

The Age of Coal

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In 2016, the age of coal in Silverdale was landscaped into fields and housing estates. ‘Over there,’ the guide pointed, pausing briefly at each location, ‘was the winding gear, the spoil tips, the railway line.’ I nodded, trying to build a picture of Silverdale colliery—the now demolished buildings and people in fluorescent jackets hurrying between them.

I fastened the buttons on my coat. Late November afternoons were short. You wrapped up, expected to feel the damp wheedle its way through to your skin.

‘It was a great place to grow up,’ a man told us. ‘The machinery was like one big playground. Course you weren’t supposed to go near it. You’d get a right telling off. They’d take you back to you parents and,’ he sucked in a breath, ‘you were in for it then.’

I thought of the den I’d made in the hedge line at the bottom of the field by the disused railway line and the fuss when my parents had found out about it. ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘That’s the last thing you’d want.’

We walked up the hill on large concrete slabs, industrial strength for the constant thunder rumble of lorries which made the journey from pit to spoil heap when the mine was operational. It was breezy on the summit, a fresh wind whipping along the tops of the hills from the north. From here the view stretched along the valley towards the flat-topped retail units of Newcastle. The guide passed round an old photo taken from this spot. A sea of smoke with the spire of St Luke’s church peeping above the cloud. I thought of the people working below in the bitter, caustic smell. Their scarves wrapped tight for protection.

I’d liked that sharp tang that caught on the roof of your mouth as you shovelled coal into the scuttle. I used to watch Mum making the fire, placing the lumps in the grate, interspersing them with firelighters which she formed from rolling sheets of newspaper round a knitting needle. Once she made an extra one with a looped handle like a sword and a paper hat to go with it. When she wasn’t looking, I reached out and touched the shiny, black surface. I was intrigued. I had heard that Auntie Val had eaten a piece before Pam was born. When Mum turned round her face fell. ‘You’ve been playing with the coal again. Wipe your hands. Don’t get it on the door. Oh, for goodness sake.’

In winter evenings when the fire was lit, we edged our chairs a little closer and watched shadows flicker on the hearthrug.

‘Of course, it doesn’t do to get too sentimental,’ another man said to a group passing me on the path. ‘It must have been hell at times, working in the pit.’

I pushed aside my thoughts of the cosy side of coal.

Our footsteps quickened as we descended towards a large lake. A group of duck huddled near the shoreline. Warmth from their bodies melted the thin film of ice. A viewing area jutted out over the water—the level, unusually low. ‘We’ve got a problem down there,’ said the ranger. ‘An invasive species we’re trying to flush out.’ A laminated notice was attached to a block of wood. The water level, it said, was being reduced temporarily. The word underlined several times with a ball point pen. The monster in the lake was New Zealand Pygmyweed. Its vegetation threatened to cover everything with a dense, choking blanket.

'You should see it in summer,' he said. 'The grass is full of wild flowers.' He pointed to a gritty slope. 'It's called The Void. The old open cast mine. We get orchids there and skylarks.' In the thin autumn light it did not look promising. Birches clung to the scree, tufts of pale grasses stirred in the breeze. A fence circled the base of the slope; a far-off metal tower loomed like a guard over the top.

'No access?' I said.

'Unstable land.'

As our group returned to the visitor centre, I considered the shifting nature of land. How hard it was to understand it when we obscured the contours with buildings. The opposite seemed to be happening here. In nineteen years since the pit closed, the land had shaken off its weight and started to breathe.