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Drakelow: a Natural Concern

Luca Csepely-Knorr

Drakelow Nature Reserve is a thriving landscape, described as a 'haven' for wildlife and bird watchers in the Trent Valley. The birdwatching hides allow stunning views of both flora and fauna flourishing in this quiet, undisturbed area. It feels hard to believe that this idyllic landscape played a key part in the modernisation of Britain as part of a series of coal fired power stations built in the Trent Valley after World War II. There are no signs of coal storage, ash disposal or gravel pits anymore proving the remarkable capabilities of landscape to reconquer areas from extensive and destructive human use – if planned and managed with a long-term future vision.

The landscape we now see in Drakelow is the result of a combination of nationalisation, progressive policy, long-term professional collaboration and a flexible, responsive and progressive design thinking. All issues that are crucial in thinking about ways to address our current climate and biodiversity emergency.

In 1959, when landscape architect Brenda Colvin was invited to design the landscapes around Drakelow, she was joining the project that created the biggest concentration of electricity generating plants anywhere in Europe (although soon to be undertaken by even bigger ones). Her involvement in the project was result of the 1957 Electricity Act, that – on the one hand – created the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB), a nationalised, public body, responsible to develop and maintain an efficient, coordinated and economical system of electricity supply that included the overseeing of the creation of power stations, and, on the other hand, through the so called 'amenity clause' regulated the Board to take into account any effect which their proposals would have on the natural beauty of the countryside and on the flora and fauna. To create statutory duty to balance the objectives of cheap and efficient electricity production and respect for the environment was a unique and very progressive policy, resulting in great assets for wildlife and biodiversity.

When Colvin started to work on the masterplan around Drakelow, the A and B stations were already designed and sited, and Drakelow C was in the design process. In her report, Colvin stressed the importance of thinking holistically and included the whole complex in the proposal 'in relation to surrounding landscape'. Her design decisions aimed to create a 'fine landscape for the future', a 'landscape restored to esteem, with the additional buildings making it an outstanding feature of the locality in a distinguished setting'.¹ The site being next to the river, meant that certain areas were affected by flooding and had high water tables. Colvin considered these carefully both in relation to the aesthetic opportunities the views of the cooling towers and the water provided, and, in terms of possibilities for wildlife. In 1964 she provided detailed drawings for a duck pond, that became the basis for later developments.

In 1965 a series of Conferences titled 'Man and Environment' were organised in preparation to the forthcoming European Conservation Year in 1970. The conference pointed out Local Education Authorities' an imminent need for sites to create field study centres to promote environmental studies for schools. Drakelow was chosen as the first site to test opportunities to create these educational opportunities on sites of power stations, owned and managed by the CEGB. In July 1967 the first nature trail in an operational industrial site in Europe opened through Drakelow's areas of woodlands – designed by Colvin for screening the station - and the duck pond. The three quarters of a mile long nature trail had all species labelled and spots identified where aspects of natural life were marked. In 1969, a few years after the successful opening of the nature reserve, Colvin together with ornithologist Peter Scott promoted the creation of a wildfowl reserve to extend the existing nature trail, prompted by the realisation that the large-scale gravel extension areas of the power station site had become a 'haven for wild life'. As Colvin described 'there is now the opportunity of a nature reserve related to the schools nature trail which would appeal to

¹ MERL AR COL A/2/1 Drakelow Landscape Report, 1959

educational and conservation interests.’² In 1970 the original nature trail was extended by the addition of a further three quarters of a mile to the nature trail – running down to the river bank, designed by Colvin’s business partner Hal Moggridge. While agricultural use was allowed along the river, a number of the spoil heaps were pushed into some of the deep lagoons. This created shallows to attract wading birds and islands for mating and roosting’. The nature trail and the wildfowl reserve at Drakelow achieved much publicity and acclaim, including a Countryside Award in 1970 especially for its ecological focus and excellence. The scheme soon became an example to follow throughout the country, and the Board in collaboration with County Councils, educational authorities and local ornithologists’ and naturalists’ societies, have sponsored a variety of conservation schemes, in both sites of substations and power stations. By 1982, more than 20 CEGB sites were used for various public activities as well as environmental centres.

Drakelow’s landscape and the remaining field study centres and nature trails around the quickly diminishing number of still existing or recently demolished coal fired power stations are reminders of a quite unique era when long term collaboration between industry and designers allowed schemes to be developed flexibly to respond to evolving ideas about conservation, ecology and the future of landscapes. As the booklet ‘A Natural Concern’ describing the landscape of Drakelow explained it was also an era when a nationalised industry had a statutory duty to ‘*have account for the natural beauty of the countryside and for its wildlife in everything it does*’³ but also a bold vision that ‘*conservation is everybody’s business*’ and a moral duty as well as a statutory one.⁴

² MERL AR COL A/2/1

³ CEGB (1970) *A Natural Concern* Solihull: CEGB: Midlands Region p. 14

⁴ CEGB (1970) *A Natural Concern* Solihull: CEGB: Midlands Region p. 3