John Lamb	43	-
21a	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey	44	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
21b	John Lamb	45	-
21c	Williamson Art Gallery, Birkenhead		