



DUDLEY CANAL & CAVERNS

2025 - 2030 STRATEGIC VISION



THE DUDLEY CANAL AND CAVERNS STORY IS ONE OF CONNECTION.

Our trips connect us across almost unimaginable spans of time, from a time when the only living creatures were strange types of fish, through the industrial centuries and all it brought with it, to our heritage attraction as we know it today.

Through canals and tunnels, we connect places and landmarks: we can reach Dudley Zoo & Castle, the Glass Quarter in Stourbridge, Merry Hill and the Waterfront, and our future will drive us to unlock Wren's Nest and its incredible geological landscape.

But our canals are more than merely routes - they are relationships, reaching into the earth's history and the present day.

Through our connections with schools, thousands of children each year learn the wonder of geology as well as a sense of the importance of the Black Country's canals in shaping today's world.

We are one of only ten UNESCO global geoparks in the UK.

Ours is a human story of colossal history, told through tunnels carved by hand.

We reconnect people with place and communities with the hidden wonders beneath their feet.



It might seem counterintuitive to begin the launch of a new strategy by reflecting on the past.

As we're built on connection it's a meaningful place to start. In 2007 we reached the final two of the People's Millions with a bold vision: a major capital project linking us with Wren's Nest National Nature Reserve to create a world-class heritage attraction. Though the funding didn't come through, the ambition never faded. The Trust kept moving forward and so did our partners.

Over the next decade, we grew, evolved, and deepened our impact. Yet the Wren's Nest vision remained quietly present, a thread in the background of our journey.

As we shaped this new strategy, we returned to that thread. We recognised that connection is not just part of our history, it's our future.

The canals once powered a nation's prosperity during the industrial revolution. Today, they offer something just as vital: a way to connect people, places, and stories.

So we're proud to launch a new vision; one rooted in connection.

A vision that reaches across time, geography, and experience. Most importantly, it renews our commitment to connect with our communities, creating a heritage destination where everyone feels seen, heard, and represented.

THIS STRATEGY IS ONE OF FINISHING WHAT WE STARTED. AND WE'LL DO IT WITH A DEEPER SENSE OF PURPOSE.

OUR VISION

To shape a future where people, places, and time are powerfully connected through the world's most captivating network of canals, caverns, and community.

OUR MISSION

We protect the extraordinary hidden landscape beneath the Black Country



INTRODUCING OUR STRATEGY

At Dudley Canal & Caverns, our new strategy is rooted in connection across people, places, and time.

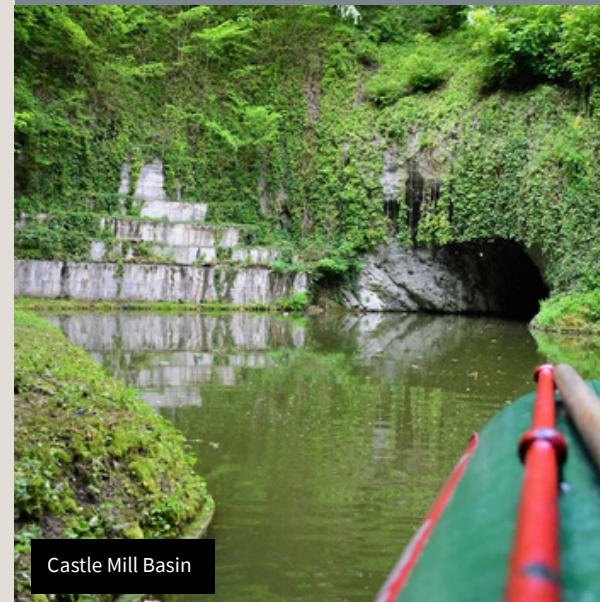
It builds on our rich heritage and bold ambitions, including the long-held vision to link our site with Wren's Nest National Nature Reserve and create a world-class geohistorical experience.

Our people, our volunteers and our community will shape the next phase but we'll continue to drive our impact as a business, contributing to the visitor economy and provide opportunities for jobs and development

This strategy marks a renewed commitment to our communities and a promise to finish what we started with purpose, pride, and a vision that connects us all.

We'll anchor our vision through three strategic pillars, with people, education and conservation at the heart of everything we do

Connection Through Experience



Castle Mill Basin

We will deepen our impact, celebrate our heritage, and build long-term partnerships. Our operations, volunteer programmes, and learning spaces will evolve to meet diverse needs.

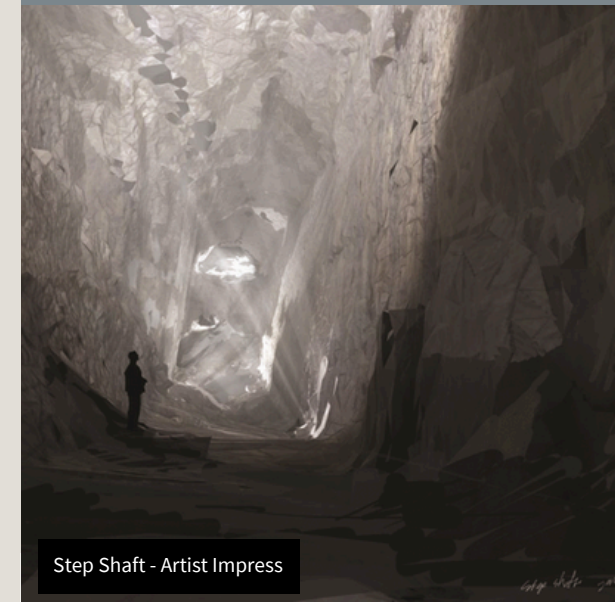
Connection Through Time



Construction shaft

We will create immersive, inclusive, and unforgettable experiences that spark curiosity and wonder, blending education with entertainment and showcasing local talent.

Connection Through Place



Step Shaft - Artist Impress

We will launch the first phase of our bold new capital project reconnecting more people with the underground landscape from us to Wren's Nest creating a transformational visitor journey



Conference Centre



Adventure Street Stay n Play



Biffa Gallery Render



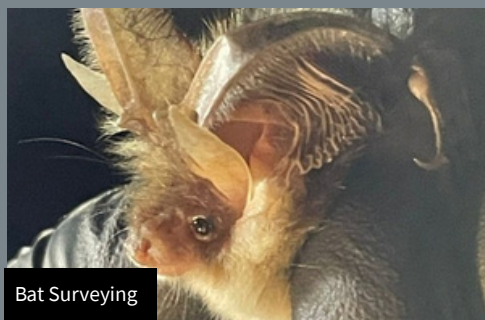
Christmas at the Caverns



Vic Cream Tea Boat



Wreath Making



Bat Surveying



Easter Dinos



Paddleboarding



Biffa Activities



Navvies to Skippers

CONNECTION THROUGH EXPERIENCES

We believe in creating experiences that are immersive, imaginative, and unforgettable not just visits, but moments that spark curiosity and wonder. We'll keep pushing our destination as one that should be known nationally, blending entertainment with education, and using our spaces for storytelling, creativity, and connection.

WE WILL

- Core Offer:** Re-design core offers and establish a special events programme. Introduce new core offers, including wellbeing experiences and unique activities found nowhere else. Redevelop our exhibition space, making it dynamic to the programme, and in turn increasing all of our experiences from 45 minutes to 90 minutes. Have a programme with specific focus on our Historic Boats.
- Community Engagement:** Work with local suppliers and artists, showcasing their work and embedding community into our offer.
- Dynamic:** Be bold and innovative, trying new things, pushing boundaries, and telling stories that would otherwise be forgotten. Use audience insight to guide decisions, grow our profile, and make brave choices. Adapt tours and workshops to meet the needs of all visitors, striving for excellence in every interaction.

BY 2030

- We'll have a brand new exhibition space that will be engaging and immersive. Helping us on the way to becoming a nationally recognised heritage experience.
- Developed a diverse and inclusive programme that reflects our audiences and adapts to their needs.
- Built a strong network of local collaborators, with artists and suppliers contributing to our core offer.
- Created dynamic, multi-use spaces that serve educational, community, and commercial needs.
- Embedded accessibility and representation into every aspect of our visitor experience.
- Engaged with an extended network of our community
- Completed necessary restoration works to our Historic Boats



Tunnel Tots Guests



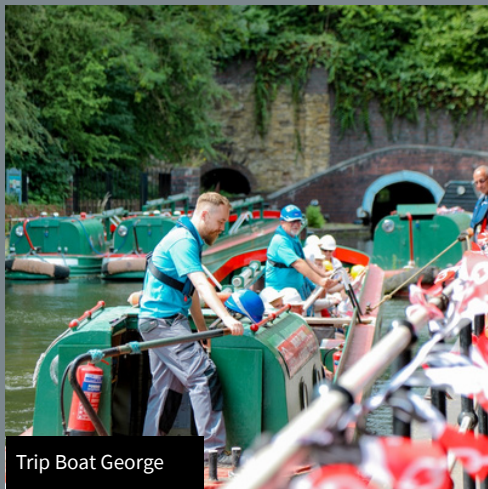
Susan Colman Grand Day Out Channel 5



Gardening Volunteer



Tunnel Tots Volunteer



Trip Boat George



Underground Experience



School Workshop



Chit Chat



Tow Path Volunteer



Grant Awards



Home School



Annual Boat Maintenance Programme

CONNECTION THROUGH TIME

We believe in creating time and space for people to re-connect. Education is central to our mission, and our legacy is one of learning, pride, and shared history. We also believe that we must find time to prepare and plan for the future.

WE WILL

Learning: Dedicate whole days to schools, community groups, and education providers, ensuring learning is accessible and inspiring. Explore learning through apprenticeships, placements, and volunteering. Celebrate the Trust's pioneering legacy and share it through community-led storytelling.

Become the centre for Black Country Canal History, partnering with experts to keep heritage alive.

Spaces based on need: Reimagine our spaces to support diverse uses — from revision zones for students to conferencing and birthday parties. Build a volunteer programme that reflects the needs of our organisation and people.

Sustainable Operations: Be a respected exemplar in boat operations — replacing our fleet over the next decade and adapting services to meet audience needs. Ensure operations work alongside every team to deliver excellence and secure our future.

BY 2030

- Created a minimum of five T-Level placements with Dudley College and explored apprenticeships
- Created two long term hire spaces to deliver workshops aligned to the Trusts vision, supporting start ups & SME's, and Heritage at Risk
- Launched a fundraising initiative to replace and modernise our fleet, improving accessibility and efficiency.
- Developed long-term partnerships with schools, universities, and heritage organisations, and in turning building a diverse and sustainable volunteer programme.
- Embedded learning and development pathways across the Trust, growing our organisation



Cathedral Cavern - Artist Impression



Step Shaft Walkway - Artist Impression



Step Shaft Walkway - Render Image



Seven Sisters Mine - Render Image



Underground to Surface Train Concept

CONNECTION THROUGH PLACE

We are custodians of an extraordinary underground landscape a place where ancient geology and industrial ingenuity converge. We believe in reconnecting people with this hidden world, making it accessible and immersive. Our mission is to protect the extraordinary hidden landscape beneath the Black Country, and so we believe that our limits are endless.

WE WILL

Finish what we started: Launch a bold, phased capital project, *Connection Through Place: Wrens Nest*, starting with feasibility studies and a dedicated project team

Feasibility: Produce a phased Project plan that establishes the requirements for a large scale capital project. Completing community, economic and engineering feasibility studies to understand the full scope of the project. Launch our long term fundraising strategy to match this aspiration

Partnerships: Partner with Friends of Wren's Nest, Dudley Council (DMBC), West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), Historic England, Birmingham & Black Country Wildlife Trust and others to understand & align the project.

Transformation: Design an experience that combines boat trips, walking trails, and geological exploration.

OBJECTIVES BY 2030

- Produce a full feasibility study of the project to prepare us for the next stage
- Secure approximately £250k in grant support
- Develop a conceptual multi modal visitor journey from Castle Mill through Wren's Nest Tunnel to Step Shaft/Cathedral Cavern, and the Seven Sisters Mine via a funicular railway.
- Showcase the Black Country UNESCO Global Geopark and strive to unlock the overnight economy.
- Aim to increase annual visitors to 150,000, then 200,000, creating lasting impact.
- Create 30 job opportunities
- Create 75 volunteering opportunities
- Support & grow Dudley as a legitimate, sustainable & regenerative tourist destination.



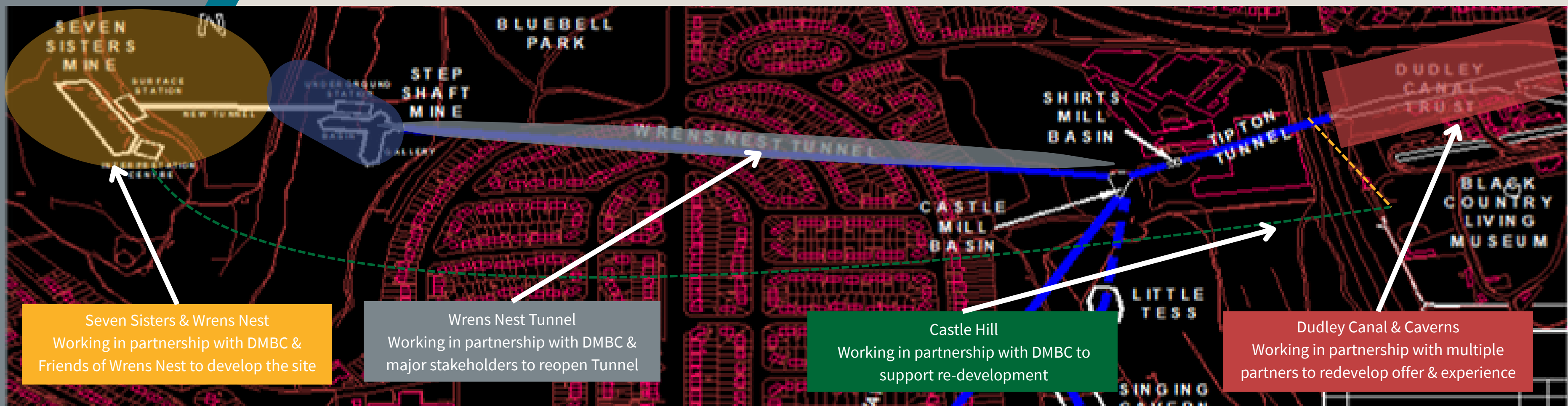
CONNECTION THROUGH PLACE

WRENS NEST

DRAFT CONSULTATION WRENS NEST VISION

We'll co create an immersive experience by water, tunnels, cavern exploration, and nature trails. Placing community at its heart. we'll reopen Wrens Nest Tunnel and in turn connect people to Dudley's geological, industrial, and natural heritage, promoting wellbeing, protecting habitats, and inspiring lifelong stewardship through storytelling, and nature.

18 years ago, we just missed out. it's time to finish what we started...



The Wrens Nest project will transform one of the UK's most extraordinary geological and industrial heritage landscapes into a world-class, immersive experience co-created with the community, driven by their voices, and designed to serve their future.

At its core, this project is about connecting people to place, to nature, to their heritage, and to each other. It begins at Dudley Canal and Caverns, where visitors will journey by boat underground, navigating historic tunnels and awe-inspiring caverns, brought to life through storytelling. At Castle Mill Basin, they'll make their way through the reopened Wrens Nest Tunnel, exploring the majestic Cathedral Cavern, and ascend via a unique lifting platform into the Seven Sisters.

Above ground, the experience continues through fossil-rich landscapes and newly restored woodland trails, designed to promote health, wellbeing, and reconnection with nature. The project will protect and enhance habitats, celebrate biodiversity, and create inclusive spaces.

This will be a community-led legacy. Every phase will be shaped by deep, meaningful engagement with local people, schools, and organisations, changing perception and promoting community cohesion; from co-designing interpretation and trails to leading fossil hunts and storytelling, the community will be at the centre of decision-making, delivery, and celebration. The project will build pride, ownership, and opportunity ensuring that Wrens Nest is not only explored, but loved, protected, and sustained for generations to come.

PHASE 1

Phase 1: Project Initiation & Team Formation

- Establish a multidisciplinary project team
- Define governance structure, roles, and responsibilities.
- Secure initial funding for feasibility and scoping.
- Develop a shared vision and guiding principles with stakeholders.

Q2
2026

Q4
2026

PHASE 3

Phase 3: Pilot & Early Activation

- Deliver small-scale pilot experiences and test underground access.
- Launch school and community programmes.
- Refine operational plans based on feedback.

Q3
2026

Q2
2027

PHASE 4

Phase 4: Concept Design & Planning

- Develop concept designs for all key elements of the visitor experience.
- Secure planning permissions and heritage consents.
- Finalise access routes, transport links, and wayfinding.
- Begin fundraising and grant applications.

A PHASED APPROACH

PHASE 5.1

PRIMARY PROJECTS

Wrens Nest Tunnel Reopening

- Structural works to safely reopen the tunnel for pedestrian access.
- Install lighting, interpretation, and safety systems.
- Begin guided walking tours as a soft launch.

DEPENDENCY PROJECTS

- Design and planning of the woodland walking route.
- Support Friends of Wrens Nest in Wrens Nest Developments



PHASE 5.2

PRIMARY PROJECTS

Cathedral Cavern Access & Interpretation

- Create safe, accessible pathways from the tunnel to Cathedral Cavern.
- Install interpretation points
- Begin limited access tours.
- Begin woodland walking route with environmental enhancements.

DEPENDENCY PROJECTS

- Begin woodland walking route with environmental enhancements.
- Support & deliver Friends of Wrens Nest in dual experience proposals



PHASE 5.3

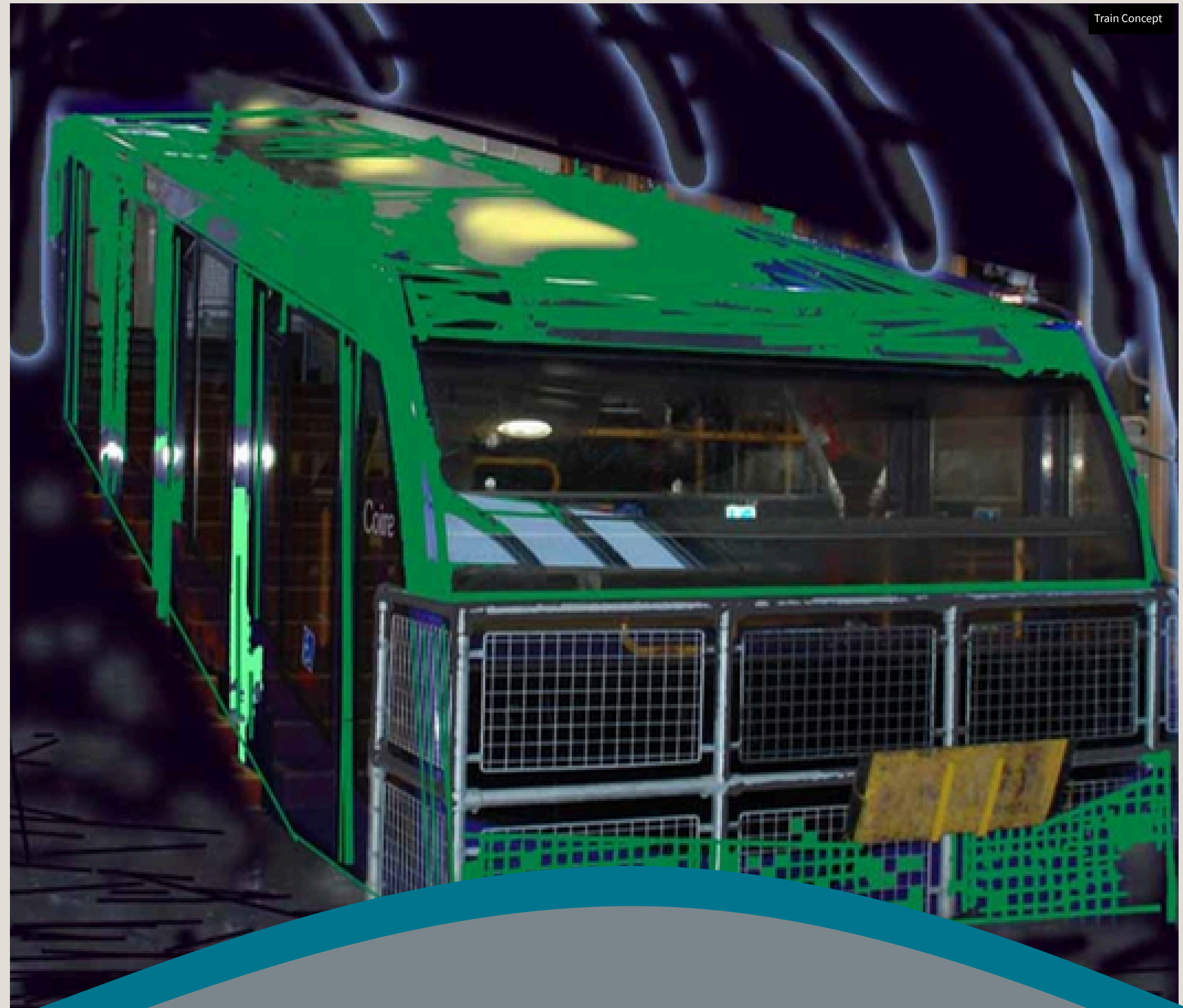
PRIMARY PROJECTS

Lifting Railway & Surface Arrival

- Investigate, Construct and commission the 'to surface' vehicle.
- Design the arrival experience
- Ensure full accessibility and safety compliance.

DEPENDENCY PROJECTS

- Work with relevant partners to develop woodland walkways
- Begin next phase of community engagement projects



PHASE 5.4

PRIMARY PROJECTS

Seven Sisters & Fossil Exploration Zone

- Begin engineering solution to re-open the Seven Sister mines
- Develop trails and interpretation across the Seven Sisters.
- Create hands-on fossil hunting and learning zones.

DEPENDENCY PROJECTS

- Deliver school and family programmes.
- Finalise and open the woodland walking route.

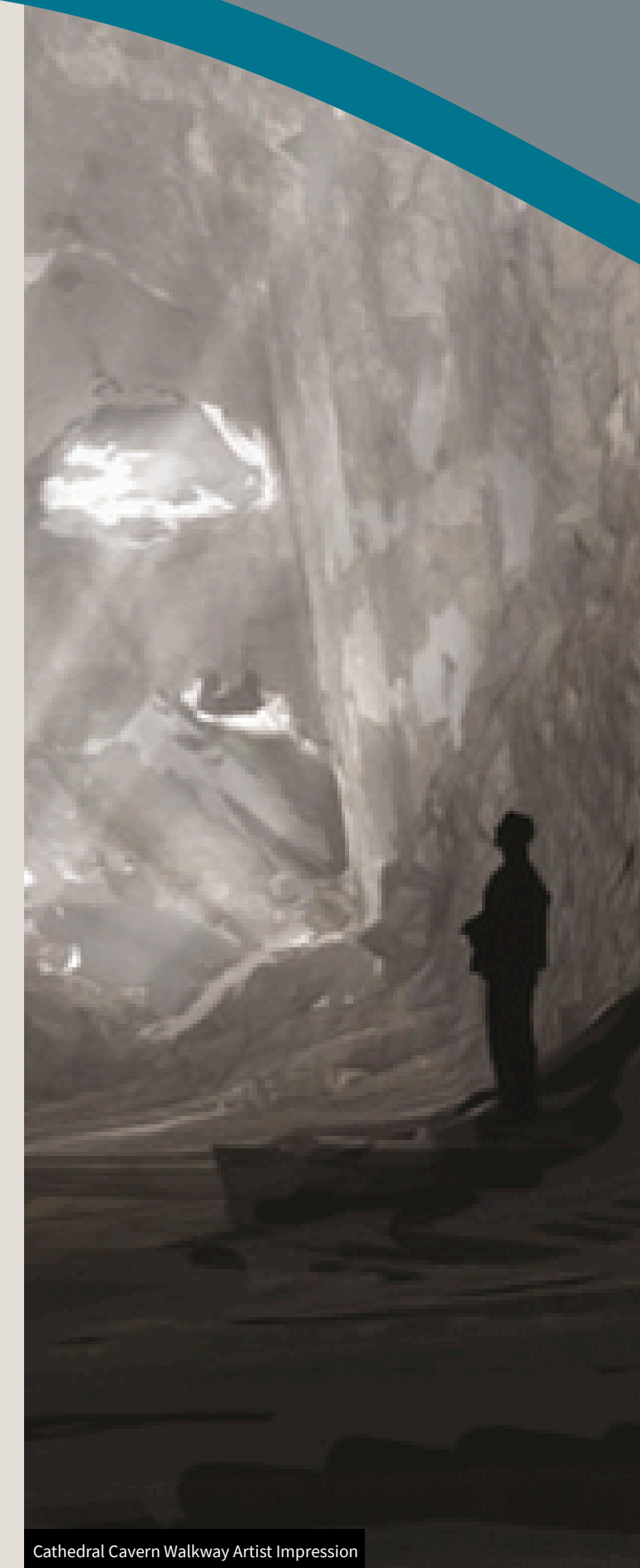


PHASE 5.5

DELIVERED PROJECT

Full Integration

- Seamlessly connect all elements of the visitor journey.
- Launch full visitor experience with ticketing and staffing.
- Deliver a major launch campaign and community celebration.



In preparing this vision, we have considered the strategic deliverables of DMBC and the WMCA.

We have consulted with, and shared this vision document with National Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic England, DMBC, Birmingham & Black Country Wildlife Trust, Friend of Wrens Nest, and Local Government representatives.

Dudley Canal & Caverns is committed in this vision to consult with it's community and major stakeholders, particularly in respect to the Wrens Nest Vision



WMCA: <https://www.wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/culture-and-digital/culture-and-creative-industries/>

Dudley Place-based Strategy: <https://www.dudley.gov.uk/business/regeneration/place-based-strategy/>

Dudley Economic Regeneration Strategy: <https://www.dudley.gov.uk/business/regeneration/economic-regeneration-strategy/>

Dudley Cultural Strategy: <https://www.dudley.gov.uk/business/regeneration/cultural-strategy/>

This vision will align with the Castle Hill Vision Phase 2: <https://www.dudley.gov.uk/residents/planning/historic-environment/dudley-castle/>

Castle Hill Vision Phase Two REVISION G

(This document covers the area of Dudley Zoological Garden and the adjacent Castle Hill Woodland)

Dudley Zoological Garden and Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

May 2019



BPN ARCHITECTS



Appendix 1

CULTURAL STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN
FOR DUDLEY MBC
View from the Hill Consulting Limited

Dudley Economic Regeneration Strategy

March 2024



Dudley's Place-Based Strategy

September 2023



SQW

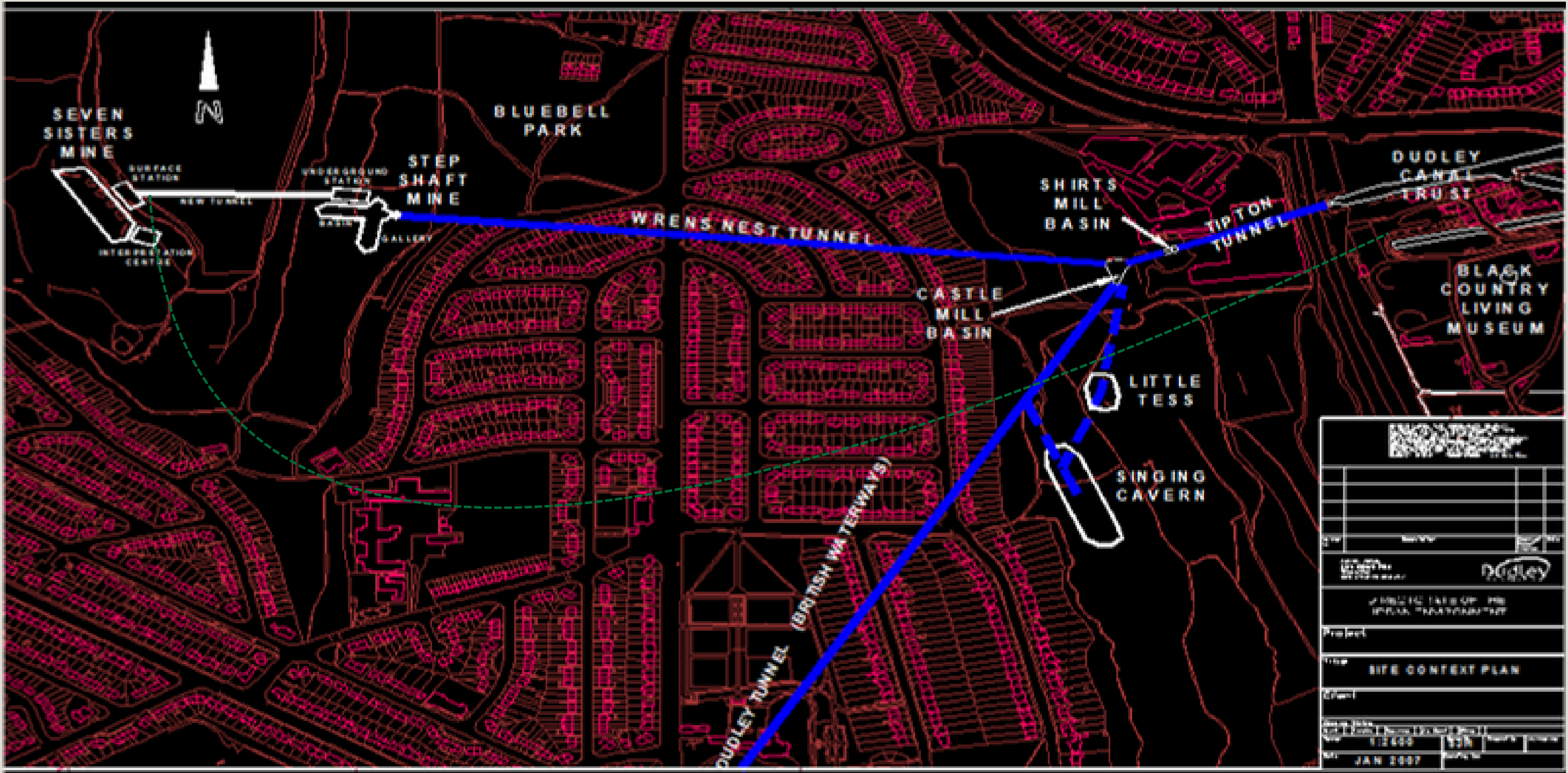


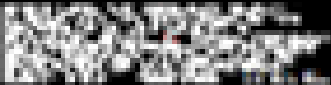


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Company Registration Number: 09784120 Charity Number: 1166460



			
Project Name		Client	
Project		Type	
			
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