

RESERVOIR ACTION GROUP

Newsletter 33, January 2014

Western Power Distribution Finally Defeated!

Wow! We finally did it! After a long battle of 12 years, we finally saw off Western Power Distribution (WPD) and their plans to build 324 houses and flats on the site of Llanishen Reservoir. Here's what happened over the last twelve months.

After a wait of well over a year since the closure of its planning inquiry, the Welsh Government announced on 25th April 2013, that Western Power's appeal was being rejected on two grounds. The first was that the proposed housing development would cause 'substantial and irreversible diminution' to Llanishen reservoir and its setting, as the reservoir is a listed building of historic importance; the second reason was that the proposed access would harm the character and appearance of Lisvane Road and cause a highway safety risk to the residents who lived near the entrance. This decision was obviously a huge blow to Western Power Distribution and effectively the third time that its proposals had been rejected by the Welsh Government following a public inquiry. Following the decision there was a fairly anxious period of six weeks when WPD was able to appeal against the Minister's decision on a point of Law, but it did not appeal, and instead WPD put the houses that it had bought at the top of Rhyd-y-Penau Road up for auction. These were sold on 21st May for a combined total of £957,000. This was an encouraging sign, but rumours still abounded, and we were worried that WPD might be considering another planning application with yet another access route.

Things went rather quiet over the summer, and in August, Phil Bale, a Llanishen Councillor and RAG member, decided to fly out to America and confront the executives of the Pennsylvania Power and Light Corporation (PPL), the parent company that owns Western Power, at their headquarters in Allentown. Although there was some reluctance to engage with him, he finally met with Mr. Rick Klingensmith, the president of PPL Global, and Phil explained how the residents of Cardiff rejected the proposed despoilment of this much loved local beauty-spot and asked PPL to turn it into a flagship environmental project as they have done with several similar sites in Pennsylvania. Mr. Klingensmith promised nothing and simply stated that colleagues at WPD would make any decision.

Whether Phil's trip played a significant part in events that developed we will probably never know, but on 3rd September 2013, we heard that Western Power had sold the entire reservoir site to Celsa Steel U.K. for an undisclosed sum. Celsa is an international steel company based in Barcelona, that took over the Allied Steel and Wire works in Cardiff Bay in 2003. Its connection with the reservoirs is due to Lisvane reservoir being used, for many years, to supply water to the steel works in Cardiff Bay. Celsa has stated clearly that it purchased the reservoirs to secure its water supply and has no intention of proposing any housing developments on the site. It is also worth noting that at times of drought in the past, Lisvane reservoir has had to be topped up by water pumped from Llanishen reservoir, so if it wants to secure its supply, it also makes sense for Celsa to refill Llanishen reservoir!

We do not know the full story behind the sale of the reservoir to Celsa, but in effect, WPD decided after twelve long years to throw in the towel and just walk away. It is something we never really expected and must be one of the few cases in recent planning history when a community action group has managed to face down and defeat a large multi-national corporation. This has mainly been achieved through the loyal and generous support of all our members, who have doggedly supported the campaign over the last twelve years, and the inspired leadership of both Ted Thurgood and Andrew Hill. We must also thank all our local politicians who have also united behind our cause, and provided tremendous support over the entire period.

RAG's Campaign Continues

Although the defeat of WPD has been a huge milestone, there is still much to do. Since Celsa took over the site at the beginning of September we have been trying to engage with them to discuss the future of the site. Llanishen reservoir is still lying empty and the ugly steel fences erected by WPD are still preventing people from visiting the reservoirs. Celsa's core business is steelmaking, which is a challenging business at the best of times and is particularly difficult at present. This is clearly the first priority for its management team and the refill of Llanishen reservoir is not high on their agenda at the moment. We are working closely with local politicians and other interested groups to try and engage with Celsa's management in a constructive way, and to see what we can do get the process of refill underway.

Although refilling the reservoir may seem to be a simple process of closing the scour valve, and effectively putting the plug back in, it is not that straightforward. We have discovered that in the summer of 2012, Western Power had the reservoir officially designated as 'abandoned' under the Reservoirs Act 1975. This means that before the reservoir can be refilled it must be thoroughly inspected by a qualified reservoir engineer to ensure that it is safe to do so, and the engineer must make regular visits to the site to oversee the refill process. There would also need to be repairs to the stone pitching on the inside face to the reservoir where it has been vandalised, and removal of the scrub which has grown up in the reservoir basin. This will all take time and money to resolve and we are currently getting estimates of the costs involved.

Please be assured that the RAG Committee are working hard to try and achieve the goals of refilling Llanishen reservoir and restoring public access to the site. Whilst the immediate threat of a housing development has been removed, and 2013 has seen great progress towards our ultimate aim, it is very important that RAG continues to maintain its membership, so that we can continue to be an effective campaigning group with both Celsa and Cardiff Council. Membership of RAG runs from the first of January each year, so please renew your membership now for 2014. You can use the form below, or join and make donations online via our website www.llanishenrag.com.

Thank you for your continued support, which has led to a momentous victory over Western Power in 2013. We now just need to finish the job and secure the long-term future of Llanishen reservoir as a resource that can, one again, be enjoyed by members of the public.

RAG Committee

RAG Membership Application 2014

I/We enclose our annual membership fee/s of £..... (£5.00 per person) and a donation of £.....
Please make cheques payable to the *Reservoir Action Group*.

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