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The Wheels Edge

I have never been to Birmingham Wheels Park (and as things stand, I'm never likely too). As a devout non-driver and serial avoider of all things vehicular, I'd never had any reason to go. Wheels Park has been around since the 1980s, it's long been a favourite destination for local petrol heads. Wheels Park contained a series of race orientated attractions, with a variety of tarmac circuits, designed for Go-karts, Stock cars, Drifting, and even the UK's only purpose built Speed skating circuit. The site was never pretty, it was run down and generally shabby, but it was popular. Sadly, despite this popularity, Birmingham City Council evicted all the tenants from the site in late 2021 and it has been closed ever since.

The Wheels site, in Bordesley Green, occupies a large tract of uneven, polluted brownfield, totalling approximately twenty one hectares. The site is bordered by a railway viaduct, a railway cutting, a canal and three main roads (Landor St, Bordesley Green Road and Garrison Lane). Wheels Park has only one access point, via Adderley Road South, off Landor Street, entering through a gate beneath the railway viaduct. This road orbit the entire park and was laid down when the site opened in the 1980s and is the only formal road on site.

Walking around the area where Wheels Park is located it is generally impossible to see anything of the site, aside from the odd tantalising glimpse of trackside floodlights in the distance. The land all around Wheels Park is occupied, predominantly by various industrial parks and factories. These are all pretty much impenetrable too, most are patrolled by Security, and even polite requests to look over brick walls are firmly rebuffed. The railway viaduct, which runs parallel to Landor Street, effectively screens the entire site from the outside world.

When I arrived on site after walking from the city centre I was hopefully of gaining access to the site. But within minutes it was obvious that I would never be able to get in. The gate had been securely double locked and several tons of earth and rocks have been deposited behind the gate to prevent the criminally minded from ramming their way in. And if that wasn't enough, behind the massive mound sits a four metre tall Cylon, whose eyes are permanently peeled on the gate. Doubleplusungood.

So, what to do, how to approach this inaccessible problem? I had hoped to be able to document the edges of the actual site of Wheels Park, because beyond the viaduct, Wheels Park is

itself surrounded by miles of fencing and buildings. But, because of the site's permanent closure, what I have presented for the Grid Project, is a series of images of the more obscure, impenetrable edge that has sprung up around the periphery of Wheels Park.

Historically the area where Wheels Park is located has long been over-used by humankind. For hundreds of years the site, referred to in places as Garrison Farm, has been quarried for clay and sand, the basic ingredients for brick making. Looking at old maps is one of my guilty Grid Project pleasures. I've spent quite a bit of time over the last few years pouring over old maps that chronicle what was and what remains in the city. The interesting thing about where Wheels Park is now is that, looking back over nearly a hundred and eighty years of map history, the footprint of the site has remained remarkably unaltered.

Looking from overhead you can see how the railways, canal and roads have separated it from its immediate surroundings, it is a dis-location. Maps from the mid-19th century onwards show how the area was being used. There were at least six brick and tile manufactories on the site, surrounding a series of ancient clay pits and ponds. Companies such as 'Globe Brick & Tile', 'Atlas & Brown', 'Crown Bricks', 'Garrison Farm' and 'Britannia Bricks' were busy stamping their names on the building blocks of Birmingham. There weren't any formal roads on the site at that time, and access was restricted to a level crossing (called 'Brickyard Crossing') at the end of Garrison Street. The level crossing was removed in the 1980s around the same as the Wheels Park site was being laid out, but you can see its location in my last image, taken from the canal.

An aerial mosaic photo of Birmingham from the late 1940s shows that the area was mostly wasteland by that time. Most of the brick manufactories had gone and locals now referred to it as the Bordesley Tip. This area was heavily bombed during the Second World War, as the Luftwaffe attempted to destroy our transport and manufacturing infrastructure. Since that time the site has never been really cleaned up, and there's a strong possibility (according to City council surveys) that unexploded bombs remain buried in situ.

The city has since grown and crowded around it, with housing, schools and industrial parks nibbling hungrily away at the outskirts, but still the general footprint remains. Now that Wheels Park is closed, all eyes are on the cash strapped local council, who are keen to sell the site to raise much needed funds. In a recently published action plan for the newly named Bordesley Park, the city council in tandem with the Department for Levelling Up, announced plans to open up the site and clean the contaminated land, ready for redevelopment. Buzzwords dominate the plan like sustainability, green investment, regeneration opportunities, targeted training and inclusive growth..... Bordesley Tip, Garrison Farm, Wheels Park, Bordesley Park,

whatever you want to call this place, it remains the largest piece of urban land yet to be fully developed and integrated into the city landscape.

So. I have hope that perhaps one day, I'll see beyond that great big gate off Landor Street, I suppose.

Reference

Department of Levelling Up, Housing & Communities; "£17 million investment for inner city Birmingham" a Case Study for Bordesley Park; published 17th January 2023. Accessed November 1st 2023.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/17-million-investment-for-inner-city-birmingham>

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