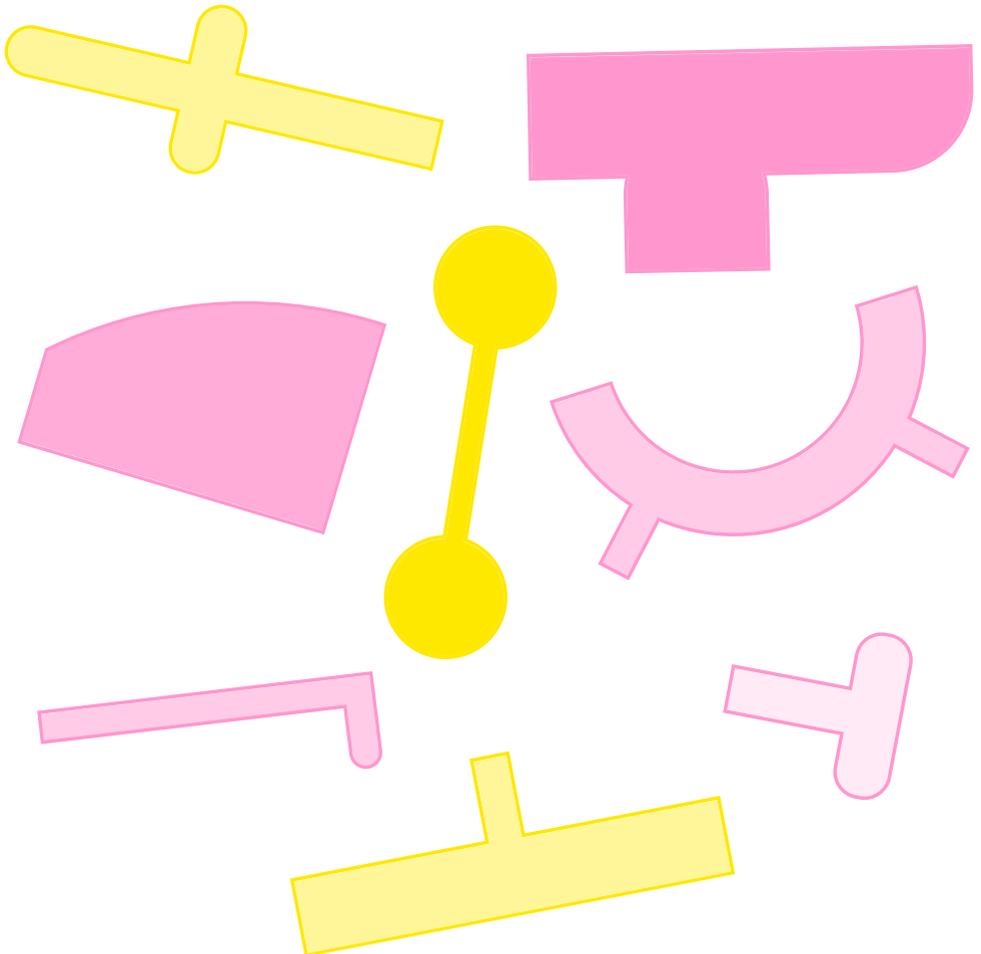


fountain 1937

Keith Harrison



Raiders

A short story by Daniel Wiles

See the pistol. Its shimmer against the lamplight.
How something so crude could look so fetching.
Feel it. A dense lump spread across both hands.
Here it was, out of its box again. Charlie had made
his mind up. Tonight would be the first night he
would take it with him.

Charlie on the track. Box underarm. Black earth lay
smouldering underfoot. The sun perpetually hidden
behind an enormous ashen cloud. To the west streaks
of red. The broiling belly of a land burning. Across
the open stretches of land scored by shallow pits
a low humming thunder wormed its way toward him.
The awakening of something deep down, ancient,
unmoving for years, only now stirred by man's hand.
And inside Charlie too a stirring.

Charlie saw his first raid when he was just sixteen.
He and his father aboard an old iron narrowboat.
They were anchored off an inlay reserved for perch
fishing. Lines cast with the crow of the cockerel.
Somewhere behind the smog smothered sky there
was a sun rising. In these memories of years ago
he could not remember the warmth of their star upon
his cheek. Only rain and dark and many miniature
manmade suns spread about the lands. Bending iron,
smelting ore. Smithing and stamping.

A simple wind carried through the sparse trees about
the inlay. His father reposed in the boat reclaiming lost
sleep. Wek me if the lines move, he had said.

Not far from the inlay the main cut road had slowed
as it always did at this time when the night shift turned
into the day. Still the stream of working narrowboats
carrying anything from quicklime to nails did not end.
From the black empty space in between, a handful of
figures moved upon the boats like ants upon dropped
bread. In the hazed morning they silently swarmed
the boats. He sat up in the boat and touched his father's
arm. Look, he said.

What is it?
What am they doing to the boats?

His father rose and turned and eyed the cut for no
longer than five seconds before returning to his kip.

I said wek me if the lines move.



Round Oak Steelworks, Brierley Hill, c.1962. © Peter Donnelly 



Pithead baths soap 

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Now some nine years on and he stepped onto the
narrowboat he would drive on this ever brightening red
night. It was packed with the last box by a man Charlie
had never seen before. He could not place this man's
age. He looked like something emerged from a cave.
Thin, bearded, skin darkened by coal dust. His stinking
black hair fell almost to his shoulders in thick matted
locks. Charlie caught his eyelid and nodded to him and
the man nodded back, before sitting down. They began
moving along the crude black cutwater, sending it sluicing
against the sides and out onto the soot marbled soil.

And the man was only on the boat for but a moment
before Charlie began to wonder his business. The cart
driver had told him this man needed a ride to Dudley,
but why would he choose a narrowboat? Could he not
afford a cart? And why Charlie's boat? What plans did
this bloke have for him and this boat?

What was once a rare occurrence became **many times**
and close between as the years went by. More and more
raids, and some even by daylight. The raiders became less
and less bothered about being captured, fought against,
or reported. They only cared for taking all they could carry.
Charlie promised himself never to step foot on a working
barge, to never put himself in the position to be attacked
by these almost animals. He found work as a nailmaker,
banging out two hundred miniature iron spikes a day with
hammer and anvil. He spent most of his life in the heat
of the workshop, and would not return home until the
clouds had turned from black to red. Still there he would
hear out in the dark depths beyond the cuts the shouting
of men and boys and see their black figures moving about
the boats. Sometimes he would see them walk past him
holding crates of ore and coal. They were but boys with
faces like his own. And in those faces and in those bodies
he would see a free soul. Sometimes he would even sit
out on the boat in the inlay and watch raiders run out into
the open country beyond where nothing lay except black.
Where they went he did not know. Only that they went.

Soon whenever he returned to the heat of the shops and
felt the closeness of the other nailmakers and the pain
in his bones that already swelled even in his young age,
he thought of the raiders. Where would they be? What
would they be doing? Who did they plan to take from
tonight? Did they plan at all or did they just do things?

At age twenty-four he signed on to be a bargeman.
He would take with him the water. To feel the rain move
on his face. To see the sky above broil and turn like
bubbling fish atop a fire.

It was not long before he met fellow bargemen that had fell
prey to the thieves. A bargeman with a six inch scar across
his brow. One with an ear missing. Many with permanent
limps. Yet they still worked. Still drove their boats through
the thick black smoggy night. He would too for months
without seeing any untoward thing. Still, he was prepared.
He used all the money he had saved to purchase the pistol
and kept the red box it lived in close to his heart every night.

Charlie looked back. Was this man a raider? A shadowy
agent, ready to signal his partners that waited somewhere
along the cut? As far back as his eyes would take him
he saw long lines of barges. The cut busier tonight than
he had ever seen. Ripe for the taking.

The man appeared at his side. How far to Dudley?
Be there by sunrise, Charlie said.

He drove on the boat. The man had found himself a seat
not far from the red box. Charlie thought perhaps this
man was not a raider, it was simply that he saw in this
man the same thing he saw in the raiders. A flighted soul.
Free to travel wherever he wished. Charlie held within
him among other things a great envy. Even now aboard
a boat in the open air. But this boat was his boat, and no
raider would take that from him.

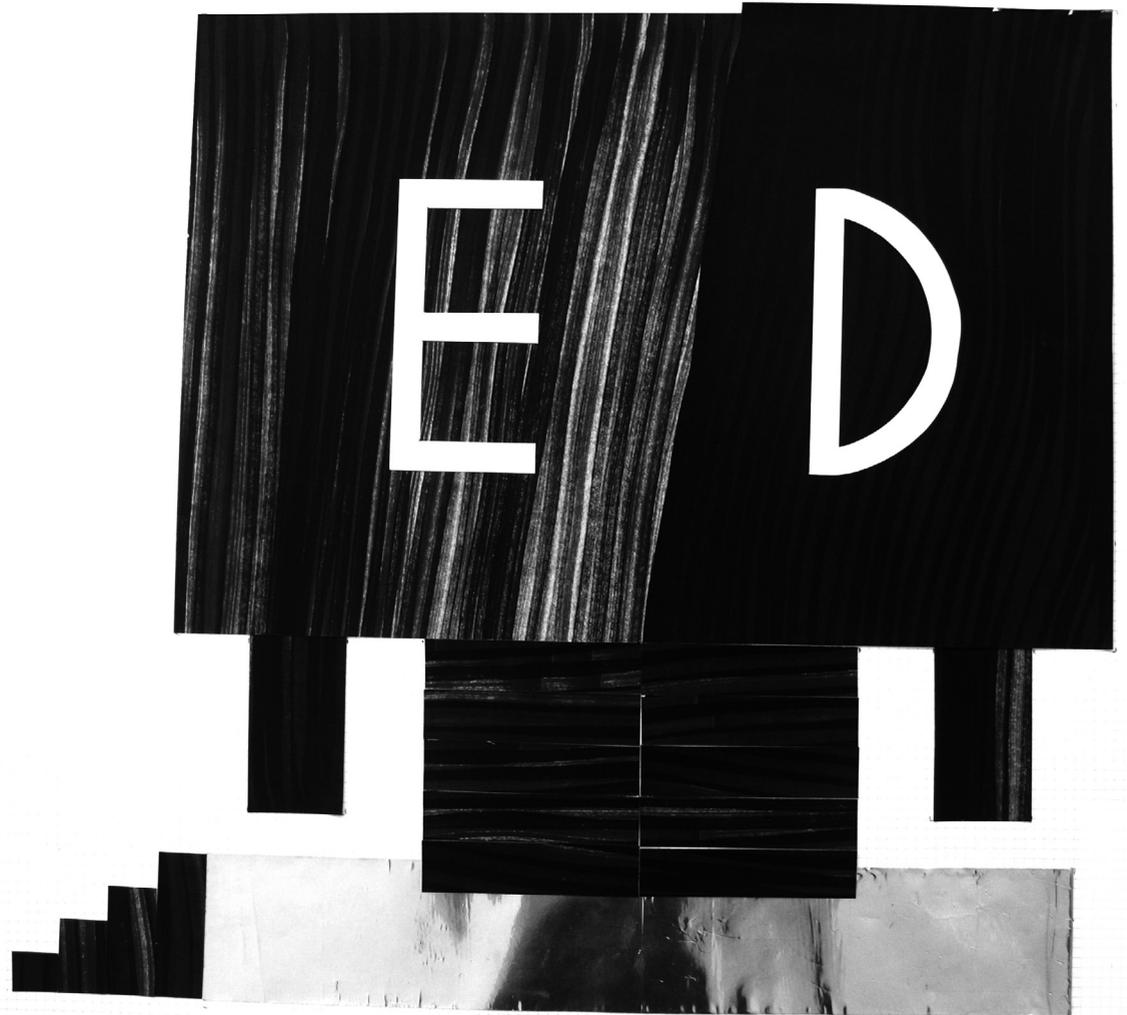
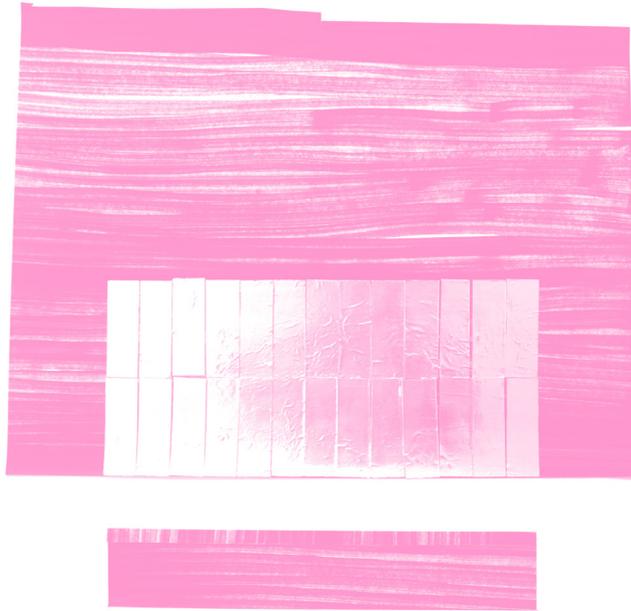
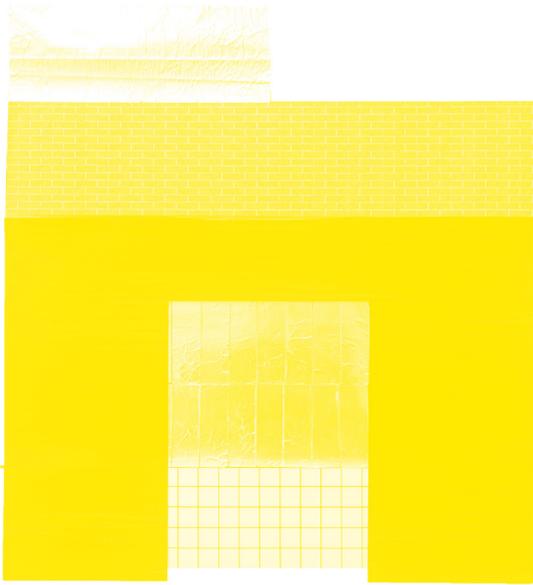
● Daniel Wiles is a writer from the West Midlands. Wiles'
first novel, *'Mercia's Take'*, based in the Black Country,
was published in 2022.



Tame Valley Canal at Hamstead © Keith Harrison 

fountain

1937



Keith Harrison
fountain 1937

A soundtrack by Preston Field Audio

Tracklist

1. Labour (0:00)
2. Out of Darkness (5:34)
3. Ballroom (10:07)
4. Lady Dudley (13:36)
5. Contrasting Lives (14:58)
6. Old Fashioned Methods (17:33)
7. Luxury (20:09)

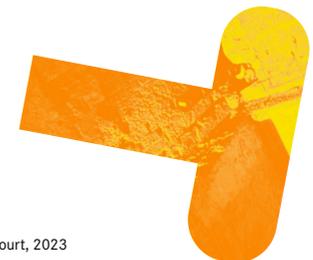
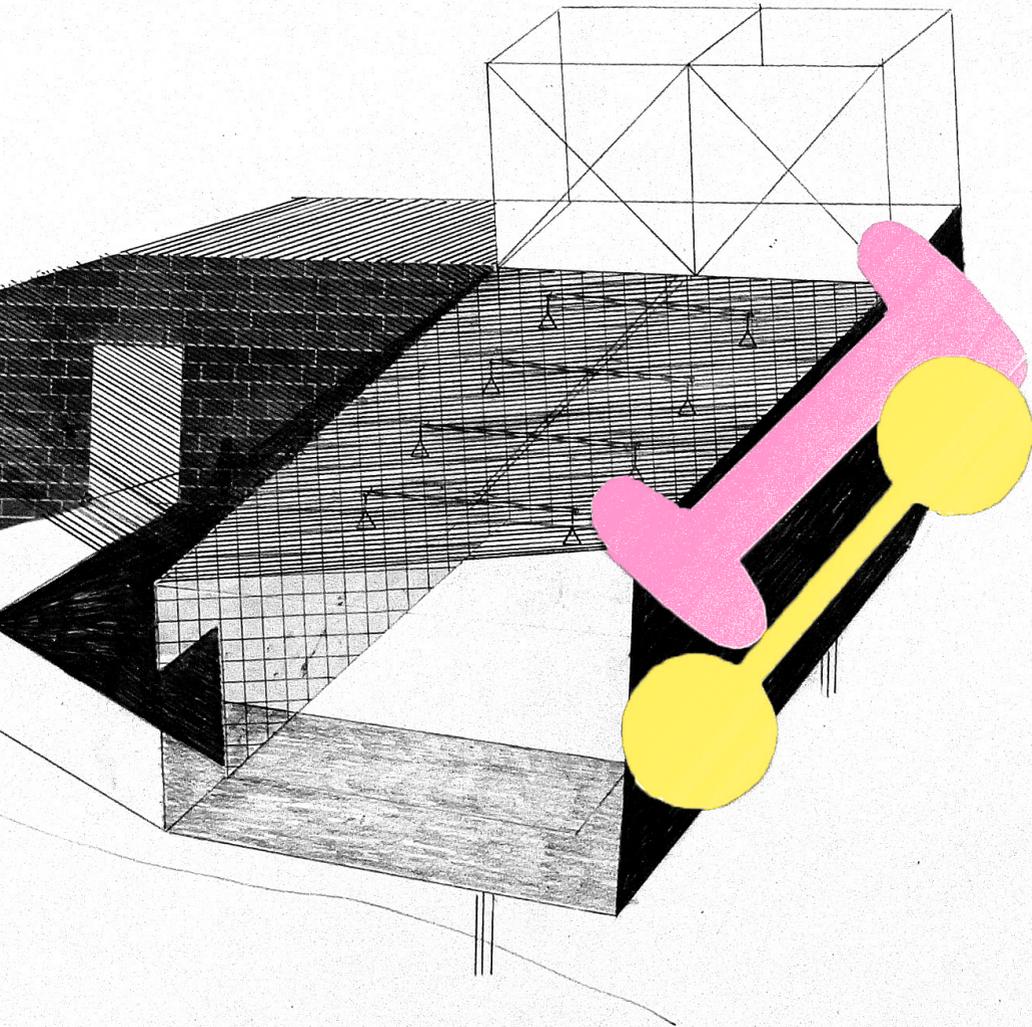
An accompanying soundtrack by Preston Field Audio intended for active listening via handheld audio guides at the installation artwork 'fountain 1937' by Keith Harrison.

The composition consists of 7 movements presented as a long-form narrative for the on-site audio guides. While enjoying the soundtrack listeners are encouraged to be aware of external sounds within their immediate environment including nature sounds, construction and other members of the public engaging with the artwork. Experiment by interacting with the audio guide, holding the device near and far from the ears, performing a uniquely individual rendition of the soundtrack whilst moving through the installation. Headphones with 3.5mm input jack are also compatible for a more accurate studio representation of the soundtrack audio.

Musically, the soundtrack draws parallels between prominent themes of labour and luxury. Field recordings are placed in measured dialogue with musical arrangements with an ambiguity between environmental and instrumental sounds. Key sound sources include Merry Hill Shopping Centre situated on the former site of the Earl of Dudley's Round Oak Steelworks, Baggeridge Country Park on the site of the Black Country's last operational coal mine and Lady Dudley's basement plunge pool at Witley Court.

Electronic loops and pulses and recordings of colliers' voices taken from archival footage were played back on bluetooth speakers placed around the once abundant and now derelict rooms of Witley Court. The positioning of the speakers within the various spaces inevitably shapes the stereo field, creating claustrophobic, dissonant new harmonics and forming an exclusive relationship between the music and the building. Listen for the bells of the baroque Great Witley Parish Church chime against passages of ghostly drones recorded amidst the ruins of the magnificent ballroom.

●
Preston Field Audio aka *Carl Brown* is a Preston based musician and composer.



Keith Harrison

I'm a visual artist and I've been commissioned by English Heritage to make a response to Witley Court.

Steven Brindle

I'm a historian at English Heritage.

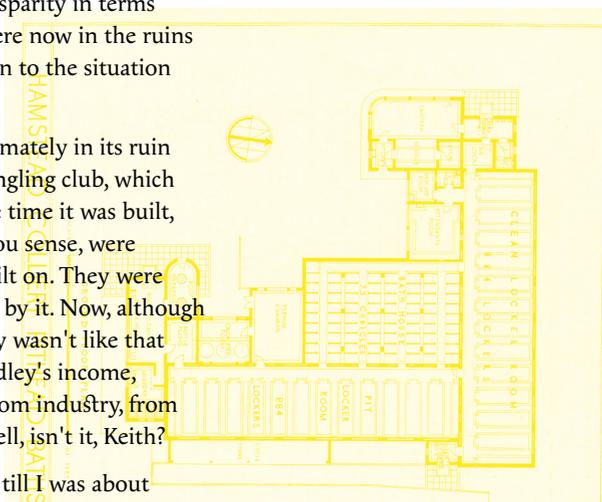
K Okay, so in terms of my initial responses to Witley Court, they're very much informed by the tour that myself and Steven took around the grounds and the house. There was a reference made by Steven to Witley Court being the equivalent, now, for the super yacht and the Russian oligarchy. And I was really struck by that. I knew this area as a place that we came fishing as part of an angling club that was based originally in the Black Country - the Golden Throistle Angling Club - who met at the former site of a mine, Hamstead mine, in the former Pithead Baths, so there was a connection to mining and to travel to this area. And I was immediately aware of the disparity in terms of the wealth that was on show, even though we were now in the ruins of Witley, what it once had been, and in comparison to the situation of those working in the Black Country.

S I love the thought that this great trophy house, ultimately in its ruin state, becomes a destination for a working men's angling club, which is historic justice there, isn't it? Witley, really, at the time it was built, was like a trophy house. A lot of country houses, you sense, were the creation of the landed estate that they were built on. They were built from the surplus of that estate, they were run by it. Now, although the estate here was large, it was 10,000 acres, Witley wasn't like that at all. The estate produced maybe 10% of Lord Dudley's income, which was well over £100,000, and the rest came from industry, from Staffordshire. And that's an area you know quite well, isn't it, Keith?

K Yeah I was born in West Bromwich and lived there till I was about eight. And we were on an estate, not the same kind of estate as this estate, but an estate. And I guess it wasn't so heavily industrialised even at that point, in the late 60s, early 70s - a lot of the major industry had already started to disappear. But it was a heavily built-up area, there wasn't really any kind of natural spaces. And so the fishing club I saw as the chance to... as some kind of retreat, as respite, maybe not at the time, but certainly looking back, it was a place for a group to come away from that area, to have five hours in beautiful countryside. And I think now that maybe the fishing was almost secondary to the opportunity to get out into an environment such as this, around Witley Court.

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S The countryside is beautiful. But of course, the fortune here was made in a very different kind of landscape. A landscape which was appallingly damaged and degraded by it, by the circumstances in which the fortune was made. And it's something we've talked about before. Witley was built on coal, iron and limestone, those being the three ingredients you need to make steel. And they're all found in Staffordshire. So there was mining in Staffordshire of all three, of limestone and ironstone and coal, on a large scale. Is there still a vivid memory of that area's mining communities, of coal mining in South Staffs, Keith?

K I think my experience was that there was not necessarily much of that industry left. And for me, an important part of this project is that there isn't necessarily that commemoration or awareness of this huge industrial endeavour going on in the Black Country and how might that be marked? I was really aware that essentially it was the work of the miners that made the fortune for this kind of place to be as it was, and for the Earl of Dudley to be able to come to this space at the weekend. So, what I was aware of was a pub called the Crooked House, which had severe subsidence within it. And as part of my research that I started to carry out at Dudley Archives, I realised that subsidence was a huge part of that area, particularly around the Baggeridge coal mine and the Halfway House was on the border of that area. So the notion of subsidence was almost the remnant of this activity that had taken place under ground. And through the Dudley Archives I was increasingly seeing that there were ongoing claims against the Earl of Dudley in terms of recompense for that situation, and so yeah it was the subsidence that for me started to represent the situation of the miners.

S Back in Staffordshire the Dudley estate was actually all powerful, but also controversial in the 1840s. The roots of this go back to the extraordinary circumstances in which it was founded, and that's what was called the Enclosure Act in the 1780s and 90s whereby the then Viscount ward, who was the Lord of the manor, was able to steer the Enclosure Act through a large area called Pensnett Common whereby the common land was all divided out among the existing landowners. Now he only ended up with about a quarter of the land, but as the Lord of the manor, he made sure that he got 100% of the mineral rights over the whole area, with unrestricted rights of access, and that meant that he and his successors and the Ward Estate, that they could sink limestone mines, and quarry for ironstone and dig for coal, and send shafts and tunnels out sideways under other people's property. And people's houses subsided and cracked, and fires broke out underground, and the groundwater was polluted, and the area was appallingly degraded, but as you say, Lord Dudley had



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an act of parliament on his side, and the estate battled away all claims for compensation. The estate in the early 19th century was highly controversial there, and it cast this strange light on the circumstances in which Witley Court was built as a retreat from all that.

K Yeah, and I think the sense that it was once common land, that it was owned by those people, I was really struck by that, both the article that you brought to my attention, and the ongoing claims that were there in Dudley Archives as it went from a privately owned coal mine to the National Coal Board, those claims were still ongoing. I feel like, the fact it's now English Heritage maintained, and that essentially, it's back in common ownership, there's almost been a full circle that has occurred here, in that members of the public can access the house and the grounds. And so, yes, for me that also felt significant. And wanting to bring an aspect of the miners' situation represented by the pithead baths to the site. as an alternative space, another water feature in contrast to the fountains that are in the grounds.

S I'm really glad you have, because the people who have made the fortune need to be represented here too. I mean, quite often we try and do something to interpret country houses in terms of the servants, but in this case the people who actually made the money need to be remembered too. And the industrial history in Staffordshire has its own extraordinary rhythm and sense of evolution which I think is picked up in your work. It starts as you say, with Pensnett Common as common land and very small-scale operators would dig coal pits, iron pits, set up forges. Individual craftsmen would be making iron on common land until the Enclosure Act and the division of the property put an end to that, and it was all monetized by Lord Ward. And for several generations working conditions were appalling and unregulated. But things got better in the 19th century and by the 1860s the industry was wholly reorganised on a much grander scale but very much controlled by the Dudleys. And in particular there were two businesses, there was a huge steelworks, which I think you would recall, Round Oak, and there was a huge colliery they founded at Baggeridge early in the 20th century, and I think it is more that period, the mature industrial period, that you are reacting to here, isn't it Keith?

K I guess that was the way in for me. Both those spaces are no longer functioning, the steelworks is now a shopping centre and Baggeridge coal mine is a country park. So, when you go there, it is no longer evident what was going on, unless you look pretty closely and have some prior knowledge. So, the sense that this later industrial period was the beginnings of a better situation for those workers, there was more regulation and in particular for me it was the pithead baths that



represented this change. Around the time that the fire took place at Witley, in 1937, was also the period when pithead baths were being built nationally. So, 1937 became a pivotal moment of change and also the year my Dad was born who was secretary of the Golden Throble Angling Club in West Bromwich.

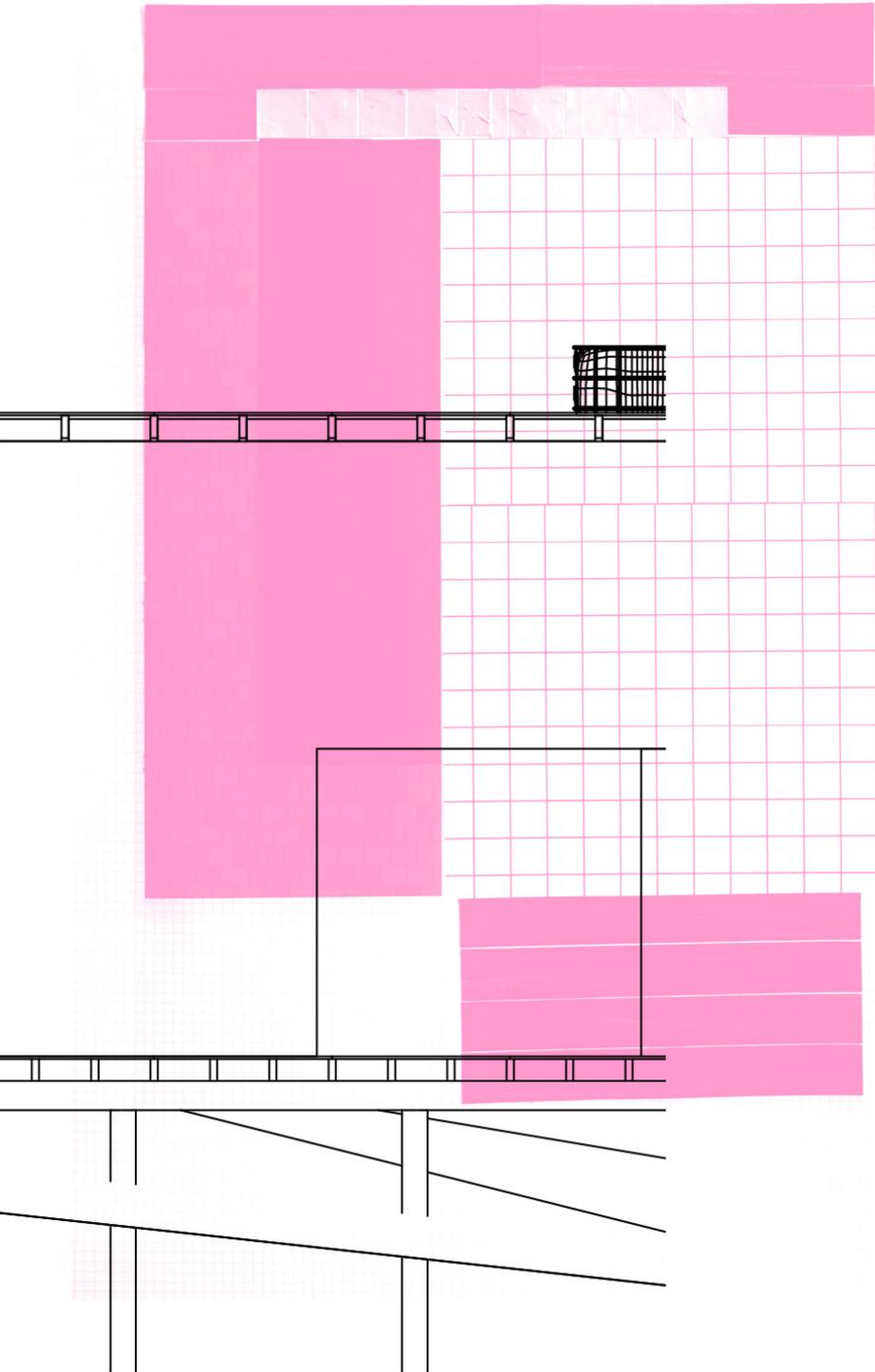
S There's a nice sense of crossover there, isn't there, that Witley Court was at its precipitous descent, burning down in 1937, in the year that the Baggeridge Colliery pithead baths did so much to improve the working lives of men there, were built, changing the fortunes. But now Witley survives as a ruin, but at Baggeridge there is very little to see. And it's a sad thing isn't it, that that kind of history, working class history, is not more realised in the same kind of way as the aristocratic history quite often.

K This felt like an opportunity to bring that story to Witley and for those visiting Witley Court. The work is deliberately hard edged, drawing on the modernist architectural style of the pithead baths as a contrast to the neo-classicism of Witley Court. On the lake I saw a further opportunity to bring in an aspect of the Round Oak Steelworks. I found a pamphlet at Dudley Archives that listed all the profiles of the items produced at the steelworks. I took the profile shapes and used these as the basis for the outlines of the floats with a colour scheme taken from the body and Day-Glo tips of course fishing floats. So, the angling club, the steel and coal industry of the Black Country are all wrapped up within the two main elements of the commission.

S Well I'm really glad you've come to work here Keith, because you've really restored a sense of the working class history which underlies Witley with its impression of luxury and bottomless wealth, but something that is now irredeemably of the past. You've restored something of the social reality of its history to it, and I think we are very grateful and I'm sure our visitors will get a lot out of it. Your work really has a lot of historical resonances, I love the thought of the multiple resonances, because it's about men at work but also about working men at leisure.

K I hope that this commission is an opportunity for a moment of reflection for those that visit. The structure offers a direct interaction with water inside but there is also reference to water through the view to the lake which itself was the water source for the Perseus and Andromeda and Flora fountains. I hope the reference to the pithead baths might offer a chance to think about the functionality of water for cleaning and transportation as well as for leisure and, in so doing its capacity, for making working lives better.





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Credits & Acknowledgements

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In memory of **Brian Harrison, 1937–2024**
Secretary of Golden Thistle Angling Club,
1980–2001

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