

Coming up for Air 2001

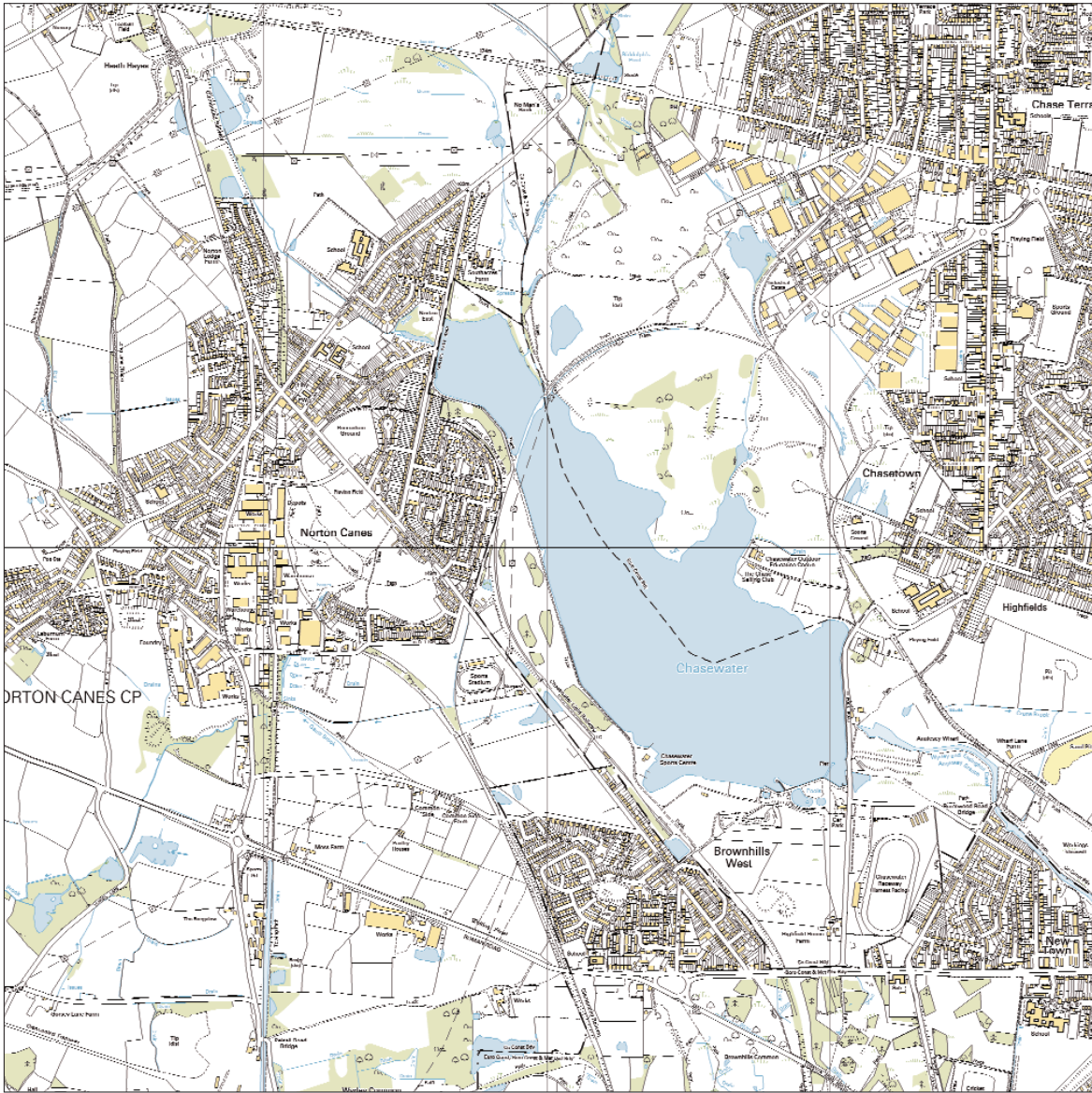
Coming up for Air was a proposal for a temporary public art project based on the production of an imposing landmark in the reservoir of Chasewater Country Park, Staffordshire. The project aimed to promote debate on the relationships between art and history, especially the changing connections between economic activity and representations of landscape. As the work was proposed for Chasewater, and it could only have been realised through the democratic planning process, it would also have raised issues of geography and politics, from a regional to a global level.

We proposed to build a large industrial chimney, cylindrical in form, perhaps made from smooth, pale concrete, and very plain as to detail. The scale of the chimney would have been informed by current public health decision-making processes, taking account of the type and quantity of emissions, the physical geography of the location, and the distribution and density of settlements in the fallout area.

The ‘Black Country’ landscape was defined in the late eighteenth century by coal-mining, iron-smelting and canal-building. After centuries of deforestation and coal-mining, the valley in Cannock Chase was dammed and flooded in 1797 to create the reservoir now known as Chasewater. This was a time of radical change from an agricultural to an industrial way of life, and in relations between the people who owned natural resources and the people who made them into commodities. From the outset, coal-mining transformed the landscape and began industrial society’s dependence on fossil fuel, which continues to drive the consumerist ideology today.

Coming up for Air contrasted with the Romantic tradition of the architectural ‘folly’ in the landscaped grounds of an English country house. Standing directly in the waters, the sculpture would have been poised between suggestions of submersion and re-emergence. The object and its silhouette, shadow and reflection might have brought together ideas of permanence with change, and perhaps operated as a metaphor for both loss and discovery.

Coming up for Air (1939) is the title of a novel by George Orwell, whose writing reached across class divisions – in this case to warn against the dangers of complacency, narrow materialism and short-term thinking. The novel centres on the narrator’s journey through the Modern landscape of England, to re-visit a pond, which for him had come to symbolise a lost paradise of youthful optimism and pristine nature.



1:25,000 scale map of Chasewater, England reproduced from Ordnance Survey with the permission of Her Majesty’s Stationery Office © Crown Copyright 2001



Left:
Phillip James de Loutherbourg
Coalbrookdale by Night (1801)
Courtesy of the Science Museum, London

Centre:
Miner Drilling for Blasting (1916)
Courtesy of Imperial Publishing Ltd

Below:
An Environment Agency Officer leads a man from the floodwater at Bewdley, where the River Severn has burst its banks (1998)
Courtesy of News Team International



Coming up for Air (2001)
Artist's impression by Robert G. Lloyd
Collection of Daniel Brooke