

Localism and lap dancing in Berwick-upon-Tweed.

Berwick-upon-Tweed is a unique place. An historic walled town in the far northeast corner of England at the mouth of the river Tweed it sits on an elevated peninsular in a dramatic coastal setting. With surviving medieval layout; 400 years of bridge building; refined domestic and civic architecture and outstanding military engineering it has considerable animated variety, atmosphere, quality and sense of place. Recognised by nationally important buildings, landscape and monuments the often referred to 'jewel in Northumberland's crown' has been studied and documented by numerous academics, historians and artists alike all drawn to the complexities of its 900 year old past. Nikolaus Pevsner described it as "one of the most exciting towns in England, a real town, with the strongest sense of enclosure".

It certainly is a 'real town' with real people who care passionately about the town's historic legacy but also the provision of local jobs, affordable homes, an ageing population and struggling tourist economy. The succession of defences and circuit of stone walls first laid down by Edward 1 in 1296, later subsumed within the magnificent Elizabethan ramparts, continue to bestow a muscular embrace around the town today. The Walls however, do not signify a barrier to change or delineate a boundary for heritage assets to be preserved in aspic but they do present modern day challenges if Berwick is to move forward and grow. The 21st century presents a struggle of a different kind that requires intervention and concerted action.

Like many border towns Berwick has tremendous development and tourist potential but underperforms economically; its built heritage is recognised as a valuable asset but requires investment. The strategic planning process has identified a 'need' for an area based regeneration programme and overall vision that looks to the future in order to deliver the economic transformation and step change that is so desperately required.

Nothing new here, but *how* Berwick is going about this through local action; partnership working and increased involvement of 'its people' is of interest, especially since we have official terminology for such an approach; 'the Big Society' and localism.

Berwick's Future Partnership was formed in 2005. The borough council (now Northumberland County Council), English Heritage, the regional development agency One NorthEast, Community Development Trust, Local Strategic Partnership and Town Council commissioned and published a Masterplan that extended its remit beyond the town walls.

The Masterplan and subsequent Regeneration Strategy set out the vision, opportunities and aspirations for both physical and social improvements to be delivered over a 20-year period. The suite of strategies to flow from this overarching vision include a Movement Strategy, Public Realm Strategy as well as a number of project groups seeking deliverable options for priority sites. Thankfully, a detailed Conservation Area Character Appraisal was

produced to inform these cross cutting themes and development opportunities.

Whilst the public sector organisations have since endured their own dramatic border raids, barely surviving the cuts following the public spending review, the community partner organisations, local residents and amenity societies have grown in strength and resolve, determined to deliver Berwick's vision; their vision.

In spite of the recession; lack of private investment and vanishing public resource we *are* in the delivery phase with conservation *and* community very much in the driving seat of a number of heritage led regeneration projects. External funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, English Heritage and OneNortheast has been secured (in the nick of time). A 1.2 million pound 4 year investment programme is delivering a Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI) and two Area Partnership Schemes (APS). Year 1 has concluded and the first repair schemes are underway.

The heritage schemes build on the work of Berwick Preservation Trust who has been tirelessly restoring buildings since 1971. The Trust's most ambitious project has also been completed. Dewar's Lane Granary, a 4.5 million pound conversion of an 18th century industrial building opened in March as the Youth Hostel Associations' latest flagship accommodation. With conference rooms, art gallery and café facilities this single building project adjoins the Bridge Street Area Partnership Scheme and THI boundary.

The Granary project has undoubtedly provided the catalyst for investment and partnership working; testament to a 'never give up' attitude in the face of many obstacles faced by BPTs and local cash strapped partners. Its success, together with the delivery of the THI and AP Schemes will hopefully lead to a critical mass of repaired historic buildings, improved visitor offer and wide reaching benefits to the local economy.

Community input has been keenly provided through the Conservation Area Advisory Group (CAAG). In existence since 1999 the forum has grown in confidence and stature. Although it doesn't always agree, it has developed protocols for dealing with differences of opinion and provides credible comment on planning applications as well as feed local knowledge into the area based documents and strategies.

The CAAG comprises Civic Society, 4 resident's associations, Building Study Group, Chamber of Trade, Town Council and Community Development Trust. The group meets monthly and is instrumental in the delivery of the heritage schemes. This method of working has been noted by English Heritage in "Valuing Places: Good Practice in Conservation Areas" (February 2011) as an exemplar in local engagement. Flattered but somewhat bemused by this recent accolade and national recognition, the CAAG has no desire to sit back, it's 'business as usual' for there is much work to be done in delivering Berwick's opportunities. Whilst the focus of the THI and APS is undoubtedly

fabric repairs, the schemes are also about people and building community trust.

The heritage projects support a number of complementary initiatives with other funders and volunteers including design work and improvement of the public realm; facilitating building recording and contributing to an enhanced Berwick archive through a Friend's Group. It is also trying to broaden the scope of understanding by capturing the ephemeral things; the discarded remnants of past industries; memory; anecdotal evidence and 'atmosphere' that can only be experienced by spending time in a place. An artist photographer and writer were commissioned to 'capture the magic' of the now vacant critical buildings within the THI through a different creative discipline. A more abstract, but no less valuable method of recording buildings and people, the book of photographs and poems is both evocative and stimulating as it contemplates the concept of heritage, memory and 'home'.

Like most 20-year plans within the historic environment we express an overriding need to 'conserve the past for future generations', yet so rarely engage the future generation in the process. The THI has supported a 6-month 'Changemaker' project as part of an early training initiative.

Changemakers are a national organisation. Through its Future Cultural Leader's Programme it aims to inspire and involve young people in heritage and culture. Sponsoring a young advocate the equivalent of 10 days paid work, the advocate works alongside a Champion who mentors, supports and opens doors for their young person. My advocate, a planning undergraduate from Newcastle University was incredibly hard working, interested in her subject and inspired by conservation and youth engagement. Elizabeth worked with Berwick Middle School taking over Year 5 Geography class (9/10 year olds).

The pupils focused on the Bridge Street AP Scheme. Ensuring cross curriculum activities, the school were instrumental in designing lesson plans that covered geography, history, design, creative writing and IT skills. Explaining 'heritage led regeneration' to 9 year olds was both enlightening and fascinating to watch. They responded positively to their 'young advocate' and started by looking at maps, past uses, trades and occupants of Bridge Street; carried out field surveys on the condition of buildings, interviewed current occupants and visitors and undertook traffic studies before producing their own visions for the area in 10 years time.

Their project entitled 'Past, Present, Future' was presented as an exhibition and scheme launch in the newly opened Dewar's Lane Granary in April. The children had studied this building during lessons on regeneration as an example of 'before and after'. It was therefore, an exciting reward to display their work in the gallery alongside other professionals, to showcase their ideas to partners and funders.

Pupils also designed a building for a vacant site on the edge of the study area. Their 2 dimensional drawings concentrated on commercial buildings,

leisure activities, playgrounds and 'fun' colourful buildings. With the exception of the lap dancing club (don't ask) their 'Bridge Street in 10 years time' stemmed from their own analyses of the past; recent field trip and interpretation of regeneration. Unfettered, imaginative, bold and sometimes futuristic, their ideas were no less informed by their personal experience of the heritage environment within which they live and will continue to occupy long after the policy makers are gone.

Elizabeth's project is a case study for Changemakers. It also forms part of her final year dissertation, bucking the trend for the customary topics to come before examiners. The children's work has been properly archived by the volunteer group and the school will continue to role out the lesson plans for other classes and pupils. Class 5j will no doubt become the monitors of the heritage schemes over the next 4 years, possibly returning in 10 years time to see if any of their thoughts and ideas have actually come to fruition as part of 'heritage led regeneration' (although perhaps not the lap dancing club).

Annette Reeves

Annette Reeves was the former part time Berwick Borough Council Conservation Officer between 2005-2009 and on secondment from Northumberland County Council since January 2010 as full time THI Project Officer delivering the Berwick Historic Area Improvement Schemes.