

LAND RECLAMATION

Spoil Heaps into Pastures

from our Special Correspondent

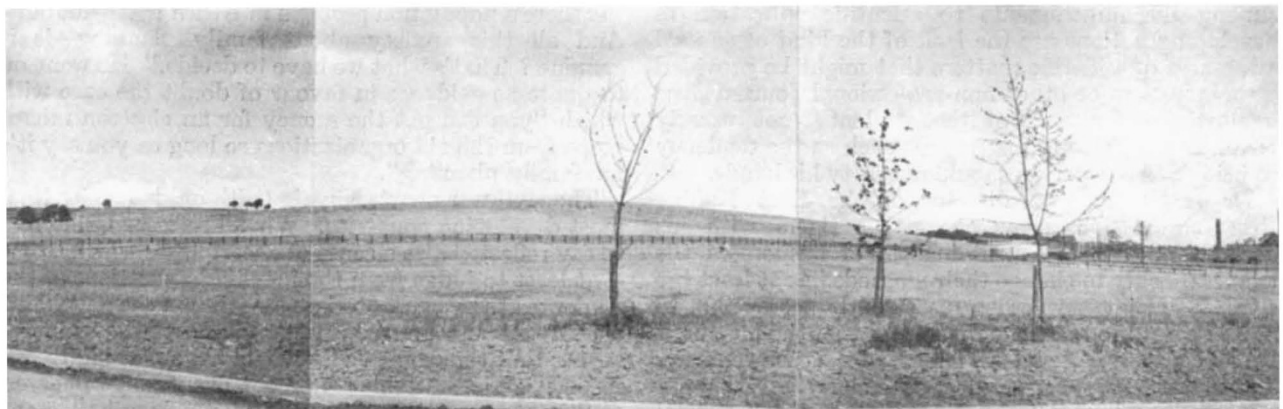
THE hated spoil heaps of Durham are disappearing under a lush growth of grass and trees. The mountains of black shale which remained after the closure of the county's many coal mines are being flattened and planted to convert them to pasture, woodland and recreational areas which defy recognition as the eyesores of the past. Last week some of the pioneering work carried out in Durham gladdened the hearts of members of the British Association. About twenty of them were conducted on a fifty mile tour of about a dozen heaps, reclaimed and being reclaimed, by Dr A. J. Richardson of the Department of Botany, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and Mr R. Briggs, Durham County Council's Landscape Reclamation Officer.

One of the oldest examples was a small wooded hill which had been a spoil heap planted with trees in 1927 by the county council. In spite of this early start in reclaiming derelict land—long before concern for the environment reached its present status—the council did not swing fully into action until after 1950. Between 1954 and 1960, however, about thirty small heaps were tackled, representing about 700 acres of reclaimed land. After the Local Employment Act of 1960 made government grants available for reclamation (50 per cent of the cost, increased to 85 per cent in 1963), the council set up its reclamation unit. Then it really got to work on the 350,000,000 tons of pit waste deposited in the county during the past 200 years.

The largest scheme so far is in progress near Thinford, where 2.6 million out of 7 million cubic yards of spoil is being spread onto adjacent agricultural land, which, as in many cases, has been purchased by the council. Work began last February, and grass should be growing by the summer of 1971, at an estimated cost of about £278,000.

Another scheme at nearby Sherburn Hill has involved a reduction of nearly 130 feet in an ungainly 200-foot conical heap, which has been merged into an adjacent limestone ridge. Available topsoil is being spread over the new surface ready for seeding with grass. The reclaimed land will be used for grazing, and some trees will be planted. This is costing £105,000. About twelve miles away are forty-five acres of pasture, woodland and open space which were once a 190-foot high spoil heap dominating the town of Willington. Reclamation began with the shifting of about 15 million cubic yard of material in October 1967, and, within a year, grass was growing on the reshaped mound, some of it sown on top soil and some put directly into the shale.

At Reddymoor Colliery, near the town of Crook, the spoil heap is now covered with the grasses *Agrostis tenuis*, *Dactylis glomerata*, *Festuca rubra* and *Festuca ovina*. This heap is part of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne's landscape reclamation project, and various trees and shrubs are being tested for their suitability to such conditions. *Sorbus aucuparia*, the rowan tree, is doing quite well and so is *Rosa rubiginosa*, sweet briar, but *Robinia pseudacacia*, acacia, is not, nor is *Sambucus*, elderberry. Acidity and lack of nitrogen often have to be overcome by a judicious use of lime and fertilizer.



Brancepeth pit heap as it used to dominate Willington (top), and as it is now (bottom) after treatment by Durham County Council.