

**BLACKPOOL CHINA CLAYWORKS BIRD SURVEY** by Sid Cole and Nigel Climpson  
Covering the period March 1<sup>st</sup> 2013 to August 31<sup>st</sup> 2013

Since the article by Sid Cole describing Blackpool Clayworks and its birdlife, written in 1975 (and included in the 2013 summer issue of the Palores magazine) many changes have taken place to the site.

In the intervening years, the pit has grown in size, so too the height and number of waste tips. The vegetation has matured and hundreds of trees planted, with varying degrees of success. The most significant change was the closure of the works in 2007 and its effect on the landscape and of course the local employment situation.

Many of the commoner bird species have thrived, while others have declined alarmingly. Some have succumbed to harsh winters and poor breeding seasons, others are part of a national downward trend.

Long gone are the days, (as in November 1976) when on a newly hydroseeded section of Blackpool tip Sid recorded a flock of 200 + Yellowhammers, up to 5 Snow Buntings and a pair of Cirl Buntings, the latter being the last record for this species in the area. The large numbers of breeding and wintering Meadow Pipits are now just a distant memory. The healthy Stonechat population appears to have reached a previously unrecorded low point. The numbers of Long-tailed Tits and Goldcrests are also noticeably down on earlier years.

It was with this knowledge of the changing fortunes that had taken place, we concluded an up to date bird survey was needed.

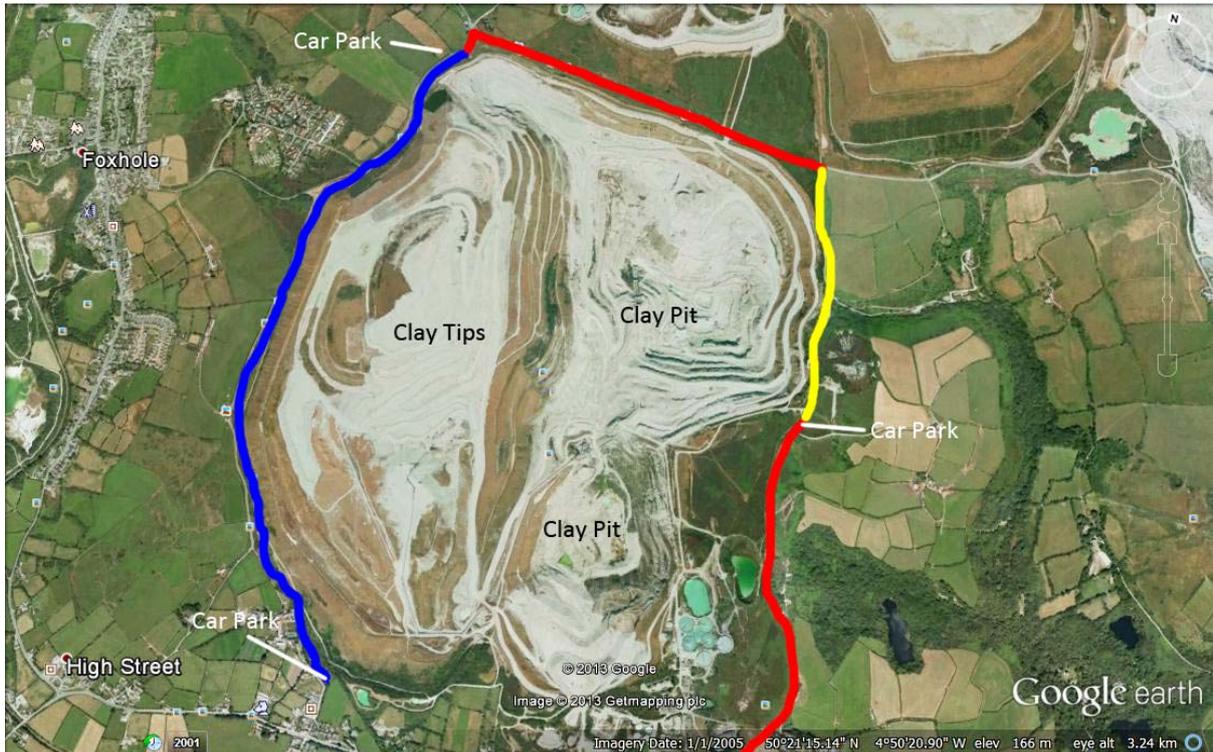
At the beginning of March 2013, we embarked on a project to carry out a bird survey of the Blackpool China Clayworks complex, located at High Street, near St Austell. This would take in the clay pit, its associated waste tips and the refining plant. The whole complex covers an area of about four square kilometres.

Our plan was to survey a typical sample piece of china clay landscape, over a twelve month period, with a view to establishing the numbers and range of bird species found there and to also see what the potential was for the remainder of the vast clay area. Hopefully, others could be persuaded to take up the challenge and survey other parts of the clay region.

This is a summary of the first six months of our efforts and a brief description of the habitats involved.

This would be a suitable time to remind readers, that although more public access is being made available into the china clay area, with cycle ways and permissive paths, most of it is closed to the general public, mainly because of safety issues. Anyone wishing to gain legal entry must undergo induction training and abide by rigorous safety conditions.

Two areas where public access is permitted are Great Carclaze pit at Carludon and Caerloggas Downs at Stenalees which both have spectacular views and are good for birds. There are also numerous advertised Clay trails with public access.



An overview of Blackpool Clay Pit with the Blackpool Clay trail in blue, public roads with some views in red, public footpaths in yellow. The pit is now filled with water to a depth of 50m.

## **The habitats**

### **The Pit.**

The water filled clay pit covers an area of about 1.5 square kilometres. The sides are very steep and the water dangerously deep. All production equipment (except for a pontoon pump to extract water for recycling) has been removed, and with time the pit will acquire a more natural appearance. In spite of the water being very deep, a surprising number of birds make use of it. Up to 60 Herring Gulls, 6 Great Black-backed Gulls, and the odd Lesser Black-backed Gull, use the pit for roosting and bathing. Forty plus Canada Geese are regular visitors and a pair raised four young. Eleven Little Grebes, all in breeding plumage, were seen at one time. Later in the season several juveniles were identified, and small chicks were still present in late August.

A long established pair of Ravens, successfully fledged four young from their nest on a rock ledge overlooking the water.



The water filled pit surrounded with levels and tips, looking south east. Note the safety equipment required in this area

### **The Tips.**

The waste tips are composed of a wide range of china clay byproducts, from fine quartz sand, rubble, huge chunks of granite, to overburden (sub soil).

Being poor in nutrients, the make up of the tips will affect which plant species grow there and how well they flourish.

The tips, consisting of a mixture of smaller material, with a generous measure of boulders creates Wheatear heaven. The short turf courtesy of the numerous rabbits and the cavities formed among the boulder strewn slopes provide ideal feeding and nesting opportunities. At least five pairs of these welcome summer visitors held territories during the breeding season. Two pairs are known to have reared chicks to independence and when last seen were moulting into their first winter plumages.

The tipping area is mainly confined to the western side of the works. The slope of the outermost tip rises up above the Blackpool Trail, giving public access to the area. It was from here in March that several birders were able to obtain excellent views of up to six Ring Ouzels. On the highest level a wintering Merlin has returned year after year and was again present in the 2012/13 winter.



A typical Wheatear habitat on the slopes of the tips.

### **The refining plant.**

The extensive refining plant, which is now a mixture of derelict buildings and concrete clay storage tanks, plus two partly overgrown pools, both attracting feeding hirundines and migrating waders. The large numbers and variety of conifers and shrubs planted to screen the various operations on the plant, have created a wilderness alive with birds. The buildings are filled with nesting Swallows, Starlings and Jackdaws. The wooden power line poles are riddled with nest holes excavated by Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers, and subsequently requisitioned by other hole nesting birds. Greenfinches, Goldfinches, Chaffinches, Willow Warblers, Chiff Chaffs and Blackcaps are everywhere. No visit is complete without seeing three or four pairs of Bullfinches, in itself an unusual occurrence.



### **Scrub land.**

On the nearby grass and scrub area known as Burngullow Common , Nightjars, Grasshopper Warblers and Common Whitethroats are present. As are numerous pairs of Linnets occupying the swathes of gorse and brambles.

On the debit side, no Skylarks were recorded and just a single pair of Stonechats. In fact only four pairs were found over the four square kilometres of the survey area. Meadow Pipits too were in short supply, with only four pairs on the common and eight pairs in total .This is surprising considering the amount of suitable habitat available. A further disappointment was finding only two pairs of Yellowhammers on the common and none elsewhere.

### **Remnant fields.**

The final significant area of habitat is found on the boundaries surrounding the survey area. This consists of overgrown remnant fields, being all that remains of former farms and small holdings taken over by the industry. The extensive hedgerows and thickets , mainly of goat willow, hawthorn and blackthorn, provide a haven for wildlife. Several of the bird species previously mentioned , breed here in numbers.

Much of this area is accessible from the Blackpool Nature Trail and from public roads to the north and east of the complex.

The survey will continue for a further six months covering the autumn and winter period.

## **Bird List.**

Total Number of Species 67

Confirmed Breeders (CB) 37, Probable Breeders (PB) 13, Not Breeding in Area (NB) 11, Migrants (M) 4, Winter Visitors (WV) 2.

Little Grebe (CB), Canada Goose (CB), Mallard (CB), Tufted Duck (M), Red Kite (M), Sparrowhawk (NB), Common Buzzard (CB), Kestrel (CB), Merlin (WV), Peregrine (CB), Common Pheasant (PB), Moorhen (NB), Coot (NB), Green Sandpiper (M), Herring Gull (NB), Lesser Black-backed Gull (NB), Great Black-backed Gull (NB), Wood Pigeon (PB), Collared Dove (PB), Cuckoo (PB), Tawny Owl (PB), Nightjar (PB), Swift (NB), Green Woodpecker (PB), Great Spotted Woodpecker (PB), Sand Martin (NB), Barn Swallow (CB), House Martin (NB), Meadow Pipit (CB), Pied Wagtail (CB), Wren (CB), Dunnock (CB), Robin (CB), Stonechat (CB), Northern Wheatear (CB), Ring Ouzel (M), Blackbird (CB), Song Thrush (CB), Redwing (WV), Mistle Thrush (PB), Grasshopper Warbler (PB), Garden warbler (PB), Common Whitethroat (CB), Blackcap (CB), Chiffchaff (CB), Willow Warbler (CB), Goldcrest (PB), Long-tailed Tit (CB), Coal Tit (CB), Blue Tit (CB), Great Tit (CB), Magpie (CB), Jackdaw (CB), Rook (NB), Carrion Crow (CB), Raven (CB), Jay (CB), Starling (CB), House Sparrow (NB), Chaffinch (CB), Greenfinch (CB), Goldfinch (CB), Siskin (CB), Linnet (CB), Bullfinch (CB), Yellowhammer (CB), Reed Bunting (PB)