THE coal mining industry which despoiled much of south Lancashire’s pastoral appearance, resulted at Bryn in the formation of huge conical spoil heaps – the Three Sisters for which the recreation area was named, and which were often humorously referred to by locals as the ‘Wigan Alps’! They were over 150ft high, and like the Alps dominated the skyline for many miles around. Mining for coal at this site by the Garswood Hall Colliery Company began in 1865 and finished when the colliery closed in 1956.

As far back as 1880 Garswood Collieries acquired worldwide fame for the testing of new safety lamps. Over 250 different types of lamp from all over the world were brought to Garswood, and a special pavilion was erected for the tests on the south side of the site which Three Sisters now occupies. The gas used in these experiments was a blower of natural gas (a ‘blower’ being a pocket of CH4 or Methane gas, trapped between the layers of coal, sometimes in quite large amounts) which issued from the Wigan 9ft seam and was brought to the surface through a 2-inch pipe. Prior to the experiments, this gas had been used to light the pit yard and bankings. According to a report in the Colliery Guardian dated 9th December, 1892 ‘... the gas was stated to be almost pure Marsh gas which showed little if any cap on the flame when examined with a safety lamp ...’ (The ‘cap’ describes the size, shape and colour of the flame in the lamp and indicates the percentage of gas and oxygen present). The lighted lamps were placed into a sealed, glass-fronted box into which the Methane gas and the measured percentage of oxygen was introduced. A mixture of between 5% and 13% is considered to be in the explosive range, and 9.5% said to be the most dangerous, reputedly going off ‘like a cannon!’ – a fact any miner would be wise to know about, before lighting the detonation fuse! Experiments with explosives were also carried out here during the same period, the objective being to find a ‘safe’ explosive material for mine work, which would not ignite any escaping gas present in the workings.

‘Interesting Ceremony at Bryn’ was the headline in a local newspaper in April 1887 and concerned the opening of new shafts by the Garswood Company on the dip side of the Wigan Fault Line. The first sod was cut by Mrs R. Edmondson, wife of the then Chairman and Mr James McGeevor, the General Manager, presented her with a beautiful silver spade, engraved for the occasion and boasting an elaborately carved ebony handle. Following a speech the lady ‘truly and efficiently cut the first sod ... amidst applause ... and named it the number 5 pit’. Much later in the 1930’s (or so local legend has it) this same pit was one of many visited by the writer George Orwell during research, prior to writing his book ‘The Road to Wigan Pier’ a social and economic comment on the living conditions of working-class people – though there is little evidence to confirm that he ever found Wigan Pier!

During reclamation of the spoil heaps – which when finished left over 80 acres of derelict land – 3½ million tons of earth were excavated and reshaped; 10 miles of surface water ditches, drains and sewers were laid, and 21 million gallons of water from 21 separate sources were pumped out – along with an equivalent volume of silt and 68,000 cubic yards of domestic refuse. Reclamation work was started in the late 1960’s by Lancashire County Council with grant aid from the Department of the Environment, later taken up and continued by Greater Manchester Council in 1974, before finally being handed over to Wigan Metropolitan Borough for completion and subsequent management. Three Sisters Recreation Area opened to the public in November 1978, and represents the successful culmination of a well thought-out plan to make formerly barren land useful again.

Moving back in time, to the very earliest documented history of the immediate surroundings of Three Sisters, nearby Ashton lies midway between the towns of Warrington and Wigan, both of which were military forts during the Roman occupation of Britain, and called ‘Wilderspool’ and ‘Coccium’ respectively. The Roman road between the two approximately follows today’s modern A49, and as few Roman remains have been found here, it seems as though Ashton was only ‘en-route’ for the Roman Army. However, as many visitors touch on the A49 before arriving at Three Sisters perhaps an imaginative thought should be spared for the thousands of Italian foot soldiers who marched this way almost 20 centuries ago...
Ashton in Makerfield, or as it was sometimes known, Ashton in Makerfield, or even Ashton in the Willows, was up to 1841 part of the ancient parish of Winwick and one of the most extensively agricultural areas in Lancashire. The name Makerfield, though of doubtful origin, is thought to be a derivation of the Gaelic and Saxon word meaning ‘the great cultivated plain’. The Winwick parish was also said to be the favourite residence of Oswald, the Christian King of Northumbria, who was slain in the battle of Maserfelth in the year 642. Some scholars believe Maserfelth to be Makerfield, though others claim the King was killed during a crusade at Oswestry in Shropshire.

Prior to the Norman Conquest in 1066, Ashton was the largest and most populous township in the parish, and contained many smallholdings and family farms. Following the years of conquest Ashton, in conjunction with Winwick, became two small divisions of ‘berewics’ of the ‘Newton Wapentake’ (a ‘wapentake’ being a section of land which took its name from the Royal Manor within its boundary, while a ‘berewic’ was a small estate, separate or outlying in the wapentake, though still liable to royal taxes!). Ashton was then further subdivided into smaller manors or basic units and kept by a population who belonged to a very well defined class system! These people not only managed their own land, but had responsibilities to the Lord of the Manor and his land! ‘Thanes’ were high ranking servants, while ‘drens’ were free peasants who held land in return for military service: there were many drens in Lancashire. At the bottom of the heap were the slaves, who were neither free nor able to change their jobs, move home, or buy and sell anything without permission from their owner! However, the Domesday Survey records very few slaves for the rich growing land ‘Inter Ripam et Marsham’ – ‘Between the Ribble and the Mersey’. That this very involved manorial system of life operated in the Ashton area can be seen from place names such as Ashton Cross, Bryn Cross, Stubshaw Cross, Manor Farm and Downhall Green – all ancient names existing into modern times and indicative of small self-supporting settlements.

The Gerard family became Lords of the manor at Bryn when William Gerard (born c1322) became possessed of estates in Bryn and Ashton on his marriage to Joan, daughter and heiress of Sir Peter Bryhill of Bryn. History records that the pair were children when their marriage took place. The Gerard lineage pre-dates their arrival at Bryn and can be traced back to the time of Edward the Confessor (1042-66). One of the Gerard family homes, New Bryn Hall, still stands just outside the boundary of Three Sisters, on the north-eastern perimeter and is now in private ownership. The present Lord Gerard lives in London and as there are no heirs the Gerard ties with Ashton look set to come to an end after more than 600 years of continuous association.

No record of Three Sisters would be complete without mention of the Ashton Hermit – Old Jonas, or as he was known, Old Mo – who lived on Ashton Heath in a hole in the ground covered by a cardboard roof, with only his cat for company. During winter he found discarded tin cans and melted them down for solder to sell to passing tinkers. In spring and early summer he walked down south to earn a ‘few bob’ by picking hops, steadily making his return on foot in autumn. As he advanced in years, keeping warm in winter became an increasing problem. He solved his dilemma by moving onto Three Sisters spoil heaps, which were warm because of the continually smouldering fires underneath. Alas, one bitter winter morning in 1916 Old Jonas was found dead by miners reporting for the early shift; it was presumed he had been suffocated by the sulphur fumes.

Coal mining has now disappeared from the area, and Ashton is becoming more and more suburban with a large influx of people from nearby crowded cities, most notably Liverpool, who prefer to live in Ashton’s newly regained rural landscape and travel the 20 or so miles to work in the city. Many of these local people enjoy the amenities offered at Three Sisters, be it noisy motor sports, or peaceful early morning walks with their dogs before the rest of the world is stirring . . . Three Sisters seems to have that unique ability to be all things to all people . . .

Reference sources used during the preparation of this leaflet include:
Baines’s Lancashire Volume Two: A Short History of Ashton in Makerfield by Gover; The Domesday Book edited by Thomas Hulme; Wigan Records Office; Wigan Library Archives: Ashton & Leigh Libraries. Special thanks are due to Mr Walter Carney, Mrs Norma Ackers and Mr Ian Winstanley – all gave help and information which was greatly appreciated.