

Project Number : R7 Rixton Clay Pits



Project Overview: The aim of the project was to link two sections of SSSI which, at the time, were remote from each other so that it would act as a natural corridor and aid the movement and intermingling of two largely separate Great Crested Newt populations. A “stepping stone” pond would be excavated between the two existing clusters of ponds at either end of this corridor to aid movement. The pond clusters were opened up from dense scrub shading. The removal of scrub from this area would allow sunlight into the rescued ponds, and the return of species rich grassland and fen, thus benefitting a large section of plants and animals. Further to this, the damming of an old trench would create additional breeding space for a rapidly expanding Newt population.

Project lead organisation and other organisations involved: Warrington Borough Council, Natural England.

Project Location: Rixton Claypits

Project dates: 2017 to 2019

Project Outputs

Measure	Target	Delivered	Notes
1.3 ha of species rich wet grassland fen improved	1.3ha	1.3ha	
170 m wide habitat corridor opened	0.17km	0.17km	
2 ponds created	2	4 1Ha	

Reflecting on the last 5 years, what’s the one thing that you’re most proud of that has come from your project being part of the Carbon Landscape?

Rixton Clay Pits are a great example of a species rich site with diverse natural habitats. This particular project allowed for us to increase, yet further, the availability of sunny open aspect in a 1.3 ha tract of land very suited to wildflower prosperity and pond construction which should be advantageous to the Great crested Newts.

What difference has this project made to the cultural and natural heritage of Carbon Landscape?

Before embarking upon such a costly and time consuming project, great consideration must be given to the aftercare, and is this sustainable for years to come. This “Newtopia” is a scheme we had wanted to do many years ago, but with the realisation we had not the resources available to maintain it, this notion was shelved. However, in more recent years, we were able to find a farmer who was looking for somewhere to graze rare breed Hebridean and Herdwick sheep, species ideally suited to dealing with invasive Willow, Birch and Bramble. The fact we now had a way to curtail scrub invasion gave us the confidence to press ahead with project “Newtopia” once we were aware of the Carbon landscape project.

These unusual looking sheep, the Rams with their large, curled horns (some have four) are certainly a talking point with visitors and they are a good way to engage in dialogue and explain about the Claypits and the critical role they play in site management.

This project has enabled Warrington Borough Council Ranger Service to enhance upon what we had previously, and, with the financial capacity to extend grazing onto new areas, with sections of stock fencing, and previously overgrown compartments becoming attractive, flowery vistas it is quite apparent to the visitor much work has been undertaken here to help maintain the natural heritage of the, once, old clay quarry.

Ranger Mik Lees commented. “I am proud we were able to bring the idea into fruition, creating additional species rich grassland, Fen and Ponds into an area previously completely shaded and mostly dominated by a single species. This ensured connectivity of habitats and their populations throughout the reserve, giving the resident Great Crested Newt population room for expansion.”

What difference has this project made to people?

Prior to Covid, Rixton Claypits was not well known and fell under most people’s radar. However, with the lockdowns its usage increased, massively creating access pressures. Warrington Borough Council Ranger Mik Lees reports. “The magnitude of visitors that descended upon the reserve, highlighted its sensitivity and carrying capacity issues. Activities such as picnicing, mountain bike riding across meadows, and the playing of football, when there were so many visitors, contributed to trampling of SSSI areas. Vandalism and littering were also issues. In some locations, grass paths turned to mud baths where this had never occurred before, under the weight of human traffic.

Those areas of the reserve which are grazed, are divided into paddocks and sheep can be moved around so as not to overgraze certain sections of meadow, and control can be had over the effectiveness of this activity. One great advantage the fencing has brought is some control over where people can go. It has also massively reduced the amount of dogs going into ponds and wrecking the habitat, not just for Newts, but also other wildlife dependent upon these water bodies.

There is also a classroom at Rixton which works really well as a congregation point for Citizen Science projects, university visits, local organisations and smaller scale meetings.

Useful Links

www.warrington.gov.uk/rixton-claypits-local-nature-reserve

“Resurgence” VR Immersive Experience www.carbonlandscape.org.uk/vr-immersive-experience-resurgence

Future Plans and Legacy

Maintenance is crucial, following on from the initial capital investment, to uphold the character and continuity of “Newtopia” as a conception for decades to come where future generations can benefit from today's work.

Lessons learned?

Working closely with Natural England, and select contractors, the capital works went relatively well to plan. However, the overwhelming numbers of visitors, brought about by the Covid pandemic, showed the reserves Achilles heel in that it does not cope well with overuse, and its fragility during this time was sufficiently highlighted.

Photographic Evidence

First two photo credit Paul Thomas, Natural England



Ranger Mik Lees, Warrington Council



Fencing improvements



Funding Partners	

