



Timewalk of the Three

Sisters www.carbonlandscape.org.uk/3SAudio Timewalk

Inspired by the RoundView and Dr Joanne Tippet with help of the Friends of Three Sisters on behalf of the Carbon Landscape partnership

Close your eyes and imagine the story under your feet. The Timewalk of any ex-coal mine is incredible and starts 4.55 billion years ago, when the earth formed.

2.7 billion years ago algae-like cells formed. They started producing oxygen, and it took 350 million years for them to make enough oxygen to turn the sky blue for the first time. More than a billion years later the first recognisable animals appeared jelly-fish and sponges in the sea.

360 million years ago the rainforest of the Carboniferous period grew. At that time Wigan was at the equator as part of a supercontinent called Pangea. America and Africa were interlocked.

There was so much oxygen in the air that giant dragonflies had metre-wide wingspans. Giant swamp monsters swam in the depths. Sea levels rose and fell. The giant forests and hot steamy swamps that covered Wigan would later fossilise to become coal seams. As this coal was formed and buried, it took huge quantities of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere. This cooled the planet.

Continents shifted. The dinosaurs ruled the earth from 245 million years until 66 million years ago, possibly wiped out by a major asteroid that hit the earth at that time.

The Timewalk now moves forward rapidly.

Our early ancestors started using stone tools 2.5 million years ago. The earliest fossil record of modern humans is 190,000 years old.

Early civilisation and the first cities emerged 12,000 years ago.

As the glaciers retreated from this landscape 10,000 years ago, great peat bogs were created by sphagnum moss in the depressions left behind. A few remaining fragments of these great stores of carbon in the soil can still be found at Astley and South of Wigan.

3,500 years ago coal was first burned in China. However, it was not until the early Industrial Revolution in the late 1700s here in the North West that coal use became widespread. Over the last two hundred years the climate has begun to change again. Greenhouse gases have been spewed out into the atmosphere. These molecules of carbon had been locked deep in the earth for over 300 million years but they are now being released when fossil fuels are burnt. This is causing the planet to warm and modern-day climate harm.

The Lancashire Coalfields provided the fuel for the industrial revolution and paved the mass exodus from the countryside to the factories and mines in the towns. Canals then railways carried the coal to make this happen.

The conditions in the early Victorian mines were terrible. A public outcry led to an 1842 Act of Parliament where women and children over ten could no longer work down the mine. The pauper colliers were described as white slaves.

Mining for coal at this site by the Garswood Hall Collieries Company began in 1865.

The Garswood Hall Collieries were a huge undertaking and over the years employed many thousands. By 1911 there were 2440 people employed in getting coal but this number slowly declined.

The collieries also employed the famous Pit Brow Lasses. Their main job was to sort the coal from the debris at the screens. They had a distinctive head shawl and long skirts that were worn and often seen on post cards of the day.

Legend has it that Garswood Hall Collieries were 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.

Mining for coal at this site by the Garswood Hall Collieries Company finished in 1958, and the last mine closure in Wigan was Bickershaw in 1992.

Coal mining at Garswood resulted in three huge spoil heaps - the Three Sisters. These were often humorously referred to by locals as the 'Wigan Alps!' when they had snow in winter.

In the 1960s, the Aberfan mining landslide in Wales killed one hundred and forty-four people. Afterwards, spoil heaps like the Three Sisters began to be levelled to prevent further disasters. One of the Three Sisters was hollowed out to make way for the Three Sisters racing circuit. The other two were landscaped.

After 1968 the Three Sisters were reclaimed for wildlife and people and the site is now owned by Wigan Council.

Three Sisters needs to your help to continue to thrive.

Support the Friends of Three Sisters by following them on facebook and getting involved.

Learn to survey wildlife as knowing where it lives helps you to protect it.

Keep your greenspaces and waterways clean – litter pick, reduce, reuse and recycle.

Think what you can do to reduce greenhouse gasses – such as leaving the car at home and exploring by foot and bicycle . On this former coal mining site we can think of our future energy use.

Without nature reserves and wildlife corridors species will be lost for ever.

It's our wetland landscape where we live, work and play. Get involved with volunteering and exploring. Together we can create a green revolution, helping wildlife, people and future generations to thrive.