

FROM CHEMICAL WORKS TO COUNTRY PARK - THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACKLEACH

In 1997, Blackleach Country Park, a site of about 100 acres in Salford, sandwiched between the M61 motorway industrial estates and residential areas, celebrated its 10th birthday.

Ten years ago, Blackleach, was like too many derelict urban sites, contaminated with a cocktail of pollutants, the legacy of its previous industrial life. It was also a place used for tipping, burning out cars, cables burning and shorting - it was regarded as a dangerous place to go.

The reservoir was originally constructed in the 18th century to supply water to the coal mines and other local industry and was subject to regular pollution incidents with frequent fish kills over the years. The surrounding grassland and willow scrub had developed on the sites of factories, areas of colliery spoil and landfill sites.

However, despite its reputation and derelict nature, Blackleach was highly valued by anglers and had become a significant wildlife area. It was one of only 5 Grade B Sites of Biological Importance in the City of Salford. The reservoir itself provided a very important overwintering and breeding site for waterfowl and the grassland had been colonized by northern marsh and common spotted orchids and other locally unusual plants and animals.

The area had been designated for housing in the Local District Plan and in 1987 British Coal the owners of the site submitted plans to Salford City Council to in fill the reservoirs and build housing on the site. An action Group had already started to

resist plans to in fill yet another local reservoir and a combined campaign was started.

Following much lobbying and work by the Action Group their first victory was the decision by the City Council to turn down the planning application and look into the potential for developing Blackleach into a Country Park instead. There followed 3 years of campaigning and battling by the Action Group, being supported by the City Council, the Council for Voluntary Service, Lancashire Wildlife Trust and many other local groups, before British Coal agreed to sell the land to the local authority, just days before an expected public enquiry.

Once the planning battle had been won, the task of transforming a derelict, seriously contaminated area into the local communities vision of a safe and accessible site, required extensive landscaping and lots of engineering work. With funding from the Department of the Environment, European Regional Development Fund, Countryside Commission and local business sponsor Eaton, the City of Salford worked with local people to secure

Blackleach as a wildlife haven and a valuable recreation and education resource within the surrounding urban environment.

Now much of the large scale landscaping and engineering work has been completed. Now together with the Friends of Blackleach Volunteers, and with help from local groups, such as Bolton Conservation Volunteers, we are now carrying out smaller scale nature conservation projects.

The hedgelaying skills of the BCV have been passed onto the Blackleach Volunteers, and we are now enthusiastically surveying all of our hedges as to their potential.

One of the groups other great interests (well Rick's anyway) has helped us construct a pond in the nature reserve area of the site last August. Within days of the pond being filled with water, dragonflies were laying eggs in the new site. With the pond now full and vegetation establishing around the margins we are hoping amphibians will start breeding this spring.

With plans for more ponds on the site, the Blackleach Volunteers look forward to working with you again soon.

If any of you want more information on Blackleach just contact me, Annie Surtees on 0161 790 7746.

Mid week practical days are held on Tuesdays & Thursdays from 10am to 4pm and lunch is provided for anyone interested.

Annie Surtees

March 1998

