

MADE

Stourport-on-Severn Docks area

Stourport is unique in the fact that it is the only town in Britain to have been developed as a sole consequence of the canal boom in the 18th century. The cultural and economic heritage and identity of the town is therefore intrinsically linked with the canal network and its link to the River Severn.

The regeneration of the town's canal basins and surrounding built environment into a vibrant and accessible part of the experience of the town have been the cornerstone in the wider regeneration of Stourport. The town is emerging as an important heritage tourist destination with an estimated growth in visitor numbers of 225,000 per annum.

Introduction

Stourport now has a population of over 19,000, but before the building of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire canal it was a small hamlet called Lower Mitton. The first basins were set out in the late 1760s, and within the first ten years of their operation, a wide range of neighbouring employment opportunities (brass and iron foundries, vinegar works, tanneries, spinning mills and carpet manufacturers, barge and boat building yards, wharves, warehouses, shops and inns) had been attracted to the town. By the early 19th century, Stourport was one of the biggest and busiest interchange ports in the country.



The economic and cultural life of the town has been extremely dependant on the commercial success of the river and canal basins. The economic decline of the canal system severely impacted on not only the economic performance of the town, but also on it's image and identity. This resulted in the town becoming physically and visually dislocated from its canal basins and thus its origins, and though the commercial, cultural and social drivers for growth within the town have tried to adjust to this, the town has been left with a fractured and slightly surreal relationship between people and place.

These issues were generally recognised by the various public sector organisations concerned with Stourport, and so in 1999 British Waterways and the local authorities agreed to work in partnership, forming the Stourport Forward Partnership. This has subsequently brought in Market Towns Initiative and other funding totalling £3.3m for the restoration of historic buildings and major engineering works to historic structures. A programme of arts, education and community events culminated in the 'Flow Festival' in July

2008, relaunching the canal basins and the town as a major Worcestershire tourist attraction.

Design process

The regeneration process taking place within Stourport is not being realised through a single programme, but rather through an intertwined series of programmes and initiatives that have been conceived, nurtured and delivered by the various working partnerships established through the life of the project. As well as the local community, (who have been fully engaged in the process since Stourport Forward took a leading role), the partners involved in the process have been; the Heritage Lottery Fund, British Waterways, Advantage West Midlands through Stourport Forward, Wyre Forest District Council, Stourport Town Council, Worcestershire County Council and the Arts Council.

The creation of Stourport Forward provided the opportunity to create a masterplan for the regeneration for the town with three major projects forming the overall Stourport Forward programme:

Restoration of Stourport Canal Basins (British Waterways)
Revitalisation of the Sandy Lane Industrial Estate (British Business Parks)
Stourport Pride Study (Wyre Forest District Council)

The masterplan was also imbued with a strong support for artistic and community involvement and engagement throughout the regeneration process. Some of the key objectives of the masterplan were:

Enhance the overall quality of the built and natural environments and the quality of life of its residents and visitors
Promote better design, innovation, creativity and excellence
Ensure meaningful participation for local communities, artists and other design and planning professionals in regeneration processes and opportunities.

Within these core principles was the ethos of interrogating all design work, using a simplified and site-specific materials palette to ensure continuity across the site and ensuring that the restoration and regeneration of the site and buildings are expressed honestly and directly in the context of its historical function. In order to facilitate and capture such an approach to design work within the regeneration areas, a Supplementary Planning Guidance "Design Guidance" document was produced by British Waterways in partnership with Wrye Forest District Council to inform and guide the anticipated developments.

The restoration scheme has been meticulously designed to re-introduce significant elements of the past. Quality has been key, with the masterplan and design guide informing the palette of materials and the restoration work being carried out to a very high standard to seamlessly blend with the historic environment. Training in heritage restoration techniques has also been provided as part of the process. Being an arts led masterplan, there have

been nine specialised arts commissions and a project mix of archaeological and landscaping work, major engineering work to locks and basins and bridges, and events to involve the local community and reach a wider, more diverse audience.

Extensive engineering works have endeavoured to reuse local building materials. Re-pointing, brickwork repairs and grouting (to prevent leaks through and around the brickwork) have been carried out in the locks. The brickwork to the overflow weir on narrow lock 3 has been re-laid to prevent leakage through the lock walls, recycling the existing bricks in the original 1770s pattern. The wing walls to the timber bridge over the upper broad barge lock by the historic former Tontine hotel have been completely re-faced in new brick to match the original. Refurbishment of sandstone copings around the lower basins and dry dock has retained original copings where possible. The replacement of the lower basins swing bridge was also delivered as part of the landscape and access improvements. Restoration work has focused on practical improvements that also add to the heritage value of the structures

Community involvement in regeneration in Stourport was limited before this initiative. The project team has worked hard to ensure it is firmly embedded in the local community, with open public sessions, regular updates, an informative website and materials produced for local schools, reports and newsletters. Strong relationships have been formed with the local media, and Stourport Civic Society has been involved throughout the programme. A number of neighbouring projects, in private ownership, have also come on line in the lifetime of the partnership. These include the new residential development around the Lichfield Basin, and the rescue of the historic Tontine from the Buildings at Risk register and its redevelopment into 15 residential units. The Tontine overlooks the river and was originally a prestigious commercial hotel with a fine ballroom, built by the Canal Company in the 1770s for merchants, passengers and higher grades of employee.

Evaluation

To date 22 historic buildings and structures have been sensitively restored along with some major infrastructure improvements and the area is now again a vibrant and attractive extension to the built environment of the town.

The Stourport Forward Programme Manager and the Restoration Project Manager work under the same line manager and in the same office, and this has brought significant benefits to both projects. Strong local working partnerships have been created and strengthened through the development and delivery of this project, and British Waterways are actively involved in other relevant projects within the town, including the 'Enhancement of Bridge Street' project.

Other local investment by County and District Councils as well as Advantage West Midlands (via Stourport Forward), including the Stourport Pride design guide, has created a critical mass of change and has given local people confidence in the objective of town-wide regeneration.

Taylor Young Associates were employed by the development partnership in 2006 to support and articulate further plans to improve the accessibility to the basins from Bridge Street via a piazza. This 'Enhancement of Bridge Street' project will link the town centre and the canal basins area once again.

Putting together the finance for the project was also a challenge. It took two years to draw together the current cocktail of funders – a year to reach in principle agreement and another year to receive the official letters of confirmation from the major funders such as the Heritage Lottery, Advantage West Midlands, and the various councils.

The process of submitting a Heritage Lottery application encouraged the drawing up of policy documents such as an education plan and a volunteering plan. This acted as a driver for Stourport Forward to think creatively around their project, and helped them to identify a comprehensive range of social benefits. The project has included a wide variety of environmental, social, economic, and community benefits.

Key design features to look out for

- New brickwork very closely matching the older brickwork in colour, texture and pattern of bond, maintaining the heritage character of the buildings.
- The attention paid to the choice of materials and quality of detailing to ensure the restoration process does not rob the existing structures and buildings of their character.
- The application of artistic installations as a key part of the social, educational and heritage aspects of the project. The mosaic floor panel showing an aerial plan of the basin area is educational, decorative and practical and is a good illustration of how the art is integrated into the fabric of the restoration process.

Link and downloads

Stourport Town Website. Waterways renaissance narrative.
<http://stourporttown.co.uk/BURA.htm>

Stourport Town website. General narrative.
http://stourporttown.co.uk/stourport_basins.html

Wyre Forest District Council. Design Guidance document.
<http://www.wyreforestdc.gov.uk/e-dms/resources/includes/file.php?id=644>

Wyre Forest District Council. Stourport Regeneration Update Report.
<http://www.wyreforestdc.gov.uk/e-dms/resources/includes/file.php?id=2306>

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