

Castleford ready to broadcast renewal

The revival of a devastated former mining community in Yorkshire is to feature as a television documentary. **David Dewar** investigates

When the coal industry was decimated in the 1980s and 1990s, the pit town of Castleford was particularly hard hit. Seemingly cut off from the outside world and heavily reliant on mining for employment, the West Yorkshire town and its surrounding area spent many years in the doldrums, often featuring in statistics detailing the UK's most deprived areas.

But things are now looking up for Castleford, thanks in no small part to the unlikely regeneration vehicle of Channel 4. In 2003 the station decided to embark on a pioneering project to effectively champion a makeover of the town and to chart the exploits of this adventure in a five-part documentary. Thus *The Castleford Project* was born.

As part of Channel 4's public service mission, the programme aims to help deliver a series of improvements in the town to contribute to its regeneration, and equally importantly to enable the community to make Castleford a better place to live. It also hopes to provide some good viewing along the way.

Channel 4 appointed Talkback Productions to make the series and secured *Grand Designs* presenter Kevin McCloud as frontman for the project. It then quickly secured the support of Wakefield City Council and got on board a range of partners. These include regional development agency Yorkshire Forward, English Partnerships, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and the Coalfields Regeneration Trust.

But why Castleford? The programme-makers chose the town after trawling through dozens of potential candidates for the series. But there was something about Castleford, in particular the spirit of its

local community, which they say that they simply could not resist.

"The population is so dynamic and so determined for the place to improve," explains David Barrie, who has just stepped down from his role as project director. "There are lots of communities like that around the country, but there was just something slightly different in Castleford."

Barrie maintains that the town was also chosen because the type of problems that it faces are a neat microcosm of the issues faced by many towns in the UK. These include a decaying town centre and an underused river frontage. "The sorts of places and spaces and things that the community wanted to improve were those that lots of other towns want to improve and might resonate with television viewers," he adds. "There is the classic situation where the town centre is not making the most of itself. There are lots of towns where because of planning decisions in the past or whatever other reason the place has turned its back on the river."

But it is not until you meet the people of the town and witness their obvious passion for turning the place around and making regeneration a success that you realise what made Channel 4 click when it came here. The people have a togetherness and a spirit that is rooted in the area's mining past. This has been garnered highly successfully in the appointment of "community champions" for the various *Castleford Project* schemes to highlight the townsfolk's views on what needs to be done.

But what is Castleford's history and why does it need regenerating? It was 150 years ago that the mining tradition first took root in the town, with the opening of the Wheldale pit. By the late 1970s eight collieries were operating there, providing jobs for more than 6,000 people. But by the late 1990s that total had plummeted to just 600. This decline spurred the local authority to take a hard look at the area's economic future.

"The council had begun a fresh look at economic development and regeneration



McCloud (left) and Schwarz: programme-makers resolved from the outset that

priorities," says Jonathan Hall, head of regeneration at Wakefield. "The critical event was the last pit closing. While the decline had been going on for 15 to 20 years, the last closure was quite a specific event. So there was some work done to investigate the area's future prospects."

A number of priorities emerged out of that work, including improving the environment in the town centre, diversifying the local economy and improving links with the wider area. "The Greater Leeds economy is growing very strongly," says Hall. "But it is typical of mining areas that they are very introspective. So the big thing is opening up Castleford to the world."

The town had also been the subject of the Renaissance Towns programme run by regional development agency Yorkshire Forward, which was attempting to look at how the physical attributes of places like Castleford could be improved. So when Channel 4 came to town, much regeneration work was already in progress.

On arrival, programme-makers established two principal priorities. One was that community engagement should be a prerequisite. The other was a big investment in design. "We have had more architects wandering around Castleford in the past two years than in the previous 200 years," says Hall.

design quality should be crucial factor

In July 2003, the television crew went to Castleford to hold a series of public meetings to establish what projects the townspeople wanted to see get off the ground. More than 1,000 people took part in the consultation exercise and the result was that eight key projects were launched. These ranged from a new village green to an adventure playground and improved river frontages (see panel, right).

As for the problems encountered throughout the project, one major issue confronted by Channel 4 was that of timing. Initial plans were for the series to be screened in late 2004 or early 2005. But the programme-makers soon found that the project would take far longer than originally envisaged.

There is currently no set date for broadcasting the series, other than it being loosely planned for the end of 2006. But the Talkback crew seems happy with this arrangement and its members have become familiar figures around the town. "We always knew from the start that it would take a long time," reveals Barrie. "But after two-and-a-half years there is stuff happening on the ground."

Hall elaborates: "It was an issue that the speed of regeneration and the speed of making television programmes are completely different. Channel 4 came in thinking that it could get it all wrapped up in 12 to 18 months. But it very soon realised that it was not going to happen.

The Castleford Project: key schemes decided following public consultation

Pedestrian bridge

There is currently only one point in the town where people can cross the River Aire, a narrow road bridge that is very pedestrian-unfriendly. Canadian architect Renato Benedetti has drawn up designs for a footbridge spanning the river. Hydraulic modelling for the crossing began last April.

River frontage plan

Castleford, like many other English towns, has turned its back on its river over the years despite it being a key junction for the region's waterways. The Aire and the Calder meet in the town.

You could walk around the town centre without knowing that it has a river. Brick walls, houses and factories hide it from the main road. At the river's edge was a large area of overgrown foliage and piles of rubbish, before community champion Roy Wright and others led a clean-up.

Riverside transformation plans include sheltered seating — "objects of enchantment" designed by Sarah Wigglesworth — and river viewing platforms. These are at the feasibility stage of design and development.

Carlton Street

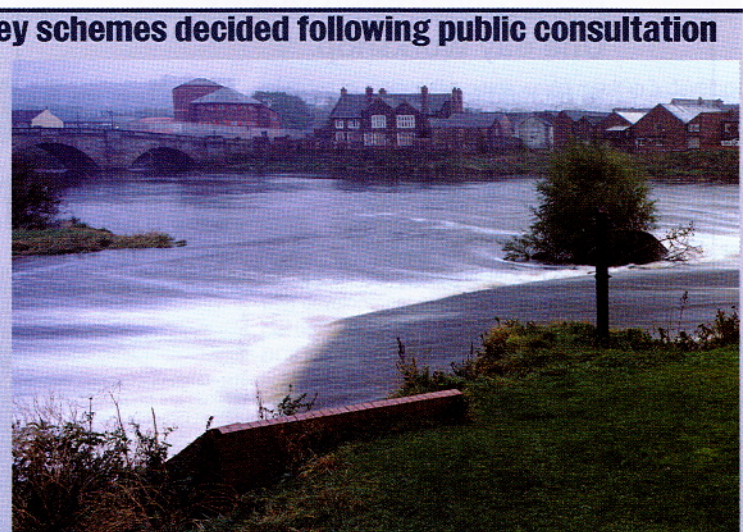
The main shopping street in Castleford feels rather down-at-heel. Under the project plans, the area will be spruced up, the outdoor market will be relocated and streets repaved. Hudson Architects have drawn up plans for a "21st century market stall". Planning applications have been submitted and work is scheduled to start within the next year.

The Green, Ferry Fryston

This local green has suffered from neglect and decay over the years. A local community group, Friends of the Green, called for the project to revamp the area, making it a safe, well-designed public space.

Work is well under way. Latest features include new play equipment, a revamped entrance, improved landscaping and better facilities for the local bowls club.

"These things take time. It is a long process persuading bodies to provide funding, getting planning permissions, keeping the community on board, sorting out architects and so on. But to Channel 4's credit, it has kept with it. It has found enough interesting things to film in the process. The end product will be important but the journey is important too. It has



River frontage: transformation plans designed to harness a neglected resource



Ferry Fryston: play equipment installed in improved landscape for village green

Cutsyke Play Forest

The local community in the Cutsyke area called for children to be provided with an adventure park on a tract of land between housing and former council allotments. The play forest was designed by Estell Warren and Allen Tod Architecture. Planning permission was granted last year and work started in February.

New Fryston Village Green

After the reclamation of a local colliery and the demolition of rows of housing, there were insufficient numbers to sustain some of the amenities in New

Fryston, including the village green. Landscape architect Martha Schwarz was brought in to devise a £1 million revamp of the area. The impressive results include new seating, a green area, walkways and a modern bridleway.

Little Cott Underpass

This very narrow walkway under a railway line links the town centre with a car park and residential areas. It is perceived as a poor environment for pedestrians. Plans are in place to reconfigure the link and make it more navigable for walkers.

With designers like Martha Schwarz, Renato Benedetti and Sarah Wigglesworth fronting some of the key projects, it is sure to provide a lasting legacy of quality for the town. The success of the project has helped to spur other regeneration projects, such as the revamp and refurbishment of the town's main shopping centre being carried out by its owners.

Community champions play pivotal role in delivery of Castleford's range of regeneration schemes

For each of the key *Castleford Project* schemes, a "community champion" has been appointed to represent the views of the local townsfolk.

These include Rheta Davison, who has played a pivotal role in getting the Cutsyke Play Forest off the ground. The scheme has included extensive consultation with children.

Davison says that the experience has helped her become an expert in tapping into various funding sources. She lavishes praise on *The Castleford Project*. "Channel 4 has highlighted that Castleford deserves regeneration

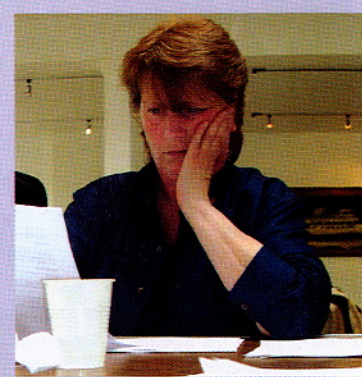
because it is a town of people who are willing to get off their backside and get something done," she enthuses.

As a former pub landlord, Roy Wright was a well-known character in the town before the project took off. When he spoke at a public meeting on the schemes he was asked to become a community champion. He started a local group aimed at co-ordinating the sprucing up of the riverside and the river frontage plans. It has given him a new lease of life.

"I found out two-and-a-half years ago that I could not work again

because I had a disability. I was quite depressed about being told that at 48 years old your life was over, because to me it was," he recalls. "But the inspiration of this project took me out of that and gave me back my confidence. I work hard at it but I am having a wonderful time. I have met some wonderful people and it has broadened my horizons."

Wright adds: "The project has shown us something totally and utterly different. The community has got together and given something back to Castleford."



Davison: worked on play forest project