

THE RAILWAY LAND

Reclaimed by nature

I'm all for the kind of labelling that makes it impossible to forget a place's history, and you certainly don't need me to explain what this slice of nature used to be. But in any case – and titles aside – the Railway Land is dotted with reminders of its industrial history. And amongst the odds and ends of railway debris, the many manifestations of wildlife seem to have settled very happily indeed. On the one (very important) hand it might be unforgivable that we lost the Lewes to Uckfield line, but in other ways this stretch of nature seems the perfect denouement for the decline of Lewes's railways.

But not all the land the railways once owned here to accommodate that lost railway line, as well as some quite significant freight operations, was quite so lucky. The buildings from the shopping precinct south to where the Railway Land now starts were all built on land that fell into disuse as the railways lost their clout. What a good thing it was, then, that building work juddered to a halt before spreading into the kind of edge-of-town development which might have mirrored the likes of Tesco and Homebase



to the north.

It was the kind of campaign that Lewes excels at and one which resulted, towards the end of the 1980s, in a partnership between Lewes District Council and a newly formed trust, later to become the Railway Land Wildlife Trust. They bought up the land and set about transforming the derelict sidings, coal yard, abandoned railway line (together with the remains of its viaduct) and other railway paraphernalia into the kind of habitat that might be good for the wilder sort of Lewes resident – and appreciated by people. And by 1995 the site had been designated a Local Nature Reserve and things were most definitely looking up. Now it's a hive of activity for amphibians and reptiles, eels and water voles, as well as a host of different birds. And the quite wonderful *Heart of Reeds* project by Lewes land artist Chris Drury, which began development in 2004, puts a whole new spin on the land. But look beyond the art, the wildlife and the railway frag-

ments, and another set of clues to the area's history emerges.

There's the footprint of the rather grand house – Leighside – that stood, sandwiched between railway lines, in the woodland here until it was finally defeated by the watery nature of the area. And historians, rather than concrete clues, tell us that the Grey Friars (who gave the nearby retirement development its name) used to have a 'stew pond' here in which they kept fish to eat in their stews throughout the winter months.

Now of course there's the Linklater Pavilion to put the Railway Land even more firmly on the map and give us another reason to walk the couple of hundred metres from the shopping precinct. And that makes it even more likely that on a good day you'll spot quite a few humans going about the place – which is another sign that the Railway Land has developed into exactly what it was meant to be.

Juliette Mitchell

Photo by David Stacey