

Clue: A major city



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How former miners transformed a pit into an energy village

Martin Wainwright

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The local community has transformed the former Ollerton colliery into an energy-efficient town. Photograph: Sherwood Energy Village

Britain's royal organisation dealing with high quality planning has given its annual award to the regeneration of 150 acres of former coalmine and slagheap, once regarded as a national totem of despair.

An industrial provident society in Nottinghamshire, which has carried out traditional northern doorstep-cleaning on a massive scale, has won the Silver Jubilee Cup, the Royal Town Planning Institute's highest award

"We used to say 'where there's muck there's brass' but we'd had enough muck when mining came to an end," says Stan Crawford, the former president of the National Union of Mineworkers in Nottinghamshire, who heads the group's remarkable creation, Sherwood Energy Village.

Looking out over wind turbines, ponds and modern offices angled to trap sunlight, he can now count 600 jobs on the site, as many as when Ollerton colliery finally closed in 1995.

"We knew two other things back then: that we wanted a diverse economy, after years of the pit for the men and the clothes factory for the women, and we didn't want anyone else imposing our future on us," says Crawford.

The society, democratically run on traditional co-op lines, negotiated with British Coal for two years before buying the site on a 100% mortgage of £50,000.

The deal circumvented British Coal's arrangements for most of its other abandoned pitheads, which were either taken over by the government regeneration quango, English Partnerships, or sold to private developers. Determination and a canniness, which saw the group reject one BC offer of sale for just £1 plus a huge slice of any future profits helped them through.

Geological nous from the many mining veterans involved in the scheme was also immediately useful, first in shifting thousands of tonnes of polluted soil, and then in creating Britain's largest sustainable urban drainage system.

Circular dykes carry heavy rainfall long enough for the water to drain into the sandy aquifer below without any run-off into the river Trent and other local rivers.

"It's designed to cope with the sort of flooding we might get every 200 years," says Crawford, "and last summer, we got very near that. But everything coped."

"We maintain the drainage, rather than Severn Trent, and the rain harvesting for flushing lavatories and the like means a big reduction in water rates," says Crawford. On the society's own headquarters, the E-Building which houses a bistro and has a children's nursery next door, the savings reached £4,000 last year.

Office tenants such as Karen White, an accountant who has relocated her business to the energy village, have to sign leases, which require systems such as heat exchange using ground extraction and a ban on power-hungry air conditioning.

"I'm not complaining because it's going to reduce my energy bills," she says. "It's certainly warm enough in here, and we're glad to take part in other village ideas, like the car share scheme."

The latest phase of the regeneration is house building, with 196 properties planned on the same entirely commercial and unsubsidised basis as the office and industrial units. Unlike them, though, the houses are being sold freehold, from £94,000 for a one-bedroom home to a minimum £200,000 for a four-bedroom one.

"We didn't think leasehold would appeal to housebuyers, but we've kept control over the sustainable standards by being our own developer where the homes are concerned," says Crawford, whose CV includes a useful spell as past Labour leader of the local Newark and Sherwood district council.

The planting of two former slagheaps has matured to give the new houses a pleasant view, with mixed young trees merging neatly into a large copse of ancient woodland, which survived the coming of coal.

The wider setting of gentle hills, close to the Dukeries area of mansions and estates, whose owners initially exploited the coal, is attracting professionals, including hi-tech tenants, to the energy village.

Ollerton still has the close feel of a pit community, but the provident society is happy to broaden the social range at the same time as diversifying the local economy.

The latest and biggest coup is the arrival this summer of 200 Nottinghamshire county council jobs, relocated from Newark, attracting considerable controversy. That perhaps says more than anything about the journey travelled by Ollerton since the despairing days of the broken strike: it is now successful enough to be criticised in the wider community of north Nottinghamshire for attracting too many jobs.

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