



A History of Three Sisters Recreation Area

Ashton-in-Makerfield

By Ian Winstanley



A LITTLE of the HISTORY of ASHTON-in-MAKERFIELD

ROGER LOWE of Ashton-in-Makerfield

GARSWOOD HALL COLLIERIES

LAST DAY AT GARSWOOD HALL - A Story in Pictures.

THE ASHTON HERMIT

ASHTON GOLF CLUB

RECLAMATION

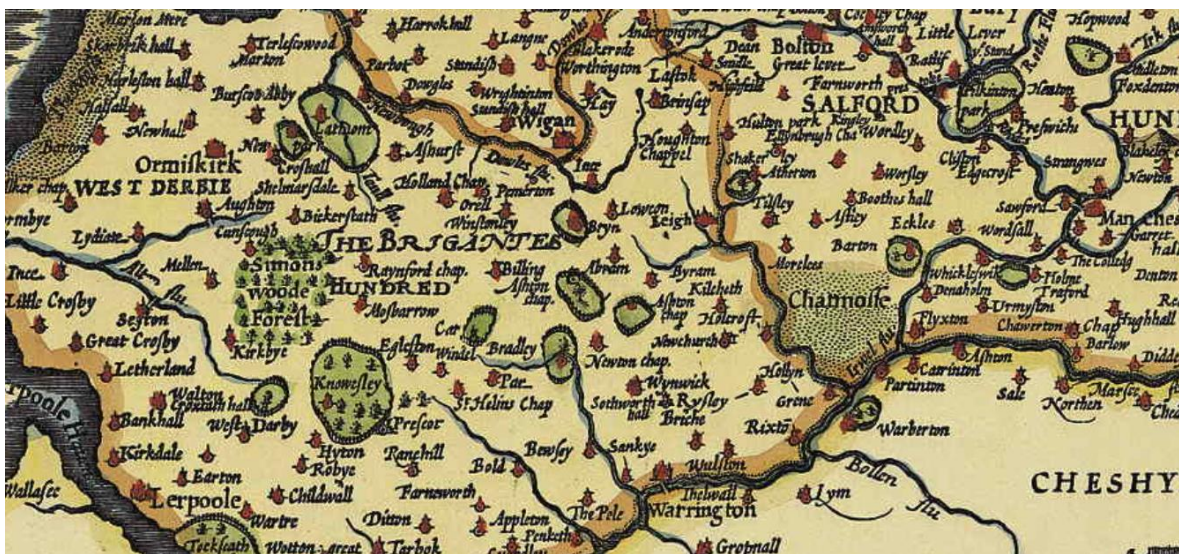
THREE SISTERS RACE TRACK

FRIENDS OF THREE 3 SISTERS (FO3S)

A LITTLE of the HISTORY of ASHTON-in- MAKERFIELD

THE coal mining industry which despoiled much of south Lancashire's pastoral appearance, resulted at Bryn in the formation of huge conical spoil heaps - the Three Sisters for which the recreation area was named, and which were often humorously referred to by locals as the 'Wigan Alps'! They were over 150ft high, and like the Alps dominated the skyline for many miles around. Mining for coal at this site by the Garswood Hall Colliery Company began in 1865 and finished when the colliery closed in 1958.

Moving back in time, to the very earliest documented history of the immediate surroundings of Three Sisters, nearby Ashton lies midway between the towns of Warrington and Wigan, both of which were military forts during the Roman occupation of Britain, and called 'Wilderspool' and 'Coccium' respectively. The Roman road between the two approximately follows today's modern A49, and as few Roman remains have been found here, it seems as though Ashton was only 'en-route' for the Roman Army. However, as many visitors touch on the A49 before arriving at Three Sisters perhaps an imaginative thought should be spared for the thousands of Italian foot soldiers who marched this way almost 20 centuries ago.



John Speed's map 1610. Ashton is in the centre under "Billing"

Ashton in Makerfield, or as it was sometimes known, Ashton in Macerfield, or even Ashton in the Willows, was up to 1841 part of the ancient parish of Winwick and one of the most extensively agricultural areas in Lancashire. The name Macerfield, though of doubtful origin, is thought to be a derivation of the Gaelic and Saxon word meaning the great cultivated plain'. The Winwick parish was also said to be the favourite residence of Oswald, the Christian King of Northumbria, who was slain in the battle of Maserfelth in the year 642. Some scholars believe Maserfelth to be Macerfield, though others claim the King was killed during a crusade at Oswestry in Shropshire.

Prior to the Norman Conquest in 1066, Ashton was the largest and most populous township in the parish, and contained many smallholdings and family farms. Following the years of conquest Ashton, in conjunction with Winwick, became two small divisions of 'berewicks' of the 'Newton Wapentake' (a 'wapentake' being a section of land which took its name from the Royal Manor within its boundary, while a berewick was a small estate, separate or outlying in the wapentake, though still liable to royal taxes!).

Ashton was then further subdivided into smaller manors or basic units and kept by a population who belonged to a very well defined class system! These people not only managed their own land, but had responsibilities to the Lord of the Manor and his land! 'Thanes' were high ranking servants, while 'drengs' were free peasants who held land in return for military service: there were many drengs in Lancashire. At the bottom of the heap were the slaves, who were neither free nor able to change their jobs, move home, or buy and sell anything without permission from their owner! However, the Domesday Survey records very few slaves for the rich growing land 'Inter Ripam et Mersham - 'Between the Ribble and the Mersey'. That this very involved manorial system of life operated in the Ashton area can be seen from place names such as Ashton Cross, Bryn Cross, Stubshaw Cross, Manor Farm and Downhall Green - all ancient names existing into modern times and indicative of small self-supporting settlements.

The Gerard family became Lords of the manor at Bryn when William Gerard (born c.1322) became possessed of estates in Bryn and Ashton on his marriage to Joan, daughter and heiress of Sir Peter Brynhill of Bryn. History records that the pair were children when their marriage took place. The Gerard lineage pre-dates their arrival at Bryn and can be traced back to the time of Edward the Confessor (1042- 66). One of the Gerard family homes, New Bryn Hall, still stands just outside the boundary of Three Sisters, on the northeastern perimeter and is now in private ownership. The present Lord Gerard lives in London and as there are no heirs the Gerard ties with Ashton look set to come to an end after more than 600 years of continuous association.

Roger Lowe of Ashton-in-Makerfield born 1642

Roger Lowe of Ashton-in-Makerfield was an apprentice mercer to a merchant in Leigh and had sole charge of a shop in Ashton but he was more than a shopkeeper to the community. He was accountant, solicitor, scrivener and errand boy in general. When two men quarrelled over their trading, Roger was called in to go over the figures or to arbitrate the issue. Sometimes he drew up indentures. People looking for houses would ask Roger to accompany them with the details of the leases. Occasionally he was summoned to write a will and as he himself put it, he could do that somewhat handsomely. A villager such as Thomas Heyes might feel equal to composing his own documents but he would have Roger read what he had written. One man wished his son to be taught how to write and reckon and Roger good-naturedly tried his hand at teacher. He was indeed the clerk to the village and for the years 1663 to 1678 kept a detailed diary of his and village affairs.



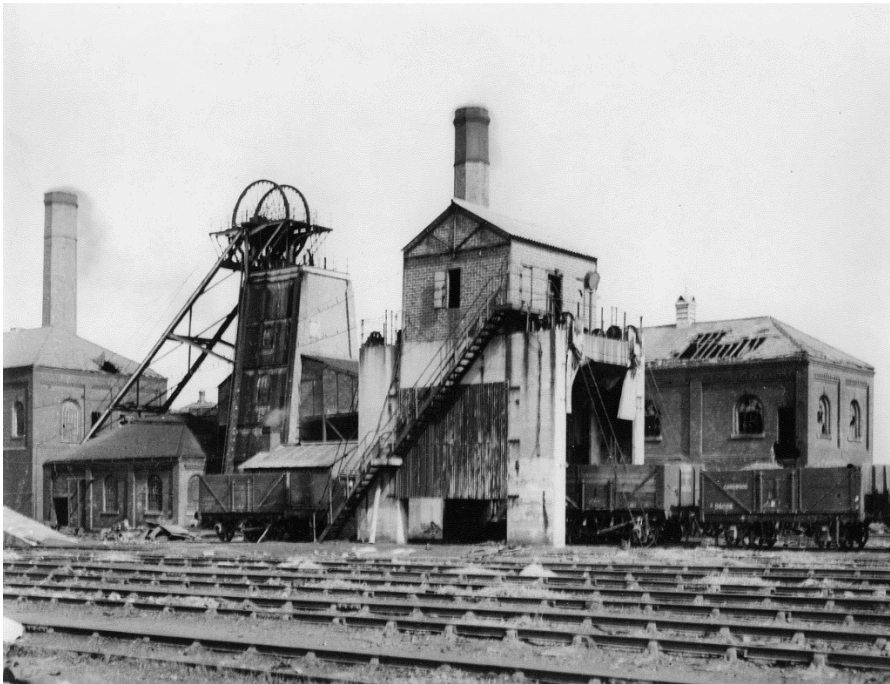
In those turbulent times, he was a non-conformist and would travel to the nearest church at Winwick to hear Reverend Wood's sermons which he would sometimes memorise and relate to non-conformist groups in Lancashire. But for all his religious conviction Roger was a young man with all a young man's fancies. There are many references to his trips to Winwick calling at an inn, Heapeys' in Newton and spending several pence on ale. On several occasions the next entry in the diary recounts that Roger is on his bended knees in a ditch on Ashton Heath asking God's forgiveness.

Writing was Roger's principle avocation but this usefulness did not stop there. Anyone with a job was sure to first ask Roger as he was both accessible and willing. When a gentleman needed to go to Lancaster and then to London what was more natural than to ask Roger to find some dependable person? He found a maid for Anne Greinsworth whose accounts he was always going over and whose letters he wrote to her brother in London. Thomas Johnson of Liverpool sent a lad into the neighbourhood on a business errand and instructed him to report to Roger who was to accompany him and supervise the transaction. The schoolmaster of Ashton heard of a teaching vacancy near Preston and solicited Roger's help in approaching the right people.

Very likely the local officials thought it would be wise to have Roger along when they were about some of their duties. The constables were glad of his help when they collected the poll tax. When money was gathered for the poor of London after the Great Fire, Roger was one of those who went soliciting the contributions. The constables of neighbouring villages came to him to write out their presentiments for the assizes. 'When I had done, I writ: "Poor is provided, highways repaired, these queries answered and clerk unrewarded. "The constables laughed heartily but it is not recorded if they took the hint. For such services it is hard to say how much he was paid. Widow Low gave him a shilling for a sermon and old Jenkins paid him eleven shillings and six pence for making a will and preparing legal papers. In one instance he was given sixpence for a bond and by nightfall the alehouse keeper had it.

Roger also documents his complicated love life in the pages of his diary which is a wonderful insight into life in the village in the seventeenth century. Roger has a good claim to be called the Lancashire Samuel Pepys.

Garswood Hall Collieries



Headgear Garswood Hall Colliery

Photo credit Wigan Archives and Local Studies, Wigan Council.



Screens at Garswood Hall Colliery

As far back as 1880 Garswood Collieries acquired worldwide fame for the testing of new safety lamps. Over 250 different types of lamp from all over the world were brought to Garswood, and a special pavilion was erected for the tests on the south side of the site which Three Sisters now occupies. The gas used in these experiments was a blower of natural gas (a 'blower' being a pocket of Methane gas, trapped between the layers of coal, sometimes in quite large amounts) which issued

from the Wigan 9ft seam and was brought to the surface through a 2 inch pipe. Prior to the experiments, this gas had been used to light the pit yard and bankings.

According to a report in the Colliery Guardian dated 9th December, 1892 the gas was stated to be almost pure Marsh gas which showed little if any cap on the flame when examined with a safety lamp. (The 'cap' describes the size, shape and colour of the flame in the lamp and indicates the percentage of gas and oxygen present). The lighted lamps were placed into a sealed, glass-fronted box into which the Methane gas and the measured percentage of oxygen was introduced. A mixture of between 5% and 13% is considered to be in the explosive range and 9.5% said to be the most dangerous, reputedly going off 'like a cannon!' - a fact any miner would be wise to know about, before lighting the detonation fuse! Experiments with explosives were also carried out here during the same period, the objective being to find a 'safe' explosive material for mine work, which would not ignite any escaping gas present in the workings.

'Interesting Ceremony at Bryn' was the headline in a local newspaper in April 1887 and concerned the opening of new shafts by the Garswood Company on the dip side of the Wigan Fault Line. The first sod was cut by Mrs R. Edmondson, wife of the then Chairman and Mr James McGeevor, the General Manager, presented her with a beautiful silver spade, engraved for the occasion and boasting an elaborately carved ebony handle. Following a speech, the lady 'truly and efficiently cut the first sod amidst applause and named it the number 5 pit'. Much later in the 1930's (or so local legend has it) this same pit was one of many visited by the writer George Orwell during research, prior to writing his book 'The Road to Wigan Pier' a social and economic comment on the living conditions of working-class people - though there is little evidence to confirm that he ever found Wigan Pier!



Employees outside the colliery offices

The Garswood Hall collieries were a huge undertaking employing thousands over the years. In 1923 Garswood Hall Nos. 2 & 3 employed 835 underground and 376 on the surface with EW Stephenson manager and John Bullough, undermanager. Nos. 5, 6 and 7 were managed by WJ Thompson and the undermanager was Joseph Brogan with undermanager at No.7 William Allsop. The collieries employed 1320 underground and 381 on the surface. By 1938 Garswood Hall Nos. 2 & 3 was managed by Jack Latham with undermanager A Clough and employed 150 below ground 25 above. No.9 Pit was abandoned. Garswood Hall No.5, 6 and 7 manager HO Ince undermanagers Joseph Brogan, J Corbett and JW Brough respectively collectively employing 836 underground and 390 on the surface. In 1945 EA Hughes was the manager and J Corbett undermanager. The colliery employed 38 below ground and 21 above ground. Garswood Hall No.5, employed above ground 225 below 97, No.6 530 below ground above 62 and No.7 251 below ground and 145 above. The manager was Jack Latham and the undermanagers S Rigby, Joseph Brogan, P Broomhead respectively. By the time of its closure the pit still employed over 500 men and women.



Garswood Hall Pit Brow Lasses

Photo credit Wigan Archives and Local Studies, Wigan Council.

The Pit brow lasses who worked at the pit right up to its closure have a unique place in mining history. The photographs of early photographers like Munby and Wickham brought to the Victorian public the fact that women worked in coal mining, the majority in the Wigan and St. Helens areas. They worked on the screens sorting, cleaning and grading coal and it was an end of an era for them when the colliery closed.



It was the dirt from the screens that was carried to the ever growing tips and dumped. This was how the Three Sisters were born and how they grew.

Coal mining was and still is very dangerous business. In Great Britain between 1850 and 1914 there are official records of over 90,000 men women and children losing their lives in the mines. During the life of Garswood Hall over 300 men and women lost their lives and many more were injured.

Last day at Garswood Hall – a story in pictures



These pictures tell a story - the success story of pit that died with a flourish. Garswood Hall exceeded its target in each of the last four weeks of its life but that is only part of it, Garswood Hall also showed that with careful planning the end of a pit need not be a very sad occasion. Look at the pictures below for proof of that.



There's Jim Naylor aged 52 with 38 years in the pits and his sons William and Gordon all ready to move to Sutton Manor. Jim has other son at Bold and Landgate and he's only sorry they aren't with him on this final Saturday.

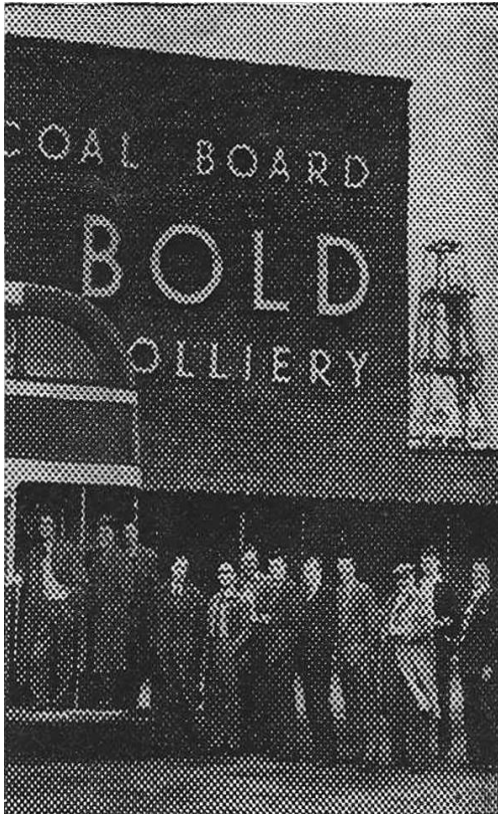
There, too are William Culshaw with 30 years service, Tom Ormshaw with 40 and Harry Price with 31. William and Tom are going to Sutton Manor and Harry is going to Bold.



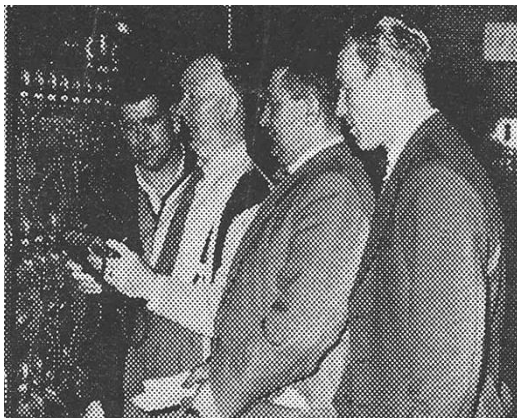
There are no glum faces in these queues for the buses that will take them to their new pits. the odds are that on Monday morning each Garswood Hall man will be starting work with his old mates at the pit which is most convenient for him.



All the men were interviewed individually by manager John Abbott and branch secretary Jim Moore with the union taking part at every stage. Both men can now relax now the 'bus-lift' is complete but they will not have a great time of time to relax as they are staying on for three months salvage work and they had 16 conveyors, 8 cutters, 5,000 yards of cable and 10 miles of steel piping to bring put of the pit as well as a lot of other valuable material.



More than 500 men are going to other pits and 130 of them are going to Bold. Here are some arriving there and you can see the reception committee there to meet them. Training Officer Jack Wildman is interviewing a couple with Bold officials in attendance.



Ned Ashton, head lampman, showing how the new self-service lamp system works.

After that the new boys had a cup of tea in the canteen. Then it's home in the bus to spend Sunday thinking about the change of job. "It's a smart new pit head isn't it?" But even Bold has something to learn from Garswood Hall.

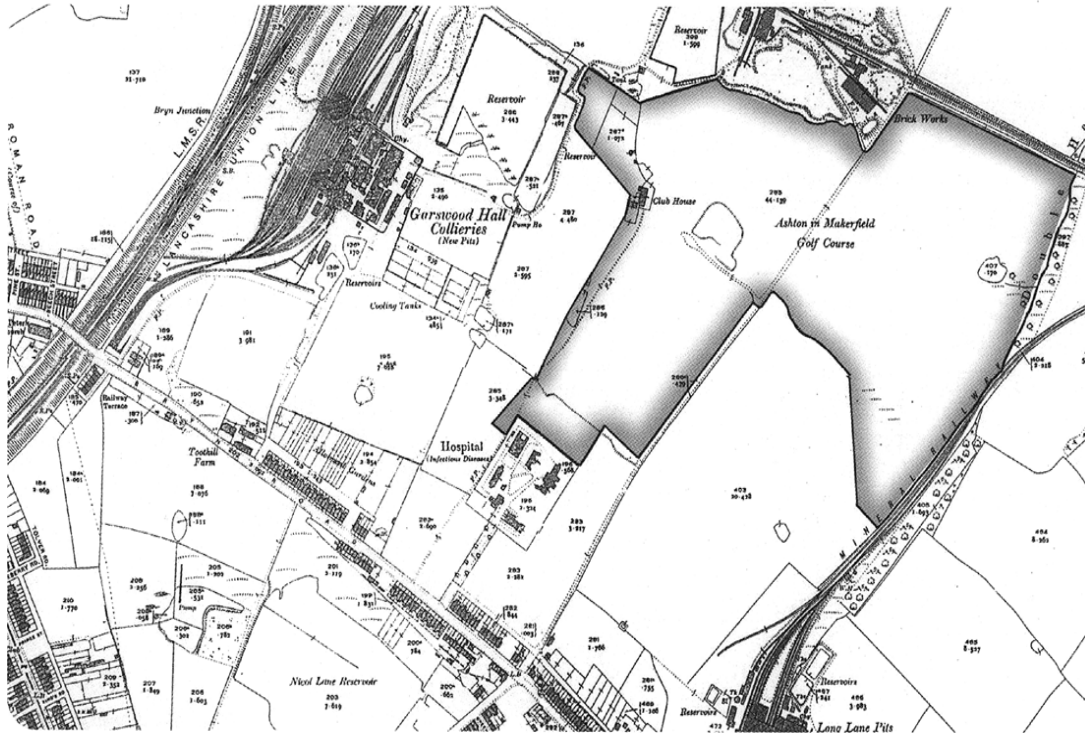
The Ashton Hermit



No record of Three Sisters would be complete without mention of the Ashton Hermit - Old Jonas, or as he was known, Old Mo - who lived on Ashton Heath in a hole in the ground covered by a cardboard roof, with only his cat for company. During winter he found discarded tin cans and melted them down for solder to sell to passing tinkers. In spring and early summer he walked down south to earn a 'few bob' by picking hops, steadily making his return on foot in autumn. As he advanced in years, keeping warm in winter became an increasing problem. He solved his dilemma by moving onto Three Sisters spoil heaps, which were warm because of the continually smouldering fires underneath. Alas, one bitter winter morning in 1916 Old Jonas was found dead by miners reporting for the early shift. It was presumed he had been suffocated by the sulphur fumes.

Ashton Golf Club

Founded by Tom Mayall and Andrew Molyneux 18th. February 1902 for the staff at the Garswood Hall collieries. In 1946 the land was bought from Garswood Hall Collieries. The Club suffered a major setback when opencast mining reduced the Old Bryn Course from nine holes to six in the late 1950s



Plan of Bryn site 1926

The Golf Club occupied the site until the early 1960s when Lancashire CC bought the land for reclamation by compulsory purchase order and the Club moved to its present site on Garswood Park.



Wilf Jackson (putting) and John Jones enjoying a friendly game at Old Bryn, 1951.

Reclamation

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth visited Ashton, Bryn and the reclamation the site in 1968.



HM Queen Elizabeth with the Lancashire County Planning Office, Mr. Coates.

The mammoth task of reclamation work was started in the late 1960's by Lancashire County Council with grant aid from the Department of the Environment, later taken up and continued by Greater Manchester Council in 1974, before finally being handed over to Wigan Metropolitan Borough for completion and subsequent management. Three Sisters Recreation Area opened to the public in November 1978, and represents the successful culmination of a well thought - out plan to make formerly barren land useful again.



During reclamation of the spoil heaps - which when finished left over 80 acres of derelict land - 3.5 million tons of earth were excavated and reshaped; 10 miles of surface water ditches, drains and sewers were laid, and 21 million gallons of water from 21 separate sources were pumped out - along with an equivalent volume of silt and 68,000 cubic yards of domestic refuse.

Coal mining has now disappeared from the area and Ashton is becoming more and more suburban with a large influx of people from nearby crowded cities, most notably Liverpool, who prefer to live in Ashton's newly regained rural landscape and travel the 20 or so miles to work in the city. Many of these local people enjoy the amenities offered at Three Sisters, be it noisy motor sports, or peaceful early morning walks with their dogs before the rest of the world is stirring. Three Sisters seems to have that unique ability to be all things to all people.

The initial phase involved the building of a Visitor Centre, a motor car and motor cycling racing circuit and creation of a lake for sailing and angling. Following local government reorganisation in 1974 the area was passed to the care of Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council. With the cutbacks in public expenditure in the eighties further development of the site ceased and there was little maintenance. However, the trees and meadows flourished to provide a pleasing contrast to the previous industrial dereliction and an active programme of improving the woodlands and grasslands is now in progress. The facilities at the Three Sisters are popular with racing enthusiasts, fishermen, walkers and cyclists, and it also serves as a gateway to the Wigan Flashes, Viridor Wood and surrounding countryside.

Three Sisters Race Track



The Three Sisters Race Track

Originally constructed in the early 1970's, Three Sisters Race Circuit has been the home to 'The Racing School' since 1993 and is one of the most versatile race

circuits in the UK. The circuit hosts a wide variety of motor sport race meetings every year including regional and national rally's, sprints, motorcycle and kart racing.

Kart racing features strongly on every annual racing calendar at Three Sisters, the circuit has hosted the RAC British Kart Grand Prix in the past. David Coulthard, Jenson Button, Nigel Mansell and UK's biggest motor sport hope, Lewis Hamilton all raced at Three Sisters in their early days and the circuit still continues to hone the stars of the future!

The compact nature of the venue means you are always close to the action, and over the years Three Sisters is proud to be referred to as 'The Jewel of the North' within the motor sport fraternity. 'The Racing School' is Europe's longest established race school and has been delivering exceptional driving gifts and experiences since 1978.

The circuit offers a full range of driving experiences for those who are new to sitting behind a wheel to learning to handle a F1 car. A skid car offers experienced drivers to hone their skills and 4 x 4's can be driven off road. For those who like the adrenaline rush there are drives offered in high powered Lotus and Mini Coopers, super cars Porsche 911 turbo, Ferrari 360 and ultimately single seat Ferrari and an F1 drive in a 3 lit. McLaren Cosworth V8.



The challenging variety of different configurations makes Three Sisters circuit an ideal venue for driving experiences. The technical nature of the circuit deems it perfect for our intensive race training programmes and it continues to be the proving ground for motor racing's stars of the future.

The School also operate our experiences at Donington Park Race Circuit in Derbyshire and Rockingham Motor Speedway in Northamptonshire and are one of the founding members of 'The Association of Racing Drivers Schools' (ARDS) so all of our instructors are fully qualified and recognised by ARDS.

Friends of Three Sisters

The Friends of Three Sisters (FO3S) was initially formed in September 2003 as an interest group to assist in the promotion of the Three Sisters Recreation Area as a local amenity. In November 2005 the group became a formal constituted community association with the following aims:-

- To foster communication between Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust (now Inspiring Healthy Lifestyles), the Rangers (Wigan Council) and users of the Three Sisters
- To raise the profile and promote the public use of the Three Sisters Recreation Area
- To support practical projects to improve the Three Sisters and promote the site by voluntary work and fund-raising.



There are monthly meetings to which any interested member of the public will be made welcome and regular practical work parties.

The Friends have undertaken many projects and much needed jobs like litter picking in the woodland areas, replacing bird feeding tables installing notice boards round the site and the large notice board at the visitors centre. They had also helped in the clearing of trees that have been blown down, clearing willow, birch and oak saplings from the heathland area and the meadow. All this is done under the supervision of Wigan Council. The Friends also learn new skills and have been instructed in the construction of weaving willow hurdles which can be seen round the bird feeding

station and they constructed the stile at the Baldwin's Farm entrance to the Three Sisters.



The Friends Willow Weaving.

To find out more about the Friends of Three Sisters contact:

www.facebook.com/friendsof3sisters

Chair at chair@friendsof3sisters.org.uk

Secretary at secretary@friendsof3sisters.org.uk

or visit the web site: www.friendsof3sisters.org.uk

www.thehamletwigan.co.uk Nest café, Lakeside printing, training provision for young people with additional needs

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