

# LandscapeReview

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## At the coalface of landscape design

Former mining sites across the UK have been remodelled to include leisure, retail and business developments p22

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## Our man in the North

Bill Blackledge is hard at work, promoting landscape architecture in Yorkshire p8



# Facelifts for coalfaces

**Deep industrial scars are being healed as UK coalfields are remodelled, but the schemes' success depends on local support**

In its prime it packed a powerful punch, with hundreds of workers able to sway governments and capture headlines through vast productivity or by stopping production during mass strikes.

But headlines change with the times and these days Betteshanger Colliery is making news for productivity of a different kind – from a landscape architect.

Rumme Design Associates is overseeing the first stage of work on 120ha of land. The finished landscape will include a rambling country park next to a business estate, sculpture garden and a world-class cycling centre spooling out 3.5km of racing track.

Bulldozers rolled into action 11km from Deal this summer to herald the first major activity on the site since 1989 when Betteshanger became the last coalfield to close in Kent. The colliery once boasted mine shafts stretching 1.5km out and under the seabed. These were capped and most of the buildings were demolished leaving a patchwork of scrub, rubble and spindly trees.

Rumme Design Associates managing director Robert Rumme is wondering how far his £18.8-million brainchild can, or should, go to covering scars of the industrial past, especially with a site so rich in history as Betteshanger, which opened in 1921.

"We wanted to blend some of the mining elements into the design, such as creating features where mine shaft openings stood," says Rumme. However, though the community is eager for a statue of a miner, not all want too many reminders of a past at times painful.

Some of the Betteshanger locals, which include former pit workers living in miners' cottages next to the site, have complained about lack of consultation and the chopping and changing of plans. Rumme, based in Sevenoaks, insists the design process has been strong on

consultation, with public presentations, posters, leaflets and discussion groups.

One of the biggest issues for the locals, he says, was the need to maintain views – across marshland to the coast on one side, and back across the Kent downs to the south.

The master-plan has taken advantage of the rolling land to ensure the tallest offices and warehouses are built on the lowest part of the site to avoid blocking views. A new road and roundabout linking the site's two main areas are being cut into the land to avoid the sight of cars on the horizon and too much orange glow from streetlights.

Ecologist Nick Hilton, an environmental associate with project manager Peter Brett Associates, says a hefty whack of the budget is being spent on wildlife conservation. Despite the throng of heavy industry in recent years, this site is burgeoning with wildlife. Teams of experts are busy rounding up grass snakes, slow-worms, lizards and badgers in a reptile and mammal "translocation" that involves moving them to specially created habitats on the site such as woodlands and wetlands.

A two-metre wide culvert costing £250,000 is being built under the roundabout as a wildlife migration route to the country park. Tunnels will be dug near the new roads to ensure low-flying pipistrelle bats use them and avoid being killed by cars.

"The ecological constraints are huge," says Hilton, who likens the site in its present form to a "moonscape" of bold but barren landforms. Nesting birds will roost in chalk grass habitats and wetland lagoons will be fed by natural drainage from the site.

Local archaeological groups will have designated areas on the site for fossil digging: the land includes overgrown cliffs that used to form the ancient



coastline where sea lapped against the land millions of years ago.

Meanwhile, areas of dramatic black shale, birch trees and forests of rare holm oak will be preserved. Around these habitats will wind tracks for BMX riders and competitive cyclists. The local triathletes' club in Deal is one of the country's largest, but at present cyclists have only busy roads to practise on.

## Digging in across the UK

Plans for this 10-year scheme started in 2000 when the colliery and tip were singled out by English Partnerships and the South East England Development Agency to be part of the £385-million National Coalfields Programme. This was set up to help mining communities hit by widespread pit closures in the 1980s and 1990s. Since the initiative's launch in late 1996, around 100 former coalfield sites totaling more than 3,300ha of land have come under the programme's remit. Two fairly recent additions are Silverdale Colliery near Newcastle-under-Lyme and a coke works near Sunderland.

According to English Partnerships, the programme is on target to create 40,000 job opportunities, two million square metres of commercial floor space





**Betteshanger Colliery (main):** cycling tracks wind their way through wildlife habitats. **Showing off plans (left):** Robert Rummy and SEEDA representative Gordon Harris meet with local cyclists. **Tilmanstone Colliery (above):** planting followed the strong landforms created by heaps of mining waste

to grow native plants on a 400mm surface layer of rich growing matter. Grass and trees were planted to follow the strong landforms created by heaps of excavated material from the mines.

Principal Tom La Dell believes ecological methods invariably make economic sense. "Our cultural landscape has usually come about for economic reasons, so we cannot manage it without thinking of economics," he says.

### Community must come on board

Dalton Park, a 35ha tip for dumping coal waste in Tyne and Wear, has also been transformed recently by taking advantage of landforms created by mining waste. A giant slag heap has given the landscape architecture its boldest form.

Though this isn't part of the National Coalfields Programme, the private development has been put forward for a Coalfields Regeneration Trust award, one of six entries to prizes including gongs from the Landscape Institute, Royal Town Planning Institute, Civic Trust and Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.

The designer, Lovejoy London, wanted to shift 600,000m<sup>3</sup> of land waste from one part of the site to another to create a development platform for the central

and 6,500 homes. It will also bring in £1 billion of private money.

An English Partnerships representative says: "With our national remit we are now best placed to champion the needs of the former coalfields and help families living with the legacy of the coal industry." But making regeneration sensitive to the cultural landscape is tough when the physical landscape is mired with contamination and awkward landforms.

Though the local council has ruled out homes on the Betteshanger site, some of the schemes have had to blend massive land or coastal reclamation with retail, commercial and housing elements.

Achieving a landscape that knits together such disparate uses is a tall order.

Another recent addition to the National Coalfields Programme is Tilmanstone Colliery, which is also near Deal. Long gone are the saw-tooth roofs and towering winding gear that handled 20 million tones of coal in its 74-year history.

The coalface closed in 1986 but Tom La Dell Landscape Architects has worked to ensure the site retains traces of its former use while giving drama to its rebirth as an industrial park set among sweeping embankments and hills. The Maidstone practice created nearly 40,000m<sup>3</sup> of topsoil from coal shale and compost



## THROCKMORTON AIRFIELD

The most recent proposal to heal man-made scars on the landscape is perhaps the most controversial. Damage to this site in Worcestershire was not from old-fashioned heavy industry but modern agricultural methods.

One of the country's biggest foot-and-mouth burial sites is to be transformed into a wildlife enclave to quell public worries of the long-term impact of a mass grave for 133,000 animals.

Proposals for Throckmorton Airfield, the 20ha site near Pershore, include new

shrubs, different types of grasses and a lagoon. Mounds of earth will be replaced with wild flower habitats, according to the scheme's mastermind, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs.

Worcestershire council environmental services director Richard Wigginton says: "A key principle will be to remove as many indicators of the use of the site for carcass burial purposes. Final ground level will be as close as possible to that which existed before burials started.

"As the site is inaccessible to the

public and hardly visible from outside it is reasonable to consider ecology as being of prime importance in any restoration."

DEFRA staff are not revealing whether a landscape team has been appointed, but a local councillor hopes the plans will calm locals who are still angry about the choice of Throckmorton as a burial site.

But there are fears that Throckmorton's reputation as a foot-and-mouth burial ground may continue to hit property prices, despite independent assurances the land poses no health risks.

feature, an 18m-high hillock with grass terraces and stone steps.

"We used existing material to create dynamic landscapes rather than dumping it elsewhere," says associate Peter Wilder. "We formed valleys and hill features out of shale, used clay to line the lake and sand to form planting areas."

This dramatic remodelling helped the landscape architects create seven different habitat zones including wetland and dryland areas and meadowland.

The site, designated an Enterprise Zone and so open to tax incentives to

help revitalise the economic blackspot, was bought by ING Real Estate. The firm enlisted Lovejoy in 2000 for a landscape overhaul worth nearly £1.5 million. The payoff for ING was its proposal to include – but not anchor the site around – a shopping centre. Wilder says landscape was as integral to the scheme as the commercial element. The crux of the design philosophy was the link between the creative use of the natural landscape on a site once used for the industrial extraction of a natural product.

It is only right, insists Wilder, for land once exploited for industrial purposes to be returned to nature. "We wanted a site that would be unique and awe-inspiring, but one that would also sum up the scale of industrialism in the North, with huge landforms created by man.

"However, we softened them with grass and introduced diverse habitats that reflect the landscape of the region. Visitors walk across organic landforms and planting, sweep through woodlands

and meadows, cross boardwalks and trek over exposed hillsides. You experience a number of different spaces within one site and each one is related to landscapes of the North East: high hilly areas, forests, lowlands and scrubland typical of the hedgerows of the area."

Lovejoy's landscape was an instant hit. The opening day this April saw 20,000 visitors take to the hills of Dalton Park. More than 200,000 people followed suit over four days during Easter.

"The most encouraging thing is the response from the community," says Wilder. "Always at the back of your mind was the contrast between a highly commercial shopping centre and the natural environment. Success depended on whether the whole was adopted and embraced by the local community."

Had the landscape failed, he believes it could have resulted in vandalism and other social problems. However, the design team did a lot coaxing to win over locals who had been made skeptical by previous promises to clean up the land, which ended with a token scattering of grass seed.

"An important lesson was that using sustainable methods is often cheaper than engineering solutions," says Wilder. "We saved £400,000 by bringing in recycled sewage sludge to improve the shale instead of using topsoil, which would have meant stripping a greenfield site."

But ultimately, he says, the key to salvaging industrial land is that sustainable design will only work if communities can interact with the site. "Some people focus too heavily on sustainability and not the wider social context." ■



"Our cultural landscape has usually come about for economic reasons, so we cannot manage it without thinking of economics"

Tom La Dell, principal, Tom La Dell Landscape Architects



Dalton Park: work gets going on the site



Return to nature: different areas of Dalton were intended to reflect landscapes of the North East