



Renewing the Kelvin Valley

This year's Gathering takes place in the Kelvin Valley, where, like many other places in the Central Belt, the rise and fall of mining and heavy industry have taken their environmental and social toll. However, as Paul Carter explains, a vigorous regeneration effort has seen the valley turn green once again.

The three Rs of Regeneration, Renewal and Reforestation are vital to the future of the Kelvin Valley, situated in North Lanarkshire and at the heart of Scotland's Central Belt. Following two centuries of mining and industry, reforestation is an important tool in the campaign to renew our area.

Our part of the Kelvin Valley is centred on Kilsyth and includes

Top left: The Antonine wall comes back to life. Top right: The new canal marina at Auchinstarry. Below: Dumbreck Pit around 1900. Photos: Paul Carter.

several other ex-mining villages. The valley is sandwiched between the growing town of Cumbernauld to the south and the Kilsyth Hills to the north. About 12,000 people live in the valley today.

Revolution

The area went through a revolutionary change over the last 200 years, starting with the coming of the Forth and Clyde Canal in 1773. Until that time, the residents of the valley had made their living from subsistence farming and weaving. The canal sparked the industrial and agricultural revolutions which transformed the valley.

Writing in 1795, local minister Robert Rennie says that the valley was then "divided into numerous beautiful enclosures, like the compartments of a flower garden". But he also comments on

the lack of woodlands, saying that "a child may number the trees". Farming and weaving were still predominant, but the writing was on the wall – the first miners had appeared.

The new canal gave cheap and easy access to the great Carron Ironworks and the growing industrial cities of Glasgow and Falkirk. Mines and quarries opened all along the valley to provide coal, ironstone, lime and building stone.

My own village of Banton was created by the mining boom, with 16 small pits and a great pumping engine dominating the landscape. The human cost, as well as the environmental cost, was huge. Speaking in 1842, Banton mine manager Walter Jarvie confessed that "there is a vast deal of carbonic acid in the mines... which causes the men to drop off [die] early. In the small village of Banton there are nearly 40 widows."

By the late 1800s, coal had become king, with many big pits throughout





the valley working the black gold and reaching seams over 412m deep. The entire valley was undermined. Along with the mines came a network of mineral lines, extensive waste bings, smoking coke and tar works, and a main line railway. Most of the local workforce was miners and the valley looked like a scene out of the 1940s film *How Green Was My Valley*.

In the 1960s the industrial revolution ran out of steam. The pits closed, the coke works closed, the canal closed and the railway closed. Like many other areas of central Scotland, we were left with huge unemployment and a massively scarred and derelict environment.

Renewal

Recent decades have seen a tremendous fight back. The large pits have all been landscaped and converted into new uses, including wildlife and woodland areas, industrial estates and housing. An old quarry has been turned into a public park and climbing wall. A range of local and national government bodies and agencies have been involved, spurred on by local support and campaigning.

Local groups also took on the seemingly impossible task of re-opening the Forth and Clyde Canal. A vigorous local campaign included boating events, publicity and lobbying, coupled with other community campaigns along the length of the Lowlands Canals. This led to the Millennium Link re-opening in 2001 and the creation of the popular marina at Auchinstarry.

Friends of the Kelvin Valley Park and the Kilsyth & Villages Community Forum have been working with local councils and agencies to convert the old mineral line network into a comprehensive path network. We now have around 50km of signed and surfaced paths and 50km of less formal paths in the valley. We became a 'Walkers are Welcome' town in 2008 and hosted the national conference in 2010.

Another legacy of the past which has been put to good use is the Antonine Wall. Once the northern frontier of the Roman Empire, it is now a World Heritage Site and Historic Scotland called our stretch "the best walk along the Wall".

Reforestation

Reforestation of the valley started while the industrial revolution was still in full swing. Some of this was natural, some artificial. The earlier small pits and bings have naturally re-wooded. Small wooded hills dotting the fields often turn out to be old tips. Here in Banton, a quarry that was still working in the 1970s is now a jungle. Landowners also played their part. The four big country estates planted oak woods on land unsuitable for agriculture, beech woods in glens and estate policies and avenues around their mansions.

Reforestation played a big part after the closure of the big pits in the 1960s. Community woodlands were planted in Queenzieburn, Banton, Kilsyth and Kelvinhead by Central Scotland Forest Trust (see page 16) and their predecessors. The Forestry Commission (FC) initially planted up Bar Hill with conifers but is now replacing these with broadleaf species and developing a new community woodland at Nethercroy. This year, the FC has re-profiled the old Nethercroy mine ironstone and coal bings to allow natural woodland regeneration.

The new woodlands have played a major part in regenerating the Kelvin Valley and are helping to heal the scars of past industry. The reforestation has also reversed the massive over-use of our woodlands in previous centuries when "a child may number the trees". The valley is now a well-wooded area.

Paul Carter lives in Banton near Kilsyth and is the Secretary of the Friends of the Kelvin Valley Park. See www.kelvinvalleypark.info

Top left: Auchinstarry quarry is now a climbing wall. Below clockwise: Nethercroy bings being reprofiled for woodland; Canoeing in the restored quarry; Dumbreck is now a nature reserve. Photos: Paul Carter.

